

Linguistic Impoliteness And Rudeness II (LIAR II)

Panel Abstracts

PANEL: IMPOLITENESS IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Panel convenor: Miriam Locher (University of Basel)

Introduction: Impoliteness in computer-mediated communication

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The new linguistic possibilities of interacting in a synchronic or asynchronous manner in an online environment have fascinated linguistics for over two decades. While there is already a large body on interpersonal issues discussed in the linguistic literature, the topic of politeness and impoliteness has not yet received the attention it deserves. In many instances, researchers have employed Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) model to discuss the character of face-threatening instances, as for example in the keynote lecture by Susan Herring, one of the prominent researchers on online language, at the Meeting of the International Pragmatics Association at Gothenburg in summer 2007. More recent developments in politeness research, as discussed in the *Journal of Politeness Research*, however, have only rarely been transferred to an analysis of online interaction. It seems timely to move our attention to online interaction for the following three reasons.

(1) The newer research trends highlight the discussion of norms in the light of politeness/impoliteness research and the question of what constitutes appropriateness (cf., e.g., Spencer-Oatey 2007; Locher and Watts 2005; Bousfield and Locher 2008). As a consequence, online interaction is such an exciting research field because we have access to written records on the negotiation of norms in discussions about Netiquette, such as for example the rules of forum contributions, and we see interactants publicly discuss violations of such rules. By studying such negotiations, we can further our understanding of what constitutes politeness in a particular context and what factors might play a role in assessing politeness and impoliteness.

(2) Since the conceptualizations of politeness and impoliteness issues are no longer only restricted to the study of mitigation strategies, the entire spectrum of interpersonal negotiation is open for linguistic scrutiny. It will be of special interest to investigate how interpersonal issues of politeness and impoliteness are commented on in online interaction, and how these comments tie in with identity construction and the negotiation of face. Both aspects have been argued to be closely connected to politeness considerations (cf., e.g., Spencer-Oatey 2007) and are in need of further research.

(3) The nature of synchronic or asynchronous platforms, and the fact that many forms of online communication are publicly available are likely to influence the way in which relational work is realized. It is thus of interest to establish in what way exactly computer-mediated communication might differ from face-to-face interaction with respect to the restrictions that the medium imposes on relational work / facework and the consequences of these restrictions on linguistic choices. For example, it may well be that we find more comments on violations of norms of appropriateness in online communication than in the data on face-to-face communication available to date (e.g., the British National Corpus), because the public nature forces interactants to defend themselves, while the non-proximity of the addressee provides a safety zone to make face-threatening moves. This field clearly warrants further research.

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“A THIEF and SCAMMER” or “schönen Dank” - (Im)politeness in British English and German online transactions

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Regarding the immense increase in “computer-mediated communication (CMC)” (Danet and Herring 2007: 1; Herring 1996: 1; Herring 2001: 612), it is certainly high time to extend research on (im)politeness to this new mode of communication. The work at hand thus wants to contribute to this underrepresented research area in investigating the face-threatening speech act of complaining (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987) in online situations. More precisely, the data comprises a total of 100 British English and 100 German complaints, which have been collected from the feedback forum of the online auction house eBay. The aim is to investigate how speakers formulate their online complaints, whether cross-cultural differences become apparent, and to discuss the findings in light of current research on (im)politeness (cf. Bousfield and Locher 2008; Culpeper et al. 2003; Locher 2006a, 2006b; Locher and Watts 2005; Spencer-Oatey 2005, 2007; Terkourafi 2008; Watts 2003). It will hence be considered to what extent the complaining behaviour found in the present data are open to an (im)polite interpretation or if it has to be classified as being appropriate/politic or overpolite (cf. Locher and Watts 2005: 12). It is argued that if one considers the particular online context in which the complaints occur, i.e. the specific communicative situation, the Netiquette of eBay, as well as the communicative norms that have developed among members of the eBay community, the evaluation of the complaining behaviour differs from views of traditional politeness theories (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987; Leech 1983). In other words, many of the complaints which, according to Brown and Levinson’s (1987) face-saving view and also Leech’s (1983) conversational contract view would be regarded as impolite, have to be judged as appropriate given this specific online context.

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Avoiding rude and aggressive messages in a French-speaking transvestite website

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In this presentation, I propose to reflect on the representations of feminine politeness as displayed on a French-speaking transvestite website, especially regarding members' avoidance of rude and aggressive messages. Insofar as stereotyped representations on feminine identity and communication in western cultures involve notions of being nice, supportive and cooperative (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003; Mills 2005) whilst male speech is often described by researchers as more competitive and aggressive, I argue that transvestites use gender-coded traits of politeness such as positive politeness, apologies and compliments (Holmes 1995).

