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A Socio-Pragmatic Study of Joking in English and Arabic TV programs

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Abstract

This study deals with joking as a socio-pragmatic phenomenon. Joking can be defined as something said to provoke people's laughter and amusement. This study deals with joking and its relation to socio-linguistics and pragmatics focusing on its concept, its relation to politeness and cooperative principle. The present study also discusses politeness being one of the main sociolinguistic theories that are interrelated to joking. The main problem of the current study illustrates the interrelationship between cooperative principles on one hand and joking, politeness on the other.

The study aims at shedding light on the use of joking in English and Arabic TV programs, showing joking as a socio-pragmatic phenomenon and also showing the difference between English and Arabic programs concerning joking. This paper is divided into a number of sections.

The introductory section is devoted to the term joking as a concept, and also through the lens of socio-linguistics, and pragmatics as well as Grice's cooperative principle since this principle is

incompatible with joking. There follows separate sections regarding the limitations of the study, the procedures as well as collecting and analyzing data.

The methodology section provides a presentation of data analysis and the findings and statistics therein, which represent the practical side of the study. In this study, some joking texts from different English and Arabic TV programs were collected for analysis. Many episodes were analysed and six texts of joking were selected from both languages (English and Arabic) depending on specific programs. These texts that convey a sense of joking were analysed socio-pragmatically.

Results show that from a sociolinguistic level, English joking tend to use polite and impolite expressions equally since both of them are used 50% in the selected data. Pragmatically speaking, English joking flouts the maxim of relevance in 50% of the selected data. Arabic joking tends to employ more polite than impolite forms of jokes. Concerning Grice's maxims, Arabic joking flouts the maxim of quality in 66% of the selected data, maxim of relevance and manner are flouted equally 16% each whereas quantity maxim is not flouted in all the selected data. This study concludes that ,pragmatically speaking, Grice's maxims must be flouted in achieving any joke. Joking and politeness share the same aim, since both of them try to lessen the distance between the speaker and the hearer.

1. Introduction

Joking as a Socio-Pragmatic Phenomenon

1.1. Joking as a Concept

Joking is a display of humour in which words are used within a specific and well-defined narrative structure to make people laugh and is not meant to be taken seriously. It can take the form of a story, usually with dialogue, and ends in a punch line. The punch line is usually what the audience expect (the story contains a second, conflicting meaning). This can be achieved by using a pun or other word play (e.g irony, sarcasm, nonsense, a logical incompatibility or other means) (Hetzron,1991:66).

Joking can be considered as the prototypical form of verbal humour. In most of its types it is produced orally in conversations and sometimes published in collections. Even if the expression is unfamiliar to language users, who grasp its meaning intuitively, it does pose definitional problems. Joking is defined with regard to its constituent parts (Hockett, 1977:177).

Sherzer (1985:216) shows that a joke can be defined as "a discourse unit consisting of two parts, the set up and the punch line. The set-up is normally built of a narrative or/and a dialogue while the punchline is the final portion of the text, which engenders surprise and leads to incongruity with the set-up". And there are many ways that this incongruity appears and is resolved.

Chateau (1950) cited in Attardo (1994:3) shows that Joking should be contrasted with seriousness rather than tragic (tragedy) then (ibid,320) he shows that the simplest and most common humorous interaction is joke telling. It is the prototypical situation of linguistic humor. It is the kind of context analyzed by Sacks.

The participants claim that they will engage in joke telling session in the conversation either explicitly or implicitly. Such expressions as "Have you heard the latest?" or "Do you know the one ... " are often used by speakers to explicitly declare that the narrative following the sentence is a joke, although, of course, jokes can also be introduced in conversation without explicit markers? Attardo explains that most of jokes cannot be translated into another language since they are based on the versatility of each language (ibid).

1.2. Joking and Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is the field of linguistics which deals with the relation between language and society (Trask, 2007:264).

Sociolinguistics can be defined as the descriptive study of the effect of the aspects of [society](#) (cultural [norms](#), context and expectations) on the way [language](#) is used, and it is concerned with society's effect on language (Gumperz,2008:532).

