HUMOUR AS A RELATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGY IN THE ROMANIAN PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES*

MIHAELA VIORICA CONSTANTINESCU[1]

Abstract. Our paper intends to focus on the (im)politeness strategies attained through humour within the Romanian parliamentary debates. The Parliament is seen as a very competitive and confrontational setting (Ilie 2004, Harris 2001), which explains the frequency of face attacks and also the need to create a ludic ethos. In our approach, *face* is conceived as "associated with attributes that are affectively sensitive" (see Spencer-Oatey 2007: 644), thus a FTA could attack both the positive and the negative poles of the face.

In the case of the parliamentary debates, the interactions reveal a certain type of joking culture used to promote an in- (and out-) group relationship, to reinforce common ground, to signal shared knowledge and attitudes. On the other hand, political humour has a precise, identifiable target (a politician or a political group) who is negatively evaluated. Witty utterances and positive reactions to them could reveal appreciation, agreement – thus conveying positive politeness towards the initiator, on the one hand, and impoliteness towards the target (agree to a negative evaluation, ridicule the other, dissociate, etc.), on the other hand. Humour involves cognitive and affective complicity, the latter emphasising the two-sidedness of witty utterances.

Keywords: humour, politeness, impoliteness, on record/ off record strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Humour represents, in general, a marked communicative behaviour; in the parliamentary discourse humour is a strategy of, simultaneously, positively- and negatively-oriented relational management. Parliamentary discourse allows for the manifestation of a (false) humoristic detachment from the "seriousness" of the discussions and/or conveys a negative evaluation of the political opponents by means of humorous insertions.

The corpus we have selected contains several parliamentary discourses, ranging from the Old (1866 to 1938) to the present-day Romanian Parliament. The humorous utterances identified have multiple functions, both extra- and inter-discursive. They emphasize shared knowledge and values between the humour initiator and his public (exhibiting politeness); simultaneously, the negative evaluations of the opponents convey intentional unmitigated face-threatening acts targeted to the out-group representatives (thus exhibiting impoliteness).

[1] Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest, mc_tinescu2000@yahoo.com.

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In what follows, we are interested in those situations revealing intentional humour; we shall focus on the illocutionary felicity and perlocutionary efficiency of a humorous act. As a consequence, we have supplemented the analyst's perspective, as an ideal hearer, having a humorous competence similar to that of the speaker, with evidence of humour understanding and appreciation. One of the difficulties the analyst faces, especially when there is an important temporal distance from the time frame analyzed, is to establish some selection criteria concerning the humorous utterances. Although there are some opinions – for instance Genette 2002 – stating that humour (as a comic subtype) is a subjective and relational phenomenon, the analyst could not take into account only the utterances that appear witty to him/her. There is the risk of appreciating an utterance as a humorous act while the member of Parliament (MP) had no humoristic intention and the public did not consider the utterance as being amusing; this possible mismatch derives from the significant difference between the *cultural model* (Kronenfeld 2008) of the humour initiator and that of the analyst's.

Humour is seen in this paper as a cover term which accounts for both humour and irony (ranging from witty irony to sarcasm). We shall focus on the techniques used to get humour and to convey (im)politeness within an institutional community of practice: the Parliament. Besides recognizing and understanding humour, we shall also focus on appreciation and the manifestation of the appreciation: for instance, the audience's reaction (applause, laughter) involving the affective complicity. The shared implicit (Priego-Valverde 2003: 38), conveying common norms and a cognitive complicity of the group (*ibidem*: 42), is a *sine qua non* condition for humour. Some of the techniques presented in this paper are based on this cognitive complicity (manipulating the presuppositions, using nicknames and pretended lapses concerning names, constructing fantasy scenarios), while others emphasize the parliamentary discursive norms (upgrading).

2. HUMOUR AND (IM)POLITENESS

Jokes, as a humour subtype, are considered by Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) a positive politeness strategy, involving shared knowledge, values, and attitudes. In the case of a community of practice, like the Parliament, the interactions reveal a certain type of joking culture used to promote an in- and out-group relationship.

On the one hand, political (parliamentary) humour has, more often than not, an easy identifiable target (an MP or a political group), who is negatively evaluated. Utterances reveal *on* or *off record* attacks, which are disguised as witty remarks. The audience's reactions to these utterances, revealing understanding, appreciation, and maybe agreement with the implicated message convey politeness towards the initiator, and, simultaneously, impoliteness towards the target of the utterance. When expressing adhesion to the negative evaluation, the public (like the initiator) ridicules the target and dissociates from it.

