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Impoliteness on the political stage:
The case of the 2019 final Macedonian presidential debate

Abstract

Electoral debates are a win-lose game in which the stakes for the political contenders are extremely high. The antagonistic nature of these encounters very frequently results in impoliteness or face aggravating moves with which the debaters aim to hurt the opponent's positive or negative face.

The aim of this research is to investigate the impoliteness strategies employed by politicians during electoral debates. Garcia-Pastor's (2008) positive-face and negative-face impoliteness strategies are taken as a starting point in the analysis at hand. The final electoral debate of the 2019 presidential elections in the Republic of North Macedonia is used as a data source for this research, which is based on several different hypotheses and is both qualitatively and quantitative oriented. The findings of the research are in line with the insights gained from previous studies, which, more or less, suggests that Macedonian politicians follow the mainstream "rules" when it comes to using impoliteness in political debates.

Keywords

impoliteness strategies, positive and negative face, electoral debates

1 Introduction

Both politeness and impoliteness are intrinsic parts of social interactions. According to the seminal theory of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) linguistic politeness is an attempt to exercise power over one's interlocutors whilst simultaneously ensuring that they are not offended in the process. Conversely, impoliteness, which has traditionally been considered a secondary product of social interaction and a simple deviation from certain politeness principles (Limberg 2008), is viewed as an attempt to exercise power over one's interlocutors whilst simultaneously ensuring that they are offended in the process (Bousfield 2008).

Impoliteness is a pervasive feature of many different contexts (e.g. army training, political discussions, courtroom trails, etc.) (Culpeper 1996; Lakoff 1989, in Limberg 2008), but in comparison with politeness, impoliteness has been

considerably neglected and under-researched. Recently, however, a number of researchers have noted this disproportionate and misbalanced treatment of these two interrelated phenomena, and opted for a more thorough analysis of impoliteness (Bousfield and Locher 2008).

Impoliteness in political debates surfaced as one of the most legitimate targets of some rather recent studies as politics presents a particularly conducive ground for generating and using impoliteness (Garcia-Pastor 2008). Politicians, in their attempt to promote their political position and ensure the votes of the electorate, during pre-election campaigns, in particular, very frequently exploit their linguistic repertoire to intentionally cause offence to their political opponents (Trajkova and Neshkovska, 2018; Trajkova and Neshkovska, 2019).

The paper at hand seeks to make a modest contribution to the studies whose main aims is to unveil impoliteness in the context of political debates. More specifically, the accent here is placed on disclosing the impoliteness strategies employed by Macedonian politicians in the course of a crucial political debate held during the 2019 presidential campaign. Garcia-Pastor's model of impoliteness strategies serves as a basis for this research, and the main aim is to unveil what impoliteness strategies prevail in the heated political debates between the last two contenders running for the presidential seat: Stevo Pendarovski and Gordana Siljanovska-Dafkova. Given the fact that both contenders have had an extensive academic as well as political career, and also given the gender difference, it was interesting to observe the occurrence of similar and dissimilar patterns in their usage of impoliteness strategies in their final political debate, when the pressure for both contenders practically has reached its culmination.

2 Theoretical background

The research on impoliteness as stated in a growing number of papers is long overdue, since the accent has always been placed on the opposite phenomenon – politeness. Nevertheless, recently, impoliteness has started attracting researchers' attention and the insights into this phenomenon, slowly but surely, seem to be gaining momentum (Culpeper 2005; Bousfield 2008; Lanchenicht 1980, etc.). This means that there are no more dilemmas that politeness and impoliteness should be studied as two sides of the same coin, i.e. as equally important counterparts. Stevenson (1882: 30-31) (in Jamet and Jobet 2013: vii) rightfully noted that "two forces are at work in conversations: a) a positive force which secures harmony during verbal interactions, and b) a negative force which is based on verbal struggle". Logically, both these forces deserve an equal deal of attention. This premise has been adopted by a host of other researchers who argue that an adequate account of the dynamics of interpersonal communication should consider both the hostile as well

as the cooperative communication (Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann 2003; Bousfield and Locher 2008, etc.).

Impoliteness is an unavoidable component of conflictive talk whose presence, in its own right, is found in various contexts ranging from army training (Culpeper 1996), to courtroom trails (Lakoff 1989; Penman 1990), family interactions (Vuchinich 1990), therapeutic discourse (Labov and Fanshel 1977), "everyday conversation" (Beebe 1995), fictional texts (Culpeper 1998; Tannen 1990) (in Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann 2003), political discourse in televised political panel discussions (Zupnik 1994), parliamentary debates (Christie 2002; Harris 2001; P´erez de Ayala 2001; Rudanko 1995), political broadcast interviews (Fernandez García 2000; Mullany 2002) and electoral debates (Agha 1997; Fernandez García 2000; Galasinski, 1998) (in Garcia-Pastor 2008). It goes without saying that, in all these different contexts and interactions, due to its complex nature, impoliteness can have very grave implications not only for interpersonal communication but the society at large (Neshkovska & Trajkova, 2017).

Classic politeness theories (Brown and Levinson 1987; Leech 1983) give the impression that impoliteness is the *result of doing nothing*, i.e. the result of not taking redressive action or not undertaking communicative work in order to abide by politeness maxims. This approach, however, does not accommodate the rich array of purposeful communicative action undertaken to achieve impoliteness (Culpeper 2008).

Culpeper (2005), one of the main researchers of impoliteness, claims that "impoliteness is considered the nasty marginal stuff on the fringes of language and indeed society" and that it comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates face attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behaviour as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2).

