Impoliteness and taking offence in initial interactions

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Abstract:

The notion of “offence” lies at the core of current models of impoliteness. Yet is also well acknowledged that being impolite is not necessarily the same thing as being offended. In this paper, it is suggested that previous work on *causing* offence (Culpeper, 2011) can be usefully complemented by an analysis of *taking* offence. It is proposed that taking offence can be productively examined with respect to a model of (im)politeness as interactional social practice (Haugh, 2015). On this view, taking offence is analysed in part as a social action in and of itself, which means those persons registering or sanctioning offence in an interaction, whether explicitly or implicitly, can themselves be held morally accountable for this taking of offence. It is further suggested that taking offence as a social action can be productively theorised as a pragmatic act which is invariably situated with respect to particular activity types and interactional projects therein (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014). This position is illustrated by drawing from analyses of initial interactions amongst speakers of (American and Australian) English who are not previously acquainted. It is suggested that ways in which taking offence are accomplished are both afforded and constrained by the demonstrable orientation on the part of participants to agreeability in the course of getting acquainted.

Keywords:

impoliteness; pragmatic act; activity type; American English; Australian English; interactional pragmatics

Bionotes:

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1. Impoliteness and offence

The notion of “offence” lies at the core of current models of impoliteness. Bousfield (2008: 72), for instance, elects to treat “the intention of the speaker (or ‘author’) to ‘offend’” as synonymous with “threaten[ing]/damag[ing] face” (p.72), while Culpeper (2011, 2015) develops a theoretical account of impoliteness and causing offence. Yet it is also well acknowledged that being impolite is not necessarily the same thing as giving offence, and that participants may or may not take offence in response to ostensibly impolite talk or conduct (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 2011; Haugh, 2010a). Indeed, Bousfield (2008) has argued that “it is both a priority and a challenge for future research to test the perlocutionary and interactional offensive effects of linguistic impoliteness” (p.82). The relationship between the impoliteness and offence thus needs more careful attention from researchers.

Despite its evident importance for impoliteness research, however, the notion of offence has generally been noted only in passing rather than being examined in any great depth to date by researchers, with the notable exception of work by Culpeper. While not doing justice to the nuanced and complex account he develops in his monograph, impoliteness is essentially construed by Culpeper (2011) as a particular attitudinal stance on the part of speakers, while offence is analysed as both (a) an emotional response on the part of recipients that varies in degree of intensity (e.g. a *feeling* of anger, displeasure or annoyance that is caused by an offending event), or as (b) a source of such feelings (e.g. a *source* of feelings of anger, displeasure or annoyance). Given studies of impoliteness in interaction have indicated that participants have a range of different response options in the face of (perceived) impoliteness (e.g. Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann, 2003: 1563; Bousfield, 2008: 219; Dobs and Blitvich 2013: 126), it is evident that “taking offence” is something that is predicated on a complex interplay of different factors.

Culpeper (2011) proposes that one key factor that underpins the degree to which offence may be legitimately taken is related to the activity type (Levinson 1979) in which the impoliteness event occurs. He suggests that impoliteness may be sanctioned or legitimised in particular contexts (e.g. army training) (p.217). However, he goes on to point out that “this does not mean to say that any impoliteness is *neutralised*, i.e. that the target will not take offence at perceived face-attack...people can and do still take offence in such situations, even if there are theoretical reasons why they should not” (p.217, emphasis added). That participants may take offence even though “there are theoretical reasons why they should not” (p.217) is suggested by Culpeper to be a function of the fact that “when experiencing impoliteness, it is difficult to see it *in context*, and so it is still possible for it to cause offence” (p.218, original emphasis), as well as the fact that “context in many cases is likely to be overwhelmed by the salience of impoliteness behaviours” (p.219).

However, while the salience of particular features of the context, including the activity type in question, may well differ between producers and targets of (ostensible) impoliteness, it is important to bear in mind that *causing* and *taking* offence are not one in the same thing. In the former case, it is the speaker who is exercising his or her socially-mediated agency, while in the latter case it is the recipient, with respect to a particular action trajectory

(Mitchell, forthcoming; Mitchell and Haugh, 2015). To put it another way, while causing offence is a social action initiated by a speaker through various kinds of impoliteness triggers (Culpeper, 2015), taking offence can be understood as a social action initiated by the recipient in which he or she construes the actions or conduct of the prior speaker (or some other person or group of persons) as offensive. Although a complex model outlining the range of different impoliteness triggers that may cause offence has been developed (Culpeper, 1996, 2005, 2011, 2015), our understanding of the interactional dynamics of taking offence, while acknowledged as important (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 2011) is much more circumscribed.

