When is an email really offensive?: Argumentativity and variability in evaluations of impoliteness

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Abstract

The analysis in this paper centres on an email exchange between a lecturer and a student at the University of Auckland which resulted in the dismissal of that lecturer. This dismissal gave rise to significant controversy, both off- and online, as to whether the email itself was simply "intemperate" and "angry", or more seriously "offensive" and "racist". Through a close analysis of the interpretations of the emails by the lecturer and student, as well as online evaluations made on blogs and discussion boards, it becomes apparent that the inherent discursivity of evaluations of impoliteness arises not only from different perceptions of norms, but also from the ways in which commentators position themselves vis-à-vis these evaluations. It also emerges that the relative level of discursive dispute is mediated by the technological and situational characteristics of the CMC medium in which these evaluations occurred. It is concluded that research into various forums of online interaction provides a unique window into the inherent variability and argumentativity of perceptions of offensive behaviour, as a public record of discursive disputes surrounding particular alleged violations of norms of appropriateness can be (re)scrutinized in such forums.

Keywords: impoliteness, offence, email, blog, discussion board, norms, discursive

1. Introduction

While much of the work to date on (im)politeness in email communication has drawn from Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, a number of persuasive challenges to the dominant status of Brown and Levinson's theory have emerged in recent years from researchers embedded within a broadly social constructionist paradigm, including the discursive approach (Watts 2003, 2005; Locher 2004, 2006; Locher and

Watts 2005, 2008), the postmodern approach (Eelen 2001; Mills 2003, 2005), the interactional approach (Arundale 1999, 2006; Haugh 2007), and the social psychological approach (Spencer-Oatey 2005, 2007). One of the key challenges raised by researchers working within these various frameworks, building upon Eelen's (2001) seminal work, is that there is variability in the perceptions of norms and expectations underlying evaluations of behaviour as polite, impolite, over-polite and so on, and thus inevitably discursive dispute or argumentativity in relation to evaluations of (im)politeness in interaction. Yet with the exception of work by Locher (2006) and Graham (2007, 2008), there has been little research on (im)politeness in various forms of computer-mediated communication from this perspective.

Another key challenge for researchers has been the shift from an almost exclusive focus on politeness to a deeper consideration of how impoliteness and offence arise through interaction (Culpeper 1996, 2005; Kienpointer 1997; Bousfield 2008; Bousfield and Locher 2008). The vast majority of work on relational aspects of various modes of CMC thus far, including email, however, has focused on politeness (Harrison 2000; Bunz and Campbell 2004; Preece 2004; Davies et al. 2007; de Oliveria 2007; Hatipoğlu 2007; Vinagre 2008). Impoliteness, on the other hand, has received much less attention (Graham 2007, 2008; Nishimura 2008), with most such research being framed as "flaming" (Avgerinakou 2003), defined as "the antinormative hostile communication of emotions … that includes the use of profanity, insults, and other offensive or hurtful statements" (Johnson et al. 2008: 419). Yet while the notion of flaming has largely developed in the specific contexts of email and online discussion boards, it bears remarkable similarity to the notion of impoliteness in that both involve evaluations of behaviour as hostile and offensive. It appears, then, that research into relational or interpersonal aspects of CMC in various modes and contexts might benefit from recent work where impoliteness has been theorized in its own right.

In this paper, the focus is on an email exchange between a lecturer and a student at the University of Auckland regarding the student's request for an assignment extension. The lecturer's email to the student was made public after the lecturer was fired in response to the student's complaint that the lecturer's email was deeply offensive. While this incident attracted comments in traditional offline forms of media, both in New Zealand and internationally, it also generated significant controversy online, becoming the subject of a number of blogs and discussion boards. As much of the ensuing discussion focused on whether the lecturer deserved to be fired for writing such an email, norms of appropriateness in relation to emails, both specific to the emails sent by the lecturer to the student, as well as for academics more generally, became the

topic of discussion in many of these online interactions. In analyzing how such norms were discursively disputed by various online commentators, it becomes apparent, in this case, that much of the variability and thus argumentativity characteristic of evaluations of impoliteness was intertwined with the ways in which commentators positioned themselves in relation to those evaluations. In particular, it emerges from this analysis that the discursive construction of evaluations of (im)politeness is intimately linked with issues of identity, echoing Spencer-Oatey's (2007) suggestion in relation to face. It also becomes apparent that the CMC medium in which these evaluations occurred mediated the relative level of discursive dispute that emerged in the blogs and the online discussion boards.

In Section 2, recent research on impoliteness and the place of norms vis-à-vis speaker intentions are briefly discussed. In particular, this section addresses the implications of the social constructionist movement in (im)politeness research where both intentions and norms are understood as being co-constructed through interaction, and thus open to discursive dispute, rather than as pre-existing constructs that researchers seek to "discover". This approach is then applied in analyzing the controversy surrounding the above-mentioned lecturer's email. In Section 3, the broader email thread from which this dispute arose is analyzed, with a particular focus on differences in the way in which the lecturer and the student positioned themselves in relation to the email. This is followed in Section 4 by an analysis of variability in evaluations of the email by the wider public, and the ways in which this variability led to online discursive disputes, particularly on blogs. The implications of this analysis for how our understanding of the relationship between impoliteness and identity is mediated through different CMC forums are also considered in this section.

