IMPOLITENESS IN DRAMATIC DIALOGUE

Ana Maria Birtalan
Lecturer, PhD, Ecological University of Bucharest

Abstract: A number of studies have shown that the frameworks of linguistic politeness can be used to shed light on literary critical issues. Broadly speaking, politeness is very important in the study of drama, it is actually about the strategic manipulation of language, about expediting our conversational goals by saying what is socially appropriate. A framework that brings together ***face*** *and sociological variables (such as power and social distance) and relates them to motivated linguistic strategies, is going to be useful in helping us understand , on the one hand, how characters position themselves relative to other characters, and, on the other hand, how the plot is pushed forward. Such a framework will allow us to describe systematically, for instance, how one character might ingratiate himself or herself with another or how one character might offend another. In the case of drama, the key dramatic points often occur at times of interactional conflict. Thus, one of the tasks of this work is to start to investigate* ***impoliteness*** *strategies, that is, strategies that are designed to cause offence and social disruption.*
Firstly, I will try to approach impoliteness by outlining the framework of linguistic politeness, (explaining politeness with reference to the notion of face, positive and negative) and, in the second part, I will briefly consider why the study of impoliteness is important for drama, particularly recent twenty- century drama, analyzing some dialogue extracts from Harold Pinter's Birthday Party , a play in which conflict has a key role in the development of both plot and character and where the focus is on how (im)politeness relates to characterization.

*Keywords****:*** *politeness- impoliteness maxims, negative face, positive face, strategy, linguistic manipulation.*

There has been quite a lot of work in linguistics to explain how speakers are polite to one another in what they say and do, and how they mitigate impolite behavior in order to uphold social cohesion (for example, the way people will say "I'm sorry" when they bump into someone else in a crowded street).

In this work, we shall try to explore the role of impoliteness in dramatic dialogue, focusing on the idea that, in dramatic terms, impoliteness is particularly interesting because it generates the disharmony and conflict between characters fact that generates audience interest and often moves the plot forward. After outlining the main theoretical ideas, we will go on analyzing the relation between the characters of Harold Pinter's play 'Birthday Party.

A number of studies have shown that frameworks of linguistic can be used to the light on literary critical issues. Broadly speaking, politeness is about the strategic manipulation of language, about expediting our conversational goals by saying what is socially appropriate. A framework that brings together *face* (the concept about the self) and sociological variables (such as power and social distance) and relates them to motivated linguistic strategies that are very useful for us to understand how characters position themselves relative to other characters, how they manipulate others in pursuit of their goals and how the plot is pushed forward. Such a framework will allow us to describe systematically how, for instance, how one character might

BDD-A24690 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:59 UTC)

ingratiate himself with another or how one character might offend another. The politeness theories have tended to concentrate on how communicative strategies maintain or promote social harmony. In the case of drama, the key 'dramatic' points often occur at times of interactional conflict. Thus, one of the tasks of this work is to begin to investigate impoliteness strategies: strategies that are designed to cause offence and social disruption. We will approach impoliteness by outlining a framework of linguistic politeness strategies and afterwards, we shall briefly consider why it is that the study of impoliteness is important for drama, particularly the twentieth century drama.

FROM POLITENSS TO IMPOLITENESS

Brown and Levinson explain politeness with reference to the notion of *face.* In the everyday sense of the word, face is involved in notions such as reputation, prestige and self-esteem. They suggested that face consists of two basic socio-psychological wants. *Positive face* is the want to be approved of. For instance the need to approve of one's opinions, to express admiration of what one says and does. *Negative face* is the want to be unimpeded. For instance, I may assume that one wants me to let him or her attend what he or she wants, and say what he or she wants. Life would be wonderful if our faces remained untouched. However, in relatively mundane interactions our actions often threaten the other person's face. For instance requests typically threaten our negative face, while criticism usually threaten our positive face. We deal with the so called Face Threatening Acts. An act can be threatened as far as its face is concerned in a number of occasions, depending on a number of factors, but in particular the relationship between the characters and the size of the imposition involved in the act to be performed. For instance, if I am at work, and desperately want a glass of water, it is going to be easier to ask a long-standing colleague than a new one. This happens because, in terms of social distance I'm closer to the colleague I've known for ages, than the one I've only known for a few days. Furthermore, if a superior of mine would be in the same room at the time, it would be more difficult for me to ask him than to ask my new colleague. This happens because he is more powerful than I am, whereas my new colleague would be more or less equal with me in terms of power. Thus, Brown and Levinson suggest that it is possible to rank acts according to size of imposition.

