

IMPOLITENESS AND FACE THREATENING ACTS IN THE U.S PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE BETWEEN DONALD TRUMP AND KAMALA HARRIS

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Abstract

The paper examines a pragmatic analysis of impoliteness and Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) in the high-stakes context of U.S. presidential debates. Focusing on the September 2024 presidential debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, the paper adopted Culpeper's (1996, 2011) framework of Impoliteness with Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The paper selected twelve excerpts (12) to deconstruct how grammatical choices engineer pragmatic effects. The findings reveal that both candidates frequently engaged in face-threatening behavior, but with distinct stylistic patterns rooted in their grammatical choices. Donald Trump's rhetoric was characterized by high-modality declarative clauses. In contrast, Kamala Harris predominantly employed Material and Causative Processes to cast Trump as the sole Actor responsible for national outcomes while her strategic use of Verbal Processes to report third-party criticism and the imperative mood functioned to perform a persona of moral and factual accountability. The study concludes that impoliteness in this context is a calculated, strategic tool, where the specific grammatical structures chosen by candidates are central to constructing political personas, delegitimizing opponents, and shaping the debate's narrative for the voting public.

Keywords: Impoliteness, Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs), Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Pragmatics, MOOD, Transitivity, Political Discourse, Presidential Debates, Donald Trump, Kamala Harris.

Introduction

Political debates are not just about politics but also about the language candidates use to establish dominance, project confidence, and undermine their opponents. Impoliteness, as a deliberate linguistic strategy, plays a critical role in disrupting harmony and asserting power. For instance, when a speaker uses sharp language to challenge an opponent's credibility, it can shift the audience's perception and frame the narrative of the debate. This research focuses on analyzing key terms such as impoliteness, political discourse, and face-threatening acts to uncover how these elements influence political outcomes. Impoliteness, in particular, involves strategies that intentionally threaten the "face" or public image of others, which is crucial in high-stakes debates. Similarly, political discourse involves the intentional use of language to sway public opinion, emphasizing the importance of framing, tone, and

delivery. This is where pragmatics comes in to offer the lens to analyze these subtle but impactful language choices.

Pragmatics is crucial in understanding how language creates or reduces tension. It considers factors like tone, context, and the relationship between speakers to determine the true meaning of an exchange. In political debates, where every word and gesture are scrutinized, pragmatics provides valuable insights into how candidates communicate power, defend themselves, or attack their opponents. It allows us to see beyond the words to understand the strategies at play. Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on how context shapes the meaning of language. Unlike syntax, which concerns sentence structure, or semantics, which deals with literal meanings, pragmatics examines how the situation in which language is used influences what we say and how it is understood.

According to Fromkin and Rodman (1978), pragmatics studies language use in context and the role of social factors in shaping communication. Finch (2000) further elaborates that pragmatics is concerned with the unspoken aspects of communication—the things implied rather than directly expressed. For instance, in a heated debate, if a candidate says, "I think we need to move forward," they might not just be suggesting progress; they could also be implying that their opponent is stuck in the past or obstructing progress. This aspect of pragmatics is crucial for understanding how language is used strategically in adversarial contexts. In high-stakes scenarios such as presidential debates, language becomes a tool for power, persuasion, and provocation, which is particularly evident in how impoliteness and Face-Threatening Acts are used to challenge opponents and sway public perception. In the U.S. Presidential Debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, language was not just a medium of communication but a battlefield for dominance. The deliberate use of impoliteness, executed through specific grammatical and lexical choices, framed arguments, shaped narratives, and influenced how each candidate was perceived by the audience. This study focuses on these linguistic strategies, integrating the pragmatic framework of Impoliteness Theory with the grammatical tools of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to examine how these choices disrupted harmony, asserted control, and ultimately shaped the outcomes of their political interaction. This duality is particularly evident in political contexts, where language becomes a strategic tool to assert power and influence public opinion. In this light, the study of impoliteness and face-threatening acts in U.S. Presidential Debates between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris becomes essential.

Linguistic Study of Metaphors and Impoliteness

Impoliteness is an utterance or a behavior when it comes to gathering in the other community. Impoliteness is an utterance that produce disharmony between individuals and other people in social interactions. It means impoliteness is an utterance that causes a

disharmony relationship between individuals. Locher and Bousfield claim that impoliteness is a behavior that is face-aggravating in a particular context (Locher & Bousfield, 2008). According to Terkourafi, "impoliteness occurs when the expression used is not conventionalized relative to the context of occurrence (Terkourafi, 2008, p. 70). Bousfield(2008) and Culpeper (2005) argued that speakers' intention and hearers' recognition of these intentions are both main factors in determining impoliteness, whereas, Terkourafi (2008) claimed that an utterance can be impolite even if the speaker's intention was not to be polite, but the hearer perceived it as such. Since language is a means of communication, the use of language is bounded by social norms in society. People use language in the society in order to keep good social interactions with others. Maintaining interpersonal relationship is important and in other to keep the harmony with other members in the society people need to follow the social norms by performing good attitude or behave politely. There are other times in which people use linguistic strategies to attack face. According to Culpeper, they do not indicate their polite acts because they want to attack other people's identities or rights (Culpeper, 2010, as cited in Ratri & Ardi, 2009).

