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# A discursive approach to the analysis of politeness data

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to provide an exemplification of the way that the discursive approach can work in relation to the analysis of data. As such, it argues for the validity of the discursive approach to politeness. Because the discursive approach has been seen as difficult to employ in the analysis of data, in recent years, there has been a proliferation of research returning to Brown and Levinson's approach. Although discursive approaches to politeness have functioned successfully as a critique of Brown and Levinson's work, they are not seen as a means of analyzing politeness and impoliteness in their own right. By tracing the development of the discursive approach to politeness, and by addressing the critiques that there have been, we argue that although the critical role of the discursive approach is paramount to the development of the field, discursive approaches are more than just a critique, and should be seen as constituting an approach to the *analysis* of politeness as well. As a case in point, we illustrate what a discursive approach consists of through analyzing an intercultural interaction between a group of close friends of Dutch and Italian origin.

**Keywords:** discursive approaches, politeness, evaluations, intercultural approach, ideology

## 1 Introduction

There are a wide range of theorists working within politeness research at the moment, who are developing a variety of different approaches to the theorizing and analysis of politeness and impoliteness. Many of them have been influ-

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enced to some degree by what has become known as the discursive approach to the analysis of politeness. The discursive approach, broadly speaking, focuses on the way that discourses inform what speakers think is possible to say, how they view their relations with others and with their communities, and how power impacts on these relations. Rather than starting with an analyst's sense of what politeness consists of, there is a tendency for analyses to be local, context-focused, and qualitative. These analyses are often focused on misunderstanding, ambiguity and the potential for interpreting an utterance as polite or impolite, rather than assuming that politeness is inherent in words themselves. This paper aims to describe the theoretical underpinning of the discursive approach to politeness and, more importantly, provides a step by step account of the analysis which such an approach entails.

Many theorists have found the discursive approach to be of use in that it serves as a critique of Brown and Levinson's work (1987 [1978]), and as such it has enabled theorists to use their model more critically and productively. In this way, the discursive approach has played a role in the development of the field, even for those politeness theorists who do not in fact draw on the approach in their own analysis. Some theorists, such as Eelen (2001) and Watts (2003), have mounted very productive critiques of Brown and Levinson's work but have not developed an alternative approach or model.<sup>1</sup> Some theorists have agreed with the critique of Brown and Levinson's work, but have felt driven back to Brown and Levinson's work, because the discursive approach seems too difficult to use as an analytical approach. For many, the discursive approach seems nebulous and unsystematic, and compared with Brown and Levinson's model, it is very difficult to know how to go about analyzing interaction (Holmes 2005, 2007). Perhaps most importantly, it seems very difficult to teach it to students. Indeed, we have noticed a "return to Brown and Levinson", both in terms of the numbers of PhD theses submitted recently (e.g., Al-Adaileh 2007; Shih 2007; Hsieh 2009), and in terms of journal articles and other publication outputs which draw explicitly on Brown and Levinson's model (e.g., Peterson and Vaattovaara 2014; Schlund 2014; Bouchara 2015; Hatfield and Hahn 2014), albeit seemingly modified by a (discursive) critical approach. Although new research outputs that make use of adapted versions of Brown and Levinson's model do make important contributions to the field of politeness research, too, in this article we would like to address some of the critiques of discursive approaches to politeness, and establish discursive approaches more markedly as an alternative starting point for the analysis of politeness. In line with Locher

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<sup>1</sup> However, see Watts' paper on blended space (2008).

(2006a), Culpeper (2011a) and Kadar and Haugh (2013), we argue in this essay that the discursive approach is not simply a critique, but constitutes a mode of analysis itself, and our aim in this essay is therefore to spell out the way that this approach can be drawn on in analysis. Thus, our essay first charts the way that the discursive approach has developed and the impact it has had on the field of politeness research. We then examine the problems that theorists have encountered with the discursive approach, and then we set out the stages of a discursive analytical approach.

## 2 The development of the discursive approach

Any attempt to provide an overview of the discursive approach to politeness is fraught with difficulty. The eclectic nature of the approach makes it problematic to adequately describe it as if it consisted of a unitary group of theorists with a manifesto and agreed set of protocols and models of communication.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the term “discursive approach” should be seen as an umbrella term for a fusion of different theoretical and analytical research strands (Mullany 2011: 134). These approaches were initially drawn together by their shared critical response to Brown and Levinson’s model (1987 [1978]), and further united in their wish to develop new theoretical positions and forms of analysis beyond the constraints of a speech act theory, universalist paradigm. Discursive approaches are often influenced by the work of critical and political theorists, and discursive politeness should also be seen as part of the “discursive turn” in sociolinguistics and other disciplines. We now discuss each of these elements in the development of the discursive approach in turn.

### 2.1 The discursive approach as a critique of Brown and Levinson’s model

As Culpeper (2011a: 409) notes, Brown and Levinson’s (1987 [1978]) model was criticized from its first publication in the 1970s, but it is largely since the 1990s that critics have questioned in earnest the main tenets of their model.<sup>3</sup> This

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<sup>2</sup> Although see Mills (2011) for a comprehensive overview of the characteristics of various approaches to politeness research which have been or could be categorized as discursive politeness research.

<sup>3</sup> Brown and Levinson themselves were very critical of their own model, particularly in the introduction to the second edition (1987) which critiqued their use of Speech Act theory but left the general tenor and aims of their approach and model intact.

early politeness research influenced by Brown and Levinson can be regarded as *first wave politeness research* (Culpeper 2011a: 393; Grainger 2011: 169–172). Work since the 1990s can be classified as *second wave politeness research* and constitutes a fundamental critique of first-wave approaches to politeness, and provides alternative research avenues. The discursive approach to politeness can be seen to be situated within this core of second wave of politeness research. Although the discursive approach forms both a critique and aims to set out an alternative research trajectory, early work constituted mainly of a critique of Brown and Levinson's work (e.g., Eelen 2001; Mills 2003; Watts 2003). We now give a brief overview of some of the main problems discursive politeness theorists find with Brown and Levinson's work, in order to set out more clearly why it is that the discursive approach is focused on particular issues and elements of analysis.<sup>4</sup>

Many discursive politeness theorists find that Brown and Levinson's conception of what *politeness* is fails to adequately capture the complexity of the term (e.g., Eelen 2001; Watts 2003). Brown and Levinson focus on politeness in relation to facework, characterizing politeness mainly as the strategic mitigation of face-threats which individuals employ in order to achieve their own aims in a conversation. There are a number of problems with taking such a starting point (Watts 2003: 251). This first and foremost postulates a very negative view of humanity that discursive theorists do not necessarily agree with. More importantly, politeness can be seen as encompassing a wider range of behaviours rather than just the strategic employment of politeness for the avoidance of face-threat (Mills 2003: 60).

