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Impoliteness in the ‘*casse-toi pauv’ con*’ incident: a discursive case-study

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Abstract

In February 2008, when visiting the Paris Agricultural Show, French President Nicolas Sarkozy insulted a visitor who refused to shake hands with him. The exchange was filmed and his insult, ‘*Casse-toi, alors, pauv’ con*’ (‘Then get lost, you poor jerk!’), was soon all over the Internet and worldwide media. However, few researchers have tried providing an in-deep analysis of the whole interaction.

In a recent article (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2010), Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni offers a study of the reply itself and how it constitutes a prototypical example of ‘positive impoliteness’. However, as much as the content and form of the reply matter, a comprehensive analysis of the realisation of impoliteness can’t focus on the utterance alone. Instead, as recent post-Brown and Levinson models of impoliteness (Bousfield 2008, Culpeper 2011) have shown, it is necessary to contextualize it within the sequence in which it was uttered and in its larger context. The following study will provide such an analysis of the whole incident using those models. Beyond the single utterance of President Sarkozy, it will take into account the dynamics of his interaction with the visitor and replace it both in its narrow co-text and wider context (background information about the interactants, norms, conventions...).

Keywords: impoliteness, discourse analysis, interaction, power, face

1. Introduction

In February 2008, Nicolas Sarkozy, then President of France, was filmed insulting a visitor who refused to shake hands with him at the Paris International Agricultural Show. The video was soon posted on the website of French newspaper *Le Parisien*¹ and his insult, ‘*Casse-toi, alors, pauv’ con!*’, which can be translated as ‘Then get lost, you poor jerk’, became famous in no time. Interestingly enough, the scene was seen and commented by thousands of people on the Internet and in the news, providing a vast sample of reactions to what was judged impolite, inappropriate, vulgar or rude. But what is even more interesting for the linguist is that very few attempts have been made at analyzing this famous case with the tools of discourse analysis, even less at providing an in-deep analysis of the whole interaction. Most of the time, the incident has been reduced to the single, decontextualized, insulting utterance of the president, which came to be known under the simplified version ‘*Casse-toi pauv’ con*’. However, as much as the content and form of the reply matter to understand the realization of impoliteness, a comprehensive analysis can’t focus on the utterance alone. Instead, as recent post-Brown and Levinson models of impoliteness (such as Bousfield 2008a or Culpeper 2011) have shown, it is necessary to contextualize it within the whole sequence in which it was uttered and in its larger context (social and cultural). This is precisely what this study is aimed at.

The conception of impoliteness which will serve as a theoretical framework for all the following analyses is Derek Bousfield’s as synthetized in his 2008 article “Impoliteness in the struggle for power”. A particularly important feature of this model is its focus on how impoliteness is co-constructed by participants in interaction. Bousfield’s definition of ‘successful impoliteness’ starts from the speaker’s producer role: from the speaker’s point of view, impoliteness constitutes ‘the issuing of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive face-threatening acts (FTAs) that are purposely performed’ without mitigation (where it is

expected) and / or ‘with deliberate aggression’, which means aiming at maximizing face damage to the hearer (Bousfield, 2008b: 132). But impoliteness is only made successful by the hearer’s reception: ‘Furthermore, for impoliteness to be considered successful impoliteness, the intention of the speaker (or ‘author’) to ‘offend’ (threaten / damage face) must be understood by those in a receiver role’ (Bousfield 2008b: 132). As we are going to see, the ‘*casse-toi pauv’ con*’ incident proves to be a good illustration of how impoliteness might be co-constructed in interaction.

The concept of ‘face’ too, is to be understood not in a traditional Brown and Levinsonian way but as social image or representation of self (to make it simple) ‘internally expected and externally realized in interaction’ and ‘requiring, in actuality, some fine tuning or outright re-modification/manipulation’ (Bousfield 2008a: 41). This conception of face suits particularly well the realization of face in the case of a politician, who is by definition a public figure and whose face is constantly being manipulated and worked on. I won’t use Brown and Levinson’s traditional distinction between positive (desire to be approved of) and negative face (desire to have freedom of action) either since it proves quite ‘superfluous’ (Bousfield 2008b: 137) in the case at hand, in which realizations of impoliteness constantly appeal to both faces at the same time.