Even though politeness is an important aspect of social interaction, the opposite phenomenon impoliteness is inevitable and highly salient in the public life and is as important as politeness in pragmatic literature. Verschueren (1999) claims that politeness should not be treated as center of social interaction, nevertheless impoliteness may be functional as politeness in interaction. Culpeper (2011, p.23) says:

"impoliteness as a negative attitude towards specific behaviors occurring in specific contexts. Compared to politeness that has been discovered for years, impoliteness has been explored quite recently, because it has been ignored and considered as an offensive linguistic behavior."

(Culpeper, 1996)

Concisely, the reason behind the recent interest in impoliteness was the inability of politeness approaches to explain fully the confrontational

interaction in impolite discourse. It is sustained by expectations, desires and disbeliefs about social organization including in particular how one person's or a group's identities are mediated by others interaction. Situated behaviors are viewed negatively or considered impolite when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behavior is presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. Various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behavior is taken to be including whether one understands a behavior to be strongly intentional or not". He also defines impoliteness as a communicative strategy designed to attack face and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony Culpeper et al (2003). Impoliteness comes when the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally or the hearer perceives and or construct behavior as intentionally face-attacking. Verbal impoliteness is a linguistic behavior assessed by the hearer as threatening her or his face or social identity and infringing the norms of appropriate behavior that prevail in particular contexts and among particular interlocutors whether intentionally or not.

Impoliteness phenomena do not only occur in daily interactions, but also occur in the dialogues found in various media such as movies books, novels, speeches, TV shows, political debate etc. also impoliteness connects aspects of identity, social context and linguistic forms. According to Locher and Bousfield (2008, p.3) impoliteness is a behavior that is face-aggravating in a particular context. Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviors that occur in specific contexts. Brown and Levinson's model of politeness (1987) paved the way for linguists to explore the phenomenon of impoliteness. Linguists Culpeper, Bousfield and Eelen have studied the communicative situation in which the purpose of the speaker is to damage a hearer's face rather than softening face threatening acts as in politeness (Mohammed & Abbas, 2016). Thanks to Culpeper's article "Towards an Anatomy of Impoliteness", the notion of impoliteness can be approached from different disciplines, it is

grounded in linguistic pragmatics. Generally speaking, pragmatics is the study of language in use. The modern concept of pragmatics was first introduced by the philosopher, Charles Morris, in 1938. He stated that the pragmatics is the branch of semiotics which studies the origin, the uses and the effects of signs. Pragmatics includes the study of deixis, presupposition, speech acts, implicative, cooperative principle, politeness and impoliteness (Mohammed & Abbas, 2016). According to Yule (1996), pragmatics is the study about the speaker intention and it is the study of contextual meaning. He also stated that pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that study and deals with how meaning communicated by speakers or writers and how it is interpreted by listeners or readers (Eriek, 2015, p.3).

In spite of the fact that the present study deals with the theory of impoliteness and impoliteness strategies, before defining this concept we start with defining its opposite phenomenon politeness briefly as the impoliteness theories have been developed based on the politeness. The concept of politeness was first introduced by Brown and Levinson. Brown and Levinson's theory (1987) is based on Goffman's face notion and Grice's maxims, they state that attempts to protect the face of the addressee in polite and any behavior that attacks the face of the addressee is impolite (Aydinoglu 2013, p. 473). Before discussing and analyzing Culpeper's model of impoliteness and impoliteness strategies the concept of "face" needed some explanations and definitions.

During an interaction every individual presents an image of self (face) which is intended to be internally consistent and supported by the other participants' judgement. According to Goffman (1959), self-presentation composes one of the most important elements of communicative behavior, which is aimed at establishing and maintaining an image of the individual in the mind of the others. The result of self-presentation activity is self-image (face). Face was originally proposed by Goffman in the 1960's and later Brown and Levinson (1987) utilized it for their face-saving theory which is regarded as the most well-known politeness theory. Brown and

Levinson distinguished two aspects of face: negative face and positive face. Positive face represents person's desire to be liked, appreciated and approved by others. Negative face represents person's desires to be independent and not to be imposed on. A face-threatening act is a speech that can damage hearer's positive or negative face. In other words, face-threatening act is a verbal or non-verbal act against hearer's negative face, as the hearer will be impeded by the speaker to do what the speaker wants rather than what he/she wants (Mohammed & Abbas, 2015). Face is the main reason for impoliteness. As mentioned by culpeper's (1996), impoliteness happens when there is an imbalance of power between participants, also when it is not in the participant's interest to maintain the other face. In close relationship impoliteness is quite complex.

