The conventionalisation of mock politeness in Chinese and British online forums

Jiayi Wang and Charlotte Taylor

ABSTRACT

While much cross-cultural and cross-linguistic analysis centres on difference because it is so often what is salient in miscommunication, we argue that we need to be more aware of similarity. Drawing on corpus-assisted discourse studies, we aim to uncover similarities in the pragmatic processes across two languages/cultures, more specifically, the shared developments in the conventionalisation of apparently polite forms for impolite functions used in British and Chinese forum communities within the last decade or so. The case studies which have been selected for analysis are 'hehe' in Chinese and 'HTH' [hope that helps] in British English. In both cases, these items had previously been identified as potentially mock polite through their presence in meta-discussions of im/politeness within the forums themselves. Our analysis shows how the items become pragmaticalised within specific contexts, while remaining unaffected in others, displaying both diachronic and synchronic variation in the degree of conventionalisaton of mock politeness which they express. The differentiation between the expected behaviours in different areas of the forms (collaborative or combative) and correlation with the mock polite usage also helps explain how it is that users orient towards the conventionalised meaning even when it is still relatively low frequency compared to polite usage, i.e. low frequency but high saliency.

Keywords: mock politeness; conventionalisation; forums; Chinese; British English; corpus-assisted discourse analysis

1. Introduction

The objects of our study are two forms with non-canonical mock polite connotations, *HTH* (an abbreviation of *hope that helps*) in British English and *hehe* (an approximation of laughter) in Chinese, which are currently in the early stages of the language change process. More specifically, the forms under investigation are being conventionalised as mock

politeness in certain contexts. In this paper, we define mock politeness as occurring when there is an im/politeness mismatch leading to an implicature of impoliteness (Taylor, 2016). In terms of impoliteness implicature, the two forms discussed here just started moving along the conventionalisation continuum in the last decade or so. They are unlikely to reach the ultimate extreme of becoming fully conventional soon, partly because consistent non-mock polite usage remains dominant, and partly because pragmatic change is a long and slow process and there is "no guarantee that it will ever reach its logical conclusion" (Beeching, 2005:173). As a result, they have become pragmatic signposts in both sincere and insincere usage. In this paper we examine how the two forms display both diachronic and synchronic variation in the degree of conventionalisation of mock politeness which they express.

We begin by providing background from the literature on mock politeness and conventionalisation and then describe the data and methodology we used in our study. We report the findings by presenting the Chinese and British case-studies in sequence. The paper ends by comparing the two cases and relating the findings to current gaps in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic pragmatic research.

2. Background

2.1. Mock politeness

We consider mock politeness to be part of *implicational impoliteness*, as outlined in Culpeper's model (2011) which is derived from analyses of how impoliteness was implied/inferred in actual reported impoliteness incidents (2011:155). The following three types of implicational impoliteness are identified in that model:

(1) Form-driven: the surface form or semantic content of a behaviour is marked.
(2) Convention-driven:
    (a) Internal: the context projected by part of a behaviour mismatches that projected by another part; or
    (b) External: the context projected by a behaviour mismatches the context of use.
(3) Context-driven:
    (a) Unmarked behaviour: an unmarked (with respect to surface form or semantic content) and unconventionalised behaviour mismatches the context; or

> (b) Absence of behaviour: the absence of a behaviour mismatches the context.

Mock politeness exploits norms of im/politeness by subverting them and thus is considered to be *convention-driven* (category 2). In the two cases we discuss in this paper, the mismatch is internal to the utterance as both polite and impolite moves are textually present, as illustrated in the example below:

> people that carry on like you clara, are often described as twattish, or a bit of a tit.
> hth.

In this message, which is quoted in its entirety, the first line attacks the addressee through implicational impoliteness (note the lack of personalisation in *people like you* as opposed to *you*). The second line (*hth*) which is graphologically separated in the original, then compounds the attack by adding another layer of implicational impoliteness in which the speaker ostensibly poses as someone offering helpful advice.

It is this second layer which makes this an instance of mock politeness more specifically as this is where we have the clash or mismatch of im/politeness. The receiver is forced to reconcile the apparently mixed messages of impoliteness (attack on values and behaviours) and politeness (offering of goods), resulting in an overall evaluation of impoliteness. Thus, the definition of mock politeness, as understood in this paper, is that: *mock politeness occurs when there is an im/politeness mismatch leading to an implicature of impoliteness* (Taylor, 2016). This definition is somewhat broader than that developed in Haugh (2014), who defines mock politeness implicatures as occurring when

> an ostensibly "polite" stance, which is indicated through the occurrence of a (non-) linguistic form or practice that would in other circumstances be associated with a polite attitude, masks or disguises an "impolite" stance that arises through implicature

> Haugh (2014: 278)

The wider definition is followed because it encompasses both those instances where the im/politeness mismatch arises from contextual factors (which reveal the 'disguise') and where it is explicitly present in the co-text, as illustrated in the example above. This latter

type has been somewhat overlooked to date, and yet, like the contextual variety, it involves mismatch and, as Culpeper (2011: 166-167) proposes, '[a]n interpretation triggered through mismatching is more implicit and involves more inferencing than one triggered through matching, as targets must spend cognitive effort in resolving internal or external mismatches' (2011: 166–167). Thus, it has significant potential for communicating impoliteness, where the target must invest cognitive effort in reprocessing the ostensibly 'polite' component in order to retrieve the impolite interpretation, potentially increasing the impoliteness impact.

