Conclusion

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11 *What's in a word?* Reflections about impoliteness and future directions

Abstract: This short piece, prompted by the chapters in this volume, considers the question whether impoliteness is more a matter of the form of particular expressions (what the expression looks like) or of the meaning that they convey (what the expression means). A new distinction between 'conventions of form' and 'conventions of meaning' is proposed to capture these two possibilities, which can be accounted for under two different understandings of conventionalization, as lexicalization (verbatim repetition of a form across contexts) or as constructionalization (possibility of replacement by synonymous expressions leading to abstraction away from specific lexical items). Both options have been entertained in the literature and the chapters in this volume offer the tools to approach this fascinating question at the heart of im/politeness research with renewed theoretical and methodological rigor.

Keywords: conventionalization, constructionalization, lexicalization, conventions of form, conventions of meaning

1 Reflections

During an online lecture at the start of the academic year in August 2020, University of Southern California professor of clinical business communication Greg Patton was explaining to students the concept of pause or filler words, that is, words such as *err*, *umm* and *you know* in English, which speakers use to buy themselves time while they are planning what to say next. Patton, who had by that time been coordinating the university's programme in China/Korea relations for several years, went on to illustrate the concept with an example from Chinese, saying: "In China, the common pause word is 'that, that, that'. So in China, it might be *na-ge*, *na-ge*, *na-ge*." The phonological proximity of the Chinese word to the N-word in English, despite the avowed lack of any semantic/meaning relationship between the two, was enough to raise protests by students, in response to which the professor stepped down from teaching the course and the University issued a statement that: "It is

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simply unacceptable for the faculty to use words in class that can marginalise, hurt and harm the psychological safety of our students".[1]

While the chronological proximity of this incident to the murder of George Floyd by US police in May 2020 and the country-wide protests that followed in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement certainly heightened recipients' sensitivity to this particular phonological sequence, the occurrence of the incident alone raises questions whose ramifications extend beyond the narrow interests of im/politeness researchers: to what extent can impoliteness be inscribed in particular words, such that merely producing a similar sounding phonological sequence can be perceived as offensive and impolite 'by association'? Far-fetched as it may sound,[2] the possibility that linguistic form, separated from meaning, can directly cause offence cannot be excluded, as this incident suggests.

Incidents such as this fly in the face of the recent trend in im/politeness studies to insist that politeness and impoliteness do not lie in forms but in how speakers use them. And while the last part of this statement, "how speakers use [linguistic forms]", can be understood in at least two ways – namely, as emphasizing individual speaker intentions (and their recognition by listeners) or as highlighting the (more or less abstract) contexts of occurrence of linguistic forms – the question of whether im/politeness is a matter of semantics or pragmatics looms large in this discussion.

The question is not new. In a way, it spans the history and even the pre-history of the field, in that the earliest treatises on the topic – manuals dating back to the 15th century – typically associated politeness and impoliteness with particular forms, creating the impression that, so long as certain words are used or not used, politeness or impoliteness is guaranteed. This attention to form survives to this day in the casual teaching of politeness to children, who are often told to use the "magic word" (*please*, in English), as if the word by itself is enough to guarantee positive reception of their request. It took the field decades, if not centuries, to move away from this understanding of politeness as something inscribed in specific linguistic forms (which had the added effect of creating the impression that a closed set of such forms can be identified, the rest of the language being irrelevant to im/politeness assessments) and inject growing doses of contextual sensitivity into our analyses. And now, the pendulum is swinging back . . .?

Not exactly. The volume's answer to the thorny question whether im/politeness is a property of linguistic expressions (semantic) or a matter of how people

1 Source: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-54107329 (last accessed 30/05/2025).

2 Admittedly, the professor did not lose his position and, after internal investigation, it was concluded that he had not acted in bad faith, suggesting that the university's response was more a knee-jerk reaction in a tense situation than recognition of intentional wrong-doing.

use them (pragmatic) is a nuanced one – pretty much like the distinction between semantics and pragmatics itself. Indeed, this distinction has become more nuanced in recent years, with increasing attention paid to the middle ground between semantics and pragmatics, which is where notions such as generalized conversational implicatures, explicatures, and conversational defaults reside. However, in delivering this nuanced answer, the preceding chapters break new ground, in that they emphasize what is linguistic (rather than psychological or social) about impoliteness, and, crucially, how we can use linguistic theories and techniques to study it. The volume can thus be seen as a manifesto 'reclaiming' im/politeness for linguistic theory, and in so doing reminding us of the intellectual roots of the field in early attempts, such as Robin Lakoff's (1973) rules of politeness, to explain what makes utterances pragmatically "well-formed", this phrasing alone echoing the prevailing syntactic concerns of the time. Half a century later, the question remains current, with generative syntax being represented in the current volume by the chapter by Davis and Jang on the anti-honorific prefix *-che* in Korean. Their analysis places impoliteness (or: anti-honorification, as they call it) firmly on the semantic side, although they also allow for the possibility of sarcastic honorification handled by pragmatics, a matter they leave to future research.

