

## Revisiting (im)politeness, face and identity construing

E. Petrenko\*

V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Kharkiv, Ukraine

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: jelena\_petrenko@mail.ru

Paper received 08.05.15; Accepted for publication 27.05.15.

**Abstract.** This article addresses the issues of pragmatics and is aimed at both theoretical principles of politeness/impoliteness and identity construing. It is argued that (im)politeness is to be approached as a dual phenomenon to give a realistic picture of verbal interaction. In this paper we explore the notion of face as a self-image co-constituted by interlocutors, and the identity as anticipated social positioning of self toward other interlocutors as the result of such construing. Besides that this article considers the necessity of employing both first-order and second-order perspectives in researching (im)politeness.

**Keywords:** *face, identity construing, (im)politeness, social positioning*

Face is 'in the eye of the beholder.'  
M. Terkourafi [2008, p. 52]

Research on (im)politeness was inspired by the pragmatic shift which postulated that natural language is full of variation in need of explanation. The study of the fact that the same speech act can be expressed in different ways reveals that individuals not only use language to impart information but also shape their relationships by means of language use [25, p. 250]. The importance of the relational or interpersonal side of language use has long been recognized in linguistics [34]. This research gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s through the seminal work of Lakoff [19], Brown and Levinson [5], and Leech [20]. Building on Grice's [12] Cooperative Principle, all three approaches attempted to establish generally valid rules for language use that might ultimately explain the observed communicative variation. Politeness was seen as a technical concept that explains motivations for why people adapt various expressions in different situations when addressing different interlocutors. Lakoff [19, p. 298] proposed "rules of politeness" that affect language in use. Brown and Levinson [5] identified the factors of power, social distance and the ranking of an imposition within its cultural context that together influence the 'weightiness' of a particular face-threatening act (FTA). When choosing the appropriate strategy, the speakers are to attend to the addressee's need for distance (negative face) or involvement (positive face) or both.

However, in the past decade much of these earlier approaches have been increasingly challenged [1; 9; 33]. In recent years, there has been an important shift towards a discursive perspective on interpersonal dimensions of communication, where identities are treated by analysts as performed and transient [10], and politeness is seen as arising locally in interactions within the context of communities of practice [27], or latent/emergent networks [21]. Today scholars tend to focus on the emergence of norms of appropriateness against which interactants make judgments on politeness and to explore the link between these norms and relational effects. This shift goes hand in hand with a move from a theoretical, etic understanding of the concept of politeness (second order) to an interest in understanding what the interactants themselves consider polite (first order, emic). In addition, the research field has broadened its scope to include impoliteness phenomenon as well. While early studies on impoliteness [7; 15; 18] worked within the Brown and Levinson paradigm by mirroring politeness strategies with general impoliteness

strategies, the more recent work contributes to and furthers the same theoretical and methodological discussions as outlined for politeness research [4; 7; 17].

In our research we suggest that both *p o l i t e n e s s* and *i m p o l i t e n e s s* should be approached as a unified dual phenomenon that is realized in interaction through a set of strategies aimed at regulation or deregulation of communicative process, in general, and interpersonal relations and psychological states of interlocutors, in particular. Without social expectations it is difficult to see how one interlocutor could offend another using the language (either intentionally or otherwise). As such, 'politeness' can be regarded as the set of devices which can be used for avoiding or otherwise mitigating impoliteness in interaction. Essentially 'semantic (im)politeness' is enacted pragmalinguistically, that is – some lexico-syntactic forms are conventionally held to be (im)polite across multiple, regularly occurring, well known discursive contexts and, as such, their enactment produces the pragmatic effect(s) that the participants conventionally believe or understand them to hold. If intention is a factor that distinguishes impoliteness from politeness, as argued in Culpeper [7] and, further, Bousfield [4], then we need a richer understanding of the discursive context, in order to more confidently infer user intentions. This is an area ripe for further consideration of *f a c e* and *i d e n t i t y* *c o n s t r u i n g*.

