



Explore the Merit of Applying Discursive Approaches to Im/politeness in *The Inbetweeners*

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Introduction

During this assessment, I will explore im/politeness as a discursive phenomenon in the TV show, *The Inbetweeners*. I aim to elicit how discursive approaches offer a more nuanced study of im/politeness than classic approaches, in particular, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Throughout my analysis, I will exemplify how the discursive approaches to im/politeness remedy some of the fundamental limitations of the classic models. In addition, I will explore how discursive theorists transcend classic frameworks; they envisage im/politeness norms as ideological which are central to identity construction and the negotiation of power in interaction.

The flexible discursive definition of im/politeness is necessitated by my data as the viewer witnesses a group of adolescents who have unconventional im/politeness norms, which cannot be analysed using classic politeness models. Furthermore, a dynamic definition of im/politeness is demanded as the protagonist, Will, changes his im/politeness strategies to be accepted into the social group of Jay, Simon and Neil. Notably, the ideological reach of discursive approaches to im/politeness permits the exploration of identity construction and power within the group, which is crucial to my study. During this assessment, I will illustrate how the application of discursive approaches not only alleviates some of the limitations of the classic models, but also moves beyond them, through claiming that Will's trajectory of assimilation into the group can be elucidated through his im/politeness strategies.

Background

Classic Approaches to Politeness

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory has had a lasting impact upon politeness studies and continues to have currency today. Brown and Levinson appropriated Goffman's (1955) concept of face as 'the public self image', to explain how a social equilibrium is maintained in conversation (62). Brown and Levinson (1987) make the distinction between positive face, the want 'to be desirable at least to some others' and negative face, that 'his/her actions can be unimpeded by others' (62). This strategic approach to interaction is seen in the delineation of face-saving acts which yield to the positive/negative face arrangement; individuals have a choice to: baldly state the face-threatening act (FTA) on-record without redressive action, perform the FTA on-record with positive politeness, perform the FTA on-record with negative politeness, perform the FTA but off-record or not perform the FTA at all (60). Brown and Levinson's model is still used widely, this can be attributed to its ability to produce neat analyses; it functions well when tested empirically in a wide range of interactions.

However, Brown and Levinson (1987) model of politeness is limiting. Firstly, it assumes that all conversations are cooperative and that the speaker invests in the face needs of their interlocutor. Brown and Levinson's model of politeness therefore does not account for intentional impoliteness; it assumes that the mitigation of FTAs is a universal concern. This is problematic as much of my data focuses upon intentional impoliteness. Furthermore, this critique is extended by Sara Mills (2011) who claims that Brown and Levinson's politeness model envisages politeness as the 'rational strategic use of language by individuals to achieve their ends' (22). Here, Mills critiques how Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is centred on having goals in conversation; they view interaction as a strategic, rather than social phenomenon.

This strategic, all-encompassing politeness framework has led to the study of speech acts in isolation, a macro methodological trend which has resulted in the systematic abstraction of data. The decontextualised analysis of speech acts has been criticised by Bousfield (2008), who argues that politeness research has become 'locked in enshrining single acts of politeness in single utterances' (66). Notably, this use of quantitative research methods has until recently resulted in a relatively narrow focus in politeness studies; identity work has until recently been neglected from decades of research in the field.

Impoliteness Frameworks

Culpeper (1996) remedied the absence of impoliteness in Brown and Levinson's model by introducing a framework solely dedicated to its study. However, Culpeper's (1996) model transposes Brown and Levinson's framework into the domain of impoliteness, which is problematic; it retains the same binary principles of positive and negative face. Thus, although Culpeper's model has afforded focus upon impoliteness, it is subject to several of the criticisms of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Culpeper's framework is not applicable to my data as I aim to move im/politeness beyond the positive/negative face dichotomy and into the realm of identity construction and the negotiation of power.

However, Bousfield (2008) has alleviated many of the problems of Brown and Levinson and Culpeper's frameworks. Bousfield (2008)'s model of impoliteness is simple which makes it flexible, he distinguishes between 'on-record impoliteness', a deliberate FTA, and 'off-record impoliteness', the withholding of politeness where expected (211). Furthermore, Bousfield advocates discourse analysis over decontextualised speech acts; he supports Terkourafi's (2008) view that face is constituted over several turns. The dynamic, interactional quality to Bousfield's framework is further demonstrated in his attention to the recipient's response, a shift away from the ego-centric focus upon the speaker in classic approaches. Bousfield argues that the recipient can either 'opt out', respond with a 'counter-offensive strategy', or respond with a 'counter-defensive strategy' (193). Bousfield can thus be viewed as being on the cusp of the discursive turn in im/politeness research as he views face and impoliteness as dynamic concepts which are maintained over stretches of discourse.

