“That’s the worst compliment I’ve ever heard”:

Analyzing gender, discourse, and (im)politeness

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Drawing on the method of discourse analysis, this paper explores the complex relationship between gender, discourse and (im)politeness. By examining an extended excerpt of interaction taken from the reality TV show The Apprentice, I investigate the role of gender stereotyping and gender assumptions in the assessment of (im)politeness by the discourse participants. Following Mills (2002), I argue that gender plays an important role in the judgments of (im)politeness by the interactants, even though judgments may vary among individuals. The analysis illustrates that a woman’s relatively masculine verbal behavior, albeit politic in view of the stereotypically ‘masculine’ context, is perceived as inappropriate and impolite. It is suggested that she may be subjected to more stringent gender norms which govern what constitutes polite behavior, as her linguistic behavior may be evaluated against the norms of women’s speech which is assumed to be stereotypically more polite than men’s speech. This highlights the issue of a double bind (Lakoff 1975) that women confront at work.
1. Introduction

In her book *Women, Men and Politeness*, Holmes (1995) suggests that women as a whole are linguistically more polite than men, since women are more concerned with the affective rather than the referential aspects of utterances. However, Mills’ recent work (2003, 2005) challenges Holmes’ (1995) claim that women are globally more polite than men, arguing that it is merely based on a stereotypical view of women’s language. As Mills (2003: 214) puts it, ‘[f]or some women, this stereotype may be important, but for others it may be something which they actively resist and reject’. In other words, Mills questions Holmes’ unproblematic generalization of women as a homogeneous group, which, according to her, results in an unproductive reproduction of the stereotypical view of ‘women’s language’ as polite and deferent (Lakoff 1974), rather than an accurate reflection of the *actual* behavior of individual women in specific contexts.

In Mills’ (2003, 2005) approach to gender and (im)politeness, she suggests that gender stereotyping plays an important role in interpreting what counts as polite or impolite. As Mills (2004) points out, politeness is stereotypically associated with values and types of behaviour, which in turn are associated with certain gender positions. She suggests that at a stereotypical level, politeness is associated with stereotypes of femininity (see also Okamoto 2002). In other words, politeness or ‘relational practice’ is a gendered concept, with politeness being stereotypically associated with femininity, and impoliteness stereotypically linked with masculinity (Holmes and Schnurr 2005; Mills 2003; Mullany 2007). As such, ‘[j]udgments about whether an utterance counts as impolite may be informed by stereotypical beliefs about gender-appropriate behavior (Mills 2005: 264). Thus, if women whose behavior is judged in relation to femininity employ stereotypically masculine speech styles, they may be interpreted as displaying inappropriate behavior and hence being impolite (Mills 2005).

In this paper, I aim to explore the interplay between gender and (im)politeness, with particular attention to the role of gender stereotyping and gender assumptions in the assessment of (im)politeness by the discourse participants. Following Mills (2002, 2004, 2005), I argue that gender plays an important role in the judgments of (im)politeness by the interactants, even though judgments seem to vary among individuals. In describing instances of (im)politeness, I draw on the politeness
framework developed by Watts (2003) and Locher and Watts (2005), in which (im)politeness constitutes a continuum ranging from over-polite (marked) to polite (unmarked) to impolite (marked) behavior. The data of the paper is taken from an episode of the debut season of The Apprentice, which was broadcast on NBC in 2004. In the show, sixteen contestants vie for the top position in one of Donald Trump’s (DT henceforth) organizations, and they are engaged in a variety of business-related tasks which serve to test the contestants’ commercial shrewdness in the sixteen-week interview. Two teams of contestants are set up, and led by their project managers. They compete with each other in every episode. At the end of each episode, one member of the losing team will be fired.

In my analysis, the issue of ‘(im)politeness’ is explicitly invoked and talked about in the boardroom interaction, where the participants make metalinguistic judgments about (im)politeness. In the boardroom meeting, the losing team meets with DT who will decide which team member should be fired at the end of the meeting. Drawing on an extended stretch of interaction, following Watts’s (1989, 2003) framework, I examine in detail two instances of a woman’s linguistic behavior which is deemed ‘impolite’ by the participants. Interestingly, on close examination, I regard such instances of behavior as appropriate, politic, and unmarked, considering the context, especially the norms of interaction in that specific situation. This is where, following Mills (2003), I would argue, gender plays a role in the attribution of (im)politeness by the participants. The two instances under examination are printed in bold below.

