STRAIGHTFORWARD VS. MITIGATED IMPOLITENESS IN THE ROMANIAN PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE. THE CASE OF *IN ABSENTIA* IMPOLITENESS*

LILIANA IONESCU-RUXĂNDOIU

Abstract. The paper examines some impoliteness forms in the parliamentary session debating the proposal of President T. Băsescu's suspension from office. The analysis aims at discussing some theoretical aspects concerning the definition and the main strategies of *in absentia* impoliteness in an institutional setting. Two main sets of distinctions, operating at different levels, are proposed: (1) straightforward vs. mitigated impoliteness, expressing the general manner of approaching the target of attacks, as reflected in the speaker's choice of the grammatical person; (2) on record vs. off record impoliteness, having in view speaker's strategies of doing FTAs. Accordingly, *in absentia* impoliteness belongs mainly to the mitigated type, on record and off record strategies appearing quite often interwoven in the same discursive sequence.

Keywords: politeness, impoliteness, on record / off record strategies, *in absentia* impoliteness.

1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

This paper examines impoliteness forms in a very special type of parliamentary debate. It is focused on the joint session of the two Chambers of the Romanian Parliament debating the proposal of President Trajan Băsescu's suspension from office (April 19, 2007). The proposal, signed by 200 members of Parliament (MPs), was initiated by the Social Democratic Party, the main opposition party at that time. As most of the MPs voted in favour of this proposal (322 vs. 108), the President was suspended from office for 30 days. Still, he came back to office after a referendum characterized by a high rate of absenteeism (participation of less than 45%).

* Paper presented at the *Linguistic Impoliteness and Rudeness II* (LIAR II). *The 2009 International Conference of the Linguistic Politeness Research Group*, Lancaster University, U.K., 30 June – 2 July 2009.

This work was supported by CNCSIS-UEFISCU, project PN II − IDEI, code 2136/2008.

RRL, **LV**, *4*, p. 343–351, Bucureşti, 2010

BDD-A338 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:47:44 UTC)

This analysis will provide the opportunity of tackling some theoretical aspects concerning the definition and the strategies of impoliteness (especially *in absentia* impoliteness) in institutional settings.

2. THE COMMUNICATIVE CONTEXT

Even if parliament is typically a confrontational setting, the case under consideration could be positioned in an area where cooperation is completely excluded and conflict is continuously kept alive.

One can speak of an open dispute, engaging two groups of MPs: President's detractors (the members of all the parliamentary parties except the Democratic Party) and President's defenders (the members of the Democratic Party, his former political party, as in Romania the President is obliged to resign from his party after the elections).

The targets of their attacks are of a different nature: an individual (the President) vs. a group (the initiators and supporters of President's suspension from office). In the first case, the attacks are performed *in absentia* – as the President did not participate in the parliamentary session –, having as a focus a great diversity of vulnerable aspects of his public as well as private personality. In the second case, the attacks are global, in spite of the differences in the political affiliation of those who were against the President. Collateral targets could also be identified: persons associated either with the President or with his opponents, whose names are mentioned by some speakers.

In spite of the formal differences between the speeches, the competing claims stated by the representatives of the two camps are completely predictable, as pre-determined by their party membership. The possibility to negotiate opinions and to produce a change in the result of the final vote using strong arguments is excluded.

Speakers' immediate goals: to score points in the debate and accordingly to challenge the pretended authority of the adversaries, are closely connected with their major long term persuasive goals directed to the visible and invisible audience whose voting decision in the forthcoming referendum and elections should be influenced. Given the above sketched situation, where disagreement is programmatic not only as a communicative attitude of the participants, but also as a constitutive feature of the considered discursive genre, impoliteness appears as an important means to these ends. It has a double effect: projecting a negative image of the target and indirectly – depending on the speaker's communicative ability – a positive self-image or group-image.

The format of the parliamentary debate under consideration assigns the President's opponents the initiative role and the President's supporters the reactive role.

BDD-A338 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:47:44 UTC)

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1. In the following, impoliteness will not be viewed as a secondary phenomenon in relation to politeness, or as "a parasite of politeness" (Culpeper 1996: 355). Considering impoliteness as politeness with a changed sign (minus vs. plus) does not properly reflect the communicative reality, as politeness and impoliteness strategies frequently coexist within the same discourse (see, for example, Harris, 2001: 462–466). Between the most polite and the most impolite forms of verbal behaviour there is a large spectrum of possibilities which are actualized in interaction (see Kienpointner 1997: 257). Regarding impolite behaviour, there are important differences in the degree of attacking someone's face between reproaches, accusations, criticism or insults, as well as between insinuations, allusions, ironies, sarcasm, as possible strategic devices.