Brown and Levinson [5] introduced a definition of 'face' and 'face-threatening act' to the politeness field. The concept of 'face' was taken from Goffman [11], who defined it as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for [himself/herself] by the line others assume [he/she] has taken during a particular contact" [11, p. 5]. Brown and Levinson [11, p. 61] developed this idea and distinguished between a positive (involvement) and negative (independence) aspect [5, p. 62]. The type, quantity, strength and salience of different aspects of face are conditioned by various contextual factors. Indeed, it is evidenced, amongst many other things, by the fact that contemporary British culture is often viewed, perhaps simplistically, as a negative-face culture, and the US, just as simplistically, as a positive-face culture. This very observation which has been made by many researchers over the years must inevitably lead us to considering these two identified aspects of face as being of different strengths and, thus of differing importance in different cultures. This does not im-

ply that the desire to be approved of, in some direct or peripheral way is non-existent in the UK culture, nor that the desire to be free from imposition is simply non-existent in the US culture, rather that (traditionally at least) the desire for freedom from imposition and the desire for approval are more important, respectively, in these two cultures.

In the meantime, there is extensive literature that discusses the different sides of the concept of face [28]. While there is no general agreement on a definition of the term as such, it is nevertheless considered a crucial part of different approaches within interpersonal pragmatics. For example, Spencer-Oatey [29], who uses the term "rapport management", differentiates among types of face (situation-specific, pan-situational, individual face, group). Locher highlights the idea that face is "conjointly co-constituted by interlocutors in interactions" [24, p. 26]. In short, this heralds Thomas' [32, p.169] and Brown and Levinson's [5, p. 61] own view that face is maintained, enhanced or damaged in interaction with others. Face in Terkourafi's view is constituted or threatened purely in interaction, that is, face is only constituted externally. The latter goes in line with Bousfield's idea that individuals alone do not 'have' face and cannot 'gain' or 'lose' face [4]. Rather [face] is grounded in the interactional dyad. Without an Other to whom they may be directed, face concerns cannot arise. The moment an Other enters the Self's perceptual field creating the possibility to approach or to withdraw, that is the moment when face concerns prototypically arise. To adapt a well known expression, face is 'in the eye of the beholder.' [30, p. 52]

We agree with the idea of all the scholars [4; 30] who insist that there is, and can be, no communication without face being an issue, which has implications for Brown and Levinson's model of politeness. However, we cannot agree that the individual interactant does not bring something concerning their own face to the interaction. After all, surely actors approach interactions with *expectations* as to how they would like their face(s) to be constituted. Such expectations of how face should be constituted are, necessarily, internal. They are brought by an individual to the interaction based on her/his own feeling of self-worth and her/ his understanding of the context of previous, similar encounters (with whom one is meeting, the situation the interactants are in, and so on). Such expectations are held right up to the point at which the interaction starts and, indeed, must survive in some (albeit modified) form throughout the exchange. Essentially, when the *reality* of the socially and interactionally constituted face differs markedly from the individual's internal expectation of how their face should be constituted – especially where face is constituted at a somewhat 'lower' level than it is expected, then tensions can ensue requiring, perhaps, remedial face/politeness work, an individual's re-assessment of their positioning in society in relation to their feeling of self-worth including a defence of their expectations in an attempt to bring actual face in line with the expected, or an attack on a threatener's face or other, similar 'repositioning'. That echoes a post-structuralist idea of an anticipated face closer to that of identity, with the latter (especially in connection with the roles that actors assume in communication) being approached as positioning in a particular discursive context.

The study of identity and language, in contrast, has a longstanding research tradition that is not primarily linked to politeness studies. Thus, tackling questions of identity is thus a question of ontology, since addressing who the individual 'is' is coupled with questions of 'being' and 'existence'. Whereas structuralist approaches to identity generally viewed this 'is' as a static and coherent pre-given entity, post-structuralist approaches underline identity as emergent and constructed when individuals engage in social behavior, including communication [5, p. 101]

Davies and Harre's [8] socio-psychological theory discusses identity in light of the key concept 'positioning'. They argue that positioning is "the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines" [8, p. 46]. The fact that positioning is discursive and involves communication process maintained by more than one party underlines that it is an intersubjective process. Since positioning ensues when individuals interact with one another, its emergence is contingent upon the interaction. Analogously, then, selves are emergent in interaction, since an individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate [8, p. 45]. Thus, when individuals construct identities in interaction, they are performing acts of positioning, and underlining the existence of a particular self which can be observed by others at a particular moment in time. The more particular acts of positioning are performed by the same individual, the more central this attribute is to his/her own construction of identity [5, p. 104].

