

Politeness in Roasting: When Humour Meets Power

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the use of politeness strategies in stand-up comedy roasts. Specifically, it examines how comedians manage power dynamics and societal standards of politeness while addressing those in authoritative positions in a given society. The author investigated stand-up comedy roasting using Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and prior research on humor and impoliteness. The results indicate that comedians used numerous politeness methods, including the use of compliments or flattery, indirectness or hedges, and off-the-record discourse, to achieve their humorous objectives. This research provides insights into how comedians utilize language and humor to manage challenging social situations by implementing the politeness strategies theory.

Keywords: politeness strategies, stand-up comedy roasting, power dynamics, humor

INTRODUCTION

Politeness theory is a well-established framework in linguistics and sociology that explains how language is used to maintain social norms of respect, deference, and empathy toward others (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In stand-up comedy roasting, where comedians use insults and ridicule to entertain their audience, politeness is essential as the line between funny and offensive is often blurred, leading to controversies and debates about the ethics of this form of humor. However, when

stand-up comedy roasting is performed where the subjects of the roast are those with power in a particular society, the stand-up comedians need to consider the social norms of respect and deference of the subjects roasted. Politeness theory is one of the ways for them to encounter this matter since it helps them to maintain respect yet keep the performance funny.

This research article delves into the role of politeness in stand-up comedy roasting, exploring how comedians use language and tone to balance between the need to entertain and maintain social norms of politeness. Specifically, the article reviews the literature on the role of politeness in humor and stand-up comedy roasting, focusing on the concepts of face, politeness strategies, and humor.

The concept of face, which refers to the positive social value that a person claims for oneself in each engagement, is a critical idea in politeness theory (Goffman, 1967), and in stand-up comedy roasting, comedians need to balance positive and negative face of the roasting subjects while using language and non-linguistic tactics to maintain face. The politeness strategies in the politeness theory give the inherent risks of insulting their targets and audience.

Humor can serve as a means of mitigating face-threatening acts (Simpson, 2003). In stand-up comedy roasting, insults can be realized as a face-threatening act, but they can also be used to enhance the status of the comedian and the target (Zhang, 2017). Two of the studies conducted by pragmatic researchers have looked at how politeness is used in stand-up comedy roasts, revealing that comedians use euphemisms, indirect speech acts, and mitigators to soften the blow of insults and signal that they do not intend to be offensive (Sihombing et al., 2021; Zhang, 2017).

This research article aims to contribute to understanding the complex interplay between humor and politeness in stand-up comedy roasting. It highlights the importance of considering the role of politeness when analyzing the linguistic and non-linguistic cues that comedians use to entertain their audience while avoiding causing offense to their targets and maintaining social norms of politeness.

The novelty of this research lies in its examination of how comedians use language and tone to balance the need to entertain with the need to maintain social norms of politeness in stand-up comedy roasting. It is different from the previous studies since the subjects are the ministers who hold power within the countries where they are in charge. This research contributes to

understanding the complex social phenomenon of politeness and its role in humor, particularly in the controversial form of stand-up comedy roasting where the subjects are the people with power. By shedding light on the various strategies comedians employ to balance being funny and polite, this research can potentially inform the future development of stand-up comedy roasting, helping comedians navigate the blurred line between funny and offensive.

Based on the elaboration above, the research questions of this study are: *First*, How can Brown and Levinson's politeness theories be applied to stand-up comedy roasts in Indonesia, where persons in positions of authority are the target audience? *Second*, How do roasting stand-up comedians manage the conflicts between humor and politeness in their performances in stand-up comedy roasts in Indonesia?. *Third*, How does discourse analysis help evaluate politeness theories' application in stand-up comedy roasts in Indonesia?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to analyze the use of politeness in stand-up comedy roasting, drawing on prior research that highlights the value of qualitative methods for examining complex social phenomena such as humor and politeness (Arief, 2020; Arief, 2021; Mohajan, 2018; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Silverman, 2013). Data for the study were gathered from the video recordings of a stand-up comedy roast performed by comedian KS in which she targeted several ministers in Indonesia.

The data analysis involved a discourse analysis. In this case, the discourse analysis examines language use in social contexts to understand how meaning and identity are constructed (Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough, 2013; Fairclough & others, 2003), systematically analyzing textual data to identify patterns and themes (Krippendorff, 2018). Utilizing this method allowed for a detailed examination of the linguistic and contextual factors that shape the use of politeness in stand-up comedy roasting.

The data of the research was collected by observation and note-taking. The source was the video of the roasting performed by subjects who were the ministers of Indonesians. The researcher identified various linguistic and contextual factors that shape the use of politeness in stand-up comedy roasting in the data collected by conducting the discourse analysis. The purpose was to

determine the politeness strategies and find out how the stand-up comedian managed the conflicts between humor and politeness in their performances using different strategies. Additionally, the researcher also tried to find out if politeness was used differently in different social contexts, such as when roasting someone in a position of authority.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

According to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), speakers employ different politeness methods to minimize face-threatening acts, depending on the social distance and power between the interlocutors. This study found that politeness strategies were used in roasting people with power, including compliments or flattery, Indirectness or Hedges, and off-record.

