

The Impoliteness Strategies and Their Functions Used by the Chairperson at the 2023 Hearing of the *TikTok* CEO

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines impoliteness strategies and their functions used by Cathy McMorris Rodgers (the chairperson) during a hearing with Mr. Chew (*TikTok* CEO). The hearing focused on the data security, regulation, *TikTok*'s relationship with China, and her impolite response to Mr. Chew's questions. This study highlights Ms. Rodger's role in leading the hearing is higher than the *TikTok* CEO's who is the defendant. This increases the likelihood that she uses impolite language. Theories by Culpeper (1996, 2005), Culpeper et al. (2003), and Culpeper (2011) used to analyze the impoliteness strategies and functions. The findings showed that the chairperson utilized all impoliteness strategies, except withholding politeness. Negative impoliteness strategy was often used to limit the freedom of Mr. Chew's explanation, whereas sarcasm strategy was least used to uphold formality. She chose straightforward over presupposition. Meanwhile, she used all the types of impoliteness functions, with coercive impoliteness function being the most used, followed by affective and entertaining functions. She applied coercion most often to get clear answers from Mr. Chew and to exercise her power. In conclusion, the chairperson utilized impoliteness strategies on purpose to exercise her power, to obtain social dominance, and to establish superiority during the conversation.

Keywords: chairperson, functions of impoliteness strategies, hearing, impoliteness strategies, *TikTok*'s CEO

INTRODUCTION

Language becomes an essential instrument in communication. It acts as a bridge that enables a person to talk to others and express their emotion. During the conversation, usually, people want to feel respected; therefore, they will pay attention to their choice of words to show politeness. However, sometimes, people use rude utterances when talking to others. This is what is known as impoliteness.

In this study, the writer decides to choose *TikTok*'s hearing as the object to be analyzed. *TikTok* itself is a social media platform developed in China under the name Douyin by ByteDance, a Beijing tech company. As one of social media platforms, *TikTok* enables its users to share, create, and explore short-form videos (LaFleur, n.d.). The writer is interested in analyzing a hearing because it is the first step to occur, where the lawmakers determine whether the witness will proceed to the court or not. Additionally, the writer wants to analyze the impoliteness in this legal case because the way lawmakers convey their impolite utterances can show the credibility of themselves as the lawmakers in the public.

The writer attempts to find out the impoliteness strategies and the functions from Cathy McMorris Rodgers' (the Chairperson's) utterances towards Mr. Chew (*TikTok*'s CEO). The reason for choosing her is because Ms. Rodgers, as the chairperson of the House of Energy and Commerce Committee, was the person who spoke first at the beginning of the hearing, so she led the atmosphere of the hearing when it took place. Further, the impolite utterances from the chairperson could also influence

the people's perception of whether they wanted to support Mr. Chew or against him. It also strengthened that during the hearing, the lawmakers were impolite to Mr. Chew by employing impolite utterances, where *TikTok*'s users also noticed the aggressive tone that some of the U.S. lawmakers used (Maruf, 2023) and the chairperson was one of them. Besides that, some video clips of the hearing that had been spread in *TikTok* also highlight their mocking questions, which appeared to degrade Mr. Chew as the CEO and deliberately performed a face attack on him. Further, "the more powerful the speaker is, the less polite they must be" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, as cited in Bousfield, 2008). Moreover, the rivalry between the United States and China also made the hearing more heated.

In analyzing the chairperson's impolite utterances, the writer uses the theory from Culpeper (1996, 2005) and Culpeper et al. (2003) about the impoliteness strategies. Those strategies are divided into six types. There are bald on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock impoliteness, withhold politeness, and off record impoliteness. Additionally, Culpeper's (2011) theory is utilized to analyze the function of impoliteness. It is categorized into affective, coercive, and entertaining functions.