Discursive Approaches

Discursive approaches respond to some the limitations of Brown and Levinson's politeness framework. Rather than viewing im/politeness norms as universal, Mills (2003) defines im/politeness as a matter of appropriateness, of 'judgement and assessment' (110). Discursive theorists therefore envisage im/politeness norms as constructed out of the context of the interaction: they are domain-based (dependent on the situation) and addressee-based (dependent on other speakers). This dynamic definition is central to my data; I will elicit how Will's im/politeness norms change as he spends time with the group.

Discursive theorists also move away from the analysis of decontextualised speech acts and advocate discourse analysis. The thick description enables the micro analysis of linguistic features in context, moving beyond the abstraction seen in Brown and Levinson's model. Moreover, van der Bom and Mills (2015) advocate this micro approach by proposing that the Community of Practice (CofP) is the site of analysis, they claim that 'meaning is constructed locally' within the CofP (195). The CofP was adapted to linguistics by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992), it denotes a group of speakers who have a 'mutual engagement', a 'joint enterprise' (a shared goal/activity) and a 'shared repertoire' (shared linguistic norms) (462). Im/politeness strategies can be envisaged as part of the 'shared repertoire' of the CofP, they index the group identity. This allows scope for the analysis of how im/politeness intersects with identity construction and the negotiation of power within the CofP.

The negotiation of power can be mapped on a local level; the understanding of the CofP's im/politeness norms determines an individual's assimilation into the group. In her analysis of the TV show, *Ice Road Truckers*, Mullany (2011) demonstrates how the core members of CofP frequently utilise impoliteness to project their shared masculine identity, which simultaneously marks the isolation of the peripheral member (80). This notion of 'othering' through im/politeness strategies is central to my data; it highlights how Will is 'othered' as a peripheral member due to his conventional politeness norms. I aim to debunk this notion of 'othering' through deploying Bucholtz and Hall's poststructuralist theory of identity being the 'social positioning of the self and the other' (2005: 586). Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) theory of 'adequation' (using similar linguistic features to show affiliation with others) and 'distinction' (using different linguistic features to distinguish the self from others) can be applied to im/politeness norms and will be useful to map Will's assimilation into the CofP in my data.

Methodology

Data

I have taken my data from the first and second episodes of the comedy series, *The Inbetweeners*. The series depicts the liminality of adolescence; the viewer follows the group of Will, Jay, Simon and Neil, through their experiences of Sixth Form in a British state school. *The Inbetweeners* is therefore a

valuable data source; the viewer witnesses how the group attempt to convey a non-conformist identity, which is seen in their unconventional im/politeness norms. In the first episode, it is Will's first day at the college and he is initially isolated. I will propose that Will's marginalisation is due to his conventional politeness norms which index a conformist, 'nerd' identity. Thus, to gain core membership, Will has to change his im/politeness strategies in order to identify with the rebellious joint enterprise of the CofP. I have chosen extracts which demonstrate Will's assimilation into the CofP across the first two episodes. The extracts will be analysed in chronological order to illuminate Will's trajectory from a peripheral to core member, which will make his changes in im/politeness strategies transparent.

Approach

As *The Inbetweeners* is constructed media data, I will undertake a 'scene-based' approach to televisual discourse. The 'scene-based' approach was coined by Androutsopoulos (2010) and accounts for the analysis of the dialogue between characters. Furthermore, Bednarek (2012) argues that characters are constructed with recourse to social stereotypes to enable viewer identification; she deploys socio-cultural terminology and claims producers 'construct styles for characters using semiotic resources that index identities' (222). This is central to my analysis as I will elicit how conflicting im/politeness strategies signal the clash between two stereotypes: the 'nerd' (Will) and the hegemonic male (Jay). I will propose that it is the evocation of stereotypes which creates the synthesis between the viewer (reality) and the characters (fictional world). With reference to Bednarek (2012), I will investigate how im/politeness strategies encompass some of the 'semiotic resources' which enable this character construction and fusion between the real and fictional world.

