

Mock politeness and culture: Perceptions and practice in UK and Italian data

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Abstract

This paper investigates the extent to which perceptions of cultural variation correspond to actual practice with reference to (national) cultures in Britain and Italy. More specifically, the aspect of im/politeness which is addressed is mock politeness, a subset of implicational impoliteness (Culpeper 2011) which is triggered by an im/politeness mismatch.

In the first phase of the study, two sets of comparable corpora are employed to investigate perceptions of mock politeness (using search terms such as *sarcastic* and *patronising*) in relation to cultural identities. The first pair of corpora is composed of national newspapers in England and Italy, collected in 2014, and the second set are web corpora (ItTenTen and EnTenTen12, see Jakubíček et al. 2013). What emerges from this stage is a strong tendency for both the English and Italian corpora to associate (potential) mock polite behaviours such as being *ironic* with a British cultural identity.

In the second stage of the study, I use a corpus of conversational data from British English and Italian online discussion forums, in which mock polite behaviours have been identified and annotated, in order to investigate whether there is any evidence for the cultural assumptions found in the first phase. As will be shown, the analysis reveals both variation in cultural practice and a significant gap between perceptions and practice.

In describing and identifying this gap between perceptions and practice, I show both how (anglocentric) academic description has underestimated cultural variation, and, in contrast, how cultural variation is over-estimated in lay description.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I investigate to what extent perceptions of cultural variation/difference in the performance of im/politeness correspond to actual practice with reference to (national) cultures in Britain and Italy. More specifically, the aspect of im/politeness in which I am interested is mock politeness, a subset of implicational impoliteness which is defined as ‘an impoliteness understanding that does not match the surface form or semantics of the utterance or the symbolic meaning of the behaviour’ (Culpeper 2011a: 17). In the case of mock politeness, as discussed below, the mismatch is one of is triggered by the existence of incompatible polite and impolite moves within the same utterance. One of the starting points for this investigation was the observation of an intrinsic contradiction in academic work which discussed mock politeness under the labels of ‘irony’ and ‘sarcasm’: first, the assumption that these are universal behaviours, and second, the assumption that these are culture-specific behaviours. In this introductory section, I briefly define mock politeness and describe these two incompatible assumptions in more detail.

1.1 Introducing mock politeness

To date, most research into the phenomenon of mock politeness has been carried out under the headings of ‘irony’ and ‘sarcasm’ although, as argued elsewhere (e.g. Taylor 2015, Dynel 2016), these are overlapping but clearly distinct concepts. The blurring of boundaries between these concepts arises with the first significant theorisation of mock politeness within a frame of im/politeness in which Leech (1983: 144) describes ‘irony’ as ‘an apparently friendly way of being offensive (mock-politeness)’. This conceptualisation of mock

politeness was integrated and applied in Culpeper's (1996) model of impoliteness and subsequent developments of this (Culpeper et al. 2003; Culpeper 2005), although the term 'sarcasm' preferred in these later studies. Kaul de Marlangeon & Alba-Juez (2012, based on Kaul de Marlangeon 2008) also account for mock politeness in their typology of impoliteness, with a category of 'formally polite acts with an impolite purpose'. Similarly, they associate this group with the rhetorical device of irony, stating that:

[w]ithin this type, politeness forms are paradoxically used as a means to aim at impoliteness. The context of the situation plays a crucial part in the successful achievement of this aim, for the formally polite language of S is to be interpreted as *an ironic attack* towards H (or a third party).

Kaul de Marlangeon & Alba-Juez (2012: 82, italics added)

In more recent work, Leech (2014) reasserts the importance of indirectness in his definition of what he now terms 'sarcasm or conversational irony', and describes the communication of mock politeness as follows:

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.

Leech (2014: 233, italics added)

However, this definition cannot fully account for a sub-category of mock politeness, what Leech (2014) terms *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). Although he recognises this more overt form, he does not resolve the (acknowledged) discrepancy between a definition that relies on covert and deniable expressions of impoliteness and the on-record (i.e. not plausibly deniable) nature of this particular kind of mock politeness.

In order to try and encompass the full range of mock polite behaviours in this study, the definition used here is that:

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

This then accounts for both kinds of mock politeness that Leech (2014) was addressing, what Taylor (2012) termed *co-textual* and *contextual* mismatch and what Culpeper (2011a) identifies as two types of convention-driven implicational impoliteness:

- (1) Internal: the context projected by part of a behaviour mismatches that projected by another part;
- (2) External: the context projected by a behaviour mismatches the context of use.

Culpeper (2011a: 155)

To illustrate this, the examples provided in Figure 1 (taken from the mumsnet corpus used in this paper), are distributed along a sort of cline of ‘on-recordness’. Each example was identified by a participant in the forum as impolite, and in each case, we have an im/politeness mismatch. While those on the left rely more on context for identification of the impolite move, those on the right are more overt in the mismatch production.

FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE

Starting with the two examples in the upper half of the figure, on the left-hand side, the expression of gratitude has no multimodal or textual markers that indicate insincerity, the im/politeness mismatch, for the participant who identified this as *sarcastic*, lies entirely in the context. In contrast, on the right-hand side, the *put down*, as it was described in the surrounding text, adapts a garden-path structure (Leech 2014: 238) moving from ostensible politeness to insult and this is expressed on-record in the co-text.¹ In Culpeper's (2011a) model, this is a sub-type of internal mismatch labelled as 'verbal formula mismatch'. We may consider that these two examples in the upper part of the figure represent opposing points on a continuum of mock politeness, from a potentially deniable utterance based on contextual im/politeness mismatch to an on-record utterance based on co-textual im/politeness 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 2000, discussed as 'irony markers'). Some examples from the corpus which seem to fall into this category are shown in the lower part of Figure 1. The item towards the left-hand side may be seen to make use of internal mismatch, although only if the hearer interprets *dear* as a conventionalised impoliteness marker within that context. The instance in the centre relies on the tone to indicate mismatch, and as such, in Culpeper's model would be categorised as another sub-category of internal mismatch, that is 'multimodal mismatch' in which verbal, oral and visual elements may clash. Finally, in the

¹ For more on garden-path structures in this sense see, inter alia, Mey (1991) and Dynel (2009) or Attardo (2001) on logical mechanisms of irony.

bottom-right example, the mismatch is initially external, drawing on the context, but then the final, *written*, reference to *sarcastic voice* places the impoliteness on-record.