METHOD

The writer used a qualitative research method to address the chairperson's utterances. However, in order to improve the study, the writer also used numerical data as support. The source of the data was the utterances performed by Cathy McMorris Rodgers (the chairperson) when talking to Mr. Chew during the hearing of 2023, which was taken from an online platform, *YouTube* (Washington Post, 2023). The data analyzed by the writer was impolite utterances around data security, regulation, *TikTok*'s relationship with China and the chairperson's impolite responses towards Mr. Chew's questions. The writer took a few steps to gather the data. First, the writer watched only the hearing session of *TikTok* CEO 2023 on *YouTube* (Washington Post, 2023). The whole duration of the video on *YouTube* is 7 hours and 3 minutes. However, the writer only focused on the hearing scene where the chairperson talked to Mr. Chew. Then, the writer examined the hearing transcription. The writer used transcription taken from the website, namely, *Tech Policy Press* (Tech Policy Press, 2023). Next, the transcription was copied and pasted into *Google Docs*. Afterwards, the writer only selected the chairperson's utterances when talking to Mr. Chew. After that, the writer checked whether the transcription was in accordance with the chairperson's utterances on *YouTube* or not. Then, after checking it, the writer highlighted the utterances containing the impoliteness strategies performed by the chairperson with yellow color and bolded the specific words that became the clue of impoliteness strategies. The writer used a one-digit numbering system to show the order of the number of each data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the types of impoliteness strategies the chairperson uses during the hearing. The second section discusses the functions of the impolite utterances performed by the chairperson. Then, the last section discusses the interpretation of the findings. Further, the summary of the findings is presented in the table below.

Table 1: Table of Summary of the Findings of Impoliteness Strategies and Their Functions Used by the Chairperson

**Fortunata: The Impoliteness Strategies and Their Functions Used by the Chairperson
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Impoliteness Strategies						Functions		
BOR	PI	NI	S/MP	WP	ORI	A	C	E
✓ (9)	✓ (14)	✓ (15)	✓ (1)	-	✓ (13)	✓ (12)	✓ (23)	✓ (3)

Abbreviations:

BOR: Bald on Record Impoliteness

PI: Positive Impoliteness

NI: Negative Impoliteness

S/MP: Sarcasm or Mock Politeness

WP: Withhold Politeness

ORI: Off-Record Impoliteness

A: Affective

C: Coercive

E: Entertaining

The Types of Impoliteness Strategies Used by the Chairperson

Based on the findings, the chairperson used all types of impoliteness strategies except withhold politeness. In the following section, the writer elaborates on each of them and provides some examples taken from the data. In analyzing the data, the writer gave bold word(s) that indicate the impoliteness performed by the chairperson.

A. Bald On Record Impoliteness

- Utterance
Data (5) → **“TikTok has repeatedly been caught in the lie that it does not answer to the CCP through ByteDance.”**

The context of this sentence was that the chairperson accused *TikTok* of allowing the company to collect sensitive information or users’ data, where they could take control of the users using it. Moreover, at that time, *TikTok* was also celebrated for its 150 million users in America. The situation encouraged the Congress to take action about it. The sentence belonged to bald on record impoliteness strategy because the chairperson here directly attacked Mr. Chew that *TikTok* had repeatedly been caught in a lie. In other words, *TikTok* was not being transparent about its relationship with ByteDance.

B. Positive Impoliteness

- Utterance:
(Data 19) → TikTok told us that you weren't tracking the geolocation of American citizens, **you were**. TikTok told us you weren't spying on journalists, **you were**.

The context of this sentence was the chairperson accused *TikTok* of collecting the geolocation of American citizens and spying on journalists. *TikTok* said they did not collect and track American citizens' geolocation and were not spying on journalists. Nevertheless, the chairperson said that they did all of that. This chairperson’s sentence included positive impoliteness in seeking a disagreement output strategy. It could be seen from the word **“you were”**. When the chairperson utilized that word, she intended to attack

Mr. Chew's positive face to be approved of by seeking disagreement about those two statements: tracking geolocation and spying on journalists because she found out that Mr. Chew's statement was not following the facts. The fact that she used the same words "you were" twice showed her disagreement about it. This situation also led to *TikTok* being caught for not being transparent in its statement.

C. Negative Impoliteness

- Utterances:
(Data 10) → "Banning your platform will address the immediate **threats**."

