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Humorous Impoliteness in The Big Bang Theory and Sherlock: Conveying Humour with Offensive Language

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Humorous Impoliteness

in *The Big Bang Theory* and *Sherlock*:

Conveying Humour with Offensive Language

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Conveying Humour with Offensive Language

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Contents

General introduction

Violence and its ubiquity in entertainment media have been the subject of heated debates and many studies during the past decades: some have claimed, for example, that violent films and video games could alter the personalities of vulnerable people such as children and teenagers and make them more aggressive. While it is true that onscreen violent behaviours may influence us in some ways, further research has also clearly proved that 'there is no monocausal relationship between the consumption of violent media and real-life aggression' (Melzer *et al.* 2010). These concerns and studies, no matter what the results actually are, show that violence, its representations and effects do affect us and need to be addressed. Our time seems to be more concerned with violence than any other, and Bessel goes as far as to call it 'a modern obsession' (2015).

   It should be noted, however, that these studies have tended to focus on representations of physical violence, when verbal aggression—which, of course, is not limited to insults—is just as omnipresent in most TV programmes. This fact is not surprising at all: what makes most fictions what they are is conflict, and the use of conflictive language has been seen as a sign of round, complex, well-developed and dynamic characters (Forster 1927/1955: 73). Shakespeare's plays are full of more or less elaborated insults and violent arguments, like many other novels, comic books, movies… Fiction thrives on conflict, whether it be physical, verbal, or both. But there seems to be a great deal of difference in people's minds between physical and verbal violence. The latter is generally—and mistakenly—viewed as less harmful, less potent; occasionally, and quite legitimately, it is even seen as a superior, better answer than physical violence. This idea is reflected in the way people treat their representations. Physical violence shocks: rapes and murders in *Game of Thrones* or *American Horror Story* make headlines and stir heated discussions; insults, threats and

harassment rarely do. The difference is such that conflictive language has also become a form of entertainment and, it seems, even humour. TV programmes use and abuse of verbal aggression because, although it is not as striking as physical violence, it is still salient, noticeable and memorable. Unlike normalised, good and civilised behaviour, verbal impoliteness triggers something in our minds. And sometimes, perhaps more often than we imagine, it triggers laughter.

The association between verbal violence and humour first seems paradoxical: violence is negative, criticised, illegal, rejected; humour is positive, praised, encouraged and appreciated. Yet a lot of TV series, amongst other programmes, make offensive language a distinctive form of humour—at least intending to make the audience laugh—and the main trait of key characters such as Gregory House (*House M.D*), Chandler Bing (*Friends*), Barney *(How I Met Your Mother)*, Malcolm Tucker (*The Thick of It*), Sterling Archer (*Archer*), Eric Cartman (*South Park*), Sheldon Cooper (*The Big Bang Theory*), Sherlock Holmes (*Sherlock*) and many more. How to explain this association between verbal impoliteness and humour? How and why does it work? Is verbal abuse always funny and, if not, what makes it so? These questions will be at the heart of this study, which is divided into four main parts.

The purpose of the first part is to give an overview of various definitions and theories about humour and laughter. Of course, such complex phenomena can hardly be fully accounted for, and this for two reasons. First, the subject keeps being investigated today in many different disciplines such as biology, physiology, neurology, linguistics, philosophy and literature—which definitely hints at the importance and ubiquity of the phenomenon. And second, studies of humour and laughter actually go back to Antiquity, where theatre and comedy held a major place: chunking two millennia of different accounts in such a limited space is certainly a challenge, but it is not impossible. Thus, Part I will be divided into four subparts, each with a different objective. The first subpart will define and explain the word *humour* from a historical point of view and present the main types of humour; the second one

will focus on Henri Bergson's theory of laughter, which I favoured in terms of space because it is one of the most well-developed and detailed accounts of humour; the third one aims to introduce incongruity theories, which have stood the test of time and are still some of the most recognised approaches; finally, the fourth and last one will briefly explain three other useful models of laughter and humour: superiority, release and benign violation. All these accounts shed light on the workings of humour and some of the reasons that make us laugh.

The second part also addresses theories but this time of linguistic impoliteness. Impoliteness, unlike humour, is a quite recent area of research that struggled to leave the shadow of politeness studies. Impolite language was often viewed as limited to rude, vulgar and insulting words and unworthy of serious research. Why take time to explore such a nasty aspect of human behaviour? To turn this rhetorical question into a genuine concern, precisely because it *is* one aspect of it, and not a small one since impolite interactions frequently occur, notably on TV. For thirty years, academic interest in impoliteness has been growing and today, we finally have a variety of concepts and models to work with. Part II is divided into three subparts. The first subpart concerns two main—and rather antithetic—theories of politeness, Brown and Levinson's and Richard Watts's, which influenced and inspired further studies on impoliteness; such an introduction to politeness also allows me to present key concepts involved in linguistic impoliteness. The second and third subparts both draw from Jonathan Culpeper's research spanning more than twenty years: from his beginnings with a reversed Brown and Levinsonian model, Culpeper gradually revised and refocused his research to devise a new and more accurate theory.

Culpeper's new model and its associated categorisation are the main ones I chose to use in the third part, whose aim is to look for and analyse different examples of both humorous and impolite occurrences in light of the previously introduced theories. The data I am working with in this third part and the next comprise two TV fictions: *The Big Bang Theory* (seasons 1 to 6), a CBS sitcom, and *Sherlock* (seasons 1 to 3), a BBC drama series. These programmes

regularly convey humour through impolite linguistic behaviour or conversely make impolite, conflictive interactions humorous, and this part aims to show that such a combination between impoliteness and humour does work and that a wide array of impoliteness types may trigger laughter. This third part is divided into four subparts. The first subpart is a detailed presentation of the TV shows' plots and characters. The three others concern general types of impoliteness, such as conventionalised formulaic impoliteness for which a list of recurring expressions used to cause offence is given, implicational impoliteness—including imitation, sarcasm or lack of politeness—where the offence is not contained in the words but in what the words imply, and finally dysphemistic directness—or the best way to make people uncomfortable—which consists in using taboo expressions.

The fourth and last part focuses on a particular form of implicational impoliteness, sarcasm, and the limits of humorous impoliteness. Interestingly, sarcasm is both described as a type of humour in Part I and as a type of impoliteness in Part III, which makes it the perfect alliance of the two concepts. Not surprisingly, it is also one of the most recurring forms of impoliteness in *The Big Bang Theory* and *Sherlock*: unlike other forms, it is almost guaranteed to be humorous because of its intrinsic creativity stemming from the inferencing process. The sarcastic form is highly valued because of the sarcast's double role: to act one part and to show his or her disapproval of the part at the same time. This fourth part is divided into three subparts. The first one aims to explore the definitions, practice and recognition of sarcasm as well as its teasing and self-deprecating potentials; the second one elaborates on the creativity of the sarcastic form. The last subpart derives from sarcasm to consider the limits of humorous impoliteness and to suggest some factors influencing our interpretation of verbal offence as humorous.

Part I: Theories of humour

Introduction

This first part will focus on theories of humour and laughter. I will first present an account of the word *humour*, originally related to bodily fluids, as well as different genres that humour can take such as parody, satire or dark humour. This will be followed by different philosophical theories on the subject. Bergson's mechanical theory explains that laughter comes from 'du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant'; I will particularly develop Bergson's account, notably because it is particularly detailed and offers a precious insight into the workings of laughter and comedy. Incongruity theories posit that the comic comes from the unexpected and has been defended by a certain number of thinkers such as Kant and Schopenhauer since the 18th century. Before that, it was generally accepted that laughter was the result of one's feeling of superiority, which is what superiority theorists—like Aristotle or Hobbes—believed. Another account of humour includes Freud's release theory, mostly inadequate because of its scientific inaccuracy but still interesting and influent. Finally, the Benign Violation Theory is one of the most recent and is still being researched: it explains that humour involves a process of violation, the realisation of the violation's harmlessness and the confrontation of these two elements to create humour.

1. What is *humour*?

Humour
1. n. The quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech
Synonyms: comical aspect, comic side, funny side, comedy, funniness, hilarity, jocularity

(*Oxford Dictionary online*)

The word *humour* is quite complex and was subjected to a series of change in meaning through time. We will briefly explore its historical evolution, from the borrowing *humor* to designate bodily fluids to today's sense, as provided by the *Oxford Dictionary*. We will conclude this part by presenting some forms that humour can take.

1.1 Humours

The English language does not have the precious distinction that French acquired between *humour* et *humeur(s)*, which makes the word more complex in English.

Humor was borrowed during the Middle English period, after the Norman conquest, either from Old French or directly from Latin. It first designated the four bodily humours theorised by Hippocrates and related to elements, seasons and tempers:

Humour	Season	Element	Organ	Qualities	Ancient name	Temperament
Blood	spring	air	heart	warm moist	*sanguis*	sanguine
Yellow bile	summer	fire	liver	warm dry	*kholé*	choleric
Black bile	autumn	earth	spleen	cold dry	*melaina kholé*	melancholic
Phlegm	winter	water	brain	cold moist	*phlégma*	phlegmatic

(chart from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humorism)

In 2 A.D., Galen asserted that the predominance of one of those humours was the source of all diseases.

Several centuries later, Ben Jonson related these humours to theatre and especially to the comedy of character (Escarpit 1960/1963: 13). He noticed that ancient and medieval theatre was based on types or stock characters, and he wanted to define these with the theory of humours: each character could be called by his/her predominant humour, such as the Melancholic or the Phlegmatic. Louis Cazamian, quoted by Escarpit (1960/1963), explains:

[Jonson] a détruit toute impression qui pouvait encore survivre que la servitude physique impliquée par le sens médical de *humour* fût un élément tragique, mieux adapté au pathétique qu'à la comédie. Il a donné au mot et à la notion une atmosphère nettement comique. L'association ainsi conclue et confirmée entre les humours et le rire était grosse de conséquences bien au-delà de ce qu'il pouvait imaginer. (16)[1]

What is interesting for us is that the first sense of the word highlighted a flaw considered as unusual or antisocial which was then responded to with laughter. By linking comedy and humours, Jonson established a relation between laughter and the abnormal. This would mean that any behaviour—whether it be physical or linguistic—going against a norm has the potential to be comic or to make us laugh; and since impoliteness is also an unusual, abnormal characteristic of interaction, it establishes a link between laughter and impoliteness as well.

1.2 How *humour* developed

While the word was borrowed by most European countries during the 17th and 18th centuries, it soon started to develop further and left behind the theory of humours. In England however, *humour* remained strongly linked to it and gave rise to the so-called *British humour* or *sense of humour,* which Escarpit defines as 'une sorte de dialectique entre des tendances contradictoires dont chacune sert alternativement de masque à l'autre, la plaisanterie venant humaniser la mélancolie ou la morosité venant tempérer une vitalité trop exubérante.'[2] (1960/1963: 23) In other words, it would be a way to soften something sad with a comic element and to give something humorous a sad element—Shakespeare's jesters are generally

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[1] '[Jonson] destroyed all surviving beliefs that the physical servitude implied in the medical sense of *humour* were a tragic element, better suited to the pathetic rather than comedy. He gave the word and the notion a distinctly comic atmosphere. The association thus finalised and confirmed between humours et laughter was to have consequences beyond anything he could have imagined.' All translations are my own.
[2] 'some sort of dialectics between contradictory tendencies, each alternatively masking the other, such as laughter humanising melancholia or moroseness tempering excessive vitality.'

good examples of sad yet comic characters. Stephen Potter also notes that British humour, this 'détachement par le sourire'[3] (1960/1963: 27) attempting to balance humours, became a sort of national reflex.

During the 18th century though, humour started to be socially engaged and satire became a literary trend, from Jonathan Swift to Laurence Sterne. Escarpit notes that 'La partie vitale, viscérale − le *sense of humour* − s'est détachée de la partie intellectuelle, consciente, esthétique, celle que depuis lors le monde entier appelle l'humour.'[4] (1960/1963: 41) He believes that humour as a concept now only denotes serious and engaged humour and that the sense of humour born from the theory of fluids disappeared for its lack of interest into the things of life and serious concerns; I would tend to disagree with this, given the current definition of the word *humour*, which encompasses everything that makes us laugh and contains many different forms; some are engaged, of course, but others are not. Escarpit, though, wrote his historical overview of the word and concept in 1960 and it is highly possible that the term shifted again in the past fifty years.

1.3 Different types of humour

Humour can take many forms and we will conclude this section by establishing a list of its most important varieties. The following account is mostly based on Stephen Hoover (2013: 19-41).

Parody's first traces go back to ancient Greece where performers would imitate the style of poets; today, we only need to browse YouTube to find thousands of *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings* parodies. Their aim is to reproduce, imitate a piece and highlight or exaggerate its most prominent features: a good illustration would be the *Austin Powers* films, parodying spies—maybe James Bond's love of women and overconfidence. Parody is, according to

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[3] 'detachment with a smile'.
[4] 'The vital, visceral part—the sense of humour—detached itself from the intellectual, conscious and aesthetic part, which the whole world calls humour since then.'

Hoover (2013: 23), a specific, non-engaged type of satire, and it is not surprising that a few of these categories overlap.

Satire is generally distinguished from parody by its relation to real issues; it is often—not always—linked to politics or personalities. The aim of satire is to criticise something that is deemed inappropriate, ridiculous or dangerous, by pointing at its absurdity. It can include elements of irony, sarcasm or caricature. Some of the most famous examples of literary satire include Orwell's *Animal Farm* or Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

Verbal irony is a form of humour in which, frequently, the opposite of what is meant is said (*Oh, I love being sick and stuck in bed!*). Situational irony is a situation which is contrary to what is expected or what should be; for example, a policeman inadvertently shooting himself during a gun safety lecture. It is worth noting that irony, just like sarcasm, is not always humorous.

Sarcasm, often seen as a particularly biting form of irony, is included in Hoover's list. He remarks, however, that it is delicate and that some skills are needed to keep it laughable: 'Sarcasm requires rapid-fire remarks and jokes in an effort to hurt someone else or to deride a situation or a statement the person made.' (2013: 29)

Sherlock, 'The Reichenbach Fall' (S02E03)

Context: As he and Anderson are examining a room where two children were kidnapped, Sherlock notices traces of linseed oil.

> (1) Anderson: Not much use. Doesn't lead us to the kidnapper.
> (2) Sherlock: **Brilliant, Anderson.**
> (3) Anderson: Really?
> (4) Sherlock Holmes: **Yes. Brilliant impression of an idiot.**

And indeed, later in the scene, the traces of linseed oil under black light reveal a message and footsteps that one of the children, avid of detective stories, left before he was taken away. Sherlock's sarcastic (2) and (4) are meant to insult Anderson and his lack of observation and deduction skills. For a more detailed analysis of this extract, see Part III, section 2.2.1.

Slapstick is a kind of physical humour, which is why it is often considered as a lower, non-intellectual form of comedy (2013: 25). It consists in falls, trips and stumbles, slipping on banana peels and getting kicked in the privates, for instance. Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin were masters of slapstick comedy in cinema.

Black or dark humour concerns very serious or tragic topics but takes them lightly. It 'juxtaposes morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones that underscore the senselessness or futility of life.' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*) Consider the following example:

Sherlock, 'A Scandal in Belgravia' (S02E01)

Context: Everyone is invited to Sherlock and John's to celebrate Christmas. Molly, a post-registrar, enquires about Mrs. Hudson's bad hip.

> (5) MOLLY: How's the hip?
> (6) HUDSON: Oh, it's atrocious! But thanks for asking.
> (7) MOLLY: **I've seen much worse…** *(jokingly)* **but then I do post-mortems.** *(awkward silence)* Oh, God, sorry.
> (8) SHERLOCK: Don't make jokes, Molly.

Molly's remark in (7) is a typical example of dark humour, as she juxtaposes a 'hopeful', light introduction ('I've seen much worse') and then a reminder that she examines dead people, making her previous statement much less valid. This excerpt also emphasises the riskiness of dark humour: indeed, Molly's joke is welcomed by an awkward silence as no one finds it funny. It should be noted that such a use of dark humour in medical professions is not rare—it is a means to cope with difficult situations, mostly disease, age and death—, but since Mrs.

Hudson does not belong to the medical world—and everyone realises it—, (7) falls flat and rather appears as a rude remark.

Blue humour is often described as dirty or vulgar. Hoover notes that it 'use[s] language and cover[s] topics that you might not talk about in "polite company"' (2013: 39). It mainly concerns taboo notions such as bodily functions, sex, race or gender and violence.

Many more types of humour exist: anecdotal, deadpan, stand-up, improv… I have here focused on the ones which might be of interest for the rest of this study. We can also notice that many of them can overlap and it is not rare to find comedies using several of these types at the same time.

2. Henri Bergson and the mechanical theory

> 'The philosopher Henri Bergson says it's funny when a human being behaves
> like an object. […] Perhaps I'll spend some time developing a unified theory
> of comedy, which will allow me to elicit laughter from anyone at any time.'
>
> Sheldon Cooper in 'The Hesitation Ramification'

Henri Bergson held three major conferences on laughter and comedy, later published as essays in 1900. Mainly drawing examples from French theatre, each part focuses on different types of comedy and, providing a set of laws governing the subject, the reasons they make us laugh: the first one introduces Bergson's general theory and comedy of forms and gestures as well as their force of expansion; the second one is about situation and language-based comedy; the last one addresses comedy of character.

2.1 Bergson's laws of laughter

Before we start developing Bergson's theory, I will provide a list of Bergson's laws concerning laughter. Some of them which are particularly relevant for our study will be given more attention in the next sections.

- Law 1: 'Quand un certain effet comique dérive d'une certaine cause, l'effet nous paraît d'autant plus comique que nous jugeons plus naturelle la cause.' (1900/2013: 68) ['When a certain comic effect derives from a certain cause, the effect appears all the more comic as the cause seems to be natural.']

- Law 2: 'Peut devenir comique toute difformité qu'une personne bien conformée arriverait à contrefaire.' (1900/2013: 74) ['Any deformity that a well-formed person could fake can become comic.']

- Law 3: 'Les attitudes, gestes et mouvement du corps humain sont risibles dans l'exacte mesure où ce corps nous fait penser à une simple mécanique.' (1900/2013: 78) [Attitudes,

gestures and movements from the human body are laughable in the cases where this body looks like a simple mechanism.']

- Law 4: 'Est comique tout incident qui appelle notre attention sur le physique alors que le moral est en cause.' (1900/2013: 91) ['Any incident drawing our attention to a physical aspect when a moral aspect is involved is comic.']

- Law 5: 'Nous rions toutes les fois qu'une personne nous donne l'impression d'une chose.' (1900/2013: 95) ['We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing.']

- Law 6: 'Est comique tout arrangement d'actes et d'événements qui nous donne, insérées l'une dans l'autre, l'illusion de la vie et la sensation nette d'un agencement mécanique.' (1900/2013: 102) ['Any arrangement of acts and events which gives us the illusion of life and the clear sensation of a mechanical organisation, inserted in each other, is comic.']

- Law 7: 'Dans une répétition comique de mots il y a généralement deux termes en présence, un sentiment comprimé qui se détend comme un ressort, et une idée qui s'amuse à comprimer de nouveau le sentiment.' (1900/2013: 105) ['In a comic repetition of words, there are generally two terms: a repressed element which unloosens like a spring, and an idea which compresses the element again.']

- Law 8: 'Une situation est toujours comique quand elle appartient en même temps à deux séries d'événements absolument indépendantes, et qu'elle peut s'interpréter à la fois dans deux sens tout différents.' (1900/2013: 119) ['A situation is always comic when it belongs to two independent series of events at the same time and can be interpreted in both different senses.']

- Law 9: 'On obtiendra un mot comique en insérant une idée absurde dans un moule de phrase consacré.' (1900/2013: 128) ['A comic word will be obtained by inserting an absurd idea in a conventionalised expression.']

- Law 10: 'On obtient un effet comique quand on affecte d'entendre une expression au propre, alors qu'elle était employée au figuré. Ou encore : Dès que notre attention se porte sur la matérialité d'une métaphore, l'idée exprimée devient comique.' (1900/2013: 130) ['A comic effect is obtained when we pretend to understand an expression literally instead of

figuratively; or as soon as we pay attention to the materiality of a metaphor, the expressed idea become comic.']

- Law 11: 'On obtiendra un effet comique en transposant l'expression naturelle d'une idée dans un autre ton.' (1900/2013: 135) ['A comic effect will be obtained by transposing the natural expression of an idea into another tone.']

- Law 12: 'L'absurdité comique est de même nature que celle des rêves.' (1900/2013: 174) ['Comic absurdity is of the same kind as dreams.']

2.2 General theory and comedy of forms and gestures/movements

Bergson starts his work by explaining that what he seeks to discover is the essence of comedy; it is a core value of what makes us laugh that he will try to bring to light: 'Quelle distillation nous donnera l'essence, toujours la même, à laquelle tant de produits divers empruntent ou leur indiscrète odeur ou leur parfum délicat ?'[5] (Bergson 1900/2013: 61).

While reminding us that laughter has always been seen as a properly human characteristic—an idea recently shut down by experiments on animals—, he adds that it is dependent on indifference and states that it requires 'une anesthésie momentanée du cœur'[6] (1900/2013: 64). Indeed, according to Bergson, comedy and laughter address intelligence only and cannot prevail if emotions are involved: the audience will have to be manipulated into not having feelings for the comic character (cf. 2.4). Another condition is the presence of a group, or an echo, providing an 'arrière-pensée d'entente [et] de complicité'[7] (1900/2013: 64), already emphasising laughter's social function.

More interestingly, Bergson then introduces his first law: 'Quand un certain effet comique dérive d'une certaine cause, l'effet nous parait d'autant plus comique que nous jugeons plus naturelle la cause.' (1900/2013: 68) In other words, we will tend to laugh more if we think

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[5] 'What kind of distillation will give us the essence, always the same, to which so many different products borrow their indiscreet smell or delicate perfume?'
[6] 'a momentary anaesthesia of the heart'.
[7] 'an ulterior motive of agreement and complicity'.

that the comic element is natural to the man/woman who displays it. The comic character must be comic by essence and not on purpose, and s/he must be in contradiction with society.

Bergson develops an ideal of society, or what is expected of us, i.e. some constant attention to the things which surround us and flexibility of the body and mind or their capacity to adapt (1900/2013: 71). Comic behaviours challenge this ideal and laughter is a social gesture to inform the comic character of his/her rigidity: 'Cette raideur est le comique, et le rire en est le châtiment.'[8] (1900/2013: 73) What is important to remember is that a comic behaviour, which will make us laugh, is one that deviates from what is socially expected. This is—not so strangely—also valid for impoliteness, which is a deviation from the social norms of interaction.

The philosopher expands on the comedy of forms—and deformities—in his second law, but it is the third law concerning the comedy of gestures/movements that will be of interest here: 'Les attitudes, gestes et mouvements du corps humain sont risibles dans l'exacte mesure où ce corps fait penser à une simple mécanique' (1900/2013: 78). We might think of Sheldon Cooper and his inevitable triad of *knocks* followed by the name of the person he is visiting, a behaviour almost comparable to an OCD. But this law also introduces Bergson's most crucial element for his theory: the mechanism.

Bergson thus presents the core value of laughter, which takes place whenever there is 'du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant'[9] (1900/2013: 83). Laughter itself, though, is a living thing, and it can develop into many forms because comedies and behaviours can as well. The essence may expand to take a variety of directions, such as nature or society when they appear mechanised: some are tempted to laugh at a funeral for example, not necessarily because they are disrespectful but because a ceremony is mechanised and it is laughable to realise it. More generally, it is about forgetting the substance to analyse the form only. Another of Bergson's

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[8] 'This rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its punishment.'
[9] 'a mechanical behaviour in a living entity'.

directions is the mind/soul constrained by the needs of the body (1900/2013: 91), this mere machine which contains our being: an inadvertent flatulence always manages to make people giggle. He notices that tragedies tend to ignore all body-related functions and actions such as eating or sitting lest the spectator should laugh. Comedies, however, are closer to these taboo notions.

