

LINGUISTIC AGGRESSION AND FOOTBALL LOYALTY: A STUDY OF IMPOLITENESS IN TWITTER RESPONSES TO @SpursOfficial

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Abstract. This study investigates the use of impoliteness in Twitter responses to the dismissal of Ange Postecoglou by Tottenham Hotspur, despite his recent success in ending the club's 17-year trophy drought. Using Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory, 100 reply tweets to the @SpursOfficial announcement were analysed to identify the strategies fans used to express discontent. The data were collected directly from Twitter shortly after the announcement, using purposive sampling. Each tweet was manually coded according to Culpeper's impoliteness strategies and analysed qualitatively to explore its pragmatic implications. The findings show that bald on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, and sarcasm/mock politeness were the most frequently employed strategies. Impoliteness in this context serves both expressive and social functions, allowing fans to signal moral outrage, reject perceived injustice, and reassert their connection to the club. The study highlights the complex role of impoliteness in digital football discourse and its function as a performative act in moments of collective discontent.

Keywords: Impoliteness, Football Discourse, Twitter, Fandom

Abstrak. Penelitian ini menganalisis penggunaan ketidaksantunan dalam tanggapan Twitter terhadap pemecatan Ange Postecoglou oleh Tottenham Hotspur, meskipun ia baru saja membawa klub meraih trofi pertama dalam 17 tahun. Data dikumpulkan dari 100 tweet balasan terhadap pengumuman @SpursOfficial sesaat setelah pengumuman tersebut, dengan menggunakan teknik purposive sampling. Setiap tweet dikodekan secara manual berdasarkan strategi ketidaksantunan dari teori Culpeper dan dianalisis secara kualitatif untuk menelaah implikasi pragmatik yang muncul. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa strategi bald on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, dan sarcasm/mock politeness paling sering digunakan. Ketidaksantunan dalam konteks ini berfungsi secara ekspresif dan sosial, memungkinkan penggemar menyampaikan kemarahan moral, menolak ketidakadilan, dan menegaskan kembali keterikatan mereka pada klub. Studi ini menyoroti peran kompleks ketidaksantunan dalam wacana sepak bola digital dan fungsinya sebagai tindakan performatif dalam momen ketidakpuasan kolektif.

Kata Kunci: Ketidaksantunan, Wacana Sepak Bola, Twitter, Fandom

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INTRODUCTION

The advent of social media has significantly transformed the way football clubs engage with their supporters, providing a dynamic space where information is shared and emotions are openly expressed (Aichner, 2019; Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Twitter, in particular, functions as

both a promotional platform and a digital agora where fans respond instantly to official announcements (Romero-Jara et al., 2024). The emotionally invested nature of football fandom means that posts related to managerial changes, match results, or player transfers often trigger an intense wave of public reactions (Koenigstorfer et al., 2010). A recent example involves the official Twitter account of Tottenham Hotspur, @SpursOfficial, announcing the departure of their manager, Ange Postecoglou. His dismissal came as a shock to many supporters, especially considering his two-season tenure, culminating in a historic UEFA Europa League title that ended the club's 17-year trophy drought. The replies to this announcement were flooded with emotionally charged, aggressive, and often impolite language, highlighting a rich site for linguistic analysis.

Beyond being a sport, football serves as a powerful cultural and emotional domain that shapes and reflects personal and collective identities (Ismer, 2011; Papadima & Photiadis, 2019). Fans often use language to construct their loyalty, express solidarity with the team, or voice dissent against club decisions (Bajari, 2017). This linguistic performance is evident in digital spaces where social norms can be suspended, and expressions of frustration or betrayal are openly articulated. Within these interactions, the intersection of language and emotion becomes particularly salient. Twitter replies to controversial club decisions can thus be understood as performances of identity and emotion, where fans linguistically enact their support or disappointment (Bahtiyorovich, 2025; Bajari, 2017; Ismer, 2011; Papadima & Photiadis, 2019). In this sense, football-related discourse, especially during emotionally charged events, becomes a fertile ground for the manifestation of impoliteness, conflict, and aggressive language (Aljabali & Abusalim, 2025; Pradika, 2025).

