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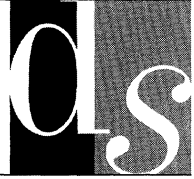**Email Alerts:** http://dis.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

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# Politeness, power and provocation: how humour functions in the workplace

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ABSTRACT This article examines verbal humour in routine interactions within professional workplaces, using material recorded in four New Zealand government departments. The problem of defining humour is discussed, followed by a brief outline of the theoretical models which underpin the analysis of the various functions which humour serves in professional organizations.
    Humour can express positive affect in interaction. It can also facilitate or 'licence' more negative interpersonal communicative intent. While politeness theory can account for the former, as a means of expressing collegiality at work, or de-emphasizing power imbalances, in its standard form politeness theory does not explain barbed, competitive or confrontational humour. For this it is necessary to look to 'the dark side of politeness' (Austin, 1990). An alternative perspective thus examines the extent to which humour functions, especially in unequal encounters, as an acceptable strategy to help superiors maintain a position of power but also as a strategy used by subordinates to licence challenges to the power structures within which they operate, and as a legitimizing strategy in attempts at subverting the repressive or coercive discourse of superiors.

KEYWORDS: *contestation, critical discourse analysis, humour, politeness theory, power, resistance, workplace*

## Introduction

Most workplace humour is inextricably context-bound. Utterances which give rise to great hilarity among work colleagues often appear obscure and opaque to outsiders. This is a reflection of one of the most basic social functions of humour – that it serves to create and maintain solidarity, a sense of belonging to a group. Shared humour is an important in-group vs out-group boundary marker. But humour can also be a management strategy – a way of attenuating or reinforc-

ing power relationships. Humour can be used to reduce inequalities between those of different professional status, alternatively it can be used to emphasize power imbalances, or even to license challenges to status hierarchies. This article explores some of the diverse functions of humour in the workplace, drawing on a database of interactions recorded in four New Zealand government organizations.

There is extensive pragmatic research on humour examining the contribution of conversational maxims and pragmatic inferencing to an understanding of how jokes function in interaction (e.g. Attardo, 1990, 1993; Raskin, 1985), and exploring the communicative function of humour (e.g. Mulkay, 1988; Norrick, 1993). Sacks (1978, 1989) analysed the work involved in telling jokes, and described the joke as a 'conversational achievement'. Other conversational analysts have explored the social meanings expressed by humour (e.g. Pizzini, 1991). Some sociolinguists have examined gender differences in the use of different types and functions of humour in interaction (Ervin-Tripp and Lampert, 1992; Jenkins, 1985; Kotthoff, 1995; Kramarae, 1987; Sollitt-Morris, 1996). But overall there is relatively little sociolinguistic research on humour, and even less on humour in the workplace. Most of the extensive literature in this area appears in journals and collections in disciplines such as management, business administration, business organization, social psychology and communication.

Much of this research focuses on demonstrating the social and psychological benefits of humour to business organizations (e.g. Davis and Kleiner, 1989; Decker, 1987; Duncan, 1982; Duncan et al., 1990; Linstead, 1985; Morreall, 1991). Humour is advocated as a means of improving productivity (e.g. Caudron, 1992), and an essential tool for managers (e.g. Decker, 1987). The work of Consalvo (1989) on the distribution and function of humour in business meetings is typical. He asserts:

> The role and constructive uses of humor need to be better understood as humor has the potential to improve quality of life, job satisfaction, and performance in organizations. (1989: 285)

Researchers document the type of humour noted in workplaces (e.g. Vinton, 1989) and the functions of workplace humour (e.g. Cox et al., 1990; Duncan, 1985; Linstead, 1988; Murphy, 1986; Sabath, 1990) with special attention to the advantages of humour for encouraging creativity (e.g. Cade, 1982; Caudron, 1992), and defusing conflict among workers (e.g. Duncan et al., 1990; Fry, 1992).[1] More recently, some researchers have begun to treat humour as a source of insight into the complexity of the workings of business organizations (Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993).

From a sociolinguistic viewpoint, one remarkable feature of much of this research is the reliance on indirect, reflective, or apparently unsystematic methods of collecting data about how people actually use humour in interaction (see Williams, 1988). Participant observation and the use of field notes cannot provide a sufficiently exact account of normal conversational interaction for the

purposes of discourse analysis. Similarly, self-report data, interview responses, and answers gleaned from questionnaires involving simulated situations tend to elicit people's beliefs about how they and others use humour, rather than reliable information on what they actually do (see Mott and Petrie, 1995). There is remarkably little research on humour in the workplace which uses tape-recorded material from authentic workplace interaction. Such research is, of course, subject to the familiar problem of the effect on participants' behaviour of their awareness that they are being recorded. On the other hand, it guarantees that the material analysed is an accurate rendition of what was actually produced, unfiltered through the observer's perceptual biasses, and unaffected by memory limitations. For these reasons, we decided to use recorded material for our New Zealand workplace research.