2.3 Situation and language-based comedy

Starting with situation comedy, Bergson here draws his examples from theatre and compares their different categories to… children's toys. The Jack-in-the-box represents the conflict between two obstinacies, one of which is purely mechanical (1900/2013: 102): these repeating movements—the mechanism which makes the head burst out of the box and the counteract to put it back into the box—, each attempting to take over the other, make the child laugh. The puppet is the character who believes s/he acts freely but is in fact controlled by someone else: the audience might see the strings but the character does not, and his/her unawareness is comic. Finally, the snowball represents the succession of actions, enabling the so-called snowball effect, making things bigger and bigger each time. All of these toys, according to Bergson, tell us some of the mechanical characteristics that make us laugh. Summarising his theory, he explains:

> Le comique est ce côté de la personne par lequel elle ressemble à une chose, cet aspect
> des événements humains qui imite, par sa raideur d'un genre tout particulier, le
> mécanisme pur et simple, l'automatisme, enfin le mouvement sans la vie. Il exprime donc
> une imperfection individuelle ou collective qui appelle la correction immédiate. Le rire

est cette correction même. Le rire est un certain geste social, qui souligne et réprime une certaine distraction spéciale des hommes et des événements. (1900/2013: 113)[10]

And thus he distinguishes three major mechanisms for situation comedy: repetition, inversion and interference of series. Repetition consists in repeating a situation so it may appear as a coincidence. Inversion consists in switching roles, for example a child reprimanding his parents or the famous 'arroseur arrosé' (1900/2013: 118). The interference of series is best expressed in Bergson's eighth law: 'Une situation est toujours comique quand elle appartient en même temps à deux séries d'événements absolument indépendantes, et qu'elle peut s'interpréter à la fois dans deux sens tout différents.' (1900/2013: 119) He gives us the example of the *quidproquo* or misunderstanding: two series coincide on the surface but refer to two different things. Let's illustrate this with an example from *Sherlock*. Sherlock is a brilliant but asocial detective and Molly is a colleague of his who works in a morgue and regularly provides him with bodies for experiments. It is made obvious to us that she is attracted to him but that she is also very shy. While he is busy doing some analyses in her lab, she tries to ask him out.

Sherlock, 'A Study in Pink' (S01E01)

> (1) MOLLY *(shyly)*: I was wondering if you'd like to have coffee.
> (2) SHERLOCK: **Black. Two sugars, please. I'll be upstairs.**

In (1), Molly meant to express her interest in Sherlock and her desire to go on a date with him, as most people would understand from the situation. Yet Sherlock in (2) interprets her proposition literally, and believes he has just been offered a cup of coffee. This results in a

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[10] 'The comic is this side of a person which makes him/her look like a thing; this aspect of human events imitating, through a very particular rigidity, the pure and simple mechanism, automatism, or lifeless movement. Thus it expresses an individual or collective flaw calling for correction. Laughter is this very correction. Laughter is a social gesture, highlighting and repressing a certain distraction in men or women and events.'

comic situation, where Sherlock's misunderstanding of the proposition coincides with a literal, surface interpretation of Molly's invitation.

Language-based comedy is paralleled with situation comedy as Bergson applies the same mechanisms to it, i.e. inversion, interference of series and repetition/transposition: 'On devine donc qu'une phrase deviendra comique si elle donne un sens en se retournant, ou si elle exprime indifféremment deux systèmes d'idées tout à fait indépendants, ou enfin si on l'a obtenue en transposant une idée dans un ton qui n'est pas le sien.'[11] (1900/2013: 132) Inversion consists in inverting the objects of a sentence:

> (3) What is this flowerpot doing on the table?
> (4) What is this table doing under the flowerpot?

The interference of two series mainly consists in puns, plays on sounds and figurative/literal meanings. In the example below, Raj is having dinner with Lucy and tells her about his father.

TBBT, 'The Contractual Obligation Implementation' (S06E18)

> (5) RAJ: My dad's a gynaecologist in India, so if you're ever over there and need a check-up, as he likes to say, **he's at your cervix**.
> (6) LUCY: That's terrible, your dad should be sent to **the pun-itentiary**.

In (5), Raj mentions that his father often plays on the phonetic similarity between *service* and *cervix* (the lower part of the uterus), and replaces the first word with the second in the expression *be at someone's service*. This can remind us of Bergson's ninth law: 'On obtiendra un mot comique en insérant une idée absurde dans un moule de phrase consacré.' (1900/2013: 128) Lucy replies by saying that since Raj's father's play-on-words is so bad that he should be

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[11] 'We can conclude that a sentence will be comic if it can be reversed and still make sense, or if it expresses indifferently two independent systems of ideas, or if we obtain it by transposing an idea into an unnatural tone.'

sent to the *pun-itentiary* instead of the penitentiary, playing again on the phonetic closeness between *pen-* and *pun* and inventing a new type of prison for those who make bad puns.

Repetition or transposition is about transposing the natural expression of an idea into another tone (1900/2013: 135), as in parodies or exaggerations. More generally in transpositions, Bergson notices a conflict between reality and ideal, and this is where he opposes irony and humour. He defines irony as enunciating an ideal and pretending to believe it is real (A: 'I lost your keys…' - B: 'Fantastic!') while humour would be to enunciate something real and pretend to believe it is ideal (C: 'I lost my keys… well, I didn't want to go home anyway.'). Another example would be the use of jargon in an inappropriate context. In the example below, Leonard and Leslie are both physicists working at the same university and Leonard wants to ask her out.

TBBT, 'The Fuzzy Boots Corollary' (S01E03)

> (7) LEONARD: Leslie, I would like to propose an experiment.
> (8) LESLIE: Hang on. I'm trying to see how long it takes a five hundred kilowatt oxygen iodine laser to heat up my cup o' noodles.
> (9) LEONARD: Pff, I've done it, about two seconds, 2.6 for minestrone. Anyway, I was thinking more of **a bio-social exploration with a neuro-chemical overlay**.
> (10) LESLIE: Wait, are you asking me out?
> (11) LEONARD: I was going to characterise it as **the modification of our colleague/friendship paradigm with the addition of a date-like component**. But we don't need to quibble over terminology.

The use of 'bio-social exploration with a neuro-chemical overlay' in (9) or 'modification of our colleague/friendship paradigm with the addition of a date-like component' in (11) is clearly an example of scientific jargon and it is quite amusing to hear these long phrases instead of a short and plain 'date'.

2.4 Comedy of character

Comedy of character comes from a rigidity against social life. Bergson says that 'est comique le personnage qui suit automatiquement son chemin sans se soucier de prendre contact avec les autres.'[12] (1900/2013: 142) This rigidity is translated into a flaw of character. Because, as we remember, we cannot laugh if emotions are involved, Bergson proposes two ways to separate this flaw from emotion. The first one is to isolate the flaw from the character to make it appear as having a will of its own—i.e. mechanical. In parallel to the first law—i.e. the flaw should be inherent to the comic character—, s/he should be unaware of it or at least partially unable to control it. The second way is to focus on independent, quick, unexpected gestures rather than planned acts, which will prevent the spectators from connecting with the character. Seeing or hearing the planning of something or a train of thought can indeed make a connection with the audience; knowing the motives for any unusual behaviour can erase its comic side. He adds that in comedy, we need to observe others without going too far into their interiority for fear we should become emotional about it; the aim is to generalise—a flaw, most of the time—and to show what is laughable in order to correct it. Thus the comic character often has to be a type, defined by one particularly funny quality, and not a fully-fledged personality as in tragedies. This idea is quite similar to what Jonson remarked about theatre characters who are comic if one of their humours overrides the others and comes to define their whole character: the Choleric, the Phlegmatic…

Reflecting on how to create an ideally comic character, Bergson believes that the main flaw which makes us laugh is vanity: 'Issue de la vie sociale, puisque c'est une admiration de soi fondée sur l'admiration qu'on croit inspirer aux autres, elle est plus naturelle encore, plus universellement innée que l'égoïsme'[13] (1900/2013: 166). Vanity is ideal because it generally

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[12] 'the character who automatically follows his own path without paying attention to the others is comic.'
[13] 'Born out of social life, since it is self-admiration coming from the admiration we believe to inspire in others, it is even more natural, more universally innate than selfishness.'

does not inspire pity and we all have experienced it. We could give the example of Alceste in *The Misanthrope*, but comedies are full of overconfident characters who end up failing.

Finally, it is the character's own logic, generally illogical or absurd, which participates in creating a comic atmosphere. Bergson gives the example of Don Quixote, who shapes reality according to what he reads in chivalric novels. The character follows his/her own ideas, however absurd they might sound. We also have this common image of the shadow that looks like a monster: the character is trembling and sweating, waiting to be attacked, but as it gets closer and comes to light, it appears to be something completely harmless. But instead of comparing this behaviour with madness—which would be tragic—Bergson associates it with dreams in his last law: 'L'absurdité comique est de même nature que celle des rêves.' (1900/2013: 174). In dreams indeed, Bergson tells us, we use our sensations to create a memory, which is why things, like shadows, may appear different from reality.

3. Incongruity theories

3.1 Beattie, Kant and Schopenhauer

Incongruity theories all posit one core value to humour and laughter, which is the unexpected or the incongruous. In the 18th century, several thinkers started to defend such a view and the most important ones were James Beattie and Immanuel Kant. Beattie was the first to use the term *incongruous*, defining the cause of laughter as 'two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage' (in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 'Philosophy of Humour'); in other words, laughter would occur when there is an association of two (or more) incongruous elements which would not usually go together. Kant also supported an incongruity theory, though he never used this particular word. According to him, laughter comes from 'an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing' (*ibid*.), meaning that what we expect to happen does not and vanishes, to be replaced by something else. Both had a quite similar view and maintained that humour was based on the interruption of the unexpected.

Schopenhauer also considers laughter in *The World as Will and Representation*, where he examines human desires and motivations. His discussion about the incongruity existing between intuitive and abstract cognition leads him to study the phenomenon of laughter, which he believes to be the result of this very incongruity. For Schopenhauer, it comes from the sudden realisation that there exists an incongruity between a concept—what we imagine and is abstract—and the realities which fall under this concept. He adds that 'it often occurs when two or more real objects are thought through a *single* concept that transfers its identity to them; but their very great difference in other respects makes it conspicuously obvious that the concept only applied to the objects in a very one-sided way.' (1818/2010: 84) To give a

very simple example, tomatoes and pineapples are both fruits conceptually, but our intuition/perception tells or shows us that they are different.

I will try to explain Schopenhauer's different types of object/concept incongruities—wit, foolishness and wordplay—with formula, the second element symbolising the incongruous realisation:

- 2+ realities → 1 concept = *wit*

> A hands B diced pineapples and tomatoes.
> B: What is this?
> A: You wanted a fruit salad. You never specified which fruits.

Here B sees the two different realities but is made aware by A that they are the same thing conceptually, i.e. fruit. Realising that two realities that are so different are actually one concept is an example of wit for Schopenhauer.

- 1 concept → 2+ realities = *foolishness*

> A: Would you like a fruit for dessert?
> B: Yes, please!
> A hands B a tomato.

B accepts to be given a fruit for dessert and probably expects an orange, a peach or a banana; but A gives B a tomato, which is a fruit, though not usually eaten for dessert. Realising that one concept can contain different realities is an example of foolishness.

- 1 reality → 2+ concepts = *wordplay*

> C: I try to develop my photographic memory.

The word/reality *develop* can be thought through two concepts: the first one means enhancing—C tries to enhance his/her memory—but the word is made funny by the adjective

photographic applied to *memory*, since *develop* is also used for the processing of photographs.

3.2 Incongruity or incongruities?

Is incongruity too broad a notion for humour? Some have pointed out that many things could be incongruous and yet not laughable: Bain (a proponent of the degradation theory, cf. 4.1) gives the examples of snow in May, an instrument out of tune or parental cruelty. [14] Incongruity can stir other emotions, ranging from pleasure to sadness. Morreall distinguishes three sorts of reactions to incongruity[15]: negative emotion, reality assimilation and amusement. Feelings such as anger, fear, sadness are negative emotions; reality assimilation occurs when the incongruity is puzzling or challenging. In both cases, we experience a loss of control and try to reverse the situation, i.e. to push the negative emotions away or to find a solution. Amusement, on the contrary, is when we enjoy incongruity and do not feel threatened by its presence; amusing incongruity is based on our acceptance of the situation. Of course, we could always find a specific context in which Bain's examples come out as funny, since nothing is by nature humorous or not. Incongruous events or objects can take a variety of forms, including a humorous one. There are thus different incongruities and everything will depend on their context and our subjective perception.

Incongruity theories were partly a response to the superiority theory, which had been the doxa for centuries—actually since Antiquity, as we will see in the next section. Gaining awareness of its flaws, many thinkers tried to find a different approach, which would not be based on an emotion but on an intellectual attitude or, as Sully puts it, the 'modification of our thought-activity' (1902: 125).

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[14] See http://www.pragmaticshumour.net/makingsenseofhumour/1.3incongruity_theories.htm
[15] *Ibid.*

4. Other theories

4.1 The superiority theory

Superiority or degradation theories originated with Aristotle, who remarked that laughter induced by comedies involved a feeling of superiority. In his *Poetics*, he maintained that we could only laugh at inferiors and that the ludicrous was 'some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive' (quoted in Sully 1902: 120). However, it is Thomas Hobbes who developed the first superiority theory in *Human Nature*, stating that 'the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly' (in Sully 1902: 120).

Alexander Bain proposed a softened version of the superiority/degradation theory: while he defined it as 'the degradation of some person or interest possessing dignity in circumstances that excite no other strong emotion' (in Sully 1902: 121), he implied that it did not always involve our own superiority but could be sympathetic, that it was not always about a person but could be an object, and finally that there should be no emotions like pity or disgust involved.

Hoover considers Bergson's model as an offshoot of the superiority theory (2013: 71); but while his mechanical theory can sometimes imply a feeling of superiority and some degradation of the comic character because of his/her apparent flaw, it is not always the case, for example in puns. Moreover, the superiority theory is built on the predominance of an emotion, which is exactly what Bergson rejects since one of his conditions for laughter to happen is 'une anesthésie momentanée du coeur' (Bergson 1900/2013: 64). James Sully remarks that the superiority theory is quite limited and does not encompass everything that is laughable, such as children's laughter, word and sound plays, nonsense or laughing at oneself.

Yet it has 'dominated Western thinking about laughter for two millennia.' (*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*) and there are still some contemporary proponents of this theory, such as Roger Scruton (Scruton & Jones 1982), whose argument is that being laughed at is negative and thus implies a devaluation.

4.2 The release theory

The release theory dates from the 18th century, when Shaftesbury first said that laughter consisted in releasing some fluids and gases stuck in our nerves which built pressure as they remained there. Laughter, he said, was a way to evacuate this pressure by releasing the fluids and gases (quite similar to humours in fact). It proved to be scientifically inaccurate but provided a basis for further theories.

Herbert Spencer, in the early 20th century, replaced Shaftesbury's fluids by nervous energy created by emotions. Laughter consisted in the accumulation of this energy and then its release, with the punch line. Sigmund Freud had the same idea, but he distinguished three types of release. The first type was the *joke* (*Der Witz*) which consisted in releasing the energy we normally use to repress feelings; the *comic* was to release our energy to think; *humour*, finally, was about releasing our energy used to feel emotions. He considers that jokes are mostly about taboo topics that we usually want to repress such as sex or violence. We save energy to repress our libido or hostility for example. But when telling or hearing a joke of sexual or violent contents, we uncensor ourselves and the saved energy becomes superficial because there is no need to repress the taboo in a joke. The saved energy will thus be released through laughter. The comic concerns our ability to make sense of things. When something happens, we save energy to think and make sense of what happens. When, for example, a clown makes gestures which are not logical and do not communicate anything, our energy saved to think is no longer needed and is released through laughter again. Finally, humour

functions slightly differently: it concerns situations that would normally make us release emotions or affects but do not. Let's consider this short poem:

'Waste' by Harry Graham (2009)

> I had written to Aunt Maud
> Who was on a trip abroad
> When I heard she'd died of cramp,
> Just too late to save the stamp.

The first three lines should make us feel pity but the last one cancels the emotion; hence we laugh because we save an emotional release. This technique is quite common to numerous comedies: when a serious situation happens, it often ends on a lighter note, preventing us from feeling too emotional about it.

Escarpit also mentions the notion of relief, which is quite similar: it is a 'brusque détente après une forte tension' (1960/1963: 111). The relief laughter is a primitive form based on security. It explains why the infant laughs at expected surprises such as peek-a-boo (seeing the parent's face again means security) or gravity which makes objects fall.

4.3 The Benign Violation Theory (BVT)

The BVT started to be developed in the 2000s: the research is led by Peter McGraw and is still going on today. Its aim is to find an adequate universal formula—the possibility of which is debatable—to describe and decrypt any situation involving humour and laughter. Inspired by Thomas Veatch's work and other previous theories, it posits that three conditions are required in any laughable situation: 'A
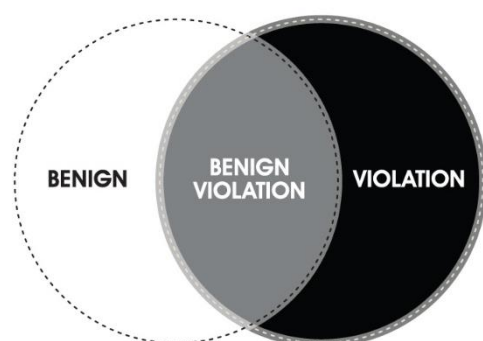
situation must be appraised as a violation, a situation must be appraised as benign, and these two appraisals must occur simultaneously.' (McGraw & Warren 2010:1142)

In other words, we first have to acknowledge that a norm has been violated; we then have to realise that the violation is actually benign, harmless; and finally, we need to confront these two realisations together.

The violation of a norm and its harmlessness is purely subjective and may depend on context, countries, cultures or gender. McGraw and Warren nevertheless propose three general ways to evaluate a situation as benign, regardless of subjective perception. The first one is 'conflicting norm interpretations' (2010: 1144), i.e. the violated norm contains an element which reduces its shock-value. They give the (rather dubious) example of a man rubbing his genitals to a purring and satisfied kitten—as opposed to a whining kitten—, this last detail being the funny and redeeming side of the violation (2010: 1144-5). The second one would be a lack of commitment to the violated norm (2010: 1145): consider religious or racist jokes; their ability to provoke laughter will depend on one's closeness to the norm, here religious or cultural affiliation. The last one is psychological distance (2010: 1146), which can be mainly temporal, spatial or social; with distance, any situation that used to be serious can become funny and thus benign: for example, a mishap resulting in a broken leg that happened to someone else or a long time ago.

Conclusion

It should be clear that all of these accounts can be valuable but also that each of them has its flaws: superiority theories cannot explain puns; incongruity theories have trouble accounting for repetition or habits; the mechanical theory is based on a certain subjective view of ideal society. Therefore, I believe it is essential to keep them all in mind, as each will be relevant to particular situations. It is difficult to imagine that we will ever find a universal theory of humour and laughter, as it is one of man's most complex phenomena and involves a high degree of subjectivity—mostly cultural. It is also notable, and the reason why we cannot choose one, that many of these theories can overlap: Bergson's contains elements of incongruity and superiority while the BVT relies on incongruity and relief for example. We could conclude this part with Sully's words: 'The result of our inquiry is that the impressions of the laughable cannot be reduced to one or two principles. Our laughter at things is of various tones.' (1902: 153)

In Bergson's mechanical theory, it was said that a comic behaviour was one that deviated from socially expected conventions or ideals. We also noted that this deviation was fairly similar to that happening in impolite behaviours: in any case, something unusual is taking place and this event is salient because unexpected. In fact, both comic and impolite behaviours rely on a subversion of expectations, much as in incongruity theories about laughter. These ideas will bring us to present some theories about (im)politeness in more detail in the next section, in an attempt to highlight the link existing between humour and impoliteness.

Part II: Theories of impoliteness

Introduction

The field of linguistic impoliteness was for a long time overshadowed by the study of politeness, to the point where impoliteness was often presented as 'the long neglected 'poor cousin' of politeness' (Bousfield & Locher 2008: 2). This idea seems a little less valid today as impoliteness has benefited from further research during the last fifteen years (Culpeper, Bousfield, Leech, Mills, Haugh, Dynel…). To say that the literature on impoliteness has become as rich as that on politeness would be an exaggeration, but we now have a certain diversity of theories and frameworks to choose from and work with.

This part's aim will be to introduce the main aspects of linguistic impoliteness, starting quite paradoxically with politeness. It is difficult to completely separate one from the other though, and politeness theories have certainly inspired studies of impoliteness. Culpeper himself, who has been working on impoliteness for twenty-five years, started by using Brown and Levinson's politeness model from 1987. Yet further research on both politeness and impoliteness drew the limits of such a framework and proposed different approaches. In 2011, Culpeper published *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence*, an updated and detailed account of the main aspects of the subject from which I will largely draw in this study.

1. Politeness theories

Before I start to study impoliteness, it will be interesting to have a look at some major accounts of its opposite, politeness, in order to better understand key concepts. I will give a brief overview of Brown and Levinson's theory, mostly developed during the 1980s, which had a considerable influence on both politeness and impoliteness studies. I will also mention Richard Watts, who proposed a more descriptive and discursive model of politeness.

1.1 Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987)

Brown and Levinson's account of politeness was published in a book in 1987. It introduced major concepts such as the distinction between positive and negative face, the sociological variables involved in interaction and a categorisation of politeness strategies.

1.1.1 Positive and negative face

If the concept of 'face' is not Erving Goffman's invention, he did introduce it in the social theory of his article 'On Face Work', first written in 1955, and then republished in *Interaction Rituals* in 1967. He defines it as '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 other words, the face is the image of ourselves we intend to give to others during social interactions. For Brown and Levinson (hereafter B&L), the goal is, during these interactions and for each individual, to maintain one's own face and that of others; their theory of politeness can thus be defined as a face-saving view, where anything will be done to avoid loss of face.

B&L distinguish two types of face when interacting with others: a negative face and a positive face. The negative face is defined as 'the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others' (1987: 62) i.e. the individual's desire for freedom and non-imposition. The positive face expresses 'the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others' (1987: 62) i.e. that his/her desire that his/her wants be appreciated. A person wants to please the people s/he is addressing.

1.1.2 Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs)

During a social interaction, people can have their faces threatened by their interlocutor; this phenomenon is called a Face-Threatening Act (FTA). The term is used by Brown and Levinson to describe a verbal or physical action that threatens the face of an individual.
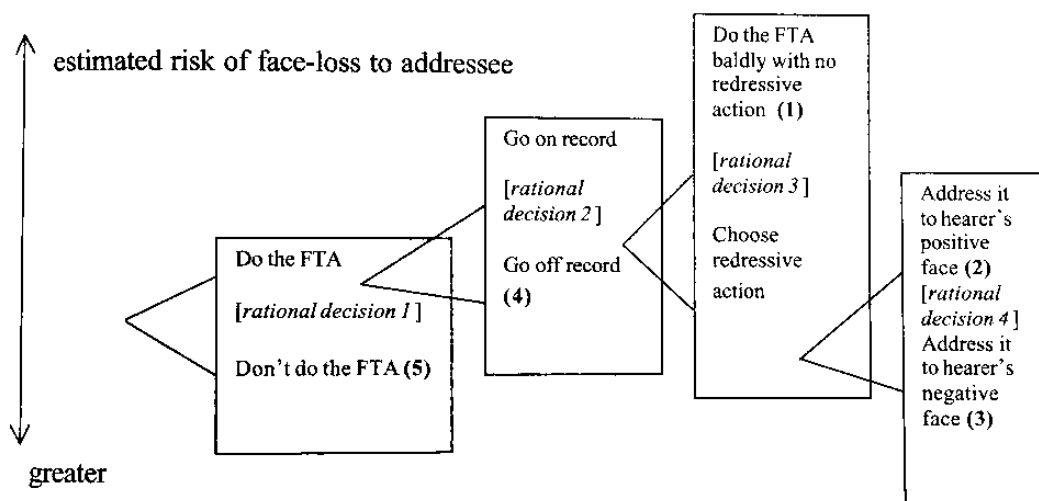
Figure 4.1 *Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies*

The chart above (Watts 2003: 87) explains the different strategies available when an FTA is about to be performed. If the speaker (S) chooses not to avoid the FTA, another choice has to be made: to do the FTA on-record or off-record. In the off-record situation, S's intentions are unclear; there could be more than one interpretation to his/her utterance. On the contrary, in the on-record situation, S's intentions are clear to his/her audience and s/he expresses them unambiguously. Finally, another choice can be made in the on-record situation: either to go 'baldly' or to use a redressive action. In other words, S can choose to mitigate the threatening value of the FTA or not. Examples for each of the strategies will be given in subsequent sections.

