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## **Women are smaller, weaker and less intelligent: A linguistic case study on Piers Morgan v. Janusz Korwin-Mikke interview<sup>1</sup>**

### **1. Introduction**

A twelve-minute conversation might seem like a short one, but sometimes it is enough to exhibit an abundance of versatile linguistic cues. On March 8, 2017, a Polish Member of the European Parliament, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, was invited to the British morning show *Good Morning Britain*. That day's hosts, Piers Morgan, Susana Reid, and Charlotte Hawkins, wanted the controversial MEP to elaborate on his previous statement about the gender pay gap as motivated by biologically-dependent factors such as average lower height or IQ levels of females. That conversation, or rather, confrontation, was not treated lightly by the presenters and quickly turned into a heated debate. There are several underlying aspects of that encounter that are of special interest from the linguistic point of view, and those are linguistic (im)politeness, locutors' power, and consequently, power (im)balance. From a sociological perspective, the interview, as an intercultural encounter of native and non-native English speakers, can be discussed in the context of native-speakerism, and its broader context reflects a perceptual fallacy: the so-called *halo effect*.

Korwin-Mikke as well as Morgan are both very popular in the media for their controversies. Their public performances gather not only the popular, but also scientific attention. Both Korwin-Mikke and Morgan have been analyzed linguistically (cf., e.g., Kuros,

<sup>1</sup> Author's note: In strife for an open science and replicability access movement, all materials, including transcription with annotations, all comment data scraped, and the analysis can be found at the following link: <https://github.com/sewerynjulia/JKM-vs-PM>

2011 for Korwin-Mikke's use of sexist language; Okoniewska, 2019; Bartłomiejczyk, 2023 for issues in interpreting Korwin-Mikke in the EU Parliament; Fedyna, 2016 for Morgan's politeness techniques; Abbas, 2021 for humor in Morgan's idiolect), politically (cf., e.g., Jaruga, 2014; Chwedczuk-Szulc & Zaremba, 2015; Lipiński & Stępińska, 2019 for analyses of Korwin-Mikke's status as a phenomenon in the right-wing political milieu; Wring & Ward, 2020 for the political influences of Morgan), and in the context of media/social studies (cf., e.g., Janikowski, 2014; Romanshova & Smółka, 2016 for the emergence of Korwin-Mikke as a pop-cultural phenomenon; Blatt, 2024 for Morgan's engagement into the allyship discourse; Greenslade, 2024 for Morgan's reliability as an editor).

## 2. Literature review

Impoliteness, discussed as a pragmatic strategy, has gathered a lot of traction in the past decade (cf. Lai, 2019 for impoliteness in reviews; Oliver, 2022 for impoliteness in Shakespeare; Shevchenko et al., 2021 for impoliteness in parliamentary discourse; Andersson, 2022 for impoliteness and COVID-19 on Facebook; O'Toole, 2024 for impoliteness among incels). It is a heavily individual and culture-dependent linguistic strategy, which causes disagreement and a lack of unification across literature available on what *impoliteness* in fact indicates. Moreover, interpretations of interactions cannot be deprived of their preceding contexts; what individuals view as impolite in one interaction can be evaluated neutrally or even positively in another (Graham, 2007). And while there are many scholars who claim that (im)politeness is by no means inherent (e.g., Fraser & Nolan, 1981), there are also those who propose that there are instances of linguistic structures that are conventionally assessed as impolite, e.g., personalized negative vocatives (YOU+NP structure) (Van Olmen et al., 2023, p. 26).

One of the most important concepts in the (im)politeness theory is, dated but still relevant, Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of face and, consequently, face-threatening acts (FTAs), i.e., linguistic behaviors that expose individuals to potential damage and loss of social positioning/status in the eyes of others. Although both Brown and Levinson's politeness, and Culpeper's impoliteness (1996, 2011, 2017) theories are widely quoted and well-respected, what has to be taken into consideration is their culture-specificity; the theories cannot be generalized as describing a universal concept, but rather one that suits primarily the middle-class Anglo-Saxon context (Culpeper & Hardaker, 2017). (Im)politeness is "contextual by nature" and thus has to be viewed through the cultural lens via "part[s] of cultural models, conventions, and norms that bring about different expectations" (Shevchenko et al., 2021, p. 82).

Wierzbicka (1985), one of the most prominent researchers in the field of contrastive Polish-English linguistics, mentions two critical differences in the construction of speech acts between Polish and English speakers. Firstly, the opinions in Polish are constructed more forcefully than in English; e.g., in order to express dissatisfaction, an English speaker is more likely to utter a first person singular subjective opinion sentence,

such as *I don't like it*, while a Polish speaker would rather utter it in the form of a fact statement, e.g., *To źle* (Eng. 'It's bad'). Secondly, courtesy is expressed differently, and because no language is *more* or *less* courteous in Wierzbicka's opinion, Polish is characterized by more bald on-record expressions and does not involve much hedging as opposed to hedge-abundant English.

Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (2017a) observes the most prominent cultural (and thus linguistic) differences between the Polish and the British in emotional salience. Polish speakers, to get "higher visibility," are more likely to use *ad personam* arguments as well as more abusive and radical language as compared with the British speakers (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2017a, p. 3). This, however, does not mean that British speakers are devoid of abusive and strongly emotional language. Indirectness in the form of irony, sarcasm, and hedging is what can be typically associated with British discourse (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2017b).

Metalinguistic commentary, especially prominent in sensitivity to the interlocutors' erroneous use of language, is characteristic for both Polish and British speakers. The difference can be observed in the face-threatening/face-saving act division. The Polish use a more educator-like tone (i.e., associated with FTAs more), while the British pinpoint the errors with less didacticism (FSAs) (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2017b, p. 355). Finally, rather than metaphors, preferred by the British, the Polish speakers use intertextual references. Referring to common experiences and shared background knowledge promotes relatability. This seems more important within collectivist societies (like Poland) than individualist ones, such as Great Britain (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2017b).

