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RATING IMPOLITENESS IN EFL
Results from an Experiment with TV Series

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Abstract – This contribution is part of a wider project aimed at ascertaining the merits of explicit teaching of pragmatic issues in EFL classes. More specifically, after reflecting on the importance of teaching pragmatics, and (im)politeness in particular, especially to advanced learners of English, the result of an experiment carried out with different groups of EFL students are discussed, with a view to understanding to what extent they understand (im)politeness and how they perceive its different nuances in interaction, without having received any formal instruction on the topic. By using excerpts from the TV series *Sherlock* (2010-2017), whose main character is a trigger for face-threatening acts, respondents with different backgrounds, levels of language competence, and different inputs (audio-visual or just audio, both integrated by the transcription of the dialogues) were asked to recognise and rate impoliteness. The students involved, who had not been taught (im)politeness explicitly, were proposed different situations, which they were asked to rate in terms of impoliteness, using Lickert scales. They were also asked to describe the characters involved in every interaction through adjectives.

Keywords: impoliteness, second-language pragmatics, EFL, audiovisual materials.

1 Introduction

The aim of the present contribution is to shed light on the comprehension of (im)politeness by EFL students. As is well-known, the perception and comprehension of what counts as a normal, natural and smooth interaction is subject to cross-cultural variation. Thus, as recognised by Thomas in her seminal work (1983), even when learners have an advanced knowledge of the (L2) language, they are not exempt from making pragmatic errors.

Defined by Kasper and Schmidt (1996, p. 150) as "the study of the development and use of strategies for linguistic action by non-native speakers", Second Language Pragmatics (henceforth, SLP) is concerned with the crucial passage from the theoretical knowledge of how a language works to the test of use, i.e., putting it into practice. Bardovi-Harlig clarifies this aspect by saying that SLP is concerned with the ways in which "learners come to know how-to-say-what-to-whom-when", which emphasises the various contextual aspects of an interaction (2013, p. 68).

As was shown by Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983), pragmatics is often discussed in terms of socio-pragmatics (relating to the contextual dimensions of pragmatics) and pragma-linguistics (the use of linguistic devices to achieve certain aims). In most cases, even when learners develop the linguistic means to do something with words, the right circumstances of use escape them. Culpeper, Mackey and Taguchi (2018, p. 2) quote an illuminating example of a Mandarin-speaking student interacting with her advisor in the UK. She presented her supervisor with a Chinese painting as a form of greeting and she was at a loss when the British lecturer said: "Wow! Really, you shouldn't have". For the Chinese student this utterance counted as a reproach, because she did not understand the true nature of this speech act, i.e., a conventionalised way of accepting a gift and thanking the giver for it. In fact, the student replied with "Sorry", which either meant that she did not understand the lecturer's utterance, or, alternatively, that she did not know how to downgrade the lecturer's utterance by underlining that the gift was only a small thing. The exchange ended with another turn by the lecturer, who felt the need to clarify what he meant by adding "No, I mean, it's lovely, thanks".

Examples like this show that both socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic features may represent obstacles for students who, despite their good knowledge of the language, are not capable of interacting with natives smoothly. As has emerged from the above example, crucial aspects that define SLP are: the speaker's intended meaning, conventionalised expressions, the management of politeness, and the like.

Functional approaches, which became popular in foreign language teaching in the 1970s, provide students with the necessary resources to perform a vast array of language functions, while sociolinguistics gives them the instruments to understand which specific means are used in specific contexts.

Starting from these premises, in what follows, the results of an experiment carried out with EFL students will be described, with a view to understanding to what extent they recognise and understand (im)politeness in interaction and how they perceive its different nuances, without having received any formal instruction on the topic. By using video clips from the TV series *Sherlock* (2010-2017), whose main character is a trigger for face-threatening acts, the principal aim is to ascertain how EFL students, with different backgrounds and levels of competence in the language, and exposed to different types of input, understand and recognise impoliteness. The test and its results represent an initial step in a wider project, whose more ambitious aim is to use different forms of input to teach pragmatics explicitly at an advanced level.

2 SLP studies: a historical background

Among the first to discuss the importance of pragmatics between L1 and L2 was Thomas (1983), who highlighted the need to develop, alongside lexico-grammatical competence, pragmatic (and cross-cultural pragmatic) competence, i.e., "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context" (1983, p. 92). The 1980s saw a flourishing of studies on comparative/contrastive linguistics, cross-linguistic and L2 pragmatic surveys. A seminal work that lay the ground for future developments was the interlanguage project on speech acts developed by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), a comparison of speech acts (requests and apologies) across seven languages using Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) in L1 and L2 environments, which evidenced pragmatic failures stemming from L1-L2 differences and L1 transfer. Studies that followed in this tradition considered an array of parameters such as level of proficiency, length of study of the language, length of exposure to the language by residing in the country, but the acquisition of pragmatic competence revealed very difficult to define and calculate across different L2 groups.

The most significant finding in the subsequent decade was that pragmatic competence is teachable, that is, explicit pragmatic instruction is profitable for L2 students, alongside other factors. However, a caveat of these research projects was that the majority concerned English and concentrated on college students and did not take into account other age groups (Culpeper *et al.* 2018, pp. 9-10).

