

Impoliteness and Persuasion in Greta Thunberg's Public Speeches on Climate Change

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ABSTRACT

The present paper examines the impoliteness strategies in Greta Thunberg's public speeches on climate change and their role in persuasive communication. Employing an integrated framework of Culpeper's Impoliteness Strategies and Aristotle's Rhetorical Appeals, we qualitatively analyzed twelve speeches. The findings indicate that bald on-record impoliteness is the dominant strategy, used to express frustration and deliver direct criticism toward politicians and adults. This straightforwardness constructs ethos by projecting a persona of bold truth-telling. Furthermore, negative impoliteness, which expresses disappointment with the indifference of older generations, cultivates pathos by aligning with the perspective of youth and fostering a shared emotional response. Similarly, the use of sarcasm to mock politicians enhances pathos by provoking audience indignation at perceived incompetence. Finally, positive impoliteness, manifested through direct disagreement, underscores her use of logos by pinpointing logical flaws in policymakers' positions. Overall, this study substantiates the persuasive power of impoliteness in public oratory. It offers new insights into how strategic face-threatening acts can generate persuasive discourse capable of mobilizing action towards climate action.

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Introduction

Climate change—a significant and lasting shift in global weather patterns—poses a severe threat to the planet, with negative impacts including air pollution, rising sea levels, and ocean acidification. This crisis is primarily driven by anthropogenic activities, particularly the burning of fossil fuels (May, 2017). In response, global social movements have emerged, with activists striving to hold organizations and individuals accountable for environmental responsibility.

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Among these voices, Greta Thunberg has become one of the world's most influential figures. She first gained international attention in August 2018 by initiating a school strike outside the Swedish parliament to demand concrete action on carbon emissions (Penz, 2022). Her prominence grew due to her characteristically direct, confrontational, and authoritative rhetorical style when addressing politicians and world leaders (Penz, 2022; Meyer, 2019). A defining example of this approach is her address at the 2019 United Nations Climate Action Summit, where she declared, "How dare you? You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words" (Meyer, 2019).

Greta Thunberg herself attributes her direct speaking style to her Asperger's syndrome, a condition she describes as a "gift" that enables her to be straightforward and bypass conventional social niceties (Meyer, 2019; Ottesen, 2021). This very bluntness, however, has made her a frequent target of criticism, with online commentators often berating her for her perceived impoliteness (Park et al., 2021; McCambridge, 2022). Despite this controversy—or perhaps because of it—the persuasive power of Thunberg's rhetoric has garnered significant scholarly attention.

Literature Review

This section provides a brief overview of studies on impoliteness and persuasion, respectively. Based on the literature reviewed, we found a gap in the existing literature that combines the two aspects, as they are paradoxical.

Recent Studies on Impoliteness

Bustan and Alakrash (2020) investigated the impoliteness strategies used by Donald Trump in his tweets about Middle Eastern countries. The findings suggested that four impoliteness strategies were identified: positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, bald on-record impoliteness and sarcasm. Positive impoliteness was used to disassociate Americans from a Somali refugee, to label a terrorist attack as Islamic, to address the Syrian President with pejorative language, and to address Barack Obama with inappropriate identity markers. In addition, negative impoliteness functioned to belittle the Iranian President and humiliate the Israeli government. Muazzaro and Dewanti (2020) examined impoliteness in Trump's speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference held in 2018. These findings are in line with Bustan and Alakrash (2020)'s findings that negative impoliteness was employed by Trump most predominately, followed by positive impoliteness, mock politeness and bald on-record impoliteness.

Furthermore, Alemi and Latifi (2019) uncovered the realization of impoliteness in debates on healthcare and the 2013 government shutdown issue between American Democrats and Republicans. Democrat and Republican speeches from press conferences, briefings, and interviews were analysed and eight impoliteness strategies were identified (i.e., disassociating from the other, using inappropriate identity markers, seeking disagreement or avoiding agreement, threatening or frightening, scorning or ridiculing, explicitly associating the other with a negative aspect, sarcasm or mock politeness, and challenges). Both parties were found to use the challenges strategy most frequently and threatening or frightening the least. The challenges strategy was mainly used to question the opponent's plans and policies. The lack of threatening or frightening strategy may possibly indicate that explicit threats may lead to legal charges.

Andersson (2021) explored impoliteness in the criticism of Greta Thunberg on YouTube. Being a target of online hate speech, trolling and cyberbullying, Thunberg constantly received negative reactions regarding her public appearance, age, lack of experience, and the like. A total of 500 top comments under ten videos (50 comments per video) were selected to analyze. The findings revealed that impoliteness used to attack Thunberg served the purpose of affiliation with individuals who held negative views towards her. Impoliteness can invite like-minded individuals to deploy more impolite language to attack her. Park et al. (2021) also studied incivility in user comments under the most-viewed videos about Thunberg, specifically focusing on explicit and implicit ageist, sexist and ableist language. For the first part of the study, Park et al. (2021) used content analysis to examine the themes or patterns of the data. They identified the comments based on the following: (1) attacks on immaturity (ageism), (2) attacks on appearance and speech manners (sexism), and (3) attacks on private matters and disability (ableism). After content analysis, Krippendorff's Alpha was also used to count the frequency of ageism, sexism, and ableism that occurred in the comments. It was apparent that 43.7% of the comments contained incivility, with ageism accounting for most of the uncivil comments, followed by sexism and ableism. The findings suggested that the online users were not interested in discussing Thunberg's work on climate change but rather attacking her personal characteristics. Moreover, incivility was used as a means to promote climate change denial perspectives.

