14th International Language, Literature and Stylistics Symposium

Direct-Indirect Impoliteness and Power Struggles in Harold Pinter's Plays

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Abstract

Characters in Harold Pinter's plays are always on alert against any kind of physical or psychological threat. They verbally struggle for survival or dominance. This struggle is characterised by direct or indirect impoliteness strategies they use. Impoliteness in their language is the most important weapon to win the struggle for power. Taking Culpeper's five impoliteness strategies as its basis, this paper examines Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957) and *Old Times* (1970) in terms of the linguistic impoliteness strategies the characters employ in their power struggles, their preferences to adopt direct or indirect strategies and the way these preferences affect the power relations between them.

Keywords: Harold Pinter; politeness/impoliteness theory; negative/positive face; direct/indirect impoliteness.

1. Introduction

Nobel Prize-winning English playwright Harold Pinter's plays are famous for his characters' struggle for power. Knowles (1995: 190) states that "Pinter's writings have always shown a consistent concern with direct and indirect

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forms of power – physical, social, and oral". His major plays are usually set in a single room whose occupants are threatened by outside forces or people. Often these characters are ordinary people who have no strong desires or ambitions and who are engaged in a struggle for survival or domination. There are those who are in power and those who play the role of the victim, powerless and weak. In this power struggle, the most effective weapon used is the "language". According to Peacock (1997: 48) "By lowering language's informational potential Pinter makes the audience aware of the strategic employment of language as a mode of defense, but at the same time he also reveals its potential as a weapon". The language used for these purposes is often impolite.

   Linguistic politeness is often described as attempts to maintain each other's face in interaction. The most well-known and dominant theory on linguistic politeness is that of Brown and Levinson (1978). According Brown and Levinson (1987: 61-62), everyone has a *face*, "the public self-image" that they want to maintain. Mills (2003: 6) describes Politeness as the expression of the speakers' intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts toward another. The term *face* is divided into two different categories by Brown and Levinson (1987: 61-62): *negative* and *positive face*. *Negative face* is the want to preserve one's own independence, and *positive face* the want to be liked by others. They further identified two kinds of politeness, deriving the concept of face: *negative* and *positive politeness*. *Negative politeness* requires making a request less infringing and respecting a person's right to act freely. *Positive politeness* seeks to establish a positive relationship between parties; and it requires respecting a person's need to be liked and understood (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 70).

   Generally politeness and impoliteness are considered to be opposites of each other but Mills (2003: 139) disagrees saying that they cannot be taken to be "polar opposites since impoliteness functions in very different and context-specific ways". Jonathan Culpeper develops impoliteness strategies which are based on the theory of Brown & Levinson (1987). Culpeper (1996: 8) says: "Instead of enhancing or supporting face, these impoliteness strategies are a means of attacking face". Culpeper (1996: 8-9) defines five impoliteness strategies:

> **1.** *Bald on record impoliteness* - The face threatening act (FTA), a threat to a person's face, is performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way in circumstances where face is not irrelevant or minimized (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 69). It is the most obvious and straightforward impoliteness.
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> **2. Positive impoliteness** - Refers to the strategies that are designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants, the desire to be appreciated or approved of. Below is a list of some strategies for positive impoliteness:
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> - Ignore, snub the other - fail to acknowledge the other's presence.
> - Exclude the other from an activity
> - Disassociate from the other - for example, deny association or common ground with the other; avoid sitting together.
> - Be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic
> - Use inappropriate identity markers - for example, use title and surname when a close relationship pertains, or a nickname when a distant relationship pertains.
> - Use obscure or secretive language - for example, mystify the other with jargon, or use a code known to others in the group, but not the target.
> - Seek disagreement - select a sensitive topic.
> - Make the other feel uncomfortable - for example, do not avoid silence, joke, or use small talk.
> - Use taboo words - swear, or use abusive or profane language.
> - Call the other names - use derogatory nominations.
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> **3. Negative impoliteness** - the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's negative face wants.
> Frighten - instil a belief that action detrimental to the other will occur. Below is a list of some strategies for negative impoliteness:
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> - Condescend, scorn or ridicule - emphasize your relative power. Be contemptuous. Do not treat the other seriously. Belittle the other (e.g. use diminutives).
> - Invade the other's space - literally (e.g. position yourself closer to the other than the relationship permits) or metaphorically (e.g. ask for or speak about information which is too