

Investigating Impoliteness Strategies in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*

Nariman Hamdoun Younis¹, Ashraf Abdulwahid Dhannoon²

^{1,2}Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Mosul, Iraq

*Corresponding Author's Email: nariman.h.younis@uomosul.edu.iq

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Abstract

Background: Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947) is considered a landmark of modern American drama that discusses the themes of morality, family conflict, and moral responsibility, in addition to the consequences of immoral choices. **Aims:** This study discusses the use of the strategies of impoliteness in this play. The heated exchanges that employ impolite strategies aren't just dramatic additions, but they are essential to understanding the story's conflicts and the characters' inner worlds. The study aims at revealing the ways wherein is intentionally used to amplify the prevalent conflict among the involved characters. It also presents the way in which each character is given a specific quality in order to expose their roles throughout the events of the play. **Methods:** Culpeper's model of impoliteness (1996) has been adopted to identify the impolite speeches employed by the characters. **Result:** Three hundred and three impolite speeches have been identified. These speeches are frequently used among the Keller's family. Thematic analysis has been followed to analyze the data. The findings prove that bald-on-record impoliteness is the most suitable strategy, which accounts for 81.52% of the selected data and emphasizes the raw and the direct nature of the characters' conflicts. **Implication:** These linguistic strategies shed light on the prominent themes of the play, in addition to showing the role of drama in expressing these relationships among the characters. Furthermore, the study provides a deep insight into how language can be used as an active tool for both the conflict and resolution in drama.

Keywords: impoliteness strategies, Culpeper's model of impoliteness, *All My Sons*, conflict

Introduction

Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* is set after the events of the Second World War and discusses the relationships by exposing the cracks in their seemingly perfect lives as secrets and tensions come to light. While much has been written about the play's critique of the American Dream and its moral dilemmas, there has been less focus on how characters use language to navigate their relationships, precisely, how they employ impoliteness as a tool in their interactions. In simple terms, impoliteness is when language is used intentionally to hurt, challenge, or assert dominance in a conversation (Culpeper, 2011). In *All My Sons*, the characters often clash verbally, and the heated expressions used by the characters are not just dramatic flourishes, but they're key to understanding the story's conflicts and the characters' inner worlds (Miller, 1947). Whether it's Joe Keller's defensiveness, Chris's idealism, or Kate's desperation, their words reveal power struggles, repressed emotions, and the tenuous connections among them. Examining how characters use impoliteness through sarcasm, insults, or outright challenges, this research aims to uncover how Miller crafts tension, exposes moral flaws, and underscores the vulnerability of human connections.

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Many linguists believe that impoliteness should be understood as a phenomenon in its own right, not merely through the lens of politeness theory. In contrast, Leech (2014) suggests that the most effective way to develop a theory of impoliteness is by building it on politeness theory, since they are closely related and fundamentally opposite. Culpeper (1996) reframed Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory to analyze antagonistic speech, arguing that impoliteness exploits the same mechanisms as politeness but with the opposing goal of damaging 'face' rather than preserving it. Culpeper identified five distinct impoliteness strategies: (1) bald, on-record impoliteness, (2) positive impoliteness, (3) negative impoliteness, (4) sarcasm or mock politeness, and (5) withholding politeness. Brown and Levinson (1978) explained that bald, on-record impoliteness is the most straightforward and explicit approach. Positive impoliteness undermines the speaker's positive face, while negative impoliteness targets the hearer's negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Culpeper (1996) further described sarcasm or mock politeness as the use of insincere politeness strategies and withholding politeness as the deliberate absence of expected polite behavior in specific contexts (Al-Neama & Hussein, 2024a).

Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness framework stands out for its focus on how intentional impoliteness creates conflict during social interactions. Building upon Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, Culpeper challenges their belief that impoliteness plays a minor role in daily conversations (Al-Neama & Hussein, 2024b). He argues that fully understanding politeness requires an in-depth analysis of impoliteness, necessitating a more robust analytical approach (Mohammed & Abbas, 2015).