2.2. Conventionalisation

Following Terkourafi (2015:15), we may 'consider an expression to be conventionalized for some use relative to a context for a speaker if it is used frequently enough in that context to achieve a particular illocutionary goal to that speaker's experience'. Crucially, we she goes on to discuss, such conventionalisation is '*inherently evaluative*: when we learn, through socialization in a community or group, that "this is the way to do some thing" […] what we are implicitly learning is that this is the right way of doing this thing (apologizing, requesting goods) in this type of context' (2015:16, italics in original). Thus within the forums analysed here, acquiring these quasi-conventionalised forms is also a way of displaying in-group membership.

With reference to mock politeness more specifically, we can envisage two key roles for conventionalisation:

    (a) the behaviours which are used to express the insincere politeness may involve conventionalised impoliteness formulae (e.g. *twattish* in the example above)

    (b) the mock polite behaviour itself may be conventionalised for the expression of impoliteness, as illustrated in the following exchange from a television series:

    Humphries: Minister, with the greatest possible respect--
    Hacker: Oh, are you going to insult me again?

<div align="right">Extract from Yes, Minister (a BBC TV series)</div>

It is clear that the second speaker interprets the politeness formulae of the first utterance (*with the greatest possible respect*) directly as a pre-insult, thus recognising the conventionalised impoliteness function.

In this paper, we focus on impoliteness implicatures (Haugh, 2015) that are realised through a convention-driven internal mismatch, and more specifically on those forms where the apparently polite form is undergoing a process of conventionalisation in some contexts.

A key question arising with conventionalisation is how this process occurs; for instance, in Levinson (2000), conventionalisation is discussed within a frame of diachronic meaning shift. However, there is no reason to assume that meanings which become conventionalised will necessarily move further along the cline towards conventional meanings at any one, synchronous moment in time. Conventionalised meanings may be conventionalised for particular contexts while remaining non-conventional in others, as we discuss in the two case-studies. This aspect is central to Terkourafi's (2003) definition of conventionalisation, in which she describes

> conventionalisation as a relationship holding between utterances and contexts, which is a correlate of the (statistical) frequency with which an expression is used in one's experience *in a particular context*
>
> (Terkourafi, 2003:151, our emphasis)

The focus on (statistical) frequency in which im/politeness is viewed as habit-based (Terkourafi 2015) also shows how corpus-assisted discourse studies / corpus pragmatics may be useful in investigating this area. However, as Culpeper notes, an interesting feature is that 'people have knowledge of impoliteness formulae which far exceeds their direct experience of them. So, frequency cannot be the sole or even dominant factor in their conventionalisation' (2010:3243). In explaining this phenomenon, he emphasises the role of indirect experience and experience of metadiscourse, 'the long shadow of impoliteness behaviours' (2010:3243). Thus, we should consider that 'one's experience', as referenced in Terkourafi's (2003) definition, may also be second-hand and indirect. In the case of the forum language analysed here, this second-hand experience may well be acquired through reading threads in which these conventionalised im/politeness markers are used.

Another salient issue relates to the *degree* of conventionalisation and subsequent effect on perceptions of im/politeness. Culpeper's (2011) empirical study reports that conventionalised impoliteness formulae will vary according to three scales: first, the degree of conventionalisation, for instance whether an item is only conventionalised when

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accompanied by a particular prosody; second, the extent to which they are 'context-spanning', i.e. are conventionalised as impolite in a range of contexts; and third, the degree of gravity of offence associated with the formula (2011:137). As will be seen, in the two case-studies examined here they are not (yet) conventionalised to a 'context-spanning' degree and in some cases this ambiguity may be part of their effectiveness.

3. Data & Methodology

The data used in the two case-studies examined here both come from *written conversation*.[1] This is an aspect which has been somewhat overlooked, at least partly due to a perceived novelty of the form. However, now that written conversation is such an integral part of everyday communication, carried out through a range of platforms and for a range of purposes, it should no longer be considered a marked form of conversation compared to a spoken norm. More specifically, in this study, we examine forum data as a form of polylogue communication. Thus, both sets of data we are looking at contain a non-careful form of speech, relatively informal, and performed with an unknown number of hearers who may fill a range of participation roles (Goffman, 1981).

The British English data comes from a forum called mumsnet.com which, despite the name, hosts a wide range of forums on a variety of topics. The Chinese data comes from major Chinese forums, including Baidu and Tianya. In both cases, the corpora used were constructed using search terms relating to im/politeness to identify threads, which were then compiled into the corpus. It should be noted that corpora had been collected for different research questions relating to im/politeness.[2] It was only in a subsequent stage that the two authors realised there was significant overlap with regards to the topic of this paper. Thus, the two items provided as case-studies (*hehe* and *hth*) emerged from the data in a way that demanded attention, rather than having been chosen *a priori* as similar meaning units. The two items came into focus for several reasons. Both provide a rare window into the interesting phenomenon of 'pragmatic reversal'. Both are conventionalised politeness formulae that begin to act as signposts in insincere usage as well while not losing their core

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[1] The terms *CMC/CMD/e-language* etc. are not used here because it seems unlikely that the means of transmission can still meaningfully be used to group language practices across other register factors.
[2] The Chinese forum data was collected to investigate what constitutes im/politeness for Chinese internet language users. The British English forum data was collected as part of a wider investigation into how mock politeness is named and perceived (see Taylor, 2016). It is worth pointing out here that the authors were looking at overall shifts in relation to im/politeness which might cast light on the processes of pragmaticalisation, and, as such, controlling or investigating variables such as gender or topic was not part of scope of the study.

politeness functions. The co-existence of sincere and insincere usage and the seemingly disproportionate frequency in comparison with the saliency of the forms stood out from the data. Moreover, the rich meta-discussions around both items offer insights into what internet language users think and say about these phenomena. This kind of spontaneous large-scale meta-discussion did not seem to happen with other lexical items in our data. The British English data was collected using a wide range of im/politeness and potential mock politeness search terms (see Taylor, 2016). The Chinese data was gathered by using a wide range of potential im/politeness search terms.[3] The threads identified were examined manually and only those containing im/politeness metapragmatic comments were saved to the corpus.

