

## Marriage, Conflict, and Communication: Pragmatic Inquiry into Impoliteness in the Marital Relationship

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### Abstract

The issue of impoliteness has long been a matter of interest in linguistic investigations. Considerable research has been conducted to uncover factors and features regarding the realizations of impoliteness in multiple social contexts. This study engages in a pragmatic inquiry into impoliteness in the marital relationship. The data of this study consisted of a TV episode from one famous on-site mediation reality program in China. Primarily drawing on Bousfield's (2008) model of impoliteness realizations, this study used a qualitative approach to examine the means by which the couple in a marital relationship causes face-attacking effects and ultimately arouses conflicts. The primary findings of this study indicate that couples might struggle with various communicative challenges. A problematic marital relationship tends to be signaled in some practices of impoliteness. This study has identified thirteen realizations of impoliteness linguistically and behaviorally that indicate gender variations concerning the couple's frequent impoliteness practices.

**Keywords:** impoliteness; marital relationship; conflict; TV mediation program

## INTRODUCTION

Language pervades interactions and activities of people; it has thus long been deemed one of the centers of human life (Locke & Bogin, 2006). From the perspective of social science and humanities, language is the primary and prime vehicle for the exchange of communicative ideas (Littlewood, 2014), and the essential means by which individuals gain access to others' minds and transmit knowledge (Kempson et al., 2016). Language use in contexts, namely pragmatics, is therefore central to human communication as it is connected with a range of insightful and empirical perspectives (Jumanto et al., 2022), to name a few, underlying implicatures, communicative intentions, social practices, notion of face, and (im)politeness (Arundale, 2021). In past decades, conversational interaction has attracted more academic attention and become a core focus of pragmatic investigations in language studies. It is considered the foremost prominent way individuals utilize languages to construct messages and meanings for the production of utterances (Haugh, 2012). In general, all human interactions and social activities are realized through the medium of languages. Achieving effective communication and establishing desired interpersonal relationships have become the frequent ultimate purposes of human interaction (Tranca & Neagoe, 2018). Moreover, if language selections and communication manners do not take place appropriately, the desired communicative purposes might be defeated (Arundale, 2020). Thus, scholars often argue that the knowledge about the manner in which human beings form their various everyday interactions demands continuous attention in pragmatics studies.

The marital relationship is considered a crucial part in many social contexts (Attado, 2022). A happy marriage seems to lead to happy lives for individuals involved in the relationship, mainly the couple. It is, therefore, worth pursuing for many people today. Seeking marriage happiness has been discussed from various facets, particularly drawing upon the conversation between the husband and wife. As Van Pelt (1997 as cited in Uwom-Ajaegbu et al., 2015, p. 1) claimed, "the happiness of a couple depends largely on the effectiveness of their communication." He further asserted that "how a couple communicates can make or mar their relationship" (cited in Uwom-Ajaegbu et al., 2015, p. 1), and that "communicating effectively will allow the couple to negotiate problem areas, fulfill needs, avoid misunderstandings, and develop intimacy over the years."

Existing literature, especially on impoliteness, has highlighted language uses and pragmatic features in political discourse (Garrido Ardila, 2019), public health communication (e.g., pandemic) (Han, 2021), social media interaction (Andersson, 2021), and family relationship (e.g., mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) (Zhao & Ran, 2022). Despite people witnessing the significance of pragmatic investigations on the marital relationship, there is a paucity of academic attention paid to marriage communications. This study thus seeks to examine the communicative interaction in the marital relationship, to enhance the understanding of impoliteness practiced by the couple causing face-threat and ultimate conflicts in their marriage.

### **Marriage, Conflict and Communication**

From the perspective of functional linguistics, a ‘character language’ serves as a means of human communication bound to specific interpersonal and social contexts (Jumanto, 2014). One particular property of the character language is that types of hearers/speakers are essential in constructing conversational implicatures and interpersonal relationships. For instance, according to Jumanto (2006), speaking to close or distant hearers (i.e., close or distant language) brings different politeness or camaraderie. In other words, different social relationships, intertwined with specific power and solidarity, may create special communication. This concept of character language hereby motivates the present pragmatic consideration of marriage (close language) and conflict communication (impoliteness).

Previous systematic studies on marriage are often related to psychology, which are largely organized to benefit couples in curbing marital distress. Investigations of conflictual interactions have a privileged status in those studies, as the concept of ‘marriage conflict’ has been generally accepted as “distress results from couples’ aversive and ineffectual response to conflict” (Koerner & Jacobson, 1994, p. 208). It has been argued that marital conflict causes profound implications for an individual’s well-being (Coyne & Downey, 1991). Social studies also indicate that marital conflict is highly associated with an overall family relation, including child adjustment (Grych & Fincham, 1990) and appropriate parenting (Erel & Burman, 1995). Though initially pertinent to psychological concerns, social linguists are increasingly exploring marital communication and seeking new approaches to understanding this prominent social relation.

