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REVISTA DE ESTUDOS DA LINGUAGEM

Notes Toward a Systemic Functional Model of (Im)politeness

Apontamentos para um Modelo Sistêmico-Funcional da (Im)polidez

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Abstract: Grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL – Halliday, 1978; Matthiessen; Teruya, 2024), this paper discusses the systemic functional modeling of politeness and impoliteness phenomena (e.g., Brown; Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014; Culpeper, 2011). Although (im) politeness is frequently cited as a central interpersonal element for modeling the relationship between language and context, to date there has been no comprehensive systemic functional model of the phenomenon that details its implications for contextual, semantic, and lexicogrammatical selections. Methodologically, the paper is based on a staged procedure involving review, metatranslation, and analytical testing. Combined with a set of criteria for descriptive adequacy, this procedure seeks to produce descriptions that are consistent, explicit, analytically useful, and empirically grounded. As a result, we argue that a systemic functional modeling of (im) politeness allows for a stratified and metafunctionally oriented treatment of the phenomenon. More specifically, the model construes (im)politeness as a fundamentally interpersonal phenomenon, characterized by realizational alignments across contextual (e.g., we propose a contextual system of POLITENESS ROLE as part of tenor, since (im)politeness is emically interpreted as an attribute of the interactant), semantic (e.g., positive [im] politeness often involves attitudinal meanings concerning the addressee, thus relating to the system of ATTITUDE), and lexicogrammatical configurations (e.g., specifying different strategies of [im]politeness in terms of MOOD, MODAL ASSESSMENT and PERSON). We hope that such a model will not only enrich SFL and facilitate its dialogue

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with other theories of the language–context interface, but above all make explicit elements that, although relevant, may remain unnoticed in other approaches.

Keywords: politeness; impoliteness; Systemic Functional Linguistics; context; sociopragmatics.

Resumo: Fundamentado na Linguística Sistêmico-Funcional (LSF – Halliday, 1978; Matthiessen; Teruya, 2024), este artigo discute a modelagem sistêmico-funcional dos fenômenos de polidez e impolidez (p. ex. Brown; Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014; Culpeper, 2011). Embora a (im)polidez seja frequentemente citada na LSF como um elemento interpessoal central para a modelagem da relação entre linguagem e contexto, até o momento não houve uma modelagem sistêmico-funcional abrangente do fenômeno que detalhe suas implicações para seleções contextuais, semânticas e léxico-gramaticais. Metodologicamente, o artigo fundamenta-se em um procedimento em etapas de revisão, metatradução e testagem analítica. Com um conjunto de critérios de adequação descritiva, o procedimento busca produzir descrições consistentes, explícitas, analiticamente úteis e empiricamente fundamentadas. Como resultado, argumentamos que a modelagem sistêmico-funcional da (im)polidez permite um tratamento estratificado e orientado metafuncionalmente do fenômeno. Mais especificamente, o modelo interpreta a (im)polidez como um fenômeno fundamentalmente interpessoal, caracterizado por alinhamentos realizacionais entre configurações contextuais (por exemplo, propomos um sistema contextual de PAPEL DE POLIDEZ como parte das relações [*tenor*], uma vez que a (im)polidez é emicamente interpretada como um atributo dos interactantes), semânticas (por exemplo, a [im] polidez positiva frequentemente envolve significados atitudinais relativos ao destinatário, relacionando-se, assim, ao sistema de ATITUDE) e léxico-gramaticais (por exemplo, a especificação de diferentes estratégias de [im]polidez em termos de MODO, VALIDAÇÃO MODAL e PESSOA). Esperamos que tal modelo não apenas enriqueça a LSF e facilite seu diálogo com outras teorias da interface linguagem–contexto, mas, sobretudo,

torne explícitos elementos que, embora relevantes, podem passar despercebidos em outras abordagens.

Palavras-chave: polidez; impolidez; Linguística Sistêmico-Funcional; contexto; sociopragmática.

1 Introduction

This paper is grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1978; Matthiessen; Teruya, 2024), an approach that explores the paradigmatic (i.e., systemic) organization of human languages as motivated by semantic and contextual (i.e., functional) pressures. It is part of a project aimed at developing a new description of the contextual parameter of **tenor**, which concerns the roles and relations assumed by participants in an interaction and the ways in which such elements activate linguistic choices or are enacted by them (Hasan, 2020; Farhat, 2025).

More specifically, this study addresses the phenomenon of **(im)politeness**. Although (im)politeness is frequently cited in SFL as a central interpersonal element for modeling the relationship between language and context, to date there has been no comprehensive systemic functional model of the phenomenon that details its implications for contextual, semantic, and lexicogrammatical selections. For instance, Matthiessen and Teruya (2024) mention (im)politeness eleven times in their SFL guide, but always *en passant*, as an illustration or a secondary component of another notion. The only explicit attempt we are aware of to move toward a systemic functional modeling of (im)politeness appears in a blog post by Matthiessen (2017); even there, however, the author offers only a few suggestions as to how such work might proceed. With the present paper, we aim to contribute to filling this gap by proposing an initial SF architecture for the study of (im)politeness.

We expect that a systemic functional modeling of (im)politeness will make it possible, fundamentally, to treat the phenomenon in a way that is (1) stratified and (2) metafunctionally oriented. More specifically, the systemic functional model of (im)politeness construes it as an interpersonal phenomenon characterized by different realizational alignments across contextual, semantic, and lexicogrammatical configurations.

At the contextual level, we propose a system of POLITENESS ROLE as part of tenor, since (im)politeness is emically interpreted as an attribute of the interactant ("she was [im]polite") — that is, as a property external to language, although dependent on linguistic behavior for its realization. At the semantic level, we propose that the typification of (im)politeness strategies is linked to their relation with different semantic systems — for example, so-called "positive" (im)politeness, oriented toward the (dis)approval of the other, often involves attitudinal meanings about the addressee and thus relates to the system of APPRAISAL (Martin; White, 2005). Finally, at the lexicogrammatical level, we highlight the relevance of the SF description of lexicogrammatical systems and realizational patterns associated with different (im)politeness strategies — for instance, so-called indirect speech acts, a prototypical realization of negative politeness, can be interpreted in systemic functional terms as a type of interpersonal grammatical metaphor.

In the next section, we present the methodological procedure underpinning this study. We then briefly revisit some of the main perspectives on (im)politeness, highlighting

sociopragmatic and interpersonal elements that can be reinterpreted in systemic functional terms. The fourth section then presents some of the most important features of SFL and of the description of tenor we adopt. The fifth section then presents the proposed framework, whose implications are analytically illustrated through a pilot study in the sixth section. Finally, in the concluding remarks, we consider the model's exploratory nature, its limitations, and outline directions for future research.

2 Methodological procedures

This study is grounded in a methodological procedure organized into four stages:

1 **Review.** The first stage focuses on examining previous proposals — both foundational works in (im)politeness research and more recent developments — so as to delineate the landscape of source metalanguages that, in the subsequent stage, will undergo metatranslation into the systemic functional metalanguage. This is not a simple return to earlier studies, but rather an active process of identifying patterns and formulating hypotheses.

2 **Synthesis and metatranslation.** The outcome of the review is a synthesis of descriptive elements that can be incorporated into SFL. This incorporation takes place through a procedure of *metatranslation* (Matthiessen *et al*., 2022), whereby notions external to the target metalanguage are reinterpreted in terms of the principles and formalisms provided by SFL. For instance, a distinction between two categories in a given theory may be reinterpreted as a system with two options under a given entry condition, while a pattern of correlation between categories may be construed as a realizational principle (for discussion, see Farhat, 2025).

3 **Modeling.** The results of metatranslation make it possible to move on to the modeling stage, in which the interrelations between the elements incorporated into SFL and pre-existing components of the theory are discussed. Descriptions that make up the model are required to follow a set of criteria for descriptive evaluation, whose aim is to ensure the quality of the description along several complementary dimensions. In brief, these criteria are as follows:

   A **Formal adequacy.** Here, "formal" is understood in the sense found in *formalism* as a *descriptive technique*. A formally adequate system is one that appropriately employs all the obligatory descriptive techniques made available by the theory. There is no space here to detail such techniques; we therefore recommend Martin (2013) and Matthiessen (2022).

   B **Internal consistency.** The model should not be redundant or internally contradictory. To assess compliance with this criterion, it is necessary to conduct a careful examination of all system options and their interrelations, "calculating" the selections allowed and identifying potential points of redundancy and/or contradiction. In addition, two subcriteria must be kept in mind:

(a) **Metafunctional/stratal consistency:** this involves checking whether the proposed categories are compatible with (i) the degree of symbolic abstraction of the stratum at which they are located (context, semantics, lexicogrammar, or expression), and (ii) the metafunction (or parameter, in the case of context) with which they are aligned (ideational, interpersonal, or textual).

(b) **Consistency with the entry condition:** by the criterion of formal adequacy, all categories within a system must describe the entry condition of that system. For example, in many languages, the system of GENDER, whose entry condition is [noun], cannot be applied to the unit [verb].

C **Degree of detail.** To be descriptively and analytically useful, a system must reach a level of detail that allows for the precise categorization of distinct objects. Such details operate in two different, but related, ways:

(a) **Delicacy:** systemic detail allows categories to be specified along different dimensions, enabling fine-grained categorization of the objects under description. A system with low delicacy may be coherent and adequate, but will typically have reduced analytical usefulness, as very different objects may end up classified under the same category.

(b) **Realization:** realizational elements function, in practice, as recognition criteria — for example, in English grammar, a clause is recognized as *interrogative* by the realization of a "Finite^Subject" structure.

D **Descriptive explicitness and analytical testability.** If a category is described vaguely, its testability in the analysis of instances is seriously compromised, making its reliable application impossible or, in many cases, allowing more applications than would be desirable for the category to reveal important distinctions. To ensure such explicitness, one must resort to the *trinocular perspective* (Halliday, 2009): the category should be considered "from below," in terms of its realization (intra- or interstratal); "from above," in relation to its realizational alignment with options in the stratum above; and "from around," considering the relations between the category in question and other categories at the same stratum (whether in the same system or not, and whether within the same metafunction or not).

