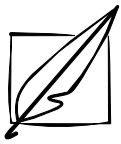

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Ageist propaganda on social media: Disguising hate speech through mock politeness

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to analyse how mock politeness strategies signal the expression of ageist propaganda in online news commentary. By resorting to a subset of the NETLANG hate speech corpus, composed of user-generated texts posted on the comment boards of the *Daily Mail* news website, namely in response to articles dealing with sensitive age-related issues, the article looks into the disguised ways in which ageism is voiced. More specifically, it examines four different types of politeness strategies – thanking, complimenting, agreeing, and apologising – and assesses whether their positive and negative face-enhancing function is genuine or, as the hypothesis goes, insincere, hence strategic and manipulative, playing a triggering role in the expression of prejudice. The findings confirm the occurrence of pragmatic mismatch, as anticipated in the literature on mock politeness, and reveal a two-phase process under which it is accomplished. The article thus hopes to shed light on a relatively neglected aspect of im/politeness studies, by describing devious realizations of politeness strategies through both formulaic and creative language. At the same time, it hopes to contribute to understanding the exploitation of polite speech acts for propagandistic, potentially harmful, ideological effects regarding an equally neglected social group in hate speech research.

Keywords: mock politeness, hate speech, speech acts, face, ageism, propaganda, social media, NETLANG corpus.

1. Introduction

Propaganda and hate speech have been considered to be notorious semantic partners. United on a negative connotative basis, the two phenomena share a few crucial traits, such as ideological manipulation and potentially harmful

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intent. They also use similar propagation techniques, being published and broadcast with a view to influencing public opinion as widely as possible. The correlation between hate speech and propaganda has been pointed out in social media scholarship: Langton (2012), for instance, believes the former to work "as a kind of" the latter, while Karjo and Ng (2020), similarly, use "hate speech" as a modifier of "propaganda". The Internet has proved to be an ideal stage for hate speech to flourish, and the elderly have also been unfortunate targets. In this case, ageist propaganda online is not necessarily at the hands of a specific social group, let alone an organised one, i.e. a set of people understood under a certain social variable that carry out a prearranged agenda. Rather, social media ageism seems to cut across various sections of society, regardless of gender, nationality, class or ethnicity – much along the lines of offline ageism for that matter (Butler 1969; Levin – Levin 1980; Palmore 1999). The pervasiveness of ageism on the web is so acute, despite the anti-prejudice regulations established by digital companies, that it begs more academic attention. Actually, it is exactly because moderation policies are in full force that it is interesting to see how haters manage to voice ageism successfully without being deleted or suspended.

In light of these premises, the present article revisits the concept of mock politeness, a relatively neglected issue in im/politeness studies, so as to see whether it may function as an enabling, or triggering, device to express prejudice and discrimination. The main research question guiding this study is whether politeness, instead of being used to protect the hearer's face, may be used for the exact opposite, i.e. to attack and jeopardise it, thus serving antisocial functions in allowing the speaker to paradoxically voice aggressiveness and hate. By focusing on a set of four conventionalised politeness strategies and interactions, namely thanking, complimenting, agreeing, and apologising, the study deconstructs their occurrence in specific discursive contexts and describes the reverse, impolite, effect they carry in building a disparaging, bigoted, and defamatory picture of a vulnerable social group.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 briefly reviews the literature on the key notions of hate speech, propaganda, and ageism, trying to highlight their conceptual intersections. The third section puts forth the concept of pragmatic mismatch as a key element to defining "mock politeness", and it outlines the existing theoretical approaches to the concept by distinguishing between cognate phenomena, like mock impoliteness and deception. Section 4 describes the method and data, which were collected from a corpus of user-generated texts posted on the *Daily Mail* website. The

fifth section offers a pragmatic analysis of a range of comment texts which exemplify ageist prejudice disguised through mock politeness strategies, trying to find out how the speech act mismatch occurs. Finally, section 6 sums up the findings and concludes.

2. Hate speech, propaganda, and ageism

Notwithstanding its pernicious lurking presence all over the online world, hate speech seems to escape a consensual definition, often being mistaken with kindred phenomena, such as aggressive, offensive, insulting, threatening, abusive, and obscene speech (Davidson et al. 2017; Fortuna et al. 2020 – for an overview of the definitional challenge, see Ermida 2023b). Outside academia, where digital companies try to monitor and control the proliferation of hate speech, human rights activists and institutions also keep a watchful eye. The Council of Europe (2022), for instance, defines it as follows: "[…] the term 'hate speech' shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance" – "intolerance" covering "discrimination and hostility" against various so-called minorities.[1] The United Nations (2023), likewise, has tried to define hate speech, but by enlarging its target scope beyond CoE's ethnocentric, nationalist emphasis: in its view, hate speech is any kind of communication that "uses pejorative or discriminatory language" with regard to "a person or a group on the basis of who they are", and particularise: on the basis of "their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender, or other identity factor".[2]

In academic contexts, approaches to hate speech either dismissively take the term for granted, thus falling on the conceptual quagmire trap, or concentrate on just one or two of the concept's defining features disregarding all others (Brown 2017). The latter stance varies depending on the theoretical standpoint adopted: whether it is a content-based, an intent-based, or an effect-based approach to hate speech (Marwick – Miller 2014). Content-based studies of hate speech concentrate on *what* it says about an individual or a group, adopting a locutionary focus on the lexis of hate speech, e.g. in terms of keyness, frequency, and collocation, especially within NLP research and computational linguistics (e.g. Zampieri et al. 2019): the assumption is

1 https://www.coe.int/en/web/no-hate-campaign/committee-of-ministers1.