Brown and Levinson's approach also fails to recognize the importance of the hearer, and the hearer's perspective, in determining what constitutes politeness, and it neglects to take into account the social and discursive context in which utterances are made and politeness is negotiated (Watts 2003: 251). Such an approach does not take the social nature of politeness into account sufficiently (cf. Fukushima 2000: 52). Instead, Brown and Levinson take the (implicit) stance that it is unproblematic for analysts to evaluate the utterances of a speaker in a slightly decontextualized way, thus relying on the idea that utterances are inherently meaningful, and overlooking the hearer's understanding of the utterance.<sup>5</sup> Instead, a discursive approach stresses the notion that mean-

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<sup>4</sup> These issues have been well-aired elsewhere, and are therefore only mentioned briefly in this article (but see, for example, Eelen 2001; Mills 2003; Watts 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Brown and Levinson do try to set their approach to politeness analysis in context by introducing variables such as social distance, power and rank of imposition, but these tend to be rather generalised rather than specific to particular contexts.

ing can be dynamically constructed by multiple participants over the course of longer stretches of discourse (cf. Mills 2003, 2011).<sup>6</sup>

Discursive approaches to the analysis of politeness, furthermore, find fault with the reliance of Brown and Levinson on Speech Act Theory, because it entails a speaker-centred, sentence-focussed model of communication, which forces them to assume that elements in conversation have single functions and are readily agreed upon by participants. Mills (2003: 221–226), for example, points out the problems with conducting quantitative analysis of the speech act of apologizing. She argues it forces researchers to rely on countable linguistic elements which they can recognize as constituting an apology, such as those utterances containing the words “sorry” or “I apologise”. In doing so, researchers inadvertently take the position that “politeness can be recognised objectively by the analysis of formal features” (Mills 2003: 225).<sup>7</sup>

Brown and Levinson have furthermore been criticized by discursive politeness theorists for not clearly delineating a notion of impoliteness in their model, except as an absence of politeness (Eelen 2001) or a failure of communication (Culpeper 1996: 349, 2011b: 6). Discursive theorists have argued politeness and impoliteness, although closely linked, function in very different ways (e.g., Culpeper 2011b: xii), and it is necessary for the specificity of impoliteness to be analyzed separately (see Bousfield and Locher 2007; Bousfield, 2008). However, at the same time, it is necessary to analyze politeness in relation to impoliteness, (what could have been said and was not), because in all interaction, the choices which were not taken weigh on the production and reception of the utterance.

Finally, discursive theorists have critiqued Brown and Levinson for focusing too much on the analyst’s notion of what politeness means, rather than on how individual speakers and hearers in interaction understand the term (e.g.,

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<sup>6</sup> This is a common criticism of Brown and Levinson, which stems from their reliance on Speech Act Theory, and work from Austin (1962) Searle (1969) and Grice (1975).

<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, although many apologies might indeed fall into common patterns, this does not allow for an understanding of when such features are intended for other purposes by the speaker, or understood differently by the hearer. Utterances which take the elements traditionally recognized as constituting an apology, such as ‘I’m sorry’, might in fact not be intended or recognised as apologies, and might be interpreted differently in different contexts. By contrast, apologies which are made using different linguistic strategies, for example indirectly or over a number of turns, might not be picked up as apologies by researchers adopting a quantitative speech act model (also see Mills 2011: 21–22). Thus, apologies should be seen as complex negotiations between interactants which cannot be simply analysed as explicit reparations of face-threat using ‘sorry’ or ‘I’m afraid’. This is not only the case for apologies but for all speech acts.

Eelen 2001; Clark 2011; Watts 2003; Grainger et al. 2015). Discursive politeness theorists make the distinction between first order politeness (politeness1) and second order politeness (politeness2). Politeness1 focuses on participants' judgements of what constitutes politeness in interaction, politeness2 comprises the more theoretical notion of what constitutes politeness (see Watts et al. 1992; Eelen 2001). In traditional approaches to politeness, it is the theorist who decides whether something counts as polite or impolite. Discursive theorists recognize the importance of taking into account interactants' point of view on what constitutes politeness as well, and are well aware of the fuzziness of boundaries between these two concepts.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.2 Discursive approaches and discourse theory

Combined with this critique of Brown and Levinson is a concern with issues of power. The discursive approach draws on the work of theorists such as Michel Foucault (1972) and Norman Fairclough (1995) in their work on discourse and power (see also Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013). Foucault sees discourse as a set of regulated practices, generated by a society or by an elite within society, which determine the forms and evaluation of utterances; for example, what can be expressed and considered to be true or valuable. Discourses are held in place and maintained by institutions and their practices and by the power relations that these bodies generate. What is seen to be appropriate linguistic behaviour is tied in with what elite groups in a society consider to be important. Discourse theory has a scepticism towards all meta-narratives, all globalizing theories which aim to give a universalizing account of the way languages work. It is for this reason that quantitative research and generalizations are suspect within discursive theorizing and instead a more local analysis is preferred.

## 2.3 The “discursive turn”

The discursive approach should be seen to be part of a wider “discursive turn” within a wide range of fields. There are similarities here with the waves of

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<sup>8</sup> Eelen (2001) noted how much traditional theorists confused their own sense of what politeness was with their theoretical statements about politeness in general. Individuals in interaction, as well as producing politeness and impoliteness and judging others' utterances as polite or impolite, have a keen sense themselves of folklinguistic generalisations about what constitutes politeness in general, what rules they think are in place, even if they themselves do not agree with those rules. Thus a discursive approach sees politeness 1 and 2 not simply as binary opposites.

research that Eckert (2012) has described within variationist linguistic research. Where first and second wave approaches to variation focused on structure and macro-sociological notions, the third wave of sociolinguistics now focuses on how meaning is constructed locally, in everyday interaction. Similarly, early politeness research focussed on the generalizations that could be made about politeness phenomena and macro-sociological categories such as socio-economic class, sex, ethnicity and age.<sup>9</sup> Brown and Levinson's traditional approach, for example, incorporates these large macro-sociolinguistic categories in their theorizing on variables and aimed to describe the universals of politeness that they felt could be discerned.

