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Candidates' humour and the construction of co-membership in job interviews

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we draw on audio-recordings of authentic job interviews to explore the various ways in which candidates use humour to establish, confirm or claim co-membership with the recruiter. We not only analyze whether these humorous comments are successful, but also how candidates use humour to construct various identities. We found that the humorous comments are all oriented to the construction of personalized – instead of professional – identities and that their success could be related to the various discourse types in which they occur. Overall, humour may contribute to the construction of multi-dimensional identities for candidates.

1. Introduction

Job interviews are a primary tool for personnel selection in a vast majority of organizations (Kirkwood and Ralston, 1999). It is thus perhaps not surprising that they have attracted the interest of researchers across different disciplines. Since the 1960s, researchers in the fields of applied psychology and organizational sciences have developed an interest in job interviews, and have, for example, attempted to test the reliability and validity of various interview methods in order to improve selection tools and criteria (see e.g. Dunnette, 1962; Palacios et al., 1966). However, most of these studies tend to be based on post hoc questionnaires (e.g. Ugbah and Majors, 1992), simulated job interviews (e.g. Wong and Phooi-Ching, 2000), or data obtained through experimental research designs (e.g. Purkiss et al., 2006). Only relatively recently have scholars begun to explore authentic job interviews. Building on the early work of Gumperz (1992) on job interviews in intercultural situations, discourse analysts have attempted to tease out the interactional processes in job interviews, and recent studies have, for instance, analysed the influence of gender (Reissner-Roubicek, 2012), ethnicity (Campbell and Roberts, 2007), and language skills (Roberts, 2013) on the negotiation of meaning in these interactions. In this article, we will adopt such a discourse analytical approach to explore the role of humour in job interviews.

The topic of humour in the workplace has also received considerable attention from scholars across disciplines, including psychology, organizational behavior, business and leadership studies, sociology, anthropology, and discourse analysis (e.g. Barsoux, 1996; Westwood and Rhodes, 2007; Plester and Sayers, 2007; Martin, 2001; Schnurr, 2009a). In addition to the numerous beneficial functions that humour may perform in a workplace context (for an overview see Schnurr, 2014), humour is also an excellent means to assist interlocutors in processes of identity construction (e.g. Richards, 2006; Schnurr, 2009b). In

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line with much of this research on humour and identity construction in the professional domain, we take a social constructionist stance and understand identities as emergent, fluid, and dynamic processes that are co-constructed and negotiated among interlocutors as an interaction unfolds (e.g. Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Schnurr and Van De Mieroop, 2017).

Questions of identity construction and negotiation are, of course, also particularly relevant in job interviews because in these encounters candidates tend to try to present themselves in the best possible way, and equally, recruiters have a strong interest in portraying themselves (and their company) positively to attract the candidates' interest. Importantly though, these often relatively explicit attempts at constructing specific identities are not constrained to the candidates demonstrating their expertise and experience in a particular field, but also include attempts at showing that they are a likable person and would 'fit' in the organization where they are applying for a job. The candidates thus not only work on establishing their professional, expert identities, but they also construct specific social identities at the same time. Some of these identities are shared with the recruiter, and, as we illustrate below, candidates often highlight their co-membership with the recruiter on the basis of shared features (e.g. ethnicity, gender), background (e.g. geographical origin) or interests (e.g. hobbies) (Erickson and Shultz, 1982: 17; see also Kerekes, 2006; Van De Mieroop et al. fc). As various studies have demonstrated (Kerekes, 2006; Lipovsky, 2008), this construction of co-membership can be essential for the candidates' success in the job interview and we argue that humour may be an important means to achieve this.

This claim is supported by various studies of workplace interactions in which humour has been described to be frequently used to signal, create and reinforce solidarity among interlocutors, and to achieve bonding and create in-group membership, while at the same time potentially excluding others (e.g. Stallone and Haugh, 2017; Holmes and Hay, 1997; Holmes and Marra, 2002; Wolfers et al., 2017). As such, successful humour (i.e. those instances that are responded to supportively (e.g. Schnurr and Chan, 2011)) may be a useful tool for candidates to construct co-membership and portray themselves in a particular way. This hypothesis is also supported by studies on candidates' humour in job interviews conducted within psychology, career development research, and organizational studies. For example, Gallaher (2010: 67) found that "using affiliative humour [by candidates] leads to higher evaluations" in the experimental set-ups that she conducted her research in; and there is also some evidence that candidates with a sense of humour are preferred over candidates who do not display this trait (Barden, 2007; Gallaher, 2010). However, if an attempt at humour fails, the speaker's claims for co-membership and a particular identity are challenged, and the assumed or intended relationship between interlocutors is questioned (see also File & Schnurr fc). Thus, employing this discursive strategy in a relatively high stakes communicative event like a job interview is also potentially 'risky' as it may backfire and thus result in face-loss and a threat to the interlocutors' relationship (e.g. Schnurr, 2009b; Bell, 2015; Barden, 2007). Because the repercussions of failed humour in job interviews could be particularly detrimental for the candidates, any attempts at humour initiated by the candidate are balancing acts in which positive and potentially negative effects of humour are weighed against each other. This paper aims to explore these balancing acts and gain insights into the ways in which candidates use humour in job interviews – in particular to establish, confirm or claim co-membership with the recruiter. We look at several instances where these attempts are successful and also where they fail, but first we describe the data from which these instances were selected.

2. Data

The data that we report on in this article consist of 26 authentic Dutch spoken job interviews, resulting in a corpus of more than 200,000 words, covering more than 17 h of recordings. The interviews were all audio-recorded between 2013 and 2016 at various blue collar and white collar workplaces, as well as in several different recruitment agencies in the north of Belgium. They were transcribed (and translated into English) using conversation analytic transcription symbols (Jefferson, 1984).

It is important to note that in our analyses, we only focus on the local success of the candidates' humour, but we do not consider the candidates' global success (i.e. whether they were offered the job). One reason for this decision is that 'success' may have quite different implications depending on the specific interview type. For instance, in the case of the interviews taking place at recruitment agencies, this is often just a first step in the recruitment process and the final outcome can be extremely varied. Moreover, 'success' may not always be related to a successful interview, as there were a few cases in our data where a candidate got the job even though the recruiter commented on the job interview in very negative terms to the researcher afterwards. Reasons for the success of these candidates were often related to candidate scarcity or an unexpected surge in the need for employees. Finally, as we discuss only relatively short fragments from each interview, it would be difficult to make any claims about the relevance of these excerpts to the overall outcome the interview – in particular since the length of these fragments is less than a minute, while the average length of the job interviews in our data is 40 min. Overall, the actual selection decision is based on a wide range of factors, including not only the candidate's performance in the interview but also their CV, experience and age in relation to expected labour costs, and in comparison to the other candidates who applied for the same position.

3. Analyses

In order to explore how candidates' humour may be (un)successful in constructing co-membership in job interviews, we draw on the related concepts of activity type and discourse type. Introduced by Levinson (1992), the notion of activity type refers to relatively conventionalized communicative activities which are goal defined and which take place in a particular

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