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RESEARCH ARTICLE

GASLIGHTING, POLITENESS, AND THE ILLUSION OF COOPERATION: A STUDY OF MANIPULATIVE DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Gaslighting, a manipulative strategy aimed at undermining the victim's confidence in his/her perception of reality and reasoning, constitutes a complex discourse practice with significant pragmatic and cognitive dimensions. Despite its relevance to interactional communication, gaslighting has received limited attention within the field of linguistic pragmatics. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, Culpeper's (1996, 2015) impoliteness framework, Grice's (1989) cooperative principle, and recent work on manipulation by Sorlin (2017) and Spear (2019), this study conceptualises gaslighting as a discourse strategy that systematically exploits (im)politeness, facework, and maxim violations to generate epistemic uncertainty and restrict the hearer's agency. The empirical material consists of selected excerpts from *Changeling* (2008), analysed through a qualitative discourse-pragmatic framework. A large language model, ChatGPT (GPT-5; OpenAI, 2025), was employed as an auxiliary analytical tool to provide emotion-neutral, unbiased interpretations of linguistic strategies. The findings demonstrate that gaslighting relies on an ambivalent interplay of politeness and impoliteness, simultaneously attending to and threatening both positive and negative face. By concealing their coercive intent under a façade of cooperation, gaslighters establish epistemic authority and distort individuals' perceptions of objective reality to their advantage. The study expands existing research on manipulative discourse by framing gaslighting as a linguistically mediated, cognitively grounded communicative strategy rather than a purely psychological phenomenon.

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Introduction:

Gaslighting, a form of verbal, cognitively oriented psychological manipulation, represents a complex discourse strategy characterized by its unique linguistic realization. However, despite the growing social and academic interest in manipulative discourse and the increased public awareness of coercive communicative practices, gaslighting as a discourse phenomenon has not yet been sufficiently examined through the lens of linguistic pragmatics. Previous linguistic research has approached gaslighting from various perspectives, including Catapang-Podoski (2021),

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whose work draws upon the theory of language order, laying the groundwork for the modern linguistic exploration of gaslighting. In my earlier studies (Purtseladze, 2024; 2025), I analyzed gaslighting through the framework of speech act theory, drawing on the propositions of Austin (1962) and Searle (1979) and elaborating on the specificity of speech acts characteristic of gaslighting contexts. However, as we go further into the dynamics of manipulative discourse, it becomes evident that traditional linguistic frameworks often prove insufficient for capturing the pragmatic irregularities that gaslighting entails. Gaslighting discourse tends to distort, and at times even violate, the established norms of traditional pragmatics. For instance, assertive speech acts within gaslighting interactions exhibit a double direction of fit — an attribute not typically associated with assertives. (Purtseladze, 2024) What makes gaslighting particularly peculiar is that it constitutes a manipulative discourse strategy capable of rendering false or distorted statements seemingly felicitous. Through carefully calibrated linguistic choices, the speaker constructs utterances that, while pragmatically coherent on the surface, are in fact strategically misleading.

This deceptive coherence not only obscures the speaker's true intentions but also makes such utterances more difficult for the hearer to identify as manipulative or to process adequately within the expected norms of conversation. The insidiousness of gaslighting lies precisely in this paradoxical combination of felicity and falsehood. By adhering superficially to the conventions of politeness and conversational appropriateness, the manipulator can disguise aggression, control, and epistemic domination. As Alvarez (2020) observes, emotionally abusive communication can be framed within the linguistic boundaries of politeness, thereby sustaining the illusion of normalcy and civility. In this sense, politeness serves not as a marker of social harmony but as a rhetorical shield that conceals psychological manipulation. In this paper, I will attempt to approach gaslighting through the theoretical framework of politeness theory, as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) and further developed by Culpeper (1996, 2015). Particular attention will also be given to the ways in which gaslighting discourse violates Grice's cooperative principle (1989). The analysis draws upon empirical data excerpted from *Changeling* (2008), an American crime drama directed by Clint Eastwood and written by J. Michael Straczynski.

The film, based on real-life events surrounding the 1928 Wineville Chicken Coop murders in California, stars Angelina Jolie as a mother who is reunited with a boy she quickly realizes is not her missing son. When she attempts to prove this to the police and city authorities, she is publicly discredited, pathologized as delusional, declared an unfit mother, and ultimately confined to a psychiatric institution. The film has been selected as the primary source for analysis because it offers a multifaceted portrayal of gaslighting that extends beyond the interpersonal realm of a mother-child relationship into the broader structures of institutional and societal power. Through ostensibly courteous and formalized interactions, representatives of authority construct an appearance of procedural legitimacy while systematically undermining the protagonist's credibility and emotional stability. This makes *Changeling* particularly relevant for linguistic-pragmatic inquiry, as it demonstrates both politeness and impoliteness strategies in action, alongside systematic manipulation of the hearer's positive and negative face.

The film exemplifies how facework — the management of self-image and social value within communication — can be exploited to achieve coercive goals. Here, politeness strategies are employed to create a façade of care and procedural correctness, concealing underlying acts of epistemic and emotional domination. Conversely, impoliteness manifests in explicit face attacks — public humiliation, discrediting, and verbal aggression — when the protagonist resists the imposed narrative. The alternation between politeness and impoliteness serves as a discursive mechanism that challenges the hearer's sense of agency and interpretive reliability, thereby reinforcing the asymmetry of power between the gaslighter and the victim. The paper seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on manipulative discourse by offering a linguistic-pragmatic perspective on gaslighting as a form of politeness-based coercion.