Recent Studies on Persuasion

Landau and Keeley-Jonker (2018) conducted an affective-emotional rhetorical analysis of Barack Obama's eulogy speech in 2011 in Tucson, Arizona. His speech came after a tragic shooting that ended with 6 deaths and 13 wounded people. Obama's speech was described from three registers: (1) the symbolic and ideological meaning behind Obama's emotional words, (2) the tone, volume and tempo, and the body language of the critics, and (3) the uncontrolled speech or sounds that come from the audience's bodies while watching the speech event. The findings showed that Obama used emotional words to express the public's shared feelings of pain and anger following the tragic event. However, Obama strategically used his tone, volume, and tempo to express enthusiasm, thus transferring positive energy and resulting in applause by the audience despite the negative sentiments. This was deemed persuasive by Americans as his approval rating went up significantly following his Tucson speech.

Hakoköngäs et al. (2020) focused on the rhetorical functions and persuasiveness of Facebook memes of two far-right groups in Finland. Memes refer to ideas and images with the purpose of humoring and amusing the audience and they can also be used to disseminate political arguments and ideologies. A total of 426 image-based memes from two Facebook groups, Finland First and Soldiers of Odin, were collected and analyzed in terms of themes from a multimodal perspective. The findings revealed that history and humor were commonly used by both groups, mainly targeting Islam, immigrants, political opponents, and the EU. Furthermore, the two groups also shared memes that served as news to their readers as they contained information and addressed issues that supported the agenda of movements. The combined rhetorical appeals (i.e., pathos, logos, and ethos) in the memes were used to diminish the opposition, provide a history to the in-group, reinforce in-group identity, and recruit supporters of the same view.

Khajavi and Rasti (2020) conducted a critical discourse analysis on the speeches by two American politicians, Barack Obama from the Democratic Party and Mitt Romney from the Republican Party, during the 2012 election campaign. A total of 30 speeches by Obama and Romney from June 2011 to November 2012 were analyzed. The findings showed that the

politicians employed several strategies including positive self-representation, others' negative representation, legitimization, delegitimization, and persuasion in order to win over their voters' attention. Furthermore, it was found that Obama often focused on positive self-representation by portraying the myth of the American Dream; whereas Romney often tried to portray the others' negative representation by highlighting Obama's weaknesses and his inefficiency to continue as a president for a second term. Evidently, Obama's attempts were successful as he eventually won the election and stayed on for another term. Another significant finding was that the two politicians commonly adopted rhetorical devices, particularly metaphors to convey their messages.

Bangstad and Helland (2019) also employed a critical discourse analysis to investigate ethos, logos, and pathos in Hege Storhaug's 2015 book entitled **Islam-The Eleventh Plague**. To understand her book's success, Bangstad and Helland (2019) examined the rhetoric and discursive strategies as her purpose was to influence, exert power and convince Norwegians of her negative ideas about Islam and Muslims. Storhaug successfully utilized ethos (projection of herself) by advocating for feminism and human rights, which were universal ideals, but she weaponized them in a manner that Muslims are excluded. Hence, she portrayed herself positively to her audiences. She also associated oppressive and primitive ancient Norway to Islam. Furthermore, she portrayed Islam as anti-democratic. She attempted to make this argument using Islamic theology, hence contributing to her logos. Lastly, Storhaug's whole book was based on invoking fear about Islam in her readers' minds, contributing to her pathos. This perhaps goes in line with her target audience in this case.

Saeed et al. (2020) analyzed rhetorical and persuasive strategies in the then Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan's speech after being elected as the Prime Minister of Pakistan using Aristotle's Rhetoric (ethos, logos, and pathos) and other persuasive strategies such as the use of personal pronouns, predication strategy, positive self-representation, and negative other-representation. The findings showed that Imran Khan used Aristotle's rhetorical appeals alongside other persuasive strategies to effectively persuade the Pakistani masses to accept his ideologies. Firstly, Imran Khan used ethos to present himself as the most suitable person to form a "prosperous Islamic state" for the nation, a concept that appeals to the ideological beliefs of the majority in Pakistan. He also used pathos to convince his people to pay taxes by comparing it to paying zakat, an Arabic term that means charitable contribution which is an obligation in Islam meant to help the poor. Finally, he successfully used logos by providing logical explanations and numerical data regarding the debts in Pakistan which were caused by money laundering, thus making his audience believe him more easily.