Since the construing of identity is intersubjective, positioning needs to be studied both from the perspective of the self and the other. The terms used by Davies and Harre [8, p. 46] are reflexive and interactive positioning [5]. When individuals engage in positioning acts, they are involved in the construing and co-construing of identities. Identity is thus understood from a post-structuralist perspective [6, p. 586] as "the social positioning of self and other". Social positioning does not take place in a social vacuum, but is rather intersubjective and emergent. Thus, identity is "intersubjectively rather than individually produced and interactionally emergent rather than assigned in an a priori fashion" [6, p. 587]. When individuals interact with one another, they construe their own identities and make assumptions about the identities of others. This process is fundamentally relational in that ties between interactants are created and recreated, shaped, challenged and confirmed (for the connection between relational work and identity construction [2; 24]). Relevant for this construing are numerous impact factors such as culture, ethnicity, social group, gender and age. Clearly, language, while not the only means of identity construing, is central to this process.

An essential part of an individual's social identity is formed by group membership. Moreover, presumably individual's face concerns are closely intertwined with group-face sensitivities, which are linked up with the sensitivities of a group one belongs to or identifies with [28; 4]. Thus, intergroup (im)politeness is an important interactive practice in the creation and maintenance of the boundaries that define

groups, communities, cultural entities. As an evaluative attitude, (im)politeness "is sustained by expectations, desires and/or beliefs about social organisation, including, in particular, how one person's or group's identities are mediated by others in interaction" [7, p. 3233]. This mediation is intertwined with the co-construing of face.

Adopting a discursive approach in which (im)politeness norms are seen and analysed as practiced in on-going discourse, we must acknowledge that linguistic behaviour which might be perceived as impolite by outsiders of certain communities could be considered by the participants themselves as perfectly appropriate, 'politic behaviour' in Watts' sense [33, p. 161] or vice versa. However, we assume that there is also a set of shared conventions which allows for the intuitive (out-of-context) judgements [7, p. 31], people make about certain expressions. These often coincide with categories of (im)politeness established in theoretical models. Thus, in contrast to Watts [33], we do not see such a clear-cut boundary between strategies outlined in theoretical models of politeness (second-order perspective) and individuals' perceptions of token structures realised in specific contexts as polite or impolite (first-order perspective). Drawing on Culpeper [7], we assume that a possible bridge between the two perspectives is our conventionalized knowledge about the potentially (im)polite impact of such token construing outside specific contexts. This knowledge is part of our frame- and scheme-based knowledge [7] and deeply entrenched in our cultural models about cooperative interaction [16]. It is transferred, among other means, via 'metadiscourse', which, as an "(i)ndirect experience" of (im)politeness, "plays a role in the group dynamic that gives rise to a behaviour being evaluated as impolite" [7, p. 271] or polite respectively.

The latter goes in line with Schifffrin's [27] idea of communicative practices, which are seen as the discursive practices (micro level) of actors in pursuit of their everyday goals and aspirations (macro level) [13, p. 454]. Communicative practices fit into the macro-micro opposition in the following way: on the one hand, they are treated as shaped by one's habitus [3], a term which, in Gumperz's [13, p. 453] understanding, includes the "embodied dispositions to act and perceive the world that directly reflect the macrosocial conditions, political and economic forces, and relationships in which they were acquired". On the other hand, the more constructivist approach towards communicative practices is identified with the understanding of the ways in which localized interactive processes work. The scrutiny of these localized interactive processes can explain if and in what ways linguistic (im)politeness is construed [31, p. 25].

Yet while there is evidently an increasing number of studies that take a broadly discursive perspective on identities and im/politeness as situated in interaction, these two phenomena have generally been analysed somewhat independently of the other. In recent years, however, there has been broader recognition that identity work and relational work are, at times, closely interrelated [14; 23; 28]. Locher [21, p. 517] argues that "an important aspect of identity construction is whether or not we want to project an image of ourselves as someone who is aware of the social norms of behaviour that are relevant in a particular social practice". She suggests that the use of language that is perceived as "polite", "impolite",

"over-polite" and so on can occasion the casting of persons as "polite", "impolite", "over-polite" and so on. In other words, we can talk of polite and impolite identities [25, p. 76]. Locher [23] goes further, however, in arguing that research on relational work and identity can be merged within "a broader postmodern constructionist framework" [22, p. 187], both for the analysis of face-to-face interactions. This move by Locher to integrate research on relational work and identity stems from her definition of relational work as "the process of defining *relationships* in interaction", and the definition of identity as "the active negotiation of an individual's *relationship* with larger social constructs" [21, p. 510]. Locher [21, p. 511] further suggests that relational work and identity are closely interconnected as "relational work refers to the ways in which the construction of identity is achieved in interaction, while identity refers to the 'product' of these linguistic and non-linguistic processes". However, while analytically distinct, identities and relationships are nevertheless dialectically related, such that interpretations and evaluations of identities are ultimately relationship-implicative (i.e. may be treated as consequential for the participants' relationships) and vice versa.

