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Im/politeness research – what it says on the tin? (Not quite)

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Abstract: Several decades of analytical inquiry into linguistic im/politeness have produced a substantial body of research shedding light on its linguistic and social dimensions, but also distinct discursive conventions and terminology. This study turns the spotlight on *im/politeness* as the term of choice for researchers to think and talk about a rather broad range of social meanings and considers the pros and cons of this preferred denotation. I argue that while the term has undoubtedly scaffolded the development of a coherent field of enquiry, its continued use as a moniker, despite shifting concerns and broadening perspectives, may becloud our views too. The field's trajectory of development is revisited by likening it to a process of register formation, in which the term *im/politeness* has accrued differential (and stereotypical) indexicalities for different groups, in a diverse, multicultural community of scholars with different research agendas. Our differential allegiances to a particular taxonomy arguably engender different ways of seeing, and the increasing complexity of the field demands that we continue to interrogate and justify the labels we use.

Keywords: im/politeness terminology; enregisterment; relational language; prototype; stereotypes

1 Introduction

The return of the Sociolinguistic Symposium to Ghent in 2022 inspired a reflection on the 20-year journey that the field had been on by the time im/politeness studies specialists (many of whom were the same individuals) reconvened in the same city. The call for papers concluded by asking the existential question of whether, with the emergence of interpersonal pragmatics and sociopragmatics as recognisable fields of study, "im/politeness" can be even thought of as an "an identifiable, separate 'thing'" or a coherent field of research (a question raised also in Grainger and O'Driscoll's editorial, 2022: 7). What follows here are some scattered thoughts around this question. Is the boundedness of the concept of "im/politeness", one

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which neatly distinguishes "im/politeness" from some analogous or contiguous phenomenon, ontologically justifiable in linguistic, sociolinguistic, or anthropological enquiries? Is it methodologically useful? Is allegiance to this label what makes us a "field"? A glance at the array of topics and issues discussed in any recent issue of the journal, or even the topics of the 2022 panel in which that question was raised – from discussions of Italian *figura* and the speech act of "greet", to "gaslighting" and "cancel culture" – one could be forgiven for wondering whether im/politeness is indeed what the field of im/politeness studies actually ponders about, or what scholars mean by "im/politeness" anyway.

Other im/politeness scholars have reflected on how certain conceptualizations or theoretical frameworks can facilitate new developments at the same time as they hem them in to particular angles and circumscribed phenomena (Watts 2010; Haugh 2018). Here I wish to reflect about how conceptual affordances and limitations are linked to the terminological apparatus we work with, that is the choice of the specific term *im/politeness* (henceforth, I use italics to refer to the metalinguistic denotation). Since, as it is well known, the "metaphors we live by" matter, the field's reflexive language necessarily affects its horizon. And indeed, as noted early on by Ehlich (1992: 74), it is not possible to escape from the "language-boundedness" of a concept of im/politeness. Now historical debates in the field have already problematized terminology and extensively rehearsed some of the arguments at play, and I will not repeat them in detail. I will however refer to them to the extent that they are relevant to my reflection about the legitimacy of a distinguishable field of "im/politeness" today, some 20 years after those debates started. The issue has multiple facets, just as the terminological unit of *im/politeness* has multidimensional features: cognitive (how "im/politeness" gets discerned and conceptualized), linguistic (how it gets designated, as an existing/newly created term within existing/newly created linguistic systems), and communicative (how the term functions as a vehicle for the transmission of knowledge across relevant communities of practice), and I will touch on all of these.

As is well known, in critiques that appeared already in the '90s and became very prominent at the turn of the century, the conflation of two distinct usages and understandings of the same term of "politeness" – a folk understanding, generally formulated in terms of standard-oriented stereotypes of conduct (*im/pol*$_1$), and the linguist's understanding, formulated in terms of abstract and technical notions (*im/pol*$_2$) – was recognized as a source of an ontological and epistemic bias (Watts et al. 1992: 3–4; Eelen 2001). The use of the term *politeness* was the focus of the debate, although the theoretical point arguably equally applied to *impoliteness*.[1] The

1 Culpeper (2011a: 72) however considers the use of *impoliteness* as a technical term not problematic, since "is so rarely used that the issue of its lay usage does not arise".

distinctive concerns of studies of local, culturally-specific, emic phenomena and studies of abstract, possibly universal, notions, principles and mechanisms threw up the question of whether the latter phenomena should go by the same name (see Ehlich 1992; Terkourafi 2005; O'Driscoll 2020: 13; Haugh 2012; Watts 2003: 13 discuss the cross-linguistic transposition of analytical terms). Locher, for example, believes that the use of the term *politeness* for early theories was likely a misnomer, as Lakoff, Leech, and Brown and Levinson used it as a "shorthand to describe much more fundamental processes of meaning making" (2015: 6), pragmatic principles and pragmatic variation. Leech's *Politeness* Principle, she notes for example, is "one of the pillars of his theoretical framework 'Interpersonal Rhetoric', which aimed at explaining how people create meaning, and not just the creation of politeness" (Locher 2015: 6). Moreover, effectively suggesting that the terminological distinction between the folk and the scientific definitions is not just to do with degrees of abstraction, and given her broader holistic interest in the relational component of interactional practices, she admits to finding the use of the term as a theoretical label (*im/pol*$_2$) restrictive. This expanded interest in the web of meanings involved in the (linguistic) construction of sociality and the study of dynamic mechanisms of interpretation led to the adoption of superordinate terms such as "rapport management" (Spencer-Oatey 2000), "relational work" (Locher and Watts 2005; Locher 2006), "interpersonal pragmatics" (Locher and Graham 2010; Haugh et al. 2013) or "relating" (Arundale 2010, 2021, choosing a verb to highlight its processual nature). In this reframed field of interest, "im/politeness" comes to be repositioned as one of several possible pragmatic effects of language use (and as such, for example, it occupies just one section of Locher and Graham's 2010 handbook above).