1.1.3 The sociological variables

There are three factors according to B&L that allow people to assess the seriousness of an FTA.

The *social distance* is the relationship between the speaker and the hearer: are they close friends? Relatives? Mere acquaintances? The type of relationship they have will affect the choice of strategy.

> (1) Open the door, please.
> (2) Could you open the door, please?

(1) may be considered as a polite request form to a close friend or a family member, as it includes 'please', but it might also be viewed as too direct to a colleague or an acquaintance, in which case (2) is the preferred form.

The *relative power* posits that we do not address our hierarchical superior the same way we would address an equal or someone who has less power. Let's take the example of a teacher asking a class of noisy students to be quiet:

> (3) Be quiet! I'm trying to work in the next room.
> (4) Excuse me, would you mind being a little quieter, please? I am working in the next room.

If the teacher sees that the class is unsupervised, s/he is likely to use a form like (3). If, however, s/he has to address a colleague who is in charge of the class, (4) is preferred.

The *absolute ranking* implies that some impositions are greater than others. Depending on the level of threat implied in the FTA, the level of redressing will be different.

> (5) Can you buy me a coffee, please?
> (6) Can you pay my rent this month, please?

(6) will always be more imposing than (2), no matter what the context and the relationship between H and S are.

1.1.4 Realisations of politeness strategies in language

In social context, a face-bearing agent will try to use 'FTA-minimising strategies' (1987: 91) to mitigate those FTAs. They will do so in response with their rational interpretation of the face-loss risk of their interlocutor. S makes an inference about the hearer's face and state of mind and will try to satisfy this assumption as well as s/he can by using different strategies. In this part, I will detail the main strategies evoked earlier: bald on-record, positive, negative and off-record politeness.

Bald-on record

The bald on-record strategy is used when S wants to do the FTA with maximum efficiency, i.e. when the want for his/her meaning to be conveyed efficiently is stronger that his/her want to satisfy H's face. Going on-record usually means respecting Grice's maxims. This strategy is generally used in cases of emergency. If S was to use a redressive action, then s/he would diminish the level of urgency s/he is trying to convey.

> (1) Help!
> (2) Look, I am telling you that […]

(1) is much more efficient during an emergency than *Could you please help me sir?*, which diminishes the urgency of the request. In (2), 'attention-getters' (1987: 96) can also be used to draw attention to an important matter.

Positive politeness

Positive politeness is 'redress directed to the addressee's positive face' (1987: 101). It is oriented towards the positive face of H and designed to minimise the potential face-threat of an act. B&L detail fifteen strategies: I will not mention each of them but give a few examples.

Claim common ground will mainly consist in S trying to redress H's face by expressing some kind of interest in him/her or in his/her particular wants. The goal is to suggest that H and S share 'common grounds', common interests and common wants.

> (3) I absolutely love the flowers you have outside! By the way, I came to see if you had any eggs I could borrow?

S saying that s/he finds H's flowers beautiful means that H's tastes are appreciated and that S and H have the same tastes, which gives them a common interest and makes them closer.

Convey that S and H are co-operators means that S and H want to be seen as working in collaboration towards a particular goal in some specific activity. This can be achieved by S conveying his/her collaboration with H by 'indicating that s/he believes in reciprocity to be prevailing between H and himself' (1987: 125).

> (4) Surely you won't mind if I borrow your car for the weekend?

S anticipating that H will not be bothered by the borrowing of his/her car means that they know each other and may cooperate, while still letting room for a potential refusal from H.

Fulfil H's want means that S no longer pretends s/he has the same interests or wants as H. Here S is fulfilling the want that H is expressing by giving him/her actual goods, sympathy or cooperation.

Negative politeness

Negative politeness is a redressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face: his/her want to have his/her freedom of action unhindered and his/her attention unimpeded (1987: 129). It includes many strategies, but I will only mention a few of them.

Be direct can be a negative politeness strategy. Even if bald on-record is often perceived as an FTA, B&L modulate this idea: '[…] there is an element in formal politeness that

sometimes directs one to minimise the imposition by coming rapidly to the point, avoiding the further imposition of prolixity and obscurity' (1987: 130). In other words, going to great lengths and keeping the conversation going for a long time can sometimes be perceived as more threatening than being direct and not wasting H's time. Let's say that H has a phone charger in his/her hand. In the first strategy case, S could use the following sentence to ask for the charger that H clearly has.

> (5) Don't mind me, I am just looking for a charger.

Don't presume/assume can be achieved by the addition of questions or hedges such as *sort of, kind of, pretty* or *quite* to soften the strength of an assertion.

> (6) I know you don't like her but I think she's kind of nice.

The idea is to convey that H does not need to share S's opinion.

Don't coerce H consists in trying to redress H's negative face by not coercing him/her into a specific answer. This can be done by giving H the option not to do the action implied by the FTA.

> (7) Could you help me get these upstairs?

The indirect form leaves room for H to refuse.

Communicate S's want to not impinge on H or S can decide to let the hearer know that s/he is taking into account H's demands when making a decision. This, however, only satisfies partially the negative face of H.

> (8) I am sorry to ask you this but could you help me with that paper?

Apologising in advance threatens S's own face and thus helps H to feel empowered and free to decide.

Redress other wants of H, finally, consists in offering some compensation for the face threat of the FTA by proposing redress of some other want S might know his/her interlocutor to have.

> (9) I would be so grateful if you could help me with this paper!

Off-record

The off-record strategy is dealt in relation to Grice's maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relevance and Manner governing talk exchange and ruling the Cooperative Principle of conversation. However, B&L argue that, in many cases, those maxims are not respected as precisely in natural conversations as they are in theory. Flouting a maxim implies that H will still understand what S means to say by means of an implicature: saying something that is obviously untrue is flouting the Maxim of Quality; telling a convincing lie is violating it. B&L's argument is that the desire to give attention to the notion of face is a very powerful motive for the non-respect of these maxims. While the cooperative principle aims to make the conversational act as clear as possible and to avoid ambiguity, it also lays the basis for deviation; because speakers assume that conversations should respect these maxims, they are able to establish the underlying intended message (1987: 95). In other words, when mitigating FTAs, speakers can be indirect and imply more than they say. The hearer's task is to infer what is meant.

Invite conversational implicatures is done by flouting the Gricean maxims of Quality, Quantity and Relevance.

> (10) I would ask you to come with me to the movies, but I'm sure you'll say no so...

Be vague or ambiguous consists in flouting the maxim of Manner. When going off-record, S will try to avoid imposing on his/her interlocutor's face as much as possible by being

extremely vague, hoping that the content of his/her message will come across as s/he intended to.

> (11) It's kind of hot in here, don't you think?

S actually means that it is too hot in the room and hopes that H will understand that s/he wants him/her to open the window or turn on the air conditioning.

1.2 Watts's theory of *(im)politeness*

Watts's approach to the issue of politeness is quite different from B&L as it focuses more on people's subjective perception of the phenomenon. His theory is based on distinctions between folk evaluations of politeness and theoretical politeness, and between *politic behaviour* and *polite behaviour*. He also takes on diverse concepts to demonstrate that politeness is not necessarily about linguistic structures but individual interpretation.

1.2.1 (im)politeness$_1$ and (im)politeness$_2$

Watts distinguishes between two notions:

- *(im)politeness$_1$* concerns 'the varied interpretations of politeness and impoliteness in ongoing verbal interaction' (Watts 2003:4) or 'lay interpretations', meaning the way people perceive, evaluate what is polite or impolite.

- *(im)politeness$_2$*, however, concerns the sociolinguistic concept of politeness; it is thus a theoretical concept.

It is worth noting that *(im)politeness$_1$* is marked by subjectivity: two different persons could have perfectly different views on what is polite or not. He also insists on the fact that no linguistic structure is inherently polite. The very concept of politeness can differ between people: when asked for a definition of politeness, some might equate it with refinement when

45

others will associate it with insincerity. It is this 'discursive struggle' (2003: 8) that will be at the heart of Watts's theory, focusing on *(im)politeness₁* (2003: 142) in order to propose a descriptive, non-normative, context-based theory:

> The model that I am proposing here makes no claim to describe and/or explain what types of human social behaviour *are* polite, but rather to offer ways in which we as researchers can show when and perhaps why individual users of language in socio-communicative verbal interaction *classify* utterances as polite or even *express* utterances politely, and to allow both politeness and impoliteness to be evaluated by individual users. (2003: 160)

1.2.2 Politic behaviour and polite behaviour

Another distinction is central to Watts's model: *politic behaviour* and *polite behaviour*. He argues that:

> Linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the ongoing interaction, i.e. as non-salient, should be called politic behaviour. […] Linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be beyond what is expectable, i.e. salient behaviour, should be called polite or impolite depending on whether the behaviour itself tends towards the negative or positive end of the spectrum of politeness. (2003: 19)

Formulaic utterances (such as *thank you, please, excuse me*, terms of address, titles…) are often examples of politic behaviour.

Watts considers B&L's politeness theory as flawed because he maintains that they are more concerned with *politic behaviour* (what is appropriate) than *polite behaviour* (what goes beyond appropriateness). He is quite critical of their approach, as most discursive theorists of (im)politeness, because their claim to ground some 'universals in language' is deemed too

simplistic; he argues that they wrongly focus on the speaker's perception, ignoring cultural diversity (2003: 13), relational dynamics (2003: 124), possible third-party interventions as well as group influence (2003: 113).

1.2.3 Bourdieu's habitus and Watts's 'emergent networks'

Bourdieu's *habitus* is defined as 'the set of dispositions to behave appropriately' and which is acquired by previous experiences or interactions (Watts 2003: 149). It is in fact closely linked to politic behaviour and implies a state of equilibrium to be reproduced in Watts's own theory of 'emergent networks', i.e. what happens during the course of an interaction. However, 'members may change the structure and contents of the network links during an emergent network and thus disturb the equilibrium' (2003: 155) and doing so, try to exercise power.

To Watts, 'any linguistic behaviour that goes beyond the bounds of politic behaviour is open to potential classification as 'polite'' and 'play[s] a role in the acquisition and exercise of power' (161).

Let's conclude by considering this short extract:

TBBT, 'The Hawking Excitation' (S05E23)

Context: Sheldon is a physicist who emailed Hawking one of his papers to be proofread; in the following scene, he visits him to hear his comments about the paper.

> (1) SHELDON: Professor Hawking, it's an honour and a privilege to meet you, sir.
> (2) HAWKING: I know.
> (3) SHELDON: I want to thank you for taking time to see me.
> (4) HAWKING: My pleasure. I enjoyed reading your paper very much. You clearly have a brilliant mind.
> (5) SHELDON: I know.

(1) could be interpreted as polite behaviour, since it is more than can be expected from a scientist to another scientist: with the double term of address, we understand that Sheldon has a certain admiration for Hawking, which leads us to believe this case of politeness should be evaluated positively. Hawking's answer (2), however, unsettles Sheldon, whose *habitus* is disturbed; it could be evaluated as impolite by Sheldon. As the emergent network builds, Hawking compliments Sheldon on his paper and mentions that he has 'a brilliant mind' in (4), a remark to which Sheldon answers 'I know': he has come to understand that this interaction and its associated politic behaviour include teasing and/or acknowledging not only each other's quality as a scientist, but also their own. As Watts puts it, 'participants in verbal interaction are thus quite capable of temporarily changing the nature of the politic behaviour and adapting their *habitus* according to the exigencies of the ongoing interaction.' (2003: 147)

We could also mention the question of power, since both have disturbed the equilibrium in a different way: Sheldon tries to exercise power with politeness—he wants his paper to be proofed by Stephen Hawking—and Hawking tries to unsettle Sheldon with unexpected, possibly impolite, behaviour.

2. Impoliteness as politeness's 'parasite' (Culpeper 1996)

Jonathan Culpeper started to work on impoliteness in the 1990s as he remarked that the number of studies on the subject was quite low compared to what had been done in the field of politeness. Even more recently, it has been noted that there is still an 'enormous imbalance […] between academic interest in politeness phenomena as opposed to impoliteness phenomena.' (Bousfield & Locher 2008: 1). The goal of Culpeper's earliest paper on the subject (1996) is to prove that we need an impoliteness framework as much as a politeness framework and that B&L's politeness strategies can be reversed to do so.

2.1 Inherent impoliteness vs. mock impoliteness

Culpeper first makes an essential distinction between inherent impoliteness and mock impoliteness or banter. Classic theories of politeness (B&L 1987, Leech 1983) proposed that some acts, such as orders or criticisms, are always impolite or threatening. Yet Culpeper stresses that an order can be polite in its illocution—to save someone's life or from a parent to their child—and that some criticisms or insults are not meant to harm—as in the case of banter. Thus context is most of the time crucial in the understanding of (im)politeness. As Fraser and Nolan argued: '… no sentence is inherently polite or impolite. We often take certain expressions to be impolite, but it is not the expressions themselves but the conditions under which they are used that determine the judgement of politeness.' (in Culpeper 1996: 351)

However, Culpeper also advances that some combinations of acts and contexts can be inherently impolite and are very difficult, if not impossible, to mitigate (1996: 351). A

minority of acts do not even need context, such as picking one's nose or farting, i.e. antisocial acts. Making someone aware that they are engaged in some antisocial activity or, in general, that they possess a genuine undesirable aspect is, according to Culpeper, inherently impolite and will damage their face no matter what amount of politeness work is used. Telling someone not to pick their nose (provided it is not a child) can never be polite, because the act of picking one's nose is antisocial and to point at it will trigger at least some embarrassment.

Mock impoliteness, on the other hand, can be very aggressive and yet only a surface realisation of impoliteness. It generally occurs between persons of close or intimate relations. It is not rare to hear friends calling each other names without meaning to hurt each other. One of the rules of banter is that it must sound untrue and exaggerated, especially in ritualised contexts; 'weak' insults are paradoxically more dangerous in that they do not draw attention to the impossibility of the association between the person and the term, and thus are more likely to be thought as genuine. Culpeper notices, however, that banter can be used in non-intimate contexts such as advertising: because impoliteness is not expected in a seller-client relationship, it is likely to be interpreted as banter, the goal of which is to reproduce a friendly atmosphere. More importantly, Culpeper sees banter as a 'societal safety-valve' (1996: 353), which allows people to be impolite in non-antisocial conditions: perhaps we could see it in parallel to the release theory of humour, as a release of aggression without punishment—unless laughter is the punishment, as Bergson would argue.

2.2 Why are we impolite?

Our need to cooperate in social interactions—and thus use politeness—comes from the fact that our own face is vulnerable; by being polite, we usually ensure a similar reciprocal conduct. However, in the case of highly unequal power, for example, Culpeper notes, it is not rare that the more/most powerful person will use impoliteness. The question of power is

alluded to here but will be explained in more detail in a subsequent section. In the case of conflicts of interests, it can be used to push someone to do something. It is more difficult to see how impoliteness occurs in equal relationships and sometimes in very intimate contexts (between spouses or siblings for example). What is certain for Culpeper is that the notion of affect plays a role and we are more likely to be impolite towards the people that we do not like. Impolite behaviour between equals also has a tendency to escalate up to physical violence; as equal relationships do not have the authority to solve a problem, the conflict is often stopped by a third party.

2.3 Brown and Levinson's reversed model

Culpeper bases his impoliteness strategies on B&L's politeness superstrategies, i.e. bald on-record, positive, negative, off-record politeness or withhold the FTA. He gives five superstrategies of impoliteness, which are 'opposed in terms of orientation to face' (1996: 356), i.e. they try to damage instead of saving face. The different impoliteness superstrategies and their descriptions are summarised in the following chart.

Superstrategy	Description	Examples
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.' (1996: 356)	Saying *Shut up!* instead of *Be quiet.*
Positive impoliteness	'the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants.' (1996: 356)	Ignoring, excluding, criticising someone
Negative impoliteness	'the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's negative face wants.' (1996: 356)	Threatening, forcing, someone or invading their space/imposing oneself
Sarcasm or	'the FTA is performed with the use of	*No offense but you're a jerk.*

mock politeness	politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realisations.' (1996: 356)	*No offense* is a politeness strategy whose value is immediately cancelled by the right co-text.
Withhold politeness	'the absence of politeness work where it would be expected.' (1996: 357)	Failing to thank for a present

Culpeper ended up deviating from B&L (as many other theorists of (im)politeness, cf. Watts, Bousfield, Mills) for several reasons, some of them having already been mentioned in the section about Watts's politeness theory. One particular aspect which was abandoned is the distinction between negative and positive face, as it was argued to be too individualistic and insensitive to relational dynamics like the adjustments made during interactions (cf. Watts's emergent networks) and how the hearer perceives the offence. Fifteen years after his first paper on impoliteness, Culpeper published a book devoted to the subject and proposed a new approach, more critical of B&L's work, as well as a new model, which I will use in my third part to categorise impoliteness events. Although it may seem very different from B&L, it actually keeps one of the core distinctions that they made between on-record and off-record strategies.

3. Understanding impoliteness (Culpeper 2011)

What is impoliteness and how to define it properly? Culpeper mentions the difficulty involved in this task. As he lists a series of various definitions, a number of them appear to have common elements such as the notion of face, intentionality, emotions and the breach of social norms, but there is no consensus and each definition given seems to favour different aspects. Bousfield and Locher proposed a 'lowest common denominator' which would be a 'behaviour that is face-aggravating in a particular context' (2008: 3) but this kind of definition seems too vague and ignores the subtleties involved in impoliteness. Culpeper explains that the difficulty to provide a fitting definition comes from the facts that impoliteness depends on context and includes wide-ranging, various phenomena. As no previous definition is deemed precise or detailed enough to encompass all impoliteness-related phenomena, Culpeper offers the following:

> Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires and/or beliefs about social organisation, including, in particular, how one person's or group's identities are mediated by others in interaction. Situated behaviours are viewed negatively when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviours always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. Various factors can exacerbate how offensive an impolite behaviour is taken to be, including for example whether one understands a behaviour to be strongly intentional or not. (2011: 23)

To better understand how impoliteness functions as well as this definition, we have to dive into other related concepts such as face, sociality rights, intentionality, emotions and power.

3.1 Face, social norms and sociality rights

Culpeper comes back to Goffman's notion of face. He believes that B&L misunderstood it by ignoring the implied social interdependence involved in face, explaining that 'how you feel about your 'self' is dependent on how others feel about that 'self'' (2011: 25). As a result, B&L's politeness theory (and particularly the distinction between positive and negative face) and thus Culpeper's earlier mirrored model (1996) appear too individualistic—in the sense that they do not consider relational and group factors—and require some degree of modification.

He first proposes to 'hypothesise the self as a schema consisting of layers of components varying in emotional importance with the mostly highly charged closest to the centre, and this is thus where potentially the most face-sensitive components lie.' (2011: 26) The self is not only made of one's actual self but of other elements such as family, friends, country, possessions… This remark was already defended in his earlier works: 'the notion of face is not confined to the immediate properties of the self, but can be invested in a wide range of phenomena such as one's family, job, nationality.' (1996: 361). He adds that there is an emotional gradation related to these elements: criticism on one's t-shirt is (usually) less offensive than criticism on one's spouse or job, because the first is less valuable than the second.

3.1.1 Quality face, relational face and social identity face

Inspired by Spencer-Oatey's 'rapport management' model, Culpeper distinguishes three types of face replacing the previous positive/negative dichotomy: quality face, relational face and social identity face.

- Quality face is 'concerned with the value that we effectively claim for ourselves in terms of such personal qualities as these, and so is closely associated with our sense of personal self-esteem.' (Spencer-Oatey in Culpeper 2011: 28). An attack on quality face is directed at one's own self. Culpeper gives the example of a student whose outfit for a night out, i.e. his/her personal tastes in clothes, is mocked by his/her peers.

- Social Identity face is 'concerned with the value that we effectively claim for ourselves in terms of social or group roles, and is closely associated with our sense of public worth.' (in Culpeper 2011: 28). Our social identity generally concerns our role(s) in society and our belonging to a certain community; it can range from job or hobby to gender or nationality.

- Relational face is quite similar to social identity face, but it concerns our relationship with 'significant others' (2011: 30), i.e. people who are personally known and have a certain importance. This notion of significant others, in this case, can range from family to acquaintance. A useful example given by Culpeper to distinguish social identity face from relational face is the following: if a teacher is told that teachers are lazy, it may be considered as an attack on social identity face because it concerns one's own profession but also all (unknown) teachers; the entire group will be offended by the remark. However, if a teacher is told that s/he is not attentive to his/her students' needs, it may be considered as an attack on relational face because it concerns the specific and significant relationship between this particular teacher and his/her particular students; it will not affect other teachers. Relational face seems to stand in-between quality and social identity on a spectrum: it concerns one's social identity or role, only in significant relationships.

3.1.2 Impoliteness and social norms

According to Culpeper, impoliteness does not affect face only but also one's sense of norms, conventions and rights. But what are social norms? Three remarks are made:

- Social norms can be rational and self-interested: conventions are a rational choice because they are self-interested (to avoid sanction or to obtain something for example). Thus politeness is usually considered as rational and impoliteness as irrational.

- Habits, regular behaviours can become norms if they are expected. For example, if X had been dining with a particular friend every Friday evening for the last five years, X would have to apologise if s/he had planned a dinner with someone else on the next Friday evening; also, it is likely that the friend would feel offended by the broken norm.

- Finally, social 'oughts' are motivated by the group (and not self-interest or sanctions); wearing black at a funeral is a social 'ought' in many occidental cultures for example, and dressing in pink instead could be seen as inappropriate.

Culpeper considers social 'oughts' as social norms and habits as experiential norms; impoliteness consists in a breach of social or experiential norms.

Mills argues that 'it is difficult to assume that there are norms which will always be recognised by all as appropriate.' (2009: 1056) We have to keep in mind that social norms can vary between and within cultures but also through time, and thus the notion of what is appropriate or not. Hence some impoliteness events might not appear very impolite to some or extremely rude to others. Mills notes that 'those norms which are perceived to be social norms are generally the ones associated with those who are perceived to be powerful' (2009:

1056) and that 'it is middle and upper class culture, in fact, which we are defining as English culture' (2009: 1057).

3.1.3 Sociality rights: Equity and Association rights

Spencer-Oatey explains that:

> face is associated with personal/relational/social value, and is concerned with people's sense of worth, dignity, honour, reputation, competence and so on. Sociality rights and obligations, on the other hand, are concerned with social expectancies, and reflect people's concerns over fairness, consideration and behavioural appropriateness. (in Culpeper 2011: 40)

Culpeper borrows Spencer-Oatey's two categories of sociality rights:

- Equity rights concern one's belief that they deserve consideration and fair treatment from others. Spencer-Oatey adds:

> This principle […] seems to have three components: cost-benefit considerations (the principle that people should not be exploited or disadvantaged), fairness and reciprocity (the belief that costs and benefits should be 'fair' and kept roughly in balance), and autonomy-control (the belief that people should not be unduly controlled or imposed upon).' (in Culpeper 2011: 40)

The example given is that of a girl who asks for a glass of tap water at a bar but the bartender refuses to serve her; she later explains to have felt that she was denied a basic human right and had not been considered and treated fairly.