In this paper, I propose that taking offence can be productively examined with respect to a model of (im)politeness as interactional social practice (Haugh, 2007, 2013, 2015; Kádár and Haugh, 2013). On this view, taking offence is analysed as a social action in and of itself distinct from any feelings of offence a participant may or may not experience. This means that those persons registering and sanctioning offence in a particular interaction are not only holding another person (or group of persons) accountable for causing offence, but can themselves be held morally accountable for this taking of offence. I suggest that taking offence as a form of social cation can be productively theorised as a pragmatic act which is invariably situated with respect to particular activity types and interactional projects therein (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014). I illustrate this position drawing from analyses of initial interactions amongst speakers of (American and Australian) English who are not previously acquainted, with the view that this thereby makes a contribution to our understanding of the pragmatics of impoliteness across Englishes. In doing so, it lays preliminary groundwork for exploring the potential relevance of “taking offence” for the pragmatics of “impoliteness” in other languages and cultures, and thus for a more general theorisation of (im)politeness.

2. Taking offence as a pragmatic act

Culpeper (2011) touches upon *offence* in his analysis of impoliteness metadiscourse in the course of discussing the semantic domain of *offensive*, and how it intersects with *rude*, *(verbally) aggressive* and *(verbally) abuse*, although interestingly not with *impoliteness* (pp.80-83). In doing so, he focuses on offence as both an emotional response on the part of recipients and as a source of such feelings. This echoes lay definitions of *offence* and *offensive*.¹

Building on this, *taking offence* as a social action can be analysed from the perspective of pragmatic act theory (Mey, 2001). According to Mey (2001), pragmatic acts are afforded by “the situation being able to ‘carry’ them” (p.224). A pragmeme is a “general situation prototype capable of being executed in a situation”, which consists of an activity part and a textual part, which when instantiated in a particular situated context constitutes a

¹ According to the Oxford Dictionary of English Online (2015), *offence* originates from Latin *offēnsa* (transgression, misdeed, injury, wrong, affront) being borrowed from Middle French *offense*, while *offensive*, that is, liable to cause offence, subsequently emerged by the 16th century. Early attested usage in the 14th century indicates four senses of *offence* that are still in use today: (1) attacking or assailing, (2) causing or experiencing a negative emotional state, (3) moral (and legal) transgressions, and (4) sources of those negative emotional states.

“pract” (Mey, 2001: 221). In the case of taking offence, there are arguably two key activities involved, namely, registering and sanctioning offence (Haugh, 2015). Registering offence encompasses an affective stance, that is, indicating a negative emotive state of “feeling bad”, which includes displeasure, annoyance, hurt, anger, and so on (cf. Culpeper, 2011: 69). Sanctioning offence encompasses a moral stance, that is, a moral claim of a prior transgression, affront, misdeed and such like on the part of another participant (Haugh, 2015; Kádár and Márquez-Reiter, 2015). The various ways in which these two activities underpinning the taking of offence can be accomplished lie on a continuum of pragmatic explicitness (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014; Culpeper, 2015), ranging from different forms of metapragmatic comments through to various types of (im)politeness implicatures. These practices are, however, invariably *afforded* by particular situations. In order to better understand those affordances or constraints, then, such practices are arguably more productively analysed as situated with respect to various kinds of sociocultural knowledge schema, including activity types (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014).

An activity type involves “any culturally recognised activity”, specifically, “a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded events with *constraints* on participants, setting, and so on, but above all on that kinds of allowable contributions” (Levinson, 1979: 368, original emphasis). The relevance of activity types for the analysis of the pragmatics of social actions (Thomas, 1995), including advice (e.g. Culpeper, Crawshaw and Harrison, 2008), has already been attested in previous work. In order to understand taking offence as a pragmatic act, then, it is arguably important to consider the way in which it is both afforded and constrained with respect to particular activity types, and the interactional projects that are accomplished therein.

In the following section, we thus move to consider the taking of offence that occurs within a particular activity type, namely, initial interactions where participants are getting acquainted.