4 **Analytical testing.** Although the present study is primarily theoretical in purpose, in order for its results to be empirically grounded in primary data (and thus to meet criterion D), a stage of analytical testing and evaluation is included, in which SFL analytical tools (e.g., Halliday; Matthiessen, 2014; Martin, 1992; Martin; White, 2005; Figueredo, 2011) and the proposed model itself are employed as analytical instruments. Depending on the analytical results obtained, the model may be reformulated so as to ensure its empirical sensitivity and its usefulness as an analytical tool. To this end, we analyzed a corpus consisting of five Twitter (X) threads, totaling 81 individual tweets. An ideal corpus for our purposes would be homogeneous with respect to the

contextual parameters of *field* and *mode*, but heterogeneous with respect to *tenor*, thus allowing a focused examination of different realizations of this parameter. To this end, three criteria were used in collecting the Twitter threads:

1 All threads address the same topic, thereby stabilizing ideational variables and, consequently, *field*. For this purpose, we used X's (formerly Twitter's) advanced search, querying *"esse oscar" min_replies:5 until:2023-03-14 since:2023-03-13*, with the following specifications: (a) all initial tweets in the threads used the string "esse Oscar" (literally "this Oscar") and were published between 13 and 14 March 2023, ensuring that the topic under discussion was the 95th Academy Awards ceremony, which took place between 12 and 13 March. The choice of topic is motivated by its publicity: as a widely discussed event, it was assumed to be more feasible to find threads that met criterion 3 (see below); (b) all threads consist of at least five replies to the initial tweet, ensuring a minimum amount of semiotic material for analysis. In cases with many replies, we collected up to the twenty-fifth, a number we consider both representative and amenable to detailed analysis.
2 The entire corpus consists of Twitter threads, which provides a certain degree of stability to *mode* variables. For all instances of written language, however, the following configuration applies: [graphic; mediated: congruent: digital; public] (based on Hasan, 2014).
3 We sought to collect threads that, in pre-analytical observations, exhibited variation in interactants' roles and relations — that is, in *tenor*. The analyses indicate the extent to which such observations are borne out.

3 (Im)politeness Theories

3.1 Brown and Levinson

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory is built upon the abstraction of a Model Person (MP): a willful, rational agent endowed with "face." The notion of face was originally conceptualized by Goffman (1967, p. 5):

> The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes — albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself.

According to Goffman (1967), participants in an interaction — especially in public settings — are constantly concerned with avoiding threats to their own face and to the face of others. Brown and Levinson (1987) develop these reflections by proposing that the MP's rationality is specifically deployed to satisfy two simultaneous and complementary dimensions of face:

- **Negative face:** the desire for autonomy, freedom from coercion, and freedom from imposition.
- **Positive face:** the desire for acceptance, affiliation, and appreciation.

The authors argue that politeness emerges as a set of strategies aimed at mitigating **face-threatening acts (FTAs)**. Within this framework, the MP is assumed to be a "rational calculator" who assesses the degree of threat inherent in a move before selecting a linguistic strategy. The "weight" (*Wx*) of an FTA is assumed to be the sum of three variables:

1. **Social Distance (D):** the degree of familiarity between the speaker (*S*) and the hearer (*H*).
2. **Relative Power (P):** the vertical asymmetry between *H* and *S*.
3. **Ranking of Imposition (R):** the culturally defined degree of "gravity" of the specific act (e.g., asking for a pen vs. asking for a large loan).

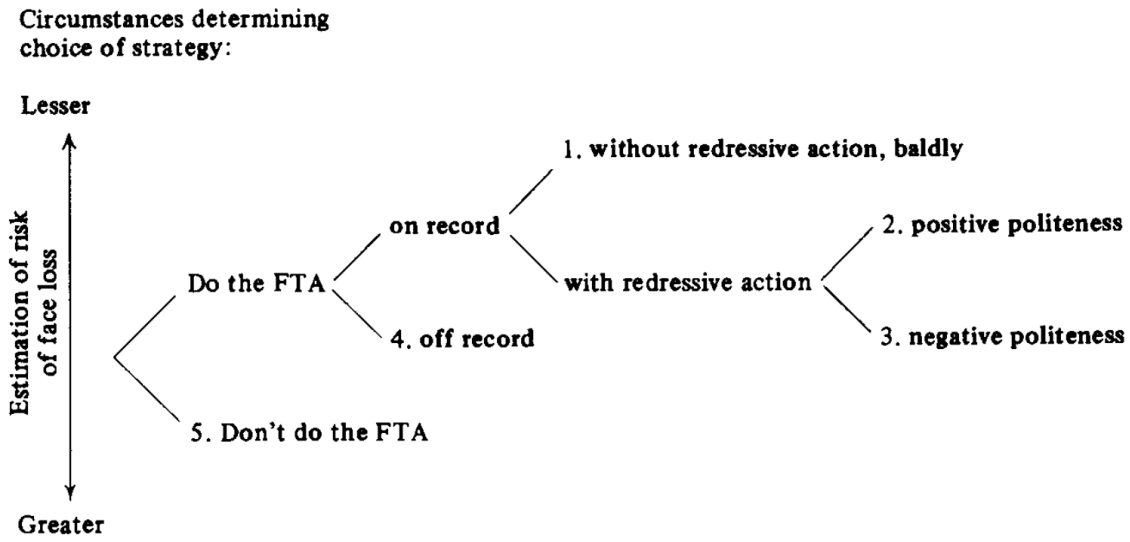
This assessment is formalized in the following formula:

$$Wx = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + Rx$$

For example, asking to borrow money may constitute a high *Rx*; however, if the act is directed at a close friend (low *D*) with no power asymmetry (low *P*), the total *Wx* remains relatively "light." Conversely, if the same request is made to a superior at work, the increase in *P* and *D* results in a higher *Wx*, necessitating more complex and indirect politeness strategies. From an SFL perspective, this formula is particularly significant because it attempts to quantify the pressure that situational variables exert on linguistic choice. For instance, the variables of Distance and Power seem to map directly onto the SFL parameter of tenor (see below).

On this basis, Brown and Levinson (1987) propose a typology of strategies available to interactants for dealing with an FTA, ranging from not performing the act at all (when its "weight" is excessive) to performing it directly (when it is "light"), with a set of intermediate options. Figure 1 presents the most general categories of this typology; Table 1 provides illustrative examples, with the most relevant structures for each strategy underlined.

Figure 1 – Typology of FTA strategies



Source: Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 60).

Table 1 – Examples of Brown and Levinson's FTA strategies

	Specific strategy: examples	Example
	Bald on record	"Hey, lend me fifty dollars."
Positive politeness	Claim common ground: Use identity markers	"Hey mate, could you lend me fifty dollars?"
	Convey that S and H are cooperators: offer, promise	"Give me fifty dollars and I promise I'll have it back to you by Monday morning."
Negative politeness	Be conventionally indirect	"Can you lend me fifty dollars?"
	Don't presume/assume	"I'm perhaps looking to borrow something like fifty dollars, if that's at all possible."
	Don't coerce H (Be pessimistic)	"I don't suppose you'd be able to lend me fifty dollars, would you?"
	Communicate S's want to not impinge (Apologize)	"I'm terribly sorry to bother you with this, but would it be okay if I borrowed fifty dollars?"
	Redress other wants of H's (Go on record as incurring debt)	"I'd be eternally grateful if you could spare fifty dollars; I'd really owe you one."
Off record	Invite conversational implicatures (Give hints)	"Man, I'm exactly fifty dollars short for my rent today and the landlord is coming in an hour."
	Be vague or ambiguous (Violate Manner Maxim)	"It would be quite a relief if a certain amount — say, fifty dollars — were to somehow materialize."

Source: categories by Brown and Levinson; examples constructed by the author.

A substantial portion of Brown and Levinson's (1987) work is thus devoted to cataloguing, describing, and explaining different strategies of "positive" and "negative" politeness. There is no space here to detail them; for present purposes, it suffices to note that while positive politeness strategies are oriented toward signaling affiliation with and appreciation of the interlocutor (e.g., indicating common group membership, praising the addressee), negative politeness strategies focus on minimizing the imposition potentially instantiated by the act (e.g., indicating that compliance with the request is not obligatory); as we will suggest in Section 5, Brown and Levinson's typology of politeness strategies may be reinterpreted as part of the (systemic functional) semantics of (im)politeness.

3.2 Leech

Leech (2014) proposes an alternative model of (im)politeness. As in the previous discussion, the present review is necessarily selective.

(1) Pragmalinguistic vs. sociopragmatic politeness

Since pragmatics is, by definition, concerned with the relationship between language and context, Leech (2014) argues that analytical emphasis may be placed on one or the other side of the dyad. In politeness studies, there may be a *pragmalinguistic* emphasis (for example, investigating why, even in a decontextualized manner, *thank you very much* tends to be interpreted as "more polite" than *thank you*), or a *sociopragmatic* emphasis (for example, investigating the different "weights" that factors such as social distance and power have in determining the "appropriate" use of politeness). In line with this distinction, Leech (2014) also proposes two scales: on the pragmalinguistic politeness scale, there is a unidirectional continuum from "non-polite" to "extremely polite"; on the sociopragmatic politeness scale, there is a bidirectional continuum, with "appropriately polite" at the center and "over-polite" (more than appropriate) and "under-polite" (less than appropriate) at the extremes.

(2) The Principle of Politeness

In line with the Gricean tradition, Leech's model proposes a set of maxims that specify a *Principle of Politeness* (originally formulated in 1983):

> The Principle of Politeness (PP) [...] is a constraint observed in human communicative behavior, influencing us to avoid communicative discord or offence, and maintain or enhance communicative concord or comity. What I mean by "communicative discord" is a situation in which two people, x and y, can be assumed, on the basis of what meanings have been communicated, to entertain mutually incompatible goals. [...] Concord is the opposite of discord: both participants explicitly or implicitly purport to pursue each other's goals (Leech, 2014, p. 87).

