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ScienceDirect

Journal of Pragmatics xxx (2016) xxx–xxx

journal of
PRAGMATICS

www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

“Just kidding”: Teasing and claims to non-serious intent

Michael Haugh *

School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science, Griffith University, Nathan, Brisbane, QLD 4111, Australia

Abstract

The analysis of humour in interaction is often closely tied to the intentions of the producer in question. The notion of intent that is invoked in humour research generally involves a deontological construct, where issues of moral accountability come to the fore. In this paper, the role of claims to non-serious intent with respect to (ostensibly) jocular forms of teasing amongst speakers of English are examined in order to broaden our understanding of this deontological account of intent. Building on an analysis of the action-sequential environments in which claims to non-serious intent are made, a distinction is first made between two distinct teasing practices, jocular mockery and jocular pretence. These practices are revealed as distinct through the design of the tease itself (i.e. whether it is delivered as non-serious or serious), the sequential placement of laughter from recipients (i.e. whether it is contiguous with the tease or delayed), and what next action is made contingently relevant by a claim to non-serious intent (i.e. a return to serious talk or laughter). It is subsequently claimed that claims to non-serious intent are not only sequentially implicative, but morally implicative as well, given such claims revolve around the degree to which producers may be legitimately held accountable for the potentially serious implications of the tease in question, and the degree to which recipients are licensed to take offence. The moral work associated with claims to non-serious intent include pre-empting or blocking the taking of offence in response to the tease, acknowledging a possible impropriety, sanctioning a recipient for taking things too seriously, and disputing the appositeness of the claim to non-serious intent itself. It is concluded that claiming non-serious intent is sequentially and morally implicative, and so constitutes a situated social action in and of itself, and that an analysis of the interpersonal implications of teasing, including the interactional accomplishment of interpersonal evaluations, participant identities and relationships, requires careful attention be directed accordingly. The implications of this first order, discursive account of *intent* for technical, second accounts of cognition-for-interaction are also briefly considered.

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Keywords: Teasing; Jocular mockery; Intention; Interactional pragmatics; Australian English; American English

1. Introduction

Defining humour is a complex and challenging task for researchers (Hatch and Erlich, 1993:506; Schnurr, 2010). In studying conversational humour, the focus has generally been on identifying various paralinguistic, prosodic and discursive clues (Holmes, 2000:163) through which “participant(s) *signal* amusement to one another” (Mullany, 2004:21, emphasis added). There is also been a distinction made between intentional humour, on the one hand, which may be either “successful” or “unsuccessful”, and “unintended” humour (Mullany, 2004; see also Bell, 2015). In these ways, then, the analysis of humour in interaction has been closely tied to the intentions of the producer in question.

However, making inferences about the likely or plausible intentions of participants is not an activity that is limited to professional analysts of humour. Participants may also orient to issues of perceived intent when engaging in various forms of conversational humour. It has long been recognised by researchers that inferences about “humorous intent” may well

* Tel.: +61 7 3735 5150.

E-mail address: m.haugh@griffith.edu.au.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2015.12.004>

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be negotiated by participants in the course of interaction (Attardo, 1994:308). This is a result of the way in which the cues to talk as non-serious may be somewhat ambivalent leading participants to question “is this play? (Bateson, 1955; Sacks, 1972), and the way in which non-serious frames may be “laminated” together with serious frames of interpretation (Goffman, 1979). The phenomenon of teasing and its relationship to humour is a case in point. Teasing is generally understood to involve combining elements of (ostensible) provocation with (ostensible) non-seriousness, including being framed as playful or jocular (Drew, 1987; Haugh, 2014). Yet given the potential for teasing to be construed as aggressive or hostile, a point well noted by social psychologists (e.g. DiCioccio, 2010; Kowalski, 2000; Wright and Roloff, 2013), attributing intentions can prove critical for those participants (Kruger et al., 2006). As de Jongste (2013) points out, however, acknowledging that humorous intent can be negotiated leaves somewhat open the question of what do we as scholars of humour actually mean by “intention”?

