Gender and impoliteness

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Abstract
This article analyzes the complex relationship between gender and impoliteness. Rather than assuming that gender and impoliteness are concrete entities which can be traced in conversation, I argue that gender and impoliteness are elements which are worked out within the course of interaction. They are elements which are closely inter-related as stereotypically feminine gender identity is largely constructed around notions of “nice”, supportive, co-operative behaviour, either affirming or resisting those stereotypes of femininity. Challenging the notion that women as a whole are “nicer” than men in interaction, since much current research seems to highlight women’s interactional competitiveness, I argue that nevertheless supportiveness may play a role in other interactants’ judgments of women’s linguistic behaviour and may result in assertiveness being categorized as impoliteness.

Keywords: Gender; impoliteness; politeness; assertiveness; co-operativeness; nice

1. Introduction
This article analyzes the complex relationship between gender and impoliteness and calls for a more nuanced and context-dependent analysis of both gender and impoliteness. Rather than assuming that impoliteness and gender pre-exist interactions, we need to see gender identity as constructed in slightly different ways in each interaction depending on assessments of the interactional history of particular Communities of Practice, and the stereotypes of both politeness and gender which are constituted within the course of the interaction itself. In order to analyze the way that judgments of impoliteness are informed by beliefs about what is gender-appropriate behaviour, I will begin by proposing a model of
impoliteness which is performative and dependent upon contextual judgments. I will then go on to analyze the role that gender plays in the attribution of impoliteness.

2. Impoliteness

There has been surprisingly little analysis of impoliteness itself in research on politeness in general. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that much of the research is dependent on a view of conversation which “emphasises the harmonious aspect of social relations, because of an emphasis on conversational contracts and the implicit establishment of balance between interlocutors” (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 3). However, there are occasions when people do indeed attack rather than support their interlocutors, and sometimes those attacks are considered by others to be impolite and sometimes they are not. Kienpointner (1997) argues that non-co-operative behaviour should be seen as less exceptional than most politeness theorists see it. However, Eelen (2001) argues that the model of politeness drawn on by researchers in this field is one which implicitly or explicitly focuses only on politeness and sees impoliteness as a deviation; this causes theoretical difficulties since:

the concepts involved can never explain impoliteness in the same way or to the same extent as they explain politeness. So the bias towards the analysis of politeness is not just a matter of differential attention, it goes far deeper than that: it is a conceptual, theoretical structural matter. It is not so much quantitative, but rather a qualitative problem (Eelen 2001: 104).

If impoliteness does different interactional work to that done by politeness, as I argue in this article, then we risk misunderstanding what is happening in interactions where speakers and/or hearers consider that someone has been impolite. Furthermore, the polarization of politeness and impoliteness might lead us to assume that, for interlocutors, behavior falls into either one or the other category. Although this is correct up to a point, speakers and hearers may be generally tolerant in relation to making judgments about whether an exchange is polite or impolite, accepting statements which may be a little ambiguous in terms of their function, as part of the give-and-take of interaction. It seems to be only at moments of interpersonal crisis that clear judgments about impoliteness are made. Judgments about whether an utterance counts as impolite may be informed by stereotypical beliefs about gender-appropriate behaviour.

Rather than assuming that there is something intrinsically impolite about certain utterances or exchanges, I argue that impoliteness is attrib-
uted to a speaker on the basis of assessments of their intentions and motivations, and these assessments are informed by beliefs about gender which may emanate from the Community of Practice or from the wider society. I examine impoliteness in its own terms, rather than in terms of its relation to politeness, considering what factors contribute to the assessment of an act as impolite, and what consequences the judgment of impoliteness has on individuals and Communities of Practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1998; 1999). Thus, firstly I question the notion that politeness and impoliteness are binary opposites. I then analyze the factors which lead to judgments of impoliteness. In contrast to a great deal of research in this area, I believe that impoliteness has to be seen as an assessment of someone’s behaviour rather than a quality intrinsic to an utterance.