2. Impoliteness, intention and norms

Although impoliteness research is still arguably in its infancy (at least in comparison to politeness research), a diverse range of approaches has already emerged (Culpeper 1996, 2005; Bousfield 2008; Bousfield and Culpeper 2008; Bousfield and Locher 2008). However, in line with the received view in pragmatics (Haugh 2008a, 2009a), most of the current approaches still assume that (recognition of) the speaker's intentions plays a central role in defining impoliteness or rudeness (Culpeper 2005: 38, Bousfield 2008: 72; 2008: 36; Locher and Watts 2008: 80; Terkourafi 2008: 70), as Locher and Bousfield (2008: 3−4) note.

In a recent analysis of email messages sent within a church-based computer-mediated community, for instance, Graham (2007) argues, in line

with current theorizing of impoliteness, that evaluating certain emails as impolite crucially involves framing such emails as "intentional face attack" (Graham 2007: 749)[1]. In a detailed analysis of the response of one list member (Jane) to a request for prayers from another member (Brad), as well as subsequent responses by other list members to this initial exchange, Graham (2007) argues that:

> whether or not she intended to attack Brad's face, by violating the norms of this C of P [Community of Practice] and posting this critical message within a prayer request thread, Jane elicits criticisms of impoliteness because the other ListMembers have interpreted her actions as intentional face attacks (and therefore impolite acts).   (Graham 2007: 749)

However, while Graham (2007: 747−750) foregrounds the attribution of intentions in her analysis of impoliteness, it is arguably the perceived violation of particular norms for appropriate postings in this computer-mediated community that is most critical to Jane's message being evaluated as offensive. If the violation is perceived or framed as *intended,* the degree of impoliteness or offence may indeed be perceived as greater; but even if Jane's posting is perceived to be *unintended,* it can nevertheless be evaluated as impolite or offensive, or alternatively rude (Locher and Bousfield 2008: 3−4). In other words, the view held by some scholars that impoliteness necessarily involves the speaker having impolite intent and/or the recipient attributing impolite intent to the speaker arguably underplays both the inherent discursivity of intentions, and the pivotal role (perceptions of) norms play in evaluations of impoliteness.

Intentions are inherently discursive in that while speakers may at times have particular impolite intentions, and attributions of particular intentions to speakers by recipients to offend may at times occur, these attributions can themselves be disputed (Haugh 2008b, 2008c: 69−71). In other words, whether one appeals to the speaker's intentions themselves (plausible or actual), or alternatively to the recipient's perceptions of the speaker's intentions, such appeals ultimately result in an impoverished account of impoliteness. Situations where diverging interpretations of impoliteness arise, for instance, cannot always be treated as a matter of recipients "incorrectly" inferring the intentions of speakers, as is largely assumed in (neo-)Gricean and Relevance Theoretic approaches to communication (Arundale 2008; Haugh 2009a: 92). Instead, they may involve deeper differences in interpretative norms and sociocultural presuppositions that cannot be reduced to contextual differences (Haugh 2008b: 219−224).

It appears, then, that in evaluating a speaker's behaviour as impolite or offensive, it is arguably not the (attribution of the) speaker's intentions per se that are necessarily crucial, but rather the speaker's behaviour with respect to how the recipient thinks *others* would (or should) evaluate such behaviour (as impolite, offensive and so on). As Locher and Watts (2008) have recently argued:

> a term such as 'impoliteness' should be seen as a first order concept, i. e. a judgment made by a participant in an interaction with respect to the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the social behaviour of co-participants.   (Locher and Watts 2008: 77)

In making such evaluations, then, "norms" of social behaviour are inevitably invoked (Eelen 2001). These encompass both empirical norms, namely what behaviour one thinks is *likely* to occur in particular situations, arising from the sum of each individual's experiences, as well as moral norms, namely what behaviour one thinks *should* occur in particular situations, which has its basis in the moral structures of society (Culpeper 2008: 29; Haugh 2003: 399−400; cf. Eelen 2001: 127−158)[2]. Yet such norms are not pre-existing constructs that drive social interaction, but are themselves discursively co-constructed through interaction.

Locher and Watts (2008), for instance, analyzed a discussion board focusing on an incident where a waiter responded to a customer taking a fork from another empty table by replacing the said fork in a manner interpretable as reproaching the customer for not asking first. They found that responses varied: some respondents claimed that the waiter was not impolite at all, with some even claiming the customer was actually at fault, while others claimed the waiter may indeed have breached norms of politeness (Locher and Watts 2008: 82). They argue that what is interesting is "there is no clear agreement among the contributors to the thread on how this brief episode should be classified with respect to the level of relational work" (2008: 83). In other words, there is often (if not always) variability across individuals in regards to their evaluations of certain instances of behaviour as (im)polite. Such a claim echoes that made in Eelen's (2001) groundbreaking critique of politeness theory, where he found that the inherent variability in evaluations of (im)politeness had been largely ignored by politeness researchers.

Consistent with this position, research into flaming in various modes of CMC has generally placed greater emphasis on the explanatory power of (localized) norms over the (recognition of) speaker intentions. Avgerinakou (2003), for instance, argues that while flaming involves messages "contrary to the norms sanctioned by other participants" (2003: 274), to

which others take offence or are insulted by (2003: 276), the norms them-selves are not necessarily stable.

