



Life's Too Short to be polite: *Exploiting impoliteness and rudeness in Gervais And Merchant's humour about physical difference*

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ABSTRACT: What follows is a qualitative analysis of the use of impoliteness for comic effect in the British comedy series *Life's Too Short* written by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant. Because each episode centres on Warwick Davis, an actor with restricted growth, or dwarfism, there is a considerable risk of superiority or disparagement-type comedy about a taboo subject like physical difference, stigmatized in current British culture. In this analysis I set out to show that the authors' use of impoliteness plays an important role in allowing them to write comedy centred on this sensitive issue.

The starting-point of the analysis is Culpeper's proposal that impoliteness can be entertaining, which in this case is applied to scripted comedy rather than impromptu or semi-spontaneous examples of impoliteness for purposes of entertainment. Referring to aspects of impoliteness applied to entertainment, and with reference to the concept of face, and to superiority, incongruity, and relief humour theories, the paper suggests there are at least six techniques by which the authors use impoliteness to reprise physical difference for a contemporary comedy series.

KEY WORDS: docucomedy; disability; impoliteness; rudeness; humour



INTRODUCTION

Life's Too Short, written by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, is a docucomedy series starring Warwick Davis, an actor who suffers from dwarfism. In this series Davis plays an exaggerated version of himself as a former bit part actor who now runs a talent agency for dwarves called 'Dwarves for Hire'. The very fact that the two writers build their comedy round a character with dwarfism leaves them open to the charge of using an outmoded, superiority-based form of humour to get cheap laughs; a charge that was duly levelled at them by some reviewers and interest groups alike, not entirely surprisingly, as humour based on physical difference is currently regarded as one of the least acceptable forms of comedy by the general viewing public (see BBC, Broadcasting Standards Commission, Independent Television Commission).

Gervais and Merchant are widely regarded as a ground-breaking comedy writing team, and presumably their choice of subject does not betoken a sudden dearth of ideas, but a deliberate attempt to reprise physical difference humour and to find ways of making Warwick an acceptable butt, even though the category he belongs to is widely expected in contemporary British culture to inhibit laughter rather than encourage it.

Life's Too Short is a mock documentary, defined by Mills (128) as comedy *vérité*. As a genre, it shows comic characters in simulated real life situations and, by and large, they become comic by behaving in ways that depart from the kind of behaviour that would be expected of them in 'real life'. For example, in the case of *Life's Too Short*, viewers see Warwick interacting in a variety of contexts, ranging from professional (workplaces), service (shops, restaurants, accountants, dating agencies), to social encounters (parties and wedding receptions). In 'real life' such encounters are conventionally associated with forms of linguistic politeness, facework, or at least 'politic' (Watts) behaviour, which may not be marked by overt politeness but is deemed adequate to the demands of the situation. Because of Warwick's physical size, in 'real life' it would be reasonable to expect encounters to be accompanied by significant levels of the kind of tactfulness associated with political correctness. Part of the comic effect achieved is due to the rudeness and inconsiderateness with which Warwick is repeatedly treated in such situations. Such behaviour is unexpected and therefore potentially amusing, as its comic effects correspond to the incongruity model of humour. On the other hand, the fact that his size is the source of much comedy conforms to the superiority model of humour, which involves laughter at a category that is viewed as a legitimate butt or target because of its difference from the joke-sharing community. Were it to end there, it would be reasonable to accuse Gervais and Merchant of merely writing vicarious, superiority comedy, in that the putdowns endured by Warwick are apparently delivered by 'real life' people from whom viewers can disassociate themselves, while still enjoying voyeuristically (Culpeper, "Impoliteness" 44) the spectacle of the putdown.

However, Warwick himself is also rude and impolite in many of these interactions, displaying a significant lack of tact and sensitivity, which puts him on the same level as many of the other interactants, including those who are rude or impolite to him.



Lockyer and Pickering (2005) state that “humour at once permits, legitimates and exonerates an insult” and that “comic discourse allows the contraband of offence to be smuggled aboard”. In this paper I consider the role of rudeness and impoliteness (Culpeper, “Impoliteness”) in making Warwick an acceptable butt for comedy. Additionally, I examine how the writers use rudeness and impoliteness as a social and human leveller that also complicates the viewer’s perception of the kind of butt or target Warwick is.

