A Linguistic Analysis of Trash Talk Using Examples from the Ultimate Fighting Championship

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to provide a linguistic analysis of trash talk based on the sociolinguistic theories of face, politeness, and impoliteness. Experiences in martial arts environments and a love of sociolinguistics inspired me to explore language, gender, and sports more closely. Martial arts, specifically mixed martial arts (MMA), is the selected sport not only for personal reasons but also because it exemplifies that which sport is so often associated with - masculinity and *machismo*. In the world of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) this *machismo* is partly indexed through the use of trash talk.

After proposing a linguistic definition of trash talk, examples from UFC athletes Ronda Rousey and Conor McGregor will be analyzed. These particular speakers were chosen due to their high level of success within UFC as well as being well-known for their trash talk. Their examples will be analyzed in terms of strategies used, whether they are within the bounds of acceptable impoliteness and are acceptably entertaining (based on an analysis of YouTube comments), and whether they involve practices that focus on making the speaker look good ("self-elevating") or making the opponent look bad ("other-lowering").

The next level of analysis concerns audience reception to the use of trash talk by the speakers. Comments from YouTube videos will be analyzed as a means to access their attitude toward the trash talk of the speakers. They may also provide insight into language ideologies around gender in a hyper-focused and intensely masculine environment, as the audience reactions

1.1 What is trash talk?

Examples of trash talk (also referred to as “smack talk”") can be found throughout the world of sports. Almost any sport has its trash talkers, though some are more accepted than others. This is apparent, for example, when comparing audience reactions (an important aspect of trash talk, as will be discussed later in this paper) to the trash talk of professional tennis players versus that of basketball players. While trash talk occurs in these two sports, there is a different audience expectation for the frequency and intensity of it. In basketball, trash talk is expected and it is also expected that players may engage in intense trash talk. In tennis, trash talk happens, but it is not as common and therefore would be noteworthy after a match. Regardless, trash talk has a place in most sports, if not all, and usually at every level of sport – from recreational to professional. Trash talk is typically easily identified by the general public as insults shared between opponents, boasting, or even hand gestures such as the middle finger, or a taunting “come hither” hand movement such as the one made popular by martial arts stars like Bruce Lee, seen in Figure 1. These speech and gesture choices are made for various goals such as improving self-efficacy (Conmy et al., 2013), destabilizing opponents (Rainey and Granito, 2010), and expressing anger or amusement (Tambourini et al., 2008).

Figure 1. Bruce Lee in *Game of Death* showcasing his “come hither” hand movement, taunting his enemy to approach him (Little and Lee, 2000, 1:07:26).

While not exactly trash *talk,* gestures can convey a taunting arrogance, a hallmark of professional athletes attempting to demonstrate their power through elevating themselves (another concept important to that of trash talk, to be discussed in detail in Section 2.3). Some examples of trash talk can be seen below, with examples taken from professional athletes with reputations for their trash talk. Notably, all of the examples below are taken from male athletes. This is unintentional and based on a search using the wording of “best trash talkers” and/or “trash talk moments”. It is telling that these compilations usually only feature male athletes. Whether this is the result of men using more trash talk and/or men being celebrated for their trash talk where women are not cannot be determined through these examples alone and is a topic I intend to explore in further research.

(1)

You up here, I'm at the ceiling […] by the time you was my age, you was the 8th man on the bench.
Kevin Durant (NBA player) to Gary Payton (former NBA player). Payton engaged Durant in a trash talk exchange from the crowd during a game.

(Varier, 2025)

(2)

I'm going to get [the ball] right here and I am going to bury it in your face.
Larry Bird (NBA) to Xavier McDaniel during a game, after which Bird delivered on his promise.

(Jungfer, 2019)

(3)

I heard about you. You're that ugly fella.
Muhammad Ali (Boxing) to an interviewer in response to their introduction.

(Seekins, 2016)

(4)

Shoot it you fucking midget.
Michael Jordan (NBA) goading Muggsy Bogues to take a shot during a game. Bogues missed.

(Gaine, 2018)

(5)

Keep your head up tonight, kid. [...] cross-checked me in the throat. You're fucking getting it now.
Brad Marchand (NHL) to Mitch Marner during a game after a cross-check from Marner's teammate.

(Mazzei, 2024)

(6)

Gilbert, you don't deserve to be on the same court as me!
John McEnroe (Tennis) to Brad Gilbert during their Nabisco Masters match in 1986.

(Gilbert, 2007)

The above examples demonstrate trash talk that is directed at the addressee, but trash talk can also occur in circumstances where the addressee is not the target. This would occur in situations like interviews and press conferences. A notable example of this can be found courtesy of Diego Maradona, who coached Argentina for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. In an interview about their upcoming match against Germany,

Maradona mocked one of the German players, imitating his accent and suggesting he is afraid of the Argentinian team (Hayward, 2010). This was in response to the interviewer's question, and though it was said to the interviewer (the addressee) the target was someone else. This is another way that trash talk can function, as will be seen with some of the data collected for this paper.

Another aspect of trash talk is that its effectiveness can be considered after it has occurred. Examples like the Argentina-Germany rivalry, as well as (2), (4), and (6), were all affected by the outcome of the event they refer to. Argentina ultimately lost their match against Germany, with Schweinsteiger (the player mocked by Maradona) performing exceptionally well. In (2), Bird makes a promise to perform a certain way and then does exactly what he says he will. (4) is a goad by Jordan to Bogues, who ultimately fails, and (6) is McEnroe in a heated moment against Gilbert, with Gilbert winning the match. In the Argentina-Germany example and in (6), the trash talk used is viewed differently because of the failures of the speakers to "back up" their claims on the field/court even though they may still be seen as effective examples of trash talk. What may have been seen as a verbal "win" initially, inciting audience support, may be viewed as embarrassing or foolish in hindsight. This cannot be ignored in the discussion of trash talk, as trash talk is just one of the many battles an athlete may face throughout a match or game, with the ultimate outcome being winning or losing.

As trash talk is generally accepted by the majority of the sports world (players, audience, and management alike), there is a certain degree of face-threatening speech and impoliteness that is therefore acceptable. What constitutes face-threatening speech and impoliteness will be discussed in the literature review. Importantly, if the speaker is too impolite, their public image may be tarnished, or they could even face punishment within the sport itself if what they say crosses into

something like hate speech. This paper strives to help define when trash talk crosses this threshold into *too* impolite territory.

As far as I can determine, trash talk is a relatively uncommon topic in sociolinguistic or linguistic anthropological research. Research on trash talk has primarily been conducted within the sociology or psychology fields. These studies still help to provide understanding of the context and participants in trash talk. Research showing the participants in trash talk tend to reveal that most participants are male (Conmy et al., 2013; Tamborini et al., 2008; Rainey and Granito, 2010) and white (Tamborini et al., 2008). However, trash talk can be further understood as a speech genre in competitive sports contexts, where it involves rude or profane language or anger that is aimed at an opponent. It is generally used in a competitive setting to humiliate or intimidate an opponent. It can be used privately, such as directly to the opponent in a moment where both participants are physically close together, or publicly in front of an audience, such as during a press conference. It can also be a combination of both, where the audience is still able to overhear a comment despite it being meant for only the speaker's opponent. This is relevant for a politeness discussion because it means that the target of trash talk has to worry about the perception of their face by an audience. I argue that this awareness of an audience is always present, even if trash talk is delivered privately with no intention of being overheard, especially at a professional level. There is always the possibility that the audience, referee, or other players will overhear or be informed about trash talk.

The public or private nature of trash talk may also depend on the sport. Some sports may offer limited opportunities to trash talk opponents, such as tennis where the reputation for decorum and the expectation for silence during a match may not inspire a player to use trash talk (McEnroe being one of the more brazen exceptions).

Some sports may also not typically present the opportunity for opponents to speak to or about one another in front of an audience. The press conference context specific to UFC seems to be unique in that both athletes are present and can interact with one another, or speak about their opponent in response to a question while in front of them.

Trash talk can cover a number of different topics about the opponent, such as their skill, character, or performance (see examples (1)-(6) above). It can be used before, during, or after a competition or game.

One question the prevalence of trash talk raises is whether it is officially allowed when considering the rules of whatever game is at play. The official rulebook of the NBA contains a section titled “Conduct”, which, while it does not mention *trash talk*, does provide a definition for technical fouls as well as examples that could include trash talk.

