

Provocative Speech Acts in *Mythic Quest*

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Introduction

Politeness theories have focused on the communication strategies to foster social harmony. Geoffrey Leech explains the role of politeness as “to maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place” (*The Pragmatics of Politeness* 82). However, Politeness theories have neglected to take impoliteness as one of the central issues on language phenomena. On the other hand, Jonathan Culpeper, using the notion of face which has been proposed in politeness theories, sheds a new light on the notion of impoliteness and points out its importance in language activities. Culpeper et.al. define impoliteness as “communicative strategies designed to attack face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony” (1546). His work has spurred impoliteness studies and led them to a wide-ranging approach. For example, Argyro Kantara analyzes peculiarities of the protagonist in a TV series from the point of view of the impoliteness strategies Culpeper applies (336). The analysis of the meanings of speech acts in terms of the role in a given situation has also received attention. Seiko Otsuka suggests how complimenting speech acts can be evaluated negatively in certain contexts between couples (“Politeness” 36-7). The present paper discusses the impacts that speech acts on the purpose to attack others have in the conversation, or how the use of them changes the given discourse, analyzing the speech acts in a workplace context of *Mythic Quest*.

The materials to be analyzed are from conversations held in a game company, *Mythic Quest* where the workers focus on refining their game which has the same name as their company. There are going on conflicting speech acts when they try to remove the bugs found in their program before releasing the updated version of the game. Here, we focus on the conversation between Ian and Poppy, both of whom have a crucial role in the company. Ian is the creative director who produces the entire game world, and Poppy is the lead engineer who materializes his ideas into a game system. The conversation between them is worth analyzing in the following respects. Firstly, since they interact more often than any other workers do, there are significant materials to analyze. Secondly, their background histories, their family members, where they are from, that they have known each other since the early days of their company, and so on are detailed through the series, which allows us to analyze their utterances more precisely.

1. Impoliteness as Provocation

People often make a rude utterance. In order to figure out why a speech act like this is done, we need to explore the characteristics of rude speech. As mentioned above,

impoliteness causes social conflict and disharmony. This means not only that it causes disunity between the speaker and the hearer contemporaneously but that it creates a vicious circle of rude exchanges. Basing on the following quotations, we will explore the provocative effect of impoliteness.

In the following quotation, Ian is inviting Poppy to a drinking party over a video chat call since she has finished her job to solve the problem they have had in their company.

Example 1

Ian: Pick up. Poppy, pick, pick, pick, pick. Poppy, pick up.

Poppy: What?

Ian: Hey, Poppy! Congratulations. I heard you finished your sprint. Let's celebrate.

Poppy: Thanks, I can't. I'm busy.

Ian: Oh, no, you're not. David said you are all finished with your work. And so am I because I've already had two of these and I wanna make a third, so get on it. And, by the way, turn your camera on because it's less sad when I can see you if I'm drinking alone.

Poppy: Great. Sorry, I can't turn it on. I just got out of the bath.

Ian: Bath? You don't bathe. Now I know you're lying. What's going on?

Poppy: Nothing's going on. I just don't want anyone to see me right now, okay?

Ian: All right, I... I did something nice for you and I wanted to have a drink and watch it, but let me just send it to you now. And you can...

(*Mythic Quest*. Episode 10, "Quarantine." underlines added)

As seen in the line, "I just don't want anyone to see me right now, okay?," Poppy wants to keep her distance from others, so she tries to decline Ian's invitation to the celebration. On the other hand, Ian is concerned that she seems to be in low spirits. He intends to have a party in order to manage to cheer her up. Thus, the two people's wishes are in conflict.

In Example 1, which lines can be considered as impolite? In order to answer this question, the definition of impolite behavior must be clarified. Culpeper, a pioneer in this field, defines it as follows:

Impoliteness comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behavior as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2).