Complaining has been discussed as a representative speech as it serves as a typical behavior displaying a marital partner's dissatisfying behaviors and verbal offenses (Kowalski, 1996). How someone expresses his/her unpleasantness towards others has tremendous implications for individual and relational well-being (Worley & Samp, 2019). Complaint, as an example, is a verbal practice that appears to create adverse outcomes such as hindering relational harmony (Roloff & Ifert, 2000) and causing relational dissatisfaction (Worley & Samp, 2016) as well as increasing psychological distress (Liu & Roloff, 2015). This is because voicing conflicting messages in communication always connects with 'impoliteness' that is conventionally disrespectful, awkward, rude, and face-attacking (Bousfield & Locher, 2008). Based on the reviewed literature, it is necessary to consider the language uses, or broadly pragmatic realizations, in which a couple creates impoliteness and hurts each other (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Worley & Samp, 2019).

### **Impoliteness in Pragmatics**

A plethora of pragmatics studies are closely modelled on the classic, most cited concept of politeness (Culpeper, 2010; Tawilapakul, 2022; Yaqin & Shanmuganathan, 2020). Politeness theory is based on the conceptual notion that individuals have a social self-image that they consciously construct and try to adhere to (Goffman, 1959). This sense of self-image is defined as 'face' (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 2011; Jumanto, 2011; Terkourafi, 2005). Brown and Levinson (1987) postulated that some communicative acts are intrinsically threatening individual's 'face.' These so-called 'face-threatening acts' featuring offensive nature result in impoliteness (Terkourafi, 2008), which become one of the essential issues in pragmatic studies.

In the recent decade, lots of pragmatic focus has been paid to explicating impoliteness (Han, 2021). Studies have been carried out to discuss meta-pragmatics of impoliteness, entertain hypotheses about the conventionality of impolite linguistic forms and their implicatures, and investigate the contexts and roles of impoliteness-related behaviors (Andersson, 2019; Culpeper, 2011; Han, 2021; Zhao & Ran, 2022; etc.). "Although there is no solid agreement in the conclusion as to what 'impoliteness' exactly is" (Locher & Bousfield, 2008, p. 3), a widely accepted definition of the notion is put forward by Culpeper (2010, p. 3233):

*Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires and/or beliefs about social organisation, including, in particular, how one person's or group's identities are mediated by others in interaction. Situated behaviours are viewed negatively when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviours always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. Various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behaviour is taken to be, including for example whether one understands a behaviour to be strongly intentional or not.*

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 65) primarily elaborate “Face Threatening Acts” (FTAs) as “what is intended to be done by a verbal communication” to threaten other’s face potentially. Nevertheless, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) positions have been criticized because they hold that verbal speech acts primarily or mainly perform face-threatening effects. The consequence of such critical critique is the emergence of symbolic means for conveying impoliteness, which emphasizes contextual elements and pragmatic strategies instead of only linguistic forms. This position is demonstrated by Culpeper (2010) that impoliteness can be more inherent in a linguistic form yet more determined by context. Thus, both the verbal expressions and the situated communicative behaviors (i.e., non-verbal) showing negative evaluative attitudes can realize impoliteness.

The frame-based approach to (im)politeness has been put forward by scholars. Terkourafi (2005) argued that we should analyze the concrete linguistic realizations (i.e., formulae) and particular contexts of application which co-constitute “frames”. There is a scale of conventionalization in pragmatic behaviors that “meanings can become more semanticized (i.e., conventional for the majority of the speakers of the language)” (Culpeper, 2010, p. 3237). Conventionalization has been introduced to illustrate with regard to impoliteness (Culpeper, 2010; Jumanto, 2014). Concentrating on conventionalized frequency correlations between forms and uses, impoliteness models were formulated by scholars, among which Derek Bousfield makes a leading influence. Bousfield’s (2008) conventionalized impoliteness formula offers general impoliteness realizations and is instructive at capturing pragmatic strategies in which impoliteness is embedded in conversational interactions in diverse contexts. This impoliteness

model projects sixteen patterns, which are semantically constituting specific pragmatic meanings and impolite effects. Each impoliteness pattern can be realized through particular linguistic choices, as demonstrated in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Realizations of Impoliteness in Interactions (Bousfield, 2008, pp. 101-138)