(7)

> a. An official may assess a technical foul, without prior warning, at any time. **A technical foul(s) may be assessed to any player on the court or anyone seated on the bench for conduct which, in the opinion of an official, is detrimental to the game.** The technical foul must be charged to an individual. A technical foul cannot be assessed for physical contact when the ball is alive.
>
> […]
>
> d. A technical foul shall be assessed for unsportsmanlike tactics such as:
>
> […]
>
> 4. Use of profanity
>
> […]
>
> 7. Taunting
>
> (National Basketball Association, 2024)

While many instances of trash talk are not called as technical fouls during a basketball game, one of the most common types of technical foul is trash talk. The threshold for such a call, as outlined in the above rules, is unsportsmanlike conduct,

disrespect toward officials (or opponents), taunting, and conduct that is “detrimental” to the game. However, what is considered disrespectful, unsportsmanlike, or detrimental to the game seems to be at the discretion of the officials as a specific definition for these terms is not provided.

Similar rules are present in the NHL’s Official Rulebook, as seen below:

(8)

> Rule 75 – Unsportsmanlike Conduct
> […]
> 75.2 Minor Penalty - A minor penalty for unsportsmanlike conduct shall be assessed under this rule for the following infractions:
> (i) **Any identifiable player who uses obscene, profane or abusive language or gestures directed at any person.**
> […]
>
> (National Hockey League, 2024)

Again, the term *unsportsmanlike* is used here but is not specifically defined.

The above two examples consider sports where physical contact is a blatant violation of the official rules (even in hockey – though there is a certain amount of allowance for violence). How, then, is conduct assessed in a sport like UFC, where physical contact is the intent and art?

The UFC is governed by the Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts, which also provides the official rules for many other MMA jurisdictions around the world. Unlike the above examples, there is a clear stipulation in the rules regarding language, including a definition of abusive language:

(9)

> 21. Use of abusive language in the fighting area. The use of abusive language is not allowed during MMA competition. It is the sole

> responsibility of the referee to determine when language crosses over the line to abusive. It should be clear that fighters can talk during a match. The mere use of auditory language is not a violation of this rule. Examples of abusive language would be (Racially motivated or Derogatory language)
>
> (Association of Boxing Commissions, 2019)

The above rules regulate behaviour during a game or match, but it should be noted that fines have been issued for rule-breaking due to off court/ice/octagon violations. Though in my research I have not found an example of abusive language being the cause of such a fine, it is not outside the realm of possibility for a language rule to be enforced in a similar manner.

While the official rules of sports may define language that violates the rules, there is no specific mention of language that is allowed (with the exception being the Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts, despite a lack of specificity). Based on the less formal definition presented at the beginning of this section, trash talk could be considered abusive, as it often entails insults, belittling, and comments about personal characteristics or circumstances. However, most trash talk does not result in punishment for the athlete. Therefore, definitions of trash talk based on official rules or casual observation are not sufficient enough to encapsulate its true nature. In Section 2, I will use linguistic theories such as face and politeness to attempt to provide a more robust definition of trash talk.

1.2 The Ultimate Fighting Championship, Ronda Rousey, and Conor McGregor

The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is a mixed martial arts competition in the United States. It was founded in 1993 and was first created with the goal of determining the most effective martial art by pitting athletes of different disciplines

against one another. Athletes would fight with minimal rules and using the most effective techniques from their respective disciplines. Over time, athletes began using combinations of techniques from across different martial arts, leading to the creation of what is now known and taught as MMA, a martial art in its own right.

When UFC first began, there was no women's category. It was not until 2012 that a women's category was created with the signing of the first female fighter in UFC: Ronda Rousey.

At the time of signing with UFC, Rousey was the bantamweight champion with Strikeforce (a smaller mixed martial arts organization). However, her experience with martial arts began much earlier, having started training in judo at age 11. Rousey would go on to win a bronze medal at the 2008 Olympic Games, becoming the first American woman to ever win a medal in judo (Mihoces, 2008).

Rousey's UFC career is also well decorated. After six title defence fights in the UFC, Rousey remained undefeated, with most of her fights being won by armbar - a move where your opponent's arm is locked to your body, and, depending on the force, can result in a broken arm if not submitted to (Figure 2).

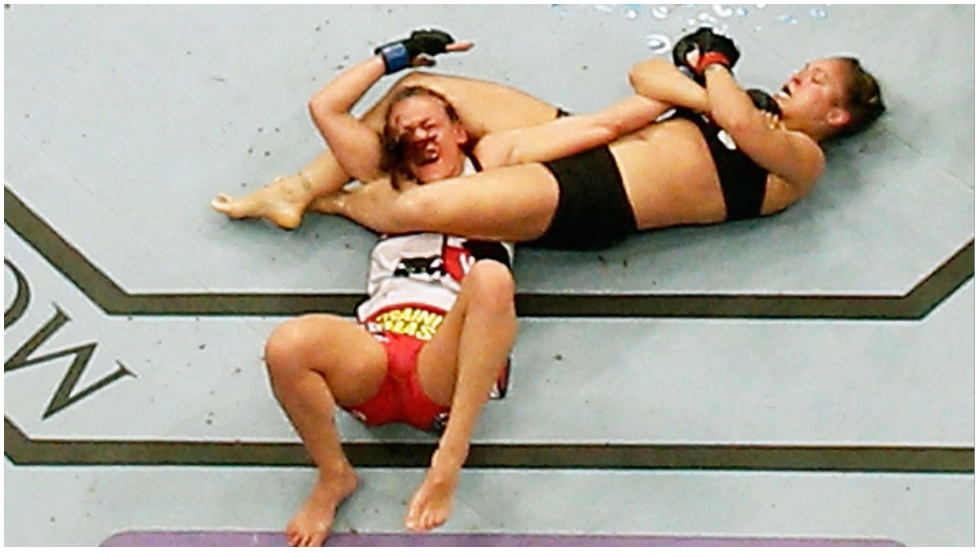

Figure 2. Ronda Rousey defeating Miesha Tate via armbar on March 3, 2012, for UFC. (Mikhailenko, 2023)

On February 18, 2015, Rousey would defeat Cat Zingano via armbar in 14 seconds, setting the record for the shortest title match in UFC history, until 11 months later when Conor McGregor would defeat José Aldo. Rousey's total time in the octagon for all six fights was approximately 17 minutes, and she earned a total of $1,080,000.

Rousey faced Holly Holm in her seventh title defence on November 15, 2015. She was defeated by knockout from a kick to the head and subsequently put on medical suspension. A year later, Rousey faced Amanda Nunes and lost via knockout in the first round. Rousey then retired from UFC.

Conor McGregor began studying boxing at age 12 and went on to begin his professional MMA career in 2008. He was signed with UFC in 2013. In 2015, McGregor pursued the title of Featherweight Champion. He defeated Dennis Silver by technical knockout on January 18, 2015, and was scheduled to face José Aldo in a highly anticipated match that July. However, due to an injury, Aldo had to pull out of the fight. McGregor instead faced Chad Mendes, in a match that would determine the Interim Featherweight Champion. McGregor won, yet again, by technical knockout, becoming the Interim Featherweight Champion. McGregor would go on to face Aldo on December 12, 2015, where he would beat Rousey's record for the fastest knockout in a title bout, defeating Aldo in only 13 seconds. McGregor continued his career well past 2015, and as of this paper remains a signed fighter with UFC.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Face

The concept of face is integral to the topic of trash talk. Goffman (1955) first established face as whatever declared "positive social value" a person has established through their evaluation of a situation and its participants, as observed by others. Goffman speaks about face-work (actions taken by a speaker to remain consistent with their face) and how one could potentially use it aggressively. If a speaker puts the onus of doing face-work on their interactant rather than themselves, they create a situation that is more likened to a contest rather than a collaboration. Goffman says:

> "The purpose of the game [contest] is to preserve everyone's line from an inexcusable contradiction, while scoring as many points as possible against one's adversaries and making as many gains as possible for oneself. An audience to the struggle is almost necessary. The general method is for the person to introduce favorable facts about himself and unfavorable facts about the others in such a way that the only reply the others will be able to think up will be one that terminates the interchange in a grumble, a meager excuse, a face-saving I-can-take-a-joke laugh, or an empty stereotyped comeback of the "Oh yeah?" or "That's what you think" variety."
>
> (Goffman, 1955, pg. 233)

This quote essentially summarizes trash talk, with the one missing component being a comeback that effectively forces the initial speaker into the face-work maintenance position. It is interesting that Goffman also discusses the necessity of an audience in such an exchange. Section 2.2 goes into further detail about the importance of an audience for the success of trash talk.

