
Impoliteness in Simon Cowell's Utterances in "The X-Factor USA" Reality Show

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Abstract

The studies on impoliteness phenomenon are still few. Impoliteness in the social interactions of this modern era, is now highly unavoidable. This study aims to discuss about impoliteness done by Simon Cowell, who is the personage of "The X-Factor USA". The writer hopes to find the types of impoliteness utterances that were being used and the factors that caused them. Politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1978) was the main theory applied in analyzing the data. Impoliteness framework by Culpeper (1996) was also used as the supporting theory. The findings show that the most used strategies is sarcasm, followed by bald on record, positive and negative impoliteness, and then, withhold politeness. The factors that affect Cowell's impoliteness are the Power Relation (P), Social Distance (D), and Rank of Imposition (R). This study also proves that there are also entertainment factors that affect Cowell's impoliteness as well.

Keywords: impoliteness, politeness, entertainment, utterances

Introduction

In daily life, we are always involved in interaction with other people, whether it is face to face, or by communication tools, such as cellphone and the internet for instance. In communicating with each other, every individual has his/her choice to perform a polite or an impolite behavior as a form of claiming their identity. As we all know, impoliteness is the opposite phenomenon of politeness, and it has not received much attention in the context of scholarly works while it actually is happening more frequently and often unavoidable in today's social interactions. It is now somehow considered as important to perform the impolite behavior for the necessity of showing a sign of close and tight bound in a relationship. It also can be used for the purpose in showing one's personality and uniqueness, even a symbol of being fitted in any particular social group in the life of this modern era.

On the other hand, the study of politeness has been conducted from several decades. It has been studied in both pragmatics and sociolinguistics subfields. Many researches focus on the model of politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) who state that politeness is a rational behavior to all humans and also that everyone has a positive and a negative face. The writer also uses the grand theory of politeness proposed by them. According to their work, there are four strategies of politeness in performing FTA (Face Threatening Acts), they are: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record. Later, Culpeper (1996) writes a research about impoliteness and constructs his own model of framework based on the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson. He divides the sub-strategies into five ways in delivering an impolite behavior. The list are:

1. Bald on record impoliteness – as in Brown and Levinson's strategy, the FTA is performed as clearly and boldly as possible, but the difference is that Brown and Levinson's strategy is a politeness strategy in situations where the threat to the hearer's face is small.
2. Positive impoliteness – the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants.
3. Negative impoliteness – the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's negative face wants.

4. Sarcasm or mock politeness – the FTA is performed with the use of obviously insincere strategies.
5. Withhold politeness – the absence of politeness in situations where it is expected.
6. (Culpeper 1996, p. 356)

This paper also uses the impoliteness model proposed by Culpeper (1996) as an elaborative theoretical framework corresponds with the Brown and Levinson's politeness theory.

To say further about impoliteness and its relation with FTA, it is important to explain about the notion of face which is used for this study. There was a statement from Brown & Levinson (1987, p. 61), taken from their theory of politeness, face is the public self image that every member wants to claim for himself. Brown and Levinson distinguished the face into two kinds of face, negative face and positive face; negative face: the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others. positive face: the want of every member that he wants to be desirable to at least some others (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62).

Brown and Levinson (1987) agree that there are three sociological factors that affect the politeness level between the speaker and the hearer. Those factors are; relative power (P), the social distance (D), and the ranking of the imposition (R) involved in doing FTA (1987, p. 15). The (P) factor is the relative power of the hearer over the speaker. The (D) factor is stand for the social similarity or familiarity between the speaker and the hearer, while the (R) factor is the degree of threat and topic sensitivity in the relevant culture. The speaker tends to be polite when addressing the person with higher status rather than the equal or lower status, to the strangers, and when there is a high rank of imposition (1987, p. 67). According to Watts (2003, p. 96), the definition of 'power', whether it is always 'the power over' or it can be changed into 'the power toward' is underspecified in Brown and Levinson's work. Since this paper is mainly focused on impoliteness, that mostly the hearer is in the same or lower state of relative power than the speaker, hence, the writer defines the (P) as the relative power of hearer toward the speaker, or the relative power of the speaker over the hearer.

