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The grammar of impoliteness

Abstract: This chapter introduces the grammar of impoliteness as a field (worthy) of study. It argues that more attention should be paid in the literature to linguistic forms that are specialized for expressing impoliteness, in particular to not purely lexical ones. To frame this type of research, we first discuss how the concept of impoliteness is understood in the field at large and how it is interpreted in the present volume and in its contributions. The chapter then moves on to the notion of grammar, examining how it is viewed in different theoretical frameworks and how those views relate to this volume and the studies that it brings together. We also consider challenges for research into the grammar of impoliteness and outline avenues for future inquiry. The focus here is on issues of a methodological, typological, diachronic and theoretical nature. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the contribution that this volume as a whole makes to the study of the grammar of impoliteness.

Key words: diachrony, grammar, impoliteness, methodology, theory, typology

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1 Introduction

(Im)politeness has been studied in fields as diverse as psychology, sociology and neuroscience. The dominant view in linguistics, especially since the “discursive” and “poststructuralist” turns of the research on the topic (e.g. Mills 2003; Locher 2006; Van der Bom and Mills 2015), is that (im)politeness is an essentially socio-pragmatic phenomenon related to the negotiation of societal norms. It is seen as not intrinsic to language but as arising from a situational assessment by the speech participants. As a result, issues of linguistic form have not received much attention in the field so far. It would obviously be absurd to claim that context plays no part in (im)polite linguistic behavior (e.g. in banter, *you bastard!* may serve to strengthen rather than challenge the rapport between friends). Still, scholars like Terkourafi (e.g. 2005a) and Culpeper (2011) have argued that no account of (im)politeness can be complete without a thorough understanding of the role of actual linguistic form in it and that there do exist words as well as more complex structures that are, to varying degrees, conventionally associated with (im)politeness. In other words, (im)politeness is not merely of a socio-pragmatic nature in their view: it also has a linguistic component and perhaps even its own grammar. This position has been generally overlooked in the literature. Even Knoblock’s (2022) *The Grammar of Hate* volume, for instance, deals primarily with purely pragmatic uses of specific morphosyntactic features for impolite purposes (see Giomi 2023).

The present volume seeks to help redress this neglect of form, by bringing together studies dealing with the grammatical expression of impoliteness in particular. This aim assumes an understanding of impoliteness as well as grammar, of course. Impoliteness could be characterized as involving negatively evaluated (linguistic) behaviors that have (often intentional)

offensive effects (see Culpeper 2011: 23) and as encompassing phenomena such as insults, threats, curses, condescensions and reproaches. It is important to acknowledge, though, that impoliteness is a complex notion. Section 2 will therefore discuss it in more detail, with reference to the ways in which it is understood in the contributions to this edited collection. Grammar is not easy to define either. The volume's focus is certainly not on discursive aspects of impoliteness or on individual words like Dutch *eikel* 'dickhead' and ready-made multi-word lexemes like English *son of a bitch*. A linguistic form such as French *espèce de NP!* (lit. 'species of NP!'), by contrast, falls within the present scope, as the structure itself appears to have the potential to create novel insults (e.g. *espèce de linguiste!* 'you linguist!'; Van Olmen and Grass 2023). The exact sense(s) in which something can be regarded as grammar should still be spelled out, however. For that reason, Section 3 will examine the concept of grammar in more depth, in relation to the range of forms studied in this volume.

The grammatical expression of impoliteness merits more attention but is not entirely uncharted territory. The existing literature consists mostly of isolated studies of specific structures in individual languages – especially European and East Asian ones (e.g. Mel'čuk and Milićević 2011 on Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian; Hudson 2018 on Japanese; Mattiello 2022 on English). But few attempts have been made thus far to draw together the research for a more comprehensive picture of grammatical impoliteness and bring it to bear on issues of wider/theoretical significance. Giomi and Van Oers (2022) is a recent exception, with their cross-linguistic survey of structures expressly reserved for direct insults and with their conclusion that several languages across the world distinguish insults as a sentence type in its own right. Through its different contributions, the present volume too wishes to weigh in on a number of broader issues – of a methodological, typological and diachronic nature, among other things. These challenges for the field will be presented in Section 4. Section 5, finally, will discuss how the various chapters in this collection help address them.

2 Impoliteness

People who research grammar probably assume that the concept of impoliteness is relatively straightforward; and people who research impoliteness probably assume that the concept of grammar is relatively straightforward. Neither assumption, of course, is true. Impoliteness, as a concept, has had a particularly tortuous history. We should note immediately that the label *impoliteness* for this concept is not the only possible one, other candidates being, for example, *rudeness*, *verbal aggression*, *verbal abuse* and *incivility*. Different labels have different nuances of meaning (see Culpeper 2011: Chapter 3) and different disciplines have gravitated toward different labels (*verbal aggression* is important in psychology, for instance). Of course, those are but some of the labels in English. In other languages, we see *scortesia* (Italian), *unhöflichkeit* (German), *kukosa adabu* (Swahili), 失禮 (Mandarin), to name but a few (and needless to say, within each language, there are multiple terms for the notion of impoliteness). An upshot of all this is that we cannot rely on a notion of impoliteness determined by the English lexical item *impoliteness*. Instead, we need a definition of the concept itself. In other words, we need a second-order notion of politeness (a theoretical construct), not first-order (the layperson's commonsense notion), though the latter may shape the former.

It is not the place of this section to attempt to review all second-order definitions of impoliteness. Despite the apparent confusion in the field, we can say of politeness studies that something of a consensus is emerging. Haugh and Watanabe (2017: 67) remark that in politeness studies:

the focus has shifted squarely to politeness as involving 'subjective judgements about the social appropriateness of verbal and non-verbal behaviour' (Spencer-Oatey 2005, 97),

and (im)politeness itself is broadly conceptualised as a type of interpersonal attitude or attitudinal evaluation.

Attitudes and evaluations are key. So far so good. The tricky bit, however, is to spell out the factors motivating the attitudes and evaluations that connect with politeness or impoliteness.

