



MOCKERY AS SOLIDARITY: THE SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF INSULTS AND HUMOUR IN *WE NEED NEW NAMES*

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Abstract

This study examines the sociolinguistic roles played by insults, teasing, banter and humorous mockery in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) from a theoretical perspective of Jonathan Culpeper's Theory of Mock Impoliteness. The research uses a qualitative textual analysis method by analysing selected dialogues and interactions between the child protagonists in the novel to explore the use of apparently offensive language in their peer group. The results show that mock impoliteness is mostly used as a means of solidarity than as an act of hostility. Teasing, joking insults and verbal play are important means of communication through which the children negotiate intimacy, group membership, friendships and social cohesion in the face of economic deprivation and social volatility. The study also illustrates that the interpretation of impolite expression is not purely linguistic, but also relational and depends on the shared understanding. This research adds to the fields of literary sociolinguistics and the significance of language in the construction of identity, belonging and resilience in children's peer cultures, through the application of sociolinguistic and pragmatic theories.

Keywords: *Children's Peer Discourse, Humour and Teasing, Mock Impoliteness, Sociolinguistics, Solidarity, We Need New Names (2013) by Noviolet Bulawayo.*

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1. Introduction

Language is much more than a neutral medium for the transfer of information. At a basic level it is a social action that people engage in to make sense, to negotiate identities, to build relationships and to set up boundaries to their communities (Fairclough, 1989; Halliday, 1978). Language and its social context have always been an integral part of sociolinguistic study, and the influence of language usage on the social environment in which it takes place, including the language attitudes taken by speakers in relation to others, has always been the focus of sociolinguistic research (Labov, 1972). Each time a word is uttered it is part of a context; a social context, a cultural context or a history of shared experiences that will impact the meaning and the reception of the word. Language, therefore, is not merely a means of conveying information, but also of expressing solidarity, establishing intimacy, claiming belonging, and of maintaining the social cohesion.

The study of the interaction between language and social interaction has been a continuous focus of research in the study of sociolinguistics. Those in the field of interactional sociolinguistics and conversation analysis have presented that everyday conversation can be a place of complex social work, a place where people interactively manage their identities, negotiate interpersonal relationships, and orient themselves to the communicative norms of the community (Gumperz, 1982; Goffman, 1967). One of the most fascinating results of this body of research is that communicative strategies that seem to be norm-violating politeness serve very affiliative purposes. While seemingly rude at face value, teasing, banter, verbal play, humorous insults, and jocular mockery often serve as vehicles for speaker to establish rapport, to secure group membership, and to bond interpersonally. Among other means, humour can be said to be a potent communicative tool that can soften the discourse, express closeness in relationships, signal a shared identity and foster social cohesion (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Raza, 2024).

Teasing and humorous mockery is particularly important in the sociolinguistic context in close friendships and peer groups. Hassan et al. (2024) note that teasing humour is often used to bond people together and to achieve a sense of "*in-group-ness*". Playful insults do not necessarily reflect simple verbal aggression but are often based on an understanding between the parties and the parties' recognition of the insult. Possibly face threatening utterances are transformed by means of shared laughter and contextual knowledge into expressions of intimacy and belonging. In a similar way, He (2023) believes that humorous mockery has both face threatening and face supporting functions, and that the fulfilment of the latter can only be decided by relation context in which it is realized instead of only by the form of language itself. These findings suggest teasing as a communicative practice of ambiguity that lies on the seams of humour, identity and social affiliation.

At the heart of Jonathan Culpeper's (2011) theory of Mock Impoliteness is the notion of these observations. Culpeper differentiates between impoliteness, in which face attack is a serious attempt; and mock impoliteness, in which it's obviously impolite language meant instead as fun. Mock impoliteness involves teasing, banter, jocular abuse, humorous insults, and ritualized verbal play, all of which are based on a common interactional frame that neutralizes their potentially impolite impact. Culpeper (2011) states that the social meaning of such expressions is not just found in its literal meaning, but in the contextual cues and relational understandings that are used to interpret the expression. Liu (2022) extends this idea and claims that mock impoliteness is dynamically created in the process of interaction, and thus people can tell whether a certain expression is impolite or affiliative. Thus, the same speech form can be used as an act of aggression or as a strong sign of solidarity, depending on the social context in which it is used.