Hence, the concept of face appears to be individually (internally, cognitively, historically) expected by the individual but interactionally (externally, mutually, continuously) constituted between the individual and other actor(s). Consequently, face is enhanced or threatened/damaged in interactional dyads [4, p. 39-41]. The individual's understanding of how their face was constituted and developed during this interaction then constructs part of their internal expectations of face for future interactions with other actors, i.e. their identity. 'Positive' and 'Negative' face, that is the desire for approval, and the desire to be free from imposition are applicable to most, if not all cultures but are of differing strengths and saliency dependent upon context. 'Positive' and 'Negative' face are but two identified aspects of face. There are others which are applicable to different cultures and contexts and these, too, will be of differing strengths and saliency.

Summing up, both politeness and impoliteness are best to be studied from two different research perspectives: a second-order perspective, focusing on strategies outlined in theoretical models of politeness, and a first-order perspective, considering interlocutors' perceptions of token structures realised in specific contexts as polite or impolite. Apparently, the combination of these two angles proves to be fruitful in researching communicative behaviours, and particularly politeness/impoliteness phenomenon. Although the interactive practices in the two threads display some similarities, the details of how (im)politeness tokens and metapragmatic factors are distributed and negotiated in specific contexts can be dramatically different and will mostly depend on face work and identity construing. Moreover, not losing sight of the fact that face and identity construing is an interpersonally performed group process, we also wish to tackle in more detail the complex interrelationship between more static and emergent parts of an individual's identity. This can be done, for example, by comparing the explicit identity claims with the acts of performed positioning. This will allow us to zoom in further research on the dynamic and interactive construing of identities.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Arundale, R.B. *Relating* / R.B. Arundale // *Interpersonal Pragmatics*. – Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, – 2010. – P. 137-167.
- [2] Bolander, B. “Peter Is a Dumb Nut”: Status Updates and to Them as ‘Acts of Positioning’ in Facebook / B. Bolander, M.A. Locher // *Pragmatics*. – 2015. – № 25(1). – P. 99-122.
- [3] Bourdieu, P. *Language & Symbolic Power* / P. Bourdieu. – Cambridge: Harvard University Press, – 1991. – 302 p.
- [4] Bousfield, D. *Impoliteness in Interaction* / D. Bousfield. – Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008. – 277 p.
- [5] Brown, P. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* / P. Brown, S.C. Levinson. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. – 357 p.
- [6] Bucholtz, M. *Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach* / M. Bucholtz, K. Hall // *Discourse Studies*. – 2005. – № 7. – P. 584-614.
- [7] Culpeper, J. *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence* / J. Culpeper. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. – 292 p.
- [8] Davies, B. *Positioning: The social construction of self* / B. Davies, R. Harre // *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*. – 1990. – № 20(1). – P. 43-63.
- [9] Eelen, G. *A Critique of Politeness Theories*. – Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2001. – 280 p.
- [10] Georgakopoulou, A. *Postscript: Computer-mediated communication in sociolinguistics* / A. Georgakopoulou // *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. – 2006. – № 10. – P. 548-557.
- [11] Goffman, E. *Interactional Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* / E. Goffman. – Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967. – 270 p.
- [12] Grice, H.P. *Logic and conversation* / H.P. Grice // In P. Cole, J.L. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics*. – 1975. – Vol. 3 (*Speech Acts*). – P. 41-58.
