ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Impoliteness or underpoliteness: An analysis of a Christmas dinner scene from Dickens’s *Great Expectations*

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**Abstract**
This is a stylistic analysis of an extract from Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. The focus is on impoliteness incurred in a convivial setting of a Christmas dinner among low class people. As a result of the analysis of the text, I propose to establish another variety of impoliteness, namely “underpoliteness”. This is impoliteness exercised without malice or spite which occasionally appears to be incidental and a result of socializing habits. Nevertheless, similar to other types of rudeness it creates feelings of discomfort, disharmony and even revenge.

The analysis is made at the micro level of single utterances. Occasionally, more than one utterance is taken into consideration for the reconstruction of the speech activity to assist determining the exact degree of offense incurred. The method of analysis depends on positive and negative impoliteness strategies as proposed by Culpeper (1996, 2003). This is complemented with a reversal of Leech’s 1983 politeness maxims.

The heart of this paper comprises analysis of interaction in the Christmas dinner in *Great Expectations*.

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1. What is Impoliteness?

Impoliteness concerns hostile, confrontational communication. It is how offense is communicated and received. The notion of impoliteness emerged by way of contrast to politeness. Politeness “maintain[s] the social equilibrium and friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being co-operative in the first place.” (Leech, 1983, p. 82). In contrast, impoliteness creates social disruption. It is defined as “communicative strategies designed to attack face and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony.” (Culpeper et al., 2003, p. 1546). Hearer’s perception of face damage is taken into account. Face attacks are “communicative acts perceived by members of a social community (and often intended by speakers) to be purposefully offensive.” (Tracy and Tracy, 1998, p. 227). The notion of purposefulness or intentionality in face threats is referred to by Goffman. He defines face threats as “calculated to convey complete disrespect and contempt through symbolic means” (Goffman, 1967:89). Malice and spite conveyed by the offender are “with the intention of causing open insult” (Goffman, 1967, p. 14).

Intentionality is of crucial importance to impoliteness. It is directly related to Grice’s discrimination between natural and non-natural meaning. Intentional meaning is non-natural.
An utterance is uttered not only “with the intention of inducing a certain belief but also the speaker must have intended the audience to recognize the intention behind the utterance.” Similarly, the offensive information is not merely expressed by the speaker but the information that that offense is being expressed intentionally is most crucial.

Impoliteness is not incidental face attack (Tracy and Tracy, 1998, p. 226; Culpeper et al., 2003, p. 1550; Culpeper, 2005, p. 36; Goffman, 1967, p. 14). It is not “caused inadvertently as a result of a person pursuing a particular course of action.” It is not a “by-product of an action that the offender carries out in spite of its offensive consequences.” A teacher may criticize the work of a student which may have offensive consequences, but this may be only a by-product of assisting the student to improve.

Impoliteness is not “unwitting offense”. It is not “face threat as a result of innocent action such as faux pas, verbal gaffe, boners or bricks.” Impoliteness consists of face attacks that are “deliberately nasty” characterized by maliciousness and spite. It is “aggressive facework”; a competitive mutilation and “scramble of another’s person’s face in an attempt to look better at another’s expense.” (cf. Tracy and Tracy, 1998, p. 227; Goffman, 1967, p. 24–25; Culpeper, 2005, p. 36). Kienpointer’s definition of rudeness refers to the disequilibrium in personal relationship, the feeling of hatred, antipathy and irreverence induced as well as to the contextual determinants that make a person’s face vulnerable to attack. “Rudeness,” he explains, “is competitive communicative behaviour,

- Which destabilizes the personal relationships of the interacting individuals and this makes it more difficult to achieve the mutually accepted goal of the interaction or makes it more difficult to agree on a mutually accepted goal in the first place.
- Which more particularly creates or maintains an emotional atmosphere of mutual irreverence and antipathy …
- Whose goals are realized via pre-established (verbal routines) in a speech community or by individual adaptations of these routines to a specific context. …
- Which is partially determined by concepts of power, distance, emotional attitudes and cost benefit scales which are generally accepted in a speech community.
- Which is, however, also (partially) changeable via negotiations during the ongoing talk exchange or during the social history of a speech community.” (1997:259)

Power and intimacy are two contextual factors that increase vulnerability of face. Impoliteness is more likely to occur in situations where there is an imbalance of power. A powerful participant is more likely to be impolite, because he can reduce the chances of the less powerful one to retaliate and can also exert more severe penalizing in case the less powerful person is impolite. In fact, looking ahead to the analysis, we find that Pip (who is almost always rudely treated) is a helpless child, an orphan who is dependant on his sister for a living. He is subservient and his face is attacked without any overt response.