- Association rights concern one's belief that they deserve a certain degree of association with others according to the type of relationship they have. Spencer-Oatey adds:

> This principle […] seems to have three components: involvement (the principle that people should have appropriate amount and types of 'activity' involvement with others), empathy (the belief that people should share appropriate concerns, feelings and interests with others), and respect (the belief that people should show appropriate amounts of respectfulness for others).' (in Culpeper 2011: 41)

The example given is that of a man who admits to one of his friends that he sometimes does not listen to him but pretends by nodding. The friend is offended because he believes that he has the right to a certain amount of attention from the man who claims to be his friend, but this right is violated.

3.2 Impoliteness and intentionality

Intentionality is defined as a complex process:

> In people's folk concept of intentionality, performing an action intentionally requires the presence of five components: a desire for an outcome, beliefs about an action that leads to that outcome, an intention to perform the action; skill to perform the action; and awareness of fulfilling the intention while performing the action. For example, we are hereby intentionally writing a self-referential example to illustrate our model – that is, we wanted to provide a vivid illustration (desire); we thought that a self-referential example might be vivid (belief); we therefore decided to write such an example (intention); we had

the skill to do so (skill); and we were aware of fulfilling our intention (awareness) while

writing the example. (Culpeper 2011: 49)

In an earlier definition of impoliteness, Culpeper used to consider intentionality as mandatory

to evaluate an act as impolite: 'Impoliteness comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates

face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behaviour as

intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2).' (2005: 38) But intentionality as

defined above requires many elements, and Culpeper notices that a number of events do not

fit this definition and can still be evaluated as impolite. He revises his position to advance that

intentionality is not, in fact, necessary for an act to be considered impolite. He proposes

instead to see intentionality as a scalar concept which impacts on the perceived degree of

offence: less intentional impolite acts are likely to be considered as less offensive than

strongly intentional impolite acts. He also argues that the less intentional an impolite act is,

the more foreseeable it must be: for example, the act of asking a non-pregnant woman 'When

is it due?' (as a genuine question) is foreseeable because she must look physically pregnant or

bigger than usual.

3.3 Impoliteness and emotions

The processing of impoliteness is cognitively based on appraisal/interpretation and the

different emotions associated to it. (Culpeper 2011: 57) Impoliteness is, not so strangely,

mostly associated with negative emotions, such as sadness, anger and fear. What is interesting

is that face-related impoliteness and rights-related impoliteness have different emotional

consequences: the first will typically trigger self-related emotions; the latter will rather cause

moral emotions (which are not self-interested). Using the distinction made by Haidt between

self-conscious and other-condemning emotions, Culpeper explains that:

impoliteness resulting from violations of sociality rights is more likely to be accompanied by other-condemning emotions (e.g. anger, disgust and contempt), whilst violations of face are more likely to be accompanied by self-conscious emotions (e.g. embarrassment and shame), though face violations could additionally involve other-condemning emotions if the face-attack is considered unfair. (2011: 62)

3.4 Impoliteness and power

Power is an important factor in evaluating impoliteness. Culpeper (2011: 225) uses the distinction made by Fairclough between power *in* and power *behind* discourse. Power in discourse concerns the negotiation of power taking place during the interaction; it is quite similar to Watts's emergent networks, although I mentioned these about the negotiation of politic behaviour, which can vary from one interaction to the other. Power in discourse can vary as well, especially if impoliteness events are involved: impoliteness, as we have seen, is a way to disturb a certain social equilibrium and exercise power. The fight for power in impolite interactions is perhaps well expressed by the possible responses to an impoliteness act available (Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1563):
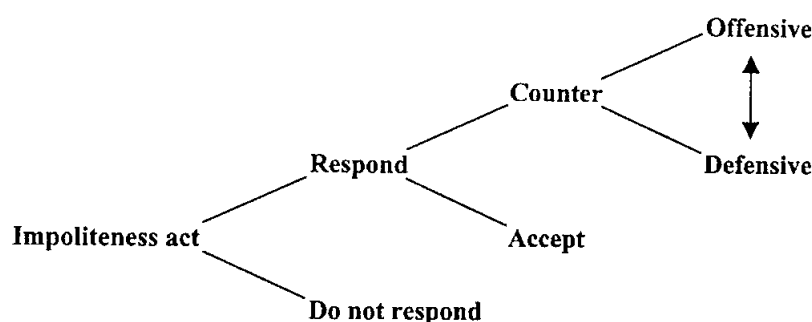

Fig. 1. A summary of response options.

Not responding to an impoliteness act or responding by accepting it might mean that the power in discourse exercised by the attacker is not challenged and thus accepted. However, responding to the act by countering it, either offensively or defensively, can be seen as an

attempt to neutralise the attacker's act or to exercise power as well, by saying something more offensive for example.

Power behind discourse concerns the social structures or hierarchy. B&L already discussed it in their sociological variables: relative power is one of the variables that has to be taken into account in the choice of a politeness strategy. Indeed, more politeness work is expected when a speaker addresses a hierarchical superior. The opposite is true as well: less politeness work—and thus potential impoliteness—is expected when a speaker addresses a person of inferior relative power. It may also be hypothesised that an impolite act coming from an inferior power is likely to be considered as more offensive; conversely, an impolite act coming from a superior power is likely to be thought as less offensive. This hypothesis was verified by Culpeper (2011: 188-192), who gave students a number of scenarios involving a person asking someone else to be quiet. There were three possible answers: 'you be quiet', 'could you be quiet' and 'you aren't being quiet', i.e. a direct, a conventionally indirect and a non-conventionally indirect command. Each scenario and each response, from a lower power to higher power (L-H) and from a higher power to lower power (H-L), were evaluated by the students. The conclusions were the following: in a H-L context, none of the three commands were considered as impolite; in a L-H context however, the three commands were considered as impolite, in particular the direct and non-conventionally direct commands.

3.5 Entertaining impoliteness and creativity

Violence, aggression and confrontation have been a source of entertainment for thousands of years, from gladiator fights to first-person shooter videogames. It is thus not surprising that verbal conflicts and linguistic impoliteness should be as well.

Culpeper notes that one of the functions of impoliteness—in addition to the affective and coercive functions—is to be entertaining. It is perhaps essential to stress that it is mostly

exploitative impoliteness, meaning at the expense of others, that is entertaining. What happens to someone else, in fiction or on TV does not concern us directly, which is why it is easier for us to laugh at certain offensive acts or comments. A number of TV programmes rely on exploitative impoliteness, the most famous of which are *The Weakest Link* (adapted as *Le Maillon faible* in France) and diverse open contests such as *Britain's Got Talent*. According to Culpeper, there are five sources to this entertaining function: emotional pleasure (arousal, thrill for potential violence), aesthetic pleasure (linked to creativity), voyeuristic pleasure, superiority and security—which I have already mentioned in theories of humour. This correlation with entertainment allows us to link impoliteness with humour: indeed, entertainment is defined as '*amusement* or pleasure that comes from watching a performer, playing a game, etc.' (*Merriam-Webster*). To support the idea that impoliteness can be used to convey humour, Culpeper notes that 'today the TV genre with the most verbal aggression is comedies/sitcoms' (2011: 234). This association will become clearer in the next part, as I will examine different categories of impolite *and* humorous events.

Culpeper considers creativity as an important feature of impoliteness, which certainly contradicts the general belief that impoliteness is not worthy of study as it merely consists of vulgarities, insults and so on. But creativity seems to be all the more crucial in entertaining impoliteness. The idea that there are 'structural patterns in conversational disputes, including such patterns as repetition, escalation and inversion' (2011: 5) brings us back to Bergson's situation and language-based comedy and their mechanisms, i.e. repetition/transposition, inversion and interference of series. Culpeper too distinguishes several patterns of creativity which can be applied to impoliteness events, such as pattern reforming, pattern forming, situational deviation and unusual implicitness.

We can analyse these patterns in relation to Bergson's mechanical theory. For example, pattern forming includes repetition, escalation and opposition and these may correspond to the different toys mentioned in Bergson's essay, i.e. the puppet, the snowball and the Jack-in-the-

box. Pattern reforming is quite similar to Bergson's ninth law of laughter: 'On obtiendra un mot comique en insérant une idée absurde dans un moule de phrase consacré.' (1900/2013: 128). The pattern is a conventionalised impolite formula in this case, for example *You X* and it is modified in a creative way: the expression 'You irritatingly incompetent and infuriatingly unhelpful bunch of twats' includes many polysyllabic words in a usually simple two- or three-word combination (*You ... twats*), which makes it quite original although still offensive. Situational creativity is achieved through 'the interaction of language and context' (2011: 241) such as the absence of politeness or underpoliteness: failing to thank someone for a present is an extreme case of inadaptability or, in Bergson's words, social rigidity. The last pattern is unusual implicitness, or unexpected indirectness: Culpeper gives the example of a man who said to a judge that s/he was 'a few French fries short of a Happy Meal in terms of what's likely to take place', meaning that s/he is out of touch and does not understand. This last example is impolite in the context of a courtroom and the relative higher power of the judge but it is also amusing because the image used is, paradoxically, also out of touch with the context, and a form of voluntary inadaptability.

Conclusion

Throughout this overview of linguistic impoliteness, key concepts such as face, face-threatening act, politic behaviour, social norms or rights were introduced. What has to be remembered, however, is impoliteness's extreme dependence on a multitude of variables, which makes the defining process very difficult; actually, what is impolite is impossible to assess without a cultural and contextual perspective. There cannot be universal generalities about impoliteness, as there cannot be a universal theory of humour. Indeed, humour was also said to be dependent on subjective and cultural factors, notably in the section about the Benign Violation Theory: one's closeness to a social norm will play a decisive role in determining the humorous or impolite potential of the breach of such a norm, for instance. It thus has to be stressed that what is considered as humorous and impolite in the following parts of this study is based on an Anglo-Saxon view.

Studying these different theories and frameworks of humour and impoliteness have shown that both types of events share several similarities, such as social rigidity or unexpectedness. Theoretically, impoliteness could be used to convey humour and a humorous form could be evaluated as impolite without going against logic. What remains to be seen is if impoliteness is indeed used as a humour strategy: to do so, I will focus on the TV shows *The Big Bang Theory* and *Sherlock* to analyse potentially impolite *and* humorous events in the next part.

Part III: General corpus study of humorous impoliteness

Introduction

After a brief presentation of my corpus, I will analyse several examples in light of both humour and impoliteness theories. Culpeper's latest model of impoliteness (2011) makes a distinction between conventionalised and non-conventionalised forms. I will detail his model using examples from my corpus and attempt to explain why some impolite events can be considered as humorous—or conversely why some forms of humour used can be considered as impolite. I also added a third category of impoliteness events which can serve as a humour strategy, absent from Culpeper's model, which I called 'dysphemistic directness': it seems to be a defining trait in some characters of the TV shows studied and involves a regular violation of taboo notions and the use of dysphemistic expressions—or rather the refusal to use euphemisms.

1. Presentation of the corpus

My primary corpus will consist of CBS's sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*; I will also study some excerpts from BBC's drama series *Sherlock*. The aim in using both TV series is to show that impoliteness as a humour strategy does not necessarily pair with comedies and comic situations. I will start by introducing *The Big Bang Theory*'s and *Sherlock*'s main plots and characters to broadly contextualise the excerpts subsequently analysed.

1.1 *The Big Bang Theory*

The Big Bang Theory (*TBBT*) is an American sitcom created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady and broadcast by CBS since 2007; it has been quite successful and, as of today, has been

renewed for a tenth season. The show focuses on the lives of two Caltech physicists and roommates, Sheldon and Leonard, and their aspiring actress and neighbour Penny in Pasadena, California. Their other friends include Howard, Raj, Bernadette, Amy and Stuart. The appeal of the series relies on the contrast between the scientists' superior intellect, nerdy pastimes and awkwardness and the typical girl-next-door's social ease and common sense.

Sheldon Cooper's eccentricity is probably the main reason for *TBBT*'s success. After obtaining his Ph.D at the age of 16, he became a theoretical physicist at Caltech and Leonard's roommate. Sheldon is also a devoted comic book and *Star Trek* fan, taking Spock as his role model. But he is also a very unusual character apart from his IQ of 187: having absolutely no knowledge of social conventions and having difficulty detecting sarcasm, he is more than once compared to a robot, can be very childish and is the ideal provider of impoliteness (and hilarious) events. Some argue that he exhibits traits of Asperger's syndrome because of his numerous OCDs (Clifton in Kowalski 2012: 53); however, in the scientific world of the series, these traits do not disable but enable him and actually lead him to success, which is why we should not feel guilty for laughing at him. The creators of the show have however strongly rejected the theory, saying that Sheldon was never imagined nor his dialogues written in this perspective.

Leonard Hofstadter is an experimental physicist and Sheldon's roommate. He struggles on a daily basis to tolerate Sheldon's idiosyncrasies (as most characters, actually). He is very sensitive and quite vulnerable to women in general; he has an on-and-off relationship with Penny throughout the show.

Penny has moved from Nebraska to California in the hopes of becoming an actress and works as a waitress meanwhile. She is Leonard and Sheldon's neighbour and they all rapidly become friends despite their differences: Penny's IQ is not as high as Sheldon's and Leonard's, but she certainly knows more about society and people than them.

Howard Wolowitz is an engineer and lives with his invading and overprotective mother, never seen onscreen but always yelling. He believes himself to be a womanizer—though he is definitely not—and, because he is the only one in the group not to have a doctorate (apart from Penny), he is regularly mocked by Sheldon. Howard is probably, along with Penny, one of the most sarcastic characters in the series.

Raj Koothrappali is an astrophysicist who comes from a very wealthy Indian family. He is, just like Leonard, pretty shy and sensitive and describes himself as 'metrosexual' as he likes to take care of himself. One of his main traits is his selective mutism: he cannot speak to women (his mother and sister are exceptions), especially if they are attractive. The only way to counter his mutism is alcohol, but it also makes him overconfident and quite direct/rude.

Bernadette Rostenkowski is a microbiologist working with Penny as a waitress while finishing her Ph.D. She is later Howard's girlfriend and wife.

Amy Farrah Fowler is a neurobiologist who becomes Sheldon's girlfriend; she shares many of his very special traits, being socially awkward herself, but changes more rapidly than Sheldon as she realises their platonic relationship of the mind is not enough for her.

Stuart is the owner of the comic book store where the group spends much of their time and, throughout the seasons, becomes friends with them. He is sort of a 'jest with a sad brow' and a master of self-deprecating humour.

1.2 *Sherlock*

Sherlock is a British drama series created by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat and broadcast on the BBC. Its format is quite special as it consists of three 90-minute telefilms per season. To this day, three seasons and a Christmas special have been released; a fourth season is planned for 2017. The series is an adaptation of Conan Doyle's novels in modern London, following

the adventures of consultant-detective Sherlock Holmes and ex-army doctor John Watson against Jim Moriarty, a criminal mastermind with an exceedingly vast network.

Sherlock Holmes is described in Conan Doyle's *A Scandal in Belgravia* as 'the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen' (2005: 388). The TV series is quite faithful to the novels: Sherlock is a brilliant consultant-detective using his own science of deduction to uncover very improbable mysteries with the help of Dr. Watson. Like the machine he is compared to, however, it is also remarked that he 'loathe[s] every form of society' (2005: 388): Sherlock shows very little emotion—when dealing with murders for example—, tends to ignore social conventions and even labels himself as a 'high-functioning sociopath'. Since he often is very direct or sarcastic, he is a good provider of impoliteness events.

John Watson is a doctor haunted by the memories of his service in Afghanistan; to avoid a lonely life of boredom, he accepts Sherlock's proposal to move in with him and to be his assistant to solve crimes. His military background is visible in his character, his sense of honour and respect of hierarchy, but also in a certain coarseness in his habit to yell and swear.

Mycroft Holmes is Sherlock's older brother. Very powerful and influential on the political scene, he, according to Sherlock, controls the entire British government. Also a deduction professional, he is not interested at all in solving crimes. If he is as brilliant as his brother, Mycroft is Sherlock's polar opposite in terms of language use: he always favours indirectness and is quite fond of euphemisms—a quality certainly derived from his political activities.

Molly Hooper works at St Barth's hospital as a specialist registrar, and is often in contact with the police and Sherlock. She admires Sherlock's qualities and seems to be attracted to him but is often victim of his social indelicacies.

James Moriarty is Sherlock's nemesis and the show's ongoing villain. He is a criminal mastermind who exerts his influence all over the world through different organisations, and if

his mental health is questionable, Sherlock finds in him a worthy adversary, pushing him to challenge himself always further.

1.3 A few extra notes about the corpus

- What should be humorous in *TBBT* is indicated by the laugh track, typical of sitcoms: it is thus fairly easy to 'check' the humorous potential of the occurrences. In *Sherlock* though, there is no such thing: I had to rely on other cues (soundtrack, smiles and gestures) as well as my own interpretation of the dialogues.

- Linguistically, it will be impossible to draw certain conclusions such as real-life frequency of impoliteness events. Since fiction relies on movements between conflict and resolution, it is highly probable that examples of impoliteness, humorous or not, will be more frequent than in non-fictional contexts.

- The fact that both TV series are broadcast and not age-restricted for *TBBT*/-12 for *Sherlock* means that it is minimally censored and that strong language or very offensive words are controlled and can only be used under certain rules. The BBC editorial guidelines explicit quite well that strong language needs to be justified and not gratuitous, or to serve a purpose. Of course, very few people bother to do so in reality; the quantity and quality of insults and swearing is certainly altered because of the shows' accessibility on TV.

- As noted before, both impoliteness and humour are culturally dependent. Since both series analysed are Anglo-Saxon, they will, obviously, reflect the same culture. We might certainly find differences between American and British perceptions but this is beyond my scope.

2. Conventionalised formulaic impoliteness

2.1 Culpeper's impoliteness formulae (2011)

Although context is certainly important in the interpretation of (im)politeness events, Culpeper proposes a list of conventionalised impoliteness formulae.

There are two types of impoliteness strategies: those which are *context-tied* depend mostly on context, and nothing in their linguistic features *per se* hints at impoliteness; these are non-conventionalised impoliteness events and they will be mentioned in the next section. The other type is *context-spanning* impoliteness, meaning that, in a majority of contexts, they are likely to be interpreted as impolite.

Most discursive approaches to the study of (im)politeness (such as Watts: 2003) are adamant that (im)politeness cannot be inherent in language; however, Culpeper shows that there is evidence for some basic semantic encoding in certain linguistic forms for us to understand one another. Indeed, we do need some degree of mutual understanding of certain linguistic forms in a particular culture, otherwise communication would be impossible: 'it is difficult to see how communication could proceed without some shared conventions of meaning.' (2011: 123) Inspired by Leech, he opts for a dualist view, balancing absolute and relative (im)politeness:

> My own position is dualist in the sense that I see semantic (im)politeness and pragmatic (im)politeness as inter-dependent opposites on a scale. (Im)politeness can be more determined by a linguistic expression or can be more determined by context, but neither the expression nor the context guarantee an interpretation of (im)politeness: it is the interaction between the two that counts. (2011: 125)

Gathering the most recurrent forms included in his data, he presents a list of conventionalised formulaic impoliteness utterances in English organised as follows:

Insults

1. Personalised negative vocatives

- [you] [fucking/rotten/dirty/fat/little/etc.]

[moron/fuck/plonker/dickhead/berk/pig/shit/bastard/loser/liar/minx/brat/slut/squirt/sod/bugger/etc.]

[you]

2. Personalised negative assertions

- [you] [are] [so/such a]

[shit/stink/thick/stupid/bitchy/bitch/hypocrite/disappointment/gay/nuts/nuttier   than   a   fruit cake/hopeless/pathetic/fussy/terrible/fat/ugly/etc.]

- [you] [can't do] [anything right/basic arithmetic/etc.]

- [you] [disgust me] / [make me] [sick/etc.]

3. Personalized negative references

- [your] [stinking/little] [mouth/act/arse/body/corpse/hands/guts/trap/breath/etc.]

4. Personalized third-person negative references (in the hearing of the target)

- [the] [daft] [bimbo]

- [she]['s] [nutzo]

Pointed criticisms/complaints

- [that/this/it] [is/was] [absolutely/extraordinarily/unspeakably/etc.]

 [bad/rubbish/crap/horrible/terrible/etc.]

Unpalatable questions and/or presuppositions

- why do you make my life impossible?

- which lie are you telling me?

- what's gone wrong now?

- you want to argue with me or you want to go to jail?

- I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience

Condescensions (see also the use of 'little' in Insults)

- [that] ['s/is being] [babyish/childish/etc.]

Message enforcers

- listen here (preface)

- you got [it/that]? (tag)
- do you understand [me]? (tag)

Dismissals
- [go] [away]
- [get] [lost/out]
- [fuck/piss/shove] [off]

Silencers
- [shut] [it] / [your] [stinking/fucking/etc.] [mouth/face/trap/etc.]
- shut [the fuck] up

Threats
- [I'll/I'm/we're] [gonna] [smash your face/beat the shit out of you/box your ears/bust your fucking head off/straighten you out/etc.] [if you don't] [X]
- [you'd better be ready Friday the 20th to meet with me/do it] [or] [else] [I'll] [X]
- [X] [before I] [hit you/strangle you]

Negative expressives (e.g. curses, ill-wishes)
- [go] [to hell/hang yourself/fuck yourself]
- [damn/fuck] [you]

(from Culpeper 2011: 135-6)

Different features can exacerbate the offensiveness of impoliteness events, such as message intensity through negatively connoted words, including taboo terms, or through non-verbal signals such as prosody or movements (2011: 154).

Culpeper also explains the way in which these expressions can become conventionalised:

The process by which expressions become semantically imbued with their politeness or impoliteness contexts assumes that some expressions have a more stable relationship with (im)politeness contexts and effects than others, and that over time those expressions begin

73

to acquire conventional associations of the (im)politeness contexts in which they are regularly used – they become conventionalised. (2011: 127)

2.2 Examples

I will study two examples taken from my corpus which make use of conventionalised impoliteness formulae.

TBBT, 'The Alien Parasite Hypothesis' (S04E10)

Context: Raj and Howard are arguing over which one of them could be the imaginary superhero Rat-Man and which one would only be his sidekick. They decide to settle the matter by wrestling. During the whole scene, Raj and Howard turn around each other in a defensive position but none dares to make a move.

(1) RAJ: You realise you can't win.
(2) HOWARD: I prefer to think that I can't lose.
(3) RAJ: You're wrong. It's only a matter of time before you fall into Rat-Man's rat trap.
(4) HOWARD: **You pathetic fool!** If there were a rat-catcher, wouldn't it catch Rat-Man?
(5) RAJ: Just because I didn't express myself well doesn't mean my underlying point was invalid! **You bloviating buffoon!**
(6) HOWARD: **You narcissistic nincompoop!**
(7) RAJ: **You crimson coward!**

The scene above displays a genuine conflict between Howard and Raj which they try to settle by a physical contest; the stronger of them should be the superhero Rat-Man. Howard and Raj, yet, are far from being natural-born fighters and, as none of them actually engages in the wrestle, their conflict veers towards a verbal joust, which lasts for a very long time; the transcribed excerpt is only the very end of the scene. In this exchange, we have numerous

conventionalised formulae: a personalised negative assertion in (1), ('you can't win') and a condescending remark in (3) ('You're wrong') as well as a threat ('It's only a matter of time before […]'). More importantly, and I will focus on this, we can see the personalised negative vocative [you X X] repeated four times. [you X (X)] is probably one of the most frequent conventionalised formulae, and even if it is not always the case, it is very often used to insult someone, either genuinely or in a banterous way ('You bastard!'). They are directed at each other's Quality face, criticising an aspect of their personality.

