IMPOLITENESS IN ONLINE CRITICISM OF POLITICIANS

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Abstract: The role of social media in society has evolved significantly. Social media has become more than just a tool for maintaining personal connections. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter have emerged as important sources of current information while also serving as spaces for people to express their personal opinions and perspectives. As a result, these platforms are a valuable resource for linguistic research, particularly in the field of online interaction. The present study explored the manifestation of impoliteness in online criticism. Data were procured from a local Malaysian English newspaper's Facebook page in which the six articles for this study were published. 300 Facebook comments conveyed as criticisms were analysed based on Culpeper's (1996, 2011) impoliteness strategies. The study offers insights into linguistic impoliteness in online communication – Facebook comments posted by Malaysians, who are ironically known for portraying polite behaviour in communication as a symbol of collectivism in the society.

Keywords: Criticism, Facebook, Impoliteness, Pragmatics

1. Introduction

Communication is essential for humans as we cannot survive without interacting with our environment. In fact, society itself is formed through interactions. Our relationships with others play a significant role in shaping our well-being as they help develop social support, relationship fulfilment, self-esteem and a sense of community (Cohen & Wills, 1985). With the Internet now enabling people to communicate without geographical boundaries, many recognize its potential to mediate communication. However, the absence of nonverbal cues, lack of warmth and reduced demand for engagement may lead to impersonality, shallow interactions and difficulties in building social rapport (Lee et al., 2010). Furthermore, these limitations may contribute to the formation of fake identities and anonymity, allowing individuals to conceal their true selves and become bolder and more open in criticising others. This phenomenon aligns with Suler's (2004) concept of online disinhibition effect which suggests that anonymity may reduce individuals' self-restraint, encouraging behaviours that might not occur in face-to-face communication.

In the Malaysian sociocultural context, politeness constitutes one of the key aspects to mould Malay identity and being polite can be seen through verbal and non-verbal norms. Nevertheless, recently the issue of impoliteness among Malaysian citizens has become more prominent especially in online communication where people can freely express themselves, unfiltered (Azman et al., 2020). This trend of being impolite can also be observed in political fields particularly when a general election is approaching. In this situation, Malaysians frequently criticise political figures that they oppose using offensive and profane words openly (Omar et al., 2023). Criticism which is also a form of interaction can be realised as an impolite act. Nguyen (2005), defined criticism as an act of negative evaluation towards an individual's actions or statements with an intention of improvement or for the benefit of a third party. While criticism is not inherently impolite, but it could also lead to face-threatening depending on linguistics choices. Therefore, drawing upon Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness framework,

this study will explore the impoliteness strategies employed in Malaysians' online criticism of political figures.

2. Jonathan Culpeper's Impoliteness Framework

Impoliteness is one of the key areas in the field of pragmatics, as it focuses on how language can be used to cause tension or conflict in many social interactions. Most of the time, research examines politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987) or how speakers maintain harmony and protect each other's face. However, Culpeper (1996) has paved a new door by highlighting how language is used to attack or damage a face. Culpeper (1996) impoliteness framework has provided many new insights into social norms, power relations and shows how communication can build relationships as well as disrupt them. Hence, this area of research helps many researchers to analyse verbal behaviour not only in daily conversation but also in a wide range of settings such as institutional discourse and online communication.

According to Culpeper (1996), impoliteness is a structured model that aims to explain how speakers attack or damage a face through language. To simply put, the impoliteness framework is a communicative behaviour that is intended to cause face loss. It is one of the earliest systematic impoliteness strategies, and according to Culpeper (1996), it can be divided into five different strategies: bald-on-record, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock and withholding politeness. The first strategy; bald-on-record refers to direct and clear face attacks without any softening, while the second strategy aims to damage an individual's need to be liked or approved. The second strategy; positive impoliteness, focuses on using insulting language or ignoring them. Culpeper (1996) explained the third strategy; negative impoliteness concerns an individual's freedom of action such as threatening, mocking or invading personal space. Sarcasm or mock politeness is the fourth impoliteness strategy, where an individual uses polite forms in an insincere way to show contempt. The last impoliteness strategy, withholding politeness, occurs when an individual fails to show expected politeness, such as basic manners like thanking or greeting someone. On the whole, addressing these strategies in discourse is fundamental in identifying impolite language.