The data that I am currently working on is drawn from texts of introduction written by members of a virtual community of transvestites for a French-speaking website. I focus on a section of the website called '*Le coin des copines*' – literally 'girlfriend's corner' - in which more than 250 members posted letters of introduction with a picture in order to introduce themselves to other members. This is a first mean of contact for members of the website and a crucial point in time when one takes into account the fact that, for such websites, hostility often comes from outsiders who would not comply to the rules. With these texts, I am able to work on linguistic ideology and representations: expectations on *feminine* talk and politeness, reminiscent of the notion of *verbal hygiene* that Cameron (1994: 383) defines as: 'ways of using language [which] are functionally, aesthetically, or morally preferable

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to others'. The data is analysed using a pragmatic as well as a discourse analytic methodology. In the process, I focus on pragmatic markers: forms of address (feminine forms such as *amie*, *copine*, *consoeur*, use of inclusive pronoun 'nous') and the choice of vocabulary in order to respect a netiquette (overuse of *traditional* tokens of politeness) and avoid flaming.

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“Are we serious here? You are not worth talking to!” A study of conflictual disagreement in CMC

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This paper reports on an ongoing project on the study of impoliteness in asynchronous CMC contexts. We draw on data from two academic online discussion fora, addressing two overarching *Communities of Practice* (namely students and professional academics). 200 posts are collected from interactions where disagreement is explicitly marked.

Disagreement is the norm in the two fora and the topics the participants bring to discussion are typically highly controversial. Although we do not consider disagreement an *a priori* negatively marked act, it entails opposing views among the users and as such the escalation of disagreement can potentially conclude in breaching the norms of appropriate behaviour and be negatively evaluated by the participants. We discuss here unmitigated disagreement and we focus on instances where the exchanges become clearly confrontational. As Locher (2004: 143) suggests “unmitigated disagreement can occur in contexts where it is more important to defend one's point of view than to pay face consideration to the addressee”. We focus on the range of *oppositional strategies* the interactants employ in order to attack the face of their interlocutors and to counter face attacks in defending their opinions. Special attention is paid to the use of direct questions and discourse markers and we examine occurrences of both ‘impolite’ and ‘politic’ talk.

Our preliminary findings show that the strategies employed by the interactants indicate different judgements of what constitutes marked behaviour and are contingent on factors such as the overall purpose of communication, the topic of the forum, the relationship between participants and the dynamic personal and group identities which the interactants call upon in any given situation. We close this paper

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by providing a model that attempts to capture the dynamic nature of the strategies used in this particular CMC discourse context.

“Speak for yourself lazy, self important journalist!!!!” Impoliteness strategies in online newspaper comments

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Impolite and aggressive behaviour of anonymous users appears to be an important feature of online newspaper comments. This paper aims to investigate how impolite strategies, as identified by Culpeper (1996, 2005) and Bousfield (2008), are realized by participants in discussion sections of three online newspapers in the UK. Empirical data is drawn from user comments of *Guardian Online*, *Times Online* and *Telegraph Online*. The focus will be on how such impoliteness strategies are utilized by newspaper readers in order to attack the author of an article. Utterances like “Speak for yourself lazy, self important journalist!!!!” or “Having taken time to read your article I can honestly say that I feel depressed that people like you actually exist in this country” will be evaluated building on Culpeper’s catalogue of categories (1996, 2005) as well as Bousfield’s (2008) extended framework of Culpeper’s categories which include the strategies of *criticizing*, *enforcing role shift* and *challenging*. Preliminary analysis suggests that impolite strategies frequently involve attacks against the author’s quality of writing and expertise. Often strategies as defined by Culpeper and Bousfield are employed to express such a face attack. In line with Locher and Bousfield’s (2008: 8) approach of “impoliteness as an exercise of power”, this paper proposes that in this situational context impoliteness strategies serve as a tool for online commentators to challenge power relations and roles established in the era of traditional media. Results will show that this specific communication mode allows for a form of digital discourse to evolve that redefines the ways of who can say what to whom in what way.

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“I’m here to kill time and to piss people like you off you loser”. Trolls and flames in synchronous computer-mediated communication

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Computer-mediated communication (CMC), or communication that is sent and received by humans via networked computers such as desktops (December, 1997: 5,

