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Keywords: impoliteness, dysfunctional behaviour, complaints, Computer-mediated communication

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FORMS OF IMPOLITENESS IN COMPANY-CUSTOMER INTERACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to examine verbal violence in companies’ answers sent in response to customers’ complaints through two different channels: online (on a public forum) vs. offline (by postal mail). We draw on a recent body of marketing literature pertaining to employees’ dysfunctional behaviors, as well as on conceptualizations of impoliteness, to analyze which role the communication method plays on the forms of impoliteness taken in those interactions.

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1. Introduction

Companies and their employees can sometimes be impolite, aggressive and even violent with their customers and several studies in literature have proven it (Fisk et al. 2010, Grandey 2003, Reynold and Harris 2006). As Fisk et al. (2010) wrote, “All too frequently we observe customers and staff almost competing with each other to be the most abrupt, rude, and uncooperative” (p. 417).

These deviant behaviors, far from the ideal image of employees who smile constantly and are always at the customer’s beckon, have been studied from different angles and have been given various explanations. Workplace harassment, discourtesy, and conflict between members of the same company can be the roots of an evil that is rooted in intense stress, emotional exhaustion and is manifested in incidents of aggressive language towards customers. It was only recently that customer behavior as cause and a precursor to the employee reactions was identified and studied, in particular within the context of customer dissatisfaction that in turn leads to violent remarks (Fisk et al 2003, Harris and Reynolds 2003).

Whether the cause is internal (management, colleagues) or external (customers), it is now recognized that employees sometimes dump their emotional overflow on the customer, thus creating a little more distance from the ideal of stellar customer focus strategies pursued by companies (Yagil, 2008). All of the current studies, however, are based on behaviors that occur synchronously: in a store when the employee and the customer are face-to-face (Reynolds and Harris 2006), or on the telephone in a call center, for example (Grandey, Dickter and Sin 2004). The employee is unable to temporarily manage the stress inherent to the situation, which then transforms into actions inconsistent with the pursuit of customer satisfaction, especially when the employee is openly insulting and threatens the face of the customer (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Our study is based on the analysis of the comparison of impolite answers to customers’ complaints from two datasets: one containing 936 online disputes posted on an Internet forum, and one related to the private correspondence collected by postal mail within the framework of an experiment conducted with 2325 Belgian companies having received a complaint. This research provides several theoretical contributions.

First, our study brings a new perspective through a linguistic analysis of the phenomenon in comparison to previous studies focused primarily on marketing and in management (e.g. Bradley, Sparks, McColl-Kennedy, Jimmieson, & Zapf 2010; Fisk et al. 2010).

Secondly, despite our bibliographical research, no other study in the marketing field seems to describe similar behaviors in a written, asynchronous context in which the employee’s response does not immediately follow the potentially aggressive content of a customer complaint. In this study we show that the company’s aggressive communication takes on different forms, depending on the context, and that tension sometimes culminates in extremely vulgar and insulting language.
Third, unlike current theories (Neurater-Kessels, 2011) propose, our study shows that the most serious cases of impoliteness (bald on record) occur in private correspondence, a.o. through the use of taboo words and insults. In public online exchanges, where anonymity is the rule, impoliteness is interwoven between justification and apologies, which lowers the general impression of threat for the customer’s face.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. The Importance of Complaints in Marketing

The marketing discipline has devoted many decades of research to provide a better understanding of the levers of customer satisfaction and to highlight its major role in customer loyalty, word of mouth advertising, and in the company’s profitability margins (Olivier 2009). Complaints, as a visible manifestation of dissatisfaction, have also received special attention as they give the company a way to “redeem” itself. In the words of Hirschman (1970), a dissatisfied customer has three options: end their relationship with the business, remain loyal despite the disappointment, or make their issues known via a complaint.

Paradoxically, studies have shown that a customer may experience greater satisfaction after a successfully handled complaint than with an unproblematic, uneventful situation (Smith and Bolton, 1998; De Matos, Henrique, and Rossi 2007). Performing multiple research studies has helped to isolate the defining criteria from the consumer’s viewpoint: the successful handling of the complaint. Del Rio-Lanza, Vázquez-Casielles and Díaz-Martín (2009) have shown that the quality of interaction when handling the complaint plays a leading role in the customer’s satisfaction. This quality of interaction is expressed through the courtesy shown by the employee (McKoll-Kennedy and Sparks 2003; Blodgett, Hill and Tax 1997; Mattila and Cranage 2005), his empathy (Johnston 2001), the efforts made to resolve the customer’s issue (Tax et al. 1998; McKoll-Kennedy and Sparks 2003; Johnston and Fern 1999), the explanations provided (Teo and Lim 2001), and more generally the employee’s attitude (Blodgett et al. 1997).

