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Research Paper

Echoes of Impoliteness: Navigating Identity in Pinter's Dual Landscapes

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Abstract

Despite the fact that impoliteness has been the focus of much investigation in various contexts, including political and cultural, there remains a paucity of evidence on the manifestation of impoliteness in literary texts. Examining Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language* (1988) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996), this paper discloses the impact of (im)politeness on identity. It posits that because of a mismatch in power dynamics and impoliteness between communicators, identity and self-esteem are subject to threat. Harold Pinter's plays manifest profound interconnection between (im)politeness and identity construction/destruction. Our analysis shows how, in plays under scrutiny, characters are in a constant verbal struggle for survival and dominance and how this conflict impacts on characters' social identity. Adopting Bousfield and McIntyre (2018) alongside Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009)'s model, this paper elucidates how impoliteness operates within the political settings of the plays in which the oppressors' aggressive language aims to delegitimize the social identity of the oppressed ones. Furthermore, we strive to indicate how the impolite language and social/individual identity are closely related which contributes to a deeper understanding of characterization in literary works.

Keywords: Impoliteness Strategies, Positive/Negative Impoliteness, Harold Pinter, Power relations, Identity.

1. Introduction

Investigating impoliteness in dramatic discourse has been of great interest to stylists and literary critics during recent decades. One explanation for choosing literary texts as the propitious case for investigating impoliteness could be assessing the limits of impoliteness strategies before practicing them in real life situations (Bousfield & McIntyre, 2018). Culpeper (1998), on the other hand, contends that linguistic impoliteness in fictional texts is the "motivated choice" of the writer who intends to convey a message in terms of a character's behavior. He also suggests that since in real life such impolite language would rarely happen due to the social restrictions, the world of fiction is the appropriate space for exploring verbal violence in unexpected behavior (Culpeper, 1998: 87). Culpeper believes that in drama, impoliteness does not occur for the sake of audience entertainment, rather it serves more significant functions, including "social disharmony" (1998: 86). Simpson and Bousfield (2017) also believe that as fictions portray human-like conditions and depict settings from real life, the same identical face wants that we perceive in real life situations are required (165). A number of stylists give credence to the idea of congruence between the two language styles; fictional language and naturally occurring language (see, Kizelbach, 2017; McIntyre & Bousfield, 2017; Bousfield & McIntyre, 2018). Therefore, analyzing fictional texts in terms of linguistic models, including, of course, theories of impoliteness, not only validates the previous studies in terms of the impoliteness framework but also unravels new developments in the analysis of literary works from a novel and cognitive approach.

Despite the growing literature on impoliteness in the fictional language investigating various aspects of

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impoliteness, including imbalance of power (Culpeper, 1998), banter (Bousfield, 2007a), sarcasm (Brown, 2013), humor (Simpson & Bousfield, 2017), aggravated impoliteness (Rudanko, 2006), and aggressive language in modern fiction and different literary eras (Kizelbach, 2023), the notion of identity in the realm of impoliteness in fictional characters has remained relatively less touched. Although we are facing a proliferation of the published literature on the interplay between impoliteness and identity including Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009, 2013), Bousfield (2013), Joseph (2013), and Locher (2008), none of them has taken into consideration the proximity of impoliteness and identity in literary texts. Most of these studies undertaken so far have examined the issue in the context of work; yet the impact of impoliteness on identity construction and identity destruction in dramatic discourse has not been their primary focus. Nevertheless, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou (2017) seems to be one inquiry, filling this gap. This means that there is a need for an inquiry in the literary texts to delve into the discourse of fictional characters to find out the interconnection between impoliteness and identity.

The current paper appraises the impolite language engaged by the characters in Harold Pinter's plays; *Mountain Language* (1988) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) and portrays the abuse of political power in depicting the oppressor and the oppressed. Harold Pinter as a modern playwright, who has been identified as an advocate of Absurd Drama, has been of particular concern for his use of aberrant language. Being notorious for having a round shape (with the finishing point the same as the starting point) and illogical construction, Absurd Drama is imbued with irrational, repetitive, and incoherent speech, which is emblematic of modern life and uncertainty of human condition (Esslin, 2001: 239). Chiasson (2017) demonstrates that in Pinter's world, informational and transparent language is replaced by the oblique language that is intended to empower or disempower, thus either promoting or hindering a character's power (2017:17). Additionally, it is purported that Pinter's weapon to depict his characters' power is either silence or verbal aggression (Dukore, 1988: 59). Impoliteness as a verbal aggression is one of the linguistic devices that abound in Pinter's characters, illustrating their "struggle for power" (see Bousfield, 2008b) and attempt to protect their identity.

What inspired us to elect these two plays to pursue the implicit role of impoliteness in identity construction/destruction, was the political and military setting and aggressive language foregrounded in both plays. It has been declared that contemporary fiction and drama has gravitated towards impoliteness theories for delving into characterization (Kizelbach, 2023: 47). This indicates that violent linguistic behavior permeates modern literature. In a face-threatening linguistic behavior through which some degree of power exercise is manifested, impolite language is engaged to demolish the unfavorable political party of minority groups and reshape the preferred characters' new individual and group face aggressively. Due to the lack of consensus on an explanation concerning the abundance and normalized occurrence of aggressive language in military settings; whether justified and conventionalized discourse or regarded as impolite, we decided to discuss the impoliteness in the political context of the two plays. However, we need to make a distinction between *Mountain Language* (1988) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996). While in the case of the former the play takes place in prison in the context of the army, in the latter the political and conflictive discourse occurs in a lovely setting of a home. Since the question of context carries significant weight to the argument on impoliteness and identity, dividing two plays in terms of context seems quite relevant.

