

FORMULAIC EXPRESSION IN LINGUISTIC POLITENESS¹

CARL VOGEL

Abstract: Formulaic expressions constitute a heterogeneous category, in that some exhibit robust re-combinatory potential through modifiable and re-useable internal compositionality. Subcategories of linguistic politeness and impoliteness items, which are generally formulaic, are analyzed with respect to subcategories that exhibit more rigidity as formulaic expressions than is entailed by merely being formulaic. A classification scheme is used within which it is argued that a closed-class category may be identified, and within which non-compositional expression categories may also be noted. These, it is suggested, are strong candidate subcategories within the heterogeneous category of formulaic expressions, for exhibiting holism.

Key words: (im)politeness, (non-)compositionality, formulaicity, holism

1. Introduction

Part of recent debate regarding formulaic language is the extent to which it may be demonstrated that formulaic expressions are holistic in the sense of being syntactically or semantically unitary, rather than compositional in construction (cf. Wray 2002; Wray 2008; Siyanova-Chanturia 2015). Linguistic expressions of politeness and impoliteness have been analyzed using the category label, “formulae” (Terkourafi 2002; Culpeper 2010). This work has tended to approach the category evidently with an intent to identify exactly the internal structure and semantic compositions that systematically yield varieties of politeness and impoliteness expressions (e.g. “SPEECH ACT VERB-IMPERATIVE-2nd PLURAL”, (Terkourafi 2002:189) or “Insults -- 1. Personalized negative vocatives...” (Culpeper, 2010:3242)) where a range of expressions may be substituted into the “formula” in order to achieve an expression normally effective for the relevant category. This categorization of the internal structure of these expressions, with emphasis on generative schema, supports the arguments of Siyanova-Chanturia (2015) that the category of formulaic expressions as a whole does not have holism as an essential trait. However, it remains interesting to ask the question of whether a non-empty holistic subset of the category of formulaic expressions exists and whether there is a differential relevance to exhibiting holism vs. compositionality. Some formulaic expressions, idioms, do exhibit non-compositionality (even though they may be discontinuous, and allow internal modification, e.g. “let the cat out of every bag”). The question is asked here not across the entire category of formulaic expressions, but within the sub-category of those frequently used within linguistic (im)politeness.

Within the analysis reported here, empirical psycholinguistic and neuroscience accounts are not deeply explored. Siyanova-Chanturia (2015) usefully reviews a body of literature from this domain indicating that for a number of psycholinguistic tasks, the processing facts of formulaic expressions do not differ significantly from compositional expressions. However, one additional observation to make on this approach to the question relates work of Shillcock and Bard (1993:163) which reports empirical evidence that discriminates closed-class and open-class words in cognitive processing, closed-class words providing a principled “exception to the general encapsulation of lexical access from syntactic information” (cf. Fodor 1983). A relevant question here is whether linguistic (im)politeness formulae pattern with closed or open class lexical items. It

¹ Trinity Centre for Computing and Language Studies, School of Computer Science and Statistics, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, Ireland (vogel@tcd.ie). Support from Science Foundation Ireland through the CNGL Programme (Grant 12/CE/I2267 and 13/RC/2106) in the ADAPT Centre (www.adaptcentre.ie) is gratefully acknowledged.

is not obvious that politeness formulae are homogeneous with respect to the closed-class or open-class distinction – while they may at first glance appear to be open-class, since, by construction, they are conventionalized patterns of word collocations, and to some extent (im)politeness may be intensified by diverging from established formulae, as discussed below, some subsets resist augmentation.

The discussion in this paper gives focus to linguistic (im)politeness. This excludes gesture and non-linguistic behavior of other sorts. Sometimes (as in the title, and in the next paragraph), “politeness” is used as a term encompassing impoliteness and politeness; I hope that the context makes clear when “politeness” is used in this more general way. It must be conceded that this is not a principled exclusion, since, even apart from sign-language, gesture is known to have conventional structure (de Jorio 1832; Kendon 2004). Inasmuch as gestures and other non-linguistic behaviors are conventionalized, considerations raised below may also apply within gestural communication and non-linguistic behaviors.