In short, being polite involves seeking concord and avoiding discord — not merely reducing face threat, but seeking communicative altruism. Leech (2014, p. 90) further proposes a *General Strategy of Politeness*:

> *General Strategy of Politeness*: In order to be polite, *S* expresses or implies meanings that associate a favorable value with what pertains to *O* or associates an unfavorable value with what pertains to *S*.

More succinctly, one could say that the General Strategy of Politeness encompasses acts of *other-enhancement* and *self-deprecation*. This strategy can be further specified into a set of sub-strategies — more specifically, ten maxims (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Leech's politeness maxims

Maxim	Description	Examples
(M1) Generosity	Give a high value to the other's (O's) wants.	Offers, invitations, and promises — acts where the speaker proposes a future action for the benefit of the other.
(M2) Tact	Give a low value to the speaker's (S's) wants.	Mitigation of the degree of imposition in requests or directives to give the other an "out."
(M3) Approbation	Give a high value to the other's (O's) qualities.	Compliments and expressions of praise for the other's attributes or performance.
(M4) Modesty	Give a low value to the speaker's (S's) qualities.	Self-deprecating evaluations and the rejection or deflection of compliments.
(M5) Obligation (S to O)	Give a high value to the speaker's (S's) obligation toward the other (O).	Apologies (for an offense committed by S) and thanks (for a favor done by O).
(M6) Obligation (O to S)	Give a low value to the other's (O's) obligation toward the speaker (S).	Responses to thanks or apologies that minimize the debt, such as "it's okay" or "no problem."
(M7) Agreement	Give a high value to the other's (O's) opinions.	Convergent responses and emphatic agreement using intensifiers like "exactly" or "absolutely."
(M8) Opinion Reticence	Give a low value to the speaker's (S's) opinions.	Mitigation or omission of disagreement to avoid appearing overly opinionated.
(M9) Sympathy	Give a high value to the other's (O's) feelings.	Congratulations for the other's success and condolences or commiserations for their misfortune.
(M10) Feeling Reticence	Give a low value to the speaker's (S's) feelings.	Suppression or mitigation of one's own feelings, especially negative ones, to preserve rapport.

Source: Leech (2014).

We believe the importance of Leech's model for a systemic functional approach to (im)politeness lies primarily in its evaluative orientation. Each maxim essentially assigns a "value" to the participants' qualities or wants. This aligns with the SFL system of APPRAISAL, suggesting that (im)politeness can be modeled as the semantic management of interpersonal "values" (other-enhancement vs. self-deprecation). Furthermore, his distinction between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic scales provides an early, though less formal, intuition of the stratified nature of (im)politeness.

3.3 Impoliteness

Over the past two decades, there has been increasing recognition that, while polite acts are often treated as the "unmarked" norm in interaction, impolite acts are a frequent and systematic feature of discourse. This has shifted the research focus toward the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic properties of acts that do not seek concord, but rather discord and social disruption.

Foundational to this shift is the work of Culpeper (1996), who attempts to build an anatomy of impoliteness that is parallel to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, critically examining and expanding it. Arguing that impoliteness is "very much the parasite of politeness" (p. 355), Culpeper (1996) proposes five superstrategies designed to attack face rather than maintain it. Mirroring Brown and Levinson's categorization, these strategies range from direct attacks to indirect sarcasm:

- **Bald on record impoliteness:** the face-threatening act (FTA) is performed in a direct, clear, and unambiguous way in circumstances where face is not irrelevant or minimized. *Example:* explicit assertions such as "you are despicable" or "you've already proven to be a damn habitual liar".
- **Positive impoliteness:** the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants (the want to be approved of). *Examples:* ignoring or snubbing the other; using inappropriate identity markers (e.g., using a title and surname when a close relationship pertains); seeking disagreement; or using taboo words and abusive language.
- **Negative impoliteness:** the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's negative face wants (the want to be unimpeded). *Examples:* frightening the target; ridiculing or scorning to emphasize relative power; invading the other's space (literally or metaphorically); or explicitly associating the other with a negative aspect (e.g., "you're the one intimidating… my squad leaders").
- **Sarcasm or mock politeness:** the FTA is performed using politeness strategies that are obviously insincere and remain surface realizations. *Example:* using a polite formula to convey the opposite meaning, such as saying "Do me a favor…" before a face attack like "…don't have any children," or saying "you really impress people" to imply failure.
- **Withhold politeness:** the absence of politeness work where it would be expected. *Example:* failing to thank somebody for a present or remaining silent when a response is expected.

Later, Culpeper (2011) argues that impoliteness is not merely a "failure" of politeness or a collection of strategies, but a functional phenomenon in its own right. Culpeper (2011) defines impoliteness as a negative evaluative attitude toward specific behaviors occurring in specific contexts. Crucially, he proposes that impoliteness occurs when an act is perceived as a salient attack on face sensitivities or a violation of sociality rights. He also argues that impoliteness serves specific functions, and accordingly delineates three broad types of impoliteness:

- **Affective impoliteness** is "the targeted display of heightened emotion, typically anger, with the implication that the target is to blame for producing that negative emotional state" (Culpeper, 2011, p. 223). These are cases in which other-deprecation is clearly at stake: the other is construed as responsible for an undesirable state of affairs.

- **Coercive impoliteness** "seeks a realignment of values between the producer and the target such that the producer benefits or has their current benefits reinforced or protected" (Culpeper, 2011, p. 226). This involves self-enhancement on the part of the speaker; however, since the speaker's benefits may be detrimental to the other, other-deprecation may also occur.
- **Entertainment impoliteness**, finally, "involves entertainment at the expense of the target of the impoliteness, and is thus always exploitative to a degree" (Culpeper, 2011, p. 233). In such cases, other-deprecation is deployed in the service of the speaker's affective (humor-related) state, thereby generating (implicitly) self-enhancement (the speaker "deserves" to laugh).

Along similar lines, Leech (2014, p. 221) also proposes a General Strategy of Impoliteness: "In pursuing the goal of impoliteness, S [the speaker/writer] will express/imply evaluative meanings that are favorable to S and unfavorable to O [other person or people]." Here, the expectations of the politeness strategy are reversed, materializing in the violation of the maxims: the high value assigned to the other becomes low value, while the low value assigned to the speaker becomes high value. In addition, the absence of politeness in contexts where polite utterances are expected may itself be interpreted as impolite, even though such cases can still, at least in part, be subsumed under maxim violation (for example, the absence of apologies or thanks may be interpreted as devaluing the speaker's obligations toward the other, thus violating M5 – Obligation).

Finally, there has also been growing attention to the role of interactants' identities in the dynamics of (im)politeness. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou (2017), for instance, question a rigid distinction between the notions of face and identity, arguing that there are important areas of overlap between the two. Moreover, the authors advance the hypothesis that (im)politeness itself is a phenomenon that is fundamentally identity-related: from an emic perspective, the primary targets of evaluations such as "polite" or "impolite" (or, more commonly in English, *well behaved* or *rude*) are the interactants themselves, rather than their individual acts. This reinforces the need for a contextual description of (im)politeness: if (im)politeness may be seen as an emic attribute of an *interactant*, it may be also modeled as a "speech role" — a temporary identity assumed during the logogenetic unfolding of the text.

4 Systemic Functional Linguistics and tenor

As noted in the introduction, SFL is grounded in the idea that the systemic organization of language is motivated by functional factors — namely semantic factors (understood in a broad sense, encompassing much of what is traditionally treated as "pragmatics") and contextual factors (that is, situational elements that "activate" certain language uses over others). In practical terms, this has led scholars such as Hasan (2014, 2020) to argue that SFL should also be concerned with the *systemic description of contextual phenomena themselves*. These contextual phenomena are understood as the cultural variables underlying variation in language use across different registers, genres, and the like.

SFL also operates with the notion that there are three *metafunctions* — broad functions of language around which linguistic systems cluster. Because of their generality, these functions constitute a crucial dimension in the organization of language as a whole. They

are: the *ideational metafunction*, which deals with the construal and articulation of experience ("representation"); the *interpersonal metafunction*, which construes language as a resource for intersubjective negotiation; and the *textual metafunction*, which encompasses the resources that create *texture* — that is, the elements that enable a text to function as a meaningful whole.

Correspondingly, each metafunction is associated with, and realizes ("expresses"), a contextual parameter: *field*, the parameter concerned with the nature of the activity constituted by/with the help of language (e.g., narrating, explaining, arguing), is realized by the ideational metafunction; *tenor*, which concerns the relations among participants in an interaction and the roles they occupy (e.g., intimacy, power, similarity/difference), is realized by the interpersonal metafunction; and *mode*, which encompasses the possibilities of contact (written, spoken, etc.) between interactants and is realized by the textual metafunction.

For example, when, in the tenor system of **STATUS ROLE**, the option [epistemic: inferior] (i.e., a position of "knowing less") is selected, this choice may activate the selection of [demand; information] (i.e., a question) in the interpersonal semantic system of **SPEECH FUNCTION**. This choice is then typically realized by the selection of [indicative: interrogative] in the grammatical system of **MOOD**; finally, this selection may be realized, in English, by the grammatical structure Finite^Subject (i.e., the "auxiliary verb" precedes the Subject).

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to describe in greater detail certain aspects of tenor — that is, of the "interpersonal context." In Farhat (2025), we argue that the systems constituting this parameter are motivated by two broad, possibly universal, human needs: *positive needs* (affiliation, acceptance) and *negative needs* (non-interference, autonomy). While related to the notion of *face* as used by Brown and Levinson (1987), the notion of *need* is broader, being relevant even when no "threat" is perceived; all interpersonal moves instantiated in a text could be seen, ultimately, as motivated to some degree by these impulses of "approach" (positive) and "distance" (negative). Concretely, these needs unfold into the following systems:

- **SOCIAL DISTANCE:** measures the degree of "intimacy" or "impersonality" between interactants; it reflects both positive needs (we draw closer because we seek affiliation) and negative needs (we keep distance in order to preserve autonomy). For details and analyses, see Farhat and Gonçalves-Segundo (2025).
- **STATUS:** describes the positioning of interactants in terms of symmetries and asymmetries, both of power (capacity for action and coercion) and of knowledge (knowing more or less); it primarily reflects negative needs ("having status" is closely related to "being autonomous").
- **SOCIOMETRIC RELATION:** describes the degree of "harmony" or "disharmony" between interactants — that is, relations of cooperation and conflict. While "harmony" typically arises when interactants' needs are not in conflict, "disharmony" may emerge precisely from divergences in those needs.

