**SIL Electronic Book Reviews 2012-003**

**Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence**

By Jonathan Culpeper


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**Review**

Jonathan Culpeper is Professor of English Language and Linguistics at Lancaster University in the UK, as well as co-editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Pragmatics* and a member of the UK-based Linguistic Politeness Research Group. Over the past 15 or so years, he has produced an impressive amount of research into the linguistic phenomena related to verbal politeness and impoliteness, as well as other areas of language study. His latest book, *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence* (258 pages of text, not counting the end notes, references, and index), is a cutting-edge scholarly account of the numerous social and linguistic factors that are involved when people are rude to each other. Combining materials from his previous publications together with new data sources and analyses, Culpeper provides a masterly account demonstrating that verbal impoliteness is not merely “a debased form of language” (p. 239) that is completely at the mercy of a person’s uncontrollable emotional reflex. Rather, like all other aspects of language, impoliteness, too, is frequently creative and strategic in accomplishing a speaker’s social goals.

The **introduction** (pp. 1-18, no chapter number) gives a brief literature review that situates this book in the post-Brown and Levinson (1987) era of linguistic politeness and impoliteness research. From the outset, Culpeper indicates that impoliteness research is “a multidisciplinary field of study” (p. 3) and that, although it has so far been fundamentally grounded in sociopragmatics, it must also take into account other disciplines such as social psychology, sociology, and conflict studies. He then discusses the wide range of natural language data sources used (and used well) in this book. Although not all of them are listed in this chapter, they include: diary reports in which people describe personally experienced impoliteness events, the Oxford English Corpus, fieldnotes of other linguists, blogs and websites, official transcripts of impolite monologues and dialogues, prescriptive lists of manners, dialogue on TV game shows and chat shows, a documentary about army recruit training, and even graffiti on desks. Culpeper also highlights several of the research frameworks that he considers particularly important as “background notions” to his present work. The frameworks that he relies on most (both those listed in this chapter and those not mentioned here) are:
• discursive models of politeness, such as Watts (2003)
• Spencer-Oatey’s (2000) rapport management framework
• schema theory (e.g., Schank and Abelson 1977)
• Grice’s (1975) conversational implicatures
• sociocognitive discourse research (e.g., van Dijk 2008)

Chapter 1 begins with a definition of what exactly is meant by the term impoliteness. After reviewing commonalities in previous scholars’ attempts to define this notion, Culpeper settles on a paragraph-long definition, which he elucidates in the rest of the book. The bottom line of his definition of impoliteness seems to consist of the following components:

• Speaker’s words conflict with Hearer’s social norm-based expectations of how Speaker should be addressing Hearer;
• Speaker’s words cause or are presumed to cause the perlocutionary effect of offence (i.e., negative emotional consequences) for at least Hearer;
• other factors (such as intentionality) can exacerbate offence, but are not necessary conditions; and
• these perceptions are context-dependent.

Culpeper criticizes Brown and Levinson’s category of “negative politeness” (Speaker’s attempt to not impose on Hearer) as too simplistic and individualistic and prefers to use Helen Spencer-Oatey’s rapport management categories, as well as a couple of his own, to put labels on how exactly impolite speech causes offence (e.g., by using a taboo word, by classifying Hearer as belonging to a stigmatized group or not belonging to the in-group, etc.). He applies these categories in a statistical study of which offence types were most common among five cultures (British, Chinese, Finnish, German, Turkish) as indicated in reports by 100 university students from each of these cultures. The results show both expected and unexpected trends as to what most offends people in these cultures.