These formulae, although genuine, are here used for their humorous effect which seems to lie in the creativity of the exchange. We can first notice that [you] is each time followed by two words, an adjective and a noun, making the invectives longer and more complex. Bergson says that 'on obtiendra un mot comique en insérant une idée absurde dans un moule de phrase consacré.' (1900/2013: 128) The words used are indeed quite unusual—one might say old-fashioned—and polysyllabic, which goes against traditional one-syllable, compact insults (*cunt, fuck, whore, ass…*). This joust of invectives even becomes a poetic game: after the first one in (4), all following [you X X] start with the same letter: 'bloviating buffoon', 'narcissistic nincompoop' and 'crimson coward'—let's also notice the sound similarities between *Howard* and *coward*. The comic effect also relies on repetition: the formula [you X X] is repeated four times in four following lines, giving the exchange a certain mechanical layout: each participant launches a verbal attack that will, hopefully, make the opponent surrender. It does not work and each invective is countered by an equivalent force; it could probably go on and never end. This idea is reinforced by the fact that it is the very last scene of the episode; we ignore what happens next and if the conflict is resolved.

All in all, this verbal joust is a parody of verbal attacks mirroring the failed wrestle; it translates the participants' inability to engage in a real fight, whether it be physical or verbal. The conventions of the verbal joust are not respected through the use of unexpected and funny words. The conventionalised impoliteness formula [you X] is here used to a comic end.

Sherlock, 'The Empty Hearse' (S03E01).

Context: Watson is furious at Sherlock for having faked his death and not told him, letting him suffer and mourn for two years. As Watson refuses to return to their crime-solving activities, Sherlock uses Molly as his assistant while Watson continues to work at his medical practice. Sherlock receives a client, a crying woman accompanied by her stepfather, who explains that her online boyfriend has suddenly disappeared and stopped sending her messages. To emphasise Holmes and Watson's separation, there is a crossed scene alternating between Sherlock solving the case mentioned and Watson with a patient.

> (8) SHERLOCK: And your pen pal's emails just stopped, did they? And you really thought he was the one, didn't you? The love of your life?
> *(Sherlock goes to Molly who is taking notes.)*
> (9) SHERLOCK *(softly)*: Stepfather posing as online boyfriend.
> (10) MOLLY: What?!
> (11) SHERLOCK: Breaks it off, breaks her heart. She swears off relationships, stays at home – he still has her wage coming in.
> *(He turns back to the stepfather and addresses him firmly.)*
> (12) SHERLOCK: **Mr. Windibank, you have been a complete and utter-**
> *(The scene changes to Watson in his cabinet.)*
> (13) JOHN: **... piss pot.** There's nothing to worry about, just a small infection by the sound of it. *(He gives his patient a plastic container to collect urine samples.)*

We have a genuine case of conventionalised impoliteness: Sherlock wants to offend and insult Mr. Windibank's Quality face and Relational face (his role as a stepfather) in front of his manipulated stepdaughter. There is the beginning of a personalised negative assertion [you] [be] […] in (12), but the utterance is cut before the end and followed by Watson's handing a 'piss pot' to a patient in (13). Of course, *piss pot* can also be an insult, meaning a nasty person, and thus fits quite well the end of Sherlock's utterance while being used in a medical

context. It is also an ingenious way to censor Sherlock's insult, unless he used exactly *piss pot*—which is possible: 'utter' seems to be followed by a bilabial sound if we pay attention to the movements of his mouth. Schopenhauer would perhaps call this a 'foolish' realisation— that one concept can be applied to two different realities, and therefore elicit laughter. There is, in any case, an interference of series, similar to an unwitting wordplay made by Watson. The conventionalised impoliteness formula is used in a creative and humorous way and depends on the felicitous match between the form [you] [be] […] and the noun *piss pot*.

3. Non-conventionalised impoliteness: Implicational impoliteness

Implicational impoliteness is highly dependent on context and can take many non-conventionalised forms. I will here focus on form-driven and convention-driven impoliteness as well as nonpoliteness and underpoliteness.

3.1 Form-driven impoliteness

Form-driven impoliteness often takes the form of insinuations and innuendos. Culpeper elaborates: 'they refer to implicit messages which are triggered by formal surface or semantic aspects of a behaviour and which have negative consequences for certain individuals.' (2011: 157) There are two ways to produce or interpret form-driven impoliteness: flouting Grice's maxims of conversation and mimesis or imitation.

3.1.1 Flouting Grice's maxims of conversation

Flouting Grice's maxims is the first strategy: the idea is to flout one of the maxims (Quality, Quantity, Relevance, Manner) to imply something and bring the addressee(s) to understand and infer what is implied, i.e. to make the necessary implicature(s). Consider the following example:

TBBT, 'The Justice League Recombination' (S04E11)

Context: Penny and Zack, her new (and not very smart) boyfriend, come by Leonard and Sheldon's apartment to say hello and give Leonard his science magazine. Following a series

of exchanges where Zack ridicules himself—mistaking an atom for a planet on the cover of the magazine, for example—Penny says that they should leave.

(1) ZACK: Ah, not yet. I want to talk science with the science dudes.

(2) HOWARD: Oh, and the science dudes want to talk science with you. What do you want to talk about, rocks, dinosaurs, **our friend the beaver?**

(3) ZACK: You know, I saw this great thing on the *Discovery Channel*. Turns out that if you kill a starfish, it'll just come back to life.

(4) SHELDON: **Was the starfish wearing boxer shorts? Because you might have been watching *Nickelodeon*.**

(5) ZACK: No, I'm almost sure that it was the *Discovery Channel*. It was a great show. They also said dolphins might be smarter than people.

(6) LEONARD: **They might be smarter than *some* people.**

(7) ZACK: Well, maybe we can do an experiment to find out.

(8) SHELDON: Oh, that's easy enough. We'd need a large tank of water, a hoop to jump through, **and a bucket of whatever bite-sized treats you find tasty.**

(9) ZACK *(laughs and suddenly stops)*: I don't get it.

(10) LEONARD: **A dolphin might.**

(11) ZACK: Oh, I see. You guys are inferring that I'm stupid.

(12) SHELDON: That's not correct. We were implying it. You then inferred it.

Throughout this exchange, we have a series of flouted maxims implying that Zack is stupid, which he realises only at the very end of the extract. It is a case of genuine but veiled impoliteness, aiming to criticise and downgrade Zack's Quality face.

The first flouted maxim can be found in (2): it is quite subtle and concerns the Maxim of Manner, more specifically about being orderly. Howard proposes several topics of conversation: 'rocks, dinosaurs, our friend the beaver?' The first two topics have nothing specific and could indeed be interesting—though slightly connoted as childish. 'Our friend the beaver', however, breaks off with these: in terms of form, of course, but also because it is a reference to a 1970s *Doonesbury* comic strip, in which two students are discussing their biology papers. One is writing about 'Juxtabranchial organ secretions in higher mollusks'

while the other's paper title is 'Our friend, the beaver'; since then, the expression is synonymous with a very simple and undemanding topic, requiring little knowledge. Howard thus implies that Zack can only talk about very basic scientific subjects since he is uneducated.

In (4), Sheldon flouts the Maxim of Relevance by asking Zack if the starfish he saw was wearing boxer shorts (cf. Patrick Star in *SpongeBob SquarePants*)—in which case he would have been watching the children TV network *Nickelodeon*—when Zack was speaking about a documentary on the *Discovery Channel*. Sheldon's remark is irrelevant to Zack's statement and its only purpose is to change topics to imply something. And not only does Sheldon imply that Zack barely has the intellect of a child, but also that he might not recognise the channels he watches.

In (6), Leonard flouts the Maxim of Quantity: he says less than is required, i.e. '*some* people' instead of specifying that he means Zack, which is obvious from the strong emphasis and high-pitch on 'some'. In (8), Sheldon proposes to experiment on Leonard's '*some* people' to compare them to dolphins: this time, he uses the pronoun 'you' to make sure that Zack understands, but when he admits that he still does not get it, Leonard replies 'A dolphin might', flouting the Maxim of Quality and implying that Zack is so stupid that even a dolphin might understand what he cannot (which is obviously untrue).

It takes Zack five insinuations, all pretty obvious apart from the first one, to make the necessary implicature, which only confirms what is implied.

A great deal of the comic side of this extract comes from the mutual understanding and bonding between the 'smart' characters (Leonard, Sheldon, Howard, Raj, and even Penny who notices that they are making fun of him) and the spectators, as opposed to Zack's complete inability to infer what is meant. If the superiority theory of humour cannot be applied to every case, it is safe to say that it perfectly fits this one: for once—because *TBBT*'s spectators are not always brilliant physicists—they might just feel as clever and, more

importantly, as part of the group. This is a typical case of humorous superiority, where Zack's blatant lack of reasoning skills highlights our own capacities.

3.1.2 Mimicry/Imitation

Mimicry is the second strategy: it generally consists in an exaggerated imitation implying something, such as the imitator's dislike or contempt for the exaggerated feature. Accents are often targets of such imitations:

TBBT, 'The Extract Obliteration' (S06E06)

Context: Sheldon, Raj and Howard are in the apartment. It is the beginning of the scene.

> (13) RAJ: I think the next time I have to speak to a call centre in India, I'm going to try using an American accent.
> (14) HOWARD: Why?
> (15) RAJ: Because when I use my regular voice, I feel like I'm making fun of them.
> (16) HOWARD: That's ridiculous. Not to mention, your American accent is terrible.
> (17) RAJ: Dude, my accent is brilliant. *(in American accent)* **Hey, my snow-white American friends, let's put some cow meat on the barbecue and eat it until we're all obese.**
>
> <div align="center">[…]</div>
>
> (18) HOWARD: Terrible.
> (19) RAJ: All right, hotshot, let's hear your Indian.
> (20) HOWARD *(in Indian accent)*: **I can't sit on that elephant, my ass is on fire from eating all this curry.**
> (21) RAJ: Okay, yeah, that's pretty good.

In (17) and (20), we have two examples of imitations: Raj, who is Indian and naturally speaks with an Indian accent, tries to take an American accent and Howard, an Indian accent. More interestingly, each of them utters a sentence which they think fits the accent, and thus, the

people speaking with it. These sentences are about demeaning stereotypes: Americans are all white, obese and eat cows; Indians ride elephants (implying they are a primitive or less civilised people) and eat too much curry. Each imitation is offensive because it attacks Social Identity face—the people of America and the people of India—and the stereotypes concerning each culture are directed at someone from the said culture.

Yet this exchange of imitations is rather likely to be interpreted as banter, especially when Raj supports Howard's imitation in (21); it is probably why spectators feel entitled to laugh, along with the fact that both cultures are equally targeted. Banter, as has been said, is a humorous, insincere form of impoliteness, primarily occurring in close relationships, such as Howard and Raj's—and the show plays heavily on their strong intimacy sometimes veering towards romance. It is a 'societal safety-valve' (Culpeper 1996: 353) allowing people to be impolite without breaking social bonds. Because the stereotyped utterances are obviously untrue and exaggerated, they should be interpreted as banter, especially since they are uttered in a non-natural way, i.e. a fake accent; indeed, Bergson argues that 'On obtiendra un effet comique en transposant l'expression naturelle d'une idée dans un autre ton.' (1900/2013: 135).

3.2 Convention-driven impoliteness

Convention-driven impoliteness events are commonly called 'sarcasm' or 'teasing' and are often associated with biting humour (Culpeper 2011: 167). The possibility to interpret the event as impolite relies on a mismatch within behaviour and/or context; we may distinguish between internal (within the behaviour) and external (behaviour vs. context) forms.

3.2.1 Internal mismatch

The internal mismatch can be multimodal, i.e. between language and prosody or body language for instance.

Sherlock, 'A Study in Pink' (S01E01)

Context: Holmes and Watson are examining a crime scene. The woman found dead has carved *rache* on the floor with her nails. Anderson, who is in charge of forensics, appears at the door to make a suggestion. Following the transcript, I will display a few snapshots of the extract to better appreciate the movements involved.

(1) ANDERSON *(proudly)*: She's German. *Rache*. German for revenge. She could be trying to tell us someth-

(2) SHERLOCK: **Yes, thank you for your input.** *(shuts door loudly in Anderson's face)*

ANDERSON: She could by trying

to tell us someth-
SHERLOCK: Yes, thank you

for your input.
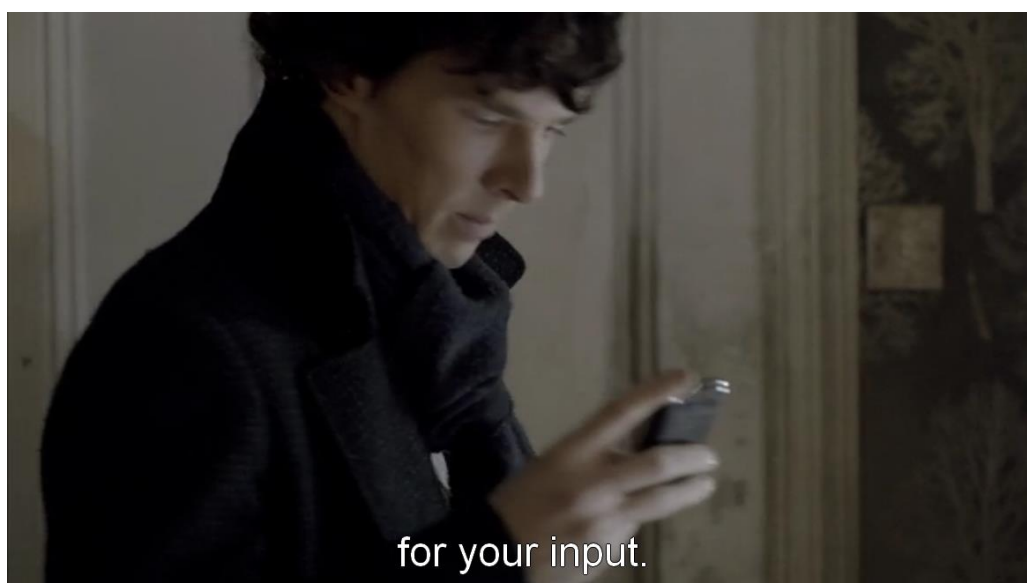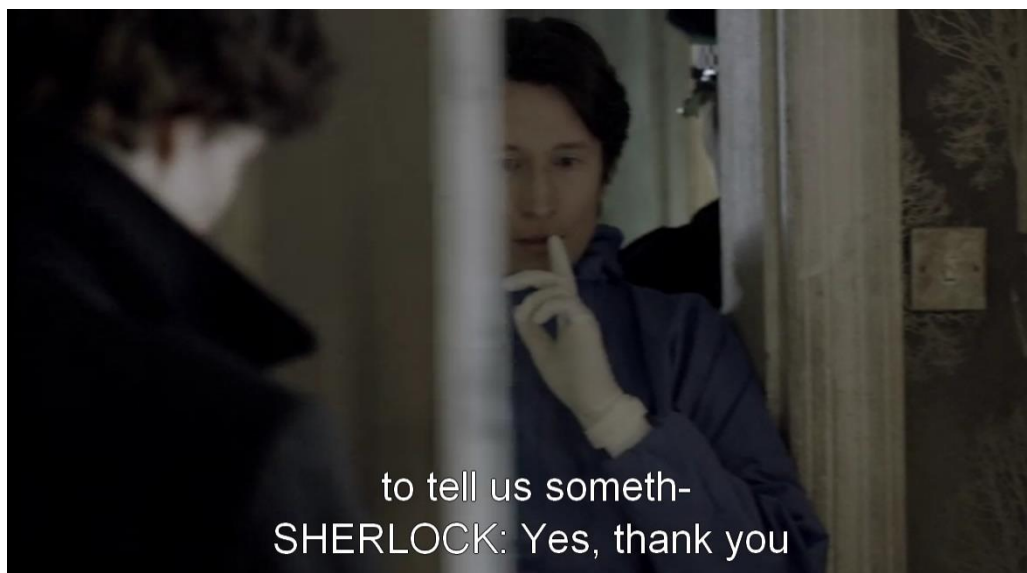
Sherlock's comment is formally a polite thanking for the suggestion that the dead woman might be German since *rache* is a German word: 'yes' is a term of agreement and precedes 'thank you' which seemingly implies that the suggestion has some value. Yet several elements make the interpretation of Sherlock's utterance as polite impossible: first, Sherlock interrupts Anderson in the middle of his sentence; second, he does not look at him but at his phone; third, he shuts the door to his face while thanking him. These mainly behavioural mismatching elements along with a deadpan delivery cancel the polite effects of the thanks

(including the agreement with and value of Anderson's suggestion) and lead us to interpret it as sarcastic.

This particular sarcastic comment, which has become a meme in Internet culture, is often thought as amusing because the character of Anderson is made quite unlikeable from the beginning of the series: he hates Sherlock and fears his extreme abilities, believing that he is a psychopath. Sherlock, on the other hand, thinks Anderson is so stupid that he 'lowers the IQ of the whole street' when he speaks. Anderson's suggestion that the woman might be German is said with pride and confidence, which accentuates the strength of Sherlock's sarcastic answer but also pushes the spectator to believe that Anderson deserved it—especially since it is later proven that the dead woman was not German but only trying to write the name 'Rachel'.

The internal mismatch can also consist in a verbal formula mismatch, i.e. a seemingly polite linguistic element that is immediately cancelled. Traditional examples include the terms 'no offence but', 'I hate to say that but…' and so on. Leech calls this form 'attitude clash' (2014: 237).

Sherlock, 'The Reichenbach Fall' (S02E03)

Context: Sherlock and Anderson are examining a room where two children were kidnapped. Sherlock notices a bottle of linseed oil, meaning that under black light, something may have been written or traced.

(3) SHERLOCK: Linseed oil.
(4) ANDERSON: Doesn't lead us to the kidnapper.
(5) SHERLOCK: **Brilliant, Anderson.**
(6) ANDERSON: Really?
(7) SHERLOCK: **Yes, brilliant impression of an idiot.**

This example of verbal formula mismatch—between 'brilliant' and 'idiot' in (7)—follows Anderson's inability to detect the sarcasm in (5). Indeed, him asking if Sherlock genuinely thinks that his comment was brilliant sort of proves his poor judgement—especially when we know the kind of relationship the two characters have (cf. previous example).

We laugh at Anderson's inability to observe; he is presented as a character unable to adapt himself to the situation and circumstances and to think properly, i.e. in Sherlock's deductive fashion—and it was also the case in the previous example. Again, we feel that he deserves Sherlock's sarcastic comments as a punishment (and our laughter).

The association between two contradictory terms is humorous because unexpected, but also because it is constructed in a creative way: we need only imagine that Sherlock could have answered (6) by 'No, you're an idiot' or simply 'Idiot.' Instead, he chose to agree with Anderson by saying 'yes', reuse the previous sarcastic term 'brilliant', and finally add some sort of punch line with 'impression of an idiot'. It resembles the structure of a traditional joke: Hoover mentions 'The Rule of Three' which consists in a pattern like AAB: it allows to build a certain tension before the punch line/twist happens (2013: 15). Besides, as Leech argues, sarcasm and particularly 'attitude clash' is a more complex, elaborated form of impoliteness which not only degrades the addressee's face but also enhances the speaker's. There is something enjoyable and valuable about sarcasm, which is why it tends to make us laugh: we certainly enjoy a good sarcastic comment more than an uncreative 'You idiot.'

Culpeper also mentions habitual sarcasm, or persons/characters who are known for their use of insincere polite formulae such as Sherlock: he argues that the associated impoliteness events can become expected and conventionalised in some way, which might lessen their impact on face (2011: 178). Such habitual behaviour can both enhance or cancel its humorous effect. Indeed, if the remarks are expected, they sort of mechanise the inappropriate

behaviour, which matches Bergson's theory, and make it less violent; but impolite remarks which are expected also abandon their incongruity effect, like a joke repeated too many times.

3.2.2 External mismatch

The external form consists in a mismatch between language and context. There are no internal cues pointing at the mismatch in the utterance itself; only the context and co-text can help interpret the utterance as sarcastic.

TBBT, 'The Proton Resurgence' (S06E22)

Context: Sheldon and Leonard have invited retired science TV show host Arthur Jeffries, a.k.a. Professor Proton, to come to the apartment. Arthur does not feel well as he is about to leave, and so Sheldon accompanies him to the hospital. On his bedside, Sheldon sings his favourite lullaby.

> (8) SHELDON: Soft kitty, warm kitty, little ball of fur. *(Arthur awkwardly smiles at him.)* Happy kitty, sleepy kitty, purr, purr, purr.
> (9) ARTHUR: **Thank you, Sheldon. That, that was very nice.**
> (10) SHELDON: Want me to sing it again?
> (11) ARTHUR *(quickly)*: No. *(3-second silence)* **The fourth, the fourth time was, was the charm.**

Thank you, Sheldon. That was very nice.

Turn (9) is a seemingly polite 'thank you' addressed to Sheldon for singing a lullaby; Arthur adds that he found it 'very nice' or pleasant to hear. What can be noted right away is that Arthur's tone is generally quite soft and monotonous, and (9) is delivered in his usual tone, without any change in pitch or speed and without any particular behavioural aspect which could lead to an interpretation of his thanks as insincere. In other words, if only (9) was heard and seen, it is doubtful that anyone would suspect any sarcasm. Yet, the spectator understands that Arthur did not enjoy Sheldon's song because the context and co-text prove so: first, in (8), while Sheldon is singing, Arthur gives him a very awkward smile which lets us know he is not feeling comfortable, and second, in (11), Sheldon's question is answered very quickly by a strong 'no'. Following Arthur's refusal is a quite long silence and another sarcastic comment which plays on the expression 'third time's a charm': we understand that Sheldon has been repetitively singing *Soft Kitty*. Of course, the impact of these subtle sarcastic comments in (9) and (11) is lessened by Sheldon's difficulty to detect any insincerity involved while the spectator can, which also makes the remarks amusing. The humour of this type of sarcasm, and particularly in this scene, has a lot to do with Arthur's emotionless and serious delivery, which is typical of dry or deadpan humour.

3.3 Nonpoliteness and underpoliteness

This category roughly corresponds to Culpeper's context-driven impoliteness; however, I thought that he did not explain it very clearly and that the term context-driven could easily be applied to a convention-driven external mismatch as well. I thus chose to use Leech's notions of nonpoliteness and underpoliteness.

Nonpoliteness is a lack of politeness. It is 'a property of utterances that have no polite value of any kind' (Leech 2014: 216). Is nonpoliteness impolite? Where does it stand on the spectrum of (im)politeness?

Leech makes a difference between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic nonpoliteness (2014: 217):
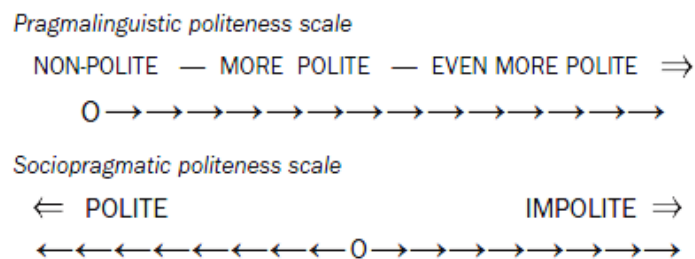
FIGURE 8.1 Contrast between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic politeness scales.

The pragmalinguistic scale has only one direction, starting from nonpoliteness (or zero politeness, typical in imperatives for example) to an increasing degree of politeness: there is no notion of impoliteness because a sentence is either non-polite or in various degrees polite. The sociopragmatic scale, however, puts nonpoliteness in-between politeness and impoliteness, and Leech mentions that it corresponds to Watts's politic behaviour, i.e. unmarked and expected behaviour. It thus leaves room for phenomena such as underpoliteness (under the 0 point) and overpoliteness (over the 0 point). The sociopragmatic

scale is also subjected to sociological variables—the same as Brown and Levinson's: vertical and horizontal distance and cost-benefit.

