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Dark Humour as a Politeness Strategy Referring to Muslims: A Pragmatic Analysis

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Abstract

Dark humour is a genre of humour which is characterized by its dark or morbid content used to pass issues that are normally sensitive or taboo. The current study is an attempt to investigate dark humour, as a politeness strategy in 4 posts that are in English and by Western speakers, the first two are extracted from Facebook and are against Muslims, the third from Twitter, and the fourth from Youtube and are in defense of Muslims. The study, while adopting Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987), aims at finding out the role played by dark humour in utterances that are for or against Muslims and how far such roles differ accordingly. It is hypothesized that dark humour can be an aggravation or a mitigation strategy depending on the speaker's/writer's stand in relation to Muslims. In conclusion, dark humor can be used to aggravate or mitigate the face threatening act towards Muslims when the utterance is meant to be against Muslims, and it can only aggravate the face threatening act against those who attack Muslims when the utterance is meant to be in their defense.

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الكوميديا السوداء كاستراتيجية للتأديب عند الإشارة إلى المسلمين: تحليل باستخدام التداولية

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المستخلص

الكوميديا السوداء هي نوع من الفكاهة التي تتميز بمحتواها المظلم أو المهووس الذي يستخدم لتمرير القضايا التي عادة ما تكون حساسة أو محظورة. عند الإشارة إلى المسلمين في وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي الغربية، لوحظ استخدام الفكاهة السوداء على نطاق واسع. في الدراسة الحالية، تم بحث استخدام الفكاهة السوداء كاستراتيجية للتأديب في أربعة منشورات تشير إلى المسلمين باستخدام نظرية براون وليفنسون للتأديب، منشوران تمت صياغتهما للدفاع عن المسلمين واثان آخران ضد المسلمين. تحاول الدراسة معرفة الدور الذي تؤديه الكوميديا السوداء في الأقوال التي تكون لصالح المسلمين أو ضدهم، ومدى اختلاف هذه الأدوار وفقاً لذلك. تفترض الدراسة أن الكوميديا السوداء يمكن أن تكون استراتيجية تفاقم أو تخفيف اعتماداً على موقف المتحدث/الكاتب فيما يتعلق بالمسلمين. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن

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الكوميديا السوداء يمكن استخدامها لتشديد أو تخفيف فعل التهديد الوجهي تجاه المسلمين عندما يكون الكلام ضد المسلمين، ولا يمكن إلا أن تفاقم فعل التهديد الوجهي ضد أولئك الذين يهاجمون المسلمين عندما يكون المقصود من الخطاب الدفاع عنهم

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكوميديا السوداء، المسلمين، التآدب، الوجه الإيجابي، الوجه السلبي، التخفيف، التشديد

Introduction:

Dark humor is regarded as one of the most widespread techniques nowadays. Such a spreadability is a result of the increasing prohibitions on speech due to the spread of political correctness and the effectiveness of such a strategy in passing prejudices and uncomfortable matters in a humoristic manner. However, when making fun of things or people, regardless of the reasons or the intentions, a third part will always be offended and lose face or vice-versa. In this respect, when investigating the role of dark humor adopting a pragmatic approach, politeness theory sounds to be workable. In the current study, four posts which are extracted from western social media referring to Muslims are analyzed adopting Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). Via this analysis the role of dark humor will be traced. The present study will present an evaluation for the effectiveness of dark humour as a politeness strategy that may possibly contribute to saving or threatening the referent's face and how such a strategy can be a mitigation or an aggravation strategy.

Statement of the Problem:

In the era of political correctness, offending or defending a certain group of people can be an issue especially in dealing with sensitive matters. In this respect, the role of dark humor in addressing such sensitive matters is questionable. In this study, such a role will be examined in relation to Muslims to see how this strategy is employed in attacking or defending Muslims.

Research Questions:

The study tries to answer the following questions:

1. What is the role of dark humour as a politeness strategy in reference to Muslims?
2. How imilar is the role of dark humour in utterances that are against Muslims to the role in utterances that are in defense of Muslims?
3. How can dark humour be an aggravation or a mitigation strategy?
4. What is the significance of dark humour in relation to power?

Hypothesis:

The study hypothesizes the following:

1. Dark humour possibly contributes to the politeness of the utterance.
2. There might be a difference in the role of dark humour in utterances that are for or against Muslims.
3. Dark humour can be an aggravation strategy or an aggravation strategy.
4. Dark humour can designate the power of the speaker/ writer over the referent.