Having compiled the corpora, the methods of corpus-assisted discourse studies (see, for example, Partington et al., 2013) or corpus pragmatics (see, for example, Taavitsainen et al., 2015) were used to investigate the usage of the two items which constitute the case-studies.[4] In identifying whether the lexical items under study were used to express mock politeness, we drew on the definition of mock politeness provided above and manually examined the concordance lines for the presence of 'mixed messages' where it was apparent that both polite and impolite moves were contemporaneous in an utterance.

There are two ways to detect conventionalised impoliteness formulae. One is through identifying metadiscourse, that is, discussion of the lexical items among the participants in an interaction themselves, which points towards a conventionalised usage (see also Haugh 2018). In fact, it was im/politeness meta-discussion, such as (7), (8), (10) and (12) cited below in Section 4, in both the Chinese and British data that led the authors to note the two forms. The other way is through frequency-in-context, that is, by identifying repeated

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[3] The Chinese search terms of im/politeness are 礼貌 (polite), 有礼貌 (have politeness), 不礼貌 (impolite), 没(有)礼貌 (not have politeness), 无礼 (have no manners), 讲理 (reasonable and rational), 不讲理 (unreasonable and irrational), 文明 (civil), 不文明 (uncivil), 有素质 (have good manners/upbringing), 没素质(have no breeding), 有风度 (have manners), 没(有)风度 (have no manners), 羞辱 (abuse), 侮辱 (abuse), 辱骂 (verbally abuse), 喷(abuse), 黑(abuse), 骂(abuse), (人身)攻击 (abuse), 粗鲁 (rude), 鲁莽 (rude),粗暴 (rude and savage), 粗俗 (unrefined), 唐突(offend), 冒犯 (offend), 冒昧 (offensive), 冒失 (offensive and rash), 莽撞 (offensive and rash), 得罪 (offend), 触怒 (offend), 触犯 (offend), 野蛮 (rude and barbarian), 蛮横 (rude and unreasonable), 嘲讽/冷嘲热讽 (mock/mocking/sarcastic), 嘲弄 (mock/mocking), 嘲笑 (mock), 取笑 (mock), 讽刺 (mock/sarcasm/sarcastic), 暗讽 (insinuate with sarcasm), 奚落 (mock/sarcasm/sarcastic), and 挖苦 (mock/sarcasm/sarcastic). Developed from the literature and dictionaries, these search terms potentially signal discussion of im/politeness. Akin to the British data (Taylor 2016), the Chinese corpora were compiled through an iterative process until a point of saturation was reached. Using the thesaurus and word sketch tools, metalinguistic labels that could potentially describe (im)politeness were collected and analysed in the web corpus zhTenTen11 (11 billion words), provided with Sketch Engine, and NLPIR's Chinese Microblog Corpus (1 million entries) in order to see what other items occurred in similar environments.

[4] The methods of corpus-assisted discourse studies/analysis and corpus pragmatics are essentially the same, though the latter is characterised by a greater use and need for (pragmatic) annotation.

occurrences of the lexical item with the conventionalised impolite meaning (Culpeper, 2010). It is worth noting, though, that formulaicity is not necessarily correlated with frequency alone (e.g. Culpeper, 2010; Wray, 2012). Specifically, we used corpus pragmatics, and therefore, both methods are employed here.

4. Results

4.1. The case of Chinese *hehe*

Hehe is a Chinese onomatopoeic word meaning laughter. While it has conventionally been regarded as a discourse marker of politeness in modern Chinese conversations, such as expressing agreement in a friendly manner, it has gradually acquired an array of new meanings (Luo, 2017; Meng, 2015). A handful of Chinese scholars (Pu and Su, 2011; Wang, 2012; Zhang, 2016) have briefly touched on the word's new pragmatic functions in online contexts. For example, Pu and Su (2011) mentioned its newly acquired function of politely closing a conversation that is of no interest to the speaker or that embarrasses the speaker.

> A: Then what is (your) salary?
> 　　那工资呢？
> B: hehe.
> 　　呵呵。(Author's translation) (Pu and Su, 2011:90)

In this example, *hehe* is a polite hedging reply. B shuns the sensitive topic of salary while saving face for both the speaker and the hearer (Pu and Su, 2011). This newly acquired pragmatic meaning of 'closing a sensitive/uninterested conversation courteously' still orients towards politeness traditionally inherent in the lexical item.

Significantly, *hehe* is currently polysemous and multifunctional, undergoing a gradual pragmaticalisation in which a non-conventional, or non-canonical, mock polite sense seems to be emerging in specific contexts (Meng, 2015; Luo, 2017). In addition to being a pragmatic signpost of politeness in sincere usage, *hehe* has begun to develop an impolite sense in insincere usage, which, interestingly, is highly salient but not necessarily highly frequent among its different meanings. It was voted by Chinese netizens as the most hurtful and annoying phrase to use in an online chat for the year 2013 (Alia, 2014). While the various functions of *hehe* remain to be further explored, especially because Chinese internet language is generally under-researched, this case study concentrates on the implicational

impoliteness of this lexical item. In the following sections, we will look at the use of *hehe* as mock politeness from two perspectives: synchronic and diachronic variation.

