

Impoliteness in Iraqi Political Interviews

Asst.lect. Jumana Mohammed Saad

Imam Jaafar Al-sadiq university – Najaf
Faculty of Arts English Department

Abstract: This study examines the use of impoliteness in Iraqi political television interviews, a discourse type that often reflects conflict, power struggles, and strategic face attacks. The research aims to identify how politicians employ impolite language and to classify the dominant strategies used in televised interactions. Using a qualitative, discourse-analytic approach, the study analyzes data from Iraqi TV talk shows within Culpeper's (1996, 2003, 2011) framework of impoliteness strategies. The findings reveal frequent use of coercive and entertaining impoliteness, often triggered by anger and political rivalry, highlighting how language functions as a tool of dominance in media settings. This research contributes to understanding the interplay between language, power, and culture in Iraqi media discourse, offering insights for scholars of pragmatics, political communication, and sociolinguistics.

I. Introduction

Impoliteness is not merely a linguistic phenomenon; it extends beyond language to encompass behavior and social norms. The term *impolite* typically refers to a person whose conduct, speech, or writing is considered disrespectful or inappropriate. However, the interpretation of impoliteness varies across cultures, shaped by the traditions and social expectations of each community.

As such, impoliteness represents a significant area of interest in linguistic research. From a descriptive perspective, impoliteness plays a central role in various types of discourse, particularly in confrontational or exploitative television programs. Despite its visibility in media, this form of discourse is often underexplored and insufficiently analyzed. Theoretically, several linguistic disciplines especially pragmatics and interactional sociolinguistics, which have extensively addressed the concept of politeness, making the study of impoliteness a necessary and complementary focus.

This research investigates the phenomenon of impoliteness as it appears in political interviews and talk shows on Iraqi television. It specifically examines how politicians employ impolite language during live media interactions and seeks to understand the underlying motivations and communicative purposes behind such usage. By doing so, the study aims to shed light on the nature and function of impoliteness in televised political discourse.

The primary objectives of the study are: (1) to explore how impolite expressions are used in TV interactions, and (2) to identify the most common impoliteness strategies, types, and techniques employed by participants in live talk shows. These aims are pursued within the broader context of discourse analysis and sociolinguistic inquiry.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to enhance our understanding of how language is strategically used in public political discourse in Iraq. It is expected that the findings will offer valuable insights for scholars, media analysts, and students interested in the intersection of language, power, and media. Moreover, this study may serve as a useful reference for future investigations into the use of impoliteness in Arabic-language media.

Methodologically, the study adopts a descriptive and qualitative approach. Data are collected from selected Iraqi TV political talk shows and analyzed using established frameworks for impoliteness, particularly those developed by Culpeper (1996, 2003, 2011). This approach allows for a detailed and context-sensitive analysis of impoliteness strategies in media discourse.

1.2 General Overview

Generally, numerous scholars have examined the concept of impoliteness, with Culpeper being among the most prominent. Culpeper et al. (2003:1545) defined impoliteness as a set of communicative strategies aimed at

attacking the interlocutor's face, thereby generating social conflict and disharmony between the speaker and the hearer. Later, Culpeper (2005) expanded this definition to account for both the speaker's intentions and the hearer's perceptions. In alignment with this view, Bousfield (2008:132) emphasized that impoliteness involves intentional face-threatening acts, noting that "*impoliteness embodies the concepts of intentionality and face-threatening acts that are performed on purpose*".

Furthermore, according to Verschueren (1999: 46), the idea of impoliteness is just as significant and useful as the concept of politeness. Impoliteness comes in many forms and is necessary for human contact. According to certain linguists, such as Tracy (2010:169), impoliteness is significantly more common than previously assumed. Tracy (2010:202-203) maintains that "*impoliteness is a critical emotional commentary about other's actions*." Bousfield (2007:285) provides examples of circumstances where impoliteness is widespread, such as army training camps and talks between automobile owners and those responsible for traffic accidents.