Culpeper’s (1996, pp. 359–63) analysis of impoliteness in an army training camp underlines how hierarchical power structure is strictly maintained and how recruits are subjected to face attack by sergeants without hitting back.

Impoliteness is also more liable to appear if there is an extreme intimate relationship among participants. Intimacy is partly familiarity and familiarity breeds contempt and antipathy. Thus the more intimate participants are to each other the more impoliteness is employed. Spouses, for example, know which aspects of their partner’s face are sensitive to attack while even predicting the kind of retaliation that would follow (cf. Culpeper, 1996, p. 354 citing) (1).

Hence the interpretation of (impoliteness) of any linguistic signal has to take into account contextual elements such as gender, age, social status, effect of participants’ relationship etc. Polite vs. impolite interpretation of a linguistic signal depends primarily on context since either is not inherent in any particular utterance. This has been repeatedly pointed out.

...no sentence is inherently polite or impolite. We often take certain expressions to be impolite, it is not the expressions themselves but the conditions under which they are used that determine the judgment of politeness. (Fraser and Nolan 1981, p. 96) (See also Culpeper, 1996, p. 351, 2005, p. 41 and 63; Watts, 2003, pp. 5, 8, 21, 95, 98 and all through) (2).

Contextualizing an interaction can be through embedding it within an “activity type.” This enables us to understand the utterance by knowing the role which it plays within the activity. An activity type is a concept introduced by Levinson which refers to ...a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal defined, socially constituted, bounded events with constraints on participants, setting and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions. Paradigm examples would be teaching, a job interview, a jural interrogation, a football game, a task in a workshop, a dinner party, and so on. (Levinson, 1992, p. 69 [my underlining])

Activity types “help to determine how what one says will be taken.” Thus the value and nature of impoliteness of an utterance could be decided upon from the activity of which it is a part (cf. Watts, 2003, p. 28). For example, cursing by an in-group member of a football team in the middle of a game could hardly be thought of as impolite. Within the activity type of a football game curses are not to be taken as impolite.

To sum up, impoliteness has been defined as communicative acts intended to cause offense and bring about disharmony and social disruption. They are reconstructed and taken by the hearer to be offensive. They convey malice and spite. Impoliteness is not unintentional. It is not incidental and it is not inherent in a particular linguistic utterance. No utterance is inherently polite or impolite and its interpretation as either depends on the role it plays within a particular activity type.

2. Underpoliteness (3): In what way is it different from impoliteness?

A quick review of conflict literature reveals researchers developing types of rudeness (cf Kienpointner, 1997 and Culpeper, 1996, 2005; Rudanko, 2006) (4). Underpoliteness poses itself as yet another variety where the above aspects of impoliteness may not necessarily be fulfilled. Malice and spite are not necessary conditions for underpoliteness. Not all offensive acts comprise hatred. Underpoliteness could be a result of intimacy between caring spouses. Character frailties such as immodesty and miserliness carry self-directed offense but do not convey malice. Corrective behaviour in mother-child reproach (see analysis of the data below) as well as impoliteness employed in TV entertainment shows is free from spite. Underpoliteness could therefore, be defined as communicative acts which may cause offense though not triggered by malice.
In underpoliteness, offence may be used to reinforce in-group solidarity. Offensive acts may be double edged. They may have a dual role. The very performance of an offensive act directed to a target may simultaneously serve to grease the wheel of talk or to enhance social relations (see analysis below). A participant may perform a purposefully offensive act with the paradoxical aim of gaining a turn at talk or a chance to put in a word or to express agreement with what has already been said thereby effecting solidarity.

