"Reasonable Hostility": Situation-appropriate face-attack

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Abstract

In this paper I argue for a different standard to assess the quality of communicative conduct in local governance meetings. Rather than seeing public talk occasions as needing politeness or civility, a better norm, I suggest, is "reasonable hostility". Emotionally marked criticism of the past and future actions of public persons (i. e., reasonable hostility), I show, is necessary for the able functioning of democratic bodies. Following a critique of politeness theories, including a claim for why Goffman's concept of face is more suitable for exploring situated communicative practices, background on U.S. school governance practices and the particular U.S. school board meetings that are the focus of this paper are provided. Then, I illustrate and analyze recurrent, ordinary kinds of face-attack that occurred in the community's public meetings and provide evidence that meeting participants judged the remarks to be face-attacking. In the paper's concluding section, I describe the situation and face-attack features that distinguish reasonable hostility from unreasonable forms.

Keywords: impoliteness, face-attack, grounded practical theory, democracy, school board meetings, reasonable hostility

1. Introduction

> "Politeness should first and foremost be regarded and studied as a *practice*" (Eelen 2001: 221, italics in the original).
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> "A context-oriented description necessarily ends up becoming involved in the ethical struggle of everyday life" (Eelen 2001: 248).

In an impressive critique of politeness theories, Eelen argued for a radical rethinking of how to study the relational dimension of communica-

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tive conduct. In this paper I work to advance his suggestion, as well as develop a grounded practical theory (Craig 1989; Craig and Tracy 1995) of school board meetings. Grounded practical theorizing constructs an understanding of the communicative problems, conversational strategies, and normative ideals of talk-centric practices. In this essay I propose a normative ideal to guide conduct in the talk-focused practice of school board meetings. A better ideal than civility or politeness – the most commonly touted norms taken-for-granted in local governance sites – is that of "reasonable hostility". Reasonable hostility involves emotionally marked criticism of the past or future actions of public persons. Whether communicative acts deserve to be labeled reasonable hostility often will be a matter of disagreement, as reasonable hostility is an interpretation rather than a list of dos and don'ts. From a target's point of view, a stretch of reasonable hostility will almost always be seen as rude and unfairly attacking; for others in the public situation, criticisms regarded as morally warranted will be assessed as reasonable hostility.

In sociolinguistics, politeness is the umbrella label for research that is interested in describing how people talk with others of various categories in different kinds of situations (e. g., Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]). In communication, Goffman's (1967) notion of face (facework, face-attack) is more likely to be the over-arching frame (e. g., Arundale 1999; Penman 1990; Ting-Toomey 1994; Tracy 1990). To be sure, politeness and face are found in each other's company in both fields; nonetheless who is at home and who is the visitor makes a difference. The paper begins with a brief overview of the main criticisms of politeness theories followed by an argument for why face is a better frame for studying the "ethical struggle of everyday life". In the paper's next section, I give background on school board meetings generally and the meeting group (see Tracy 2008). Then, I illustrate commonplace kinds of face-attack that occurred in this community's public meetings and provide evidence that participants perceived these episodes as face-attacking. Finally, I elaborate the key features of reasonable hostility, set forth criteria for distinguishing appropriate face-attack (reasonable hostility) from unreasonable face-attack, and suggest why reasonable hostility is essential in sites of local governance.

2. (Im)politeness and face-attack as the theoretical backdrop

Politeness theories seek to describe the discursive practices that "minimize the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interaction" (Lakoff 1990: 34), while accounting for how uses of linguistic tokens vary with social situations. Eelen's (2001) critique focuses on nine politeness theories that he regards as the most distinctive. Included in his list are the three that have spawned the largest amount of research: Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]), and Leech's (1983) theories; several that seek to remedy the English language/culture bias of earlier theories: Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), Gu (1990), Ide (1989), and three that introduce distinct explanatory principles: Fraser's (1990) conversational contract view, Arndt and Janney's (1985) idea of emotive communication, and Watts' (1989) distinction between politic and polite behavior. Each of these theories differs from the others, with later ones responding to criticisms that had been raised for earlier ones, but especially the theory of Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]).

Eelen (2001) identifies three major criticisms of politeness theories. A first concerns the fact that "politeness" is not just a theoretical scientific term; it is a concept important in ordinary life, as a goal everyday speakers seek to achieve and as a judgment made of others. Many of the later formulated politeness theories attempted to address the difference between ordinary communicators' notion of politeness – how speakers express themselves, classify others' talk in actual situations, and metapragmatically discuss politeness as a concept – versus politeness as a theoretical scientific concept, with a set of meanings that are stipulated within a particular sociolinguistic theory. The problem, Eelen shows, is that not only do theorists drift from one notion to the other in ways that they do not recognize, but it is impossible to separate the two domains. Politeness in everyday life is inherently evaluative. Politeness theories with their interest in developing *scientific* models that describe actual social interaction cannot escape dealing with the evaluative quality of politeness in everyday life. The distinction between two meanings of politeness is not a new one, an early critique of Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) theory (Craig et al. 1986) raised it. Eelen, however, makes visible the continued presence of the slippage between these two notions even in theories that have explicitly sought to overcome it.