Lambrou & Stockwell (2007: 211) state that "*impoliteness is a term that is struggled over at present, has been struggled over in the past and will, in all probability, continue to be struggled over in the future*." Their definition implies the ongoing disagreement among scholars regarding the notion of impoliteness.

Besides, the notion of "pragmatic failure" was introduced by Thomas (1983) as an important aspect closely related to the concept of impoliteness. Essentially, pragmatic failure refers to the inability to convey the appropriate pragmatic meaning. Thomas was particularly concerned with pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication contexts, where one participant's knowledge of pragmatic resources and their appropriate usage may differ from that of other participants (Culpeper & Demmen, 2011: 254).

Impoliteness is a negative attitude toward certain actions that occur in specific situations. It is sustained by expectations, ambitions, and/or beliefs about a social group, particularly regarding how an individual's or group's identity is mediated by others in interaction. "*Situated behaviors are viewed negatively considered 'impolite' when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be*." Such acts always have, or are believed to have, emotional effects for at least one person, causing or arguably presumed to cause offence (Culpeper & Demmen, 2011: 254).

II. Brown & Levinson's (1987) Face-Saving Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-saving theory is widely regarded as the most well-known explanation of politeness. According to Brown and Levinson, politeness is a "universal principle of human interaction" (Malmkjær, 2004: 426). Their politeness theory is based on two fundamental assumptions:

2.1.1 The First Assumption: It is associated with the concept of a model person (MP). According to Brown and Levinson, conversationalists are rational agents who strategize to select from the available linguistic options they are aware of (Locher, 2004: 66).

2.1.2 The Second Assumption: It is linked to Goffman's (1967) concept of face, which Brown and Levinson built upon and eventually expanded into the core component of their theory (Locher, 2004: 66).

Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) define face as "*the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself*." They propose that face is "*something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must constantly be attended to in interaction*." They distinguish two aspects of face:

2.1.3 Negative Face: It represents the individual's desire to be independent and free from the imposition of others (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 62).

2.1.4 Positive Face: It represents the individual's desire to be liked and appreciated by others (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 62).

When a verbal or nonverbal act threatens the hearer's or speaker's face, it is described as a "Face-Threatening Act" (FTA). Brown and Levinson's perspective is grounded in speech act theory; they define any form of linguistic behavior with a relational dimension as an FTA. According to them, every face-threatening act should be mitigated by an appropriate degree of politeness (Walkinshaw, 2008: 47).

According to their theory, both the speaker and the hearer tend to maintain each other's face; however, face-threatening acts (FTAs) are occasionally committed between them. These FTAs threaten the hearer's independence as well as the involvement of both the hearer's and speaker's faces. Brown and Levinson (1987: 74) propose three sociological factors to analyze the likelihood of face loss:

- The **social distance** (D) between the speaker and the hearer, which is a symmetric relationship.
- The relative **power** (P) of the speaker and the hearer, which is an asymmetric relationship.
- The **absolute ranking** (R) of imposition within a particular culture.

2.2 The Most Frequent Linguistic Ways of Impoliteness

Impoliteness, as we have seen, can be a complex concept. Nonetheless, it can be realized in a linguistically consistent manner. The following examples (all actual cases) are among the most common forms found in communication (Denis & Jobert, 2013: 8).

2.2.1 Vocatives

- Moron / plonker / dickhead / etc.
- [You] [[fucking / rotten / dirty / fat / burk / pig / shit / bastard / loser / etc.]]

2.2.2 Personal Negative Evaluations

- You're [nuts / nuttier than a fruitcake / hopeless / pathetic / stupid, etc.]
- You can't do anything right.

2.2.3 Dismissals

- Get [lost / out]
- [Fuck / piss] off.

2.2.4 Silencers

- Shut [it / your mouth, face / etc.]
- Shut [the fuck] up.

2.2.5 Threats

- [I'll / I'm /we're] [gonna] [smash your face in / beat the shit out of you / box your ears / bust your fucking head off / etc.]

