

Speak of the Devil's Right Hand: Emily Charlton's Assertion of Dominance Through Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory

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Abstract

Impoliteness is defined as communicative strategies designed to create social disharmony. Impoliteness strategies often occur in daily interactions, including in the workplace. This study applies Jonathan Culpeper's (1996) theory of impoliteness to identify which types of impoliteness superstrategies are employed by the character Emily Charlton in The Devil Wears Prada film. Furthermore, this study aims to explain how these impoliteness superstrategies are expressed through language and identify the functions of these impoliteness superstrategies in maintaining her social hierarchy in the workplace. This study applies qualitative descriptive research approach and purposive sampling to obtain data. The analysis of this study reveals that Emily Charlton only uses three out of five impoliteness superstrategies, which are negative impoliteness, mock politeness, and bald-on record impoliteness. Emily Charlton expresses her use of impoliteness superstrategies through rhetorical questions, criticism, insult, and sarcasm. Moreover, Emily Charlton only uses two out of three functions of impoliteness superstrategies, namely the affective and coercive impoliteness functions. The findings of this study suggest that Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness superstrategies can be employed effectively to maintain and strengthen social hierarchy in the workplace.

Keywords: *Culpeper's impoliteness theory, impoliteness strategies, Emily Charlton, The Devil Wears Prada, impoliteness functions*

Introduction

In most professional settings, power plays usually occur between senior co-workers and junior co-workers competing for status rather than a boss and their employees. Power hierarchy in the workplace is not only shaped by a company's organizational chart but also daily interactions between co-workers as negotiated identities or status is constantly constructed through everyday linguistic choices (Norton & Darvin, 2016). In their daily interactions, one of the ways co-workers can maintain their workplace hierarchy is by using indirect aggression. Oftentimes, senior co-workers feel threatened by their junior co-workers; therefore, language becomes a strategic tool to assert dominance and protect their status in the workplace.

A film released in 2006, *The Devil Wears Prada*, depicts this phenomenon of aggression between senior co-workers and junior co-workers. Although the film is known for Miranda Priestly's toxic leadership as the Editor-in-Chief of *Runway Magazine*, an intense power play happens between Miranda's two assistants: Emily Charlton and Andrea "Andy" Sachs. Emily, who is Miranda's senior assistant, feels threatened by Miranda's new assistant, Andy, as Andy gradually gains Miranda's approval in the film despite lacking fashion knowledge and experience, which Emily has spent years maintaining to secure her position. Since Emily lacks the power to fire people like Miranda, she uses language to strengthen her status in the office.

To properly understand how language works in power dynamics, we use Pragmatics. Pragmatics is one of the major branches in linguistics. To put it simply, Yule (1996) defines Pragmatics as speaker's intended meaning. In analyzing language used in media like films or TV shows, Pragmatics helps show the hidden meaning in the characters' dialogues beyond their literal words. One of the keys to uncovering these underlying meanings is to analyze the ways characters disrupt social harmony in their dialogues. This study specifically employs Jonathan Culpeper's (1996) theory of impoliteness strategies. According to Culpeper (1996), impoliteness is a communicative strategy designed to create social disharmony.

As Yule (1996) suggests, to understand impoliteness, one must understand the concept of 'face,' defined as a person's public self-image. The concept of 'face' is split into two types: negative face, the desire to act independently without imposition; and positive face, the wish to be liked and approved of by others. Impoliteness deliberately attacks the hearer by performing a face-threatening act (FTA), which occurs when a speaker produces an utterance that threatens the hearer's 'face.'

Culpeper (1996) identifies five superstrategies of impoliteness used to perform face-threatening acts (FTAs). The first superstrategy is the bald-on-record impoliteness, which involves directly attacking the hearer's face (e.g., insulting the hearer directly). Positive impoliteness is the second superstrategy; this attacks the hearer's positive face wants by ignoring them, excluding them from social activities, or using inappropriate identity markers. The third strategy, negative impoliteness, attacks the hearer's negative face wants through actions like frightening them, invading their personal space, or explicitly ridiculing them. Then, Culpeper introduces sarcasm or mock politeness, which occurs when a speaker uses insincere politeness to cause offense, such as giving fake praise to mock someone. Finally, withholding politeness happens when a speaker fails to show expected politeness, for example, a person refusing to thank someone for a gift.