2 "https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech. Accessed March 2023.

that the presence of certain negative lexical elements (such as slurs, taboo words, and disparaging nouns and adjectives) can be used as a predictive feature for classifying a text as hateful (Schmidt – Wiegand 2017). The second, intent-based perspective has been popular in social sciences and media studies on the one hand, where hate speech is regarded as a mechanism intended to "enact and brutally enforce" antisocial values around the world (e.g. Udupa et al. 2021), and on the other hand in pragmatic scholarship, where illocution-based research has tried to establish the performativity of hate speech and the accountability of the expression of discrimination and prejudice (e.g. Macdonald – Lorenzo-Dus 2020). Finally, effect-based approaches have thrived among political philosophers and ethicists, who are mainly interested in the actual harm, and not just hurt, that expressions of hatred do to "the groups who are denounced or bestialized" (Waldron 2012: 9; see also Cohen-Almagor 2013, Weinstein 2017). Harm-based approaches have also prospered in legal scholarship, concerned as it with the public jeopardising of minority rights in the difficult ongoing process of democratic legitimation (e.g. Benesh 2014; Sellars 2016; Gelber 2017).

The idea of harm also underlies much of the discussion of propaganda, tying in with other features that the two phenomena share, such as their public propagation, their persuasive intent and manipulative effect. Tsesis (2002), for instance, who investigates how harmful social movements feed on hate speech, crucially examines the destructive power of hate propaganda, using the two terms interchangeably. Most academics actually consider hate speech to be *a kind of* propaganda, i.e. a modifier, or a hyponym of the broader, superordinate category (Langton 2012; Oberschall 2012; Karjo – Ng 2020). Many other scholars acknowledge the negative connotation of the term propaganda: Hobbs (2020), for example, mentions the bad reputation the word enjoys, pointing out its association with totalitarian regimes from the past, with lies and misinformation, and with unethical efforts by interest groups to sway public opinion and crush criticism. Besides, she remarks, even though present-day propaganda can also voice harmless agendas by the entertainment industry, the business sector, health and social organisations, education, culture, and religion, many digital forms of contemporary propaganda thrive on conflict and cultivate us-versus-them narratives that dehumanise the other and desensitise the masses into hatred and segregation, much like hate speech.

One of the target groups of hate speech, or hateful propaganda, is the elderly. The social variable of age, along with gender, ethnicity, and social class, among others, is believed to be a factor of bias and stereotyping in

interpersonal, institutional and public discourse (on a synopsis, see Ermida 2009). Coined by Robert N. Butler (1969: 243), the term "ageism" designates "a deep-seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged – a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing older". The word applies to three conceptual areas, namely prejudicial attitudes, often by the elderly themselves, discriminatory practices, especially in institutional settings such as employment and health care, and stereotypic beliefs against the aged, which undermine their personal dignity (Butler 1980). A mirror concept of ageism is "gerontophobia" (Levin – Levin 1980), which denotes an obsessed fear of the elderly, of one's own ageing, and of association with death, also implying a tendency to blame the (aged) victim.

In so-called gerontological linguistics, the "deficit paradigm" has been observed in a legion of communicative contexts, where senior adults are represented and addressed from the standpoint of presupposed impairment and decline (e.g. Coupland – Coupland 2013). Indeed, an ageist bias has been detected in a range of miscellaneous language settings, from doctor/patient dialogues (Thompson et al. 2004) and institutional discourse in nursing homes (Grainger 2004) to TV fictional characterisation (Robinson et al. 2004) and politics (Witrogen 2020). A curious neologism has recently been coined to report on discrimination against the aged and the process of ageing, namely the blend "discriminaging" (Grego – Vicentini 2022).

3. Mock politeness as pragmatic mismatch

The term "mock politeness" is credited to Leech (1983), who was the first to suggest two forms of exploiting politeness in a mocking way: the first relates to causing offence in an indirect way, by means of irony; the second relates to strengthening solidarity in an equally indirect way, by means of banter. According to him, "[w]hile irony is an apparently friendly way of being offensive (mock politeness)", banter "is an offensive way of being friendly (mock impoliteness)" (Leech 1983: 144). In both cases, there is an obvious mismatch between what is said and what is intended.

Culpeper (1996) rescues the concept of mock politeness in his early framework of five impoliteness categories. Based on Brown and Levinson's 1987 politeness model, he views "mock politeness" as a category in which "the FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realisations" (Culpeper 1996: 357). The label reappears in his 2003 joint paper, where, yet again, mock

politeness is seen as an impoliteness device aiming at "social disharmony" (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1555). The term is overshadowed by that of "mock *im*politeness" in his later 2011 book, where he offers a reshuffled model of "implicational impoliteness". Yet, mock politeness can be argued to be implicit in his discussion of "mixed messages" (including sarcasm, teasing and some labels for humour), which "mix features which point towards a polite interpretation and features that point towards an impolite interpretation" (Culpeper 2011: 165). The notion of "convention-driven" categories that clash and create implicational impoliteness can also be said to involve mock politeness. In such categories, both internal and external, the concept of "mismatch" regains prominence: internally, i.e. in the text, the mismatch takes place between two discrepant linguistic behaviours; externally, the mismatch occurs between the linguistic behaviour and the context. Importantly, Culpeper (2016: 429) later on salvages the literal term "mock politeness" and calls it an "impoliteness meta-strategy".

