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# The landscape of impoliteness research

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**Abstract:** This article attempts to give a state-of-the-art picture of impoliteness studies and to indicate a few prospective research directions to enrich them. It critically surveys a number of theoretical and methodological problems (impoliteness vs. rudeness; intention; sanctioned face-threat; and impoliteness strategies), as well as the paramount topics of investigation (such as disagreement; arguments; insults, taboo words; or sarcasm), and discourse domains in which impoliteness can be found. Importantly, this paper brings to focus a selection of notions central to impoliteness, albeit not yet widely recognized in the scholarship on impoliteness. These include: slurs; pejoratives; and a number of phenomena promoted by computer mediated communication (e.g., flaming or trolling).

**Keywords:** impoliteness research, manifestations of impoliteness, methodological problems, theory of impoliteness

## 1 Introduction

The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Journal of Politeness Research* is a good occasion to dwell on the past and future of *impoliteness* research, which will soon have its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Primarily thanks to Culpeper's 1996 article,<sup>1</sup> the notion of impoliteness has developed into an independent field of investigation vis-à-vis politeness studies. Whilst the volume of research done on impoliteness cannot eclipse that of politeness, which enjoys a much longer tradition and never ceases to stimulate academic interest, the scholarship on impoliteness continues expanding very rapidly (cf. the paucity of research lamented by Locher and

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1 However, the concept of face attack/aggravation had been addressed in earlier works (Goffman 1967; Craig et al. 1986; Lachenicht 1980; Austin 1990; Penman 1990), and Lachenicht (1980) also proposed a classification of "aggravating language" strategies inspired by Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework.

Bousfield in 2008). The multifarious studies on impoliteness fly in the face of Leech's claim that "conflictive illocutions tend, thankfully, to be rather marginal to human linguistic behaviour in normal circumstances" (Leech 1983: 105), as well as a misguided assumption that Brown and Levinson's (1987) on-record strategy can accommodate face-attacks. A bedrock premise underlying the classical scholarship (Craig et al. 1986, Culpeper 1996, 2005; Culpeper et al. 2003, Bousfield 2008a) is that impoliteness cannot be viewed as part of politeness and deserves to have distinct theoretical frameworks developed for it that will account for its workings. As Bousfield (2008a) explains, when a speaker makes an impolite utterance, he/she not only refuses to preserve the hearer's face but also actively seeks to damage/aggravate it. Similarly, following in Beebe's (1995) footsteps, Culpeper et al. (2003) take as their departure point an assumption that impoliteness is not merely an unintentional result of failed politeness.

In the light of the above, "impoliteness" is traditionally used as an umbrella term for purposefully produced face-threatening utterances,<sup>2</sup> by means of which the speaker intends (rather than happens) to inflict face-damage (cf. e.g., Lachenicht 1980; Culpeper 1996, 2005<sup>3</sup>, 2008; Culpeper et al. 2003; Bousfield 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b, 2010). Face-threatening utterances have two paramount manifestations, depending on how they are delivered:

- (i) Unmitigated, in contexts where mitigation is required, and/or,
- (ii) With deliberate, aggression, that is, with the face-threat intentionally exacerbated, "boosted", or maximized in some way to heighten the face-damage inflicted (Bousfield 2007a: 2186–2187, 2008b: 72, cf. Bousfield 2008a: 132).

Many theoretical problems and conceptualizations are germane to both politeness and impoliteness. These include the distinction between *first* and *second order*<sup>4</sup> approaches, i.e., lay users' own understandings vs. theorists' conceptualizations of impoliteness (see, for example, Locher and Bousfield 2008; Bousfield 2010), the notion of *face* (e.g., Bousfield 2008a), relational work (e.g., Locher and Watts 2008), or intercultural/intracultural issues (e.g., Mills 2009; Haugh and Schneider 2012; Sifianou 2013). However, the centre of attention here is a choice of issues specific to impoliteness. Impoliteness studies rely on research frameworks and terminology independent from those germane to politeness, fielding research queries different from those pivotal to politeness.

<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, silence can also be conceived of as a vehicle for impoliteness.

<sup>3</sup> In his more recent work, Culpeper (2005, 2011) incorporates the hearer's perspective into the definition (cf. Dynel 2013b).

<sup>4</sup> For the distinction, see Craig et al. (1986); Watts et al. (1992); Eelen (2001).

Additionally, impoliteness shows a plethora of manifestations across discourse domains, some of which will be surveyed in the course of this article.

This paper gives an overview of a number of theoretical and methodological problems and the paramount topical research strands pursued in the scholarship on impoliteness (for other summaries of the field with different foci of interest, see Bousfield and Culpeper 2008; Locher and Bousfield 2008; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010a). Importantly, this article addresses also a selection of linguistic concepts which seem to be closely related to impoliteness, as defined above, but are not necessarily widely recognized by impoliteness researchers yet. It is thus shown how impoliteness studies can enrich and, simultaneously, benefit from other research traditions.

