

**Gonzalo Martínez Camino. Reseña de E. Brenes, *Descortesía verbal y tertulia televisiva. Análisis pragmalingüístico*. Bern: Peter Lang AG**

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This book constitutes a solid and insightful case study of verbal impoliteness. The author sets out her aims in the introduction: the study of the interrelation between linguistic forms and social factors (contextual and situational). To this end, she focuses on what she calls a pseudo TV talk-show: “a specialized branch of journalism focusing on the private lives of persons considered famous or well-known” (p. 14, my translation). She justifies her choice because, as long as “television is the nerve centre of our existence [...], we convert the characters in these television programs into a standard, guide or model of our own behaviors” (p. 14-15, my translation). It is logical, therefore, that the author should choose this form of speech since, because it has a strong influence on large sectors of society, it also has a major influence on verbal communication.

The book consists of six chapters, the conclusions, and two appendices. The six chapters form two parts: in the first three, Brenes Peña defines the main concepts around which her study will revolve, (im)politeness and TV talk-shows; the second part is a detailed analysis of the linguistic and rhetorical strategies that she finds in her corpus.

In the first two chapters, the author illustrates her position on (im)politeness. She begins with an outline of the state of the art. She observes how the evolution of these studies, since their origins in the early seventies, has marked out a socio-pragmatic field in the larger area of Pragmatics.

Nowadays, its object of study is the negotiation of the face of the communicators during an exchange and the description of its linguistic expressions. However, the author sees a shift in the perspective from a predictive one in the seventies and eighties toward a descriptive one at the start of the millennium. Taking into account her own interests, she dedicates half of the chapter to the concept of impoliteness and the development of its study.

In Chapter Two, the author outlines her methodology. The (im)politeness of a message depends on the receiver's assessment; linguistic expressions are neither polite nor impolite in themselves. However, the repeated use, inside a speech community, of a linguistic expression with a social value allows this (im)polite value to be codified. This means that any person who wants to be an operative member of a community needs to acquire a shared socio-cultural knowledge about which social values are associated with which expression, what effects these expressions will have in which situations, and how she or he can, finally, evaluate the social effect of the message once it has been produced in a specific communicative encounter. Therefore, the context is the shared socio-cultural knowledge that surrounds the communicative encounter and its interlocutors and it is necessary to distinguish clearly between what is codified and what is the result of the interpretation during the interaction (Briz Gómez 2004). Brenes Peña

distinguishes four different variables that condition how the interlocutors assess whether the communicator is being polite or not: socio-cultural, generic, situational, and individual. The first refers to what a particular culture understands by (im)polite, to the set of values and social roles. The second is related to the differences of the type of exchange. The third variable is the formality or informality of the situation. Finally, the fourth variable is the character of the interlocutors.

Consequently, she defines (im)politeness as a pragmatic function of a discourse where the emitter's intention is present, either to enhance or damage the social face of his or her receiver, and where the latter decodes this message properly. This reminds us of the Relevance Theory definition of ostensive-inferential communication as the communicator's behaviour that makes manifest to her audience her intention of making manifest a basic layer of information. In this reviewer's opinion, if the author thinks that (im)politeness is not coded in the linguistic units but is rather an effect that the communicator intends to stimulate in her audience's mind(s) using her or his message, it would have been better to use terms such as "interpret", "assess", and "react", rather than "decode".

The social effects that result from this pragmatic function form a gradation with two contradictory poles: the polite effect that creates a comfortable communicative atmosphere; the impolite effect that degrades both this atmosphere and the interlocutors' faces; in the middle, a neutral zone. Here Brenes Peña locates adequate communicative behavior that fits in with the situation and, therefore, goes by unnoticed by the interlocutors; it corresponds to what Watts (2003, 2005, 2008) calls politic behavior. However, we wonder if a behavior that fits in the interlocutors' socio-cultural expectations does not produce the social effects of polite behaviour: facework and a comfortable communicative atmosphere. On the other hand, she thinks that politeness can enhance the emitter's face because she or he can be seen as a competent or considerate interlocutor; in contrast, impoliteness makes the receiver think that the emitter is incompetent or inconsiderate. However, the author, following Held (2005), Hernández Flores (2005, 2006), and Bernal (2007), thinks that, in some situations, it could be assessed positively that the speaker behaves impolitely, for example, in parliamentary debates or military training.