Many theorists, following Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]), assume that impoliteness is necessarily an attack on the “face” of the interlocutor/s, and that “certain ‘impolite’ speech acts, such as reproaching, threatening and insulting are performed by speakers with the intrinsic purpose of attacking or undermining the hearer’s face” (Haverkate 1988: 394). The analysis of impoliteness is therefore concerned with a reconstruction of what the speaker’s intentions are supposed to have been. Culpeper questions Leech’s notion that there are some speech acts which are inherently impolite (Culpeper 1996). However, we might question that any act is necessarily intrinsically impolite, since even the most offensive insults can be used by close friends to signal camaraderie. Indeed, de Klerk (1997) and Coates (2003) have argued that such extreme insults are characteristic of certain types of masculine talk which are concerned with establishing a sense of in-group solidarity. Lycan questions the notion that speech acts such as interruptions, even when they are bald-on-record interruptions, are necessarily interpreted as face-threatening, and he draws attention to the fact that in certain types of academic discussions, for example, among philosophers and linguists, interruptions are, in fact, seen as positive contributions to the development of the discussion (Lycan 1977: 24). Lycan suggests it is simply “prudish” — an interestingly gendered term in this context — to assume that interruptions are, in essence, impolite. Tannen (1981) also argues that within what she terms “high involvement” groups, simultaneous speech, which might in other Communities of Practice be considered as interruption, is considered to be part of social bonding. When interruptions do not take place the individual may think that others in the group are not listening to them.

It may be the case that certain acts are conventionally associated with impoliteness, for example, with speech acts such as threats, in certain contexts where it is clear to both speaker and hearer that the speaker
intends to threaten the other. But this is rarely the case, since most of the time there is an option of understanding the utterance in another way (considering it as a case of misunderstanding on the part of the hearer, for example, because of overemphasizing the importance of certain cues) or of considering that the threat is in fact better interpreted as a case of accidental, or unintended impoliteness (that is, a fault of expression on the part of the hearer). Thus, hypothesizing of intention is essential to assessing an act as impolite.

Politeness and impoliteness cannot therefore be considered to be simply polar opposites. Culpeper (1996) takes Brown and Levinson’s four super-strategies (bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off-record [Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]) and inverts them to describe impoliteness: thus, he analyzes impoliteness as consisting of bald-on-record impoliteness, positive and negative impoliteness and sarcasm or mock politeness (Culpeper 1996). However, Beebe (1995) has shown that this assumption that impoliteness is the opposite of politeness cannot hold; she gives examples of what she terms “pushy politeness”, where seemingly polite utterances are taken to be impolite and face-threatening. Beebe analyzes an incident in a busy New York restaurant, where a group of people were repeatedly asked by different waiters if they would care to order, when they had made it plain that they wished to have a discussion over lunch and would therefore take their time over their meal. The attentiveness of the waiters “seemed to reflect a desire on the part of the waiters to get it over with, not a policy regarding length of stay, a lack of communication among waiters, or a problem with crowding, so it was viewed as rude” (Beebe 1995: 161).

Kienpointner (1997) also draws attention to the fact that some forms of politeness, such as manipulative or insincere politeness, should be seen as less than optimally co-operative or rational, and hence impolite. Nor should impoliteness be seen as the marked term, in relation to an unmarked norm of politeness, since this assumes that politeness is almost invisible because it is the norm, whilst impoliteness is noticeable. Furthermore, the description of impoliteness should not simply be phrased in evaluative terms where impoliteness is treated as the “abnormal and irrational counterpart of politeness” (Kienpointner 1997:280). Thus, rather than a simple opposition between politeness and impoliteness, Kienpointner suggests that we should try to consider linguistic behaviour along a continuum, as a matter of degree rather than absolutes. Whilst agreeing with this notion of a continuum, it is important that we see it as a continuum of assessment rather than as a quality of impoliteness and politeness. If, for example, an interactant assesses someone’s speech as marginally impolite, they may decide that they will let it pass and not draw attention to it or react adversely to it. Similarly if they
consider that someone’s impolite behaviour is institutionally sanctioned, say, for example, their boss continually interrupts them, they may decide that their own status might be called into question if they claimed that the behaviour was impolite. In both of these cases, the individual assesses the behaviour as impolite, but decides that it is not interactionally expedient for them to act in relation to this perception of impoliteness or to call attention to the fact that they do indeed classify it as impolite. Thus, with a scalar model of impoliteness, we can see that individuals may assess certain behaviour as impolite and yet choose not to openly and explicitly treat it as such.

