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Impoliteness as self-directed positively marked facework

One of my class-mates recently said that at the beginning of my school career I used to be polite, I had good manners. Now I am like others, like other boys, no longer polite. And they like me. We have a lot in common.

Tomasz (sixteen-year-old)

The relationship between *(im)politeness* and *facework* seems obvious (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987). People use various polite strategies to *maintain* or *save self-face* or *other-face*. Impoliteness is associated with a threat to face, a threat which calls for some redressive action. However, facework does not always involve politeness, and politeness does not always mean face-saving. What is at issue is *relational work*, which refers to “the “work” individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others” (Locher and Watts 2005: 10). It comprises negatively marked behaviour (impoliteness, rudeness), positively marked behaviour (politeness), and unmarked behaviour (*politic behaviour*) (Locher 2006: 249–251). The difference between the former and the latter lies in that (im)polite behaviour is the one which is perceived as being beyond what is expectable, while politic behaviour, as Watts (2003: 19) defines it, is “linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the ongoing interaction, i.e. as

non-salient". Thus, relational work comprises all types of behaviour which can be observed during social interaction. As such it can be understood as equivalent to Goffman's concept of facework.

Central to the concept of relational work is Goffman's (1967) face, as "any interpersonal interaction involves the participants in the negotiation of face" (Locher and Watts 2005: 11). The discursive approach to face and politeness (Watts 2003: 142, 2005; Locher 2004, 2006; Locher and Watts 2005) is in line with Goffman's ideas on face and interaction:

We can interpret Goffman as implying that face is constructed discursively in instances of socio-communicative verbal interaction, i.e. it is constructed socially. If this is the case, we need a theory of facework rather than one of politeness, unless we are prepared to give up the notion of face threat mitigation as being the basis of politeness (Watts 2005: xxix).

Thus, face is constructed discursively during interaction with other people in accordance with the line an individual has taken. Every individual can have an infinite number of faces, each attributed to him/her in different social encounters. Faces are like masks, "on loan to us for the duration of different kinds of performance" (Locher and Watts 2005: 12; Goffman 1967; Locher 2006).

There are situations, not so uncommon though, when polite behaviour does not seem preferable, as being polite, or not being rude, may be considered as threatening to self-face. At least in some cultures in which the prototypical man is strong and aggressive, and whose main principle is defence by means of attack. Thus, any attack, verbal or nonverbal, must be parried, because lack of such an action can be perceived as a weakness and a threat to one's good name and reputation (positive self-face). Insults or other positive-face-threatening acts must be reciprocated; otherwise the threat to one's face will be aggravated by the lack of action on one's part (Jakubowska 2006). The only way to maintain or save one's face in such a situation is to threaten the positive face of the attacker. What is traditionally interpreted as impoliteness, but perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the ongoing interaction (Watts' politic behaviour), can paradoxically become a self-face-saving or self-face-maintaining act. Watts (2005: xx) claims that:

Evaluative terms [...] such as *polite*, *impolite*, *rude* etc. are subject to discursive dispute in that participants in social interaction are likely to differ in attributing these evaluations to individuals' contributions to the interaction.

In other words, what is perceived as polite by some people may seem impolite to others, and vice versa. That is why many politeness researchers (e.g., Watts 2003, 2005; Locher 2006; Locher and Watts 2005; Haugh 2007) postulate a discursive approach to politeness.

The aim of my paper is to analyse social interactions in which “impolite” acts are used to save or maintain self-face and “polite” behaviour leads to loss of self-face. The data come from the observation of a group of teenagers – 16 students (8 girls and 8 boys) of the secondary school in Katowice, all of them sixteen-year-olds. They were observed during interactions in their peer group and individually during interactions with their parents. Some of the members of the group were also interviewed by the author.

Youth culture

According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* (2000: 400), three general features distinguish youth culture:

- It is a culture of leisure rather than work,
- Social relations are organized round the peer group rather than families or individual friends,
- Youth groups are particularly interested in ‘style’, by which is meant an interest in external markers such as the use of distinctive language forms, taste in music or clothes, the adoption of particular leisure pursuits or a concern with personal appearance.

The above-mentioned group of teenagers is representative of youth culture. Members of the group, attending school five days a week and often spending some of their free time together, know each other very well and are aware of what can be accepted by the rest and what cannot. They form a small community with its leaders and dependants, special codes, norms and patterns of behaviour.

