

WARPING FRAGILE LITTLE MINDS? REVIEWS OF *SOUTH PARK*

Mary Shapiro
Truman State University

Linguistic politeness in the media has recently been the subject of public debate in the United States, thanks to the success of one of the first shows to be given the TV-MA rating (for mature audiences only) According to its own "warning," the animated cable television series *South Park* "contains coarse language, and, due to its content, it should not be viewed by anyone"¹

Although linguists think of Brown & Levinson's (1978) seminal theory and the body of research it has generated when they think of "politeness," this term is more generally understood by "real people" as good behavior When parents in the U S tell their children to "be polite," they typically mean to say "please," "thank you," and "excuse me" at the appropriate moments, to avoid taboo language and topics, to not point or stare or pick their noses in public The "mature" language and the "rude" behavior of the characters (adults and children alike) on *South Park* has stirred up discussion about whether such language is appropriate in the media (where children might be exposed to it), and ironically, whether children actually do speak this way when unsupervised

Such questions are important for linguists to examine, if we are to avoid the problem of linguists and "real people" talking past each other, using the same terms but understanding them differently Linguists have recently begun to wake up to the importance of popular beliefs about language and to become concerned about how we communicate our findings (e g , Preston 1999) To my knowledge, no one has yet attempted to bring together scholarly and folk discourses about politeness This paper examines the "arguments" and "facts" about language put forward by the media, looking at both the original newspaper reviews which appeared the date of the show's premiere² and

¹ I thank my students at Truman State University for drawing my attention to the show when it first began, with frequent journal entries and classroom comments Those outside of the United States may not yet have heard of it, those in the U S cannot have avoided it Although many major metropolitan areas do not get the Comedy Central cable channel, this cartoon has achieved cult status on many campuses, has spawned music CDs, a film, endless merchandising tie-ins, many internet sites set up by fans, and a great deal of press

² Eight reviews were included in the Lexis-Nexis database for that date (August 13, 1997), there were no further selection criteria They will be abbreviated in the text as NYT (New York Times), USAT (USA Today), BG (Boston Globe), NYN (New York Newsday), LAT (Los Angeles Times), SLPD (St Louis Post-Dispatch), CT (Chicago Tribune), and OS (Orlando Sentinel), respectively

later newspaper and magazine articles, including three cover stories which appeared simultaneously in March, 1988³ Quoted in these articles are writers, producers, critics, members of the general public everyone but linguists We will consider why linguists have remained silent on these issues of great interest to the general public, and what role we should play in this discussion It seems obvious that we must not let public discussions about language rage without our input, we must not allow the media alone to "decide" the answers to these questions

WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT REAL WORLD POLITENESS CONCERNS

Not surprisingly, most of the press about *South Park* has centered around the show's use of taboo language and taboo subject matter It is naive to believe that this is merely an aesthetic concern, writers and publications are acutely aware of First Amendment issues, slow to censure lest they should find themselves censored as a result To criticize *South Park's* use of language is a dangerous step, in that it could set a precedent that the publication would also be expected to follow To approve or even mirror this usage is also a risky tactic, as the publication may come in for the same attacks as the show Either of these stances constitutes a threat to the publication's own face

All the writers/publications agree that the show's language is "crude" (NYT), "raunchy vitriol" (LAT), "profane a salty vernacular" (OS), "filthy" (BG), "rude" (NYN), with "obscenities aplenty" (SLPD), etc Even Rolling Stone (RS), which mirrors such usage, refers to the show as "hard-cussing " The characters are described as "foul-mouthed" (LAT, CT), "trash-talking" (USAT), "potty-mouthed" (SLPD), "talk[ing] like sailors" (CT), "swearing like lumberjacks" (BG), etc NYT comments that "[t]heir language alone would be enough to earn the show its TV-M rating " SLPD points out in the lead that "most of their jokes can't be reproduced in a family newspaper" and BG agrees that "[m]ost of the gags on *South Park* aren't remotely printable " The metalanguage for taboo is obviously very well developed in English although every article mentioned the language on the show, no two use the same description The fact that we have so many ways of referring to and talking about language which we find objectionable is a sign of the degree of awareness we have about these issues and the amount of importance we accord them in public discourse