More recent approaches to politeness have adopted more fine-grained approaches to correlating politeness phenomena in language with macro-sociological categories. An example is Terkourafi's (2005) frame-based approach, in which she posits a data-driven model that seeks to establish patterns of co-occurrence between linguistic expressions in a particular language group and their schematic contexts of use. According to Terkourafi, politeness resides not in linguistic expressions themselves, but in the regularity of the co-occurrence of particular types of contexts with particular linguistic expressions that go unchallenged. For example, if a request is made by interactant A, and interactant B complies with it without challenging it (verbally, prosodically, or kinetically), and such an exchange is repeated on several occasions in the same context, then the linguistic expression can be considered to be polite. Terkourafi examines the Cypriot Greek speech community specifically in establishing patterns of "preferred" interpretation of certain expressions. The problem with this approach is that, whilst her data-driven approach is commendable, Terkourafi is only able to find patterns of co-occurrence in data by examining speech-acts of offering and requesting, and by reducing context to macro-sociological categorizations of speaker and addressee according to sex, age and social class, along with relationship and predetermined setting. In this respect, the research remains prone to the same problems of earlier approaches, namely that rather than paying attention to the local dynamics of the interaction, in order to derive an understanding of how linguistic meaning, as well as context, are constructed and negotiated in discourse, these notions are predetermined by the analyst. Such an approach focuses on the local dynamics of smaller communities in offering an insight into politeness, but remains based on broad generalizations about speakers and linguistic expressions.

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<sup>9</sup> This is true not just of Brown and Levinson's work but also that of Leech (e.g., 1983) and Lakoff (e.g., 1990); see Locher (2012) for an overview.

Discursive approaches to politeness, much like third wave variationist studies, place both data and social theory, such as Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977), at the heart of an approach to understanding politeness, focusing on how politeness is meaningful at a more fine-grained, local, and micro-level, and how the way politeness is understood and evaluated is dependent on personal indexing of social position (Agha 2006; Christie 2013).<sup>10</sup> In a similar way to Eckert's (2012) conclusion in her overview of variationist sociolinguistics, and Terkourafi's (2005) conclusion about politeness, all three levels of politeness study are important in creating an understanding of politeness. By looking into how people construct meaning individually and dynamically in interaction, we are not negating the existence of larger macro-sociologically categories; rather, we offer insights useful for the construction of a comprehensive overview of politeness phenomena, from broad macro socio-cultural notions to the more nuanced, micro-level of interaction.

For Agha, it is important to chart the role of politeness and impoliteness as moral and ideological systems, rather than simply assuming that individuals use politeness as a way of demonstrating their empathy for others. Eelen's (2001) work has shown us that it is important to recognize that politeness is a question of judgement of others, and where there are judgements of others, particularly moral judgements, then we have to analyze the role of linguistic ideologies about politeness. Agha's work forces us to recognize that judgements about politeness and impoliteness are imbricated in issues of social inequality, and we therefore cannot simply describe the resources associated with politeness as if they were universal or value-free. He states:

The existence of cultural models and tropic variants involves sociological asymmetries. Not all norms which exist in a society are recognized or accepted by all members of that society. Similarly, not all behaviours that trope upon norms occur equally routinely or are intelligible, nor are all intelligible tropes ratified by those who can construe them; not all the ones that are ratified come to be presupposed in wider social practices, or get normalized in ways that get widely known (Agha 2006: 5).

Thus, what Agha is arguing here is that politeness as such is not a set of resources which is agreed upon by all individuals or all groups within a society. Politeness, as Mills (forthcoming) argues, is associated with the behaviours and values of elite groups within society. To draw on these resources is already to

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**10** We are arguing here discursive approaches can be located both within second wave critiques of traditional approaches to politeness, and here, within the third wave approaches which focus on constructing a more localised, contextual approach to the analysis of politeness and impoliteness.



position yourself as a classed individual, just as when someone is judged to be impolite or decides to be impolite, that is an act which has implications, among other things, for judgements about class position and “roughness” or “respectability” (Skeggs 1997). Thus, whilst discursive approaches are very much focused on local analysis and contextualized judgements, rather than generalizations about linguistic universals, they are nevertheless also very concerned to chart the way that social norms manifest themselves in the local judgements that individuals make.

Thus, in summary, discursive approaches to politeness have not just problematized Brown and Levinson’s notion of politeness, but have forced theorists to be critical of all of the terms which they have used, such as face, FTA, positive and negative politeness, discernment, volition and so on. They have also forced politeness researchers to be critical of the bases of our models of communication and making sense. Perhaps most important of all, discursive approaches have forced theorists to critically evaluate the social role of politeness and impoliteness, and the social origin of politeness as a system and ideology (Agha 2006; Mills forthcoming).<sup>11</sup>

## 2.4 What constitutes a discursive approach?

Discursive approaches are not interested in constructing an overarching theoretical position and model of analysis in the same way as Brown and Levinson were, (Locher and Watts 2005: 16; Watts 2005: xliii) precisely because that approach resulted in very neat theories and analyses which could not in fact capture the complexity of the process of making sense of interaction. Discursive approaches are a more localized, interactive and context-focused form of analysis which takes into account the interaction between participants, chooses longer stretches of discourse for analysis, and focusses on the perceptions of the individuals concerned in terms of what they judge to be polite and impolite. Discursive approaches to politeness are also more concerned with ideologies of politeness and impoliteness. Thus, a discursive approach is both at the same time concerned with a more contextualized, localized interpretation and a more socially focused approach, centring on judgement and interpretation, as we explain in due course.

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<sup>11</sup> Other approaches which have reacted to Brown and Levinson’s work have been Arundale on face constituting theory (2010), Spencer-Oatey’s research on relational work (2008 [2000]) and interpersonal pragmatics (2010).

