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Impoliteness, aggression and the moral order

Vahid Parvaresh^a, Tahmineh Tayebi^{b,*}^a Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK^b Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

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ABSTRACT

While studies devoted to impoliteness have been increasing in number, only scant attention has been paid to how impoliteness can be viewed as a reaction against attributes or social actions that are deemed undesirable. The current study is concerned with the relationship between 'impoliteness' and the notion of 'moral order'. More specifically, we examine the aggressive comments directed towards the official Facebook page of an Iranian actress, living in exile, after posting a nude photograph of herself. We consider the impolite language used in the comments under investigation to have been occasioned by an implicature, and subsequently argue that such an aggressive language originates from a set of similar assumptions and expectations which seem to be part of the moral order. As the study reveals, considerations of impoliteness are heavily dependent upon the development of communities whose members apparently share, and demand, common beliefs and similar social values.

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1. Introduction

Being treated as a thriving line of inquiry, impoliteness has over the years become a topic of extensive research (see, e.g., Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 1996, 2011; Culpeper et al., 2010; Culpeper et al., 2017; Haugh, 2010, 2015; Kádár, 2017; Tayebi, 2016, 2018, to mention only a few). Impoliteness, as conceptualised by Culpeper (2011: 23), is "a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts." Impoliteness is thought to be "sustained by expectations, desires and/or beliefs about social organisation" (Culpeper, 2011: 23). Negatively viewed (i.e. impolite) behaviour and language are thus in conflict with "with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be" (Culpeper, 2011: 23).

While no doubt notions such as one's *wants*, *desires*, and *expectations* mentioned above have proved to be imperative in how people evaluate an act or behaviour as impolite, the nature and type of these expectations have not yet been systematically investigated across languages and cultures. One possible way to address this gap would be to treat impoliteness "not simply as arising in social practice" but rather "as a form of social practice" (Haugh, 2013: 54; cf. Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003, 2009; Watts, 2003). On this view, impoliteness is conceptualised as a form of social practice with a view to investigating "what participants are doing through evaluations of [im]politeness, and how such evaluations are interdependently inter-linked with the interactional achievement of social actions and meanings" (Haugh, 2013: 56).

The present study is concerned with impolite and aggressive language directed towards the official Facebook account of the Iranian actress and public figure, Golshifteh Farahani, after she posted a nude photograph of herself on 18 January 2012, a photograph which allegedly resulted in her being banished from the country.¹ The significance of the photograph in question

* Corresponding author. School of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, Menzies Building, 20 Chancellors Walk, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

E-mail addresses: tahmineh.tayebi@gmail.com, tahmineh.tayebi@monash.edu (T. Tayebi).

¹ The photograph and the corresponding comments can be found at: <http://goo.gl/BD2KYA> (last accessed 08/May/2018).

lies in the fact that, as Gibbons (2012: para. 3) notes, it shattered a “taboo of unimaginable proportions.” The study shows how and why evaluations of impoliteness arise and invoke different aspects of the moral order which are socially both “standardized” and “standardizing” (Garfinkel, 1964: 226). We argue that impoliteness is a situated concept evoked by expectations of the moral order (Haugh, 2013, 2015). As the study reveals, impoliteness predominantly depends on the development of communities which both share “a mutual engagement in a common enterprise” and use “a shared repertoire of statements, modes of behaviour, reifications, etc.” (Watts, 2010: 57). Indeed, the impoliteness evaluations under scrutiny seem to inform and influence such social actions as *criticising, rebuking, shaming* and so on.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Section 2 the notion of moral order is discussed with reference to impoliteness. In Section 3, the methodology of the study is explained and some background information to the study is provided. Sections 4 and 5 are devoted to the analysis of the nude photograph as a form of socially significant action which invokes pragmatic inference. Section 6 discusses the social practice in question in light of the expectancies² of the moral order. Finally, in Section 7, a summary of the findings as well as a discussion are provided.