2. Re-contextualizing ‘*casse-toi pauv’ con*’

The ‘*casse-toi pauv’ con*’ incident has most of the time been reduced to a simplified and de-contextualized version of Nicolas Sarkozy’s now famous insult, without taking into account its narrow (the rest of the interaction) and wider (background information about the interactants, norms, conventions...) context, which is full of crucial information. However, as any interaction implying a behaviour deemed impolite, it ‘cannot be investigated without looking in detail at the context, the speakers, the situation and the evoked norms’ (Locher 2004: 90). Thus, what is needed before starting any discursive analysis is to re-contextualize the insult, starting with the narrow context or ‘co-text’. To do so, one simply has to watch the 45-second video which launched the scandal. Here is a detailed account of what it shows:

The video opens on President Nicolas Sarkozy coming out of an official car, surrounded by a crowd of bodyguards, press officers, reporters and visitors. He is all smile and waves to the crowd. We then see him crossing the main hall, still smiling, shaking hands and giving friendly ‘bonjour’ to the visitors. Suddenly, a voice is heard booing in the public. Nicolas Sarkozy does not react and keeps shaking more hands but he certainly looks more nervous. The incident happens a few seconds later: he (somewhat mechanically) extends his hand to a visitor who replies ‘*Ah non, touche-moi pas!*’ (‘Ah no, don’t touch me!’). While moving forward and trying not to look annoyed, Sarkozy immediately retorts ‘*Alors casse-toi!*’ (‘Then get lost / go away’), which the man answers indirectly by adding (and aggravating his initial offence) ‘*Tu m’ salis!*’ (‘You’re making me dirty!’). It is then that Nicolas Sarkozy utters the famous reply, with a frozen smile, ‘*Casse-toi, alors, pauv’ con!*’ (‘Then get lost, you poor jerk!’). It is to be noted that he never stops moving forward during the exchange and immediately tries to go back to shaking hands afterwards.

As for the larger context, three points have to be taken into account straight from the beginning:

-First, the difference of status between the two interactants. One is the President, which means someone invested with institutional power. The other is an anonymous passer-by (the precise

identity of the man is still unknown to this day), invested with the power, rights and obligations of any regular citizen, not more, not less, and normally in a hierarchically lower position compared to the highest official in the country.

-Secondly, the visit of the President is an official visit but the video and the exchange are by no means official. In fact, this particular exchange has been judged as “semi-private” by the President’s press officials and was filmed without President Sarkozy’s knowledge or consent. This is quite interesting because for once, the interaction implies a politician outside of usual ritualized interactions such as debates, interviews or official speeches.

-Last but not least, and this last point is in fact derived from the two preceding remarks, there is much face at stake in this interaction, partly because of the context and the status of one of the interactants: as María Dolores García-Pastor remarks in an article on political campaigns (García-Pastor 2008: 104-105): ‘politician’s image and /or its attribution by the public is crucial for him/her to achieve his/her political goals.’ Being followed by reporters, officially visiting a public show, this is all the more true for the President, who represents the highest official authority and, in this context, has high face wants.

Keeping all this information in mind, we can now begin analyzing the whole interaction.

3. The anonymous visitor’s first reply

3.1. Utterance beginnings

Let’s go back to the ‘utterance ‘beginnings’ as Derek Bousfield calls them, meaning ‘antecedent events which trigger the onset of impoliteness’ (Bousfield 2008a: 146). The opening utterance of the interaction is the first reply of the anonymous visitor, ‘*Ah non, touche-moi pas!*’ (‘Ah no, don’t touch me!’). However, this reply ‘does not spring from nowhere’ (Bousfield 2008a: 146): it is itself triggered by what Jacob Mey calls a ‘pragmatic act’, that is a ‘movement of the body’, more precisely a gesture containing pragmatic meaning (Mey 2001: 223). It is worth noticing that this triggering event is in fact a gesture belonging to a politeness ritual. The President indeed extends his hand to the visitor, which is the very first step of a conventionally polite opening ritual which consists in shaking hands. This gesture aims at ‘establishing physical and psychological contact’ (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1998: 221) and is thus a crucial step of the interaction. It is even more crucial when, as is the case here, the responsibility of the interaction is unilateral and the person taking the initiative has to be admitted inside the interlocutor’s space. The response the visitor gives, that is not reciprocating the gesture, then constitutes an obvious face-threatening act (I will use the abbreviation FTA afterwards) before he even utters his first reply. Without taking into account whether this response is intentional or not, it already threatens the President’s face since it impedes his initiative and goes against the course of action he expected, and more generally his expected face wants.