Dark Humour:

Dark humour is a tool used for handling dark situations. That is the reason why most people who deal with death and despair a lot with a dark sense of humor. It is a way of dealing with the fact that there are tragic or morally reprehensible issues happening without sinking into depression (Redmick, 2021).

Alliand and Piolat (2012) argue that dark humour is an interesting form of humour to study as it treats sinister and tragic subjects, like death, with amusement and trivializes the victim's suffering. Dark humour is described as cynical, gallows, morbid. Playing with serious or sad real life events, and is generally considered as transgressive since it crosses the red line of social norms and moral systems.

Yet, Ridnpaa (2018) also argue that dark humour is a tricky form of humour and using it with the aim of establishing affinity, belonging, and "we"-feeling is seriously complex. Sheftel (2012) commented on how dark humour functions as a subversive form of countermemory allowing the expression of dissent from dominant narratives. On the other hand, if (and often when) dark humour is not understood, its impact is easily a negating one, especially in the case of sensitive topics.

Katthoff (2006) argues that 'Humour' in general is a very dense type of communication. However, the rise of social media especially amid a pandemic, has largely [contributed](#) to a rise in the normalization of dark humour. Unfortunately, this has also led to people misusing the term and making disgusting jokes about harmful topics under the guise of dark humour. Dark humour is joking about experiences you have had and are potentially coping with, not joking about things like racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. When someone uses humour as a way to cope with their own experiences, even if some people find it morbid, it's a completely normal response to trauma.

Giora, R. (2003), deals with Dark Humour in a book entitled 'On Our Mind: Salience, Context, and Figurative Language'. The book deals with how do people learn to produce and comprehend non-literal language while developing a novel and comprehensive theory, "the Graded Salience Hypothesis", aiming at explaining figurative language comprehension. Giora argued that the cognitive priority people assign to words that are encoded in our mental lexicon, carries the main role in language comprehension and production.

Brigaud and Blanc (2021) have presented a paper that examines the way dark humour leads female participants to approve a utilitarian response in sacrificial dilemmas. In this paper, the effects of two types of humorous contexts were compared (i.e., dark vs. non dark) on dilemmas, which differed according to the one who benefits from the crimes. Despite the fact that this is a psychological study, yet, the reference that have been made to language can be of much use to linguistic scholars.

Usti, Ikhwan M. Said, and Munira Hasjim (2023) have conducted a research paper that analyzed the types of dark humour found on Twitter and uncover the meanings of dark humour found on Twitter. They revealed that the presence of ten types of dark humour, namely sexual, educational, political, familial, ethnic, medical, thief-related, orphan-related, religious, and mental dark humour. Furthermore, the study revealed that the meanings of the dark humour discovered designate denotative, connotative, associative lexical, grammatical, and referential meanings.

Brown and Levinson's Face Theory:

Face theory was first developed in 1978 by Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson and it was published as an article in the journal 'Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction' (Brown &

Levinson, 1978). They primarily relied on the concepts of 'face' and 'rationality' in their account of speakers' linguistic behaviour claiming universality for these two concepts. They proposed that one of the most common reasons for violating or flouting Grice's Maxims is to maintain face and be polite. (Alabdali, 2019)

In Face theory terms, 'face' is the public image that an interactor aims to maintain. Face is "something that is emotionally invested, and can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 66). There are two types of face, the positive face and the negative face. Positive face is the positive consistent self-image or personality claimed by interlocutors and it reflects the desire for approval, respect and connection to a specific group (Brown and Levinson 1978, and Brown and Levinson 1987, Saeed 2009). The negative face refers to "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others, it is associated with a member's need to be independent and free from any kind of imposition (Brown and Levinson 1987, p. 62)."

Saeed (2009) suggests that face, in most cases of verbal interaction, can be threatened. Threatening negative face of the listener includes damaging participant's autonomy, through advices, requests, suggestions and orders. That is on the one hand, on the other hand, threatening positive face occurs through diminishing the individual's self and social discretion, and such diminishing may involve expressions of disapproval, disagreements, accusations and interruptions. To reduce the damage to the face of the hearer or the speaker himself, the speaker adopts certain strategies. However, such strategies are chosen depending on the size of the FTA. According to Thomas (1995), the size of the FTA is calculated in relation to social factors that are present in all cultures, such factors are power (P), distance (D) and rating of imposition (R). These factors, all together, determine the overall 'weightiness' of the FTA. On this basis, Brown and Levinson assume a list of four possibilities to avoid or to minimize the possible face-threatening act, ranging from the best case, 'Don't do the face threatening, positive politeness, negative politeness, off the record to the worst 'Do the FTA' and go on record as doing so baldly and without any redressive action.

