

All the president's tweets; on the rise of impoliteness in public discourse in the age of Donald Trump, 45th president of the United States

Maurice Jamall

Abstract

This paper discusses linguistic impoliteness, with specific reference to examples of language used by Donald Trump, the 45th president of the USA. The utterances are analysed applying Culpepper's (1996) Impoliteness model. The possible causes and underlying reasons for these utterances are examined as well as the possible implications for public discourse.

*When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.*

Written almost sixty years ago, the above extract from Jenny Joseph's charmingly dark poem, "Warning", serves as a reminder as to the importance of restraint, self-control and caution in everyday social interactions between members of all speech communities. It is generally agreed that in order for any social group to function, its members must temper their utterances and their behaviour so as not to cause unnecessary friction with or inconvenience to others. This self-censorship is motivated by a sense of one's place in society, a desire

to be accepted and respected by one's peers, one's fellows. While there may well be superficial differences across cultures, the importance of one's 'face' is both universal and indispensable. We all go to great lengths to protect and preserve our public self-image; fear of being shunned, rejected or ostracized is a very powerful motivator.

Brown & Levinson (1987) attempted to quantify 'face' describing it as something that is 'located in the flow of events' and 'on loan from society'. They argue that 'face' consists of two aspects: *positive face* which refers to one's desire to be liked and approved of and *negative face* referring to certain rights one can reasonably expect to claim for oneself: freedom of action; freedom from imposition and claims to territory (personal space). While being subject to some criticism (see, for example, Matsumoto, 1988) the Brown & Levinson politeness model remains the generally accepted starting point for any discussion of politeness.

A great deal of research has been done into the area of Politeness (see: Leech, 1983), but the study of Impoliteness is a relatively new field. This area is becoming more relevant as in the last few years, we have witnessed an ever-increasing rise of impoliteness, particularly in public discourse. Much of this debate has taken on a rather light-hearted tone. A recent article on the BBC's website argued that the British cannot be understood by others as their language is routinely couched in sarcasm, innuendo and double-entendre and provides the reader with the following choice examples of how Brits attempt to avoid being impolite:

What the British say	What the British mean
I hear what you say	I disagree and do not want to discuss it further
With the greatest respect...	I think you are an idiot
That's not bad	That's good
That is a very brave proposal	You are insane
Quite good	A bit disappointing
I would suggest...	Do it, or be prepared to justify yourself
Oh, incidentally/by the way	The primary purpose of our discussion is...
I was a bit disappointed that	I am annoyed that
Very interesting	That is clearly nonsense
I'll bear it in mind	I've forgotten it already
I'm sure it's my fault	It's your fault
You must come for dinner	It's not an invitation, I'm just being polite
I almost agree	I don't agree at all
I only have a few minor comments	Please re-write this completely
Could we consider other options?	I don't like your idea

However, with Donald Trump's succession to the Whitehouse, there has been a shift towards a much darker public discourse. Today, it is not uncommon for those in the public eye, of all stripes, to engage in out and out insult. The implicit understanding, once shared by almost all of us, and which makes Joseph's poem so amusing, the understanding that since there are terrible social consequences to impolite conduct we should refrain from such behavior until we have little or nothing to lose, is now, sadly, going the way of the dodo. Indeed, outrageous pronouncements are, in many quarters celebrated as, 'speaking truth' or, worse, a

legitimate antidote to ‘political correctness gone mad.’

*“When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best.
They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending
people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems
with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.
And some, I assume, are good people.”*

These words were spoken by then candidate Trump, as he announced his run, on June 16th, 2015. Ordinarily, such a bald attack on an entire race would put pay to any political ambition. Yet, not only has Trump managed to inoculate himself against any and all criticism, worse still, he has found a legion of apologists who defend and ultimately, enable him. Later on, this article will analyse some of Donald Trump’s utterances (both speech and tweet), but first let us examine a framework within which impoliteness can be discussed.

There have been several attempts to formally define impoliteness. For instance, Mills (2005) states that impoliteness is, “any type of linguistic behavior which is assessed as intending to threaten the hearer’s face or social identity” (2005:268). Culpeper (2005) on the other hand, defines impoliteness as, “communicative strategies designed to attack face and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony” (2005:36).

