Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
2023, Vol.10, No. 5, 16-28
http://dx.doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1740

ISSN: 2149-1291

How Polite can Impoliteness be? A Jordanian Gendered Perspective

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Abstract: Contrary to the abundance of research on politeness in many languages, little research has been done on impoliteness, for, unlike politeness, impoliteness is essentially unmarked and, hence, defies direct observation. This study, which is informed by the work of Culpeper (1996, 2005, 2011), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), and Holmes (1995, 2008, 2013), attempts to examine impoliteness from a gender perspective. The data were collected from an equally divided sample of 100 male and female adults (age 20-79 years) from different regions of Jordan by means of a 31-item checklist of potentially impolite behaviors. The findings revealed an effect for gender as, despite evident similarities, male and female respondents manifest differences in their perceptions of what constitutes (im)polite behavior. The study concludes with recommendations for further research.
Keywords**:** Culpeper, gender, impoliteness, Jordan, politeness.

Unlike prolific research on politeness in both English and Arabic (e.g., Bataineh, 2013; Bataineh & Aljamal, 2014; Bataineh & Bataineh, 2005, 2006, 2008; Bousfield, 2008; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967), relatively little research has been done on impoliteness (Al-Jahmani, 2009; Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 1996; Locher & Bousfield, 2008) probably because, unlike politeness, impoliteness is essentially unmarked and, hence, unnoticeable (Escandell-Vidal, 1996; House, 2010). Politeness research has proven inadequate to explicate impoliteness (Austin, 1987; Eelen, 2001), which has led scholars (e.g., Culpeper, 1996) to use politeness research (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1987) as a springboard for devising impoliteness strategies.

Culpeper (2010, p. 23), who has done extensive research on impoliteness, defined impoliteness as a "negative attitude towards specific behavior in specific contexts" but later reworked the definition to entail negative attitudes towards such behaviors as informed by societal expectations. As such, any behavior incompatible with "how a person is meant, how he/she wants to be, and/or how he/she feels it needs to be" (Culpeper, 2011, p. 23), may be seen as impolite. Culpeper (2011) further posits that impoliteness is oftentimes less what is said than how it is said. Impoliteness is also defined as "communicative strategies designed to attack the face, and cause social quarreling and disharmony" (Culpeper et al., 2003, p. 1546), an advertent or inadvertent (Culpeper, 2005) face-threatening behavior in a particular context (Locher & Bousfield, 2008), and an insensitive or disrespectful behavior which communicates disregard towards others (Dubrin, 2011) or conflicts with another's expectations of how things should be (Culpeper, 2011). In other words, impoliteness becomes evident when one intentionally

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communicates a face-attack, the hearer perceives it as intentional, or a combination of the two (Culpeper, 2005).

The substance of impoliteness is a matter of debate, and, hence, impoliteness research is done from two perspectives. Some scholars view impoliteness as the reverse of politeness (Culpeper, 1996; Eelen, 2001; Lakoff, 1989) whereas others view it as a tool for deliberate communication (Beebe, 1995; Kasper, 1990). Either way, impoliteness is essentially an uncooperative attitude resulting from particular behaviors in particular contexts (Culpeper, 2011; Locher & Bousfield, 2008; Mullany, 2011). It occurs when one intentionally attacks another's face, when one comprehends another's behavior as deliberately face threatening, or both (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Bousfield, 2013; Christie, 2013; Croom, 2014).

Impoliteness affects people's life (Jobert & Jamet, 2013), for the absence of communicated politeness is potentially the absence of polite manners (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 1996, 2005; Meibauer, 2014). While politeness attempts to weaken deliberate, accompanying and unintentional (Goffman, 1967) face threatening acts, impoliteness represents the communication of conflictive actions which strengthen them. Therefore, impoliteness depends on both intention and aggression (Bousfield, 2008).

Language scholars have long been interested in the disparities between the language used by men and women. The identification of and attempts to explain differences in the speech patterns of men and women have been the focus of a plethora of research on language and gender. Lakoff (1975) and Holmes (1995) put forth several fundamental presumptions about what distinguishes the language of women (and men). Lakoff (1975) claims that because they are inferior to men in society, women use more politeness strategies. Similarly, Holmes (1995), drawing on her own work and that of others (e.g., Fishman, 1978; Tannen, 1990, 1994; Zimmerman & West, 1975), claims that women tend to speak more politely than men.

