
(IM)POLITENESS IN CARAGIALE'S THEATRE. A CASE STUDY: *O SCRISOARE PIERDUTĂ*

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Abstract: *This paper sets out to examine the strategies and mechanisms of (im)politeness at work in Caragiale's theatre, focusing primarily on the comedy *O scrisoare pierdută* ("A lost letter"). Beyond its literary and satirical value, the play offers remarkably rich material for investigating the linguistic strategies through which the participants in communication – in this case, the characters – negotiate social status, power relations, and self-image.*

Keywords: *(im)politeness, self-positioning, Caragiale, metacommunicative dimension, expressive dimension*

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INTRODUCTION

The study adopts a pragmatic-discursive perspective and draws on recent contributions from historical pragmatics, postmodern theories of (im)politeness, and qualitative approaches to speech acts and the social construction of interpersonal relations. The theoretical foundations of this research rest on the work of Culpeper (2008), Brown and Levinson (1987), Eelen (2001), Terkourafi (2011), Watts (2003), Haugh (2013), and Ogiermann (2009), as well as, not least, Mihaela Constantinescu's study *Principatele Române între Orient și Occident: dinamica modelelor culturale ale politeții și impoliteții în secolul al XIX-lea* (2016).

The research method is qualitative, centred on the contextualized analysis of a corpus drawn from the play, with particular attention paid to forms of address (both allocutive and delocutive), expressive speech acts (apologies and insults), and the way in which these elements shape verbal interaction and configure the social dynamics between characters.

The aim of this research is to bring to light the mechanisms through which these forms of (im)politeness are perceived within the text – through the characters' own reactions – and to show how they reflect the tensions between social norms, cultural conventions, and individual strategies of self-positioning. At the same time, the study seeks to construct a coherent picture of the expressiveness of Caragiale's discourse and to reveal its critical, comic, and social dimensions.

MAIN TEXT

The analysis focuses on a series of examples drawn from *O scrisoare pierdută*. In this play, politeness and impoliteness serve as how characters conceal or assert their power, interests, and rivalries. Excessively deferential forms of address mask underlying conflicts and are frequently deployed ironically or strategically, in moments of heightened tension. Politeness thus becomes a form of political hypocrisy, emptied of any genuine affective content, while impoliteness erupts at moments of crisis in the form of blunt, offensive, or caricatural remarks. Caragiale captures this contrast with remarkable subtlety, using it to expose the degradation of political discourse and the falseness of interpersonal relations. Our analysis adopts a multi-layered approach, considering the perspective of the participants in the interaction, their evaluations, and the communicative norms at play in each context. We examine the contextual factors and the metapragmatic commentary relevant to interpreting discursive meaning, while also attending to the expressive dimension of the text – identifying speech acts, allocutive and delocutive forms of address, and the metacommunicative and metadiscursive features that together shape the construction and interpretation of (im)politeness in Caragiale's world.

1. The Metacommunicative Dimension

The metacommunicative lexicon of politeness in the play is rich and varied. Notable are the adjectives *onorabilul/onorabile* (“honourable”), *venerabilul/venerabile* (“venerable”), *amabilul* (“kind, amiable”), *politicos* (“polite”), along with the verb *a onora* (“to honour”). Even though these terms belong, in principle, to the domain of polite behaviour, we must take into account both their semantic actualization by Caragiale's characters and the clear distinction between manners and morality (Constantinescu, 2016, p. 24). Each example is therefore evaluated within its specific context and from a broader perspective, taking into consideration not only the literal deployment of these lexical items but also their underlying moral dimension.

In the line: “Forgive me for offending you. Let me be even briefer... Here it is: you, sir, are a practical man, you possess something I need. So I come to you and say: (with great affability) if I may, **honourable** sir, what would you ask of me in exchange for that thing?” (Caragiale, 1959, p. 152), Tipătescu addresses his adversary, Nae Cațavencu, in an attempt to recover the compromising letter that has unfortunately fallen into the latter's hands. The adjective *honourable*, reinforced by the allocutive *domn* (“sir”), carries an apparently respectful value typical of the political and official register of the period. On a formal level, this address signals marked politeness, suggesting consideration and deference toward the interlocutor. Within the play, however, the term takes on an unmistakably ironic and strategic function, veiled beneath a tone of “great affability”. Tipătescu is not pursuing an authentic relationship grounded in respect; rather, he resorts to polite discourse solely to negotiate in his own favour. Politeness thus becomes a rhetorical tool, a mask behind which his true intention is – or is meant to appear – softened.