## The Language in the Workplace Project

The Language in the Workplace Project was begun in 1996 with the following goals:

(1) to analyse the features of effective interpersonal communication in a variety of workplaces from a sociolinguistic perspective; and
(2) to explore the practical implications of the results of the research for a range of New Zealand workplaces.

Over the last three years we have collected interactions from a range of workplaces, including the four New Zealand government agencies whose interactions provide the data for the analysis in this article. The bulk of the data consists of small, relatively informal work-related meetings and discussions ranging in time between 20 seconds and two hours. Such meetings are regarded by the participants as the focus of their core business and they fulfil a wide variety of purposes in these workplaces, being used to plan, convey instructions, seek advice, check reports, solve a problem or do a task, provide feedback, evaluate proposals and so on. They are also the sites of many different types of humour, as I will demonstrate.

METHODOLOGY

It is only relatively recently that humour research has adopted a more ethnographic methodology, using recordings of spontaneous spoken conversations, rather than questionnaires or surveys (see Hay, 1995: 8–10). Recording in workplaces is difficult, especially if the aim is to be minimally intrusive in order to collect data which is as spontaneous and 'natural' as possible. The methodology developed for recording in New Zealand offices was designed to give participants maximum control over the data collection process. After some initial training, a group of volunteers from each workplace tape-recorded a range of their everyday work interactions over a period of about two weeks. Some kept a recorder and microphone on their desks, others carried the equipment round with them.

All those involved provided information on their ethnic background, home language, age, contextual information, and permission for the data to be used for linguistic analysis. They also participated in debriefing sessions after the recording process, and, in some cases, in follow-up interviews to discuss the interpretation of the material. This methodology provided a wealth of ethnographic information which enabled the contextualization of interpretations at a different level. This was crucial for qualitative analysis of the kind undertaken in this article.

Throughout the process participants were free to edit and delete material as they wished. Even after they had completed recording and handed over the tapes, they could still ask us to edit out material which, for whatever reason, they did not wish to be analysed. By handing over control of the recording process in this way, we developed an excellent research relationship with workplace participants, based on mutual trust. Over a period of time, people increasingly ignored the recording equipment, and there are often comments at the end of interactions which indicate that people had forgotten about the tape recorder.[2] Also, over time, the amount of material participants edited, or asked us to edit, decreased dramatically. As a result, in return for guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality, our volunteers trusted us with a wide range of fascinating material.

The data base consists of more than 120 hours of material constituting 330 workplace interactions in four government departments. The participants include New Zealand Pakeha, Maori and a range of other ethnic groups, such as Samoan, Chinese and Thai.[3] In each workplace a group of key personnel, representing a range of roles and levels within the organization, recorded their everyday interactions with a variety of interlocutors across a number of work settings. From this database I selected for detailed qualitative analysis a range of interactions consisting mainly of small meetings (involving between two and four people) which a preliminary analysis had identified as including instances of humour. At least five interactions from each of the four workplaces were included, with examples of single sex and mixed sex interactions, involving both Pakeha and Maori participants. My analysis of these interactions identified 200 instances of humour, and these provide the basis for the qualitative analysis of humour in the New Zealand workplace which follows.

## Definition

However difficult it may be, it is useful to start with a brief definition of what was counted as an instance of humour. The literature abounds with discussions of this issue, many linked to particular theories of humour.[4] Some theorists distinguish between humour and wit (Coser, 1962), some categorize jokes as instances of humour (Duncan, 1984) while others treat jokes as a distinct category which is different from humour (Long and Graesser, 1988). A number of analysts identify essential components of humour; so that many agree, for example, that

humour must always involve some kind of cognitive dissonance, such as the establishment of an incongruent relationship or meaning (e.g. Berger, 1976; Duncan and Feisal, 1989).

Some researchers consider an instance of humour from the point of view of the speaker: something is humorous only if it was intended to amuse (e.g. Pizzini, 1991; Winick, 1976). Use of 'smile voice', and similar paralinguistic or prosodic clues can provide an empirical basis for judgements of speakers' intentions (Crystal and Davy, 1969; Sacks et al., 1974). Some analysts who take this perspective include consideration of failed humour as well as successful humour (Hay, 1996). Others consider humour from the listener's or the audience's point of view, and some identify humour by the listener's response (e.g. Coser, 1960; Norrick, 1993). For such practitioners, laughter is a crucial auditory clue and, when videotapes are used, a smile is an important visual clue. Others take the view that the speaker and the hearer must both be taken into account in identifying instances of humour: so the speaker's intention is relevant and must evoke an appropriate response (e.g. Berger, 1976; Martineau, 1972).