These results have therefore fueled decades of managerial advice, all of which contain, in one form or another, the need to train employees on the rules to observe when handling a complaint in order to increase customer satisfaction (del Rio Lanza et al. 2009; Teo and Lim 2001; Spreng, Harrell and McKoy 1995; Martinez-Tur et al. 2006; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekaran 1998; McKoll-Kennedy and Sparks 2003; Goodwin and Ross 1992; Blodgett et al. 1997).

2.2. The Phenomenon of Employee Aggression Towards Customers

However, far from the ideal of the perfect employee who is constantly smiling, respectful of the rules and customer-focused, many marketing studies have identified deviant
or dysfunctional employee behaviors. Fisk et al. (2010) have classified these types of behavior in two categories: deviant behaviors motivated by financial gain, and those that have no economic purpose. If the behaviors falling into the category of financial gain (fraud and theft, for example) can be easily explained by greed, those which have no economic purpose are more difficult to understand. For the latter, the literature is rich with explanations why the emotional component plays a central role.

It is about aggressive behaviors towards customers during normal business interactions; whether in the store (Grandey, 2003; Harris and Reynolds, 2003; Reynolds and Harris, 2006) or on the telephone (Yagil, 2008), aggressive behaviours can be triggered by internal company factors (Grandey et al. 2004) or an external stimulus. The customer's stress, and the emotions conveyed, are the very example of external stimulus. However, these emotions are contagious (Menon and Dubé, 2000). The employee therefore absorbs these emotions and reacts as a sounding board that sends back other emotions, more or less controlled, towards the customer. In fact, Yagil (2008) emphasizes the employee’s difficulty to manage this emotional bombardment, which inevitably leads to exhaustion followed by relaxation, which can then be the origin of violent behaviors like insults (Harris and Reynolds 2003).

If trifle situations may sometimes “degenerate”, in recent years the research has focused on the study of employee reactions to a situation in which the customer presents a deviant behavior him or herself. The deviant behavior is then defined as the non-compliance with social rules, which indirectly gives a cultural tone to the behavior in question (Fisk et al. 2010).

A deviant customer behavior, for instance impoliteness, is very dependent on the context. It follows that what might be completely acceptable in a given setting, might be unacceptable in another (see Neurauter-Kessels 2010: 189). This corresponds to the current views of sociolinguists on how to study impoliteness (Culpeper 2008). This breach of social acceptability rules manifests itself in particular in disputes where the customer, feeling short-changed by a broken promise, seeks to be compensated. The customer can then, as a function of the emotional state caused by his disappointment, allow his anger or frustration to emerge in his request. Menon and Dubé (2000) showed that 25% of complaints containing an expression of anger were themselves followed by an aggressive reaction by the employee. This proportion fell to 12% when the complaint was tinged with anxiety and logically fell to 1.7% when the complainant expressed himself without conveying his negative emotions. These reactions, incongruous in the context of fulfilling the company’s marketing strategy, are explained by the phenomenon of mimicry. They were classified by Homburg and Fürst (2007) under the name of organisational defence behaviours, the customer complaint representing an “aggression” towards the company and the employee who is its the personification.
According to Grandey (2003), employees manage the discord between a negative mind-set and the pursuit of corporate objectives by using their acting skills (“acting”); either profoundly (“deep acting”), when the employee is empathetic and genuinely tries to put himself in the customer’s shoes and to feel his frustration; or superficially (“surface acting”), when the employee’s emotions are fake. In this case, wearing only a mask of empathy towards the customer’s complaints, the emotional discord wears the employee down, making the risk of aggression towards the customer increasingly more likely (Hochschild, 2003).

2.3. Impoliteness

Unlike the study of politeness, its opposite, impoliteness, still remains scarcely studied (Neurater-Kessels, 2011). This stream of research is marked by a lack of consensus as to what constitutes the very essence of impoliteness (Locher and Bousfield 2008: 3) (cited in Neurauter-Kessels 2011). Researchers agree, however, that impoliteness depends on the context of the interaction itself, must be judged in situ (Culpeper 2008) and that cannot be reduced to a lack of politeness (Culpeper et al. 2003).

The politeness system is able “to achieve its ends” by structuring the exchange in terms of the target language’s actions (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2000). What then is impoliteness? Traditionally unwelcomed in social exchanges, especially because of the communication breakdown it may trigger, but also for the negative reputation that it projects upon the impolite speaker, it no less exists according to relatively explicit manifestations. In speaking situations, the listener is not always saved face and impoliteness is far from marginal as Kerbrat-Orecchioni points out (2011: 38). If there are kinds of speech reserved for threat, controversy, sarcasm and verbal abuse that integrate forms of impoliteness “ontologically”, there are also communication situations in which polite and impolite markers are adjacent because of hybridity that can weigh on the speaker’s status, the communication channel, and on the words themselves... “Impoliteness is inexorably linked to politeness for which it seems to be the counterpoint. Based on the various forms of impoliteness, speaking about impoliteness amounts to positioning it to better counter impoliteness and it would be futile to want to separate the two concepts” (Jobert 2010: 7). Impoliteness then becomes a new research paradigm in a wide-open field of politeness studies that it compliments and problematizes.

