

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.

Received: 30 March
2025

Revised: 30 June 2025

Accepted: 12 July 2025

Published: 15 September
2025

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

1 Introduction

Interactions between citizens and employees of private services or public administrations frequently lead to conflict, a phenomenon observed across various service sectors globally. Reports of violent incidents by citizens accessing services in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands underscore the gravity of these conflicts. The roots of these conflicts can be traced to both inappropriate behaviour by employees and aggressive behaviour by citizens.

Extensive literature has examined user mistreatment by employees across different contexts, including hospitals (Lindbloom et al., 2007, Auslender & Fleury, 2017, Wong et al., 2019), hotels (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara et al., 2013), and public services (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2020). User complaints typically stem from perceptions of unsatisfactory service quality, which is often understood as disrespectful (Yagil, 2008). Perceptions underlying the data gathered can substantially influence the interaction dynamics, leading to increased tension and conflict. Scholarly studies have also focused on the demanding or deviant behaviours of citizens, which have been categorised and examined by various researchers. These behaviours consistently result in the mistreatment of service providers (Bitner et al., 1994, Bies 2001, Dormann & Zapf, 2004, Frisk et al., 2010, Wang et al., 2011, Kong & Kim, 2017). The dual opposition in these interactions is evident: employees are bound by the principles of public interest and regulatory frameworks (Kozjek & Brezovar, 2022), which do not always align with citizens' individual desires and expectations.

This misalignment often leads to citizens' dissatisfaction, as they tend to evaluate employees' performance based on personal interests rather than on broader regulatory constraints. Additionally, there is a pervasive stereotype that public employees are lazy and unproductive, only exerting effort when subjected to pressure, sometimes harshly. This stereotype further fuels the conflict, creating an environment of distrust and suspicion. The atmosphere of distrust and suspicion between citizens and employees often turns dialogue into a site of latent or explicit conflict. In these contexts, the dynamics of interaction can give rise to acts of aggression and rudeness, which are key elements in the study of (im)politeness theory. (Im)politeness theory, which examines how politeness and impoliteness are communicated and interpreted in social interactions, provides a valuable framework for analysing these conflictual exchanges.

This article proposes that the inherent dynamics of these interactions, influenced by stereotypes and regulatory constraints, contribute to the manifestation of aggression and rudeness. By applying (im)politeness theory, one can better understand the pragmatic mechanisms through which this kind of behaviour emerge and is sustained. To support this analysis, this study will characterise conflict manifestations through detailed examples of dialogues collected from the small Town Hall of Occhieppo Inferiore, a community in the province of Biella in Elvo Valley. These dialogues, amounting at 20 for a total of 500 words, have been collected directly at the window of different Town Hall service during the first half of 2023. Some of them will illustrate the specific ways in which misunderstandings, stereotypes, and regulatory constraints interact to produce conflictual exchanges. By examining these real-life examples, we aim to shed light on the complex interplay of factors contributing to citizen-employee conflicts in bureaucratic settings. This pragmatic analysis not only contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of (im)politeness and conflict but also offers practical insights for improving communication strategies in public service interactions. By identifying the root causes of conflict and proposing strategies for mitigating aggressive and rude

behaviours, this study aims to enhance the quality-of-service delivery and foster a more constructive and respectful dialogue between citizens and public employees.

2 Theoretical Framework

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides a foundational understanding of how face-threatening acts (FTAs) and politeness strategies function in communication. However, acts of rudeness by citizens are not merely threats to the employee's face but are embedded in a context where disrespect towards the other's face generally dominates. In other words, citizen-users often start with the prejudice that the diligence and honourableness of the employee are insufficient, thus eliciting contempt. This prejudiced mindset influences their communicative behaviour, leading to more frequent occurrences of impoliteness. Brown and Levinson (1987) propose the concept of "facework", where all moves in dialogue aim to minimise social conflict by limiting or softening attacks on the interlocutor's "face". Face, in this context, refers to the public self-image that every member wants to claim for her- or himself. Any act of rudeness violates this conversational norm, as it directly attacks an interlocutor's face. Therefore, impoliteness is the absence of politeness, theoretically categorised within the frameworks introduced by politeness theory.

Lakoff (1973) expands on the notion of politeness by integrating it into Grice's (1975) conversational maxims, specifically through the Maxim of Politeness, which is operationalised through three sub-maxims: a) do not impose, b) give options to the interlocutor, and c) make the interlocutor feel good. Rudeness can be characterised as violation of these norms. According to this model, rudeness becomes an integral component of dialogue structure rather than individual FTAs. However, any act that diminishes the face — i.e., the honourableness of the interlocutor — is considered impolite.