While the existing literature provides robust, separate explorations of impoliteness in political discourse and persuasion in various rhetorical contexts, a significant lacuna remains at their intersection. Previous studies have effectively catalogued impoliteness strategies in the speech of established political figures like Donald Trump and in parliamentary debates (Bustan & Alakrash, 2020; Alemi & Latifi, 2019), and have separately analyzed the persuasive appeals in the rhetoric of leaders like Barack Obama and Imran Khan (Landau & Keeley-Jonker, 2018; Saeed et al., 2020). However, these domains are often treated as paradoxical, with impoliteness viewed as a breakdown in communication rather than a strategic persuasive tool. Furthermore, while Greta Thunberg has been the subject of impoliteness from online critics (Andersson, 2021; Park et al., 2021), no study has systematically analyzed the impoliteness she proactively employs as a core component of her own persuasive rhetoric. This leaves a critical research gap: the lack of an integrated analysis that examines how impoliteness strategies function as deliberate rhetorical

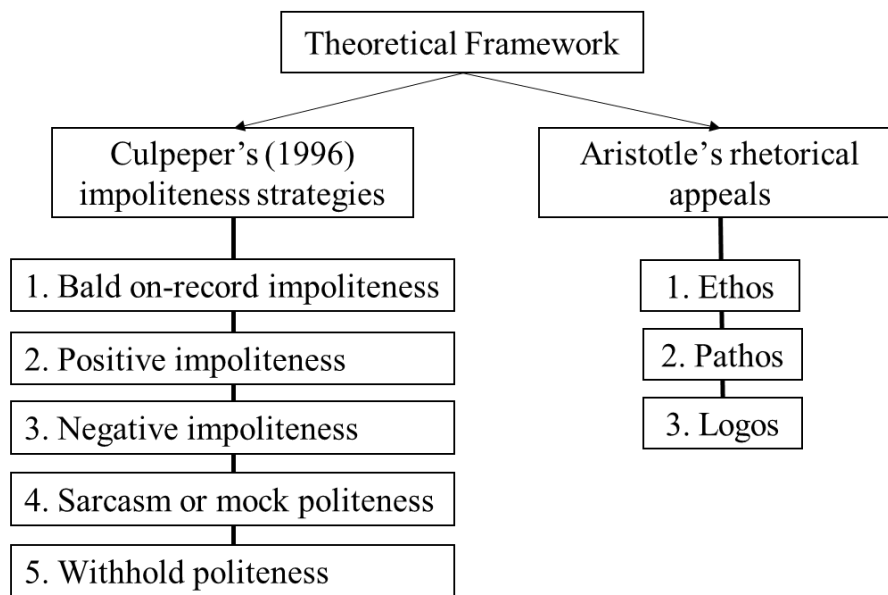
appeals in the discourse of a non-political, youth activist. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by investigating the specific types of impoliteness Thunberg uses and analyzing how these strategies are strategically deployed to build ethos, pathos, and logos, thereby establishing their persuasive function in mobilizing for climate action.

Theoretical Framework

To determine whether Greta Thunberg's impoliteness discourse is persuasive, we proposed the integration of two concepts related to language. Hence, the theoretical framework combines Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness strategies with Aristotle's rhetorical appeals. Culpeper's impoliteness theory is used to identify the types of impoliteness strategies used by Greta Thunberg in her speeches. The identified impoliteness strategies are then interpreted in relation to Aristotle's logos, ethos, and pathos.

Figure 1

The proposed theoretical framework of the study



Culpeper's (1996) Impoliteness Strategies

Before discussing the notion of impoliteness, it is essential to provide some background for Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) borrowed from Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Face is defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for him/herself" (p. 61). There are two types of face, namely negative face and positive face. Negative face refers to the hearer's desire not to be imposed on; whereas positive face refers to the hearer's desire to seek appreciation and approval. An FTA means the act of making someone lose face by humiliating or embarrassing them (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Culpeper (1996) defined impoliteness as communicative strategies that attack the interlocutor and cause social disruption and disharmony. Impoliteness occurs when "(1) the

speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behaviour as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2)" (Culpeper, 2005, p. 38). Due to insufficient work on impoliteness, Culpeper proposed an impoliteness framework based on yet opposite to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory.

According to Culpeper (1996), it is assumed that impoliteness tends to happen when there is an imbalance of power and when individuals have no concern for other people's face. Powerful individuals have more freedom to be impolite because they are able to "(a) reduce the ability of the less powerful participant to retaliate with impoliteness (e.g., through the denial of speaking rights), and (b) threaten more severe retaliation should the less powerful participant be impolite." (p. 354). Individuals may choose to be impolite as a way to shame others into doing something of benefit for them, or individuals have an intention of attacking others' face. For instance, in an American court, direct confrontation is practised because they believe it will elicit the truth. The prosecution considers the defendant as inhuman and loathsome, and they do so by using impoliteness to provoke the defendant (Lakoff, 1989). Impoliteness may also occur in equal relationships where no one has the upper hand. Hence, an attack or insult from one individual may bring another counter-insult from the other individual and so on. It is assumed that individuals tend to counter-attack as an attempt to save face in light of a verbal attack (Culpeper, 1996).