There are some very interesting arguments which underlie the public discussion of these issues, which have never been clearly set out The "popular" argument, to which the publications seem to be responding although it is never explicitly stated, would go as follows

³ A later editorial in New York's Newsday alluded to the show "simultaneously gracing - or disgracing, depending on your point of view - the covers of both Rolling Stone and SPIN " The third cover story was in Newsweek

- (1) *South Park* is obscene
Approving of *South Park* is thus approving of obscenity
Obscenity is bad language
We do not approve of bad things
Thus, we do not approve of obscenity
Thus, we cannot approve of *South Park*

A stronger variant of this argument might be

- (1a) *South Park* is obscene
Obscenity is bad for society
Therefore, *South Park* is bad for society

The logic seems unarguable, the conclusions inevitable, particularly as everyone agrees with the first premise. Evidence for widespread acceptance of the conclusions is found in an April 1998 front page article in the Chicago Tribune about reactions to *South Park*, which talked about the show as a "problem" that "school officials nationwide" are facing. "school districts across the country have issued warnings to parents, [and] banned the wearing of *South Park* clothing." The prominent placement of this article and the repeated references to "nationwide" and "across the country" create the impression of epidemic rejection. Yet there is also evidence of support for the show. On November 24, 1997, Fortune magazine speculated that the wholesale revenues for *South Park* merchandise (action figures, dolls, teeshirts, watches, CDROMs, film, etc.) would reach one hundred million dollars. According to Newsweek's March cover story, "5.2 million viewers watched" *South Park* in the last two weeks of February. And the show continues to receive critical acclaim.

How can a newspaper or magazine praise a show which, logically, "we" ought to condemn, which can be shown to be "bad for society"? It is crucial for the media (particularly the news organizations) to preserve the appearance of logical, coherent thought. Without this, a media organ will lose its authority and its audience. An equally important image for the media to protect is that of "serving the public," being good for society. Both of these face needs are threatened by approving of *South Park* in the face of the assumed popular beliefs about "bad language."

Thus, in the eight original reviews and all the follow-up articles, a counter argument is implied, though again never overtly stated.

- (2) *South Park* is obscene
Obscenity is harmful for children
QED, we must not let children watch the show (but adults may enjoy it)

Although other television shows with similar language or content have been met with disapproval (e.g., *Beavis and Butthead*), the unprecedented extent of the uproar over *South Park* is clearly

attributable to the fear that the "childish" animation style and the 8-year-old heroes will attract young viewers. Every review and every follow-up article discusses the "mature audiences" rating given to the show. We are reminded that it is "decidedly adult" (NYT), "adult-aimed" (OS), that we should "keep the kids away" (USAT), that it "merits" (LAT) or "earns" (CT) the MA rating, that the cartoon about kids "isn't for them" (SLPD), etc. The marketing of *South Park*, itself, has emphasized this argument. One advertisement for the show reads "Alien Abductions, Anal Probes & Flaming Farts *South Park* Why They Created the V-Chip." The Newsweek cover story pointed out (implying a causal connection) that eight months after *South Park* premiered, "the Federal Communications Commission issued technical guidelines for the home-censor chips (allowing parents to block reception of any channel at any particular time) to be built into all new television sets." A follow-up CT article refers to *South Park* as "Exhibit A in the case for the V-chip."

This counter argument, however, is not strong enough to overcome the face threat inherent in applauding the show. This may be, in part, due to public skepticism about our ability to control what children watch. According to Newsweek, minors constituted 23 percent of *South Park's* audience in February 1998, despite the TV-MA rating.