The impoliteness phenomenon can also be found in the other layer of society, the celebrities and the television shows. However, the behaviors of the celebrities which we cannot avoid in noticing or even just watching it, are inevitably connected with the people who happened to be the audience. The study by Linder and Gentile (2009) shows that there are relationships between watching programs that contains verbal dan behavioral aggression and the youngsters' behavior. The celebrities and how they are potrayed, is anyhow very highly related with the behavior they or the media choose to show to the public. Concerning the image they want to create, or the image that media wants to construct, they sometimes tend to use a certain verbal impoliteness in order to cause offence toward their fans and bring the popularity also the entertaining element to the show.

In the rapid development of television prgrams, reality shows have become very popular nowadays, as it records and displays ordinary people on the television. The reason why the writer chooses *The X-Factor USA* show is because it is one of the entertainment shows that not only has been well known globally, but it also represents the kind of today's favorite kind of show, the reality show. Simon Cowell is not only the creator of the show, but he is also one of the judges in the panel, which makes his statements are considered important and give a lot of influence toward the contestants also the audience. The fact that *The X-Factor USA* is an entertainment show, and is still maintaining its popularity from the first time it is aired until now, interests the writer to examine about the impoliteness used by Simon Cowell as a celebrity and the main attention in one of the world class reality show. Through the pragmatics approach toward the words from Simon Cowell, the creator of *The X-Factor USA*, the writer hopes to find out what are the types of impoliteness used by Cowell and the factors causing them

There are two previous studies which are conducted in the impoliteness area of study: "Impoliteness and Entertainment in the Television Quiz Show: The Weakest Link." by Jonathan Culpeper (2005) and "Impoliteness in Reality Show—A Pragmatic Account" by Hu Junhua (2010). However, this paper is the first study conducted in the area of impoliteness phenomenon, since there are no similar studies before in Universitas Airlangga Indonesia. The two previous studies the writer has mentioned above both have also

addressed in the area of entertainment world, more specifically, the television shows. However, none of their works used the object of talent searching contest or performance show as this research does. Culpeper's (2005) work uses the quiz show called *The Weakest Link* as his object, and Junhua's (2010) uses the professional reality show called *The Apprentice*. The other difference is, the research conducted by Junhua (2010) used the model of Grand Strategy of Impoliteness (GSI) which was corresponding to the Grand Strategy of Politeness (GSP) by Leech (2005), as in this research, the writer uses the sub-strategies of impoliteness constructed by Culpeper (1996) which he designed from the politeness strategies theory by Brown and Levinson (1987).

Method

The method of this research is qualitative approach. This kind of approach is appropriate with the purpose of the study itself, which is analysing the impoliteness strategies used by Simon Cowell on his own television show, *The X-Factor USA*. Bogdan (1975) stated that qualitative method is a research procedure which involves observing the data in a form of written and/or spoken words from people also their behavior, and qualitative approach is a research method which emphasizes on description, induction, grounded theory, and the study of people's understandings. The information gathered in this study, aims to provide more knowledge towards the verbal treatment from a speaker to the hearers in the television show.

Source of data of this study are the video of *The X-Factor USA* episodes 1-5 from season three, because it is the latest or the newest season of the show. The writer focuses on episodes 1-5 from season three because, according to the *The X-Factor* official YouTube account, they are the episodes which represent Cowell's most impolite behavior, or what they called "Simon's Meanest Moments" of the entire season (*X-Factor*, 2013), hence, it is the most relevant with the public image of him and it qualifies for the analysis of this study as well.