Considering this goal, we wish to discover whether the violent language in the military setting of the plays could be viewed as impoliteness or the norm. To this end, we mainly draw on Bousfield (2010)'s model to shed light on the offensive and destructive discourse of the plays. Nevertheless, the salient point of our paper would be disclosing the link between impoliteness and identity in the two plays. In so doing, the Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009)'s investigation would be an apt framework for our study to discover how characters' language symbolizes impoliteness to preserve their own power and identities yet to demolish the identity of the oppressed group.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Face and Identity

One fundamental issue within impoliteness theory is the notion of face, which has gained attention since Goffman's analysis of social interaction. In his detailed account of face, Goffman lays emphasis on the other participants and their judgments during the "flow of the events" (1967: 5). He declares that face-saving has particular codes we need to learn to be able to maintain not only our own face but also other participants' face in the interaction. This "positive social value", as defined by Goffman, is a self-delineated image pertaining to commendable social facets when one receives praise for his profession or religion (Goffman, 1967: 5). However, Bousfield (2018) argues that Goffman's definition suffers a certain deficiency and ignores some major points. He maintains that there exist more factors determining identity and self-image rather than merely profession or religion that Goffman refers to. Aligning closely with Bousfield we presume that political inclination, social role, economic condition, scientific knowledge, and language are issues playing notable roles in constructing people's self-image and identity (see Basarati & Kazemian 2024); forthcoming. Following the same line of argument as Goffman, Brown and Levinson (1987) also presumes that every one's face or self-image is comprehensible when they are in interaction with other people. They identify "face" as wants, which one claims for oneself, endeavoring to maintain. Since "face" makes sense as relational and interactional (see Izadi, 2018), everyone intends to maintain others' face. In this sense, face is viewed as a social attribute and a punctual and relational phenomenon (see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2017 & Bousfield and McIntyre, 2018).

To render a brief interpretation of identity, it is defined as "self-concept" or "self-definition" that according to Simon (2004) entails some attributes including; abilities, ideologies, social roles, personality, behavioral characteristics,



language, group membership including religious and political groups and so on. On the basis of these considerations, we may distinguish two types of identity; individual identity, associating with individual and independent features leading to self-interpretation and social identity, disclosing self-description in terms of one's relationships and interactions with others (Spencer-Oatey, 2007:641). Nevertheless, Simon believes that whether individual or social, both types of identities are interactional and cognitive. What lies at the bottom of this claim is the fact that even our personal characteristics are constructed through our interrelationship with the society, which we are a member of.

Considering face and identity as synonymous conceptions, one may think of the two terminologies as two parallel lines that may never intersect. To deepen our understanding, Spencer-Oatey (2007) also discerns a difference between face and identity. She demonstrates that while "face" is associated with merely "*approved social attributes*" (Goffman, 1967: 5) and positive attributes, identity includes both positive and negative attributes (643). However, Spencer-Oatey believes that evaluation of attributes varies among different people and in distinct contexts. Ostensibly, losing or saving face is contingent on the people's perspective and their perception of positive attributes. Therefore, it is people's perception and cognition that evaluates attributes as positive or negative. On this account, Spencer-Oatey (2007) contends that face and identity are cognitively identical since both are pertinent to the issue of self-image (644). This argument corroborates Simon's discussion denoting the cognitive nature of identity, since our cognition pivots on our society and its participants. Given that our cognitive system is directed and governed by our social and cultural predispositions, the interactive nature of face is vindicated.

Another established framework on which our study depends is that of Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009, 2010, 2013a, 2013b) that centers on the close connection between face, identity and impoliteness. Relying on Anton and Peterson's (2003: 406-412) concept of subject positions, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009) explains that our belief system arising from our experiences is influenced by our subject positions. Subject positions, according to Anton and Peterson (2003), are either structural including age, gender, profession, and political affiliation, or existential referring to our personal communication as friend, neighbor, and classmate (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich , 2009: 288). Weighing up the confrontation and clashing interactions between interviewer and interviewee in the American new media, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009) contends that impoliteness questions one's subject position. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009, 2010, 2013a, 2013b) argues that impoliteness emerges due to the identity partial verification or non/verification or due to the threat to the authenticity/self-efficacy associated with one's identity. As she clarifies, these subject positions strengthen one's identity and urge them to claim one's epistemic privilege or epistemic qualification to acknowledge one's own subject position superior to others' subject positions (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich , 2009: 288). This is evident in the case of minority groups, whose subject positions have been felt to be in inferior positions (see Looragi Poor, et. al., 2025). The stereotypical positions (such as people of color, female) are other-asserted positions that are viewed as an endeavor to devalue a group or a community one belongs to. Building on Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009, 2010, 2013a, 2013b), this study discloses the way Harold Pinter's characters encounter one another in an insulting manner to construct one's own identity and destroy the participant's identity.

2.2. Impoliteness

Culpeper's (1996) model of impoliteness defines impoliteness as attacking "face" rather than maintaining "face". Culpeper et al. (2003) considers the influence of the speaker's intention to support face (politeness) or to attack it (impoliteness). In their study, apart from the speaker's intention, the hearer's perception is also foregrounded, which are both seen as key concepts in the current paper. Developing his ideas, Culpeper (2005) proposes four fundamental keynotes concerning impoliteness; impoliteness is not incidental face-threat, impoliteness is not unintentional, impoliteness is not banter, and impoliteness is not bald-on-record politeness. Culpeper suggests that the actual intention of a speaker cannot be perceived, but rather plausible intentions are to be reconstructed through adequate evidence (1552).

Yet a more comprehensible and influential definition that is deemed necessary to be pointed out is that of Culpeper (2011). He holds that impoliteness is a negative attitude in specific contexts. This new definition focuses on social interactions, which determine one person's or group's identities. Once the behavior is in conflict with the recipient's expectation, it is viewed as impolite and if the situated behavior and language are in accord with the recipient's face wants, it is viewed as polite (23).