The utterance that accompanies this negative gesture (in that it is the remarkable absence of an expected gesture) only makes it worse since it acknowledges the intentional nature of his pragmatic act. It even begins with an unmitigated simple and direct expression of refusal to do what is expected: ‘*Ah non*’ (refusal is quintessentially an FTA, which then normally needs to be softened or minimized thanks to an appropriate strategy)². We are thus here in presence of a particularly clear illustration of Bousfield’s definition of impoliteness quoted above: ‘the issuing of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive face-threatening acts (FTAs) that are purposely performed’ without mitigation (where it is expected) and / or ‘with deliberate aggression’. Moreover, as mentioned above, the context itself emphasizes the

amount of face threat for the President: the victim of the FTA is indeed a man playing a public role (*'en representation'*, as French says) on a public visit, and who, as a result, has high face wants (he has to 'represent' the presidency, which involves much work on his public image, then dangerously exposed and particularly vulnerable to any face threat).

3.2. Impoliteness strategies

This impolite opening in fact relies on a complex combination of strategies which are all context-dependent to different degrees. We have already mentioned the unmitigated and direct refusal to do what is expected. But the content of the utterance that accompanies it and makes the attack unambiguous combines several other 'on-record impoliteness' strategies, which Bousfield defines as 'designed to explicitly (a) attack the face of an interactant, (b) construct the face of an interactant in a non-harmonious or outright conflictive way, (c) deny the expected face wants, needs or rights of the interactant, or some combination thereof.' (Bousfield 2008b: 138).

Let's try and describe their realization:

a/ Withholding politeness

This first strategy consists in 'the absence of politeness work where it would be expected' (Culpeper 1996: 357). Bousfield classifies it among 'off-record impoliteness' (Bousfield 2008b: 138) since most of the time, 'when an interlocutor withholds politeness, it is difficult to say whether or not it is meant as impoliteness' (Bousfield 2008a: 123). However, it is made explicit here by the negative comment *'ah non, touche-moi pas'*, which explicitly states the visitor's refusal to reciprocate the polite ritual of handshake. As a result, it ought to be considered an on-record impolite strategy, unambiguously aimed at frustrating the President's face wants and needs and attacking his (self-)image, at a time when it is particularly exposed.

b/ Inappropriate speech act

The second strategy I'd like to point out is rarely tackled as such in impoliteness strategies. I've chosen to call this strategy "inappropriate speech act" since it consists in producing a speech act which the speaker normally shouldn't or isn't allowed to produce given his social status, which implies discursal rights and obligations. In the case at hand, this speech act is a command, issued with a direct unmitigated imperative. Directives are, as has often been remarked, inherent FTAs since they are direct impingements on the hearer's freedom of action. Amongst directives, commands and orders are the most direct, hence a command typically needs to be softened or mitigated and will often be expressed indirectly³. This is not the case here where it is expressed directly (*'me touche pas'*) without any attempt at mitigation. The context in fact makes it even more threatening since the imperative is really intended at prohibiting an act desired and initiated by the hearer. But this is not the most important point in this strategy. What is more interesting, though, is the underlying status and power relationship at stake in the production of this speech act. Giving and receiving commands normally obeys social codes and norms which are pre-existing. It is ruled by what Bousfield calls interactant's 'socio-discursal roles'. They rule the 'powers, rights, obligations' of the interactants (Bousfield 2008a: 173) and, as a result, their speech acts. Conventionally, given his high status and the authority he represents, the President is not likely to receive direct orders or commands from a common citizen (even less be insulted, 'offence to the President' still exists in French law⁴). Conversely, as commands and orders

‘confer (or claim to confer) an obligation to do on the addressee’ (this is how French linguist Oswald Ducrot describes them in an interesting study on illocutionary force, Ducrot 1991: 286), addressing a direct command to the President implies assigning him a submissive role which is not expected, or even compatible with the hierarchy existing outside of the verbal exchange. It forces him out of his ‘socio-discoursal role’.

All this makes the initial FTA worse. Indeed, to quote Jonathan Culpeper when he extends to impoliteness Brown and Levinson's formula for assessing the weightiness of an FTA, ‘the greater the imposition of the act, the more powerful and distant the other is, the more face-damaging the act is likely to be’ (Culpeper 1996: 357). What is more, the strategy not only impinges on the President’s freedom of action but also attempts at damaging his social image and status. In this respect it could also enter Culpeper’s strategy ‘condescend, scorn or ridicule – emphasize own power, use diminutives to other (or other’s position), be contemptuous, belittle, do not take H seriously’ (Culpeper 1996: 358). Interestingly enough, many indeed interpreted the initial FTA as humiliating, as the Minister of Labour Xavier Bertrand whose reaction was that ‘in this country, it is forbidden to *humiliate* the President of the Republic’⁵ (my emphasis).

