

Book review

Sinkeviciute, Valeria. (2018). *Conversational Humour and (Im)politeness*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

As the title implies, *Conversational Humour and (Im)politeness* by Valeria Sinkeviciute examines the intersections between (im)politeness and humour research. These fields have been studied separately for the most part, and it is only in recent years that there has been a surge of studies exploring humour and im/politeness in a combined focus. This monograph could be placed within the areas of *socio-pragmatics* and *interpersonal pragmatics*, as it examines jocular activities in relation to im/politeness, while considering the relational aspects of language use in concrete interactions, in which speakers draw on linguistic and semiotic resources to negotiate identities and social relationships. In addition, the present study discusses speakers' attitudes, feelings, and evaluations of jocular verbal behaviour, therefore filling the gap of the *metapragmatically-oriented* studies of humour and im/politeness in English (Culpeper et al. 2019). This monograph also makes a significant contribution to cross-cultural humour research, since it examines the jocular practices of two different sociocultural groups, that is, of Australian English and British English. The book follows a mixed-methods approach to im/politeness and humour. In particular, it espouses the tradition of the discursive approaches, as some parts of the analysis are based on fine-grained, empirical and qualitative analyses of local interactions, while also drawing on quantitative data to propose models and present the socio-cultural differences between British and Australian interactions and conceptualisations of teasing and im/politeness.

The avowed purpose of this book is twofold; firstly, it aspires to enhance our understanding of how teasing is (co-)constructed and evaluated in interaction in two different socio-cultural groups; secondly, it intends to offer insights into the relationship between teasing and im/politeness. The book combines three data sets, i.e. corpora, reality television discourse and qualitative interviews. The corpus-assisted part of the study is based on data from two large corpora, the *British National Corpus (BNC)* and the *Macquarie Dictionary* database of Australian English (*Ozcorp*). The second dataset involves both frontstage and backstage interactions between the participants of the Australian and of the British *Big Brother* reality shows. The study also examines qualitative interviews that allow the analyst to tease out the audience's lay evaluations of situated jocular interactions, and thus constitute fertile ground for studying the meta-pragmatics of teasing.

The book consists of nine chapters, which are divided into well-organised sections, and are embedded in cutting-edge literature in the fields of humour and im/politeness research. The first chapter ("Introduction") defines the scope of the book, discusses the terms that will be employed in the empirical analyses which follow, and provides the rationale for studying two English-speaking cultural groups. In the last two subsections of the chapter, Sinkeviciute identifies the main research questions of the study and provides a concise summary of the book's content.

The second chapter, "Meanwhile in the world of (im)politeness," outlines the main developments in the field of im/politeness research, since its inception in the second half of the twentieth century to the post-2000s discursive approaches to im/politeness. The author, first,

“provide[s] the fundamental starting point for understanding the field” (p. 11) and presents a brief critical overview of the classic politeness theories rooted in Pragmatics and Speech Act theory. First-wave approaches to politeness, informed by structuralist approaches to language and society, propose politeness models and maxims with universal applicability, while ignoring both the production context and the hearer’s interpretation of speaker production in discourse. Despite a lack of consensus over the definition of politeness, discursive approaches are united in their view of im/politeness as a contextual judgement, and in their focus on the hearer’s first-order evaluations, rather than on the analysts’ second-order interpretations of speaker meaning. To this end, there has been a surge of metalinguistic studies of im/politeness seeking to tease out lay views and concepts of im/politeness.

The third chapter entitled “Data: From corpora to reality television to interviews” describes the three datasets employed in the research. From our point of view, the advantages of combining different data sources can be summarised as follows: first, the study employs different methodological tools (i.e. corpora, audio-recordings and interviews), which facilitates the corroboration and triangulation of findings, while mitigating the weaknesses inherent to employing each method by itself; second, it examines data from various interactional settings, from reality television to interviews. Examining multiple genres is important, as it showcases the contextually contingent nature of im/politeness-related evaluations of (jocular) behaviour. Last, but not least, this study draws on data from two English-speaking cultural groups, which provides a nuanced account of how cultural norms may be interpreted in two countries where the same language is spoken.

