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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.

In more recent work, Leech (2014) refers to ‘sarcasm or conversational irony’ and in his revised definition, shown below, retains the emphasis on the covert expression of impoliteness and the importance of context for disambiguation (marked in italics).

In order to be ironic, S expresses or implies a meaning (let’s call it Meaning I) that associates a favorable value with what pertains to O (O = other person(s), mainly the addressee) or associates an unfavorable value with what pertains to S (S = self, speaker). At the same time, by means of Meaning I and the context, *S more indirectly implies a second, deeper meaning (Meaning II)* that cancels out Meaning I by associating an unfavorable value with what pertains to O, or associating a favorable meaning with what pertains to S. The derivation of Meaning II from Meaning I is by means of two paths of inference: first, *Meaning I is infelicitous (i.e., pragmatically untenable in context*, often because of violation of the Cooperative Principle) and therefore to be rejected; and second, given that the meaning is infelicitous and in accordance with the PP, the obvious way to make sense of it is to look for a related interpretation that is felicitous and not in accordance with the PP—which is what the Irony Principle provides.

Leech (2014:233)

Regarding naming choices of what he also refers to as ‘mock politeness’, he defends the choice of ‘irony’ by drawing on research from irony studies and noting that ‘Wilson has linked this theory to “expressing a mocking, scornful or contemptuous attitude” (Wilson, 2013), so that the connection between irony and (im)politeness is implicitly made’ (Leech, 2014:232). In previous research into the same dataset examined here (Taylor, 2015) I found that the verbal behaviours which were described as *ironic* and *sarcastic* by lay participants did indeed always involve the expression of some negative evaluation but this did not apply to a comparable set of Italian language data, suggesting a possible cultural bias.

Following Leech (1983), the irony principle was integrated into one of the first attempts to model impoliteness in Culpeper (1996). Within this early framework, the strategies of impoliteness are:

- (1) Bald on record impoliteness – the FTA is performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way in circumstances where face is not irrelevant or minimised.
- (2) Positive impoliteness – the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee’s positive face wants.
- (3) Negative impoliteness – the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee’s negative face wants.
- (4) Sarcasm or mock politeness – the FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realisations.
- (5) Withhold politeness – the absence of politeness work where it would be expected.

Culpeper (1996:356–357)

In the fourth strategy, we see the recurrence of *mock politeness*, although here it has been renamed as ‘sarcasm or mock politeness’ because Culpeper notes that ‘I prefer the use of the term sarcasm to Leech’s irony, since irony can be used for enjoyment and comedy. Sarcasm (mock politeness for social disharmony) is clearly the opposite of banter (mock impoliteness for social harmony)’ (1996:356). The same label is applied in the revision of this framework in Culpeper et al. (2003) and the model has subsequently been adopted in a number of investigations of impoliteness (as a rough measure of uptake, Google scholar currently lists some 629 citations of the 1996 article and 337 citations of the 2003 paper).

Later models by the same authors replace *sarcasm* with the broader categories of *off-record politeness* (Culpeper, 2005; Bousfield, 2008) and *implicational impoliteness* (Culpeper, 2011) and therefore the more specific area of mock politeness has received less attention in the field. However, it is still fully accounted for in Culpeper’s model of implicational impoliteness, which includes the following categorisation:

- (1) *Form-driven*: the surface form or semantic content of a behaviour is marked.
- (2) *Convention-driven*:
 - (a) Internal: the context projected by part of a behaviour mismatches that projected by another part; or
 - (b) External: the context projected by a behaviour mismatches the context of use.
- (3) *Context-driven*:
 - (a) Unmarked behaviour: an unmarked (with respect to surface form or semantic content) and unconventionalised behaviour mismatches the context; or
 - (b) Absence of behaviour: the absence of a behaviour mismatches the context.

Adapted from Culpeper 2011:155–156 (italics in original)

The second category of *convention-driven impoliteness implicatures* would encompass mock politeness (although the two are not interchangeable because there could be convention-driven implicatures which do not involve a mismatch of

politeness/impoliteness). What is important about this model, and a significant way in which it differs from previous descriptions of mock politeness, is that it accounts for both *internal* and *external* mismatch (discussed as *co-textual* and *contextual* mismatch in Taylor, 2011). To illustrate this, I will anticipate two examples from the corpus used in this study (bold is used to highlight the metapragmatic comment and the verbal behaviour which is being described is underlined):

(1) I am very hot on manners. I usually say something if someone doesn't thank me to be honest – a **sarcastic** “no problem” might remind them to be polite next time.

(2) AIBU [am I being unreasonable] to think this is the best **put down** ever?

I just heard this quote. I think it was in a movie, or correct me if I heard it here.

I think it is just priceless.

I'd like to see things from your point of view but I can't stick my head that far up my ass.