Chapter 2 downplays the role of intentionality as a necessary condition for the construal of a speech event as impolite and emphasizes the relevance of an emotional response (whether by Speaker or Hearer) to an impoliteness event. After arguing for several pages that people get offended by certain speech behaviors even if the Speaker is not intentionally trying to offend, Culpeper goes on to highlight the major role of negative emotions in leading people to consider certain speech to be impolite. Culpeper analyzes respondents’ report data about conversations that made them ‘feel bad.’ Using Eleanor Rosch’s (1973) superordinate/basic/subordinate category distinction, he groups together emic English terms (such as sadness, suffering, hurt) that are used to describe emotional perceptions of impoliteness, and then categorizes them according to Spencer-Oatey’s categories of offence. Although his prediction that certain types of offence produce certain types of negative emotions is not fully supported by this data, he appeals to caveats concerning imperfect methodology to allow his original hypothesis to stand. At the end of the chapter, Culpeper proposes an “integrated socio-cognitive model” of the components involved in the mental processing of impoliteness, schematized in a nice diagram on p. 68.

Chapter 3 presents several studies related to English metadiscourse dealing with impoliteness and overpoliteness, with a corpus-based approach as the central research methodology. Culpeper
examines several partially synonymous metalinguistic terms, including rude, inappropriate, aggressive, and impolite, in textual corpora representing the lexicons of academics and lay people. Noting the terms’ relative frequencies, collocational patterns, and genres in which they tend to occur, he disambiguates their meanings and contextual nuances. He then correlates these metalinguistic labels with three etic dimensions: degree of offence, degree of symbolic violence, and group membership (i.e., in-group/out-group). Culpeper’s corpus examination of metapragmatic comments involving the expressions over-polite and too polite reveals that what upsets people most about this speech behavior is not the actual linguistic expressions used to convey politeness, but rather the frequency with which they are used – “doing politeness too frequently with respect to what is appropriate in the situation” (p. 103). He notes that although overpoliteness is not necessarily perceived as impolite, it may be intentionally used with a negative effect, for example, in ‘mock-politeness.’ The last part of this chapter probes conventional metapragmatic rules proscribing impolite behavior in British and North American society, both in public and private settings (e.g., don’t use crude language; don’t threaten; don’t talk back to your superiors, etc.). Culpeper sees these rules as driven by social norms, and groups them by the offence they are meant to prevent according to his etic categories.

Chapter 4 examines how impoliteness is manifested via conventional expressions, such as threats, silencers, and personalized insults. Culpeper argues that certain verbal expressions (such as most swear words) are considered impolite in all but a very narrow and specific context and are therefore context-spanning, while the impoliteness of other expressions is much easier to neutralize in context and is therefore context-tied (the terms “context-spanning” and “context-tied” are borrowed from Tracy and Tracy 1998). He acknowledges that this runs contrary to prevailing opinion in politeness research: that the perlocutionary effect of any expression is totally context-dependent without regard to its form or lexical meaning. Nonetheless, Culpeper takes a conciliatory middle road by affirming that “impoliteness is partly inherent in linguistic expression” (p. 124), with the emphasis on “partly,” following Leech (1983). At the same time, he briefly and somewhat unconvincingly argues that speech acts cannot be inherently polite or impolite even though linguistic expressions can. The last part of this chapter investigates various means that people have at their disposal to exacerbate the intensity of an impolite message conveyed by a conventional expression. These include lexicogrammatical means (such as by adding modifiers, e.g., You’re stupid → You’re so stupid, and taboo words) and prosodic and non-verbal means. An instrumental acoustic analysis of the words of the predictably impolite host of the game show The Weakest Link is included to demonstrate how prosody can accentuate an impolite statement (multimodal impoliteness).

Chapter 5 moves on to a discussion of impoliteness that is produced by conversational implicature, as opposed to conventionalized expressions. Culpeper distinguishes three structural types of impolite implicatures. The first type, form-driven impoliteness, is typical of innuendo, snide remarks, and mocking mimicry and operates based on lexical cues, prosodic cues, and co-text that all point to the fact that Speaker is trying to offend Hearer, typically by flouting one of Grice’s Maxims. The second structural type of impolite implicature is convention-driven (e.g., sarcasm, teasing). This should not be confused with the conventional impoliteness formulas discussed in the previous chapter; rather, this term designates the mismatch of conventional politeness expressions with a co-text or prosodic context in which a polite interpretation is unsustainable. Culpeper cites TV show host Simon Cowell of American Idol as producing many
such mismatches, such as *I think you’re amazing: amazingly dreadful*. The final structural type, *context-driven* impoliteness, is not defined or exemplified as clearly as the other two, but seems to consist of the marked absence of polite behavior on the part of Speaker where it is strongly expected by Hearer. Hopefully, this section will be clarified in future editions of this book. In the final part of this chapter, Culpeper argues that directness of speech is not directly correlated to a perception of how offensive that speech may be, contrary to previous theorizing on the issue. His statistical analysis of questionnaires administered to British students indicates that both direct and non-conventional indirect expressions are judged to be more impolite than conventional indirect expressions, at least when Speaker has more power than Hearer (i.e., conventionality of expression is more relevant than level of directness to a perception of impoliteness). Several instrumental acoustic analyses of impolite speech events are neatly presented in support of Culpeper’s claims in this chapter as well.

