

## Negotiating Im/politeness via Humor in the Greek Parliament

Marianthi Georgalidou

University of the Aegean

[georgalidou@rhodes.aegean.gr](mailto:georgalidou@rhodes.aegean.gr)

### Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio es examinar la manera en la que el humor sirve como medio de negociación des/cortés en el discurso de los parlamentarios griegos. (Harris 2001; Morreall 2005; Bippus 2007; Tsakona and Popa 2011; Georgalidou 2011). El humor ha sido abordado como una estrategia de cortesía positiva, en el sentido de mitigar el ataque directo a personas, situaciones o ideas y sirve como medio de crítica indirecta (Haugh 2016). No obstante, el humor -y la ironía- en el discurso parlamentario se usa para lanzar ataques contra adversarios y sirve como un medio de construcción de identidades políticas perjudiciales para los adversarios políticos (Tsakona 2011; Nuolijärvi and Tiittula 2011). En el contexto de la crisis económica que atravesó Grecia, el presente estudio basado en datos recopilados de las Actas de las Sesiones Plenarias del Parlamento Helénico durante un período de 10 años (2009-2019), analiza la relación entre el humor y la agresión verbal en el discurso político griego. Las cuestiones abordadas conciernen al humor como modo de comunicación en casos de conflictos que superan los límites de la rivalidad política en el discurso parlamentario (Corranza-Marquez 2010; Georgalidou 2016; Frantzi, Georgalidou and Giakoumakis 2019). La aproximación analítica es émica, basada en el análisis de unidades discursivas como acciones sociales. Por tanto, se analizan episodios de discurso parlamentario agresivo por la organización secuencial de interacción humorística. Es más, se aplica una combinación de modelos interaccionales y críticos de modo que se puedan abordar complicadas distinciones entre la rivalidad política esperada y el abuso verbal. El análisis destaca cómo receptores inmediatos y colegas parlamentarios utilizan los chistes como +/-abusivos. Rechazos, intensas protestas e interrupciones temporales de procedimientos formales, así como los aplausos de los partidos contrarios, sacan a luz el papel de múltiples receptores, aunque no necesariamente del mismo alineamiento, como factor crítico en la contextualización del humor político como des/cortés.

**Palabras clave:** humor, ironía, des/cortés, agresión, discurso parlamentario.

### Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to examine how humor serves as a means for negotiating im/politeness in the discourse of Greek parliamentarians (Harris 2001; Morreall 2005; Bippus 2007; Tsakona and Popa 2011; Georgalidou 2011). Humor has been approached as a positive politeness strategy, in the sense that it mitigates the straightforward targeting of persons, situations or ideas and serves as a means of indirect criticism (Haugh 2016). However, humor -and irony- in parliamentary discourse is used to launch attacks against adversaries and serves as a means for the construction of damaging political identities for political opponents (Tsakona 2011; Nuolijärvi and Tiittula 2011). In the context of the Greek economic crisis, drawing on data from the

Minutes of Plenary Sessions of the Hellenic Parliament for a period of 10 years (2009-2019), the present study investigates the connection of humor to verbal aggression in Greek political discourse. The theoretical issues tackled concern humor as face-threatening communication in the light of cases of conflict that exceed the limits of expected political rivalry in parliamentary discourse (Corranza-Marquez 2010; Georgalidou 2016; Frantzi, Georgalidou and Giakoumakis 2019). The analytic approach is emic, based on the analysis of discourse units as there and then social actions. Thus, episodes of aggressive parliamentary discourse are analyzed for the sequential organization of humorous turns-in-interaction. Moreover, a combination of interactional and critical frameworks is applied so that complicated distinctions between expected political rivalry and verbal abuse can be approached. Analysis highlights how immediate recipients and fellow parliamentarians construct humorous jab-lines as +/-abusive. Rejective contributions, intense protests and the temporary breakdown of formal procedures, but also applause by opposing parties, bring forth the point of view of multiple, but not necessarily aligned, recipients as the critical factor in the contextualization of political humor as im/polite.

**Key words:** humor, irony, im/politeness, aggression, parliamentary discourse.

## 1. Introduction

The present study deals with humor and im/politeness in parliamentary discourse (Harris 2001; Morreall 2005; Bippus 2007; Tsakona and Popa 2011). The language material examined consists of the Minutes of Plenary Sessions of the Hellenic Parliament between the years 2009 to 2019. The purpose of the study is to examine how humor serves as a means for negotiating im/politeness in the discourse of Greek parliamentarians. It mainly focuses on the impact of humor on the impoliteness end of the politeness-politic speech-impoliteness continuum (Watts 1992) and the construction of damaging political identities for political opponents (Georgalidou 2011). Humor has, among others, been approached as a positive politeness strategy, in the sense that it mitigates the straightforward targeting of persons, situations or ideas and serves as a means of indirect criticism (Haugh 2016). However, humor -and irony- in parliamentary discourse is used to launch attacks against adversaries (Ilie 2001; Nuolijärvi and Tiittula 2011) and can be constructed as bald on record impoliteness by recipients.

Drawing on data from the Minutes of Plenary Sessions of the Hellenic Parliament for a period of 10 years (2009-2019), we investigate the connection of humor to verbal aggression in the context of the Greek economic crisis. The theoretical issues involved concern humor as face-threatening communication in the light of cases of conflict in parliamentary discourse that are marked as exceeding the limits of expected political rivalry (Corranza-Marquez 2010; Georgalidou 2017; Georgalidou, Frantzi and Giakoumakis 2019; Frantzi, Georgalidou and Giakoumakis 2019). The analytic approach is interactional, based on the analysis of discourse units as there and then social actions. Thus, episodes of aggressive parliamentary discourse are analyzed for the sequential organization of humorous turns, albeit, as far as parliamentary sittings are concerned, these can be contained within long contributions. In the said episodes, response to dispreferred acts may appear in an adjacent contribution and/or the immediate reaction of the audience or be delayed substantially. When they are not immediately responded to,

attacks to the face of rival politicians, especially the ones that aim at personal rather than political issues, do not remain unanswered. They are noted and reintroduced as second pair parts, in responsive contributions by the original addressee. In the institutional context of parliamentary debates, the present analysis highlights how immediate recipients of face attacks and fellow parliamentarians construct humorous jab-lines as +/- abusive. Counterattacks, rejective contributions and intense protests by members of the out-group, as well as the temporary breakdown of formal procedures bring to the fore the function of political humor as a purposeful attack to the opponent's face and as strategic impoliteness. Applause by members of the in-group, on the other hand, highlights the fact that the point of view of multiple, but not necessarily aligned, recipients is the critical factor in the contextualization of political humor as an act of purposeful impoliteness.

In what follows, we will examine the theoretical framework of our analysis (section 2), Greek economic crisis as the overall context of the episodes discussed (section 3), our data and the analysis (sections 4 and 5). Section 6 summarizes our findings.

## **2. Im/politeness, face and humor in the context of rival political encounters**

### **2.1. Im/politeness in the parliament**

Politeness has been defined as a set of linguistic strategies designed to reduce threats to face and maintain communication (Brown and Levinson 1987), or else, as a pragmatic tool by means of which participants of an interaction manage to maintain relationships (Murphy 2014). It fulfils an expectation that permeates a considerable number of everyday life settings, namely preference for the avoidance of conflict (Bull, Fetzer and Kádár 2020). Impoliteness on the other hand, entails on- and off-record face-threatening speech acts (Culpeper 2011), conflict and possibly the breakdown of communication. Within ethnomethodological (Arundale 2010) and social constructionist approaches (Culpeper 2005; Watts 2010; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013), both politeness and impoliteness are seen as interactional constructs accomplished by participants to discourse via concrete interactional action and reaction (Eelen 2001; Culpeper 2005; Watts 2010; Arundale 2010; Mitchell and Haugh 2015;). Within this perspective, impoliteness comes about when the speaker communicates face attack intentionally and/or the hearer ostensibly perceives, therefore constructs, behaviour as intentionally face-attacking (Culpeper 2005: 39). Thus, impoliteness is interactionally construed when offence is registered by recipients (Mitchell and Haugh 2015).