4.1.1. Synchronic variation

Overall, there were 2671 occurrences of *hehe* in the Chinese corpus. The vast majority were not mock politeness-related, e.g. polite hedging or showing agreement/approval in a friendly manner, such as in (1).

(1) Thread title: <u>Politeness</u> is a golden key for people to get along. Do you think this sentence is reasonable?

Poster L: **Hehe**, it is a reasonable saying. This is the first time that I heard it from you. Comparing people's getting along to a lock and <u>politeness</u> is the key. The comparison is very good. **Hehe**, vote up, keep it up. **Hehe**

<u>礼貌</u>是人们相处的一把金钥匙，你觉得这句话有道理吗？

L: **呵呵**,说的是很有道理啊.这是我第一次听你说的呢.把人们之［间］相处比喻成锁,<u>礼貌</u>是钥匙,比喻的太好了.**呵呵**,顶一下啦,加油吧.**呵呵**

Poster L in (1) uses this lexical item to express and intensify agreement with the thread starter. This is a typical example of the most frequent usage of *hehe* in the corpus. However, in a small number of cases, all together 65 instances (2.4%), *hehe* was used in utterances with im/politeness mismatch, as shown in Figure 1 below.

1	卡吧的妹子们对卡卡西顶礼膜拜。	呵呵，	您到底是哪只眼睛看到
	Participants of the sub-forum K pay extreme homage to KKX	*hehe,*	*from which of your eyes did you see that*
2	我加特技) @キョン：	呵呵，	您对口碑不那么在意，偏偏无意之
	wojiateji) @キョン：	*hehe,*	*you don't care much about word of mouth, but unintentionally*
3	光明正大地告诉您，	呵呵，	您的灵魂我也看不上
	To tell you openly and frankly,	*hehe,*	*I look down upon your soul*
4	结果看到楼主说这话，	呵呵，	您的三观不会走丢了吧
	Then saw the thread starter saying this,	*hehe*	*did your morality get lost*

5	说我的行为令人发指？	呵呵，	您的三观也只能让我呵呵了
	said my behaviour was outrageous?	*hehe,*	*your morality can only make me laugh*
6	居然到后来还拿棍子要打我们！！！	呵呵，	您那是高素质？？？真讽刺！！！
	[You] even took out a stick and wanted to beat us!!!	*hehe,*	*You were good-mannered??? Really sarcastic!!!*
7	谁又得到了蒹葭，	呵呵，	您上过学吗？
	Who has got the Reeds,	*hehe,*	*have you ever been to school?*
8	16 – 15 posts – 9 authors	呵呵，	您又歪曲理解了
	16 – 15 posts – 9 authors	*hehe,*	*you understood it wrongly again*
9	反而劝我莫装 13？？	呵呵，	您这断章取义的功夫
	but asked me not to pretend bastard??	*hehe,*	*your skills of quoting out of context*
10	不承认得来一句，还是和谐就好	呵呵，	您真有节操。好一朵盛世白莲花
	(you) didn't admit and said, it's OK as long as we are harmonious	*hehe,*	*you really have high principle, (you're) such a fake bitch*

Figure 1 Selection of 10 refined concordance lines showing hehe followed by a direct face attack containing the polite 'vous' form of you[5]

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[5] Some of these refined concordance lines in Chinese quoted here were longer than what the original window size captured, because the chopped sections that affect the understanding of the meaning were added back. The contexts of the examples: Line 1. This attack occurred within a Baidu sub-forum dedicated to a fictional character in a popular manga, Kakashi Hatake. The speaker is refuting another forum participant's claim that the girls of the sub-forum are paying homage to this character and turning a blind eye to his weaknesses.
Line 2. The poster started a thread to criticise the deterioration of the quality of movie reviews for a particular film because he believes it is a very poor movie but the reviews have been positive. This view is countered by one of the review writers who says he wrote what he genuinely felt, does not care about word of mouth and is not affected by others. Then, the original poster attacks the review writer, saying that if he really does not care about word of mouth, why did he click on this 'not-so-well-known post' to give such a long reply to justify himself.
Line 3. Similar to the example above, this poster started a thread to criticise the poor quality of a published Chinese translation of an English novel. The editor of that book replies, saying she is satisfied with the translation, which was done conscientiously. The original poster then attacks the editor, saying that she should not use her conscience and soul to guarantee the quality of the work.
Line 4. The poster challenges the thread starter, who, commenting on an accident in which a luxury car was hit by a taxi, stated that luxury cars should not be driven on roads because this is just an attempt to show off wealth.
Line 5. This is taken from a thread asking how to win back a girlfriend after cheating on her twice. The commenter seriously denounces the original poster and is accused by some participants for a lack of sympathy. The commenter then attacks them back for having a lack of morality.
Line 6. The poster extended a real-life quarrel with a shop owner to the online space. While the shop owner says he behaved well, even though the customers did not, the poster, who was one of the customers, rebuts the charges and says the owner is actually the one who was very rude.
Line 7. A participant in a thread claims that the lyrics of classical style songs nowadays are too hard to understand, citing an example of a line 'Who has got the Reeds'. The poster ridicules him for not understanding the line, which is partly taken from a famous traditional poetry song, 'Reeds' (*jianjia*, 蒹葭).

If we read vertically down the right of the node *hehe*, we can see a distinct pattern of internal mismatch. The apparent polite use of *hehe* and the pronoun 'vous' (您 *nin*) clashes with the bald-on-record face attack that immediately follows, leading to an implicature of impoliteness. The repeated use of *hehe* and *nin* plus a face attack in these contexts could be itself becoming conventionalised to an extent.

