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Impoliteness in the Negotiation of Expert Status: Folk Linguistic Debates in a French Online Forum

1. Introduction

Recent works underline the importance of analysing (im)politeness in its context (Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 2008; Locher/Watts 2005, 2008) and specifically its role in the formation of identities in social interaction (Graham 2007). Therefore, the perspective is shifting from studying isolated linguistic structures to the observation of interactions in *Communities of Practice* (CoP) (Lavé/Wenger 1991). This chapter contributes to this approach by examining impoliteness in the negotiation of expert status.

In section 2, I explain my understanding of impoliteness and its use in interaction. To this end, I adopt the notion of *relational work* (Locher/Watts 2005, 2008), aimed at constructing and negotiating relationships and identities within social contexts. The empirical data of this study draws on a sample of folk linguistic debates in a French online forum that is presented in section 3. I then discuss the notions of expert and layperson in the field of folk linguistics, allude to the difficulties of expert-layperson communication and examine the discursive construction of expert status in group practices for which status signals are essential (Rifkin/Martin 1997) (section 4).

In section 5, taking a qualitative approach, the aim is to show an example of perceived impoliteness that is a result of different expectations and interpretations of norms in CoP, influenced by constraints of the medium. These norms concern the use of technical language, as this is a typical way of seeking expert status. While diverse interpretations make it difficult for the interlocutors to adapt to “appropriate” communication, norms can be explicitly or implicitly (re-)negotiated within the CoP. Conclusions are presented in section 6.

2. Impoliteness and relational work

In contrast to Brown/Levinson’s (1987) traditional approach, more recent theories maintain it is impossible to define (im)politeness at sentence level without reference to the context. For identifying (im)politeness, it is in fact necessary to analyse *deviations* from the norms and expectations inherent in a specific CoP. The choice of each individual to behave in a certain manner allows him to position himself relative to the other group members. In this regard, the interlocutors’ own interpretation of utterances in a specific social context as (im)polite gains in importance. This is usually described in terms of politeness as a *first order concept* (politeness₁), in contrast to theoretical and technical concepts described as *second order concepts* (politeness₂).

This point of view is adopted by the notion of *relational work*, introduced by Locher/Watts, for “the ‘work’ individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others” (Locher/Watts 2005: 10). In contrast to the notion of *face work*, it is considered to have a broader meaning.

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Following Goffman we argue that any interpersonal interaction involves the participants in the negotiation of face. The term “facework”, therefore, should also span the entire breadth of interpersonal meaning. This, however, is rarely the case in the literature. Especially in accordance with Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory, “facework” has been largely reserved to describe only appropriate and polite behavior with a focus on face-threat mitigation, at the exclusion of rude, impolite and inappropriate behavior. To avoid confusion and in favor of clarity we adopt “relational work” as our preferred terminology [...]. (Locher/Watts 2005: 11)

Thus, relational work comprises not only interactions considered as polite, but the whole range of verbal behaviour. In models based on the *first order concept*, behaviour therefore, rather than a binary structure, is seen as a *continuum*, oscillating between the *polite, appropriate, inappropriate* and *impolite* poles (e.g. Watts 2003).

While research in the past decades has mainly focused on politeness, recently further insight has been gained into impoliteness. Following Locher/Bousfield (2008: 3) it can be defined as “face-aggravating” behaviour. However, identifying (im)politeness by referring to an interlocutor’s interpretation raises a number of questions.

With regard to the speaker’s intention, Culpeper (2008), amongst others, distinguishes between (1) *intentional* and (2) *unintentional* behaviour that is perceived as inappropriate by the audience. The former is described as “impoliteness”, the latter as “rudeness”. But also the recipient’s perception of an utterance, the perlocutionary force, has to be considered in a theoretical framework following the first order approach. To identify impoliteness, Locher/Watts (2008: 80) judge “interactants’ *perceptions* of communicators’ intentions” as even more important than those of the speakers. In fact, they illustrate that a speaker and a listener of the *same* utterance in the *same* context could interpret it differently in terms of the

(im)politeness level. Online forums offer a rich source for these considerations, because the perlocutionary effects often become visible in the responses of other users (cf. Maaß, this volume, and the relational notion of face discussed and illustrated by Ehrhardt, this volume).

