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# Context-dependency and impoliteness in intercultural communication

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**Abstract:** There has been a great deal of research on impoliteness focusing on one particular language or cross-cultural differences between languages (e.g. Bousfield 2008; Bousfield and Locher 2008; Culpeper 2005, 2009; Haugh 2007, 2011; Kienpointner 1997). However, much less attention has been paid to impoliteness in intercultural communication in which all or some speakers communicate in a language other than their native tongue.

On the basis of research on L1s and cross-cultural analysis of impoliteness, most of the researchers (e.g. Culpeper 2005, 2009, Haugh 2011; Watts 2003) in the field seem to agree that no act is inherently impolite, and that such an interpretation depends on the context or speech situation that affects interpretation (see Culpeper 2009). The paper will examine this context-dependency in intercultural communication where interlocutors cannot always rely on much existing common ground, shared knowledge and conventionalized context but need to co-construct most of those in the communicative process. It will be argued that limited shared knowledge and common ground may restrict the interpretation process to the propositional content of utterances, which may result in an increase in the actual situational context-creating power of utterances. Recent research (e.g. Abel 2003; Bortfeld, 2002, 2003; Cieślicka, 2004, 2006; House 2002, 2003; Kecskes 2007) demonstrated that in intercultural communication the most salient interpretation for non-native speakers is usually the propositional meaning of an utterance. So interpretation generally depends on what the utterance says rather than on what it actually communicates. As a consequence of their taking propositional meaning for the actual meaning of an utterance, interlocutors are sometimes unaware of impoliteness conveyed implicitly or through paralinguistic means.

**Keywords:** context-dependency, prior context, actual situational context, salience, common ground

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# 1 Introduction

Research in politeness and impoliteness in intercultural communication is almost uncharted territory. This is not necessarily surprising because politeness and impoliteness are considered universal categories by several researchers (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987; Lakoff 1973) that are expressed lexically in a variety of different ways in languages. So researchers have been occupied with investigating how these categories are expressed in different languages and how they compare to each other. As a result, there is much research on politeness/impoliteness focusing on one particular language or cross-cultural comparisons between languages but much less about how politeness/impoliteness theories can be applied to explain intercultural interactions. Writing about intercultural (im)politeness, Haugh (2010) found that no specific theory of intercultural politeness had yet been developed. The main reason for this situation may be that politeness and impoliteness are essential parts of cultural models, conventions and norms in languages that bring about different expectations about what is polite or impolite in a given language. For instance, Culpeper (2005: 38) suggested we should use Tracy and Tracy's (1998: 227) definition of impoliteness: "communicative acts perceived by members of a social community (and often intended by speakers) to be purposefully offensive". Then further referring to the role of the speaker and hearer Culpeper (2005: 38) defined impoliteness as those occasions when "(1) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behavior as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2)". It is crucial how we understand the role of a speech community and the role of individuals in the impolite speech act because as Holmes and Schnurr noted: "We can never be totally confident about the ascription of politeness or impoliteness to particular utterances, even for members of our own communities of practice" (Holmes and Schnurr 2005: 122).

Tracy and Tracy's (1998) definition clearly referred to the "members of a social community". Other researchers such as Eelen (2001), Mills (2003), and Watts (2003) used the term 'communities of practice'. Kadar and Haugh (2013) used 'relational network' (which is different from 'communities of practice'). The important thing for us in this paper is that all these categories refer to some kind of relatively constant language communities. However, interlocutors in intercultural interactions hardly make up a "social community" or "community of practice" in the traditional sense of the expressions. The "social community" in which the lingua franca is used as a means of communication is usually just temporary. Interlocutors can rely on factors such as common beliefs, common cultural models, community norms, etc. only to a limited extent in these

temporary speech communities. But there is some evidence that even in these kinds of communities there is a strong tendency for interlocutors to co-construct some kind of norms of their own, however short a time their members spend together (e.g. Canagarajah 2014; Kecskes 2007, 2013, 2015b). Those temporary norms are quite loose and vague in comparison to norms in traditional language communities (or whatever other term we use). However, it is expected that the more time members of a speech community spend together the more norms of conduct they develop for themselves. This is true for lingua franca use as well, which explains why lingua franca research is considered very important within the European Union where English is considered as a lingua franca.

Talking about intercultural interactions the question we need to ask is as follows: Will a person, with, let us say, a French L1, sound polite enough or impolite to a, for instance, Japanese speaker when they use English as a lingua franca? Will the Japanese speaker of English consider the utterance of the French speaker impolite or polite enough in English? Will the actual situational context help the interlocutors process the utterance appropriately as polite or impolite? Will they have a common context that they can rely on while processing the given utterance? What does it mean for those international speakers to process the utterance “appropriately”? To illustrate what I mean, here is an example from a dialogue I noted down at Fuzhou Airport between a Chinese waitress and an Australian traveler who was sitting at a table talking to two other fellow travelers drinking beer and coffee and eating something (see also in Kecskes 2014):

- (1) Chinese: Can I get you some more coffee, sir?  
Australian: *Who is stopping you?*  
Chinese: You want to stop me?  
Australian: Oh no, just bring me the damned coffee.