The fourth chapter entitled “Conversational humour: Jocular verbal behaviours” provides a comprehensive overview of different theories and analytical approaches to teasing. Sinkeviciute, taking into consideration that humour “can be located at all points on the scale from politeness to impoliteness” (Kotthoff 1996: 306), regards teasing as a potentially *face-threatening* or *face-supportive* verbal act, and underlines the significance of contextual factors for assessing a jocular verbal act. To illustrate this, she proposes a comprehensive quadripartite model for teasing, which considers both speaker production and hearer interpretation of speaker meaning. In this model, the form and/or content of speaker production can be deemed either potentially impolite or potentially polite. However, the target is provided with four possible evaluations of speaker meaning, particularly with evaluations of politeness, impoliteness, non-politeness, and non-impoliteness. The analyst’s (second-order) interpretation of teasing as polite, impolite, mock polite or mock impolite is, therefore, informed both by what was said and by how this was evaluated by the target of jocular behaviour. This model might lead one to suppose that the author embraces third-wave approaches to im/politeness, which attempt to integrate both participants’ and analysts’ interpretations (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich & Sifianou 2019: 94). The penultimate section of this chapter covers analyses of certain teasing episodes taken from the *BNC* and *Ozcorp*, with the aim of tapping into lay conceptualisations of teasing in British English and Australian English. The analysis concentrates on three main features of teasing: (i) the communicative “how” of teasing, (ii) the functions of teasing, and (iii) the potential after-teases mobilised by the target as a response to the tease. The qualitative analyses are supplemented by quantitative data, which illustrate the cross-cultural differences between British English and Australian English vis-à-vis the analytical components of teasing.

The aim of chapter five, “Jocular verbal behaviours in Australian and British cultural contexts,” is to illustrate how the interactional preferences of the British and the Australians vis-à-vis various jocular interactional practices are partly shaped and underpinned by sociocultural norms. More specifically, the cultural proscription against “taking oneself too seriously” appears to be guiding participants’ evaluations of jocular interactional behaviours as non-impolite, mainly in public contexts. This tacit cultural prescription coupled with the tendency of feeling

similar to others, is said to be associated with the interactional practices of self-deprecating, taking a joke at oneself, and of taking the piss out of someone, when they appear to be pretentious or arrogant. Notably, the author found this tendency to be more salient in the Australian English interactions, in which participants appeared to appreciate both laughing at someone and laughing with someone more than the British did. As the following chapter six makes clear, these preferred responses of laughing and not getting upset with others are mostly encountered in public contexts, whereas in backstage interactions or post-recording interviews, the target's assessment of the same jocular behaviour may vary.

In chapter six "Frontstage and backstage reactions to jocularity," the author elaborates on the public versus private distinction in relation to evaluations of jocularity. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) work on self-presentation, she discusses the frontstage and backstage reactions to jocularity in specific teasing episodes in *Big Brother Australia 2012* and *Big Brother UK 2012*. What is interesting to note is that in both versions of the reality show, both the targets of teasing and the third parties tended to change their evaluations of teases from non-impolite in the frontstage to impolite in the backstage. In other words, it was in more private settings that the targets felt free to express their personal feelings, which they tended to conceal in public due to the awareness of the culture-specific expectation to not take oneself too seriously. However, the two socio-cultural groups significantly seemed to differ in relation to the backstage behaviour of third parties (i.e. of the target's and instigator's housemates).

Chapter seven entitled "Negative evaluations of jocularity" is dedicated to the exploration of general and special issues associated with negative evaluations of jocularity in the Australian and the British *Big Brother* houses. In terms of the general issues, entertaining third parties, making recurrent jokes about the same person and delivering disaffectionate speech appeared to occasion negative assessments of humorous remarks in both versions of the reality show. As regards the special issues, casting the target into a negative category, violating social norms, raising taboo topics, and changing the facts featured as salient aspects of impoliteness in both culture groups. Although the author did not make clear the analytical process through which she came up with these categories, it is interesting that the Australian housemates appeared to take offence more often to issues related to the disruption of social harmony, whereas the British were found to negatively assess person-oriented teases.