Although Culpeper (1996) hardly delineates context as a significant aspect in impolite behavior, it endeavors to explain the basic reasons for the prevalence of impoliteness in the military discourse. Highlighting the role that power plays in impoliteness, he acknowledges that a powerful participant is more likely to employ impoliteness by reducing the ability of the less powerful communicator and by engaging even more impolite behavior in case the oppressed one is impolite (Culpeper, 1996: 354). As an instance of occurrence of impoliteness in unequal relationships, he refers to the context of the army in which imbalance of power is inherently visible.

Pointing to a rigid hierarchical power structure with the recruits at the bottom of this hierarchy, Culpeper (1996) and Bousfield and McIntyre (2018) pursue the aggressive dialogues delivered by the sergeants at the garrison. Culpeper (1996) assumes that the training programs in the army necessitate molding the recruits as ideal soldiers and this aim requires demolishing the recruits' self-esteem altogether and reshaping a new identity instead (359). On this account, Culpeper (1996) posits impolite behavior and aggressive language is engaged by the sergeants to construct a new and approved identity for the soldiers to be, an identity that is appropriate for the situations the recruits may encounter. He



considers a “systematic impoliteness” as a crucial condition for impoliteness rather than accidental impoliteness:

In the context of the army, impoliteness is not the haphazard product of, say, a heated argument, but is deployed by the sergeants in a systematic way as part of what they perceive to be their job (Culpeper, 1996: 359).

On the other hand, Mills (2005) believes that aggressive linguistic behavior observed in military discourse is normalized and not perceived as impoliteness:

However, I would argue that within this particular community of practice, this behavior may or may not be classified by any of the participants as impolite. The dominant group in the interaction, the officers, as representatives of the army, are drawing on ritualized and institutionalized codes of linguistic behavior, which have made this seeming excessive impoliteness on the part of the trainers the norm. This is not to suggest that the recruits are not concerned about this language use or are not adversely affected by it. But they probably will not classify it as impoliteness as such, since impoliteness is only that which is defined as such by individuals negotiating with the hypothesized norms of the community of practice (Mills, 2005:270).

However, following Culpeper's (1996) line of argument, Bousfield (2007b) contends that abundance of one attribute within a discourse does not make a normal discourse (2189). Therefore, the sort of discourse and the frequency of a specific type of terminology would not construct a successful impoliteness. As discussed earlier (Culpeper et al., 2003), not only the speaker's intention but also the hearer's interpretation takes responsibility for a successful impoliteness to occur. This corroborates with the findings of the previous research as some of the recruits would perceive the sergeant's aggressive language as an entertainment and humor rather than as impoliteness (Bousfield and McIntyre, 2018: 49). According to Bousfield (2007b), impoliteness can be defined as:

The issuing of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive face threatening acts that are purposefully performed:

- 1) Unmitigated in contexts where mitigation is required and/or
- 2) With deliberate aggression, that is with the face threat exacerbated, boosted, or maximized in some way to heighten the face damage inflicted.

Furthermore, for impoliteness to be considered successful impoliteness, the intention of the speaker (or author) to threaten/damage face must be understood by those in a receiver role (Bousfield, 2007b: 2187)

Drawing upon Bousfield's definition of impoliteness and Bousfield and McIntyre (2018), the current paper tends to unravel the aggressive language in the specific context of the plays and distinguish whether it is viewed as impoliteness or rudeness.

3. Data and methodology

To illustrate the proximity between impoliteness and identity in a political and military setting, two plays by Harold Pinter were used. The motivation behind selecting these two plays lies in the aggressive and impolite language observed in the conversation between the characters. Apparently, Pinter's device for depicting the power struggle among the characters is violent, impolite language. However, while some parts of the dialogues may seem to be impolite, some may not be regarded as merely impolite but may be viewed as rudeness, accidental impoliteness, or incidental impoliteness. To make a distinction between various forms of impoliteness, we apply Bousfield (2010) and Bousfield and McIntyre (2018) prototype scheme (see table 1).

Moreover, to demonstrate how the identity of the less powerful character is devalued in the light of impoliteness, we apply the model introduced by Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009, 2010). Applying Anton and Peterson (2003: 406-412)'s analysis of subject positions, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009) points out that impoliteness emerges when an incongruity is perceived between self-asserted subject positions and other-asserted subject positions (282). She argues that impoliteness would be responsible for celebrating a particular worldview, typically the dominant one, and delegitimizing that of the minority group. The same line of argument is to be pursued in the current paper. The more powerful characters strive to devalorize the social and individual identity of the less powerful characters and their self-asserted or other-asserted subject positions to give credence to their own social, political, and religious self-esteem.



Table 1- Towards a prototype understanding of impoliteness and rudeness (Bousfield, 2010: 122-123)

rio	Speaker (Producer) intent to threaten/damage face?	Speaker (Producer) aware of possible face-damaging effects of utterance?	Hearer (Receiver) perceives/constructs speaker's <i>intent</i> to threaten/damage face?	Hearer's (Receiver's) face <i>actually</i> damaged according to hearer?	Outcome for the receiver(s)
1	+	+	+	+	IMPOLITENESS is successfully communicated.
2	-	+	+	+	RUDENESS: INADEQUATE LEVELS OF, OR INEXPERTLY USED POLITENESS which is interpreted/inferred by the receiver as IMPOLITENESS
3	-	-	+	+	ACCIDENTAL FACE DAMAGE as a result of RUDENESS: INADEQUATE LEVELS OF, OR INEXPERTLY USED POLITENESS , 'speaker insensitivity', 'hearer hypersensitivity', a clash of interactant expectations, cultural misunderstanding, misidentification (on either part) of the type of communicative activity engaged in, etc. (see Goffman 1967: 14). IMPOLITENESS is inferred, however.
4	+	+	+	-	IMPOLITENESS attempt fails but is recognised/acknowledged.
5	-	+	+	-	RUDENESS: INADEQUATE LEVELS OF, OR INEXPERTLY USED POLITENESS which is interpreted as an attempt at IMPOLITENESS (actually as failed IMPOLITENESS) OR PATRONISING BEHAVIOUR .
6	-	-	+	-	ACCIDENTAL FACE THREAT as a result of 'rudeness' (inadequate levels of politeness), 'speaker insensitivity', 'hearer hypersensitivity', a clash of interactant expectations, cultural misunderstanding, misidentification (on either part) of the type of communicative activity engaged in, etc. ... (see Goffman 1967: 14). IMPOLITENESS attempt is inferred.