The gradual nature of both politeness and impoliteness phenomena is closely connected with the cooperative or confrontational (often competitive) communicative relationships between the interlocutors. The continuum politeness – impoliteness reflects the continuum cooperation – conflict. Each form of interaction (genre) is characterised by a particular balance between the cooperative and the conflictive component, which is mainly motivated by external factors (the particular configuration of the communicative situation), but also by internal factors (such as the constitutive rules of the considered genre). Accordingly, even if usually impoliteness represents a reactive behaviour, it can also be inherent, inscribed in the genre performing norms, as in the case of the parliamentary debate.

2. Concerning the possibilities of expressing impoliteness, the only operating distinction seems to be that between the on record / off record (super)strategies. Brown and Levinson (1987) define positive and negative politeness as involving on record strategies for doing FTAs accompanied by redressive actions. As impoliteness excludes any redressive action, negative and positive politeness can no longer be distinguished from the bald on record strategies. On the one hand, the strategies of positive and negative impoliteness, as described by Culpeper (1996: 357-358), involve a reversal of distance between interlocutors in the original definition of the two politeness forms: positive impoliteness artificially creates distance, whereas negative impoliteness reduces distance where it would be necessary. Positive and negative politeness turn into their opposites. On the other hand, negative impoliteness strategies: frighten, ridicule, belittle the other, invade the other's space, associate the other with a negative aspect, put the other's indebtedness on record, etc., affect not only someone's negative face wants, but also his / her positive face wants. As Spencer-Oatey puts it: it is "no help in unpacking the complex face claims that people make in real-life situations" (2007: 646).

3. To establish an absolute hierarchy of the on record and off record impoliteness strategies based on their efficiency is almost impossible, as such a hierarchy is dependent on the communicative situation, the specific of the discursive genre included.

BDD-A338 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:47:44 UTC)

Speaker's evaluation of the degree of politeness or impoliteness of his/ her own verbal behaviour does not necessarily coincide with its evaluation by the addressee. Addressee's reaction should also be taken into account as it is determined not only by certain features of his / her temperament and personality, but also by his / her way of interpreting and perceiving the other's discourse.

4. The distinction proposed by Spencer-Oatey (2007) between a person's identity (his/her self-concept) and a person's face (his/her image held by the others) seems useful for an appropriate understanding of the *in absentia* impoliteness. In the author's opinion, unlike identity, face is necessarily associated with affective sensitivity, leading to individuals' emotional reactions to the others' evaluations. This happens because self-presentation operates in two distinct modes: a foreground and a background modes. Through the process of communicative interaction, people want to bring forward their positively evaluated attributes and to keep in the backstage the negatively evaluated ones. Face threat, loss (or even gain) involves a mismatch between an attribute claimed or denied by a person and the way it is perceived by the others, as displayed in their discourse.

Impoliteness is closely connected with these possible clashing evaluations. It can represent either an initiative or a reactive behaviour. As an initiative behaviour, impoliteness – at least in some institutional settings – is always intentional, determined by individual or group reasons (interests, opinions, believes, ideologies, etc.). A deliberate face attack aims at unveiling someone's true identity by a reversal of status and hierarchy between his / her front stage and backstage attributes, claiming the latter and keeping silence on the former. What is unveiled depends on the communicative situation, and – as Spencer-Oatey states – does not always conform to what is socially sanctioned. This seems particularly true in the case of a community of practice (Mills 2009), like the parliament, where the hierarchy of the sensitively affective attributes is very much different from the one in the ordinary contexts.

As a reactive behaviour, impoliteness can be either deliberate or the result of a lack of self-control (due to a person's temperament or to a low degree of education, in connection with his / her social status).

In the parliamentary debate under consideration, reactions do not belong to the person who is the target of evaluations, but to his partisans, who are an intermediate instance.

4. FORMAL AND SEMANTIC ASPECTS OF THE *IN ABSENTIA* IMPOLITENESS

In absentia impoliteness is based on structural patterns involving the reference to the target of the attacks in the IIIrd person. IInd person forms, typical of the *in praesentia* impoliteness, where the target is directly addressed, appear only as markers of a rhetorical device, as in following example:

BDD-A338 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:47:44 UTC)

(1) *Honourable Mr. President*, *Trajan Băsescu*, let me submit some figures to your attention.