Culpeper’s (1996) impoliteness model, which has its roots in the Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness model, provides a working framework for the analysis of polite discourse. He argues that there are five super strategies speakers may use to convey impoliteness:

1. Bald on record impoliteness; the face threatening act (FTA) is performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way where face is not irrelevant.
2. Positive impoliteness: the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee’s positive face wants.
3. Negative impoliteness: the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee’s negative face wants.
4. Sarcasm or mock politeness: the FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realisations.
5. Withhold politeness: the absence of politeness work where it would be expected. (ibid:356)

Culpeper then goes on to give examples of language output, the sorts of language that is used by speakers to realise these super strategies:

Positive Impoliteness: Output Strategies:

- a. Ignore, snub the other; fail to acknowledge the other's presence
- b. Exclude the other from an activity
- c. Disassociate from the other (for example avoid sitting together)
- d. Use of inappropriate identity markers, (use of an incorrect title)
- e. Use obscure or secretive language
- f. Seek disagreement (by, for instance, selecting a sensitive topic)
- g. Make the other feel uncomfortable
- h. Use of taboo words / swearing
- i. Name calling (insult)

Negative Impoliteness: Output Strategies:

- a. Frighten
- b. Condescend, scorn or ridicule, emphasise relative power
- c. Invasion of other's space (literally or metaphorically)
- d. Explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect
- e. Put the other's indebtedness on record (ibid: 357-8)

It is important to note that Culpeper's framework excludes the use of impoliteness as an in-group marker, that is the use of taboo language to indicate a close personal relationship. For instance, upon seeing a very good friend after a long interval, the following greeting could easily be employed:

How are you, you old bastard? It's been fucking ages. Great to see you!

This sort of utterance between close friends is not uncommon in English-speaking speech communities and serves to underscore the intimacy and importance of the relationship that the speakers share. The key element which is lacking in this kind of relationship is power, one person's authority over the other. Power and impoliteness go hand in hand; when one person's power—or even perceived power—extends over the other, freedom to exercise impolite language is readily granted and this can be achieved in the following ways.

Impoliteness and Power

Culpepper (1996) goes to great lengths to stress the importance of power in the exercise of impoliteness. He argues that where there is an imbalance of power, the interlocutor with the upper hand is free to employ impoliteness strategies (listed above) with impunity. This position is broadly in line with Brown and Levinson's face threatening acts model. According to their model, a speaker may choose to make, for instance, a request 'baldly', without attempting to attend to other's face. Consider the angry parent disciplining a child with the utterance, "Get to bed! Now!" S/he makes no attempt to sugarcoat the request with linguistic niceties. The parent is able to do this since use of such bald language will not result in any loss of face; the power in the relationship is almost entirely one-sided. Additionally, this exercise of impoliteness, Culpepper argues, stems from a conflict in the needs and wants of the interlocutors. Citing Watts (1991), he states that, "the central meaning of power surely involves a conflict of interests rather than a consensus." (Culpepper, 2008:35)

Analysis of Donald Trump's use of Impoliteness

Since becoming president, Trump has tweeted over 20,000 times. The language he chooses to employ in his communications is almost always informal and often vulgar. This is of interest since this signals a dramatic break with political convention and norms. Before this presidency, entertaining the possibility that the leader of the free world would use language which even his most ardent followers label 'inappropriate' would have been unthinkable. The following are examples of Trump's speech which will be discussed using Culpepper's Impoliteness Model.

1. Claims to territory

Brown & Levinson posit that 'claims to territory', one's personal space is a central component of negative face. They draw on the work of researchers such as Edward Hall who in 1963 coined the term 'proxemics' which refers to personal physical boundaries. The closest is 'intimate space', the area nearest to and including the body. Those allowed into this space are emotionally close and are allowed actual physical contact. Typical members of this group include family, lovers, and very close friends. On two well-publicised occasions, Trump violated this cultural rule. The first instance was the now infamous handshake with Prime Minister Abe. The 45th president held on to the prime minister's hand for far longer than is socially acceptable; the relief and disbelief on Abe's face when Trump's grip was released is most telling (the clip may be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iiitQ-5_E_Y). A second example of Trump's flagrant intrusion into another's personal space occurred during a meeting with French president Emmanuel Macron when he appeared to brush off some dandruff from his shoulder. This would be considered an act of intimacy and friendship were the participants close. However, given the relationship of the two men, Trump's action can only be viewed as a vulgar intrusion into another's personal space (see clip: <https://www.youtube.com/>

watch?v=Q1eifCBKDTA)

2. Snub

The clearest example of Trump's snubbing the American people is his refusal to release his tax returns, this despite the fact that it has been customary for every presidential candidate to do so for the last 40 years. Initially, he said that he would happily share his financial information:

"If I decide to run for office, I'll produce my tax returns, absolutely," he said. "And I would love to do that."

He made these remarks on May 20th, 2014 on an Irish television programme. This promise later evolved into the following position with his remarks during the first presidential debate:

"I don't mind releasing. I'm under a routine audit, and it will be released. As soon as the audit's finished, it will be released."

The administration's position now is that the tax return issue is now moot; the American people voted for Trump despite not having seen his tax returns.

3. Name-calling

Throughout his campaign and now into his time in office, the 45th president of the United States has stooped to insulting nomenclature in order to belittle and attack political opponents and rivals. The following list is by no means an exhaustive one:

Sleepy Joe (Joe Biden); Low Energy Jeb (Jeb Bush); Crooked/Lyin'/Leakin' Hilary (Hilary Clinton); Slimeball (James Comey); Lyin' Ted (Ted Cruz); Pocahontas (Elizabeth Warren); Little Marco (Marco Rubio); Horseface (Stormy Daniels); Dumbest man on television (Don Lemon).