Kienpointner (1997) distinguishes between motivated and unmotivated rudeness. In motivated impoliteness, the speaker is assumed to have intended to be rude, whereas unmotivated impoliteness is the result of insufficient knowledge of some kind. A hearer’s response to these different forms of impoliteness may well be significantly different, for with the latter type, the hearer may recognize that it is impolite, but decide that they will not treat it as such. Beebe claims that rather than seeing impoliteness as a failure to be polite, motivated rudeness should rather be seen as “a reflection of pragmatic competence”, that is, that it should be seen as achieving certain aims in a conversation, firstly, to get power and secondly, to give vent to negative feelings (Beebe 1995: 154). In her analysis of examples such as the following, the interactants had clearly not miscalculated the level of appropriate politeness due in the circumstances, but had chosen to be impolite. In New York, a man was trying to park his car next to a pedestrian crossing and a woman was trying to cross the road with her children. They argued about who had right of way:

Woman: Oh, shut up, you fat pig!
Man: Go fuck yourself.
Woman: Go on a diet!
Man: Go fuck yourself!
(Gavis, cited in Beebe 1995: 154)

This type of impoliteness, Beebe asserts, often results from a “volcanic” loss of temper, or loss of control over one’s emotions; outright hostility seems to pervade many of the examples that she discusses. She argues that when an act is assessed as impolite, by one or all of the participants, it has serious consequences for the interaction. She also argues that “the idea that socially sanctioned norms of interaction are violated is central to the perception of rudeness” (Beebe 1995: 159). Thus, interactants will draw on what seem to them to be stable norms of acceptable behaviour in their assessment of impoliteness, despite the fact that individuals may
in fact assess these norms differently according to the Community of Practice within which the exchange takes place.

Impoliteness is often attributed to someone on the grounds of not having observed the socially sanctioned politeness behaviour which other participants assume would be expected in a particular situation, for example, the use of directness for requests which would normally be indirectly handled in English, or the lack of elements such as “please”, “thank you”, and “sorry”. Jary argues that impoliteness and politeness are therefore to be considered fundamentally different in kind rather than simple polar opposites, since, instead of the Brown and Levinson view that “whenever the so-called polite forms/strategies are used then an additional layer of meaning is necessarily communicated … our experiences as conversationalists tells us that polite forms often go unnoticed by participants. Although there are cases when we do comment on the politeness of someone’s verbal behaviour, much of the time we don’t notice this aspect of it” (Jary 1998: 2). Thus, the omission of formal greetings or thanks may well be considered to be impolite, especially if that person is not liked, or if this is not the first time that socially sanctioned politeness norms within the particular Community of Practice have been breached. Indeed, if a person is not liked, practically any linguistic utterance or intonation can be classified as impolite. But impoliteness is not simply a question of the omission of formal or formulaic social politeness. Impoliteness can be considered as any type of linguistic behaviour which is assessed as intending to threaten the hearer’s face or social identity, or as transgressing the hypothesized Community of Practice’s norms of appropriacy.

This notion that it is also the stability of the Community of Practice which is threatened in instances where someone is accused of impoliteness is important since very often accusations of impoliteness are concerned with problems of agreement over the assessment of the social standing of individuals in relation to one another, or the judgment of the level of familiarity between them and thus the assessment of the appropriate level of politeness to use. Accusations of impoliteness generally signal to participants that there has been a mismatch in the judgment of status, role or familiarity and thus perhaps also a mismatch in their assessment of their position in the particular Community of Practice. Where this mismatch may be significant is in the stereotypes of gender-appropriate behaviour. If one of the participants in a Community of Practice assumes that females should be submissive, linguistically and interactionally, then any form of assertive or “masculine” linguistic behaviour may be interpreted as impolite or inappropriate. Thus impoliteness is not simply a question of making statements which are offensive, but also of displaying to others an assessment of one’s social standing.
and relation to others, and, among other things, one’s assessment of what constitutes gender-appropriate behaviour.