## 2 Bones of contention in impoliteness research

Several theoretical problems loom large in the scholarship on impoliteness. One of them concerns the basic terminology. Whilst the label “impoliteness” prevails in the literature in reference to deliberately face-threatening acts, some (e.g., Tracy and Tracy 1988; Kasper 1990; Kienpointner 1997; Beebe 1995) discuss the same phenomenon, calling it *rudeness*. Interestingly, Kienpointner (2008) recognizes the duality but chooses to use both terms synonymously. Several researchers have delved into this issue, which turns out to be merely the problem of transposed labels. In the light of historical and etymological evidence collated across different languages, Terkourafi (2008) avers that “rudeness” is the right label for intentional face-threat, whilst impoliteness best captures unintentional face-threat. By contrast, Bousfield (2008a, 2010), Culpeper (2008), and Culpeper et al. (2003) support an opposite view, which tallies with the prevalent parlance in the literature. Regardless of (historically validated) lay language users’ choice, impoliteness is a natural counterpart of the earlier studied “politeness”, which accounts for intentional language behaviour as viewed academically (see Culpeper 2008;<sup>5</sup> Bousfield 2010). At this stage, the prevalence of this term (together with the useful label “(im)politeness”, which captures the two opposing poles of the continuum) may be considered reason enough to sustain it. “Rudeness”, on the other hand, may be deployed with

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<sup>5</sup> Even though he endorses the second order term, irrespective of the labels used by lay language users, Culpeper (2008) does state that his approach is validated by dictionary definitions, and that the word “rude” exhibits polysemous meanings. Additionally, Culpeper (2011) does corpora research into lay uses of the words captured by an umbrella term “impoliteness metadiscourse”.

reference to unintended face-threatening behaviour. Nevertheless, the paramount criterion distinguishing between impoliteness and rudeness constitutes a problem on its own.

The notion of *intention* lies at the heart of the prevailing definitions of impoliteness (e.g., Culpeper 2005; Culpeper et al. 2003; Bousfield 2008a, 2010), according to which impoliteness is an intentional act of face-aggravation. This is a neat conceptualization, yet it raises major queries when language data are to be analyzed. This is because intentions can never be determined, but only “plausible” intentions can be reconstructed, given adequate evidence” (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1552), yet the result of intention attribution is never certain (Hardaker 2010). However, other authors argue that it is not the speaker’s intention, which escapes verification, but the interactants’ (first order) judgement of an utterance (e.g., Locher and Watts 2008) that is the crucial determinant of impoliteness. Interestingly, although Culpeper’s (2005) definition of impoliteness encompasses both provisions, viz. the speaker’s intention and the hearer’s recognition of it, he indicates that impoliteness comes into being as long as at least one of the two criteria comes into play. Later, Culpeper (2011: 254) bases his definition on the hearer’s perspective, marginalizing the speaker’s intention: “Situated behaviours are viewed negatively – considered ‘impolite’ – when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be”. Hence, the speaker’s intention to cause offence is entirely insignificant from this perspective (cf. Dynel 2013a). Frequently, nevertheless, emphasis is placed on the joint communicative product created by the speaker and the hearer (Mills 2002, 2003, 2005; Watts 2003; Culpeper 2005, 2008, 2011; Bousfield 2007a, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Locher and Watts 2005, 2008; Terkourafi 2008; Hardaker 2010).

From this, one can extrapolate that impoliteness in interaction escapes simple definitions, whether or not intention-based. Admittedly to resolve this problem, Bousfield (2010) proposes a complex classification of (intentional) impoliteness and (unintentional) rudeness centred on four binary criteria, which clarifies the terminology and theoretical landscape of face-aggravation in interaction. These criteria, each of which may be satisfied or not, are as follows: the speaker’s intent/projectability; the speaker’s awareness of possible face-damaging effects of his/her utterance; the hearer’s perception of the speaker’s intent; and the hearer’s actual taking offence. Prototypical impoliteness meets all the four criteria, whilst other impolite/rude behaviours present different combinations of the (non-)fulfilled criteria.

All of the above also indicates that second order (etic) approaches (Politeness<sub>2</sub>) need to deploy first order (emic) evaluations (Politeness<sub>1</sub>) (Locher and Bousfield 2008; Lorenzo-Dus 2009; Bousfield 2010). The problem of intention

recognition is also manifest at the level of first order interpretations, which influence second order interpretations. The need and possibility of the hearer's appreciating the speaker's intention is frequently called into question (e.g., Arundale 2008; Haugh 2008; Locher and Watts 2008). This problem is related to epistemological ambiguity of intentions, that is whether hearers consciously ascribe intentions to speakers when construing meanings (Haugh 2008). One may venture to claim the hearer aims to decipher the speaker's intended meaning (Bilmes 1986) and usually holds the speaker accountable for the meaning he/she has gleaned, tacitly assuming that the latter intends to communicate it even if this should not be the case. This happens also when the hearer regards the speaker as having violated his/her expectation/desire concerning situated behaviours, which is conducive to impoliteness (cf. Culpeper 2011). The hearer will hold a default subconscious belief concerning the speaker's intentions and will purposefully ponder it only when an utterance causes interpretative problems or when the speaker denies an intention ascribed to him/her<sup>6</sup> in the course of the interaction. Overall, impoliteness is co-constructed by interactants on the reception and production ends, being subject to scholarly investigation. Another query related to this is whether face-threat endemic in some *communities of practice*<sup>7</sup> (e.g., the army, or political debates) or prevalent situational contexts (e.g., a mother disciplining her child) should really be deemed impoliteness (albeit variously labelled) by interactants themselves and by researchers alike.