Looking at the whole corpus, it becomes apparent that the mixing of messages, i.e. *hehe* and face attack, has increasingly become a stock strategy associated with impolite effects for Chinese internet language users in combative conversations. It is noteworthy that there seems to be a distinction between online and offline communication (Meng, 2015; Luo, 2017), which has actually been touched on by a number of meta-comments in the corpus, for example, "Only on the internet do some people take *hehe* as mocking, have never seen (the usage) in real life (也就网络上有人把呵呵当嘲讽，现实生活中没见过)". This distinction is not explored further in the paper. What we focus on here is the use of a canonical politeness formula for purposes other than routine politic behaviour in online interaction, and more specifically the internal mismatch where

> [t]he 'polite' device is becoming a conventionalised prelude to impoliteness. Some of these regular ways of performing mixed impoliteness are themselves becoming conventionalised to an extent (Culpeper, 2010:178-179)

Generally speaking, *hehe* was also found in metapragmatic comments of im/politeness on specific events or behaviours, including those experienced within the online space, as illustrated in the last example in Figure 1 above, and those outside, as shown in (2).

Line 8. The poster expresses his strong disapproval of a person's behaviour described in a news story. In the online conversation, a few participants, who say that person's behaviour does not breach the law, argue with him. He accuses them of misunderstanding his words.

Line 9. This is part of an online argument arising from a poster's comment that the Tianyan forum has sadly also started using teams of professional writers rather than ordinary forum members. The poster is attacked by others for not understanding the situation and making false accusations. He attacks one of them back for decontextualising what he has said.

Line 10. In this example, the interlocutors are having an argument about pop stars. Perhaps in the hope of ending the conflict, one of them then says harmony is the most important. She is mocked by the poster, asking why she even started the argument in the first place.

(2) Thread starter: The so-called incident that Fang Zhouzi (a popular science writer famous for his aggressive campaign against pseudoscience) <u>mocked</u> a worker who had found gravitational wave five years ago. There are many (like this)

Poster W: I really can't understand, [Thread Starter], how they dare to <u>mock</u> others like this, especially Fang Zhouzi. He was speaking with a disgusting sense of superiority and <u>sarcastic</u> **hehe**, and did not even let others to speak.

所谓的工人在五年前发现引力波被方舟子<u>嘲笑</u>事件，很多

Poster W: 我就不明白了楼楼，他们凭什么像这样<u>嘲笑</u>别人。特别是那个什么方舟子，全程说话都带着一股子令人作呕的优越感和<u>嘲讽</u>的**呵呵**，甚至连话都不让人家说。

In (2), we see the posters discussing an event that took place outside the online realm, i.e. a special guest's behaviour towards an interviewee on a reality TV show in recruitment where each entrant is given a chance to introduce himself and what he is doing. Poster W's evaluation that the guest was "speaking with a disgusting sense of…sarcastic *hehe*" explicitly uses the meta-label "sarcastic" to refer to the mock polite sense of this lexical item.

On the whole, the mock polite usage of *hehe* was low in frequency (less than 2.5%) in the corpus compared to its non-mock polite usage (over 97.5%). However, its mock polite sense seemed to be rather salient to Chinese netizens, as illustrated in the meta-discussions in Examples (3), (4) and (5) below:

(3) Thread title: There are many ways to express <u>politeness</u> on the internet. Why does "**hehe**" feel like a bitch?

在网络表达<u>礼貌</u>的方式很多，为啥"**呵呵**"给人感觉像 bitch？

(4) Poster K: "When I type '**hehe**', I'm actually thinking go back to fuck your mother's cunt (QNMLGB) in my mind"

K: "当我打出"**呵呵**"的时候，其实我心里想的是 QNMLGB" [6]

Poster L: How come **hehe** is <u>impolite</u>?

L: **呵呵**怎么<u>不礼貌</u>了？

Poster A: I don't know its origin, but I understand it.

A：出处不清楚了，但是意思我理解。

Poster X: Say **hehe** when you don't want to continue the conversation. Implied meaning: Aren't you fucking enough? Say **hehe** to <u>mock</u> the original poster. Implied meaning: You idiot.

X：不想与对方聊天，**呵呵**　潜台词：你 TM 烦不烦？

　　<u>讽刺</u>楼主低智商，**呵呵**　潜台词：你懂个球。[7]

(5) He won *not a <u>sarcastic</u> **hehe*** (Italics added)

他赢了　不是<u>嘲讽</u>的**呵呵**

The poster in Example (5) even went further to clarify that the *hehe* he used did not have a sarcastic connotation. What stands out here is the participants' awareness of the mock polite meaning. In other words, its high saliency, which was mainly reflected in metadiscourses, was in sharp contrast to its relative low frequency of use compared to its non-mock polite usage. This lends support to Culpeper's (2010) insightful observations about the high saliency yet low frequency of impoliteness formulae discussed earlier.

Furthermore, all the threads containing *hehe* were classified by the nature of the conversations, i.e. combative, collaborative, mixed and unclassified. On the one hand, over half the threads containing mock polite *hehe* (72%) were combative interactions. Impolite exchanges such as Example (6) dominated the scene.

(6) X: I really like to make those arrogant people angry, the more they anger, the happier I am.

X：我就喜欢那些自以为是的人急，他们越急，我就越乐。

S: **Hehe**, a thief will confess (his theft) three years later even if he is not interrogated. You really are not such an arrogant person *ne*.

