

Van Houlten's Impoliteness in John Green's Novel "The Fault in our Stars"

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ABSTRACT:

Impoliteness is an act that is rejected and refused in the conventions of any society. However, it is utilized occasionally for various hidden motives and not only as an act of threatening others' faces. This act is ascertained to be systematic according to Culpeper's 'Anatomy of impoliteness which is the adopted model in the present study. This model is applied to demonstrate the strategies that John Green adopts to demonstrate Van Houlten's character that acts impolitely in Green's novel "The Fault in our Stars. The present study intends to reveal the types of impolite strategies that the writer utilizes to indicate this act of impoliteness and it also intends to reveal that impoliteness is a means to express grief, anger, and despair of life when losing our beloved.

Key Words: Impoliteness, Culpeper's 'Anatomy, face theory, Van Houlten, cruelty, Hazel.

1. Introduction

Pragmatics studies the principles of the human communicative competence. However, communication is not always a cooperative process; it is sometimes an act of attack rather than a support to the audience through the process of speaking. The attacker is usually regarded as impolite by the audience (Mills 2003, p.121). Impoliteness is an aspect of human communicative behavior that has been shown to be highly salient in society. It is salient because it is a deviation of the norm; i.e., politeness. It is an act that is also disapproved by others. Leech (1983) explained that "Conflictive illocutions tend to be rather marginal to human linguistic behavior in normal circumstances" (p.105).

Likewise, Brown and Levinson's (1978-87) influential model of politeness is built entirely on how to avoid face threatening act (FTA henceforth). However, Culpeper et al. (2003) points out that there are discourses in which conflictive illocutions are rather more central than may be the case in discourses which can be considered to be operating within normal circumstances. As non-marginal human linguistic phenomena within certain types of discourse, the concepts of conflictive illocutions, in general, within interaction are therefore worthy of study and research (Bousfield 2008, p.1).

Impoliteness is a complex, sometimes not easy to pin down, multi-disciplinary field of study because scientific fields such as sociology, psychology, history, media, business, and literary studies can all be related to the field of impoliteness and has serious implications for interpersonal communication and society as a whole. Therefore, impoliteness deserves serious and concentrated academic study (Jamet and Jobert 2013, p. 13).

2. Impoliteness

Compared with politeness, there is a small amount of literature on impoliteness. Though, some works on impoliteness were considerably eminent. Goffman's (1967) distinction among three FTAs ; *intentional* , *accidental*, and *incidental* FTAs is inspirational since she presents a kind of scale in accordance with which, impoliteness can be measured. Culpeper (2005, p.36) states that “the phenomenon of impoliteness is to do with how offense is communicated and taken.” and defines impoliteness as “communicative strategies designed to attack face and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony”.

Bousfield (2008, p.72) defines impoliteness as “the communication of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive verbal face-threatening acts (FTAs) which are purposefully delivered.” Thus, what is considered impolite by Culpeper, Bousfield and others should correlate only with the intentional face threatening act presented by Goffman, because a central concept to any approach to a linguistic issue within pragmatics is that of intention (Ibid, p.74).

One of the key elements that is salient in impoliteness studies is that impoliteness is caused intentionally. Culpeper (2008, p.32-2) makes a distinction between impoliteness and rudeness. Impoliteness might be unintentional, whereas rudeness is intended. However, he considers both impoliteness and rudeness to be “inappropriate and negatively marked”. The present study shows how impoliteness is meant to be unintentional and has motives and consequences.

3. Approaches to Impoliteness

There are some approaches emerged to describe how impoliteness is acted strategically to damage face. Most of them are

inspired by Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness. The most prominent one is Lachenicht model (1980) that was the first grounded paper on impoliteness and uses the aggravating language as a relational attempt to hurt or damage the addressee. Hurt or damage is achieved through four aggravation strategies; off record, Bold on record, positive and negative aggravation (Bousfield 2008, p.83-4).

However, Bousfield (2008) summarizes the strategies into two; either off record or on record strategy. Terkourafi's model differs from others in that it is concentrated on the hearer and his perception as the one affected by the aggressive act instead of concentration on intention. One of the most comprehensive models is that of Culpeper's. It is the selected model of analysis in the present study that is demonstrated in the next section.