There are currently attempts to model impoliteness, which is not yet established as a subject of analysis but for which its interactional dynamic and its role in face analysis is recognized: for example Bousfield (2008), who first distinguished direct impoliteness from indirect impoliteness (like sarcasm) and then proposed 13 strategies of direct impoliteness from a rich corpus: among them in our corpus we find the use of inopportune identity markers, negative personalisation, insult, criticism and blame. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2011) proposes to refine the entrenched nature of opposition between politeness and impoliteness by taking into account hyper politeness, marked by excess and non-politeness, in which the lack of polite forms is normal. She puts forward questions about the line between politeness
and impoliteness in the attacking statements during political debates and categorizes irony in the context of “polirudeness”, within a continuum ranging from negative politeness to almost non-politeness. While the respective definitions differ depending on the context's observable parameters, they meet in the acceptance of the context as the defining common denominator for the markers’ interpretation.

Our private corpus falls within the wide range of written communication that covers a variety of practices governed by labels and models depending upon cultural, social and historical contexts, and the relationships with the writers (worldly, professional, familiar, romantic, etc.) These rules of correspondence have been widely transmitted by manuals on etiquette and propriety, by the family unit and the school system. Impoliteness is therefore viewed as the failure to comply with the rules and the epistolary conventions in force (wrong salutation used for the sender, omission of formal closure, improper spelling, etc.)

In the specific case of electronic exchanges (public corpus), it was found that the methods of interaction have become less formal while still following some sociolinguistics norms. If there is a “netiquette” constraining users to follow generic socio-linguistic standards focused on adaptation, the forms of electronic politeness therefore vary according to use and context. This netiquette also relies on ideal communication, a utopia (Wauthion and Simon 2000), it tells us nothing about the way internet users practically control these rules: “Violating the netiquette, respecting it, challenging it or reminding of it will be the strategic ways for a user to build an image, to build one’s place within the interaction and the discursive legitimisation procedures” (Marcoccia 2000: 166). If advice about politeness markers abundantly circulates on the web and suggest a shorter, more concise electronic politeness, courtesy, respect for others and the need to be pleasant remain, as in the past, the core values and the recommendations remain classical. The outcomes produced by the variety of communication channels within mediated and public exchanges do not seem to be considered.

3. Methodology

This research is based on the discursive comparative analysis of two distinct corpora, linked by a common origin: complaints. The first corpus is public, in that exchanges between the complainant and the company occur through an online public forum. The second corpus is private in nature as it is based on written correspondence by mail between the complainant and the implicated company. We detail below the method used to obtain the two corpora.

3.1. Public Corpus
The online forum Les Arnaques (The Scams) (www.lesarnaques.com) is, in France, the most widely known mediation online platform for dissatisfied consumers and the implicated companies. The goal of the forum is to mediate between customers and companies in a state of conflict over unresolved customer issues, achieve a resolution directly with the company or find an acceptable compromise. It is therefore, in a marketing sense, a “third party” complaint resolution process (Goetzinger, Park and Widdows 2006). In addition, because the complaints appearing on the forum have not initially been resolved directly, we can advance that each of the exchanges studied corresponds to a double deviation scenario (Lee and Park, 2010).

In August 2013, all complaints having received a response from the implicated company were archived. In total, 335 companies responded to 20,204 complaints addressed between September 2, 2003 and July 17, 2013.

A statistical analysis showed that 22% of the companies had been active only in the first 30 days following their registration on the forum. The present study is based upon a corpus of 936 exchanges, representing the 30 first days of activity of all firms on the forum.

A guide was developed in order to standardise the constitutive dimensions of politeness in the company’s response (Schwab and Rosier, 2013). Double blind coding was conducted and the coding discrepancies were resolved through a discussion between the two coders (Taylor 1999). The rate of the initial agreement between coders for all dimensions was 90.06%. Of all the messages analyzed, 139 business responses contained a threat against the complainant’s positive face. Using the terminology of Enache and Poppa (2008), these responses contained a criticism, rebuttal, reproach, insult, abuse, mockery or sarcasm. The rate of initial agreement between coders for this dimension was 90.80%.

A double-blind selection was performed on these 139 responses to retain only those that were impolite or insulting, which allowed production of a corpus of 14 messages, which constitute the subject of the present research.

