

# *Mock Impoliteness in a Classic CCTV Spring Festival Gala Sketch*

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**Abstract:** This study employs Haugh and Bousfield's Mock Impoliteness Framework to investigate the use of a classic CCTV Spring Festival Gala sketch titled "Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow". Through qualitative analysis, the research identifies three categories of mock impoliteness: speaker's mock impoliteness towards themselves, speaker's mock impoliteness towards the direct hearer, and speaker's mock impoliteness towards a third party. Contextualized within the framework of the sketch and the characters' intimate and friendly relationships, these instances of mock impoliteness are found to serve as comedic devices aimed at creating humour to elicit laughter. This study contributes to the understanding of humour production and the role of mock impoliteness in comedy within the context of Chinese televised entertainment.

## **1. Introduction**

One of the prime platforms for the dissemination of comedic content to a wide audience is the CCTV Spring Festival Gala, an annual televised event in China that attracts millions of viewers. The Gala features a diverse array of performances, including sketches, skits, and musical acts, showcasing the talents of renowned comedians and entertainers. Among the myriad sketches presented over the years, certain performances have attained iconic status, captivating audiences with their wit, charm, and comedic flair. One such classic sketch is "Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow," performed in 1999 and starring acclaimed comedians Zhao Benshan, Song Dandan, and Cui Yongyuan. This sketch, like many others featured in the Gala, offers a rich tapestry of humour, characterized by clever wordplay, exaggerated situations, and sharp comedic timing. However, beneath the surface of seemingly lighthearted banter lies a nuanced exploration of interpersonal dynamics and the strategic use of impoliteness as a comedic device.

Over the years, linguists have achieved much in the study of politeness. In contrast, there has been much less research on impoliteness and mock impoliteness, the concept of which was first introduced by Leech<sup>[1]</sup>. With the clear redefinition by Haugh & Bousfield, research on mock impoliteness has had a fresh start. They view mock impoliteness as a form of social behavior evaluated as non-impolite, breaking away from the dilemma of traditional impoliteness perspectives and emphasizing the "non-impolite" nature of mock impoliteness<sup>[2]</sup>. It is pointed out that the construction of mock impolite discourse is aimed at achieving specific social purposes, providing a broader perspective for its study. In addition to researches on the definition of mock impoliteness, scholars have also studied the realization of mock impoliteness in interaction and its functions. Singeviciute encoded mock

impoliteness in literary context in his book<sup>[3]</sup>. Chen and Chen studied mock impact on WeChat, expanding the study of mock impoliteness to computer-mediated communication contexts<sup>[4][5]</sup>. He & Xue conducted a study on mock impact in the context of television entertainment design<sup>[6]</sup>. Zhang and Yan also took *Two Broke Girls* as an example to study the mock influence in TV<sup>[7]</sup>.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to delve into the intricacies of humour dynamics within the "Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow" sketch, with a particular focus on the phenomenon of mock impoliteness. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of Haugh and Bousfield's mock impoliteness theory, this research endeavors to dissect the various manifestations of mock impoliteness present in the dialogue exchanges among characters within the sketch. By categorizing and analyzing instances of mock impoliteness, including speaker's mock impoliteness towards themselves, speaker's impoliteness towards the direct interlocutor, and speaker's impoliteness towards a third party, this study aims to elucidate how such comedic devices function within the specific context of the Spring Festival Gala sketch.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Haugh & Bousfield's conceptualization of mock impoliteness serves as the fundamental notion of this study. The evaluation of mock impoliteness originates from interpreting interactional practices in accordance with a politeness-impoliteness continuum, and mock impoliteness is placed in between. Influenced by the discursive approach to politeness, in the view of Haugh and Bousfield, mock impoliteness is neither politeness strategy nor impoliteness strategy, but a term "denoting evaluations of potentially impolite behavior as non-impolite", which is also viewed as "allowable offence"<sup>[2]</sup>. Mock impoliteness is re-conceptualized as evaluations that are occasioned by some practices. With reference to Haugh & Bousfield's research, mock impoliteness is an evaluation that derives from the judgment of utterance launcher and at least one utterance recipient. In addition, social evaluation entails the evaluation of personal identity and social relationships. Mock impoliteness is prone to get the evaluation of threatening the target's personal face as well as his relationships with others, but it is ultimately evaluated as supportive of relational connection.

There are two steps when analyzing potential cases of mock impoliteness: (1) the identification of potentially impolite talk or conduct and (2) indications from conversational participants that this talk or conduct as has been evaluated as "non-impolite," that is, an allowable offense which is neither impolite nor polite.

