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A Pragmatic Study of Self-Deprecation in British Stand-Up Comedy Performances

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ABSTRACT: Self-deprecation is a form of humour where the speaker targets himself/herself in the joke, drawing attention to his/her weaknesses, failure, shortcomings, or unattractive features. The present study investigates self-deprecation pragmatically in selected British stand-up comedy performances by Tez Ilyas and Josh Pugh. It aims to find out what types of self-deprecation are employed in the selected data and to discover the impoliteness strategies that realise self-deprecation. A mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative analyses is employed. Twenty self-deprecating utterances are purposefully selected from two full-length British stand-up comedy performances made available on YouTube; ten are selected from each comedian. The analysis focuses on four types of self-deprecation: self-defeating, self-enhancing, self-affiliative and self-referential. Furthermore, the analysis adopts Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory and concentrates on bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, off-record impoliteness and mock politeness. The findings reveal that self-defeating is the dominant type followed by self-referential and self-affiliative while self-enhancing does not occur. In terms of impoliteness, bald-on-record is the most frequently occurring strategy, followed by off-record impoliteness and positive impoliteness. Negative impoliteness and mock politeness do not occur in the selected data. The findings indicate that self-deprecation in the selected British stand-up comedy performances is mainly realised through direct self-attack, indirect self-belittlement and derogatory self-labeling for humour.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

Humour has been identified as a key component of communication, which functions to entertain, foster social bonds, and convey various attitudes and meanings. As one of the most popular forms of humour, stand-up comedy relies predominantly on verbal resources and live interactions with audiences. Self-deprecation, a frequently encountered feature of stand-up comedy, entails comedians using themselves as the butt of jokes by describing their flaws, shortcomings, character traits, conduct, or capabilities in an unfavourable manner. While existing research has examined self-deprecation within political discourse and online communication, there remains little focus on its pragmatic realisation via self-directed impoliteness in modern British stand-up comedy. Consequently, the current study fills this gap by exploring how impoliteness categories, traditionally utilised to analyse face-threatening acts directed at others, can be applied to comedians who purposefully undermine their own public personas for comedic effect. This study seeks to answer the following research questions: What types of self-deprecation are present in the chosen performances? Which impoliteness categories are used to enact self-deprecation? How do these two categories work together to produce humorous face-threatening acts aimed at the self? The objectives of the study are thus to categorise the data as self-defeating, self-enhancing, self-affiliative, or self-referential; determine the presence and distribution of bald-on-record, positive, negative, off-record, and mock politeness; and explore how these two categorisations relate to one another pragmatically. It is expected that self-defeating self-deprecation will predominate, bald-on-record impoliteness will be

the most prevalent category, followed by off-record and positive impoliteness, and self-deprecation will primarily manifest through straightforward self-criticism, derogatory self-description, and implicit self-degradation. This study is restricted to twenty purposively sampled utterances from Tez Ilyas's Vicked and Josh Pugh's Live from Birmingham Town Hall, both accessible on YouTube, with ten utterances extracted from each performance.

1.3 PRAGMATICS

According to Bublitz (2011), pragmatics studies how meaning is affected by contextual factors and how the speaker uses language to communicate a meaning that is more than the literal meaning of the words. It thus takes into consideration contextual factors, social relationships, shared background knowledge, and the speaker's communicative intentions when interpreting language. Allott (2010) also states that pragmatics focuses on the study of language use and meaning, including the study of implied meaning, shared assumptions, communicative goals, and reference. Levinson (1983) says that pragmatics is the study of language use in specific situations, taking into account the speaker's intended meaning, the hearer's understanding of what is being said, and the social and cultural context within which the communication takes place. Consequently, pragmatics involves many aspects of language use, such as speech acts, implicature, presupposition, and conversational cooperation. Yule (2020) says that pragmatics is also concerned with the speaker's intended meaning and how the listener interprets an utterance that is not fully stated. In brief, pragmatics studies how language produces and interprets meaning in relation to the context.

