Language & Communication 55 (2017) 55–68

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language & Communication

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

Ethnopragmatic perspectives on conversational humour, with special reference to Australian English

Cliff Goddard

Griffith University, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 10 January 2017

Keywords:
Humour concepts
Cultural scripts
Lexical semantics
Ethnopragmatics
NSM

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the ethnopragmatic approach allows humour researchers both to access the "insider perspectives" of native speakers and to ward off conceptual Anglocentrism. It begins with a semantic inquiry into the word 'laugh', a plausible lexical universal and an essential anchor point for humour studies. It then demonstrates how the two main modes of ethnopragmatic analysis, semantic explication and cultural scripts, can be applied to selected topics in conversational humour research. Semantic explications are proposed for three English specific "humour concepts": 'funny', 'amusing', and 'humour'. Cultural scripts are proposed for "jocular abuse", "deadpan jocular irony" and "jocular deception" in Australian English. The semantic explications and cultural scripts are composed using simple, cross-translatable words.

1. Introduction

This paper has dual goals: empirical-analytical on the one hand, theoretical-methodological on the other. It argues that the analytical techniques of ethnopragmatics (Wierzbicka, 2003; Goddard, 2006b; Goddard and Ye, 2015) allow researchers into conversational humour to access the "insider perspectives" or "participant orientations" of native speakers, while at the same time reducing the dangers of terminological and conceptual Anglocentrism. The paper begins with a discussion of the semantics of the word *laugh*, which, it is argued, has a plausible claim to being a lexical universal or near-universal and thus provides the most promising starting point for developing a non-Anglocentric conceptual framework for humour studies. It goes on to demonstrate how the two main modes of ethnopragmatic analysis, namely, semantic explication and cultural scripts (both formulated in simple, cross-translatable words and grammar) can be applied to selected topics of high importance to conversational humour research. Semantic explications are proposed for three key English-specific "humour concepts": the adjectives *funny* and *amusing*, and the noun *humour* itself. As for cultural scripts, the paper seeks to demonstrate their value to the study of conversational humour by proposing cultural scripts for three characteristic speech practices of Australian English, which in conventional parlance could be described as "jocular abuse", "deadpan jocular irony" and "jocular deception".

1.1. The pursuit of an insider perspective and the problem of terminology

Some approaches to social interaction make no real attempt to capture, represent or understand what is happening from the point of view of the participants themselves. Rather, they seek to describe interactions, extract generalizations and test

E-mail address: c.goddard@griffith.edu.au.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2016.09.008
0271-5309/

hypotheses in frames and terms that derive from social psychology, universalist pragmatics, or the like. Some linguists employ the term "etic grids" to designate such putatively universal frameworks of description. Though such approaches may yield interesting and potentially valuable results, they can be fairly characterised as adopting an "outsider perspective".

Set against such approaches (though not, ultimately, irreconcilable with them) are various research traditions which place high priority on understanding what is going on from the point of view of the people concerned. These traditions seek what anthropologists sometimes term an "insider" or "emic" perspective". They include (with highly selective references) the Hymesian ethnography of communication tradition and recent developments from it such as Cultural Discourse Analysis (Carbaugh, 2005, 2007), interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982), interactional pragmatics (Haugh, 2009, 2014), varieties of ethnolinguistics (Underhill, 2012; Peeters ed., 2015 [1]), cultural linguistics (Sharifian, 2015), some strands of cross-cultural pragmatics and ethnopragmatics (Wierzbicka, 2003; Béal and Mullan, 2013; Goddard, 2006a; Goddard and Ye, 2015; Levisen, 2012).

All these approaches face several problems in which issues of terminology, methodology and epistemology are intertwined. How can the insiders' perspectives (orientations, shared understandings, social cognitions, etc.) be faithfully and authentically depicted if the descriptive terms and categories employed by the analyst are far removed from the insiders' own ways of speaking? If the local categories and ways of speaking of a given linguaculture are highly language-specific, i.e. resistant to translation, how can their meanings be described so as to be accessible to people from other languages and cultures? Given that English is increasingly the global lingua franca of science, what can be done to ensure that English-specific terms and categories are not reified, naturalised, and treated as culture-neutral?