In underpoliteness, impolite acts may have an incidental element. The offender performs an action “in spite of its offensive consequences though not out of spite.” (Culpeper, 2005, p. 36)

A reversal of Tact (Applies to directives)
Maximize cost to the hearer
Minimize benefit to the hearer

REVERSAL OF TACT (Applies to directives)
Maximize cost to the hearer
Minimize benefit to the hearer

A reversal of Leech’s politeness maxims

MINIMIZE SYMPATHY between self and other
MAXIMIZE ANTIPATHY between self and other

REVERSAL OF SYMPATHY (in representatives)
Maximize antipathy between self and other
Minimize sympathy between self and other

3. Model of analysis

The impoliteness model of analysis which is employed in this paper is based on Culpeper’s (1996) which is repeatedly cited in Culpeper et al. (2003) and Culpeper (2005). It is based on Brown and Levinson’s framework of politeness superstrategies. Culpeper provides a list of output strategies for positive and negative impoliteness. A reversal of Leech’s politeness model is also used to complement Culpeper.

Culpeper’s (1996) output strategies for positive and negative impoliteness.

Positive impoliteness output strategies:
Ignore, snub the other – fail to acknowledge the other’s presence.
Exclude the other from an activity.
Disassociate from the other – for example deny association or common ground with the other; avoid sitting together.
Be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic.
Use inappropriate identity markers – for example use title and surname when a close relationship pertains, or a nickname when a distance relationship pertains.
Use obscure or secretive language – for example, mystify the other with jargon, or use a code known to others in the group, but not the target.
Seek disagreement – select a sensitive topic.
Make the other feel uncomfortable – for example do not avoid silence, joke, or use small talk.
Use taboo words – swear, or use abusive or profane language.
Call the other names – use derogatory nominations.

Negative impoliteness output strategies:
Frighten – instill a belief that action detrimental to the other will occur.
Condescend, scorn or ridicule – emphasize your relative power. Be contemptuous. Do not treat the other seriously.
Belittle the other (e.g. use diminutives).
Invoke the other’s space – literally (e.g. position yourself closer to the other than the relationship permits) or metaphorically (e.g. ask for or speak about information which is too intimate given the relationship).
Explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect – personalize use the pronouns “I” and “you”.
Put the other indebtedness on record. Etc.

REVERSAL OF LEECH’S POLITENESS MAXIMS

REVERSAL OF TACT (Applies to directives)
Maximize cost to the hearer

REVERSAL OF GENEROSITY (Applies to directives and commissives)
Maximize benefit to self

REVERSAL OF APPROBATION (Applies to expressives and representatives)
Maximize displeasure of other

REVERSAL OF MODESTY (Applies to expressives and representatives)
Maximize praise of self

REVERSAL OF AGREEMENT (in representatives)
Maximize disagreement between self and other
Minimize agreement between self and other

REVERSAL OF SYMPATHY (in representatives)
Maximize antipathy between self and other
Minimize sympathy between self and other
4. The analysis

The extract comprises a convivial type of activity. Mrs. and Mr. Joe Gargery are inviting friends to a Christmas dinner. The goal of this event type is polite since the Gargery family is bringing benefit to others and cost to themselves. The context of situation in which the interaction takes place can be described in terms of three dimensions: participants, activity and setting. All participants attending the dinner are of low class. They form a relatively big number of individuals including the Gargery family, the Hubble family, Mr. Pumblechook (uncle of Joe Gargery), and Mr. Wopsle, a church clerk. Apart from the inmates of the house, other individuals attending the Christmas gathering are strangers which fact makes the interactional situation formal. The setting is humble. The dinner takes place in the kitchen and parlour of Mr. Gargery. It is, however, decorated specially for the occasion, with the table laid, Mrs. Joe dressed and the front door, ‘‘which never was locked’’ unlocked. Despite the formality of this occasion, underpoliteness acts (as indicated by the analysis below) are numerous so that it is not necessarily true to say that ‘‘the more formal the situation is, the higher the degree of politeness expected’’ (Leech and Short, 1981, p. 314).