One factor which is rarely considered in analyses of humour is the role of the analyst. The analyst's identification of instances of humour is a crucial component in the analytical process. Instances of humour which are not identified, or which are misinterpreted by the analyst, will obviously be excluded. It seems important, therefore, to take account of the clues used by the analyst who works with material provided by others. In cases where, as in our research, the analyst is working from audio-tapes (supplemented by discussion), the analyst's role is particularly crucial. Another problem is the status of 'failed humour', where for whatever reason the speaker's humorous intention is not appreciated by the audience (Hay, 1996). This topic has been excluded from the current analysis because it raises many complex issues which there is not space to explore in this article. The following definition, therefore, has been developed for the purposes of this analysis.

> *Definition of humour*
> Instances of humour included in this analysis are utterances 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.

A wide range of contextual and linguistic clues are relevant to identifying instances of humour, including the speaker's tone of voice and the audience's auditory and discoursal response. So while laughter is an obvious (though not unambiguous) clue, it is by no means the only way in which members of an audience signal that they consider something to be humorous.[5] As Hay (1996) documents, audience members may respond to humour in a variety of ways, including an echo response, by contradicting self-deprecating humour, or by producing more humour. While irony may elicit a mere raised eye-bow or twitch of

the lips, at the other extreme, a humorous remark may trigger a range of overt responses. Indeed, some of the more interesting, effective, and extended instances of humour encountered were dynamic, interactively achieved and 'jointly constructed' examples, with verbal contributions from a number of participants (Marra, 1998). Addressees often added to a humorous remark, indicating not only appreciation, but a willingness to extend the humour.

The definition adopted for this analysis is obviously not comprehensive. As mentioned previously, it excludes 'failed humour', just as it excludes unintended humour. However, it is adequate for an exploratory qualitative analysis of the functions of humour in the New Zealand workplaces included in our sample. It also has the advantage of highlighting the extent to which humour is an interactional achievement.

## Theoretical frameworks

Many analyses of humour adopt psychological or sociological theoretical frameworks, examining psychological functions of humour such as tension release, the expression of aggression, or hostility (Freud, 1905) or social functions such as the assertion of superiority (Duncan, 1985; Radcliffe-Brown, 1952), or the enforcement of social norms (Bricker, 1980; O'Quin and Arnoff, 1981). In this analysis, I explore the value of Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987) to account for the social psychological functions of humour in the workplace, combined with insights from Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk, 1993, 1998), an approach which provides concepts such as 'repressive discourse' (Pateman, 1980) and 'coercive discourse' (Fairclough, 1995) to more adequately analyse power relationships in workplace interaction.

Politeness Theory provides an account of the ways in which humour takes account of the positive face needs of both addressee and speaker. So humour may express solidarity, indicating concern for the *listener's* positive face needs, as well as self deprecation, which attends to the *speaker's* positive face needs. Politeness Theory also includes consideration of power relations, insofar as they are assumed by, or salient to, the participants. But the main focus of Politeness Theory is an account of how participants handle face threat, and Brown and Levinson's analysis is designed to account for modifications of face threatening acts (FTAs) which are consistent with a basic cooperative intent. Differential power tends to be considered largely as a factor accounting for deferent behaviour (i.e. more mitigated FTAs) by the person with less power, or for the use of less mitigated FTAs by the more powerful participant. Hence, humour which is deliberately used to license a direct threat to the face of the addressee, or instances of humour used to legitimize unambiguously aggressive intent, are not so effectively accounted for within a model which assumes cooperative intent as its starting point (cf. Austin, 1990).[6]

Following Weber (1947), Brown and Levinson provide a useful and widely accepted definition of power, as 'the degree to which H [the hearer] can impose

his (sic) own plans and his (sic) own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of S's [the speaker's] plans and self-evaluation' (1987: 77). Such power may be institutionally authorized, or it may be based on less tangible factors. In institutional contexts, such as the workplace, when individuals are acting in role in asymmetrical interactions, they can articulate their power overtly by reference to their position. This is coercive power (Thomas, 1995: 125) enacted through 'oppressive discourse' – discourse in which the intentions are quite explicit and undisguised (Pateman, 1980: 83).

However, it is also possible to 'do power' less explicitly, and this is generally more acceptable in an era when informality is valued, and there is a general trend towards democratization, and a reduction of emphasis on power differences (see Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995). Where the underlying intent is controlling or coercive, however, this use of language can be identified as 'repressive discourse' (see Patemen, 1980). Repressive discourse disguises the coercive intent underlying an utterance, or fudges the power relationships involved (Pateman, 1980: 84–5). So while it is fundamentally based on a power imbalance, repressive discourse tends to distract attention from issues of power. It often functions to gain willing compliance, retain goodwill, promote social cohesion and, at least superficially, to reduce asymmetry (see Sollitt-Morris, 1996, 1997). Humour is one means of realizing repressive discourse.