An elegant way of describing this parameter, then, is as a "three-dimensional" space: a *horizontal* dimension (SOCIAL DISTANCE), a *vertical* dimension (STATUS), and a *transversal* dimension (SOCIOMETRIC RELATION). There is also, however, the system of SPEECH ROLES, describing terms such as "speaker" versus "addressee" and their more delicate differentiations (e.g., the Goffmanian categories of "author", "animator" and "principal"), as well as systems of ATTRIBUTES (Hasan, 2020), which describe the social positioning of interactants — their ethnicity, social class, age, and so on.

Finally, due to its functional orientation, Systemic Functional Linguistics does not treat language solely as an abstract potential, but also as a set of concrete instances through which meaning is enacted. It therefore posits a complementary relationship between the potential ("what can be said") and the instance ("what is said"), modeled through the **cline of instantiation**. This cline represents a continuum of socio-semiotic generality, reflecting the analytical standpoint adopted by the researcher.

At one pole of the cline lies the **instance**, where language is viewed as a text realizing a specific context of situation. At the other lies the **potential**, where language is viewed as a system (a meaning potential) realizing a context of culture. Between these poles lies an intermediate region of **subpotentials**, such as registers and genres, which mediate between individual texts and the overall system by capturing recurrent patterns of contextualized meaning-making. Contextual systems play an important role in the description of subpotentials (Hasan, 2014). See, for instance, Matthiessen's (2015) description of field as activity types realizationally aligned with the global logico-semantic relations that organize the logical structure of certain text types; or Farhat's (2024) contextual description of the *open letter* genre (traditionally involving, for example, [divergent] SOCIOMETRIC RELATION and [public] SOCIAL DISTANCE).

In this study, the proposed model is designed to capture (im)politeness across the entire cline of instantiation, addressing the phenomenon at its different levels of socio-semiotic generality. At the level of potential, the model describes the abstract systemic resources — across the contextual, semantic, and lexicogrammatical strata — that constitute the (im)politeness potential of a language/culture. At the level of the instance, we examine how these resources are uniquely deployed and negotiated in specific (con)texts. Finally, the model accounts for the level of subpotentials by identifying how such instancial choices are dynamically regularized into patterns of expectations within specific situation types. By encompassing the entire cline, the model avoids treating (im)politeness as a static linguistic category or an idiosyncrasy of specific texts, instead framing it as a dynamic phenomenon that bridges system and instance.

5 A Systemic Functional Model of (Im)politeness

How should (im)politeness phenomena be modeled in systemic functional terms? In summary, we propose that such a model should be:

1 **Socio-semiotic** (rather than individual or cognitive): (im)politeness is viewed as arising at the fluid, continuous interface between language and culture, thereby integrating both *sociopragmatic* and *pragmalinguistic* perspectives.

2 **Primarily systemic** (rather than structural or syntagmatic): (im)politeness is described as emerging from variably coordinated patterns of co-selection across different system networks.

3 **Metafunctionally oriented:** (im)politeness is understood as arising from systems that are inherently aligned by virtue of their shared interpersonal orientation, even when they clearly operate at different levels of abstraction (e.g., context and grammar).

4 **Instantially, registerially and culturally variable** (rather than universal): (im)politeness can only be described and evaluated with reference to the (con)textual expectations specific to the situation (type) and culture in which it occurs.

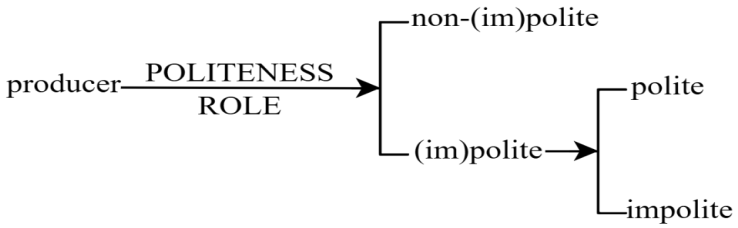
5 **Semogenically dynamic:** (im)politeness should not be understood as static, but as a phenomenon continually shaped through the evolution of a language/culture, the development of individuals, and the unfolding of texts.

In the following sections, we outline how a systemic functional model of (im)politeness can focus on features at the levels of context, semantics, and lexicogrammar. This entails viewing politeness as *positioning*, as *meaning*, and as *wording*, thereby clarifying points (1) to (3). We then aim, through a synthesis of the model and its analytical application, to elucidate points (4) and (5).

5.1 (Im)politeness as positioning: tenor

Let us begin with context. We argue that the environment most conducive to the occurrence of (im)politeness is one in which the SOCIOMETRIC RELATION is not "neutral"; that is, there is some perception of (potential) conflict, in line with notions such as *face threat*, *discord* and *(dis) harmony*. Thus, when the sociometric relation is [biased: divergent], there is a high likelihood that the tenor system of POLITENESS ROLE becomes relevant: see Figure 2.

Figure 2 – The contextual system of politeness role



Source: The author.

This system has [producer] — a feature of the SPEECH ROLE system — as its entry condition. This means that it describes (im)politeness not as a property of a "speech act", but as a *positioning* dynamically assumed by an interactant (speaker or writer) and/or attributed to them, in line with the fact that, from an emic perspective, (im)politeness is primarily seen as a "property" of the participants themselves (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich; Sifianou, 2017).

Just as the speech roles of *producer* and *addressee* are easily reversible, so too is the positioning of the producer as "(im)polite": even though assessments of a producer's politeness may extend beyond a single interaction, such judgments are typically local and interactionally bound, concerning the interactant's "polite" (or otherwise) positioning at a given point in the exchange. A producer categorized as polite or impolite may easily come to be seen as the opposite after a subsequent move, or politeness may simply cease to be salient. This is why we propose to describe POLITENESS ROLE as part of the SPEECH ROLE system: such roles are precisely those dependent on local interactional dynamics, restricted to a specific communicative event.

The options are as follows: [non-(im)polite] — the interactant is positioned as neither polite nor impolite; [(im)polite: polite] — the interactant is positioned as polite; and [(im)polite: impolite] — the interactant is positioned as impolite. In general, and in line with Leech's (2014) view

of politeness as a resource for maintaining concord, when a [divergent] SOCIOMETRIC RELATION (i.e., with conflict potential) is perceived, the likelihood increases that (im)politeness roles will be assumed: [polite], when divergence is mitigated; and [impolite], when oppositions are intensified.

Thus, *from a contextual perspective*, politeness is defined as a speech role taken up by (or attributed to) a producer in an interaction, typically in response to — or in anticipation of — a potential conflict, with the aim of avoiding or "softening" divergence. In contrast, impoliteness is defined as a speech role taken up by (or attributed to) a producer in an interaction in which divergence is not mitigated but foregrounded, either by allowing a potential conflict to escalate or by actively intensifying it.

Finally, some remarks are in order regarding probabilistic patterns of co-selection between the POLITENESS ROLE system and other tenor systems:

- **STATUS:** the system dealing with (a)symmetries of power and knowledge between interactants. Assuming a [polite] role often involves positioning oneself as somehow [inferior] to the addressee, who is thereby positioned as [superior]. This is, however, a *compensatory* move: the producer "self-lowers" in order to avoid being seen as *lowering* the addressee, ideally resulting in (a sense of) symmetry. By contrast, [impolite] roles are associated with the explicit lowering of the addressee and, correlatively, the elevation of the producer. These considerations view politeness primarily in terms of *enactment* — as a means by which (im)polite meanings (see below) can *enact* tenor, including STATUS. Traditionally, however, status has been treated as an *activating* factor of politeness: according to Brown and Levinson (1987), the higher the addressee's relative status, the more polite the usage. In systemic functional terms, this is a matter of realization — a dialectical relationship (Hasan, 2013), in which status both *activates* politeness and is *enacted* through it. Furthermore, such considerations must also take into account the ways in which power is associated with different social (e.g., ethnicity, gender, age) and institutional (e.g., teacher–student) roles.
- **SOCIAL DISTANCE:** the system dealing with degrees of intimacy between interactants. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is proportional to social distance, such that assuming a [polite] role correlates with public distance, whereas intimate distance "licenses" [non-(im)polite] and even [impolite] roles. In other words, the more intimate the relationship, the less careful one needs to be. Wolfson (1986), however, proposed that politeness is most intense in the intermediate region of the social distance scale and less so at public *or* intimate distance. Her explanation is that public and intimate relationships are more stable and predictable than those at intermediate stages of intimacy, leading to reduced caution (i.e., politeness). We suggest that such inconsistencies may stem from the fact that these studies, understandably, focus on only a subset of contextual systems (primarily STATUS and SOCIAL DISTANCE), while other relevant factors (e.g., social and institutional positioning) may affect the outcomes of otherwise similar analyses. From a more dynamic perspective, however, it seems relatively clear that many genuine uses of *im*politeness are intended to *increase* social distance.
- **ATTRIBUTES:** the system encompassing interactants' "identity" roles. Following Culpeper (2021), one might expect that, since (im)politeness is typically viewed as inter*personal* rather than inter*group*, group membership would be of limited relevance. However, if we consider that certain groups and identities are systematically subjected to status

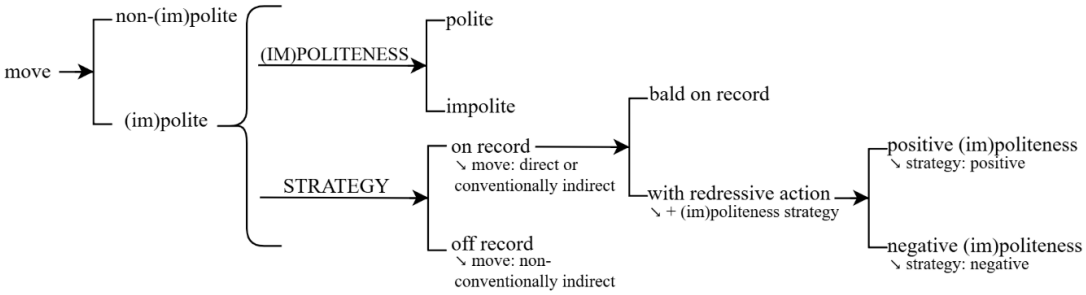
lowering — a crucial factor in the (mis)use of (im)politeness — important implications emerge. For example, Poynton (1989) notes that, due to sexist status diminution, women are more often subjected to abusive uses of terms of address by men ("hello, dear"). In other words, although such uses may appear to promote women's positive needs, they in fact invade personal space, thereby attacking negative needs.