Scenario	Speaker (Producer) intent to threaten/damage face?	Speaker (Producer) aware of possible face-damaging effects of utterance?	Hearer (Receiver) perceives/constructs speaker's <i>intent</i> to threaten/damage face?	Hearer's (Receiver's) face <i>actually</i> damaged according to hearer?	Outcome for the receiver(s)
7	+	+	-	+	IMPOLITENESS attempt fails as it is interpreted as RUDENESS .
8	-	+	-	+	RUDENESS: INADEQUATE LEVELS OF, OR INEXPERTLY USED POLITENESS.
9	-	-	-	+	INCIDENTAL FACE DAMAGE as a result of perceived 'rudeness' (inadequate levels of politeness), 'speaker insensitivity', 'hearer hypersensitivity', a clash of interactant expectations, a cultural misunderstanding, a misidentification (on either part) of the type of communicative activity engaged in, etc. ... (see Goffman 1967: 14). IMPOLITENESS is not inferred.
10	+	+	-	-	IMPOLITENESS attempt fails and is <i>not</i> recognised by the receiver(s).
11	+	-	-	-	Producer's HOSTILITY OR AGGRESSION is not communicated – it is successfully masked by POLITENESS or a 'non-communication of the FTA' for example.
12	-	+	-	-	POLITENESS: in that the speaker has recognised and attended to (e.g., mitigated) the potentially face damaging comments sufficiently so that face-damage is not recognised or at least, intentionality is not inferred or taken.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Impoliteness in *Ashes to Ashes* (1996)

Ashes to Ashes happens in both domestic and political context as Pinter connects the personal feelings of love and hatred with the public experience. It would be difficult to follow the events of *Ashes to Ashes* in an ordered and organized timeline since it is devoid of plot. The events arise from Rebecca's memory, being a repertoire of images from the past. Rebecca's dramatic pictures give an account of the historical and political issues in the past and provide the reader/audience adequate evidence of the Holocaust. Although the Holocaust and the Nazis are never pointed to in the play, the reader would elicit the idea through the vivid images. The play consists almost entirely of Rebecca's fragmented memories and centers around her challenging confrontation with Devlin. For the ease of analysis and for avoiding confusion, we tend to divide the play into nine memories: the lover, the factory, the babies, the pen, the train station, the walk to the sea, the return to the train station, the cinema, and the strangling and drowning. It should be



noted that the focus is only on the memories leading us to aggressive language and the ones highlighting impoliteness.

3.1.1. The Lover

Ashes to Ashes opens with a couple, in their 40s, living on the ground floor of a house in the country. The room is set with two armchairs and two lamps, with a window toward a garden. Devlin and Rebecca are arguing over the identity of an absent lover whose presence is felt throughout the play. While Devlin is standing with a drink in his hand, Rebecca suddenly begins describing her former lover and his erotic violence. Rebecca seems to be engaged in a mutual and voluntary seduction with a man who “*adores*” her. The opening scene delineates the first moment of negative impoliteness as Rebecca’s former lover invades her private territory.

Rebecca: Well, for example, he would stand over me and clench his fist. And then he’d put his other hand on my neck and grip it and bring my head towards him. His fist grazed my mouth. And he would say, “Kiss my fist”.

Devlin’s challenging questions about Rebecca’s former lover would be considered a case of positive impoliteness. Being highly skeptical about Rebecca’s stories and description of her former lover, Devlin manifests positive impoliteness and discredits Rebecca’s claims:

Devlin: Did you?...What did you say?...You said what?...And did he?....

Apart from Devlin’s attempt to investigate the details of the relationship between Rebecca and her former lover, perhaps out of jealousy and possession, he casts doubt on Rebecca’s responses by asserting that he may have hypnotized her. We tend to postulate that Devlin’s aim at Rebecca’s oppression and subjection is particularly pertinent to the idea of identity. While Rebecca endeavors to recollect past events to construct her social identity, her “collective self” as a member of the Jewish society, Devlin intends to question her community, discrediting her social being. Here the significant element, pertaining to the notion of identity, is associated with the idea of group membership as one self-asserted subject position. Rebecca belongs to the Jewish, which gives Devlin a sense of distinctiveness and animosity. Claiming her own subject position as a Jewish woman, Rebecca endeavors to assert her religion. However, Rebecca’s structural subject positions such as her religious inclinations and her political affiliation could be detrimental to Devlin. As a matter of fact, by reinforcing his own position as not being a Jewish man, Devlin claims his own epistemic privilege and delegitimize the arguments of Rebecca.

However, Rebecca strives to protect her identity, her own subject position as a member of the Jewish society:

Devlin: What do you think?

Rebecca: I think you are a fuckpig.

Devlin: Me a fuckpig? Me! You must be joking.

Rebecca: Me joking? You must be joking.