Taylor (2011, 2015, 2016), in her substantial work on mock politeness, labels mock politeness mismatched forms as "co-textual" (Culpeper's 2011 "internal") and "contextual" (Culpeper's 2011 "external"). Co-textual mismatch covers several different structures, for instance a blend of a polite grammatical structure with a vulgar word (e.g. "Could you just f*ck off?" [Taylor 2015: 130]), or what she calls a garden-path structure, where the speaker moves from apparent politeness to impoliteness (Taylor 2015: 138) by renegotiating initial interpretations. Contextual mismatch, on the other hand, involves a discrepancy between the utterance and the discursive situation. The centrality of the motion of mismatch for Taylor is patent in her definition of mock politeness as occurring "when there is an im/politeness mismatch leading to an implicature of impoliteness" (2015: 130). Taylor (2011: 226) significantly states that mock politeness "involves an absolute inversion of effect: far from functioning to mitigate the FTA, the politeness forms constitute the FTA". She goes on to assert that the effects of mock politeness – which she also calls "surface politeness" – derive from "a reversal of face evaluation: from respect for face to attack on face" (Taylor 2011: 227). This clash, she ventures, results in a greater face loss than might have been achieved by a blunt, unambiguous on-record FTA, owing to the previous, misleading, gain.

Haugh (2014: 278) defines a mock politeness implicature as carrying "an ostensibly 'polite' stance, which […] masks or disguises an 'impolite' stance". The idea of masking or disguising a certain illocutionary force relies on the notion of indirectness, a crucial one to conceptualising mock politeness, as well as mock impoliteness, on which Haugh's book mainly

focuses. Indirectness, as Haugh (2014: 21) aptly remarks, is also a cornerstone of most discussions of pragmatic mismatch, from Grice's distinction between what is said and what is intended, to Searle's dichotomy of direct and indirect speech acts, and Sperber and Wilson's "explicature vs. implicature" dyad. In the case of mock politeness, indirectness seems to lie in the roundabout way to being impolite: instead of expressing the impolite content straight away, the speakers opt for an insincerely polite introductory utterance which only then gives way to a direct FTA.

Other authors who have tackled mock politeness usually concentrate on its indirect and/or antithetical nature. Bousfield (2008), for instance, views it as a form of "off-record" impoliteness (or "indirect", in Brown and Levinson's terms), which "appears on the surface to positively constitute, maintain or enhance the face of the intended recipient(s) but actually threatens, attacks and/or damages the face of the recipient(s)" (2008: 138), whereas Marlangeon and Alba-Juez (2012: 82) regard it as "formally polite acts with an impolite purpose". Yin and Zhou (2019) conceive the antithetical nature of mock politeness as a contrast between what they call a "superficially polite speech act" and an attack on the hearer's face or "sociality rights" (which include so-called equity rights and association rights).

Other recent studies on mock politeness have tended to concentrate on its sarcastic and ironic character. Beeching (2019), for instance, regards mock politeness as a sarcastic or ironic usage of conventionalised politeness strategies, and mock apologies, in particular, as pretence strategies that fail to undergo what she refers to as Ducrot's 'performative illusion'. She adds that such mock polite usages are typically indirect and dependent on implicature, and that they rely on a "mismatch" (again) between the politeness strategy and the context in which it appears. In other words, the lexical semantics says one thing, but the pragmatic illocutionary force says another, thus "creating a potentially highly impolite interpretation" (Beeching 2019: 291). Ghezzi and Molinelli (2019: 245) also view mock politeness strategies as ironic or sarcastic speech acts, and they find that in Italian the "scusa" apology and variants "do not position the speaker as being regretful, but reinforce dissent, challenge or sarcasm". In such contexts, they hold, these mock forms are used to actually foster impoliteness.

A terminological detail should be added to this brief overview of mock politeness scholarship, concerning the very adjective in the phrase: "mock" qualifies something that is not authentic or real. As Haugh and Bousfield (2012: 1102) point out, the dictionary meaning of the term "mock" is that of "having the character of imitation" or of "being 'simulated' or 'feigned'", and

they add: "when it is used to refer to an attitude it indicates that the attitude is 'not based on real feelings'". But the imitation or simulation underpinning mock politeness does not aim to deceive: instead, it intends to be successfully identified as such, so as to reap the desired face-attack effects. As Taylor (2016: 15-16) aptly remarks, mock politeness differs from deceit in the presence of an "honest [sincere] metamessage", which is communicated in an "obvious" way: the "overtness of the mismatch" is meant to guide the participants to "knowingly shift to another mode of interaction which is patterned onto the primary framework", a shift which characteristically occurs within the same interaction (unlike deception, where the mismatch may be perceived much later on).

This is exactly the case with the four types of mock politeness strategies discussed in this article, which are grouped under four categories of speech acts: thanking, complimenting, agreeing, and apologising. In Austin's original taxonomy (1962: 89), these are regarded as "behabitives" – "a kind of performative concerned roughly with reactions to behaviour by others and towards others, and designed to exhibit attitudes and feelings" – a category which Searle (1976: 13) later renamed as "expressives", the illocutionary point of which is to "express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content". Each of the four types of expressives discussed in the textual analysis subsections of this article is taken to illustrate what at surface level is a typically polite speech act, aiming at apparently redressing the hearer's positive and/or negative face, only to produce a reverse effect. In other words, the psychological state expressed by the speaker (e.g. gratitude, sorrow, etc.) proves to be insincere, as it does not correspond to the propositional content of the rest of the comment. The sincerity condition for illocutionary acts (Searle 1976) is thus broken – but the resulting infelicitous speech act is strategic, aiming at conveying hateful content indirectly.

