This paper aims at providing some support for Locher & Watts’ (2005) claim that politeness is a discursive concept and that it is norm-oriented. Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Theory is briefly revisited in order to show how the continuum of relational work could account for some behaviours that their theory has not covered. Two movie extracts are used to argue that direct speech acts may be interpreted as appropriate (politic) rather than impolite. The examples highlight that norms and expectations of interlocutors are crucial factors in assessments of linguistic behaviour that researchers should not neglect.

1. Introduction

Since the Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), a large number of scholars have been studying different politeness phenomena and using Politeness Theory as a starting point. Some of these scholars, for example Locher and Watts (2005), have argued that Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory is not a politeness theory but rather a theory on facework with a focus on the mitigation of face-threatening acts. According to these scholars, politeness is just a small part of
relational work which is more than the mitigation of face threatening acts (FTAs). They propose that politeness has several levels: normal, appropriate and unmarked as well as (positively and negatively) marked behaviours, depending on different norms in different contexts.

This paper explores how alleged impoliteness (in Brown and Levinson’s Politeness theory) may be interpreted as unmarked/politic/appropriate behaviour in Watts’ relational work (1989). Different interpretations of the notion of face (Goffman 1967) that underlies the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson and the relational work of Watts will be explained. Moreover, the importance of norms and frames of expectation (of the speakers and hearers) will be highlighted in respect to Locher and Watts’ (2006) claim that ‘impoliteness’ should not be treated as a second order concept (theoretical politeness) but as a first order one (judgment made by participants). Therefore, the norm of what counts as appropriate social behaviour is assessed with respect to the interactants’ judgment rather than being predicted universally. Two movie extracts will be presented to illustrate how direct speech acts may be interpreted as politic

1, unmarked behaviour rather than as impolite in different contexts. The analysis will also show that (im)politeness is a discursive concept.

2. Literature review

Both Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory and Watts’ relation work are linked to the notion of face, which is derived from Goffman (1967). Goffman views face as something which “is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to an interaction (Brown & Levinson 1987: 61).”

According to Brown & Levinson, interlocutors are assumed to respect each other’s “face” needs. Therefore, interactants will apply different linguistic strategies to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) and to perform polite behaviour. In order to mitigate a request, for example, speakers may employ a range of linguistic hedging strategies so that their behaviour will not be considered as impolite.

1 Politic behaviour is “equaled with appropriateness in lay people’s perception… It indexes a wide variety of forms of social behaviour that include both non-polite and polite behaviour (Locher 2006: 256).”
Rather than using politeness and impoliteness as binary opposites, Watts’ relational work spans a continuum ranging from politic to impolite behaviour. Whether certain behaviour is polite, impolite or appropriate depends on the judgments of the interactants which are determined on the basis of norms and expectations of the individuals (Locher & Watts 2006). In other words, according to Watts politeness is a concept that is relative to different contexts and speech communities. Therefore, politeness is monitored on the interpersonal level of linguistic interaction, it is norm-oriented and can only be addressed at a local level rather than universally (Locher 2006). Moreover, Watts (1989) has argued that there is politic and appropriate behaviour which refers to a wide range of social behaviour including polite/positively marked and non-polite/unmarked behaviour.

Interactants might not show evaluative reactions/comments towards unmarked/politic/appropriate behaviour (Figure 1, column 2) since this behaviour is the norm, while positively marked/politic/appropriate will trigger the judgment of behaviour as polite (Figure 1, column 3). And those behaviours which violate social norms and are negatively marked are referred to as impolite (Figure 1, column 1) and over-polite (Figure 1, column 4).
2.1 Speech acts

Speech acts can basically be divided into direct and indirect speech acts. Direct speech acts (Searle 1975) are those where there is a direct relationship between the structure and the function. Direct speech acts consist of three structural forms (declarative, interrogative, and imperative) and perform three general functions (statement, question and command/request). Direct speech acts are usually used in conflict contexts to explicitly convey meaning or to stress the particular command/request directly and clearly (Hammonds 2001). Directives tend to be used frequently from superiors to subordinates in routine instructions in workplace contexts (Holmes & Stubbe 2003).

3. Data

As mentioned above, polite behaviour only covers a small part of relational work. Two extracts from the movies Closer (Nichols 2004) and The Devil wears Prada (Frankel, 2006) have been chosen to illustrate how Watts’ interpretation of direct speech acts varies from the classical Politeness Theory of Brown & Levinson.

