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Impoliteness strategies in Guns N'Roses' 'Get in the Ring'

Strategie niegrzeczności w utworze 'Get in the Ring' w wykonaniu Guns N'Roses

Artykuł jest analizą strategii niegrzeczności zastosowanych w utworze „Get in the Ring” zespołu Guns N'Roses. Utwór był reakcją zespołu na zainteresowanie mediów stylem życia członków grupy, który zdecydowanie odbiegał od przyjętych standardów. Artykuł jest próbą odpowiedzi na pytanie, czy któraś z superstrategii niegrzeczności zaproponowanych przez Jonathana Culpepera (1996) jest częściej używana w tej piosence.

Słowa kluczowe: niegrzeczność pozytywna, niegrzeczność negatywna, twarz, atak na twarz
Key words: positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, face, face attack

1. Introduction

Rock musicians are infamous for being rebellious and employing mutiny against older generations as a means of expressing themselves or, as some disillusionedly suggest, as a method of selling their product to the young and the mutinous. One of many such bands is Guns N'Roses described by www.billboard.com in the following way:

At a time when pop was dominated by dance music and pop-metal, Guns N' Roses brought raw, ugly rock & roll crashing back into the charts. They were not nice boys; nice boys don't play rock & roll. They were ugly, misogynistic, and violent; [IS1]

The band originally consisted of five members: W. Axl Rose, Izzy Stradlin, Slash, Duff McKagan and Steven Adler and they released their initial EP 'Live?!*@ Like a Suicide' in 1986. It was followed by 'Appetite for Destruction' in 1987 and another EP 'GN'R Lies' in 1988 [IS2]. By that time the band had become immensely popular and, consequently, thoroughly scrutinized by mass media. The band members' rock'n'roll lifestyle, Axl Rose's irascible character and mass

media search for scandal ignited a conflict between the musicians and the media. The band displayed its displeasure with its media coverage in a song titled 'Get in the Ring' from its 1991 album 'Use Your Illusions II'. In this article, I would like to analyze the lyrics of the song with a view to answering the question of which impoliteness superstrategies were employed by the author(s) to express their feelings of dissatisfaction and disregard. However, to make the breakdown possible the following concepts need introduction: *face*, *face attack*, *bold-on impoliteness*, *positive politeness*, *negative politeness*, *sarcasm / mock-politeness*.

2. Impoliteness – basic terms

a) Face

Face is the centrepiece of any models of politeness or impoliteness and one of the most commonly quoted characterizations of *face* is Goffman's definition who states that *face* is:

[...] the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share [...] (Goffman 1967: 5)

He argues that *face* is 'on loan' from society and it is granted when we abide by the rules of society and can be withdrawn once the rules are crossed or broken (Goffman 1967: 10). His stance was argued by Brown and Levinson who described *face* as one's wants to be approved of by others (*positive face*) or one's desire to be unimpeded in one's actions or exploits (*negative face*). Their view differed from Goffman's in the concept of the aforementioned wants as they perceived them as something that everyone has and, thus, understands others to possess as well (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62). Nevertheless, this concept is strongly opposed by Terkourafi, who claims that *face* does not exist internally in every human as we need another person to start experiencing *face* concerns. Putting it simply, we do not worry about *face* loss or gain being on our own (Terkourafi 2007). Accordingly, it is safe to assume that *face* can be defined as the self-image of an individual that this individual wants others to possess about him or her. *Face* can further be subdivided into *positive* and *negative* – the former referring to one's need to be appreciated and accepted as part of a group or society and the latter regarding an individual's need of freedom and liberty to perform their actions in an unimpeded manner.