IMPOLITENESS, RUDENESS AND COMEDY

Politeness and impoliteness theory largely concern ‘real life’ interactions, both mediated and non-mediated. Thus, for example, Culpeper (“Politeness” 526) uses a dinner table scenario to illustrate both social norm and pragmatic views of politeness, and when referring to mediated interactions (“Impoliteness”), he refers to chat shows and quiz shows or documentaries, formats in which participants perform (im)politeness with varying degrees of spontaneity. As Dynel (105) observes, “impoliteness has not yet been discussed in the context of humour theory except for providing a framework for analysis of chosen forms of conversational humour.” The data I analyse in this article is written specifically to achieve certain comic effects by, among other things, a deliberate and calibrated use of impoliteness or rudeness. Like Dynel (106), in this article I aim to “discuss the humorous potential of impoliteness in fictional media discourse”. I do not aim to say whether the resulting comedy is more acceptable; I limit myself here to identifying different uses of impoliteness and their possible role in diluting the impact of physical difference comedy.

To do this, I will draw on those areas of impoliteness theory that will help me to articulate and define how impoliteness is used to achieve different comic effects. Culpeper (“Impoliteness” 44-46) has been in the forefront in this area, noting that humour involves impoliteness and also claiming that entertainment involves impoliteness and offensiveness. He indicates four ways in which impoliteness can be considered entertaining: 1) the intrinsic enjoyment of witnessing argument for its own sake; 2) the “thrill of potential violence” ensuing from impoliteness; 3) the voyeuristic pleasure of witnessing “colourful confrontationalism”; 4) the superiority of the audience, which is related to superiority humour theories and the entertainment afforded by witnessing someone in a “worse state than oneself”, combined with the safety of the audience, in that the audience is unscathed and safe from the unpleasantness it is witnessing.

FACE AND IMPOLITENESS

In Culpeper’s (“Impoliteness” 39) view, “impoliteness concerns offence, and face still represents the best way of understanding offence”. In Erving Goffman’s classic definition, “the term face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact”. Goffman (*Interaction* 6) glosses this pithy statement as follows:



A person tends to experience an immediate emotional response to the face which a contact with others allows him; he cathects his face; his "feelings" become attached to it. If the encounter sustains an image of him that he has long taken for granted, he probably will not have feelings about the matter. If events establish a face for him that is better than he might have expected he is likely to "feel good"; if his ordinary expectations are not fulfilled, one expects that he will "feel bad" or "feel hurt".

The last response described by Goffman is the result of what he (*Interaction* 14) calls a "threat to face" and Goffman indicates that there are three principal ways of achieving this: inadvertently in the form of "*fauxpas, gaffes, boners or bricks*"; "maliciously and spitefully, with the intention of causing open insult"; or through "incidental offenses"—"an action the offender performs in spite of its offensive consequences, although not out of spite". Culpeper ("*Impoliteness*" 63) makes a similar distinction in his impoliteness model, in which impoliteness is neither unintentional, or incidental; he also introduces a distinction between rudeness and impoliteness ("*Reflections*" 30) by which "the term rudeness could be reserved for cases where offence is unintentionally caused [...] whilst the term impoliteness could be used for cases where the offence was intentionally caused". Although Terkourafi (62) suggests the reverse, this is the impoliteness model I refer to when distinguishing between the kinds of offensiveness involved in Gervais and Merchant's physical difference comedy. With reference to the intentionality underlying impoliteness, Dynel (108) makes an important point about the validity of media fiction for this kind of analysis:

... film discourse seems to lend itself to analysis more easily than natural language corpora (Coupland 2004) inasmuch as characters' interactions devised by the film crew must be, by nature, available to an external hearer, the viewer. If film discourse is devised properly, the viewer is granted access to all relevant information, which may not be the case in real life conversation serving as research data.

This is especially true when gauging levels of intentionality, because the viewer/analyst can refer to a whole range of accompanying prosodic and kinetic signals to assess whether the actor is simulating intentionality, and hence impoliteness, or not.

