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# Introduction

## Bridging theory and practice in im/politeness research

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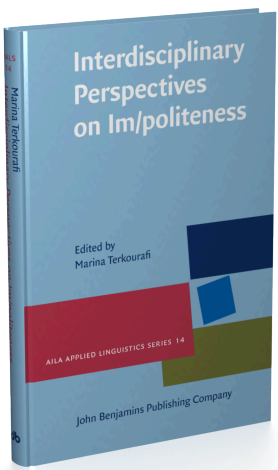


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# Introduction

## Bridging theory and practice in im/politeness research

Marina Terkourafi

Perhaps more than any other area of language study, im/politeness research lies at the intersection of several disciplines. Since its emergence over four decades ago,[1] linguists, psychologists, sociologists, neuroscientists, legal experts, philologists, computational scientists and second language teachers, among others, have been keen to unlock its secrets, each from their own perspective.

This has been both a blessing and a curse for im/politeness studies, for different reasons. A blessing because, like any object of scientific inquiry, our understanding of im/politeness is enhanced every time it is lit from different angles, especially when findings from different disciplines converge on the same underlying explanation – much like triangulating results using different methodologies helps to increase our confidence in them. At the same time, this cross-disciplinary interest has, not infrequently, muddled the definitional waters of what is meant by im/politeness and what is, ultimately, the object of investigation – something that can, of course, just as easily occur within the boundaries of a single discipline.

A second reason why the study of im/politeness has, to some extent, been a victim of its own cross-disciplinary appeal is that the studies produced are typically presented at widely diverse venues, with little chance of reaching audiences beyond the dedicated attendees of the corresponding conferences and the specialized readerships of the corresponding journals. In the past five years alone, articles touching on im/politeness have appeared in journals as diverse as *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies, Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience, Journal of Language and Social Psychology, Journal of Pragmatics, Patient Education and Counseling, Research on Language and Social Interaction,* and *The International Journal of Press/Politics,* to

1. For the purposes of this introduction, Robin Lakoff's (1973) "The logic of politeness or minding your p's and q's" is taken as the landmark study that, by drawing attention to politeness phenomena in language, kicked off the new field.

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name a few – not to forget the dedicated *Journal of Politeness Research,* which celebrates its 10-year anniversary in 2015. Scholars interested in im/politeness thus run the risk of living in 'parallel universes,' reminiscent of the characters in the 1998 film "Sliding Doors," destined never to meet and unable to reach across and impact each other's state of knowledge.

This is where the present volume makes its primary contribution. By bringing together under the same roof the work of linguists, psychologists, neuroscientists, and second language experts, it hopes to provide readers with a snapshot of the possibilities for studying im/politeness in the 21st century and so to help create an impetus for new synergies that transcend disciplinary boundaries. It should be made clear from the outset, however, that such cross-disciplinary collaborations are still a desideratum for the future rather than a thing of the present. Other than the vastly influential work of Brown and Levinson (1978/1987), cross-disciplinary awareness of research on im/politeness is only just beginning to emerge. As such, the present selection is more akin to a patchwork than a delicately woven tapestry of complementary approaches – and the value of bringing these together lies in its potential to spark new lines of inquiry, perhaps even more so than in their reporting of independently obtained results.

It is in this interdisciplinary outlook that the volume also aligns itself with the tenets of Applied Linguistics, broadly defined. As Markee (1990: 316–317) highlights, what defines Applied Linguistics in a weak sense is not a commitment to any particular theoretical framework or even object of analysis. Any language-related phenomenon deemed worthy of investigation falls within the purview of Applied Linguistics, so long as the analysis combines insights from different disciplines and is carried out with a commitment to contributing to our understanding of real-world problems. More recently, Grabe has defined applied linguistics as a "practice-driven discipline that addresses language-based problems in real-world contexts" (2002: 10). In this sense, applied linguistics is "a discipline much in the way that many other disciplines are defined. It has a core and a periphery, and the periphery blurs into other disciplines that may or may not want to be allied" (ibid.). From the vantage point of im/politeness research, the other disciplines linguistics may be allied with – as the list of journals where related articles have also appeared readily attests – include psychology, education, sociology, neuroscience, computer science, management, economics, and political science. Adding to this the contribution of im/politeness studies to understanding pragmatic failure (Thomas 1983) and the social functions of polite and impolite language, and to promoting harmonious relations in several discourse domains, im/politeness emerges as a language-related problem that lies at the heart of the applied linguistics enterprise.