Vertical-wise the social status of the gathering is low; Joe Gargery is a blacksmith; Mr. Hubble is a wheelwright, Mr. Pumblechook a corn chandler and Mr Wopsle a clerk at church. Horizontally, those ‘‘social equals in a low position treat each other with a lower degree of politeness than social equals in higher positions’’ (Runqing, 1986, p. 35).

Neither is the social relationship among interactants identical. Pip – younger brother of Mrs. Joe Gargery – is an orphan and a dependant. Though a member of the family and in close relation to his sister and her husband, he is not socially equal. His social status as a dependant brought up by his sister puts him in a subservient position. Underpolite and impolite acts are targeted at him.

As a child his quality face and social identity face (cf. Spencer-Oatey, 2005) are almost completely effaced. Quality face is our fundamental desire for people to assess us positively as regards our personal qualities such as appearance, potentialities and abilities. As a poor child, the personal qualities of Pip are almost annihilated. Neither has he got any social identity face to claim. As a child his social identity or his social role such as a group leader, peer, customer, or mentor is also void. This makes him susceptible to face damage.

Pip’s subservient position immediately appears from the seating. He ‘‘was squeezed in at an acute angle of the table cloth with the table in [his] . . . chest, and Pumblechookian elbow in [his] . . . eye.’’ Mr. Pumblechook invades the territorial individual space of Pip. By placing his elbow in Pip’s eye he is positioning himself too close to Pip and being negatively impolite. Further, adult diners ‘‘scorn’’ Pip when they put the remainders of their plates into his. He ‘‘was regaled with the scaly tips of the drumsticks of the fowls, and with those obscure corners of pork of which the pig, when living, had the least reason to be vain.’’

As a boy ‘‘he was not allowed to speak.’’ This delineates a situation with a noticeable imbalance in power. Although the whole conversation is focused on him, although adult diners direct their talk to him, he is not permitted to respond. Through denial of speaking rights, his sister, as a powerful participant, together with adult diners vitiates his ability to react to their underpolite communicative acts. Should he respond, a threat of more severe retaliation would ensue. The social context constrains Pip’s ‘‘response options’’ to being a silent participant in interaction (cf. Culpeper et al., 2003, p. 1563).

The dinner commences with saying ‘‘grace’’ upon which Pip’s sister, Mrs. Joe reproaches him saying: ‘‘[i] Do you hear that? [ii] Be Grateful.’’ [i] is a meta-communicative directive (Tracy and Tracy, 1998, p. 233). It is an indirect form of face attack since it directs the boy’s attention to a feeling and a course of action which she presumes he lacks. [ii] ‘‘Be grateful’’ is a rebuke that contains the pragmatic presupposition that Pip is ungrateful (cf. Levinson, 1983, p. 185). Here the communicative act of reprimand is considered ‘‘underpolite’’ rather than impolite even though it is made in the presence of a gathering of visitors. It is part of the up bringing of Pip. There is no room for feelings of hatred or spite. The offence is incidental; it is performed as part of the education of the young by a person who is in a position of being a parent. A short term offense is employed for a long term benefit.

It is to be noted however, that Mrs. Joe does not face attack by saying ‘‘you are ungrateful’’ with the pronoun ‘‘you’’ personalizing the face-threat. The impolite belief is expressed by implication. Indirectness increases impoliteness. Indirectness-impoliteness scale corresponds to the indirectness-politeness one. Quite well known by now is the notion that the more indirect the utterance the more polite. To request someone by saying ‘‘Could I possibly ask you to mark my paper?’’ is indirect and polite because it takes permission from the hearer to make the request. Yet indirectness can also increase impoliteness. Lecch (1983, p. 171) points out that the more indirect the form the more offensive. ‘‘ . . . [B]ecause ‘you have something to declare’ is an impolite belief, the more indirect kind of question [e.g. ‘‘Haven’t you something to declare?’’] are progressively more impolite . . .’’

‘‘Be grateful,’’ is a rather severe kind of underpolite act both because of its indirectness and its performance in the presence of a company of strangers.

Mr. Pumblechook adds, ‘‘Especially . . . be grateful, boy, to them which brought you up by hand.’’ Repetition of the underpolite act ‘‘be grateful’’ intensifies it. It is further exacerbated by putting Pip’s indebtedness on record. Pumblechook is bringing to the attention of Pip the very sensitive topic of his being raised at the expense of his sister.