The question of nomenclature came to the fore not only in terms of the adverse consequences of uncritically transposing the term *im/politeness* from lay to scientific domains (and back, as Eelen 2001: 33 notes). Another important strand of the terminological debate addressed the contextual conditions under which users appear to recognize something called *im/politeness* as a distinct effect. Watts' reflections called attention to matters of normativity: he observed that behaviours are noted when they are in excess or in defect of some normatively expected form, which he refers to as "socio-culturally determined *politic* behaviour" (Watts 1992: 51).[2] Consequently, the normatively expected behaviour was rebaptised as *politic behaviour*, and the term *politeness* was relegated, as it were, to a smaller set of cases departing from the former (Watts 1992: 51; also 2010: 50) (with impoliteness being a possible interpretation of behaviours seen as "non-politic" or "inappropriate", 2003:

2 The terminological problem is also not resolved by the use of the term "appropriateness", which also clearly oscillates, in Watts' (1992: 51) discussion, between the sense of "conventional" and "normatively prescribed" – another example of the ideological baggage of the English language.

161; also Locher and Watts 2005). Note that the definition of *politeness* as a behaviour that leads to the "enhancement of ego's standing with respect to *alter*" (Watts 1992: 51) is not formulated in terms of a Hearer or Referent's deference entitlement, but as a speakers' self-presentational result. The significance of highlighting what is effectively second order indexicality was not particularly theorized in Watts' work, but, as I will mention below, seems to me to point to an important weakness of the current terminology (and cf. Terkourafi, this issue, for a model that formalizes this indexicality).

Those critiques and the subsequent debates (cf. Haugh 2012 for one of many reviews) illustrated ontological and epistemological consequences of matters of conceptualization, categorization and denotation, that is matters of terminology. Yet despite those robust critiques, the field has not abandoned this particular metalinguistic (and problematically also metapragmatic) denotation as a term for self-reference; *im/politeness* continues to be used, sometimes presupposed in the analysis rather than demonstrated; studies that do not mention, do not define, or do not spell out their relevance to *im/politeness* are occasionally published in the *Journal of Politeness Research* (legitimate as this may be, it leaves readers to figure out the link); and finally, calls have been made, after the distractions of concerns with "face", "identity" and other such indexicalities, to re-place good old "im/politeness" back in center stage (more on all this below).

What is the power of this term? Under what conditions can we treat im/politeness as related to but distinct from more general interpersonal dynamics? Should researchers consider im/politeness as a constant or immanent (rather than emergent) effect? As I consider these and other questions, I try to tease out the pros and cons of this terminology, and how beneficial it may still be for a field that has now grown to include a mindboggling range of interests.

Having set out to focus on the terminological angle for my analysis, my reflections about the trajectory of the field revealed the tensions in processes of register formation described in the work of the linguistic anthropologists Michael Silverstein (e.g., 2003) and Asif Agha (cf. 1999, 2007: 89). They describe registers of discourse as forms of linguistic behaviour that come to be linked, as the result of metapragmatic activity and chains of communicative events in particular sociohistorical populations, with particular indexical values (relationship between individuals, social personae, levels of speech, etc.). Processes of enregisterment are observed when such formations stabilize,[3] but also when fragments of existing registers (and their typical

3 Terkourafi (2015: 16) offers a succinct but clear example of a process of conventionalization and its inherently evaluative (i.e., metapragmatic) nature. Her "habit-based definition" of conventionalization, described in the discourse of pragmatics, seems to me very much in line with the process of enregisterment described in the linguistic anthropological literature.

instantiations) are subsequently reinterpreted, used in new formations and transformed, generating new indexicalities. I came to think of our modern community of im/politeness researchers as the sociohistorical population that witnessed the formation of a register, the metapragmatic field we have come to recognise as pertaining to "im/polite" behaviours, thanks to the metapragmatic activity of researchers who captured interesting regularities in the interactional behaviour of language users and spread such knowledge through repeated acts of communication (academic publications, conferences, lectures and the like). Dominant normativity in the register of this community (a stereotypical notion of im/politeness, though see footnote 11 for the particular sense of "stereotype") came to be contested by alternative discourses by different populations of users adopting different metapragmatic models of im/politeness, which push for an internal restructuring of the system – and the process dynamically repeats itself, in ever-evolving semiotic struggles. I will not pursue this parallel in great depth, but I think there is some value in observing the development of our field of enquiry as a process that follows the same norms that produce any "order of discourse" (Foucault 1981 [1970]), as this may help us tease out some of the critical issues entailed by how we, as "agents of knowledge", categorize, describe, and occasionally blindspot ourselves, as we do our investigative work.