3. Taking offence in initial interactions

Initial interactions in which participants are getting acquainted appear to constitute a good candidate for analysis as an activity type.² While getting acquainted is the overall goal, what is recognisable as getting acquainted is situationally and culturally afforded and constrained. While previous research has identified various aspects of getting acquainted (see Haugh and Carbaugh [2015] for a brief summary), Schneider’s (1988) work on the place of politeness is of particular relevance here. Building on Leech’s (1983) politeness principle, he proposes a number of “politeness maxims” that are specific to small talk in initial interactions in English, including the preference for comity, which arises through expressing agreement and positive evaluations of others (see also Svennevig, 1999). While there is not space here to develop an argument in full, close interactional analysis of initial interactions amongst American and Australian speakers of English (and likely British speakers as well) indicates this preference for agreement (Sacks, 1987; cf. Brown and Levinson, 1987) is regularly accomplished by

² The preliminary analysis undertaken in this section is part of a larger research project on Americans and Australians getting acquainted. See Haugh and Carbaugh (2015) for further details about the dataset in question.

those participants in the form of an ongoing orientation towards interactionally achieving “agreeability”.

Building on an early observation by Sacks (1992) that “pointing out that someone has been impolite may itself be impolite” (p.705), it appears that there are indeed constraints on the ways in which participants may indicate they are taking offence in initial interactions. For instance, although explicitly claiming offence in the form of a metapragmatic comment (e.g. “I take offence to what he said”) is potentially afforded in such interactions by various types of impoliteness triggers, participants can be observed to orient to such explicit claims as problematic in initial interactions through either only claiming *incipient* offence (see excerpt 1), or by making such claims post facto with another person (see excerpts 2 and 3).

In excerpt (1), for example, the American participant, Jill, is responding to the claim by Fen (a Taiwanese-Australian) that Fen has a “stereotype” about Americans that she “ha[sn’t] been able to get over”. Jill does so by claiming she will “try not to be offended”.³

(1) AmAus26: 10:14

360 F: there’s a <stereotype> ftheref (0.2) [that]
 361 | ((smiling)) |
 362 J: [mhm?] (0.6)
 363
 364 F: I haven’t been able to get foverf?
 365 | ((smiling)) |
 366 J: °okay° [what] is tha:t.
 367 F: [just]
 368 J: sorry >I w- I w’s-< fI’ll try not to be ←
 369 offe(h)nded?f HAHAHA=>no but no go ahead<
 370 | ((raises palms)) |
 371 F: o:hɿ (0.2) okay yeah >um well um< (.)that’s
 372 cause I’m not trying to foff(h)e[ndf you he]heheh
 373 | ((shrugs and cocks head)) |
 374 J: [yeah I know]
 375 J: °no I know°

In claiming she will try to not take offence in lines 368-369, Jill presumes in the form of an implicated premise (Sperber and Wilson, 1995) that Fen is likely going to say something potentially offensive. In this sense, then, Jill is registering incipient offence. Fen responds in lines 371-372 with an intention-denial claim, although she nevertheless goes on to deliver disparaging comments about Americans (see Mitchell and Haugh [2015] for further discussion).

In other cases, participants may initially disattend the impoliteness trigger, and delay metapragmatic comments about taking offence until after the event in question has passed. Just prior to excerpt (2), for instance, Tammy has asked Nathan what other kinds of IT-related work he does.

(2) AmAus13: 3:53

³ All excerpts are transcribed using standard CA transcription conventions (Jefferson, 2004).

158 N: um: ↑at the moment I've got s-:: oh I'm making
 159 an iphone app.
 160 (0.4)
 161 T: REally? >heh heh heh< [°haha°]
 162 | ((smiling)) |
 163 N: [well] when I say that
 164 I mean (.) I've hired fIndians to make it for mef=
 165 T: =.hh hahaha f°nice haha°f
 166 |((smiles and throws
 167 head back)) |

Following Tammy's display of surprise by which she implies she is impressed (line 161), Nathan deflects the positive assessment through shifting its object from himself to the people who he has hired to do the actual programming work (lines 163-164). Through this jocular self-deprecation (Haugh, 2010b), he navigates between the preference for agreement and the preference for avoiding self-praise in compliment responses (Pomerantz, 1978). Tammy then responds with laughter and another positive assessment (line 165), thereby interactionally achieving the mockery as non-serious.

However, in a follow-up interview Tammy claims that Nathan's reference to "Indians" was "a bit offensive."