Brown and Levinson (1987) take face further by distinguishing between concepts of positive and negative face. They also discuss face-threatening acts. Per Brown and Levinson, face can be described as the desired self-image that a person would like to be associated with by those they interact with. Face can then be distinguished in two ways: positive face and negative face. Importantly, the definition

of face incorporates a *want*. There is a desire for the speaker to be perceived a certain way. Positive face refers to a speaker's desire to also be wanted by others, and negative face is the desire to have "freedom of action" and "from imposition" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, pg. 311). As Brown and Levinson also mention, part of what is so important to the definition of self-image is the participation of the person we are interacting with. If a speaker does not feel approved of by their interactant, there is a challenge to their face.

Both positive and negative face can be threatened. Face-threatening acts occur when an act opposes the wants of the speaker or of the addressee (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In the context of trash talk, both positive and negative face-threatening acts are relevant. Brown and Levinson include the following in their list of positive face-threatening acts:

- Criticism
- Contempt/Ridicule
- Accusations
- Insults
- Disagreements/Challenges
- Bringing up taboo topics
- Interrupting
- Showing non-attention
- Misidentification
- Boasting

(Brown and Levinson, 1987, pg. 314)

Negative face constitutes a desire for freedom of action. In the case of trash talk in a sports environment, the action in question could be considered as general as winning the game/match. Brown and Levinson include the following in their examples of negative face-threatening acts:

- Orders and requests
- Suggestions

- Reminders
- Threats, warnings, dares
- Offers
- Promises

(Brown and Levinson, 1987, pg. 313)

Consulting these lists, it is easy to see how trash talk would be considered a face-threatening act, and I argue that all trash talk is inherently face-threatening. Consider some examples from earlier:

(10)

Gilbert, you don't deserve to be on the same court as me!
John McEnroe (Tennis)

(Gilbert, 2007)

This example is a positive face-threatening act, as it displays contempt for McEnroe's opponent (Brad Gilbert). It also insults him, as the implication is that Gilbert is not as skilled of a player as he is. The *face want* of Gilbert is certainly not to be less-than, and so a comment that implies that he is very much less-than McEnroe is clearly a threat to his face. Essentially, it is likely that Gilbert's want is to be better (or perhaps at least be considered equal) than McEnroe, and this comment makes it clear that McEnroe does not share this want.

(11)

I'm going to get [the ball] right here and I am going to bury it in your face.
Larry Bird (NBA)

(Jungfer, 2019)

This example is a negative face-threatening act, as Bird clearly intends on impeding his opponent's freedom of action. Here he uses a threat - one that could also be interpreted as a promise.

2.2 Audience

An important concept briefly mentioned by Brown and Levinson (1987) is that of the audience. Specifically, it is stated that audience support can potentially "destroy" the face of a speaker's interactant while maintaining their own (Brown and Levinson, 1987, pg. 316). This is integral to trash talk. Audiences can be present for much of the trash talk, for example at press-conferences or interviews. If an interview is done privately, whether filmed or printed, it will eventually have an audience. Though some trash talk is done more subtly and the audience cannot hear it – for example, during a basketball game when players are playing close defense and are able to say something quietly to their opponent – there are many instances where the audience is aware of what is being said. Tennis is a sport that demands silence from the audience – so when a player like McEnroe decides to insult his opponent, it can often easily be heard by the audience and by the referee, who may penalize the player as a result. Similarly, in the octagon of UFC fights, though what is being said cannot always be heard, trash talk can be seen to be happening, and gestures like the one above from Bruce Lee are often used.

Though different from trash talk, insult comedy employs similarly face-threatening acts that are acceptable partly because of the support of the audience. Haviland (2011) looks at the speech and more specifically the insults of a street vendor in Mexico. These insults are delivered publicly and toward random passersby for the sake of entertainment. Though these insults can be demeaning, there is an understanding from the audience that such comments are expected and presented for entertainment purposes; there is no greater depth of meaning to them. Interestingly,

though, Haviland observed female street performers being aggressively confronted about their use of vulgar words (2011, pg. 260), where the male performers did not receive such negative feedback. Though Haviland's experience was in Mexico and with few participants, it does raise the question of if there are different face-maintenance expectations based on gender in particular cultures, an idea that is supported by Ochs Keenan in her 1976 study exploring the language ideologies of Malagasy.

Audiences have also participated in trash talk themselves. This is also a generally accepted practice in sports, however, it is somewhat less common and less commented on, likely because the audience for audience-uttered trash talk is much smaller and because it is understood that no matter what the audience member says, the athlete they are trash talking is of a higher status as a much higher skilled participant in the sport. However, there is still power in audience participation in trash talk. Kassing (2020) discusses the use of memes by the public as trash talk. This expands the audience of trash talk to include hundreds, or potentially thousands, of people, as a meme can be continually shared online (proving the audience's acceptance).

2.3 Politeness and Impoliteness

Irvine's 1992 work on honorifics in Javanese, Wolof, Zulu, and ChiBemba, provides insight into how ideologies can influence how politeness or respect is conveyed through language. In the languages she observed, status differences between speaker and addressee are established in one of two ways: elevating the other ("addressee-elevating") or lowering the self ("speaker-lowering").

The opposite is the case for trash talk, which is self-elevating and/or other lowering.

(12)

I heard about you. You're that ugly fella.
Muhammad Ali (Boxing)

(Seekins, 2016)

In the above example, Ali lowers his addressee by insulting his appearance. Despite this being the opposite of the polite examples as described by Irvine (1992), impoliteness cannot be strictly defined as the opposite of politeness. Impoliteness has been described by Culpeper (2010) as involving rudeness, profanity, and disrespect. This can be seen in the definition below:

> "Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires and/or beliefs about social organisation, [...]. Situated behaviours are viewed negatively when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviours always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. Various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behaviour is taken to be, including for example whether one understands a behaviour to be strongly intentional or not."
>
> (Culpeper, 2010, pg. 3233)

Therefore, I would begin to define trash talk as contextually accepted impoliteness. To support this definition, I draw on Culpeper again, who also speaks to the importance of context for impoliteness (2010), for which there is a relatively clear definition when it comes to trash talk; that of sports (or other games).

One key element to Culpeper's definition is the observation that impoliteness is often experienced indirectly, and those instances of impoliteness are often spoken

about – Culpeper describes this as impoliteness metadiscourse. This is especially true in the context of trash talk. Though any person who engages in sport may have experienced trash talk, often it is from friends because play is taking place at a very casual level, and so the trash talk is not as deep or insulting as that we may witness when watching professional sports (though it can certainly be harsh at levels of sport below professional). Trash talk from friends at a casual level may not even be considered impolite, depending on the comments made. Therefore, when trash talk is witnessed at the level of professional sports, it is notable. It is notable not only for its intensity, but also because instances of genuinely impolite speech are rarer than instances of politeness (Culpeper, 2010). Witnessing trash talk in a sport is just as Culpeper said impoliteness is often experienced – indirectly.

The second level of analysis in this paper deals essentially with impoliteness metadiscourse, as comments about trash talk are analyzed. The trash talk used and an athlete's ability to trash talk are often topics of conversation among sports fans.

3.0 Methods

Ten examples of trash talk were transcribed and compared. The speakers being analyzed are Ronda Rousey and Conor McGregor. Both speakers were considered the best fighters of their gender at the time of these fights (2015-2016). McGregor was celebrated for his trash talk at the time and continues to be considered one of UFC's best trash talkers (Feldman, 2024). Rousey's trash talk was also a topic of discussion during her UFC career (NPR, 2015). These speakers were chosen because of their superiority in UFC at the time of these fights and their reputations for trash talk.

McGregor and Rousey are both similar in age, with Rousey being only one year older. Both are white, though McGregor was born and raised in Ireland, and Rousey was born and raised in the United States. Both are native speakers of English.

McGregor's examples are taken from a peak time in his career; the pre-fight press conference prior to UFC 196 (March 5, 2016), where his opponent was Nate Diaz. Similarly, Rousey's examples are from the peak of her UFC career, UFC 193 (November 14, 2015), versus Holly Holm. Videos of these pre-fight press conferences were accessed via YouTube[1][2][3]. After viewing the videos, a goal of ten examples from each speaker was set. This is because Rousey did not have many examples of trash talk within the press conference itself. One video from the pre-fight press conference was used for McGregor, as it contained enough examples of trash talk, and two videos for Rousey: one from the pre-fight press conference, and one with a compilation of pre-fight interviews, as she did not have enough examples of trash talk within the press conference itself.

The examples taken from the speakers were chosen partly for ease of analysis. Examples with excessive overtalk from other speakers in the room were excluded. In Rousey's case, trash talk examples from these specific contexts were limited, and so every instance of trash talk was collected. Examples from McGregor were chosen to attempt to show the variety of strategies used in his trash talk.