In the first example, in which the utterance *no problem* is described as *sarcastic*, the mismatch lies between the behaviour, which is a conventional second-part in a thanking-acknowledgement adjacency pair, and the context, in which there was no first part expression of thanks (where it might have been expected). In the second example, the im/politeness mismatch in the *put down* lies in the context projected by the first part of the behaviour (*I'd like to see things from your point of view*, suggesting the speaker values the hearer) and the second part of the behaviour (*but I can't stick my head that far up my ass*, suggesting the speaker is insulting the hearer). Like the example of 'Could you just fuck off?', discussed in Culpeper (2011) and Leech (2014), the utterance mixes conventionalised politeness formula with conventionalised impoliteness formula, and as Culpeper explains '[a]n interpretation triggered through mismatching is more implicit and involves more inferencing than one triggered through matching, as targets must spend cognitive effort in resolving internal or external mismatches' (2011:166–167). In both examples (1) and (2) there a mismatch of im/politeness and the hearer is required to test various interpretive hypotheses, with reference to the context, before (possibly) arriving at the speakers intended meaning of impoliteness. Thus, both types require some kind of 're-processing' of the apparently polite move in order to give rise to the an impoliteness implicature. It is the second type, that involving internal mismatch in the co-text, which has previously been neglected. Although it is mentioned in Leech's (2014) study of mock politeness under the heading of *attitude clash*, which is defined as 'a case where the overt "polite" meaning and the "impolite" meaning of irony occur side by side in the same piece of language' (2014:238), he does not resolve the (acknowledged) discrepancy between a definition of mock politeness that relies on covert and deniable expression of impoliteness and the on-record nature of this kind of mock politeness. Indeed, this second type of mock politeness constitutes the principle challenge to subsuming mock politeness under a category of *off-record impoliteness*.

Rather than conceiving these two examples as entirely different types of mismatch, we may consider them as representing opposing points on a continuum of mock politeness, from a contextual external mismatch to a co-textual internal mismatch. Towards the centre of such a continuum, we could envisage the communication of mismatch through meta-communicative cues, as reported for both mock impoliteness (e.g. Haugh, 2010:2108) and irony (e.g. Attardo, 2000b). Indeed, Culpeper (2011) further specifies two categories of *internal* mismatch: *multimodal mismatches* in which verbal oral and visual elements may convey conflicting messages and *verbal formula mismatches* and we may hypothesise that the multimodal mismatches are likely to be positioned in a more central position on the continuum.

A recent exception to the general side-lining of mock politeness is Haugh's (2014a) extensive work on im/politeness implicatures, in which he discusses *mock politeness implicatures*, defined as 'an ostensibly "polite" stance, which is indicated through the occurrence of a (non-) linguistic form or practice that would in other circumstances be associated with a polite attitude, masks or disguises an "impolite" stance that arises through implicature' Haugh (2014a:278). The definition of mock politeness which is employed in this study is similar to Haugh's model and is as follows:

mock politeness occurs when there is an im/politeness mismatch leading to an implicature of impoliteness

This definition therefore positions mock politeness within the category of *implicational impoliteness* (Culpeper, 2011) and crucial components are the presence of *mismatch* and evaluation of *impoliteness*.² The definition used in this study is deliberately broader in scope than that of Haugh (2014a), for instance in the specification of im/politeness *mismatch* rather than *masking* or *disguise* precisely because I want to address all those instances along that continuum of im/politeness mismatch, from instances where the mismatch arises from contextual factors, as illustrated in (1), to those where it is explicitly present in the co-text, as illustrated in (2). Another key feature in this definition is that it does not refer to *intention*. As Culpeper

² Impoliteness is here understood as 'behaviour that is evaluated by a participant as attacking face or sociality rights in a particular context', drawing on the 'lowest common denominator' from Locher and Bousfield (2008) but taking into account Spencer-Oatey's distinction between face and sociality rights and Culpeper's (2005) reference to both speakers and hearers.

(2011:22) comments '[i]mpoliteness is very much in the eye of the beholder, that is, the mind's eye. It depends on how you perceive what is said and done and how that relates to the situation'. First-order evaluations of im/politeness are made without access to actual intention (although they are undoubtedly influenced by perceptions of intention and accountability) and nor can a researcher access speaker intention.³ Thus, employing this definition means that, in the following analysis, I treat an utterance as impolite if it has been evaluated by any participant (speaker, addressee or observer) as impolite. As the definition also makes clear, mock politeness is here being constructed as a second-order concept, in line with Leech's (1983, 2014) theorisation, and, following Watts et al. (1992:4) stricture that second order concepts should not use first-order labels (*mock politeness* or derivations thereof were not found in the corpus analysed here).⁴

1.3. Drawing on analysis of mock impoliteness within an im/politeness frame

In contrast with the relative neglect of mock politeness, *mock impoliteness*, drawing on the second of Leech's principles mentioned above, has received more extensive attention and theorisation in recent years (cf. Bousfield, 2007; Haugh, 2010, 2014a,b; Haugh and Bousfield, 2012), perhaps reflecting the way in which politeness has generally attracted more attention than impoliteness (as described Locher and Bousfield, 2008, for example). In many ways, mock impoliteness has been seen as a counterpart to mock politeness, described as its 'unmistakeable flipside' (Bousfield, 2008:136), and it is for this reason that research in this area may be relevant for the study of mock politeness.⁵ Of particular relevance is Haugh and Bousfield's (2012:1103) position of treating 'mock impoliteness and banter as linked, but discrete concepts. The former constitutes an evaluation while the latter constitutes an action'. A mirrored process needs to be performed in the detachment of sarcasm or irony and mock politeness. Research has shown that sarcasm may be used as either mock politeness or as mock impoliteness (discussed as *mock mock politeness* in Bousfield, 2008) as, for instance, in Brown's (2013) analysis of sarcastic honorifics in Korean. With irony, the argument is even stronger because the existence of ironic compliments (also labelled as *asteism*, Attardo, 2000a; *ironic praise*, Colston and Gibbs, 2007; *ironic compliments*, Pexman and Olineck, 2002; *positively evaluative irony*, Dynel, 2013; *positive irony*, Alba-Juez and Attardo, 2014) is well-documented in the literature.⁶ Thus, we can say that mock impoliteness may be performed using a number of behaviours which may include sarcasm and irony, but also features such as *and-mockery* (Haiman, 1998; Iwata, 2015) and, as discussed in the following section, *patronising*.

