

# Alternative Approaches to Politeness and Impoliteness: An Introduction

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## 1 Introduction

The aim of this Special Issue is to present a variety of analytical concepts and methodologies by which politeness and impoliteness can be examined more innovatively, and which differ from those used in current *mainstream* politeness research. Over the course of the last four decades, linguistic politeness research has developed into a fully-fledged interdisciplinary field. As the recent publication *The Palgrave Handbook of Linguistic (Im)Politeness* (Culpeper et al. 2017) has illustrated, politeness researchers have, over the years, drawn on research from outside the realm of linguistic pragmatics, including sociolinguistics, interaction studies, critical discourse analysis and suchlike. However, in keeping with many other established areas of academic inquiry, politeness research has become dominated by a distinct set of concepts and methodologies. Consequently, ‘mainstream’ research within the field has concentrated on one or more of the following analytic foci:

1. From the early 2000s, scholars have primarily focused on evaluations of politeness and impoliteness, rather than on their production (Eelen 2001), in mainly longer stretches of interaction. Thus, the main methodological procedures in the field are centred on synchronous interpersonal interaction and associate the realisation of (im)politeness with interactional reactions. In addition, research on evaluation has often attempted to interconnect the evaluation process and the speaker’s intention, and relatively little attention has been devoted to the variation between the evaluations of an offence in local contexts (but see, for example, Parvaresh and Tayebi 2018) or to contextual factors beyond dyadic interaction (but see, for example, articles by Márquez Reiter and Horgan in this Special Issue).
2. Politeness research has prioritised modern data over its historical counterpart. Although a number of researchers have stressed the importance of looking at the historical operation of politeness (see, for example, Culpeper and Kádár 2010), such research has had a somewhat limited effect on the field (but see, for example, Jucker and Taavitsainen 2019).

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3. Scholars have focused on the language use of middle-class people in relatively ‘safe’ – i.e. friction-free – settings (but see, for example, Bousfield 2008). Of course, from the early 2000s, rudeness and aggression have both received significant attention, but little effort has been made to venture into genuinely ‘rough’ realms of language use, such as ritual interactions in which cursing (in a literal sense) is involved (Kádár & Szalai 2020) or the valorisation of (im)politeness practices in economic migratory contexts (Márquez Reiter & Kádár in press, Márquez Reiter in this Special Issue) involving low-skilled migrants and their exploitation.

This list of foci is not exhaustive – and is not intended to be a *critique* of the field – particularly as the foci mentioned here have not been entirely ignored in previous research. What we are trying to explain is that, to date, there has not been a concerted effort to launch a single project which attempts to make a systematic and conscious effort to engage in openly ‘alternative’ politeness research outside the scope of the previously mentioned analytic foci.

The ‘alternative approaches’ that are proposed in this Special Issue mainly investigate the research foci as outlined above. ‘Going alternative’ has an advantage: if nothing else, it can help us to critically reconsider what we think we know about politeness and impoliteness. Take ‘face’ and ‘facework’ as an example. These notions have often been interpreted as phenomena which are co-constructed in face-to-face interactions, mainly on the basis of research that focuses on modern data that has been produced in middle-class settings. It would be an interesting and fruitful endeavour to investigate whether these conceptualisations of ‘face’ and ‘facework’ hold true, for instance, for ancient texts. Kim Ridealgh’s contribution to this volume illustrates that this is not the case in certain ancient settings.

## **2 The scope of ‘alternative’**

Before introducing the contents of this Special Issue in Section 3, let us now provide a brief synopsis of the alternative thoughts presented by our contributors, which mainly centre on the three analytic foci introduced in Section 1:

1. Every person involved in politeness research would probably agree that, in conceptual terms, the default starting point for politeness research has been ‘politeness’ and ‘impoliteness’, rather than ‘deference’, ‘civility’ and so on. More precisely, while a number of important studies – such as Ide (1989), Culpeper (2011) and many others – have examined the terms (metalexemes) that surround the key notions of politeness and impoliteness, they have studied such terms in relation to (im)politeness (a notable exception to this trend is Sifianou’s 2019 study). Yet, outside the politeness paradigm a large volume of highly influential research has been dedicated to phenomena such as ‘civility’, and in such work, politeness and impoliteness have been, at best, of secondary importance. An example of this research is the work conducted by Phillip Smith and his colleagues on civility, which represents an important North American sociological strand of research (see, for example, Phillips and Smith 2003). These inquiries typically apply datatypes and related analysis that lie outside the evaluative focus traditionally pursued in politeness research (cf. focus point 1 in Section 1) and

go beyond the dyad. Instead, they focus on group behaviour. In our pursuit of ‘alternatives’, the question emerges as to whether it is possible to integrate such research more fully into our own field. Mervyn Horgan’s paper in this Special Issue provides a fundamental contribution to this area: Horgan makes an important attempt to bring together research on (in)civility and (im)politeness, by focusing on previous North American sociological research from the politeness scholar’s point of view, and he proposes an innovative approach to politeness anchored in civility.

2. Many concepts in the field are based on ontologies which focus on modern data that has been drawn from industrialised middle-class settings (see also Section 1). Consequently, little research has been dedicated to challenging the paradigmatic viewpoint in politeness studies that (im)politeness essentially serves the dynamic negotiation of relationships. However, in other areas of academic inquiry – such as historical research on ritual (Teeter 2011) or historical pragmatics (Kohnen 2008) – scholars have often argued that politeness and impoliteness are relatively ‘unnegotiable’, because in antiquity the maintenance of relational hierarchies was far more important than the negotiation of relationships. Research methodologies and concepts developed for the study of ancient history, therefore, has much to offer the study of (im)politeness because it conceptualises ‘relating’ in a very different way to what is considered to be ‘default’ in the field (cf. focus point 2 in Section 1). In this Special Issue, Kim Ridealgh examines this matter.
3. The concept of ‘politeness’ is not only anchored in modern industrialised understandings of language use, but also in typically middle-class understandings (Mills 2003), in which it is important to make an impression on others by the skilful use of language (cf. Goffman’s 1959 notion of ‘impression management’). Yet, as Márquez Reiter and Kádár (in press) have recently pointed out, in many other life domains, such as the daily lives of low-skilled immigrants, showing consideration to one another through the use of language is secondary to ‘sociality’. Thus, migratory studies and sociological research on the interactional practices of members of the working class and disadvantaged groups have much to offer (im)politeness research, because such areas of academic investigation help politeness scholars to engage in critical self-reflection regarding the social validity of ‘(im)politeness’ itself. In addition, methodologically speaking, when experts in these areas engage in linguistics-related research, they often integrate alternative methodologies – such as ethnography – into the scope of their inquiry. Rosina Márquez Reiter’s study in this Special Issue explores the observations obtained from the study of economic migrants and discusses such concepts and related methodologies (cf. focus point 3 in Section 1).
4. Along with cross-disciplinary issues, it is important to critically revisit key concepts in the field, such as ‘politeness marker’ and ‘context’. Such research is particularly relevant if we intend to focus on point 1 (see Section 1), that is, to explore politeness in larger corpora outside the current scope of evaluation. This line of inquiry allows us to depart from the study of issues that we could, by default, dismiss as ‘outdated’ in current theoretical politeness research, by attempting to bring backgrounded topics and areas of research to the forefront of politeness theory. For instance, in post-2000 politeness research, the concept of ‘politeness marker’ – i.e. the idea that words such as *please* somehow indicate politeness – has been largely (and rightly) dismissed in mainstream politeness research, mainly because in many languages ‘polite’ speech acts

and forms have only a casual relationship. However, bearing in mind that in some other – lesser studied – languages, such as Chinese, this relationship is less casual (i.e. a strong relationship exists between so-called ‘politeness markers’ and politeness itself), the self-reflexive question emerges: should we not attempt to critically revisit the assumption that the relationship between forms and ‘polite’ speech acts is casual, by contrastively examining various languages? In this Special Issue, Kádár and House engage in such an exercise, as they attempt to reinvigorate contrastive pragmatic research on speech acts and the forms that indicate those speech acts, an area that had undergone a period of intensive study during the 1980s and 1990s (see Blum-Kulka et al. 1989).