3.2. Private Corpus

Until now, marketing research on complaints of a private nature was based on the generation of consecutive responses to complaints whose temporal origin was somewhat remote and which were dictated by the needs of an experiment. The most common methodological framework is to ask students to remember a product or service that was unsatisfactory and to make each of them send a complaint (e.g. Baer and Hill 1994, Strauss and Hill 2001, Bolkan 2007, Bolkan and Daly 2009). For instance Bolkan and Daly (2009) asked 134 volunteer students to think of a recent experience where they had been dissatisfied with either a product or a service. Students were then asked to send a complaint letter to the organization and the researchers collected the answers for their study. This
method has the advantage of being based on an event that truly led to a dissatisfaction, but has the disadvantage of containing a bias induced by the very content of the complaint. Since each student has to submit a complaint, the reasons for dissatisfaction are in fact as varied as the number of students, thereby preventing the comparison of responses received. Furthermore this method, practiced mainly in the United States where firms are on average larger than in Europe, has the disadvantage of leading to an over-representation of large companies in which the complaint handling procedures are very standardized (Morgan, Anderson, and Mittal 2005) and an under-representation of the different B2C sectors, leaving thus little room to observe deviant phenomenon. In the study by Bolkan and Daly (2009) for instance, only three sectors were represented: dine-in restaurants, fast-food merchants, and high-tech retailers.

In order to overcome these obstacles, an experiment was conducted based on sending a fictitious complaint to a representative sample of companies in a given region. The purpose was to trigger a response/reaction from the implicated companies by sending false information with the goal of comparing their reactions within the frame of acceptable practices (e.g. Manant, Pajak, and Soulié 2014).

To avoid potential legal issues, the experiment’s framework and implications was first discussed with a lawyer from the Belgian Direct Marketing Association (BDMA), whose members act as solicitation mail handlers, a similar activity to the one proposed in the study. The attention of the authors was drawn to the requirement to create a database ex nihilo, using business addresses freely available in the public domain. The internet was used to establish a sample of 2325 companies representing Belgian consumer businesses (B2C). Representativeness was ensured through sectorial and geographical distribution using the official database provided by the National Social Security Office (ONSS). The characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 1.

Based on the typology of complaints in the B2C area (Holloway and Beatty 2003), a fictitious complaint letter was designed to express dissatisfaction regarding a communication issue with the company. In Holloway and Betty’s (2003) study, this was precisely the general issue for which the occurrence rate was highest. Each letter was hand-signed to increase its authenticity. All of the letters were sent on the same day and the responses were recorded up to 60 days following the initial mailing of the complaint. The 60-day timeframe is consistent with what is normally practiced in this kind of experiment (see for example Bolkan 2007: 61). The final response was received 57 days after sending the initial complaint.

A total of 270 responses were received, corresponding to a response rate of 11.6%, which is very weak compared to the response rates found in English-speaking countries. Strauss and Hill (2001) for instance obtained a 47% response rate in their field experiment.
The responses received were coded the same way as those from the public forum, which lead to keeping 8 responses that contained threats to the customer’s face. These responses are identified by the letters A to H later in our study (company A, company B, etc.)

3.3. Discourse Analysis

The comparative analysis of the two corpora is based on linguistic, discursive and pragmatic criteria (Kerbrat 2000, 2011; Bousfield 2008, Culpeper 2011). Linguistically, the first step is to highlight the terms, expressions and syntactic constructions that express a convention of formal politeness (formal greetings, formal closings, salutations) or the emotional content (positive or negative) that removes the exchange from the necessary axiological neutrality. At the discursive and pragmatic levels, the influence of the context of the communication channel (electronic or written) on the format of the exchange itself needs to be examined;

The comparative analysis of the corpora, and in particular the analysis of impoliteness strategies, was guided by Culpeper, Bousfield, and Wichmann’s work (2003).

4. Results

Business communication is based on an asymmetric exchange. According to norms and standardized practices, the company must in fact seek to maximize customer satisfaction and the quality of interaction, especially if the exchange takes place within the context of a complaint and therefore customer dissatisfaction is the general tone of the correspondence. The dissatisfaction expressed in the complaint itself, can display negative feelings in forms that are not interactionally correct but which are somehow tolerated in situ. Neurauter-Kessels (2011) reminds for instance that “there is no utterance that could be identified as universally impolite” (p. 189). In certain settings like political debates, army trainings or TV shows, impolite behaviors are accepted. (Neurauter-Kessels 2011).

