

# Impoliteness and Second Language Teaching: Insights from a Pragmatic Approach to Italian L2

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*Non prenderai, dunque, il bruttissimo vizio di mettere ne' tuoi discorsi certe parolacce sudicie, sguaiate e cattive che si sentono sulla bocca dei monelli di strada...<sup>1</sup>*

("Le parolacce scorrette e le parole guaste", in Collodi 1883: 38).

## 1. Introduction

The topic of this paper<sup>2</sup> is formulated according to two basic observations. The first one concerns the fact that learners of a second or a foreign language sooner or later come across verbal behaviour recognisable as impoliteness or

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<sup>1</sup> "You won't, therefore, get into the ugly habit of introducing certain dirty, coarse and bad swear words into your speech that are heard on the lips of street rascals ..." (our translation).

<sup>2</sup> This article follows a study and its related pedagogical application in the design of digital materials (see further on, in Introduction) An earlier, preliminary version – entitled "And being impolite? Teaching choices in a pragmatic approach to Italian L2" – was presented at the SLEdu International Conference, *Standard and variation in second language education* (Università di Roma Tre, 12-13th November 2015). The content and structure of this paper have been jointly discussed by the authors, who contributed to its drawing up as follows: Rosa Pugliese wrote sections 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6; Greta Zanoni wrote section 5.

linguistic rudeness. Instances of impoliteness may occur in interactions between or with native speakers (i.e. in contexts of language immersion) or in non-interactive contexts such as listening to songs or stories or watching movies, etc. (in formal or informal learning contexts). The second observation is that, although students are extremely likely to come across impoliteness, it is quite rare to find manifestations of it in language teaching syllabuses and materials or as part of a selected input relevant to students' repertoire. The treatment of sociolinguistic variation and (socio)pragmatic knowledge generally fails to cover deliberate infringements of linguistic politeness norms. The objective of teaching/learning material aims to (supposedly) ensure a representation of standard language. In the formal teaching of L2, impoliteness is mostly not mentioned, programmatically excluded or "seldom, insufficiently or inefficiently taught" (Rieger 2017: 347).

However, if target language behaviour is not to be simply reduced to passive conformity to conventions and rituals or restricted to "the pleasanter side of second-language interaction", as Mugford (2008: 375)<sup>3</sup> puts it, such infringements are important to both learner comprehension and, arguably, production. The discrepancy between impoliteness (in its various degrees) as an intrinsic communicative reality – as well as a complex linguistic and sociocultural construct – and its absence in second language teaching appears illogical, whatever the reasons for it.

Bearing in mind these general premises, the ultimate purpose of this article is to present a pedagogical proposal aimed at making L2 learners observe, recognise and identify both the pragmatic value of language items (fixed expressions, single words, interjections, etc.) and – by means of dialogue sequences – the interactional dynamics in impolite communication or verbal

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<sup>3</sup> Mugford (2008: 375) refers here to prominent subjects "such as making friends, relating experiences, and expressing likes/dislikes", whereas "everyday communicative realities as rudeness" remain ignored. Along the same lines, as we will see later on, Warters (2012) says that "the world that is reflected in coursebooks rarely exists outside of their pages", by also noting how, while "reviewing materials [...], it seems that systematically we teach the importance of how to be polite extensively and in great detail".

conflict, together with some important implications (as regards intentions, reactions, opinions, etc.). We will illustrate these features through a digital learning unit which is part of the LIRA repository (“Lingua e Cultura Italiana in Rete per l’Apprendimento”, i.e. “Italian Language and Culture for online learning”)<sup>4</sup>, a repository that makes a series of pragmatic learning activities and resources available to Italian language learners. The decision to include impoliteness, along with politeness, within the themes of LIRA, is connected to the current teaching debate on the topic, which in turn is influenced by the recent scientific conceptualisations of (im)politeness. We will, therefore, be first concerned with (im)politeness both as an object of study in pragmatics and as a useful teaching/learning object in language education, so as to broadly contextualise our teaching proposal within the main theoretical and pedagogical framework.

More specifically, our article is structured as follows: after taking a glimpse at what lies behind the expressions – *(im)politeness* or *im/politeness* – now widespread in literature, we provide an overview of studies conducted mainly within pragmatics and sociolinguistics in the last couple of decades. The aim of these studies has been to fill a conceptual and empirical gap in the investigation of impolite language and, more generally, of conflict talk and its different verbal forms<sup>5</sup>. We then survey the still rather scant literature on language teaching

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<sup>4</sup> The acronym LIRA denominates an inter-university project funded by the Italian Ministry of Higher Education and Research which was carried out in the period 2009-2012. The repository – namely the implementation of the project – has been available online since December 2012 at the following link: [lira.unistrapg.it](http://lira.unistrapg.it). The project involved four different Italian universities: Perugia (for Foreigners), Bologna, Modena and Reggio Emilia, and Verona. As members of the University of Bologna, the authors of this paper were responsible for the setting up of the teaching activities in the pragmlinguistic path of the project, including the one on impoliteness discussed here (see § 5.). For an in-depth description of the LIRA repository, see Ferrari *et al.* (2017).

<sup>5</sup> This subject has become fairly topical throughout Italy in national newspapers, popular publications (see, among others, Tartamella 2005; Fioretto 2016) and public service announcements, such as the recent “Chi fuma è scemo” (“Smokers are dumb”), a good example of the constant change in language use: what previously was “bad language” may later become “standard”, as Andersson and Trudgill (1990) say. Commonly used in everyday life, some swear words lose their “shock value” (Lawson 2004, cited in Stapleton 2010: 300), have attenuated effects in discourse and verbal interactions or are no longer evaluated as insults.

dealing with impoliteness. Against this theoretical and practical background, the conditions for an adequate pedagogical treatment of impoliteness as a pragmatic phenomenon can be better specified. The present frame of L2 teaching of pragmatics is the *locus* for such treatment, within which teaching models and pedagogical criteria are articulated and our proposal is set. While reaffirming the crucial relevance of context (its multiple layers and several variables), when impoliteness is at issue, in our conclusion we will suggest some further directions in the teaching domain.

This article contributes to the studies on (im)politeness in the teaching of pragmatics in L2, by providing some insights into online materials. While addressing learners and teachers of Italian as a second language, the activities described can be shaped to fit other languages and learning resources, particularly with regard to the discursive and interactional dynamic of impoliteness. With specific regard to L2 Italian teaching and learning – and as far as we know – there are no contributions to date that systematically address the topic.

## **2. (Im)politeness: conceptualizations**

### **2.1. On the semantic level**

In general terms, according to Fabbri (2014: 11), engaging with *impoliteness* means entering “the vast world of phatic speech, where contact is more important than content” (our translation). *Politeness* belongs to the same “vast

With respect to this last point, it is worth mentioning a recent excerpt by the High Court of Appeal: “The evolution of manners and customs and the progressive decline of language used in interpersonal relations, together with an increasing valorisation of dirty expressions as a form of realism in contemporary arts (cinema, mainly), as well as in traditional ones (literature or theatre), have made some swear words more and more used, especially by less educated people. Their high frequency mitigates their offensive force, if considered with reference to the sensitivity of the average man” (<http://www.laleggepertutti.it/>; our translation).

world”, given that contact is also of great importance in politeness. The Italian semiologist’s statement highlights an overlap between the two domains. Indeed, dealing with impoliteness only apparently means leaving the sphere of politeness behind. On the contrary, as Jobert writes,

impoliteness is inexorably linked to politeness, of which it seems to be the counterpoint. Morphology helps, since talking about impoliteness is asking politeness to deny it better and it would be vain to try to dissociate the two concepts (Jobert 2010: 7; our translation)<sup>6</sup>.

If both quotations call attention to the relational dimension of the topic, Jobert’s words are a good starting point to approach it from a semantic angle, before attempting to cover the main points of the intensive scholarship discussion to this regard. Despite being formal opposites, impoliteness and politeness are indeed marked by indissociability. The former is commonly viewed as the reverse of the latter and this view is mirrored in studies that have dealt with them distinctly (Culpeper 2012). However, it has been increasingly acknowledged that the two concepts are actually contiguous and complementary, neither separable by clear-cut boundaries nor always mutually exclusive (see §. 2.2).

The nature of the two distinct categories and their concomitant proximity are now linguistically conveyed by the widespread use – in the fields of sociolinguistics and pragmatics – of a slash in *im/politeness*, or a variant that brackets the negative prefix in *(im)politeness*. Highly frequent in ongoing literature, both signs clearly index “a new approach to the study of verbal interactions encompassing both politeness and impoliteness” (Jamet and Jobert 2013: 2).

Culpeper (in Dynel 2013: 168-169) discusses about the term *impoliteness* and its lesser use in everyday conversation compared to other linguistic options

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<sup>6</sup> “L’impolitesse est inexorablement liée à la politesse dont elle semble être le contrepoint. La morphologie aidant, parler d’impolitesse revient à poser la politesse pour mieux la nier et il serait vain de tenter de dissocier les deux notions” (Jobert 2010: 7).

such as *rude(ness)*, *verbal aggression or incivility*. However, he argues, this is precisely why it results more suitable as a technical term: *impoliteness* functions as a metapragmatic label, an umbrella term that covers various phenomena, ranging from disagreement to argument, from sarcasm to insults, swear words, cursing, etc., all of which also correspond to specific topics of investigation in a multidisciplinary perspective involving sociology, social psychology, cognitive psychology, anthropology, conflict studies and many other fields too<sup>7</sup>.

## 2.2. A brief overview of literature

Undertheorised for a long time as an object of study, (im)politeness has received an increasing amount of attention in the past twenty years, as evidenced by the huge growth of books, journals, scientific associations<sup>8</sup> and related congresses on the topic. According to some authors (Dynel 2013; Culpeper and Hardaker 2017: 208), this quantitative and qualitative expansion reached a highpoint in 2008, with both the publication of Bousfield's book, *Impoliteness in interaction*, and two special issues in *Journal of Politeness Research* and *Journal of Pragmatics*. To these and many later contributions, including the entries in new handbooks of pragmatics (Bublitz *et al.* 2011; Östman and Verschueren 2013), we can now add a systematic work such as *The Palgrave Handbook of impoliteness* (2017), edited by Culpeper *et al.*<sup>9</sup>

(Im)politeness appears wholly legitimate both as a broader paradigm and as an

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<sup>7</sup> In our article, whenever we use *impoliteness* (without the *im* in brackets) we refer to its typical meaning, while we use the term *(im)politeness* to indicate the wider scope of phenomena labelled by it in the literature.

<sup>8</sup> See *The Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* (JLAC); *Linguistic Impoliteness and Rudeness* (LIAR), together with the conferences, labelled with this same acronym, that have been held from 2006 onwards.

<sup>9</sup> It is not the last one: apart from the publications which appeared in 2018, as we are writing this paper we learn about the newly published book series *Advances in (Im)politeness Studies* by Springer Editions.

established, productive area of enquiry. A glance at the theoretical and methodological articulations of the theme (“im/politeness and cognitive pragmatics, conversation analysis, corpus linguistics, intercultural communication, multimodality”, etc.) in dedicated conferences is sufficient to realise the extent of a variety of perspectives and intersections now reached in the field. Different research questions and approaches, various studies in contemporary and historical (im)politeness practices<sup>10</sup> account for its multidisciplinary nature. Furthermore, the subject also shares a specific concern about interpersonal interaction, as one of the most salient aspects in current pragmatics studies; it identifies a particular strand, as explicitly stated in the title of Locher’s (2015) paper, *Interpersonal pragmatics and its link to (im)politeness research*.

