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From impoliteness to linguistic violence: a non-ideal speech-act theoretical perspective

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Abstract This paper explores the complex relationship between violence and language from a non-ideal speech-act theoretical perspective. After highlighting the limited attention given to conceptualizing linguistic violence within non-ideal philosophy of language, I first examine perspectives that conceive of linguistic violence as arising primarily from either perlocutionary consequences or illocutionary forces, arguing that both have limitations. Building on Marina Sbisà's work on the ethical basis of (im)politeness, I then establish a connection between violent speech and impoliteness. More specifically, I situate linguistic violence and impoliteness along a continuum defined by the degree to which speech acts disregard layers of others' subjectivity. Subsequently, I introduce context-dependent criteria, including the persistence of subjectivity denial, the nature of the layers disregarded, the impact of the environment, and the vulnerability of the target. As I argue, these criteria interact with illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions, pushing towards the threshold of violence. While the challenges of establishing precise boundaries remain, the proposed non-ideal framework aims to provide a starting point for clarifying when speech might legitimately be classified as violent through the disregard of subjectivity layers.

Keywords: speech act theory, linguistic violence, subjectivity disregard, impoliteness, illocutionary effects, perlocutionary consequences, non-ideal speech acts

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0. Introduction

In recent years, analytic philosophers of language, particularly those adopting a non-ideal perspective, have significantly focused on studying hate speech and analyzing its various facets (see, e.g., Beaver, Stanley 2019; 2023; Khoo, Sterken [eds.] 2021; Mühlebach 2022). However, less attention has been paid to exploring the relationship between violence and language[1]. This lack of attention is likely due to the complex

[1] This issue should not be dismissed by simply assuming that linguistic violence is limited to hate speech. Linguistic violence goes beyond just hate speech and can occur in broader contexts: indeed, it also includes forms of harmful speech directed at individuals or groups, regardless of their social identity or disadvantage.

challenge of defining *linguistic violence* precisely. In contrast, physical violence has a more widely accepted definition.

At the same time, there has been extensive public debate, particularly in the United States[2] but increasingly in Europe, about whether certain speech can be considered violent. Some argue that labeling discourse as "violent" amounts to censorship and justification for physical retaliation (Lukianoff, Haidt 2018: 81-98). Others believe that abusive speech, even without overt harm, should be considered violent and restricted. For instance, psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017) contends that over time, such speech can have serious effects on the nervous systems of its targets.

In light of these controversies, philosophers of language interested in examining speech with social and political relevance, particularly discriminatory and manipulative forms, should explore whether violence can be enacted through language and, if so, how. This requires constructing a non-ideal conceptual framework to situate linguistic violence. This paper establishes foundations for such a framework using speech act theory. To achieve this, I will proceed as follows. In the first section, I argue that perspectives conceiving linguistic violence as primarily stemming from either perlocutionary consequences or illocutionary forces fall short of fully capturing the intricate nature of linguistic violence. In the second section, building on Marina Sbisà's (2022) work on the ethical basis of (im)politeness, I propose to situate violent speech and impoliteness along a continuum defined by disregard for others' layered subjectivity enacted through speech acts. Finally, I suggest that, despite challenges in precise demarcation, the proposed framework aims to be a starting point to clarify when speech, by disregarding layers of subjectivity, might justifiably be labeled as violent.

1. Linguistic violence between illocution and perlocution

In a recent paper on the development of a non-ideal philosophy of language, David Beaver and Jason Stanley (2019: 503-516) begin with a discussion of linguistic violence. They note that philosophers of language have traditionally viewed language as a cooperative tool for the efficient exchange of information between interlocutors. However, Beaver and Stanley argue that language goes beyond this, including expressing emotions, shaping perspectives, and influencing social dynamics. Notably, for the context of this paper, language can also be employed violently to attack others. While their insights are valuable in approaching linguistic violence by examining the relationship between speech practices and ideologies, I think it is important to first take a step back and understand how violent language can occur through speech acts. In what follows, I will focus on this issue, as it remains unclear whether linguistic violence is associated with illocution, perlocution, both, or neither.

