

**Review of Victoria Guillén-Nieto (2024). *The Language of Harassment: Pragmatic Perspectives on Language as Evidence*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield. 147 pp. ISBN 9781793619075 (cloth), 9781793619082 (ebook).**

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*“When we claim to have been injured by language, what kind of claim do we make?  
We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and  
position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory. [...]  
Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense,  
linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be?*

*Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of our being constituted with terms?” (Butler 1997: 1f).*

Judith Butler’s reflection captures a fundamental truth about the human condition: to be linguistic beings is to be inescapably vulnerable to linguistic harm. Language does not merely equip us with the means to communicate: it constitutes us, shaping the conditions under which we can be recognised as subjects at all. If this formative power precedes and exceeds us, then it also exposes us to injury from the very start. Harassment, in this light, is not an accident of speech, a distortion of otherwise cooperative interaction, but an enactment of the constitutive vulnerability inscribed in discourse itself.

Butler insists that the same medium that confers recognition can withhold it, delegitimise it, or strip it away. To claim that words ‘wound’ is therefore not a metaphorical flourish but a recognition of language’s dual agency: it enables social existence while simultaneously rendering that existence precarious. Harassment exemplifies this dynamic with particular clarity: its force lies not only in the hostility of individual utterances, but in their capacity to sediment and reproduce broader relations of domination, inscribing hierarchies, producing marginality, and making certain lives less liveable.

Seen from this perspective, harassment cannot be conceived merely as an external assault on otherwise autonomous individuals. It must be understood as a communicative practice that both reflects and sustains existing structures of inequality. Studying harassment linguistically, then, entails more than cataloguing verbal aggression or offensive speech acts. It requires interrogating the formative power of discourse itself, how language does not simply mirror social hierarchies, but actively produces and legitimises them.

The formative power of discourse has been extensively demonstrated by existing scholarship in pragmatics and critical discourse studies, which has shown how harassment is realised through recurring speech acts (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), deliberate violations of politeness norms (Lakoff 1973; Brown & Levinson 1987; Culpeper 2011), and discursive strategies that legitimise domination and perpetuate inequality (van Dijk 1995; Fairclough 2010; Wodak & Meyer 2016; Dick 2013). The convergence of these perspectives has also influenced forensic linguistics (Coulthard & Johnson, 2020; Gibbons & Turell, 2008; Olsson & Luchjenbroers, 2013), where the analysis of sequences of hostile utterances can serve evidentiary purposes in harassment cases.

Against this backdrop, Victoria Guillén-Nieto’s *The Language of Harassment: Pragmatic Perspectives on Language as Evidence* offers a systematic framework for the pragmatic investigation of harassment. Rather than relegating hostile or abusive communication to the margins, as if it were merely a deviation from the cooperative norms of interaction, the book conceptualises harassment as a communicative phenomenon “talked into being” (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy 2012). In doing so, it provides both theoretical insight and practical tools for understanding how language itself enacts harm.

Guillén-Nieto’s book opens with a historical and conceptual overview of harassment, tracing the terminological and disciplinary debates that have shaped its study. The author recalls how terms such as *mobbing*, *bullying*, *workplace aggression*, and *harassment* itself emerged from ethology, psychology, sociology, and legal discourse, highlighting both their overlaps and their tensions. This genealogy is not merely an intellectual

exercise: it shows why harassment is so difficult to define, how inconsistencies in terminology complicate research, and why a unified terminological (and, by extension, legal) framework is urgently needed. The introduction also distills the four core elements that recur across existing definitions of harassment: hostile, aggressive or violent conduct, repetition, ill intentions and harm inflicted upon the target. These elements anchor the chapters that follow, each applying a pragmatic theory to illuminate different dimensions of the phenomenon.

The first substantive chapter turns to law, framing harassment as a legal problem. What emerges is the centrality of evidence: legal systems struggle to accommodate the diffuse, repetitive, and often subtle forms of hostile communication that constitute harassment, while the burden of proof continues to fall heavily on victims. Illustrating these difficulties with examples from American and European case law, Guillén-Nieto argues that more nuanced, cumulative, and context-sensitive legal standards are urgently needed to reflect harassment as a structured communicative phenomenon rather than a series of isolated events. Here the need for linguistic expertise becomes clear: by analysing language as evidence, expert witnesses can demonstrate the systematic nature of harassment and provide courts with a coherent account of abusive interaction.