b) Face attack

Another notion which is inextricably connected with impoliteness is *face attack*, which will hereafter be referred to as an FA. Goffman states that an FA is a communicative act in which one presents oneself in a positive manner and describes another or others in a negative way (Goffman 1967: 25). This is achieved through demonstrating disrespect and contempt through symbolic means (Goffman 1967: 89). Tracy and Tracy believe that these acts must be perceived by society as committed on purpose and with the intent to hurt. They list the society's perception as requisite whilst the speaker's intention, despite being cited as common, is not essential in their view (Tracy and Tracy 1998: 27). Bousfield opposes this claim as he maintains that the intent to harm the hearer is essential to naming a communicative act an act of impoliteness. He states that impoliteness cannot be analyzed from the perspective of the hearer as this will unavoidably lead to 'the interpretation and perception of politeness' rather than impoliteness itself (Bousfield 2008: 82). Obviously, perception of impoliteness depends on the context in which a communicative act takes place and the same utterance may be understood as impolite, neutral or even polite in certain situations. Additionally, it needs to be stated that there exists a continuum between politeness and impoliteness as well as different extents to which an act can be described as polite or impolite (Cupach and Metts 1994: 13–14). In the case of the song to be analyzed the intentions of the speaker seem to be clear and the author of the lyrics does not attempt to conceal his disregard and disdain while presenting himself in a favourable manner.

c) Impoliteness superstrategies

As the attacker can employ numerous strategies to perform an FA, a model providing a systematic breakdown of the strategies needs to be utilized to describe the aforementioned. Culpeper's division (1996) of impoliteness superstrategies into *bold-on impoliteness*, *positive politeness*, *negative politeness*, *sarcasm/mock-politeness*, *withhold politeness* seems applicable here. He supplies a model of impoliteness superstrategies based on Brown and Levinson's division of politeness strategies claiming that corresponding strategies instead of providing support or positive feelings attack the face (Culpeper 1996: 356). To be more precise, Brown and Levinson claim *bold-on politeness* is an example of communication where efficiency is of utmost importance and face concerns are marginalized due to the situation. *Bold-on impoliteness*, in turn, is the bluntest and most straightforward manner of communicating impoliteness with no place for ambiguity. Brown and Levinson's *positive politeness* tends to positive face's needs and *negative politeness* provides support for negative face's wants (1986). Analogically, *positive impoliteness* superstrategies include those that attack positive face's

wants and *negative impoliteness* superstrategies aim at damaging *negative face* (Culpeper 1996: 356). Brown and Levinson's *off-record* superstrategy of saving the interlocutor's face is a manner of communicating in which whatever is stated is always expressed in an ambiguous way so that the hearer is allowed the choice between understanding the speech act as an illocutionary or a locutionary one (1986). In Culpeper's model, these are mirrored by *sarcasm/mock-politeness* which are only superficially polite or face-enhancing and without any doubt are aimed at achieving the opposite result (Culpeper 1996: 356). Finally, *withhold a face-threatening act* is reflected in Culpeper's model by *withhold politeness* when politeness is expected. However, this superstrategy is not present in 'Get in the Ring'.

What is more, *positive* and *negative impoliteness* make use of several strategies to attack positive and negative faces' wants. The main ones, in Culpeper's opinion, are:

Positive impoliteness

- a) ignore, snub the other – fail to acknowledge the other's presence
- b) exclude the other from an activity
- c) disassociate from the other – deny association or common ground, avoid sitting together
- d) be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic
- e) use inappropriate identity markers
- f) use obscure or secretive language – e.g. use jargon or unfamiliar topics
- g) seek disagreement – select a sensitive topic
- h) make the other feel uncomfortable – e.g. do not avoid silence, joke, use small talk
- i) use taboo words
- j) call the other names

Negative impoliteness

- a) frighten – make the other believe that an action detrimental to the other will occur
 - b) condescend, scorn, ridicule – show your relative power, do not treat the other seriously belittle the other
 - c) invade the other's space – physically or metaphorically (ask questions which are too intimate)
 - d) explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect, use 'you'
 - e) put the other's indebtedness on record
- (Culpeper 1996: 356–358)

The analysis that follows will apply Jonathan Culpeper's model to measure which superstrategy is the most common in the song.

3. The analysis

The main focus of the study is whether there exists any imbalance between the impoliteness superstrategies employed in the song and which of these is the most prevalent. To avoid any lack of clarity, I will mark the superstrategies found in the song. As for positive and negative impoliteness, I will also determine which of the strategies proposed by Culpeper (1996) is employed in each particular instance. The following abbreviations will be used to describe the superstrategies:

B – bold-on impoliteness

PI – positive impoliteness

NI – negative impoliteness

S – sarcasm

MP – mock-politeness

Additionally, lower case letters will be used to ascribe an appropriate positive or negative impoliteness strategy from the list of thereof which can be found above. To exemplify, *PIa* – will refer to Positive Impoliteness, ignore, snub the other – fail to acknowledge the other's presence.