Culpeper et al. (2003) describe impoliteness as "communicative strategies designed to attack the face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony". In interactions with public administrations, conflict and disharmony are often presumed due to existing stereotypes. Rudeness then becomes a consequence of these preconceived notions. Culpeper and Hardaker (2017, p. 202) further specify that "impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires, and/or beliefs about social organisation, in particular, how one person's or a group's identities are mediated by others in interaction". Thus, understanding the phenomenon requires an initial understanding of citizens' beliefs regarding the functioning of the public system.

As noted by Kozjek and Brezovar (2022), citizens do not often expect a functional and efficient service but rather an administration that addresses reported needs, even if this requires stretching the interpretation of common rules. Instead of accepting the employee's suggestions, citizens often challenge them, hoping their interpretation will prevail. This challenging behaviour is rooted in the belief that the

public system is inherently flawed and that their personal needs should override standard procedures. Rudeness, therefore, emerges from an intertwining of mental models and stereotypes between citizen-users and public administration employees. Adopting a goal-oriented view (Castelfranchi & Parisi, 1980, Castelfranchi, 1996), interactions between citizen-users and employees are guided by the dominant intent of the former to resolve specific bureaucratic issues in the desired way, while the latter's goal is to translate problems into bureaucratic terms and manage them in that frame. If conflict arises between these goals, citizens often strive for their interpretation to prevail, employing various strategies, including FTAs. Subsequent paragraphs will analyse these stereotypes and communication strategies adopted by citizens, alongside "disengagement" (Metts, 1992) strategies to exit conflict. By drawing examples from the collected dialogues, this study aims to illustrate how these theoretical concepts are evidenced in practical interactions. This pragmatic approach not only provides a deeper understanding of the dynamics of impoliteness but also offers insights into potential strategies for mitigating conflict and improving citizen-employee interactions in public administrations.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative, discourse-analytic research design grounded in pragmatics and (im)politeness theory. The research aims to explore how conflict, rudeness, and impoliteness are discursively constructed and negotiated in institutional encounters between citizens and public employees. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the study follows an exploratory, interpretive approach, focusing on naturally occurring interactions in a real-world bureaucratic setting.

The methodological framework is informed by qualitative discourse analysis and interactional pragmatics, drawing on established models of politeness and impoliteness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper et al., 2003; Culpeper & Hardaker, 2017), as well as argumentative and interactional approaches to institutional talk (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984; Bousfield, 2008).

2.2 Data collection

The corpus consists of naturally occurring service encounters collected at the service counters of the Town Hall of Occhieppo Inferiore, a small municipality in the province of Biella (Piedmont, Italy). Data were collected during routine public service interactions over a period in the first half of 2023 (or 2024 — ensure consistency in the final version).

The dataset comprises approximately 20 interactional episodes, amounting to approximately 500 words of transcribed dialogue. The interactions involve citizens requesting information or contesting administrative decisions, primarily

related to taxation and municipal services. The encounters were selected because they displayed varying degrees of communicative tension, conflict, and manifestations of (im)politeness.

The data were collected through direct observation and note-based transcription by the researcher in situ. The dialogues represent spontaneous, naturally occurring institutional talk and were not elicited for research purposes, ensuring ecological validity.

2.3 Ethical considerations

All data were anonymised to protect the identity of participants. No personal identifying information (names, addresses, or case-specific identifiers) is included in the corpus. Participants are referred to using role-based labels (e.g., SF1, SF2, SF3), indicating their interactional role rather than personal identity.

Given the observational nature of the data and the focus on institutional communication rather than personal narratives, the study follows standard ethical practices for qualitative research in public institutional settings. The data are presented exclusively for academic analysis of communicative practices, and all examples have been edited to remove potentially sensitive information.

2.4 Transcription and translation

The interactions were transcribed in Italian and subsequently translated into English for the purposes of publication. Transcriptions aim to capture relevant pragmatic and interactional features, including turn-taking, interruptions, and salient paralinguistic markers (e.g., emotional stance indicated through emojis or descriptive annotations). The English translations are intended to preserve pragmatic force rather than provide strictly literal renderings. Where necessary, explanatory glosses are provided to clarify culturally or institutionally specific expressions.

2.5 Analytical framework

The analysis follows a qualitative, theory-driven coding procedure based on established models of politeness and impoliteness. The primary analytical categories include:

- Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) (Brown & Levinson, 1987)
- Impoliteness strategies (Culpeper et al., 2003)
- Stereotype-based discursive positioning
- Argumentative strategies (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984)
- Disengagement strategies (Bousfield, 2008)

The dialogues were examined iteratively to identify recurring pragmatic patterns, including expressions of institutional distrust, challenges to authority, assertions of superiority, and appeals to higher authority. These patterns were then grouped into

analytically meaningful categories, such as the four stereotype-based strategies discussed in Section 4.