The notion of underpoliteness is interesting as well: is it a kind of impoliteness? It is difficult to classify it as impoliteness because it does not always involve *face attack*, intentional or not, and because it is one of the most context-tied forms. Let's take Leech's striking example of the mountaineer who is stuck and injured, calls for help, and is saved by a rescue team. After they all reach the road, the rescued mountaineer jumps in his car, says *Well, thanks—good night!* and drives off. There is an element of politeness but it is disproportionally weak compared to what we feel the rescue team deserved for finding and saving the mountaineer. Leech explains that:

> the speaker makes some token gesture of *pragmalinguistic politeness* (the use of *thanks* in the mountaineer's parting utterance), but this is construed as *sociopragmatically* inadequate for the occasion. Thus underpoliteness, as I see it, is a case of sociopragmatic impoliteness where there is an inadequately low degree of pragmalinguistic politeness. (2014: 218)

TBBT, 'The Vacation Solution' (S05E16)

Context: Sheldon is forced to take a vacation; he decides to spend the week with Amy to help her. His first day is a catastrophe, as he refuses to do basic tasks—such as washing beakers— and to acknowledge that he does not have the required training for neurobiology experiments (he cut his thumb with a scalpel and fainted at the sight of his blood). The next day, Sheldon returns to Amy's lab.

(1) SHELDON: *(knocks)* Amy? *(knocks)* Amy? *(knocks)* Amy?

(2) AMY: What do you want?

(3) SHELDON: I was kind of hoping I could continue vacationing in your laboratory. After all, I did book the whole week.

(4) AMY: Do you honestly think you can just waltz back in here after the way you behaved yesterday?

(5) SHELDON: **I was not myself. I had lost a lot of thumb blood.**

(6) AMY: That's not an apology.

(7) SHELDON: **That is your opinion.**

(8) AMY: I want a real apology.

(9) SHELDON: **I'm sorry that you weren't able to…**

(10) AMY: No.

(11) SHELDON: **That my genius…**

(12) AMY: No.

(13) SHELDON: **That the soap was…**

(14) AMY: Sheldon.

(15) SHELDON: Fine. Sorry.

We have in this example several instances of nonpoliteness and underpoliteness. Amy's question in (4) implies that she wants and deserves an apology from Sheldon, which would only be polite or politic behaviour. Yet Sheldon's answer in (5), and what he considers to be an apology if we look at (7), is that he was not himself because he 'had lost a lot of thumb blood'. This is not only a rather weak and unacceptable explanation for his behaviour but it is also very unlikely to be taken as an apology by anyone except himself. It is clearly an example of nonpoliteness: there is a lack of politeness where it would be expected; this lack of politeness could be interpreted as impolite by Amy. Amy understands that she will have to ask directly if she wants an apology, which she does in (8). Sheldon then plays on expectations of politeness in (9), (11) and (13): according to him, the expression 'I'm sorry' should be enough to be considered as an apology, no matter what follows. Thus, he tries to find a way to apologise without really doing so, by blaming either Amy's abilities ('you' in

(9)), his own intellect ('my genius' in (11)) or, even more absurdly, the soap he used to wash the beakers in (13). These are all examples of underpoliteness, containing indeed an element of politeness, i.e. an apologetic 'I'm sorry', but which is clearly neither enough nor adapted to the situation. Sheldon never runs out of creative ways to not-really-apologise and it is this manipulation of expectations which gives a certain humorous tone to the extract.

Interestingly enough, all examples of nonpoliteness and underpoliteness are followed by the laugh track; only the real apology in (15) is not.

4. Dysphemistic directness

What I call 'dysphemistic directness' is not part of Culpeper's categorisation of impoliteness events. However, as it is a sort of impoliteness frequently found in my corpus, I believe that it deserves a place in this study of humorous impoliteness, although it is neither part of conventionalised formulae nor non-conventionalised ones. I will here make a few remarks about taboos and dysphemisms and analyse two examples of dysphemistic directness used to convey humour.

4.1 Taboos and dysphemisms

The English word *taboo* comes from the Tongan *tabu* which means 'forbidden'. A taboo comes from society and its constraints and eventually leads us to replace taboo words or expressions with other less offensive and socially accepted terms or expressions (Allan & Burridge 2006: 1-2). Examples of taboo topics in many societies include death, sex and bodily secretions.

Culpeper notes that the use/mention of taboo words or topics is offensive and thus possibly impolite. According to him, it should be categorised within sociality rights, more specifically equity rights:

> Taboos are less a matter of mediating an individual's self and more a matter of social conventions. This would suggest sociality rights. Although not explicitly accommodated within equity rights, one can construct an argument that the producer of something taboo shows lack of consideration for the perceiver by introducing something with strong negative emotions […] (2011: 42)

Not using socially adequate replacements, i.e. euphemisms, to mention taboo topics can thus be offensive and thus dysphemistic. Allan and Burridge define this last term as follows: 'A dysphemism is an expression with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum or to the audience, or both, and it is substituted for a neutral or euphemistic expression for just that reason.' (Allan & Burridge 1991: 26)

I decided to term 'dysphemistic directness' a feature of language appearing in certain characters, such as Sheldon, Amy or Sherlock, who often ignore social conventions or hold them in contempt. They, voluntarily or not, tend to be very direct by refusing to veil their speech with euphemisms and by employing dysphemistic expressions. We could note Sheldon's persistent use of the word 'coitus' to openly talk about sexual intercourse in everyday situations and regardless of whom he is speaking to, for instance. Consider the following example:

TBBT, 'The Spaghetti Catalyst' (S03E20)

Context: Penny and Leonard have just broken up. Sheldon comes across Penny in the hallway and does not know how to act now that she is his friend's ex-girlfriend.

> (1) SHELDON: I just wasn't sure of the proper protocol now that you and Leonard are no longer having **coitus**.
> (2) PENNY: God, can we please just say 'no longer **seeing each other**'?
> (3) SHELDON: Well, we could if it were true. But as you live in the same building, you see each other all the time. The variable which has changed is the **coitus**.
> (4) PENNY: Okay, here's the protocol, you and I are still friends, and **you stop saying 'coitus'**.

Sex is a strong taboo in American society and the word 'coitus' seems to be a dispreferred term: although it is not really vulgar and more of a scientific word, it makes Penny very

uncomfortable. It is clear from the example, as in (2), Penny explicitly says that she would prefer Sheldon to use the euphemism 'seeing each other' and urges him to 'stop saying coitus' in (4). Of course, this extract is also humorous for two main reasons: 'coitus', because of its Latin origin, is often considered as a fancy, amusing word and Sheldon rightly points at the euphemism's inaccuracy in this context. The Benign Violation Theory of humour is quite interesting for this category, as the violation of a taboo is indeed a transgression of social norms, but it is also likely to be evaluated as benign, and thus humorous.

4.2 Examples

Dysphemistic directness also gives rise to humorous impoliteness events. I will detail two examples concerning the taboos of death and menstruation.

4.2.1 Death

Sherlock, 'A Scandal in Belgravia' (S02E01)

Context: At the beginning of the episode, Holmes and Watson are looking for a case to work on; they receive different clients, including two little girls who want to know what happened to their grandfather after he died.

> (1) GIRL 2: They wouldn't let us see Granddad when he was dead. Is that cause he'd gone to heaven?
> (2) SHERLOCK: People don't really go to heaven when they die. **They're taken to a special room and burned.**
> *(The two girls look at each other.)*

The little girl's question in (1) contains a euphemism for death, i.e. going to heaven. Yet she previously has no trouble using the word 'dead' to mention her grandfather, which might imply that 'gone to heaven' was the answer provided by other adults to whom she asked the

same question. In (2), Sherlock negates the idea that people go to heaven; instead he chooses to tell the truth: the grandfather's body was burnt and this is why they can no longer see him. The word 'burned' is dysphemistic in the sense that it does not attempt to hide the reality of death and gives a clear mental picture of what happened to the body of the family member. Moreover, if we take into account Allan and Burridge's middle class politeness criterion[16], it is unlikely that someone would find the term 'burned' appropriate to describe cremation. What seems to be brutal honesty from Sherlock is yet perhaps a better-suited answer to the children's question, an idea hinted at by the girls' reaction: they do not really seem offended but rather look at each other in a 'that's what it was' manner. It is likely that the spectators feel more offended at Sherlock's remark since it is addressed to children, but we come to understand that the truth was not so bad and might actually be a better way to explain things. Besides, we can remark that Sherlock does adapt his speech somehow, using 'special room' and 'burned' instead of more technical words such as *crematorium* or *cremated*.

The excerpt can be thought as humorous for several reasons, although it seems closer to dark humour than comedy: first, Sherlock's apparent inability to adapt his speech for the audience and his addressing children as if they were adults (cf. his quick, monotonous and cold delivery); and second, the benignity of the taboo violation, as the direct mention of cremation seems to feed the girls' curiosity instead of offending them, pointing at the irrationality and ineffectiveness of the previous answer 'gone to heaven'.

4.2.2 Menstruation

TBBT, 'The Zazzy Substitution' (S04E03)

Context: Sheldon and Amy are joining the group to the restaurant but they are late. It is the first time that Amy is introduced by Sheldon to everyone.

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[16] 'In order to be polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment, one would normally be expected to use the euphemism rather than its dispreferred counterpart(s).' (Allan & Burridge 1991: 31)

> (3) SHELDON: Sorry we're late.
>
> (4) AMY: I must take responsibility. **I had to stop for feminine hygiene supplies.**
>
> (5) LEONARD *(disgusted, feigning laughter)*: Ahhh, ah…
>
> (6) HOWARD *(shocked)*: Okay…
>
> (7) SHELDON: **I believe she's experiencing her *menses*.**
>
> (8) AMY: **Actually, I'm not. In order to avoid surprises, I wear them all the time.**

Amy's excuse in (4) is quite unexpected, especially in the context of a restaurant and eating: violating the taboo of menstruation, she deliberately states that she needed 'feminine hygiene supplies' instead of veiling the reason of their delay. The awkwardness of the situation is exacerbated by the fact that all other members sitting at the table are male and, unsurprisingly, express disgust and shock following Amy's declaration: they are offended and consider her remark as inappropriate and impolite, despite the fact that it contains no intrinsically dysphemistic terms. The evaluation of (4)'s impoliteness relies solely on context, a context (restaurant − male addressees) in which the slightest reference to menstruation is prohibited and where any mention of it could be considered as dysphemistic. But Amy's comment is furthered by Sheldon in (7), who explains that she must be 'experiencing her *menses*' putting an emphasis on the last word—an even more direct reference to menstruation. It is also a medical term which sounds a little peculiar, and quite amusing, in such a friendly context. In general, their tendency to use scientific terms instead of more vulgar words to mention taboo topics can remind us of a blue humour parody.

Following Sheldon's unnecessary clarification, Amy gives very personal details in (8), countering Sheldon's previous statement by explaining that she wears feminine protection at all times. We have between (4), (7) and (8) a gradation in the inappropriateness of the details given, resulting in a breach of equity rights: Amy and Sheldon's comments are inconsiderate

of the others' negative feelings associated with menstruation—although they do not do it on purpose and are just very ignorant of taboos—, especially as they are about to have lunch. By infringing on her own personal space, i.e. giving personal details to men that she is meeting for the first time, Amy also infringes on the men's as she forces a certain level of intimacy that they have not reached yet—and probably never will. Interestingly, Amy's way of speaking can be associated to masculine behaviour:

> The linguistic features which seem to be stereotypically positively associated with masculinity and hence power are: *the use of direct assertions rather than indirectness*; swearing; *unmitigated statements and expressions of negative opinions*; face-threatening acts in general; verbal wit and humour, *non-emotional language*.' (Mills 2005: 273, my emphasis)

Yet the male addressees do not bond with her, because the subject evoked is definitely associated with—some might believe reserved to—women. This idea gives me the opportunity to mention gender overlap in *TBBT*, which is also a humour strategy playing on stereotypes. Many male characters display characteristics traditionally associated with femininity, such as Leonard's sensitivity or Raj's fondness for cosmetics, and female characters with masculinity, such as Penny's strength and roughness, Bernadette's decisiveness and Amy's directness—all characteristics which are likely to be interpreted as impolite coming from women, Mills argues.

Conclusion

This part's aim was to show that, as previously predicted, humorous events can definitely be impolite, or that impoliteness events can bear humorous overtones. Indeed, *TBBT* and *Sherlock* make an extensive use of impoliteness aiming to convey humour, but this practice also raises one major question: what kind of impoliteness is humorous?

By using such a categorisation of impoliteness events—conventionalised, non-conventionalised and dysphemistic—I have shown that humorous impoliteness is not a matter of type since all of these categories had a fitting humorous example. If the form is not at stake in determining the humorous potential of an impoliteness event, then its contents must be relied on and there must be factors involved in our interpretation of such events. I will explore this idea in the next and last part, after focusing on a non-conventionalised form of impoliteness, sarcasm. Indeed, the study of sarcasm will help us gain an overview of this specific type of implied impoliteness and lead us to an essential characteristic of humorous impoliteness: creativity.

Part IV: Sarcasm and the limits of humorous impoliteness

Introduction

One of the most recurring forms of humorous impoliteness found in my corpus, the series *The Big Bang Theory* and *Sherlock*, seems to be what Culpeper termed non-conventionalised convention-driven impoliteness, more commonly called 'sarcasm'. It is not so surprising that sarcasm should be the perfect candidate to combine impoliteness and humour and that it is widely used, even more so in fictional contexts: indeed, we saw that it was considered as a form of humour in the first part of this study, as well as a form of impoliteness in the third part. I will, in this last part, analyse sarcasm in more depth and give additional examples from my corpus. Defining and theorising sarcasm requires to consider it side by side with irony: both include the presence of a metamessage and self-alienation but only sarcasm involves a certain aggressiveness—whence its impoliteness potential. Analysing the way sarcasm is processed will then help us cast light on this particular form: even if understanding sarcasm should be relatively easy thanks to the presence of intonational or segmental cues, there is no zero risk and the metamessage may not always be conveyed. Briefly mentioning teasing, I will show that sarcasm can be more or less aggressive and even directed at oneself. Following this overview of the sarcastic form—which involves our ability to use and recognise non-literal meanings—and its functions, I will argue that sarcasm is intrinsically creative and that its creativity or originality relies on the inferencing process. I will lastly attempt to find the limits of humorous impoliteness by studying cases where laughter does not come as easily or where we might feel that the offence has gone too far; this will allow me to bring out some decisive elements in the interpretation of impoliteness as funny or not.

1. Sarcasm

Sarcasm was previously mentioned as being part of non-conventionalised impoliteness: it was explained as relying on an internal or external mismatch between behaviour/language and context but no additional details were given.

This section will attempt to shed light on this linguistic form, more specifically on its relationship with irony, how it self-alienates the speaker, its functions, its processing and its humorous and aggressive potentials.

1.1 What is sarcasm?

1.1.1 Sarcasm and irony

Sarcasm is, in many dictionary definitions, described as a biting form of irony, meaning that sarcasm is irony whereas irony is not always sarcasm. The difference between the two might be a little more complex in reality, as explained by Brant in his own definition of the term:

> [Sarcasm is a] form of expression of language often including the assertion of a statement that is disbelieved by the expresser […] Sarcasm involves the expression of an insulting remark that requires the interpreter to understand the negative emotional connotation of the expresser within the context of the situation at hand. Irony, contrarily, does not include derision, unless it is sarcastic irony. The problems with these definitions and the reason why this dissertation does not thoroughly investigate the distinction between irony and sarcasm involves the ideas that: (1) people can pretend to be insulted when they are not or pretend not to be insulted when they are seriously offended; (2) an individual may feel ridiculed directly after the comment and then find it humorous or neutral thereafter; and (3) the individual may not feel insulted until years after the comment was expressed and considered. (Brant 2012: 145-6)

Because it is difficult to trace the emotional consequences of an ironic or sarcastic remark on the hearer, the interpretation of its degree of offence is quite complex to establish, especially since emotions might change within a short or long period of time. There is indeed a distinction between irony and sarcasm: the latter is intended to be offensive and is meant to convey contempt for someone, but it involves individual interpretation in the same way as Watts's (im)politeness[1]. In other words, the difference between irony and sarcasm relies on the speaker's intention and/or the hearer's interpretation.

On this distinction, Haiman identifies two core elements nevertheless: 'First, situations may be ironic, but only people can be sarcastic. Second, people may be unintentionally ironic, but sarcasm requires intention. What is essential to sarcasm is that it is overt irony intentionally used by the speaker as a form of verbal aggression' (1998: 20).

What thus characterises sarcasm is its aggressive and offensive potential, which explains why it deserves a place in the study of impoliteness.[17] Yet it is also related to irony, and verbal irony is often used to convey humour. Sarcasm is therefore a complex form of expression which navigates between humour and violence.

Because sarcasm and irony are related, some theories of irony can be useful and apply quite well to the subject. Notably, Sperber and Wilson mention that irony is traditionally believed to be a figure of speech in which the opposite of what is said is meant, but it is only the most common form. Several examples contradict this idea and show that irony in fact covers a wider range of cases, including ironical understatements, quotations or interjections. The same is true of sarcasm (cf. upcoming examples).

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[17] Its aggressive potential is also clearly established in the word's etymology, from the Late Greek *sarkasmos* or the Greek *sarkazein* meaning 'tear flesh' and 'bite'.

Sperber and Wilson's theory of verbal irony is that of an *echoic mention*. This idea relies on the distinction between language use and mention. Let's consider the following sentences:

> (1) Cordelia is King Lear's daughter.
>
> (2) 'Cordelia' is a beautiful name.

In (1), the word *Cordelia* refers to the youngest daughter of King Lear in Shakespeare's play; it is a case of use where the name refers to a character. In (2), however, *Cordelia* refers to the word itself, which is why it stands between inverted commas; it is thus a case of mention. A word or expression is *used* when it refers to something or someone; a word or expression is *mentioned* when it refers to itself.

Sperber & Wilson argue that irony is a phenomenon of echoic mention:

> Verbal irony, we argue, invariably involves the expression of an attitude of disapproval […] The speaker echoes a thought she attributes to someone else, while dissociating herself from it with anything from mild ridicule to savage scorn. (Sperber & Wilson in Gibbs & Colston 2007: 41).

Verbal irony thus allows the speaker to echo an utterance, a belief or a norm with which s/he is not associated. The notion and nature of the echo will be tackled in more detail in 1.2.1.

1.1.2 'Alienation and the Divided Self' (Haiman)

Quite similarly to Sperber and Wilson, Haiman argues that sarcasm mostly relies on a dissociation between the speaker and what s/he says. For this reason, he often compares sarcasm to playacting throughout his study:

Like every actor, the sarcast has a divided self, existing both as the performer and the persona—the character portrayed. […] the sarcast is a disdainful playactor who advertises his or her insincerity by self-consciously keeping the performer and the persona alive, distinct, and opposed. The ostensible message delivered in character expresses the role, but the metamessage—an aside directed to the other members of the play—expresses the performer's sincere alienation from the role which, for whatever reason, he or she elects to play. (1998: 61)

Haiman considers sarcasm as a type of un-plain speaking which requires the speaker to be divided in two. The speaker plays a role, just like an actor embodying someone else. The only difference with playacting is that the actor is supposed to be convincing, while the sarcast is not and actually *must* show that s/he is playing a role through diverse verbal or paralinguistic cues.

It might also be the case that sarcasm is not universal but culture-specific, since self-alienation and playacting in general are inexistent in certain societies (Ilongot, Samoans, Alekano, 1998: 63). Haiman explains this idea with the propensity of smaller communities to give less importance to individuality; instead, they choose to emphasise group cohesion so that one becomes part of the group but not a single individual. Conversely, in highly individualistic societies—such as our own—which value the possibilities to develop an individual self or to become someone else, alienation is ubiquitous, and so is sarcasm.[18]

1.1.3 The function(s) of sarcasm

Two mutually exclusive theories of ironic criticism proposed that it was used either to dilute offensiveness (*tinge hypothesis*) or to exacerbate it (*aggressive hypothesis*). In the case of sarcasm, where there is a distinctive intention to offend, it seems more logical that it should

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[18] For more information about cultural perceptions of alienation and the self, see Haiman (1998: 63-66).

function as exacerbating the offence caused by creating some sort of contrast between the situation and what is said.

Haiman also argues that sarcasm is the result of a certain postmodern sensibility: as we believe that nothing can be new because everything has already been done or uttered, we are victims of this 'Western terror of losing face through inadvertent sententiousness and uttering nothing but other people's shopworn clichés' (1998: 15). The only way to express one's superiority over these clichés is to utter them parodically, i.e. sarcastically.

Sherlock, 'The Empty Hearse' (S03E01)

Context: Sherlock has just returned to London after having faked his death two years earlier. In the middle of a talk with his brother Mycroft concerning an upcoming terrorist attack in London, Sherlock enquires about Watson.

> (1) SHERLOCK: And what about John Watson?
> (2) MYCROFT *(surprised)*: John?
> (3) SHERLOCK: Have you seen him?
> (4) MYCROFT: **Oh yes, we meet up every Friday for fish and chips!**

Many elements guide to the interpretation of (4) as sarcastic: Mycroft's position as shown in the picture, which is one of superiority and power—consistent with an attack—as well as his frowning and higher than usual pitch.

This example is quite interesting because it illustrates how sarcasm can be much more than just the opposite of what is said. By uttering a sarcastic answer in (4), Mycroft actually implies several things: that he has not seen Watson, even less regularly; that Sherlock's question is stupid since he knows that Mycroft is a very busy man and does not burden himself with friends; and that he is offended by Sherlock's concern for Watson only when the whole of London is under threat. It would be a mistake however to interpret Mycroft's remark as signalling 'We *don't* meet up every Friday for fish and chips'. The goal is clearly to exacerbate the attack against Sherlock and to point at the inappropriateness of his inquiry. Mycroft, by drawing attention to the banality of the new topic ('every', 'fish and chips'), provides a stark and accusing contrast with the previous topic—an imminent terrorist threat. By doing so, he also avoids a plain, boring and inefficient literal equivalent. We can actually note that a literal equivalent is quite hard to find, mostly because of the creative and exaggerating addition 'every Friday for fish and chips' and the numerous implications stemming from the sarcastic form, which would definitely be lost with a 'No, I have not'.

1.2 The processing of sarcasm

1.2.1 Understanding sarcasm

Concerning the processing of sarcasm, Gibbs distinguishes between the *Standard Pragmatic Model* and the *Echoic Mention Theory* (based on Sperber & Wilson). The Standard Pragmatic Model (SPM) is the traditional view positing that sarcasm and irony processing occurs in three steps:

A person must (a) compute the utterance's context-independent, literal meaning; (b) decide whether the literal meaning is the speaker's intended meaning; and (c) if the literal interpretation is inappropriate, compute the nonliteral meaning by assuming the opposite of the literal interpretation. (2007: 174)

It is thus a linear processing which involves time, and according to the SPM, sarcasm should logically take longer to process than a literal remark. Yet several elements contradict this idea:

- Based on previous experiments, Gibbs affirms that people take no longer to process indirect requests (such as 'Must you open the window?' meaning 'Do not open the window') and non-literal idiomatic expressions ('Don't beat around the bush').

- Sometimes, the literal meaning behind the sarcastic remark is far from being obvious and simply the opposite of what is said. Any attempt at reversing the utterance's meaning might not convey enough of the speaker's intention, as it has been demonstrated in the previous example. Consider the following situation: A tells B that s/he looks really tired; B replies 'Well, thank you.' The insincere thanks does not only imply 'I'm not thanking you' but also 'you're rude', 'I didn't appreciate that' and so on according to the situation.

- Finally, there are cases in which something true is uttered and yet the comment remains sarcastic: imagine that B had replied 'I do like compliments.' It is highly probable that B does like compliments: there is thus a certain truth value in B's reply. The reply is sarcastic nonetheless because it does not match its context and implies that what A has said was a compliment whereas it certainly was not.