1.1 Linguistic violence as (primarily) perlocutionary

«In conceptualizing violent language as arising from perlocutionary consequences, the focus is on the potential material impacts of a speech act» (Austin 1975: 102, 106-107, 109-119). Indeed, in common language, violence is usually associated with the deliberate use of physical force that causes harm or damage to people. The association of linguistic violence with the material consequences of speech on the thoughts, feelings and

[2] In recent years, a debate has emerged in the US, driven primarily by certain student groups. They argue that allowing controversial speakers or discussions on sensitive topics on campus can be a form of "violence" against marginalized social groups. As a result, there have been protests against speakers advocating for extreme right-wing views, such as Milo Yiannopoulos, with the aim of protecting the members of these groups.

behavior of an audience is thus consistent with perlocutionary acts. However, as we shall see, there are important differences between this conception of linguistic violence and physical violence.

From a perlocutionary standpoint, violent language can manifest itself in two main ways. First, in what can be termed *indirect causation* (IC), language can, among other things, ignite, incite, or trigger violence by cultivating an environment of violence and intolerance. This indirect causal link implies that certain speech may not directly harm potential targets, but may catalyze behavior that leads to violence against them. Second, *direct causation* (DC) involves speech that directly causes harm, inflicts pain, or undermines the dignity of victims (see, e.g., Delgado 1982). For example, some argue that intimidating or shaming words can have effects comparable to a physical blow but on mental health.

In sum, perlocutionary perspectives consider speech to be violent when it causes material harm to its target, either indirectly by inducing violent behavior (IC) or directly by inflicting psychological harm (DC), or both. If, as said above, physical violence typically requires an intention to cause harm through the use of physical force, linguistic violence operates solely through language, without direct physical force, and can produce unintended harmful effects that deviate from the speaker's intentions, as seen in cases of microaggressions (Glover 2023)[3]. This highlights a fundamental distinction between perlocutionary goals and sequels (Austin 1975: 117), with sequels being outcomes that are not necessarily intended or anticipated, while goals are conventionally associated with specific illocutionary forces. For example, an order like «Shut up!» may have the perlocutionary goal of compelling compliance but can elicit sequels such as fear or discomfort unrelated to the illocutionary force.

The question now is whether the material consequences of speech considered violent should be categorized as perlocutionary goals or sequels. To explore this, let's consider a non-violent scenario. Imagine that speaker S announces to listener L that she is moving to another city. L accepts this information as true, in line with the perlocutionary goal of making an announcement. However, L is startled, loses balance, falls, and gets injured. Can we attribute this to S's announcement? It is difficult to establish a direct link between the fall and injury and S's words, even though S may have intended to startle L. This example highlights the complexity of establishing a clear cause-effect relationship between speech acts and their potential perlocutionary consequences. This complexity becomes even more apparent when considering the connection between instances of speech and their potential material harms.

In fact, there does not seem to be any illocutionary act with the perlocutionary goal of materially harming someone. It would be a mistake to think that threats, despite their perlocutionary aim to induce fear, can fulfil this role. Not all threats involve actual harmful consequences that are significant enough to be considered violent, such as a mother threatening her child that he will not be allowed to play video games if he does not eat dinner. Although this is unpleasant for the child, it does not make the mother's action "violent". Similarly, insults do not inherently have a perlocutionary goal of causing material harm, whether psychological or physical; an insult aims to offend its target, but not all insults result in material harm. This is not to say that insults cannot produce material harms, but rather that any harm is largely contingent, not necessary.

[3] Emma McClure (2020) points out that while individual instances of microaggressions may seem harmless on their own, their impact can be quite damaging when they add up over time and come from different sources. This accumulation can have a significant impact on the self-esteem and well-being of those affected.

For these reasons, I argue that any harm attributed to speech deemed violent should be viewed as a perlocutionary sequel.

