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IMPOLITENESS AS A PERSUASIVE TOOL IN SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICAL
DISCUSSIONS

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Annotation. This article investigates impoliteness as a persuasive communicative strategy in political discussions on social media platforms. Drawing on pragmatic and discourse-analytical approaches, particularly the theories of impoliteness developed by Culpeper and Bousfield, the study examines how face-threatening and aggressive language is strategically employed to influence audiences, delegitimize political opponents, construct group identities, and mobilize political support. The article argues that impoliteness in online political discourse should not be interpreted merely as a violation of communicative norms, but rather as a purposeful rhetorical resource reinforced by the affordances of digital media. While impoliteness increases visibility, emotional engagement, and persuasive impact, it simultaneously contributes to polarization and the deterioration of deliberative democratic communication.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada ijtimoiy tarmoqlardagi siyosiy munozaralarda qo'llaniladigan qo'pol nutqning ishoniruvchi strategiya sifatidagi o'rni tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot pragmatik va diskursiv yondashuvlarga, xususan Culpeper va Bousfield tomonidan ishlab chiqilgan impoliteness nazariyalariga asoslanadi. Maqolada shaxsiy obro'ga tahdid qiluvchi til birliklarining auditoriyaga ta'sir o'tkazish, siyosiy raqiblarni delegitimatsiya qilish, guruhiy identifikatsiyani shakllantirish va siyosiy qo'llab-quvvatlovni safarbar etishdagi strategik roli yoritiladi. Xulosa sifatida, qo'pol nutq raqamli siyosiy diskursda me'yor buzilishi emas, balki ijtimoiy tarmoqlar imkoniyatlari bilan kuchaytirilgan ongli ritorik vosita ekanligi asoslanadi.

Аннотация. В статье анализируется невежливость как инструмент убеждения в политических дискуссиях в социальных сетях. Исследование опирается на





дискурсивные подходы, в частности на теории невежливости Дж. Калпепера и Д. Боусфилда. Рассматривается, каким образом агрессивная и угрожающая лицу речь используется для воздействия на аудиторию, делегитимации политических оппонентов, формирования групповой идентичности и мобилизации сторонников. Делается вывод о том, что невежливость в онлайн-политическом дискурсе является целенаправленным риторическим ресурсом, усиливаемым медиаспецификой социальных сетей.

Keywords: impoliteness, persuasion, political discourse, social media, pragmatics, online interaction, face-threatening acts.

Kalit so'zlar: odobsizlik, ishontirish, siyosiy nutq, ijtimoiy media, pragmatika, onlayn o'zaro ta'sir, yuzga tahdid soladigan harakatlar.

Ключевые слова: невежливость, убеждение, политический дискурс, социальные сети, прагматика, онлайн-взаимодействие, действия, угрожающие лицу.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally reshaped political communication. Political discussions have increasingly moved from institutional and formal settings to highly interactive online environments, where immediacy, emotional expression, and confrontation are not only common but often rewarded. In this context, impoliteness has become a salient feature of political discourse.¹ Unlike traditional political communication, which was largely governed by norms of civility and politeness, social media political discussions frequently involve insults, ridicule and mockery.²

LITERATURE REVIYEW

This article argues that such impoliteness should not be treated merely as communicative failure. Instead, it functions as a strategic persuasive tool aimed at influencing audiences, discrediting opponents, and reinforcing ideological alignment. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks proposed by Culpeper and Bousfield, the study explores how impoliteness operates persuasively in social media political discussions and why it has become increasingly effective in digital political contexts.

¹ Culpeper, J. Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence. 2011

² Dynel, M. Impoliteness in computer-mediated communication. 2015





Politeness theory, most notably formulated by Brown and Levinson, conceptualizes communication as oriented toward the maintenance of face.³ Speakers typically employ politeness strategies to mitigate face-threatening acts. However, this framework has been criticized for its limited capacity to account for aggressive and confrontational discourse, particularly in political contexts. In response, scholars such as Culpeper and Bousfield have developed theories of impoliteness, defining it as intentional face attack designed to cause offense.⁴ Culpeper identifies several impoliteness strategies, including bald on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm, and the withholding of politeness.⁵ Bousfield further emphasizes the dynamic and interactional nature of impoliteness, highlighting its role in power struggles and resistance.⁶

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Social media platforms provide specific affordances that facilitate impolite political discourse. Anonymity and physical distance reduce social accountability, while algorithmic systems prioritize content that generates strong emotional reactions.⁷ As a result, impolite and aggressive political messages often receive greater visibility and engagement. Furthermore, the collapse of traditional gatekeeping mechanisms allows ordinary users to engage directly with political elites, often in confrontational ways. This environment normalizes impoliteness and transforms it into a communicative norm rather than an exception.

