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“Sei un idiota!”. Observations on prosodic mock impoliteness in the Italian language

This research aims to explore some prosodic aspects of mock impoliteness, a mismatch between the semantic meaning of an utterance and its actual communicative intention. Mock impoliteness has always been presented as the opposite of genuine impoliteness: while the former is considered a kind of impoliteness that does not intend to cause any offence to the recipient, the latter is a communicative strategy that aims to threaten the face of the recipient.

This study intends to examine the phonetic and phonological cues of mock and genuine impoliteness, with a particular focus on how pitch range and mean intensity help distinguish between these two attitudes. The data showed that mock impoliteness is characterised by a less marked prosody than genuine impoliteness, with lower values for pitch range and mean intensity. Moreover, the two parameters are positively correlated. Finally, the phonological analysis showed that mock and genuine impoliteness have different distributions of their nuclear pitch accents.

Keywords: mock-impoliteness, prosody, pitch range, intensity.

1. Defining mock impoliteness

Mock impoliteness is a pragmatic strategy involving a mismatch between the semantic meaning of the utterance and its actual communicative intention. Studies on humour, irony and impoliteness were the first to show an interest in pragmatic mismatch. In fact, these three topics often overlap considerably, with Taylor (2016: 13) stating that “they may be seen as sharing an interest in similar interactional phenomena but viewing them from different perspectives and with different goals” (Taylor, 2016: 13).

The studies on mock impoliteness (it. *scortesia canzonatoria*) are part of the broader research on linguistic impoliteness. This field of research appeared for the first time in 1996, within the archetypal framework outlined by Jonathan Culpeper in “Towards an anatomy of impoliteness”. Since the first theories, mock impoliteness has been presented as the opposite of genuine impoliteness. If the genuine attitude is associated with a series of communicative strategies aimed at attacking the face of the listener and thus causing social conflicts, the mock attitude is defined as a type

¹ The paper is the result of a continuing collaboration between the authors. However, for academic purposes: *Study concept and design:* GV, GG, PS; *Data collection:* GV, GG; *Data analysis:* GV, GG; *Writing original draft* and *Writing-review:* GV, GG, PS.

of impoliteness which does not intend to offend the recipient. It is “a particular interpersonal relation in which the interlocutor’s face is not compromised and tends to reinforce participants’ trust and affective feelings” (Bernal, 2008: 272-273). In this regard, Culpeper clarifies that:

[...] we can think of mock impoliteness in theoretical terms as involving the canceling of impoliteness perlocutionary effects flowing from a conventionalised impoliteness formula when an obvious mismatch emerges with the context it is used in. (Culpeper, 2011: 208)

In fact, Geoffrey Leech (1983) already tried to capture this kind of phenomenon with the Banter Principle, which is widely considered to be the ancestor of mock impoliteness. Leech was the first to adopt the meta-pragmatic label of “mock impoliteness”². Illustrating the differences between the concepts of “irony” and “banter”, the author summarises that “while irony is an apparently friendly way of being offensive (mock-politeness), the type of verbal behaviour known as ‘banter’ is an offensive way of being friendly (mock-impoliteness)” (Leech, 1983: 144). According to the Banter Principle, in certain communicative circumstances, the speaker can produce a message with a false and impolite locutionary habit in order to show solidarity with the interlocutor. The adequate interpretation of the speech act can only take place if the recipient, after understanding the real communicative intentions, associates them with a meaning of opposite polarity, i.e. polite. As the author points out, the lack of politeness can acquire an advanced pragmatic function, becoming a mark of intimacy, since “the ability to be impolite to someone in jest helps to establish and maintain such a familiar relationship” (*ibid.*).

Similarly, mock impoliteness also finds a place in the model proposed by Manfred Kienpointner (1997): according to Kienpointner, mock impoliteness fits into a continuous space that goes from politeness to rudeness, called “cooperative rudeness”. The author states that it “is a technique for creating a relaxed atmosphere [...] especially if there is a little social distance between the participants”³.

2. *The functions of mock impoliteness*

Over time, scholars have observed how the speaker’s use of mock impoliteness serves three focused illocutionary purposes⁴. The first function associated with mock impoliteness is the promotion of camaraderie among interactants, which Culpeper (2011: 215) suggests generally “takes place between equals, typically friends, and

² Mock impoliteness has also been the subject of a debate over terminology and definitions. Culpeper (1996; 2005; 2011), Bousfield (2008) and Haugh & Bousfield (2012) – following Leech (1983) – adopt the label of “mock impoliteness”; Bernal (2008) proposes the label of “non-authentic impoliteness” or “non-genuine impoliteness” (*Sp. descortesía no auténtica*); Zimmerman (2003) employs the Spanish term *anticortesía*.

