

***How verbal aggressiveness may be  
positive?***

***Demonstration through an  
exchange of professional emails***

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# Introduction

- Verbal violence and aggressiveness are often seen as negative behaviors and conveying negative emotions in our interactions.

→ But is that always the case?

1/ We here interpret the “margin” theme proposed for the conference, in **observing in which cases verbal violence or aggressiveness could on the contrary be positive**

2/ And even **useful for something - and** then, for what?

→ More specifically, we want here to consider **aggressiveness as having two facets**: one known as **negative**, but also a less known one, that is **positive**.

# Theoretical Frame

- Our global theoretical frame is the one of **aggressiveness as developed in ethology** (Lorenz 1983; Pankeerst 1998).
- On the linguistics side, our theoretical frames of **interactionnal analyses** are Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2010), (im)politeness (Brown et Levinson 1987; Culpeper 2011), the linguistic analysis of verbal violence (Fracchiolla & al. 2013) ; and the description of aggression (Archer 2008).
- Fracchiolla “etholinguistics” → answering vital needs with language

# Aggressiveness

- As a matter of fact, aggressiveness is often a signal sent to mark a **limit**;
- this **signal** be answered in 2 forms:
- that is **acknowledged** and answered to with a **backing up from the receiver**;

Or

- **ignored** which, in most cases, will lead to verbal violence.
- → 2 examples to illustrate one of each kind

# “Positive aggressiveness”

- We develop the explanation of the notion of **“positive aggressiveness”**, through the **analysis of email exchanges between academics, where a tension appears but gets solved.**
- In fact, we think aggressiveness is useful to maintain the social and relational bond.

# “Positive aggressiveness”

- It may be seen as +, because
  - a certain amount of **information gets released** (or given) to **others** **about how one works** and what her or his **limits** are, in order to **optimize** the kind of **relations** that can be **maintained** or **continued** between the two interactants.

# The language of aggressiveness

- We will then analyze **how aggressiveness is**
  - **verbally shown,**
  - **developed** and
  - **positively** or **negatively** used

in our corpora in the **framework of accommodation** and **cooperation** (Bousfield 2008).

# Corpus analyses

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# Our corpus

- Gathered **anonymously** between 2010 and 2012
- The field of academic exchanges was at **the origin of email exchanges in the 90s**. However, **no instruction manual to accompany the emergence and spread of this means of communication**.
- The **2 exchanges** which follow **highlight some of the characteristics and difficulties of its use**.

# The academic work scene

**Exchange 1-** features 3 colleagues.

- **Topic:** a **difficulty** in organizing a **schedule** for speakers at a **conference**. 3 speakers were initially planned but in fact **only 2 were possible** in the time available.
  - A **negotiation** thus begins about how to satisfy everyone concerned and find a solution.
  - In this exchange, the **question of the status of each person is also at stake**. In **France**, Speakers are funded by **their laboratories** concerned which therefore means **there is a question of professional and institutional recognition linked to saving face involved**.
  - **How should 1 of the 3 people be chosen to not take part without causing a conflict?**
  - A **proposal** is made to **shorten** the allotted **speaking time**, but this would nevertheless **mean the 3 speakers would be less favourably treated** than other speakers.
- After consulting the colleagues concerned, the **person who wrote the original mail** finally decides (and **promises**) to **find a solution which will not entail anyone being at a disadvantage**.

# Email 1

From: A

08/04/2011, 03:52

Subject: scheduling problem

to: B

cc: +4

Dear friends,

I had managed to fit everyone in over the two days of the scientific conference after lengthy tinkering and fiddling which I will spare you the details of. **And now the last person on the waiting list has just confirmed their presence** [...]. Would it be possible for only two speakers to attend? We could compensate for this with the publication of three chapters in the forthcoming Proceedings.

What do you think? Have I gone further than is possible?

Thanks in advance for letting me know your views as soon as is possible for you.