In order to locate these 'semiotic resources' I will undertake a discourse analysis approach to benefit from its thick description of linguistic items, an approach which is advocated by Mills (2011). Furthermore, I will apply Silverstein's (2003) analytical framework of 'indexicality' to debunk how certain im/politeness strategies index certain social identities in interaction. The indexical utility of im/politeness will inform my reading of the construction of the stereotypical 'hegemonic male' and 'nerd' in my study. Furthermore, the CofP is characteristic of discursive approaches, it facilitates the exploration of the axes of inclusion and exclusion, which is central to mapping Will's assimilation into the group.

However, Holmes (2005) argues that discursive approaches, that I adopt above, are examples of the 'rug-pulling' of the postmodern turn in linguistics; she implies that the resistance to over-arching frameworks is counter-productive (120). As discursive approaches can be nebulous, I will provide a clear methodological framework through utilising Bousfield's (2008) model of impoliteness when analysing 'impolite' extracts. Bousfield's model synthesises with the discursive definition of im/politeness as it is dynamic and focuses on stretches of discourse. I will therefore contest Holmes' claim by using a hybrid of macro and micro approaches to analyse im/politeness. I will use Bousfield's (2008) macro framework to structure the impolite sequences into different categories of impoliteness and responses. Yet, I will also investigate how im/politeness is integral to identity construction and power within the CofP through the micro analysis of linguistic items.

Analysis

Episode 1

From the outset, Will is marginalised due to his linguistic features. Will's conventional politeness norms are exemplified when he first meets Jay and Neil, his courtesy is depicted in, 'nice to meet you' (see appendix, line 2). Yet, Jay and Neil respond with 'on-record impoliteness', they ridicule Will for his appearance, 'oh, briefcase!' (Bousfield 2008: 211) (line 3). Brown and Levinson's (1987) model does not account for Jay and Neil's use of impoliteness here; it is not a pragmatic failure of politeness strategies, they use impoliteness to damage Will's face and effect his exclusion from the group. The insult, 'briefcase', can be read as one of Bednarek's (2012) 'semiotic resources' which constructs the stereotypes of televisual characters; it indexes Will's 'nerd' persona (222). Furthermore, briefcases are associated with older, middle-class males, an identity which does not synthesise with the non-conformist joint enterprise of the CofP. In contrast, Jay's insults signify his non-conformism and elicit his power as the leading core member of the CofP; Jay instigates the insults, Neil simply copies him (lines 5 and 6). This is illustrative of Mills' (2003) claim that im/politeness norms are 'negotiated within the CofP', Jay, as the leader sets the norms for the other core members (3).

Moreover, Jay excludes Will from the trip to the pub, another example of on-record impoliteness. Will's conventional im/politeness strategies are reiterated in his response, an example of Bousfield's (2008) 'counter-defensive strategy' 'I just thought we could all=' (line 13). Here, Will uses

conventional politeness strategies; he avoids imposition by using mitigation, which is seen in the minimiser 'just' and the inclusive use of 'we'. Yet, Jay again deploys on-record impoliteness with the interruption '=you thought wrong' (line 14). The interruption signifies how Jay, as a core member, has the power to take the floor and exclude Will. The use of indexicality here debunks how through being deliberately impolite, Jay conveys toughness which indexes his masculinity. Notably, Jay's sustained insults are evidence of the 'semiotic resources' which constructs the stereotype of the hegemonic male which resonates with the viewer, part of the 'double articulation' of televisual discourse (Bednarek 2012: 222). This sequence can be analysed using Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) theory of 'distinction', Jay repeatedly utilises impoliteness strategies against Will's conventional politeness style to mark his powerful, masculine identity apart from Will's passive, 'nerd' persona. This establishes social distance and thus reaffirms the power dynamic; Will remains a peripheral member of the CofP.

Episode 2

In the second episode, Will's im/politeness strategies undergo a significant change. This highlights how im/politeness norms cannot be envisaged as static universals as Brown and Levinson proposed, instead, they are dynamic and are receptive to the context of the CofP. In this extract, the group are drinking alcohol at Neil's house after truanting. This highlights the group's joint enterprise of carving out a rebellious identity which is an ideal site for the investigation into unconventional im/politeness norms.

