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An empirical cross-cultural study of humour in business meetings in New Zealand and Japan

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Abstract

Transactional or work-related discourse is highly valued in the workplace because of its obvious relevance to workplace objectives. However, relational or social talk plays an equally valuable role by contributing to good workplace relations (e.g., Fletcher, 1999; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Schnurr, 2005). The research literature indicates that humour makes a particularly important contribution in this area. Most research, however, has been conducted in English-speaking societies and/or Western countries.

This article fills a gap in empirical cross-cultural studies, drawing on authentic Japanese workplace discourse. It reports a qualitative analysis of humour in Japanese and New Zealand business meetings, describing its manifestations and functions. The first section reviews the relevant literature and outlines the conceptual frameworks used for the analysis and the methodology adopted in the analysis. The results of the analysis are then discussed. The analysis indicates that (1) though humour serves as Relational Practice, its manifestations are distinctive in each CofP, and (2) meeting members enact Relational Practice through humour in ways that meet the underlying expectations of each CofP.

Keywords: Workplace humour; Relational Practice; Communities of practice (CofP); Japanese

1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years, research on humour in the workplace has been undertaken in disciplines such as business management, social psychology, and communication. In recent years, a focus has been the analysis of humour in authentic business interaction (Westwood and Rhodes, 2007). Research on workplace humour includes humour in business organisations (Duncan et al., 1990; Morreall, 1991); humour for improving productivity (Caudron, 1992); humour for defusing conflict among workers (Duncan et al., 1990; Fry, 1992); humour as a component of the complexity of the workings of business organisations (Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993); humour as social cohesion at work (Holdway, 1988; Blau, 1955); leadership and humour (Schnurr, 2005, 2009a,b); humour and gender (Mullany, 2004, 2007; Schnurr and Holmes, 2009; Vine et al., 2009).

These researchers argue that humour plays a particularly important role in the workplace from a relational perspective. However, most of the research focusses on workplace humour in English speaking societies. Researchers such as Backhaus (2009), Geyer (2010), and Saito (2011) analyse some aspects of humour in Japanese workplace data, but they do not attempt to identify every type of humour in their data. As one rare example, Takekuro (2006) conducted a contrastive study on humour in Japanese and English and showed that there were no occurrences of humour in Japanese formal business settings, while there were many occurrences of humour in similar English settings. However, compared with research on English, the amount of literature on workplace humour in Japanese is scarce.

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The present study addresses this gap in the empirical research on humour in authentic Japanese business interaction. Previous literature on workplace humour is first reviewed; then the methodology, including the conceptual framework for analysis, is described and the data introduced. Finally, the data analysis is provided.

2. Workplace humour

2.1. Definition

Humour is a ''complex and paradoxical phenomenon'' (Linstead, 1985:741). Workplace humour is context bound and often cannot easily be understood by non-group members (e.g., Pogrebin and Poole, 1988; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Schnurr, 2005). Researchers have provided various definitions of (workplace) humour. For example, drawing on a significant amount of authentic workplace interaction, Holmes (2000) defines humour as follows:

> Humorous utterances are defined as those which are identified by the analyst, on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic, and discoursal clues, as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants' (Holmes, 2000:163).

In her definition, the role of the analyst is considered. Holmes (2000) points out that deciding whether an utterance is humorous depends on the analyst's point of view. In analysing humour, a variety of interactional clues such as ''the speaker's tone of voice and the audience's auditory and discoursal response'' (2000:163) play important roles.

Mullany (2004) criticises Holmes' (2000) definition for not covering unintentional or failed humour, and for being speaker-oriented (though in fact Holmes (2000) includes attention to the audience's response in her analysis). Mullany (2004:21) expands Holmes' (2000) definition in the following way:

> Humour is defined as instances [of utterances] where participant(s) signal amusement to one another, based on the analyst's assessment of paralinguistic, prosodic and discoursal clues. These instances [of utterances] can be classified as either successful or unsuccessful according to addressees' reactions. Humour can be a result of either intentional or unintentional humorous behaviour from participants.

Within the definition above, Mullany (2004) includes failed or unsuccessful humour and unintentional humour where a listener laughs at an utterance that is not intended to be amusing. Her definition includes hearers' perspectives as well as speakers' perspectives.

Schnurr (2005) takes hearers' emotions into consideration in adopting Brown and Keegan's (1999) approach to humour. It is reasonable to think that humour and responses to humour are emotion-involving activities which can be constructed discursively and jointly between speakers and hearers. From the speakers' points of view, there are successful and failed attempts at humour. From the hearers' points of view, on the other hand, there are possible varieties of responses ''such as the prototypical laughter or smile, as well as the lift of an eyebrow, the production of more laughter or the expression of offence'' (Schnurr, 2005:44). This means that the hearer's perception of humour depends on a variety of linguistic and paralinguistics features, and their emotions are not limited to amusement but also include different feelings. Schnurr (2005:44), thus, defines humour as:

> . . . [U]tterances which are intended and/or perceived as being funny, and which result in a change of emotions in the audience, which then triggers some kind of response.

Schnurr's (2005) definition includes not only failed or unsuccessful humour but unintentional humour and also a variety of responses involving hearer's feelings. Her definition considers hearers' perspectives as well as speakers' perspectives. That is, her succinct definition considers humour as being jointly constructed in ongoing interaction. In this article, I adopt Schnurr's (2005) inclusive definition.

2.2. Function

There seems to be a consensus that humour serves to amuse or entertain at one level. In business discourse, however, we see the multifunctional nature of humour and its contribution to positive workplace relations (e.g. Brown and Keegan, 1999; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Schnurr, 2005, 2009b; Holmes, 2006b). Humour in the workplace is identified as exemplary Relational Practice[1] (Holmes and Schnurr, 2005), a more specialised concept than ''relational work''

[1] ''Relational Practice'' is used to refer to workplace discourse, while ''relational work'' (Locher and Watts, 2005) is a more general term, though both ''refer to all the ways in which people attend to the face needs of others'' (Holmes et al., 2011:83).