In summary, treating (im)politeness at the level of context foregrounds the socio-semiotic orientation of the model: (im)politeness *as positioning* is captured through contextual features that are analytically relevant only insofar as they are *realized linguistically* (a point taken up in the next section). It also highlights the model's systemic orientation, since, at the contextual stratum, (im)politeness is primarily organized through the options available in the POLITENESS ROLE system. Finally, this perspective underscores the interpersonal (in metafunctional terms) nature of (im)politeness: the features of the POLITENESS ROLE system cannot be interpreted in isolation, but must be understood "from roundabout", that is, through their patterned interaction with other simultaneous tenor systems.

5.2 (Im)politeness as meaning: interpersonal semantics

When (im)politeness is approached in contextual terms, the emphasis is *sociopragmatic*: the categorization targets the producer themselves and the "surrounding" tenor systems. (Im)politeness, however, may also be treated as a *lexicogrammatically realized semantic phenomenon*, in which case a more *pragmalinguistic* emphasis is adopted; here, the meanings that realize the (im)polite role are categorized. More practically, it is at this level that the model aims to account for the description of politeness strategies such as those proposed in Brown and Levinson's seminal work: see Figure 3.

Figure 3 – The semantic systems of (im)politeness and strategy



Source: The author.

Thus, the present discussion concerns a system with *move* as its entry condition. A move is the interpersonal semantic unit congruently realized by a clause in the lexicogrammar (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2014). The move may be [non-(im)polite], realizing a [non-(im)polite] producer — that is, communicative "altruism" is simply not socio-semiotically salient in that instance — or [(im)polite], realizing an [(im)polite] producer. If [(im)polite] is selected, two simultaneous systems become accessible:

- **(IM)POLITENESS**, which specifies whether respect for communicative altruism is foregrounded ([polite]) or, conversely, whether a lack of such respect is foregrounded ([impolite]).
- **STRATEGY**, which describes the general (im)politeness strategies available: [off record], [bald on record], [positive (im)politeness], and [negative (im)politeness].

At this incipient stage of description, the system merely mirrors the categories originally proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) to describe politeness and subsequently extended by Culpeper (1996) to account for impoliteness. Indeed, the system could be further elaborated by increasing delicacy so as to model more specific strategies, such as [positive (im)politeness; polite: claim common ground] and [negative politeness; positive: don't presume/assume] (see Brown; Levinson, 1987, p. 102 and p. 131 for overviews). Alternatively, the description could be closer to Leech's "maxims".

We believe, however, that a more "purely" systemic functional approach is likely to yield a somewhat different account of this system, given the particular descriptive commitments of SFL (e.g., trinocularity). We therefore see this proposal as provisional and anticipate that future research will help refine the system along more distinctly systemic functional lines. This is particularly true of the realizational description of the system, which currently includes indications such as "off record ↘ move: non-conventionally indirect", largely restating Brown and Levinson's characterization. It seems to us that one of the most relevant contributions of a systemic functional model of (im) politeness should lie precisely in offering a detailed account of realizational lexicogrammatical patterns of (im)politeness strategies that is coherent with the general description of interpersonal lexicogrammar; for some initial indications, see the next section.

Finally, at a fairly general descriptive level, we can also propose the following systemic approximations, which will play a role in the systemic functional description of the system:

1 **"Positive" (im)politeness** often involves elements of the semantic system of **ATTITUDE**, a subsystem of APPRAISAL (Martin; White, 2005) that concerns the evaluative positioning resources afforded by language. This intersection has been increasingly explored in recent literature, which describes how evaluative resources act as primary vehicles for managing interpersonal rapport and face (Santamaría-García, 2014, 2017). For instance, Khosravi and Babaii (2017) show that impoliteness in academic conflict is frequently realized through negative judgment of capacity, while Andersson (2022) identifies a prosody of heightened affect and social sanction in online discord. In the Brazilian context, Galindo and Gonçalves-Segundo (2024) have also highlighted how the articulation between APPRAISAL and Culpeper's (1996) categories allows for a precise characterization of verbal violence[1]. Even when subtle, positive politeness often entails the incidence of positive attitude toward the addressee and/or negative attitude toward the producer; in the case of positive *impoliteness*, the reverse holds: negative attitude toward the addressee and/or positive attitude toward the producer. Often, for such

[1] However, while these studies focus primarily on the semantic identification of (im)politeness through evaluative tokens, the present model aims to bridge the gap between these semantic choices and their specific lexicogrammatical realizations. By detailing how interpersonal lexicogrammatical systems (Section 5.3) serve as the "wording" for these evaluative positionings, the model suggests a more granular account of how (im) polite meanings are linguistically anchored.

evaluations to occur, some degree of *experientialization* of the interactants is required — that is, they are construed as explicit referents ("*you* spoke beautifully"; cf. Farhat [2025] on experientialization). In many cases, however, the target of evaluation is not the interactant per se, but something they have done ("*your presentation* was awful").

2 "Negative" (im)politeness, in turn, often involves elements of the semantic system of **NEGOTIATION**, which deals with the interactional possibilities opened up by language (Martin, 1992). This connects to the idea that negative politeness concerns who has the "right" to enact each move, especially [A2] (the "getting someone to do something" move, such as orders). In negative politeness, the producer's [superior] STATUS role is mitigated; in negative impoliteness, it is made explicit — while the addressee's [inferior] role is correspondingly backgrounded in politeness and foregrounded in impoliteness.

3 Both "positive" and "negative" politeness may involve the APPRAISAL subsystems of **ENGAGEMENT** (how open or closed meanings are to alternative perspectives) and **GRADUATION** (how an evaluation is "sharpened" or "softened"). For example: *You're probably a bit wrong* (ENGAGEMENT: [heteroglossia: dialogic expansion] & GRADUATION: [soften]) versus *You're so wrong, definitely* (ENGAGEMENT: [heteroglossia: dialogic contraction] & GRADUATION: [sharpen]).

In sum, approaching (im)politeness at the level of interpersonal semantics provides a way of relating contextual positioning to lexicogrammatical realization by treating (im)politeness as meaning organized around the semantic unit of the move. By modeling (im)politeness through the co-selection of the systems of (IM)POLITENESS and STRATEGY, the account aims to offer a principled means of describing how (im)polite positioning may be semantically enacted, rather than inferred solely from contextual factors or reduced to isolated linguistic forms. At the same time, the present system remains exploratory and draws, at this stage, on well-established categorizations proposed by Brown and Levinson and their subsequent extensions. From a systemic functional perspective, however, these categories can be seen as provisional and open to refinement in light of metafunctional alignment and systemic organization. This level of description also suggests potential points of contact with interpersonal semantic resources such as APPRAISAL and NEGOTIATION, while underscoring the need for a more detailed account of their lexicogrammatical realization — an issue taken up in the following section.

5.3 (Im)politeness as wording: interpersonal lexicogrammar

At the level of lexicogrammar, (im)politeness is approached as *wording*. If context defines the role (5.1) and semantics defines the meaning (5.2), lexicogrammar provides the specific systems — such as MOOD, MODALITY, and PERSON — through which these are realized.

Recent research suggests that impoliteness, much like politeness, is not merely a pragmatic inference drawn from "neutral" grammar, but often possesses its own specific grammar (Van Olmen *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, the degree to which (im)politeness is "built into" the grammar varies across languages, ranging from obligatory systems of deference to optional metaphorical realizations.

A significant distinction therefore concerns the extent to which (im)politeness is grammatically entrenched. In languages like Korean (Kim *et al.*, 2023), (im)politeness is a

core component of interpersonal grammar. It is realized through mandatory Exchange Marks that encode addressee deference and speech function simultaneously. Choosing a politeness level is as grammatically necessary as choosing a tense. Crucially, this system is not limited to "politeness"; as Davis and Jang (2025) explore, it also includes so-called **anti-honorifics**. For instance, the prefix *che-* (as in *che-mek-*, "eat [vulgar]") explicitly encodes a negative, irreverent attitude toward the subject, effectively "grammaticalizing" impoliteness within the verbal group.

In languages such as Portuguese — the primary language of the analytical illustrations in this study — (im)politeness is not encoded through mandatory morphology. However, this does not imply that it is absent from the (interpersonal) grammar. Instead, the "grammaticalization" of (im)politeness in Portuguese is primarily located in the PERSON system (through the T/V distinction, such as *você* vs. *o senhor*) and in the strategic manipulation of the MOOD and TENSE systems. For instance, the use of the imperfect indicative to realize a present-time desire (*eu queria* instead of *eu quero*) is a conventionalized interpersonal resource in Brazilian Portuguese. In SFL terms, this may be seen as constituting a type of interpersonal metaphor where temporal distance realizes social distance, thus realizing a [polite] move. Thus, while the system is not "mandatory" in the morphological sense of Korean, it remains a systematic and predictable locus of realizational choices within the Portuguese interpersonal potential.

