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## USE AND ABUSE OF *POLITENESS*: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF *POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN KEEPING UP APPEARANCES*

*This study investigates the complex interplay between normative politeness and interactional impoliteness within the televised discourse of the British sitcom Keeping Up Appearances. The research focuses on the protagonist, Hyacinth Bucket, whose linguistic behavior serves as a fertile site for exploring the performative nature of social class and the strategic management of «face.» Central to the investigation is the paradox wherein the protagonist's obsessive adherence to prescriptive politeness norms – intended to project a superior social identity – frequently results in profound face-threats and communicative failure.*

*Drawing upon a multi-dimensional framework, the study synthesizes Brown and Levinson's (1987) classical Politeness Theory with more recent developments in Impoliteness studies (Culpeper, 2011; Bousfield, 2008) and Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 1991). The methodology involves a qualitative analysis of verbal exchanges from the series, categorized according to the perceived social class of the interlocutors. The findings reveal that Hyacinth's communicative strategies are strictly delineated along class lines. It's been established that with the perceived «social elite,» the protagonist employs blatant over-accommodation and hyper-polite strategies that often miscarry, resulting in divergence rather than the intended social synchrony. Conversely, her interactions with family and the «socially less fortunate» are marked by downward divergence and bald on-record impoliteness.*

*The analysis further explores how Hyacinth utilizes negative politeness and off-record implicatures not to mitigate face-threats, but to establish social distance and bestow guilt. This is particularly evident in her interactions with «in-group» members, such as her husband Richard and neighbor Elizabeth, where she systematically flouts Gricean maxims to undermine their positive face while ostensibly maintaining a «polite» veneer. Ultimately, the study concludes that Hyacinth's behavior illustrates the fundamental distinction between the socially expected behavior and her actual (im)polite behavior. Her failure to achieve social upward mobility via language stems from her inability to align her linguistic output with the interactional needs of her interlocutors, which is arguably the result of her linguistic performance – but also her non-verbal behavior – being systematically shaped by her social aspirations.*

**Keywords:** *Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), politeness strategies, positive face, negative face, Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs), face management, on-record (im)politeness, off-record (im)politeness.*

**Problem statement.** The relationship between language, social identity, and interpersonal dynamics has long been a central concern in sociolinguistics and pragmatics. One of the ways to examine this relationship is through the analysis of fictional dialogue. While scripted conversations are not recordings of natural speech, they nevertheless reflect and reproduce the unconscious assumptions that

speakers hold about social relationships, class, and face-to-face interaction. As the *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics* argues, whether one prioritizes actual language use or constructed examples, the ultimate frame of reference remains individual speech activities and the verbal interactions in which they occur [7, p. 120]. Consequently, the systematic study of television dialogue can yield genuine insights



into the sociolinguistic mechanisms that underpin everyday communication.

The present study undertakes to explore the language choices made by the main character of the British television series *Keeping Up Appearances* (henceforth KUA), Hyacinth Bucket (pronounced “Bouquet” at her insistence). Hyacinth is an abnormally snobbish, arrogant, and self-righteous middle-class housewife, driven by an overwhelming desire to be accepted into upper-class social circles. The series, which aired from 1990 to 1995, derives much of its humour from the contradiction between Hyacinth’s professed politeness and her actual communicative behaviour, which is frequently bullying, manipulative, and dismissive.

The focus of this paper is on the sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of Hyacinth’s verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Since people’s linguistic choices reflect their social behaviour, our intention is to determine whether and how Hyacinth’s (mal)treatment of those around her can be explained linguistically from the perspective of several established theories: Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), *face* and identity theory [19], politeness theory [5], and impoliteness approaches [8; 9; 11]. We argue that KUA offers a particularly rich dataset for such analysis because the series is explicitly built upon the concepts of politeness, social appearance, and class distinction.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we lay out background research on the key theoretical frameworks, which is followed by a discussion of the projected goals and tasks, as well as the object, methods and corpus of the research. The main body of the paper presents a detailed analysis and discussion of the results, organised around accommodative and (im)politeness strategies. Finally, the concluding section summarizes the findings and sketches out ideas for prospective research.