2 A thing is born

Social actors are likely to "do im/politeness" by using im/politeness-related adjectives and adverbs (e.g., Ide et al. 1992; Pizziconi 2007; Culpeper et al. 2019; Haugh 2019) to qualify people, behaviours, or actions, that is in acts of evaluation.[4] In contrast, interest in politeness as a noun – a "thing" – is a prerogative of conduct writers, philosophers, and modern researchers. The so-called "scientific turn" of half a century ago refers to the inception of pragmatic investigations into the language of social relations that galvanized the field by giving the phenomenon of "politeness" the spotlight (I leave aside for the moment the question of the asynchronous focus on "impoliteness", highlighted later in Culpeper [1996], as impoliteness was initially understood "to follow"). Im/politeness became "a thing" – but was this a discovery or was it an invention (that is a man-made, arbitrary, designation)?

The terminology adopted in these early scientific studies, which we have come to call "classic" or "traditional", signified that a phenomenon could be observed that had empirically verifiable, systematic features – that is, it could be commonly and regularly observed in social life, and had discernible linguistic correlates to warrant

4 However, see Eelen (2001: 35) for examples of the non-obvious nature of such evaluations; also Davies (2018).

the adoption of a distinct label – *im/politeness*. The subtle but arguably consequential change in the title of the publication which was to become the dominant canon of the field, Brown and Levinson's essay of 1978 reissued as a monograph in 1987, is symbolic of what one could see as a process of steady enregisterment: what started life as "Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena" gained gravity in "Politeness: Some universals in language usage".[5] The decade between the two publications had seen researchers engage intensely and enthusiastically with this and to a lesser extent other models. Regularities and correlations were found, across languages and contexts, between social factors such as power and distance and the realization of various linguistic strategies – though not of the cultural significance of these strategies, as pointed out early on by Hymes 1986, and several specialists on Asian and African languages (e.g., Matsumoto 1988; Ide 1989; Gu 1990; Nwoye 1992; De Kadt 1994, or see Watts 2010 for a review). Even in Japanese, the language that some considered a prototypical example of an exception to the Brown and Levisonian conceptual apparatus, due to the existence of what came to be called "socio-pragmatically obligatory" forms (Ide 1989), Brown and Levinsonian strategies could easily be identified (see Pizziconi 2003: 1478–1479). So it felt as if a principled, rule-governed phenomenon had indeed been discovered.

This "discovery" arguably also shook research environments which already had established research traditions in the field of politeness, such as Japan. With the loanword *poraitonesu* (from English "politeness"; e.g., in Usami 1997), Usami set her research agenda as a programmatic alternative to indigenous studies, traditionally denoted as *keigo* (honorific language), *keii-hyōgen* (expressions of respect), or *keigo-hyōgen* (honorific expressions) studies. Researchers with a declared interest in im/politeness matters beyond the system of honorifics had already coined the somewhat unwieldy label of *taigū hyougen* (lit.: 'expressions of treatment', or 'interpersonal conduct'; Ōishi 1983: 6; Pizziconi 2020: 734, 759), and it is not necessarily the case that these other strands had no interest in Western pragmatics or sociolinguistics (see Wetzel and Inoue 1999 for an overview), but the term *poraitonesu*, at a glance, declared Usami's approach distinct. It had an interest in universal principles, referenced Western mainstream politeness research, but it also had a strong discourse-based approach novel in the field – relying on quantitative measures to establish default (expected) and deviation (norm-violation) effects in both honorific and non-honorific usage (Usami 2006: 20). Usami's adoption of a loanword illustrates

5 The intro to the monograph notes that between the publication of the first essay and its reissue "Issues *bearing upon* politeness have emerged as being of central interest in sociolinguistics, pragmatics, applied linguistics, social psychology, conversation analysis and anthropology, generating an enormous body of research bearing directly on our thesis." (Brown and Levinson 1987: 2, my italics). Also spotting the significant change in title, Watts puts it down to the fact that they "saw "politeness" phenomena as a paradigm case in which such universals might be found" (Watts 2010: 45).

the clear advantages of a metalanguage which cannot be easily confused with folk terminology (a particularly problematic dimension when English is both the medium and the object of analysis at the same time; Watts 2003: 15; Haugh 2018, 2019: 203).