Simon Cowell is a celebrity who had been working in the entertainment business since 1979. In 2001, he produced and starred as a judge in a world class talent show called 'American Idol' and keep making a name for himself afterwards. In 2004, he got himself an industry recognition. *Entertainment Weekly* named Cowell as one of the Top Entertainers of The Year, and he got another one later in 2007, he earned the no. 3 slot on the *Forbes* TV Faces List, and no. 21 on *Forbes'* Celebrity 100 Power List. His show, *American Idol* also earned a huge success and managed to raise millions for children in Africa. Not until 2011, he and his team have just imported this big hit British show called *The X-Factor* into USA, and also being a one of the judges alongside big artists such as Britney Spears, Paula Abdul, Nicole Scherzinger, and other big names (Biography, 1996). The other participants beside Cowell are the twenty three contestants involved in those episodes. Four contestants from episode 1: Shally Hessnice, Valeria Colombo, K-Nected, and John Tanner Davis. From episode 2: Yosseline Marquez, Thomas Weiderspoon, Carrigan Bradley, Amber Ferarri, K+B, Jocelyn Hinton, Russ Pouliott. From episode 3: Shirley and Cynthia, Vincent Crisostomo, Chloe J, and CJ. From episode 4: Na'christia Harris, and several unknown contestants. Then the last ones, from the episode 5: Melanie Wright, Oksana Mamchur, Maya Lehmann, and Ruben Gloria.

In collecting the data, the writer follows several steps in order to get the data collected: seeking out the wanted episodes on YouTube, downloading the data, and then transcribing the data. In analyzing it, the writer used these steps: classifying the data, analyzing the data, interpreting the data, and finally, making the conclusion of it.

Result and discussion

The discussion of this paper uses the five classifications of impoliteness which are *Bald on Record Impoliteness*, *Positive Impoliteness*, *Negative Impoliteness*, *Sarcasm or Mock Politeness*, and *Withhold Impoliteness*. The classification of the factors that affect the Face Threatening Acts (FTA) are the Relative Power (P), the Social Distance (D), and the Rank of Imposition (R). The data of this paper are impolite utterances by Simon Cowell, as one of the judges in *The X-Factor USA* Season 3, episodes 1-5.

Impoliteness types

Bald on record impoliteness

Not to be confused with bald on record politeness by Brown and Levinson (1987), bald on record impoliteness as one of the lists in impoliteness strategies by Culpeper (1996) do also state that the FTA is performed directly, clearly, in an unambiguous and concise way. But the difference is, in Brown and Levinson's bald on record, the face attack happens in specific circumstances. For example, when the threat to hearer's face is small and when the speaker is more powerful than the hearer as in a parent to his/her child. Bald on record impoliteness can be conducted in any situation and the face is no longer relevant. (Culpeper, 1996). As the data shows it, Cowell, as a matter of fact, performs several bald on record impoliteness as one of the judge in the show. One of the examples is in the second episode:

Dialogue 1

Paulina : We don't feel you have the x factor.

Yosseline : I do. I do have the x factor.

Simon : You don't have the x factor, and Denver hates you. It's a no.

The fact that he performed the FTA by saying the sentence "*You don't have the x factor, and Denver hates you. It's a no.*" directly, clearly, and without any minimization added, shows the face safety consideration is no longer relevant. Which is also the requirement of bald on record strategy, it occurs when the speaker wants to speak what s/he desires more than s/he wants to save the hearer's face. Another examples of bald on record strategy performed by Cowell are in these sentences:

- "You're not gonna get four yeses."
- "I've done this a long time, I mean, that's one of the worst I've ever heard."
- "I think this is one of the worst groups we've ever had on this show."
- "I let you go on because I thought, maybe it will get better, it actually got worse."
- "It was out of tune, horrible song", "Uh, you are both absolutely awful."
- "The song (the contestant's original song) was terrible."

Positive impoliteness

The next on the list is positive impoliteness. Culpeper (1996) brings up several output strategies in performing positive impoliteness: ignoring the other, excluding the other from activity, dissasociating with the other, being disinterested/unconcerned/unsympathetic, using inappropriate identity markers, using obscure/secretive language, seeking disagreement, making the other feeling uncomfortable, using taboo words, and calling the other names. The writer takes the example from the dialogue of first episode:

Dialogue 2

Kelly : I think that, if it's something that you guys really want to do, then you should do it-

Simon : (interrupts) Without your mom.