Watts (2003) proposes the concept of *sanctioned aggressive facework*, which is rooted in individuals' neutralizing face-threatening acts in interactions among family members, friends, competitors (e.g., in politics) or hierarchically organized interlocutors (e.g., military services). In a similar vein, verbal conflicts in the British parliament are thought of as *conventionalized aggression* (Harris 2001), face-threatening acts in local governance meetings are dubbed *reasonable hostility* (Tracy 2008), and impolite messages communicated on an everyday basis by superiors in the workplace are conceptualized as politic behaviour, on condition that the targets do not show offence in their replies (Schnurr et al. 2008). Rightly, Terkourafi (2008) distinguishes *unmarked rudeness*<sup>8</sup> which is realized by dint of conventionalized impolite expressions expect-

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6 Hence, "a priori" intention tends to be superseded in the literature by "post facto" intention (Haugh 2008; Culpeper 2011), which captures cases when interlocutors use the notion of intention explanatorily.

7 The concept of a "community of practice" was first advocated by Lave and Wenger (1991) and later popularized by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (e.g., 1992, 1998).

8 Terkourafi (2008) uses "rudeness" as a label for intentional face attacks.

ed in contexts conventionally perceived as face-threatening. The use of such unmarked face-threatening utterances (Dynel 2015a) is most pronounced in institutional power structures, which may (at least sometimes) provide for the use of *legitimate power* (see Eelen 2001; Harris 2001; Watts 2003; Mills 2003; Locher 2004; Bousfield 2008a; Mullany 2008) by those higher in the hierarchy (e.g., an employer towards an employee, a police officer towards a detained person, an army sergeant towards a recruit, a teacher towards a pupil) when giving commands or orders or voicing criticism. This, technically speaking, can scarcely count as prototypical impoliteness (cf. Culpeper 2011). Such behaviour may be conceived as the realization of Brown and Levinson's (1987) *bald-on-record* strategy, originally encompassed by the politeness framework. Essentially, *relative power relation* and the absolute *ranking of imposition* will help determine whether a request (e.g., "Send these files within 15 minutes please") or a critical comment (e.g., "Your answer is wrong") can be made bluntly without mitigation, not impugning the hearer's dignity. Even if the latter should not be content, they can hardly accuse the speaker of having been rude, impolite, aggressive, etc. However, face-threatening utterances in facilitating contexts cannot be taken as one homogenous construct. Some may indeed display exacerbated face-threat, given their form or topic (see Dynel 2015a).

Mills (2002, 2003, 2005) consistently avers that aggressive behaviours in certain communities of practice (epitomized by the army) conform to *norms of appropriacy* and that they can hardly be regarded as impoliteness either by participants (first order impoliteness) or by researchers (second order impoliteness). This approach is premised on an assumption that "impoliteness only exists when it is classified as such by certain, usually dominant, community members, and/or when it leads to a breakdown in relations" (Mills 2002: 79). On the strength of the evidence she provides, it is typically the dominant speakers that produce face-threatening acts towards hearers lower in the hierarchy and it is also these speakers that consider their communicative practices to conform to the prevalent norms. Nonetheless, the targets of face-threat should also be able to decide what counts as impoliteness, i.e., inappropriate behaviour, even if, due to lack of leverage, their evaluations may not overtly impact on their relationships with dominant community members.

Culpeper (2005, 2011) contests Mills' approach, convincingly arguing that *sanctioning/legitimizing* aggressive behaviour does not equal *neutralizing* it (for a different view, see Watts 2003). Even if sanctioned/legitimated, blatant verbal aggression may not be disregarded by hearers. In other words, they will recognize the face-threat, which is why it should be conceptualized as (second order) impoliteness as well (Culpeper 1996, 2005, 2011; Bousfield 2007a, 2008a, 2010). Culpeper (2011) marshals diversified socio-cognitive research, adducing evi-

dence in favour of the reasons why individuals may be offended by sanctioned impoliteness. The reception of (im)politeness depends on different types of norms (Culpeper 2008),<sup>9</sup> whilst impoliteness is judged in the context of cultural and personal norms, which “can engulf local norms which might otherwise ‘neutralise’ a judgment that it is impolite” (Culpeper 2008: 31, Culpeper 2005). As a result, an interactant may still recognize the impoliteness of an utterance which subscribes to the current activity type or a situational/co-textual norm at hand. Also, as Bousfield (2010) rightly observes, normative concepts are a matter of social conventionalization, and they obtain across communities of practice, which are linked and whose members are cognizant of their common characteristics. This may explain why individuals still rely on the norms with which they are already familiar (thanks to their prior interactions with members of other communities of practice) once they enter a community of practice which deploys aggressive behaviour as a peculiar norm. Among other things, language users can recognize certain communicative practices as being impolite, even though they may not be able to label them, which is a researcher’s task. Researchers also aim to distinguish and term the forms impoliteness assumes.