2.1 The enregisterment of im/politeness – benefits and drawbacks

Having a (distinct) name for a phenomenon provides other unquestionable benefits. Discussing the legacy of the early theories of the '70s and '80s, Terkourafi noted that they "provided the terminology for talking and even thinking about politeness phenomena" (2005: 240). While Terkourafi only refers to the use of terms such as "face", "positive" and "negative" politeness, the point applies more generally to the overarching term that came to label the field. An established term, in principle, sensitizes the analyst to the occasions in which im/politeness becomes a relevant meaning in social encounters. It makes it possible to see commonalities across phenomena which may be characterized differently in different disciplinary traditions – a definite advantage in an increasingly multidisciplinary landscape spanning pragmatics and sociolinguistics, formal linguistics, anthropology and social psychology, business, health, media, conflict studies, and so on and so forth. For example, thanks to this overarching label, Culpeper was able to interrelate his study of impoliteness with previous research on e.g., threats, name-calling and insults, ridicule, intimidation by shouting or swearing, and other derogatory and critical remarks, by declaring "…although [those studies] do not use the terms impoliteness or impolite, this *fits the underlying notion of impoliteness*." (Culpeper 2011a: 4, my italics). Similarly, while declaring his study to be "a-theoretical" vis-à-vis a notion of impoliteness, O'Driscoll's work on language that causes offence deploys Culpeper's definition as a starting point to delimit the scope of his inquiry (2020: 15). Spencer-Oatey proposes that another way to harmonize our visual field is to use *politeness* as an umbrella term covering "all kinds of evaluative meanings (e.g., warm, friendly, considerate, respectful, deferential, insolent, aggressive, rude)" (Spencer-Oatey 2005: 97). On the flip side however, aside from the problem of then needing a further qualification for "evaluative meanings" lest the list is extended indefinitely and unhelpfully, the enregisterment of this term as a label for the field carries a well-known risk: the potential for confusion between scholarly and ethnolinguistic modeling and the resulting inadvertent overprojection (e.g., the lack of validation, in users' evaluation, of researcher intuitions about what constitutes an instance of "im/politeness"). This is the gist of Watts et al. (1992) and Eelen's (2001) critique, as well as Mills (2003), Watts (2003) and Agha (2007).

Historical im/politeness scholars are arguably very conscious of having to tread carefully when claiming continuities (Kádár and Culpeper 2010; Kádár and Haugh 2013: 160; O'Driscoll 2010). In the Introduction to the 2017 *Palgrave Handbook of Linguistic (Im)politeness* for example the editors establish a lineage from ancient civilizations in the consciousness (and scrutiny) of this phenomenon, albeit at a rather abstract level:

> While (im)politeness research is a relatively young academic field, interest in issues of '*politeness*', '*propriety*' *and so on* have long been discussed in social and philosophical works. The earliest writings about politeness stretch back to the civilisations of Ancient Eygpt, Greece, India and China more than two and a half thousand years ago (Pan and Kádár 2011; Terkourafi 2011). Interest in '*proper*' *ways of behaving* has continued unabated across speakers of different languages and cultures since then. (Culpeper et al. 2017b: 1, my italics).

Here, an obvious contiguity, if not a full equivalence, is presupposed between "politeness" and "propriety", a notion that, all-embracing as it may be, is not neutral but has a rather distinct slant (a moral concern that is absent from labels such as "relational work", for example). Broad descriptions of politeness often refer to "propriety", or "etiquette", but in fact this dimension is what mainstream im/politeness research ended up neglecting for several decades. The focus on pragmatic processes and strategies to achieve cooperative as well as conflictive communication, expressive or classificatory "politeness", i.e., acts of "deference" (cf. Haugh 2010: 273), obscured and marginalized for a while aspects of conduct or "demeanor" – a second order indexicality (Silverstein 1998), which was seen as a kind of "derivative" byproduct of the use of those strategies, until more recent perspectives brought this dimension back. Such a loose characterization in the introductory cap for the handbook is rather harmless, but it illustrates how, in the pragmatism of adopting "umbrella" or "blanket" terms to establish commonalities and continuities, multifarious kinds of indexicality can get easily swept up together.

Enregisterment, and consequently the power of a chosen categorization, is enhanced and entrenched by circulation. In the same Handbook, the authors link the growth of studies in "impoliteness" and "im/politeness" partly to "the increasing visibility of politeness" (Culpeper et al. 2017b: 5). The resilience of the label (as well as its vagueness) is not surprising if we think of the vast arrays of senses in which the sememe has appeared in linguistic research (Culpeper's 2011b review offers a handy overview*):* a "principle" or a "superstrategy" for Leech (1983), "maxims" for Lakoff (1973), a (face-regulating) "strategy" for Brown and Levinson (1978), a pragmatic (perlocutionary) "effect" as well as a "regular co-occurrence" for Terkourafi (2005), "evaluations" in discursive approaches (e.g., Watts 1992, 2003; Locher 2006), a positive/negative "attitude" for Culpeper (2011a: 23), to name a few. One could also note, in passing, that the plasticity of the term facilitates not always warranted and not

inconsequential conceptual leaps from discussing the im/politeness of utterances to that of speakers.

Shortcomings identified in the classical theories revolved around the content of maxims, the function of strategies, or their culturally specific characterization (e.g., Ide's *wakimae* or 'discernment', 1989; similarly, Pandharipande 1992 on appropriateness as the "obligatory" observation of social conventions or *maryādā*), but it was thanks to the reflexive scepticism and relativism of post-modern, discursive critiques (starting with Eelen [2001], Mills [2003], Watts [2003], Locher and Watts [2005]) that the field collectively turned to problematizing the label, although not quite to the point of rejecting it.[6] The plethora of studies which made politeness the privileged angle of analysis and a privileged category made the term a "standard". Standardization however (think of national languages) is not a neutral process: it is ideological, and comes with pros and cons. While specialized terminology is required by the advancements of science and the emergence of new concepts and conceptual fields (Cabré 1999: 4), it inevitably also shapes what is made visible and worth of attention, that is it constrains users' worldviews.

2.2 "Taming the prototype"

The analytical biases affecting the so called "first wave" approaches that I hinted at above – im/pol$_2$ as a questionable abstraction from users' understandings – remind one of what Ten Hacken (2015) calls the "taming of the prototype", a process of selecting precise definitions for phenomena that are effectively rather fuzzy, which characterizes the creation of technical terms.