Methodology:

The samples of the analysis are four posts that are gathered manually from social media. The first post is taken from a public account with no reference for the name for the one who posted it. The second one is taken from Facebook reels and from the account of an Arab user, Waleed Ghaben, who reposted the original post. The third one is taken from Twitter, from the account of a user called Mike Hunter. The final post is taken from Youtube and the speaker is the famous standup-comedian Trevor Noah. The posts are going to be analyzed using Brown and Levinson politeness theory, Face theory, (1987) and throughout this analysis the role of dark humor will be traced.

Data Analysis and Results:

In this section, the selected posts will be analyzed according to the selected model, Brown and Levinson's Politeness theory, or Face theory.

Sample One:

A post on Facebook, in the form of a picture:

The boy: Mum why do you wear the hijab?

The Mother: Because it's my choice sweetie!

The boy: what happens if you don't want to wear it anymore?

The Mother: First, your father will kick me in the gut. My family will disown me and friend will take shit about me. After I die Allah will burn me in hell.



The utterance is regarded as a PFTA as well as a NFTA. It is a PFTA as it is loaded with implicit expression of disapproval and criticism. Those expressions mount to accusations and insults, as such expressions insinuate slam is unfair to women, Muslim women are oppressed, Muslim women are treated with violence, and that they are denied the freedom of choice. The criticism is highly manifest over the utterance, and its peak is in the last line, "after I die Allah will burn me in hell", this line leaves no doubt that the speaker is not merely criticizing the habits of Muslim community, but criticizing the religion's legislations and laws. However, the negative insinuations are delivered indirectly, sarcastically and ironically, such style is called dark humor. Such humor is highly manifest in the mother's second line, as the mother's first line insinuates a complete satisfaction regarding her choice. This satisfaction contradicts the inevitable consequences of choosing another path; in such a case not wearing hijab, represented by the second line. In this respect, the dark humour has two functions. The first one is to pass what is regarded as the ugly truth according to the speaker in a funny manner. The second function is to aggravate the message as well as the impoliteness of the entire utterance, delivered by the element of shock passed via the dark humor. Besides, the writer, through this sentence, puts the justice of Islam towards Muslim women into question and mocks Muslims doctrine of it, but, the God in reference here is the God of Muslims, 'Allah', and the writer chose this specific word to highlight this aspect, and consequently implying that the God of Muslims is unjust, and Islam in general is unjust.

Besides, in using dark humour as an aggravation strategy, the speaker/writer designates that he/she enjoys power over the Muslims. This power is manifested in the fact that the speaker, the individual who originated the post, does not seem to care about the sensitivity of the matter at all, he/she designs the utterance with no reservations or fear or any attempt of avoiding ate speech, such aspect is highly manifest

in the last line of the mother with the use of the word ‘Allah’ and the burning in hell notion. As a politeness strategy, the speaker is being bald on record through the use of dark humor.

Sample Two:

A video posted on Facebook by an African American blogger, entitled: ‘Arguing with my Arab Neighbour’:

The Arab neighbour: Go take care of your baby Mama.

The other neighbour: Go ride your camel.

The Arab neighbour: Shut up your mouth fifty cent, go steal some shit.

The other neighbour: Go blow some shit up.

The Arab neighbour: Okay.

The other neighbour: Oh shit.



This utterance, is represented in dark humour, is a metaphorical exchange of accusations in the form of orders between a non-Arab speaker and his supposed Arab neighbour. As far as politeness is concerned, the utterance is impolite in two ways. The first one is related to the negative face needs or wants as there is a high degree of imposition mixed with a strong expression of emotions represented by the orders. However, the speaker does not only order the supposed Arab communicator, the orders designate his negative evaluation of the second communicator as an Arab since those orders show that the first speaker adheres to the stereotypes of Arabs. The stereotypes are backwardness represented by ‘ride your camel’, and violence and terrorism represented by ‘go blow some shit up’ strengthened by the Arab’s immediate approval of the insinuation represented by ‘okay’. Such statements are accompanied with the indifference of the non-Arab speaker about the supposed Arab’s feelings by declaring his true conception and beliefs regarding Arabs which are offensive, insulting, and hateful .

The argument is in English, and the Arab is supposed to be the neighbor of a Western person, thus, the overall meaning suggests that the Arab one is living in a Western society. In this respect, the negative

evaluation of the Arab designates the non-Arab speaker's disapproval and rejection of the Arab, consequently the Arab will feel unwelcomed by the new community he is living among, as well as the obvious expression of contempt and implied criticism. Therefore, the utterance is considered as a PFTA and a NFTA as the strong expression of emotions threatens the positive face as well as the negative face .

