

Beyond sarcasm: The metalanguage and structures of mock politeness



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Abstract

This paper aims to cast light on the somewhat neglected area of mock politeness. The principle objectives are to describe the ways that mock politeness is talked about and performed. In order to investigate such usage, I analyse data from informal, naturally occurring conversations in a UK-based online forum. The paper introduces a range of metalinguistic expressions which are used to refer to mock polite behaviours in lay interactions and describes the different structures of mock polite behaviours. The analysis shows that both metalanguage and structure are more diverse than anticipated by previous research and, as a result, the paper argues against equating mock politeness with sarcasm and calls for further research into mock politeness as an important strategy of impoliteness.

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1. Introduction

In this paper I aim to draw attention to the phenomenon of mock politeness and describe the ways in which it is evaluated and performed. The phenomenon described here under the label *mock politeness* (following Culpeper, 1996, who, in turn, adopted it from Leech, 1983), has frequently been discussed within im/politeness studies using other terms, such as *irony* and *sarcasm*, (e.g. Leech, 1983, followed by Culpeper, 1996), *off-record impoliteness* (e.g. Bousfield, 2008; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010a,b), *implicational impoliteness* (Culpeper, 2011) and *mock politeness implicatures* (Haugh, 2014a). Furthermore, outside the field of im/politeness, it has been addressed under the terms *sarcasm* and, less frequently, *irony*. As I will argue throughout this paper, the equation of mock politeness with irony/sarcasm is problematic because the label of sarcasm is simultaneously too broad, because behaviours labelled as *sarcastic* do not always perform mock politeness, and too narrow because there are mock polite behaviours which would not be labelled as *sarcastic* in either the lay or academic/theoretical senses.

In this introductory section, I start by clarifying the distinction between first and second order concepts of im/politeness, briefly trace the history of mock politeness within impoliteness studies and present the definition of mock politeness which will be employed in this paper.

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1.1. First and second order concepts

One of the primary distinctions made in current studies of im/politeness is between the notions of first-order im/politeness and second order im/politeness (also notated as *im/politeness*₁ and *im/politeness*₂ following Eelen, 2001). This distinction largely follows Watts et al. (1992:3) who defined first-order politeness as ‘the various ways in which polite behaviour is perceived and talked about by members of socio-cultural groups’ and second-order politeness as a ‘theoretical construct, a term within a theory of social behaviour and language usage’. This development has been described as one of the most significant developments in im/politeness research (e.g. Mitchell and Haugh, 2015) and a central tenet of the discursive approach (e.g. Terkourafi, 2005; van der Bom and Mills, 2015). According to Eelen (2001:77) the distinction is necessary in order to prevent the epistemological status of the theoretical analysis becoming blurred. If the analyst does not maintain this distinction, the risk is that a (culturally specific) lay-concept is elevated to the status of a second-order concept by the backdoor (Watts et al. 1992:4).¹ In operational terms, addressing first-order understandings requires the analyst to look at extended sequences of interaction and start from participant evaluations (discussed further in section 2.1). As Davies et al. (2011:272, italics in original) note, in ‘the move away from the concept of the omniscient analyst [...] we are now concerned with the issue of *identifying* im/politeness behaviour’. This is particularly relevant to studies that address the second-order concepts of irony and sarcasm, because, as Partington (2007:1550) protested:

[i]n very many studies in the field, the examples discussed, whether invented or selected, are taken for granted as being ironic for no other reason than that the author intuitively feels them to be so. Any discussion of irony based upon data which has not been previously validated as ironic runs the risk of being both oversubjective and circular. Partington (2007:1550)

This problematising of the processes of identification is part of a more general movement in im/politeness research, indeed according to Haugh (2013:61) ‘[o]ne of the most significant developments in im/politeness research has been the shift away from a singular focus on the speaker’s behaviour or intentions’.

1.2. Mock politeness within an im/politeness frame

The first significant theorisation of mock im/politeness within a frame of im/politeness occurs in Leech’s (1983) work on *The Principles of Pragmatics*. He identifies two important aspects of im/politeness mismatch: *the irony principle* and *the banter principle*, which he proposes may be expressed as follows:

Irony Principle: if you must cause offence, at least do so in a way which doesn’t overtly conflict with the PP [Politeness Principle], but allows the hearer to arrive at the offensive point of your remark indirectly, by way of implicature

Banter Principle: in order to show solidarity with h, say something which is (i) obviously untrue, and (ii) obviously impolite to (h)

Leech (1983:82/144)

In this description the choice of ‘irony’ for the expression of an impolite belief seems to serve to reduce the impolite force of the utterance and ‘[permits] aggression to manifest itself in a less dangerous verbal form than by direct criticism, insults, threats, etc.’ (1983:143–144), which appears close to Brown and Levinson’s positioning of irony as a potential off-record strategy for mitigating face-threat (1987:221):

By saying the opposite of what he means, again a violation of Quality, S can indirectly convey his intended meaning, if there are clues that his intended meaning is being conveyed indirectly. Such clues may be prosodic (e.g. nasality), kinesic (e.g. a smirk), or simply contextual.

Brown and Levinson (1987:221–222)

However, in his summary of the relationship between irony and banter, Leech makes it clear that the relative goals are impoliteness and politeness, stating that: ‘[w]hile irony is an apparently friendly way of being offensive (mock-politeness), the type of verbal behaviour known as “banter” is an offensive way of being friendly (mock impoliteness)’ (Leech, 1983:144). Thus, we can see that the second order concept of mock politeness from its inception was intended as a strategy of impoliteness.

¹ Although the distinction is not without complications. It is beyond the scope of this paper to cover them here but Haugh (2007) and Bousfield (2010) provide overviews and Haugh (2012) offers a more nuanced model of first and second order distinctions.

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