(audience laughs)

The fact that he said this group of family would be better if they performed without their mother, which was the leader of the group and the nurturing one, showed that Cowell's FTA excluded the others from activity, also seeked for a disagreement at the same time by selecting a sensitive topic, the family bounding. There was one more sentence that indicated a positive impoliteness by seeking disagreement: "*I'd hate to be your parents*". Cowell said that after he saw a performance by two young girls. A family relationship, especially between parents and children, is a personal also a sensitive topic. By saying a personal opinion that he would hate to be their parents was obviously seeking a disagreement from his surroundings. We can see that directly from the comment of his fellow judge, Kelly, she argued that he should not say things like that, because of its sensitivity. The similar impoliteness was also occurred in this sentence: "*Yeah, you need new friends*". Although not as sensitive as family, a topic about group of friends and their relationship is still a relatively sensitive thing to be interfered in.

Negative impoliteness

The output strategies of negative impoliteness are: frightening, condescending/scorning/ridiculing, invading the other's space, explicitly associating the others with a negative aspect, and putting the indebtedness on record (Culpeper, 1996, p. 357-358). The example of negative impoliteness:

Dialogue 3

- Simon : Are you brother and sister?
CJ : No, we're friends.
Simon : Boyfriend, girlfriend?
Chloe : No.
CJ : No.
Simon : No?
(audience laughs)
Kelly : She said, "No".

When Simon asked about the contestants' relationship at the first place, it still sounds acceptable and still showing a neutral behavior and he got the answer of his question directly afterward. However, by deciding to ask them about that again, twice (the first: "*Boyfriend, girlfriend?*", the second: "*No?*"), showed that Cowell was invading the contestants' personal space with his too personal questions.

The other output strategy of negative impoliteness is condescending oneself toward the hearer. We can look at this example:

Dialogue 4

- Russ : My name's Russ. Simon, I want to say to you, it's an honor to meet you. I've met a few great men in my life, and you're one of 'em.
Simon : Oh, thank you. A lot of people said that to me.
(audience laughs)

One of the contestant obviously showed that he admired Cowell and he liked to express it. The FTA in that sentence clearly shows us that he condescended his words by emphasizing his relative power and being contemptuous, that as a celebrity, he often got that compliment from other non-celebrities people. The other example of negative impoliteness is:

Dialogue 5

- Demi : What do you want to sing for us today?
Vincent : Um, Leann Rimes, 'How do I live without you'.
(audience gets noisy)
Simon : None of this is making sense to me.

The definition of the negative impoliteness strategy itself is, the impoliteness which is designed to damage the hearer's negative face wants. Cowell's words "*None of this is making sense to me.*", showed that he failed to appreciate the hearer's negative face and managed to attack it, by using one of the negative impoliteness output strategies, ridicule. He ridiculed the song choice or the decision of the contestant, he did not treat the contestant seriously.

Sarcasm or mock politeness

The writer finds this strategy as the most frequently used by Cowell in the show. Sarcasm is a use of strategy which is designed to attack the hearer's face with the push of insincere purpose. Cowell put up with some output strategies to perform the sarcasms. One of them is using metaphor. He compared the performances with some illustrations that he believed will be able to declare his very point. It happened in this dialogue:

Dialogue 6

- John : I'm John Tanner Davis. I'm eighteen, I'm from Dallas, Texas.
Paulina : Eightteen?

- John : Yeah, I just graduated from High School.
Kelly : Oh, really? Let's hear it.
(John sings a song)
Simon : John, I think you did a better job than the iceberg.
(audience laughs)

The meaning of Cowell's sarcasm in this sentence was related with the song that the contestant chose to sing. The contestant sang 'My Heart will Go on' from the original soundtrack of the movie 'Titanic', movie that tells about a big ship that sank from hitting an iceberg (Cameron, 1997). Therefore, he decided to perform an FTA by saying that John sang better than the iceberg, means he actually did no good as a singer, yet as Cowell satirized it, at least John did not make a ship sank like the iceberg did. Then, here are Cowell's other sarcasm utterances using metaphor:

- "Have you ever got a shirt back from the laundry, where it's got too much starch in it? You know, like, you literally can't put it on, 'cause it's, like, made of wood? That's what you were like."
- "It'd be like trying to chop down a tree with a banana."