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Ferris, 1997, Herring, 2003: 612) provides a rich area for the study of impoliteness and face-threat. Whilst CMC has many benefits, such as allowing for quick and easy communication by those spatially and temporally separated (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler & Barab, 2002: 371), it also seems predisposed towards higher levels of aggression than other forms of interaction such as face-to-face (FtF) for a number of reasons: CMC generally lacks FtF cues such as tone of voice, eye contact and gestures (Herring, 2003: 612, Zdenek, 1999: 390), and this allows the greater chance of misinterpretation, whilst the anonymity that CMC offers may encourage a sense of impunity, a loss of self-awareness and greater likelihood that the user may act upon normally inhibited impulses, an effect also known as deindividuation (Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984, Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler & McGuire, 1986, Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Further, whilst politeness and, to a lesser degree, impoliteness within *asynchronous* CMC (ACMC) such as emails, newsgroups, messageboards and blogs have received some attention (e.g. Graham, 2003, 2007, Hatipoğlu, 2007), both *synchronous* CMC (SCMC) and (im)politeness within SCMC remains very under-researched (see however Merchant, 2001, Zdenek, 1999). This paper attempts to redress this balance slightly by presenting the preliminary findings of an analysis of a 2,000-word SCMC corpus of chatroom data. (This sample is taken from a 250,000-word corpus which forms the basis of a PhD in online conflict.) Within the data, eleven conflicts were identified and this paper focuses on *why* those conflicts occurred, and for what purpose. Early results suggest that online impoliteness in this SCMC environment can be motivated by a number of reasons such as reinforcing social hierarchies, group norms and entertainment. This paper specifically focuses on the phenomena of *trolling*, where a user, or users, deliberately attempt to bring about conflict for the purposes of entertainment, and *flaming*, or the use of hostile or aggressive language by users.

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Politeness in Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication ("Chat")

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The increasing role of digital media for interpersonal communication has radically reconfigured patterns of social interaction. The paper focuses on politeness and face in digital communication. Using data from synchronous computer-mediated (CMC) classroom discussions, the study explores politeness strategies advanced foreign language learners use as they negotiate a group consensus. In their desire for approval, ratification and appreciation, participants seek to present a positive self-image to others (i.e., positive face) and at the same time, they seek to pursue self-determination (i.e., negative face) (Goffman 1967). The demands associated with the particular classroom task, namely disagreeing, yielding to others and pressuring others to do so, thus threaten participants' positive and negative face, respectively. The paper will look at the politeness strategies participants employ to mitigate or redress these unavoidable face-threatening acts.

The large body of research on politeness in oral interaction (for an overview, see Kasper 2005, Locher & Bousfield 2008) may provide models adaptable to the study of politeness in CMC. Yet, there are important caveats. Whereas oral conversation makes available a range of microstrategies, including nodding, backchanneling and turntaking, CMC participants are restricted to a reduced nonverbal repertoire. Considering linguistic indices of politeness as well as activities such as the principle of recipient design and preference organization, I explore how participants jointly manage politeness in CMC. In contrast to early research (e.g., Daft et al. 1987) which suggested that CMC environments might not be suited to promoting positive socio-emotional relations and would therefore best serve transactional applications, my results demonstrate a) that participants do facework in CMC and b) that participants do facework in task-oriented activities.

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"Am I detecting some sarcasm from U????": Impoliteness in the responses to the Obama Reggaeton YouTube video.

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The study of impoliteness no longer has a 'Cinderella status' in pragmatics. Numerous studies have been conducted over the past five years based on different cultures, contexts, genders and linguistic groups. Although general impoliteness and flaming have been the object of much CMC research (see among others Dyer et al 1995; Herring 1994; O'Shea et al 1992), current trends in linguistic impoliteness within the pragmatics tradition have not often tackled digital contexts, especially those that are generally referred to as Web 2.0 environments where newer applications of web technologies aim to enhance collaboration and functionality (but see Garces-Blitvich 2008; 2009; forthcoming). Video-sharing sites, such as *You Tube*, are both a case in point and the context within which our study is based.

This paper examines impoliteness in a corpus of c. 1,500 *You Tube* postings in response to the so-called 'Obama Reggaeton' video, which was released during the 2008 US democratic primaries. Our *You Tube* corpus contains postings in both Spanish and English. Two levels of analysis are conducted. Firstly, we examine impoliteness in discussion threads (more than two related postings), focussing on their opening, middle and closing stages (cf. e.g. Bousfield, 2008) and exploring the relationship between the anonymity of the medium and the different realisations of impoliteness. The relationship between on-line anonymity and impoliteness has been explored in other related fields- Papacharissi 2004; Lee 2007; Lange 2007 - but not as extensively within pragmatics. Those papers address incivility or impoliteness but they do not describe how it is achieved linguistically. Secondly, we examine perceptions of impoliteness by *You Tube* users (surfers) that did not directly participate in the discussion threads in our corpus. To this end, we analyse the findings of an impoliteness perception survey that was administered to speakers of English and Spanish. Preliminary findings point both to impoliteness being unmarked behaviour (but see Fraser 1990) in each of the three stages of the discussion threads examined and to its being interpreted as intrinsic to the 'activity type' (Levinson 1992) of web-mediated public debate.