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Linguistic Anger Management – Using Verbal Irony in Complaint Letters

Who has not experienced the following: Holiday has been looked forward to or a new longed-for item has been anticipated, but on arriving, reality does not live up to expectations. In order to give vent to one's disappointment and anger, one writes a letter of complaint. This, in itself, is nothing special. However, in using verbal irony, a few people manage to voice their discontentment in an outstanding way, which makes reading those letters an enjoyable task. It is my contention to show that using verbal irony in complaint letters is more polite than expressing one's anger in a straightforward way. Based on Brown & Levinson's politeness theory, I argue that irony does not threaten a person's face as much as direct insults do. Furthermore, Culpeper's impoliteness theory is looked at in order to show that the constitution of a face-threatening act does not depend on the intentions of the author but rather on what is stated in the letter. It is, therefore, the reader's interpretation which is crucial for how insulting and face-threatening the complaint letter is. An example analysis of such a complaint letter will be given during the presentation as well as input for further research.