2. Excerpt

(The Apprentice, Disc 3, ‘Tit for Tat’ (Episode 6), Scene 4, 41:35)

*Context:* The losing team, Protégé, is meeting with DT in the boardroom where one member of the team will be fired. Omarosa is the project manager of Protégé.

29 DT: how did Heidi do?
30 OMA: Heidi was fantastic
31 and I will tell you that I haven’t always been a fan of Heidi
32 I haven’t always thought that she was professional
33 nor does she have much class or finesse
34 HEI: oh [laughs]
35 thank you [laughs]
36 DT: that’s one of the worst compliments I’ve ever heard
37 HEI: /best\ compliment
38 [laughs] I have no class
39 OMA: but I’ve been very candid with Heidi haven’t I?
40 HEI: /yes\ I appreciate that
41 DT: but in this instance
42 HEI: /I’ve\ heard a lot worse
43 DT: I don’t know I’m not so sure
44 that’s maybe the worst thing I’ve ever heard
[general laughter]
45 HEI: that’s the worst thing I’ve ever-
46 I have a lot of class
47 DT: /that’s\ the worst thing I think I’ve ever heard
48 that’s the worst compliment I’ve ever heard
49 HEI: I have a lot of class
50 I have one of the biggest clients in the country
51 OMA: but I have to just tell you-
52 DT: well do you think Omarosa has class?
53 HEI: you know in the beginning I didn’t think she had a lot of class
54 DT: do you like her now?
55 HEI: I do like her
[Omarosa laughs]
56 DT: after that last statement you like her?
57 HEI: /you know\ what Mr Trump
58 DT: if somebody said that about me I wouldn’t like her
59 //I don’t care what they do\
60 HEI: /Mr Trump you know what?\ she’s entitled to her opinion
61 I know myself I have class =
62 DT: = that doesn’t mean you have to like her
[...]”
64 DT: Jessie go ahead
65 JESS: Omarosa and I were paired up to do Issac’s together
66 DT: so- so what happened?
67 JESS: //basically\ 
68 OMA: /you were\ the lead //Jessie\ 
69 JESS: /I was\ the lead
OMA: please take responsibility for your //actions\n
JESS: /I was the lead\ but- =

DT: = do you like Omarosa the way she talks to you?
do you like her?

JESS: I do like Omarosa

DT: how can you like her the way she’s talking to you?
you know she’s got a very sharp edge
I mean she destroyed you with a //compliment\n
HEI: /she\ didn’t destroy me

DT: well let me tell you
she wasn’t very nice
she gave you a very very negative compliment
maybe the worst compliment I’ve ever heard

HEI: no I don’t

DT: you’re wonderful you have no class
it’s a terrible thing she said.

HEI: you get over //it-\

DT: /and\ just now she- she knocks you
and you’re saying how much you like her +
either you’re not telling the truth or you’re not very bright
there’s something wrong
the way she just talked to you Jessie

I don’t know how you can like her personally
Omarosa as project manager
I’m holding you partially responsible

 […]

DT: I’ve got pretty strong ideas on this one
Jessie why should you not be fired?

JESS: because you’re choosing someone to represent you
ultimately (in this) of course it’s important to win
and to accomplish something
but it’s also their character behind it
that’s very important

DT: do you think these two people have good character?

JESS: I think that Heidi has great character

DT: what about Omarosa?

JESS: I like Omarosa very much

DT: I can’t believe that
you’re saying you like her
and maybe that’s a smart thing to do
but I don’t believe you like her
and I don’t believe you could like her the way she talked to you either
[laughs] um no personally no
well but before you said you did like her
I didn’t- I had more respect for her after her becoming a PM
Omarosa so
you’re the team leader and you lost
why should you not be fired?
because you’re looking for leadership
and I demonstrated leadership based on the time frame that I was given
and the tasks that I was given as well as the resources that I was given
and the wonderful teammates that I had
and um I was able to come away //with great donations\
(and then) your team didn’t do that well
what do you think Heidi?
who would you say should be fired?
you know what?
after being classed unclassy and unprofessional
I’m gonna have to go with //Omarosa (I wouldn’t)\
you’re very //insulted\
/I wouldn’t\ work for somebody that called me unclassy and
unprofessional
I wouldn’t do it
definitely wouldn’t do it that’s character
I have to respect somebody that I work with
and I respected her, but after that-
but don’t forget you both changed your tune a lot
you were just saying you love //her\
[loudly] /no\ she’s great
she treated you //like a dog\ she’s a great leader\ she treated you both like dogs + +
all right it’s decision time
Jessie I think you were overly nice to Omarosa who treated you terribly
you know I don’t love that
I think it’s more legitimate for you to fight your team leader after what I saw in terms of the way she treated you. I can almost say the same thing for you Heidi, I think you’re tougher than Jessie, maybe you’ve had more experience than Jessie, but I do believe you’re a little bit tougher, and I’m not sure if that’s a bad thing. Omarosa you were very rude to two these people, how they took it is unbelievable to me because you are rude. [Omarosa shakes her head disapprovingly]

