



Editorial

Approaching conversational humour culturally: A survey of the emerging area of investigation



A B S T R A C T

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Conversational humour
 Intracultural research
 Intercultural research
 Cross-cultural research

This introductory article gives a state-of-the-art picture of the research on conversational humour in cultural contexts. The most important categories of conversational humour are briefly introduced, followed by an overview of the existing research on conversational humour within and across languages and cultures. The focus is both on topical strands and on the prevalent methodological approaches. The paper closes with a summary of the contributions to this Special Issue.

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1. Introduction

Albeit nowadays eclipsed by novel technologically facilitated forms of humour, such as *Internet memes* (see [Dynel, 2016a](#) and references therein), *canned jokes* are regarded as the prototypical category of humour. It is on them that the traditional humour theories appear to have been based, from classical philosophy to modern developments. The seminal theoretical studies in philosophy, linguistics and psychology deem humour (or any of its specific categories) an allegedly universal phenomenon which evinces the same mechanisms and characteristics across languages and cultures (e.g. [Suls, 1972](#); [Raskin, 1985](#); [Attardo, 1994](#)). However, much ink has also been spilt on canned jokes in the context of different languages and cultures primarily in sociology and ethnography (e.g. [Kuipers, 2006](#)), including comparative cross-cultural studies (e.g. [Davies, 1990, 1998, 2002](#)). Specific forms and sources of humour typifying different kinds of sense of humour also known as “taste-cultures” (see [Kuipers, 2006](#)) have been addressed in edited volumes on Jewish humour ([Ziv and Zajdman, 1993](#)), Chinese humour ([Chey and Milner Davis, 2011](#); [Milner Davis and Chey, 2013](#)), Japanese humour ([Milner Davis, 2005](#)), or Polish humour ([Brzozowska and Chłopicki, 2012](#)).

Although canned jokes can be interwoven into conversations, a distinction may be drawn between (canned) jokes and *conversational humour* ([Kotthoff, 1999](#); see [Dynel, 2009, 2011a](#)), which is also sometimes called “humour in interaction” (e.g. [Norrick and Chiaro, 2009](#)). The latter term may be considered a broader category encompassing all manner of humorous forms (e.g. comic strips, humorous cartoons, pranks, or Internet memes) studied from an interactional perspective, with attention being paid to the production and reception ends. Conversational humour, more specifically, encompasses a wide array of verbal behaviours that occur in conversation, whether written or spoken, face-to-face or computer-mediated, private or mass-mediated.

Recent years have seen an influx of data-driven studies on conversational humour, some being devoted specifically to chosen linguistic and cultural contexts. This research boasts a full spectrum of topics and methodologies, further enriching the already diversified scholarship on humour.

This introductory chapter aims to shed some light on conversational humour and on the burgeoning field of investigation into such humour within and across languages and cultures. The article is organised into seven sections. Section 2 gives an overview of categories of conversational humour. Sections 3, 4 and 5 address the studies on conversational humour in the

context of its cultural specificity. Attention is thus paid to *intracultural*, i.e. single-culture, *intercultural* and *cross-cultural* scholarship on humour. Even though in the relevant research so far, there seems to have been no clear-cut distinction made between *intercultural* and *cross-cultural* communication, here we do differentiate between the two. While cross-cultural communication refers primarily to comparative or contrastive studies of native speakers' interactions within their own cultural contexts, intercultural communication brings together participants from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and the focus of analysis is their interaction in a common language (see Harris and Bargiela-Chiappini, 1997, p. 6; Kecskes, 2016). Section 6 surveys the methodological approaches found in the existing research. The article closes with a succinct presentation of the contributions to this Special Issue.

2. Conversational humour and its forms

Numerous categories of conversational humour have been distinguished over the past few decades. Researchers usually address isolated notions, sometimes giving them new labels, and frequently present chosen concepts (and hence labels) as being interdependent and/or quoting research that is based on terminology markedly different from their own. Consequently, the scopes of the different phenomena frequently overlap (fully or in part), which is why they can hardly be presented in the form of a taxonomy. Moreover, one label may pertain to markedly different phenomena, as epitomised by the vexing category of *teasing*, which has been variously defined in the context of its aggressive/face-threatening potential, as well as its solidarity-building function (e.g., Bateson, 1972; Drew, 1987; Pawluk, 1989; Alberts, 1992; Norrick, 1993; Alberts et al., 1996; Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Keltner et al., 1998; Tholander and Aronsson, 2002; Partington, 2006; Geyer, 2010; Haugh, 2010; Dynel, 2011b; Sinkeviciute, 2013). Traditionally, it is viewed as involving feigned hostility and real friendliness (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940). On various accounts, teasing carries ostensible aggression or face-threat which is not genuine and should be perceived as promoting, or testifying to, the speaker's rapport and solidarity with the hearer, based on what Bateson (1972) calls "this is play metamessage" (see Straehle, 1993; Dynel, 2011b). Teasing is thus frequently conceptualised as being primarily *jocular*, *playful* or *non-serious* (see Sinkeviciute, 2013, 2016).