In the following decades little space was granted to developmental studies, which are the best method to ascertain pace and patterns of L2 acquisition, including in pragmatics. By contrast, most studies concentrated on pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic behaviour in non-native speakers and their differences from native speakers, rather than on second language acquisition (Bardovi-Harlig 1999, 2010; Kasper, Rose 1999, 2002; Kasper, Schmidt 1996). Most recently, however, L2 pragmatic studies have been fully situated within SLA theory. Some of the questions that longitudinal studies have to answer concern the comprehension of pragmatic phenomena and how decoding develops from semantic to pragmatic inferencing, and how pragmatic production is gradually built up, shifting from one-to-one form-function correspondence and over-generalisation to a wider and more sophisticated array of form-function mapping. The main theoretical underpinnings include for example the noticing hypothesis, skill acquisition theories, language socialisation theory, dynamic system theory and the interaction approach, as evidenced by Culpeper *et al.* (2018, p. 15). Developments in the conceptualisation of pragmatics have also influenced research into SLP, which nowadays goes beyond the competence of the single speaker to adopt a

conception in which pragmatic competence is considered situated in context (Young 2008) and presupposes interaction with co-speakers. Given the changes in world borders and the increased circulation of people on the one hand, and the rise of internationalisation and multilingualism on the other, recent studies have acknowledged the changing role of the once-coveted native speaker model. Communicative needs have thus re-defined the "appropriateness model" which was in vogue until the end of the last century, for example conceptualising appropriateness "according to local norms, rather than idealized native speaker norms" (Culpeper *et al.* 2018, p. 18). Still, in teaching English (or any other language) to foreign learners, it is essential to provide them with natural models of interaction, which they can observe and analyse, retaining structures and lexis to be re-used when needed.

3. Impoliteness

In what follows (see 4), the aim is to test if and how Italian students of English recognise and perceive impoliteness, without having been explicitly taught about it. My interest in this depends on the cross-cultural variation that characterises the two lingua-culture sets: as emerges from studies on cultural orientation, English texts, in line with the features of *Low Context Cultures* (Hall 1990; Katan 1999; Manca 2012, 2016), tend towards simplicity and reader-friendliness, whereas Italian are still richly informative and often pay less attention to the addressee's needs. In the sphere of interpersonal relationships this often translates into special attention being given to the interlocutor's negative face in English-speaking countries (and in the UK in particular), whereas Italian and Mediterranean cultures attach more importance to positive face, in the form of appreciation of the interlocutor, but may often result intrusive (Bruti 2006).

Interesting differences have been shown in the relevant literature regarding the performance of speech acts (see George 2018, pp. 410-411 for a retrospective description of the PIXI group's findings, and, *inter alia*, Aston 1988, 1995; Bruti 2009a, 2009b, 2013; Gavioli, Mansfield 1990; George 1990; Gesuato 2016, 2017; Vincent-Marrelli 1988; Zorzi *et al.* 1990; Zorzi 1990), but little work has been done, to the best of my knowledge, on contrastive (im)politeness (Bruti 2021).

Although impoliteness as a construct has been mentioned in the literature since the earliest politeness studies (Brown, Levinson 1987; Lakoff 1973; Leech 1983), it only really began to attract researchers' attention as a phenomenon in its own right towards the end of the 20th century (Culpeper 2005; 2011), with the so-called "third wave" of impoliteness studies (see Bruti 2021). As has been pointed out by Locher, impoliteness no longer corresponds to the infringement of expected social norms, but "the scope of analysis has

been widened from face-maintaining and face-enhancing data to instances of conflictual and face-aggravating behaviour" (2015, p. 5).

On the whole, studies on (im)politeness have developed from scrutinising interaction "as a system of rational choices made by an ideal speaker to evaluating how choices about what counts as (im)politeness are made in specific contexts" (Bruti 2021, p. A83). In other words, there is no expression that is either polite or impolite in itself, out of context. As Culpeper and Terkourafi explain (2017, p. 29), "[e]ven a bare imperative directive *Shut up* can be polite, if said slowly and evenly with a kind tone of voice to one's chatty sweetheart". Consequently, discursive approaches have become established and have often adopted a specific focus on cross-cultural variation (Watts 2003; Locher, Watts 2005; Locher 2006).

Impoliteness has lately become more and more pervasive in a vast array of contexts, genres and interactions. Although politeness, "targeted at reaching a desirable social balance and solidarity" (Bruti 2021, p. A80), continues to be the preferred strategy in interaction in a vast array of contexts, the number and types of occasions in which interactants are hostile and aggressive on purpose has grown enormously in recent decades (see Bazzanella 2020, p. 14, who highlights how studies on impoliteness, insults, slurs, etc. have grown to account for the growth of both physical and verbal violence in our society). There are discourses in which conflict talk is more central than collaborative or supportive talk (e.g., army recruit training, exploitative TV programmes, talk between car drivers and wardens, see Culpeper 2005, but also computer-mediated communication in the form of chat-rooms, Youtube crews, Twitter, see Bruti 2021 for a more detailed account). Studies on telecinematic register and on some TV programmes have shown how impoliteness is liberally used in scripts as an element that can provoke laughter in the audience. This strategic use of impoliteness has been labelled in different ways: Lorenzo-Dus calls it "incivility-as-spectacle" (2009, p. 100), while Dynel talks of "vicarious pleasure" (2016, 2017, p. 462). Impoliteness events entertain the viewer at someone else's expense by exploiting aggressive behaviour and face-threats. The genres where this form of humour is recursive are contests and quizzes, e.g., *The Weakest Link, Britain's Got Talent*, "where competition partially accounts for a certain degree of aggressiveness, but also in political debates and interviews, and, more recently and noticeably, TV fiction, especially TV series" (Bruti 2021, p. A84). Bednarek (2012), in her studies on media language, has highlighted that the language of nerds too is somehow characterised by a marked use of impoliteness. Sheldon, the Aspergerish scientist of *The Big Bang Theory*, and many other remarkable and unconventional characters (e.g., Doctor House, Sherlock) are characterised by their behaviour, which is "'antisocial', 'abnormal', 'rude', or 'not quite human'" (Bednarek 2012, p. 199; see also Dynel 2016, 2017; Pillière 2013), as they find it difficult to understand and apply social conventions, relate to other

human beings, and build rapport. Their interlocutors often become the target of this disagreeable behaviour, "which often borders on the pathological, but at the same time proves to be the source of (bitter) humour on the external axis for the watching audience" (Bruti 2021, p. A84).