Interestingly, the framework first appeared in 1996 and was developed in 2005 and further extended by Culpeper in 2011. The refined framework aims to give greater emphasis to context and the process of evaluation. Culpeper (2005) claimed that impoliteness involves both the speaker's intentions and the hearer's interpretation of whether the utterance is offensive. He argued this view is more on the interactional approach, which emphasises that meaning is co-constructed between participants in communication. In short, impoliteness is not just about saying something mean; it is about how people understand it and feel about it in a certain situation. Expanding the original 1996 strategy-based framework, Culpeper (2011) also introduced the idea of conventionalised impoliteness formulae in his book, Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence (2011), which later became widely recognised as a more comprehensive and theoretically grounded account of impoliteness. As defined by Culpeper (2011), impoliteness is a negative attitude of particular behaviours in certain situations, shaped by people's expectations, preferences, and beliefs about social norms. The central idea of Culpeper's (2011) theory is offensive words or phrases, such as taboo words or insults, are widely known in a speech community and various contexts. These contexts include media discourse, institutional talk and online communication. Overall, this framework is more dynamic, as it provides a clear set of strategies that are applicable to various contexts and social norms.

1.1 *Past Studies On Impoliteness Strategies*

Many studies have been conducted to explore the instances of using impolite remarks and the strategies employed by users to express themselves across cultures. A previous study by Ibrahim (2020) investigated how age and gender differences affected the use of impoliteness strategies on Twitter in response to political tweets. The researchers examined 89 relevant tweets chosen from an initial sample of 100 posts using Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness framework. The results show that impolite language is frequently used on Twitter, especially when reacting to political information. The results also show

notable differences according to gender and age. In general, male users of 25-35 years old are more likely than female users to employ impoliteness strategies. Regarding strategy preferences, negative and bald-on-record impoliteness are the most frequently employed, whereas withholding politeness and off-record strategies are the least common. Users in this category was found to be using such strategy to underestimate others and humiliate the targets for them to look powerful. Similarly, a study by Santosa (2020) found that negative impoliteness was the most used strategy as a cyberbullying instance in an Indonesian Instagram gossip page. While this study did not emphasize on gender differences, yet it aligned with the study by Ibrahim (2020) whereby the strategy; negative impoliteness was frequently used due to its effectiveness in attacking the target's face, particularly through acts such as intimidation, ridicule, and belittlement.

Meanwhile, Norouzi and Rahimi (2025) explore the role of impoliteness in digital communication, focusing on gender-based differences in impoliteness strategies used in English comments on Instagram news pages. The study analysed a corpus of 520 comments (17,850 words) produced by male and female users on the Instagram accounts of CNN, BBC, Fox News, and *The New York Times* between 2022 and 2025, using Culpeper's (2011) framework of impoliteness strategies. The findings indicate that bald-on-record impoliteness is the most frequently employed strategy, while withholding politeness is the least common. Statistical analysis showed no significant gender differences overall, even though female users used negative impoliteness slightly more frequently than male users, aligning with societal norms that promote face-saving behaviours.

Overall, these studies show that impoliteness is prevalent in online interactions on social media platforms, with bald-on-record and negative strategies continuously showing up as the most prevalent types. Some studies stress the importance of demographic factors like age and gender, while others highlight the role of platform norms in shaping impoliteness behaviours. All of these results point to the need for more comparative and cross-cultural research, indicating that impoliteness in digital communication is influenced by a combination of environmental, social, and platform-related factors.

3. Methodology

The study was based on the analysis of 300 comments posted on Facebook in response to the Malaysian 15th General Election discussed in six online newspaper articles. Based on purposive sampling, the first 50 comments posted on each newspaper article was recruited into the study corpus. The main inclusion criterion that guided the data collection was the languages used. Only comments written in Malay or English were collected into the research corpus whereas comments written in other languages were excluded. As the articles were written in Malay language, the comments were mostly written in the same language. Another inclusion criterion was the primary focus of the comments which should be related to the Malaysian 15th General Election, considering the situation in which Malaysians were highly engaged in and alert to the political issues surrounding the election reported in the news. While the study corpus comprised only Malay and English comments, the study acknowledges the lack of cultural variation which may be found in comments written in other languages spoken in Malaysia such as Mandarin and Tamil. The analytical framework used in coding the data was the strategies of impoliteness proposed by Culpeper (1996). Coding was carried out using the ATLAS.ti software and which involved several rounds of coding and recoding (Saldaña, 2016). Online comments were often written in short sentences but required thorough understanding of authors' underlying intention of posting the comments. Hence, the comments were first perused to gain better insights. Each comment was then segmented into meaningful units for deductive coding based on the framework in Table 1. The coding process was iterative to allow for refinement of strategies if new patterns emerged in the study corpus.

