

Banter - or just plain rude. It depends on the situation

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

We hear quite a lot about banter these days, especially in sporting contexts. A footballer may complain that an opponent has said something insulting to them. The opponent's defence is that what was said was not intended as an insult, it was "just banter".

Probably all cultures employ banter, but it seems that some cultures use it more than others. It's certainly very common in British society, and some people reckon that it's more common amongst men than amongst women. A difference between cultures might explain why misunderstandings can occur in our multi-ethnic English Premier League.

The late Geoffrey Leech, who was Professor of English Linguistics at Lancaster University, provided some important insights into banter. He pointed out that, in social interaction involving language, a number of principles are understood by everybody to be in operation. One of these is the Banter Principle.

Banter is mock-impoliteness. It's a way of stressing group solidarity. The Banter Principle is based on the following idea: We are good friends so we don't need to be polite to one another. If I insult you, you will understand that it's a joke,



■ Banter or rudeness? Your colleagues may have different takes on that. Picture: THINKSTOCK/PA

which will prove what good friends we are.

But it can go further than that. Because the only people you can be rude to without giving offence are people who you like and respect, then by extension you might be rude to someone you don't know very well in order to show that you like and respect them... On the surface, banter is offensive, but deep down it signals friendship.

This extension generally works well here, where the Banter Principle is well understood, but I know from personal experience that there are parts of the USA where people don't get it and think you're just being rude. They don't perceive the "mock" bit of mock impoliteness, even if you are smiling.

Another of Leech's insights was to point

out that there is also an Irony Principle. Irony is the opposite of banter. If banter is mock impoliteness, then irony is mock politeness. On the surface, irony is polite, but deep down it's intended to offend, or at least offer criticism. "That's right," we might say ironically to someone who's supposed to be working, "you have a nice rest!"

The Banter Principle counterpart of that would be to say to someone who has been working flat out for 14 hours "Taking things easy today then are you?"

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■ Prof Trudgill's latest book is **Dialect Matters: Respecting Vernacular Language**, a collection of his EDP columns, published by Cambridge University Press.