A second and related criticism of politeness theories is that as a phenomenon of social life, politeness is often contested. Straightforward, descriptive classification of acts into polite or impolite is not possible. Ordinary speakers, as Eelen (2001: 39) notes, "never identify with impoliteness, but always see themselves as generally polite. Impoliteness is almost always a property attributed to others". In everyday interaction, classifying someone as "polite" or "impolite" is an argumentative matter, carried out in the service of portraying one person's action as appropriate and another's as not. Because assessments of politeness are positioned and done for specific purposes, scientific theories that seek to describe how people are polite, but not make value judgments, fail to

recognize adequately the character of what they study. "In stipulating 'how to be polite', the rules become involved in the very evaluative practices they are supposed to capture and explain" (Eelen 2001: 50)

A third criticism leveled at politeness theories (Eelen 2001; see also Tracy and Tracy 1998) is that they are biased toward describing the positive side of social life. Acts of impoliteness, rudeness, and disrespect – speech actions that politeness theories presumably include – are as much a part of daily life as acts that smooth relations and create harmony. But within politeness theories, these acts are largely invisible. Impoliteness in Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) theory, for instance, is equated with failing to do politeness strategies. If absence of politeness is the sole domain of impoliteness, then impoliteness is a communicatively limited and uninteresting concept.

To be sure, the bias toward pleasing, respectful, friendly communication is not absolute. In the past decade, there have been increasing numbers of scholars theorizing impoliteness (e. g., Culpeper 1996, Kienpointner 1997; Mills 2005) and investigating it empirically. Impoliteness has been studied in the interactions that occur during army training (Culpeper 1996), television quiz shows (Culpeper 2005), the prime minister's question time during sessions in the British House of Commons (Harris 2001), an Anglican church chat line (Graham 2007), in adversarial questioning during political broadcast interviews (Piirainen-Marsh 2005) and in telephone calls between citizens and police call-takers (Tracy and Tracy 1998). Although all of these studies made a link to politeness theories, they do not necessarily use them as the central frame. Piirainen-Marsh (2005), for instance, argues for conversation analysis as a better frame; Tracy and Tracy (1998) argue for Goffman's (1967) notion of face as more useful for exploring the hostile side of social interaction.

Calls to use Goffman's (1967) notion of face as the central anchor for studies about communicative conduct are to be found in many quarters (e. g., Watts 2003; Locher and Watts 2005). For Goffman, face is located in the back-and-forth-flow of talk, an *emergent* property of persons that is dependent on the actions of both interlocutors (Arundale 2006).When observers are part of a social scene, as is the case in public meetings, face assessments also involve observer judgments.

In Goffman's work, and the politeness theories that build on it, it is recognized that communicators *generally* will work to support each others' face: each person's want to be respected and not imposed upon, and his/her desire to be seen as competent and likeable. Yet although people generally support each other's face, Goffman explicitly recognized that they do not always do so. Communicators also regularly threaten their conversational partner's face, with threats varying in seriousness. On the less serious side, threats occur because of verbal gaffes or faux pas; they also occur in the routines of talking. In requesting a favor, for example, a speaker inadvertently threatens the other's general want to be free from imposition and, at the same time, may threaten the other person's face because of the way the request has been designed (e. g., exhibiting marked reluctance to ask a small favor might threaten a sense of the requestee being a generous person). On the more serious side are communicative acts that are judged as deliberately nasty and spiteful, where the speaker is assessed by the target and at least some others as purposefully out to disrespect and insult. It is this category of acts that Tracy and Tracy (1998) label "face-attack".

Face-attack is a better way to label communicative acts that are (or are seen as) intentionally rude, disrespectful, and insulting. "Impolite" is too tame a descriptor for serious acts of face threat; moreover, to call such acts "(im)polite", whether the definition is an everyday one or researcher-stipulated, leaves unexamined whether acts that insult should be conceptualized in the same discourse family as those that smooth interaction and display considerateness. If face-attack is detached from politeness theorizing, its current discursive map is sketchy, but this can be a resource rather than a limitation. In not being tethered to an elaborate theoretical frame, observation of communicative practices is directed to features of conduct that would elicit attention in the everyday world. Such a starting point seems a good place to reflect about face-attack.

