The discursive challenge to politeness research: An interactional alternative

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Abstract

The discursive approach to politeness represents one of the most coherent challenges to the dominance of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to date, and indeed to the continuing viability of the field of politeness research itself. However, while the discursive approach advocates the displacement of politeness as the focus of research, upon closer examination of the epistemological and ontological assumptions underlying this approach, a number of inconsistencies arise. In particular, the issue of how researchers can identify instances of (im)politeness without imposing the analysts' understandings comes to the fore. In this paper it is suggested that a theory of (im)politeness needs 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. This entails the analyst looking 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). In this way, the development of a theory of (im)politeness within a broader theory of facework or interpersonal communication can remain a focal point for the field of politeness research.

Keywords: Face, politeness theory, postmodernism, discursive approach, interactional

1. Introduction

The dominance of Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) seminal work on politeness has been repeatedly challenged over the past twenty years.

While many acknowledge the important contribution made by Brown and Levinson to the field of politeness research, it has also attracted voracious criticism. Initially, critiques of Brown and Levinson's theory were somewhat reactive in nature, focusing on specific points of dispute, such as their conceptualization of face (e. g., Matsumoto 1988), or their over-reliance on analysis at the utterance-level (e. g., Kasper 1990). In recent years, however, a coherent challenge to the status of Brown and Levinson's as the dominant theory in politeness research has emerged from researchers coming from a broadly postmodern paradigm, who offer an alternative epistemological and ontological framework in which to conduct politeness research (Eelen 2001; Mills 2003; Watts 2003, 2005; Locher 2004, 2006; Locher and Watts 2005). While there are indeed subtle yet important differences between the approaches suggested by these scholars, they are united in their determination to see the following move in politeness research:

> a shift in emphasis away from the attempt to construct a model of politeness which can be used to predict when polite behaviour can be expected or to explain post-factum why it has been produced and towards the need to pay closer attention to how participants in social interaction perceive politeness.   (Watts 2005: xix)

However, in their attempts to force a shift in the way researchers approach the study of politeness, the utility of the notion of politeness itself has come under scrutiny − a consequence perhaps of the underlying postmodern agenda to deconstruct and thereby challenge long-held assumptions rooted in positivist or essentialist ways of viewing the world. Pizziconi (2006) thus proposes one of the key debates in politeness research at present is whether "any useful notion of politeness" can survive "when the construct is removed is removed from a historically determined, socioculturally specific, and interactionally negotiated conceptualization of the term" (p. 680). Politeness itself as a focal point of research has thus come under threat in the postmodernist vision of politeness research.

   The move to displace the very notion of politeness in politeness research is most apparent in the recently emerging 'discursive approach to politeness' (Watts 2003, 2005; Locher 2004, 2006; Locher and Watts 2005), which has its roots in work on politeness from a decade earlier (Watts 1989, 1992; Watts et al. 1992). This shift is perhaps a natural consequence of an approach which regards politeness as "a slippery, ultimately indefinable quality of interaction" (Watts 2005: xiii), but it leads to a fairly clear hint of the ultimate consequence of adopting a discursive approach to politeness, namely "giving up the idea of a

Theory of Politeness altogether" (Watts 2005: xlii), or at least placing much less importance on the notion of politeness itself as a focus of research (Locher 2006: 251). In other words, the postmodern approach to politeness as represented in the discursive approach abandons the pursuit of not only an a priori predictive theory of politeness or a post-facto descriptive theory of politeness (Watts 2003: 142, 2005: xix), but also any attempts to develop a universal, cross-culturally valid theory of politeness altogether (Locher and Watts 2005: 16). The essence of the discursive challenge, then, is that a theory of politeness is neither necessary nor desirable, and that the focus of politeness researchers should be on broader issues of interpersonal interaction − or what Locher and Watts (2005) term "relational work"[1]. But if one follows this train of thought the question arises as to what is left for politeness researchers to do? What distinguishes politeness research from the broader concerns of the fields of interpersonal (and intercultural) communication? Indeed, do we need to continue to regard "politeness research" as a field of study if it can be subsumed within these broader research traditions?

While there are no easy answers to these challenges to politeness theory raised by the discursive approach, it is not yet apparent that these proposals do in fact *prima facie* constitute an argument for completely displacing the study of politeness. In this paper, it is first argued that while the discursive approach has consolidated a number of emerging trends in politeness research, a closer examination of the assumptions underlying it reveal a number of epistemological and ontological issues that undermine its viability as an alternative to Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness. It is then suggested that we revisit the politeness1-politeness2 distinction, as formulated by Eelen (2001: 32−48), in an attempt to address the broader question of whether politeness remains a useful notion, as well as to gain further insight into the epistemological and ontological challenges currently facing politeness researchers, in particular, the place of the analyst vis-à-vis the participant.