2. The moral order and impoliteness

It has long been argued that the moral order constitutes one of the central features of human societies. By and large, the moral order encompasses “any system of obligations that defines and organises the proper – *good, right, virtuous* – relations among individuals and groups in a community” (Davis, 2008: 17; italics added; cf. Kádár, 2017). Domenici and Littlejohn (2006, cited in Culpeper, 2011: 38) point out that the moral order is a “socially constructed set of understandings we carry with us from situation to situation.” As such, the moral order is *moral* precisely because “it guides our sense of right and wrong, good and bad”, and it is an *order* precisely because “it is reflected in a patterned set of personal actions” (Domenici and Littlejohn, 2006, cited in Culpeper, 2011: 38).

Garfinkel (1964: 225) views the moral order as consisting of “the rule governed activities of everyday life.” In other words, for us, as members of society, the moral order includes “normal courses of action-familiar scenes of everyday affairs, the world of daily life known in common with others and with others taken for granted” (Garfinkel, 1964: 225). Thus, it would be wise to claim that the systems comprising the moral order have their roots in “religions, traditions (Romantic individualism, natural law theory, etc.), or ideologies” (Davis, 2008: 1). The moral order is expressed both explicitly and implicitly. Examples of the former include “institutional rules, laws, moral codes, and the like”, with examples of the latter being “rites, and rituals of social life” (Davis, 2008: 1). In this respect, it has recently been suggested that priority should be given by researchers to the explanation of the moral grounds on which attributions of (im)polite beliefs and behaviours are made (Haugh, 2015: 158). As Haugh (2015: 158, italics in the original) recommends, “theorising im/politeness-as-evaluation opens up the key question of what is *done* with such evaluations in interaction.”

In this regard, drawing on insight from Culpeper (2011), Kádár and Haugh (2013: 93) explain the various aspects of the moral order and how they are believed to influence how “people know (or at least think they know) something is polite, impolite and so on.” As the authors note, the first aspect is that (im)politeness involves “evaluative beliefs”, which specify what behaviour is expected in particular contexts. The second important aspect of the moral order is that it is socially grounded (Kádár and Haugh, 2013: 94). These socially grounded beliefs “are dispersed to varying degrees across various kinds of relational networks, ranging from a group of families and friends, to a localised community of practice, through to a larger, much more diffuse societal or cultural group” (Kádár and Haugh, 2013: 94). The last aspect is that beliefs derived from the moral order “have recourse to a set of (im)politeness evaluators: descriptors or metalanguage used by members to conceptualise their social world” (Kádár and Haugh, 2013: 94). In this context, it has been argued that interactants are, to a certain extent, bound to both an interactional and behavioural contract (cf. Fraser and Nolen, 1981). Consequently, the ‘right’ and ‘appropriate’ ways of members behaving in a particular manner generally go unnoticed, “until one member does more than is necessary” (Watts, 2010: 57) or infringes such behavioural contracts (Tayebi, 2016). As Haugh (2013: 57) explains, such commonly seen, but often unnoticed, expectations of the moral order are therefore “not something to be simply assumed by the analyst, but rather constitute an important object of study in their own right.”

It goes without saying that modern societies may well involve competing moral orders as people tend to belong to different social networks or communities, each of which representing different values and codes of conduct. This makes the study of the moral order a tremendously onerous task as it would be impossible for analysts to examine the infinite number of real-life situations, their underlying expectancies and the corresponding reactions. Nevertheless, it seems that computer-mediated communication gives researchers an opportunity to uncover a wide range of practices and expectations that are ‘morally organised’ (Jayyusi, 1991, cited in Haugh, 2013: 57) and are in line with “the socially standardized and standardizing, ‘seen but unnoticed,’ expected, background features of everyday scenes” (Garfinkel, 1964: 226).

While there are certainly differences between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face interactions, it has been demonstrated that “emotional and physiological responses to mediated conflict are analogous to those found in real face-to-face situations” (Reeves and Nass, 1996, cited in Blitvich, 2010: 558). As Locher (2010) notes, computer-mediated communication brings a ‘variety of group practices’ (Androutsopoulos, 2006: 421) to be explored to the fore, thus offering

² While we prefer to use the term ‘expectancy’ rather than ‘expectation’, throughout the paper the two might be used interchangeably. Technically speaking, ‘expectancy’ can be defined as a state of expectation. An ‘expectation’, however, is something which is likely to happen.

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