Political Language and Communication

Politics is fundamentally about power—the ability to make decisions, influence people's thoughts and behaviors, and shape societal values. One of the most powerful tools in achieving this is language, as it has the capacity to shape public opinion and drive political agendas. Rozina and Karapetjana (2009, p.113) describe language as "the universal capacity of humans in all societies to communicate," while defining politics as "the art of governance." This shows how intertwined the two are. Chilton and Schaffner (2002, p.5) go further by explaining politics as a struggle for power between those who want to maintain control and those who seek to challenge it. In this struggle, language becomes an essential tool. Obeng (1997, p.83) argues that politicians use language as a means of manipulation, shaping narratives to serve their interests. Fairclough (2000, p.85) describes political language as the "lifeblood" of politicians because communication is what connects society, keeping it functional and organized. Orwell (1946, p.139) takes a more cynical view, stating that political language is designed "to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." In other words, politicians often use language to obscure reality rather than reveal it.

Chilton (2008, p.226) defines political discourse as the use of language to conduct the

business of politics—whether through persuasion, euphemisms, emotional appeals, or rhetorical devices like alliteration and rhetorical questions. Political speechwriters craft powerful messages that shape public perception and control narratives. The connection between language and politics is undeniable. As Schaffer (1996) points out, human life is deeply political, and every political action is prepared, carried out, and influenced through communication. Understanding the language of politics, as Beard (2000) emphasizes, is key to recognizing how those in power gain, exercise, and maintain their influence. Political speeches are not just words—they are strategic tools used to announce policies, persuade the public, and solidify authority. In essence, a politician's career depends heavily on the ability to use language effectively.

Lakoff (1990, p.7) captures the deep connection between language and politics, stating that "language is politics, politics assigns power, and power governs how people talk and how they are understood." In other words, language is not just a tool in politics—it is politics itself. Political manipulation relies heavily on language because it is through words that power is established, reinforced, and challenged. Language does not just convey power; it determines who holds power, how it is exercised, and how it is perceived. Lakoff further explains that political communication operates within a linguistic power game, where what is left unsaid is often more powerful than what is spoken. Politicians strategically choose their words to shape public perception, mask intentions, and guide interpretations. Language allows them to frame narratives, control debates, and present their agendas in ways that serve their interests. In this sense, language is the vehicle that drives politics forward.

Opeibi (2009) supports this view, emphasizing that language is the primary channel through which politicians express their manifestos, communicate political ideologies, and translate them into social action. It is through language that candidates persuade, mobilize, and gain support from the electorate. Political discourse is, therefore, not just about informing people—it is about influencing them. The power of persuasion

in politics depends not only on what is said but also on how it is said. Akinkukrolere (2011) highlights this further, arguing that the success of a political campaign, policy, or movement is closely tied to both the message itself and the way it is delivered. Politicians understand that people are drawn not just to ideas but to how those ideas are communicated. This is why rhetoric, tone, and strategic phrasing play such a crucial role in political discourse. Ultimately, language in politics is an instrument of both offense and defense. It can be used to attack opponents, counter criticisms, rally supporters, and shape national conversations. Whether through speeches, debates, propaganda, or media interviews, politicians wield language as a weapon, a shield, and a bridge to power.

Impoliteness in Political Speeches

Political discourse is often centered on power struggles and the exercise of authority (Newman, 2004). Politicians use language as a tool to assert dominance, whether over their peers, subordinates, or those they see as disloyal. While they may use polite language to maintain their public image and that of their supporters, they also resort to verbal attacks to undermine opponents. Verbal attacks occur when a speaker uses words that put the listener in a difficult position, often to gain an advantage. The listener may see such language as unfair or offensive. These attacks can take many forms, including insults, threats to reputation, shaming, sarcasm, public humiliation, dismissive remarks, criticism of appearance, the use of offensive words, name-calling, or comparing someone to an animal. Politicians use these tactics to intimidate, manipulate, or pressure their opponents. In political debates, verbal abuse is often fueled by anger and takes the form of harsh, degrading, or offensive language meant to hurt the target. Sometimes, it is disguised in polite or seemingly pleasant speech, but the goal remains the same—to damage the opponent's reputation. Culpeper (2011) refers to this kind of disguised hostility as a "mock politeness strategy."

Bousfield and Locher (2008, p.3) describe impoliteness as "behavior that is face-aggravating in a particular context." In politics, impoliteness is often used as a strategy to offend, undermine, or

damage an opponent's reputation, and it is usually recognized as such by the audience. Holmes et al. (2008, p.198) define verbal impoliteness as language that threatens a person's social identity or violates expected norms, whether intentional or not. However, it can sometimes be challenging to determine whether a speaker intends to be impolite, as listeners may perceive an utterance as offensive even when no harm was meant.

Culpeper et al. (2003, p.1552) note that while intentions are central to speech act theory, they are not always clear because "interlocutors do not wear their intentions on their sleeves." This makes it difficult to judge whether impoliteness is deliberate or simply perceived. Culpeper (1996, p.354) also observes that impoliteness is more common in situations where there is a power imbalance. A dominant speaker has more freedom to be impolite, as they can limit the ability of a weaker participant to respond—such as by denying them the chance to speak or threatening further consequences if they retaliate. This explains why impoliteness is widespread in politics, where those in power can freely attack their subordinates without fear of immediate repercussions. However, impoliteness is not limited to situations of power imbalance. It also occurs between political opponents of equal status, especially when neither is willing to maintain a respectful tone. In such cases, politicians often respond to attacks with equally harsh language to defend their public image.