Because, as rightly remarked by Culpeper et al. (2017, p. 2), "there is no one-size-fits-all definition of politeness or impoliteness," what is going to be interpreted as impolite acts in this paper are acts intentional in nature, i.e., when a) the speaker attacks the face of their interlocutor with intention; b) the interlocutor interprets the speaker's act as an intentional attack; or c) both a) and b) intertwine (Culpeper & Hardaker, 2017, p. 203). Another crucial aspect that should be mentioned here is a more novel way of perceiving face as both "cause and effect" and thus as being entrenched in interactions but also shaping them (O'Driscoll, 2017, p. 105). It is also worth noting the differences between positive (intentional positive-face damage, e.g., via insults), negative (intentional negative-face, e.g., via interruptions), mock ("obviously insincere politeness") impoliteness, and withhold politeness (lack of politeness where expected), which are all considered valid impoliteness strategies (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021, p. 129). Moreover, impoliteness should be considered within the scope of reciprocity, as impolite exchanges are quite frequent. After all, "[p]eople tend not to 'turn the other cheek', but to retaliate in kind in British and North American cultures" (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021, p. 148).

Power, and thus solidarity and distance, are critical elements employed in the exercises of linguistic (im)politeness (Leech, 1983; Spencer-Oatey & Žegarac, 2017). Spencer-Oatey, Žegarac (2017, p. 120) define it as "the ability to exercise control or exert influence on other people" from both the individual and collective perspectives. Such control, or power, may stem from a number of various sources: institutionalized relations, social

status, perception of others, acquired power, i.e., expertise and knowledge, or persuasive power (French & Raven, 1959).

The distinction between powerful and powerless language/speakers dates back to O'Barr and Atkinson's (1980) study conducted as a response to Lakoff's (1975) controversial statements, lacking in evidence, of the alleged differences in women's and men's language, where the "female language" could be characterized by elements such as empty adjectives, hedges, hesitations, or tag questions. O'Barr and Atkins (1980) concluded that elements deemed by Lakoff as female-specific are, in fact, social status-specific, and therefore they suggested renaming the concepts to *weak* and *powerful* language as opposed to *female* and *male*. Hosman and Siltanen (2006, p. 33) define weak, powerless, or low-power speech style as "exhibiting the hedges [and] hesitations," and powerful or high-power speech style as devoid of these but filled with intensifiers. Questions can also be interpreted as a tool used to reinforce the speaker's power. Hutchby (1996) mentions how important they are, especially in the interview environment, where the interviewer wields the power over questions and thus moderates the conversation. Although the researchers are not unanimous when it comes to a clear distinction between who the powerful party in the interview is, the host or the guest, the interviewer's ability to control the conversation and change its path along the way favors the host. Hutchby (1996, p. 485) additionally mentions the host's "power of summary," i.e., agency in starting, finishing, and concluding the conversation. The sequence of speaking also plays a role; the first turn may be at a disadvantage as it requires immediate stance-defending.

Freiermuth (2001) draws a parallel between the power imbalance that can be observed in the context of an interview and a conversation between native and non-native speakers. In his view, the dynamic between interviewers and interviewees resembles the disproportion in authority and expertise observable in the interactions of native (NSs) and non-native speakers (N-NSs). Studies conducted in the field, for example, Zuengler (1989), suggest that even in situations of higher competence among non-native speakers, native speakers still lead the discussions and are perceived as the expert party. What seems to fuel this disproportion at the highest level are mispronunciation and accents (Freiermuth, 2001). The disbalance between native and non-native speakers is not necessarily the result of ill will or the illusion of superiority expressed by the former. Shimahara (2015) reports that in interactions with N-NSs, all his native English-speaking interviewees simplify their speech. Although this may seem like genuine goodwill, it may also be interpreted as condescending behavior. It can result in unintentional flouting of the conversation motivated by native-speakerism – a deeply rooted ideological belief in the superiority of the NSs (Holliday, 2006). The native/non-native division shifts into an insider/outsider or even better/worse, which has its origins in the culture of "correcting non-native speaker culture" (Holliday, 2006, p. 386). Such an ideological distinction, labelled by Holliday (2018, p. 2) as a contemporary form of "linguistic neo-racism," creates unjust social inequalities and reinforces prejudice towards N-NSs. In the interview discussed here, the interviewee is automatically in a disadvantaged (supposedly powerless) position. Not only is he immediately numerically dominated by the interviewers, but he is

also the only non-native English speaker present, which, as shown by the research, has consequences for the path the conversation takes.

Clayman (2013) mentions two distinctive professional norms usually expected from journalists: *neutrality* and *adversarialness*. Firstly, despite the goal of remaining completely impartial and objective being unrealistic, journalists, at least to some extent, are expected to remain neutral sources of information rather than opinions (Clayman, 2013, p. 637). Secondly, the interviewer should be “an independent watchdog” and, by being adversarial, should remain a counterbalance to powerful speakers, especially strongly opinionated politicians, and public figures (Clayman, 2013, p. 641). To achieve both of these norms, journalists may use specific question design and presuppositions, which set an agenda and display expectations (Clayman, 2013, p. 641). Adversarialness, however, is not about showing aggression or disrespect to the interviewee. To be perceived as professional, objective guards of the public, not prone to propaganda and sweet talk, interviewers cannot offend and/or attack their guests. Maintaining the attitudes of neutrality, adversariality, and professionalism at the same time is possible through *damage control* vehicles, such as respectful treatment of the interviewee, justifying interviewers’ reluctance, and minimizing (e.g., when asking for more time by phrases such as *just one thing* or *very quickly*) (Clayman, 2013, p. 648–649). Theoretically, such journalistic conduct should be followed; however, as rightly observed by Hutchby (2022, p. 39), we experience a non-neutrality shift in journalism, as “in more recent decades the conventional and adversarial interview formats—while they still exist in most broadcast outlets—have been joined by still more aggressive, tendentious styles of interview.”