2. Postmodernism and the discursive approach to politeness

The term postmodernism is not easily defined, but it serves as an umbrella term for a diverse range of perspectives grounded in a broadly constructionist position on the nature of reality. Constructionists assume the objectivist notion that "meaning, and therefore meaningful reality, exists as such apart from the operation of any consciousness" (Crotty 1998: 8) is problematic, especially in accounting for social interaction. However, postmodernism goes beyond this constructionist tenet in its particular interest in the "progressive deconstruction and dissolution of distinctions" (Crotty 1998: 192). The postmodern agenda in politeness

research is perhaps most comprehensively represented to date in the discursive approach to politeness (Watts 2003, 2005; Locher 2004, 2006; Locher and Watts 2005)[2]. Yet while the discursive approach has contributed much to the pursuit of a more coherent framework that moves beyond the various problematic assumptions underlying Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness, it arguably also leads ultimately to the collapse of the crucial analyst-participant distinction in politeness research. In the spirit of critical examination of theory engendered by the postmodern programme, then, in this section the underlying assumptions of the discursive approach to politeness are considered in relation to the somewhat thorny epistemological and ontological issues to which they give rise as a consequence of this move.

2.1. Epistemological issues

A cornerstone of the discursive approach to politeness has been the distinction between a first-order lay conceptualization of politeness, "the various ways in which polite behaviour is perceived and talked about by members of sociocultural groups" (Watts et al. 1992: 3), and a second-order theoretical conceptualization of politeness, "a term within a theory of social behaviour and language usage" (Watts et al. 1992: 3). After first making this distinction it is then argued that politeness research should focus on "how participants in social interaction perceive politeness" (Watts 2005: xix), and "how people use the terms that are available to them in their own languages and … the discursive struggle over those terms" (Watts 2005: xxii). Second-order notions of politeness are dismissed as lacking in utility, as Watts (2003), for example, argues that "scientific notions of politeness (which should be non-normative) cannot be part of a study of social interaction (normative by definition)" (p. 11). In other words, the focus of politeness research should be on first-order politeness (lay perceptions or conceptualizations of politeness), and thus a theory of politeness is presumably neither necessary nor feasible.

The first question facing the first-order and second-order distinction as formulated in the discursive approach is whether it has really succeeded in avoiding the constant vacillation "between the way in which politeness is understood as a commonsense term that we all use and think we understand in everyday social interaction and a more technical notion that can only have a value within an overall theory of social interaction" (Watts et al. 1992: 4), which they claim characterizes much politeness research. In other words, is the conceptualization of politeness in the discursive approach really a first-order notion? Careful examination of the ways in which politeness is defined in the discursive approach

finds the current definition somewhat wanting in relation to their own criteria.

In the discursive approach, politeness is defined as "linguistic behaviour that carries a value in an emergent network in excess of what is required by the politic behaviour of the overall interaction (Watts 2003: 162), "behaviour which is perceived to be beyond what is expectable" (Watts 2003: 19), or behaviour that "is perceived to be salient or marked behaviour" (Locher and Watts 2005: 17). Politic behaviour, which is crucial to understanding politeness in the discursive approach, is defined as "linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the ongoing interaction" (Watts 2003: 19). A number of researchers, however, have argued that this conceptualization of politeness is not in fact a first-order notion, but rather is a theoretical notion masquerading as a lay conceptualization (Terkourafi 2005a: 243; Xie et al. 2005: 449; Glick 2006: 732; Vilkki 2006: 329).

Investigations of how English speakers talk about politeness (which is part of a first-order notion of politeness according to Watts) reveal inconsistencies between the conceptualization of politeness in the discursive approach and "the various ways in which polite behaviour is perceived and *talked about* by members of sociocultural groups" (Watts et al. 1992: 3, emphasis added). Sifianou (1992: 88), for instance, found that British English speakers conceptualize *politeness* as follows:

> consideration of other people's feelings by conforming to social norms and expectations. These norms include the use of standard forms such as *please* and *sorry* in appropriate situations, requests rather than demands for people to do things for you and the display of 'good manners'.

Furthermore, in interviews with Australian English speakers, Obana and Tomoda (1994: 41−42) found *politeness* was associated with (a) being friendly, approachable, kind and attentive, (b) respect and consideration, (c) appropriate use of language, and (d) being modest, indirect and humble. In a questionnaire focusing on politeness in email communication, Murphy and Levy (2006: 4) found Australian English speakers believe *politeness* is expressed in the following ways:

> showing formality, use of correct titles, greater use of please and thank you, use of formal greetings and closings, offering assistance for further queries, offering friendly greetings generally, use of careful wording and use of respectful endings.

In the case of American English speakers, Ide et al. (1992: 290) found, on the other hand, that *polite* correlated with 'respectful', 'considerate',

'pleasant', 'friendly' and 'appropriate', while *impolite* was correlated with 'conceited', 'offensive' and 'rude'. In other words, across different varieties of English, speakers' lay notions of *politeness* encompass various notions, including consideration, friendliness and pleasantness, respect, appropriateness, and modesty. However, unless one regards being 'friendly' or 'pleasant', for example, as behaviour that "is perceived to be salient or marked behaviour" (Locher and Watts 2005: 17), it is difficult indeed to square how politeness is defined in the discursive approach with a definition of first-order politeness that includes how polite behaviour is talked about by speakers of different varieties of English (cf. Watts et al. 1992: 3). It is even more problematic in light of Watts' (2005: xxii) claim that constructing a model of linguistic politeness "can only be done by looking closely and more intensively at how people use the terms that are available to them in their own languages and by recognizing the discursive struggle over those terms", since defining politeness as perceptions of behaviour which are 'marked' or 'beyond what is expectable' leaves little room for doing just that.

