Joint fantasising as relational practice in Brazilian Portuguese interactions

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ABSTRACT

Joint fantasising involves the (co-)construction of imaginary worlds with their own local logic. An analysis of instances of joint fantasising identified in a corpus of recordings of over eighteen hours of ordinary mundane talk amongst Brazilian speakers of Portuguese revealed that participants very often act out fantasy persona through various forms of voicing in the course of such sequences. In doing so they co-constitute relational connection (and in some cases relational separation) with other members, as well as accomplishing interpersonally sensitive acts, including teases and complaints. Joint fantasising is thus not simply a matter of mutual entertainment or enjoyment for participants, but is also consequential for the ongoing co-constitution of their relationships.

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*'Madness is rare in individuals - but in groups,
parties, nations, and ages it is the rule'*
(Friedrich Nietzsche)

1. Introduction

There are various practices by which humour arises in interaction, ranging from jocular mockery and teasing through to humorous irony and wisecracks (Béal and Mullan, 2013; Dynel, 2009, 2011; Kotthoff, 2007; Norrick, 1993). One practice that has received somewhat less attention to date is what has variously been termed 'fantasy jamming' (Hall, 1974), 'fictional narratives' (Leary, 1980), 'collaborative play' (Davies, 1984), 'fantasy humour' (Hay, 1995, 2001), 'fantasy layering' (Clark, 1996), 'collaborative fantasy' (Norrick, 2000), 'joint fictionalisation' (Kotthoff, 1999), 'joint fantasising' (Kotthoff, 2007), 'joint fantasy' (Priego-Valverde, 2006; Bertrand and Priego-Valverde, 2011), and 'escalating absurd humour' (Béal and Mullan, 2013). While there are variations in how it is characterised by different researchers it is generally held to involve the co-construction of improbable, or even impossible, imagined scenarios or narratives, which follow their own internal logic.[1] The former is what

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[1] We have elected to use the term "joint fantasising" as the participants themselves refer to just such an episode as an instance of *fantasia* (cf. *fantasy*) in our data. And as we shall discuss later, it is always "joint" in the sense that it invariably involves not only a shared understanding of the *fantasia* in question as just that (i.e. imagined and fictional), but active participation on the part of two or more the co-present interactants to maintain that *fantasia*.

cues the valence of these co-constructed scenarios or narratives as 'non-serious', and consequently open to evaluation as being *playful*, *jocular*, *laughable* and so on. The latter is what enables such sequences to be co-constructed in a spontaneous and yet relatively fluid manner by participants. However, like language play and humour more generally, what is ostensibly framed as non-serious may nevertheless be masking sensitive or delicate social actions such as criticisms, complaints, reprimands and the like (Dynel, 2011; Emerson, 1969; Haugh, forthcoming-a; Norrick, 1993).

The fact that what appears, on the surface at least, to involve a more or less similar interactional practice has generated a relatively long list of scientific terms amongst researchers is arguably a consequence of the fact that lay participants themselves do not appear to have a specific folk linguistic term for it (Hall, 1974: 36; Kotthoff, 1999: 129).[2] It is only loosely categorised by lay participants through terms such as 'messing around' (Hall, 1974: 36), 'shooting the shit' (Leary, 1980: 289), 'fooling around' (*blödeln*) (Kotthoff, 1999: 146) and so on. Yet while it is 'seldom if ever conceptualised…as an object for discussion' by participants themselves (Hall, 1974: 36), it nevertheless involves, as Kotthoff (1999) points out, 'patterns which can be uncovered from a scientific etic perspective' (p. 129). The challenge for the analyst, then, is to reconcile a systematic scientific analysis of these patterns with an emic or insider's understanding of the 'humorous potentials' (Kotthoff, 1999: 130) of the mock proposals, claims and so on made by participants in the course of joint fantasising.

Indeed, such work has occurred in analysing joint fantasising in face-to-face spoken interactions in a number of languages, including German (Kotthoff, 1999, 2007), French (Priego-Valverde, 2003, 2006), as well as some varieties of English, including American English (Hall, 1974; Davies, 1984; Norrick, 2000), Australian English (Béal and Mullan, 2013; Haugh, forthcoming-a), and New Zealand English (Hay, 1995, 2001; Holmes and Marra, 2002), and more recently in computer-mediated settings (Chovanec, 2012; Schnurr and Rowe, 2008). Yet while such studies have brought to the fore various characteristics of instances of joint fantasising, for the most part the analyses themselves have formed only a small part of a broader study of different types of humour, with the exception of more extended discussions by Kotthoff (1999) and Priego-Valverde (2006). One consequence of this is that joint fantasising, as a pragmatic phenomena, has not yet been systematically examined from a cross-linguistic or cross-cultural perspective.

The aim of this paper is to start to address this empirical lacuna through close analysis of instances of joint fantasising identified in a corpus of recordings of over eighteen hours of ordinary mundane talk amongst speakers of Brazilian Portuguese. Our analysis focuses not only on teasing out prototypical features of episodes of joint fantasising in a language for which the pragmatics remains vastly under-studied, but on characterising both what occasions such episodes, and what it typically accomplishes in contexts where participants who would construe themselves as close friends or family members are engaged in social interaction. We draw from an interactional pragmatics perspective (Arundale, 2010; Haugh, 2010, 2012), namely, an approach to pragmatics that is informed by research and methods in ethnomethodological conversation analysis (Heritage, 1984; Sacks et al., 1974), in analysing these episodes of joint fantasising.

We begin, in the following section, by offering a brief overview of the literature to date in order to tease out characteristics of joint fantasising identified by researchers. We then describe our dataset in section three, before going on to analyse the episodes of joint fantasising that emerged in our dataset in section four. We then examine, in section five, the different forms of relational work that can be accomplished through joint fantasising. We conclude that joint fantasising is not simply a matter of mutual entertainment or enjoyment for participants, but is also consequential for the ongoing co-constitution of relationships amongst them.

2. Joint fantasising

2.1. Joint pretence

While various terms have been used to refer to sequences where participants co-construct improbable, or even impossible, imagined scenarios or narratives, what unites studies of it is that in all cases the participants are engaged in acting out some form of joint, generally quite overt, pretence.[3] In other words, they co-construct 'a fictional or imaginary world, where *x* is true' despite being fully aware that in 'the real world…*x* is false (a pretense)' (Vincent and Castelfranchi, 1981: 755). Joint fantasising thus involves participants contributing mock claims, mock proposals, mock questions, mock requests and so on in the course of jointly co-constructing the fictional or imaginary scenario or narrative in question. Clark and Van Der Wege (2001) characterise this form of 'joint pretence' as 'an activity in which two or more people jointly act as if they were doing something that they are not actually, really, or seriously doing at that moment' (p. 783). Dynel (forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b) further characterises the pretence on the part of participants in such cases as invariably 'overt' (what Vincent Marrelli [2004: 230] refers to as 'acting') as opposed to 'covert' (which constitutes an attempt to deceive). What lies at the heart of joint fantasising, then, is a shared understanding on the part of participants that the scenario or narrative they are co-constructing is not true or real. What this means is that the speaker(s) in question are not held to be committed to or accountable for the real-world consequences of what they are saying (Haugh, 2013a). In some instances there are grammatical structures that indicate the irrealis mood, such as the use of *could*, *would* and so on in English (Norrick, 2000: 131). In

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[2] At least not in the languages examined thus far by researchers.

[3] The term "joint pretence" was first used by Clark (1996), while the distinction between overt and covert pretence was first proposed by Dynel (forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b).