Introduction: Politeness and impoliteness in computer-mediated communication

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This special issue deals with how interactants negotiate the relational aspect of language use in computer-mediated contexts; a subject matter which has received scant attention to date. It offers a range of articles on impoliteness and politeness strategies in various computer-mediated communication (CMC) settings, using data derived from different language backgrounds and practices.

In order to set the stage for the papers, I will offer a brief contextualization of the topic of CMC and im/politeness research. "Communication", most basically stands for the exchange of information (be it ideational or relational), "mediation" describes the fact that there is a technological means that is employed to communicate, and, finally, "computer" specifies that the means of mediation is related to technology, such as computers/internet, mobile phones, video conferencing, etc. In addition, it is useful to distinguish between synchronous means (e. g., chats) and asynchronous means (e. g., blogs, fora) of computer-mediated communication and to investigate both the situation and the technical factors that influence language practices (cf. Herring 2007a).

The use of language in CMC is an important field of study. We can see how language is used creatively to meet the technological challenges and to exploit them (e. g., the abbreviations in texting on mobile phones or in chats), and we can witness rapid and innovative language change by observing language in use. As Wilbur (1996, quoted in Crystal 2006: 9) points out, communication in CMC "is still largely a text-based affair" and thus within our range of interest as linguists. Furthermore, online communication is as real as offline interaction. This comment is triggered by the common usage of the expression "in real life", referring to offline life, which automatically implies the existence of "an unreal life". However, as Wood and Smith (2005: 20) point out, when people interact online − be it with their proper names or with invented identities − they may "consider the effects of online interaction just as impact-

ful as those one might encounter in a face-to-face scenario". Both comments − that we are dealing with text and that we are observing people who use language for real communicative purposes − warrant our attention as linguists.

The kind of creativity we can witness in CMC began to fascinate linguists, communication researchers and sociologists early on and we can already look back on almost twenty years of research on CMC. Androutsopolous, in a 2006 special edition of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, speaks of three "waves" that characterize how researchers met the challenges the new data posed. In a first wave, the technological influence was stressed. The use of language in emails or in chats was described in detail. This resulted in so-called "computer determinism" or "technical determinism" (cf. Baym 1995; Androutsopoulos 2006). This means that the patterns observed were explained primarily by drawing on the mediated aspect of the communicative act. This led to claims that something along the lines of a *general* "email-language", or "chat-language" exists (cf. the discussion about the term 'Netspeak', used by Crystal [2001] 2006). In the meantime, however, researchers have become cautious not to claim that the type of technological mediation of the text is the *only* reason at the heart of the patterns observed. In wave two, the focus is on "the interplay of technological, social, and contextual factors in the shaping of computer-mediated language practices" (Androutsopoulos 2006: 421). In this interim period between wave one and wave three, the individual user (hence social factors) and the actual communicative situation (hence contextual factors) are brought back into the picture. Finally, in wave three, the focus is on "the role of linguistic variability in the formation of social interaction and social identities on the Internet" (Androutsopoulos 2006: 421). The agenda of wave three researchers is then to start "demythologizing the alleged homogeneity and highlighting the social diversity of language use in CMC" (Androutsopoulos 2006: 421). For example, the language used in email correspondence nowadays ranges from very informal (e. g., when you arrange to meet your friends for a pub night) to very formal (e. g., when you are invited to a job interview). The same classical factors (or variables) usually studied for their influence on language use, such as gender, age, status, purpose of interaction, etc. thus also affect the language used in CMC (cf. Herring 2007a). Androutsopolous (2006: 421) summarizes the current research thrust by saying that we witness "a shift of focus from medium-related to user-related patterns of language use, and [this shift] brings the 'variety of group practices' to the centre of attention." There is a vast field of computer-mediated communication to be explored from this stance and this approach offers fertile ground to link theoretical interests with

regard to the relational aspect of language with an interest in group practices and how people define their social environments online.

With a number of important exceptions (see the reviews in the individual chapters), the majority of texts published on computer-mediated communication to date have not focused on politeness or impoliteness issues *per se*. In many instances, researchers have also mainly employed Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) model to discuss the character of face-threatening instances, as, for example, in the keynote lecture by Susan Herring, one of the prominent researchers on CMC language, at the Meeting of the International Pragmatics Association at Gothenburg in the summer of 2007 (Herring 2007b). More recent developments in politeness research, as discussed in previous issues of the *Journal of Politeness Research*, however, have only rarely been transferred to an analysis of online interaction. Since politeness and impoliteness within CMC has not yet received the attention it deserves, this special issue has given this topic centre stage. It seems timely to move our attention in politeness research to online interaction for the following three reasons:

(1) The newer research trends highlight the discussion of *norms* in the light of politeness/impoliteness research and the question of what constitutes appropriateness (cf., e. g. Locher and Watts 2005; Spencer-Oatey 2007b; Locher and Bousfield 2008). As a consequence, online interaction is such an exciting research field because we have access to written records on the negotiation of norms (for discussions about Netiquette, see, for example, Graham 2007, 2008) and we can witness interactants publicly discussing violations of expectations. By studying such negotiations, we can further our understanding of what constitutes im/politeness in a particular practice and what factors might play a role in assessing it.

(2) Since conceptualizations of politeness and impoliteness are no longer only restricted to the study of mitigation strategies, the entire spectrum of interpersonal negotiation is open for linguistic scrutiny. It will be of special interest to investigate how interpersonal issues of politeness and impoliteness are negotiated in online interaction, and how these issues tie in with *identity* construction and the negotiation of *face*. Both aspects have been argued to be closely connected to politeness considerations (cf., for example, Spencer-Oatey 2007a, 2007b; Locher 2008) and are in need of further research.

(3) Taking into account the social and medium factors proposed in Herring's framework (2007a), it will be of interest to establish in what ways forms of computer-mediated communication differ from face-to-face interaction with respect to the *restrictions* that the medium

imposes on relational work/facework and the consequences of these restrictions on linguistic choices. In addition, it is of relevance to explore how and to what extent interactants also exploit the medium restrictions for their own ends.

The six papers in this special issue have started to address these issues. They reflect a breadth of interests, data types and languages studied. With respect to the type of CMC medium, we see data collected from interactions in online newspapers (Upadhyay), blogs (Haugh), bulletin boards/fora (Nishimura, Angouri and Tseliga), an interactive website (Planchenault), email (Haugh) and chat (Darics). The languages worked with are French (Planchenault), Greek (Angouri and Tseliga), Japanese (Nishimura), and English. The latter is discussed in contexts where English is used as lingua franca (Darics), as native language (Haugh, Upadhyay) and in cross-cultural interaction (Haugh). Finally, the issue covers various aspects on the continuum of relational work. Haugh, Angouri and Tseliga, and Upadhyay focus explicitly on impoliteness and conflictual language usage, while Planchenault and Darics focus on how solidarity and the creation of an ingroup feeling is created and maintained.

To summarize, the aims of this special issue are the following: (a) to continue to develop the latest discussion on politeness with respect to the question of norms of appropriateness; (b) to further the current theoretical discussion on the interconnectedness of politeness, face and identity construction; and (c) to work with empirical data on computer-mediated communication and discuss politeness issues by paying attention to the specifics of the online context − research areas that will keep the research community busy for some time to come.

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Bionote

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