1.4 SELF-DEPRECATION

Self-deprecation has been described as a type of humour in which the speakers make their own weakness, failure, and shortcoming the target of humour. Ziv (1984 as cited in Kitazume, 2008) states that self-deprecating humour is humour that presents one's own weakness. According to Kitazume (2008), self-deprecation reduces the evaluation of the speaker as he/she reveals his/her weakness and appears as being inferior to others; however, such self-devaluation may also have some positive communicative functions like reducing aggressiveness and receiving appreciation, sympathy, and affection from others. Self-deprecation can then be considered a way of lowering oneself while at the same time developing a positive relationship with an audience. Likewise, Ask and Abidin state that self-deprecating humour exposes the speaker's personal failure and struggle rather than the perfect self-image and can create relatability through shared experiences. They define the usage of self-deprecation as "one-downmanship" in which people humourously present their inferiority, failures, and struggles to gain relatability, sympathy, attention, and engagement. Therefore, in general, self-deprecation can be understood as a humorous practice where speakers intentionally lower, criticise, ridicule, or evaluate themselves in a negative manner by exposing their own weakness, failure, inadequacy, or undesirable quality.

1.5 METHODOLOGY

This study uses both qualitative pragmatic and descriptive quantitative analyses to investigate self-deprecation in chosen examples of British stand-up comedy shows. The data for this study were collected from two full-length performances on YouTube – Tez Ilyas's Vicked (uploaded to the official Tez Ilyas channel on February 11, 2023, with a duration of 1 hour, 13 minutes, and 2 seconds) and Josh Pugh's Live from Birmingham Town Hall (uploaded to the 800 Pound Gorilla Media channel on July 23, 2023, with a duration of 56 minutes and 20 seconds). In addition, these YouTube videos contain transcripts generated by YouTube's "Show transcript" feature. Twenty purposively selected utterances containing self-deprecation were obtained from the two performances – ten from each – which constitute the dataset for this study. These utterances are selected because they make the comedian the target of the humour by portraying his/her weaknesses, failures, limitations, or undesirable qualities through either direct or indirect negative evaluation. Qualitatively, all utterances in the dataset are categorised under four different types of self-deprecation (i.e., self-defeating, self-enhancing, self-affiliative, and self-referential) and are then examined through an adapted version of Culpeper's impoliteness framework, including bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, off-record impoliteness, and mock politeness.

1.6 Data Analysis

Utterance (1)

"So I grew up into this useless man-child."

Here, this utterance is self-defeating since Tez Ilyas portrays himself as immature and helpless. The utterance ‘useless man-child’ reflects negatively on him as he is portrayed as an adult that does not behave or act as one and is not capable of looking after himself. With respect to the Impoliteness Theory by Culpeper, this utterance is realised through positive impoliteness where the comedian himself is attacked with the pejorative expression ‘useless man-child’. It is aimed at attacking his positive face by implying that he is incompetent and not mature. Therefore, the comedian is the object of the negative assessment and comedy.

Utterance (2)

“Because I’m a narcissist.”

The above utterance is an example of self-defeating behavior because Ilyas describes himself as having a negative personality trait. He describes himself as “a narcissist”, which means that he is someone who has an excessive need for attention and admiration. In terms of impoliteness, the utterance is positive impoliteness because the word “narcissist” can be considered as a derogatory term used towards the speaker. It attacks his positive face by describing him as having an undesirable personality trait. Thus, the comedian insults himself, decreases his own face and uses the need for attention from his audience as a source of comedy.

Utterance (3)

“I’m a clapaholic. I’m a clap junkie. I can’t function without claps. I need claps to let me know that I’m a worthy human being.”

This utterance is an instance of self-defeating as Ilyas claims he is very reliant on applause and an audience's reaction. By describing himself as a ‘clapaholic’ and ‘clap junkie,’ he paints himself as though he were hooked on applause, while the phrase ‘I can't function without claps’ further reduces his independence. With regard to impoliteness, this utterance constitutes positive impoliteness as the insulting terms used against himself attack the comedian's positive face. He presents himself as someone insecure and in need of others to validate him. The insult is aimed at himself and it is the comedian's vulnerability that is the source of humour.

Utterance (4)

“I feel like I’ve become really grumpy.”