Culpeper (1996) proposed two significant definitions of impoliteness. His initial definition broadly characterized impoliteness as strategies designed to attack an individual's face, resulting in social discord and disharmony (Bousfield & Locher, 2008). This definition was later refined by Culpeper (1996), who proposed that impoliteness occurs if "a speaker consciously inflicts a face-attack, the hearer consciously perceives or interprets behavior as a face-attack or the behavior is interpreted as a face-attack or both factors are present". This redefinition emphasizes the relevance of intentionality with respect to being rude. In contrast, Huang (2012) argues that when intention and the recognition of intention are involved, the behavior aligns more closely with rudeness rather than impoliteness.

The objectives of this research are twofold: first, to identify and categorize the types of impoliteness strategies used by Arthur Miller in his play *All My Sons*, and second, to understand the reasons behind the use of these strategies. The research seeks to answer two main questions

1. What types of impoliteness strategies are employed by Miller in *All My Sons*?
2. What are the reasons behind using these impoliteness strategies in the mentioned play?

In the present research, the model that has been adopted is Culpeper's (1996) model of impoliteness, which is an insightful framework to explore how language can intentionally disrupt social harmony in a dramatic context. Using this model provides a clear, systematic way to analyze the linguistic impoliteness used by the characters to create tension, conflict, inner guilt, and the characters' development throughout the play.

Literature Review

Main Themes in Arthur Miller's All My Sons

Going deeply and investigating the main themes in *All My Sons* will give richer insight and

observation in the analysis of the selected data. Moral responsibility and accountability, guilt and denial, family and loyalty, social judgment and isolation, truth and justice, the American dream, and war and its aftermath are the main themes in *All My Sons*.

The theme of moral responsibility and accountability highlights the significance of placing one's duty to society and country above personal obligations to family. The play shows the terrible consequences of giving one's family wealth and a luxury lifestyle top priority at the expense of society's welfare. Ultimately, Joe Keller's quest for the American Dream, based on the values of the early Puritan settlers who wanted to establish a New Jerusalem and construct an economic civilization in the wild American wilderness, results in tragedy.

The theme of guilt and denial features prominently in *All My Sons*, in particular, through Joe Keller's moral conflict over the defective airplane parts he knowingly shipped during World War II, which led to the deaths of 21 pilots during World War II. This personal burden of guilt is a succinct distillation of the implications of placing self-interest before ethical obligation. As Miller illustrates, guilt is not easily contained; it spills into the family dynamic, affecting Kate's denial and Chris's disillusionment with his father's actions. This theme reflects Miller's broader critique of post-war American individualism. As Bigsby (2005) notes, Miller's works often focus on the individual's responsibility within a wider social context.

Family loyalty is also one of the main themes in the play. Joe Keller's conviction that he must do whatever it takes to ensure the well-being of his family is absolute, creating the play's central tension. He has tried to justify himself by the plea of loyalty to his family, but this loyalty, which conflicts with the ethics of society, ultimately proves to be abortive at its core. Chris Keller's disillusionment, particularly in Act III, highlights the tragic irony of his father's choices. As Welland (1983) highlights, Miller uses familial relationships to explore broader moral dilemmas.

The illusion of the American Dream is depicted in Joe Keller, who is the embodiment of the American Dream, a self-made man who achieves financial success for his family. However, Miller deconstructs this ideal and points out its moral costs. The dream, in Joe's case, is corrupted by unethical decisions that ultimately tear the family apart. Miller criticizes the belief that prosperity and success justify immoral behavior, aligning with Marxist critiques of capitalist ideologies, as explored by Abbotson (1999).

Method

Source of data

This study conducts a detailed analysis of the conversations among the characters in Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons*. Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* was chosen for this study because it provides a rich context for analyzing pragmatic speech acts, particularly impoliteness. The play's emotional complexity, revolving around themes of guilt, responsibility, and family conflict, offers numerous instances where speech acts such as requests, apologies, and refusals are pivotal in character interactions. These dialogues reveal underlying social dynamics and tensions, making it an ideal text to explore how language is used to navigate conflict and power.