There are particular signs which may be drawn on to decide whether an utterance is polite or impolite. Impoliteness can be construed from the occurrence of a very wide range of linguistic behaviour. In some cases, it can be attributed to someone over a long period of time, where previous “signs” of impoliteness are called upon to prove that someone’s utterance is impolite. Alternatively, impoliteness may be judged to have occurred in a fairly direct and clearly face-threatening way in a single utterance. Most analysts of politeness tend to focus only on the single utterance level rather than this cumulative view of impoliteness. Thus, impoliteness cannot be said to be simply a question of the content or surface message of the utterance, but is an assessment made on the basis of hypothesized intention. This “intention” is constructed by drawing on a range of different types of evidence. Beebe suggests that intonation is very important here; she categorizes a particular type of contemptuous intonation as the “You are Stupid Intonation”, where, when used with deliberate misinterpretation and contemptuous looks, the utterance can be classified by the hearer/s as impolite (Beebe, 1995: 165). However, each of these elements may be used to disambiguate other elements; for example, if an interlocutor decides that the speaker is giving her/him a contemptuous look, they will be more likely to categorize other elements in the interaction as sarcastic, for example classifying their intonation or tone of voice as problematic.

Although I have been arguing that impoliteness is an assessment of others’ behaviour which is arrived at within particular interactions, it is not simply a matter of individual assessment alone, since this judgment is constructed within the context of institutional and community norms. An important aspect of the evaluation of utterances as polite or impolite is the degree to which institutions have routinized the use of certain types of language. Thornborrow argues that institutions tend to constrain what can be counted as a legitimate contribution and also the “discursive resources and identities available to participants to accomplish specific actions are either weakened or strengthened in relation to their current institutional identities” (Thornborrow 2002: 4). Gender is important in this respect, since as Walsh (2001) and Baxter (2003) have shown, women and men may be perceived to have different claims or rights to a position within the public sphere.

In his analysis of impoliteness, Culpeper (1996) analyzes a documentary programme on American army training in order to isolate examples which he suggests are impolite linguistic behaviour. He lists several instances of impoliteness by the trainers to the recruits: the trainers swear at the recruits and humiliate them by calling their competence into ques-
tion; direct commands are given without any mitigation; and formulaic politeness, such as the use of “please” and “thank you”, does not feature at all. Culpeper argues that the reason such ritualized insults are used is to train the recruits into accepting their place unthinkingly in the army hierarchy, so that they will obey orders. Whereas positive politeness is generally used as a resource to indicate that one acknowledges the interlocutor as part of a shared Community of Practice, the army attempts to deny the recruits’ basic humanity and force them to move beyond conventional socialization through the use of language which would normally be considered extremely impolite: “in the context of the army, impoliteness is not a haphazard product of say a heated argument, but is deployed by the sergeants in a systematic way as part of what they perceive to be their job” (Culpeper 1996: 359). However, I would argue that within this particular Community of Practice, this behaviour may or may not be classified by any of the participants as impolite. The dominant group in the interaction, the officers, as representatives of the army, are drawing on ritualized and institutionalized codes of linguistic behaviour which have made this seeming excessive impoliteness on the part of trainers the norm. That is not to suggest that the recruits are not concerned about this language use or are not adversely affected by it; there will be different responses to this behaviour by community members. But they probably will not classify it as impoliteness as such, since impoliteness is only that which is defined as such by individuals negotiating with the hypothesized norms of the Community of Practice. Even here, it is something which may be contested by community members, either openly in the case of complaints, or tacitly, by people who resent the behaviour but do not complain.

To sum up, politeness and impoliteness cannot be taken to be polar opposites, since impoliteness functions in very different and context-specific ways. It is thus important not to analyze impoliteness in a decontextualised way, focusing only on what takes place in an interaction, as it is a negotiation or a testing out of what are perceived to be Community of Practice norms; and beliefs about gender obviously play a role in an assessment of those norms.