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We shall conceive the *self* of the MPs according to H. Spencer-Oatey's (2007) observations. *Face* is connected to the *image of self* and to the action of assuming positively evaluated attributes and dissociating from negatively evaluated attributes (Spencer-Oatey 2007: 644). Self-image is constantly changing in interaction, individuals being very sensitive to the mismatches between the assumed/denied characteristics and those attributed to them. We shall distinguish between the individual, the relational and the collective self (*idem*). When confronted with an FTA (face threatening act), the *face* of an MP has a multiple vulnerability, drawing from the different sub-roles an MP plays both in his private and public life (see Ilie 2001: 247-248, Ilie 2004).

In this paper, both politeness and impoliteness are considered as second order principles, theoretical constructs based also on the observance of some concrete phenomena empirically associated with first order politeness and impoliteness. We shall use Bousfield's (2007, 2008) suggestions according to which an FTA intentionally performed to maximally damage the other's face simultaneously affects positive and negative face. Therefore, in this approach, we shall apply Bousfield's simplified distinction (cf. Culpeper 1996) between *on record* and *off record* impoliteness, seen on a scale, allowing also for a *blended on/off record impoliteness*; in this case, indirectness could convey a more damaging effect than directness does.

In this paper, (im)politeness is seen as a form of "relational work" (Locher/Watts 2005, 2008) or "relational management" (Culpeper 2008): "work people invest in negotiating their relationship in interaction" (Locher/Watts 2008: 78); thus following the postmodern approaches of (im)politeness, politeness is considered as an appropriate positively marked behaviour with respect to a particular social situation or positively-oriented relational management; impoliteness is considered inappropriate negatively marked behaviour or "negatively-oriented relational management" (Culpeper 2008: 31).

Considering the institutional communicative norms of the Parliament (applied to debates and other parliamentary subgenres), as well as the Romanian cultural model (see Culpeper 2008, the *situational* and the *co-textual norms*), the MPs know that face attacks are frequent and they expect to be the target of these attacks; on the other hand, an expected face-attack does not necessarily mean that the actual attack is considered less offensive or less face-aggravating.

3. HUMOROUS TECHNIQUES

3.1. Manipulating the presuppositions

Our first example, conveying *off record* impoliteness, belongs to P.P. Carp (Conservative Party); the MP speculates some information circulating as a public rumour at that time, concerning an alleged paternity problem of another MP, Take Ionescu (Conservative Party):

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(1) P.P. Carp: Mr. Take Ionescu told you that he had a kind of filial relationship with Mr. Catargi. I am sure that in the serene spheres he is today, *Mr. Catargi might have heard, with a legitimate pride, that after his death he ended up by becoming Take's father too*. (13.01.1906)
P.P. Carp: Dl. Take Ionescu v-a spus că se stabilise un fel de raport filial între domnia sa şi domnul Catargi. Sunt convins că în sferele senine în care se află astăzi, va fi auzit, cu o legitimă mândrie, că după moartea lui a ajuns şi el să fie tatăl lui Take.

The idea that Take Ionescu's real father is not the one from the official documents appears as a presupposition: "he [Mr. Catargi] is Take's father ***too***", indicating the shared knowledge of the parliamentary community. Carp is intentionally misinterpreting Ionescu's words (quoted indirectly), the "filial relationship" was a political rapprochement (interpersonal and collective part of the individual identity) by means of which Ionescu placed himself in the conservative line. By reinterpreting the words, Carp emphasizes the private dimension of the opponent's identity and uses a type of gossip, inappropriate for the parliamentary community of practice (conveying *off record* impoliteness towards Ionescu). Still, gossip draws from a shared attitude and a negative evaluation of the target within a group.

The next example is taken from the present-day Romanian Parliament; an MP has an unauthorised intervention, interrupting the main speaker:

(2) Mr. Corneliu Vadim Tudor: We are being elected here too. I happened to be voted by more people than all of you put together. 3, 6 million people voted for me. (Protests in the chamber)
From the audience: *Yet, we are mentally sane (lit. normal/ healthy)*! (The chamber makes fun of the situation)
Mr. Corneliu Vadim Tudor: You are a delinquent, mister Novolan! (17.02.2003)
Domnul Corneliu Vadim Tudor: Suntem şi noi votaţi aici. Întâmplător, pe mine m-au votat mai mulţi oameni decât pe dumneavoastră toţi la un loc. M-au votat 3,6 milioane de oameni. (Proteste în sală.)
Din sală: Dar noi suntem sănătoşi! (Sala se amuză.)
Domnul Corneliu Vadim Tudor: Dumneata eşti un infractor, domnule Novolan!

