



The Sarcastic Edge: How Impoliteness Strategies Construct Rhetorical Authority in the 7th IUDC Arabic Debate

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026 - 06 - 01 Revised: 2026 06-18 Accepted: 2026 06-30	<i>Debate requires individuals to think critically, systematically, and strategically when selecting linguistic devices to defend arguments, maintain social standing, and challenge opponents. This study aims to identify and explain the rhetorical functions of impoliteness strategies used in the context of high stakes competitive debate. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study analyzes data sourced from video documentation of the final round of the 7th IUDC Arabic Debate in 2024 in Qatar. The data were analyzed using content analysis techniques based on Culpeper's framework of impoliteness. The results indicate the presence of all five impoliteness strategies: Bald on Record, Positive Impoliteness, Negative Impoliteness, Sarcasm, and Withhold Politeness, with sarcasm being the most dominant strategy. This dominance simultaneously undermines the opponent's positive face while showcasing the speaker's composure and analytical power before the judges. Each strategy was not chosen randomly but as a response to specific communicative demands, and the combination of their use by both finalist teams constitutes a face-management strategy inseparable from competitive success. This finding expands Culpeper's framework of impoliteness by demonstrating that, in high stakes academic debates, impoliteness strategies function as cumulative rhetorical tools through which debaters establish their own authority, undermine their opponents' credibility, and ultimately convince the judges of their team's argumentative superiority.</i>
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1. Introduction

Debate is a form of academic communication that integrates critical thinking, structured argumentation, and strategic language use. In educational contexts,

particularly higher education, debate functions not only as a competitive arena but also as a platform for developing rhetorical proficiency and pragmatic competence (Baketa et al., 2023; Deliana & Ganie, 2025; Lazuardi & Murti, 2021; Maulani et al., 2024). Through debate, students are trained to construct arguments logically, respond to opposing views, and engage with complex global issues all of which require mastery of effective communication (Balai Pengembangan Talenta Indonesia, 2024; Harun et al., 2025). This is evident in international Arabic debate competitions such as the International University Debating Championship (IUDC), held in Doha Qatar, where language serves as the primary vehicle for both argument and identity.

Beyond conveying arguments, language in debate is also a tool for strategic self-presentation. Word choice and sentence structure shape the speaker's authority, regulate emotional dynamics, and influence both the audience and opponents (Febriyanto & Manshur, 2025; Khotimah & Kusuma, 2024). This dynamic is reinforced by the positions of the proposition and opposition teams, where participants are not only permitted to challenge one another but are also evaluated based on their ability to do so (Gustiani et al., 2022). The presence of judges as an evaluative audience gives each utterance higher social stakes, making face-threatening acts a characteristic strategy of the teams. These strategies ranging from subtle sarcasm to direct rejection fall within the domain of pragmatics, particularly the study of face.

The concept of face, introduced by Goffman (1967) as the social image a person seeks to maintain in interaction, was developed further by Brown and Levinson (1987) into a systematic theory of politeness strategies. This concept is divided into two dimensions of face, positive face, the desire to be approved of, liked, and respected, and negative face, the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Any utterance that threatens either dimension constitutes a Face-Threatening Act. Culpeper (2011) expanded this framework by proposing a theory of impoliteness strategies that deliberately attack or damage the interlocutor's face. Together, these three theoretical pillars debate discourse, face theory, and impoliteness form the foundation of the present study.

Prior research has examined impoliteness across various communicative contexts. Irawati et al. (2023) analyzed impoliteness strategies targeting public figures on social media, finding that sarcasm and positive impoliteness were the most dominant strategies used to attack personal and professional credibility. Lestaria et al. (2024) identified both politeness and impoliteness strategies in the Mata Najwa talk show, demonstrating that impoliteness in media discourse often functions as a tool for audience engagement rather than personal hostility. Dara et al. (2022) observed impoliteness in film dialogues, showing how FTAs serve narrative and characterization purposes. In the context of formal debate, Gustiani et al. (2022) documented face-threatening acts in the 2019 Indonesian presidential debate, revealing that impoliteness strategies were deployed tactically to discredit

opponents before a national audience. Jabbar and Al-Aadili (2022) similarly examined impoliteness in political discourse, finding that negative impoliteness was particularly effective in restricting the opponent's rhetorical space.