Their trash talk will be compared in terms of impoliteness as well as strategies (positive or negative face-threatening, self-elevation and/or addressee-lowering) to see if there is a difference in their level of impoliteness or chosen strategies.

[1] McGregor: https://youtu.be/bX6288YKCpY?si=hTQ-ESaaro86Jbds
[2] Rousey: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2QKCJ8mNwU&ab_channel=UFC
[3] Rousey: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFpRdhWx7Y0&ab_channel=MMAClips

Impoliteness can be determined by considering what kind of insult or comment the speakers are making. For example, trash talk criticizing the skill of an opponent may be less impolite than trash talk that insults their character directly. Similarly, a speaker presenting themselves as powerful and adept without disparaging their opponent (self-elevating) may be considered boastful and impolite, but not as impolite as a direct insult to their skill (other-lowering).

The second analysis is of the YouTube comments on each video. Eight comments for each speaker were collected from the videos used for the trash talk analyses. The comments were chosen based on availability of comments in the case of McGregor's video - the comment section is relatively sparse, perhaps due to the posting date of the video (2016) and also the viewing trends of audiences at the time, which may have been skewed more to the live event rather than a YouTube video.[4]

For comments about Rousey's trash talk, comments were collected to attempt to show diversity in responses (positive, negative, gender based, performance based, etc.).

The comments were analyzed based on the content of the comment, whether they are positive or negative, and whether there is any mention of gender within the comment.

4.0 Analysis of Trash Talk

The trash talk of each speaker is analyzed based on how they threaten the face of their opponents or the speakers. Trash talk is inherently face-threatening as it often

[4] YouTube comments do not account for all internet discourse during this time. Other online platforms (such as Twitter, Instagram, etc.) may have also been used to discuss these speakers.

comes in the form of threats, insults, or boasting, all of which threaten either positive or negative face (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

It will also be determined whether the examples are self-elevating, other-lowering, or both. In this analysis I am making a distinction between addressee- and other-lowering because of the presence of a mediator in both press-conferences and interviews. The speakers are not addressing the interviewer when they use trash talk, and therefore these instances will be categorized as *other*-lowering where they occur.

After the analysis of each speaker's face-threatening acts and strategies, their trash talk will be compared against each other.

4.1 Conor McGregor's Trash Talk

Ten examples of trash talk were taken from the official UFC pre-fight press conference made available through YouTube. Each example was analyzed for its politeness and the strategies used by the speaker. Interestingly, throughout this video as trash talk is exchanged between the two speakers, the audience can be heard reacting through laughter or vocal expressions of acknowledgement of the intensity or effectiveness of an insult. There is a clear sense of audience engagement and enjoyment in the verbal sparring.

The examples are in chronological order, with some being initiated as responses to Diaz and some being the answers to questions. Because of the nature of the video from which the examples were collected (a compilation of highlights from the press conference), the questions from the media representatives were not included and so some of the context is missing. While some of the examples occur close

together, there are clearly moments where both speakers are answering questions without trash talking one another.

(13)
CM[5]: But now, as the fight comes closer, he's like a scared little boy,
((audience yelling/cheering))
trying to pass the spotlight off, trying pass the spotlight onto Nick,
trying to pass the spotlight onto Hickson,
ND[6]: [Bullshit, they got opinions on you too.][7]
CM: [Even that little skinny-]
ND: [They got their opinions on you too.]
CM: [Even that little skinny twerp-]
even that little skinny twerp that he does the open workout,
he even tried to plug him at the last press conference.

In (13), McGregor uses several positive face threats and uses other-lowering as his strategy. He insults Diaz by referring to him as a "scared little boy", calling both his character and masculinity into question. He further insults Diaz's team, referring to his workout partner as a "little skinny twerp". The comment as a whole can be taken as criticism of Diaz's character. He does not acknowledge Diaz's interruptions directly but continues repeating himself to show he is not engaging with Diaz.

(14)
CM: That's what a man does when he's scared,
he tries to
He- he- he shies away and tries to pass it on.
((audience yelling))

In this comment, McGregor is referring to Diaz's previous comments in interviews where he speaks about his training team instead of his own skill. McGregor continues

[5] Conor McGregor
[6] Nate Diaz
[7] Square brackets indicate portions of overlapping speech

to insult Diaz's character and also employs accusation. This comment is other-lowering and threatening positive face.

(15)
CM: He's talked a lot previous, said he was gonna do this and do that,
now we're up here, we're doing this
and he is saying absolutely nothing
((audience yelling/cheering/clapping)).
He's sitting in a little shell.
So let's see what he's got.

In (15), McGregor continues to use positive face threats, insulting the character of Diaz by suggesting that he previously engaged in a lot of trash talk toward McGregor, but now that he is face to face with him, he is too scared to do anything. An insult, as defined by Brown and Levinson (1987), is an act that threatens positive face and therefore shows that the speaker has a negative assessment of the addressee's/other's positive face (the want for their want to be desirable).

Further, he indirectly dares Diaz by asking to "see what he's got" – an example of a negative face-threatening act. This comment overall employs the threatening of positive face through criticism (of Diaz's character) as well as the threatening of negative face by daring Diaz to trash talk him now that they are in the same space as one another. This comment is other-lowering.

(16)
CM: He has a bully mentality until a real man shows up.
Like Mike Tyson said he's scared of the real man.

McGregor maintains his strategy of insulting Diaz's character in (5). He also includes another reference to masculinity, suggesting that Diaz is not a "real man"

because he is a bully only to those who are inferior to him and cannot maintain his toughness when confronted with someone like McGregor.

(17)
((prior dialogue is cut from video footage))
CM: ….be grateful for this opportunity that I am giving him.

This comment could be considered both self-elevating and other-lowering in the sense that McGregor is placing himself as superior, suggesting he is offering Diaz an opportunity to fight him. He is employing an act that threatens negative face, as it is a suggestion.

(18)
CM: Don't talk about money, you're broke.
((audience laughing/cheering/clapping))

(18) threatens both positive and negative face. It threatens positive face because McGregor insults Diaz by suggesting he is poor and it brings up the taboo topic of money. Brown and Levinson discuss the raising of emotional and divisive topics as being face-threatening acts. Money is a topic that can be emotional, as it is connected to both pride and survival.

This example threatens negative face because it is an order. This is also an example of addressee-lowering, because in this comment McGregor is addressing Diaz directly, as opposed to most of the other examples where he is speaking about Diaz while answering a question from the host or media representatives.

(19)
CM: But all I want is a thank you, or even a little dance.
Even a little dance, dance for me Nate, dance for me
((audience laughing)).

And don't look me in the eye when you dance.
((audience laughing))

This comment threatens both positive and negative face. It refers back to the same circumstances as (14), where Diaz has previously spoken about his team rather than his own fighting ability. It threatens positive face because it uses ridicule by asking Diaz to dance and not to look him in the eye when he does it. It threatens negative face because it is phrased first as a request, and later in the comment (when McGregor says not to look him in the eye) as an order. This comment is addressee-lowering.

(20)
CM: That's a sign of a man who's scared for his life.
You're like a gazelle, you're all bunched up together
hoping that you get spared, while I'm a lion
and I'm going to eat you alive.

The above comment threatens positive and negative face. It threatens positive face because it ridicules and insults Diaz by comparing him to a prey animal. It threatens negative face because it includes a threat ("I'm going to eat you alive"). While this threat is metaphorical, it is still obviously intended to be threatening. This comment is both self-elevating and addressee-lowering. McGregor compares himself to a lion, a skilled hunter and carnivore, while comparing Diaz to prey.

(21)
CM: I'd slap the hell out of your whole team and your big brother.

This comment threatens negative face as it contains a clear threat. It should be noted that Diaz's brother, Nick Diaz, is also a UFC athlete, and so the threat to family in this example may not be considered a taboo topic. As well, Diaz's entire "team" as referred to by McGregor consists of fighters, though they may not be professional.

Again, this exempts the comment from stepping into the territory of taboo topics. This comment is self-elevating, as McGregor speaks to his ability to defeat Diaz and his entire team, as well as his professional fighter brother.

(22)
CM: You don't make any calls, you only answer the calls.
((audience laughing))

This comment threatens positive face and addressee-lowering. This is an example of an accusation (an act that threatens positive face), as it states that Diaz is never the one taking initiative but simply acts in response to other people, and therefore it is addressee-lowering.