Interviews, because of their dynamic character, do not have a strictly fixed structure, but we can draw distinctions between the major subtypes, i.e., *accountability*, *vox pop/experiential*, *campaign*, and *panel/debate* interviews. The material analyzed here can be classified under the umbrella term of the *accountability interview*, where the interviewee is held responsible for their actions or claims (Montgomery, 2025). Conditions for such classification include public interview execution and adjusted interactional roles of interviewer and interviewee. While conforming to the rules of journalistic conduct (remaining neutral and professional), the interviewer becomes the voice of the people (Montgomery, 2025). Normally, the accountability news interview, similarly to other genres of interviews, does not violate the typical order of turn-taking distribution, i.e., the interviewer interrogates and the interviewee answers (ibid.). Questions allow the interviewer to remain neutral, as they are not, by default, a stance-taking technique. As opposed to yes/no questions (or polar interrogatives), which force the interviewee to (dis)agree with a proposition, wh-questions, according to Montgomery (2025), can be seen as neutralistic. However, in the case of accusatory imports, such as “how could you...,” the interrogative form of the structure is dominated by the assertion, and that is “pushing the boundaries of what is permissible journalistic conduct” (Clayman, 2013, p. 645). Apparently, in British accountability interviews, declarative + negative tag structure prevails (Montgomery, 2025). Such a structure, in a way, restricts the interviewee’s freedom in answering. Lastly, in order to create a full picture, we may refer to characteristics of

interview format that more closely resemble entertainment talk show formats, where the interviewer – not the interviewee – takes the center of the stage. Examples of such shows include the Polish *Kuba Wojewódzki show*, the English *Late Show with James Corden*, or the American *Ellen DeGeneres Show*. In these formats, hosts often provoke or even insult their guests to boost their own popularity and sustain audience interest. The primary goal of such conversations is not to inform the spectators but to entertain them.

### 3. Methodology

The case study presented here is a conversational analysis of a debate between two main actors, who are, undoubtedly, powerful speakers: the host Piers Morgan and his guest Janusz Korwin-Mikke, as well as two secondary actors, co-hosts Susanna Reid and Charlotte Hawkins. Conversation Analysis (CA) is the methodology of choice, as its assumptions lay in the situational, repeatable order. It is heavily dependent on context and thus “legitimately investigates all areas of socially motivated talk” (Liddicoat, 2022, p. 5). Fox et al. (2013, p. 739) mention that CA and linguistics “cross-fertilize” one another, as CA grows out of the interest in human interaction and social order, which are shaped by language. Moreover, because of the changing nature of journalistic conduct and perception of what is acceptable and what is not in an interview, Conversation Analysis seems to be an accurate measure of assessing the material analyzed.

The starting point of CA, most frequently, is not research questions or hypotheses but rather “unmotivated looking” as described by Psathas (1995, p. 45). In this case, unmotivated looking was indeed the first step; however, post-initial familiarization, the construction of research questions seemed a necessity; thus, the paper aims at answering the following:

RQ1: What linguistic tools do the two powerful speakers use to mark their powerfulness and portray themselves as experts?

And to understand the social impact of the event:

RQ2: What is the social response to the interview, and how are the actors perceived by the online audience?

To answer the RQs, a detailed transcription<sup>2</sup> of the conversation has been prepared, annotated, and analyzed specifically focusing on the enlisted characteristics of powerful and powerless language. Based on an inductive qualitative model, the analysis investigates the lexico-syntactic level in the use of (in)direct speech acts, epistemic modal verbs, intensifiers, hedges, and the use of pronouns. Pragmatically, and especially (im)politeness-wise, it considers negative impoliteness, turn-taking, conventionalized polite salutations, and metadiscursive references. In its final part, the paper analyzes the social perception of the event across commenters of the four most popular YouTube videos dedicated to the event by qualitatively analyzing 1075 of the most

<sup>2</sup> The transcription can be found in the GitHub library, <https://github.com/sewerynjulia/JKM-vs-PM>

visible comments using the WebScraper API and searching for overt categories: criticism of Morgan, criticism of Korwin-Mikke, praise of Morgan, and praise of Korwin-Mikke.

The study focuses on the specimen approach (rather than the factist) and thus analyzes a singular example of social interaction, which in a way contributes to our understanding of reality. With that being said, qualitative, small-scale studies are of value, as they all represent elements of reality (Liddicoat, 2022, p. 72). Moreover, the material analyzed, a broadcast news interview, is “a natural occurring interaction” and thus not only suits the scope of CA (Liddicoat, 2022, p. 18) but is also one of “the earliest forms of institutional talk to be investigated within Conversation Analysis” (Clayman, 2013, p. 630).

The analysis, following Liddicoat (2022), should consider turn-taking, sequences (with a specific focus on TCUs<sup>3</sup> and TRPs<sup>4</sup>) of interaction, and repair work. The study presented examines the first two aspects; however, the understanding of repair work here is turned into *anti-repair work*, as the whole conversation is driven rather by impoliteness than cooperation.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Language