Sociolinguistics is concerned with studying language and society. It deals with different topics that concentrate on interaction and enrich communication between members of society.

One of the main sociolinguistic theories that interrelated to joking is Politeness Theory.

Yule (2010:135) defines politeness as "showing awareness and consideration of another person's face". Politeness deals with ideas like being modest, tactful and nice to others.

In talking about joking, it is very important to refer to its relation to politeness, though the study is a pragmatic one. Politeness as a linguistic behaviour, tries to lessen the negative influence of one's speech on the addressee's feelings and increases the positive influence (Cruse, 2006:131).

In fact, what positive politeness or solidarity does is to lessen the social distance, while deference does the opposite since it increases distance or it inhibits solidarity development (Allan,1990:257).

Brown and Levinson (1987:120) differentiate between two types of politeness (positive and negative politeness). Positive politeness means the redress that is directed to the hearer's positive face, his desire for his wants to be desirable by others. Negative politeness on the other hand is a redress that is directed to the hearer's negative face embodied in his want to be free of imposition. They consider joke as a **(strategy number 8)** of positive politeness strategies and one of the positive politeness techniques that is used to increase shared background or shared values. So Joking depends on mutual shared knowledge and values between the participants. joking may

work to minimize face threatening act of request, like: "**How about lending me this old heap of junk??**".

The most obvious function of joking is to create solidarity among the participants.

1.3. Joking and Pragmatics

Pragmatics is that branch of linguistics which is concerned with how the 'meaning' of an utterance depends on the situations in which it is uttered (how linguistic actions are used). Pragmatics studies those relations between language and context that are encoded in the structure of a language. In other words, one can say that pragmatics is the study of just those aspects of the relationship between language and context that are relevant to the writing of grammars (Levinson,1983:9).

Mey (1993:215) on the other hand defines pragmatics_ referring to its components_ as a subfield of [linguistics](#) and [semiotics](#) that deals with the ways in which [context](#) affect the meaning. Thus, he claims that pragmatics comprises [speech act](#) theory, conversational [implicature](#) , [talk in interaction](#) and other approaches to language behaviour in [philosophy](#), [sociology](#), linguistics and [anthropology](#) .

Pragmatics is concerned with the effect of the context on the meaning of utterance. It presents different theories and cooperative principle is one of them. It is very important to refer to cooperative principle which is produced by Grice, since this principle is incompatible with joking.

Whereas joking implies a presentation of ambiguous expressions, long sentences and somehow irrelative to the context, cooperative principle on the other hand is interesting in presenting clear utterances that are related to the context.

Crystal (2003:117), Warren (2006:109) and Martin and Bowe (2007:10) state that people apply cooperative principles in their communication and those principles are proposed by Grice so they are called Grice maxims and they are four:

- A. **The maxim of quantity** which means that the utterance should be informative in the conversation so the speaker should present his idea in a way that he uses neither too little words nor too much. So the number of words should match the idea that is intended by the speaker.
- B. **The maxim of quality** which means that the speaker contributes to conversation in order to be true .In other words ,the speaker should say only what he believes to be true and to avoid false ideas.
- C. **The maxim of relevance** which means that the utterance should be relevant to the exchange purpose .So if the speaker aims to explain the development of medicine he will not use terms that refer to industry.

- D. **The maxim of manner** which means that the utterance should be orderly chosen and it should be brief .Obscurity and ambiguity should be avoided so everything should be clear

1.4 The Problem of the Study

This study investigates the use of Joking in English and Arabic TV program. It studies joking as a socio-pragmatic phenomenon. So it focuses on its significance in communication by lessen the distance between the participants. The study tackles the use of joking in English and Arabic TV programs. It shows the difference between these two cultures in the use of joking.

The current study illustrates the interrelationship between cooperative principles on one hand and joking, politeness on the other hand. Since joking and politeness are incompatible with cooperative principles.