Other chapters adopt a Construction Grammar approach, which suits well both their quantitative methodologies and the gradient nature of their findings. In Construction Grammar and similar usage-based or lexicalist frameworks, there is no strict division between semantics and pragmatics. Rather, the unit of analysis is the sign, which may be smaller or larger than a conventional word and carries several features at the same time. These features include information about the sign's combinatorial possibilities, be those with other signs (syntax and semantics) or with aspects of the context, including the speaker's illocutionary goals and extra-linguistic/social context (cf. Copestake and Terkourafi 2010). Signs combine with other signs through a process of unification, which is where eventual conflicts between their features are resolved. In other words, a sign is a combination of form (at its most basic, a string of sounds) and meaning (understood as the sign's combinatorial possibilities with other signs and with extra-linguistic contexts). On the meaning side, it makes no difference whether these properties are called 'syntax', 'semantics', or 'pragmatics' and no one feature has priority over the other. Moreover, because signs carry meaning of their own that goes beyond the meanings of their component parts, lexicalist frameworks are well suited to formalizing the patterns discovered by many of the chapters, making it no surprise that they are the framework of choice for several of them (see chapters by Finkbeiner, Van Huyssteen, Breed and Pilon, and Queisser and Pleyer).

Besides being theoretically diverse, the volume is also methodologically diverse, featuring data drawn from corpora, metapragmatic comments found in textbooks, ethnographic fieldwork, and online experiments. These methodological choices are dictated in part by the wide range of language varieties represented, which include both well documented and less studied varieties as well as different periods of these varieties, making different resources and methods appropriate for studying them. Beyond its descriptive interest for the varieties studied, this typological diversity is an asset in itself, as it enables answers to some very interesting questions raised by the juxtaposition of studies in this volume – a task to which I turn next.

2 Future directions

Given this theoretical, methodological and typological richness, it is not surprising that the volume also opens up a wealth of new directions to explore. A first direction relates to the role of coercion in generating impolite meanings and in helping us identify the relevant constructions. Since first popularized by Michaelis (2004), the notion of coercion captures the idea that multi-word expressions can 'force' the meaning of component words that appear in them to align with the expression's overall meaning, no matter what the component word's own stored meaning might otherwise be. In impolite or insultive constructions, then, a word will become negative 'by association'. Convincing empirical evidence for this is offered in the chapter by Queisser and Pleyer, and it has been proposed that coercion can be used as a criterion to decide whether an expression is an impoliteness formula in the first place (Giomi, Van Olmen and Van Oers 2025). This claim, in turn, generates a further, very interesting question, namely, whether the same applies to politeness. Is politeness equally lexicalized (carried by fixed lexical forms) or is lexicalization primarily a feature of impoliteness? And if so, why? Although adversarial contexts (such as army training; Culpeper 1996) exist in which impoliteness is the norm, politeness and impoliteness are definitely not symmetrical in many respects, including their cognitive salience and overall frequency of occurrence; so there is no reason to expect that they will be symmetrical when it comes to lexicalization either. The question, however, whether impoliteness is more lexicalized and thus more encoded in specific lexemes than politeness, is beyond the current volume's focus in impoliteness and necessitates a comparative treatment of the two phenomena to be answered.

The notion of coercion is related to conventionalization, a theme that runs through the volume as a whole. In my work on politeness, I defined conventionalization as a three-way relationship between an expression, a user, and a context

of use (Terkourafi 2001: 130), from which it follows that conventionalization is a matter of degree that varies by user and for the same user across different contexts and over time: an expression which is conventionalized for me relative to a context (*qua* frequent in that context in my experience until now), may not be conventionalized for me at this time in a different context. As such, encountering that expression in a different context will require extra processing effort from me to decide on its import. As a next step in this process, an expression can spread across contexts, gaining frequency in a 'lateral' way. This process of expansion of the range of contexts in which an expression is used, described in Terkourafi (2015a) using the example of *My bad!* for (urban, cool-sounding) apologies in US English, is also the result of conventionalization but this time at a higher (supra-individual) level. Crucially, on this community-level understanding of conventionalization, the expression becomes increasingly detached from both nonce (one-off or local) contexts and individual users. This second step in the conventionalization process corresponds to Morgan's (1978) "conventions of usage", which can in turn generate, as a third step, "conventions of the language". One possible path for this is grammaticalization realized as phonological reduction (Terkourafi 2001: 158–160; think of the specialization of American English *wanna VP?* for invitations/suggestions, or of the English greeting *goodbye* originating in the wish *God be with you*). What is important for our purposes is that the lexical material in these cases fuses but is not replaced by semantically synonymous material – so the expression remains stable or fixed in its lexical make-up. Conventionalization as described in this paragraph may thus be considered a matter of "conventions of form".