Theoretical Framework:

1. Face and Politeness Strategies. The concept of *face*, originally developed by Goffman (1967) as part of his study of social interaction, is defined as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken”. (1967, p. 5) In sociolinguistics and pragmatics, face refers to the self-image that an individual ascribes to him/herself in interaction, which is recognized, maintained, or challenged by others during communication. According to Brown and Levinson, face consists of two related aspects: 1. *negative face*, the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction — that is, the freedom of action and freedom from imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62); 2. *positive face*, the positive consistent self-image or personality (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants. (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61)

Building on Goffman's (1967) concept of face, Brown and Levinson (1987) developed a comprehensive model of politeness strategies aimed at mitigating face-threatening acts (FTAs). They distinguish four primary strategies that speakers may employ, depending on the degree of face threat and the situational context. The bald *on-record* strategy involves direct and unambiguous expression without any attempt to minimize the threat to the hearer's face. *Positive politeness* focuses on satisfying the hearer's positive face needs by expressing approval, solidarity, or friendliness. In contrast, *negative politeness* attends to the hearer's negative face by emphasizing respect and minimizing imposition through indirectness or deference. Finally, *off-record* politeness employs indirectness and implicature, enabling the speaker to avoid explicit responsibility for the act. The choice of strategy is conditioned by three sociological variables: the power differential between speaker and hearer, the social distance between them, and the ranking of imposition inherent in the FTA. (Brown & Levinson, 1987; see also Fathi, 2024).

2. Positive and Negative Politeness as Manipulative Discourse Strategies. Within the framework of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, both positive and negative politeness can be reinterpreted as instruments of psychological manipulation. (Chilton, 1990; Sorlin, 2017) In its extreme form, positive politeness, which aims to satisfy the hearer's need for approval and belonging, may manifest in manipulative discourse as *love-bombing*¹ — an excessive display of affection, admiration, and validation designed to create emotional dependency. By offering continual praise or exaggerated concern, the manipulator maintains control through emotional reward, ensuring that the hearer associates compliance with affection.

Conversely, negative politeness, which conventionally mitigates imposition and respects autonomy, can also be employed as a manipulative tool. Apparent deference, apologies, or acknowledgments of personal boundaries may conceal *guilt-tripping*² or *emotional blackmail*³. In such cases, the speaker's feigned respect evokes the hearer's empathy or obligation, thereby pressuring him/her to re-engage or conform to the manipulator's expectations. Thus, strategies originally intended to preserve social harmony can, in manipulative contexts, serve as mechanisms of control — masking coercion under the guise of politeness. Likewise, *gaslighting* can strategically exploit politeness strategies as instruments of manipulation. As one of the most pervasive and all-encompassing forms of psychological abuse, it operates through a carefully planned and systematic use of multiple manipulative tactics, including those discussed above.

3. Impoliteness Strategy. While politeness theory explains how interlocutors attempt to preserve face, it does not fully account for deliberate face-threatening behaviour or manipulative discourse. To address this gap, the concept of *impoliteness* (Culpeper, 1996), as a communicative strategy designed to attack the addressee's face and thereby cause social conflict or disharmony, must be introduced. Culpeper (2015) proposes a taxonomy of impoliteness super-strategies, outlining the principal ways in which language can be used to attack or damage another's face. Bald *on-record* impoliteness involves direct and unambiguous face attacks, where the speaker does not attempt to mitigate the offense. *Positive impoliteness* consists of strategies aimed at undermining the addressee's positive face, such as ignoring, excluding, disassociating from him/her, or employing inappropriate identity markers and taboo language. In contrast, *negative impoliteness* targets the hearer's negative face by intimidating, belittling, invading personal or conversational space, or interrupting. *Off-record* impoliteness operates indirectly, using *implicature* to inflict offense while maintaining plausible deniability. Finally, *sarcasm* or *mock-politeness* involves the insincere use of politeness forms to ridicule or demean, thereby disguising hostility under the guise of civility. Culpeper (1996) asserts that impoliteness is not simply the absence of politeness but a distinct discursive strategy with its own mechanisms. This framing makes impoliteness theory particularly relevant to the study of gaslighting, as gaslighting itself operates as a strategic form of communication — one that manipulates discourse norms and relational expectations to exert psychological control and distort the victim's perception of reality.

¹*Love-bombing* refers to a manipulative tactic characterized by excessive displays of affection, attention, and praise aimed at quickly gaining the target's trust and emotional dependence. While it may appear genuine, its underlying purpose is often control or dominance rather than authentic intimacy. (Richardson, 2004)

²*Guilt-tripping* is a manipulative tactic that induces feelings of guilt or responsibility in another person to control his/her behavior or elicit compliance. (Simon, 1996)

³*Emotional blackmail* is a manipulative tactic in which an individual exploits emotions — typically fear, obligation, and guilt — to gain power, control decisions, or ensure compliance. It often involves coercive threats, blame, or withdrawal of affection to pressure the target into submission. (Johnson, 2014)