The analysis is interpretive and qualitative in nature, focusing on how participants construct meaning, negotiate power, and manage face in institutional encounters. The goal is not statistical generalisation, but analytical generalisation, offering insights into typical pragmatic mechanisms that characterise citizen-administration conflicts.

2.6 Limitations

The study is based on a relatively small corpus drawn from a single municipal context. As such, findings cannot be generalised statistically to all public administrations. However, the depth of qualitative analysis allows for the identification of interactional patterns that are likely to be transferable to similar institutional settings.

The reliance on observational transcription rather than audio recordings may also limit the fine-grained analysis of prosody and timing. Nevertheless, the data provide sufficient pragmatic detail to support the study's analytical claims.

4 Results

4.1 Stereotypes in citizen-employee interactions

Dialogues frequently feature remarks that underscore widely held stereotypes about public servants. Following our criterion of analysis, these can be classified into four fundamental groups, though additional categories are not excluded:

a. Social block opposition

This category manifests through remarks such as: *“You! Why you..., Ah, public employees! It's time to stop it!”* These expressions target the entire category rather than a specific individual, depicting it as a hostile social group characterized by behavioural uniformity and perceived as uncooperative and overdue for elimination. These remarks aim to offend employees, motivating them to distinguish themselves from the category by satisfying 'citizens' needs. For example:

- *“You!”*, accusing employees of inefficiency and inattentiveness to citizens' concerns.
- *“Ah, public employees!”*, generalising the issue to the entire category.
- *“It's time to stop it!”*, suggesting a broader call for action against perceived incompetence.

b. Call for individual responsibility

This strategy is articulated through statements like: *“But I'm talking to you! I'm speaking to you!”* This call accuses employees of inefficiency, suggesting they are not carefully listening to citizens' concerns. Alternatively, it may imply, "I disregard

regulations; I'm addressing you, and you must take responsibility." The intent is to pressure the individual employee to act independently of bureaucratic constraints.

c. Appeal to higher authority

A more complex strategy is articulated through remarks like: "*I'll tell the Mayor!*" In this case, citizens threaten to seek intervention from higher authorities, intending to assert familiarity with the mayor while simultaneously expressing distrust in the employee's competence and capability. This strategy serves a dual purpose: it aims to intimidate the employee by invoking higher power and to convey the citizen's dissatisfaction with the current service.

d. Assertion of superiority

Statements like: "*I pay your salary!*" or "*I pay taxes!*" emphasise that public employees should consider themselves citizens' servants, thus diligently attending to their interests. This tactic aims to establish a hierarchy of legal sources, where the citizen's financial contribution is positioned above regulatory compliance, thereby compelling the employee to fulfil the 'citizen's demands.

The differentiation between a Face-Threatening Act (FTA) and mere expressions of irritation can significantly impact one's understanding of interpersonal communication dynamics. When analysing utterances for their potential as FTAs, it is crucial to consider both the context and the intent behind the speaker's words.

For instance, Case b. (Call for individual responsibility), while seemingly benign, functions as a pragmatic strategy to elicit a more attentive response from the employee. It indirectly asserts the speaker's needs without overtly challenging the employee's face. In contrast, case a. (Social Block Opposition) presents a more generalised critique aimed at an entire category, diluting the personal impact and thus softening the FTA. This approach leverages generalisation as a mitigative tactic, thereby reducing the directness of the threat to the interlocutor's face while still conveying dissatisfaction.

Case c. (Appeal to Higher Authority) subtly undermines the interlocutor's perceived competence. This indirect strategy allows the speaker to maintain a veneer of politeness while implicitly questioning the interlocutor's abilities, thereby constituting a more sophisticated form of FTA that operates on a relational level.

Case d. (Assertion of Superiority) is the most overt, where the power dynamic is explicitly invoked, positioning the citizen as superior. This type of interaction borders on outright aggression, transcending mere discourtesy and entering the realm of confrontational discourse. The directness of this act leaves little room for interpretation, clearly delineating the power hierarchy between the parties involved.

The following real-world dialogue fragments, inserted in the table 1, underscores the impact of entrenched stereotypes on communication behaviour. By examining how these stereotypes manifest in language, one gains insights into the pragmatic mechanisms that drive conflict in public service interactions. This understanding is essential for developing strategies to mitigate these conflicts and improve the quality-of-service delivery and interpersonal communication in public administration contexts.

