



Impoliteness, conflict, and power: an analysis of impoliteness strategies used in Pinter's *The Homecoming*

1. Introduction

Harold Pinter's play *The Homecoming* won a Tony Award for Best Play in 1967, and became 'a huge popular and critical success' (Billington 2007: 194, 325). It tells a story about the family of Teddy, who, after living in America for six years, comes back to his home in North London where he grows up (Trussler 1973: 119). He is a 'brain-drained college professor' (Trussler 1973: 119) and 'academic philosopher' (Billington 1996: 171) in his 'middle thirties' (Pinter 1966: 6). Teddy also brings back his wife, Ruth, in her 'early thirties', to meet his seventy-year-old father, Max (Pinter 1966: 6), who is a 'bullying, foul-mouthed', and 'stick-wielding' ex-butcher (Billington 2007: 49, 356). There are another three family members, which are Teddy's sixty-three-year-old uncle, Sam, and two younger brothers, Lenny and Joey, in their 'early thirties' and 'middle twenties' respectively (Trussler 1973: 119; Pinter 1966: 6). These family characters are portrayed as all having 'a mad life' (Billington 1996: 297). The play fascinatingly shows how they 'struggle to gain authority within the family structure', and presents 'the relationship between power and identity' (Cahn 1994: 55).

This essay will analyse the language used in an excerpt from the end of Act One of *The Homecoming* (Pinter 1991; see the Appendix), in which Teddy and Ruth, having arrived home late at night without seeing Max, Sam and Joey, meet them in the morning, the first time after they come home. The framework of impoliteness strategies proposed by Culpeper (1996) (revised by Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann (2003)) will be employed, in order to explore how the intended impoliteness used by Pinter in the characters' language reflects their power relations and personalities, and drives the plot forward. In the next section,

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impoliteness theories will be explained, including accounts of politeness, impoliteness, five main impoliteness strategies, and patterns of responses to impoliteness, and their connections with drama. This will be followed by the analysis of the intended impoliteness in both verbal and non-verbal communication between characters in the extract, emphasising its contribution to characterisation and the construction of power relations. Finally, a conclusion will be provided, with suggestions for future research.

2. Impoliteness in drama

2.1. From politeness to impoliteness

Many researchers have studied politeness theories concerning the use of communicative strategies to promote social harmony (e.g. Brown and Levinson 1987; Lakoff 1989; Leech 1983). One of the most widely used politeness framework is that proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), which is founded on the notion of 'face' derived from Goffman (1972: 5), referring to one's public self-image. Brown and Levinson (1987: 62) further explain face as 'wants', and categorise face into 'positive face' and 'negative face'. Positive face refers to the 'want' to be respected or approved of, whereas negative face is the desire to do or have what is wanted without being impeded (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62). The actions which threaten one's face are labelled as 'face-threatening acts', shortened as 'FTAs' (Brown and Levinson 1987: 60). The force of FTAs depends on two main factors, which are the relationship (i.e. the social distance and power relations) between participants, and 'the size of the imposition involved' (Culpeper 1998: 84).

However, impoliteness, as 'a type of aggression', is also very common in social interactions (Culpeper 1998: 85-86). It has been considered in addition to politeness by some scholars (such as Craig, Tracy and Spisak 1986; Lakoff 1989; Penman 1990; Tracy 1990). However, none of these studies contain a theoretical framework of impoliteness. Although another two linguists, Lachenicht (1980) and Austin (1990), have developed impoliteness frameworks, the former's work is simply an extension to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory



and lacks consistency in some definitions, while the latter only focuses on the hearer's interpretation rather than the impoliteness 'intended' by the speaker (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1553-1554). To address the limitations of these studies, Culpeper (1996) and Culpeper *et al.* (2003) propose a more systematic and comprehensive impoliteness framework, inspired by, and in parallel to, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework.

2.2. Impoliteness superstrategies

Impoliteness, as defined by Culpeper *et al.* (2003: 1546), is 'communicative strategies designed to attack face' (similar to Kienpointner's (1997) and Beebe's (1995) concepts of rudeness). Culpeper (1996: 356) suggests that there are five 'impoliteness superstrategies' to attack face, emphasising the impoliteness that is 'intended', rather than 'failed politeness' discussed by Beebe (1995: 166). The first superstrategy is 'bald on record impoliteness', in which FTAs are intentionally 'performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way' (Culpeper 1996: 356). The second superstrategy is 'positive impoliteness', concerning the strategies used to 'damage the addressee's positive face wants' (Culpeper 1996: 356). These include: 'ignore, snub the other'; 'exclude the other from an activity'; 'disassociate from the other'; 'be disinterested, unconcerned'; 'use inappropriate identity markers' (e.g., 'use title [...] when a close relationship pertains'); 'make the other feel uncomfortable' (e.g., 'do not avoid silence'); 'use taboo words'; and 'use derogatory nominations' (Culpeper 1996: 357-358).