As any other linguistic phenomenon, impoliteness exhibits an array of subtypes and manifestations. Attempts have been made at listing and classifying those in order to facilitate the detection of impoliteness in discourse. The taxonomy put forward by Culpeper and colleagues (Culpeper 1996; Culpeper et al. 2003) has given rise to a flurry of academic research (e.g., Cashman 2006; Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2011) but primarily student research, testifying to its usefulness in a wide range of discourse analyses. The five-point classification advanced by Culpeper (1996, 2005) and Culpeper et al. (2003)<sup>10</sup> is as follows: *balloon-record impoliteness*; *positive impoliteness*; *negative impoliteness*; *sarcasm/mock politeness* (Culpeper 1996; Culpeper et al. 2003), later changed for *off-record impoliteness* (Culpeper 2005); and *withhold impoliteness*. Albeit widely accepted, this well-entrenched classification can be, and has been, challenged on similar grounds as Brown and Levinson’s (1987) taxonomy<sup>11</sup> of politeness strategies (Bousfield 2008a; Dynel 2013b, cf. Culpeper 2015 forthcoming) and reorganized (Bousfield 2008a). The central point of criticism is that the super-

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<sup>9</sup> The categories of norms Culpeper (2008) endorses may overlap or may be interdependent. The total of situational norms an individual has garnered may have a bearing on his/her personal norms.

<sup>10</sup> In his later work, Culpeper (e.g., 2011, 2015) abandons this approach, even though he does not deny its feasibility (see Dynel 2013a).

<sup>11</sup> Lachenicht’s (1980) typology is burdened with the same methodological problem.

strategies are discerned with reference to two unrelated criteria: observing/flouting the Gricean maxims (conducive to literally conveyed meanings or implied meanings, respectively) and face orientation. Negative and positive impoliteness strategies do involve literalness or implicitness, whilst off-record and on-record strategies address positive or negative face. Consequently, the superstrategies are not mutually exclusive (see Bousfield 2008; Dynel 2013b).<sup>12</sup> Another issue, which also Culpeper et al. (2003) acknowledge, is that positive face orientation and negative face orientation merge in discourse, which is why the face-related dichotomy may be regarded as being superfluous (Harris 2001; Cashman 2006; Haugh 2006; Bousfield 2008a). Also, the strategies (whether or not relating to one face) can easily co-occur, and thus one utterance may present more than one of them, which poses a major problem for quantitative studies.

Furthermore, the decision to distinguish sarcasm, which is defined as a face-threatening type of irony couched in pretended politeness (see Section 3.1), as a superstrategy (Culpeper 1996; Culpeper et al. 2003) may be considered dubious. Sarcasm is later (Culpeper 2005) replaced in the list of five superstrategies by off-record impoliteness, yet retaining the status of a “meta-strategy, using politeness for impoliteness” (Culpeper 2005: 42, cf. Culpeper 2015 forthcoming). This presents itself as a right move, inasmuch as off-record (i.e., implicature-based) impoliteness seems to be a superordinate notion, which encompasses “sarcasm”, as well as a wide spectrum of other impolite implicatures, which the earlier version of the framework does not appear to have accounted for.

As a result of his critique, Bousfield (2008a) gives up on the original taxonomy and proposes a robust compilation of impoliteness strategies, extending Culpeper’s list, which he duly divides into two main groups: on-record impoliteness and off-record impoliteness, the latter of which includes sarcasm and withhold politeness. Whilst this classification of sarcasm is understandable, it is open to question whether not producing a polite expression inherently promotes implicature (e.g., purposefully not saying “Thank you” having been done a favour is not necessarily conducive to an implicature in a Gricean sense; it is just an overt signal of the beneficiary’s impoliteness). Additionally, Bousfield’s (2008a) approach inherits another minor shortcoming of Culpeper’s approach:

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<sup>12</sup> Brown and Levinson, in whose work this problem first arose do concede that they “may have been in error to set up the three superstrategies, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record, as ranked unidimensionally to achieve mutual exclusivity” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 18) and that there is a “possibility that the off-record strategy is independent of, and co-occurrent with, the other two super-strategies is something which definitely requires closer investigation” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 21).



the strategies seem to show different degrees of generality: some are very specific and capture solely the mechanics of impoliteness, whilst other ones constitute distinct communicative phenomena which may (but do not need to) promote impoliteness. As Culpeper (1996) stresses, however, not all of the listed strategies are inherently associated with impoliteness, being heavily dependent on the context (see Culpeper 2010). This is the case with the use of taboo language, which will be discussed in Section 3.1.

As researchers agree, impoliteness (and politeness alike) cannot inhere in semantic meanings, whilst no linguistic form invariably carries politeness or impoliteness across contexts (cf. Fraser and Nolen 1981; Watts 2003; Locher 2004; Locher and Watts 2005; Mills 2005). Nevertheless, some expressions are commonly associated with impoliteness, especially in the first order approach (Bousfield 2010; Culpeper 2010). Culpeper (2010, 2011) rightly observes that some formulae (which may be couched in taboo expressions) tend to occur in impoliteness contexts, and thus they are tagged for impoliteness. Whether particular instances of such conventionally impolite formulae do subscribe to impoliteness or less typical politeness uses must be judged individually.

