

IMPOLITENESS AND CONFLICT IN A MUNICIPALITY: APPLYING (IM)POLITENESS THEORY

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Abstract:

Conflict frequently arises in interactions between citizens and employees of public services, influenced by patterns of behaviour perceived as inappropriate from both parties. This study tries to explore the origins of these conflicts, by focusing on employee mistreatment and citizen aggression. Drawing on extensive literature across various service sectors, it highlights how user dissatisfaction with service quality and disrespectful perceptions contribute to tension. Conversely, citizens' demanding attitudes also exacerbate service providers' mistreatment, perpetuating a cycle of distrust and distrust. By applying (im)politeness theory, the study analyses few real-life dialogues collected in a small-town hall in the North of Italy, in Piedmont Region, in 2024, to illustrate how stereotypes and regulatory constraints fuel conflictual exchanges. These examples reveal the intricate interplay between misunderstandings, societal beliefs, and bureaucratic norms that underpin citizen-employee conflicts. Theoretical frameworks such as Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, as well as Lakoff's maxim of politeness, elucidate how face-threatening acts (FTA) and rudeness manifest in these interactions, where citizens' preconceived ideas of employee incompetence challenge normative communication norms. This disruptive kind of behaviour reflects citizens' goal-oriented approach to problem-solving versus bureaucratic adherence. In conclusion, this research underscores the importance of (im)politeness theory (following Culpeper) in understanding and managing conflict in public services.

Keywords: *Impoliteness strategies; Citizen-employee interactions; Conflicts; Stereotypes in public services.*