

“It was obscene in the real world”: The Function of Jordan Belfort’s Impolite Language in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013)

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Abstract

The present contribution analyses language as performed in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) from a pragmatic perspective. More specifically, by focusing on the utterances spoken by Jordan Belfort, the protagonist of the movie, this study aims to demonstrate how impoliteness qualifies as an intrinsic feature of his speeches from a certain point in his story, as he constantly performs it regardless of the context in which he operates. This article is structured into two sections: the former outlines the methodology; the latter delves into Belfort’s language as displayed during his early days as a connector and when he becomes the Wolf of Wall Street, an accomplished stockbroker.

Parole chiave

Pragmatics, Im/politeness, *The Wolf of Wall Street*

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Scholars and journalists have defined Martin Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) as the most expletive-filled movie in history¹, featuring a total of 715 instances of swearing². The present contribution aims to investigate the pragmatic function of explicit language employed by Jordan Belfort, the protagonist of the black comedy.

By offering a qualitative analysis of selected excerpts, this study intends to demonstrate that Belfort does not initially use profanities as he starts working in the stock market; instead, his language becomes increasingly impolite as he advances in his career. Furthermore, impoliteness emerges as an inherent feature of the main character’s speeches, since he consistently performs it regardless of the context. This tendency is particularly pronounced in workspace conversations, where he addresses both co-workers and customers without attempting to either save or preserve the others’ face; conversely, he performs straightforward, invasive and rude language in order to pursue his goal: making money.

The article is structured as follows: Section 1 illustrates the methodology that is rooted in the Goffmanian concept of “face” and draws from Politeness Theory as conceived by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson as well as Jonathan Culpeper’s Impoliteness Theory; Section 2 analyses selected excerpts in light of the models mentioned above. In the final remarks, I emphasise the peculiar – not to say paradoxical – function of impoliteness in Belfort’s interactions with his employees: instead of creating a gap between him and his staff, it seems to narrow the distances between them, being perceived as the quintessence of their unique relationship.

1. Methodology

The methodological framework underpinning this study is grounded in the concept of “face”, theorised by Erving Goffman in 1967 as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he had taken during a particular contact [...] an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an

¹ See Dan Thorne, *How The Wolf of Wall Street broke movie swearing record*, 16 January 2014, <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2014/1/how-the-wolf-of-wall-street-broke-movie-swearing-record-54478> (last consulted: July 2024); Nizar Ibnu, *Strategies and Pragmatic Equivalence of the Word Fuck Translation in The Wolf of Wall Street Movie*, «Journal of English Language and Language Teaching», 5, 2, 2021, p. 65.

² The categorisation as well as the function of swearwords in *The Wolf of Wall Street* have been the object of numerous studies. On this matters, see, among others, Dewi Putri Rahmayani and Fitrawati, *Analysis Types and Functions of Taboo Words in “The Wolf of Wall Street” Movie*, «E-Journal of English Language & Literature», 7, 3, 2018, pp. 341-343; I Gusti Ngurah Mahadiputra, *The Form and Use of Swearing Words in the Movie the Wolf of the Wall Street*, «Jurnal Humanis Fakultas Ilmu Budaya Unud», 22, 2, 2018, pp. 419-422; Putu Aristya Dewi and Suastra I Made, *The Analysis of American Slang in Movie Script “The Wolf of Wall Street”*, «Jurnal Humanis, Fakultas Ilmu Budaya Unud», 22, 1, 2018, pp. 3-4; Mariam D. Saffah, *Swearing in The Wolf of Wall Street: A Pragmatic Study*, «Educational and Linguistics Research», 6, 2, 2020, pp. 131-136; Leonardo Alexander Salim and Eko Budi Setiawan, *The Swear Words Analysis in the Movie Entitled The Wolf of Wall Street*, «Humaniora Scientia: Online Journal on Linguistics, Literature, and Translation», 4, 1, 2020, pp. 13-19; M. Nurcholish, Muhammad Taufik and Andi Syurganda, *Analysis of Taboo Language Used in The Wolf of Wall Street Movie*, «Ashlition Journal», 1, 2, 2023, pp. 27-32.