A second issue is the validity and utility of the four categories of relational work outlined in the discursive approach (Locher 2004: 90, 2006: 256; Locher and Watts 2005: 12; Watts 2005: xliii), namely 'impolite' (negatively marked, inappropriate/non-politic), 'non-polite' (unmarked, appropriate/politic), 'polite' (positively marked, appropriate/politic) and 'over-polite' (negatively marked, inappropriate/non-politic). Since there can be considerable variability in the way in which individuals evaluate behaviour as 'polite', 'impolite' and so on, it is argued that "there can be no objectively definable boundaries between these categories" (Locher and Watts 2005: 12). While the discursively negotiated nature of politeness is quite apparent from recent work, it is less obvious that 'relational work' (or alternatively 'facework', 'rapport management' and so on) is well served by the categories postulated in the discursive approach. One epistemological issue arising from this categorization is that it is not clarified in what sense these different manifestations of relational work are positively or negatively marked. In what ways is this positive marking, for example, related to face, identity, distancing/alignment, showing sincerity, or (un)intentional behaviour? This issue has only been briefly touched upon thus far (e. g., Watts 2003: 199; Locher 2004: 91, 2006: 158), yet it lies at core of the analytical validity and utility of this approach. It is also not clear whether this categorization is intended as a (first-order) representation of a hearer's evaluations of speaker's behaviour or as a (second-order) analytical tool. Yet whether one takes this four-way categorization to be based on the perceptions of the hearer or alternatively the analyst's interpretation, it remains problematic as it is currently formulated. For example, while

'over-politeness' is defined as 'negatively marked', experience from inter-cultural situations indicates that being overly polite is not necessarily always regarded as problematic. Is it really the case that over-politeness is always received negatively by participants? Certainly in intercultural communication, a certain amount of leeway is often given in these kinds of situations, and thus labelling over-politeness as inevitably being nega-tively marked does not do real justice to the complexities of the ways in which behaviours are perceived across cultures.

A third epistemological issue is the theoretical foundation on which the discursive approach builds. At the heart of the model of communica-tion utilized in the discursive approach is the assumption that what un-derlies politeness are the speakers' intentions, and hearers recognizing those intentions (more or less successfully) (Locher 2004: 91, 2006: 252). While Watts (2003) aligns himself less directly to such a view, his re-course to relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995), which also in-volves the recognition of speakers' intention(s) by hearers, means the discursive approach is ultimately embedded within an encoding/decoding or transmission model of communication. Yet it has been convincingly argued by Arundale (1999, 2004, 2006a) that an intention-based view of communication is inconsistent with a social constructionist or interac-tional perspective on communication as a joint and collaborative activi-ty. An encoding/decoding model, such as relevance theory, cannot suc-cessfully account for the property of emergence or interactional achieve-ment that characterizes communication in general (Arundale 1999: 122−124, 2006a: 195), and politeness in particular (Haugh 2007a: 95). This gives rise to a very real theoretical inconsistency in that, on the one hand the discursive approach argues for an approach to politeness situated within a constructionist epistemology, yet on the other hand utilizes an encoding/decoding model of communication embedded within a positiv-ist and thus objectivist epistemology (cf. Cummings 1998).

One final epistemological issue is the crucial role Goffman's (1967) notion of face plays in the discursive approach to (im)politeness. The move away from Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) notions of positive and negative face to Goffman's construct of face is indeed an important move as argued by Bargiela-Chiappini (2003). However, as both Arun-dale (2006a: 197−198) and Bargiela-Chiappini (2003: 1463) go on to point out, Goffman's notion of face was intended for examining interac-tions in the North American context, and thus is rooted in a social actor concerned with his or her *own* self-image and self-preservation. Such a conceptualization, however, is highly problematic when imported with-out qualification as an analytical tool in examining relational work in other sociocultural contexts. For example, in the case of users of Modern Standard Japanese, the 'place' of one's in-group as well as oneself within

a social network, for example, is foregrounded in assessments of polite-
ness and face (Haugh 2005a, 2005b, 2007b). To rely on Goffman's theo-
retical notion of face is thus problematic in that it imposes (analytical)
understandings of interactions which are not necessarily consonant with
participant understandings. Indeed, it is curious why an approach which
recognizes a distinction between lay conceptualizations of politeness
(first-order politeness) and theoretical notions (second-order politeness)
does not similarly apply such a distinction to the notion of face, when
first-order notions such as *mianzi/lian* in Chinese (Hu 1944; Mao 1994;
Hinze 2005), *kao* in Japanese (Yabuuchi 2004; Tanaka and Kekidze 2005;
Haugh 2005b, 2007b), *yüz* in Turkish (Ruhi and Işık-Güler 2007) abound.
This is not to suggest that reified notions of 'face' in different cultures
need be directly incorporated into a theory of (im)politeness or broader
theories of interpersonal interaction. But an approach centred on how
face and (im)politeness is discursively negotiated through interaction
surely cannot ignore the participant's understandings or evaluations of
face in this emic or folk sense, if its avowed aim is to focus on the
perceptions of participants in social interaction.