Culpeper (1996) proposed a framework for impoliteness in accordance with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. Brown and Levinson distinguished five politeness strategies: (1) bald on-record, (2) positive politeness, (3) negative politeness, (4) off-record, and (5) withhold the FTA. Based on this, Culpeper (1996) offered five impoliteness strategies for attacking face:

1. Bald on-record impoliteness – The FTA is communicated in a direct, clear, and unambiguous manner where face is not minimised or concerned for. As the most obvious and straightforward impoliteness, its usage reveals the speaker's deliberate intention of attacking the hearer's face.

2. Positive impoliteness – It refers to the strategies used to damage the hearer's positive face wants, the desire to be appreciated or approved of. Positive impoliteness includes ignoring the other, using inappropriate identity markers, using obscure or secretive language, seeking disagreement, using taboo words, using abusive or profane language, and using derogatory nominations.

3. Negative impoliteness – It refers to the strategies used to damage the hearer's negative face wants. This includes frightening the other, being condescending, scorning, or ridiculing, belittling the other, putting the other's indebtedness on record, and explicitly associating the other with a negative aspect.

4. Sarcasm or mock politeness – The FTA is communicated indirectly with the use of politeness but insincerely.

5. Withhold politeness – The absence of politeness where it would be expected. For instance, not thanking someone for a present may be perceived as deliberate impoliteness.

Aristotle's Rhetorical Appeals

Persuasion is often adopted into both spoken and written forms of communication in an attempt to convince the audience (Krishnan et al., 2020). Aristotle's (384-322 BCE) rhetoric has been one of

the most widely acknowledged theories for the past 2500 years (Krishnan et al., 2020) and it has been used as a foundation for numerous studies on persuasion (Bangstad & Helland, 2019; Khajavi & Rasti, 2020; Krishnan et al., 2020; Poggi, 2005; Varpio, 2018). For Aristotle, rhetoric simply means the ability to see the available means of persuasion. Persuasive acts appeal to one or more modes of proof, which are known as ethos, pathos, and logos, also referred to as Aristotle's rhetorical appeals (Parrish, 2013). Ethos focuses on the speaker, pathos on the reader, and logos on the argument. When used together, audiences can be effectively persuaded (Varpio, 2018).

Ethos refers to the appeal to the credibility and character of the speaker. In other words, it concerns whether the speaker appears to be someone whom the audience can trust (Baumlin & Meyer, 2019). An important dimension of credibility is authenticity, meaning that audiences perceive the speaker as being genuine. Authenticity can also be seen as honesty and sincerity regarding the cause the speaker supports. Additionally, the speaker's profession, education, gender, and age group can influence whether the speaker is considered believable and trustworthy. Audiences are more likely to regard the speaker as trustworthy when they feel a connection to them. The credibility of the sources the speaker uses also affects persuasion, as using credible sources reinforces the speaker's credibility (Baumlin & Meyer, 2019).

Pathos is the appeal to the audience's emotions. Emotions play an important role in persuasion because they affect the audience's perceptions and decisions about certain issues. One of the easiest emotions to appeal to is fear. A skillful speaker can take advantage of the audience's fear by convincing them with solutions to fearful situations or issues. However, if not done properly, appealing to fear can also make the audience feel powerless.

Logos refers to the appeal to reason and rationality, using clarity and logical integrity in the speaker's arguments. It focuses on the arguments presented by the author (Varpio, 2018). There are two central aspects to logos: the central claims and the reasons to legitimize them. Successful logos require information that supports logic, such as scientific evidence and statistics. By logically presenting an argument or claim, the speaker appears to be speaking the truth (Bangstad & Helland, 2019).

Integrating Impoliteness and Rhetoric

While Culpeper's framework provides a taxonomy for classifying face-attacking language and Aristotle's appeals outline the foundational elements of persuasion, this study posits a strategic link between them. We argue that impoliteness is not merely disruptive but can be a calculated rhetorical device. Each impoliteness strategy can be deployed to construct a specific rhetorical appeal:

Bald-on-record impoliteness can build ethos by projecting uncompromising honesty and moral clarity, positioning the speaker as a truth-teller who rejects diplomatic niceties (Bousfield, 2008).

Negative impoliteness and sarcasm are potent tools for eliciting pathos. By condescending to or mocking powerful figures, the speaker can channel the audience's frustration, foster a sense of shared grievance, and create emotional solidarity against a common opponent.

Positive impoliteness, particularly through direct disagreement and challenges, can serve logos when used to dismantle an opponent's argument. By rejecting flawed premises and policies, the speaker can frame their own position as a more rational and fact-based alternative.