image that others may share”³. Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson later expanded upon Goffman’s concept in their seminal book, *Politeness: some universals in language usage*, where they differentiated between “negative face,” that is “the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction”; and “positive face,” namely “the positive consistent self-image of ‘personality’ (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by the interactants”⁴. Given that language can affect the interactants’ positive or negative face, they introduced the concept of Face-Threatening Act (hereafter FTA), along with numerous strategies based on politeness aimed at mitigating or avoiding the loss of face:

Do the FTA;

Don’t do the FTA;

On Record: an actor goes on record in doing an act A if it is clear to participants what communicative intention led the actor to do A;

Off Record: if an actor goes off record in doing A, then there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent;

Positive Politeness: in positive politeness the sphere of redress is widened to the appreciation of alter’s wants in general or to the expression of similarity between ego’s and alter’s wants;

Negative Politeness: all forms useful in general for social ‘distancing’.⁵

In the 1990s, Jonathan Culpeper postulated a framework with an orientation opposite to that theorised by Brown and Levinson⁶. Rather than supporting face, his Impoliteness Theory intends to attack it through the following strategies:

Bald on record impoliteness: the FTA is performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way incircumstances where face is not irrelevant or minimized.

Positive impoliteness: the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee’s positive face wants [...]

Negative impoliteness: the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee’s negative face wants [...]

Off record impoliteness: the FTA is performed by means of an implicature but in such a way that one attributable intention clearly outweighs any others.

Withhold politeness: the absence of politeness work where it would be expected.⁷

³ Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual. Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1967, p. 5.

⁴ Penelope Brown, Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: some universals in language usage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 61.

⁵ See *ivi*, p. 69.

⁶ Jonathan Culpeper, *Towards an anatomy of impoliteness*, «Journal of Pragmatics», 25, 1996, p. 356.

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 352.

The following section will apply both Politeness and Impoliteness Theory to Belfort’s utterances to demonstrate that, in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, his influence in the stock world correlates with an increase in the impoliteness of his speeches.

2. Analysis

2.1 *Young and Polite*

Belfort’s initial forays into the stock market show no signs of harsh language. Conversely, it can be inferred that he is subject to several offences, as in the following dialogue:

JERRY FOGEL: You are lower than pond scum. You got a problem with that... Jordan?		[BR] ⁸
JORDAN BELFORT: No, no problem at all.		[P6]
JERRY FOGEL: Good, because that is what you are: pond scum.		[BR]

Table 1: *The Wolf of Wall Street* (5:17-5:29)⁹

The exchange illustrates the derogatory welcome received on his first day on Wall Street while seeking employment as a connector at L.F. Rothschild, a prominent stock company, with Fogel, who “[offends] the opponent’s pride”¹⁰, performing bald on record impoliteness (“You are lower than pond scum”). To such a demeaning remark, Belfort responds with a kind “No, no problem at all”, thereby avoiding disagreement and conflict; his complaisance provides Fogel with the opportunity to reiterate the message, performing again bald on record impoliteness to underscore the assertion that Belfort is “pond scum”. Nonetheless, the protagonist is exposed to several additional FTAs that same day.

The audience learns that the young boy attempted to sell stocks to the board conducting his job interview. His confidence not only secured his position but also piqued the curiosity of his boss, Mark Hanna – played by Matthew McConaughey. Impressed by the new employee’s audacity and resolve, Hanna invites him to lunch¹¹. During this encounter, Jordan is resolute to exhibit the utmost kindness and gratitude towards the interlocutor, who, in turn, threatens his face:

⁸ The List of Abbreviations is provided in the final part of the paper, following the References.

⁹ The transcriptions of the dialogues and the timing are drawn by the official film broadcast by Netflix.

