

A Pragmatic Analysis of Impoliteness Strategies in Trevor Noah's Stand-Up Comedy: *I Wish You Would*

Fadhel Ramli¹

Universitas Pamulang

Email: ¹fadhelramli88@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the types and functions of impoliteness strategies in Trevor Noah's Netflix stand-up comedy special I Wish You Would. While impoliteness has often been studied in conflict-driven interactions, its role in comedic performance remains less explored. Using Culpeper's (1996) typology of impoliteness strategies and his (2011) functional framework, the research applies a qualitative descriptive approach to 30 purposively selected utterances from the show. The analysis identified four types of impoliteness strategies: sarcasm (10 utterances, 33%), negative impoliteness (10 utterances, 33%), positive impoliteness (6 utterances, 20%), and bald-on-record impoliteness (4 utterances, 14%). Withhold impoliteness did not appear in the data. Regarding their functions, the majority of instances served an entertaining purpose (23 utterances, 70%), followed by coercive (3 utterances, 10%) and affective (4 utterances, 13%). These findings demonstrate that in stand-up comedy, impoliteness functions less as an offensive act and more as a rhetorical device for humor, social critique, and audience engagement. In Noah's performance, impoliteness enables him to address sensitive issues in ways that entertain while softening the potential harshness of critique.

Keywords: *Impoliteness, Stand-up Comedy, Pragmatics, Trevor Noah, Culpeper*

A. Introduction

Communicating involves not only conveying information but also interpreting the context and meaning behind each utterance. In this process, politeness and impoliteness become crucial, since the way a message is expressed shapes how it is received and understood (Ribino, 2023). Politeness is often used when addressing individuals of higher status or greater maturity, while impoliteness functions in the opposite way. Culpeper (1996) defines impoliteness as a communicative strategy designed to attack the hearer's face and potentially create social conflict or disharmony. Importantly, impoliteness is not merely the absence of politeness but a deliberate act that may threaten or damage interpersonal relations.

In pragmatic studies, impoliteness has been widely analyzed in conversations, media discourse, and institutional settings. However, its role in humor and entertainment, particularly in stand-up comedy, remains underexplored. Previous research has demonstrated that impoliteness strategies can generate conflict or discomfort (Culpeper, 2005; Culpeper, 2011), yet fewer studies examine how these strategies can also produce laughter, social critique, and audience engagement.

This gap provides an opportunity to explore how impoliteness functions in a comedic context, where face-threatening acts may be perceived positively rather than negatively.

Trevor Noah's Netflix stand-up special *I Wish You Would* (2022), directed by David Paul Meyer, offers a relevant case for analysis. The show discusses social phenomena such as the death of the Queen of England, the COVID-19 pandemic, horror films, and Noah's personal experiences—many of which are framed through impoliteness strategies. Although audiences laugh at his “face-attacking” remarks, many may not consciously recognize them as instances of impoliteness. This makes the performance a suitable object for examining how comedians strategically employ impoliteness to balance entertainment, critique, and audience connection.

Accordingly, this study adopts Culpeper's (1996, 2011) framework to analyze the impoliteness strategies used in *I Wish You Would*. The scope is limited to Noah's utterances containing identifiable impoliteness strategies and their corresponding functions.

The research is guided by the following questions:

- 1) What types of impoliteness strategies are employed by Trevor Noah in *I Wish You Would*?
- 2) What functions do these impoliteness strategies serve in the context of stand-up comedy performance?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to contribute to pragmatic and humor studies by demonstrating how impoliteness can be recontextualized as a communicative tool for entertainment and social commentary rather than purely as a source of conflict.

B. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze and interpret the data. Creswell (2013) explains that qualitative research emphasizes understanding meaning within theoretical frameworks and assumptions. This method was chosen because it allows for detailed examination of Culpeper's (1996, 2011) impoliteness strategies, which are context-dependent and best understood through descriptive interpretation. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) note, qualitative data are inherently descriptive, making this approach appropriate for analyzing language use in performance.

The data source consisted of Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy special *I Wish You Would* (Netflix, 2022). A publicly available transcript was obtained from *Scraps from the Loft* (<https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/comedy/trevor-noah-i-wish-you-would-transcript/>). To strengthen reliability, the transcript was cross-checked against the official Netflix subtitles while re-watching the show. Any discrepancies between transcript and subtitles were resolved manually by revisiting the video. This verification process ensured greater accuracy of the linguistic data used in the analysis.

From the full performance, 30 utterances containing impoliteness strategies were purposively sampled. The sample size was determined by selecting utterances that clearly represented one of Culpeper's impoliteness categories. Rather than analyzing every line of the transcript, the study focused on these 30 utterances to allow for depth of qualitative interpretation while ensuring that different strategy types were represented. The selection was based on explicit

criteria: the utterance had to (1) involve face-threatening elements, (2) demonstrate relevance to Culpeper's framework, and (3) be central to the comedic punchline or social critique.

