

Microaggressions and Impoliteness at the crossroads: EU academics in the UK facing hostility in the Brexit age.

Abstract – The Brexit process has created a loss of rights and heightened hostility towards EU migrants within the UK, even among groups previously shielded from such animosity, notably EU academics. This paper is based on 24 clear instances of microaggressions, and two bordering hate speech involving EU academics in England and synthesises the psychology/philosophy literature on microaggressions with linguistic frameworks of “rapport management” and “impoliteness triggers” leading to a novel understanding of the phenomenon. Microaggressions are defined as a specific type of impoliteness “of the mild kind”, characterised by repetition at the individual and/or the collective level, which produces feelings of annoyance, irritation and shock. This study shows Brexit-microaggressions usually involve social identity face and the breach of equity/association sociality rights. They mostly take the shape of formulae echoing slogans entrenched in the discourses of Brexit and arise out of a mismatch between pro-Brexit comments uttered in the presence of an EU migrant.

Keywords: Brexit, EU academics, microaggression, impoliteness, hostility

1. Introduction

Following the results of the Brexit referendum of 2016, the United Kingdom officially left the European Union on 31st January 2020. British citizens have, therefore, been deprived of EU citizenship, while rights and protections related to EU membership have stopped applying to EU citizens living in the UK. In this process, ethnic and national groups that had previously been subject to limited hostility became the target of a specific anti-European sentiment from part of the British population. In an attempt to capture some of these experiences, we collected data from a relatively privileged group – EU academics working in the UK – to offer insights into perceptions of legitimacy and worsening conditions during the Brexit process. We apply the concept of microaggressions, re-interpreted through the lens of impoliteness, to analyse the transcripts and explore the kinds of hostile interactions that seemingly developed out of a shift from tolerance to hostility. These interactions are analysed from an emic viewpoint, i.e., how they are perceived by the target group.

This paper focuses on specific events as reported by our interviewees and argues in favour of their classification as forms of microaggression, provided that this concept is interpreted critically when faced with spontaneous (i.e., not elicited or constructed) data. First, we give some context about the political dimension of the Brexit process (section 2). Then, section 3 discusses some of the relevant literature around the concept of microaggression as developed mostly in psychology and philosophy. Next, we present our understanding of the notion of impoliteness and introduce the two frameworks used in this paper (section 4). Following this, we present our data (section 5) and how we selected the narrative episodes of hostility on which this study is based. Section 6 presents a thematic analysis of our data and a critical evaluation of taxonomies popular in psychology. The limitation of this approach is addressed in section 7, focusing on the interpersonal dimension of the hostility events analysed. Finally, section 7 deals with their formal realization. The microaggressions towards EU academics working in the UK analysed in this paper tend to display specific characteristics, arising mostly out of a threat to the participants’ sense of social worth and community belonging alongside a lack of fair treatment and a perceived lack of empathy. Interestingly, some of the formulaic offences

discussed in section 8 directly echo pro-Brexit slogans that are widely accessible in discourse, e.g., through the media, and are, thus, normalised.

2. The political context of Brexit

The campaigns preceding the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK, and later during the ongoing Brexit process, have been characterised by hostility towards the European Union, both on the part of political campaigners, and in a significant part of British media (e.g., Koller et al. 2019; Radziwinowiczówna and Galasińska 2021). The hostility targeted several actors, including EU institutions, non-EU27 migrants, as well as refugees who are described by some as a perceived threat, implying a degree of EU involvement in their arrival in the UK (e.g., Abbas 2019; Breeze 2020; Durrheim et al. 2018; Koller et al. 2019). The Brexit context gave rise to the development of specific hostility towards EU27 migrants, which built on previous anti-immigration metaphors already common in British public discourse (e.g., Mussolf 2015). The development extended previous processes of racialisation of Eastern Europeans (Fox, Morosanu and Szilassy 2012; Rzepnikowska 2019), but hostility against Western Europeans, if not completely novel, resurfaced after decades of acceptance of such migration and/or was greatly increased. In addition, the Brexit process involved a substantial loss of formal rights for EU27 citizens in the UK (as well as for British citizens) and brought about both worries around the economy and xenophobia, such as delegitimation and being made to feel unwelcome (e.g., Brahic and Lallement 2020; Genova and Zontini 2020; Guma and Jones 2019; Lulle et al. 2019; Rzepnikowska 2019; Sime, Moskal, and Tyrrell 2020; Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz 2021; Sredanovic 2021; Sredanovic and Della Puppa 2023).

The political climate linked to Brexit has led to an increase in reported hate crimes, although these have been clustered in the period immediately after the 2016 Referendum (Devine 2021). Moreover, concerns of ethnic harassment have been perpetuated among EU27 citizens as a result of Brexit, with a stronger increase among those with a university degree, and in areas characterised by more affluence, higher concentration of minorities, and less previous support for right-wing parties (Nandi and Luthra 2021). Qualitative work has further shown experiences of harassment before and after the referendum among Poles in the UK (Rzepnikowska 2019) together with alarming levels of bullying towards youth of Central and Eastern European background (Sime, Moskal, and Tyrrell 2020).

In this context, EU27 academics have reported experiencing the Brexit process as a source of vulnerability, both in terms of symbolic hostility and in terms of introduction of bureaucratic barriers to the continued enjoyment of rights and employment (Luthra 2021).

The academic context has been recognised to partly “insulate” individuals from a hostile national context, and some universities have been active in reaffirming their support for EU27 staff. Nonetheless, this support has often been experienced as insufficient or limited by the larger neoliberal organisation of the higher education sector (Luthra 2021), as job insecurity and the high competition for academic positions can exacerbate the insecurities deriving from Brexit.

3. Microaggressions

Originally proposed by Pierce (1970), the concept of microaggression was first elaborated on by Rowe (1977) and Davis (1989) from an organisational/legal viewpoint, then revived by Sue and colleagues (Sue 2005; Sue and Spanierman 2020) in psychology/counselling. The latter eventually established itself as the dominant model (Rini 2020, 20) and was more recently refined through a philosophical/moral lens (Freeman and Weekes Schroer 2020; Rini 2020). An often cited and broadly speaking established definition of microaggressions comes from

Sue et al. (2007, 271) who describe them as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights that target a person or group”. Theoretical debates around the concept of ‘microaggression’ mainly revolve around the following points: the prefix “micro”, the term “aggression”, repetition, intentionality¹ and the establishment of taxonomies and scales.

The first issue concerns the prefix “micro”, which rather intuitively captures the difference “in magnitude” between e.g., a snub and a slight act at one extreme and physical violence such as lynching and raping at the other (see Rini 2020, 24). Sue and Spanierman (2020, xiv) refine this distinction further, moving away from an assessment of magnitude to align themselves more with the micro- and macro-level of societal organisation. Microaggressions are, therefore, “situated in microlevel interpersonal context” through “beliefs and attitudes of individuals” in contrast to macroaggression being “systematic in nature” and residing “in programs, policies and practices of institutions and societies”. Under a “structural account of microaggressions”, it is remarked that “what makes an act or event count as microaggression is that it *implements a function of subtle oppression* within a social system” (Rini 2020, 78, italics in the original), thus establishing a link between the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’. Therefore, microaggressions may be seen as indexical of large, societal systems of oppression (Rini 2020, 2, 10, 15, 26, 30). However, at the individual level, a person may doubt whether a given offence/act of hostility is indeed an instance of broader societal issues or not: this is referred to as the “ambiguous experience account of microaggression” (Rini 2020, 59). Even if this counts as definitory for Rini (2020), this is in practice quite hard to implement as specific overt reflections on this point are not systematically offered in spontaneous data. Furthermore, as the overt link to specific identity aspects in Sue et al.’s (2007, 71) definition shows, focusing on what in the UK are known as “protected characteristics”, research on microaggression mainly focuses on “mature” systems of discrimination (an exception being Wilkes and Speer 2021 on kinship carers). Whereas the assumption in the literature is that these systems of discrimination and marginalisation are ripe and already established at the moment of the microaggression(s), our research shows how microaggression can configure differently in the presence of a system of discrimination that is still emerging and consolidating.