The third superstrategy, labelled as 'negative impoliteness', is 'the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's negative face wants' (Culpeper 1996: 356). They include: 'frighten'; 'condescend, scorn, or ridicule'; 'invade the other's space'; 'explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect'; and 'hinder linguistically (e.g. interrupt, deny turn) or physically (e.g. block other's passage)' (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1555, 1557). Another two impoliteness superstrategies are 'sarcasm or mock politeness' and 'withhold

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politeness'. The former refers to the situation where politeness strategies are used insincerely and 'remain surface realisations', while the latter relates to 'the absence of politeness work where it would be expected' (Culpeper 1996: 356-357).

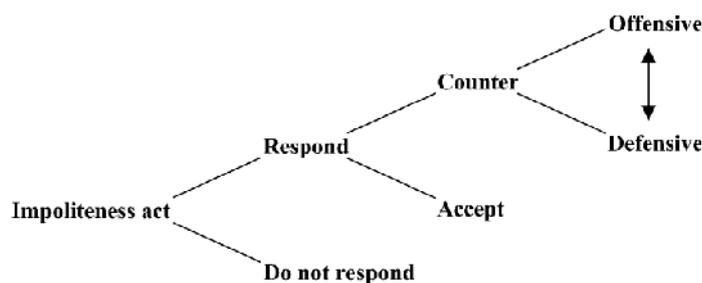
Although Brown and Levinson (1987: 17-20) suggest that politeness strategies cannot be used in combination, Culpeper *et al.* (2003) indicate that impoliteness strategies can be mixed and used repetitively to 'form a parallelism' (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1561). A prime example of this is the utterance 'what the fuck you doing', combining negative impoliteness ('ask a challenging question') with positive impoliteness ('use taboo words'), which boosts the force of the impoliteness (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1561). In addition, while Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework excludes paralinguistic or non-verbal aspects, Culpeper (1996) considers them (such as shouting) in his impoliteness theory, as these aspects can also create 'threatening atmosphere' and 'suggest hostility' (Culpeper 1996: 363).

2.3. Responses to impoliteness

Culpeper *et al.* (2003) also propose a framework to discuss the responses to impoliteness (see Figure 1), which has seldom been considered by other researchers (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1562). They suggest that recipients of intended FTAs can 'either respond or not respond (i.e. stay silent)' (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1562). Those who respond can 'accept the face attack' (e.g. giving an apology), or 'counter it' by using 'offensive' or 'defensive' strategies (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1562). Offensive strategies, or 'counter face attack with face attack' (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1562), is usually regarded as the most effective way to save face when being threatened (Harris, Gergen and Lannamann 1986). It forms the 'OFFENSIVE-OFFENSIVE pairs', which can lead to a similar degree of FTAs from the other party (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1564). It may also cause an 'escalation', where 'each speaker makes a stronger, more emphatic statement than the previous speaker' (Lein and Brenneis 1978: 301). In this situation, the 'subsequent aggressive actions' can 'escalate into a spiral

of conflict' (Andersson and Pearson 1999: 458). Defensive strategies, on the other hand, refer to 'counter face attack by defending one's own face', seeking to 'deflect, block or otherwise manage the face attack', which are less face-threatening than offensive strategies (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1562-1563; see also Labov 1972). These two strategies are 'not mutually exclusive' (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1563). In other words, they may overlap to some extent, with one being the main strategy while the other being ancillary (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1563).

Figure 1: 'A summary of response options' (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1563).



2.4. From real life to drama

Although both politeness and impoliteness frameworks are designed to analyse real life communications, they are also suitable for studying drama (Culpeper 1998: 83, 86), which offers the 'representation' of the reality (Wallis and Shepherd 1998: 55). Impoliteness, in particular, plays an important role in drama, as it can create conflict or tension between characters, and can support the development of plot and characterisation (Culpeper 1998: 86-87). The analysis of impoliteness in drama often relates to studies of conversational behaviour and turn-taking (e.g. Culpeper 1998). One important concept concerning

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conversation analysis is 'adjacency pairs', which refers to turn exchanges between different participants, consisting of two utterances, with the first following immediately after the second (Schegloff and Sacks 1973: 295; see also Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). One normal adjacency pair is 'greeting-greeting' (Schegloff and Sacks 1973: 296), which will be considered in the analysis.