4. Impoliteness as a Mechanism of Gaslighting. The intersection of politeness and impoliteness frameworks offers a comprehensive lens for analysing manipulative discourse such as gaslighting. In terms of impoliteness, gaslighting transcends the boundaries of mere on-record face attacks; it represents a sophisticated communicative strategy aimed at destabilizing the victim's perception of both self and reality. Within gaslighting discourse, impoliteness strategies, as outlined by Culpeper (2015), become tools of achieving psychological control through the systematic erosion of the hearer's face wants. For instance, negative impoliteness often manifests through belittling, derision, or invalidation: utterances such as *You're imagining things again*, or *You always twist everything* challenge the victim's cognitive reliability and autonomous reasoning. Positive impoliteness, by contrast, may take the form of emotional withdrawal or denial of solidarity — for example, *I can't even talk to you when you act like this* — thereby inducing guilt, self-blame, and a willingness to conform to the manipulator's constructed reality. Through these discursive mechanisms, the gaslighter not only damages the victim's positive and negative face but also positions his/her own narrative as the sole credible version of reality. In this sense, impoliteness extends beyond mere tactlessness or blunt rudeness, becoming a strategic instrument of epistemic dominance and psychological subjugation.

5. Gaslighting and the Illusion of Cooperation. Despite the considerable body of research on psychological manipulation, manipulative discourse, and gaslighting in particular, a crucial question remains unresolved: why is this specific form of manipulation so harmful and predominantly effective? Essentially, why do victims believe gaslighters, and why are gaslighters able to consistently achieve their ends through verbal manipulation? In popular discourse, gaslighters are often portrayed as sinister figures with mysterious mind-controlling abilities, which contributes to the spread of biases regarding their invincibility and menace. However, can the speaker truly influence the hearer if the latter is not predisposed to compliance?

Gaslighting, like any other form of manipulation, seeks to achieve what Gu (1994) defines as the speaker's *ultra-linguistic* goals — objectives that transcend the mere exchange of information and aim at influencing or controlling the hearer. Manipulative speakers rely on the addressee's assumption that communication follows Grice's *cooperative principle*, which presupposes honesty and mutual effort toward understanding. (Sorlin, 2017) Mooney (2004, p. 918) observes that it is almost impossible for the hearer to detect manipulation, since such discourse seems to leave the cooperative principle intact; in other words, the hearer assumes that the speaker is being cooperative. (Sorlin, 2017) Grice (1989, p. 28) himself acknowledged that conversation is not always confined to the "maximally effective exchange of information," but may also serve broader purposes such as "influencing or directing the actions of others." Therefore, although gaslighting appears to conform to the cooperative principle, it covertly violates it, and its very success, as in the case of any other manipulative tactic, lies in the hearer's assumption of the speaker's cooperation.

Examining the underlying cognitive mechanisms of gaslighting, the main factor that leads the victim to comply with the gaslighter's distorted version of reality is the need for *dissonance reduction*.⁴ It is evident that the statements made by a manipulator in the context of gaslighting, being discordant with reality, inevitably cause cognitive dissonance in the victim. (Spear, 2019, p. 78). As a result, "what the victim finds herself confronted with is a challenge to her epistemic self-trust being lodged by a person she views as a typically sincere epistemic peer or authority. If she revokes her epistemic self-trust, then she can maintain her view of the gaslighter as a typically sincere epistemic peer or authority. If she revokes her view of the gaslighter as a typically sincere epistemic peer or authority, then she can retain her epistemic self-trust. Yet, the cognitive dissonance created by the gaslighter means that she can't do both, even as she may have very strong emotional and prudential reasons to concede to the gaslighter." (Spear, 2019, p. 80). Thus, why does the victim choose to revoke her epistemic self-trust? In my opinion, the answer lies within the victim's inferential abilities.

As is known, language is inherently communicative, meaning that we speak with intent (Jakobson, 1960). Gu (1993, p. 188) distinguishes between two overarching forms of cooperation functioning at interconnected levels: the first, "the level of S-sending/H-interpreting," where the cooperative principle holds, and the second, a *rhetorical level*, which encompasses extralinguistic perlocutionary aims achieved through various illocutionary acts. He defines this level as "the purpose(s) the speaker attempts to reach in performing an illocutionary act." (Sorlin, 2017).

⁴The process by which a person reduces the uncomfortable psychological state that results from inconsistency among elements of a cognitive system." APA Dictionary of Psychology". APA.org. American Psychological Association. Retrieved October 25, 2025.

As I have previously stated, the linguistic realization of gaslighting primarily depends on the speaker's specific use of indirect speech acts. (Purtseladze, 2024). As is known, in indirect speech acts, the speaker communicates more than he/she is saying to the hearer, conveying additional meanings beyond literal utterances. In doing so, the speaker relies on their shared background knowledge and the hearer's capacity for rational *inference*. (Searle, 1975:60) This shared background is formed, on the one hand, by meta-linguistic components, namely constituents of interpersonal relationships, such as *trust*, for instance, and pragmatic felicity, on the other. (Purtseladze, 2024) Consequently, victims internalize the gaslighter's claims as true, as they perceive themselves to be in a shared conceptual reality with the speaker, and trust them based on the context of their relationship. This seems to be the primary reason why indirect messages are inferred accordingly by the hearer in the context of gaslighting.