A second theoretical issue around the concept of microaggression is concerned with the choice of the term “aggression” inasmuch as these hostile behaviours are perceived as not usually or typically meeting the conditions for a lawsuit (Rowe 1977), while nevertheless being abusive in nature. In this, microaggressions are distinct from hate crime, whose form makes it very reportable (see Culpeper 2021; Culpeper et al. 2017). From this angle, we do recognise that a few concepts² aimed at capturing a variety of aggressive and hostile behaviours do indeed overlap, without fully identifying with, microaggressions. Beyond hate crime, which is more

¹ The literature on (im)politeness prefers the term “intentionality”, whereas the psychological and philosophical literature talks about intentions. The concept of intentionality has been widely debated within impoliteness theories, but the concepts has recently been marginalised or excluded completely.

² Hate crime is a type of “social identity-based hostility” (Culpeper et al. 2017, 2), resulting in criminal acts motivated by bias towards a social group or demographic. In England and Wales, the law focuses on hostility deriving from the victim’s belonging to a group category such as race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or transgender identity. Under English law, harassment is defined as a code of conduct and it may include bullying and stalking. Harassment is a form of anti-social behaviour constituting a crime and a civil wrong. Bullying, on the other hand, is not a crime under UK legislation. Furthermore, there is no consensus on its definition (Hellström et al. 2021, 6). Mobbing is a sociological construct, not a legal one, which refers to an individual being targeted by a group “ganging up” on them. Bullying and mobbing can be thought of “as occurring along a continuum related to the degree of involvement of group and organizational dynamics and to the severity of the negative consequences for the victims” (Duffy and Spence 2012, 38, 48).

extreme in its manifestations (Culpeper 2021), these are harassment, bullying and mobbing. Intentionality, for instance, is not core to harassment but it is to bullying and mobbing. Magnitude of effect is definitional only in harassment. Racial (as well as ethnic and nationality-based) bias is often correlated to harassment and hate crime, but not so much to bullying and mobbing. Some concepts are socio-psychological constructs (bullying, mobbing), whereas others (also) have legal (criminal) status (harassment, hate crime). Repetition of the hostile behaviour is key to bullying (Culpeper 2011a, 257), mobbing and harassment but does not appear as a definitional feature of hate crime, which is connected to one-off offences produced “in the heat of the moment” (Culpeper et al. 2017). In light of all this, we consider microaggressions as overlapping with neighbouring concepts only along some dimensions, in a relationship of “family resemblance” (Wittgenstein 2001/1953). However, in the case of legal concepts, we are fully aware that they vary in time and place. Therefore, they can hardly be used as a “universal” parameter beyond single legislative domains.

The third definitory issue debated in the literature is that of the repetition typical of microaggressions: these do not consist of isolated incidents, but of daily, constant, incessant experiences that have a cumulative harmful effect on the individual. Our data problematises this assumption in the context of incipient discrimination phenomena (as opposed to “mature” scenarios), which may result in more sporadic experiences for the individual, concomitant with a gradual diffusion at the community level.

The fourth matter of concern is the thorny issue of intentionality. There is consensus in the literature that microaggressions (like impoliteness) need not be deliberate intention, but instead may be produced unwittingly. We support a view of intentionality as a joint construct in interaction, which reflects, methodologically, a possible (but not necessary) operationalizable factor in interaction e.g., with explanatory function (Culpeper 2011a, 49-51, and references therein). In practice, though, intentionality may be difficult to evaluate if no explicit evaluation of the hostile episode is present –as it is the case in the spontaneous dataset analysed in this study.

The four areas of debates noted so far show great concern with the identification of definitory criteria for microaggressions vis-à-vis other manifestations of hostility. The search of necessary and sufficient conditions betrays an approach to microaggressions as a classical category. The approach in singling out these criteria is often etic (top-down, placing the analyst at the centre). There is, however, an exception: Sue and Spanierman (2020) places emphasis on the subject’s response, thus distinguishing between micro-assaults (when blatant and overt forms of hostility are acknowledged by the participants), microaggressions (characterised by ambiguous attribution) and lack of conflictual behaviour (when no offence is taken, i.e., the behaviour goes unchallenged). This approach, which has the advantage to be operationalizable at the textual level, displays some similarities with the emic evaluation central to the impoliteness frameworks discussed below and shows a site of potential integration between the two approaches.

Fifth and last, beyond definitory issues, the psychological literature on microaggressions is greatly concerned with the establishment of taxonomies and scales (e.g., Williams et al. 2021 among others), but shows limited attention to exploring the language of microaggressions in detail, despite the importance of verbal hostility in their frameworks. Taking the specific context of Brexit as a case study, this paper shows how notions developed in the field of linguistic impoliteness can be fruitfully extended to the language of microaggressions.

4. Impoliteness frameworks

“Impoliteness” is understood as an umbrella term (Culpeper 2011a, 80) similar to “hostility” in philosophy and psychology, but also more specifically as in Culpeper (2011, 254). Microaggressions are seen as types of impoliteness “of the mild kind”, characterised by repetition and patterning (at the individual and/or group level), which result in feelings of frustration, annoyance and worry. Two impoliteness frameworks are introduced here to explore both the interactional and the formal side of this specific offence in our data.

4.1 Face, rights and obligations

This study adopts Spencer-Oatey’s (2000, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2008) “rapport-management” model of face and sociality rights and obligations, with Culpeper’s additions (2011, 27 and 42). This model overcomes some of the limitations of Brown and Levinson’s (1987, 61) notion of ‘face’, drawn from Goffman (1967), by accounting for both individual and collective dimensions. Furthermore, it relies on research in social psychology and communication theory (Culpeper 2011a, 26; Spencer-Oatey 2007, 641).

Face is a three-pronged concept for Spencer-Oatey (2002, 540), who distinguishes between “quality face” (“concerned with the value that we effectively claim for ourselves in terms of personal qualities”), “social identity face” (“concerned with the value that we effectively claim for ourselves in terms of social group roles”, see also 2005, 106-107; 2008, 14) and “relational face” (focusing on relationships between the participants and how these are maintained Spencer-Oatey 2007, 647). In other words, in this framework face is related to one’s personal, relational and social worth. However, not all instances of impoliteness arise from face issues: the remainder cases originate from breaches to social norms and conventions. These are accounted for in terms of “sociality rights” (and obligations) (Spencer-Oatey 2005, 98-100; 2007, 651-653). There are two categories of sociality rights: “equity rights” (whether an individual is fairly dealt with) and “association rights” (whether an individual is met with empathy and consideration). Culpeper (2011, 42) adds the categories of “taboo” and “physical self” (intimidation leading to fearing for one’s safety).

4.2 Impoliteness triggers

When looking at the linguistic realisations of impoliteness, this paper adopts Culpeper’s (2011) framework of impoliteness “triggers”,³ understood as “linguistic means which routinely achieve certain ends, specifically impoliteness effects” (Culpeper 2016, 436). Culpeper’s model incorporates and evolves Terkourafi’s (2001, 2005) frame-based approach to politeness, resulting in the identification of “impoliteness formulae”. These arise out of the regular co-occurrence of particular linguistic expressions in particular types of contexts where they are challenged⁴ as the realization of specific acts creating the perception of impoliteness. While

³ The term “trigger” is used here in a technical sense to refer to linguistic/semiotic behaviour that triggers evaluations of impoliteness signalled (con)textually by reactions/challenge to the event.