1.4. Mock politeness outside im/politeness studies

There is an extensive large body of research into irony and sarcasm (e.g. see Gibbs and Colston, 2007 for an overview) which overlaps with mock politeness because sarcasm is one of the frequent realisations of mock politeness, as discussed above. However, despite the proliferation of research in this area, there is surprisingly little agreement over what the terms irony and sarcasm may include in academic discussions. Indeed, as Attardo (2000a:795) states, '[t]here is no consensus on whether irony and sarcasm are essentially the same thing [...] or if they differ significantly' which represents a substantial challenge to research because it is not easy to distinguish exactly what construct a given paper is reporting on. Furthermore, this ambiguity between irony and sarcasm largely comes from a lack of clarity regarding first and second status of the discussions, for instance Attardo explains elsewhere that the two cannot be distinguished because they are 'folk concepts' (2013:40). This 'slippage' between first and second order status makes the interrogation of the relationship particularly salient.

Although this previous work has mainly occurred within irony studies and psychology, it is relatively well-known amongst im/politeness scholars, unlike the work on patronising and condescending behaviours from social psychology which has been less frequently drawn on in im/politeness studies. Furthermore, where patronising or condescending behaviours have been addressed within impoliteness studies, they have not been linked to im/politeness mismatch. In this section, I briefly survey the previous research and explain why I feel *patronising* and *condescending* are relevant to investigations of mock politeness.

Starting with work within the im/politeness field, in Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness framework, shown above, the second of the negative impoliteness output strategies is as follows:

Condescend, scorn or ridicule – emphasize your relative power. Be contemptuous.
Do not treat the other seriously. Belittle the other (e.g. use diminutives).

Culpeper (1996:358)

³ It is, of course, possible to identify negotiation of intention but that would be a highly specific sub-section of the data.

⁴ Although it may prove that the first-order understanding of 'mock' leads to some difficulty with the second-order term 'mock politeness'.

⁵ Highlighting the problem with second-order labels, the model of irony presented in Gibbs (2000) considers banter to be a sub-type of irony.

⁶ Although they are less frequent than ironic insults according to Gibbs (2000) study of conversation, following what Wilson (2013) discusses as the *normative bias*.

This category is subsequently applied in [Garcés-Conejos Blitvich \(2010b\)](#) and [Blas-Arroyo \(2013\)](#) *inter alia*, where it is found to be one of the frequent impoliteness output strategies in the contexts of English language comments youtube videos and Spanish language reality TV shows.

More recently, [Culpeper's \(2011\)](#) first-order investigation of metalinguistic labels for reported impoliteness events yielded PATRONISING as a dominant domain. First-order lexical items which were subsumed into this domain included: *patronising/patronised, arrogant, condescending, put down, snobby, belittling, disrespectful, abuse of power, bossy, authoritarian, superiority, showing off, authority, take the piss* ([Culpeper, 2011:94](#)). As he notes, this category has received little attention within impoliteness studies, and yet the behaviour holds great impact. He goes on to explain this, observing that '[b]eing patronised involves a kind of "double whammy": your face is devalued in some way, but it is also devalued in a particular relational context that does not licence the "patroniser" to do so' (2011:95), the latter point making clear that it involves some kind of mismatch, relating in particular to sociality rights.

These discussions of patronising or condescending behaviour within impoliteness studies make clear why they are important to the realisation of impoliteness but, in order to see evidence of im/politeness *mismatch* in their structures, research from social psychology studies is particularly insightful. Research in this area has predominately been carried out with reference to intergenerational interactions (e.g. [Ytsma and Giles, 1997](#); [Giles et al., 1993](#); [Hegeman et al., 2012](#)) and gender relations (e.g. [Vescio et al., 2005](#); [Gervais and Vescio, 2012](#)), in particular so-called 'benevolent sexism' ([Glick and Fiske, 1997](#)). In these conceptualisations, im/politeness mismatch is given a central role because both areas assume that the patronising speaker is under-estimating the competence of the hearer. Thus, in terms of politeness, we might expect it to correspond to an attack on sociality rights, relating to expectations of fair treatment and respect.

However, where research in this area diverges from that into second-order sarcasm, for instance, regards the intentionality of the speaker because the assumption is often that the mismatch is a result of social stereotypes rather than the accomplishment of local, interpersonal impoliteness goals. For instance, according to [Hummert and Ryan \(2001:263\)](#), in the context of intergenerational interactions, 'communicators do not appear to have the production of patronising communication as their goal [...] [i]ronically, those who give patronising messages may be trying to be effective communicators'. Similarly, the reception of behaviour open to interpretations of being patronising has not been found to be universally negative, for instance [Ytsma and Giles \(1997:259\)](#) report that behaviour labelled by others as *patronising* or *condescending* may be viewed as *helpful* or *comforting* by more frail or dependent participants.⁷ Although a speaker may not have intended to offend, if a recipient perceived an im/politeness mismatch and is offended, it still fits within the definition of mock politeness provided in section 1.2.

2. Methodological framework and corpus description

In this section, I briefly describe the conceptual framework for this project, explaining how the first-order metalanguage approach was put into practice and how the mock polite behaviours were identified and annotated.