Mrs. Hubble shook her head and asked ‘‘Why is it that the young are never grateful?’’ Mr. Hubble responded ‘‘Naturally vicious.’’ All agreed ‘‘True.’’ From the WH question of Mrs. Hubble, we infer that ‘‘the young are never grateful.’’ Although a generalization, this impolite belief is targeted at Pip. He is the only boy in the gathering and the conversation is pointed at him. Again, it is interpreted as an underpolite act; it carries no spite and is invoked coincidentally in an attempt at socialization. It is motivated by politeness conventions. Mrs. Hubble self-selects to take a turn and puts in a word. Avoiding silence is a primary polite goal in a social gathering. Mrs. Hubble upholds this politeness principle and in the very act of doing so, exudes an impolite belief. It is rudeness used as a ‘‘means to enhance sociability.’’ Kienpointner identifies this as ‘‘sociable rudeness’’ which ‘‘can even be used as a means of expressing group identity and solidarity.’’ (1997:268). Her husband’s comment is a ‘‘derogatory nomination,’’ ‘‘Naturally vicious,’’ is a positive impoliteness strategy of name calling.
They all react to this by expressing agreement. This is a further instance of impoliteness employed with the intention of achieving solidarity. The maxim of Agreement is at work. There is a maximizing and exaggeration of agreement with others. “Everybody murmur[s] ‘True.’” Yet they agree to the impolite act of “derogatory nomination.”

Later on in the dinner, Mr. Wopsle offers a moral for the young.

Swine pursued Mr. Wopsle, . . . Swine were the companions of the prodigal. The gluttony of Swine is put before us as an example to the young. (I thought this pretty well in him who of the prodigal. The gluttony of Swine is put before us as an example to the young. (I thought this pretty well in him who had been praising up the pork for being so plump and juicy.) What is detestable in a pig is more detestable in a boy.

In spite of preaching being “heavily offensive” (Kienpointner, 1997, p. 274), in this context it is rated as underpolite. It is intended for the long term benefit of Pip. Its purpose is to set him on the right path. No antipathy is conveyed and the harm incurred is due to the supremely offensive nature of preaching itself.

Preaching portrays members of the audience as immoral (Bauman, 1981). In so far as a preacher holds negative judgments of others it is offensive. Mr. Wopsle, for example, thinks of Pip as gluttonous. Further, a preacher usually lacks modesty. He sets himself in the position of advisor who knows the way to righteousness. Here Mr. Wopsle is a stranger who has got the audacity to think of the behaviour of Pip as evil and gluttonous. The goal of preaching is “converting”. Its purpose is to impress a way or style of life on a stranger. In this sense it is a violation of Tact since it interferes with the freedom of action of others. The language of preaching is intimidating. A preacher instills fear in the audience as a means of converting them. In this extract, Mr. Wopsle associates gluttony of swine with the prodigal son; he is indirectly terrifying Pip of becoming a lost child if he continues this bad habit. Yet the convivial setting in which the act occurs ameliorates its offense. It makes it more of an underpolite act rather than an impolite one. Preaching, as it occurs within the activity type of a Christmas dinner, is within the expected norm of behaviour among this group of people.

The language of preaching is vague in the sense that right and wrong is pointed out to all. Mr. Wopsle’s “ostensive behaviour” however, is deviant in underscoring “the guarantee of relevance” of impolite behaviour to Pip. The language of preaching is vague because the degree of “guarantee of relevance” of the moral preached differs from one individual to another. The “ostensive behaviour” of the preacher directs cognizance to a phenomenon which will appear relevant enough to his audience to be worth notice. Yet, the degree of “manifestness” to members differs. What the preacher’s ostentation mostly does, is to make manifest some phenomenon. This may, at times, be very weakly manifest to some members of the audience. It makes the language of preaching vague and therefore tolerant (cf. Wilson and Sperber and Deidre, 1986, pp. 38–54).