Humour is also a very effective way of 'doing power' less explicitly, and hence some uses of humour are most illuminatingly analysed as instances of coercive or repressive discourse. In other words, humour can be used to achieve the speaker's instrumental goal while apparently de-emphasizing the power differential.[7] Pizzini (1991: 477) for example, describes how gynaecologists used humour to 'move interview talk along' and 'to stop patients rambling on' [sic] in order to gain the patients' compliance with their agenda. An analysis which treats such humour as simply attenuating an FTA, i.e. as purely an expression of concern for the addressee's face, risks under-analysing the interactional social significance of the exchange, and ignoring the complexity of the communicative goals involved (see Tracy and Coupland, 1990).

Conversely, humour can also be used by the subordinate in an unequal power relationship to subvert the overt power structure. Humour provides a socially acceptable means of signalling lack of agreement, registering a protest, or even a challenge to more powerful participants. Graham et al. (1992: 162) comment on this use of humour to 'veil socially unacceptable behaviour'; and Winick (1976) and Pizzini both comment on the fact that humour enables subordinates to express risky opinions:

> Because humour officially does not count, persons are induced to risk sending messages that would be unacceptable if stated seriously. (Pizzini 1991: 481)

I have labelled this function of humour *contestive*. I turn now to a more detailed consideration of these functions of humour, with exemplification from the New Zealand workplace data.

## Functions of humour in the workplace

There is an extensive literature on the functions of humour. Martineau (1972), for example, discusses three very broad functions: consensus, conflict and control. Following Ziv (1984), Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992) identify four functions: *equalizing* or creating solidarity, *defending* or protecting the self, *sharing* similarities, and *coping* with weaknesses. At a more detailed level, Graham, Papa and Brookes (1992) identify 24 functions of humour on the basis of a comprehensive review of a wide range of papers dealing with the social–psychological functions of humour. Hay (1995: 98) groups the functions of humour in her data into a hierarchy with an overall general function, three broad macro-functions (relating to solidarity, power and self-defence) and twelve micro-functions.

Two familiar methodological problems arise in any such analysis. The first is the well-known fact that all utterances are multifunctional (see Holmes, 1982; Tracy and Coupland, 1990). Hence, a humorous utterance may, and typically does, serve several functions at once.

**Excerpt 1** (See Appendix for transcription conventions.)
Context. A young policy adviser, Ivan, and a senior policy officer, Esther, meet for a discussion with a third adviser. The meeting begins with a complaint from Esther.

| 1 | Esther: | you were supposed to bring coffee and he was bringing croissants |
|---|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2 | Ivan:   | was he |
| 3 | Esther: | yeah we had this discussion last week |
| 4 | Ivan:   | ah you should have got it in writing |
|   |         | [Laughter] |

Ivan's remark is an example of good-humoured sarcasm: he is sending up bureaucratic procedures generally. At the local level, he is also parodying Esther, in particular, who is inclined to want everything well documented; hence this is also an example of contestive discourse from a subordinate to a senior. At a more global level, it can be seen as a good tempered response to a criticism, in other words a cooperative attempt to amuse, to keep the tone light and maintain good collegial relations. This analysis is typical in its complexity – almost every example of authentic discourse has several layers of meaning.

The second problem is that of infinite regress.[8] In my view, and this is reflected in the definition provided above, the most general or basic function of humour is to amuse. But then one can ask *why* does the speaker wish to amuse the audience. The answer to this question can be extremely complex, involving a never ending regression proceeding from sociological through increasingly detailed psychological explanations. Why does Ivan want to amuse his colleagues? From a social point of view, he is maintaining collegiality, but the form of his humour reflects the power relationships between those involved (the sarcasm is attenuated or

gentle). From a psychological point of view, one can ask if Ivan is motivated by guilt or by a desire to avoid conflict, or both of these simultaneously.

Politeness Theory provides a basis for constraining the level of analysis to an examination of the impact of humour on the face needs of the participants. Brown and Levinson (1987: 102) include 'joke' as a positive politeness strategy, in that it 'claims common ground (point of view, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, empathy)'. Their discussion is very brief, however, focussing on ways in which jokes can emphasize shared values, or attenuate FTAs of various kinds. Exploring the issue further, in principle, there are a number of ways in which humour can be regarded as an expression of politeness:

1.  Humour as positive politeness
    1.1  Humour can **address the hearer's/addressee's positive face needs** by expressing solidarity or collegiality.
    1.2  Humour can be used to **protect the speaker's positive face needs** by expressing self-deprecatory meanings or apologetic sentiments.
2.  Humour as negative politeness
    2.1  Humour can be used to **attenuate the threat to the hearer's/ addressee's negative face** by downtoning or hedging an FTA, such as a directive.
    2.2  Humour can be used to **attenuate the threat to hearer's/addressee's positive face** by downtoning or hedging a Face Attack Act (Austin 1990) such as a criticism or insult.