The use of IIIrd person forms has a "mitigating" effect: saying something *about* someone has a different impact on the addressee and the audience than saying the same things directly addressing him / her (cf. *You, stupid cow!* vs. *She is a stupid cow*.). The target is more or less (depending on the syntactic structure of the utterance) moved away from the focus of the attacks.

Accordingly, one can distinguish between a straightforward and a mitigated impolitenesses, using the criterion of the formal aspects of the utterances (namely the presence or absence of the IInd person pronouns and verbs). *In absentia* impoliteness is mainly of the mitigated type (in the above defined sense).

The distinction between the on record and off record impoliteness (both for the straightforward and the mitigated types), based on the criterion of the directness and indirectness of doing the FTAs, is also valid.

(A) *On record strategies* of doing FTAs convey a negative evaluation of the target person, damaging mainly his / her positive face wants. They are either *ascriptive* (attributive), when qualifying nominals (adjectives or nouns) are used to characterize an individual, both as a public and as a private person, or *descriptive*, when an individual's actions are characterized using verbs with an evaluative semantic component.

Ascriptive strategic uses involve two basic syntactic patterns:
(a) X is (was) +Aj
(b) X is (was)/represents + N (+Aj)
which are discursively actualized in several variants with different degrees of complexity.

For the simplest variants, see the following examples:

(2) Seeing how *irritable* and *aggressive* he was, I told him […]
(3) Mr. Băsescu is *a politically finished man*.
(4) Trajan Băsescu represents *a failed political project*.

Negative terms can appear in more complex structures:
• in antithesis with their positively connoted counterparts:

(5) Trajan Băsescu, instead of beeing *the catalyst* of the sound energies of the nation is, unfortunately, *the anticoagulant* of positive and sound energies of the nation.

• accumulated as successive corrections:

BDD-A338 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:47:44 UTC)

(6) This is not *a president player*, but a *president offender*. He is not an *active* president, but a *negative* one. He is not an *atypical* president, but an *abnormal* one.

• in parallel constructions with intensifying effects:

(7) All were *stupid*, so that he could seem *the smartest*, all were *mean*, so that he could seem *the most earnest*, all were *thieves*, so that he could seem *the judge*.

Antithesis, sometimes associated with parallelism, is also a possible structure in the case of descriptive strategies based on the use of verbs with a negatively evaluating semantic content:

(8) He *did not criticize*, he *demonized*, he *did not correct*, he *destroyed*, he *did not build*, he *devastated*.

The (b) pattern (including a N) has usually the form of a definition:

(9) He is a *drag* to Romania.
(10) **I think** that Trajan Băsescu […] was the last *shiver of a long illness*, at the same time feudal, communist and transitional.

Including a verb of existence which equivalates their two component parts, these definitions look very much like gnomic formulae. Still, they lack objectivity and are disputable.

The presence of metaphoric equivalents, as well as of prefaces with epistemic modal verbs (as in example 10) are discursive marks of the subjectivity.

Considering examples (9, 10), should we speak of on record impoliteness strategies, having in view the directness of the FTAs provided by the verb of existence, or of off record strategies, having in view the presence of metaphors?

What we would like to bring forward is the idea of a gradual transition between these two basic types of strategies.

(B) *Off record strategies* are based on the violation of one or more maxims of the cooperative principle (which generates implicatures) or on exploiting the presuppositions. They take the discursive form of the basic semantic and syntactic figures of speech, usually occurring in various combinations in the same unit of the discourse.

Irony is one of the most frequent figures, very often in its extreme version: sarcasm. It results from a ludic attitude of the speaker, who plays with meanings, words, expressions or quotations, decontextualizing them and placing them afterwards in unexpected contexts.

BDD-A338 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:47:44 UTC)

Ironic metaphors are quite frequent. In many cases, there is a core metaphor, which determines all the other lexical choices, so that the whole sentence should be read in a figurative key. One can speak of "spun-metaphors" (fr. *métaphores filées*).

(11) it is astonishing that *a former long cruise sailor*, […] such *a sea-dog gets drunk with plain water*.
(12) everyone understood that the president's *hat* was too big for Mr. Băsescu and *fell on his eyes*.
(13) Unfortunately, we are living in the *king's shadow*. These shadows have not yet vanished. From recent memory, *King Carol's shadow*, *King Nicolae's shadow* and now *King Trajan's* […]. In the *king's shadow* it is growing something that Mr. Băsescu takes as the people, it *is growing a vegetation* of […] king's clowns.
(14) At the beginning of his presidency, he declared that he *would gamble* everything on one card: the constitution; he *gambled* on the Constitution… he danced on it with his feet (15) his reign was nothing else but a long commemoration of the dead with *poisoned doughnuts*.