A number of studies have also investigated how norms arise and are (re)negotiated in various online (or virtual) communities (Androutso-poulos 2006). Preece (2004: 58−60), for instance, argues that norms of appropriate behaviour arise in different CMC settings through the writ-ing and subsequent revision of manuals of appropriate behaviour (net-iquette); explicit correction or sanctioning of inappropriate behaviour by moderators and others in the computer-mediated community; role modelling of appropriate behaviour by established members; as well as specific online tools such as filters (for obscenities, for example) and community tools (for approving, rejecting, editing or deleting messages and so on). Moreover, in a study of a church-based computer-mediated community, Graham (2008), argues that while the FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) distributed to all list members is not always an accu-rate reflection of how interactions are carried out in the online com-munity, it is nevertheless valued by the community as constituting impor-tant guidelines. It thus represents, in some sense, the codified moral norms of appropriate behaviour in that particular electronic community. Some of these norms are specific to particular online communities, for example, sanctions against "blatting" (that is, reposting someone else's message without their permission) or using an inaccurate subject line in some listserv discussion lists (Graham 2007: 756), or against giving particular personal details in some online discussion forums (Stommel 2008: 11). Other norms, however, are shared more generally with face-to-face interaction, for example, sanctions against impersonal references to someone who is a potential recipient (Graham 2007: 756). What is perhaps unique to many forms of CMC, however, is that any discussion and negotiation of norms is open to a much wider audience than is generally the case for face-to-face interaction, and that an enduring re-cord of this discussion may be created online, and is thus available for scrutiny (and revisiting) by others at any time (including the researcher) (Herring 2002: 146). Through analyzing such data, then, not only are researchers able to investigate how norms of (im)politeness are discur-sively co-constructed, but also how such norms may be disputed (de Oliveria 2007; Graham 2007).

In placing greater emphasis on norms in evaluations of impoliteness, however, the question arises as to how participants might ascertain which norm(s) are relevant to particular interactions. In the following sections, it is suggested that through an analysis of the variability and argumentativity surrounding evaluations of an email sent by a lecturer to a student we may gain at least some insight into the ways evaluations of impoliteness and the moral norms that underlie those evaluations can be co-constructed, negotiated and disputed in (online) interactions.

3. Disputing offence in email communication

On the 6th of August 2007 a national newspaper in New Zealand, *The New Zealand Herald* (NZH)*,* ran a story on a lecturer at the University of Auckland who had been fired the previous month. In the initial report in the NZH, and those that followed, it was reported that the lecturer was dismissed because of an email he had sent to a student:

> Security and intelligence expert JS has been dismissed from the University of Auckland apparently after sending an "angry" email to a student, refusing her an assignment extension […] While neither Dr S or the University will comment on what led to his dismissal, the Herald understands that the matter began over his emailed response to the request for an extension.
>
> ("Lecturer dismissed after refusing assignment extension",
> Edward Gay, *New Zealand Herald*, 6 August 2007).

Reports on the incident were also broadcast on major television and radio networks in New Zealand and internationally, although the NZH continued to remain at the centre of reporting on the controversy until the reinstatement of the lecturer in September 2008. The email itself was published on the 8th August 2007 in the NZH, with much of the debate that followed focusing on whether the email was judged to be only "intemperate" and "strongly worded" thus not justifying his dismissal, or "offensive" and "racist" thereby justifying his dismissal. The ways in which the email was framed in the New Zealand media as opposed to the media in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), from where the student had come, largely reflected the above dichotomy. The online responses of people worldwide (although primarily in New Zealand and the UAE) were much more varied. The focus in this analysis is thus not on the ways in which the story developed in traditional print and broadcast media, but rather on how the email was evaluated online, drawing from relevant blogs and discussion boards. However, before considering evaluations of the email by the general public, the way in which the email was evaluated by the lecturer and student themselves is first considered, as it is their evaluations that lie at the heart of the controversy. These evaluations are drawn from (online) media reports together with the determination of the New Zealand Employment Relations Authority (ERA) on the case of JS versus the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Auckland (AA 108/08) .While these reports are in the public domain, the student's name has not been included in this paper as her identity has been subsequently granted suppression, although she was identified in earlier reports in the NZH and *Gulf News*. The lecturer has also been anonymized at his request.

The email about which the student made a complaint leading to the lecturer's dismissal was actually the fourth in a longer thread which has been reconstructed from the above reports. The emails sent by the student and lecturer that preceded and followed the controversial email in this thread prove instructive in interpreting how both the lecturer and the student evaluated it, and so are included in the following analysis. The thread started with an emailed request sent by the student on the 22nd of May for an essay extension (which was due on the 29th of May):

(1)   (E1) (From student to the lecturer, 22 May, 1:56am)

```
 1  Good morning,
 2
 3  Hope you are fine,
 4
 5  As all students know from the beginning of the semester,
 6  we can't ask for an extension just if you accept the reason
 7  why we want to extend the time?
 8
 9  But, can I ask for an extension because the last two weeks
10  I was under pressure because my father was in the intensive
11  care. Unfortunately, on Friday morning at 7.30am, he passed
12  away and I couldn't manage to go to attend my father's funeral
13  back home in Dubai. All this after your confirmation.
14
15  Also, can I ask some questions about the last essay. Please can
16  you illustrate further what does bibliographic essay? Should I do
17  the essay on a topic which interests me?
18
19  I will appreciate your cooperation with student.
20
21  Looking forward to hearing from you.
```

In the first email in the thread (E1), after first acknowledging that the lecturer did not normally grant extensions, the student then went on to request an extension, which was then followed by questions about the scope of the essay itself. This first email from the student is certainly interpretable as polite, at least from the perspective of email practice in Australian (and arguably New Zealand) tertiary institutions (Merrison et al. 2009; cf. Davies et al. 2007), with a conventionally indirect request form being used (i. e., a standard modal form in line 9), accompanied by a reason for the request (lines 9−13). The request is also preceded by a "polite" greeting in line 1 (cf. the Australian/New Zealand standard use

of "hi" or "hello" by students), as well as showing friendliness through the semi-personalized "hope you are fine" in line 3. It is also preceded and followed by non-idiomatic expressions of deference to the lecturer's authority (lines 5−7, 13). The interpretation of the non-idiomatic expression of pre-thanking in line 19 remains somewhat ambiguous though as to whether the student is presupposing that the lecturer will grant her an extension, which is potentially interpretable as impolite, or as presupposing that he will help with her inquiry (lines 15−17), where an impolite evaluation appears less likely.

