



The pragmatics of conversational humour in social visits: French and Australian English



Christine Béal^{a,*}, Kerry Mullan^b

^a Praxiling CNRS UMR 5267, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, Route de Mende, Montpellier 34199, France

^b RMIT University, GPO Box 2476, Melbourne, VIC 3001, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This study on conversational humour in French and Australian English investigates how speakers use humour spontaneously in naturally occurring conversations during social visits among friends. Following the four dimensional model outlined in Béal and Mullan (2013), this paper focuses on the speaker/target/recipient interplay and the various pragmatic functions of conversational humour in a number of representative examples from the two languages-cultures. For example, Australians show a marked preference for recipient-oriented humour, creating complicity with the other participants by threatening another's face for the sake of humour. French speakers on the other hand, prefer to reinforce complicity at the expense of an absent third party via third-party oriented humour.

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to compare some of the ways in which Australian and French hosts and guests use humour to interact in visits between friends. It takes place within the framework of a larger project based on two comparable corpora of naturally occurring conversations recorded during social visits in France and Australia.¹ Humour is one of the many facets of social interaction which shows how interpersonal relationships are enacted, linguistically and interactionally.

The first part of the paper is devoted to the theoretical framework, the data and the methodology: we briefly describe the background of analysing French and Australian English from a cross-cultural point of view and the specificity of analysing conversational humour from that perspective. Then we introduce our two sets of contrastive data and the model we have already developed to deal with the comparison of humour cross-culturally (Béal and Mullan, 2013). We show that the coupling of two dimensions of our model, the *speaker/target/recipient interplay* and the *pragmatic functions*, is particularly relevant to explore the social dimension of conversational humour.

The remaining sections apply this approach to the contrastive analysis of the examples found in the two corpora: first we show that self-oriented humour is used at different points and with slightly different pragmatic functions in the two languages-cultures. Secondly we show some common points and differences: in particular in relation to face-management issues; in the various examples of humour in which the target is the addressee (humour for the sake of humour, humour as a repair politeness strategy, humour in self-defence); and finally we look at the cases where humour is aimed at an absent third-party. The concluding discussion proposes an interpretative outcome.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: christine.beal@univ-montp3.fr (C. Béal), kerry.mullan@rmit.edu.au (K. Mullan).

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2. Analysing French and (Australian) English from a cross-cultural perspective

The purpose of the contrastive approach is to describe recurring discursive and interactional behaviour in two languages-cultures and the implicit norms for communication that can be inferred from these observations. Secondly, it is to link these norms to more general, underlying cultural values that give them sense in their context of culture.

There exists a sizeable body of research contrasting various French and English aspects of linguistic and discursive behaviour and linking them back to cultural norms of communication. The overall communicative style and underlying cultural values that make up the *communicative ethos* (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1994, 2002) have been described for French and Australian English by Peeters (2000) and Béal (2010). Other work has focused on how British and French speakers construct interaction through the analysis of interruptions (Guillot, 2005) and turn-initial devices (Guillot, 2012), while Mullan has worked on interactional norms and discursive markers in French and Australian English (2010). Certain ritual aspects of conversation in French and Australian English have also been described: Peeters (1999) examined greetings, and Béal and Traverso (2010) looked at openings of visits. In addition, the preferential choices for a number of speech acts have been explored in French and Australian English: expressing opinions (Mullan, 2010), disagreement (Mullan, 2012), and directive speech acts (Béal, 2010). The overall organisation of a given interaction type has been compared by Béal (1992) for small talk in France and Australia, and by Gagne (2014) for interaction in small shops in Britain and France. Hanna and de Nooy (2009) have compared discussions on public internet forums in France, Britain and Australia.

While it is difficult to sum up findings in terms of cultural differences from such a varied body of research without over-generalising, a number of recurring tendencies can be pointed out. The observation of linguistic behaviour shows that French culture puts the emphasis on speakers expressing their emotions and giving their opinion rather spontaneously, whereas Anglo-Saxon culture favours more circumspection and tact. This goes together with a different attitude towards controversy and consensus. The respect for others' autonomy is well-documented in Anglo-Saxon culture. By comparison, French interactants can often engage in behaviour, linguistic or otherwise, that can be seen as constituting a breach of territory, all in the name of sincerity, enthusiasm or familiarity. Conversely, the analysis of terms of address and politeness strategies and their use in context (Béal, 2014; Béal and Détrie, 2016) can be seen as reflecting a French society in which it is still important for people to "know what their place is".

In this study, our main aim is to describe and compare another aspect of discursive behaviour: conversational humour between friends in French and Australian contexts. As with all the previous studies, it involves collecting comparable data suitable for the chosen objectives.

3. The specificity of analysing humour from a cross-cultural perspective

Holmes and Marra (2002b: 67) define humour in conversation as 'utterances which are identified on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discursive clues, as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some of the participants'. From this definition, it appears already that conversational humour is different from many other discursive phenomena in that it can be "superimposed" on almost any type of interaction. Conversely, it cannot be clearly isolated as an activity or a genre:

'Si l'on considère qu'un genre dépend d'un dispositif de situation communicationnelle, l'humour n'en est pas un. En effet, aucune situation de communication ne prédétermine une prise de parole humoristique; celle-ci peut surgir dans n'importe quelle situation.' (Vivero Garcia and Charaudeau, 2015: 44). (If one assumes that a genre can be defined in terms of a specific participation framework, then humour clearly does not qualify. No particular context of communication can be said to predetermine the emergence of humorous utterances; the latter can arise in almost any situation.)

This in itself is one of the challenges of analysing conversational humour because it means that it is spontaneous, context-bound and not "reusable". It is even more of a challenge from a cross-cultural point of view since it makes it harder to control the variables that ensure comparability.

A large portion of the research on humour in conversation focuses on the analysis of what makes a particular utterance or exchange funny: it consists of bringing to light the kind of linguistic and/or discursive strategies that produce the intended effect. For Vivero Garcia and Charaudeau (2015: 44), it is most important to separate the '*procédés*' (devices/mechanisms) from the '*effets de connivence suscités*' ('the kind of collusion/rapport that is created between the participants'). This is made difficult by the folk taxonomy of humour which puts very different characteristics on an equal footing: *word play* and *tease* are considered two different categories of humour, yet *word play* is a linguistic device whereas a *tease* is best defined by its interactive impact. Other folk categories of humour may be based on yet different characteristics as we showed extensively in a previous paper (Béal and Mullan, 2013): the target, the kind of topic, the characteristic of the delivery etc. This means that there is no single external yardstick by which one could classify and compare the different categories of humour. This difficulty has led many researchers to create their own labels in an effort to meet the needs of their particular field of investigation (cf. discussion in Béal and Mullan, 2013: 114). Others have tried to develop models that focus on wider, more general parameters: Biardzka (2013) proposes a typology of humour based on the various components of Jakobson's model for communication, ending up with categories such as *humour expressif*, *humour conatif*, *humour inférentiel*, *humour poétisant* (expressive humour, conative humour, inferential humour, poetic humour) etc. With none of the above models being easily applicable to our purposes, we found ourselves developing our own model (see below).

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