

A Research on Mock Politeness — A Case Study of *the Legend of Zhen Huan*

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Abstract. The present study attempts to put forward a different definition and study the realization of mock politeness--somewhat neglected area of (im) politeness studies. Based on previous studies on mock politeness abroad and at home, this paper redefines mock politeness as a superficially polite speech act which challenges or attacks the communication participant's face or sociality rights in a particular context. Then on the basis of Geoffrey Leech's [1] Politeness Principle and Helen Spencer-Oatey's [2] Rapport Management Theory, a model of mock politeness is put forward. Based on the definition, 4 typical conversations possessing most representative characters of mock politeness are selected as research samples from the costume drama *The Legend of Zhen Huan*. With the guideline of mock politeness model, the special application of mock politeness by characters is qualitatively analyzed. Through the discussion, it proves that this model has effective explanatory power concerning the characters' option and the use of mock politeness and thus can also be adapted to the pragmatic analysis of other texts. At the same time, this study of mock politeness will help people understand the communicative value of mock politeness in avoiding direct conflicts and maintaining superficially harmonious interpersonal relationships, which will contribute to the improvement of people's communicative skills and competence.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, politeness has drawn the attention of linguists from different research areas. In contrast to this, impoliteness was lack of research until Culpeper [3] systematically studied it in 1996. Since then, both of politeness and impoliteness have gradually become prominent topics in pragmatics researches. However, there are many concepts between them are not specifically determined. In the late 1990s, scholars began to notice those vague concepts in language using such as mock politeness. In daily life, there are cases that people feel unhappy when hearing some politely worded and decently expressed utterances. The reason for this unpleasantness may attribute to the speaker's use of mock politeness. In fact, mock politeness is a common language phenomenon in communication. However, mock politeness remains a relatively new aspect in the study of (im)politeness. Most scholars only briefly mentioned mock politeness and regarded it as one of the strategies of impoliteness. Specialized researches of mock politeness could be found only in recent years. Besides, there have been extensive debates concerning the naming of mock politeness behaviors and the relationship between mock politeness and (im)politeness stays blurring. There is a long way to go toward a clear recognition of mock politeness. Therefore, this paper attempts to make an exploration of mock politeness to help redressing that balance. Specifically, the present study centres on redefining mock politeness and analyzing how is mock politeness realized by characters in *The Legend of Zhen Huan* under different contexts.

Previous Definition of Mock Politeness

Mock politeness has been subject to a struggle over terminology. The first significant theorization of mock (im) politeness within a frame of (im) politeness is done by Leech. Leech [1] defines irony as “an apparently friendly way of being offensive (mock politeness)” (1983: 144). Culpeper [3] equates mock politeness with sarcasm and suggests that mock politeness behaviors are the cases of impoliteness where “the face-threatening act is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realizations” (1996: 356). Similarly, Bousfield [4] condenses the strategies of impoliteness into on record and off-record and mock politeness is one of the off-record impoliteness strategies. Kaul de Marlangeon & Alba-Juez [5] also account for mock politeness in their study of impoliteness, viewing it as the “formally polite acts with an impolite purpose” (2012: 82). Kálár and Haugh [6] maintain that with regard to (im) politeness, there is a range of categorizations that do not fall straightforwardly into being labelled as either “polite” or “impolite”, such as mock polite. Charlotte Taylor [7] defines mock politeness as a phenomenon that “occurs when there is an (im) politeness mismatch leading to an implicature of impoliteness” (2015: 130). Most scholars just mention the concept of mock politeness as a strategy of impoliteness but do little detailed researches about it. In China, Wang Jianhua [8] distinguishes two similar concepts: literal politeness and actual politeness. Similarly, Lin Dajin and Xie Chaoqun [9] make a distinction between surface politeness and deep politeness and they think these two concepts do not always correspond to each other. Li Chengtuan & Ran Yongping [10] study mock politeness by exploring its realization modes and pragmatic features in interaction. They think mock politeness speech act observes one or more maxims of Politeness Principle, but at the same time fails to comply with other one(s). However, this definition seems too general to define mock politeness.

A Different Perception of Mock Politeness.