Both Devlin and Rebecca are engaged in a mutual verbal conflict, as if they are holding a contest of aggressive and abusive language. This sort of word exchange between the two interlocutors corroborates the conflicting nature of the couple’s relationship. However, due to her being kept under surveillance and being victimized, Rebecca’s taboo words seem a little strange. Acknowledging the interconnection of impoliteness with identity construction, [Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou \(2017\)](#) maintain that verbal aggression would be understood as an indirect manifestation of group/individual identity (247). [Spencer-Oatey \(2007\)](#) is a further investigation, which holds that we may rarely be sensitive about our faces when everything proceeds effortlessly. However, once people begin to appraise our faces in an unexpected fashion, we become sensitive to their evaluations (644). As Rebecca’s religion is not credited by Devlin (social identity as a Jewish woman), she engages another strategy to preserve her identity and attacks Devlin’s face. Rebecca is completely aware of her own insulting language; yet deliberately uses this policy to depict her power and defend her identity. In this sense, according to Bousfield’s table the utterance (*fuckpig*) is perceived as impoliteness rather than rudeness. Because all the necessary conditions for a successful impoliteness including Rebecca’s intention and her awareness of using impoliteness are present. Therefore, according to Bousfield (2010), the remarks uttered by Rebecca and Devlin so far could not be understood as cultural misunderstanding, speaker insensitivity, or hearer’s oversensitivity.

On the other hand, Devlin also returns Rebecca’s impolite remarks by the same words. The hidden idea in this conversation lies within the concept of “impoliteness reciprocity¹” (see, [Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021](#)). Actually, the implication is that the speech of both lover and Devlin abounds with linguistic violence, indicating characters’ quest for domination. Their one-word exchanges are reminiscent of a football match in which each opponent is trying to win and dominate the other (see [Hosseini, 2021](#)).

¹ Impoliteness reciprocity concerns preserving “a balance of payments”, interpreted as “a balance of power” in the context of politics. That is to say, a politely structured language is in compliance with a politely formulated articulation, and similarly, an impolitely formulated insult would potentially receive verbal impoliteness as well ([Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021:150](#)).



Aggressively insisting on his power, Devlin declares that this is his right to learn about Rebecca's former lover:

Devlin: You understand why I am asking you these questions. Don't you? Put yourself in my place, I am compelled to ask you questions. There are so many things I don't know... Or do you think my questions are illegitimate?

Rebecca: What questions?

Devlin: Look. It would mean a great deal to me if you could define him more clearly.

Rebecca: Define him? What do you mean? Define him?

His emphasis on his relative power is another instance of negative impoliteness occurring in the play, putting Rebecca in the circumstance of impingement. However, in response to Devlin's imposition, Rebecca pretends not to perceive Devlin's questions. Rebecca's unconcern about Devlin's inquiring would also be regarded as a case of positive impoliteness. What is deduced from all these cases is impoliteness attempt rather than a clash of interactant expectations or misidentification of the type of communication (Bousfield, 2010: 122).

There exist two hypotheses for Rebecca's evading Devlin's interrogation. In pursuit of power and her social self as belonging to the Jewish society, Rebecca distracts the conversation with elusive answers. The second interpretation concerns her avoidance strategy to forget the atrocities. Both arguments are assumed plausible. Yet, our analysis depends on the first intimation, and it is supposed to illuminate Rebecca's struggling for constructing and preserving her subject position as a Jewish woman as well as power, which is, of course, a question of controversy. Hall (2001) believes that Rebecca is exercising some degree of power for her access to language and her ability to choose her own narrative (274). Hall suggests that through evasive and irrelevant answers, Rebecca evades describing her lover to Devlin as he wishes to get informed. However, Ali (2018) argues that Rebecca is powerless, for she is constantly struggling to proceed with her narrative in confrontation with Devlin, who tries to block her memory (94). We tend to concur with Ali's argument according to which it is Devlin who wields immense power over Rebecca and frequently hinders her narrative. However, this is not to mean that we would refute Rebecca's partial power over Devlin and her dominance in controlling the flow of the story. This hindrance is neither accidental nor incidental impoliteness. While in the former the face threat is merely perceived by the hearer and all the other elements are absent, in the latter the hearer himself/herself would not understand the face damage either whereas the threat has really occurred.

A further portrayal of impoliteness rather than other forms of face-threatening acts occurs in Devlin's persistence in calling Rebecca "darling", being interpreted as an emblem of his power and an instance of controlling Rebecca's title and speech. In Culpeper's classification, using inappropriate identity markers could be perceived as an embodiment of positive impoliteness (1996: 357). Devlin's positive impoliteness is an instance of what Ali (2018) calls "chic dictatorship". Expressed in quite a different manner, a thin veneer of politeness has concealed Devlin's animosity. Based on this scenario, more powerful people employ insincere politeness to oppress and dominate their subjects and to establish a kind of totalitarian power while less powerful characters draw on insincere politeness to seek power, identity and survival in their interactions with people of authority. In an attempt to authenticate his structural subject position as a Christian man and his existential position as Rebecca's husband, Devlin refers to Rebecca as "darling" to control her position in the arguments. Being totally aware of his face-threatening act and being intentional, Devlin's remark is seen as impoliteness. We are not witnessing any misidentification in terms of cultural values.

Once again, Rebecca's assertiveness is evident and gives credence to her strategy in legitimizing her own structural subject position as a Jewish woman, yet disallowing her existential position as Devlin's wife:

Rebecca: well, how can you possibly call me darling? I am not your darling.

Devlin: yes, you are.

Rebecca: Well, I don't want to be your darling. It's the last thing I want to be. I'm nobody's darling.

Devlin: It's a song.

The above lines represent another case of impoliteness, in which Devlin is seeking disagreement in interaction with Rebecca. Moreover, Devlin, pursuing a hostile attitude, aims at impeding Rebecca from defending her identity. Therefore, he immediately draws Rebecca's attention away from her defense and replies to Rebecca by saying, "*It is a song*". Violating maxims of cooperative principle (Grice, 1989) (maxim of relevance), Devlin's utterance is conceptualized as impoliteness rather than cultural misunderstanding, since Devlin's aberrant remark is completely purposeful. As proposed by Culpeper (2003), hindering and blocking are deemed as cases of negative impoliteness. Opting out of the maxim of relevance to avoid answering Rebecca, Rebecca is hampered from defending her structural subject position. This circumstance takes place frequently throughout the play.