Positive evaluations of *South Park* tend to be apologetic (a negative politeness strategy) about its "rampant, raunchy immaturity" (USAT), "lowbrow" sensibility (LAT), and use of language. Rolling Stone called its cover story "South Park and the Triumph of No-Brow Humor." The NYN review had a confessional tone: "I like twisted adult satirical cartoons. I like *South Park*, too." The headline of a follow-up LAT article was "Yes, I know it's sick, but still." Mostly, the reason given for this "shameful" preference is the show's humor, which is called (among other things) "appealingly irreverent" (NYT), "uncompromisingly hilarious" (Rolling Stone), "deliciously deranged" (USAT), and "break[ing] new ground in comedy" (NYN). The writer of the original CT review decided to "confess" months later in a follow-up CT article that he was "enamored of *South Park* for the same reasons as its fans. It's shocking, sick -- and funny." SLPD explicitly states that the "redeeming value" (emphasis mine) of the show is that it "is seldom mean-spirited, and it's often outrageously funny."

An additional argument, then, would be

- (3) *South Park* is immature/tasteless/obscene/etc
- South Park* is humorous
- Humor is a redeeming value
- It is acceptable to approve of something immature/
tasteless/obscene, etc if it has a redeeming value
- It is therefore acceptable to approve of *South Park*

Humor, however, is a subjective construct. What is funny to one reviewer is "sophomoric, gross, and unfunny" to another (OS). As a later review in the *Kansas City Star* (2/25/98) puts it, "The show just

ain't that funny, folks " If one does not accept the premise that *South Park* is funny, the syllogism fails

Thus, the creators and promoters of *South Park* have put forward yet another argument, one which they claim to be objective fact

- (4) *South Park* is immature/tasteless/obscene/etc
- South Park* reflects the reality that children are cruel and foul-mouthed
- Realism is a redeeming value
- It is acceptable to approve of something immature/tasteless/obscene, etc if it has a redeeming value
- It is therefore acceptable to approve of *South Park*

The original reviews in August 1997 do not immediately adopt this argument, although several of them hint at it or attribute it to *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone CT quotes Parker as saying that children "are usually portrayed as being sweet and innocent We all know it's not true because we were all kids at one point [] [A]ll we're doing is saying, 'OK, how did we talk in the 3rd grade?'" SLPD has Stone "insisting" that "[e]ight-year-olds talk like that all the time " In both cases, this view is attributed to the creators of the show, not necessarily endorsed by the writer or publication NYT leads with a comparison to real life ("Like most 8-year-old boys who spend a lot of time together, the friends in the animated series *South Park* have a phrase they repeat endlessly"), but does not comment on the realism of the show overall LAT makes the strongest claim of realism in the original reviews, saying that the show contains "some knowingly clever observations about childhood and popular culture," but it falls short of specifying that the way the children use language is realistic

A quick look at the three cover stories which appeared in March 1998 shows that in seven months, this argument has prevailed in media discourse All three publications not only argue for the realism of *South Park*, they presuppose it, a much more pernicious practice, since it may lead readers to accept this premise without conscious evaluation of the claim ⁴ Rolling Stone comments that the show faces "the ugly truth that our inner children are baby-faced sadists with big eyes," that it has "revealed childhood as a dangerous and obscene place," and notes that "hard truths go down more comfortably in cartoons " SPIN agrees that "for all its absurdity, *South Park* is probably truer to the kid experience than any other program on TV Perversely, *South Park* may be one of the realest social worlds on TV " Both of these publications are aimed at a youthful audience (presumably similar to *South Park's* audience) and are very approving of the show, so it is not surprising that they would accept this argument Newsweek, on the other hand, is aimed at a much more general public, and its article expresses much greater reservations about the

⁴ See Van Dijk (1998) for an examination of how presupposition is used to express opinions in the press The emphasis in all the quotes in this paragraph is added

show The headline of the story is "The Rude Tube," and the subhead poses the question "But does the world really need a Mr Hankey chocolate bar?"⁵ The presupposed answer is, obviously, no Yet, even in this context, the boys are described as foulmouthed 11'1 'bastards' (Stone and Parker's favorite description of 9-year-old boys) who abuse each other, delight in dissing authority figures and yet possess a dumb innocence that makes their bad behavior forgivable to anyone with an honest memory of third grade