This integrated framework allows us to move beyond cataloging impoliteness strategies to interpreting their persuasive function. In particular, the study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1: Which impoliteness strategies does Greta Thunberg employ in her speeches?

RQ2: What persuasive functions do these specific face-attacking moves serve?

Method

A descriptive qualitative design has been employed in this research as it systematically describes the facts and characteristics found in the data. Qualitative research addresses general cases in social phenomena to provide descriptions and explanations of these phenomena (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997; Zohrabi, 2013).

Specifically, the study aims to explore the impoliteness strategies used in Greta Thunberg's speeches and the persuasive functions of these strategies. To achieve this aim, we used discourse analysis, a key qualitative research method for deriving meaning from language in context (Mautner, 2017).

This study focused on speeches by Greta Thunberg delivered between 2018 and 2021, as she first appeared in the public eye in 2018 and has been active in climate change advocacy since then (Kramer, 2021). We searched for her speeches on YouTube using keywords such as Greta Thunberg, climate change, speech, United Nations, and conference. Therefore, only speeches delivered during the period 2018–2021 were selected. Additionally, the speeches were chosen only from verified organisations and news sources such as Guardian News, Fridays For Future, World Economic Forum, and similar outlets. After an exhaustive search, a total of 12 speeches were selected (Table 1). The total duration of all selected speeches is 100 minutes, and they were broadly transcribed to allow for in-depth repeated analysis. It is worth noting that the prosodic and paralinguistic features of the speeches were not transcribed, as they are not relevant to our research aim.

Table 1

The corpus (12 speeches) collected from YouTube from 16 December 2018 to 5 November 2021

No.	Speech Event	Video Title	Source	Date	Duration
1.	TEDxStockholm	School strike for climate - save the world by changing the rules Greta Thunberg TEDxStockholm	TEDx Talks	13 Dec 2018	11m 10s
2.	UN Climate Change COP24 Conference 2018	Greta Thunberg full speech at UN Climate Change COP24 Conference	Connect4Climate	16 Dec 2018	3m 29s
3.	World Economic Forum 2019	Greta Thunberg: Our House Is On Fire! World Economic Forum 2019	World Economic Forum	25 Jan 2019	6m 3s
4.	Civil Society for rEUnaissance 2019	“You’re acting like spoiled irresponsible children” – Speech by Greta Thunberg, climate activist	European Economic and Social Committee	21 Feb 2019	10m 3s

5.	EU Parliament in Strasbourg 2019	Greta Thunberg full speech at the EU Parliament in Strasbourg	FridaysForFuture	22 Apr 2019	12m 54s
6.	UK Parliament 2019	Greta Thunberg speech to UK Parliament Climate strikes	WWF UK	24 Apr 2019	12m 2s
7.	R20 Austrian World Summit 2019	Greta Thunberg's speech at the R20 Austrian World Summit, Vienna, May 2019	EKOenergy ecolabel	1 June 2019	10m 57s
8.	UN Climate Action Summit 2019	Greta Thunberg (Young Climate Activist) at the Climate Action Summit 2019 – Official Video	United Nations	23 Sept 2019	4m 7s
9.	UN Climate Change COP25 Conference 2019	Greta Thunberg full speech at UN Climate Change COP25 – Climate Emergency Event	Connect4Climate	18 Dec 2019	11m 34s
10.	Fridays for Future strike in Berlin 2021	Fridays for Future: climate protests kick off with Greta Thunberg in Berlin	Guardian News	24 Sep 2021	1m 59s
11.	Youth4Climate in Milan 2021	Greta Thunberg's Full Keynote Speech at Youth4Climate Pre-COP26 Doha Debates	Doha Debates	29 Sep 2021	7m 35s
12.	Fridays for Future strike in Glasgow 2021	Greta Thunberg full speech from Glasgow COP26 of "Global North Greenwash Festival"	FridaysForFuture	6 Nov 2021	8m 33s

The analysis was conducted in two primary cycles. The first cycle involved identifying and coding impoliteness strategies. Each transcript was reviewed multiple times to identify utterances constituting a Face Threatening Act (FTA) directed at politicians, world leaders, or adults collectively. Identified FTAs were then categorized using Culpeper's (1996) typology: bald on-record, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, or sarcasm/mock politeness. The unit of analysis was the propositional utterance, defined as one expressing a complete face-attacking thought.

In the second cycle, the coded impoliteness strategies were re-examined through the lens of Aristotle's rhetorical appeals. This stage employed a hermeneutic process, asking: what is the persuasive function of each specific face-attack? For instance, a bald on-record accusation was analyzed not only for its directness but for how that directness could establish a credible persona (ethos). Sarcastic remarks were assessed for their capacity to foster shared indignation (pathos), while challenges to policy were evaluated for their reliance on factual claims and logical reasoning (logos). This two-stage coding process systematically connected the micro-level linguistic features of impoliteness with their macro-level rhetorical effects, as outlined in the integrated theoretical framework.