Impoliteness enhances persuasion by attracting attention and increasing emotional arousal. Emotionally charged language is more likely to be noticed, remembered, and shared, thereby amplifying its persuasive reach.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In political discussions, impoliteness is frequently used to delegitimize opponents through ridicule, name-calling, and personal attacks. In addition, impoliteness contributes to the construction of in-group solidarity. By collectively attacking a shared

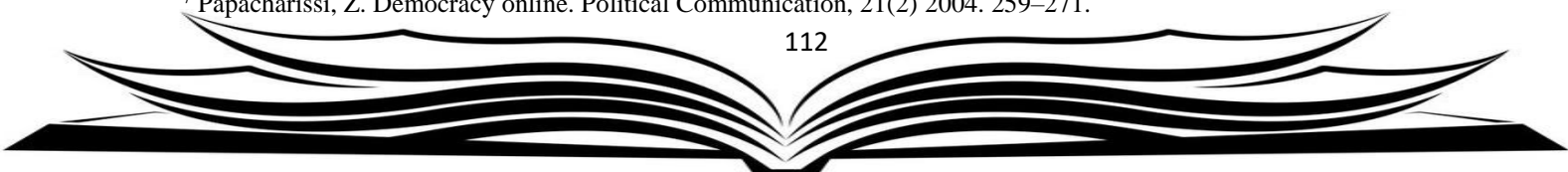
³ Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press. 1987

⁴ Culpeper, J. Towards an anatomy of impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 25(3) 1996. 349–367.

⁵ Culpeper, J. *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence*. Cambridge University Press. 2011.

⁶ Bousfield, D. *Impoliteness in interaction*. John Benjamins. 2008

⁷ Papacharissi, Z. Democracy online. *Political Communication*, 21(2) 2004. 259–271.





opponent, group members reinforce ideological alignment and social identity. This ‘us versus them’ dynamic strengthens group cohesion and enhances persuasive impact.

Table 1: Impoliteness Strategies and Their Rhetorical Functions in Digital Political Communication

Impoliteness Strategy	Core Characteristics	Persuasive Role in Political Context
Direct (Unmitigated) Impoliteness	Impoliteness Openly aggressive language that attacks the recipient's social image without softening (e.g., explicit insults, harsh commands).	Generates attention, projects authority and control, and establishes a dominant stance.
Attacks on Positive Face	Actions that damage an individual's need for social acceptance and belonging (e.g., mockery, ignoring, or socially excluding them).	Seeks to invalidate opponents by damaging their reputation and reducing their perceived credibility.
Attacks on Negative Face	Language that threatens a person's autonomy and freedom to act (e.g., directives, threats, or imposing restrictions).	Aims to intimidate and suppress dissenting voices or opposing arguments
Sarcasm/Ironic Politeness	The use of polite phrasing or tone to convey clear disrespect or	Allows the user to mock an opponent while appearing rhetorically superior, persuading audiences indirectly.





	criticism, often through irony.	
Politeness Omission	Deliberately withholding expected courteous words or gestures in a given interaction.	Signals disregard or disrespect, while simultaneously strengthening cohesion among supporters who share the same stance.

Table 1 illustrates the main impoliteness strategies identified in pragmatic research and demonstrates how each strategy functions persuasively in social media political discourse. Drawing on Culpeper's classification of impoliteness strategies and Bousfield's interactional approach, the table shows that impoliteness serves not only to attack face but also to achieve specific rhetorical goals such as attracting attention, delegitimizing political opponents, reinforcing in-group solidarity, and projecting power⁸. The table highlights that different forms of impoliteness vary in their persuasive potential depending on their degree of directness and interactional context. To support our argument, we will provide examples of different forms of impoliteness.

1. **Bald On-Record Impoliteness: Direct Insults & Attacks.** Donald Trump's tweet about North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