Here, the utterance is categorized as self-defeating as Ilyas talks about himself by using a negative character trait. By using the word grumpy, he is described as bad-tempered and easily annoyed. In Culpeper’s model, this utterance is classified as bald on record impoliteness since it clearly states the negative assessment of him without any implication or hiding. Instead, the comedian directly admits that he is becoming a negative and unpleasant person. Thus, he is lowering his own image in an open way.

Utterance (5)

“I’m a hypocrite because I’m on social media. I need it for my job.”

The above example is an instance of self-defeating since Ilyas criticizes his own actions and describes himself as being contradictory. He scolds social media while also saying that he also partakes in its use and so he refers to himself as “a hypocrite.” This is an instance of positive impoliteness because “hypocrite” is an insult that insults his positive face. This shows him as someone whose actions don’t align with his words. In this case, he is making fun of his own negative evaluation of his own character.

Utterance (6)

“I did do a bit of fraud. I did a bit of fraud—who hasn’t done a cheeky bit of fraud in their life?”

This utterance is simultaneously self-defeating and self-affiliative. The utterance is self-defeating because Ilyas acknowledges that he is a fraudster and thus presents himself as immoral. This utterance is also self-affiliative because the humorous question “who hasn’t done a cheeky bit of fraud in their life?” encourages the audience to regard his failure as a normal human condition. As for impoliteness, this utterance primarily realises off-record impoliteness, since Ilyas does not explicitly describe himself as

an immoral or criminal person; rather, the negative evaluation is implied by his admission of being a fraud. That is, the audience can understand the negative image of Ilyas even though he does not insult himself explicitly.

Utterance (7)

“I fell out with her younger brother. He’s eight.”

The above utterance is self-defeating as Ilyas makes himself look immature for confessing that he had a serious fight with an 8-year-old kid. He doesn’t explicitly state that he is childish, yet the incident itself makes him seem less mature. According to Culpeper’s theory, the utterance realizes off-record impoliteness, since the negative message is implied. It is left to the audience to deduce from the utterance that a grown-up who considers an eight-year-old as an equal opponent in a fight is behaving immaturity. So, the comedian attacks his own image in an indirect way.

Utterance (8)

“It was my fault for trying, really. I shouldn’t have tried. I’m an idiot.”

The utterance here is an example of self-defeating, as Ilyas insults himself with respect to intelligence and judgement by saying “I’m an idiot” which implies that he is dumb and becomes the butt of the joke. The utterance also fulfils the positive impoliteness strategy according to Culpeper’s theory because ‘idiot’ is a blunt insult that is aimed at him. This insult challenges his positive face and undermines his positive image regarding intelligence, thus both the self-defeating and impoliteness strategies seem to be self-directed.

Utterance (9)

“I didn’t say it was the best joke of the show. I said it is a joke.”

The above utterance is both self-defeating and self-referential. It is self-defeating in the sense that Ilyas diminishes the quality of his own joke rather than implying its success. It is also self-referential as the comedian comments on himself as a professional comedian and on his own joke. As for the type of impoliteness it expresses, the utterance constitutes off-record impoliteness, since the comedian does not directly state that his own joke is bad, but instead implies it by referring to it merely as a joke. From this we infer the speaker’s negative evaluation of his own comedic skills.

Utterance (10)

“I’m a ten-year stand-up comedian. I pride myself on my quick-wittedness ... nothing. Nothing would come to me—nothing funny, witty, clever.”

This utterance is also both self-defeating and self-referential. It is self-defeating because Ilyas admits that he couldn’t come up with a clever remark even though he was very proud of his quick-wittedness. It is self-referential because the joke itself is about his own identity and ability as a professional stand-up comedian. As for impoliteness, this utterance mainly realizes off-record impoliteness since he doesn’t directly state that he’s incompetent. Rather, the statement shows that he’s been professionally failing because, despite claiming he’s quick-witted, he couldn’t come up with something “funny, witty, clever.” The negative evaluation thus only comes through in context.

Utterance (11)

“I could never be in the army. I’d be bloody rubbish in the army.”

This is also a self-defeating utterance, since Josh Pugh directly reduces his own ability by saying that he would be “rubbish” in the army. Here, Pugh claims himself to be unable to succeed in a difficult profession. The utterance is an example of bald-on-record impoliteness in the terms of Culpeper’s theory, because the negative assessment is explicit and clear. Pugh announces his own incompetence in the job instead of letting the audience guess for themselves. It is thus his own lack of ability that is attacked.