Note that one possible key factor is flagged in the quotation above: “social appropriateness”. Schneider (2012) argues that it is key for both politeness and impoliteness, and it also looms large for both in the relational approach espoused by Richard Watts and Miriam Locher (Locher 2004: 51; see also Watts 2003: 19; Locher and Watts 2005: 11; Watts 2005: xliii). However, Culpeper (2011) points out that the term *inappropriate* has a particularly weak link with impoliteness-related terms of the kind mentioned at the beginning of this section. Even for politeness, although appropriateness encompasses much, that very factor makes it vague. Arndt and Janney (1987: 376) argue that “appropriacy-based approaches to politeness” are “too vague”. They suggest that, rather than social situations and their norms of appropriacy, people should be the focus of politeness and we should “focus on cross-modal emotive behaviour as a means by which politeness is negotiated” (Arndt and Janney 1987: 377).

Emotion, in fact, is key in making impoliteness what it is, and thus is one way of making a definition less vague. As Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010: 69) points out, with reference to Kienpointner (2008: 41): “we tend to associate impoliteness, but not necessarily politeness, with true emotions”. Most of the impoliteness definitions in this volume allude to emotion but, with Van Huyssteen, Breed and Pilon, it is foregrounded: “(Im)politeness is typically associated with emotive psychological states of mind, emotively motivated human behaviour, perceptions and expectations of what is appropriate or not, (dis)agreeable social interactions and relationships, cultural identity, etc.”. One issue here is: which emotions are we talking about? Knowing this would help us be more precise. Culpeper (2011: Section 2.3) considered this issue for British culture. Culpeper (2011: Section 2.3) characterized and quantified the emotion labels people reported in describing impoliteness events where they have been offended. The vast majority of the emotion labels, 70%, fell into the category which emotion scholars call “sadness”, a category that can be made more transparent by considering the emotion labels it included from the data: *embarrassed*, *humiliated*, *hurt* and *upset*. Henceforth, we will refer to this category as “hurt”. “Anger” was the next most important category, accounting for 14.3% of labels used, included the labels *angry*, *irritation* and *annoyed*. Culpeper et al. (2014) showed that these two emotion groups, hurt and anger, also accounted for the vast majority of emotion labels reported by informants experiencing impoliteness events in Germany, Finland, Turkey and China, though there was slight variation between the weightings of those two emotion groups.

The hurt emotion group brings us into contact with another way of conceiving of impoliteness, i.e. via the concept of face. This is the approach taken by Matiello and Finkbeiner in this volume. When it comes to the academic concept of face, most scholars – including the most cited work on politeness, namely, Brown and Levinson (1987) – connect with Goffman’s (1967: 5) definition of face:

the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes.

Losing face means that one’s public image is damaged, and that often results in emotional consequences. Goffman notes the emotional consequences of face loss at various points: “If events establish a face for him [and] if his ordinary expectations are not filled, one expects that he will ‘feel bad’ or ‘feel hurt’” (Goffman 1967: 6); “He may become embarrassed and

chagrined; he may become shamefaced” (Goffman 1967: 8). These clearly involve the hurt emotion group. Impoliteness is a matter of facework that attacks or aggravates face, and indeed the first generation of works on impoliteness all took it this way (see, for example, Lachenicht 1980; Austin 1990; Culpeper 1996, 2005; Kienpointner 1997; Bousfield 2008). Face is closely linked to identity, and so violations of identity are part of facework (see, for example, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013 and references therein). However, face, although a rich and useful notion, does not easily accommodate all impoliteness-relevant negative emotions or the beliefs that give rise to them. Note that the anger emotion group is not directly accommodated by face. People have strong beliefs about social organization and behaviors within social organizations, about how people should be treated, about what is fair and what is not, and so forth. For example, in British culture, the rude act of jumping the queue is not so much a matter of face but perceived to be a violation of the fair and “right” practice of awaiting your turn, and it is something that is likely to provoke the emotional response of anger. Beliefs about rights are underpinned by morality and constitute part of society’s “moral order”. The concept of moral order is essentially “a culture-specific ideology about what counts as right or wrong” (Culpeper and Tantucci 2021: 148; see also Garfinkel 1964: 225) and is often referred to in recent (im)politeness research (e.g. Parvaresh and Tayebi 2018; Xie 2020).

In more recent years, and keying into the notions of attitude and evaluation, approaches to politeness and impoliteness have generally been more inclusive. Spencer-Oatey’s (e.g. 2008; Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2021) rapport management framework accommodates a range of evaluative beliefs, including some based on types of face and some based on what she terms “sociality rights”. In a similar vein but focusing specifically on impoliteness, Culpeper (2011: 23) pulls together the factors that shape impoliteness:

Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires and/or beliefs about social organisation, including, in particular, how one person’s or a group’s identities are mediated by others in interaction. Situated behaviours are viewed negatively – considered “impolite” – when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviours always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. Various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behaviour is taken to be, including for example whether one understands a behaviour to be strongly intentional or not.

The papers in this volume not mentioned in this section thus far all orientate to this definition. Of course, there is no claim here that this is the one and only way of defining impoliteness. Indeed, interestingly, some papers in this volume highlight specific parts of it, perhaps as a way of compensating for the fact that the definition’s very broadness makes it lose precision. As with most definitions, if not all, there is the problem of infinite regress: the concepts that defined the concept themselves need definition. In the above definition, the notion of “offence” would be a case in point (see Culpeper and Haugh’s 2021 attempt to pin it down). Furthermore, impoliteness will always have controversial boundaries and boundaries that are difficult to navigate. For example, Mantiello’s morphopragmatic analyses in this volume are focused on items that belong to slang. Obviously, much slang is oriented toward in-group membership and positive emotions, not the stuff of impoliteness. Thus, Mantiello’s analyses required an extra step to identify the items that are “generally perceived as impolite, offensive, and face-threatening, both to the speaker’s and to the hearer’s face”.