2.1. Operationalising a first-order, metalanguage approach

As discussed in section 1.1, 'the understandings of participants themselves (so-called "first order" understandings) rather than solely the interpretations of (im)politeness theorists (so-called "second order" understandings) have been increasingly regarded as the appropriate starting point for any analysis of (im)politeness' ([Mitchell and Haugh, 2015:208](#)). However, operationalising a first-order approach is not without challenges: one difficulty is keeping these two orders separate (as noted in [Eelen, 2001](#); [Haugh, 2007, 2012](#); [Terkourafi, 2011](#)) and how, in practice, the first/second order distinction is operationalised in the analytic procedures. In this study, 'mock politeness' is a second-order concept which is investigated through a first-order metalanguage approach.

The metalanguage approach is employed as one way of addressing lay understandings of politeness and face and avoiding the circularity described in [Partington \(2007\)](#). According to [Jaworski et al. \(2004\)](#), the power of the metalanguage approach is that

It is in the 'interplay' between usage and social *evaluation* that much of the social "work" of language – including pressures towards social integration and division, and the policing of social boundaries generally – is done. [...] In another regard, speakers and writers make active and local use of the metalinguistic function of language in goal-oriented ways in communicative acts and events themselves

[Jaworski et al. \(2004:3, my italics\)](#)

⁷ A key point here, of course, is that those who are favourably evaluating the behaviour as *comforting* and those who are labelling it as *patronising* are different participants.

Thus, the analysis of metalanguage can tap into the ideological assumptions that are being enacted. This means that for many researchers (for instance, [Culpeper, 2009](#); [Jucker et al., 2012](#); [Waters, 2012](#)) analysing metalanguage allows the researcher to investigate first-order understandings and address the problems raised by an exclusively second-order analysis, such as the potential anglo-dominance of theoretical models. From a practical perspective, the analysis of metalanguage can also offer a 'short-cut', indicating that a certain kind of facework has indeed occurred ([Locher, 2011:203](#)). In this study, the interactions for analysis were identified by metapragmatic comments, such as *sarcastic* and *passive aggressive*, and the im/politeness understandings of those behaviours were interpreted based on how the incidents were discussed. Thus, in [Eelen's \(2001\)](#) terms, the analysis primarily makes use of classificatory and metapragmatic aspects of first-order im/politeness.

2.2. The model of face

For the purposes of this study, I adopt [Spencer-Oatey's \(2000, 2002, 2008\)](#) analytic frame for face. This model has been chosen for three main reasons: first, because it breaks the concept of face into more detail than other models, which has practical advantages at the analytic stage. Second, because it was developed in order to discuss intercultural communication and therefore is potentially better suited for a cross-cultural analysis (e.g. as used in [García, 2010](#)) which was important for the wider project ([Taylor, 2015](#)) from which this paper draws. Third, because it has been successfully applied to the analysis of impoliteness (e.g. [Culpeper et al., 2010](#); [Cashman, 2006, 2008](#)). In this frame, face is conceived following [Goffman \(1967\)](#) as 'the positive social value the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact' (1967:5). In contrast, sociality rights are concerned with an individual's expectations and entitlements regarding their interactions with others ([Spencer-Oatey, 2008:13](#)) and, as such, broadly correspond with Brown and Levinson's concept of negative face. Given that I am interested in describing the structures of mock politeness in this paper, I will primarily be discussing how participants attack face and infringe upon sociality rights and thus perform impoliteness, although that is not to deny the role of self face-enhancement and face-saving is also important in understanding why a participant chooses to perform mock politeness.⁸

2.3. The corpus

According to [Romero-Trillo \(2008:1\)](#), 'pragmatics and corpus linguistics have not only helped each other in a relationship of mutualism, but, they have also made common cause against the voices that have derided and underestimated the utility of working with real data to elucidate the patterns of language use'. They are, therefore, a combination that is ideally suited to an empiricist approach to linguistics. In this study, im/politeness theory and corpus linguistics play complementary roles, essentially, to adapt [Sinclair's \(2007\)](#) metaphor, they give the study head (theory) and legs (data).

2.3.1. The data sources

The data used in this study come from an online forum, this kind of interaction was chosen because it allows access to 'everyday' or 'conversational' comments on mock politeness, while retaining much of the situational context. The forum is from the website mumsnet.com, and as the name suggests, is mainly populated by people presenting as women. It is a highly active site, as of January 2015 mumsnet claims to have over 70 million page views and over 14 million visits per month ([Mumsnet, 2015](#)). It should be recognised that the use of a single forum places restriction on potential generalisations because it can only represent a small sub-culture, but the analysis represents a starting point in developing a second-order understanding of mock politeness which is founded on first-order use.

2.3.2. Compilation and annotation of the corpora

The corpus was compiled using the free software BootCat ([Baroni and Bernardini, 2004](#)), which gathers text from the web using seeds (search words). In this case, the search terms which were used were potential candidates for discussing mock politeness, which had been identified by using terms discussed in the relevant literature and potential synonyms (as retrieved through the Sketch Engine distributional thesaurus ([Rychly and Kilgarriff, 2007](#))).⁹ Using this method of compilation a corpus of approximately 61 million tokens was created.

⁸ The term *attack* rather than *threaten* is preferred, following [Culpeper \(2011\)](#) because, as he states, '[t]he semantics of 'threat' herald future damage' (2011:118) but in most cases I will be discussing actual past/present damage.

⁹ The full set is shown in [Appendix A](#).