⁴ We agree with one of the editors who pointed out that “when the behaviour remains unchallenged, [it] does not mean that no offence [is] taken. For various reasons (e.g. power differences, to avoid escalation), the recipient may have decided to not react.” However, in order to achieve a text-based/bottom-up model of microaggressions (avoiding speculation and mind-reading) we will consider the existence of a contextual challenge as an assessment that an event is evaluated as impolite by the participant that reports it. Culpeper & Hardaker (2017: 211) specify that: “Evidence of challenges includes, notably, counter impoliteness (tit-for-tat pairings), but also meta-pragmatic comments (e.g. ‘that was so rude’), indications, verbal or non-verbal, of offence being experienced (i.e. symptoms of emotions such as humiliation, hurt or anger). Such actions are part of what constructs impoliteness contexts.” We do not claim that impoliteness does not occur unless an overt assessment is made (and in this we distance ourselves from Sue & Spanierman (2020) (section 3) -- what we claim, instead, is that without a challenge there

there is no claim that these formulae have completely stable meaning, there is a statistical/probabilistic association for the individual and/or the speech community. To be identified, impoliteness formulae need evidence of challenge and evidence of conventionalisation (Culpeper & Hardaker 2017, 211). Not all linguistic expressions triggering impoliteness evaluations, however, are impoliteness formulae. The remaining cases are treated as “implicational impoliteness”, defined as “an impoliteness understanding that does not match the surface form or semantics of the utterance or the symbolic meaning of the behaviour” (Culpeper 2011a, 17). In other words, implicational impoliteness arises when what is said in a particular context is interpreted as impolite despite not being “pre-loaded” with impoliteness (Culpeper 2011a, 17; 2016). There are three types of implicational impoliteness: “form driven” (“the surface form or semantic content is marked”, “convention driven”, and “context driven” (Culpeper 2011a, 155-156). The first category further splits into “internal” (when “the context projected by part of a behaviour mismatches that projected by another part,” *ibid.*) and “external” (“the context projected by a behaviour mismatches the context of use,” *ibid.*). The third category splits into “unmarked behaviour” – “an unmarked (with respect to surface form or semantic content) and unconventionalized behaviour” and “absence of behaviour” (“the absence of behaviour mismatches the context”) (Culpeper 2011a, 156).

Taking a collection of microaggressions related to the socio-political context of Brexit, this study shows how impoliteness constructs and models can contribute to our understanding of microaggressions and vice-versa.

5. Data

Data are drawn from two independent research projects: the *Brain Drain* project run by the University of Liverpool and the *CitiBrexit* project based at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. The former resulted in 40 one-to-one semi-structured interviews (37 transcribed), lasting about one hour each, with Italian and Spanish academics in the Northwest of England. The latter included 13 semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes with academics from Croatia, Poland, Italy, Austria, Germany, Hungary and the Netherlands (mostly one-to-one interviews, except one collected as part of an interview with a couple), as part of a larger project on the experiences of EU27 citizens in Great Britain and British citizens in Belgium. These interviews were conducted in Spanish, Italian and English for the *Brain Drain* project and in English, Italian and Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian for the *CitiBrexit* project. This paper presents excerpts in English or translated into English.⁵

For what concerns the impoliteness events in our corpus, the fact that the targets were academics is not clear in all events, and in some events it was clear that this identity trait was not known by the speaker producing the impoliteness event. Our analysis does not therefore explore specifically hostility expressed towards academics, but rather hostility expressed towards EU citizens, and in particular towards EU citizens who despite a relatively privileged profile were nevertheless not insulated from the negative effects of Brexit.

This study starts off by examining the effects of Brexit on the participants and is, therefore, based on excerpts from 40 interviews in total (Table 1) dealing with this topic.

is no textual evidence that it does. We apply this constraint to avoid failing in the trap of mind-reading and speculation and *etic* (analyst-based) assessment.

⁵ Preference has been given to adherence to the original rather than full idiomaticity in English.

Table 1. Datasets

University	Interviewer	Year	Version Qs	N speakers talking about Brexit
Liverpool	GD	2018	Pilot	4
	VM	2020	V1	10
	JIH	2020	V1	5
	MR	2021	V1	8
ULB	DjS	2018-2022	Independent Project	13
Total				40

Importantly, the process through which we contacted the interviewees did not follow a probabilistic design, but relied on qualitative methods including direct contacts, calls to participate on social media, and the snowball procedure. Therefore, the analysis we present is entirely qualitative: as the group of interviewees who produced the corpus is not the result of probabilistic sampling, it would not be appropriate to subject the corpus to a quantitative analysis based on the assumption that it statistically represents a larger population. Some quantification is offered for illustration purposes and clarity, but the figures are too low to be drawing any statistical inferences based on these.

5.1 Identification of impoliteness events

Impoliteness events were identified using an emic criterion, i.e., looking at how the interviewees challenged the behaviour reported in a certain episode: this is in line with the “second wave” of impoliteness studies (Culpeper 2011b) but differs from the literature on microaggressions that squarely relies on etic (researcher-centred) criteria. The one exception consists in Sue and Spanierman (2020) criterion according to which if something is not remarked as a microaggression by the participants then it should not count as such (and that if it is marked as an aggression *tout-court* it should count as a micro-assault, upon the “ambiguous account” of microaggressions – which we reject here). Challenges to the microaggression (underlined) could be metapragmatic comments, verbal or non-verbal indications of offence being taken, and negative emotions. Our data record emotions of annoyance, frustration, irritation – but there are also stronger feelings of shock (probably arising out of surprise at these events) and also fear in one of the cases bordering hate speech. The following excerpts display what we consider to be challenges to behaviour understood to be impolite by our participants: (1) overtly labels a behaviour as racist; (2) reports the participants’ facial expression as expressing negative emotions; (3)-(5) mention shock; (6) reports discomfort; irritation (7) and frustration (8).

- (1) And I say, what a hypocrisy, right? Because a minute ago I was thought to be English, right? And (the person) was saying, well, racist things, right? (Patricia)
- (2) Sure, because they would start to give arguments, of course, in favour of Brexit, right in front of me and my face would speak volumes, and when they saw my face, they would say... (Mabel)
- (3) and he started talking to me about Brexit and that it is right because enough immigrants and that was another shock. (Betta)
- (4) So that was my first shock because there were lots of people that did not realise that a university member of staff is also a person. (Mabel)
- (5) And you can imagine the shock to get this phone call, the fear (Betta).
- (6) There could have been a conversation, for example, with a colleague at work during which you realise they are pro-Brexit, and you are not, so this leads to a slight degree of tension that you need to know how to handle. (Mercedes)

- (7) ... usually you get “oh you’ll be fine, you’ll be fine”, which is so irritating. (Susanna)
(8) I remember this was one of the most brutal experiences I’ve ever had involving frustrations. (Juan)

Experiences of impoliteness were a common theme in twenty-one interviews. Leaving aside mentions of the larger context of hostility (e.g., generic reference to politics, media, discrimination and their interiorisation of those – i.e., “environmental microaggressions” in Sue and Spanierman’s (2020) parlance), a total of thirty-two impoliteness events were reported. Eleven subjects reported a total of twenty-eight clear⁶ incidents directly involving themselves, and four speakers recalled seven incidents involving people in their own surrounding (family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances), with some events being double-coded. Each participant reported from one to four events. Finally, there is also one isolated instance of a participant producing a hostile remark towards the British.

