

Analysis of Verbal Bullying in Film from the Perspective of Impoliteness Strategies

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Abstract

School verbal bullying is highly insidious yet rarely examined from linguistic perspectives. Adopting Bousfield's impoliteness framework, this paper conducts quantitative and qualitative analysis on bullying dialogues extracted from the film *Better Days*. Positive impoliteness ranks first at 39 percent, followed by bald on-record impoliteness at 36.6 percent and negative impoliteness at 19.5 percent. Sarcastic mock politeness accounts for the smallest proportion of 4.9 percent despite its strong concealment. In this film, bullies choose different strategies due to distorted class perceptions and group power dynamics, and victims mostly cope with harm via silence. This study verifies the applicability of impoliteness theory in interpreting school verbal bullying and provides linguistic references for bullying prevention.

Keywords: School Bullying; Verbal Bullying; Impoliteness Strategies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

School verbal bullying is highly insidious yet rarely examined from linguistic perspectives. Adopting Bousfield's impoliteness framework, this paper conducts quantitative and qualitative analysis on bullying dialogues extracted from the film *Better Days*. Positive impoliteness ranks first at 39 percent, followed by bald on-record impoliteness at 36.6 percent and negative impoliteness at 19.5 percent. Sarcastic mock politeness accounts for the smallest proportion of 4.9 percent despite its strong concealment. In this film, bullies choose different strategies due to distorted class perceptions and group power dynamics, and victims mostly cope with harm via silence. This study verifies the applicability of impoliteness theory in interpreting school verbal bullying and provides linguistic references for bullying prevention.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 School Bullying

Bullying was first formally defined in 2016 as "a form of peer violence occurring in the absence of provocation," inflicting distress on both victims and perpetrators who act out of frustration, anger, or status-seeking motives (Ren, 2017). Psychologist Olweus, a pioneer in the field, identified bullying as the primary form of adolescent aggression in school settings. In 2016, school bullying gained widespread attention (Ren,

2017). Defined as intentional, persistent infringement among students involving power imbalance, school bullying encompasses four types: physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying (He *et al.*, 2025; Liu, 2020). Among these, verbal bullying is the most prevalent yet covert form in China, often masked as "jokes" or casual interaction (Le, 2024). As societal awareness grows, bullying-themed films have proliferated, with scholars advocating social co-governance perspectives through cinematic analysis (Yin & Yuan, 2020; Zhang & Chen, 2023).

2.2 Impoliteness Strategies

Culpeper (1996) first defined impoliteness as face-attacking communicative strategies that trigger social conflict and disharmony. Bousfield (2008) revised the definition by highlighting the core role of context, framing impoliteness as context-bound face-attacking behavior in speaker-hearer interaction.

In terms of research development, Culpeper (1996) pioneered systematic impoliteness studies and proposed a five-category strategy taxonomy, which was later streamlined into on-record and off-record types by Bousfield (2008). Since the third phase of politeness research, the field has transcended traditional paradigms, expanding its scope to linguistic phenomena including teasing, sarcasm and banter (Haugh, 2013).

In terms of application, impoliteness research is largely integrated with interpersonal pragmatics, covering both dyadic and multi-party conversations. Existing studies examine impoliteness strategies in interpersonal conflicts, their identity-constructing functions, and impolite discourse in online multi-party communication contexts.

Overall, impoliteness strategies align closely with the core nature of verbal school bullying inflicting harm through language and can effectively deconstruct how bullies exert face threats and power oppression via positive, bald on-record, negative and sarcasm strategies.

However, research applying these strategies to school verbal bullying remains insufficient. Further studies in this field can expand the application scope of impoliteness theory, enrich contextual research cases and support the refinement of the theoretical framework. From a linguistic perspective, such research can also guide film and film creators to design more reasonable, socially responsible dialogue that authentically reflects issues like school verbal bullying.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Impoliteness Strategies

This paper selects Bousfield's impoliteness strategies as the framework, primarily because it not only simplifies the strategies, making classification clearer, but also proposes an impoliteness response model, resulting in a more complete chain.