They have created their own hierarchy of values, which is evolving as they are getting older. At the age of sixteen their hierarchy of values includes: adulthood, independence, freedom of choice, freedom of action,

in-group identity, peer acceptance, and toughness. These values can be achieved by means of performing certain actions and keeping up appearances. To be perceived as an adult they do whatever they consider typical for adult life. So they smoke cigarettes, take snuff, drink alcohol, swear and use dirty words. They try to make an impression that they are independent and able to do whatever they want and to make decisions freely. In conversations with friends, their parents are almost totally “non-existent”, if mentioned at all they are referred to as *moi starzy* (“my old folks”). Parents are never mentioned as those who have power or authority. Peer acceptance is one of the most important values they cherish. To gain it they claim common ground by using various in-group identity markers (cf. Brown and Levinson, 1987). They use address forms marked for solidarity (e.g. nicknames (e.g., *Blondie*, *Krasnolud* (dwarf), *Szopen* (Chopin), *Shogun*, *Skowron* (lark (augmentative)), *Infidel*) or surnames). They communicate in their specific slang full of in-group terminology, e.g. emotionally loaded neologisms (*przypał*, *wtopa*, *siara* (shame), English borrowings (*sorewicz* – “sorry”, *bye*, *OK.*), clippings (*w porzo* (*w porządku* – “all right”), *spoko* (*spokojnie* – “all right”), *nara* (*na razie* – “see you later”)), or swear words. Besides linguistic means, there are also paralinguistic and extralinguistic means of gaining peer acceptance: a special tone of voice, “impudent” and “self-confident”, specific modes of dressing, non-conformist hairstyle, body postures showing disregard for others and offensive gestures. Their behaviour is aimed at creating a particular self-image consistent with the above-mentioned values.

Face and presentation of self

During social interaction every individual presents *an image of self (face)* which is intended to be internally consistent and supported by the judgements of other participants. Thus, face is determined by the participation of others and earned through social interaction (Goffman 1967; Lim and Bowers 1991; Mao 1994). *Self-presentation* consists in using behaviour to communicate some information about oneself to others. The two main self-presentational motives are to please others and to construct (create, maintain, and modify) one’s public self congruent with one’s ideal (Baumeister 1982). Thus, self-presentation constitutes one of the most important elements of communicative behaviour, which is “aimed at establishing,

maintaining, or refining an image of the individual in the minds of others” (Goffman 1959). It is a complex activity that is shaped by “a combination of personality, situational, and audience factors”, such as an expression of self, a role-played response to situational pressures, and conformity to the identity expectations of salient others (Schlenker 2003: 498; Brown 1998). So, the presented image of self must be consistent with the role an individual plays in a particular situation and with the expectations of other participants.

When self-presentation is treated as a goal-oriented activity, it can be viewed as a transaction rather than a mere expression of self. Then, what is at issue is not the individual, but his/her relationship with others (Schlenker 2003). The end-result of the self-presentation activity is a self-image – face, a complex of positive attributes the individual wants to be associated with and characterized by. These attributes vary with respect to interpersonal relations in which the individual is with others, social situations in which he interacts with them, and culture or sub-culture he/she belongs to (Jakubowska 2008).

In contacts with other people, every person tends to act out a line, “a pattern of verbal and non-verbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself”/herself (Goffman 1955: 319; Johnson 1985). A person may *have, be in, or maintain face* when the line he/she takes presents an image of him/her as internally consistent and supported by the judgements of other participants. In other situations, when his/her social worth cannot be integrated, or when he/she does not have a line of the kind participants in certain situations are expected to have, he/she may be said to *lose face*.

Face can be understood in terms of basic human wants, desires: “*for proximity and belonging*” (positive face) and “*for distance and individuation*” (negative face) (O’Driscoll 1996; Brown and Levinson 1987). They are inherently present in every individual, in every culture. Whether one prevails over the other depends on culture, context of situation and individual characteristics of a person. Besides, the basic, universal desire, inherent in the human nature, “for a ‘good’ face” earns different interpretations in different cultures, subcultures or even groups, because the constituents of ‘good’ are culturally determined (O’Driscoll 1996: 4). In other words, there are differences in the content of face (Mao 1994; Matsumoto 1988; Jakubowska 2008). As Lim says, “face is in terms of social values” (1994: 210; Goffman 1967; Chu 1985), and it is as complex as the value system of a given culture or group. Goffman (1967:5) defines face as “an image of self de-

lineated in terms of approved social attributes”. Thus, every individual belonging to a particular culture or group, tries to create his/her self-image in terms of the attributes approved by the important others (members of his/her culture or group). However, the content of face is not only culture-determined. It depends on (Jakubowska 2008):

- Cultural context (social organisation, social norms, moral rules and a hierarchy of social values),
- Context of situation (participants of interaction, their role-relationship and their rights, responsibilities and expectations),
- Individual characteristics (personality and personally held values).