4.1. Analysis of the public corpus

Online public forums provide data that are regularly assessed in academic studies. The relevance of these corpora is as much for the study of politeness (Angouri and Tseliga, 2010) as for the study of exchanges related to customer dissatisfaction (Schwab and Rosier 2013, Lee and Lee 2006, Harrison-Walker 2001). The communication balance rests upon the positioning of faces and territory, as much on the complaining customer’s side as on the responding company’s terrain. Schwab and Rosier (2013) have shown that the electronic exchange mechanism (the public forum) significantly influenced the conversational modeled, but did not necessarily result in polite exchanges. In particular, the company demonstrated an
axiological ambivalence in its responses through the alternate use of first person singular and plural [For clarification, while in the English language, “you” is both the singular and plural pronoun form which does not hold any specific expressive or situational content, in the French language, there are two distinct pronouns: “tu” for singular and “vous” for plural. The alternate use of the forms depends on many socio-linguistic scenarios, one of which is distinctly related to our topic. Using the singular form “tu” in a communication with a customer, for instance, is considered irreverent and can express different degrees of impoliteness, from dismissiveness to contempt], an indication of an enunciative and communicative tension in the receipt of the complaint messages.

The analysis of impoliteness within the public forum shows, in the majority of cases, that it challenges the customer’s integrity and objectivity, which is the main category of impoliteness found by Neurauter-Kessels (2011) in his study of impoliteness on information forums. Example (1) is therefore typical of this “put them in their place” mentality espoused by the company trying to restore its own integrity by destroying that of its customer.

(1) […] First of all, and to erase your accusations against us, I would like to clarify that eBuyClub has been distributing cheques to its members since 1999 and that more than €1.000.000 (1 million) euros have already been distributed. I think that is a guarantee of the quality we provide (and it is not the only one). […]

Forum Les Amaques

A more detailed discursive analysis of each response shows that the individual responsible for responding on behalf of the company can stray from the collective enunciative line in many ways: for personal reasons, to justify and defend himself, but also to attack the customer head on.

In most cases the threat to the customer’s face is “interwoven” in the context of more socially acceptable and less threatening statements, like excuse and justification. This enunciative hybridity (in terms of discursive coexistence of both polite and impolite forms within a single message) reflects the emotional dissonance between the spontaneous mood of the individual responding (personal dimension) and the politeness expected to be extended by the same person as a company representative.

In example (2), the response is thus formed with an implied apology (“You are right, it’s ongoing”) followed by a threat to the customer’s positive face in the form of a stroke of irony (“I invite your boss here, because then, even with the best intentions […]”). It then closes with a justification that seeks to garner the customer’s support.
(2) You are right, it's ongoing. I invite your boss here, because then, even with the best intentions... Understand fully that to not cancel an order that we know will be refused cost [sic] us even more.

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Forum Les Arnaques

It is remarkable to note that the most face-threatening part is a personal expression of the individual involved in the exchange, not the individual as representative of the company. This threat written in the first person is regularly encountered, as for example in response (3) where the threat between sender and receiver is enhanced by reducing the formal “distance” with the use of “tu” (see explanation above on the acceptable socio-linguistic scenarios for the use of pronouns in the French language).

(3) [...] Je t'invite à te référer aux conditions générales de vente [...]

I invite you to review the general sales terms....

---

Forum Les Arnaques

In example (4), the attack directly follows the formal opening and takes the form of correcting the customer’s statement.

(4) Hello sir, You haven’t specified in your post that you rushed us during the test, that you wanted it done quickly, yet I had told your salesperson that I wanted to do the test on the [computer] towers, and install the operating systems, we only had 1h00 to set up 5 PCs without an [operating] system! If your salesperson had been patient, you’d have left satisfied!!

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Forum Les Arnaques

Another variation appeared further on in the same response: the accusatory and demeaning injunction is then followed with a positive statement and a cordial closing.
4.2. Analysis of the private corpus

Current research about impoliteness predicts that face-threatening acts are amplified by exposure of the conversation to third parties (Neurauter-Kessels 2011). In other words, in public forums impoliteness is more prevalent, as a result of the anonymity of the medium. Following this logic, a correspondence between two parties which identify themselves clearly, should theoretically, not engender impoliteness.

Our analysis shows that as theory predicts, the majority of messages from the private corpus are comprehensive and polite. The ideals of professional interaction between company and customer are respected to the letter, including the absence of first person singular usage, evidence of politeness markers (formal opening, formal closing), no use of the “tu” singular form, absence of threats to the customer faces. The form of the communication channel (the letter) seems to be conducive to a discursive formality that has almost disappeared from online exchanges (Marcoccia 2005).

However the content and form of deviant responses is surprising for the physical and verbal violence that they contain. The formal context still accentuates the impression that emerges from these exchanges in which we find controversy, debates and quarrels (Amossy 2014; Flahault 1987).