Between obligatory inflection and free variation lies derivational morphology. Mattiello (2025) identifies "pejorative suffixoids" in English — such as *-ass*, *-brain*, and *-face* — which function as dedicated impoliteness markers. These morphemes allow for the construction of "slang" nominal groups (e.g., *smart-ass*, *fuckface*) that realize interpersonal *attitude* (specifically [judgment: negative]) directly at the word rank.

More generally, however, (im)polite meanings may be realized through more optional resources. For instance, through interpersonal grammatical metaphor (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2014, Section 10.3), rather than using obligatory suffixes, producers can manipulate the MOOD system to "soften" a move: realizing a command (semantics) via an interrogative clause (lexicogrammar) — "Could you open the door?" — symbolically recasts a demand as a negotiable request, thus realizing a [polite; negative politeness] move and therefore a [polite] speech role.

5.3.1 Key lexicogrammatical systems

Across languages, some key regions of interpersonal lexicogrammar seem to serve as the primary loci for (im)politeness wording:

MOOD: the "grammaticalization of the semantic system of SPEECH FUNCTION in the clause in adopting and assigning speech roles such as questioner and (designated) answerer" (Matthiessen; Teruya; Lam, 2010, p. 146). *Metaphorical realization*: as suggested above, MOOD options open the possibility of metaphorical realizations of potentially "threatening" moves, such as commands (e.g., *Could you lend me fifty dollars?*). However, even congruent (non-metaphorical) realizations may be construed as [polite] moves. For instance, in the interpersonal grammar of Brazilian Portuguese (Figueredo, 2011, 2021), the imperative of the "request" type (realized by "+Predicator; tone 5") is explicitly described as the "polite imperative"; a similar distinction is also made in German (Steiner; Teich, 2004). Conversely, specific MOOD options may be conventionalized for impolite functions. Languages may utilize specific optative or subjunctive structures for malediction (cursing), such as the

Italian subjunctive construction *Che ti venga [nominal group]* ("May [disease] come to you") (Paternoster, 2025). Similarly, conditional clause complexes can be conventionalized to realize the speech function of threats, as seen in the German construction *Wehe, wenn…* ("Woe betide you if…") (Finkbeiner, 2025).

MODALITY: this system allows for the expression of indeterminacy between "yes" and "no", thus enabling producers to distance themselves either from a negative attitude towards the addressee (*Perhaps you committed a mistake* — [positive politeness]) or from the imposition of their own wants (*Perhaps you should see a doctor* — [negative politeness]). Alternatively, modality may be deployed in the realization of explicitly [impolite] moves — for instance, by maximizing epistemic certainty to sharpen an attack (e.g., *You're definitely dumb*), or by modulating capacity to realize a negative judgement (*You can't even do that*).

VOCATION: since vocatives are among the primary resources for identifying the addressee, they may function both politely (*Dear sir*) and impolitely (*Shut up, you swine!*). Accordingly, in some languages, politeness may be grammaticalized in vocative markers — for example, in Telugu (Prakasam, 2004). See also Poynton (1990) for a systemic functional approach to the grammar of vocation in (Australian) English.

Nominal group structure: recent studies highlight how the structure of the nominal group itself can enact impoliteness through coercion (Van Olmen; Andersson, 2025). The specific deictic configuration of *You + [Noun]* (e.g., *You idiot*) forces the Head noun to be interpreted as an evaluative attribute, such that even neutral terms become insults when instantiated in this structure (e.g., *You theoretician*). Similarly, the post-deictic *such* can function as an intensifier of negative evaluation (Queisser; Pleyer, 2025). In structures like *You are such a [noun]*, the DETERMINATION system realizes a high degree of [GRADUATION: force], signaling an intensification of the attribute that is frequently associated with impolite judgment.

PERSON: many languages distinguish between familiar and polite second-person pronouns — the T/V distinction. Examples include French (*tu/vous*), German (*du/Sie*), Greek (*esi/esis*), and Brazilian Portuguese (*você/o senhor*). The deliberate misuse of these forms — such as using the familiar T form where V is expected — is a typical realization of impoliteness. See Helmbrecht (2003) for an overview.

Modal particles: in languages such as Brazilian Portuguese (Figueredo, 2011, 2021), (im) politeness may be realized through optional modal particles (e.g., *né, uai, sabe*). These resources allow producers to seek alignment and to negotiate or validate their "polite" positioning "in real time".

Finally, the systemic considerations outlined above must be complemented by an account of how (im)politeness is **structurally** realized. Overall, despite the specificities of the lexicogrammatical systems involved, (im)politeness is best understood as being realized prosodically. Rather than being realized through clearly delimited constituent structures, (im)politeness, as an interpersonal phenomenon, tends to permeate the clause. In Halliday's (2002, p. 205) terms, it "is strung throughout the clause as a continuous motif or colouring".

This prosodic realization emerges from the interaction of multiple lexicogrammatical resources, including the ones outlined above. For instance, a negatively polite request such as *Honey, I was wondering if you might be able to have a look at this when you have a moment* exemplifies a command act realized through grammatical metaphor (through the conventionalized projection of a mental process rather than a congruent imperative), combined with softening through low-

intensity graduation (*might*, *when you have a moment*) construes the requested action as minimally imposing, while the affective vocative *Honey* realizes positive politeness by enacting intimate social distance. Together, these resources distribute the interpersonal meanings of deference, solidarity and mitigation across the clause, rather than locating it in any single structural element.

In summary, treating (im)politeness as wording completes the model by making explicit how (im)polite positionings and meanings are realized in linguistic materiality. This perspective suggests a gradient of variation across the strata:

- At the level of **context**, the options for (im)politeness roles (e.g., [polite] vs. [impolite] positioning) may act as unifying parameters across languages.
- At the level of **semantics**, the strategies adopted (e.g., [negative politeness]) exhibit general variability but remain relatively global in their categorization of interpersonal meaning.
- At the level of **lexicogrammar**, however, the model opens up a potentially infinite space of variation. While these realizations typically gravitate toward nuclear areas of interpersonal grammar — such as MOOD and MODALITY — the specific linguistic resources used to enact them are highly variable.

5.4 Synthesis and implications

Taken together, Sections 5.1–5.3 articulate a stratified model of (im)politeness in which *positioning* (context), *meaning* (interpersonal semantics), and *wording* (interpersonal lexicogrammar) are analytically distinct yet mutually constraining. At the level of context, (im)politeness is modeled as POLITENESS ROLE within tenor: a dynamic interpersonal positioning assumed by, or attributed to, a producer in situations characterized by potential sociometric divergence. This perspective foregrounds the socio-semiotic nature of (im)politeness, treating it not as an inherent property of utterances but as an interactionally contingent role, co-selected with other tenor systems such as STATUS, SOCIAL DISTANCE, and ATTRIBUTES.

At the level of interpersonal semantics, (im)politeness is reconceptualized as meaning, organized around the unit of the move. Here, contextual positioning is enacted through the co-selection of the systems of (IM)POLITENESS and STRATEGY, providing a principled account of distinctions such as positive vs. negative (im)politeness while situating them within a broader semantic architecture. This level also reveals systematic points of contact with other interpersonal semantic resources — notably APPRAISAL and NEGOTIATION — linking (im)politeness to evaluative stance, dialogic positioning, and the negotiation of rights and obligations in interaction.

At the level of **interpersonal lexicogrammar**, (im)politeness is treated as *wording*: the linguistic prosodies through which semantic strategies and contextual roles are realized. While languages vary considerably in the degree to which (im)politeness is grammatically entrenched — ranging from obligatory systems of deference to optional and metaphorical realizations — the model identifies recurrent loci in interpersonal grammar (e.g., MOOD, MODALITY, PERSON, VOCATION, and modal particles) as privileged sites for its enactment. This stratum thus accounts for both cross-linguistic diversity and functional convergence.

Crucially, this stratified account must also be understood as *dynamic*, unfolding through processes of semogenesis (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2006). Of the semogenic time frames they identify, the most directly relevant here is **logogenesis**: the instantial construction of meaning as a text unfolds. From a logogenetic perspective, meaning is probabilistically recalibrated through time, as earlier selections condition later ones by restricting, disfavoring, or opening up subsequent options.

Incorporating logogenesis has important consequences for the modeling of (im)politeness. A move is not necessarily "polite" or "impolite" in and of itself; rather, its interpersonal value may only emerge retrospectively, through uptake, evaluation, and recontextualization in subsequent turns. A move initially construed as neutral or polite may come to be reclassified as impolite if later developments foreground divergence, while an apparently "face-threatening" move may be reinterpreted as polite through affiliative alignment, mitigation, or repair. Politeness and impoliteness are thus not fixed labels attached to isolated moves, but emergent categorizations shaped by the evolving interaction.