From a methodological viewpoint, in both projects participants were *not* asked specifically nor explicitly about impoliteness or microaggressions but were prompted with generic questions about Brexit and how – if at all – it had affected them. This means that while these frequent mentions or narratives of hostility are even more significant spontaneously made relevant by the participants, the obvious drawback is the lack of detailed information that might have been otherwise retrieved through targeted elicitation. This results in data that are significantly different to the elicited or constructed anecdotes (“vignettes”) that form the basis of much literature on microaggressions in psychology and philosophy, which has a bearing on how the concept of microaggression is applied in practice and constructed theoretically. A similar approach to our own is found in discursive psychology (Wilkes and Speer 2021).

Once we identified episodes of impoliteness in our dataset, the next step was to ascertain whether they would also count as microaggressions.

5.2 Identifying microaggressions

The microaggression literature relies heavily on the analysts’ perception and assessment of magnitude. In contrast, our bottom-up approach relies on looking for textual evidence of small magnitude and repetition. Even by looking at textual evidence, magnitude/size is difficult to operationalise “objectively”⁷, and it is therefore not taken as criterial/definitory but observed as contributing added descriptive value.⁸ In relation to the issue of repetition, we propose a novel understanding in contexts of emergent discrimination. Next, explicit links between the individual experiences and the broader socio-political phenomenon of Brexit are also pointed out in our data. In addition, attributional ambiguity, where present, is not a salient and typical feature of the hostility events recollected/mentioned by the interviewees in our dataset. In excluding attributional ambiguity as criterial for microaggressions, our operationalisation of the construct is therefore maximally different from Sue & Spanierman’s (2020) – which is the “reference” text in psychology/counselling. Exclusions and ambiguous cases are also commented on in this section.

First of all, textual evidence for small magnitude comes in the form of minimisation (“I had only a couple of situations, *the small things*”) general extensors (“*and things like that*”) or

⁶ As agreed in discussions among the research team.

⁷ At the other end of the scale, studies on hate crime (Culpeper et al. 2017; Culpeper 2021) circumvent this problem by taking police reports as evidence of high magnitude.

⁸ We agree with one reviewer who points out that the subjective assessment of magnitude would rely on the analyst’s intuition and create a rather obvious problem of inter-rater reliability among researchers. For this reason, we did not adopt this feature as criterial. However, we report emic evaluations/perceptions of magnitude, where present.

relativisation to major forms of violence such as physical violence (“*acts of racism... and I don’t mean violent or physical ones but psychologically aggressive ones; a couple of incidents... luckily, they were not physically violent but they were pretty aggressive emotionally though*”). Alternatively –though more rarely– lexical items express an extreme quality, acting as maximisers, such as the adjective “brutal” (“*one of the most brutal experiences I’ve ever had*”), which is apparently in conflict with psychological and philosophical definitions of microaggressions. Since textual evidence (overt assessment) is not always present, we found that, overall, small magnitude is a difficult criterion to operationalise beyond intuition.

Moving on to cumulative experience, seven interviewees in our data reported more than one experience affecting either themselves or people in their immediate environment (academic or otherwise). In some cases, there might be overt markers of events that happen repeatedly or are recurrent in a series. Expressions used are *a whole series of events, I heard stories like that a lot, the classic/usual remarks*. Frequency adverbs can convey iterativity as well (*normally, every time, constantly*) as do general extensors (*and stuff like that*). Similar to small size, repetition is also difficult to adopt as criterial.

Next is the issue of the connection between the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’, which also impacts on how the cumulative effect should be understood. One of the novelties of our approach stands in contrast to Sue’s account (2010, 25), which suggests a sharp opposition between microaggressions towards the individual and environmental microaggressions (i.e., “the numerous demeaning and threatening social, educational, political, or economic cues that are communicated individually, institutionally or societally to marginalized groups”). Based on our data, we postulate an intermediate level of hostility towards people in the immediate surroundings of the interviewee (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances). This is because we believe that hostility directed towards members of one and the same group to which the interviewee belongs can contribute to an increased sense of vulnerability for the self, even if the subject has not experienced hostility directly (yet). A clear example of this spreading of feelings can be found here:

- (9) A couple of weeks ago, a friend of mine was telling me that when it comes to renting a flat, if you have the pre-settlement status people no longer want to rent you a flat, erm, they already prefer people who have the settled status, right? So, well, you find yourself *I haven’t experienced it myself* because I haven’t rented a flat since this happened *but it worries me a great deal* especially with a job like mine [...]. (Mercedes, emphasis added)

In keeping with the dynamic view of onset discrimination and emerging hostility, a ripple effect can thus be imagined as “closing in” on the individual from society at large through the individual’s immediate environment. The thrust of the argument in relation to the cumulative effect, therefore, is that this may not be immediately experienced by the individual in emergent systems of discrimination and inequality, contrary to the established literature on microaggression in mature oppression systems. Instead, direct hostility may be experienced sporadically by various members of one and the same group and observed across the group first, before becoming commonplace in the individual’s experience. More directly on the link between the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’, our data show a clear explicit link between individual experiences and the wider social context, with this impacting the subject:

- (10) Thankfully we have never really had any issues in L~~~~, of noticing any kind of #version [aversion?: Authors] or anything, but you can’t help watching the news, of course. (Beatriz)

- (11) Firstly, the amount of racist attacks that escalated in this country 24 hours after the Referendum, with remarks that are sometimes a bit too direct to us. It once happened at a bar too. (Antonia)

The impact of the broader context is evident in our dataset through *discourses of environmental hostility*, subsuming the *discourse of hostile social climate*, the *discourse of accentism* and the *discourse of othering and exclusion*, which are – however – not examined in detail here. There are some points of contact between Sue’s (2010, 25) category of environmental microaggression⁹ and these discourses. Section 7 shows that impoliteness formulae also bear traces of these discourses, thus casting bridges between the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’.

Next, moving on to attributional ambiguity or “the inability to determine whether a microaggression has occurred” (Sue 2010, 55, see also Rini 2020), we already noted that this presupposes explicit evaluation of an incident. Sue (2010, 83) points out that attributional ambiguity typically takes the form of an internal dialogue, with the subject explicitly doubting/questioning if an incident is e.g., racist or not, like in example (12) below, in response to staring:

- (12) On my train journey back, I experienced a range of feelings, I’m not sure if it’s my perception but my English friend next to me told me “They’re actually looking at you” therefore there really is this perception of this tension of being perceived as the other. (Betta)

The evaluation phase of the microaggression process is, however, missing from the majority of the hostility episodes collected in our dataset. This may perhaps be interpreted as a lack of relevance to the participants, who at least do not foreground any interpretive dilemma. On the other hand, some events are clearly referred to as “racist attacks”, “racist remarks” and similar, pointing to a straightforward interpretation of the hostile behaviour by our interviewees. According to Rini (2020) cases like these should be excluded from a rigorous account of microaggressions. Sue and Spanierman (2020), for example, categorise them as “micro-assaults.” In contrast to this perspective, we incorporate these instances as illustrative of microaggressions, as demonstrated in example (1) above.

With these criteria in mind, a total of thirty-three microaggression episodes were identified. However, some could not be analysed for linguistic impoliteness. One case is that of non-verbal¹⁰ impoliteness triggered by staring.¹¹ Incidentally, not all instances of staring necessarily embody a microaggression, as shown by Ivana’s comment in response to her L1 usage triggering curiosity (Garland-Thomson 2009) (example 13 below, contrasting with 12 above)

- (13) I see looks, but these are not those judging, negative looks, these are “oh, what language might that be?” (Ivana)

⁹ Elsewhere, Sue (2020, 71) identifies environmental microaggressions with the physical surroundings that represent the microaggressive event in many situations. This definition, however, is a worse fit with our type of data (whereas it may be suitable for e.g., participant observation).