Apart from presenting itself in a number of strategies, which may be studied in isolation, such as *threats* (Limberg 2009), impoliteness shows affinity with, or bears resemblance to, a number of notions which have been studied outside the field of impoliteness research. Also, impoliteness, in its various forms and guises, reverberates across different discourse domains. These notions and domains will now be briefly revisited.

### 3 Manifestations of impoliteness

Allegedly marginal and non-normative, impoliteness is a frequent communicative phenomenon, which manifests itself in the whole gamut of discourse domains, private or public/mass-mediated, informal or institutional, face-to-face or technologically mediated, spoken or written, and fictional or real-life. Here is a selection of discourses which are studied by impoliteness researchers, the lists of discourse types and references being subject to further expansion:

- military training discourse (Culpeper 1996; Bousfield 2007a)
- legal discourse (Archer 2008; Harris 2011)
- classroom discourse (Cashman 2006; Dobs and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013)
- talk in the workplace (Schnurr et al. 2008; Mullany 2008, 2011)
- institutional discourse (Taylor 2011)

- YouTube interactions (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010b, 2012; Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2011; Bou-Franch et al. 2014)
- Internet forums (Graham 2007, 2008; Hardaker 2010; Haugh 2010)
- political broadcast (Harris 2001; Clayman and Heritage 2002; García-Pastor 2002, 2008; Lorenzo-Dus 2007, 2009; Kienpointner 2008; Tracy 2008, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2009, Dynel 2011a)
- (exploitative) quiz and talent shows (Culpeper 2005; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. 2010, 2013; Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2013; Culpeper and Holmes 2013)
- films and drama (Culpeper 1998, 2001; Dynel 2012a, 2013c, 2015a, 2016 forthcoming)
- (exploitative) reality shows (Blas Arroyo 2013; Gordon 2013)
- literature (Culpeper 1996; Rudanko 2006; Bousfield 2007b; Toddington 2008)

Whilst some speech activities in everyday interpersonal interactions, such as conflicts and quarrels, will be replete with impoliteness, they are much more rarely analyzed by researchers, given their restricted availability (cf. moral issues concerning the recording of subjects, in tandem with the social and legal proscriptions that come with the use of offensive language). It is thus hardly surprising that researchers should resort to diversified forms of publically available discourse: Internet communication, television talk, as well as the language of films and literature; each of which displays its distinctive characteristics, which may have a bearing on the nature of impoliteness. For example, it is widely acknowledged that Internet users' anonymity instils a sense of impunity and lack of inhibitions in them, whereby it facilitates the occurrence of impoliteness (cf. the paragraphs on computer-mediated communication in Section 3.1). On the other hand, largely thanks to its creativity, impoliteness in mass-mediated real and fictional interactions is shown to perform an entertaining function (cf. the paragraphs on humour in Section 3.1).

An important query arises regarding the feasibility of investigating fictional discourse,<sup>13</sup> given that impoliteness may be considered to be artificial, if constructed by (script)writers. Linguists examining stylistics consider communicative phenomena necessarily as fictional, not necessarily extrapolating from their findings any conclusions holding for real-life language use, even though they tacitly assume that fictional talk does hold lessons for real-life interaction. On the other hand, linguists with other research interests may treat fictional data as specimens of discourse that help elucidate universal mechanisms of

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**13** Interestingly, both Bousfield and Culpeper, two of the forerunners of impoliteness theories, have engaged in stylistic readings of (im)politeness.

impoliteness (Bousfield, personal communication). Support may be given to Coupland's (2004: 258) premise: "My motive in using fictional, media texts is partly based in the belief (cf. Grimshaw 1996) that fictionalized reality can sometimes reveal social processes more clearly than lived reality." Needless to say, it would be unwise to do sociolinguistic studies based on non-natural data, but it can be safely assumed that fictional discourse and real-life discourse present a lot of affinities, also with reference to the mechanics of impoliteness. After all, (script)writers are language users with acute sensitivity to communicative patterns and phenomena, and their (script)writing success resides in the verisimilitude of the fictional characters' interactions of their devise. This helps viewers immerse themselves in the fictional reality. Fictional discourse also manifests benefits for researchers in that it does not operate on interlocutors' restricted common ground, whilst the characters' rationale, goals and feelings can typically be conjectured, insofar as fictional interactions are inherently contrived for viewers' understanding.

### 3.1 Notions related to impoliteness

Impoliteness is inextricably connected with a few notions which, as such, constitute distinct research topics outside (im)politeness studies in various disciplines of linguistics and beyond. One of the concepts pertinent to impoliteness is *verbal aggression*,<sup>14</sup> a notion discussed at length in psychology and sociology (e.g., Harris et al. 1986), by means of which impoliteness tends to be defined (e.g., Bousfield 2007a, 2008a, 2008b) and which very frequently reverberates across analyses of impoliteness practically as a synonym of the latter. The underlying rationale can be found in Brown and Levinson's (1987: 1) statement that politeness presupposes the "potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it, and makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties". By way of contrast, impoliteness thrives on aggression, being its concomitant. On the other hand, Archer (2008) views impoliteness as a category of verbal aggression, which is because the latter encompasses not only intentional but also incidental and unintended face-threat (cf. Goffman 1967). This alludes to the problem of the speaker's intention underlying impoliteness, as well as the rudeness – impoliteness distinction considered earlier.