The humorous air of the overall utterance, the dark humour, performs two functions. The first is to mitigate the aggressiveness of the utterance via attempting to make the audience laugh. It is worth mentioning, that there might be a very slight attempt to mitigate the hateful atmosphere represented by two strategies .

The first one is pretense of humour, as the basic speaker tries to create a humoristic atmosphere to make the message less hateful and less face threatening. However, this humoristic attempt could be intended for another purpose, as it might be used to mitigate the seriousness of the message and attract the type of audience that detest any content with a political aim. In this manner, the speaker passes a political message in a cunning humoristic manner and attracts more audience which may consequently increases the spreadability of the utterance with its message .

The second one is represented by exchanging accusations and stereotypes between the non-Arab speaker and the Arab one. The Arab speaker states 'go take care of your baby mama' and 'go steal some shit', and both phrases refer to stereotypes of African Americans, the loss of morality represented by having children out of wedlock, having bad reputation such as the reputation of Fifty Cent, 'the infamous African American rapper', 'as well as being thieves. Through this exchange of stereotypes, the speaker tries to normalize the racist content through normalizing having and taking about stereotypes. However, in comparing the two types of stereotypes, we find that those of Arabs are worse than those of the African Americans, which consequently leads to the failure of mitigation .

The metaphorical exchange of accusation shows that the speaker feels that he enjoys no power over Muslims as a result of realizing that both groups can have bad side. Despite the fact that dark humor is adopted as a mitigation strategy as it can be regarded as a slight attempt of positive politeness but in a bald on record manner .

Sample Three :

A tweet on Twitter with the following content:

What did the US military do after 9-11? The military got busy and immediately fought our enemy.

How many kids were killed? Thousands.



Mike Hunter
@KMikeHunter



What did the US military do after 9-11? The military got busy and immediately fought our enemy.

How many kids were killed? Thousands.

4:40 AM · 23/05/2021 from Earth

2 Likes 1 Bookmark



As far as politeness is concerned, the utterance carries a deep though indirect reference that is meant to be in defense of Muslims. The writer in attacking the US military, i.e, the US government, he makes a face -threatening act to both the negative face as well as the positive face of the US government. The utterance comprises a positive face threatening act as the writer severely criticizes the American regime and accuses it of killing children which makes them brutal criminals. Besides, the ironic and sarcastic tone that is manifest in the dark humour of the utterance insinuates a strong expression of emotions, which comprises a negative face-threatening act to the American regime as a result of its actions towards those whom they it regards as an enemy, in particular, the Muslims civilians and their children.

Accusing someone of crimes that mount to terrorism or war crimes, other than Muslims, in a context where there is a reference to Muslims, and by a Western American writer or speaker, the speaker makes an indirect face-saving act to Muslims. The writer indirectly, though not necessarily unintentionally, rips out the terrorist stereotype from the Muslims and attaches it to another, the American regime and the military, as a case in point. In this manner, he (the writer) shows positive as well as negative politeness to Muslims in general, and the people of Iraq and Afghanistan in particular. The speaker designed his utterance using dark humour, which is represented by the irony of the children's death instead of criminals and terrorists that are supposed to responsible of the 9-11 accident. Since the audience will expect the death of the supposed enemies but later faced with the shock of the death of children. A such the dark humour aggravates the face threatening act towards the American government, which pours into the defense of Muslims in general, and the Iraqis and Afghans in particular .

In relation to power relations criticizing the America regime, shows that he enjoys the same power as the government does, and there is a slight chance that he enjoys more power. This power springs from the belonging to a supposedly democratic society .

As a politeness strategy, the speaker uses dark humour as a positive and negative politeness towards the Muslims, that is to say, Iraqies and the Afghans, and as a bald on record strategy in relation to the American government .

Sample Four :

A video on Youtube entitled “The Disgusting Racism of Western Media: Trevor Noah on the news coverage of Russia Ukraine War”



A lot of people on tv, didn't expect a war like this to happen, let's say' in certain neighborhoods (with a sarcastic tone)