3. Gender and impoliteness

In feminist linguistics in recent years, third-wave feminists have developed new models of gender and particularly new models of the way that gender identity is constructed in language and interaction (Bergvall et al. 1996; Holmes and Meyerhoff 2003). Because of what they term the “discourse turn”, that is the move away from the analysis of discrete linguistic items to the analysis at a higher discourse level, Eckert and
McConnell-Ginet argue that feminist linguistics is no longer concerned with mapping out the differences between men’s and women’s speech, and has thus progressed from “the search for correlations between linguistic units and social categories of speakers to analysis of the gendered significance of ongoing discourse” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 4). Gender is now seen by feminist linguists as something which one performs in interaction rather than something which one has or possesses; it is emergent rather than achieved (Meyerhoff 2003). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet argue that:

"gender is not a part of one’s essence, what one is, but an achievement, what one does. Gender is a set of practices through which people construct and claim identities; not simply a system of categorizing people. And gender practices are not only about establishing identities but also about managing social relations (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 305).

This latter argument about gender and the managing of social relations is of particular importance in this article, since judgments about the appropriateness of women’s speech and women’s role in the Community of Practice are crucial to the assessment of impoliteness.

Influenced by the work of Judith Butler, gender is now seen as performative, that is, it is constructed in the process of interacting with others and varies depending on the context in which interaction takes place and the assumptions about appropriate behaviour which are seen to be in play (Butler 1990). Gender is not seen as something which is completed prior to and within interaction but something which interactants try to achieve or “bring off”. Furthermore, gender identity is constituted out of the gender roles that each interactant assumes they have in the interaction as well as out of the assumptions about gender role that others make about them specifically in the interaction. In addition, gender identity is constituted in relation to the roles that interactants assume are appropriate for women in society as a whole. All of these assumptions about appropriate roles are ones which are affirmed and contested in the course of interaction, either explicitly or implicitly, and they are often subject to misinterpretation. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet argue that “gendered performances are available to everyone, but with them come constraints on who can perform which personae with impunity” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 10). Thus, professional women may feel that because they are working in a business environment they are called upon to perform linguistically according to masculine speech norms, using directness, interruption and verbal banter, but others
within that business environment might consider such behaviours linguistically inappropriate for women in general\textsuperscript{10}.

In past feminist research it was often assumed that women use “powerless” speech, for example, using tentative language features such as tag questions, deference, modality, hesitation and so on (Lakoff 1975). For many feminists, it is clear that not all women use this type of language but it constitutes a stereotype of women’s language based on the linguistic behaviour of some white middle class women. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet have argued that stereotypes should not be perceived as lies about the way that people in fact behave, but they nevertheless “constitute norms … that we do not obey but that we orient to … They serve as a kind of orienting device in society, an ideological map, setting out the range of possibility within which we place ourselves and assess others” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 87). For some women, particularly white middle class women, these stereotypes of how women should speak (using deference, hesitation and indirectness, in short co-operative speech) are an important factor in the construction of their self-identity, since they consider that they signal to others their concern with others’ well-being\textsuperscript{11}. Thus, this group of women may consider it appropriate for them to use indirectness to achieve their ends. For other women, particularly some feminists, these stereotypes are to be resisted or at least actively negotiated, since it is felt that these ways of speaking signal powerlessness to others. Indirectness for them would signal powerlessness and directness would be used instead\textsuperscript{12}. Thus, indirectness although clearly indexing femininity for many groups of women, does not have the same value or function for them.

In recent discussions of the relation between language and power, Thornborrow has argued that we should see powerful speech as a set of linguistic resources which may be drawn on by interactants, rather than seeing particular groups of interactants as powerful or powerless (Thornborrow 2002). I have also analyzed the way that women do not necessarily use only powerless elements in their speech, but instead draw strategically on what they consider both stereotypically feminine and masculine speech norms to establish a position of interactional power for themselves (Mills 2003)\textsuperscript{13}. Thus, directness and interruption might be considered to be linguistic resources associated with power which men and women can both use, but as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet have shown, these linguistic resources, in particular contexts, as well as indexing power also indirectly index masculinity\textsuperscript{14}. Women may feel that they have to temper their use of these powerful and masculine speech forms in order that their speech is not judged by others to be aberrant. Whilst these notions of powerful linguistic resources and negotiation are useful, it nevertheless has to be acknowledged that there are links between gen-
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der and power and that those elements which are generally classified as masculine, also tend to be those which are considered to be interactionally powerful and effective at least within the public sphere. The linguistic features which seem to be stereotypically positively associated with masculinity and hence power are: the use of direct assertions rather than indirectness; swearing; unmitigated statements and expressions of negative opinion; face-threatening acts in general; verbal wit and humour, non-emotional language\textsuperscript{15}. McElhinny has demonstrated that not only are these speech norms assumed to be stereotypically masculine, but many of these features are also assumed to be indicative of professionalism (McElhinny 1998). Thus, in her analysis of the speech patterns of women police officers in Pittsburgh, she found that they felt that they had to adopt the masculine norms of that particular work environment in order to be considered to be professional.