*Disagreement* (e.g., Locher 2004; Tannen 1981, 1998) is another concept which seems to be related to impoliteness, being not only a situational factor

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<sup>14</sup> This also shows in the contents of the latterly launched journal entitled the *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*.

fostering impoliteness but also one of its salient strategies cf. “seek disagreement” (Culpeper 1996; Bousfield 2008a). According to a standard definition, it is “an oppositional stance (verbal or non-verbal) to an antecedent verbal (or non-verbal) action” (Kakavá 1993: 36). Although disagreement rests on opposing views, it may be a topic for politeness researchers, given interactants’ attempts to mitigate face-threat and achieve rapport. In this vein, disagreement is perceived as unmarked behaviour and even a norm in chosen communicative contexts, for instance being commonplace in problem solving (see Angouri and Locher 2012). However, most importantly here, disagreement may also be conducive to face-threat, and thus impoliteness (e.g., Sifianou 2012; Langlotz and Locher 2012; Shum and Lee 2013).

Impoliteness researchers (e.g., Harris 2001; Graham 2007; Bousfield 2013; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014 forthcoming) frequently raise the topic of *conflict* (Grimshaw 1990; Kakavá 2001). The labels “conflict” and “disagreement” are practically interchangeable, as evidenced for instance in this definition: “Conflict is a disagreement between two or more parties who perceive incompatible goals or means of achieving those goals” (Jones 2001: 91), even though some authors distinguish between them, suggesting that not all disagreement must be conflictual (e.g., Langlotz and Locher 2012). Both conflict and disagreement may also be studied in the context of broader communicative phenomena, such as *arguments* (Schiffrin 1985), *disputes* (Brenneis 1988), and *quarrels* (Antaki 1994).

Whilst the few notions succinctly presented above are naturally associated with (im)politeness, albeit not always expounded on in the literature with reference to impoliteness frameworks, this is not the case with a few other concepts, which will now be addressed. Although intermittent works devoted exclusively to these impoliteness-related phenomena can be found, their affinity with impoliteness shows much more potential for future investigation. Each of these notions boasts its own research tradition, on which impoliteness scholars may capitalize. Given the extensive research on most of these notions outside impoliteness studies, only a few references to some of the classical and most recent publications are provided, where further bibliography can be sought.

The topic of *insults* is the one that nicely bridges the overview of the phenomena central to impoliteness with a survey of independent concepts that may be geared towards impoliteness effects. Sometimes, insulting is understood as a superordinate goal of causing offence, as evidenced by the title of Lachenicht’s (1980) paper or Goffman’s (1967: 14) reference to purposeful offence performed “maliciously and spitefully, with the intention of causing open insult”. However, Culpeper (2011) presents an insult as one category of the

impoliteness formulae. An insult may be understood as a distinct type of speech activity encompassing remarks which invoke negative characteristics of the target, so far studied primarily in sociolinguistics (Labov 1972; Illie 2001; Ewaldsson 2005; Stokoe and Edwards 2007) but more recently also in pragmatics (Mateo and Yus 2013), which is still in need of investigation in terms of impoliteness. Mateo and Yus (2013) propose that insults can perform three functions: offence, praise and social bonding. It might be observed that whilst the first one is orientated towards impoliteness, the latter two appear to serve solidarity politeness. This will also be the case with *ritual insults*, as testified by Labov's (1972) classical study. Insults often make use of taboo language, which is another potential focus of investigation.

Using *taboo language* is recognized as an impoliteness strategy (Culpeper 1996; Culpeper et al. 2005; Bousfield 2008a) and is reported to have constituted one of the first strands of research on impoliteness (see Bousfield and Culpeper 2008). Nonetheless, the topic of *taboo words* or *expletives* (i.e., socially circumscribed polysemous words related to taboo spheres, notably religion, sex and bodily functions), together with its salient subtype *swearing* (also known as *cussing*), has received relatively little focused attention in impoliteness studies (see Jay and Janschewitz 2008; Dynel 2012b; Christie 2013; see also short discussions in Bousfield 2010, and Culpeper 2010). However, it has generated ample interest within general pragmatics, sociolinguistics and speech ethnography (e.g., Montagu 1967; Jay 1992, 2000, see Dynel 2012b for more references). Researchers have dwelt on the forms and functions of taboo words, as well as sociopragmatic variables related to their use, such as gender. Generally, three major functions of expletives can be differentiated, viz. *social connection* (also referred to as *solidarity*), *catharsis* (i.e., to give vent to frustration or indicate one's pain) and *aggression* (which typically shows in verbal abuse/insults directed at the hearer). Regardless of their potential solidarity politeness function, taboo words are commonly regarded as violating etiquette and being impolite, which is why they may be considered to be impoliteness formulae (Culpeper 2010, 2011).