Quite problematically for a research agenda centered around the notion of *grammar of impoliteness*, it is not only the boundaries of the concept of impoliteness that are fuzzy and potentially controversial: decades, if not centuries of debate in the (narrowly or broadly defined) field of language studies go to show that exactly the same is true of the notion of grammar. And after all, if this was not the case, there probably would not be so many different linguistic theories around. What most of these theories have in common is that, in one way or another, they describe the grammar as a structured set of constraints and operations that has some sort of psychological reality in the mind of language users. What is far from consensual, on the other hand, are the workings of these constraints and operations and the nature of the building blocks to which they apply.

On a restrictive (and usually prescriptive) approach, grammar tends to be equated with morphological and syntactic structure only. This has been referred to as “the traditional sense [of the word “grammar”] in linguistics, and the usual popular interpretation of the term” (Crystal 2008: 217). Crystal is probably right in submitting that this is also the concept of grammar (however vague and subconscious) that one may tentatively ascribe to most laypeople. And it also does not seem too far-fetched to say that this pre-theoretical conception of grammar is precisely what informs the vast majority of the grammars (intended as grammar *books* for individual languages) that are used in language teaching, of both L1 in basic schooling and L2, for whatever age range. As soon as the question “what is grammar?” is taken to the next, more theoretically-oriented level of reflection, however, the picture becomes more complicated.

To start with, at least some implicit recognition that grammar is more than just syntax and morphology is to be found in most contemporary frameworks. This is also the case for Generative Grammar, the theory that *par excellence* tends to offer the most restrictive definition of grammar “proper”, essentially equating it (at least in some of its versions) with syntax, or at best *morphosyntax*. As a matter of fact, the practice of sticking semantic labels such as *tense*, *aspect*, *modality* etc. onto the various syntactic nodes has been ubiquitous in generative grammarians’ famous tree diagrams since the early days of the framework. This is, in itself, already quite meaningful. And when this practice has been criticized, as in Ray Jackendoff’s Parallel Architecture (Jackendoff and Audring 2019, 2020), this was done in the spirit of arguing that syntax and semantics constitute separate modules of the grammar (not that syntax is *the only* component of the grammar). In fact, the status of the so-called *Logical Form* with respect to the grammatical system has been a topic of debate between proponents of different versions of Generative Grammar (see Hornstein 1995: 3–4).

At face value, one may be tempted to take as a starting point the traditional divide of the linguistics world into formalists and functionalists, and automatically ascribe to the former the assumption that grammar is essentially concerned with the formal properties of language, and to the latter the competing assumption that grammar encompasses at least a certain amount of meaning representation. In fact, this would be an utter oversimplification of a much more complex and diverse landscape. Not only have various formally-oriented linguists proposed that what they call Logical Form is a level of grammatical analysis in its own right, but the other way round, there also are linguistic frameworks such as Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014) that typically focus much more on the meaning and function of linguistic utterances rather than their form, but which all the same regard semantics and *lexicogrammar* as two sharply separate systems. On this approach, the lexicogrammar *realizes* a semantic structure, but the latter is not *part* of the former. What Crystal (2008) refers to as the “traditional” view of grammar, in sum, is still very much alive and kicking, even in some of the otherwise most radically functionalist framework.

By contrast with the restrictive approach, in other frameworks the grammar is explicitly argued to include not only the strictly semantic (i.e. denotational, truth-conditional) properties

of linguistic expressions but even (some of) their pragmatic properties. In Functional Discourse Grammar (Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2008), for instance, the grammatical component is comprised of an Interpersonal and a Representational Level (dealing with pragmatics and semantics, respectively) which hierarchically govern the Morphosyntactic and the Phonological Level; precisely for this reason, the first two levels do not encompass any possible facet of an utterance's meaning but are restricted to those aspects of pragmatic and semantic content that receive overt encoding in linguistic form, whether morphosyntactically, phonologically, or both (e.g. the different syntactic templates for declarative and interrogative sentences in English and the falling versus rising prosodic contours associated with these two sentence types in so many languages). This point is particularly important here, because much (though certainly not all) of what is generally understood to belong to the realm of impoliteness is pragmatic, rather than semantic in nature: not, or not necessarily in the sense that it is strictly a matter of discourse (and as such not relevant to the grammar) but in the sense that it concerns what the speaker *does* with their utterance rather than what they *describe*. After all, the notion of 'doing' is precisely what the word *pragmatics* is literally about: and there is nothing in this notion that is inherently in contrast with the possibility of being conventionally associated with a given linguistic form. One fundamental assumption of what we have referred to as the *grammar of impoliteness* research agenda is precisely that some aspects of grammatically encoded meaning are not denotational but rather interpersonal in nature (i.e. pragmatic in the sense just described). For instance, the descriptive, truth-conditional content of a curse or threat may not differ at all from that of a mere statement about the future: what distinguishes curses, threats and predictions from each other is that they each realize a different type of communicative action, i.e. a different speech act. To the extent that such speech acts are explicitly indicated by dedicated formal means, such as the morphological markers or syntactic constructions discussed in the chapters by Dobrushina, Finkbeiner and Paternoster in this volume, there is no reason why the illocutionary distinctions in question should not be regarded as *bona fide* grammatical features of the language at stake.

It should be stressed that, once again, this perspective is not necessarily restricted to functionally-oriented approaches. Clearly pragmatic notions such as topic, focus and illocutionary force are nowadays an integral part of the hierarchy of functional projections assumed in generative syntax, and some generative accounts have proposed further interpersonal concepts as part of the grammar, whether as syntactic nodes in their own right or as features associated with certain items or positions within a syntactic tree. This is precisely what is suggested in the one chapter of the present volume that adopts a generative approach, authored by Davis and Jang: in Korean, the features [+honorific] and [-honorific], which encode the speaker's subjective evaluation of a referent rather than its objective, truth-conditional properties, are specified in the head position of a noun phrase (and trigger the use of the prefixes *si-* and *che-* on a verb agreeing with that noun phrase), so they are also understood as being part of the grammar to all intents and purposes. Even though their meaning is non-truth-conditional, it is still not defeasible, i.e. it is not an inference but an inherent specification of the linguistic forms expressing them: in other words, such meanings correspond to what Grice (1975) called conventional implicatures, and which would later come to be known as use-conditional meanings (Recanati 2004; Gutzmann 2015). Yet other models, such as Discourse Grammar (Kaltenböck, Heine and Kuteva 2011) regard such meaning components as belonging to a module of the linguistic system (Thetical Grammar) which is distinct and separate from that dealing with the semantic "proper", i.e. denotational aspects of meaning (Sentence Grammar), but which nonetheless can be shown to be systematically associated with certain linguistic forms and hence deserves to be called a *grammar*.