³ Kienpointner (1997: 262).

⁴ Cf. Culpeper (2011), Haugh & Bousfield (2012), Taylor (2016).

is reciprocal”. For example, the *insultes de solidarité* investigated by Lagorgette & Larrivée (2004) could be considered a typical example of an impolite speech act used by the speakers to reinforce solidarity with the listener. In the paper, the authors list the possible means by which the listener can recognise all these types of insults: i.e. the use of adjectives modifying the epithet⁵, the use of diminutive suffixes, etc.⁶. Other researchers studying mock impoliteness have also identified a number of cues that help guiding the recipients towards the correct interpretation of the messages. For example, according to Haugh (2010: 2108), these include: lexical exaggeration, formulaicity, topic shift markers, contrastiveness, prosodic cues, inviting laughter and facial/gestural cues. Taylor (2016) infers that many of these cues are the same as those identified for irony and humour, and – given this overlap – she hypothesises that these cues signal a shift to a pretence mode.

Secondly, mock impoliteness is also used by speakers to conceal coercion: humour is used “to minimally disguise the oppressive intent, i.e. as a repressive discourse strategy” (Holmes, 2000: 176).

The final function of mock impoliteness is that it may be deployed to entertain the audience, as a form of exploitative humour that “involves pain for the target but pleasure for other participants” (Culpeper, 2011: 215). In these frameworks, mock impoliteness exhibits a typical instance of “disaffiliative humour”: especially when it is performed in public contexts, “the speaker [...] and non-targeted receivers affiliate against the target and may derive humorous pleasure from the target being genuinely disparaged in a humorous (i.e. witty/creative) manner” (Dyrel, 2021: 27).

The relationship between impoliteness and amusement is a recurrent topic in the pragmatic and communication literature. Culpeper (2005: 45), who explored this relationship using data from the television quiz show “The Weakest Link”, suggests that there are four general factors behind this intimate relationship between impolite interactions and public entertainment: 1. intrinsic pleasure; 2. voyeuristic pleasure; 3. audience superiority; 4. audience safety. Moreover, he specifies that, in addition to these general factors, there may be some more specific causes: for example, literary genres thrive on conflict as a means of advancing the plot and characterisation, creating dramatic entertainment.

Specifically, this study aims to analyse the first type of strategy in order to observe the prosodic behaviour of mock impoliteness when it is used by the speakers to promote friendship and solidarity with their interlocutors.

⁵ Lagorgette & Larrivée note speakers’ frequent use of the adjective *petit* (En. *small*) as a mark of solidarity attitude (e.g. *Petit menteur!*, “Little liar!”).

⁶ The paper’s final section also mentions two further contexts in which insults are not a product of human aggressivity: verbal duels and pornographic contexts.

3. (Im)politeness and prosody

The connection between (im)politeness and prosody has not received enough attention from researchers. This lack of research seems to be mainly due to the difficulty of finding spontaneous audio material.

Culpeper et al. (2003) is the first and foundational study on the contribution of prosody to the development of the impoliteness strategy. The authors assumed that “no utterance can be spoken without prosody and it is, therefore, desirable at some point to include this dimension of speech in pragmatic analysis” (Culpeper et al., 2003: 1568).

The main focus of the study is “the contribution not of *what* was said but of *how* it was said” (*ibid.*), since sometimes prosody alone is responsible for the impolite realisation of the utterances. Along with the experimental sections of the article, Culpeper and his co-authors show how negative and positive impoliteness strategies can only be implemented through prosody mediation. For example, the *negative impoliteness strategy* “invade auditory space” prosodically involves the role of pitch and intensity. In ordinary conversation, *etiquette* requires the speaker to match the pitch and the intensity of their voice to that of the interlocutor. In impolite interactions, the speaker – moved by the arousal of emotions – can increase the two prosodic indices, simulating an invasion of the listener’s auditory space.