The unauthorised MP's intervention – *Yet, we are mentally sane* – could be interpreted on the one hand as an attack to the MP that has the floor (Vadim Tudor), affecting the MP as an individual, and, on the other hand, as an attack to the mass of Tudor's voters (an attack targeted at a group). Vadim Tudor has construed the attack to discredit himself, not the voters – it is obvious from his quick reaction and direct attack to Novolan's individual representation: "you are a deliquent".

3.2. Nicknames and pretended lapses concerning names/titles

Throughout the parliamentary debates we have observed that sometimes Romanian MPs use their opponents' nicknames, provided that they are familiar to the public. We have encountered cases in the XIXth and XXth century debates, but

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also in the present-day discourses. Nicknames are used to diminish the individual/relational representation of an MP, shifting the frame and placing the opponent outside the official setting. The familiarity implied by nicknames and the (pretended) search for names are rhetorical artifices meant to involve the audience in co-constructing the discourse.

In example (4), Cezar Preda (Democratic-liberal Party) refers to Victor Ponta, head of the Social Democrat Party, one of the main opposition parties, using his nickname, "Young Titulescu":

(3) Mr. Cezar Preda: Mr. Crin Antonescu, as usual, a very good orator, displaying all the attributes required from the head of an Opposition. *But what about "Young Titulescu"?* (Laughter) *"Young Titulescu"*, coming to the microphone, started to shoot people, to say that the policemen in the square had bullets in their guns, to mention Hitler and others. Allow me, distinguished colleagues, to tell you that he *rapidly turned into "Young Iliescu". Maybe this way he can get rid of that glorious title of "young horse" and finally grow up.* (27.10.2010)
Domnul Cezar-Florin Preda: Domnul Crin Antonescu, nota obişnuită, un foarte bun orator, cu tot ceea ce înseamnă, până la urmă, vârful unei Opoziţii. Dar ce ne facem cu „Micul Titulescu"? (Râsete.)
„Micul Titulescu", venind la microfon, a început să împuşte lumea, să spună în piaţă că jandarmii aveau glonţ pe ţeavă, să-l pomenească aici pe Hitler şi pe alţii. Daţi-mi voie, stimaţi colegi, să vă spun că s-a transformat rapid în „Micul Iliescu". Poate cu această denumire reuşeşte şi domnia-sa să scape de acel titlu glorios de „cârlan". Se maturizează.

In the discussion of a censure motion, Preda hints at the speeches of the opposition leaders. After flattering Crin Antonescu (National Liberal Party), he turns to Victor Ponta, but he refers informally to his target: using the MP's nickname he belittles the target, makes the target inappropriate for that kind of political debate, conveying *off record* impoliteness. The simple use of "Young Titulescu", after praising Antonescu, indicates the fact that Ponta is not considered a real opposition leader.

Another interesting case is provided by the false lapses concerning some politicians' names. The technique is repeatedly used by Crin Antonescu in a discourse, alternatively with periphrases or euphemisms:

(4) Mr. Crin Antonescu: *You, the gentleman with the national interest, general of the Romanian Army, from Băsescu's canteen, mister Oprea, have you got any idea*? (Applause, laughter) (…)
Don't count on … mister … what's his name? Vlădescu's godson? Mister Boureanu (applause). Don't count on my gratitude because you have given me the chance of a speech. I am not willing to become the president of Romania, as you said, but, *thank God, I am not a shoe polisher of the president of Romania*. (16.03.2011)
Domnul George Crin Laurenţiu Antonescu:
Domnul cu interesul naţional, domnul general al Armatei Române, de la popota lui Băsescu, domnul Oprea, aveţi idee? (Aplauze. Râsete.)

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(...) Să nu mizați... domnul... cum îl cheamă? Finul lui Vlădescu? Domnul Boureanu. (Aplauze.) Să nu mizați pe recunoştința mea, pentru că mi-ați dat, cum spuneați, şansa unui speech. Eu nu sunt doritor de preşeden... preşedinte al României, cum ați spus, dar slavă Domnului că nu sunt lustruitor de pantofi de preşedinte al României.