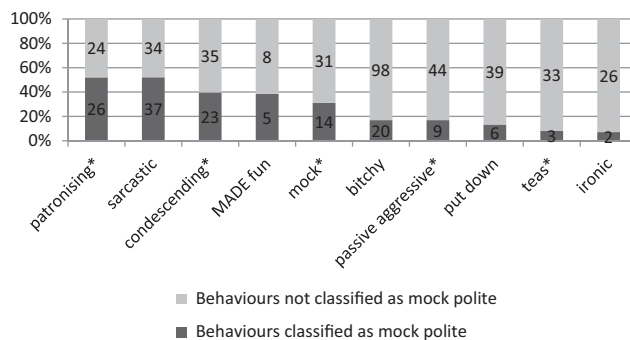


Fig. 1. Percentage of behaviours which performed mock politeness.

The chart only displays items with a minimum number of 10 behaviours, the raw numbers are displayed on the bars.

Additional items which were examined were: (a) *biting*, *cutting* and *caustic*, which are not reported because there were fewer than ten retrievable behaviours labelled with these items, and (b) MIMIC, PARODY and CATTY which are not reported because there were no instance of mock politeness in the behaviours which they described.

In the first annotation phase, each potential reference to mock politeness was identified and the 2464 metapragmatic labels were annotated according to a range of features relating to participation role and evaluation. In the second phase, the expanded concordance lines were read in order to identify what event/behaviour had been evaluated using the metapragmatic comments and 581 events were retrieved.¹⁰ The events included both behaviours which occurred within the forum, and behaviours which the participants had experienced outside the forum. These events were then annotated for features relating to mismatch, im/politeness and the relationship between the person describing the behaviour and the performer.

3. The metalanguage of mock politeness

The first aspect I wish to address is what first-order terms are actually used to refer to mock politeness. For maximum transparency, an event or behaviour was labelled as mock polite if (a) it contained im/politeness mismatch and (b) it was evaluated in the forum discussions as impolite. Fig. 1 displays the frequency of mock polite behaviours in events labelled by different metapragmatic comments.¹¹

As can be seen, none of the labels consistently referred to mock polite behaviours. Even in the case of *sarcastic*, which is the lexical item which has most frequently been associated with second-order discussions of mock politeness, almost half the behaviours did not include any mock politeness, as in illustrated in (3). In (3), there is no evidence in the co-text that suggests the utterance *Get back on your tablets* could have had a polite interpretation, the use of the term by the forum poster simply does not coincide with the second-order understandings of sarcasm.

(3) Thread title: Advice please

Also constantly goading me about being on anti-depressants (not a major depression problem and dose relatively small) saying things like “Get back on your tablets” in a really **sarcastic** tone any time we disagree on something. I don’t understand why she is so hard on me.

The second significant point shown in Fig. 1 is that the metapragmatic comment which most frequently referred to mock polite behaviours was not *sarcastic*, but *patronising*, the use of which is illustrated in (4).

(4) Thread title: Heavy periods – Tranexamic Acid

i did the same as you. . . waking up in the middle of the night, heart racing, sweating, panicking that i was dying of some undiagnosed problem. . . ex called the doc out several times (really took its toll on relationship) and the doc **patronisingly** gave me diazepam and said “calm down. . . everything is fine., maybe we ned to review some anti depressants..grrrrr 🙄”.

¹⁰ Where the behaviours could not be retrieved this was generally because the behaviour was not specified e.g. ‘what I find very difficult about dh is his critical, negative, sarcastic and blaming nature’. In some other instances, it was because the preceding post had been deleted.

¹¹ It should be noted that I am not assuming that the following is an exhaustive list of all items which could refer to mock politeness, it is intended as a preliminary sample. Different communities of practice would almost certainly have additional/different terms for indicating mock polite behaviours and this is matter for future studies.

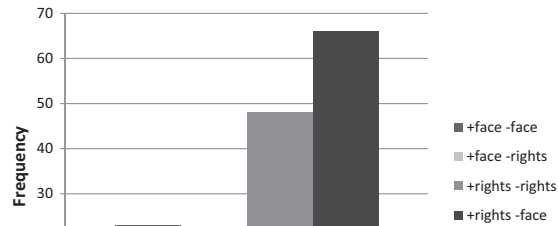


Fig. 2. Types of politeness mismatch in mock polite behaviours.

In (4), the doctor's utterance could have been interpreted as empathetic (paying attention to sociality rights) and performing supportive facework, but instead is interpreted by the addressee as an attack on their sociality rights by belittling the problem. The poster's unfavourable evaluation of the behaviour which they label as *patronising* is expressed in the angry face emoticon and paralinguistic *grrrrrr*.

The identification of the metapragmatic labels which may indicate mock politeness illustrates the difficulties of relying on a label such as *sarcastic*, which has a more limited first-order use and helps to show the overlap with first-order concepts of *patronising*. At a practical level, identifying terms which may indicate mock politeness can facilitate future work which aims to take a metalanguage approach.

4. The structures of mock politeness

In this section, two aspects of the structure of mock polite behaviours are presented: the type of im/politeness mismatch and the location of the mismatch.

4.1. Type of im/politeness mismatch

If we consider that mock politeness has been equated with second-order concepts of sarcasm (following Culpeper's 1996 early model) and irony (following Leech, 1983) and that, in their most prototypical form these are described in terms of propositional mismatch (e.g. Grice, 1975, and, in the neo-Gricean tradition, Dynel, 2013, 2014), then the expectation might be that politeness mismatch would most typically involve a direct reversal of politeness. However, this kind of matched reversal of face evaluation, where the same aspect of face (most likely quality face) is first flattered and then attacked, actually accounted for a small proportion of the observed mock polite behaviours, as will be shown. In total, four principal kinds of mismatch were identified, and these were:

- mismatch of favourable evaluation of face and attack on face
- mismatch of favourable evaluation of face and violation of sociality rights
- mismatch of upholding sociality rights and violation of sociality rights
- mismatch of upholding sociality rights and attack on face

It should be noted that, in many instances, the attack involved *both* a threat to face and sociality rights, but I have maintained the four categories based on the aspect which seemed to be the primary locus of attack.¹² Fig. 2 summarises the frequency of each mismatch type.