The example clearly shows what problems nonnative speakers may face when they produce and process impolite or polite utterances in intercultural interactions. The expression “*who is stopping you?*” used by the Australian in this situation sounded very rude according to the norms of most varieties of the English language, however, the Chinese waitress did not seem to have felt that way. She might have been misled by the literal meaning of the expression, which, however, hardly fitted into the actual situational context. If she really relied on the literal meaning of the expression she may not have found the utterance rude according to her limited L2 (English) cultural models and expectations. The actual situational context did not appear to have helped the Chi-

nese waitress to process the utterance properly. Actually, I asked her later if she had realized how rude the Australian tourist was. She smiled and said she did not think so. The example demonstrates how the impoliteness of the utterance was lost because the waitress understood what the expression said rather than what it implicated. The actual situational context did not help her recover the communicative meaning of the utterance. Why? This is what this paper is all about.

## 2 Approaches to impoliteness

This paper does not aim to go into the details of the very complex debates about politeness and impoliteness theories that appear to have a monolingual focus as will be explained below. That would take another paper. This study attempts to explain what happens to impoliteness when none of the interlocutors communicate in their L1 in the course of interaction. But still a basic understanding of the notions and leading current theories in im/politeness is necessary for us to explore what is going on in intercultural communication with the politeness and impoliteness phenomena, and how those theories of politeness/impoliteness should or could be modified (if needed) to accommodate intercultural interactions. When I say that the theories appear to be monolingual in nature I mean that they mainly analyze and discuss how im/politeness works in different languages and across cultures such as English, German, French, Chinese, Japanese, etc. So they focus on one language at a time or the comparison of two or more languages rather than on intercultural interactions where the language of communication is not the L1 of any or some of the participants. Still those studies are all very important because they have paved the way for intercultural interaction studies. There are few papers (see for instance Chang 2008; Chang and Haugh 2011 as exceptions) that actually focus on and analyze intercultural (not cross-cultural!) data in which the interlocutors use a common language and represent different L1s such as in lingua franca communication or native speaker and nonnative speaker interaction.

Several authors (e.g. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010; Wierzbicka 2001) emphasized that most models and theories of politeness and impoliteness are Anglo-centered. At the same time there are some studies that show a certain awareness regarding cultural and linguistic variation when theorizing about politeness/impoliteness related concepts (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini and Haugh 2009; Holmes et al. 2008). This is mainly true for the field of politeness studies where, as I mentioned above, there are a number of studies that focus on cross-

cultural variations. However, impoliteness has just started to be explored in the last decade. Culpeper et al. (2010: 598) claimed that “it makes sense to put notions that may assist in understanding how impoliteness works to the cross-cultural test as a matter of priority, the objective being to let the mechanisms of variation help define impoliteness, rather than let a definition of impoliteness obscure variation.”

Another issue that we need to take into consideration when we examine intercultural impoliteness is *the discursive turn* in politeness/impoliteness research (Eelen 2001, Haugh 2007; Locher 2004, 2012; Watts 2003). Criticizing theories of politeness Eelen (2001) and Watts (2003) argued that a theory of politeness cannot develop without a radical re-conceptualization of politeness that involves a shift away from politeness as an abstract theoretical concept towards members’ evaluative practices as found in their natural environment in everyday discourse. Eelen (2001: 247–248) said that politeness research should focus on the processes of constructing social reality and evaluations of politeness as particular representations of reality. In line with this argument Watts (2003: 19–20) redefined the goal of politeness research as follows: “What a theory of politeness should be able to do is to locate possible realizations of polite and impolite behavior and offer a way of assessing of how the members themselves may have evaluated that behavior.” As Haugh (2007) puts it, this requires the researcher to examine more carefully how (im)politeness is interactionally achieved through the evaluations of self and other (or their respective groups) that emerge in the sequential unfolding of interaction. So the analyst should look for “evidence in the interaction that such (im)politeness evaluations have been made by the participants, either through explicit comments made by participants in the course of the interaction (less commonly), or through the reciprocation of concern evident in the adjacent placement of expressions of concern relevant to the norms invoked in that particular interaction (more commonly)” (Haugh 2007: 301).

The aim of the discursive approach is not to describe and explain what linguistic expressions are going to sound (im)polite, or (in)appropriate, and why, but how the interlocutors arrive at their evaluations of their partners’ behavior, and why. This means that the focus is on individual evaluation, and on how people react to their conversational partners’ behavior. As we saw in example (1), the expression “who is stopping you” is theoretically rude, but practically, for the Chinese waitress in that particular context, the expression did not sound impolite. This highlights the importance of individual evaluation beside context-dependency. Both of them are crucial in intercultural interactions.

