

Prehumor Politeness and Impoliteness Strategies by an American Stand-up Comedian on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

Humor plays a pivotal role in interpersonal communication, yet most research focuses on the delivery of jokes while neglecting the preparatory discourse that precedes humor. This study defines this preparatory phase as the "pre-joke process" and examines how politeness and impoliteness strategies function within it. Drawing on contemporary sociolinguistic theories, including Culpeper's (2011) impoliteness framework and Locher and Watts's (2005) relational work, this analysis identifies how Gabriel Iglesias strategically primes his audience for humor through pre-joke discourse. Data from 10 hours of Iglesias's comedy specials (Stadium Fluffy, One Show Fits All, Beyond the Fluffy) reveal that positive politeness strategies (42%) and self-deprecation (20%) dominate his pre-joke segments, fostering audience relatability and mitigating potential face threats. Audience perceptions, gathered from YouTube comments and Reddit threads, further illustrate the effectiveness of these strategies in constructing a shared comedic frame. The study contributes to sociolinguistic research on humor by positioning pre-joke discourse as a critical site for audience alignment. The primary limitation of this study is its focus on a single comedian, which may limit the generalizability of findings across the broader stand-up comedy landscape.

Keywords: Politeness, Impoliteness, Stand-Up Comedy, Gabriel Iglesias, Sociolinguistics, Youtube

INTRODUCTION

Stand-up comedy represents a unique linguistic performance where subtle shifts in tone, word choice, and timing determine comedic success. Gabriel "Fluffy" Iglesias, a renowned comedian, exemplifies this through his strategic use of pre-joke discourse. This study investigates how Iglesias deploys politeness and impoliteness strategies to engage audiences and establish rapport before delivering punchlines.

While existing research predominantly focuses on punchlines and their delivery mechanisms (Adetunji, 2013; Dynel, 2020), this paper addresses the underexplored pre-joke phase by applying Culpeper's (2011) impoliteness taxonomy and Terkourafi's (2008) frame-based politeness theory. The pre-joke phase represents a critical moment where comedians establish audience expectations, build rapport, and create the necessary social conditions for humor to be received positively rather than as offensive or inappropriate.

Understanding pre-joke strategies is essential for comprehending the full scope of comedic performance. Without focusing on these preparatory moments, we risk missing crucial insights into how comedians navigate potential face-threatening acts, manage audience expectations, and create the social scaffolding that allows taboo or potentially offensive content to be received as humor rather than aggression.

Research Questions

- 1- How does Iglesias use politeness and impoliteness strategies in pre-joke segments?
- 2- Which strategies are most prevalent, and how do they vary across different performance contexts?
- 3- How do audiences interpret these strategies as humorous rather than offensive?

LITERATURE REVIEW

(Im) Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory introduced the concept of face-threatening acts (FTAs), establishing a foundational framework for understanding how speakers navigate social relationships through language. However, contemporary scholars have critiqued its universalist assumptions and cultural limitations. Culpeper (2011) redefines impoliteness as fundamentally context-dependent, while Locher and Watts (2005) propose "relational work," emphasizing the fluid nature of social interactions and the dynamic construction of politeness norms.

Recent critiques argue that Brown and Levinson's model overemphasizes individual agency while neglecting systemic power dynamics that shape interpretation (Terkourafi, 2008). In comedy contexts, these power dynamics become particularly salient. For instance, a white male comedian employing racial humor may receive different audience reactions than a minority comedian using identical material (Martinez, 2021). This differential reception demonstrates how comedian identity intersects with content to influence audience interpretation.

Culpeper's (2016) revised impoliteness taxonomy introduces the concept of "affordances"—how linguistic choices enable or constrain interpretation based on audience demographics and cultural context. This framework proves critical for analyzing Iglesias's multicultural audiences, where culturally specific terms like "tío" (uncle) signal in-group membership for Latino audiences while potentially excluding non-Spanish speakers (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2022).