Prosody is not a marginal component: it contributes to differentiating polite behaviours from political and impolite ones, also from a perceptual point of view (e.g. Culpeper et al. 2003, Álvarez et al., 2011)⁷. In addition, prosody makes it possible to differentiate genuine impoliteness from mock impoliteness⁸, thus allowing the speaker to mitigate or intensify the degree of (im)politeness of their utterances (cf. Culpeper, 2011a; Gili Fivela & Bazzanella, 2014).

3.1. The prosodic features of mock impoliteness

Due to their multifunctional nature, genuine and mock impoliteness could be difficult to differentiate in some conversational contexts. Interpreting the mock attitude correctly depends on an interactive process, in which both interlocutors identify the locutionary speech act, such as a false impolite literal formula.

However, the contextual and paralinguistic components play a pivotal role in the process of interpretation, because mock impoliteness – like other “mixed messages”⁹ (Culpeper et al., 2017) – is the result of a multimodal clash between words, structures and non-linguistic resources.

⁷ “[...] politic behavior can be defined as socio-culturally determined behavior directed towards the goal of establishing and/or maintaining in a state of equilibrium the personal relationships between the individuals of a social group, whether open or closed, during the ongoing process of interaction” (Watts, 1989: 135).

⁸ Cf. McKinnon & Prieto (2014); Andreeva et al. (2016); Xu & Gu (2020); Vinciguerra & Gurrado (*forthcoming*).

⁹ Culpeper et al. (2017: 323) refer to *mixed messages* as “messages that contain features indicative of a polite interpretation mixed with features indicative of an impolite interpretation”. Other *mixed*

At present, the largest portion of studies focusing on the prosodic patterns of (im)polite interactions has promoted the investigation of the perceptual role played by prosody. Only recently have scholars begun to investigate the role played by specific prosodic indices aimed at creating mock or genuine nuances (Caballero et al., 2018).

Currently, there are very few studies aimed at comparing genuine and mock impoliteness. In this regard, McKinnon & Prieto (2014) examined the role played by prosody and gestures in the perception of mock impoliteness in Catalan. The authors focused on the intonation patterns and the acoustic properties of the utterances, elicited by the Oral Discourse-Completion Task, and integrated the results with a perceptual test. They observed that the prosodic features associated with genuine impoliteness were typically those associated with anger. This is not surprising, given that highly arousing emotions have previously been associated with genuine impoliteness¹⁰. Anger has been the main focus of research into the vocal expression of emotions. Most researchers have found that this emotion typically produces an increase in speech rate and in mean f_0 and a widening of the pitch range. Statistical tests revealed that intonation contours did not occur in significantly different proportions ($p > .05$), although they found that there were no relevant differences in intonation contours between the two experimental conditions, which is plausible given the small size of the corpus, as the authors postulated. For both genuine and mock impoliteness, the most recurring nuclear configurations were $L^* L \%$ and $H+L^* L \%$, which in Catalan can be used for the command (Prieto, 2014). The acoustic analysis showed that the pitch range and peak intensity were significantly higher in genuine situations. However, the difference between mock and genuine was not significant for syllable duration and the average intensity for the whole utterance, even if they were quantitatively higher for genuine utterances.

Further data in this regard comes from the study carried out by Andreeva et al. (2016) in two different languages. They collected 32 utterances each in German and in Polish (4 speakers x 4 utterances x 2 impoliteness conditions) to conduct a production and perception analysis based on McKinnon & Prieto's previous work. Six acoustic parameters were extracted using Praat, including mean f_0 , pitch range, mean intensity and speech rate. Voice pitch and pitch range did not differ significantly between the two languages or the attitudes, although there was a slight tendency for the pitch range to be wider in the mock condition in both languages¹¹. The f_0 standard deviation significantly differed in both languages, with higher values in the mock utterances than in genuine utterances. Regarding the mean intensity values, the Polish group spoke louder than the German speakers, and the utterances produced in the derogatory condition were significantly louder than

messages typically fall under such label are *sarcasm, banter, teasing, jocular mockery, jocular abuse, ritual insults, mock politeness, insincere or manipulative politeness, pushy politeness, under politeness*.

¹⁰ Culpeper (2011: 148-149) stated that anger and disgust are "two emotions particularly relevant to impoliteness events".