Faced with this body of publications, we are far from claiming completeness in the general overview that follows. For this paper, we will recall a few preliminary lines of investigation and present some relevant key issues of (im)politeness studies.

The contemporary discussion on the topic is in debt to Culpeper (1996, 2011a, 2011b), whose constant research and publications on the subject are authoritative references in the field. According to the author, the modern debate can be brought back to the *Anatomy of Swearing* by Ashley Montagu (1967) and to “Aggravating language: a study of abusive and insulting language” by Lachennicht (1980; both mentioned in Culpeper 2011a). Occasional contributions to impoliteness appeared, then, in the late 80’s and during the 90’s, at the same time as the theoretical and applied developments in the area of politeness studies, which, in turn, were inspired by the seminal and influential work by Brown and Levinson’s book (1978/1987).

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<sup>10</sup> An interesting contribution in Italian linguistics regarding the diachronic continuity of (im)politeness is Alfonzetti’s (2018) article, “Di che cosa è (s)cortese parlare?” [“What is it im/polite to talk about?”].

Culpeper's (1996) article represents one of the first attempts to elaborate a descriptive framework of impoliteness as "parallel but opposite to Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness", which concerned communicative strategies aimed at preventing threatening the 'face' (in Goffman's sense of the notion) and at preserving social harmony in interaction. Drawing on current real data and written/oral sources collected in different contexts, Culpeper provided grounds for further studies on the topic.

In short, the conceptual elaboration of impoliteness stemmed from a revision of classic approaches to politeness and, in Haugh's (2010: 18) words, "continues to emerge from the shadow of theories of politeness". If, initially, impoliteness was presented as a complement to the latter, later the widened scope of the phenomena under study progressively determined a shift from the two poles of politeness and impoliteness to the range of behaviour that lies between them (as we will see in § 2.3). Leading to different approaches, these developments have helped overcome the reductive view of impoliteness as a mere "absence of politeness" and affirm the commonly shared idea, according to which the two categories need to be studied together (see Culpeper 2013; Terkourafi 2008).

### **2.3. Themes at issue: general observations and a focus on swearing**

As a simple way of articulating a cursory coverage of studies into (im)politeness and its main theoretical and empirical concerns, we will structure these concerns along a grid provided by the typical wh-questions. Moreover, we will intentionally deal with them in a short or a wider manner, depending on how they are relevant to the later description of our pedagogical proposal.

Although rather schematic, a grid of that kind can represent the emerging interrelated aspects both as main objects of analysis and as questions being posed in the discussions. In this map of the current state of research, aimed at contextualising the later section on language teaching, we will mention only



some major works on impoliteness and a few bibliographical sources related to the specific aspects we summarise<sup>11</sup>.

We begin by addressing the object of the study: *what*, as the first basic question dealt with in the literature. So, what is actually meant by *(im)politeness*? What does it consist of? If, on the one hand, according to laypeople, multiple interpretations of impoliteness (Eelen 2001) can be found<sup>12</sup>, on the other, academic hand, the definition of the notion has concerned many complexities of phenomena indicated by the term itself.

Following a general definition, impoliteness is “the use of strategies designed to attack face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony” (Culpeper quoted in Bousfield and Locher 2008: 131). Impolite behaviour, according to Oprea (2013: 54) lies in “a devaluing behavior (supposedly intentional) for the face of others, whether the presence of markers of impoliteness is expected or unexpected in the current interaction”<sup>13</sup>. From a contrastive perspective, it follows that, while politeness means “showing, or appearing to show, consideration of others” (House 1998: 54), impoliteness has to do with the opposite, i.e. disregarding wishes or needs of others, or invade them, as pointed out by Culpeper (2013) with reference to the perception of speakers in public service encounters. More specifically, according to the author, impoliteness is

a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires and/or beliefs about social organisation, including, in particular, how one person's or a group's identities are mediated by others in interaction. Situated behaviours are

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<sup>11</sup> For extensive bibliographies on (im)politeness, see the above-mentioned handbooks or sections of them dealing with the topic.

<sup>12</sup> Even a failure to comply with the grammatical rules can be considered ‘impoliteness’. See Valentin (2009).

<sup>13</sup> “[...] a un comportement dévalorisant (supposé intentionnel) pour la face d’autrui, que la présence des marqueurs d’impolitesse soit attendue ou inattendue dans l’interaction en cours” (Oprea 2013: 54).

viewed negatively – considered ‘impolite’ – when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviours always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offense. Various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behaviour is taken to be, including for example whether one understands a behaviour to be strongly intentional or not (Culpeper 2011a: 23).

This comprehensive definition is also shared by Turbide and Laforest (2015: 3) who, with the same idea of “a transgression of social expectations”, emphasize the listener’s evaluation:

the recipients' evaluation of [discursive forms] [...], to be variable according to individuals, is nonetheless relatively shared within a community. [...] impoliteness (or more precisely the effect of impoliteness) is the shared recognition of the transgression of a threshold of acceptability of verbal aggression. This threshold evolves, fluctuating according to [...] parameters that are at the same time: - contextual (cultural norms, socio-political context, media genre, statutes and roles of the participants in the interaction, etc.); - located, in relation with the progression of the interactional tension, the resources mobilized to raise or lower it (Turbide and Laforest 2015: 3)<sup>14</sup>.

Among the many aspects discussed in recent studies, we will highlight a relevant one before moving on to the next *wh*-question. Several authors observe that conceptualizing (im)politeness requires a departure from the laypersons’ concept of it. It is argued that theory cannot overlook the common-

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<sup>14</sup> “[...] l’évaluation que font les destinataires de ces formes – observable en discours – [...], pour être variable suivant les individus, n’en reste pas moins relativement partagée au sein d’une communauté. [...] l’impolitesse (ou plus justement l’effet d’impolitesse) est la reconnaissance partagée de la transgression d’un seuil d’acceptabilité de l’agressivité verbale. Ce seuil évolue, fluctue en fonction de paramètres [...] qui sont à la fois: – contextuels (normes culturelles, contexte sociopolitique, genre médiatique, statuts et rôles des participants à l’interaction, etc.); – situés, relativement à la progression de la tension interactionnelle, des ressources mobilisées pour la faire monter ou diminuer” (Turbide and Laforest (2015: 3).

sense opinion about politeness and impoliteness. To this regard, Locher and Watts (2008) distinguish between *(im)politeness* as a 'first-order' concept (the laypeople's consideration of it) and (im)politeness as a 'second-order' understanding (referred to interpretations of scholars who should recognise the former concept as an meaningful point of their analysis). In both cases, the variability in the evaluation and assessment of impoliteness is indeed important, due to the different ways in which the intentions of speakers may be perceived, or the social norms or expectations may be presumed and negotiated by participants (see Haugh 2010; Mitchell and Haugh 2015). Whether impoliteness implies a presence or absence of *intention* is a general issue discussed at a theoretical level, as well as on a 'lay theory' level.

Moving on to *how*, many (sub)questions dealt with by researchers should be observed: how does (im)politeness occur? How is it most frequently enacted, put in action and managed? What explicit and implicit ways are deployed? How is impoliteness hindered or avoided? And how is it discursively and interactionally accomplished and evaluated in different contexts?

It can be said that impoliteness lies in common, explicit linguistics forms (vocatives, negative evaluations, interjections, threats, bad words, insults...) emerging and recognisable in discourse, but actually it is not limited to single lexical and grammatical strategies, i.e. to uttering impolite conventional words or formulas. Impoliteness can occur in several implicit ways like, for example, through implicatures engendered during a conversation or it can be conveyed through prosody, whose role in expressing impoliteness is relevant. Therefore, it is necessary to go over extended discourse in order to see how impoliteness is scattered throughout it and what role impolite usages and behaviour play in the macro and/or micro context of an interaction (see Culpeper *et al.* 2003; Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 2013; Jamet and Jobert 2013).

The "discursive turn", which initially concerned politeness as a critical re-examination of Brown and Levinson's focus on *speech acts*, later qualified itself as an approach to (im)politeness, requiring real data and longer sequences of discourse, according to the methodology of conversational analysis. A view of

(im)politeness as “an interactional achievement”, namely a social action emerging locally in the ongoing talk-in-interaction, rather than as a static, individual dimension resulting in single moves of the speaker, was increasingly affirmed (Mills 2011). It followed that the hearer’s interpretation (alongside the speaker’s) gained value. Moreover, individual differences in the evaluations of the same conversational turn or utterance have been recognized (Mitchell and Haugh 2015). Many existing studies, in fact, focus on the interactional nature of (im)politeness as a situated process. Tracing the ways in which it develops throughout a long sequence is indeed the goal of what has been characterised, over time, as *situated (im)politeness*.

That it is not a matter of drawing a line between politeness and impoliteness but, on the contrary, of considering them as relationally constituted, is also shown by the multiple ways they can intertwine, mainly in interactions. They can indeed display “different hybrid forms that account for their overlap: false praise, false self-pity, perfidious compliments, insistent repetition of titles or courtesy pronouns, *Sir* and *Madam* etc.”, as Moïse and Oprea (2015: 1, our translation) specify. Even a much-conventionalised polite formula such as *thank you*, if uttered with a certain marked prosody, can take on connotations that are very distant from real thanks (Culpeper 2012). Not restricted to “polite” and “impolite”, (im)politeness lies in a large typology, comprising “over-polite”, “under-polite”, “mock impolite”, “mock polite” and so on (Kádár and Haugh 2013)<sup>15</sup>. Dealing with political TV debates, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2010), for example, distinguishes between politeness, impoliteness, non-politeness and “polyrudeness” (*polirudesse*), a term she had previously coined to describe how a threatening act on the interlocutor’s face can be concealed as a seemingly flattering act (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2005). The reverse is also true for mock impolite acts or even mock aggressions that can manifest, in specific contexts, their nature of “brands of true solidarity”, to mention Fabbri’s words (2014: 21) from his article on insults.

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<sup>15</sup> Culpeper (1996) distinguishes five super strategies whereby impoliteness can be created and received: Bald on record impoliteness, Positive impoliteness, Negative impoliteness, Sarcasm or Mock impoliteness, Withhold politeness.

In this rich typology of broad categories, which are in turn encompassed within a larger one – (im)politeness – the dual purport of insults and swear words is also clarified. Swearing, therefore, does not have only a negative valence. It “can be construed as polite or impolite”, as Jay and Janschewitz (2008: 268) state, its purposes “are not obviously offensive or emotional”, since it can be a “tool to achieve personal and social goals” (Jay 2018: 109). Accordingly, a functional categorisation of swear words (‘why people use them’) is preferred to a semantic one, as suggested by Jay (2018), while examining instances of swear words “to determine when [swearing] is acceptable or normative behaviour versus where it is impolite and abusive” (*ibid*:108)<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, in conversational storytelling – as Norrick (2013) gives evidence – “aggression, impoliteness and swearing can all interact with humor to disrupt or enhance the narrative performance” (*ibid*: 10). In sum, impoliteness shows multiple facets, including among its functions that of being a trigger of humour, comic effect and laughter, as may occur, for example, in television series and drama, in literary works or other domains.