- [13] Gumperz, J.J. *On interactional sociolinguistic method* / J.J. Gumperz // In S. Sarangi, C. Roberts (eds.), *Talk, Work and Institutional Order: Discourse in Medical, Mediation and Management Settings*. – Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999. – P. 453-472.
- [14] Haugh, M. *When is an email really offensive?: Argumentativity and variability in evaluations of impoliteness* / M. Haugh // *Journal of Politeness Research*. – 2010. – № 6(1). – P. 7-31.
- [15] Kienpointner, M. *Varieties of rudeness. Functions of Language* / M. Kienpointner. – 1997. – № 4. – P. 251-287.
- [16] Kleinke, S. *Interactive aspects of computer-mediated communication: ‘Disagreement’ in an English-speaking and a German-speaking public news group* / S. Kleinke // In S. Tanskanen, L. Helasvuo, M. Johansson, and M. Raitaniemi (eds.), *Discourses in Interaction*. – Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010. – P. 195-222.
- [17] Kleinke, S.B. *Intergroup Rudeness and the Metapragmatics of its Negotiation in Online Discussion Fora* / S. Kleinke, B. Bos // *Pragmatics*. – 2015. – № 25(1). – P. 47-71.
- [18] Lachenicht, L.G. *Aggravating language: A study of abusive and insulting language* / L.G. Lachenicht // *Papers in Linguistics: International Journal in Human Communication*. – 1980. – № 13(4). – P. 607-687.
- [19] Lakoff, R.T. *The logic of politeness, or minding your p’s and q’s* / R.T. Lakoff. – Chicago: Chicago Linguistics Society, 1973. – № 9. – P. 292-305.
- [20] Leech G.N. *Principles of Pragmatics* / G.N. Leech. – New York: Longman, 1983. – 250 p.
- [21] Locher, M.A. *Relational work, politeness and identity construction* / M.A. Locher // In G. Antos, E. Ventola, T. Weber (eds.), *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*. – Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 2008. – Vol. 6. – P. 509-540.
- [22] Locher, M.A. *Situated impoliteness: The interface between relational work and identity construction* / M.A. Locher // In B. Davies, M. Haugh, A.J. Merrison (eds.), *Situated Politeness*. – London: Continuum, 2011. – P. 187-208.
- [23] Locher, M.A. *Introducing Relational Work in Facebook and Discussion Boards* / M. A. Locher, B. Bolander, N. Hohn // *Pragmatics*. – 2015. – № 25(1). – P. 1-21.
- [24] Locher, M.A. *Relational work and impoliteness: Negotiating norms of linguistic behavior* / M.A. Locher, J.W. Richard // In D. Bousfield, M.A. Locher (eds.), *Impoliteness in Language: Studies on its Interplay with Power in Theory and Practice*. – Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 2008. – P. 77-99.
- [25] Michael, H. *“Doing Deference”: Identities and Relational Practices in Chinese Online Discussion Boards* / H. Michael, W.M. Chang, D.Z. Kadar // *Pragmatics*. – 2015. – № 25(1). – P. 73-98.
- [26] Sage, G.L. *Disagreeing to agree: Conflict, (im)politeness and identity in a computermediated community* / G.L. Sage // *Journal of Pragmatics*. – 2007. – № 39(4). – P. 742-759.
- [27] Schiffrin, D. *Approaches to Discourse* / D. Schiffrin // *Discurso*. – Malden: Blackwell, 1994. – № 20. – P. 105-110.
- [28] Spencer-Oatey H. *(Im)Politeness, face and perceptions of rapport: Unpackaging their bases and interrelationships* / H. Spencer-Oatey // *Journal of Politeness Research*. – 2005. – № 1(1). – P. 95-119.
- [29] Spencer-Oatey, H. *Identity, face and (im)politeness* / H. Spencer-Oatey // *Journal of Pragmatics*. – 2007. – № 39(4). – P. 635-638.
- [30] Terkourafi, M. *Toward a unified Theory of Politeness, Impoliteness and Rudeness* / M. Terkourafi // In *Impoliteness in Language*, Derek Bousfield and Mariam Locher (eds.). – Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008. – P. 45-74;
- [31] Theodoropoulou I. *Politeness on Facebook: the Case of Greek Birthday Wishes* / I. Theodoropoulou // *Pragmatics*. – 2015. – № 25(1). – P. 23-45.
- [32] Thomas, J. *Meaning in Interaction* / J. Thomas. – London and New York: Longman, 1995. – p. 526.
- [33] Watts, R.J. *Linguistic politeness theory and its aftermath: Recent research trails* / R.J. Watts // In M.A. Locher, S.L. Graham (eds.), *Interpersonal Pragmatics*. – Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 2010. – Vol. 6 (*Handbooks of Pragmatics*). – P. 43-70.
- [34] Watzlawick, P. *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes* / P. Watzlawick, J.H. Beavin, D.D. Jackson. – New York: Norton, 1967. – P. 48-71.