## 3. Data and Methodology

The data used in this study are selected from a sketch performed on the CCTV's Spring Festival Gala in 1999, featuring Zhao Benshan, Song Dandan, and Cui Yongyuan. The selected sketch not only stand out in the Spring Festival Gala program of that year, but also continue to have influence today, creating a classic in the history of Chinese sketches. Famous Chinese actors Zhao Benshan and Song Dandan played a couple in their seventies from Northeast China in this performance, named Heitu and Baiyun respectively. Their dialogue is full of humour, leaving a deep impression on the audience. This paper first transcribes the conversations in the video into text, and then manually classifies and qualitatively analyzes the corpus according to the mock impoliteness framework.

This study is a qualitative study, which mainly explains the mock impoliteness in the selected sketch based on Haugh & Bousfield's framework of mock impoliteness, and analyzes the role of mock impoliteness in the construction of humour in the sketch. The analysis focuses on specific examples of different mock impoliteness collected from the selected sketch. According to the target of mock impoliteness, we can divide those in the sketch into three categories: mock impoliteness to the speaker himself/herself, mock impoliteness to the direct hearer and mock impoliteness to a third

party.

#### 4. Analysis of Humour with Different Mock Impoliteness in the Sketch “Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow”

In the selected sketch "Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow", Cui Yongyuan played the host to interview Zhao Benshan and Song Dandan, who played a simple and humorous northern Chinese couple in their seventies. The relationship between the old husband and wife was very natural and interesting. The dialogue was full of “mutual hatred”. The design of the laugh line in the program was just at the right time, making the audience laugh from beginning to end. In view of the close relationship between Baiyun and Heitu couple, their words are literally impolite, but in fact they do not reach the level of impoliteness, which can only be regarded as mock impoliteness, that is, what appears to be impolite is actually polite. Mock impoliteness made the dialogue humorous and the love and warmth between the couple perceptible.

##### 4.1. The Mock Impoliteness to the Speaker Themselves

The language used in Chinese sketches comes down to the language of people's daily lives, but the actors will try to create more humour in the sketches, including saying something impolite to themselves. This behavior is called “Zihei (lower oneself)” in Chinese, which is applied by comedy performers at times. This is followed by an analysis of some examples of how performers use mock impoliteness strategies to be seemingly impolite to themselves and bring humour to the audience.

Example 1

Heitu: Actually, Xiao Cui you should have that kind of eye, in today's terms, back then I was very good looking and she pursued me.

Baiyun: Why don't you tell it like it is? Let everyone look at your old face. It looks like a shoehorn. Would I chase you?

Heitu: Why do you have no aesthetics?

Baiyun: Why?

Heitu: This is called a shoehorn face it? This is the authentic pig kidneys face!

In example 1, when the host asked Baiyun and Heitu who pursued first when they fell in love when they were young, they both thought that it was the other party who started the pursuit first, because they both felt that they were very good-looking. But when Heitu talks about being handsome when he was young, Baiyun doesn't like to listen and retorts that Heitu has a shoehorn face. Baiyun's words denied Heitu's evaluation of his appearance, and also denied that she took the initiative to pursue Heitu. Heitu believed that Baiyun did not appreciate his handsome appearance. At this time, the audience thought that Heitu would say something to praise himself to prove that he was indeed good-looking, but they didn't expect that although Heitu intended to refute Baiyun's evaluation of his face, what he said was self-deprecation. He compared his face to a pig's kidney, which is not a good shape as an organ in the pig's body. The reversal of Heitu's joke about himself caught off guard and amused the audience. However, the feigned impoliteness here does not cause any interactive conflict, but emphasizes the humorous effect of the whole performance.

##### 4.2. The Mock Impoliteness to the Direct Hearer

In the sketch, because the host saw that the two interviewees were a little nervous, he asked them to relax and chatted as if they were chatting on their own “kang” (a special bed used in northeast China). Heitu took off his shoes and curled up on the chair as soon as he heard this, but Bai Yun immediately stopped him.

#### Example 2

Baiyun: What do you make to relax foot? Your feet are sweaty and smelly. Don't take off your shoes.

Cui: Ah, okay, okay.

Baiyun: You are rude.