Research Methodology

The paper is a qualitative analysis of impoliteness in the U.S. presidential debate, focusing on interactions between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. Through the examination of the debate transcript, the research aims to identify and interpret instances of impoliteness, understanding their pragmatic functions within political discourse.

The analysis employs a dual theoretical approach to achieve both pragmatic interpretation and micro-linguistic rigor. The primary pragmatic framework is Jonathan Culpeper's (1996, 2011) theory of Impoliteness, which facilitates the identification and categorization of impolite utterances. To provide a grammatical foundation

for this analysis, the study incorporates key concepts from Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Specifically, the analysis focuses on the MOOD system, to examine how clauses are structured as exchanges (e.g., declaratives, imperatives), and the Transitivity system, to analyze how speakers represent reality by assigning roles to participants (e.g., Actor, Goal). This SFL analysis serves to deconstruct the grammatical choices that underpin the pragmatic functions of Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs), as conceptualized by Brown and Levinson (1987). Data collection involves selecting twelve specific debate excerpts where Trump and Harris engage directly, with six (6) from each speaker to ensure a balanced analysis. The selection criteria include exchanges that demonstrate clear instances of impoliteness, face-threats, or those that garnered significant media attention, indicating the potential impact of the language used.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework that combines a pragmatic theory of social interaction with a linguistic theory of grammatical choice. The primary frameworks are Culpeper's (1996, 2011) Theory of Impoliteness, which explains the social function of face-attacking language, and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which provides the tools to analyze the grammatical structures that realize these functions.

Culpeper's Theory of Impoliteness and Face-Threatening Acts

This study is grounded in the concept of "face," as originally proposed by Goffman (1967) and famously developed by Brown and Levinson (1987). "Face" refers to the public self-image that every individual wants to claim for themselves. Brown and Levinson distinguish between positive face (the desire to be liked, approved of, and seen as a competent member of a group) and negative face (the desire for autonomy and freedom from

imposition). A Face-Threatening Act (FTA) is any utterance that runs contrary to these desires.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

To understand how impoliteness is grammatically constructed, this study incorporates tools from Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. SFL views language as a resource for making meaning and connects grammatical choices to their social functions. This study utilizes two key SFL systems that operate at the clause level:

The MOOD System: This system is part of the interpersonal metafunction and is concerned with the clause as an exchange. It analyzes how speakers enact social relationships by choosing a speech role, such as giving information (declarative), demanding information (interrogative), or demanding action (imperative). The MOOD element, consisting of the Subject and the Finite (the verb operator), determines this function. Analyzing the MOOD structure reveals how speakers position themselves and their propositions—for example, presenting a harsh accusation as an objective, factual declarative is a powerful impoliteness tactic.

The Transitivity System: This system is part of the ideational metafunction and is concerned with the clause as a representation of experience. It analyzes how speakers represent "who does what to whom" by choosing different process types (e.g., Material, Mental, Relational), assigning roles to Participants (e.g., Actor, Goal, Senser), and adding Circumstances (e.g., of time, place, cause). Analyzing transitivity reveals how speakers construct reality to serve their rhetorical goals—for instance, casting an opponent as the sole Actor in a negative Material Process assigns them direct blame.

By integrating SFL with Impoliteness Theory, this study can conduct a more robust analysis, moving from identifying an impolite act to explaining the precise grammatical machinery that brings it to life.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The analyses present and highlight the data collected from the U.S. presidential debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. The transcripts, sourced from official debate records, form the basis of analysis. The data is categorized into two distinct groups to facilitate a clear, comparative analysis:

- **Excerpt A** focuses on the analysis of impoliteness strategies in Donald Trump's debate responses.
- **Excerpt B** examines Kamala Harris's debate responses, identifying the impoliteness strategies she employs.

Below is the pragmatic analysis of selected excerpts from the debate.

EXCERPT 1

- **Context:** Responding to Harris's claim about a "Trump sales tax."
- **Quote:** "That's an incorrect statement. She knows that."
- **Analysis**

This utterance consists of two clauses structured in the declarative mood, a grammatical choice that presents the propositions as objective statements of fact, thereby maximizing their force as Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs). From an SFL perspective, the first clause, "That's an incorrect statement," has the MOOD structure of Subject ('That') followed by the Finite ('is'). Its Transitivity uses a Relational Process (attributive) to assign a negative quality (*Attribute*: "an incorrect statement") to Harris's utterance (*Carrier*: "That"). This initial move attacks the 'competence' aspect of her positive face by framing her claim as factually wrong. The second clause, "She knows that," is where the impoliteness escalates dramatically. It also follows the declarative Subject ('She') ^ Finite ('knows') structure, but its Transitivity shifts to a Mental Process of cognition ('knows'), positioning Harris as the *Senser* who possesses, but has ignored, the truth. The modality in both clauses is high and unequivocal, presenting these claims as absolute certainties.