Antonescu plays with the name of some important politicians representing the government or the political power. In the first case, he chooses to address directly the Minister of National Defense employing a phrase his target often uses; the MP also uses as an address form a title the minister obtained without having a proper military career (general). The direct form of address is boosting the force of the FTA, thus conveying *on record* impoliteness. Humour is achieved *via* the combination of a high register (presupposed by the institutional setting and the appeal to an important institution – the Army) with downgrading the title (connecting the title "general" with the political servitude: "from Băsescu's canteen"); this type of stylistic combination is referred to as *bathos* in humour studies (see Partington 2008). Addressing Boureanu, the MP simulates a lapse in order to refer to his target by means of a relational representation (*Vlădescu's godson*) and then implies (by a conversational implicature) that Boureanu is "a shoe polisher of the president of Romania".

3.3. Constructing fantasy scenarios

We shall present here some cases of MPs creating fantasy scenarios starting from different recent political scandals. In the first case, there is indirect reference to a political scandal, but the utterance contains enough elements so that the audience could reconstruct the allusions. In our first example of this section, an MP refers to the tactic used by the Justice Department to tape (and then to incriminate with the recordings) the private calls of politicians and media tycoons:

(5) Mr. Varujan Vosganian: *I shall consider speaking on the phone, and not at the microphone, just to be sure that all my words will be quoted accurately*. But, leaving the joke aside, I would like to speak about this Government, by invoking the concept of honour. (27.10.2010)
Domnul Varujan Vosganian: Mă gândesc să vorbesc la telefon, şi nu la microfon, ca să fiu sigur că toate cuvintele mele vor fi menționate ca atare. Dar, lăsând acum gluma la o parte, eu aş vrea să vorbesc în legătură cu acest Guvern invocând onoarea.

Speaking on the phone and the accurate quotations are the elements triggering the allusion. In a parliamentary debate all the interventions should be made in front of the assembly, and not on the phone, a private means of communication. The conversational implicature is that political power is no longer concerned with the real institutional debate, but with the desire/aspiration of total control (the sarcastic utterance – referred to as a "joke" – conveys an *off record* attack to the political majority and the government).

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Roberta Anastase, the Chairperson of the Chamber of Deputies, is alluded to as the lady who counted more votes than the number of the MPs participating in a debate, thus ensuring the success of an important bill in the Chamber:

(6) Mrs. Aurelia Vasile: Mister Chairman (Geoană), *I shall kindly ask you to have the votes counted by Roberta Anastase, thus, the motion is sure to pass*. (Applause) (27.10.2010)
Doamna Aurelia Vasile: Domnule preşedinte Geoană, am să vă rog astăzi să puneți să numere voturile pe Roberta Anastase, pentru că atunci, sigur, va trece moțiunea. (Aplauze.)

Asking the Chairman of the Senate (Mr. Geoană), who represents an opposition party (Social Democratic Party) to allow the Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies (Anastase) – representing the majority/power –, to count votes for a censure motion proposed by the opposition is clearly a fantasy. What the MP is saying is that Roberta Anastase has a problem counting votes and that she is likely to make a "mistake" again. The MP is implying that the mistake Anastase made was deliberate and that it could only happen in the benefit of the government – the example conveys *off record* impoliteness targeted to Anastase.

3.4. Upgrading

In the "upgrading" category we have included some examples where mock politeness could be perceived, either in interaction – collaborative, showing the quick reaction to the attack –, or produced by a single MP evaluating either a discourse (a meta-discursive intervention) or the actions of an opponent. The evaluation register is higher than the usual institutional standard, thus the contrast emphasizes the false appreciation and the lack of adaptability of the opponent to the parliamentary norms.

The first example, chosen from the interwar period, shows *mock politeness* between a minister and two MPs from the opposition:

(7) Mr. V. Vâlcovici, minister of Public Works and Communications: Gentlemen, please *do not interrupt the beauty of Mr. Deputy Călinescu's speech, which I literally taste with all pleasure.*
Mr. Eduard Mirto: *In our turn, we promise that we shall taste the beauty of your speech and we shall not interrupt you*.
Mr. Ar. M. Călinescu: *Please allow me to share courtesy with the minister and declare that I too taste the beauty of his writing as proved by the fact that I quote him with so much pleasure*. (10.02.1932)
D. V. Vâlcovici, ministrul lucrărilor publice şi al comunicațiilor: D-lor, eu vă rog să nu întrerupeți frumusețea expunerii d-lui deputat Călinescu, pe care eu o gust cu toată plăcerea.