3.1.2. The Pen

In order to retreat from Devlin's detection, now Rebecca begins a new narrative in which she remembers writing a laundry list with a pen. Humanizing the pen when calling it "*innocent*", Rebecca disregards Devlin's persistent demand for getting informed of her lover's appearance. Passing over Devlin's remarks quite quickly, the reader detects another



form of impoliteness in her confrontation with Devlin. Rather than being comprehended as a cultural or linguistic clash, turning the course of the argument is thought of as impoliteness.

Considering pens' conventional sense, they are assumed to represent intelligentsia, higher culture, higher authority and power. However, in the current discourse "*pen*" is identified as a sinful "*pen*" unable to achieve redemption. While Rebecca weighs up the pen to be "*perfectly innocent*", Devlin speculates a contrasting idea:

Devlin: Because you don't know where it had been. You don't know how many other hands have held it, how many other hands have written with it, what other people have been doing with it. You know nothing of its history. You know nothing of its parents' history.

Pointing to the pen's parents and its history, Devlin seems to associate pen's identity with Rebecca's identity. In Devlin's sarcastic confession, there seems to be a parallel feature between a guilty pen and guilty Rebecca for the blameworthy conduct she has experienced in her liaison with her lover. Objectifying and dehumanizing Rebecca, another instance of impoliteness rather than rudeness is revealed, through which Rebecca is prone to expulsion from human society. This is another circumstance in which Devlin intends to delegitimize Rebecca's self-asserted subject position as a human being. Interestingly, through personifying, the pen is claimed to own an existential subject position (having parents).

3.1.3. A return to the Train Station

Devlin and Rebecca pursue the argument further as they discuss God as "*the only God we have*". Pointing to God's power, Devlin questions Rebecca's authority, attacks her identity and challenges her right "*to discuss such an atrocity*":

Devlin: What authority do you think you yourself possess which would give you the right to discuss such an atrocity?
 Rebecca: I have no such authority. Nothing has ever happened to me. Nothing has ever happened to any of my friends. I have never suffered. Nor have my friends.

Depriving Rebecca of her right of articulation, Devlin's utterance is viewed as a threat and a case of positive impoliteness. Devlin's aim at attacking Rebecca's face and invalidating her identity is associated with impeding her from recounting. Devlin insinuates that only those in the position of authority have the power to express themselves. Ali (2018) disputes that God's power and existence are strong reasons for Devlin's power and existence (92). Similarly, **Silverstein** (1999) maintains that a world lacking God thus equals a world lacking Devlin, and that is a threat to Devlin's identity (80). Celebrating his power, Devlin delegitimizes Rebecca's right of speech and hinders her narration. As it was touched upon earlier, hindering is a negative impoliteness strategy.

Devlin proceeds with interrogatory discourses and casts doubt on Rebecca's morality and virtue:

Devlin: Did he have a name, this chap? Was he a foreigner? Where was I at that time? What do you want me to understand?
 Were you unfaithful to me? Why didn't you confide in me? Why didn't you confess?

Bombarding Rebecca with challenging questions, Devlin begins to criticize Rebecca's morality (another aspect of her identity). Challenge strategy is either rhetorical or response seeking, which all carry underlying criticism. According to **Culpeper et al.** (2003), challenge strategy in the form of rhetorical questions is viewed as negative impoliteness (1559). In his model of response-strategy, **Bousfield** reckons that the rhetorical questions force the hearer to respond in a self-damaging way (2008b: 132), while response-seeking questions potentially emerge in the situations of imbalanced power relations (2008b: 243). Ostensibly, Devlin's challenging interrogation embraces two forms of challenge simultaneously. On the one hand, Devlin's constant questions direct towards censuring Rebecca for her love affair (*Were you unfaithful to me?*). On the other hand, he wishes to know her lover (*Did he have a name? Was he a foreigner?*).

4.2. Impoliteness in Mountain Language (1988)

Mountain Language is set in the prison and revolves around some unnamed guards, who ban the prisoners' native language. **Hall** (1991) believes that Harold Pinter is inspired and appalled by his visit to Turkey and that *Mountain Language* is Pinter's attempt at recreating the linguistic oppression he witnessed. In the same manner that the Turkish government regards Kurdish as a submissive language and prohibits using it, Pinter's characters proscribe the "mountain language" articulated by prisoners, through aggressive language.

4.2.1. A prison Wall

The play opens with a line of women waiting outside of a prison to visit their men. An elderly woman with a basket at her feet is standing while a young woman keeps her arm around her shoulders. A sergeant followed by an officer enters and points to the young woman and asks her name:



Sergeant: Name?

Young woman: We have given our names.

Sergeant: Name?

Young woman: We have given our names.

Sergeant: Name?

Officer: (to the sergeant) stop this shit. (to the young woman) any complaints?

Young woman: She's been bitten.

Violating the maxim of relevance, the sergeant pretends not to make sense of the young woman's response and repeats his question a few times. Snubbing the young woman (positive impoliteness), the sergeant intends to deny her presence and her identity. The notion of identity in *Mountain Language* is conceptualized as language affiliation. In an attempt to ignore the language of the prisoners and their families, the oppressors tend to destroy their subject positions as members of the "*mountain people*". However, another implication would be perceived as the sergeant's failure of communication with the prisoners. The languages of the sergeant and the women are so different, that they have trouble perceiving each other. A further justification for disregarding women's articulation could be the insufficiency and absurdity of ordinary speech, which is purported to be rather repetitive, incoherent and illogical not only in absurd drama but in modern life (Essl, 2001: 239). People would find it difficult to grasp each other's ideas in the 20th century; so, communicating and interacting could be highly controversial and debatable. In this sense, in "*Mountain Language*", we may encounter characters who are unable to explain their actions, thoughts, and feelings due to language failure. However, we postulate that language failure in the first scene of *Mountain Language* takes place intentionally for the aim of impoliteness and the discredit of the prisoners' identities as rural people. Far from misinterpreting the language of the "*mountain people*", the sergeant repudiates their structural subject position (being a member of the mountain society) and gives credence to his subject position (not belonging to the community of mountain people).