As has been shown, impoliteness is also used as a strategic instrument to exercise power (Culpeper 2008); showing disrespect for the interlocutor can be part of a (re-)negotiation of status and position. Many studies point out that impolite behaviour is particularly widespread when users are allowed to publish their opinion *anonymously* in *computer-mediated contexts* (CMC) (Herring 2007: 16; Maaß 2012; Upadhyay 2010). In public face-to-face situations like TV debates, panellists tend to avoid behaviour that could harm their reputation (Kotthoff 1997: 142); they are aware of the impact that their behaviour could have on socially constructed power relationships. In *anonymous* CMC, on the other hand, it seems that their reputation is not threatened by inappropriate behaviour, and they might perceive *online* power relations between interactants as more equal. Besides, in CMC, as it is practised in online forums with open access, potentially *all* internet users can read the posts (Herring 2007), and thus the wide audience could increase the pressure to construct an image as a “powerful”, competent interactant defending him/herself against face-threatening acts.

3. Languefrancaise.net as community of practice

The forum Languefrancaise.net is dedicated to the discussion of French-language issues, from grammatical to stylistic to etymological questions, with, however, a focus on a normative perspective. Anonymous users can post their questions and answers and discuss them with other users; communication is asyn-

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chronous and generally text-based. The messages can be read in chronological order in an archive that is divided into seven thematic categories as, for example, *Réflexions linguistiques* (linguistic reflections about rules of orthography, grammar, linguistics) with more than 3,000 topics and 30,000 postings and *Pratiques linguistiques* (linguistic practice: words and their sense, regional languages, special languages, etc.) with more than 2,000 topics and 20,000 postings (March 2013).¹ Furthermore, it is possible to search the threads for key words to find answers to questions that have already been discussed. In a table the number of views is indicated for each thread, with some going up to more than 10,000; these numbers are a reflection of the wide audience interested in the forum.

Most of the participants remain anonymous by choosing a fictional user name.² According to their place of origin, where indicated, most participants are from France, the others mostly from other francophone countries. Among the active users there are also some non-native French speakers. Users identify themselves, for example, as French teachers or translators with an academic background related to linguistic studies, or as pupils or other “amateurs” in linguistics. For each member, the total number of messages posted in the forum is visible. A number of the participants have already posted several hundred or thousands of comments, and hence meet online on a regular basis. Among these, there are 18 members who have published more than 1,000 postings so far, five of them more than 2,000 (March 2013). However, unlike in other forums, there is no verbally expressed hierarchy for “pre-

¹ Messages concerning other topics or the forum itself can be posted in four additional categories.

² In the excerpts that I quote in this paper, I have replaced the pseudonyms by “membre_A”, “membre_B” and “membre_C”.

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mium” users, based on factors such as the number of posted messages or other activities.

Like other forums, Languefrancaise.net has published a *netiquette* guide to define rules of accepted conduct. Moderators can reprimand participants for (politeness) rule violations or even block inappropriate messages.

4. Experts – laypersons – negotiation of expert status

4.1. The term *folk linguistics* and the underlying expert-layperson continuum

The discussions on Languefrancaise.net can be characterised as “folk linguistic”, with “folk” referring to “those who are not trained professionals in the area under investigation” (Niedzielski/Preston (2000: viii). In the German research tradition, to differentiate from the direct translation of the English term, *Volkslinguistik*, Antos (1996: 3) coined the term *Laienlinguistik* to specifically refer to, among other things, reflections and comments on language *intended for*, and in many cases also *written by*, non-linguists, for instance in language style guides or handbooks about common errors in the use of language. Even if usually normative or prescriptive in orientation, it can also include descriptive or even entertaining treatment of linguistic questions or problems.³ Nowadays, specialised online forums like Languefrancaise.net (cf. Kunkel in press), as well as other forms of CMC (cf. Hardy/Her-

³ For a brief overview about English, German and French terminology and research traditions in the field of folk linguistics cf. Achard-Bayle/Paveau 2008: 6-8; Stegu 2008.

ling/Patzelt in press), have brought folk linguistic discussions to the internet and thus opened them to a wide audience.

As widely discussed in research about folk linguistics, the distinction between experts and laypersons is not as clear as it might seem at first glance (cf. also Schrader-Kniffki, this volume). A division into *simple* and *double* folk linguistics, in other words texts written *by* laypersons *for* laypersons on the one hand and those written *by* experts *for* laypersons on the other hand, as proposed by Law (2007: 11), appears to be untenable. More recent works discuss the difficulties of drawing on criteria such as a university degree in linguistics, professional experience in a related field or linguistic knowledge (Baderschneider/Kessel 2010) and point out an underlying continuum (Stegu 2008).