Stereotypes aside, there are reports that males are less polite (hence, more impolite) than females (e.g., Mills, 2002; Sung, 2012; Yating, 2014). Research seems to suggest that aggressors generally share certain features in terms of age, sex, wealth, education, and physical appearance, among others. Anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that older and younger wrongdoers bring out less anger than teenagers and young adults, rich and educated less than poor and uneducated, and thin and tall less than obese and short (e.g., Jay, 1992).

Research on impoliteness in Arabic is probably as relatively limited as that in other languages. However, there is a good body of research on impoliteness, in both standard and various dialects of Arabic, in both naturally-occurring or simulated exchanges (e.g., Al-Odwani, 2019; Al-Qarni, 2020; Badarneh et al., 2018; Bahous, 2009; Belfarhi, 2009) and various literary, audio, and visual media (e.g., Abdelkawy, 2019; Al-Dilaimy & Khalaf, 2015; Al-Zidjaly, 2019; Hammod & Abdul-Rassul, 2027; Hassan, 2019; Jarrah et al., 2023; Rabab'ah & Rabab'ah, 2021).

The current research addresses verbal impoliteness, which is defined as linguistic behavior perceived by the hearer as face threatening and/or inappropriate according to the prevalent norms of a particular context (Holmes, 2008). Research on the relationship between language and gender reports fundamental differences in language use between men and women (e.g., Brown & Nelson, 2012; Chambers, 1992; Eslami Rasekh & Saeb, 2015; Haas, 1979; Hanafiyeh & Afghari, 2014; Holmes, 1995; Lakoff, 1975; Talbot, 1998). For example, Talbot (1998) maintains that

> *[gender] is an important division in all societies. It is of enormous significance to human beings. Being born male or female has far-reaching consequences for an individual. It affects how we act in the world, how the world treats us. This includes for instance, the language we use, and the language used about us* (p. 2).

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Researchers have attempted to explain gender differences in the use of language (e.g., Henly & Kramarae, 1991; Noller, 1993; Uchida, 1992). Some point out biological differences as an important factor (Buffery & Gray, 1972; McKeever, 1987) whereas others argue that socialization is key since boys and girls have various ways of operating and understanding language (Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1987). Each society has its own norms that commit how, and whether or not, boys and girls use specific language patterns (Holmes, 1995).

Gender, as a social variable, informs the perception of politeness, or lack thereof, within a particular community or social group. Despite remarkable gender equality in health and education, gender-related bias, restrictive social norms, and a discriminatory legal framework are reported to widen economic and political gaps between Jordanian men and women (World Bank, 2014). Several reforms were made to instill gender parity across education, health, politics, and economic participation. However, even though gender differences in Jordan are not as pronounced as those in neighboring countries, the Global Gender Gap Index, which measures economic behavior, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, ranked Jordan 126 (out of 146 countries) in terms of gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Social interaction is contingent upon civility, courtesy, and good manners (Forni, 2002), as regulated by social norms and expectations (Porath & Pearson, 2013). Learning (and abiding by) social norms, which are taught through socialization (Conerly et al., 2021), are requisites to living in harmony (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Unfortunately, not all behaviors abide by these norm, hence impolite, deviant, or uncivil behaviors (Nugier et al., 2009). Gender norms, which determine appropriate behaviors for men and women, are also learned through socialization (Hemsing & Greaves, 2020).

Although communication is affected by other factors such as age, race, socioeconomics, and cultural identity, gender is reported as the most influential of these factors (Brown & Nelson, 2012; Chen-Xia et al., 2022; Holmes, 2013). Research suggests that gender relations are power relations and, thus, the disparities in gender equality are indicative of a social mismatch in the status and power relationships of men and women. Being a woman is stereotypically associated with being powerless (quiet, obedient, accommodating) whereas being a man is associated with being powerful (outspoken, in control, able to impose his will). Gender roles tend to perpetuate the power inequalities on which they are based. For example, women in Jordan, as in many other contexts, are discouraged from public social interaction (e.g., speaking up in public), which often limits their access to social involvement and, eventually, decision-making.

Like politeness (Chambers, 1992; Holmes, 1995; Lakoff, 1975; Mills, 2003; Trudgill, 1972), impoliteness is affected by gender (e.g., Suhandoko et al., 2021), as gender constitutes a catalyst for building both personality and social relationships. According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003),

> *[g]ender is not a part of one's essence, what one is, but an achievement, what one does. Gender is a set of practices through which people construct and claim identities; not simply a system of categorizing people. And gender practices are not only about establishing identities but also about managing social relations* (p. 305).