The author classifies the impolite strategies of the interlocutors taking into account three criteria: Omission/expression, directness/indirectness, autonomy/affiliation:

- The emitter is impolite because he or she fails to produce a speech act that he or she is expected to produce taking into account the (in)formality of the situation, his or her social role and the genre he or she is using.
- The emitter is impolite because he or she produces a speech act that he or she is not expected to produce taking into account the (in)formality of the situation, his or her social role and the genre he or she is using.
  - This speech act can be assessed as an aggression to the face of the receiver as an autonomous member of the group (face of autonomy)
    - and it is expressed directly
    - or indirectly.

- This speech act can be assessed as an aggression to the face of the receiver as an accepted member (face of affiliation)
  - and it is expressed directly
  - or indirectly.

In the third chapter, the author addresses the definition of her object and the justification of her choice. What is the relation that she finds between this TV genre and impoliteness? The need to have a greater share of the TV audience makes the channels increase the level of impoliteness of these debates. This creates what the author calls mediatic-ludic impoliteness as well as a new genre, the pseudo TV talk-show. This is one of the situations where impolite behavior could be assessed positively. To analyse this, Brenes Peña recorded several broadcasts of seven programs; and she transcribed these audio-visual texts using the system proposed by Grupo Val. Es. Co (2003).

In order to define this genre, Brenes-Peña draws on Ducrot's theory of polyphony (1986). She distinguishes between the semantic point of view of the director and the persons responsible for the show, on the one hand, and the presenter's and the participant's view, on the other. The latter may just utter, as "enunciators", the message planned by the former, who, therefore, occupy the position of "locutors", those who are responsible discursively and legally. The presenter and the participants behave like "locutors" when they express their own points of view. Brenes Peña describes the reception as a triangular structure with a twofold disposition: on the first level, she finds that the presenter and the participants are "allocutionary receivers" when other participants are holding the floor. However, on a second level, she finds two different types of "non-allocutionary receivers": "addressees" and "non-addressees". The former is made up of the public that may be physically present in the TV studio or viewing the talk-show at home. The latter receive the message accidentally. These are the discursive coordinates which, according to Brenes Peña, define this genre. Nevertheless, this applies to any type of TV or radio debate. Brenes Peña, however, identifies particularities in three areas: objective, content and roles. The main objective of the talk-show is not the debate of an idea, but the manifestation of conflict among the participants. Therefore, the pitiless criticism of the romantic and sexual life of celebrities has to feed this conflict. Consequently, the presenter is no longer a "firefighter"; rather, the presenter's function is "to throw gasoline on the confrontation". If traditionally the attending public's role was to clap whenever the director of the program told them to, now, the channel and the program directors try to reduce the gap that separates these addressees from the participants in the talk-show. The presenter and the participants address them directly and, therefore, they become allocutionary receivers; in response, this public cheers and may even interrupt the participants or may try to correct what has been said. The use of SMS (texting, etc.) allows the absent public to participate too. Finally, Brenes Peña considers as a defining feature of this genre that it turns impolite behavior into a show.

In Chapter Four, the author identifies the impolite strategies and linguistic expressions that the participants use in the talk-show samples that make up her corpus. She focuses on those that are used in symmetrical relations between participants. The methodology she uses in order to identify the particular cases of impoliteness is to pay attention to the

reactions of the receiver, whether it be the allocutionary addressees, that is the other participants in the talk-show, or the non-allocutionary addressees, that is the public, present or absent. She can observe the reactions of the allocutionary addressees during the debate, but how can she verify the reactions of the non-allocutionary addressees? She resolves this by conducting a test of social habits; the results of this test are found in the second appendix of the book.