Ambivalence in the various forms (slight and extreme) of (im)politeness is an aspect of key importance, pointed out by many contributions. Several forms weaken or rather overturn a diametric contrast between the two categories. “Politeness and impoliteness are not at opposite ends of a simple unitary scale” (Culpeper 2012: 1132) and this stable point on the theoretical level has undermined the politeness-impoliteness dichotomy. Scholars, in fact, sustain a relational framework, whose aim is to account for the dynamic nature of (im)politeness, namely for the interconnections between politeness and

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<sup>16</sup> As for insults, seen as manifestations of explicit impoliteness, it has been observed by Lagorgette (2006: 39) that “si elles blessent, n’en restent pas moins encore un mode d’interaction ; elles restent du domaine du dire, du dialogue et laissent donc la porte ouverte à une dernière tentative de négociation socialement acceptable avant de passer à l’acte qui attaque l’intégrité physique de l’autre” (“if they hurt, they are still a mode of interaction; they remain in the domain of saying, of dialogue, and thus leave the door open to a last socially acceptable attempt of negotiation before moving to an action that attacks the physical integrity of the other”; our translation).

impoliteness, as well as for the elements of differentiation that, obviously, remain between the two categories.

As for the *when* question, it brings us to analyse the relationship that (im)politeness has with emotions, besides identity, ideology and power (especially in institutional contexts), namely with a set of issues under study. We will only refer here to emotions, or rather, to the emotional correlates of impoliteness, as a focus of attention in research. With specific regard to taboo words, in fact, investigations have highlighted the role they play in the communication of a range of emotions (anger, frustration, surprise, etc.). Studies addressing the psychological aspects of swearing, conducted in the field of cognitive psychology, like the well-known ones carried out by Jay and his team (see, for example, Jay and Janschewitz 2008; Jay 2009, 2018), contribute to pragmalinguistics with a more comprehensive view of swear words and taboo language, either because they describe the perception of the offensiveness of swear words (also in comparative studies on native and non-native English speakers), investigate reasons that account for their usage, or examine the ways one's knowledge of swearing is informed by language and sociocultural experience and attitudes. Jay's (1992) categorisation of the reasons why we use taboo language also includes social motives, such as creating and conveying group solidarity, membership and friendliness.

Descriptive literature that focuses on the range of social functions swearing can take on and that goes beyond speakers of English is provided in the volume *Advances in Swearing Research*, edited by Beers Fägersten and Stapleton (2017b)<sup>17</sup>. Our understanding of impoliteness in its relation to swearing is also enhanced by comparative research on attitudes and perceptions of multilinguals towards swear words. In one of his studies conducted within a more general interest about emotions in language and how multilinguals express them, Dewaele (2004) investigated the link between perceptions of the force of swear words and their use and he found that non-native speakers consider their native

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<sup>17</sup> See Mateo and Yus (2013) for a "cross-cultural pragmatic taxonomy of insults".

language more powerful and more emotionally expressive than languages learned later in life.

The relationship between swearing or taboo language and (im)politeness, in studies that show how the former function above all as intensifiers of the latter, has been also explored in sociolinguistics and pragmatics, as one of the interconnections between (im)politeness and the categories it subsumes, i.e. a wide range of speech acts, behaviours and social actions marked by negative or conflicting attitudes.

Along our grid, with regard to *where*, it has to be noticed that the pervasiveness of impoliteness and the roles it plays in each context are well-documented by studies that cover a highly diversified variety of contexts, such as: health (doctor-patient dialogue, therapeutic discourse), legal (courtroom discourse, police–citizen interaction), political (parliamentary discourse, interviews, political campaigns, talk shows, electoral debates) and family settings, besides workplaces/academic settings, service encounters, business meetings, everyday conversations and other types of contexts, concerning intra-cultural and inter- or cross-cultural communication, without neglecting literary texts of various genres. The field of enquiry has expanded to inevitably include – together with ‘old media’ settings (TV, radio talk shows, etc.) – digital communication. This line of research investigates how different forms of impoliteness have entered, are enacted and evolve in communication technology, in “low-tech” (e-mail, blogs, forum), as well as in social networks (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.). The high frequency of impoliteness in these new online spaces is not surprising. Focusing specifically on swearing, Jay (2018: 121) observes that “it is a realistic assumption about language that where humans go, swearing will follow”. As a correlated aspect of this widespread use, there is the issue of moral order, of restrictions and norms which are necessary to govern offensive Internet language and conflictive online talk. In relation to both the face-to-face and online communication mentioned above, impoliteness is examined in its interplay with interaction –

either spoken or written – where it is always potentially present, and in informal as well as professional domains.<sup>18</sup>

Regarding *who/whom*, we briefly refer to a few studies demonstrating gender equality in bad language. Currently, the commonly held view according to which “women stick to standard speech” and taboo language is the language domain of males rather than females, has been challenged by providing counterevidence, based on data, that “young females are familiar with, and use, a wide range of taboo/slang items themselves” (De Klerk 1992: 277). The complex relations between gender and politeness is discussed extensively by Mills (2003) who argues that in many circumstances women act just as impolitely as men. Holster’s (2005: 127) research findings indicate that age, rather than gender, has a great influence on speaker use of taboo language. The younger male and female teachers involved in her survey used taboo English more frequently than their older counterparts. Gender did not prove to be an important variable.

The *why* of (im)politeness still remains to be considered, especially in its connections with the broad range of domains (*where*) and the local conditions and correlated emotions or behaviour (*when*). By applying this question both to the phenomena under study and to the study itself, a preliminary consideration concerns how far current research on (im)politeness is from the common view of impoliteness itself as a peripheral phenomenon in research where politeness is targeted. While talking about a change of the theoretical paradigm in the linguistic field (see § 2.2 above), we might get the impression that this change lies with different orientations emerging among scholars, *within* their domains of knowledge. But, as the Italian linguist De Mauro (2013) said, “in their long history, [linguistic] studies are more in debt to significant changes coming from the life of societies and the intellectual cultures as a whole that emanate from

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<sup>18</sup> Romain and Fracchiolla (2016), for example, examine the relation between verbal violence and written digital communication among colleagues, in a university context. By referring to the same professional domain, Haugh (2010) discusses a single peculiar case that had a certain resonance in the press and on the web.



them than to endogenous pushes” (our translation)<sup>19</sup>. *(Im)politeness* has become a critically important area of research (Bousfield 2008), which can be accounted also for the frequency and increase of impoliteness itself, not only in the new media.

While referring to insulting, Fabbri (2014: 9-10) ironically observes in very general terms that “it’s on the agenda”. The “excess” of “negative axiological lexems”, as he defines insults, demonstrates an inversion, a shift “from *understatement* to *overstatement*”, which calls for possible explanations:

how do you explain it? With the evidence that language is not a window on the individual mind, but a view on the collective culture, on its rank of hierarchies and its margins. It is not a tautological reference – *call a spade a spade* – to the colourless world of logic, but an effective action on its values, conflicts and transformations [...] (*ibid*; our translation)<sup>20</sup>.

Which changes are significant present? Should we say, at least in relation to contemporary western societies, that people are more impolite nowadays than they were in the past? Do speakers intentionally use offensive speech? Is it because contemporary ideologies value directness, assertiveness, free expression of emotion, extroversion and the like? In order to provide empirical evidence for the increasing use of swear words, Twenge *et al.* (2017) conducted a large-scale study, analysing the manifestation of their use in cultural products such as books, “a useful place to observe and quantify cultural change” (*ibid*: 2). They interrogated the Google Books corpus of American

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<sup>19</sup> “[...] nella loro lunga storia, gli studi linguistici sono debitori più che a soprassalti endogeni, ai grandi mutamenti, alle grandi spinte che vengono dalla vita delle società e dalle culture intellettuali complessive che si sprigionano da esse” (De Mauro 2013).

<sup>20</sup> “Come si spiega l’inversione [...]? Con l’evidenza che [...] la lingua non è una finestra sulla mente individuale, ma una veduta sulla cultura collettiva, le sue gerarchie e i suoi margini. Non è la referenza tautologica – dir pane al pane, vino al vino – del mondo esangue della logica, ma l’azione efficace sui valori, i loro conflitti e trasformazioni. [...] (Fabbri 2014: 9-10).

English books from 1950 to 2008 with the purpose of finding out if the increasing use of swear words could be another aspect of language (as in other studies describing increases in first-person singular and second-person pronouns, or the decline in words referring to moral character) that may be connected to individualism (*ibid*: 2). The findings of their study show “increases for individual swear words ranged from 4 to 678 times” over the years considered; “readers of books in the late 2000s were 28 times more likely than those in the early 1950s to come across one of the “seven words you can never say on television”. Limited to the books examined, and therefore to their potential readers, the authors view these results as consistent with the hypothesis about a rise in individualism in present-day American society.

By closing this cursory overview on the issues central to the study of (im)politeness in its latest developments, we quote one of Twenge *et al.*'s (2017) concluding considerations:

several studies have found that swear words are more emotional and distracting than nonswear words [...]. This suggests that swear words are powerful ways of attracting attention. However, as they become more common, they may lose their power. This prediction that the attentional power or “shock value” of swear words has declined [...] is an interesting question for future research (Twenge *et al.* 2017: 2).

### **3. Impoliteness in language teaching literature**

#### **3.1. The debate**

To what extent does the research overviewed above resonate in the field of second language teaching and learning? How can learning benefit from the recent conceptual framework, if aimed at treating impoliteness adequately (in classrooms, textbooks and digital resources), and at developing or strengthening learners' pragmatic awareness about it?

In general terms, we shall say that the overcoming of the sharp traditional opposition between politeness and impoliteness and the subsequent conjoined consideration of them, together with the description of their discursive and linguistic configurations, offer fruitful insights into language instruction on (im)politeness as a pragmatic phenomenon. In order to delineate more specific answers to the above questions, we shall address the ongoing language teaching debate on the topic.

To begin with, a state-of-the-art article about this emerging debate is available in a chapter – *(Im)politeness: Learning and Teaching*, written by Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford (2017) – of the above-mentioned *The Palgrave Handbook of Impoliteness* (Culpeper et al. 2017; see § 2.2). As the title implies, the conceptual overcoming of a clear-cut distinction between politeness and impoliteness (see § 2.1 above) is then mirrored throughout the chapter itself. Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford (2017: 493) make it explicit by underlining that “research no longer considers impoliteness and rudeness to be mere opposites of politeness, but rather they represent interactional choices”. What is firstly referred to here is research conducted in the domain of interlanguage pragmatics, aimed at gathering experimental evidence on L2 pragmatic competence, now extended to (im)politeness. As the authors say, they are particularly interested in reviewing “effects of instruction” on the construction of this competence, as well as surveying the outcomes of analysis of L2 (im)polite behaviour in various settings and “current views that examine the use and learning of L2 (im)politeness features from a discourse perspective” (*ibid* : 490).