2.2. *Ontological issues*

The postmodern turn in politeness research advocates a greater focus on
the evaluations made by participants through interaction. Locher and
Watts (2005: 16) claim, for example, that "we consider it important to
take native speaker assessments of politeness seriously and to make them
the basis of a discursive, data-driven, bottom-up approach to polite-
ness". Such an approach is indeed promising, but it requires careful
thought about how we, as analysts, might access such assessments or
perceptions. Xie et al. (2005: 449) argue that the lack of a clear method-
ology is a major weakness in the discursive approach, with a lack of
clarity as to what kind of "interpretive approach" is being employed (cf.
Locher and Watts 2005: 17). In addition, quantitative analyses of corpus
or elicited data seem to hold no place in the discursive approach (Usami
2002; Holmes and Schnurr 2005: 144; Terkourafi 2005a), nor do insights
from experimental approaches (Holtgraves 2005a: 89). The discursive
approach thus places a considerable burden on the validity of the ana-
lyst's interpreting of the interaction. In this section it is argued that the
discursive turn in politeness research raises serious ontological issues, in
particular in relation to the participant-analyst distinction.

One of the main challenges of the postmodern approach to previous
politeness research has been to the privileged place apportioned to the
analyst in Brown and Levinson's and others' politeness theories. In the
postmodern approach, it is argued that the analyst's role is not to impose

a theoretical view of politeness, but rather to explicate the participant's understandings or perceptions of politeness (Eelen 2001: 253; Mills 2003: 2; Watts 2003: 143, 2005: xxii; Locher 2006: 252). The discursive approach to politeness represents a particularly strong version of postmodernism, as previously noted, in arguing that "scientific notions of politeness (which should be non-normative) cannot be part of a study of social interaction (normative by definition)" (Watts 2003: 11). Thus, such a move relegates, in effect, the analyst to the position of only *representing* the participant's understandings or perceptions, since an analyst, by definition, must hold to some kind of theoretical understanding of politeness, which is *non sequitur* within the discursive framework[4]. However, while a focus on the participant is indeed welcome it does raise the issue of the status of the analyst vis-à-vis the participants. A number of researchers, for example, have questioned whether the postmodern emphasis on the understandings and perceptions of participants leaves the analyst with precious little to do (Holmes 2005: 115; Mullany 2005: 294). But even more problematic is the question of who is really establishing that evaluations of (im)politeness have been made: the analyst or the participant? While much of the data utilized in the discursive approach thus far has involved the analyst also being a participant in the interaction (Watts 2003; Locher 2004; Locher and Watts 2005), thereby perhaps giving the analyst more insight into the interaction, the study of (im)politeness surely cannot be restricted to instances where the analyst is also a participant, as this would inevitably result in only particular demographics being represented in politeness research (Mullany 2005: 294). However, if one admits to analyzing data in which the analyst is not necessarily a participant, yet aims to elicit assessments or perceptions of the participants in relation to (im)politeness, it is important to establish the validity of such an analysis if one is to avoid conflating the analysts' and participants' perspectives.

The move in the discursive approach to focus on only identifying *potential* instances of (im)politeness (Watts 2003: 143; Locher 2006: 263; Locher and Watts 2005: 17) appears to be made in recognition of the inherent variability in, and thus potential indeterminacy of, evaluations of (im)politeness, as well as to avoid imposing the analysts' understanding on participants. Yet while a certain amount of caution in interpreting interactional data is always necessary, an analysis which only points out linguistic behaviour that *may* be evaluated as 'polite', 'impolite' (Locher and Watts 2005: 17; Locher 2006: 263) and so on is questionable, if not disingenuous. If the analyst is not able to identify with some degree of certainty evaluations of (im)politeness that arise through a close analysis of the interaction, what indeed has been accomplished? Of course, the very tentative nature of the analysis in the discursive approach could be

a reflection of the fact that other analysts, or indeed lay observers of this interaction might not agree with such an assessment. It is not clear whether this tentative analysis is a reflection of a lack of certainty about the evaluations made by the participants themselves in the particular interaction being analyzed, or perhaps a reflection of the inevitable variability in perceptions one would find in attempting to generalize across speakers in similar situations. Yet while a certain degree of caution about the latter is quite warranted, the discursive approach is ostensibly focused on evaluations made by participants in interaction, which are presumably made by the participants themselves with a fair degree of certainty. The question of why the analyst in the discursive approach is so tentative in his or her analysis thus lies at the core of whether such an approach can have substantive theoretical or analytical import.

While the postmodern approach as represented by the discursive approach has much to offer in advancing our understanding of (im)politeness, there are a number of key epistemological and ontological issues that require further clarification, if not radical rethinking, in order for it to constitute a viable alternative to Brown and Levinson's admittedly problematic theory of politeness. The tension between first-order and second-order notions of politeness remains to a large degree unresolved in this approach, and the four-way categorization of relational work in the discursive approach requires further clarification if it is to be readily employed by other analysts. Furthermore, the theoretical base from which the discursive approach draws is inconsistent with epistemological assumptions about (im)politeness which it makes, while its lack of clarity as to the status of the analyst vis-à-vis the participant leaves a number of ontological problems unresolved.

In the following section, it is suggested that by revisiting the first-order and second-politeness distinction as formulated in the discursive approach we can more critically examine the displacement of (im)politeness in the discursive approach. In particular, by orienting towards the interactional achievement of politeness1, an approach emerges which is more consistent with the postmodern conceptualization of (im)politeness as being something that is discursively negotiated. In this way, the epistemological inconsistencies between the encoding-decoding model of communication and individual-oriented notion face on which the discursive approach currently rests and the understanding of (im)politeness it posits can be avoided.