The evolution from Brown and Levinson's (1987) universalist framework to contemporary context-dependent approaches is crucial for analyzing intercultural communication, power dynamics, and audience reception in stand-up comedy. Unlike the static model proposed by Brown and Levinson, modern theories recognize that politeness and impoliteness are fluid constructs shaped by cultural norms and situational factors.

Context-Dependent Impoliteness

Contemporary impoliteness theory (Culpeper, 2011; Locher & Watts, 2005) recognizes that the interpretation of linguistic behavior depends heavily on contextual factors including cultural background, social relationships, and situational dynamics. In comedy, a joke's potential offensiveness depends significantly on audience identity and cultural positioning.

Racial humor, for example, may be received differently by majority versus minority audiences, with identical content producing vastly different interpretations (Martinez, 2021).

Power dynamics and systemic bias further complicate these interpretations (Terkourafi, 2008). Critiques of traditional politeness theory highlight how power hierarchies based on race, gender, and class influence how linguistic behavior is interpreted. A white comedian's racial humor may be perceived as perpetuating oppressive stereotypes, while a minority comedian's identical humor could be interpreted as subversive commentary on power structures, demonstrating systematic bias in reception patterns.

Multimodal Humor in Digital Contexts

Recent studies highlight the multimodal nature of YouTube humor, where gestures, editing techniques, and prosodic features enhance comedic effect (Bernad-Mechó & Girón- García, 2025). Iglesias's strategic use of pauses and open-palm gestures in pre-joke segments aligns with these digital humor strategies, reinforcing politeness intentions through nonverbal communication channels.

Additionally, YouTube's algorithmic systems tend to amplify emotionally engaging content (Brown et al., 2022), potentially influencing comedian content choices. This technological mediation may explain Iglesias's increased reliance on positive politeness strategies over taboo topics in his post-2020 content, as algorithms favor content that generates positive engagement metrics.

(Im) politeness in Comedy

Humor often involves what Haugh (2018) terms "ritual impoliteness," where apparent face attacks are reinterpreted as playful rather than genuinely aggressive. Glick (2021) highlights comedians' use of "comedic facework" to negotiate identity and manage audience relationships, while Sinkeviciute (2019) links humor effectiveness to incongruity and strategic norm violation.

Stand-up comedy uniquely operationalizes (im)politeness through several mechanisms:

1. Asymmetrical power dynamics: The comedian controls the conversational floor, allowing strategic deployment of face threats without immediate audience rebuttal (Dynel, 2020).
2. Temporal framing: Pre-joke segments create "safe zones" for potentially taboo topics through strategic mitigation techniques such as disclaimers ("No offense, but...") (Murphy, 2022).
3. Audience complicity: Laughter functions as audience "ratification" of impoliteness, transforming potential face threats into shared social experiences (Haugh, 2018).

Iglesias's signature catchphrase—"I'm not fat, I'm fluffy"—exemplifies this transformation process, converting a potential face threat into a shared identity marker that audiences embrace (Glick, 2021).

The Pre-Joke Phase

Despite its critical importance in comedic success, the pre-joke phase remains significantly understudied in sociolinguistic research. Murphy (2022) examines setup linguistics but overlooks the specific (im)politeness strategies employed during this crucial period.

The pre-joke phase refers to the anticipatory segment of humorous performance where comedians employ linguistic, paralinguistic (tone, pauses), and nonverbal cues (gestures, facial expressions) to prime audience expectations before delivering punchlines. This phase is critical for managing audience tension and enhancing perceived spontaneity of reactions (Murphy, 2022; Bell, 2020).

The pre-joke phase serves three key functions:

1. Frame-setting: Meta-comments such as "Let me tell you about..." signal upcoming humor, effectively lowering audience politeness expectations and preparing them for potential norm violations (Terkourafi, 2008).
2. Ally-building: Strategic use of inclusive pronouns ("we") creates coalitional identities
3. before potentially risky jokes, establishing shared group membership that mitigates face threats (Spencer-Oatey, 2017).
4. Incongruity priming: Exaggerated pauses or deliberate tone shifts prepare audiences for norm violations, creating anticipation that enhances punchline effectiveness (Sinkeviciute, 2019).