Cognitive pragmatics suggests that in the case of indirect speech acts, the hearer's inferential process is initiated by the assumption that the speaker adheres to the principle of cooperation (Grice, 1978), along with detecting an inconsistency between the utterance and the context of pronunciation. First, the hearer attempts to interpret the utterance literally. Only when this literal interpretation fails, due to its irrelevance to the context, does the hearer search for an alternative meaning that captures the primary illocutionary intent. (Bara, Bosco, Bucciarelli, 1999). It is essential to bear in mind that in normal conversations, people do not consciously go through the inferential steps involved in reasoning (Searle, 1979, p. 34), inference thus being an automatic process, an ability underlying human cognition. Consequently, as the gaslighter distorts reality through indirect assertive speech acts, ensuring the fulfillment of felicity conditions, the hearer's cognitive processes come into play, filling in the gaps and rationalizing the inconsistencies presented. In essence, in his/her verbal manipulation, the gaslighter relies on the hearer's inclination to make sense of the situation, exploiting his/her trust and susceptibility to influence. It follows that, to a substantial extent, the hearer's inferential abilities, being an integral part of human cognition, effectively serve the gaslighter's purposes, making it one of the most effective verbal manipulation techniques. Thus, what appears to the hearer to be cooperative communication is, in fact, an *illusion* of cooperation. Yet its perlocutionary effect resembles that of true cooperative communication, driven by the hearer's cognitive processes.

Methodology:

The study employs critical discourse analysis of selected dialogue sequences from the film *Changeling* (2008) to examine linguistic representations of gaslighting. The primary aim is to explore how pragmatic strategies contribute to epistemic destabilization and the discursive construction of an alternative reality, particularly within institutional contexts. The analysis proceeds in several stages:

1. Selection of Extracts. Key dialogue sequences (five extracts) were selected chronologically from the film. These segments feature interactions between Christine Collins and figures of authority — police officers and medical professionals — where her perception of reality is systematically challenged. Scenes were chosen based on their relevance to gaslighting, power asymmetry, and the use of manipulative discourse.

2. Analytical Framework.

The study employs a combination of pragmatic tools:

- a) Politeness and impoliteness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 1996): identifying positive and negative politeness strategies, as well as positive and negative impoliteness moves, to examine how ostensibly polite discourse can function coercively.
- b) Face-threatening acts (FTAs): mapping threats to positive and negative face, highlighting how institutional authority is leveraged to delegitimise dissent.
- c) Cooperative principle (Grice, 1989): evaluating violations of the maxims of quality, quantity, relation, and manner to identify how dialogue maintains the appearance of cooperation while undermining the hearer's epistemic authority.

3. Contextual Analysis. Each extract is examined with attention to the institutional and gendered dynamics at play. The study examines how the film portrays Christine's role as a woman and mother, and how authority figures exploit societal assumptions about gender, maternity, and female rationality to perpetuate power asymmetry.

4. Perlocutionary Effect: Beyond surface-level discourse, the analysis examines the intended cognitive impact of institutional gaslighting on Christine's epistemic self-trust and the audience's perception of reality distortion, illustrating the dynamics of gaslighting as a cognitive and communicative strategy.

It should be noted that non-verbal elements of communication were not taken into consideration in this analysis. This exclusion is due to the focus on the linguistic realization of gaslighting as a manipulative strategy, which allows for a more precise examination of how language alone constructs epistemic uncertainty and constrains the victim's agency. While non-verbal cues may complement or reinforce these strategies, their analysis is beyond the scope of the present study.

In addition to traditional qualitative analysis, the study employed the large language model ChatGPT (GPT-5, OpenAI) to examine the extracts. Given its emotionless non-human perspective, artificial intelligence (AI) offers a potentially more objective analysis of linguistic strategies, enabling the identification of subtle manipulative patterns, violations of Gricean maxims, and face-threatening acts that may be less perceptible through human interpretation. Its use complements the researcher's interpretive reading by highlighting structural and pragmatic features of gaslighting discourse without affective bias.

Results and Discussion:

Changeling (2008) provides a compelling depiction of gaslighting as a mechanism of psychological and institutional control. The following analysis examines key extracts in their chronological order, illustrating how linguistic strategies are deployed to induce epistemic uncertainty and restrict the victim's capacity for autonomous action.

Data Extract 1

Jones: Well? Aren't you going to —

Christine: He's not my son.

Jones: I... what are you —

Christine: He's not my son. He's not my son!

Jones: I'm... I'm sure you're mistaken.

Christine: Mistaken?

Jones: He's been through four long, terrible months... he's gone through changes, lost weight —

Christine: I know my own son.

Jones: I'm just saying... I mean, you're in shock, and he's changed, and — [...]

Jones: Mrs. Collins, listen to me. I know you're feeling uncertain right now, but that's to be expected... a boy this age changes so fast. But we've compensated for that in our investigation. We're experts in child identification. There's no question that this is your son.

Christine: It's not Walter.

Jones: It's not Walter as you remember him. That's why it's important for you to take him home, on a... trial basis.

Christine: A trial basis?

Jones: Once you've put him back in familiar surroundings and given yourself time to recover from the shock of his changed condition, you'll see that it is him. I swear to you, Mrs. Collins. I give you my word. Trust me... this is your son.