Women are reported to consider talking not only a significant way to keep in touch with others but also a means to build and sustain relationships. Men, on the other hand, are reported to view language as a means for exchanging information (Holmes, 1995; Murphy, 2014; Vallée, 2014). Women use more politeness strategies (e.g., hedges, qualifiers) than men use in requests (Brown & Nelson, 2012) and are more likely to apologize than men (Bataineh, 2013; Bataineh

& Aljamal, 2014; Bataineh & Bataineh, 2005, 2006, 2008; Brown & Nelson, 2012). Similarly, unlike men, who use negative impoliteness (viz., using particular acts to attack one's negative face, e.g., condescend, scorn, ridicule), women seem to prefer positive impoliteness (viz., use particular acts to attack one's positive face, e.g., be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic), which may be attributed to women's relatively more empathetic nature and men's tendency for dominance (Suhandoko et al., 2021). However, Mills (2005) cautions against seeing impoliteness and gender (and, by extension, the relationship between them) as readily identifiable static entities. She argues that

> *gender and impoliteness are elements which are worked out within the course of interaction. They are elements which are closely inter-related as stereotypically feminine gender identity is largely constructed around notions of "nice", supportive, co-operative behavior, either affirming or resisting those stereotypes of femininity* (Mills, 2005, p. 1).

Purpose, Questions, and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impoliteness strategies used by adult Jordanian men and women, compare them against those of Culpeper (1996), identify the potential similarities and differences between the two, and offer potential causes and interpretation. More specifically, this study answers the following questions:

1. What behaviors are perceived as (im)polite by Jordanian female adults?
2. What behaviors are perceived as (im)polite by Jordanian male adults?
3. What are the similarities and differences in the perception of (im)politeness between Jordanian male and female adults?

This study derives its significance from being one of the first to examine impoliteness and gender in the Jordanian context (cf., Al-Jahmani, 2009). The study is hoped to bridge a gap in Jordanian impoliteness research and encourage future research on the various aspects of impoliteness.

Method and Instrumentation

The sample of the study consisted of a random, equally divided group of 100 male and female speakers of Arabic between 20 and 79 years of age from different regions of Jordan. To examine the respondents' perceptions of what constitutes (im)polite behavior, a 31-item checklist, based on the work of Culpeper (1996, 2005, 2011) and Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), was designed, checked for validity and reliability, distributed, and collected hand-to-hand. To eliminate any language-related problems on the part of the respondents, the Checklist was translated into Arabic.[2]

To establish its validity, the Checklist, in both its English and Arabic versions, was given to a jury of seven experts, from Yarmouk University and Jordan University of Science and Technology (Irbid, Jordan), whose comments were reflected in the final version of the Checklist. It was then piloted on 10 participants, who were later excluded from the main sample of the research, to establish its reliability (r=0.92). After collecting the filled-in Checklists, the researchers analyzed the responses and calculated the percentages to find potential similarities and/or differences in the participants' responses.

[2] For a copy of the instrument, kindly contact the corresponding author at rula@just.edu.jo

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http://dx.doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1740

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Findings of the Study

Male Responses to the Checklist

The respondents were given thirty-one behaviors to judge as polite or impolite. The responses were tallied and percentages calculated, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Numbers and Percentages of Behaviors Perceived as (Im)Polite by Male Respondents

Item No.	Item	Polite		Impolite	
		n	%	n	%
30	divulging others' secrets, directly or indirectly	0	0	50	100
19	telling people off	1	2	49	98
23	using facial expressions that signal disgust and dissatisfaction (e.g., frowning, moving eyebrows)	2	4	48	96
31	not thanking others for help no matter how small	2	4	48	96
13	disdaining others	3	6	47	94
17	ordering people around	3	6	47	94
27	greeting others while seated	4	8	46	92
15	turning away from the speaker and ignoring him/her	5	10	45	90
24	missing an important appointment without making an apology	6	12	44	88
25	not apologizing for arriving late to an appointment/ meeting	6	12	44	88
7	dissing other people's opinions	8	16	42	84
18	silencing people with hand/arm movements instead of words	9	18	41	82
6	interrupting others	10	20	40	80
11	using insults	11	22	39	78
1	ignoring others in the middle of a conversation	12	24	38	76
5	joking regardless of the formality of the situation	12	24	38	76
22	insulting people for differences in opinion	12	24	38	76
3	calling acquaintances by first names or surnames (without titles)	15	30	35	70
12	corroborating every statement through invoking God's name	16	32	34	68
14	ogling others	16	32	34	68
16	raising one's voice	16	32	34	68
28	chewing loudly	16	32	34	68
4	allowing select people to participate in a conversation	17	34	33	66
21	showing disbelief with words/phrases (e.g., *for real?, swear!)*	17	34	33	66
29	using opening statements that degrade others	17	34	33	66
2	paying no attention to and not sympathizing with people	18	36	32	64
8	side-talking	18	36	32	64
10	intentional use of jargon with people who do not understand it	18	36	32	64
9	using the second-person pronoun to address people instead of names or titles	20	40	30	60
26	boasting about accomplishments, knowledge, or relationships	22	44	28	56
20	answering a mobile phone without permission	24	48	26	52