Pragmatically, this grammatical shift from a relational claim of error to a mental claim of intent is crucial. It transforms the FTA from a simple disagreement into a direct assault on her character. This constitutes a severe form of positive impoliteness through the strategy of *accusing the other of being untruthful*. The strategic function is therefore not merely to correct a factual error, but to fundamentally disqualify Harris as a credible debater. By grammatically framing her statement as a factual error and her intention as a knowing deception, Trump attempts to poison the well, suggesting to the audience that she cannot be trusted and that her arguments are rooted in malicious intent.

EXCERPT 2

- **Context:** Responding to Harris's mention of Project 2025.
- **Quote:** "Number one, I have nothing to do, as you know and as she knows better than anyone, I have nothing to do with Project 2025."
- **Analysis:**

This utterance is structured around a central declarative clause, "I have nothing to do with Project 2025," which is reinforced by embedded clauses that perform the primary Face-Threatening Act (FTA).

The SFL analysis of the main clause shows a Relational Process of possession ('have'), with the Subject ('I') ^ Finite ('have') structure establishing a factual denial. The key FTA, however, lies in the embedded clauses: "...as you know" and "...as she knows better than anyone." These are Mental Processes of cognition ('knows'), positioning the moderator ('you') and Harris ('she') as the *Senser* of this "truth." The high modality and the intensifier "better than anyone" grammatically assert that Harris possesses absolute certainty about his non-involvement.

Pragmatically, this utterance performs an FTA against Harris's positive face, specifically her want to be seen as honest and well-intentioned. By stating that she "knows" he is not involved, Trump is not just disagreeing with her but is implying that her decision to mention Project 2025 is an act of deliberate, bad-faith misdirection. This is a clear use of positive impoliteness via the strategy of *accusing the other of being disingenuous*. The strategic function is twofold: it allows him to issue a

strong public denial while simultaneously pivoting to an attack on his opponent's character, framing her as a cynical political operator who knowingly uses false associations to attack him.

EXCERPT 3

- **Context:** Responding to Harris citing economic analyses critical of his plan.
- **Quote:** "That's just a sound bite. They gave her that to say."
- **Analysis:**

This two-clause response, both in the declarative mood, functions to systematically dismantle the credibility of both Harris's argument and her personal agency. The SFL analysis shows a progression of attack. The first clause, "That's just a sound bite," uses a Relational Process (attributive) with a Subject ('That') ^ Finite ('is') structure. It assigns a dismissive *Attribute* ('just a sound bite') to her point, framing it as superficial. The second clause, "They gave her that to say," shifts to a Material Process of transfer ('gave'). Here, the Subject is an undefined 'They' (implying handlers or strategists) as the powerful *Actor*. Harris ('her') is positioned as the passive *Recipient* of the words, and 'that' (the sound bite) is the *Goal* being transferred. This grammatical construction is pragmatically potent. It constitutes two distinct FTAs against Harris's positive face. The first FTA attacks the substance of her argument, while the second, more severe FTA attacks her authenticity and intellectual independence. This is positive impoliteness using the strategies of *belittling the other's contribution* and *questioning the other's sincerity and agency*. The strategic function is to completely devalue her point by suggesting it is not a product of her own intellect but rather a pre-packaged, hollow line fed to her by others, thereby undermining her authority and presenting her as a puppet.

EXCERPT 4

- **Context:** Continuing his response to Harris's economic arguments.
- **Quote:** "...she doesn't have a plan. She copied Biden's plan. And it's like four sentences, like run-Spot-run."
- **Analysis:**

This sequence of three declarative statements is engineered to systematically dismantle Harris's positive face by presenting a cascade of attacks as undeniable facts. The SFL analysis reveals the escalating nature of the attack. The first clause, "she doesn't have a plan," has the MOOD structure of Subject ('she') ^ Finite ('does' + 'n't'). The negative polarity in the Finite is key. In terms of Transitivity, it's a Relational Process negating a key attribute ('a plan') for the *Carrier* ('she'), attacking her competence. The second clause, "She copied Biden's plan," again uses a declarative Subject ('She') ^ Finite ('-ed' past tense) structure, but shifts to a Material Process ('copied'), grammatically casting Harris as the *Actor* who performs an act of intellectual theft on the *Goal* ("Biden's plan"), attacking her originality. The final clause, "it's like... run-Spot-run," uses the declarative Subject ('it') ^ Finite ('is') in another Relational Process to equate her plan (*Carrier*: 'it') with a childish text (*Attribute*), attacking her intelligence.

This consistent use of the declarative mood is pragmatically significant, as it allows Trump to stack three distinct FTAs as a series of objective truths. This is a multi-layered use of positive impoliteness, employing strategies of *criticism*, *challenging originality*, and severe *ridicule*. The strategic function is to construct a comprehensive image of Harris as a fundamentally unserious and intellectually unqualified candidate, with the progression from "no plan" to "copied plan" to "childish plan" creating a narrative of escalating incompetence.

