

Sol Tovar

# Understanding (mis)gender(ing) and pronouns from a politeness theory standpoint

**Abstract:** Certain linguistic forms have a “wounding potential”. The most recognizable forms of “linguistic wounding” are direct insults. However, gendered forms – i.e., words that openly signal someone’s gender, such as pronouns, gendered morphemes or lexemes – also carry this potential. Based on the links shown by Motschenbacher (2010) between gender and Brown and Levinson’s (1987) and Watts’ (2003) work on politeness theory, this study aims to lay out a method for the analysis of (mis)gendering as an (im)politeness strategy. This method involves the analysis of interactions and the use of gendered forms as “face-work” considering Motschenbacher’s conceptualisation of “gender face”, Culpeper’s categorisation of impoliteness strategies and Watts’ views on (im)politeness as politic behavior within a theory of social practice. In this contribution, an in-depth case analysis of a piece of impolite discourse is carried out, bringing together helpful categories of analysis from the existing literature and laying down the groundwork for future work on gendering and politeness.



**Keywords:** impoliteness linguistic wounding, misgendering politeness theory, politic behavior, political discourse

## 1 Introduction

It is “often difficult to untangle [the] link between the folk understanding of politeness and the theoretical concept” (Dimitrova-Galaczi 2002: 1–2). As a theoretical construct, linguistic (im)politeness goes beyond the widespread, traditional “social-norm” idea that politeness arises when actions align with societal norms and impoliteness occurs when actions contradict these norms (Fraser 1990: 220). Linguistic impoliteness encompasses at the same time linguistic behaviors which would commonly not be considered simply impolite but deliberately hurtful, rude, and even discriminatory. Therefore, I wish to emphasize that analyzing misgendering as an

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impoliteness strategy does not imply a reduction of this process as something as inconsequential as, for instance, not saying “please” or “thank you”.<sup>1</sup>

To fully understand the underlying motivations behind the use of certain gendered forms to refer to transgender, non-binary and gender-nonconforming individuals, a politeness theory-based approach to the analysis of gender, gendering, and misgendering built upon the concept of “gender face” (Motschenbacher 2010: 171–172) is needed. In this contribution, an in-depth case analysis will be carried out to illustrate how misgendering operates as a form of linguistic wounding, impacting individuals’ gender face. In addition, since “[w]hat is ‘polite’ or ‘impolite’ language can only be assessed as such by analyzing the context of real social practice” (Watts 2003: 141), it is imperative to analyze how context affects the interpretation of these forms. By examining real-world instances of misgendering as an impoliteness strategy, I aim to lay out the groundwork for a comprehensive analysis of (im)politeness strategies in discourses around and about gender. To that end, I will first introduce the relevant theoretical concepts before applying them in my analysis.

## 2 On politeness theory and linguistic wounding

Motschenbacher (2010: 170) builds upon Butler’s (1997) discussion of hate speech and the wounding potential of words by defining two types of “linguistic wounding”: first-order and second-order. First-order linguistic wounding is connected to the illocutionary and perlocutionary force of the speech act (i.e., the intention of the speaker to harm and the hearer’s/referent’s perception of the speech act as injurious). Second-order linguistic wounding is linked to the wounding potential of certain linguistic categories (e.g., the use of words that have a gender marking, like 3rd person pronouns in the case of English, or certain nouns with a human referent, e.g., *Bundeskanzler* ‘federal chancellor.MASC’ and *Bundeskanzlerin* ‘federal chancellor.FEM’, in the case of German). Consequently, second-order linguistic wounding is unavoidable, since the use of these forms is needed in communication, though it is worth pointing out that “[i]t is not the categories as such that cause harm, but the normativity they have acquired throughout their discursive history” (Motschenbacher 2010: 173).

It is this wounding potential that makes these forms ostensibly impolite, as their use can be connected to politeness and impoliteness strategies employed as part of the facework (Goffman 1967: 5) done by members of different communities of prac-

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1 I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for noting how framing misgendering as impoliteness could lead to an unintended trivialization of discrimination.