Utterance (12)

“I’m no good with those hypothetical situations.”

This is an example of self-defeating behavior. Pugh actually acknowledges that he has a flaw in his imagination, stating “I’m no good.” This phrase serves to reduce the status of his cognitive or imaginative abilities. In terms of pragmatics, this is an instance of bald on record impoliteness since Pugh directly states that he is deficient in this regard and uses his own weakness as the subject of the joke.

Utterance (13)

“I could not have a job with that level of responsibility. It would freak me out. I think the maximum responsibility I could deal with in a job would be being the guy who’s in charge at the top of a water slide.”

This is self-defeating since Pugh diminishes his capacity to be responsible. He portrays himself as incompetent for an important job and says that the highest level of responsibility he can take on is a ‘job at the top of a waterslide’. It is off-record impolite because he does not explicitly characterise himself as incompetent, but rather the hearer makes that inference based on how low the level of responsibility is that he is claiming he can take on. Thus his incompetence and lack of confidence is implied.

Utterance (14)

“I’m not a good husband. I’m not a good husband, I’ll be honest. I’m not unfaithful or controlling, but I am incompetent.”

This utterance is another example of self-defeating self-deprecation since Pugh degrades himself as a spouse. His use of “I’m not a good husband” and “incompetent” conveys the idea that Pugh is unable to perform his marital role successfully. As for Culpeper’s theory, the utterance satisfies bald-on-record impoliteness since the negative evaluation is evident and unambiguous.

Utterance (15)

“I just make mistakes. That’s all it is. I just make mistakes in our marriage.”

This utterance is an example of self-defeating self-deprecation. By claiming that he is constantly making errors within his marriage, Pugh reduces his standing as a faithful and capable husband. The statement also constitutes bald-on-record impoliteness, since the negative self-assessment is explicitly stated. Pugh clearly assumes responsibility for the errors and places the blame on his own actions, making him the butt of the joke.

Utterance (16)

“I’m quite a negative person.”

As for self-defeating, Pugh has attributed a negative personality trait to himself in this statement. He calls himself “a negative person” and thereby diminishes his social and emotional persona. As for impoliteness, this utterance realizes bald-on-record impoliteness because the evaluation of Pugh’s personality is negative and doesn’t need inference. Pugh the comedian critiques his own personality and presents himself negatively as a form of humor.

Utterance (17)

“She’s an up person. I’m a down person.”

This is self-defeating since Pugh takes on a negative position when juxtaposing himself against his wife. His wife is characterised in positive terms (“an up person”) while Pugh is characterised in negative terms (“a down person”). This comparison gives Pugh a lower emotional image and portrays him as more negative and pessimistic than his wife. In line with Culpeper’s framework, the utterance fulfils bald-on-record impoliteness because Pugh explicitly attributes the negative description to himself. The self-attack is thus made explicit.

Utterance (18)

“Look, I’m not even headlining my own therapy session.”

This utterance is both self-defeating and self-referential self-deprecation. It is self-defeating because Pugh is being presented as being less important or interesting than someone else, even within his own therapy. It is self-referential because he uses the concept of headlining, which is a professional term, to comment on his own standing as a comedian. This utterance realises

off-record impoliteness because Pugh doesn't actually say that he's not important or below another comedian, but we infer it from his words, as he says that he's not even the main guy in his own therapy.

Utterance (19)

“Well, I just kind of do, like, semi-surreal rambling stories that just sort of tail off at the end.”

The above utterance can be classified as both self-defeating and self-referential self-deprecation. The reason why this is self-defeating is because Pugh provides an intentionally bad description of his own comedy when he describes it as “rambling stories” that “tail off at the end.” It is self-referential because Pugh is commenting directly on his own work and style as a comedian. In terms of impoliteness, this utterance is off-record impoliteness because Pugh does not explicitly state that his comedy is bad; rather, he implies this by providing a weak, unflattering description of his own professional work.

Utterance (20)

“I kept turning up even when I felt this big because I couldn't do the most menial of tasks.”