The data collection procedure consisted of four stages:

1. Watching *I Wish You Would* in full on Netflix.
2. Aligning the transcript with subtitles to ensure transcription accuracy.
3. Identifying utterances that potentially contained impoliteness strategies.
4. Filtering these utterances based on the inclusion criteria above, resulting in a final dataset of 30 utterances.

Data were then analyzed through coding. Each utterance was classified into types of impoliteness strategies based on Culpeper's (1996) model and further examined for its function according to Culpeper's (2011) framework. To improve credibility, the coding process was independently reviewed by two researchers. Inter-rater reliability was established through discussion and consensus, reducing subjectivity in classification.

Finally, ethical considerations were addressed by ensuring that the transcript source was publicly accessible, with the full performance available legally via Netflix. The study was conducted for academic purposes under fair use, with excerpts quoted only to illustrate analysis.

C. Findings and Analysis

1. Findings

1.1. Impoliteness Strategies and Functions in *I Wish You Would*

The writer found 30 data from Trevor Noah's utterances in the *I Wish You Would Stand-up Comedy Show on Netflix* and classified the types of impoliteness strategies by using Culpeper's (1996) theory of impoliteness strategies. From the aspect of impoliteness strategies, only four types are found. The result showed that sarcasm and negative were the most common data found, with 10 utterances or 33%. The next is positive with 6 utterances or 20%. The last is bald on record with 4 utterances or 14%. In the aspect of functions of impoliteness, entertaining function is the most data found with 23 utterances or 70%. The next is coercive with 5 utterances or 16%. The last is affective with 4 utterances or 14% of the data found. While there is no data that belongs to withhold impoliteness.

The distribution of the impoliteness function that arises from the type of impoliteness strategies, with the entertaining function being the most found data with 23 utterances from the impoliteness type, sarcasm or mock with 8 utterances, while positive 5 utterances and negative with 10 utterances. Coercive function is most found in bald-on-record with 2 utterances, while sarcasm with 1 utterance total of 3 utterances has have coercive function. Affective function is most found in bald on record with 2 utterances, with sarcasm or mock and positive 1 each, with a total 4 utterances. More information about the data will be provided in the table below.

1.2. Bald on Record Impoliteness

Bald-on-record impoliteness is a communication strategy in which a speaker directly and bluntly confronts another person, often through criticism or commands. Culpeper (1996) describes it as straightforward, brief, and typically used either between individuals with close social ties or

in contexts where the speaker disregards the addressee's control. This type of impoliteness openly threatens the hearer's face without mitigation.

An example appears in Trevor Noah's recounting of a humorous dispute with a friend over who understood curry better. When his friend insisted, "You're not more Indian than me," Noah countered by invoking the Bollywood film *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* as cultural proof, before responding with: "*Don't tell me I'm not more Indian than you. You shut up. When the waiter comes in...*" This blunt remark illustrates bald-on-record impoliteness.

Delivered in a playful tone, Noah's statement conveys mock frustration while simultaneously exaggerating the absurdity of his friend's claim. The direct command "*You shut up*" strips away politeness, highlighting Noah's assertiveness and momentary dominance in the exchange. In this case, the function of the strategy is coercive, as Noah asserts control over the situation—symbolically deciding who has greater authority in the interaction—while also transforming potential conflict into comedic entertainment.

1.3. Positive Impoliteness

Culpeper (1996) defines positive impoliteness as a strategy that undermines the addressee's positive face—their desire to be liked, approved of, or included. Rather than directly confronting the hearer, the speaker uses techniques that erode social harmony and challenge the listener's self-image. Examples of such tactics include ignoring or excluding others, showing a lack of sympathy or interest, using inappropriate identity markers, employing obscure language, expressing dissatisfaction, swearing, deliberately causing discomfort, or mocking through jokes and casual remarks.

An illustration of this strategy appears when Trevor Noah comments on the backlash against Disney's casting of a Black actress in *The Little Mermaid*:

"Schadenfreude is what happened when Black women saw middle-aged white men crying after Disney said they were changing The Little Mermaid. That's schadenfreude. That was one of the funniest things I've ever seen in my life. Grown men, crying."

Here, Noah ridicules the overreaction of middle-aged white men, portraying their emotional response as absurd and laughable. By doing so, he employs positive impoliteness: he undermines their positive face needs (the desire to be respected and taken seriously) while simultaneously turning their discomfort into a source of humor for his audience.

1.4. Negative Impoliteness

Negative impoliteness differs from positive impoliteness in that it directly threatens the hearer's negative face—their desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Culpeper (1996) identifies several sub-strategies, including condescension, ridicule, invading personal space, associating the addressee with negative traits, or reminding them of obligations. These tactics restrict the hearer's freedom by asserting the speaker's dominance or control.

An example can be seen in Trevor Noah's declaration of his love for Indian cuisine:

"I think it's the best cuisine in the world. Nothing comes close. You don't agree with me, let's meet in the parking lot and we can fight."

Here, Noah uses hyperbole to transform a difference of opinion into a mock challenge. By inviting dissenters to “fight in the parking lot,” he threatens their autonomy in an exaggerated and humorous way. This utterance reflects negative impoliteness because it imposes on the audience’s freedom to disagree, associating opposition with confrontation.