However, empirical analysis of impoliteness strategies in Arabic-language debate competitions remains limited. Most existing studies focus on Indonesian political debates, social media, or entertainment media, leaving the domain of international Arabic academic debate relatively underexplored from a pragmatic perspective. Unlike previous studies that examine impoliteness in informal contexts, this study focuses on a structured formal competition in which both teams strategically employ face-threatening acts, thereby creating a dynamic of mutual face negotiation that has not yet been examined in Arabic-language academic debate. Furthermore, while prior research tends to describe the strategies used, this study goes further by analyzing the reasons behind the selection of particular strategies and how they function rhetorically. This study aims to address this gap by analyzing the face threatening acts employed by finalists in the final round of the 7th IUDC Arabic Debate, with the objective of identifying types of impoliteness strategies and explaining their rhetorical functions in competitive academic discourse.

2. Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze impoliteness strategies used by debate participants. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive depiction of the phenomenon under investigation (Sulistiyo, 2023).

Research Design

This study is designed as descriptive qualitative research, focusing on the analysis of language use in a competitive academic setting. This design is appropriate given that the data consist of spoken utterances requiring contextual interpretation.

Data Source

The data were drawn from a video recording titled "المناظرة النهائية: جامعة النجاح الوطنية ضد جامعة العلوم والآداب اللبنانية", released in 2024 on the QatarDebate YouTube channel (<https://youtu.be/eVXHv8Pr5IY?si=fbeBzaHpnRePr7G->). The video documents the final round of the 7th IUDC Arabic Debate, featuring two finalist teams, An-Najah National University Palestine and the University of Sciences and Literature Lebanon, each composed of three members. The motion debated was: "هذا المجلس بصفته شاب مسلم سيهاجر إلى الغرب". The final round was selected because it

represents the climax of the competition a high-pressure, high intensity context that maximizes the likelihood of observing strategic impoliteness.

Data Collection

Data were collected through observation. The video, approximately one hour and five minutes in duration, was watched repeatedly and examined closely with the aid of a transcript display. Utterances were identified and timestamped based on the moment they occurred within their contextual setting (Miles & Huberman, 1992). An utterance was included in the dataset if it contained explicit or implicit strategies that threaten the interlocutor's face, as defined by Culpeper's (2011) impoliteness framework. Through this process, 70 utterances were selected as the final data.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using content analysis, a method for constructing valid representations of symbols or texts within specific contexts (Krippendorff, 2018). The analysis followed three steps: (1) identifying utterances that potentially constitute face-threatening acts, (2) classifying each utterance according to one of Culpeper's (2011) five impoliteness strategy categories is Bald on Record, Positive Impoliteness, Negative Impoliteness, Sarcasm and Withhold Politeness, (3) interpreting the pragmatic function of each utterance within its debate context.

3. Result

The research findings indicate that all five types of impoliteness strategies appear in various utterance contexts throughout the debate. A total of 70 utterances were identified as containing these strategies. Table 1 presents a summary based on strategy type, frequency, and percentage.

Table. 1 Impoliteness Strategies of Participants

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Sarcasm	23	33%
Positive Impoliteness	18	26%
Bald on Record	16	23%
Negative Impoliteness	10	14%
Withhold Politeness	3	4%
Total	70	100%

Among the five strategies, sarcasm was the most dominant, followed by positive impoliteness, bald on record, negative impoliteness and withhold politeness. This indicates a strategic preference among debaters for undermining their opponents' face without resorting to overt aggression.

Sarcasm was the most dominant strategy that appearing in 23 instances. This strategy was typically delivered through sharp rhetoric or contradictory statements designed to subtly but pointedly undermine the opponent's argument

and social standing (Junaid et al., 2021). Its function in debate is dual, it attacks the opponent's positive face, their desire to be respected and taken seriously, while simultaneously projecting the speaker's own image as composed and rhetorically superior.