Natural concepts such as those that arise in lay speakers' minds are based on prototypes (Rosch 1978). A prototype is a class of objects cognitively organized in categories based on similarity; at the centre of a metaphorical cognitive space is a well-established, most often associated exemplar, and less agreed upon ones are arranged further away from it in fading degrees of applicability (e.g., sparrows vs. penguins in the category of "bird"; honorifics/slurs vs. hints/elliptical expressions, in the category of "*im/politeness*"). Technical definitions, such as those of science or law, which aim to prevent interpretive conflicts, must therefore tame the fuzziness of meanings and interpretations. They are based on algorithms, i.e., lists of the necessary and sufficient conditions that apply to a particular concept (necessary

6 Interestingly, having reconceptualized and relabeled linguistic politeness as "politic behaviour" as early as 1989, Watts published his critical monograph under the title of "Politeness". Though he saw the book "as a radical rejection of politeness$_2$" (2003:11), it arguably did contribute to the term's ascendancy.

conditions are those that must always be there, and sufficient conditions those that minimally guarantee some event). Some key concepts deployed by the early theories can indeed be seen as attempts to list necessary and sufficient conditions defining "politeness" as a universal phenomenon, be it Lakoff's or Leech's maxims, or Brown and Levinson's notions of negative and positive face.[7] None of these definitions would necessarily be the output of folk theorizing, nor perhaps be recognized as meaningful in everyday language. Lay users' reasoning is of a fuzzier kind, based on ad hoc logic, or culturally well-trodden narratives and tropes (Gagné 2010; Kádár and Haugh 2013; see also Haugh 2019 on participants' variable conceptualizations depending on conceptual frames mobilized by interviewers, experiences etc.). In the process of taming this fuzziness, the scientific gaze arguably became reductionist, and at most, focused on central cases of the category.

The focus on conventionality at the expense of more diffuse manifestations of "im/politeness" illustrates an example of analytical preference for the central cases of a prototype of im/politeness.[8] For some this is a notable bias of the first-wave approaches – what Kienpointner and Stopfner (2017: 78) call the specific *ideology* of "Encoded (Im)politeness", that is the focus on speech acts that, as Brown and Levinson would say, "*intrinsically* threaten face" (1987: 65).[9,10] At the other end of the im/polite continuum, Eelen had questioned whether "banter" revolves around

7 Lakoff's maxims: (a) Don't impose, (b) Give options, and (c) Make your receiver feel good (Lakoff 1973); Leech's maxims "Minimize (other things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs […] (Maximize (other things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs)" (Leech 1983: 81); or Brown and Levinson's negative and positive face (in short: "the want of every [person] that his actions be unimpeded by others" and "… the want of every [person] that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61–62).

8 Bousfield (2010) discusses a "'prototype approach' to defining im/politeness" but we seem to adopt this notion for different features and rather contrasting purposes. Bousfield discusses it in relation to "…community-wide concepts […] *socially conventionalised* concepts which are individually understood variations-on-a-theme […] to a high degree socially *shared* even if ultimately individually *produced* and *spun*" (2010: 118–119). In contrast to his focus on sharedness and commonalities, I use the notion of prototype to highlight the gradient distribution of evaluations across any social group, all of which, by providing contrastive valorization, are equally important in processes of meaning making.

9 But see Culpeper (2011a: 118) for a more lenient interpretation and a detailed discussion of the view of im/politeness as "inherent" in various kinds of linguistic formations.

Culpeper's observation that the reverse ideology of "Inferred (Im)politeness" (im/politeness which emerges from interpretation in a discursive context) neglects the expressive force of conventionalised expressions does not actually deny that such kinds of "calculated", non-short-circuited im/politeness exist (Culpeper 2011a: 134–136), but suggests (on the basis of empirically verifiable corpora) that there are more central and more peripheral cases of "(im)politeness" interpretations.

10 Cf. Leech's (2014: 88) insistence on the value of a decontextualized scale, or the distinction between "absolute/pragmalinguistic" and "relative/sociopragmatic" politeness scale.

speakers" recognizing some forms as (inherently) "impolite" to start with (he disagrees: Eelen 2001: 36; cf. also Bousfield 2010: 105 for a review of this point). Another example of this bias, one that may conceivably have something to do with the iconic status of "indirectness" in English, would be the propensity to associate "indirectness" with "politeness" (rather than more aptly with "relational work"), which generated the extreme overprojection of interpreting camaraderie-based "polite" strategies as redress for impolite acts (e.g., Blum-Kulka 1987; Sifianou 1993; Ogiermann 2009). The same bias is arguably at work in the assumption that honorifics systems, being lexicalized or grammaticalized systems dedicated to social indexicality, invariably convey deferential meanings, and those meanings alone.