**Analysis of recent research and publications.** *Communication Accommodation Theory* (CAT) [15; 16; 17]. CAT is a robust social-psychological framework whose core assumption is that language and behaviours communicate social status, group belonging, and attitudes between conversational partners. CAT emerged from Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT), which focused primarily on two strategies: convergence and divergence.

Convergence refers to the process by which speakers adapt their communicative behaviours—accent, speech rate, pause length, intonation, vocal intensity, vocabulary, etc.—to become more similar to their interlocutor [15, p. 107–110]. Convergence is often

motivated by a desire for social approval, efficiency of communication, or the need to reduce social distance. Divergence, conversely, is the strategy by which speakers accentuate speech differences to establish or maintain distance from others. Divergence can signal in-group loyalty, resistance, or a desire to assert one’s own social identity. CAT later broadened the scope to include non-verbal modifications such as body language, posture, and positioning.

Crucially, CAT overlaps in its concerns with politeness theory, notably on issues of face management and identity concerns. For the purposes of this study, CAT provides a lens through which to examine how Hyacinth’s accommodation patterns shift depending on the perceived social status of her interlocutor.

*Politeness and Impoliteness Approaches.* Even Grice and Searle acknowledged that treating conversation simply as information exchange would be something of an oversimplification, and that to do justice to the complexities of real conversational exchanges, one would need to factor in social aspects of communication, notably politeness. Crucial to understanding of politeness is the notion of *face*, which we understand in a sense that goes beyond Goffman’s interpretation [19, p. 5] and subsumes the positive and negative faces of Brown and Levinson, as well as Culpeper’s and Bousfield’s view of face within fairly recently developed approaches to impoliteness and is construed as the public image, or social identity that one tries to uphold and project [3; 4; 8; 9; 10].

It seemed fitting to deploy politeness and impoliteness theories to the series because, as the title implies, the series is built upon the very concept of polite behaviour and on how one appears in the eyes of others. The idea that underlies this particular perspective of Hyacinth’s behavior is one expressed by Terkourafi that face considerations are ever-present in any communication [27]. Indeed, Scollon and Scollon believe that “there is no *faceless* communication” [25, p. 38], meaning that “use of language can never be innocent with respect to face considerations and how interactants always come out of an exchange feeling that their faces have been constituted or threatened to a greater or lesser extent [25, p. 38]. Applying this line of argument, it would be hard to find any exchange in the series which would be inconsequential to face, especially the ones where Hyacinth is involved.

By politeness we will mean, to use Watts’ definition, linguistic behaviour geared toward maintaining the equilibrium of interpersonal relationships within the social group [28, p. 135]. However, communicative diversity that unfolds throughout the episodes

under analysis leads one to call into question whether politeness theory alone can account for many communicational contexts in the series, given the fact that the protagonist tends to continuously bully, harass or impose on those around her, effectively communicating with no regard for any face considerations. In view of this, we were compelled to look for a more encompassing framework to accommodate all (or almost all) cases. The reason why we have opted for an integrated view of politeness/impoliteness, rather than the better-known and better-developed theory of politeness is because the latter is now believed to be somewhat limited in its application, i.e. there are countless situations of communicative interchange that it is incapable of accounting for. The Brown-Levinson theory seeks to show how affronts to face are redressed in order to avoid or mitigate face-threatening acts, while face threat mitigation or redress is often not an issue [5]. There are many situations where “the focus of interaction is task-oriented” or the speaker “does not care about maintaining face” [5, p. 97]. These are, in fact, contexts which impoliteness theory has stepped in to account for. We therefore believe that, for the purposes of the more profitable line of analysis of Hyacinth’s speech, it is best to draw on various available perspectives: the traditional view of politeness, the more recent approaches to politeness by Watts [28; 29], and more recent studies of impoliteness [3; 4; 8; 9; 10]. With this in mind, we have adopted the following classification, synthesised from the above scholars:

Negatively marked behavior		Positively marked behavior
Impolite ↔ Rude ↔	Over-polite ↔	Polite
On-record impoliteness	Bald on-record politeness	Positive politeness
Off-record impoliteness (sarcasm, withholding of politeness)	Negative politeness	Off-record/indirect politeness