For better illustration, we first separated the letters that were sent by the companies (A, B, C, F) from those that were returned to the customer containing handwritten add-on “responses” (D, E, G, H). The term “response” is in quotation marks because given its content and the form it takes, it is in fact a disqualification of the complaint itself by a material rejection: the return to sender. For example, in letter F the word “response” is handwritten directly alongside the subject “complaint”. Factual corrections are also written in the same manner on the complaint letter. In letter D the company criticizes the sender for having omitted his email address, while letters E and H criticize the omission of the sender’s phone number. The tone is accusatory in order to discredit the customer’s complaint: the customer is blamed and responsible for the absence of a reply because the contact information was not provided. These letters are also the most insulting, in particular letter H (see figure 1) which contains all of the following breaches: “tu” singular pronoun form, use of slang vocabulary and expressions (“balls”, “bullshit”), displaced salutations (“my great”), and insults (“asshole”).

Generally, the responses contain subjective linguistic markers intended to degrade the customer. For instance the response of company B qualifies the complainant’s letter of
“for the least unpleasant”. Responses also include unfounded accusations on the alleged intentions:

(6) “you obviously don’t want me to contact you, you willingly left out…”

Company A

Even conversational statements expected to repeat the comments made or thought by the customer:

(7) “if you have forgotten the name of the wicked secretary who didn’t do her job…”

Company A

Irony, which is part of the criteria for impoliteness described by Culpeper (2008), is also present and denoted in those business letters. The writer of Letter A states that he read the letter “with amusement”, and the writer of Letter C quips frankly:

(8) “obviously this never happens to you, no forgetfulness, no mistakes, you’re Mr. Perfect!!!”

Company C

Letter F (see excerpt 9) is a barrage of accusatory questions:

(9) “why didn’t you call back? How did you hear about me?”

Company F

Letter G advises the customer “to go see a psychologist” and to “keep his recommendations to himself”. These are defense mechanisms that reverse the roles of the injured party: we start with an unhappy customer, and end up with a company that seems “wounded”, justifies itself, accuses, and disqualifies the complaint.
All of the responses display excessive impoliteness in terms of the initial complaint letter: the tone is critical, excessive, which translates, in addition to the aforementioned characteristics, into the abusive use of exclamation and question marks, inappropriate language registers (familiar and/or rude), and displaced emotional content.
Bruxelles, le 2 Décembre 2013

Objet : réclamation

Madame, Monsieur,

Par la présente je souhaite vous faire part de mon insatisfaction. J'avais pris contact le mois dernier pour obtenir des renseignements tarifaires. Après cette prise de contact la personne que j'avais eu au téléphone (et dont je n'ai malheureusement pas eu la présence d'esprit de relever le nom) m'avait proposé d'être recontacter pour que ma demande puisse être traitée. A ce jour je constate malheureusement que ces promesses sont restées vaines et que rien n'a été fait.

Cet état de fait, bien malheureux, ne m'incite pas à vous recommander.

Bien cordialement.

Dis moi mon pauv’,
T’en veux rien d’autre à faire ???
c’est pas même pas aht1 coment ?!
Encre une arsence pue gasse de l’agent ?
N’import pue ! Appelle moi ou le Vaux ! En espérant te 
être TROU DU COL !
5. Discussion

The levels of analysis aggregate around the challenge of faces: how to maintain a positive image of the company and how to avoid threats when involved in exchanges in which the self-image is tarnished by the very nature of the exchange (the complaint). Our data analysis tends to show that forms of impoliteness can often be found in the alternation of Face-Threatening-Acts and positive politeness strategies. When a person’s argument can't be attacked, then it's the person who is attacked (Apothéloz, Brandt, and Quiroz 1992). The exchange can become increasingly more contentious when the speakers’ images no longer conform to their representations (Spinola, 2000: 25) and the speakers then resort to strategies to undermine the other. For example, the return to sender strategy contains forms of impoliteness pertaining to the communication channel, or to the complaining customer's intellectual abilities. In the public corpus, the company often responds by requiring the purchase order number, implicitly meaning that the customer did not spontaneously provide the pertinent information. This can be considered a form of “impolite-politeness” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2001). In fact, we have also found more gentle forms that might be due to the public nature of disputes on the forum. In mailed correspondence, the divisions between politeness and impoliteness are more entrenched, immediately indicating the nature of the interlocutory relationship, as it happens in our private corpus, an ironic bias, derogatory, even violent, in respect to customer complaining.

5.1. The Influence of the Communication Channel

The forum format generates diverse dialogues according to the designated speaker in the exchange. The customer presents his case to all forum members and talks about the company without directly addressing it. Conversely, the company’s representative opts instead to address the customer directly. But it is also possible that the spokesperson chooses a delocutive form and addresses the group rather than the customer.