While analytically reviewing several studies published in recent decades, Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford (2017) identify three major, progressive strands concerned with (im)politeness in FL/L2 learning and teaching. The first two are primarily in pursuit of politeness, that is of conformity to the target-language politeness norms and of the discursive achievement of politeness in interactions; the third one is focused on identity management or facework (in Goffman’s terms) “that allows one to be (im)polite in one’s own way” (*ibid*: 492). The authors point out how research has advanced from paying much and unidirectional attention to the hearer and target-language norms to recognising

that FL/L2 learners-users have choices about how they wish to participate. It is this shift that displays a general influence of theories of (im)politeness on teaching and learning. However, the authors say that, unlike the many studies on the learning of polite practices, those related to impolite behaviour are still few. Indeed, analyses reviewed in their chapter deal mostly with the learning of speech acts related to prevent impoliteness, such as mitigation of requests (its failure, accomplishment or lack of), refusals, disagreement, as well as 'responding to rudeness'.

If 'responding to rudeness' is now emerging in investigations (see also Farnia *et al.* 2010), other linguistic practices encompassed by the broad notion of (im)politeness, such as heavy disagreement, offences, insults, swearing, etc., are not mentioned in the authors' review. We shall return to their work in section 4. However, before illustrating our learning unit on impoliteness, we will consider some recent contributions in the bibliography specifically concerned with (im)politeness in language teaching (Mercury 1995; Doyle 2006; Dewaele 2008, 2019; Mugford 2008, 2012; Ahmadi and Soureshjani 2011; Horan 2013; Schepers 2014; Haugh and Chang 2015; Liyanage *et al.* 2015; Finn 2017; Guo *et al.* 2016; Rieger 2017).

Looking back over this literature, a common shared element is soon observable: recognising a lack of attention to impoliteness in language teaching is a recurrent initial issue that occurs with slightly different accentuations.

In its mild forms or in the strong forms of taboo language, impoliteness is seldom a topic treated in textbooks or included as part of the target language curriculum. "Sometimes [this] sort of things came up", as one of the teachers interviewed by Liyanage *et al.* (2015: 120) observed, but taboo language generally surfaces on the fringes of classroom dialogue, i.e. 'informal' interactions. As a topic, it belongs to extra-classroom anecdotes, rather than to professional dialogue or 'formally' planned lessons and targeted pedagogy. Although probably emerging and not totally avoided in language classrooms, it remains largely omitted.

Horan (2013: 284) defines this a “glaring omission”, while focusing in his paper on cursing and swearing seen as having an important role in expressing emotions and attitudes. No matter how this absence in formal teaching comes back to obvious motivations (social customs, education, religion, etc.), it appears no longer reasonable to many authors who claim that impoliteness deserves attention and that it would be pedagogically useful to teach it, seeing its contemporary pervasiveness in everyday life, namely in face-to-face and virtual conversations, as well as in song lyrics, literature, TV series, theatre, cinema, politics and social media. It is well documented, furthermore, that social media have given impulse to plenty of theoretical and empirical studies (see § 2.3 above).

If second language teaching has been traditionally characterised by the pursuit of linguistic conformity and has aimed at developing a communicative competence solely restricted to conventionalised language forms (see § 1), it has correspondingly disregarded both how ubiquitous the practice of impoliteness and the use of impolite language are and the fact that learners may have – indeed express – a “real need to at least be aware of impolite forms of the 2nd language” (Warters 2012). Pointing out the absence of impoliteness in pedagogy is also calling attention to the contradictions and ambivalent aspects in L2 teaching choices, especially when referred to the aim of developing communicative competence.

An answer to whether (im)politeness is to be taught is already implied in what all the authors do first in their contributions, that is stress the remarkable contrast between impoliteness left out of formal language instruction and its persisting presence outside the classroom. A large part of the literature we examined is devoted to subsequent problems, benefits and pedagogical and practical concerns.

### **3.2. Key questions: Is impoliteness to be taught? Why should we teach it? Is it teachable? How should it be taught?**

The above questions structure the debate on (im)politeness in L2 teaching. Which arguments have been advanced to respond to them? Let us examine the questions and answers in some detail.

By arguing that attention should be given to (im)politeness, the authors mentioned so far have claimed pedagogic reasons and social implications, ranging from teachers' and students' attitudes towards the topic to the communicative approach, its commonly agreed aims and the challenges involved in including this topic, from the consequences of a recognised lacuna in language teaching to the benefits that students would receive if assisted within instruction based on the conceptual framework of language pragmatics.

With specific regard to language pragmatics, many authors (see, for example, Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford 2017: 490; House 2015) point out that the ability to perceive and – to a certain extent – produce impolite language in second or foreign language teaching is part and parcel of pragmatic knowledge, which in turn is a fundamental component of language ability. As such, (im)politeness should be, in classroom and teaching resources, a complement to the more widely represented politeness. Dealing with both – politeness and impoliteness – means dealing with the sociolinguistic inner varieties of languages, whose implications for language teaching are mostly linked to the importance of context and its components, namely to the issue of 'appropriateness'. Adding 'authenticity' as a key aspect, according to which impolite language should be comprised in "the repertoire of emotional language", Guo *et al.* (2016) soon make it clear that "understanding and exercising principles of authenticity and appropriacy requires explicit instruction" (*ibid*: 2). In this perspective, (im)politeness could even drive the process.

A recurrent point in the literature, linked to the above considerations, and which resonates the discursive turn in the theoretical discussion (see § 2.3 above), is that handling the theme of impoliteness, especially swearing is not just about considering single words in isolation, nor is it limiting attention to their meanings (Horan 2013). Instead, it requires us to look both at their use in interactions, as determined by pragmatic variables (speaker-listener relationship and social

settings), and at the variety of linguistic and non-linguistic ways in which (im)politeness can be shaped: lexical and grammatical choices, prosody, tone of voice, facial expression, gesture, etc. In other words, also in the classroom, impoliteness should be treated as a contextually determined, interactionally (and not just linguistically) produced discourse, and one that is subject to variation and discussion.

“At the more extreme end of the impoliteness scale”, Horan (2013: 288) says, are swearing, insults and taboo words. Viewing taboo words as “products of sociolinguistic rules”, Mercury (1995: 28) recognises study value in them for (adult) language learners. The author argues that class treatment of swearing could allow students the opportunity to comprehend their connotative meanings and pragmatic values, the reasons for their use by native speakers, together with time, places and possible restrictions or censure of use. Students should be given occasions to develop a solid awareness of the social complexity implied in using taboo language. Finn (2017: 18) makes a similar point when she stresses the students’ need of “being knowledgeable” about the ambivalence of swear words, their nuances, purpose, timing and the degrees of offence they may provoke. According to the author, acquiring an adequate awareness of when swear words are socially acceptable or not is an important aim to pursue, in order to permit students to overcome their insecurity about the words’ emotional force or about misunderstandings and faulty knowledge of appropriate use or contexts of use.

Contrary to the common expectation that learners will naturally discover taboo language outside the classroom, coming across them through mere exposure to input or a direct experience (like being involved in impolite interactions, for example), explicit instruction would be helpful for them, like any other topic in language pragmatics. Finn (2017: 18) also observes that leaving students to learn about this aspect by themselves is a potential source of disadvantages, of communicative problems or difficulties for them, due to a lack of pragmatic awareness. Horan (2013) mentions this aspect as well, by stating that the topic should not be left “to the domain of light-hearted, humorous publications such as swearing dictionaries, which often fail to place swear words in their

communicative context". On the contrary, in a FL/SL classroom, "opportunities for contextualised discussion of appropriateness and register" should be provided (*ibid*: 291).

From a critical point of view, Liyanage *et al.* (2015: 123) believe that leaving (im)politeness in L2 language to self-instruction "shifts responsibility for what can be a troublesome element of socialisation to those most vulnerable". This pedagogic choice – shall we say *in absentia* – actually "misses opportunity to link deliberately a recognised dimension of learner-need with explicit instruction as a learning moment" (*ibid*: 123). However, this choice can also be considered justifiable where specific cultural and religious conditions are given, as is the case of the Iranian context of English language teaching, discussed by Ahmadi and Soureshjani (2011), who carried out a survey on the theme among students, teachers and education experts .

(Im)politeness and, above all, swearing are a controversial pedagogical matter. It is not easy to even talk about introducing swearing as a possible theme in the classroom, without causing surprise among teachers (Mugford 2008: 374). Basing their argumentation on interviews with (three) experienced teachers, Liyanage *et al.* (2015: 119) observe that talking about taboo language in language classrooms "is actually, and there is no better word for it, taboo" itself, particularly powerful when related to swearing. This taboo 'at a meta-level' – as we might call it – not only surrounds all dimensions of language teaching (educational institutions, teacher training programmes, pedagogic approaches, classroom practices and teaching materials, given the reluctance of publishing houses to accept course books addressing also taboo language), it also emerges through teachers' own perceptions, although there is variation in the individual perception of the topic (see also Horan 2013).

Overall, teachers' discourse about the introduction of taboo language in the classroom produces opposite views, perplexity, uncertainty and contradictions. On the one hand, the relevance of sociolinguistic and sociocultural (unwritten) norms of this aspect of language, and the usefulness in responding to learners' pragmatic need of receiving "at least some knowledge about the use of taboo



language” (Liyanage *et al.* 2015: 123), are recognised. On the other hand, several factors make taboo language a problematic issue. From a pedagogic perspective, it accentuates the difficulties aroused by the instruction of sociocultural knowledge, at a linguistic, pragmatic and social level, namely by appropriateness. Socially, it brings teachers face-to-face with the dominant underlying views (and with their own opinions, at least the opinions of some of them) of taboo language as uneducated language, morally inappropriate to be taught in an institutionalised setting, unprofessional and therefore to be avoided, a type of language that is very likely to give rise to embarrassment, complaints or shock on the part of some students, colleagues or authorities.

What follows from this state of affairs? It is pertinent, here, to consider Horan’s question and her subsequent answer:

should this deter the teacher from addressing cursing and swearing in the FL classroom? The short answer is ‘no’, but a note of caution is also necessary here: there is little to be gained from ‘teaching swearing’ in the rather straightforward sense of devoting a lesson to familiarising students with cursing and swearing vocabulary. [...]Cursing and swearing, I would argue, do have a place in the FL curriculum, but within the larger context of thematising and discussing taboo language [and addressing, as well,] openly linguistic purist and moral attitudes to ‘bad language’ in general (Horan 2013: 295-296).

Among the reasons in favour of making cursing and swearing part of the language curriculum, Horan mentions their being characteristic of emotional speech, culturally specific and used for many different purposes, besides the fact that “language learners are often interested in ‘rude’ or ‘dangerous’ language” use (*ibid*: 284), and need to make appropriate use of swearing and taboo registers<sup>21</sup>. Being particularly concerned with teaching emotional language, rather than with dealing with swearing as a linguistic practice in itself,

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<sup>21</sup> The interest aroused by multilingual swearing is also shown by the presence, on the Web, of a singular swearsaurus. See Dewaele’s lecture on “The power of swearwords: a lecture at Birkbeck, University of London”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Blkh1KI3uQ>.

the author also highlights the variety of communicative functions fulfilled by taboo language. She links them essentially to (a) communicating powerful emotions through transgressive, rule-breaking and potentially face-threatening verbal acts, and (b) expressing personality, identity, solidarity, group membership, positive affect, humour, joking, verbal emphasis, or establishing or maintaining social bonding .