Data collection and analysis

The research focuses on 303 impolite utterances, which are categorized using Culpeper's (1996) typology of impoliteness strategies, such as bald-on-record, sarcasm, and others. The primary goal is to examine the role of these impolite exchanges within the context of character

dynamics and thematic conflict in the play. The analysis follows a clear, step-by-step approach, based on Culpeper’s (2011) framework, particularly as outlined in his book *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence*.

The first step in the analysis involves identifying and sorting instances of impoliteness within the dialogues. Each utterance is classified according to Culpeper’s (1996) typology, providing a clear picture of the various ways characters express rudeness toward one another. This classification allows the study to map out the patterns of impoliteness that occur throughout the play. The second step delves into understanding the underlying reasons behind these impolite exchanges. This phase examines the contexts in which these interactions occur, considering the characters’ relationships, emotional states, and personal histories that drive their impolite behavior. By understanding these motivating factors, the study connects the language used to the psychological and relational dynamics of the characters. The third step explores the significance of impoliteness within the narrative. This part of the analysis investigates why these impolite interactions are crucial to the development of the plot and how they impact the characters’ relationships. It also reveals the broader themes of the play, such as guilt, responsibility, and family conflict, by examining the role of impoliteness in expressing these key issues.

Finally, the study synthesizes the findings, pulling together insights gained from the previous steps to summarize how impoliteness contributes to the overall meaning of *All My Sons*. This step highlights how impolite exchanges reflect the inner workings of the characters and their social environment, providing a deeper understanding of the play’s thematic core. Through these steps, the research offers a comprehensive analysis of impoliteness and its role in shaping the narrative and character development in *All My Sons*.

Results and Discussion

A. Results and Analysis

This section analyzes the impoliteness strategies in Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons*. Table 1 and Figure 1 illustrate the types of these strategies and their frequencies, shown in percentages.

Table 1: Impoliteness Strategies Used in the Data from *All My Sons*

Types of Impoliteness Strategies		No.	%
1	Bald on Record Impoliteness Strategy	Using Direct, Clear, and Unambiguous Statements	247 81.52%
2	Positive Impoliteness Strategy	Disassociating from the Others	5 1.68%
		Calling the Other Names	2 0.66%
		Utilizing Taboo Words	1 0.33%
		Using Inappropriate Identity Markers	3 0.99%
3	Negative Impoliteness Strategy	Condescending, Scorning, or Ridiculing	7 2.31%
		Associating the Other with a Negative Aspect Explicitly	4 1.65%
		Invading the Other’s Space	8 2.64%
4	Sarcasm or Mock Impoliteness Strategy	Employing Insincere Politeness	18 5.94%
		Being Silent	2 0.66%
5	Withhold Politeness Strategy	Failing to Thank	6 1.98%
		Total	303

As illustrated in the above table, all types of impoliteness strategies are employed by Miller's characters in *All My Sons*, emphasizing the family conflict, the fragile connections among family members, and the characters' inner conflicts. The most dominant type of impoliteness strategy used by Miller's characters is Bald on Record, as the majority of the speeches are of this type, which constitutes 81.52% of the total number of impoliteness strategies used in the drama. Negative Impoliteness counts as the next highest rate of impolite speech usage, which constitutes 2.31% (Condescending, Scorning, or Ridiculing), 1.65% for (Associating the Other with a Negative Aspect Explicitly), and 2.64% for (Invading the Other's Space). Moreover, Sarcasm or Mock Impoliteness constitutes 5.94% of the data. Then, Positive Impoliteness constitutes 1.68% for (Disassociating from the Others), 0.66% for (Calling the Other Names), 0.33% for (Utilizing Taboo Words), and 0.99% for (Using Inappropriate Identity Markers). Finally, the least employed type of impoliteness strategy by Miller's characters is Withhold Politeness and constitutes 0.66% for (Being Silent), and 1.98% for (Failing to thank). Overall, Bald on Record occupies the highest rate with 81.52%, followed by Negative Impoliteness 6.27%, Sarcasm or Mock Impoliteness 5.98%, Positive Impoliteness 3.63%, and finally Withhold Politeness 2.64%.