Face and impoliteness

Face is the main reason for impoliteness. Culpeper, in his model of impoliteness (1996; Culperer *et al.* 2003), enumerates several circumstances in which impoliteness is most likely to appear. This happens especially when there is an imbalance of power between interactants, which leads to the situation when “the vulnerability of face is unequal and so motivation to cooperate is reduced” (1996: 354). Impoliteness appears also when it is not in the participant’s interest to maintain the other’s face. In equal relationships, the question of impoliteness is more complex. Culpeper argues that impoliteness correlates with intimacy – in intimate relationships, people are more hostile towards each other than strangers, and they know which aspects of face are particularly sensitive to attack. Certainly, impoliteness is more likely to appear in dislike relationships in which people expect less concern for face. By analogy to Brown and Levinson’s politeness strategies, Culpeper (1996: 356–357) proposes five impoliteness strategies:

- ***Bald on record impoliteness*** – the FTA is performed in a direct and unambiguous way in a situation when face is not irrelevant,
- ***Positive impoliteness***, employed to damage the hearer’s positive face,
- ***Negative impoliteness***, employed to damage the hearer’s negative face,
- ***Sarcasm or mock politeness*** – “the FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realisations”,
- ***Withhold politeness***, which involves the absence of “politeness work” where it is expected.

All the impoliteness strategies are used to attack particular aspects of the other's face. However, as Culpeper claims (1996: 361),

The notion of face is not confined to the immediate properties of the self, but can be invested in a wide range of phenomena such as one's family, job, nationality. Liu (1986) conceptualised the notion of face as consisting of concentric circles with the most face-laden closest to the ego.

Insults or other impolite remarks may be directed at different components of the other's face, e.g., her/his social roles, personal values, self-sufficiency, mental abilities or psychological make-up.

The self "in transition"

The self-identity is not a constant entity. It is rather a way of thinking about oneself, which varies in different situations. Giddens (1991) claims that the self is "*a reflexive project*". Changes in an individual's life are always related to some psychological reorganisation; the self is constructed and transformed in the reflexive process, involving both individual and social changes. Teenagers are individuals "*in transition*" (they are no longer children, not yet adults). And so are their hierarchies of values and identities.

Teenagers adopt different values and present different faces in the interaction with their peers than in the interaction with their parents or other adults. Interacting with parents or other adults teenagers usually behave in a polite/politic way, i.e. follow the socially accepted patterns of behaviour. They try to apply the knowledge of interactional norms they have been taught both at home and at school. Among their peers, they seem to completely forget these norms, which are in contradiction to the norms of youth culture. A "good face" has a different meaning here (cf. O'Driscoll 2001). And so has the word *polite*, which seems to be equivalent to *naive* and *gullible*, and associated with weakness. The so-called polite rituals and polite formulae are used in a jocular or ironic way, or not used at all.

As individuals "in transition", teenagers are extremely sensitive about their self-image (face), which has to be delineated in terms of attributes approved of by their peers. It is intended to be internally consistent, which is difficult to achieve due to the transitory character of the self. It should also

be supported by the judgements of other participants, who for the same reason are not supportive in this respect. That is why almost every interaction between teenagers is emotionally loaded and full of tension. In such circumstances to lose face or to have it threatened is quite easy.

“Good” and effective self-presentation can result in peer acceptance, which means “to be or not to be” in such a group. Creating the self is a matter of self-presentation only insofar as it is concerned with establishing and maintaining one’s public self which to a great extent is based on appearances. A model teenage person has to be tough and strong; he/she can never turn out to be weak or sensitive. He/she, like other human beings, has two basic desires “for proximity and belonging” (positive face) and “for distance and individuation” (negative face), but in contacts within the peer group the former prevails over the latter.

Self-directed positively marked facework in youth culture

The analysis of the data collected during observation and interviews shows that any expression of politeness is not highly valued by the teenagers, it may even be said that it is dispreferred, and any instance of it is ridiculed as a sign of weakness. Teenagers approve of direct expression of emotions and opinions. They follow the imperative to say what one thinks. This freedom of expression includes also one’s opinions about the hearer, no matter whether they are positive or negative (e.g., *Ty chyba zupełnie zgłupiałaś* (You must be completely crazy)). Speaking in conformity with Grice’s maxims of conversation and the use of the bald-on-record strategy is the preferred type of action, e.g.:

Ale zmaściliś ten sprawdzian. (You’ve fluffed the test.)

Debil/Debilka z ciebie. (You’re a moron.)

Robisz trzodę/wieś! (You behave like a troglodyte!)