The first feature that we might note from Fig. 2 is that the most frequent mismatch does not involve simple reversal of the same aspect of politeness (e.g. flattering of quality face followed by attack on quality face), but involves ostensibly upholding sociality rights alongside/ followed by an attack on face. In fact 78% of occurrences ostensibly upheld sociality rights. In contrast, regarding the impolite move, face attack was more frequent than violation of sociality rights, accounting for 62% of occurrences.

¹² Occurrences which could not be classified were marked as unclear and have been omitted from the charts that follow (there were 21 such instances in total).

The stronger weighting towards initial or superficial upholding of sociality rights may be the result of the data in two ways. First, the analysis of naturally occurring data means that the mock polite behaviours occur within extended sequences and this kind of authentic data has been somewhat neglected in previous studies of irony and sarcasm (e.g. as noted in Partington, 2007; Nuolijarvi and Tiitula, 2011). Second, participation in an online forum involves entry to a discourse community and therefore concerns of sociality rights may be particularly salient (although not all the behaviours occur online).

What will be interesting to explore further in future work is how these different types of mismatch correlate to different contexts and the perceived weight of the offence and to what extent they consistently correlate with particular metapragmatic comments.

4.1.1. Mismatch of favourable evaluation of face and attack on face

This kind of mismatch is illustrated in (5), in which the speaker describes a past interaction, labelled as *bitchy*, in which a friend flatters her quality face by showing appreciation for her appearance (*those trousers are so much better for you*) while almost simultaneously attacking the same aspect of face through an unfavourable comparison with her usual appearance.

(5) Thread title: Are cropped trousers for short people really a no no

Poster C: Yes I have watched Trinny and Susanna and Gok and I know the rules. However I still have cropped trousers as part of my wardrobe and do wear them with heels and also with flat sandals.

However my new gay friend who is a lovely guy said to me this week when I was wearing ankle length trousers (which I actually don't like tbh) I do like bootflares though

ooh [NAME] those trousers are so much better for you than crops.

[...]

I've decided I don't really care that much, I will carry on wearing them and that my Gok friend was feeling a bit **bitchy** that day.

In line with the research discussed above, Alba-Juez and Attardo (2014) define sarcasm as *negative irony*, that is 'where an apparently positive comment expresses a negative criticism or judgement of a person, a thing or a situation' (2014:100). This definition effectively describes this first kind of politeness mismatch in which a favourable evaluation of face is mismatched with face attack, and this kind of mismatch appears closest to second-order descriptions of irony and/or sarcasm more generally. For instance, it could be explained with reference to Partington's (2007) model of irony as reversal of evaluation or to prototypical models of reversal propositional meaning or negation. However, as noted above, it was far from being the most frequent kind of mismatch, as shown in Fig. 2, which suggests a gap between second-order theory and first-order usage.

4.1.2. Mismatch of favourable evaluation of face and violation of sociality rights

In the second kind of mismatch, face is still the aspect which is apparently being flattered, but the impoliteness is oriented towards the target's sociality rights. As can be seen from (6) the speaker (a cat, as voiced by a forum poster), is ostensibly evaluated favourably in terms of its abilities, a key component of quality face, and it considers this a violation of its sociality rights:

(6) Thread title: Cat behaviour

Today I decapitated a mouse and dropped its headless body at their feet. I had hoped this would strike fear into their hearts, since it clearly demonstrates my capabilities. However, they merely made **condescending** comments about what a "good little hunter" I am. B*st@rds!

As seen in Fig. 2, this was the least frequent kind of mismatch.

4.1.3. Mismatch of upholding sociality rights and violation of sociality rights

The third category involved apparent attention to and attack of the same aspect, in this case some type of sociality rights. The most frequent kind of sociality rights to be upheld in the polite move was association, and often it related to the feature of 'involvement' because the attacks occurred within sequences of interaction and the attack often ostensibly appeared to be a preferred response within some adjacency pair.

This category is illustrated in (7), in which the *patronising* utterance, made by someone in a position of power, involves ostensibly upholding sociality rights (involvement and empathy) whilst also violating those sociality rights by not taking the problem seriously and respecting the target's concerns, and referring to the addressee as *mummy*.

(7) Thread title: Ascending testicles in my 6 1/2yr old

The following morning, a different urologist visited. and told us it's perfectly normal for this to be happening, and he was ordering an u/sound on bladder and kidneys to check for stones!!! When the ultrasound showed healthy bladder and kidneys (Duh!), he told me, rather **patronisingly**, "isn't that a relief, mummy?" and was quite happy to send us away. [...] So now I'm feeling that there is a problem and it's being ignored.

This was the most frequent mismatch type for behaviours labelled as TEASE and MOCK and was also frequent for behaviours labelled as *condescending*.