Culpeper's definition of impoliteness is decidedly not the only one. In fact, so far, numerous definitions have been proposed and no consensus has been reached as to how impoliteness should be defined (Locher and Bousfield 2008). Thus, for instance, Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann (2003) define impoliteness as "the use of strategies designed to attack face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony". Bousfield (2007) takes impoliteness as the issuing of intentionally 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 maximised in some way to heighten the face damage inflicted. Furthermore, he underlines that for impoliteness to be considered successful, the intention of the speaker (or "author") to "offend" (threaten/damage face) must be understood by those in a receiver role (in Bousfield and Locher 2008).

Garcia–Pastor (2008), drawing on the previous definitions of impoliteness, presents impoliteness as a speaker's intentional communication of face aggravation

or attack to the hearer, who perceives and/or constructs the speaker's behaviour as intentionally face aggravating or attacking in such a way that what is under attack is either a) the hearer's positive face, i.e. "the desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired", or b) the hearer's negative face, namely, "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others".

As can be noted in the definitions above, the concept of "face" is central to the impoliteness theories (and politeness as well)[1]. Evidently, in the case of impoliteness, rather than constituting face, the effect achieved is opposite – impoliteness entails a threat to "face".

Another concept which is in a close nexus with impoliteness and which deserves special attention in the context of this research is the concept of power. Power is vital in communicative encounters where there is a conflict of interests between conversational participants (Garcia-Pastor 2008). Political debates present a typical instance of such encounters as debaters normally bid for power through positive self-presentation and negative other-depiction (Trajkova, 2018; Jaworski and Galasinski 2000, in Garcia-Pastor 2008). Garcia–Pastor (2008) highlights that the antagonism in political debates is fundamentally prompted by the competition for a determinate political office. Debaters are acutely aware that political campaign debates are win-lose games, and hence their hostile character which becomes salient in candidates' reciprocal exchanges. In an earlier research, García-Pastor (2006) depicts power in electoral debates as interactional *persuasive* power since politicians' ultimate goal in their interactions with the public, according to her, is to attain persuasion. In these exchanges, politicians employ impoliteness to discredit the opponent, and implicitly score points for their own image. Garcia-Pastor also adds that this also creates a discursive situation in which a politician coerces the adversary into having to respond somehow to such discrediting action, and, this results in the former exerting power over the latter.

Another point relevant for this research and closely related to politics is the relation of impoliteness and gender. Namely, nowadays, immense attention is drawn to the role of gender in the speechmaking process, as linguists often claim that men and women command language differently. Whilst women see the act of speaking as a means of establishing personal relationships, men use language as a tool to obtain and convey information (Holmes 1995). In addition, some researchers

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[1] Goffman (1967: 5) was the first researcher to define 'face' as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for her/himself by the line others assume s/he has taken during a particular contact"; "an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes". The notion of 'face' was then adopted into linguistic theorising by Brown and Levinson (1987), who depict it as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself consisting of two related aspects: (a) negative face: the basic claim to . . . freedom of action and freedom from imposition (b) positive face: the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' claimed by interactants, crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of."

interested in gender studies claim that female and male speaking styles vary due to the social attitudes towards the masculine and feminine roles in society. Thus, for instance, in a public space like politics, men are considered to be more dominant, therefore, the masculine way of speaking (such as being assertive, competitive, aggressive, interruptive, confrontational, direct, autonomous, dominating, task-oriented) is largely considered to be an appropriate style (Holmes and Schnurr 2006). On the contrary, women are believed to be naturally empathic, less prone to interruptions, more skilled in turn-taking, polite and less confrontational or direct. Unlike men, they tend to use powerless speech forms like tag questions, hedges, apologies, forms of politeness, etc. (Mills 2003). Not surprisingly, women seem to be negatively assessed, and are claimed to sound unconvincing whilst using feminine speech strategies in a male dominant sphere. Therefore, despite the undesirable nature of masculine speech strategies, women tend to opt for them when exposed to the male dominated public spaces (Totibadze 2017).

Finally, the last point of relevance to be addressed in this study concerns the linguistic strategies people use to generate impoliteness in their communicative interactions. Thus, Culpeper (2010), for instance, suggests that there are regular linguistic means with which impoliteness is achieved. Amongst the most common ones he mentions the following: vocatives (e.g. "moron", "plonker", "dickhead", "pig", "shit", "bastard", "loser", etc.); personal negative evaluations (e.g. "you're nuts", "you're hopeless", "you're pathetic", "you're stupid", etc.); dismissals (e.g. "get lost /out"; "fuck/piss off"); silencers (e.g. "shut it/your mouth", "the fuck up", etc.); threats (e.g. "I'll smash your face", "beat the shit out of you", "box your ears", etc.), etc. Culpeper (2010), however, also notes that impoliteness is not inherent in the semantic meaning of these linguistic formulae. On the contrary, he offers evidence that implicit ways of achieving impoliteness are slightly more frequent than explicit ways deploying the above-mentioned impoliteness formulae.

Garcia-Pastor (2008) too proposes a classification of impoliteness strategies based primarily on a thorough investigation of political debates. Her model consists of a set of positive face-oriented impoliteness strategies and negative face-oriented strategies. The positive face-oriented strategies include the following: convey dislike for, and disagreement with hearer and close others (his/her/their things, actions, values and opinions); use aggressive punning; be ironic/sarcastic; deny in-group status; disassociate, distance from hearer; ignore hearer; belittle or diminish the importance of hearer and hearer's actions, things values and opinions. The negative face-oriented strategies, on the other hand, include the following: state the communicative act(s) as common or shared knowledge; indebt hearer; refer to things, duties and rules not respected, fulfilled or complied with respectfully; increase imposition weight; refuse hearer and hearer's things, actions, values and opinions; challenge; frighten and dare.