With this in mind, let's look again at (IC) and (DC) cases. In the case of (IC), S's utterance allegedly causes L to physically assault Victim V based on the basis of S's words. While S's speech may in some cases influence L's actions, it is unlikely that speech alone is sufficient to catalyze harm. Even if S's words were a necessary factor in L physically assaulting V, relying solely on those words may not provide a satisfactory explanation of why L assaulted V. There may be other reasons why L assaulted V, such as pre-existing hostility towards V, L's own propensity for violence, or particular beliefs L holds about the use of physical violence. This implies that the same words from S might not be sufficient to cause people other than L to physically attack V. Therefore, S's utterance is likely to be a potentially necessary, but certainly insufficient, factor for L to inflict physical harm on V.

Regarding direct causation (DC), S's speech could directly cause mental or emotional distress to V, including prolonged emotional distress. Critics counter that classifying speech as violent solely on the basis of its negative emotional resonance could lead to almost any speech being classified as violent, as language can evoke adverse reactions in certain individuals. The core concern lies in defining violence solely by its ability to evoke robust negative emotions, disregarding individual sensitivity in shaping responses (Lukianoff, Haidt 2018: 94-98). This criterion may not effectively discriminate between speech classified as violent and speech classified as merely offensive, although (as we shall see) there is overlap between these categories.

Thus, defining violent speech solely in terms of its material consequences poses challenges in establishing clear criteria for classifying an instance of speech as violent. Furthermore, in the absence of tangible harm, categorizing speech as violent becomes complex in the (IC) scenario where L does not physically attack V, or in the (DC) scenario where S's speech has no discernible effect on V. Given our discussion so far, we may encounter difficulties in classifying such cases as violent on the basis of a strict perlocutionary approach.

1.2 Linguistic violence as (primarily) illocutionary

Let's explore the implications of linking violent language to illocutionary force. From this perspective, certain utterances not only cause violence but actually constitute forms of violence through their normative effects (on the distinction between causing and constituting see McGowan 2019: 23-25). According to some speech act theorists, successfully performing an illocutionary act involves precisely bringing about these effects (e.g., Brandom 1994; Kukla, Lance 2009; Sbisà 2009). Consequently, differences between speech acts arise from the changes they bring about in the normative statuses (essentially, entitlements and commitments) of both S and L. For instance, uttering «Shut up!» where S has recognized authority over L constitutes an order, obligating L to be silent and entitling S to enforce consequences for noncompliance.

Applying a similar illocutionary framework developed according to an inferentialist model, Lynne Tirrell (2012) examines the role of linguistic violence in enabling physical violence during the *Rwandan genocide* in the 1990s. According to her, linguistic violence consists of speech acts that typically lead to psychological harm or enable assaults and murder by altering social norms and permissions, not just intentions . The focus here is not on the material consequences, but rather on the normative effects that enable such outcomes. She contends that «linguistic violence can violate rights, reduce autonomy, confer inferior status, define unjust hierarchies, and ultimately legitimize acts like assault by reshaping the normative landscape within which people operate» (Ivi: 186). From

this illocutionary perspective, then, understanding linguistic violence requires examining the social context that empowers speech.

Specifically, Tirrell examine the role of dehumanizing terms like "inyenzi" (cockroach) directed at Tutsis in enabling genocide by diminishing empathy towards them (Ivi: 196-207). She situates their use within «"genocidal language games" characterized by three key moves» (Ivi: 207-216). First, language entry moves initiate hostile discourse, as when Tutsis were labeled "inyenzi". Second, language-language moves make inferences within the game, as when "inyenzi" spread from rebels to all Tutsis. Finally, language exit moves carry the game into actions like assault. In Tirrell's analysis, tracing these moves demonstrates how genocidal speech reshaped entitlements and obligations among the involved actors, enabling violence.

Unlike the perlocutionary model, Tirrell's illocutionary approach does not require establishing a causal link between the speech act and any resulting harm. Instead, it focuses on the "permissibility conditions" brought about by certain speech that legitimize violence, regardless of whether harm actually occurs. While this model can account for a broader range of cases, we need to examine whether a more generalizable model applies not only to extreme linguistic violence such as genocide, but also to everyday or institutionalized speech that qualifies as "violent".