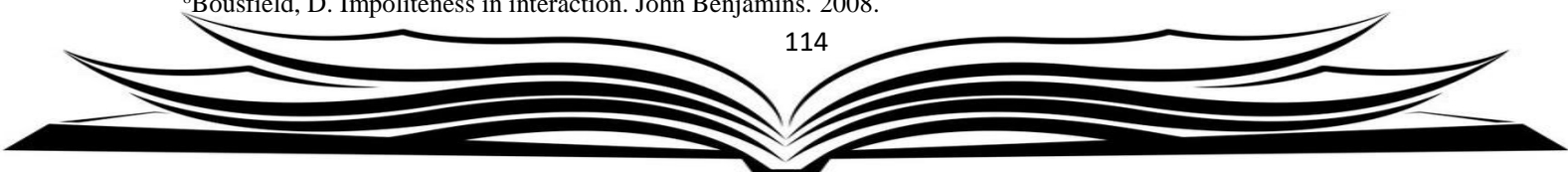
Example: "Just heard Foreign Minister of North Korea speak at U.N. If he echoes thoughts of Little Rocket Man, they won't be around much longer!" This direct insult ("Little Rocket Man") aimed to project dominance, undermine Kim Jong-un's stature, and signal unwavering toughness to both the international community and Trump's domestic base, framing the adversary as irrational and childish.

[Archived Trump tweet (NBC News, September 23, 2017). Twitter (now X) <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>]

2. Positive Impoliteness: Ridicule and Exclusion

Example: UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson mocking opposition leader Keir Starmer's stance. In the House of Commons, Johnson accused Starmer of wanting to "go back to the EU and ... accept their rules... He would end the bounce we are seeing in this

⁸Bousfield, D. Impoliteness in interaction. John Benjamins. 2008.





country. He would go back with his cronies, he would go back to the jeremycorbynsociety.org.uk."

The sarcastic reference to a defunct pro-Corbyn website was a ridicule tactic. It aimed to damage Starmer's positive face by associating him with the more controversial former leader (Jeremy Corbyn), excluding him from the "sensible" political mainstream and delegitimizing his critique.

[January 6, 2021/Platform: Parliament (clip widely shared on social media). Source: Official UK Parliament YouTube channel footage].

3. **Negative Impoliteness: Threats to Autonomy (Silencing).**

Example: Indian politician and BJP member Tejasvi Surya's tweet towards journalists. "To all Urban Naxals sitting in newsrooms of Delhi: Your days are numbered. Nation is awake to your sinister design of breaking India. You shall be shown your place." Labeling critics "Urban Naxals" (a term equating them with violent extremists) and stating "your days are numbered" is a clear threat. It aims to intimidate and silence critical media voices by threatening their safety and autonomy, thus discouraging future opposition.

[February 14, 2020/ Platform: Twitter (now X) Source: Archived tweet reported by The Indian Express].

4. **Sarcasm / Mock Politeness.** Example: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's sarcastic remark about the International Criminal Court (ICC).

After the ICC announced a preliminary examination into his drug war, Duterte stated: "I would like to announce that I am ready to face the ICC. I will also prepare a very long and beautiful list of all the drug lords, the policemen, the soldiers, the mayors, the governors who were killed."

The use of "very long and beautiful" is classic mock politeness. It sarcastically frames a list of fatalities as an achievement, projecting moral superiority and defiance. It persuades his supporters by ridiculing the ICC's authority and reframing the accusation as a badge of honor.

[March 17, 2018/ Source: Transcript from presidential speech, reported by Reuters].

5. **Withholding Politeness: Displaying Contempt.**

Example: Former US President Donald Trump's response to Speaker Nancy Pelosi's State of the Union invitation.





"Dear Madam Speaker: ... Because of the shutdown ... I will be honoring your invitation ..." The letter notably addressed her as "Madam Speaker" instead of the traditionally respectful "Dear Madam Speaker" and used a dismissive tone throughout.

The deliberate omission of expected formal courtesies and the use of a condescending tone served to publicly display contempt.

[October 16, 2019.Source: Public letter published by The New York Times].

Impoliteness also functions as a means of projecting power and dominance. Political actors who employ aggressive language are often perceived as strong, authentic, and decisive. Such perceptions can increase persuasive appeal among audiences dissatisfied with conventional political rhetoric. However, the widespread use of impoliteness contributes to political polarization. Persistent exposure to hostile discourse reduces opportunities for rational deliberation and fosters antagonistic forms of political engagement.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined impoliteness as a strategic persuasive resource in social media political discussions, challenging the traditional view of impoliteness as merely communicative failure or norm violation. Drawing on pragmatic theories of (im)politeness, particularly the works of Culpeper and Bousfield, the study has demonstrated that impoliteness in online political discourse functions as a deliberate and goal-oriented communicative practice rather than an accidental by-product of emotional expression.⁹

The findings indicate that the affordances of social media platforms facilitate the use of impoliteness to attract attention, project power, and delegitimize political opponents. Through face-threatening acts, sarcasm, and verbal aggression, speakers increase emotional engagement and reinforce polarized positions, contributing to in-group solidarity and identity construction.

⁹Wodak, R. The politics of fear. Sag. 2015.





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