

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF INTERPERSONAL POWER: IMPOLITENESS
STRATEGIES IN *SLEEPING GIANTS*

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Sylvain Neuvel's novel *Sleeping Giants* is the first of the trilogy titled *The Themis Files*. An apt name, since each book consists not of chapters, but of files with a number. The content of each file varies between interviews conducted by an unnamed character with participants possessing different levels of enthusiasm, as well as journal entries, newspaper articles, and audio transcripts from varying sources. Through this choice of narrative structure, what occurs throughout the novel is revealed by what the characters themselves communicate to one another. No actions are described and no information is given about the moods that characters are in. One has to read between the lines to decipher what kind of roles the various characters fulfill within the narrative as well as in their society. Readers do receive some guidance in this task: the interview file titles give the name and title of the interviewed character, and the location in which it takes place. What the titles do not reveal is any kind of information about the character conducting these interviews. All the reader knows is that the Interviewer is male, and that he apparently wields a considerable amount of power. This becomes prevalent not through the chapter titles, but rather through his interactions with the named characters, especially when paying close attention to how (im)politely he treats them, and they him. This manner of narrative asks the reader to actively make their own connections, and Neuvel also puts readers on the wrong foot. Some of his chapters are not included in the books themselves, and are instead up on his website for the active reader to find. This reading across different modes asks the reader to constantly adjust their conclusions, and challenges them to pay close attention to what the characters reveal through their speech. This essay aims to analyze two chapters from *Sleeping Giants* in order to illustrate how the reader's expectations are subverted, focusing on the way the characters use politeness and impoliteness strategies to maintain control over the conversation, paying specific attention to the character of the interviewer.

Before analyzing the chapters themselves, a brief overview of the theory used to form the analysis will be given. An introduction to *Sleeping Giants* will also be provided, after which the chapters themselves will be discussed. To conclude, the analyses of the two chapters will be compared and the limitations of this research discussed.

The work of Grice [1975] will be discussed first, as his conversation theory is the starting point from which Brown and Levinson [1987] developed their politeness theory. Grice [1975: 314] theorized that there is an unspoken agreement between participants in a conversation that they will work together rationally to achieve an effective and coherent exchange, which he refers to as the “cooperative principle”. He also identified four maxims that participants need to adhere to in order to uphold their cooperation: the maxims of quality, quantity, relation, and manner. These are defined by Katie Wales [2011] as speaking the truth, giving the correct amount of information, being relevant, and avoiding obscurity respectively. Not adhering to a maxim can fall into two categories: either the speaker is flouting the maxim – blatantly failing to fulfill it – or they are violating the maxim by accident [Grice, 1975].

The aforementioned Brown and Levinson expanded upon Grice’s ideas with their own politeness theory. One of their main components is the idea that every adult has “face”, defined by Mick Short [1996, 213] as one’s “public self-image”. Face is a dynamic “thing” that is able to be lost, regained, or maintained, and thus needs to be kept in mind during interactions [Brown and Levinson, 1987]. There are two distinctive aspects to face: positive face and negative face. The former is concerned with a person’s self-image, consisting of the way they wish to be seen by others, and the desire to be liked by those around them. The latter deals with a person’s desire to be free and independent in their actions: the desire to not be imposed upon by others.

Brown and Levinson [1987, 61] also express the idea that within society, all competent adults have face, as well as certain “rational capacities”: the capability to recognize the means that need to be used in order to satisfy their desires throughout the exchange. In order to satisfy one’s desire, an individual will often have to commit a “face threatening act”, or FTA for short. FTAs are defined as “acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker” [65]. These FTAs can damage both the positive face as well as the negative face of the speaker or the addressee. When threatening someone’s positive face the speaker indicates that they have a disregard for the feelings and desires of the addressee. The negative face is threatened when the speaker is not avoiding impeding on the addressee’s freedom to choose their own actions.

There are various types of FTAs that can be committed, which the following paragraphs will deal with. Firstly, a speaker can commit an FTA that damages their own face; they can damage their positive face by for example apologizing, accepting a compliment, or confessing their guilt; or they can offend their negative face by e.g. expressing thanks and thereby acknowledging they are indebted to their conversational partner in some manner [67].