It is not true that the semantic meaning of these linguistic formulations includes impoliteness. However, there is a case to be made that these formulae are traditionally linked with certain impoliteness contexts and are therefore contextually tagged as impolite. As a result, uttering one of these formulae increases the likelihood of impolite consequences (Denis & Jobert, 2013: 9).

2.3 Types of Impoliteness

Impoliteness manifests in various forms, each characterized by different linguistic strategies and social functions. Understanding these types helps in analyzing how impolite language operates within specific communicative contexts.

Culpeper (1996: 350) states that "some acts are intrinsically polite, while other acts are intrinsically impolite." He distinguishes the following types of impoliteness:

Mock and aggravated impoliteness are the first two types of impoliteness to be developed. These two types operate in opposition to one another. In the case of mock impoliteness, Culpeper (2005: 38) explains that "*it occurs when the speaker intends to attack the face of the hearer or when the hearer himself perceives or behaves in a way that reveals his intention to attack the face or uses a combination of the two.*"

As Culpeper (1996: 352) argues, mock impoliteness remains at the surface level of discourse and does not cause offence. He (2011: 254) further claims that it promotes harmony among members of society. Kienpointner (1997: 261) adds that speakers perceive it as a form of simulated and cooperative rudeness. According to Terkourfi (2008: 68), mock impoliteness is an "unmarked form of rudeness" used when individuals with "homologous habits" employ an utterance within a traditional context. Conversely, Bernal (2008: 782) defines mock impoliteness as a speech act that is inauthentically impolite and is often followed by joking or mild laughter.

Aggravated impoliteness is another type of impoliteness and is considered to be at the extreme end of the impoliteness scale (Culpeper, 2003: 838). In such cases, the nature of the interaction, the form of the face-attack, the context in which the offensive expression occurs, as well as the participants' intentions and conditions, must all be taken into account. The clear dividing line between mock and aggravated impoliteness lies in the presence of ill or malicious intent. Furthermore, Culpeper (2011: 56) identifies three types of impoliteness that function to contradict interpersonal relationships, social norms, and identities, as follows:

a. **Affective Impoliteness:** This type occurs when one participant in the interaction expresses anger or hostility toward the other. It creates a hostile and emotional atmosphere in the conversation. For example:

- **You made me crazy!**

b. **Coercive Impoliteness:** This type realigns the power dynamics in a conversation, allowing the speaker (the producer) to gain at the expense of the other participant (the target). It often occurs when one party holds greater social power or authority, which justifies their rude behavior. For example:

- **Shut up, or I'll smash your head! (Huang, 2014: 150)**

c. **Entertaining Impoliteness:** This occurs when a participant exploits another's feelings by mocking or teasing them for amusement, often entertaining themselves and others. For example:

- **Hey idiot, come in!**

2.4 Impoliteness Strategies

Impoliteness is considered a parasite of politeness, with its super-strategies being the opposite of politeness super-strategies in terms of facial orientation. Instead of enhancing or supporting face, impoliteness super-strategies aim to attack face and cause social disharmony. Culpeper (1996: 350) defines “impoliteness as the use of strategies to attack the interlocutor’s face and create social disruption.” For this purpose, he suggests the following super-strategies:

2.4.1 Bald on Record Impoliteness

Here, when the face is neither irrelevant nor minimized, the FTA is performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous, and succinct manner. This strategy should be distinguished from Brown and Levinson’s bald-on-record strategy. For Brown and Levinson, bald-on-record is considered a politeness strategy when face concerns are suspended in an emergency, when the threat to the hearer’s face is very low (e.g., “Come on” or “Do sit down”), or when the speaker holds significantly more power than the hearer (e.g., a parent telling a child to “Stop complaining”). In all these situations, there is little face at stake, and the speaker does not intend to attack the listener’s face (Culpeper, 1996: 535).