The linguistic frameworks mentioned so far in this section may be divided (admittedly somewhat roughly) into those that regard meaning and grammar as separate, though of course

interconnected entities and those that include some aspects of meaning within their respective notions of grammar. Within the latter group, one may draw further lines depending on exactly how much, and what kind of meaning is taken to be grammatical in nature (especially, semantic/denotational only, or pragmatic/interpersonal as well?). For instance, another theoretical approach that would presumably include interpersonal meaning in its conception of the grammar is the Morphopragmatics framework (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1991, 1994; see Mattiello's chapter in this volume). While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to pursue a detailed classification of linguistic frameworks with respect to this criterion, we could not conclude this section without mentioning the constructionist approach, which plays an important role in several of the following chapters.

Typically, scholars working with one or another version of Construction Grammar,¹ or who anyway make reference to the basic principles of this family of approaches, endorse a rather encompassing perspective when it comes to the boundaries of grammar. A key assumption of this perspective is that each specific construction of a language (understood as a conventionalized pairing of form and meaning) is specified for a variety of properties of different types. Namely, these subsets of properties correspond to what in other models would be regarded as different levels of grammatical analysis, such as pragmatics, semantics, syntax, morphology, phonology. It should be noted, in this connection, that the type of pragmatic properties included in this set of specifications is usually more encompassing than in other frameworks. For instance, the fact that a construction belongs to a certain register, or even to a certain variety of a language, would be part of this set in a good many constructionist accounts (see for instance the diasystematic approach adopted in van Huyssteen, Breed and Pilon's chapter) but not in, say, Discourse Grammar, Functional Discourse Grammar or Generative Grammar.

There are two last aspects of the term *grammar* that must be mentioned here. First, so far we have discussed the notion of grammar as (more or less) equivalent to "language competence" (Saussure's *langue*) and hence opposed to all that is extra-grammatical in the sense of pertaining to linguistic performance and/or the sheer articulation of sounds (*parole*). There is however a more restrictive, but equally important interpretation of the term, namely, one in which "grammar" essentially denotes the procedural, abstract knowledge relevant to linguistic competence (the "know-how" of the language faculty); in this sense, grammar contrasts with *lexicon*, understood as the declarative, propositional component of linguistic competence (the "know-that": see Ullman 2001 for an overview). Simplifying somewhat, for most theories of grammar the former type of knowledge is observable in the form of rules (e.g. mainstream Generative Grammar) or mapping constraints (as in Optimality Theory: Prince & Smolensky 1993), whereas lexical knowledge provides the building blocks with which procedural knowledge operates. In Construction Grammar, on the other hand, linguistic knowledge basically consists of a network of constructions, interconnected with each other by various types of taxonomical relations of inheritance. In this perspective, the procedural/declarative distinction is a matter of degree and not an ontological divide: the types of linguistic competence that other frameworks regard as grammatical or lexical in nature do not stand in a dichotomic opposition to each other but correspond to a continuum of constructions. While all constructions consist of a number of slots and are specified for the same types of properties (see above), they vary as regards their degree of *schematicity*, that is, as to how many slots they include and how many of these are pre-instantiated or are left open, and if the latter, what and how many types of units they can host. The more open slots a construction has, and the more different types of fillers can go into these slots, the more schematic that construction will be (i.e. the more procedural knowledge is involved in using that construction). In this vein, some of the

¹ "Construction Grammar" is of course a bit of a misnomer, but it has become rather customary in the literature to use this term to refer to a variety of more specific frameworks. For an overview, see Hoffmann (2017).

contributions included in this volume more or less explicitly discuss the expressions examined in terms of open or fixed slots: for instance, Culpeper, van Dorst and Gillings compare the productivity of more abstract and schematic impoliteness-related constructions with that of more fixed, lexical-like ones, whereas both van Huyssteen, Breed and Pilon for Afrikaans and Van Olmen and Andersson for English and Polish address the interaction between the impoliteness meaning of the construction as a whole and that of the individual items that may fill the open slots.

Finally, one prominent topic in constructionist research (and the chapters mentioned above are no exception) is the issue of conventionalization. This too is obviously very relevant to the notion of grammar – at a pre-theoretical level (and going back once again to good-old Saussure), because language is by definition conventional; in synchrony, because most definitions of “construction” make overt reference to conventionalized pairings of form and meaning (e.g. Goldberg 2006); and in diachrony, in that much contemporary research on grammaticalization regards the context- and frequency-induced conventionalization of an inference as the mechanism responsible for the emergence of new meanings (König and Traugott 1988; Traugott and König 1991; Heine 2002). Indeed, frequency, productivity and context feature prominently in discussions of conventionalization, see e.g. Terkourafi’s (2005b: 247) definition of linguistic norms as “regularities of co-occurrence between linguistic expressions and their extra-linguistic contexts of use”. As we will see in Section 4, the question of determining to what extent a construction is conventionalized for the impoliteness-related meaning it expresses is a recurrent theme in this volume, and is often explicitly addressed in connection with both frequency and context – for instance in Queisser and Pleyer’s discussion of the conventionalized insulting meaning of ‘such’-constructions in German and English.

4 Challenges and directions

As pointed out in Section 1, the grammar of impoliteness has, of course, not gone completely unexplored in the literature. In our view, however, the existing body of research raises a number of questions that warrant further investigation. There are also areas that it has paid little attention to but that we deem relevant for an in-depth understanding of the topic. The present section will briefly discuss these theoretical, methodological, typological and diachronic issues. They are, as we will see in Section 5, taken up to varying degrees in the contributions to this volume. Our primary aim here, though, is to set an agenda for future research.