In media dialogues impoliteness is thus used with two main functions: the first one, as an adversarial move, between characters (internal axis); the second one, to entertain viewers, as was mentioned above (external axis). Various tactics that increase emotionally-loaded talk (Bednarek 2010, 2011) have been noticed as typical features of telecinematic dialogue, because they push the plot forward in a way that is unexpected, unconventional and therefore attractive for the audience.

4. The experiment: methodology and research aims

This section describes the experiment that was carried out as a preliminary step in a research project aimed at evaluating the benefits and shortcomings of teaching foreign language pragmatics explicitly. This is therefore a pilot study that will be replicated in the future with a higher number of respondents, and by isolating variables such as command of the language and familiarity with the characters and situations to be evaluated, as well as by explicit instruction in cross-cultural pragmatic issues. For the time being, the respondents counted on their knowledge of the language to give their answers, but in the future I would like to be able to differentiate between students who have been taught pragmatics and politeness issues explicitly from those who have not, and between relying on bimodal input (e.g., audio-visual material) or monomodal input (e.g., just audio).

More specifically, my aim was to ascertain how EFL students understand and perceive impoliteness in interaction. In order to situate impoliteness and offer respondents a contextualised representation, I decided to select a set of examples from the TV series *Sherlock*, where impolite interactions are very frequent. On the basis of previous studies on the topic, I identified four examples of the four main types of impoliteness according to Leech 2014 and four distractors, i.e., interactions where impoliteness is not an issue (see below). Leech distinguishes four types of impoliteness: non-politeness, impoliteness, irony or sarcasm, and banter. The first one, non-politeness, corresponds to the absence of politeness (either socio-pragmatic or pragma-linguistic) in situations in which it would have been expected, whereas impoliteness is the polar opposite of politeness. Given that there has been considerable overlap and confusion between impoliteness and rudeness in the English language, Leech specifies that rudeness occurs when there is an additional offensive use of language, that is "adding aggravating affront to impoliteness" (2014, p. 229). Finally, he mentions two further impoliteness

strategies, irony and banter. The former implies a contrast between the overt meaning, which is polite, and the covert one, which is impolite; conversely, with banter the contrast is between the overt meaning, which is impolite, and the implicated meaning, which is its opposite

The methods that have been widely adopted in research in pragmatics, especially to assess students' comprehension and production of pragmalinguistic forms and their socio-pragmatic adequacy, include DCTs, scaled response questions, role plays, and multiple choice tests. One drawback of DCTs is that they lack features of natural conversation such as all the typical traits of turn-taking, prosody, gestures, etc. They are an approximation, in that a written form attempts to reproduce an oral one. Results for DCTs may also differ considerably from naturally-occurring data: an example comes from a research experiment carried out by Golato on compliment responses (2005), in which DCTs highlight the use of *Danke* in 12% of responses, while in naturalistic data this form never appears. On the other hand, scaled response questions are useful because there is no correct answer as such and they do not require learners to choose between appropriateness or non-appropriateness; therefore, the task can rely on their degree of certainty or confidence. They are mostly used for speech act analysis, to associate form and context, or to test cross-cultural variation. They are employed to rate phenomena on a Likert scale, or evaluate different contextual parameters: thus, this instrument seems especially suitable to assess impoliteness.

The test (see Appendix), administered in Italian to 21 students on the Moodle platform, starts off with some general questions, aimed at ascertaining the respondents' age, gender, language competence (self-assessed) and familiarity with the series used to represent impolite behaviour. I decided to ask students to self-assess their language level because higher or lower language proficiency may have important repercussions on their ability to evaluate what counts as polite or impolite behaviour. Clearly, in order to establish thorough correlations between results and language competence, students should be evaluated by means of a language test. For the time being, it can hypothesised that students with a solid language knowledge should be more at ease in interpreting pragmatic meanings and evaluating politeness.

The question regarding the respondents' familiarity with the TV series is crucial, in that people may have heard about Cumberbatch's *Sherlock* and the leading character's social awkwardness, and they may even have watched some episodes, thus forming the impression that Sherlock is a sociopath and that behaviours that would be considered impolite for other characters might be considered normal for him.

The test includes eight questions, for each of which students are asked to evaluate the degree of impoliteness by means of a Likert scale ranging from 0 (least impolite) to 5 (most impolite). The type of impoliteness portrayed in the clips (and therefore how they should be interpreted by viewers) was

established by the author of this paper on the basis of previous investigations on the topic of (im)politeness and of other studies on the TV series *Sherlock* (Bruti, Zanotti forthc.). In the future, since the evaluation relies on the cultural perception of impoliteness, native speakers should be involved, either before administering the test, to check their perception of the proposed examples, or as respondents to the test itself as a control group. Each of the questions relates to an interaction that is briefly described to provide some background information and is complemented with the transcribed dialogues and a video clip. For each situation there is an additional open question in which students are asked to describe the people involved in the interaction by means of an adjective (very often students provided several adjectives). Four of the eight clips/situations are examples of the four different types of impoliteness in the model put forward by Leech (2014), which turns out to be extremely convenient to analyse Sherlock's speech and to differentiate between the most recursive impoliteness strategy he employs. These four strategies are exemplified respectively in clips 1 (non-politeness), 3 (impoliteness), 5 (irony) and 7 (banter). Clips 2, 4, 6 and 8 do not represent prototypical examples of impoliteness and were introduced in the questionnaire as distractors.