2.4.1.1 Positive Politeness: This strategy minimizes the threat to the hearer’s face; thus, when applying it, the speaker focuses on the hearer’s satisfaction and conviction rather than on their own desire to perform the FTA.” This approach is used not only to mitigate the FTA, but also to establish a social and personal relationship between the speaker and the listener (Friess, 2008: 115).

2.4.1.2 Negative Politeness: Among the various strategies, this is the most widely used. Brown and Levinson (1987: 70) describe it as “self-effacement, formality, and restraint, with attention to H’s (the hearer or redressed) self-image centering on his want to be unimpeded.” This strategy seeks to satisfy the hearer’s negative face while minimizing the threat to that face.

2.4.2 Off-Record

Participants may, in certain instances, employ vague insults, give indirect hints about a particular issue, or use irony in their remarks. This strategy contains several politeness features, as it enables the insulter to wound the other person’s feelings while maintaining an appearance of innocence (Lachenicht, 1980: 619). “These utterances do not damage the other’s face, but still constitute a threat to their face. Indeed, they protect the face of the insulter rather than that of the injured” (Stewart, 2008: 54).

2.4.3 Withhold

This type of impoliteness occurs when a person receives a gift but does not express thanks, or when others do them a favor and they fail to show appreciation. When courteous behavior is expected but absent in certain situations, it is regarded as impolite (Atyaf, 2020: 68).

2.4.4 Meta-Strategy

It is carried out through the use of surface-level, fake politeness strategies. Leech (1983: 82) explains that if someone intends to insult others, they should do so indirectly. According to him, these methods range from the least face-threatening influence on others to the most highly face-threatening degree.

2.5 Impoliteness in TV Show

As Hutchby (2005: 12) states, “broadcast talk is a form of talk in public that is oriented towards an approximation of the conditions of interpersonal communication in everyday face-to-face conversation.” However, broadcast talk is inherently different from everyday face-to-face conversation, as it constitutes institutional discourse. This distinction arises from the fact that all broadcast output is meticulously planned.

Impoliteness, like laughter, is an important aspect of social behavior (Uçar & Koca, 2011). Unlike laughter, however, impoliteness is often irritating; it can cause people to feel insulted or angry. According to Culpeper (2011), entertaining impoliteness is exploitative in nature, as it involves a victim or potential victim.

Theoretically, when a recipient perceives a strategic impoliteness act, they may either respond or choose not to reply (i.e., remain silent), according to Culpeper et al. (2003).

“The [latter] option presents particular problems for both the other participants in the original speech event and the researcher, who must depend solely on contextual factors in interpreting the meaning of the silence.” If recipients choose to respond, they may either accept or counter the face attack. The latter involves a set of techniques that can be classified as either offensive or defensive. Defensive methods primarily defend one’s own face against attacks, while offensive strategies mainly respond to face attacks with further face attacks. Culpeper et al. (2003) also note that these strategic groups are not mutually exclusive, stating: “Offensive strategies have, to some degree, the secondary goal of defending the face of the responder; defensive strategies may, to some degree, have the secondary

goal of offending the speaker of the original impoliteness act. As a consequence, the distinction is best conceived of as a scale” (Culpeper et al., 2003: 1562–1563).

In brief, “impoliteness in ‘exploitative’ TV shows (Culpeper, 2005: 46) can be seen as a function of the discourse, not a personal goal. Both the effect of the dominant group and the type of the show can be important in the perception of impoliteness.”

Although impoliteness as a source of humor may seem unusual, it provides viewers with amusement and a “humor experience” in media discourse (Culpeper, 2005: 106). Culpeper argues that disaffiliative humor differs from the “playfully hostile types” found in superiority and disparagement humor. Rather than being characterized by “playful/jocular/pretended aggressiveness, as in pleasant teasing,” it involves a form in which the speaker “antagonizes some persons and shows his/her win over others.” The focus of this notion is on the listener. Dynel (2013:112) states that “the hearer takes pleasure in humor by means of which the speaker displays his/her superiority over, and disaffiliates himself/herself from, the butt (target).”