¹¹ German: 10.84 ST (Genuine) vs 12.32 ST (Mock); Polish: 12.76 ST (Genuine) vs 13.52 ST (Mock).

those produced in the supportive group. The Polish group showed higher intensity values (+ 4.56 dB) in the genuine condition than in the mock one, whereas the German group was equally loud in both experimental conditions. In addition, both groups of speakers realised genuine utterances with a wider range of intensity than mock utterances. Statistically, the impolite attitude had a significant effect on speech rate; in fact, the German group spoke faster in the mock condition, while the Polish group had comparable rates in both conditions. As in McKinnon & Prieto, the authors analysed and labelled the nuclear pitch accents of each utterance according to ToBI conventions. In the German data 5 pitch accents were identified: H*, L*, H+L* L+H*, and H+!H*. Both high and low pitch accents were more or less equally distributed across the mock and genuine attitude¹². H* was the most frequent pitch accent in mock and genuine utterances. The nuclear pitch accents used by Polish speakers were H*, ^H*, !H*, L+H*, L+!H*, H+!H*, and L*. In contrast to the German H* pitch accent, the Polish H* was characterised by a pitch peak which was typically reached early in the syllable, producing a falling pitch over the syllable. In contrast with the German group, Polish informers modified their intonation systematically with intended impoliteness conditions. Andreeva et al. (2016: 1002) conclude that speakers tend to use a combination of phonetic-prosodic and categorical intonation properties which they exploit to varying degrees.

In the same vein, Xu & Gu (2020) explored the prosodic configuration of mock and genuine (im)politeness in the Mandarin language, and identified a more defined trend. In order to perform a quantitative analysis of prosodic characteristics, they conducted a context-elicited discourse completion task so that they would collect genuine and mock (im)polite Mandarin utterances in both imperative and interrogative modes. For each target utterance, the researchers measured f_0 , intensity, time and voice quality. The data revealed that mock impoliteness was characterised by lower f_0 and intensity values; furthermore, pitch range was wider in genuine impoliteness. Finally, while jitter and shimmer were lower in mock impoliteness, HNR values were higher.

The only study available on this subject in the Italian language confirms the presence of some differences between the two attitudes (Vinciguerra & Gurrado, *forthcoming*). The authors compared two samples of utterances performed by a group of male speakers of Italian (Bari). For each target sentence, the researchers measured the following parameters: f_0 mean, f_0 min, f_0 max and pitch range, intensity mean, intensity min, intensity max and intensity range, the speech rate (calculated by dividing the utterance duration, including pauses, by the number of syllables actually produced by the speaker in the utterance), and the duration of the nuclear stressed vowel. The quantitative and statistical analysis revealed that f_0 mean, f_0 maximum value and pitch range were significantly lower in mock utterances. In a comparison of mock and genuine impoliteness, the mean, maximum and range of intensity were significantly higher in genuine attitude utterances. These trends

¹² However, H+L* L % was more frequent in genuine impoliteness than in mock impoliteness but this tendency is not statistically significant.

confirm the results of previous studies. Diversely, speech rate and the duration of nuclear vowels showed no significant behaviour.

4. *The research*

The present study is a part of this line of research, and aims to shed light on the prosodic cues that characterise mock impoliteness especially in comparison with genuine impoliteness. This reason for this focus is the lack of studies on mock attitude in Italian language.

On this basis, the present research aims to answer the following main questions:

1. To what extent does the mock/genuine attitude affect the prosody of an utterance? Do these two attitudes differ in terms of prosody?
2. What role do pitch range and intensity play in discriminating between genuine and mock impoliteness?
3. What is the nuclear distribution of pitch accents in mock and genuine impoliteness?

To date, research has focused on genuine impoliteness from different perspectives, leaving mock impoliteness in a marginal position. In particular, the prosodic dimension has not been particularly investigated. For this reason, we aimed to determine the role played by some acoustic parameters in the communication of mock impoliteness, and to identify the extent to which each of them characterises the attitude. In particular, we focused on pitch range and intensity because, in a previous research these two parameters seemed to best differentiate mock impoliteness from genuine impoliteness (Vinciguerra & Gurrado, *forthcoming*).

We also investigated whether the distribution of the pitch accents could be influenced by the different types of impoliteness conveyed by the utterance: in particular, we wanted to establish whether mock and genuine impoliteness differ significantly in terms of nuclear contours.