Realizations	Examples
Challenge	<i>Why is there a yellow line anyway?</i> <i>How am I supposed to work?</i>
Seek disagreement	<i>No, there's no come on because you've towed the car off my own.</i>
Sarcasm	<i>Oh, dear unfortunately you had to queue up.</i>
Be uninterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic	<i>Hey, don't stand there bubbling because it makes no difference to me, you can bubble all you want.</i>
Snub	<i>I don't care what you do.</i>
Disassociate from the other	<i>I don't want you.</i>
Condescend, scorn or ridicule	<i>Well, that's being babyish, isn't it?</i>
Threaten	<i>Touch my new car and I'll bust your head off!</i>
Criticize	<i>You've botched the job!</i>
Withhold	<i>I don't thank you at all.</i>
Hinder	<i>Fine, stop talking it.</i>
Use inappropriate identity markers	<i>Hi, girl, come here.</i>
Use taboo words	<i>What the fu*k are you doing!</i>
Shout	<i>WHAT WAS THAT JANES?</i>
Enforce role shift	<i>I'm asking you to finish this work.</i>
'Explicitly' associate the other with a negative aspect	<i>Don't give me you just wear the uniform and so you're just as much to blame as everybody else as far as I'm concerned.</i>

Impoliteness is situated in specific socio-cultural contexts (Kecskes, 2017; Mugford, 2018). A verbal expression or a linguistic behavior is neither inherently polite nor impolite, whereas the judgment of its impoliteness rests on the corresponding socio-cultural context and communicative intention (Schnurr et al., 2007). People's judgments of face-aggravating communication or the related inappropriateness are influenced by cultural norms and social practices in every specific context. Regarding impoliteness, Locher (2011, p. 193) asserted "further research is needed here to establish what linguistic behavior is judged in what way by different social groups in situated interaction". Therefore, increasing attention has been paid to less-investigated social contexts to discover impoliteness practices.

Previous studies have discussed impoliteness in various social contexts and different social groups. Nonetheless, insufficient attention was paid to the marital

relationship. This study draws on a qualitative approach to uncover the discursive construction and features of impoliteness appearing in the marital relationship. With a purpose of gaining an in-depth exploration of the view of impoliteness, Bousfield's (2008) conventionalized impoliteness formula was adopted as the instructive framework. By doing so, this study was hoped to shed light on a novel perspective on impoliteness: the marital relationship, thus impoliteness could be negotiated from a broader social and linguistic context.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The data corpus for this study was compiled from a Chinese studio dialogue program, *Jin Pai Tiao Jie* (literally *Ideal Mediation*). The program team was awarded the title of *National Model People's Mediation Committee* by the *Ministry of Justice*, and it is one of the top ten legal TV program in China. *Jin Pai Tiao Jie*, as the first TV mediation program in China, focuses on real emotions and the true life of the Chinese people. It is committed to reconciling the thorny and complex contradictions faced by ordinary people and helping them deal with the dilemma. The 'parties' seeking mediation are usually two people involved in disputes, including property controversy, maintenance for parents, marital conflicts, etc. The program is a combination of digital genres of "indoor drama", "reality show", "pan-legal program", "open court style" and slightly "entertainment". It incorporates elements of court arguments and provides a platform for people to appeal to their demands through the on-site conversation. There is a host and mediators in all professions (e.g., lawyer, psychologist, civil servant) on-site to uncover problems and discover solutions for the 'parties' (as shown in Figure 1).

Drawing on the theme of marriage conflict, the current episode analyzed was selected from the serial entitled: 《金牌调解》丈夫寻妻未果大闹居民楼莫名生气冷暴力妻子 20220514 (*Jin Pai Tiao Jie The Husband Made a Scene in the Residential Building because He Could Not Contact His Wife. He Pissed off for No Reason and Gave His Wife Tacit Violence 20220514*). The duration of the video is 39 minutes and 21 seconds. The first rationale behind the data selection is that this episode has attracted wide publicity, being viewed more than 15000 times on the official TV channel (i.e., *China Jiangxi Radio and Television Network*) and more than 6,000 times on YouTube. Most importantly, this episode echoes the foci of this study as "conflict in marital relation" and "impoliteness in marriage communication". This

couple got in the throes of marriage because of trivial events and accumulated misunderstandings. Moreover, many other contradictions of marriage in the show were caused by a core reason/issue. Therefore, the present case of marriage would allow more pragmatic discussions. During the on-site mediation process, the couple both exposed the other's mistakes, offensive expressions and inappropriate behaviors, which can be accounted as causing impoliteness (Culpeper, 2011). It is henceforth selected as the representative case to uncover the impoliteness, both verbal and non-verbal, occurring in the marital relationship.