III. Data Analysis

This section presents selected examples of impolite discourse drawn from participants’ interactions. The extracts demonstrate various forms of face-threatening acts, including insults, threats, and derogatory language. The quotations, provided both in the original Arabic and in English translation, illustrate how speakers use direct and indirect impoliteness strategies to assert power, express hostility, and negotiate social and political identities within the context. These examples form the basis for a detailed analysis of the linguistic features and social functions of impoliteness in the data.

Text 1:

"انا حزب الحكمة من انت ايه الجاهل"

“I am the Al-Hikma party, who are you, the ignorant one?”

This utterance employs a direct **face-threatening act (FTA)** that attacks the interlocutor’s positive face by insulting their intelligence with the term “ignorant one.” The speaker simultaneously asserts political identity and authority by declaring affiliation with “the Al-Hikma party,” which serves to establish dominance in the discourse. The rhetorical question “who are you?” functions as a delegitimization strategy aimed at undermining the opponent’s social standing. This strategy aligns with **negative impoliteness** because it openly threatens the hearer’s face without mitigation, fostering conflict and emphasizing hierarchical differences.

Text 2:

"انت مجرد وبعثي حذاء ومليشيا"

“You are just a shoe, a Baathist, and a militia.”

Here, the speaker uses a compound insult that combines a metaphor (“shoe”) with political and militant labels (“Baathist” and “militia”). Calling someone a “shoe” is a strong cultural insult implying worthlessness and subservience. The political terms intensify the insult by associating the interlocutor with a historically contentious regime and armed forces, which delegitimizes their political stance. This illustrates a **direct impoliteness** strategy that attacks both social identity and political legitimacy, deepening social divisions and reinforcing antagonism.

Text 3:

"اي احد يسيى على السيد الحكيم اسحقه بحذاني"

“Anyone who offends Mr. Al Hakim, I will crush him with my shoes.”

This utterance contains a **threatening face attack** framed through an aggressive metaphor (“crush him with my shoes”). The use of “shoes” is culturally significant as a symbol of contempt and disrespect in Arab societies. This serves as a coercive form of impoliteness aimed at intimidating opponents and protecting the positive face of the referred figure, Mr. Al Hakim. The threat functions both to silence opposition and assert the speaker’s loyalty and power, generating an atmosphere of hostility.

Text 4:

"ولانكم لايران هو خدمة للارهاب وداعش اذهبوا الى والدكم خامنئي انتم يا كلاب لاتصلحون الى الحكم"

“Your loyalty to Iran is a service to terrorism and ISIS, go to your father Khamenei, you are dogs and are not fit to rule.”

This utterance combines **political accusation, dehumanization, and derogation**. Accusing loyalty to Iran of supporting terrorism serves to delegitimize the opponent’s political position. Referring to the group as “dogs” dehumanizes them, a powerful impoliteness strategy that strips the interlocutor of social and moral worth. The insult “not fit to rule” attacks their competence and authority. The combined effect is a highly aggressive face attack aimed at social exclusion and undermining political legitimacy.

Text 5:

"صدام حسين هو ليس زعيم عربي بل هو قاتل وسارق سرق الحكم خلسة وقتل رفاق دريه ولا يجب ان ينعته احد بالزعيم"
"Saddam Hussein is not an Arab leader. Rather, he is a murderer and a thief who stole the ruling surreptitiously and killed his comrades. No one should call him the leader."

This statement performs **historical and political impoliteness** by denying Saddam Hussein's legitimacy as a leader and labeling him with highly negative traits such as "murderer" and "thief." The explicit rejection of the title "leader" challenges collective identity and disrupts social narratives. The utterance functions as a face attack on Saddam's positive face and on those who might support him, reflecting deep political polarization. It contributes to conflict by polarizing social memory and identity.

Text 6:

"احترم نفسك يا حقير لا تتعت صدام باخانن يا كلب وتادب والا ساهينك آيه الحمار"
"Show some respect; you are despicable, don't call Saddam a traitor, you are just a dog, be polite, or I will insult you donkey."