As is obvious from the above table, our view of politeness makes a distinction between behavior that is perceived as positive and behavior that is viewed negatively. Negatively marked conduct subsumes impolite behavior, on the one hand, and rude behavior, on the other, the difference, according to Bousfield, being that impoliteness necessarily involves intentionality, whereas rudeness does not [3; 4, p. 138]. It may be worth noting here that, as Terkourafi argues, intentions are socially influenced

and, just like politeness in general, vary cross-culturally [27, p. 249]. With on-record impoliteness, one deals with strategies designed to attack the face of an interactant; to construct his/her face in a non-harmonious way; to deny the interactant’s face needs, wants or rights. The attack is made in an unambiguous way. With off-record impoliteness, the threat or damage to the interactant’s face is conveyed indirectly, by way of implicature. Here Bousfield considers sarcasm and withholding of politeness as dominant strategies, where some form of polite behavior is expected or mandatory. Sarcasm describes a situation where the utterance that appears – on the surface – to positively constitute, maintain or enhance the face of the intended recipient, actually threatens, attacks or damages the face of the recipient [4, p. 138].

**Task statement.** The primary *objectives* of this study are to identify and classify the accommodative strategies (convergence vs. divergence) employed by Hyacinth Bucket, the protagonist of the series, in her interactions with characters from different social classes; to identify and classify the (im)politeness strategies deployed by Hyacinth and to examine how these correlate with her accommodative patterns; to determine whether social class is the primary variable governing Hyacinth’s communicative choices (which has been our hypothesis); finally, to assess the explanatory power of an integrated politeness/impoliteness framework when applied to a fictional but sociolinguistically revealing corpus.

The *object* of the research comprises the communicative strategies – both accommodative and (im)polite – that Hyacinth Bucket deploys across different interactional contexts, as well as – in some cases – the responses these strategies elicit from her interlocutors.

The *corpus* for this study consists of verbal exchanges culled from all five episodes of Season 1 (approximately 180 minutes) and two selected episodes from Season 2 (Episode 3, “The Candlelight Supper”, and Episode 4, “The Toy Store”) of KUA. The total number of analysed exchanges is 78, each defined as a sequence of turns initiated by Hyacinth or addressed directly to her. The selection was purposive: only episodes containing interactions with representatives of three distinct social groups (upper-class aspirational targets, same-class family/neighbours, and working-class relatives) were retained.

*Methods* employed in the study. Analytical procedure followed three stages. First, each exchange was transcribed orthographically, with paralinguistic features (sighs, eye-rolling, posture

shifts) noted. Second, each utterance was interpreted within its context for accommodative strategy (convergence, divergence, over-accommodation, or non-accommodation) following the CAT framework. Third, each utterance was analyzed in the context of the exchange for (im)politeness strategy following the integrated taxonomy presented above.

**Analysis and Discussion of the Results.** We will start with considering accommodative patterns in Hyacinth's speech. The examination of tokens from the first five episodes (45 exchanges between Hyacinth and family members, neighbours, or social superiors) demonstrates that her communicative strategies are distinguished along social-class lines. Three groups are manifest:

*Group 1:* Richard (husband), Daisy and Rose (sisters), and Elizabeth (next-door neighbour) – same-class or close family.

*Group 2:* Onslow (brother-in-law) and other working-class individuals – socially inferior.

*Group 3:* Major, Mrs. Fortescue, and other upper-class representatives – socially superior.

We will now consider the evidence in support of the hypothesis that Hyacinth's need for social approval would correlate positively with convergence towards higher-status individuals. As Giles et al. [17, p. 18] note, the greater the speaker's need for social approval, the greater the likely degree of convergence. Hyacinth's burning ambition to enter social elites intensifies this need.

*Divergence with regard to the working-class people (Group 2).* In interactions with Group 2, Hyacinth's strategies are predominantly divergent. Fragment 1 (Episode 1, at Daisy's house) illustrates this. Her body language conveys revulsion: exasperated facial expressions, weary sighs, rolled eyes. When compelled to address Onslow, she tends to look away, turn her head, or ignore his remarks entirely. She excludes him from the communicative situation, violating the principles of reciprocity and synchrony [2; 12]. She does not show downward convergence; instead, she accentuates difference to assert her own superior status.