c/ Inappropriate identity markers

The preceding strategies go hand in hand with this third strategy, which relies on the use of what Culpeper calls ‘inappropriate identity markers’ (Culpeper 1996: 357). The visitor indeed uses the second person singular form of the imperative, ‘*me touche pas*’, instead of the second person plural, which is more formal and generally expected when addressing someone the speaker has never met, all the more when the person in question represents authority. In fact, the singular form the visitor uses corresponds to a ‘*tu*’ pronoun, while the expected polite form is pronoun ‘*vous*’, which marks a respectful distance. No need to mention this is an additional way to debase the President’s image and damage his face by denying him an expected mark of respect. What is more, as Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni notes in a chapter about French terms of address (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1992: 45-55), using ‘*tu*’ where formal and polite ‘*vous*’ is expected can be interpreted as an inappropriate reduction of the social (and symbolical) distance separating the interactants and thus as an invasion of the hearer’s intimate space. This is quite a coherent face-damaging strategy to combine with the initial one: the anonymous visitor refuses Sarkozy’s ‘intrusion’ in his personal space (the physical contact of the handshake) but in his turn he symbolically invades the President’s intimacy by using a grammatical form denoting familiarity.

d/ Enforce role shift

The last strategy I have chosen to expose may be the most interesting in terms of discursive analysis. I have chosen to assimilate it to the strategy ‘enforce role shift’ mentioned in Culpeper’s 1996 classification although it is not a straightforward and explicit realization of this strategy. To some extent, however, this opening utterance corresponds to an interesting and subtle way to force the President out of his ‘social and/or discoursal role and into another’ (Bousfield 2008a: 131).

In fact, as I have already mentioned, the mere fact that the anonymous visitor addresses a direct unmitigated command to the President forces the latter out his socio-discoursal role. But the man also uses a very familiar register to address the President. Apart from the 2nd person singular I have already mentioned, he uses a non-standard form of the imperative: a negative marker is elided (‘*ne*’, which is often omitted in oral / informal French) and the pre-verbal clitic pronoun ‘*me*’ is replaced with a post-verbal complement pronoun (‘*moi*’), which

is typical of non-standard / oral French. Clearly, the anonymous visitor uses an informal register the President is not supposed or expected to match in his reply. This is where it becomes particularly interesting. Indeed, Nicolas Sarkozy was already known for his use of language, rather different from his predecessors, to the point of being judged inappropriate for a President. He had indeed already created a controversy when using the word '*racaille*' (a slang term which can be translated as 'scum' or 'scumbags') to describe the youth involved in the 2005 'Paris riots', and was more generally criticized for using too many informal turns of phrases in public or official addresses. Thus, if 'politicians rarely respond in kind to hecklers' because 'presumably, it would damage their image of being calm and in control' (Culpeper 2011: 206), Nicolas Sarkozy could be thought more likely to accept this role shift and go out of socio-discoursal role of President and speak as a common man, which is in fact what he did.

Another way to understand this shift in the expected behaviour of the President is to study it in terms of 'politeness threshold' (Culpeper 2011: 203-207) of the interaction. Taking into account that 'social behaviours take place in the context of other behaviours', Culpeper points out that 'there seems to be a tendency for people to match the kinds of social behaviours produced by others' (Culpeper 2011: 204). Which is why using familiar / informal language to address someone who is not supposed or expected to use such language is a strategic way to force him out of his role: 'setting the (im)politeness threshold at a particular point constrains the interlocutor to match it'. It is a sort of pragmatic challenge, particularly for a politician who is known to use language in ways sometimes judged inappropriate for his social status and function.

All those elements of analysis shade a very different light on the President's famous insult, which we are now going to turn to.

4. Nicolas Sarkozy's response

4.1. The dynamics of impoliteness

I am going to examine Nicolas Sarkozy's response by going through Derek Bousfield's interesting exploration of 'choices when faced with an offending event' (Bousfield 2008a: 188) and applying it to the case at hand. To do so, I will also use some interesting suggestions concerning possible responses written in comments to the video.

When faced with verbal aggression, the first choice the speaker has to make is between responding and not responding. Nicolas Sarkozy himself, with hindsight and once confronted to the numerous negative reactions to his behaviour, estimated that he shouldn't have responded at all⁶. Indeed, not responding, that is staying silent, can sometimes be a way to defend one's face. Was it really possible here? The offence of the visitor has been seen by the surrounding crowd, including many journalists. Moreover, it is blatantly and explicitly intentional, which makes the public damage to the President's face even worse. Not responding would mean accepting the FTA and may be judged as discursive demise, all the more in the context of an offense coming from someone who is in a lower hierarchical position. Thus, making this choice seems rather unlikely and unsuitable for a President who is publicly humiliated, particularly for one who likes to emphasize his image of strong authority. The second possible choice was responding, which is the one chosen by the President.