In the discursive approach, analysis happens on the discourse level, and one of the main arguments is that it is the speaker rather than the utterance that is impolite or polite. This claim puts emphasis on the individual. However, the discursive approach also relies on the notion of *communities of practice* (cf. Wenger 1998) (and several similar notions mentioned above such as ‘social community’, ‘relational network’, etc.) that has been very popular lately in several linguistic fields including sociolinguistics, second language acquisition and bi- and multilingualism. This notion focuses on language practices and styles developed by groups of people as they engage in a common task. By analyzing these practices the researcher is expected to identify the norms of appropriateness for a given community of practice and then assess a given utterance as polite or impolite against those norms. However, the analyst’s interpretation as an outsider might not always coincide with that of participants’ themselves (see example 1 above). So the analyst has to look for cues such as explicit comments made by interlocutors in the course of the interaction, or the reciprocation of concern that is evident in the adjacent placement of expressions of concern relevant to the norms invoked in that particular interaction. Intercultural interactions with participants representing different L1s can be considered *temporary communities of practice* or temporary social communities or whatever other terms we use (the emphasis here is on “temporary”). In these temporary speech communities we cannot speak about well-established prior norms, expectations, frames, and familiar contexts because members of the temporary community have not had time to establish them yet. But they need to rely on some common ground when producing or interpreting utterances. In the co-construction of core common ground the following factors are relied on: L1-based norms, conventions, their limited L2-based knowledge about norms and conventions in L2 and common understanding of elements and factors in the given actual situational context. Out of all these factors interlocutors must co-construct their own micro-context. This is why more “burden” seems to be on the individual than on the socio-cultural, normative, frame-based factors.

*This shift from the communal to the individual evaluation is the most important phenomenon for intercultural impoliteness.* This is where we should look for cues that help us understand the differences between L1 communication and intercultural communication regarding impoliteness. Since there are very few conventions and norms that actually characterize a temporary speech community or ad hoc intercultural interaction, individual participants need mainly to rely on their own knowledge and prior experience in L1 as reference rather than shared common ground, conventions, norms in a long-term speech community. The question is how this shift from the communal evaluation (what is

considered impolite in a given speech community) to the individual evaluation affects the role of context. Before answering the question we will need to discuss the nature of context.

### 3 Context-dependency

In L1 communication research and pragmatics context is everything. Contextualism in pragmatics is one of the dominant approaches according to which context-sensitivity is a pervasive feature of natural language. Literalism, according to which (many or most) sentences express propositions independent of context (declarative knowledge), has been almost completely extinct for some time. According to contextualists, linguistic data must be supplemented by non-linguistic, contextual interpretation processes. There is no meaning without context. As Carston claims, “... linguistically encoded meaning never fully determines the intended proposition expressed” (Carston 2002: 49).

As said above, in politeness/impoliteness research almost all researchers seem to agree that no act is inherently polite or impolite, but such a condition depends on the context or speech situation. Culpeper (2009: 13) claimed: “Impoliteness involves (a) an attitude comprised of negative evaluative beliefs about particular behaviors in particular social contexts, and (b) the activation of that attitude by those particular in context-behaviors”. This may be true for L1 communication. However, the issue of context-dependency should be revisited in intercultural interaction because context may play a more complex role than just being a selector/activator. This complexity can be understood better if we analyze the interplay of prior context and actual situational context in meaning construction and comprehension. So we need to review briefly how context is understood in linguistics research and im/politeness research.

In linguistics, context usually refers to any factor – linguistic, epistemic, physical, social – that affects the actual interpretation of signs and expressions. Context-dependency is one of the most powerful views in current linguistic and philosophical theory going back to Frege (1884), Wittgenstein (1921) and others. The Context Principle of Frege (1884) asserts that a word has meaning only in the context of a sentence. Wittgenstein (1921) basically formulated the same idea saying that an expression has meaning only in a proposition. Every variable can be conceived as a propositional variable. This external perspective on context holds that context modifies and/or specifies word meanings in one way or another. Context is seen as a selector of lexical features because it activates some of these features while leaving others in the background. According to

Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory (1986), relevance is something that is not determined by context but constrained by context. A context-driven pragmatic process is generally top-down. It is usually not triggered by an expression in the sentence, but occurs for purely pragmatic reasons: that is, in order to make sense of what the speaker says. Such processes are also referred to as “free” pragmatic processes. They are considered free because they are not mandated by the linguistic expressions but respond to pragmatic considerations only. For example, the pragmatic process through which an expression is given a non-literal (e.g. a metaphorical or figurative) interpretation is context-driven because we interpret the expression non-literally in order to make sense of a given speech act, not because this is required by linguistic expressions. This is demonstrated in example (2) in the interpretation of the word “shoot”.

- (2) Bob: Jim, I need to tell you something.  
 Jim: OK, shoot.

The opposite view on context is the *internalist perspective*. This perspective considers lexical units as creators of context (e.g. Gee 1999; Violi 2000). Violi (2000: 117) claimed that our experience is developed through the regularity of recurrent and similar situations which we tend to identify with given contexts. The standard (prior recurring) context can be defined as a regular situation that we have repeated experience with, and about which we have expectations as to what will or will not happen, and on which we rely to understand and predict how the world around us works. It is exactly these standard contexts that linguistic meanings tied to lexical units refer to. For instance:

- (3) Help yourself.  
 You are all set.  
 Have a nice day.

These situation-bound utterances (SBU) can actually create their own contexts (See Kecskes 2003, 2010b). Gumperz (1982: 138) said that utterances somehow carry with them their own context or project a context. Referring to Gumperz's work, Levinson (2003) argued that the message versus context opposition is misleading because the message can carry with it or forecast the context.