Walsh has shown that women in Britain working within the public sphere have had great difficulty carving out positions for themselves in relation to the type of language which they can use (Walsh 2001). When women have used assertive masculine norms, they may be criticized for being over-aggressive and unfeminine, as Walsh discusses in the case of the Cabinet minister Clare Short. Even women such as Margaret Thatcher, when she was Prime Minister, did not, as Webster has shown, use masculine language as many of her predecessors had done, but instead chose to combine masculine and feminine elements in her speech (Webster 1990)\textsuperscript{16}. It seems clear that women in the public sphere are choosing to adopt a range of different positions in their speech in relation to what they consider will most effectively achieve their ends. Thus, on occasions it may be considered strategic to use seemingly stereotypically feminine speech forms, such as indirectness in requests, if it is considered that the other interactants will not respond well to what they consider more masculinized linguistic behaviour. Similarly, if others seem as if they are intentionally or unintentionally misunderstanding indirect requests, more direct masculine language may be adopted. This may be an ongoing process whereby women respond to what they perceive others' reactions to be.

For many conservative interactants, there is often an assumption on a stereotypical level that women are generally more sympathetic and caring and will see it as their role within a Community of Practice to be co-operative rather than competitive. Indeed, much feminist research seems to assert that women in general are more co-operative in their speech than men (Coates 1996). However, Bucholtz (1999) suggests that we need to critique this assumption that women are necessarily “nicer” than men and that instead we should analyze the exceptions to these rules and perhaps also analyze the reasons why women choose to be co-
operative. Research into girls’ linguistic behaviour in playgrounds has challenged a number of these assumptions about niceness; Harness Goodwin’s research (1998; 2001; 2003) has drawn attention to the fiercely competitive nature of girls’ play, where girls decide who to include and exclude from their games in direct and assertive ways. She argues that although feminists have often been drawn to revalue cooperative strategies which are seen to typify feminine speech styles, that should not lead them to ignore that fact that “conflict is as omnipresent in the interaction of females as in that of males” (Harness Goodwin 2003: 243). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet agree that women “are every bit as driven to compete as men. Only the domain in which they compete and the means and the forms of competition are different” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 125). Because of concerns about how their behaviour will be judged in relation to femininity, some girls, particularly white middle class girls, mediate their aggression, channeling it through more indirect speech styles. In addition, the judgment of women’s competitive behaviour also differs, with what is seen to be competitive behaviour sometimes being considered inappropriate or impolite. Thus, if women within a particularly conservative Community of Practice draw on masculine speech norms, they may be interpreted as using inappropriate behaviour, and hence being impolite.

To conclude, when we analyze the relation between gender and impoliteness it is important to analyze the way that participants view their gendered identity and the way that they think their usage is judged by others. If others are likely to view assertiveness and other masculine forms as aggressive, women may well decide to strategically use more feminine speech forms in order to achieve their goals. This should not however lead us to assume that women are in general intrinsically more “polite” and less “impolite” than men.