The second wave reckoned with the notion that "im/polite" forms do not always yield "im/polite" meanings. The very notions of "politic behaviour" (Watts') or of "sociopragmatically obligatory" devices (Ide's) were in fact created to demonstrate that the valence of linguistic forms, even iconic forms, as markers of im/politeness, is actually rather low. No matter how conventional and presumably entrenched an interpretation may be, it is always subject to contextual re-interpretation: "when we focus squarely on situation, any act, however prototypically face-threatening or face-supporting, can have the opposite effect" (O'Driscoll 2017: 99). Although iconic forms exist that may immediately evoke im/politeness and be widely recognized (cf. the notion of shibboleth in Silverstein 2003, 2017), interpretation relies on the *congruence* of individual forms with other co-textual fragments, other contextual signs, etc. In other words, what matters is the coherence of the register (while many researchers discuss congruence in their analyses, Agha 2007 theorizes it most comprehensively as "register formations"). "Genuine" versus "mock" impoliteness (Culpeper 1996, 2011a: 207) is one such contrasting effect, generated by some form of "mismatch". Routinely deployed "incongruent" speech-level shifts are common ways in which honorifics can be manipulated to generate expressive effects such as sarcasm and anger (Okamoto 2002; Pizziconi 2003: 1492–1493; Haugh 2007: 668–669; Pizziconi 2011).

Importantly, some im/politeness researchers also turned to exploring indexicality associated with speakerhood, such as social class (Terkourafi 2002), gender (Mills 2003), the speaker's "dignity or elegance" (Ide 2005); private/public or professional self-presentation (Cook 1996, 1997, 2011, 2013; Okamoto 1998), etc. Despite the common conceptualization of im/politeness as manners, conduct, etiquette, i.e., behaviours which have obvious effects for the speaker/actor, as well as the obvious contiguity between identity and face, the field was slow to address matters of identity (Hall and Bucholtz 2013) but, on reviewing a wide-range of discourse-oriented research, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich even concluded that "identity work processes encompass relational work, i.e., relational work is embedded in identity work." (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013: 17).

A "coding" view and the reliance on conventionality and denotational indexicality in language clearly takes us only up to a point in the understanding of im/politeness. Researchers have to be mindful of prototypical – or rather stereotypical – effects also when they analyse speakers' reflexive models of behaviour (Agha 2007: 119), i.e., their evaluations of behaviours.[11] What speakers consider to be polite, rude, in/considerate, etc. is based on normative models which are variably distributed in society – people may be aware of "typical" norms but not subscribe to them, they have different understandings of what is typical or appropriate and, of course, have different ideas about what constitutes im/politeness.[12]

Second-wave research changed the field of enquiry in a way which perhaps can be depicted as an increasing ease in working with fuzziness, a move away from algorithmic conceptualizations toward the complexity and even messiness of prototypes and natural categories. Dominant norms are considered in an ecology including minority ones; frequent, common and widely accepted forms and expressions are seen to co-exist with more contested ones, all providing relevant signification both in terms of their internal structure and in relation to each other; social variability in use and argumentation is expected (rather than sharedness) as a result of sociological and ideological diversity. Im/polite meanings are sought not in forms but in participants' orientations to them, distributed in participants' contributions over exchanges of variable length, drawing from tropes, discourses, indexicalities circulating in society and invoked in local interactions. Attention to the sociocultural dimension has shown that "im/polite" meanings are not easily nor unilaterally distinguishable or isolable, but emergent and often elusive, and that they are contiguous with other pragmatic effects which may or may not fit the label (annoyance, hostility, sarcasm, banter, dis/affiliative behaviour, Goffmanian civil

11 Space does not allow a full discussion but see Agha's distinction between "stereotypic denotation" and "prototypical reference" in Agha (2007: 119), and the concept of "register' shibboleths, the most salient anchors of being 'in register,' that provide anchoring cues to unconscious intuitions of indexical – context-indicating – coherence in discourse" in Silverstein (2021: 144).

12 Terkourafi (2015) envisages conventionality to ensure recognisability (economy of interpretation), but also to index the speaker's familiarity with relevant norms regulating what counts as polite – what I refer to here as stereotypical effects, following Agha.

Haugh showed this in a recent study of layperson's politeness metalanguage, where it is clear that every single act of evaluation is associated with "a structured field of semantically related moral notions" but that "much of this broader semantic field is likely to remain backgrounded for those participants on specific occasions" (Haugh 2019; 2010). Indeed speakers may have maximum awareness of registers on which they received explicit training, as in standard languages or manuals for interactions with customers in business settings, and less distinct awareness of other contexts (and make at best educated "guesses"). But such social knowledge is never uniform and multiple norms coexist at any one point.

inattention, multifarious marking of identity, culturally prescribed modesty, consideration, conviviality, friendliness, tact …the list could go on). "Such diversity [of reflexive models of human behaviour]", observes Agha (2007: 1), "is the taxonomist's nightmare. But this is as it should be, because, when it comes to culture, taxonomy is taxidermy."

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that many felt the need for a different terminology, labelling a more encompassing conceptualization. Not only the relation-related terminology mentioned earlier multiplied during the noughties, but ever broader categories were suggested which aspire to define broad fields of investigation, in which matters of "im/politeness" (im/pol$_1$) nevertheless occupy a prominent place of enquiry. Caffi for example has been exploring "mitigation" since the late nineties – and the following remark is a textbook example of the overlaps and terminological dilemma involved (which sense of "politeness" does the next definition refer to?):

> Speakers mitigate out of uncertainty, caution, or consideration. Briefly put, they mitigate to attune with others […] Far from being limited to a matter of politeness, mitigation captures rationally grounded behaviour mainly aimed at avoiding unnecessary risks, responsibilities and conflicts. Mitigation is a bridging category between different paradigms: it is a cognitive, a relational and an emotive category. It meets practical as well as relational needs (Caffi 2013: 277).