Thus we can see that the definition used here, that ‘mock politeness occurs when there is an im/politeness mismatch leading to an implicature of impoliteness’, allows for the full spectrum of mock polite behaviours to be considered. Furthermore, this definition makes it clear mock politeness falls within the category of *implicational impoliteness* (Culpeper 2011a) and crucial components are the presence of *mismatch* (there are polite and impolite moves in the same utterance) and an evaluation of *impoliteness* (in this paper, this is always an evaluation which was made by a participant).

In previous research into the metalanguage of mock politeness (Taylor 2016), I found that the following metapragmatic labels were used to describe mock polite behaviours (according to the definition presented above). None of these labels exclusively indicated mock polite behaviours, and so they are presented in order of the percentage of behaviours which they described that were mock polite: *patronising**, *sarcastic*, *biting*, *condescending*, *cutting*, *caustic*, MAKE FUN, MOCK, BITCHY, TEASE, *ironic*, *passive aggressive*, *put down*, *overly polite*, in an English forum, and *paternalis** ‘*paternalistic/patronising*’, *sadis** ‘*sadism/sadistic*’, PRENDERE IN GIRO ‘*MAKE fun*’, SARCASTICO ‘*sarcastic*’, *viperis** ‘*viper*’, SUBDOLO ‘*underhand*’, DERIDERE ‘*LAUGH AT*’, BEFFARE ‘*MOCK*’ and IRONICO ‘*ironic*’ in an Italian forum.²³ Thus, in Section 4, it should be noted that the mock polite behaviours could have been described using any of these terms.

1.2 Assumptions of universality and cultural stereotypes

² The translations given in brackets are not intended as functional translation equivalents which is a complex area. They are the first item given in the *Oxford Paravia Bilingual Dictionary*.

³ The asterisk is conventionally used to indicate that all possible endings were captured.

In this section, I will refer mainly to work on irony and sarcasm. This is not to suggest that these are either the same as one another, nor that they can be equalled with mock politeness. It is a simple recognition of the fact that there is overlap between the three in terms of academic theorisation and that most previous description of mock politeness has fallen under these headings.

The first, and most pervasive, embedded assumption is that irony and sarcasm are universal human behaviours and that analysis of behaviours performed in one language (usually English) has validity for all language. Some even go so far as to assume that the metalanguage for discussing irony in one language (usually English) will apply to others too, as for instance when Utsumi (2000) states that:

Verbal irony is fundamentally implicit, not explicitly expressed. As Haverkate (1990, p. 79) pointed out, verbal irony cannot be expressed by referential expressions like ‘I ironically inform you that...’ or ‘It is ironic that...’, and it may be empirically inferred from the fact that there does not exist a verb like ‘ironize’

Utsumi (2000: 1778)

The initial reference to ‘verbal irony’, rather than, for instance, ‘verbal irony in English’, indicates the assumption that this is discussion of irony as a universal language feature. Yet, the following assertion that there is no verb like ‘ironize’ brings us sharply back into a more restrictive English-speaking domain. There is certainly a verb for ‘ironise/ironize’ in Italian (‘ironizzare’) and presumably many other languages.⁴ In fact, the rise of hashtags on Twitter such as *#ironic* also indicate that the wider point that irony is not expressed by referential

⁴ Including, arguably English. It is listed in the OED with a first attested use dating back to 1638.

expressions was also culture-dependent in the sense that it does not account for many people's experience of contemporary culture. The result of such anglocentricity is that the potential for describing and theorising mock politeness is greatly reduced. Furthermore, when empirical data has been included, as Rockwell & Theriot (2001: 46) note, 'most studies of irony and sarcasm have been conducted on American, English-speaking subjects. Therefore, it is not known if individuals from other cultures will express sarcasm in the same manner or with the same frequency as English speakers'. Regarding the potential for cultural differences, Haiman (1998) goes as far as to suggest that sarcasm does not exist in some cultures, citing the example of the Hua, a group of New Guinea Highlanders. If it should transpire that the use and performance of irony and/or sarcasm is culturally specific, and that the second-order theorisation is built upon an anglocentric model then this has significant ramifications for the generalisations that have been drawn about the feature.

The second issue relates to the association of particular forms of im/politeness with national identities in what looks like cultural stereotyping. If we take the example of the popular *Lonely Planet* guidebook, the English language version tells the reader that '[h]eavily ironic, sharp and self-deprecating, the English sense of humour sails over the heads of many visitors, but until you get a handle on the English habit of "taking the mickey", you'll be missing a crucial key for understanding what makes this peculiar little country tick' (Else 2008: 50-51), and the same information is repeated in the Italian translation (Else 2009: 48). Nothing similar appears in the *Lonely Planet* guide to Italy, here the stereotypes include the assertion that 'Italy is no place for an introvert' (Else 2008: 60). Fox's popular anthropological guide, *Watching the English* similarly asserts the importance of irony for English interactions, claiming that 'we are accustomed to not saying what we mean: *irony*, self-deprecation, understatement, obliqueness, ambiguity and polite pretence are all deeply ingrained, part of being English' (2005: 363, my italics) and 'virtually all English conversations and social

interactions involve at least some degree of banter, teasing, *irony*, wit, *mockery*, wordplay, satire, understatement, humorous self-deprecation, *sarcasm*, pomposity-pricking or just silliness' (2005: 402, my italics), as if this were unique to being English. In contrast, the only reference to irony in Severgnini's *La Bella Figura: An insider's guide to the Italian mind*, is that 'we consider irony to be a form of detachment and silently disapprove' (2007: 71). Thus there seems to be some kind of consensus about the cultural specificity of irony at least in this kind of lay discussion. Interestingly, Barbe (1995: 185) suggests that Germans consider their irony to be more like sarcasm than that produced by speakers from the USA. However, her empirical analysis of German data found that irony was used for face-saving purposes and therefore she hypothesises that the assumptions were driven by more general (self) stereotypes about German behaviour.