The overall span of the interview totals 12 minutes and 30 seconds, but the turns add up to 12 minutes and 62 seconds. The additional 32 seconds are a result of simultaneous speech. Korwin-Mikke<sup>5</sup>, the interviewee, has, unsurprisingly, the most time to speak. His overall turns equal 6.08 min, which constitutes 48.2% of the whole interview. Morgan<sup>6</sup>, the interviewer, takes 4.37 min, 34.6% of the airtime; Reid<sup>7</sup>, a co-host, takes 2 minutes (15.8%), and Hawkins<sup>8</sup>, another co-host, takes 0.17 min. (1.3%). The ratio is interesting because, although JKM has the longest airtime, it is still very close in percentage points to PM (13.6 percentage point difference). García Gómez (2000), in his comparative study on British and Spanish talk-shows, showed the ratio of around 70–80% of the airtime as dedicated to the interviewee and 20–30% to the host (a 40–60 p.p. difference). That is three to four times more than in the case of the interview analyzed (and that applies only to the main interviewer, not the co-hosts), which, even considering the error margin, suggests that the *Good Morning Britain* hosts did not provide their guest with the standard floor/turn-taking opportunities. When it comes to turns, a critical component of Conversation Analysis, it can be observed that PM takes the most of them

<sup>3</sup> Turn-Constructional Units “end at places of possible completion” and they may be completed via grammar, prosody (intonation), or pragmatics (Liddicoat, 2022, p. 89).

<sup>4</sup> Transition Relevance Places are “points of possible completion” (Liddicoat, 2022, p. 89).

<sup>5</sup> From now on referred to as JKM.

<sup>6</sup> From now on referred to as PM.

<sup>7</sup> From now on referred to as SR.

<sup>8</sup> From now on referred to as CH.



(18) as compared to JKM (13), SR (10), and CH (3). Although there are no rules when it comes to turn-taking, as they are locally organized (Liddicoat, 2022), in the context of interviews, we can talk about turns as “partially predetermined,” where interviewers limit their scope of actions to asking questions, and interviewees, to answering them (Clayman, 2013, p. 631). This is not the case in the interview being discussed: TCUs and TRPs are violated to the extent that it is difficult to measure them in any way due to constant intentional and aggressive interruptions (not overlaps<sup>9</sup>) of both main speakers. Another aspect to consider here is the remote nature of the interview and limitations it entails. In addition to the aforementioned intentional interruptions, a slight delay in the broadcast – acknowledged by the speakers a few times – further contributes to unintentional turn overlaps, a common issue in online conversations. These two combined create noise that might additionally frustrate the speakers and influence the way they communicate.

Formally speaking, PM asks a lot of questions – 8 of them are rhetorical and 6 do demand answers. 3 questions are accusatory imports (“How can you say that...”), which Clayman (2013, p. 654) deems to be inappropriate journalistic conduct and an “extremely aggressive practice.” Similarly to JKM, who uses the interrogative form only three times and, in neither case, demands an actual answer (e.g., “Why are you not interested...?”), what he does is the preservation of his dominant face (Okoniewska, 2019). Additionally, PM goes beyond the scope of interviewing his guest and asks a question of his colleague: “Susanna, would you like to speak to this gentleman?” playing on what could be named a *knighly code* – a polite invitation for the lady to join the conversation. What he, perhaps unconsciously, does is in fact mark a power imbalance between the interviewers. PM directly portrays himself as the conversation moderator, showing that he and SR are not equal hosts. In 3 questions that SR asks, one demands an actual answer (“Can you just give me an example...”), one is purely polite (“Can I establish just your credentials?”), and one is to confirm a statement of facts (“...is that right?”). She employs *damage control vehicles* (Clayman, 2013) in all of them: minimizing departure (“just”) and justifying resistance (making sure she has the fact right).

Table 1 presents the analyzed linguistic components implemented by the actors. Speech acts-wise, direct imperatives (e.g., PM and JKM: “stop,” PM: “let me,” JKM: “don’t mix up”) are uttered equally often, 6 times by JKM and PM. Indirect imperatives are not as frequent; they appear only 4 times: three by PM (e.g., “Sorry the lady is about to speak”) and twice by SR (“Can you just give...,” “Can I just interrupt...”).

By the use of epistemic modal verbs (“can,” “could,” “may,” “might,” “must,” “would,” “shall,” “should,” “will”), the speakers position themselves as authorities, experts in their fields (Ushchyna, 2020). PM exercises that technique 4 times (e.g., “That might be...,” JKM 8 times (e.g., “If you are weaker, you must earn less”), and SR use it twice (e.g., “you should be pay, paid more”).

<sup>9</sup> Overlapping is not interpreted as impolite, as opposed to interrupting. It can result from the excitement and engagement; in some cases, it can be even considered cooperative (Weatherall & Edmonds, 2018).



Component	Janusz Korwin-Mikke	Piers Morgan	Susanna Reid	Charlotte Hawkins	Overall
Time	6.08 min (48.2%)	4.37 min (34.6%)	2 min (15.8%)	0.17 min (1.3%)	12.30 min
Turns	13	18	10	3	44
Speech act – imperative	6 (direct)	6 (direct) 3 (indirect)	2 (indirect)	X	17
Speech act – interrogative	3	14	3	X	20
Epistemic modality	1 ( <i>would</i> ) 5 ( <i>should</i> ) 2 ( <i>must</i> ) = 8	4 ( <i>might</i> ) 2 ( <i>should</i> ) = 6	1 ( <i>will</i> ) 1 ( <i>should</i> ) = 2	X	16
Conventionalized polite salutations	20	8	3	X	31
Intensifiers	21	22	13	X	56
Hedges	5	6	14	X	25
Negative impoliteness	9	18	3	1	32
1 <sup>st</sup> p. pronouns (sg.)	37	19	27	1	84
2 <sup>nd</sup> p. pronouns	32	86	21	X	139
Metadiscursive references	14	32	8	1	55

Table 1. Results: summary

Source: own data.