This multifaceted nature of swear words and their pluri-functionality are among the important aspects emerging both in theoretical and applied literature. Scholars and educators stress that the additional, auxiliary functions, whereby swearing is not really swearing, nor is it always a way of expressing negative emotions, but also a way of emphasizing an exclamation<sup>22</sup>, communicating surprise, happiness, humour or intimacy – that is ‘mock impoliteness’ (see § 2.3 above) – cannot be ignored. Mugford (2013) prefers to categorize it as *anti-normative politeness* and supports the idea that impolite words used in inoffensive manners, with an implicit friendly intention, should have a place in adequate classroom treatment of (im)politeness. Moreover, the use of a rude expression or swear words that do not have an offensive function is fully consistent with a communicative pedagogy aimed at exposing the learner to a plurality of registers, therefore, with the designing of materials involving aspects “such as the use of humour and irony, dealing with sarcasm and teasing” (Cohen 2016: 343).

The discussion in language education literature, summarised so far, still implies a relevant point as far as teachers are concerned: they could assist learners in the development of knowledge and metacognition of swearing, but certainly not in relying on atheoretical conceptions of the latter. Teachers themselves need to be supported, prior to methods and materials, with scholarly reference points about definitions, categorisations, taxonomies, grammar and lexical fields of taboo and offensive speech, analyses of the relationship between cultures and

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<sup>22</sup> “This is really, really fucking brilliant!”, to quote an example used by Steven Pinker (2007) in one of the Talks at Google.

taboo language, etc.<sup>23</sup>, as well as with professional training on pragmatic and sociolinguistic issues and subsequent practical concerns (about ‘when’ (im)politeness should be addressed in the classroom, if on the students’ or teachers’ initiative; about on which level of communicative competence it is better to introduce the theme, and so on; see Mercury 1995; Ahmadi and Soureshjani 2011).

These practical concerns should be addressed according to the specific classroom contexts. However, a general suggestion, here, would be that of treating the topic within an approach already oriented towards an inner sociolinguistic variability, and that of taking into account students’ needs of clarification.

To cope with the complexities of (im)politeness is not an easy pedagogical task, nor is it a task to be limited to certain strategies, as they occur in the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR), which ignores impoliteness itself (Pizziconi 2015; House 2015). On the contrary, it is a delicate task, a pragmatics-related challenge that requires teachers to be equipped with theoretical and pedagogical knowledge in order to raise sensitive language issues in class. (Im)politeness should be taught, is teachable and does not need to “compromise the ethical standards within which teachers operate”, as Guo *et al.* (2016: 7-8) say, also adding that “there is a distance factor between *knowing, using* and *knowing what, when and how to use* contentious knowledge that guides teachers and shields learners and classroom learning” (authors’ emphasis).

#### **4. Teaching impoliteness**

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<sup>23</sup> For a typology of swear words, see Dewaele (2006).

#### **4.1. Teaching impoliteness is not (meant as) teaching students “to be impolite”**

In light of the reasons and suggestions we considered above, the statement heading this section may sound obvious. However, it is noteworthy, as also evidenced both by the literature, where its frequent explicitation is variously conveyed, and by discussions on Internet language forums<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, it will not be redundant to recall how Mercury clarifies students' needs about swearing and taboo language:

I do not mean ESL learners should learn how to swear; rather, learners need to understand what constitutes obscene language in [...] contexts, why native speakers choose to use it, and what it signifies sociolinguistically. [...] what is acceptable or unacceptable in taboo language behaviour (Mercury 1995: 28).

There is, on the part of the teacher, the responsibility to respond to the students' need, as also underlined by Warters (2012). In line with Mugford's (2008) point of view, and with a slighter emphasis on students' empowerment, Warters (2012) considers that the persuasive argument made by students themselves lies precisely in the ability of “*being able* to be impolite”, rather than in their intention or “*desire to be impolite*” (our italics). Far from being a matter of how to imitate a native speaker in swearing (on the part of students) or, needless to say, of encouraging students to swear, prompting them to act in a rude way (on the part of teachers), teaching impoliteness is primarily about raising awareness and understanding it, with the aim of helping students to manage instances of deliberate or unintentional violation of politeness rules when heard around them, i.e, in Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford's (2017: 495) words, of preparing “learners to negotiate uncomfortable situations”.

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<sup>24</sup> A Korean teacher of English, for example, also involved in research on teaching taboo words, summarises his pedagogical perspective by stressing about, while saying that it implies “teaching students ABOUT taboo words”; see: <http://www.joshesl.com/taboo--slang.html>.

## 4.2. Teaching models and structuring criteria

Is it actually possible to teach impoliteness? Wondering about it implies holding pragmatics as a fundamental component of second language teaching, with the the main purpose of helping students to produce “meaningful communicative behaviour”, rather than demonstrating “instances of correct [language] usage”, as Widdowson (quoted in Mugford 2016: 173) emphasized as early as 1978.

Without going back to issues that have now been fully acquired in the L2 teaching pragmatics literature, it will be sufficient here to recall only some pedagogical points useful as for ‘how’ teaching impoliteness.

In this perspective, it is worth referring to the assumption made by Kasper (1997) in her well-known article – *Can Pragmatic Competence Be Taught?* – where she answered this question by rendering it even more precise: more than teaching, the challenge for teachers involves arranging “learning opportunities in such a way that [students] benefit the development of pragmatic competence in L2” (*ibid*: 22). These learning opportunities are essentially provided by observation and analysis, as previously suggested by Kramsch (1993: 92): it is only through them and through a deep understanding of the social context that pragmatic knowledge can be acquired. Indeed, its acquisition “is not an *if-then affair*” (original emphasis).

A theoretical point about pragmatic knowledge and ability, which is also recurrent in the literature on impoliteness, is the well-attested distinction, advanced by Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983), between *pragmalinguistic competence*, referred to the linguistic resources and conventional uses that in a given language convey interpersonal or relational meanings, and *sociopragmatic competence*, concerning the consistency of language performance with the sociocultural rules underlying communication and the perception of it as appropriate or inappropriate. This conceptual key has supported the now long-standing justification for the instruction of pragmatics. Whether this instruction is advocated as an ‘explicit’ (meta-pragmatic) approach, as an implicit one, or rather, as a combination of the two, it

constitutes a must. Teaching purposes, organising criteria and a typology of activities have been subsequently specified.

The use of authentic language materials as examples or models and a sufficient exposure to input (prior to the metapragmatic analysis of relevant phenomena) are two fundamental criteria for successful pedagogic practices, according to Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003), who also specify the goals to be accomplished by teachers:

- (a.) raise language learners' pragmatic awareness;
- (b.) provide language learners with a choice of target language (TL) pragmatic devices and practices;
- (c.) expand learners' perception of the TL community.

With regard to consciousness-raising tasks, a range of suggestions is available in the literature, going from comparing learners' L1 and L2 behaviours in making requests, for example, or more generally, in identifying how politeness in L2 contrasts with that in their L1, to telling personal episodes about intercultural incidents or misunderstandings due to pragmatic errors; from participating in role-plays to keeping a reflective journal, interviewing native speakers about appropriate L2 behavior, focusing on pragmalinguistic differences in L1-L2 translations, and the like (Krulatz 2014; Haugh and Chang: 2015). In the gradual development of pragmatic competence (see, among others, Ishihara, 2010), the link between attention and learning that highlights the concept of *noticing* (Schmidt 1990) is particularly relevant, and, as we will see (§ 5.2), it can shape the rationale of teaching units on (im)politeness.

Consistent with this general framework on teaching pragmatics are a few practical proposals about (im)politeness and sensitive language issues. While documenting an emerging area of investigation, in fact, the literature on (im)politeness in language teaching has remained mostly on the level of recognising value, although with some exceptions. Among the few contributions that provide structured paths to be efficiently followed in the classroom, we will

mention those by Haug and Chang (2015), Rieger (2017), and Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford (2017). Although different, their proposals share some features that clearly show the link between research and pedagogy on (im)politeness.

Evidence of how the recent theorisation of (im)politeness has inspired teaching approaches and topics can be found, for example, in Haug and Chang's (2015) interactional approach, whose ultimate aim is to create conditions for "promoting sociopragmatic awareness of im/politeness systems across cultures amongst L2 learners" (*ibid*: 391). Focusing primarily on the students' ability to interpret and understand language uses, the authors address teasing banter, a relational practice, which – in their words – "can give rise to both evaluations of mock impoliteness as well as outright impoliteness" (Haug and Bousfield 2012: 391). Their intent is to go beyond the restricted focus of polite forms, or rather the binary distinction between politeness and impoliteness. The authors' aim is also to move away from previous "structuralist accounts" focused "on the analyst's interpretation of a speaker's production of 'polite' utterances" (*ibid*: 395). Instead, they draw on discursive models of relational work that conceptualise (im)politeness as an interpersonal, variable evaluation (such as mock impoliteness and "genuine" impoliteness), likely to arise interactionally across participants. The peculiarity of Haug and Chang's approach is in the analyses of sequential aspects of authentic interactional data, which are provided in long fragments (transcribed in a simplified form). Through them it is possible to observe how interactions are locally contextualised and co-constructed. Thereby – and in line with the recent strand in applied conversation analysis (CA) – the authors propose an adaptation of the four-step model by Huth and Talgehani-Nikazm (2006), which employs insights from CA in teaching L2 pragmatics<sup>25</sup>. Haug and Chang's planned path includes: "(i.) introducing a relational practice in the L2 of the learners in question, (ii.) examining authentic instances of the relational practice in their L2, (iii.) comparing these with authentic instances of the relational practice in their L1, and (iv.) jointly

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<sup>25</sup> The potential of CA studies and the relevance of conversation analytic findings for different applied linguistics areas, language teaching among them, are widely recognised. For a state-of-the-art article, see Kasper and Wagner (2014).

reflecting on underlying sociopragmatic differences and similarities”<sup>26</sup> (Haugh and Chang 2015: 407).

Still in an interactional approach, Rieger (2017) deals with the theme of online posting as social behaviour. She indicates four main criteria for including (im)politeness in instruction pragmatics: *authenticity* (i.e. postings created for a real purpose), *complexity* (i.e. pragmatically laden messages and evaluations of (in)appropriate behavior); *diversity* (i.e. variety in the underlined social norms and values) and *feasibility* (i.e. being suitable for proposing an analysis and reflection to students, in participatory learning activities (*ibid*: 345)). These features are, then, exemplified by making use of a controversial incident in a peculiar intercultural encounter, an official meeting of world leaders. While showing a silent video clip of this encounter, the absence of verbal interaction reveals itself to be very effective in demonstrating how non-verbal resources usually juxtapose linguistic formulas and verbal communication, in conveying (im)politeness. Then, through a selection of posts in online fora, a further analysis and evaluation of the relational work and interactional behaviour as (im)polite is highlighted.

In Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford’s contribution (2017), already mentioned as a state-of-the-art article on impoliteness and language teaching and learning (see §. 3.1 above), we also find their own pedagogic proposal. The authors present a four-stage approach to the teaching of (im)politeness in the classroom, which draws explicitly on previous models for teaching speech acts. Their perspective, in fact, resonates with Da Silva’s (2003) proposal on polite forms of refusal and with her idea that engaging learners in an explicit discussion on the sociopragmatics of the speech act would be the point of departure, then followed by displaying examples, targeting recurrent linguistic forms in refusal speech acts, and, finally, engaging in role-play activities.

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<sup>26</sup> This last step is also accounted for by a critical view of what the authors – with reference to works on politeness so far – call a “bias towards developing pragmlinguistic awareness, rather than a deeper awareness of sociopragmatic dimensions” (Haugh and Chang 2015: 394). This difficult area calls for raising awareness of what underpins evaluations of meanings and actions interactionally accomplished as im/polite.