4.2. Expert-layperson communication

As research has generally shown, conflicts might arise in expert-layperson communication. A major difficulty consists of the lack of information about what exactly is the layperson's prior knowledge of the problem and of the expert's capacity to formulate adequately their explanation, taking the audience into account (*audience design*). Clark (1992), in his *common ground theory*, states that individuals involved in a conversation must share knowledge, *common ground*, in order to communicate efficiently and to reach mutual comprehension. Bromme/Jucks/Runde (2005: 90), drawing on the example of expert-layperson communication in the medical field, argue, "that the problematic impact of such knowledge differences might be augmented by a computer as the medium of communication". In their experiment, a health expert has to respond to a (fictional) e-mail inquiry on health topics, sent by (1) a layperson, (2) a "co-expert" from a neighbouring discipline and therefore adapt the *audience design* of the message.

4.3. Negotiation of expert status

Rifkin/Martin (1997) underline that a distinction has to be made between the status of expert/professional *in society* (as discussed in 4.1) and *in a conversation*.

Expert status represents a measure of authority over a conversation. Expert status refers to a concept very different from that of the status of experts, such as engineers, in society. One might say, using engineering parlance, that the system boundaries for the two concepts are different. The status of experts in society has society as the relevant system. Expert status [...] has the conversation as the relevant system. (Rifkin/Martin 1997: 31)

Depending strictly on the conversation itself, expert status as a socially constructed role is therefore provisional and can always change. Often, the interlocutors do not even have the capacity and knowledge to verify the statements of others (Rifkin/Martin 1997: 31/32). So, "real expertise" is not immediately decisive or sufficient to gain *expert status*:

[...] Expert Status appears to be a result of Participation in the community of practice. Doubtless, there is an influence of Expertise on Expert Status, however this is mediated by Participation. (Nistor/Fischer 2012: 117)

In the negotiation of expert status, other strategies are important. Among the *status signals* that serve to negotiate expert status, there are *extra-linguistic* status information factors such as knowledge, institutional hierarchy, physical power or personal relations, referring to the social context of a person. In the context of anonymous CMC, however, the social context can be eliminated so that *linguistic* means become crucial.⁴

⁴ On a detailed analysis of different self-presentation strategies in forum discussions cf. also Schrader-Kniffki in this volume.

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On the one hand, among linguistic resources there are *specific* status signals that seem to be the most important ones in negotiating status in a group (Ridgeway 2001: 359f.). A clear cue in a conversation is the competent use of technical language (Rifkin/Martin 1997: 34). Another strategy, used by participants to substitute the aforesaid *extra-linguistic* status information (missing in anonymous CMC), is to mention the expertise gained and/or proven by education, professional experience or social status. If this expertise – be it real or fictional – is relevant to the subject discussed in the thread, it can help to position the users as experts. This is, for example, the case when users claim to have an academic background in linguistics, as described above.

On the other hand, expert status is negotiated by *non-specific, diffuse* status signals. Kotthoff (1997), in her analysis of “[t]he interactional achievement of expert status” in TV discussions, describes how “highly debatable claims are explicitly presented in the most straightforward manner”, “without any marker of subjectivity” (165). She distinguishes two *conversational styles*: the *expository style*, in which “facts, knowledge and/or opinions” are exposed, while the knowledge of others can be devalued, is “potentially status-enhancing, valued talk” (157). In *exploratory style*, speakers “first outline the questions to be asked instead of merely providing answers” (157) and present their opinion in a more contained way; it is less likely that they dominate the conversation (140).

To analyse the role of (perceived) impoliteness in the negotiation of expert status, I have chosen an example in which a user, MEMBRE_A, is reprehended for the use of technical (and thus potentially incomprehensible) language as one of the *specific* status signals described above.

5. (Perceived) impoliteness and negotiation of expert status: example

The example to be discussed is found in a thread opened by a user who wants to know if the expression “tout au long”, apparently meaning “plus en détail” (*more detailed*) or “davantage” (*more*) in an “old text” he read, is still in use. The main interlocutors in the following extracts are MEMBRE_A, MEMBRE_B and MEMBRE_C. With about 600 posts since 2008 (MEMBRE_A), 700 posts since 2009 (MEMBRE_C) and 2,000 posts since 2011 (MEMBRE_B), they are all active users and have met in other threads before. MEMBRE_A, in his signature, presents himself as “typographe, relecteur-correcteur, dictionnairiste” (*typographer, proofreader, lexicographer*) and he has a special status in his profile of “onomathécaire”.