4.1.4. Mismatch of upholding sociality rights and attack on face

The fourth type of mismatch was the most frequent overall and involved ostensibly upholding sociality rights, as in the type above, but the attack then primarily focusses on some aspect of face, as shown in (8). In (8), the speaker responds to the forum poster who started the thread, voicing concerns regarding violation of her sociality rights, asking 'why so many mums harbour jealousy and blank you during school run?'. Poster G offers some possible reasons, thus completing the adjacency pair and showing involvement. However, the reasons that are offered attack the addressee's quality face and the poster goes on to offer unsolicited advice, which further violates sociality rights and attacks face. She then finishes with the use of a smiling emoticon, returning to the persona of one attending to sociality rights.

(8) Poster B: Thread title: why so many mums harbour jealousy and blank . . .

you during school run? my son is now seven, and not all, but so many of the mums just will not speak to me, and ive done no wrong and i am friendly and look normal enough.

this group are quite cliquish and gossipy, but it does hurt that they just blank me, and ive given up trying to make new friends – that clearly isnt what the school run is about, sadly.

my partner thinks its down to two things – one – they are just typical provincial women who dont want to take in 'outsiders' – and also that my son is very good looking and my partner thinks some mums are jealous. which if this is the case, that is just silly. [...]

Poster G: Perhaps they have picked up on the fact that you and your DH regard them as 'provincials'.

Never met a woman who blanked another mother out of jealousy of their child's attractiveness 😊

You sound like you are overthinking things a bit. Perhaps get a job, or a hobby. 😊

[...]

Poster B: [...] most women arent worth knowing. youre mostly a pack of backstabbing b*tches but i will take your advice – i wont let women like you get me down anymore.

[...] ladies, if you want to bully other women who just come on here for support, youre a sad, fat lot, and for those who cast a stone my way, you can f*ck rite off.

for those who had the decency to be supportive, thank you. x

Poster G: <gasp> I just came on to apologise for my earlier **bitchy** comment, but now feel VINDICATED

This was the most frequent type of mismatch for behaviours labelled with the items BITCHY, *patronising*, *sarcastic*, PUT DOWN, and *passive aggressive*. For behaviours labelled as *condescending*, the third and fourth types were equally frequent. It is particularly interesting to note the shared significance of this type of mismatch for the metalinguistic labels *patronising*, *sarcastic* and *condescending*, given the way in which the second-order concepts have been treated separately in im/politeness literature to date.

4.2. Location of im/politeness mismatch

As discussed above, mismatch was considered to be *internal* when 'the context projected by a part of the behaviour mismatches that projected by another part' (Culpeper, 2011:155), illustrated in example (9).

(9) Thread title: E petition gluten free prescriptions

Poster S: [Name]. . . you really do not know what you are talking about. Lucky you.

Poster D: [Name]- you have no idea what I do and don't know. **Patronising** to assume you know a thing about me or my situation.

In (9) we can see that the Poster S primarily attacks Poster D's quality face in the first part by asserting her lack of competence, and this too violates her sociality rights by questioning her right to participate in the discussion. In the second part, *lucky you*, the speaker ostensibly shows some empathy and interest in the addressee's state.

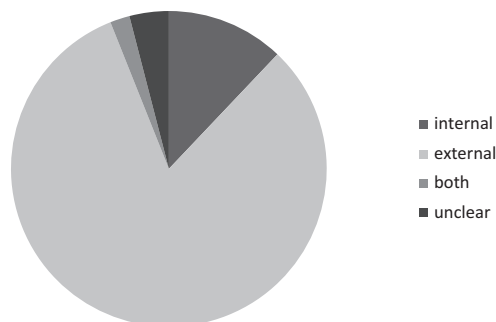


Fig. 3. Location of mismatch in mock polite behaviours.

Conversely, mismatch was considered to be *external* when ‘the context projected by a behaviour mismatches the context of use’ (Culpeper, 2011:155), as shown in (10). Although, as noted above, these are not absolute classifications, but positions on a continuum of mock polite structures.

(10) Thread title: Do you have a Grand, Long Term Financial Plan? Or are you blowing in the wind, too?!
Blimey, that’s organised and impressive, seriously. I’m not **mocking**- it shows forethought and planning!

As can be seen, in (10), there are no verbal, oral or visual elements (Culpeper, 2011:169) which indicate mismatch. However, we see the poster feels the need to clarify his/her intentions by adding *I am not mocking*, because she was concerned that the display of attention towards quality face could be interpreted as insincere in the context.

Fig. 3 summarises the results of this phase of the analysis, showing the distribution of mismatch structures.

As Fig. 3 shows, the instances of internal mismatch were much lower than the occurrences making use of external mismatch. However, the fact that such usages do occur shows how the reality of mock politeness differs from the dominant second-order focus on external mismatch.

Regarding the order of the im/polite components in the verbal formula mismatches, in the majority of cases the speaker moved from apparent politeness to impoliteness, as anticipated by Leech (2014). Thus the mismatch follows a garden-path mechanism as discussed with reference to one-liners in Dynel (2009), and this is illustrated in (11).

(11) Thread title: NCT group problems

The best was when I got married, the comments ranged from “well your dress was nice considering it was from the high street”, to “well that restaurant is ok for you but it’s not Michelin starred is it. I wouldn’t eat there” and “your flowers were good considering you did them yourself”. At the time I just dismissed them but as time has gone on there have been so many **bitchy** comments that I could write a book!

In such instances, the reversal of evaluation (cf. Partington, 2007) means that the target and hearer is forced to re-process the initial politeness in light of the subsequent impoliteness, thus increasing the cognitive load. In such instances, it may be hypothesised that the impoliteness will have greater impact because of this investment. If the reward for such processing in humour is pleasurable, in this case it is the opposite. In this, the mechanism appears similar to that hypothesised for external mismatch which also requires multiple processing and the extra investment required helps to answer the question of why a speaker chooses mock politeness rather than direct face attack (as asked in Leech, 2014:234).