The four stages of Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford's model are the following: (i) discussion; (ii) identification of polite features (at a contextual, co-textual and linguistic level); (iii) identification of impolite features; (iv) practising polite and impolite language in the classroom via role-play situations in order to develop speaking skills in communicating politeness or reacting to rudeness (Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford 2017: 504).

While Félix-Brasdefer and Mugford give more consideration to polite language, although within a teaching model that attempts to combine polite with impolite language, our proposal for online resources, as we will see in the following section, foregrounds impoliteness literally, i.e. without the bracketed (im) and includes its mild forms, as well as strong ones.

## **5. A pedagogical proposal for web-based learning**

### **5.1. Variety as a tenet in the design and implementation of digital resources on LIRA (Lingua e Cultura Italiana in Rete per l'Apprendimento)**

Sharing the theoretical assumptions discussed in the earlier sections, the LIRA digital learning unit (see § 1) is framed in the current pragmatic approach and aims to promote (meta)pragmatic awareness of linguistic forms and sociocultural contexts of impoliteness. Our proposal links up to the teaching suggestions mentioned previously (§ 4.2) and starts out by emphasizing *variety* as a key concept, the focal point along which activities are structured. It applies, in fact, to the various components involved in introducing the teaching of impoliteness: (i) diverse contexts, both negative and positive functions and texts (audio, video and written excerpts from daily communication and fictional texts); (ii) very differentiated activities, all consistent with their main goals of

- a. promoting students' noticing of swear words, of their forms and functions, as well as of the social actions they accomplish in a variety of discursive contexts;

- b. presenting examples of use and of variation in use, chosen as a language *input* that, to a certain extent, reflect the range of impolite behaviours (real and mock ones) examined and conceptualised in recent research;
- c. creating occasions mainly for exchanging and comparing opinions within the LIRA community, not only about linguistic (lexical) choices but above all about socio-cultural determinants, in order to further support reflexive and meta-pragmatic activities.

Having mentioned aims and procedures, in the next section we will closely describe the LIRA learning unit.

## **5.2. Contents and structure of the LIRA online repository**

As mentioned in section 1, LIRA is a multimedia open access repository that aims to assist heritage learners, non-native speakers of Italian, as well as native ones, to develop or refine their linguistic and pragmatic competence. In this regard, the repository is not meant as a traditional online language course but rather as a series of self-learning materials and activities whose ultimate goal is awareness-raising about current language uses. A list of key characteristics for a learning environment of this type has been drawn up in order to establish the structure of the repository and its primary aims, which are the following:

- encourage knowledge construction relating linguistic and cultural content to context;
- avoid oversimplifying the complexity of real situations;
- present language use in specific real contexts, avoiding generalisation and abstraction;
- provide multiple representations of reality;
- promote knowledge construction through cooperation and exchange with other users.

The contents in the repository are representative of what we can envisage, in a

global sense, as contemporary Italian language and culture, inclusive of intra-linguistic and cultural variations. LIRA's authors have carried out a careful selection of authentic materials and documents, which are the main tool to be used if we want to let users encounter rich and varied language use in real contextualised interactions. For these purposes, LIRA has attempted to provide input, in such a way that users – especially those who do not live in the Italian community – are exposed to a large number of variables to be taken into account. This is a necessary condition for facilitating the learning of pragmatics in a second language.

Although data collection and the selection of video clips is a very time-consuming preliminary task, in order to implement LIRA activities, we decided to mainly use sequences of spontaneous interactions, semi-spontaneous speech (short excerpts taken from films, radio and television broadcasts and, in particular, TV series) and also recordings of open role-plays.

As for the latter, it would seem a contradictory proposal in relation to what we pointed out about authentic materials. However, in line with Taguchi and Roever (2017), we assume that role plays simulate natural interaction more closely than traditional controlled production activities (i.e. DCT), even if the interaction elicited in them is still constrained, due to the fact that participants are asked to act out a situation, while taking on imagined roles.

Regarding audio visual material, their potential in presenting learners with a contextualised view of language and real-life speech – namely with authentic samples of appropriate pragmatic input – is underlined by many authors (Washburn 2001; Martínez-Flor 2008; Ishihara 2010; Nuzzo 2015, 2016). Ishihara (2010) stresses that these materials are very suitable, while discussing how forms of technology can be applied to the teaching and learning of pragmatics. More specifically, as the author states, “the situational context, the high-interest content, and the rich visual imagery combine to provide learners with multi-sensory input that tends to be reasonably close to what we find in authentic interaction” (*ibid*: 245). According to Quaglio (2009: 149), even though the language used in television series or guided role-plays is not the same as

unscripted and spontaneous language, “the use of television dialogue as a surrogate for natural conversation for the analysis of certain linguistic features seems perfectly appropriate”<sup>27</sup>.

Another valuable resource for teaching impoliteness are literary texts. Scholars agree that the use of contemporary literature can serve as a useful resource for language learning. Maley (1989) suggests a distinction between the *study* of literature and the *use* of literature. Carter and McRae (1996: XX) resume this distinction by highlighting how “using literature as a linguistic resource implies the assumption that literature is language in use and can, therefore, be exploited for language learning purposes”. As for any other pragmatic phenomenon, like discursive markers (see Pugliese 2015: 194-5), literary pragmatically-rich texts are particularly apt for language activities whose aim is to promote the cognitive process of *noticing* uses and mechanisms of the use of some words (see Activity 1 below). Handford (2002: 2) defines literary texts as “representational texts”, i.e. “examples of attested language” that codify pragmlinguistic and sociopragmatic norms.

These reasons account for the accurate selection, made for the LIRA repository, of short video clips from contemporary fiction, together with those taken from newspaper articles.

As for the structure of the repository, the contents dealt with are grouped into thirteen macro-areas: seven aimed at the development of pragmatic-linguistic competence (e.g. the ability to make linguistic choices that are appropriate to context) and six aimed at strengthening social and cultural competence (showing how social and cultural factors are reflected in communicative practices). Table 1 illustrates the labels of each macro-area and also how these labels show proximity to the common language, since they are addressed to a

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<sup>27</sup> The advantages offered by the use of films in facilitating the development of pragmatic competence are described in detail also by Abrams (2016), whose article deserves consultation for further exploration of the theme.

wide audience of native and non-native speakers<sup>28</sup>, and do not focus on single speech acts. The labels also illustrate how the conjunction of politeness and impoliteness discussed in § 2.3 is put into practice: besides a unit on politeness, such as *Parole per essere carini*, the LIRA repository deliberately includes a complementary macro-area on impoliteness, *Quando le cose si mettono male*:

<b>Pragma-linguistic macro-areas</b>	<b>Socio-cultural macro-areas</b>
Dare del Tu, dare del Lei	Essere e apparire
<i>Being informal or formal</i>	<i>Stereotypes</i>
Una frase per ogni occasione	Occasioni importanti
<i>Greetings</i>	<i>Important occasions</i>
Parole per essere carini	Non solo parole
<i>Being agreeable</i>	<i>Gestures</i>
Basta chiedere	Italiano e dialetti
<i>Requesting</i>	<i>Standard Italian and local dialects</i>
Siamo d'accordo	Al lavoro
<i>Agreeing and disagreeing</i>	<i>Communication on the workplace</i>
Quando le cose si mettono male	Italiano e media
<i>When things go wrong</i>	<i>Italian and mass media</i>
Facciamo due chiacchiere	
<i>Small talk</i>	

Table 1. *The Lira structure*

Each macro-area contains a series of units on a specific pragmatic and/or cultural issue. Each unit, in turn, comprises a flexible number of activities

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed description of the LIRA community, see Zanoni (2016a).

designed to make users aware of the variety of and variation in contexts, language uses and functions. Moreover, the structure of each macro-area broadly follows a fixed pattern: it initially presents the general content of the unit and then articulates the problem in such a way to allow users to further understand both typical and atypical language uses.

LIRA rationale is essentially based on (i) noticing and understanding and (ii) reflection and awareness about (im)politeness, both at a semantic and a discursive-interactional level (see § 3.2 and § 4.2 above). The design of activities is based on these two main objectives, although activities are not always focused on both goals. In some cases, as we will see in 5.3.1 and 5.3.2, the goal is to point out the linguistic structures required by certain uses, as well as to let users understand their functions (*pragmalinguistic competence*). In other cases, the intent is to stimulate users towards more explicit reflection in order to develop meta-pragmatic awareness (*sociopragmatic competence*).

As we will see in the following sections, the LIRA unit on impoliteness reflects the richness of the aspects mentioned in the previous overview. Besides keeping, for example, with the criteria described by Rieger (2017; see § 4.2), the unit also has the advantage that it can be used autonomously and in independent space-time conditions by users. Dealing with a technology-assisted learning repository means, in fact, offering different navigation options: a linear – more controlled – navigation mode according to the authors' suggested sequence and a free navigation mode, in which users can move from one unit to another, depending on their individual needs and interests. Unlike CARLA<sup>29</sup>, a well-known platform designed to provide information, instructions and teaching materials about six speech acts (requests, refusals, apologies, complaints, compliments and thanking) in different languages (see Cohen 2016), the LIRA repository targets one single language, however it is not confined to contents and activities related only to politeness, as is the case in the above-mentioned unit concerning compliments, apologies and thanking, but

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<sup>29</sup> The acronym stands for *Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition* (CARLA); <https://carla.umn.edu/speechacts/index.html>.

it also offers a macro-area dealing with conflict in communication and impoliteness.

### **5.3. The learning unit “Offending, insulting and swearing”**

The macro-area *Quando le cose si mettono male (When things go wrong)* presents some of the variety of phenomena that are described by the term *(im)politeness*. It suggests a gradual approach to the topic, according to the relational and linguistic intensity of phenomena presented. Users can choose to follow or ignore the order just mentioned, since they are given different options in the online navigation.

A careful selection of impoliteness events and adversary contexts of disagreement or conflict was carried out by LIRA’s authors during the data collection phase. Their intent was specifically to design five units, four of which devoted to different face-threatening speech acts, along a scale of increasing disagreement, complaining, accusing, threatening and arguing, and one, the fifth, centered on impoliteness: *Offendere, insultare, dire parolacce (Offending, insulting and swearing)*. This unit is introduced through some useful prompts for observing and recognizing, within interactional sequences, fixed expressions, single words, interjections, etc., and culminates with insults and swearing.

The unit is made up of six activities, displaying different values of impoliteness. Written texts and audio-visual materials illustrate impoliteness through swear words, offenses and insults. Owing to the dual value of these words, the materials will also illustrate jocular occurrences of the same lexical items (see § 3.2 above).