However, attacks to face need not fall into a binary relationship of either polite or impolite action. Watt's three part distinction of polite-politic-impolite behaviour defines politic choices as designed to maintain a state of equilibrium during on-going processes of verbal interaction (Watts 1992a; 1992b: 50) and seem to be applicable to speech events within parliamentary procedures (Christie 2005) and speech communities (Sifianou 2008). As Culpeper (2011) points out, there are contexts where communicative behaviors are not subject to politeness prescriptions. In other words, there are contexts in which behaviors which might be viewed as 'impolite' are unrestricted and licensed, parliaments being a case in point (Harris 2001). In the context of parliamentary debates, aggressive interactive choices form part of the on-going communication and are not necessarily registered as offensive. Based on their analysis of discourse in the British Parliament, Bull, Fetzer and Kádár (2020: 66, 69) point out that conflict has become the ritual norm and is not regarded

as a marginal activity but rather as quintessential to parliamentary institutions. However, even within ritualized forms of political combat, constructions marked as dispreferred (Pomerantz 1984) define the limits of rival discourse as a politic choice. The construction of prior turns as insults in the addressee's responsive contribution, as well as in intense protests, and the breakdown of communication, retrievable in the local context of parliamentary speech events, can be considered markers of dispreferred aggressive communicative choices, even when they are delivered by means of the humorous mode.

## 2.2. Humor in the context of rival political encounters

But what role can humor play as a means for negotiating politic speech and im/politeness in the parliament? As Tsakona and Chovenec point out, humor is never “innocent”<sup>i</sup> and devoid of emotional impact and social consequences, whether positive or negative ones; “on the contrary, it is employed as a tool for testing common ground and shared values, thus bringing interlocutors closer together or driving them further apart.” (2018: 6). What is more, political humor cannot be clearly distinguished from irony,<sup>ii</sup> especially when used in political combat. They both construct the target and may be perceived as moving along the pole of aggression, therefore being constructed as relevant inappropriateness (Attardo 2000).

In a rather essentialist outlook on irony, Leech (1983) defines it as a strategy that allows the attacker to cause offence indirectly and the hearer to arrive at the offensive point of the ironic remark by way of implicature. Based on similar linguistic devices, i.e. the activation and disambiguation of script opposition, humor and irony in political combat both aim at the production of amusement for the in-group and the overhearing audience (i.e. tv viewers, users of media platforms, social media participants, etc.), and offence against both the target and the collective face of the members of the out-group. As much as humor and irony can be the means for performing face attacks in a way that seems “to reduce the impolite force of the utterance” and permits “aggression to manifest itself in a less dangerous verbal form than by direct criticism, insults, threats, etc.” (Leech 1983: 143-144), the mitigating force of humorous attacks cannot be taken for granted. The way they are received and responded to by multiple audiences, not necessarily aligned, is the subject matter of the present discussion.

In the context of parliamentary debates, humor can be ostensibly appreciated by members of the in-group and at the same time ostensibly rejected as an act of offence by members of the out-group, delineating the boundaries between rival parties and political alliances. In this analysis, humor and irony will be approached as facets of similar pragmatic devices which result in outcomes discursively negotiated by differently orientated interlocutors. Amusement may be a possible outcome of both (Nuolijärvi and Tiittula 2011) depending on the different stances adopted by immediate recipients and audiences. However, once registered as threatening, they cease to be amusing, at least from the point of view of the target. What is more, in- and out-grouping procedures triggered by humorous / ironic contributions, render the affiliative aspect of humor negotiable within interaction. As Tsakona and Chovanec (2018) point out, discursive practices exploiting different types of incongruity employ linguistic devices to accomplish the target of either bringing interlocutors closer together or driving them further apart (Tsakona and Chovanec 2018: 6), parliamentary communities of practice being a prototypical case in point.

As institutional restrictions render outright aggressive behavior totally unwelcome, the parliament is the ideal domain for the examination of how humor<sup>iii</sup> as strategic im/politeness is negotiated in interaction. As discussed above, combat and the injury of the opponents' face lie at the heart of political conflict. What is more, aggressive facework is deployed by speakers in order to gain face for themselves (Goffman [1955] 1967: 24) and political humor is deployed in order to bypass and ultimately defy institutional requirements for decorum (Tsakona 2011). Due to its inherent or even superficial ambiguity, humor has been approached mainly as redressive action (Leech 1983). However, it can serve as a means for the launching and negotiation of face threats, as well as a means for striking a blow at the opponent's face. It also enhances the face of the attacker via constructing oratorical skillfulness (Nuolijärvi and Tiittula 2011; Tsakona 2011; Georgalidou 2011).

What is more, political humor can be indicative of the different ways in which politics is organised in various socio-cultural and political systems. Within this perspective, humor in competitive democracies, such as the Greek, is proven particularly aggressive, mainly promoting polarisation, disaffiliation and the discrediting of the opponent (Tsakona 2009; Archakis and Tsakona 2011; Georgalidou 2011), all the more so, in the years of the economic crisis (Frantzi, Georgalidou and Giakoumakis 2019) and in the context of imminent elections.

### **3. The overall context: the Greek crisis**

The Greek crisis was officially acknowledged in the end of 2009 when New Democracy (ND) called a snap general election, asking the Greek people for a new mandate to tackle the looming financial crisis. The Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) party won power. In mid-2010 though, due to the fiscal deficit, Prime Minister George Papandreou sought the assistance of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Union (EU) and the European Central Bank. Funding was provided on the condition that Greece proceed to fiscal adjustment and consolidation measures. Greek debt crisis forced Papandreou to resign. In November 2011, he was succeeded by Loukas Papadimos, the former manager of the Bank of Greece, leading a governmental coalition among the Panhellenic Socialist Party (PASOK) and the right-wing conservative parties of New Democracy (ND) and Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS). The sharp deterioration of the economy, the rising unemployment rates and the adoption of more austerity measures dictated by the second memorandum with the IMF and the EU, forced prime minister Papadimos to call another snap general election on May 6, 2012, the outcome of which did not allow for the formation of a new government. A new election was called on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012. It led to rapid rearrangements in the distribution of power in the Greek parliament and the subversion of the previously powerful parties of PASOK and ND. Nevertheless, a new governmental coalition was formed among ND, PASOK and the newly founded left wing party of the Democratic Left, which quitted the coalition after the shutdown of ERT, the Greek state radio and television broadcaster, in 2013. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2015, a snap election was called for the fourth time in five years. The election was won by the Coalition of the Left Radicals (SYRIZA). SYRIZA formed another governmental coalition with the right-wing party of Independent Greeks (ANEL), which again called and won a snap election on September 20, 2015, after the third

memorandum was voted by the Greek parliament.

Thus, during the years 2009–2019, Greek politics underwent significant changes and upheavals due to the economic crisis. The subversion of previously powerful political organizations and the rise to power of a left-wing party of communist origin (SYRIZA) led to the aggravation of the adversarial style already preferred by Greek parliamentarians (Tsakona 2009; Archakis and Tsakona 2010; Georgalidou 2011; Georgakopoulou 2013; Georgalidou 2017; Frantzi, Georgalidou and Giakoumakis 2019). Marked impoliteness bordering aggression has been used not only to attack opposing political ideologies but also to discredit the personality of political opponents. Personal attacks, humorous or otherwise, during parliamentary sittings have become the dominant style of opposition in contemporary Greek political discourse. Attributing insulting or even abusive characterizations to persons has been a common choice in the period under scrutiny, with rates of aggressive discourse judged by addressees' reactions during parliamentary procedures rising by 41% in 2015 as compared to 2014 (Georgalidou Frantzi and Giakoumakis 2019a and b).

#### 4. The data

The Greek crisis forms the overall context for the employment of humor as a means for negotiating im/politeness in the discourse of Greek parliamentarians examined in the present study. Analysis is based on transcripts of parliamentary discourse which are available from the official site of the Greek Parliament. The written record of parliamentary debates is edited, i.e., it is not a full verbatim record of parliamentary proceedings. However, despite the fact that repetitions and redundancies are omitted, all crucial elements of the speech events as well as paralinguistic information are included in the records. Transcripts used in the analysis of the selected excerpts are checked against video recordings of the sittings, which are also available from <https://www.hellenicparliament.gr/> and YouTube. If considered necessary, they are re-edited. The excerpts discussed form sequences of related humorous/offensive acts and represent aspects of the adversarial style adopted by rival politicians in the years of the economic crisis. They come from parliamentary sittings of the decade 2009-2019.

Excerpts 1 and 2 are chosen as indicative of two strategies employed in the contextualization of humorous contributions as offensive, namely their straightforward dismissal as abusive and the temporary breakdown of the sitting due to the intense protesting of offended parties. Excerpts 3-5 on the other hand, come from the last parliamentary debate between the then Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and the then leader of the Opposition Kyriakos Mitsotakis, in May 2019. The debate took place on 8 May 2019, approximately 20 days before the local and European elections, on 26 May 2019, and is characteristic of the aggravated oppositional style adopted by rival politicians in the context of imminent elections. The excerpts discussed form pairs of a) humorous attacks contained in long speeches which revise policies and stances adopted by the government and the opposition, and b) response to them by rival party leaders in the course of their own contributions. The analysis of the data is qualitative, informed by interactional approaches to discourse.<sup>iv</sup>

## 5. Analysis

The first two examples examined, are short episodes involving male parliamentarians and female addressees, members of adversary political parties. In the first, the attacker claims a jocular intention, therefore benevolence, in his portraying the addressee as a person suffering from the Alzheimer's disease.<sup>v</sup> The addressee directly contests the jocular interpretation and contextualizes his contribution as a purposeful offense.

