Culture and the Question of Impoliteness in Computer-Mediated Communication: a research gap

Jessica Haß
Sylvia Wächter
waechter@udk-berlin.de

Universidade de Artes de Berlin
(Universität der Kunst - Berlin)

Abstract

The article at hand reflects the phenomenon of impoliteness in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and aims to point out a research gap: While impoliteness in CMC has hardly been investigated in general, the available studies (cf. e.g. Nishimura 2010; Angouri/Tseliga 2010) regard CMC merely on an intracultural level. Studies with a cross-cultural, comparative perspective on the topic of impoliteness in CMC hardly exist at all, neither do studies investigating the dynamics and implicit and explicit negotiation of appropriate behavioral norms in intercultural CMC situations.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication (CMC), a cross-cultural perspective, intercultural communication.

Introduction

A bigger and bigger part of our daily lives takes place on the World Wide Web. The Internet is not only a source for information and entertainment anymore. Since the upcoming of Social Media, private and professional communication, the building and maintaining of relationships increasingly shift into the virtual world. These processes are transforming across all cultures. However, research has so far neglected the field of intercultural communication in computer-mediated contexts (cf. Shuter 2012).
Researchers have discovered the topic of impoliteness in Social Media only recently (cf. e.g. Locher 2004; 2010; Nishimura 2010; Upadhyay 2010; Angouri/Tseliga 2010 and others). Although a well-known phenomenon in daily life, scientific research is still scarce in this field. The topics of “shitstorms” or “cyberbullying” are almost omnipresent in online and offline media nowadays. Surely, these concepts present extreme and specific cases of impolite CMC, but milder forms of impolite behavior can be observed every day in the commentaries of online news sites, in discussion fora and so on. Before we lead to the recent research results in the field, a short introduction to the concept of (im-)politeness shall be given.

Politeness Theory and the Concept of Face

The term politeness or impoliteness, respectively, is closely related to the concept of face, introduced by Goffman (1955), described as the “image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (Goffman/Best 2005: 5) and “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself” (Goffman 1967: 5). Moreover Goffman developed the idea of face-work, namely efforts people undertake to maintain face during conflicts (cf. Ting-Toomey/Kurogi 1998). As Ting-Toomey (2005: 77) indicates, face-work is twofold: In addition to protecting one’s own face, people strive to give face to their conversational partners, too. Thus, Locher/Watts (2005) term face-work “relational work”, as the maintenance of the relationship is an important factor. Therefore, having face means to be valued as a relational partner (Chen 2013: 3).

The most important politeness theories, Lakoff's (1973; 1979; 2005), Leech's (1983) and Brown/Levinson’s (1987), are based on these notions on face, as well as on the cooperative principle formulated by Grice (1968). Lakoff (1979: 64) defines politeness as “device used in order to reduce friction in personal interaction.” All theories suggest pragmatic rules or maxims, respectively, and strategies to be followed in conversations to achieve politeness, addressing one’s own and others’ face needs.

Following this logic, impolite behavior is certainly face-threatening or face-damaging. Culpeper (2008) differentiates between intentional and unintentional impoliteness.
Unintentional impoliteness, termed as rudeness by Nishimura (2010), is defined as inappropriate behavior as a result of the sender’s ignorance or mistake (ibid: 35). In contrast, (intentional) impoliteness presents an intentional face-attack. In addition to the speaker’s intention, the hearer’s perception is a criterion for the classification of behavior as impolite (cf. Culpeper 2008).

The Context of Culture in Communication Styles

As Angouri/Tseliga (2010: 58) point out in accordance with Watts (2003) and Locher (2004), “what ‘counts’ as impolite behavior is not contained within language itself but is enacted in discourse and firmly embedded in co-constructed and negotiated norms of interactants. […] Situational and discourse context determines the interpretation of utterances” (also cf. Spencer-Oatey 2005). As Nishimura (2010) has shown, the evaluation and consequences of impolite behavior depend amongst others on the implicit norms of the respective online community. However, not only the closest environment is relevant, but also the broader context of culture.

All cultures are based on shared values, and many of them are universal. However, each culture emphasizes these values differently. Usually a certain set of values is prevalent, as well as a range of acceptable and nonacceptable verbal and nonverbal behavior (Krause-Ono/Wächter 2008). In addition, culture provides a lens through which the world is seen (cf. Moosmüller, 1997). This does not mean that people have no choice in their behavior or expressions or that cultural frames are static. Rather, cultural frames are decided upon by the members of a culture, mostly through their cultural or collective memory (cf. Assmann, 1992). These frames constitute the link between one member of a certain culture and all its members. There can be overlapping aspects with other cultures, but a predominant communicative style exists within each culture.