The context here was that the chairperson previously said that *TikTok* became a foreign threat that influenced the American people's lives. The chairperson further said that *TikTok* is dangerous because it could collect data and take control of it. Data 10 was included as negative impoliteness that used the negative aspect output category. It could be seen from the word "**threats**" in the utterance. *TikTok* is a platform that people can use as a place to distribute their creativity; however, the chairperson connects it with threats, which can be overlooked as a negative aspect. In other words, it was being said that banning them would be useless because *TikTok* would just create other threats. Further, her utterance conveyed that *TikTok* was nothing more than something that could bring a threat.

D. Sarcasm or Mock Politeness

- Utterance:
(Data 9) → "It's been said, **it's like allowing the Soviet Union the power to produce Saturday morning cartoons during the Cold War, but much more powerful and much more dangerous.**"

In the chairperson's utterances, the context was *TikTok* became a platform that could cause threats to the American people. The way the chairperson uttered this is considered sarcastic. The reason was that children usually watch cartoons in the morning, and it would look polite and pleasant if the Soviet Union could provide them for them. However, the history between the American and Soviet Union was bad because both of them were involved in the Cold War from 1947 to 1991 or more than 40 years. Hence, this utterance was more like being sarcastic rather than praise. As commonly known, the Cold War itself happened because both countries had different ideologies. America is a country with a liberal capitalist, whereas the Soviet Union is a country with a communist ideology. The Soviet Union attempted to spread its ideology to Western countries to take control of it. Therefore, by saying this statement, the chairperson was being sarcastic because, historically, the Soviet Union tried to spread its ideology to dominate other countries through its influence. The chairperson attempted to convey her disagreement indirectly more politely by making a scenario where the Soviet Union spread its communist belief by creating a cartoon movie for children. This sentence would not be sarcastic if America and the Soviet Union did not have any political conflict.

E. Off Record Impoliteness

- Utterance:
(Data 15) → "**Complete honesty is the standard** and the law you are being held to before this committee as we seek to get answers in a full understanding of what happens at TikTok under your watch."

The context of this sentence was the chairperson said this statement before she allowed Mr. Chew to give his justification. Here, the chairperson said that the committees searched for answers about the

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issues at *TikTok* when it led under him. This sentence implied that the committee expected Mr. Chew to cooperate well in discussing the problem by telling the truth. The FTA here attacked Mr. Chew by using an implication because the committees had skepticism. In other words, they did not fully believe Mr. Chew would be honest during the hearing. Therefore, the chairperson's utterances here contained a hidden meaning or implicature with the intention to attack Mr. Chew indirectly.

Functions of Impoliteness Strategies Used by the Chairperson

Based on the findings table, the writer found out that the chairperson used all those functions. In the next section, the writer provided a more detailed explanation for each function and presented some examples taken from the chairperson's data.

A. Affective Impoliteness Function

- Utterance
Data (23) → **"I will remind you that making false or misleading statements to Congress is a federal crime."**

This sentence shared the same context with the two types of impoliteness strategies: Bald on record impoliteness and positive impoliteness. The chairperson used bald on record impoliteness with the purpose of emphasizing that if Mr. Chew made a false statement in Congress, it was included as a federal crime. In addition, the sentence also belonged to positive impoliteness because the chairperson attacked Mr. Chew's desires when he wanted his answer to be approved. This sentence employed the use of affective function. The reason was that the chairperson expressed her emotion to warn Mr. Chew to be aware of his answer since misleading statements could make him a federal crime. It also showed that the chairperson affirmed that making mistakes during the hearing could harm the interlocutor himself.

B. Coercive Impoliteness Function

- Utterance
Data (15) → **"Complete honesty is the standard and the law you are being held to before this committee as we seek to get answers in a full understanding of what happens at TikTok under your watch."**

The following sentence referred to off record impoliteness, which displayed the coercive impoliteness function. It was considered as off record impoliteness strategy, the chairperson said indirectly that she expected Mr. Chew to cooperate in this Congress by being honest. Additionally, this type of impoliteness strategy is considered to contain a coercive function because the chairperson here gave a command to Mr. Chew. By saying, **"Complete honesty is the standard..."**, the chairperson pressured Mr. Chew; she expected him to give justification honestly or be transparent with the committee during the hearing. Further, the chairperson's statement here also means that the chairperson enforces Mr. Chew not to lie when giving his answer.