4. A Model for Analysis

The present study adopts Culpeper's (1995, 2005) model 'Anatomy of Impoliteness' which is one of the most comprehensive models that is inspired by Goffman (1967), Brown and Levinson's (1978), and Leech's (1983) model of politeness. Culpeper proposed five strategies and substrategies. These strategies are;

1. *Bald on record*: it refers to create explicitly the maximum possible face damage when there is an intention by the speaker to attack the others' face.
2. *Positive politeness*: It captures behavior which is designed to explicitly damage the addressee's positive face wants as being unconcerned, Exclude the other from an activity, ignoring others, or being unsympathetic; using obscure or secretive language, seeking disagreement, using taboo words, and call the others names.
3. *Negative politeness*: It captures behaviour designed to damage the addressee's negative face-wants as in frightening, scorning or ridiculing, being contemptuous, not treating the other seriously, ridicule-emphasize your relative power, belittling the other, invading the other's space, put the other indebtedness on record, and explicitly associating the other with a negative aspect.
4. The fourth and fifth strategies are *sarcasm* and *mock*. They explicitly outline the use of ironic and superficial politeness for impolite purposes. These strategies reflect the influence of Leech (1983)
5. Withhold politeness; keep silent when politeness work is expected, necessary or 'mandatory' and hence damage the hearer's face as in failing to thank someone for a present. (Archer et al 2012, 90-91)

Culpeper's (2011, p.23) impoliteness also discusses the hearer's perception when linking between impoliteness and emotions, stating that "impolite behaviour always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant." This implies that

“people feel hurt when someone says or does something that they perceive emotionally, and injured them or when they perceive someone’s failure to say or do something emotionally injures them” (Vangelisti 2007, p.139).

The aim of the present study is to reveal the kinds of strategies used by one of the crucial characters in the novel “The Fault in our Stars” to damage others’ face. It tries to shed lights on this link of impoliteness and emotions. To understand which emotions resulted impoliteness i.e. the **motives** that lead to that behavior.

5. Data Collection

The data used for the analysis is an authentic one extracted from a scene taken from a novel entitled *The Fault in Our Stars* written by the American writer John Green who won the 2006 Printz Award for his debut novel *Looking for Alaska* and his fourth novel *The Fault in Our Stars* debuted at number one on The New York Times Best Seller list in January 2012. The novel is downloaded from a free online library.

The novel talks about a young teenage girl named Hazel who has been diagnosed with lung cancer, her friend Augustus Waters whom she met in support group. He, as well, has cancer. Hazel and Augustus have been embarking on a roller coaster ride of emotions, including love, sadness and romance, while searching for the author of their favourite book.

They travel to Amsterdam in search of Peter Van Houten the author of *An Imperial Affliction*. She loves this book because it replicates her life. *An Imperial Affliction* talks about a girl who eventually dies of cancer. Hazel wanted to know what will happen to that girl’s family after her death. Thus, Hazel and Augustus wished to meet Van Houten to give her an insight into what will happen to their families after they succumb to their cancers. Upon meeting Van Houten, Hazel and Augustus surprised by his character and behaviour. Van Houten is an aggressive alcoholic who treats them with cruelty. In the end, it is revealed that Van Houten has lost a child from cancer. That child was his daughter Anne the main character of his novel *An Imperial Affliction* and has fallen into alcoholism since her passing.

The present paper investigates how one of the crucial characters Peter Van Houten used impoliteness to express his grief. This novel by John Green has the most salient scene of impoliteness revealed when Hazel and her friend met Van Houten. Impoliteness is made distinct in this novel for reasons. Though he appears to be a heartless drunk, genius intellectual Van Houten lost his way after he lost his young daughter to cancer. Like Van Houten, John Green also believes that once the book is finished, the future of the story does no longer lie in the hands of the author, but that of the readers.

The present study is a qualitative one that attempt to reveal the significance of impoliteness to the main theme of the novel that is of love, sadness and despair. The following extract to be analyzed is taken from chapter twelve in the novel *The Fault in our Stars* when Hazel and Augustus meet the writer of *An Imperial Affliction*, Peter Van Houten. The scene is narrated by Hazel the protagonist or heroine of the novel.

