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Rudeness as a System of Strategies and an Object of Classification

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In the article rudeness is considered as a strategy aimed at achieving a certain pragmatic effect. The author considers it possible to subdivide rudeness into rudeness of repulsion, cathartic rudeness, authoritative rudeness, rudeness as an expression of dissoluteness, aristocratic rudeness, rudeness as an expression of “buddy-buddy manners”, friendly rudeness, carnal rudeness, rudeness as an expression of class solidarity, etc. Different versions of rude abuse are also observed.

Keywords: politeness, rudeness, abuse, repulsion, catharsis, class solidarity, level of competence, cultural patterns

You spoke your words as though you denied the very existence of the shadows or of evil. But would you kindly ponder this question: What would your good do if evil didn't exist, and what would the earth look like if all the shadows disappeared?

M. Bulgakov. Master and Margarita

The present article regards rudeness as a sort of strategy aimed at achieving a certain pragmatic effect.

In the Russian online Philosophical dictionary one may read:

“Rudeness is a negative moral quality characterized by neglect of behaviour culture; opposite to politeness. One of the most disrespectful attitudes towards other people, rudeness expresses itself in undisguised hostility to other people, in lack of attention to other people's interests and needs, in an impudent attempt to impose one's own will and wishes on

others, in an inability to restrain one's annoyance, in an unpremeditated, or premeditated, attack on other people's self-respect, in undue familiarity, in dirty language, in making use of humiliating nicknames, as well as in rampageous actions”.

As we can see, this detailed definition builds up an opposition between rudeness and politeness, and points out that rudeness may express itself in action as well as in words. The present research dwells on verbal rudeness, although rude actions cannot be neglected either.

If the phenomenon of politeness has always been popular among the research workers all over

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the world (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Larina, 2009, et al.), that of rudeness interested the scholars much less. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the role rudeness plays in communication is in no way smaller than that of politeness, for all their behavioural differences.

The fact is that politeness as well as rudeness in their typical manifestations is nothing else than two opposite means of achieving one and the same aim, namely an attempt to gain a certain profit. Metaphorically, politeness may be compared to peaceful negotiations of two competing powers, while rudeness may be equalled to a military conflict, the final aim in both cases being an attempt to get in possession of certain resources.

For all that, one cannot assert that politeness and rudeness are opposite mirror-like, that is where one has a “plus” the other exposes a “minus”. Things are more complicated, it seems. Still, it is evident that they both allow themselves to be arranged in a certain classification.

Though a necessary reservation seems due here. Where politeness may easily be structured in a more detailed way, a similarly fine gradation of rudeness is hardly possible. Tautology excused, rudeness is, by definition, too rude, too unceremonious to be able to fit into a strict and exact classification net.

As it has been mentioned above, rudeness may be physical and verbal. Naturally, so can be politeness. But in the case of rudeness the difference is much more noticeable. Not that the problem is in which is stronger. After all, we know that verbal rudeness may be, literally, more deadly than a physical blow.

According to Prof. T.V. Larina, politeness may be absolute semantically, and relative pragmatically (Larina, 2009). Similarly, one may try to subdivide rudeness into *absolute*, like a fist blow, a deliberate push or exposing one’s middle finger. Evidently, here we have physical, or visual, rudeness. *Verbal* rudeness, on the

contrary, is mainly pragmatic, which is accepted in accordance with the norms of the given social group. On the practical level, every social group possesses its own concept of rudeness.

The fact is that rudeness is discursive and cannot be regarded in isolation from the context, while the context in this case is a social milieu in which any act may be or may be not looked upon as rude. To a very great extent decision on what is more rude and what is less rude depends on the addressee; for example, even Russian dirtiest language, like the so-called “mat” may be received by the opponent as something much less offensive than a humiliating order without a single bad word, as “Get away!”

Different reactions to rudeness may well be illustrated by two Russian proverbial idioms, «Собака лает, ветер носит» (A dog’s bark is blown away by the wind) and «Ему плюнь в глаза, а ему всё божья роса» (You may spit him in the eye, yet he will say it was holy dew). The first idiom refers to the indifferent or spiteful reaction to an invective attack, while the other describes the behaviour of a shameless fellow with very low morals. In both cases the invective shell bursts but just does not hurt. Still, the first “victim” admits that what he hears are swear words hurled at him and meant to harm, otherwise he would not have called the opponent’s words “dog’s bark”. In the second case, however, offensive language is taken for granted and is placidly ignored.

