

# Interpersonal pragmatics and its link to (im)politeness research



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## Abstract

In light of the fact that politeness research has been on the map since the 1970s, this paper revisits some of the more recent developments. The scope of analysis has been widened from face-maintaining and face-enhancing data to instances of conflictual and face-aggravating behaviour. There is an increase in discussions about appropriate methodological and theoretical approaches to politeness, and we see a tendency to creatively draw on approaches from other fields (such as identity construction research). These trends have made the field an especially vibrant one that is currently witnessing a struggle to (re)define its focus. Two connected issues (clarifying and refining the scope of our research questions and efforts of developing an interdisciplinary approach within interpersonal pragmatics) are particularly discussed in an endeavour to outline potential research paths.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on politeness has been a set topic within pragmatics ever since Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) and Leech (1983; see also 2014), as the most influential early scholars, put the topic firmly on the linguistic agenda. In an endeavour to explain pragmatic variation in naturally-occurring data on the one hand (as part of the pragmatic turn) and still working within a mind set that proposed 'rules' and universals on the other, their thinking has influenced all following scholars within this field of interest. Roughly from the 1990s onwards, however, the scope of analysis has been widened from face-maintaining and face-enhancing data to instances of conflictual and face-aggravating behaviour. We have also witnessed an increase in discussions about appropriate methodological and theoretical approaches to politeness and a tendency to creatively draw on approaches from other fields (such as identity construction research). These trends have made the field an especially vibrant one that is currently witnessing a struggle to (re)define its focus. Culpeper's work on his own and with colleagues has shaped these discussions considerably since he was among the first to broaden the scope of interest to include impoliteness phenomena (e.g. 1996, 2005, 2010, 2011; Culpeper et al., 2003; Bousfield & Culpeper, 2008), to also work with fictional and historical data (e.g. 1996, 1998, 2010; Culpeper & Kádár, 2010; Culpeper & Demmen, 2011) and to ceaselessly question and discuss current wisdom within the research community (e.g. 2012; Culpeper & Haugh, 2014; or the current extensive project on the *Palgrave Handbook of Linguistic (Im)Politeness*, Culpeper, Haugh & Kádár). In what follows, I want to offer some thoughts on two connected issues that are currently being discussed and that bear further thinking: the scope of our research questions and efforts of developing an interdisciplinary approach within interpersonal pragmatics.

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## 2. Differences in the scope of our research questions

Although the early theories by Lakoff, Leech and Brown and Levinson are still very much used today, one of the achievements of what has been termed the ‘discursive approaches to politeness research’ was to again draw attention to the negotiability of the emic understandings of evaluative concepts such ‘polite’, ‘impolite’, ‘rude’, etc., and, in connection with this, to highlight the embeddedness of the observed social practices within their local situated framework of the moral order (see, e.g., Kádár and Haugh 2013, p. 95). It is of course true that all of the early theories at one stage or another allow for variability in understanding. This insight faded into the background once scholars started to apply the suggested ‘rules’ by rote. The discursive approaches try to allow for the fact that there are societal ideologies of politeness and impoliteness, while at the same time acknowledging that the practices we are studying may deviate from these more general norms. Culpeper (2008, p. 30) tried to pinpoint this by introducing the idea of personal, cultural, situational and co-textual norms that shape interaction. Kádár and Haugh (2013, p. 95) speak of (1) localised norms, (2) “community of practice/organisational or other group-based norms,” and societal/cultural norms as shaping the moral order that underpin all evaluations of politeness.

Some of the critics of the discursive approaches say that focusing on the interactants’ own understanding of (im)politeness ultimately leads to abandoning the study of (im)politeness.<sup>1</sup> For example, recently, Haugh (2013), who is also an advocate of the discursive approaches, used an interesting formulation in this connection. He deplores that Locher and Watts (2005, 2008) “are forced to retreat to only making claims that something is ‘open to evaluation’ as polite, impolite and so on” (italics added) and asks “[h]ow do we as analysts confidently identify instances of im/politeness?” (Haugh, 2013, p. 55). We have indeed used such phrases when describing interaction in situ, but do not consider this a defeat. Rather, it is an attempt to pay tribute to the *qualitative nature* of the analysis and the *discursive nature* of the concept. We are not ‘forced’ to give up, but phrasings such as ‘behaviour is open to evaluation as polite’ are the consequence of our theoretical position. We aim at offering a qualitative interpretation based on linguistic and non-linguistic cues that reveal the interpersonal stance that the interactants take towards each other and towards (im)politeness norms. This position is based on the belief that societal norms are in flux and negotiated in interaction (while acknowledging the importance of frames with their cognitive and historical nature). As outlined above, more widely shared beliefs can be co-present with local norms of a community of practice. Since we understand politeness as a judgement by interactants on one’s own and other’s behaviour that is grounded in a particular society’s beliefs and value system and its variants in local communities of practice, its surface forms will also be in flux (see also Kádár and Haugh, 2013, p. 69, on the idea of politeness as social practice). This has been shown in cultural differences in the understanding of what constitutes politeness or the mere fact that the concept has its own historicity and different connotations in different languages. From this perspective, it is not the primary aim to pinpoint particular instances of linguistic surface forms to be able to say that these are instances of undeniable polite (or impolite) behaviour. Instead, such research reveals the negotiation of relational meaning and the struggle over ideologies of adequate behaviour.

It is worthwhile to keep in mind that scholars differ in their research agendas. The early theories used the term ‘politeness’ as a shorthand to describe much more fundamental processes of meaning making. The question raised by Haugh above is thus narrower in scope than the ones raised in the early theories of politeness, which, inspired by and contributing to the pragmatic turn, wanted to address pragmatic variation in general. Lakoff suggested her three rules of politeness in connection with Grice’s CP and analogous to syntactic rules of language use. Leech proposed his Politeness Principle as one of the pillars of his theoretical framework ‘Interpersonal Rhetoric’, which aimed at explaining how people create meaning, i.e. not just the creation of politeness. In Brown and Levinson’s approach, we see the introduction of the concept of ‘face’ and psychological wants of involvement and distancing. All approaches highlight constraints on interaction (e.g. closeness and distance, power differences, the ranking of the imposition within its cultural context) and thus contribute to theorising how relationships are indexed through linguistic choices and how such linguistic cues will lead to certain interpersonal interpretations. In this spirit of the broader approach to studying sociality and (linguistic) relationship construction, scholars have worked with concepts such as facework, rapport management or relational work. To describe this field of research, Graham and I speak of ‘Interpersonal Pragmatics,’ by which we mean a relational/interpersonal perspective on studying interaction (Locher and Graham, 2010, p. 2; see also Haugh et al., 2013, p. 9), no matter which concepts you use for analysis. Adopting an interpersonal perspective does not mean that one has to exclusively focus on (im)politeness concerns, but it may well be a focus.

In recent years, scholars have adopted a number of theoretical concepts and positions in order to discuss data with an interpersonal lens (some more, some less compatible with each other, and all going beyond the classical politeness approaches). Arundale (2010a,b), for example, develops a face-constituting theory, that, as he clearly states, is not

<sup>1</sup> For arguments against this view, see Locher (2012, pp. 51–53).

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