According to Brown/Levinson (1987) face-work is a universal characteristic in communication styles across cultures (cf. also Rygg: 68). The model has been criticized especially by Eastern theorists (cf. e.g. Ide 1989) for focusing merely on the
protection of face. The above mentioned classification by Ting-Toomey seems to be more appropriate for the Asian concept of face (cf. Rygg: 68). In each case, how people meet face needs in a discourse and what they perceive as (im)polite, is amongst other factors constituted by their cultural socialization. That is also valid for the relative importance of polite behavior and the strategies applied to achieve politeness. Yamashita (2003), for example, analyzes the role of values such as honesty and politeness among other values in Germany and Japan. In his study he concludes that for Germans honesty is among the top values, whereas politeness is regarded as less important. Of course, one should not jump to the conclusion that politeness is not an important factor in German communication at all. As Papacharissi (2004) points out, being polite is a positive value in Western societies. People generally do expect politeness in face-to-face communication as well as in CMC (cf. Chen 2013).

The cultural understanding of politeness and impoliteness, respectively, is closely linked to related concepts, like the acceptance of hierarchies and inequality (power distance, cf. Hofstede et al. 2010) and to the verbal communicative style. The (in)directness of speech is especially relevant. Rygg (2012: 65) stresses that (in)directness is almost exclusively based on politeness and the concept of face, as well as the opposing social needs of closeness versus distance. Concerning the directness or indirectness of speech, the Japanese and German cultures present two opposite poles of a continuum. Amongst others, Stahl (1999), Watanabe (2006), and Krause-Ono/Wächter (2008) have compared the German and Japanese verbal communication style. While Japanese communicative style privileges indirectness, in Germany such style is marked by directness in speech. In Watanabe’s (2006) study of Japanese-German business negotiations, the German executives are very task oriented. They are hardly referring to the previous speaker at a speaker-turn, and very much focused on the topic at hand. Therefore, in German discussions the focus is usually on the task, fact, or subject at hand. Interpersonal relations are hardly taken into consideration, and verbal expressions can be very direct, like pointing out mistakes or criticizing the person without considering his or her face needs. A person
earns the trust and acceptance of his or her colleagues by planning thoroughly, being self-disciplined and working hard – not by informal interpersonal communication (Krause-Ono/Wächter 2008; cf. also German cultural standards: Schroll-Machl 2002).

In contrast to that, Condon (1984) indicates that the main tendency in Japanese culture lies in the values of loyalty and group-orientation and to base public rationale more on emotions than on analysis. This does not mean that Japanese are not individualistic, but that their rules are different from other nations (Yamada 1997), especially when it comes to the place, timing and situation in which an individual is allowed to express his or her feelings. Japanese behavior tends to be vaguer than German behavior, more indirect, controlled and not promoting oneself but rather referring to the actual in-group (cf. Moosmüller 1997; Krause-Ono/Wächter 2008).

The State of Research on Impoliteness in CMC: Leaving Culture out of the Equation?

As mentioned above, research on the topic of impoliteness in CMC is scarce. Locher (2010) has recognized this gap and edited a special issue on politeness and impoliteness in CMC in the Journal of Politeness Research.

Haugh (2010) analyzes impoliteness in e-mail communication (for politeness and face-work in e-mail communication also cf. Biesenbach-Lucas 2006; Stroïnska/Cechetto 2013). Nishimura (2010) investigates impolite behavior on two Japanese bulletin board system communities. Angouri/Tseliga (2010) carry out a study on the link between disagreement and impoliteness in two Greek online fora and Upadhyay (2010) points out the connection between impoliteness and identity in online contexts. Lu (2010) examines impoliteness in Chinese synchronous private online chat and discusses whether politeness principles based on face-to-face communication can be applied to CMC.

Of course, there has been research before on the use of language in computer-mediated contexts in general. Androutsopoulos (2006; cf. also Locher 2010) summarizes three waves of research on this topic. The first wave is marked by the
so-called computer determinism, where the influence of the technological components of the medium on the observed linguistic patterns in online communication is stressed. The second wave focuses on “the interplay of technological, social, and contextual factors in the shaping of computer-mediated language practices” (Androutsopoulos 2006: 421), wave three focuses “the role of linguistic variability in the formation of social interaction and social identities on the Internet” (Androutsopoulos 2006: 421).