you were rude I’ve seen it I’ve seen it, but I have to say that + worse than you rudeness was the way Jessie took it. this is a very tough choice =

JESS: = Mr Trump

DT: because Omarosa has an attitude and

JESS: who do you want representing your company Mr Trump?

DT: well we’re gonna //see\ OMA: /I have\ a great character

DT: well she’s almost saying you don’t have great character =

OMA: = I have a great character

I do have an edge but I have a great character

JESS: please don’t fire me Mr Trump

DT: Jessie you were the worst negotiator

but worse than that

I hated the way + you took so much crap from Omarosa to me that was a form of weakness

and I think it’s because you’re very young

you may be somewhat inexperienced but I just hate it

I didn’t like what she was doing and it was repulsive to me.

but worse was the way you took it

JESS: please please //don’t\ DT: /I have\ no choice and I have to say that you’re fired

The first instance of linguistic behavior under examination takes place from line 30 to line 33. Asked by DT how Heidi performed in the task, Omarosa compliments Heidi that she did a fantastic job during the task by saying Heidi was fantastic (line 30). And
she goes on to state what she thought of Heidi previously, saying that she thought Heidi was unclassy and unprofessional: *and I will tell you that I haven’t always been a fan of Heidi, I haven’t always thought that she was professional nor does she have much class or finesse* (lines 32–33). Here, by stating the negative impression she had of Heidi previously, Omarosa could be said to intensify her compliment on Heidi, given that Omarosa, in doing so, emphasizes that Heidi’s outstanding performance in the task has not only impressed her, but also completely changed her negative impression of Heidi. This in effect adds emphasis to Heidi’s *fantastic* performance.

Heidi responds to Omarosa’s comment by first indicating her surprise with *oh* (line 34), but later accepts her compliment graciously by saying *thank you* (line 35). Here, Heidi seems to take Omarosa’s comment as a compliment, at least superficially, rather than as a criticism. This interpretation is well supported by Heidi’s expression of appreciation following Omarosa’s comment: *thank you* (line 35). However, DT does not interpret Omarosa’s comment as Heidi does. Rather, he considers Omarosa’s evaluation of Heidi as potentially face–threatening to Heidi, since Omarosa criticizes Heidi of having been unclassy and unprofessional, seriously threatening Heidi’s positive face. So, contrary to Heidi’s response, DT classifies Omarosa’s comments as *one of the worst compliments I’ve ever heard* (line 36).

However, despite DT’s classification of Omarosa’s comment as *one of the worst compliments* (line 36), Heidi does not seem to take Omarosa’s comment as particularly face-threatening. Nor does she feel seriously offended by it. This interpretation is well reflected in Heidi’s laughter (line 38) as well as her humorous self-mockery, *I have no class* (line 38), uttered in an exaggerated, joking tone of voice. Indeed, Heidi even plays along, and considers Omarosa’s comment the *best compliment* (line 37), which directly contradicts DT’s previous categorization of it as *one of the worst compliments* (line 36). Interestingly, in order to avoid being viewed negatively by DT, Omarosa explains that *I’ve been very candid with Heidi* (line 39), followed by a tag question *haven’t I?* (line 39), which serves to elicit confirmation from Heidi. In doing so, she implies that her comment is not meant to attack or threaten Heidi’s face needs, but this is just how they communicate with each other. In response, Heidi expresses her agreement with Omarosa and acknowledges the direct and unmitigated way with which they interact (line 40). And Heidi also expresses her appreciation of Omarosa’s candidness by saying *I appreciate that* (line 40).

But regardless of Heidi’s interpretation as well as Omarosa’s explanation, DT still considers Omarosa’s comment *the worst thing I’ve ever heard* (line 44). He also states
clearly his negative opinion on Omarosa’s comment: *if somebody said that about me, I wouldn’t like her, I don’t care what they do* (lines 58–59). In other words, DT finds Omarosa’s comments about Heidi outside of the acceptable levels of politeness.