Secondly, a speaker can commit an FTA that damages the face of their addressee. These FTAs can also be split up into positive FTAs and negative FTAs. The former can be split up into two separate categories: ones that imply the speaker has an explicitly negative view of their hearer’s face, and ones that show the speaker feels indifference towards the hearer’s face. Into the first category fall speech acts such as expressions of disapproval, criticisms, ridicule, complaints, reprimands, and insults [66]. The second category holds – among others – expressions of violent emotion, mention of taboo topics, blatant non-cooperation, and using the

wrong terms of address for the hearer – e.g. using the wrong pronouns for a transgender person or calling a high ranking individual by their first name instead of their official title [66, 67].

Threats to a person's negative face can be split up into three categories: speech acts that put pressure on the hearer to either commit or refrain from an act, ones that pressure the hearer to either accept or reject an offer/promise from the speaker, and speech acts that imply the speaker desires the hearer or their property [66]. The first category contains orders or requests, reminders, and threats; the second category contains offers and promises; the third holds compliments and expressions of admiration or envy, as well as expressions of strong negative emotions.

Because each individual within a conversation has goals that they wish to accomplish within their interaction together, FTAs are difficult to avoid. Hence, in order to be polite, a speaker must do their best to mitigate the threat to the face of whomever they address by using politeness strategies [Short, 1996]. In order to do so, an individual can go off record and keep the meaning of their speech act ambiguous, thereby not committing to a single meaning and maintaining the possibility to save one's face later on by claiming one's intentions were misinterpreted [Brown and Levinson: 1987]. When going on record, the FTA is done baldly while adhering to all of Grice's maxims, making the meaning unambiguous. To prevent the addressee from losing face, the bald statement is redressed by using either positive or negative politeness, focusing respectively on assuring the hearer that both parties share similar desires, or indicating that the speaker acknowledges the hearer's freedom of choice of action and does not wish to impose upon it [Brown and Levinson: 1987].

On the other side of the politeness spectrum lies impoliteness theory, which uses the concepts outlined by Brown and Levinson to define the non-polite acts. Culpeper et al.

[2003:1549] state that the difference between being polite or impolite lies in “whether it is the speaker’s intention to support face (politeness) or to attack it (impoliteness)”. They combine the work of Lachenicht [1980] and that of Brown and Levinson [1987] into 5 superstrategies that speakers can use: bald on record impoliteness (when there is intention to hurt the face of the hearer), positive impoliteness (damaging the hearer’s positive face wants), negative impoliteness (aiming to damage the hearer’s negative face wants), mock politeness or sarcasm (using politeness strategies that are obviously insincere), or withholding politeness (not speaking or acting when it would be polite to do so) [Culpeper et. al, 2003: 1555]. When on the receiving end of one of these impoliteness strategies, the addressee can either choose to ignore or respond to the committed FTA. To ignore the attack an individual can make use of sarcasm. To respond one can either take the damage to one’s face, or counter the attack with offensive and/or defensive strategies. When going on the offensive, the receiver of the FTA responds by attacking the face of the previous speaker, whereas the defensive strategies consist of blocking, deflecting, or otherwise managing the face attack. Culpeper et. al [2003: 1565] found abrogation is an often utilized deflection strategy which “involves attempting to switch either social role [...] or discursal role” by claiming relation with a higher power and deflecting the blame to there. Insincere agreement is another deflective strategy given, where the receiver of the FTA expresses agreement with the speaker superficially, in order to give their attacker the chance to calm down.

With the basics of the theory covered, the rest of this essay will focus on applying it to *Sleeping Giants*. The novel takes place mainly in America during contemporary times, and follows the investigation of a team into the appearance of a giant robot, which was left behind by an alien civilization. One of the main characters of the novel is the one referred to in this essay as the interviewer. He is the person that initially puts the team together, and acts as the protector of

the team and their interests. As was previously mentioned, the interviewer does not give out any information with regards to who he is and what kind of overarching organization he is a part of, and what the reader learns about him is conveyed through his interactions with the characters he interviews. The chapters chosen for the analysis within this essay are the ones titled “FILE NO. 034” and “FILE NO. 230”, in which the interviewer speaks with Robert Woodhull, assistant to the president for National Security Affairs, and an unknown subject respectively. Both chapters subvert the reader’s expectations with regards to who has the most power during the conversation, mirroring one another in remarkable ways.