For example, utterance 62 in minute 52:14, delivered by the third speaker of the opposition team, stated: "طيب أنا كشاب مسلم أين مصلحتي لا يهمني أنا كشاب في هذه الحياة أريد أن ابني أنا كشاب خصوصيتي كشاب مسلم ما هي مصلحتي نحن لسنا هنا". *"Alright, as a young Muslim, where exactly is my interest? I want to build my identity as a young Muslim. So, what is my interest? We are not here to discuss the general benefits of hijrah, that topic can be addressed at another time"*. The utterance implicitly mocks the proposition team's argument as too broad and off-motion, while affirming the speaker's own position as the team that better understands the debate context (Boginskaya, 2025).

Similarly, utterance 55 in minute 42:33 from the third speaker of the proposition team "يتكلمون كأننا نملك دولة اسلامية أصلاً تقوم بدعم الفكر الإسلامي". *"They speak as if we actually have an Islamic state that supports Islamic thought"*. sarcastically challenges the opposition's assumption that Muslim-majority countries provide a conducive environment for Islamic identity development. By exposing this assumption as unrealistic, the speaker frames the opposition's argument as illogical and their call for young Muslims to remain in their home countries as untenable (Herrera et al., 2023).

Positive impoliteness appeared in 18 instances and consistently targeted the opponent's positive face through expressions of disapproval, rejection of common ground and attempts to undermine their values. A recurring pattern was the accusation that the opposing team failed to grasp the core of the motion. For example, utterance "قالوا أن مشكلتهم عدم وجود واستقرار سياسي واقتصادي وقلة"

"تعليم، نحن هنا نناقش وتناول شاب مسلم بشكل خاص Criticizing the proposition for neglecting the specifically Muslim of this motion. This strategy damages the opponent's credibility by portraying them as incompetent (Berjawi et al., 2025).

Bald on Record appeared 16 instances and was characterized by direct face attacks delivered. These included explicit rejections of the opponent's arguments, such as in utterance "قالوا الغرب هو من يحيط بالإسلام السياسي وهذا خاطئ", as well as explicit accusations of logical failure, such as in utterance "لم يثبت فريق الموالة"

"لماذا الغرب هو الوجهة". Although less frequent than indirect strategies, these utterances created moments of confrontation and demonstrated the speaker's confidence in their position.

Negative impoliteness appeared in 10 instances, targeting the opponent's negative face, their desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. These strategies included direct demands, accusations of ignoring previously presented arguments and challenges to the opponent's logical consistency, such as in utterance "كان هناك كلام مستمر من قبلنا عن الأوضاع الاقتصادية والسياسية". *"There has been ongoing discussion from our side about the economic and political conditions"* which accused the opposing team of deliberately overlooking previously established arguments (Jabbar & Al-Aadili, 2022). And Withhold Politeness was the least frequent strategy, appearing only 3 instances, all in the form of refusing or ignoring interruptions. Such as in utterance "ارتداء!!!", "مرفوضة" and silence in response to an interruption attempt.

4. Discussion

Based on the analysis, the most frequently threatened face type was the positive face. In the context of debate, this is evident in utterances that aim to undermine the opponent's credibility, their position, and the assumptions they put forward (Gustiani et al., 2022). This pattern is consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that positive face, the desire for approval and recognition is particularly vulnerable in public discourse and reflects the specific dynamics of competitive academic debate, where intellectual credibility is both the primary asset and the primary target. Unlike everyday conversation, where face threats are typically accidental or situationally triggered, the face threatening acts identified in this study appear to be strategic and premeditated. They are not driven by hostility, but rather by rhetorical calculation. Each strategy is not used arbitrarily, but is selected in response to specific communicative demands, what needs to be attacked, how it should be delivered, and what impression needs to be constructed in the minds of the judges.

Sarcasm as the Dominant Strategy

The prevalence of sarcasm reflects a deliberate rhetorical strategy rooted in two primary demands of competitive debate. A debater operating in a formal context evaluated by judges must achieve two often conflicting goals in the interaction, effectively attacking the opponent while maintaining their own positive image before the judges (Sen et al., 2023). Most strategies of impoliteness generally achieve only one of these goals at a time, rarely both simultaneously.