This dialogue between Christine Collins and Captain Jones in *Changeling* exemplifies a sophisticated use of politeness strategies and face-threatening acts within a clear instance of gaslighting. Jones's narrative demonstrates how politeness strategies can be manipulated to conceal domination beneath a façade of care. He employs both *positive* and *negative* politeness to maintain the appearance of empathy while systematically undermining Christine's autonomy. Through *positive* politeness, as in *Mrs. Collins, listen to me. I know you're feeling uncertain right now*, he constructs a false sense of solidarity, presenting himself as an understanding ally rather than an enforcer of institutional authority. This rhetorical move aligns him with Christine emotionally, masking his coercive intent through the language of reassurance.

Simultaneously, Jones employs *negative* politeness to soften the imposition of his demands. When he suggests, *That's why it's important for you to take him home, on a... trial basis*, the modal phrasing and hesitation create an illusion of choice. In reality, the utterance functions coercively — it pressures Christine into compliance while maintaining the polite veneer of a reasonable suggestion. Moreover, his use of deference and hedging, as in *I'm sure you're mistaken... you're in shock*, disguises epistemic domination as concern. While appearing polite, this statement invalidates Christine's perception and redefines her certainty as emotional instability. Thus, here politeness strategies serve as manipulative tools — they maintain social harmony on the surface while reinforcing power asymmetry.

The exchange in question is saturated with face-threatening acts (FTAs) that reveal the manipulative dynamics underlying institutional gaslighting. Christine's initial assertion — *He's not my son* — directly threatens Jones's positive face, as it challenges his authority and competence as a police representative. In response, Jones performs a series of counter-FTAs aimed at both preserving his own face and undermining Christine's. His utterances systematically target her positive face, attacking her self-image as a rational and perceptive mother. When he insists, *You're in shock* or *You're mistaken*, he implies emotional instability and cognitive error, positioning Christine as unreliable and irrational.

At the same time, Jones threatens Christine's negative face, restricting her right to act according to her own judgment. The seemingly polite instruction, *You'll take him home on a trial basis*, is not a suggestion but an imposition framed as care. It cloaks coercion in bureaucratic language, reinforcing institutional dominance while denying Christine's autonomy. In contrast, Jones's own self-face preservation emerges through his assertion of expertise — *We're experts in child identification*. This appeal to authority functions as a self-defensive move, legitimizing his stance and shielding him from accountability.

From the standpoint of Grice's cooperative principle, in the provided exchange, Jones systematically violates all four maxims, yet maintains the appearance of cooperation, which is precisely what enables his gaslighting to succeed. The latter is evidenced by Christine's eventual compliance: she takes the boy home despite her persistent doubts.

The maxim of quality, which requires truthfulness, is blatantly violated when Jones insists, *There's no question that this is your son*. He asserts false information as an objective fact, exploiting his institutional authority to create epistemic confusion and to undermine Christine's trust in her own perception. The maxim of quantity — providing sufficient and accurate information — is equally compromised. By declaring, *We've compensated for that in our investigation*, Jones withholds critical details about the flaws and uncertainties of the investigation process, reducing a complex situation to a falsely conclusive statement that discourages further inquiry.

The maxim of relation is violated through strategic diversion. Instead of engaging with Christine's factual claim, *He's not my son*, Jones shifts the frame of reference to emotional reassurance: *You're in shock... a boy this age changes so fast*. This redirection replaces a rational discussion with an emotional narrative, pathologizing Christine's resistance. Finally, the maxim of manner, which demands clarity and precision, is breached through Jones's vague and paternalistic appeals: *Trust me... this is your son*. The ambiguity of his language compels emotional rather than logical compliance, reinforcing his dominance through tone rather than truth.

Data Extract 2

Christine: *He's not my son.*

Jones: *Mrs. Collins ...*

Christine: *I don't know who he is, or why he's saying he's Walter, but there's clearly been some kind of mistake.*

Jones: *We agreed you would give him time to adjust —*

Christine: *He's four inches shorter than Walter. Boys his age don't shrink. If anything, he should be taller.*

Jones: *Maybe your measurements are off. Look, I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation for —*

Christine: *He's circumcised. Walter wasn't.*

Jones glances back, uncomfortable about discussing circumcision in public view. He lowers his voice.

Jones: *Mrs. Collins... your son was missing for four months. For at least part of that in the company of an as-yet unidentified drifter. Who knows what such a disturbed individual might have done? He could have had him... circumcised... might have —*

Christine: *Made him smaller? Captain, please —*

Jones steps into his office as Christine follows him in.

Christine: *Why won't you listen to me?*

Jones: *I am listening, damn it, I ... I am listening. And I understand your feelings. He's changed, no mistake. You've both been through a terrible experience. That's why he needs your support and love to bounce back.*

Christine: *Captain, that boy wouldn't bounce back as my son if you coated him in rubber and dropped him off the roof.*

Jones: *Why are you doing this, Mrs. Collins? You seem perfectly capable of taking care of the boy, your work pays you enough to attend to his personal needs... so I don't understand why you're trying to run away from your responsibilities —*

Christine: I'm not running away from anything, least of all my responsibilities. I'm even taking care of that boy because right now I'm all he has. What worries me is that you've stopped looking for Walter.

Jones: Why should we look for someone we've already found?

Christine: But you haven't found him. He's still out there somewhere, lost, maybe hurt —

Jones: His identity has been confirmed by the best minds in the field of child identification, people who know what they're doing.