The discursive approach is interested in meta-statements about politeness (Grainger and Mills forthcoming). Thus for example, in Grainger and Mills' analysis of indirectness, it is the participants' views of what constitutes directness and indirectness, rather than simply the theorists' analytical views. Grainger and Mills' approach involves interviews, questionnaires, role plays and focus groups, which inevitably complicate the process of describing politeness and impoliteness in interaction. The notion that individuals might disagree about what constitutes a polite statement leads to a much more complex analysis. What a discursive approach focuses on is the range of positions which individuals take up in relation to politeness and impoliteness.

### 3 Problems with the discursive approach

There have been some critiques of the discursive approach to politeness (see the discussion in Locher 2012). The first is that because it is not as concerned with individual linguistic features as traditional approaches have been, it is nebulous. For example, a speech act approach to politeness might focus on requests and count the number of times that individuals use words or phrases such as "Can I", "Could you", "Would you mind ..." and so on. For discursive approaches, this type of approach to analysis simply decides prior to interaction what counts as a request, and does not in fact recognize the complexity of the process of requesting. The various ways in which individuals for example make a request implicitly, by hinting for example, without using elements such as "Could you ..." is not accounted for in traditional approaches.<sup>12</sup> Nor do conventional approaches examine the way that interactants respond to and judge requests, in short the consequences for the hearer of a request. Discursive approaches to politeness, in researching requests (if they focus on particular types of behaviour) focus more on the discursive interaction between participants, and on interlocutors' judgements on whether what was said does, or does not, in fact constitute a request. Thus, a discursive approach might interview interactants about the various language items which constituted politeness or impoliteness in particular interactions.<sup>13</sup>

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**12** Traditional theorists account for hinting through the use of terms such as off-record politeness strategies, but there is no systematic ways in which these off-record strategies can be characterised.

**13** We should stress that there are great variations within what constitutes a discursive approach. Not all theorists agree that interviews are useful within this approach (see for example of this variation the essays in Linguistic Politeness Research Group's (2011) book *Discursive approaches to politeness*).

Because of the focus of discursive politeness approaches on judgement and interpretation, critics have also been concerned that discursive politeness leaves no means of designating something as polite or impolite whilst maintaining a definition of first-order politeness (e.g., Terkourafi 2005; Haugh 2007; Locher 2012). Haugh (2007: 298), for example, questions whether the discursive approach to politeness is actually examining first order politeness, whether it is able to make a clear distinction between first order and second order politeness, and whether it does not run into the danger of confusing and conflating the participant's and analyst's evaluations of politeness.<sup>14</sup> Locher (2012) also poses the question of whether within a discursive approach "anything goes", because it is focused on the judgements of individual participants. She argues that "members' judgements are tied to the norms of a CoP [community of practice] which is embedded in the larger social context" (Locher 2012: 52). She argues that we can therefore focus on the norms which individuals orient to in their use of politeness within Communities of Practice (also see Locher 2006a, Locher 2006b).

Terkourafi (2005: 245) comments that discursive politeness may result in "minute descriptions of individual encounters, [which] do not add up to an exploratory theory of phenomena under study". Because Terkourafi (2005) also finds that the discursive view is theory driven (rather than data driven), she therefore takes issue with the notion that the discursive approach is non-predictive (2005: 245). Kadar and Haugh (2013: 56) conclude their chapter on discursive approaches to politeness by noting that no clear overarching theory has emerged since Brown and Levinson's ([1978] 1987) theory, and call for the unification of existing theoretical concepts and methodological approaches into one coherent framework. This trend of aiming to create a grand unifying theory of politeness is flawed. As explained above, we should not aim to construct an overarching theoretical position and model of analysis in the same way that Brown and Levinson did (Locher and Watts 2005: 16; Watts 2005: xliii) precisely because that approach resulted in theories and analyses which could not in

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<sup>14</sup> It is indeed difficult to always maintain a clear distinction between politeness<sub>1</sub> and politeness<sub>2</sub> and between the analyst vis-à-vis the participant, as we mentioned earlier, but the distinction is useful because it stresses the ontological difference between the analyst's perceptions of politeness (and further theorising) and that of the participants. It creates awareness that both these understandings of what politeness is are important. The discursive approach employed in this article argues that theories of politeness (politeness<sub>2</sub>) should be informed by what participants in interaction do, how participants relate to each other in conversation, and through analysis of what participants judge to be polite. In other words, any understanding of politeness<sub>2</sub> should be derived from investigation of politeness<sub>1</sub> (cf. Terkourafi 2011: 179; see Clark 2013 for an example).

fact capture the complexity of the way that negotiations around politeness and impoliteness are handled within interaction.

Critics have also noted that the discursive approach is an umbrella term for a number of research strands rather than a specific theory of politeness, and therefore it is not always clear which research falls into the discursive domain and to what extent research advocating a discursive approach is fully discursive. This has caused confusion among critics with regards to the underlying principles of discursive politeness approaches, its model of communication, and the methodology used (see Haugh 2007; Culpeper 2011a). Some approaches within the discursive paradigm have for example made use of Relevance theory, which is based on Grice's maxims of communication, and which focuses on speaker intention rather than on the more complex negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer (cf. Haugh 2007: 301; Culpeper 2011b: 21).

We now aim to set out what these underlying principles and theoretical discussions entail for analysis.

## 4 A discursive approach to analysis

It is our aim in this section of the essay to map out the scope of a discursive approach to the analysis of politeness and impoliteness. As we have shown above, there are a number of misapprehensions about what a discursive approach to the analysis of data might consist of.<sup>15</sup> It is the aim of this section to set some of those misconceptions straight, and to show what sort of focus a discursive approach might have. In this part of the article, we therefore provide a step-by-step example analysis to illustrate the different facets that a discursive approach might consist of, and thus how this approach can be used in the examination of politeness. We first discuss our methods of data collection and the type of data we have selected for this study, before we go on to address gaining participants' evaluations of the selected extract. We then analyze their judgements and come to some conclusions about the way politeness functions in this interaction. Notably, our texts for analysis include the initial recorded interaction, as well as recordings of the evaluations and judgements from participants about the initial interaction themselves. Finally, we address how the

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<sup>15</sup> We should stress that this is only one form of analysis which a discursive approach could take. Under the umbrella of discursive approaches, a wide range of different analyses are possible.

interplay of the initial conversation, in combination with the participants' evaluations of politeness in the interaction, and the analyst's view, might lead to a second-order understanding of politeness and impoliteness. We focus particularly on ideologies of politeness and impoliteness in this final section.