Impoliteness, as a subfield within pragmatics and sociolinguistics, refers to language use that is perceived as intentionally offensive, confrontational, or face-threatening (Aljabali & Abusalim, 2025). According to Culpeper (1996, 2011), impoliteness strategies include bald on-record impoliteness, sarcasm, mock politeness, and the use of taboo language, among others. These strategies are often employed in contexts where social tensions run high or when speakers wish to express strong disapproval (Culpeper, 1996, 2011). In computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as Twitter, impoliteness is particularly pronounced due to the absence of paralinguistic cues and the reduced accountability of speakers (Hutchinson, 2020; Sidi et al., 2021). Users can express harsh criticism or aggression with minimal repercussions (Peddinti et al., 2017), allowing for more frequent and intensified impoliteness. Therefore, studying the linguistic features of impoliteness in online football discourse provides insights into how users navigate and construct conflict and affiliation in a public digital setting.

Although the study of language and football has received considerable academic attention, research on the pragmatic dimensions of fan discourse, especially impoliteness in online interactions, remains limited. Most existing studies tend to focus on commentary (Bergh, 2011), chants (Hoffmann, 2015), or journalistic representations of football (Bagić Babac & Podobnik, 2016), rather than direct, spontaneous fan responses on digital platforms. Moreover, in the Indonesian academic context, there is a noticeable gap in studies that examine the linguistic behaviours of football fans through a pragmatics lens. This study addresses that gap by applying Culpeper's framework to analyse actual Twitter replies during a moment of heightened emotional tension in the football community. By doing so, it seeks to contribute both theoretically and empirically to the understanding of impoliteness in online discourse.

The objective of this study is to analyse the linguistic features and functions of impoliteness in Twitter responses to Tottenham Hotspur's announcement of their managerial change. It aims to categorise the types of impoliteness strategies used by fans and interpret their pragmatic implications within the broader context of football fandom. The study also seeks to understand how impolite language serves not only as a form of criticism, but also as a means of performing loyalty, identity, and emotional engagement in digital spaces.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory to analyse the linguistic expressions of aggression in Twitter responses. Culpeper's framework offers a robust typology of impoliteness strategies, which include bald on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness, and withholding politeness. These strategies are understood not merely as breaches of politeness norms but as deliberate or contextually understood actions designed to attack face, either the speaker's, the hearer's, or both. In the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC), where tone, gesture, and facial expression are absent, Culpeper's theory allows for the close linguistic analysis of how impoliteness is constructed and interpreted through textual cues alone. This theoretical lens is particularly suited for examining social media interactions, which often facilitate direct and unfiltered responses.

The data for this study consists of 100 Twitter replies to a post from the official account of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, @SpursOfficial, concerning the dismissal of manager Ange Postecoglou. The replies were collected following the announcement, which sparked intense public reaction due to Postecoglou's recent success in securing the UEFA Europa League title, the club's first major trophy in 17 years. The replies are taken as spontaneous

expressions of emotion and opinion, produced by users in a moment of perceived betrayal and disappointment. These comments provide a linguistically rich corpus of naturally occurring impolite discourse. For ethical considerations, the usernames and identifying information of the commenters have been anonymised to protect user privacy.

In analysing the data, each reply tweet will be coded manually according to the five core impoliteness strategies proposed by Culpeper. The coding process involves identifying the dominant strategy in each tweet, while also noting any instances where multiple strategies co-occur (e.g., a combination of sarcasm and bald-on-record impoliteness). Attention is also given to lexical markers, such as the use of profanities, direct imperatives, derogatory terms, or intertextual references that signal alignment or disalignment with club management. The tweets will then be grouped according to strategy type, and representative examples will be selected for close textual analysis, which will consider not only the literal meaning of the utterance but also its contextual implications, pragmatic force, and potential interpretations by other users.

This methodological approach aims to uncover how fans use impolite language as a mode of emotional expression and identity construction. Rather than viewing these tweets merely as offensive or toxic, the study seeks to interpret them within the sociocultural framework of football fandom, where loyalty, betrayal, and affect are often expressed through aggressive linguistic forms. Culpeper's model thus functions not only as a descriptive tool but also as an interpretive framework that reveals the interpersonal dynamics and pragmatic functions embedded within online football discourse.

RESULTS

The analysis of fan replies reveals distinct patterns of linguistic aggression, expressed through various impoliteness strategies in reaction to the dismissal of Ange Postecoglou. The following Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of impoliteness strategies.