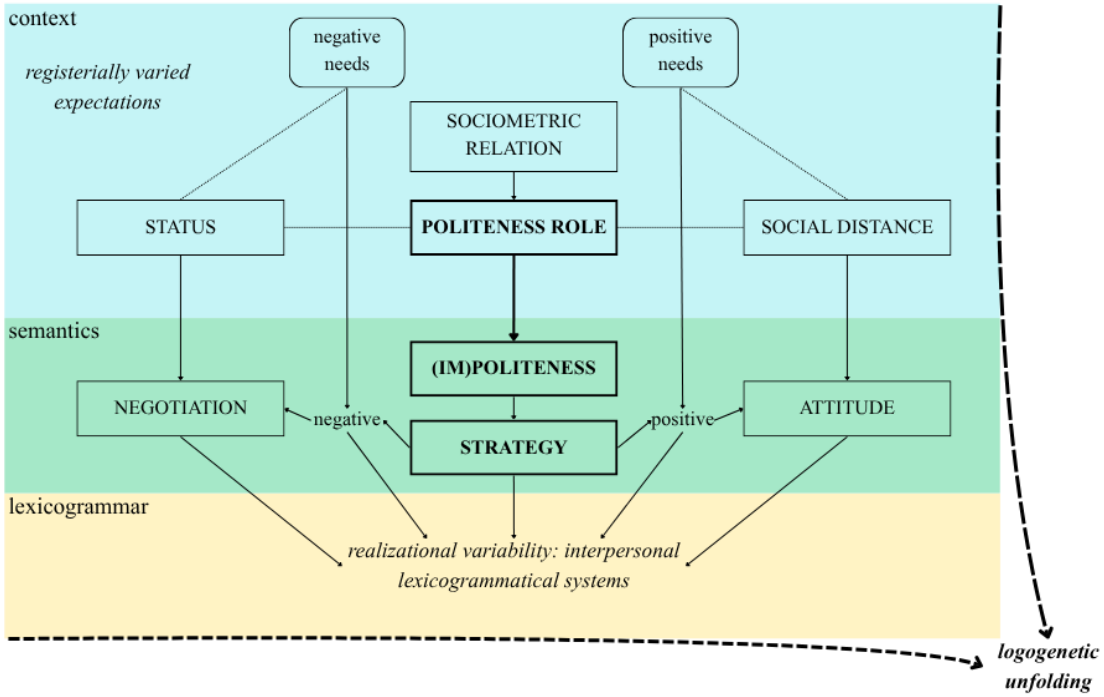
Integrating logogenesis therefore refines the treatment of POLITENESS ROLE at the contextual level: such roles are not simply selected at a single point, but are continually negotiated, ratified, or revised as the discourse progresses. Similarly, at the semantic level, (im)politeness strategies must be understood as part of an evolving interpersonal trajectory, rather than as discrete, (con)text-free options. At the lexicogrammatical level, individual wordings contribute locally to this trajectory, but their interpersonal significance can only be fully interpreted against the backdrop of preceding and ensuing selections.

At the same time, a systemic functional model of (im)politeness does not treat polite or impolite behavior as intrinsically *marked*. Rather, (im)politeness is construed as socio-semiotic behavior whose markedness is contingent on the expectations generated by the register and context type instantiated by a given text and the situation it realizes. What counts as neutral, polite, or impolite is therefore relative to the normative patterns of interaction associated with particular registers. In some registers, alignment, mitigation, and "face-attentive" behavior are expected and unmarked; in others, directness, confrontation, or even aggression may be anticipated as part of the interactional norm.

From this perspective, Leech's (2014) Principle of Politeness — and by extension the General Strategy of Politeness — is best understood as registerially restricted. It is most readily observable in certain broadly "cooperative" registers, where the maintenance of concord is an expected interactional goal. In other practices (e.g., adversarial, competitive, ritualized conflictual, or entertainment-oriented interactions), there may instead be an expectation of (mock) impoliteness, such that polite conduct may itself become marked or interactionally dissonant. It may still be maintained that impoliteness often requires greater interpersonal effort or energy — being, in this sense, more interactionally "exhausting". However, such claims must be tempered by the recognition that effort, markedness, and normativity are register-dependent. What appears effortful or marked in one context type may be routine and unmarked in another.

Overall, the synthesis underscores a central claim of the model: (im)politeness is neither reducible to context, nor to meaning, nor to form alone, nor to isolated moments in interaction. Rather, it emerges from **patterned relations across strata, across systems and across time**, shaped by logogenetic development and calibrated against register-specific expectations. By integrating stratification, semogenesis, and registerial sensitivity, the model aims to capture (im)politeness as a socio-semiotic resource that is at once systemic and emergent, structured yet dynamically reconfigured in the unfolding of discourse.

Figure 4 – The Systemic Functional Model of (Im)politeness



Source: The author.

6 Analytical illustrations

The analyses below draw on two contrasting data sets to indicate the model's analytical potential across different registers. While the testing detailed in Section 2 was conducted on the Twitter corpus, we here introduce a supplementary excerpt from the C-Oral corpus (Raso; Mello, 2012) for specifically illustrative purposes. This first data set is an audio-recorded institutional academic interaction between an English teacher (MAR) and his superior (ELI), produced in Brazilian Portuguese. The transcription was adapted to facilitate reading. This interaction is characterized by asymmetrical STATUS, potential institutional consequences, and a relatively high degree of interpersonal monitoring, which makes it a privileged site for the activation of politeness. The second data set consists of a publicly available Twitter thread responding to a celebratory post; it was collected as part of the original "analytical testing" corpus. As a digitally mediated, non-institutional interaction, it is marked by weak role stabilization and platform-specific evaluative practices. Due to space limitations, the analyses are necessarily highly selective and therefore non-exhaustive.

6.1 Institutional interaction

Table 3 – Transcript

Adapted transcription (Portuguese)	English translation
MAR: Mas eu queria que cê me desse uma orientação aí, porque eu sei que, é... foi culpa minha também o fato de eu ter... virou uma bola de neve, essas atividades, né?	MAR: But I wanted you to give me some guidance, because I know that, um... it was my fault too that it ended up becoming a snowball, these assignments, you know?
ELI: Mm-hm.	ELI: Mm-hm.
MAR: Foi irresponsabilidade minha, falta de tempo esse semestre e eu fiquei muito... chateado comigo mesmo pelo fato de eu ter deixado isso acontecer.	MAR: It was my irresponsibility, a lack of time this semester, and I was really... upset with myself for having let this happen.
ELI: Mm-hm.	ELI: Mm-hm.
ELI: É, mas agora a gente tem que arrumar uma solução, né? Eu acho que se você fizer... até o último dia, Marco, vai rolar.	ELI: Yeah, but now we have to find a solution, right? I think that if you do it... by the last day, Marco, it'll work out.
MAR: Das atividades em que eu fiz bagunça, nessa... nessa via de frequência.	MAR: About the assignments where I messed things up, in terms of attendance.
ELI: É.	ELI: Yeah.
MAR: Eu fiz uma confusãozinha aí.	MAR: I caused a bit of confusion there.
ELI: Hum hum.	ELI: Mm-hm.
ELI: Não, mas porque mudou o dia e tal, mas a gente fazendo até o último dia, é isso mesmo.	ELI: No, but it's because the date changed and all, but if we do it up to the last day, that's right.
MAR: Não, eu tô falando das revisões, dessas atividades que entregaram.	MAR: No, I'm talking about the revisions, those assignments that were submitted.
ELI: Ah, do homework?	ELI: Oh, the homework?
MAR: Não. Tô falando da minha própria atitude, de ter colocado nota boa no...	MAR: No. I'm talking about my own attitude, about having given a good grade on the...
ELI: Ah, você viu meu relatório, né?	ELI: Oh, you saw my report, right?
MAR: Eu vi. Hum hum.	MAR: I did. Mm-hm.
ELI: Pois é, eu sei.	ELI: Yeah, I know.
MAR: Isso foi errado.	MAR: That was wrong.
ELI: Você entendeu?	ELI: Do you understand?

Source: C-Oral corpus (Raso; Mello, 2012).

(1) Lexicogrammatical patterns

The analysis reveals a prosody of wordings oriented towards the mitigation of interpersonal pressure and the explicit modulation of responsibility.

MOOD metaphor, tense and aspect: MAR initiates the sequence with *"eu queria que cê me desse uma orientação"* ("I wanted you to give me some guidance"). Here, the co-selection of the imperfective aspect with a desiderative process ("wanted to") projecting a declarative explicitly signals a metaphorical realization of a command. The imperfective aspect creates a "temporal distance" that metaphorically widens the interpersonal distance between the "want" of the producer and the obligation it entails, thereby realizing the proposal as less binding and more negotiable than a congruent realization (cf. Travaglia, 1987).

Morphological GRADUATION: MAR selects the morphological diminutive *"-inha"* in *"confusãozinha"* (literally "little confusion"). In Portuguese nominal grammar, this suffix functions as a resource not merely for the experiential construal of size, but mostly for the interpersonal realization of GRADUATION, downscaling the scope of the evaluation (cf. Turunen, 2009 on the semantics and pragmatics of diminutives in Brazilian Portuguese). By qualifying the problem as "little," the producer attempts to minimize his mistake, a feature of positive politeness strategies.

PERSON alignment: ELI, the superior, reciprocates with *"a gente tem que arrumar uma solução"* ("we have to find a solution"). The use of the pronominal form *"a gente"* (semantically "we", grammatically singular) instead of *"você"* (you) serves to redistribute the obligation; in Gonçalves-Segundo's (2011, p. 214) terms, it creates a sense of "collectivization", allowing the producer "to construct co-responsibility and co-validation for their representations and evaluative positions, avoiding isolation in their stances, which could otherwise affect their credibility and authority". This signals a shift from an authoritative command to a cooperative proposal, realizing institutional power through solidarity rather than coercion.

(2) Interpersonal semantic strategies

At the semantics stratum, these lexicogrammatical patterns realize a complex configuration of (im)politeness strategies, orchestrated to manage the "debt" incurred by the producer.

APPRAISAL and "modesty": In terms of the ATTITUDE system, MAR employs an inscribed negative judgement directed at the self: *"foi culpa minha"* ("it was my fault"), *"irresponsabilidade minha"* ("my irresponsibility"). By explicitly judging himself negatively, MAR adheres strictly to Leech's (2014) Modesty Maxim ("Give a low value to the speaker's qualities"). This creates a semantic paradox typical of polite repair: by lowering his own moral standing (self-deprecation), he protects the addressee's positive face (agreement), effectively pre-empting any external criticism.

STRATEGY: Overall, the patterns outlined above suggest that MAR, who is in a vulnerable position admitting fault, relies heavily on [negative] politeness to show deference and minimize his imposition — e.g., by being conventionally indirect. In turn, ELI relies on [positive] politeness to reassure him, claim common ground, and minimize the threat to his positive needs.

NEGOTIATION: ELI's semantic moves are largely characterized by acknowledgements ("*Mm-hm*", "*É*"). By refusing to upgrade the negative judgement initiated by MAR (e.g., avoiding "Yes, it was irresponsible"), ELI adheres to what Leech (2014) terms Agreement ("Give a high value to the other's opinions") and Approbation ("Give a high value to the other's qualities"), clearly aiming to maintain concord.