4. Data analysis

4.1 An argument between a couple

Similar to many other argument scenes in the movie, the participants in the extract use a lot of direct speech acts. As mentioned above, using direct speech can be viewed as the norm in argument contexts in order to emphasize the illocutionary force of the argument. Therefore, it can be expected that the interactants use direct speech in an argument. However, direct speech acts are not the only element to form the norm in arguments – emphatic intonation and the use of gesture also affect the judgment of the participants. Examples of different types of direct speeches in the first extract are presented below.

The scene in example 1 is taken from the film Closer. The film is set in contemporary London. The story is about a complicated relationship between two couples: Dan and
Alice, and Larry and Alice. Dan is a writer and Alice has just arrived from America. They met each other in the street. Later Dan has written a book about his girlfriend Alice and Anna is the photographer of the book. Dan and Anna fall in love with each other during this photo shooting. After that, Anna meets Larry (a doctor) and they get married. Few years later, at Anna’s gallery exhibition, the two couples meet each other. Larry falls in love with Alice, and Dan and Anna start seeing with each other again. The argument scene occurs after the gallery exhibition. When Larry comes back from New York where he has attended a conference, he reveals to Anna that he has had an affair with a whore during the trip. Anna reacts very calmly and does not seem to be angry. Instead she tells Larry that she has also had an affair with another man, and Larry guesses that this man is Dan.

Extract from Closer (in original disc 57.14 – 58.28)

01 Larry Is he a good fuck?
02 Anna °Don't do this.° ((walk away to the kitchen))
03 Larry ((Larry follows her to the kitchen)) Just answer the question. Is he
goood?
04 Anna Yes.
05 Larry Better than me?
06 Anna Different.
07 Larry Better?
08 Anna (0.3)Gentler.
09 Larry What does that mean?
10 Anna (0.2)You know what it means.=
11 Larry =Tell me.
12 Anna No.
13 Larry I treat you like a whore?=  
14 Anna =Sometimes.=
15 Larry =Why would that be?
16 Anna I'm sorry you're=
17 Larry ((Suddenly shouted to Anna)) =DON'T SAY IT! ((Anna stares at
18 Larry)) Don’t you fucking say "You're too good for me." I am, but
don't say it. You're making the mistake of your life. ((holding her
head by gripping her face))You're leaving me because you believe
that you don't deserve happiness, but you do, Anna.
19 Larry Did you have a bath because you had sex with him? So you
20 wouldn't smell of him. So you'd feel less guilty?
In the extract, Larry uses an interrogative “Is he a good fuck? (line 01)” with a normal pitch and intonation to begin the argument. And Anna uses a short imperative in return “Don't do this. (line 02)” with a very soft voice. When looking at the syntactic realizations of the argument, we could say that imperatives are more straightforward than interrogatives and declaratives. Declaratives and interrogatives appear more hedged. In the extract Larry mainly uses interrogatives. Judging by her response, Anna does not seem to be angry. She may, however, be upset due to the sensitive topic that Larry has stirred up but not because of the direct speech that he has used.

Moreover, it is believed that imperatives are more straightforward than interrogatives and declaratives since Anna has hedged this “less-mitigated” act with a very soft voice to express her unwillingness to further discuss the topic. She seems afraid of talking about it will make the situation even worse: “Don't do this” (line 02). Her soft voice reduces the tension while she is reluctant to talk about this issue. Besides, Larry only uses imperatives when Anna rejects or does not answer his question. This shows his wish to get an answer, for instance in line 03: Anna refuses to discuss the matter with an imperative “Don't do this (line 02)”, Larry responds with an imperative “Just answer the question (line 03)” to show his insistence. Also in line 10, Anna answers his question indirectly but he uses an imperative “Tell me (line 12)” in order to make this order clear and precise. It is believed that Larry has used a less-mitigated sentence structure to express his determination when Anna does not cooperate.