4. Method and data

The analysis offered next is a qualitative approach to mock politeness occurrences that are contextually embedded, and as such require manual identification. Only through a careful reading of the co-text, be it intra-comment or inter-comment (within the speaker's utterance or across a dialogue sequence), could the mocking intent be spotted. An automatic keyword search proved insufficient, producing a great number of false positives, that is, of occurrences of polite formulae, such as *thanks* and

sorry, that happen to be genuine expressions of, respectively, gratitude and regret. In such cases, the routine keywords implying politeness had to be interpreted both within the comment and across the conversation sequence. The reverse also occurred: some polite keywords were true positives, that is, they proved to be actual cases of mock politeness. Yet, a keyword search proved useless to spot non-conventional expressions of mock politeness, whose linguistic originality makes them escape the formulaic straightjacket that more easily falls prey to automatic detection. In other words, verbal creativity is a clever way to elude hate speech identification algorithms.

A second methodological proviso is that the type of mock politeness strategies covered is not restricted to negative politeness, as in Taylor (2011). Conversely, the present article looks at both positive and negative politeness strategies, which are "mocked" so as to achieve a reverse, face-threatening effect. Besides, and also unlike Taylor (2011), the analysis is not restricted to first-order occurrences of mock politeness, i.e. situations where the hearers, or the speakers themselves, acknowledge its occurrence, even though a few such cases do come up. Rather, it proposes a second-order analysis where the language used suggests, or indicates, the presence of a mock politeness strategy, even if the interlocutors fail to recognise it, or refrain from doing so. The first-order scenario is not only much less productive, but also less likely to provide a view of the actual variety of pragmatic strategies of mock politeness used in online exchanges, which beg for examination.

The data were collected from NETLANG, a bilingual hate speech corpus constructed under the auspices of a four-year research project (on a description of the compilation and pre-processing phases of the corpus, see Ermida 2023a). The subset that emerged from the selection is composed of extensive comment threads published on the *Daily Mail* website, in response to news articles dealing with sensitive issues regarding old age, such as health care, retirement pensions and subsidies. It should be recalled that the *Daily Mail* is a widely read British tabloid newspaper with a right-wing slant and a lurid reporting style, which may inherently steer readers towards bias, by conveying prejudicial perceptions of events and actors and by attracting discriminatory responses. The extraction covers a period ranging from 2019 to 2022, and the number of comments under analysis totals 3219.

In short, the method of analysis adopted in this study is a combination of corpus tools with a manual approach. First, a keyword search was undertaken with the help of the program devised by the project team: this was done by choosing the items "language" [English], "age" [Over 65s], and platform [*Daily Mail*]. An automatic search of politeness formulae followed,

by using the localizing function on the resulting PDF documents. Finally, a more laborious, time-consuming analysis was carried out, which involved raking the documents manually, so as to spot non-routine expressions of surface politeness in the expression of ageism.

5. Textual analysis

Before turning to the discussion of four mock politeness strategies present in the dataset under scrutiny – which are, or give way to, implicit expressions of ageism – it is important to remark that the corpus also contains quite a few occurrences of explicit ageism. Actually, the dataset does exhibit many direct, on-record formulations of ageist prejudice, as the next two passages, of all that could be summoned, show:

(1) Pensioners have some front claiming the genuine sick and disabled deserve no help but only pensioners should receive extra help and money.. THIS IS THE CURRENT GENERATION OF PENSIONERS we the young ha.te. The sick and disabled are 10 of you, your anytime d.eath couldn't come quick enou gh, sata.nists.

(2) As if that much age confers anything besides frailty, faulty judgement and waste of resources. Past retirement age, people just become parasites. Those two should be thrown in a mincer and sold as dog-food. At least then they'd be useful for a change.

The first of these comments is particularly rich in that the commenter explicitly phrases the word "hate" (misspelled as "ha.te" so as to dodge detection algorithms) while establishing a divide between old and young (see e.g. van Dijk 2015). Besides, it generalises prejudiced accusations and presents faulty presuppositions (the adjective "genuine", which qualifies the other "sick and disabled", carries the idea that they, the pensioners, are *not* genuine in their health complaints), at the same time as it phrases blatant ill wishes and direct affronts.

Similarly, but perhaps more graphically, comment (2) expresses extreme ageist abuse: after the claim that the old are "nothing but" people with physical and mental deficiencies who are a drain on the public purse (another generalisation, devoid of evidence), the commenter moves on to obnoxious insult ("just parasites") and to an actual incitement to physical violence. The closing remark, that serving to feed dogs is the only use people

past retirement age have, is the epitome of contempt, reducing an entire social group to sheer worthlessness.

In terms of im/politeness theory, the two comments show utter disrespect for the hearer's face (Goffman 1967), be it positive or negative. As Brown and Levinson (1987) hold, the victims' basic claim to, respectively, an appreciated public self-image on the one hand, and to freedom of action and freedom from imposition on the other is viciously attacked. Indeed, the explicitly discriminatory portrayal of the elderly destroys their positive face, whereas the cruel suggestions of how they should act and how people should act towards them destroys their negative face.

Unlike the cases above, the examples discussed in the next four subsections illustrate indirect forms of expressing hate. Rather than being on-record formulations of face-attack, the following discursive situations are framed as apparently – or initially – polite, while carrying an underlying hateful content that becomes manifest only afterwards.