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D. Eduard Mirto: Şi noi, vă promitem că vom gusta frumusețea discursului d-voastră şi nu vă vom întrerupe.
D. Ar. M. Călinescu: Dați-mi voie, vă rog, să fiu în schimb de amabilități cu d. ministru şi să declar că, la rândul meu, gust frumusețea scrisului d-sale, dovadă că îl citez cu atâta plăcere.

Minister Vâlcovici selects a target (Călinescu), whose speech is apparently positively evaluated. Mirto intervenes manipulating the presuppositions: although the minister has not delivered his speech yet, the MP already considers the "beauty" of the minister's speech: Mirto's irony draws from their shared conversational history. The target, Călinescu, replies that he admires the minister's style and he offers an ironical proof: within parliamentary debates, opposition MPs quote from the members of the government not in order to show admiration, but to reveal inconsistency, errors, etc.; the frequent quotations are thus, by antiphrasis, the proof of lack of appreciation, conveying *off record* impoliteness.

In the final example, the chairman of the Senate (representing the opposition) evaluates the speech of the previous MP, representing the political power/majority; the intervention is a meta-discursive comment:

(8) Mr. Mircea Geoană: *Thank you for this incursion in the theory of political sciences, cinematography, automobiles, and the contribution of the German minority to our national history*. (27.10.2010)
Domnul Mircea-Dan Geoană: Mulțumesc pentru această incursiune în teoria științelor politice, cinematografie, automobilism şi contribuția minorității germane la istoria națională.

The topics used as hyperonyms to sum up the MP's contribution are not adequate to the object of the debate – a motion of no confidence. Some of the hyperonyms are outside the scope of politics – cinematography, automobiles –, other hyperonyms show connections with politics; the terms used to frame the tangential hyperonyms rise above the MP's intentions and competence – it is a hyper-understanding from the part of the Chairman conveying *off record* impoliteness towards the target. Not only are the topics inadequate, but the MP is beneath the level of the debate.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The amusement of the audience (hilarity, laughter, applause, the collaborative nature seen at a distance or in proximity) attests, on the one hand, the appreciation of the communicative skills of an MP and the adhesion to a meaning explicitly or

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implicitly conveyed, reaffirming common ground; these are all positive politeness strategies (following Brown/Levinson) attained *via* humour. On the other hand, displaying politeness towards the initiator of a humorous act targeted at fellow MPs signals, implicitly, lack of solidarity towards the target-MPs, a shared negative evaluation, isolating the MPs and conveying impoliteness. Thus witty utterances can exhibit both positively-oriented (towards the in-group) and negatively-oriented (towards the out-group) relational management.

The reaction of the audience and that of the target involve a ritual(ized) character of (im)politeness within the institutional frame. It is obvious within this activity type that speakers have a double goal: to elaborate a negative image of the other, while working on their own positive image; both goals rely on a cognitive and affective complicity that exists within a political group. Combativity, spontaneity, wits are positively valued attributes of a Romanian MP in the Old, as well as in nowadays' Parliament – it could be a culture based feature. At the same time, parliamentary debates, especially motions of no confidence, are a prominent and favourite arena for attacks due to the visibility and the interest shown by the secondary audience (media, voters, etc.). The indirectness of the attacks is influenced by the institutional setting and by the need to get humour. The audience is allowed to fill in the gaps; the undecided and the secondary audience could be attracted by speaker's ethos or could see the re-confirmation of their shared attitude and values. The affective complicity and indirectness are the path to persuasion.

We could connect humorous (im)politeness to Watts' (1991) distinction between the *power to* and the *power over*, although the linguistic expression of power (force, coercion, influence) does not entail impoliteness. To re-activate an aspect of the speaker's power or to contest the power of the other usually involves impoliteness (Bousfield 2008): accordingly, a common technique of contesting power is to exploit the personal or relational vulnerability (ascendance, morality, oratorical skills, political ability or leadership), while simultaneously ensuring the complicity of the MPs whose decision, in the deliberative process, has to be influenced.

Many of the previous examples show *off record* impoliteness and the fact that the initiators are, most of them, members of the opposition. They contest the government and its political parliamentary majority (examples 4-8): through impoliteness, they try to gain *power over* the political majority, and then the *power to* impose things on the majority (see Bousfield 2008: 140). The MPs representing the political power react to the contesters, reaffirming their *power over* (and, implicitly, the *power to*) the minority (example 3). From a sociological/ anthropological point of view, the audience's adhesion to the message conveyed by the humorous utterance facilitates a shift of places: the initiator of humour and his in-group hearers reach the winning side, even temporarily; humour becomes a mechanism of temporary social control of those situated in an inferior position against those in power.

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