All the difficulties of classification notwithstanding, one may subdivide rudeness into several groups. Let us consider some of them.

1. First will come what one may call **rudeness of repulsion**, i.e. a deliberate desire to push the opponent away, literally or verbally, to offend them, to humiliate them, to ruin their self-esteem. This may be put in effect by a physical blow, a slap in the face, a rough repulsion, as well as

calling names, cursing, using obscene language, etc.

2. In a way, rudeness of repulsion is related to **cathartic rudeness**, when one swears and thus, by breaking a strong taboo, feels better, “relieves his soul”. In this case a physical reaction is also possible, when a person may crush anything in sight. But more often we speak about a verbal attack, when violating a universally accepted taboo offers the actor a satisfaction similar to, say, a plate broken during a noisy family row.

See in this connection a story from the memoirs by the great Russian social anthropologist Prof. Yu.M. Lotman who describes his war-time adventures (Translated from the Russian):

The place was absolutely deserted. I was completely broken down, but I somehow found a means to support myself: I was walking and shooting tracer bullets, one by one, right up into the blue sky. Strangely, it somehow helped to overcome the feeling of being lost. At the same time I shouted at the top of my voice the most unprintable swear words. This mixture of shooting and swearing gave me the necessary relief. At last I waded the last tributary, dropped to the ground and immediately fell asleep. Crossing the river Don was over (Lotman, 2003, p.25 in Russian).

3. A part of this strategy may be named **authoritative rudeness**, an attempt to humiliate one’s subordinate to show who the boss is. Naturally, such rudeness is always one-sided, and answering back is looked upon as an unprecedented violation of the norm.
4. One may speak about rudeness as an expression of **dissoluteness**, a deliberate neglect of etiquette. A convincing example is the behaviour of the popular Russian hairdresser Zverev, who, according to

yellow press reports, makes use of the most repulsive obscenities regardless of where and with whom he chooses to speak. Zverev’s lazily slow manner of speech proves that the fellow does not experience any need to “let out the steam”, it is just a means to demonstrate his indifference to other people’s feelings.

5. Next comes **“aristocratic rudeness”**, rudeness with the sole purpose to shock and startle. Unlike the followers of Zverev, actors are rude only in their own company. Their language is a way to express their “democratic views”. Examples are numerous, especially among artists, actors, but most of all among military and political leadership. Among Russian foul-mouths one might mention emperors (Peter the Great and Alexander the Third) politicians (Chernomyrdin and Gorbachev), army generals (G. Zhukov) and many others.
6. Close to this one stands rudeness as an expression of **buddy-buddy manners**. This is, so to speak, “good-natured rudeness” of the type “Hello, fartface, haven’t seen you for ages” Strictly speaking, this is no rudeness in the direct sense, the speaker demonstrates his friendly attitude, always supported by a benevolent intonation. Still, the use of the rude idioms allows us to list this case among all the others. See the following example from the memoirs of the famous Russian ballet dancer Maris Liepa (Translated from Russian):
(Yermolaev says, “You are such a bastard, such a true bastard, such a good bastard that you’re the best in this show. Ulanova and Timofeeva praised me, too.” (“Ogonyok” Journal 1989, No5, in Russian). It is an imitation of rudeness, an

attempt to conceal a friendly attitude under the disguise of calling bad names.

7. The detonating power of rudeness is visibly diminishing when it demonstrates itself in a friendly push, even quite tangible, or verbally, when the speaker wants to exhibit their “swearing art”. Genuine bad language, as a rule, lacks any desire to impress the opponent with its eloquent artistic skill; its super destructive power is hidden, above all, in their primitiveness and artlessness, which make them more emotional. Similarly, to inform others of the death of a dear relative, we never use high-flown idioms like “He left us”, “He met God our Lord” etc., but just say “He died”. Contrarily, a set of brightly coloured invectives, often rhymed, rather amuses than makes one angry.

8. **Carnal rudeness** occupies a noticeable place among all other types. Here aggressive attitude, unavoidable in sexual experience, is completed by intentionally rough language which, however, is meant to express tenderness and endearment. A good example may be observed in D. Lawrence’s “Lady Chatterley’s Lover”:

“Th’art good cunt, though, aren’t her? Best bit o’ cunt left on earth” (...)

“All on’t,” she teased. “Cunt! It’s like fuck then.”

“Nay, nay! Fuck’s only what you do. Animals fuck. But cunt’s a lot more than that. (...) Cunt! Eh, that’s the beauty o’ thee, lass?”