Having chosen to respond, there are once again different choices to be made between different possible responses. The first alternative opposes accepting the attack and countering the attack. Once again, and for the reasons exposed before, accepting the attack seems hardly conceivable. After all, Nicolas Sarkozy did not do anything intrinsically impolite in the first place. On the contrary, he merely engaged in a polite ritual opening gesture by extending his hand, so why would he ‘assume responsibility for the impoliteness act being issued in the first place’ or ‘agree with the impolite assessment contained with the exacerbated FTA’ (Bousfield 2008 a: 193). His face is under attack and he is being deliberately provoked, it is only natural for him to choose countering the attack.

The countering strategy brings about another choice. Nicolas Sarkozy has to choose, first, between an offensive (‘primarily counter face attack with face attack’) or a defensive strategy (‘primarily defend one’s own face or that of a third party’), or some intermediate strategy (Bousfield 2008a: 193).

Choosing an offensive attack, as I have written above, is risky since it can damage the President’s ‘image of being calm and in control’ (Culpeper 2011: 206) and be judged all the more impolite coming from someone who represent the highest official authority (and therefore supposed to behave in an exemplary manner). But are defensive strategies really less risky? Defensive strategies ‘seek to deflect, block or otherwise ‘manage’ the face attack of the impoliteness to reduce or remove the face damage’ (Bousfield 2008a: 195). Bousfield gives a few possible strategies of that kind (Bousfield 2008a: 195-202):

-‘abrogation’ (‘role-switching as a defence’) consists in trying to ‘avoid responsibility for the ‘triggering’ action(s) that have caused the opposite interlocutor to issue a face damaging utterance in the first place’. As I have said this is not possible here since it would mean recognizing that the initial gesture of extending one’s hand for a handshake was wrong and / or inappropriate.

-‘Dismiss: make light of face damage, joke’ was a possible response and could have been a good way, maybe the best, to regain the upper hand in the interaction. For instance, he could have said something off-hand such as “don’t worry, I’m not contagious” in order to defuse the conflict. It could have dismissed the face threat while taking good care of the President’s face, who would have appeared in control and even witty (a good point for what Brown and Levinson call his ‘positive face’, that is his want to be liked and admired). Even better, he could have added a whiff of offense to this dismissive strategy. Indeed, a reply such as ‘I see, you certainly need to wash your hands first’ would have dismissed his face damage while simultaneously countering it with an elegant FTA. However, it wouldn’t have explicitly condemned the initial FTA, which may not be satisfying for someone who represents authority and wants to be respected.

-‘Ignore the face attack’, which means ‘allowing the interactant issuing the face attack to ‘let off steam’ is problematic for the same reason as ‘abrogation’ or ‘not responding’. Answering something as ‘ok, it is your right to do so’ or “do as you please” may have conveyed a dignified and magnanimous image of the President, and thus would have been a good way to reduce the damage to his public image. But it leaves the previous FTA intact, or worse, legitimizes it, which is problematic in a situation where the victim is a high authority and the offender a simple citizen (Sarkozy commented afterwards that he was not ‘someone on which people can wipe their feet’⁷).

-‘offer an account – explain’ is a risky and quite unlikely strategy in this case since the President would have to offer an explanation without admitting any responsibility. Appearing accountable could also deflect his socio-discoursal status.

-‘plead’ may be the less likely strategy in this context since it implies ‘damaging [one’s] own positive face, in order to avoid the perceived threat or greater face damage’. It is clearly not a possible option for a high authority offended by a mere citizen.

-‘opt out’, on the contrary, may appear as a possible solution. And this strategy is in fact the one many commenters said he should have chosen. For the President to be the one putting an end to the interaction would have been a way to regain the upper hand and the control of the interaction, while equally depriving his opponent of his freedom of action. It would therefore have restored his face (once again without dismissing the previous FTA, though).

As Bousfield remarks, for some participants with a particular social role (army, police or any figure of official authority), which is of course the case of the President, there seems to be much less choices available. The set of possible strategies is fairly reduced precisely because of the President’s socio-discoursal role, that is his status, powers, rights and obligations in the interaction. What is more, in this precise case, it seems to me that Nicolas Sarkozy is caught in a pragmatic double-bind: as a politician, he should avoid damaging his face through counter-offensive, but as a man, it is hard for him not to react to the offensive utterance and ensuing face damage. This is after all a very human reaction: ‘People tend not to ‘turn the other cheek’, but to retaliate in kind’ (Culpeper 2011: 205). Interestingly enough, this is precisely what most positive assessments of Sarkozy’s reaction focused on. Both anonymous commenters on the Internet⁸ and the President’s political allies indeed praised him for behaving as and like a man (Sarkozy’s Prime Minister, François Fillon, said his reaction showed the President is also a man, while Michel Barnier, then Minister of Agriculture, and Jean-Pierre Raffarin, then former Prime Minister, dismissed the incident as being nothing more than a ‘man to man’ exchange⁹).

