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STUDY OF VERBAL IMPOLITENESS IN MOBA COMMUNITIES: A CONVERSATION DATA ANALYSIS TO EXPLAIN PATTERNS AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO DIGITAL COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS

RONY ARAHTA SEMBIRING*[1], SRI MINDA MURNI[2],
I WY DIRGEYASA[3]

[1,2,3] UNIVERSITAS NEGERI MEDAN, MEDAN, INDONESIA
[1]ronyarahta.sembiring@uhn.ac.id
[2]srimindamurni@unimed.ac.id
[3]wayandirgayasa@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Interaction in online gaming communities, especially in the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) genre, creates a unique and complex linguistic landscape. This study examines in depth the pragmatic phenomenon by analysing the form, function, and factors that influence the use of impoliteness strategies in the MOBA gamer language community in Indonesia through a descriptive qualitative method. This research explores the types, functions, and contextual use of impoliteness strategies within MOBA gaming communities, aiming to contribute to the fields of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and digital discourse analysis. Descriptive qualitative methods used in this research, because this research involves data collection with the aim of describing existing conditions. this method focuses on cultural, social, personal identity and its purpose is more descriptive than predictive. The results show that MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) gamer community uses incivility by composing direct name calling, sequencing accusations and insults, using interjections for transitions, using expletives. gamers in MOBA community tend to use disrespectful or toxic language during game play due to some main reasons emotional reaction during high pressure game play, lack of consequences & anonymity, peer influence & in-group norms, as a strategy or skill expression, miscommunication & poor team coordination.

Keywords: Impoliteness strategies; Language community; MOBA gamers; Pragmatics; Verbal impoliteness

INTRODUCTION

The use of language does not always adhere to the agreed-upon norms, principles, or language ethics that serve as guidelines for behaviour, including language behaviour (Heman et al., 2025; Sutikno et al., 2025). Language or language forms that do not conform to these norms are deemed impolite or unacceptable to use or speak in public (Jahrir et al., 2025). Impoliteness techniques are theoretical studies that comes from the study of politeness in language. Today with ease of communication, the role of using impoliteness strategies between interlocutors has been highlighted.

Impolite language is frequently used among gamers. With virtual game worlds often becoming breeding grounds for offensive and profane behaviour. Competition or frustration that arises in the game can spur players to use dirty words, insults, and insulting language towards

opponents or even their teammates. The anonymity provided by online gaming platforms can embolden individuals to unleash their worst impulses, hiding behind screen names and avatars. This toxic culture not only taints the gaming community, but it also takes a toll on the overall gaming experience. The use of inappropriate language can undermine sportsmanship, foster hostility, and create a hostile environment that discourages newcomers or more sensitive.

The nature of impoliteness is subjective, for impoliteness to occur, there must be intent to attack the hearer's face and the context must be consistent with an interpretation of impoliteness. It does not specifically address instances where there are different interpretations of Speaker intent between the Speaker and the Hearer (Munthe et al., 2024). Impoliteness is dependent on both the Speaker and the Hearer. Perceptions of impoliteness are dependent on both the interactants' assessments of what is appropriate within a given context and the prior history that affects those interpretations.

In this communication context, the use of impoliteness strategy is often found. Impoliteness in communication is not just a linguistic error, but a deliberate pragmatic choice by the speaker to attack or threaten the face of the interlocutor. In contrast to politeness, which aims to build and maintain harmonious social relations, impoliteness can be used to express anger, frustration, dominance, or even as a form of sharp criticism.

Gaming is a highly prevalent and multicultural mode of interaction in first world countries and is growing exponentially as more young people turn to gaming as a primary setting for interaction and community. Despite (or perhaps because of) the widespread popularity of online games, it is not uncommon for people to associate these games (particularly those played for entertainment or recreation) with violence and inappropriate behaviour. Impoliteness in the form of flaming, spamming, trolling, and cyber-bullying is, in fact, a "hot topic" of discussion, particularly among parents, who are concerned that online gaming promotes violent behaviour among their children. For others, however, impoliteness is simply a normal component of online interaction and is something that should be ignored. Flaming and trolling,

MOBAs have been around since 1998, there are many unique concepts and characteristics that can be difficult to understand without any prior encounters with one personally (Sinaga et al., 2025). Recently, the game community has witnessed the rise of MOBA (Multiple Online Battle Arena) Games. Multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) is a subgenre of strategy video games in which two teams of players compete against each other on a predefined battlefield. Each player controls a single character with a set of distinctive abilities that improve over the course of a game and which contribute to the team's overall strategy. The typical ultimate objective is for each team to destroy their opponents' main structure, located at the opposite corner of the battlefield.