EXCERPT 5

- **Context:** Describing the state of the economy under the current administration.
- **Quote:** "People can't go out and buy cereal bacon or eggs or anything else. These the people of our country are absolutely dying with what they've done."

- **Analysis:**

This utterance uses two declarative clauses to construct an emotionally charged narrative that functions as an indirect but powerful Face-Threatening Act (FTA). The SFL analysis of the second clause is most revealing. In "These... people... are absolutely dying with what they've done," the main process is a Material Process ('dying') where 'people' are the affected *Actor*. The crucial element is the Circumstance of Cause: "with what they've done." This grammatical structure explicitly links the suffering of the people to the actions of "they" (the current administration). The modality is intensified to an extreme degree with the adverb "absolutely," presenting the situation as dire and unequivocal.

Pragmatically, this is an indirect FTA against the positive face of Harris, as the representative of the administration being blamed. It uses the positive impoliteness strategy of *criticizing the other's group or associates* by attributing immense harm to their actions. The strategic function is to evoke a sense of crisis, fear, and economic pain in the audience and to channel that emotion into resentment towards his opponent. By grammatically connecting "dying" people to "what they've done," he constructs a simple and potent narrative of cause and effect designed to undermine Harris's credibility on the economy.

EXCERPT 6

- **Context:** Criticizing Harris's policy positions and alleged shifts.
- **Quote:** "I don't say her because she has no policy. Everything that she believed three years ago and four years ago is out the window."
- **Analysis:**

This utterance consists of two declarative clauses that perform distinct but related Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) against Harris's positive face, attacking both her substance and her integrity. The SFL analysis of the first clause, "she has no policy," reveals a Relational Process of possession. The MOOD structure is Subject ('she') ^ Finite ('has'), but the proposition is negated ("no policy"). This grammatically presents a void, an absence of a key attribute for a political leader. The second clause, "Everything... is out the window," is also a Relational Process, with 'Everything that she believed...' as the Subject / *Carrier* and 'is' as the Finite. The attribute "out the window" is a metaphorical idiom for being discarded or abandoned. The modality is high and absolute ("Everything... is"), leaving no room for nuance.

Pragmatically, these grammatical choices deliver a two-pronged attack. The first FTA attacks her competence by claiming a complete lack of policy substance. The second FTA attacks her political conviction and integrity, suggesting she is unprincipled, opportunistic, and that her beliefs are disposable. This is a powerful combination of positive impoliteness strategies: *criticizing the other for a lack of substance* and *challenging the other's consistency and principles*. The strategic function is to construct an image of Harris as a hollow and unreliable political figure, one who not only lacks plans for the future but also has no stable connection to her past beliefs.

EXCERPT 7

- **Context:** Continuing his critique of Harris's policy shifts with a taunt.
- **Quote:** "In fact, I was going to send her a MAGA hat. She's gone to my philosophy."
- **Analysis:**

This utterance uses two declarative clauses to perform a taunting and dismissive Face-Threatening Act (FTA) aimed at Harris's political identity and autonomy. From an SFL perspective, the first clause, "I was going to send her a MAGA hat," is a Material Process of transfer ('send'), with Subject ('I') ^ Finite ('was'). While the action is hypothetical ("was going to"), its symbolic meaning is potent. The second clause, "She's gone to my philosophy," is a Material Process of movement ('gone'), with Subject ('She') ^ Finite ('is'). This grammatically depicts her as an *Actor* who has moved towards his ideology (*Circumstance of Location*: "to my philosophy").

The high modality of the contraction ('She's') presents this as a completed action. Pragmatically, these clauses constitute a significant FTA against Harris's positive face. The act of "sending her a MAGA hat" functions as a form of mockery, a positive impoliteness strategy intended to ridicule her by suggesting she has effectively joined his political movement. The subsequent claim that "She's gone to my philosophy" is an FTA that attacks her originality and ideological independence, framing her not as a leader with her own vision, but as a follower who has capitulated to his. The strategic function is to belittle Harris, portray her as ideologically weak and inconsistent, and simultaneously elevate his own political philosophy as the dominant force that others inevitably move towards.

EXCERPT 8

- **Context:** Making a strong accusation about Harris's political ideology.
- **Quote:** "She's a Marxist. Everybody knows she's a Marxist."
- **Analysis:**

These two declarative clauses perform an exceptionally strong FTA against the core of Harris's political identity, a central aspect of her positive face. The SFL analysis shows the first clause, "She's a Marxist," uses the declarative mood with Subject ('She') \wedge Finite ('is'). In terms of Transitivity, this is an intensive Relational Process that defines the *Carrier* ('She') by a highly contentious *Attribute* ('a Marxist'). This grammatical choice does not describe a temporary action but assigns a fixed, essential identity. The second clause, "Everybody knows she's a Marxist," also uses the declarative mood with Subject ('Everybody') \wedge Finite ('knows'). The Transitivity here is a Mental Process of cognition ('knows') with a universalized *Senser* ('Everybody'). This grammatically frames the contentious label not as an opinion but as a universally held cognition. The high, positive modality of the Finite verbs ('is', 'knows') presents these claims as absolute and certain.