Apart from debating ways to offend face in interaction, a more nuanced account of face is useful to account for the scope of face threatening acts. Helen Spencer-Oatey (654) indicates the complexity of the kind of "personal value an individual claims for himself", principally by suggesting that face is bound up with the concept of self and identity (639), which she claims "are particularly pertinent for the study of face" (642). Quoting Simon (64-66), Spencer-Oatey (642) lists the functions of identity as follows:

- It helps to provide people with a sense of belonging (through their relational and collective self aspects);
- It helps people 'locate' themselves in their social worlds by helping to define where they belong and where they do not belong in relation to others, it helps anchor them in their social worlds, giving them a sense of place;
- The many facets of identity help provide people with self-respect and self-esteem.



These insights into the complex underpinnings of face are also helpful in appreciating the range of face threat used for comic effect in *Life's Too Short*. As a sufferer of dwarfism, Warwick Davis's social identity is obviously at stake. However, it is important to take into account other aspects of self and identity for a more complete view of the kind of butt Warwick is. Spencer-Oatey (649) makes point that "people's evaluation of their own attributes [...] could be influenced by the relative importance of their various personal constructs. This in turn could influence what attributes are more face sensitive for them than others, and the degree to which they are face sensitive". In the case of Warwick, for example, his physical attributes are not necessarily more face sensitive than aspects of his character and social attributes that he prefers to stress in his life as 'documented' by the comedy *vérité* format, not least his celebrity status, his belief in his popularity, and his pretensions to philanthropy. The definition of the comic effects achieved through impoliteness or rudeness will also be made with reference to these aspects of face.

IMPOLITENESS AND HUMOUR THEORIES

As I am focusing on the use of impoliteness in mediated fictional humour, defining the kinds of comic effect achieved by the use of impoliteness will entail reference to the three main umbrellas of humour theories (Ross) and their use and function in the genre of sitcom (see Mills 76-99). Impoliteness about physical difference can be defined with reference to superiority theories, incongruity theories, or release theories, depending on what aspects of impoliteness are accented in each comic context; sometimes all three definitions may overlap simultaneously, which contributes to the particular kind of edginess associated with the comedy of Gervais and Merchant.

COMEDY AND SUPERIORITY

The very fact that this docucomedy features a character with dwarfism involves the risk of superiority humour in which "people laugh when they feel a kind of superiority particularly over other people" and "the butt is representative of a group perceived as inferior" (Ross 55). This can be seen as risky because in the current cultural climate, as Mills (78) points out, "sitcom is more commonly critiqued for its mockery of the vulnerable", and the resulting comedy is more likely to be stigmatised as politically incorrect or, to use Ross's term (55), guilty of inadequate "social awareness". Such reservations about the way comedy can generate a sense of superiority are not exclusive to contemporary culture. Mills (77) reminds us of Plato's observation that "a person's malice, shows itself in pleasure at the misfortunes of those around him" and this is particularly acute in comedy based on physical difference.



COMEDY AND INCONGRUITY

The task that Gervais and Merchant face, then, is that of eliciting laughter by employing a butt that traditionally excites a sense of superiority in ways that stimulate other feelings and attitudes. One of the ways they attempt to do this is through incongruity. In the context of sitcom, incongruity humour theories can describe how comedy works by “creating an incongruity between expectations [...] and what actually plays out within each episode” (Mills 82). Incongruity theories cover a wide range of techniques for confounding expectations; many of them, for instance, emphasise how humour is achieved through linguistic incongruities produced by manipulating rules of language use in ways that play with the expected meaning of words in context (see Ross 36-39, Ritchie 40; Goatly 21). However, Mills (86) also points out that “incongruity theory demonstrates that humour rests on diversions from social norms”, adding “the theory suggests that comedy only makes sense to viewers who understand and accept what is normal, for without such norms any incongruity is not sufficiently marked”. Dynel (136) notes that the “humorous incongruity underpinning impoliteness is typically based on novelty manifest in diversion from conventionalized linguistic patterns”. Much of the impoliteness and rudeness in *Life’s Too Short* produces laughter because it departs from the kind of linguistic behaviour viewers can be assumed to expect in interactions involving a physically challenged character like Warwick and other ‘normal’ characters, who are often service providers or even subordinates. Part of the comedy is the difference between their status and Warwick’s in that particular context and the incongruity of the way they address him, or the way Warwick himself addresses or talks about others, particularly sensitive categories like gays, women and dwarves themselves.