4.1 Methodology

A first issue that merits more consideration is how we can establish that particular grammatical structures in a language are specialized for impolite purposes. If its conventionalization for impoliteness is “a correlate of the (statistical) frequency with which” it “is used in one’s experience of” impolite “contexts” (Terkourafi 2005a: 213, originally about politeness), corpus linguistics looks like a fruitful approach. It can give us a good idea of whether and how often a certain structure is meant and/or taken as offensive, through careful examination of the context (see, for instance, Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper 2023: 29–30 for the details of such an analysis). It will not come as a surprise therefore that this method has been adopted quite regularly, perhaps most notably by Culpeper (2011) for the identification of impoliteness formulae in British English (see also, for example, Kleinke and Bös 2015 on German; Lai 2019 on Chinese; Andersson 2022 on Swedish).

The corpus-based approach still has its challenges, however. A rather self-evident but not unimportant one, in light of some of our questions below, is its non-applicability to the many languages for which we have no adequate corpora yet. Determining impoliteness based on

corpus data is also susceptible to (unconscious) analytical bias, though this problem can be solved with, say, interrater reliability testing (cf. Landone 2022: 221). More significantly, impoliteness is, all in all, a relatively rare phenomenon in language (Culpeper 2011: 9). As a result, to find sufficient data for grammatical structures of potential interest, one may be obliged to resort to extremely large corpora, like web-crawled ones, or highly specific corpora, like discussions on contentious topics. The former run the risk of being unmanageable and the latter that of being skewed. Heated debates about politics, for example, are unlikely to feature sincere compliments taking the form of *you genius!* and would fail to give us all the necessary information about the structure in question. It thus seems desirable to reflect more on which (combinations of) corpora are most appropriate for the present aims.

Conventionalization as correlative to frequency furthermore prompts the question of how often some structure actually has to fulfill an impolite function to make up an expression dedicated or even just partly dedicated to impoliteness. Culpeper (2011: 134) sets the bar at half of all hits for his formulae. For Dobrushina (2024: 615), by contrast, the exceptional usage of an optative marker for blessings instead of curses in two Turkic languages is enough to write that it is not specialized for curses and that positive versus negative “evaluation is still the job of the communicative context and the lexical meaning of the words”. The discrepancy between these scholars reflects different takes on what counts as conventionalization and, from the perspective of pragmatics (see Terkourafi 2005b: 251 on generalized, i.e. default but still cancellable, implicatures), one could probably make a case for this optative being partially dedicated. The disagreement nonetheless suggests that other or supplementary ways to establish conventionalized impoliteness may be needed.

One possible approach centers around linguistic coercion, a process whereby “the meaning of [a] lexical item conforms to the meaning of the structure in which it is embedded” (Michaëlis 2004: 25). It has been employed implicitly as a criterion/measure in various publications (e.g. Jones 1996: 223; Finkbeiner, Meibauer and Wiese 2016: 4; Jain 2022: 389) and Giomi, Van Olmen and Van Oers (2025) propose it as one of their conditions for a grammatical structure to constitute an insulting sentence type: it can solely contain negatively evaluative expressions or, if other types of expressions are tolerated, a negatively evaluative reading is imposed on them. A noun like ‘linguist’ becoming an insult when it occurs in a particular structure (see Section 1 on *espèce de NP!* in French) is a good indication of that structure’s conventionalized impoliteness. Coercion even appears to be helpful in candidates for partial conventionalization, considering how *you linguist!* – despite the acceptability of genuine *you genius!* – would usually be interpreted (without context). For that reason, it is worth exploring, in our view, whether the use of such effects can be extended beyond insults in some way. Coercion has the further advantage that it can be tested fairly easily, for example, by asking speakers to assess the well-formedness and (im)politeness of suitable stimuli in a questionnaire.

This line of experimental research more generally avoids the corpus-based approach’s potential for analytical bias and also has – its own complications notwithstanding (for reasons of space, we refer to Landone 2022: 151–167 for an evaluation) – a long and productive history in the field (e.g. Hill et al. 1986; Nadeu and Prieto 2011; Terkourafi, Weissman and Roy 2020). A more intensive application of such methods to the topic of conventionalized impoliteness in grammatical structures would undoubtedly prove useful, providing us with (quantitative) data on how they are interpreted, perceived and the like by speakers themselves. Yet, not all these methods will be equally effective for the present goals. The popular instruments of discourse completion tasks and production questionnaires (see Landone 2022: 125–139) expect participants to supply language themselves and they have generated interesting insights into conventionalized structures for, among other things, apologies, requests and compliments (see Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper’s 1989 ground-breaking work and its many follow-up studies). For research on impoliteness, however, there are obviously ethical issues around asking people to

produce the kind of language required. Participants are also likely to feel uncomfortable doing so and to moderate their answers accordingly.

There is room for more online experimental approaches as well. As Raizen, Vergis and Christianson (2015: 213) correctly point out, methods such as questionnaires can only tell us about forms “after they have been processed”, while the authors’ own eye-tracking study of taboo words reveals that speakers’ assessments of them as impolite may in part happen pre-consciously. Linguistic research into (im)politeness that adopts such experimental approaches is, as a whole, still in its comparative infancy. It is not difficult to imagine, though, how measuring reaction times, event-related potentials, skin conductance responses or heart rates (e.g. Jiang and Zhou 2015; Ruytenbeek, Allaert and Vanderhasselt 2024; Zlov and Zlatev 2024) could contribute to investigations into the grammar of impoliteness. One could hypothesize, for instance, that relevant structures would trigger heightened arousal, as indicated by psychophysiological responses (cf. Fox et al. 2018), even when they are lexically nonsensical or incomplete or when they are used jokingly.