¹⁰ Culpeper et al. (2021, 12) have a similar point about spitting or the cutting-the-throat gesture in the case of hate crime.

¹¹ We have excluded from this analyses instances where the Spanish verb *mirar* (‘look’) enters the idiomatic constructions *mirar mal* (‘to look askance’) and *mirar por encima del hombro* (‘look down one’s nose at someone’). We also excluded an instance of a hypothetical incident *puede que alguien me mirara así, a ver si te vas, te vas ya* (‘Maybe someone would look at me like this, let’s see if you’re leaving, you’re leaving now’) as it does not recount an actual microaggression – even if it may signify expectations generated by a hostile social climate.

Other instances in which it is impossible to deploy the subtleties of impoliteness analysis concern meta-pragmatic terms used to implicitly refer to microaggressive episodes. Specifically, Spanish *comentario(s)* and Italian *commento(-i)/commentino(-i)* refer to snide/snarky/evil/inappropriate remarks, barbs, quips, jokes and taunts which may be of discriminatory nature (racist, sexist, homophobic, etc). Interactionally, these are taken as ground information between the interviewee and the interviewer who share the same sociolinguistic profile and, therefore, are not usually “unpacked” but left implicit. This leaves us with a collection of twenty-seven episodes.

Two of these, however, are borderline between microaggressions and hate speech. The first is the case of an anonymous abusive phone-call received by one of the participants the day after Brexit. The second instance is a case of abuse uttered by one of our participants about the Northern English who are called “ugly”. This may seem like a minor incident, but reference to racial superiority escalates it in our perception. Furthermore, both instances seem to be a one-off, uttered “in the heat of the moment” (Culpeper 2021, 7), and lack repetition, thus, making them more aligned to hate speech. In particular, both examples (14) and (15) are private events, whereas hate speech is typically public. In addition, example (15) is “behind the back” of the target.

(14) The following morning we received here at home an anonymous phone call and I answered and I hear a man certainly from the North West by the accent, [...] and he tells me: You- (##) [...] “You fucking¹² European migrant, remember that you are here to suck British cocks” (CHUCKLES) and you can only imagine the shock to get this phone call, the fear... (Betta)

(15)

1	Gerardo	And more good-looking human beings, I mean, (TSK) I would also say it, yes, yes.
3	Interviewer	Yes, well, though in the North of England @@ I’m joking. [@@]
4	G	[This is] quite debatable and also very controversial.
5	I	Yes.
6	G	but I honestly believe in genetic superiority.
7	I	@ Ok.
9	G	Hispanic, you only need to take a train, lift your head and say<MISC> please, (H) I mean
10	I	@
11	G	Close the barn gates, (H) but well, this is very subjective and
12	I	@
14	G	I shield myself in my anonymity, but, mmm, I don’t care, I would easily defend this in a newspaper article, [you are ugly, yes, yes

Although participants in our dataset mostly convey experiences of undergoing microaggressions, there is one instance in which one participant delivers a verbal offence towards the (Northern) English, claiming the genetic superiority of the Spanish resulting in their greater beauty. The insult is worsened by the comparison of (Northern) English people to animals (l.12, *close the barn gates*) and the retreat from any forms of redress (l.4 *[This is] quite debatable and also very controversial*, l.13 *I shield myself in my anonymity*) to then taking full responsibility for this thought (ll.14-15, *but, mmm, I don’t care, I would easily defend this in a newspaper article*). This shows affinity with Williams et al.’s (2021, 1001-1002) theme of “pathologizing minority culture or appearance”, but to our mind it is more serious and extreme than that (racial superiority). However, the interpretation of this passage is complicated by our awareness of issues with the interviewing process, as the interviewer overtly agreed with the interviewee, despite presumably attempting to redress this as a joke (l.3 *Yes, well, though in*

¹² The original in Italian was *tu bella emigrata europea*.

the North of England @@ I'm joking). It can also be speculated that the interviewer did not actually truly agree with the respondent, and “went along” with him to allow him the opportunity to elaborate on the topic, in a move that would be condescending but ultimately motivated by the will to maintain rapport and engagement; an affirming approach to interviewing, in which the interviewee’s statements are reinforced regardless of the opinion of the interviewee is recognised as a legitimate approach in the literature (e.g. Pezalla, Pettigrew and Miller-Day 2012). The discourse marker *well*, and the chuckle (@@) could be taken to evidence discomfort and potentially disagreement. We have no means to ascertain what was the interviewee’s approach as the interviewer left the team over two years before this paper was written.

Despite classificatory uncertainties, these two episodes have not been excluded from the dataset and are commented on in the remainder of this study.

Given the characteristics outlined in this section, the microaggression impoliteness events thus identified in our Brexit dataset can be synthetically captured by (Latin) *gutta cavat lapidem* (‘a water drop hollows the stone’) or “the straw that broke the camel’s back” view of hostility.

6. Microaggressions: Thematic analysis

The psychology literature on microaggressions is rife with taxonomies and scales. Williams et al. (2021) is a systematic review of taxonomies of racial microaggressions, which are thematically closely related to our data set and culminating in sixteen thematic categories expanding on Sue et al.’s (2007) foundational taxonomy. While these categories have been thought for race-related microaggressions, they map well onto nationality-related ones, as we have done in this analysis. Twenty-seven episodes of microaggressions in our data have been coded for themes adopting Williams et al. (2021) with some episodes being double coded. Eight themes have been identified in total, seven of which match William’s et al.’s (2021) list (with minor modifications), with an additional one –discrimination on language and accent– which is overlooked in the literature. These are useful to gain a more granular insight as to what is challenged by the offensive act, going beyond the identity facet of race or nationality.

Table 2 below gives a summary of the themes and their distribution.

Theme	Number of episodes
Not a (valuable) part of society	19
Assumption of criminality	2
Second class citizen	4
Discrimination based on language and accent	3
Assumptions about intelligence, competence or status	2
Denial of individual racism	2
Eroticization and sexualization	1
Pathologizing other people’s appearances	1

Table 2. Themes and their distribution

6.1 Not a (valuable) part of society and assumption of criminality

Most microaggressions cluster around a theme similar to Williams et al.’s (2021, 999) category labelled “not a true citizen”. Williams et al. (2021) concentrate on individuals who, as citizens, hold the same formal rights, but –despite this– are not regarded as equally valuable members of society due to racial discrimination, in some cases leading to the assumption that some are foreigners due to their somatic features which differ from the dominant white group. In the context of Brexit Britain considered here, on the other hand, our interviewees had different legal statuses (only their EU citizenship, permanent residence, the newly introduced pre-

/settled status, but in some cases also British citizenship), and in all cases saw the loss of at least some formal rights. Linked to this, they often experienced marginalisation, de-valuation and othering of certain members of the community on the basis of their belonging to a (newly) discriminated group. In light of this, we suggest a more appropriate (and more encompassing) label for this theme would be “not a (valuable) part of society”. The assumption of criminality is introduced rather implicitly through the *topos* of foreigner not obtaining their jobs legally or on merit (“steal”).

- (16) And then the second situation was in a pub. You know, you go to Friday afternoon after five you go to a pub with a few friends and there was a guy, yes, ordering my beer and the drinks for my friends and a guy sitting just on the front, just notices I am a foreigner and he was really happy with the Brexit result apparently, and, he told me[...] “Ahh you foreigners you come here to steal our jobs.” And I say, “I don’t think so, I don’t steal anyone’s job.” (Domingo)

6.2 Second class citizen and assumption of criminality

The theme called “second class citizen”, introduced by Sue et al. (2007) and incorporated into Williams et al.’s (2021, 1000) model, is adapted here as referring to situations in which discriminated people “are treated with less respect, consideration or care than is normally expected or customary” (ibid.). These instances border on “institutional racism” (for example Sue 2010). Example (17) also contains a hint of “assumption of criminality”.

