Impoliteness and taking offence in initial interactions

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Abstract

The notion of "offence" lies at the core of current models of impoliteness. Yet is also well acknowledged that being impolite is not necessarily the same thing as being offended. In this paper, it is suggested that previous work on *causing* offence (Culpeper, 2011) can be usefully complemented by an analysis of *taking* offence. It is proposed that taking offence can be productively examined with respect to a model of (im)politeness as interactional social practice (Haugh, 2015). On this view, taking offence is analysed in part as a social action in and of itself, which means those persons registering or sanctioning offence in an interaction, whether explicitly or implicitly, can themselves be held morally accountable for this taking of offence. It is further suggested that taking offence as a form of social action can be productively theorised as a pragmatic act which is invariably situated with respect to particular activity types and interactional projects therein (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014). This position is illustrated by drawing from analyses of initial interactions amongst speakers of (American and Australian) English who are not previously acquainted. It is suggested that ways in which taking offence are accomplished both afforded and constrained by the demonstrable orientation on the part of participants to agreeability in the course of getting acquainted.
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1. Impoliteness and offence

The notion of "offence" lies at the core of current models of impoliteness. Bousfield (2008:72), for instance, elects to treat "the intention of the speaker (or 'author') to 'offend'" as synonymous with "threaten[ing]/damag[ing] face" (p.72), while Culpeper (2011, 2015) develops a theoretical account of impoliteness and causing offence. Yet it is also well acknowledged that being impolite is not necessarily the same thing as giving offence, and that participants may or may not take offence in response to ostensibly impolite talk or conduct (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 2011; Haugh, 2010a). Indeed, Bousfield (2008) has argued that "it is both a priority and a challenge for future research to test the perlocutionary and interactional offensive effects of linguistic impoliteness" (p.82). The relationship between the impoliteness and offence thus needs more careful attention from researchers.

Despite its evident importance for impoliteness research, however, the notion of offence has generally been noted only in passing rather than being examined in any great depth to date by researchers, with the notable exception of work by Culpeper. While not doing justice to the nuanced and complex account he develops in his monograph, impoliteness is essentially construed by Culpeper (2011) as a particular attitudinal stance on the part of speakers, while offence is analysed as both (a) an emotional response on the part of recipients that varies in degree of intensity (e.g. a *feeling* of anger, displeasure or annoyance that is caused by an offending event), or as (b) a source of such feelings (e.g. a *source* of feelings of anger, displeasure or annoyance). Given studies of impoliteness in interaction have indicated that participants have a range of different response options in the face of (perceived) impoliteness (e.g. Culpeper et al., 2003:1563; Bousfield, 2008:219; Dobs and Blitvich, 2013:126), it is evident that "taking offence" is something that is predicated on a complex interplay of different factors.

Culpeper (2011) proposes that one key factor that underpins the degree to which offence may be legitimately taken is related to the activity type (Levinson, 1979) in which the impoliteness event occurs. He suggests that impoliteness may be

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sanctioned or legitimised in particular contexts (e.g. army training) (p.217). However, he goes on to point out that "this does not mean to say that any impoliteness is *neutralised*, i.e. that the target will not take offence at perceived face-attack. . .people can and do still take offence in such situations, even if there are theoretical reasons why they should not" (p.217, emphasis added). That participants may take offence even though "there are theoretical reasons why they should not" (p.217) is suggested by Culpeper to be a function of the fact that "when experiencing impoliteness, it is difficult to see it *in context*, and so it is still possible for it to cause offence" (p.218, original emphasis). That is to say, "context in many cases is likely to be overwhelmed by the salience of impoliteness behaviours" (p.219).