I will briefly summarise the context in which the following extract is embedded. Among the different replies, the one posted by MEMBRE_A explains that in a proofreader’s language, to write an abbreviation or a number “tout au long”, means to write them out in full. MEMBRE_C replies directly to this post, explaining that throughout his career as a “correcteur” (*proofreader*), he had always heard this expression used without “tout”. MEMBRE_A in his response describes some details about editing procedures, for example how to indicate that a number has to be written out. MEMBRE_B refers to the rather technical printer’s terminology used by MEMBRE_A (“en voilà du lexique!” *this is lexicon!*) and asks if the terms “corrigeur” and “corrigeage”, employed by MEMBRE_A, have nowadays disappeared or been developed further. Citing from the dictionary *Édition et techniques éditoriales* by Jacques Berthelot (Hachette Technique 1992), MEMBRE_A in his answer explains thoroughly six technical terms from his previous response, including “corrigeur”: typographic worker who materi-

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ally implements the corrections asked for by the “correcteur” (*proofreader*) or the author. MEMBRE_B thanks MEMBRE_A for his detailed explanations. He regrets that MEMBRE_A does not write more often on the forum and concludes his post with “respectueuses salutations” (*respectful greetings*). At this point, MEMBRE_C comments on the incident as follows:

(1) MEMBRE_C, 11-04-2012

Vous avez eu raison, cher membre_B, de faire cette intervention. Parce que dire bonjour et transmettre sa cordialité est bien, mais utiliser un jargon professionnel quand on s’adresse à des personnes qui ne sont pas toutes « de la partie » est pour moi la marque d’une grande impolitesse. Je n’aimerais pas qu’un ingénieur agronome ou un scaphandrier s’adressent à moi en utilisant des termes techniques de leur métier auxquels je n’entendrais rien. J’ai publié deux récits de mer : j’ai veillé à utiliser le moins de termes du vocabulaire marin possible, et, quand je le faisais, à les expliciter dans une langue courante. (Langue Française 2012)

You were right, dear membre_B, to make this intervention. Because to greet and to transmit one’s cordiality is fine, but to use professional jargon when you address people that are not “from your group” is for me a sign of great impoliteness. I would not appreciate an agricultural engineer or a scuba diver addressing me with technical terms from their profession with which I would not understand anything. I have published two stories of the sea: I made sure to use the minimum number of marine terms and, when I did, to explain them in common language.

MEMBRE_B, 11-04-2012

Je n’ai pas perçu le message de membre_A comme impoli, d’autant plus qu’il n’a pas hésité à développer et expliquer. Si c’était devenu un dialogue fermé entre deux spécialistes, ç’aurait été désagréable. Cela n’a pas été le cas. [...] (Langue Française 2012)

I didn’t perceive membre_A’s message as impolite, all the more since he has not hesitated to develop and explain it. If this had been a dialogue between two specialists, it would have been unpleasant. This has not been the case. [...]

Extract 1 shows how users discuss what they consider polite and impolite behaviour in the forum. At first, MEMBRE_C recognises the *formal* politeness of MEMBRE_A's posts: they are opened by a greeting and concluded by "cordialement" (*cordially*). However, he perceives "great impoliteness" in MEMBRE_A's use of printer's professional jargon despite knowing that other users would not understand him. MEMBRE_B contradicts him, pointing out MEMBRE_A's readiness to explain the technical terms.

In this extract we can observe a *negotiation of politeness rules* that are particularly *relevant* to the formation of expert and layperson roles in anonymous online forums: MEMBRE_C claims that the use of technical terms that potentially not everyone on the forum understands, should be avoided and hence accuses MEMBRE_A of (intentional) impoliteness. In MEMBRE_B's view, explanation "on request" is sufficient.

By referring to his own stories of the sea, in which he had avoided using technical terms without further explanation, MEMBRE_C *constitutes* himself as an *author* and an expert on marine subjects. In a similar way he mentioned his career as a *proofreader* earlier in this thread, and later on, in a post not cited here, even as a *translator*. Furthermore, he describes a pedagogical approach when he says that, when he uses difficult words, he explains them to the readers.⁵ While, so far, the discourse was about printing and marine terms – terms of special domains that are not the focus of the forum –, further on in the thread MEMBRE_A draws MEMBRE_C's attention to his observation that "savants linguistes" (*experts in linguistics*) in this forum also demonstrate the

⁵ In another post, membre_C explains: "employer un mot peu connu en l'explicitant, c'est de la pédagogie; l'employer tel quel, comme si tout le monde était censé le connaître, c'est ... autre chose" (*to use a little known word explaining it, that's pedagogy; using it as it is, as if everybody should know its meaning, that's ... something else*).

habit of using a vocabulary that is incomprehensible to foreign language learners.