Sarcasm is the exception. By expressing criticism through contradiction or implicit insinuation, sarcasm attacks the opponent's positive image specifically their desire to be taken seriously as a credible participant while simultaneously showcasing the speaker's rhetorical sophistication, composure, and analytical acuity (Junaid et al., 2021). The audience, including the judges, receives two messages at once: that the opponent's argument is weak or unrealistic, and that the speaker is intelligent enough to expose those weaknesses.

To understand sarcasm as a dominant choice, it is important to consider what would happen if debaters relied more heavily on the bald on record strategy. This strategy is direct, unmitigated, leaves no room for interpretation, and conveys certainty with maximum clarity. While it can be rhetorically powerful at certain moments, its sustained use throughout a debate carries significant risks. A speaker who constantly attacks directly risks being perceived as aggressive, emotionally reactive, or intellectually arrogant. In a formal academic context, where judges evaluate not only the strength of the argument but also the delivery and character of the speaker, such perceptions are detrimental. A debater who appears to lose control, even momentarily, will lose credibility. The sustained use of Bald on Record can actually undermine the ethos the speaker is trying to build.

If positive rudeness is adopted as the primary strategy, repeated outright rejection of the opponent's competence also risks appearing too obvious, thereby diminishing the perceived depth of the speaker's analysis. A debate team that simply rejects all of the opponent's arguments without demonstrating analytical engagement may appear confident, but it lacks rational persuasiveness. Sarcasm can bridge this tension, it conveys the same core message that the opponent's arguments are unrealistic, their reasoning is weak, and their position is untenable, but through a rhetorical form that simultaneously demonstrates intelligence, self-control, and argumentative engagement (Berjawi et al., 2025; Junaid et al., 2021).

Opponent Credibility Weakening Strategy

Positive impoliteness serves a distinct function and complements sarcasm. While sarcasm undermines the opponent through insinuation, positive impoliteness operates through direct expressions of disagreement, a rejection of shared perspectives, and repeated accusations of the opponent's incompetence. The most consistent phenomenon in these debates is the accusation that the opposing team has failed to understand the motion a claim that, if accepted by the judges, effectively invalidates the opponent's entire argument without the need to refute each argument individually.

This strategy is highly effective in academic debates because judges evaluate each team's overall performance in terms of credibility, preparedness, and argumentative coherence. By repeatedly positioning the opposing team as fundamentally misunderstanding what they are supposed to be debating, positive disrespect undermines the overall impression, not just individual parts of it

(Berjawi et al., 2025). Once the judges begin to doubt whether a team truly understands the motion, all subsequent arguments tend to be viewed with skepticism.

If negative impoliteness is used instead, the rhetorical effect is likely to be less effective. Negative impoliteness does exert pressure and limit autonomy, but it does not directly undermine the opponent's intellectual credibility. In fact, it may even elicit sympathy by positioning the pressured party as a victim of unfair treatment rather than as an intellectually weak participant. Positive impoliteness is explicit in its rejection, clearly stating the failure and leaving little room for the opposing team to reframe the accusation without first acknowledging and responding to it. This forces them into a time-consuming defensive position, while simultaneously building an increasingly strong narrative of incompetence through repetition.

Decisive Argument Rebuttal Strategy

Bald on Record is used selectively, not consistently and serves as a rhetorical marker at crucial points in a debate. Bald on Record delivers a sharp rebuttal at moments when a specific claim needs to be dismantled with clarity, leaving no room for interpretation.

When sarcasm is used selectively, its implicit and indirect nature allows the opponent room to evade or reframe the criticism. Sarcasm works through suggestions and implications that invite the audience to draw their own conclusions, rather than stating them explicitly. When a speaker needs to clearly demonstrate a logical fallacy so that the jury recognizes it as a concrete point of debate, sarcasm is too subtle and easily dismissed.

Negative Impoliteness Strategy

Negative impoliteness operates on a different level from previous strategies. This strategy targets the negative aspect of their stance namely, the desire for freedom from coercion by actively limiting rhetorical space through direct demands, accusations of disregarding previously presented arguments, and challenges to logical consistency (Jabbar & Al-Aadili, 2022). Thus, its primary function in competition is tactical, forcing the opposing team into a defensive position that consumes their limited speaking time and disrupts the flow of their own argumentation.