This extract reveals a progressive escalation from concealed manipulation to overt verbal aggression, illustrating how gaslighting operates through both politeness and impoliteness strategies. Initially, Captain Jones employs surface politeness to preserve institutional authority and appear cooperative (*I understand your feelings*), yet this politeness is instrumental rather than genuine. It functions as a façade, masking epistemic domination and silencing Christine's dissent. His manner exemplifies strategic politeness used as a manipulative tool — an apparent concern that conceals coercion.

As the dialogue intensifies, Jones violates all *Gricean maxims*. The maxim of *quality* is broken when he asserts falsehoods (*His identity has been confirmed by the best minds in the field*). The maxim of *quantity* is violated through omissions and oversimplifications of the case's flaws, while the maxim of *relation* is flouted as he diverts the discussion from facts to Christine's supposed irresponsibility (*You seem perfectly capable of taking care of the boy*). The maxim of *manner* is breached through evasive, vague, and paternalistic speech — all intended to distort reality while maintaining the illusion of reasonableness.

In terms of face-threatening acts, Jones attacks both Christine's positive and negative faces. By implying she is hysterical and delusional (*Why are you doing this, Mrs. Collins?*), he undermines her self-image as a rational mother, directly threatening her positive face. Simultaneously, his institutional authority imposes on her autonomy, limiting her right to object — a violation of her negative face.

When politeness fails to subdue Christine's resistance, Jones resorts to overt impoliteness. His verbal aggression (*I am listening, damn it!*) represents positive impoliteness, aimed at damaging Christine's social value and self-esteem through mockery and condescension. Meanwhile, his authoritarian tone and dismissal of her testimony enact negative impoliteness, restricting her freedom of expression and forcing submission to institutional control.

Data Extract 3

Christine: Doctor Tarr, I thought you were here to help me.

Dr. Tarr: I am. Captain Jones said the boy had gone through some extreme physical changes and asked me to look in on him... to reassure you in your time of motherly concern.

Christine: My "motherly concern" isn't for him because he's not my son.

Dr. Tarr: Statements like that will hardly help the boy's self-esteem, now will they?

Captain Jones said something about a change in height...?

Christine: He's four inches shorter than —

Dr. Tarr: Ah, well... hardly a mystery, Mrs. Collins. We've known for some time that trauma can affect the growth of children. Given the stress of the last four months, his spine may have actually shrunk. It's uncommon, but within the realm of possibility.

Christine: What about the circumcision?

Dr. Tarr: Very likely his abductor thought it appropriate. After all, circumcision is hygienically sound. Must have been quite traumatic at the time. No wonder he's submerged the memory.

Christine: Look, doctor —

Dr. Tarr: As you can see, there's a perfectly sound medical explanation for all of this. But it's good for you to raise these questions. You should be apprised of all changes the lad went through during his absence.

Christine: Wouldn't I know whether or not he was my son? I'm his mother.

Dr. Tarr: Which means you're in no position to be objective. You are looking through the prism of extreme emotion at a boy who has changed from what you remember. He isn't the same boy that left here, just as a boy who goes off to war and returns isn't the same anymore. A mother's heart, driven by intuition and emotion rather than logic, sees these changes and rebels, insists that this cannot be your son. But that doesn't change the facts.

This scene illustrates the institutionalization of gaslighting through scientific authority, where Dr. Tarr reinforces the deception initiated by Captain Jones under the guise of rational expertise. His discourse exemplifies epistemic

gaslighting — a form of manipulation that delegitimizes the victim’s capacity to perceive and interpret reality — by appealing to authority, logic, and medical reasoning while invalidating Christine’s emotional truth.

From a *politeness theory* perspective, Tarr’s language initially employs negative politeness strategies, such as hedging (*Trauma can affect the growth of children; Given the stress of the last four months, his spine may have actually shrunk*), to present his claims as objective and considerate. However, this surface politeness conceals epistemic domination: his medical rationalizations override Christine’s first-hand maternal knowledge, reframing her certainty as irrational emotion.

Dr. Tarr’s reference to *a mother’s heart, driven by intuition and emotion rather than logic*, exemplifies a strategically *ambivalent* politeness move. On the surface, it appeals to positive politeness, as it appears to validate Christine’s maternal sensitivity and care. However, this validation operates as a disguised face-threatening act toward her negative face — her right to independent judgment and epistemic authority. By praising her intuition, Tarr simultaneously infantilizes and disempowers her, implying that her maternal affection precludes rational objectivity. Pragmatically, this ambivalence accomplishes several goals. First, it installs a rhetorical hierarchy: medical/scientific expertise is foregrounded as the arbiter of truth, while maternal knowledge is recast as affective bias. Second, it exploits conversational inference — listeners (and Christine herself) are nudged to treat her testimony as affective noise rather than as a credible source of information. Third, it short-circuits rational engagement by relocating the dispute from evidential grounds to the domain of emotion, where institutional actors (like Tarr) can comfortably offer “reassuring” explanations (spinal shrinkage, traumatized memory) without substantiating them.

Viewed through impoliteness theory, Tarr’s move also contains elements of positive impoliteness masked as positive politeness: by ostensibly sympathizing with Christine’s *motherly concern*, he simultaneously reduces her social value as a knower, covertly attacking her competence. The perlocutionary effect is significant — Christine is not merely contradicted; her epistemic self-trust is eroded.