In discussing offensive language, Culpeper (2011, p. 238) mentions the use of “conventionalized polite salutations” in a sarcastic manner as a part of mock impoliteness. In the case of the British interlocutors, PM and SR, their use of polite salutations is, in fact, sarcastic in nearly all instances (SR  $n=3$ , e.g., “I mean, you know, forgive me,” PM  $n=8$ , e.g., “Thank you very much indeed for joining us... oh God”). The situation is different in the case of JKM, a Polish speaker, who uses numerically the most polite salutations ( $n=20$ , e.g., “Sorry” when trying to win the floor), and they are never uttered sarcastically but as a part of polite language. This example might either show an interesting cultural difference or simply fluency limitations experienced by JKM. At the same time, the native speakers might take advantage of the lower proficiency level in their interviewee’s English and purposefully adapt more conventionalized sarcastic salutations as an impoliteness strategy.

The two main actors in this interview make frequent use of intensifiers (PM  $n=22$ , e.g., “really,” “incredibly,” “obviously”; JKM  $n=21$ , e.g., “very,” “no doubt”). SR uses

significantly fewer intensifiers ( $n=13$ , e.g., “absolutely,” “utter”). Intensifiers reinforce both speakers’ dominant face, and are, as mentioned by Bartłomiejczyk (2023, p. 65), typical for JKM’s idiolect (specifically markers of evidentiality e.g., *obviously*).

Hedging, typically associated with the powerless speakers, is employed infrequently by both PM (6 times, e.g., “I sort of assumed,” “struggling a bit”) and JKM (5 times, e.g., “quite different,” “generally regarded”). Contrastively, SR makes intense use of hedging with 14 instances across the interview (e.g., “I feel like,” “sounds like”). Again, considering the low ratio of her turn span and the nearly three times higher number of hedges than the other two conversers, it might be concluded that either hedging is an idiolectic feature characteristic for SR, or she can be classified as a powerless speaker.

Metadiscourse, and especially meta-impoliteness, can be incredibly potent in conflict talk (Culpeper et al., 2017), and the interview participants make extensive use of it. PM uses metadiscursive elements 32 times throughout the whole interview. JKM uses 14 and SR, 8. Based on focal references within metadiscourse, it can be gathered that PM focuses primarily on metadiscourse with reference to his addressee (2nd p. sg.) and less on himself (1st p. sg.) (e.g. “you believe,” “you sound,” “you say”), while both JKM and SR use metadiscourse to emphasize or reinforce their own positions (1st p. sg., e.g., JKM: “I didn’t say,” “I’m explaining,” SR: “I don’t understand,” “I agree”). What is more, both JKM and PM use what Ushchyna (2020, p. 85) calls the expert stance, i.e., assertive epistemic utterances expressing certainty, the so called “faceless stances,” e.g., JKM: “If you are weaker, you must earn less,” PM: “[stupidity] is linked to intelligence.” SR, on the other hand, exhibits more of a layperson’s stance, i.e., affective emphatic techniques, e.g., “I’m not sure we ever got to the bottom of why a shorter man should learn less than a taller man,” “I think women ever are grateful.”

Negative impoliteness-expressed insults, pointed criticisms, presuppositions, silencers, and condescensions is most frequently implemented by PM (18 times) and JKM (9 times). SR (3 times) and CH (once), despite their lower contribution, also use these strategies. Table 2 presents strategies employed by each speaker.

Both JKM and PM make frequent use of bald-on-record negative impoliteness strategies, as observable in Table 2. Interestingly, positive impoliteness is not observed in this interview, unless we consider PM’s polarizing remarks drawing a line between Britain and Poland as such. This, however, does not seem intentional; at the beginning of the conversation, PM rather tries to draw a line between *us* (British people) and *you* (JKM), not *them* (Poles) (“Can you explain... to people in Britain, please”). At the end of the interview, he creates a framework of a kind by saying, “You are the greatest advert for Britain leaving the European Union,” which could be superficially interpreted as drawing a *us* vs. *them* line (Brits vs. the EU), but later he adds, “As somebody who voted *remain*, you could have single-handedly persuaded me to vote *Brexit*,” which, again, rather points to the distinction between *us* vs. *you*.

The speakers insult one another with no redress (PM: “you are just a horrendous sexist pig,” JKM: “you’re an idiot”), enforce their messages with condescensions (PM: “Let me try again, right?”) or accusations (JKM: “it only shows so that that you who don’t

believe in science, that's all"). JKM reiterates his statistics-based argument ("it is checked, it is proved, and women earn less"), using science as the highest authority; therefore, it is *argumentum ad auctoritatem* and simultaneously *argumentum ad verecundiam* (lexemes "scientists," "science" and "scientifically proven"). Moreover, what JKM implements is the *number game*, a reference to "objective facts," in this case, statistics. This technique was used by him in the past, e.g., in his controversial parliamentary speech preceding the interview (Okoniewska, 2019). Speakers fight for the floor so aggressively that they are forced to silence one another using condescending onomatopoeic expressions (PM: "shush") and/or direct imperatives (JKM: "stop").

Impoliteness technique	JKM	Example	PM	Example	SR	Example	CH	Example
Insult (personalized negative assertions)	1	"It only, only show shows that <b>you're an idiot</b> "	2	"what you're really doing is showing the world that <b>you are just a horrendous sexist pig</b> "				
Insult (personalized third-person negative references in the hearing of the target)			1	"It's quite extraordinary to have <b>a guy that tall to be so unbelievably dim</b> "	2	"he spoke for himself"	1	"He's been called the 'Polish Borat'"
Pointed criticisms/complaints	2	" <b>you still believe in stereotypes</b> "	3	" <b>you yourself sound so unbelievably stupid</b> "	1	"whatever your argument that is just complete rubbish"		
Challenging or unpalatable questions and/or presuppositions	2	"do you say the women are not shorter than men?"	6	"Is that a joke?!"				
Condescensions			1	"Do you see it, do you see how it works?"				
Silencers	4	"stop!"	5	" <b>shush</b> , shush, shush"				

Table 2. Impoliteness strategies

Source: Adapted from Culpeper, 2011, p. 135–136.