Iglesias's characteristic 5-second pause before weight-related jokes exemplifies this priming strategy, creating temporal space for audience anticipation while signaling the comedic nature of forthcoming content.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a hybrid methodology combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to systematically analyze Gabriel Iglesias's pre-joke strategies in stand-up comedy. The methodological design enables comprehensive examination of how Iglesias uses politeness and impoliteness techniques to engage audiences before delivering punchlines.

Data Collection

Primary Data Source: The research analyzes 10 hours of video footage from three Gabriel Iglesias comedy specials: Stadium Fluffy (2017), One Show Fits All (2019), and Beyond the Fluffy (2022). These specials provide temporal diversity spanning five years and represent different venue types (arena shows versus intimate club performances).

Pre-joke Segment Definition: Pre-joke segments are operationally defined as the 30-60 seconds of discourse immediately preceding joke delivery, identified through specific linguistic and prosodic markers:

Prosodic indicators: Pitch elevation exceeding 20% of speaker's baseline, signaling setup initiation (Adetunji, 2013) **Kinesic markers:** Iglesias's signature "lean-in" gesture punchlines consistently preceding Temporal boundaries: Segments beginning with frame-setting utterances ("Let me tell you about...") and ending with punchline delivery

Segment Identification Process: From the 10 hours of footage, 247 distinct pre-joke segments were identified and coded, with an average duration of 42 seconds per segment. This yielded approximately 168 minutes of pre-joke discourse for analysis.

Secondary Data: Audience reaction data were collected from YouTube comments (n=1,247) and Reddit discussion threads (n=89) to complement primary analysis and assess audience perception of Iglesias's strategies.

Sampling Rationale

Purposive sampling was employed based on the following criteria:

Temporal spread (2017-2022): Enables tracking of strategy evolution across time periods

Venue diversity: Arena shows versus intimate club settings to assess context-dependence of strategies

Content variety: Inclusion of different comedic themes (family, cultural identity, physical appearance) to capture strategy variation across topics

RESULTS

Ethical Considerations

YouTube comments were anonymized using identification codes (e.g., YT-103) to protect user privacy. All analyzed content represents publicly available material, and no personally identifying information is reported.

Study Limitations

Limited generalizability: Analysis focuses exclusively on Gabriel Iglesias, potentially limiting applicability to other comedians or comedic styles **Selection bias:** Purposive sampling of specials may underrepresent less prominent pre-joke techniques **Platform specificity:** Focus on YouTube performance may not capture live audience dynamics fully

Analytical Framework

Coding Scheme: Pre-joke segments were coded using established politeness frameworks:

Positive politeness: Inclusive pronouns, nicknames, solidarity markers

Negative politeness: Hedging, indirectness, deference markers **Bald-on-record:** Direct statements without mitigation **Impoliteness strategies:** Sarcasm, taboo topics, withholding politeness (Culpeper, 2011).

Operationalization of Variables:

strategy	Linguistic marker	Data example
Positive	Inclusive "we,"	"We all got that
politeness	nicknames	crazy tío, right?"
Negative	Imperatives,	"Stop lying—you
politeness	interruptions	know this!"
Self depreciation	Self-directed adjectives	"I'm shaped like a burrito."

Reliability Measures

Two independent coders achieved 92% agreement (Cohen's $\kappa = .88$) on strategy identification. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus coding sessions.

Software and Tools

Praat: Professional phonetics software used for acoustic analysis of pitch and pace variations

NVivo 12: Qualitative data analysis software for thematic coding of audience comments and discourse analysis.