- "It's like a goldfish wanting to be a shark."
- "It sounded like, two-three year olds who've got the flu, trying to sing"

- "...it was like a competition as to who could sing the worst, and you both win."
- "...it did actually sound like you were drowning when you—literally, I've never heard anyone sing while they drown, but I think that's what it would sound like.
- "It was like finding out cinderella works at the playboy mansion."

- "It was like being in the chair (in a dentist's office) for three hours with—with no anesthetic."
- "Did you ever watch 'close encounters of the third kind'? If that ever happened and they sang, they would probably sound like that, because it just didn't sound human"

The second output strategy is using irony:

Dialogue 7

- Simon : And whose idea was it to be in a group—your mom or you?
Cynthia : Um, well, I started singing first, around the age of eleven.
Simon : (interrupts) Right.
Cynthia : And then later on, we were like, "Wow, this is really fun, we should do this together."
Simon : (interrupts) Wow.
Cynthia : So, we started singing together.
Simon : Amazing.
Cynthia : I mean...
(Shirley & Cynthia both giggle)
Simon : What an incredible story.
(audience laughs)

Those utterances represented what Cowell believed to be false. It also involved a non-verbal way of communication. When Cowell chimed in the contestant's story by saying that it was amazing and incredible, the absence of his eye contact showed that it actually was neither amazing nor incredible, in other word, it was boring. Eye contact is essential when it comes to non-verbal communications. It communicates interests, involvements, also establishes connections with other. Therefore, lack of eye contact can be considered as rude (Rothwell, 2004). Other Cowell's sarcastic actions by being ironic are: "I've got to be honest with you, the best part was actually when you forgot the words" and "Well, you totally reinvented the song.". Cowell said that after he saw Jocelyn Hinton and Ruben Gloria performed.

The non-verbal type of communication as the support of these sarcastic acts is his facial expression. By saying the sentence with half-laughing, he indicated a contradiction as one of the role of non-verbal communication (Wertheim, 2008). Cowell was contradicting the message that Jocelyn and Ruben tried to convey. The third example of Cowell's irony:

“Valeria, you know when you said, after you sing, people scream? I don't think that was a good thing.”

Cowell thought that she was not good and he also believed that she had misunderstood the people reaction toward her voice. Cowell decided to make the point by ironically pertaining to correct the hearer's statement. The third example of irony:

Dialogue 8

Simon : Uh... Why were you—what were you doing with the telephone?
Yosseline : I was seeing the lyrics of the song.
(audience ‘ohs’)
Simon : Could you actually read them?
Yosseline : Yes.

Cowell's question above is rhetorical and ironic since Yosseline obviously could read them, but by asking the question, he wanted to make a point. Eventhough she read the song's lyrics while she was singing, according to Cowell, still did not make any better impact to her performance, as if she could not be able to read at all. The last example of irony usage:

Dialogue 9

Simon : Do you rehearse at home?
K-nected mom : Yes.
Simon : Do you live near an airport?
(audience laughs)
K-nected mom : No.
Simon : You can't ever heard yourself sing!

The question shows that he was being ironic and irrelevant. The question has nothing to do with the previous question and it was both rethorical and not on-topic. However, he did that not to seek for an answer to his question, but he asked that to attack the contestants' face with an insincere strategy, he wanted to mock the performance via implicating the point through his rethorical question. What he was actually saying is that the contestants' voice were not good at all and no way they can hear themselves sing.

The third way to perform a sarcasm is by exaggerating. As seen in in these sentences below:

- “Well, I've just been told, Sally, that eight thousand dogs have just tried to get into the venue”
- “They left the room (after you sing)”
- “You can't ever heard yourself sing!”
- “You just killed that song.”
- “I don't know which one's the worst singer.”
- “It really was painful. I mean, it really was.”
- “Uh, you're a dentist, right? And you know all about delivering pain to people, because that's what it was like.”

Withhold politeness

The writer finds this type of impoliteness in just one occasion:

Dialogue 10

Cynthia : Oh, you're wonderful, Simon.
Simon : I know.
(Shirley & Cynthia both giggle)

After receiving a compliment from the contestant, Cynthia, Cowell decided not to thank her. This is the situation where politeness is expected, but he decided to withhold it, and saying "I know" for the reply instead. Hence, the absence of gratitude in this situation is considered as impolite.