)clips of reporters including those in our analysis: “This is not a developing third world nation, this is Europe”, This isn't a place, with all due respect, you know like Iraq or Afghanistan, you know this is a relatively civilized relatively European, I have to choose those words carefully too, a city where you wouldn't expect that or hope that it's going to happen”)

wow, that was you choosing your words carefully? That was the careful version? So, what were you gonna say if you weren't choosing your words carefully? (I just hope the next time this happens it happens back in the Middle East where it belongs). Here is the thing people, beyond the racism, right? Like let's forget about racism. Oh, how I wish we could forget about racism. You do realize that until very recently fighting crazy wars was Europe's thing, that was Europe thing. That's all of European history, they even have something called The Hundred Years' war. You understand how long that is. That's like a decade. They got a Nobel prize because they stopped fighting, imagine that. Now people are gonna be like, Oh, to see this in Europe, to see this. Like, I'll tell you now I don't know about you, but I was shocked to see how many reporters around the world, by the way, seem to think that it's more of a tragedy when white people have to flee their countries, because I guess what the darkies were built for it?(now an imaginary dialogue starts between) I mean you see how they run in the Olympics, Peter, clearly God has given them this talent for a reason, I totally agree, I mean even if this wasn't a war, these people would probably be fleeing their homes for fun.

In politeness terms, the utterance carries two main purposes. The first one is to criticize the reporters' racism and misconception, in doing this he makes a PFTA and a NFTA towards them. Those threatening acts are regarded as acts that save the negative as well as the positive face of the Muslim audience, in the Middle East in particular, and this designates the second purpose. In showing his refusal and criticism, the speaker does not stop only at the videos, he adds some imaginary metaphorical lines. The first imaginary line is :

“I just hope the next time this happens, it happens back in the middle east, where it belongs”

This mockery line, which comes as a dark humour, is a reaction to the reporter’s feeling of carefulness while being implicitly racist. Thus, the speaker imagines a situation in which the reporter was not careful, in such case, what the reporter would do is naming the region he hopes this would happen, and the implicit one will be explicit, the middle east. The face threatening act through mockery is a face-saving act to the Muslims. In this way, the speaker is being polite to Muslims .

The second step, in this respect, is shattering the reporters’ belief, that such war is not supposed to happen in a European country. Due to this section, the speaker mentions the bloody war history of Europe. This statement is a face threatening act to the Europeans and a face-saving act for the Muslims as it is meant to be in their defense. He complemented this factual content with another dark humoristic content as he mocks the awards the Europeans supposedly got for stop fighting.

Consequently, the dark humour adopted by the speaker functions as an aggravation strategy to aggravate the impoliteness of the reporter’s while referring to the Middle East, and to aggravate the face threatening act towards the reporters themselves as well as the Europeans .

In relation to power manifestation, through criticizing the reporters as well as the Europeans, the speaker shows that he enjoys a sort of power over them. Yet, this power does not spring from ethnical nature, it rather springs from the attempt of the speaker for undoing the wrongs against the Muslims and the Middle Easterns .

Thus, as a politeness strategy, the speaker uses dark humor as a bald on record strategy in relation to the reporters as well as the Europeans and as a positive and negative politeness.

Conclusions :

Dark humor contributes majorly to the politeness and impoliteness of the utterances. Furthermore, when referring to Muslims, the role of dark humor differs in utterances that are for Muslims from those which are against Muslims. In the first utterance against Muslims, dark humor is used as a bald on record strategy and an aggravation one, in which the speaker feels that he/she enjoys power over the Muslims. In the second utterance against Muslims, the speaker uses dark humor as a mitigation strategy designating that he realizes the hate of his speech and therefore attempts to mitigate the severity of the hate speech, and as the speaker does not feel that he enjoys a sense of power over the Muslims. In utterances that are meant to be in defense of Muslims, as it is the case in the third and the fourth utterance, dark humor is used as an aggravation strategy aggravating the face threatening acts towards those whom the speaker attacks in defense of Muslims. In the third utterance, the speaker uses dark humor in a bald on record manner to aggravate the face threatening act towards those who are racist to the Muslims, the Middle Easterns in particular, and to highlight their racism along with aggravating the criticism towards those who believe to be superior than the Middle Easterns, the Europeans. Besides, the speaker in doing so shows that he enjoys a sort of power over those whom he is attacking, but the power in here is the power of being an antiracist. The same applies for the fourth utterance on which the speaker uses dark humor to aggravate the face threatening towards the American government in a bald on record manner while enjoying power over it springing from belonging to a democratic society .

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Appendix

The links of the posts :

- <https://www.facebook.com/share/5biEoSeF8z4bXmHJ/?mibextid=QwDbR1>
- <https://www.facebook.com/reel/845630086745000?fs=e&s=TIeQ9V&mibextid=xCPwDs>
- <https://x.com/kmikehunter/status/1396279906732969984?s=46&t=q-Tn6HVRzLKrOYXA5rpeqg>
- <https://youtu.be/4IuE324VBBQ?si=dFMuPeA2xKMS4v24>