In the lecturer's response that same day (E2), however, there is no indication that he is orienting to this potential impoliteness in the student's previous email. Instead, he appears to reciprocate the polite tone of the student's initial request:

(2)   (E2) (From the lecturer to the student, 22 May, 5:18am)

   1   Dear XXX
   2
   3   If you need an extension you must go to the University medical
   4   centre and speak to a mental health counsellor who can verify
   5   your loss and the stress sit [sic] has caused you. Having lost both
   6   of my parents in recent years, I can sympathies with your grief,
   7   but in the interests of fairness to the other students I am re-
   8   quired to request certification that your request is legitimate.
   9   I hope that you will understand this reasoning …

In his response, the lecturer first asks the student to provide certification that her father had indeed passed away in line with university policy on granting extensions before giving advice about the essay (not included above). The request for certification is framed as an official process out of the lecturer's control ("I am required", line 7), but in personalizing the expected expression of sympathy for the student's loss (lines 5−6), his response is also interpretable, while not necessarily as polite, at least as not impolite.

The student then emailed the lecturer on the 30th of May saying that she had received the medical certificate from the health centre and wanted to make an appointment to give it to him (E3)[3]. The lecturer's response to this email, however, was markedly different in tone to his previous email. And it was about this email (E4) that the student made her complaint to the university:

(3)   (E4) (From the lecturer to the student, 30 May, 7:24pm)

1   I say this reluctantly but not so subtly: you are not suitable for
2   a graduate degree. It does not matter if your father died or if you
3   have a medical certificate. I have been too nice and given you too
4   high marks all along (at c+). I do not anticipate that you will do
5   better in the final exercise. You are already a day late. The
6   extension is meaningless because you have not attended for the
7   last few classes and are the worse [sic] performer in the class.
8   Of course by a far stretch, You will have the obituary of your
9   father, but even if available and the student health people might
10   have believed you, I do not. You are close to failing in any event,
11   so these sort of excuses − culturally driven and preying on some
12   sort of Western liberal guilt − are simply lame.
13
14   Prove that your father died and you were distraught and unable to
15   complete assignments in spite of your abysmal record to date as an
16   underperforming and underqualified student and perhaps you
17   might qualify for an extension to get a C−. But as it stands, you
18   will flunk since your [sic] are already a day+ late, and you [sic]
19   track record is poor.
20
21   By the way − are you a [teacher name] student? That would ex
22   plain a lot of things.
23
24   In a word: NO − I do not accept your extension request.

This email differs considerably in its tone both from his previous email (E2) and the emails that followed (particularly E5 discussed below), and so appears to be a prototypical instance of "flaming" (Avgerinakou 2003: 273−274), and thus interpretable as impolite. In this email a number of potential face-threats arise as the lecturer criticizes the student's work, explicitly associating her with negative characteristics such as being "not suitable for a graduate degree" (lines 1−2), the "worse [sic] performer in the class" (line 7), and having an "abysmal record to date" (line 15). He also implicitly accuses the student of lying about her father's death (lines 8−10), and characterizes her excuse as "lame" (line 12), which is also highly face-threatening. However, it is his comment in lines 21−22 where he undermines a colleague, and his positioning of the student's reason for the extension as "culturally driven" (line 11) and "preying on some sort of Western liberal guilt" (lines 11−12) that were to prove most controversial. While the latter was cited as evidence by those who evaluated the lecturer's email as "unprofessional", "offensive"

and "racist" rather than simply "intemperate" or "angry", what the lecturer actually meant by his comments in lines 11−12 is somewhat opaque. The interpretation of this comment by both the lecturer and the student is thus of particular interest.

According to the lecturer in an interview published on the personal blog of the editor of the student newspaper that originally broke the story, *Craccum*, the comments were aimed at international students in general who are allegedly "known" for making up deaths in the family to get extensions and the like:

(4)   the Western liberal guilt stuff, I was talking about myself, my own culture, I don't have any Western liberal guilt, I'm sort of a hard person. As far as the culturally driven stuff, I thought at the time that she was preying on the fact that she was alleging that her father had died abroad, and I hear that all the time at the end of semester from international students. I hear it all the time every semester − relative dying in far-off places with no evidence of the death provided, and so I was in a particularly bad-tempered mood and so I wasn't believing it, so that's why I wrote what I wrote.

<div align="right">("Liberal guilt", Paul Litterick,
The Fundy Post, 16 August 2007)</div>

In explaining his "culturally driven" comment, the lecturer appeals to his previous experience with international students, namely that some students claim that a relative has died without providing evidence, and by implication that these deaths were actually made up. Little light is shed on the "Western liberal guilt" comment in this interview, however, although the lecturer identifies this as something that is part of his "own" culture, and so was presumably not a criticism directed at the student.