The main problem with the externalist and internalist views of context is that they are both one-sided because they emphasize either the selective or the constitutive role of context. However, the dynamic nature of human speech communication requires that we recognize both regularity and variability in meaning construction and comprehension, and take into account both the se-



lective and constitutive roles of context at the same time. World knowledge is available to interlocutors in two ways: 1. as tied to lexical items and images based on prior encounters and experience, and 2. as provided by the actual situational context framed by the given situation (Kecskes 2008, 2010a). According to the socio-cognitive approach to pragmatics (Kecskes 2010a, 2013), context represents two sides of world knowledge: prior context and actual situational context, which are intertwined and inseparable. Actual situational context is viewed through prior context, and this combination creates, as it were, a third space. Meaning is, in this view, seen as the outcome of the interrelation and interaction of prior and current experience. This has a profound effect on the evaluative function of language because *prior, reoccurring context may cancel the selective role of actual situational context*. We can demonstrate this through an example taken from Culpeper (2009).

- (4) Creative deviation from the default context (cf. “mock impoliteness”) [Lawrence Dallaglio, former England Rugby captain, describing the very close family he grew up in]

As Francesca and John left the house, she came back to give Mum a kiss and they said goodbye in the way they often did. “Bye, you bitch,” Francesca said. “Get out of here, go on, you bitch,” replied Mum. (Dallaglio, 2007).

Culpeper explained that the reason why the conversation between the mother and daughter does not hurt either of them is due to the context (“mock impoliteness”). However, a closer look at the example reveals that actual situational context hardly plays any role here. Rather what we have here is the strong effect of prior context, prior experience that overrides the actual situational context: “... they said goodbye in the way they often did”. Reoccurring context and frequent use may neutralize the impolite conceptual load attached to expressions. This is exactly what seems to be the case in this interaction. When I talk about “prior context” I mean two things that are intertwined. Prior context that those two participants themselves share (i.e. prior context emerging from their prior interactions with each other) in the example above, and prior context that can also be “sourced” from similar interactions with other speakers.

In politeness research Terkourafi’s approach to context appears to be quite influential.

Terkourafi (cf. 2005, 2009) proposed a frame-based approach according to which specific linguistic expressions should be analyzed in their particular contexts of use (i.e., frames). She said that it is “the regular co-occurrence of par-

ticular types of context and particular linguistic expressions as the unchallenged realizations of particular acts that create the perception of politeness” (Terkourafi 2005: 248). Terkourafi (2009: 23) emphasized the constitutive role of the (actual situational) context that creates a frame for the participants to evaluate what is polite. As her focus is on politeness, she concentrates on statistical regularities of usage: “politeness is not a matter of rational calculation, but of habits” (Terkourafi 2005: 250). She also argued that “Empirically, frames take the form of observable regularities of usage” (Terkourafi 2001: 185). Analyzing Terkourafi’s approach, Culpeper (2010) asked the questions: “Could conventionalised impoliteness formulae have the same basis as that argued for politeness formulae? Are they conventionalised frequency correlations between forms and particular contexts?” (Culpeper 2010: 3232). His argument was that impoliteness cannot be adequately treated that way. I agree with Culpeper’s assessment. Impoliteness formulae should be handled differently from politeness formulae. Referring to Leech, Culpeper argued that impoliteness formulae are much less frequent than politeness formulae. Leech (1983: 105) stated that “conflictive illocutions tend, thankfully, to be rather marginal to human linguistic behaviour in normal circumstances”. Another important difference between politeness and impoliteness expressions was pointed out by Watts: “Behaviours and expressions considered impolite are more noticed and discussed than politeness” (Watts 2003: 5). People know about impoliteness, they are familiar with impolite expressions and understand when they face impoliteness in their L1 but do not necessarily exercise impoliteness. It is one thing to know how to be impolite or when someone is impolite, and it is another thing to actually be impolite or “practice” impoliteness. Culpeper (2010: 3238) confirms this line of thinking: “... there is an interesting point of difference with politeness formulae is that people acquire a knowledge of impoliteness formulae that far exceeds their own direct experience of usage of formulae associated with impolite effects in such contexts. This, I argue, is because they also draw upon indirect experience, and in particular metadiscourse.”

As we see, impoliteness research has also pointed out that context plays a different role in impoliteness than in politeness. Something can be conventionalized not only through frequent usage. There are other factors that may play an important role in conventionalization of any formulas or expressions in a language. These factors include (but not restricted to) familiarity, functional importance, psychological salience and something that I call “resonance” which refers to affecting someone in a personal or emotional way. What I mean by this is that some linguistic signs, expressions and occasionally whole utterances may evoke or suggest images, memories, and emotions for a language user. These expressions may carry a negative or positive load for a language

user for particular, usually individual reasons. People know negative expressions like “get lost”, “you are an idiot”, “drop dead”, etc. but most of them very rarely use those. Or on the other hand, some people may overuse certain expressions with a positive load, like myself who uses “would you mind ...” too often although it is quite rare in American English.

Consequently, to be familiar with an impoliteness formulae does not necessarily require frequent and direct prior contextual experience. One can get to know the “norm” not only through direct prior experience but also indirectly, through hearsay, observation, etc. This is an important factor for intercultural interactants because there is no easy answer to the question: Whose im/politeness norms should be followed when participating in an intercultural interaction? For instance, when a French person is speaking with a Japanese person in English, whose norms will define what is considered im/polite? The obvious answer would be English norms but in fact this is hardly what happens as we will see in some of the examples below. Besides, there is the additional issue that Culpepper raised in connection with impoliteness formulae: no direct prior experience is needed to be familiar with what is considered impolite in a given speech community. Living in that community, members can get to know what is impolite through indirect means as well.