¹⁰ M. Nurcholish, Muhammad Taufik and Andi Syurganda, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹¹ MARK HANNA: “[...] Did you really pitch a stock in your job interview?” / JORDAN BELFORT: “I had to do something to stand out. Right, sir?” / MARK HANNA: “I *fucking* love that. Lunch. Today.” / JORDAN BELFORT: Yeah!” (*The Wolf of Wall Street*; 6:15-6:24; emphasis added). As observed by Salim and Setiawan, Hanna recurs to impoliteness – by using the swearword “ *fucking* ” – to express excitement and “happiness about something unexpected” (Leonardo Alexander Salim and Eko Budi Setiawan, *op. cit.*, p. 17).

JORDAN BELFORT: I gotta say I'm incredibly excited to be a part of your firm. I mean, the clients you have are absolutely-	[P2]
MARK HANNA: Fuck the clients! Your only responsibility is to put the meat on the table. [...]	[BR]
Name of the game: move the money from the client's pocket into your pocket. JORDAN BELFORT: Right. But if you can make the clients money at the same time, it's advantageous for everyone, correct?	[P5]
MARK HANNA: No. [...] he [the client] thinks he's getting <i>shit</i> rich, which he is on paper, but you and me, the brokers, we're taking home cold hard cash: the commission, <i>motherfucker!</i>	[PI7]
JORDAN BELFORT: Right. That's incredible, sir. I can't tell you how excited I am.	[P2]

Table 2: *The Wolf of Wall Street* (8:49-9:00; 9:11-9:20; 10:29-10:46; emphasis added)

Belfort seizes the opportunity to express his enthusiasm and gratitude for joining the company. He performs positive politeness by uttering, "I gotta say I'm incredibly excited to be a part of your firm"; furthermore, he tries to comment about the clients he will be assisting, but Mark Hanna abruptly interrupts him with a bald-on record statement, "Fuck the clients!", which surprises the young broker and is followed by an analogously straightforward sentence: "Your only responsibility is to put the meat on the table". Belfort does not intend to contradict his boss – in fact, he answers "right" –; nonetheless, he endeavours to underline his commitment towards the clients by asking, "But if you can make the clients money at the same time, it's advantageous for everyone, correct?" In so doing, he seeks agreement by performing a P5 strategy. However, Mark Hanna does not share his vision: as a matter of fact, the response he provides to the question is "No". Determined to teach the young boy the fundamentals of the brokers' world, Hanna frequently employs swearwords to emphasise his points, as evident in the sentence: "he thinks he's getting *shit* rich, which he is on paper, but you and me, the brokers, we're taking home cold hard cash: the commission, *motherfucker!*" Belfort overlooks Hanna's use of profanity, and instead reinforces his enthusiasm by recurring to positive politeness by saying, "That's incredible, sir. I can't tell you how excited I am". Shortly afterwards, the young broker is exposed to both positive and negative impoliteness while learning the keys to success in the stock market:

MARK HANNA: It's two keys to success in the broker business. First of all: you gotta stay relaxed.	
JORDAN BELFORT: Yeah.	
MARK HANNA: You jerk off?	[NI3]
JORDAN BELFORT: D-Do I jerk off? Yeah, yeah, I jerk off.	
MARK HANNA: How many times a week?	[NI3]
JORDAN BELFORT:	

Like... 3, 4 times... maybe 5.	
MARK HANNA:	
Pump those numbers. Those are icky numbers in this racket.	[NI2]
I, myself, I jerk off at least twice a day. [...]	[PI8]
Second key to success in this racket is this little baby right here called cocaine.	[PI9]

Table 3: *The Wolf of Wall Street* (10:48-11:17; 12:14-12:20)

According to Hanna, brokers who aspire to succeed “gotta stay relaxed”. To bolster his peculiar thesis, he blatantly invades Belfort’s privacy, performing negative impoliteness, by asking: “You jerk off?” The young man is shocked, considering they have known each other for only a few hours; notwithstanding, he provides an answer that fails to satisfy his boss, who once again recurs to negative impoliteness by ridiculing him with the sentence, “Those are icky numbers in this racket”. He then switches to positive impoliteness, deploying a PI8 output strategy by sharing details about his own ‘private routine’ (“I, myself, I jerk off at least twice a day”), making the hearer feel uncomfortable. Finally, he reinforces this approach with positive impoliteness by broaching taboo topics when introducing cocaine, which he presents as the second key to success in the broker world.