C. Entertaining Impoliteness Function

- Utterance

Data (9) → “It's been said, **it's like allowing the Soviet Union the power to produce Saturday morning cartoons during the Cold War, but much more powerful and much more dangerous.**”

This utterance was an example of sarcasm or mock politeness. It was a sarcastic sentence performed with the intention of entertaining the audience about *TikTok*. The chairperson was being sarcastic in mocking *TikTok*, which was actually no different from the Soviet Union, which spread its communist ideology during the Cold War era. By saying this, the chairperson means to deliver her sarcasm to entertain the audience because she was using the similarity to make a connection between *TikTok* and the Soviet Union. The chairperson delivered her message to mock *TikTok* vividly by making a similarity, that is “**it's like allowing the Soviet Union the power to produce Saturday morning cartoons during the Cold War, but much more powerful and much more dangerous.**” She used Saturday morning cartoons during the Cold War produced by the Soviet Union as a medium to make a connection between *TikTok* and the Soviets, where both of them were just the same, that is, to spread harmful to the American people but with a strategy using the non-visible technique through outspread.

Interpretation of the Findings

After analyzing all Cathy McMorris Rodgers’s (the chairperson’s) sentences, the writer interpreted the findings. Firstly, the chairperson only used five strategies out of six: bald on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness, and off record impoliteness strategies. The chairperson did not use the withhold politeness strategy. The writer interpreted that she did not use the strategy because she had to manage the hearing since she was the chairperson. She needed to give her answer or approval if the witnesses asked her permission to follow up on the other lawmakers’ statements, whether she allowed him or not. Therefore, the chairperson certainly gave her response to Mr Chew. Further, the chairperson used negative impoliteness strategy for fifteen times, which led as the most used strategy then followed by positive impoliteness strategy for fourteen times, off record impoliteness strategy for twelve times, bald on record impoliteness strategy for nine times, and sarcasm or mock politeness strategy for once.

Negative impoliteness is the most used strategy applied by the chairperson, especially ridicule output. The writer interpreted that it was utilized to limit the freedom of Mr. Chew in explaining his answer through showing the chairperson’s power as the person who led the hearing. Whereas, sarcasm or mock politeness strategy was rarely used because the chairperson upheld her formality since a hearing was a formal occasion. It also led to the situation where the chairperson chose to be more direct in conveying her impolite utterances rather than employing presuppositional sentences.

Second, the chairperson utilized all the impoliteness functions: Affective, Coercive, and Entertaining. During the hearing, the chairperson frequently used the coercive impoliteness function when talking to Mr. Chew. This function was used twenty-three times by the chairperson, followed by affective impoliteness function twelve times, and entertaining impoliteness function three times. The writer assumed that coercive impoliteness function was often used by the chairperson in order to get clear and specific answers by coercing Mr. Chew to give a response about his company, *TikTok*, and to exercise her power. Further, entertaining impoliteness function was rarely used because she wanted to maintain her formality during the hearing, a formal event. She preferred not to convey her utterance by using entertaining impoliteness function; however, she preferred to use the other impoliteness functions, such as affective impoliteness function to express her emotion and coercive impoliteness function to pressure. Further, in the findings, the writer found the impoliteness strategy patterns used in the impoliteness function.

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In the affective impoliteness function, the writer found out that the strategy most likely used was bald on record impoliteness strategy, where five data of bald on record impoliteness used the affective function. Regarding impoliteness strategy, bald on record impoliteness strategy occurred when the speaker performed it directly and clearly. Whereas in affective function, the speaker used it to express her emotion during the conversation. In other words, there was a similarity between bald on record impoliteness strategy and the affective impoliteness function. Therefore, the bald on record impoliteness strategy was likely to be used to get affective impoliteness function. Besides the same characteristic, there was also a relationship between them that led to the reason why the chairperson used bald on record impoliteness strategy. The chairperson used a bald on record impoliteness strategy a lot in this impoliteness function because she expressed her impoliteness directly to Mr. Chew. In the analysis, the chairperson used it to convey the danger of *TikTok* for the American users and to warn Mr. Chew to pay attention to what he had said. Therefore, she tended to use bald on record impoliteness strategy more in order to support her in conveying her statement regarding these issues. The chairperson used the bald on record impoliteness strategy five times in affective impoliteness function.