The adjective *venerable* (*venerabile/venerabilul*) is used exclusively to designate Zaharia Trahanache, marking both his age and his position within the social hierarchy as *domn prezident* (“Mr. President”). In Nae Cațavencu's lines – “What patience, **venerable** Mr. President! It is getting late. There are other speakers still to come...” (Caragiale, 1959, p. 185); “I am the candidate of the young, intelligent, and independent faction... Our honourable, **venerable** president – (looking around for him) where is our venerable president? I don't see him... – will, as far as we know, proclaim this evening the candidate of your committee – your committee – ... And should I have the honour of being agreed upon by your committee too... since it is yours...” (Caragiale, 1959, p. 140); “My



venerable friend Zaharia! In circumstances such as these (moved) petty passions must be set aside” (Caragiale, 1959, p. 145) – the adjective *venerabilul/venerabile* conveys not genuine admiration but a calculated strategy meant to flatter, appease, and secure a personal advantage, namely Trahanache’s electoral support. The adjective is thus used strategically and manipulatively, drained of any real affective substance. Moreover, Cațavencu’s exaggerated and insistent repetition of the term turns it into an ironic verbal tic with delocutive potential. Trahanache himself appears well aware of the hollowness of this address and later echoes it in a parodic key, mocking Cațavencu’s duplicity: “**Venerable** this, **venerable** that...” (Caragiale, 1959, p. 114). This exchange exposes the purely theatrical and hypocritical nature of the formula, revealing how an expression otherwise laden with respect becomes, within the play, an instrument of manipulation and ridicule. Yet even as he dismisses the way Cațavencu addresses him, Trahanache himself appropriates the adjective *venerable* as a form of self-designation: “That anyone should come into a public assembly and call me – an honourable citizen, a venerable man – a forger... who?! (great uproar. Tipătescu and Zoe listen with bated breath) Who?! (forcefully) A licensed forger!” (Caragiale, 1959, p. 114). Trahanache lays claim to his own “venerability” at precisely the moment his authority is being challenged, which heightens the comic contrast between his self-perception and social reality.

The adjective *amiable* (*amabilul*), in the phrase “our **amiable** prefect” (Caragiale, 1959, p. 154), suggests a positive interpersonal quality – approachability – yet, in the context of a political confrontation, it may equally conceal a strategy of ingratiation or of smoothing over a potentially conflictual interaction.

The adjective *polite* (*politicos*) appears in the following context: “Mrs. Joița, more sensible than the rest of them, calls for me, and I, ever **polite**, here I am, ready to kiss her hand with respect...” (Caragiale, 1959, p. 160), where it marks a strategically assumed, performed conduct, adopted according to the interests of the moment. Cațavencu is not genuinely polite; he merely plays the role of a polite man in order to win Zoe Trahanache’s support and, through it, the political advantages that come with proximity to her. He justifies his presence before her not through any affective or moral motive but through electoral calculation, openly admitting that “the hand that grants you your mandate” (Caragiale, 1959, p. 160) must be treated with deference, however hypocritical the gesture. Here, the adjective *polite* thus acquires a metadiscursive, self-reflexive value: Cațavencu does not merely adopt an attitude but comments on his own attitude, labelling it from the outside with the clear awareness that it is a form of social mimicry rather than authenticity.

The verb *to honour* (*a onora*) appears in the present indicative but carries a reflexive function: “Brothers, I have been reproached, and I am proud of it!... I accept it! I consider it an honour to say that I deserve it!... (very voluble) I have been reproached for being too – for being far too – progressive... for being a free trader... for wanting progress at any cost” (Caragiale, 1959, p. 183) — the utterance becomes an act of theatrical self-celebration, through which Nae Cațavencu constructs the image of a visionary leader, persecuted precisely for his “exceptional” qualities.