The second chapter explores harassment through Genre Theory. Rather than treating it as a random collection of abusive acts, Guillén-Nieto proposes to see harassment as a communicative genre, albeit a destructive one. Concepts such as *super-genre*, *genre colony*, and *genre integrity* are used to show how harassment patterns recur across contexts, whether in workplaces, schools, or online environments. Harassment should be recognised as a super-genre of negative communication marked by repetition, intent, imbalance, and harm, but deliberately structured to evade recognition. By situating harassment within a genre framework, the book offers a powerful analytical tool to identify, document and explain the phenomenon more readily. This conceptual move also has theoretical consequences, expanding Genre Theory to include negative or harmful genres and underscoring the pragmatic insight that not all communicative action is cooperative or benign.

Building on this foundation, the third chapter applies Speech Act Theory to harassment, asking what type of speech act it represents. Drawing on Austin and Searle, Guillén-Nieto demonstrates how scattered insults, threats, or slurs can be understood as parts of a unified illocutionary pattern. Even when the utterances are discontinuous or seemingly unrelated, they cohere into a macrostructure of abuse. This argument has practical resonance, as it helps researchers and courts to recognise that harassment is not defined by single utterances but by sequences of hostile speech acts whose repetition and accumulation create harm. The discussion is illustrated with examples from school bullying and workplace mobbing, which provide vivid evidence of how repeated acts of verbal aggression form a cohesive “text” of coercive communicative practices.

The fourth chapter turns to the question of intention, a central issue in both pragmatics and law. Through the lenses of Grice’s Cooperative Principle, Relevance Theory, and the notion of *salience*, Guillén-Nieto shows how perpetrators often communicate hostility indirectly, leaving ill intentions to be inferred. Victims, and later courts, are left to reconstruct what was meant but not said: this inferential process is particularly salient in cases of sex-based harassment, where insinuations, jokes, or ambiguous remarks carry heavy implications. By analysing these dynamics, the book demonstrates how pragmatic theory can shed light on the ways in which malicious intent is encoded and decoded, even in the absence of explicit threats.

The final substantive chapter focuses on power imbalance and harm, drawing on (Im)politeness Theory. Guillén-Nieto explains how harassment relies on the deliberate violation of politeness norms, exploiting impoliteness as a strategy to diminish dignity and reinforce asymmetrical relations. Concepts such as *fustigation impoliteness* and *extimacy* are mobilised to show how perpetrators strategically employ offensive behaviour to wound reputation and corrode the social standing of their victims. The analysis underscores that harassment is not just a matter of unkind words, but an intentional face attack: a calculated communicative practice that exploits social hierarchies and inflicts lasting psychological and reputational damage.

Available empirical evidence on harassment underscores Butler’s (1997) insight that words do not merely describe but act, inflicting wounds, imposing constraints, and eroding the dignity of those they target. The first global survey on workplace harassment, conducted in 2022 by the International Labour Organization (ILO), found that nearly one in four workers worldwide have faced some form of violence or harassment, with psychological harassment reported as the most prevalent. Such experiences are linked to severe consequences, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, psychosomatic illness, and social isolation (ILO 2022). Victims, especially of verbal and psychological abuse, frequently downplay the harm or choose silence, held back by shame, fear of disbelief, and the normalisation of abuse—forces that perpetuate its chronic under-reporting and invisibility.

Available data consistently show that harassment does not affect all groups equally. Women and girls are disproportionately targeted, particularly through sexual and gender-based harassment in workplaces, public spaces, and online environments (FRA, EIGE & Eurostat 2024). Marginalised communities, including migrants and other racialized groups, LGBTQ+ people, and persons with disabilities, also face heightened risk (FRA 2020; WHO 2023). The ILO’s 2022 global survey confirms these disparities, finding that women, young people, and those in precarious employment are especially vulnerable to harassment (ILO 2022).