Two main actors fight for the floor seven times, each time by force and volume; whoever is louder wins. JKM refers to his disadvantaged position as a guest who is not allowed to finish his sentence (“I was talking and you b-”; “for the fifth time you are inter, interrupting-”). Such behavior, i.e., highlighting the linguistic injustice or disproportion in floor bids, might be intentional and may work in JKM’s favor in the eyes of the audience. PM is portrayed as a host who does not allow his guests to fully express themselves; as a result, he is perceived as an unprofessional journalist. PM wins the floor seven out of seven times (or perhaps JKM intentionally gives it up?), and the conversation moderated by the host continues. This shows that the last word belongs to the interviewer, positioning him as the more powerful speaker.

Roughly in the middle of the interview, PM, enraged by JKM’s accusation of “believing in stereotypes” flouts Grice’s Relevance Maxim and uses an *ad exemplum* argument. As the conversation moderator with an already established dominant position, he suddenly shifts the topic of debate to JKM’s private life. He mentions unrelated intricacies of his family life, i.e., the number of his ex-partners and children to ridicule his guest (*ad ridiculum* argument) and undermine his statements and position. To reinforce this, PM uses a mocking tone and remarks sarcastically, “Do you think your special brand of, of umm... celebration of of women is is struggling a bit, given your extraordinary private life.” JKM, surprised by the unexpected argument, tries to cut it short by absolute terms (reiterating “nothing”) and goes back to the main conversation topic. While the three interlocutors discuss the statistical intricacies of the gender pay gap and its positive correlation with height, PM uses anecdotal evidence, again using an *ad exemplum* argument, by asking SR how tall she is. SR gives an answer that complies with the statistical average of female height (5’4, i.e., ca. 162 cm). PM presents the singular instance as extrapolatable data: if SR is not above the average and still earns a lot, it poses enough evidence to debunk JKM’s claims. That, of course, is a rhetorical fallacy and an over-generalization. When discussing false equivalence, Baron and Jost (2019, p. 300) aptly remark that “[t]he fact that Nicole Kidman is a foot taller than Danny DeVito hardly disproves the reasonable generalization that men are (on average) taller than women.”

The interviewers try to close the conversation twice using typical cues (Liddicoat, 2022, p. 323) – using falling intonation and backchanneling (“okay,” “yeah,” “you’re right”). First time their attempt is unsuccessful as JKM keeps on talking and they decide to extend the interview.

After the interview, the presenters briefly reflect. Susanna Reid utters an interesting comment. She jocularly finishes the conversation by actually agreeing with Korwin-Mikke’s comment: “[A fifteen-year-old boy is already more intelligent than his mother] Although I have to say, in my family that’s probably true.”

## 4.2. Public reception

Table 3 presents an overview of how YouTube commenters received the video, highlighting the main patterns that emerged in audience reactions. The data illustrate the

dominant evaluative tendencies and the range of sentiments expressed across the comment section.

YouTube video source	PM critique	PM praise	JKM critique	JKM praise
<i>PewDiePie</i>	66% (N=107)	0% (N=0)	11% (N=18)	22% (N=36)
<i>GoodMorningBritain</i>	36% (N=43)	0% (N=0)	18% (N=22)	46% (N=56)
<i>France24English</i>	46% (N=13)	0% (N=0)	4% (N=1)	50% (N=14)
<i>DoctorRandomercar</i>	63% (N=45)	0% (N=0)	6% (N=4)	31% (N=22)
Overall	55% (N=208)	0% (N=0)	12% (N=45)	34% (N=128)

Table 3. Reception of YouTube video commenters

Source: own data.

Considering the studies on positive social perception of powerful speakers, Morgan, due to his more frequent floor wins and generally more powerful behaviors, should be perceived very positively in light of the interview discussed (cf. Holtgraves & Lasky, 1999; Hosman & Siltanen, 2006). That, however, is not the case. The material, originally uploaded by *Good Morning Britain*'s official YouTube account, after gathering internet traction, had its comment section restricted. That happened most likely due to a great number of comments criticizing *Good Morning Britain*, as the video on its own for 1,145,795 views has 10,000 upvotes and 26,000 downvotes. The video was reuploaded by several internet content creators, either in the form of a raw file or as satiric commentary videos, out of which two, i.e., *PewDiePie*'s and *DoctorRandomercar*'s, gained impressive audiences (*PewDiePie*: 10,214,953 views, 592,000 upvotes, 24,000 downvotes; *DoctorRandomercar*: 117,715 views, 7,100 upvotes, 125 downvotes). *FRANCE 24 English* reuploaded fragments of the video under a suggestive title "Piers Morgan shouts down 'sexist' Polish MEP," gathering 18,000 views, 44 upvotes, and 991 downvotes. Recently, as of 2024, *Good Morning Britain* opened their comment section for discussion again.

As can be observed in Table 3, 55% of all analyzed comments include criticism of PM (e.g., "Why is Pierce on TV. He's an awful interviewer," "Piers Morgan infuriates me") and 12% of JKM ("[...] he does it in a very idiotic way," "Korwin-Mikke is victim of his own ego"). While 34% of the comments include some praise of JKM (e.g., "Chad Korwin with 8 kids vs virgin Piers," "[...] Janusz Korwin Mikke is in fact one of the most sane people in europe goverment"), not a single comment praising PM can be found. Even in the case of highly suggestive video titles, as in *Good Morning Britain*

and the aforementioned *FRANCE 24 English*, the comment sections do not reflect the sentiment proposed by the publishers. Morgan is never the protagonist, at least in the eyes of the audiences; he is either the main antagonist or he is no better than his debate opponent. The commenters in their criticism primarily discuss the issues of journalistic conduct breaking (9%), sexism (1%), media manipulation (0.7%), and the state of the European Union (0.3%).