## 4 Norms and context in intercultural interactions

People generally think that when using a second or third or X language interlocutors are impolite or rude not according to the norms of the target language but according to the norms and rules of their L1. This is not surprising, because even very fluent speakers of L2 may fall back on their L1 norms and conventions when they are emotional: very happy, or very angry, or rude, and when they are tired (see Dewaele 2006; Gawinkowska et al. 2013). In order to clarify this issue we need to discuss how the relationship of norms and the process of co-construction are handled in the discursive approach and the socio-cognitive approach.

### 4.1 Norms and the discursive approach

As far as the role of norms and conventions in interaction is concerned there is significant difference between the discursive approach (Eelen 2001, Haugh 2007; Locher 2004, 2012; Watts 2003) and the socio-cognitive approach (e.g. Kecskes 2010a, 2013; Zufferey 2015). Norms and conventions are results of prior

experience and repeated prior contexts. As mentioned above norms, conventions and their sharedness have become a key issue in politeness/impoliteness research in the discursive view. However, the discursive view does not consider norms straightforward and pre-existing entities, but versatile argumentative tools, which are not necessarily shared across the board by individuals in the language community. Norms are seen as being relative to the practice to which they are part of, rather than informing it in an objective way (Eelen 2001: 229–236). They are maintained through interactions and discourses on im/politeness, but they may also be challenged or disputed by speakers. Researchers should accordingly focus on how norms are discursively co-constructed and how they may be resisted or contested. It is very important to note that there is no formal distinction made between pre-existing and co-constructed norms in most discursive approaches. As a consequence, the discursive approach relies on the minute by minute description of specific occurrences of politeness and impoliteness in individual encounters. The socio-cognitive approach does not accept this approach to politeness/impoliteness research. It maintains that interlocutors rely both on pre-existing norms and conventions and co-constructed elements in both production and comprehension. So the effect of prior experience substantiated in norms, conventions and expectations cannot be ignored as is done in the discursive view. In the socio-cognitive approach, politeness/impoliteness is both constituted in the communicative process through on-the-spot evaluations and decisions, and constitutive of the communicative process through expectations and norms. So what we have is a process that blends what the interlocutors already have, based on their prior experience (dominated by L1 experience) and what they co-construct in the course of interaction. Prior experience with politeness and impoliteness expressions is especially important for nonnative speakers in intercultural communication. For instance:

- (5) I'll talk to you later,  
Be my guest,  
Get out of here  
Knock it off, will you?

If these expressions are used according to the norms of the target language (English) and interlocutors are familiar with them, no problem is expected to occur in the interaction. They will know the socio-cultural load attached to these expressions. However, if they are not familiar with them the use of these expressions may cause conflict or tension. The following conversation between

a Turkish student and a Russian student illustrates this point. (Source: Albany ELF dataset).<sup>1</sup>

- (6) Ali: Sasha, come with me to the library.  
 Sasha: Sorry, I cannot. I need to finish this essay.  
 Ali: You really need to come. Peg will also be there.  
 Sasha: *Knock it off, will you?* Don't you see that I am kind of busy  
 Ali: Okay, okay, just chill.

*Knock it off, will you?* used by the Russian student is quite rude by American English norms, and this is how the Turkish student processed it. Both students were familiar with the impolite load of the expression in American English, so there was no escalation of conflict. Although Sasha's expression does seem to carry a possible "escalatory" or even "aggressive" attitude, Ali attempts to deescalate the conflict by asking Sasha to "chill". In other words, Ali recognizes the possible emotional/aggressive load of Sasha's prior utterance and responds by attempting to calm him down. Both are familiar with the socio-cultural load of the expression and act accordingly: no escalation of conflict occurs because of the Ali's appropriate response.

Situation-bound utterances (like the ones in example 5) whose use is tied to particular speech scenarios may cause trouble in intercultural interaction because interlocutors cannot be sure that their communicative partners know that particular formulation of a norm that they used in the interaction. Although a number of SBUs usually express a polite approach if they are processed literally, they may be easily misinterpreted and considered impolite.

- (7) Don't you look pretty  
 Not that I do not believe you, but ...  
 Tell me about it  
 Get out of here

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the examples are from the Albany datasets which is a collection of intercultural interactions (video-recorded, or hand-recorded). Hand-recorded data come from researchers' noted experience. Video-recorded data were collected in the "clinic class" that is an essential part of the TESOL MSc program at SUNY, Albany. In that class TESOL students organize an intensive English Language Institute for non-native speakers from the community. The syllabus for the TESOL class, and reciprocally, for classes in the English Language Institute, included a requirement that all students would participate in NNS-NS interactions in order to "provide English learners with the chance to apply their knowledge of L2 in an actual conversation with a more experienced speaker of English." The syllabi also advised students that "The conversations will be video-recorded, and kept in an archive for possible use as a resource for instruction or research."