McGregor's favoured strategies in these examples is that of insulting Diaz's character. Some comments may be considered more impolite, such as including family as in (21), or discussing personal financial issues (true or not) as in (18). Most of McGregor's comments are addressee/other-lowering as opposed to self-elevating.

One of the most notable things about this press conference is the audience reactions. In several of the examples from McGregor, the audience reacts with laughter or acknowledgement of the intensity and effectiveness of an insult, in a way similar to that of insult comedy as discussed in Haviland (2011). There is clear audience engagement and enjoyment. There is also an air of humour to most of the trash talk. While there are moments of intensity where the speakers get emotional, most of the trash talk is structured in a way that is cutting – because they often employ positive face-threatening techniques like insult, ridicule, and interruptions - while also being somewhat shallow and humorous, as the audience reaction indicates. There is a sense of the speakers being aware that while they are trying to achieve personal success (by having the better insults and not being verbally outsmarted, as Goffman

(1955, pg. 225) discussed) they also have a sense of need to entertain the audience, because enlisting the audience can help them to gain status over their opponent (Brown and Levinson, 1987). This relates back to the concept of politeness in respect to maintaining face in front of an audience. By being entertaining while insulting each other, the speakers maintain their face despite engaging in face-threatening speech.

4.2 Ronda Rousey's Trash Talk

In order to collect ten examples of trash talk from Ronda Rousey, two separate YouTube videos had to be viewed as the press conference itself only contained three examples of trash talk from Rousey. Three examples were taken from the official UFC pre-fight press conference, as McGregor's were. The remaining seven examples were taken from a compilation video that used clips from several different pre-fight interviews. Though these are one-on-one interviews and do not share a live audience in the same way a press conference does, the audience still exists in that Rousey is aware her answers will be publicized.

Each example was analyzed for whether it is self-elevating and/or other-lowering, as well as if it is an act that threatens positive or negative face.

(23)
RR[8]: … She's a 19-time boxing world champion not MMA world champion
and I believe that I'm better than every other girl
in every other area of MMA.

(24)
RR: MMA striking is different and I think I'm the best at it.

[8] Ronda Rousey

(23) is both self-elevating and other-lowering. Rousey states that she is better than any other female MMA fighter, which is blatant self-elevation. Rousey's comment on Holm being a 19-time boxing world champion, but not an MMA champion is other-lowering, but not to the same degree as the insults McGregor used against Diaz, for example. It is not an insult that is directed at her character, and it is not particularly demeaning. It is an observation.

(24) threatens both positive and negative face. It threatens positive face because Rousey boasts about being the best female fighter in MMA, and it threatens negative face because she uses a reminder of the facts about Holm's record.

This comment is self-elevating. Rousey does not even mention Holm at all. She is employing a tactic that threatens positive face, as she is boasting.

Because this comment does not contain any speech directed at Holm, some may not consider it trash talk. This comment comes directly after (23), and so in context Rousey is still speaking about her ability to defeat Holm because she's the best at MMA striking. Therefore, it is trash talk because it is functioning as self-elevation for the purpose of demotivating an opponent. She is letting Holm know that she is the best MMA striker; there is no chance she will be beaten, even by a boxing world champion.

(25)
RR: … I'm really just thinking about beating Holly and that's it.

Rousey gave this answer in response to a question from an interviewer about her plans for her career. This comment is both self-elevating and other-lowering. It is both of these stances because Rousey is making an assumption that she will beat

Holm. For Rousey this is an undeniable fact. It therefore also threatens negative face because it acts as a promise.

(26)
RR: Well, what makes me so confident that I can win is
I'm the greatest fighter in the world.

This comment is self-elevating. It threatens positive face because it is boastful. This is another comment where Rousey does not mention Holm whatsoever.

(27)
RR: I know that she's the kind of fighter I want to test myself against
and I want to show the world why I am the best.

This comment is self-elevating, but also somewhat other-elevating. It is self-elevating because Rousey mentions that she is the best fighter (in the world, or at least in women's MMA). It is other-elevating because part of being the best is contingent upon her defeating Holm. Rousey is stating that Holm is a good fighter, and so a win against her is an accomplishment as opposed to an easy fight. I argue this is still trash talk despite being positive toward her opponent because, despite the compliment, the comment as a whole is being used as a tactic to demotivate her opponent.

This comment threatens positive face as Rousey is boasting about her skill. It is one of many examples where the threat to face is one against the speaker rather than the (indirect) addressee. This will be discussed further in the summation of this section, as well as in the discussion section.

(28)

RR: They could watch every single one of my trainings
leading up to the fight and they could have known me since I was 4,
and I'm still going to beat them, it doesn't matter.

In context, this comment is taken from a pre-fight interview with Rousey in response to a question about Holm's chances of defeating her. It is self-elevating. It is a threat to Rousey's positive face because she is boasting.

(29)
RR: Beating Holly Holm is definitely in my hands and I'm going to do it.

This comment is self-elevating and threatens negative face. It is self-elevating because Rousey is speaking very confidently about her ability to defeat Holm. It threatens negative face because it can be interpreted as acting as a promise or a threat/warning.

(30)
RR: After I beat Holly and I look around, I mean,
it's the most amazing feeling and I realize,
like, this is my place in the world and I love it
and I'm great at this, I'm the best at this.

This comment is self-elevating and threatens both positive and negative face. It is self-elevating because she is implying she will beat Holm, and she is doing so casually, which implies an ease to the predicted win. It threatens positive face because she is boasting about being great and the best at MMA. It threatens negative face because she is offering a promise (or a warning) that she will win.

(31)
RR: This is my rule for all the women in the division,
Y'know, they, it's…
it helps them all out that they get to all take turns losing to me.

This comment is both self-elevating and other-lowering. It threatens negative face. It is both self-elevating and other-lowering because Rousey is implying that she can beat any woman in the division (and at this point in her career she was indeed undefeated) which elevates her while also lowering her opponents by saying their skill does not match hers. It threatens negative face because it acts as a promise and/or warning.

(32)
RR: Holly's one of those people that have been tested before.
I don't need that person to be shaking and walking in already defeated
in order for me to win. I'm gonna defeat them anyway
regardless of how they feel during staredowns.

This comment is both self-elevating and other-lowering. It threatens both positive and negative face. Rousey is commenting on her ability to defeat any opponent regardless of if they are nervous or not (self-elevation). It is other-lowering because she suggests that regardless of her opponent's skill they will never be as good as she is. It threatens positive face because she is boasting about her skill by suggesting that no one can defeat her. It threatens negative face because it is acting as a promise and/or warning.

The majority of Rousey's trash talk threatens positive face because it is boastful. All the examples of trash talk from her are self-elevating as well, with the few that are other-lowering being somewhat indirect comments as opposed to direct, demeaning insults. Therefore, most of Rousey's trash talk is more threatening to her own face, as opposed to her opponent's. While all trash talk is face-threatening in nature, there seem to be certain ways to still save face and some ways to lose it. Comparing the reception to Rousey and McGregor's trash talk will help to shed light

on the impact of self-elevating, addressee-lowering, and positive or negative face-threatening on the maintenance of face.

4.3 Comparison

Upon analysis, McGregor uses more other-lowering speech, while Rousey uses more self-elevating speech. Rousey also uses more acts that threaten negative face. They both use acts that threaten positive face but use different strategies within this classification. Rousey exclusively used boasting, whereas McGregor used ridicule, insults, and accusations. McGregor is continually disparaging his opponent's skill and character, even extending the insults to include Diaz's training team. He also brought in the taboo topic of money.

Within a press conference context, it is also clear that McGregor had more occurrences of trash talk than Rousey. This is evident based on the examples available for analysis in Rousey's press conference video versus McGregor's.

One notable aspect is that of audience participation and response. McGregor's trash talk had the audience audibly reacting, either through yells, cheers, or claps. Only three of Rousey's examples were taken from a press conference (the rest from one-on-one interviews), however none of these had any audience reaction.

In her paper on how female tennis players present themselves as powerful, Sznycer (2010) likens a press conference to a tennis match, with the players returning each "shot" from the media representatives. This metaphor can also be made with trash talk and the UFC fights at hand; one athlete strikes and the other responds. The trash talk exchanges act as pre-fight fights, providing a preview of what is to come. Sometimes, the results align, with the athlete with the best trash talk also winning the

fight. Naturally, this is not always the case. With this in mind, there is a sense of entertainment that accompanies the trash talk. The audience whets their appetite with these exchanges and so is supportive of a back-and-forth, especially if the speakers also provide some humour. This can be felt in the footage of McGregor and Diaz, where the exchange is supported by the audience. Both speakers are supported by laughter or cheers throughout the press conference. However, this is not the case for Rousey. Rousey's trash talk does not offer an opportunity for banter. At the time of this fight, Rousey was at the height of her UFC career and was the reigning undefeated bantamweight champion, having successfully defended her title six times. Therefore, trash talk where she boasts about being "the best" is difficult to counter and also does not warrant a big reaction from the audience, because based on her performance, she is speaking the truth.