("Impoliteness and Entertainment" 38)

Culpeper uses the concept of “face” proposed by Brown and Levinson. They suggest that one has two faces at the same time and expects them to be respected by others. One of them is called negative face, or “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his [*sic*] actions be unimpeded by others,” and the other is positive face, or “the want of every member that his [*sic*] wants be desirable to at least some others” (62). These faces indicate that people want others to show an appropriate distance neither too close nor too unfriendly. To “attack face,” as Culpeper calls it, is considered as impolite. Furthermore, Culpeper refers not only to the speaker’s intention but also to how the hearer interprets words addressed by the speaker. Whether or not an action is polite depends on the perspective of both the speaker and the hearer. In short, a face attack may be recognized even if the speaker does not intend a face attack, because the listener may think so.

In the light of (2), the invitation to the drinking party, “Congratulations. I heard you finished your sprint. Let’s celebrate,” and the request to talk over face to face, “turn your camera on because it’s less sad when I can see you if I’m drinking alone,” are impolite because of attacking Poppy’s negative face. In addition, two utterances, “Bath? You don’t bathe.” and “Now I know you are lying.” are Ian’s mere guess. Even though these statements might be understood as jokes, they are disturbing Poppy’s privacy. Therefore, they are to attack her positive face, and fulfill the condition of (1) and (2) in Culpeper’s definition.

On the other hand, Poppy replies “Thanks, I can’t. I’m busy,” “Sorry, I can’t turn it on. I just got out of the bath.” Turning down Ian’s suggestions allows her to impinge his face. Poppy expresses her gratitude and makes an apology for this face-impingement, as well as her reasons for Turning down Ian’s suggestions. By making the persuasive excuses suggested by Brown and Levinson (189), it can be said that Poppy tries to persuade him not to worry about her, implying that she does not wish to threaten his face. These tentative excuses have a point for Poppy. As stated above, though she wishes to be left alone, Poppy cannot explain it well. They allow her to conceal her true intention, thereby saving her own face. Thus, though the excuses are not true, they can be considered to be white lies. However, a lie is a lie. If a white lie is found to be a lie, it will not work as the speaker intends. In Example 1, Ian points out that Poppy is not providing her real reasons. In this respect, Poppy deceives him twice. This could lead to an inference that Ian is not a person to be taken sincerely, which results in attacking his positive face. Nevertheless, Poppy has yet to give a clear explanation in the third response, “Nothing’s going on. I just don’t want anyone to see me right now, okay?”

Each speech act becomes more aggressive as the conversation progresses. For example, at the beginning of Example 1, Ian presumably does not intend to offend Poppy by inviting her to the party, but he continues to be rough with her, by pointing out her dirtiness and unfaithfulness, which is perceived as ruder. As for Poppy’s lines, in her third line, “Nothing’s going on. I just don’t want anyone to see me right now, okay,” she does not show any politeness to refuse his invitation. Ian is getting irritated by Poppy escaping from him,

and Poppy is annoyed that Ian does not understand her. Because of this misunderstanding between them, each impoliteness evokes the other's impolite response.

These impolite resorts by the two people result in clear attack on each other as follows:

Example 2

Poppy: No, I don't... Can you... [...] Turn the... Can you get the videos off my... I don't wanna watch any... Listen... I just wanna be alone, okay?

Ian: Okay, okay.

Poppy: Stop acting like you're trying to help me! This isn't about me. It's about you being too scared to leave your compound, but you still need attention because you're a fucking narcissist!

Ian: What? A narcissist? Like... Fine! Then, okay. I was doing something nice, but forget it. Go! Go be with your dead plants, your cats, or whatever. I don't care.

Poppy: Okay, thanks. Yeah, I will.

Ian: Okay, fine. I've got better shit to do too. So, whatever, dude.