Findings

To address the first research question of the study, namely, *which impoliteness strategies does Greta Thunberg employ in her speeches*, the types of impoliteness strategies used in the 12 selected speeches are first identified and then analyzed in the light of persuasion and rhetorical appeals. The analysis found that Greta Thunberg used the following four impoliteness strategies in descending order of frequency: bald on record impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness, and positive impoliteness. In most of Thunberg's speeches, she adopts bald on-record impoliteness strategy the most.

Bald on Record Impoliteness

As shown in Extract 1, Thunberg not only talks openly about her Asperger syndrome, but also includes her group members in the use of inclusive pronoun *we* and the plural noun *autistics*. Her direct mention of her syndrome communicates the message that autistic people like her are only able to speak the truth about climate issues as the disease restrains them from telling lies. She refers to normal people as *pretty strange* because people acknowledge the threat of climate change and yet, they do not take any action against it. Speaking in a direct manner indicates that she has no intention of saving her hearers' face. This is emphasized in Extract 2 which shows herself more straightforward. She says that she does not intend to be polite as she needs to convey the facts about climate issues clearly so that people are able to understand the urgency and therefore take action. Here, she also attacks the face of world leaders and politicians as they tend to sugar-coat the truth regarding the world's progress against climate change. In Extract 3, Thunberg directly criticizes the leaders of developed nations at COP25. She calls their pledges against climate change *misleading*, and she provides her argument for this. By doing so, she damages the leaders' face in order to shame them into doing better in their actions and pledges. This implies false or empty promises and that they are liars. She is telling them what sectors and services they need to find solutions.

Extract 1: *We aren't very good at lying and we usually don't enjoy participating in the social game that the rest of you seem so fond of. I think in many ways that we autistics are the normal ones and the rest of the people are pretty strange, especially when it comes to the sustainability crisis where everyone keeps saying that climate change is an existential threat and the most important issue of all and yet they just carry on like before.* (Speech 1/2018/Track 02:15)

Extract 2: *We are facing a disaster of unspoken sufferings for enormous amounts of people. And now is not the time for speaking politely or focusing on what we can or cannot say. Now is the time to speak clearly.* (Speech 3/2019/Track 01:48)

Extract 3: *Recently, a handful of rich countries pledged to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases by so-and-so many percents by this or that date or to become climate neutral or net zero in so-and-so many years. This may sound impressive at first glance but even though the intentions may be good, this is not leadership. This is not leading. This is misleading because most of these pledges do not include aviation, shipping, and imported and exported goods and consumption.* (Speech 9/2010/Track 05:35)

Negative Impoliteness

In Extract 4, Thunberg is condescending towards her adult listeners who are referred to by the pronoun *you*. She directly associates adults with *spoiled irresponsible children* due to their lack of action in ensuring a sustainable future for the upcoming generation. Hence, she threatens the face of adults who are reluctant to act. This is further emphasized in the use of pronoun *you* two times. In Extract 5, Thunberg is also condescending towards politicians and adults at the UK Parliament in 2019. She directly points out that solutions to climate change already exist, but politicians do not fully understand or refuse to understand them. This is reflected in their lack of urgency towards solving the crisis despite its severity. In Extract 6, Thunberg threatens world leaders and politicians at Fridays For Future Strike that children protestors *have not disappeared* and that they will continue to strike against governments who have not fulfilled the Paris Agreement. Overall, the use of negative impoliteness is to express her disappointment over politicians' and adults' indifference to climate issues from a youth's point of view.

Extract 4: *You can't just sit around waiting for hope to come, you're acting like spoiled irresponsible children.* (Speech 4/2019/Track 09:01)

Extract 5: *We say that all those solutions needed are not known to anyone and therefore we must unite behind the science and find them together along the way. But you do not listen to that. Because those answers are for solving a crisis that most of you don't even fully understand. Or don't want to understand.* (Speech 6/2019/Track 10:08)

Extract 6: *In some parts of the world, we have experienced what it is like to truly treat an emergency like an emergency and to change social norms. But while all this has happened, of course the climate crisis hasn't disappeared, and we have not disappeared.*

(Speech 10/2021/Track 00:25)

Sarcasm or Mock Politeness

Extract 7 presents Thunberg being furiously sarcastic at the UK Parliament in 2019. She raises three rhetorical questions successfully not because she is worried that her audience cannot hear her. Instead, she is mocking the audience who still refuse to acknowledge the facts and take urgent action against climate change in an indirect manner. In Extract 8, Thunberg expresses sarcasm by using positive lexical items such as *very special*, *mind-blowing* and *very creative* to castigate the UK government's wrong policy of carbon accounting. She later points out that although they achieved a significant reduction in their CO₂ emissions, it is only because the numbers did not include emissions from aviation and shipping. Hence, Thunberg's positive expressions in this regard are not sincere. Instead, she indirectly criticises the UK government for its policy through the use of sarcasm. In Extract 9, Thunberg is also sarcastic in the use of *green jobs* and *politically correct green act* to criticise politicians who are taking advantage of the climate situation to achieve their political agendas. She uses sarcasm to express her frustration with politicians' politicization of climate crisis and intentional lack of cooperation to combat climate change.