The roasting that became the data in this study was a stand-up performance in the context of a particular event called *Kerja Belum Selesai*, where Kiky Saputri roasted the ministers of the Joko Widodo administration in the Working Cabinet on Sunday, September 20, 2019. Present at the event, where the ministers who became Kiky's roasting material, namely the Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Susi Pudjiastuti, Minister of Manpower Hanif Dhakiri, Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi, and Minister of Communication and Information Rudiantara.

Compliments or Flattery

Comedians may use positive politeness strategies, such as compliments or flattery, to mitigate face threats and to establish rapport with the target (Culpeper, 2008). In her comedy, the subject use compliments to mitigate the impoliteness, as shown in the following quotations:

(1) *"Bapak Hanif Dhakiri ini **keren banget** karena beliau adalah Menteri ketenagakerjaan dan juga sekarang merangkap sebagai menteri sementara pemuda dan olahraga".*

English Translation: Mr. Hanif Dhakiri is **really cool** because he is the minister of manpower and also now doubles as the interim minister of youth and sports.

(2) *"Tapi beliau ini adalah salah satu **menteri yang sangat milenial**, karena hobi beliau adalah main Mobile Legend"*

English Translation: But he is a **very millennial minister** because his hobby is playing Mobile Legend.

(3) *"Tepuk tangan buat Ibu Retno karena **beliau satu-satunya perempuan pertama yang berhasil menduduki jabatan sebagai Menteri Luar Negeri Indonesia**"*

English Translation: Give applause for Ms. Retno for she is **the one and only first woman to successfully occupy the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia**.

(4) *"Fakta Pertama, ibu Susi dipilih oleh pak Jokowi sebagai menteri dengan alasan yang sangat out of the box, **incredible**"*

English Translation: The first fact, Mrs. Susi was selected by Mr. Jokowi as a minister for very out-of-the-box reasons, **incredible**.

In her roasting, she gave various compliments for each minister she roasted like *keren banget* (really cool), *Menteri yang sangat milenial* (a very millennial minister), *satu-satunya perempuan pertama yang berhasil menduduki jabatan sebagai Menteri* (the only first woman as a minister), *and* dan *incredible*. During the roasting performance, the comedian used compliments as a positive politeness strategy to show solidarity, establish or maintain social relationships, and express positive attitudes towards the addressee. Compliments are consistent with Brown and Levinson's politeness theories (1987) and other studies showing how compliments can enhance positive social relationships and increase the speaker's likability and attractiveness (Wolfson, 1983; Wolfson & Manes, 1980). Moreover, compliments can serve as a form of face-saving by helping to mitigate the potential negative impact of criticism or negative feedback. This use of compliments is a deliberate strategy

employed by the comedian to manage the conflicts between humor and politeness in the roasting performance.

Other studies have also demonstrated that compliments are a common feature of everyday interaction (Herbert, 1990) and can be utilized in numerous settings, including business meetings (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003), academic settings (Harris, 1991), and social interactions (Wolfson & Manes, 1980). However, cultural variations exist in how compliments are used across different languages and cultures. For instance, while compliments are relatively common in Western cultures, they may be less frequent in some Asian cultures, where direct praise may be seen as immodest or inappropriate (Wolfson, 1983).

The interesting finding in this study is that despite the reputation of roasting as a form of aggressive and insulting humor, using compliments as a politeness strategy is still prevalent in the roasting performances analyzed. This finding is in line with the previous studies, despite the different context and setting, where the use of compliments can be seen as a way for comedians to balance the tension between humor and politeness, which is a crucial aspect of successful roasting performances. They show that politeness is a universal system that applies to any social situation and condition.

Indirectness or Hedges

Comedians may also use negative politeness strategies, such as indirectness or hedges, to avoid confrontation and minimize the risk of offense (Zhang, 2017). KS also applied this strategy in her roasting comedy. It can be found when she roasted the Minister of Communication and Information Technology as in the following quotation:

(5) *"Tugas bapak Rudi adalah memblokir situs-situs dewasa agar tidak bisa ditonton oleh kita semua. Pak Rudi, sebulan ini udah ada berapa video yang bapak tonton, eh, bapak blokir?"*

English Translation: Mr. Rudi's obligation is to prevent access to adult websites, so we can't all watch them. Mr. Rudi, how many videos have you watched this month, *uh, blocked them?*

According to the data analysis, the comedian intentionally used hedging in her roasting by initially stating her intention incorrectly and then correcting herself. The stand-up comedian does it by stating *eh, bapak blokir?* (uh, blocked them?) After saying, *sebulan ini udah ada berapa video yang bapak tonton* (how many videos have you watched this month). This finding is surprising since hedging is not typically used as a politeness strategy in comedy. Instead, comedy often relies on bold and confident statements to generate laughter and surprise (Simpson, 2003). Instead, comedians often use language features like irony, sarcasm, and hyperbole to create humor while maintaining a certain level of politeness. These features can distance the speaker from potentially offensive statements, soften criticism, or create a shared understanding between the comedian and the audience (Attardo, 2001). The irony, for example, can be used to express a negative opinion about an influential person or group while signaling to the audience that the statement should not be taken at face value. This enables the comedian to criticize without openly attacking or offending the target and can contribute to a sense of fun and humor in the performance (Bousfield, 2008). However, it is essential to note that this study has limitations, as it only analyzed one comedian's performance and may not be generalizable to other comedians or comedy genres.