Will intentionally uses FTAs, which can be seen as an attempt to negotiate his way into the CofP; he attacks Jay as he is the leading core member who prevented his assimilation. Will deploys on-record impoliteness, he ridicules Jay, 'if my mum told me we were caravanning I'd call childline' (line 20 and 21). Here, Will intentionally damages Jay's face by denigrating him for his lower socio-economic status. Yet, Jay responds with a counter-offensive strategy which highlights the contestation for power within the CofP; his aggression is evidenced in the emphatic stress, 'shows how much you know... it's a sense of freedom you don't get with other holidays=' (lines 23 and 24). By responding with a counter-offensive strategy, Jay conveys toughness, which indexes his non-conformist, masculine identity. However, again, Will responds with a counter-offensive strategy, this denotes his determination to damage Jay's face to negotiate his place into the CofP. This is seen in the interruption, '=it's a sense of shitting in a bucket in a cupboard...in England with your parents' (lines 25 and 26). The interruption here highlights how Will attempts to convey his authority, and overturn the power dynamics in the CofP, a stark contrast to his passive stance in the first extract, when Jay interrupted him. Will targets Jay's lower socio-economic status through referring to the base experience of 'shitting in a bucket' and indexing his limited opportunities through holidaying in England. Will also renders Jay's projection of himself as the hegemonic male fallible through ridiculing that he goes on holiday with his parents. The subsequent laughter of Neil and Simon on line 27 reiterates how this FTA has been successful, Will has inherited Jay's role as the 'joker', the leading member. Likewise, the laughter elicits how Will's use of persistent and deliberate FTAs is suited to this CofP.

In this extract, Will adopts a confrontational style which is produced by the repetition of acts of on-record impoliteness and counter-offensive responses. Will effectively negotiates core membership by utilising the CofP's 'shared repertoire' of insults and interruptions. This can be debunked using Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) theory of 'adequation', Will emulates Jay's excessive impoliteness style which denotes how he signals his identification with the 'joint enterprise' of the CofP, he projects a non-conformist persona. However, the repeated use of counter-offensive responses also elicits how Will seeks to reduce Jay's power as the leading member; he intends to subvert the power dynamic in the CofP.

Extract 3

Will's assimilation into the group is consolidated when he is impolite towards Neil's father. The group are caught drinking at Neil's house and Neil's father exclaims to Will, 'I am especially surprised at you' (line 31). This highlights how Will's rebellious behaviour jars with his 'nerd' identity. Here, Will is provided with the ammunition to prove himself to the other members of the CofP, and he does this through impoliteness. Will uses conventional politeness within his FTA, which strengthens his attack, 'Oh, I'm so sorry, my manners. Please piss off, please' (line 34). Here, Brown and Levinson's (1987) view that some speech acts, such as the apology, are inherently face-saving is debased; the apology is clearly insincere. Furthermore, by invoking his 'manners' Will develops a metadiscourse on im/politeness. Will signals what his im/politeness norms should be in this context, he acknowledges that the social distance between him and Neil's father demands a deferential style, but he rebels against this, marking his abandonment of conventional im/politeness strategies. Will has embraced the CofP's shared repertoire,

he consistently performs impoliteness strategies to signal his non-conformist persona. The success of this series of FTAs is demonstrated in Jay's approval at the end of the scene, 'that was pretty special' (line 37). Here, Jay compliments Will; he signals his approval which affirms Will's assimilation into the group.

Discussion

The application of discursive approaches to im/politeness in my study has demonstrated how they alleviate some of the limitations of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework. Firstly, discursive approaches contest Brown and Levinson's view that politeness norms are universal. Through using Mills' (2003) definition of im/politeness, as a 'matter of judgement and assessment', I have demonstrated how the im/politeness norms vary depending on the CofP; they are dynamic (110). This definition of 'appropriateness' is seen in my data; Will's im/politeness norms change dramatically from the first to second episode as he assesses how impoliteness is part of CofP's identity.