- (17) I was flying from London to Venice, I live near [...] Venice for me is one of the nearest airports and often it happened that at the airport they stopped me and asked me for the visa. And I say them “but I am a citizen of the European Union, I don’t need a visa, I am flying to the European Union from the European Union, and I am always in the European Union”, and then it happens that the whole line for boarding stops, and I am the first there, like the worst of criminals at the airport, and then they call the colleagues, call the supervisors [...] (Ivana)

A debated issue in the literature is whether oppression is “all in the individual’s head”, perhaps expressing a so-called “victimhood culture” (Campbell and Manning 2018). In line with Rini (2021, 66), we believe that microaggression crucially “presupposes the objective existence of oppression, made up of historically entrenched social processes”. Some interviewees in our dataset recall factual acts of discrimination such as the following (notice the inclusion of the loss of privileges/rights after Brexit –which is also interpreted as discriminatory especially by people who have long been resident in the UK):

- (18) At the beginning it felt like a discrimination [being refused registration by a GP]. (Marcelo)
- (19) I was crossing the border and I was using my ID, my Spanish ID and the police, you know, the police there asked me about my passport, and I said “I don’t need a passport. We are still in Europe, and we can travel just using the ID [...]”. (Domingo)

Our study does not aim to assess this type of discrimination phenomena *per se*: what matters to us is that they are present in the interviewee’s awareness, and they pattern with broader discourses of oppression.

6.3 Discrimination based on language and accent

There is widespread evidence in the sociolinguistic literature that perceptions towards language use can lead to discrimination, particularly in terms of accent with a view of non-native English

speakers perceived as less intelligent, competent and of a lower status than non-accented speakers (Fuertes et al. 2011; Gluszek and Dovidio 2010). Unsurprisingly, there has been a reported reluctance towards using languages other than English in the UK Brexit context (Kelly 2018) with multilingual speakers often facing linguistic discrimination. For instance, Kozminska and Hua (2021, 452) explore the language use and attitudes of Polish multilingual families in post-Brexit UK with participants reporting “instances of either physical or symbolic linguistic violence, which involve abuse directed to others who are speaking another language or speaking with a ‘foreign accent’” similar to the account reported in our data (20) below.

- (20) You know, today I was talking to someone who lives in Birmingham, and she said she was told off while talking on the phone in Polish... I heard stories like that a lot, but I never heard experiences like this in London. (Elżbieta)

Williams et al. (2021) do not point out a theme related to accent/language per se, despite dealing with racial discrimination that may have a strong linguistic component (e.g., negative attitudes towards African American Vernacular English, Spanglish, Spanish in the US). Only one paper they review (Housemand et al. 2014) notices the factor in relation to international students. We argue that language and accent issues may be more relevant in a migration context than previously assumed in the microaggression literature on social discrimination.

6.4 Assumptions about intelligence, competence or status

This relates to those situations in which “behaviour or statements are based on an assumption about a person’s intelligence, competence, education, income or social status derived from racial stereotypes” (Williams et al. 2021, 999). However, it must be pointed out that instances like the following link up to the previous themes of citizenship as there is an explicit connection between physical appearance and national belonging.

- (21) ... of practically having to tell us that it is not that we, the Spanish, are ignorant, as you say, it’s that maybe since you don’t speak Spanish, (H) or when you are in Spain and people don’t talk to you in English, you don’t know what people are saying, but that is not because they are mentally handicapped,¹³ the thing is that (TSK) you just lack the resources to (H) [...]...communicate, (H) yes, that has been the most negative aspect of all the experience. (Gerardo)

6.5 Denial of individual racism

For Williams et al. (2021, 999) the theme of denial of individual racism captures those situations in which “a person tries to make a case that they are not biased, often talking about non-racist things that they have done to deflect perceived scrutiny on their own biased behaviours”. Typically, lack of bias or discrimination may be conveyed through the mention of friendship or personal connection with members of the discriminated groups (e.g., *I am not a homophobe – I have lots of gay friends; I am not a racist – my brother-in-law is black*). Although not taking exactly this shape, the instance below shows a functionally similar dynamic.

- (22) And I recall talking to people at the University, and here we go back to the same thing, who are allegedly educated, with an open mind, blah, blah <MISC> (H) and the first thing they say is “No, no”, [...]because they used arguments, of course, in favour of Brexit, in front of me and I was perplexed, and when they saw the look on my face they said <MISC> “No, no but this is not because of you, it is because of immigration” and

¹³ Although the phrase “people with learning disabilities” is currently favoured over “mentally handicapped”, the latter was kept in the English translation to capture the use of *disminuidos mentales* in the original.

they said “No, no” but that is what they don’t realise: that I am European, (H), that is, that this immigration of Pakistanis or Indians or whatever it is has nothing to do with Brexit. The immigration of Africans has nothing to do with Brexit... (Mabel)

The theme of “eroticization and sexualization” (example 14 above) and “pathologizing other people’s appearances” (example 15) are marginal. Here they are reflected only in the two borderline cases with hate speech: therefore, they can be considered less representative of Brexit microaggressions than the themes above.

This thematic classification provides a useful “bird’s eye” glance of *what* causes the offence reported in the particular context of Brexit. It is useful, for instance, at the descriptive level to tease apart the specificities of a context of microaggression from the other within the same identity aspects, for example microaggressions against European academics in Brexit Britain vs. East and South Asian international college students in Canada (Houshmand et al. 2014), both falling under race/nationality.

The analysis of Brexit data reveals rather obvious clustering around issues of citizenship and belonging, which is entirely compatible with the socio-political context. This renders a more homogeneous picture than e.g., religiously aggravated hate crime, where religious identity is challenged alongside seemingly unrelated identity aspects such as race, gender and sexuality (Culpeper et al. 2021). Despite its value, the contribution of this thematic analysis stops here as it does not provide us with any information as to *how* the microaggression is carried out. This is a gap that can be plugged through the two impoliteness frameworks introduced above.

7. Impoliteness: face, rights and obligations

In the rare cases in which linguistic examples are given for the themes identified in psychology, these tend to take the form of a Gricean (1989, 37) conventionalised implicature, which is assumed to be stable across all contexts. What is overlooked is that the core aspect of implicatures is their defeasibility: therefore, from a pragmatic viewpoint, the “attributional ambiguity” noticed in the psychological and philosophical literature (see section 4 above) may actually derive from the implicature’s cancelability. The examples below are lifted from Sue et al. (2007, 276).

“Theme: Alien in One’s Own Land.

Microaggression: “Where are you from? Where were you born?” [uttered to natives assumed to be foreign born: Authors]

Message: You are not American. You are a foreigner.”

“Theme: Pathologizing cultural values and communication styles

Microaggression: “Why do you have to be so loud/animated?”

Message: Assimilate to the dominant culture”

Sue et al (2007) do not use the concept of implicature, resorting to the generic term “message” instead. We believe that pragmatics/impoliteness can supply a much richer interpretation of the linguistic dynamics of microaggressions than the rather simplistic account proposed in psychology/counselling.

Most episodes in our data (out of 27, but some are double coded) show an offence arising out of a threat to one’s social identity face (13 episodes). This is associated to one’s sense of “public worth” (Spencer-Oatey 2002, 540), especially one’s membership to social groups such as ethnic and nationality groups. Offence may also be produced by “a claim that someone is not

part of a group that they would wish to be part of” (Culpeper 2011a, 29). Social exclusion, othering and rejection are at the core of the theme “not a (valuable) part of society”.