Pragmatically, the choice of a high-modality declarative mood is crucial. By grammatically encoding this extreme accusation as a simple, objective fact, Trump closes down space for negotiation or nuance. He is not *offering an opinion* ('I think she is...'); he is *stating a reality*. This grammatical choice to present an attack as irrefutable information is what makes the FTA so potent. It functions as a powerful tool for positive impoliteness (name-calling) to ideologically 'other' her, placing her far outside the accepted political spectrum and evoking fear among moderate voters.

EXCERPT 9

- **Context:** Concluding a critique of the current administration's policies.
- **Quote:** "They have and she has destroyed our country with policy that's insane. Almost policy that you'd say they have to hate our country."
- **Analysis:**

This utterance, structured in the declarative mood, delivers a powerful, two-part Face-Threatening Act (FTA) that attacks not only competence but also patriotism. From an SFL perspective, the first part, "...she has destroyed our country," is a Material Process ('destroyed') with 'she' as the *Actor* and 'our country' as the *Goal*. This transitivity choice assigns her direct, active agency in a catastrophic action. The Circumstance of Means is "with policy that's insane," where 'insane' is a high-intensity negative attribute. The second part, "...you'd say they have to hate our country," shifts to a Verbal Process ('say') and then a Mental Process of emotion ('hate'). The use of the generic 'you' as the *Sayer* invites the audience to agree with this extreme conclusion. Pragmatically, this is a severe FTA against Harris's positive face. The first part attacks her competence with extreme hyperbole. The second part is a more profound attack on her character and motives. By suggesting that the only logical explanation for her policies is a "hatred" for the country, Trump employs the positive impoliteness strategy of *questioning the other's motives or loyalty*. The strategic

function is to escalate the critique from simple policy disagreement to a matter of national allegiance, framing his opponent not just as incompetent but as a potentially malicious, anti-American actor.

EXCERPT 10

- **Context:** Discussing abortion policy, referencing an alleged comment by a former governor.
- **Quote:** "He said the baby will be born and we will decide what to do with the baby. In other words, we'll execute the baby."
- **Analysis:**

This utterance uses a declarative structure to report a statement and then provide a shocking reinterpretation, functioning as a severe indirect Face-Threatening Act (FTA). The SFL analysis shows the first part uses a Verbal Process ('said') to attribute the quote to a third party ('He'). The second part, introduced by "In other words," signals a rephrasing. The clause "we'll execute the baby" is a Material Process ('execute') with the Subject ('we') ^ Finite ('will') structure. 'We' is used to represent Democrats, and 'execute' is a process word with profoundly negative and violent connotations, far removed from the original context of medical decisions. The high modality of 'will' presents this interpretation as a certain outcome.

Pragmatically, this reinterpretation is a severe FTA against the positive face of Democrats, and by extension Harris. It employs the positive impoliteness strategy of *associating the other (or their group) with a profoundly negative and taboo act* (infanticide). Even though Trump attributes the original words to someone else, he takes ownership of the brutal interpretation. The strategic function is to horrify the audience and create moral outrage, painting his political opponents as morally bankrupt extremists on a deeply emotional issue, thereby damaging Harris's image through her party affiliation.

EXCERPT 11

- **Context:** Continuing his discussion on abortion and Democratic positions.
- **Quote:** "Because they're radical. The Democrats are radical in that. And her vice presidential pick, which I think was a horrible pick... because he is really out of it."
- **Analysis:**

This utterance is a sequence of declarative clauses that performs a cascading Face-Threatening Act (FTA), moving from a general attack on the party to a specific attack on an individual associate. The SFL analysis of the first two clauses, "they're radical" and "The Democrats are radical," shows an intensive Relational Process. The Subject ('they' / 'The Democrats') ^ Finite ('are') structure assigns the negative *Attribute* ('radical') to the *Carrier*. The third clause attacks Harris's running mate. The main clause "which... was a horrible pick" is another Relational Process with Subject ('which') ^ Finite ('was'), assigning the *Attribute* "horrible pick". The final clause "he is really out of it" is a third Relational Process with Subject ('he') ^ Finite ('is'), assigning the belittling *Attribute* "really out of it," with "really" functioning as a high-intensity modal adjunct.

Pragmatically, this constitutes a multi-layered FTA against Harris's positive face. By first labeling her party as "radical," he uses the positive impoliteness strategy of *associating the other with a negative group*. He then attacks her judgment by disparaging her running mate, employing the strategy of *criticizing an associate*. The strategic function is to construct a narrative of extremism that encompasses not just Harris, but her entire political affiliation and her chosen team, thereby framing her as a central figure in a movement that is outside the political mainstream and led by incompetent individuals.