Moreover, Culpeper (2011) adds that impoliteness superstrategies have three core functions when performed by a speaker. Affective impoliteness involves intentional emotional outbursts that suggest the hearer is responsible for the speaker's negative emotional state. Coercive impoliteness is used to gain social power, show differences in social status, impose harm on the hearer, or force compliance. Finally, entertaining impoliteness is the act of using impoliteness strategies with the intention of entertaining.

Recent studies on film media which focus on impoliteness strategies mostly explore characters with absolute power, the concept of toxic bosses and their strategic use of language (Ardi & Ratri, 2019; Tandiono & Tjitrakusuma, 2023).

First, Ardi and Ratri (2019) conducted research entitled *Power and Impoliteness in The Devil Wears Prada Movie*. Their research focuses on the relationship between the deliberate use of impoliteness strategies and maintaining hierarchy in the workplace by analyzing Miranda Priestly's utterances using Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness strategies theory. It reveals that Miranda Priestly mostly employs bald-on record impoliteness and her use of this strategy directly relates to her position as the editor-in-chief of *Runway Magazine*.

Second, Tandiono and Tjitrakusuma conducted a study in 2023 on how impoliteness strategies are applied in the movie *Cruella*. The study focuses on how the antagonist of the movie, the Baroness, employs various impoliteness strategies towards her employee and her rival. It highlights that the Baroness' use of impoliteness strategy is influenced by who she believes she is talking to and what her power dynamic is like with the other person. It is found that when she is talking to her employee, Estella, she uses all five superstrategies and off-record impoliteness. However, when she is talking to her business rival, Cruella, she only uses four out of the five superstrategies and she does not use a lot of bald-on record when talking to Cruella.

However, only analyzing the boss or people with absolute power creates a gap in understanding how co-workers use impoliteness to maintain workplace hierarchy, especially how workers in the middle rank of hierarchy, like Emily Charlton, fight to keep her position.

To address this research gap, this study analyzes Emily Charlton's use of impoliteness superstrategies in her interactions with her junior colleague, Andy Sachs. This study proposes three research questions:

1. Which types of Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness strategies does Emily Charlton employ in her dialogues in *The Devil Wears Prada*?
2. How are these impoliteness strategies expressed through language in Emily Charlton's dialogues in *The Devil Wears Prada*?
3. What are the functions of Emily Charlton's use of impoliteness strategies in her dialogues in *The Devil Wears Prada*?

Furthermore, this study aims to identify and examine Emily Charlton's use of impoliteness superstrategies, her linguistic realization of these impoliteness superstrategies, and the functions of her use of impoliteness superstrategies.

Method

This study uses qualitative research design. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative research design focuses on meaning in context and our interpretation of it. Since this study centers on contextual meanings and interpretation, qualitative research design is the most suitable choice. This research design helps understand the context of Emily Charlton's interactions in the film *The Devil Wears Prada*. Moreover, this paper specifically adopts the qualitative descriptive design. Kim et al. (2017) argue that qualitative descriptive aims to describe a phenomenon and present the facts of the phenomenon in everyday terms. This approach aligns with the aim of this study, which is to describe the phenomenon of workplace hierarchy through Emily Charlton's use of impoliteness strategies in her dialogues.

This paper uses purposive sampling. Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016) note that it is an approach where researchers only choose data that is relevant to their study. The data type in this paper is written online text collected from an audiovisual media since the data source is a film. The data is taken from the film *The Devil Wears Prada*, which was released in 2006 and was directed by David Frankel. The transcription of the film is taken from *SubslikeScript* (SubslikeScript, n.d.). The accuracy of every data that is selected has been confirmed as they have been cross-checked with the original scenes of the film. The data is then organized into a new file.