To recapitulate, this paper considers two questions. Are there unitary non-compositional expressions among expressions of politeness? Is there a functional property that depends on the compositionality of expressions of politeness? Politeness expressions may be characterized as compositional or non-compositional, discontinuous or continuous. This claim will be elaborated presently.

2. Preliminaries

It is helpful to frame discussion in relation to a classification scheme appropriate for linguistic expression types in dialogue, as in Table 1.

Edge	Address	Content
Greet	Honor	Impart
Part	Deride	Inquire

Table 1: Oppositions of linguistic expression types

The idea of this classification scheme is to note that while dialogue may take the form of information exchange or bonding rituals (the latter including weather talk, which nearly never involves information exchange), other components provide occasions to use (im)politeness expressions. That is, greetings and partings, events at the edges of dialogues, typically involve formulaic expressions that express politeness or impoliteness (where there is a neutral connection between individuals who share a space without acknowledging it, by hypothesis, there is no accompanying expression). Similarly, the decision of whether or not to use the name of an interlocutor is a pragmatically important one, but also comes with the possibility of epithets that express honorifics or derision. Hurford (2001) provides an interesting argument that names are late arrivals to proto-language, and they are patently most useful linguistic devices in managing interpersonal relations (Rymes 1999), just as politeness and impoliteness as general behaviours (even in their non-linguistic manifestation are). The possibility of naming as an ornate addition to linguistic expressive possibilities coheres with a theme discussed later, in relation to the flourishes inherent in (im)politeness expressions. On this classification scheme, two thirds of the categories of dialogue utterance types demand direct attention to politeness norms. This does not exclude the content from incorporating (im)politeness.

One might inspect the scheme and find it overly general in including under “content”, *inter alia*, declarative propositions, feedback particles, praise, threats and offers. However, this critique

serves to emphasize that the content of dialogue also provides occasion for politeness expressions. Within this scheme, inquiry includes informational questions as well as requests. A response to a request may be an assurance of compliance or refusal (either imparts information). A response to an offer may be to accept or to decline (again, either imparts information). Imperatives perhaps have properties of both impartings and inquiries: imperatives impart that the speaker wishes something done and indicate that the speaker feels empowered to seek the doing from the addressee; imperatives share an *irrealis* quality with questions in indicating that some state of affairs (i.e. epistemic certainty) does not hold, and with requests, in indicating who might bring about the desired state of affairs. While there might be other critiques of the classification scheme in Table 1, two are prominent; the main is likely to be that the content stream is heterogeneous in including both propositional content communicated and meta-communication statements (such as feedback).

In response, as intuitive as it is to separate utterances intended to convey propositional content (or questions) from those that convey meta-communication content (or, in turn, questions about the status of communication), such as social content, it is surprisingly difficult to find a satisfactory framework for isolating these dimensions of content (cf. Bonin, et al. 2014). It is true that politeness expressions are involved in content expressions differently between direct communication of content and communication about content (introspective and anecdotal evidence suggests that meta-communicative requests are more brief or more quickly uttered than more directly situated requests – “could you please repeat that?” vs. “could you please refund this?”). However, the main point to make here is that these elaborations do not dramatically change the categories of politeness expressions that occur under the heading “Content”.

The second feature of the classification scheme in Table 1 that is likely to create pause for criticism is that it does not individuate dialogues with turns. Although “Impart” is paired with “Inquire”, it is not presupposed that questions follow declaratives, nor vice versa. A request is a question, which is typically met with a response (but this might be a question or a declarative). An offer imparts information, and is typically met with a response (but this might again be a question (e.g. “how can I thank you?”) or a declarative). Each part of a turn/exchange can be categorized within the classification scheme, and for most purposes here, turn pairs are not essential. This contrasts with the mode of presentation of options within turn pairs in the classification system developed by Brown and Levinson (1978). The different focus here is not intended to dismiss that framework (nor subsequent distinctive approaches to politeness theory), but to highlight aspects of meaning conveyed by expressions of politeness and impoliteness as a function of their form.