One remarkable thing is Larry’s reaction in line 18. It is believed that using direct speech is treated as the norm in this context since in line 17 Anna has changed her tone and sentence structure to a formulaic apology “I'm sorry you're...” to which Larry immediately responds with an imperative in a very loud voice. We could interpret the apology as an over-polite/negatively marked behaviour (Appendix 2, column 4) in this context as Larry’s reaction shows. Anna chooses to use an apology as hedging that Larry is too good for her instead of saying that directly. And due to the violation of the norm in this argument context Larry reacts negatively. Nevertheless, the type of speech act is not the only factor affecting the utterance is perceived as appropriate or not in a particular context. There are other discursive features like
interruption, intonation of the speech act and the use of gesture. In line 18, Larry uses an imperative speech act “Don’t say it!” in response to Anna’s negatively marked indirect speech act. Though Larry also uses an imperative speech act in other lines, the increased intonation (very loud volume) in line 18 makes Anna respond differently. She stares at Larry which shows that she is shocked when Larry suddenly interrupts her and raises his intonation. She even lowers her intonation and provides her answer in direct and concise form in the following utterances (lines 26, 28) to reduce the tenseness. Anna’s response shows that Larry’s interruption and raising his intonation is a negatively marked/impolite/inappropriate behaviour (Appendix 2, column 1) which results in a tense atmosphere and which silences Anna. Besides, in line 21, Larry even holds her head by gripping her face; this further action shows his rage and leads to Anna’s further silence. Anna’s different responses show that intonation and gesture are crucial in interpreting the tactic of speech act. Though Larry has used a lot of direct speech acts in the context, Anna only reacts negatively to the one with loud voice and gesture while she does not react to the others. Obviously, discursive norms are not formed by single element. As politeness is a norm-oriented concept and norms vary in different contexts and depending on the relationship between the participants, politeness is a discursive but not a fixed concept.

4.2 In a meeting

Apart from the context of arguments, direct speech is also widely used in workplace context from superiors to subordinates. In the next example – a scene from the movie The Devil wears Prada, Miranda also uses directives frequently in order to meet her objectives to make sure her subordinates get things done.

The film The Devil wears Prada is about a graduate student, Andrea Sacks, who works for a famous fashion magazine. Her boss, Miranda is target-oriented and typically uses direct speech acts when talking to her subordinates. In the extract, Miranda and her subordinates are discussing the upcoming edition of the magazine for next season.

Extract from Devil who wears Prada (in original disc 57.16 – 58.43)

01 Miranda  No. right February back to the issue did anybody speak with
02 Staff    Solman’s people yet?
03 Staff    Yes but she’d rather do a summer cover because she has a movie
coming out=
=No. also I am pulling the (XXX) piece on the Supreme Court women .hh Wallman, and I need to see your new draft on the piece about shopping for plastic surgeon it’s dull .hh And this layout in the winter wonderland spread (. ) not wonderful yet Ok, I’ll I’ll look at it What about Justina where are we on that? (XXX) is a very sculptural suit so I suggest that Justina suit match with Gucci garb Per↑fect. I got somebody came to work today What about accessories for April? One thought I have was enamel, um, bangle pendants earrings No we did it two years ago what else? Um wow They’re showing a lot of florals right now so I was just thinking [about] [flo]rals? For spring? ground breaking. But we thought about shooting in industrial space we thought the contrast between the femininity of the florals and the more raw rock human background would create this wonderful [tension] [N]o Which [ w w whi] [((Cough))] Has anybody else has anything that I can possibly use? anti-bacterial wipes perhaps

In the meeting the turn-taking and the direct interrogative speech show Miranda’s dominant position. For instance, she uses “did anybody speak with Solman’s people yet?” (line 01 to line 02) thereby controlling the meeting. She also uses interrogatives in the meeting for instance, “What about Justina where are we on that? (line 10)”, “what else? (line 16)”, and “Has anybody else has anything that I can possibly use? (line 26)”. By asking questions, she decides who the next speaker is, which could be interpreted as “doing power” downwards. Besides, as a boss, Miranda uses a lot of direct negative judgments (without any mitigation), for instance the single word “No” has appeared in lines 01, 05, 16 and 23, “it’s dull (line 7)”, “not wonderful yet (line 08)” and Miranda uses sarcasm in line 19 “groundbreaking” to mock the lack of creativeness of her subordinate.
These interrogatives, instructions and negative judgments are face-threatening acts (FTAs) according to Brown and Levinson as they damage the “face needs” of recipients. It is proposed by Brown and Levinson that each model person has negative face and positive face. Negative face involves one’s “freedom of action and freed of imposition (1987: 61)” and positive face involves “the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others (1987: 62).” Therefore, those direct interrogatives and instructions will damage the negative face of the subordinates since Miranda is imposing on them. However, her direct negative judgments will damage the positive-face of the recipients and damage their public self-image. These FTAs without any mitigation are (implicitly) defined as impolite behaviours according to Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory.