5.1 Mock thanks

Current speech act accounts have placed thanks within an "attitudinal" category of illocutions which relate to the speaker's reaction to the hearer's behaviour (House – Kádár 2021), i.e. the speaker's attitude towards, and judgement/evaluation of, the interlocutor's action. As such, they typically project onto the past, since their propositional content regards an action or an event, attributable to the hearer, that has previously taken place. Besides, and importantly, this action or event has to be something that the speakers perceive to be positive or beneficial for them, hence deserving their appreciation.

The "speaker-benefit" felicity condition is clearly absent from the following reply, which a commenter gives during a heated discussion about the British NHS. The propositional content of the rest of the utterance, which claims the elderly's ill health is their fault, indicates that the speaker has nothing to thank the interlocutor for:

(3) *Many thanks* for the uncalled-for health update. So how much should the tax payer spend on keeping you alive? New hearts for 90 year olds? New lungs for those who have smoked? Let's face it many of the old folk used to eat beef dripping on toast and then wonder why their arteries are shot [Italics mine, henceforth]

Thanking is one of a variety of speech acts that tend to be realised with routine formulae (Coulmas 1981), which encompass not only the literal

rendering of the verb in a range of forms (*thank you, thanks, thanks a lot, thanks a bunch*) but also an array of more verbose phrasings, such as *I'm so grateful, I appreciate it, I couldn't have done it without you, I owe you one, Much obliged*. Various authors have employed the concept of "politeness markers" to describe the correlation between certain formulae and the speech acts that, by default, they indicate. Yet, this relationship has proved to be fuzzier than expected, and routine expressions have often been found not to coincide with their established illocutionary category (see e.g. Eelen 2001; Haugh 2003; Watts 2003). This means that certain politeness markers, such as the quintessential "thank you", may serve illocutionary forces other than expressing a psychological state of gratitude. In other words, the sincerity condition is violated, producing an infelicitous speech act.

As in (3) above, the occurrence of thanking formulae with non-gratitude-based illocutions in (4) below seems to mock politeness conventions:

(4) *Thx a lot* old geezers, you will consume every last resource of this country and leave nothing behind, and couldn't care less.

The use of the politeness marker "Thx a lot" (i.e. "thanks a lot") is not in agreement with the propositional content of the whole of the second-person singular construction that follows it, a sentence that attributes not only actions but intentions to a group sneeringly identified as "old geezers". The serious double accusation of excessive expenditure and utter recklessness that is addressed to the elderly is in stark contrast with the expression of thanks that opens the utterance. In other words, thanking is in this case an ironic marker that means exactly the opposite of what it says, thus creating a clear pragmatic mismatch – hence, it is a strong contender to the category of mock politeness. Along similar lines, another significant comment, which occurs on a thread about free bus passes for seniors, reads:

(5) Wait we should *thank* the Greedy baby boomers who got free education Who could buy houses at a reasonable price And who messed up the country for the rest of us *Cheers*

Again, the speech act of thanking is literally phrased at the outset of the comment, with the help of a modal verb ("should") that gives apparent moral legitimacy to the statement that follows. This statement, however, contains no positive propositional content whatsoever, hence, nothing to thank the targets for: instead, it expresses another litany of accusations, this time regarding purported privileges of the elderly, slurred as "greedy", as

well as macro-economic failings to be blamed on them. The mock expression of thanks is reiterated with "cheers" at the end of the utterance.

These examples illustrate blunt face-attacks against all senior addressees. The bold generalisations on which they are built group all members of a fairly large group under the same demeaning, defamatory portrayal, shattering their public image (i.e. their positive face) – which misleadingly the expression of thanks seemed at first to redress.

5.2 Mock compliments

Paying compliments is another typical politeness strategy to strengthen the hearer's positive face. By praising a characteristic of the hearer's, a possession, a deed, or an event that is somewhat related to them, the speaker fosters the hearer's desire that their self-image be appreciated and approved of. In light of Brown and Levinson's (1987: 104) framework, compliments, like other positive politeness strategies, may "exaggerate S's interest in, approval of, and sympathy with H", also functioning as a kind of "gift" to be given to the hearer as a sign of respect and deference.

Scholarship on the speech act of complimenting has highlighted their sociologically conditioned nature, for instance in terms of gender (Briallen 2008), and their culture specific realisations. Jucker (2009), for instance, aptly points out that the appropriateness of compliments depends on the communicative situation and the language community where the compliment is paid. And responding to compliments may also be a cultural trap (on a taxonomy of compliment responses, see e.g. Herbert 1990): accepting it may give an impression of immodesty; rejecting it may transmit the idea that the recipient disagrees with, hence does not respect or look up to, the complimenter.

In the present dataset, the conjunction of compliments with sharp criticisms and accusations happens next:

(6) *Many elders have depth and character after what they've experienced and are a joy to be around*. But some things they do are devastating to everyone else I.e. brexit which the young will continue to pay a hefty price for decades. Using the NHS for attention seeking on a scale that cripples it.
[Reply:] Thank you for such a patronising comment

The first sentence in comment (5), phrased in a non-conventional, creative way, attributes a string of desirable features to elders. Yet, the next sentence quickly switches to conveying, again, stereotypes against seniors through

abusive generalisations. In other words, there is an obvious mismatch, signalled by the conjunction "but", between the complimentary content of the first part of the comment and the accusatory content of the second, as if the compliment were meant to catch the targets off-guard and make them lose face more drastically afterwards (cf. Taylor 2016). Curiously, the comment given in reply ("Thank you for such a patronising comment") is, in itself, a case of mock thanks, with a very interesting occurrence of meta-language, i.e. the use of a first-order evaluative comment to classify the previous utterance.

