



Call centre interaction: A case of sanctioned face attack?

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigate a sub-corpus of call centre interactions building on and extending the work of Jagodziński (2013) and Archer (2008, 2011a,b). Our aim is to show (i) how the institution's tacit acceptance of impoliteness and verbal aggression, on the part of callers, can lead to a form of institutional sanctioning, (ii) how the sting of impoliteness/verbal aggression is neutralised for some agents, in the course of conflictive customer service interactions – but not all, and (iii) possible reasons for this (non)-neutralisation. Our goal is to provide real-life evidence of: how impoliteness and/or verbal aggression are performed in the call centre, the extent to which they are mutually related, and how they link with the notion of instrumentality. In this way we present our own understanding of concepts which, although they have been used in im/politeness research for some time, are still relatively under-researched in real-world contexts such as the call centre.

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1. Introduction

The first order and second order approaches to im/politeness are now well known (Kádár and Haugh, 2013: 41, Haugh, 2013: 61), as are some of the criticisms posed by first order researchers in respect to second order approaches, and second order researchers in respect to first order approaches (for an overview, see Bousfield, 2010 and Terkourafi, 2011). Some scholars – for example, Terkourafi (2011) and Haugh (2012: 119–128) – have also focused on the nuanced interrelationships between both approaches, and pointed in particular to the inherent oversimplification of the first-order/second-order division present in contemporary face/im-politeness research. In this paper, however, we will concern ourselves with Mills' (2003) assertion that some second order researchers (e.g. Culpeper, 1996, Culpeper et al., 2003) have concentrated specifically on interactions that are representative of activity types or, more generally, of Communities of Practice (henceforth CofPs) for which face attack is central. This is problematic for Mills (2003: 9, 136–137) – if that face attack is judged to be impoliteness by default, as she (i) considers impoliteness to be a *deviation of the norms of a particular CofP*, and, hence, (ii) argues that behaviour should not be called impoliteness when it is not considered by participants to be deviant given the context and, more specifically, the specific normative practices (i.e., is *sanctioned* in some way). Bousfield (2007: 2189, 2010: 105) and Culpeper (2005: 65) have countered Mills' criticisms, in turn, by suggesting that she may be in danger of confusing sanctioned (linguistic) behaviour with neutralised (linguistic) behaviour – when the two are not necessarily synonymous. In fact, Bousfield (2010: 105) goes as far as to suggest that:

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Just because [impolite or aggressive verbal behaviour] is normal (as in *and only* in the sense of ‘commonly or regularly occurring over a period of time’) does not in any way either *sanction* or *neutralise* the harm caused. By the same token, face-threat can be normal and central to the discourse type and be *sanctioned*, and in neither case need it be necessarily *neutralised*.

Similarly, Culpeper (2008) has pointed out that sanctioning and neutralisation are not only different but that sanctioning may affect the interlocutors differently in asymmetric situations (for a similar argument, see also Limberg, 2008). This paper explores one such asymmetric situation – customer service interaction and, more specifically, inbound phone calls between customers for an airline and call centre agents acting as representatives for the airline¹ – where a level of verbal face attack does appear to be sanctioned, or at least tacitly accepted, but only when instigated by the customer-caller (see Jagodziński, 2013). The objective of our study is fourfold, namely, to determine:

1. The extent to which sanctioned (or tacitly accepted) face attack on the part of callers is neutralised, from the call-centre agents’ perspective (if at all).
2. Whether such face attack is best considered to be *verbal aggression* as opposed to *impoliteness* (given the normative practices of the call centre in question).
3. Whether the call centre agents reciprocate with face attack at all and, if so, what type(s).
4. The extent to which the face attacks we identified – sanctioned/tacitly accepted by the company or otherwise – were instrumental.

Objective (4), in particular, means that we can address the difference(s) between instrumental impoliteness – that is, impoliteness which fulfils a specific, goal-oriented function (Beebe, 1995) – and impoliteness which primarily constitutes a venting of negative feelings akin to an emotional outburst or flare-up. For examples of the latter, we need look no further than:

- (a) Christian Bale’s “expletive-laden rant at a crew member” during the filming of a Terminator movie, a transcript of which was published in the online edition of *The Telegraph* (dated 4th February 2009), and
- (b) the answer-phone message that actor Alec Baldwin apparently left for his daughter, Ireland, who was 11-years-old at the time (reproduced, and discussed at length, in Culpeper, 2011: 223–26).²

However, we might note Bousfield’s claim (2010: 106), here, that impoliteness is never issued for its own sake – even when that impoliteness constitutes a rant, as in these examples: rather, “all impoliteness is” understood to be “instrumental in that it is co-constructed within specific contexts for (extra-)linguistic reasons” (i.e., is strategic in some way). If we accept this position we might want to argue, for example, that Bale’s actions, in respect to (a), were meant to serve as an implicit warning to any onlookers not to cross him in any way.

As part of Objective (2), we will be drawing on recent work by Archer (2008, 2011a) as a means of distinguishing impoliteness – characterised as it is within second order research by a primary intent to cause face damage (following Goffman, 1967) – from other acts of strategic verbal aggression – where the intent to inflict face damage is not the primary intent. We should point out, however, that (following Grimshaw, 1990: 281) we focus here on the *plausible* intentions of the participants, as determined by the (as optimally-complete) record of an encounter in its ethnographic context as is possible: thereby enabling us to make inferences which are “for-the-most-practical-purposes...no less plausible than those” made by the participants involved. The connection between im/politeness and intentions has been discussed by, for example, Culpeper (2008) and Terkourafi (2008), and usefully summarised by Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009: 273–274). We will not replicate those discussions here beyond echoing Culpeper’s (2008: 19) observation in respect to the shortcomings of classic politeness theories, which “tend to focus on speaker intentions as reconstructed “faithfully” by hearers (ignoring the co-construction of meanings in the interaction between speaker and hearer)”; and his assertion that it is the *perception* of intentions rather than intentions themselves which constitutes the crucial factor in the evaluation of a potential face attack (Culpeper, 2008: 32). Archer provides the example of cross-examining lawyers who will often use an indirect strategy to threaten face, and in a way that indicates “some degree of contempt” on their part (Penman, 1990: 21). Because they need to avoid legal censure, however, they will be careful to ensure that one attributable intention does not clearly outweigh

¹ The outsourcing company and the airline have requested that we maintain their anonymity.

² Such behaviour does not appear to be culture specific. In Poland, in 2009, for example, a co-worker of a well-known TV presenter covertly recorded the latter attacking them. The recording was then leaked to the Internet (see <http://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artukul/kamil-durczok-obrocil-sprawe-w-zart-wideo>) (accessed 19.03.14).

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