3. Analysis

At the beginning of the excerpt, Teddy and his wife, Ruth, get up late in the morning, and see Teddy's father, Max, the first time after they come home. Teddy smiles and says: 'Hullo...Dad...We overslept' (Line 1, henceforth L1). Here Teddy greets Max politely, supporting Max's positive face, or the 'want' to be respected (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62). According to the principle of adjacency pairs (Schegloff and Sacks 1973), Max is expected to greet Teddy in return, especially after being apart from his eldest son for six years. However, Max ignores the greeting, adopting a positive impoliteness strategy, where he damages Teddy's positive face by snubbing him (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1555).

In addition, as Max keeps silent 'where politeness work is expected', he also uses the strategy of 'withhold politeness' (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1555). His silence in response to the greeting can particularly insult the other (Saville-Troike 1985: 6). The offense leads to a 'pause' in Teddy's turn (L2), suggesting a disjointed flow of interaction (Herman 1995: 97-98) and indicating 'unspoken tensions' between the characters (Esslin 1972: 56). Teddy tries to repair the conversation by asking 'What's for breakfast?' (L3), which is followed by Max's silence again (L4). This damages not only Teddy's positive face (by ignoring him and making him feel uncomfortable), but also his negative face (by refusing to give the information that Teddy wants) (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1555). Teddy, as a result, 'chuckles' embarrassingly, trying to avoid the silence by saying 'we overslept' again (L5). The repetition suggests the emptiness of their relationship to each other (Esslin 1972: 39).



After Teddy utters 'we overslept' twice (L1 and L6), Max starts speaking, yet not to Teddy, but to his brother, Sam, and his youngest son, Joey. By excluding Teddy from the conversation and using the third person pronoun, 'he' (L8), to refer to Teddy, Max uses a positive impoliteness strategy, damaging Teddy's 'wants' to be acknowledged (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1555). After several exchanges with others and ignoring Teddy's greetings ('How are you?', L23) again, Max begins talking with Teddy, yet with no greetings, but an abrupt question: 'How long you been in this house?' (L26). This is a use of positive impoliteness strategies again, showing no respect to Teddy. Moreover, Max starts the conversation by interrupting Teddy when the latter is introducing Ruth to the family ('look, I'd ... like you to meet ...', L25). Max's hindering Teddy linguistically also damages Teddy's negative face (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1555).

In fact, Max interrupts three times in total when Teddy wants to introduce Ruth to the family (L26, L37, and L39). Max appears to be uninterested in who Ruth is, which threatens her positive face (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1555). What is more disrespectful and aggressive is that Max uses taboo words ten times to address Ruth as a prostitute, such as 'tart', 'scrubber', 'pox-ridden slut', and 'whore' (L33-51), even after hearing Teddy's clarification ('She's my wife! We're married!', L45). The use of abusive or profane language is a typical positive impoliteness strategy, where the addressee's desire to be respected is seriously impaired (Culpeper 1996: 358). Ruth is even depersonalised when being referred to as 'that disease' (L52), which attacks her role as a human, using a positive impoliteness strategy (Culpeper 1996: 361). As Ruth's face is threatened in a direct way, a bald on record impoliteness strategy is also used in combination (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1554). This further shows the 'violence of [Max's] language' (Trussler 1973: 132), and presents the ex-butcher as 'bullying [and] foul-mouthed' (Billington 2007: 49).

Despite facing such 'a torrent of insults against her femininity' (Sakellaridou 1988: 110), Ruth utters no single word, only listening passively and submissively. Although Ruth gains

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'triumph and ultimate empowerment' at the end of the play (Billington 1996: 171), she is absolutely powerless in the dominant male world in the beginning. In addition, Max's remarks 'I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died.' tend to be interpreted as addressing Max's dead wife, Jessie, as a prostitute (Dukore 1981: 179). This disrespectful address also damages Jessie's positive face, which further demonstrates women's 'difficult position in a patriarchal society' (Sakellaridou 1988: 86).

Towards the end of the excerpt, when Max asks Joey to 'chuck out' Teddy and Ruth, he addresses Teddy with the title 'a Doctor of Philosophy' twice (L57). Here the mock politeness strategy is used, where the politeness is insincere, remaining 'surface realisations' (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1555). In other words, Max refers to his son by his academic title, not because he wants to show respect, but because he intends to mock and exclude him, in order to 'maintain a position of dominance' in the family (Prentice 1980: 461). In fact, Max does not regard Teddy with any approval throughout the play (Prentice 1980: 467). In the father-and-son relationship, where the nickname or other intimate addresses are normally used, the use of title can be regarded as employing an 'inappropriate identity marker' to 'disassociate from the other', which suggests that positive impoliteness strategies are also applied (Culpeper 1996: 357). Max also damages Teddy's positive face by attacking his role as a man. He addresses Teddy as a 'bitch' (L42), which is usually a derogatory term for women (Trussler 1973: 122). This also demonstrates how Pinter exploits use of sarcastic language rather than the situation for effect (States 1972: 153).