S：**呵呵**，贼不打三年自招。您还真不是个自以为是的人呢。

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[7] Perhaps because common dirty words tend to be censored online, Chinese netizens often use initials for the *pinyin* of the swearwords, for example, TM and QNMLGB, to avoid censorship. TM are the initial letters of *ta ma*, which is a swearword equivalent of 'fuck', and it literally translates as 'his mother's'. 你懂个球 literally is 'you understand *ge qiu*'. *Ge qiu* (a ball) is a derogatory form in dialectal Mandarin, and *qiu* originally refers to 'testes'.

In the example above, the main chunk of Poster S's last sentence, "You really are not an arrogant person (您还真不是个自以为是的人)," seems to be a positive evaluation of Poster X. However, the Chinese particle attached to it in the end "*ne* (呢)" brings in an insincere prosody that constitutes an internal mismatch (Culpeper, Bousfield, and Wichmann, 2003), leading to an interpretation of sarcasm. Moreover, the context projected by this face attack and that projected by the apparent polite *hehe* constitute another mismatch, exacerbating the impoliteness of the message.

On the other hand, non-mock polite *hehe* in interaction often occurred in conversations without disagreement, and only one non-mock polite usage was found in impolite exchanges in the corpus: a poster used it genuinely to echo what another poster had suggested in a conflictive thread where the participants were discussing a news story that a nouveau riche bought an expensive laptop and smashed it in front of a snobbish salesperson.[8]

It may be argued that, in the corpus overall, there was a two-way relationship. The mock polite usage tended to be found more frequently in combative conversations than elsewhere in the forums, and in combative conversations, *hehe* was used more often than not as mock politeness, substantiating the argument that *hehe* is highly context specific (Luo, 2017).

4.1.2. Diachronic variation

In order to explore the diachronic variation, an additional sample of 100 occurrences of *hehe* from the period spanning 2000-2006, which was not included in the original corpus, was collected. Only two were used to express mock politeness, 96 were used genuinely as a politeness device which often occurred in collaborative conversations and two were unclassified. We may hypothesize that it was during the last decade that the item became more primed for mock politeness. This was supported by the meta-discussions (the second method to investigate impoliteness conventionalisation) that predominantly emerged after 2010, such as Examples (7) and (8).

(7) What kind of emotions does '**hehe**' usually express in online conversations?

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[8] "hehe, to be honest, if the nouveau riche actually gave a red pocket to the salesperson to mock him/her, I would be really willing to do that. Rather than spending over 10k to buy a laptop and smash it, [I] would rather use this money as a red pocket to turn [the snobbish salesperson] into a fan [of the nouveau riche] (呵呵，你还真别说，如果这土豪真的发红包嘲讽这个销售员的话，我是很乐意去干的，与其拿 1 万多块钱买个电脑砸，还不如用 1 万多块钱的红包吸引粉丝)." In this single case, the poster was not mocking but was relatively seriously considering the other's suggestion to prove wealth in a much less destructive way.

F: "**hehe**" rose to popularity very quickly twice. The first phase was that several years ago, almost everyone used "**hehe**" to show approval of what the other has said… recently "**hehe**" became very popular again… [it] expresses <u>sarcasm</u>

在网络交谈中，「**呵呵**」通常用来表达什么心情？

F：“**呵呵**”火了两个阶段，第一个阶段在几年前，大家几乎都用”**呵呵**“，算是对对方谈话的肯定……最近“**呵呵**”又火起来了……表达<u>嘲讽</u>

(8) Thread title: Now (I) just knew what '**hehe**' means

现在才知道^呵呵^是什麼意思了

Poster B: 5 or 6 years ago, I interacted a lot on Taiwanese discussion forums. At that time, people used this word frequently with each other. Felt it meant (it's) interesting and euphemistic laughter, but then (I) seldom browsed and interacted on forums. Some mainland netizens said this word meant <u>sarcasm</u> and treating someone lightly. I thought it had many different meanings. Today I looked up the Wikipedia entry. A little bit shocked. (Its) meanings are almost all negative.

So (I) won't use this word in the future. Just use *haha*. Sincerely thank those mainland netizens who kindly reminded me

楼主 B: 5..6 年前, 比較有在台灣論壇交流, 那時彼此都常用這個詞彙 感受到的意思是有趣及委婉的笑聲, 后来就很少呆在論壇交流了 來台版有陸陸說這是<u>讽刺</u>.敷衍的意思, 我以為是一詞有很多不同的意思 今天查一下維基百科, 有點嚇一跳, 幾乎是負面的意思 所以, 今后應該不會再用到這個詞彙了, 就用哈哈就好了. 也衷心感謝跟我提醒的陸陸[9]

Poster W: Generally saying **hehe** more or less means don't care about...but sometimes it means *go back to fuck your mother's cunt* (QNMLGB)...As for how the poster understands it, it's all down to what the poster thinks.

W: 一般来说呵呵差不多是漠视…但是也有些是我去你吗拉个比的意思…至于楼主怎么理解全靠楼主什么看法

Poster X: *Misunderstood. When I chat with my classmates and friends, (we) still use* **hehe** *quite a lot as an expression of (genuine) laughter, but if it's used in replies to*

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[9] While Taiwanese forum data is beyond the scope of this study, one of our reviewers has brought to our attention an interesting fact that the word ㄏㄏ *changchang*, which implies sarcasm and has risen to popularity online in mainland China more recently, was actually derived from the mainland Chinese netizens' variation of the Taiwanese Bopomofo of *hehe* (Lao, 2016).

Baidu Tieba forum posts, *most of the time it conveys the meaning of <u>mocking</u> (the poster for) being unreasonable* (Italics added).