Comment sections then, in contrast to the presupposition based on the abovementioned studies, assess Korwin-Mikke far more positively than Morgan. This does not necessarily stand in contrast to the previous research; Bradac et al. (1994) mention a paradox, where overly powerful speakers (Morgan in this case) are viewed negatively because of the connotations of power with abuse of control (Hosman & Siltanen, 2006). We might think of it as the *powerful speaker's paradox*, where (linguistically) powerful personas are positively perceived, as long as they do not overuse their power (Korwin-Mikke). Once they exemplify excessive powerfulness, they are seen as authoritarian, more distant, and less congenial (Morgan).

Comments praising Korwin-Mikke can be interpreted in the context of the perceptual fallacy called the *halo effect*. This cognitive bias results in a positive evaluation of an individual based on a single situation or feature (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Gabrieli et al., 2021). The commenters do not perceive Korwin-Mikke through the lens of his overall political work or his beliefs but rather that of one interview, where, juxtaposed with Morgan's lack of professionalism as a journalist, he is evaluated more positively.

## 5. Discussion

Morgan takes advantage of the host's power of summary and interrogation (Hutchby, 1996); he moderates the debate, changes the topic according to his preferences, and has more ease in taking the floor. Whether the interview can be analyzed in the context of native-speakerism is a matter of discussion. Some YouTube comments mention that, in their opinions, the hosts mock their guest's limited English fluency and take advantage of it by not letting him finish his sentences (e.g., "Do not laugh at a man who speaks broken English, THEY KNOW ANOTHER LANGUAGE," "his native language clearly wasn't English and he was struggling, and they're just taking the piss," "It's funny that Piers calls him sexist here when Piers himself is being racist towards the guy just because his English isn't great. And not even giving him a chance to finish his sentences, even interrupting him and telling him to let him finish"). However, the hosts might not have mocked a non-native speaker intentionally but flouted the conversation due to their emotionality within the sensitive context.

Both main actors follow the golden impoliteness rule "condescend, scorn, or ridicule – emphasize your relative power. Be contemptuous. Explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect – personalize, use the pronouns *I* and *you*" (Wu et al., 2020, p. 608).

Going back to the research questions, RQ1 can be answered as follows. Both Korwin-Mikke and Morgan are undoubtedly powerful speakers, and both exercise their linguistic



force through an extensive use of bald-on acts of negative impoliteness, e.g., insulting or accusing, intensifiers, metadiscourse (either directed at the speaker or the interlocutor), gradation, epistemic reasoning, and imperatives (both in the form of direct and indirect speech acts). They do not employ (or employ very rarely) elements characteristic of powerless speakers, i.e., hedging or hesitations (Hosman & Siltanen, 2006).

Morgan wins the floor using his authority as interviewer, i.e., the conversation moderator. However, considering the aforementioned social reaction to this legendary, in some circles, pop-cultural event and the positive reception of Korwin-Mikke across the group of online users, it can be observed that floor winning does not necessarily grant debate winning. Moreover, neither of the main powerful actors tries to alleviate the conflict (as could be expected in the case of a broadcast interview); they both attack and counterattack constantly, which plays into the concept of *reciprocal impoliteness*. Neither can let go, as it would skew the “balance of payments” and lower the perception of their power (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021, p. 150). This can be interpreted as the *anti-repair work*, where the speakers do not try to cooperate but rather vie with one another. Consequently, the interview may be perceived more as a talk-show, where the interviewer – acting as the main performer – seeks to entertain the audience by provoking and insulting the guest, rather than as news format, where the interviewer’s role is primarily to inform.

To answer RQ2, empathy – and, by extension, sympathy – is shaped by factors such as group affiliation (cf. Vanman, 2016) or stereotypes (cf. Gallegos, 2024). While it may seem intuitive to empathize more with those in disadvantaged positions – such as minorities (e.g., Kapikiran, 2021), individuals with mental disabilities (e.g., Mirete et al., 2022), or those lower in the social hierarchy – this is not always the case (cf. Jimenez-Moya et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2021; Kassem et al., 2024). In this analysis, the underprivileged party – i.e., Korwin-Mikke – elicits greater empathy from spectators. This is primarily because, unlike Morgan, he does not possess the power inherent in the interviewer’s role. Additionally, the quality of his participation suffers due to his limited language proficiency, which is further mocked by the hosts – ironically, to Korwin-Mikke’s advantage, as it amplifies empathetic responses from the audience.

PM is regarded as the definite antagonist (55% criticize and not a single commenter praises him). JKM is, overall, perceived in a more balanced way, still however, a substantial number of commenters criticize him (34% criticize and 12% praise). Many commenters do not take a side but rather view both actors negatively (e.g., “The ‘discussion’ is basically clown-to-clown communication”). The interview became truly high-profile. Gathering a lot of traction, it has been discussed in the contexts of journalistic conduct (9% of the analyzed YouTube comments, e.g., “>Be interviewer >invite guest on to speak >call guest sexist pig >say “shush” to guest”; “What’s the point of inviting a guest to your show and never allow him to talk”), gender pay-gap (1%, e.g., “He should have asked if Piers is being paid more than the short woman next to him,” “Plot twist. Later they revealed how much Pierce and his co-anchor makes ... and he makes more ... LOL”), media manipulation (0.7%, e.g., “Politician: ‘I never said, that [...] women SHOULD earn less.’ WSJ: ‘Polish politician stated: Women SHOULD earn less!’”), and the current

state of the EU politics (0.3%, e.g., “And this people are sitting in EU parliament and dictating to us what we should do, eat, use and etc...”). Interestingly, despite being nearly a decade old, the interview is still being widely discussed (the most recent YouTube comments are 2–3 days old as of 2025), which further emphasizes its topicality.