**Chapter 6** looks at how co-texts and contexts condition a person’s perception of a speech event as impolite. The focus is on schematic “backdrops” in which impoliteness is considered normal (and therefore less rude) because it is habitual, has a positive value in the specific context of use, or is otherwise legitimated by a dominant ideology. Culpeper demonstrates that in certain cultural schema, conventional impoliteness formulas, even context-spanning ones, are acceptable and even expected (i.e., their impoliteness implicature is neutralized). For example, language games such as ritual banter or organized swearing occur in many cultures around the world, including ‘signifying’ among young African-Americans and organized insulting of enemy teams and their fans by British football crowds. Likewise, there is the case of mock impoliteness (such as friendly teasing or humorous insults), in which the negative effects of impolite expressions “are (at least theoretically for the most part) cancelled by the context” of solidarity and emotional warmth between interlocutors (p. 208). At the same time, Culpeper realizes that the line between genuine impoliteness and mock impoliteness is quite fuzzy, so that Hearers can be offended even if they realize that Speaker was not really trying to hurt their feelings by teasing. (No wonder British football games so often end with murder and mayhem!)

**Chapter 7** investigates the functions of impoliteness in speech and discourse patterns associated with impoliteness events. Culpeper delineates several functional categories of impoliteness and illustrates each with a detailed analysis of a natural text. The first function is called *affective impoliteness*. This involves “the targeted display of heightened emotion, typically anger, with the implication that the target is to blame for producing that negative emotional state” (p. 223). Culpeper demonstrates linguistic characteristics of affective impoliteness in a publicly available recording of actor Alec Baldwin’s offensive phone message to his daughter. He notes that although this type may primarily be impulsive due to a bubbling over of negative emotions, it is still used strategically and within the bounds of certain social norms. The second type is *coercive impoliteness*, in which Speaker attempts to increase his or her power over Hearer by means of socially unacceptable speech patterns. This is exemplified by a transcript of a dialogue in which an American police officer abuses his power over an Ethiopian immigrant taxi driver. The third type Culpeper calls *entertaining impoliteness*; here, the primary target of the speech event is not the addressee of the rude language, but rather a third-party audience that finds the impoliteness event humorous. The example provided is a highly creative disgruntled letter to a cable company circulated on the Web to produce laughs. Culpeper also discusses *institutional impoliteness*, which is guided not by Speaker’s personal desire to offend Hearer, but by Speaker acting to
promote the interests of the dominant group behind the institution in which the speech event occurs. Two examples are provided: 1) the verbal abuse that a drill sergeant spews on army recruits in order to mortify their sense of self and reshape them as obedient soldiers (a type of coercive impoliteness); 2) rude hosts on so-called exploitative TV game and chat shows, whose goal is to please the viewing public (a type of entertaining impoliteness).

Chapter 8 concludes the book by returning to the definition of impoliteness, which Culpeper here extends from what was initially one paragraph to a full page, pulling together the main points he covered in the book. He includes a summary table of impoliteness strategies and formulas discussed in the book, with no claim of exhaustiveness. He also marks out territory for further research, specifically noting the need to study diachronic aspects of impoliteness, both on a personal level (e.g., impoliteness in repeated bullying situations) and a community level (such as tracking the changing perception of impoliteness in British society).