This is particularly evident in work on children's discourse in peer groups. Language socialization studies have repeatedly revealed that children are active agents in the process of creating their social world, by using language strategically to make friends, to negotiate status, to draw boundaries about who belongs to the group and who doesn't, and to create group identities (Goodwin, 1990; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Teasing, humorous name-calling and playful insults have important social functions within peer groups, help to enforce group norms and indicate trust (Kyratzis, 2004). These practices are not just disruptive but they help to shape the peer group culture and are a way of being socially included. In many instances the teasing is not really teasing at all but a sign of acceptance and belonging, and is a good illustration of the way language can play a part in the socialization process.

The sociolinguistic interactions are vivid in the widely greeted novel *We Need New Names* (2013) by NoViolet Bulawayo. The novel is set in a Zimbabwean shantytown where a community of children lives amidst poverty, uncertainty and social change. The children manage to build up a rich social life, though, full of teasing, mockery, playful insults, and verbal competition. The way they interact demonstrates how seemingly insulting language is not a divisive force, but a way to sustain a friendship, solidarity, and collective identity. The children's frequent use of humorous insults and playful name calling indicate an interactional culture and a language of intimacy and belonging that are mutually shared. The novel provides insights into the sociolinguistic processes for negotiating and sustaining relationships, through the rich depiction of children's discourse.

While aspects of impoliteness, humour and teasing have all been discussed in various communicative contexts, studies on mock impoliteness in African literary texts, especially those focusing on aspects of children's speech, are still rather scarce. This study is an attempt to fill in the gap in the literary sociolinguistic studies which have so far concentrated on face-to-face interaction, education and in the field of communication on

the media discourse and digital communication. *We Need New Names* (2013) is particularly rich in this regard because the novel's story is so bound up with the mundane speech of its young characters. This study aims to show the sociolinguistic functions of teasing, humorous insults and mockery in the novel and how mock impoliteness is a potent resource for creating solidarity, belonging and peer-group identity. It thereby joins the larger debates about the interconnections between language, humour and social cohesion, as well as expanding the scope of Culpeper's (2011) Theory of Mock Impoliteness to an under-researched aspect of African literary discourse.

1.1. Research Question

In the novel *We Need New Names* (2013), how does NoViolet Bulawayo use mock impoliteness as a sociolinguistic tool to build solidarity, belonging and peer group identity for the child characters?

1.2. Research Objective

This study uses NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) to explore the role of teasing, humorous insults, banter, and playfully mocking the other as modes of mock impoliteness that are used to assert solidarity, build friendship and maintain social cohesion among the child characters in this novel, using the theoretical framework of Culpeper's (2011) Theory of Mock Impoliteness.

1.3. Significance of the Study

The study is important as it contributes to the emerging field of literary sociolinguistics as it treats the intricate nature of the language-humour-social-bonding dynamic in African literary discourse. This study shows that banter, teasing, and humorous insults often considered a form of verbal aggression can also be an effective means of affiliation, intimacy, and community. The study employs Culpeper's (2011) Theory of Mock Impoliteness to *We Need New Names*, a body of literature which has been less studied than other, more obviously sociolinguistic or pragmatic works. Moreover, it explores the depiction of childhood in NoViolet Bulawayo's novel and uncovers how the novel's child protagonists build friendship, negotiate identity and how they maintain social cohesion through the playful use of words. The study explores a largely neglected aspect of the relationship between mock impoliteness, children's discourse and African fiction, thereby enriching the general debate about language as a social practice and setting the stage for further research on humour, solidarity and construction of identity in literary texts in postcolonial Africa.

2. Literature Review

Since Culpeper's (2011) pioneering theorization, the field of scholarship on mock impoliteness has progressed significantly over the last 20 years and the framework has been expanded, elaborated and empirically tested in an ever-widening range of communicative contexts. An important aspect of this body of work is the fact that

impoliteness (as a linguistic and pragmatic phenomenon) is by no means uniform. Liu (2022) is one of the most thorough and theoretically sophisticated recent studies of mock impoliteness, as applied to a Chinese online roast show. Citing Culpeper's mixed-messages theory and Spencer-Oatey's (2002) rapport management theory, Liu claims that the "*mock impoliteness*" is dynamically created as a result of the interaction of convention-based and context-based mismatches, in which the participants somehow "show" through multimodal and metalinguistic means that the apparently impolite message is actually affiliative rather than sincere. Most importantly, Liu's results reveal that funniness and perceived impoliteness are the two evaluative dimensions that are most statistically significant in audience members' processing of funniness and mock impoliteness in this mode of communication, thereby bringing light to the inseparability of funniness and face management in this mode. The consequences for literary and interactional analysis are significant: that to consider a seemingly insulting statement "*just rude*" is to miss the interactional frame in which the insult is carried out.