In the private corpus, the business exchange is classic. The responses are either courteous, or impolite. Unlike the theories suggesting that public acts encourage brazenness and impoliteness, we find in the private corpus that it is the intimate nature of the exchange that leads to “bending the rules” and becoming impolite. This can also go so far that the business relationship is damaged forever when the customer’s own letter is sent back, with handwritten markings, comments and crossed out paragraphs, as an ultimate insult.

5.2. Typography

The uses of word capitalization to indicate a raised voice, as well as the overuse of typography are two strong indicators of impoliteness (Rosier 1998). This overuse is
characteristic of online exchanges and is intended to compensate for the lack of emotional
cues in online writing (Neurauter-Kessels 2011). Typographical markings can also be seen as
a way to offset the written medium’s lack of prosody, which may also be considered a
strategy of impoliteness (Culpeper et al. 2003).

Typographical symbols are the preferred means of expression and there are no
emoticons in these exchanges, while they are considered a polite approach to mitigate or
defuse a statement (Marcoccia and Gauducheau 2007) but also as a way to express emotion
in the absence of verbal expressive cues.

Overuse of typographic markers is found less frequently in the public corpus by
comparison to the private one, not significant enough to warrant a research category. In the
public corpus only one occurrence was identified:

(10) If your salesperson had been patient you’d have left our of here satisfied!! And what
you didn’t say is that we gave you almost €500 in discounts!! so your €100 in after-
sales service are not much!! I understand your anger, but your comments are rather
defamatory!

Forum Les Arnaques

In the private corpus, there are more occurrences (examples 11 to 13)

(11) Obviously this never happens to you… no forgetfulness… no mistakes… you’re Mr.
Perfect!!!"

Company C

(12) Don’t you have the balls to provide your phone number?!

[…]
Tell me, big guy, Do you really have nothing else to do???
It’s like more of this bullshit?!

Company H
(13) Do you actually spend all of your time writing?

Company D

In the private corpus the typography (question marks or exclamation marks) is also used to establish an incisive pattern to the company’s response. This pattern is evidenced by the use of short biting phrases (barbs), which appear to be “picking” at the customer, like in examples 14 and 15.

(14) No email!
  Not in FLEX our accounting sistem [sic]!
  Not in the white pages! [sic]

Company D

(15) For what job?
  What kind of service?
  When?
  You tell me that you made contact by telephone - OK –
  Why didn’t you call back?
  How did you hear about me?

Company F

This pattern may be likened to the parallelism induced by repetition suggested by Culpeper et al. (2003).

Overall, typographical marking is still quite rare in either corpus. The company responses contain little of it while on the contrary, customer complaints are strewn with it. Therefore, at first sight it would seem that the company leverages asynchronicity in responses, in order to control emotions.

A discursive level analysis will show that impoliteness may be found elsewhere.

5.3. Subtle Impoliteness vs. Frontal Threats
In both corpora we find the use of irony and sarcasm ("sarcasm or mock politeness" using the terminology of Culpeper et al. 2003) directed at the customer. This represents a type of subtle verbal abuse that may be present in business exchanges. This innuendo often serves to criticize the complainant's communication style, meaning the way he has chosen to contact the company for a resolution (e.g. examples 17 and 18).

(16) Obviously this never happens to you… no forgetfulness… no mistakes… you're Mr. Perfect!!!

Company C

(17) you obviously don't want me to contact you since you willingly omit your phone number, so in this case in order to be sure that you will read this, you have received this letter by registered mail with acknowledgement of receipt.

Company A

(18) IPLANETE JOUETS has a hotline and a contact email for our customers' information, they have successfully ordered they can contact us without difficulty.

Forum Les Arnaques

(19) [The] internet is magical except that it is unfortunately a receptacle for a lot of bitter people

Forum Les Arnaques

But this hint of biting humour is sometimes contrasted by the familiar or rude register ("bald on record impoliteness", Culpeper et al. 2003), astonishingly present as the following examples demonstrate:

(20) You are a rude person!

Company E
(21) As for your suggestions, you can obviously keep them to yourselves

Company G

(22) You should speak to a psychologist, it would be more helpful to you

Company G

(23) […] Don't make yourself out to be a poor little man to get pity, because you took advantage of your friends by not sharing the discount with them!!

Forum Les Arnaques

Singularly, the epitome of impoliteness in the private corpus equates to responses handwritten directly on the body of the original complaint letter. This leads us to consider aggression as a scriptural gesture. In fact, we were struck by what appears to be overt violence: crossing out parts of the very letter received and returning the “offensive” letter to the customer with scribbles on it. Like a desecration, the customer’s letter is returned in some way soiled with handwriting. Of the eight impolite responses identified in the private corpus, four were written on the complaint letter itself.

In the example reproduced in Figure 1, there are condensed markers of aggression: use of the “tu” form, foul language, use of capital letters to indicate a raised voice, shouting, hyper marking of the modality, allover the customer’s complaint. This is obviously a very special and unique example but it contrasts sharply with the public corpus, and shows the most slippery slope towards aggression in the private corpus.