4.2. The President’s offensive strategy

The final choice of the President is then to counter the offense with another offense, which is a risky choice, albeit spontaneous in such a context.

Before explaining the effects of such a choice on his face, let’s say a few words about the strategy itself. It operates in two successive utterances, the first being ‘*alors casse-toi!*’, which is reinforced by the second, ‘*casse-toi, alors, pauv’ con!*’, consecutive to an aggravation of his initial FTA by the visitor (he adds ‘*tu m’ salis*’ –‘you’re making me dirty’, which further damages the image of the President).

In both utterances, the President uses the same linguistic resources as his ‘opponent’. He resorts to an inappropriate marker of familiarity too since he uses a second person singular imperative. He also uses informal language, more precisely colloquial language (‘*se casser*’, which is the colloquial translation for ‘leave’) and informal pronunciation (the typical elision of the final vowel found in informal oral French is to be found in the visitors ‘*tu m’ salis*’ and in the President’s ‘*pauv’ con*’). Last but not least, he counters the unmitigated command with another unmitigated command, in a typical display of counter-impoliteness. To make it short, what he does here is matching the (im)politeness threshold set by his interlocutor.

The main difference, which in fact may have made the difference and make him appear even more impolite than the anonymous visitor, is that he adds an insult, further lowering the

(im)politeness threshold of the interaction. Indeed, if the behaviour of the anonymous visitor was very often perceived as “rude”, “impolite” or “inappropriate”, some comments also focused on the fact that he had not used any swear word or derogatory name¹⁰. For the President to reply with an insult was therefore perceived as being even more impolite and inappropriate. Of course, adding an insult is part and parcel of Sarkozy’s impoliteness strategy. The overall command (*‘casse-toi’*) is an attack on the visitor’s freedom of action since it orders him to leave. But it is delivered in such a way which also attacks his image, namely by calling him names (*‘pauv’ con’* –which can be translated as ‘poor jerk’- is at the same time derogatory and condescending, and is reinforced through the adverb *‘pauvre’*). This double attack is deployed in order to cause high damage to the interlocutor’s face wants (both negative and positive, to use Brown and Levinsonian terms again).

5. The end of the interaction

5.1. Outcome of the President’s strategy

Now, what are the actual effects of such a strategy here? Talking about ‘counter-impoliteness’ used in reaction to face loss in a case where the initial impoliteness, as is the case here, is ‘part of strategy to coerce the target’, Culpeper writes that ‘[c]ountering with impoliteness not only restores that face loss but might block the coercive strategy’ (Culpeper 2011: 205). However, he adds, ‘some social contexts constrain the target’s ability to reciprocate’. This is precisely the case of the President: because of his social role (the President is also elected to represent the country abroad and in the media, and as such, has to give an exemplary image of himself), counter-impoliteness was judged inappropriate. The manner in which the Head of State is expected to behave, which may be characterized as “dignified” obviously does not include counter-impoliteness. His social function implies a certain level of dignity and correctness which is by nature perceived as incompatible with the strategy he has chosen. This is precisely what he was most reproached with, both by anonymous commenters on the Internet (‘the President is really not up to his job’, ‘for a President, he doesn’t set a good example’, ‘[his] behaviour [...] lacks dignity, in a job that requires some’, ‘the President is not the average man in the street’¹¹) and political opponents (François Hollande, then leader of the Opposition judged that Nicolas Sarkozy didn’t ‘behave as a President’, explaining that ‘the President is not a citizen like others’, while Laurent Fabius, then former Prime Minister, said “retaliating in kind should be avoided at the risk of debasing oneself”¹²).

It is interesting to notice that once again, this proves that discursive rights and obligations of speakers are highly dependent on their social role. In an interview for French radio station RMC¹³, Jérôme Sainte-Marie, a political scientist then at the head of poll institute BVA Opinion, pointed out that Nicolas Sarkozy’s ‘straight-speaking’ style was considered a quality during the presidential campaign but no longer once elected President. According to him, the presidential function is widely perceived as requiring a different linguistic and pragmatic behaviour (more precisely a high politeness threshold and the use of sustained language). And in fact, Nicolas Sarkozy has often been accused of demeaning the presidential function precisely because of his linguistic behaviour¹⁴.