The following comment, meanwhile, is a clear case of mock politeness in that the compliment is ironical: what looks like a surface form of praise, regarding the admiration that the so-called baby boomers deserve from the generations down the line (again, a non-formulaic compliment), turns out to be contradicted by the rest of the utterance, which violently attacks this age cohort for purportedly supporting Brexit:

(7) Hey B00mers, *your children and grandchildren will remember you fondly when you're gone..* You've been handed everything on a gold platter since birth and then ruined it for the rest of us by leaving the EU. Will go down as the most selfish generation in history.

The next comment, more drastically still, consists of one single ironical statement, a statement whose mismatch occurs halfway – from deserving an honorary prize to being described in very demeaning terms, senior adults seem to be the butt of an aggressive joke:

(8) You old codgers *desrve a medal each* for draining our economy with your entitlement, constant whining, your sticky hands grabbing freebies while the rest of us are working hard to pay for it all

Once again, ageism is rendered in an initially disguised form, only to give way to violent, prejudiced diatribes against the elderly enjoying social benefits.

5.3 Mock agreement

The importance of agreement to politeness goes back to the early approaches. Leech (1983: 138) clearly establishes a "Maxim of Agreement" in his discussion of maxims of politeness, and frames it within a "tendency to exaggerate agreement with other people, and to mitigate disagreement

by expressing regret, partial agreement, etc.". Likewise, Brown and Levinson (1987) place the strategies of "Seeking agreement" and "Avoiding disagreement" under their list of positive politeness strategies. Clearly, pretending to be in consonance with an opinion or judgment expressed by the hearer is likely to shield their positive face, i.e. build their impression that the opinions they expressed are valuable, competent and knowledgeable – hence, that they are liked and admired. Later research into disagreement has highlighted its impoliteness potential (on an overview, see Ermida 2017). Angouri and Locher (2012: 1549), however, remark that it is the ways in which disagreement is expressed, rather than its occurrence per se, that will have an impact on relational issues, and determine whether it is felt as face-aggravating, face-maintaining, or face-enhancing. Walkinshaw (2015) also points out that disagreements can be regarded as supportive, for instance when disagreeing with a negative self-assessment.

In the present dataset, the strategic use of agreement seems, at first sight, to signal a concurring attitude, a friendly position of support – but, on closer analysis, the semantic import of the whole utterance switches to the opposite:

(9) *Yay, free travel!* A lot of old people can't wipe their own bottom anymore but whatever.

The exclamatory token "yay" opens the comment, explicitly indicating (excited) agreement with seniors enjoying the free bus pass policy. However, the sentence that follows completely inverts the truthfulness of such an attitude, and instead phrases the faulty argument that the elders are too crippled to enjoy it – a typical ageist stereotype. The sincerity condition for agreements is obviously at odds with the propositional content of the second part of the comment, creating a serious speech act mismatch, and a drastic shift from surface politeness to flagrant impoliteness.

Similarly, the following comment makes a supportive claim about the same issue via the agreement formula "right". However, the fact that the assertion is obviously ironical, i.e. false, makes the utterance a case of mock agreement, which can also be read as conveying a ridiculing intention:

(10) *Right,* free bus passes are important for the economy.

The next comment, made in the same discussion thread, is yet another way to express surface agreement with the government's free bus pass measure, by resorting to the agreement marker "definitely". It is purportedly authored

by a 59-year-old, who ironically claims to be looking forward to enjoying it upon turning sixty. Yet, the last part of his utterance, after the adversative conjunction "but", cancels the concurring attitude by humorously mentioning death, which creates a sudden semantic clash. Of course, the underlying ageist connotation is that a person as young as 60 is already close to the grave:

(11) I recently moved up to Scotland and turned 59 last week and *definitely* am quite looking forward to having a free bus pass next year, but I'm looking forward to death even more.

An interesting case occurs in the next passage. The commenter starts by using the agreement formula "ok", followed by an anti-ageism assertion. But what comes next – a series of remarks about older people "dithering" and wasting other people's time – completely invalidates the opening claim, and proves it to be insincere, hence infelicitous:

(12) *OK ageism sucks*. Mind you, I'm only 58 but I do make a conscious effort not to dither like so many others my age plus do. You know the ones, always blocking the aisles on planes as they retrieve their jaffacakes or just standing and waiting until all the shopping is through the till before even imagining that they might actually need money.

Ridicule is a rather productive strategy in the mock agreement category. The following comments are another two cases of cancelling a previous agreement (that ageist discrimination does exist) by invoking ageist stereotypes, regarding both physical decline, namely deafness, and intellectual decline, namely memory loss:

(13) *I'm sure* 95 year olds are discriminated against but then they probably can't even hear you so it doesn't really matter.

(14) *Aboslutely*, seniors should file a complaint against every ageist attack, but as they've forgotten their name they can't do it can they

A good example of humour mixed with mock agreement takes place next. A previous comment on the "invisibility" of older people, who complain about being ignored in public places, meets with an agreement token, "True". Yet, the adversative clause cancels the implied solidarity effect by triggering a humorous clash – between a sad, regrettable situation, that

older people passively fall victim to, and a voluntary, deliberate criminal activity, shoplifting:

(15) The older you get, the more invisible you become!
[Reply:] *True*, but doesn't work when you are shoplifting.