The introductory phase attempts to foster noticing and observation and addresses the users’ attention to the topic of *(im)politeness* itself. The home page of the unit contains a brief narrative extract that contextualises it and provides the inspiration for this unit, introducing the fact that, when people disagree with each other, they may use outrageous swear words, gestures and

expressions, as well as insults. The cue in the text is offered by speaker A, who is telling speaker B about an argument in which he had lost his temper causing his interlocutor to display an outburst of emotion (see the first line, in Figure1: *A quel punto mi sono arrabbiato e lui ha dato in escandescenze* = “At that point, I got angry and he lost his temper”). Significantly, here, speaker B completes speaker A’s utterance by adding a verb (*insultandoti* = “insulting you”). Next, speaker A confirms his interlocutor’s completion (*Insultandomi, sì* = “yes, insulting me”). Speaker B then asks *insultandoti come?* (= “how did he insult you?”). This interaction illustrates a variety of explicit and implicit ways of insulting. The design of the whole unit is then articulated on this initial question to show a variety of verbal and non-verbal ways of insulting:

## Offendere, insultare e dire parolacce

[...] “(...) *A quel punto mi sono arrabbiato e lui ha dato in escandescenze*”  
*“Insultandoti”*  
*“Insultandomi, sì”*  
*“Insultandoti come?”*

Tratto da “*Quelli che però è lo stesso*” di Silvia Dai Prà (Laterza, 2011)

Figure 1. Home page of the unit “Offending, insulting and swearing”

### 5.3.1. Activity 1: finding the words

The LIRA repository was mainly designed for heritage learners of Italian and non-native Italian speakers who already have a good command of grammar and vocabulary but want to improve their ability to use the target language, developing or refining their pragmatic skills. As already mentioned, the use of contemporary literature represents a good starting point for activities that can facilitate learners in recognising bad words and, more generally, in ‘noticing’ the impoliteness expressions and various strategies adopted in a text to offend and insult (see § 3.2 above).

In this light, the first activity *Cerca la parola (Find the word)* presents four contemporary extracts where we encounter some locally contextualised impolite



words. Users can recognise them or, by recurring to their intuitions, attempt to anticipate and interpret forms and meaning(s). The users' task, here, is to notice single words used to offend and insult. In the first, second and fourth excerpt they are, respectively: "*cretino*" (*stupid*), "*ignorante*" (*ignorant*) and "*bastarda*" (*bastard*), probably recognisable as offensive by an intermediate learner of Italian. Instead, in the third short text, the word is "*dottoruncolo*" (*quack*), i.e. a word with a diminutive of *doctor*, implying that the character in the story is definitely not considered a good professional. This example suggests how a simple change in the word's suffix can take on a negative connotation, within a specific context:

Durante un'udienza in tribunale la **GIP** chiede all'avvocato Malinconico di spiegare le ragioni della discussione in atto.

- Buongiorno, - dico.
- Che cosa sta succedendo, avvocato...? – chiede la Gip, sospettosa.
- Malinconico, - completo la domanda, soddisfatto che mi abbia riconosciuto nel ruolo ; poi, senza minimamente soppesare le parole, vengo al punto.
- Che questo cretino – indico il cretino con un cenno della testa, - si è permesso di dirmi di spegnere il cellulare.

Tratto da "Non avevo capito niente" di Diego De Silva (Einaudi, 2007)

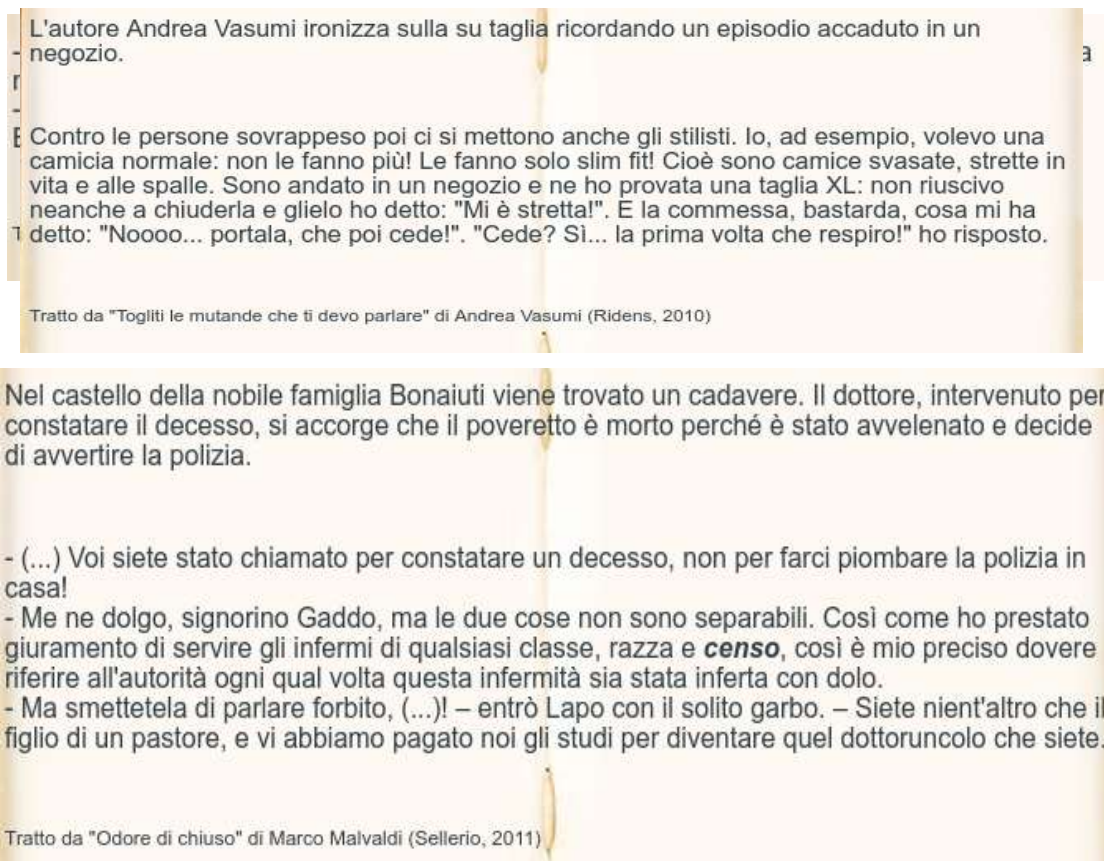


Figure 2. Texts of activity 1 "Find the word"

### 5.3.2. Activity 2: matching words and reactions


The need to present a broad communication context that is not confined to a single or few conversational turns can be resolved by using film sequences. An illustration of this use is presented in the second activity, *Attento a come parli* (*Be careful how you talk!*), whose input, provided by a video clip, is taken from the television series *"Non pensarci"*. The scene takes place on a bus. A young man – the main character in the TV series, a sort of angry man who always speaks polemically – is sitting, and next to him there is a free seat. An elderly lady asks if she can sit on the empty seat beside him. The young man responds in a very impolite tone (as the initial opposite *No* shows), by saying that the place is already taken by his sister and that there are other free seats on the bus. An animated discussion follows between the two and another passenger takes the floor in defence of the elderly lady. The video clip input is

accompanied by a transcript of the interaction so that, besides or while listening to the dialogue, the user can also read it:

**Attento a come parli!**

Guarda il video tratto dalla serie TV **NON PENSARCI** di **Gianni Zanasi** e leggi la trascrizione. Osserva con attenzione sia le espressioni offensive, gli insulti espliciti e impliciti, sia le diverse reazioni agli insulti. Trascina poi accanto ad ogni "reazione" il commento che la descrive, facendo attenzione perchè una reazione non ha un commento.

La scena si svolge su un autobus. Stefano è seduto e accanto a lui c'è un posto libero. Una signora anziana chiede se può sedersi, ma Stefano le risponde dicendo che il posto è occupato e che ce ne sono altri liberi. Tra i due nasce una discussione alla quale si aggiunge anche un altro passeggero.



Signora anziana	posso?
Stefano	no è occupato...
Signora anziana	come occupato? lo sono anziana sono stanca
Stefano	è pieno è pieno di posti vada...
Signora anziana	e chi c'è lì?
Stefano	c'è mia sorella che adesso arriva
Signora anziana	lei è un maleducato
Stefano	perché? Che aggressività... è occupato

Figure 3. Video of the activity “Be careful how you talk”

In this activity, the learning aim is two-fold: (a) to notice and understand the offensive expressions and insults, if any, used, and (b) to associate the different reactions to the insults uttered in the interaction. The table represented in Figure (4) shows both the utterances used by the characters to offend, in an explicit or implicit way (e.g. *una persona civile si sarebbe alzata* = “a decent person would have stood up”) and the reactions/answers to them, given by counterparts (e.g. *ecco si vede che lei è civile* = “here we see that you are a decent person”). Specific attention is drawn to reactions, by asking LIRA users to match the comments which describe the type of reactions in the ongoing interaction (as reported on top of Figure 4: ‘reproaching using a severe tone’; ‘judging the emotional reaction’; ‘conveying irony’; ‘reacting with an emphatic question’) with offences and related reactions/answers:

Rimprovera usando un tono severo	Giudica la reazione emotiva	Esprime ironia	Reagisce con una domanda enfatica
<b>Insulto</b>	<b>Reazione all'insulto</b>		
lei è un maleducato	perché? Che aggressività... è occupato		
ignorante toh maruchin!			
una persona civile si sarebbe alzata... (implicito = lei è incivile)	ecco si vede che lei è civile		
nooo siete voi che la state facendo negli stadi con i mortaretti	ma che cazzo c'entra?		

Figure 4. Activity “Be careful how you talk”

### 5.3.3. Activity 3: What do you think about? Comparing opinions

Depending on the context, some common words can take on the meaning of insults (e.g. in activities 1 and 2); in other cases, insults can also be formulated using swear words, a particular class of words. A third activity in the unit, entitled *Parolacce come insulti (Swearing as insults)* consists of a short text and is divided into two parts. The first part presents open questions addressed to the users – “Have you ever expressed an offence or insult using a swear word? What swear words do you know in Italian?”– who are invited to give a short written answer about whether they use expressions to offend and what type of language they normally use. After completing the task, users click and submit their written answer. These answers can then be compared with those given by community members (native and non-native LIRA users).

An innovative aspect of LIRA, in fact, lies in providing multiple feedback for useful comparison. Since the LIRA repository is mainly designed for self-learning, it is primarily through the feedback itself (given by LIRA editors or received by community members) that users may understand the links between forms, functions and contexts (Ferrari *et al.* 2017). However, due to the very nature of language use, it is not possible to provide learners with a single right answer, nor is it possible to exemplify possible uses in an exhaustive way. For this reason, activities are designed to suggest a range of different reference models to the users of the repository, related to what Italians belonging to groups of different ages, sexes, and, supposedly, different geographical origins, have said or written, while referring to the situations presented in the activities themselves. When entering the platform the first time, in fact, users are invited to fill in a short questionnaire – *The User’s profile* – about their mother tongue/s, other languages spoken, and main biographic characteristics (age, gender, nationality, etc.). The data registered in this *User Profile* allow the system to aggregate the users’ answers given to open-ended activities, such as the one shown below (see Figure 5).