B. Discussion

Throughout the comprehensive thematic analysis of impolite language that has been used by Miller through the characters in *All My Sons*, and by thoroughly investigating the characters' inner worlds, we can better understand how their impoliteness strategies reflect their struggles, fears, and desires. This analysis allows one to see the characters not just as elements for conflict, but as deeply human individuals struggling with pain, guilt, and the consequences of their choices. The Keller family is a web of love, loyalty, and unresolved pain. Their use of direct, harsh language (Bald on Record impoliteness) as Chris's outbursts "You killed them, you murdered them!", Mother's to accept Larry's death "Because if he's not coming back, then I'll kill myself!", and Keller's dismissive remarks "What the hell is the matter with you, Kate?" reveal the raw emotions simmering beneath the surface. These moments of frankness are not only about anger but they are calling for mutual understanding, acknowledgment and connection. The Keller family lies in a crisis of pain. Chris tries to find responsibility; Mother wants denial and The Father desires freedom. Both Chris and The Mother address each other using tough language to express their anger over the guilt. As a result of this, they seem desperate that they could not find rest. This is why they start to put the blame on Keller. Moreover, the same characters also use the same impolite expressions to hide themselves behind the expressions they use to protect themselves from the bitter reality that they encounter. Their inability to speak frankly not only heightens their isolation and agony, but it also reveals the way in which their perfect connections are fragile.

The play provides a clear insight on the theme of guilt and its consequences. The impoliteness strategy employed by the characters reflects their inability to experience or evade the moral dimensions of their behaviours. Chris's direct accusations such as "You killed twenty-one men!" goes against his father's responsibility in addition to revealing his guilt. This is why Chris's cruel words are considered a way to separate himself from his father's guilt and to confirm his morality. Moreover, Chris's accusations add a touch of betrayal and fear implicitly by showing his anger that he might be involved in the sins committed by his father. On the other hand, Keller's reaction in the following line, "What the hell kinda talk is that?" aims to avoid the blame and to

protect himself and his family. His cruelty protects him from the harsh truth, in which he is the only one who is responsible for causing the unbearable pain. In spite of this, Keller's guilt is highly obvious in his outlet, which makes it clear that he is divided between his desire to survive and his realization concerning his misdeeds. Additionally, Mother's resistance to admit Larry's death when she says "He's not dead, so there's no argument!" comes from her grief and guilt in the sense that if Larry is dead, it means that Keller's guilt is unforgivable in causing the destruction of the family's integrity. Mother's harsh words not only maintain the illusion of normality but also betray her fear of dealing with the plain truth and the moral decline that would follow. The characters' impoliteness reveals their struggle to live with the weight of the past. Chris seeks justice, Keller desires absolution, and Mother wants denial. Their cruel words reflect their inner struggles, their anxiety about losing what they have acquired and the complexity in corresponding their actions with their moral values.

Concerning the social judgment and tension, the Keller family endeavors not only with their inner conflict but also with the apparent judgment of their society. Their impoliteness with other members outside their family exposes their isolation and the stress of maintaining their appearances. An example of their social judgment is Sue's speech when she employs a dramatic technique in an ironic tone. This is clearly expressed in the following "You're surprised at me!". Sue's speech originates from her own instability as well as social fear. She feels agitated by the Kellers due to their past actions that have cast a shadow over her husband's profession. Her cruel words not only prove her moral responsibility but also confirm her fear of being affected by the involvement, besides George's frank inquiries when he says, "Why isn't your name on the business?". This inquiry plays a crucial role in the play because it seeks justice and expresses his pain. His father was sent to jail because of Keller's actions. This is why his harsh words compel the Kellers to face the bitter truth. Under his anger, there lies a deep sense of betrayal and a strong desire to vent and be away from the curse caused by the guilt. The collective judgment of the society amplifies the Kellers' guilt and isolation, which mirrors their psychology and behaviors. It is important to notice that Sue and George's cruel words not only express a wide social condemnation of Keller's actions but also show their struggles with guilt, pain and resentment. In a nutshell, the play alludes that social judgment can deteriorate personal guilt and lead to undesirable consequences.