To give an illustration of the way that context determines whether we consider something to be impolite or not, and the important role that gender stereotyping and judgment play in the attribution of impoliteness, I would like to consider a fairly banal incident which happened to me recently. The use of anecdotal evidence is of course extremely problematic, and feminist linguists such as Robyn Lakoff (1975), who have relied on anecdotal evidence for their generalizations about women’s linguistic behaviour, have been rightly criticized. In the analysis of impoliteness, however, it is extremely important to be able to be specific about the effects that context has on the judgment of impoliteness. Thus, in this sense, the use of an anecdote enables me to illustrate how judgment operated in this particular instance and to expose some of the mechanisms of impoliteness17. This anecdote, however, should not be taken as
the basis for making any generalizations about “women’s language” as a whole. An elderly aunt was rather irritated with me because of what she perceived to be a slight on my part. She is not someone who finds it easy to discuss disagreements or problems and therefore she generally signals her displeasure through indirect means. She has not worked outside the home and sees her role in life to be caring for others and the maintenance of good relations between members of the family, and the control of the behaviour of family members whose behaviour she does not approve of. Normally my aunt takes great care in choosing and sending birthday cards, ensuring that the birthday card has a beautiful picture on it (generally by an artist whom she admires) but also suited to the person to whom she is sending the card. On my birthday she sent me a very dull card with a minimal illustration on the front and only a very minimal (but polite) message inside (“with best wishes”, rather than “with much love”) which seemed to be stressing distance rather than intimacy. It was clear to me when I received this, taken in the context of her previous birthday cards, that this was intended to be impolite or intended to at least indicate her annoyance with me. As with many cases of indirect impoliteness, which I would suggest is coded as a stereotypically feminine way of being impolite, the speaker provides the option of this message being understood as impolite but at the same time allows for the possibility that, if accused directly of impoliteness, then the impoliteness could be denied. Had such a bland card been sent to me by other members of my family I would not have interpreted it as signifying anything in particular. Indeed, I would probably have assumed that they simply had not had enough time to buy a nicer card. Most of the family when faced with this aunt’s indirect messages choose to, or are encouraged to, ignore them, that is to refuse to recognize the impoliteness which they perceive to be intended, at the same time recognizing that a message has been clearly conveyed. For women of my aunt’s generation and class, this form of behaviour is extremely effective, in that it allows them a great deal of interactional power and allows them to express their disapproval without having to engage in confrontation. Thus, she is drawing on stereotypically feminine forms of indirect behaviour which I can assume to be in force, because of my knowledge of her past behaviour within a particular Community of Practice. Thus, in all interactions we assess what stereotypical assumptions about each individual’s gender role we think are in play and we judge behaviour accordingly.

Gender is therefore not something which leads us to believe that men and women speak differently but is a factor in our assessments about whether stereotypically gendered behaviour norms are operating in a particular interaction. Thus, it is important that we see gender identity...
as constructed within interaction itself; in this example my aunt’s indirect impoliteness can be seen as part of the construction of a particular type of conservative feminine identity, generally concerned with managing social relations within the family without directly causing arguments and explicitly discussing issues of concern. Impoliteness for her would consist of openly discussing conflicts and in some ways such a strategy would call into question her feminine identity. In this example, she is able to make a very clear point but without running the risk of being accused of being impolite. Thus, within this example, the distinction between what counts as polite and impolite behaviour has to be seen as a matter of judgment on the part of interactants.

4. Conclusions

It is essential not to see impoliteness as inherent in certain speech acts but rather as a series of judgments made by interactants on the appropriateness of others’ actions and these judgments themselves are influenced by stereotypes of, among other things, what is perceived to be gender-appropriate behaviour. If we consider gender to be something that we perform in each interaction, and if our linguistic behaviour is judged in relation to our past behaviour and to the type of behaviour which is considered appropriate for the group, then middle class white women choosing to speak in indirect ways may well achieve their ends, that is showing concern for the Community of Practice without bringing about conflict, even though others may well judge their behaviour to be indicative of powerlessness (or as in this case may still judge them to be impolite). Other women may well choose to use more direct language to signal their independence and professionalism, but may be judged as aggressive and impolite. Thus analysis of impoliteness should be concerned with analysis of the judgments made within particular Communities of Practice and it is important to see gender as a significant factor when considering how those judgments are made.

Notes

1. The section on impoliteness is a substantially revised part of a chapter in Mills (2003).
2. It could be argued that Brown and Levinson do, in fact, consider impoliteness implicitly, as a great deal of their analysis is taken up with the description of face-threatening acts; however, most of their work is concerned with the description of politeness as the avoidance of FTAs, rather than concentrating on the nature of FTAs or impoliteness.
3. Indeed McElhinny has argued that “the notion of community of practice … serves as a mediating region between local and global analysis” (McElhinny 2003: 30).
Thus, for her, the Community of Practice is crucially important as an arena where social values are negotiated with by individuals.