## 4.1 The data and participants

The data used in this article consists of a casual conversation between four friends, who are in their 20s and 30s, Italian and Dutch, who use English as a lingua franca. All speakers are fluent in English. Cecilia and Dorothy are currently living in the UK, whilst Naomi lived there briefly in the past. We have selected an intercultural conversation for analysis on purpose. As Kadar and Haugh (2013: 244) and Kecskes (2014) point out, there is limited research on politeness in intercultural interaction, and it typically focusses on caused offence and ensued misunderstandings between intercultural conversational partners. It typically attributes this to pragmatic transfer between L1 and L2, or (perceived) cultural differences between participants. Such research focuses on intercultural communication as the grounds for potential friction and stereotyping by both participants and analysts (Stadler 2011). By choosing to analyze an intercultural conversation, we would like to focus on how politeness in intercultural interaction, is discursively negotiated, rather than a result of static cultural norms.<sup>16</sup>

Dorothy, Naomi and Cecilia are all long-standing close friends.<sup>17</sup> Matthias, Naomi's boyfriend also belongs to the friendship group, although his relationship with the other participants is less close. Matthias and Naomi, both Dutch, are visiting Dorothy (Dutch) from abroad. Cecilia, who is Italian, has come over to catch up with everyone. These participants have a fairly equal power relationship in terms of status, and yet what we are interested in is the way that they negotiate these power relations locally. An audio recording was made of the conversation with the consent of all participants. In the recording, Cecilia, Dorothy, Matthias and Naomi are seated in Dorothy's living room, and are engaging in informal conversation. Earlier in this part of the interaction, Naomi has recommended the TV series "Orange is the New Black", which Dorothy has been fairly scathing about. The extract below begins with Dorothy offering an explanation for why she did not like the series.

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<sup>16</sup> We would like to argue that this analysis of this data has implications not just for intercultural interaction but also for all forms of interaction; perhaps the negotiated nature of interaction simply is more clearly evident in intercultural interaction.

<sup>17</sup> These are all pseudonyms.

It should be said that once the recording had been made, we as the authors both discussed which parts of the conversation might be interesting for politeness analysis and we also asked Dorothy for her opinion of what part of the conversation was difficult. However, we did not limit ourselves to our initial assessments. Nor did our initial analysis consist of checking the data for particular linguistic features. Rather we focused on what we considered, and any of the participants considered, to be moments which appeared to be that of interactional difficulty or awkwardness, as we considered that these might be the moments when politeness or impoliteness might be employed. We thus decided to focus on this short extract where the friends are at this point discussing the television show 'Orange is the New Black':

*Matthias (M): Dutch, male, boyfriend of Naomi, 27*

*Naomi (N): Dutch, female, 27*

*Cecilia (C): Italian, female, 30*

*Dorothy (D): Dutch, female, 26*

*D, N, C are close friends*

*((N has offered a positive evaluation of a television programme Orange is the New Black, and D has not agreed with her))*

1 D: I'm very snobbish when it comes to TV series I'll just @ I'll just say

2 N: and books and literature and ... [stories]

3 M: [I think it's okay] except from the the the lead actor

4 N: yeah the lead actress sucks

5 M: she she really is awful

6 D: who is that? Is that with?

7 N: Taylor Shilling

8 M: yeah she Chatman or something

9 N: I don't know what she's called in the show

10 M: Chapman *((softly))*

11 N: but it's okay Dorothy has never liked the things that I liked in terms in of literature-or movies or apart from Amélie maybe

12 M: @

13 C: hmhmhm @

14 D: I liked the Grave of the Firefly<sup>18</sup>

15 N: yeah but that's that's a special one I think I I but in general I remember one of the reasons that I stopped writing was because every time I wrote

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18 Reference to the film *The Grave of the Fireflies*.

- something and I let you read you were like ‘Ah, this is so normal and it’s so so cliché’ that I was like ‘okay maybe I’m not a good writer’ and I stopped
- 16 D: I don’t remember this I don’t remember ever looking at any of your literature
- 17 N: @@
- 18 D: [the point is] I don’t think [I did]!
- 19 N: [well I] I actually used to write stories
- 20 D: but I don’t think you sent them on to me?
- 21 N: yes I did, I remember you reading them  
(*(M/C: background chuckling)*)
- 22 C: you just destroyed the career of a [great writer]
- 23 M: [you you said you read them] @@
- 24 N: @@ pardon?
- 25 M: maybe she *said* she read them but
- 26 N: [@@@]
- 27 D: [@@@]
- 28 M: [actually she was doing something else] watching [Facebook]
- 29 N: [but that’s even worse] she is not even reading it [and then bashing it]
- 30 D: @@
- 31 N: [going like ‘oh this is] so [bad’]
- 32 M: [‘oh this] is so cliché, so boring’ ah [can you <X>]
- 33 D: I really don’t remember I really don’t remember reading it or you giving it to me or thinking that is was cliché
- 34 N: it’s okay  
... (1.0)
- 35 D: I also you should erm make out<sup>19</sup>

In the extract, Dorothy describes herself as “snobbish when it comes to TV series” (line 1). Naomi then extends Dorothy’s self-description of snobbery by

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**19** Transcription Conventions:

*(italic)* contextual information

@ laughter

[ ] simultaneous speech

*italic* stress

<X> inaudible speech

...(1.x) pause of at least 1 second

listing three other things in terms of which Dorothy is snobbish. Although the subsequent talk also addresses aspects of the TV series, the main focus of the ensuing conversation centres around Dorothy's taste in literature and film, and Naomi's claims that Dorothy has read Naomi's writing and judged it as "being clichéd", thus leading to her giving up writing.

## 4.2 Choosing an extract of conversation based on participant's evaluation of "difficulty"

This extract was chosen because it seemed to constitute a difficult moment in the interaction in which potential face-threatening acts,<sup>20</sup> such as mockery, and laughter are evident, and where there are a number of repeated rebuttals of claims made by Naomi. Rather than starting our analysis with a focus on linguistic elements which we as theorists might have isolated as indicators of politeness (such as "sorry" or the use of "would you mind"), what we focus on here is moments in the interaction where, according to at least one participant, there appears to be some difficulty or interactional problem. We then track through that moment of difficulty, to isolate the elements or strategies which are used by interactants to avoid or resolve the difficulty. Politeness seems to us to be a key element which is drawn on by participants when difficult interactional situations arise.