However, while the salience of particular features of the context, including the activity type in question, may well differ between producers and targets of (ostensible) impoliteness, it is important to bear in mind that *causing* and *taking* offence are not one in the same thing. In the former case, it is the speaker who is exercising his or her socially-mediated agency, while in the latter case it is the recipient, with respect to a particular action trajectory (Mitchell, Forthcoming; Mitchell and Haugh, 2015). To put it another way, while causing offence is a social action initiated by a speaker through various kinds of impoliteness triggers (Culpeper, 2015), taking offence can be understood as a social action initiated by the recipient in which he or she construes the actions or conduct of the prior speaker (or some other person or group of persons) as offensive. Although a complex model outlining the range of different impoliteness triggers that may cause offence has been developed (Culpeper, 1996, 2005, 2011, 2015), our understanding of the interactional dynamics of taking offence, while acknowledged as important (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 2011) is much more circumscribed.

In this paper, I propose that taking offence can be productively examined with respect to a model of (im)politeness as interactional social practice (Haugh, 2007, 2013, 2015; Kádár and Haugh, 2013). On this view, taking offence is analysed as a social action in and of itself distinct from any feelings of offence a participant may or may not experience. This means that those persons registering and sanctioning offence in a particular interaction are not only holding another person (or group of persons) accountable for causing offence, but can themselves be held morally accountable for this taking of offence. I suggest that taking offence as a form of social action can be productively theorised as a pragmatic act which is invariably situated with respect to particular activity types and interactional projects therein (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014). I illustrate this position drawing from analyses of initial interactions amongst speakers of (American and Australian) English who are not previously acquainted, with the view that this thereby makes a contribution to our understanding of the pragmatics of impoliteness across Englishes. In doing so, it lays preliminary groundwork for exploring the potential relevance of "taking offence" for the pragmatics of "impoliteness" in other languages and cultures, and thus for a more general theorisation of (im)politeness.

2. Taking offence as a pragmatic act

Culpeper (2011) touches upon *offence* in his analysis of impoliteness metadiscourse in the course of discussing the semantic domain of *offensive*, and how it intersects with *rude*, (*verbally*) *aggressive* and (*verbally*) *abuse*, although interestingly not with *impoliteness* (pp.80–83). In doing so, he focuses on offence as both an emotional response on the part of recipients and as a source of such feelings. This echoes lay definitions of *offence* and *offensive*.[1]

Building on this, *taking offence* as a social action can be analysed from the perspective of pragmatic act theory (Mey, 2001). According to Mey (2001), pragmatic acts are afforded by "the situation being able to 'carry' them" (p.224). A pragmeme is a "general situation prototype capable of being executed in a situation", which consists of an activity part and a textual part, which when instantiated in a particular situated context constitutes a "pract" (Mey, 2001:221). In the case of taking offence, there are arguably two key activities involved, namely, registering and sanctioning offence (Haugh, 2015). Registering offence encompasses an affective stance, that is, indicating a negative emotive state of "feeling bad", which includes displeasure, annoyance, hurt, anger, and so on (cf. Culpeper, 2011:69). Sanctioning offence encompasses a moral stance, that is, a moral claim of a prior transgression, affront, misdeed and such like on the part of another participant (Haugh, 2015; Kádár and Márquez-Reiter, 2015). The various ways in which these two activities underpinning the taking of offence can be accomplished lie on a continuum of pragmatic explicitness (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014; Culpeper, 2015), ranging from different forms of metapragmatic comments through to various types of (im)politeness implicatures. These practices are, however, invariably *afforded* by particular situations. In order to better understand those affordances or constraints, then, such practices are arguably more productively analysed as situated with respect to various kinds of sociocultural knowledge schema, including activity types (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014).

An activity type involves "any culturally recognised activity", specifically, "a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded events with *constraints* on participants, setting, and so on, but above all on that kinds of allowable contributions" (Levinson, 1979:368, original emphasis). The relevance of activity types for the

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[1] According to the Oxford Dictionary of English Online (2015), *offence* originates from Latin *offēnsa* (transgression, misdeed, injury, wrong, affront) being borrowed from Middle French offence, while *offensive*, that is, liable to cause offence, subsequently emerged by the 16th century. Early attested usage in the 14th century indicates four senses of *offence* that are still in use today: (1) attacking or assailing, (2) causing or experiencing a negative emotional state, (3) moral (and legal) transgressions, and (4) sources of those negative emotional states.