The metacommunicative lexicon of impoliteness is likewise diverse, comprising the nouns *mofturile* (“fuss, nonsense”), *infamul* (“the infamous one”), *canalia* (“the scoundrel”), the adjectives *mișel* (“villain”) and *mizerabile* (“wretch”). Unlike the lexicon of politeness, which does not necessarily reveal the deeper moral makeup of the characters, the lexicon of impoliteness proves far more expressive and far more revealing of the interpersonal relations that structure Caragiale’s world, offering direct, contextualized, and often incisive judgements of the characters and their actions. This lexicon allows for a sharper delineation of conflicts and social hierarchies.

The noun *mofturile* (roughly, “fuss” or “nonsense”) is used with a deeply pejorative value, offering a clear example of a lexeme drawn from the sphere of evaluative impoliteness. In the selected example – “Now then, calm down, man, and stop this nonsense, we have more serious



matters to discuss. There's a meeting tonight. Has it been decided? Do we put forward Farfuridi's candidacy? What do we do? – Tonight, I've heard, the schoolteachers, together with Cațavencu and his lot, plan to cause a scandal. We must tell Ghiță to keep an eye on things. That villain Cațavencu will take the floor tonight to speak against us..." (Caragiale, 1959, p. 105) – *mofturile* designates empty talk, needless preoccupations, insignificant matters that Tipătescu cannot see past and that Trahanache regards as exaggerated or out of place given the "serious" business at hand, namely the political meeting. The term carries an implicit negative judgement, casting Tipătescu's attitude as frivolous and immature and thereby marking a relational asymmetry: by labelling something as *mofturi*, Trahanache lays claim to the authority to decide what matters and what does not, effectively delegitimizing the other's concerns. From a metacommunicative standpoint, the use of *mofturi* functions as an act of invalidation directed at the interlocutor's position, illustrating a form of strategic impoliteness justified by the urgency and gravity of the situation. At the same time, *mofturile* carries a strong cultural charge in Caragiale's era, having come to mean "idle chatter" or "absurd pretensions", a meaning later reinforced by the celebrated satirical magazine *Moftul Român*. In this sense, the word also acquires a recognizable stylistic function, heightening both situational and linguistic comedy and lending the impoliteness an ironic, authoritative edge.

The nouns *infamul* ("the infamous one") and *canalia* ("the scoundrel"), together with the adjectives *mizerabile* ("wretch") and *mișel* ("villain"), all belong to a markedly negative lexical register, unambiguously situated within the sphere of conflictual, dishonouring impoliteness. Characters use these terms in tense situations where the goal is no longer to preserve appearances or negotiate relationships but to explicitly disavow the other. Such evaluations are often produced in the absence of the person being labelled – for instance: "TIPĂTESCU (turning back from upstage): The infamous wretch! The scoundrel!" (Caragiale, 1959, p. 107), or "the villain sees he has no way out, and pulls out a little letter... Guess whose, and to whom?" (Caragiale, 1959, p. 108) – but also arise in direct interaction with the character being addressed: "TIPĂTESCU (lunging forward and seizing him by the throat with both hands): You wretch!" (Caragiale, 1959, p. 156). Through this vocabulary of impoliteness, Tipătescu and Trahanache construct a projection of Cațavencu that is both in praesentia and in situ (Constantinescu, 2016, p. 86), with the negative evaluation of the character drawing on a shared body of knowledge held in common with the reader (Constantinescu, 2016, p. 87).

2. The Expressive Dimension: Allocutives and Delocutives

The expressive dimension of (im)politeness in *O scrisoare pierdută* emerges through a varied linguistic repertoire in which allocutive and delocutive forms play a central role in shaping the relationships between characters and in bringing discursive strategies into relief. The forms of address are diverse, serving as vehicles for deference, irony, contempt, or flattery, and are frequently laden with ambiguity, shaped throughout by the political and social context in which they appear. In what follows, each example is examined both for its pragmatic function and for its stylistic and ideological value, within a textual framework in which politeness and impoliteness are constantly intertwined, reflecting the theatricality and artificiality of the communication at hand. It should also be noted that, in analysing these allocutive and delocutive forms, particular attention is given to the hierarchical relations that structure this society.