4.1 Participants

Six male speakers of Bari Italian, aged between 27 and 38, were invited to participate in the experiment. At the time of the recording session, they had no phonetic or phonological skills; they gave their written informed consent, although they were not informed of the aim of the study. The choice of involving only male speakers is motivated by the fact that some studies have found that men tend to use mock impoliteness more than women¹³, in order to show camaraderie with each other. This type of miscommunication is preferred by men since adolescence, as a strategy to contrast with the adult world and to reinforce their belonging to a group

¹³ Some sociolinguistic studies have shown that women tend to adopt a verbal interaction model based on politeness and the expression of feelings and emotions, while men prefer a more practical and referential communicative model (Lakoff, 1973).

(Zimmerman, 2003). As a consequence, it was hypothesised that boys would be able to perform an impolite sentence in a more natural way than girls, because they are more comfortable with irony and mock impoliteness¹⁴.

4.2 Materials and recording session

12 texts were created for this research. Each of them described a contextual situation ending with an impolite declarative sentence, such as “You’re an asshole!” (Pron+Verb+Adj). According to the contextual situation described, six of the target sentences were labelled “genuine impolite” while the other six were labelled “mock impolite”.

In order to select the most common epithets used by Bari Italian speakers in everyday conversation, a preliminary test was conducted on a Google Form. We asked a group of 36 young men from Bari to read a series of scenarios, imagine themselves in the situation and complete the sentence with an epithet related to the scenario described. By means of this procedure, we could identify the epithets that best matched the spontaneous speech in order to construct the target sentences. The pre-test produced homogeneous results. Almost all the participants selected the same six epithets, which were used to design the role plays. The six epithets were: asshole (it. *stronzo*), jerk (it. *cretino*), moron (it. *deficiente*), dick (it. *coglione*), idiot (it. *idiota*) and *trimone*, a peculiar Apulian epithet of uncertain etymology, meaning stupid or similar.

The following are two examples of role plays:

Genuine attitude

You are coming back from work. You are in your car, you are very stressed, tired and hungry, waiting for the light to change. You take your eye off it for one second, and as soon as the light turns green someone behind you starts honking the horn madly. You get angry and exclaim:

“You’re an asshole”

Mock attitude

You are coming back from work. You are in your car, waiting for the light to change. Suddenly, someone behind you starts honking the horn intoning a jingle. After a couple of seconds you realize that your friend is driving the car and he wants to mess with you. It’s fun, so as soon as he approaches your car, you exclaim:

“You’re an asshole”

The recording session took place in a quiet room, with the distance between the speaker and the microphone set at 20 cm to ensure a correct level of intensity. The speakers were asked to read the role plays as naturally as possible, identifying with

¹⁴ However, this issue could feed a gender stereotype. For this reason, we aim to perform the same test with female speakers in the future.

the situation described. First, they had to read the scenarios in silence, then they could read out the texts and each related target sentence.

The digital recording was run by means of a TASCAM DR-40, frequency sampling of 44kHz/24-bit resolution. The recording session provided 72 target sentences (36 genuine impolite sentences and 36 mock impolite sentences).

4.3 Acoustic, phonological and statistical analysis

The stimuli were analysed using PRAAT (6.3.10), taking into account the variables employed in this field of study:

- pitch range (ST)_PR
- mean intensity (dB)_INT

In order to explore the trends that emerged from the analysis, we extracted the mean (M) and the standard deviation (SD) of the following parameters: f_0 mean (f_{0x}), f_0 maximum (f_{0max}), Intensity max (Imax), Intensity Range (IR) and Total Duration (TD).

The phonological analysis was based on the autosegmental and metrical theory, using the ToBI transcription system. It aims to verify the nature of the nuclear pitch accents of the two pragmatic attitudes.

Statistical significance was assessed by means of the Paired-Samples T-Test ($p < .05$). The correlation between pitch range and intensity was also tested using Pearson's correlation coefficient.

4.4 Results

The data revealed that the prosody of mock impoliteness is less marked than that of genuine impoliteness. As shown in Table 1, with reference to the pitch range, the difference between the two attitudes is about 1.7 ST, while the mean intensity difference is 3 dB.

Table 1 - *Pitch range and Intensity mean differences between Mock (M) and Genuine (G) Impoliteness*

	<i>M/G mean differences</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>PR</i>	- 1.67 ST	- 2.797	35	<0.01
<i>INT</i>	- 3 dB	- 3.047	35	<0.01

With reference to the Pearson test, our data showed a positive correlation between pitch range and mean intensity values in both mock ($r = .465$; $p < .01$) and genuine impolite sentences ($r = .478$; $p < .01$).