That is, however, not the only way in which conventionalization can be understood. Further to lexicalization leading to more formulaic realisations (seen in repetition of the same form, as above), conventionalization can also be understood as generalisation *away* from specific lexemes leading to more *abstract* constructions. On this second understanding, what becomes conventional (fixed) is not the form that realizes a certain meaning (or illocutionary function) but rather the meaning (or illocutionary function) itself – "conventions of content" is thus a more suitable label to describe the outcome of conventionalization in this second sense. This is the way in which, for instance, the illocutionary repertoires of different communities can be seen to emerge.

Interestingly, this second understanding of conventionalization can also be diachronically explained using a Construction Grammar account: conventionalization of content would then be akin to "constructionalization" (Traugott and Trousdale 2013), which occurs when not (only) contexts but (also) particular lexical forms are gradually abstracted away from and replaced by abstract grammatical categories such as Verb, Noun etc. that come to fill (at least some) slots in the construction. Which of these aspects of conventionalization is responsible for creating the impo-

lite effect each time? Since both can be explained using a Construction Grammar approach, the use of this framework by several of the chapters in the volume cannot help us advocate between these two options.

The volume puts its finger on this problem right from the start, when, on the first page of the Introduction, we read that "no account of (im)politeness can be complete without a thorough understanding of the role of actual linguistic form in it". But what exactly *is* the role of form in im/politeness assessments? Is a form impolite because of *what it looks like*, as a "badge" signaling belonging in a community of practice, this signaling alone being enough to produce the positive or negative evaluation that is im/politeness (as argued in Terkourafi 2002: 186; 2005a: 293)? Or is a form impolite because of *what it means*, that is, because it encodes certain values such as a general directive to Raise Other and Lower Self as predicted, for instance, in Leech's (2014: 90) General Strategy of Politeness?

Both views have been defended in the literature. Regarding the first possibility, explaining the frame-based approach to politeness, in Terkourafi (2019) I argued that, when it comes to the linguistic expressions that are paired with certain extra-linguistic categories in a frame,

> what matters is not so much what they mean but the sheer fact that they are uttered and how, including their intonational contour and potentially other phonetic detail. [. . .] What does the work in such cases is their form (the *signifier*) rather than their meaning (*what is signified*) so we don't need to be actively communicating solidarity or avoiding imposition through the semantic meaning of our words in order to be perceived to be polite. Rather, what we have is an interaction between frequency of occurrence and face-constituting, as exemplar theorists describe it, such that each time the expression-context combination, the frame, is accessed in either encoding or decoding, its face-constituting potential is reconfirmed. [. . .] This treating of linguistic expressions as forms opens up fascinating new avenues for investigating the power of words as signifiers [. . .] – quite independently of the speaker's intention *and* of the expression's semantic meaning. This is a dimension that is often overlooked in the mentalizing literature on implicatures and speech acts, and is only occasionally captured in anthropological linguistic work on indexicality. Awareness of this dimension is sometimes found in analyses of magical language, which can be characterized as being performative (bringing about changes in the world), while its propositional /referential functions can remain obscure to its direct users (Tambiah 1968).

On the other hand, the possibility of forms being impolite because of what they encode/mean (their *signifieds*) is captured in Geoffrey Leech's maxim-based view, whose content-full nature I highlighted in Terkourafi (2015b: 959–960). "By attributing to the maxims explicit semantic content," I argued,

> Leech is claiming (as he did in 1983) that politeness is about maximizing the expression of polite beliefs, and correspondingly minimizing the expression of impolite beliefs. This is reiterated in the current formulation of the general principle of politeness, which states that 'in

> order to be polite, S [i.e. self, speaker] expresses or implies meanings that associate a favorable value with what pertains to O[ther] or associate an unfavorable value with what pertains to S[elf] (2014: 90). While this makes the current scheme flexible enough to account for impoliteness as well [. . .], it also makes politeness a matter of what we say, rather than, as is often claimed, of how we say it. [. . .]. While the maxims of politeness can motivate the conventionalization of particular expressions, conventionalization would be driven by their semantics rather than their grammatical form, allowing also for nonconventionalized instances of politeness to be accounted for under the same scheme. And while Leech is clearly not suggesting that the polite beliefs encapsulated in the maxims should be sincerely held [. . .], this is a most interesting proposition that can also be tested crosslinguistically.