Given the inferior–superior relationship at play, the most frequently occurring allocutives in the text under discussion are the masculine *coane* and the feminine *coană* (roughly, "sir/madam", used toward a social superior). Ghiță Pristanda, the policeman and Tipătescu's trusted man, uses the allocutive/delocutive *coane* + *first name* in addressing both Tipătescu and Trahanache: "PRISTANDA (likewise): What a farce!... Pardon me, forgive me, coane Fănică, but let me ask:



bam-what? What's a vampire?" (Caragiale, 1959, p. 101); "PRISTANDA: Here I am, kiss your hand, coane Zaharia" (Caragiale, 1959, p. 101). Symmetrically, Pristanda uses the allocutive/delocutive coana Joițica to refer to Trahanache's wife: "PRISTANDA: I went, coană Joițica... It's a hard bargain, very hard indeed: either a thousand gold pieces or the deputy seat..." (Caragiale, 1959, p. 170). Pristanda's closeness to the other characters is visible both in his use of *coane/coană* and in his pairing of these terms with first names, at times even in a diminutive form. Elsewhere in his speech, Pristanda alternates between second-person plural and second-person singular verb forms in his dialogue with Tipătescu: "PRISTANDA: You, sir, suck the blood of the people!... Lord helps us!" (Caragiale, 1959, p. 101). This can be explained by his use of *dumneata*, the intermediate, semi-formal form of the polite personal pronoun.

Unlike Pristanda, Cațavencu, Brânzovenescu, and Farfuridi address Zoe using the formulas *madam Trahanache* or *doamna Trahanache* ("Mrs. Trahanache"), signalling a distant, purely social dimension in the relationship between the three men and Trahanache's wife. Moreover, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the term *madam* acquired certain negative and pejorative connotations (Constantinescu, 2016, p. 183), and in this context it can only be read as reflecting a vague disregard for the female character on the part of the three men. These same three male characters use the formula *domnule prezident* ("Mr. President") when addressing Zaharia Trahanache, Zoe's husband, marking the closeness in social status between them (Constantinescu, 2016, p. 187). Zoe Trahanache, for her part, addresses Cațavencu symmetrically, through the allocutive *domnule* + *name*: "ZOE (rushing between Cațavencu and Tipătescu, pleading and visibly upset): Mister Cațavencu, sir; for God's sake! I beg you, don't shout... Fănică, have you gone mad?... Mister Cațavencu... I beg you..." (Caragiale, 1959, p. 156). Zoe's address may be read as ironic, given that Cațavencu is the very man blackmailing and mocking her; yet, through the formula *domnule*, she attempts to defuse the tension of the situation in which she finds herself.

The terms *nene* and *neică* (both roughly "uncle", used affectionately toward an older man) are used allocutively and delocutively by Tipătescu to refer to Trahanache. Originally reserved for kinship and family relations, these forms have been extended to cases involving a considerable age difference within close friendships: "TIPĂTESCU: Well! *neică* Zaharia, what is it? Come, tell me, you look rather changed!..." (Caragiale, 1959, p. 112); "TIPĂTESCU: Well, she didn't mean it unkindly, she said it in jest. Doesn't *nenea* Zaharia know, doesn't she know, that you are our man?..." (Caragiale, 1959, p. 105).

In his demagogic speech, Cațavencu addresses the wider public using the form *fraților* ("brothers"): "Gentlemen!... Honourable fellow citizens!... Brothers!... (choked with tears) Forgive me, brothers, if I am moved, if emotion overtakes me so strongly... as I climb to this rostrum... to tell you too... (his tears choke him further)... Like any Romanian, like any son of his country... in these solemn moments... (barely containing himself) I think... of my beloved little country... (overcome entirely by tears) of Romania... (weeps. Scattered applause)... of her happiness!... (the same on both sides)... of her progress! (likewise, building)... of her future! (sobbing loudly. Thunderous applause)" (Caragiale, 1959, p. 183); this form conveys an affective dimension, marking the desemanticization and emphatic reinforcement of belonging to a particular target group (Constantinescu, 2016, p. 176).