Wyglądasz jakby matka karmiła cię z procy. (You look as if your mother fed you with a catapult.)

Other strategies the teenagers most frequently use are positive impoliteness and sarcasm or mock politeness, e.g.:

Ale harcerczka z niej! (What a girl guide she is!, meaning “What a slag she is!”)

Co ja jestem PCK/Caritas? (Do I work in the Polish Red Cross/Caritas?, meaning “I am not going to do anything to help you”.)

Such linguistic behaviour is not limited to face attack situations, i.e., situations when “a segment of discourse – a single comment, an extended exchange, a speech – [...] is interpreted as intentionally insulting” (Tracy 2008: 175). It is a form of politic behaviour in which teenagers engage during everyday social interaction. Any display of sensitivity to and consideration for the others’ feelings or face is perceived as a sign of weakness, and as such a threat to one’s own face.

Teenage persons take care especially of their own *face*, and do everything to maintain it, neglecting at the same time the face of the other. And it is their positive face that is most often threatened by their teenage friends. The positive face-threatening acts that were most frequently observed are the following (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987):

- expressions of disapproval, criticism, contempt or ridicule, e.g.:
Jesteś pokopany/zielony (you are stupid),
Z ciebie ciężko kapująca mózgowica/CKM. (You are a very slow thinker.)
Ale kaszana!, Co za siara! (You are hopeless!)
Wpadłeś pod kosiarkę? (Have you been run over by a lawnmower?, meaning “you have a terrible haircut”),
- accusations, e.g.:
Pękaasz/ cykasz się/ wymiękasz? (Are you afraid [to do that]?),
- insults, e.g.:
Ty cykorze! (You chicken!), *Ty kablu!* (You nark!), *Ty kujonie!* (You swot!),
Ty matole! (you fool!),
- challenges, e.g.:
Jakieś wonty?, Masz wonty? (Do you have any objections?)
Ściemniasz! (You try to mislead me!), *Nie wciskaj kitu!* (Don’t bullshit me!), *Bajerujesz?* (Do you try to bullshit me?),
- expressions of strong negative emotions, e.g.:
Kur(r)czaczki! (Shoot!), *Cholerka!* (Bloody hell (Dim)!), *Ja pikolę!* (Holy shit!),
- irreverence, e.g.:
Mam cię tam, gdzie słońce nie dochodzi. (I don’t give a monkey’s about you.),
- use of address terms in an offensive or embarrassing way, e.g.:
złotko (dear), *niuniuś/niunia* (bimbo, babe), *lalka* (sweetie).

These acts must be reciprocated; otherwise the threat to one’s face would be aggravated by lack of action on one’s part. And lack of action

in such a situation is perceived as a weakness and a threat to one's good name and reputation. The only way to maintain or save one's face is to threaten the positive face of the attacker. What is traditionally understood as impoliteness aimed at the other, in the youth culture, often forms part of self-directed positively marked facework, perceived as appropriate to the constraints of the ongoing interaction (politic behaviour). No matter what character a given face-threatening act has, a response to it can take the form of:

- a verbal act (e.g. an insult with the use of swear words, a challenge, expression of negative emotions, or a mixture of some of them),
- a nonverbal act (e.g. aggressive and/or insulting gestures),
- a physical attack (extremely rare, at least in the group observed).

Depending on the weightiness of a face threat, self-face saving involves one of the acts or all of them. This type of behaviour helps an individual to present the image of strength (Goffman 1967). Lack of any response to an insult or to any other positive face-threatening act or silence as a response is perceived as an action inconsistent with the approved image of strength and leads to a loss of face of the insulted or attacked person (Goffman 1955, 1959; Tjosvold 1983; Jakubowska 2004).

Conclusions

Traditionally, impoliteness is associated with inappropriateness, unfavourableness, unsupportiveness, non-abidance by social rules, non-politicness, lack of cultural scripts or lack of FTA-redress (Eelen 2001; Jakubowska 1999). In the observed group of teenagers, impolite behaviour cannot be defined by means of all these terms. FTAs performed bald on record without redress, positive impoliteness and sarcasm the teenagers use are definitely unfavourable and unsupportive, but they are considered appropriate and politic by members of the group. The observed individuals interacting with their peers abode by interactional norms specific for their group/culture and used their specific cultural scripts.

“Politeness is a social judgement” (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 3), and people are judged to be polite or impolite, depending on what that say, to whom, and in what context. Norms and patterns of polite behaviour differ across cultures, across different social groups, or even age groups. That is why what

is considered impolite behaviour in interaction between adults can be appropriate in interaction between teenagers.

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