In other words, humour can function both as a positive politeness strategy expressing solidarity, or as a hedging strategy, a means of modifying illocutionary force (Holmes, 1984), expressing negative politeness. I will discuss each of these in turn.

1. HUMOUR AS POSITIVE POLITENESS

With its basic assumption of cooperative intent, and consideration of participants' 'face needs', Politeness Theory provides a convincing explanation of humour oriented to the addressee's positive face needs by indicating friendliness, and to the speaker's positive face needs by conveying self-deprecation.

*1.1 Addressee's positive face needs: solidarity or collegiality*  To the extent that a humorous utterance amuses others in the workplace, it contributes to the development of social cohesion at work (Blau, 1955; Holdaway, 1988; O'Quinn and Arnoff, 1981). Shared humour emphasizes common ground and shared norms. A successful attempt at humour indicates that the speaker shares with others a common view about what is amusing – thus creating or maintaining solidarity, while also enhancing the speaker's status within the group. Hay (1995) clearly demonstrates the relevance of this function of humour for the examples collected in the friendship groups she studied. It is also much in evidence in our workplace data. There were many instances of humour between equals in the workplace

data which clearly served to express and strengthen solidarity, and so contributed to social cohesion.

This was particularly apparent in examples which were interactively constructed, where several participants contributed to the discourse, and each built on the contributions of others. Excerpt 2, which centres around the need for people to 'panic early', nicely illustrates the way humour can build solidarity between work colleagues.

**Excerpt 2**

Context: Planning meeting of a group of colleagues. They are discussing the need to coordinate the taking of annual leave to ensure minimum negative impact on the work project.

```
 1   Hel:    people might have to take some leave by that stage as well with this
 2           sort of panic before the end of November
 3   Will:   oh I'm saving up all mine [laughs]
 4   Sel:    well people could panic early [laughs]
 5           [general laughter]
 6   Hel:    never happens
 7           [general laughter]
 8   Sel:    well the HR coordinators might crack the whip /so that people
 9           panic early yes\
10   Toni:   /I planned to panic early by taking\ the school holidays off but that
11           didn't work [laughs]
```

People's problems with getting prepared ahead of time elicit the suggestion from Selena that they need to 'panic early' (line 4) – something of a contradiction in terms, since the notion of panic is almost inextricably tied to last minute pressures. The group clearly share a common reaction to the notion, and this is a good example of them 'doing collegiality' through humour.[9] The humorous scenario is interactively achieved or jointly constructed: Helen's comment (line 6) and Toni's contribution (line 10) both build on the humorous suggestion made by Selena, who elaborates on it further in line 8.

Shared criticisms of others can also serve to cement solidarity between work colleagues. A criticism endorsed by others reflects common values and attitudes. Criticisms of people not present were often a source of amusement for co-workers, as in Excerpt 3.

**Excerpt 3**

Context: Two young Maori men are discussing plans for a formal presentation which will involve the use of the Maori language by another Maori colleague. Maori is a second language which all three men acquired after childhood.

```
 1   Tom:    Sam's probably the fellow who's had the most experience of them
 2           all but god his pronunciation it's [laughs]
 3   Kit:    [laughs]
```

Sam's pronunciation of Maori is clearly beyond description; indeed it is so embarrassing that it is a source of shared humour for Tom and Kit. The inexplicitness of

this exchange is typical of much workplace humour; it reflects shared background knowledge, experience and understandings. Tom and Kit reinforce their shared in-group status with such exchanges.

Humour directed at outsiders to an organization also illustrates the function of humour in expressing solidarity and emphasizing in-group status and group membership. In Excerpt 4, in a workplace where swearing is relatively rare, humour is generated by the unexpectedly strong language directed at outsiders.

**Excerpt 4**

Context. Three colleagues are discussing a problem which the organization is having with an outside group.

```
1   Val:   so shall we just
2   Sal:   pay the bloody /money\
3   Val:   /pay them\ pay the sods and sort it out
    [Laughter]]
```

Once again, the extent to which the participants are 'in tune' with each other is reflected in the discourse structure, with Val and Sally jointly constructing turns, and with each producing a slightly 'shocking' word, indicating stylistic harmony as well.