4.1. Results and discussion

In what follows, the results of the questionnaire regarding the evaluation of impoliteness are illustrated and discussed; then some of the evaluative adjectives chosen by the respondents to describe the speakers involved in the interactions are considered. The results of the evaluation of impoliteness can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 1 below. Afterwards, comparisons are drawn with results from a comparable experiment on impolite events in *Sherlock* that was carried out a couple of years ago on different groups of students, in a classroom setting and by means of a paper questionnaire.

The above results are compared with those obtained from a comparable experiment, carried out before the pandemic in a classroom setting and as a paper-based test, with students from two different university programmes, namely 24 undergraduates in Tourism Management and Organisation and 20 postgraduates in Specialised Translation. On that occasion, the test was administered to the undergraduates by dividing the class into two groups, one was given the transcribed dialogues for the eight situations and only listened to the audio, while the other half was shown the clips and could find the dialogues on the answer sheet. The postgraduates could rely on dialogues and were shown the clips. All respondents were asked whether they were familiar with the series and had watched some episodes.

	Likert scale of impoliteness						Average impoliteness rate
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	
Clip 1	--	1	5	3	8	4	3.4
Clip 2	6	3	6	4	1	1	1.4
Clip 3	--	--	--	2	6	13	4.5
Clip 4	1	1	2	5	11	1	3.3
Clip 5	--	--	1	2	2	16	4.6
Clip 6	4	1	7	5	3	1	2.2
Clip 7	1	3	2	7	7	1	2.8
Clip 8	--	1	4	7	7	2	2.9

Table 1
Impoliteness rates for each clip/situation and average values.

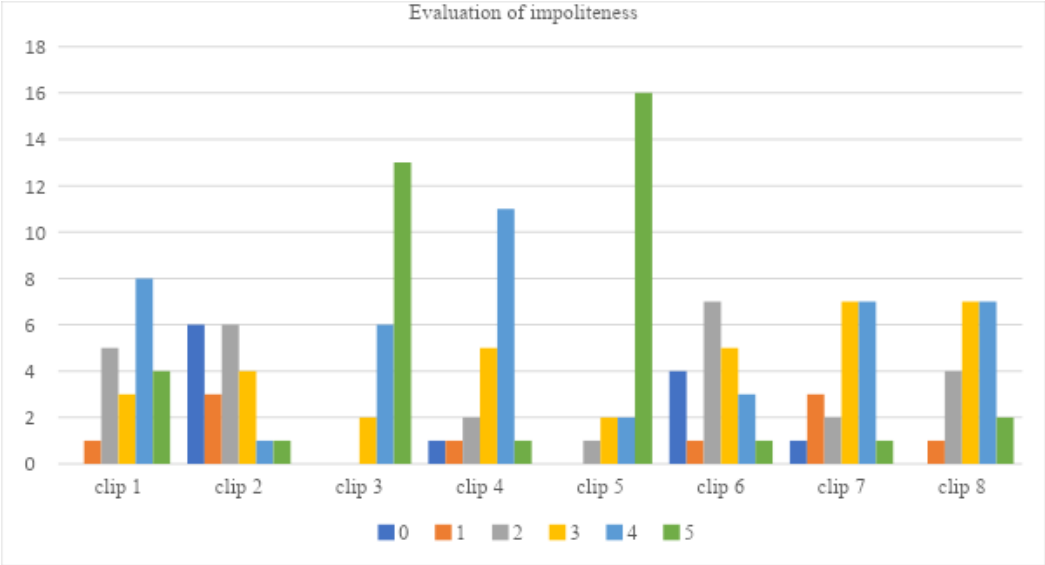

Figure 1
Results of the assessment of impoliteness in the 8 situations (clips 1 to 8) proposed.

The situation that was perceived as the most impolite was the one in clip 5, with an average of 4.6 points out of 5, whereas the one that was perceived as the least impolite was situation 2, with an average of 1.4. In clip 5, Sherlock's caustic attitude is associated with irony, i.e., the impolite content is conveyed indirectly, as he says the opposite of what he means ("Yes, thank you for your input."). In this case his target is Detective Anderson, a member of Lestrade's forensics team at New Scotland Yard. Unlike Lestrade, Anderson openly despises Sherlock, who loathes him back. In the situation under analysis, he is giving Sherlock some details about a murder, but Sherlock considers them so obvious and trite that he ironically praises him, thanking him for his contribution. Here the addressee of this impolite, ironic remark has several clues to appraise the real nature of the utterance, as Sherlock is quite serious, even intimidating in his look, and his tone of voice is sarcastic. What is interesting about this example is that almost all students not only recognised and understood irony, but they evaluated this utterance even more impolite

than impoliteness *tout court* as seen in clip 3. The concomitants of speech, that is Sherlock's tone of voice, his gaze, and his kinesics might have been helpful in understanding his intentions and meaning.