COMEDY AND RELEASE

Mills (87-88) poses the question as to why “such incongruity should be pleasurable”, and proposes that it might be so because “it is a respite from the mundanity and certainties of everyday life”, which makes sitcom a “powerful tool for the analysis of the norms of society, for it repeatedly refuses to conform to such conventions and offers representations quite at odds with what is normal, acceptable, and conventional, of course it is precisely for these reasons that the sitcom might also be seen as offensive, out of control and troublesome”, a charge levelled by various parties at *Life’s Too Short*.

The humorous feelings generated by impoliteness and rudeness can also be defined by reference to the relief theory of comedy, which emphasizes the feelings of release involved in breaking taboos (Ross 63-70). In *Life’s Too Short*, the superiority elements of the comedy based on physical difference infringe a taboo set in place by the current cultural requirement of political correctness and therefore create and overlap with relief interpretations of comedy. As Mills (88-9) points out, “in the last decade or so this has often been described as ‘anti-PL’ humour, with creators precisely defining their jokes as ones which refuse to conform to prescribed ideas of



acceptability". Gervais and Merchant are no stranger to such humour. In *The Office* (BBC 2001-3) they produce comedy from one of the character's attitudes to wheelchair users, and Mills (88-9) suggests that while such humour may criticize the character's inability to conform to social expectations (which also entails incongruity effects), it "is a testament to the idea that many people feel socially proscribed in discussing disability and these comedies allow such repression to be laughed away". Thus the traces of superiority humour and the recurrence of incongruity humour, both involving issues of physical difference in *Life's Too Short*, combine to produce the effects associated with relief humour.

The recurrent simultaneous overlap of humorous and comic effects of different types often means that the viewer is rarely entirely sure how s/he is laughing at Warwick Davis or other characters, and this is also a technique which may be responsible for diluting the force of comedy based on physical difference. Viewers may experience the forbidden pleasure of superiority humour vicariously through characters who are mouthpieces for it, and can thus also be viewed as the real butt of the comedy; at the same time, they may enjoy the surprising incongruity of the behaviour, given current expectations about how physical difference is negotiated in interactions; this may also bring feelings of release from proscriptive taboos that are often perceived as inordinately repressive by many people.

AUDIENCE AND HUMOUR

As Erving Goffman (*Forms* 138) observes, "much radio and TV talk is not addressed (as ordinary podium talk is) to a massed but visible grouping, but to imagined recipients." This introduces us to the role played by the participation framework. Traditional sitcom conventionally presents situations in which comic characters interact ostensibly unaware of the presence of an audience, even though it is betrayed, either by real laughter, if the programme is performed and recorded before a live studio audience, or by canned laughter, added in the production phase, to get radio listeners or television viewers to laugh along with the programme. Unlike traditional sitcom, the participation framework of the comedy *vérité* acknowledges the presence both of a production crew and, by implication, the audience for whom the documentary is being produced. This open acknowledgment is conveyed by the character of Warwick Davis, either in the form of interviews, in which he talks directly to the camera, as if answering a specific question or expatiating on a topic that has been put to him, or by breaking off from various activities in which he is involved to comment on what is happening. Acknowledgment of the audience is also achieved in those moments when characters break out of their "self-enclosed, make-believe realm" (Goffman, *Forms* 139) to look directly at the camera, often using it to communicate non-verbally, by means of facial expression or eye movement, attitudes about the events unfolding in the situation to the various audiences or overlooking participants.

This framework contributes to a particular range of comic effects that fall within the theories outlined above. Although the participants know they are being filmed, they are frequently incapable of restraining themselves from impoliteness and



rudeness. Such behaviour can produce the superiority, incongruity and, cumulatively, relief effects, as well.

CELEBRITY RUDENESS

This comic genre itself simulates the real life, warts and all behaviour of the characters, many of whom are celebrities playing themselves as social incompetents, whereas in 'real life' their image is usually carefully mediated and manicured by the media and film industry. Part of the frisson produced by this comedy is, therefore, due to the unexpected spectacle of these media stars falling to earth as they fail to manage one rapport after another.