Table 1: Strategies of Impoliteness

Bald on record impoliteness	The FTA is performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way in circumstances where face is not irrelevant or minimised.
Positive impoliteness	The use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants.
Negative impoliteness	The use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's negative face wants.
Sarcasm or mock politeness	The FFA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere.

4. Findings and Discussion

Data analysis shows that the main impoliteness strategies employed by Facebook users in their criticism towards Malaysian politicians and political parties were positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness and mock politeness.

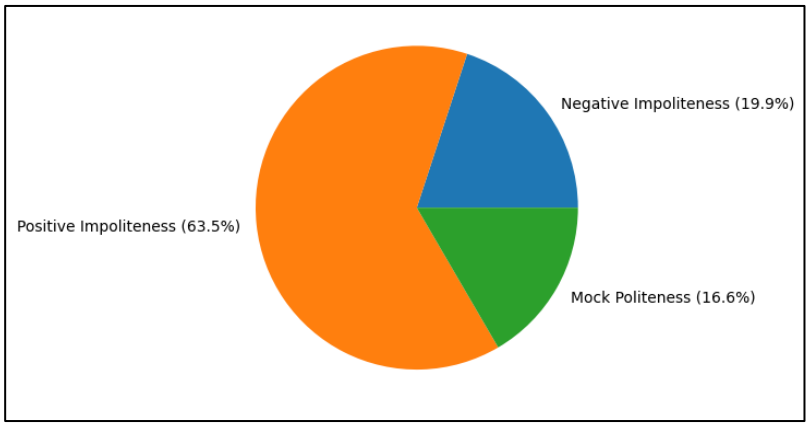

Figure 1: Distribution of impoliteness strategies used in online criticisms

The chart above presents that positive impoliteness was most frequently employed, indicated by the highest percentage, 63.5%. The second most frequently employed impoliteness strategy was negative impoliteness with a percentage of 19.9%. The least employed impoliteness strategy, mock politeness, showed a little difference in its percentage with negative impoliteness which was only 16.6%.

4.1 *Positive Impoliteness*

In excerpt 1, the criticism attacked the politician's positive face by associating him/her as a liability. However, the Facebook user tried to minimize the threat by apologizing, "*Maaf dato'*" and hedged the statement with the phrases "*merupakan*" and "*sekadar pandangan peribadi*". Apart from that, the Facebook user also recognized the politician's status and addressed him/her as "*dato'*", an honorary title given based on an individual who gave excellent contributions to Malaysia.

1) "Maaf dato'.. saya merasakan dato' merupakan liabiliti yg paling besar ditanggung oleh [Party B] sekarang.. sekadar pandangan peribadi.."

Excerpt 2 shows how the Facebook user undermined a political party's move to form a strategic alliance with another party. In the first clause of the comment, "*Belum bertanding dah nak bergabung dgn parti lain*" the Facebook user only highlighted the party's intention although it implied the Facebook user's attempt at criticising the move. Following this, the next clause, "*X confident menang ler tu*" indicated the Facebook user's attack on the political party's credibility and its contesting politicians' in winning the election.

2) "Belum bertanding dah nak bergabung dgn parti lain X confident menang ler tu..."

In excerpt 3, the Facebook user disregarded the criticised politician's status or title by addressing him as "*ko*". The usage of "*ko*" was present twice as shown in the phrases, "*kalau ko ckp*" and "*confirm ko*

kena naik turun mahkamah". This usage would put the Facebook user and the politician on an equal status. Besides, the Facebook user also criticised the information revealed by the politician "*sy dapat info sumber terdekat*". This phrase doubted the politician's trustworthiness and could trigger others to have doubts about him/her too.

3) "lepas tu ayat dia " sy dapat info sumber terdekat " kalau ko ckp "sy ada bukti kukuh".. confirm ko kena naik turun mahkamah."

4.2 *Negative Impoliteness*

Excerpt 4 shows an Facebook user's disagreement with a political party's move to recruit an Islamic scholar into the political sphere. The Facebook user did not directly state the disagreement but phrased it as a question indicated by the sentence "*Kenapa lah ulamak dibawa masuk politik*". Although the phrase did not end with a question mark (?), the sentence could be clearly understood as an attempt to criticise the political party's decision. The next sentence, "*Siap Di beri kerusi lagi*" reinforced the Facebook user's criticism against and disagreement with the Islamic scholar's electoral contest.

4) "Kenapa lah ulamak dibawa masuk politik. Siap Di beri kerusi lagi."

In excerpt 5, contesting politicians were criticised for their failed commitment to attend sessions held at the House of Representatives. This criticism was translated into a command as conveyed in the phrase, "*berhenti lah bertanding*". The command was not stated directly, but was hedged by the phrase "*Saya cadangkan*" which minimised the impact of the threat to the criticised politicians' negative face.