Delivered with a playful tone, the statement functions primarily as entertainment. Instead of genuinely seeking conflict, Noah dramatizes his passion for Indian food, turning potential disagreement into a source of laughter and audience engagement.

1.5. Sarcasm or Mock Politeness

Another strategy identified by Culpeper is sarcasm or mock politeness, which involves using insincere politeness to perform a face-threatening act. As Culpeper (1996, 2005) explains, the outward form appears polite, but the intended meaning is the opposite, often carrying negative or critical connotations. This strategy allows speakers to indirectly convey disapproval, ridicule, or irony while masking it under a veneer of politeness.

An example occurs when Trevor Noah ridicules people who request curry without spice:

“How you gonna ask for curry but not spicy? That’s the whole point of curry. You want curry without the spice. What, do you go to a sushi restaurant and ask for the fish slightly boiled? ... Your forefathers went around the world killing people for this spice! Now you don’t want it?”

Here, Noah highlights the absurdity of rejecting spice by drawing an exaggerated comparison to boiling sushi—an act that undermines the essence of the dish. He then escalates the critique through historical irony, mocking the contradiction between colonial exploitation for spices and contemporary rejection of them.

This utterance illustrates sarcasm/mock politeness because Noah frames his critique in the form of humorous exaggeration and irony, while the underlying message is critical. The function in this case is primarily affective, as Noah channels his frustration toward cultural hypocrisy while simultaneously provoking laughter. By doing so, he transforms a sharp social critique into an entertaining comedic moment.

2. Discussion

The analysis of Trevor Noah’s *I Wish You Would* revealed 30 utterances containing impoliteness strategies. As shown in the table, four types were identified—bald-on-record, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, and sarcasm/mock politeness—while withhold politeness did not appear in the dataset. Sarcasm and negative impoliteness were the most frequent, with 10 occurrences each, followed by positive impoliteness (6) and bald-on-record (4).

From a functional perspective, impoliteness was used primarily for entertainment (23 instances), with fewer examples serving affective (4) or coercive (3) purposes. This distribution demonstrates that although impoliteness strategies are theoretically face-threatening, in the context of stand-up comedy they function less as attacks and more as tools to generate laughter, highlight social critique, and sustain audience engagement.

The predominance of sarcasm and negative impoliteness reflects Noah's reliance on irony, exaggeration, and ridicule as central elements of his comedic style. Sarcasm allows him to voice criticism indirectly while still framing it humorously, while negative impoliteness often appears in mock confrontations with his audience or imagined opponents. Both strategies create tension but resolve it through laughter, reinforcing the idea that impoliteness in comedy does not necessarily produce disharmony, as Culpeper (1996) suggests in other contexts.

The results also align with Culpeper's (2011) view that impoliteness can fulfill different functions depending on the setting. In Noah's performance, coercive impoliteness is rare and appears mostly in stories where he asserts dominance over a conversational partner. Affective impoliteness, though limited, highlights moments of personal frustration or cultural commentary. However, the overwhelming dominance of the entertainment function suggests that the stand-up stage transforms impoliteness into a resource for humor rather than conflict.

Overall, these findings suggest that impoliteness in stand-up comedy should be understood not only as a linguistic strategy but also as a performance device. By reframing face-threatening acts as humorous exaggerations, Trevor Noah demonstrates how comedians exploit impoliteness to balance critique and entertainment, thereby challenging conventional notions of politeness and face management in interaction.

D. Conclusion

This study examined the use of impoliteness strategies and their functions in Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy special *I Wish You Would*, drawing on Culpeper's (1996, 2011) framework. Four types of impoliteness strategies were identified—sarcasm, negative impoliteness, positive impoliteness, and bald-on-record—while withhold impoliteness was not observed. Among the 30 utterances analyzed, sarcasm and negative impoliteness emerged as the most frequent strategies, underscoring Noah's reliance on irony, exaggeration, and ridicule to frame his critiques humorously. Functionally, impoliteness was used predominantly for entertainment, with fewer instances serving affective or coercive purposes.

These results highlight that in comedic contexts, impoliteness is not primarily employed to provoke conflict or offense, but rather as a resource to entertain, frame social criticism in lighter terms, and strengthen audience engagement. By transforming face-threatening acts into humor, Noah demonstrates how comedians can address sensitive social and political issues without alienating their audiences.

Beyond contributing to pragmatic theory, this analysis offers practical implications. For linguists, it illustrates how impoliteness strategies can be recontextualized across genres, moving from conflict-driven settings to entertainment. For media and humor scholars, it provides insight into how comedians strategically balance critique and laughter. For performers, it shows how impoliteness can be used as a stylistic tool to challenge norms while maintaining audience rapport.

Future research could expand on these findings by comparing impoliteness strategies across comedians from different cultural backgrounds, examining multimodal aspects such as gestures, facial expressions, and timing, or investigating how audiences interpret and respond to impoliteness in live versus recorded performances. Such directions would enrich our understanding of the interplay between language, humor, and social critique in global comedy.

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