More specifically, a male PASOK MP, Basileios Keggeroglou, claims that the female Undersecretary of Employment and Social Welfare, Theano Fotiou (SYRIZA), *keeps forgetting things that have been explained to her* (turn 1). By means of third person reference to Fotiou, Keggeroglou suggests that *she suffers from Alzheimer's*, a disease that induces memory loss to the elderly, indirectly activating the categorization senior citizen / incompetent. Thus, he humorously invokes incompetence on her part.

### (1) 29/6/2015, Official Proceedings<sup>vi</sup>

1. ΒΑΣΙΛΕΙΟΣ ΚΕΓΚΕΡΟΓΛΟΥ: Αλλά έχω εξηγήσει και έχω δώσει τα έγγραφα στην κ. Φωτίου πολλές φορές, όχι μία. Γιατί ξεχνά. Της έχω πει μάλιστα χαριτολογώντας ότι έχει Αλτσχάιμερ.
2. ΘΕΑΝΩ ΦΩΤΙΟΥ (Αναπληρώτρια Υπουργός Εργασίας, Κοινωνικής Ασφάλισης και Κοινωνικής Αλληλεγγύης): Δεν δέχομαι αστειόκια τέτοιου τύπου. Δεν τα δέχομαι, γιατί αυτό είναι χυδαιότητα. Δεν τα δέχομαι.
3. ΠΡΟΕΔΡΕΥΩΝ (Σπυρίδων Λυκούδης): Σας παρακαλώ πάρα πολύ, κύριε συνάδελφε. Κυρία Υπουργέ, σας παρακαλώ.
4. ΘΕΑΝΩ ΦΩΤΙΟΥ (Αναπληρώτρια Υπουργός Εργασίας, Κοινωνικής Ασφάλισης και Κοινωνικής Αλληλεγγύης): Του δίνετε τον χρόνο για να με υβρίζει;

1. BASILEIOS KEGGEROGLOU<sup>vii</sup>: But I have explained and I have handed the documents to Mrs Fotiou many times, not just once. Because she forgets. I have also told her jockingly that she has Alzheimer's.
2. THEANO FOTIOU: I do not accept this kind of jokes-DIMINUTIVE. I do not accept them because this is scurrility. I do not accept them.
3. HOUSE SPEAKER (Spyridon Lykoudis): Please Mr Colleague. Mrs Minister, please.
4. THEANO FOTIOU: You grand him the time in order to revile me?

As it is customary in parliamentary speeches, Keggeroglou launches his attack in the third person avoiding direct second person address terms. He directly contextualizes his comment as jesting. Nevertheless, the humorous interpretation of the remark is directly contested by Fotiou, who uses the plural diminutive of the term *joke* (*αστειόκια / jokes-DIMINUTIVE*), indirectly categorizing Keggeroglou's attack as pertaining to a specific *kind* (turn 2) of ill-intended jokes. She goes on to reject his comment three times, directly

categorizing it as a *hideous insult* (turn 2). Via an explicit metapragmatic comment, by which she rejects the humorous intention claimed by her interlocutor, she holds him accountable for an offensive, therefore impolite, act (Haugh 2016). The House-Speaker, however, calls both MPs to order, indirectly dismissing Fotiou's account as unfounded. His reaction is contextualized by the overall history of employing humorous discursive choices to attack opponents in the Greek Parliament (Tsakona 2011; Georgalidou, Frantzi and Giakoumakis 2019a). It also features diverse constructions of parliamentary humor as im/polite.

In the second excerpt, a male minister of the then coalition government of the right-wing New Democracy (ND) with the social-democratic PASOK, Adonis Georgiadis, launches a humorous attack against two female members of the opposition by means of two jab lines. Both are structured as 3<sup>rd</sup> person references. The first, recontextualizes the parliamentary procedure as a discussion on the mental state of the SYRIZA MP Zoe Konstantopoulou. The second, indirectly refers to Rahil Makri's allegedly sexually provocative appearance. Both MPs were protesting against the shutdown of ERT, the Greek state radio and TV broadcaster by the said governmental coalition, in 2013. His contribution is construed as unacceptable by fellow MPs, judging by their strong reactions and the temporary interruption of the parliamentary procedure (lines 2 and 3).

(2)<sup>viii</sup> Hellenic Parliament, 10 November 2013: Motion of censure on the New Democracy - PASOK coalition government.<sup>ix</sup>

1. Adonis Georgiadis: Ευχαριστώ πολύ κύριε Πρόεδρε (.) Θα ήθελα να ξεκινήσω την ομιλία μου με τα χθεσινά γεγονότα στην ΕΡΤ, και την εικόνα της ε: κυρίας Κωνσταντοπούλου να: καλεί σε βοήθεια. Θέλω και 'γω απ' την πλευρά μου να πιστοποιήσω, έχοντας ζήσει με την κυρία συνάδελφο στη λίστα Λαγκάρντ για περίπου πέντε μήνες, ότι είναι απολύτως προφανές ότι την χρειάζεται ((ψυχιατρική βοήθεια)) και θα πρέπει με κάποιο τρόπο να τη βοηθήσουμε. Επίσης, θα πρέπει να πω ότι η εικόνα της κυρίας Ραχήλ Μακρή πάνω εις τα κάγκελα, ήταν πραγματικά πέραν [πάσης προσδοκίας.]
2. MPs: [((strong protests))]
3. HS: [Παρακαλώ] ((repeated 12 times))

1. Adonis Georgiadis: Thank you very much Mr Speaker (.) I would like to begin my speech with yesterday's events at ERT, and the sight of e:h Ms Konstantopoulou crying for help. I, too, for my part, wish to certify, having served with this colleague on the Lagarde List ((committee)) for five months, that it is plainly obvious that she needs it ((i.e. psychiatric help)) and we should somehow help her. Also, I should say that the image of Ms Rahil Makri onto the railings was really beyond [every expectation.]
2. MPs: [((strong protests))]
3. HS: [Order] ((repeated 12 times))

More specifically, Georgiadis (ND) attacks Konstantopoulou (SYRIZA), word-playing with the referents of the term *help*, in her plea for legal intervention against the shutdown of ERT and the imminent invasion of riot police forces to evacuate the premises. He ostensibly sympathizes with Konstantopoulou's plea (*we should somehow help her*),



taking advantage of the incongruity produced by the different referents of the requested help, i.e. legal or medical / psychiatric. By doing so, he insinuates mental aberration activating the categorization irrational / incompetent (Georgalidou 2017). According to Culpeper (2005), his comment comprises off-record impoliteness and an indirect sexist verbal attack via humor and irony. In the case of Rahil Makri (ANEL) on the other hand, the choice of the phrase *on the railings* has various connotations. It indirectly refers to the Greek idiomatic phrase “the railing of the hooker” used by Greek speakers in informal contexts when things get out of hand. The phrase indirectly refers to Makri’s appearance as *exceeding* the attacker’s *expectations* by being sexually provocative. It is further contextualized as marked via the stressed first syllable of the word *κάγκελα* / *railings* and the use of the scholarly full form of the prepositional phrase *εις τα* / *onto the* instead of *στα* / *on the*, which further stresses the incongruity among the formal parliamentary context and reference to colloquial expressions containing sexual connotations (Georgalidou 2017).

Employing the negative impoliteness strategy, “Condescend, scorn or ridicule - emphasize your relative power. Be contemptuous. Do not treat the other seriously. Belittle the other.” (Culpeper 1996: 358), Georgiadis uses humor to indirectly construct both women as lacking either intellectual capacity (the first) or moral status (the second). At the level of presuppositions, he categorizes them as unsuitable for office. Intense protests force the House Speaker to repeat his plea for *order* twelve times (turn 3). The attacks are contextualized as unacceptable by the strong reactions of fellow MPs and the temporary breakdown of the procedure.