However, according to Watts’ relational work, there is no obvious indication to subordinates’ reactions that they interpret Miranda’s behaviour as negatively marked/impolite behaviour (Appendix 2, column 1). Instead, it can be interpreted that giving directives from superiors to subordinates is the norm in the workplace, and thus providing direct judgments is an aspect of Miranda’s job in order to ensure the high standard of the magazine. This target-oriented working style is part of Miranda’s leadership style and her subordinates expect her to be direct when giving instructions and judgments. Therefore, based on the norms in this workplace context and the expectations of the interactants, Miranda’s behaviour could be interpreted as appropriate/unmarked/politic behaviour (Appendix 2, column 2).

5. Discussion and conclusion

The Politeness Theory of Brown & Levinson is a starting point for researchers to investigate different politeness phenomena. The chosen extracts support Locher & Watts’ (2005) proposition about the importance if interlocutors’ norms and expectations. Since Brown & Levinson primarily focus on polite variations (and do not explicitly mention impolite aspects) behaviour that is not considered as polite may be implicitly interpreted as impolite. Apart from that, when dealing with sociocultural factors that affect interlocutors’ interpretations, Brown & Levinson only consider the relative importance of power, social distance and the ranking of the imposition. Therefore, their theory can only portray a small part of the politeness phenomenon (Watts 2003). The continuum of relational work as proposed by Watts could help us to explain a wider variety of forms of social behaviour in addition to the binary notions
of polite and impolite. Therefore, “taking a discursive perspective on polite behaviour by seeing it as a part of the relational work inherent in all human social interaction (Locher & Watts 2005: 28)” is preferred since humans will not limit themselves to follow theoretical rules in order to mitigate face-threatening acts.

Both extracts discussed above show the importance of knowing the contextual norms in order to interpret certain behaviour as politic, polite or impolite. Depending on different situations, individuals will adapt their behaviours to what is considered appropriate. Therefore, no utterance is inherently polite or impolite (Locher & Watts 2005). In extract 1, both interlocutors mainly used direct speech acts in the argument thereby adhering to the norm of being direct. Using direct speech with normal volume/intonation is the norm in this argument context as reflected in the unmarked reactions of the interactants in example 1. Besides, in extract 2, Miranda has used direct instructions and judgments to her subordinates since this is the norm in this company and particular this community of practice\(^2\) (Wenger 1998 in Holmes & Stubbe 2003). Since these norms shape the expectation of the interlocutors they do not show any evaluative reaction in response to the relatively directness of the speech displayed in the argument scene. Both examples thus show the importance for researchers to consider the norms and expectations of the participants in the context.

Clearly, then, politeness is more complex in reality that any single theory suggests it. Since the nature of politeness is inherently linked to norms, notions of what is considered as politeness change in different contexts and across time rather than being universally predictable in a theoretical way. Watts’ continuum of relational work could help us to gain a better understanding of the complexities of politeness phenomena (Locher 2006).

Appendices

1. Transcription conventions

(.) noticeable pause shorter than 0.5 second (including regular pauses between sentences)

\(^2\) Community of practice “is a group of close members who regularly engage with each other in the service of a joint enterprise, and who share a repertoire of resources which enables them to communicate in a kind of verbal shorthand which is often difficult for outsiders to penetrate (Wenger 1998 in Holmes & Stubbe 2003:2).”
(n) timed pause where “n” indicates the interval measured in seconds

, falling intonation
,
, level intonation
?
rising intonation
!
emphatic tone
↑
onset with higher pitch and/ or louder volume
°XXX° words are said softer than the surrounding items (not limited to the ending/onset position; can be anywhere in an utterance)
[
the beginning of overlapping
]
the end of overlapping
= A: XXX= B’s utterance is latched onto A’s
B: =XXX
.h audible inhalations (more “h”s indicate longer sound)
XXX stressed words (bolded and underlined)
( ) transcriber’s best guess of uttered words
(( )) non-verbal features or transcriber’s comment

2. Relational work

![Diagram of relational work and its polite (shaded) version](image)

Figure 1. Relational work and its polite (shaded) version (adapted from Locher 2004: 90).

(Locher & Watts, 2005, p.11)
References


Frankel, D. (Director) 2006. The devil wears Prada [motion picture]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.