To this end, we need to identify the effects and conditions of potentially violent illocutionary acts. In terms of effects, following the distinction between (IC) and (DC) mentioned earlier, violent illocutionary acts can be characterized by either (i) imposing prohibitions or withdrawing rights (as in DC), or (ii) granting permission for harmful behavior (as in IC), or both. Such patterns are common across various illocutionary acts, especially exercitives, but not exclusively; consider threats, which belong to commissives. What enables these acts to produce their normative effects is the condition of an inherent power imbalance between speaker and victim through authority, capability, etc. However, not all violent speech depends on an imbalance. Indeed, we can imagine it occurring in discussions between peers, such as friends or colleagues of equal status. We can also imagine instances of violent speech in situations where a power imbalance does not fully explain the violence: think of a simple order versus a violent one. Returning to the previous threat scenario: we could compare a mother's threat to take away her child's video games, which may not sound violent, to a threat of causing serious physical harm, which clearly is. The challenge is to figure out what distinguishes ordinary speech acts from violent ones, and to understand what aspects create conditions that enable significant material or social harm. To explore this, we will consider the connection of linguistic violence and its harms with impoliteness within a theoretical framework elaborated by Sbisà.

2. Theorizing linguistic violence through impoliteness: subjectivity and its disregard

As discussed earlier, defining linguistic violence presents challenges from both perlocutionary and illocutionary perspectives. As I will suggest, insights may be gained by examining its connection with the concept of impoliteness, exploring both commonalities and differences in their harms. In particular, building on Sbisà's (2022) work on the ethical basis of (im)politeness, I will argue that linguistic violence, like impoliteness, involves using language to disregard or deny various layers of other's subjectivity through speech acts.

2.1 Connecting impoliteness to the disregard of subjectivity

Impoliteness has been studied from diverse theoretical perspectives, yielding varied proposed definitions (see, e.g., Bousfield, Locher [eds.] 2008; Culperer 2011; Xie [ed.] 2021). However, scholars generally agree that it refers to communicative behavior that is perceived, intentionally or unintentionally, as face-damaging and offensive in a given context. «More specifically, it involves the use of language that deviates from social expectations and disregards norms of appropriate behavior, resulting in offense or other negative emotional responses» (Culperer 2011: 56-65). In contrast, politeness involves communicative strategies aimed at preserving or enhancing the public self-image or "face" of the interlocutor, thereby promoting social cohesion and interpersonal relations. Impoliteness can thus be seen as the flip side of politeness, as it challenges face rather than supporting it.

It is widely accepted that judgments of (im)politeness depend heavily on contextual and behavioral features rather than simply on the speaker's intention or the use of specific linguistic formulas. Indeed, behavior that is considered impolite in one scenario may be perfectly acceptable in another. In examining the basis for such context-dependent evaluations of face-threatening or face-enhancing speech, Sbisà (2021) offers a philosophical perspective that links (im)politeness to the recognition or disregard of the other's subjectivity, applying speech act theory. Specifically, she considers evaluations of (im)politeness as responses potentially elicited by speech acts based on how they position participants in terms of mutual recognition of subjectivity. This recognition constitutes a fundamental expectation of human interaction that emphasizes the inherent dignity and agency of individuals.

Central to Sbisà's framework is the idea that recognizing someone as a subject involves layered attributions that are built incrementally (*Ivi*: 159-161). Politeness acknowledges layers of the other's subjectivity, while impoliteness disregards or neglects them, refusing full recognition. Most importantly, recognition can be partial, including some layers but not others. Therefore, in her view, impolite behavior stems from failure to fully recognize the other as an equal subject.

Let's examine these layers of subjectivity and examples of when they are not recognized. At minimum, recognizing subjectivity requires acknowledging the capacity for basic perspective-taking. Sbisà (ivi: 170-171) characterizes this as recognizing that others have certain beliefs, intentions, and desires different potentially from our own. Failure to recognize this basic level can dehumanize others, as in referring to Tutsi as "inyenzi" (cockroach) during the *Rwandan genocide* or Jews as "ungeziefer" (vermin) during the Holocaust.