While Korwin-Mikke more often builds his metadiscursive speech acts around first person singular pronouns (*I, me, my, mine, myself*), Morgan prefers to refer to his interlocutor using second person singular pronouns (*you, your, yours, yourself*). This, to an extent, complies with what Wierzbicka (1985) marks as a typical Polish-English difference. These reflections must be, nonetheless, taken with a grain of salt, as the differences might be contextual. Pronouns-wise, it might be due to an interviewer/interviewee context, and polite salutations – native vs non-native speaker context.

What must be, even if scarcely, mentioned here is, besides the obvious explicit sexism exemplified by JKM, implicit sexism. The secondary interviewer, Susanna Reid, is not treated by her colleague as an equal, which can be observed in PM’s remark when he *chivalrously* asks whether she would like to comment. This sentence can be interpreted as an example of “benevolent sexism” (as opposed to hostile), expressed through “chivalry and protection offered to women” (Bartłomiejczyk, 2023, p. 59). Despite asking the question, PM does not give SR a floor but keeps on talking. Reid later takes a turn and makes a metadiscursive comment on the conversational power imbalance, which, consciously or not, advocates for women’s agency in debates: “I do feel like I sat on the sidelines while two men discuss the intelligence of women.” This comment, although not exhaustive on the query, of course, sums up the issue comprehensively.

All this plays into what Wodak et al. (2021, p. 371) call “shameless normalization of impoliteness,” where speakers go beyond the “sayable/unsayable” border to test the socially conventionalized norms and see how far they can go without being caught (or *cancelled* in today’s world). Clayman (2013, p. 637) proposes that “[c]onsistent with the ideal of objectivity, broadcast journalists are supposed to remain impartial.” The interview analyzed is not only far from prototypical morning show institutional talk; it is also conducted in a way that leaves room for improvement from the journalistic point of view. Perhaps it is its very strength, as it resembles human-to-human confrontation far more realistically than the majority of finely-tuned debates broadcast on TV. If so, it gives us an insight into how a real conflict unfolds when two truly powerful speakers meet and neither of them is willing to let go of the floor.

## 6. Limitations

To address the limitations of the study, firstly, its qualitative dimension must be mentioned. In the age of corpus-based studies analyzing large sets of data simultaneously, an analysis of a singular interview might seem like a drop in the ocean. However, an intercultural interaction that has gathered great popularity world-wide and became a reason for many journalistic articles (cf. Baker & Burke, 2017 for *The Daily Mail*; Walker, 2017 for *the Independent*; Saunders, 2017a for *Mirror*; Saunders, 2017b for *Wales*

*Online*), as well as popular internet content, must be of special importance. Moreover, the public reaction in the form of comments posted online analyzed in the last part of this paper leaves no doubt; individual cases do matter, and their analyses should be acknowledged. As rightly remarked by Stivers, Sidnell (2013, p. 2), CA, by analyzing individual cases, aims at understanding the structures of social interaction; this is of foremost importance in understanding convolutions of human linguistic behavior in confrontation.

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## SUMMARY

**Keywords:** conversation analysis, intercultural pragmatics, linguistic impoliteness, Morgan v. Korwin-Mikke, powerful speaker

In 2017, *Good Morning Britain* invited a Polish MEP, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, to join the show and elaborate on his controversial remarks made during an EU debate. The interview, conducted by Piers Morgan, quickly became a heated debate abundant in linguistic cues typical for conflict talk. The study presented analyzes this confrontation within the framework of conversation analysis and pinpoints specifically the concept of the speaker’s powerfulness. The analysis shows that both interlocutors exercise their linguistic force through negative impoliteness, intensifiers, meta-discourse, gradation, epistemic reasoning, and imperatives. Public reception of the event is highly critical of Piers Morgan and negative, however more balanced, of Janusz Korwin-Mikke, and the discussion provokes broader debates on journalistic conduct, sexism, and the EU. Despite Morgan’s pragmatic floor winning, it is Korwin-Mikke who gathers more proponents, an outcome which stems from two perception fallacies: *the halo effect* and *the powerful speaker paradox*.



## STRESZCZENIE

### **Kobiety są mniejsze, słabsze i mniej inteligentne: analiza wywiadu Piersa Morgana z Januszem Korwinem-Mikke**

**Słowa kluczowe:** analiza konwersacyjna, pragmatyka międzykulturowa, nieuprzejmość językowa, Morgan vs. Korwin-Mikke, mocny mówca

W roku 2017 program *Good Morning Britain* zaprosił na swoją antenę Janusza Korwina-Mikkego, ówczesnie członka Parlamentu Europejskiego, aby wytłumaczył się ze swoich kontrowersyjnych wypowiedzi w trakcie jednej z europejskich debat. Wywiad, który prowadził Piers Morgan, szybko zmienił się w ożywioną dyskusję pełną sygnałów językowych charakterystycznych dla dyskursu konfliktu. Przedstawione badanie analizuje tę konfrontację i korzystając z metodologii analizy konwersacyjnej, koncentruje się na koncepcji mocy mówcy. Analiza pokazuje, że rozmówcy prezentują swoją moc językową poprzez bezpośrednią nieuprzejmość językową, wzmacniacze, dyskurs na poziomie meta, gradację, argumentację epistemiczną, tryb rozkazujący. Publiczny odbiór wydarzenia jest wysoko krytyczny względem Piersa Morgana oraz krytyczny, ale bardziej zbalansowany, w przypadku Janusza Korwina-Mikke. Dyskusja na temat wywiadu otwiera szerzej zakrojone debaty na temat (nie)prawidłowości dziennikarskich, seksizmu oraz UE. Mimo pragmatycznego zwycięstwa Morgana w tej debacie, to Korwin-Mikke zyskuje większe poparcie wśród odbiorców, co sprowadza się do zjawiska dwóch błędów poznawczych: *efektu aureoli* oraz *paradoksu mocnego mówcy*.