A Pragmatic Analysis of Impoliteness in Reply Articles as an Instance of Academic Conflict

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Abstract

The current study aimed to investigate the realization of impoliteness in reply articles published in academic journals in the field of applied linguistics as an instance of academic conflict. Drawing on the theoretical model of impoliteness (Bousfield, 2008a), on-record and off-record impolite behaviors were coded in a corpus of 49 reply articles published in academic journals. The results of the analysis including the frequency counts as well as normalized frequency scores demonstrated the prevalence of on-record impoliteness, i.e. the authors of the reply articles revealed a strong preference for using on-record impolite behaviors while responding to comments posed by other scholars in the field on their previously published works. The findings of the current study seem to contribute to the academic community by expanding the currently available literature on (im)politeness. Moreover, the findings would raise the consciousness of the academic courses instructors, novice and professional members of the applied linguistics discourse community considering the potential (im)politeness implications of their contributions to the discourse community in order to choose pragmatically appropriate alternatives (Ishiara, 2006).

Keywords: face, impoliteness, on-record impoliteness, off-record impoliteness, reply article.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic nature of social interaction allows the speakers to draw on various linguistic strategies in order to "promote, maintain, or attack an addressee's face" (Limberg, 2009, p. 1376). According to Limberg (2009), a speaker may intentionally employ a communicative strategy to cause "a social conflict with the addressee" (p. 1376). These types of strategies had first given rise to the recognition of impoliteness, a field of study which was neglected till 1990s. For a long time, it had been either overlooked or simply considered as pragmatic failure to observe the politeness principles (Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; cited in Limberg, 2009). Nevertheless, it has gained prominence in recent years as a "systematic" (Lakoff, 1989, p. 123), "functional" (Beebe, 1995, p. 154), "purposefully offensive" (Tracy & Tracy, 1998, p. 227), and "intentionally gratuitous" (Bousfield, 2008b, p. 132) strategy to attack face.

Since the introduction of the first theories of impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996; Kienpointner, 1997), a large body of research has shown the relationship between the concept of impoliteness and the exercise of power. In this sense, Mills (2009) points to impoliteness "as a way of enacting power" (Mills, 2009, p. 1049) and Waternberg (1990, cited in Locher & Bousfield, 2008) reiterates that there is no interaction without power and impoliteness is the realization of exercise of power. Indeed, the users of both polite and impolite utterances are involved in "a struggle of power" (Watts, 2003, p. 10).

On the one hand, as Hatipoğlu (2007, p. 761) notes, members of each community have "their own ways of doing (im)politeness". On the other hand, "conflictive illocutions" seem to be more prevalent in some contexts (Leech, 1983, p. 105). In this regard, one genre which seems to be the locus of such conflicts and negotiation of power seems to be the reply articles which are written in order to reply to another scholar's views presented earlier within an academic discourse community, e.g. applied linguistics.

While a large number of studies have so far considered numerous types of spoken and written discourse (See Limberg, 2009), no study has touched upon the possible realization of forms of offensive language in formal written arguments among scholars of the field of applied linguistics. Much research on (im)politeness has been focused on informal settings and ordinary conversations (Ermida, 2006; Harris, 2001; Myers, 1989) and there is a growing consensus that more empirical research is needed to examine the (im)politeness beyond the existing frameworks in "institutional contexts and more formal generic types of discourse" (Harris, 2001, p. 469) in order to identify more impoliteness patterns and defensive strategies (Bousfield, 2008a).

Bearing this in mind, the current study aimed to investigate the realization of impoliteness in reply articles published in academic journals in the field of applied linguistics as an instance of academic conflict. The study specifically addressed the following research question:

- How frequent are (im)polite behaviors in reply articles published in academic journals of the field of applied linguistics in two forms of on-record and off-record?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Culpeper (2010, p. 2333) defines impoliteness as follows:

> Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires and/or beliefs about social organization, including, in particular, how one person's or group's identities are mediated by others in interaction. Situated behaviours are viewed negatively when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviours always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. Various factors can exacerbate how

offensive an impolite behaviour is taken to be, including for example whether one understands a behaviour to be strongly intentional or not.

He puts forth a number of superstrategies for impoliteness including *bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness, and withhold politeness* (Culpeper, 1996, pp. 356-357). Almost two decades earlier, Lachenicht (1980, p. 619) had considered the use of "aggravating language" and had suggested four aggravation superstrategies including *off record, bald on record, positive aggravation, and negative aggravation.* Later, Bousfield (2008a) tried to modify previously presented models and put forth two overarching tactics (p. 95):

On record impoliteness

The use of strategies designed to explicitly (a) attack the face of an interactant, (b) construct the face of an interactant in a non-harmonious or outright conflictive way, (c) deny the expected face wants, needs, or rights of the interactant, or some combination thereof. The attack is made in an unambiguous way given the context in which it occurs.