This definition of teasing is essentially compatible with what Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997) view as "nipping"¹, which involves overtly pretended aggression, and should not be mistaken for teasing in the form of "biting", in which verbal aggression is only slightly mitigated. In either case, even aggressive teasing tends to serve bonding (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; see also Schnurr, 2009; Schnurr and Chan, 2011; Haugh and Bousfield, 2012). However, Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997, p. 279) also assert that while some teasing tends to bond, with or without "nipping" and "biting" (genuine aggression), other teasing "bites" and does not bond at all. There are also other claims which may be taken to mean that some genuine aggression is involved in teasing, such as that "the first element of teasing is a face-threatening act" (Keltner et al., 1998, p. 1232), or that it is "an interactionally delicate social action, which appears to be both face threatening and face enhancing" (Geyer, 2010, p. 1220). Alberts et al. (1996, p. 340) aver that teasing centres "the truthfulness of the insult". In this vein, evidence is adduced in favour of a view that teasing disguises genuine aggression, among intimates or among interlocutors in relationships showing power imbalance (see Eisenberg, 1986; Straehle, 1993; Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997).

A question arises as to whether humour which "bites" but does not bond should actually be technically conceptualised as teasing (see Keltner et al., 2001; Dynel, 2011b). Instead, humorous but genuinely aggressive utterances may be classed as a distinct notion: *disaffiliative humour* (see Dynel, 2013a and references therein), i.e. a conversational species of *disparaging* humour, which encompasses also other forms not coinciding with conversational humour (e.g. Zillmann, 1983; Ford and Ferguson, 2004). In order to be distinguishable from disaffiliative humour, teasing essentially needs to be benevolent even if a serious and potentially aggressive message should be communicated as well (see Holmes and Schnurr, 2005; Kotthoff, 2007; Schnurr, 2009; Schnurr and Holmes, 2009; Sinkeviciute, 2016). Disaffiliative humour may be an adequate label to capture conversational humour that centres on denigrating the target/butt, frequently in front of other participants in an interaction, who reap humorous rewards, together with the speaker. Therefore, this blanket term will encompass notions such as humorous *sarcasm* (e.g. Partington, 2006) or *putdowns* (Zillmann and Stocking, 1976; but see Lennox Terrion and Ashforth, 2002, who seem to equate putdown humour with playful teasing).

Teasing is very close to, and sometimes explicitly presented as encompassing, *jocular mockery* (e.g. Haugh, 2010, 2014; Haugh and Bousfield, 2012). In jocular mockery, the speaker "jocularly" and "non-seriously" imitates or makes fun of another individual, which may be meant and/or interpreted as playful and friendly or truly aggressive (Haugh, 2010, 2014). *Jocular abuse* is another similar concept presented as a category of teasing (e.g. Hay, 1994, 2002; Haugh and Bousfield, 2012). Jocular abuse appears to have its roots in the well-recognised notion of *ritual abuse*, which serves solidarity building in certain communities of practice (Abrahams, 1962). Haugh and Bousfield (2012, p. 1108) define jocular abuse as "a specific form of insulting where the speaker casts the target into an undesirable category or as having undesirable attributes using a conventionally offensive expression within a non-serious or jocular frame." This is juxtaposed with the cases of genuine abuse or insults, which are truly meant (e.g. Hay, 2002; Sinkeviciute, 2015). What makes all these distinctions even more problematic is that frequently there is no way of knowing what the speaker's intentions really are and how much aggression is

¹ In their often quoted paper, Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997) propose that teasing, contrasted with joking (even though their terminology does not seem to be consistent), operates on a continuum ranging from "biting" to "nipping" and "bonding". This tenet, albeit very frequently referred to in the literature, does not seem to be clearly conceptualised. The three notions should not be seen as being mutually exclusive, as the authors also concede.

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