*Convergence towards the upper class (Group 3).* With representatives of higher social classes, Hyacinth exhibits consistent, indeed excessive, convergence. However, her convergence is rarely reciprocated. She over-accommodates: her prosodic shifts, lexical choices (e.g., adopting formal registers, avoiding even mildly informal language, pronounced 'ladylike' speech etc.), and deferential body language are so blatant as to become irritating. In Fragment 2 (Season 2, Episode 4), Hyacinth attempts to match

the speech of an upper-class acquaintance but cannot resist boasting about her son (and thus herself). This miscarried convergence amounts, in effect, to divergence, as her interlocutors respond with visible disgust and divergent non-verbal cues.

As Meyerhoff and Niedzielski [23, p. 320] observe, a person attempting to communicate as if a network tie exists where there is none will meet resentment or incomprehension. Hyacinth consistently overestimates the intimacy and shared identity with her social superiors, thereby provoking the opposite of her desired effect.

*Asymmetrical convergence with same-class interlocutors (Group 1).* With Richard, Elizabeth, and her sisters, convergence is asymmetrical. Hyacinth frequently over-accommodates when she has an ulterior motive (e.g., securing help with a candlelight supper). One rare example of symmetrical convergence occurs in Episode 1, when Hyacinth invites Major to supper. Here, she engages in turn-taking, provides *preferred* (to use the language of Conversational Analysis) responses, and avoids flouting Gricean maxims. However, Major's motives differ: he is making romantic advances to her. Notably, Hyacinth tolerates address forms such as "you minx" and "By God, woman..." – which would otherwise offend her if such forms were coming from someone socially inferior – precisely because they come from a higher-status individual. This selective tolerance underscores the primacy of class-based accommodation.

*Impoliteness and Politeness Strategies.* We hypothesised that differences in (im)politeness strategies would also align with the social-class divide, with politeness correlating with convergence and impoliteness with divergence. This hypothesis has been largely confirmed.

*On-record and off-record impoliteness.* Consider the opening of Episode 1 ("Daddy's Accident"). Hyacinth intercepts the postman with: "You new?" Such phrasing, typical of contexts where one wields power over another, constitutes a bald on-record threat to positive face. When the postman proves impervious, she shifts to negative politeness: "I'd be greatly obliged if you'd make quite sure there's anything for Mrs. Bucket." However, her body language (weary expression, exasperated look, resignation) reveals divergence. The postman's divergence intensifies when she insists on having her name pronounced "Bouquet" rather than "Bucket".

Later in the same scene, Hyacinth tells the postman: "There must be a card from my sister in Tenerife. She's back home, of course, but we're still waiting for the card." From a Gricean perspective, this flouts the

maxims of quantity and relevance. The implicature is boastful: Hyacinth signals, by association, her connection to someone with sufficient socio-economic status to holiday in Tenerife. In Bousfield's terms [4, p. 138], this is off-record impoliteness: the face-threat is conveyed indirectly. The postman's response – turning his back, refusing to face her and even stop when responding to her comments – shows that the implicature was understood.

*Indirect impoliteness from powerless characters.* When Hyacinth invites her next-door neighbor, Elizabeth, to her home for the much-dreaded candlelight supper, Elizabeth's response to Hyacinth's reminder – “*You will remember, Elizabeth, that you're invited this evening to my candlelight supper?*” – is “*It's engraved on my mind.*” This off-record impoliteness flouts the maxim of manner; the implicature (caustic resentment) is typically lost on Hyacinth. Powerless groups resort to off-record impoliteness because they fear confronting the powerful Other openly, and indirectness allows the implicature to be denied if challenged. Similarly, Richard's meek remarks (e.g., “*Practically in Beirut*”) constitute off-record face-threats that go unnoticed.

*Positive and negative face attacks on Elizabeth.* In the kitchen scene (Episode 1), Hyacinth's first remark to Elizabeth, commenting on her somewhat early arrival – “*A tiny bit early, but do come in, Elizabeth*” – is negatively impolite, indirectly making Elizabeth feel piqued. When Elizabeth blames her watch for this, Hyacinth responds: “*Oh that watch? I suppose it would.*” This attacks her neighbor's positive face by criticising an item associated with Elizabeth.