The force of this act is intensified by its gendered bias. Tarr’s paternalistic tone draws upon culturally sedimented stereotypes of women — and especially mothers — as emotional, irrational, and unreliable witnesses. His validation of her maternal intuition reproduces patriarchal discourse structures in which women’s speech is framed as expressive rather than epistemic, as feeling rather than fact. The apparent politeness of acknowledging her motherly concern thus becomes a gendered mechanism of silencing: her femininity is used to undermine her rational authority.

Dr. Tarr also violates Grice’s maxims while maintaining a veneer of professional cooperation. He breaks the maxim of quality by providing pseudo-scientific explanations (*his spine may have actually shrunk*), the maxim of relation by diverting the discussion from facts to emotional reasoning (*You are looking through the prism of extreme emotion*), and the maxim of manner by using obscuring medical jargon that suppresses direct engagement with Christine’s claims. These violations are strategic, serving to appear rational while confusing and discrediting the hearer. In Gricean terms, Tarr’s speech simulates cooperative and informative discourse while violating its core principles. Through these pragmatic deviations, Tarr maintains the appearance of cooperation while strategically undermining the communicative goal of truth-seeking — a hallmark of manipulative and institutionally protective discourse.

Data Extract 4

Jones: *You’ve put us through quite a bit of trouble, Mrs. Collins. This situation has become an embarrassment for the entire department.*

Christine: *It wasn’t my intention to embarrass anyone.*

Jones: *No, of course not. You just told the papers we can’t tell one boy from another as a compliment for the months we spent working on your case. Are you trying to make fools out of us? Is that it? Do you enjoy this?*

Christine: *No, of course not. I had to get your attention, I had to make you understand... he’s not my son.*

Jones: *You know what your problem is? You want to shirk your responsibilities as a mother. You enjoyed being a free woman, didn’t you? Enjoyed not having to worry about a young son. You could do what you wanted, go where you wanted, see anyone you wanted. But then we found your son. Brought him back. And now he’s an inconvenience. That’s why you cooked up this whole scheme, to try and throw him to the state, let the state raise him for you.*

Christine: *That’s not true!*

Jones: No? Even the boy says he's your son. Why would he do that? How would he know to do that?

Christine: I don't know! All I know is that he's lying!

Jones: Maybe so. Maybe he is a liar. But that's how he's been trained, isn't it? Lying was born in both of you. You're a liar and a troublemaker and if you ask me you've got no business walking the streets of Los Angeles.

Christine: Just a minute —

Jones: Because either you know you're lying, or you're not capable of knowing if you're lying or telling the truth. So which is it, Mrs. Collins? Are you a derelict mother? Or just nuts? Because from where I sit, those are the only options.

Christine: I'm not going to sit here and take this —

Jones: You want to bring in experts? Doctors? Well, I can do that too.

(calling out) Matron? [...] Mrs. Collins... do you still insist that the boy out there is not your son?

Christine: Yes. [...]

Jones: (still to matron) Make the following entry in the booking department: Defendant states she has been deceived by police and others, and that they have given her a boy and tried to make her think it is her son when she says it is not.

In this extract, Jones's interaction with Christine exemplifies overt gaslighting through a blend of positive and negative impoliteness strategies and systematic violations of Grice's cooperative principle. Jones employs positive impoliteness by attacking Christine's social identity and self-image as a mother and a moral person. His accusations (*You want to shirk your responsibilities as a mother; You enjoyed being a free woman*) undermine her positive face — the need to be heard and respected. He reframes her grief and persistence as selfishness and immorality, constructing a socially deviant persona to delegitimize her claims. His mock politeness (*No, of course not!*) and sarcastic repetition of her words (*Christine: All I know is that he's lying! Jones: Maybe so. Maybe he is a liar. But that's how he's been trained, isn't it? Lying was born in both of you.*) further perform face-threatening acts, that attack her both positive and negative face, ridiculing her sincerity and positioning her as absurd.

Concurrently, negative impoliteness manifests through coercion and threat. Jones restricts Christine's freedom of expression (*You've put us through quite a bit of trouble; Are you trying to make fools out of us?*), silencing her through institutional authority and intimidation. His question *Are you a derelict mother or just nuts?* is an on-record face-threatening act, simultaneously attacking her *positive* and *negative* face, forcing her into a *double bind*⁵ where any response invalidates her credibility.

According to the Gricean perspective, Jones's discourse flagrantly violates the maxims of quality and relation: he introduces personal and moral accusations irrelevant to the empirical question of the boy's identity. His feigned adherence to the maxim of quantity, offering excessive detail about her supposed motives. Yet, quantity is being violated by withholding any substantive information about the actual investigation or the location of the real missing boy. Instead of providing evidence, Jones uses accusations and emotional rhetoric, creating the illusion of informativeness. The deliberate shift from evidential to emotional framing is characteristic of manipulative speech. In addition, Jones's question — *Are you a derelict mother, or just nuts?* — exemplifies a violation of the maxim of manner: it is emotionally charged, deliberately ambiguous, and framed as a false dichotomy designed to induce cognitive dissonance and divert the hearer from her legitimate claims.

Data Extract 5

Steele: According to your file, you believe the police have substituted a fake boy for your son. Is that true?

Christine: I didn't say they substituted a fake boy, just... not the right boy. They brought back the wrong boy. Not my son. He's still missing.

Steele: That's strange... you see, I have here a newspaper article with a photo of you at the train station, welcoming your son home. That is you in the photo, isn't it?

Christine: Yes.