Off record impoliteness

The use of strategies where the threat or damage to an interactant's face is conveyed indirectly by way of an implicature (cf. Grice [1975] 1989) and can be cancelled (e.g., denied, or an account / post-modification / elaboration offered, etc.) but where "...one attributable intention clearly outweighs any others" (Culpeper, 2005, p. 44), given the context in which it occurs.

Sarcasm and the Withholding of Politeness where it is expected would also come under this heading, as follows:

Sarcasm

Sarcasm constitutes the use of individual or combined strategies which, on the surface, appear to be appropriate but which are meant to be taken as meaning the opposite in terms of face-management. The utterance that appears, on the surface, to positively constitute, maintain, or enhance the face of the intended recipient(s) actually threatens, attacks and/or damages the face of the recipient(s) (See Culpeper, 2005) given the context in which it occurs.

Withhold politeness

More specifically, withhold politeness where politeness would appear to be expected or mandatory. Withholding politeness is within the Off Record category as"[...] politeness has to be communicated [...] the absence of communicated politeness may, ceteris paribus, be taken as the absence of a polite attitude." Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 5).

Bousfield (2008a, p. 96) holds that his model is "robust, in that it is applicable alongside traditional (e.g. Goffman, 1967), culture-specific (e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1987), or more

contextually and culturally sensitive (e.g. Spencer-Oatey, 2002, 2005) models of face". He also believes that his modified model of impoliteness is "an adaptable adjunct to existing and foreseeable models of face" (p. 96).

Along with theoretical frameworks developed to elaborate the concept of impoliteness, it has been the focus of a large number of empirical studies. Various forms of offensive language have been investigated in military discourse (Culpeper, 1996), political discourse (Harris, 2001; Garcia-Pastor, 2008), and legal discourse (Harris, 1984; Archer, 2011). Furthermore, a large number of researchers have given particular attention to several speech acts such as requests (Félix-Brasdefer, 2006), complaints (Perelmutter, 2010), invitations (Bella, 2011), and disagreement (Sifianou, 2012; Zhu, 2014). Some scholars also tried to shed light on the impoliteness in various literary works (Brown & Gilman, 1989; Culpeper, 1998; Ermida, 2006; Rudanko, 2006; Metthias, 2011). On the other hand, the realization of impoliteness phenomena has been investigated in e-mail communications (Cehjnová, 2014), internet discussion forums (Shum & Lee, 2013) and academic blog discussions (Luzón, 2013).

Furthermore, a number of scholars have also studied politeness strategies in academic written discourse. In this sense, Cherry (1988) studied politeness in 22 letters that academics wrote in support of a colleague whose promotion and tenor had been denied and Myers (1989) analyzed a set of articles by molecular geneticists in terms of politeness strategies. Itakura and Tsui (2011) used Brown and Levinson's (1987) model and analyzed 20 English and 20 Japanese book reviews to see how criticism was managed. However, no study has yet taken impoliteness models as their point of departure for examining the academic written discourse.

METHOD

Corpus

A comprehensive list of professional journals was collected from the following valid and reliable sources: The Modern Language Journal (Weber & Campbell, 2004), Egbert's (2007) evaluation of applied linguistics journals, Jung's (2004) examination of the frequency of appearance of ELT journals selected for presentation in Language Teaching between 1996 and 2002, and Lazaraton's sample (2000). Then, three PhD holders were asked to provide expert judgment on the list. The final list included the following journals from which 49 reply articles, which included impolite behaviors, were selected:

Applied Linguistics, English Language Teaching (ELT), Journal of Pragmatics, International Journal of Applied Linguistics, Language Learning, TESOL Quarterly, Journal of Second Language Writing, and *Journal of Second Language Research*.

Analytical Framework

For the purpose of investigating how (im)politeness was represented in reply articles, Bousfield's (2008a) model was used. Of course, there are various politeness and

impoliteness models but Bousfield's (2008a) model seems to lend itself much better to analyzing (im)politeness in written discourse as a robust model (Bousfield, 2008a). (See Review of the Literature).

Procedure

Each reply article was analyzed in order to code the cases of off-record and on-record impoliteness. After the first analysis by the researcher, 10 percent of the data was coded by the second coder and inter-coder reliability of 0.88 was obtained. Then, the frequencies were determined for both cases of impoliteness, on-record and off-record. Then, the percentage values were determined and the raw frequencies were normalized to 1000 words in order to make the reply articles of various lengths comparable (Nur Aktas & Cortes, 2008).