## 4.3 Interviewing participants and eliciting evaluations of the extract

After having selected an extract, we then interviewed the four participants separately to find out how they evaluated the interaction. All participants were asked to listen to the recording and were given a transcript of the interaction before they were asked to give an evaluation of the situation. Dorothy, for example, commented:

OK So one of the things my friend Naomi told me was that one of the reasons that she stopped writing was because I always said that her writing wasn't very good and she said that she showed it to me and it wasn't very good but I was a bit shocked at that

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**20** Although we see politeness as being much more than a means to avoid face-threats, we agree with Brown and Levinson (1987) that face-threatening acts are part of politeness. We see face-threats here as complex, situated and relational acts that arise out of interaction, and are offensive to one of more interactions in a conversation.



especially because I didn't remember ever looking at her writing or err saying such things er so yeah I don't I just tell her that I don't remember but then I don't really give counterarguments because because she says er that I don't like any of the things that she likes in terms of literature and movies and and I could have already given counterarguments to that but then I didn't except for one.

Dorothy argued that she did not use confrontational language (face-threatening acts) here because:

er well I think partially because er I was a little bit shocked by what she says but also I didn't want to say something which wouldn't be taken well by her and um and also she says that she remembers at one point she says that she remembers me reading her work and I can't really argue against that like you know your memory is wrong because I don't remember that but then at the end, all of this time I am saying that I didn't remember reading her work or judging it but what I also wanted to say was um that she shouldn't let her her um of how good her writing is depends on only on me only on MY judgement so she shouldn't stop writing just because I have *apparently* have judged it to be as being not very good um but I never said that because I wasn't sure I didn't want to aggravate the situation.

Thus Dorothy clearly recognizes the difference between what she actually said "I really don't remember reading it" (line 33) and what she actually thought, which was that she had definitely not read N's work. In this difference lies politeness, because Dorothy states in the conversation that she does not remember, rather than baldly stating that she had not read the N's writing.<sup>21</sup>

Dorothy argued that she felt that she had not handled the situation well:

well I don't think I handled it very well and I do also I do remember thinking it but not saying it in the end ... there is this slight pause at the end where I wanted to say yeah well you should not let your judgement depend on what I think but er then I never said it and also because it would be admitting that I had read it even though I don't remember so maybe that's also one of the reasons I didn't say it.

The use of "maybe" is interesting here, because this shows that Dorothy is trying to make sense of the interaction and that she herself cannot exactly recall the motivations or is not willing to share them.<sup>22</sup> Here, not speaking her mind is important. When asked about how politeness came into this interaction, Dorothy said:

I I think here politeness is very much about negotiating the relations between people so it's not just the topic and er saying ... er I don't know er keeping to conventions er but it's

<sup>21</sup> However, that could be occasioned by a consideration for N's face-needs.

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to one of the reviewers of the paper for bringing this to our attention.

also to do with longer standing relations so I keep in I think about how *our* relationship is between her and me because I think we do have an interesting relation and I think I quite know I take into account the way that she has reacted previously to things and also how well I know her and if I was talking to my friend Cecilia I might have said something very different.

She argued that she felt that politeness consisted of her not saying anything too confrontational. She was very clear that this depended on her sense of what had happened immediately prior to this section of the interaction:

at points before I was quite er how do you say it er ... direct in saying things but I didn't give many arguments and when I listen back to it I thought I could have maybe offended her a bit *there* and also by not giving arguments actually sometimes it makes it worse.

Thus, overall, Dorothy stresses the need for her to hold back her real opinions in order not to confront Naomi with what she sees as the truth of the situation. Naomi considered the conversation to be relatively lighthearted:

while I was reading [the transcript] I was going like 'wow, we're talking a lot through each other rather than waiting for everybody to finish their sentences' but I know it's very Dutch so yeah ... and also the conversation seemed like fun reading it back made me go 'Oh I wish I was still there'. It was fun.

Rather than commenting explicitly on politeness or impoliteness, Naomi said she remembered the second part of the conversation, because she wondered afterwards whether she “should have said what I've said about the writing ... because it sounds harsh even though it's true”. When asked to comment explicitly on this she said:

... like the last part erm it sounds like I'm blaming D for not writing anymore but not but I'm not blaming her at all but it sounds like that if I listen back to it and then D being apologetic and it's it's it's still fun and banterish but it also sounds like I'm blaming D for something that really wasn't her fault.

A notion of banter is clearly in force throughout this interaction and as Mills (2003: 124) states: “banter of mock impoliteness might allow someone to utter something closer to their true feelings in an exaggerated form at the same time as posing it in a manner where it will be interpreted on the surface at least as non-serious” (see also Clark 2011). Naomi, Matthias and Cecilia all refer to banter in their interpretations, but Dorothy interprets what they said in a serious way, rather than as a joke.

While Naomi and Dorothy had a clear memory of this part of the recorded conversation, Cecilia and Matthias did not remember this part of the conversation as clearly. Cecilia said:

I don't particularly remember that the bit about the TV show because er probably I was there but because I didn't watch it I didn't participate to that bit of conversation too much erm I remember particularly the part where Naomi was saying how she were inspired by D erm when D said that er her pieces of writings were a bit cliché I I completely remember that erm I didn't think anyone was particularly impolite to anyone else. It was a nice chat within friends speaking about a TV show.

When asked about how politeness played a role in the conversation she said:

yeah so nothing [I think] nothing bad of it it's erm really colloquial and maybe frank and direct but not impolite

She continued:

I found that bit quite funny erm speaking about N's career as a writer erm yeah no it was quite funny 'cause erm you wouldn't expect a career as a writer to start by such a comment a frank comment from a friend ... as I said before there are very really tight direct of erm the sentences but they're like in such a friendly way they don't come across as impolite ... like saying that something is a bit cliché, is a bit boring, speaking about the writing of someone else but it's it comes from a friend so it's kind of a constructive comment rather than an impolite remark.