Mr. Wopsle draws Pip’s attention to gluttony “in a manifestly intentional way,” thus “guaranteeing that there is some relevant information [for him] to be obtained.” (51) Pip complains that during his moral talk Wopsle “pointed his fork at my [Pip’s] blushes, as if he were mentioning my Christian name.”

Later, Mr. Wopsle ends his talk with a moral:

“Of course, or girl, Mr. Hubble,” assented Mr. Wopsle, rather irritably, “but there is no girl present.”

Mr. Hubble’s maximizing of “the guarantee of relevance” is rebuffed by Mr. Wopsle who, in his attempt to make it particularly relevant to Pip deviates from the vague language of preaching.

Further underpoliteness is exercised by Mr. Pumblechook in his talk at the dinner table. He puts Pip’s indebtedness to his sister on record and intimidates him. Culpeper (1996) lists both as negative impoliteness strategies. In this context, they are treated as underpolite because they form part of the up-bringing of Pip and because they are within the norms of expected behaviour of the social interaction particularly among working class people in England in the Victorian period. (6)

Mr. Pumblechook draws Pip’s attention to the fact that he is “enjoying himself with his elders and betters, and improving himself with their conversation, and rolling in the lap of luxury.” He also frightens and instills fear in him (Ceylan, 1998). He makes him believe that he would be killed. He compares him to a “Squeaker” that is sold for a few shillings to a butcher who “getting out his penknife from his waist-coat pocket,” “sheds his blood.” Pip becomes so terrified as to stop eating. “Joe offered [him] me more gravy, which [he] I was afraid to take.” Intimidation as an underpolite act is usually employed by elders with children to deter them from being naughty. Here, it is not exercised out of malice or spite.

Another instance of underpoliteness occurs when Mrs. Hubble attempts to sympathize with her hostess. Her commiserating with Mrs. Joe over the trouble Pip causes in his upbringing is an act of socialization which carries within its fold the impolite truth that Pip is a source of annoyance to his sister. Mrs. Hubble pays consideration to Mrs. Joe at the expense of Pip.

Mrs. Hubble is polite in so far as she attempts to enhance sociability. She abides by the Maxim of Sympathy. Yet, in the very act of sympathizing she raises the sensitive topic of “troublesome children.” Mrs. Joe dwells elaborately on the topic listing all the illnesses which Pip is guilty of. Reciting Pip’s misdemeanors is a violation of Approbation.

“He was a world of trouble to you, ma’am,” said Mrs. Hubble commiserating my sister.

“Trouble?” echoed my sister, “trouble?” And then entered on a fearful catalogue of all the illnesses I had been guilty of, and all the acts of sleeplessness I had committed, and all the high places I had tumbled from, and all the low places I had tumbled into, and all the injuries I had done myself, and all the times she had wished me in my grave, and I had contumaciously refused to go there.

This is another instance of “sociable rudeness” and it is underpolite since it is within expected norm of behaviour of social interaction among low class people.

Underpolite acts may be self-directed. They may be a result of character frailties that cause harm to the speakers themselves. Mr. Pumblechook expresses immodesty when presenting his Christmas gift. He says:

“I have brought you as the compliments of the season – I have brought you, Mum, a bottle of sherry wine – and I have brought you, Mum a bottle of port wine.
In maximizing the worth of his act of generosity Mr. Pumblechook violates the maxim of Modesty; “minimize praise of self.” Usually when someone offers a gift, he expresses politeness by understating his generosity. Mr. Pumblechook is overstating it. Pip describes him as though carrying “the two bottles like dumb-bells” brandishing his Christmas gift.

In presenting a gift, it is conventionally polite to conceal one’s role as a gift presenter. This is minimizing the role of self as benefactor. Thus it is polite to say “Please accept this small gift as the compliment of the season.” Mr. Pumblechook expresses himself differently. He exaggerates and maximizes his role of gift offerer. This is very clear at the level of linguistic choice where the phrase “I have brought you” is repeated three times. Mrs. Joe responds with

“Oh, Un – cle Pum – ble chook! This is kind!”

