

Interactional humour and spontaneity in TV documentaries

Jan Chovanec



Department of English and American Studies, Masaryk University, Faculty of Arts, Arna Nováka 1, 60200 Brno, Czech Republic

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Abstract

This article investigates spontaneous humour-related phenomena in TV documentary, arguing that their presence helps to overcome the scripted nature of the genre. Focusing on the diegetic level of interaction between the presenter and other individuals present in the scene, the analysis traces how the interlocutors achieve mutual in-tune-ness that is necessary for setting up the play frame. It pays attention to several humour-related phenomena, including non-humorous laughter, joint joking and physical pranks. The findings indicate that while laughter can alleviate tension associated with face-threat or personal failure, other forms of humour emerge in the diegetic frame as part of the programme producers' design to divert from the transactional mode of factual television to a more entertaining hybrid format based on a significant experiential component. As a result, TV viewers do not simply receive information but derive pleasure from the playful spontaneity performed for their benefit by the presenter and other interlocutors.

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1. Introduction

The communication in many factual, non-fictional TV genres is predominantly transactional with only occasional shifts towards a more interpersonal engagement between the interlocutors. TV documentaries are among the types of factual broadcasting that are centrally focused on the presentation of factual information through the expository mode. It might seem that there is little potential for the presence of humour in a genre such as this, but in view of the general trend towards infotainment in the media, the opposite is actually true. In this paper, I address one specific format of the documentary characterised by its experiential dimension. This means that the presenter is involved in a discovery procedure or the performance of some tasks, and has to interact with other interlocutors – typically experts. Various forms of interactional humour may appear in such programmes in order to increase the spontaneity of the interactions and to overcome the scriptedness of the programmes' content.

Based on data from the British TV documentary series *How Britain Worked*, the analysis in this article documents several occurrences of humour emerging between the presenter and various other individuals. This involves both unintentional humour and intentional humorous acts. Concerning unintentional humour-related phenomena, I analyze situations of laughter, including non-humorous laughter (Morreall, 1983), which may help the interlocutors overcome momentary problems and express positive emotions. As regards intentional humorous acts identified in the data, those take the form of non-verbal physical humour (e.g., the performance of pranks) and various forms of verbal humour involving conversational joking, banter and teasing.

E-mail address: chovanec@phil.muni.cz.

As I argue in the discussion section of the paper, such humorous acts are characterised by several points. First, they are jointly constructed by both interlocutors after one of them – typically the presenter – initializes the play frame. Second, the brief joking episodes that the interlocutors engage in defocus from the main activity and attend to their interpersonal relations, building rapport and mutual bonding. Regardless of whether the humour is speaker-directed (as in self-denigrating utterances) or other-directed (targeting the recipient or mocking a third party), this form of affiliative bonding through humour constitutes an act of onstage performance done for the benefit of the ultimate recipients, i.e. the TV audience.

The presence of conversational humour and other humour-related phenomena in documentaries is interpreted as a strategic design of the production team to incorporate seemingly spontaneous talk in the programme and, thus, enhance the impression of authenticity. In TV documentaries, the incorporation of humour in offhand interactions is indicative of the hybridity of non-entertainment media formats where sophisticated factual content needs to be presented in an enjoyable manner without reclassifying the programme into a genre of open entertainment. This follows the trend observable across various media formats in the area of factual programming, where the simulation of liveness, immediacy and authenticity have become increasingly important. The casualness and spontaneity related to humour and laughter in TV documentaries attest to the current communicative ethos characterised by a heightened articulation of sociability in the broadcast media.

2. Analysing humour in interaction

Interactional humour in the genre of the TV documentary is located at the intersection of various situational and contextual characteristics, which partly reflect and determine the various types of interactions and styles available to the interlocutors in a given case. They involve, among others, whether the interaction is scripted or not, whether it is performed in public and/or possibly mediated, and whether it classifies as an instance of a fictional genre or not. Based on previous studies of interactional humour, we may identify the following three broad communicative situations that revolve around the concepts of scriptedness, fictionalization and mediatization: (i) unscripted authentic conversation, (ii) scripted fictional discourse, and (iii) non-fictional mediated dialogue (which can be scripted, partly scripted or non-scripted). While the concept of ‘interactional humour’ is sometimes used as an umbrella term to refer to all of them (for an overview of the field, see [Tsakona and Chovanec, 2017](#)), it is useful to tease these dimensions apart in order to appreciate some points of difference and some points of contact, as well as to establish the position of the genre of the TV documentary with respect to the existing research strands on interactional humour.

The first of these areas, spontaneous everyday conversation, is without any doubt among the most extensively researched fields in the area of the pragmatics of humour ([Norrick, 1996, 2003](#); [Dynel, 2009](#); [Norrick and Chiaro, 2009](#); [Sinkeviciute and Dynel, 2017](#)). Some of the now classic research in the conversation analytical framework has addressed issues such as laughter ([Jefferson, 1983, 2004](#)), turn-organizational principles underlying laughter ([Glenn, 1989](#)), impoliteness ([Kotthoff, 1996](#)), gender differences ([Hay, 2001](#)), identity display ([Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997](#)), mitigation of conflict ([Norrick and Spitz, 2008](#)), bonding ([Schnurr, 2009](#); [Schnurr and Chan, 2011](#)), disaffiliation and mockery ([Haugh, 2010](#)), and even humour among TV viewers ([Gerhardt, 2009](#)) and failed humour ([Bell, 2015](#)).

In the past few years, scholars have been paying increasing attention to interactional humour in the second area – scripted communication. Research has been carried out on quite diverse topics, e.g., humour and laughter in sitcoms and TV series ([Dynel, 2011a,b](#); [Messerli, 2016](#)), metaphor, irony ([Dynel, 2013](#)), audience participation ([Cain, 2013](#)), irony in real and fictional discourse ([Kapogianni, 2014](#)), and problems concerning translation of sitcoms ([Chiaro, 2005](#); [Arampatzis, 2012](#)). The unstated premise connecting the studies in this area is that they are based on fully scripted texts and situated character behaviour ([de Jongste, 2016](#)). Typically, the humour is to be appreciated on the level of the audience, with the characters seemingly unaware of the humorous nature of their performance.

A border-line between the second and the third areas consists of such inherently humorous genres as the stand-up comedy ([Rutter, 2000](#); [Lockyer and Myers, 2011](#); [Laineste, 2012](#); [Chłopicki, 2012](#)). This involves the conscious production of humour by an on-stage comedian. Many of the performances are more or less scripted and rely for their effect on the artists’ direct performance sometimes involving the audience and even hecklers ([Brock, 2015](#)). While the stand-up cannot be considered as ‘spontaneous’ (certainly not in comparison with everyday face-to-face conversation), it is a genre where the open role-play of the comedian is counterbalanced by immediacy, personal contact and (limited) interaction with the audience.

The third dimension of interactional humour involves face-to-face communication that occurs in public and mediated contexts. Concerning broadcast data, some of the humour-related research in this area has dealt with the management of laughter in live political interviews ([Eriksson, 2009](#)), humour in political talk shows ([Ekström, 2011](#)), irony in news interviews ([Weizman, 2013](#)), and the frontstage/backstage contrast in sports commentators’ talk on TV ([Chovanec, 2016a](#)). This orientation partly overlaps with some non-mediated public genres (e.g., [Tsakona, 2009](#); [Archakis and Tsakona, 2011](#)) that

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