On the basis of previous studies on mock politeness abroad and at home, here the present study redefines mock politeness as:

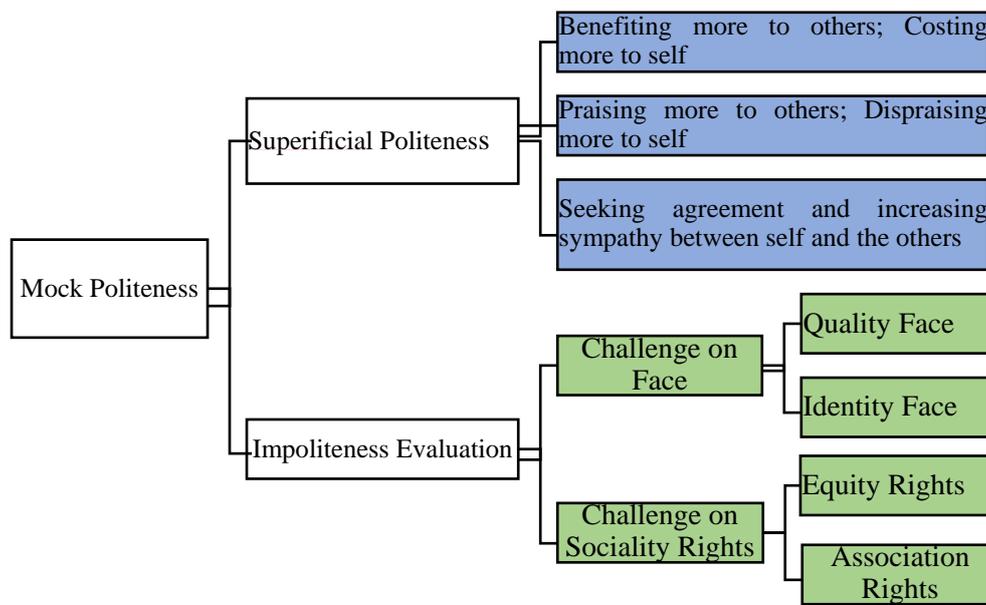
A superficially polite speech act which challenges or attacks the communication participant’s face or sociality rights in a particular context.

This definition holds that mock politeness consists of double elements, that is, the “polite” element and “impolite” element. The superficially polite language form can be evaluated as a polite move while the challenge or attack on the communication participant’s face or sociality rights can be evaluated as an impolite move. This reversal of evaluation requires the participant to re-process the initial politeness in light of the context, thus increasing the cognitive load. Such kind of investment gives mock polite speech act a greater impact in the sense that the insincere and ostensible politeness adds to the weight of the impoliteness by compounding the challenge or attack, posing a threat to the target while remaining formally polite on the surface. This may help to answer the question of why a speaker tends to choose mock politeness rather than direct face attack. Moreover, this definition does not just refer to a hearer-perspective of the challenge or attack. The “communication participant” adopted in this definition leaves space for the evaluation to refer to challenge or attack on another one’s face or sociality rights.

A Model of Mock Politeness

In 1983, British linguist Geoffrey Leech [1] put forward the famous Politeness Principle (hereafter PP) to account for the deviations from the Cooperative Principle in communication. Leech’s PP is politeness-oriented with its maxims stipulated for the purpose of realizing politeness. In mock politeness speech acts, the speaker deliberately or intentionally applies superficial politeness in order to disguise their negative attitude. The “polite” element of mock politeness can be fully accounted for by PP since it emphasizes on the connection between speakers’ intention and politeness in the process of interaction. However, the politeness principle perspective overlooks the addressee’s and other recipients’ understanding of (im) polite behavior. Therefore, according to PP, the potential face-threatening aspect of mock politeness behaviors can only be interpreted from the perspective of the speaker. For the explanation of “impolite” element of mock politeness, the theory of rapport

management is more proper. In 2000, Helen Spencer-Oatey [2] put forward Rapport Management Theory to describe the management of the harmonious or disharmonious relations among people with the management of face and the management of sociality rights highlighted as two main components. It can be used to explain the maintenance and construction process of interpersonal relationships in interaction, as well as to explain various phenomena that damage interpersonal harmony, such as impoliteness or conflicts. Therefore, Politeness Principle and Rapport Management Theory can be complementarily operated as a model to analyze mock politeness phenomenon. Here, a model of mock politeness is constructed as following (see Fig. 1):