This may seem to be at odds with some contemporary approaches to (im)politeness which focus on the pragmatic experience of politeness in dialogue and discourse situations -- the experience for the speaker, addressee and participating and non-participating audiences who witness statements that may be perceived as polite or impolite in some context (inclusive of community). However, I argue that it is not a contradictory approach. It is correct that some profoundly taboo expression might be a term of endearment within some community and equally that some seemingly polite phrase may be profoundly offensive if uttered within a deeply intimate friendship. However, it is also the case that lexical items in general have (often a range of) conventional meanings without it being a surprise that those items are use in unconventional ways to achieve effects like irony or metaphor. That the meaning of “please” is not rigid is not evidence that the expression lacks conventional meaning.

An additional important caveat is that the observations of this paper are grounded in examples from English. It has been observed that some of the theoretical constructs used in analyzing politeness are not universally applicable (Matsumoto 1988). These assumptions and cautions understood, it is appropriate to address the questions of this article more directly.

3. (Non-)Compositionality in (im)politeness formulae

Table 2 provides some example expressions from each cell of the classification scheme articulated in Table 1. In each case, there is one example that has a default interpretation as polite and one as impolite. In some cases, the expression is ambiguous between cells within the column of Table 1. For example, “pretty please” may be used to impart a response to a question or as a modifier to a request. Expressions that are merely politic (Watts 2003:17-24) are not highlighted in the table. Politic behavior, in Watts terms, is that which is appropriate and unmarked in a communication situation (using a broadly defined notion of communication situations, taking into account contextual norms). In English, second person address achieved without naming, using pronouns alone, may be thought of as politic rather than polite or impolite. That other languages discriminate polite forms of pronouns entails that these should be incorporated into comparable analyses of those languages. A larger set of examples is provided in the Appendix (Table 3); however, the items in Table 2 are sufficient to ground the main discussion.

One observation is that expressions of (im)politeness are typically vocative or explicitly include second person reference, often including first person reference as well. That is, these expressions tend to be relational with respect to interlocutors in dialogue (they may also involve third person reference). The composition of information about relations that hold, pairwise, between interlocutors (or between speaker and groups of addressees), including projected and perceived respect inform the overall interpretation of such expressions as conveying politeness, neutrality or impoliteness (particularly in frameworks like that of Vogel (2014a, 2014b, 2015)).

Another observation is that few of the words within expressions have irreversible affective qualities. “Good” and “favorite” may be negated, but some derogatory expressions are exceedingly difficult to mitigate. For the majority of expressions, the overall interpretation depends on the larger phrasal context (“good bye” vs. “good riddance”) as well as the still larger context of use. However, it is not essential that expressions of (im)politeness contain within them constituents with affective content (e.g. “so long”, “gimme”, “would you ever”). The expressions that do compose from units that convey affect are more likely to allow productive alternative re-composition than those that do not (e.g. “Our most beloved <derogatory expression>” vs. “very long”).

Some of the expressions appear to have internal coherence of structure, both syntactically and semantically, (e.g. “pardon me”) while others do not (e.g. “good bye” or “if you please”). Alternative re-composition of expressions is more immediately afforded by those expressions that have internal semantically coherent grammatical composition than those that do not (“Do you mind” vs “Do the group mind” and “Do you think you will mind”, in contrast with “If you please” vs **“If the group please”* and **“If you think you will please”*; the asterisk is used to mark an expression likely to be deemed ungrammatical). While all of the expressions are conventionalized, the category of expressions that are lacking in recombination potential are strong candidates for viewing as holistic, in the sense discussed above. On-the-spot regeneration is thwarted by internal ungrammaticality. Because they are not compositionally determined, they are candidates as expressions accessed in their entirety rather than on-the-spot re-generation.