5) Saya cadangkan kepada calon yang tak boleh bagi komitmen untuk datang dewan rakyat berhenti lah bertanding....

Excerpt 6 shows the use of negative impoliteness strategy in the suggestion of joining forces with other parties instead of Party D, "*gabung la dgn parti lain*". The Facebook user first expressed his/her approval of the politician's plan to contest the general election and aim to become the next prime minister. Threat to the negative face was present in the cricitism against the politician's forging of an alliance with Party D and proposed merging with other parties.

6) Nak jadi Perdana menteri sgt boleh, tapi keluar dari bersekongkol dgn [Party D] tu, gabung la dgn parti lain..

4.3 *Mock Politeness*

At a superficial level, the Facebook user in excerpt 7 seemed to compliment the politician's electoral strategy by describing it as a good game "*cantik game*". However, a close scrutiny of the statement suggested that the Facebook user actually ridiculed the strategy. This was indicated by the nickname used to refer to him "*wak*" which is a Javanese Malay term of endearment commonly used for elderly male and female. In addition to "*wak*" The politician was also not addressed by his real name, but was addressed by a Javanese-pronounced name.

7) "cantik game wak [politician J] nie"

In excerpt 8, the Facebook user expressed sympathy towards politician A "*Kesian jugak*". The next phrase revealed that the Facebook user's sympathy was a mock at the politician's ambition of becoming the next prime minister. This was indicated by the phrase "*tanpa segan silu menyebutnya dari dulu lagi*". In the Malay culture, "*segan silu*" or to be restrained in one's behaviour is a form of politeness. Hence, describing the politician's behaviour in achieving his aim to become the next prime minister with no restraint was depreciated by the Facebook user.

8) "Hehehe... Kesian jugak tengok [politician A] ni.. Begitu teringin sekali utk menjadi PM tanpa segan silu menyebutnya dari dulu lagi.."

Excerpt 9 shows an Facebook user's prayer for politician J. However, the prayer "*Aamiin Ya RabbalnAlamin*" was uttered with no sincerity as the Facebook user had hoped for the politician to be defeated in the election "*Semoga wak … tewas*"

9) "Semoga wak [politician J] tewas Aamiin Ya RabbalnAlamin."

The present study shows that the most frequent impoliteness strategy manifested in Facebook users' online criticisms towards politicians was positive impoliteness. A similar finding was reported by Chiew and Mohd Faizal (2023). This could be influenced by the similar context in which both studies were conducted – comments posted on social media by Malaysian netizens regarding topics that could trigger Malaysians' emotional concerns. This finding also revealed a contradiction to the Malay concept of face which places importance on one's face as self-presentation and is concerned with respect and public self-image (Raja Suleiman & Maros, 2021). This face-concept is related to positive face wants, but when engaging in online communication, Malaysians tend to dismiss this concept and not hesitate to damage others' positive face. The bold shift from being reserved to being expressive could also be influenced by the relatively unconstrained style of online communication which could trigger negative reactions more easily than face-to-face communication (Villa-Pérez & Monroy, 2026). Meanwhile, Benaouda and Awad (2026) showed that female netizens were more likely to employ positive impoliteness than male netizens. However, this study did not factor in gender differences in the use of impoliteness strategies in online comments because social media users could alter their online identities and maintain anonymity particularly in discussing political issues (Atanesyan et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion

The present study has attempted to identify the ways impoliteness was manifested in online criticism specifically in Facebook comments towards Malaysian politicians. Malaysian netizens, specifically Facebook users were more likely to make impolite comments that attacked politicians' positive face wants or their desire to be approved of and appreciated by potential voters. In their negative impoliteness realizations, the Facebook users would criticise politicians' credibility and their capabilities in leading the country. In their criticisms, they would negatively evaluate the election campaigns run by political parties and their contesting candidates by making negative associations with the politicians negatively-perceived credibility and their past conduct and achievements. The Facebook users did not hesitate to make negative comments openly on social media which verged on impoliteness, a conduct that is rarely observed in face-to-face communication within the Malaysian community. This study has only identified impoliteness strategies employed by Malaysians in Facebook comments. A more detailed analysis needs to be considered by future studies to identify and categorise conventionalised impoliteness formulae (Culpeper, 2010) manifested in online criticisms towards politicians. Ultimately, the study findings suggest that, online platforms such as social media may create conditions that increase the likelihood of impolite communication because users can conceal their identities and disguise themselves online by creating fake identities. Thus, messages advocating respectful communication should be amplified at every level of society.

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