The factors behind impoliteness

The factors that cause Cowell's impoliteness are suitable with Brown and Levinson's factors classification: Relative Power (P), Social Distance (D), and Rank of Imposition (R). The writer finds all of the three factors exist in Cowell's impoliteness. As a judge, Cowell had much stronger power (P) over the contestants, and always keep his social distance with the contestants by ignoring their responses toward his impoliteness (D), also the degree of sensitive topics or imposition (R) also occurred in Cowell's positive and negative impoliteness. Those high rank of imposition led to another impoliteness since Cowell did not concern about the imposition.

In order to find the correlation in impoliteness and entertainment, the writer also adds these generic factors which also were taking role in causing Cowell's impoliteness as well.

- 1) Intrinsic pleasure : the thrill of watching arguments or possible violence.
- 2) Voyeuristic pleasure : the thrill of watching the exploitation of human weaknesses
- 3) 'The audience is superior': the thrill of watching somebody in a worse state than oneself.
- 4) 'The audience is safe' : the thrill of watching somebody in a worse state than oneself without any chance in getting in the same situation.

(Culpeper, 2005, p. 45)

The only way the writer can figure those factors is through looking at the reactions of the audience in the entire show. All of those factors took role in causing Cowell's impoliteness in *The X-Factor USA* season three since the audience mostly responded to the thrills that Cowell's impoliteness and the other elements in the show gave to them.

Conclusion

This study aims to analyze how the impolite utterances are presented in an international reality show, what factors that cause them, also what makes them to have an entertaining value. The theory used in this research is Politeness Strategies by Brown and Levinson in his book *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Unit*, and uses the impoliteness model by Culpeper in *Towards the Anatomy of Impoliteness* as an elaborative framework for analyzing the type of impoliteness. This research analyzes *The X-Factor USA* reality show Season Three, episodes 1-5.

The main participant of this study is Simon Cowell, as the creator and one of the judges of the show. In this study, Cowell entirely acted as the speaker (S). The other participants of the show are the twenty three contestants from episode one until episode five. All of the contestants act as the hearer (H). In analyzing the data, the writer uses the qualitative approach. From the overall data analysis, Cowell had performed all of the impoliteness types proposed by Culpeper. The impoliteness types consist of Bald on Record Impoliteness, Positive Impoliteness, Negative Impoliteness, Sarcasm or Mock Politeness, and Withhold Politeness. The extracted data show that there are eight (8) Bald on Record, three (3) Positive Impoliteness, three (3) Negative Impoliteness, twenty three (23) Sarcasm or Mock Politeness, and only one (1) Withhold Politeness. The most frequently used impoliteness is Sarcasm or Mock Politeness, since there were twenty three sarcasm utterances out of thirty eight (38) utterances. Followed by Bald on Record Impoliteness, Positive and Negative Impoliteness, and the last one is Withhold Politeness.

From the analysis of the data, the writer concludes that the impoliteness utterances by Cowell are used in order to cause offense and used his capability to attack the contestants' both positive and negative face. It happened because as the creator and one of the judges of the show, Cowell had the right to show his stronger power and higher status (P) to the contestants, also he could create the high rank of imposition

(R) to the contestants as he pleased. He used his power to determine which were the contestants that qualified, and which were not. Apparently, the best way to be impolite in the context of entertainment business, according to Cowell, is by using sarcasm. Through the large amount of sarcasm type of impoliteness performed by him, he created his own trademark as a celebrity.

The other factors which brought up the entertaining value, which is proposed by Culpeper, also exist in all of Cowell's impolite utterances. They are intrinsic pleasure, voyeuristic pleasure, 'the audience is superior', and 'the audience is safe' factors. The results lead to the fact that as much as impoliteness is considered as a rude and offensive behavior, it is actually important for the sake of entertaining the audience. Through these findings, the writer can now connect the line between impolite utterances and entertainment in the reality show called *The X-Factor USA*.

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