	Edge		Address			Content		
	Polite	Impolite		Polite	Impolite		Polite	Impolite
Greet	Pardon me	You're in my way	Honor	Ms.	<Surname>	Impart	Pretty please	Listen fool
Part	Good bye	Good riddance	Deride	My favorite <derogatory expression>	<derogatory expression>	Inquire	Do you mind if	Would you ever

Table 2: Example (im)politeness expressions in each category of dialogue contribution

With these distinctions in mind, Table 4 presents items in each of the dialogue expression categories with example expressions that, in a null context, are likely to have either polite or impolite interpretation, as indicated. For each combination of expression type and politeness category, representative compositional and non-compositional examples are provided. It is an analytic expectation that the non-compositional items should be relatively frequent in occurrence (just as irregular verbs tend to be frequently used, it is frequency of use that may be expected to preserve ungrammatical or semantically incoherent internal structure in a formulaic expression (Lieberman, et al. 2007)); however, this does not entail that they are frequent (or attested) in most dialects of English: “All you alright?” is a frequent expression of greeting in Hiberno-English service contexts; “Feck off” is often heard during Dublin partings at the edge of conflict oriented conversations; “c'me're” is a frequent vocative expression in Hiberno-English. (While, across categories, the items marked as non-compositional do not support decomposition and recombination with like constituent items to achieve the same effect, they are amenable to what has been described as the Fornication Insertion Rule (Shad 1971:34). However, this is meaning preserving (or intensifying) only in the case of application to the impolite expressions.) It should be noted that the item recorded for compositional impolite derision, “herself” or “himself”, is with respect to the Hiberno-English use in which the reflexive is licit in even subject position without a discourse antecedent. As a mono-lexeme item (albeit morphologically complex) it is trivially compositional.

		Compositional		Non-compositional	
		Polite	Impolite	Polite	Impolite
Edge	Greet	Pardon me	You're in my way	Are you alright?	Hey you
	Part	Hope to see you soon	Good riddance	Good bye	Feck off
Address	Honor	My friend <name>	<adjective> <name>	Ms. <name>	<surname>
	Deride	My favorite <derogatory expression>	Himself	C'me're	<derogatory expression>
Content	Impart	If you would enjoy	Listen fool	If you please	No skin off my apple
	Inquire	Do you mind if	Would you ever	If you could	Say what?

Table 4: Examples, by sub-category, inclusive of (non-)compositionality

4. Closed sub-categories

The motivating details of the background theory of (im)politeness expressions that frames this discussion (Vogel 2014a, 2014b, 2015) include the observation that expressions of these sorts involve extra-linguistic effort to produce, effort that is justified by the social urgency of avoiding triggering a disgust response among those one respects, coupled with advantage of sharing with those one respects a disgust response to extreme adversaries. The formal details of that framework are not essential to the current discussion, but these motivating facts are relevant because they highlight the production expense of politeness expressions. For example, while nominal reference in discourse and dialogue proceeds towards increasing economy (reference might start with a noun

phrase marked with an explicit determiner and modified within by adjectives, prepositional phrases and relative clauses, and through repeated reference in some dialogue or discourse context, the linguistic material used to pick out the same referent transitions to a “less expensive” pronoun, and ultimately, mentionless inferred reference), in contrast, expressions of politeness tend not diminish in their ornateness through contexts in which they are relevant to use (for an example of a context in which politeness expressions are not relevant to use, one may not expect their use in surgical operating theatres). In considering the items for thanking listed in Table 3 in the appendix, one may note that while there are a number of available forms, and while one might not be surprised if a speaker deploys a few of them during the course of conversation around a collaborative task, exercising variety in selection is its own form of ornateness, and the articulation effort of “Ta” is not significantly different to that required by “Thanks”. Ongoing effort in producing (im)politeness expressions extends the observable investment in perception management as appropriate to the social urgency named above. This also suggests that (im)politeness will be intensified by diverging from formulae, and this is true to an extent. However, there is a trade-off between the value of such innovation and the value of being able to demonstrate one’s credentials as a clear member of some community by virtue of knowing what expression is most appropriate in terms of the group’s conventions surrounding the occasion for use. Extensive innovation in politeness formulae risks misconstrual. Innovation may take the form of novelty (with patent risk of misunderstanding, but more on novelty is noted below) or ornateness. Ornateness to the point of excess in the case of politeness, can be cloying and seem obsequious, triggering a disgust response, and in the case of impoliteness, can be interpreted as revealing underlying respect and affection for the target, rather than the opposite (“... doth protest too much...”), again contrary to the adaptive purpose of (im)politeness expressions (Vogel, 2015).