6. Data analysis and Discussion

From the beginning of the scene, John Green presents the character of Van Houten who receives Hazel and Augustus in a very careless appearance as his description is made obvious when the door is open:

- *The door creaked open. A potbellied man with thin hair, sagging jowls, and a week-old beard squinted into the sunlight. He wore baby-blue man pajamas like guys in old movies. His face and belly were so round, and his arms so skinny, that he looked like a dough ball with four sticks stuck into it. “Mr. Van Houten?” Augustus asked, his voice squeaking a bit. **The door slammed shut.** Behind it.*

As suggested by the underlined description that Van Houten receives his guests in inappropriate way, as he does not express a word of welcome when the contrary is expected. Thus, from the beginning he starts using one of the strategies of impoliteness which is withholding politeness. This also can be interpreted to be *positive impoliteness strategy* expressed by ignoring the others, disassociate from them, being unconcerned or indifferent because the usual way for a well famous writer is to receive his guests in a very courtesy way showing his gratitude to his fans.

Unlikely, his behaviour exceeds the norm and reflects his carelessness, his ignorance to himself and others in order to damage his and his fans' positive face wants. Not only the looks, but the first act Van Houten did is shutting the door without a word to his guests. In which he uses *negative impoliteness strategy*. It reflects condescend, scorn or ridicule and do not treat the others seriously, belittling the others. Van Houten used these strategies to damage their negative face wants, to deliberately show carelessness about their presence. Then he shouted to his assistant in a way that Hazel and Augustus heard their conversation behind the door as follows:

I heard a stammering, reedy voice shout, “LEEE-DUH-VIGH!” We could hear everything through the door. “Are they here, Peter?” a woman asked. “There are—Lidewij, there are two adolescent apparitions outside the door.” “Apparitions?” she asked. Van Houten answered in a rush. “Phantasms specters ghouls visitants post-terrestrials apparitions”

The act of shouting at his assistant reflects the use of *negative impoliteness* which emphasizes relative power and not treating the others seriously. Van Houten also uses *positive impoliteness* when he describes his guests as “post-terrestrials apparitions”. His description reflects *the positive impoliteness* in which he uses inappropriate identity markers but though not with their presence but they could hear him as Hazel stated “*We could hear everything through the door*”. This reflects his carelessness and even anger of their presence to visit him.

They are Augustus and Hazel, the young fans with whom you have been corresponding.”

“They are—what? They—I thought they were in America!”

“Yes, but you invited them here, you will remember.”

“Do you know why I left America, Lidewij? So that I would never again have to encounter Americans.”

“But you are an American.”

“Incurably so, it seems. But as to these Americans, you must tell them to leave at once, that there has been a terrible mistake, that the blessed Van Houten was making a rhetorical offer to meet, not an actual one, that such offers must be read symbolically.”

The interaction above between Van Houten and his assistant Lidewij illustrates the use of *positive impoliteness strategy* that is of ignoring others, and failing to acknowledge the others’ presence. There is *sarcasm and mock* of his and his guests’ nationality. He refuses to meet them or encounter with any American. This indicates that he denies his identity and do not want anyone to remind him of it.

“I will not do this, Peter,” answered Lidewij. “You must meet them. You must. You need to see them. You need to see how your work matters.”

“Lidewij, did you knowingly deceive me to arrange this?”

In this utterance, there is disagreement and denial of any good deed that reflect generosity and politeness. Thus, using *positive impoliteness strategy* to exclude the other from the activity and disassociate from others.

finally the door opened again. He turned his head metronomically from Augustus to me, still squinting. “Which of you is Augustus Waters?” he asked. Augustus Waters started, “um, I, Hazel, um. Well.” “This boy appears to have some kind of developmental delay,” Peter Van Houten said to Lidewij. “Peter,” she scolded.

“Well,” Peter Van Houten said, extending his hand to me. “It is at any rate a pleasure to meet such ontologically improbable creatures.”

Van Houten here uses *positive impoliteness strategy* that of failing to acknowledge the other's presence when he reluctantly opened the door. Not only that, he also called Augustus names as *ontologically improbable creatures* showing also *positive impoliteness strategy* that of ridicule and scorn of the others to damage face wants

Then I noticed two large black garbage bags, full and twist-tied, behind the couch.