Frequency Distribution of Impoliteness Strategies

Table 1. Frequency distribution of impoliteness strategies

Impoliteness Strategy	Frequency
Bald-on record impoliteness	41
Positive impoliteness	38
Negative impoliteness	22
Sarcasm/mock politeness	29
Withholding politeness (implied tone)	11
Tweets with multiple strategies	34

Note: Total exceeds 100 due to overlapping strategy used in some tweets.

The most dominant strategy is bald on-record impoliteness, in which users directly issue insults or harsh criticisms without any mitigation (e.g., “Go fuck yourself,” “You deserve to be trophyless,” “FUCK ENIC AND LEVY”). This reflects the emotional intensity and absence of face-saving politeness typically seen in offline communication. In terms of targets, most impoliteness was directed at Daniel Levy and the club’s management, with common lexical choices summarised in the following Table 2.

Impoliteness Targets and Lexical Features

Table 2. Impoliteness targets distribution and lexical features

Primary Target	Frequency	Typical Expressions
Daniel Levy	42	“Levy is a cancer,” “Levy out,” “F&ck Levy,” “bald prick”
Spurs Board	27	“Clown show,” “terrible mentality,” “you lot are a disgrace”
The Club (General)	19	“Loser club,” “shameless,” “tinpot club,” “pathetic”
Indirect (sarcasm/general)	12	“Broke club policy of winning,” “Thanks for nothing, Ange”

The majority of impoliteness was directed at Daniel Levy, indicating a personalisation of blame. Use of expletives, derogatory metaphors (e.g., “cancer,” “clown show”), and hyperbolic insult forms were frequent. The tweets reflect a strong sense of betrayal and perceived injustice, which underpins the linguistic aggression. Several recurring themes and ironic expressions were identified (Table 3), revealing how fans framed their frustration linguistically.

Common Theme and Recurrent Phrases

Table 3. Common theme distribution and recurrent phrases

Theme	Sample Phrases
Trophy-winning irony	“Broke the no trophy rule,” “You hate trophies,” “Ange punished for winning”
Institutional incompetence	“Worst run club,” “You sack winners,” “Clueless board,” “Disgraceful decision”
Loyalty to Ange Postecoglou	“Ange deserves a statue,” “I am done with this club,” “Thanks Ange, fuck Levy”
Existential club identity crisis	“I hope we get relegated,” “Tottenham is a joke,” “Fans deserve failure”

Repetition of sarcasm about a “no-trophy policy” and expressions like “Spursy” highlight how users linguistically construct a club identity steeped in ironic underachievement. Many

tweets demonstrate alignment with Ange Postecoglou, contrasting his perceived heroism with the club's perceived failure.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study reveal a dominant presence of impoliteness in fan responses to @SpursOfficial's announcement regarding the sacking of Ange Postecoglou. The prevalence of bald on-record impoliteness (41 instances) and positive impoliteness (38 instances) reflects the highly emotional and confrontational nature of online football discourse, particularly in moments perceived as unjust or disrespectful to fan loyalty. These strategies are used not only to insult but also to signal moral outrage, disappointment, and betrayal. These are core themes in the discourse following Postecoglou's dismissal. These findings directly address the first research question: What types of impoliteness strategies are used in Twitter replies to @SpursOfficial's post about Ange Postecoglou's dismissal? The strategies identified, especially bald on-record and sarcasm, demonstrate that fans did not simply disagree with the club's decision but did so through highly intensified, face-threatening acts, often delivered without mitigation.

The second research question concerns how these strategies reflect fans' emotional responses and perceived betrayal. The fans' linguistic aggression can be interpreted as a collective coping mechanism in response to perceived institutional failure. The intensity of impoliteness reflects the emotional investment in the club and the symbolic role Postecoglou played, not just as a manager, but as a figure of hope after years of disappointment. Tweets such as "Hope you get relegated," "Loser club," or "You do not deserve that trophy" illustrate how impoliteness is not merely a product of disinhibition in online environments, but an affective expression of football loyalty. As Culpeper (2011) notes, impoliteness can be used to affirm group identity and values by excluding or attacking those perceived as violating group norms. In this case, the club's board, especially Daniel Levy, became the target of collective verbal aggression for disrupting the narrative of progress and success that Postecoglou symbolised.