3. The communicative practice: U.S. school board meetings and BVSD

School governance in the United States is quite diverse (Briffault 2005), with boards varying in terms of whether members are elected, appointed, or some combination, and, when there are elections, whether they are partisan or conducted at-large or within wards. Yet, amidst the diversity, a prototype school board does exist. Most typical of the category is a small set of people (5–9) who receive little or no pay and are selected through non-partisan elections (Hess 2002).

This structure was the one in effect in Boulder Valley School District (BVSD), the site for this analysis. BVSD is a 25,000-student district in the Western United States. Its board has seven members and it meets twice a month in public to make a large swath of resource and symbolically-weighted decisions regarding the 50+ schools that comprise the district. These meetings are publicly broadcast. As is true of other units of government, school boards are expected to conduct themselves "democratically". What it means to be democratic is far from straightforward. Similar to politeness, democracy is a term of discursive struggle (Watts

2003). Appeals to it, or accusations that someone is not giving it its due attention, are regular moves in U.S. public meetings; democratic beliefs, as Dahl (1961: 1) noted close to half a century ago, are espoused "with a fervency and a unanimity that have been a regular source of astonishment to foreign observers". When democracy is in trouble in the United States, it is because *others* are working to subvert it.

Unlike most Western countries in which policies about education are set nationally with educational experts responsible for making decisions, U.S. education gives ordinary citizens in these local governance bodies a significant role. Not only do elected officials make important decisions about their district's education, but also a community's local citizens play a role in the decision-making process. Every BVSD public meeting, for instance, had a space for citizens to speak out about issues on the agenda, as well as other concerns they had.

The larger project (Tracy 2008), of which this paper is a part, is based on 63 BVSD board meetings that occurred during a particularly contentious 35-month time period (1996–1999). During this period, the board divided into voting blocs; and articles, editorials, and letters siding with one or the other board bloc regularly appeared in the local newspaper. A typical meeting included 17 citizen speakers and lasted 4.6 hours. Prior studies of BVSD meetings have considered how the district's naming and framing of its interactional troubles further contributed to its difficulties (Tracy and Muller 2001); examined how the language in a policy document became a battleground for ideological conflict about the district stance toward gay students and staff (Tracy and Ashcraft 2001); identified discourse strategies that board members used to problematize fellow board members' conduct (Tracy and Standerfer 2003); examined how a little girl's science fair project about race and prettiness, which the district "yanked", ignited extended community debate (Tracy et al. 2007); and developed a profile of discourse features of citizen speeches in contentious moments (Tracy and Durfy 2007).

Prior studies of BVSD board meetings have not used face-attack (or impoliteness) as the focal theoretical frame. Yet the frame is a natural one – face-attack was a regular feature of meetings: in citizen comments to the board, board members with each other, and board members in public statements. During this time, rudeness was a central community frame for understanding the interactional trouble occurring in and around board meetings. For many, the issue was not "education issue differences", but how people were treating each other as they made decisions together. Headlining the editorial page of the local newspaper one Sunday in 1997, for instance, was the proclamation: "Communication a top priority". The editorial went on to describe the board's "unpleasant tone", "destructive divisiveness", and "open display of disrespect" (*Sunday Camera* 1997: 1E).

In contrast to state and federal venues that U.S. citizens assume to be sites for adversarial democracy, i. e., places of competing interests that require debate and argument, models of school governance draw on a cooperative, problem-solving model similar to Mansbridge's (1983) notion of unitary democracy. Because the education of a community's children is a matter of shared community concern, school board elections had been structured to be nonpartisan. Until the 1950s, politics was considered irrelevant to school governance. For a variety of reasons, especially the move to desegregate American schools that began in the 1950s, and the 1990s involvement of conservative religious groups seeking to win elections for school board positions (Frank 2004), the assumption that school governance was or could be an apolitical affair became untenable. Today heated conflicts in school governance meetings are commonplace (Howell 2005). At the same time, notions of goodwill, civility, and community cooperation remain strong ideals that shape communicative conduct and infuse the evaluative scene in which judgments of school board participants are made.

Face-attack, as many have noted (e. g., Harris 2001; Mills 2005), is accomplished through multiple aspects of communication, including the content of a proposition and its linguistic clothing, what is presupposed by a statement, what is not said but expected, modes of address, turntaking procedures, prosodic cues, and gaze and facial expression. Moreover, acts of criticism and disagreement, while not inherently face-attacks, carry strong potential within them to morph into such. When a speaker tells a person he or she is wrong – in contrast to making a request, offer, or any number of other speech acts – the recipient's desire to be judged competent is on the line in a particularly significant way.