(3) AmAus13_Followup(Am): 19:34

659 T: one thing that >it< kind of (0.4) caught
 660 me: (.) a bit was he sai:d um: (0.2) oh well I
 661 paid some (0.6) fIndians to do it?f
 662 L: yeah.
 663 T: .hh and like (1.1) I dunno I'm/um (.) fr- from the
 664 States like we're very (0.7) multicultural
 665 [and]
 666 L: [>yeah] yeah yeah<.
 667 (0.3)
 668 T: um:. (.) >like I know he was just joking <but>
 669 that was something I was< like °↑oh (.) okay (.) so°
 670 L: hahahahaha
 671 T: maybe a bit offensive but ←
 672 (.)
 673 L: oh: right (.) haha[ha
 674 T: [yeah=
 675 L: =yeah

Tammy grounds her moral claim that this reference to Indians was potentially "offensive" (line 671) in asserting that the US is a multicultural society (lines 663-664), thereby alluding to the cultural discourse that references to race or ethnicity are considered sensitive (Carbaugh, 2002). In this way, then, Tammy takes a moral stance whereby she sanctions this as an offence on the part of Nathan. Notably, this is in spite of recognising this reference by Nathan to have been jocular in intent (line 668) (see Haugh [forthcoming] for further discussion).

Another practice by which participants were observed to indicate they had taken offence was through implicated negative assessments, other-criticisms and complaints. As Haugh (2015) suggests, one means by which participants may indicate they have taken offence is through impoliteness implicatures. Implicatures may, of course, vary in their degree of pragmatic explicitness with respect to the transparency of their illocutionary point, target and semantic content (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014), a characteristic which may be exploited by participants in increasing the degree of deniability as to whether they have indeed taken offence.

In some cases, the implicated other-criticism becomes “exposed” (Jefferson, 1987) as the focus of the interactional business of that sequence. Prior to excerpt (4), for instance, Natalie has been repeatedly exhorting Gary to reciprocate by asking her some questions as well.

(4) AGA: NJGR: 8:00

208 G: U:M I haven't got any questions to ask you
 209 actually.
 210 (1.2)
 211 N: ↑you must be fun at parties. ←
 212 G: .hhh don't like parties
 213 N: no: I can imagine. ahe parties probably don't like
 214 you either(h)
 215 (0.6)
 216 G: I guess so. ↑OH NO. (0.8) people always like
 217 someone they can saddle up to
 219 (2.1)
 219 talk to. at least someone in the corner they can
 220 talk to.

Gary replies that he doesn't have any questions (lines 208-209), which occasions a recognisably sarcastic response from Natalie in line 211. The ostensibly positive assessment does not fit the interactional trajectory at this point, involving what Culpeper (2011) terms a “convention-driven” mismatch, thereby implicating a negative assessment of Gary, namely, that he is socially inept. The positive assessment is delivered sarcastically and so constitutes an instance of “mock politeness” (Culpeper, 1996; Leech, 1983; Taylor, 2015). This mock politeness implicature is then upgraded to a more pragmatically explicit insult in which “parties” metonymically stands for “people” in her subsequent turn (lines 213-214). Yet while Natalie's response delivers an implicated negative assessment, and this sarcasm is hearably impolite (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 1996, 2011, 2005), the implicature also registers offence on her part with regard to his ongoing refusal to ask her any questions, as well as sanctioning Gary for this refusal. Gary himself responds to the implicated negative assessment in his subsequent turn, thereby exposing it as “interactional business in its own right” (Jefferson, 1987: 97), first by agreeing (line 216), and then disagreeing with Natalie's proposal (lines 216-220). Notably, he does not orient to the negative assessment itself as impolite (see Haugh [2015: 160-164, 285-286] for further discussion).

In other cases, an implicature may remain “embedded” (Jefferson, 1987), that is, the talk in progress continues without the participants orienting to the action that is accomplished through the implicature as an object of interactional business. Prior to the following excerpt, for instance, Peter has been instructing Sally at length on the difference between “ketchup” and “tomato sauce” and claiming he is particular about such things as his family own a pizza place back in New York. Immediately following this exchange, Sally proffers a complaint about her ex-boyfriend who happened to be American.