The gamer community can be categorized as a form of discourse community, namely a group of individuals who share specific interests, knowledge, and languages. They engage in social interaction and communicate using codes and practices that are understood by the members of that community. A discourse community is a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated. An individual may belong to several professional, public, or personal discourse communities. The gaming community has a unique language and communication practices. They use phrases, terms, abbreviations, and memes that only fellow gamers understand.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Impoliteness Theory

Although this study focuses on incivility, an understanding of politeness is an essential point of departure. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory posits the concept of "face", which is divided into two types:
- **Positive Face**: The individual's desire to be liked, appreciated, and accepted by others.

- **Negative Face**: The individual's desire to be free from interference or coercion, and to have freedom of action.

They also introduced "Face Threatening Acts" (FTAs), which are communication acts that have the potential to damage the face of the speaker or listener. Although Brown and Levinson focused more on strategies to defuse or avoid FTAs (politeness strategies), their theory became the foundation for understanding how face can be intentionally attacked, which is the essence of incivility.

According to Culpeper (2005), there are five super strategies of impoliteness; they are bald on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness and withhold politeness (as cited from Bousfield, 2008: 84-85).

Online Forum Communities

Communication in the context of online video games is often computer-mediated; it can be either spoken (using a microphone and some sort of voice chat service) or written (a chat or a direct messaging tool, for example). Online gaming is also relatively anonymous; people usually operate from behind of an avatar and a username, rather than their own name and picture. According to Rösner and Krämer (2016) and Christie and Dill (2016) researchers have connected hostility in computer-mediated communication to anonymity; however, their own research does not completely support this. Instead, they claim that there are social (Rösner and Krämer 2016) and individual (Christie and Dill 2016) factors that affect whether anonymity leads to increased hostility and aggressive language use in computer-mediated communication.

Rösner and Krämer (2016) argue that the social norm—whether the language used by others in the context is generally aggressive or non-aggressive—has a stronger impact on people's language use than whether they are anonymous or not. However, they also note that in their study, when the social norm was aggressive, and the participants were anonymous, the people were more inclined to use aggressive language than when the social norm was aggressive, but the participants were identifiable (Rösner and Krämer 2016: 10). On the contrary, Christie and Dill (2016) focused on individual differences and found out in their study that higher self-esteem, higher sense of autonomy, and lower social anxiousness resulted in more aggressive language use, whereas lower self-esteem, lower sense of autonomy, and higher social anxiousness did not result in aggressive language use despite of anonymity. Based on these results, it seems that rather than cause verbal aggression, anonymity only makes it easier for people to verbally abuse others in computer mediated communication if they are already so inclined or if the (social) environment supports it.

Syntactic Pattern Compliment

In the context of complementation, syntactic patterns play a significant role in describing how complements are structured within a sentence (Herman et al., 2021). Complements are words or phrases that describe other words in a sentence or clause, and they are necessary for the meaning of a sentence. There are three types of complements: subject complements, object complements, and adverbial complements. Subject complements describe the subject of a sentence, object complements describe the object, and adverbial complements describe the manner or time of an action. The study of syntactic patterns in complementation is important in understanding how language is structured and how meaning is conveyed through the arrangement of words. It is also essential in analysing and generating natural language, which is critical in applications such as natural language processing and machine learning
Compliments can follow various syntactic patterns, but here are some of the most common ones:

1. Subject + Verb + Adjective/Adverb + Object

- This is the most basic and common structure for compliments.
- **Example:** "You look **great** today!" (**You** - Subject, **look** - Verb, **great** - Adjective, **today** - Adverb, **!** - Emotional marker)

2. Be + Adjective/Adverb + Prepositional Phrase

- This structure emphasizes the quality being complimented.
- **Example:** "You **are** so **talented**!" (**You** - Subject, **are** - Linking verb, **so** - Intensifier, **talented** - Adjective, **!** - Emotional marker)
- **Example:** "She **is** incredibly **good** at drawing." (**She** - Subject, **is** - Linking verb, **incredibly** - Adverb, **good** - Adjective, **at drawing** - Prepositional phrase)

3. What a/an + Adjective/Noun + Object!

- This structure creates a more informal and enthusiastic compliment.
- **Example:** "What a **beautiful** painting!" (**What a** - Exclamation, **beautiful** - Adjective, **painting** - Noun, **!** - Emotional marker)
- **Example:** "What an **amazing** voice you have!" (**What an** - Exclamation, **amazing** - Adjective, **voice** - Noun, **you** - Subject, **have!** - Verb phrase)