3. The Expressive Dimension: Speech Acts

This section turns to the expressive speech acts bound up with (im)politeness, focusing specifically on apologies (a speech act associated with politeness) and insults (a speech act associated with impoliteness).

Apologies are speech acts strongly shaped by convention. They are most often associated with politeness, given their ritualistic character and the way they mark the domain of consensual relations (Vasilescu, 2007, p. 106 *apud* Constantinescu, 2016, p. 134).

In Caragiale's theatre, apologies appear as speech acts with an ostensibly reparative function, yet one frequently shot through with irony, ambiguity, or strategic intent. Although they formally observe the conventions of politeness, they are rarely the expression of genuine regret, functioning instead as discursive tools for manipulation, conflict avoidance, or the preservation of appearances.

In *O scrisoare pierdută*, the formulas used to apologize are varied. We find instances of direct apology addressed to the interlocutor using the verb *a ierta* (“to forgive”) in the imperative or subjunctive, second person only, alongside patterns that were more modern for the nineteenth century – the verb *a cere* + *iertare/scuze* (“to ask for forgiveness/apologies”) – as well as the term *pardon*, a loanword from French that appears both alongside the verb *a ierta* and as a verb in its own right (“*să pardonati*”).

The first category to be examined comprises apologies expressed through the verb *a ierta* (“to forgive”). In Pristanda's case, we find him assuming an inferior position relative to his interlocutor, Tipătescu. In the line: “PRISTANDA (likewise): What a farce!... Pardon me, forgive me, coane Fănică, but let me ask: bam-what? What's a vampire?” (Caragiale, 1959, p. 101), the apology marks the speaker's acknowledgement of a presumed offence – here, the act of asking what “vampire” means. Placed before the question itself, the formula “forgive me” softens the utterance that follows. A further instance of the same pattern occurs elsewhere in Pristanda's speech: “PRISTANDA: I didn't find him, coane Fănică, it's as if he vanished into thin air. (slapping his forehead as though suddenly remembering something) Ah, what did I forget! Forgive me, I kiss your hand, coane Fănică... The minister... no, all seven ministers, want you at the telegraph office at once... that's why I was looking for you so urgently...” (Caragiale, 1959, p. 205), where we can clearly detect a note of anxiety and an attempt to forestall a negative reaction from Tipătescu.

Whereas Pristanda's apologies, expressed through the verb *a ierta*, betray a veiled fear of his superior, Cațavencu uses the same verb in the imperative for altogether different ends: “CAȚAVENCU (strikes a pose, makes his way importantly through the crowd, and climbs to the rostrum; sets his hat aside, sips from the glass of water, pulls out a sheaf of papers and newspapers and lays them on the lectern, then draws out his handkerchief and dabs his forehead with lawyerly elegance. He is visibly moved, coughs, and ostentatiously struggles against an emotion that seems to be overwhelming him. – Complete silence. In a trembling voice): Gentlemen!... Honourable fellow citizens!... Brothers!... (choked with tears) Forgive me, brothers, if I am moved, if emotion overtakes me so strongly... as I climb to this rostrum... to tell you too... (his tears choke him further)... Like any Romanian, like any son of his country... in these solemn moments... (barely containing himself) I think... of my beloved little country... (overcome entirely by tears) of Romania... (weeps. Scattered applause)... of her happiness!... (the same on both sides)... of her progress! (likewise, building)... of her future! (sobbing loudly. Thunderous applause)” (Caragiale, 1959, p. 183) – not in order to repair any offence, but to move his audience emotionally. Here, the apology becomes falsely performative, turned into an instrument for manipulating and managing the character's public image; politeness is purely enacted, never genuinely felt.