The audience reacting to McGregor's comments may also reflect the unseriousness of them. Though McGregor clearly gets emotional at points throughout the press conference (getting annoyed with Diaz's behaviour or by a particular comment), his trash talk remains somewhat shallow. He comments on Diaz being broke in (18), but there is no way for him to actually know this and no proof for the audience that he knows this to be true. Additionally, McGregor's delivery is not completely serious. He uses metaphors and hyperbole to maintain a distance from reality in his comments. This can be seen in (19) when asking Diaz to "do a little dance" for him, in (22) where he accuses Diaz of only being responsive rather than taking initiative, and in (20) with the suggestion that Diaz is "scared for his life". His comments are insincere in that he likely does not actually know whether Diaz is broke, does not expect him to perform a dance, and does not believe him to be scared for his life. I cannot speak to this with complete certainty, as I am not McGregor and have no way

of knowing his inner thoughts; however, it is reasonable to assume that he does not seriously believe in what he is saying.

For Rousey, it appears she believes all of what she said in her trash talk examples. She appears to believe she is the best fighter in the world and the best MMA striker. After her UFC career, Rousey's reputation with many fans declined, with some fans calling her arrogant and delusional. It is impossible to say that this is solely because her trash talk was too serious, however, if sincere trash talk is unsuccessful in enlisting the audience to support the speaker, then it is possible that her style of trash talk resulted in damage to her face.

Therefore, I suggest that successful trash talk exists when the "audience" is enlisted to support the speaker, and this occurs when there is insincerity from the speaker.

5.0 Analysis of Reactions to Trash Talk

Comments are taken from the comments section on YouTube and are separate posts, not connected to one another unless mentioned. The analysis of the comments will focus on whether the comments are positive or negative, whether they discuss the speaker's trash talk, fighting ability, or character, and if they mention gender. Comments for each speaker will be analyzed based on these themes. Comments were collected regardless of the time when they were made. Therefore, comments from potentially years after the fights were included in the analyses. These comments, though older, help to reflect the overall audience attitude toward the speakers and their trash talk.

5.1 Comments on McGregor

Eight comments were taken from the comment section on the same video used to collect McGregor's trash talk and can be found in Table 3. Because the video was uploaded in March of 2016, there are minimal comments available for analysis. Comments were selected if they mentioned McGregor's trash talk (directly or indirectly) or if they indicated support (or lack thereof) based on either McGregor's speech or character.

	Comment	**Negative**	**Positive**	**Gender Mentioned**	**Word Count**
1	Love how Connor has to say a million words but all Nate has to say is FUCK YOU. HAHAHA	x			19
2	Connor kept moving his neck and shaking side to side he [k]new he was getting owned	x			16
3	when connor mcgregor said he makes no excuses i almost peed myself laughing lolololooloololol	x			14
4	Connor has some funny lines, but Nate held him down with facts. Nate v Connor was the h[e]ight of modern UFC.	x	x		21
5	mcgregor's deep cerebral insults with diaz's completely DGAF responses is pure comedic gold		x		13
6	The loudest are the weakest and it's apparent in McGregor's last few performances and he continues to make an asshat off himself time again whenever he steps into the octagon 🤣	x			31
7	It still feels good knowing that the midget-champion got his ass handed big time by Diaz, lol. Connor was only good fighting smaller and shorter opponents or a washed up cowboy.	x			31
8	Conor is like a kid in the back bench..who entertains whole class		x		12

Table 3. Comments about McGregor.

Comments 1-3 in Table 3 are negative toward McGregor. They criticize McGregor's trash talk for being too wordy, whereas Diaz needs a simple phrase (containing a swear word) to entertain this commenter (Table 3, Comment 1). This comment shows that audience support is not always enlisted through the most articulate response. Sometimes the audience responds best to something simple, and in this case McGregor using longer responses resulted in damage to his face.

Comment 2 speaks to the "blow-for-blow" nature of trash talk. It also illuminates the audience awareness of when one participant is losing face or "losing" the verbal match. The commenter is aware of, or believes it to be the case that, McGregor is losing to Diaz.

Comment 3 accuses him of being hypocritical for saying that he does not make excuses. The commenter has some information outside of the press conference that makes them believe McGregor is contradicting himself. This is an example of McGregor losing face and therefore losing audience support based on behaviour outside of the trash talk at hand. One important aspect of trash talk is that it is not just the moment where it takes place that is relevant to its effectiveness, especially for professional athletes. The athletes' cumulative performances and behaviours contribute to whether an audience supports them.

(33)

Connor has some funny lines, but Nate held him down with facts. Nate v Connor was the h[e]ight of modern UFC.

This comment (Table 3, Comment 4) is both positive and negative toward McGregor's trash talk. The first sentence is negative toward McGregor, as it suggests that although McGregor has amusing trash talk, Diaz ultimately "won". It is positive toward McGregor in the second sentence, where the commenter praises this era of UFC. It is possible this commenter is referring partly to the trash talk exchanges between these two athletes, as their rivalry became well known[9].

(34)

mcgregor's deep cerebral insults with diaz's completely DGAF[10] responses is pure comedic gold

This is the only comment that is positive toward both McGregor and Diaz. Here the commenter describes McGregor's insults as "cerebral" and compliments the banter between the two athletes. This comment shows a potential example of what successfully enlists the audience to support a speaker in the context of trash talk in sports. The comment suggests there is some balance achieved by the thoughtfulness of McGregor and the indifference of Diaz and this juxtaposition is evidently highly amusing for the commenter.

The next comments (Table 3, Comments 6-7) are negative toward McGregor and focus on his fighting ability and character. Comment 6 accuses him of being outspoken and taunting his opponents without having the fighting skill to support it. The commenter accuses him of making a fool of himself both in the octagon and outside it. This could be an example of losing audience support by using too much

[9] So much so that a second "redemption" fight was scheduled in August of 2016.
[10] Don't give a fuck

trash talk or perhaps going too far with it. It is difficult to say which as the commenter does not specify what they mean by McGregor being “loud”. However, this comment does point to the likelihood of there being a limit to trash talk, as doing too much may result in a loss of audience support.

Comment 7 is negative toward McGregor and comments not on his trash talk alone but also on his reputation. It suggests that McGregor’s attitude (which includes his trash talk) in the video does not sit well with this commenter. In other words, McGregor’s trash talk has contributed to losing face with this commenter.

(35)

Conor is like a kid in the back bench..who entertains whole class

This comment (Table 3, Comment 8) is positive toward McGregor. The commenter essentially likens McGregor to a class clown – someone whose antics entertain everyone and who enjoys the attention, and who will often get in trouble as a result. This comment shows full audience support of McGregor from this commenter. One trait associated with a “class clown” character is that of making jokes. This commenter therefore acknowledges McGregor’s trash talk as joking. Though they may not be considered jokes in the same sense of something with a specific structure, like a knock-knock joke, for example, there is still an air of unseriousness and flippancy to McGregor’s comment (as discussed above) that allows this commenter to compare him to the character of a class clown.

The comments are all relatively short, averaging around 19 words. The negative comments made about McGregor are usually in reference to his fighting ability and trash talk. Positive comments refer to the entertainment value of McGregor’s trash talk.

The comments remain shallow, with no real criticism about his character or anything about his personal life. None of the comments mention anything about gender.

5.2 Comments on Rousey

Eight comments were taken from the comment section on the same videos used to collect Rousey's trash talk, as seen in Table 4. Because the press conference video was uploaded in September of 2015, after the fight itself took place, there are minimal comments available for analysis. Comments were selected if they mentioned Rousey's trash talk, fighting ability, character, or gender. The comments have been grouped and analyzed based on these themes. The comments are unrelated to one another.