In episode five, Johnny Depp hires Warwick so that he can study him in preparation for playing the part of the fairy tale dwarf Rumpelstiltskin in a forthcoming film. This, therefore, is a professional encounter that, at least in its initial phases, would normally entail a certain amount of politeness or at least politic behaviour as both parties adjust to each other to establish a working rapport. But this is comedy, and although Depp does express approval from the very first turn: 'ooh oh wow that's perfect', 'that' refers to Warwick not as an individual, but to his size or shape, and therefore constitutes a direct face-threat. The actor then proceeds to use direct speech acts in the form of blunt imperatives: "You just move. Just go and do whatever you would normally do", before switching on a voice recorder into which he dictates "He's got a crazy little walk", and later "he's kinna like a grub, coming out of an apple, seeing the world for the first time". What should be backstage or 'back region' behaviour (Goffman, "Presentation" 109-140), expressed in private or written for personal use, and therefore off-record, is performed onstage or in the 'front region', and therefore becomes an on-record face-threat of a rather serious kind, firstly because it makes uncomplimentary comments about Warwick's size, but also because it refers to him in the third person as if he were not directly involved in the interaction, and thus unworthy of even minimal face-work, outlined by Goffman (1990: 10) as follows:

Just as the member of any group is expected to have self-respect, so also is he expected to sustain a standard of considerateness; he is expected to go to certain lengths to save the feelings and the face of others present, and he is expected to do this willingly and spontaneously because of emotional identification with the others and their feelings.

In terms of Culpeper's model, Depp's behaviour would appear to be aggravated rudeness, in that it is essentially unintentional; Depp is portrayed as being so involved in his preparation that he is incapable of extending the normal courtesies of a professional interaction or Goffman's minimal standard of considerateness to Warwick. There are clearly elements of superiority humour at work in this episode, though there appear to be two sources for the audience's feeling of superiority. Because his size and shape occasion Depp's delight and approval that takes the form of insults, Warwick may be considered a very traditional butt of superiority-based humour. At the same time, Depp is also a butt of such humour. Despite the fame and glamour of the version of himself he is playing here, he emerges as a social incompetent and chronic egotist, who is unaware of how outrageously he is treating Warwick. It would appear,



therefore, that one of the methods by which Gervais and Merchant reprise traditional superiority-based humour is by expressing it vicariously, so that the mouthpiece, in this case Depp, becomes the butt of the joke precisely because of his outrageous tactlessness and insensitivity. This is a comic technique made famous by the character Alf Garnett in the series *Till Death Us Do Part* (Speight 1965-75). As Mills (80) says, comedy like this risks a crucial ambiguity because it can be seen as either critiquing or supporting the outrageous views expressed. This is precisely what may account for the divided critical opinion about this series.

PEER IMPOLITENESS

Though a member of a category that has been traditionally targeted as the butt of superiority based humour, Warwick is repeatedly offensive to and about his peers. This can take the form of confirming unflattering stereotypes, as for example, in episode one, where he is called to the set where one of his agency dwarves, Peter, has been hired for a production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. Peter does not know any of the songs, and Warwick asks in disbelief "You're a dwarf how can you not know *Hi ho hi ho?*" To which Peter replies: "I've never heard it before". The face threat implied in this instance of stereotyping is diluted by the fact that it is expressed by another dwarf. This appears to make it even more legitimate to laugh vicariously at humour based on physical difference. This kind of offensiveness is taken to even greater extremes later in the same episode. Following a meeting of the movement for 'little people', of which he is vice-president, Warwick criticizes the President, Anthony Braden: "I've seen him say to young dwarves in there 'ooh you can be an astronaut, you can be a doctor'. No they can't. They're too small. Not going to be a doctor. Be a proctologist maybe". Here, too, the vicarious taboo offence is legitimized because the mouthpiece belongs to the same category as the butt of the joke. There is also evidence that this technique of legitimizing the butt by using a peer to carry out the putdown is also attenuated by other distracting elements. One of these is the way physical difference humour is defused by the metadiscourse on the appropriate cultural knowledge for dwarves, expressed in Warwick's dismay that Peter doesn't know *Whistle while you work*. Others derive from multiple ironies concerning Warwick's character. Thus Warwick puts down Peter for being less stereotyped than himself, the would-be "sophisticated dwarf about town" (episode 1). When he claims of his fellow dwarves "truth is they can't act. There's a reason they're bowling balls or being fired from cannons, it's cos it's all they're good at", this appears extremely ironical when measured against his behaviour and treatment in the humiliating episode with Johnny Depp. Moreover, Warwick's putdowns in such scenes are also partly deserved because, rather than giving the job to one of the dwarves in his agency, he takes it for himself, seizing the opportunity to rub shoulders with a famous celebrity. Ultimately, these ironies add to the characterization of Warwick, depicting him as ambitious for recognition, confused about his allegiances and inconsistent in his values. It is true that in his desire to be taken as an equal he is prone to adopt a superiority stance to his peers and that this entails much superiority based humour that depends on impoliteness and rudeness,