Put in a nutshell, the two possibilities outlined above might be summarized as follows: are linguistic forms actually processed semantically and is it their meaning that does the face constituting (Leech 1983, 2014)? Or are they merely registered as forms achieving belonging and recognition as a member of a group not through what they mean but through what they look like (whereby synonymous forms do not have the same politeness import) in a quasi-magical fashion (Terkourafi 2015a, 2019)? The contributions in this volume give us renewed impetus to tackle this question.

A first possibility is to look to the diachrony of grammatical expressions of impoliteness. With respect to this, we may ask: considering that conventionalization is a cline (a matter of degree), how is the impoliteness potential of expressions affected as they become more conventionalized? Do we observe a process comparable to semantic bleaching (whereby greater conventionalization translates to less/attenuated offence) or is the opposite the case (with greater conventionalization resulting in greater/aggravated offence)? These matters can be empirically investigated and the answer could help advocate between the two options outlined earlier and which of the two, conventions of content or conventions of form, carries the burden of im/politeness work: if greater conventionalization of form bleaches the impoliteness effect, then impoliteness may be carried more by contents/signifieds (which are taken to be less sincerely expressed the more formulaically they are worded, since less effort is expended in producing/processing them); if, conversely, greater conventionalization of form aggravates the impoliteness effect, then impoliteness may be carried more by forms/signifiers (in that the signifier alone produces offence directly, unmediated by what it means or even the ability to process what it means).

A preliminary answer to this question may be found in the chapter by Culpeper, Van Dorst and Gillings, who found that "the more productive, more abstract formulae (more dependent on grammar as opposed to specific words) attract slightly lower impoliteness scores". While this might be specific to impoliteness (see the discussion of coercion above), the finding that the more abstract the formula, the

less impoliteness it carries, may be seen as supporting the view that impoliteness *is* inscribed in forms (understood as *signifiers*) rather than their contents – confirming the "conventions of form" or 'magical' (locutionary) view above.

However, other findings in the volume can be seen to point in the opposite direction. The common finding, for instance, in previous research as well as in many of the chapters in this volume (see chapters by Dobrushina, Paternoster, Queisser and Pleyer, and Van Olmen and Andersson), that explicit mention of the target of the offence ('you') heightens its impoliteness import suggests the existence of cross-linguistic tendencies that could be seen as supporting the second, "conventions of content" or *signified*-based view. While in some cases we could be simply dealing with more surface-like phenomena due to borrowing, a possibility explored in the chapter by Van Huyssteen, Breed and Pilon, a more fascinating prospect is that of a universal grammar of impoliteness. More typological/comparative research on impoliteness is clearly needed to uncover further cross-linguistic tendencies that would justify looking for the underlying reasons for this, if that turns out to be the case. If cross-linguistic tendencies are discovered that go beyond the explicit mention of 'you', we could indeed be dealing with the third-level of im/politeness research envisaged by Terkourafi (2005b), at which theories such as Brown and Levinson's (1987) may be seen to operate. Such theories would then be capturing underlying motivations (in Brown and Levinson's theory: positive and negative face) predicting the range of expressions that can do im/politeness work, with different possibilities becoming conventionalized (in the 'conventions of form' sense) in different languages. Indeed, herein lies a possible compromise position between the two conventionalization scenarios outlined above.

Yet, even the question of a universal grammar of impoliteness does not mark the end of the line for impoliteness research. Because, even if a more semantic, signified-based, "conventions of content" view of impoliteness ends up being supported by the typological evidence, we could still ask whether linguistic forms (such as certain moods, grammatical persons, numbers etc.) encode impoliteness directly or rather what they encode is an altogether different meaning from which impoliteness (but also politeness) can be generated. Such a possibility is proposed, for instance, for the semantics of the diminutive by Jurafsky (1996), who used cross-linguistic evidence to organize the meanings of the diminutive in a radial category from which both endearing (polite) and denigrating (impolite) meanings can be generated. To come full circle to the example that opened these reflections, even the N-word, when used by members of the in-group, in certain interactional moments and with certain phonological features, can serve solidarity functions (Rahman 2011), as has also been shown for other expressions, such as *re malaka* (lit. 'hey, wanker') in Greek (Vergis and Terkourafi 2015). As Dobrushina and Paternoster, in the respective chapters in this volume, emphasize, the findings regarding impo-

liteness are no more than tendencies and even a curse such as Italian *che ti venga* . . ., 'may you get . . .' has "rare benedictive uses". Impoliteness, in other words, continues to sit stubbornly on the fence between semantics and pragmatics and the questions it raises are sure to keep us busy for years to come.

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