After the young woman complains about the elderly woman's injury, the officer insists that he can only pursue the interrogatory procedure if he is given the dog's name. The officer's comment on the dogs' names actualizes another positive impoliteness through which the women are referred to as dogs implicitly. In this part of the text the officer dehumanizes the women to devalue their identities and to attack their positive faces. To put the same argument slightly differently, exemplifying positive impoliteness, the officer as a man of authority, possessing a degree of political power victimizes the ordinary people, here the "*mountain people*", who are not able to speak the sergeant's language (capital language). The mountain people epitomize a population of minorities of rural people who are void of official language and the civilized culture. Renouncing their subject positions as human beings and identifying the "*mountain people*" with dogs that bite, the sergeant consciously and intentionally refers to the women as dogs.

Sergeant: Every dog has a name. They answer to their names. They are given a name by their parents and that is their name, that is their names. Before they bite, they state their names. It is a formal procedure. They state their names and then they bite.

Then the sergeant investigates any probable complaints, and the young woman files a complaint about their standing all day long in the snow wanting to visit their men. The sergeant's retaliation for her assertiveness is using taboo language to express his revulsion towards the prisoners:

Sergeant: your husbands, your sons, your fathers, these men you are waiting to see are shithouses. They are enemies of the state. They are shithouses.

Referring to the prisoners as "*shithouse*", and dehumanizing the men, the sergeant invalidates their identities to claim his own epistemic privilege. Being uninterested, unconcerned and unsympathetic to the visitors' regard for their men would also be weighed up as a form of positive impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996: 357). It is worth pointing out that the imprisoned men have been put into jail for some undetermined crime, yet they are referred to as enemies of the state. Their probable guilt may be ascribed to their belonging and identity, known as "*mountain people*". Their language is one facet indicating their subject positions as "*mountain people*" and hence their identity.

After calling the prisoners "*shithouses*" the officer develops another impoliteness scenario to belittle the mountain people explicitly:

Officer: Now hear this. You are mountain People. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your mountain language in this place. You cannot speak your language to your men. Do you understand? It is outlawed. You may only speak the language of the capital. That is the only language permitted in this place. You will be badly punished if you attempt to speak with your mountain language in this place. This is a military decree. Your language is dead. No one is allowed to speak your language. Your language no longer exists.

Deprecating the language of the minorities and condemning the women to speak with their original language, the officer depicts some sort of positive impoliteness towards the mountain people. The officer seems totally unconcerned



about the mountain people and strives to exclude them from human society. Showing deep contempt for these rural people and their language for not being the state members, the sergeant's tyrannical treatment illuminates the dominance of the political group with possession of higher authority. It looks an obligation for someone to be connected to the state; otherwise, they are doomed to castigation and abuse. Additionally, the threatening remarks, "*You will be badly punished if you attempt to speak with your mountain language in this place. This is a military decree.*.", are deemed to be impolite since they frighten and threaten the recipients. The officer intends to invalidate the women's language, which is the embodiment of their identity. Furthermore, excluding the mountain people from human society and denying the prisoners' association or common language would be judged as positive impoliteness (see, Culpeper, 1996: 357). In this sense, other styles of face-damaging acts are excluded since the sergeant's remarks are purposefully and consciously uttered.

However, the young woman takes a defensive strategy and expresses that she does not speak the mountain language:

The young woman: I do not speak the mountain language.

Sergeant: what language do you speak with your arse?

The young woman: My name is Sara Johnson. I have come to see my husband. It is my right. Where is he?

Sergeant: she looks like a fucking intellectual to me.

Sara Johnson's bravery to assert herself might depict her restricted power. However, she is not able to return the sergeant's impolite language since she is obliged to be submissive. In our opinion, Rebecca's docility and struggle for power in *Ashes to Ashes* parallel Sara Johnson's attempt in *Mountain Language*. Our proposal concerning Pinter's characters, who strive to preserve their identities confronting people of higher authority, seems to be closely aligned with what Rosca (2009) has found out about Pinter's plays. Rosca (2009) suggested that character's struggle to defend themselves against threats posed to their autonomy, to their territorial and psychological security and finally to their identity (92). To explain Sara's power, employing Culpeper's proposition concerning counterattack strategies seems quite reasonable. To defend one's identity and to save one's own face, encountering verbal aggression, the recipient chooses to counterattack either offensively or defensively (Culpeper et al., 2003: 1562). While Sara Johnson seems to engage the latter strategy, the defensive strategy, to protect her own identity in reacting to the sergeant's aggressive language, Rebecca acts in both a defensive and offensive manner. However, in struggling for power, Rebecca seems to be partially victorious compared with Sara's situation. Once Sara initiates to express herself and holds her position of power, her positive face is attacked by the sergeant. The notion of "fucking intellectual" is directed at Sara Johnson, who tries to preserve her actual structural subject position as a member of "mountain people" and her existential position as the prisoner's wife. In a positive impoliteness strategy, the sergeant keeps on terrorizing Sara's identity for belonging to the mountain people. On the other hand, the idea of "fucking intellectual" implies that Sara may not belong to the mountain people, the marginalized group. Sara and her incarcerated husband may be kept captive wrongly since they can speak the state language. Moreover, Sara's assertiveness is highly disparaged by the officer through utilizing taboo language, when he raises doubts about Sara's language.