In relation to the email as a whole, in subsequent statements made to the media in August 2007 onwards, the lecturer repeatedly characterized it as an "angry email", an "angry rant", and an "outburst", consistent with his claim above that his comments were a result of his "bad-tempered mood". For instance, in a radio interview, the lecturer described the email as follows:

(5)   (Interview between Jose Barbosa and JS, 95bFM, 7 August 2007)

  1 JS: It sta:rted with- I wrote a student an angry e:mail=
  2 JB: yeah.
  3 JS: =to: a: (.) student who asked for an extension the day a:fter

4   the assignment was ↓<u>due</u>. (0.2) .hhhhh that was the <u>reason</u>
5   ↑<u>given</u> HHh <u>A</u>:nd a(.hh) (0.2) you k<u>no</u>w a little <u>bo</u>thersome
6   b<u>e</u>cause I uh (0.2) .hhhh (.) I didn't say anything <u>se</u>xual,
7   gender or anything in the <u>e</u>:mail it was cl<u>e</u>:arly an <u>a</u>:ngry <u>ra</u>:nt.
8   So(h) I apologized the next day after writing ↑her (0.2) .hhhh
9   and hh told her (.) ahhh u:m that she could um hand in the
10   assignment <u>la</u>te, I'd give her consideration.

In positioning his email in this way, as an angry rant (lines 1, 7) in response to a late request for an extension (lines 3−4) rather than something interpretable as any form of harassment (lines 6−7), the lecturer focuses primarily on his own feelings, thereby avoiding any explicit reference to any offence the student might have felt, as well as indirectly justifying his anger by positioning the request as late and thus unreasonable[4].

The student, however, had a markedly different interpretation of the comment about "cultural driven" excuses. In an interview with the NZH, the student was quoted as saying the following:

(6)   "He is pointing at our culture − why?" Miss XXX said this week.
       "Does he say that all the white people have the right to have this feeling when they lose their parents?
       "Once he was talking to someone on Symonds St. I said, 'Hi.' He didn't reply."

                                  ("Palestinian link in lecturer's firing", Simon Collins,
                                                          NZ Herald, 11 August 2007)

From her reported response, it is apparent she interpreted the comment as attacking her culture, and thus racist. She also provides what she appears to consider further evidence of the lecturer's "racism" in describing an incident where he ignored her when she greeted him.

The student was also reported as evaluating the lecturer's email (E4) as a whole in quite a different way to the lecturer. In the same blog mentioned above, the editor of *Craccum* reported the student as saying the email was offensive:

(7)   She had forwarded S's email to us on 18th July, saying she found it offensive and hurtful. She asked us to print it so that students would be aware of the "institutional racism" at the University

                                          ("Liberal guilt", Paul Litterick,
                                                   The Fundy Post, 16 August 2007)

In her evaluation of the email, then, the student focused on her feelings in response to the email, namely feeling offended and hurt, as well as

attributing the email to racism on the part of the lecturer (see also "Lecturer sacked over offensive e-mail to Emirati", Daniel Bardsley, *Gulf News*, 9 August 2007).

The controversial email was then followed by another email from the lecturer early in the morning of the following day, where he apologized for his previous email:

(8)   (E5) (From the lecturer to the student, 1 June, 4:14am)

    1 I apologise for my annoyed response − I had a series of extension
    2 requests and other student excuses yesterday and yours was the
    3 last of the day.
    4
    5 If you can provide a medical or mental health
    6 certificate justifying the extension request I shall grant it, but be
    7 aware that you will have to lift your game in order to meet
    8 graduate level standards.
    9
   10 Again, my apologies for being hard on you and a reiteration
   11 that I will consider your extension request.

In this follow-up email, the lecturer positioned his previous email (E4), which led to the complaint by the student, as an "annoyed response" (line 1) and referred to himself as "being hard on you" (line 10) (E5), while also apologizing twice for it (lines 1 and 10)[5].

However, while the lecturer made repeated reference to the fact that he had apologized in statements to the media (as seen, for example, in the radio interview discussed above), it became apparent that the student did not consider this apology sufficient in light of his previous email and so persisted in lodging a formal complaint. Interestingly, the view that his apology was not sufficient was reiterated in the Determination of the New Zealand Employment Relations Authority (ERA):

(9)   Dr S sent an offensive email to a student, to whom he had pastoral care obligations, which he then half heartedly apologized for. He then continued to communicate via email, purportedly attempting to arrange for delivery of the requisite medical certificate as documentary proof of the reason for the extension, while at the same time criticizing her and reiterating his view that she was an underperforming student.   (AA 108/08, 14)

Here the apology is characterized as "half hearted" relative to the degree of offence caused. The ERA also drew attention to the way in which the lecturer repeated his criticisms of the student's performance in his subsequent emails (for example, E5, lines 6−8)[6].

4. Variability and argumentativity in online evaluations

Just as the lecturer and the student had markedly different perspectives on the email in question (E4), so too was there a wide range of views represented in online commentary posted about the email and the dismissal of the lecturer. In this section, these online evaluations are explored in more detail. After briefly discussing the degree of variability across different evaluations of the email, the ways in which these evaluations were disputed is considered. Through this analysis it emerges that these evaluations were mediated by the situational and technological particulars of the online forum in which they emerged, as well as being closely interlinked with the attribution of particular identities to the lecturer and student.