Even today the word “cunt” is considered the most obscene word in the whole of the English language, as well as its Russian equivalent. Yet, in the example above, it is an expression of the highest form of intimacy, another case of “fake rudeness”.

9. One more case of rude language is worth mentioning. It is rudeness as a means of

expressing **class solidarity**, whose motto is akin to R. Kipling’s “We’re of one blood!” Russian philologist A. Plutzer-Sarno quotes Yu. M. Lotman who, in one of his lectures, describes a visit of Maxim Gorky to Lev Tolstoy. The two famous authors engaged in a friendly talk, during which Tolstoy garnished his speech with the worst obscenities possible. Gorky, well-known for his low-class origin, was morbidly offended by such a behaviour of Tolstoy, he thought the count was imitating the speech of the low classes to humiliate him, to show the former tramp his place, while Gorky wanted to keep the image of an intelligent and well-brought up fellow. But Gorky was wrong, Lotman pointed out. Tolstoy meant no offence; on the contrary, his manner of speech was an indication that the count included Gorky in his intimate circle in which such use of dirty language was commonplace (Plutzer-Sarno, 2001, p.30).

In this case, again, it is not easy to talk about rudeness as an aggressive tool. In fact, here we do have an aggressive speech act, but this time aggression is shared by all those present, it is aggression as a tool of relieving co-habitation, a sort of *modus vivendi*. It is about such cases that Russians say jokingly, “We do not just use obscenities in our speech, we speak Obscense”. In some Russian subcultures one who avoids obscenities is looked upon as an alien and an enemy by definition.

Sometimes such rudeness may be classified among different versions of phatic speech.

Thus there exists a strategy of politeness as well as a strategy of rudeness. The first is thoroughly studied and minutely classified. Certain “rituals of politeness” are described in detail. “Rituals of rudeness” are much more difficult to deal with. To begin with, rudeness,

as has been mentioned above, is devoid of nuances, which are so typical of politeness. Secondly, perception of rudeness to a very great extent depends on the “receiving party”. “Thank you very much!” is more polite than the curt “Thanks!”, while “Millions of thanks!” is the “gratefulest” of the three. At the same time, one cannot likewise arrange “Get out!”, “Get off!”, or even “Fuck off!”, “Go to hell!”, or “Drop dead!” Each of the mentioned uncomplimentary wishes possesses approximately similar repulsive power, and in some circumstances the seemingly mild “Get off!” may sound ruder than “Fuck off!”

Still, one cannot deny that the strategy of rudeness does exist. Its existence is especially visible when two or more cultures are opposed to each other.

As we know, Russian speech practice is a proud possessor of only a few basic obscenities plus a limitless multitude of their derivatives. Remarkably, the more elaborate and decorative these derivatives are, the less their explosive power is.

In case of politeness things are just the other way round, elaborate and expanded politeness being appreciated much more than short and formal. The exception is when polite idioms are used ironically, sarcastically or humiliatingly.

In many cultures the bulk of the list of rude idioms is based on sex, in Germanic cultures the stress is laid on the scatological concept of dirt and filth. There are cultures which concentrate on profanities, as well as cultures which avoid rude speech altogether (Zhelvis, 2001, in Russian). Which, presumably, does not mean that the latter cultures have no idea of what rudeness is, they just make successful use of other means to make their opponents life unhappy. The strategy of rudeness by no means limits itself with the use of rude vocabulary.

Here are some behavioural patterns of different cultures, when what is considered rude

in one culture looks quite acceptable in another. In other words, different cultures make use of different conventionalist strategies.

Thus, for Russians it seems rather strange and excessive when some Westerners try to avoid direct address, especially when addressing strangers. Instead of the common Russian «Вы выходите на следующей остановке?» (Do you leave at the next stop?) natives of a few other cultures would rather say “Excuse me, next stop is mine!” thus avoiding direct address altogether. In the similar fashion, instead of direct question “Are you the last in the line?” (Russian way) the English would rather prefer non-personal “Where’s the end of the line?” The much more preferred way of asking for direction would be “I’m looking for “such-and-such street”.

Sometimes even a formal thank-you letter may be regarded as too rude or even offensive. Arab cultures are well-known for their colourful expressions of gratitude. G. Triandis quotes a thank-you letter of a leading figure from a university in Jordan (in back translation from Russian):

“May I thank you for your exceptional hospitality which you received us with. You were extremely generous and magnanimous. All your guests, ladies and gentlemen were examples of nobility. The schedule of our visit was also exceptionally well arranged”. It would be only appropriate to mention that the visit described so eloquently included an informal meal of hamburgers and non-alcoholic drinks (Triandis, 2011, p.254).