There are five stages of analysis applied in this study. The analysis began by looking for utterances where Emily Charlton potentially uses impoliteness strategies in her dialogues. The identification criteria focus on the five superstrategies of impoliteness, which are bald-on record impoliteness, negative impoliteness, positive impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness, and withholding politeness. Then, the author identifies which superstrategies Emily Charlton employs in her dialogues to answer the first research question. Next, to address the second research question, the author interprets Emily Charlton's utterances containing usage of impoliteness strategies by analyzing how she expresses her impoliteness strategies through language. After that, to answer the third research question, the functions of Emily Charlton's usage of impoliteness strategies are interpreted. The identification of Emily Charlton's use of impoliteness strategies, how she expresses these strategies through language, and the functions of her use of impoliteness strategies help determine how power dynamics play out in her interactions. Finally, the author draws a conclusion based on a detailed analysis of the data to be able to create a complete research paper comprehending how Emily Charlton employs impoliteness strategies in her dialogues to maintain workplace hierarchy.

Results and Discussion

This section examines how Emily Charlton utilizes impoliteness superstrategies to maintain her position within the workplace hierarchy in *The Devil Wears Prada*. To answer the research questions properly, the analysis consists of two main parts. The first part analyzes the selected scenes which feature Emily Charlton's interaction with Andy Sachs to identify the impoliteness superstrategies used, the linguistic realization of her utterances, and the functions of utilizing these impoliteness superstrategies. Then, the second part provides a comprehensive discussion of the findings of Emily Charlton's use of impoliteness superstrategies to give a better idea of her overall linguistic patterns.

Scene 1: (00:03:39–00:03:53)

Andy : Hi, I have an appointment with Emily Charlton.

Emily : Andrea Sachs?

Andy : Yes?

Emily : **(1) Great. Human Resources certainly has an odd sense of humor.** (sigh, annoyed).
Follow me.

The scene presents the dialogue between Emily Charlton, a senior assistant for Miranda Priestly, the editor-in-chief for *Runway Magazine*, and Andrea “Andy” Sachs, a journalism fresh graduate. Andy arrives at *Runway Magazine* for a job interview as Miranda's junior assistant. Andy asks the receptionist for Emily. Then, Emily appears from the hallway, trying to confirm Andy's name while seeing her appearance with disgust. Andy then responds with her confirmation. Emily replies with, “Great. Human Resources certainly has an odd sense of humor.”

In Data (1), Emily's utterance uses sarcasm or mock politeness. Culpeper (1996) defines that sarcasm or mock politeness is a strategy where the speaker uses insincere politeness to subtly convey offense. Emily's use of the word “great” may seem positive, but she is actually implying that Human Resources is a joke for accepting Andy's job application as she believes that Andy is unfit for the position. In this context, there is a mismatch between Emily's choice of words and her true intent. Culpeper (1996) states that mock politeness or sarcasm allows the speaker to remain polite on the surface while performing an FTA. The word “great” becomes negative because it is used to describe a situation that Emily finds absurd.

In addition, Emily's remark that Human Resources has an “odd sense of humor” intensifies the impoliteness. Portraying that Andy's hiring is a joke implies that Emily views Andy's presence in the office as a mistake, not a professional job interview.

The sarcasm Emily uses attacks Andy's positive face. Andy as a fresh graduate applying to a job has a desire to be liked and approved of by her potential colleagues. However, Emily immediately starts to be dismissive towards Andy. By telling Andy to her face that Human Resources must be joking to approve of her, Emily damages Andy's desire of being liked. Emily's utterance functions to establish a power hierarchy; therefore, it is considered as coercive impoliteness. Culpeper (2011) defines coercive impoliteness as a function that imposes harm on the hearer's face or to force compliance. This function also aims to show differences of the social status between the speaker and the hearer or the target. In Data (1), Emily positions herself as superior in the fashion world as she dresses well and that Andy would not be hired as Miranda's junior assistant with her sense of fashion.

Scene 2: (00:05:57–00:06:06)

Emily : Oh no. You're still here. Go.

[...]