«The next layer involves recognizing others as agents with intentionality and autonomy, that is, as having freedom of choice» (*Ivi:* 169). An example of violating this level of subjectivity might be when someone belittles another's choices or denies their autonomy. For example, mocking someone's choice of career or minimizing their ability to make independent choices.

«A further layer concerns the recognition of linguistic competence to convey meanings and communicate» (*Ivi:* 163). This clearly presupposes intentionality attribution. Indeed, even when an individual is recognized as an agent, they may not be recognized as an individual capable of expressing meanings. This can occur when communication is interrupted, ignored, or when one talks over the addressee instead of recognizing their communicative intentions.

«Another level involves recognizing that others are experiencing intentional and emotional states that require interest and solidarity» (*Ivi:* 170). Showing disinterest in their perspectives and feelings disregards this facet. For example, dismissing someone's grief over a loss fails to acknowledge their emotional state.

Finally, there is recognition of normative statuses like commitments and entitlements. As suggested earlier, «assigning and/or cancelling such statuses depends on normative effects of speech acts» (Ibidem). Normative statuses may be disregarded by using language that cancels rights rather than defend them, failing to acknowledge rights and imposing decisions irrespective of one's will. Thing of someone disregarding someone other's right to speak during a discussion by constantly interrupting them and imposing their own decisions without considering the other person's will.
In the next section, I will make a connection between violent speech and rudeness, placing both on a continuum characterized by these levels.

2.2. The impoliteness-linguistic violence continuum

As described in Section 1, violent speech can directly cause psychological or social harm or foster conditions leading to physical harm. These consequences may involve a failure to recognize levels of subjectivity in others through speech acts. More specifically, similar to impoliteness, violent speech appears to neglect essential elements of subjectivity, such as perspective-taking, agency, expressive capacity, and emotionality. It can also undermine rights, impose hierarchies, and legitimize aggression. This disregards intersubjective recognition between speakers and hearers. Moreover, it affects levels of subjectivity of individuals who are targeted by the speech but are not directly involved in the exchange. Considering these facets, the harmful consequences of violent speech seem to be related to the failure to fully or partially recognize others' subjectivity. We can therefore hypothesize that impoliteness and linguistic violence differ in the extent to which they affect the failure to recognize the subjectivity of others in communicative contexts. On this basis, the next step is to clarify the similarities and differences between impoliteness and violence along a continuum of subjectivity disregard.
A useful starting point is examining prototypical cases. As suggested, even if both phenomena involve some degree of disregard for layered subjectivity, there are likely to be salient differences between their prototypical cases. Consider a reviewer adopting a brusque, accusatory tone when critiquing a research article. This is an example of prototypical impoliteness: it temporarily deviates from social norms by disregarding limited aspects of subjectivity such as perspective-taking and self-expression. However, prototypical linguistic violence seems to deny core layers of subjectivity on a broad scale, persistently, not temporarily. Context-dependent criteria can help distinguish speech closer to one extreme from the other, such as:
- the degree and persistence of subjectivity disregard: as said above, prototypical cases of impoliteness involves temporary failures to fully recognize limited aspects of others' subjectivity. In contrast, prototypical linguistic violence involves the persistent denial of core levels of subjectivity, such as autonomy, dignity and emotionality. Speech that repeatedly disregards additional layers over time approaches linguistic violence through the cumulative impact of denying broader facets of subjectivity. For instance, persistent workplace aggressions may initially overlook emotional states, but accumulate to deny capabilities and worth;
- the foundational nature of the disregarded layers: speech that disregards basic layers like perspective-taking or agency constitutes more severe denial than overlooking complex layers like emotional states. Consequently, dehumanization categorically denying core subjectivity categorically qualifies as linguistic violence. But consider also situations where an individual's autonomy is challenged. For instance, a parent continually undermining their child's choices involves obstructing legitimate interests to control actions through threats like «I'll ground you if...», which goes beyond mere impoliteness;

- the harmfulness of the environment: speech that repeatedly contributes to an intolerant climate enables escalating harm by cultivating conditions that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups over time, even if individual acts have limited impact. In this way, the cumulative effects on the environment distinguish impoliteness from violence;
- the vulnerability of the target: impoliteness tends to occur in isolated interpersonal exchanges, such as a heated discussion between friends, whereas violence centered on vulnerable identities exposes specific individuals, particularly those from marginalized groups, to amplified harm by overlooking their precarious subjectivity within unjust power structures.