Then, in the coercive impoliteness function, the writer found that a negative impoliteness strategy was likely to be used. There were thirteen data points of this strategy that used the coercive function. Related to the impoliteness strategy, this strategy occurred when the speaker limits the interlocutor's freedom. Meanwhile, in the coercive impoliteness function, the speaker utilized this function to exercise her power, to obtain social dominance, and to enforce particular action. The chairperson here had a tendency to show her dominance or power as the one who led the hearing. That was why she used the negative impoliteness strategy more when coercing Mr. Chew. Other than that, the relationship between negative impoliteness strategy and coercive function relied on when the chairperson used it to convey her distrust; to scorn; to relate *TikTok* with negative aspect; to make Mr. Chew feel indebted; to belittle; to ridicule; to frighten; and not to treat Mr. Chew seriously. That is why, the chairperson often used a negative impoliteness strategy with coercive impoliteness function in order to support her in delivering these issues. The chairperson used a negative impoliteness strategy fourteen times for the coercive impoliteness function.

Next, in the entertaining impoliteness function, the writer found that off record impoliteness was most likely to be used. There were two data points of this strategy that were used in the entertaining impoliteness function. This off record impoliteness strategy was likely used for entertaining functions because when the speaker used it, the speaker's utterance contained a hidden meaning. Whereas in entertaining functions, the speaker utilized it by using their creativity to string words together so that the speaker could entertain the audience, but it actually harmed the interlocutor. Therefore, the speaker used the off record impoliteness strategy to attack the interlocutor indirectly and used the entertainment impoliteness function to entertain the others so that the speaker's attack did not look too blunt. Further, the relationship between off record impoliteness strategy and the entertaining function was seen when the chairperson used it to attack Mr. Chew's face by making a comparison between Uni Soviet and *TikTok*, where actually *TikTok* was as dangerous as that communist country. The chairperson also used off record impoliteness strategy when making a statement as representative to show a relief feeling, where the statement means that finally the CEO of *TikTok* was called to the hearing to discuss issues experienced by the American users. Therefore, in order to deliver these issues well, the chairperson used off the record impoliteness strategy the most frequently with entertaining impoliteness function to express her hidden meaning through entertainment. The chairperson used off record impoliteness strategy twice in entertaining impoliteness function.

The findings produced a different result from the writer's hypothesis. In the beginning, the writer hypothesized that a positive impoliteness strategy would become the most likely strategy that the chairperson used. Nevertheless, it turned out that a negative impoliteness strategy was likely to be used. The writer assumed that it was because the chairperson wanted to limit Mr. Chew's freedom of action by belittling and scorning him rather than approving his desire to be approved. It also means that the chairperson wanted to show off her dominance over the defendant. Meanwhile, the coercive impoliteness function was in accordance with the writer's hypothesis as the most used function in impoliteness strategies utilized by the chairperson.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the writer's study revealed that the chairperson deliberately used impoliteness strategies to exercise her power, to obtain social dominance, and to establish superiority during the conversation. She performed it when she talked to Mr. Chew to discuss problems related to his company by using impoliteness strategies. Further, the chairperson performed forcing actions or giving orders towards Mr. Chew, such as to make him stop talking. Besides that, she also performed insultation towards Mr. Chew.

The writer hopes that the findings from her study can help other people who are interested in conducting a study on impoliteness. The writer also hopes that her study can contribute in terms of the academic field of pragmatics. Additionally, the writer has a recommendation, that is, to conduct a similar study but with a different context, such as in a movie or podcast in the future. In closing, the writer hopes that it can bring more knowledge in understanding the impoliteness strategies and their functions.

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