The volume is organized along methodological lines in three parts, with each part being preceded by a brief introduction that provides an overview of the evolution and advantages and disadvantages of the relevant methodologies. Part I covers self-reporting methodologies, which were arguably the first to be used in im/politeness research, and includes studies by Luchkina, Vergis and Terkourafi, and Burt, making use of DCTs, questionnaires, and interviews, respectively. Part II is dedicated to observational studies and includes studies by Yoon, Mitchell and Perelmutter making use of TV, email and online forum data. These studies also showcase the recent shift from the study of im/politeness in the field and in dyadic informal interaction to its study in public, multi-agent contexts and online. Finally, Part III introduces experimental methodologies and illustrates their use in im/politeness research through studies by Baxter, Raizen, Vergis, and Christianson, and Jiang and Zhou using reaction times, eye-tracking, and ERP data respectively. It ought to be noted that the small selection of studies in each Part is intended to illustrate rather than exhaust the range of methodologies available under each rubric. At the same time, the methodologies used can be intermeshed, as in Burt's chapter, which combines introspective interview data with observation of actual interaction, making use of self-reporting and observational data at the same time.

As this brief description illustrates, a variety of methodologies and media, ranging from face-to-face communication in private and in public and classroom interaction, to e-mail and Internet forum use, and both synchronic and diachronic analyses are represented in the current volume. Despite being diverse in their subject matter and methodological outlook, the chapters in this volume nevertheless share some of their premises and reach some common conclusions. To begin with, they are mindful of the fact that im/politeness is ultimately a matter of evaluation relevant to certain contextual parameters by actual language users and attempt to do justice to it by using a variety of empirical measures (listener's uptake, rating scales, questionnaire responses) to determine what these evaluations are. Several chapters also contextualize the expressions they are focusing on against broader systems of linguistic forms rather than analyzing them in isolation. They thus implicitly, if not explicitly, acknowledge that "there are gradations of polite and impolite behavior" (Leech 2014: 4–5). Finally, several chapters reveal a renewed appreciation for the conventional(ized) aspects of many im/polite expressions or, more broadly, im/politeness strategies, which seem to be an integral part of constructing one's identity and claiming membership in a group, on- and off-line. As the relationship between im/politeness – more specifically, face – and identity is currently hotly debated (cf. Spencer Oatey 2009, 2013; Blitvich 2013), these findings put the onus on theoretical frameworks to further elucidate the relationship

between the two. Crucially, a central goal of the present collection is to make a case for the relevance of all these types of data and of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to the ongoing theoretical debates in the field of im/politeness. As such, no single theoretical perspective is favored. Rather, the data are discussed in the light of a variety of theoretical frameworks (face-based, discursive, interactional, identity, frame-based), while insights are also drawn from neighboring fields, such as experimental psychology and cognitive science, in line with the volume's interdisciplinary promise. The result is, one hopes, as thought provoking as it is stimulating to read.

Many people contributed to bringing this project to fruition and ought to be thanked here. First of all, I would like to thank the authors, who patiently agreed to numerous rounds of reviews and revisions. This project belongs to you. I would also like to acknowledge the work of my editorial assistant, Staci Defibaugh, who contributed many good ideas and helped with brainstorming during various phases of this project, and Kate Lyons, who helped edit and format several of the chapters. I am especially indebted to Jonathan Culpeper for kindly agreeing to write the epilogue that closes the volume, adding further dimensions to the analyses presented in the preceding chapters. Further, I would like to thank the reviewers who gave generously of their time to read and comment on the chapters in their area of expertise. Although academic etiquette requires that you remain anonymous, your feedback on individual chapters contributed significantly to bringing them to their final form. Finally, I am grateful to the AILA Applied Linguistics series editor Rosa Manchón for taking this project on board and to Kees Vaes of John Benjamins who helped bring it to fruition. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Award Number 1225997. While only a modest step, given the size of the task, I hope it is in the right direction.

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