



Humor in British academic lectures and Chinese students' perceptions of it

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Abstract

This paper explores humor in British academic lectures and Chinese students' perceptions of it. Britain is one of the most popular destinations for international students, but there are hardly any investigations into humor in academic contexts or international students' understanding of it. In my study, instances of humor were identified and analyzed in a large number of lectures recorded in the British Academic Spoken English corpus and 13-hour academic lectures recorded by me. Some Chinese students, non-Chinese students and all of the lecturers from the lectures I recorded commented on selected instances of humor. Informed by pragmatic theories, the analysis showed that the lecturers used humor to enhance self-image, tackle potential face loss, mitigate face-threatening acts, and increase solidarity with students. Humor also draws attention to stance of language. Understanding of the stance entails the speaker's and listeners' shared awareness of the implied meaning and associated sociocultural values. However, the Chinese students had evident problems comprehending their lecturers' humor, and some expressed a feeling of alienation at having to laugh with other classmates without understanding the cause. The lecturers were either unaware of the Chinese students' problems, or were aware of the problems but insensitive to their students' needs.

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1. Introduction

A growing number of studies have investigated humor in intercultural academic contexts (Bell, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Davies, 2003). Davies' work "highlight[s] the apparently arbitrary nature of idiomatic expressions, the difficulty of coping with interaction in the new language, and the general powerlessness of the language learner in a world of native speakers" (Davies, 2003:1361). Yet Bell reassures us that, despite her non-native participants' limited abilities with respect to humor in a second language, misunderstandings based on humor are rare and do not appear to cause interactional difficulties. Such studies derive their data from conversations in academic contexts, yet it is important to acknowledge that an important part of the academic experience for international students does not take this form. In comparison with conversation, communication in lectures is mostly asymmetric and is far less interactive. In the lecture context, students have far fewer means of controlling and shaping their interaction, thus humor may play a greater role than it assumes in the conversational interactions observed by Bell. In this study, I explore the under-examined phenomenon of humor in intercultural academic lectures. Specifically, I focus on the experience of Chinese students, a cohort that has come to compose the largest international audience in British lectures.

Abbreviations: LT, laughter tag; HE, humor episode; RR, respondent's report form.

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1.1. Humor as paradoxical face-work

This paper mainly concerns the interpersonal functions of humor, so I begin by reviewing studies of this topic. Many linguistic studies reveal that humor may be used to carry out aggressive or contentious acts which are potentially face-threatening (Brown and Levinson, 1987), while simultaneously performing in-group rapport building and expressing affection (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Eggins and Slade, 1997; Norrick, 1993; Partington, 2006). In addition, humor generates laughter from the audience, and as shared laughter is acknowledged to enhance in-group intimacy (cf. Jefferson et al., 1987), the positive face of the group members is benefited.

Keltner et al. (2001:229) describe teasing as “an intentional provocation accompanied by playful markers that together comment on something of relevance to the target of the tease”. Teasing is first of all provocative – it poses a potential threat to the targeted person’s face if taken seriously. But teasing is also playful, and the playfulness is always marked. Much psychological and linguistic research has demonstrated that teasing is a way to display common values, and that rapport is built through sharing laughter and the message that the act of teasing communicates (Baxter, 1992; Eisenberg, 1986; Norrick, 1993). Teasing, therefore, is paradoxical:

Teasing criticizes yet compliments, attacks yet makes people closer, humiliates yet expresses affection.

Keltner et al. (2001)

Another typical example of humor playing paradoxical roles in interaction is self-deprecation. Jefferson (1984) describes how laughter defuses seriousness in talk about troubles. In the case in which a speaker has incidentally trapped himself/herself into an awkward situation, the use of humor to generate laughter may be a skillful way to divert attention, defuse tension and bring the face-threatening situation to an end. One may also deprecate oneself in situations without potential face-loss. In this case, a verbal attack targeted at oneself implies the opposite, and consequently improves the speaker’s face. Nesi (2012) gives an example of such self-deprecation in a university classroom: the lecturer makes fun of his/her long executive title in medical education in saying that the longer the title one has in a university, the less important one is (Nesi, 2012:85).

1.2. Stance and face work in humor

All language uses are evaluative; as Volosinov points out “[t]here is no such thing as a word without evaluative accent” (1973[1929]:103). Humor is always evaluative: it invokes the speakers’ attitudes or stance toward certain objects, entities or propositions. Following Thompson, “evaluation” here is defined as “the indication of whether the speaker thinks that something (a person, thing, action, event, situation, idea, etc.) is good or bad” (2013[1996]:80). The expression of evaluation, or stance,¹ in humor is interpersonal and is often implicitly expressed, e.g. in teasing and irony, reflecting the speaker’s and listeners’ shared awareness of the implied meaning. Kotthoff argues that irony “is a way of communicating an evaluation gap”; the evaluation assigns to the entity a value on a continuous scale between the positive and negative poles. Kotthoff further notes that irony very often alludes to in-group knowledge, so it “allows us to re-affirm the in-group relations among friends” (2003:1390).

Eggins and Slade (1997) and Partington (2006) are amongst the few researchers to investigate humor in conversation, and its relation to evaluation. Eggins and Slade claim that humor is a semantic resource, and that humor devices including teasing, telling dirty jokes and funny stories can be applied to negotiate attitudes and alignments. Analyzing “laughter-talk” from White House press briefings, Partington shows that, in the case of irony, evaluative markers at lexical, grammatical and textual levels are exploited to reverse an evaluation of something that is initially expected to be either positive or negative (2006:195–206).

Studies of language creativity, on the other hand, often have a strong focus on humor. Scholars in this field have foregrounded stance in their analysis; Maybin and Swann (2007), for example, propose a critical dimension to the analysis of creativity, arguing that creative language can be used to draw attention to evaluation taking place within the text and has “the potential for developed critique of social relations/positions and associated values” (Maybin and Swann, 2007:513). Maybin and Swann use the example of reported speech to illustrate the critical properties of language creativity. In reported speech, we recycle other people’s language, but endow the language with our own stance on top of that of the original speaker (also see Bakhtin, 1981[1935]; Tannen, 1989[2007]). A similar idea is elaborated in a recent paper by Park (2013) which argues that mimicry is a “stance-taking act” and is linguistic as well as social.

¹ Various labels have been used in the studies of evaluation in language including modality, evidentiality, affect, and hedging. Detailed overviews of these terms and their definitions are included in Hunston and Thompson (2000), Partington (2006:195–197) and Martin and White (2005:38–40). “Evaluation” and “stance” are used interchangeably in this paper.

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