What is even more striking is that these kinds of stereotypes also seep into academic discussion. To take just two recent examples referring to mock politeness, Ajtony's (2013: 10) analysis of stereotypes in the UK television show *Downton Abbey* tells us that 'another stereotypical English trait of some of the characters is their humour (English humour!) blended with irony', but there is no evidence for the assertion that such behaviour is typically English, or specification about what constitutes 'English humour'. Similarly, Maynard & Greenwood (2014: 4328) tell us that 'sarcasm occurs frequently in user-generated content such as blogs, forums and microposts, especially in English' and 'while not restricted to English, sarcasm is an inherent part of British culture', but, once again, this is not an outcome of the analysis, but an *a priori* assumption. Furthermore, this stereotype is not only found in academic work published in English, for instance Almansi (1984) discussed irony in terms of being 'tipicamente inglese' "*typically English*" both currently and historically, noting how the English language has been 'abituata da secoli al contatto/uso di questo tropo'

“*accustomed for centuries to contact with and use of this trope*” (reported in Polesana 2005: 62).

1.3 Research aims

As shown in the discussion above, there is a conflict between the assumptions embedded in the stereotype of certain types of mock politeness as peculiarly English or British and a) the lack of empirical evidence and b) assumptions made by academics analysing (English) data in order to generalise to language performance. Thus, the principle aim of this paper is to observe whether participants from two national cultures perceive mock politeness to be associated with any particular cultures (Section 3), and then to analyse how mock politeness is performed in two forums (one mainly British and one Italian) in order to investigate what similarities and differences are present in these behaviours (Section 4).

2. Conceptual and methodological frameworks

2.1 Culture and anglocentrism

The analysis of culture within im/politeness research has a somewhat troubled record. On the one hand, researchers have been keen to challenge the subtitle of Brown and Levinson’s seminal text (*Some Universals in Language Usage*) by examining different cultures, and yet on the other, by doing so, they have left themselves open to critiques of replicating similarly blunt or biased descriptions. The first reason why this may occur is the because of a tendency to operationalise culture along predominantly national lines. This is the approach taken in this paper because I aim to investigate the claims made about national cultures, but that is not to assert that national culture is likely to be the most important variable in mock politeness use

in any given context.⁵ A whole range of other socio-cultural features are likely to influence language behaviours as discussed so extensively within sociolinguistics more generally. Indeed, this has been shown with reference to sarcasm in Dress et al. (2008) who compare self-assessed and elicited use of sarcasm in students in New York and Tennessee in order to investigate regional variations.

In many instances, the issues of false claims to universality or cultural blindness arise from three ways in which im/politeness may be considered to be, or risks being, anglocentric. The first is that much published research has been carried out on English-speaking cultures, the ‘play-ground of theory-makers’ (Bayraktaroglu & Sifianou 2001: 7). The second is that much published research has been carried out by English-speaking researchers. The third is that English constitutes the dominant scientific language in our area of study. These three points are clearly heavily interlinked but where they differ is in the overtness with which they operate, which presents something of a cline. For instance, in the case of the first, the researcher is likely to be conscious of the limitations and the solution is relatively easy insofar as it involves (para)-replication of the study across other cultures. However, in the case of the last point, the researcher is highly constrained (is there an alternative available?) and much less likely to be conscious of the limitations. According to Haugh (2012), the adoption of English as the scientific language of im/politeness may lead to two problems. The first is that it may ‘unduly restrict the scope of what we as analysts treat as worthy of interest, because words and concepts inevitably encapsulate a worldview, including ways of perceiving, categorizing and evaluating our social world’ and, second, ‘the use of English for some concepts may mask important differences as well as underlying assumptions about

⁵ This approach also means that I am side-stepping the issue of defining culture, the difficulties and implications of which are addressed in relation to im/politeness in Bargiela-Chiappini (2009) and Ogiermann (2009), *inter alia*.

those concepts in different languages and cultures' (2012: 116). In this study, I partially address the potential anglocentricity of the theoretical constructs of mock politeness by investigating the perception and use from a participant perspective. However, in the longer term, if we accept that a single language is likely to continue as the dominant language of academia in our field, then it seems that we need a process of 're-location' of the scientific language, away from the national/cultural centre, in line with the ways in which the English language as a whole has re-located away from its cultural base (Saraceni 2010).

The second major criticism of work investigating im/politeness and culture is that, as Mills (2009) argues, 'generalisations about impoliteness at a cultural level are frequently underpinned by stereotypical and ideological knowledge' (2009: 1047). As Section 1.2 shows, this appears to be a feature of work on mock politeness and is one of the aspects that I aim to explore in this paper.

A third problem relates to the awareness of what functions particular features may play in different cultures (Sifianou 1992), and how realisations of im/politeness may differ widely, for instance 'although tact may encode the essence of politeness in some cultures, in some others it may be concepts like generosity or modesty which predominate' (Bayraktaroglu & Sifianou 2001: 3).

Such criticisms, have led, in the discursive approach (e.g. Mills 2011), to a rejection of a search for universals or generalisations. However this response has been challenged in cross-cultural studies such as Ogiermann (2009) who work from the basis that universal concepts may be used in cross-cultural comparison and is addressed in Culpeper (2011b), who states that:

If we throw out universal concepts or more radically any kind of generalization, how can we compare the politeness of one culture with that of another, if each is defined

solely within its own terms? It would be the equivalent of comparing apples with oranges and concluding that they are different; whereas applying dimensions of variation (e.g. the absence/presence of seeds, edibility, sweetness) gives us a handle on the differences.