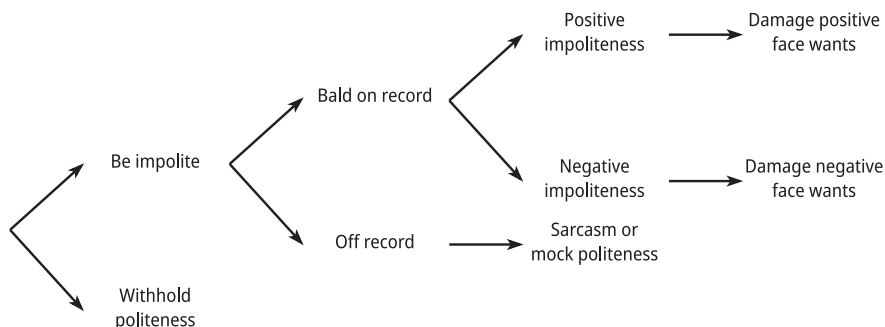
tice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). As a result, misgendering could be implemented as a Face Threatening Act (FTA; Brown and Levinson 1987) to the addressee's "gender face" (Motschenbacher 2010: 171–172), which is deeply connected to what Culpeper (2011: 200) calls "social identity face". In terms of face needs, a person's positive gender face would involve their "need to be accepted with respect to their desired gender identities", whereas their negative gender face would involve their "need not to be restricted in terms of their desired gender practices" (Motschenbacher 2010: 172).

## 2.1 A brief overview of impoliteness strategies

In the present study, impoliteness is analyzed based on Culpeper's (1996) categorization of impoliteness strategies (which was later expanded in Culpeper 2005, 2011; Culpeper et al. 2003). Culpeper's framework for categorizing impoliteness superstrategies mirrors that of Brown and Levinson (1987) for politeness strategies and is reproduced here (cf. Culpeper et al. 2003: 1554–1555):

1. *Bald on record impoliteness*. [...] [B]ald on record impoliteness is typically deployed where there is much face at stake, and where there is an intention on the part of the speaker to attack the face of the hearer.
2. *Positive impoliteness*. The use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants ('ignore, snub the other', 'exclude the other from the activity', 'disassociate from the other', 'be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic', 'use inappropriate identity markers', 'use obscure or secretive language', 'seek disagreement', 'make the other feel uncomfortable[...]', 'use taboo words', 'call the other names', etc.).
3. *Negative impoliteness*. The use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's negative face wants ('frighten', 'condescend, scorn, or ridicule', 'invade the other's space', 'explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect', 'put the other's indebtedness on record', 'hinder or block the other—physically or linguistically', etc.).
4. *Sarcasm or mock politeness*. The use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realizations. Sarcasm (mock politeness for social disharmony) is clearly the opposite of banter (mock impoliteness for social harmony).
5. *Withhold politeness*. Keep silent or fail to act where politeness work is expected.

If we were to see these superstrategies as a decision tree (see Figure 1), the first choice would be whether to be impolite or to withhold politeness. If one chooses to



**Fig. 1:** Decision tree for the use of impoliteness superstrategies.

be impolite, this can be done bald on record or off record (through an implicature, as with sarcasm or mock politeness); and if done bald on record, one can damage positive face wants or negative face wants through positive or negative impoliteness strategies.

Considering these superstrategies, I argue that deadnaming and misgendering are a form of bald on-record impoliteness, in particular a positive impoliteness strategy, as they would correspond to Culpeper et al.'s (2003: 1555) "use of inappropriate identity markers". Bald on-record impoliteness serves as "a means of controlling others as well as maintaining dominant groups in society at the expense of others" (Culpeper 2011: 200). It relies heavily on first-order linguistic wounding – that is, the deliberate use of words that have a strong wounding potential – and can threaten both the positive and the negative face of the other.

## 2.2 Impoliteness and politic behavior

In his discussion of linguistic politeness, Watts (2003) notes the distinction between politic and non-politic behavior within a theory of social practice. Politic behavior is then defined as "linguistic behavior which is perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the ongoing interaction" (Watts 2003: 19). Considering the non-saliency aspect of politic behavior is of particular interest in this case analysis, as it has been pointed out that impoliteness is "the normal and expectable communicative behavior [...] in political conflicts between political leaders, parties and their followers, especially during election campaigns or during periods of hostile relationships between government and opposition" (Kienpointner 2008: 244).

The theory of social practice rests on the premise that the way individuals engage in social interactions is influenced by their past experiences and backgrounds (Watts 2003: 256). Therefore, since impoliteness is expected in the discourse of politi-

cians, certain instances of impoliteness could be seen as politic behavior (i.e., “aggressive facework”; Watts 2003: 259) whereas others as non-politic behavior. To determine that the linguistic behavior is politic, it should be considered canonical and adhere to the established norms and power dynamics within a social group (in this case, members of the *Bundestag*).