Chapter eight, "Interviewees' attitudes to jocularity," examines non-participant evaluations of potentially face-threatening jocular practices. In this empirical chapter, Sinkeviciute draws on video-stimulated interview data to examine the metapragmatic side of teasing. Notably, the scarcity of studies looking at lay conceptualisations of teasing makes this chapter an important contribution to humour research. More specifically, the analysis of the interviews revealed that the interviewees' lay assessments of the jocular behaviours encountered in the two versions of *Big Brother* varied according to the interviewee's perspective (i.e. the target's, the instigator's and the non-participant's): adopting the target's perspective was coupled with negative evaluations of jocular acts; in contrast, teasing was deemed acceptable by those looking from the instigator's point of view. Indeed, the examination of variability in perspectives from which to evaluate jocularity appeared equally central to conceptualisations of funniness. Funniness did not emerge as a fixed and unified concept, but its meaning was again filtered by the perspectives from which to judge jocularity as funny (i.e. participant and non-participant). This chapter also analyses British and Australian interviewees' interpretations of jocularity in a variety of interactional settings, which differed in terms of the participants' number and cultural identities. This is notable since it could further the discussion about the situation-specific understandings of jocularity. What is of equal importance here is that the interviewees were expected to judge and conceptualise jocular comments not only in their own but also in other cultural contexts, which makes a significant contribution to both intracultural and intercultural studies of humour

and im/politeness. The qualitative analysis of specific extracts among others revealed intriguing interactional tendencies. Most importantly, the British appeared to be more supportive of the target of teasing, while the Australians seemed more dismissive of “po-faced” responses (Drew 1987) to jocularity, drawing on the culture-specific norm of appreciating humour directed at both self and other.

In chapter nine, “Conclusions,” Sinkeviciute provides an overview of the main contributions of the study to the fields of conversational humour and (im)politeness, while suggesting some directions for future research. From our point of view, the main edge of Sinkeviciute’s approach is the integration of first-order and second-order perspectives for the interpretation of potentially impolite jocular behaviours, which is in line with third-wave approaches to im/politeness (Ogiermann & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2019). This cross-pollination of perspectives privileges participants’ lay understandings of jocularity as they emerge in interaction, without “displacing” the very concept of jocularity or delegating the analyst to the mere role of describing lay participant views (cf. Haugh 2007). Another major strength of this book is the mixture of various data sources, each of which sheds light on different angles of the phenomena under study, thus enriching the analysis of interactional practices of humour and impoliteness. This combined focus on closely related but seldom conjointly scrutinised phenomena (but see, e.g., Haugh & Bousfield, 2012; Haugh 2016) indeed constitutes one of this study’s most important contributions. Finally, the book succeeded in teasing out the cross-cultural differences in conceptualisations of jocularity in two English-speaking cultural groups, therefore furthering the discussion about lay understandings of humour and im/politeness in English, which have been under-researched (but see Culpeper et al. 2019; Ogiermann & Saloustrou forth.).

This book could have benefited from how jocularity is conceptualised and perceived in other intra-cultural environments (cf. Kotthoff’s 1996 work on conversational humour in Switzerland, Germany, and Austria). However, the author has paved the way for further studies of jocularity in various genres of media discourse, such as TV sitcoms, TV interviews, advertisements, films, and talk shows (see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014). Further research could also examine variability in evaluations of jocular acts among American speakers of English. In addition, it would be worth investigating teasing and other jocular practices in digital discourse (e.g. in emails, blog posts, YouTube comments; see Wibowo & Kuntjara 2012; Arendholz 2013). Finally, researching the interplay of humour and impoliteness in interaction could also be extended to other genres, such as academic discourse (Lee 2006), political discourse (Tsakona & Popa 2011), and literary texts. Overall, this book constitutes a cutting-edge study on the interplay of humour and impoliteness in media discourse, and is highly recommended to all researchers in the fields of discourse analysis, pragmatics, humour and (im)politeness research, intracultural and intercultural communication and media studies.

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