FILE NO. 034 spans pages 57 through 63 in the novel, and takes place at the White House between the aforementioned Woodhull and the interviewer. It is the 9th chapter in the book, and it is the first time the interviewer is put into a situation where he is speaking to someone who has a government position, and in a location as important as the White House. It also takes place shortly after a piece of the robot has come above ground in a populated area, thereby destroying the surroundings and killing 8 civilians, among whom was a young girl. The NSA was not aware of the artifact’s surfacing being initiated by the team, and their hand has been forced to help cover up the cause of the deaths only after the fact. This knowledge in combination with Woodhull’s status and the location of the interview, leads the reader to expect that the interviewer is in for punishment, and that he will have to behave in a polite manner in order to minimize the damage he and his team have done with regards to their relationship with the government of the United States. The opposite becomes clear however, as the interviewer consistently counters any FTAs Woodhull throws in his direction, and acts altogether unconcerned with regards to Woodhull’s threats. The interviewer’s text is bolded, Woodhull’s is plain.

-I don't know who you think you are, or whom you think you answer to, but this is the Office of the President, not some subcommittee you can just lie to for funding. How the hell did the NSA let that happen?

-It was out of their hands.

-Well, then, if it was out of their hands . . . Do I even want to know how you got them to agree to this?

-They did not agree or disagree to anything. It was just . . . out of their hands. I felt there was nothing to gain through their continued involvement. I do not know how or why they got involved in the first place. They are cryptology experts. They analyze phone calls. Giant artifacts left behind by alien civilizations seem a tad out of their league. If we need to talk about this project over the phone, then I will ask the NSA. [Neuvel, 2016: 57]

Woodhull attacks the interviewer's positive face by going baldly on record with the phrase "I don't know who you think you are" with the intended perlocutionary effect of making the interviewer feel inferior to Woodhull. He calls upon the fact that he is part of the office of the president in order to strengthen his power, and also uses the phrase "how the hell" showing indifference to the interviewer's positive face by using positive impoliteness and using a taboo word. Interviewer counters by ignoring the FTA, and when pushed for an answer he chooses to attack the NSA's positive face while going baldly on record, ridiculing them by saying they merely analyze phone calls.

-It's nice to see you have such a great respect for our national agencies. One question.

Who are you to tell the NSA what they can and can't do? Forget that. Just who the hell are you?

-I have the utmost respect for the National Security Agency. I also hold my dentist and my accountant in very high esteem. I have not, however, asked either of them to lead our research team.

-You didn't answer my question.

-What were you told when you took this job? [58]

Woodhull responds to the FTA with sarcasm and goes back to the positive impoliteness by asking the interviewer "who the hell are you", using the taboo phrase again and challenging the interviewer to explain himself, attacking the latter's negative face. The interviewer withholds politeness by not cooperating and gives the mock polite answer that he has respect for the NSA, threatening both their positive and negative face: first by grouping them together with his dentist and accountant, and then saying that those people also do not have anything to do with the research team. When Woodhull let's this FTA slide and points out the interviewer's non-cooperativeness, interviewer withholds politeness once again and changes the topic, flouting the maxim of relation as well as that of quantity, showing his disregard for Woodhull and demonstrating his own power by steering the conversation in the direction he wants.

Woodhull does not let this go for long, and returns the conversation to the topic he wants to discuss:

-You killed eight people, you son of a bitch! Eight US citizens - a child, for God's sake!
A six-year-old girl, with curly red hair and bright blue eyes.

-Would you feel any better if her eyes had been a different color? [58]

Woodhull attacks interviewer's positive face by showing strong emotion and using profanity with "you son of a bitch!", as well as by going into detail about the girl who died by mentioning her physical characteristics in order to elicit an emotional response. Interviewer ignores the insult

and chooses to flout the maxim of relation by asking about the girl's eye color, knowing full well that is not what Woodhull actually wants to discuss, showing disregard for the latter's negative face.