Table 1. Dialogue 1

| Turn no. | Utterances (IT) | Utterances (Eng.) |
|----------|---|---|
| 1 | SF1 😊 <i>buongiorno Comune di Occhieppo Inferiore</i> | SF1 😊 good morning Municipality of Occhieppo Inferiore |
| 2 | SF2 😞 <i>volevo parlare con l'ufficio tributi per avere un'informazione perché c'è qualcosa che non mi quadra</i> | SF2 😞 I wanted to speak to the tax office to get some information because there's something not right with me 😞 😞 |
| 3 | SF1 😊 <i>buongiorno signora ...mi dica pure, mi dica per piacere come è intestata l'utenza, così la vediamo insieme (controlla al terminale i dati)</i> | SF1 😊 good morning Madam ... tell me, please tell me how the account is registered, so we can see/check it together (checks the data on the terminal) |
| 4 | SF2 😊 <i>ah, mi dedica del tempo ...</i> | SF2 😊 ah, you (f) take the time for me ... |
| 5 | SF1 😊 <i>è vero, vedo che il papà è mancato a fine anno</i> | SF1 😊 it's true, I see that dad passed away at the end of the year |
| 6 | SF2 <i>si si, esatto ...</i> | SF2 yes yes, exactly ... |
| 7 | SF1 😊 <i>signora visto che ci siamo sentite io e lei, quando rientro la richiamo io, vabè... la prossima settimana e le faccio sapere</i> | SF1 😊 madam, since you and I spoke, when I get back I'll call you back next week, ok... and let you know |
| 8 | SF2 <i>quindi non pago una multa se pago in ritardo?</i> | SF2 so I don't pay a fine if I pay late? |
| 9 | SF1 <i>no, tranquilla, metto in sospensione e rimodulo il tributo</i> | SF1 no, don't worry, I'll suspend and recompute the tribute |
| 10 | SF2 😊 <i>bene grazie! E' stata gentile</i> | SF2 😊 good, thanks! You have been kind |
| 11 | SF1 <i>Arrivederci. Buongiorno.</i> | SF1 Goodbye. Good morning. |

The citizen's surprise at the employee's politeness (turn 4) underscores a fundamental expectation of discourtesy, which is deeply rooted in stereotypical beliefs about bureaucratic interactions. This reaction exemplifies how ingrained these stereotypes are, liable to influence both perception and response in communicative exchanges. The citizen's initial surprise reveals an anticipatory

schema where politeness from public employees is considered atypical, thus highlighting a pervasive expectation of rudeness or inefficiency.

These expectations are not merely passive; they actively shape the communicative behaviour of the citizen, who might approach the interaction with a defensive or confrontational attitude. Thus, the citizen's surprise at politeness from a public employee reveals much about the entrenched stereotypes which shape bureaucratic interactions. By examining these dynamics through the lens of politeness theory and FTAs, we can gain valuable insights into the communicative behaviours that perpetuate conflict and the potential strategies for fostering more positive interactions.

4.2 Communicative strategies

Understanding the interplay between the citizen's objectives and the stereotypes associated with public employees is crucial for analysing the underlying causes of aggressive communicative behaviour. The citizen's primary goal often involves resolving a personal issue efficiently and satisfactorily, while stereotypes about public employees being unhelpful or inefficient can exacerbate tensions, which lead to confrontational interactions. The conflict generated by these interactions can be examined through two additional lenses: the argumentative structure preceding acts of aggression or discourtesy, and the strategies employed to dissolve the conflict. Argumentation strategies play a pivotal role in shaping the interaction dynamics, as they provide the framework within which the citizen constructs their claims and demands.

The argumentative discourse has been studied following different models. The textual approach, as discussed by de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), emphasises coherence and cohesion in argumentative texts, analysing how linguistic elements contribute to the overall effectiveness of the argument. The speech act theory approach, explored by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984), focuses on the illocutionary acts performed during argumentation, highlighting how utterances function within the communicative exchange to achieve specific goals. Traditional Aristotelian rhetoric, with its emphasis on *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*, provides a foundational framework for understanding persuasive strategies in argumentation. *Ethos* refers to the credibility and character of the speaker, *pathos* to the emotional appeal, and *logos* to the logical structure of the argument. In the context of citizen-public employee interactions, these rhetorical elements can be observed in the way how citizens present their cases, appeal to emotions and construct logical arguments, albeit often relying on fallacious reasoning. The provided examples will illustrate how fallacious logic underpins many arguments, serving the claimant's interests at the expense of a fair and balanced discourse. Recognising these fallacies is essential for developing effective resolution strategies which address the root causes of the conflict rather than merely mitigating its symptoms.

The following dialogue¹ (cf. Table 2), involving a tax-related complaint, serves as a case study to explore these argumentative strategies and their implications in real-world interactions. By dissecting the argumentative structure and identifying the logical fallacies present, one can gain insights into the communicative tactics employed by citizens and the potential responses from public employees to de-escalate the conflict and achieve a constructive resolution.