In example 2, what Baiyun said didn't seem to take into account the face of Heitu, but she was actually thinking about his image. In the setting of this sketch, the couple's interview is going to be on TV, so Baiyun reminds her husband to maintain a good image. What she practiced is an act of mock impoliteness that she didn't really mean to belittle Heitu. When Baiyun noticed that Heitu was behaving inappropriately in front of the camera, she asked him to pay attention to the inappropriate behavior at once, ensuring that Heitu was a polite image when this interview was broadcast. Because of the close husband and wife relationship between the two elders, Heitu didn't feel that Bai Yun's words were offensive to him, on the contrary, Heitu behaved in a proper way after listening to Baiyun's warning. It can also be seen from this that in the relationship between the husband and wife, Baiyun has more authority in speech than Heitu, which shows power distance between the two<sup>[8]</sup>.

### 4.3. The Mock Impoliteness to a Third Party

In order to give the sweater she knitted to Heitu as a love gift, Baiyun was accused by the organization for using too much wool. Heitu revealed the truth, there were a total of fifty sheep, and Baiyun had been pulling the wool of the same sheep, and it was so obvious that it was easy to be discovered. Heitu attributed the reason to the fact that Baiyun was an honest person.

#### Example 3

Heitu: She is too honest. Fifty sheep were released at that time, but you only collected from the same one. Who couldn't see that sheep like Ge You?

In example 3, Heitu used the rhetorical device of metaphor, comparing the bare-haired sheep to Ge You's head. Even if Ge You who has a bald head is not present, the sheep still has a specific image in the audience's mind through comparison. Ge You is a well-known public figure to the audience, and the performance is suddenly full of comedy. Although this statement of the Heitu may seem to be an impolite evaluation of Ge You's appearance, the performers and the audience alike know that the metaphor used here is for comedic effect and does not lead to any genuine impoliteness. At the same time, this example also shows that mock impoliteness in the sketch can be directed at a third party who is not with the speaker.

When it comes to the topic of sleeping separately, the couple expressed different opinions. They all believed that this is each other's problem. Heitu thought it was because Baiyun has a narrow mind. However, Baiyun revealed the real reason, while Heitu only thought about Ni Ping on TV and ignored her.

#### Example 4

Baiyun: You never spare me a glance all day long, always sitting in front of the TV waiting and hoping to see Ni Ping. I won't say anything to you anymore, forget it!

Heit: what's the use of saying that? When Zhao Zhongxiang appears, aren't your eyes also glued to him?

Baiyun: Zhao Zhongxiang? Zhao Zhongxiang is my idol in my heart.

Heitu: Then Ni Ping is my dream lover, love her no matter what!

In example 4, it can be seen that the reason why Baiyun and Heitu are in conflict is because they both are jealous. From Heitu's words, it can also be seen that he also cares a lot about Baiyun's special attention to Zhao Zhongxiang. From this, it can be seen that although they are already in their seventies, they still deeply love each other, which is very heartwarming. Ni Ping and Zhao were the

hosts of the Spring Festival Gala that year. In the video, when the actors on stage mentioned them, the camera immediately shifted to the people below, and they all smiled in response. This is because they knew that the actors did not offend them, nor did they truly see them as relationship destroyers. Ni Ping, Zhao Zhongxiang, and the audience all knew that this was not real impoliteness. From the dialogue, we can also feel the charm of the two hosts, they have won the love of many viewers.

Interestingly, although all the samples selected seem to contain mock impoliteness, it never leads to any conflict, but will occasion a lot of humour and fun, making the audience pretty happy. None participants or parties involved in the dialogue would regard these words as genuine impoliteness. Actors often show some unexpected lines in comedy sketches, which is totally unexpected to the audience, and when there is a contradiction between thought and reality, humour will appear. From the previous discussion, it can be seen that impoliteness will not cause conflicts among the interlocutors in Chinese comic sketches.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the theory of mock impoliteness, the present study discusses the humour occasioned by the mock impoliteness utterances set in the Chinese comedy sketch through the analysis of the classic sketch of CCTV Spring Festival Gala “Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow”. The study classifies mock impoliteness into three categories according to different targets: mock impoliteness to the speaker themselves; mock impoliteness to the direct hearer; mock impoliteness to a third party. Mock impoliteness is not absolute, instead, it is relative. Like politeness and impoliteness, it needs to be considered in certain contexts. In one context, it is mock impoliteness, but in another context, it may become genuine impoliteness. At the same time, it should not be ignored that the close relationship between the two or more parties in the communication. When the interlocutors are close, jokes, mockery and other discourses tend to produce the effect of mock impoliteness, which leads to closer interpersonal relationships between the interlocutors. From this study, it can be seen that the use of mock impoliteness in Chinese comedy sketches has the discursive function of generating humour, which can achieve the main purpose of pleasing the audience for this form of artistic performance. The use of mock impoliteness by performers to play a more impressive role in this sketch should have some light on the further development of Chinese comic sketches.

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