After Elizabeth drops a cup and saucer because her hands tremble – as they always do in the presence of Hyacinth – the latter says: “*Do stop worrying, dear. We're not going to fall out over a cup and saucer. Even a very old and irreplaceable cup and saucer [...] Now, we're not going to worry anymore about a bit of expensive carpet and a cup that's been around for ages!*” Semantically, she reassures her guest. But the adjectives (“*very old*”, “*irreplaceable*”, “*expensive*”) flout the maxim of quantity; the implicature emphasizes the gravity of Elizabeth's accident. This constitutes a threat to her negative face (bestowing guilt) while superficially appearing polite. Prior to this, Hyacinth had remarked of Onslow's similar accident: “*I could have killed him. Of course, one can't make a fuss on festive occasions but he certainly got the short end of the turkey.*” The pattern is consistent: pretended forbearance combined with articulated guilt.

The worst attack comes when Hyacinth comments on Elizabeth's daughter: “*It's a struggle, isn't it, when*

*they are not academically gifted.*” The sympathetic frame (“*it's a struggle, isn't it*”) and the generic “*they*” do little to conceal the positive-face assault. Elizabeth's predicament is compounded by Hyacinth's monopolization of the conversation, which also restricts her negative face. Her weak attempts to push back are immediately forestalled.

*Distinguishing rudeness from impoliteness.* Hyacinth exhibits both impoliteness (intentional face-attack) and rudeness (unintentional or habitual face-threat). An example of rudeness occurs when she is so single-mindedly pursuing her agenda that she fails to hear the response: “*And you'll never guess who I bumped into?*” “*Good. Would you polish those glasses for me, dear?*” The lack of alignment with the interlocutor does not appear to be strategic but rather compulsive.

Or another recurring example: Hyacinth offers Elizabeth a seat “*anywhere you like*” in the kitchen. Elizabeth chooses a chair, but Hyacinth responds: “*Except there, dear.*” Only one chair is actually available. The offer turns out to be an empty gesture that prioritizes Hyacinth's control over any genuine politeness. What all of this demonstrates is that the protagonist's verbal behavior can be viewed, in Cameron's terminology, strictly “*performative*” [6]. Her speech is not natural – it is a careful built performance, used to distance her from her working-class roots. By over-applying rules of what she believes to be “*proper*” speech, she is actively “*performing*” the identity of a high-status woman.

**Conclusions.** This study set out to examine the communicative strategies of Hyacinth Bucket in the TV series *Keeping Up Appearances* through the integrated lenses of CAT and (im)politeness frameworks. The analysis yielded three principal conclusions.

First, social class is the primary variable governing Hyacinth's linguistic and non-verbal behaviour. Her accommodative strategies are systematically differentiated: divergence towards those she perceives as socially inferior; excessive, often miscarried convergence towards social superiors; and asymmetrical, often agenda-driven convergence towards same-class family and neighbours.

Second, the integrated politeness/impoliteness framework proves more powerful than traditional politeness theory alone. Brown and Levinson's model [5] accounts for Hyacinth's negative politeness strategies with superiors and her occasional redressive acts, but it cannot explain her frequent on-record and off-record face-attacks. Bousfield's [3; 4] and Culpeper's [8; 10; 11] impoliteness categories –

particularly off-record impoliteness via sarcasm and withholding of politeness – are essential for analysing exchanges with Elizabeth and the postman.

Third, a central paradox defines the series' humor: Hyacinth wishes to appear as a woman of class and politeness, yet she is consistently impolite and rude. Her face-threatening behaviour toward equals and inferiors, combined with her over-accommodative but ultimately self-defeating behavior toward superiors, ensures that she never achieves her desired social standing. The model of human interaction provided by CAT and (im) politeness theory offers a profitable framework for understanding the sociolinguistic and interpersonal dynamics that underpin not only this fictional world but also analogous real-world interactions where status, face, and identity are at stake.