The following examples (3, 4, 5) pertain to an extended verbal combat. They are excerpts of the long speeches delivered by the then prime minister Alexis Tsipras (SYRIZA) and the leader of the opposition Kyriakos Mitsotakis (ND), during the vote of confidence sitting that took place two weeks before the local and European elections in May 2019. The event was the culmination of conflict among political parties striving for optimal results in the forthcoming elections and ultimately in the national elections that were to take place in the next few months. Both leaders make long reference to the advantages of governmental policies they have implemented (the former) or intend to implement (the latter). Both engage in harsh criticism on a personal level, undermining each other’s personality and moral status. In order to do so, within the formal institutional context of the parliament, where unparliamentary decorum is castigated and may be disapproved by the voters, they resort to humor and irony. Face-threats form part of expected verbal action in the said domain. Attacks, humorous or otherwise, are largely tolerated, if not welcomed. However, as we have discussed in examples 1 and 2, instances of marking personal attacks as dispreferred construct impoliteness, or else offensive behavior exceeding the limits of expected political rivalry.

The selected excerpts form pair parts within longer sequences; however, they are not necessarily placed in consecutive turns as in everyday conversational genres. Pairs are initiated by preceding speakers and are noted to be answered in the talk of the speaker who has been the target of the attack in subsequent contributions. Therefore, 2<sup>nd</sup> pair parts may be delayed responses to criticism, humorous or otherwise.

In the first example, part of a 40-minute speech devoted to what he considered his government’s successful policy implementations, the then prime minister Alexis Tsipras refrains from personal attacks against the leader of the opposition. In one of the two instances in which he initiates such an attack, he challenges Mitsotakis adequacy. He

humorously portrays him as a cheating student (*Do you want Mr Portosalte ((a reporter who supports ND)) as the moderator so that he can give you cheat sheets? We will have him. We will have whoever you like.*), indirectly activating the presupposition of oratorical inadequacy. Repeated rhetorical questions are posed to present the scenario preferred by the humorist, i.e. the opponent's refusal for a debate on television due to his being aware of his lack of oratorical ability (*(...) why do you refuse a debate on television? What is the reason? (...) Why are you hiding?*) They open slots for a response to the accusations they mask.

When called on the rostrum, Mitsotakis addresses the humorous insinuations by reversing the challenge. He directly portrays his adversary as a person boasting about his own ability (*you claim*), thus lacking modesty, which constitutes indirect negative evaluation. He proceeds to predict his party's victory in the imminent elections. The allegations about his own lack of oratorical ability are not addressed. As Nuolijärvi and Tiittula (2011) point out, this would make the implicit meaning of Tsipras' attack obvious, which might be more face threatening for the addressee.<sup>x</sup> In the final part of his response to Tsipras' insinuations, he counter-attacks his adversary by means of direct control acts, urging him to repeat his supposed claim to the voters' preference and appreciation after his forecasted defeat in the elections. He thus escalates his attack by answering humor with irony in reporting his adversary's supposed self-praising direct speech acts and claims (*you claim / come and tell us*). In contrast to examples 1 and 2, both leaders address each other directly, by means of the conventionally polite 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural, further personalizing the attacks.

- (3) 8/5/2019, Official Parliamentary Transcripts: Tsipras' talk, lines 4-637, Mitsotakis' talk, lines 652-1430<sup>xi</sup>

352-358: ΑΛΕΞΗΣ ΤΣΙΠΡΑΣ (Πρόεδρος της Κυβέρνησης): Κύριε Μητσοτάκη, δεν έχω καταλάβει. Μιας και έχετε μια ανησυχία, τώρα που σας βλέπω πείτε μου, αλήθεια, ποιος είναι ο λόγος για τον οποίο αρνείστε μια τηλεοπτική αναμέτρηση; Ποιος είναι ο λόγος; Θέλετε να βάλουμε ως moderator τον κ. Πορτοσάλτε να σας δίνει σκονάκια; Να τον βάλουμε. Όποιον θέλετε να βάλουμε. Ελάτε επιτέλους να αναμετρηθούμε. Ελάτε να αντιπαρατεθούμε. Γιατί κρύβεστε;

681-689: ΚΥΡΙΑΚΟΣ ΜΗΤΣΟΤΑΚΗΣ (Πρόεδρος της Νέας Δημοκρατίας): Εσείς ισχυρίζεστε πάντα ότι έχετε μία μεγάλη ρητορική άνεση και κοινοβουλευτική υπεροχή. Θα το κρίνει αυτό η κάλπη. Εγώ θα κάνω την πρόβλεψη: στις 26 Μαΐου ένας θα χαμογελάει και ένας θα κλαίει, και η Νέα Δημοκρατία θα πετύχει την μεγάλη πολιτική νίκη που θα οδηγήσει σε μία μεγάλη πολιτική αλλαγή. Και μετά, ελάτε πάλι εδώ στη Βουλή, να μας πείτε όλα αυτά τα ωραία για το πόσο σας εμπιστεύεται ο ελληνικός λαός και το πόσο χαρούμενος είναι με την κατάσταση, στην οποία έχετε φέρει τη χώρα. ((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY))

352-358: ALEXIS TSIPRAS (Prime Minister): Mr Mitsotaki, I don't understand. Since you seem preoccupied, now that we face each other, tell me, really, why do you refuse a debate on television? What is the reason ((for your refusal))? Do you want Mr Portosalte ((a reporter who supports ND)) as the moderator so that

he can give you cheat sheets? We will have him. We will have whoever you like. But let us have the debate. Let us confront each other. Let us debate. Why are you hiding?

681-689: KYRIAKOS MITSOTAKIS (PRESIDENT OF NEW DEMOCRACY): You always claim that you have a great oratorical and parliamentary supremacy. The ballot box will judge that. I will make a prediction: on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May one of us will be smiling and the other will be crying, and New Democracy will succeed a great political victory which will lead to a big political change. And then, come back to the Parliament and tell us all these nice things about how much the Greek people trust you and how happy they are with the situation in which you brought the country. ((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY))

The first pair of Tsipras – Mitsotakis attacking each other did not spark rejective reactions neither on the part of MPs affiliated to the opposition nor to the government. Lack of such reactions contextualizes the attacks as pertaining to politic speech in the politeness-politic speech-impoliteness continuum, thus, as legitimate discursive practices in the Greek Parliament (Tsakona 2011). However, Mitsotakis proceeds with his speech, launching further successive attacks against Tsipras via humor and irony. As Nuolijärvi and Tiittula (2011: 580) point out, opposition leaders tend to use more attacking humor and irony as opposed to prime ministers in office. This time, his attacks are contextualized as offensive, therefore face-threatening and impolite, by the latter (example 4).

(4)718-728: ΚΥΡΙΑΚΟΣ ΜΗΤΣΟΤΑΚΗΣ (Πρόεδρος της Νέας Δημοκρατίας): Μιλήσατε, κύριε Τσίπρα, για σχέδιο, γυρίσατε άρον άρον πίσω, ακυρώσατε τις περιοδείες σας στην Ήπειρο και στην Άρτα για έναν και μόνο λόγο, επειδή γνωρίζατε ότι η επικαιρότητα ασχολιόταν με άλλα θέματα, γιατί το ηθικό σας πλεονέκτημα, κύριε Τσίπρα, βούλιαξε στα γαλαζοπράσινα νερά του Ιονίου. ((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY)) Γελάτε, κύριε Τσίπρα. Πράγματι, θα είναι αστείο, διότι εκεί που σας φώναζαν κάποτε «να τος, να τος, ο Πρωθυπουργός!», τώρα θα λένε «να τος, να τος, ο Τσίπρας ο σκαφάτος!». Έτσι θα σας θυμάται η ελληνική κοινωνία! Από την Αριστερά των καταλήψεων, στην Αριστερά του κότερου! ((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY / Noise and intense protests by SYRIZA))

729: ΠΑΝΑΓΙΩΤΗΣ (ΠΑΝΟΣ) ΣΚΟΥΡΟΛΙΑΚΟΣ: Επιθεώρηση το κάνατε!

833-851: ΚΥΡΙΑΚΟΣ ΜΗΤΣΟΤΑΚΗΣ (Πρόεδρος της Νέας Δημοκρατίας): (...) Το τι έγινε μετά είναι πλέον γνωστό στο Πανελλήνιο. Ο κ. Τσίπρας πήγε διακοπές κρυπτόμενος σε μία θαλαμηγό, όταν η χώρα ακόμα μετρούσε τους νεκρούς της στο Μάτι. Αυτή είναι η αισθητική και αυτή είναι η ηθική της εξουσίας, όπως την αντιλαμβάνεται ο Πρωθυπουργός σας. Αυτός βέβαια είναι ο λιτός βίος στα καταστρώματα της πλουτοκρατίας! Αυτή είναι η υποτιθέμενη μάχη κατά της διαπλοκής! ((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY)) Μου έκανε εντύπωση!. Αναρωτιέμαι, κύριε Τσίπρα, πραγματικά, γιατί σήμερα δεν επαναλάβατε αυτό το δίλημμα που θέτετε πάντα στις τελευταίες σας ομιλίες «με τους πολλούς ή με την ελίτ». Πώς να τα πείτε, κύριε Τσίπρα μου; Πώς να μιλήσετε ξανά για την ελίτ; ((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY)) Εκτός –

υπάρχει μια άλλη εξήγηση- αν συγχρωτίζεστε με τις ελίτ, όπως φαίνεται να έλεγε ο Τρόσκι, για να ρίξετε την πλουτοκρατία από μέσα. Υπάρχει και αυτή η εξήγηση. ((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY)) Αυτό, λοιπόν, είναι το υποτιθέμενο ηθικό πλεονέκτημα του πολιτικού χώρου.