but the ironies that undermine his stance also counterbalance the comedy about physical difference with comic scenes that target his character.

FAILED BANTER

Banter or mock impoliteness (Leech 238) can be defined as the use of impolite language or face threatening language in a way that is meant to strengthen a bond between interactants. It normally consists of insults or face threats that actually show interactants are on very good terms. Because it is meant to demonstrate liking and affection through insult, it is a form of positive facework that can easily go wrong, especially if the other interactant fails to perceive the friendly intention or feels that the face threat has gone too far to be considered acceptable. Having separated from his wife, Warwick returns to the dating agency he originally met her through. The agency is run by Toby, who is presented as a friend by Warwick: "So this is Toby" and their position side by side at the desk and their body language suggests that their relation is informal and friendly, which probably accounts for Toby's use of the following banter: "I was so proud of finding Warwick [pointing] a wife when, I don't, he, when he first came in, I was like [facial expression of disbelief] 'Right, here's [pointing at Warwick] a challenge Toby'". Warwick, however, is not entirely comfortable with this, as his facial expression suggests. The participation framework is instrumental in turning the banter into a rude face threat. Had there been no overlooking audiences involved, it is quite possible that the banter would have been successful; but Toby fails to calculate the effect that the same banter would have in front of other parties. When Warwick spots a woman in the data base who interests him, saying, "she's a stunner, isn't she?", Toby pleasantly replies "if I send you out, she'll get straight on the phone to me; goin' to be telling me what you palming me of with some midget", once again miscalculating the effect of his words, as is made clear by Warwick when he looks askance at the camera.

By openly referring to Warwick's size, Toby's banter is conceivably meant to play it down and show that between them it isn't an issue, failing to see that in this particular participation framework Warwick is sensitive about it. The difference between this and other examples is that through banter Toby sets out to perform positive face work that is meant to further endear him to Warwick; as in other episodes, rudeness is expressed through a mouthpiece that, while well-meaning, is not entirely competent in the use of politeness.

TRUMPING RUDENESS

A further way in which Gervais and Merchant appear to dissipate offensiveness aimed at Warwick's stature is by making him guilty of breaches of political correctness, also towards other categories like gays and women, traditionally the butt of superiority based humor. A recurrent dynamic is for Warwick to start as the butt of physical difference comedy and for him to trump this by making offensive remarks about other categories. In episode two, for instance, Warwick begins a brainstorming session with



Cheryl, his new, comically simple secretary, about ways to increase business for his agency. She starts by suggesting Warwick branch out as a chimney sweep because “it used to be children didn’t it? [...] but it’s cruel to send children up there nowadays”. This also reveals a related sleight that allows the authors to employ the comic effects resulting from face threats by using an innocent like Cheryl as a mouthpiece for offence, which ensures that it will not be taken seriously. The resulting laughter at physical difference is further dissipated by the absurdity of her proposal. Indeed, in her innocence, she also exacerbates the offensiveness by suggesting that Warwick widens his operations to “other stuff that that’s too dangerous for children”, such as being “bait to catch a paedophile”, describing how Warwick could “do it in a little dress ... waiting for people to come up to you. And molest you”. When Warwick asks why he can’t be a little boy, Cheryl replies that she doesn’t think there are any gay paedophiles, to which Warwick replies “there’s loads of gay paedophiles”, at a stroke topping Cheryl’s rudeness to him by offending another sensitive category in a way that tends to “desensitize the material” (Milner Davis 27).