5.4 Mock apologies

Apologising, perhaps the quintessential politeness strategy and the most widespread cross-culturally, aims to redress the hearer's negative face, unlike the three previous categories. Brown and Levinson define negative face as the want of every hearer to have their "freedom of action unhindered" and their "attention unimpeded" (1987: 129), which covers their "basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction" (1987: 61). In apologising, the speaker admits wrongdoing regarding a past action which is not beneficial to the hearer and is of their responsibility (thus threatening their own positive face), even though the action may also be imminent, as in the routine formula "Sorry to bother you, but… (e.g. can you tell me time?)". The awareness that the speaker's action intrudes upon the hearer's space and causes inconvenience and/or harm lies at the basis of the sincerity condition for apologies, which implies a certain degree of sorrow or remorse (Austin 1962: 79 calls it "repentance") and turns them into a request for forgiveness.

The variety of Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs) for apologies shows that, just like thanking and agreeing, apologising has a range of "formulaic, routinized expressions in which the speaker's apology is made explicit" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 290): e.g. *sorry*, *excuse me*, *I apologise*, *forgive me*, *pardon me*, *I regret that*, *I'm afraid*. As Jucker and Taavitsainen (2008: 241) remark, these lexicalised expressions of responsibility and regret are either speaker-oriented or hearer-oriented: in the former case, they focus on the expression of the speaker's feelings (*I'm sorry, I regret, I'm afraid*), whereas in the latter they are "requests to the addressee to change his or her attitude, to show generosity and to forgive the offence perpetrated by the speaker", usually expressed through directives (*excuse me, forgive me, pardon me*).

The study of insincere apologies has pointed out the exploitation of such speech acts for personal gain. Kampf (2009), for instance, elaborates on what he calls public non-apologies as a means for image restoration. Other approaches have focused on signals to identify insincere apologies: Murphy (2014: 199), who examines apologies in the discourse of politicians, regards as less prototypical (i.e. more marginal members of the category)

those apologies made when the attitude of the speaker towards the offense is dismissive or trivialising. Crucially, Beeching (2019) investigates ironic uses of apologetic IFIDs, and argues that they are non-denotative and rely, rather, on a pragmatic mismatch used to perform mock politeness – exactly the line of analysis adopted in this article.

Even though the rather formal apologetic performative verb ("I apologise") is, not surprisingly, absent from our typically colloquial dataset, "sorry", the classic expression of regret, is often used as a mock politeness strategy, as seen next:

(16) *Sorry*, truth hurts, boomers ripped off the future generations. They don't deserve any perks or discounts and should be made to pay for their self indulgence.

(17) *So sorry*, wrinklies, but you had the best of everything. Cheap houses, which meant lots could afford 2nd homes, good wages, stay at home house wife's and free stuff when retired. Wish they'd just all clear off to the marigold hotel

The most striking feature of these two comments is that the expression of regret is in glaring mismatch with the violent accusations performed afterwards. Usually, apologies contain a future-oriented strategy which Olshtain and Cohen (1983) call "promise of forbearance": the apologetic speaker, in admitting regret, commits to not incurring in the same wrongdoing again. However, what happens in (16) and (17) above is that, after expressing regret, the speaker goes on to phrase a range of rather offensive, indeed hateful (i.e. prejudiced and discriminatory), remarks about seniors (who are mentioned in the 3rd person in the former case, but directly addressed in the latter). Of course, anticipatory apologies do occur in genuinely polite exchanges, where they are, as Jacobson (2004: 198) suggests, "disarming or softening". Here, however, they seem to be a mere surface politeness ritual, which completely violates the sincerity condition for apologies, showing the speaker to have a manifestly contemptuous attitude towards the offense s/he is about to perpetrate.

The combination of an apologetic formula with the adversative conjunction "but" happens again in (18), where "Excuse me" is followed by a very toxic appraisal of "brexiteers", many of whom are usually, even if wrongly, taken to be senior citizens, plus a direct insult:

(18) *Excuse me*, but every over 60 that voted for brexit should have their taxes tripled for destroying our country. Shameful traitors.

Actually, the statement that over-sixties having voted for Brexit should be financially punished, for which the speaker gives an initial surface apology, resembles one of the possible offences that Deutschmann (2003: 64) lists as underlying the expression of true apologies, namely retaliation. Indeed, the last of his nine offences reads "Offences involving breach of consensus", and he exemplifies them by referring to disagreeing, contradicting, reprimanding, denying, and retaliating, among others. But the point is that in (18) there is a mismatch between the seriousness of the punishment proposed, and especially of the slander that follows it, and the light-heartedness of the opening apology. Again, it is as if the mock polite speech act served as an enabler of hate speech, as an introductory, triggering exculpation device, after which everything becomes admissible.

Redundancy in the workplace, a cause of great concern for older workers in the comment boards under focus, is the motto of the following thread. The ageing participant shares his anxiety regarding job hunting after being let go, but instead of receiving solidarity and support, gets to be derisively reprimanded – but not without a previous patronising apology:

(19) Try looking for work at 60, I've got 6 years till I'm an OAP I need to work nobody gets back to you on your job application, was told we are not giving you the job as you'll be at the Doctors and Hospital all the time. just want a van driving job.

[Reply:] *feel sorry for you*, but should have studied a little harder!