The main idea here is that politeness comes about when one indicates concern to support someone else's face. Let's take an example. If I request someone to help me operate my computer, my FTA would threaten negative face in causing inconvenience. Rather than just say "Help me with my computer!" I could say "Would you mind helping me with my computer?" On the surface, I am asking a question about whether the addressee would mind helping me; only indirectly does my utterance carry the speech act force of a request. By displaying concern not to impose- in other words, concern for face- I maintain social harmony (and probably stand a greater chance of being helped).course, there are many different combinations of politeness strategies. The politeness strategy selection usually depends on one's assessment of how face threatening a particular act is going to be.

IMPOLITENESS

We have seen so far how we use different linguistic strategies to maintain and promote harmonious social relationships. However, there are times when people use linguistic strategies to

BDD-A24690 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:59 UTC)

attack face – to strengthen the face threat of an act. This kind of linguistic strategy can be called 'impoliteness'. Of course, there are different ways in which the face threatening act of criticism may be conveyed. For instance, evaluating an essay a pupil has just written , we can say:

Perhaps it could have been improved	**Politeness**
It wasn't good	↓
It was bad	↓
It was horrible	↓
You must have crap instead of brains	**Impoliteness**

Here we have a scale varying from very polite to very impolite. At the beginning of the scale the first utterance " **Perhaps it could be improved**" could be interpreted as polite, given a suitable context, because, on the one hand, the hedge 'perhaps' reduces the force of the speaker's criticism and, on the other hand, 'it could be improved' is an oblique way of expressing criticism. The speaker flouts Grice's Maxim of Manner and, thus, conveys the criticism in an implicature. At the end of the scale, the utterance '**You must have crap instead of brains'** could be interpreted as extreme positive impoliteness , given a suitable context, for several reasons: 1) 'crap' is a sort of taboo word, 2) the criticism is personalized through the use of 'you' and 3) the speaker flouts the Maxim of Quality, implying the belief that the writer of the essay has absolutely no intelligence. As for the utterance placed at the middle of the scale '**It was bad',** whether one would interpret this as polite or impolite depends very much on the context. For instance, if it were not part of someone's role (a parent, or a tutor) to make the criticism, and if it were known that the addressee is sensitive to criticism, then the utterance would seem impolite. What is interesting here is the fact that the key difference between politeness and impoliteness is a matter of the hearer's understanding of intention: whether it is the speaker's intention to support face (politeness) or to attack it (impoliteness).

IMPOLITENESS AND DRAMA

When talking about the importance of impoliteness for the study of drama, we should focus on the idea that impoliteness is a type of aggression and aggression has been a source entertainment for thousands of years. It is made intriguing by the fact that the generally it is – thankfully- fairly rare and by the fact that it is socially outlawed compulsive desire of children to do what they have been told not to is an evidence of how what it is forbidden attracts interest). Moreover, it is from a position of relative safety and comfort that theatre audiences can watch violent conflicts. Lucretius, writing in the first century BC, noted the positive feelings that can arise when one in safety watches others in danger.