These considerations make the question of whether (im)politeness formulae contain closed or open-class sub-categories interesting. Referring to the larger (yet still very incomplete) list of items in Table 3 (in the Appendix), it may be noted that the politeness expressions in the category “Greet” and “Part” are small sets with rare within-dialect additions, while new impoliteness expressions in the same categories may be relatively easily generated and understood as such. Within the content category, forms for explicit performative thanking are also limited in scope for addition. A high frequency of use may be expected for these forms, although not evenly distributed across the forms, just as for other closed-class categories, and this expectation appears to be met. The frequency of these forms is of the same order of magnitude as that of established closed-category items: using Google Internet search (July 2017), “thank you” has 1.27 billion hits (while “thanks” has 2.64 billion and “thanking you” has 1.21 million hits); in comparison, “we” has 11.72, “they” has 7.61, “under” has 4.42 and “to” has 25.27 billion hits. The claim that explicit performative thanking forms a closed class does not entail that formulaic forms of thanking may not be achieved using compositional, open-class construction types. One may find even discontinuous expressions among the compositional forms of thanking (e.g. “I *offer* for your <beneficence expression> *my* <adverbial> *gratitude*”): in these cases the phrase as a whole is understood compositionally, supporting considerable variation within the formula, and therefore lack holism. However, paraphrasing Austin (1955:79), one may reasonably wonder whether the addressee of “I offer my gratitude” has been thanked in more ways than left open by an utterance of “Thank you”. That the category of explicit performative thanking is evidently non-empty and closed directly impinges on the possibility that particular species of formulaic language are holistic. These observations support a claim that of the expressions of (im)politeness, politeness expressions for dialogue edges and thanking, seemingly acting as closed-class categories, may be understood as holistic items.

A claim here is that non-compositionality, on one hand, and populating a closed-class functionally defined category, on the other hand, individuate species of politeness formulae which have properties that may make them behave differently to formulaic language in general (or other

expressions of (im)politeness), and such that they might satisfy some of the conditions on holism that Siyanova-Chanturia (2015) has found to be lacking compelling empirical evidence in general.

5. Concluding remarks

While agreeing that the general category of formulaic expressions is insufficiently homogeneous as a linguistic category to support all of the features associated with strongly holistic forms, this paper has attempted to identify within expressions of politeness and impoliteness classes of expressions that demonstrate strong formulaicity: these are argued to be the sub-categories that are either syntactically non-compositional or otherwise very slow to accept new members (acting as closed-class categories). It remains to explore whether these items withstand empirical tests of holism.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Dr. hab Bożena Duda and to Dr hab. Małgorzata Fabiszak for encouraging the development of the argument made here and for constructive feedback on the manuscript. Flaws are mine alone.