(*Mythic Quest*. Episode 10, "Quarantine." underlines added)

Poppy obviously intends to more aggressively attack Ian's face by her underlined utterances. This can be supported by the following three facts. First of all, she declares that he uses her to make himself look a good person. Secondly, she criticizes his personality as narcissistic. Thirdly, she inserts a taboo word, exaggerating her denial. Similarly, with regard to Ian, he also uses a taboo word to make it clear that he has no further cares about her. Moreover, it is noteworthy that her voice is getting louder, and her statements are being emphasized, as indicated by the exclamation marks in the script. Culpeper et. al. explain the tonetic effect in perceiving about whether a given utterance is polite or rude as follows:

The 'raising' of a voice normally involves both an increase in pitch and loudness and can have both internal and external motivation. It may be motivated [...] internally by the presence of extreme emotions, both positive and negative.

(1572)

Thus, though using louder voice does not necessarily cause face-attack, Culpeper considers "the invasion of auditory space" as negative impoliteness (1573). In Example 2, Poppy is annoyed by Ian, losing her mind. Her louder voice than his deprives him of his turn in a conversation after Ian's line, "Okay, okay." This results in his yelling back. This indicates they both intend to attack each other more fiercely and hysterically. In the end, this emotional

exchange is cut off when Poppy hangs up the call. This signifies disregard for turn-taking in a conversation, i.e., that impolite exchange is concluded by another impoliteness.

2. Impoliteness as a Way to Protect the Speaker's Face

In the previous section, we have seen how one impoliteness induces another impoliteness in a conversation. This explains why an addressee responds with another impolite speech act, but it does not provide adequate explanation for why people speak in an ill-mannered fashion. One of the keys to clarifying this issue lies in discourse. In Example 2, Poppy says, “Stop acting like you’re trying to help me! This isn’t about me. It’s about you being too scared to leave your compound, but you still need attention because you’re a fucking narcissist!” The discourse is severed by her sudden switching the ongoing subject of the conversation into that of Ian’s narcissism. This implies that giving new impoliteness has an effect to divert the present topic of the conversation owing to directing the attention of the addressee to another point.

This raises another question: why should Poppy resort to such an act even though it might ruin her relationship with Ian? In order to find clues for answering this question, it is necessary to examine closely how Poppy behaves and feels during her distance work in this episode. The workplace in the company has been affected by the world-wide pandemic of COVID-19, and in Episode 10 the workers are individually telecommuting. Poppy, who is from Australia, lives alone, away from her family and friends. Even when she has finished her job, she has nobody to share her accomplishments with. The remote work deprives her of companionship. Although she feels sad about it, her competitive nature prevents her from expressing her feeling to those who are around her. In the Example 3 at the end of the episode, she finally opens up about it when Ian asks her how she is doing on the FaceTime call.

Example 3

Ian: Pop, come on, man. You’re really freaking me out. Just let me see you.

Poppy: I don’t think I’m doing very well. It was okay when I still had work, but now that’s done, and I don’t have anything else. All my family are thousands of miles away and I don’t have any friends. And I’m just alone.

Ian: That’s not true. That’s not true, Poppy.

Poppy: No, it is. It is. I thought that I could handle this, but I don’t think that I can. And everybody else seems to have somebody, but I don’t. I’m just... I’m just alone.

(*Mythic Quest*. Episode 10, “Quarantine.”)

Throughout this episode, Poppy has tried to hide her true feelings from people

around her. Her private matters, including her physical and mental condition, and whether or not she enjoys a fulfilling life out of the work, are sensitive topics which she does not want others to interfere in. For instance, for others to worry about her is to convey the assumption that they think she is not fine, which could attack Poppy's face.

The quotation given below is one of the examples of Poppy's attempt to switch the topic focused on herself to another one. In the meeting scene of the Example 4, the workers discuss how to eliminate the disaster called *Blood Ocean* in the game, which they implemented and published in the previous episode, without losing the consistency of the game plot. It was a contagious disease which affects the playable characters in the game, like viruses in the real world. The workers think it should not give a good impression on the players to program the situation similar to the real-life ongoing pandemic.

Example 4

Ian: Poppy, you should be taking this time to recharge and stay healthy like me.
You know, I haven't left my compound in like three months because I'm so afraid of getting sick.