	Comment	**Negative**	**Positive**	**Gender Mentioned**	**Word Count**
1	Did I hear this right ? Ronda says if she can skate through her career with 30 second finishes then it's all good but if she actually has to fight a five round war like every other champion has to to defend her belt then she would probably end her career a liitle[sic] sooner than later. I guess this explains why she's choosing to fight Holly the # 9th ranked fighter with very limited ground game instead of Miesha that has made it to the 3rd round with her and has the best chance of actually chellenging[sic] her. It really blows my mind that nobody questions Dana and the UFC's motives for giving Ronda the least threatening matchups as possible, when Dana clearly admits that it's all about Ronda. If you just read between the lines it's pretty obvious that it's all about riding the Ronda hype	x			165

	train as long as they can... UFC = Ultimate Famewhore Championships, where it's all about ratings not rankings..				
2	Ronda is the most overrated athlete of all time and she is a hypocrite so stop acting like she is a god	x			22
3	I love how she kept calling Holly's respectful behaviour a "fake nice act", then got absolutely destroyed, and Holly hugged and thanked her after the fight instead of talking crap. Holly's "fake nice act" was realer than Rondas entire mentality. She tested herself and realized she isnt cut out for this, thats how bad Holly and Amanda broke her.	x			59
4	Rhonda became a bad winner. Her arrogance became her downfall.	x			10
5	My favorite video is watching Rhonda shadow box. It's great for a laugh when having a tough day. Comedy GOLD	x			20
6	ronda wants to protect that "pretty face" for Hollywood, at the first sign of war, whoever gives it to her, she is gonna pack her bags and leave, and that my fellow MMA fans is the warrior spirit.	x		x	38
7	“I’m a tough woman; I can beat up any man” Cries into a pillow while being walked out of the airport like an actual toddler	x		x	25
8	Ronda's voice is becoming more manly with time			x	8

Table 4. Comments about Rousey.

Comments 1-5 in Table 4 are negative toward Rousey and criticize her fighting ability and/or character. Comment 1 is in reference to Rousey stating that the length of her fights determines how long she will be able to stay with UFC as a fighter. In response to a media question, she states that if she finishes the fight with Holm

unscathed, she will have more stamina for more fights than if she had a “five round brawl”. This comment suggests that she would prefer to face fighters who are below her in ranking and skill to maintain a level of fame within UFC and therefore continue to make the organization money. It mentions Dana White (the CEO of UFC) being part of a plot with Rousey to maintain her dominance. This comment suggests that winning a fight quickly is not challenging and diminishes the talents of both Rousey and Holm.

This comment was not made in response to trash talk, but in response to Rousey’s answer to a question about the future of her career. Rousey’s response is reasonable, but this commenter implies a malicious reason for such an answer and therefore does not provide their support for Rousey. Though this example is not a comment on her trash talk, it is a comment on her losing face in a different way. This commenter believes her to be dishonest and therefore she loses face from their perspective.

The commenter in Comment 2 refers to her as an overrated athlete and a hypocrite. The commenter also suggests that some fans see her as a “god”. When the commenter mentions hypocrisy, it is unclear what they are referring to. It may be a reference to Rousey being very confident, only to be defeated and subsequently retire from UFC. This is an example of Rousey losing audience support because of the contradiction of her trash talk with her behaviour.

Comment 3 suggests that while Holm was “nice”, Rousey had a negative mentality, and perhaps this comment also suggests poor sportsmanship, based on the constant comparison to Holm, who does not use trash talk. The reference to Rousey’s “mentality” is a reflection of her trash talk strategies, specifically the consistent use of boasting. This is an example of Rousey losing audience support based on her use of trash talk, as well as her behaviour. Comment 4 displays a similar reception of Rousey.

The mention of her “arrogance” is clearly in reference to her trash talk, as the examples provided in this paper support - almost every example employs boasting.

Comment 5 refers to a clip in the compilation video where Rousey is shadowboxing (practicing strikes into the air as opposed to hitting a target – an essential drill in most martial arts). This comment suggests that Rousey’s shadowboxing is humorous, likely because it looks unskilled. This comment supports the suggestion that despite Rousey’s success, she has lost audience support because of her use of boastful trash talk and her skill does not measure up to her confidence.

Comments 6-8 are negative and mention gender. Comment 6 could be interpreted as gendered because of the use of “pretty face”. *Pretty* is most often used when describing women and typically not used to describe men. This comment suggests that despite Rousey’s successes in UFC she has not been challenged in a way that threatens her, and once she is matched with an opponent who does threaten her, she will become cowardly.

The commenter in Comment 7 infers that Rousey said she could “beat any man”, though Rousey never said these words. It is possible that the commenter inferred this from Rousey’s comments about being the best fighter in the world. The commenter is juxtaposing Rousey’s egotistical comments about being a tough, successful fighter with her behaviour, similar to that in Comment 5.

Comment 8 is notably gendered without any mention of fighting ability or character. The commenter is probably referring to a lowering of Rousey’s vocal range, but the parameters of the commenter’s interpretation of “manly” cannot be confirmed. This comment ignores all of what Rousey said and instead insults her “femininity” based on her voice, perhaps because Rousey has several instances of vocal fry which has been known to be interpreted negatively when used by women (Anderson et al.,

2014). In this example, the commenter disregards anything Rousey has to say as well as her skill and record in UFC.

The comments toward Rousey are all negative, though this is not necessarily something unique, as most internet commentary leans toward negativity. They criticize her character by suggesting she is arrogant, has poor sportsmanship, and only participated in UFC for the fame. They comment on her gender through reference to the sound of her voice, her appearance, and her emotions. The average word count for the comments is around 43 words.

5.3 Comparison

Overall, there are some general trends that can be observed when comparing the comments made about McGregor and Rousey. Comments about McGregor were shorter and more positive, whereas comments about Rousey were longer and more negative. The negative comments for McGregor focused on different topics than those about Rousey.

When measured in characters, comments about McGregor were shorter. Comments about McGregor had an average of 19 words per comment, and comments about Rousey had an average of 43.

Three out of the eight comments for McGregor were positive, with commenters admiring his thoughtful responses, reminiscing about this particular era of UFC, and finding McGregor amusing. None of the comments for Rousey were positive. When comments contained negative criticisms of McGregor, they focused on his fighting ability, character, and his trash talk, whereas negative criticisms of Rousey focused on her character, emotions, gender, sportsmanship, and fighting ability. When

comments discussed McGregor's trash talk, they made direct reference to the words he used, as in Comments 4 and 5 in Table 3. For Rousey, her trash talk is mentioned indirectly, with commenters instead commenting on her character as well as her trash talk when they refer to her as arrogant (Comment 4, Table 4) or hypocritical (Comment 2, Table 4).

None of the comments about McGregor mention gender. 3 of the 8 comments for Rousey mention gender.

6.0 Discussion

To provide a sociolinguistic definition of trash talk, pragmatic theories of face and impoliteness were considered. Based on the concepts of face (Goffman; Brown and Levinson) and the parameters of impoliteness as described by Culpeper (2010), a preliminary linguistic definition of trash talk (in the context of UFC press conferences and interviews) includes accepted impoliteness and the enlisting of audience support. Trash talk is inherently impolite and therefore also inherently face-threatening, but with audience support it becomes acceptable. However, what is the boundary for audience support?

The examples taken from McGregor and Rousey may provide some insight. Though both speakers had negative comments directed toward them, the comments were different in subject matter and tone. Negativity directed toward McGregor was shallow in each example. The primary areas of criticism were his fighting ability as well as the trash talk he used. The comments made were short and did not attempt to delve deeply into McGregor's character or psyche. Only one comment speaks negatively of McGregor's character. In Table 3, Comment 6, the commenter states that McGregor

“continues to make an asshat of[f] himself” and says “the loudest are the weakest”, implying that McGregor’s skill falls short of his trash talk. This comment is the only example of criticism of character and maintains a level of superficiality when compared to the comments about Rousey’s character that makes it less impactful.

Negative comments for Rousey were more serious in nature. Most of the comments criticized Rousey’s character, with some also mentioning emotions, her appearance, or gender. Table 4, Comment 1, is not a criticism only of Rousey’s skill, but also attempts to dissect her motivations and desires, as well as insulting the other women in her division. Table 4, Comment 2, suggests that Rousey lacks a “warrior spirit”. Table 4, Comment 3, suggests that Rousey’s “entire mentality” was inappropriate and states that she is not “cut out” for UFC.

I propose that the differences in these comments mirrors the differences in McGregor and Rousey’s trash talk styles, with McGregor’s style maintaining audience support and Rousey’s losing it. Upon first reading of the examples taken from each speaker, this may seem surprising, as McGregor is consistently insulting his opponent (other-lowering) while Rousey is only talking about herself (self-elevating). However, I argue that part of what makes trash talk successful in the eyes of the audience is unseriousness. Though McGregor may be quite serious when speaks about defeating Diaz (in the octagon or in the verbal match beforehand) and he may take the situation seriously, his trash talk remains unserious. The audience is aware that McGregor does not know the state of Diaz’s finances, and even if McGregor has shared knowledge with the audience about some financial situation Diaz had gone through, this remains true. In other examples McGregor uses strategies like metaphor and hyperbole, which further support an unseriousness to his trash talk, such as comparing Diaz to a gazelle.