The second category – that of the more modern patterns – is considerably richer in examples, offering varied and expressive material for the study of apology in Caragiale's work. In Tipătescu's monologue, we find the formula *să-ți cer iertare* (“let me ask your forgiveness”): “And they elect Mr. Agamiță Dandanache! So this is the man for whom I have sacrificed, for so long, my own peace of mind and that of the woman I love... Where are you, Cațavencu, so you may see yourself avenged! Where are you, let me ask your forgiveness for having preferred the honest Mr. Agamiță, the



admirable, the sublime, the dear, the darling Dandanache, over you... What a world! What a world! What a world!..." (Caragiale, 1959, p. 204) – yet here the formula is used sarcastically and rhetorically, in the absence of its ostensible addressee, Nae Cațavencu. We also find the formula *cer scuze* ("I apologize"), a relatively infrequent construction by the end of the nineteenth century. In her desperate attempt to prevent Cațavencu from publishing the letter that could ruin her standing in society, Zoe Trahanache apologizes on behalf of her lover Tipătescu's inappropriate conduct: "ZOE (pleading): Mister Cațavencu, I apologize for the moment of temper that made Fănică forget himself..." (Caragiale, 1959, p. 156). Zoe thus intervenes as a kind of "mediator", offering apologies in Tipătescu's stead, attempting to restore balance between the offended party (Cațavencu) and the offender (Tipătescu). The formula *cer scuze* is among the most neutral and conventional apology formulas, one that does not necessarily entail any affective acknowledgement of guilt. Within the logic of the play, it also carries a subtle undercurrent of feminine diplomacy: Zoe steps in to control the situation and calm tempers, resorting to a form of official politeness. Rather than emotionally charged expressions ("I'm sorry" or "please forgive me"), she opts for a concise, calculated statement that conveys control and conciliatory intent without any loss of status. The borrowed French form *pardon* is most often used to smooth over difficult moments in communication, precisely because it implicates neither speaker nor addressee directly (Constantinescu, 2016, p. 141): "CAȚAVENCU (interjecting): Pardon, allow me: on the contrary, it seems to me that in a constitutional state, especially a young state such as ours, the administration ought to..." (Caragiale, 1959, p. 159); "DANDANACHE (who has been listening closely): Quite right, well said, my dear boy... bless you, bless you... pardon... you know... from the road (seriously) just imagine: bumpity-bump, clickety-clack, and the little bells... my ears are still ringing something dreadful..." (Caragiale, 1959, p. 203). Yet Pristanda's recurrent use of *pardon* also serves to characterize him as an obedient, servile, and somewhat muddled figure, caught between the wish to appear civilized and an inability to master his own speech. In his dialogue with Tipătescu, Pristanda pairs *pardon* with the verb *a ierta*: "PRISTANDA (likewise): What a farce!... Pardon, forgive me, coane Fănică, but let me ask: bam-what? What's a vampire?" (Caragiale, 1959, p. 101). This suggests that the Romanian term carries far more expressive weight for the speaker than the borrowed French *pardon*. The doubling of the apology thus becomes, in this context, a marker of affected politeness, through which Pristanda, the social inferior, hastens to safeguard his position within a discourse dominated by his superior.

The analysis of these examples from *O scrisoare pierdută* thus shows that apologies in the play are highly ritualized, embedded in a social and political context in which communication is deeply theatricalized and the relationship between sincerity and convention is constantly undermined.

Regarded as offensive speech acts, insults negatively and pejoratively characterize the image of their target (Necula [Zvirid] 2012 *apud* Constantinescu, 2016, p. 155). Although the present analysis has identified numerous examples of this speech act, we will focus on only two, to trace not merely the speaker's own attitude but also the interlocutors' reactions and perceptions. In Caragiale's work, insults constitute a central form of impoliteness, reflecting the social, political, and personal tensions between characters. Beyond their directly aggressive function, they frequently serve to delimit status, assert superiority, or trigger conflict, skilfully woven into a theatrical discourse marked by exaggeration and the grotesque.

The conflict between Tipătescu and Cațavencu is particularly intense and violent. In the line: "TIPĂTESCU (bursting out): You wretch! (Cațavencu steps back.) You shameless scoundrel! I don't know what stops me from smashing your skull... (lunges forward, grabs a cane from beside the wall and turns furiously toward Cațavencu.) You villain! You must hand me that letter right now, you must tell me where the letter is... or I'll kill you like a dog! (rushes at him. Cațavencu circles round the table and the sofa, knocking over the furniture, and dashes to the window, which he flings wide