4. Helping Verb + Past Participle (adjectival form) + Prepositional Phrase**

- This structure emphasizes the result of an action and creates a more formal compliment.
- **Example:** "I am **impressed** by your **dedication** to your studies." (**I am** - Subject, **impressed** - Helping verb, **by** - Preposition, **your dedication** - Past participle used as adjective, **to your studies** - Prepositional phrase)
- **Example:** "She is **well-prepared** for the presentation." (**She is** - Subject, **well-prepared** - Past participle used as adjective)

5. It + Be + Adjective/Adverb + to + Verb

- This structure emphasizes the pleasantness of something caused by the complimented person.
- **Example:** "It's **so kind** of you to help me." (**It's** - Subject, **so** - Intensifier, **kind** - Adjective, **of you** - Prepositional phrase, **to help me** - Infinitive phrase)
- **Example:** "It was **wonderful** seeing you again!" (**It was** - Subject, **wonderful** - Adjective, **seeing you again** - Infinitive phrase)

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) is a social psychological theory developed by Howard Giles in the 1970s. The theory focuses on how individuals adjust their communication styles to accommodate others during interactions. It emphasizes the role of social identity and group membership in shaping communication behaviours (Howard Giles, 2024). Giles et al., (2023) in his article entitled "Communication accommodation theory: Past accomplishments, current trends, and future prospects", this article provides an overview of this research domain, with particular attention to the theoretical practices within it. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) is introduced as the foundation for other widely cited models of communication and aging. The author outlines some of the tenets of CAT based on recent research on age meta-stereotypes and intergroup felt understanding. Giles (2016) divide the concept of CAT into:

1. **Accommodation**: Accommodation involves adopting similar communication styles to enhance social closeness, while divergence involves emphasizing differences to maintain distance or assert identity. This can involve: Social approval, social identity, Distancing, Power and status.

2. **Convergence**: This occurs when individuals adapt their communication to become more like their interlocutor. This can involve mimicking speech patterns, vocabulary, or nonverbal cues. Convergence is often used to foster rapport, show empathy, or signal solidarity. This can involve: Speech rate, Vocal tone, Dialect, Vocabulary.

3. **Divergence**: This is the opposite of convergence, where individuals emphasize their differences in communication. This can be a way to assert one's identity, maintain social distance, or express disapproval. Divergence can also occur in response to perceived social inequalities or power dynamics. This can involve: maintaining a distinct accent or dialect, using jargon or technical terms that the other person may not understand, speaking more formally or informally than the other person.

4. **Social Identity**: CAT posits that individuals' communication choices are influenced by their social identities, which are shaped by group memberships (e.g., ethnicity, nationality, profession). People may adjust their communication to align with the norms of their in-group or to distinguish themselves from out-groups. The Implications of Social Identity in Communication

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically focusing on conversation data analysis, to investigate patterns of verbal impoliteness within Mobile Legends player

Data Source and Participants

The primary data for this study consisted of in-game verbal conversations generated by gamers playing the Mobile Legends online mobile game. Since direct observation of live gameplay with participant consent was not feasible on a large scale, the data was sourced from publicly available YouTube videos. To ensure relevance and representativeness of popular content, seven (7) YouTube videos with the highest view counts featuring MLBB gameplay and in-game communication were purposively selected. These videos served as an archive of naturalistic conversation data from the target community. The participants in this study are, therefore, the anonymous gamers who's in-game voice communications were captured and uploaded in these selected YouTube videos.

Data Collection

The data collection process involved several steps:
1. Video Selection: Seven MLBB gameplay videos with the highest view counts were identified and selected from YouTube. This criterion was chosen to capture widely consumed content, potentially reflecting common communication practices within the community.
2. Transcription: The in-game voice conversations from the selected videos were meticulously transcribed verbatim into text. This transcription process converted ephemeral spoken interactions into a tangible format suitable for linguistic analysis. Care was taken to capture not only the words spoken but also paralinguistic features or contextual notes relevant to the interpretation of impoliteness, where discernible from the video.

Data Analysis

The transcribed conversational data was subjected to a multi-layered linguistic analysis guided by three primary theoretical frameworks:
1. **Impoliteness Framework**: The analysis primarily utilized established theories and frameworks of impoliteness (e.g., based on the work of Jonathan Culpeper or other relevant scholars) to identify and categorize specific impolite strategies employed by the gamers. This involved examining instances where linguistic actions were perceived or intended to cause offense, violate social norms, or attack a speaker's 'face'.