In contrast, Rousey is serious when she trash talks. There is no joking around, no banter, and no shallowness. Because she is speaking only about herself, she has to be serious, and this places her at a disadvantage when it comes to the support of the audience. Trash talk that is self-elevating certainly has its place in sport and is not unique to Rousey, but when it is the only strategy used, the audience loses interest and may also find it hard to support the speaker. The use of exclusively self-elevating trash talk stifles the potential for the verbal sparring that is expected with the use of trash talk.

6.1 Is trash talk face-threatening for the speaker?

As mentioned, trash talk is inherently face-threatening, whether it is positive or negative face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). This is true for the speaker, addressee, or target of the trash talk. However, I propose that trash talk is only face-threatening to the speaker if they lose the audience.

Haviland (2011) discusses the insult comedy of a Mexican street clown. This type of comedy, despite being vulgar, is accepted by the audience. The same is true of trash talk. The audience determines its continued existence and determines what type of trash talk is inappropriate, and what kind is entertaining. If the audience does not support a certain kind of trash talk, the speaker of said trash talk has lost face and may be required to take certain actions (like a public apology). With Rousey, her trash talk was not offensive and so did not require reparative action from her, but it did not fit with the expectation and desire of the audience and so she lost face.

However, if the definition of trash talk I proposed earlier is considered, then trash talk is *accepted* impoliteness. This means that if a speaker uses trash talk, they

do not automatically lose face despite being potentially rude, insulting, or vulgar. Depending on the context, these features of an utterance could be outside the realm of expected social behaviour and therefore result in a loss of face. But when it comes to the world of sport and trash talk, rudeness or vulgarity does not carry the same weight. As Culpeper (2010) stated, impoliteness can be identified partly in how rare it is. In the world of sports, it is not rare for one athlete to be rude toward another. Trash talk therefore does not fit this part of the definition of impoliteness when considered from the perspective of a participant in or viewer of the sport.

While a speaker will not automatically lose face for genuinely insulting their opponent, the threat is still there. As mentioned, if the audience deems their trash talk to be outside the bounds of the expected and accepted, then face will be lost by the speaker. If, however, a speaker prevails in their trash talk usage, “winning” the verbal sparring match and gaining laughter and cheers from the audience, then they potentially have been extremely rude about or toward an opponent with no loss of face whatsoever. However, the outcome of the game/match will ultimately determine the winner. A speaker can use trash talk and successfully enlist the audience and then lose a game with or without losing face. Rousey is perhaps a good example of this, because her style of trash talk is one that takes a big risk. The bigger the claim the bigger the loss in face with the audience. This may be part of the reason why Rousey currently has a poor reputation among UFC fans.

6.2 Gender

Ultimately, it is impossible to conclude what gender-based differences are occurring in the trash talk or the reception of the trash talk of only two speakers.

McGregor and Rousey have different styles of trash talk, which makes comparing reactions to their trash talk even more difficult. However, it may be worth considering that gender has a relationship with what style of trash talk is used. Rousey used exclusively self-elevating trash talk and received no audience reaction, while McGregor used mostly other-lowering and some self-elevating trash talk and received energetic responses from the audience. While a firm conclusion cannot be obtained from this study, perhaps these tendencies can provide some footing for further investigation.

Despite this difficulty, the prevalence of socio-cultural norms regarding women's behaviour cannot be ignored. In a North American context, part of this socio-cultural norm is that women should not be boastful, but should instead be modest (Tannen, 1990, pg. 219). Though Tannen's work has been heavily debated, there is no doubt that certain expectations exist for women, and this extends to their language choices. Rousey is undeniably boastful. If a man used the same amount of boasting as she did, he may well be considered arrogant as well. In Western culture, however, it cannot be denied that Rousey being confident and expressing it, especially in a heavily masculine field like that of UFC where men are expected to be superior, could be unexpected.

6.3 Limitations

This paper does not provide a comprehensive linguistic analysis of trash talk as it only analyses two speakers and it does not include all the possible scenarios for trash talk to occur. For example, trash talk can occur much more privately, as when players are close together and can speak quietly to one another. Trash talk can occur

in settings where there is no audience to overhear it, like in a hockey game where the noise from the game itself makes it extremely difficult to hear any kind of speaking from the players, or a soccer game where the players are far away. This paper dealt only with a professional level, but trash talk can occur at every level of sport. Trash talk between friends is likely much different than that exchanged between speakers who are essentially colleagues. Future research should include more speakers, control for cultural backgrounds, and consider the level of play as an important factor to the parameters of allowable trash talk.

7.0 Conclusion

This paper set out to provide a linguistic definition of trash talk based on examples from a male and female professional fighter in the UFC. An analysis of trash talk from each of the speakers revealed the male speaker to use more other-lowering strategies such as insults and ridicule, and the female speaker to use more self-elevating strategies, primarily boasting. Reactions to the trash talk used by the speakers were analyzed by collecting comments from the YouTube videos in which the trash talk occurred. The female speaker received more negative and longer comments. The male speaker mostly received criticism about his trash talk and fighting ability, while the female speaker mostly received criticism for her character. Drawing on theories of face and impoliteness, trash talk can be defined as accepted impoliteness where the speaker only loses face if they also fail to enlist the support of the audience.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

[Overlap begins

] Overlap ends

(( )) Transcriber's descriptions

Appendix: Data

Table 1. *McGregor's Trash Talk*

	Comment	**Timestamp**
1	But now, as the fight comes closer, he's like a scar little boy, ((audience yelling/cheering)) trying to pass the spotlight off, trying pass the spotli onto Nick, trying to pass the spotlight onto Hickson,[Bullshit, they got opinions on you too. Even that little skinny- They got their opinions on you too.] Even that little skinny twerp- even that little skinny twerp that he does the op workout, he even tried to plug him at the last press conferen	0:12
2	That's what a man does when he's scared, he tries to He- he- he shies away and tries to pass it on. ((audience yelling))	0:32
3	He's talked a lot previous, said he was gonna do t and do that, now we're up here, we're doing this and he is saying absolutely nothing ((audience yelling/cheering/clapping)). He's sitting in a little shell. So let's see what he's got.	0:40
4	He has a bully mentality until a real man shows up. Like Mike Tyson said he's scared of the real man.	0:47
5	((prior dialogue is cut from video footage)) ….be grateful for this opportunity that I am giving him.	1:02
6	Don't talk about money, you're broke. ((audience laughing/cheering/clapping))	1:10

7	But all I want is a thank you, or even a little dance. Even a little dance, dance for me Nate, dance for m ((audience laughing)). And don't look me in the eye when you dance. ((audience laughing))	1:21
8	That's a sign of a man who's scared for his life. You're like a gazelle, you're all bunched up togethe hoping that you get spared, while I'm a lion and I'm going to eat you alive.	1:50
9	I'd slap the hell out of your whole team and your big brother.	2:27
10	You don't make any calls, you only answer the calls	3:17

Table 2. *Rousey's Trash Talk*

	Video 1: **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-** **2QKCJ8mNwU&ab_channel=UFC**	
	Comment	**Timestamp**
1	… She's a 19-time boxing world champion not MMA world champion and I believe that I'm better than every other girl in every other area of MMA.	1:06
2	MMA striking is different and I think I'm the best at it.	1:13
3	… I'm really just thinking about beating Holly and that's it.	3:34
	Video 2: **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFpRdhWx7Y0** **&t=33s&ab_channel=MMAClips**	
4	Well, what makes me so confident that I can win is I'm the greatest fighter in the world.	0:14
5	I know that she's the kind of fighter I want to test myself against and I want to show the world why I am the best.	0:46

6		They could watch every single one of my trainings leading up to the fight and they could have known me since I was 4, and I'm still going to beat them, it doesn't matter.	1:40
7		Beating Holly Holm is definitely in my hands and I'm going to do it.	
8		After I beat Holly and I look around, I mean, it's the most amazing feeling and I realize, like, this is my place in the world and I love it and I'm great at this, I'm the best at this.	2:56
9		This is my rule for all the women in the division, Y'know, they, it's… it helps them all out that they get to all take turns losing to me.	3:16
10		Holly's one of those people that have been tested before. I don't need that person to be shaking and walking in already defeated in order for me to win. I'm gonna defeat them anyway regardless of how they feel during staredowns.	3:31