4. Face-attack in school board meetings

To reiterate, face-attack is a segment of discourse – a single comment, an extended exchange, a speech – that is interpreted as intentionally insulting. It is talk taken by at least the recipient, and probably others, as purposefully disrespectful. In everyday life, labels for face-attack include terms like "offensive", "insulting", "unfair", "demeaning", "disrespectful", "out-of-line", "personal attack" and "rude". Kienpointner (1997: 255) defined rudeness as "inappropriateness of communicative behavior relative to a particular context". This definition fits the broad category of face-attack too, as long as one recognizes that inappropriateness is a judgment and, quite frequently, a contested one. Because face-attack is evaluation of situated communication rather than stand-alone speech

action, its assessment draws on cultural knowledge of what kinds of identities are desired in particular communicative practices.

To understand face-attack, we need to recognize how linguistic form is bound up, and inextricably tangled with the content of communicative acts. To flip an aphorism on its head, it is not merely how something is said, but *what* a person says that matters. Face-attack is a situated judgment; it is an enthymematic process in which participants and observers supply interpretive premises that make a comment insulting. As cultural members share beliefs about what are good and bad actions, as well as who is responsible for scenes, they can indict others through description of situations.

To judge a particular communicative act as a face-attack requires engagement with two questions: (1) What desired identities does a communicative practice make relevant for its different categories of participants? In school boards, for example, elected officials could be expected to want to be seen as "democratic", "fair", and "caring about children". (2) What did people actually say and how might the content and form of utterances have implicated an absence of a desirable identity or the presence of a disvalued one?

To be sure there are ways of speaking that are likely to be judged insulting in many situations. Obscenities and name-calling, and loud, high-pitched talk interpretable as screaming are discourse moves that people often judge as face-attacking. Tracy and Tracy (1998) described these practices as "context-spanning face-attack", but even here it is important to keep in mind that insult is an interpretation and not a linguistic feature (e. g., "bastard" may be intended and taken as a friendly form of address). In situations in which civil, polite conduct is generally valued and given lip service, as is the case in school board meetings, strategies of face-attack typically include at least a few "politeness" forms such as Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) identified. Public meetings of school boards rarely see strings of profanities delivered in a screaming style. Instead, what occurs are discourse moves that work by setting in motion negative character implications about a person or set of people.

In Culpeper's (1996: 356) anatomy of impoliteness, the face-attack moves used in school board meetings largely fall under the category of positive impoliteness, i. e., "strategies designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants". But to understand face-attack in school board meetings, it is important to go beyond this general positive impoliteness category and identify specifically the situated face wants that people in local governance meetings will possess. Among Kienpointner's (1997) three varieties of motivated rudeness, school board face-attacking seems to bring together the categories of strategic rudeness in public institutions with intergroup rudeness (e. g., between different ethnicities or classes). But there is a twist. In contrast to courtroom cross-examinations (i. e., his category of strategic rudeness in public) in which the parties high in institutional power attack those without much (attorneys attacking witnesses), the dynamic is the opposite: citizens in public meetings attack the face of officials considerably more often than the reverse happens.

Face-attacks, like physical blows, vary in force. To imply that a person is violating the institutional principle of acting democratically is a stronger face-attack than to imply that someone has been inattentive to this principle. In addition, face-attacks that occur in situations defined as relatively cooperative are likely to be experienced as more severe than if the same comment occurs in a context understood as competitive or adversarial. How to scale face-attack in these partly adversarial, partly cooperation-seeking meetings is a complex issue beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that, similar to the notion of face-attack itself, situated judgments of severity are likely to be contested, affected by a judgment-maker's position as well as other factors.

5. BVSD's commonplace kinds of face-attack and its meta-discourse

This case study of BVSD board meetings began in 1996, six months after an election that had changed who had power in the district. With the election, the new board now had four of seven members committed to bringing about significant changes, including reversing a major initiative of the school district superintendent. With the majority of votes on its philosophical side, the board began changing a wide swath of policies and procedures. These changes were applauded by some and criticized by others, and BVSD board meetings became a place for controversy. As a result of the increased participation at meetings, the leadership added a statement about civility, which was to be read at each meeting before citizens were given the opportunity to speak. Consider its content:

> Excerpt 1: Conduct preface
>
> We are glad to hear from the public and we look forward to receiving your comments. The Board has unanimously resolved however that it cannot tolerate personal attacks upon board members, administrators, teachers, or staff. We must all encourage and insist upon a more civil public discourse and we thank you for helping us to achieve that goal.

For a couple of reasons this conduct statement is intriguing. First, it identified "personal attacks" as likely dangers of BVSD meetings, so