Of course, these utterances are not intentionally offensive: they are either the result of Cheryl’s blissful ignorance of political correctness or Warwick’s misplaced pedantry in the midst of an absurd conversation. They are basically gaffes, and as such they are nearer to Culpeper’s definition of rudeness. The comic technique that Gervais and Merchant use might be called a cascade of rudeness, with the preposterousness or absurdity of each successive offensive utterance drowning out the previous one. Thus, by the time Warwick makes his sweepingly prejudiced claim that a lot of paedophiles are gay, Cheryl’s initial rudeness concerning his physical difference has paled into insignificance.

A similar escalation can be observed in episode five. While shopping in a supermarket, Warwick meets a young woman who turns out to be a fan. They exchange phone numbers and agree to meet few days later. On his way to the checkout he buys a packet of condoms, and this leads to another sequence of snowballing rudeness. Just as Warwick confides to the camera how happy he is, the cashier asks him “are these condoms all right for you?... Cos it’s eh one size fits all”. This face threat breaks two taboos at a single stroke by referring to Warwick’s physical difference and also to the most intimate and possibly sensitive part of his anatomy. His private parts are therefore threatened in public in a totally unexpected and incongruous manner, considering that this is a service encounter in which it is anyway customary for the client to ask the questions (Biber and Conrad 102-105). This act of rudeness is actually occasioned by a misplaced sense of duty on the part of the cashier, who tells Warwick “well we got to be careful cos you could sue us”. In her show of dutifulness she further compounds the insult by asking the other cashier: “Barbara, will these johnnies fit a dwarf?”. As in the Johnny Depp episode, the effect of rudeness is achieved by moving what would normally be backstage or back region behaviour, an informal consultation between the two cashiers in which it would be legitimate to discuss Warwick and his purchases in this way, front stage, even more so because of the mock documentary format. The second cashier replies “depends how big he is”, this time topping the rudeness of the first cashier with an act of impoliteness in the form of a deliberate joke which plays on two possible meanings of ‘big’. Clearly the comedy is not produced by the linguistic incongruity of the rather



lame pun, but the social incongruity of the comment in the context of a service encounter.

Through no fault of Warwick's, this exchange has now attracted the attention of other customers, among them the young woman who Warwick has arranged to meet, and it is at this point that he trumps the display of the cashiers' rudeness. Flustered, because she now knows about his purchase of the condoms, he tells her "They're not for you.... I wasn't would never presume". From his presumption about her sexual availability he then moves on to impoliteness about her sexual hygiene: "you've got to be careful. There's all sorts of diseases, aren't there now? ... Not that I've got. I'm clean. But I don't know about...". In both this and the 'brainstorming' episode, the preferred trumping technique involves an escalation from physical difference impoliteness/rudeness to offence at the level of sex, be it sexuality or the taboo subject of sexual organs. In this swift transition from one taboo to another, the force of the original physical difference offence is attenuated.

RECIPROCAL FACE THREATS

The participants in Gervais and Merchant's comedy *vérité* are acutely aware of the overlooking audiences involved in the genres and know they are the objects of scrutiny. Despite this, they often fail to manage interactions with adequate levels of politeness. Warwick, for example, is constantly at pains to aggrandize himself and justify himself before the camera, and in his anxiety to impress he can be rude and abusive, while other characters, though aware that they are on camera, are caught in various kinds of crassness in the attempt to make a good impression or defend their face. In episode five, for example, Warwick arrives at a restaurant where he has arranged to meet a woman through a dating agency. When the maitre D tells Warwick "Ah hello good evening, Sir...she's over there", he initially gives it no thought and heads towards the table where Amy, also a dwarf, awaits him. However, he immediately turns back and challenges the professional face of the Maitre D by asking: "sorry what makes you think I'm meeting that particular lady?" The Maitre D apologises, explaining that he had "just assumed". Rather than accepting the apology, Warwick continues to threaten the Maitre's professional face, asking: "why would you assume I was meeting her". This further threat results in a retaliatory face threatening action from the Maitre. When Warwick points out that of the two women waiting he could be meeting the tall attractive one, adding defiantly: "What if I just walked over there and started snogging her. What would happen then?" To which the Maitre responds: "She'd scream?". Warwick insists on running through this service encounter from the beginning again, telling the maitre D what to say and thus undermining his professional credibility even further. When Warwick says "Oh yeah, there she is", the Maitre D retorts "so you were meeting her". There is a further shift towards intentional impoliteness when, to Warwick's claim that he could have been meeting the taller of the two women, the Maitre D retorts "That's always unlikely". The episode ends with Warwick asking the maitre D why he wouldn't "fix him up" with the taller of the two women, eliciting the putdown: "Because if an attractive woman comes up to me and



says I'm looking for a man, my first words wouldn't be 'Oh great there's a horny dwarf over there who's up for it'. I'd say 'let me buy you a drink'".