Bousfield (2008) primarily divides impoliteness strategies into two major categories: On-record impoliteness and Off-record impoliteness.

On-record impoliteness includes:

Bald On-record Impoliteness: Directly, explicitly, and unmodifiedly performing a face-threatening act, disregarding the hearer's face.

Positive Impoliteness: Attacking by damaging the hearer's positive face (self-image identity). Includes ignoring, excluding, using inappropriate identity markers, seeking disagreement, using taboo words, etc.

Negative Impoliteness: Attacking the hearer's negative face (freedom of action/autonomy). Includes threatening, belittling, invading space, imposing, etc.

Off-record impoliteness includes:

Sarcasm or Mock Politeness: Superficially polite but actually implicitly aggressive, e.g., irony, sarcasm.

Withholding Politeness: Deliberately omitting polite behavior in contexts where it is expected, e.g., not responding to a request, ignoring a greeting. For instance, maintaining silence in response to a question is seen as intentional impoliteness.

The analysis in this study will focus mainly on the above four strategies (Positive impoliteness, Bald On-record impoliteness, Negative impoliteness, Sarcasm/Mock Politeness), as they are prominently manifested in verbal school bullying. Withholding Politeness strategies did not appear or were not significantly present in the study and are therefore not a focus of this analysis.

3.2 Impoliteness Response Model

Bousfield (2008) also proposed his own impoliteness response model. This model is dynamic and expands participant choices. When a participant perceives impolite behavior or an offensive triggering event, they have two choices: respond or not respond (remain silent). If the recipient of impoliteness chooses not to respond or remains silent, he/she might simply have nothing to say on the topic or be rendered speechless. Silence here is seen as a way to save or defend one's own face, which might lead to a form of conflict resolution, such as an unconcluded confrontation or preventing the next triggering event.

4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter mainly presents the process of data collection. It introduces the procedures of research design and data collection.

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative research. Using the movie *Better Days* as the textual source, it systematically examines the discursive characteristics of verbal bullying on school by applying Bousfield's (2008) impoliteness strategies and response model. The analysis follows a "transcription-statistics-interpretation" process. Dialogue scenes featuring typical bullying incidents were selected to ensure the theoretical applicability and representativeness of the research objects.

4.2 Data Collection

Better Days, a landmark Chinese film on school bullying, has drawn wide academic and public attention. Set before the college entrance exam, it captures the full bullying spectrum from exclusion to physical violence. Its dialogues authentically reflect peer power struggles and face attacks, offering rich data for impoliteness analysis.

The subtitles of the entire film were transcribed frame by frame, resulting in 32 utterances involving impoliteness strategies. Among these, 28, utterances (87.5%) represented impolite interactions between students in the film. Daily conversations unrelated to bullying (e.g., classroom question and answers) were excluded.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Chapter five is the main body of the whole paper. In this chapter, the author provides a detailed discussion and analysis of the data collected from the movie. Impoliteness strategies and response patterns will

be discussed respectively, and the author summarizes and discusses the causes for the differences from multiple perspectives.

5.1 Frequency and Percentage of Impoliteness Strategies

Strategy Type	Percentage	Behavioral Characteristics
Positive Impoliteness	39.0%	Systematically demeaning character, group exclusion, destroying self-esteem and identity.
Bald on-record Impoliteness	36.6%	Explicit violent threats, death curses, insulting commands.
Negative Impoliteness	19.5%	Depriving bodily autonomy, restricting freedom, violating property and space.
Sarcasm / Mock Politeness	4.9%	Feigned concern masking humiliation, insincere invitations creating isolation.