Emily : No, stay. I don't want you walking past her. **(2) Just sit there and I'll pray she doesn't notice you marring the area.**

Scene 2 is the continuation of Emily and Andy's first meeting. Emily is in the process of interviewing Andy when Miranda suddenly calls saying that she is about to arrive at the building. Emily panics and tells everyone that she is about to enter. Everyone is in a rush to clear out the way to prepare for Miranda's entrance. Then, Emily notices that Andy is still sitting at her desk. She instructs Andy to go but changes her mind. She says, "No, stay. I don't want you walking past her. Just sit there and I'll pray she doesn't notice you marring the area."

In Data (2), Emily's response employs negative impoliteness. Culpeper (1996) suggests that negative impoliteness strategies damage the hearer's negative face. She specifically uses the sub-strategy where she ridicules Andy. By using the phrase "marring the area," Emily equates Andy to some kind of stain or dirt that ruins the office's visual perfection. By definition, to mar is to damage, spoil, or impair the quality or appearance of something (Cambridge University Press, n.d.-a). Here, she dehumanizes Andy and attacks Andy's dignity and her positive face by implying that Andy is an eyesore. She perceives Andy not as an individual, but as a physical flaw that ruins *Runway Magazine's* high-fashion environment.

In Emily's utterance, the function of the strategy is coercive impoliteness. Her utterance acts as a power move for her to remind Andy that her aesthetics do not match Miranda's strict standards of fashion. She tries to degrade Andy and asserts her superiority as a fashion "insider" who dresses perfectly. Emily's negative impoliteness in this instance shows that she places Andy beneath her. She coerces Andy to believe that she is unworthy of the position as an assistant.

Scene 3: (00:12:50–00:13:03)

Emily : **(3) Bloody hell. I hope you know this is a very difficult job for which you are totally wrong. And if you mess up, my head is on the chopping block.**

Andy : [looks baffled].

Scene 3 takes place at Emily's desk where she is waiting for Andy to bring Miranda's coffee. Andy is late, and once she arrives, she brings the coffee to Emily. In Data (3), Emily then says, "Bloody hell. I hope you know this is a very difficult job for which you are totally wrong. And if you mess up, my head is on the chopping block."

Emily's utterance employs a bald-on record impoliteness strategy. Culpeper (1996) argues that when bald-on-record impoliteness is used in an interaction, the speaker intentionally attacks the face of the hearer, usually by directly insulting them.

Emily's utterance where she states that Andy is wrong for the job is direct criticism. She views Andy's tardiness as unprofessional. Emily delivers this criticism without softening the blow; she presents it as a harsh fact. In this scenario, Emily's utterance serves as coercive impoliteness. Emily coerces Andy to comply with her implied request (that Andy must not make any mistakes in doing her job) through intimidation. She wants to assert her superiority as the senior assistant. She wants Andy to know that she is competent whereas Andy is not, and that her position as the senior assistant is on the line if Andy fails.

Scene 4: (00:17:12–00:18:03)

Andy : She called me in there and asked me about Pier 59. There was something about Simone and Frankie and someone else. And, um, she needs skirts from Calvin Klein. And, uh, and there was something about a pony.

Emily : Did she say which skirts?
Andy : No.
Emily : Did she say what kind? Color? Shape? Fabric?
Andy : No. I tried to ask her, but—
Emily : You never ask Miranda. Anything. (sighs). Right, I will deal with all of this and you will go to Calvin Klein.
Andy : Me?
Emily : **(4) Oh, I'm sorry. Do you have some prior commitment? Some hideous skirt convention you have to go to?**

In Scene 4, Andy is called into Miranda's office. Miranda asks her to do some tasks. Andy does not have time to write down or memorize Miranda's requests fully. She panics, then goes to her desk. Prior to the requests, Miranda also requests to call Patrick Demarchelier, a major fashion photographer. Miranda asks Andy whether she has gotten him on the phone or not. Andy panics, and Emily comes up from behind her, taking control of the situation by calling Patrick Demarchelier.