Table 2. Dialogue 2

| Turn no. | Utterances (IT) | Utterances (Eng.) |
|----------|---|--|
| 1 | SF1 😞 😞 Buongiorno | 😞 😞 Good morning |
| 2 | SF2 😊 Buongiorno, mi dica | 😊 Good morning, tell me (polite) |
| 3 | SF1 😞 😞 ho ricevuto la tassa dell'immondizia per una casa vuota che era di mia madre, non ci abita nessuno, perché devo pagare??? | 😞 😞 I received the (notification of the) garbage tax to pay for an empty house that belonged to my mother, nobody lives there, why do I have to pay??? |
| 4 | SF2 😊 Guardi, secondo il regolamento comunale, per non pagare il tributo, l'immobile deve essere senza utenze, non deve avere contratti aperti per la luce e il gas | 😊 Look, according to the municipal regulation, in order not to pay the tax, the property must have no utilities, it must not have open contracts for electricity and gas |
| 5 | SF1 😡 ma la casa è vuota quindi non produco rifiuti e non devo pagare | 😡 but the house is empty so I don't produce waste and I don't have to pay |
| 6 | SF3 (Responsabile finanziario) 😊 Buongiorno, sono la collega , qual è il problema? SF1 espone il problema 😡 😞 e ripete il suo concetto | (financial manager). 😊 Good morning, I'm the colleague , what's the problem? exposes the problem 😡 😞 and repeats his concept |
| 7 | SF3 😊 verificiamo subito ... l'immobile risulta con le utenze collegate, SF1 (prende il turno parlando sopra dicendo che non ci abita nessuno...e non deve pagare) | 😊 let's check immediately ... the property has connected utilities, SF1 (she takes the turn speaking above saying that no one lives there...she doesn't have to pay) |

¹ The emoticons are used to signal the mood of the speaker in order to avoid the interpretation of flatness.

| | | |
|----|---|---|
| 8 | SF2 😊 è vero che è vuoto, capisco, ma da regolamento deve avere le utenze staccate ...(SF1 😡 parlava sopra non c'è una persona –smette e ascolta senza ascoltare con gli occhi al cielo) pensi in questo caso, essendo un immobile a disposizione volendo lei potrebbe affittarlo e darlo in uso subito | 😊 it is true that it is empty, I understand, but by regulation it must have the utilities disconnected ... (SF1 😡 he spoke above there is not a person - he stops and listens without listening with his eyes rolled up) think in this case, being a property available if you wish, you could rent it and give it to use immediately |
| 9 | SF1 😡 😡 insiste...il tributo non è dovuto | 😡 😡 She insists...the tribute is not due |
| 10 | SF2 😊 guardi che è da regolamento, non è un pretesto, se non vuole pagare basta staccare le utenze | 😊 look, it's by regulation, it's not a pretext, if you don't want to pay, just disconnect the utilities |
| 11 | SF1 😡 Ma tanto volete la ragione voi, tanto avete sempre ragione voi ...guardate che siete qui e lo stipendio ve lo pago io! | 😡 But you want to be right, you're always right... look, you're here and I'll pay your salary! |
| 12 | SF2 😊 😊 adesso mi sembra proprio troppo, siamo qui per lavorare e per venire incontro alle persone e non per portar via soldi | 😊 😊 now it seems to me just too much, we are here to work and to meet people and not to take away money |
| 13 | SF3 😡 (solo pensato e non detto: «e noi per pagarle la pensione!») | 😡 (only thought and not said: "and we to pay her pension!") |
| 14 | SF1non saluta ed esce dall'ufficio sbattendo la porta | he doesn't say hello and leaves the office slamming the door |

This dialogue highlights the citizen's misconception that her/his unique circumstances should be considered outside the established regulatory framework. The regulation in question requires all service contracts to be deactivated as evidence of the property's non-use, a stipulation that the citizen finds unreasonable. The citizen's use of an imposing linguistic form, specifically the phrase "I do not have to pay," reflects a definitive stance that leaves no room for negotiation or inquiry. This choice of language is meaningful as it shifts the interaction from a potential request for information to a declarative statement, thereby intensifying the conflict. These linguistic choices are critical in pragmatic analysis as they reveal the underlying attitudes and assumptions of the speaker. The intervention by the head of the service department (turn 6) introduces an authoritative explanation of the regulatory details, attempting to realign the citizen's understanding with the official requirements. This

move is an essential part of conflict resolution in institutional discourse, where clarification and reiteration of regulations serve to mitigate misunderstandings and assert the institutional perspective.