### 3 Study background and methods

To provide a comprehensive analysis, it is essential to first establish the contextual backdrop behind this piece of discourse. Two contrasting members of parliament are involved: Beatrix von Storch, a cisgender woman from the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), and Tessa Ganserer, a transgender woman from the left-wing green party Bündnis 90/Die Grünen. Alternative für Deutschland is “a right-wing nationalist party” (Johnson and Barbe 2022: 76), which is critical of the European Union and has been described as having “an overtly nationalist, anti-immigrant, anti-Islam agenda” (Goldenberg 2021). Bündnis 90/Die Grünen is “a coalition of the West German Green Party and the East German protest movement Bündnis 90 (...) comprised of environmental, peace, and human rights activists” (Johnson and Barbe 2022: 75).

The piece of discourse analyzed in this study is AfD representative Beatrix von Storch’s intervention during a session of parliament in which women’s rights were being discussed in anticipation of International Women’s Day. It starts with a reference to J. K. Rowling’s (2020) article on German magazine *Emma* entitled *Frauen werden abgeschafft!* (‘Women are being abolished!’), which triggers her discussion of the topic of gender. The focus of the analysis lies on the impoliteness strategies used by von Storch when referring to Green representative Tessa Ganserer.

Said piece of discourse was sourced from a publicly available recording (Deutscher Bundestag 2022a) as well as the official stenographic records (Deutscher Bundestag 2022b) of the 17th session of the German *Bundestag* (federal parliament) held on February 17, 2022. The coded transcript (as found in Section 6) corresponds to a segment of the video recording of the session (Deutscher Bundestag 2022a) spanning from minute 50:23 to 53:31, comprising von Storch’s full intervention. For the sake of clarity, interruptions and reactions which were recorded in the stenographic records (Deutscher Bundestag 2022b) were removed.

QualCoder 3.2 (Curtain 2023), an open source Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software, was employed to analyze the piece of discourse. The data were systematically coded using a top-down approach to identify gendered forms and linguistic wounds, distinguishing between bald on-record and off-record im-

politeness strategies. In the case of bald-on record impoliteness, instances of misgendering and deadnaming were coded separately, and off-record strategies were divided into mock politeness and indirect FTAs.

Speakers' intentions are known to be hard to determine objectively, yet it has been argued that speakers "manifest their intentions (...) through facework" (Lim 1994: 228). Following this line of argumentation, these instances of linguistic impoliteness were considered alongside the context and co-text to carry out an analysis of Beatrix von Storch's facework. This analysis will in turn allow us to draw conclusions about her intent.

Consequently, the following questions will guide the case analysis:

1. What impoliteness strategies were used by Beatrix von Storch?
2. How is the use of gendered linguistic forms linked to the face-work done by Beatrix von Storch?
  - (a) Which gendered linguistic forms have been used in reference to Tessa Ganserer?
  - (b) What is the intention or wounding potential behind those forms?

## 4 Case analysis

Beatrix von Storch employs a variety of impoliteness strategies; each one of them has different purposes, which will be discussed and exemplified here. It is worth noting, that von Storch uses impoliteness strategies not just in addressing and referring to Ganserer, but also when addressing other members of parliament as a group. This can be seen very early in her discourse in Example (1):

- (1) *Sie fast alle hier sind Frauenabschaffer, weil Sie fast alle hier der Genderideologie anhängen.*  
 'Almost all of you here are women abolitionists because almost all of you here adhere to gender ideology.'

Beatrix von Storch accuses members of parliament of being *Frauenabschaffer* (literally 'women abolitionists', 'misogynists') because of their adherence to what she calls "gender ideology". In this bald on-record display of impoliteness, she uses both positive and negative impoliteness strategies (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1555). Positive strategies attack the positive face of the other and include disassociating from the other ("almost all of you" are misogynists, but "we", the AfD, are not) and seeking disagreement (she claims that those who oppose her "adhere to gender ideology", which implies a divisive stance). Negative strategies attack the negative face of the

other and include overtly associating a person or group with a negative attribute or characteristic (calling the members of the other party *Frauenabschaffer*).

She also uses indirect impoliteness strategies, as seen in Example (2), where she does not attack other members of parliament directly but calls parliament a *Theater* ‘theater’, implying that the discussion of the *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* is not serious or is a joke. She combines this with mock politeness when she adds “wir warten schon mit Freude darauf”, since she is not genuinely happy about the discussion of the law.

- (2) *Das Selbstbestimmungsgesetz kommt demnächst auch in diesem Theater; wir warten schon mit Freude darauf.*

‘The Self-Determination Act [a law on self-determination regarding gender registration] is coming soon to this theater as well; we are already waiting for it with joy.’