5. When ‘going alternative’, it is also important to conduct research in the ‘mainstream’ of the field from a more theoretical and self-reflexive point of view: the research of Parvaresh and Tayebi in this Special Issue represents such an endeavour. As their study reveals, on various occasions a degree of dissonance can exist between the ways in which (im)politeness is realised by the speaker and the hearer, in that there are significant discrepancies in what they consider to be offensive. Parvaresh and Tayebi propose an alternative ‘radical contextualist’ account to revisit this issue of dissonance between evaluations in locally situated interactions. Their study departs from recognising the speaker’s intention as being the key factor in evaluations of offence (cf. focus point 1 in Section 1).

Now that we have addressed what ‘alternative’ in this Special Issue implies, let us now provide a brief overview of the content of each contribution.

### **3 Contents**

Mervyn Horgan’s research interconnects (in)civility and (im)politeness by bringing a Durkheimian sociologist view into the scope of the inquiry. It is an interesting phenomenon that while Goffman’s theory has been fundamentally important to politeness research, and Goffman’s debt to Durkheim has been substantial, Durkheim’s work has been largely ignored in the field. Horgan’s paper argues that a renewed and broadened field of inquiry opens up around politeness and impoliteness when we seriously apply the centrality of Durkheim’s concept of the sacred to both the practice of everyday life and the analysis of everyday phenomena. The strength of Durkheimian cultural sociology is that it provides the politeness researcher with a replicable route by which to broaden the scope of current investigations, allowing the examination of phenomena which have been somewhat neglected but which are every bit as important as their ‘mainstream’ counterparts, such as the notion of ‘ritual’ which is on a par with the widely studied notion of ‘face’.

In keeping with the social focus of Horgan’s contribution, Rosina Márquez Reiter’s interpersonal pragmatics approach to politeness is anchored in knowledge gained from ethnographic fieldwork conducted within a specific social group in London: Spanish-speaking Latin Americans. The author demonstrates how essential this knowledge is for improving our understanding of the complexity of the social relations observed between members of this social group and their structures. Importantly, she demonstrates that it is against this knowledge that we, as analysts, can more effectively capture the value of politeness within the transactional order of the group and valorise its relative importance.

Kim Ridealgh's study explores ancient Egyptian data in an attempt to highlight that many modern understandings of 'facework' and 'ritual' are difficult to apply when studying these types of data. Ridealgh examines the limitations of 'facework' and offers an alternative approach – the 'community-embedded' model. This approach allows the impact of utterances to, and involving, God within wider social networks and how this simultaneously supports the maintenance of relationships between humans, God and larger networks that are specific to ancient cultures, to be analysed. While Ridealgh's model might appear to be diachronically 'distant' to experts of modern data, it is a powerful reminder that many common technical terms and concepts that are used in the field reflect modern ontologies.

The research of Dániel Z. Kádár and Juliane House revisits the concept of 'politeness marker', by proposing the bottom-up and corpus-based model of 'ritual frame indicating expressions' (RFIEs). Their central argument is that, in certain linguacultures, the relationship between 'politeness markers' and politeness itself is significantly stronger than in other linguacultures. Therefore, any theory which argues that a definite relationship exists between form and politeness – or totally rejects this relationship – is potentially problematic if it does not take a contrastive pragmatic perspective, simply because this relationship is subject to linguacultural variation. Thus, the contrastive pragmatic study of RFIEs helps us to determine the relationship between forms and speech acts and, indirectly, politeness. Thus, Kádár and House not only reintroduce the concept of 'politeness marker' in a critical way in their politeness inquiry, but they also reinvigorate contrastive research on the relationship between forms and speech acts.

Finally, Vahid Parvaresh and Tahmineh Tayebi investigate the pragmatic processes that are at work when the hearer assigns a particularly offensive meaning/intention to an utterance during an interaction. Parvaresh and Tayebi draw insight from 'radical contextualism' and scrutinise a number of exchanges taken from both films and reality TV shows. As the authors demonstrate, on many occasions offensive evaluations are not triggered by an expression in an 'a priori' fashion, but rather take place in a top-down manner, and entirely pragmatically.

We hope that by 'going alternative' this Special Issue fills a knowledge gap and that it will trigger the further exploration of alternative themes, concepts and data types in the field.

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