Culpeper (2011b: 410)

The last potential weakness for work on culture and im/politeness that I want to discuss is the tendency to focus on difference at the expense of similarity. As Bargiela-Chiappini (2009: 309) notes ‘many of us could narrate anecdotes of the manifestations of culture as “difference in action” witnessable in the intercultural encounters which we have observed as participants’. What is salient about culture as participants, is indeed usually, *difference*, the potential for unintentional impoliteness, for instance. However, as argued above, where this natural tendency becomes problematic is when it seeps into the academic discourse, with the result that what gets reported is not so much intercultural or cross-cultural comparisons, but *differences*. The unfortunate result is that, by focussing on difference, the researcher can only obtain a partial picture of the target area, as discussed in Taylor (2013), and thus the overall impression of a given culture or variety becomes skewed, as summarised in Baker (2010):

Not publishing or sharing such findings can result in what has been called ‘bottom drawer syndrome’. For example, imagine that ten sets of researchers, working independently from each other, all build a corpus of Singapore English and compare it to a similar British corpus, looking at the same linguistic feature. In nine cases the researchers find that there are no significant differences, decide that the study is therefore uninteresting and assign the research to the bottom drawer of their filing cabinet rather than publishing it. However, the tenth researcher does find a difference

and publishes the research, resulting in an inaccurate picture of what the general trend is when such a comparison is undertaken.

Baker (2010: 83)

Although he takes the example of sociolinguistic variation, it is equally applicable to intercultural pragmatics. Indeed, as recently illustrated in Grainger et al. (2015), we need to ‘focus in our work as much on the similarities between different cultures’ sense of what is appropriate behaviour as much as we do on the differences between them’ (2015: 43). Thus, in this study, for each feature which is discussed in Section 4, I endeavour to present similarities across the two datasets, rather than highlighting only differences.

2.2 First order, metalanguage investigation

As noted above, the analysis here takes a first-order approach, that is to say, I start with participant evaluations of behaviours on the basis that ‘utterances can only be classified as polite when they are interpreted as such by the addressee’ (Ogiermann 2009: 28). The importance of this kind of first-order approach for im/politeness research has been recognised in recent years, in particular with the development of the discursive approach, which emphasises the central role of lay understandings (see Eelen 2001; Mills 2009; Locher & Watts 2005).⁶

In this project, the way that I have operationalised the first-order approach is by combining it with a metalanguage approach. According to Jaworski et al. (2004), the power of the metalanguage approach is that

⁶ Although the distinction is not without complications. It is beyond the scope of this paper to cover them here but Haugh (2007b) and Bousfield (2010) provide overviews.

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)

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 im/politeness metalanguage allows the researcher to investigate first order understandings and address the problems raised by an exclusively second order analysis, including 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). However, there are some shortcomings to the approach, namely, that evaluations which do not make use of the metalanguage will not be captured. In this sense, the metalanguage approach will mainly represent a starting point in identifying behaviours, as is the case in this paper which constitutes a first step in building a picture of what features of mock politeness are shared across cultures.

2.3 Corpus pragmatics

As this project uses the metalanguage approach, it is particularly well-suited to corpus analysis, which allows the researcher to access a large number of occurrences of each item. The methods of corpus pragmatics largely overlap with those of corpus and discourse studies (see, for example, Partington et al. 2013, Baker 2006) although annotation is particularly important for pragmatic study. The main corpus tools used in this paper are *concordances*

which allow us to retrieve and view all occurrences of a given lexical item or tag within the context of production, and *collocates* which offer a synthesised set of information from the concordances by showing those words which are strongly attracted to the node.

2.3.1 Implementing a corpus pragmatic approach

There were two principal stages to the analysis: the investigation of *perceptions* of mock politeness and the study of *practice* in an online forum. In the first stage (reported in Section 3), I investigate what nationality terms co-occur with possible references to mock politeness in two different text types; the intentionally public, one-to-many discourse of the national press, and a more diverse set of (internet) interactions. In the second stage (reported in Section 4), I use concordances to identify potential references to mock politeness and then located, where possible the actual behaviours that had been described as *sarcastic* / SARCASTICO and so on. These events were then annotated according to a way in which they employ mismatch, evaluation and facework so that they could be subsequently retrieved and grouped. This process of annotation is an interpretative stage in which theories of im/politeness are used to analyse the data.

One aspect of annotation to which I will return in the discussion is the analysis of what is ostensibly flattered in the polite move and what is attacked in the impolite move of mock politeness. For this, I made use of Spencer-Oatey's (2000, 2002, 2008) categorisations of face and sociality rights, and to aid the classification, I applied the same set of questions for identifying different aspects of face and sociality rights as Culpeper et al. (2010).

TABLE 1 NEAR HERE

2.3.2 The corpora

Table 2 summarises the information about the corpora used in the first stage, to collect perceptions of mock politeness relating to culture. The corpora were chosen in order to be comparable across English and Italian, as far as possible.

TABLE 2 NEAR HERE

The two pairs of press corpora were created using the Nexis UK database to search for articles which included some of the terms listed in Section 1.1, which have been shown to refer to mock polite behaviours. The first set of corpora is composed of articles which referred to *irony/ ironies / ironic* / sarcasm/ sarcastic** (UK) and *ironia / ironie / ironic* / sarcasm* / sarcastic** from two national newspapers in each country.⁷ The second uses the same newspapers but the search terms were *patronising, patronizing, condescending* (UK) and *condiscendent* / condiscendenza* / paternalistic* / paternalism** (Italian). The labels used for corpus-building are a smaller set than those listed in Section 1.1 because pilot studies showed that several items were not used sufficiently frequently in the press to be analysed in this way. The third pair of corpora come from the TenTen family of web corpora, all of which were collected using similar techniques (described in Jakubíček et al. 2013) to enhance comparability and are available via SketchEngine (Kilgariff et al. 2004).