Teddy's response to Max's offensive remarks starts with offensive strategies while ending with silence, suggesting that he is incompetent and powerless. His most offensive responses to Max's impoliteness are 'Listen, don't be silly -' (L36) and 'Stop it!' (L41), where bald on record, positive, and negative impoliteness strategies are all used, by employing imperative sentence to give orders, directly belittling Max, and impeding Max's 'want' to humiliate Ruth (Culpeper 1996: 356-358). However, after being repeatedly interrupted by Max (L36 and



L38), and being continually humiliated (L33-58), Teddy shifts from being offensive to being defensive ('She's my wife! We're married!', L45), and to a much weaker statement ('She's my wife.', L54), and then to silence (L56 and L59). His reactions show that he is 'despairing' (Ganz 1969: 182) and 'pathetic and ineffective' (Free 1969: 4). As Teddy 'returns seeking admiration and tries to assert his superiority over his family', his failure to save face suggests that his academic titles 'guarantee nothing about his intelligence', competence, and power (Prentice 1980: 466, 469).

While Max is 'consistently abusive' (Free 1969: 4) and trying to 'ground the father's power' (Silverstein 1993: 85), his youngest son, Joey, antagonises him by using multiple

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impoliteness strategies. When Max asks Joey, 'Did you know he was here?' (L11), Joey offers no answer. Here Joey uses, resembling Max's responses to Teddy, both positive and negative impoliteness strategies. He does not show respect to his father who is expected to have more power, and refuses to give the information that his father wants. This causes a pause in Max's turn (L12), and a repetition of the question 'I asked you if you knew he was here' (L13). As Max forces Joey to answer the question, which is against Joey's will, he threatens Joey's negative face. Although Joey answers him this time (L15), he does not follow Max's repeated order to 'chuck out' Teddy and Ruth at the end of the excerpt (L5559). Even after this aggravates Max who shouts: 'what's the matter? You deaf?' (L60), which damages Joey's positive face by attacking his competence, Joey offensively responds with 'You're an old man' (L61). Such a derogatory expression undoubtedly damages Max's positive face and is also bald on record (Culpeper 1996: 358). Joey even repeatedly challenges Max's authority and belittles him by stating 'He's an old man' (L61) again to Teddy. The repetition boosts the impoliteness, and the shift from the second person pronoun 'you' to third person pronoun 'he' further damages Max's positive face by distancing him. Indeed, Joey is very rude to Max (Babae, Babae and Nesami 2012: 43).

The interaction between Max and Joey forms 'OFFENSIVE-OFFENSIVE pairs', where the 'subsequent aggressive actions' lead to 'a spiral of conflict' (Andersson and Pearson 1999: 458), or an 'escalation' (Lein and Brenneis 1978: 301). Max counters the face attack with 'a spasm of violence [...] against both Joey and Sam' (Cahn 1994: 63), which is even more offensive. More specifically, Max 'hits Joey in the stomach with all his might' (L65) and 'hits [Sam, aged sixty-three] across the head with his stick' when 'Sam moves forward to help [Max]' (L70). Such non-verbal aspects of impoliteness create an extremely threatening atmosphere (Culpeper 1996: 363). These present Max as a 'stick-wielding bully' (Billington 1996: 356), who attempts to maintain his 'patriarchal position' in the family (Prentice 1980: 461), by disrespecting the other family members and violently invading their space. His actions damage both the positive and negative face of them, directly. In fact, Max is the only figure in this



excerpt who uses all the five impoliteness superstrategies in combination, repeatedly, which amplifies the impoliteness and helps him gain more power (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1561).