In order to investigate in more detail the comparison between these two utterances realisations, other prosodic parameters were measured. The results demonstrated that mock impoliteness is characterised by lower values of f_0x , f_0max , I_{max} , IR and TD , as shown in Table 2. The data suggest that, in this case, all prosodic parameters contribute to the differentiation between mock and genuine impoliteness. For this reason, some phonetic parameters were examined. First of all, the Onset was higher in genuine than in mock impoliteness (respectively: $M=144$ Hz, $SD=24$; $M=127$ Hz, $SD=13$; $p < .01$). In addition, the initial verb also seemed to be influenced by the attitude, specifically the duration of the first consonant was longer in the 73 % of the mock impolite assertives considered (mock: $M=167$ ms, $SD=61$; genuine: $M=118$ ms, $SD=37$; $p < .01$).

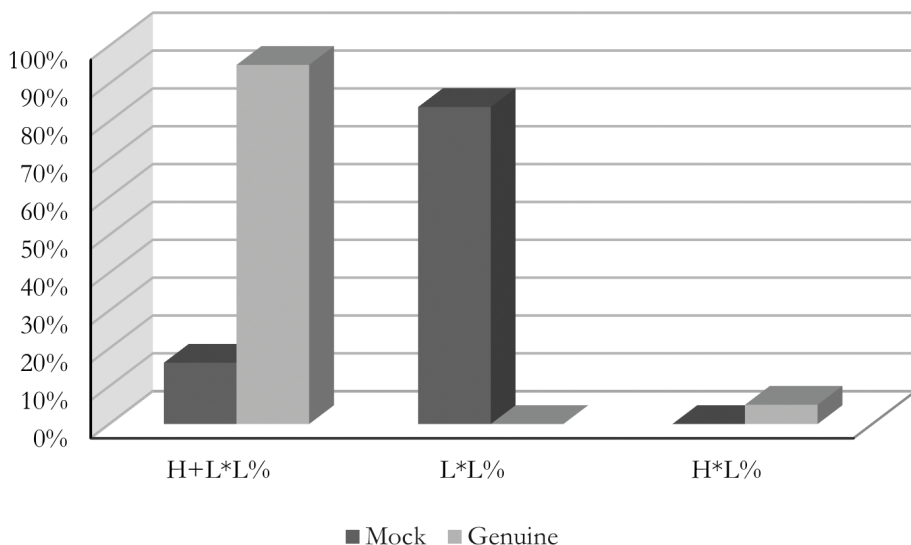
Table 2 - f_0 Intensity and Duration mean differences between Mock and Genuine Impoliteness

f_0x	f_0max	I_{max}	IR	TD
- 3 ST	- 1.8 ST	- 9.1 dB	- 8.4 dB	+ 130 ms

The intonation contours of the attitudes also showed clear patterns. The analysis was carried out to verify the distribution of nuclear pitch accents in the two attitudes under consideration. As can be seen in Fig. 1, the mock impoliteness mainly presents a $L^* L$ % (83.78 %) contour and a very small percentage of $H+L^* L$ % nuclear pitch configuration (16.2 %). This aligns with the emphatic nature of genuine impolite sentences and with the intonation patterns of Bari Italian¹⁵. By contrast, the mock impolite sentences show a flat nuclear contour in which the lack of prominence indicates that the attitude is not intended to have a literal meaning. This intonation contour, combined with a longer duration of nuclear vowels and a soft voice quality, often accompanied by a hidden smile, is enough to give the mock sentences an oblique and indirect meaning that differentiates them from neutral declarative sentences.

¹⁵ There are numerous studies on the intonation of Bari Italian. Among them we refer to Gili Fivela et al. (2015) for its comprehensive and comparative nature.

Figure 1 - *Distribution of nuclear pitch accents in mock and genuine impoliteness*



The distribution of nuclear pitch accents indicates a more dynamic f_0 profile in genuine impoliteness assertives than in mock impoliteness ones. As an example, Figs. 2 and 3 show the spectrogram, the waveform and the orthographic transcription of the same impolite declarative sentence (*Sei un coglione! / You're an asshole!*) pronounced by the GM speaker with a mock (Fig. 2) and a genuine (Fig. 3) attitude, respectively. It can be noticed that the genuine impolite sentence is more dynamic and has an H+L* L % pitch contour, while the mock impolite sentence shows a L* L % configuration. In terms of pitch range, the difference between the two sentences is 4.2 ST. As for the intensity, the speaker used this parameter as a cue to distinguish between the two utterances, with a difference of 9.25 dB.