Gibbs instead prefers to use Sperber & Wilson's Echoic Mention Theory. He explains quite clearly the underlying principle and makes very interesting remarks about the notion of 'echo':

According to the Echoic Mention Theory, there is no nonliteral proposition that hearers must substitute for the literal proposition. Rather, the listener is reminded echoically of some familiar proposition (whose truth value is irrelevant) and of the speaker's attitude toward it. There are many different types and degrees of echoic mention, some of these are immediate echoes, and others are delayed; some have their sources in actual utterances, others in thoughts or opinions; some have real sources, others have imagined ones; some are traceable back to particular individuals, whereas others have a vague origin. (2007: 175)

The replies 'Well, thank you' and 'I do like compliments' echo the belief that it is not appropriate to tell someone that they look tired and that it breaks a politeness norm. The echo is indirect and implicit, because it concerns a social norm. Let's now imagine that, later in the day, A asks B to do something, and B replies 'Don't I look too tired to do this?'; this time, the echo comes from A's earlier utterance and is explicit.

TBBT, 'The Friendship Algorithm' (S02E13)

Context: Sheldon is in a rock climbing centre.

> (1) SHELDON *(to the man who attaches him to the ropes)*: So is this your entire job? *(silence)* **Your parents must be so proud.**

Your parents must be so proud.

Sherlock's utterance is a typical impolite sarcastic remark: directed at a man he does not know, it is unlikely to be interpreted as teasing or banter; moreover, Sheldon's intention is to criticise and downgrade the man's Social Identity face (his job) and Relational face (his role as a son). It is therefore a case of genuine impoliteness.

The utterance can be divided into two parts. The first is the question 'So is this your entire job?' directed to the man who works at the rock climbing centre and, in the scene, attaches Sheldon to the ropes. What can be inferred from the question, and what Sheldon obviously thinks, is that it is not a very demanding nor rewarding job and that it is far from Sheldon's purely intellectual conception of success. The second part is the sarcastic, mismatching remark 'Your parents must be so proud.' It is in complete disagreement with Sheldon's previous implications, therefore it cannot be sincere. It seems to echo a certain social norm or belief in which children are supposed to make their parents proud; the echo is not explicit, i.e. it does not echo anything from the co-text, but it certainly reminds us of a typical expression. 'Your parents/mother/father must be (so) proud' may be uttered sincerely but has also become sort of conventionalised[19] as sarcastic, provided some paralinguistic elements confirm the

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[19] Hence Culpeper's designation as a 'convention-driven' form.

insincerity. Thus Sheldon's remark cannot be mistaken for sincere: first because it is in contradiction with his previous implications and his beliefs as a character, and second because he uses an inappropriate intonation (cf. following section 1.2.2) in flattening a normally enthusiastic utterance. The pitch is low and descending, transcribed in the subtitle with a full stop. Finally, Sheldon is looking at the man when he asks the question but not when he utters the sarcastic remark, which also suggests that he does not mean what he says. What does he exactly mean though? I believe it is a straightforward case of sarcasm in which he means the opposite, i.e. 'your parents must *not* be proud'. We could probably infer other logical implications but the context does not favour additional meanings, since it is only a side remark directed at someone who does not even answer.

To conclude, I would like to analyse a little more of the context: the episode focuses on Sheldon trying to become friends with his colleague Barry, who controls certain university resources, in order to obtain the said resources. As Sheldon is looking for ways to be more friendly, he establishes a 'friendship algorithm' and comes to the conclusion that the only way to befriend Barry and get what he wants is to engage in an activity together. Barry chooses rock climbing, unaware that Sheldon is terrified of heights. Despite Sheldon's attempt to create a 'friendship algorithm', his remark to the man could not be less friendly. The fact that his character is completely at odds with his goal to make friends gives the situation an even more humorous undertone: he might try to be friendly with Barry, but he can never hide his true colours in the end. Bergson would argue that Sheldon's arrogance has a will of its own and thus mechanises his character, despite his superficial attempts to change.

Finally, following a series of experiments to test sarcasm processing time and memory, Gibbs arrives at several conclusions:

- The first is that there is no linear three-step processing of sarcasm as it is traditionally thought, but instead a direct understanding of an echoic mention. According to Gibbs's results, people take even less time to process sarcasm than literal remarks. Interestingly, because it is the norm to be polite, people take less time to process insincere politeness (sarcasm) than insincere impoliteness (banter).

- The second is that sarcastic remarks are better remembered than literal equivalents. Sarcasm has a stronger impact on memory than literal language.

- The third is that explicit echoes are processed and understood faster than implicit ones. The speed and ease of sarcasm understanding thus depends on the nature/explicitness of the echo involved.

1.2.2 Cues to sarcastic utterances

Haiman's analysis of sarcasm relies on one main element: the presence of a metamessage, or in other words, that what is said is different from what is meant or does not fit context and thus implies something else. It is essential to recognise the metamessage from the utterance, and because the former is not clearly enunciated, 'the sarcastic metamessage ('I don't mean this message' or 'I'm not serious') is most frequently signalled by a very limited set of highly iconic gestures.' (1998: 30)

Haiman thus presents a list of strategies, both verbal and non-verbal, involved in the production and recognition of sarcasm. Of course, most of these strategies can be used together, depending on how subtle the remark is intended to sound.

Intonational cues

- Sneers and laughter are some of the main intonational cues. Sarcastic utterances are often marked by their nasality, which corresponds to an instrumental gesture of

disgust according to Darwin; we wish to expel whatever is disgusting through the mouth, but also through the nose (Haiman 1998: 30). In the same way, a derisive snort (nasal laugh) also hints at disgust and insincerity.

- Inverse pitch obtrusion can also hint at sarcasm. It consists in uttering stressed syllables at a lower pitch than the surrounding sounds (1998: 31).

- Intonational misfits, characterising insincerity, are 'emotionally inappropriate intonation[s]' (1998: 33) or 'incongruous' tones. They can range from exaggerating amplitude, duration and pitch to flattening enthusiastic words ('Wow. Great.') or using a *falsetto* voice associated with childishness or weakness.

Concerning intonational cues, Haiman concludes by saying:

A sarcastic delivery presupposes and contrasts with a normal or emotively appropriate one. The conceptual distance between words and the speaker's true or intended meaning is then signalled not directly by the 'distance' or 'misfit' between the intonation and the segmental utterance but rather by the distance between the actual intonation and an unspoken intonational model which a sincere delivery would call for. The meaning of sarcastic intonation, like that of every other sign, consists in its contrast with other signs that are in a paradigmatic relationship with it. (1998: 41)

The word 'misfit' may remind us of Culpeper's own description of sarcasm as a mismatch. Sarcasm necessarily presupposes a mismatch and its visibility—and one's intonation is the most common and effective way to do so. However, some segmental markers can also help us recognise such a form.

Segmental markers

- Hyperformality and the use of formal registers such as an exaggerated clarity of pronunciation, orthographic honorifics (titles and capital letters) can lead to a sarcastic interpretation.

- Descriptive language, such as saying 'It hurts so much.' instead of 'Ouch!'—i.e. describing instead of expressing—may be evaluated as a sign of sarcasm.

- Known or cliché quotes, evident or obvious remarks and ironic repetition of fresh talk all serve to echo another utterance. Haiman elaborates to extend the 'quoting' category to implicit echoes: 'Direct quotation, then, may be of the actual words, of the proposition, or of the illocutionary force of the utterance which is being mocked.' (1998: 51)

- There are certain punctuation conventions to mark sarcasm as well, such as inverted commas '…' or chunking/hyphenating cliché expressions. Interestingly, we can find sarcastic/ironic chunked utterances everywhere today in hashtags: the hashtag consists in tagging a post with a certain theme or word (*#sarcasm*). It has become an internet cliché quite rapidly, and many people prefer to show that they are conscious of it and superior by using it ironically. Doing so consists in inserting whole chunked sentences instead of a single word as it should traditionally be.

  #hashtag *says:*

  July 23, 2011 at 4:09 pm

  #youaresoright #hashtagsareoverused #annoyedbloggerproblems

  Reply

  (Comment in response to an article entitled 'How to Hashtag Without Looking Like an Idiot')

- Other segmental devices include the repetition of signs of assent ('Yeah, right.'), provided they are pronounced in a deadpan manner, and unusual syntax ('A fine friend you are.')

1.2.3 Not getting it

Not understanding sarcasm, even in spite of all the cues, is still possible. Usually, only children under the age of six are unable to detect such a complex form. Several parts of the brain—the right hemisphere, the prefrontal lobes and mostly the prefrontal cortex—are responsible for processing sarcasm. Research has shown that people with prefrontal damage had trouble recognising nonliteral meanings, notably because of their difficulties to detect paralinguistic cues such as tone of voice or emotions (Singer 2005). Understanding sarcasm can also be difficult in the written form if there are no specific segmental markers, obviously because the written form cannot provide us with prosodic cues.

The non-recognition of sarcasm is a recurring topic in *TBBT*, where Sheldon above everyone else has a lot of trouble inferring nonliteral meanings. Quite strangely, he seems to be perfectly able to produce sarcastic remarks (cf. example in 1.2.1).

TBBT, 'The Big Bran Hypothesis' (S01E02)

Context: Sheldon and Leonard have just met their new neighbour Penny, whose apartment is a complete mess. One night, they decide to sneak in there to tidy things up while she is sleeping. The next morning, an infuriated Penny rushes to their apartment.

(1) PENNY: Do you understand how creepy this is?!
(2) LEONARD: Uh, yes. We discussed it at length last night.
(3) PENNY: In my apartment? While I was sleeping?!
(4) SHELDON: And snoring. And that's probably just a sinus infection. But it could be sleep apnea. You might want to see an otorhinolaryngologist. *(silence)* The throat doctor.

> (5) PENNY *(very calmly, slowly approaching Sheldon)*: **And what kind of doctor removes shoes from asses?**
>
> (6) SHELDON: Depending on the depth, that's either a proctologist or a general surgeon.
>
> *(behind Penny, Leonard holds up a piece of paper with 'sarcasm' scribbled on it)*
>
> (7) SHELDON: Oh.

What is particularly interesting in (5) is the form Penny's question takes: it is a direct echo to Sheldon's previous comment, in which he advises her to see a throat doctor because of her snoring. This parodic repetition is also a thinly veiled threat: by insincerely asking 'what kind of doctor removes shoes from asses', she implies that Sheldon will need one after she kicks him. There is indeed a more or less literal equivalent ('I'm going to put my shoe into your ass' or 'I'm going to kick you in the ass') but it cannot be assumed that Penny means the opposite of what she says; moreover, the opposite of such a question remains to be found.

(5) is a good example of sarcastic wit and creativity: Penny uses Sheldon's own condescending remark against him, incorporating a violent threat while on the surface only asking a seemingly related question to the topic of special doctors.

Penny's question in (5) is, for most people, a pretty obvious example of sarcasm. In (1) and (3), Penny voices her anger by almost shouting. In (5), she suddenly becomes abnormally calm and speaks very slowly while approaching Sheldon to scare him; the gesture goes hand in hand with the intended threat. And yet the brilliant Sheldon Cooper is unable to assess the true nature of her question and answers literally in (6). He only realises his mistake when Leonard shows him a 'sarcasm' sign, i.e. a literal hint. I believe that Sheldon's literal processing of (5) softens or even cancels the intended threat and its offensiveness only to make it more humorous. The failure is, of course, on the hearer for not understanding, but also on the speaker for not transmitting the metamessage correctly: Penny's threat did not work and Sheldon never got scared.

1.3 Sarcasm and teasing

Many papers on conversational humour concur with the idea that teasing can both reinforce solidarity and exclude from a group (Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997; Dynel 2008; Haugh 2010). Marta Dynel believes there is in fact a continuum of teasing ranging from less to more aggressive forms (2008: 242). Because of this double potential, she elaborates that 'it is thanks to this dichotomous nature that teasing can serve either as a benign attempt to joke or as an aggressive act meant to hurt another person's feelings or ostracise them from a group' (2008: 247). Dynel also explains that mocking and sarcasm are some of the most aggressive forms of teasing. These forms may sometimes veer towards *putdown humour*, which she differentiates from teasing: putdown humour is defined as 'aggressive verbalisation which may be veiled as, or mistaken for, teasing.' (2008: 249) We can associate putdown humour to entertaining impoliteness in the sense that it is generally humorous for the audience or third-party but not for the addressee. Putdown humour occurs when the speaker's genuine intentions are to hurt/offend/downgrade the hearer instead of amusing him/her (2008: 251).

Indeed, according to Dynel, even the most aggressive forms of teasing consider the hearer's amusement, whereas putdown humour does not. The response of the hearer (ranging from laughter to taking offence) often helps to interpret the speaker's utterance.

What we can gather from Dynel's paper is that sarcasm can be used as aggressive teasing or as putdown humour. Yet the line between the two might not be as straightforward as in the definitions.

TBBT, 'The Toast Derivation' (S04E17)

Context: Everyone is having dinner at Raj's apartment, which he shares with her sister Priya. As Leonard is dating Priya, he kisses her in front of Raj when he arrives.

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(1) HOWARD *(to Raj)*: **That's got to be fun for you, huh? Watching Hofstadter suck the saliva out of your sister's mouth.**

(2) RAJ: *(silence, angry face expression; slowly turns his head away from Howard/Leonard and Priya)*

That's gotta be fun for you, huh?

This excerpt is a good illustration of the thin line between teasing and putdown humour. Howard's comment could actually be both if we look at contextual factors more closely. In

the series, Howard and Raj are very close best friends and tease each other all the time; it is quite doubtful that Howard's intention was to hurt or downgrade Raj, despite the aggressiveness of the tease. The fact that they tease each other quite often and that Howard is known for his use of sarcasm should lessen the impact of (1). Yet some essential paralinguistic elements lead us to believe that Raj is deeply offended by his sister and Leonard's kiss and by Howard's comment. First, his position before and during (1) and (2) is highly defensive (legs apart, arms along the body and head forward), suggesting that he feels attacked. Second, his reaction to Howard's (1) includes a refusal to respond, an obviously very angry face expression and the movement of turning his head away from everyone. While these cues seem to be slightly exaggerated for comic purposes, they also suggest that he is offended by Howard's sarcastic remark: Raj's silence shows that the tease, whose aim is to bond, has failed and the head movement means something like 'If I keep looking at you and them, I might do or say something stupid', i.e. it is a contained threat of retaliation. So is it a tease that Raj took the wrong way or a putdown that Howard did not intend? I believe that both interpretations hold and that this particular situation navigates between teasing and putdown humour.

1.4 On self-deprecating sarcasm

Self-deprecating sarcasm belongs to self-deprecating humour. The latter might be compared to self-teasing and can be, just as regular teasing, more or less aggressive.

Zajdman notes that 'the phenomenon of humour directed against one's self has been especially interesting to psychologists', mostly because it appears strange that someone should 'humiliate him/herself in the presence of others' (1995: 337). An FTA directed at oneself is logically interpreted as humorous, since no one should want to hurt him/herself. Of course, the reasons behind such a use are strategic and often beneficial for the speaker and

target: Zajdman quotes Ziv who indicates that 'one message of self-disparaging humour to the enemy could […] run something like this: 'You don't have to attack me and damage my honour – I'll do it myself (and even better than you!)'.' (1995: 337) Self-deprecating humour means that the speaker is in control of the situation and has power over what should be laughed at. It is a sort of active defence mechanism.

TBBT, 'The Holographic Excitation' (S06E05)

Context: Stuart, the owner of the comic book store, is hosting a Halloween party. Raj has made many different monster-shaped biscuits for the occasion. Stuart is staring at a woman dressed as a witch, standing next to the buffet. She notices him.

(1) WOMAN: Hello! *(silence)* It's a great party.
(2) STUART: Thank you.
(3) WOMAN: The monster foods, they're really fun.
(4) STUART: Oh, yes, thank you. **I like to think of fun things like that because I'm fun. I'm not clinically depressed at all.**

Anyone familiar with the character of Stuart knows that his assertion in (4) could not be less true: he often complains that he is depressed because of the state of his business, his loneliness and inability to find love and even properly talk to women. Although it is a little more complex than regular sarcasm, we know it is self-deprecating sarcasm for several reasons. Besides the contextual mismatch from previous episodes, there is first an echo in the 'fun' part, which is a direct ironic quotation of (3); the word is repeated twice, showing that Stuart is perhaps uncomfortable with the term: exaggerating its use calls for an insincere interpretation. We can also notice exaggerated gestures throughout (4), such as hand movements and a heavy nodding at 'not clinically depressed at all', which suggest a sort of playacting. These elements point at the insincerity of the utterance: there is a visible metamessage ('I'm not a fun guy', 'I'm clinically depressed'), so it has to be ironic or sarcastic. Yet the target of the metamessage is Stuart himself, meaning that he is offending and hurting himself as he exposes a certain part of his personality. We can logically conclude that this example is one of self-deprecating sarcasm.

The remark functions as a self defence mechanism: by stating and showing one unlikeable aspect of his personality, he exposes a flaw that might have been discovered otherwise and used against him. However, it also shows his inability to adapt to the situation, because his remark is uncalled for and certainly unexpected given the previous turns. Stuart has just met the woman, and she has engaged in a very casual conversation; mentioning his mental state so soon and in response to a compliment about the biscuits is hardly appropriate. It seems that he has to blurt the utterance as soon as he hears the word 'fun', in an attempt to sabotage his chances with the girl; such proof that he is responsible for his own seduction failure makes the situation even more humorous.

2. Sarcasm and creativity

Impoliteness could be considered as creative in itself because it does not correspond to social or conversational norms. An impolite utterance may be creative because it is novel, usually matches its context and, most of all, because it is unpredictable (D'Agostino 1984: 88). In this sense, impoliteness and incongruity theories of humour perfectly match: they both concern the unexpected. It could be argued, however, that certain forms such as conventionalised formulae, used with traditional words/insults (*you moron, you're such an idiot*) do not sound particularly creative since they are often heard and only repeat pre-formed patterns and words.

The creativity of impoliteness has already been mentioned in the section about entertaining impoliteness, where it is an essential factor. Examples of common structures (repetition, escalation…) paralleled with Bergson's own patterns were given. A repetition of the same conventionalised formula, for example, may form a pattern which can be humorous (cf. Raj and Howard's failed joust). Creativity can therefore be built during the exchange.

Patterns, however, are not the only way to make impoliteness creative. Culpeper considers that implied impoliteness is also highly creative. He links creativity to the inferencing process: some utterances that do not convey impoliteness directly instead go 'through a more creative process of delivering particular words in a particular context at a particular time, signalling to the target that [s/he] should infer the meanings.' (Culpeper in Jamet & Jobert 2013: 10) Kotthoff made a similar remark in discussing conversational humour and its 'special inferential efforts' (1996: 301): because sarcasm also requires these inferential efforts, it can be considered as a creative form of impoliteness.

In the same vein, Leech remarked that conversational irony—his equivalent for sarcasm—was a more elaborated and entertaining form of impoliteness:

A second observation is that irony tends to be more complex, ingenious, witty, and/or entertaining than a straight piece of impoliteness. An advantage of this is that it boosts the face of the ironist while attacking the face of the target O. In plain language, S scores at O's expense. […] A straightforwardly insulting remark would have been less likely to excite laughter, and would have been less entertaining to the viewers. (Leech 2014: 235)

As for Haiman, he also believes that sarcasm is a sophisticated form of aggressive language in certain parts of the world and most occidental cultures. Indeed, he argues that 'irony and sarcasm may conceivably define a 'higher' or 'more decadent' type of culture or personality or at least a geographically and temporally restricted use of language to perform verbal aggression or other kinds of work.' (1998: 12) According to him, our postmodern sensibility and fear to repeat what has already been said countless times has pushed us to develop a culture of sarcasm which enables us to render cliché phrases and obvious remarks more creative.

All of these arguments in favour of a certain superiority of the sarcastic form may explain why we enjoy it so much and why it is widely used not only in fiction but also in everyday life. I will detail two examples of particularly creative sarcasm from *Sherlock* and *TBBT*, where creativity does not stop at the presence of an implied metamessage which must be inferred, but where it is also present in the form taken by the surface message.

Sherlock, 'The Great Game' (S01E03)

Context: Sherlock is visiting a prisoner who stabbed his girlfriend and wants to hire him to prove it was an accident. Berwick, the prisoner, explains to Sherlock how everything happened, claiming that he lost control of himself; during the whole conversation, Sherlock cannot help but correct Berwick's numerous grammatical mistakes. This is the very end of the conversation and Sherlock is about to leave, seemingly refusing to take the case.

> (1) BERWICK: You've got to help me, Mr. Holmes! Everyone says you're the best. Without you, I'll get hung for this!
>
> (2) SHERLOCK: **No, Mr. Berwick, not at all.** *(slowly)* ***Hanged***, **yes.** *(turns away with a smile)*

Sherlock's (2) contains an internal mismatch or attitude clash, visible in the two extremities of the utterance 'No […] yes.' It relies on a play between the words 'hung' and 'hanged': the past participle of the verb 'hang' is generally 'hung', but in the case of death by hanging, 'hanged' should be used. Literally, Sherlock's (2) does not even contain any opposite of what is meant: Berwick will not get 'hung' indeed but 'hanged' and Sherlock's utterance is literally sincere. It is however clear that Sherlock has understood what Berwick meant by 'hung' and heavily plays on his own utterance's structure. What is interesting is that the first part of (2) seems to be sincere at first glance: Sherlock speaks in a normal voice, at least appropriate to what he says—one might even believe that he has in fact decided to take the case. There is no need for prosodic cues in this first part for the simple reason that what seems to be implied by the utterance ('You will not die by hanging' or 'I will finally take the case') is immediately cancelled by the next. The part '*Hanged*, yes' contradicts what has just been implied and is uttered quite differently: Sherlock emphasises the word 'hanged' by exaggerating its duration to pronounce it very clearly, insisting on the [æ] sound.

(2) functions as a sarcastic pun, whose creativity lies in the complexity of the inferencing process triggered by a dynamic surface structure. The surface structure is dynamic because the second part of (2) changes the whole utterance and invites us to reread the first part. '*Hanged*, yes' allows us to understand that Sherlock meant 'No, Mr. Berwick, not at all' in reference to the incorrect 'hung' and not to what Berwick really meant and what the audience probably thought as well. Sherlock appears to say something he means, until we discover that he did not mean it, only to find out that he actually meant it in a literal way.

As we know that Sherlock spent the entire conversation correcting Berwick's grammar, which made him quite worked up, this last utterance appears as one last provocation. Sherlock's leaving with a smile on his face is further proof that he intended to offend him. Sherlock is playing with Berwick's expectations and hopes by first countering his belief that he will be sentenced to death and then by reaffirming it with the correct past participle. While this sarcastic pun is very close to dark humour, Berwick is made so antipathetic—he is a violent murderer after all—that we feel he deserves Sherlock's last putdown. If the rectification is made unexpected by the first part of (2), it also echoes the many previous rectifications made by Sherlock during the conversation and forms the last bit of a repetition pattern. The manipulation of both Berwick's and the audience's expectations is so extreme that we feel entitled to laugh, even if not heartily—while Berwick probably does not.

TBBT, 'The Robotic Manipulation' (S04E01)

Context: Howard has built an arm-robot that can serve food; everyone is gathered in the living room to try it. Penny is here and it is often said in the show that she is bad at waitressing and that she has a poor memory.

(3) SHELDON: You realise, Penny, that the technology that went into this arm will one day make unskilled food servers such as yourself obsolete.
(4) PENNY *(high pitch)*: **Really? They're gonna make a robot that spits in your hamburger?**
(5) SHELDON: *(silence; stares at Penny)*

To better understand Penny's remark, we have to remember a few previous episodes in which Sheldon explains that he is terrified of germs and that nobody should touch his food. In 'The Panty Piñata Polarisation', he even goes as far as throwing away an entire plate of onion rings because Penny took one and had thus contaminated the food. In (3), Sheldon, in his usual way, overtly criticises Penny's waitressing, calls her 'unskilled' and says she might as well be replaced by a robot. Penny replies sarcastically in (4), implying that she spits in Sheldon's hamburger whenever she serves him at *The Cheesecake Factory*. The insincerity is made obvious by her high pitch and face expression, but as we know that Sheldon has trouble recognising sarcasm, he looks confused at Penny's remark and might even believe it is true. As can be seen from the screenshot, Raj and Leonard seem quite amused, but Sheldon is certainly not.