((Noise by SYRIZA))

ΠΡΟΕΔΡΟΣ (Νικόλαος Βούτσης): Ησυχία, παρακαλώ.

(...)

718-728: KYRIAKOS MITSOTAKIS (President of New Democracy): You spoke about a plan, Mr Tsipras, you hurried back, you cancelled your Ipiros and Arta campaign for one reason only, because you knew that the media were discussing other topics, because your moral high ground, Mr Tsipras, sank in the turquoise Ionian waters. ((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY)) You laugh, Mr Tsipras. Indeed, it would be funny because once people cheered “here comes the prime-minister” whereas now they will be cheering “here comes Tsipras the yacht-cruise-maker”. This is how Greek society will remember you! From the Left of the squats to the Left of the yachts! ((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY / Noise and intense protests by SYRIZA))

729: PANOS SKOUROLIAKOS: You have turned it ((the sitting)) into a vaudeville!

833-853: KYRIAKOS MITSOTAKIS (President of New Democracy): (...) Every Greek knows what happened next. Mr. Tsipras went on holidays hiding on a yacht when the country was still counting the dead of Mati ((referring to the disastrous fires in Attica in the summer of 2018)). This is your good taste, and this is the ethos of your administration, as your prime minister understands it. And this is your austere lifestyle on the decks of the plutocracy! This is your so-called battle against corruption! ((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY)) It has impressed me! I wonder Mr Tsipras, really, why don't you repeat the dilemma you posed in your recent speeches, “with the people or with the elites”. But how can you say those things my dear Mr Tsipras? How are you ever again going to speak about the elites? ((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY)) Unless – there is one more explanation – you hang out with the elites so that, as Trotsky seems to have said, you can defeat them from within. There is this explanation as well. ((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY)) This is the moral high ground of the Left.

((Noise by SYRIZA))

HOUSE SPEAKER: Quiet, please.

(...)

The first jab line in example 4 (718-728), refers to Tsipras' personal ethos. Mitsotakis uses the metaphor of it having *sank in the turquoise Ionian waters*. In the next utterance we are informed that Tsipras' reaction to the attack was laughter. His dismissive reaction triggers the escalation of the humorous/ironic attack, this time by means of the mock chant, *Here comes Tsipras the yacht-cruise-maker*, echoing the pre-electoral chant, *Here comes the prime minister*, by which supporters welcome party leaders. The pun refers to a three-day cruise Tsipras and his family went on, in August 2018, 20 days after a

destructive fire in Attica which caused about one hundred casualties. The pun portrays Tsipras as cynical and indifferent to the people's suffering. The first part of Mitsotakis' attack is concluded with another humorous pun, *From the Left of the squats to the Left of the yachts!*, referring to Tsipras' young past as an activist of the Left and his alleged political transformation. The pun produces further applause on the part of ND MPs and, for the first time, intense reactions on the part of the governmental coalition. These are summarized in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person offensive speech act addressed directly to the leader of the Opposition in the form of the declarative, *You have turned it ((the sitting)) into a vaudeville!*. The SYRIZA MP, Panos Skouroliakos (729) attacks Mitsotakis comparing his speech to a series of burlesque comedy acts. He constructs his humorous attacks as lacking graveness and respect for the procedure. Skouroliakos violates parliamentary protocol by claiming the floor and addressing the Body to defend the collective face of both his leader and his party's members against disparaging insinuations by the leader of the opposition.

Mitsotakis intensifies his attack by straightforwardly addressing the collective face of his adversaries. He claims that Tsipras' ethos reflects upon the ethos of the members of his party (*This is your good taste, and this is the ethos of your administration, as your prime minister understands it.*). The attacks are escalated by mocking jab lines which further disparage the adversary, juxtaposing his alleged austere lifestyle to his going on a cruise (*and this is your austere lifestyle on the decks of the plutocracy*). He feigns sympathy expressed by address terms of mocking conviviality (*my dear Mr Tsipras*) and rhetorical questions expressing his compassion as to how Tsipras is ever again going to attack the elites (*How are you ever again going to speak about the elites?*). By doing so, Mitsotakis activates implicatures of impoliteness masked as mock politeness, i.e. an ostensibly polite stance, constructed by linguistic forms that would in other circumstances be associated with a polite attitude (Haugh 2014: 278). Banter is concluded by another mock explanation of Tsipras' supposed coalition with the so-called plutocracy, that is, his hanging out with them in order to defeat them from within. The pun is attributed to Trotsky, a famous Russian leader of the 1917 socialist revolution, to whom Tsipras is juxtaposed to be constructed as a caricature revolutionary figure within the socialist movement (*Unless – there is one more explanation – you hang out with the elites so that, as Trotsky seems to have said, you can defeat them from within*). Mitsotakis' attacks are cheered by his party members and vehemently rejected by SYRIZA MPs, thus contextualized as witty by the former and as particularly offensive by the latter.

(5)1496-1555: ΑΛΕΞΗΣ ΤΣΙΠΡΑΣ (Πρόεδρος της Κυβέρνησης): Δημιουργήσατε ρίγη συγκίνησης κατά τη διάρκεια της εξηντάλεπτης ομιλίας σας. Πραγματικά, όμως, δεν περίμενα ποτέ ότι θα φτάνατε στο σημείο σήμερα εδώ, στο ελληνικό Κοινοβούλιο, να παριστάνετε τον Στέφανο Χίο της πολιτικής ζωής του τόπου. Αυτό το κατόντημα δεν το περίμενα ποτέ ((Applause by SYRIZA)) Η κατάληξη, όμως, της κατηφόρας είναι ο πάτος. Τον πιάνετε σήμερα. (...) Δεν μπήκα στην πολιτική ζωή του τόπου πλούσιος, δεν έγινα πλούσιος και δεν ανήκω σε μια πολιτική οικογένεια, η οποία δεν έκανε καμία άλλη δουλειά, παρά μόνο πολιτική και είναι ζάμπλουτη, κύριε Μητσοτάκη. Είσαι πολύ λίγος, κύριε Μητσοτάκη, για να μιλάς για την ελίτ και για τους πολλούς σε εμένα! ((Applause by SYRIZA)) (...) Κύριε Μητσοτάκη, δεν χρειάζεται να ξεοδέυστε. Αν μου ζητούσατε, θα σας έδινα εγώ φωτογραφίες μου. Βγάζω και selfie, έχω βγάλει και

με το προσωπικό φωτογραφίες. Μπορεί να σας έδινα και μία με ψαροντούφεκο, αν θέλετε, γιατί μου αρέσει και το ψαροντούφεκο, αν σας αρέσει να έχετε πιο ευχάριστες φωτογραφίες από άλλες που βάζετε το παρακράτος σας να ξοδεύετε προκειμένου να υποκλέψουν τις στιγμές της προσωπικής μου ζωής! Και είναι ντροπή σας! Είναι ντροπή σας! ((Applause by SYRIZA))

1496-1555: ALEXIS TSIPRAS (Prime Minister): You have caused chills during your sixty-minute speech. Really, though, I have never expected that you, here, today, in the Greek Parliament, would go so far as to become Stefanos Chios ((an owner/editor of media affiliated to the far-right)) of Greek politics. I have never expected this downfall. ((Applause by SYRIZA)) But the end of decent is the bottom. And this is exactly where you are today. (...) I didn't enter politics as a rich man, I haven't become rich and I do not belong to a political family that have never had any other profession except for politics and became filthy rich, Mr Mitsotaki. You(-SINGULAR) do not have what it takes, Mr Mitsotaki, to talk about the elite and the ordinary people like myself! ((Applause by SYRIZA)) (...) Mr Mitsotaki, you shouldn't have wasted your money. If you had asked me, I would have given you my photos myself. I take selfies, I have taken pictures with the personnel. I might have given you one with the speargun if you had asked, because I like the speargun, if you wished to have more pleasant pictures of me than the ones you have your deep-state<sup>xiii</sup> waste money on, in order to steal moments of my personal life! And it is a shame of you! It is a shame of you! ((Applause by SYRIZA))