The second group of corpora are also search-term specific, and in this case the search terms included all the terms listed in 1.1. The corpora were collected from two online forums on the websites, mumsnet.com and alfemminile.com and the final sizes were 61 million and 35 million tokens respectively. The forums were considered comparable because they are both targeted at women and are active sites of interaction. The main reason for selecting this forum discourse is that they represent a conversational, non-careful form of communication, which

⁷ The asterisk marks a wild card so that a range of endings could be were retrieved.

is centred on interaction and dialogue. In the discussions of mock politeness, the participants discuss behaviour which occurred in a range of situations, including both online and in face to face interactions.

3. Perceptions

In this section I present the main patterns from the analysis of the newspaper corpora and TenTen web corpora with reference to which nationalities are associated with (possible) labels of mock politeness.

3.1 Irony

The most striking finding from the analysis of perceptions was the consistency with which the label *irony* in particular was associated with British national identity. As discussed above, this is asserted or presupposed in academic literature as well as cultural guides, and seems equally pervasive in the text types analysed systematically here. Starting with the media perceptions, as this is the more visible and influential text type, the results from both the UK and Italian newspapers shared one dominant pattern, illustrated in Figures 2 and 3; that *irony* is a British / English behaviour. As the concordance lines show, this was in no way restricted to self-presentation in the UK corpus, but was equally present in the two sub-corpora.

FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE

FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE

In the UK newspapers, no other nationality or group was so frequently associated with ironic behaviour. Similarly, in the Italian newspapers no other nationalities were characterised as being *ironic* (or not *ironic*), nor was it presented as an *Italian* identity trait, although, as

shown in Figure 4, it is associated with regional identities, specifically, Milanese and Tuscan, which offers further scope for investigations into perceptions and practice at regional levels.

FIGURE 4 NEAR HERE

In the English language corpus, EnTenTen12 which extends beyond just co.uk domains, the main reference to *irony* was in the context of the British vs American debate. There were no assertions of *irony* as an American identity marker outside this discussion, and the only countries that were characterised as having *irony* as an identity feature were Britain, Australia and, with a single mention, France.

In the Italian ItTenTen corpus there was a consistent association of performing *irony* with British identity which was evident in the collocates of IRONIA, shown in Table 3.⁸ As can be seen, four of the first five identity markers refer to British and English identity (marked in bold in the table). The next most salient group appears to be a religious rather than national cultural group with *ebraico* “jewish”, *Yiddish* and *ebreo* “jewish” all occurring. With reference to Italian identities, there are again regional markers: *toscano*, *emiliano* and *bolognese*.

TABLE 3 NEAR HERE

Where a more marked variation from that shown in the newspaper corpus emerged was in the description of Italians as being / not being *ironic*; there were 32 concordance lines which clearly discussed *irony* in connection to an Italian identity, of which 20 asserted that *irony*

⁸ The collocates are ranked by logdice which is a statistical measure for calculating collocation that emphasises lexical collocates (see Rychly 2008).

was a characteristic part of Italian behaviour (examples 1), while 12 affirmed the opposite, (example 2).

(1) Gli **italiani** hanno più **ironia**, non drammatizzano , come sempre sono scettici e non hanno preso troppo sul serio neanche gli oggetti di scarto. *'Italians are more **ironic**, they don't overreact, as always they are sceptical and they don't take waste objects too seriously either'*

(2) E un film **italiano** ed è **ironico** ! *'It's an **Italian** film and it's **ironic**!'*

Interestingly, alongside this overt conflict, many of the co-occurrences of *Italian* and *irony/ironic* referred to Italian individuals performing irony - and being favourably evaluated by these Italian writers for doing so. This is illustrated in (3) and (4), which shows the frequency and value assigned to *ironic* behaviour, even when overt discussion denies the importance for national identity construction and characterisation.

(3) questo libro rappresenterà l'occasione per fare la conoscenza con una delle penne più raffinate, **ironiche** e graffianti del giornalismo **italiano** *'this book is an opportunity to get to know one of the most refined, **ironic** and scathing writers in **Italian** journalism'*

(4) Bella, **ironica** e spudorata, è una delle comiche **italiane** più dissacranti del momento. *'Attractive, **ironic** and brazen, she's one of the most irreverent **Italian** comics at the moment'*

So, what we see emerging is a mismatch between the Italian national stereotype which does not feature *irony*, and reported practice, where *ironic* behaviours are commented on favourably.

3.2 Sarcasm

With reference to *sarcasm*, in the Italian press there were no instances indicating that this was a British/English behaviour and in fact the statistically significant collocates of *sarcas** did not contain any geographical identity markers. In the UK press, there were references to *sarcasm* being a British behaviour, as shown in Figure 5 but this was a less frequent pattern than that for *irony*.

FIGURE 5 NEAR HERE

There were no patterns of *sarcasm* being associated with any other nationality in the two UK newspapers. The analysis of EnTenTen12 also revealed a pattern of association of *sarcasm* with British identity, and in a similar way to discussion of *irony*, this was frequently within the context of an American vs British debate, as shown in (5), which also illustrates the way in which cultural stereotypes may be contested in the discourse.

(5) Poster A: As a Brit living in Austin, Texas I quickly learned people here think I am being mean bordering on rude when in fact I am being humorously **sarcastic**. Maybe only **Brits** and **Aussies** do that.

Poster B: Yeah, we **Americans** don't understand **sarcasm** at all. Isn't that ironic? No, actually that was humorously sarcastic. I wasn't aware that this type of thing was limited to certain continents.

In the Italian ItTenTen, there was a clear association of SARCASMO with British identity, as illustrated in Figure 7 which shows the post-modifiers *londinese* 'from London', *inglese* 'English', and *britannico* 'British', differing from the findings of the newspaper corpus.

FIGURE 6 NEAR HERE

This was the main nationality association, although there were (less frequent) references to American *sarcasm* (particularly with reference to film / TV dialogue), and one reference to Germans.