Through the analysis of percentage of impoliteness strategies in verbal bullying on school within the movie *Better Days*, it shows following characteristics: Positive Impoliteness strategy is characterized by systematic character denigration, group exclusion, and destruction of self-esteem identity. Accounting for 39%, it is the most prevalent strategy type. This indicates that bullying through damaging the victim's self-identity and social relationships is common in school verbal bullying. Bald on-record Impoliteness accounts for 36.6%, characterized by explicit violent threats, death curses, and insulting commands. This type of strategy is overtly aggressive and threatening, directly impacting the victim's psychological safety and well-being. Negative Impoliteness: Accounting for 19.5%, it mainly involves depriving bodily autonomy, restricting freedom, and violating property and space. This strategy restricts the victim's normal actions and rights at a behavioral level. It not only violates the victim's personal rights but may also disrupt their normal study and life routines. Sarcasm /Mock Politeness: Accounting for the lowest percentage, only 4.9%, it manifests as feigned concern masking humiliation and insincere invitations creating isolation. This strategy is relatively covert, masking harmful intentions behind superficially polite behavior, trapping the victim in awkward and isolating social situations. Due to its covert nature, it may be less easily detected by others, and the psychological harm caused to victims can be complex.

Regarding the distribution, the combined percentage of On-record impoliteness strategies are more popular highlighting that direct, intense verbal attacks are the primary form of expression in school verbal bullying. Off-record impoliteness strategies account for a relatively low percentage but should not be overlooked, as they are often more implicit. The different proportions reflect that in school verbal bullying scenarios, bullies tend to prefer using direct, obvious harm strategies, but may also employ more covert strategies depending on the specific situation.

5.2 Impoliteness Strategies Used in *Better Days*

I. On-record Impoliteness Strategies

(1) Bald on-record Impoliteness

Example 1:”打，打死他，先给你烧纸”

Context: Near an off-school basketball court, the bullying gang collectively issued violent commands while surrounding Xiao Bei, accompanied by inflammatory language preceding physical conflict. This unmodified imperative directly threatens life safety. Death implications like “烧纸” intensify intimidation. Combined with group jeering, it destroys the victim's face (freedom of action and right to life), reflecting the linkage between linguistic and physical harm in school violence.

(2) Positive Impoliteness

Example 2:”胡小蝶，那个圣女婊，所有人都讨厌她”

Context: In the classroom, the bully publicly attacked the deceased Hu Xiaodie's character using an insulting label. The stigmatizing label “圣女婊” (holy bitch) implements a positive impoliteness strategy, damaging the victim's positive face (self-image identity in this context). The group implication “所有人都讨厌” (everyone hated) reinforces exclusion, using school public opinion pressure to isolate the victim. This is a typical “labeling attack” behavior.

Example 3:”我妈说呀，龙生龙凤生凤，老鼠的儿子会打洞 帮你妈还债那么累，今天还能来打球呀！”

Context: On the school volleyball court, Wei Lai and other bullies used a proverb to attack Chen Nian's family background, accompanied by the physical act of throwing the ball at her. The bullies demeaned Chen Nian's character based on her origins, forcibly binding her to the identity of a “poor family” using the proverb “龙生龙凤生凤，老鼠的儿子会打洞” (Dragons beget dragons, phoenixes beget phoenixes, the son of a mouse knows how to dig holes). This belongs to “family background denigration” within positive impoliteness. The cultural implication of the proverb makes the attack more covert. Combined with physical violence

(throwing the ball), it forms a compound attack on positive face (identity).

(3) Negative Impoliteness

Example 4: “敢报警，你怎么不像胡小蝶一样去死啊”

Context: On a street near the school, the bully chased Chen Nian while issuing a death threat, accompanied by physical encirclement.

The bully forcibly linked “报警” (calling the police) with “死” (death), threatening Chen Nian’s right to seek help and restricting her freedom to seek external assistance. This belongs to the strategy of restricting negative face through “fear oppression.”

Example 5: “陈念站住，你赶着去死吗？你以为你躲得掉吗？”

Context: Threatening commands issued by the bullying gang while surrounding Chen Nian, accompanied by chasing and physically blocking her. Commanding language like “站住” (stop) and “躲不掉” (you can’t hide) forcibly deprives Chen Nian of her autonomy of movement, directly violating her negative face need for “freedom of action.” The rhetorical question “你以为你躲得掉吗？” (you think you can hide?) reinforces oppression, implying the bully’s control overrides Chen Nian’s actions. “你赶着去死吗？” (are you rushing to die?) forcibly links Chen Nian’s escape behavior with “死” (death), suppressing her resistance through fear. This belongs to the “life threat” strategy within negative impoliteness, damaging her negative face need for “freedom from fear.” This dialogue is often accompanied by group encirclement, amplifying the threat effect through group pressure. Chen Nian’s negative face is further violated in the power imbalance of “individual versus group.”