In the end, the President’s counter-impoliteness ends up being counter-productive and further damages his face, more precisely the public image he gives of himself. Thus, his

strategy is a failure: he discredits himself by resorting to counter-impoliteness instead of restoring his face.

What is interesting, though, is that the non-verbal behaviour of the President seems to indicate that he is well-aware of the potentially face-damaging side-effects of his strategy. He tries to make up for the pragmatic impact of his linguistic behaviour on his image by keeping his calm and trying to appear in control (at least of himself). In fact, he does not show any of the usual signs associated with anger or irritation such as loud voice or expansive gestures. On the contrary, he utters his two replies with a frozen smile and a composed facial expression, to the point of appearing a bit contemptuous. However, this is obviously not enough to minimize the impact of the content of the utterance, which is by and large imputable to factors the President has no control on.

5.2. Discourse end

As for the exchange itself and its end, it is not really satisfactory either for Nicolas Sarkozy. Derek Bousfield predicts that ‘the deployment of an offensive counter to an offensive utterance often does nothing to move the conflict towards a peaceable resolution and can result in a *standoff*’. (Bousfield 2008a: 194). By ‘standoff’, Bousfield means that the conflict can continue ‘theoretically, indefinitely’ (Bousfield 2008a: 214) as neither interactants want to submit or compromise. Here, standoff is actually combined with mutual withdrawal, one of the possible ends listed by Bousfield described as withdrawal ‘from communicative conversational activity, or physically leav[ing] the area’ (Bousfield 2008a: 215). In fact, as I have described earlier on, it is to be noted that Nicolas Sarkozy never stops moving forward during the exchange and immediately tries to go back to shaking hands afterwards, trying as he can to restore his face by going ‘back to business’ as if nothing has happened. As for the man, after insulting the President, he also goes his way, in the opposite direction. So they mutually physically withdraw. This conflict termination is not satisfactory for the President precisely because it is mutual. We may even go as far as seeing this as a last instance of snubbing from the anonymous visitor.

In the end, once the interaction has ended, the face of the President, which was much more at stake in the interaction because of his social role, is left battered and bruised. Worse, it will even be further damaged after the video has been made public, while the man, whose identity is unknown, will leave the public scene unnoticed.

6. Impoliteness and power in the ‘*casse-toi pauvre*’ incident”.

A comprehensive discursive analysis of the ‘*casse-toi pauvre*’ incident would not be complete without trying to examine the power relationship at the heart of the interaction. I have used terms such as ‘hierarchy’, ‘high status’, ‘social status’, ‘authority’, or ‘submissive role’: clearly, a power relationship is at stake in the interaction. Of course, any social interaction involves power that is, to define it very broadly and summarily (needless to say the notion of power is far too complex to be dealt with in a single short definition), the exercise (or ability to exercise) of one’s influence on someone else. However, this precise interaction is an impolite interaction involving an asymmetrical power relationship, which, on top of that, is largely institutional. This makes it quite an interesting illustration of how power can be managed in interaction.

In this respect, I totally subscribe to the view that even though power may be institutionally based, that is depend on the institutional status of interactants, 'power is not static; rather, power is highly dynamic, fluid and negotiable' (Bousfield and Locher 2008: 9). As a result, I think it is compulsory to distinguish two conceptions of power which are simultaneously present in our case: what Culpeper, who is quoting Norman Fairclough (1989:43), calls 'power behind discourse' and 'power in discourse' (Culpeper 2011:225). 'Power behind discourse' materializes here in the social status of the participants which gives them certain discursal power, rights and obligations. As I have written above, the discursal power of the President is normally backed up by his social and institutional power: after all, he is the Head of State, that is the highest-ranking official in France. 'Power in discourse', on the contrary, is the negotiation of power through interaction, for example confirming or challenging the aforementioned status, rights and obligations. Impoliteness is one such way to exercise power in discourse: when 'successful and left uncountered', it is 'a device par excellence for the (re-)activation of one's power over one's interlocutors within an interactional exchange' (Bousfield 2008b: 141-142).

The initial FTA of the anonymous visitor, aimed at an interactant with much higher status, can then be seen as an attempt at disputing /contesting the pre-existing socio-discursal hierarchy, in that it aims 'to challenge and limit the power of an institutionally more powerful addressee' (Bousfield 2008b: 145). Conversely, what is at stake for President Sarkozy is not only repairing face loss but also re-activating his power, which, to make it worse, has been disputed by an interactant with a hierarchically lower status. To say it differently, his choice of an offensive counter could be interpreted as an attempt at regaining the top position in the power structure, and relegate his offender to the bottom position. Which, in his case, means re-asserting his institutionally based power which has been violently challenged, contested and disputed by the anonymous visitor.