Off-record

Comedians may use off-record strategies, such as irony or sarcasm, to convey their real intentions without being seen as impolite or aggressive (Bousfield, 2008), and it was also found in her roasting as in the following quotation:

(6) *"Pak Hanif Dhakiri ini sebagai menteri pemuda olahraga sementara ini mengganti Bapak Imam Nahrawi yang tersandung kasus korupsi, ternyata benar kata pepatah kadang kebahagiaan kita tercipta karena ada penderitaan orang lain."*

English Translation: Mr. Hanif Dhakiri is the sports youth minister while replacing Mr. Imam Nahrawi, who stumbled on a corruption case. *It turns out that the saying is true, sometimes, our happiness is created because of other people's suffering.*

(7) *"Tapi ngomongin soal rumah tangga saya paling meneladani rumah tangganya Ibu Retno karena beliau dengan suami itu sama-sama pejabat tapi rumah tangganya harmonis aja gitu, karena Ibu Retno menjabat sebagai Menteri Luar Negeri dan suaminya menjabat sebagai ketua RW. Betul kan bu? Luar biasa emang, seimbang sekali."*

English Translation: But talking about the household, I follow the example of Mrs. Retno's family the most because she and her husband are both officials. Still, the family is harmonious because Ms. Retno is the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and her husband is the RW head. Right, ma'am? *It's amazing, really balanced.*

(8) *"Sumpah, ini menandakan bahwa di negeri ini banyak orang waras yang gabisa kerja, ayo jadi orang gila."*

English Translation: I swear, this *indicates* that in this country, many sane people can't work; *let's be crazy.*

In the quotation above, it is obvious that she used irony and sarcasm as her politeness strategy instead of 'attacking' the roasting subjects' faces directly. These facts agree with the previous studies stating that Off-record strategies are often used in comedy to avoid confrontation or criticism while still conveying a message to the audience. Using irony and sarcasm as a politeness strategy in stand-up comedy is an effective way for comedians to avoid confrontation or criticism while conveying a message to the audience. This strategy allows the comedian to create humorous effects while maintaining plausible deniability since the statement can be interpreted in multiple ways. Studies have shown that off-record strategies, such as hints or innuendos, are often used in comedy to criticize a person or group

without directly attacking them, allowing the comedian to express their opinion in a less confrontational way (Culpeper, 2008).

Off-record strategies are particularly effective in stand-up comedy because they allow the comedian to create a sense of shared understanding with the audience while maintaining a certain level of plausible deniability. This can help reduce the risk of offending or alienating the audience while allowing comedians to express their opinions and ideas (Zhang, 2017).

There are three main limitations to this study. One limitation of this study is that it only analyzed one comedian's roasting performance in Indonesia. Therefore, the findings may not generalize to other roasting performances or cultures. Nonetheless, this study provides insights into the role of compliments in managing the conflicts between humor and politeness in roasting performances, which can be helpful for future research in this area. Another limitation is that it only analyzed one comedian's performance and may not be generalizable to other comedians or comedy genres. The other limitation is that it is essential to note that using politeness strategies in stand-up comedy roasting is complex and context-dependent. Comedians must balance their desire to entertain the audience with the need to maintain social norms of politeness while also navigating the power dynamics between themselves, the target, and the audience. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct further research to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the use of off-record strategies in stand-up comedy and to investigate the limitations and constraints of these strategies in different contexts.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated how Brown and Levinson's politeness theories can be applied to stand-up comedy roasts in the Indonesian context, where authority figures, the ministers of Jokowi's cabinet, are the target audience. Roasting is exceptionally different from comedy in general since this type of comedy requests the performers to 'attack' their subjects' faces. Through discourse analysis, the study also explored how comedians manage conflicts between humor and politeness in their performances. The findings reveal that comedians employ various politeness strategies, such as compliments or flattery,

indirectness or hedges, and off-the-record discourse, to achieve their humorous objectives. These results show how comedians use language and humor to navigate challenging social situations where she had to roast, meaning that she had to attack the subjects' faces.

In contrast, she had to keep being respectful since they were Indonesian ministers with higher social status than hers. However, it is essential to note that using politeness strategies in stand-up comedy roasting is complex and context-dependent. This study is limited in its scope to roasting stand-up comedy performance in the Indonesian social context. Further research is needed to explore how comedians in other cultural contexts utilize language and humor to manage conflicts between humor and politeness.

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