Early on, Meier talked of appropriateness (1995, 1996a, 1996b) – a concept which presupposes the existence of enregisterment, and highlights the role of normativity in assessing what is im/polite. Recently, impoliteness is explored as a sub-topic of the "language of aggression and conflict" (Sifianou 2019b), and of "offensive language" (O'Driscoll 2020, where it coincides with a specific assessment of behaviour). Sifianou (2019a) is surprised by the absence of the concept of "civility" in politeness research and refers to the relation between "in/civility" and im/politeness as one of "affinity" (with some differences which remain hard to define). Horgan (2021) decisively calls for a full repositioning of the field of im/politeness as a subfield of "in/civility". Despite what would seem an obvious contiguity of the behaviours investigated, there has been scarce contamination between linguistics/pragmatics and (North American) Communication Studies, in which *in/civility* is popularly used (see a few chapters briefly discussing this term in Culpeper et al. 2017a; also Grainger and O'Driscoll 2022: 6). As an anonymous reviewer reminds us, the exclusivity of this or the other term to a particular discipline also exemplifies the effects of "professional societies and departmental gate-keeping practices", and despite the increased accessibility of research in the digital age, the combination of academic regimentation and nomenclature matters can unquestionably boost intellectual siloization.

3 A mere rhetorical move?

Interestingly, Haugh and Culpeper (2018: 216) characterize the contribution of the second-wave critical studies as a "successful *rhetorical* move" (my italics). Although the phrase was likely chosen in reference to a criticism of the epistemological and methodological features of the second-wave critiques, they are right in characterizing it as a consequential change of discourse, a new way in which the subject matter came to be imagined and talked about.

Energizing for the field as it has undeniably been, the direction of second-wave research is indeed not uncontroversial, and their critiques not necessarily embraced by all. Locher and Watts' (2005, 2008) approach, for example, was deemed "defeatist" for claiming that something is only "open" to interpretation as "polite, impolite and so on…" (Haugh 2013: 55), a stance which prevents reliable "identifications" of impoliteness phenomena. Likewise, Haugh and Culpeper (2018) make explicit calls for a middle ground between first and second-wave approaches which can "reground" the work in the field. The authors' dissatisfaction with the alleged elusiveness of theorization (not of the phenomena explored), is epitomized in the statement that:

> Ultimately, then, in placing the focus of analysis squarely on the ways in which participants may dispute what is "polite", "impolite" and so on, there is little heed given to the fact there must be some *object* for those users and observers to discursively co-construct, negotiate or dispute in the first place. The role of (im)politeness theory, in our view, is not simply to offer an account of discursive struggles vis-à-vis (im)politeness, but to develop a systematic explanation of the phenomena itself, that is, (im)politeness. Haugh and Culpeper (2018: 217).

And they reiterate the point specifically in reference to those approaches at the "social end of theorization", which concern themselves with how politeness is tied to identity claims, arguing that "such identity claims must be focused on some object, that object being, of course, (im)politeness" Haugh and Culpeper (2018: 219).

The concerns they express appear to make a strong claim for the existence of a bounded notional category of "im/politeness", which *can* be teased away from issues of second order indexicality or social contestation, and that can be observed independently from "identity claims" made through some "im/polite" meaning. Both authors' remarkable body of research demonstrates that this criticism does not originate in a simplistic view of processes of interpretation, of users' reflexivity, or the complexity of the indexicalities which are always at play. And yet it is hard to see how it is possible to theorize pragmatic processes without keeping all those other associated (indexical) meanings under the spotlight, and to see them as all synchronically available and emergently constituted.

Of course the reference to an *object* is not to be taken as a call for an objectivist stance and "politeness as a thing", but the claim's formulation undervalues the role of

processual aspects of meaning-making, and assumes im/politeness to be independently detectable rather than the outcome of a well-formed register formation, (emergent or conventionalized as it may occasionally be), a register formation which also crucially relies on, and is inevitably accompanied by, the enactment of relevant identities. It leaves unaddressed the question of whether "im/politeness", rather than any other contextually defined emergent meaning (any of the meanings discussed in the expansive literature on relational work, such as humour, hostility, sarcasm, morality, gender, ethnicity, etc.) can be that object, and/or whether "im/politeness" should be seen as an immanent – privileged – property of relational work, either in the sense of referent-oriented relational work or that which indexes the speakers' self-presentation, i.e., the dimensions of deference *and* demeanour, or first- and second- (and nth-) order indexicalities. Work based on corpora and discursive analyses which these authors authoritatively pursue addresses two crucial features of indexicality: their stereotypy, which can be measured quantitatively, and their creative composition, which results from the (in)congruence of register formations. Neither author seems to take issue with the fuzziness of the concept. For example, Haugh (2019: 210) provides a corpus-based analysis of the term *considerate* and notes that whenever "we evaluate someone as *considerate* (or *polite*, *respectful*, *courteous* and so on), this evaluation carries with it a structured field of semantically related moral notions". These observations make me wonder whether terminology – the insistence on the centrality of *im/politeness* – is once again the cause of contention.