The couple who sought mediation in this episode have been married for 27 years. First, they were in a common social relation as a couple signaling equal social power, namely equal social status, high familiarity (know each other well), and close social distance. Nonetheless, in the face of conflicts, the 'solidarity' of their marital relation reflects non-intimacies (Jumanto, 2014; Salifu, 2010). The wife, Ms. Qiao, had filed for divorce to the court before attending *Jin Pai Tiao Jie*. However, the court advised a cooling-off period for half a year because the husband, Mr. Dai, strongly opposed the divorce. With the cooling-off period coming to an end, Mr. Dai turned to *Jin Pai Tiao Jie* for helping ease their conflict. According to the couple's statements, the mediators concluded that the lack of effective communication led to most of their conflicts, offensiveness and incompatibility.



Figure 1. On-site mediation concerning the couple's conflict



The analytical process drew on a qualitative approach to pragmatics (Zainal Abidin & Mohd Jan, 2022) to probe into the impoliteness realized by the couple in the marriage, namely Ms. Qiao and Mr. Dai. The two researchers viewed the entire episode and independently identified the potential impoliteness practices. The coding focused on the representation of impoliteness based on the couple's complaints and accusations against each other, and their behaviors observed on the scene to create conflicts and rudeness. The primary coding of the impoliteness realizations/patterns was based on Bousfield's (2008) formula (see Table 1) as this provides a detailed and explicit method to classify impoliteness (Garrido Ardila, 2019).

An impoliteness instance was identified when one's utterance or behavior caused resentment, anger, and pain to the other. Realizations were first identified in accordance with Bousfield's (2008) formula according to the features each instance revealed, whether the realization was a linguistic or non-verbal process. Novel realizations were also determined, i.e., which could not be exemplified in Bousfield's (2008) formula. Only one occurrence frequency was recorded when the same instance was mentioned twice or above by the couple. Finally, the coding results were compared. Differences were resolved through discussions until an agreement was reached.

## RESULTS

Findings indicate that 65 occurrences of impoliteness were identified in the couple's marital interactions, which directly or indirectly caused their negative emotions and unpleasant responses. As shown in Table 2, frequencies and percentages were presented to display the distributions of impoliteness in the couple's marriage. The initial findings show that thirteen patterns of impoliteness realizations were identified as triggers causing conflicts in their marriage, which were, in general, in accordance with Bousfield's (2008) discursive approach to human impoliteness. It suggests that most conventionalized impoliteness types exist in the marital relationship, whereas, the type of "*Explicitly' associate the other with a negative aspect – personalize, use the pronouns 'I' and 'you'*" (Culpeper, 1996, p. 358) was not mentioned by the couple. Besides, the couple did not force the other to change social roles, which is defined as "*Enforce role shift*" by Bousfield (2008, p. 131). Though shouting could be a common means of conveying impoliteness, this was not explicitly emphasized or shown by the couple.

**Table 2.** Impoliteness Formulae in the Series

Impoliteness Realizations	Description	Overall (n=65)			Mr. Dai (n=23)			Ms. Qiao (n=42)		
		Fr.	Prop.	PR	Fr.	Prop.	PR	Fr.	Prop.	PR
Challenge	Unpalatable questions	11	16.92	1	4	17.39	2	7	16.67	1
Seek disagreement	Refute interlocutors' argument	9	13.85	2	5	21.74	1	4	9.52	4
Be unconcerned	Do not care about recipients' feelings	6	9.23	3	1	4.35	7	5	11.90	2
Snub	Ignore the recipient and tend to cease the communication	6	9.23	3	2	8.70	4	4	9.52	4
Sarcasm	Speak sarcastically or ironically	5	7.69	5	0	0.00	11	5	11.90	2
Disassociate	Deny association or avoid being related	5	7.69	5	1	4.35	7	4	9.52	4
Scorn or ridicule	Despise others	5	7.69	5	1	4.35	7	4	9.52	4
Threaten	Implicate speaker's intention to cause dangers for something done or not done	5	7.69	5	4	17.39	2	1	2.38	10
Criticize	Dispraise recipient's actions, characteristics, etc.	4	6.15	9	0	0.00	11	4	9.52	4
Hinder	Interrupt recipient's speech	3	4.62	10	2	8.70	4	1	2.38	10
Withhold	Not expressing affection/attitude	2	3.08	11	2	8.70	4	0	0.00	13
Use taboo words	Use disrespectful or cruel language	2	3.08	11	0	0.00	11	2	4.76	9
Misbehave	Incorrect or shameful behaviours	2	3.08	13	1	4.35	7	1	2.38	10

Note: Fr.=occurrences; Prop.=percentage proportion over total inscription count; PR=Percentage Ranking.

Studies in humanities and social sciences are often discussed from the perspective of frequencies to uncover levels of importance/values attached to different strategies (e.g., Wu & Cheong, 2020). In this study, all the impoliteness realizations were considered 'optional' as none of them was overwhelmingly used by the couple in their marital relationship. 'Challenge' and 'Seek disagreement' were tentatively classified as relatively low optionality (> 10%). Those realizations occurring >5% while <10% were termed as relatively medium optionality. The realizations that were used minimally (<5%) were named relatively high optionality.