3. Revisiting the notions of first-order and second-order (im)politeness

The discursive approach advocates a shift in focus away from theorizing about (im)politeness to other terms such as "politic behaviour" or "rela-

tional work". However, this move has raised a number of issues that remain far from resolved as seen in the previous section. One move in particular which has been pointed out as being problematic is the distinction between the participant's and analyst's understanding of politeness (first-order and second-order notions of politeness respectively). In other words, in the discursive approach, a tension arises between the avowed aim of focusing on "how the participants in social interaction perceive politeness" (Watts 2005: xxii), and the imposition of a decidedly theoretical conceptualization of politeness as behaviour which is "perceived to be salient or marked behaviour" (Locher and Watts 2005: 17). The upshot of this approach as discussed, then, has been the displacement of (im)politeness as the focal point of study in politeness research. In this section, however, it is suggested that politeness research may be better served by revisiting the first-order and second-order politeness distinction as outlined by Eelen (2001) in order to build a more solid foundation for theorizing about (im)politeness.

In a penetrating critique of the field of politeness research, Eelen (2001: 31) makes the following point in relation to Watts et al.'s (1992: 4) original distinction between first-order and second-order concepts of politeness:

> if the distinction is not properly made and politeness1 and politeness2 are simply equated, the epistemological status of the theoretical analysis becomes blurred. The concepts it uses then pertain simultaneously to the commonsense world of everyday interaction and to the world of scientific theorizing, and the distinction between these two activities is lost, which causes the analysis to (possibly randomly) oscillate between both epistemological perspectives.

This oscillation can occur in both directions: politeness1 concepts can be reified and elevated to the status of scientific concepts, and politeness2 concepts can be unquestioningly imposed onto the world of everyday reality (Eelen 2001: 31). He thus argues that "the relationship between both notions should be carefully monitored *throughout the entire analytical process*" (Eelen 2001: 31, original italics). It is vital, therefore, to focus on how we can more clearly distinguish between first-order and second-order notions in politeness research.

While Watts et al. (1992: 3) defined first-order politeness as "the various ways in which polite behaviour is perceived and talked about by members of sociocultural groups", Eelen (2001: 77) expands upon this in the following more detailed conceptualization of first-order politeness (or politeness1):

> how a native informant conceptualizes his or her own behaviour, as well as … what actually goes on in the native informant's head while performing the behaviour in question. In terms of politeness, this … refers to, on the one hand, the informants' conscious statements about his or her notion of politeness … and on the other to his or her spontaneous evaluation of (im)politeness (of his or her own or someone else's behaviour), made in the course of actual interaction.

He then goes on to distinguish between three kinds of politeness1: expressive, classificatory and metapragmatic. Expressive politeness1 refers to "politeness encoded in speech, to instances where the speaker aims at 'polite' behaviour", while classificatory politeness1 refers to "politeness used as a categorizational tool: it covers hearers' judgements (in actual interaction) of other people's interactional behaviour as 'polite' or 'impolite'" (Eelen 2001: 35). Metapragmatic politeness1, on the other hand, refers to "instances of talk about politeness as a concept, about what people perceive politeness to be all about" (Eelen 2001: 35).

However, while making a distinction between expressive politeness1 and classificatory politeness1 is useful if one wants to focus on disputes between participants about particular (im)politeness evaluations in an interaction, it is less useful in accounting for instances where (im)politeness emerges through interaction. In other words, while (im)politeness may be *projected* by speakers or *interpreted* by hearers, if our aim is better understand how perceptions of (im)politeness arise through interaction, it is important to also focus on how (im)politeness is *interactionally achieved* as a joint accomplishment of both the speaker and the hearer. This warrants, therefore, an additional category of politeness1, namely interactionally achieved politeness1 where "each participant's cognitive processes in interpreting and designing are responsive to prior, current, or potential contributions the other participants make to the stream of interaction" (Arundale 2005: 59). (Im)politeness is thus conceptualized as being conjointly co-constituted in a collaborative, non-summative manner through interaction by participants. In this way, we can move our understanding of politeness1 beyond the problematic encoding-decoding model of communication implicitly relied upon in the discursive approach to politeness.

It is also worth noting that upon closer examination one finds that expressive politeness1 and classificatory politeness1 only arise as *post facto* interactional achievements when dispute arises over the evaluation of particular behaviours as 'polite', 'impolite', 'over-polite', and so on. For example, when an interactant claims he did not intend to be impolite (expressive politeness1) in response to an accusation of being rude (clas-

sificatory politeness1). Talk about (im)politeness in conversations − an instance of metapragmatic politeness1 − also arises as an interactional achievement[3]. One of the main focuses of politeness research should therefore be on the interactional achievement of (im)politeness1. In other words, politeness research can benefit from focusing on the interactional achievement of both converging and diverging evaluations of (im)politeness1, as well as on how (im)politeness1 norms, or more broadly ideologies, are shared or constructed through social life.