The preceding paragraphs have discussed a range of methods that may help establish that some grammatical structure is specialized for impolite purposes. They do all require access to a substantial amount of data and/or speakers, which cannot be assumed for most of the world’s languages. As such, these methods are ill-suited for any study that wants to examine the grammar of impoliteness from a typological point of view. That type of research will almost inevitably have to draw on the limited resources available for each language – perhaps, the intuitions of a few of its speakers and, more likely, whatever information is included in its description by a field linguist. Reliability is an obvious concern here. However, the difficulties for cross-linguistic research in this area are more fundamental. (Im)politeness and its formal side especially have, understandably so, not been on the minds of most people documenting languages and are therefore only occasionally mentioned in their grammars, if at all. The typologist’s initial task is thus simply to find (data on) structures of potential interest. An approach that could be fruitful in this respect is querying parallel corpora with numerous languages (e.g. Open Subtitles) for equivalents of known impolite structures. Another one is to search vast collections of grammars with corpus tools for words that would occur in descriptions of relevant structures (e.g. *threat**) and to check the concordances and then the primary sources.

4.2 Areas of research

There are clearly serious methodological challenges to overcome. At the same time, they offer opportunities for further research into more languages, which would enable us to answer questions that have largely remained open. We know little, for instance, about whether (different types of) grammatical expressions of impoliteness have formal features in common across languages and, if so, which ones and why. Early indications of a positive answer come from a pilot study by Giomi and Van Oers (2022) on structures that are specialized for direct insults. What may be called “insultives” are found to display marking usually associated with possession in a variety of languages. *Din* ‘your’ in Norwegian *din idiot!* ‘you idiot!’ (Julien 2016: 88) can serve as an example and so can the second person singular possessive suffix -*u* in *Tukang Besi pai’i-u la!* ‘you stupid!’ (Donohue 1999: 455) and *se-n-kin* ‘its’ with genitive -*n* in Finnish *senkin pässi!* ‘you oaf!’ (Hakulinen et al. 2004: §1726) (see Oda 2019 on Japanese too). Another feature that (partially) conventionalized insult structures appear to share and that can again be illustrated with Norwegian and *Tukang Besi* is the presence of a second person form (see also Corver 2008 on Dutch; Hu and Van Olmen 2024 on Chinese).

More research is needed, though, to determine how widespread these phenomena really are and, of course, to see if other types of expressions (e.g. silencers, ill-wishes) exhibit any cross-linguistic similarities in form. Only then can we properly assess the validity of

explanations like Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper's (2023: 37) appeal to "pragmatic explicitness" (Culpeper and Haugh 2014: 170) for the occurrence of 'you' in insultives. That is to say: is it true for all languages/cultures at issue that spelling out the target with a second person is a manifestation of directness that is not very compatible with politeness (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987: 131) and instead allows speakers to overtly "associate the other with a negative aspect" (Culpeper 2005: 41)?

A question that is closely related to the one about shared features is whether there are any recurrent grammatical and/or lexical sources for (different types of) expressions of impoliteness and, if so, which ones and why. A (for now) tentative observation in this regard is that the imperative, for one, seems to be the basis for a range of structures in various languages. English *don't you dare V!*, for instance, clearly originates from a negative imperative. However, unlike regular negative imperatives (e.g. *don't (you) worry!*), this expression of a threat can no longer omit the subject. In the same vein, Aikhenvald (2020: 53–55) notes – for languages as diverse as Thai, Russian and Amharic – that curses often take an imperative-like form but do not have all the syntactic characteristics typical of conventionally directive imperatives. The imperative is, as Van Olmen (2018) argues, also a source for structures in a number of European languages dedicated to conveying a reproach, i.e. 'you should have Ved!' (e.g. the Dutch so-called "reproachative" *had gebeld!* lit. 'had called!'; see Mori 2024: 34 on Japanese too). These remarks make it tempting to assume that the imperative's apparent versatility can at least to some extent be accounted for by its ostensible potential, as an imposition on the addressee, for impoliteness. Support for this idea, in a way, comes from Aikhenvald's (2020: 55) assertion that imperatives in Manambu are actually "judged too strong to be used in curses and maledictions". Still, in many languages, the imperative is, in fact, among the more polite strategies to issue a directive (e.g. Kasanga 2006: 70 on Northern Sotho). For that reason, any sweeping statements about its role here are probably somewhat premature.

The same holds for any claims about more lexical sources. Guillaume (2018: 118), for instance, contends that Tacana's depreciative suffixes derive from lexemes meaning 'bad' and 'be wrong' but such negatively evaluative items are clearly not the only possible lexical sources for the grammatical expression of impoliteness. The French insultive mentioned in Section 1 features a noun meaning 'species, type' (cf. Italian *razza* 'race, breed' in *razza di scerno!* 'you fool!'), its Hebrew equivalent one meaning 'piece' (Fishman 2018; cf. English *piece of shit*). A more comprehensive picture of the origins of structures of impoliteness is needed, however. It will enable us to identify potential tendencies and provide us with a stronger cross-linguistic foundation for our attempts at explaining findings.

In this endeavor, there is a vital role for diachronic research too. To our knowledge, little attention has been paid so far to how (different types of) grammatical forms of impoliteness emerge and evolve over time. The Spanish insultive *so NP!* (Giomi and Van Oers 2022) already raises interesting questions, though, about how frequently expressions of impoliteness develop out of ones of politeness or vice versa. Real Academia Española (2023: s.v. *so*, our translation), a reference dictionary of Spanish, writes that *so* serves "to enhance the meaning of the adjective or noun it precedes, generally with a derogatory meaning" (e.g. *so cabrón!* 'you bastard!') and traces its etymology back to *señor* 'sir, mister'. In other words, the structure appears to originate in some kind of politeness strategy and it is not implausible that the former is the result of the ironic/sarcastic usage of the latter. Pragmatic reversal (e.g. Mazzon 2017; Fedriani 2019) may therefore be one of the mechanisms of change that gives rise to grammar of impoliteness. Van Olmen's (2018: 141–149) account of the Dutch reproachative adds analogy and insubordination (see Evans 2007) to the mix of relevant processes but it still requires checking against actual historical language data. In short, it very much remains to be seen, for instance, which mechanisms are most significant for the development of grammatical expressions of impoliteness (e.g. reanalysis?), whether it involves any typical bridging contexts or how

conventionalization really unfolds diachronically.