Interviewer eventually makes his power over Woodhull – and the president – very clear:

-You and I both know I did not do anything that this country has not done a dozen times before. And while you might be too proud to admit it, your approval ratings will jump twenty points because of this. Oh, do not give me that look. You have many talents but acting isn't one of them. The election is less than a year away. How many presidents have lost an election during a crisis? Will you really stand there and tell me you did not think about that? Not even for a moment? [59]

He puts their indebtedness baldly on record, implying that the coverup he devised (a terrorist bomb that went off in the apartment) will make the president look good due to the fast actions of the NSA to stop the (non-existent) terrorist plot. He also attacks Woodhull's positive face by accusing him of thinking about how he could spin the events in a positive way for the president's reelection.

As the conversation continues interviewer starts to become even less polite towards Woodhull. On page 60, he starts by addressing Woodhull as "my dear Robert" in response to a positive FTA:

-Don't you think you should have talked to, let me see, me, before you did anything that stupid?

-My dear Robert. I thoroughly enjoy talking to you. You can rest assured I would have come to you without hesitation had I thought for a second it was something I needed to do. [60]

His positive impoliteness with the wrong term of address and the mock politeness of assuring Woodhull that he enjoys talking to him leads to Woodhull responding with “Go to hell...” (60), a relatively mild response compared to how he reacted earlier.

-[...]If you and the president are not willing to go all the way, there are plenty of other players in this game who might not have the same reservations.

-Don't threaten me. Don't *ever* threaten me. You might have enough pull with this office to force me to listen to you, but if you ever threaten me again, you'll spend the rest of your miserable life in some third-rate country being water-boarded ten times a day. I know people too. Do I make myself clear?

-As always, my dear Robert, you are the epitome of clarity. Empty threats aside, my point still stands. [61]

Interviewer's opening statement in this excerpt is an on-record negative FTA, and it causes Woodhull to react emotionally, showing no regard towards interviewer's positive face nor his own. He goes baldly on record with a threat of his own, one that is a lot more violent than the interviewer's. The latter chooses to be mock polite and once again attack Woodhull's positive face with the “my dear Robert”, and stating that he disagrees with Woodhull's power by calling the latter's threat an empty one.

The way interviewer navigates this conversation with Woodhull shows that while Woodhull has the institutional power of the NSA and the president, it is in fact interviewer who is the one in control of this conversation and the way the NSA will act moving forward. Interviewer ignores Woodhull's questions and threats with sarcasm and mock politeness, and puts pressure on Woodhull by calling out the government's indebtedness to the interviewer and his coverup, as well as forcing their hand in cooperating with the research team.

It is from this point onwards in the book that the reader truly knows how much power the interviewer has. When faced with Robert Woodhull who has a lot of institutional power, his reaction is to use sarcasm and refuse to respond to questions he is asked. It may not be clear what kind of position he occupies nor what kind of work he does, but it allows him to disregard the threats from someone connected to the government of the United States. He is characterized as a man who knows exactly what he is doing and has full control of the situations he finds himself in

However, in FILE NO. 230 this situation is reversed. By this point in the book the interviewer is even more firmly established in the narrative as the most powerful person in the room, and the one who is in control. The file title changes this. "INTERVIEW WITH UNKNOWN SUBJECT. Location: New Dynasty Chinese Restaurant, Dupont Circle, Washington, DC" [193]. In contrast to the rest of the novel, it is now the interviewee who has no information revealed about them, setting up a parallel situation with the previous interview between Woodhull and the interviewer, where the latter was the unknown character. The reader now knows more about interviewer than they do about the new character, and having that knowledge about the former leads the reader to assume that he will be the one in charge once again. The lack of information of the unknown subject and the location imply that this is not so, as previous interviews were not held in a restaurant, and thus a new and unfamiliar setup is created.

The interview starts out with the interviewer stating that he is waiting for a man who contacted him on a classified number, and that there is a sniper across from the restaurant, which implies that he is still controlling the situation to a certain degree. Then the interviewee arrives.

-Hello sir! I'm so happy to finally meet you! I've heard so much about you.

-I seriously hope not, for your sake. Please be aware that this conversation is being recorded.