Extract 7: *Did you hear what I just said? Is my English OK? Is the microphone on? Because I'm beginning to wonder.* (Speech 6/2019/Track 03:39)

Extract 8: *The UK is, however, very special. Not only for its mind-blowing historical*

carbon debt, but also for its current, very creative, carbon accounting.

(Speech 6/2019/Track 04:48)

Extract 9: *When I say climate change, what do you think of? I think jobs, green jobs.*

Green jobs...This is not about some expensive politically correct green act of bunny hugging. (Speech 11/2021/Track 00:30)

Positive Impoliteness

Thunberg's usage of positive impoliteness can be reflected by her direct disagreement over adults' inaction and EU's proposal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The disagreement is linguistically realised by the adversative conjunction *yet* in Extract 10 and negation *not* in Extracts 11 and 12. Thunberg ignores the status of adults by directly pointing out the incorrectness of adults' thoughts related to environmental protection on half of the youths. Furthermore, she also challenges the EU's status by reasonably mentioning the weakness of its policy. Her direct expression of disagreement threatens adults' and EU's positive face as she damages adults' desire to be admired by the younger generation and EU's desire related to the public's appreciation and approval of its new policy.

Extract 10: *Maybe they will ask why you didn't do anything while there still was time to act. You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes.* (Speech 2/2018/Track 02:03)

Extract 11: *People always tell us that they are so hopeful. They are hopeful that the young people are going to save the world, but we are not. There is simply not enough time to wait for us to grow up and become the ones in charge.*

(Speech 4/2019/Track 01:58)

Extract 12: *In the new target, the EU is proposing to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to 45 percent below 1990's level by 2030. Some people say that is good or that is ambitious. But this new target is still not enough to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius.* (Speech 4/2019/Track 07:00)

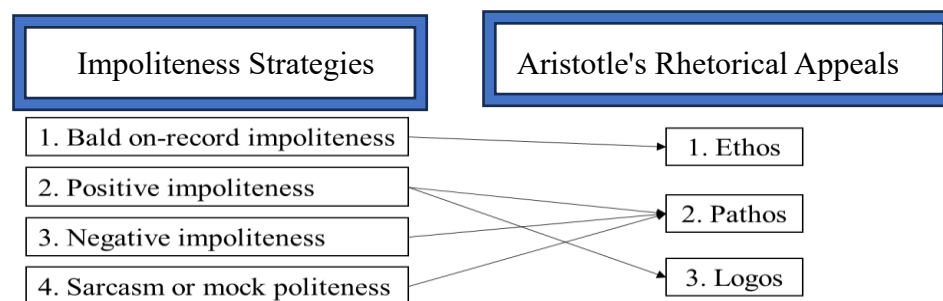
Persuasion Through Four Impoliteness Strategies

As for the second research question, namely *what persuasive functions do these specific face-attacking moves serve*, the study found that Bald on-record impoliteness was employed by Thunberg to express her anger and criticism bluntly and straightforwardly, explicitly attacking her target's face (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 1996). Her mention of her Asperger syndrome, a form of autism that makes it difficult for her to tell lies, implies to her audience that she conveys the facts and truth without any sugar-coating. This also means that she denies the expected face-wants of those she attacks (Bousfield, 2008). Her straightforwardness helps establish ethos as it portrays her as someone who is not afraid of speaking truthfully. With the use of ethos, the audience is more likely to be persuaded to act on the matter (Poggi, 2005). Furthermore, she also prominently uses negative impoliteness to criticise world leaders and adults. Thunberg is found to be condescending towards these two groups, damaging their negative face, and imposing on their freedom of action

(Brown and Levinson, 1987). She often blames these two groups for causing the climate problems that currently exist and for depending on children to fix their problems. She also attacks them for their inaction and criticises existing climate policies because they are not sufficient to prevent climate issues. This downplays the leadership and competency of world leaders to the public (Alemi and Latifi, 2019). Her intention was for the discredited audience to feel ashamed and guilty as her criticisms insinuate that they need to do more towards preventing climate change effects, hence damaging their negative face (Culpeper, 2011). Moreover, by expressing her disappointment over politicians' and adults' indifference to climate issues from a youth's point of view, she strikes a chord with her younger audience. By doing so, pathos is successfully established. Consequently, the younger audience is more likely to have the same sentiment as she does and be persuaded by her style. She also uses sarcasm and positive impoliteness in most of her speeches. Superficially, she uses positive lexical items such as *very special*, *mind-blowing* and *very creative* to castigate the UK government's policy. In fact, she criticises the UK government and its policy with heavy sarcasm. Thunberg's utterance that appears to enhance the face of the members of the UK government actually threatens their face (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 1996). The use of sarcasm can also establish pathos through which audiences' negative sentiments regarding world leaders' inaction and incompetence can be provoked. In addition, Thunberg uses positive impoliteness to express disagreement with adults' indifference to climate issues on the behalf of the youths and EU's policy. The direct expression of disagreement can not only reveal her use of pathos as it can provoke her youthful audiences' negative attitudes towards adults, but also reveals her use of logos as she shows her capability to identify the inappropriateness of EU's policy by referring to the climate threshold *1.5 degrees Celsius*. Overall, the impoliteness strategies used in Thunberg's speeches successfully establishes ethos, pathos and logos and contribute to persuasion as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