Additional commentary

Although the book explicitly rejects anything like politeness universals (a la Brown and Levinson 1987), it does create a useful conceptual framework and a taxonomy of categories for analyzing impolite speech. In doing this, Culpeper is liable to the same type of criticism as leveled at Brown and Levinson for asserting that their taxonomy of politeness strategies is universal, a claim that discursive post-modern politeness researchers consider hubristic and pseudo-scientific. The etic nature of many of his categories (e.g., form-driven, convention-driven, context-driven, etc.) opens the door for criticism from scholars coming from the first-order (or emic) politeness research framework. To defend against possible accusations of having one foot in the classic politeness research camp, Culpeper actively disassociates himself from Brown and Levinson at the beginning of the book (p. 7) and makes a point of noting in the Conclusion that impoliteness judgments in this work are all based on lay people’s metalinguistic comments, not those of the researcher himself (p. 255). Still, this may be a case in which “the lady doth protest too much.”

The most disappointing thing about this book is that every single example is taken from English. This really should have been explicitly indicated in the title of the book, e.g., Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence IN ENGLISH. Even though cross-cultural studies are referred to here and there (such as in ch. 1 where culture is correlated to perceived offence type as reported by students in five countries), no attempt is made to look at actual language data outside of English. Culpeper is aware of this problem – “my data largely reflect Anglo cultures, mainly British” (p.11) – but is not yet ready to venture into the little-explored wilds of impoliteness outside the English language. Doing so might significantly alter his current taxonomy. To soften this criticism, it must be noted that Culpeper references a forthcoming article in Intercultural Pragmatics that will present the cross-cultural study of offence types in greater depth, hopefully with plenty of natural language examples from those languages.

The focus on English also does not mean that the book is of no use at all to linguists who are describing impoliteness forms in language X. Culpeper’s taxonomy of underlying cognitive strategies underlying impoliteness is instructive and probably applicable to a good number of languages, even though it makes no claim to universality. The book may also be useful for people who are getting ready to live in a foreign culture as they learn to consciously analyze
situations in which they will inevitably offend the native population or themselves be offended by the natives.

Readers should be prepared for a solid representation of English swear words illustrating impoliteness in its various verbal incarnations. At the same time, one should realize that this is by no means gratuitous cussin’; it is a metalinguistic analysis of how real people speak in the real world, exactly the stuff of good descriptive linguistics.

Occasional factual infelicities occur in the book, such as on p. 49 where Malle and Knobe (1997) are said to “explicitly follow” an assertion made by Gibbs (1999). Either Malle and Knobe have mastered the art of time travel or they did not really base their conclusions on what Gibbs wrote, as Culpeper makes it sound (no reference to any previous writings of Gibbs are mentioned in the Malle and Knobe article either). The copy editing is otherwise generally good with only a few minor errors/inconsistencies found:

- The name of the same questionnaire rating scale is spelled “Lickert” on p. 10, but “Likert” (the actual spelling of its inventor’s name) on p. 188.
- On p. 50, the letter “o” is missing in the phrase “is taken t be impolite or not” in citation from Locher and Watts (2008).
- On p. 239, Culpeper says he is referring back to section 2.5.1, when he really means section 2.3.1. Likewise, on p. 254, he says “section 2.1” when he really means 1.2.

A final general gripe is that Culpeper has the somewhat annoying habit of putting the disclaimer [sic] following the non-gender-inclusive pronoun ‘he’ wherever it occurs in citations of other scholars. Whereas this new convention might be expressing politeness toward an in-group of political correctness practitioners, it is at the same time needlessly rude to the excellent scholars who wrote before political correctness became the sad fad it is today.

Apart from these nitpicky details, Jonathan Culpeper’s *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence* is an engaging and valuable contribution to the subdiscipline of linguistic politeness theory. Pragmatics, scholars of contemporary English, social psychologists, corpus linguists, lexicographers, English language learners, and many others should find this work stimulating and engaging. Field linguists, however, are not likely to find much in the book to help them with their everyday language documentation and analysis tasks unless they are focusing specifically on (im)politeness devices.

**References**