2.2 Talking like the Wolf of Wall Street

Thus far, Belfort has refrained from performing impoliteness even when repeatedly subjected to it. However, in due course, he will start his own firm, Stratton Oakmont, and emulate his former boss, Mark Hanna, viewing his clients merely as instruments for profit¹² and relentlessly using impolite language. Concerning this latter point, it is noteworthy that the protagonist utilises the greatest number of expletives throughout the movie to emphasise his statements¹³. The speech regarding the founding of his company serves as a prime illustration of this talent:

JORDAN BELFORT: Gentlemen, welcome to Stratton Oakmont! You *schmooks* will now be talking to the wealthiest 1% of Americans. I’m talking about whales: Moby *fuckin*g Dicks! With this script, which is now your new harpoon, I’m gonna teach each and every one of you to be Captain *fuckin*g Ahab, you get it?
 GUY 1: Uh?
 GUY 2: Captain who?
 JORDAN BELFORT: Captain Ahab, from the *fuckin*g... from the book, *motherfuck*er, from the book!
 (*The Wolf of Wall Street*, 31:44-32:16; emphasis added)

¹² Such attitude can be detected from the first deal he closes at Stratton Oakmont: after persuading the interlocutor, Kevin, to invest ten thousand dollars in penny stocks, he hangs up the phone and celebrates the success by crying out “Fuck that motherfuck!” (35:46-35:47): a bald on record utterance that synthesises his unconcerned and unscrupulous disposition towards the clients.

¹³ On the protagonist’s use of expletives, see Barli Bram, Puguh Kristanto Putra, *Swear Words Used by Jordan Belfort in The Wolf of Wall Street Movie*, «SKASE Journal of Theoretical Linguistics», 16, 2, 2019, pp. 134-138; Nizar Ibnu, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70.

The tendency to use swearwords as a “slot-filler whose function is that of an intensifier”¹⁴ will define his forthcoming speeches, particularly those delivered in his professional environment on special occasions, such as the launch of Steve Madden’s stocks on the market:

JORDAN BELFORT:	
We have him here, in our office! We should thank our lucky stars this man is here. We should be on our hands and knees, right now, getting ready to suck this guy off like this, okay? I want to suck you off, Steve!	[NI5] [NI3] [NI3]
STEVE MADDEN:	
It’s okay...	
JORDAN BELFORT:	
Everyone is going to suck you off! This is our golden ticket to the <i> fucking </i> Chocolate Factory, right here! And I wanna meet Willy <i> fucking </i> Wonka, okay? I wanna be with the <i> fucking </i> Oompa Loompa like this! Get off this fucking stage, get out of here! All right. I want you to focus for the next seconds. See those black boxes? They’re called telephones. I’m a let you know a little secret about these telephones: they are not gonna dial themselves, okay? Without you, they are just worthless hunks of plastic, like a loaded M16 without a trained marine to pull the trigger. And in the case of telephones, it’s up to each and every one of you, my highly-trained Strattonites, my <i> killers... my killers </i> will not take “no” for an answer; my <i> fucking warriors </i> will not hang up the phone until their client either buys or fucking dies!	[NI3] [BR] [PI9] [BR]
[...]	
And I want you to go out there and I want you to ram Steve Madden’s stocks down to your clients’ throats until they fucking choke on it, ‘till they choke on it and they buy a hundred thousand shares: that’s what I want you to do! You’ll be ferocious, you’ll be relentless, you’ll be telephone <i> fucking </i> terrorists!	[BR] [PI9]

Table 4: *The Wolf of Wall Street* (1:21:03-1:22:28; 1:24:45-1:25:08; emphasis added)