5.4. The Perceived Role of the Communication Medium as a Source of Impoliteness

Responses received by post mail also lead us to question the perceived role of the medium and in particular its asynchronic nature (a response by post mail taking, in principle, longer than a response sent electronically).

It is altogether remarkable to note that the majority of businesses demonstrate impoliteness by criticizing the complainant’s communication method (see examples 13, 14, 15, and 25 to 28).

(25) Rather than writing, it would have been much simpler to call our office.
Company C

(26) why haven’t you called back? why waste your time writing??

Company A

(27) you haven’t even provided your phone number!!

Company E

(28) It will enable you, perhaps, to communicate more quickly...

Company F

The letter’s influence on the occurrence of impoliteness can therefore be logically questioned. From the firms’ responses, we can hypothesize that the customer is blamed for the slowness of the communication channel chosen, hence making the company incapable of controlling the response time. While post mail rightly enables the company to take time and weigh out its words, in rare cases the opposite may occur. The company then perceives the response time as a lack of control on the outcome of the complaint, which causes additional stress thus manifested by impoliteness.

6. Conclusions

The aim of our study was to test the influence of the communication channel on impoliteness. According to the current theories, we expected that impoliteness would occur mainly in public exchanges, since stakeholders are able to hide behind anonymity and asynchronicity to vent their negative emotions (Suler, 1996; Neurauter-Kessels, 2011). The occurrence of impolite forms in company-customer exchanges is not uncommon on the public forum, where the use of singular person pronoun in communication in French language (as explained in paragraph above) shows to what extent employees can equate a complaint to a personal attack. However, the private corpus makes us question the effect of the medium on the occurrence of impoliteness. In fact we find a level of impoliteness in the private corpus beyond belief, often characterized by direct face threatening acts and the use of profanity (bald on record). It seems that letter correspondence, nowadays rather obsolete, crystallized tensions. Exchanges by letter correspondence have become rare and mail received by post has an institutional and sometimes repressive nature (as it is commonly used for banking, taxes, bills, administration and police). It generates therefore a more intense emotional value because of its targeted use. We also put into
perspective the role played by the letter’s asynchronicity and the delayed response time, longer than by electronic means, which acts like a catalyst for tension. Having become a tangible manifestation of dissatisfaction, the complaint letter is thus transformed into a hated object that reminds the company of the harsh reality of business. In the smallest companies, in which one person is responsible for everything, it is associated to a personal attack, which results in the use of first person singular. The problem cannot be attributed to someone other than the person who manages the business. Some therefore equate threatening the business’ face to a personal threat. Hence, the emergence of the deviant communication behaviors we observed in responses to customers, which in the private corpus can sometimes lead to the customer’s complaint letter being riddled with insults and returned, as if to erase the memory of that painful encounter. In addition to impoliteness in content (text) is an impoliteness in form (the return of the contentious object with certain areas of the written message being crossed over).

The observations made on these grounds thus enable us to enrich the results in the study of impoliteness. We confirm the contextual interpretation of the concept of impoliteness within the public corpus. Impoliteness in the public corpus is indeed “embedded” between apologies or justifications. But the study of the private corpus allows us to present interesting and unexpected nuances, which show that even in the most agreed contexts, one element can completely “derail” the interaction, leading to rudeness and bald on record impoliteness (Culpeper et al. 2003). Resending the complaint letter as well as the role of asynchronicity seems to us to be interesting elements as well, which bring a new dimension to the discursive analysis and prosodic impoliteness.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study’s main limitation is of course the limited size of the corpus. Despite all of our efforts to amass an as large as possible initial sample, we had to acknowledge, fortunately, that the deviant communication behaviors of company representatives are not a common occurrence. We note, however, that the number of responses taken from the private corpus was impacted by the companies’ very weak response rate to claims sent by post mail. That may, in itself, be considered a further evidence of impoliteness, which Culpeper et al. (2003) call “withheld politeness”.

The other limitation involves the corpus language (French), which gives this study a cultural dimension. We know that handling complaints involves a certain cultural color (e.g. the comparative study of van Mulken and van der Meer, 2005) and that customer satisfaction in general is dependent on the culture (Goodwin and Verhage 1989; Laroche et al. 2004). We must therefore question the generalisation of results on a larger business population and monitor to confirm these results in other contexts.
8. References


### Table 1: Sectorial and geographical repartition of the sample

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Sample size for the Walloon region: 18
Sample size for the Brussels region: 15
Sample size for the Flemish region: 22

Sample size for the entire country: 45
Sample size for the Brussels region: 15
Sample size for the Flemish region: 22
Sample size for the Walloon region: 18