"Trash?" I mumbled to Augustus "Fan mail," Van Houten answered as he sat down in the lounge chair. "Eighteen years' worth of it. Can't open it. Terrifying. Yours are the first missives to which I have replied, and look where that got me. I frankly find the reality of readers wholly unappetizing."

When they entered the house, Hazel noticed that Van Houten keeps his fans' letters in a garbage bag and he said it baldly. He also confessed that they were the first fans whom he answered and even wished that he did not ever do it. This is *bald on record strategy* in which he explicitly expressed how he deals with his fans' letters. Hazel's letters were among them of course.

Would you care for some breakfast?" asked Lidewij.

I started to say that we'd already eaten when Peter interrupted. "It is far too early for breakfast, Lidewij."

"Well, they are from America, Peter, so it is past noon in their bodies." said Lidewij

"Then it's too late for breakfast," he said

In these utterances, when his assistant invited the guests for breakfast, he did not let her finish using illocutionary acts not to socialize or bond with them by not presenting breakfast. Thus, using *positive politeness strategy* to achieve that.

I said, "first, we do want to say thank you for dinner last night and—"

"We bought them dinner last night?" Van Houten asked Lidewij.

"Yes, at Oranje."

"Ah, yes. Well, believe me when I say that you do not have me to thank but rather Lidewij, who is exceptionally talented in the field of spending my money."

In this interaction, Van Houten uses *negative impoliteness strategy* when he condescends them and refuses the polite act of buying dinner for them by his assistant whom he accused further of spending his money on trivial things as buying dinner for his fans. His assistant, in all occasions tried to show politeness, sympathy in order to reduce his impolite attack.

"We have questions about what happens to the characters after the end of the book, specifically Anna's—" said Hazel

“You wrongly assume that I need to hear your question in order to answer it.”

There are multi-strategies used in this utterance, Van Houten uses *bald on record* when he attacks her request and reflects his unwillingness to answer her question. He also uses *positive impoliteness* when he was unconcerned, disinterested with her questions, and also *negative impoliteness* when he did not appreciate her coming long way to meet him and her enthusiasm about his novel. All these strategies used to damage face, positive face wants and negative face wants.

But to be perfectly frank, this childish idea that the author of a novel has some special insight into the characters in the novel . . . it’s ridiculous. That novel was composed of scratches on a page, dear. The characters inhabiting it have no life outside of those scratches. What happened to them? They all ceased to exist the moment the novel ended.”

Hazel insists on finding out “what will happen after Anne’s death? He uses *bald on records strategy* and also *negative impoliteness* when he condescends, scorns and ridicules her questions and refuses to answer them as if telling her that her family will stop living after her death.

I pushed myself up off the couch. “No, I understand that, but it’s impossible not to imagine a future for them.

“I regret that I cannot indulge your childish whims, but I refuse to pity you in the manner to which you are well accustomed.”

“I don’t want your pity,” I said.

“Like all sick children,” he answered dispassionately, “you say you don’t want pity, but your very existence depends upon it.”

“Peter,” Lidewij said, but he continued as he reclined there, his words getting rounder in his drunken mouth. “Sick children inevitably become arrested: You are fated to live out your days as the child you were when diagnosed, the child who believes there is life after a novel ends. And we, as adults, we pity this, so we pay for your treatments, for your oxygen machines. We give you food and water though you are unlikely to live long enough—”

“PETER!” Lidewij shouted.

“You are a side effect,” Van Houten continued, “of an evolutionary process that cares little for individual lives. You are a failed experiment in mutation.”

These utterances reflect the climax of his attack. Extremely *bald on record strategy* is used when he attacks her with angry reaction deliberately to damage face. He uses *positive impoliteness* when being unsympathetic, unconcerned and make them feel uncomfortable. He uses *negative politeness* when he frightens them with his bald words,

scorn and ridicule their wants and explicitly associate them with a negative aspect saying “*You are a side effect*” and “*You are a failed experiment in mutation*”. This is also *mocking and sarcasm*. With all the impoliteness strategies Van Houten expresses his anger that they will die eventually and hurt their families. Hazel starts to defend her and her friend face by bursting into threatening acts in return when she says:

I need one and only one thing from you before I walk out of your life forever: WHAT HAPPENS TO ANNA’S MOTHER?”