1.5 Aims of the study

The current study aims at:

- 1.Showing the concept of joking and its linguistic significance.
- 2.Shedding light on the use of Joking in English and Arabic TV programs.
3. Showing joking as a socio-pragmatic phenomenon.
- 4.Showing the difference between English and Arabic programs concerning joking.

1.6 Limitations of the study

The present study is limited to studying the concept of Joking and its use in English and Arabic TV programs (American jokes, comic club, النكت, الكوفد واحد).

1.7 Value of the study

The study is expected to be of value to every student who studies English as a foreign language. It is of a crucial value for those who are interested in pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

1.8 The Procedures

The procedures of the study are:

1. Collecting data about joking from linguistic resources.
2. Putting these data in tables to organize it.
3. After presenting a background of Joking concept, its relation to pragmatics and sociolinguistics is revealed.
4. Using internet resources.
5. Giving the findings and conclusions.

1.9 Model of the Study

The model that is followed in this study is an eclectic one, **Firstly**, Hetzron's (1991). Model in identifying in joking as a display of humour in which words are used within a specific and well-defined narrative structure to make people laugh and is not meant to be taken seriously. **Secondly**, Brown and Levinson's model of politeness (1987) especially its classification of politeness types into positive and negative and their strategies since they consider Joking as one of positive politeness strategies.

Thirdly, Martin and Bowe's model (2007) which is represented by cooperative principle as incompatible with Joking.

2. Methodology and Data Analysis

2.1 Method

The method that is followed in this research is taking some joking texts from different English and Arabic TV programs to be the data of analysis by identifying these texts that convey a sense of joking and analyze them socio-pragmatically.

2.2 Data Collection

In this study, some joking texts from different English and Arabic TV programs are collected to be data of analysis. Many episodes are watched and six texts of joking are selected from both languages (English and Arabic) with depending on specific programs (American jokes, comic club, النكت, الكوفد واحد). They tell some funny situations in everyday life. The texts of joking are noticed aurally and visually by the researcher.

2.3 Data Analysis

This section will present some joking texts from English and Arabic TV programs and their socio-pragmatic analysis starting with English data then Arabic.

Part (A): English Data

Text (1) My friend thinks he is smart he told me, an onion is the only food that makes you cry so I threw a coconut at his face.

Unit of Analysis, so I threw a coconut at his face.

Sociolinguistic Analysis

Joking here is used to lessen the distance between the speaker and the hearer and to enrich the interaction. This joke can be considered as a form of positive politeness since it is achieved between friends and who have a sense of solidarity.

Pragmatic Analysis

The speaker flouted the maxim of quality when he says *I threw a coconut at his face* since he doesn't say a true sentence. In other words, he doesn't actually aim to throw his friend.

Text (2) Teacher: Why do we write 'etc' at the end in the exam.?

Student: It means.\

E_End of

T_Thinking

C_Capacity

Unit of Analysis, E-End of, T-Thinking, C-Capacity

Sociolinguistic Analysis

Returning to politeness theory this joke can be considered as impolite. There must be no such answer from student to his teacher since the teacher and student are not in the same level but, there is a distance between them. Thus, this joke is impolite.

Pragmatic Analysis

The student flouted the maxim of quality when he says *E-End of T-Thinking C-Capacity* since he doesn't answer in an expected way that seems clear to the question of the teacher, instead of that he presents an obscure answer.

Text (3) The doctor to the patient: 'You are very sick'

The patient to the doctor: 'Can I get a second opinion?'

The doctor again: 'Yes, you are very ugly too...'

Unit of Analysis, 'Can I get a second opinion?'

Sociolinguistic Analysis

This joke can be considered as impolite. There must be a distance between the doctor and the patient and it is known that negative politeness must be present here. Thus, this joke is impolite. Since the patient chides the doctor when he says *Can I get a second opinion?* And the answer of the doctor is also impolite.

Pragmatic Analysis

The patient flouted the maxim of relevance when he says '*Can I get a second opinion?*' since the word opinion is irrelevant to the context. In other words, the doctor doesn't give any opinion.