Table 1 shows that the male respondents considered all the behaviors impolite but with varying frequency. All 50 respondents viewed the behavior in Item 30, *divulging others' secrets, directly or indirectly*, as impolite compared to 52% who considered that in Item 20, *answering a mobile phone without permission*, impolite. Similarly, 98% considered the behavior in Item 19, *telling people off*, impolite, and 96% of the respondents considered the behavior in Item 23, *using facial expressions that signal disgust and dissatisfaction* and Item 31, *not thanking others for help no matter how small*, impolite, respectively.

Female Responses to the Checklist

Table 2 shows the numbers and percentages of the responses by the female participants.

Table 2
Numbers and Percentages of Behaviors Perceived as (Im)Polite by Female Respondents

Item No.	Item	Polite		Impolite	
		n	%	n	%
11	using insults	0	0	50	100
19	telling people off	0	0	50	100
30	divulging others' secrets, directly or indirectly	0	0	50	100
18	silencing people using hand/arm movements instead of words	1	2	49	98
27	greeting others while seated	1	2	49	98
31	not thanking others for help no matter how small	1	2	49	98
13	disdaining others	2	4	48	96
29	using opening statements that degrade others	3	6	47	94
6	interrupting others	4	8	46	92
24	missing an important appointment without apologizing	4	8	46	92
25	not apologizing for the delay to an appointment or meeting	4	8	46	92
1	ignoring others in the middle of a conversation	5	10	45	90
15	turning away from the speaker and ignoring him/her	5	10	45	90
17	ordering people around	5	10	45	90
23	using facial expressions that signal disgust and/or dissatisfaction, such as frowning or moving eyes	5	10	45	90
28	chewing loudly and annoyingly	5	10	45	90
2	giving no attention to a person and sympathizing with him/her	6	12	44	88
14	ogling others	6	12	44	88
4	allowing some people but not others to participate in the conversation	7	14	43	86
16	raising one's voice	7	14	43	86
3	calling acquaintances by first names or surnames (without titles)	8	16	42	84
10	intentional use of jargon with people who do not understand it	8	16	42	84
12	corroborating every statement through invoking God's name	8	16	42	84
21	showing disbelief with words/phrases (e.g., *for real?, swear!)*	8	16	42	84
9	using the second-person pronoun to address people instead of names and titles	9	18	41	82
7	dissing other people's opinions	10	20	40	80
22	insulting people for differences in opinion	10	20	40	80
26	boasting about accomplishments, acquisitions, knowledge or relationships	11	22	39	s8
20	answering a mobile phone without permission	12	24	38	76
5	joking regardless of the formality of the situation	15	30	35	70
8	side-talking	20	40	30	60

Table 2 shows that, like their male counterparts, the female respondents considered all the behaviors impolite but in different percentages. All female respondents agreed that *divulging others' secrets, directly or indirectly* (item 30), *using insults* (item 11), and *telling people off* (item 19) are impolite whereas only 60% (n=30) of the respondents regarded *side-talking* (item 8) impolite.

Tables 1 and 2 show that all male and female respondents considered the behaviors in the Checklist impolite, albeit some more so than others. Both groups of respondents invariably considered *using insults* (item 11), *telling people off* (item 19), and *divulging others' secrets* (item 30) impolite whereas only 60% (n=3o) considered *side-talking (*item 8) impolite.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1740

ISSN: 2149-1291

Male and Female Responses Compared

Table 3 summarizes the respondents' perceptions of (im)polite behaviors in the Checklist.

Table 3
Numbers and Percentages of Behaviors Perceived as (Im)Polite by All Respondents

Polite	%	Impolite	%
536	18	2464	82

Both Male and female respondents perceived most of the behaviors impolite, as only 18% (n=536) perceived them as polite. There were mostly similarities between the two groups, as male and female respondents were in agreement that the behaviors in the Checklist are impolite. Not only did the male and female respondents regard *divulging others' secrets and taunting them, directly or indirectly* (item 30) impolite, they also agreed that other behaviors were impolite in close percentages, namely *disdaining others* (item 13), *not thanking others for help* (item 31), *telling people off* (item 19), *greeting others while seated* (item 27), and *turning away from the speaker and ignoring him/her* (item 15). More male than female respondents considered some behaviors impolite, namely *joking regardless of the formality of the situation* (item 5), *dissing other people's opinions* (item 7), and *ordering people around* (item 17). In contrast, more female than male respondents considered other behaviors impolite, such as *paying no attention to and not sympathizing with people* (item 2), *using insults* (item 11), and *boasting about accomplishments, acquisitions, knowledge or relationships* (item 26).