4. However, this notion that combative styles in academic discussion are acceptable to all participants assumes that this stereotypically masculine style is in fact neutral. Many female academics and some males find this combative style very uncomfortable and find it does not lead to genuine productive debate.

5. Indeed, I would argue that we need to reconsider the self-evident nature of these speech act categories such as “threat”, for in order to classify something as a threat we have to take up a position in relation to the utterance and align ourselves either with the speaker or the hearer. Categorizing something as a threat is an evaluation of the utterance, and an alignment with the hearer, rather than an analysis.

6. Beebe is thus making a clear distinction between accidental impoliteness and intentional rudeness, a distinction which I do not retain here as I would argue it is not a simple distinction but one which has to be established by the interactants themselves, and over which there may well be disagreement.

7. The notion of appropriateness is not ideologically neutral, and this is why I stress that it is a hypothesized norm — one which individuals assume to be in place. But this process is informed by wider societal norms of what behaviour is considered to be gender-appropriate. Thus when individuals hypothesize what the Community of Practice would consider appropriate behaviour for them, they necessarily also invoke these social norms, whether to contest or affirm them.

8. Another institutional context where insults are used in a ritualized manner is the House of Commons, especially the language used in Prime Minister’s Question Time. Harris (2001) and Shaw (2002) both analyze the way that language, which in other contexts would be interpreted as face-threatening, is not interpreted as impolite but rather is generally evaluated and considered in terms of verbal skill.

9. Second wave feminism is largely associated with a concern with representing women as an oppressed group whose language reflects their subordinate position (for example, Lakoff, 1975). Third wave feminists, rather than seeing gender identity as pre-existing interaction, see it as constituted in each interaction and as socially constructed (Mills, in progress; Holmes and Meyerhoff 2003; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003).

10. However, Mullany (2003) has found that often women and men within the business environment use more feminine styles of speech, and perhaps this is due to what she terms “the conversationalisation of public discourse”. In many public contexts, particularly the work environment, this speech style may be gaining momentum, since more feminine forms of speech are considered to be more effective, as Cameron (2003) has shown. But Walsh (2001) argues that in public discourse in general, when women use these feminine speech styles, if they are in an environment where masculine norms prevail, such as in the House of Commons, their interventions are devalued. Women may thus be caught in a double-bind, where they are judged to be aberrant if they adopt masculine norms and ineffective if they adopt feminine speech styles.

11. Even within this group there are significant differences due to age and education (Eckert 2003; Trechter 2003). One has to see these factors as constituting one’s gender identity in different ways.

12. For other women, particularly African American women, indirectness is not seen as a strategy which is necessarily part of the construction of their gender identity (Harness-Goodwin 2003; Trechter 2003).

13. However, Diamond has found that in her analysis of a group of psychotherapists that those in positions of power did not need to use powerful masculine speech
patterns and instead chose to rely on the group acknowledgement of their institutional power to encode their seemingly feminine forms of speech as powerful speech (Diamond 1996).

14. It feels as if this notion of masculinity and femininity is coming to the end of its conceptual usefulness; however here I use these terms as shorthand to indicate certain types of behaviour which indirectly index gender (Ochs 1992).

15. Although it should be acknowledged that these features are also associated with boorish behaviour and may be viewed negatively in certain Communities of Practice.

16. Cameron notes: “Nobody ever said approvingly of Margaret Thatcher that she was ‘in touch with her masculine side’”. (Cameron 2003: 463)

17. Cameron (1998) has argued that anecdotes can sometimes be useful as a tool to illustrate and encapsulate the functioning of certain types of linguistic feature.

18. How one would analyze data if one were not a participant is an interesting point, but it should be possible to interview participants and elicit information which would help in assessing their views of what is appropriate within a particular Community of Practice.


20. There are good grounds for arguing that what is happening here is not in fact impolite, and for many readers, this incident would not be considered impolite at all, but perhaps just signaling my aunt’s displeasure. However, as a recipient, I considered it to be impolite.

References