The politeness1-politeness2 distinction also draws critical attention to attempts to theorize about (im)politeness. Eelen (2001: 43), building upon Watts et al.'s (1992: 3) notion of second-order politeness as "a term within a theory of social behaviour and language usage," defines second-order politeness (or politeness2) as follows:

> the scientific conceptualization of the social phenomenon of politeness in the form of a theory of politeness1. By means of such a theory we should be able to understand how politeness1 works, what its functionality is, what it 'does' for people and for society in general.

In other words, Eelen (2001: 44, original italics) argues that "concepts developed in a theory of politeness should be able to *explain* the phenomena observed as politeness1". This stance differs crucially from that in the discursive approach where explaining politeness1 from a theoretical point of view is explicitly rejected as a legitimate aim of politeness research (Watts 2003: 142, 2005: xix). Eelen (2001: 48) then goes on to argue that a politeness2 theory should be non-evaluative, non-normative, and focus not only on politeness, but also impoliteness, over-politeness and shades in-between. While the last point is certainly indisputable in the development of an alternative theory of (im)politeness, the first two claims deserve closer scrutiny.

Eelen (2001: 45−46) bases his argument for a non-evaluative theory of (im)politeness on the postmodern axiom that reality always involves a "struggle to define reality" (Eelen 2001: 45, citing Bourdieu 1991: 224), and also on the fact that there was disagreement about whether particular utterances could be evaluated as 'polite' amongst the speakers surveyed in Ide et al.'s (1992) study of politeness in American English and Japanese. The first argument for non-evaluativity is ultimately unfalsifiable, however, since demonstrating empirically that (im)politeness always involves a struggle to define (im)politeness is difficult to accomplish in a worldview where there are no empirical realities.

The second argument, that speakers do not agree in their assessments of the relative (im)politeness of particular instances, however, is genu-

inely problematic for the development of a theory of (im)politeness. Any attempt to generalize across speakers must accommodate variability in perceptions of (im)politeness. In theorizing such variability though, it is worth remembering the distinction between participants in (both speakers and hearers), and observers of, interaction, and how this can impact on such perceptions. Holtgraves (2005b), for example, has found that subjects differ in their interpretation of (im)politeness implicatures depending on whether they take the speaker's or hearer's perspective, while Clark (1996, 1997) has found interpretations of what has been communicated differ between participants and observers. To ask speakers to evaluate an interaction as (im)polite *as an observer* does not, therefore, necessarily give us a sound basis for constructing generalizations and thereby theorize about (im)politeness. While there is apparent variability in observer evaluations of (im)politeness, this variability is potentially misleading for those constructing an alternative theory of (im)politeness. What is of greater interest is variability in perceptions of (im)politeness formed by the participants themselves across different contexts. Crucial to generalizing across evaluations of (im)politeness in the face of evident variability, then, is a greater understanding of the norms drawn upon or exploited in such evaluations.

   The notion that a theory of politeness2 should also be non-normative is based on an argument similar to that forwarded for the alleged non-evaluative character of politeness2 (Eelen 2001: 46−47). However, while the analyst should avoid reifying his or her own personal assessments of (im)politeness as norms, a theory of politeness necessarily involves an understanding of both what people think *should* happen (moral norms) and what people think *is likely to* happen (empirical norms) (Eelen 2001: 140; Haugh 2003: 400). One possible window into 'moral normativity' is a careful analysis of 'talk' about politeness (metapragmatic politeness1), including etiquette guides, media discourse on (im)politeness, and conversations explicitly focusing on what is considered (im)polite behaviour. To better understand empirical normativity, on the other hand, requires corpus-based work where expectations about (im)politeness are grounded in an analysis of participant uptake (Terkourafi 2001, 2005a, 2005b; cf. Usami 2002, 2006). Thus, while a theory of politeness2 should be non-evaluative and non-normative in relation to the analyst's own personal interpretings, it will always be evaluative and normative in the sense that it seeks to better understand the process by which evaluations of (im)politeness are made, and how common understandings (although not necessarily practices) of norms are shared or constructed across social networks, including so-called 'cultures'.

   While the discursive approach to politeness questions the necessity for a theory of (im)politeness, and indeed the very utility of the notion of

(im)politeness, in this section it has been argued that the postmodern perspective does not necessarily have to lead to the displacement of (im)politeness in politeness research. Instead, it has been suggested that a theory of (im)politeness should focus on the interactional achievement of participant evaluations of 'politeness', 'impoliteness', 'over-politeness' and so on (interactionally achieved politeness1). The interactional achievement of (im)politeness may include, at times, dispute over such evaluations that arise from *post-facto* attributions of projectings of (im)politeness by speakers (expressive politeness1) or interpretings of (im)politeness by hearers (classificatory politeness1). A theory of (im)politeness may also benefit from a better understanding of how people 'talk' about (im)politeness (metapragmatic politeness1), both in conversation and in written discourse. A theory of (im)politeness thus ultimately deals with the evaluative and normative nature of (im)politeness, seeking to understand how such evaluations of (im)politeness are made in interaction, as well as studying the construction of the moral and empirical norms which underpin those evaluations through social life. It is critical, however, that such evaluations and norms should be based on participants' understandings not those imposed by the analyst. In the following section, the question of how the analyst can avoid imposing his or her own understandings is thus considered in more detail.