She identifies two main impolite strategies: imposition and discrediting. In the former, the participants try not just to defend their position vehemently, but to silence the other interlocutors. In the latter, they completely disqualify the other participant's opinion.

Here the author runs into a controversial sociopragmatics dilemma: if an impolite behavior is habitual in a situation or genre, and the interlocutors are used to it, does this mean that it is no longer impolite? Brenes Peña observes that the dissenting messages are not considered as what conversational analysts call a dispreferred reply: they are expressed explicitly, without delay or mitigation. The participants are aware that their job is to contradict each other; therefore, they do not feel offended because the others dissent, but they do when this rejection is expressed discrediting their person or their opinions, or when they are repeatedly interrupted in an attempt to silence them. Therefore, she concludes that the fact that the impolite messages are expectable does not mean that their social effect is necessarily positive. She quotes Bousfield (2007: 2189), when he says that just because something is more prevalent, or more central, does not necessarily mean that it constitutes a norm within that discourse type. However, I would observe that, in the case of talk-shows, as in military training or parliamentary debates, the speakers are expected to be impolite; therefore, normality and impoliteness are not contradictory.

Brenes Peña uses a test of social habits based on the one used by Hernández-Flores (2008, 2009) and Sifianou (1992) in order to determine the opinion of the absent public: they have the same perceptions as the participants; expressing dissent is not impolite (even when expressed in strong terms); however, discrediting others or their opinions or interrupting them constantly is assessed as impolite. This confirms not only what is expectable about this genre, but what is expectable about Spanish culture where self-affirmation and conflict are accepted forms of interaction (Hernández-Flores, 1999, 2002; Hickey, 2004; Martínez-Camino and Dalley, 2004).

In the next two chapters, Brenes Peña carries out a thorough and detailed analysis of these two impolite strategies. In Chapter Five, she addresses the imposition of one's opinion: she describes how the participants in the talk-show intensify their assertions in such a way that they are presented as absolute truths that cannot be contradicted; they also interrupt the others in order to try to silence them or they even threaten them. In Chapter Six she addresses the discrediting of others or others' opinions.

The author takes the position that the assertion is the enunciative commitment of the emitter with what she or he has said ("dictum"): at one extreme, the speaker can mitigate this commitment and express a very weak assumption; at the other, the speaker can intensify it and express a very strong assumption. She analyzes the five different types of linguistic resources that the participants use in order to intensify the commitment of their messages when they contradict each other.

The first is made up of the elements that mitigate or intensify the responsibility of the emitter: modal adverbs that present what is said as something accepted by the whole community (“lógicamente, evidentemente, obviamente, claro, desde luego, por supuesto” [logically, evidently, clearly, obviously, of course]); expressions of the speaker’s “authority” (“según mis fuentes” [according to my sources]); expressions that present the “dictum” as something accepted by the interlocutor (“como tú sabes” [as you know]); expressions that present the participant as an expert guaranteeing what she or he has said (“yo lo he vivido en primera línea” [I have been through that myself]); and expressions, with adverbs (“sinceramente” [sincerely]) or formulae (“de verdad, yo soy sincera” [really, truly]), of the participant’s honest and cooperative attitude. Other resources are used in order to manifest the speaker’s modal attitude of security and truthfulness about her or his “dictum”; now the communicator is not looking for support in the community or expressing authority or honesty, she or he wants to qualify what she or he is saying as something unquestionable or irrefutable: “seguro, las cosas son como son, te guste o no te guste, la verdad es que..., efectivamente” [sure, that’s the way it is, whether you like it or not, the truth is that, sure enough]. The participant can try to establish a hierarchical organization of the information, reinforcing her or his assertion; they can use a false sensorial imperative (“mira, escucha” [look, listen]), introductory formulae (“te voy a decir una cosa, que lo sepas” [let me tell you something, so that you know]); appellative appendices or tagged sentences (“¿me estás entendiendo?, ¿vale?, ¿de acuerdo?” [do you understand? OK? Do you see?]). The speakers can reinforce the contraargumentative function of their message with different types of resources: emphasizing the pronunciation, pronouncing syllables separately, lengthening the vowels, repeating parts of the message, using rhetorical questions, or using formulae that end the conversation (“y con esto zanjo el tema para siempre” [and that’s the end of that]). Finally, the participant can present what she is saying as her subjective opinion and, therefore, as irrefutable from any other subjective position (“tú puedes decir lo que quieras que estás en tu derecho, pero yo” [you can say whatever you want, that’s your right, but I]).