In the case of drama, this aggression often takes place in dialogue. It is not surprising that the courtroom has provided the basis for so many plays, films and television dramas. Here prosecutors are licensed to aggravate a witness's face. The courtroom provides a socially respectable and legitimate form of verbal aggression. In drama, impoliteness is not thrown haphazardly for audience entertainment: it serves other purposes Conflict in interaction appears either as a symptom or as a cause of social disharmony, and where there are tensions between

BDD-A24690 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:59 UTC)

characters we are more likely to see developments in character and plot. We shall try to consider first characterization. It is important to note here that our interpretative assumptions about (im)politeness behaviors in fictional texts differ somewhat from those which we have for "real life". In a fictional context, there are two reasons why any character behavior is assumed to carry more interpretative significance than would the same behavior in real life. Firstly, we know that we have the complete set of behaviors that constitute a particular character. This is, of course, never possible in the real life. Secondly, and even more importantly, we know that any character behavior is just not determined only by the fictional personality that gave rise to it, but is also the motivated choice of the writer. In real life, impoliteness, because of its rarity and social restrictions, is often perceived as unexpected behavior, and such behavior will trigger an attributional search: we want to know why something odd happened, what the special circumstances were for someone to break the social norm. We can look for a cause in the person's mood or personality, or in the situation, or simply dismiss it as unintentional. In fiction, however, we are more likely to interpret such behavior as a message from the author about an aspect of the fictional world which will be of future consequence. With regard to plot, analysts have described plot development in terms of a movement from a situation of equilibrium, through a situation of disequilibrium, to the re-establishment of equilibrium. For instance, verbal conflict can generate a state of disequilibrium in the dramatic dialogue. Furthermore, matters of characterization often move in tandem with plots developments. Conflict frequently leads to a shift of character in its resolution.

Given the value of impoliteness in plays, we can ask ourselves why the playwrights haven't made use of the device more often, as we can notice that this occurred in the recent twentieth- century drama and film. Of course, the cultural changes led to these changes, let alone that fact that in Britain theatrical censorship has played an important. Initially, censorship had a largely religious and political agenda, but by the nineteenth century social propriety had become a key issue. Moreover, any language which was construed as anti-social was liable to be prohibited. Obvious targets throughout the history of censorship have been oaths, swearing and four-letter words. Theatrical censorship in Britain was finally relaxed in 1965 and abolished in 1968.

Nowadays people most experience fictional dialogue when watching plays and movies. Unfortunately, going to the theatre is a minority activity and reading plays is almost exclusively the provenance of school and university courses. However, we will try to analyze in terms of impoliteness a short fragment from Harold Pinter's play 'Birthday Party". This play was the playwright's first commercially- produced, full-length play. He began writing the play after acting in a theatrical tour, during which, in Eastbourne , England, he had lived in "filthy insane digs". There he became acquainted with "a great bulging scrag of a woman" and a man who stayed in the seedy place. The flophouse became the model for the rundown boarding house of the play and the woman and her tenant the models, respectively, for the characters of Meg Boles and Stanley Webber. It was not a hit and most critics and reviewers opined that Pinter floundered in obscurity and suffered from the negative influence of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and other avant- garde writers. The work, in fact, became the dramatist's first full-length "comedy of menace" , where conflict plays a key role for the development of both plot and character . Stanely Webber , once a sea-side pianist, has been staying in a boarding house. He is rather perturbed by the arrival of two other guests- Goldberg and McCann- who have a "job" to do. They subject him to a rather strange interrogation. The following day, Stanley is transformed: he appears wearing as sober suit and is inarticulate. Goldberg and McCann take him away with them for "special

BDD-A24690 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:59 UTC)

treatment" . The plot, as outlined above, moves from a situation of equilibrium to disequilibrium and back again to equilibrium. Below is a small part of that interrogation (in total it runs to more than 150 turns) and we will try to describe the impoliteness phenomena, its development in the plot, and in what ways it is like a "real" interrogation and in what ways is it not:

GOLDBERG: Why did the chicken cross the road?
STANELY: He wanted……
McCann: He doesn't know. He doesn't know w ho came first!
GOLDBERG: Which came first?
MCCANN: Chicken? Egg? Which came first?
GOLDBERG and MCCANN: Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?
STANELY: [screams]
GOLDBERG: He doesn't know. Do you know your own face?
MCCANN: Wake him up. Stick a needle in his eye.
GOLDBERG: You're a plague, Webber. You're an overthrow.
GOLDBERG: Which came first?
MCCANN: You're what's left.
GOLDBERG: But we've got the answer to you. We can sterilize you.