The utterance is a form of self-defeating self-deprecation, since Pugh implies that he cannot do even the most basic work-related activities. The phrase “I couldn't do the most menial of tasks” explicitly demeans the speaker and implies that he has no skills. According to Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory, the utterance can be classified as bald-on-record impoliteness, as the negative judgment is expressed explicitly. Rather than implying his incompetence, Pugh directly states it, and that is what is being joked about in the self-deprecating speech act.

1.7 FINDINGS

The qualitative analysis of the twenty selected self-deprecating utterances shows that there are various patterns of types of self-deprecation and impoliteness strategies in British stand-up comedy. In order to help the qualitative analysis, the frequencies and percentages of each category are worked out quantitatively. The twenty utterances are treated as one unified dataset. Since one utterance may contain more than one type of self-deprecation, the total number of self-deprecation types is greater than twenty. However, each utterance is assigned one dominant impoliteness strategy.

Table (1) Types of Self-Deprecation in the British stand-up comedy performances

Type of Self-Deprecation	Frequency	Percentage
Self-defeating	20	80%
Self-enhancing	0	0%
Self-affiliative	1	4%
Self-affiliative	4	16%
Total	25	100

The table shows that self-defeating is the most frequent type, found twenty times (80%). This means that the selected utterances mostly portray the speaker in a negative light as an incompetent person, as foolish, immature, negative, immoral, etc. Self-referential self-deprecation is found in four instances (16%), where the comedians refer to their own joke, show or profession. Self-affiliative self-deprecation is found in one instance (4%), in which the speaker depicts his/her weakness/wrongdoing as something he shares with the audience. There are no examples of self-enhancing self-deprecation in the sample. The number of total occurrences is 25 since several of the utterances realize more than one type of self-deprecation.

Table (2) Impoliteness Strategies in the Selected British stand-up comedy performances

Impoliteness Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Bald-on-record impoliteness	8	40%
Positive impoliteness	5	20%
Negative impoliteness	0	0%
Off-record impoliteness	7	35%
Mock politeness	0	0%
Total	20	100

According to Table (2), bald-on-record impoliteness is the most frequent, with a total of eight instances and 40% of the selected utterances. This indicates that self-deprecation often materializes by directly and explicitly making a negative assessment of oneself. Off-record impoliteness comes second with a total of seven occurrences, and 35% of the selected utterances. This indicates that self-deprecation may be expressed implicitly, where the negative assessment of the speaker is left to be interpreted on the basis of contextual information. Positive impoliteness accounts for five occurrences, and 25% of the selected utterances. This kind of self-deprecation was usually expressed by derogatory self-labels which are direct attacks on the positive face of the speaker. There were no instances of negative impoliteness or mock politeness found in the selected data. In general, these results reveal that direct self-attack, indirect self-bellittlement, and derogatory self-labeling are the main pragmatic devices that have been used to realize self-deprecation in the twenty utterances.

1.8 CONCLUSIONS

This current study investigates twenty examples of self-deprecation from two live stand-up comedy shows delivered by Tez Ilyas and Josh Pugh, respectively, using both a qualitative and quantitative analysis. Examples are categorised according to four types of self-deprecation (self-defeating, self-enhancing, self-affiliative, and self-referential) and an adapted form of Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory (bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, off-record impoliteness, and mock politeness). Results indicate that self-defeating self-deprecation is used in all twenty utterances and makes up twenty of the twenty-five type occurrences, meaning 80% of all self-deprecation. This shows that the comedians primarily use humour by putting themselves in the spotlight by making themselves the butt of the joke. They portray themselves in a negative way, as being incompetent, stupid, childish, pessimistic, immoral, or unfit for their jobs. Self-referential self-deprecation is the next most common, occurring four times (16%), followed by self-affiliative self-deprecation, which occurs one time (4%). There are no examples of self-enhancing self-deprecation in the selected data. As far as impoliteness is concerned, bald-on-record impoliteness occurs most often, with eight instances (40%). Off-record impoliteness is the second most common, occurring seven times (35%), while positive impoliteness occurs five times (25%). Negative impoliteness and mock politeness are absent in the selected data. These findings suggest that self-deprecation is mostly carried out via straightforward negative self-appraisals, implicit self-demeaning, and self-deprecating nicknames.

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