In a later paragraph the realism of the show is twice reaffirmed As trippy as some of the show's plots can get -- like Barbara Streisand's transforming into a giant robot -- they're grounded in reality [] Another docu-dramatic truth is that kids have foul mouths and can be total bastards

Linguists have remained silent on questions that the public finds of great interest, and the media has stepped into the void Members of the press, rather than scholars of language, are presenting "facts" about language usage The media has accepted the premise that children really do speak in the way that *South Park* portrays Where is the evidence for this? And if it can be shown that children speak this way, then why should we accept the idea that they needed to be shielded from such usage? Why is this contradiction not recognized and explored? Also unexamined is the premise that realism and/or humor are "redeeming values " If "bad" language is capable of doing harm to our society, to our children, are we willing to accept this potential damage in the name of realism?

Another interesting argument lurks in the text of a few publications

- (5) *South Park* is immature/tasteless/obscene/etc
Children are routinely exposed to bad language (from other children as well as adults)
Children are not harmed by this exposure
Thus, exposure to *South Park*'s bad language won't harm them
It is therefore acceptable to approve of *South Park*, even if children are watching it

Of the original reviews, only NYN takes this position, saying, it probably will not harm them [your kids] any more than the rest of the TV they watch [] They will watch it anyway [] You might as well join in the sick, twisted fun

Newsweek appears to concur

⁵ Mr Hankey is a minor character on the show, a talking piece of excrement with magical powers

Saying the show corrupts young minds is selling short the show and the young minds Underage fans grasp that the selfish, racist fat kid Cartman is not a role model [] As for the bleepable expletives that fly out of the mouths of Kyle, Kenny & Co , an 8-year-old boy from Larchmont, N Y , says they weren't new to him 'My daddy says them every single day '

The kid's on to something

Rolling Stone and SPIN, both of which regularly print obscenities, might be seen as also tacitly endorsing this position (Presumably their own use of taboo language implies a belief that it is not harmful to their youthful audience) This argument, like the preceding one, relies crucially on an assumptions about language (that children are regularly exposed to obscenity, that this exposure does not harm them) for which no evidence is advanced, no studies are cited, no linguists are quoted

A CALL TO ARMS MAKING OUR VOICES HEARD

I suspect the reason for linguists' silence on these issues is that we have no hard data, these questions have not been ones that linguists have chosen to study ⁶ Nor am I suggesting that we have been negligent in this regard, some of the points being raised are silly and trivial If we prove that many eight-year-olds have potty mouths, what will we have gained (except causing their parents unnecessary shame)? Rather, we need to point out the assumptions implicit in the media's arguments, and show the inherent contradictions, the nonsensical nature of some of the concerns they are raising Although we have a responsibility to provide informed opinions on subjects of interest to the general public, we can and should take advantage of this interest to alter the course of the discussion The reason linguists are not voicing their opinions is that the current debate is not one we can (or want to) resolve, if linguists had a voice, however, the conversation would be a substantially different one Getting back into this discussion will not be easy, as no one is asking our opinion, but we must actively seek to join in so that we can raise other questions, ones we might want to answer, that address the underlying concerns Why are words for body parts and bodily functions considered taboo? How should we approach the topic of taboo language with our children? How can a word hurt anybody/anything? Is it the word itself, or how the word is being used (e g , hurting somebody as opposed to expressing one's frustration or strong feelings, expressing disrespect as opposed to attempting to shock, etc)? How might the language we

⁶ Timothy Jay's excellent (1992) book, Cursing in America, examines taboo language in both public and private spheres, but does not explicitly study usage by children or the effects upon children of such usage

acquire as infants and the common patterns of discourse we hear all around us affect the way we look at the world?

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