MCCANN: what about Drogheda?
GOLDBERG: Your bite is dead. Only your pong is left.
MCCANN: You betrayed our land.
GOLDBERG: You betrayed our breed.
MCCANN: Who are you, Webber?
GOLDBERG: What makes you think you exist?
MCCANN: You are dead.
GOLDBERG: You are dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There is no juice in you. You're nothing but an odor!"

Note: Drogheda is an Irish town whose inhabitants were massacred at the instigation of Cromwell in 1649

As we can very well see, in this small fragment of the play, interrogation acts as a catalyst for the transformation of Stanley. Goldberg and McCann manipulate their messages in order to attack Stanley's face . Verbal conflict is, by all means, the basic symptom of disequilibrium and the two attackers use it, either by bombing him with existential questions obsessively repeated, or by throwing ironical, even vulgar remarks right into his face. The lack of consideration is very obvious here and well intended. This series of inquisitive remarks addressed to Stanley surprises and intrigues the audience; such behavior triggers an attributional search: the audience wants to know why something that odd happened, why Goldberg and McCann broke the social norm in such a manner. Thus, through impoliteness strategies the audience is captured, persuaded to move on watching, to see Stanley's reaction to all these verbal injuries, so the development of the plot moves from a situation of equilibrium to a situation of disequilibrium. As far as the aspects of pragmatics are concerned, both Goldberg and McCann break each and every one of Grice's maxims. They are not relevant, they are not brief and informative they don't speak the truth altogether, they keep on threatening Stanley's face, acting as the catalyst for the transformation of the latter. Furthermore, talking about the maxims of politeness, we should simply say that the statement "Minimize the expression of beliefs which express or imply cost to other" is

BDD-A24690 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:59 UTC)

completely and deliberately broken ; the two protagonists attack Stanley , from the very beginning, putting him questions to which they don't even bother to wait for the answer, questioning his ability to have an answer for them . The attack is abrupt and continues with an obsessive repetition of the same question, engaging Stanley in the so-called conversation, instigating him to answer but never giving him the chance to reply. The irony principle is also used in this dialogue, in a very offensive way, and it is very quickly shifted into direct aggression addressed to poor Stanley. For instance, in the question: "Do you know your own face?", you feel the ironical force of the remark, but it appears to be less offensive, permitting aggression to manifest in a less dangerous verbal form than by direct criticism, but the shift is very quick and abrupt, as we follow McCann's next reply : " Wake him up, Stick a needle in his eye". Thus the ironic remark is replaced by direct insult and threat which attacks Stanley both verbally and physically. So, although IP usually keeps aggression away from the brink of conflict, in our dialogue it only introduces it, giving the conflict greater dramatic color. Here of, the series of direct vulgar insults and threats, like "you are an overthrow", "we can sterilize you", or, "you betrayed our breed" and " you're dead" to which Stanley appears to have no reply(he simply screams, overwhelmed by the power of the conflict). We may conclude that the two fellows make use of the most direct and brutal means of impoliteness strategies in the view of openly expressing their despise, hatred and loath towards poor Stanley.

This politeness analysis attempted to describe how the participants manipulated their messages in order to attack face. And, Goldberg and McCann chose not to exploit a large range of the impoliteness spectrum, abruptly attacking Stanley's face from the very beginning of their conversation. Pinter used this formula trying to shock and even frighten the audience, and even if it's likely not please the latter, he surely caught their attention and they would want to see and understand more.

Bibliography:

1. G. Leech(1983), Principles of Pragmatics, Longman.

2. Jonathan Culpeper, "Towards an Anatomy of Impoliteness", Journal of Pragmatics, Volume 25, Issue 3, March 1996, pag. 349-367

3. G. Leech(1981), Pragmatics and Conversational Rhetoric, In Parret, Sbisa and Verschueren.

BDD-A24690 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:55:59 UTC)