4. Association with a negative aspect

The most famous slur on an individual occurred when Trump accused Senator Ted Cruz's father of complicity in the assassination of President Kennedy. In an interview on Fox News, he stated:

"I think it's a disgrace that he's allowed to do it. I think it's a disgrace that he's allowed to say it. And, you know, his father was with Lee Harvey Oswald prior to Oswald's being — you know,

shot. I mean, the whole thing is ridiculous. What is this, right, prior to his being shot, and nobody brings it up. They don't even talk about that. That was reported and nobody talks about it. But I think it's horrible." (see entire clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdcuVUOoNZA>)

Despite claiming that there is not a racist bone in his body, many of Trump's most offensive utterances have to do with race and religion. Referring to immigration from the continent of Africa, the president was heard to utter the following:

"Why are we having all these people from shithole countries coming here?" (Whitehouse meeting, Jan. 11th, 2018)

Perhaps his most offensive remarks were made at a news conference after the events at a rally in Charlottesville (Aug. 15th, 2017) where an anti Nazi protester was killed by a white supremacist. Even though there is video footage of these white men marching, giving the Nazi salute and chanting, "Jews will not replace us", Trump could not bring himself to condemn these people, arguing instead that, at Charlottesville, in the two groups of demonstrators, in fact, *"you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides."*

Discussion

How is it that anyone, let alone a president of the United States, is able to get away with making these offensive remarks with complete impunity? Were any other individual to use this sort of language, the consequences for their career would be severe. Indeed, there are plenty of examples from recent history where lewd or vulgar behavior has cost politicians their careers. One of the most well known instances is that of Senator Al Franken. When a photo emerged from his days as a comedian, his hands placed over (but not touching) the breasts of a sleeping colleague, he was pressured into resigning his seat in the Senate. Make no mistake, what he did was a joke, perhaps in bad taste, but a joke nonetheless; he was not promoting or advocating frottage. Yet despite the context, a sincere apology did not suffice for the legions of critics; he had to go.

When it comes to the current president, however, nothing is too much to unsettle his base or the Republican members of Congress. The GOP, once the proud party of family values, of 'morality' has embraced Trump, taken him to their bosom, the price of gaining and retaining power. Yet, as the Roman historian, Tacitus, wrote, *"The lust for power, for dominating others, inflames the heart more than any other passion."* The Republican Party's tolerance of Trump's chipping away at the accepted norms of is an act of enablement not merely to be understood but to be condemned. Their crass interpretation of utility, acting for

the greater good, would have Bentham spinning in his grave.

In order to explain Trump's success in surviving where many others have fallen, we need to return to Culpepper's central claim. Impoliteness is first and foremost about power, specifically, the power that the speaker has over the hearer. As president, Trump is the most powerful man in America; he is able to say anything he wishes and he has pushed the boundaries of acceptability further than any other Whitehouse occupant. The rest of the world is yet to catch up to this new dynamic and does not dare to talk to the president in his own basilect, preferring to use language that continues to defer to the majesty of the office.

Just as importantly, when there is an absence of power in a relationship, then speakers may employ any language they *feel* is appropriate. Consider an employee who can no longer tolerate their job. They hate the workplace and their colleagues. Finally one afternoon, they choose to utter the following: "*Fuck this, I quit!*" As the employer no longer has any hold over the employee, there will be no meaningful cost to the individual thus allowing use of extreme vulgarity. Interestingly, Trump is in a similar position to this disgruntled worker. For one, he is a very old man. By the end of his term, he will be 76. There are not many years left before the curtain falls on his final act. Trump has nothing to lose in terms of long-term consequence. Secondly, it is widely believed that Trump neither expected nor wanted to win the presidency. Wolff (2018) argues that he ran for office with the expectation of losing yet benefitting from the thousands of hours of free publicity. In short, the presidency means very little to Trump; his campaign was supposed to serve as a means to an end. If this is actually the case, then the power that the fear of failing to secure a second term holds, all but dissipates and, like the old lady in Jenny Joseph's 'Warning', he is free to act on even the basest of impulses with impunity.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the Trump phenomenon raises important questions regarding the use of impoliteness in everyday discourse. His countless utterances baldly expressing racist, sexist and misogynistic values demean us all. For if the leader of the free world feels no shame in openly expressing such thoughts, then where does this leave the rest of us? Can we hope that the Trump presidency and style of discourse is merely a blip, a one-off irregular heartbeat, and that with the next occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, normal service will be resumed? Or, has Trump permanently trashed the bar for what is acceptable in public discourse?

For the global community to return to some sense of normality, we must all once again take heed of Jenny Joseph's timeless warning. The consequences of continuing to turn a blind eye, to apologise for behavior for which we would severely admonish our children, or to simply shrug our shoulders and move on, will be dark indeed leaving an unredeemable stain on our interactions for perhaps many years to come.

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