Then, Andy talks to Emily about all of Miranda's requests, including getting skirts from Calvin Klein. Emily asks if Miranda specified the skirts that she wants. Andy replies that Miranda did not specify anything other than the name of the store. Emily then says that she will deal with all of Miranda's requests, except for going to Calvin Klein, as that will be Andy's responsibility. Andy is confused and tries to confirm if she really has to be the one going to Calvin Klein. Emily responds by saying, "Oh, I'm sorry. Do you have some prior commitment? Some hideous skirt convention you have to go to?"

Emily's response uses sarcasm or mock politeness. According to Culpeper (1996), this strategy involves a face threatening act where a speaker is clearly being insincere. On the surface, Emily uses the polite structure of asking about Andy's schedule. However, she is actually mocking Andy's sense of fashion again by suggesting that Andy might have a hideous skirt convention to go to. In this context, although she appears polite on the surface by saying, "I'm sorry," her next word choice, "hideous," invalidates this politeness.

By definition, hideous means extremely ugly or bad (Cambridge University Press, n.d.-b). Emily combining the word "hideous" and the phrase "I'm sorry" in her utterance creates a contradiction which shows that the politeness is insincere. A polite speaker would not insult their colleague's clothing; therefore, the word "hideous" in Emily's utterance turns the appearance of her politeness into impoliteness.

Emily's utterance attacks Andy's positive face. Her desire to be approved of, especially in terms of the fashion world, is damaged because Emily implies that her style is still awful and it does not meet the standards of *Runway Magazine*. This strategy functions as coercive impoliteness. Her utterance in this instance is another power move for her to make Andy believe that she is beneath Emily.

Scene 5: (01:11:41–01:12:15)

Emily : You should have said no.
Andy : Emily, I didn't have a choice. You know how she is.
Emily : **(5) Oh, please. That's a pathetic excuse.** You know what really just gets me about this whole thing? Is that you know— you're the one who said that you don't really care about this stuff. And you don't really care about fashion, you just want to be a journalist.
(6) What a pile of bollocks.
Andy : Emily, I know you're mad. I don't blame you.

In Scene 5, Emily is in the hospital recovering after being hit by a taxi. Andy visits her to apologize to Emily. She wants to apologize because Miranda wants to go to Paris Fashion Week with her instead of Emily. Andy is remorseful because going to the Paris Fashion Week is Emily's lifelong dream. Emily responds that Andy should have said no to Miranda's request. Then, Andy responds that Miranda always gets everything her way. Emily replies by saying, "Oh, please. That's a pathetic excuse" (Data 5) and "What a pile of bollocks" (Data 6).

Both Data (5) and Data (6) utilize bald-on record impoliteness. Culpeper (1996) defines bald-on record impoliteness as deliberately and directly attacking the hearer's face without any mitigation. She uses phrases such as "pathetic excuse" and "pile of bollocks" as her direct and unambiguous insults towards Andy.

Emily attacks Andy's integrity. She accuses her of hypocrisy. Emily wants to make Andy feel guilty for "stealing" her lifelong dream. She still positions herself as being above Andy and that Andy should not have agreed to Miranda's request. Emily's utterance serves the function of affective impoliteness in this instance. According to Culpeper (2011), affective impoliteness is when an emotional outburst occurs in an interaction. The speaker intentionally shows intense emotions such as anger or sadness, and suggests that the hearer (the target) is responsible for their emotions. In this data, Emily uses the bald-on record impoliteness to vent her anger towards Andy. She wants to express blame toward Andy for agreeing to Miranda's request.

Scene 6: (01:23:41–01:23:47)

Emily : You went upstairs? You went to the second floor?

Andy : [nods nervously].

Emily : Oh my god. **(7) Why didn't you just crawl into bed with her and ask for a bedtime story?**

Andy : I didn't know!

In this scene, Emily asks Andy if she really went to Miranda's second floor in her house. Prior to this conversation, Emily asks Andy to put the Runway book in Miranda's house without anybody noticing, not even Miranda. Andy quietly opened the door of Miranda's house and tried to put the book on a table in Miranda's foyer; however, Miranda's children, the twins, saw her. They told her that she could give the book to their mother and that she just needed to come upstairs. Andy then decided to come upstairs, not knowing that Miranda and her husband were arguing. Miranda saw Andy, and Andy just put the book down on the staircase and left.