Sarcasm and mock politeness strategies are often used as defense mechanisms, as defined by Freud, as unconscious resources used by the ego to reduce conflict between the Id and superego, are reflections of how an individual deals with conflict and stress (Mehta, 2021). According to this, characters like Jim and Sue use humor to reduce their inner conflict concerning their instabilities and frustrations. This is clear in Jim's mocking remarks when he says, "If your son wants to play golf, tell him I'm ready. Or if he'd like to take a trip around the world for about thirty years." and Sue's mock politeness as Miller's characterizes her by saying, "She sounds like she's in terrible pain. Unless her mouth is full of candy.". These are ample examples of sarcasm and mock politeness, which act as coping mechanisms in the face of emotional pain. Jim and Sue's cruel words express their struggles with dissatisfaction and resentment, which allow them to express these feelings in an indirect way.

Withholding politeness is the least used strategy among the impoliteness strategies, expressing moments of emotional setback or avoidance. Characters like Keller and Mother in some

scenes of the play fail to thank others. This affirms their inability to completely engage with the emotional reality of their current situation. Keller's responses, "I imagined it. But that can change, too," try to avoid difficult conversations and protect him from this truth. In addition to this, the mother's refusal to admit Larry's death, "Don't speak to me" is about self-preservation. By refusing to deal with the reality of her son's death, she tries to protect herself from the pain but also tries to isolate herself from the guilt of her family. This is why Withholding Politeness protects characters from emotional pain. Keller and Mother's silence is used as a dramatic technique by Miller to express their inability to confront the truth, which causes more tension among the members of the family.

To conclude, the impoliteness strategies employed in Miller's *All My Sons* are not only about conflict, but they also mirror the human cost concerning the issues of avoidance and denial. The bitter exchanges among the involved characters, sarcasm, and their emotional distancing reveal their inner struggles, pain, guilt, and the fear of losing what they have as a dear one. The play alludes that real redemption can only come from facing the truth, whether it is bitter or not. By presenting the characters in a human light, the study exposes that these characters are not villains to be scorned or victims to be pitied, but instead it highly shows that the characters are struggling to deal with events of their own choices and their emotions as human beings.

Conclusion

Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* employs impoliteness strategies not only to present the involved conflict among the members of the Keller family, but also to reveal the truth of human cost regarding the act of avoidance and denial of guilt. The characters' various use of bald-on Record, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock impoliteness, positive impoliteness, and withholding politeness sheds light on their inner struggles, anxieties, and desires. Their cruel words, sarcastic remarks and emotional setback mirror their efforts to deal with the stress of their past actions, the consequences and the impact of these on their relationships. By analyzing these strategies, the study presents a good understanding of the characters' motivations and emotional instability by shedding light on the complex relationships of love, guilt and the pain that correlates with the Keller family. The study also shows the essential way to encounter the bitter truth in order to settle the difficulties and how important it is to talk to each other frankly to lessen the anxious feeling of being isolated that comes from unresolved problems. Thus, Miller's play presents a touching discussion of the physical and emotional difficulties of the human experience, which depicts its characters as imperfect beings who deal with the consequences of their actions and feelings

Originality Statement

The authors declare that this article is their own work and to the best of their knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material which have been accepted for publication in any other published materials, except where due acknowledgement is made in the article. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom the authors have worked, is explicitly acknowledged in the article.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that this article was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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