Despite this, SF1 persists in her/his demands, often violating basic politeness norms. This persistence underscores the tension between personal conviction and institutional authority. When cornered, Sf1 resorts to argumentative strategies outlined in sections 2a and d, which involve appeals to higher authority and direct assertions of personal rights. These strategies are indicative of the citizen's attempts to challenge the institutional framework and assert their position. S2's response effectively halts the interaction by elucidating the collective role and responsibilities of the service department, which contrasts with the citizen's individualistic perspective. This response highlights a common pragmatic strategy in institutional discourse: reinforcing the collective identity and responsibilities of the institution to counteract individual challenges.

The subsequent dialogue, also involving a tax-related complaint (cf. Table 3), will further illustrate these dynamics. By examining these interactions, we can better understand how linguistic choices and argumentative strategies reflect and shape the relationship between citizens and public institutions.

Table 3. Dialogue 3

| Utterances (IT) | Utterances (Eng.) |
|---|---|
| <i>SF1 Buongiorno Comune di Occhieppo Inferiore</i> | <i>SF1 Good morning Municipality of Occhieppo Inferiore</i> |
| <i>SF2 😞 Senta ho confrontato la bolletta dei rifiuti con quella del mio vicino, siamo uguali, ma io pago di più...mi dice il perché?</i> | <i>SF2 😞 Listen, I compared the garbage bill with that of my neighbour, we are the same, but I pay more...can you tell me why?</i> |
| <i>SF1 😊 Buongiorno, si, mi dice per favore come si chiama?</i> | <i>SF1 😊 Good morning, yes, tell me please your name?</i> |
| <i>Sf2 X Y</i> | <i>Sf2 X Y</i> |
| <i>SF2 😞 siamo uguali!!</i> | <i>SF2 😞 we are equal!!</i> |
| <i>SF1 signora, ma è sicura che la sua abitazione sia uguale? I metri e gli occupanti della casa si denunciano con una dichiarazione</i> | <i>SF1 madam, are you sure that your home is the same? The meters and the occupants of the house denounce each other with a statement</i> |
| <i>SF2 ah,! ma secondo me siamo uguali...sarà, richiedo al vicino</i> | <i>SF2 ah ! don't know! but in my opinion we are the same... it will ask the neighbour again</i> |

This dialogue occurs in the context of a telephone conversation, where a citizen disputes a tax assessment by drawing a comparison between her/his situation and that of a neighbour. The citizen's belief that both situations should be treated identically overlooks key procedural differences and the role of administrative discretion, highlighting a fundamental misunderstanding of bureaucratic processes. The citizen employs a comparative strategy, a common rhetorical device intended to emphasise perceived inconsistencies or inequities in institutional decision-making. By invoking the neighbour's situation as a benchmark, the citizen aims to strengthen their argument against the tax assessment. This approach, while intuitively appealing, fails to account for the complexity and specificity of individual cases that bureaucratic systems inherently address. The citizen's argument rests on the assumption of uniform application of rules without regard for contextual factors that might warrant differential treatment. This reflects a simplistic view of administrative processes, where the nuanced application of regulations and the exercise of discretion are essential for addressing the diversity of individual circumstances. From a pragmatic perspective, this interaction illustrates several important aspects of communicative conflict in institutional settings. First, it demonstrates how citizens may perceive administrative decisions as arbitrary or unfair when they lack a comprehensive understanding of the underlying procedural frameworks. Second, it highlights the role of administrative discretion in ensuring that regulations are applied in a manner that is both just and contextually appropriate.

The comparative argument posed by the citizen can be seen as an attempt to leverage perceived inequities to elicit a more favourable outcome. However, this strategy often leads to further conflict, as it challenges the legitimacy and authority of the administrative process. The ensuing dialogue typically requires the public employee to not only clarify procedural details but also to reaffirm the principles guiding their discretionary decisions. In this case, the public employee's response would need to address the citizen's concerns by elucidating the specific reasons why the neighbour's situation is not directly comparable. This involves explaining the procedural distinctions and the rationale behind the different assessments. Such an explanation not only serves to clarify the immediate issue but also educates the citizen on the broader principles of bureaucratic decision-making. However, in the final conversational turn the citizen reaffirms her/his distrust, as (s)he prefers to "ask the neighbour again", rather than accept the employee's explanations.

Ultimately, this dialogue underscores the importance of effective communication and transparency in mitigating misunderstandings and managing conflicts in bureaucratic contexts. By fostering a better understanding of procedural nuances and the role of discretion, public institutions can enhance their legitimacy and build trust with the citizens they serve. This interaction, therefore, provides valuable insights into the dynamics of citizen-administration communication.