Emily is baffled when she hears this story. She then responds to Andy's confirmation that she indeed went upstairs by saying, "Why didn't you just crawl into bed with her and ask for a bedtime story?"

In her utterance, Emily uses sarcasm (mock politeness) and negative impoliteness. According to Culpeper (1996), sarcasm or mock politeness is the act of expressing something insincere to convey mocking. Culpeper (1996) also defines that negative impoliteness is attacking someone's negative face.

Emily's utterance, "Why didn't you just crawl into bed with her and ask for a bedtime story?" demonstrates mock politeness and negative impoliteness. Although her utterance is structured as a rhetorical question, it only serves to ridicule Andy's mistake. Emily mocks Andy by suggesting a ridiculous alternative as if it were a real option.

The mockery comes from the difference between Andy's actual action and Emily's alternative suggestion. When Emily talks about "crawling into bed" and asking Miranda for a "bedtime story," she makes Andy seem like she does not understand the importance of

professional boundaries. Emily uses the ridiculous comparison to show that Andy's mistake of going upstairs is a breach of professional boundaries.

Emily's utterance in this scene functions as coercive impoliteness. Emily's employment of these strategies is to make Andy feel stupid and humiliated for not doing her job properly. Here, she coerces Andy to believe that she is still unfit for this position as she is not knowledgeable enough.

The analysis of the seven data above, which were extracted from multiple scenes, reveals that there are several main linguistic patterns of Emily Charlton's use of language. Regarding the first research question, the analysis reveals that Emily Charlton uses only three out of five impoliteness superstrategies, which are bald-on record impoliteness, negative impoliteness, and sarcasm or mock politeness. However, she mainly uses negative impoliteness and sarcasm or mock politeness in her utterances. In addition, the study finds that bald-on record impoliteness is the least used superstrategy. In her utterances, Emily only uses bald-on record impoliteness once. However, this finding is still significant because it shows that Emily also uses this superstrategy when her position feels threatened by Andy.

Then, to address the second research question, the analysis reveals that Emily expresses her impoliteness strategies through rhetorical questions, direct insult, and direct criticism, with direct insult and criticism being the least employed ones in her utterances.

Lastly, regarding the third research question, the analysis reveals that Emily only uses two out of three functions of impoliteness strategies in her utterances, namely the affective impoliteness and coercive impoliteness. The dominant function displayed in her utterances is coercive impoliteness while the least showed function is affective impoliteness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study illustrates that workplace power dynamics are constructed daily through deliberate linguistic choices. The results suggest that in professional settings, impoliteness strategies can become an efficient tool to maintain workplace hierarchy.

Since Emily Charlton does not have absolute power to fire people that threaten her position, she uses indirect aggression to dominate those around her. This study emphasizes how senior co-workers whose position is usually in the middle rank of workplace hierarchy, target junior co-workers to maintain their positions. By employing superstrategies such as negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness, and bald on record, middle-level employees can verbally assert dominance without depending on formal corporate status.

Despite the findings of this study, it still has its limitations. Firstly, the scope of the study is very limited. This research only uses one singular character from one particular film to analyze the use of impoliteness strategies. Because of that, the findings of this study cannot be used to generalize all workplace hierarchy in films or other audio-visual media.

Secondly, the methodology used for this study is a qualitative descriptive approach, which is inherently interpretative and subjective to the author. Other researchers may interpret the same dialogues differently and the level of offensiveness is solely based on the author's interpretations.

For future research, researchers are greatly encouraged to conduct an analysis comparing this film to another film focusing on workplace hierarchy. Another potential area of research would be to conduct an analysis comparing this film to the original novel by Lauren Weisberger. Finally, since *The Devil Wears Prada 2* is scheduled to be released in May 2026, future researchers can conduct an analysis on how Emily Charlton has evolved linguistically as a character. It would be highly relevant and interesting to see if she still frequently uses impoliteness superstrategies or if she has changed linguistically in response to workplace power dynamics.

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