Steele: So at first he was your son, but now he's not your son. Has this been going on for a long time? People... changing, becoming something other than what they are?

Christine: People don't change, doctor.

Steele: You don't think people change?

⁵ A *double bind* occurs when an individual is confronted with two contradictory messages, making any adequate response impossible. (Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland, 1956)

Christine: That's not what I —

Steele: And the police... they're not out to persecute you?

Christine: No. Of course not.

Steele: The police are here to protect us.

Christine: That's right.

Steele: That's odd, because according to the head nurse, when you were admitted, you accused the police of conspiring to do this deliberately, to punish you. So either she and the interns are also conspiring against you... or you're changing your story. Do you often have trouble telling reality from fantasy, Mrs. Collins?

This exchange between Steele and Christine demonstrates gaslighting through the strategic use of verbal manipulation and asymmetry of power. Steele's utterances enact multiple face-threatening acts directed towards the hearer's both positive and negative face. The doctor's questions appear logical and diagnostic, yet they are rhetorically loaded and intentionally misleading. By presenting Christine with false dichotomies (...*either she and the interns are also conspiring... or you're changing your story*), Steele imposes a double bind, forcing her into two equally discrediting options. This not only threatens her positive face (her need to be seen as credible and rational) but also undermines her negative face, as it strips her of epistemic and interpretive autonomy.

Steele's tone exemplifies negative impoliteness — he invades her personal and cognitive space through coercive questioning — while his feigned civility and appeals to reason reflect positive impoliteness masked as negative politeness, subtly mocking her induced irrationality. The polite framing (*That's strange...; Do you often have trouble...*) enhances the manipulation by disguising aggression beneath institutional decorum.

Here, the illusion of cooperation is masterfully constructed. In Gricean terms, Steele's discourse outwardly conforms to the cooperative principle while deviously subverting it. He violates the maxim of manner through ambiguity and insinuation, fostering confusion rather than clarity, and breaches the maxim of relation by diverting the discussion from factual verification of the boy's identity to Christine's alleged psychological instability. Yet, because the exchange takes place in a psychiatric setting — with Steele in the role of a doctor and Christine framed as a patient — these violations are concealed beneath the appearance of professional relevance and reasonableness.

The maxim of quantity appears respected when Steele refers to the newspaper photo as evidence, but is simultaneously violated since he withholds any substantive inquiry into the case or a credible psychiatric evaluation. Similarly, the maxim of quality seems upheld — Steele performs the role of an objective doctor — but is in fact flouted, as he imposes a false diagnostic frame rather than pursuing truth.

The cumulative perlocutionary effect is epistemic destabilisation: Christine's narrative authority is eroded, and institutional discourse redefines the parameters of reality. The scene thus exposes how institutional gaslighting operates under the guise of rational cooperation, in this case, using the form of medical professionalism to legitimise coercion and silence dissent.

Conclusion:

This study has demonstrated that gaslighting functions as a sophisticated, manipulative discourse strategy designed to destabilize the victim's epistemic self-trust and constrain his/her autonomy. From the linguo-pragmatic perspective, gaslighting operates through a multifaceted interaction of politeness, impoliteness, and strategic violation of Gricean maxims, creating the illusion of cooperation while systematically undermining the victim's perception of reality. Specifically, a single communicative act can simultaneously protect and violate either positive or negative face: what appears as empathy or reassurance may covertly delegitimize the victim's knowledge, while seemingly deferential language can impose authority and constrain independent action. This ambivalence underscores the strategic malleability of politeness, revealing how its surface-level affiliative features can be weaponized to achieve coercive ends.

Positive politeness strategies, such as expressions of solidarity or validation, may mask epistemic domination by framing the victim's perspective as emotionally biased rather than factually reliable. Negative politeness, including hedging, modal phrasing, and deferential formulations, creates the appearance of choice and respect for autonomy while covertly restricting freedom of action. When subtle measures fail, overt impoliteness — including ridicule, verbal aggression, and coercive threats — further erodes social value and reinforces compliance.

From the standpoint of the cooperative principle, gaslighters strategically exploit violations of the Gricean maxims of quality, quantity, relation, and manner to manipulate the interpretation and flow of information. Through ambiguity, false dichotomies, and rhetorical diversion, they generate cognitive dissonance, redirect attention from empirical evidence, and destabilize the victim's narrative authority. The perlocutionary effect is epistemic destabilization: victims' confidence in his/her own judgment is systematically undermined, enabling the manipulator to redefine reality on his/her own terms. Importantly, such violations are often masked as adherence to the Cooperative Principle, producing the illusion of rational, cooperative discourse while simultaneously serving covert, manipulative goals.

The analysis demonstrates that gaslighting is not merely psychological coercion but a complex discourse strategy that extends beyond the normative expectations of traditional pragmatic paradigms. It operates as a full-fledged cognitive and communicative mechanism, systematically manipulating the flow of information, epistemic authority, and the victim's interpretive capacities.

This study contributes to the existing body of research on manipulative discourse, presenting a detailed linguistic analysis of gaslighting as a complex strategy mediated by both cognitive and communicative processes. Focusing on the interplay between linguistic form, social context, and mental impact, the study offers both theoretical and practical insights. It elucidates the mechanisms through which gaslighting discourse operates and provides analytical tools for identifying and resisting gaslighting across institutional, professional, and everyday communicative settings.

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