The participants can also try to impose their opinions by interrupting their interlocutors. The author, drawing on the literature, obtains a definition that will allow her to analyze the participants’ behavior. She considers interruption as a transgression of the turn-taking system that is intended to remove the current speaker from the floor; this might be accomplished with or without overlapping. Therefore, she differentiates between this phenomenon and others such as casual overlapping or different types of back-channelling. The author also reflects on the relation between interruption and impoliteness. Brenes Peña points out that the (im)polite effect of an interruption will vary according to the culture, the type of discourse, the relation between the interlocutors, and the function. She also identifies several elements that might help to mitigate its impoliteness: the interrupting speakers can use mitigating expressions such as “solamente una cosita” or “perdona que te interrumpa” [just one thing, sorry to interrupt you]; she or he can avoid overlapping or, at least, she or he can try to reduce the duration of the overlapping and use a low tone and a low intensity; the less frequent the interruption, the less impolite. However, her empirical analysis shows that the participants frequently fall back on the use of interruptions, with frequent and long overlappings; they shout, expressing themselves aggressively, using a high tone; when

they use elements that might mitigate the social effect of the interruption, it is often more to attract the attention of the speaker than to mitigate.

Brenes Peña identifies another impolite behavior that the participants use in order to impose their opinions: threatening. She points out that the effect of this is always very negative and the emitter can intensify it by expressing it clearly and explicitly with obscene language, using a high tone and challenging gestures and glances. She observes that the participants threaten when, in a burst of rage, they are incensed by the heat of the dialectical battle. They lose their temper and any trace of a line of argumentation. They portray themselves as lacking any arguments or any rational capacity to use them. The social effect is devastating and it drives the exchange to the verge of dissolution. Threatening goes beyond even the lax limits of this permissive genre whose purpose is to use impolite behavior as a spectacle.

Brenes-Peña points out that when the participants lack arguments to contradict their interlocutors, they can also fall back on discrediting them, their opinions, or the act of expressing them. This is a strongly impolite behavior; however, the social effect is not as devastating as with threats; on the contrary, it portrays the participant as a controversial member that will improve the share of the program. Consequently, these strategies fit in well with the rules of the talk-show.

The author identifies several strategies that can be used in order to attack the affiliative face of other participants. These strategies are attacks on the qualities that are necessary in order to be an operative member of a talk-show, such as her or his credibility or the credibility of her or his sources. For example, Brenes-Peña identifies the use of the expression “eso lo dices tú” [that’s what you say] which underlines the idea that the participant lacks the ability to make a dispassionate assessment of reality. In this sense, the interlocutors can use insults that negate that the interlocutor qualifies as an appropriate participant. For example, “chupacamaras” [camera-hog] - this insult means that the interlocutor is capable of anything if this can help her or him to become a celebrity. The participants can also use metaphors in order to intensify their attacks on other’s faces as qualified members of the talk-show; for example, one of the participants can refer to the other as a vulture, meaning that she is ready to use anything in order to feed her fame. Finally, the participants use irony in order to present themselves as witty interlocutors and, therefore, enhance their affiliative faces; this also allows them to ridicule in one way or another their “allocutionary receivers”; at the same time, they achieve the involvement of the “non-allocutionary receivers” because they can laugh together at the expense of the other participant.