This excerpt illustrates **contradictory politeness** mixed with impoliteness. The speaker demands politeness ("Respect yourself," "be polite") while simultaneously delivering direct insults ("despicable," "dog," "donkey"). This paradoxical use of politeness norms to mask threats reflects **sarcastic and offensive impoliteness**. The threat to escalate insults ("or I will insult you donkey") intensifies the face attack and escalates hostility.

Text 7:

"لاتكن غيبا وتكلم بادب نحن اكبر منكم في العملية السياسية"
"Don't be stupid and speak politely, we are bigger than you in the political process."

This utterance combines **coercive impoliteness** and **power assertion**. The imperative "Don't be stupid" attacks the interlocutor's intelligence, threatening their positive face. The command to "speak politely" paradoxically follows the insult, emphasizing control over the opponent's behavior. Claiming "we are bigger than you" asserts social and political dominance, justifying the right to impose norms and silence opposition. The utterance reflects hierarchical power relations in the political context.

Text 8:

"انا ليس لدي سيد لاني حر انما انتم لديكم سيد لانكم اذلاء وعبيد وحقراء"
"I do not have a master because I am free, but you have a master because you are servile, slaves, and vile."

This statement asserts the speaker's autonomy and freedom while simultaneously attacking the opponent's autonomy and social worth. Labeling others as "servile, slaves, and vile" is a strong **face-threatening act** targeting both positive and negative face needs by undermining their dignity and freedom. The juxtaposition reinforces identity construction by contrasting freedom with servility, positioning the speaker as morally and socially superior.

3.2 Results and Discussion

The talk in real-time TV shows is not planned beforehand; it is not pre-scripted as in news programs, documentaries, dramas, or situation comedies. Instead, it consists of unscripted conversations that Goffman (1981) termed "fresh talk." Such broadcasting talk is mostly live. This study examines a corpus of this 'fresh talk' and investigates the public role of impoliteness within media discourse. It presents several sample discourse units where humor and anger overlap with impoliteness, based on conversations from the Iraqi TV show *The Decision is Yours* (Al-Qarar Lakum).

However, as demonstrated above, impoliteness on TV often generates disharmony and conflict among politicians, which in turn captures audience interest—thus paving the way for entertaining impoliteness. Additionally, impoliteness frequently co-occurs with disaffiliative humor. This type of impoliteness, conducive to disaffiliative humor, can manifest as sarcasm, disparagement (as explained by hostility and superiority theories), putdowns, and mockery.

Participants employ various forms of impoliteness, such as silencers and vocatives, to gain the upper hand in conflicts. They predominantly use three types of impoliteness. First, affective impoliteness, where some politicians express wrath, rage, and resentment toward others, creating a hostile and impolite atmosphere during live talk. Second, coercive impoliteness, in which speakers attempt to overpower their counterparts by raising their voices, using offensive language, and leveraging their power and higher social status, which grants them greater authority to be rude. Third, entertaining impoliteness, where participants exploit others' feelings by mocking them to entertain themselves and the audience, exposing their opponents' faults and flaws to win the conflict and project a facade of honesty to the public.

3.3 Conclusion

Impoliteness in Iraqi political interviews extends beyond individual rudeness; it operates as a strategic tool intertwined with power, identity, and conflict. Analysis reveals that politicians frequently employ coercive,

affective, and entertaining forms of impoliteness not only to attack opponents but also to assert authority, project dominance, and engage audiences. These strategies draw on culturally resonant symbols—such as using “shoes” as insults—that carry significant sociopolitical weight in Iraq. Consequently, impoliteness in televised discourse functions both as a communicative weapon and a performative act that shapes public opinion. By demonstrating how impolite language reinforces hierarchies and intensifies political rivalry, this study underscores the media’s role in reproducing power struggles and influencing collective perceptions. Future research should examine impoliteness in digital Iraqi media contexts, where interactions are more immediate, interactive, and potentially anonymous, to better understand evolving forms of political discourse.

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