Text (4) Patient: Doctor, I have a pain in my eye whenever I drink tea.

Doctor: Take the spoon out of the mug before you drink.

Unit of Analysis, Take the spoon out of the mug.

Sociolinguistic Analysis

Joking here is used to lessen the distance between the doctor and the hearer and to enrich the interaction. This joke can be considered as a form of positive politeness. It is achieved between doctor and patient.

Pragmatic Analysis

The doctor flouts the maxim of manner when he says *Take the spoon out of the mug* since it is unexpected and ambiguous for the patient. The patient expects that the doctor will provide him with certain drugs to get rid of his problem.

Text (5) Doctor: what seems the problem sir?

Patient: it hurts when I touch here.

Doctor: Then don't touch it.

Unit of Analysis, Then don't touch it.

Sociolinguistic Analysis

This joke can be considered as impolite. The patient is so serious when he complains of his problem that he has hurt when touch a part of his body, and the doctor on the other hand was impolite in his reply *Then don't touch it*. It seems as if he chides the patient. Thus, this joke is impolite.

Pragmatic Analysis

The doctor flouts the maxim of relevance when he says *Then don't touch it* since this expression is irrelevant to the context. In other words, the doctor doesn't give a serious advice that help in solving a problem, instead of that he presents a joke.

Text (6) I dreamed I was forced to eat a giant marshmallow. When I woke up, my pillow was gone.

Unit of Analysis, my pillow was gone.

Sociolinguistic Analysis

This joke can be considered as a form of positive politeness. When the speaker says *my pillow was gone*, he aims at lessening the distance so it is a positive polite joke.

Pragmatic Analysis

The speaker flouts the maxim of relevance when he says *my pillow was gone* since this expression is irrelevant to the context. In other words, the speaker doesn't provide an expression that interrelated to the previous sentence *I dreamed I was forced to eat a giant marshmallow*. There is no direct connection between the two sentences

Part (B): Arabic Data

Text (1) بخيل اشترى لأبنه آلة حاسبة وشال منها الصفر عشان ما يتصل دولي

Translation, a stingy man bought his son a calculator and he omits zero number so that his son cannot call an international number.

Unit of Analysis, عشان ما يتصل دولي

Sociolinguistic Analysis

Joking here is used to lessen the distance between the speaker and the hearer and to enrich the interaction. So it is a form of positive politeness.

Pragmatic Analysis

The speaker here flouts the maxim of manner when he says عشان ما يتصل دولي. Since this expression is an obscure and not obvious for the receiver that calculator cannot be used for calling.

Text (2) ولد فقير اشترى قطعة ارض فبنى بيتين الاول صبغه اصفر والثاني كتب عليه (نفس اللون)

Translation, a poor boy bought a yard and he built two houses and he painted the first one with yellow and he wrote (the same color) on the second one.

Unit of Analysis, he wrote (the same color) on the second one.

Sociolinguistic Analysis

Joking here is used to lessen the distance between the speaker and the audience in order to enrich the interaction. So it is a form of positive politeness.

Pragmatic Analysis

The speaker here flouts the maxim of quality when he says والثاني كتب عليه نفس اللون. Since the reaction of the audience seems as if they confused that writing the word (paint) doesn't replace the action of painting itself.

Text (3) اذا كان مخترع الواتساب رجل

فاكيد مخترع اخر اتصال زوجته

Translation, if the inventor of whatsapp was a man then it must be his wife who invented the last seen.

Unit of Analysis, اكد مخترع اخر اتصال زوجته.

Sociolinguistic Analysis

Joking here is used to lessen the distance between the speaker and the audience in order to enrich the interaction. So it is a form of positive politeness.

Pragmatic Analysis

The speaker here flouts the maxim of quality when he says فاكيد مخترع اخر اتصال زوجته . Since he is not sure of that. The quality maxim implies saying only what you believe is true.