(5) AmAus02: 1:31

119 S: mm. (0.2) [>I can imagine.<]
 120 P: [mheh heh heh]
 121 S: I had a: (.) American boyfriend, like- (0.7) ah::
 122 two years ago, and he would always pick on (.)
 123 everything I said, and say “you’re saying it wrong,
 124 you’re saying it wrong” [cuz I’m a linguistics=
 125 P: [hmhmhm heh heh
 126 S: =student studying (0.2) .hh you know=
 127 [prescriptive and descriptive language=
 128 P: [hmh
 129 S: =and >blah blah blah< I was like-
 130 P: hm
 131 (0.2)
 132 S: =>“No I’m not saying it wrong.”< hh:haha “shut up” ←
 133 ha s(hh)ort of thing.
 134 P: if you understand, who cares? hmh
 135 S: yeah exactly. yeah, so.
 136 P: hem hem hm

In the course of this telling she complains that her ex-boyfriend used to “pick on everything” she said (lines 121-129), but her response to this was to tell him to “shut up” (lines 132-133). However, what is inferable from Sally’s complaint, in particular from the fact that it follows immediately after Peter has been “correcting” Sally about her use of the terms “ketchup” and “tomato sauce”, is that while the target is ostensibly the ex-boyfriend, Peter himself could also be a target. In other words, the inference that a complaint is also being directed at the addressee is licensed by its sequential placement, although whether Peter is indeed the target is not transparent. It thus constitutes a subtle means by which Sally is able to register that she may have taken offence. Yet the inference is clearly defeasible, and Peter himself treats it as directed only at the ex-boyfriend (line 134), despite an earlier open-mouthed expression indicating surprise (Sendra, Kaland, Swerts and Prieto, 2013), and in that sense it remains embedded.

The tentative analysis that was undertaken in this section has indicated that taking offence in interaction is not simply a response to the (perceived) intentions of a prior speaker or breaches of (perceived) social norms. It also may constitute a social action in its own right by which recipients register offence and/or sanction a prior offence, as well as construe a prior action as offensive to a lesser or greater degree (Haugh, 2015; Mitchell and Haugh, 2015). It has also been proposed that the activity of getting acquainted in initial interactions

both affords and constrains the means by which recipients may take offence, at least in ways that do not readily open themselves to the charge of being impolite or offensive. For these reasons it has been argued that taking offence deserves to be studied as a pragmatic act that is invariably situated with respect to various different activity types and the interactional projects that are accomplished therein.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have briefly discussed a number of ways in which participants may indicate they have taken offence in initial interactions. These have included withholding that one has taken offence or only implicating one has taken offence, rather than explicitly claiming it. This analysis thus offers tentative evidence for the position that has been explored here, namely, that taking offence constitutes a pragmatic act that is both afforded and constrained by the activity type in which it arises. In the case of initial interactions, where there is a preference for agreeability, from which it follows that pointing out someone's transgression or impropriety could itself be construed as impolite, while taking offence is afforded, it is invariably accomplished as a relationally sensitive social action.

The analysis undertaken in this paper has echoed the work of Culpeper (2011, 2015) in a number of ways. It has been suggested that metapragmatic, including metalinguistic analysis is critical for furthering our understanding of impoliteness. It has also been proposed that pragmatic act theory, as opposed to traditional speech act theory, offers a productive means of theorising social action and practices in impoliteness research. In claiming that *taking* offence involves indicating both a moral stance and an affective stance on the part of the producer, it complements work by Culpeper (2011) on *causing* offence, while also offering further evidence that attributing intentions is not a necessary condition for offence to arise (cf. Bousfield 2008). Finally, the way in which activity types afford and constrain pragmatic acts has been briefly discussed. In the case of initial interactions, not only can taking offence be itself construed as an impropriety, but in such contexts it may open that participant to the charge of taking themselves too seriously, and thereby licence negative social evaluations of them in turn (Haugh, forthcoming). There is evidently sometimes social pressure for participants to avoid explicitly taking offence, something which is, in part, a function of the activity type in question.

Although it is increasingly recognised that the evaluations of both speakers and hearers are critical in analysing im/politeness (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 2011; Haugh, 2013; Locher, 2004), impoliteness researchers have generally focused on examining the causes of offence. It thus remains a relatively open question for the field just how we might reconcile speaker-oriented notions of impoliteness and rudeness with the recipient-oriented notion of offence. This case study represents a modest contribution towards that endeavour that is intended to stimulate further research not only on English but other languages as well, along with encouraging further work on taking offence in different activity types or situational contexts.

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