Figure 2 - *Mock Impoliteness GM_19 M “You’re an asshole”*

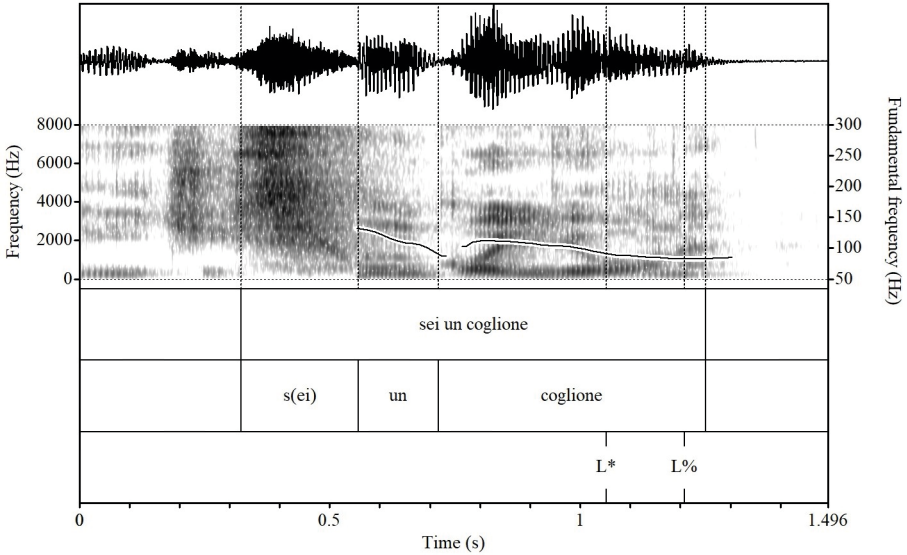
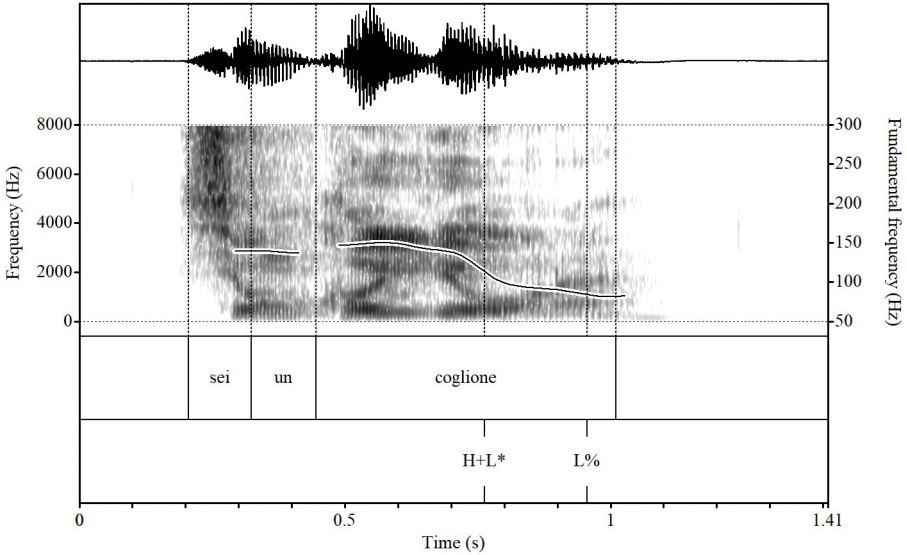


Figure 3 - *Genuine Impoliteness GM_14 G “You’re an asshole”*



5. *Discussion and conclusions*

The present study focused on mock impoliteness, a form of indirect communication that has received less attention than genuine impoliteness. Specifically, mock impoliteness has not been considered in any study of the Italian language, particularly regarding the influence of prosody, which is believed to play a key role in the production and perception of impoliteness. Given this, we intended to detect the prosodic cues that characterise mock impoliteness, with the aim of identifying the strategies used by speakers to communicate this particular kind of attitude.

This goal required a comparison between mock and genuine impoliteness. While the former consists in the communication of an attitude that allows the speaker to attack the face of the interlocutor in a more or less voluntary way, the latter can be considered as a particular type of impoliteness that is not intended to offend the recipient, but is used to tease the interlocutor in a gentle way.