(2) MEMBRE_C, 12-04-2012

Sans être un «apprenant étranger», je ne comprends rien à la plupart de ces interventions de linguistes. Mais comme il s'agit de sujets très techniques qui ne me passionnent guère (du moins l'approche linguistique qu'on en fait ne me passionne guère, justement parce que je n'y entends rien), je me contente de passer mon chemin. S'agissant de l'expression *tout au long* qui est à l'origine de ce fil, il n'était pas nécessaire, pour en parler, de sortir du langage courant que tout le monde comprend. [...]

est impoli le fait de jargonner en parlant devant des gens qui ne connaissent pas le jargon employé. Cela revient à les exclure de la discussion : laissez-nous causer entre spécialistes ! [...] (Langue Française 2012)

Without being a "foreign learner", I don't understand anything in most of the linguists' comments. But as they are about very technical subjects that hardly interest me (at least the linguistic approach that they take hardly interests me, precisely because I don't understand it at all), I'm satisfied with going my way. As it was the expression tout au long that was the origin of this thread, it was not necessary, in order to discuss it, to abandon the common language that everybody understands. [...]

it is impolite to use jargon when speaking in front of people that have no knowledge of the jargon used. This is equivalent to excluding them from the discussion: let's talk among specialists! [...]

MEMBRE_C argues that, even as a *native speaker*, he is not able to understand the posts of linguists. But he sees it in a slightly different way: as the rather technical subjects discussed by linguists do not interest him, he ignores those posts. He explains that in the present case, things are different because the topic of the thread did not make it *necessary* to use technical terms.

In the negotiation process, MEMBRE_C differentiates between topics of common interest and rather technical topics that are not

of interest to him (but perhaps exclusively for an audience of linguists). Only in the latter case does the exclusion of laypersons by the use of jargon seem not to bother him and could be justified in his eyes.

Further on in the thread, the debate continues along the same lines, without reaching a shared view.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The example shows that the use of technical terms, in the literature generally described as a (competitive) strategy for seeking expert status, in our example is closely connected with (im)politeness issues.

MEMBRE_C, in extract 1 and 2, interprets MEMBRE_A's behaviour as clearly *non-cooperative*. He criticises him for not taking into consideration that other members might not understand his technical terms and that he thus (intentionally) excludes them from the conversation. Therefore MEMBRE_C feels that MEMBRE_A is exercising power over other members and perceives his post as impolite. MEMBRE_A, on the other hand, supported by MEMBRE_B, claims to be *cooperative* by explaining the terms afterwards to other members who have not understood them. So in this specific situation, speaker and listener interpret MEMBRE_A's behaviour differently.

Among the reasons why expert-layperson communication includes the risk of not meeting a layperson's needs, there is (1) the lack of information about *common ground* and (2) experts' (non-) willingness to cooperate.

As Bromme/Jucks/Runde (2005) have already argued, due to scarce status information and nearly non-existing extra-/

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paralinguistic signals, in computer-mediated contexts it is more difficult for experts to gain insights into the interlocutor's prior knowledge and measure *common ground*. But in the context of their experiment, at least the expert's *role as advisor* is clearly defined. In an *anonymous* online forum discussion as in *Languefrancaise.net*, on the other hand, expert status is created merely through negotiation: users have to enhance and defend this status constantly, and thus their motivation to use appropriate linguistic strategies is likely to increase.

Therefore, I argue that in *anonymous CMC*, such as *Languefrancaise.net*, it is not only more difficult for participants to identify "appropriate" behaviour in terms of *audience design*, but also, behaviour will be perceived, more likely, as non-cooperative and, therefore, impolite.

As in Graham (2007), users in this forum *negotiate norms*. In this case, participants discuss MEMBRE_C's proposition to use only terms that are comprehensible to laypersons in the forum. During these (re)negotiations, several "guidelines" are proposed such as limiting the use of technical terms to technical questions that really require them or explaining technical terms when using them for the first time in a thread. Obviously, it is very difficult to reach a compromise in this field, as expectations depend on context and participants. In the *netiquette* guidelines of this forum no hint is given on this topic.

These insights underline the importance of a context-based analysis of utterances: utterances are not *per se* polite or impolite, but their interpretation depends on the co-construction and negotiation of norms within the community. Furthermore, the analysis confirms that the constraints of the computer medium also have an impact on norms and participants' expectations.

However, further research is needed to understand better the impact of impoliteness on relational work. With regard to the nego-

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tiation of expert status, as discussed in this paper, it would certainly be interesting to know more about the perception of impoliteness connected with other linguistic strategies of those mentioned above. Furthermore, investigation of previous contacts between the three participants in our example could help to explain the solidarity between MEMBRE_B and MEMBRE_A, independently of the judgement of the current incident. In this way, it would be possible to gain more insight into the long-term construction of relationships and expert status (Locher 2004: 5); to this end, online forums with archives going back for several years offer us a rich source.

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