Despite the breadth of evidence, studying harassment continues to pose significant challenges. There is no universally agreed definition, with national legislations and international bodies drawing shifting boundaries between harassment, conflict, and abuse. From a linguistic perspective, harassment frequently unfolds through indirect, ironic, or fragmented speech acts distributed across time and contexts, complicating both

evidence-gathering and legal recognition. Moreover, varying definitions and inconsistent data collection tools hinder comparability across studies, ultimately limiting effective prevention and policy design.

Amid these challenges, Guillén-Nieto's volume proves both timely and necessary. It consolidates and extends existing scholarship into a systematic, pragmatics-based framework that directly engages with evidentiary needs. Drawing on a range of linguistic theories, the book advances a unified model that not only describes hostile discourse but also demonstrates how it can be analysed, documented, and mobilised in legal contexts. Its strength lies in the systematic application of pragmatic frameworks to the core elements of harassment, each lens illuminating a distinct facet of the phenomenon. Genre Theory shows how hostile interactions form patterned and recognisable communicative routines; Speech Act Theory reveals how individual insults and threats cohere into cumulative illocutionary force; Relevance Theory highlights how hostile intent is often conveyed indirectly, requiring inference; and (Im)politeness Theory explains how violations of politeness norms are strategically employed to erode victims' dignity and reinforce existing power asymmetries. In turn, this approach demonstrates the practical utility of linguistic analysis for forensic purposes: by identifying repeated acts, ill intentions, and power asymmetries encoded in language, linguistic experts can furnish courts with the evidence required to establish coherent patterns of abuse.

A key dimension of harassment is the centrality of digital environments. Online platforms have transformed how hostility is produced, circulated and sustained, creating new modalities of abuse, from persistent cyberbullying to image-based sexual abuse and intrusive cyber-surveillance. Digital environments compress time, collapse boundaries between public and private, and enable abuses that combine speed, anonymity and virality in ways that were simply not possible offline.

The book acknowledges this shift and integrates digital harassment at several points. It treats digital spaces as a distinct setting and digital communication as a full communicative mode; it includes cyberbullying, cyber-surveillance and sexting in its typology of harassment subgenres; and it examines illustrative cases such as the ECHR ruling in *Buturugă v Romania* and the Spanish sexting case from Pamplona, as well as media-reported school cyberbullying. These examples show that the author is attuned to the relevance of digital harms and uses them to clarify the core pragmatic elements of harassment.

At the same time, the digital dimension is evolving so rapidly, and now occupies such a large share of everyday harassment, that readers might naturally expect or desire an even more sustained engagement with platform-specific practices, multimodal online genres and the algorithmic amplification of abusive behaviour. This is less a shortcoming of the book than a reflection of the pace at which digital abuse is expanding, constantly generating new forms that demand specialised treatment. Ultimately, the book's achievement lies in laying the theoretical and methodological foundations for a pragmatic analysis of harassment in any environment, including digital ones, showing that language is not simply the medium through which harassment occurs but the very material out of which harassment is constructed.

The result is a book that is both conceptually innovative and practically useful. Conceptually, it reframes harassment as a communicative genre, emphasising its patterned nature and clarifying its illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions. Practically, it provides linguists, lawyers, and social scientists with tools to identify linguistic cues of hostility, intention, and harm—cues that can strengthen both scholarly analysis and legal adjudication. The interdisciplinary reach of the volume is evident: it will be valuable for linguists interested in pragmatics and forensic applications, for legal practitioners grappling with the evidentiary challenges of harassment cases, and for social scientists examining the cultural and organisational contexts in which abusive communication flourishes.

In sum, *The Language of Harassment* stands as an important and timely contribution to the field. It demonstrates how pragmatics can illuminate the darker dimensions of communication, revealing that harassment is not peripheral to language but central to understanding how language enacts harm. The book provides a clear roadmap for integrating linguistic analysis into legal and social responses to harassment and warrants wide readership across linguistics, the social sciences, and law, where it will undoubtedly shape future work at the intersection of language, harm, and justice.

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