- (23) Nothing feels worse than when I see, I mean, a kind of... and you, where are you from? How long have you been here for? I find that must be the most demeaning thing for a person in another country. (Mateo)

There are three instances of quality face attack in our dataset. This concerns those situations falling under the theme “assumptions about intelligence, competence or status” and also the attack carried out one of our interviewees towards the physical appearance of the Northern English people – although the collective address gives this attack also a social dimension. Discrimination across language and accent lies across social identity and quality face. In fact, language can be considered akin to a quality that an individual possesses and is being disparaged, but also has a social dimension to it. Lack of social belonging is emphasised in example (24).

- (24) Well, I learnt English in the South, so when I talk to people here from the North, (TSK) “Ah, so you have a bit of a Southern accent”, (SNIFF), I don’t mind, (H) [...] so, mmm, yes, the feeling of displacement is there all the time, right? And maybe there are people who care more, but I don’t mind it that much... (Gerardo)

Offence may also arise out of the breach of sociality rights. Equity rights are violated when an individual is unfairly dealt with or disadvantaged (9 episodes). This category patterns rather neatly with the thematic category “second class citizen”, including cases in which participants have been denied GP registration or have faced difficulties travelling (visa, ID), or again were unduly questioned about their right to work. Association rights (7 episodes), on the other hand, are breached when an individual is treated without due respect, empathy or compassion. Instances in which the interviewee finds themselves talking to inconsiderate people who display their pro-Brexit orientation regardless of the effects on the hearer are met with frustration or shock (see also example 31). Denial of individual racism is ultimately unsympathetic.

- (25) And then you’ll get anything from... usually you get “oh you’ll be fine, you’ll be fine”, which is so irritating, or you get... Yeah, you get people who’ll make it quite clear that they’re quite... that they don’t really care about the impact on you, because it’s all about taking back control, and you’re just part of that. (Susanna)

Finally, there is one isolated instance of taboo language and intimidation (14), which we believe is borderline with hate speech.

Without dismissing the value of thematic taxonomies at the descriptive level, we argue that the impoliteness analysis presented here contributes more at the explanatory level. In fact, there is a rather neat patterning of social identity face offences with the theme “not a (valuable) part of society” and “assumptions about intelligence, competence or status” with quality face offences, with “discrimination based on language and accent” lying across the two categories. Violation of equity rights overlaps with the theme “second class citizen” and association rights with “denial of individual racism”. Based on this analysis, the typical profile of Brexit-related offences shows a neat patterning with social identity face attacks and violation of social and equity rights.

<i>Face</i>	<i>16</i>
Quality face	3
Social identity face	13
<i>Sociality rights</i>	<i>16</i>

Equity rights	9
Association rights	7

Table 3. Face, rights and obligations in Brexit-related microaggressions

8. Impoliteness triggers

Looking at triggers for impoliteness evaluations allows us to dig further into the linguistic makeup of Brexit-related microaggressions. Table 4, below, offers a birds’ eye view of the distribution of linguistic “devices” used in our dataset:

<i>Conventionalised formulae (all)</i>	18
Discourse echo (Brexit, Borat)	10
Foreigner-talk	3
Insults	3
Condescension	2
<i>Implicational impoliteness (all)</i>	11
Convention-driven external mismatch	9
Form-driven	1
Context-driven unmarked behaviour	2

Table 4. Triggers for impoliteness in Brexit-related microaggressions

The most wide-spread trigger for impoliteness evaluations in our data consists of “conventionalised formulae.” According to Culpeper (2011a, 1355-136), the key to identifying them is statistical frequency leading to entrenchment and conventionalisation. Ideally, corpora can be consulted to find evidence for this. Without corpus data to back this up statistically, however, we argue that repetition may also arise through discourses that circulate in society at large, leading to the “naturalisation” of themes and expressions. In our cases, there is evidence of Brexit-related slogans and mottos – traces of pervasive “discourses of Brexit” recorded in studies such as Koller et al. (2019) and Radziwinowiczówna and Galasińska (2021). From a theoretical perspective, the inclusion of statements echoing discourse(s) at large represents an addition to Culpeper’s model (2011a, 135-136). Furthermore, the trickling of leitmotifs from broader societal discourses into individual experiences suggests the loosening of barriers between individual and environmental microaggressions.

Out of the **twenty-five** episodes coded (some double coded; **two** excluded as too vague to be assessed with a typology of triggers), there are **eighteen** instances of impoliteness formulae. **Nine** of these include expressions directly reflecting Brexit-talk. Example (26e) also contains a presupposition.

(26)	a. It’s not for you, it’s for the immigration (Mabel)
	b. To see if you are leaving, are you leaving yet (Juan)
	c. We didn’t mean people like you (Francisca)
	d. this about taking back control of our country (José)
	e. When are you going to leave? (Antonio)
	f. [he said] that Brexit is right and enough immigrants (Betta)
	g. You foreigners you come here and steal our jobs (Domingo)
	h. People just openly told her to go back (Ralf)
	i. You fucking European migrant (Betta)

In addition to these nine, three instances reflect “generic” talk addressed to foreigners, i.e., the stock of trite questions, conversation starters and remarks that often foreigners are met with (at

least in some social settings in England. Example (27) is illustrative of this discourse from our data set but do not qualify as microaggressions as there is no indication that offence is taken).

- (27) And where are you from and how long have you been here? (Mateo)
- (28) We've covered the pre, the during, the whatever comes next, this is the question you get, you get asked all the time and, well, there are always two questions you get asked: Why did you come to the UK? Or why did you come to L~~~~? I've always said, if someone gave me, gave me a pound for every time I was asked that question, I could buy a house without a mortgage. (Alicia)
- (29) [aaah, look], it happened to me once, where I lived before, there's one thing, you usually ask an immigrant when you go there. And, and that is, of course, when you open your mouth, and they notice your accent and they say <LOUD> And where are you from? (Mateo)
- (30) Uauh @ Where are you from? From Scotland? From aaa, from aaa, I don't know, Scou- Scouser land [...] Mancunian land. (Juan)

Example (30), above, is particularly interesting as it is uttered by one of our participants reporting questions being asked by a taxi driver, which he reports to be especially annoying as he has been in England a very long time. Interestingly, the quoted utterance is uttered in English in the middle of a Spanish conversation. The caricatural nature of the quote, a distorted echo, is evidence through exaggerated intonation and vowel dragging. The element of “mimicry” is an instance of trigger for impoliteness driven by form, a type of implicational trigger for impoliteness (Culpeper 2011a, 161). The speaker has a negative attitude towards the question uttered by the taxi driver, which involves his social identity face, doubting his full belonging to British society. The echoed question also involves equity rights as it is asked as if talking town to a newcomer. Lexically, “Scouser land” and “Mancunian land” are caricatural renditions of Liverpool and Manchester – that together with the intonation somehow echo Sacha Baron Cohen’s “Borat” speech (Blouke 2019), thus implicitly (and probably fictitiously) attributing to the academic characteristics of vulgarity and uncouthness. Mimicry represents a side-ways retaliation redressing social identity face and equality rights though form-driven impoliteness. This instance, though, also straddles across impoliteness formulae as the caricatural rendition à-la-Borat has a further element of conventionalisation.

Compared to Brexit phrases and mottos, other impoliteness formulae (such as those found in Culpeper 2011a, 135-136) are rare. There are only three insults, one found in the indirect report of the Spaniard being called stupid (21), and the two others in the instances of microaggressions that border hate speech (“you fucking European migrant” in 14 and “you are ugly” in 15). Again in (14), “remember you are here to suck British cocks” is a threat. Finally, there are two instances of condescension, both thematically subsumed under “denial of individual racism”. A clear one is “you’ll be fine, you’ll be fine” in (25) and perhaps also “we don’t mean people like you” in (23), where the code-switching from Spanish to English singles out this expression as echoic of Brexit-discourse.