Examples (14) and (15) also involve word plays. In (14), the original word (*a juca*) is polysemic, meaning "to gamble", "to dance" and "to play a game", and in (15), the double meaning of the Romanian equivalent of *doughnut (gogoaşă)*: "doughnut" and "big lie" is exploited.

If most of the ironic remarks have as a target the President's official status and his policy, his characteristics and behaviour as a private person is the object of ironic hints:

(16) When you speak for yourself, you are always right, said Balzac. For Mr. Băsescu's correct information I specify that Balzac is *neither a brandy nor a whiskey brand*, but a great European writer and moralist.
(17) Foreign policy is not conceived *at the pub*, nor is diplomacy performed *in a bathing suit*.

It is worth mentioning the preterition (see Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2009), as a form of upgrading the criticism offering unpleasant details about a certain issue, in spite of the explicitly declared intention of skipping the embarrassing issue:

(18) *I put to one side* that the rate of penalty − that is of being penally charged − is of 100 % at the Presidency, as we have a single person and several penal charges.
(19) *I shall not review* the deceptions, the schemes, the insults, the demagogic sayings, the instigations of the 28 months of the presidential mandate. There are as many as the leaves and the grass.

BDD-A338 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:47:44 UTC)

Especially the last example brings forward the role of the so-called informational presuppositions (Sbisà 1999), which are characterized by a reversal of places between the given and the new information, as intensifiers of the criticism.

5. FINAL REMARKS

• The specificity of the setting (its institutional nature, as well as the fact that the target of the attacks is not co-present) and the constitutive rules of the parliamentary debate as a genre are major factors influencing the strategic and accordingly the linguistic choices in the case of *in absentia* impoliteness.

• *In absentia* impoliteness is not straightforward, as the IInd person appears only as a rhetorical device, but mitigated. *On record* and *off record* strategies do not appear as mutually exclusive, but quite often interwoven in the same discursive sequence.

• *In absentia* impoliteness takes mainly the form of reproaches, accusations and criticism – sometimes performed in an allusive manner – and not the aggravating form of insults. In my opinion, avoiding insults seems to be connected with the fact that the target person is deprived of the possibility to react, but at the same time, with the speaker's goal of projecting a positive self-image (insulting an absent person in a public institution setting would be evaluated as an unfair behaviour).

• Considering M. Kienpointner's concept of non-cooperative motivated rudeness (1997), the parliamentary debate dealt with appears as relevant not only to the strategic rudeness in public institutions, but also to the inter-group rudeness. The relationship between the two duelling groups is based on a difference in power. The powerful group is represented by the President's opponents, who lead the attack, whereas the President's supporters adopt the defensive position of a powerless group. The only person who is obliged to remain silent is the President himself.

REFERENCES

Brown, P., S. Levinson, 1987, *Politeness. Some universals in language usage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Culpeper, J., 1996, "Towards an anatomy of impoliteness", *Journal of Pragmatics,* 25, 349−367.

Harris, S., 2001, "Being politically impolite: extending politeness theory to adversarial political discourse", *Discourse and Society*, 12, 4, 451−472.

Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, L., 2009, „Sintaxă şi funcţionare discursivă: preteriţia în discursul politic", in: R. Zafiu, B. Croitor, A.-M. Mihail (eds.), *Studii de gramatică. Omagiu doamnei profesoare Valeria Guţu Romalo*, Bucureşti, Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 105−108.

BDD-A338 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:47:44 UTC)

Kienpointner, M., 1997, "Varieties of rudeness. Types and functions of impolite utterances", *Functions of Language,* 4, 2, 251−287.
Mills, S., 2009, "Impoliteness in a cultural context", *Journal of Pragmatics,* 41, 1047−1060.
Sbisà, M., 1999, "Ideology and the persuasive use of presupposition", in: J. Verschueren (ed.), *Language and ideology. Selected papers from the 6th International Pragmatics Conference*, I, Antwerp, International Pragmatics Association, 492−509.
Spencer-Oatey, H., 2007, "Theories of identity and the analysis of face", *Journal of Pragmatics,* 39, 639−656.

BDD-A338 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 12:47:44 UTC)