According to my interpretation of the data, students correctly rated clip 2 as the least impolite. In fact, this clip was meant as a distractor. Holmes needs to enter an apartment, so he decides to ring someone who lives in the same block to have the door opened: he cleverly chooses someone whose label on the doorbell is very new, that is someone who might not know her neighbours well. Sherlock rings and briefly explains that he lives in the flat below and has locked himself out. Ms Wintle replies cooperatively, even when Sherlock asks her to let him pass through her balcony. Of the twenty-one respondents, only two rated this situation with 4 and 5, and the one who ranked it as most impolite could not assess her own language competence, so her choice might be due to a lack of language proficiency and scarce perception of meaning nuances. The exchange between Sherlock and Ms Wintle might appear brisk, but there is nothing impolite about it. Whenever Sherlock has a precise purpose in mind (in this case, to be let in), he seems slightly more careful of social conventions. Even from Sherlock's viewpoint, the situation could be considered neutral, if not altogether polite.

Situation 3, which I selected as a prototypical example of impoliteness, involves Sherlock Holmes, Lestrade, a detective at Scotland Yard, who often uses Sherlock's help to solve difficult cases, and John Watson, a military doctor, once a veteran of the war in Afghanistan and now Holmes's roommate, here only a bystander. Lestrade is taken by surprise by Sherlock's order, "Shut up", as he was silent. Being in a position of power, Sherlock declares he is disturbed by the fact that Lestrade is struggling to come to terms with the murder, as if he really heard the noise made by his brain working. This situation ranks second for the level of impoliteness, with an average value of 4.5. All the respondents rated it with a 3, 4 or 5, showing they understood the degree of face-threat that it implies. I expected this example to be recognised better than clip 5, the example of irony, because clip 3 shows a peremptory order, whereas clip 5 displays irony, which is not always easily identified as such and understood.

Banter, which is represented in clip 7, is the third least impolite situation in the respondents' evaluation, with an average score of 2.8. Again, the majority of students rightly rated this example as not particularly impolite. Only one respondent rated this case with 5, but there is a ready explanation: the student had neither heard about *Sherlock* before, nor had she watched any episode, so she was justified in not recognising the bond of friendship between Sherlock and Watson and the former's friendly teasing. Likewise, the student who rated this exchange with 0 also had no previous acquaintance with the

series. This partly explains why he rated banter as less impolite than truly neutral exchanges such as those in clip 2 and clip 6.

Another interesting case is represented by clip 1, in which Sherlock's lack of (expected) politeness is directed at Molly, a specialist registrar in the morgue at *St. Bartholomew's Hospital* in London. Molly, who has a crush on Sherlock, asks him if he would join her for coffee. After a hesitating start, she gains courage because he mentions the fact that she is wearing lipstick, thus suggesting that he has noticed it, but soon afterwards he takes her invitation literally (i.e., as an offer of an actual cup of coffee) and does not react to the implicit invitation to spend some time together. Even though she is evidently hurt, she tries to shrug off the blow. Overall, this situation was rated with an average score of 3.4. In fact, Sherlock's utterance "Black, two sugars please. I'll be upstairs" is an unmitigated direct request (an example of a "bald on record" strategy, in Brown and Levinson's terms (1987), revised and adapted by Culpeper 1996 for impoliteness). As has emerged from a study of Sherlock's behaviour in the original dialogues of the series and their translation for dubbing and subtitling (Bruti and Zanotti forthc.), the viewing of a couple of episodes of *Sherlock* makes clear that non-polite behaviour is for him the unmarked conduct, to which additional offensive language may be appended from time to time, when tension escalates, and disagreement and conflict are openly shown. His interlocutors' perception of his behaviour vary, depending on a series of factors, including their closeness to Sherlock, their emotional involvement, etc. When Sherlock displays indifference, his interlocutors react with different verbal or non-verbal responses, which the audience use to understand Sherlock's behaviour, i.e., either non-polite (which often elicits surprise or puzzlement) or impolite (which usually provokes stronger responses). So, in the case of clip 1, variation in the respondents' ratings may depend on how familiar they are with Sherlock's 'unmarked' level of impoliteness in the series.

Before concentrating on the students' choice of adjectives, the above results are compared with those obtained from a similar experiment, carried out before the pandemic in a classroom setting and as a paper-based test, with students from two different university programmes, namely 24 undergraduates in Tourism Management and Organisation and 20 postgraduates in Specialised Translation. On that occasion, I administered the test to the undergraduates by dividing the class into two groups, one was given the transcribed dialogue for the eight situations and only listened to the audio, while the other half was shown the clips and could find the dialogues on the answer sheet. The postgraduates could rely on dialogues and were shown the clips. All respondents were asked whether they were familiar with the series and had watched some episodes.

The first consideration that can be made is that within the group of 2019 respondents, 9 students from Tourism Management and Organisation and 10

from Specialised Translation did not know the TV series, and therefore could not rely on previous knowledge of the main character and of his unusual social behaviour. Within the 2022 group, 6 students out of 21 declared they were not acquainted with the series. A comparison of the average rating of impoliteness by different respondents can now be made, starting from the data in Table 2.

	2019 experiment – no knowledge of *Sherlock* (undergraduates) – average ratings	2019 experiment – no knowledge of *Sherlock* (postgraduates) – average ratings	2019 experiment – audio only – average ratings	2022 experiment – knowledge of *Sherlock* – average ratings
Clip 1	2.6	3.1	1.6	3.3
Clip 2	1.9	2.3	1.1	2.5
Clip 3	4.3	4.4	3.4	4,5
Clip 4	3.6	4.1	3	3.1
Clip 5	3.9	4.7	2.2	5
Clip 6	1.6	2.3	1	3
Clip 7	2.1	2.2	1.5	3
Clip 8	3	3.3	1.9	3.8

Table 2
Average impoliteness ratings for each situation/clip with no previous knowledge of the series; 2019 group with audio information only.