This critical finding, that '*the social meaning of teasing and jocular abuse is not necessarily a matter of their form*' (He's 2023: 77) is further supported and developed by his analysis of humorous mockery. He traces a subtle picture of the way in which mockery is face threatening and at the same time face supportive, and claims that this juxtaposition isn't in tension but is constitutively related – it's the face threatening part of the utterance which, when suitably framed and mutually recognized, is used to enact solidarity and affiliation. It's a double operation which differentiates mockery which is funny from the impoliteness, which is sincere on one hand and the politeness of the conventional one on the other hand. He's analysis adds to the theorization of transgressive bonding developed by Culpeper (2011), by paying attention to the pragmatic complexity of the acts that are performed as transgressive bonding – complexity that is particularly significant in peer-group interaction where the rules of engagement can be implicit, co-constructed and highly context-dependent. As shown by Liu (2022) and He (2023), such an account of mock impoliteness must not only go beyond the linguistic strategies adopted by the participants, but also consider the relational history, shared norms, and interactional context that allows these strategies to be both solidarity-enhancing and non-face-threatening.

Hassan et al. (2024) analysed banter in peer groups at Pakistani universities, highlighting the practical implications and empirical evidence required to substantiate the theoretical arguments made by mock impoliteness research. Adopting Hay's (2000) model of the functions of humour, Hassan et al. recognise gendered trends in the use of teasing humour in which both types of teasing can function to reinforce camaraderie and shared identity, but also to enact subtle forms of social domination. This is an important study for the current field because it shows how teasing is not a singular act but rather a continuum of communicative acts with four socially variable functions of solidarity, power assertion,

affiliation and exclusion which are negotiated within, and through, specific relational and cultural contexts. A teasing in this system is not only an indicator of intimacy but also a space of social positioning: teasing is an act of claiming the right to tease, and toleration or reciprocation of teasing makes one feel as if he or she was a legitimate member of the group. The idea that teasing is a dual social tool – affiliative and hierarchical – has a lot going for it analytically for any teasing research in a peer group, even for the fictional portrayal of children's interaction of the present article.

In recent years, the use of Culpeper's impoliteness model in contexts other than face-to-face spontaneous speech has become more popular, and his taxonomy has been tested in these contexts and found to be valid and fruitful. Dacalanio et al. (2024) analyse online student complaints using Culpeper's model, which revealed a set of impoliteness strategies (bald on record, positive, negative and sarcasm or mock) from the data gathered on social media. Notably, they found that sarcasm and mock politeness belong to a different subcategory of impoliteness strategies than other strategies, which are based on direct attacks on the face. Their study also highlights the need to push the impoliteness analysis away from the canonical, interactional, setting and towards digital and institutional settings which reveal new instances of face-threatening and face-affirming actions that require careful analysis. In an online discourse context, Igiri et al. (2025) describe how impoliteness strategies, such as insulting or ridiculing, mockery and trolling are shaped by the sociopragmatic context of anonymity, power dynamics, and cultural context. Their work is important in establishing that the nature of the conditions of impoliteness production and reception are contextually variable, thereby further emphasizing the need for careful consideration of interactional context in the analysis of impoliteness in any medium, including literary fiction.

The methodology of using Culpeper's model in literary and media texts has been an important way in literary linguistics and stylistics. This prospect is shown in Nurjanah's (2024) analysis on impoliteness strategy in the animated film *Turning Red* which shows there are some cases of impoliteness that are bald on record, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm and mock politeness in the interaction between characters. Although the interactional aspects of Nurjanah's work is not on mock impoliteness, but on impoliteness proper, the methodological importance of the study for the present discussion lies in the fact that it can be applied to fictional discourse, that is, characters' utterances in narrative texts can be analysed using the pragmatic categories that govern real-world interaction as postulated by Culpeper. This validates the sociolinguistic study of novels as literature in that the novel is not simply a work of aesthetic value but is also a space of pragmatically meaningful, recognisable interactional norms and social functions, enacted and reflected by the linguistic behaviour of the characters. Similarly, the study conducted by Dacalanio et al. (2024) shows that Culpeper's model has analytical value in

various types of discourses, supporting the theoretical validity of the model in different types of texts and communication contexts.