However, while there were many instances of humour expressing solidarity in the New Zealand workplace data, this function did not have the same pre-eminence in the workplace as in Hay's (1995) friendship groups, where it was the over-riding and ubiquitous function of humour. The predominance of the solidarity function is not always as clear-cut in the workplace, particularly where a power differential is involved, as Excerpt 1 illustrated. This point will be discussed further below.

*1.2 Speaker's positive face needs: self-deprecation*  To the extent that a group values humour, its effective use can add to a person's prestige or standing. Not all workplaces encourage humour, however, and sometimes the workplace 'joker' is regarded as disruptive, and becomes the focus of censure. On the other hand, humour can serve the individual as a useful 'self-defence' or coping strategy (Ziv, 1984). Humour can also be a means of self-disclosure, especially of difficult or embarrassing information (Civikly, 1983; cited in Graham et al., 1992: 175; Kaplan and Boyd, 1965). In a variety of ways, then, humour can protect the positive face needs of the speaker by expressing self-deprecatory sentiments.

The New Zealand workplace data includes a number of examples of humour explicitly addressed to the speaker's face needs, i.e. face-saving humour where the face involved is the speaker's, rather than the hearer's. Excerpt 5 illustrates humour being used to cover an embarrassing memory lapse.

**Excerpt 5**

Context. Fay, the section manager, is talking to her administrative assistant, Pam, who has finally located a file which she has no recollection of creating.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Pam: | oh well I must have done it |
| 2 | [Both laugh] | |
| 3 | Pam: | oh isn't that gorgeous . . . |
| 4 | Fay: | when did you send it? |
| 5 | Pam: | ++ it's a mystery to me [laughs] |
| 6 | [Fay laughs uproariously] | |
| 7 | Pam: | it really is |

Pam first creates a positive context by explicitly admitting her culpability rather than denying it (line 1). She continues this by describing her lapse as *gorgeous* (rather than, say, 'terrible') and by comically exaggerating her ignorance with a dramatic pause (line 5) followed by *it's a mystery to me*, rather than diminishing it (one might have expected a response such as 'I'm not sure'.) Pam thus manages to preserve her positive face by amusing Fay and deflecting her potential irritation.

Similarly, the humour in Excerpt 6 is predominantly concerned with attention to the speaker's positive face needs as Ray confesses to losing touch with a project.

## Excerpt 6
Context. Two young male colleagues discussing the next stages of a project.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Len: | are you going to attend that meeting then? |
| 2 | Ray: | yeah yeah I will /( . . . )\ |
| 3 | Len: | /okay\ |
| 4 | Ray: | I'd kind of stopped when I [laughs] got too out of it /[laughs]\ |
| 5 | Len: | /[laughs]\ |

The speakers both laugh as Ray admits to acting in ways which could be considered less than fully professional, a 'confession' which is framed as humorous self-disclosure. This is typical self-deprecatory humour, where the speaker anticipates embarrassment and responds by turning the source of the embarrassment into a subject of humour. By admitting professional fallibility, the speaker expresses trust in his addressee; by encoding the message humorously, he elicits a sympathetic response in the form of a positive reaction to the humour. Such humour serves to strengthen collegiality as well as functioning as a speaker-oriented positively polite device, oriented to the participants' need to be valued.

2. HUMOUR AS A NEGATIVE POLITENESS STRATEGY

A major focus of Brown and Levinson's discussion of Politeness Theory is an account of strategies which reduce the face threat of speech acts such as directives and criticisms. Again, such an analysis is predicated on the assumption that participants wish to interact harmoniously within the constraints of their institutional roles. Negative politeness strategies constitute assurances that the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee's basic wish to preserve self-determination (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 70), and they include hedges and softening devices, as well as other linguistic means of conveying deference and concern for the addressee's negative face needs. Humour is clearly one such device.

*2.1 Addressee's negative face needs: hedging FTAs* Humour may be used to soften the impact of speech acts such as directives or instructions which might otherwise be regarded as a threat to the autonomy of the addressee. Examples of humour used in this way between equals were common in the workplace data. Humour was often used to reduce the force of a directive between equals where there was no formal institutional basis on which one person had the right to direct the other's behaviour. In such a context, humour reflects a positive concern for the addressee, and is a signal of goodwill and a basic co-operative intent; it functions as a means of maintaining and negotiating respect between participants. In Excerpt 7, Kate attenuates her directive to Melanie with humour.

**Excerpt 7**
Context. Two policy analysts, Kate and Melanie, are discussing a proposal. Kate suggests that Melanie should take the proposal away and work on it further.

```
1   Kate:   well we've just about done it to death I think
2           it's about ready for you to give give it mouth-to-mouth
3           rescuscitation do you think
4           [Both laugh]
```

The use of 'we' emphasizes the collegiality at the basis of Kate's relationship with Melanie, while the incongruity of the metaphor is a source of humour attenuating the directive which appears to threaten that collegiality. Between close colleagues, humour used in this way sometimes developed into good-natured banter, a jointly constructed humour sequence in which the person on the receiving end of the directive challenged its initiator, as illustrated in Excerpt 8.