- Adapted from Leech’s (1983) Politeness Principle
- Adapted from Spencer-Oatey’s (2000) Rapport Management Theory

Fig. 1 Model of mock politeness

As noted before, mock politeness consists of double elements, that is, the “polite” element and “impolite” element. The superficially polite language form can be evaluated as a polite move while the challenge or attack to the communication participant’s face or sociality rights can be evaluated as an impolite move. To summarize further, mock politeness utterance is a combination of superficial politeness and impoliteness evaluation.

From the figure above, superficial politeness can be achieved by one or more than one of these three strategies: “benefiting more to others; costing more to self”, “praising more to others; dispraising more to self”, “seeking agreement and increasing sympathy between self and the others”. Impoliteness will be realized by either challenge or attack on face or sociality rights, to be more exact, quality face, identity face, equity rights, and association rights. It should be noted that, in many cases, the superficial politeness is satisfied by mixing more strategies and the attack involved both a threat to face and sociality rights, so the following discussion is based on the aspect which seems to be the primary focus.

Discussion

The Legend of Zhen Huan, a palace-fighting costume drama written by Liu Lianzi and later directed by Zheng Xiaolong, tells a story about how an innocent young girl named Zhen Huan entered the Forbidden City and eventually defeated other concubines with her wits and schemes during the

relentless palace fighting and ultimately became the Empress Dowager herself. In this part, four most representative mock polite conversations are picked up as the samples for discussion and analyses.

Example 1:

Consort Hua: (1) Sister Qi looks more buxom. His Majesty will surely be pleased at the sight of you.

Consort Qi: [Smile] (2) Thank you for the sweet words.

Consort Hua: (3) Oh, I almost forgot that it has been a long time since His Majesty last visit you, right? Please excuse me for my bad memory.

Consort Qi: [Awkwardly] (4) It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter.

The Legend of Zhen Huan Episode 2

In this example, Consort Hua addresses Consort Qi as “sister”, giving Qi a feeling that Hua is expressing a friendly attitude to her. Hua uses the words “buxom” to praise that Qi looks more beautiful, which is a compliment to her good figure and appearance. By saying “His Majesty will surely be pleased at the sight of you”, Hua continues to say sweet words which make Qi very happy, because the Emperor’s love is what every woman in the palace longs for. So, Qi thanks Hua immediately for her praise. In utterance (3), Hua states that the Emperor hasn’t come to visit Qi for a long time, which can be face-threatening to Qi. Actually, Hua is quite aware of the fact that it has been quite a while since the Emperor stepped into Qi’s palace last time. She excuses herself on the pretext of a poor memory and apologies to Qi for her forgetfulness. These self-denigrating expressions humble Hua by dispraising more to herself, which help mitigate the face-threatening behavior. In fact, what Hua intends to do is to make a mockery of the fact that Qi is no longer favored by the Emperor, which is a challenge on Qi’s quality face. So the compliment in utterance (1) and the apology in utterance (3) are mock politeness behaviors realized by praising more to others and dispraising more to self with the purpose to attack on target’s face. By means of mock politeness, Hua expresses the impolite meaning under the disguise of polite expressions, although Qi understands what Hua implies and feels embarrassed; she has no choice but to forgive Hua. From the above conversation, we can see Qi’s responses reflect a reversal of evaluation from utterance (2) to (4). Qi firstly thinks Hua is truly praising her but later she realizes the impolite meaning and feels awkward. Therefore, mock politeness sometimes can be hard to identify. It requires more cognitive ability to re-process the initial politeness in light of the specific context.

Example 2:

Context: All concubines come and pay their respect to the Empress one morning. Consort Hua suggests helping the Empress renovate Her Majesty’s palace.

Consort Hua: (5) The palace is next to empty due to His Majesty’s hurry ascend to the throne, especially for the Jingren Palace. I intend to have your palace better renovated on a nice day. It will become a more pleasant place to live in.

The Empress: Thank you, Sister. His Majesty enthroned some time ago, we should be frugal if we can. Let’s discuss this later.