EXCERPT 12

- **Context:** Responding to Harris's claims about his stance on a national abortion ban.
- **Quote:** "Well, there she goes again. It's a lie. I'm not signing a ban."
- **Analysis:**

This utterance is a sequence of three short clauses, primarily in the **declarative mood**, that work

together to perform an aggressive and dismissive Face-Threatening Act (FTA). The SFL analysis reveals the structure of the attack. The first clause, "there she goes again," is a minor clause that functions pragmatically to frame Harris's actions as tiresomely repetitive. The second clause, "It's a lie," is a core part of the attack. It is a Relational Process with a Subject ('It') ^ Finite ('is') structure, assigning the negative *Attribute* ('a lie') to Harris's statement. This is a classic bald on record declarative statement with high modality. The final clause, "I'm not signing a ban," is a Material Process with Subject (I) ^ Finite ('am' + 'not'), where the negative polarity serves as a direct refutation.

Pragmatically, this is a severe attack on Harris's positive face, specifically her integrity. The opening dismissal combined with the blunt, unmitigated accusation "It's a lie" constitutes positive impoliteness through the strategy of *accusing the other of dishonesty*. The strategic function is to immediately and forcefully shut down her line of argument, project an image of indignant innocence, and undermine her trustworthiness in the eyes of the audience by framing her as a habitual liar.

Findings

The analysis has revealed that both candidates used a range of impoliteness strategies, though their patterns of use were distinct. Donald Trump's discourse was heavily characterized by Positive Impoliteness and Bald on Record Impoliteness. Positive impoliteness strategies were frequently used to damage Harris's public self-image. For example, in excerpt 8, Trump employed the strategy of *name-calling* by labeling Harris a "Marxist." In excerpt 4, he used *ridicule* by comparing her economic plan to a childish text, "run-Spot-run." His dismissals in excerpt 3 ("That's just a sound bite. They gave her that to say") questioned her authenticity. Bald on record impoliteness was evident in his direct, unambiguous contradictions, such as in excerpt 12 where he bluntly stated, "It's a lie." Conversely, Kamala Harris primarily employed positive impoliteness by *associating Trump with negative aspects*.

Also, face-threatening acts (FTAs) were employed systematically by both candidates to undermine the opponent's public image, or "face." Donald Trump's FTAs were overwhelmingly aimed at Harris's positive face, specifically attacking her competence, character, and intelligence. For example, in excerpt 4, by repeatedly asserting "she doesn't have a plan" and "she copied Biden's plan," he directly threatened her image as a competent and original leader. Furthermore, in excerpt 1, by stating, "She knows that" after calling her statement incorrect, he performed an FTA that threatened her face as an

honest person, implying she was deliberately lying. Kamala Harris also focused her FTAs on Trump's positive face, but concentrated on his moral character and fitness for office. For example, in excerpt 4, she accused him of inciting violence ("incited a violent mob"), and in excerpt 5, she cited damning testimony from his own former staff who called him "dangerous and unfit." The Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) analysis reveals that the candidates' grammatical choices were engineered to perform specific pragmatic functions. The linguistic strategies of Donald Trump primarily served the pragmatic function of constructing a reality of absolute certainty and framing his opponent as illegitimate. His consistent use of the declarative mood with high modality was central to this. For example, in excerpt 8 ("She's a Marxist"), he used a Relational Process to assign a fixed, negative identity to Harris, presenting this contentious label as an objective fact rather than an opinion. Similarly, in excerpt 1, his use of a Mental Process ("She knows that") functioned to claim knowledge of her internal state, pragmatically framing her not merely as incorrect, but as intentionally deceitful. This combination of grammatical choices functions to disqualify Harris as a credible political actor.

The linguistic strategies of Kamala Harris, in contrast, served the pragmatic function of performing moral and factual accountability while framing her opponent as a direct threat. Her Transitivity choices were key to this. Kamala Harris consistently used Material Processes to cast

Trump as the sole *Actor* responsible for catastrophic national outcomes, a grammatical choice that functions to hold him directly accountable for his legacy. A key strategy was her use of Verbal Processes to report the speech of authoritative third parties. For instance, Finally, her strategic use of the imperative mood functions to directly confront and command, projecting strength and refusing to accept his framing of reality. Her SFL choices, therefore, allow her to perform aggressive FTAs while maintaining a persona of a measured, evidence-based prosecutor.

Conclusion

This study examined a pragmatic analysis of impoliteness as well as face threatening acts in the selected debates of Donald Trump and Kamala

Haris. The paper sees political manipulation relies heavily on language because it is through words that power is established, reinforced, and challenged. Language does not just convey power; it determines who holds power, how it is exercised, and how it is perceived. Major political figures operate within a linguistic power game, where what is left unsaid is often more powerful than what is spoken. Politicians strategically choose their words to shape public perception, mask intentions, and guide interpretations. Language allows them to frame narratives, control debates, and present their agendas in ways that serve their interests. In this sense, language is the vehicle that drives politics forward.

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