In excerpt 5, Tsipras (1496-1555) initiates his response to the leader of the opposition with the ironic exaggeration *you have caused chills during your sixty-minute speech*, reintroducing the theme of Mitsotakis' inadequate rhetorical skills. He proceeds by dismissing his adversary's allegations as a *downfall*, i.e. moral abjection on his part (*I have never expected this downfall*) and by escalating his own attack by a pun which makes use of a popular metaphor, *but the end of decent is the bottom*, and the assertive speech act *and this is exactly where you are today*, which presupposes Mitsotakis' moral *downfall*. He then shifts back to the serious, non-mocking mode. Tsipras directly denies insinuations of his alignment with the economic elites of the country, a choice that functions as a negative evaluation of Mitsotakis' interrogative allegations and thus as a defense (Nuolijärvi and Tiittula 2011). His shift to the serious mode as well as to the irreverent 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular are means which construct disrespect towards Mitsotakis' own face as well as a strong personal, rather than institutional, reaction against his insinuations. He thus, contextualizes banter on the part of his adversary as a serious offensive act, one that cannot be indirectly rejected. Mock politeness perceived as off-record impoliteness is answered by means of the serious mode. Tsipras conducts a short chronicle of his political carrier, highlighting contrasts in their respective backgrounds. He contrasts their origins and financial means by categorizing himself as an *ordinary* person who has not become rich as a result of his political career and brings forth the fact that Mitsotakis comes from a political family with a very long participation in Greek politics as their professional occupation.<sup>xiii</sup> He thus, strikes a blow against his opponent's collective familial face. Bald-on-record impoliteness, registered in the unparliamentary 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular, is used to further attack the opponent's negative face:

*"I didn't enter politics as a rich man, I haven't become rich and I do not belong*

*to a political family that have never had any other profession except for politics and became filthy rich, Mr Mitsotaki. You(-SINGULAR) do not have what it takes, Mr Mitsotaki, to talk about the elites and the ordinary people like myself!"*

Several lines further on, in his responsive speech, Tsipras shifts to the humorous mode to ridicule his opponent's use of intercepted photographs of himself and his family in order to disparage him. He mockingly offers to present his photographs to Mitsotakis himself so as not to have to spend money on people spying for him: *Mr Mitsotaki, you shouldn't waste your money. If you had asked me, I would have given you my photos myself.* He shifts back to the serious mode to conclude his counterattack by an emphatic dismissal of his opponent's line of attack as shameful, repeated twice, directly constructing impoliteness and lack of ethos on his adversary's part: *"And it is a shame of you! It is a shame of you!"*.

The final part of Tsipras and Mitsotakis verbal combat (excerpt 6, lines 1686-1709) forms a more conversational part of the event. It is concluded by Mitsotakis condescending response to Tsipras' critical reference to his family's political tradition and wealth and Tsipras' final serious punch line by which he indirectly dismisses his opponent, referring to him in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person to portray him as unaccountable for his actions.

(6) Lines 1686-1709

1. ΚΥΡΙΑΚΟΣ ΜΗΤΣΟΤΑΚΗΣ (Πρόεδρος της Νέας Δημοκρατίας):  
Υπάρχει πράγματι μία διαφορά με μας, κύριε Τσίπρα. Προερχόμαστε από διαφορετικές οικογένειες και έχουμε διαφορετικές ιστορίες. Έχω την τύχη ή την ατυχία –μερικές φορές είναι πλεονέκτημα, άλλες φορές είναι μειονέκτημα- να έχω ζήσει την πολιτική από μικρός.

2. ΕΛΕΝΗ ΑΥΛΩΝΙΤΟΥ: Από έξι μηνών.

3. ΚΥΡΙΑΚΟΣ ΜΗΤΣΟΤΑΚΗΣ (Πρόεδρος της Νέας Δημοκρατίας):  
Πράγματι, κυρία μου, η οικογένειά μου εξορίστηκε στη χούντα. Άλλοι έκαναν δουλίτσες στη χούντα. Αφήστε τα αυτά τώρα και αυτήν την ειρωνεία! Άλλοι έκαναν δουλίτσες!

((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY / Noise and intense protests by SYRIZA))

4. ΠΡΟΕΔΡΟΣ (Νικόλαος Βούτσης): Παρακαλώ, κάντε ησυχία! Συνεχίστε.

5. ΚΥΡΙΑΚΟΣ ΜΗΤΣΟΤΑΚΗΣ (Πρόεδρος της Νέας Δημοκρατίας):  
Γνώρισα, λοιπόν, την πολιτική από μέσα και απομυθοποίησα τη γλιδή της εξουσίας. Εσείς την ανακαλύψατε με κάποια καθυστέρηση. Κατανοώ γιατί σας σαγήνευσε. Μόνο που, δυστυχώς, δεν ταιριάζει πια με το αριστερό σας προφίλ.

((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY))

6. ΠΡΟΕΔΡΟΣ (Νικόλαος Βούτσης): Ευχαριστούμε. Ο Πρωθυπουργός έχει τον λόγο για μισό λεπτό.

7. ΑΛΕΞΗΣ ΤΣΙΠΡΑΣ (Πρόεδρος της Κυβέρνησης): Ένας στίχος του Αναγνωστάκη μόνο ως απάντηση: Δεν έφταιγε αυτός. Τόσος ήταν.

((Applause by SYRIZA))

1. ΚΥΡΙΑΚΟΣ ΜΙΤΣΟΤΑΚΗΣ (PRESIDENT OF NEW DEMOCRACY):  
There is definitely a difference between you and me, Mr Tsipras. We come from

different families and we have different stories. I have the good or the bad luck -sometimes it is an advantage, some other times it is a disadvantage- to have been in politics since I was young.

2. ELENI AVLONITOU: Since ((you were)) six months old. ((Reference to a past statement by Mitsotakis that during the years of the dictatorship / J Junta (1967-1974), he had been a six-month-old political exile in Paris.))

3. KYRIAKOS MITSOTAKIS (PRESIDENT OF NEW DEMOCRACY): Indeed, my lady, my family was exiled by the Junta. There were others who did business-DIMINUTIVE in Junta. Stop that now, that irony! There were others who did business-DIMINUTIVE! ((referring to fake news about Tsipras' father being contracted by the Junta- rumors and fake photos were publicized by various media affiliated to ND))

((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY / Noise and intense protests by SYRIZA))

4. HOUSE SPEAKER: Please, be quiet! Go on.

5. KYRIAKOS MITSOTAKIS (PRESIDENT OF NEW DEMOCRACY): Thus, I got to know politics from within and I have demystified the opulence of power. You have discovered it with some delay. I understand why it fascinates you. But unfortunately, it does not match your left-wing profile.

((Applause by NEW DEMOCRACY))

6. HOUSE SPEAKER: Thank you. The prime minister has the floor for 30 seconds.

7. ALEXIS TSIPRAS (Prime Minister): Just a verse by Anagnostakis ((a well-known Greek poet)) as an answer: "He is not to blame. He wasn't for more". ((That is all he is capable off)).

((Applause by SYRIZA))

Both speakers contextualize each other's reference to personal information and affairs as insults and treat them accordingly. They reject insinuations of inadequacy and corruption by firing back with matching implicit accusations. Humor is the means to achieve implicitness and as such it is instrumentalized to construct threats to face and ultimately choices marked as offensive -thus impolite- within the sequential negotiation of meaning.

More specifically, in turn 1, Mitsotakis acknowledges the fact that he belongs to a political family and has been exposed to politics since a very young age. Breaching the parliamentary protocol, a female SYRIZA MP interrupts his speech with a humorous jab line repeating a statement made by him some time ago (turn 2: *Since ((you were)) six months old.*). During one of his parliamentary speeches, he had claimed that during the years of the dictatorship (1967-1974), he had been a six-month-old political exile in Paris. The statement had provoked a spontaneous heartfelt laughter to the immediate audience. It had also been uploaded and humorously commented upon in numerous content sharing media platforms.