4 Conclusions

Although second-wave research was sensitized to the terminological problem by the robust critiques reviewed above, and although third-wave perspectives appear to have taken on board the gist of those critiques, neither approach has fully resolved it. *Im/politeness*, with its inevitable, problematic ethnolinguistic baggage, remains the default label to define the field and is extensively used in research that arguably casts a much wider net. Researchers are generally conscious of the need to provide coordinates for other researchers in such a broad and multifaceted field, routinely include reviews of existing definitions, and state their own. However, commentaries inside and outside the field, including this one, illustrate the inevitable ambiguities generated by the use of a folk term elevated to scientific terminology, which invariably evokes unintended connotations, putting scholars in the interpretive predicament of elucidating ambiguities between purely analytical terms and terms describing a cultural proclivity (although any term in principle requires such work; as O'Driscoll 2010: 270–272 illustrates regarding the term "politic behaviour", terminology can compound the problem). Researchers' attributions of *im/polite*

meanings are easily interpreted as stereotypical claims, constantly challengeable by the logic of emic evaluations – ideological and hence by definition multifarious.

Finally, the label is problematic because it encourages a focus on iconic forms of im/politeness. This, in turn, neglects the role of ideological mediation in all linguistic formations, including stereotypical forms, and disregards the contribution of other elements to the overall effect, that is co-textual, discursive effects which need to be duly theorized as a kind of relational work (e.g., Silverstein 2003: 196). Some research does of course carefully address these points: Haugh (2019) accounts for the different value of a range of terms, grading them by frequency; Culpeper (2011a: 195) in relation to "impoliteness", specifically discusses the role of co-text and context (mis) matches. That the same forms yield different interpretations under different co-textual and contextual conditions can therefore be considered a norm rather than an exception and grounding the conceptualization of im/politeness in the specific formations yielding im/polite meanings (and those alone) relieves the observer from the danger of overprojection due to the adoption of an ill-fitting term.

Not im/politeness but various orders of indexicality are always immanent in meaning-making; regular, structured indexicality generates registers, "alternate ways of 'saying "the same" thing' considered 'appropriate to' particular contexts of usage" (Silverstein 2003: 212; see also Agha 2003), and within which culturally specific meanings are "enregistered". Universalist pursuits can arguably be conducted only at the level of the mechanics of processes of indexical formation.

It seems to me that there are two solutions to avoid such risks. I rule out the third option, represented by the current state of affairs, where the same term is adopted for vernacular and technical usage, even if one could, in principle, make better efforts to clarify their relationship (cf. Haugh 2012: 117). A viable exception to the current problematic situation would be to adopt the label of "im/politeness" only for observable regularities of participant behaviour (empirically established interpretations classified by analysts on the basis of participants' behavioural responses), as in Terkourafi's frame model (2005), or many works on impoliteness metalanguage. But the safest strategy seems to me to adopt the higher order terminology – "politic behaviour", "relational work", "language of conflict and aggression", etc. as in many of the works referenced, to define a broader church of scholarly investigations in which *im/politeness* is one indexical effect among many, whose nature is to be specified in the course of analysis.

Linguistic and conceptual aspects of the terminology aside, communicative aspects are also sensitive: how we talk to each other and how we talk to the community of future researchers as well as the wider community. Haugh's afterword in a previous issue of this Journal invites researchers to "address the field as a whole" when theorizing im/politeness, so we can coordinate our analyses and avoid problematic eclecticism (2018: 163). Yet once again, the observation he offers with regards to the theoretical framework adopted seem to me to be equally pertinent to the very choice

of terminology. Consider the article by O'Driscoll in the same issue of Haugh's afterword (O'Driscoll 2018): it does not contain any mention of *im/politeness*. Most readers would have had no difficulty recognizing O'Driscoll's discussion of "footing" as *somehow* relevant to "im/politeness". And yet, whether this is down to the literacy of readers of this journal, socialized to recognize that "footing", "ritual deference", "face" and other terms in the discussion have something to do with im/politeness$_2$ matters, or due to one's taking for granted that im/politeness$_1$ is involved when no such disclaimer is submitted by an author, there lies a potential problem of mutual coordination (as the same Haugh cautioned in an earlier paper, Haugh 2012). In talking to the whole field, and especially because the field has grown into a very diverse multicultural (multidisciplinary, multilingual) community, it pays off to be pernickety and problematize the labels we use.

The trajectory of the field's development shows the considerable amount of deconstruction that became necessary following the enregisterment of *im/politeness* generated by the popularity of first-wave research under that label (in the terminological sense discussed above, "invented", rather than "discovered"), to reset a research agenda which could capture the subtle ideological dimension of the phenomenon. Maintaining that term requires adding laborious disclaimers and qualifications (we can recognise whether a designation is literal or metaphorical only when we have some familiarity with it), if not perpetuating the challenge for newcomers. Some newcomers, e.g., learners of East Asian languages approaching the study of linguistics, respond well to labels such as "politeness" because it matches cultural stereotypes they are commonly exposed to, and it takes a considerable amount of training to highlight the ideological and epistemological biases of that term.

In submitting this terminological critique to this journal, I could not help wondering to what extent alternative – more accurate – titles such as *Journal of Im/politeness Research,* or the *Journal of the Language of Social Relations* would roll off the tongue. But if we choose to stay in the current house, we ought to explicitly say on what grounds we stake our claim to right of residence.

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