I shall now turn to the second instance of linguistic behavior which is overtly commented upon by the participants (lines 66–82). Again, Omarosa is the participant whose discourse moves are under scrutiny in the analysis. Here, we can see that Omarosa’s utterances could be interpreted as a warning to Jessie who is about to explain to DT what happened when they worked together on the task. This is clearly face–threatening to Jessie’s positive and negative face. By interrupting Jessie when she should be the next speaker, Omarosa shows that she does not care about Jessie’s positive face wants; moreover, by making Jessie take on the responsibility, she displays a negative attitude towards Jessie’s positive face (Brown and Levinson 1987). Also, by giving a warning to Jessie, Omarosa intrudes Jessie’s freedom of choice and hence threatens her negative face. Interestingly, asked by DT if she likes Omarosa, Jessie says that she likes Omarosa (line 74), thus considering Omarosa’s behavior as politic and appropriate. DT, on the contrary, thinks that Omarosa has got a sharp edge (line 76), and seems to consider her behavior as impolite.

### 3. Discussion

It can be seen in the analysis that in both instances, Omarosa’s linguistic behavior is judged by DT as impolite, inappropriate, and negatively marked within the boardroom context. DT interprets Omarosa’s behavior as being very rude (line 151) and rude (line 153). He also describes Omarosa’s behavior explicitly in his concluding remarks towards the end of the boardroom meeting: *she treated you both like dogs* (line 140), *treated you terribly* (line 142). In particular, in one of DT’s comments, *she’s got a very sharp edge, I mean she destroyed you with a compliment* (lines 76–77), DT uses the phrase *a very sharp edge* (line 76) to describe the piercing and wounding nature of Omarosa’s linguistic behavior. This implies that DT sees Omarosa’s linguistic behavior as an intentional attack. Indeed, DT even comments that *she wasn’t very nice* (line 80) and that Omarosa’s behavior is *impulsive* (line 173).

It is worth noting that there is a discrepancy between Heidi’s initial interpretation and DT’s assessment of her behavior. I would argue that this is where gender comes to be relevant, and such a discrepancy may stem from the impact of gender stereotypes and
gendered politeness assumptions. It must be acknowledged here that the boardroom context could be regarded as a stereotypically ‘masculine’ domain, since one of the dominant elements in the boardroom interaction is confrontation, which is typically coded as a ‘masculine’ activity type (see Maltz and Borker 1982). The classification of the boardroom interaction as taking place in a ‘masculine’ domain is well reflected, for instance, in DT’s style of speaking in the boardroom: the frequent use of interruptions, the issuing of direct and unattenuated directives, the giving of cruel criticisms and negative evaluations without mitigation, and his dominance of the speaking floor. It is clear that such features could be coded as stereotypically ‘masculine’ (see, for example, Holmes and Stubbe 2003). Thus, I would suggest that judged against such a ‘masculine’ context, Omarosa’s relatively masculine behavior could arguably be interpreted as normal, appropriate and acceptable.

However, owing to the biological sex of Omarosa, she may be subjected to more stringent gender norms which govern what constitutes polite behavior. In other words, her linguistic behavior is evaluated against the norms of women’s speech which is assumed to be stereotypically more polite than men’s speech. As Lakoff (2005) points out, ‘[w]hen the roles of men and women are seen as distinct, politeness behaviors expected of either gender may also diverge significantly, both in amount of politeness and form expected’ (2005: 178). This could explain why her behavior of giving criticisms and making interruptions is judged by DT as impolite, inappropriate, and negatively marked. A similar point is made by Mills (2002) who observes that ‘[s]tereotypically masculine speech styles may be condoned more when they are employed by men than women, because these accord with notions of the habitual styles of men and their use of politeness’ (Mills 2002: 84; see also Mills 2003). This may explain why Omarosa’s behavior, which is perceived as politic and appropriate by Heidi and Jessie, evokes such negative evaluations from DT who considers her behavior as inappropriate and impolite.