# Email 2

From: B

08/04/2011, 18:10

Subject: Re: scheduling problem

to: A

cc: +4

Hello everyone

*I understand your problem*, A, **but** it is impossible to cut a speaker because our participation is funded by our research laboratories who ask for proof to justify that funding.

What we could do if my three colleagues agree is to reduce the speaking time by getting rid of questions as this would gain us thirty minutes.

If other people now reply that they are coming a month before the conference, I think they shouldn't be accepted!

We're not a tourist agency!

Love

B

# Email 3

From: A

09/04/2011, 02:46

Subject: Re: scheduling problem

to: B

cc: +3

**Ok, I understand the situation**

**Don't worry. I will find a solution.** No need to reduce your speaking time. **Love to all.**

A

# Synthesis : Example 1

- This analysis enables us to draw certain **conclusions** regarding the idea of the *continuum* we wish to explain in this presentation.
  - 1/ there is **positive politeness** in isolated “words” like “Hello”, “Love to all”, “Hello everyone”, “Dear friends”, or “Thanks”.
  - 2/ there is **negative politeness** expressed through calming or alleviating phrase like the **modalization** using the conditional (“could”) and direct questions.
  - 3/ We find **discourse** and **argumentation** which stops short of becoming polemical. The arguments used here aim to **convince through reason** and threaten the face through discursive development without being polemical.
- This is why we refer to **positive rudeness** - it is positive insofar as it favours negotiation, interaction and continuing to interact together.
- This exchange shows an **intentional will to cooperate** in terms of getting on with each other and progressing together which is proven by nonpolemical argumentation (arguments based on reason rather than emotions) associated with positive politeness (which is also volitive).

# Example 2

## Email 1

From: W

Subject: **URGENT**/Intensive semester-long course in computing for beginner students

to: A, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K

Date: November 12<sup>th</sup> at 21:54

Good evening,

[...]

**Who is interested?**

Before meeting X and Y to discuss the budgetary and organizational issues linked to this project (obviously it is out of the question to allot the hours for this course to the department's overtime hours), **we need to know who is ready to commit to the project.**

**Thank you in advance for your prompt replies.**

Good night

W

# Email 2

From: A

Subject: Re: Urgent/Intensive semester-long course in computing for beginner students

to: W

Cc: D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K

Date: Tuesday November 13<sup>th</sup> at 09:03

Dear all,

I'm sorry but, no, I am not available to commit to **this type of** project, **not this year in any case and not in such conditions of urgency...**

**Best wishes,**

A

Sent from my iPad



# Email 3

From: W

Subject: Re: URGENT/Intensive semester-long course in French for Pakistani students

to: A

Cc: D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K

Date: November 17<sup>th</sup>, 10:02

Hello,

The question of this intensive course will be on the agenda at the next department meeting. If we decide that it is part of our mission and consider that we have the necessary financial and material resources then it will be set up.

**This project is not being put forward as a matter of urgency** as the course is only scheduled to begin in the second semester - **there is nothing fanciful about the level of reactivity asked of us!**

Teaching and administrative requirements are not optional - they are an obligation which has been clearly set out in the department's job profiles for about ten years now. At the next meeting, we will fully discuss and examine these.

Have a good day.

W

# Conclusion - 1

- Our analyses lead us to propose **there is a *continuum*** between the **moment** in which the **point of tension clearly emerges** in the **interaction** followed by the **manifestation of either positive or negative aggressiveness**.
  - The **result of the interaction** then clearly **depends** on how the recipient understands and answers the expressed aggressiveness.
- **It can either get solved or lead to a clash.**

# Conclusion 2

- Which means that **interpreting emails also relies on the interactionnal frame of analysis**
- **However**, in the interactionnal frame, **emails** have a peculiar place, since they **are highly “impersonal”** (no physical presence nor signs vs handwritten letter/note ; no voice adjustment, etc. Romain & Fracchiolla 2014, 2015)
- → **Professional exchanges are supposed to be rather “impersonal” – so they are an easy corpus**
- Emails must then be considered (aside) as such to allow correct interpretation of exchanges.

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