Steve Madden was “the name in women’s shoes at the moment”¹⁵, with several Wall Street brokers vying to list his brand on the stock exchange. Due to a unique bond shared between the stylist and Donny Hazoff, the vice-president of Stratton Oakmont, Belfort secures the representation of the designer’s company. Such an agreement would undoubtedly enhance the reputation as well as the portfolio of the firm. Thus, it is crucial for the speaker to remark on the importance of having Madden as a client, and he does so by performing negative impoliteness, claiming the group’s indebtedness towards the stylist with the utterance “We should thank our lucky stars this man is here”. Secondly, he opts for more explicit language and performs an NI3 strategy, “invading one’s space” – literally, in this case – as he exclaims: “getting ready to suck this guy off like this, okay? I want to suck you off, Steve! [...] Everyone is going to suck you off!”, corroborating his words with gestures that unmistakably mimic the sexual practice. Such behaviour is inappropriate and disrespectful for several reasons – owing to the physical context and the occasion for which people have gathered, for instance, as well as the fact that Belfort had known Madden for a matter of minutes. Consequently, the guest feels

¹⁴ Mariam D. Saffah, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

¹⁵ *The Wolf of Wall Street* (52:38-52:39).

uncomfortable and, when the speaker deploys bald on record impoliteness by uttering “[g]et off this fucking stage”, he genuinely feels relieved – rather than offended.

Besides being obscene, Belfort’s language is also violent, particularly in the latter part of the speech. Indeed, he recurs to the semantic field of warfare to convey his thoughts, using words like “killers”, “warriors” or “terrorists”¹⁶. Furthermore, violent imagery abounds when he describes the transactions between sellers and clients: from an initial “[...] until their client either buys or *fucking* dies!”, he escalates to commanding his brokers “to ram Steve Madden’s stocks down to your clients’ throats until they *fucking* choke on it, ‘till they choke on it”. Lastly, he compares the broker’s telephones to a loaded M16 waiting for a highly-trained marine to shoot: this utterance indicates that he meticulously crafts his impolite language to deliver a specific message to his audience and elicit a specific reaction in return.

Nevertheless, the most notable aspect of Belfort’s impoliteness is neither the violence embedded in the words nor the images they evoke in the hearers’ mind, but it is the peculiar function it serves: instead of creating distance between the Wolf of Wall Street and his staff, generating discomfort, fear or performance anxiety, impoliteness seems to foster a sense of closeness among people, to “[infuse] intimacy, solidarity and jocularity”¹⁷, making the “Strattonites” – as his employees are referred to – feel united¹⁸.

The examples mentioned above demonstrate that Belfort’s impoliteness is not perceived as a threat to one’s face at Stratton Oakmont; conversely, it is a unique trait these people share to strengthen bonds and build mutual trust.

¹⁶ This last term is indeed a peculiar lexical choice if we consider that this scene is happening in a skyscraper set in New York: thus, it might recall 9/11 or similarly tragic events that may hurt people’s sensitivity – that is why I labelled it as PI9 strategy, that is, “use taboo words”.

¹⁷ Mariam D. Saffah, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

¹⁸ Such traits emerge from Kimmy’s story, that Belfort shares in his resignation speech: JORDAN BELFORT: “[...] Kimmy was one of the first brokers here, one of the original twenty. And most of you met Kimmy, the beautiful, sophisticated woman that she is today: a woman that wears a three thousand Armani suit and drives a brand-new Mercedes Benz; a woman who spends her winters in the Bahamas and her summers in the Hamptons, but that’s not the Kimmy that I met. **The Kimmy that I met didn’t have two nickels to rub together; she was a single mom on the balls of her ass with an eight-year-old son, okay? She was three months behind on her rent and when she came to me and asked me for a job, she asked for a 5 thousand dollars advance just... just so she could pay her son’s tuition.** What did I do, Kimmy? Go on, tell them.” / KIMMY: “You wrote me a check for 25 thousand dollars [...] I *fucking* love you Jordan!” / JORDAN BELFORT: “I *fucking* love you!” / KIMMY: “I *fucking* love you! I love you!” / JORDAN BELFORT: “I *fucking* love you too! I *fucking* love you too!” (*The Wolf of Wall Street*, 2:11:55-2:13:10; 2:13:32-2:13:35; emphasis added). Before leaving the company due to financial problems, the CEO wishes to express his gratitude to his employees for their achievements over the past five years. He feels the trust he placed in his staff has been rewarded and, to support such a point, he publicly invades Kimmy’s privacy (NI3) by disclosing some sensitive details to a large audience (“[...] she was a single mom on the balls of her ass with an eight-year-old son, okay? She was three months behind on her rent”). Although this behaviour may potentially offend people for revealing private information, Kimmy’s reaction shows no sign of offence: instead, she provides additional information about her financial situation (“You wrote me a check for 25 thousand dollars”). Furthermore, she embraces impoliteness, repeatedly using the intensifier “fucking” to express her affection towards the boss, who reciprocates.