In the field of children's speech and peer group communication, it has become increasingly accepted that verbal play, teasing and jocular insults play a significant part in children's organization and construction of their identity. Studies of this nature invariably show that children use language strategically to negotiate group membership, define a hierarchy of relationships, draw boundaries between groups and do affiliative bonding (Goodwin, 1990; Kyratzis, 2004). Such teasing and name-calling, which can be present in a lot of children's peer interactions, are not just precursors to more socially competent adult behaviour as deficit models of children's interactions suggested: They can be sophisticated communicative practices, which through them children actively create peer cultures, test and reinforce peer group norms, and express forms of intimacy that are particular to children's peer life. The humour inherent in these practices is a kind of "social glue", a glue which cements peer groups together in the experience of transgressive play, laughter, provocation, and retaliation.

There are several themes that are convergent, each of which has a direct impact on the sociolinguistic analysis of mock impoliteness, teasing and solidarity in literary texts. First, in all empirical, theoretical and applied studies teasing is identified as a double action of face-threatening and face-affiliating in the dual social function of teasing, which is a defining feature of mock impolite discourse. Second, the context and/or relation between two individuals is always considered as a crucial factor in deciding whether an apparently hostile statement is taken as playful or aggressive. Thirdly, when applied to a wide range of different types of discourse, from digital media to film, educational discourse to peer group conversation, the theoretical strength and applicability of mock impoliteness as an analytical category have been proven. Fourth, humour, banter, and jocular abuse are consistently associated, as part of these studies, with group cohesion, group identity in performance, and with the negotiation of social inclusion/exclusion.

Although there is very rich and diverse literature on this subject, there is a gap in the literature. Existing research on mock impoliteness and teasing humour has been focused on either spontaneous speech or written texts of digital media, educational contexts, political media, or mass media texts from a western context, with only a few studies taking a pragmatic approach to literary fiction. In the fictional texts or media texts to which impoliteness theory has been applied, it has been mostly concerned with adult characters and mainstream cultural products, with the discourse of the child characters in postcolonial texts largely under-explored. In this paper, we argue that NoViolet Bulawayo's novel *We Need New Names* (2013), a narrative whose discourse was created from teasing, insults, banter and jocular mockery, which is the everyday speech of Zimbabwean child protagonists, has not been given sustained sociolinguistic attention

from the point of view of mock impoliteness theory. Literary sociolinguistics and children's peer-group discourse are therefore not well-theorised intersections, especially as it concerns African literary texts that depict vernacular childhood interaction in remarkable linguistic complexity and social specificity as a means of generating solidarity. The current study aims at filling this void direct with a sociolinguistic perspective of Bulawayo's novel using mock impoliteness as a theoretical perspective.

3. Research Methodology

The methodological approach in this study is qualitative textual analysis which is used to analyse the sociolinguistic functions of insults, teasing, banter and humorous mockery in *We Need New Names* (2013) by NoViolet Bulawayo. The study is a literary-sociolinguistic study which concentrates on the use of language in the interaction of the child characters in the novel.

3.1. Method of Research

The study is qualitative based on literary sociolinguistic approach. It looks at the linguistic expression of mockery and how that helps the children to belong together, to be friends and to be a group.

3.2. Data Collection

The main data is taken from novel's dialogues, conversational exchanges, teasing episodes, insults, nicknames and verbal humour from *We Need New Names* (2013). The text extracts are intentionally chosen for their relevance to mock impoliteness and interpersonal interaction.

3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic discourse analysis and close textual reading are used in the analysis of the collected data. Popular teasing, bantering, jocular abuse and joking insults are acknowledged, classified and analysed to figure out how they serve as expressions of solidarity, not hostility.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by Jonathan Culpeper's (2011) Theory of Mock Impoliteness which suggests that apparently offensive language can be used to show affiliative and relationship-building strategies if the utterers know that the language is not serious and is playful. This is the framework on which to analyse the use of mockery as a sociolinguistic solidarity strategy by the children-narrators in the novel.