Mrs. Joe does not construct the act as an intentionally impolite one. She does not think of it as though by repeating “I have brought you” – Pumblechook was deliberately putting her indebtedness on record. Neither is it apparent that she interprets the exaggeration of his generosity as an act intended on the part of the guest to set himself up the social ladder. She responds kindly to him exchanging ameliorating address terms, “uncle.”

Clearly, overstatement of generosity and violation of modesty reflect back on the interactant and do not breed any feeling of antipathy or antagonism. They may, therefore, be viewed as underpolite acts.

During the dinner, Mr. Wopsle interrupts Mr. Pumblechook. The latter was addressing himself to Pip saying:

“If you [Pip] had been born such [Squeaker], would you have been here now? Not you ______.”

“Unless in that form,” said Mr. Wopsle nodding towards the dish.

“But I don’t mean in that form, sir,” returned Pumblechook who had an objection to being interrupted.

 Interruption is a potentially impolite act. It violates the Maxim of Tact in so far as it is a disruptive directive. It maximizes cost to the hearer in negatively directing him to stop a turn that he has already started. It is viewed as “reciprocal activity” that involves both “doing interrupting” and being interrupted” (cf. Culpeper, 2005, p. 38 quoting Blymes 1997). Mr. Wopsle interrupts without apologizing. There is no polit formulaic expression such as “sorry.” It is responded to forcefully by Mr. Pumblechook who communicates his “objection” and irritation through a contradiction in the form of a negated repetition of the selfsame utterance of Mr. Wopsle. This forceful reaction may be viewed as a norm of behaviour among this class of people. Mr. Pumblechook continues his talk with no spite or aggression ensuing against Mr. Wopsle. The act is interpreted as underpolite since it has not gone against the canons of acceptable behaviour operative for the social interaction among this special group of low class people.

Having finished one course, and starting on another of a “savory pork pie,” Mrs. Joe finds that she is short of clean plates. She orders her husband:

“Clean plates _ cold.”

This is a violation of the tact maxim. The imposition is high because the degree of cost to the hearer is high especially because both the speaker and hearer are in the company of guests. Mrs. Joe does not mitigate her utterance. She uses no formulaic expressions as “Please.” Neither does she use in-group address terms such as “Joe” or “dear.” There is no indication in the text whereby we could find out how the hearer perceives and constructs the act. The reaction of Mr. Joe to the utterance and how he perceives its negative force appears nowhere in the text. The relation of husband and wife softens harm that could have been incurred. Spouses are individuals with shared components of selves. They share desires, means of living, social position, interests, property, etc. . . Less consideration for the feeling of each other is, therefore, needed in their interaction. Their social relation is very close and degree of politeness required may be very small. These together with the absence of further notice paid to the act make us deduce that the order has not been performed out of spite and can be taken as underpolite.

5. Conclusion

In this study “underpoliteness” as a new conceptualization of impoliteness is proposed. It comprises communicative acts that are not motivated by malice, spite or hatred and that are socially acceptable according to expected norms of behaviour. Rebutting, derogatory nominations and intimidations etc. have been classified as underpolite when they appeared as part of corrective behaviour among low class working people. Rudeness for socialization and rudeness resulting from character frailties have also been cited as instances of underpoliteness. Underpoliteness i.e. “impolite” behaviour is to impoliteness as politic is to politeness.

6. Notes

Exact nature of impoliteness or underpoliteness as a result of extreme intimate relationship is context bound. Intimacy may result in antipathy and salient impoliteness between spouses as evident in the example cited by Kienpointner from Edward Albee’s play Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf? (1997, p. 275). Yet, this is different from the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Gregory as indicated in the analysis below.

In an attempt to produce an utterance that is inherently impolite Culpeper thinks of “you fucking cunt.” He observes that “one has to think quite hard to imagine contexts in which [this] . . . would not be considered impolite.” (2005:41)

The term “underpoliteness” has first been introduced by Leech in his article “Pragmatic Principles in Shaw’s You Never Can Tell” (1992). Leech defines it very briefly as “causing offence in all innocence” which is really “unwitting offense.” The term, in this paper, acquires new complex dimensions. It is fleshed out and elaborated. If there is any similarity, it is merely in nomenclature.