5 Discussion

5.1 Comparison between two belief systems

These examples underscore how conflicts stem from a clash between two distinct belief systems regarding public service interactions. According to Kozjek and Brezovar (2022), public employees are constrained by stringent laws and regulations that dictate their actions within their respective sectors. Their primary responsibility lies in interpreting and applying these regulations to address citizen issues. In contrast, citizens often approach these interactions with personal interpretations and expectations rooted in everyday logic and common-sense reasoning. In both examples, financial matters often serve as catalysts for conflict, with citizens frequently feeling aggrieved or unfairly treated. This sentiment arises from the perception that the public administration operates primarily as a revenue collection entity, occasionally making errors that disadvantage citizens. This viewpoint tends to overlook the strategic reasoning behind public management decisions, which are typically justified by arguments appealing to bureaucratic efficiency and compliance. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, there exists a pervasive stereotype portraying public employees as lazy and prioritising bureaucratic procedures over citizen-centric solutions. This stereotype is deeply ingrained in public perception to the extent that acts of politeness or efficiency from employees can genuinely surprise citizens, as observed in the dialogues cited in section 3.

5.2 Disengagement strategies in public service interactions

The resolution of conflicts between citizen-users and public employees often involves the use of disengagement strategies by both parties. Employees may employ defensive tactics or choose silence, while citizens react to the responses they receive. Following the schema proposed by Bousfield (2008), two primary disengagement strategies emerge:

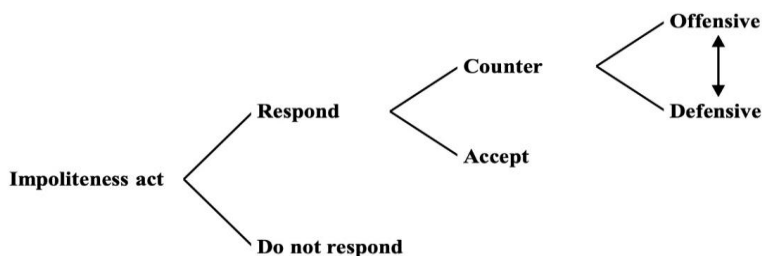


Figure 1. Disengagement strategies according to Bousfield (2008)

The first example in Table 2 concludes with a firm intervention from the head of the service, effectively halting the escalation of aggression by delivering a definitive statement that cuts off any further possibility of response (defensive exit strategy). In this instance, the citizen, unable to persist further, leaves in a huff, slamming the door as a non-verbal act of rudeness (offensive exit strategy). This scenario illustrates a typical interaction pattern where the intervention of a higher authority serves to assert control and restore order. The head of the service employs a defensive exit strategy to assert authority and close off the dialogue, aiming to diffuse escalating tensions and enforce compliance with organisational norms and procedures. The citizen's offensive exit strategy, manifested through door-slamming, underscores frustration and dissatisfaction with the outcome, signalling non-verbal disapproval of the service provided.

The second example pertains to a telephone interaction where the citizen refuses to accept information that contradicts her/his common sense. Beyond simply asserting, "*we are equal!*", in response to the employee providing clarifying information, the citizen expresses a preference to consult her/his neighbour again rather than trusting the institution. Some dialogues often involve scenarios where the citizen declares or threatens to escalate the matter to the mayor or higher authority. In a series of interactions where the citizen employs utterances like "*I'll tell the mayor*" and "*I want to speak to the mayor*" or "*I want to call the mayor*" two exit strategies can be observed.

The employee declares willingness to align with the citizen's request, even facilitating the process by providing the mayor's contact number. However, the employee concludes with a firm assertion of her initial statement. The strategy employed blends elements of acceptance and defensiveness; the employee accepts the citizen's action, promising to assist, yet asserts her/his stance by emphasising the accuracy of her/his piece of information.

This interaction exemplifies a pragmatic approach where the employee navigates between accommodating the citizen's demand and reaffirming the institutional protocol. By providing the mayor's contact details, the employee demonstrates responsiveness to the citizen's escalation strategy. Simultaneously, the employee maintains control over the dialogue by reinforcing the validity and correctness of their position within the bureaucratic framework.

Strategy No. 1 Acceptance with Defensive Assertion Strategy: in adopting this strategy, the employee acknowledges the citizen's intention to involve higher authority. By offering the mayor's contact information, the employee seeks to mollify the citizen's frustration and facilitate a potential resolution. However, the employee's subsequent assertion of the accuracy of their initial information acts defensively, ensuring that institutional guidelines and policies are upheld. For example: Employee: *Certamente; le do io il numero di telefono, ma non potrà dirle una cosa diversa da quella che sto dicendo* [→*Certainly, I will give you the mayor's contact. However, she can't tell you something different from what I'm saying to you.*].