The persuasive functions of the identified impoliteness strategies linked to Aristotle's Rhetorical Appeal



Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the types and persuasive functions of impoliteness in Greta Thunberg's climate speeches. The analysis reveals a strategic deployment of impoliteness, with bald on-record impoliteness as the predominant strategy, followed by negative impoliteness, sarcasm, and positive impoliteness. Crucially, by integrating Culpeper's model with Aristotelian

rhetoric, this study demonstrates that these strategies function not as mere outbursts of anger, but as calculated devices which construct a powerful persona and mobilize the audience.

The Prophetic Persona: Bald-on-record Impoliteness and Ethos

The prevalence of bald on-record impoliteness is central to Thunberg's construction of ethos. Her direct, unambiguous accusations function as a performance of prophetic truth-telling (Bousfield, 2008). By rejecting the diplomatic norms expected in political forums, she frames herself as an authentic and morally uncompromising figure. This aligns with Baumlin and Meyer's (2018) conception of ethos as rooted in authenticity. Her explicit rejection of politeness is a meta-discursive act that reinforces this persona. She positions her impoliteness not as a character flaw, but as a necessary response to an existential crisis, thereby transforming a potential weakness (youth, bluntness) into a source of credibility. The audience is persuaded not in spite of her impoliteness, but because of it; it signals a commitment to truth over social comfort.

Mobilizing Emotion: Negative Impoliteness, Sarcasm and Pathos

Thunberg's use of negative impoliteness and sarcasm is a powerful engine for pathos. Her expressions of disappointment and betrayal are not merely descriptive but are designed to channel collective emotional responses. By framing climate inaction as a personal betrayal of the young, she creates a sharp emotional dichotomy between the virtuous youth and the failing adults/politicians. This fosters a sense of shared grievance and solidarity among her primary audience—young people and sympathetic allies. Her sarcasm serves to ridicule the opposition, a classic technique for building in-group cohesion by mocking an out-group (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020). This mockery invites the audience to share in her indignation, transforming personal frustration into a collective emotional experience that fuels moral outrage and, consequently, mobilization.

The Logic of Crisis: Positive Impoliteness and Logos

While used least frequently, positive impoliteness serves a critical function in reinforcing logos. When Thunberg dismisses hope and demands panic, she is performing a logical operation: rejecting an inadequate emotional response (hope as complacency) and replacing it with one she deems proportionate to the scientific facts (panic as urgency). This is not an irrational plea but an argument grounded in a specific premise: the climate crisis is an emergency that warrants an emergency-level response. Her challenges and disagreements often follow a logical structure: she presents a fact (e.g., rising emissions), contrasts it with a failed policy or promise, and concludes that the current approach is illogical. Thus, her positive impoliteness in rejecting conventional pieties serves to underscore the logical inconsistency between the scale of the crisis and the febleness of the response, making her own position appear as the only rational one.

The Functional Duality of Impoliteness

A key insight from this analysis is the functional duality of Thunberg's impoliteness. It operates simultaneously as an instrument of division and affiliation (Culpeper, 2011). It is divisive in its explicit face-attack on political leaders, but it is affiliative in its creation of a powerful in-group identity among her supporters. This aligns with findings in other contexts where impoliteness serves to build solidarity within a community (Andersson, 2021). Thunberg's rhetoric demonstrates that persuasion is not solely about winning over opponents; it is also, and perhaps more effectively, about strengthening the resolve and unity of one's allies.

In conclusion, this study has examined how the impoliteness strategies in Greta Thunberg's climate change speeches function as tools of persuasion. The analysis identifies a consistent use of diverse strategies—primarily bald on-record impoliteness, alongside negative impoliteness, sarcasm, and positive impoliteness. These are employed to attack the face of political leaders and adults and to articulate frustration with their climate inaction. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that this strategic impoliteness systematically enhances her argument through the three rhetorical appeals. Thunberg's bald on-record impoliteness builds ethos by framing her as an uncompromisingly truthful speaker. Her use of negative impoliteness and sarcasm cultivates pathos by forging shared emotional responses, such as indignation, with the audience. Similarly, her positive impoliteness reinforces logos by directly challenging the logical fallacies in her opponents' positions. In conclusion, this study suggests that impoliteness, particularly in activist rhetoric aimed at dismantling the status quo, can be a highly effective and multifaceted persuasive strategy.

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