5. Data Analysis

Even before any exchanges, the novel's main sociolinguistic premise is stated in the first sentence of *We Need New Names* (2013) "*We are on our way to Budapest: Bastard and Chipso and Godknows and Sbhoo and Stina and me*" (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 1). Instead of using to insult an enemy, "*Bastard*" is used as a proper name and accepted and used by all members of the peer group, including its bearer. The name is used here as a sign of

familiarity, not of stigmatization, and is neither discussed by the children, nor challenged or used to hurt. This initial naming provides at the level of character introduction the basic principle for the children's whole interactional world: What is face-damaging in the mouth of an outsider is an expression of belonging in the frame of this peer community. The children's social world emerges, beginning with its initial expression, in the register of mock impoliteness.

The first prolonged verbal bantering ensues when the children walk to Budapest, and they discuss how Chipu got pregnant. The exchange starts with one child claiming that *'the first baby is supposed to be a boy'*, to which another child responds *"But you're a girl, big head, and you're a first-born"* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 1). The counter response, *"I said supposed, didn't I?"*, is followed almost immediately by the sharp: *'Just shut your kaka mouth, you, it's not even your stomach'* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 2). This is because the insult 'big head' and the expletive-filled order is not analytically relevant in isolation, but as part of an interactional sequence. No participant withdraws. Children don't turn sullen and silent. Rather, the discussion becomes more intense and more intimate, engaging the group in more and more intimate and introspective speculations – how babies “come out of,” how babies “get into” a stomach, and who might have fathered Chipu's child. When the address 'big head' is given, it does not put an end to talk, rather it invites it; the command 'shut your kaka mouth' does not silence, but rather provokes, sustaining a conversation. Teasing here serves an instrumental role, as a turn taking device and as an indicator of interactional involvement – to be teased is to be spoken to and to be spoken to in this group is to be included. Rather than dividing the group by Chipu's fragility, the chipping chatter establishes a shared language that allows the most challenging of situations – an eleven-year-old's pregnancy – to be tackled, irreverently, curiously and with care. However, the *"dunderhead"* thrown at one child for misattributing the mechanism of birth (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 2) isn't offensive but rather laughter and continuation, and in itself the best measure that it is not an attack but a *"dunderhead"*.

The most analytically nuanced and the most elaborated example of mock impoliteness as a practice of solidarity is the extended verbal sparring sequence on the walk from Budapest. Addressed ostentatiously 'to the sun' and not meant for Sbho herself, Bastard's response to the comment reveals it to be teasingly framed: *"She is going to do it in her dreams"* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 6). Then he throws a guava at the house which makes her furious and starts a speedy Triangulated Exchange. Walking ahead, not even facing Sbho, Godknows fires sideways, *"You think a man will marry you with your missing out teeth?"* *"I wouldn't even marry you myself"* (Bulawayo 2013, p. 6). When Sbho's immediate response is *"I'm not talking to you, chapped buttocks!"* he doesn't escalate, but rather Godknows *"flings 'his hand and makes a whatever sign because he has nothing to say to that"* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 6). This is a mock dismissal gesture which is interactionally

significant: it is a concession gesture by one who has been outmanoeuvred in a verbal game, rather than hurt or injured. Pragmatically, howbeit, the mockery on missing teeth is separated from belief, as the narrator's aside, *'The stones know that Sbho is pretty prettier than all of us here'* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 6) confirms. All recognise Sbho as beautiful; the insulting ability does not degenerate but to engage in the competitive verbal intimacy which serves the group's daily speech.

Bastard's insults escalate even more when Stina mentions that maybe he should pursue further education in order to become successful with his finances. *"But what is remarkable is that, in contrast, is that 'Stina's response is, 'he just looks at him like he is bored and eats the rest of his guava'"* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 6). This is a silent non-reaction which has its communicative significance: it is not the silence of a wounded person, but it is the silence of a person who does not want to dignify a provocation by reacting to it; it shows interactional sophistication and social confidence. Thus, a switch to *"America is too far, you midget"* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 6) when Bastard turns on Darling is an insult in a different register. But even here, there is an analytical telling, an experience of it that is deeper, more intense, in the case of Darling. Instead of challenging Bastard, she relays a very funny fantasy of physical retribution *"I would pound his stomach until he vomited all the guavas he ate"* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 7) and then interprets the insult in a relational way, which takes off its face-threatening sting: *"I know he is just saying this because he is jealous. Because he has nobody in America. Because Aunt Fostalina is not his aunt. Because he is Bastard and I am Darling"* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 7). This interpretive maneuver is the hermeneutic operation which allows to differentiate from practice between mock impoliteness and real impoliteness. Darling is able to *'read between the lines'* of the insult to its relational meaning: Bastard's insult is actually a displaced form of jealousy, which is, paradoxically, a sign of closeness. *"Who envisions thee mockest thee; he who sees thee sees thee; and to be seen is to be."*