Again, the inferencing process is made a little more complex than usual, because Penny knows that Sheldon will have doubts concerning the sincerity of her assertion, even if the others (Leonard, Raj and Howard) will not. The fact that Sheldon does not know if she was sarcastic or not silences him, giving Penny dominance over the conversation that started with Sheldon having the upper hand and downgrading her Relational face, i.e. her role as a

waitress. (4) also functions as a veiled threat in Sheldon's possible interpretation of the utterance as insincere: it implies that if he keeps criticising her, she might really spit in his hamburger. In conclusion, whether Sheldon knows or not that (4) was sarcastic, Penny wins and inverts the balance of power.

The particularly creative side of Penny's (4) lies in the swiftness of her reply and manipulation of Sheldon's fears by echoing one of his worst concerns. Everyone, including Penny, laughs at the effect of her sarcastic question on Sheldon, probably because he deserved it: at the end of the interaction, he looks like some 'arroseur arrosé'.

3. The limits of humorous impoliteness

In this section, I will deviate from sarcasm and aim to analyse some excerpts of non-humorous impoliteness events in order to find which elements of humorous impoliteness are absent. What do impoliteness events need to be humorous? Are there limits? What kind of factors do influence both the hearer and the audience in interpreting an impoliteness event as funny?

   I will consider two excerpts, one from each series, where laughter does not come as easily as in previous instances, if at all.

TBBT, 'The Killer Robot Instability' (S02E12)

Context: All the group is gathered in the living room, preparing for a robot competition. Howard is flirting with Penny in his usual non-subtle way, telling her that she is 'doable' and that he would like to take her to dance at the robot competition.

(1) PENNY: Look, normally I can just ignore you. I mean, **I get it, you're a little peculiar.** […] I know you think you're some sort of smooth-talking ladies' man, but the truth is, **you are just pathetic and creepy.**

(2) HOWARD *(amused)*: Um, so what are you saying?

(3) PENNY: I am saying it is not a compliment to call me doable. It's not sexy to stare at my ass and say, **'Ooh, it must be jelly 'cause jam don't shake like that.'** And most important, we are not dancing a tango, we're not to'ing and fro'ing. Nothing is ever going to happen between us. Ever.

(4) HOWARD: Wait a minute. This isn't flirting, you're serious.

(5) PENNY: Flirting? You think I'm flirting with you? I am not flirting with you, **no woman is ever gonna flirt with you, you're just gonna grow old and die alone.**

(6) HOWARD: Thanks for the heads up. *(heads to the door)*

(7) LEONARD: Howard, where you going?

> (8) HOWARD: I'm going home to live my creepy, pathetic life. *(leaves)*

Finding a non-humorous act of impoliteness in a sitcom is not very easy, especially since most serious situations tend to be mocked, ridiculed or softened at some point. This is actually the case in this one: a *TBBT* scene could not possibly end on such a sad note, so it ends with Raj suggesting that Penny should be their killer-robot, and everyone is laughing in the end. Yet Howard has left because of Penny's remarks, and we are left to wonder what made her speech so offensive that even the laugh track could not be played between (5) and (8).

(1) includes two personalised negative assertions ('you're a little peculiar' and 'you are just pathetic and creepy') and a message enforcer ('Look…'). Interestingly, Howard does not take these seriously, and interpret them as banter, believing that Penny is just playing a game with him or, according to him, 'flirting'. (3) includes an imitation and quote of Howard pointing at his ponderous humour and a series of negations in which Penny rejects him completely. In (4), Howard understands that she is not joking but sincere. (5) is the final straw: Penny threatens Howard by implying that if he does not change, no one will ever love him and he will just 'grow old and die alone'. Brown & Levinson's notion of positive face is quite interesting here: Howard's wants to be appreciated and desirable are completely denied by Penny's recurring attacks, which grow in intensity between (1) and (5).

Culpeper argues that the potential for face damage of an impoliteness event relies on two things, which are 'the degree of sensitivity of the face-component at issue and also the perceived degree of exposure' (2011: 202). In (1), (3) and (5), Penny directs violent attacks at Howard's Quality face—his personality in general—in front of Leonard, Raj and Sheldon. Both face-component at issue and exposure are maximal, explaining why Penny's verbal attacks sound so aggressive.

We have to consider the audience's bond with Howard, who is one of the main characters; even if we know that Penny's outburst is justified, we sort of feel sorry for Howard, who deserved a less harsh treatment in spite of all his flaws.

What seems even more essential to note is that Penny's attacks are very straightforward and not creative at all—except for 'you're a little peculiar', which seems to be an ironical understatement, meaning 'you are very peculiar'. She mostly negates what Howard thinks and tells him directly that no one will ever love him, refusing to use any creative device such as implied impoliteness; she obviously does not want to run the risk of being misunderstood.

Let's also note that we have two examples of sarcasm from Howard in (6)—insincere thanks to Penny's criticism—and (8)—an echo of her previous utterance in (1). They exacerbate the offence of Penny's criticism and the effect they have on Howard: on the surface, he accepts and surrenders to what she has just said, stopping her from saying more; the possible metamessages include 'that was rude', 'I didn't appreciate that' or 'you really hurt me'.

To conclude, Penny's verbal attacks against Howard are not humorous for several reasons: first, they are uttered in front of Howard's friends; second, she attacks his personality and Quality face or positive face sincerely and vehemently; third, her utterances are straightforward and uncreative; fourth, her intention is to hurt; and last, the audience is quite attached to the character of Howard.

Sherlock, 'A Scandal in Belgravia' (S02E01)

Context: Inspector Lestrade, Molly Hooper, Mrs. Hudson are invited to Sherlock and John's apartment to celebrate Christmas. Not long after Molly arrives, very elegantly dressed, Sherlock cannot help but give another of his deductions out loud.

(9) SHERLOCK: I see you have a new boyfriend Molly and you're serious about him.

> (10) MOLLY *(chuckling)*: What? Sorry, what?
>
> (11) SHERLOCK: In fact you're seeing him this very night and giving him a gift.
>
> (12) JOHN *(quietly)*: Take a day off…
>
> (13) LESTRADE *(to Sherlock)*: Shut up and have a drink.
>
> (14) SHERLOCK: Oh come on, surely you've all seen the present at the top of the bag. Perfectly wrapped with a bow. **All the others are slapdash at best.** It's for someone special then. *(takes the gift)* The shade of red echoes her lipstick, either an unconscious association or one that she's deliberately trying to encourage. Either way, Miss Hooper has looove on her mind. The fact that she's serious about him is clear from the fact she's giving him a gift at all. That always suggests **long-term hopes, however forlorn**, and that she's seeing him tonight is evident from **her make-up and what she's wearing. Obviously trying to compensate for the size of her mouth and breastsss…** *(sees his own name on the gift)* *(silence)*
>
> (15) MOLLY *(holding tears)*: You always say such horrible things. Every time. Always. Always. *(silence)*
>
> (16) SHERLOCK: I am sorry. Forgive me.

Molly is a colleague of Sherlock's working at St Bart's hospital on post mortems. She is a very shy woman who is secretly attracted to Sherlock, and if Sherlock does not notice it, the spectator certainly does.

In (9), (11) and (14), Sherlock is infringing on Molly's personal space and attacking her Equity rights by exposing her feelings in front of everyone. Indeed, the exposure is maximal since John, his girlfriend, Mrs. Hudson and Lestrade are present and all of them witness Sherlock's deduction, enhancing its impact. The second element defining the amount of face damage is the degree of sensitivity of the face-component at issue, here Molly's secret love for Sherlock. Indeed, two other characters, aware of the situation and of Molly's feelings, sense that Sherlock is going to hurt her if he continues: John and Lestrade, respectively in (12) and (13), try to have Sherlock stop talking. The speed and rhythm of Sherlock's speech is extremely rapid though, quite similar to his usual crime deductions, and prevents anyone from

stopping him. Interestingly, John says 'Take a day off…', implying that what Sherlock does at work, i.e. deductions based on observations, mostly to catch criminals, is completely inappropriate in a private, casual context. It is all the more inappropriate when it concerns a colleague, such as Molly, who has not done anything wrong and has never been disrespectful to Sherlock. She is moreover known to be very shy, and she prefers to avoid exposure. Sherlock's comments therefore appear as purely gratuitous. He merely wants to show off his intellectual abilities.

His speech in (14) deserves a closer look. Several comments are particularly biting and seem to increase in intensity throughout the monologue. The utterance 'All the others are slapdash at best' suggests that if Molly only cares for one person, she does not for the others who are actually in the room; her true feelings are supposedly reflected in the wrappings of the gifts. Sherlock then takes the liberty to grab the well-wrapped gift from Molly's bag without asking her. Following this action, and during the rest of the speech, he only mentions her in the third person ('her lipstick', 'she's serious', 'Miss Hooper', 'she's giving', 'her make-up and what she's wearing') although she is standing right next to him: he completely ignores her presence and shows that he is making the demonstration for an audience, i.e. the guests. Saying that her hopes are forlorn implies that she is not loved back; even if at that point, Sherlock has not realised it was about him, he suggests that Molly is potentially unlovable and downgrades her positive face. The last and most offensive utterance is plainly rude and even sexist: Sherlock judges that 'her make-up and what she's wearing' are necessarily seduction tools and implies that Molly has thin lips and small breasts which need to be enhanced, downgrading her natural physical appearance as unfeminine or unpleasant to men.

Sherlock finally realises his indelicacy when he turns the gift upside down and reads *Dearest Sherlock, Love Molly xxx*. After an awkward silence during which everyone stares at Sherlock, then Molly, her reaction in (15) emphasises the offence given by Sherlock and

makes the audience bond with her: she is holding tears and speaking in a weak voice. She clearly states that it is not the first time Sherlock has said horrible things to her; indeed, we know that she is often victim of his social indelicacies, even if Sherlock does not seem to do such things on purpose and probably did not intend to hurt Molly that much. The fact that he apologises in (16)—which never happens—indicates that the offence is different and that he realises it. Sherlock's showing-off of his powers of observation only proved that he was actually missing the obvious.

Before the excerpt, Sherlock was sitting at his computer, mostly ignoring the guests and showing that social meetings and celebrations are nothing but boring to him; the possibility to make a deduction was therefore an opportunity to play. There are hints pointing at Sherlock's intention to be banterous and funny during the interaction: he is often smiling as he speaks and exaggerates a word such as 'looove' in a childish manner. The monologue actually resembles young children's teasing about being in love with a classmate or a teacher. Interestingly, Sherlock's monologue could perhaps have been funny if it was not directed at Molly or if he was not himself the object of her feelings.

I believe it is a case of failed putdown humour or teasing. In a TV series, both hearer and spectator receive the impoliteness event, humorous or not. Had Sherlock's addressee been a less known or disliked character, the spectator would have been on Sherlock's side and his monologue would have been putdown humour, i.e. not humorous for the hearer but certainly for the audience. Because the audience (within and outside the series) bonds with Molly and knows that she does not deserve such treatment, Sherlock's showing-off is deprived of all humour and laughter.

Two examples are certainly not enough evidence to define which characteristics are systematically found in non-humorous impoliteness and which ones are not. Yet it is possible to suggest several leads which would benefit from further research. Based on the examples

that I have studied throughout this analysis, three factors seem to influence our interpretation of impoliteness as humorous.

The first one is the potential for face damage, relying on 'the degree of sensitivity of the face-component at issue and also the perceived degree of exposure.' (Culpeper 2011: 202)
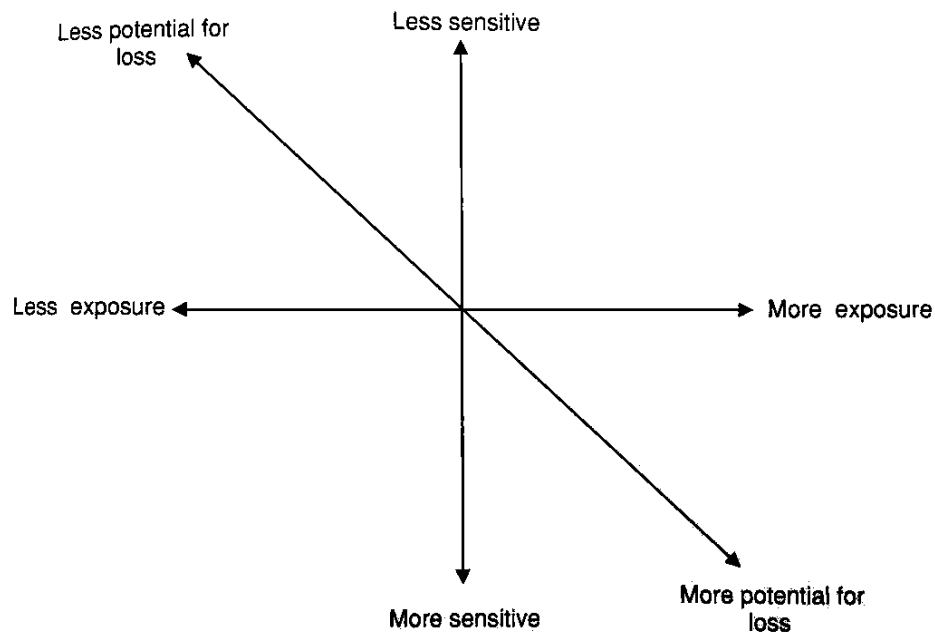

Figure 6.1 The potential for face loss

In the case of genuine impoliteness, a greater potential for face loss is likely to be less humorous, whereas a lesser potential for face damage is likely to be more humorous. Banter, interestingly, would be just the opposite: a weaker FTA is more offensive because it is not obviously untrue, whereas a stronger, exaggerated FTA is more likely to be interpreted as humorous banter.

The second one is the audience's proximity with the attacked character(s). In fictional contexts, the fact that there is an audience and that this audience has certain affinities with

characters play a key role. If the audience is close or identifies to a character or a group, it is less likely that attacks against this character or group will be interpreted as funny.

The third one, and possibly the most decisive factor, is creativity. Throughout this study of humorous impoliteness, many examples of both conventionalised and non-conventionalised forms were described as particularly creative. I believe that creativity is essential to humorous impoliteness, and can even bypass the effects of important face damage and of the audience's proximity with a character. Briefly consider the following example:

TBBT, 'The Desperation Emanation' (S04E05)

Context: Leonard has been single for quite some time. This is the beginning of the scene.

> (17) SHELDON: You know, it just occurred to me, if there are an infinite number of parallel universes, in one of them, there's probably a Sheldon who doesn't believe parallel universes exist.
> (18) LEONARD: Probably. What's your point?
> (19) SHELDON: No point. It's just one of the things that makes one of the mes chuckle. What makes you chuckle, Leonard?
> (20) LEONARD: Hmm, recently? Not much.
> (21) SHELDON: **Is it because of the conflict that arises from your desperate need to pair-bond with a woman, and the apparent collective decision of all womankind to deny you that opportunity?**
> (22) LEONARD: Um, shut up.

If we focus on (21), the potential for face damage is high—Sheldon attacks Leonard's Quality and positive faces and possibly his Association rights as Sheldon's friend—, Leonard is an appreciated character and yet, Sheldon's comment is still funny, mostly because of his peculiar and overly descriptive, almost scientific choice of words. (21) is most definitely a genuine impoliteness event whose humorous potential relies on the creativity of the utterance.

Conclusion

This study of sarcasm had a two-fold objective: the first was to prove once more that impoliteness is a complex phenomenon, certainly not limited to direct insults, and the second was to bring out creativity as one essential element of humorous impoliteness. If we look back at the examples from Parts III and IV, most were described as creative. Moreover, creativity and originality are crucial aspects of humour, whether it be unexpectedness, sudden realisation or pattern forming; thus it is logical that it should represent a decisive aspect of humorous impoliteness. In fact, if creativity is not the only factor influencing our interpretation, it is probably the most important as it can bypass even a high degree of offence or audience-character bonding. There is not one particular type of humorous impoliteness events, and it can take many forms, tackle a variety of subjects and attack all faces and rights as long as the hearer or audience is ready to laugh about it; and creativity is perhaps a way to focus more on the words than on the effect and thus redeem the offence given or taken.

General conclusion

In the first part of this study, we have seen an overview of definitions and different theories concerning humour, comedy and laughter. The word humour itself was at first related to bodily fluids, and it was believed that such bodily humours were responsible for certain dispositions of character—melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric, and sanguine; these humours and their respective qualities then became associated with comedy and laughter. Bergson also says that the comic character often has a reprehensible and overwhelming quality, which mechanises him or her. The mechanism is at the heart of Bergson's theory of laughter as he argues that it always comes from the presence of a mechanical behaviour in a living entity. Incongruity theories are more general in their explanation of humour as they posit that laughter comes from the unexpected or sudden realisations of incongruity. The notion of incongruity cannot be limited to humour though, so it must be stressed that an amusing incongruity relies on our acceptance of the incongruous situation. The superiority theory explains that laughter comes from a necessary feeling of superiority at the sight of an inferior character or quality; this idea, although mostly countered today, has prevailed for a long time. The release or relief theories posit that laughter comes from a release of useless stored energy or emotions; even if there is biologically no stored energy or emotions, the notion of release remains interesting as laughter is often associated with relieving properties. Finally, the Benign Violation Theory is one of the most recent models and supports the idea that humour stems from the violation of a norm and the benignity of this violation; the realisation that the violation is in fact benign triggers laughter. Because one universal theory of humour would be impossible to devise, it seems important to consider all of them, especially since they can overlap. Moreover, most of them seem to explain laughter through conflict, with either norm violation, social rigidity, unexpected behaviour or feelings of superiority and dissociation.

Therefore, the combination between humour and verbal impoliteness no longer seems paradoxical.

The second part focused on presenting key concepts and theories of impoliteness. Two models of politeness were given, in order to introduce the topic. Brown and Levinson's influential theory, published in 1987, takes on various sociological concepts to create a politeness framework, mostly based on the distinction between positive and negative faces. Richard Watts takes a more discursive approach of (im)politeness and argues that politeness as well as impoliteness mostly rely on individual interpretation and many sociological, contextual, and cultural factors. Concerning impoliteness, Culpeper started to study the subject as 'politeness's parasite', which is why he first chose to reverse Brown and Levinson's framework. Yet the flaws of the first model necessarily applied to the second. Paving the way for further research, he ended up devising a new framework, more accurate and more sensitive to contextual factors. Culpeper distinguishes between three kinds of faces—quality, relational and social identity—and two kinds of sociality rights—equity and association: these faces and sociality rights are the targets of impoliteness events. Intentionality is not always involved in verbal impoliteness but can exacerbate the offence given; the emotions triggered by impoliteness events will vary according to the type of face of rights attacked; power and hierarchy play a major role in the interpretation of such events: all these factors are crucial to consider in analysing impoliteness events. Finally, Culpeper notes that one of impoliteness's functions is to entertain, which is not surprising since it has been noted that violence and conflict are today ubiquitous in entertainment media. This entertaining function, related to amusement and enjoyment, also directly connects impoliteness to humour.

As both notions have been shown to be compatible, explaining why humour can be conveyed through offensive language in many TV programmes, the third part of this study aimed at analysing in more detail some excerpts of humorous impoliteness in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* and drama series *Sherlock*. To do so, I decided to use Culpeper's

categorisation, divided between conventionalised and implicational impoliteness, as well as my own category of 'dysphemistic directness' which did not fit Culpeper's model. On the one hand, conventionalised impolite formulae consist in a set of expressions and words recurrently used to cause offence such as [you] [X]; examples have shown that these formulae could be used creatively to give them a distinct humorous tone. On the other hand, non-conventionalised impoliteness consists in implying meanings which are offensive. Implied impoliteness can be form-driven, by deliberately flouting the maxims of conversation or performing an imitation to express dislike: in both cases, the form of the utterance(s) hints at the implied offensive meaning. The implication can be convention-driven, often characterised by insincere conventional politeness, or mock politeness. There is also a salient mismatch, either in the utterance itself or between the utterance and the context, hinting at the implied meaning. One last type of implicational impoliteness taken from Leech's account includes nonpoliteness and underpoliteness, which do not consist in verbalised impoliteness but in a lack of politeness which can become offensive: context is therefore crucial. The humour of non-conventionalised impoliteness often relies on the complexity and originality of the double-meaning. Finally, I termed 'dysphemistic directness' a tendency of some characters in both series to mention taboo topics and use taboo terms in a very direct manner, often making the hearers quite uncomfortable: in a society where euphemisms are the norm, it is often amusing to hear those forbidden words, especially in incongruous contexts provided the violation remains benign. By analysing specific examples for each category, this third part has proved that humorous impoliteness was not limited to a particular type and could take any form. In other words, it seems that any impoliteness event can be made humorous.

The aim of fourth and last part was twofold: to have a closer look at one particularly used form of humorous impoliteness, sarcasm, and to suggest some leads to investigate the limits of such a combination. Sarcasm is actually a form which is regularly used in my corpus and successfully allies offence and humour: it thus deserved further study and some theoretical

background to investigate its complex nature, already mentioned in the previous part. The definition of sarcasm focused on three elements: first, although sarcasm is very close to irony, it must be differentiated from it because of its offensive, harmful potential; second, the nature of sarcasm requires the speaker—or sarcast—to be divided into two personas and to make both personas visible to the addressee(s) or, in other words, to play an unconvincing role; third, the principal function of sarcasm is to exacerbate the offence by multiplying implications and by creating a situational contrast. Because it is an indirect form, the way it is processed is also crucial: Sperber and Wilson explain that sarcasm is a phenomenon of echoic mention, meaning that the addressee of the sarcastic remark is reminded of a familiar echo, which may be implicit or explicit. For the processing to be successful, hints must lead to such an interpretation: Haiman details both intonational cues (nasalisation, change in pitch, duration…) and segmental markers (inverted commas, chunking, capital letters…). Because of its association with both impoliteness and humour, sarcasm is often viewed as a biting form of teasing, although it can veer towards putdown humour if the addressee is genuinely offended. The line between teasing and putdown humour is actually quite thin and certainly not clear-cut, which adds to the complexity of the form. In rarer instances, sarcasm can also be directed at oneself as a form of self-deprecating humour. What all of this investigation of sarcasm shows is that it is a very elaborated, multi-faceted form, which explains why it is used so much. Sarcasm is seen as a superior form of impoliteness, notably because it is innately creative thanks to its inferencing options and almost theatrical disguise. It seems that it is for this precise reason that sarcasm is frequently humorous, even as putdown humour. Finally, considering cases of non-humorous verbal aggressions, I suggested that creativity, absent from these examples, was an essential component of humorous impoliteness, along with other secondary factors such as the audience's proximity with the attacked character(s) and the degree of face loss.

I started the general introduction of this study by mentioning the ubiquity of both physical and verbal conflict in entertainment media. It seems that both may have a sort of cathartic effect; in the case of verbal conflict, the use of impoliteness in fiction makes up for the fact that, for various reasons, we cannot always do so in reality, just as it is condemned to respond with physical aggression. Yet, physical and verbal aspects of violence are different, especially in the way they are valued. In light of what has been demonstrated concerning impoliteness's power to become a humour strategy, I believe that creative impoliteness appears to us as a superior form of conflict, and perhaps a very effective form of humour as well. Physical violence does not have this possibility to evolve into a form of humour because it is not as malleable as language and because it does not bear such a creative potential. The use of language over body is well-reflected in *The Big Bang Theory* where most forms of physical prowess are absent, precisely because intellectual qualities are more valued. Verbal conflict is often considered as more civilised, provided it makes the most of its creative power. Indeed, without originality, linguistic impoliteness takes the risk of being downgraded to the same primitive level as physical violence and of losing its entertaining qualities.

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