Analysis of 247 pre-joke segments revealed distinct patterns in Iglesias's strategy deployment:

Strategy Distribution:

Positive politeness: 42% of segments (n=104) Self-deprecation: 20% of segments (n=49) Negative politeness: 18% of segments (n=44) Bald-on-record: 12% of segments (n=30) Impoliteness/Taboo: 8% of segments (n=20)

Audience Engagement Metrics:

Self-deprecation generated highest audience engagement (90% laughter response)

Positive politeness strategies achieved 78% positive response rate

Taboo topics polarized audiences (60% laughter, 20% silence, 20% mixed reactions)

Cross-Special Comparison:

Special	Year	Positive politeness	Taboo topics	Venue type
Stadium fluff	2017	38%	5	Arena
One show fits all	2019	45%	2	Arena
Beyond the fluff	2022	41%	1	Club

Key Trends:

Decline in taboo topic usage post-2020 aligns with increased cultural sensitivity following social movements
Higher positive politeness usage in arena shows (43% average) versus club settings (38% average), suggesting larger audiences require more solidarity-building
Consistent reliance on self-deprecation across all specials (19-22% range)

Qualitative Analysis Excerpt 1: TSA Strategy

"TSA agents—love you guys, but come on!"

This example demonstrates strategic combination of positive politeness ("love you guys") with mock impoliteness ("but come on").

Multimodal Analysis:

Prosody: "Love you guys" delivered with lowered pitch (Δ -15 Hz), signaling sincerity

Gesture: Open palms during "come on" amplify mock frustration while maintaining non-threatening posture

Timing: 0.8-second pause after "come on" allows audience anticipation to build

Excerpt 2: Self-Deprecation Strategy "I'm so fluffy, I could be a pillow!"

Cultural coding: "Fluffy" reframes weight as endearing quality, leveraging Mexican-American cultural norms that view body positivity differently than mainstream American culture (Martinez, 2021)

Laughter timing: Peak audience response occurs at "pillow" (1.2-second laughter duration), confirming successful reframing

Audience Perception Analysis

Thematic Analysis of YouTube Comments (n=1,247):

- 1- Relatability (62%): "He's just like my tío!" / "This is my family exactly"
- 2- Absolution (24%): "He gets away with it because he's fluffy" / "Can't be mad at him"
- 3- Criticism (14%): "Weight jokes are tired" / "Same material every time"

Demographic Patterns:

Younger viewers (18-24) demonstrated 3× higher tolerance for impoliteness compared to older cohorts (45+)

Bilingual comments (English/Spanish) were 2× more likely to defend potentially controversial humor

Female commenters showed higher appreciation for self-deprecating strategies (73% vs. 58% for male commenters)

Key Finding: 78% of comments described Iglesias as "likable" or "relatable," even when he employed impoliteness strategies, suggesting successful mitigation through pre-joke positioning.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that Iglesias's pre-joke discourse functions as sophisticated audience management, strategically deploying politeness and impoliteness to create optimal conditions for humor reception. The dominance of positive politeness strategies (42%) aligns with his persona as a family-friendly comedian who builds community rather than attacking others.

The high effectiveness of self-deprecation (90% positive audience response) supports theories of comedic facework (Glick, 2021), where comedians deflect potential criticism by targeting themselves first. This strategy proves particularly effective for Iglesias, whose physical appearance and cultural background could make him vulnerable to others' mockery.

The temporal decline in taboo topics (5% to 1% from 2017- 2022) reflects broader cultural shifts toward sensitivity around potentially offensive content, particularly in digital spaces where content can be easily shared and decontextualized. This adaptation demonstrates comedians' responsiveness to changing social norms and platform dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study positions pre-joke discourse as a critical yet underexplored component of comedic performance. Gabriel Iglesias's strategic deployment of politeness and impoliteness strategies demonstrates how comedians create the social conditions necessary for humor to be received positively rather than offensively.

Key Contributions:

- 1- Establishes pre-joke phase as legitimate area of sociolinguistic inquiry
- 2- Demonstrates practical application of impoliteness theory to digital comedy
- 3- Reveals audience perception patterns that inform broader understanding of humor reception

Practical Implications:

Comedians and content creators can enhance audience alignment by:

Prioritizing positive politeness strategies, particularly inclusive pronouns, to build rapport.

Using multimodal cues like strategic pauses to signal humor intent from norms and audience demographics.

Employing self-deprecation to mitigate face threats before potentially risky material.

Future Research Directions:

Comparative analysis across multiple comedians and cultural backgrounds

Investigation of pre-joke strategies in other humor contexts (sitcoms, social media)

Longitudinal studies of strategy evolution in response to cultural changes

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