Solidarity-through-verbal-play is a dimension of solidarity that is not shown in the country-game episode in the "Country-Game" chapter. The debate on country names *"everybody wants to be the U.S.A. and Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and France"* and *'nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti'* (Bulawayo, 2013, pp. 20–21) is a means to create and perform the group's values and collective fantasy life. The dispute is not just about the game; it is also a ritual of aspiration, solidarity and shared sense of a world of hierarchies. In opposition to each other, in contestation of who gets to be the U.S.A., the children collectively confirm the imaginative community they share. All this sniping and competing claims and mock-serious claims of priority all this by friction creates the texture of true peer intimacy. Significantly, Darling writes, *"If I'm lucky, like today, I get to be the U.S.A."* (Bulawayo,

2013, p. 21), and the takeaway that this is not a normal state of affairs, but rather a fortunate one, further confirms that it is the conflict itself that is the social bonding mechanism.

One of the most structurally transparent examples of mock impoliteness as solidarity-in-action is the exchange that takes place when the NGO lorry arrives and the cameraman starts taking photos of the group, which involve a discussion over the photo of Godknows's exposed buttocks, between Bastard and Godknows. Godknows is pounced on by the cameraman who then laughs, *"Bastard points and laughs, Godknows turns around and covers the holes of his shorts with his hands like he is that naked man in the Bible"* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 22). The communal laughter *'We are all laughing at Godknows'* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 22) is not a moment of exclusion but of inclusion: Godknows is the centre of the group's attention and this is a form of recognition. When Godknows scolds Bastard for *"laughing or smiling"* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 22), or *"any of that silly stuff you are doing,"* Bastard replies without a beat, *"You are just jealous because all they took of you are your buttocks. Your dirty, chapped, kaka buttocks"* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 22). Godknows' response *"What do you have to be jealous about, you ugly face?"* Continues the exchange in kind, and both lines end with Bastard's very sincere revealing statement: *"when they look at my picture over there, I want them to see me. Not my buttocks, not my dirty clothes, but me"* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 22). Such a change from jocular insult to this vulnerability is only possible in a relationally situated frame, guaranteed by the continuous drill of mock impoliteness. This is because both Bastard and Godknows are talking to each other in the language of banter *"kaka buttocks," "ugly face"* and when Bastard tells Godknows what he really wants to see in the picture, it is emotional. There is no intimacy without mock impoliteness, but therein lies its precondition.

The most illustrative comparative scene in the novel is the one involving the security guard in the chapter titled *"Blak Power"*. The guard's first utterance *"I command you to immediately turn around and retrace your steps. Extricate yourselves from these premises and retreat to whatever hole you crawled out of"* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 45) is categorically different from the children's own banter. It is unreciprocal, exclusionary and hierarchical. The guard's language acts in a true manner of impoliteness: its 'face-attack' is sincere, its social role is purely exclusionary. Their collective answer: they resist, mock and collectively stand firm is telling in itself. The guard warns Godknows that he is going to arrest him, and Godknows asks him, *"But how will he take him to jail? Where is your car? Do you have a driver's license?"* (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 46). The quality of the children's counter-mockery is in fact different from that of their peer-group banter. It is directed towards a person outside of their relational community. The pivotal moment occurs when Stina quietly remarks that *"the spit has dried up, see"* (Bulawayo 2013:46) and *"we yell and clap and laugh"* (Bulawayo 2013:46): the kids' laughter at the guard's expense does not include him in the group but rather affirms the group's boundary against

him. When the guard finally unleashes his most extreme verbal attack "*you pathetic, fatally miscalculated biological blunder*" (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 47), he is not mock impolite, but sincere in his dehumanisation of the children and the children feel the difference; they start to move away. The impoliteness of the guard shuts down reciprocity and the peer-group banter of the children relies on it.