What makes ethnopragmatics distinctive is that it has faced these problems squarely and developed solutions based on research findings about simple cross-translatable words. Ethnopragmatics uses two analytical tools, both of which will be illustrated in this study: semantic explications and cultural scripts. Semantic explications are explanatory paraphrases of word meanings (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014). Semantic explications enable us to access insider understandings of words and expressions and to present them in the form of cross-translatable paraphrases. Cultural scripts are representations of cultural norms, attitudes and tacit understandings (Wierzbicka, 2002a, 2003, 2015; Goddard, 2009b). Cultural scripts are about shared understandings and expectations. Obviously not everyone in a given discourse community necessarily agrees with or conforms to such shared understandings, but the claim is that they are a kind of interpretive backdrop to everyday interaction. They too can be formulated in simple cross-translatable words.

1.2. The semantic basis of ethnopragmatic methodology

The analytical tools of ethnopragmatics are based on findings of a decades-long program of cross-linguistic semantic research by linguists in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) program (Wierzbicka, 1996; Goddard, 2012a; Peeters, 2006; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2002; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014).[2] This research has led to the development of a metalanguage of simple cross-translatable words, i.e. words which appear to have exact or nearly exact equivalents in all languages and which, furthermore, can be combined according to a well-specified grammar that also appears to work in all or most languages. Examples include noun-like words such as 'someone', 'something/thing', 'people', 'place', 'time', and 'words'; verb-like words such as 'want', 'say', 'think', 'feel', 'do', and 'happen'; and words for temporal and logical relations such as 'before', 'after', 'if' and 'because'. See Appendix A for the full list of 65 semantic primes. We do not have space here to discuss the grammar of the NSM metalanguage, but it is important to note that many semantic primes can appear in several different grammatical frames. In English NSM, many of these frames involve grammatical function words, typically prepositions (e.g. in expressions such as 'say something to someone', 'be with someone', 'feel something good towards someone'). The semantic metalanguage also allows use of portmanteau expressions such as 'often' (= at many times) and 'sometimes' (= at some times).

As well as semantic primes, which are the ultimate bedrock of linguistic meaning, evidence suggests that a smallish number of more complex meanings (perhaps 60–80 in number) appear in all or most languages of the world (Goddard, 2012a, in press/2016). These include biosocial meanings such as 'men', 'women', and 'children'; body-part words like 'hands', 'mouth', and 'eyes'; physical descriptors like 'long', 'round', 'hard', and 'sharp'; environmental words like 'sky', 'ground', 'water' and 'fire'; some verbs, such as 'hold', 'kill', and 'make', and others. Because these apparently universal or near-universal meanings play a role, alongside semantic primes, as the "building blocks" of yet more complex meanings, they are known as semantic molecules (and are marked in explications with the notation [m]). The concept of semantic molecules is particularly relevant to "conversational humour" because some molecules, notably 'laugh' and 'play' are arguably central to the constitution of "humour-related" concepts. In section 2, we take up the semantics of 'laugh'.

As mentioned, the ethnopragmatic approach uses the metalanguage of simple cross-translatable words in two modes of formal analysis – semantic explications and cultural scripts. Both of these modes of analysis attempt to capture or model "insider understandings". Using a simple, standardized metalanguage as a tool for cross-cultural exploration of conversational humour brings several other advantages as well. It affords a high degree of semantic resolution and precision, it helps cut through the terminological obscurity that hampers so much scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, and by

[1] Ethnolinguistics (specifically, applied ethnolinguistics) as advocated by Bert Peeters in numerous publications overlaps substantially with ethnopragmatics, as expounded here (see Peeters, 2015, and references therein). Both frameworks rest on NSM semantics.

[2] Additional resources are online at the NSM Homepage hosted by Griffith University [short URL: bit.ly/1XUoRRV].