References

- Austin, John L. 1955/1976. *How to Do Things with Words*. Second Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bonin, Francesca, Emer Gilmartin, Carl Vogel and Nick Campbell. 2014. Topics for the Future: Genre Differentiation, Annotation, and Linguistic Content Integration in Interaction Analysis *Proceedings of the 2014 Workshop on Roadmapping the Future of Multimodal Interaction Research including Business Opportunities and Challenges* ACM. doi.org:10.1145/2666253.2666256. 5-8.
- Bousfield, Derek. 2008. *Impoliteness in Interaction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Bousfield, Derek and Miriam A. Locher, Eds. 2008. *Impoliteness in Language: Studies on its Interplay with Power in Theory and Practice*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson. 1978/1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Culpeper, Jonathan. 2010. Conventionalized Politeness Formulae. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42:3232-3245.
- Culpeper, Jonathan. 2011. *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fodor, Jerry. 1983. *The Modularity of Mind*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hurford, James R. 2001. Protothought had no logical names. In J. Trabant & S. Ward (Eds) *New Essays on the Origin of Language* 119-133.
- de Jorio, Andrea (1832/2000) *Gesture in Naples and Gesture in Classical Antiquity*. Adam Kendon (Trans.). Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.
- Kendon, Adam. 2004. *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lieberman, Erez, Jean-Baptiste Michel, Joe Jackson, Tina Tang and Martin A. Nowak. 2007. Quantifying the Evolutionary Dynamics of Language. *Nature* 449:713-716.
- Matsumoto, Yoshiko. 1988. Reexamination of the universality of face: Politeness phenomena in Japanese. *Journal of Pragmatics* 12(4):403-426.
- Rymes, Betsy (1999) Names. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9(1-2):163-166.
- Shad, U. Pani. 1971/1992. Some Unnatural Habits. In Arnold Zwicky, Peter H. Salus, Robert I.

- Binnick and Anthony L. Vanek (Eds.) *Studies out in Left Field: Defamatory Essays Presented to James D. McCawley*. John Benjamins: Philadelphia. 33-36.
- Shillcock, Richard. C., & Bard, Ellen G. 1993. Modularity and the processing of closed-class words. In *Cognitive models of speech processing: The second Sperlonga meeting* 163-185.
- Siyanova-Chanturia, Anna. 2015. On the 'holistic' nature of formulaic language. *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory* 11(2): 285–301.
- Terkourafi, Marina. 2002. Politeness and formulaicity: evidence from Cypriot Greek. *Journal of Greek Linguistics* 3:179-201.
- Vogel, Carl. 2014a. Taboo semantics. In *5th IEEE Conference on Cognitive Infocommunications (CogInfoCom)*. 225-230.
- Vogel, Carl. 2014b. Denoting Offence, *Cognitive Computation*, 6(4):628-639.
- Vogel, Carl. 2015. Some puzzles of politeness and impoliteness within a formal semantics of offensive language. In Francesca D'Errico, Alessandro Vinciarelli, Isabella Poggi and Laura Vincze (Eds.) *Conflict and Multimodal Communication*. 223-241. Springer International Publishing.
- Watts, Richard J. 2003. *Politeness*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wray, Alison. 2002. *Formulaic language and the lexicon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wray, Alison. 2008. *Formulaic language: Pushing the boundaries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Appendix

Type	Expression
Greet	Please excuse me
Part	Cheery bye
Part	Good bye
Part	Good evening
Honor	Honorable
Honor	Your Eminence
Honor	Ms.
Honor	Your Honor
Deride	<Derogatory expression>
Content	I beg your pardon
Content	Pardon me
Content	Please
Content	Pretty please
Content	Pretty please with cream on top
Impart	By all means

Type	Expression
Impart	I would be... if ...
Impart	I'm sorry
Impart	If you could
Impart	If you please
Impart	It would please me if I could
Impart	It's nothing
Impart	No problem
Impart	No, thank you
Impart	Not at all
Impart	Ta
Impart	Thank you
Impart	Thank you very much
Impart	Thank you, no
Impart	Thanks
Impart	Thanky
Impart	Tx
Impart	Yes, of course
Impart	You're welcome
Inquire	Can I
Inquire	Could I
Inquire	Could you please
Inquire	Do you mind if
Inquire	May I
Inquire	May I help you?
Inquire	Would it be possible
Inquire	Would you mind if
Inquire	Would you please

Table 3: Examples of politeness formulae listed by expression type.

Table 3 provides an incomplete list of relevant categories of politeness formulae. The expressions of gratitude demonstrate that reduced forms of expression are available.