Demonstrations and examples of each realization are shown in the following sections respectively.

### **Impoliteness Realizations with Low Optionality**

'Challenge' (n=11/16.92%) and 'Seek disagreement' (n=9/13.85%) have occurred most frequently in their conflictual interactions. According to Bousfield (2008), challenges refer to asking hearer challenging questions, which critically question the hearer's position, stance, beliefs, etc. Results show two existing types of 'Challenge': responses seeking challenges and rhetorical challenges. Excerpt 1 first presents the response seeking challenges from Mr. Dai by questioning Ms. Qiao's current position and seeking an explanation with a harsh tone. It indirectly revealed a sense of blaming her for not picking him up timely. Instead of seeking information in a polite manner, Mr. Dai's requirement for details could be seen as a 'verbal trap', because such questions invisibly caused the recipient's face damage. Ms. Qiao was pissed off by the husband's impolite interrogation. She also used questions that were aggressive and defiant in tone as the response. However, her questions are more related to rhetorical challenges because she used robust assertion markers (i.e., *Didn't you? right? if*), attempting to force the husband to "respond in a highly restricted and self-damaging way" (Bousfield, 2008, p. 132).

#### Excerpt 1

Context: When Mr. Dai was discharged from the hospital, he did not wait for Ms. Qiao to pick him up. Therefore, he questioned Ms. Qiao why she did not show up.

Mr. Dai: Where are you?!

Ms. Qiao: Didn't you say that the discharge procedure has not been done yet? I went home first to pick up the social security card. Then the procedure would be proceeded, right? If you want to go home now, I will go back to pick you up.

'Seeking disagreement', or avoiding agreement, is defined as verbal communication refuting the interlocutor's claims, which explicitly threatens the recipient's positive face. In this study, this contradicting communication is categorized into direct disagreements (with negatives) and indirect disagreements (without negatives). Excerpt 2 demonstrates an instance of direct disagreement. In the face of the host's confirmation, Mr. Dai admitted that Ms. Qiao indeed got

physical hurt; nevertheless, he refuted the condition of the injury, especially the adoption of the negation marker 不是 (*not, no*), which indicates his overt avoidance of agreement on Ms. Qiao's claim. This message conveys that Ms. Qiao was exaggerating the fact, which resulted in great anger of Ms. Qiao.

Excerpt 2

Context: Mr. Dai directly denied Ms. Qiao's degree of injury.

Mr. Dai: Her finger was wounded. But it was not as severe as what she said.

### **Impoliteness Realizations with Medium Optionality**

Seven realizations of impoliteness are defined as relatively medium optionality, namely "*Be unconcerned*", "*Snub*", "*Sarcasm*", "*Disassociate*", "*Scorn or ridicule*", "*Threaten*", and "*Criticize*". Though these verbal or non-verbal patterns are optional, they are still often used by the couple to challenge each other's face and aroused conflicts (see Table 2). In Excerpt 3, Mr. Dai complained about Ms. Qiao's neglect and it caused his discontent. The host also questioned Ms. Qiao by "*Why wouldn't you care about his (Mr. Dai) feelings?*" The purpose was to seek answers to her '*Be unconcerned*'. Based on the self-statement of the couple, both of them, especially Ms. Qiao, were not in the habit of using words expressing 'concern'. Instead, most of the time, they seem to be boosting indifferent attitudes toward each other.

Excerpt 3

Context: Ms. Qiao always ignored her husband's feelings in their everyday interactions.

Host: Why wouldn't you care about his feelings?

Ms. Qiao: Because I don't like him.

In this study, the practice of snubbing occurred when the couple rebuffed each other's opinions or claims disdainfully. The verbal rejections were usually combined with an abrupt or ungracious manner. As shown in Excerpt 4, Ms. Qiao tried to explain how the money was used; however, Mr. Dai did not trust her. He further made a humiliating rebuff to Mr. Qiao by the stigmatization '*you are lying*'. Snubbing is here realized with the co-occurrence of ruthless discredit of the wife.

Excerpt 4

Context: Mr. Dai rebuffed Ms. Qiao's explanation of the usage of money.

Ms. Qiao: He did not believe what I said. Then he said "you are lying". Then I

felt angry and turned off the light.

Both of the couple used “*Sarcasm*” which results in unpleasant conversations. The standard notion of sarcasm is concerned with verbal irony, which was articulated as speech in which “we understand something which is the opposite of what is actually said” (Camp, 2011, p. 1). In impoliteness contexts, sarcasm speech normally conveys the disapproval of other people via presenting unfavorable judgments. This speech reinforces a sense of ‘false’ and ‘impossible’. In Mr. Dai’s opinion, Ms. Qiao always spoke sarcastically, which caused considerable unpleasantness in their communication. In the on-site mediation, Ms. Qiao also complained about Mr. Dai’s speaking tone. She used a popular Chinese idiom “*taiyang cong xibian chulai*”, literally “the sun would rise from the west”. This Chinese idiom is used ironically to express disbelief, which is similar to ‘pigs might fly’ in English.