2. **Syntactical Grammar Approach**: A syntactical grammar approach was employed to analyze the structural patterns of the impolite utterances. This focused on how grammatical constructions, sentence structures, and lexical choices contributed to the expression of impoliteness. It aimed to uncover recurrent linguistic forms associated with impolite communication in this specific digital context.

3.**Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)**: Finally, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) by Howard Giles was applied to understand the dynamics behind the use of impoliteness. This involved exploring how gamers' communication strategies (e.g., convergence or divergence) might be influenced by factors such as group identity, perceived status, and the immediate communicative goals within the high-stakes, competitive environment of MOBA games. CAT helped to explain why certain impolite patterns emerged and how participants might adjust their language based on their perceptions of others and the interaction context.

This integrated analytical approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the nature, patterns, and underlying motivations of verbal impoliteness within the Mobile Legends: Bang Bang online gaming community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the classification according to the theory of Culpeper the researcher found data as the following:
Based on the formula:

Table 1.
The Perc

$$\text{Percentage} = \left(\frac{\text{Number of utterances for each type}}{\text{Total number of impolite utterances}} \right) \times 100$$

Type of Impoliteness	Number of Utterances	Percentage (%)
Positive Impoliteness	200	53.76%
Bald on Record Impoliteness	124	33.33%
Negative Impoliteness	43	11.56%
Sarcasm / Mock Politeness	5	1.34%
Withholding Politeness	0	0.00%
Total	**372**	**100%**

The results show interesting patterns and provide significant insights into the dynamics of social interaction in this competitive environment. The frequency of use of different impoliteness strategies - with positive impoliteness being the most dominant (200 times), followed by bald on record impoliteness (124 times), negative impoliteness (43 times), a dearth of sarcasm or mock politeness (5 times), and an absence of withholding politeness (0 times) - painting a complex picture of how gamers negotiate their identities, relationships and frustrations.

Based on the analysis, the MOBA Gamers community utilizes syntax for impoliteness by:

- **Role 1:**
  Structuring Direct Name-Calling: Employing simple Subject-Predicate structures (dia setan) to directly label opponents with insulting terms.
- **Role 2:**
  Sequencing Accusations and Insults: Arranging phrases to move from circumstantial accusation (di setting) to personal insult (setan) and specific action accusation (curang), creating a chain of negativity.
- **Role 3:**
  Using Interjections for Transition: Incorporating interjections like eh to manage the flow between different facets of the accusation/insult while maintaining momentum.
- **Role 4:**
  Applying Terminal Expletives: Consistently using the syntactic pattern of placing vulgar terms (anjing) at the end of utterances as a final, intensifying expression of anger or frustration directed at the preceding statements.

Based on the data of Syntactical Pattern the researcher found that the use of impolite language among MOBA gamers is a prominent feature of their in-game communication and content creation, as observed through multiple gameplay transcripts and video interactions. Impolite expressions such as *"anjing," "babi," "goblok," "tai,"* and *"tolol"* are frequently employed to express emotional responses to gameplay situations, especially during moments of frustration, mistakes by teammates, or technical disruptions like lag. These words serve as an outlet for stress and disappointment, often emerging spontaneously during heated moments. Additionally, insults and vulgar remarks are directed at both teammates and opponents, commonly as a form of taunting, mockery, or to assert dominance. Interestingly, such language is also used humorously or satirically to entertain viewers, strengthen group identity, or build a "bar-bar" (aggressive) persona, particularly among popular streamers and influencers. In many instances, the usage is performative, aligning with the expectations of gaming audiences who find such expressions entertaining or relatable. However, the findings also reveal that this behavior is largely reactive and situational, suggesting that impolite language in the MOBA gaming community functions as both an emotional outlet and a communicative norm shaped by gaming culture, peer influence, and content dynamics
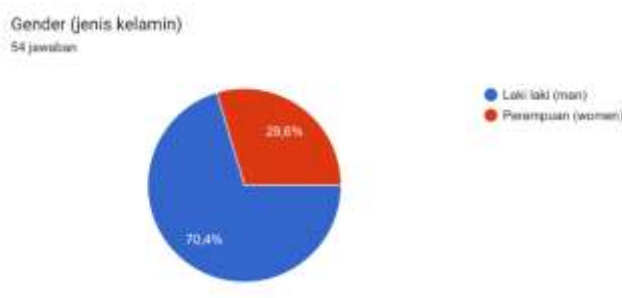

Figure 1
Participants for Interview

Based on the interview analysis, gamers in the **MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) community** tend to use **impolite or toxic language** during gameplay for several key reasons:

1. Emotional Reactions During High-Stress Gameplay

- **Frustration, anger, or disappointment**—especially when teammates perform poorly, go AFK (away from keyboard), or make repeated mistakes—often triggers toxic outbursts.