He raised his flabby chins vaguely toward me and shrugged his shoulders. “I can no more tell you what happens to her”

“BULLSHIT! That’s bullshit. Just tell me! Make something up!”

“No, and I’ll thank you not to curse in my house. It isn’t becoming of a lady.”

I still wasn’t angry, exactly, but I was very focused on getting the thing I’d been promised.

“YOU PROMISED!” I shouted, but Van Houten didn’t reply.

Hazel could not tolerate his bald attack, when she and her friend Augustus felt Van Houten’s procrastination, she uses *bald on record strategy* when having face threatening act back by raising her voice intentionally seeking damage to his face in return. She also uses *positive impoliteness* when she uses taboo words and makes him feel uncomfortable and also uses *negative politeness* when she frightens him when yelling at him, belittling him with her loud voice and makes him contemptuous. She reacts this way not because she was angry but because she could not put up with his temporization, she hopes and longs to find answers to her questions. Once he saw her reaction, he starts minimizing the tension by criticizing her rude language. He realizes what he has been acting towards Hazel and her friend. In fact, at the end of the novel, he flew back to America to show his condolences for Augustus death and try to apologize for his behaviour.

7. Results and Conclusions

The character of the writer in the novel Van Houten acts impolitely with Hazel and her friend giving them no answers, especially those she longs for perhaps because of his feeling that his life has ended after the death of his daughter Anne. He articulates it in making her the main character in his novel *An Imperial Affliction*. It appears that it is *sadness and despair* that are the motives for his cruelty. He is unable to live his life normally after his daughter’s death. Social restrictions makes impoliteness often perceived as unexpected or foregrounded behaviour in reality, such behaviour will trigger an attributional search; one might want to know why something odd happened, what the special circumstances were for

someone to break the social norm. There might be some causes in the person's mood or personality, or in the situation, or simply dismiss it as unintentional. In fiction, however, it is more likely to interpret such behaviour as a message from the author about an aspect of the fictional world which will be of future consequence (Culpeper et. al. 1998, p.87). Obviously then the message conveyed through this scene is that strategies of impoliteness are adapted to express grief, despair, anger and dissatisfaction of life. Hazel articulates this when she comments after leaving his house "*I still wanted answers from Van Houten. But it wasn't all I wanted. I only had two days left in Amsterdam. **I wouldn't let a sad old man ruin them.***"

Impoliteness in this scene is taken by the author to be a means of expressing emotions. Hazel defines Van Houten as a sad man though he has not revealed his sadness but because he has acted in an unusual way, i.e., impolitely. The strategies of impoliteness used were not his usual behavior as his assistant revealed when she said to Hazel and Augustus as they were leaving his house "*the circumstances have made him cruel*". Thus, he expresses anger and despair of life that takes his daughter and will take those too. Langlotz, Locher (2012, p. 1602) pointed out that impoliteness strategies can be used as means of implying emotions. Thus, these strategies are adapted by the author to express some of the basic themes of the novel reflected in the character of Van Houten which is that of despair and sadness.

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فضاضة فان هولتن في رواية جون كرين " الخطأ في اقدارنا"

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المستخلص

الفضاضة هو فعل مرفوض في أعرف أي مجتمع. ومع ذلك، يتم استخدامه أحياناً لدوافع خفية مختلفة وليس فقط كعمل يهدد الآخرين. أن هذا الفعل عادة ما يكون منهجياً وفقاً لنظرية استراتيجيات الفضاضة *Culpeper anatomy of impoliteness by* وهي النظرية المعتمدة في الدراسة الحالية. يتم تطبيق هذا النموذج لإثبات الاستراتيجيات التي يتبناها جون كرين لإثبات شخصية فان هولتن التي تعمل بشكل غير لائق في رواية كرين "الخطأ في اقدارنا". تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى الكشف عن أنواع الاستراتيجيات غير المهذبة التي يستخدمها الكاتب للإشارة إلى هذا الفعل غير المهذب، كما أنها تنوي الكشف عن أن الفضاضة واللامبالاة هي وسيلة للتعبير عن الحزن والغضب واليأس من الحياة عند فقدان من نحب.