Overall, it appears that the 2019 undergraduate group rated face-threats in impolite speech acts overall as less serious: in fact, apart from situation 4 ("My secret supply: what have you done with my secret supply? […] Cigarettes! What have you done with them? Where are they?), all the other cases have lower average impoliteness rates in comparison with the 2022 ratings. Out of the 10 students of the 2019 group from the BA in Tourism Management and Organisation with no knowledge of the series, 6 only listened to the audio of the dialogues, so they could not rely on the concomitants of speech, which, in Sherlock's case, are transparent: cold and intimidatory looks, tense and nervous movements, etc. These students rated the case of impoliteness proper (clip 3) as the most impolite, while clip 5 (ironic impoliteness) ranked second. This means that irony was less clear for this group, possibly because some of the respondents did not have access to visual information. The 2022 students did the opposite, as they ranked the ironic clip as the most aggressive example of impoliteness, followed by clip 3. In this case, all the students could rely on the information drawn from kinesics, as they were shown videos.

For the 2019 group of undergraduates, clip 4, depicting an interaction between Sherlock and Mrs Hudson, was the third most impolite situation. A possible explanation is that lack of familiarity with the characters prevented respondents from understanding Sherlock's directness and non-hostile provocations, as well as Mrs Hudson's humorous complaints. Again, 6 respondents could not rely on semiotic codes other than the audio one. Interestingly, the 2019 respondents from the Master in Specialised Translation with no previous knowledge of the series judged the situations proposed as

more impolite in general than the group questioned more recently and recognised the case of impolite irony in clip 5, which they rated as the most impolite interaction of all. Better language competence and specific training in contrastive linguistics and translation can account for the more nuanced perception these results suggest.

The third column in Table 2 provides information about ratings of impoliteness provided by the 2019 respondents who listened to the dialogues without watching the videoclips, whether they were familiar or not with the TV product used for the test. On the whole, EFL students who only had access to the audio channel seemed to have a reduced perception of impoliteness, probably because they were not able to grasp the value of suprasegmental traits such as pitch, tone, and ironic and sarcastic colourings of the voice.

4.1.1. A look at the adjectives

To understand how the 2022 respondents differentiated between situation 3 and 5, the two cases with the highest impoliteness score, I decided to take a look at the adjectives that were selected by participants to describe Holmes, Lestrade (involved in clip 3) and Anderson (in clip 5). More specifically, a couple of them seem to have captured the nuances and implications of the two interactions. One student, who was not familiar with the series and had not watched any episode, rated clip 3 with a 4, describing Sherlock as "bossy" and Lestrade as "quiet", whereas she considered Sherlock as even more impolite in clip 5, rated with a 5, as Sherlock appears "overbearing and […] superior", while Anderson is "nice and helpful". Another respondent, who was familiar the TV series, rated clip 3 with the highest value of impoliteness (5), and clip 5 with a 3. The difference is reflected in the student's choice of adjectives: in clip 3 Sherlock appears "aggressive" and in clip 5 "arrogant". She understood the aggravated force of the former situation and the ironic value of the latter. Another interesting example is provided by a third student who had not watched the series but was able to differentiate between these two situations, rating clip 3 with a 4 and clip 5 with a 5 and describing Sherlock as "conceited" ("*spocchioso*" in his own words) in the first case and "irritated" in the second. The annoyance in the second situation is what triggers the ironic outburst, which the respondent recognised. Most of the remaining answers, although they differentiate slightly between situation 3 and 5, do not account for this difference in the choice of adjectives, which are either the same or synonymous.

The selection of adjectives for clip 1 is revealing too, in relation to the Molly Hooper – Sherlock Holmes interaction. As was shown above, in this case acquaintance with the audio-visual product and the characters seemed to have a bearing on the rating of the interaction as less impolite than situations 3 and 5. Almost all the respondents understood that Molly is in love with

Sherlock, and described her as “shy”, “nervous”, “embarrassed”; “clumsy”, “sweet”, “kind”, “submissive”. Those who rated this situation with a 2 or a 3 judged Sherlock as “indifferent”, “detached”, or “bored”, thus showing that he had no interest in Molly.

This task has its limits and is somewhat controversial, as allowing respondents to choose adjectives freely means collecting a vast array of results, with many near synonyms. However, although a limited number of adjectives would be more convenient, asking respondents to choose from a selection of answers would orient their interpretation and skew the results. Among the respondents who knew the series, there is more agreement on the perception of the main character, as fewer adjectives were chosen, all of them depicting Sherlock as detached and socially awkward. By contrast, those who did not know the series depicted him as aggressive, e.g., “arrogante” (‘arrogant’), “sarcastico” (‘sarcastic’), but also, quite oddly, “curioso” (‘curious’), “imbarazzato” (‘embarrassed’). More investigation is needed.

5. Conclusions

With all its caveats, I think the experiment I carried out provides useful suggestions for further investigation. Its main limitations are that fictional situations were used to evaluate impoliteness; however, as is well known in pragmatics studies, it is very difficult to find contextualised authentic material. At best, dialogue transcriptions from spontaneous conversations might be used, but then the visual component would be missing. A second shortcoming was that in this kind of studies the number of variables should be controlled, in order to assess the impact of each factor: in this case, in both the 2019 and 2022 experiments students were of different ages and origins, with different backgrounds and language competence, and some had prior knowledge of the TV series used for the experiment. In relation to language competence, this factor in particular must be taken with caution, as students self-assessed their language skills. The third, and perhaps most serious flaw, is that the type of impoliteness exemplified in the clips (and how they should be interpreted) was identified by the author. Since the evaluation rests on cultural perceptions of impoliteness, native speakers should be involved before administering the test, either to check their perception of the test items, or as respondents to the test itself (control group), or both.

