



“It's just a bit of cultural [. . .] lost in translation”: Australian and British intracultural and intercultural metapragmatic evaluations of jocularity

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Abstract

This paper explores evaluations of attempts at humour and reactions to them by participants and non-participants in a jocular interaction. There are two levels of analysis: (1) the instigator's jocular comment and the target's reaction to it, taken from the reality television gameshow *Big Brother Australia* 2012, and (2) the Australian and British interviewees' (non-participants') intracultural (inside one's own cultural context) and intercultural (from another cultural context) evaluations of the comment and the reaction to it. It is true that jocularity in both cultural contexts is highly appreciated and tends to produce a laughing (or at least not a confrontational) reaction, which shows one's ability to laugh at oneself and not take oneself too seriously. However, there are particular differences in intracultural and intercultural evaluations. For instance, while it was noticed that the Australian interviewees tend to make culture-specific remarks about how different their own and British understanding of humour is, the British interviewees try to avoid cultural or collective references and rather focus on jocularity-related benefits in interaction.

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1. Introduction: a note on intracultural and intercultural research into humour

In the last several decades, a large number of analyses of such jocular verbal behaviours as teasing, mockery or banter in various cultural contexts have testified to an important role that jocularity plays in interactional practices. Much research into humour in interaction has been carried out in such settings as family and friends' discourse (e.g. [Alberts et al., 1996](#); [Eisenberg, 1986](#); [Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997](#); [Hay, 2000](#); [Holmes and Marra, 2002](#); [Priego-Valverde, 2006](#); [Haugh and Bousfield, 2012](#)), workplace environment ([Hay, 1994, 2000, 2002](#); [Holmes and Schnurr, 2005](#); [Holmes and Marra, 2002](#); [Plester, 2009a, 2009b](#); [Pullin, 2011](#)) as well as interactional behaviour while getting acquainted ([Haugh, 2010, 2011](#)).

It is easy to conceive of how differently jocular interactions can be conceptualised and perceived by the speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. *Intercultural* humour research, which primarily deals with interactants communicating in a lingua franca, can be divided into two main groups: non-native–non-native speakers' communication and native–non-native speakers' interactions. The former seems to be a particularly under-researched area with only a couple of studies representing it. For instance, the analysis of the data from the workplace interactions has shown that humour among non-native speakers includes witty quips, sarcasm, (self-)mockery and is used to manage power relations,

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promote solidarity and reduce distance (Pullin Stark, 2009). Furthermore, Walkinshaw's (2016) study of teasing among Asian speakers of English reveals that such verbal practices as jocular mockery, banter and jocular agreement are commonly used. In the study, it has also been observed that interactants tend to avoid causing or taking offence and their attempts at humour are produced and perceived as highly jocular.

The studies of the native–non-native speakers' communication have shown that humour can generate difficulties for both participants, especially when the situation involves culture-specific topics, but, importantly, many language learners, even at a beginner's level, can recognise and construct humorous exchanges (Davies, 2003; Bell, 2005). Interestingly, humour can also be produced by non-native speakers as a result of the lack of proficiency, in which cases they can jocularly attempt to make the native speakers responsible for difficulties in understanding a foreign language (Davies, 2003). Indeed, in native–non-native speakers' interactional situations, native speakers should be willing to accommodate their non-native interlocutors, the failure of which can result in unpleasant situations. For instance, if native speakers do not acknowledge the language learner's attempts at making a jocular contribution, s/he can feel marginalised as the other (Bell, 2006). Yet, despite different degrees of engagement in a jocular conversation, intercultural humour should not be seen as inherently problematic, but rather as a jointly constructed interactional practice (Cheng, 2003).

Another type of humour research pertinent to this analysis is *intracultural* research that illustrates native speakers' use of their language. With a few exceptions (e.g. Antonopoulou and Sifianou, 2003; Priego-Valverde, 2006; Geyer, 2010), a large proportion of such research has focused on the English-speaking cultural context. For instance, studies of conversational humour used by speakers of Australian English mainly examine the role of such interactional practices as teasing and banter in interaction (Haugh, 2010, 2011, 2014; Sinkeviciute, 2014) and suggest that those practices are recognisable and frequently used by native speakers. Furthermore, the findings also show that such verbal behaviours tend to be positively evaluated with the target seemingly not being upset or taking offence. Another significant contribution to the intracultural research into humour is related to the area of gender identity and workplace communication. The analyses reveal that the use of humour at work serves a variety of purposes, e.g. bonding and promoting solidarity (e.g. Pullin, 2011; Schnurr and Chan, 2011), but also displaying power (Schnurr, 2009), contesting colleagues (Holmes and Marra, 2002; Pullin, 2011) or making fun of someone (Holmes and Schnurr, 2005).

The existing research clearly indicates that there is lack of (1) intercultural analyses of forms of conversational humour in different cultural contexts where the same language is spoken, and (2) studies that are oriented towards possible culture-specific preferences and explanations of particular instances of humorous exchanges. These are the two areas to which this paper aims to contribute.

This analysis is based on two data sources that illustrate the use and understanding of jocularly in interaction (broadly understood here as verbal behaviour conceptualised and/or evaluated as playful and non-serious by different (non-) participants [see section 2]) in Australian and British cultural contexts. The article starts with the introduction of the two data sets (the *Big Brother* series and qualitative interviews), after which an overview of jocular verbal behaviours, especially in Australian and British cultural contexts, is presented. The main sections illustrate how the *Big Brother* participants produce and react to jocularly and how the Australian and British interviewees perceive such attempts at humour. Particularly, some differences between intracultural and intercultural evaluations of an Australian jocular practice and reactions to it are to be observed.

2. Data: interviews and reality television discourse

The data for this analysis comes from qualitative interviews carried out in Australia and the UK. The interviewees were recruited via random and snowball (chain) sampling and are all native speakers of Australian (16 interviewees) or British English (19 interviewees), either living in Australia or in the UK at the moment of interviewing, or having migrated to one of those countries from their homeland, i.e. Australia or the UK. The uniqueness of these interviews is that they were designed so that they would allow for more than one level of analysis that could be used to understand jocular interactional practices in the two cultural contexts. Every interview is based on video material from the Australian and British versions of the reality television gameshow *Big Brother* 2012. A number of the most controversial jocular episodes were selected and shown to the interviewees. It is crucial to point out that this study adopts an emic approach to data, i.e. it is not the analyst's conceptualisation of a verbal act as jocular that led to the inclusion of that particular act in the video material to be shown to the interviewees. Rather, the choice was based on the housemates' interactional behaviour. In other words, an episode was labelled as jocular if (i) in the case of a two-party interaction, the instigator explicitly placed it within a humorous frame and the target overtly evaluated it as jocular or (ii) in the case of a multi-party interaction (as the one analysed in this paper), either the instigator, with the help of various contextualisation cues, signals that it is jocular and/or the target and a majority of the third party evaluate it as such.

During the interviews, every interviewee was exposed to the same video extracts on which they were asked to give their opinion. The interviews were semi-structured with a set of pre-determined questions, primarily eliciting the

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