To sum up, the Italian and UK corpora broadly agreed that the performance of *ironic* and *sarcastic* behaviour is a British identity marker. However, the Italian self-representation was less clear; in the web corpus there was some conflict about self-identification of the nationality with being *ironic*. Given the large number of instances referring to Italians performing *irony*, it would appear that the mismatch occurs in the gap between people's actual experiences and evaluations of *ironic* behaviours and the accepted/dominant national stereotypes.

3.3 Patronising and condescending

The analysis of other metapragmatic labels which might indicate mock politeness, such as *passive aggressive* and others listed in Section 1.1, was limited by the low frequencies and the fact that these are probably not sufficiently well shared labels across a wider population, in fact most co-occurred with nationalities just once. Therefore, only *patronising* and *condescending* are discussed here. The patterns which emerged differed from those for *ironic*/IRONICO and *sarcastic*/SARCASTICO in that there was no agreement between the English and Italian corpora.

In EnTenTen12, there was a pattern of associating *patronizing* and *condescending* behaviours with British national culture, as shown in Figure 7. This was also supported to some extent in the press corpus (9 out of 24 occurrences referred to English/Britain). The only other country which was mentioned more than once was Germany (two occurrences), and there were also eight references to Europe/the European union, indicating the salience of power for this metapragmatic label.

FIGURE 7 NEAR HERE

However, this association with British identity was not matched in the Italian language ItTenTen, as shown in Figure 8, and nor was it reflected in the press corpora.

FIGURE 8 NEAR HERE

4. Practice

Having provided an overview of the perceptions of *ironic/sarcastic* and *condescending/patronising* behaviours, in this section I move on to considering the actual occurrences of mock politeness which may have been described using these labels or any of those listed in Section 1.1.

4.1 Frequency

The first approach that we might consider is whether mock politeness is more frequent in one corpus compared to another, although how to measure this is not entirely straightforward. For instance, if we consider the raw numbers for mock polite behaviours which were identified (according to the definition presented above) in each corpus, there does appear to be some correlation with the stronger association of being British with some forms of mock politeness. In total, 149 such behaviours were retrieved in the English corpus compared to 54 in the Italian dataset. However, we must be cautious of using this as evidence that the English *do* mock politeness more frequently, because the English forum from which the corpus is drawn is much bigger.⁹ It may also be that mock politeness is not commented on with equal frequency in both sets which is a topic for future research. Given that the comparison cannot

⁹ Relative frequency cannot be used meaningfully here because we do not have accurate measurements for the size of each forum and the size of the corpora cannot be used because these are search term specific corpora which would make the calculation circular.

be one as simple as measurement of quantitative frequency, in the following sections I compare the *form* that the mock polite behaviours take in the two forums, examining whether mock politeness is performed and evaluated in similar or different ways, and for similar or different interpersonal functions. The main research question then becomes: Are there qualitative differences in the way that mock politeness is performed in the British and Italian forums?

4.2 Evaluation of mock politeness

One of the key findings regarding evaluation of mock politeness in this study is that such evaluations are highly dependent on participation role, thus supporting Toplak & Katz's (2000: 1468) assertion that '[p]oint-of-view in sarcasm has received little attention, and needs to be addressed more in-depth in order to advance current theories of sarcasm'. The salience of participation role for both forum corpora can be illustrated by looking at who is described with the labels. The trendlines in Figures 9 and 10 show how the tendency to describe the self (listed as 1st person in the figures) with a given label runs in inverse proportion to labels chosen for descriptions of a third person (there is no relationship with descriptions of the interlocutor, listed as 2nd person in the figures). As the metapragmatic labels have been ordered from left to right according to the proportion of first person description, the figures represent a continuum from *self*-describing to *other*-describing labels.

FIGURE 9 NEAR HERE

FIGURE 10 NEAR HERE

What these figures also show is that, in both corpora people *self*-describe using these labels, an aspect which is particularly significant given that experimental research has tended to focus on asking participants to evaluate a third person's behaviour. The findings suggest that

this kind of experiment will generate a different kind of evaluation than if the participant were placed in the role of target or speaker and this should be taken into account.

4.3 Functions of mock politeness

4.3.1 Similarities in functions

In both corpora a wide range of facework functions were identified for the mock polite behaviours, including face-enhancement, face-saving and face-attack. One distinctive aspect of this was that the speaker's own use of mock politeness was presented as an offensive counter strategy (Bousfield 2007), as illustrated in (6)

(6) I've found the best thing to do is to keep my family and issues to myself and not talk about anything really and bite my lip - although sometimes I give a **sarcastic** reply back when she says something **hurtful** and that seems to hit home.

As can be seen, the speaker positions the *sarcastic* reply as a reaction to another participant's *hurtful* behaviour. The mock politeness is designed therefore to protect the speaker's own face, in a similar way to use of irony reported in Nuolijarvi and Tiittula's (2011) study of televised political debates in Finland. This rhetorical justification of the use of impoliteness helps to account for the favourable evaluations of mock politeness when performed by the speaker (as seen in Figures 9 and 10).

4.3.2 Differences in Functions: Targetting the self

Another important category of face-saving that emerged from the analysis of mock polite behaviours was the targeting of the speaker him/herself. While there was just a single occurrence of this type for mock polite behaviour in the UK data, in contrast, in the Italian

forum data it accounted for 14% of utterances labelled as SARCASTICO and 10% of utterances labelled as IRONICO.¹⁰ This use is illustrated in (7).