Another issue that more research in general will be able to shed light on is which types of impoliteness (do not) get conventionalized regularly in the grammar of languages. Preliminary results by Aikhenvald (2020) and Dobrushina (2024) indicate, for instance, that morphologically marked curses are (even more) infrequent cross-linguistically (than morphologically marked blessings). More periphrastic structures deserve to be taken into account too, of course. Similarly, a cautious comparison of Van Olmen's (2018) findings for reproachatives in European languages with those for insultives in Europe by Giomi and Van Oers (2022) and others referred to above suggests that the latter occur considerably more often than the former, which seem to be limited to just six languages. An attractive explanation for this observation comes from Culpeper, Iganski and Sweiry (2017: 15). They note that, in the Crown Prosecution Service records for England and Wales on religiously aggravated hate crime, insults are by far the most common type of impoliteness. The comparative frequency of insultives in the languages of Europe could thus be argued to exemplify De Bois's (1985: 363) famous dictum that "grammars code best what speakers do most". This claim does presume that Culpeper, Iganski and Sweiry's (2017) findings can be extended to English and (European) language(s) at large, an assumption that merits further scrutiny itself.

A final challenge for the study of the grammar of impoliteness is how to account for the phenomenon and how to capture it in theoretical models of language. This issue has received some attention in the generative paradigm and formal semantics (e.g. Corver 2008; Gutzmann 2019; Jain 2022) but it is typically examined through the wider lens of evaluative or expressive language. We would advocate for an approach that is more focused on impoliteness in particular, also within other frameworks (see, for instance, Giomi, Van Olmen and Van Oers 2025 on insultives as a sentence type from a Functional Discourse Grammar perspective).

5 Contribution of the volume

The present volume addresses the issue that most of the literature so far is made up of separate studies of specific structures in individual European or East Asian languages (see Section 1) in different ways. First, many chapters here explicitly compare impoliteness structures across languages. Mattiello's, for instance, looks at English and Italian, Queisser and Pleyer's at English and German and Van Olmen and Andersson's at English and Polish (Italian and German are also the subject of Paternoster's and Finkbeiner's studies respectively). Second, several contributions explore languages for which impoliteness remains under-researched. Davis and Jang's focuses on Korean while Dobrushina's contrasts a number of Nakh-Daghestanian languages and Van Huyssteen, Breed and Pilon's compares English to Afrikaans. Third, Culpeper, Van Dorst and Gillings's study takes a whole set of impoliteness structures or formulae that were originally identified for British English, though subsequent research has revealed that they are also relevant to a number of other languages, and examines exactly how robust these structures are in British English.

Regarding the question of conventionalized impoliteness from a methodological perspective (see Section 4.1), this volume showcases the potential of a range of different approaches. For example, Davis and Jang report on an online questionnaire testing the relative order and acceptability of the anti-honorific prefix alongside other Korean verbal prefixes in constructed sentences. This method yields insights into how these prefixes are understood in natural language usage and their syntactic domains. The chapters by Queisser and Pleyer on 'you are such a N' and by Van Olmen and Andersson on 'you NP!' deploy experimental methods too, relying on questionnaire data assessing judgments of well-formedness and (im)politeness. A key focus in these studies is the idea of testing for coercion effects, i.e. whether the structure in question forces an impolite reading onto lexical content that is not inherently negative, as an indication

of conventionalization. This idea also emerges in Paternoster's contribution. Whilst investigating the Italian formula *che ti venga* NP! 'may NP come to you!' as a conventionalized linguistic expression of impoliteness, particularly a disease curse, she examines the sarcastic use of seemingly benedictive cases of the structure.

Paternoster's approach is explicitly corpus-based, however, and an excellent example of the necessary in-depth analysis of the co-text of authentic attestations to determine their function. The study also brings metapragmatics into play, looking at how contemporaries conceived of the expression under examination and thereby gaining insight into whether, for example, it was viewed as expressing positive or negative attitude. Corpus-based methods are also central to Mattiello's quantitative and qualitative investigation of the pragmatic functions of English suffixoids like *-ass* and *-head* and their corresponding expressions in Italian, as well as to Van Huyssteen, Breed and Pilon's collexeme analysis for Afrikaans *wat de ...!* 'what the ...!'. The latter also addresses possible objections to the use of certain corpus data, by contrasting a corpus of comments removed by moderators, likely to contain offensive language, to a more general corpus of unedited online comments. Culpeper, Van Dorst and Gillings further innovate in the area of corpus studies, combining sophisticated large-scale queries with a meticulous analysis of representative samples of the retrieved data *and* interrater reliability tests to establish a consensus that a particular use of an expression really does have impoliteness effects. Another noteworthy approach found in some chapters is the use of information from dictionaries alongside that from corpus data. In Finkbeiner's contribution, this method is applied in a diachronic investigation of a threat structure in German. Mattiello uses it both in her study of English suffixoids and in her examination of their translational equivalents in Italian. Dobrushina, finally, is faced with the problem that, for her Nakh-Daghestanian languages, there simply exist no extensive corpora and solves it by employing dictionaries of Avar, Lak and Rutul as a source for examples of curses (as well as blessings).

The present volume also provides new data relevant for questions about shared features of and sources for grammatical expressions of impoliteness (see Section 4.2). Across various contributions, it highlights the potential for impoliteness within morphology. Davis and Jang, for instance, examine a unique case of impolite verbal morphology in Korean (drawing parallels with Japanese) while Mattiello explores how morphemes and their pragmatic effects are translated between the morphological (and syntactic) systems of English and Italian. The partial conventionalization of optative suffixes for curses is the topic of Dobrushina's contribution, which also notes the unexpected presence and marked position of second person pronouns in negatively oriented wishes in particular. This observation ties in nicely with the structures that are the focus of Queisser and Pleyer's and Van Olmen and Andersson's chapters, i.e. 'you are such a N' and 'you NP!'. Together, they draw attention to explicit second person pronouns as an important feature of conventionalized grammatical impoliteness. The volume also addresses the role of (presumably in subordinate) 'that'-clauses as a stable source for curse structures, as discussed in Paternoster's study, and examines the German interjection *wehe* 'woe' combined with conditional clauses as a foundation for threat structures, as explored in Finkbeiner's contribution. The latter structure is, moreover, argued to involve a second person pronoun in the embedded clause, with overt reference to the addressee – a pattern that is, of course, reminiscent of the curses and the insult structures just mentioned. Finally, Culpeper, Van Dorst and Gillings's corpus-based analysis of British English invites comparable large-scale investigations into the form and function of impoliteness across other languages, for which the authors suggest their method could be replicated.