Get in the Ring – Guns N'Roses

Why do you look at me when you hate me?

NIb

Why should I look at you when you make me hate you too?

NIc

I sense a smell of retribution in the air

NIa

I don't even understand why the fuck you even care

PIc

And I don't need your jealousy

PIc, NIc

Why drag me down in your misery, yeah

NIc

And when you stare you don't think I feel it

But I'm gonna deal it back to you in spades

NIa

When I'm havin' fun you know I can't conceal it

'Cause I know you'd never cut it in my game, oh no

PIb

And when you're talkin' about a vasectomy, yeah
I'll be writin' down your obituary, history
 NIa
You got your bitches with the silicone injections
 PIc, PIi
Crystal meth and yeast infections
Bleached blond hair, collagen lip projection¹
Who are you to criticize my intentions?
 PIc
Got your subtle manipulative devices
 PIc
Just like you I've got my vices
I got a thought that would be nice
I'd like to crush your head tight in my vice, pain, yeah
 NIa
That goes for all you punks in the press
 PIj
That wanted to start shit by printin' lies instead of the things we said.
 NId, PIi,
That means you:
 NId
Andy Secher at Hit Parader, Circus Magazine,
Mick Wall at Kerrang
Bob Guccione Jr. at Spin²
What, you pissed off 'cause your dad gets more pussy than you?
 NIb
Fuck you, suck my fuckin' dick
 PIi, NIb
You be rippin' off the fuckin' kids
 NId
While they be payin' their hard earned
Money to read about the bands

¹ *your bitches ... lip projections* – refers to women accompanying the targets of this FA.

² Although it refers to 3 different people, it is only one example of NId.

They want to know about

Printin' lies startin' controversy

NId

You want to antagonize me

Antagonize me, motherfucker

PIi

Get in the ring, motherfucker

NIa, PIi

And I'll kick your bitchy little ass, punk

NIa, PIi, NIB, PIj

I don't like you, I just hate you

I'm gonna kick your ass, oh yeah, oh yeah

NIa, PIi

You may not like our integrity, yeah

We built a world out of anarchy, oh yeah

And in this corner weighin' in at 850 pounds

NIa

Guns N' Roses

Get in the ringx16, yeah

NIB

This song is dedicated to all the Guns N' fuckin' Roses fans

Who stuck with us through all the

Fuckin' shit and to all those opposed, well ...

4. Conclusions

The analysis demonstrates that negative politeness strategies tend to be employed somewhat more frequently than positive impoliteness ones. However, the difference is not substantial as there are 15 instances of the use of positive politeness and 20 of negative impoliteness. One might risk a claim that the strategies reflect the wants of the authors of the lyrics. As the song was created in response to media coverage that the band found unwarranted and hurtful, it seems completely justifiable that the song aims both at disassociating the band members from the journalists they possess so much disrespect for and limiting the journalists' freedom for their pursuits. It is also worth noting that the whole musical

piece could be considered one long case of bold-on impoliteness in which the aggravating message is communicated in an unambiguous manner and is targeted at creating discord.

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Streszczenie

Artykuł jest analizą superstrategii niegrzeczności użytych w utworze zespołu Guns N'Roses pt. „Get in the Ring”. Analiza została przeprowadzona za pomocą modelu niegrzeczności zaproponowanego przez Jonathana Culpepera (1996). Wstępna część artykułu zawiera informacje niezbędne do zrozumienia powodów, które przyczyniły się do powstania tego utworu. Następnie wprowadzane są podstawowe terminy pojawiające się w modelu niegrzeczności proponowanym przez Culpepera (1996). Kolejna część artykułu zawiera analizę superstrategii niegrzeczności zawartych w badanym utworze zespołu Guns N'Roses. Po przeprowadzeniu badania widać, że w „Get in the Ring” jest obecna zarówno niegrzeczność pozytywna, jak i negatywna, z tym że niegrzeczność negatywna występuje nieznacznie częściej. Takie rozłożenie superstrategii niegrzeczności miało podkreślić brak elementów wspólnych między zespołem a przedstawicielami mass mediów oraz wyrazić potrzebę muzyków ograniczania ingerencji mass mediów w ich życie.