In his responsive contribution (turn 3), Mitsotakis confirms his family's exile during the Junta by means of the serious mode. He directly addresses the attacker in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural, using the address term *my lady*. He thus constructs civility which contrasts with



his subsequent counter-aggressive ironic insinuations against Tsipras' family. He indirectly invokes fake news publicized by various media affiliated to ND and the far-right about Tsipras' father being contracted by the Junta. He proceeds contextualizing reference to his childhood narrative as irony, and requests that it stops (*Stop that now, that irony!*). He thus marks Avlonitou's jab line (turn 2) as impolite. He then proceeds with a repetition of his indirect reference to his adversary's family doing business with the Junta (*There were others who did business-DIMINUTIVE.*). The use of the diminutive to refer to the alleged *business*, further constructs the ironic mode. His strategy is applauded by his party and intensely rejected by SYRIZA. Protesting provokes the House Speaker's intervention with a request for order (turn 4: *Please, be quiet!*)

Mitsotakis threatens the face of his rival as a collective construction reflecting his familial ethos. He escalates his attack by condescendingly comparing his growing up in a family engaged in politics for several generations with Tsipras' folk origin to mockingly insinuate greed for power on Tsipras' part. In his final blow, he repeats accusations of incompatibility between participation in politics and the management of power and Tsipras' lower-class origin and alleged left-wing ideology / political identity:

*“Thus, I got to know politics from within and I have demystified the opulence of power. You have discovered it with some delay. I understand why it fascinates you. But unfortunately, it does not match your left-wing profile”* (turn 5).

In his responsive contribution which forms the punch line that concludes the event (turn 7), Tsipras indirectly contextualizes offence, i.e. impoliteness. In contrast to Mitsotakis' direct 2<sup>nd</sup> person reference to him, he addresses the Body instead of his opponent, to whom he refers in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, symbolically dismissing his presence. He recites a verse by Anagnostakis,<sup>xiv</sup> *“He is not to blame. He wasn't for more”*, i.e. that is all he is capable of, to strike a blow at Mitsotakis' own personality. He thus counterattacks Mitsotakis' humorous offences by portraying him as unfit to afford accountability for his own actions. The switch to the 3<sup>rd</sup> person and the serious mode, and the brevity of his contribution, which contrasts with the so far extended responses to disparaging discourse, further contextualize Mitsotakis' insinuations as a serious offence which cannot be treated either via the humorous mode or as part of legitimate parliamentary interaction.

All in all, the Greek crisis (2009-2019) and the eminent elections (2019) form the overall context for the employment of humor and irony as means for negotiating im/politeness in the discourse of Greek parliamentarians examined in the present study. Excerpts 1 and 2 exemplify two strategies employed in the contextualization of humorous contributions as offensive, namely their straightforward dismissal as abusive and the temporary breakdown of the sitting due to the intense protesting of offended parties. Excerpts 3-6 on the other hand, are characteristic of how humor serves as a discursive strategy to aggravate conflict in sequences of extended speeches. The debating participants are the prime minister in office and the leader of the opposition. As the Nuolijärvi and Tiittula's study indicates (2011: 580), opposition leaders tend to use more attacking humor and irony as opposed to prime ministers in office. However, both speakers in our data contextualize each other's reference to personal information and affairs as insults and treat them accordingly. They both reject insinuations of inadequacy and corruption by firing back with matching implicit and, at times explicit, accusations. Rejective responses to humorous, albeit disparaging, jab lines, as well as strong reactions by MPs affiliated to the offended party, draw the limits between politic and impolite humorous verbal acts. Thus, framing humor as an impoliteness strategy sets the limits of expected as opposed

to objectionable discursive strategies in political combat.

## 5. Conclusions

In the present study, we dealt with humor and im/politeness in parliamentary discourse. In the context of the Greek crisis, we analyzed instances of discourse in the Greek Parliament derived from the Minutes of Plenary Sessions between the years 2009 to 2019. The purpose of the study was to examine how humor serves as a means for negotiating im/politeness in the discourse of Greek parliamentarians, specifically focusing on the impact of humor on the impoliteness end of the politeness-politic speech-impoliteness continuum (Watts 1992). To begin with, humor can serve as a positive politeness strategy, in the sense that it mitigates the straightforward targeting of persons, situations or ideas and serves as a means of indirect criticism (Haugh 2016). What is more, it helps bypass institutional prohibitions of foul language and demands for decorum, as it can also construct covert offensive-aggressive discourse.

The examples discussed make clear how humor and irony are chained in coherent exchanges, even when they do not occur in a sequence of consecutive conversational turns. Analysis of long stretches of talk revealed that facework via humor and irony is a sequential phenomenon as humorous utterances form pairs that may not be adjacent but are nevertheless pragmatically connected in trigger / response chains. Thus, humorous attacks are reciprocated with more humor and irony or counterattacks via the serious mode which target the original humorist / ironist. In this context, politic uses of language are constructed as unmarked linguistic choices. However, humor and irony can be also constructed as bald on record impoliteness by recipients. As we have shown in the analysis, humor in parliamentary procedures during the Greek crisis and the coming to power of a left-wing political party considered the outsider of Greek politics is often marked as an impoliteness strategy which serves to cause offence. The temporary collapse of formal parliamentary procedures, cases of intense protests and the explicit characterization or the implicit marking of attacks as offensive, contextualize impoliteness, i.e. the unacceptable use of linguistic forms perceived as abusive. The marking of contributions as impolite draws the line between politic humorous attacks and attacks which exceed the limits of expected political rivalry.

Verbal combats for access to power between political rivals are organized as binary relationships of enhancing one's face by striking a blow at that of the rival. The points humor scores in such a combat are multiple. To begin with, humor enhances witty constructions of self. As Nuolijärvi and Tiittula (2011) have also observed in their discussion on political irony, it improves the speaker's position against the opponent who is negatively evaluated. What is more, it contributes to the loss of the rival's face, at the same time resulting in the collective loss of face for all the members of the rival group, face being interpreted as "persons-in-relationships as well as relationships-in-interaction" (Haugh 2013: 47). At the same time, attackers address the ingroup as competent leading figures capable of enhancing in-group cohesion and solidarity. Humorous/ironic counterattacks serve to redress the balance.

Humor can be ostensibly appreciated by members of the in-group and at the same time ostensibly rejected as an act of offence by members of the out-group, also delineating the boundaries between rival parties and political alliances. As Tsakona and Chovanec point

out, discursive practices exploiting different types of incongruity employ linguistic devices to accomplish the target of either bringing interlocutors closer together or driving them further apart (2018: 6), parliamentary communities of practice being a prototypical case in point. Within this perspective, our analysis confirms the affiliative and/or disaffiliative function of humor as an interactional construct. As the present analysis also exhibits, humor in competitive democracies, such as the Greek, is proven particularly aggressive, mainly promoting polarisation, disaffiliation and the discrediting of the opponent (Tsakona 2009; Archakis and Tsakona 2011), all the more so, in the years of the economic crisis (Frantzi, Georgalidou and Giakoumakis 2019a and b).

Future research could address political humor as indicative of the different ways in which politics is organised in various socio-cultural and political systems as well as the impact of periods of intense socio-political and economic crisis on parliamentary discourse. It could also address the role of the media in recontextualizing and disseminating aggressive political humor, at the same time enhancing preference for aggravated forms of conflict as strategies that can arouse the interest of audiences and traumatize rival political parties. Another useful next step would be the analysis of the distribution of aggressive humor according to the gender of political personnel. Last but not least, further analysis of conversational data, institutional or otherwise, should deal with the delineation of phenomena pertaining to the humor-irony continuum, based on contextualizations negotiated by participants in discourse.

## Bibliography

Archakis, Argyris, and Tsakona, Villy. 2011. Informal talk in formal settings: Humorous narratives in Greek parliamentary debates. In V. Tsakona and D. E. Popa (eds), *Studies in Political Humor: In between Political Critique and Public Entertainment*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 61-81.

Arundale, Robert B. 2010. Constituting Face in Conversation: Face, Facework and Interactional Achievement. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42: 2078-2105.

Attardo, Salvatore. 2000. Irony as relevant inappropriateness. *Journal of Pragmatics* 32-6: 793-826.

Bippus, Amy. 2007. Factors predicting the perceived effectiveness of politician's use of humor during a debate. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 20: 105-121.

Brown, Penelope, and Levinson Stephen. 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bull, Peter, Fetzer, Anita and Kádár, Dániel Z. 2020. Calling Mr Speaker 'Mr Speaker. *Pragmatics* 30-1: 64-87.

Christie, Christine. 2005. Politeness and the Linguistic Construction of Gender in Parliament: An Analysis of Transgressions and Apology Behaviour. *Working Papers in the Web* 3.

Corranza-Marquez, A. 2010. The faces of humor: Humor as catalyst of face in the context of the British and the Spanish Parliament. *Humor* 23-4: 467-504.