The problem with the discursive view in im/politeness research not recognizing the importance of pre-existing norms and expectations is that interlocutors involved in interactions usually make predictions (based on their prior experience both in L1 and L2) regarding appropriateness and what might be expected therein. Therefore, the norms underlying expectations of politeness/impoliteness go back to generic constraints, and those generic norms are the ones the analyst needs to assess vis-à-vis assessments of politeness/impoliteness. Hong (2008) described an interesting example for this generic norm to illustrate how it may work in a speech community (example used in Ardington 2011 and Kecskes 2013). “Where the bloody hell are you?” has been used as a catch phrase of Tourism Australia’s marketing campaign encouraging tourists to visit Australia.<sup>2</sup> The advertisement features images of Australians preparing for visitors to their country. It begins in an outback pub – the bar keeper says that he’s poured a beer; moves on to a young boy on the beach – he says he’s got the sharks out of the swimming pool; and then to partygoers watching Sydney harbor fireworks, who say that they’ve turned on the lights. The commercial ends with a girl stepping out of the ocean asking “So where the bloody hell are you?” There was quite a controversy about this phrase all over Australia. Some thought that the catch phrase demonstrated light-hearted play on stereotypical characteristics of Australia such as “informality”, “casualness” and “friendliness”. Others said that, since the ad represents Australia, it should show more politeness and courtesy in standing for the country. Hong (2008) relying on Wierzbicka (2001) and her own survey argued that “bloody” is generally considered to be a very mild expletive, unlikely to cause offence in most circles. Close to 80% of her respondents said that the expression “bloody hell” is acceptable and not impolite. This would not necessarily be the case if nonnative speakers were asked about the polite/impolite load of the expression because if lacking the conceptual support they would probably process the expression literally in spite of the fact that actual situational context does not support that interpretation. Of course this is just speculation based on existing research in other similar cases (see, for instance, research of Cieřlicka 2006; House 2002, 2003; Kecskes 2007). No survey was done with non-native speakers only in the Australian case.

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<sup>2</sup> “So where the bloody hell are you?” is a A\$180 million advertising campaign launched in 2006 by Tourism Australia created by the Sydney office of the London advertising agency M&C Saatchi.

## 4.2 Context and semantic analyzability

In intercultural communication actual situational context may affect the processing of politeness and impoliteness differently from what actually happens in L1 communication. The main reason of this is the priority of semantic analyzability of an utterance for nonnative speakers in L2 language processing. Current research has shown that in intercultural communication non-native speakers very often prioritize the compositional meaning of an utterance (Abel 2003; Bortfeld, 2002, 2003; Cieślicka, 2004, 2006; House 2002, 2003; Kecskes 2007, 2015a). The following example from the Albany dataset demonstrates this quite well:

- (8) A Japanese student enters into the room of Professor Brown.  
Noritaka: Hi Professor Brown.  
Professor: Hi Noritaka. How are you? *Why don't you sit down?*  
Noritaka: Because you did not tell me to.  
Professor: OK, I am telling you now.

“Why don't you sit down?” is a formulaic expression that is used to invite someone to sit down. However, if processed literally/compositionally the expression asks about the reason why someone does not take a seat. Not knowing the figurative meaning of the expression the Japanese student relied on the compositional meaning of the expression that also fitted into the actual situational context. The problem with formulas is that they usually carry a conceptual load that is culture-specific. Nonnative speakers may require several encounters (direct) or observed cases (indirect) to acquire the appropriate use of this kind of expressions.

The priority and saliency of literal meaning for nonnative speakers in meaning processing may have a profound effect on how politeness/impoliteness is processed. As a result, the polite or impolite load of the expressions and utterances may be lost or an evaluative polite/impolite function may emerge where it should not. We saw an example in the first case at the beginning of the chapter (see example 1). The Chinese waitress did not recognize the rudeness of the Australian traveler when he asked “Who is stopping you?” as the waitress offered him more coffee. The waitress processed the utterance literally but she seemed to be confused because it did not make sense for her in that actual situational context. So the actual situational context caused confu-

sion rather than clarification because the rudeness of the expression was lost as the waitress could not process it properly.<sup>3</sup>

Another case is when a polite or impolite function emerges for the nonnative speaker where it should not. This is what is happening in example (9) in which a Japanese student, Akiko is talking to an American student, Melody (Albany dataset).

- (9) A: Melody, I have received the travel grant.  
 M: *Noooo, get out of here!*  
 A: You should not be rude. I did get it.  
 M: OK, I was not rude, just happy for you.

The Japanese student processed the situation-bound utterance ‘get out of here’ literally although it is clear that if processed that way, the literal sense of the expression does not match the actual situational context. The interesting thing is that not even the intonation and enthusiasm of Melody helped the Japanese student process the expression properly. In sum, in this short interaction all actual situational contextual factors were overridden by the student’s prior experience with the use of ‘get out of here’ (which was probably literal) and the strong semantic analyzability of the expression. The actual situational context did not really seem to allow the nonnative speaker to catch the impolite load of an expression as is usually the case in L1 communication.