The experiment was designed around two main research questions. The first one was to determine whether the impolite attitude affected the prosody of utterances. The results were positive. In fact, speakers seemed to use different prosodic strategies for each attitude, which means that the two types of impoliteness do affect the suprasegmental level of the utterance. Pitch range and mean intensity showed a significant increase in genuine attitude more than in mock impoliteness. This tendency, supported by the results of the correlation test, answered the second research question. The data revealed that pitch range and intensity are positively correlated. As a consequence, it is not possible to affirm which one of the two parameters is more involved in the communication of impoliteness. This result contributes to the definition of the prosody of mock impoliteness. However, with regard to genuine impoliteness, these data seem to align with Culpeper et al. (2003), who found that the marked prosody usually noticed in genuine impoliteness is quite similar to that of highly arousing emotions. For instance, in some contexts, genuine impoliteness is accompanied by anger, an emotion that is generally expressed by an increase in f_0 , intensity and speech rate (cf. Ekman, 2003; Scherer, 2003). Culpeper et al. (2003) connect the parallel increase in the pitch range and mean intensity parameters with the aforementioned "invade auditory space" strategy used by speakers to communicate the impolite attitude. Through this strategy, the speakers distance themselves from the prosodic level that is usually shared with the interlocutor, with the aim of prosodically trespassing on a higher and more appropriate level underlining the unfriendly intention. We hypothesise that even in the case of mock impoliteness, the speakers' need to mark the communication of the impolite intention is manifest in the positive correlation between the two parameters. A comparison with neutral speech, purged of any attitude or emotions, could help prove this hypothesis in the future.

In the light of the results collected so far, it can be affirmed that, in our study, genuine impoliteness is characterised by a significantly more marked prosody than mock impoliteness, in terms of pitch range and intensity.

The present research also investigated the intonation tendencies that characterise the sentences. Our data revealed two distinct and prevalent intonation contours related to the two attitudes analysed. Mock impoliteness tended to have a $L^* L$ % nuclear pitch profile, while genuine impoliteness is mostly characterised by the dynamic $H+L^* L$ % contour. Data are only partially consistent with McKinnon & Prieto (2014), who found that, with respect to Catalan, $L^* L$ % and $H+L^* L$ % are the most recurrent nuclear configurations in both genuine and mock impoliteness. Specifically, the $H+L^* L$ % configuration is twice as frequent in the genuine impoliteness utterances, whereas the $L^* L$ % configuration is equally distributed. The phonological tendencies of our study suggest that the speakers do use different pitch nuclear contours to differentiate between the two attitudes conveyed.

Furthermore, mock and genuine impoliteness initially show some differences in the first part of the sentence corresponding to the verb ('be') and in the epithet. In mock impoliteness, the epithet is usually characterised by a low pitch and no dynamic pattern. On the contrary, genuine impolite assertive utterances seem to have a high-fall pattern, accompanied by a higher scaling between the two tonal targets. This cue associates the genuine epithet with a prominence and with an increase in intensity from a perceptual point of view. The analysis of other phonetic features also showed a higher onset of the f_0 curve and a longer duration of the verb (especially of its initial consonant) in mock impoliteness than in the genuine impoliteness. This tendency, which needs to be deeply investigated in the future, seems to suggest that the speaker intends to signal his mocking intention to the hearer from the first syllables of the utterance. This hypothesis is confirmed by some speakers who tend to associate the lengthening with a kind of "smiled speech" (Émond & Laforest, 2013; Barthel & Quené, 2015). In particular, speaker AI used this kind of strategy: in mock impoliteness, he deliberately produced a temporal lengthening of the verbal phrase, which is usually accompanied by a smile/laugh, and by a following lowering of f_0 and intensity values in the epithet. This can be considered as a means of highlighting the non-coincidence between the real intention of the utterance and its literal form. In this way, by means of the smile/laugh the hearer is immediately aware of the mocking attitude of the speaker and the epithet is completely freed from its conventional meaning. However, this strategy needs to be investigated in a further analysis.

In the light of the results collected so far, we would like to broaden the sample, by also including female speakers, in order to avoid the influence of gender stereotypes. Furthermore, it would be advisable to perform a comparison with the neutral speech (free of any emotion or attitude), with the aim to identify the strategies used by speakers to differentiate the mock impoliteness from a speech that is far from any impolite intention.

In the future, a perception test could be useful for analysing how prosodic parameters contribute to encoding the speaker’s mocking or genuine insulting attitude.

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