4. Conclusion

This essay has used the impoliteness framework proposed by Culpeper (1996) and Culpeper *et al.* (2003), to discuss the impoliteness strategies used by Pinter in the characters' (both verbal and physical) language in *The Homecoming*, which causes a spiral of conflict and reflects power relations in this play. More specifically, Max uses all the five impoliteness superstrategies, i.e. bald on record, positive and negative impoliteness, mock politeness, and withholding politeness, in parallel, to insult and distance Teddy, Ruth, and other members, in order to 'maintain a position of dominance' in the family (Prentice 1980: 461). Encountered with the face attack, such as Max's use of taboo words to humiliate her, Ruth remains silent and passive, showing that she has little power when she first meets Max. This is in accordance with Sakellaridou's (1988: 86) suggestion that *The Homecoming* reflects women's 'difficult position in a patriarchal society'. In addition, although Teddy offends Max to counter the face attack in the middle of the conversation, he then changes to use defensive strategies, which are much less face-threatening, and becomes silent towards the end of the excerpt. Teddy's failure to save face shows that he is ineffective and powerless, as indicated by Free (1969: 4). Moreover, Max also uses non-verbal impoliteness with Sam and Joey, with the purpose of gaining more power. Joey, in response, attacks Max's face (both positive and negative) offensively from the beginning to the end, by snubbing him and using derogatory terms to address him. This shows that he is more competent and powerful than Teddy.

As the space allowed for this research is limited, it cannot include more data for analysis. For future studies, conversations at the end of the play could also be considered, so as to examine the changes in the characters' power relations reflected in, as well as caused by, their intended use of impoliteness.

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Appendix

Note: this is excerpted from Pinter, H. (1991) *The Homecoming*. London: Faber and Faber. (Page 40-42). For a clear reference, line numbers are added to the extract, and presented in brackets in the analysis.

Teddy and Ruth come down the stairs. They walk across the hall and stop just inside the room.

The others turn and look at them. Joey stands. Teddy and Ruth are wearing dressing-gowns. Silence.

Teddy smiles.

L1 **Teddy.** Hullo... Dad... We overslept.

L2 *Pause.*

L3 What's for breakfast?



- L4** *Silence.*
- L5** *Teddy chuckles.*
- L6** Huh. We overslept.
- L7** *Max turns to Sam.*
- L8** **Max.** Did you know he was here?
- L9** **Sam.** No.
- L10** *Max turns to Joey.*
- L11** **Max.** Did you know he was here?
- L12** *Pause.*
- L13** I asked you if you knew he was here.
- L14** **Joey.** No.
- L15** **Max.** Then who knew?
- L16** *Pause.*
- L17** Who knew?
- L18** *Pause.*
- L19** I didn't know.
- L20** **Teddy.** I was going to come down, Dad, I was going to...
- L21** be here, when you came down.
- L22** *Pause.*
- L23** How are you?
- L24** *Pause.*
- L26** Uh... look, I'd... like you to meet...
- L27** **Max.** How long you been in this house?
- L28** **Teddy.** All night.
- L29** **Max.** All night? I'm a laughingstock. How did you get in?
- L30** **Teddy.** I had my key.
- L31** *Max whistles and laughs.*
- L32** **Max.** Who's this?
- L33** **Teddy.** I was just going to introduce you.
- L34** **Max.** Who asked you to bring tarts in here?
- L35** **Teddy.** Tarts?
- L36** **Max.** Who asked you to bring dirty tarts into this house?
- L37** **Teddy.** Listen, don't be silly –
- L38** **Max.** You been here all night?
- L39** **Teddy.** Yes, we arrived from Venice –

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- L40** **Max.** We've had a smelly scrubber in my house all night.
L41 We've had a stinking pox-ridden Slut in my house all night.
L42 **Teddy.** Stop it! What are you talking about?
L43 **Max.** I haven't seen the bitch for six years, he comes home
L44 without a word, he brings a filthy scrubber off the street,
L45 he shacks up in my house!
L46 **Teddy.** She's my wife! We're married!
L47 *Pause.*
L48 **Max.** I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever
L49 since your mother died. My word of honour. (*To Joey.*)
L50 Have you ever had a whore here? Has Lenny ever had a
L51 whore here? They come back from America, they bring the
L52 slop-bucket with them. They bring the bedpan with them.
L53 (*To Teddy.*) Take that disease away from me. Get her
L54 away from me.
L55 **Teddy.** She's my wife.
L56 **Max.** (*to Joey*) Chuck them out.
L57 *Pause.*
L58 A Doctor of Philosophy, Sam, you want to meet a Doctor of
L59 Philosophy? (*To Joey.*) I said chuck them out.
L60 *Pause.*
L61 What's the matter? You deaf?
L62 **Joey.** You're an old man. (*To Teddy.*) He's an old man.
L63 **Lenny** walks into the room, in a dressing-gown.

L64 *He stops. They all look round.*
L65 **Max** turns back, hits **Joey** in the stomach with all his might.
L66 **Joey** contorts, staggers across the stage. **Max**, with
L67 the exertion of the blow, begins to collapse. His knees buckle.
L68 He clutches his stick.
L69 **Sam** moves forward to help him.
L70 **Max** hits him across the head with his stick, **Sam** sits, head
L71 in hands.