A thematic sample of 412 postings in relation to the dismissal of the lecturer was first assembled, drawing from the two key periods in which the case was reported in the media and consequently generated a significant level of online discussion (August 2007, March 2008) (cf. Herring 2004: 351)[7]. The postings were gathered from two types of sources, namely, online (we)blogs (Kiwiblog, Tumeke!, No Minister, Cactus Kate, The Fundy Post, and whoar.co.nz) where the dismissal was raised by the blogger, and online discussion boards that followed articles in the NZH, *Scoop Independent News*, and *Gulf News*. The sample of postings from the six blogs included seventeen original posts by the blog owners followed by a total of 237 response comments, while the sample of postings from the three newspapers included four original articles followed by a total of 169 response comments on discussion boards[8]. However, as the theme of these online discussions was the dismissal of the lecturer, not all postings included evaluations of the email as such, with many focusing, for instance, on the qualities of the lecturer as a teacher or the (un)fairness of the dismissal itself.

In order to get a sense of the wide variability in online evaluations of the lecturer's email, then, all the online comments were first integrated into a single data set and then concordances with "email/e-mail" were analyzed using TextSTAT (Simple Text Concordance Software). This analysis elicited 50 relevant concordances from the original 412 postings. A further 30 potentially relevant evaluations were identified through content analysis, although due to difficulties in determining whether these evaluations related specifically to the email itself, or alternatively to the lecturer in general, these were excluded from the count of evaluation tokens (although not from the subsequent analysis of argumentativity). In order to view the wide range of evaluations of the email, descriptions of the email were roughly arranged according to whether they connote approval or disapproval (see Figure 1). The relative degree of

gravity of these negative connotations arguably varies from mild disapproval through to very serious condemnation, although validating such an intuitive scale lays beyond the scope of this paper, so they are arranged according to frequency of tokens (indicated in brackets)[9]. Since a number of tokens co-occurred in the same posting, the number of tokens (61) exceeds the number of concordances (50).

honest (truthful) (1)   (approval)
absolutely fine (1)

silly (1)   (disapproval)
over the top (*uncalled for*) (2)
harsh (*blunt*) (3)
cruel (*mean-spirited*) (3)
insensitive (4)
insulting (4)
rude (4)
inappropriate (5)
offensive (5)
unprofessional (*unacceptable*) (6)
angry rant (*venting*) (7)
intemperate (*impetuous, ill conceived*) (8)
racist (8)

Figure 1. *Range of online evaluations of the lecturer's email (E4).*

From this range of responses, apart from indicating significant variation in evaluations of the degree of severity of the lecturer's email, it is also apparent that these evaluations actually involve two distinct foci, reflecting the contrasting positions taken by the lecturer and the student discussed in the previous section. The first focus involves evaluations of the lecturer's email, and to some extent his underlying state of mind when sending the email. In the evaluations above, these included characterizations of it as *silly, inappropriate, intemperate, insensitive, angry, harsh, over the top, unprofessional, rude* and *cruel*. The second focus encompasses evaluations of the recipient's response to the email in question. In the evaluations above, these include characterizations of it as *insulting* and *offensive* (and to some extent as *a racist and personal attack*). It is also evident that evaluations of the lecturer's email varied in their relative degree of seriousness, from characterizations of the email as *racist* (8 tokens) and *offensive* (5 tokens) through to evaluations of it as simply an *angry rant* (7 tokens) or *intemperate* (8 tokens). While such figures can only give an approximate representation of the wide variation in online evaluations of the lecturer's email, and little information is available on those who posted the evaluations, it is apparent that such variability is indeed an empirical reality.

Upon closer qualitative analysis of particular threads of online post-ings, particularly on the blogs, it became apparent how this variability can lead to discursive dispute. While many posts were one-offs and did not necessarily relate to previous posts, in some instances repeated posts were made by the same person which addressed comments made in pre-vious posts by him/herself and others. In the following excerpts from an emerging sub-thread of the larger discussion thread on Kiwiblog ("The sacking of JS", 8−10 August 2007), for instance, two posters dispute the degree to which the lecturer's email could be considered offensive. The sub-thread begins with a post by *Kevin at AK Uni* who positions the lecturer's email as "a bit abrasive" and thus as not providing sufficient grounds for the lecturer's dismissal[10]:

(10) Kevin at AK Uni: […] Dismissal should be for molestation or drunk on the job, or inability to do the job, not for being a bit abrasive and not toeing the party line.   [post 72]

This is directly responded to in the following post by *Name Withheld* (11), who claims that criticizing other lecturers in front of students (refer-ring to line 21, E4) as well as being rude to students is grounds for dismissal. In doing so, it is presupposed by *Name Withheld* that the lec-turer's email was indeed "rude" as opposed to "a bit abrasive". *Name Withheld* thereby evaluated the severity of offence caused by the email as greater than *Kevin at AK Uni*:

(11) Name Withheld: […] If the university has reason to believe that you are badmouthing other lecturers in front of students and/or gen-erally being rude to them then it affects the running of the institu-tion. Grounds for dismissal, if you have given the employee prior warning and if the behaviour persists, imho.   [post 73]

In his next post (12), *Kevin at AK Uni* characterizes the lecturer's email as a "difference of opinion", which he claims the university was not prepared to tolerate due to the possible negative implications for its public image. In doing so, he downgrades the evaluated level of offence arising from the email:

(12) Kevin at AK Uni: I have no inside information. I suppose we will find out in the fullness of time. I would have thought a university would have resisted firing for differences of opinion more than other organisations. It seems the university is more interested in public perception than open and frack [sic] discussion … [post 75]

This move, however, is explicitly resisted by *Name Withheld* in post 77 (13), when s/he frames the email as much more damaging than a simple difference of opinion. In particular, *Name Withheld* argues that through the email the lecturer vents at the student, accuses her of using her culture as an excuse to get an extension (referring to lines 10−12, E4), as well as making (presumably unprofessional) comments about another colleague:

(13) Name Withheld: This was hardly a "difference of opinion" between peers. It was a lecturer venting at a student, accusing the student of using her culture to manipulate the system and then badmouthing others in his department in front of the student. I can't believe how eager others are to say otherwise just because S was apparently "a great teacher". Even S himself says the email was inappropriate.