انت صح افضل جواب لانها نقاش مع واحد حمار (4) Text

Translation, you are right is the best answer for ending a discussion with silly man.

Unit of Analysis, لانها نقاش مع واحد حمار

Sociolinguistic Analysis

Joking here is impolite, since the word (حمار) is an impolite expression in Arabic culture.

Pragmatic Analysis

The speaker here flouts the maxim of quality when he says افضل جواب لانها نقاش مع واحد حمار . Since he is not sure of that. In other words, discussion may not be ended even if one depends such way and the quality maxim implies saying only what you believe is true.

استاذ عربي سال زوجته ماذا تعرفين عن النحو والصرف (5) Text

اجابت اصرف راتبك على النحو الي يرضيني

Translation, Arabic teacher asks his wife what do you know about grammar and al-sarf and she answers to spend your salary in the way that I desire.

Unit of Analysis, اصرف راتبك على النحو الي يرضيني

Sociolinguistic Analysis

In this text, joking can be considered as a form of positive politeness. The wife here aims at amusing her husband. She uses pun to provide a joke that can amuse and bring solidarity to her husband.

Pragmatic Analysis

The wife here flouts the maxim of relevance when she says اصرف راتبك على النحو الي يرضيني. Since it is irrelative to the previous question asked by her husband.

Text (6) زوجي يتحدث كثيرا وهو نائم

ما الحل؟

اعطيه فرصة ليتحدث وهو مستيقظ

Translation. -my husband talks a lot through sleeping what the solution?

-Give him a chance to talk when he is awake.

Unit of Analysis. اعطيه فرصة ليتحدث وهو مستيقظ

Sociolinguistic Analysis

Joking here is impolite, since it is impolite to answer in such way. The speaker here chides the wife when he claims that the reason behind the husband talk through sleeping is because she doesn't get him a chance to talk through his vigilance.

Pragmatic Analysis

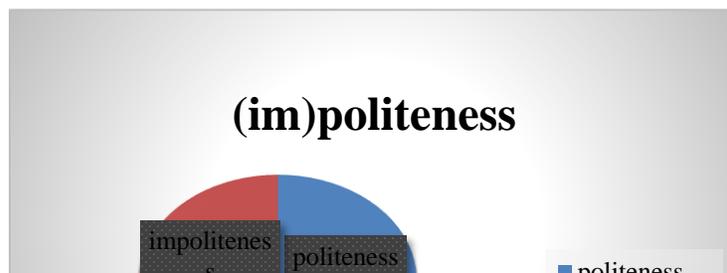
The speaker here flouts the maxim of quality when he says اعطيه فرصة ليتحدث وهو مستيقظ. Since he is not sure whether the wife is talkative or not.

3. Results and Discussions

The current study has provided the following results:

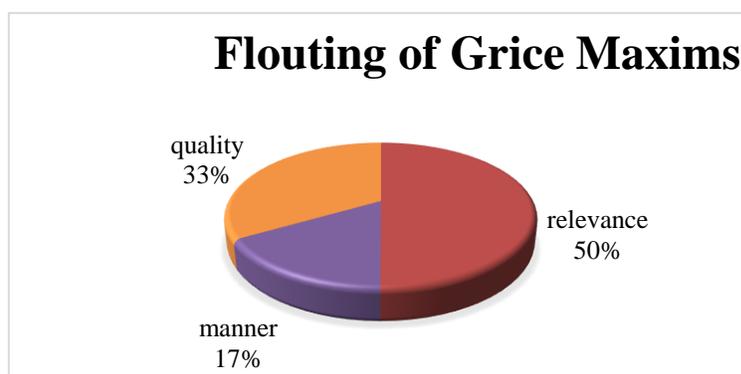
From a sociolinguistic level, English joking tend to use polite and impolite expressions equally, since both of them are used 50% in the selected data. The following chart will clarify this result:

Chart (3.1): (im)politeness in English joking.