Consort Hua: (6) Your Majesty is indeed generous. In comparison, my palace is too lavish. I feel uneasy every time while visiting your majesty.

Consort Qi: This is because your palace was occupied by Consort Yi of the late Emperor. Of course, it is magnificent.

The Empress: (7) Indeed. She was greatly honored for being a prolific mother.

Consort Hua: It’s getting late, I am leaving now.

The Legend of Zhen Huan Episode 2

In this conversation, Consort Hua kindly offers to renovate the palace for the Empress so that the Empress can live more comfortably, which is a benefit to the Empress. Moreover, by saying sentence (5), Hua shows her concern to the Empress’s living condition and leaves a considerate and thoughtful impression on the others. In sentence (6), Hua uses “generous” to praise the Empress of being kind and broad-minded. At the same time, she also expressed her uneasiness and guilt about the luxurious decoration of her palace, which can be a dispraise to herself. However, Hua’s seemingly polite utterances (5) and (6) are actually mock politeness to attack the Empress’s identity face. By saying

this, Hua intends to show off her superiority over the Empress. Sentence (5) and (6) actually describe the palaces of the Empress and Hua's respectively. (5) Implies that the Empress's palace is poorly decorated and improperly arranged while (6) shows Hua's palace is luxury and exquisite. Instead of directly expressing her superiority, Hua chooses to help the Empress decorate the palace, which increases the benefit to the Empress. Moreover, by saying (5), Hua also explains the reason for the Empress's simple decorated palace may be that the Emperor's hurry ascends to the throne, which implies that the Emperor may be too busy with government affairs and helps save the Empress's face. However, in the subsequent dialogues, Hua indicates that her palace is magnificent. By this strong contrast, Hua intends to show that the Emperor values more about her than the Empress, which is a threat to the identity face of the Empress. The Empress understands Hua's deep meaning and skillfully fights back with sentence (7). Superficially it means like Consort Yi, the former owner of Yikun Palace, Hua also wins the favor of the Emperor. However, by stating Consort Yi has many children, the Empress implies that Hua has no children, which touches a sore spot with Hua. Moreover, Consort Yi's children plotted a rebellion and eventually brought trouble to Yi – this is a message known to the Empress, Consort Hua and all the concubines present, so Hua leaves earlier with anger because she knows the Empress is conveying the meaning that even if Hua is favored by His Majesty now, there will not be a good end for her.

Example 3:

Context: The Empress find Lady An using a voodoo doll to make a curse to Consort Hua in An's palace.

The Empress: (8) You're alone in the palace; it's inevitable to feel desolate, even if you have a sister like Lady Wan. But she is deep in His Majesty's favor. I'm afraid she can't take care of you in time. (9) If you have any grievance in the future just tell me. You shouldn't have such stupid thoughts again.

Lady An: Your Majesty's concern for me, I will bring it to heart and never forget.

The Empress: Good, get up first, it's cold on the floor. Luckily someone has told me about this, I'll never know it otherwise.

Lady An: May I ask who it was?

The Empress: (10) Of course, it was your dear sister. But she didn't mean to it, she had no choice. I've made an agreement with her already. This incident ends here.

The Legend of Zhen Huan Episode 21

In this case, (8), (9) and (10) are mock politeness utterances which challenge Zhen's association rights since it aims to persuade An not to keep a close relationship with Zhen. The Empress finds An using a voodoo doll to make curses to Consort Hua, which is not allowed in the palace. Instead of blaming and punishing, the Empress effectively put herself in An's position by showing that she fully understands An's situation. Then she creates a friend-like intimate atmosphere by offering help and making reasonable suggestions to An. Moreover, she adopts hedges like "afraid", "if" in sentences 8 and 9 to show her sympathy to An. However, the Empress intentionally says "luckily someone has told me about this" to successfully draws An's attention and move to destroy the relation between Zhen Huan and An. She adopts hedges such as "someone", "your dear sister", "she" to deliberately hide information, though she knows she owns the information that An expects. The vagueness leaves enough space for An to estimate. At the same time, it also relieves her of some responsibility for her statements and avoids criticism of Zhen and others. According to the subsequent plot, we know that the Empress successfully misguide An to suspect Zhen as the one who let out her secret. The mock politeness utterances adopted by the Empress indirectly sow discord between An and Zhen and meanwhile achieve her intention of creating a new relationship with An.