**Excerpt 8**
Context. Vince and Aidan are working on a proposal.

```
1   Vin:   you're not on page 4 yet?
2   Aid:   yes
3   Vin:   [laughs] /[laughs]\ [laughs]
4   Aid:   /I've been there and come back\ [laughs]
```

Vince wants Aidan to speed up, but in the interests of maintaining good relations, he does not want to be overtly directive. He conveys his message by an indirect route, using a high-pitched incredulous and humorous tone for a comment which could be interpreted as a criticism of Aidan's slowness. Aidan retaliates, however, with a humorous challenge to Vincent's inference about his speed. Thus complex messages are conveyed in an acceptable way; humour enables Vince to convey a directive which recognizes Aidan's face needs, while Aidan preserves his dignity as well as responding appropriately to Vince.

Interestingly, in the workplace data analysed, humour was more often used to soften an FTA between equals than downwards. Superiors typically hedged directives using standard politeness strategies such as tags, modal particles, and indi-

rect structures. However, as Excerpt 9 illustrates, in some instances humour was used to attenuate a directive between people with unequal power.

**Excerpt 9**

Context. Manager, Beth, to administrative assistant, Marion, who is chatting to a secretary.

1   Beth:   OK Marion I'm afraid serious affairs of state will have to wait
2           we have some trivial issues needing our attention
3           [All laugh]

There are several indications that this utterance is motivated by politeness and oriented to the addressee's negative face needs: the use of the pronouns 'we' and 'our', for instance, function to align the manager and the administrative assistant, expressing positive politeness and solidarity; and the source of the humour itself – the ironic downgrading of their on-task work to 'trivial' compared to the social talk or work gossip in which the two women were engaged – also serves this purpose.

Excerpt 9 is also a classic case of competing discourses (Lee, 1992) – this time involving those of solidarity and power. The utterance reflects Beth's competing loyalties – to Marion as a colleague, on the one hand, and, on the other, to the management team which requires that she move Marion back on task. Hence, at one level Excerpt 9 illustrates the use of humour to maintain good relations between those with differential power, and to avoid the overt enactment of power or authority. But it is also possible to interpret such interactions as instances of repressive discourse, where humour is co-opted for less positive purposes. In power-differentiated contexts, humour can be regarded as a discourse strategy which disguises oppression – a device to sugar the pill. This issue will be discussed in more detail in Section 3 later.

*2.2 Addressee's positive face needs: attenuating FAAs*  Humour can be used to soften the impact of a criticism or even an insult – speech acts which can be described as face attack acts (FAAs): i.e. 'communicative acts which are injurious to the hearer's positive or negative face, and are introduced in a situation which could have been avoided, but where their inclusion is perceived by the hearer to be intentional' (Austin, 1990: 279).[10] Humour which attenuates a critical comment reflects the speaker's awareness of the addressee's positive face needs – the need to have their wants acknowledged, and their values respected and shared. Humour is thus a very useful strategy for softening criticisms in contexts where work is being regularly evaluated and assessed. In Excerpt 10, Andy implies that Victor has been too wordy, using humour to convey the critical message.

**Excerpt 10**

Context. Two advisers comparing their evaluations.

1   And:   apart from that I've just got what you've got
2           just in a lot less words /[laughs]\
3   Vic:   /[laughs] \

The humour lies in the directness of the criticism in a context where attention to face would be predicted. Once again, tone of voice is crucial in conveying Andy's intention to take account of Victor's face needs, to amuse rather than offend.

Where a superior was meeting with subordinates to evaluate their performance, humour was available as a strategy to reduce the face threat of critical comments. In the following excerpt Sara, the superior, is not happy that the team's strategy of passing a problem upwards means this particular problem will end up on her desk.

**Excerpt 11**
Context. Sara is assessing the procedures used by an evaluation team.

| 1 | Val: | then that sat somewhere for a little while and then Len passed it to |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | | Clive who passed it to [laughs] me but you know then |
| 3 | Sara: | yep it's coming back to me I can see it happening |
| 4 | | [adopts a funny voice] I can see it coming ah [laughs] |
| 5 | Val: | yeah [laughs] flying through the air at you um [tut] |
| 6 | Sara: | [laughs] |

Sara uses fantasy humour (Hay, 1995) to express her negative response to the results of the team's behaviour. The effectiveness of the humour as a softening device is reflected by the fact that it is picked up by Val (line 5) who makes a further contribution to the fantasy. Jointly constructed humour sequences in this context provide good evidence that the criticism has been conveyed without causing negative affect. With humour as the adhesive, the competing discourses of power and solidarity have been well integrated. Politeness Theory suggests that humour functions here to reflect the speaker's concern for the addressees' face needs.

