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Impoliteness in polylogal interaction: Accounting for face-threat witnesses' responses

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Abstract

Though, in recent years, impoliteness research has embraced a view of impoliteness as dynamically co-constructed in interaction, the role of impoliteness in polylogal discourse is still in need of further examination. Drawing from a corpus of naturally occurring classroom discourse, this paper uses a genre approach (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010) to examine the role of face-threat witnesses in small-group discussion practices among adolescents. Our research shows that face-threat witnesses respond to impoliteness in complex and dynamic ways that are integral to the co-construction of impoliteness, and that would have been missed entirely if the focus of our analysis had been purely dyadic. In view of our findings, we propose a refinement of extant models of response options (Culpeper et al., 2003; Bousfield, 2007, 2008) that incorporates the response options available to face-threat witnesses, thus moving beyond the dyad. Accounting for the multifunctionality of impoliteness in polylogal interaction allows for an understanding of impoliteness as constitutive, not just disruptive, of social life. With further application, our proposed refinement of extant models can help expand research that examines manifestations of impoliteness in a wide range of (non)institutional, polylogal discourse.

Keywords: Impoliteness; Polylogal discourse; Classroom interaction; Small-group discussion; Adolescent

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to further current understanding of impoliteness by analyzing how witnesses to the face-threat (Goffman, 1967:27, 125) or impoliteness act respond to impoliteness and to propose a revision to extant models (Culpeper et al., 2003; Bousfield, 2007). In-depth research on impoliteness is relatively recent (Culpeper, 1996, 2011; Bousfield, 2008), and it has inherited, as it were, some of the methodological traits of traditional politeness scholarship, among those a focus on dyadic interaction (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010, 2013; Dynel, 2012; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2011; Watanabe, 2001). However, many interactions are likely to be polylogal (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004) – i.e. they involve three or more participants. Polylogal interactions provide interesting sites for research, as was pointed out by Goffman (1981:133): ''The relation(s) between speaker, addressed recipients and unaddressed recipient(s) are complicated, significant, and not much explored''. These relations remain, to this day, mostly unexplored. In what pertains impoliteness, an analysis of face-threat witnesses' responses to impoliteness helps us better understand the dynamic ways in which impoliteness meanings are co-constructed in interaction and impoliteness interpretations arise. This is what we set out to

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do here by applying a genre approach to im/politeness (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010, 2013) – which understands genres not as forms but as frames for social action – to the analysis of face-threat witnesses' responses as they engaged in one genre practice of classroom discourse, namely small group discussion. Our results strongly suggest that current models of responses to impoliteness, mostly based on dyadic interaction, cannot fully account for the complexity and multifunctionality of impoliteness in unfolding discourse.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of im/politeness models both from a politeness1 (Eelen, 2001; Locher and Watts, 2005; Mills, 2003) and a politeness2 (Brown and Levinson, 1978/1987) standpoint; Mills (2011) claims that all share a discursive orientation. Along the same lines, Haugh (2010) sees recent im/politeness models as social-constructionist in nature. Furthermore, there seems to be a growing consensus that ''judgment is at the heart of politeness and impoliteness behaviour'' (Mills, 2011:48). However, ascertaining participants' judgments presents a challenge for im/politeness scholars. Analysts can enhance their understanding of participants' judgments of im/politeness with survey or interview data, but these instruments still do not assess judgments as they are made in interaction, and can thus be problematic. The best option seems to be to focus on participants' unelicited, linguistic responses as the potential im/polite act occurs. Previous scholarship has examined participants' responses to impoliteness (Bousfield, 2007, 2008; Culpeper et al., 2003) and put forth a model of response options that describes the ways in which a face-threat recipient may respond or not to an impolite act (see Appendix A). If s/he chooses to respond, the recipient can accept or deny the impoliteness act. In denying the act, s/he can come to a compromise in hopes to end the conflict or counter defensively (see Appendix B for a list of defensive strategies) or offensively with reciprocated impoliteness. Due to the polylogal nature of many interactions, however, solely focusing on the face-threat recipient's response does not seem sufficient to grasp the dynamics of im/politeness.

Recently and along the same lines as Goffman (1967, 1981), im/politeness scholarship has introduced a number of hearer or participant typologies (Bousfield, 2008; Dynel, 2010, 2012; Kádár and Haugh, 2013) in an effort to accommodate participation frameworks that extend beyond the dyad. Following Thomas (1986), Bousfield (2008:175) differentiates between (a) the addressee, to whom the utterance is directed, and the hearer, a ratified participant in the interaction; (b) the addressee and the audience, who has no or reduced speaking rights; and (c) bystanders, individuals known to be in earshot but not ratified participants in the interaction, and overhearers, individuals who are within earshot unbeknownst to the ratified interlocutors. With a single turn as her unit of analysis, Dynel (2010, 2012:168) proposes a hearer typology that first differentiates ratified and unratified participants. Ratified participants consist of the speaker and hearer/listeners. The latter is further categorized as either an addressee or a third-party participant. In line with Bousfield (2008), she then delineates nonratified participants as overhearers, either bystanders or eavesdroppers. In her analysis of film discourse, Dynel (2012:172) also distinguishes recipients who comprise the intended viewing audience and metarecipients, such as academics or film critics, who analyze the dialog of the film as privileged viewers. Dynel (2012:187) notes that in polylogal interaction ''an utterance may involve different face-threatening acts, as viewed by different hearers, and not all of such acts must be speaker-intended''. This is one reason Kádár and Haugh (2013:75) recommend a move to discuss ''*understandings* of politeness. . .rather than of a single understanding''. They propose a similar framework of participation status. Rather than using the terms speaker/hearer, Kádár and Haugh (2013:79) use the terms producer/recipient in order to avoid a bias toward spoken interaction. Like Dynel (2012), they categorize ratified recipients as either an addressee or a side participant. They account for one more distinction in unratified recipients identifying categories for bystanders, listeners-in, and eavesdroppers.

Though our paper also aims to push analysis of impoliteness beyond the dyad, we have chosen to conceptualize participant roles with a different set of terms that better suit our data, analysis, and proposed refinements to Bousfield's (2007) model of participant response options to impoliteness. While our analysis considers impoliteness as it is co-constructed across discourse, the unit of analysis represented in the model consists of the initial impoliteness act(s) and the responses from both the receiver of the face-threat and any other participants in the interaction, ratified or not. Rather than using *speaker* or *producer*, we use the term *face-threat initiator*, which allows for the accommodation of different modes of communication. Additionally, we use *face-threat initiator* in an attempt not to privilege this role over those played by other participants in the *co*-construction of impoliteness. Rather than using the term, *addressee*, we use *face-threat recipient* as the face-threat recipient may not be the individual the face-threat initiator addresses directly, and in polylogal interaction, all ratified participants may be considered addressees. Finally, we use the term *face-threat witness* to discuss any participant, ratified or un-ratified who witnesses the initial FTA. We use the term face-threat witness to place more emphasis on his/her integral role in the co-construction of impoliteness rather than on his/her role as hearer. Though he does not present the word *witness* as a technical term, Goffman (1967:27) uses it to point out that the face-work following a face-threat can be carried out not only by the offender and the individual whose face was threatened but also by a witness. We do not mean for the term witness to be understood in a passive sense but rather as a position in which an individual can also ''bear witness''. We think the term *face-threat witness* may be less problematic than terms like *third-party* or *side participant* which may imply that the individual is of secondary importance to the interaction. Face-threat witnesses are still active participants within the interaction, and their roles within the interaction are as important to the analysis as the