For the most part it seems a lay or folk sense of *intend* or *intention* (Gibbs, 1999:19–22; Knobe, 2003; Malle, 2004) is being invoked by humour researchers. This leads to a treatment of intended humour as goal-oriented or strategic (i.e. done to achieve something) and deliberate (i.e. done with awareness of the implications of what one is doing or saying) (Holmes, 2000), while unintended humour is regarded as non-deliberate and non-strategic (Mullany, 2004).¹ It also leads us as analysts to divide humour into instances that are successful (i.e. where the humorous intent of the producer is realised) and unsuccessful (e.g. where the humorous intent of the producer is not recognised, understood, or appreciated) (Hay, 2001). Yet given humour often involves ambiguity or ambivalence with regards to the producer’s intentions (Dynel, 2011), participants may legitimately deny any “serious” reading of these intentions, while still allowing serious meanings to be implicated or at least to remain inferable (Attardo, 1994; Bell, 2015; Dynel, 2009, 2011; Haddington, 2011; Kane et al., 1977; Norrick, 1993; Partington, 2006).

While the notion of intention is often linked in pragmatics and beyond with the (perceived) cognitive reality of participants (Wedgwood, 2011), then, in research about conversational humour the focus, albeit largely implicit and unvoiced, has primarily been on intention as a *discursive* construct, that is, as involving “evaluations by others of the speaker’s awareness of the implications of what he is saying or doing, and/or evaluations of what the speaker is aiming to do through the utterance (or behaviour more broadly)” (Haugh, 2012:168). A discursive perspective conceptualises intention as a *deontological* construct, where issues of moral accountability, as well as the interactional work that can be accomplished through such moral claims, come to the fore (Edwards, 2008; Haugh, 2008, 2013; Haugh and Jaszczolt, 2012:109–111). This includes, for instance, attempts to retract serious implications of humour through disclaimers (Kane et al., 1977; Norrick, 1993), or laminating non-seriousness on to a previously serious comment in order to “recontextualise it as ambiguous” (Haddington, 2011; see also Holt, 2013). It thus demands an account of cognition-for-interaction that addresses such dynamics (Arundale, 2008; Deppermann, 2012; de Jongste, 2013; Gibbs, 2012; cf. Levinson, 2006).

Recent studies by Haddington (2011) as well as Skalicky et al. (2015) illustrate the kinds of interactional work that can be accomplished through participants signalling non-serious intent. Haddington (2011), for instance, examines the interactional functions of the phrase *vitsi vitsi* (‘joke-joke’) in everyday Finnish interactions using conversation analysis. He suggests that the ‘joke-joke’ expression can be used in teasing and overstatements to: (1) undertake repair, (2) disclaim and disaffiliate from one’s immediately prior stance in order to retrospectively recontextualise it as ambiguously (non-)serious, and (3) to promote “mutual affiliation and agreement” (p. 151). Skalicky et al. (2015), on the hand, identified and coded four key functions of “just kidding” and related expressions, drawing from a corpus-assisted analysis of 1200 instances of such expressions in humorous interactions amongst American speakers of English. These included (1) “inoculation”, the pre-emptive use of disclaimers to forestall negative reactions, (2) “repair of failed humour” through “naming” the prior utterance as a joke subsequent to an attempt at humour or play not being recognised, understood, or appreciated, (3) making a bid to “return to serious”, that is, a return to a serious or non-playful frame of talk subsequent to a joking sequence, and (4) “setting up new joke”, that is, subverting the expectations of other participants through use of disclaimers to launch extensions of the previous joke (Skalicky et al., 2015:23–27). While the most commonly coded function was found to be pre-emptive use of the disclaimer inoculation, they argued that such expressions can serve multiple pragmatic functions.

Both of these studies nicely illustrate that the interactional work accomplished by claims to non-serious intent goes beyond simply repairing misunderstood or unappreciated humour. What is less readily apparent, however, is the way in which such disavowals or disclaimers actually accomplish “mutual affiliation and agreement” (Haddington, 2011:151), or “inoculate the speaker against any negative reaction” (Skalicky et al., 2015:23), in the first place. Such an account, it is suggested here, requires us to consider the inherently moral nature of claims to non-serious intent, and how this underpinning morality intersects with the different forms of humour that may be involved in such episodes.

The aim of this paper is thus to build on these prior analyses in further exploring the role of claims to non-serious intent with respect to (ostensibly) jocular forms of teasing amongst speakers of English. Drawing from close interactional

¹ There may, of course, be instances of faux unintended humour, which are ostensibly non-deliberate and thus covertly strategic, and other variations therein, a point touched upon by Bell (2015) when discussing instances of “anti-humour” (p. 36).

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