This response illustrates the employee's attempt to appease the citizen's escalating demands while subtly reinforcing her own authoritative position. The blend of Accept and Defence reflects a nuanced approach to managing conflict within bureaucratic interactions, balancing responsiveness to citizen concerns with adherence to procedural norms.

Strategy No. 2 Acceptance with Pre-emption Employee: “*Guardi, la chiamo prima io! Lo dico prima io!*” [→ Look, call first! I'll tell first!]. In this strategy the employee transforms the citizen's request, which the citizen perceives as a threat, into an even greater threat by asserting their intention to pre-empt the citizen's move. This manoeuvre not only demonstrates the employee's control over the situation but also serves to reassert their authority.

A commonly observed citizen response involves accepting the employee's position while reaffirming their determination to contact the mayor, thereby attempting to retain some level of agency in the interaction.

For example, at the door after a conversation, citizen: “*Grazie, ma comunque sento anche il Sindaco.*” [→ Thank you, but I will still talk with the mayor.].

In all examples, conflicts are resolved through dual disengagement strategies, one employed by the employee and the other by the citizen. The employee's strategy typically involves defensive measures, which may vary in their degree of firmness. Conversely, the citizen's strategy tends to focus on not acknowledging defeat but rather saving face by deferring the resolution to a later time.

The employee's pre-emptive assertion (“I'll call first!”) is a defensive strategy that transforms the citizen's threat into a counter-threat. On the one hand, this manoeuvre not only disrupts the citizen's planned course of action but also reinforces the employee's authority within the bureaucratic framework. By doing so, the employee aims to curtail further escalation of the conflict and reestablish control over the interaction. On the other hand, the citizen's response—accepting the employee's stance while indicating continued intent to contact the mayor—serves as a face-saving mechanism. This strategy allows the citizen to maintain a semblance of control and determination, even if their immediate goal has been thwarted. By suggesting future action, the citizen avoids a direct confrontation and instead opts to leave the issue unresolved for the time being, thereby preserving their self-esteem and public image.

6 Conclusion

The interactions exemplified and discussed in the previous sections demonstrate recurring features that give rise to conflictual situations between citizen-users and public employees. These situations often motivate acts of rudeness and justify the reactions of employees.

On the one hand, the primary element that emerges is that the tension generating conflict originates from a clash of stereotypical belief systems. In the case

of the citizen, these beliefs are structured hierarchically as follows: general stereotypes — the objective of public administration is to extort money from citizens, the goal of employees is to defend the public system of abuse, and public employees are lazy and unwilling to engage in solving the citizen's specific case — together with particular arguments — my particular case could be easily resolved by relying on common sense and my common sense constitutes the obvious framing of the problem. On the other hand, the employee operates according to a linear strategy: Understand the specific issue → Compare it with regulations → Construct a solution.

Conflict arises from the confrontation between these two systems and often hinders the resolution of the issue. This conflict between two mental models reflects the structure described by Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 1), as “the problem for any social group is to control its internal aggression while retaining the potential for aggression both in internal social control and, especially, in external competitive relations with other groups.” Thus, it configures as a conflict between two well-defined social groups: the patron, the client, the citizen seeking access to public services, and the employee in charge of those services.

It remains unclear whether the set of aggressive acts can all be considered acts of impoliteness in the classical sense. Certainly, it configures a competition/conflict between two social groups and stems from a lack of recognition of the honourability of one group, the employees, by the other group, the citizens. Therefore, it is not so much individual acts of impoliteness but rather an entire dialogic situation based on the violation of the principles of politeness. It is true that in some cases, the conflict leads to explicit acts of impoliteness, “face-threatening acts” (FTAs), wherein the citizen attempts to embarrass the employee to gain a position of superiority, and the employee responds politely to save face. Hence, the interest in these dialogues lies not only in identifying aggression strategies, which can be easily categorised, but also in the disengagement strategies employed.

These types of interactions prove that an FTA is not merely an isolated act occurring during a conversation but can materialise as a complex of discursive strategies where the threat to face often becomes a communicative trick. Therefore, it would be advisable to adopt a perspective based on a revision of conversational maxims. Complementing Grice's maxims (1975), Lakoff (1973) proposes a maxim of politeness articulated into three sub-maxims: a) do not impose, b) give options, and c) make the interlocutor feel good. Delving into the dialogue between citizens and institutions suggests an integration of these maxims. Understanding the interplay between these belief systems is essential for analysing the underlying causes of aggressive communicative behaviour. The study of argumentative strategies and disengagement techniques offers valuable insights into how conflicts can be managed and resolved. It is crucial for public employees to recognise the stereotypes that influence citizens' perceptions and to develop communication strategies that address these preconceived notions. By adopting a more nuanced approach to politeness and impoliteness, public employees can better navigate the complex dynamics of citizen interactions.

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