In activities where it is more problematic to predict an answer in terms of adequacy, LIRA draws on a comparison with the responses by the authors

and/or those of other members of the user community. Therefore, after submitting the answer, in the second part of the activity, users receive feedback that visualizes both their answer (see the ex. in Figure 5: *Sure! I tend to use a lot of them, too many, especially when I am angry!!!*), and the answers given by other community members, who are divided into native (see the second column “Le risposte degli italiani”) and non-native users<sup>30</sup> (see “Le risposte degli altri utenti”):

Parolacce come insulti		
La tua risposta	Le risposte degli italiani	Le risposte degli altri utenti
Certo!! Ne uso parecchie...troppe:) soprattutto quando sono arrabbiata!!!	<p>Si, mi è capitato.</p> <p>(alcuni) insulti/parolacce: stronzo, testa di cazzo, cretino, cazzo, merda</p> <p>certo che si.</p> <p>ignorante, cretino, deficiente, stronzo, bastardo, idiota, coglione, mongoloide</p> <p>Non mi capita spesso: posso usare stronzo e poco altro. Uso più spesso l'ironia o citazioni incomplete di frasi con parolacce, (ma vai !)</p>	<p>Si, mi è capitato di esprimere un'offesa usando una parolaccia, in particolare durante un litigio con l'interlocutore coetaneo.</p> <p>La maggiorparte.</p> <p>non mi è mai capitato . quasi tutte.</p> <p>no. la maggior parte.</p> <p>si mi ec apitato;quelle che conosco sono stronz* troi* puttan* cazzz* merd* coglion* e altre</p> <p>Si , mi è capitato di offendere o insultare qualcuno in svariate occasioni , non mio diletto ma per esprimere in modo più marcato e forse più chiaro alla persona a cui erano rivolte le mie idee e intenzioni.</p>

Figure 5. Community feedback

For reasons of space, we will briefly mention the subsequent task in Activity 3 which asks users to reflect on some Italian swear words very frequently used in conversations. They can also be heard on TV programmes, in talk shows, for example, and sometimes are even used by journalists and politicians. These words do not always correspond to a direct insult addressed to an interlocutor, but can just have an emotional and almost liberating function (see § 3.2), or, in some cases, they are used as conversational fillers, emptied of their denotative and connotative meanings. The swear word dealt with in the activity is *vaffanculo* (*fuck off!*), also mentioned in its abbreviated forms (*vaffa*, *fanculo* or the like). Users are asked to indicate if they know it and, then, feedback is provided both through a video taken from the column by the journalist Beppe

<sup>30</sup> This distinction is exclusively based on what LIRA users indicate as their mother tongue/s in the *User Profile*. We assume it as a distinction which is functional to the comparison between answers given by the community members. Due to this practical purpose, we deliberately suspend the dichotomy ‘native vs non-native’ from the ongoing academic debate on it, with reference to the actual communicative competence of speakers (see Zanoni 2016b).

Severgnini in the online newspaper *La Stampa*, and other examples of contextualised uses in literary texts.

#### **5.3.4. Activity 4: why do we use bad language?**

After having encountered several words frequently used in Italian to offend or insult, and considered their forms and functions, LIRA users are invited to reflect on the reasons why swear words pervade communication. The first part of the activity *La lingua "sporca"...parliamone* (*Bad language...let's talk about it*) presents an open question and users are asked to submit a short answer. Then, they can compare their answer with those given by two linguists, Vito Tartamella and Valeria Della Valle, who are invited speakers on a television programme dedicated to this topic. In the video interview, the two linguists explain and motivate the frequent use of rude and bad expressions in daily communication, pointing out an irreplaceable role these words play in our language, as they are assigned to express emotions.

In the programme, Vito Tartamella refers to his book – published in 2009 for a broad audience – that presents a collection of Italian swear words, curses and, insults, and illustrates the results of a survey on their offensiveness. He has also created an instrument – called *Volgarometro* – in order not only to rate the most frequently used Italian swear words but also to show how they are perceived by speakers.

Drawing on the television debate, the second part of Activity 4 presents a list of ten frequent Italian swear words and asks users to place them on Tartamella's scale, from the most to the least rude one, ordering words by perceived seriousness. This activity aims at furthering linguistic reflection on impoliteness and, above all, at raising metapragmatic awareness of it.

#### **5.3.5. Activity 5: joking or being serious?**

As we have seen in the above sections, the theoretical debate highlights the functional complexity of impoliteness and the dual value of swearing as an offensive tool, but also as a joking and ironic one, which signals familiarity and intimacy between speakers (see §. 2.3 and § 3.2 above).

In the activity *Scherzi o fai sul serio (Joking or being serious?)*, in order to introduce this type of variation, strictly related to the context, and the social actions accomplished in it, a brief excerpt of narrative fiction is presented. Here, the word "*cretino*" (*idiot*) takes on an affectionate and empathetic meaning, which is determined by the local, intimate context where it is inserted (two people who are falling in love). This use is also explicitly motivated by the author himself in a meta-communicative comment following the interaction of the two protagonists: "When a woman says you are an idiot, she is usually falling in love with you. And now I feel such an idiot [...]"<sup>31</sup>.

The activity then proposes four audio clips with examples of variation in use. Users are required to identify the function of the word, i.e whether the speaker is being serious or whether s/he is joking. To put it in another way, users are invited to comprehend and reflect on the pragmatic conditions in which the connotative words are used and how these conditions account for the positive purpose of insults (see Pistolesi 2007; Pugliese 2009)<sup>32</sup>:


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<sup>31</sup> The statement made by the character of the novel can give rise to multiple interpretations and critical comments, depending on the socio-cultural context in which it is read. However, it has been reported in the activity only for the teaching-learning aims illustrated above, regardless of whether it could trigger a discussion on 'political correctness'.

<sup>32</sup> In this regard, Pistolesi (2007: 127) also underlines that the Italian formula *bastardo* (*bastard*), used for example to celebrate a success, conveys a laudatory meaning ("Che bastardo che sei!"), which is diametrically opposite to the negative one (see the same word and its function in Activity 1).

## Scherzi o fai sul serio?

A volte le parolacce o le espressioni gergali più violente possono essere usate senza risultare offensive per chi ascolta. Al contrario vengono utilizzate in senso ironico o ludico o affettuoso nei confronti del nostro interlocutore, come ad esempio in questo brano:

 Comunque è vero, - fa Alessandra Persiano dopo un po'.  
Cosa.  
Che ti faccio le pulci alle parole.  
Sul serio?  
Ma sì. È che... non lo so, sono nervosa.  
E perché  
Il timing che precede la battuta che segue è, come dire, perfetto.  
Perché è colpa tua, cretino.

Quando una donna ti dà del cretino, generalmente si sta innamorando. E io mi sento così cretino, adesso, che mi metto a camminare in mezzo alla strada senza curarmi delle macchine che mi evitano e nemmeno mi strombazzano, tanto devo sembrare cretino, evidentemente.

Tratto da "Non avevo capito niente" di Diego De Silva (Einaudi, 2007)

Ora ascolta gli audio. Poi rispondi alla seguente domanda: chi parla e usa espressioni forti sta scherzando o fa sul serio? Trascina le icone sotto la relativa tabella.



Figure 6. The activity "Joking or being serious?"

### 5.3.6. Activity 6: reacting to bad language

The *Offending, insulting and swearing* unit ends with an activity entitled *La vicina insopportabile (The unbearable neighbour)*. The purpose of this activity is to facilitate raising awareness about the components of context in relation to a specific social action. A video clip contains a role-play in which two neighbours are using semi spontaneous speech to argue over a parking space. After watching the video and listening to the first part of the interaction, the conversation stops. Users are then asked to continue the discussion, by producing a short piece of writing with their reactions.

Users submit their answer and, in the feedback, they can compare their reactions with those of the characters in the clip. Here too, users have access to the transcript of the full dialogue. This is an open activity, where the users' answers can also be compared with the answers offered by other native and non-native members of the LIRA community.

## 6. Concluding remarks



Harmony and disharmony, agreement and struggle are inherent to human communication and verbal interactions (Mizzau 2002). (Im)politeness permeates every aspect of society. Although for a long time it has received little attention from scholars, at least in comparison with politeness, the recent intense investigation on it has been filling the gap. Knowledge about it has advanced a lot, witnessing a shift from a separated view of politeness and impoliteness to a *continuum* at the ends of which they are placed. This allows a better understanding of the points where they reciprocally overlap, that is of their multiple faces. The word itself, *(im)politeness*, labels a communicative complexity.

As Beers Fägersten and Stapleton (2017b: 1) state, “any behavior that arouses, as swearing does, controversy, disagreement, disdain, shock, and indignation as often as it imbues passion, sincerity, intimacy, solidarity, and jocularly should be an obvious target of in-depth scholarship”. ‘And it has been such a target’, we might add, considering also the recent advancement in studies on swearing. This human practice, corresponding to an “intense and succinct – and sometimes very directed – emotional expression” (Jay and Jay, 2013: 2), according to some of the greatest scholars dealing with it, has been portrayed in great detail.

Faced with the extant research on (im)politeness, in its wider sense, formal second language instruction that overlooks or completely ignores this significant linguistic, communicative and cultural topic, is unjustifiable. We have seen (§ 3.1) how this main assumption informs the critical discussion that has been conducted in the last two decades within the field of second/foreign language education, whose researchers have also started to provide pedagogical models. However, a certain gap between theoretical descriptive literature and literature concerned with language teaching still remains. Further investigation is therefore required, as well as experimentations framed in the pragmatic approach to L2 teaching, along with interlanguage pragmatics studies on the development of awareness about (im)politeness.

To conclude, we wish to return to (im)politeness as a context-dependent phenomenon. It is not pointless to reaffirm the value of context and its components as the most important keys in determining perception and evaluation of (im)politeness itself, whether it is real or mock. This view applies to literary language – both in history and in contemporaneity – as often highlighted by several writers. It is worth, in this regard, mentioning Pontiggia's words from his *conversations on writing*<sup>33</sup>:

[...] Is it a mistake to use vulgar words, strong words, weak words? Everything must be commensurated with the context, with the language choice made. There is a tradition of extraordinary artists who put into their language violent words, even vulgar words, even trivial, but which are redeemed in a powerful way by the literary consistency. The plays of Aristophanes, the comedies of Plautus [...] but then we could speak of Rabelais, Folengo, Céline, Miller, Bukoswski; among the Italians, of Busi [...]: their works are rich in expressions that, considered in isolation, we could define [...] violent, vulgar. In their context, however, they acquire strength, they constitute the structure, the true language of the text; and they escape any kind of censorship [...]. We must always judge the use of the word in relation to the context [...] (Pontiggia 2016: 116; our translation).

The view of context as a crucial key applies to everyday communication, as well. Bad words are uttered, heard and read daily, depending on social settings and specific interactions. (Im)politeness related to both types of language – the conversational one and the literary one – should be introduced in the classroom and provided in web teaching resources, if we agree about the aim of developing a solid awareness of it, as well as of the value of sociocultural context in communication.

Far from learning how to *dire parolacce* (i.e. “how to use swear words”) and

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<sup>33</sup> Giuseppe Pontiggia's book was published posthumously by Belleville Editions. It contains the transcription of a cycle of twenty-five radio broadcasts, on the theme of writing, which Pontiggia held in 1994 on Radio-Rai Due, the national public broadcasting company in Italy.

from censuring swearing in language teaching, an adequate pedagogic management of this topic, and of impoliteness as a whole, would allow students to gain a thorough consciousness of its social significance. It goes without saying that this management will concern today's discourse, but it will not be without any historical depth.

In light of such an awareness, the imperative addressed to an imaginary boy by the same author of the well-known *Pinocchio*, in the epigraph we quoted, may raise a slight smile, while also reminding us, once again, that teaching (im)politeness is not encouraging impolite behaviour. It is, instead, providing learners with different opportunities in L2 interactions (Rieger 2017), namely being polite, impolite or anything in between.

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