4. Reaffirming the place of the analyst in politeness research

While the discursive approach advocates only identifying potential instances of (im)politeness to reflect variability in perceptions of (im)politeness across speakers, it has been argued in the previous sections that the manner in which (im)politeness is defined not only leads to a premature displacement of it as a focal point of politeness research, but also arguably conflates the analysts' and participants' perspectives. In this section, it is suggested that the Conjoint Co-Constituting Model of Communication (Arundale 1999, 2004, 2006a) provides a more productive framework for politeness research, as it is consistent with a conceptualization of (im)politeness as being interactionally achieved in a collaborative, non-summative manner through interaction by participants, whilst carefully avoiding the ontological trap of conflating the analysts' and participants' perspectives. Although Arundale does not explicitly detail how (im)politeness might be treated within the Conjoint Co-Constituting Model of Communication or Face Constituting Theory, it is argued here that it nevertheless provides a strong epistemological and ontological base for the analysis of (im)politeness phenomena, as well as a strong theoretical foundation on which to build an alternative theory of (im)politeness within a broader theory of facework.

The approach advocated in Conjoint Co-Constituting Model of Communication focuses on the perceptions and understandings of participants, yet retains a well-defined role for the analyst. Instead of trying to side-step the problem of how the analyst can legitimately identify instances of (im)politeness1 in interaction by hedging one's analysis, it focuses on demonstrating that the analyst is not imposing his or her own understanding without carefully considering whether this understanding is relevant to those participants. It proceeds from the assumption that it is incumbent on the analyst to demonstrate that his or her analysis is not only oriented to the uptake by participants evident in interaction (procedural relevance), but that it also has validity within the theoretical framework in which the analyst proceeds (interpretive relevance) (Arundale 2006b; cf. MacMartin et al. 2001: 229; Terkourafi 2005a: 244−245). In the first instance, then, the analyst needs to focus on an analysis of "*participants' analyses of one another's verbal conduct* − on the interpretations, understandings, and analyses that participants themselves make, as displayed in the details of what they say" (Drew 1995: 70, original italics), and thus establish that (1) the interaction does indeed involve the participants making such evaluations, and (2) these evaluations are procedurally relevant to the flow of discourse.

The next step involves establishing the relevance to the interaction of the analysts' interpreting of these evaluations as involving (im)politeness1. Whether the participants themselves would label these evaluations as "(im)politeness" or something else is clearly of some interest to the analyst, but does not *in itself* determine whether (im)politeness has been interactionally achieved since participants often do not have the metalinguistic skills to articulate such evaluations (O'Keefe 1989). Moreover, consulting participants creates "another text, another conversation, only this time the interaction is with the analyst" (Mills 2003: 45), which makes such evaluations a useful resource for the analyst at times (Pomerantz 2005), but does by no means give us unequivocal insight, since these *post facto* evaluations do not necessarily reliably reflect evaluations made during the actual interaction itself. To label the evaluations evident through close analysis of the interaction as instances of (im)politeness1 thus requires a further step, namely interpreting those evaluations in terms of a particular analytical framework. This means the analyst needs to next demonstrate that the interpretation of these evaluations within his or her framework as (im)politeness is consonant or analogous with the participants' interactional achievement of those evaluations (Arundale 2006b). It does not mean, however, that the analysis need be synonymous with what the participants might say about it in terms of *(im)politeness*, since it is in the development of a coherent framework in which to undertake the analysis that the theoretical value of such an analysis

lies. To rely only on what participants might say about the interaction in assessing the (im)politeness implications of such evaluations only serves to reify the lay perspective, elevating it to the status of a theory of (im)politeness. In establishing interpretative relevance, then, one is not assuming that ordinary speakers will share exactly the same understanding of the interaction as the analyst, and thereby impose the analyst's perspective on the participant. Instead, it involves demonstrating that the analyst's interpretation is consonant or analogous with the participant's understandings, and that this interpretation has value within a theory of (im)politeness or wider theory of facework.

Conversation analytic methodology is well-placed to establish the former, procedural type of relevance. It specifically focuses on how "the unfolding of interaction depends on the interpretation of a current speaker's utterance by the next or a subsequent speaker", resting upon the assumption that "to show that they are engaged in a joint activity, they need to display that interpretation in some way" (Stubbe et al. 2003: 354). Piirainen-Marsh (2005: 215) argues, moreover, that "conversation analysis offers sophisticated tools for tracing participants' evaluations and identifying breaches of norms that are actually treated as consequential in the event". However, while conversation analysis provides considerable traction for validating the analyst's interpreting of the participants' evaluations as being consequential in the sequential organization of talk (procedural relevance), it does not necessarily establish that the analysis itself is viable with respect to the interactional achievement of (im)politeness1, or what Arundale (2006b) terms "interpretive relevance". In order to demonstrate interpretive relevance, then, the analyst needs to draw not only from the locally occasioned normative structures that are the primary focus of conversation analysts, but also aspects of the wider context which may prove salient to the analysis. Establishing interpretive relevance thus requires recourse to both sequential and non-sequential features of talk, the latter of which may include "aspects of the currently invoked identity of the participant" and "the history of their particular relationship, not only within the course of, but also prior to the conversation being examined" (Arundale 2006b: 10).