Excerpt 5

Context: Ms. Qiao sometimes satirized her husband, which caused an unpleasantness in their communication.

Ms. Qiao: If he (Mr. Dai) could talk nicely, the sun would rise from the west (*taiyang cong xibian chulai* in original Chinese).

The couple also denied their association or common grounds, and avoided being ‘together’ in their marriage. Generally, this “*Disassociate*” pattern of impoliteness occurred non-verbally. In other words, they would purposefully keep a distance, physically and psychologically. For example, in Excerpt 6, Ms. Qiao got pregnant and Mr. Dai expected to undertake the role of a father; nevertheless, Ms. Qiao refused his ‘support’. This behavioral rejection implicatures a ‘sensory deprivation’ or ‘perceptual isolation’ (Heron, 2013) to Mr. Dai. Thus, disassociation can distress relationships as it undermines the capacity to relate and therefore starves human relationships over time.

Excerpt 6

Context: Ms. Qiao got pregnant. She refused Dr. Dai’s support with his hand. She left by her own.

Mr. Dai: She was pregnant and I just wanted to help her. She flicked her arm. I felt it hurt my self-esteem, just like I was not related to the baby.

In impoliteness studies, the rhetorical realizations of “condescend, scorn, ridicule” explicitly associate others with a negative aspect (Garrido Ardila, 2019). In this study, based on the couple’s complaints, the pattern of ‘*condescend*’ was barely found in their marriage. On the other hand, verbal expressions of ‘*scorn*’ or ‘*ridicule*’ were identified. As shown in Excerpt 7, Ms. Qiao got trouble in public and she felt embarrassed; as her husband, Mr. Dai did not assist any help; moreover, he ridiculed Ms. Qiao. This definitely worsens the state of Ms. Qiao’s face loss in public. As a consequence, she felt humiliated and angry with Mr. Dai.

Excerpt 7

*Context: Mr. Dai always scorned or ridiculed Ms. Qiao, leading to complaints from Ms. Qiao.*

Ms. Qiao: He looked at me, and ridiculed my embarrassed look. What an awful face he showed.

Impoliteness is commonly concerned with “the use of communicative strategies designed to attack face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony” (Culpeper, Bousfield, & Wichmann, 2003, p. 1545). In many speech communities, certain behaviors like threats or warnings also underrate or undermine the face of interlocutors because such (verbal) actions always go against the wishes of the hearer, and thus threats or warnings are very face-attacking realizations of impoliteness (Bousfield, 2008). “*Threaten*” indeed happens in marital interactions. In the following Excerpt 8, Mr. Dai’s utterance would be perceived as a severe threat by Ms. Qiao, or anyone. Ms. Qiao also asserted that it was threatening and frightening, as one in the conversation and relationship and she was legally responsible for what would happen regarding human life. Therefore, Mr. Dai’s “*Threaten*” statements and behaviors not only destroyed a harmonious relationship among them, but also led to a potentially risky and illegal consequence.

Excerpt 8

*Context: Mr. Dai threatened Ms. Qiao to meet up with him.*

Ms. Qiao: He ran to the top of the building and called me: “I am on the roof of this building. I will give you five minutes to come here. If you do not come, I will jump.”

The last medium-optionality pattern is “*Criticize*”, which is verbally realized by someone to dispraise other’s actions or characteristics, etc. Mr. Dai complained that his wife, Ms. Qiao, frequently criticized him from multiple perspectives. During the on-site mediation, he mentioned four cases where he received Ms. Qiao’s harsh criticism, which were related to working competence, interpersonal relationship, material quality of life, and manner of speaking. As Excerpt 9 shows, during the TV mediation, Ms. Qiao criticized Mr. Dai’s manner of speaking (i.e., tone of speech) again. Immediately, this criticism aroused Mr. Dai’s dissatisfaction manifesting by his sigh.

Excerpt 9

*Context: Ms. Qiao always criticized Mr. Dai, and this accused his displeasure.*

Ms. Qiao: That is the way he talks. It is just never a pleasant tone. He is like that all year round.

Mr. Dai: (sigh).