However, in approximately a quarter of occurrences the mismatch involved a shift from expressing impoliteness to politeness, as shown in (12).

(12) Thread title: Johann-Hari-caught-red-handed-making-up-the-source-of-quotes-in-interviews

Poster C: [NAME]. Thankyou for exposing another lying leftie! The man is an idiot. When I was at University, plagiarism count get you kicked out of Uni. Why does he say he interviewed someone when he has not. What a strange man! 🤔

Poster S: [...] “When I was at University, plagiarism count get you kicked out of Uni.”

Well done. A malapropism, spelling error and prolixity, and all in one short sentence. The sentence immediately following your calling an Orwell Prize winner with a double First from Cambridge an idiot. I do not know which University had the pleasure of educating you, but on the evidence of the post you made here, (i) you should seek a refund, and (ii) I do know that it was not Cambridge.

Poster F. [NAME] People who go to University, can still be idiots as we see by the above post, and yours! 🤪 [up own arse comes to mind! 😊 [...]]

Poster S. [NAME], (may I call you that?) If you want to do **passive-aggressive**, 😊 😊 works much better than 🤪 🤪
HTH 😊

In (12) we see that the Poster F is responding to a previous utterance by Poster S which criticised another forum member and in this response s/he combines the face attack of insinuating that the hearer is an *idiot* together with a grinning/wide smile emoticon. This is evaluated as *passive aggressive* by the target, Poster S, who also performs mock politeness in the response turn in the form of an ostensibly polite move offering advice on emoticon choice. Attardo (2001) hypothesises an ‘ironical mode adoption’, but the data here suggests a more general ‘mock politeness mode adoption’. The target of an attack does not just counter with attack, but with the same form of impoliteness. This constitutes an area for further investigation as current findings are conflictive with Eisterhold et al. (2006) finding that this is an infrequent response to irony, in contrast to Gibbs (2000) and Norrick (1993).

In the impolite to polite mismatch it appears unlikely that the clash will lead to the kind of cognitive ‘oscillation’ between possible interpretations hypothesised for humour (Koestler, 1964). Instead, it would appear that the addition of the insincere politeness adds to the weight of the impoliteness by compounding the attack, frequently adding a violation of sociality rights (expectations to be treated with respect). Thus, we may hypothesise that the order of the mismatched elements has a different processing and, perhaps, a different weightiness for the target, which constitutes an avenue for future research.

In terms of how the metapragmatic labels relate to the location of mismatch, the label which most frequently indicated internal mismatch was BITCHY and in these instances the mismatch was always verbal (i.e. not multimodal). In this sense, BITCHY behaviours are more overt and therefore less deniable than those which rely on tone for internal mismatch, or on context for an impolite interpretation. However, as the total numbers are relatively low, more research is required in this area to connect metalinguistic labels with mismatch structures.

5. Conclusions

In this paper I have presented an overview of the current status of mock politeness, surveying previous research, presenting the first-order metalinguistic labels which are used to discuss mock politeness in this dataset, and describing the structures of mock polite utterances. I have argued for the consideration of second-order research into patronising behaviours within the work on mock politeness, reflecting the way that work on sarcasm is currently consulted. The first-order data supports this viewpoint and shows that behaviours labelled by participants as *sarcastic*, *patronising* and *condescending* shared the most frequent kind of im/politeness mismatch (from ostensibly upholding sociality rights to attack on face). The findings and discussion also lend weight to the argument for dissociating mock politeness and sarcasm, and viewing the latter as one possible realisation of the former, as is the case with mock impoliteness and banter. More generally, the analysis has demonstrated that both type of mismatch and location of mismatch in mock polite behaviours are more varied than anticipated from previous research. With reference to location, I have also argued for the inclusion of internal mismatch within the category of mock politeness, following Leech (2014) because it is similarly made up of ostensible attention to face/sociality rights and attack on face/sociality rights. The identification of this kind of mock politeness also represents an argument against subsuming mock politeness within a category of off-record impoliteness.

As this paper is one of the first to explicitly address mock politeness, it is hoped that it will stimulate further research and the relative novelty of the subject matter means that it raises as many questions as it provides answers. Of particular interest is the potential correlation of type, location and order of im/politeness mismatch and perceived offensiveness. The question raised in Leech (2014) of why people choose mock politeness is especially salient for future research, and it has also been beyond the scope of this study to report on how people react to mock politeness, other than to note a general tendency towards a kind of mock politeness mode adoption. Furthermore, as this study is based on just one text type and two languages, further work will be needed to compare findings in different contexts, including both activity types, cultures and languages.

Appendix A. Search terms potentially signalling discussion of mock politeness

impolite, politeness, politely, polite, politest, politer, rude, ruder, rudest, rudeness, rudely, kind, kindness, friendly, friendliness, ironic, ironical, ironically, irony, sarcasm, sarcastic, sarcastically, sarky, laugh at, laughed at, laughing at, laughs at, mimic, mimicked, mimicking, mimicry, mimics, mock, mocked, mockers, mockery, mocking, mockingly, mocks, parodied, parodies, parody, parodying, tease, teased, teaser, teases, teasing, bitch, bitched, bitchfest, bitchier, bitchiest, bitchiness, bitching, bitchy, catty, condescending, condescendingly, passive aggressive, passive aggressive, passive

aggressively, passive aggressive, patronise, patronised, patronises, patronising, put down, put downs, biting, cutting, caustic

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