Susan Herring (2007) provides a classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse articulating aspects of the technical and social context in CMC. The medium factor of anonymous messaging (cf. ibid) seems of special interest concerning the issue of impoliteness in CMC. Naturally, not all online communication is anonymous, but discussions in online fora and commentaries on news sites and blogs mostly are. Not even social networks like Facebook supporting the unison of online and offline identity can prevent the users from using pseudonyms.

Another important fact is presented by the lack of para- and extra-linguistic cues (cf. Nishimura 2010). Users have developed ways to compensate for that deficit, for example smileys, asterisks and so on, but after all, certain emotional affects are easily misinterpreted in the text-based CMC.

There seems to be agreement amongst researchers that CMC shows tendencies to promote impoliteness. Users are more likely to communicate in a comparatively impolite manner than in face-to-face communication (cf. Lu 2010). In contrast to face-to-face communication, impoliteness is less likely to lead to a communication breakdown, though, due to the factor of anonymity (cf. Upadhyay 2010). Lu (2010) finds that impoliteness in CMC fulfills certain functions such as developing and maintaining interpersonal solidarity between participants, creating a democratic environment by evening out hierarchies existing in the offline world or simply accelerating the process of information exchange and improving efficiency. Angouri/Tseliga (2010) and Upadhya (2010) argue that impoliteness is closely linked to disagreement. The latter moreover observes that users often use impoliteness, expressed through overtly face-aggravating comments, strategically to communicate disagreement, to “argue
against an out-group’s ideological views, or to discredit ideological opponents” (ibid: 105). According to Locher/Bousfield (2008) impoliteness in the sense of an intentional face-attack serves as a means of negotiating power\(^1\) among the participants in an online discourse. Furthermore Culpeper (2005) finds that impoliteness can have entertainment tendencies and satisfy voyeuristic temptations.

The studies cited above examined CMC within their respective culture and provide an intracultural point of view. Therefore, the specifics of impoliteness in computer-mediated contexts as well as the underlying strategies and processes are regarded only from a limited perspective. The concept of culture is almost completely left out of the equation.

**Conclusion**

As explained above, the culturally given notions of politeness or impoliteness linked with the directness or indirectness of the verbal communicative style play a great role in communication. However, studies in this field traditionally have been designed for face-to-face-situations; hence the resulting theories apply to face-to-face-communication in the first place. How these principles can be applied to CMC, though, has not been further investigated yet. Existing studies on impoliteness in CMC have been carried out merely in intracultural contexts. Research in China (Lu 2010) and Japan (Nishimura 2010) indicates that the phenomenon of impoliteness in CMC is not limited to societies with a very direct communicative style. However, to which extent impoliteness is realized by users with different cultural backgrounds, remains unclear. Does internet communication cause different communication styles to become more similar to each other or is there still a notable difference between German and Japanese CMC for example, with the parallel that both are more extreme in terms of directness compared to their respective culture’s face-to-face communication? Moreover: Which dynamics and negotiation processes come into

\(^1\) Locher and Bousfield understand “power” in the sense of Wartenberg (1990: 85): “A social agent A has power over another social agent B if and only if A strategically constrains B’s action-environment”.
effect when members with different cultural backgrounds interact with each other in a computer-mediated context?

The field of intercultural communication in computer-mediated contexts has been neglected in general. Impoliteness in intercultural CMC presents only one of the research gaps to be filled. Future investigations could integrate in the new field of study suggested by Shuter (2012), namely Intercultural New Media Studies.

Resources


Chen, G. M. (2013): Losing face on Social Media. Threats to positive face lead to an indirect effect on retaliatory aggression through negative affect. *Communication Research* 20/10, 1-20.


Lakoff, R. (1973): The logic of politeness, or minding your p’s and q’s. *Chicago Linguistics Society* 9, 292-305.


Rygg, K. (2012): Direct and indirect communicative styles. A study in sociopragmatics and intercultural communication based on interview discourses with


**About the Authors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jessica Regina Hass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sylvia Wächter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics; research and work in the U.S. and Japan; Professor at Kanazawa University Japan; since 2006 Assistant Professor and since 2012 Associate Professor at Berlin University of the Arts; research and teaching areas: Applied Linguistics, Intercultural Communication, Business Communication.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Revista EducaOnline, Volume 8, Nº 1, Janeiro/Abril de 2014. ISSN: 1983-2664. Este artigo foi submetido para avaliação em 12/10/2013 e aprovado para publicação em 06/01/2014.