X: 曲解了，我和同学朋友之间聊天也多用呵呵，表示笑意，但是这个词在贴吧论坛回复时表达的意思多数是<u>嘲讽</u>不可理喻

Clearly, netizens were debating the new impoliteness implicatures of *hehe*, trying to spell out the conventions regarding how to use it and interpret it in different contexts. In (7), Poster F noted the newly acquired sarcastic meaning of *hehe* in online chats in general. In (8), while Poster B was shocked by the drastic reversal of its pragmatic meaning, shifting away from politeness to impoliteness, other participants seemed to hold different views. Poster W emphasised the strong face attack involved in the expression nowadays. Poster X went further to point out that polite and mock polite usages actually co-existed and the interpretations were rather context specific.

Despite the ongoing debates, a shared understanding of the newly acquired meaning of mock politeness seemed to be emerging, as shown by Examples (3), (4), (7) and (8) discussed earlier. In this case study, the findings revealed that that *hehe* was more likely to be used as mock politeness in aggressive areas of the forums, the occurrences of *hehe* in combative conversations were more likely to be mock polite, and this new meaning of sarcasm has become more salient over the past decade.

4.2. The case of British *hth*

4.2.1. *Synchronic variation*

Starting with the snapshot from the corpus, there were 1911 occurrences of *HTH*, the majority of which acted as a closing device in a post offering advice or sharing experiences, as illustrated in (9).[10]

(9) The second twin didnt want to come out and I thought oh no c section here I come. However 20 minutes later he emerged with the help of ventouse. He was blue and needed oxygen but has been absolutely fine. This was 6 years ago, I dont know if recommendations have changed since then **HTH**. xx

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[10] This pattern is also supported by examining the data from a more 'bird's eye' view through the distributional thesaurus on Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2004), which shows that items which share similar collocates are: *!!!!!, TIA* [thanks in advance], *xxxx, Xx*, all of which we recognise as closing markers.

As in the occurrences of *hehe* described above, in a small proportion of cases (28 instances, 1.46%), *HTH* closed a contribution which involved a direct face attack, thus constituting mock politeness with internal mismatch. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

N	Concordance
1	but you did come across as a bit of a twunt. HTH Add message | Report | Message poster
2	That gem alone screams Fucking Bullshit. HTH Add message | Report | Message poster
3	Tue 31-Jan-12 12:48:23 you are being a nob hth Add message | Report | Message poster
4	loud grand-parenting and think you're a twat, hth. Sorry apparently I needed to vent that, can
5	, are often described as twattish, or a bit of a tit. hth. Add message | Report | Message poster
6	women don't like you is because you're a twat. HTH. Add message | Report | Message poster
7	10:02:31 Your right it does sound twattish. HTH Add message | Report | Message poster
8	get why she insisted. You both sound mad. HTH Add message | Report | Message poster
9	. So, to surmise: You are talking utter bollocks. HTH. Add message | Report | Message poster
10	chibi Sun 06-Nov-11 14:13:38 i utterly disagree hth Add message | Report | Message poster

Figure 2 Selection of 10 concordance lines showing HTH accompanying bald on record face attack[11]

By reading vertically down the left of the node *HTH*, we can observe a distinct pattern of bald on-record impolite moves, which then clash with the apparent polite move of *HTH*. The repeated use in these environments suggested conventionalisation despite the relatively low frequency of the mock polite usage overall.

To investigate this aspect of synchronic variation, the occurrences were classified according to the forum topic in which they occurred. We observed that 67% of the mock polite occurrences came from the same sub-forum, 'am I being unreasonable' (AIBU), which is the most combative forum on the website because, as the title suggests, it invites appropriacy and im/politeness judgements and evaluations. The remainder were from nine different forums within the site.

In order to explore this further, 100 additional occurrences of *HTH* were taken from threads started in 2013 (a year which was not included in the original corpus). Of these 100 occurrences, 85 were used sincerely, eleven were used as mock politeness, and four were unclassified. Once again, the mock polite instances were more likely to occur in the AIBU forum – six of the eleven mock polite instances were from AIBU. Also confirming the

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[11] The concordance lines are those with the insult in L1 position to facilitate reading of the concordance.

relationship between this particular forum and the use of AIBU, it was found that out of eight total occurrences from AIBU in the sample, six involved mock politeness. Thus we can see this is a two-way relationship in terms of synchronic variation in conventionalisation. The mock polite usage is more common in the combative forum than elsewhere and the occurrences in the combative forum are more likely to be mock polite.

So the frequency analysis suggested that there is a pattern of conventionalisation in the specific moment of time captured in the original 2012 corpus and 2013 extension and that this item was conventionalised in particular contexts. As mentioned above, the second method employed was through identification of meta-discussion of the item within the forum itself (and indeed this was where it had first come to the researcher's attention).

The shared understanding of the conventionalised nature of *HTH* within the forum was evident in meta-discussions, for instance where mock politeness was being recommended as a counter tactic to impoliteness (this example was also from the AIBU forum), as illustrated in (10), and in responding to queries about forum conventions, as in (11).

> (10) Yes, start off with a gentle bitch and work your way up to a full on sarcastic **HTH**

> (11) Thread title: Snarky thread: Some common MN phrases helpfully translated
> Poster P: **HTH** - 'YABU [you are bring unreasonable]. And a twat'
> Poster M: **HTH** = hope this helps you realise that you're a twat.
> Poster N: **HTH**= I have just said something really nasty and want to end on an amusing note = I am a twat
> Poster K: **HTH** = I'm a passive aggressive twat
> Poster T: **HTH** ☺
> I am giving you the literal answer to an obviously wrong interpretation of your question because I feel like it.