-I'm now perfectly aware. Thank you! Do you know who I am? [195]

The person that arrives is polite, greeting the interviewer and using positive politeness with the phrase “happy to finally meet you”. Interviewer withholds politeness, just as he did with Woodhull, and immediately attacks the unknown man’s negative face by threatening him off-record with his first sentence. While he does use “please” in his second sentence, this is not a politeness marker. Research done by Murphy and De Felice [2018] into the use of the word “please” in AmE in contrast to BrE concluded that the American please is more marked and connotated with a difference in power. It is also used less in AmE, because within a conversation it is more preferable to “establish an atmosphere of equality” [Stewart and Bennett, 1991: 89]. Interviewer is using it here in order to establish his dominance over his conversational partner, and letting him know he is in control by recording the conversation. The interviewee ignores the negative FTA, and damages his own negative face by expressing his thanks for being informed of the recording. Their conversation continues:

-I have absolutely no idea who you are, and I do not particularly care to find out. I want to hear what you know about me, who gave you that information, and what you intend to do with it.

-Oh... You're upset because I mentioned your son on the phone. I didn't mean to stir up bad memories. As I said, you have my deepest sympathies. I can't tell you how I know what I know, but you can trust me when I say you have nothing to fear from me. Your secret is perfectly safe. [Neuvel, 2016: 196]

Interviewer goes baldly on record with a positive FTA, immediately followed by a negative one, demanding answers. Mirroring his actions when interviewer interviewed Woodhull, the unknown subject flouts the maxim of quantity and does not cooperate, only answering the question of what he intends to do with the information: nothing. He damages his positive face by confessing that he did not mean to stir up bad memories – implying an apologetic tone – and then uses positive politeness to reassure the interviewer that he will not let out the secret about the interviewer’s son. This information that the interviewer has a son is new to the reader, and another clue that the more powerful position in the conversation is occupied by the newcomer. He has information that the interviewer does not seem to disclose easily, which has not happened before in the novel. No other character has knowledge about who the interviewer is, and they remark this on multiple occasions. Interviewer does not appreciate this change of power either:

-Listen to me very carefully for I will only say this once. If you value your life in any way, you will not mention my son to me, or to anyone else, ever again. You will tell me exactly what you know, and if I am satisfied with your answer, you will be allowed to leave this place unharmed.

-That’s a bit rude, don’t you think? What’s the signal?

-What signal?

-The one for the sniper across the street? [196]

The interviewer responds to the positive politeness of his conversation partner with an baldly on record threat, without any redressing. The interviewee responds with non-cooperation by flouting the maxim of quantity: not giving any information he is asked for. He mitigates the negative FTA by attacking the interviewer’s positive face and calling him rude, but immediately hedges

by adding the question at the end: “don’t you think?”. He then flouts the maxim of relation with his following question, asking about the signal, another moment where the reader realizes how much the interviewer has lost the control of the situation. The interviewee reveals shortly after that the sniper is asleep, thus cementing that conclusion further in the reader.

After this revelation of his knowledge of the sniper, and the latter’s consequent incapacitation, the interviewee takes overt control over the conversation, and interviewer stops making threats, although it takes him longer to stop being impolite:

-[...] So... let’s start this again, shall we? Would you care to guess who I am?

-I would not.

-Please! Take a guess!

-You are a retired clown who lost his eyebrows in a tragic fire-juggling accident.

-OK. No guessing then. You can call me Mr. Burns.

-That’s a horrible alias.

-It’s my last name, thank you very much. [196, 197]

Mr. Burns takes over the conversation by committing a negative FTA and starting the conversation over again, but he redresses his attack by including the interviewer in his first question “shall we?”. Interviewer does not comply and commits a positive FTA, showing disregard for what Mr. Burns wants him to do. The latter pushes interviewer to guess who he is, first without the use of the please, then committing a negative FTA by using please to insist that interviewer guesses. When he is met with blatant mockery of his positive face, Burns gives up and accepts the FTA. Interviewer goes baldly on record with his positive impoliteness and insults Burns’ name, which is where Burns uses a defensive strategy and contradicts interviewer, stating

the name given is his true name and not an alias. He also uses mock politeness with “thank you very much”.

Mr. Burns very much stays in control for the rest of the conversation, while interviewer continues to be rude. Burns starts to dominate further by taking long conversational turns, launching into a story that lasts for a full page before interviewer interrupts him with a negative FTA: “I am assuming there will be a point to this fable sometime in the near future” [199]. Burns acknowledges the interruption, but continues talking for another page and a half. After the story ends, interviewer realizes that Mr. Burns is talking about the aliens that left behind the robot, and he begins to act more politely.