As we have seen, impoliteness strategies are often used in combination with one another and not only in isolation. When von Storch refers to Ganserer, she threatens Ganserer’s positive gender-face in order to maintain her position of power, gaining status within her own reference group (AfD politicians and voters). She does this by constantly using inappropriate identity markers to refer to Ganserer, misgendering and deadnaming her. There are multiple examples in her discourse, such as (3), (4), (5), (6) and (7) in which other strategies are also used.

- (3) *Wenn der Kollege Markus Ganserer Rock, Lippenstift, Hackenschuhe trägt, dann ist das völlig in Ordnung; es ist aber seine Privatsache.*

‘If the.MASC colleague.MASC Markus Ganserer wears a skirt, lipstick and heels, that’s perfectly fine, but it’s his private matter.’

Another way von Storch can exercise her power is through indirect FTAs by saying something seemingly neutral that the addressee will interpret as face-threatening (Watts 2003: 215). For instance, in Example (4), Storch says that Ganserer is biologically and legally male, which is in principle a neutral statement since Ganserer was assigned male at birth and had indeed chosen not to legally alter her name and gender as a gesture symbolizing her protest against the German Transsexual Law, which does not allow self-determination. However, von Storch brings up this fact to threaten Ganserer’s positive gender-face.

- (4) *Biologisch und juristisch ist und bleibt er ein Mann.*

‘Biologically and legally, he is and remains a man.’

- (5) *Und wenn er als solcher über die grüne Frauenquote in den Bundestag einzieht und hier als Frau geführt wird, dann ist das schlicht rechtswidrig.*

‘And if he enters the Bundestag as such [a man] because of the women’s quota of the Green party and is listed here as a woman, then that is simply unlawful.’

Mock politeness is also used by von Storch as a way to perform a FTA “with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realization” (Culpeper 2005: 42). In Example (6), von Storch claims to be “grateful” to Ganserer while deadnaming her and in Example (7) von Storch uses the honorific *Herr* (‘Mr’), misgendering her in doing so.

- (6) *Ich bin Markus Ganserer aber für zwei Dinge dankbar: erstens, weil sein Beispiel uns so schön vor Augen führt, dass es einen Unterschied macht, ob man sich als Frau verkleidet oder ob man eine Frau ist, und zweitens, weil er die Frauenquote final ad absurdum geführt hat.*

‘I am grateful to Markus Ganserer for two things: firstly, because his example shows us so beautifully that it makes a difference whether you dress up as a woman or whether you are a woman, and secondly, because he has finally demonstrated the absurdity of the women’s quota.’

- (7) *Der Queer-Beauftragte der Bundesregierung, Sven Lehmann, meint, jeder, der Herrn Ganserer nicht als Frau akzeptiere, sei transphob. Transphob ist offensichtlich ein anderes Wort für “nicht blöd”.*

‘The Queer Commissioner of the Federal Government, Sven Lehmann, says that anyone who does not accept Mr Ganserer as a woman is transphobic. Transphobic is obviously another word for “not stupid”.’

Examples (6) and (7) also demonstrate how von Storch makes claims that indirectly threaten the face of others. For instance, when she thanks Ganserer in Example (6) for demonstrating the “absurdity” of the *Frauenquote*, she is in turn scorning all members of parliament who agree with the implementation of said quota (a negative impoliteness strategy). Likewise, she indirectly calls those who respect Ganserer’s pronouns “stupid” in Example (7) when she claims that if not treating Ganserer as a woman is transphobic, then being transphobic is “not being stupid”, threatening both their positive and negative face by calling them names and being condescending.

Departing from the observations made in Section 2.2 and considering a theory of social practice (Watts 2003), Example (2) would represent a case of politic behavior, since it is expected that a party which is against passing a certain law would undertake aggressive facework (criticizing the *Bundestag* in general) to express their positioning. However, it becomes clear that when personal attacks come into play,



as when von Storch misgenders or deadnames Ganserer or calls members of parliament who support Ganserer stupid, the linguistic behavior can only be classified as impolite, as long as we are considering Ganserer and all members of parliament the “hearer”.

This impolite behavior could be considered political behavior as well if we interpret that the intended “hearer” of von Storch’s discourse is her own social field (people who align with the AfD). Considering that political organizations are social marketplaces (Watts 2003: 149), by linguistically wounding Ganserer, von Storch is gaining social capital. By being impolite to Ganserer, von Storch is “giving something to the addressee [i.e., her social field] on the justified assumption that the addressee will give something back [e.g., political support, votes][...]thus creating and sharing a common understanding” (Watts 2003: 153). This would therefore be expected, canonical behavior between members of the same political party.

