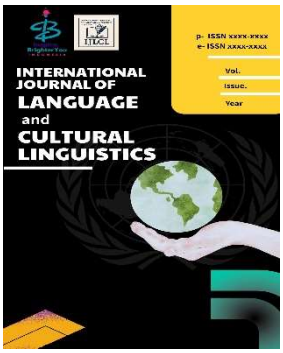
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The Meaning Behind the Song "Timeless" by Playboi Carti and The Weeknd: A Pragmatic Analysis Using Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory

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Abstract:
This study investigates the linguistic meaning embedded in the song "Timeless" by Playboi Carti and The Weeknd through the lens of Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory (1996, 2005). Employing a qualitative descriptive research design, the study systematically categorizes lyrical utterances into five impoliteness strategies: Bald on Record Impoliteness, Positive Impoliteness, Negative Impoliteness, Sarcasm/Mock Politeness, and Withhold Politeness. The analysis reveals that Positive Impoliteness is the dominant strategy (n = 5), followed by Bald on Record Impoliteness and Sarcasm (n = 3 each), and Negative Impoliteness and Withhold Politeness (n = 2 each). These findings demonstrate that the artists deploy aggressive and dismissive language as a deliberate tool for identity construction, reinforcing themes of power, fame, dominance, and emotional detachment. This research contributes a pragmatic perspective to contemporary lyrical analysis, connecting modern hip-hop and R&B lyrics with broader sociolinguistic discussions on face-threat acts and celebrity identity formation.

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INTRODUCTION

Music is a multifaceted art form that conveys emotion, ideas, and social messages through the interplay of sound, rhythm, and language. Popular music, particularly within hip-hop and R&B genres, frequently employs aggressive, boastful, and confrontational language that warrants careful linguistic scrutiny. "Timeless," a collaborative track by Playboi Carti and The Weeknd, exemplifies this phenomenon through its rich integration of luxury symbolism, dominance rhetoric, and identity assertion.

The song was released as part of The Weeknd's album Hurry Up Tomorrow and was performed live during his concert in São Paulo on September 7, 2024, with Playboi Carti also

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appearing on stage. On September 27, The Weeknd officially released the track on all major streaming platforms. The song swiftly attracted critical attention for its audacious lyrical content, blending R&B and hip-hop sensibilities with themes of celebrity power and temporal legacy.

This research seeks to analyze the linguistic meaning embedded in “Timeless” through the application of Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory (1996, 2005). Specifically, the study examines how aggressive, dismissive, arrogant, and threatening expressions in the lyrics function as pragmatic impoliteness strategies. The central thesis of this paper is that the song strategically deploys impoliteness strategies to reflect themes of fame, power, and identity construction.

The primary objective of this study is to identify and categorize the impoliteness strategies employed in the lyrics of “Timeless” in accordance with Culpeper's (1996, 2005) theoretical framework. A secondary objective is to interpret how these strategies contribute to the thematic construction of the song, particularly in relation to power, dominance, and celebrity identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Thematic Interpretation of “Timeless”

Prior thematic interpretations of “Timeless” consistently position the song within a discourse of superiority, dominance, luxury, and emotional detachment. The song presents both artists as powerful figures whose status and cultural influence are represented as enduring across time. Lyrics repeatedly foreground wealth, interpersonal control, social dominance, and a studied indifference to the feelings of others.

According to analyses drawn from community lyric interpretation platforms such as Genius, the title “Timeless” symbolizes the artists' conviction that their fame, aesthetic style, and cultural influence will remain significant regardless of shifting trends. The repeated allusions to luxury timepieces, high-end automobiles, and designer brands—including Rick Owens and Comme des Garçons—are interpreted as markers of status and assertions of cultural immortality within celebrity discourse.

Music critics, notably at Pitchfork, interpret “Timeless” as transcending a simple display of wealth. These reviews argue that while the artists explicitly claim eternal iconic status, the song subtly reveals an underlying anxiety regarding the transience of fame. Pitchfork suggests that both artists implicitly acknowledge the potential impermanence of their popularity, lending the song's central conceit a layer of irony.

Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory

Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory (1996, 2005) provides the theoretical foundation for this study. Building upon Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, Culpeper defines impoliteness as communicative behavior that attacks or undermines interlocutors' face needs—

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either positive face (the desire to be liked, admired, and socially approved) or negative face (the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition).

Culpeper (1996) delineates five principal impoliteness strategies that are employed to produce face-threatening acts:

1. Bald on Record Impoliteness: Direct, unmitigated face-threatening acts without conversational softening.
2. Positive Impoliteness: Strategies that damage the target's positive face, typically through belittlement, self-aggrandizement, or dismissal.
3. Negative Impoliteness: Strategies that damage the target's negative face through imposition, control, or violation of autonomy.
4. Sarcasm/Mock Politeness: Surface-level politeness that is clearly insincere within the communicative context and thus functions as an attack.
5. Withhold Politeness: The deliberate omission of expected polite behavior, such as failing to offer an apology following acknowledged harm.

These strategies are particularly salient in popular music contexts, where artists consciously cultivate public personas and assert social identities through stylized language.

Gaps in Existing Research

While thematic discussions of “Timeless” are accessible through lyric interpretation platforms and music journalism, existing scholarship remains largely descriptive rather than rigorously linguistic or pragmatic. Current discourse rarely analyzes how the lyrical language itself functions socially. In particular, there is a notable absence of research examining how aggressive, dismissive, arrogant, or threatening expressions in the lyrics operate as systematic forms of impoliteness within Culpeper's framework.

Although many listeners and critics acknowledge the song's hostile and dominant tone, few studies have applied Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory to explain how the artists attack positive or negative face through their lyrics. Existing annotations typically explain cultural references, slang, or symbolic imagery but do not categorize utterances into structured impoliteness strategies. This study addresses these gaps by establishing a pragmatic perspective on the song, identifying specific impoliteness strategies and explicating how those strategies reinforce themes of power, arrogance, emotional detachment, and dominance.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze the linguistic meaning of “Timeless” by Playboi Carti and The Weeknd. The research is oriented toward identifying and interpreting impoliteness strategies present in the song lyrics as classified by Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory.

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The primary data source consists of the official Spotify lyrics for “Timeless.” The complete lyrical text served as the corpus for this study. Data were collected through systematic documentation: the lyrics were read carefully and line by line, and lines containing expressions related to aggression, dominance, superiority, or emotional dismissal were selected as analytical data.

The selected lyrical data were categorized according to the five impoliteness strategies outlined in Culpeper's (1996, 2005) framework: Bald on Record Impoliteness, Positive Impoliteness, Negative Impoliteness, Sarcasm/Mock Politeness, and Withhold Politeness.

Each lyric line was analyzed using qualitative content analysis, interpreted within its contextual frame, and assigned to the most applicable impoliteness strategy. The qualitative approach was selected because it enables in-depth examination of meaning, language function, and social implications embedded within the lyrical text. Frequency counts were subsequently compiled to identify the dominant strategy.

It is acknowledged that lyric interpretation carries an inherent degree of subjectivity, as meanings may vary across different listeners and cultural contexts. This study presents one pragmatic reading grounded in Culpeper's framework, and alternative interpretations remain possible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Impoliteness Strategies

The following section presents a systematic categorization of lyrical utterances from “Timeless” according to Culpeper's (1996, 2005) five impoliteness strategies. Representative lyrical examples are provided alongside pragmatic interpretations.

Bald on Record Impoliteness

Bald on Record Impoliteness involves direct, unmitigated, and confrontational utterances that constitute face-threatening acts without any conversational softening. Three instances were identified in “Timeless”:

> “Smile on my face, ain't fearing y'all, come and get checked” — A direct challenge issued to unnamed opponents. The speaker disavows fear and invites confrontation, making no attempt to mitigate the aggressive imposition.
>
> “If I was you, I would cut up my wrist” — An unmitigated offensive statement directed toward a hypothetical target. This lyric functions as a severe face-threatening act, suggesting the target's life situation warrants self-harm.
>
> “Get out of line, send him to God” — A direct threat toward anyone who disobeys or challenges the speaker. The conditional framing retains the directness and force of the threat with no hedging.