-How much of it is true?

-Maybe all of it. Maybe none of it is true. You have to decide for yourself. Stories are there to entertain, preserve history, or serve a societal purpose of some kind. I think this one does a bit of everything.

-You are one of them, are you not? You are one of their descendants.

-I’m just an old man who likes to tell stories.

-Can you help us? Can you help us control her?

-I can do no such thing. Even if I knew what you were talking about..

-Then why tell us? Why come to me?

-How about another story? I’m afraid this one does not have such a happy ending.

-By all means. [201]

Interviewer begins to ask questions when he realizes that Mr. Burns is more knowledgeable with regards to the origins of the robot than he is, but it is now his turn to be rebuffed. In response to his first question, Burns flouts the maxim of manner by neither denying or confirming the truth

of his story. When interviewer asks whether Burns is one of the aliens' descendants, the response is a non-cooperative answer that flouts both the maxims of quality and quantity: Mr. Burns is not telling the truth, as he is clearly not "just" an old man. When interviewer presses him to reveal his intentions for coming to him and giving him the information, Burns flouts the maxim of relation and asks whether interviewer wants to hear another story. Interviewer's answer is one of negative politeness, ignoring the non-cooperation and leaving Burns free to tell his story. When the story seems unrelated to their previous topics, interviewer asks for clarification "You will forgive me for asking what may seem obvious, but I prefer to deal in certainties. What was the moral of this story?" [202]. He mitigates the negative FTA he makes towards Burns by asking for forgiveness, acknowledging his request imposes upon Burns' freedom of action, and damages his own positive face by admitting that he does not understand what Burns is conveying with his story. Burns responds:

-Oh, I don't think there's a moral, nothing that deep. If you left a weapon with someone so they could defend themselves, and you found out they were killing each other with it, you'd probably want to take it back or get rid of it. It's just common sense really. But then again, maybe I missed the point entirely. Maybe it's about something else. [202]

He commits a negative FTA, implying that there will likely be consequences from finding the robot, but he then mitigates his warning by flouting the maxim of manner and damaging his own positive face, being ambiguous about the meaning of the story and implying this is because of his own shortcomings.

At this point the waitress arrives, and the conversation ends with the two men ordering their food. Burns makes one more comment that seems to be polite: "I'll let my *friend* here order first" [202, emphasis added]. He is creating an in-group here using positive politeness, although

due to the previous conversation this can also be interpreted as him using mock politeness, since it has become clear that interviewer is not an equal to Burns, as the latter has more knowledge than he does, and Burns has been the dominant person for the majority of the conversation. However, interviewer responds by being polite in return: “I will have the Kung Pao chicken” [202]. This was what Burns told him to order earlier, and by doing so interviewer uses positive politeness, showing that he respects Burns’ taste and opinions, which damages his own negative face as he gives up his freedom of action in order to please Burns.

While both of these chapters demonstrate some of the tactics the interviewer uses, in order to give a more full analysis of his politeness and impoliteness strategies more chapters should be analyzed. He has conversations with each major character in the book, and he changes his approach towards them depending on what the situation demands. The analysis provided here also does not account for his changes in demeanor in subsequent conversations with both Robert Woodhull and Mr. Burns. Neither does it compare the difference between interviewer’s reaction to Woodhull’s eventual replacement. For future research, the interviews with other characters should also be analyzed, as well as the chapters that follow the first interview with both Woodhull and Burns.

The analysis done in this essay shows how the two chosen chapters have parallels, and how the interviewer changes his approach depending on how much power he has in the conversation. In both the chapters the reader is set up to expect that the person they know the least about is the one with the one that will be subordinate throughout the conversation, whereas the opposite is true. In the conversation with Woodhull, the interviewer is less blatantly impolite, and it is he who has the most control over the situation. When the roles are reversed in the restaurant, it is Mr. Burns who is the dominant character, and someone who starts of seeming

polite but eventually becoming as overtly impolite, much in the same manner as interviewer in his first chapter. The characters mirror one another in their respective chapters, both in their lack of familiarity to the reader as in their use of impoliteness tactics, and thus subvert the reader's expectations and conclusions.

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