## 5 Summing up and looking forward

The analysis of the parliamentary discourse of Beatrix von Storch revealed a complex interplay of impoliteness strategies. Employing both bald on-record and indirect impoliteness, von Storch asserted her power, threatening the face of her political opponents. Through the tactic of using inappropriate identity markers (gendered linguistic forms and names), she threatened Ganserer’s positive gender-face by using the masculine forms of pronouns, nouns, articles, and adjectives, as well as her “legal” name, while maintaining her own status within her reference group and gaining social capital. It also showed that by analyzing the facework done by Beatrix von Storch, it was possible to shed light on the intentions behind her use of said words, which were to maintain power and gain status (social capital) in her own community. The wounding potential of gendered words was also confirmed, since they were used to carry out FTAs that threatened the positive gender-face of Tessa Ganserer.

Future research could explore in more depth politeness strategies surrounding discourses about transgender, non-binary and gender-nonconforming individuals. In addition, a cross-cultural comparison of politeness and impoliteness strategies around gender would shed light on how different cultures and languages address the topic. Finally, it would be key to explore cases in which the perlocutionary and illocutionary force of the speech acts do not align and linguistic behaviors around gender(ing) which are intended as polite as seen as impolite and vice versa.

## 6 Appendix

Codes:

- Bald on record impoliteness
  - Use of inappropriate identity markers
    - Deadnaming
    - Misgendering
- Off-record impoliteness
  - Indirect FTA
  - Mock politeness

Sehr geehrte Frau Präsidentin! Meine Damen und Herren! “Frauen werden abgeschafft!”, das ist der Titel eines Beitrags in der “EMMA” von der Harry-Potter-Erfinderin J. K. Rowling, und das genau betreiben Sie fast alle hier. Sie fast alle hier sind Frauenabschaffer, weil Sie fast alle hier der Genderideologie anhängen.

Sie behaupten, das Geschlecht habe mit Biologie nichts zu tun und jeder könne sein Geschlecht irgendwie selbst bestimmen. Das Selbstbestimmungsgesetz kommt demnächst auch in diesem Theater; wir warten schon mit Freude darauf.

Rowling hat es begriffen. Die Genderideologie gefährdet vor allem Frauen und Mädchen: Männer brechen Rekorde im Frauenschwimmen, Männer in der Damenumkleide, Sexualverbrecher im Frauengefängnis, weil sie sich gerade als Frauen fühlen. Rowling lehnt diesen Quatsch ab und wird deswegen mit obsessivem Hass verfolgt.

Die Transideologie ist totalitär, und sie ist zwangsläufig totalitär. Wer so offenkundig die Natur, die Wahrheit leugnet, der muss die Wahrheit selbst zum Verbrechen erklären und jeden, der die Wahrheit ausspricht, zum Verbrecher.

Der Bundestag liefert ein gutes Beispiel. Wenn der Kollege Markus Ganserer Rock, Lippenstift, Hackenschuhe trägt, dann ist das völlig in Ordnung; es ist aber seine Privatsache. Biologisch und juristisch ist und bleibt er ein Mann. Und wenn er als solcher über die grüne Frauenquote in den Bundestag einzieht und hier als Frau geführt wird, dann ist das schlicht rechtswidrig.

Ich bin Markus Ganserer aber für zwei Dinge dankbar: erstens, weil sein Beispiel uns so schön vor Augen führt, dass es einen Unterschied macht, ob man sich als Frau verkleidet oder ob man eine Frau ist, und zweitens, weil er die Frauenquote final ad absurdum geführt hat.

Hätte sich Robert Habeck im richtigen Moment als Roberta bezeichnet, dann wäre Roberta vermutlich jetzt Bundeskanzlerin.

Der Queer-Beauftragte der Bundesregierung, Sven Lehmann, meint, jeder, der Herrn Ganserer nicht als Frau akzeptiere, sei transphob.

Transphob ist offensichtlich ein anderes Wort für “nicht blöd”. Nicht blöd sind auch die Initiatoren von “Geschlecht zählt”. Das sind ausdrücklich Feministinnen und Grüne, die gegen Ganserers Mandat nun klagen. Sie verstehen, dass es ohne Biologie keine Frauen gibt und ohne Frauen auch keine Frauenrechte.

Der Weltfrauentag ist ein guter Moment, um festzustellen: Ein Fisch ist kein Fahrrad, ein Mann ist keine Frau, und Gender ist gaga. Jede Wahrheit braucht einen Mutigen, der sie ausspricht, und in diesem Parlament ist das die AfD.

Vielen Dank. (Deutscher Bundestag 2022b: 1143)

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