The following two comments again focus on the sensitive issue of access to health care. In (20) the commenter resorts to the "I mean no offence" formula, which typically signals the imminent expression of an offence, and the speaker's awareness of it, whereas in (21), the insincere expression of regret is phrased by means of the explicit performative verb:

(20) *I mean no offence* to those who are genuine but if the Govt could control all these elderly blocking hospitals for the smallest ailment, preventing younger people from having access to treatment, some old folks just go there to socialise Perhaps we do need a nanny state…to whip people into shape.

(21) *I regret to inform you* that my doctor's surgery is packed out with elderly people sucking up all the resources. They have outlived their life expectancy and are on borrowed time at huge expense to the working people of this nation.

In both cases above, the typical pragmatic mismatch between the performance of a conventionalised speech act and the propositional content that ensues is obvious. In fact, the apologetic preface proves entirely empty, as it precedes a series of ageist invectives with no moral qualms whatsoever, ranging from ungrounded accusations to death wishes and fantasist images of physical punishment, where old people are whipped into proper behaviour. Thus the ideological construction of a powerless age cohort, that supposedly deserve their rights to be cut short, is freely broadcast.

The last example of mock politeness in this textual analysis section is an interesting case of reported ageism. Comment (22) is a short narrative by an elderly woman who reproduces, via direct speech, the exact words her doctor told her, which, yet again, are initiated by an insincere apology marker. The commenter's closing assessment of the verbal exchange proves to be a very lucid understanding of two key issues at stake in ageist behaviour: depriving the elderly of their social status by downgrading the address forms (using Christian names instead of last names with titles) and depriving them of their intellectual status by treating them like children or idiots. The passage is also a very interesting case of first-order, metalinguistic evaluation, where impoliteness, and by extension disrespect for the elderly (i.e. ageism), are explicitly spotted:

(22) I am 71 and retired from the NHS. A young female GP rang me to tell me that my cholesterol was raised at 6.0. I told her that I would lower it with diet rather than take a statin, and she replied "*I'm sorry* I can't make you any younger or less post-menopausal" (using my christian name throughout the conversation). I couldn't understand her logic nor the reason for the ageism and it is not the first time a GP has treated me like an idiot.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore online conversations where ageist hate speech – regarded as a type of propaganda – is conveyed in indirect, disguised ways. In order to do so, it focused on a social media subset of news commentary, collected from the NETLANG corpus, where participants discuss sensitive age-related topics, such as health care, retirement pensions, freebies, and also ageism. Even though direct, bald-on-record expressions of ageist prejudice were often found in the dataset, the analysis concentrated only on indirect renderings of age-based hate speech. The hypothesis was that online

commenters resort to mock politeness strategies – i.e. apparently friendly, supportive and respectful phrasings – in order to mask their discriminatory illocutionary intent.

The qualitative analysis undertaken has confirmed the pervasive occurrence of mock politeness strategies to express ageist propaganda. As a preliminary finding, such strategies were found to redress both positive face (in the case of thanks, compliments and expressions of agreement) and negative face (in the case of apologies), while covering a great diversity of linguistic realisations. Indeed, the comments illustrate a range of linguistic phrasings of politeness strategies, from routine formulae to less conventionalised expressions of politeness. While the former lend themselves to a keyword search in a corpus-based approach, the latter have proved much more difficult to spot. Overall, three of the four speech acts under focus (namely, thanking, agreeing and apologising) were often found to be routinely realised through lexicalised expressions. Complimenting, however, proved more averse to ready-made formulas, being conveyed through more creative linguistic choices, and thus requiring a more arduous manual search.

By looking at the discursive surroundings of the polite speech acts, contextually embedded events as they are, the analysis proceeded to examine the intra- and inter-comment co-texts. The findings confirm that all four categories of politeness strategies are framed as apparently – or initially – polite, while carrying an underlying hateful content that becomes manifest afterwards. This process of "speech act mismatch" is realised as follows. In all the cases examined, the mismatch proves to be "internal" (cf. Culpeper 2011) or "co-textual" (cf. Taylor 2015), occurring between two discrepant linguistic behaviours, in a garden-path structure. Yet, unlike previous accounts of mock politeness, the present study has revealed that the mismatch is two-fold and two-phased. First, it occurs within the mock polite illocutionary act, be it thanking, complimenting, agreeing, or apologising, whose infelicity lies in the non-observance of the sincerity condition: in other words, they do not count as expressions of the corresponding psychological states, namely gratitude, admiration, concord, and regret. Secondly, the mismatch occurs between this initial mock speech act and a second, discrepant, speech act, which tends to be a mixture of different illocutionary forces, such as accusation, criticism and complaint: the propositional content of the second part of the comment is strongly at odds with the surface politeness of the first part, and indicates blatant disrespect and contempt for the target.

All in all, the concept of mock politeness has shown to be a productive category in analysing the expression of (ageist) hate speech in indirect,

masked, or disguised ways. The deployment of surface politeness strategies that are infelicitous qua insincere is used to introduce, signal, and enable the expression of hateful prejudice against the elderly. What is more, the falsely apparent redressive function such strategies serve not only gives way to, but actually aggravates, the face-attack potential by producing ridicule and a patronising effect.

Crucially, the results of this study have confirmed the consistent existence of ageism in online discourse and signal the importance of future studies. By addressing the problem of prejudice against the elderly on social media, academic scholarship may help raise social awareness about a frequently neglected age cohort. In particular, the description of the linguistic forms and pragmatic strategies of ageist hate speech may contribute to a more fine-tuned detection of its disguised occurrences. Hopefully, it may also impact policy-making and organised action with a view to protecting senior adults on- and off-line.

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