On the other hand, Brenes-Peña identifies three different strategies that the participants use in order to discredit their interlocutor’s act of expressing opinions: they can say that she or he is violating the maxim of quality (“estás faltando a la verdad en toda regal” [you are lying through your teeth]); they can state that she or he does not follow the principle of non-contradiction (“pero este hombre ¿qué? ¿se contradice siempre?” [but this guy contradicts himself every time]); they can accuse them of following an inconsistent path of behavior (“¡ah antes lo defiendes y ahora lo puteas, ¡qué bueno eres!” [So you used to defend him and now you attack him, that’s great!]). All of this means strong attacks on the affiliative face of the interlocutor because it makes her or his utterances worthless.

Finally, the participants may show that it is not worth the effort of paying attention to what their interlocutors have said because it is false (“eso no es verdad” [that’s not true]), boring (“que me aburres, que me aburres, chico” [you’re boring me, son]), irrelevant (“yo creo que esto sea ahora mismo el tema, perdona que te diga” [pardon me but that’s not what we’re talking about now]), intrinsically stupid (“porque a las idioteces hay que contestar con idioteces” [because it’s not worth responding to nonsense]). Nevertheless, Brenes-Peña points out that to deny the discursive cooperation completely is the most aggressive strategy against the face of the interlocutor: the speaker gives up, replying “si piensas eso...” [if that’s what you think...].

## EVALUATION

This book offers a valuable contribution to the understanding of three objects of study: facework and (im)polite linguistic behavior; the talk-show, a new TV genre, and the society of spectacle. Obviously its first target is the talk-show participants’ impolite behavior; however, since impoliteness is a social effect, the author analyzes its cultural and discursive coordinates and repercussions. For this reason, Brenes Peña’s study allows us to understand how deep the impact of sociopragmatics can be when it comes to articulating an explanation of human nature and culture.

First of all, this work is a thorough and detailed empirical study of a talk-show corpus, based on a no less thorough and detailed grasp of the tenets of sociopragmatics. However, the author makes her own choices and articulates her own position; therefore, we read something that is more than a solid exposition of others’ ideas: “verbal (im) politeness arises from the confrontation of the meaning or value of an utterance with the social precepts that govern a specific communicative interaction” (p. 42, my translation).

Brenes Peña analyzes her audio-visual texts in order to identify these linguistic elements and show us how they are used in order to create particular social effects in the communicative exchange. Consequently, she studies how the participants try to influence the discursive development of these programs falling back on certain linguistic instruments. This work, then, is not just the study of a series of verbal units: it explains how the interlocutors enhance, attack, build or undermine their faces, constructing, discursively, their interpersonal reality. I think this is the right direction for the development of the discipline. However, her analysis at times lacks a more macroscopic perspective, which might allow her to advance further down this road. Perhaps she could have included the study of some particular exchange to show how it develops, dialogically, a communicative project. However, this is just a minor consideration in an otherwise highly commendable work.

This book allows us to understand how a new TV genre has emerged because the conditions of television culture demand the broadcasting of dialogues where semiotic and linguistic instruments are used in order to develop a facework characterized by imbalance, conflict or even hostility, just the opposite of daily, common conversation. In this sense, a little more macroscopic perspective would have refined Brenes Peña’s explanation of this phenomenon. Beyond this, Brenes Peña points out how the development of this new type of interpersonal exchange might affect suprapersonal

habits and intrapersonal expectations: we may get used to rudeness and accept it as the normal aggressive management of communication. Sociopragmatics allows us to understand how interlocutors construct, through communicative encounters and projects, their interpersonal reality with deep sociological and psychological repercussions, and this book is a good example of how this discipline can obtain these results.

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