Whereas impoliteness formulae taken altogether account for the majority of triggers of impoliteness found in our dataset, there are also twelve instances of implicational impoliteness. Among these, the microaggressions in our dataset mostly arise out of a mismatch between the expressed behaviour and the context in which it is carried out (“convention-driven, external mismatch”, Culpeper 2016, 439). All those situations in which our participants are met with pro-Brexit talks by e.g., colleagues fall into this category. The pro-Brexit talk is associated with anti-Europeanism and anti-immigration attitudes, perceived as inherently conflicting with the

social position of our interviewees. What is deemed impolite by the participants in our data is not inherently holding pro-Brexit views, but it is expressing them in front of a migrant from Europe. As said above, beyond involving social identity face, these instances trigger impoliteness via threatening sociality rights of association, as the speakers show no empathy and involvement with our participants.

(31) Then I attended a conference where I presented my work and I met this artist who started and even invited me for dinner and he started talking to me about Brexit and that it is right because enough immigrants and that was another shock. (Betta)

(32) There could have been a conversation, for example, with a colleague at work during which you realise they are pro-Brexit, and you are not, so this leads to a slight degree of tension that you need to know how to handle, because you can make an inappropriate comment that can make someone uncomfortable.

In (33), below, the remark “Ah, so you have a bit of a Southern accent” sounds rather neutral and descriptive: however, as the participant is located in the North of England, this remark is interpreted as othering – hence the feeling of “displacement” that he experiences as a result. In the specific sociolinguistic context of Northern England, the otherwise (overtly) prestigious variant of Southern English pronunciation is remarked as less desirable than the Northern accent, which holds covert prestige – affording a sense of belonging.

(33) Well, I learnt English in the South, so when I talk to people here from the North, (TSK) “Ah, so you have a bit of a Southern accent”, (SNIFF), I don’t mind, (H) [...] so, mmm, yes, the feeling of displacement is there all the time, right? And maybe there are people who care more, but I don’t mind it that much... (Gerardo)

Convention-driven implicational triggers for impoliteness also allows one to further reconsider the “attributional ambiguity” noted in the psychological and philosophical literature on microaggressions. In fact, this may derive from processing external mismatches – which “may lead to confusion and disorientation” (Culpeper 2011a, 166).

Finally, there are two cases of “context-driven unmarked behaviour”, occurring when the participant reports that someone they know was ordered to stop speaking in one’s first language as in (13) above and (34) below.

(34) There are colleagues, who go with their children on the bus here in ~LXXXXXX and people told them to speak to them in English, (H) when they were speaking to them in Spanish. (Gerardo).

Incidentally, being ordered to speak English also reflects the ideology of Brexit and its slogans (Awcock 2023) so to an extent these instances have a formulaic element to them, too.

To sum up, the impoliteness associated with the microaggressions in our dataset arises mostly from impoliteness formulae sounding out slogans and mottos derived from wider discourses of Brexit, followed by implicational, convention-driven impoliteness, arising out of an external mismatch. This is a very different picture from hate speech, which is characterised by a prevalence of insults and threats (Culpeper 2021).

9. Summary and conclusion

To some extent, EU27 academics have previously been regarded as a group sheltered from experiencing instances of hostility and discrimination; thus, being clustered as a privileged category

within migrants. Despite this, the instances of microaggressions volunteered by the interviewees, support the idea of a growing sense of insecurity and vulnerability due to Brexit (cf. Luthra 2021).

This paper aimed at unravelling the similarities and differences in the approach to microaggressions within the psychological and philosophical literature on the one hand and two specific frameworks within impoliteness studies on the other. Animated by a spirit of interdisciplinarity as a two-way street, it also aimed at pointing out areas in which each field could benefit from the scholarly achievement of the other. Microaggressions have, therefore, been re-defined as a specific type of impoliteness “of the mild kind”, characterised by repetition (at the individual and/or the collective level), which produces feelings of annoyance, irritation, frustration and shock.

To begin with, in order to identify an episode of impoliteness, we relied on the emic concept of challenge on behalf of the informant (Culpeper 2011a). Whilst the small magnitude/size of the offence looks difficult to evaluate objectively, textual analysis provides some anchorage for this. Furthermore, repetition is also shown to display identifiable linguistic traces. Compared to the literature on mature systems of discrimination, we offered a re-evaluation of the cumulative effect based on incipient contexts of marginalisation, which also bridges the gap between the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’ levels of sociological analysis. The links between the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’ in our data are apparent both in explicit evaluations and in more subtle traces left by the discourses of Brexit in individual impoliteness formulae. This, together with our proposed understanding of repetition, suggests that the border between individual and environmental microaggressions may be thinner and more osmotic than previously assumed. Attributional ambiguity –extensively discussed as criterial for microaggressions in psychology and philosophy– is here explained with the cancelability of implicatures and/or impoliteness originating from external mismatches in convention-driven triggers. However, this is not taken as criterial, unlike e.g. in Rini (2020).

Moving on to the thematic taxonomies of microaggressions (widely discussed in the psychological literature), these are considered to be a valuable tool for mapping specific types of microaggressions within particular identity aspects, thus allowing one to compare e.g., Brexit-related microaggressions to microaggressions directed to Black Americans on US university campuses. In doing so, taxonomies allow to capture specificities which may be valuable at the socio-political level. In evaluating existing taxonomies for race, we suggested that discrimination based on one’s language and accent should be given more prominence. Despite these advantages, thematic taxonomies fall short of explaining *how* microaggressions are interpersonally carried out and linguistically achieved.

The case of microaggressions experienced by academics in Brexit England offered a clear set of distinctive interpersonal dynamics and linguistic realizations. The analysis based on Spencer-Oatey’s “rapport management” framework revealed that impoliteness mostly involved social identity face and equity and association sociality rights. This framework also showed interesting patterning with thematic analysis. Next, Culpeper’s model of “impoliteness triggers” shed light upon the fact that the majority of prefabricated formulae echoed slogans and expressions entrenched in the discourses of Brexit. This also allowed us to expand the impoliteness triggers model to include conventionalisation at the level of societal discourse(s). Most of the remaining instances are explained through implicational impoliteness, mostly capturing the mismatch between what is said and the context in which it is uttered.

An area that deserves further systematic exploration is that of the emotional reactions caused by microaggressions. Our data report a range from non-plus, nonchalant, blasé responses to more extreme and involved reactions, but not to the level of fear for one's own safety as recorded in hate crime (Culpeper 2021), if not right in one narrative bordering hate speech. Overall, the literature on microaggressions developed in psychology and philosophy brings to the fore the links between individual experiences and societal issues, making it an appealing framework when focusing on specific socio-political contexts such as Brexit.

Beyond contributing to a theoretical understanding of microaggressions, this paper also offers a contribution to sociological studies on Brexit. Specifically, this study supports the results of previous sociological and geographical literature on the experiences of hostility othering among EU27 citizens in the UK, showing further the specificities of a rarely studied, relatively privileged, group, that is, EU27 academics. The use of theories of impoliteness and the concept of microaggressions allows us to describe and theorise more precisely, when compared to existing sociological and geographic literature, specific events of hostility reported by the interviewees. At the same time, our analysis shows the experiences of discursive othering linked to Brexit, integrating the existing discourse analysis literature on Brexit, which has largely focused on different forms of political communication and on media representations.

This paper further acknowledges the importance for applied social language studies to consider constructs elaborated outside linguistics (e.g., psychology, sociology, philosophy, etc.) while at the same time emphasising the contribution of linguistics in exploring “how psychological concepts... or processes... are enacted and contested in social interaction” (Wiggins 2017, 7).

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