Jo: He's too important to the world.

Ian: Oh, Jo, you don't need to say that. But put it in the notes.

[...]

Poppy: Oh, I have an idea. What if instead of stripping Blood Ocean out of the game, I build a vaccine?

Ian: What? That would take you weeks. What are you... I feel like you're inventing work for yourself.

Poppy: I feel like you're a cashed-up bogan.

Ian: "A cashed-up bogan?" David, Poppy is being mean in Australian. Is the meeting almost over?

David: The meeting hasn't started. You know what? Let's just forget C.W. and jump right in. Brad, can I get your attention, please?

(*Mythic Quest*. Episode 10, "Quarantine." underlines added)

As seen in the first underlined section, Ian is concerned about Poppy, but this is perceived as impolite by her. From these utterances the following ideas would be obtained. Firstly, the first line of Ian's: "Poppy, you should be taking this time to recharge and stay healthy like me." entails a risk to have the hearer, Poppy infer that the speaker, Ian, tries to have her follow his advice. This means Ian tries to control Poppy's action, i.e., it might attack her negative face. However, he is constantly concerned about her in other scenes, so it is assumed that he intends to be kind to her. Secondly, while the second underlined part, "I feel like you're inventing work for yourself," might suggest that Ian wants Poppy to stop working

and to take her own time for refreshing herself, Poppy tries not to recall her loneliness by keeping herself busy. In other words, taking a break brings her to her lonely realities. Even if Ian does not intend to offend Poppy, his concern can cause Poppy to feel annoyed.

This attitude of Ian's annoying Poppy evokes an impolite response from her. In response to Ian's second underlined statement, Poppy responds, "I feel like you're a cashed-up bogan." Here, she succeeds to change the subject, diverting Ian's attention away from his own concern about her. As seen in Ian's line, "Is the meeting almost over?" Ian stops interfering her any more, leaving the meeting. This provides her with a situation in which she can continue to concentrate on her work without being aware of her loneliness again. Her impoliteness is obviously causing disharmony between them, however another standpoint could be seen. In other words, impoliteness can be used as speakers' communicative strategy that functions as a way of establishing a "comfortable" distance for speakers, which would not be probably desirable to hearers.

Conclusion

To summarize the discussion above, the examples demonstrate two unique characteristics of impolite behavior. First, the examples in Section 1 show that a first impoliteness speech act evokes the following one. In the series of impoliteness, the speakers gradually become emotional, intensifying his discomfort with taboo words and louder voices, and attacking the recipients' face more severely. Secondly, as shown in Chapter 2 impoliteness can break the discourse in a conversation and change the subject by its power. This is because participants in the conversation get distracted by the content conveyed by an impolite speech act. These characteristics of impoliteness provide answers to the question of why people behave rudely: (1) impoliteness is one way of revenge for an attacked face, and (2) impoliteness is a way to redefine the mental distance between the participants in a given conversation, i.e., to push others away to protect one's comfort zone.

However, these characteristics raise additional questions. For example, how does one make impoliteness more offensive or what factors make impoliteness more offensive? Further research focused on the linguistic features, the value of a speech act in a certain context, prosody, and so on would be needed. Moreover, a much fuller discussion still is required about how to resolve/modify/repair the crack caused by impolite behaviors on relationship between people. In the examples discussed above, we have seen that the friendship between Ian and Poppy is going to be broken up. The conversation in Example 2 is terminated by hanging up the video chat call. Even after that, no apology for the rudeness is offered, and there is no indication that their friendship is being repaired. Nevertheless, Ian continues to interrupt Poppy throughout the episode in an attempt to cheer her up. This kind of behavior can be seen in our daily life. This suggests that the effects of impoliteness are only temporary and that the disharmony caused by it can be removed by many other factors

we have not discussed in this paper. Therefore, further research would be required to investigate the actual relationship between impoliteness and disharmony and the respective complicated features.

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