RESULTS

The research question addressed the frequency of (im)politeness in reply articles published in academic journals of the field of applied linguistics which concerned coding both on-record and off-record (im)politeness. Table 1 displays the frequency counts that indicate the distribution of (im)polite behaviors in reply articles.

Table 1. Frequencies of on-record and off-record (im)politeness in reply articles

Type of (Im)politeness	Total Frequency	Normalized Frequency
On-record	413	3.12
Off-record	74	0.55
Total	487	3.67

The results of the analysis of reply articles in terms of (im)politeness revealed that applied linguists used more on-record (im)politeness in responding to the comments of their counterparts. Out of 487 identified (im)polite behaviors, 413 ones (%84.80) were on-record (im)polite behaviors in comparison with 74 (%15.20) off-record ones.

The results of the study revealed that academic writers most frequently made use of on-record (im)politeness while responding to their counterparts' comments on their previously published articles. There were numerous cases where the authors of the reply articles explicitly and directly challenged the commentators' ideas in "an unambiguous" and "a non-harmonious or outright conflictive" way (Bousfield, 2008a, p.95).

1. Even this *weak defense* is doubtful.
2. X's *failure to understand* the nature of variation in the MDM would appear to lead to what he has to say about the acquisition criteria we employ.

In Example (1), the author directly considers the commentator's ideas as both *weak* and *doubtful.* Example (2) implies that the commentator *failed to understand* a concept. In these cases, conflictive acts are presented in a direct and explicit way.

However, there were fewer cases of off-record impoliteness:

3. I *fail to find* where in the article I have made this assertion, nor, in fact, does it correspond to my belief.

In examples (3), the author indirectly and implicitly point to the commentators' inability to present the ideas suggested in an earlier contribution to the field.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the study are in line with those of Johnson (1992) and Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2011) in that the reply articles included "direct and harsh" responses with "no apparent attempt to be polite" (p. 51). Furthermore, a large bulk of studies (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Yule, 1990; Mills, 2009; Chejnová, 2014) demonstrated the possible influence of various factors on the degree of (im)politeness of one's utterances, e.g. differences in the status of the producers and addressees. This is what happens in reply articles in which the authors, being of high status in the field, openly disconfirmed what the commentators said about their previously published articles and used on-record (im)politeness more frequently in their replies. Furthermore, considering the reply article authors' status-related information, it seems clear that they were not concerned about possible consequences of directly putting forth their responses. This is compatible with previous studies (Mackiewicz, 2007; Zuckerman & Merton, 1973; Salager-Meyer & Alcaraz-Ariza, 2011; all cited in Babaii, 2011).

As Limberg (2009) reiterated, speakers may intentionally utilize a communicative strategy to bring about "a social conflict with the addressee" (p. 1376). In this regard, Leech (1983, p .105) maintained that these "conflictive illocutions" may be more frequently used in some contexts than the other ones. The results of the study showed that one such context might be the reply articles. Along with the findings of previous studies on the politeness strategies and their representation in academic written discourse (Cherry, 1988; Itakura & Tsui, 2011; Johnson, 1992; Myers, 1989), the results of the current study revealed the application of on-record and off-record (im)polite behaviors in reply articles as an instance of academic conflict as well.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The findings of the current study seem to expand the currently available literature on (im)politeness. On the other hand, "acquiring a working knowledge of pragmatic aspects of the second language" (Haugh, 2007, p. 657) seems to be of significance. The results of the current study would sensitize applied linguistics instructors to draw the students' attention to different pragmatically appropriate strategies in order to create their identity and manage rapport (Graham, 2007, p. 743).

The present study focused only on English reply articles. Further studies can take a contrastive approach in order to find out whether and how (im)politeness is employed in reply articles written in other languages. Furthermore, reply articles as an instance of academic conflict which entails "struggle of power" (Watts, 2003, p. 10), can be studied through the lens of critical discourse analysis in order to unfold the hidden agenda behind the cases of (im)politeness.

Watts (2003, p. 9) states that "impoliteness is a term that is struggled over at present, has been struggled over in the past and will, in all probability, continue to be struggled over in the future." In this regard, the literature calls for "a need for more empirical research examining the intricacies of (im)politeness and perceptions of (in)appropriateness beyond the previous frameworks" (Graham, 2007, p. 743) which was the goal of the current study. It is the hope of the present researchers that above suggestions are considered in future research in order to enrich the existing literature on (im)politeness in academic discourse community.

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