Matthias did not remember the conversation, but listening back to it, he said it seemed like a normal conversation to him. The only thing that struck him was some of the words used:

maybe erm the words erm the the language erm with words like 'sucks' and stuff and stuff like that I'm not sure if that's just a blunt erm being blunt as being Dutch is or erm is it or is it a normal way to in speaking form for for D that's it' ... 'just yeah when I erm when I read the conversation again and heard it I think 'okay, that that could be an issue for some people' but I was not aware at the time ... it was in a a closed community yeah or closed group of friends.

Thus, there are significant differences in the evaluations of what is going on in the interaction; Dorothy considers that she has not perhaps handled the conversation very well, and is very aware of the difference between what she felt she had to say because of the context and because of considering N's feelings and face, and what she knew to be true. She argued that she needed to deploy politeness in this particular context. Others in the conversation seem to be unaware of Dorothy's difficulties and do not consider this a particularly difficult part of the conversation. They consider that there was no particular impoliteness or politeness employed here.

## 4.4 Findings

As we argued earlier, the discursive approach assumes that politeness is not inherent in words, and therefore it will involve contextualized qualitative analysis, examining the way that particular elements are cued by speakers and interpreted by hearers, and it may well focus on the way that speakers and hearers misunderstand each other. Analysis can always only approximate to what happens in conversations and this may involve the analyst laying out the possible interpretations within a politeness framework, and also drawing on post-hoc rationalizations by the interactants. The discursive approach suggested here is interested in meta-statements from participants about politeness. This obviously does not mean that politeness only means something in a particular context by particular participants, because the only way that politeness can be understood is because it exists as a system, although one over which there are disputes about what particular elements signify (Agha 2006). Each individual has their own take on the politeness resources available to them and each will engage in negotiations with others about what is acceptable and appropriate behaviour in each context, drawing on their past experience to evaluate the function and meaning of each utterance. Thus, discursive approaches are not solely focused on the local meanings of elements, because it is also concerned with the analysis of the resources available to interactants when they use politeness or impoliteness. Thus, this approach is not simply bottom-up, but is a combination of bottom up analysis, focusing on the interactants and the way that they make sense of each other's' utterances, together with an analysis which is top-down, analyzing the politeness resources which appear to be available to interactants, on the basis of their performance.

### 4.4.1 Avoiding confrontation and face-threat

In this extract Dorothy is concerned not to be too confrontational because of what she has said prior to the extract, and also because she is not sure that N will be able to accept a confrontational face-threatening act, based on her knowledge of her previous encounters with her. For this reason she uses a range of mitigating elements, for example, when N says “but it's okay D has never liked the things that I liked in terms in of literature-or movies or apart from Amélie maybe” (line 11), D responds with something which she has agreed with Naomi about: “I liked the Grave of the Firefly” (line 14) signalling her allegiance with N, and indicating that she is not threatening her face.

In her evaluation of this extract, Naomi also notes that this was a relatively difficult extract, even though overall, she evaluates the conversation as “fun”, for she points out that she reflected on whether she should have made comments about Dorothy having assessed her writing as bad, which suggests that she was aware that these comments might be somehow problematic. When probed about this, she evaluates the comments as “harsh but true”. This shows that Naomi oriented towards what she sees as the truth in the interaction, when she repeatedly states that she stopped writing because Dorothy assessed her writing negatively, rather than that she is concerned here with harming or not harming Dorothy’s face. Naomi is thus drawing on a notion of politeness as truth-based (Pinto 2011: 228), whereas Dorothy is orienting more to a face-based model of politeness.

Naomi also shows awareness of the multiple conflicting meanings the conversation can be seen to have, by re-evaluating the conversation in the follow-up interview. She shows a conflictual view in her evaluations of what is going on in the extract, by stating that it sounds like she is blaming, but then concedes she is not blaming [D] at all, and by ultimately categorizing the conversation as “fun and banterish”. By using the phrase “it sounds like”, Naomi is able to reflect on her role in the conversation as blaming Dorothy, whilst simultaneously disassociating herself from this role, which allows her to negate this possible interpretation.

Interestingly, while both Dorothy and Naomi discuss Naomi’s claims as having possible negative meaning, such as being “harsh” and causing shock, analysis of Cecilia’s judgements of politeness negotiations in the conversation show that *she* interprets the interaction in a very different way. Rather than focussing on Naomi’s claims in interpreting (im)politeness in the conversation, she centres her evaluation predominantly around the (im)politeness of Dorothy’s alleged actions of having read and assessed Naomi’s writing negatively, saying they are “direct sentences” that they form a “constructive comment rather than an impolite remark” because they are made by a friend. So rather than evaluating the linguistic utterances of the interactants in the interaction in terms of politeness, she evaluates the *practices* of someone’s described conduct prior to the moment of interaction in terms of (im)politeness. By assessing Dorothy’s alleged behaviour as “not impolite”, Cecilia implicitly accepts the truth proposition of this behaviour having actually occurred. Judging Dorothy’s supposed behaviour as impolite, furthermore suggests she felt it necessary to negate it, which implies that she can envisage Dorothy having negatively assessed the writing as being impolite. This correlates with Cecilia’s behaviour in the extract. Although Cecilia and Matthias do not align themselves with Naomi’s, nor with Dorothy’s claims with regards to Naomi’s writing explicitly

in the conversation analyzed, both Cecilia and Matthias imply that Dorothy had in fact assessed Naomi's writing. Cecilia does so by jokingly suggesting that Dorothy has "destroyed the career of a great writer", (line 22) while Matthias implies that Dorothy read the writing, "maybe she *said* she read them"( lines 23 and 25). The exaggerated categorization of Naomi as a "great writer" can be as seen as casting this potential difficulty as part of the banter which these friends are engaged in. This interpretation is corroborated by laughter, but also by Cecilia's explicit evaluation of the conversation in the follow-up interview. Like Naomi, Cecilia interprets the conversation as "fun" as well, and draws on her reference to Naomi's career as a writer, saying it is funny because one would not "expect such a career to start by such a comment a frank comment from a friend".

In the same way as Dorothy, Cecilia focuses on the relations between people being the driving force in determining whether anything in the interaction is polite or impolite here, denoting that the comments were made by a friend, and that overall: "It was a nice chat within *friends* speaking about a TV show". In a similar fashion, Matthias observes that the interaction took place within a "closed community" or "closed group of friends". Thus, issues of politeness or impoliteness are not foregrounded within this context for them, whilst they clearly are for Dorothy and Naomi.