### **Impoliteness Realizations with High Optionality**

As mentioned above, those patterns with a prevalence of less than 5% are classified as high optional impoliteness realizations, namely they are “*Hinder*”, “*Withhold*”, and “*Use taboo words*”, and a newly coined pattern “*Misbehave*”. Table 2 suggests no significant difference among the statistical occurrences of these realizations. To begin with “*Hinder*” pattern, both the husband and the wife have interrupted the other’s speech during the on-site mediation. Three occurrences of interruption were observed. For instance, Mr. Dai interrupts Ms. Qiao when she is describing their previous conflictual behaviors. Though Mr. Dai used an interrogative tone “may I say...say something?”, Ms. Qiao feels somehow unpleasant and replies him with “*shuo bei*” (ok, say). In Chinese, ‘*bei*’ functions as the sentence-ending particle, corresponding to the ‘be’ (or ‘is’) in ‘so be it’ and ‘that’s it/that’s all’. In some occasions, using ‘*bei*’ in a reply usually manifests an uncaring attitude or an unpleasant mood. Hindering is strategically utilized by a speaker to cause the hearer to give in or deny the claim (Garrido Ardila, 2019). Generally, hindering should be recognized as a verbal action that might be fulfilled by various verbal statements, such as questioning, scorning, disagreeing in this study.

Keeping silent also potentially causes conflicts in a marriage. This is termed as “*Withhold*”. According to Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 5): “politeness has to be

communicated, and the absence of communicated politeness may be taken as the absence of a polite attitude.” As complained by Ms. Qiao in Excerpt 10, Mr. Dai’s refusal behavior of speaking something violates her desire. In the eyes of Ms. Qiao, her husband’s ‘silence’ is marking ‘not expressing affection or warmth of feeling’. Thus, failing to talk may be taken as the deliberate impoliteness in a marriage.

Excerpt 10

*Context: Ms. Qiao complained that she talked with Mr. Dai on her own initiative. However, Mr. Dai just kept silent.*

Ms. Qiao: I intended to talk with him calmly. I wished he could tell me his complaints and my shortcomings. But he did not say anything. He was just crying. It looks like I was bullying him.

Taboo languages in interpersonal communication mainly result in adverse outcomes, including hurt, conflict, psychological damage, and even relationship termination. Though not using abusive expressions in Chinese, Ms. Qiao employed some inappropriate words when she was talking to Mr. Dai in daily communication. For example, she said “*he (Mr. Dai) is like a viper*”. Being offended, Mr. Dai immediately stared angrily at her. Interestingly, the conflicts would also be triggered when one of the spouses has a disgraceful performance, i.e., misbehaviors. This is explained by Ms. Qiao in Excerpt 11. Mr. Dai once quarreled with his landlord and used very vicious curses, which also humiliated her positive face. Ms. Qiao was aware that they, as a couple, were tightly bounded by other people. When her husband was behaving shamefully, others might also portray her as an indecent identity. Consequently, Ms. Qiao expected that Mr. Dai could also keep a positive image to impact the public opinions towards their family and herself.

Excerpt 11

*Context: Mr. Dai once quarreled with a landlord.*

Ms. Qiao: He (Mr. Dai) swore at his landlord, and he swore at him by vicious curses. He did not feel embarrassed. I was embarrassed. So many people came out to see it.

## **DISCUSSION**

In general, the current research revealed various impolite phenomena in the marital relationship, which are straightforwardly linked to disharmony and conflicts. Similar findings have been discussed in previous studies in multiple



marital contexts (Bustamante et al., 2011; Djurdjevic & Roca, 2016; Romano, 2008; Van Mol & De Valk, 2015) that couples might encounter familial and societal disapproval and may frequently struggle with macro or micro-communicative challenges from different habits, values, and languages. The evidence from this study supports the assumption that a problematic marital relationship tends to be signaled in certain practices of impoliteness.

The data analysis first reveals that the impoliteness realizations, in marriage communication, are in general accordance with the widely acknowledged set of impoliteness (e.g., Bousfield, 2008; Garrido Ardila, 2019). This is accounted in the words of Terkourafi (2015), “conventionalization” in linguistic behaviors. In the present case study, eleven patterns of impoliteness identified are highly correlated with Bousfield’s (2008) model of impoliteness realizations, which originally encompasses sixteen sub-patterns. It suggests that these impoliteness realizations, namely “*Challenge*”, “*Seek disagreement*”, “*Be unconcerned*”, “*Snub*”, “*Sarcasm*”, “*Disassociate*”, “*Scorn or ridicule*”, “*Threaten*”, “*Criticize*”, “*Hinder*”, “*Use tattoo words*” and “*Withhold*”, are the common “escalation” (Culpeper, 1996, p. 355) in creating impolite atmospheres across diverse social contexts. They tend to provide a general overview of how impoliteness phenomena pervade in human communications to cause conflictive face threatening. Nonetheless, some impolite realizations explicated by Bousfield (2008) — “*Shout*”, “*Use inappropriate identity markers*”, and “*Enforce role shift*”, were not discovered in this couple’s interactions. With respect to specificity in this study, the findings observed were in line with the theoretical notion that a particular communicative context signals specific types of pragmatic features or conversational relations (Culpeper, 2010; Jumanto, 2014; Tawilapakul, 2022; Yaqin & Shanmuganathan, 2020; Zainal Abidin & Mohd Jan, 2022). Marital relationship is no exception. There are other means by which impoliteness could be transmitted to give rise to conflicts in a marriage. Though the means “*Misbehave*” was observed as a minimal instance in the dataset, it was identified as a conflict trigger in the couple’s marriage since it exacerbates a discontent emotion. Hence, this study discoursed the context-dependency in impoliteness practices where interlocutors will not exclusively align with existing conventionalized impoliteness formulae, but will re-construct some unique impoliteness practices in the interactional process.