This issue is worth attention because, as mentioned above, in L1 communication the main tenet is that context is everything: meaning is dependent on context because the linguistic sign is underdetermined (see Carston 2002 above). This, however, is not quite so in intercultural communication where the semantic analyzability of expressions often creates its own context as we saw in example (9). As said at the beginning of this paper, when talking about L1 communication, all researchers (e.g. Culpeper 2009, Haugh 2007, Terkourafi

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<sup>3</sup> I want to note here that although most of the examples in this paper show problems that occurred in interaction I do not think that intercultural interaction is inherently more problematic than L1 interaction. The negative examples serve my purpose to demonstrate why and how intercultural communication is different from L1 communication. I think both in intercultural communication and L1 communication interlocutors face similar problems (see more in the paper “Intracultural communication and intercultural communication: Are they different?” *International Review of Pragmatics*, Vol. 7, Issue 2: 171–194). The question is to what extent a problem affects understanding and interpretation in L1 communication and intercultural interaction. Here I wanted to demonstrate those issues in impoliteness that affect intercultural communication more than L1 communication highlighting the possible reason for the problem.



2005) seem to agree that no act is inherently polite or impolite, but such a condition depends on the context or speech situation. This may be so for L1 communication. However, in intercultural interactions the actual situational context does not always work as a collective frame that helps interlocutors make similar sense of the linguistic signs. Occasionally the actual situational context is interpreted differently by the interlocutors because their prior experience is rooted in different cultures and in different experiences with different speech communities. I argued that the issue of context-dependency should be revisited in intercultural communication because prior context appears to be as powerful (and often even more powerful) as actual situational context in shaping meaning in language processing.

When processing politeness or impoliteness functions of utterances, interlocutors in intercultural interactions may rely primarily on (mainly L1-based) prior context in meaning construction and comprehension rather than on actual situational context. This does not help the interpretation process as it does in L1. If context does not help, interpretation generally depends on what the utterance says rather than on what it actually communicates. As a consequence, interlocutors focusing on literal meanings may sometimes be unaware of politeness or impoliteness because it is conveyed implicitly or through paralinguistic means. Here we should refer to the issue of common ground. Common ground refers to the ‘sum of all the information that people assume they share’ (Clark 2009: 116) that may include world views, shared values, beliefs, and situational context.

Kecskes and Zhang (2009) argued that core common ground should be distinguished from emergent common ground. *Core common ground* is constituted by knowledge, expectations and beliefs that members of a speech community have in common based on their prior experience while *emergent common ground* is mutual knowledge that emerges in the process of communication, and is co-constructed by the participants. Core common ground is usually attached to prior experience and prior context, while emergent common ground is immediately related to actual situational context. Limited core common ground may restrict the interpretation process to the propositional content of an utterance, and may also decrease context-sensitivity. The proper processing of impoliteness requires strong share of core common ground. In intercultural communication, however, interlocutors usually rely more on emergent common ground than core common ground, which may result in the loss of impoliteness effect as was demonstrated above. The next section will discuss a phenomenon that confirms the somewhat weaker role of actual situational context in intercultural impoliteness.

## 5 Anti-normative politeness or mock impoliteness

From the perspective of context-sensitivity we should discuss a unique occurrence of impoliteness that is called “mock impoliteness” or “anti-normative politeness” (Zimmermann 2003) in the literature (see Mugford 2012). Anti-normative politeness has been described as “mock impoliteness” (Culpeper 1996) “banter” (Leech 1983), “sociable rudeness” (Kienpointner 1997: 268) and “ritual abuse” (Parkin 1980: 45). Mock impoliteness is often contrasted with impoliteness. Culpeper (1996: 352) defined mock impoliteness as “impoliteness that stays on the surface, since it is understood that it is not intended to cause offence”.

Mock impoliteness makes it possible for interlocutors to establish their own interactional patterns without having to conform to conventional patterns of use. They use rude, aggressive and/or impolite expressions in order to express solidarity, friendship, and group-inclusion. This type of impoliteness allows a subgroup of given speech community to express positive politeness in its own creative and unique way. It is often used cross-culturally as the following example shows.

- (10) English: What’s up, dudes?  
 Russian: Kak dela, muziki?

Both the English and Russian expressions are used for addressing and/or greeting friends who belong to the close circle of the speaker. Literally they may sound rude but in fact they are not. They refer to group-inclusiveness in a funny way. Functionally the Russian word “muziki” (meaning “peasants”) is the close conceptual (not semantic!) equivalent of American English “dudes”.

Relating anti-normative politeness<sup>4</sup> to foreign-language use and participation, Mugford (2012) argued that foreign language users must be aware not only of linguistic features of expressions but also how they are used socially to achieve interpersonal goals and group understandings. Nonnative speakers, based on their L1, understand that mock impoliteness reflects phatic communion, mutual trust, group affiliation and enhanced individual image of a given speech community subgroup. However, mock impoliteness in L2 is still very difficult for them to process because their prior experience with mock impolite-

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<sup>4</sup> I prefer the term “mock impoliteness” but Mugford uses “anti-normative politeness” after Zimmermann (2003).

ness, and prior contexts with mock impoliteness, is attached to L1 rather than L2. So it is hard for them to recognize when exactly mock impoliteness is used, and actual situational context does not always help them in processing cases of mock impoliteness.