As for further research, several possible avenues emerge from this study.

a) The present analysis is confined to a British television series. A comparative study of politeness/impoliteness strategies in social-climbing characters

from other cultural contexts (e.g., American, Australian, Canadian, or Indian sitcoms) would illuminate cultural variability in face-work and accommodation.

b) Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann [3; 4; 9] have shown the importance of prosody in impoliteness. The current study noted non-verbal cues but did not pursue them further. Future research could examine pitch, pause duration, inflection dynamics etc. in Hyacinth's convergent vs. divergent speech.

c) The study treated KUA as a dataset for linguistic analysis, but an interesting sociolinguistic question might be as to how real viewers perceive Hyacinth's behaviour. Would viewers from different social backgrounds classify her strategies as impolite, rude, or humorous to different degrees?

d) The present corpus focused on Seasons 1 and 2. An extended analysis covering all five seasons could determine whether Hyacinth's strategies change over time – for instance, whether she becomes more (or less) successful at convergence as the series unfold.

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**Потятиник У. О., Кобзар Н. О. ПАРАДОКС КОМУНІКАТИВНОЇ ПРИСТОЙНОСТІ В МІЖСОБИСТІСНИХ ІНТЕРАКЦІЯХ: СОЦІОЛІНГВІСТИЧНИЙ АНАЛІЗ СТРАТЕГІЙ ВВІЧЛИВОСТІ ТА МЕНЕДЖМЕНТУ «ОБЛИЧЧЯ» У СЕРІАЛІ «KEEPING UP APPEARANCES»**

Дана розвідка присвячена вивченню складної взаємодії між нормативною ввічливістю та інтераакційною неввічливістю у телевізійному дискурсі британського телесеріалу «*Keeping Up Appearances*». У фокусі дослідження – мовленнєва поведінка головної героїні, Гіацинт Бакет (Буке), яка є репрезентативним об'єктом для аналізу перформативної природи соціального класу та стратегічного управління категорією «обличчя» (*face*). Основну увагу було зосереджено на парадоксі, за якого нав'язливе дотримання героїнею прескриптивних норм ввічливості, спрямоване на позірне завищення власної соціальної ідентичності, на практиці призводить до систематичних загроз «обличчю» та комунікативних невдач.

Теоретичну базу дослідження становить синтез класичної теорії ввічливості П. Браун та С. Левінсона (1987) з новітніми підходами до вивчення неввічливості (Дж. Калпер, Д. Баусфілд) та теорії комунікативної акомодатії (Г. Джайлз). Методологія передбачає якісний аналіз вербальних взаємодій, класифікованих відповідно до соціального статусу учасників. Дослідження продемонстровано, що комунікативні стратегії героїні чітко диференційовані за класовою ознакою. У взаємодії з «соціальною елітою» героїня серіалу використовує надмірну акомодатію та гіперввічливість, що часто призводить до «перебільшеної» ввічливості, що сприймається оточенням як дивергенція (*divergence*), і, відповідно, закінчується комунікативною невдачею. Натомість у спілкуванні з членами родини та представниками «нижчих» класів було встановлено, що в її інтеракціях домінують стратегії дивергенції та відвертої неввічливості.

Результатами розвідки продемонстровано, що негативна ввічливість та непрямі імплікатури використовуються не для пом'якшення загрози «обличчю», а для встановлення соціальної дистанції та маніпулювання почуттям провини у співбесідників. Аналіз засвідчив, що героїня систематично порушує максими Грайса заради створення загроз «позитивному обличчю» близьких осіб, зберігаючи при цьому зовнішню маску добропорядності. Виявлено суттєвий розрив у поведінці головної героїні між «соціально очікуваною» та реальною поведінкою, хоча вона переслідує протилежні цілі. Її комунікативний «провал» у спробі соціального вивіщування зумовлений нездатністю узгодити мовний

*вибір з прагматичними потребами співрозмовників, що підкреслює соціолінгвістичну напругу між амбіціями героїні та міжособистісною динамікою.*

**Ключові слова:** *теорія комунікативної акомодатії, категорія лінгвістичної ввічливості, стратегії (не)ввічливості, категорія позитивного/негативного (соціального) «обличчя», загрози «обличчю», стратегії збереження «обличчя», менеджмент «обличчя».*

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