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Positive Impoliteness

Positive Impoliteness encompasses strategies that damage the target's positive face, primarily through excessive self-aggrandizement, dismissal of critics, or projections of overwhelming dominance that implicitly belittle others. This was the most frequently occurring strategy, with five instances identified:

> "Ever since I was a jit, knew I was the shit" — Hyperbolic and self-congratulatory assertion that implicitly positions others as inferior by contrast.
>
> "It don't matter what they say, I'm timeless" — Direct rejection of critical discourse and a declaration of superiority that dismisses detractors as irrelevant.
>
> "City on fire when I'm comin' home" — Projection of an overwhelming, almost messianic influence, constructing the speaker as a figure of exceptional importance.
>
> "It's gonna hurt 'cause we did it first" — Claim of origination and precedence over competitors, reinforcing superiority through the suggestion that others suffer from being surpassed.
>
> "Her man quiet, not a peep" — Demonstrates an absence of sympathy toward a rival and implicitly devalues his dignity by highlighting his silence in the face of the speaker's dominance.

Negative Impoliteness

Negative Impoliteness encompasses strategies that damage the target's negative face by imposing upon them, restricting their autonomy, or treating them as objects rather than autonomous agents. Two instances were identified:

> "She think she the main because I keep her by my side" — The lyric implies possession and instrumental control over a romantic partner, treating her as a contingent accessory rather than an autonomous individual.
>
> "House like a bank, deposit this people" — Spatial and transactional metaphor that positions people as deposits—objects to be stored rather than persons—thereby disregarding personal dignity and autonomy.

Sarcasm / Mock Politeness

Sarcasm or Mock Politeness involves superficially sympathetic or polite language that, within the aggressive and boastful context of the song, functions as an insult or taunt. Three instances were identified:

> "I shed a tear, pray for a loss" — The expression performs sympathy but, situated within the song's overarching tone of competitive triumph, the supposed concern is ironic rather than genuine—functioning as a taunt.
>
> "Let it breathe" — Ostensibly sounds like concern for someone who has been emotionally harmed, but in context functions as feigned care that is belittling.

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"You should let her go" — Sounds like collegial advice on the surface but operates as a provocation directed at a rival, asserting that the speaker has already displaced him.

Withhold Politeness

Withhold Politeness involves the conspicuous omission of expected polite behaviors—such as apologies, expressions of regret, or acknowledgments of harm—when social convention would normally require them. Two instances were identified:

"I break her heart" — The speaker explicitly names an act of emotional harm but follows it with no apology or expression of remorse, constituting a deliberate withholding of expected politeness.

"Broke his heart, PTSD" — The speaker acknowledges causing psychological harm (PTSD) to a rival but provides no sympathy, reinforcing the emotional detachment central to the song's thematic identity.

The analysis identified all five of Culpeper's impoliteness strategies in the lyrics of "Timeless," with Positive Impoliteness emerging as the dominant category. Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of each strategy.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Impoliteness Strategies in "Timeless"

Impoliteness Strategy	Frequency (n)	Percentage
Bald on Record Impoliteness	3	20.0%
Positive Impoliteness	5	33.3%
Negative Impoliteness	2	13.3%
Sarcasm / Mock Politeness	3	20.0%
Withhold Politeness	2	13.3%
Total	15	100%

As shown in Table 1, Positive Impoliteness accounts for the highest frequency of occurrences (n = 5; 33.3%), followed jointly by Bald on Record Impoliteness and Sarcasm/Mock Politeness (n = 3 each; 20.0%), and by Negative Impoliteness and Withhold Politeness (n = 2 each; 13.3%).