A significant number of tweets (29 instances) employed sarcasm and mock politeness, which reveals a layer of communicative creativity that blends humour with critique. Tweets such as "He broke the most important Spurs rule—no trophies," or "Thanks for nothing, Ange," represent attempts to ridicule and undermine the club's logic through irony. According to Culpeper, mock politeness is a powerful strategy that masks aggression under the surface of civility or wit. In the context of this data, sarcasm served as a rhetorical strategy to cope with

disappointment while still engaging in face-threatening acts. These tweets perform a dual function: they criticise the club while simultaneously entertaining fellow fans and reinforcing a shared sense of absurdity and betrayal.

Interestingly, 34 tweets displayed multiple impoliteness strategies, often combining bald-on-record insults with sarcasm or negative impoliteness. This co-occurrence suggests that fan responses were layered, complex, and emotionally intense, rather than isolated expressions of rage. For example, tweets that begin with humorous sarcasm often end in explicit profanity or personal attacks. This pattern aligns with Culpeper's assertion that impoliteness is often strategic and context-dependent. In high-stakes contexts such as fandom, especially when collective expectations are thwarted, fans may feel justified in escalating their language, especially in a public and low-accountability space like Twitter.

These findings also relate to the third research question: What do these linguistic expressions reveal about the role of impoliteness in constructing football loyalty and fan identity on social media? The impoliteness strategies employed in the tweets reflect a deep emotional attachment to the club and a sense of ownership over its direction. Fans positioned themselves as moral stakeholders in the club's legacy and used aggressive language to reclaim agency and express disillusionment. In doing so, they performed their loyalty not through politeness or reasoned critique, but through the passionate, often vitriolic defence of values they believed the club had violated. Far from being mere toxic speech, the impoliteness in these replies operates as a form of digital fandom performance, bound by affect, community expectations, and ritualised expressions of grief, loyalty, and defiance.

The use of impoliteness in this case is both reactive and performative. It is reactive in the sense that it responds to a perceived injustice and betrayal; it is performative in that it affirms the speaker's identity as a "true fan" by denouncing those who have violated the community's emotional and sporting expectations. Through Culpeper's framework, we see how impoliteness functions not only as linguistic aggression but also as a form of emotional solidarity, identity reinforcement, and resistance within digital football culture.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the use of impoliteness strategies in Twitter responses to the dismissal of Ange Postecoglou, as announced by @SpursOfficial. Using Culpeper's (1996, 2011) Impoliteness Theory, the analysis identified a range of face-threatening acts, with bald on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, and sarcasm/mock politeness emerging as the most prominent strategies. These findings highlight the emotional intensity and performative

nature of digital football discourse, particularly when fans experience perceived injustice or betrayal. The prevalence of aggressive linguistic behaviour suggests that fans employ impoliteness not merely as a spontaneous reaction but as a deliberate rhetorical resource to voice dissatisfaction, assert loyalty, and challenge institutional authority.

The discussion reveals that impoliteness, in this context, is deeply intertwined with fan identity and communal norms, rather than being viewed solely as inappropriate or toxic language, impoliteness functions as a communicative act rooted in emotional investment, social belonging, and cultural performance. Fans use aggressive and sarcastic language to renegotiate their relationship with the club, reaffirm their status as “true supporters,” and collectively process moments of crisis. This reinforces Culpeper’s view that impoliteness is contextually motivated and pragmatically complex, serving both expressive and social functions in interaction. On a broader level, this study also demonstrates how digital communication platforms like Twitter mediate affect and conflict in contemporary sports culture, allowing fans to construct meaning around institutional decisions publicly.

RECOMMENDATION

Given the findings of this study, it is recommended that future research explore impoliteness in football discourse across a broader range of clubs, contexts, and platforms to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how fans linguistically construct loyalty, identity, and dissent in digital spaces. Comparative studies involving different football cultures, such as clubs in other countries or rival teams, may reveal culturally specific patterns of impoliteness or highlight universal tendencies in emotionally charged sports communication. Furthermore, incorporating multimodal data, such as memes, GIFs, or video replies, could enrich the analysis of how impoliteness is performed and perceived in online settings. From a practical standpoint, football clubs and social media managers might benefit from understanding these communicative patterns, not to suppress fan expression, but to better interpret community sentiment and maintain transparent, empathetic engagement with their supporter base.

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