On Impoliteness and Drama Discourse: 
An Interview with Jonathan Culpeper

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Marta Dynel: Did you conceive of the tremendous impact of your 1996 article on impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996a) as you were writing it? Did you expect a new strand of research to arise thanks to your paper?

Jonathan Culpeper: I have a mixed reaction to that, and that’s partly to do with how it came about. By chance, I happened to watch a documentary called “Soldier Girls”. I think it must have been in 1990. I remember at the time thinking how on earth one could analyse this kind of interaction. And that was the beginning of the idea for a paper. But back in those days, if you didn’t record something, there was no way you could analyse it, because there was no YouTube where you could get data retrospectively. It was just a fluke that my younger sister left the tape recorder running, and so I actually had a copy of the data. I analysed it, and a bit of that analysis went into my PhD thesis, and then later became an important part of the 1996 article. So, that article owes its life to a couple of flukes. With those flukes in mind, I’d say I had no idea it would have the impact that it did. However, looking back on it, I have a slightly different perspective, because it seems to me that what is salient, what people talk about is impoliteness. You don’t have discussions so much about someone being very polite. From that point of view, is it is not such a surprise.

MD: Fluke may be the basic reason you got interested in impoliteness, but your giving insight into it is a different matter, which is undeniable and is certainly not the matter of luck but your intellect.

*) This interview was recorded on 28 May, 2012, at the 6th Łódź Symposium: New Developments in Linguistic Pragmatics, where Professor Jonathan Culpeper gave a plenary talk. The interviewer would like to thank Professor Piotr Cap for suggesting that this interview be held and Professor Jonathan Culpeper for kindly accepting the invitation.
JC: (laughter) I take this as flattery.

MD: (laughter) This was my intention and you can treat it as such. Let me move to the second question. Your initial classifications of impoliteness strategies (Culpeper, 1996a; Culpeper et al., 2003) have garnered a lot of support but they have also been challenged on similar grounds as Brown and Levinson’s (1987) taxonomy of politeness strategies (Bousfield, 2008a; Dynel, 2009, 2013 forth). In your recent monograph (Culpeper, 2011), you no longer present any such taxonomy, focusing on several types of impoliteness realisations (e.g. implicational impoliteness and types of offence). Does this mean that your views have undergone a change in respect of the initial categorisation, and you are no longer supportive of your initial categorisation?

JC: Thank you for asking this question, because it gives me an opportunity to explain what I was trying to do. I have shifted focus; I haven’t abandoned the old idea of pragmatic strategies. It is true that the strategies I coined for the 1996 paper have been challenged, and largely on the same grounds as people have challenged Brown and Levinson’s work. However, it depends on which strategies you’re talking about. Most of the challenges are to do with the superstrategies. Bousfield (2008a) combines positive and negative politeness, and, insightfully, points out that the bald on-record category involves face as well. But the output strategies in Bousfield are, in fact, basically the same set as the ones I coined, except for a couple of extras. I think that it is quite a robust set. A number of papers have come out using it (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2011 is an excellent example), and showing it to be effective. In my more recent work (e.g. Culpeper, 2011), I decided it was not particularly newsworthy to go back and do that yet again. Broadly, I was thinking in terms of three levels. At the top, there is the conceptual orientation of how a particular act of impoliteness orientates towards two categories: face or sociality rights (cf. Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Then, there are pragmatic strategies, and finally at the bottom impoliteness formulae. As you go down, it becomes more micro, more linguistic. As for the pragmatic strategies in the middle, I did not ignore them. What I did recently was to try to get at them through a different (and for me more interesting) methodology than the usual qualitative/quantitative analyses of interactional data, namely, analysing meta-talk about strategies. For my 2011 book, I analysed manuals on and parodies of rudeness, as these are meta-linguistic reflections of how people are thought to be impolite. These represent communities talking about strategies which they recognise and which have a conventional status. Lo and behold, the strategies that emerged map quite nicely