3. Conclusive Remarks

To conclude, the present study has investigated im/politeness as employed by Jordan Belfort in two salient phases of his life and career: his entry into the stock world and his rise as an expert in this domain. The results of the qualitative analysis demonstrate that, when he was a young connector, Belfort was exposed to several impoliteness strategies – such as belittling or invading privacy – to which he always responded politely, determined to express gratitude. On the other hand, upon becoming a boss, his language is rude, inappropriate and disrespectful in various ways; notwithstanding, it proves extraordinarily effective in building cohesion within his team. Indeed, by deploying offensive and vulgar language, Belfort creates a nuanced code rooted in impoliteness that is comprehensible solely to a selected group: the Strattonites, his community. From a cognitive perspective, this distinctive feature highlights the inherent relativity of language, as Belfort's words undergo a transformation, shedding their primary connotation to acquire another one linked to a specific strategy: if this latter is well performed, the recipients will adeptly interpret the linguistic sign, translating it within the unique communicative system they share.

The peculiar function of Belfort's impoliteness gains additional significance when considering that the film is based on true events and adapts the biography of the young billionaire that was published in 2007¹⁹. However, in the memoir, the principal character has none of the language traits that are dominant in the film. This particular connotation is thus the result of a deliberate choice by the director and the author of the screenplay, a choice whose purpose becomes increasingly evident as the story unfolds.

Scorsese is not aiming at a representation of Wall Street as it is commonly portrayed or imagined, a world of unscrupulous predators. His purpose is more complex and radical, as he intends to depict Wall Street as a barbaric world in which the commonly accepted rules of civilisation do not hold²⁰; an "irreverent, wickedly, debauched tale of greed and self-destruction"²¹; a world of clans in the form of financial consultants, constantly at war with each other to acquire new territories, resources to be seized from the enemy by any means and at whatever price²². A clan with a fixed hierarchy, with its own laws and slang, that identifies its unique membership, to the exclusion of everyone else, and with a sovereign head who has the right of life and death over his subjects. A world of excesses, of which a sort of erotic and sensorial bulimia is the dominant feature. A world of the past which has resurfaced in modern times, becoming a model that imposes its rules and values.

¹⁹ Jordan Belfort, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, New York, Bantam Dell, 2007.

²⁰ See D. Stephen Long, "The Wolf of Wall Street and Economic Nihilism", in Christopher B. Barnett and Elliston Clark J. (eds), *Scorsese and Religion*, Leiden; Boston, Brill, 2019, p. 270.

²¹ Jillian S. McCafferty, *Formalism Exemplified in The Wolf of Wall Street*, «Cinesthesia», 4, 2, 2015, p. 7.

²² See Valerio Valentini, *The Wolf of Wall Street: l'estasi cinematografica e il fascino perverso della ricchezza*, 10 February 2014, <https://quattrocentoquattro.wordpress.com/2014/02/10/the-wolf-of-wall-street-lestasi-cinematografica-e-il-fascino-perverso-della-ricchezza/> (last consulted: July 2024).

List of Abbreviations

BR	Bald on Record
FTA	Face-Threatening Act
NI2	Condescend, scorn, ridicule
NI3	Invalidate the other's space
NI5	Put the other's indebtedness on record
P2	Exaggerate
P5	Seek Agreement
P6	Avoid disagreement
PI7	Seek disagreement
PI8	Make the other feel uncomfortable
PI9	Use taboo words