(7) Ho già fatto 2 cicli di chemio, perso i capelli e messo il catetere centrale.....uno spasso!!! (**in modo sarcastico**). *'I have already had two courses of treatment, lost my hair and had a catheter fitted... what fun!! (meant sarcastically)'*

In these instances, the 'target' of the sarcasm is the speaker or some difficult situation in which the speaker finds him/herself. Although drawing attention to this could have a (self) face-threatening effect, the cumulative effect is one of face-saving by allowing the speaker to express dissatisfaction with their situation while limiting risk to their face which may emerge from the act of complaining. The effect of this indirect style of evaluation or appraisal of their situation may be to lighten the effect of the 'complaining' as a form of self-presentation while the ideal/actual mismatch may additionally emphasise the difficulties they face. Dews et al. (1995) hypothesise that it manages threat to relational face by placing less strain on the speaker-hearer relationship (see also Lee & Katz 2000; Brown 1995). Furthermore, research into self-deprecation and self-mockery (e.g. Yu 2013) suggests that it has a face-enhancement function by bringing amusement to the interaction (a positive politeness strategy in Brown & Levinson's terms). Thus, it seems that in this respect it is the Italian data that is showing a closer relationship to the expectations from second-order theory.

4.3.3 Differences in Functions: Social identity face

Another aspect of difference between the forums relates to the importance of social identity face (Spencer-Oatey 2002) in interpreting face attack, which was more characteristic of the

¹⁰ Which is also higher than the data from Gibbs's study of irony (2000: 16), despite the broad definition of irony used in that study.

Italian data. In such instances, the speaker unfavourably evaluates a previous mock polite (usually labelled SARCASTICO) utterance because s/he feels implicated in the criticism through association with the target, as illustrated in (8).

(8) Poster A: Lo conosco io. Io lo conosco molto bene. Se è come il padre, l'esimio, non ti metterò in lista per il trattamento nella struttura pubblica finché non ti avrà spennato prima nel suo studio privato. So anche come ha vinto il concorso di ricercatore: la sua era l'unica domanda presentata, strano, no? *'I know him. I know him very well. If he is like his esteemed father, he won't put you on the state waiting list until he has fleeced you in his private practice. I know how he managed to get the post of lecturer too: his was the only application, strange, eh?'*

Poster N: Io probabilmente più di te **caro/a** 'NAME' '...' per quanto riguarda il padre (**quello che tu chiami sarcasticamente "l'esimio"**), ti consiglierei di portare più rispetto per persone che negli anni e grazie al duro lavoro hanno raggiunto vette che altri sognano la notte.... *'And I probably 'know him' more than you dear 'NAME' '...' and as for his father (who you sarcastically call 'esteemed'), I'd advise you to have more respect for people who over time, and thanks to hard work, have reached heights that others can only dream about....'*

The target of the *sarcastic* behaviour is a doctor, and his face is threatened primarily in his institutional role, but his quality face is also threatened through the suggestion of dishonesty. Poster N, presents him/herself as someone close to the target (although, in the anonymous online environment it is also entirely possible of course that s/he is actually the target!). S/he criticises the *sarcastic* verbal behaviour on the basis that s/he has superior knowledge of the person and attempts to repair the threat through other-oriented face enhancement strategies

(and makes use of mock politeness in doing so, for instance the mismatch in the use of *cara/o* ‘*dear*’ suggesting a move to a mock polite frame of interaction).

4.3.4 Differences in Functions: Mock politeness as a group activity

Another use which differed across the corpora was the employment of mock politeness as a group activity, which only occurred in the UK corpus. This has not been much discussed in the academic literature on mock politeness, with the exception of Ducharme (1994) on sarcasm as a form of group-exerted social control. However, it has been more extensively addressed as mock *impoliteness* under the label second-order label ‘teasing’ (e.g. Boxer & Cortés Conde 1997; Geyer 2010). However, as Haugh & Bousfield (2012: 1101-1102) point out, this is a *social action / interactional practice* rather than *evaluation*, and, as such, there is no reason to assume such labels primarily perform politeness or even that all participants will agree on the same evaluation of im/politeness. Again, the importance of participation role is key to the evaluation.

In 8% of the mock polite behaviours in the UK data, the mock politeness involved several participants, as illustrated in (9).

(9) *Poster J: boys name to go with Honey and Devon?*

hi, we're due in 9weeks and dont know what we're having. we have a girls name picked out but cannot agree on a boys name. our eldest daughter is honey and our son is devon if that helps? ‘...’

Poster L: Cream

Scone

Poster F: Given the names of your other two, I would go with the bakery theme:

Doughnut

Bun

Eccles

Bap

or

Pastie

Poster R: Rice

Pudding

Jam

Poster A: Cor - some of you are being cunts.

*Why would you **mock** the names of someone's children?*

I was about to start my own thread about baby names but I'm totally scared off now.

In (9) we can see how the mock politeness becomes a group activity with at least three participants entering the jocular frame and contributing mock polite posts which use the same kind of im/politeness mismatch: offering help while criticising the poster's choice of names (upholding sociality rights and attacking face).¹¹ Although for some participants, like Poster A in the example above, these interactions are viewed negatively, in approximately half of the occurrences some participants commented favourably on the mock politeness for instance through a metacomment such as *hilarious* or paralinguistic representation such as *haha*. The appreciation for the mock politeness further illustrates the importance of this group activity to building a social identity and its function as a form of social management, as hypothesised for teasing (e.g. Boxer & Cortés Conde 1997). For instance, in the example above, the mock politeness is used to indicate that this kind of non-traditional name is not part of the community's norms.

¹¹ The presentation is also similar in that no emoticons or other cues are used.

4.4 Structures of mock politeness

4.4.1 The location of mismatch

As discussed in Section 1.1, mock polite behaviours may be structured through either internal or external mismatch. In both forums studied here, the most frequent mismatch type is external, that is where the context is such that the ostensibly polite utterance or behaviour is interpreted as impolite, like the insincere use of *Very helpful, thanks* in Figure 1. Figure 12 summarises the frequency of the different mismatch types for each corpus.

FIGURE 12 NEAR HERE

Another similarity regarding mismatch structure is that only *sarcastic/SARCASTICO* and *ironic/IRONICO* were used as meta-references to actually constitute the internal, verbal, mismatch, as illustrated in (10). However, differences emerge in that this kind of garden-path structure was more typical of the Italian data.

(10) Poster M: Io ed il mio ex ragazzo ci siamo lasciati qualche giorno fa ma ora siamo diventati scopamici!