open.)" (Caragiale, 1959, p. 156), Tipătescu employs no mitigating formula whatsoever, building his attack instead on undermining Cațavencu's moral worth through insults such as "wretch", "scoundrel", and "villain". This verbal outburst signals a loss of discursive and emotional control, a complete abandonment of institutional politeness in favour of a visceral, offensive, unfiltered register. The line is at once a clear instance of insult and of threat – a commissive act marked by impoliteness. The threat is direct, physical, and extreme, and the phrase "like a dog" intensifies the humiliation inflicted on its target through a demeaning animalization that signals extreme contempt. Cațavencu responds with a strategy of theatrical self-victimization, hurling insults of his own back at Tipătescu: "CAȚAVENCU (trembling, shouting out the window): Help! Someone helps! The vampire is killing me! The murderous prefect! Help!" (Caragiale, 1959, p. 156). The terms "vampire" and "murderer" become markers of hyperbolic insult characteristic of Caragiale's theatre, where rhetorical overstatement generates comic effect through language while simultaneously exposing the absurdity of the political conflict.

A second context in which insult appears is Tipătescu's reaction upon seeing the Citizen: "TIPĂTESCU: To hell with him! There's no one outside: let every madman, every drunkard, come waltzing in here... Come on, get out!" (Caragiale, 1959, p. 125). The city prefect labels his interlocutor as belonging among the "mad" and the "drunk" even before identifying him. The character resorts to a violent imprecation ("To hell with him!"), an act of radical, unmitigated impoliteness that conveys contempt and exasperation while cancelling out any form of deference or civilized dialogue. This form of impoliteness is entirely unjustified by context, since the tipsy Citizen has, up to that point, done nothing wrong – indeed, ironically, he is one of the very few characters in the play to voice a sincere and legitimate confusion: "Who am I to vote for?" As prefect, Tipătescu speaks from a position of power and makes no effort to temper his language, signalling a complete abdication of the norms of institutional politeness. The Citizen, by contrast, though tipsy, maintains a cordial tone: "THE CITIZEN: I'm not drunk... (smiling) coană Joița... come now, we know each other... Coane Zaharia has known me since the 11th of February... mind you, we think highly of Mr. Nae Cațavencu... he's one of the Society... but the thing is, I'm a voter... I'm... (hiccups) a property owner, who am I to vote for? (hiccups) that's what I came for. (hesitates)" (Caragiale, 1959, p. 125), making a genuine effort to communicate politely. The resulting gap between the two registers of address amplifies the impression of an abuse of authority and of unwarranted impoliteness.

In *O scrisoare pierdută*, then, insults function as more than mere affronts: they also mark the degradation of public discourse, at times charged with theatrical comedy, at others with raw verbal violence, faithfully reflecting the ambiguity and falseness of the relationships between the characters.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis carried out on the examples from Ion Luca Caragiale's *O scrisoare pierdută*, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the mechanisms and strategies through which (im)politeness operates in the play. We have sought to show that politeness and impoliteness coexist in Caragiale's work both in conventional, ritualized forms and in ostentatious, playful, or ironic manifestations. The lexicon of politeness – marked by forms of address such as "esteemed", "venerable" or "honourable" – frequently serves persuasive, ironic, or manipulative ends, while the vocabulary of impoliteness – "nonsense", "villain", "scoundrel" – carries considerable expressive and theatrical force, helping to bring conflicts and identity positioning into sharp relief. Apologies, too, even when formalized ("I apologize", "forgive me"), remain charged with ambiguity, oscillating between sincerity, irony, and discursive strategy.

This analysis has highlighted not only the stylistic richness and subtlety of Caragiale's dialogue but also the complexity of the strategies through which interpersonal relationships are



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constructed within a hybrid social framework, caught between the imitation of Western forms of civility and the persistence of native practices of aggressive or manipulative communication. In this sense, Caragiale's theatre proves to be not merely a space for satire but also a lens through which to observe how politeness and impoliteness are discursively negotiated as forms of managing power, status, and self-image.

(Im)politeness in Caragiale's work can thus only be understood within a multi-layered interpretive framework – one that considers the interplay between social codes, discursive intentions, and audience expectations, and that ultimately reveals (im)politeness as an expression of the theatricality inherent in human discourse itself.



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