However, discursive approaches have transcended the work of Brown and Levinson: research is no longer bound to the analysis of speech acts and the positive/negative face dichotomy. Instead, im/politeness norms can be saliently connected to identity construction. This was highlighted in my data; impoliteness is part of the CofP's shared repertoire. This is seen in the confrontational texture of their interactions, which is produced by the repetition of on-record impoliteness and counter-offensive responses; this indexes their non-conformist group identity. Discursive approaches have permitted an exploration into the axes of inclusion and exclusion within the CofP which highlights the merit of Mills' (2003) approach; she argues that the understanding of im/politeness norms determines an individual's position in the CofP (3). I have demonstrated how Will's 'peripheral' status was due to his conventional im/politeness norms which indexed his conformism and marked his 'nerd' identity. Will's trajectory of assimilation from a 'peripheral' to 'core' member of the CofP can therefore be elucidated by his use of its 'shared repertoire', he uses impolite utterances to signify his identification with the group.

Finally, the ideological reach of discursive approaches has been illuminating when exploring the process of characterisation in the *The Inbetweeners*. In my analysis, I have demonstrated how im/politeness strategies index the two stereotypes: the nerd (Will) and the hegemonic male (Jay). The construction of stereotypes is central to the process of viewer identification, denoting Bednarek's (2012) claim of the 'double articulation' of televisual discourse which bridges the chasm between the fictional world and reality.

Conclusion

Discursive approaches to im/politeness have remedied some of the problems of the classic models and have also made original developments in the field. This 'reach above' classic frameworks is evidenced in the ideological aspects of im/politeness; I have highlighted how im/politeness norms are saliently connected to identity construction and the negotiation of power within the CofP. Furthermore, the application of Bousfield's (2008) flexible model of impoliteness supplemented my analysis with a clear methodological framework. This enabled me to counter the critique that discursive models are nebulous and lack replicable methodologies. However, there are caveats to consider when using media constructed data: impoliteness on television is a source of entertainment, thus its usage differs from naturally-occurring conversation. Likewise, the construction of stereotypes through im/politeness strategies is explicit due to the data being a media construction; the clean juxtaposition of the stereotypes of the 'nerd' and 'hegemonic male' is unnatural. Nonetheless, discursive approaches have offered a rich exploration into im/politeness as an ideological phenomenon in my study. The discursive definition of im/politeness as interactional, dynamic and receptive to context has enabled the study of im/politeness, identity and the negotiation of power over the past decade, and it remains an innovative field of study to be explored.

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Appendix

Data Transcription

Sources: (Episode 1) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1_qe2Y9cYE

(Episode 2) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yh7kTxF-xUU>

Transcription Conventions

(.) : Pause of less than a second

(2.0): Timed pause

(()): Non-verbal activity

Underline: Emphatic stress

= : Interruption

Episode 1

Extract 1

[8.37-8.59]

1 S: This is Will.

2 W: Nice to meet you.

3 J: Oh briefcase!

4 N: ((laughs)) Yeah briefcase.

5 W: Yes (.) it's a briefcase.

6 J: Ooooh briefcase.

7 N: Oooh briefcase.

8 W (to Simon): These are your friends?

9 J: Where are we meeting tonight then?

10 N: The Black Bull (.) it's just out on the London road.

11 W: Oh is this the drink thing? Great (.) what time?

12 J: You can get there whatever time you like. You're going on your own.

13 W: Oh (.) I just thought we could all=

14 J: = nah, you thought wrong.

15 S: Shit (.) what happens if we don't get served? Carly's gonna think I'm such a loser.

16 J: She'd be right.

17 All: ((laughter))

Episode 2Extract 2

[9.48-10.13]

18 W: Sorry (.) did you say you go on holiday in a caravan?

19 J: With the Caravan Club.

20 W: In a caravan, like a gyppo (.). If my mum told me we were going

21 caravanning (.) I'd call Childline.

22 S and N: ((laughter))

23 J: Shows how much you know because it's a sense of freedom that you don't get

24 with other holidays=

25 W: =It's a sense of shitting in a bucket in a cupboard that you don't get

26 with other holidays. In England, with your parents.

27 All: ((laughter))

28 J: Actually it's a well-known fact that The Caravan Club is like a sex club all

29 over Europe. Which is why I've lost my cherry and none of you sad acts have.

30 All: ((laughter))

Extract 3

[11.21-11.34]

31 NF: Will, I'm especially surprised at you.

32 W: Oh, piss off!

33 NF: Don't talk to me like that in my own house.

34 W: Oh, I'm so sorry, my manners. Piss off, please.

Extract 4

[11.59-12.04]

35 72 W: In hindsight I may have taken it a bit too far.

36 S: Amazing. Jesus Christ ((laughs))

37 J: Yeah. Fair play to you (.) that was pretty special.