Related to both expletives and insults is the topic of *slurs*. These are defined as derogatory expressions targeting chosen (groups of) individuals with reference to their nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation among other things, and typically having neutral counterparts, which capture the same group but are devoid of deprecation. Slurs, therefore, seem to be a salient type of insults, yet they boast a markedly different research tradition. Over the past fifteen years, this topic has drawn interest of philosophers and linguists, raising questions concerning the theory of meaning, the semantic – pragmatics divide and

the descriptivism – expressivism dichotomy (e.g., see Anderson and Lepore 2013; Hedger 2013; Vallée 2014; Croom 2014). Given their scope, slurs are of central importance to (im)politeness studies. Whilst they appear to generate impoliteness towards the targets, slurs' functions are more diversified and are contingent on whether they are used by in-group and out-group speakers (Croom 2013). For instance, they may serve appropriation (Croom 2011) when used by targeted groups themselves for the sake of dissociation from others (Bianchi 2014).

Taken together, swearwords and insults, including slurs, are also teased out in the philosophy of language under the blanket term *pejoratives*, which are defined as expressions which are meant to insult or disparage (Hom 2010). They are elucidated, for instance in reference to their (non-)truth-conditional content (Hom 2012). Swearing and insulting, whether playful and solidarity-building or orientated towards impoliteness, may also foster humour experience in some hearers.

Linguistic research into *humour* is an internally heterogeneous and fast-developing field, which may offer many insights into impoliteness. (Im)politeness frameworks have been used in various analyses of conversational humour forms (e.g., Haugh 2010; Haugh and Bousfield 2012; Sinkeviciute 2013, 2014; Dynel 2016 forthcoming). On the other hand, some light has been shed on the interdependence between impoliteness and entertainment (Culpeper 2005, 2011), which may also lead to humour experience. Paradoxical as it may seem, genuine impoliteness enjoys a humorous potential. This is possible because the co-existing face-threat and humour are devised for different hearers as independent communicative goals (see Dynel 2011a, 2012a, 2013c). It is primarily the viewers of television programmes (Culpeper 2005), films, series and serials (Culpeper 2008; Dynel 2012a, 2013c, 2016) that are meant to reap humorous rewards, which validates the prevalence of (creative) impoliteness in media discourse. Impoliteness may be shown to coincide with many aggression-based forms of humour, notably *disparagement humour* captured by the *superiority theory* (Dynel 2013c). Such humour presents itself, for instance, as putdowns or sarcasm.

The term *sarcasm* will be familiar to impoliteness researchers as a synonym of *mock politeness*, which corresponds to what Leech (1983) discusses as *irony* (Culpeper 1996; Culpeper et al. 2003; Bousfield 2008a). As Culpeper explains (Dynel 2013a), he sees sarcasm as a narrow category of irony, which produces negative interpersonal effects. Nonetheless, in other linguistic studies, sarcasm is viewed as a broader concept which does not need to centre either on pretended politeness or on irony. These are markedly different linguistic phenomena.

Irony<sup>15</sup> is traditionally defined as a rhetorical figure<sup>16</sup> carrying an implicit meaning and is prototypically (but not always) anchored in overt pretence and/or overt untruthfulness. The moot point in the voluminous theoretical pragmatic and philosophical literature on irony is its definition that would account for its different manifestations (see Gibbs and Colston 2007; Dynel 2014). Most importantly here, irony may also be approached in terms of its (im)politeness-related consequences. So far, researchers have attempted to explore the communicative effects it brings about, pondering on whether it magnifies or mitigates negative evaluation, with the findings being diverse, admittedly because of the different methodologies and examples the researchers use (e.g., Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995; Colston and O'Brien 2000; see Dynel 2015b forthcoming).

By contrast, sarcasm is a concept with fuzzy boundaries. It is seen as being tantamount to “*cutting, contemptuous, and ‘biting’* remarks, delivered often in a hostile manner” (Berger 1993: 49). A sarcastic speaker’s intrinsic aim is then to cause verbal harm, as many authors indicate (Ball 1965; Fowler 1965; Berger 1993; Littmann and Mey 1991; Partington 2006), which is why sarcasm may be claimed to be encompassed by impoliteness. However, sarcasm need not manifest the features which are the hallmarks of irony. Sarcasm does not reside in meaning opposition and does not need to convey the critical evaluation via implicature, both of which are central to irony. Also, unlike irony (which may be, but does not have to be, humorous) sarcasm is frequently discussed as a category of witty but impolite humour<sup>17</sup> operating in multi-party talk (see Ball 1965; Fowler 1965; Berger 1993; Littmann and Mey 1991; Partington 2006; see Dynel 2015b forthcoming).

As reported above, the topic of the humorous capacity of impoliteness is related to its workings in *multi-party interactions*, which transcends the canonical speaker-hearer dyad. It is argued that impoliteness carries different meanings to, and exerts various communicative effects on, hearers, depending on their footing, participatory status and relationship to the target (Dynel 2012a; Haugh 2013). Impoliteness studies may then recruit findings from the *pragmatics of interaction* (D’hondt et al. 2009), a field inspired by Goffman’s (1981) seminal collection of essays. So far, multi-party interactions, sometimes referred to as *polylogues*, have been studied also with reference to impoliteness

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15 However, some researchers, especially those of American provenance, give preference to “sarcasm” as a label synonymous with “irony”.