The dominance of Positive Impoliteness indicates that the artists primarily construct their identities through assertions of superiority and the dismissal of others, rather than through explicit threats or overt control. The notable presence of Sarcasm/Mock Politeness demonstrates a sophisticated deployment of layered meaning, in which surface-level empathy or concern is weaponized as a tool of dominance.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that the lyrics of "Timeless" are permeated with impoliteness strategies that serve as linguistic instruments for identity construction. The artists' use of aggressive, dismissive, and controlling language is not incidental but strategic: through systematic attacks on the positive and negative face of imagined rivals, partners, and detractors, Playboi Carti and The Weeknd construct and reaffirm public personas defined by power, fame, and invulnerability.

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The dominance of Positive Impoliteness aligns with existing thematic readings of the song. By repeatedly asserting superiority, dismissing critics, and projecting cultural omnipotence, the artists damage the positive face of all those implicitly or explicitly referenced as lesser figures. In pragmatic terms, these strategies perform the social function of status elevation at the expense of rivals' social standing.

The presence of Bald on Record Impoliteness—including statements such as threatening to "send him to God" and the disturbing directive to self-harm—demonstrates the deliberate employment of unmitigated face-threatening acts. These utterances perform dominance not through subtlety but through their very directness, reinforcing the artists' self-presentation as figures beyond conventional social constraint.

The use of Sarcasm/Mock Politeness is particularly noteworthy. In lines such as "I shed a tear, pray for a loss" and "You should let her go," surface politeness conventions are appropriated and subverted to produce more sophisticated attacks. This aligns with Culpeper's (2005) observation that mock politeness often conveys greater offense than direct insult because it simultaneously exploits and violates social norms.

These findings extend and deepen existing interpretations of "Timeless." While music journalists and lyric interpretation platforms have noted the song's hostile tone and status-asserting content, this study provides a systematic pragmatic framework for understanding exactly how that hostility operates linguistically. The present analysis demonstrates that what casual listeners perceive as "aggressive" can be described with greater precision as a cluster of face-threatening strategies designed to construct an impenetrable celebrity identity.

Relation to Identity Construction

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the impoliteness strategies identified in "Timeless" function as identity performances. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, the song's lyrics constitute a deliberate self-presentation that prioritizes dominance and imperviousness as hallmarks of celebrity status. The artists' willingness to violate politeness norms—threatening rivals, dismissing critics, acknowledging harm without remorse—signals their position outside the obligations of ordinary social life.

This pattern is consistent with broader observations in hip-hop scholarship regarding the performative function of bravado, aggression, and conspicuous consumption as markers of authentic masculine celebrity identity. Impoliteness, in this context, is not merely a failure of social courtesy but a calculated rhetorical strategy for claiming and maintaining cultural power.

Limitations

This study's primary limitation is its focus on a single song, which constrains the generalizability of findings to the broader discographies of the artists or to the hip-hop/R&B genre. Additionally, lyric interpretation carries an inherent degree of subjectivity: meanings may be differently construed depending on listeners' cultural backgrounds and interpretive frameworks. The present analysis represents one pragmatically grounded reading.

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CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed the meaning embedded in “Timeless” by Playboi Carti and The Weeknd through the systematic application of Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory (1996, 2005). The analysis identified all five impoliteness strategies in the lyrical corpus, with Positive Impoliteness emerging as the most dominant (n = 5; 33.3%), followed by Bald on Record Impoliteness and Sarcasm/Mock Politeness (n = 3 each), and Negative Impoliteness and Withhold Politeness (n = 2 each).

These findings demonstrate that the artists deploy impolite language as a deliberate pragmatic tool for identity construction, reinforcing overarching themes of power, fame, superiority, and emotional detachment. The song's aggressive and dismissive language functions not as incidental vulgarity but as a structured system of face-threatening acts that serve to construct and sustain the artists' dominant public personas.

More broadly, this study demonstrates that song lyrics—particularly within hip-hop and R&B—can be productively examined not only as artistic expressions but as forms of social communication that enact identity and negotiate power relations. Future research should examine multiple songs across the artists' discographies, or compare impoliteness patterns across different musical genres, to develop broader sociolinguistic insights into language, identity, and power in contemporary popular music.

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