[post 77]

Interestingly, not only *Kevin at AK Uni* but others who have defended the lecturer's email as "a bit abrasive" or "intemperate" in previous posts on Kiwiblog are then claimed by *Name Withheld* as attempting to construct a particular identity for the lecturer, namely, as "a great teacher"; the presumption being that as a "great teacher" he should be forgiven for this indiscretion. This theme of the connection between evaluations of impoliteness and identity is returned to below.

The discussion in the sub-thread continues with a response by *Kevin at AK Uni* in post 81 (14), where he claims that since the lecturer retracted and apologized for the email, the matter should have ended there. The student is also alluded to as someone with a "thin skin" (that is, someone who easily takes offence) in this post, thereby downgrading the degree of severity of the email:

(14) Kevin at AK Uni: Yep he retracted it, apologised, end of story I would have thought. Or are we going down the thin skin path so far we won't be happy until we have turned everyone into victims that can't look after themselves. It does sound like his track record deserves retaining him if at all possible.　　　　[post 81]

In post 99 (15), the discussion sub-thread is revisited when *Kevin at AK Uni* once again positions the email as a result of the lecturer losing his temper, for which he apologized, and not as a severe offence:

(15) Kevin at AK Uni: He lost his temper and then apologised, a capital offence?　　　　[post 99]

This elicits a response from *Name Withheld* (16), where s/he claims that this is not the only time that the lecturer has sent an email that has offended a student:

(16) Name Withheld: […] Kevin, you don't know shit. This isn't an iso-
     lated case.   [post 100]

It is notable that in (16), *Name Withheld* directs an insult at *Kevin at AK Uni* as both parties refuse to shift their position on the lecturer's email and dismissal. The discussion thus ends, with flaming, in a seemingly irreconcilable stalemate about how the email should be evaluated.

The emergence of discursive dispute in relation to evaluations of the email was not, however, evenly distributed across the comments posted online. As such, argumentativity largely emerged only in the response threads on blogs rather than on the discussion boards following newspaper articles (cf. Upadhyay, this volume). While blogs and newspaper discussion boards are similar genres in that both involve an initial discursive position outlined by either the blogger or the newspaper followed by an invitation for multiple others to post responses, and also use a similar medium in that users are able to post comments anonymously on to a discussion thread organized chronologically, certain other technological and situational factors influenced the differential emergence of argumentativity across these two closely related modes of CMC (Herring 2004, 2007). In the case of the blogs, there was a much higher rate of interlinking of responses, many of them in sub-threads of more than two posts, within the overall threads. 55.3 % (131/237) of posts on the blogs, for instance, referred to other previous posts either through explicitly naming the addressee (addressivity) or directly quoting from another post (Herring 2001: 619−620), with 42 % (55/131) of these being recursively related. In the discussion boards, however, the rate of interlinking of responses through addressivity or quoting was much lower, with just 4.7 % (8/169) of posts referring to previous posts.

The greater rate of interaction in the discussion threads on the blogs as opposed to the discussion boards is likely to be partly a consequence of the way in which responses appeared on a single webpage in the case of the blogs, which required participants to scroll down the page to reach the newest postings appearing at the end of the thread (and post their own thread), as opposed to the discussion board threads which were arranged in reverse chronological order (from newest to oldest), and in the case of the NZH discussion thread, appeared on a number of hyperlinked webpages. Another possible factor influencing the degree of interaction is the participant structure, in that those posting responses to blogs often revisited the same blogs, as seen in the appearance of

multiple posts by some participants on the threads, while a smaller percentage of those posting responses on the discussion boards were visibly revisiting the thread. As Herring (2009) has recently argued, then, blogs constitute a "web format in which features of HTML documents and interactive computer-mediated communication converge", and it is this interactive dimension of blogs that sees the inherent variability in the evaluations of the lecturer's email morph into observable argumentativity.

As alluded to in the above discussion of this particular discussion sub-thread, a link between variability in evaluations of impoliteness and the ways in which the identities of the lecturer as well as the student were discursively constructed also became apparent in analyzing the 412 comments posted[11]. With regard to the enaction of the lecturer's personal identity, a tendency for those who constructed the lecturer as a teacher who is "tough but fair" to evaluate his email as "intemperate", "blunt", or "inappropriate", and those who framed the lecturer as a "racist" to evaluate the email as "offensive" and "insulting" was discernible. The student, on the other hand, was characterized by some online commentators as incompetent and "thin skinned", and so presumably was not justified in feeling offended. In the following excerpt from an online blog by *Cactus Kate*, for instance, she argues that the lecturer was within his rights to send such an email:

(17) I defend his right to grumpily tell students who are obviously rubbish that they are rubbish. It's possibly the first time this pampered little Daddy's girl has ever been told she is not good at something. That in itself would have been shock enough. I doubt anyone in the Emirates has ever fronted up with the truth.

<div align="right">("The Freedom of speech issue", <i>Cactus Kate</i>,
Asian Invasion 2006, 9 August 2007)</div>

The email itself is framed as "grumpy", while the student is positioned by the blogger as someone of privilege (a "pampered little Daddy's girl") that had never been on the receiving end of criticism before, and it was for this reason that she felt offended.