Example 4:

Context: An Lingrong, daughter of Deputy Magistrate of Songyang County An Bihuai, accidentally knocks over the tea bowl and spill the tea on the clothes of Xia Dongchun. An makes an apology to Xia for this carelessness. However, as a daughter of Xia Wei who holds a position of Captain of the Imperial Guard, Xia looks down on An because of An's humble family and requires An to bow down and beg for her forgiveness. At this time, Zhen Huan comes out to save An from the embarrassment.

Zhen Huan: (11) it's only a dress. I know you are kind and generous. You mustn't be angered by trifles.

Xia Dongchun: Who are you?

Zhen Huan: My father is Zhen Yuandao, Deputy Chief of the Grand Court of Review.

Xia Dongchun: Deputy Chief of the Grand Court is not a high-ranking official.

Zhen Huan: Rank is of no importance. Justice is all that matters.

Xia Dongchun: Are you trying to teach me what to do because you think you are pretty enough to be selected?

Zhen Huan: (12) Not at all. I am only concerned on your behalf. Today they are auditioning the Han Army of the Eight Banners. It is possible that His Majesty would be disturbed by your behavior. If His Majesty vents his wrath, there is no way for us to make amends. (13) And even if His Majesty does not care about this, somebody else will do. It will not only undermine your virtuous prestige but will also tarnish the reputation of our Han Banners. Such behavior does more harm than good. Please think twice.

The Legend of Zhen Huan Episode 1

In the above conversation between Zhen and Xia, Zhen adopts mock politeness ((11), (12) and (13)) as a skillful strategy for indirectly conveying to Xia that she should better stop being arrogant and imperious, which is a challenge to Xia's equity rights. Zhen initiates the interaction by addressing Xia as "sister", which draws closer their distance and creates a friendly atmosphere. She uses "kind and generous" to praise Xia as being kind and generous in sentence (11), which meets the expectations of Xia's personal face needs. Then in sentence (12), by saying "I am only concerned on your behalf", Zhen achieves the purpose of attracting the attention of Xia and strengthening the interaction between her and Xia in their speeches. In addition, she compliments Xia for having "virtuous prestige" and puts herself in the same position with Xia by saying "our Han Banners" in sentence (13), suggesting they share the honor and disgrace together, which reduces the differences between the two sides and avoids potential conflicts with Xia. However, on the audition day, Xia looks down on An because of her humble family and humiliates her with offensive language. That's the reason why Zhen comes out and starts a conversation with Xia. Obviously, Zhen does not think Xia has virtuous prestige. The real purpose of Zhen is to indirectly stop her from punishing An unreasonably, which is a challenge on Xia's equity rights. The seemingly polite utterances are adopted here to mitigate the imposing force in her expression as it may sound as impinging on Xia's free of action. From the subsequent plot, we know that by performing mock politeness, Zhen succeeds in enforcing her will upon Xia while avoiding direct confrontation with her.

Summary

This paper has tentatively presented a different definition of mock politeness and innovatively explored and tested the feasibility of the model of mock politeness with respect to mock polite pheromone in the conversation between characters in *The Legend of Zhen Huan*. Firstly, mock politeness can be defined as a superficially polite speech act which challenges or attacks the communication participant's face or sociality rights in a particular context. It is a linguistic strategy for the purpose of expressing a negative attitude while maintaining a superficially harmonious rapport between participants. Secondly, the model of mock politeness proves to have effective explanatory power concerning the characters' option and use of mock politeness in that it provides a relatively detailed framework for explaining the mock politeness in terms of its "polite" and "impolite" components. It is argued that this model can also be applied to the pragmatic analysis of other texts. Thirdly, instead of regarding mock politeness as a variant form of impoliteness, this paper argues to view mock politeness as a special language phenomenon on its right. Because compared to direct insult, criticism or threaten, mock politeness is less unpleasant and offensive since it still stays politeness on the surface and thus reduces the possibility of direct conflicts.

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