However, we must be careful how we evaluate the role of actual situational context in anti-normative impoliteness. Culpeper argued that the role of (actual situational) context is neutralized in these cases. Analyzing example (4) above I already claimed that it is not quite so. What neutralizes the actual situational context is in fact prior context, which can also be the way the involved individuals are accustomed to speaking to each other. From this perspective we should look at another example of Culpeper (2009). He talks about a party to which he was late. He turned up at 7:00 pm, only to discover the party had started at 5:00 pm and had almost finished. Upon telling the host, a friend of his, the reason for his mistake, the friend replied “You silly bugger”. He used a conventionally impolite insult. But of course Culpeper did not take offence. For him this was a friendly banter. Banter involves mock or non-genuine impoliteness, as does some types of teasing and humor. The important thing in language processing is to recognize that the impolite expression is indeed non-genuine. Culpeper (2009) argued that the recognition of this mock impoliteness relies on some degree of mismatch between the conventionally impolite formulae used and the context (e.g. “you silly bugger” vs. friendly relations), along with additional signals (e.g. laughter, smiling) that the impoliteness is not genuine. In fact, I would argue that the additional nonverbal signals paired with the speakers’ prior experience (not the actual situational context!) cancel the impoliteness effect. It is important to note that mock impoliteness is not about the frequency of use of the given expression in similar contexts. It is about the relationship between the people who use the expression and about the relationship two people (sometimes strangers) want to establish. Mock impoliteness can arise in interactions amongst speakers who are meeting for the first time (see Haugh 2011) with the aim to establish an in-group relationship. A speaker can try to use mock impoliteness with a person that he has never met before, based on his positive prior experience with other people when his goal was similar: establish camaraderie or a friendly relationship. When I talk about prior context I also include prior experience with other speakers not featured in the actual situational context.

Elsewhere Culpeper (2009) acknowledged that “the neutralisation of impoliteness by any context is difficult to achieve.” Then he continued:

The main reason for this is that the context in many cases is likely to be overwhelmed by the salience of impoliteness behaviors. Research in social cognition would suggest

that, people do not carefully attend to contextual reasons why they should not take offence; they are more likely to focus on the impolite language or action and, with little thought, take offence. (Culpeper 2009).

We can agree with this statement that fits how the socio-cognitive approach handles these cases. The semantic content of expressions that encodes prior contexts is so powerful that the actual situational context cannot cancel that. But how would that work for a foreign language user who did not have enough encounters with the group of native speakers to establish this camaraderie? Probably not that well, as the following exchange demonstrates<sup>5</sup>:

- (11) Jerry and Bob are going to the movies. They want their Chinese friend, Zhang to go with them.  
 Jerry (smiling): Hey, douchebag, wanna come with us?  
 Zhang: What did you just call me?  
 Jerry: Forget it. Do you want to come with us or not?

The Chinese person was embarrassed to be called “douchebag”. He may not have known what the word exactly means but seemed to have interpreted it as offensive in spite of the fact that Jerry used the expression as banter. He wanted to sound funny and express a kind of camaraderie. When he saw it did not work, he just let it go. This is where the problem is for the nonnative speaker. Although he may be aware of the mock impoliteness value of the expression, still he finds it offensive because his prior L1-based experience may override what the actual situational context presents.

## 6 Conclusion

It was argued that impoliteness research is dominated by intracultural and cross-cultural views and emphasis on context-dependency with only a small number of works focusing on intercultural interactions. This paper has attempted to examine how existing theories of politeness/impoliteness can be applied to explain intercultural interaction where, according to existing research, there is dominance of propositional meaning, and only minimal core common ground is available for interlocutors. So they need to co-construct and develop emergent common ground. It was hypothesized that context may affect these

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<sup>5</sup> From author’s collection of recorded interactions.

interactions differently than it is the case in L1 communication. When participating in intercultural interactions, interlocutors have the knowledge to recognize impoliteness based on their L1. However, this recognition in L1 is supported by contextual factors that may not work in L2 the way they do in L1, and reliance on L1 experience only can be misleading.

The issue of context-dependency was revisited in intercultural interaction because context appeared to play a more complex role than just being a selector/activator. Examples demonstrated that there is a need for distinguishing prior context and actual situational context as two sides of context whose interplay strongly affects how meaning is shaped and interpreted. The main reason of this is the priority of semantic analyzability of an utterance for nonnative speakers rather than the priority of meaning most supported by the actual situational context. The behavior of nonnative speakers seems to support what Cruse said about L1 politeness which, in his opinion is “first and foremost, a matter of what is said, and not a matter of what is thought or believed” (Cruse 2000: 362). This statement is not widely accepted in politeness and impoliteness research focusing on L1s. However, it appears to be supported, at least to some extent, by what nonnative speakers do. The priority of “what is said” for nonnative speakers and their L1-based prior experience and context awareness in meaning processing has a profound effect on how politeness/impoliteness is processed in L2. As a result, the polite or impolite load of expressions and utterances may be lost or an evaluative polite/impolite function may emerge where it should not. For nonnative speakers, prior context may have a stronger effect on meaning construction and comprehension in intercultural interactions than actual situational context when processing polite or impolite value of utterances. Interpretation generally depends on *what the utterance says* rather than on what it actually communicates. As a consequence, relying on compositional (literal) meanings interlocutors may sometimes be unaware of impoliteness because it is conveyed implicitly or through paralinguistic means.

Research in intercultural impoliteness is a relatively new area of inquiry. We need large datasets (which we do not have yet) to analyze the real nature of this phenomenon. Right now we are still in the process of asking questions, mainly relying on existing research whose focus is on cross-cultural rather than intercultural data analysis. This paper has attempted to contribute to this growing field of research with pointing out areas that further research should address.

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## Bionote

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