Come faccio a farlo innamorare di nuovo?!

Grazie in anticipo popolo 😊

‘Poster M: Me and my ex split up a few days ago but now we have become fuck-buddies!

How do I make him fall in love with me again?!

TIA people 😊’

Poster N: E che cavolo di senos ha?

‘What the hell is the point?’

Poster M: Molto utile il tuo consiglio devo dire.. **...sono sarcastica al 100%!**

‘Very helpful advice I have to say... **I am being 100% sarcastic!**’

In example (10), Poster M self-describes as *sarcastica* so that the previous utterance, apparently showing appreciation for Poster N’s contribution is necessarily (re)interpreted as insincere and therefore an attack on Poster N’s face. Thus the metapragmatic comment itself makes the mismatch internal to the utterance. The attack was somewhat stronger in the original format because the speaker exploited the multimodal affordances of the forum which is structured so that only the first part would have been visible initially as this was the post title, shown in Figure 13.

FIGURE 13 NEAR HERE

However, as the previous poster did not actually offer any advice, it appears that there was little likelihood for the mock politeness in the title (*Very useful advice I must say...*) to have been interpreted as politeness. The external mismatch draws attention to Poster N’s inappropriate behaviour (from Poster M’s perspective) in that s/he does not offer advice as might be expected, thus attacking relational face by presenting him/her as a poor forum member. The internal, verbal mismatch, stating the *sarcastic* intent, subsequently puts the face attack on-record for all hearers and thus reinforces the resulting face attack. According to research by Afifi & Burgoon (2000) this type of garden-path structure may enhance potential face-attack on the basis that:^{12,13}

¹² Spellings as in original.

¹³ Although it should be noted that they are focussing on deviations from an expected behaviour and expressly note that in some circumstances the expected behaviour would be ‘disdain’ (2000: 226).

if individuals choose to move from initial behavior that is consistent with the social expectation to behavior that violates social norms, then uncertainty may increase. Observers are less able to discount the socially violative behavior, because it appears to be a conscious move away from the socially expected behavior initially displayed

Afifi & Burgoon (2000: 226)

4.4.2 *The aspects which are mismatched*

The main finding regarding which aspects (face or sociality rights) are mismatched is that the most ‘canonical’ form of mismatch or reversal is not the most common. If we consider that mock politeness has been equated with sarcasm and that, in their most basic form sarcasm and irony are described in terms of propositional mismatch (e.g. Grice 1975, and, following Grice, Dynel 2013, 2014) or reversal of evaluation (Partington 2007) then the expectation might be that im/politeness mismatch would involve a direct reversal of im/politeness.

However, as can be seen in Figure 14, this was not the most frequent form for either corpus; what is most prototypical in the literature is not the most frequent in actual usage.

FIGURE 14 NEAR HERE

Where the two corpora differ, also shown in Figure 14, is that mock politeness in the Italian corpus mismatches the same element in 75% of cases, either from ostensibly flattering face to attacking face, or from paying attention to sociality rights to infringing them. In contrast, the most frequent mismatch in the UK forum involved ostensibly upholding sociality rights but the attack then primarily focusses on some aspect of face, as illustrated above in example (9), the *mocking* thread.

4.4.3 *The direction of mismatch*

The final point regards the direction of the mismatch, whether the shift is from ostensible attention to face and rights followed by attack or vice-versa. As has already become apparent from the examples that have been discussed here, the most frequent in both corpora was a shift from ostensible politeness to impoliteness. However, in both forums, there were also occurrences in which the impolite move was followed by a polite move. This was more frequent in the (British) English data, where a quarter of mock polite behaviours with internal mismatch involved a shift from expressing impoliteness to ostensible politeness, contrasting with the preference for garden path internal mismatches in the Italian data seen in Section 4.4.1. This kind of impolite to ostensibly polite pattern is shown in Figure 15.¹⁴

FIGURE 15 NEAR HERE

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).

5. Conclusions

To conclude, it appears the academic descriptions of mock politeness (mainly under the labels irony and sarcasm) have underestimated (cultural) variation, and, in contrast, that cultural variation is over-estimated in lay description.

¹⁴ Figure 16 comes from the same forum but from an extension of the corpus to investigate this particular conventionalised feature.

The empirical analysis has shown that the cultural stereotypes noted in academic and popular literature are also pervasive in news discourse and online texts. However, these stereotypes were not reflected in attested usage. Indeed, even in the analysis of the press corpus, a rift appeared between the assertions that *ironia* was not an Italian feature, and the frequent mention of performance of *ironia* by Italians. Furthermore, behaviours labelled as *ironic*/IRONICO and *sarcastic*/SARCASTICO were present in both corpora, but were substantially more frequent in the Italian corpus indicating that the assertion that irony is not used in lay discussion for describing the rhetorical device is actually culturally specific.

Regarding the question of whether there are qualitative differences in the way that mock politeness is performed in the British and Italian forums, the analysis shows that many features are shared and there is little evidence to support the stereotype that this is a particularly British behaviour. One of the most important shared features was the extent to which participation role was key to subsequent evaluations and influenced which labels are chosen to describe these mock polite events. However, there were also a range of points on which the findings from the two corpora differed in terms of the functions and structure of mock politeness. For instance, there seemed to be different preferences in the organisation of the polite and impolite moves and more data might allow is required to investigate whether this could help explain the differing perceptions of mock polite usage in these two cultures. Further research could also employ the definition of mock politeness given here in order to work through a series of comparable interactions to investigate how many times mock politeness occurs.

What I have tried to do in this paper is present a more nuanced comparison of mock politeness across two culturally different datasets by describing both what features are shared and what features seem to be characteristic of just one corpus. By reporting on both points, it

is hoped that future work looking at other cultures (whether national or otherwise), can build on identifying shared core features and points of cultural divergence regarding mock politeness. This kind of detailed and replicable analysis may then allow us to identify and avoid influence from cultural stereotypes seeping into the academic discussions.

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