II. Off-record Impoliteness Strategies

Sarcasm or Mock Politeness

Example 6: “别瞎说，陈念才没有那么小气，是不是啊陈念？”

Context: In a public classroom setting, the bully pretended to defend Chen Nian, but actually incited group mockery of her “forced friendliness.”

Superficially denying others’ negative evaluation of Chen Nian (“别瞎说，陈念才没有那么小气” Don’t talk nonsense, Chen Nian isn’t that petty), but actually using irony to reinforce sarcasm through the forced response “是不是啊陈念” (right Chen Nian?), belonging to “sarcasm/mock politeness” within off-record impoliteness. This places the victim in an awkward position, using group pressure to threaten her face.

Example 7: “不要怕，我们就是想给你颁个奖”

Context: On school, Wei Lai’s bullying gang mocked Chen Nian’s act of helping Hu Xiaodie under the guise of “giving an award.”

The bully used the polite form of “颁个奖” (giving an award) to package humiliation, belonging to the “mock politeness” strategy. The subsequent addition, “但你跟警察聊天就不感动” (But chatting with the police isn’t moving), stigmatizes the act of kindness through semantic reversal, indirectly threatening Chen Nian’s positive face while implying a threat regarding cooperation with the police.

5.3 Causes of Different Use of Impoliteness Strategies

Wei Lai’s choice of bullying strategies is essentially driven by the distorted notion that “domination equals power,” and varies dynamically with the situation: in stable conditions, she habitually employs positive impoliteness strategies (e.g., denigrating Chen Nian’s family background) to openly attack the target’s identity, thereby reinforcing her own class superiority; when Chen Nian’s potential report to the police threatens the gang’s “impunity privilege,” her need for control escalates sharply, prompting her to switch to the most efficient bald on-record impoliteness, using explicit violent threats and commands to quickly re-establish deterrence; and when she needs to maintain her “top student” image or inflict public humiliation, she resorts to sarcasm/mock politeness, wrapping malice in a polite veneer to exert psychological pressure while preserving decorum. In addition, the deindividuation effect within the bullying group encourages members to seek solidarity through collective violence, further amplifying the extremity of the strategies. In sum, the strategy selection is a dynamic outcome of the interplay among the perpetrator’s power needs, crisis perception, and performative context.

5.4 Impoliteness Response Patterns

The study finds that Chen Nian mainly adopts non-response strategies (silence and avoidance) in response to verbal bullying, which conforms to Bousfield’s logic of “saving face through non-response”. She chooses to avoid direct confrontation to prevent fiercer attacks, yet such non-response in turn emboldens the bullies to escalate their behavior.

This strategy is not merely a psychological choice but a result constrained by environmental pressure and power structure. On one hand, Chen Nian endures the bullying to avoid disrupting her college entrance exam preparation. On the other hand, her deep-seated inferiority caused by her family background leaves her with little psychological support to fight back. In scenarios of group encirclement, her silence and escape are also a helpless choice under the power imbalance between an individual and a group, as she tries to avoid triggering more severe physical violence.

6. CONCLUSION

This study, grounded in Bousfield's impoliteness strategies, analyzes verbal bullying in the film *Better Days*. Results show that on-record strategies dominate: positive impoliteness (39.0%) attacks self-identity via sexualized labels and family insults; bald on-record (36.6%) uses overt threats to breach psychological defenses; negative impoliteness (19.5%) imposes commands to deny autonomy; and indirect strategies (sarcasm/mock politeness, 4.9%) conceal humiliation under feigned care. Perpetrator motivations stem from a distorted "domination as power" mindset rooted in class alienation, as well as deindividuation within the bullying group seeking solidarity through collective violence. The study confirms the theory's explanatory power for school bullying and offers linguistic insights for prevention and media representation. Limitations include a single data source, whose artistic processing may affect generalizability. Future research should incorporate more diverse film texts or real-life school discourse for validation.

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