Culpeper (1996) focuses on differences between “inherent” and “mock” impoliteness (banter). Kienpointner (1997) classifies rudeness into two main types; co-operative and non-cooperative. The former includes mock impoliteness, ritual insults, reactive rudeness and sociable rudeness. Non-cooperative rudeness is motivated and includes: (i) strategic rudeness in public institutions, (ii) competitive rudeness in private conversation and (iii) rudeness as political self-defense. Rudanko (2006) traces a further type which he labels “aggravated impoliteness” which he places at the higher end of impoliteness.
My perception of the relation between underpoliteness and impoliteness is different from Watts’ politc and (im)politeness. Watts thinks of polite as appropriate non-salient behaviour of and polite and impolite as going “beyond what is whether the behaviour itself tends towards the negative or positive end of the spectrum of politeness.” (2003, p. 19). In this paper, underpoliteness is impolite behaviour. The relation of impolite or underpolite to impoliteness corresponds to the relation of polite to politeness.

It is to be stressed that norms or cannons of behaviour and hence impoliteness and underpoliteness and their rate of offensiveness are open to semantic diversity through history. Cannons of expected behaviour fluctuate from one social group to another and from one period of time to another. This has been termed “historical relativity” by Watts, a dimension of analysis that requires further research. (Watts, 2003, pp. 34–45)

Appendix A. The Extract from Dickens’s Great Expectations

I opened the door to the company – making believe that it was a habit of ours to open that door – and I opened it first to Mr. Wopsle, next to Mr. and Mrs. Hubble, and last of all to Uncle Pumblechook. N.B. I was not allowed to call him uncle, under the severest penalties.

“Mrs. Joe,” said Uncle Pumblechook; a large hard breathing middle-aged slow man, with a mouth like a fish, dull staring eyes, and sandy hair standing upright on his head, so that he looked as if he had just been all but choked, and had that moment come to: “I have brought you as the compliments of the season – I have brought you, Mum, a bottle of sherry wine – and I have brought you, Mum, a bottle of port wine.”

Every Christmas Day he presented himself, as a profound novelty, with exactly the same words, and carrying the two bottles like dumb-bells. Every Christmas Day, Mrs. Joe replied, as she now replied, “Oh, Un-cle Pum-ble-chook! This is kind!” Every Christmas Day he retorted as he now retorted. “It’s no more than your merits. And now are you all bobbish, is kind!” Every Christmas Day he retorted as he now retorted. (Watts, 2003, pp. 34–45)
enjoying himself with his elders and betters, and improving himself with their conversation, rolling in the lap of luxury. Would he have been doing that? No he wouldn’t And what would have been your destination? ’’ turning on me again. ’’You would have been disposed of for so many shillings according to the market price of the article, and Dunstable the butcher would have come up to you as you lay in your straw, and he would have whipped you under his left arm, and with his right he would have tucked up his frock to get a penknife from out of his waist coat-pocket, and he would have shed your blood and had your life. No bringing up be hand then. Not a bit of it!’’

Joe offered me more gravy, which I was afraid to take. ’’He was a world of trouble to you, ma’am,’’ said Mrs. Hubble, commiserating my sister.

’’Trouble?’’ echoed my sister, ’’trouble?’’ And then entered on a fearful catalogue of all the illnesses I had been guilty of, and all the acts of sleeplessness I had committed, and all the high places I had tumbled from, and all the low places I had tumbled into, and all the injuries I had done myself, and all the times she had wished me in my grave, and I had contumaciously refused to go there.

I think the Romans must have aggravated one another very much, with their noses. Perhaps they became the restless people they were in consequence. Anyhow, Mr. Wopsle’s Roman nose aggravated me, during the recital of my misdemeanors that I should have liked to have pulled it until he howled. But, all I had endured up to this time, was nothing in comparison with the awful feelings that took possession of me when the pause was broken which ensued upon my sister’s recital, and in which pause everybody had looked at me (as I felt painfully conscious) with indignation and abhorrence.

The course terminated, and Mr. Pumblechook had begun to beam under the genial influence of gin-and-water. I began to think I should get over the day, when my sister said to Joe, ’’Clean plates – cold.’’(pp. 23–26 & 28)

References