The proposed criteria can help determine where particular instances of speech acts fall along the continuum from impoliteness to violence, based on a disregard for subjectivity. Even if, as emphasized earlier, no particular category of illocutionary act is inherently violent, nor does any illocutionary act have the perlocutionary goal of materially harming someone, this does not mean that linguistic violence is unrelated to illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions. On the contrary, contextual factors like repetition and target vulnerability interact with the illocutionary force and perlocutionary consequences of speech acts in approaching or reaching the threshold of violence.

From an illocutionary standpoint, speakers make certain linguistic choices in invoking one procedure over another, such as insulting rather than asking for or giving reasons in an intense discussion, making categorical claims rather than hypothesizing when confronted with others' opinions, and threatening rather than asking someone else to do something. Choosing one action over another in certain contexts can help create conditions that trigger behaviors that culminate in violence or psychological harm. As discussed above repetition and diffusion are often necessary for harmful effects to emerge and escalate into violence. For example, the systematic use of deeply offensive slurs over time reshapes the conditions of permissibility that enable aggression, despite isolated instances. Thus, particular illocutionary acts performed in specific contexts can alter normative landscapes in ways that facilitate harm.

From a perlocutionary perspective, it is important to recall the responsibility that speakers acquire in using certain words over others based on their potential psychological and behavioral consequences, whether direct or indirect. As emphasized earlier, categorizing speech as violent solely on the basis of negative emotional resonance risks labeling most expressions as violent since language can elicit adverse reactions depending on individual sensitivity. However, the proposed criteria address this concern by distinguishing violent speech from offensive speech, which overlaps more closely with cases of impoliteness. To overcome the difficulty in assessing the cause-effect relationship between instances of speech acts and their potential material harms, as highlighted in Section 1.1, the contextual factors outlined earlier come to our aid. Specifically, perlocutionary consequences contribute by gauging effects accumulated acts have over time. An isolated microaggression may qualify as impolite, momentarily overlooking one's emotional state. But frequent microaggressions can approach violence by gradually inflicting psychological harm. Similarly, a slur uttered once during a discussion may be temporarily impolite. But the persistent use of deeply dehumanizing slurs approaches violence through cumulative degradation of subjectivity.

3. Concluding remarks

The aim of this paper was to improve our understanding of linguistic violence from a non-ideal speech-act theoretical perspective. I began by demonstrating the limitations of

perspectives that conceive of linguistic violence as arising primarily from either perlocutionary consequences or illocutionary forces. Drawing insights from Sbisà's work, I proposed situating linguistic violence and impoliteness along a continuum defined by the degree to which speech acts disregard others' layered subjectivity. To distinguish cases along this continuum, I introduced context-dependent criteria, including the persistence of the denial of subjectivity, the nature of the layers disregarded, the impact of the environment, and the vulnerability of the target. As argued, these criteria interact with the illocutionary force and perlocutionary consequences of utterances in approaching or crossing the threshold into violence.
While challenges remain in establishing precise boundaries of linguistic violence due to its context-dependent nature, the proposed non-ideal framework aims to provide a starting point for clarifying when speech might legitimately be classified as violent through the disregard of subjectivity layers. To refine the framework, the next step would be to apply and test it with real cases[4]. Nevertheless, I hope to have at least shown that dealing with the notion of *linguistic violence* requires unraveling the complex relationship between speech, subjectivity, and harm, which warrants philosophical and interdisciplinary analysis.

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[4] Beyond this, as one reviewer suggested, additional issues that could be explored in future works include how to deal with the accumulation of temporary, non-foundational impoliteness from multiple sources over time, as well as the potential mitigating effects of conversational retractions and cancellations on the proposed impoliteness-violence continuum.

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