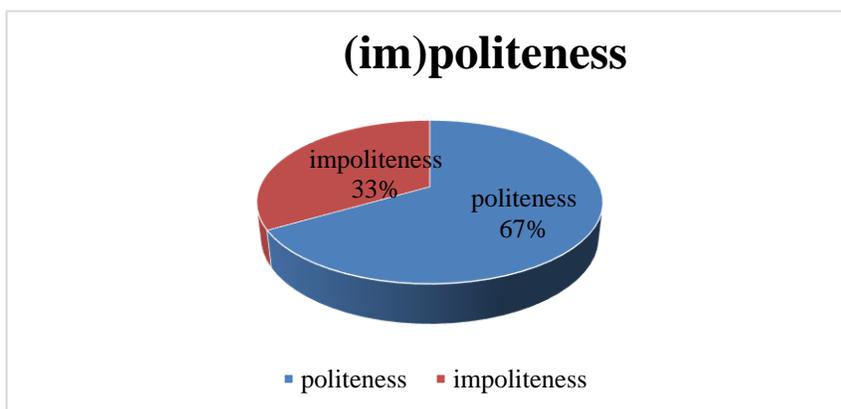
Pragmatically speaking, English joking flouts the maxim of relevance 50% in the selected data, maxim of quality is flouted 33.3% in the selected data, manner maxim is flouted 16.6%, whereas quantity maxim is not flouted in all the selected data.

Chart (3.2): Flouting of Grice Maxims in English Joking



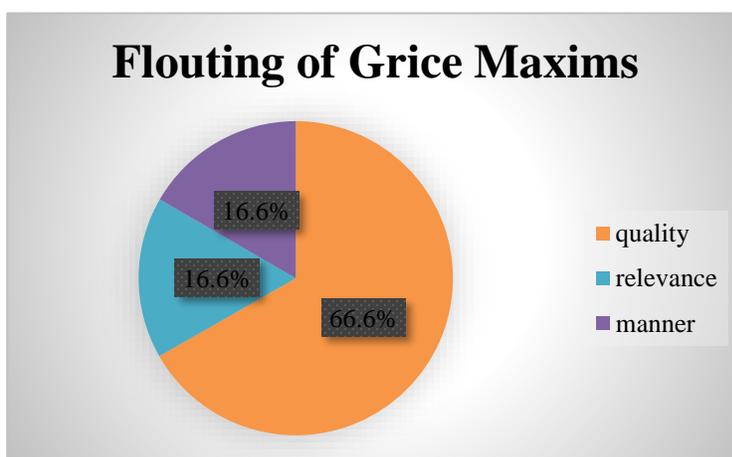
Arabic joking tends to polite form of jokes more than the impolite. Polite forms are used 66.6% in the selected data. Impolite forms are used 33.3% in the selected data.

Chart (3.3) (im)politeness in Arabic joking.



Concerning Grice maxims, Arabic joking flouts the maxim of quality 66.6% in the selected data, maxims of relevance and manner are flouted equally 16.6%, whereas quantity maxim is not flouted in all the selected data.

Chart (3.4) Flouting of Grice Maxims in Arabic Joking



4. Conclusions

1. Joking is a display of humour in which words are used within a specific and well-defined narrative structure to make people laugh and is not meant to be taken seriously.
2. Pragmatically speaking, Grice maxims, must be flouted in achieving any joke.
3. Joking and politeness share the same aim, since both of them try to lessen the distance between the speaker and the hearer.
4. English joking tend to use polite and impolite expressions equally, since both of them are used 50% in the selected data.
5. English joking flouts the maxim of relevance 50% in the selected data, maxim of quality is flouted 33.3% in the selected data, manner maxim is flouted 16.6%, whereas quantity maxim is not flouted in all the selected data.
6. Arabic joking tends to polite form of jokes more than the impolite. Polite forms are used 66.6% in the selected data. Impolite forms are used 33.3% in the selected data.
7. Concerning Grice maxims, Arabic joking flouts the maxim of quality 66.6% in the selected data, maxims of relevance and manner are flouted equally 16.6%, whereas quantity maxim is not flouted in all the selected data.

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