Rude gestures are sometimes just as national-specific as idioms. Russians are sure it is more polite to face those sitting when you are walking to your seat in the theatre; the British consider it impolite and in similar circumstances insist on showing the others their backs. An unasked piece of advice sounds very rude and unceremonious in England and is welcome

in Russia where it is looked upon as a sincere wish to help. There are cultures where soft and quiet intonation is a sign of good manners, while loud speech is frowned upon. At the same time, now that estrangement among people is visibly increasing, rude vocabulary and gestures may sometimes serve as a means to attract attention to the speaker, to give him voice, to help him speak for himself.

Scholars who study politeness single out negative or “distant” politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 129; Larina, 2009, p. 172). The aim of such politeness is establishing between the speakers a certain distance to give room to demonstrate respect. To that effect all sorts of artificial obstacles and barriers are being created, both material and spiritual. As the English would have it, “Good fences make good neighbours”. It is assumed that keeping a certain distance helps make interhuman communication smoother, it also helps avoiding unwanted intrusion into other people’s affairs, and, last but not least, save one’s face.

But the same negative strategy is used by rudeness. Politeness tactfully keeps a respectful distance, while rudeness creates distance by rudely pushing you off. A simile may be due here: personal distance is reduced to minimum in the situation of intimacy and in that of fight; physical contact is more or less the same, the aims being absolutely different.

Two polite persons should take care to observe distance, which, however, should not be too large for fear it may create estrangement. What is most important, this distance is nationally specific. Breaking national rules may lead to a misunderstanding or even conflict, to what is called cultural shock. Two quarrelling people may send each other to the most distant address possible, including hell or death. In case of the conflict growing worse, the two parties, on the contrary, may come closer and closer, violating

all the polite norms, intentionally entering the opponent’s personal space, pushing or striking him.

Quoting Howell (1982), Triandis suggests that the communicators should carefully observe the level of their *competence*. Wrong interpretation of one’s competence may lead to the incorrect interpretation of the other’s behaviour as rude (Triandis, 2011, Chapter 7 “Culture and Communication”). The following versions may be observed here:

1. Someone is rude, but does not know it, being ignorant of another (sub)culture’s norms.
2. Someone is rude to you, but you do not know the rules of answering back under the norms of the given (sub)culture. A witty example of an appropriate reaction:

A tough guy in public transport insults an elderly man:

“Old pepper-box, it’s high time you were in grave already!”

“Sonny, with your impudence you will push your way there ahead of me!”

3. Someone is rude to a person of another (sub)culture, using methods or idioms unknown to the attacked side. As a result, the offended party may even feel flattered, to an extreme joy of the attacker. The Russian “golub” (dove) may mean a passive homosexual, as well as the English epithet “gay” may produce a favourable impression on those foreigners who do not know the humiliating meaning of the word.

4. Finally, there is a sort of exchange of more or less traditional invectives, when one of them almost automatically calls forth the other:

“You’re a fool!”

“You’re another!”

(2) is an example of conscious competence, when one knows the rules of “fighting norms” and

applies them with a sort of artistic skill, while in (4) one replies automatically, without thinking.

The short notes on rudeness offered above are meant to prove the need to further study this important communicative phenomenon. Among the possible achievements of further research one may mention “a dictionary of rude manners and idioms”, a logical parallel to numerous dictionaries and encyclopaedias of good manners and polite idioms. At present, a number of dictionaries of all sorts of abuse are being published, but all of them

are nothing but collections of various obscenities. While what is needed is a thoroughly structured volume where there might be chapters devoted to methods of sending the opponent away, defaming him, cursing, deriding, etc. If there are manuals teaching table manners, there should be manuals teaching us what should not be done in polite society. Semantic and anthropological analysis of such lists might be of use to all those studying the phenomenon of aggression and its manifestation in different cultures.

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Грубость как система стратегий и объект классификации

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Грубость определяется в статье как стратегия, нацеленная на достижение определённого прагматического эффекта. Категорию грубости можно подразделить на грубость отторжения, катартическую, начальственную, аристократическую, дружескую, плотскую, выражающую классовую солидарность и др. Существуют различные виды грубых обменов репликами.

Ключевые слова: вежливость, грубость, оскорбление, отторжение, катарсис, классовая солидарность, уровень компетенции, культурные модели.