(3) Contextual positioning

The POLITENESS ROLE system is clearly relevant here due to a potentially [divergent] SOCIOMETRIC RELATION (a breach of contract/expectation); without remediation, this divergence could lead to a rupture in the professional relationship. MAR seems to adopt a continuously [polite] role as a strategic maneuver to "soften" the potential divergence and, less directly, to realign the STATUS asymmetry. By positioning himself as "inferior" and "guilty", he invites the superior to assume the role of a "benign judge" rather than a "punisher". Logogenetically, it seems that the sustained maintenance of the [polite] role by MAR eventually succeeds in neutralizing the sociometric divergence. One of ELI's final moves ("*mas a gente fazendo até o último dia, é isso mesmo*" — "but if we do it up to the last day, that's right") suggests that the issue has been successfully managed through the appropriate enactment of the politeness system. This could, however, be due to a reduced SOCIAL DISTANCE prior to the instance.

6.2 Twitter interaction

Table 4 – Twitter interaction

Original	Translation
Lead tweet: meu deus que felicidade acompanhar esse oscar, com meu marido, pizza e vinho	my god what a joy to follow this oscar, with my husband, pizza and wine
Reply 1 (R1): todos sabemos o quanto batalhou por isso / merecedor!!!	we all know how much you fought for this / so deserving!!!
Reply 2 (R2): gatilho	trigger
Reply 3 (R3): aviso de gatilho, cade?	trigger warning, where is it?
Reply 4 (R4): cadê a empatia	where's the empathy
Reply 5 (R5): Cala a boca, vadia	Shut up, bitch
Reply 6 (R6): Amg muito feliz pelo seu momento mas eu queria que tivesse acontecendo comigo	Friend I'm so happy for your moment but I wanted it to be happening to me

Source: collected by Farhat (2025).

(1) Lexicogrammatical patterns

The lexicogrammatical selections in this thread are characterized by a prosody of structures that conventionally realize [impolite] meanings.

Imperative mood and taboo vocative: R5 ("*Cala a boca, vadia*" / "Shut up, bitch") selects the imperative mood ("*Cala*"), which creates a high-force demand for the cessation of the

addressee's semiotic activity — in semantic terms, it enacts negative impoliteness. This is coupled with the vocative "*vadia*" ("bitch"), a taboo lexical item that negatively characterizes the addressee. In terms of nominal group grammar, this functions similarly to what Mattiello (2025) calls "pejorative suffixoids," but here realized as a full lexical head explicitly encoding [judgement: social sanction: propriety; negative] and therefore enacting positive impoliteness.

Ellipsis and minor clauses: R2 ("*gatilho*" / "trigger") employs a minor clause structure (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2014) — i.e., without a "main verb" (the Predicator). By stripping away the Finite and the Subject, the producer presents the evaluation as a bare, unmitigated fact. The lexical item "gatilho", which is borrowed from clinical discourse (Charles *et al*., 2022), is here "bleached" of its ideational trauma-related meaning, functioning instead as an interpersonal token of intensity directed at evaluating the lead tweet as in some way "dangerous". Similarly, R4 ("*cadê a empatia*" / "where's the empathy") uses a *Wh-* interrogative not to seek information, but to challenge the addressee's moral standing. Overall, the reactions prosodically create a sense of generalized impoliteness.

(2) Semantic patterns

While the wording seems to realize impolite meanings, a semantic analysis reveals a systematic realignment of these choices into a strategy of **mock** impoliteness or banter. Leech (1983, p. 144) defines the Banter Principle as: "In order to show solidarity with [the hearer], say something which is (i) obviously untrue, and (ii) obviously impolite to [the hearer]". Here, the "untruth" lies in the aggression. The negative judgement enacted by R5 ("*bitch*") and R4 ("*lack of empathy*") is semantically inverted. The "trigger" is not trauma, but a false "envy" of a desirable situation. Therefore, more nuancedly, the *inscribed* negative attitude realizes an *invoked* positive attitude ("You are having a great time"; "I wish I were you!").

The "true" semantic value of the earlier replies is logogenetically signaled by R6 ("*Amg muito feliz... queria que tivesse acontecendo comigo*"), which makes explicit the affective meaning of "envy" that seems to have motivated the previous turns, but also acts as a "key" that retrospectively allows us to recategorize the entire thread not as a dispute, but as a shared celebration of envy. This happens, however, due to the contextual positioning "above" the semantics — to which we now turn our attention.

(3) Contextual positioning

Despite the selection of "impolite" wordings, the participants do not assume an [impolite] role; they are not held responsible for a genuinely offensive or conflictual stance. Rather, the interaction is governed by a register-specific norm in which "surface impoliteness" constitutes the (marked) realization of "underlying solidarity". More technically, the intimate SOCIAL DISTANCE prevents us from analyzing the "impolite" meanings and wordings as enacting an actually impolite positioning. Similarly, the sociometric relation remains convergent. The apparent conflict is simulated and, in fact, realizes intimacy rather than divergence.

6.3 Contrastive synthesis

Taken together, the two analytical illustrations suggest that (im)politeness cannot be adequately accounted for at the level of wording alone, nor even at the level of inscribed interpersonal meanings. Rather, (im)politeness emerges as a contextually regulated positioning, realized through patterned alignments across lexicogrammatical, semantic, and contextual strata.

In the institutional interaction, politeness is unmarked and obligatory: it operates as a regulatory resource for managing asymmetrical STATUS, potential SOCIOMETRIC DIVERGENCE, and institutional accountability. Here, politeness is realized prosodically through indirectness, self-deprecation, collectivization, and restrained negotiation. These meanings are not merely stylistic choices, but socially expected enactments of a [polite] role, whose sustained deployment logogenetically neutralizes a potentially divergent sociometric relation. Impoliteness, in this context, would constitute a marked and sanctionable deviation.

By contrast, in the Twitter interaction, impoliteness is lexicogrammatically salient but contextually neutralized. Wordings conventionally associated with high interpersonal aggression do not result in the enactment of an [impolite] role, precisely because the interaction unfolds within a register characterized by weak role stabilization, intimate SOCIAL DISTANCE, and platform-specific norms of evaluative excess. Here, "surface impoliteness" functions as a marked but licensed strategy for realizing solidarity, envy, and shared celebration. What would count as a "face-threatening act" in an institutional setting is reinterpreted, at the level of contextual positioning, as mock impoliteness or banter.

The contrast thus reveals an inversion of markedness relations: while politeness is unmarked and interactionally mandatory in the institutional exchange, it is impoliteness that becomes a routinized resource for affiliative meaning-making. Crucially, we believe this inversion cannot be adequately explained without reference to the POLITENESS ROLE system and its interaction with SOCIAL DISTANCE, STATUS, and SOCIOMETRIC RELATION.

Overall, we believe that the juxtaposition of these data sets supports the central claim of the proposed model: (im)politeness is best understood not as a property of forms or isolated strategies, but as a **systemic option for contextual positioning**, whose interpretation depends on the alignment — or misalignment — between wording, interpersonal semantics, and the norms of the situation type.

7 Concluding remarks

This paper sought to address a significant gap in Systemic Functional Linguistics: the absence of a comprehensive, stratified model of (im)politeness. By engaging in a process of critical review, metatranslation, and modeling, we have argued that (im)politeness should not be treated as a monolithic pragmatic phenomenon, nor as a mere external appendage to grammar. Instead, we have proposed a model that locates (im)politeness at the intersection of three strata, thereby integrating it fully into the architecture of language. At the level of **context**, it functions within the parameter of tenor, characterizing the positioning of interactants in relation to potential sociometric divergence. At the level of **interpersonal semantics**, it operates as meaning, realized through specific strategies (e.g., positive vs. negative politeness) organized around the move.

Finally, at the level of **interpersonal lexicogrammar**, it is realized as wording, exploiting resources such as mood, modality, person, and vocation to create prosodies of mitigation or aggravation.

However, the model presented here represents a sketch — a map of a vast territory that requires further exploration. Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, regarding empirical scope, the model has been tested only through qualitative analysis of small data sets. While valuable for illustrating the model's systemic logic, these analyses do not possess the statistical robustness provided by large-scale corpus studies. Future research would benefit from quantitative investigations to determine the probabilistic weightings of specific (im)politeness strategies across different registers. Furthermore, while the theoretical discussion drew on examples from various languages, the analytical testing was restricted primarily to Brazilian Portuguese. A robust systemic functional model of (im)politeness requires extensive cross-linguistic validation to distinguish between potentially universal motivating pressures (such as the positive and negative needs of interactants) and language-specific systemic options.

Similarly, the current proposal has focused heavily on the content plane (semantics and lexicogrammar), leaving the expression plane (phonology/graphology) unaddressed. In spoken language, intonation is a crucial resource for the realization of (im)politeness — e.g., tone often overrides lexicogrammatical selections in the interpretation of attitude. Similarly, in written digital registers, typographical resources (e.g., capitalization, punctuation, and emoji use) play a central role. A truly comprehensive model must eventually account for how phonological and graphological (and even multimodal) systems contribute to the realization of (im)politeness.

Finally, there is the issue of contextual permeability (Hasan, 2014, 2020). We have modeled (im)politeness as a feature of *tenor*. However, contextual parameters interact and we have not yet detailed how the POLITENESS ROLE system interacts with field (the nature of the social activity) and mode (the channel of communication). For instance, how do the constraints of a specific field (e.g., legal argument vs. culinary instruction) restrict the available options for politeness? How does mode (e.g., synchronous vs. asynchronous communication) affect the logogenetic negotiation of politeness roles? Investigating these inter-parameter dynamics is essential for moving from a general model of (im)politeness to register-specific accounts.

Ultimately, this paper serves as an opening move rather than a final word. We explicitly invite the SFL community to engage in this enterprise, testing the proposed categories against a wider array of languages, registers, and modalities. We believe that undertaking this task is essential not only to deepen our understanding of the interpersonal architecture of language but also to equip SFL to take a more central role in the broader, interdisciplinary dialogue concerning the social dynamics of meaning.

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