4.2.1. Visitors Room

The major thrust of the play lies in the second scene, in which the elderly woman is blocked for not speaking the state language. Being unable to speak the capital language, she is being observed by the guards to abandon the mountain language. Challenging the mountain people's language and identity and impeding the old woman from interacting give rise to another example of impoliteness. The old woman's speech "*I have bread, I have apples*" is highly notable since it vindicates her access to language. Goodspeed (2019) makes a contrast between the old woman's caring, gentle, loving, and supportive words (*everyone is waiting for you*) and the guard's belligerent shout at the old woman (*forbidden, forbidden, forbidden, your language is forbidden*) (24). In terms of impoliteness, shouting would also be regarded as a way of conveying impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996: 358). Furthermore, shouting would be a case of flouting the maxim of manners since it is notably louder than is entirely necessary for effective communication (Bousfield, 2008b: 137).

Equally menacing could be another scene in the second act of *Mountain Language* when the prisoner asserts that:

Prisoner: I have got a wife and three kids. You are all a pile of shit.

Guard: You have got what? What did you say? You have got what?

The above-mentioned lines might be one of the traumatizing scenes taking place in the play. The guard is willing to dissociate the prisoner from human society and is quite willing to deny his presence and identity, bringing about another moment of positive impoliteness. It looks as though, based on the state's principles, only those people of authority and power have the right to possess a wife and children. The prisoner's sentence that "*I have got a wife and three kids*" is likely to trigger a change in power positions, and it could threaten the guard's position of authority (Ali, 2018: 119). Excluding the prisoners from the natural social life would be considered positive impoliteness, exerted on the prisoners and their women. In other words, the existential subject position including husband and father that the prisoner claims for himself is denigrated by the sergeant to corroborate his own superiority over the prisoners and their family.



4.2.2. Voice in the Darkness

The third part of the play unfolds another impolite moment raised by the sergeant, questioning the identity of the young woman:

Sergeant's voice: Who's that fucking woman? What's that fucking woman doing here? Who let that fucking woman through that fucking door?

Ostensibly, the sergeant would not pursue the typical goal of information or response seeking. However, the potential objective of these challenging questions posed by the sergeant signifies criticizing rather than focusing on the knowledge about the real identity of the young woman. Sara Johnson's face, power, and identity were targeted by the sergeant's rhetorical questions, yielding negative impoliteness because they endeavor to damage her negative face. Furthermore, the emergence of taboo language in the sergeant's rebellious questions would corroborate the idea of impoliteness in his demeanor to trivialize the self-asserted subject positions that the young woman claims. To reiterate what was acknowledged earlier, the sergeant's questions are not due to cultural or linguistic misinterpretation but rather on account of deliberately attacking the young woman's face.

Moreover, entitling the young woman "*Lady Duck Muck*" is a case of using inappropriate identity markers, which Culpeper (1996) views as an example of positive impoliteness. While the young woman has the audacity to preserve her identity (either as a woman or as someone who can speak the state language), the sergeant uses an improper title to deride Sara. Moreover, "*Lady Duck Muck*" is an instance of insincere approbation, perceived as mock politeness in Culpeper's theory. This might be identical with the case of "*darling*" in *Ashes to Ashes*, which we tend to identify as "decent exploitation".

4.3. Re-evaluating the role of context in *Ashes to Ashes* and *Mountain Language*

A crucial question to pose is what makes the two examined plays distinct. Putting this a slightly differently, what is noticeable in the plays to consider in terms of impoliteness and identity? The answer lurks beneath the idea of context. While *Ashes to Ashes* takes place in the lovely setting of a home, *Mountain Language* is set in a prison, in a military setting abounding with armed forces. On this account, what draws our attention is that aggressive language in *Ashes to Ashes* seems a little uncanny compared with the impolite linguistic behavior observed in *Mountain Language*. Taking into consideration Mills' argument, in the context of the army face-threatening linguistic behavior engaged by the participants is normalized as a part of the military training. This does not mean that in *Mountain Language* impoliteness is allowed and not an aberrant behavior. We suggested earlier that in *Mountain Language* all the impoliteness strategies detected by the reader are conscious and purposeful, and in the context of the prison, such face-threatening acts may be expected.

Following Culpeper's (1996) line of argument, we strongly believe that, in both contexts, impoliteness occurs in a systematic manner. Exploring the intentions of the speakers, we maintained that the only plausible justification for the speakers' impolite linguistic behaviors is verification of their own self asserted subject positions and vilification of the subject positions of the oppressed group, the minorities. While in the former the speaker claims his/her own privilege, in the latter the speaker disclaims the subject positions of the oppressed group as it could be detrimental for him/her. This is evident in both plays in parallel trends. Whereas in *Ashes to Ashes* the concept of identity is understood in terms of the participant's religion and political inclination, in *Mountain Language*, identity is defined as language.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to evaluate how effectively impoliteness as a linguistic device could illuminate power relations between the characters in Harold Pinter's plays. In this paper we conjectured that what motivates impoliteness in the characters' dialogue is the situation of conflict and social disharmony. In fact, in seeking dominance and power over each other, the characters manipulate their language to break social norms. Moreover, a salient idea in our investigation was the notion of identity, which is about to be disregarded by torturers. We indicated how people's self-asserted or other-asserted subject positions are questioned and devalued by the more powerful interlocutor. We argued how the people of authority tend to destruct the identity of less powerful people through impoliteness and how the oppressed ones try to construct and preserve their own identity and power through countering face attacks. Then, the political issue and the power imbalance between the ordinary people and the state people would be the determinant of their language and their interactions.

This study represents a further step towards developing literary pragmatics as it furthers our understanding of the role of impoliteness in identity construction/destruction in literary discourse. It should, therefore, be of interest to stylisticians, pragmatics, and literary critics who seek to unravel mysteries underlying language of the fictional texts and to explore such complexities.

It is also suggested that a similar analysis could be effectively applied to other plays, like Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, which is a felicitous choice for its violent language. Since the two plays are imbued with some common features with respect to their language, a comparative study concerning the impoliteness strategies in Beckett's



Endgame and Pinter's plays would yield valuable insights.

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