In this context, it is also notable that gender stereotypes and gender assumptions do not seem to impact on the interlocutors in the same way with regard to their judgments of (im)politeness. Rather, the influence of gender stereotyping on the assessment of (im)politeness seems to vary among participants in different ways and to different extents. This may well be reflected in the different assessments of Omarosa’s linguistic behavior by the participants, which are inferred and interpreted on the basis of their reactions as well as their explicit metalinguistic comments. As demonstrated earlier in the analysis, DT’s assessments of Omarosa’s behavior differ markedly from the judgments made by Heidi and Jessie. DT interprets Omarosa’s
behavior as inappropriate, negatively marked and impolite, which is clearly reflected in his comments to Omarosa: *you were rude I’ve seen it I’ve seen it* (line 154). By contrast, Heidi and Jessie consider Omarosa’s discourse moves as acceptable, appropriate, and politic, which is supported by their respective comments about Omarosa: *I do like her* (line 55) and *I do like Omarosa* (line 74). Therefore, it can be seen that there is hardly a consensus among discourse participants regarding whether Omarosa’s linguistic behavior is regarded as polite or impolite. This demonstrates that the strength of gender stereotypes in shaping the assessments of (im)politeness varies across individuals. I would also suggest that such variations may be the result of interlocutors’ different perceptions of the relative importance of the context-specific norms and the stereotypical assumptions about gender-appropriate behavior (see also Mills 2003). It may be the case that whilst DT judges Omarosa’s behavior largely against the gendered politeness norms which expect women to be polite and deferent; Heidi and Jessie, on the other hand, take into account the norms of the context as well as Omarosa’s habitual behavior when it comes to evaluating the social appropriateness of Omarosa’s behavior. This may possibly explain the different perceptions of Omarosa’s linguistic performance by the interlocutors.

The case study also demonstrates that the competing demands of the two contradictory norms – namely the norms of the ‘masculine’ workplace and the gendered politeness norms – may work to the disadvantage of women in professional workplaces. As noted earlier, Omarosa’s behavior is considered by DT as impolite and inappropriate, given that her behavior has violated the politeness norms expected of women. As a result, DT’s evaluation of Omarosa’s behavior raises the question of the ‘double bind’ that women at work often have to face (see Lakoff 1975, 1990; Tannen 1994). As a result of being negatively evaluated as impolite by DT, Omarosa leaves a negative impression on DT. This may eventually diminish her chance of getting the job as DT’s apprentice. Thus, this may potentially demonstrate the practical consequences of assessments of (im)politeness influenced by gender stereotypes.

Indeed, one of DT’s comments, *but I do believe you’re a little bit tougher and I’m not sure if that’s a bad thing* (line 149–150), draws attention to the ambivalence as to whether toughness is regarded as a *bad thing* (line 150) in the case of women. This, again, highlights the dilemma that women face at work: while being tough may run the risk of being negatively perceived as ‘unwomanly’, acting in a feminine way may be seen as being unprofessional or incompetent. Here, DT’s comment could be interpreted as demonstrating the relevance of gender assumptions when it comes to assessing the performance of individuals in the boardroom meeting. Indeed, it could
be argued that it is such ambivalence which results from the gender assumptions that contributes to the differing interpretations of Omarosa’s discursive behavior among the interlocutors in the meeting.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have analyzed the complex relationship between gender and (im)politeness at the level of discourse, examining an extended stretch of interaction involving two instances of potential impoliteness. Following Mills (2003, 2004, 2005), I have demonstrated that gendered assumptions play a key role in the assessment of (im)polite behaviors. As a result of gender stereotyping, Omarosa’s relatively masculine behavior, albeit being politic in this masculine context, is assessed as impolite, and is considered as ‘negatively marked’ and ‘inappropriate’ (Locher and Watts 2005). This seems to confirm the issue of a double bind (Lakoff 1975, 1990; Tannen 1994) that women confront at work. This double bind may be explained by the co-existence of two sets of conflicting norms that women need to adhere to: the norms of their ‘masculine’ workplace as well as the stereotypical expectations that women should be polite. The analysis has also demonstrated that assessments of politeness vary among participants, illustrating that gender stereotyping impacts on individuals to different extents.

Appendix

Transcription conventions

+ pause up to one second
- incomplete or cut-off utterance
(hello) transcriber’s best guess at an unclear utterance
? rising or question intonation
yes underscore indicates emphatic stress
con- incomplete word
[…] section of transcript omitted
[laughs] paralinguistic features in square bracket
[comments] editorial comments italicized in square brackets
( ) unintelligible speech
(5) pause of specified number of seconds
That’s the worst compliment I’ve ever heard

Simultaneous speech
= latching between the end of one turn and the start of the next turn

References