Darling's hearing Godknows's and Sbho's voices over the phone from Zimbabwe, as well as the involuntary temporal displacement in the retrospective passage in the "*My America*" chapter, succinctly sum up the novel's thesis about the social role of mock impoliteness. When the narrator reports that "I get goose bumps just from hearing them talk" and then that "*Time dissolves like we are in a movie scene... I'm ten again and we are playing country-game and Find bin Laden and Andy-over. We're teasing Godknows for his peeking buttocks, we're watching a fight, we're imitating the church people, we're watching somebody get buried. We're hungry but we're together and we're at home and everything is sweeter than dessert*" (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 87), one is overwhelmed by the emotions of the childhood transference. The implications to be drawn from this passage are quite analytical. One of the constitutive experiences of home and community is teasing Godknows for his peeking buttocks, the other is witnessing suffering, like watching a fight, watching a burial. When the memory of belonging is mocked, it's not just a by-product of the memory, it is one of the memories of belonging. For Darling, to be home is in some part to be in a place where she and her friends tease one another but nothing really happens, where the insult is a kind of love, where the laughter of them all is the safest the children could have. The teasing is sweeter than dessert not because of its irreverence, but because of it: because only in a real community of trust can one tease in such a manner and the other person tease back in such a manner.

6. Conclusion

In all of the passages analysed in this study the sociolinguistic pattern, which demonstrates how teasing, banter, and jocular abuse are the main means by which the child characters in this novel form, maintain, and negotiate the solidarity of their peer group, is robust and coherent. Much of the verbal duelling over Chipso's pregnancy was done at a lightning speed (Bulawayo, 2013, pp. As in (1–2), the walk home from Budapest is the subject of competitive insults and forms the basis for the insult economy of the novel. The mock-hostility of the NGO space (Bulawayo, 2013, p. 6–7), the resistance of the kids to the security guard (Bulawayo, 2013, pp. These are all illustrations of how the face-threatening (surface) aspect of the utterance is shared and neutralized and reoriented within a children's interactional frame (45–47), as a gesture to intimacy. In contrast to the security guard's actual impoliteness, the exclusionary nature of which is even more evident, the children's banter does not signal a lack of relationship; rather it is mock impoliteness in the service of affiliation, recognition and mutual belonging. That teasing for Bulawayo is

the “language of solidarity” is most succinctly and poignantly illustrated in the “retrospective” testimony given by Darling to America: “*Teasing Godknows for his buttocks is as good as home.*” (America, 2013, p. 87)

7. Findings

Overall, the text analysis reveals that mock impoliteness is one of the key sociolinguistic means of solidarity between the child characters in *We Need New Names*. Teasing, playful insults, banter and humorous mockery are always affiliative rather than aggressive behaviours across the exchanges studied. Children's verbal sparring (from teasing about Chipo's pregnancy to the competitive insult exchange on the walk home from Budapest) shows that apparently face threatening utterances are coproduced as play, as their harmfulness is deconstructed by a shared relational context and recognition. Engaging in playful insults establishes ties to the peer-group, and having the ability to take playfully insulted remarks without being sincere marks the extent of belonging to the peer-group. This is further corroborated by the contrastive analysis of the security guard encounter: When real impoliteness, that is, un-reciprocal and hierarchical attack on the face, occurs it results in an effect of exclusion and social closure, whereas the children's peer-directed banter brings about cohesion. Indeed, it's mockery that is so unceasingly tied to solidarity in this community that the novel's most resonant confirmation of this is Darling's retrospective identification of teasing as the language of home.

8. Recommendations

While mock impoliteness theory has been applied here to the novel, it would be useful in the future to extend the application of the theory to other African literary fiction that deals with children's peer interaction, such as, for example, works by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ben Okri, in which similar dynamics of verbal play and group identity construction are evident. Comparative research into children's discourse in post-colonial fictional traditions (African, Caribbean, South Asian) will provide other insights into how far and to what extent jocular abuse and teasing can be considered to be culturally specific or a form of cross-cultural solidarity. Also, in the field of sociolinguistics, investigations of humour, banter and verbal play based on literature corpora in general would be valuable in the discovery and analysis of the interactional norms of fictional peer groups in relation to those of actual ones.

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