16 Irony is here perceived as a verbal/linguistic phenomenon (cf. irony of fate or dramatic irony).

17 However, speakers may also produce sarcasm, not meaning to amuse anybody else, but showing off their wit and superiority, and thereby enjoying themselves.

primarily in the context of media discourse and computer-mediated communication (Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2011; Dobs and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014).

The various genres of *computer-mediated communication* (CMC) offer fertile ground for impoliteness, which results in a number of communicative phenomena involving exacerbated face-attack, such as *spamming*, *cyberstalking*, and *cyberbullying* (for references, see Hardaker 2010). However, scarcely have these forms been discussed in linguistics, let alone in the light of impoliteness frameworks, which leaves an enticing lacuna for the future. One of such CMC phenomena is *flaming*, which can be understood as sending aggressive messages at an individual Internet user. Flaming is seen as an antisocial activity carrying repercussions for relationships (Alonzo and Aiken 2004; Johnson et al. 2008), and an activity which violates norms (O'Sullivan and Flanagan 2003), which is why it may be studied with respect to impoliteness frameworks. Interestingly, flaming can also be approached as a politeness phenomenon, for interactants develop alliances and solidarity by performing face-threatening acts (Perelmuter 2013). Another phenomenon which has gained some scholarly attention is *trolling* (e.g., Herring et al. 2002; Hardaker 2010). Trolling rests on posting comments which provoke other Internet users into conflict. A few authors (Donath 1999; Dahlberg 2001; Hardaker 2010) also observe that trolling typically involves deception, since a troll very frequently pretends to share the group's concerns while aiming to disrupt the ongoing discussion.

*Deception*, including *lying*, its salient subtype, is another potential issue to be explored in impoliteness research. This is a topic that has been avidly pursued in the philosophy of language, with attempts being made to best define its various manifestations (e.g., Dynel 2011b; Saul 2012; Meibauer 2014a). Deception is traditionally defined as causing the hearer to (continue to) nurture a false belief, i.e., something the speaker believes to be false, not necessarily what is objectively untrue. Impoliteness researchers may be most interested in the interpersonal repercussions that deception carries, especially if it should transpire or be suspected, for the target of deception may find his/her face threatened. This research topic involves major problems in empirical investigation, though. Firstly, the notion of the speaker's belief escapes verification. Secondly, an act of deception that is successfully performed (from the speaker's perspective) is one that is not recognized as deception by the hearer, and a researcher alike. Therefore, unless deception fails immediately or is later discovered, the deceived hearer cannot appreciate the moral inappropriateness of the deceptive act, even if it can be perceived as such by other hearers (and researchers) with insight into the communicative phenomenon at hand. This is why the data may need to be restricted to public discourse on television or



the Internet. Essentially, lying, together with other forms of deception, can be perceived as being morally wrong (Saul 2012), as insulting (Williams 2002), and thus as indicative of impoliteness. Vincent and Castelfranchi (1981) are probably the first researchers to have recognized the aggressive potential of deception, which involves “the breach of faith, the shift, on the speaker’s part, from coordination to conflict” (1981: 753). They aver that aggression is intrinsic to all forms of deception, even if it should be hearer-protective (cf. white lies). In this vein, Meibauer (2014b) considers the topic of bald-faced lies, which are sometimes considered neither lies nor deception, in a technical sense (Dynel 2011b; Meibauer 2014a), but which may be viewed as acts of overt aggression.

## 4 Conclusions

This paper aimed to give an overview of impoliteness research, addressing a number of the crucial methodological queries, research domains, as well as potential developments in the field. The first part of this article brought to focus a number of vexing methodological and theoretical issues inherent in impoliteness studies, which do not cease to provoke scholarly debates: the problem of employing technical labels “rudeness” vs. “impoliteness”, the status of speaker intention and its recognition by the hearer, the conceptualization of sanctioned face-threat, the tenability of impoliteness taxonomies, and impoliteness formulae.

The second part of the paper briefly revisited the studies on impoliteness across diversified discourse domains which are riddled with impoliteness. Emphasis was placed on linguistic notions and communicative phenomena which inhere in, or overlap with, impoliteness. Whilst some are naturally associated with impoliteness, such as disagreement, conflict or verbal aggression, as evidenced by the prevailing approaches to impoliteness, other concepts have been studied independently from impoliteness frameworks, with only intermittent impoliteness-orientated studies. This pertains to topics such as taboo words and swearing, slurs and pejorative language, insults, disparagement humour, sarcasm, or CMC phenomena, such as flaming and trolling. Thus, directions of possible extensions in the field of impoliteness studies were indicated. These new topics may benefit impoliteness by enriching the existing research methodology. On the other hand, impoliteness frameworks may help explain the interpersonal workings of these notions, their list being an open-ended one. In all likelihood, there are more communicative phenomena that bring about impoliteness effects. Additionally, language users will certainly continue contribut-

ing new manifestations of impoliteness, thereby submitting new topics for academic investigation.

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