While Matthias recognizes that some of the interaction might be seen by others as blunt, he categorizes this as due to what he characterizes as certain stereotypical assumptions on what is seen as polite within the Dutch community, to which he belongs. His evaluation shows that he is aware of how resources such as directness and certain vocabulary might be linked to impoliteness within the wider community, or might be part of expected behaviour of people within a certain (cultural) community, and he draws on those in contextualizing the meaning of participants' talk.

#### 4.4.2 Potential of politeness

When analyzing politeness and impoliteness the discursive approach tends to focus on what interactants might have said as much as what they did actually say. This contextualizes their choice of words and helps the analyst work out what is going on in the interaction. Dorothy states consistently throughout this section: "I don't remember this I don't remember ever looking at any of your literature". Here, she could have expressed herself more forcefully to rebut this accusation, for example saying "I did not read your writing", but instead she uses a more mitigated form which focuses on her not remembering reading the

work. She also repeatedly indicates that she is not sure about whether she read the work, even when she knows that she did not, for she says:

“[the point is] I don’t think [I did]!”, (line 18)

“but I don’t think you sent them on to me?” (line 20) and

“I really don’t remember I really don’t remember ever looking at any of your literature (line 16)

“I really don’t remember I really don’t remember reading it or you giving it to me or thinking that it was cliché” (line 33)

Throughout the extract, Dorothy uses “I don’t think” rather than “I didn’t” (lines 18, 20). By this she is clearly disagreeing with Naomi and defending herself against the accusation, but she is not threatening Naomi’s face. When others join in and make jokes about what Dorothy has or has not done, for example when Cecilia says “you just destroyed the career of a [great writer]” (line 22) and Matthias accuses Dorothy of not having read Naomi’s work but then criticizing it: “[but that’s even worse] she is not even reading it [and then bashing it]” (line 29). Dorothy continues to assert that she does not remember reading it “I really don’t remember I really don’t remember reading it or you giving it to me or..thinking that is was cliché” (line 33).

By suggesting that Dorothy has negatively assessed her taste and writing capability, and therefore by extension her face, Naomi, on the other hand, could clearly be seen to be threatening Dorothy’s face. This potential face-threat, whilst constituting the type of utterance which would have been focused on in conventional politeness analysis, is not something which any of the interactants focus on. In the interaction, Naomi’s statements about Dorothy having different tastes are rendered as facts through the use of absolutes like “always” and “never”, which represent Dorothy’s reactions to Naomi’s preferences as static (line 11). This positions Dorothy in opposition to Naomi. Naomi further evaluates Dorothy’s behaviour through representing her actions as “even worse” (line 29), through the use of direct speech where she voices Dorothy’s supposed words “going like ‘oh this is so bad’” (line 31), and other participants then join in with this voicing of Dorothy’s supposed evaluations, for example M joins in with “oh this is so cliché so boring” (line 32). This voicing allows Naomi to criticize Dorothy but also to distance herself from this criticism.

#### 4.4.3 Ideologies of politeness and impoliteness

By focussing on how participants evaluated the interaction in terms of politeness in combination with the linguistic information provided in the transcript

of the text and our interpretation of their judgements, we are able to theorize about politeness and impoliteness on a second-order level.

Although it is clear from the comments of the participants that they differ in the way that they interpret what happened and the degree to which they or others were polite or appropriate within the interaction, their notions of what constitutes politeness or impoliteness is constituted in a negotiation with their general view of what constitutes the politeness resources available to them in general. The resources are not fixed but they consist of the linguistics elements which have been generally enregistered as used in polite interactions (Agha 2006).

What is clearly driving this interaction is a sense that what is appropriate within this community of practice is “having fun” which involves gentle mocking, laughter and banter. The fine line between banter and offence is something which all the participants seem keen to maintain. Some of them insist on categorizing certain elements as banter; elements which might be analyzed within conventional approaches to the analysis of politeness as impolite. Other participants are much more careful about how they express themselves for fear of being seen as confrontational, which would challenge or destabilize the sense of this conversation being fun.

The flexibility of such resources is especially visible in Matthias’ comments on the vocabulary used in the conversation. He states people might be offended by it, which suggests these words may typically be associated with impolite interactions, but simultaneously asserts that the interaction occurred in a “closed community” or “closed group of friends”, implying that norms of what is polite and the resources which people draw on in polite interactions might be different. Within this closed group of friends however, different norms can also be seen to be in use. Whereas Dorothy resorts to mitigation to avoid confrontation, therefore presenting herself as being polite and considerate of Naomi’s face-needs, Naomi sees her own use of direct statements as truthful and therefore also polite. Although both Naomi and Dorothy draw on ideologies of what constitutes politeness, the resources they draw on (being non-confrontational, being sincere) are different.

## 5 Conclusions

In this paper, we have attempted to establish the discursive approach as a viable mode of analysis of politeness. We have described the development of the discursive approach and its main theoretical focus. We have also consid-



ered the criticisms that there have been of this approach. We have provided an illustrative analysis so that it can be seen what a discursive approach to the analysis of politeness might consist of. We have provided our analysis in step-by-step fashion, discussing the selecting of an extract of conversation from recorded data, based on its perceived degree of “difficulty” for the interactants. This problematic nature of the extract, we feel, leads to politeness work being undertaken by at least some of the interactants and our aim has been to map out the way that interactants have gone about dealing with this difficult interactional moment. We described the interviewing of participants and the eliciting of evaluations of the extract, discussing the potential of politeness and ideologies of politeness and impoliteness.

Thus we have demonstrated in this article that the discursive approach is a viable model for analysis and we have shown that whilst this approach does not rely on a simple analysis of linguistic features in the way that Brown and Levinson’s analysis does, nevertheless, it is possible to ground our analysis of the interactants’ evaluations in a focus on linguistic elements, for example focusing on the choice of mitigation and hedging. The discursive approach has functioned as a critique of Brown and Levinson’s model of politeness, but it also constitutes a set of principles which can be followed when analyzing interaction. We feel that it has great potential for analyzing both intra- and intercultural communication, because it can analyze the contextual rationality that interactants draw on when they are trying to make sense of what others have said, and it can highlight the process that interactants go through when they judge others to be polite or impolite.

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