The fact that female respondents were found less impolite than their male counterparts is consistent with the literature (Bousfield, 2008; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). More specifically, it corroborates the work of Holmes (1995, 2008, 2013) who posits that women are more polite than men, because linguistic differences are a reflection of social differences related to status and power. Women are also reported to be more polite, because they are more status-conscious than men. In other words, women are conscious that how they speak reflects social status which they are generally keen to acquire through elevated speech forms.

The findings may also be seen through Holmes's (2013) lens of women as guardians of society's values, as society tends to expect 'better' behavior from women than from men. Women are expected to uphold certain societal values and exhibit better behavior than men is a concept rooted in gender roles and traditional norms. Through early socialization, different expectations and unique roles are assigned to men and women. Holmes (2013) maintains that

> *Little boys are generally allowed more freedom than little girls. Misbehavior from boys is tolerated where girls are more quickly corrected. Similarly, rule-breaking of any kind by women is frowned on more severely than rule-breaking by men. Women are designated the role of modelling correct behavior in the community. [..and] society expects women to speak more correctly and standardly than men, especially when they are serving as models for children's speech* (p. 168).

Holmes's (2013) subordinate group explanation lends itself readily to explain the current findings, as "people who are subordinate must be polite" (p. 168). Subordinate groups are those of less social, economic, or political power compared to dominant groups. Women are often seen as a subordinate group (in the same manner as children are seen in relation to

adults) and, thus, must speak politely to avoid offending others (viz., men). This is also consistent with the argument that women use more polite forms to protect their face and that of others to be valued by the society.

Limitations of the Study

Although the research is sound in procedure and execution, it still has some limitations. The sample was somewhat limited although the researchers included a diverse group of participants in terms of age and place of residence across Jordan. Controlling other variables (e.g., relationship, power, status) may have had considerable influence on the findings. As the instrument used was a Checklist, other instruments (e.g., interviews, role-play) could have also added more detail and justification.

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This study examines the potential role of gender in the perception of (im)politeness by Jordanian male and female adults. Gender was found to have a significant role in the perception of (im)politeness, in favor of female respondents. This may be attributed to women's natural shyness, societal norms and expectations, and social status, all of which prevent them from being impolite (El-Azhary Sonbol, 2003; Pettygrove, 2006; Sifianou, 2013).

Gender was found to impact participants' perceptions, as both male and female respondents were aware of what constitutes impolite behavior, but female respondents were more so than their male counterparts. Female respondents perceived a considerably higher percentage of the behaviors in the Checklist impolite, especially in situations related to *lack of sympathy* and *boasting about accomplishments, acquisitions, knowledge or relationships*.

However, male respondents were more sensitive to impolite behaviors than their female counterparts in some cases, mainly when asked about *dissing people's opinions*, *ordering people around*, and *joking regardless of the formality of the situation*. This can be attributed to socialization, for boys and girls are treated, and raised, differently by parents, which, as a result, justifies the differences in their perceptions of what constitutes impolite behavior. To gain status and social approval, women generally shy away from impolite and/or inappropriate behaviors (Wikan, 1982).

The respondents unanimously regarded *divulging others' secrets, directly or indirectly* impolite, whereas a vast majority of 90 percent regarded *turning away from the speaker and ignoring him/her* impolite. Close percentages of the perception of impoliteness were also noted regarding the behaviors of *disdaining others*, *not thanking others for help no matter how small*, *telling people off*, *greeting others while seated*, and *turning away from the speaker and ignoring him/her*. Similarities were also evident in the perception of the impolite behaviors of *ignoring others in the middle of a conversation, paying no attention to and not sympathizing with people*, *calling acquaintances by first names or surnames (without titles)*, *allowing some people but not others to participate in the conversation*, and *using the second-person pronoun to address people instead of names and titles*, to name a few.

Future researchers should address other variables that may affect impoliteness (e.g., age, education, occupation), as previous research suggests that educated people behave differently from the less- or un-educated, employed people are more eloquent than the unemployed, and employers are usually more so than employees. The nature of a person's work may dictate the way he/she behaves.

ISSN: 2149-1291

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