- Culpeper, Jonathan. 2005. Impoliteness and Entertainment in the Television Quiz Show: The Weakest Link. *Journal of Politeness Research* 1: 35-72.
- Culpeper, Jonathan. 2011. *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Culpeper, Jonathan. 1996. Towards an Anatomy of Impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics* 25: 349–367.
- Eelen, Gino. 2001. *A Critique of Politeness Theories*. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing.
- Frantzi, Katerina, Georgalidou, Marianthi and Giakoumakis, Giorgos. 2019. Greek Parliamentary Discourse in the Years of the Economic Crisis: Investigating Aggression Using a Corpus-Based Approach. In E. Jakaza (ed.), *Argumentation and Appraisal in Parliamentary Discourse*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, pp. 1-30.
- Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Pilar. 2013. Introduction: Face, identity and im/politeness. Looking backward, moving forward: From Goffman to practice theory. *Journal of Politeness Research* 9-1: 1-33.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra. 2013. Small Stories and Social Media, The Role of Narrative Stancetaking in the Circulation of a Greek News Story. *Working Papers in Urban Language and Literacies*, Paper 100.
- Georgalidou, Marianthi, Frantzi, Katerina and Giakoumakis, Giorgos. 2019a. “Κοινοβουλευτικός λόγος, ευγένεια και επιθετικότητα στο ελληνικό κοινοβούλιο”. (Parliamentary speech, politeness and aggression in the Greek Parliament). *Studies in Greek Linguistics* 39: 273-290.
- Georgalidou, Marianthi, Frantzi, Katerina and Giakoumakis, Giorgos. 2019b. “Addressing adversaries in the Greek Parliament: a corpus-based approach”. In M. Chondrogianni, S. Courtenage, G. Horrocks, A. Arvaniti and I. Tsimpli (eds.). *Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on Greek Linguistics*. London: University of Westminster, pp. 106-116.
- Georgalidou, Marianthi. 2017. Addressing Women in the Greek Parliament: Institutionalized Confrontation or Sexist Aggression?. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 5 (1): 30-57.
- Georgalidou, Marianthi. 2011. Stop caressing the ears of the hooded: Political humor in times of conflict. In V. Tsakona and D. Popa (eds.), *Studies in Political Humor*. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 83-108.
- Grice, H. Paul. 1975. Logic and conversation. In P. Cole and J.L. Morgan (eds), *Syntax and Semantics, Vol. 3: Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press, pp. 41–58.
- Goffman, Erving. 1967. *Interaction Ritual*. New York: Pantheon.
- Harris, Sandra. 2001. Being politically impolite: Extending politeness theory to adversarial political discourse. *Discourse in Society* 12: 451-472.
- Haugh, Michael. 2016. Just kidding: Teasing and claims to non-serious intent. *Journal of Pragmatics* 95: 120-136.

- Haugh, Michael. 2014. *Im/politeness Implicatures*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Haugh, Michael. 2013. Disentangling face, facework and im/ politeness. *Sociocultural Pragmatics* 1-1: 46-73.
- Hirsch, Galia. 2011. Between humor and irony. A pragmatic model. *Pragmatics and Cognition* 19.3: 530-561.
- Ilie, Cornelia. 2001. Unparliamentary language: Insults as cognitive forms of ideological confrontation. In R. Dirven, R. M. Frank and C. Ilie (eds), *Language and Ideology. Volume II: Descriptive Cognitive Approaches*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 235-263.
- Leech, Geoffrey, 1983. *The Principles of Pragmatics*. London and New York: Longman.
- Mitchell, Nathaniel, and Haugh, Michael. 2015. Agency, accountability and evaluations of impoliteness. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 11-2: 207-238.
- Morreall, John. 2005. Humor and the conduct of politics. In S. Lockyer and M. Pickering (eds). *Beyond the Joke. The Limits of Humor*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 63-78.
- Murphy, James. 2014. (Im)politeness during Prime Minister's Questions in the UK Parliament. *Pragmatics and Society* 5: 76–104.
- Nuolijärvi, Pirkko and Tiitula, Liisa. 2011. Irony in political television debates. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43: 572-587.
- Pomerantz, Anita. 1984. Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes. In J. M. Atkinson, and J. Heritage (eds). *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge, U.K., Cambridge University Press, pp. 57-101.
- Raskin, Victor and Attardo, Salvatore. 1994. Non-literality and non-bona-fide in language: An approach to formal and computational treatments of humor. *Pragmatics and Cognition* 2(1): 31–69.
- Searle, John. R. 1976. A classification of illocutionary acts. *Language in Society* 5(1): 1-23.
- Sifianou, Maria. 2008. Κοινοβουλευτικός λόγος και ευγένεια. (Parliamentary discourse and politeness). In A. Mozer, E. Bakakou-Orphanou, Ch. Charalambakis and D. Chila-8 Markopoulou (eds.), *Glosses Kharin: Volume Dedicated to Professor George Babiniotis by the Department of Linguistics*. Athens: Ellinika Grammata, pp. 464-474.
- Tsakona, Villy. 2009. Humor and image politics in parliamentary discourse: A Greek case study. *Text and Talk* 29: 219–237.
- Tsakona, Villy. 2011. Irony beyond criticism. Evidence from Greek parliamentary discourse. *Pragmatics and Society* 2-1: 57-86.
- Tsakona, Villy and Chovanec Jan (eds.). 2018. *Creating and Negotiating Humor in Everyday Interactions*. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Tsakona, Villy, and Popa, Diana. (eds). (2011). *Studies in Political Humor*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Watts, Richard J. 1992a. *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Watts, Richard J. 1992b. Linguistic Politeness and Politic Verbal Behavior: Reconsidering Claims for Universality. In R. J. Watts, S. Ide and K. Ehlich (eds), *Politeness in Language: Studies in its History, Theory and Practice*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 43-70.

Watts, Richard J. 2010. Linguistic Politeness Theory and its Aftermath: Recent Research Trails. In M. A. Locher and S. L. Graham (eds), *Interpersonal Pragmatics*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 43-70.

---

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Inverted commas in the original.

<sup>ii</sup> Hirsch 2011 distinguishes between irony and humor in the context of literary texts. For the detection of irony, she proposes a combination of pragmatic cues which include, among others, the flouting of Gricean maxims (Grice 1975) and the violation of the sincerity condition (Searle 1976). Cues for humor include script opposition and the violation of expectations (Raskin and Attardo 1994), punch lines and word play. Apart from the distinction between typical cases however, the proposed model acknowledges occurrences that include cues for both interpretations. These cases, it is argued, are located on a continuum between the two extremes (Hirsch 2011: 531-532), a point of view adopted in the present paper. However, a more thorough discussion of distinctions among humor, irony and sarcasm exceeds the scope of the present paper.

<sup>iii</sup> Henceforth, we will use humor / humorous as cover terms for humorous / ironic parliamentary discourse strategies.

<sup>iv</sup> A quantitative analysis of offensive humor in the Greek parliament would shed light on the distribution of relevant strategies in the corpus and is an interesting direction for further research.

<sup>v</sup> Alzheimer's disease is a progressive disorder that causes brain cells to degenerate. It is the most common cause of dementia and the decline in thinking and social skills that disrupts a person's ability to function independently.

<sup>vi</sup> List of symbols

(.): pause

(( )): extralinguistic information

underlined segments: speaker emphasis

[ ]: simultaneous speech

(...): omitted discourse

. a full stop indicates a stopping fall in tone

, a comma indicates continuing intonation

? a question mark indicates rising inflection

:: stretched sound

<sup>vii</sup> A loose English translation of the Greek conversations / speeches is given.

<sup>viii</sup> Excerpt 2 has been transcribed by the researcher (Georgalidou 2017: 44).

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXHFFFWyVKI>

<sup>x</sup> Also see Bull, Fetzer and Kádár 2020.

<sup>xi</sup> The placement of the contributions that are analyzed as the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> pair parts of the humorous exchanges in the long speeches delivered by the speakers is indicated by numbered lines. Excerpts are retrieved from the transcripts of parliamentary sittings which are available on the official site of the Greek Parliament.

<sup>xii</sup> A body of people, typically influential members of government agencies or the military, believed to be involved in the secret manipulation or control of government policy.

<sup>xiii</sup> Kyriakos Mitsotakis' grandfather and great-grandfather were members of the Greek parliament, and prominent Greek politicians and statesmen of the early 20th century. His father, Konstantinos Mitsotakis, had a life-long political career and served as prime minister from 1990 to 1993. His sister, Dora Bakoyanni, has been an MP since 1989. She served as the mayor of Athens (2003-2006). From 2006 to 2009, she was Minister of Foreign Affairs. Her son, Costas Bakoyannis, became mayor of Athens in 2019.

<sup>xiv</sup> Manolis Anagnostakis (1925-2005) was a Greek poet and critic at the forefront of the Marxist and existentialist poetry movements.