

Talk in a play frame: More on laughter and intimacy

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Abstract

Conversation is one of the key locuses of humour and it is now widely agreed that shared laughter nurtures group solidarity. This paper will explore the links between laughter and intimacy in everyday conversation. The paper will attempt to clarify the term ‘conversational humour’, focussing on informal conversation among friends and on the conversational practices involved in humorous talk. I argue, following Bateson, that conversational humour involves the establishment of a ‘play frame’. When a play frame is established, speakers collaborate in the construction of talk in a way that resembles group musical activity, particularly jazz. This way of talking is characterised by, among other things, overlapping speech, the co-construction of utterances, repetition, and a heightened use of metaphorical language. I will argue that play and creativity are linked in significant ways, and that playful talk is essentially collaborative.

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1. Introduction

In this paper I shall examine humorous talk occurring in the informal conversation of friends. I shall argue that humorous talk is a form of play, and that talk as play can only be achieved by close collaboration between speakers. Collaboration between speakers constructs solidarity, and thus a key function of playful talk is the creation and maintenance of group solidarity, of intimacy between speakers. In this respect, I shall pursue the line begun by [Jefferson et al. \(1978\)](#) in their paper ‘Notes on laughter in the pursuit of intimacy’. I shall examine some of the characteristics of talk as play, drawing on a corpus of informal conversational data involving pairs or groups of

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friends, and will argue that talk as play shares features with music, particularly with jazz. The complex, often polyphonic, textual patterns of playful talk index the complex, intricate and intimate links between speakers.

2. Language and humour

After many years of relative neglect, humour is now the focus of attention in a range of work being carried out by social psychologists, sociolinguists and conversation analysts, and in a variety of contexts. These include the workplace (Holmes, 2000; Holmes et al., 2001; Holmes and Marra, 2002; Mullaney, 2003); the classroom (Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Davies, 2003); medical settings (DuPre, 1998; Astedt-Kurki et al., 2001; Sullivan et al., 2003); TV discussion groups (Kotthoff, 2003); as well as informal settings such as the home (Norricks, 1993a, 1993b, 2004; Gibbs, 2000; Hay, 2000; Everts, 2003; Coates, in press).

In this paper, I shall focus on humour involving conversation among friends in informal settings. Despite growing interest in talk and humour, there does not seem to be general agreement on the meaning of the term ‘conversational humour’. Many researchers have used what seems to me a rather narrow interpretation of this term, focusing on specific speech acts such as telling a joke, making a pun, being sarcastic or ironic (see, for example, Chiaro, 1992; Attardo, 1993; Norrick, 1993b; Gibbs, 2000).

It could be that this bias in emphasis is gender-related. Recent research exploring gender variation in humour has established a clear pattern of difference among speakers, with men preferring more formulaic joking and women sharing funny stories to create solidarity (see Crawford and Gressley, 1991; Boxer and Cortès-Conde, 1997; Hay, 2000; Crawford, 2003). As Crawford (1995:149) remarks, “Women’s reputation for telling jokes badly (forgetting punch lines, violating story sequencing rules, etc.) may reflect a male norm that does not recognise the value of cooperative story-telling”. So perhaps the foundational work done by men (e.g. Mulkay, 1988; Attardo, 1993; Norrick, 1993a) grew out of their own orientation to humour. On the other hand, significant contributions to the literature on humour by female linguists, such as Tannen’s (1984) chapter (entitled ‘Irony and joking’) and Chiaro’s (1991) book (entitled ‘The Language of Jokes’) suggest that a focus on *joking* rather than humour in conversation is widely accepted as appropriate. Indeed, the first book-length examination of conversational humour (Norricks, 1993a) is called ‘Conversational Joking’, not ‘Conversational Humour’.

While joking is clearly part of humour, it is surely the case that humour is a much broader, more fuzzy-edged category than the term ‘joking’ implies. In British English, telling a joke is a very specific speech act, that is, a short formulaic utterance, ending with a punch line, which produces (or is meant to produce) laughter. Telling a joke, moreover, is an activity only rarely associated with friendly conversation. This is not surprising, given that, “a joke . . . is likely to disrupt a ‘normal’ or ‘serious’ conversation” (Chiaro, 1992:114). Moreover, “joke-capping sessions” (where one speaker tells a joke and then a second speaker tells a joke and so on) “are not an everyday occurrence” (ibid:113).

Chiaro’s claims are supported by the evidence of my corpus of informal conversation involving friends or family. In this corpus I have found no joke-capping sessions and only one short passage that could be described as a joke-telling. There are some instances in the corpus of the combative style which can be labelled “joking around”. This is confined to the talk of the youngest speakers (12–17 years) and is more frequently used by male speakers. This

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