- Many respondents mentioned using curses or insults like *"anjing," "tolol," "babi"* due to **uncontrolled emotions** in competitive or intense situations such:
- Annoyed by his teammate's performance (*Karena kesal melihat performa teman setim*)
- Because MOBA games are stressful and emotional (*Karena game MOBA penuh tekanan dan emosi*)

2. Lack of Consequences & Anonymity

- Players feel **safe behind the screen**, making them more likely to express negativity without fear of direct retaliation.
- Several noted that they feel **free and not afraid of anyone (***bebas dan tidak takut kepada siapa pun***)**, which contributes to rudeness.

3. Peer Influence & In-Group Norms

- Many players **adapt their communication style** to fit in with the team or community, especially when others are already using harsh language.
- Some even mentioned that **toxic talk has become a "norm"** in MOBA games.
  "Sometimes it's because you're following the team's style of speaking" (*Terkadang karena ikut-ikutan gaya bicara tim*).
  "Because the community is like that." (*Karena komunitasnya emang gitu*)

4. As a Strategy or Expression of Skill

- Some players use **trash talk** or insults as a way to **intimidate opponents** or **show dominance**.
- A few even admitted to doing it **to look cool** or to get reactions from others.
  "To look cool (*Biar terlihat keren*)."
  "To provoke or show superiority." (*Untuk memprovokasi atau menunjukkan keunggulan*)

5. Miscommunication & Poor Team Coordination

- Poor coordination and lack of teamwork often lead to **blame-shifting** and accusations, which spiral into toxic exchanges.
  "Disrespectful language comes out when a team is not united." (*Bahasa tidak sopan keluar ketika satu tim tidak kompak*)
  "Because of random playmates." (*Karena lawan main sembarangan*)

These findings collectively underscore that the use of impolite language among MOBA gamers is a prominent, multi-faceted feature of their in-game communication, serving as both an emotional outlet and a communicative norm shaped by the unique blend of gaming culture, peer influence, content dynamics, and the psychological impact of competitive play. The performative aspect of impoliteness, particularly among streamers, further highlights its role beyond mere emotional discharge, extending to entertainment and persona building.

The Central Role of Anonymity and the Lack of Consequences: Culpeper's theory focuses on linguistic strategies themselves. The Investigator's findings on how anonymity and lack of consequences ("free and not afraid of anyone") facilitate the massive use of impoliteness place a strong emphasis on situational contextual factors that may not have been explicitly the primary focus in the initial description of Culpeper's strategy. This expands our understanding that in certain digital contexts such as MOBAs, these factors are not just background, but active drivers that multiply the frequency and intensity of existing disrespect strategies. The theory may need to better accommodate how environmental architectures (such as online anonymity) fundamentally change the dynamics and calculation of risk in committing impropriety.

This study largely support the existing categories of disrespect strategies as identified by Culpeper, especially in terms of direct verbal manifestations. However, these findings significantly expand our understanding by emphasizing the crucial role of digital contexts (anonymity, lack of consequences), community social norms (peer pressure, identity formation), and game-specific triggers. This shows that to understand impoliteness in the MOBA community, linguistic strategy analysis alone is not enough; A deep understanding of the social, psychological, and technological factors that shape and normalize these behaviors is required

CONCLUSION

Regarding the findings and implications, the present study was limited to exploring verbal impoliteness exclusively within the Mobile Legends MOBA game community, utilizing transcribed in-game voice conversations from publicly available YouTube videos and interview data from gamers. Therefore, the findings of this study, while offering significant insights into this specific context, cannot be directly generalizable to all types of online communities or other gaming genres. Further research should take into account the comparison of verbal impoliteness patterns across different MOBA titles or other online game genres (e.g., RPGs, FPS) to ascertain the broader applicability of these findings. Owing to the complex interplay of linguistic, social, and psychological factors in competitive digital communication, future studies should also examine the long-term impact of such impolite communication on player well-being, community toxicity, and retention rates, perhaps from an interdisciplinary pragmatic and psychological perspective, and explore interventions for fostering healthier communication norms within these dynamic online spaces.

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