Overall, in the 2022 experiment, in which all respondents were shown videoclips of the situations under evaluation, identification and comprehension of impoliteness in interaction were very satisfactory, as the students recognised the two most face-threating situations (clip 3 and 5), were able to identify irony (in clip 5) and rated it mostly impolite and aggressive. Banter, represented in clip 7, was considered the third least impolite situation in the respondents’

evaluation, as the majority of students rated this example as not particularly impolite. The students whose evaluations were more extreme (i.e., maximum or minimum impoliteness) had no familiarity with the series and therefore were not aware of the close relationship between Holmes and Watson, which often results in the former teasing the latter.

When comparing the above results with data obtained from the 2019 experiment, it can be observed that average impoliteness rates were lower in all three groups from 2019 in comparison with those of the 2022 group. This is possibly because 1. many more 2019 students had little knowledge of the series, 2. some of them only listened to the audio files of the exchanges. Of the three 2019 groups, the Translation postgraduates seemed to be more sensitive to impoliteness nuances, possibly thanks to their specific training.

The answers to the questions regarding the choice of adjectives to describe the characters involved in impolite interactions offer controversial results, as when respondents are allowed to provide their own choices, a wide range of results are obtained, with many synonyms or near synonyms. Perhaps a limited but sufficiently varied selection should be provided, so as to restrict the range of results and at the same time prevent interpretation bias.

Acquaintance with the fictional product and characters, access to visual and kinesic information, language competence and specific training in linguistic issues are all relevant factors contributing to the rating of impoliteness in interaction. In the future, the experiment can be fine-tuned to better evaluate the impact of each component, with students with different backgrounds, language competence, and previous knowledge of the series and characters. Other audio-visual materials should be employed, to control the familiarity factor; at least one group of respondents should be chosen among specialists who are explicitly taught about (im)politeness and another among native speakers of English. However, this pilot experiment seems to show that the use of bi-modal (audio and visual) input is crucial in understanding the nuances of (im)politeness, especially in a foreign language.

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Appendix

Cari studenti, care studentesse,
nel questionario che segue troverete, alla pagina 1, le domande 1-5 su alcuni dati relativi a voi, alla vostra competenza linguistica e alle vostre abitudini come spettatori di prodotti audiovisivi.
Successivamente, nelle domande 6-21, vedrete dei brevi video clip, di cui troverete la trascrizione dei dialoghi, tratti dalla serie TV *Sherlock*. Vi si chiede di valutare qualche battuta (indicata in neretto nel testo) in termini di scortesia (su una scala di intensità da 0, cioè per nulla scortese, a 5, molto scortese).
Relativamente ai personaggi coinvolti nello scambio vi si chiede di descriverli, così come li percepite, con un aggettivo.
Vi ringrazio anticipatamente per la vostra collaborazione. Menzionerò il vostro aiuto nel lavoro scritto su questo argomento, e, se vorrete, ve ne manderò una copia.
Silvia Bruti

Soggetto intervistato:
Indica la tua età: ……..
Genere: ……
Competenza linguistica in inglese: B1 ☐ B2 ☐ C1 ☐ C2 ☐ non so giudicare ☐
Conosci *Sherlock* la serie?: Sì ☐ No ☐
Ne hai visto qualche puntata?: Sì ☐ No ☐

****

Situazione 1
Molly Hooper è una giovane patologa che lavora al St Bartholomew's Hospital Morgue. Lei e Sherlock Holmes si conoscono per lavoro, perché in quell'obitorio e laboratorio Sherlock Holmes conduce i suoi esperimenti.

MOLLY: Listen, I was wondering… Maybe later, when you're finished…
SHERLOCK: Are you wearing lipstick? You weren't wearing lipstick before.
MOLLY: I, er… I refreshed it a bit.
SHERLOCK: Sorry, you were saying?
MOLLY: I was wondering if you'd like to have a coffee.
SHERLOCK: **Black, two sugars please. I'll be upstairs**.
MOLLY: Okay.

Su una scala da 0 a 5 (0 per niente, 5 massimamente scortese), quanto reputi scortese la battuta in **neretto** di Sherlock Holmes?
……

Quali altri aggettivi useresti per descrivere, da quello che percepisci, Molly Hooper e Sherlock Holmes nei confronti l'uno dell'altra?
Molly Hooper Sherlock Holmes .

Situazione 2
Sherlock Holmes deve entrare in un appartamento e suona a un campanello di una persona, la cui etichetta è stata di recente apposta sul campanello, per farsi aprire il portone.

WATSON: So what do we do now? Sit here and wait for him to come back?
HOLMES: Just moved in.
WATSON: What?
HOLMES: The floor above. New label.
WATSON: Could have just replaced it. (*Buzzes*)
HOLMES: No-one ever does that.
MS WINTLE: Hello?
HOLMES: Hi! Um, I live in the flat just below you. I-I don't think we've met.
MS WINTLE: No, well, uh, I've just moved in.
HOLMES: **Actually, I've just locked my keys in my flat.**
MS WINTLE: D'you want me to buzz you in?
HOLMES: **Yeah. And can I use your balcony?**
MS WINTLE: What?

Su una scala da 0 a 5 (0 per niente, 5 massimamente scortese), quanto reputi scortesi le battute in **neretto** di Sherlock Holmes?
……

Quali altri aggettivi useresti per descrivere, da quello che percepisci, Ms Wintle e Sherlock Holmes nei confronti l'uno dell'altro?
Ms Wintle Sherlock Holmes

Situazione 3
I parlanti coinvolti sono Lestrade, detective a Scotland Yard, che si avvale dell'aiuto di Sherlock in diverse occasioni; Sherlock Holmes, che spesso sbaglia il nome di battesimo di Lestrade (Greg); e John Watson, un medico militare reduce della guerra in Afghanistan che una volta tornato a condurre una vita da civile diventa il coinquilino di Holmes, qui soltanto astante.