This is another example of the escalation technique used by Gervais and Merchant. However, unlike previous examples, this scene moves from a gaffe to calculated personal impoliteness about Warwick's physical difference. Although the entire scene turns on the issue of physical difference, the comedy in this interaction appears to be mainly about the inconsistencies, contradictions and motives of an insistence on political correctness. Although Warwick is technically in the right about the initial presumption, he tries to redress it in a way that disproportionately threatens the maitre D's professional face for what could be considered a pardonable if unfortunate slip-up. His face threat is so pointed that the Maitre retaliates by deliberately attacking Warwick's own face in the most obvious way. In his final face threat, moreover, there is a degree of honest or common sense truth about his answer that reminds us that Warwick, in a sense, has been asking for it by his insistence on extreme levels of social awareness. As in the in the supermarket scene, part of the comedy is generated by witnessing the failure of a service encounter genre as it deteriorates into a personal interaction in which nobody emerges very well. Warwick's complaint backfires on him and leads to his embarrassing humiliation; in response to Warwick's face threats, the Maitre D reveals attitudes that are only thinly veiled by polite behaviour. Although Warwick's physical difference occasions the comedy of this scene, that comedy appears to be satirical in nature because it is directed as much at attitudes to political correctness as at physical difference itself, and as such the enjoyment it affords can be associated with relief. Moreover, If Warwick is the butt of the comedy, it is also because his insistence on political correctness ironically implies a rejection of Amy, so in the very act of rejecting stereotypes he is actually confirming them and being rude to his date.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This qualitative analysis indicates that Gervais and Merchant deliberately make use of rudeness and impoliteness in reprising physical difference as a butt for contemporary comedy. In the article I have identified six ways in which impoliteness and rudeness, and their relative gradations of face-threat, are used to comic effect: 1) in some instances, Warwick's physical difference makes him the initial butt of unintentional rudeness or 2) failed banter, though the resulting comedy at his expense is diluted by the accompanying incredulous laughter at the perpetrator of the rudeness, who in turn becomes the target of the laughter; 3) Warwick himself is rude about his peers in a way that ironically undermines his character rather than his physical size; 4) Warwick trumps or tops initial unintentional rudeness about himself with more serious offensiveness about other sensitive categories, with the result that the impact of the original offence is felt less strongly and the laughter tends to be focused more on the impropriety of Warwick's own attitudes than on his stature; 5) Warwick places great emphasis on his fame, popularity and celebrity status and social awareness and it is on these levels of his identity, as well as that of his physical difference, that he exposes himself to face threats of a comic kind; 6) Warwick himself can be seen to deserve



escalating impoliteness, as happens at the restaurant, where he elicits impoliteness by overreacting and threatening the face of the other interactant.

It remains a moot point whether the writers are merely having it both ways by using these techniques, namely by eliciting laughter at or about physical difference and at the same time mocking such comedy, or at least undermining it. After all, the comic effects described above are initially occasioned by Warwick's size; for instance, when Warwick is forced by Depp to fall down, perform a jig, or stand in the toilet, it is undeniably comic because these actions are performed by a gifted comic actor who is a dwarf. However, it can also be claimed that because Warwick himself behaves as badly as many of the other characters, rudeness and impoliteness act as social levellers, making Warwick as bad, gauche and interactively challenged as everyone else in the series. It is also possible that this ambivalence in itself may add a further edge to the comedy. Viewers may enjoy the outrageousness of some of the views, recognize that in a contemporary context the use of a dwarf in comedy is still controversial and unexpected, and appreciate the sleights by which the authors attempt to negotiate the taboo by blurring the lines between superiority, incongruity and relief.

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