If sarcasm is used at this moment, the indirect nature of the attack will not be effective in forcing an immediate defensive response. Sarcasm works best when the audience has time to grasp its implications, within the fast-paced structure of a live debate, moments requiring immediate tactical disruption demand more direct instruments (Neshkovska, 2020). If Bald on Record is used as a substitute, its direct rejection of the opponent's argument is indeed rhetorically powerful, but it does not elicit the same response as that produced by negative impoliteness. By explicitly stating that the opposing team has ignored a previous argument, negative

impoliteness places the burden of response on them and makes the failure to respond an additional form of admission a tactical dynamic that neither sarcasm nor Bald on Record can achieve.

Interaction Control Strategy

Withholding Politeness is the least common strategy and is used only in response to attempts at interruption, indeed, its very rarity is informative. This strategy is employed only in situations where the communicative goal is not to attack the opponent's argument or credibility, but rather to assert control over the interaction (Neshkovska, 2020). Through a deliberate silence, the speaker demonstrates dominance over the turn-taking without exacerbating the disruption caused by the opposing team.

If Bald on Record is used to handle such interruptions, a lengthy or overly forceful rebuttal will actually draw excessive attention to the interruption itself, indirectly signaling that the speaker feels threatened and wasting time that should be used to develop the argument. If sarcasm is used, its subtle nuances will be lost in the dynamics of a direct interruption, where the audience's attention is divided and the argument's explanation is difficult to grasp. In contrast, Withhold Politeness conveys dominance with maximum efficiency, minimal words, maximum interactional control, and a swift return of the turn to the speaker's main argument. This measured control reflects the same pragmatic intelligence that underlies the use of all five strategies in this debate.

Impoliteness Strategies as the Rhetorical Characteristic of Debate Finalists

The presence of all five strategies of impoliteness in both teams demonstrated the rhetorical prowess of the finalists, who were able to outshine all the other teams. Both teams reached the final round because they possessed a comprehensive set of rhetorical skills, using sarcasm to demonstrate superiority without losing their composure, positive incivility to gradually undermine the opponent's credibility before the judges, Bald on Record for moments of firm rebuttal, as well as negative incivility and withholding politeness to manage the pressure of the interaction when the team's rhetorical space was threatened.

It is this variety that distinguishes a top-tier debater from one who masters only one or two strategies, strategies that are easily predictable rhetorically and easily anticipated by opponents. Every direct challenge employed contributes to the creation of a moment showcasing analytical sharpness and rhetorical mastery, built incrementally from one statement to the next, until it cumulatively convinces the judges that one team's argumentative position is stronger than the other's (Gustiani et al., 2022).

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings above, it can be concluded that in the final round of the

7th Arabic Debate Championship (IUDC), a variety of impoliteness strategies were employed by the participants. These included Bald on Record, Positive Impoliteness, Negative Impoliteness, Sarcasm, and Withhold Politeness. Among these five strategies, sarcasm was the most frequently used, accounting for 33 percent of the total instances of impoliteness. This strategy was used to convey sharp yet implicit criticism, highlighting the competitive dynamics inherent in debate. These findings emphasize that linguistic strategies in debate serve not only to deliver content, but also to shape perspectives, assert positions, and influence both opponents and the audience.

This study contributes to the development of pragmatic analysis, particularly in the area of face strategies. In pragmatic theory, a face-threatening act refers to any speech act that potentially damages the self-image or social identity of the speaker or the hearer. The findings of this research show that most impoliteness strategies in the debate targeted the positive face of the opponents, such as their desire for respect, acknowledgment, and acceptance. The high frequency of sarcasm illustrates that effective communication is shaped not only by logic and argument structure, but also by the speaker's ability to choose language that aligns with rhetorical goals and face management.

Furthermore, this study provides a foundation for developing debate training curricula that place greater emphasis on pragmatic awareness. Students should be trained not only to construct strong arguments, but also to understand the interpersonal effects of their language choices. Developing sensitivity to face-threatening acts and pragmatic strategies can enhance learners' competence in academic and professional communication. Future studies on face strategies in formal debate should be extended across various levels of competition, both national and international, and in other foreign language contexts, to investigate how impoliteness strategies operate across diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

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