The '*casse-toi pauvre*' *con*' incident can thus be viewed as an extreme example of re-negotiation of interactants power and rights through interaction. It also confirms and illustrates Bousfield and Locher's claim that 'even interactants with a hierarchically lower status can and do exercise power through impoliteness'. (Bousfield and Locher 2008: 9).

7. Conclusion

As we have seen all along this discursive study of the '*casse-toi pauvre*' *con*' incident, impoliteness is deeply contextual. It 'emerges within discourse' (Mullany 2008: 234) through a combination of parameters that appeal both to the co-text (preceding or simultaneous utterances and gestures), and wider context (background information about the interactants, socio-discursal roles, norms, conventions...). As a result, although the exchange in itself is pretty short, its analysis demands much re-contextualization and has proved to be very rich and complex, bringing a lot of supposedly peripheral elements in consideration.

But ultimately, what this case study shows is that impoliteness is also a matter of perception. The great variety of reactions to Nicolas Sarkozy's response on the Internet and in general media is a good proof of it. Conversely, as we have seen, what is tolerated from one speaker won't be from another one, depending on his status, rights or obligations. This last point, that is how representations of socio-discursal roles are built and how they influence our perception of linguistic practices (which includes the perception of impoliteness) still needs to be developed and researched further in discourse analysis. Of course, this appeals to the vast and delicate exploration of how norms of appropriate and accepted behaviour in interaction are built and put in practice, which is in itself a rich area for future research.

Notes

1. The video is still available on the newspaper's website at <http://videos.leparisien.fr/video/iLyROoafL1D.html>
2. As Richard Watts writes: 'to go on record baldly and commit the FTA without any redressive action clearly involves the greatest amount of face threat' (Watts 2003: 87).
3. See Richard Watt's study of 'semi-formulaic EPMS' and 'forms of indirectness' in Watts 2003: 189-200.
4. In France, the Press Act of 1881 still penalizes offence to the President. Interestingly enough, the last time it was used was against a man who had written '*casse-toi, pov' con*' on a placard during a protest held against Nicolas Sarkozy's official visit in Laval in 2008, a few months after the Paris Agricultural Show incident.
5. All the reactions quoted or mentioned in the article are extracted from the Internet version of the newspaper article "Le «casse-toi, pauvre con» de Sarkozy fait polémique", *Le Figaro*, 23 February. It was written on the evening of the incident and is the only article still available on the Internet to provide a large and varied sample of reactions and comments on the incident (about 2000 comments). It can be read at <http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2008/02/23/01002-20080223ARTFIG00656-salon-de-l-agriculture-mouvemente-pour-sarkozy.php>
6. "Au Salon, j'aurais mieux fait de ne pas lui répondre", *Le Parisien*, 26 February 2008
7. *Id.*
8. 'Sarkozy a [...] su redevenir un simple être humain' ('Sarkozy was able to behave as a simple human being'), 'Peu de monde aurait accepté d'être traité ainsi sans rien dire, c'est pourquoi il faut apprécier là un président humain, avec les défauts que cela comporte' ('Few people would have accepted to be treated like this and say nothing. Therefore, we should enjoy having a human president, with the flaws that go with it'), 'Je ne vois pas pourquoi Monsieur Sarkozy devrait rester correct avec les gens, s'ils sont en premier incorrects et agressifs avec le Président de la République' ('I don't see why Mr Sarkozy should remain correct with people who are being incorrect and aggressive with the President of the Republic in the first place'), anonymous comments on the web version of "Le «casse-toi, pauvre con» de Sarkozy fait polémique", *op. cit.*
9. *Id.*
10. 'celui à qui il s'adressait ne l'a pourtant pas injurié!' ('the one he was talking to had not called him names'), 'aucun mot grossier dans la bouche du monsieur' ('no swear word came from the mouth of the man'), anonymous comments, *Id.*
11. *Id.*
12. *Id.*
13. In an interview dated from 26 February 2008, only three days after the incident.
14. In 2010, socialist MP François Loncle has addressed the following remark to the Ministry of National Education during parliamentary question time: 'the President of the Republic seems to have difficulties with the French language. He makes a lot of language mistakes, ignoring grammar, misusing vocabulary and syntax, and omitting verb agreement. When he speaks in public, the President thinks it wise to mistreat, intentionally or not, the French language and he sometimes ventures to use vulgar terms and turns of phrase. In order to put an immediate stop to those offences against the culture of our country and its reputation across the world, [we] ask the Minister of National Education to take the necessary measures to enable the President to express himself in adequation with the level of dignity and correctness required by his function'.

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