In (10), the scope for mock politeness is evident but it could be argued that speaker is being entirely creative in recommending the combination of "a gentle bitch" followed by the ostensibly polite *HTH*. In other words, it is not in itself evidence of a movement along the conventionalisation cline. However, in (11), the number of responses to the original thread which suggest *HTH* being used for mock polite purposes strongly points towards an understanding of conventionalisation within that particular speech community. We also see a

negative evaluation of this mock politeness strategy in (11) which is defined as *passive aggressive* and the person employing it described using a conventional taboo term *twat* in four of the replies. The fact that *HTH* is suggested in the context of "translating common mumsnet phrases", suggests an awareness that not all users will be familiar with the conventionalised usage. Indeed, the frequency data showed, this is still a minority pattern. The usage, as in the example above, was often labelled with mock politeness meta-labels such as *passive aggressive* and also *sarcastic*, as seen in (12).

> (12)   Poster A: What is **passive aggressive**? […]
>
> Poster B: It's making some pointed insincere sarcastic comment.
>
> Common example on Mumsnet is
>
> **HTH**
>
> When actually they mean
>
> THIS IS THE WORST IDEA I'VE EVER HEARD YOU FUCKING LOON AND I'M ASTONISHED THAT YOU CANNOT SEE THAT AS CLEARLY AS THE REST OF US.

Moreover, when posting within the more combative forum areas, we see users anticipating a likely impolite evaluation based on assumptions of conventionalisation, as shown in (13) where the speaker makes clear their polite intent by addressing conventionalisation.

> (13)   If you go in with an attitude of 'you'll refuse me / you're all shit' then this will take valuable time away from your concern being heard.
>
> Hope this helps (not a **sarcastic HTH** either)

Furthermore, as (14) shows, the non-sincere usage is both acknowledged and challenged (note again the label *passive aggressive* to describe this mock polite behaviour).

> (14)   And you can keep your **passive aggressive HTH** because no, it helps nobody at all.

Overall, then, we see a pattern of conventionalisation within a sub-forum which constitutes its own community of practice.

4.2.2. Diachronic variation

With regards to the diachronic processes, a sample of 100 occurrences of *HTH* was collected from threads that were active in 2004-2005 and no occurrences of mock polite behaviours using this item were found. Furthermore, where there is meta-discussion, it does not centre around the mock polite usage, as (15) illustrates:

(15)   Poster T: […] Or you could be feeding him a bit too much and so it's coming back up because his tummy is too full?
If he's fine and not bothered then I'd just grab a load of muslins and not worry too much. You'd soon know if it was a problem because he wouldn't gain any weight.
HTH
Poster A: Many thanks **HTH**. I feel reassured. I'll have a chat with the HV on Friday though just to be on the safe side. [name]
Poster T: Hiya - **HTH** means happy to help by the way (BTW).

In this example, the meta-discussion addresses the meaning of the acronym which Poster A had mistaken for Poster T's name (and indeed the explanation is not of the present standard "hope that helps". Thus, we may hypothesise that it is somewhere between these two time periods (2004/2005 – 2012/2013) that the item becomes primed for the mock polite usage within the more aggressive forum areas of the website, reflecting the findings in our first case study.

5. Conclusions

In this brief comparison of two case-studies, we have seen similar patterns across two language varieties. Much cross-cultural and cross-linguistic analysis centres on difference because it is so often what is salient in miscommunication. However, we argue that in our pragmatic analyses, we need to be more aware of similarity and these case-studies serve as an illustration of what such searches for similarity may reveal. The shared developments in the conventionalisation of apparently polite forms for impolite functions, as used in the forum communities, are of particular interest and open up opportunities for understanding such processes of language change and diversification, or more specifically 'pragmatic reversal' (see Fedriani's article in this issue for how *per favore* 'please' in Italian has developed impolite meanings that diverge from its core politeness function).

Methodologically, corpus-assisted discourse analysis enabled us to see patterns of language variation in synchrony and diachrony, while metadiscourses were a rich source of insights into the unfolding processes from the language users' perspective. Combining both methods could be beneficial, contributing to our understanding of the pragmaticalisation of the impolite use of politeness formulae. In fact, as mentioned above, the two lexical items came

to both researchers' attention through the meta-discussions. Meta-comments during the early phase of language diversification were particularly illuminating. They revealed that while the polite, or at least non-mock polite usage still dominated the scene, the mock polite usage of the polite formulae was becoming salient to the internet language users.

In each of the case-studies, we see that the conventionalisation is highly context specific, not only for online speech communities but activity types, i.e. in combative conversations. This differentiation between the expected behaviours in different areas of the forms (collaborative or combative) and correlation with the mock polite usage also helps explain how it is that users orient towards the conventionalised meaning even when it is still used at a relatively low frequency compared to polite, or at least non-impolite, usage. This low frequency but high saliency is again part of that long shadow of impoliteness behaviours discussed in Culpeper (2010).

Finally, we note that analysing written conversation as performed in online forums allows for a simultaneous synchronic and diachronic perspective which would not be possible in spoken data: it opens up the possibility of going back in time to check hypotheses. Online interaction is indeed an exciting research field for politeness researchers (Locher, 2010).

Given the dearth of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic pragmatic studies that highlight elements which are shared across languages and the relative scarcity of politeness research on Chinese internet language, further empirical investigations and theorisation are required to better understand the dynamic processes of language variation. We recommend, therefore, that future studies of conventionalisation of mock politeness (a) move beyond a single language and culture (as discussed in Taylor, 2016), and (b) explore not only the fundamental differences between languages and cultures, but also the key similarities, so as to advance our emic and etic understandings of the norms and perceptions of im/politeness.

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