As to the diachrony of grammatical expressions of impoliteness (see, again, Section 4.2), the volume offers new insights too. For instance, Paternoster's study of Italian *che ti venga* NP! as a disease curse from the 14th to the 20th century highlights its generally stable and conventionalized use over the years but it also notes some possible shifts toward greater

conventionalization. The analysis reveals that the structure, which combines verbs in the subjunctive mood with direct address and disease nouns, functions as an expression of impoliteness in both cultural and legal contexts. Furthermore, even some studies whose primary focus is not on tracing their structures' historical trajectory still engage with their development over time. One example is the evolution of English compound constituents into bound morphemes with specialized meanings in Mattiello's chapter. Van Huyssteen, Breed and Pilon's contribution is also mainly synchronic in nature, but they present interesting reflections on Afrikaans *wat de ...!* as a structural borrowing from English that has been extended considerably in the target language. Likewise, Finkbeiner's chapter on a threat structure in Present-day German offers insight into its development from an interjection with lamentation as its primary meaning and a structure used to predict a calamity. Her findings align rather straightforwardly with approaches to grammaticalization that discuss the conventionalization of conversational implicatures and propose shifts from the representational to the interpersonal domain. Lastly, Queisser and Pleyer touch upon the historical development of 'such/so' as an intensifier in English and German and suggest a grammaticalization-like process as a result of which non-evaluative nouns in the nominal slot of the structures under examination tend to be coerced into an evaluative reading.

Another, final strength of this volume is that the grammar of impoliteness is studied from a variety of theoretical perspectives, showing that research into the phenomenon does not and need not depend on one's theoretical framework. Davis and Jang's chapter, for instance, investigates anti-honorific marking in Korean from a generative point of view, thus challenging the common assumption that impoliteness is primarily a pragmatic/discursive phenomenon rather than a structural one. Mattiello's contribution adopts a morphopragmatic perspective, indicating that impoliteness can be studied within word-formation processes too. An approach that underlies many of the other chapters is the usage-based constructionist one. It is, for example, assumed in Queisser and Pleyer's and Van Olmen and Andersson's experimental investigations into the (partial) conventionalization for impoliteness of the structures that they are interested in. Paternoster's diachronic study aligns with this framework as well, highlighting how recurring pragmatic inferences contribute to the conventionalization of impoliteness within grammatical structures over time. The usage-based constructionist approach is also present in Finkbeiner's chapter, whose findings – as stressed above – can furthermore be related to the same principles of grammaticalization theory that are relevant to Paternoster's work. Van Huyssteen, Breed and Pilon, then, are perhaps the most explicit in their acknowledgment of this theoretical perspective: they situate their study within a diasystematic construction grammar model, which aims to explain emergent bilingual or multilingual phenomena. Finally, Culpeper, Van Dorst and Gillings's contribution challenges the mainstream view that impoliteness is entirely context-driven by demonstrating that impoliteness operates on a spectrum, with some structures showing high conventionalization (e.g. *fuck off*) while others are more contextually dependent (e.g. *get lost*) – and also with the more productive, more abstract formulae (more dependent on grammar as opposed to specific words) attracting slightly lower impoliteness scores. Consequently, the study can be seen as arguing for a middle ground between grammaticalization and pragmatics, further strengthening the volume's focus on theoretical diversity.

Note, to conclude, that the volume is structured in the following way. The first part contains the present introduction. In the third and last part, Marina Terkourafi offers her reflections, as a leading scholar in the field of (im)politeness studies, on the topic of this collection and on the various contributions. The middle part starts off with studies that focus on morphology, i.e. Mattiello on English suffixoids and Davis and Jang on an anti-honorific prefix in Korean. Dobrushina's chapter is next, as it looks at optative suffixes in Nakh-Daghestanian languages but also at some syntactic peculiarities of curses in particular. Part two continues with contributions dealing with periphrastic structures that feature specific lexical content. The first one is

Paternoster's study of an Italian disease curse, a topic that is closely related to that of the preceding chapter. The second one is Finkbeiner's investigation of a threat structure in German. The middle part then moves on to studies that examine individual periphrastic structures with no specific lexical content, i.e. Van Huyssteen, Breed and Pilon on Afrikaans *wat de ...!*, Queisser and Pleyer on English and German 'you are such a N!' and Van Olmen and Andersson on 'you NP!'. The latter two have the topic of insults in common too. Part two ends with Culpeper, Van Dorst and Gillings's contribution, which looks at a whole range of different structures in British English and can be said to have the widest focus of all other chapters.

Acknowledgments

This volume emanates from a workshop on the grammar of impoliteness held at the 56th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea in Athens in August 2023. We would like to thank all participants for their presentations and the stimulating discussions, without which the present collection would not be what it is now. We are most grateful to Marina Terkourafi in particular. Her feedback as a discussant was invaluable and she also kindly agreed to share her views on this volume's topic and contributions in the concluding chapter. The final choice of papers presented here is ours, of course, and includes work by a number of scholars that we contacted after the workshop. The evaluations of the following referees have been a great help in the selection process: Sungdai Cho, Chiara Ghezzi, Andreas Jucker, Manfred Kienpointner, Natalia Knoblock, Katharina Korecky-Kröll, Maarten Mous, Na Song, Vittorio Tantucci, An Van linden and Nathalie Verelst. Thanks are also due to our authors for their internal reviews and for going on this – hopefully, not too impolitely long – journey with us. Finally, we want to acknowledge the support for this project from Chiara Gianollo as the book series' editor-in-chief, from Barbara Karlson and Birgit Sievert as the publisher and from Lancaster University, whose generous financial contribution has made open access publication possible.

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