Another finding is concerned with the mode of impoliteness. Previous

research has mostly examined impoliteness as a rhetorical strategy, in other words, from the verbal perspective. For example, Culpeper (2005, p. 38) observed that “impoliteness comes about when the speaker communicates face attack intentionally”. This statement has been proved by tremendous studies that investigated the relation between communication and impoliteness (Andersson, 2019; Han, 2021; Zhao & Ran, 2022; etc.). Drawing on the findings in this study, some non-verbal aspects also contribute to creating an impolite atmosphere, which ultimately leads to conflicts and threatens the marital relationship. This reflects a further understanding of Culpeper (2005) that impoliteness also occurs when the hearer perceives and constructs the speaker’s behaviors as intentionally face attacking. Therefore, both verbal (linguistic) and non-verbal (behavioral) practices can be markedly impolite to hinder a couple from achieving desired goals, and create a hostile emotional state.

The last key issue brought up in the analysis will be highlighted in gender variation regarding their practices of impoliteness or rudeness. Several socio-linguistic investigations have testified that females generally prefer speech forms that are indirect, mitigated, and more explicitly polite (Holmes, 1995; Ladegaard, 2012). Moreover, in this case study, the wife has shown more impolite signs than her husband, which is almost double in occurrences. Thus, it would be incorrect to assume “that women are in general intrinsically more ‘polite’ and less ‘impolite’ than men.” (Mills, 2005, p. 264). This study tentatively exhibits gender variations regarding pragmatic practices in the marital relationship. Generally, the wife in this marriage has performed more impoliteness in different ways. She would like to engage in “*sarcasm*” and “*criticize*” and even “*use taboo words*” to her husband in their everyday conversations, which definitely attacked her husband’s positive face. On the contrary, these three impoliteness patterns were not acted by the husband. Though other ways were used by both of the couple, the wife took them more frequently, for instance, “*Challenge*”, “*Snub*”, “*Be unconcerned, unsympathetic*”, “*Disassociate*”, and “*Scorn or ridicule*”. While the husband tended to realize impoliteness via “*Seek disagreement*”, “*Threaten*”, and “*Hinder*”. According to the percentage ranking in Table 2, it also indicates that both genders have their prominent practices that might heighten the face damage of the other in their marriage, for example, “*Seek disagreement*” for the husband and “*Challenge*” for the wife. Gendered ways of practicing impoliteness are not merely mirroring how

males and females actually talk or behave, but rather, more significantly, the male and female pragmatic styles that distinctively exist in their performances.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study sought to discover how a couple realized impoliteness in their marital relationship through a pragmatic-conversational approach. Though the nature of this qualitative case study might restrain the researchers from offering any exclusive conclusions, this study shows the significant roles of communication in a marriage. Specifically, the researchers would argue an assumption that there is an intricate relationship in marriage, conflict, and communication. The predominant point is that both the husband and the wife rely on several resources, verbal and non-verbal, to express views/attitudes that inherently entail impoliteness, leading to misunderstanding, stereotypes, misbehaviors, ineffective communication, and direct conflicts.

The primary aim of this research was to build on and expand the limited body of knowledge regarding marriage and communication. It is hoped that the findings can contribute to guiding couples to understand their impoliteness performances and avoid unnecessary conflicts in their marriage. The results of this study have provided further evidence for the notion that pragmatics is associated with context-dependency. In different interpersonal circumstances, e.g., the marital relationship, impoliteness (or politeness) is interwoven with particular features regarding communication and linguistics. The limitation is that we have selected one couple's on-site mediation as the data, and thus we cannot generalize exclusive findings from the present case study. Although this study has brought a heuristic understanding of the relationship in marriage, impoliteness, and conflict, a larger corpus of data is recommended to be adopted in future studies to corroborate the findings reported in this article. More studies are suggested to explore impoliteness in the marriage relationship in relation to two prominent pragmatic factors: social power and solidarity. Further examinations in this regard may utilize interviews and surveys to uncover more conflictual practices in the marital relationship.

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