Other online commentators, however, who evaluated the email as "offensive", constructed the student as someone who was an innocent victim of abuse. In one post to the discussion board of the online version of *Gulf News*, the writer claimed "[i]t was deplorable what he wrote to grief-stricken [student name]" (Rahman, Dubai, UAE, "Emirati student in New Zealand feels persecuted", *Gulf News*, 9 August 2007). It is apparent, then, that evaluations of impoliteness are not made independently of the identities attributed to the persons concerned. The variability and

argumentativity apparent across online evaluations of this email reflect not only underlying differences in perceptions of moral norms of appropriateness in emails between academics and students, then, but also differences in the identities of the lecturer and student discursively constructed through this discourse.

5. Conclusion

While analyzing the metapragmatics of impoliteness, as undertaken in the course of this paper, generally entails judgements made one-step removed from the actual evaluative moment, it is proposed here that such discourse provides us with a useful window into normative aspects of the evaluative moment, both empirical norms (what seems appropriate to individuals based on their own experiences) and moral norms (what seems appropriate to individuals based on appeals to [allegedly] shared ideologies) (Culpeper 2008: 29; Haugh 2003: 399−400). The analysis in this paper of the email sent by the lecturer that led to his dismissal has highlighted the ways in which evaluations of impoliteness are likely to vary: first, evaluations may focus on the speaker's behaviour as impolite, rude and so on, or alternatively may involve the recipient's response to the speaker's behaviour, namely (feelings of) offence; second, the degree of perceived impoliteness/offence itself can vary. Indeed, such evaluations are clearly open to discursive (re)negotiation as well as dispute. Eelen's (2001) seminal critique of politeness theories as neglecting the inherent variability and argumentativity of (im)politeness has thus been echoed in this analysis. It has also become apparent that the inherent discursivity of impoliteness arises not only from different perceptions of norms, but also from the online forum in which such evaluations are mediated, as well as the ways in which the identities of the participants are discursively constructed by themselves and others. While CMC may not seem the obvious place to begin constructing a theory of (im)politeness, it has been argued here that studies of impoliteness in various forms of CMC can shed considerable light on this endeavour as impoliteness research continues to emerge from the shadow of theories of politeness.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

underlining	stressed word or part of word
CAPITALS	marked louder volume
↑↓	marked rises or falls in pitch
hh	hearable aspiration
.hh	hearable in-breathing
=	continuation of turn across intervening lines of transcript

-	cut-off of prior sound or word
:	stretching of sound of preceding letter
(.)	micro-pause
(0.2)	timed pause

Bionote

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Notes

1. Face is currently conceptualized in various ways in the literature (Haugh 2009b), but since the focus in this paper is on impoliteness rather than face per se, these differences are not discussed in any detail here. It is assumed in the analysis, however, that evaluations of behaviour as face-threatening are not necessarily synonymous with evaluations of impoliteness.
2. These terms are from Culpeper (2008: 29).
3. The specific wording of this email was not made available in either media reports or in the determination of the ERA.
4. In fact, the initial request for an extension was made by the student before the essay was due (on the 22nd of May), a point not touched upon in the lecturer's explanation. This is most likely because the lecturer only considered extension requests "official" when the required documentation had been produced (which from that perspective was late in being offered on the 30th of May). A posting by one of the lecturer's students appears to support this interpretation: "To put his email in context: At the start of every course I have taken with him, he has told us the procedure for requesting an extension. He has said what evidence he requires, when he will grant an extension, and when he will not. I have received extensions from him in the past. It's very simple; you ask before the due date, and if it's medical or bereavement, you provide documentary evidence. This is because essay flu and mysterious sixth grandparents' deaths are not all that uncommon." (David Tong − Former Undergrad Student, "Feedback flows in support of JS", *Scoop Independent News,* 6 August 2007).
5. In a second follow-up email (E6), while positioning his email (E4) as "rude", he also pressured the student to produce the medical certificate quickly as she was, according to him, already losing marks since the due date for the essay had passed (E6). As this email focused primarily on the matter of granting an extension, it is not reprinted here.

6. It is worth noting that the decision of the initial ruling from the ERA was that the lecturer not be reinstated, and only receive financial compensation (26 March 2008). However, in response to a subsequent appeal the lecturer was eventually reinstated (19 September 2008).

7. The reinstatement of the lecturer was reported in the NZH in September 2008 ("Sacked lecturer reinstated", Edward Gay, *New Zealand Herald*, 20 September 2008), and, although this news was noted on a number of blogs (including Kiwiblog, Tumeke!, and whoar.co.nz), it generated little in the way of further online response.

8. The blogs and discussion boards from which the sample was drawn are open to general posting (only an email is required) and so cannot be considered the communications of a closed or private group as such (Ess and AoIR 2002: 5; Esyenbach and Till 2001: 1104). In addition, the identity of those posting comments cannot be traced except where they have identified themselves in their posts (Esyenbach and Till 2001: 1105). However, in the light of the sensitive nature of this topic, all posts have nevertheless been anonymized in this paper (Herring 2002: 146).

9. Indeed validating such a scale would be complicated by the fact that the relative gravity of terms on such a scale could themselves be discursively disputed.

10. Those posts not relevant to this particular exchange between *Kevin at AK Uni* and *Name Withheld* have been removed, hence the gap between the posting numbers.

11. The definition of identity remains an area of considerable controversy. In this analysis, identity is assumed to be discursively accomplished through social interaction rather than existing *a priori* or independently of discourse, and to involve four interpenetrating layers, of which the personal identities projected by the lecturer and student themselves and attributed to them by others are most relevant (Hecht et al. 2005).

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