One way in which to tease out aspects of the context beyond those available from the micro-analysis of talk-in-interaction data, might be to draw from more ethnographically-informed interactional analyses and thereby establish the viability of the analysts' interpretations in relation to a particular theoretical framework. Through such an approach the analyst may then be better placed to explicate not only instances where (im)politeness is explicitly identified by participants (metapragmatic politeness1), or dispute arises over evaluations of (im)politeness (classificatory versus expressive politeness1), but also where *reciprocation* makes

the interactional achievement of politeness1 evident. In other words, the interactional approach entails the analyst looking 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). In this way, the analyst is able to identify instances of (im)politeness1 that emerge through interaction. There remains considerable work, however, before a coherent theory of (im)politeness, that is consistent with the current paradigm shift in politeness research, emerges. In the following concluding section, some of the key themes that such a theory of (im)politeness will need to incorporate are discussed.

5. Conclusion: towards a theory of (im)politeness

The postmodern approach to politeness, in particular the discursive approach that has been the focus in this paper, has offered one of the first coherent challenges to the dominance of the positivist paradigm in politeness research. However, in this paper it has been argued that a number of epistemological and ontological issues raised by the discursive approach and broader postmodern program remain to be resolved. There remains considerable work to be done, for example, in further re-examining the distinction between first-order and second-order understandings of (im)politeness, as well as the place of the analyst vis-à-vis the participant. It has also been suggested that such issues may be more fruitfully explored within an interactional theory of (im)politeness, which focuses on the interactional achievement of evaluations of self and other (or their respective groups) that are salient to the emergence of (im)politeness in the sequential unfolding of interaction. It was further suggested that such an interactional approach could establish the procedural and interpretive relevance of such an analysis through careful ethnographically-grounded interactional analyses of the evaluations underlying the emergence of (im)politeness through interaction, and thereby overcome at least some of the epistemological and ontological issues facing the discursive approach to politeness.

Through the course of this discussion a number of broader themes in relation to (im)politeness have also been touched upon and these constitute an emerging paradigm shift in politeness research. One of the key themes which has been alluded to is that (im)politeness should be examined at the *discourse* rather than utterance level in real, naturalistic data, since (im)politeness is interactionally achieved through communication. However, studying the way in which (im)politeness arises in actual dis-

course raises the issue of the ontological stance one takes towards the role of the analyst relative to the participant. A theory of (im)politeness thus needs to consider the place of the analyst vis-à-vis the participant in order to avoid the analyst imposing his or her own personal understandings in the course of interpreting an interaction.

A second theme to have emerged is that politeness is an *evaluation* of behaviour, not a behaviour in and of itself. These evaluations rest on expectations that are interactionally achieved through communication, which in turn are perceptions of broader norms of appropriate behaviour. A key issue that arises from this theme for the development of a theory of (im)politeness is the question of how these norms and expectations come to be shared and transformed amongst individuals or broader social networks, including so-called 'cultures'.

A related theme is that people do not always agree about their evaluations of behaviour as polite, impolite, overpolite and so on. In other words, there is often *variability* in the evaluations of behaviour, and perceptions of the norms and expectations underlying such evaluations. This gives rise to discursive dispute or *argumentivity* in relation to the notion of politeness in interaction. While postmodernists argue that this variability is a defining feature of politeness (Eelen 2001; Mills 2003: 6; Watts 2003), there remains to date little empirical evidence that either supports or refutes such a claim. It is thus evident that politeness research needs to focus more on variability in perceptions of politeness and how these are discursively disputed through interaction.

Another theme to have emerged is that politeness should be studied within a broader theory of interpersonal communication, whether one terms this 'relational work' (Locher and Watts 2005; Watts 2005; Locher 2006), 'face constitution' (Arundale 1999, 2004, 2006a), 'rapport management' (Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2002, 2005) or something else. Yet while the analysis of politeness is indeed only possible within a wider theory of interpersonal interaction or communication that is not predicated on rationalistic or objectivist assumptions about language and communication, this move in itself does not necessarily mean the study of (im)politeness itself is not a worthwhile pursuit. But, as noted by Christie (2005: 5), in our attempts to construct an alternative theory of (im)politeness, it is important to consider the question of where politeness should be located within such a broader theoretical framework.

It is suggested here that in the course of attempts to define (im)politeness through theoretically-grounded interactional analyses that are consonant, yet not necessarily synonymous, with the understandings of participants in interaction, as well as through ethnographic studies of metapragmatic discourse about (im)politeness, the field of politeness research can continue to differentiate itself from the broader fields of interpersonal and intercultural communication research.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Other researchers working in other paradigms have also questioned whether politeness has "outlived its usefulness" (Meier 2004: 11). The focus in this discussion, however, is on the discursive challenge to politeness theory since it represents one of the most coherent challenges to the dominance of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness to date.
2. While the focus of the critique in this paper is on the discursive approach, it has implications for the other main postmodern approach to politeness advanced by Mills (2003, 2004, 2005). For a comprehensive critique of Mills' approach that touches upon some of the issues raised in this paper see Holmes (2005, 2007).
3. Instances of metapragmatic politeness1 found in written texts, such as in etiquette guides or newspaper articles focusing on (im)politeness, cannot be regarded as interactionally achieved as such unless they become the topic of face-to-face discussion. The way in which the ideologies and norms of (im)politeness are constructed in response to such texts, however, is very much a matter of interactional achievement.
4. This theoretical notion of politeness may be grounded in, although need not necessarily be synonymous with, participant understandings, as discussed in the following sections.

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