
Not bloody funny: Rhetorical resources for laughter in interaction

Panel contribution

Dr. Christine Howes¹, Dr. Vladislav Maraev¹, Dr. Ellen Breitholtz¹

1. University of Gothenburg

Despite previous attempts to the contrary, we argue that humour cannot be understood – or analysed – without considering the interactional and cognitive resources, including low-level repair mechanisms and higher-level inferences, which underpin any conversational exchange. Following Breitholtz and Maraev (2019), we claim that incongruity in jokes can be cast in terms of enthymemes (arguments occurring in a dialogue or text) and topoi (rules of thumb that underpin implicit arguments in interaction; Breitholtz, 2020). This perspective means that we can analyse non-humorous laughter events under the same framework. Laughter is often intrinsically linked with the performative aspects of humour, but is also an interactive phenomenon that should be studied within the same cognitive system. In this regard it is important to draw a distinction between laughers related to pleasant incongruities (the humorous type) and social incongruities, which are related to non-humorous laughter, such as nervous or embarrassed laughter (Mazzocconi et al., 2020).

We argue that although laughter can be evoked by a non-humorous event, it is still the case that the cognitive resources that are necessary for calculating incongruities are the same as those used in humorous situations. We look at how the same knowledge resources are used to underpin contrasting interactional experiences. For instance, topoi which are evoked in humorous situations may be the same as the ones that cause embarrassment. One such discourse situation is conversations about menstruation. We analyse a related joke from the BNC alongside with conversational data concerning non-humorous mentions of this topic. In addition we present some tellings of the joke in different conversational contexts (text-chat and zoom) to illustrate how presentations of the joke differ depending on the social context and medium used.

References:

Breitholtz, E. (2020). Enthymemes and topoi in dialogue: the use of common sense reasoning in conversation (p. 161). Brill.

Breitholtz, E. & Maraev, V (2019). How to put an elephant in the title: modeling humorous incongruity with topoi. In Proceedings of the 23rd Workshop on the Semantics and Pragmatics of Dialogue - Full Papers.

Mazzocconi, C., Tian, Y., & Ginzburg, J. (2020). What's your laughter doing there? A taxonomy of the pragmatic functions of laughter. IEEE Transactions on Affective Computing.