SHERLOCK: **Shut up.**
LESTRADE: I didn't say anything.
SHERLOCK: **You were thinking. It's annoying.**

Su una scala da 0 a 5 (0 per niente, 5 massimamente scortese), quanto reputi scortese le battute in neretto di Sherlock Holmes?
……
Quali altri aggettivi useresti per descrivere, da quello che percepisci, Lestrade e Sherlock Holmes nei confronti l'uno dell'altro?
Lestrade Sherlock Holmes

Situazione 4

Sherlock Holmes ha da poco smesso di fumare. Sta cercando la sua riserva nascosta di sigarette finché non arriva Mrs Hudson, la sua padrona di casa.

MRS HUDSON: Ooh-ooh!
SHERLOCK (*rummaging about in the fireplace as he speaks almost sing-song*): **My secret supply: what have you done with my secret supply?**
MRS HUDSON: Eh?
SHERLOCK: **Cigarettes! What have you done with them? Where are they?**
MRS HUDSON: You know you never let me touch your things! (*She looks around at the mess*.)
MRS HUDSON: Ooh, chance would be a fine thing.
SHERLOCK (*standing up and facing her*): I thought you weren't my housekeeper.
MRS HUDSON: I'm not.

Su una scala da 0 a 5 (0 per niente, 5 massimamente scortese), quanto reputi scortesi le battute in **neretto** di Sherlock Holmes?
……

Quali altri aggettivi useresti per descrivere, da quello che percepisci, Mrs Hudson e Sherlock Holmes nei confronti uno dell'altro?
Mrs Hudson Sherlock Holmes

Situazione 5

I parlanti coinvolti sono Sherlock Holmes e Anderson, il capo della scientifica della squadra investigativa dell'ispettore Lestrade. Al contrario di Lestrade, Anderson non sempre gradisce la presenza di Holmes sulle scene del crimine.

ANDERSON: She's German. 'Rache': it's German for 'revenge'. She could be trying to tell us something …
SHERLOCK**: Yes, thank you for your input**.

Su una scala da 0 a 5 (0 per niente, 5 massimamente scortese), quanto reputi scortese la battuta in **neretto** di Sherlock Holmes?
……

Quali altri aggettivi useresti per descrivere, da quello che percepisci, Lestrade e Sherlock Holmes nei confronti l'uno dell'altro?
Anderson Sherlock Holmes

Situazione 6
Sherlock Holmes sta interrogando la segretaria di un uomo che è stato ucciso da poco, Amanda. I due si sono appena conosciuti.

HOLMES: **What kind of a boss was he, Amanda? Appreciative?**
AMANDA: Um, no. That's not a word I'd use. The only things Eddie appreciated had a big price tag.
HOLMES: **Like that hand cream. He bought that for you, didn't he?**
HOLMES: Look at this one. Got a taxi from home on the day he died. Eighteen pounds fifty.

Su una scala da 0 a 5 (0 per niente, 5 massimamente scortese), quanto reputi scortesi le battute in **neretto** di Sherlock Holmes?
……

Quali altri aggettivi useresti per descrivere, da quello che percepisci, Amanda e Sherlock Holmes nei confronti l'uno dell'altro?
Amanda Sherlock Holmes

Situazione 7
I protagonisti sono Sherlock Holmes e John Watson, medico militare divenuto il coinquilino di Sherlock Holmes al 221B di Baker Street.
SHERLOCK: John? John! You are amazing! You are fantastic!
JOHN: Yes, all right! You don't have to overdo it.
SHERLOCK: **You've never been the most luminous of people, but as a conductor of light you are unbeatable**.
JOHN: Cheers. ... What?
SHERLOCK: **Some people who aren't geniuses have an amazing ability to stimulate it in others**.
JOHN: Hang on – you were saying "Sorry" a minute ago. Don't spoil it. Go on: what have I done that's so bloody stimulating?

Su una scala da 0 a 5 (0 per niente, 5 massimamente scortese), quanto reputi scortesi le battute in **neretto** di Sherlock Holmes?
……

Quali altri aggettivi useresti per descrivere, da quello che percepisci, John Watson e Sherlock Holmes nei confronti l'uno dell'altro?
John Watson Sherlock Holmes

Situazione 8
Sherlock Holmes è chiamato dal fratello Mycroft a risolvere un problema che coinvolge un membro della famiglia reale. L'Equerry è un dignitario di corte che Sherlock Holmes incontra in questa occasione.

SHERLOCK: I'll need some equipment, of course.
MYCROFT: Anything you require. I'll have it sent to...
SHERLOCK (*interrupting*): **Can I have a box of matches?** (*He's looking at the equerry as he speaks*.)

EQUERRY: I'm sorry?
SHERLOCK: **Or your cigarette lighter. Either will do.** (*He holds out his hand expectantly*.)
EQUERRY: I don't smoke.
SHERLOCK: **No, I know you don't, but your employer does.**

Su una scala da 0 a 5 (0 per niente, 5 massimamente scortese), quanto reputi scortesi le battute in **neretto** di Sherlock Holmes?
……
Quali altri aggettivi useresti per descrivere, da quello che percepisci, l'Equerry e Sherlock Holmes nei confronti l'uno dell'altro?
Equerry Sherlock Holmes