The requirements of institutional roles at work often make face threatening acts unavoidable. In such contexts, humour provides an acceptable attenuation strategy. Excerpt 12 provides an example where a very direct criticism is attenuated by the humorous, laughing and friendly tone with which it is delivered.

**Excerpt 12**
Context: Two female policy analysts working on the draft of a letter.

| 1 | Jo: | it kind of reads like [laughs] you didn't want to put much time into |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | | it [Both laugh] |

Jo's remark causes laughter partly because it is so direct. The workplace is a non-intimate context where such a 'bald on record' approach is unusual or marked. Jo's comment challenges the norms for polite interaction between peers; consideration for the addressee's positive face needs would generally lead to the use of a less direct strategy. The humour caused by the dissonance in such examples emphasizes the general underlying norm that people will tend to treat each other with a certain basic level of politeness in the workplace.

Humorous insults and jocular abuse are more extreme examples of the same phenomenon, while insults are quite naked FAAs explicitly signalling an absence

of concern for the addressee's positive face needs. Humour is one available strategy to attenuate the effect of such utterances; it functions to reduce the unacceptability of the FAA (Austin, 1990; see also Hay, 1994). This aggressive type of humour occurred more frequently in workplace interactions where the participants knew each other well. Between equals, working together on an issue, humour was a means of 'managing' suggestions that could be interpreted as critical, or which were undoubtedly intended to be critical, as in Excerpt 13.

**Excerpt 13**

Context. Three women discussing proposals they are working on.

1   Val:   and Celia's finished her proposals I'm sure [laughs]
2   Cel:   on the last one
3   Val:   ah you sod
4   All:   [laugh]

Val insults Celia because she is performing well, and thus showing up the other two. The laughter reflects the incongruity of such a strong term of abuse in the work context between colleagues. At one level, there is doubtless an element of underlying aggression based on envy, reflected in the fact that an insult is the chosen response. However, insults between those who know each other well are also signals of solidarity and markers of in-group membership (i.e. 'we know each other well enough to insult each other without causing offence' (see Hay, 1994). Humour encodes the criticism or insult in an acceptable form; insults can be considered instances of 'doing collegiality' between those who work together closely.

   Jocular abuse of this kind occurs in a variety of contexts in the workplace. Colleagues use insulting terms such as *rotter, sod,* and *bastard* in jest in situations such as when a colleague passes on an unwelcome job, volunteers them for a task, indicates they will be the person to respond to a tricky client, and so on. While it is possible to analyse these insults as cases where the speaker attenuates an FTA out of concern for the addressee's positive face needs, it seems that Politeness Theory is being stretched to its limits by such an interpretation. The underlying 'dark side' to some insults suggests that an alternative explanation should be sought. An instance of jocular abuse in the workplace is not adequately analysed as an attenuated FTA; nor is it simply a means of expressing solidarity (Hay, 1995). Rather, some workplace insults function as FAAs, and humour provides their 'cover'. In other words, jocular abuse often functions as a covert strategy for face attack, a means of registering a veiled protest, i.e. what I am calling a *contestive strategy*, as described later.

   So, Politeness Theory, with its focus on the speaker's concern for the participants' face needs, provides an adequate explanation for the frequent uses of humour to enact, create and maintain solidarity in the workplace. Politeness Theory also accounts for the use of humour to attenuate or hedge the impact of negatively affective speech acts, such as directives or criticisms, which threaten collegial relations and underscore power relationships. However, it must be rec-

ognized that not all participants consistently want to de-emphasize power relationships. Indeed, it is sometimes politic, especially in relation to particular broader workplace objectives, to assert authority in order to ensure that particular goals are achieved. In such cases, humour may be used 'repressively', to maintain control of a situation and emphasize who is in charge. Equally, subordinates may refuse to stay in their 'place', and humour is a powerful device for subtly signalling incipient rebellion in the ranks, or at least for encoding rebelliousness in a sufficiently indirect form to evade censure. Contestive humour challenges the status quo; it is inherently subversive. I turn now to an examination of these alternative power-based and more critical perspectives on the functions of humour in the workplace.

### 3. REPRESSIVE HUMOUR

Politeness Theory provides an adequate account of humour used to express concern for the face needs of others, but it is less satisfactory in explaining humour used to license deliberately face threatening behaviour, especially in asymmetrical relationships. Where it is acceptable for power to be blatantly exhibited (e.g. between young males), humour is often used to legitimize an emphasis on power relationships; in such situations, more powerful participants tend to make fun of those who are less powerful.[11] More commonly, powerful players use humour to subtly control the behaviour of their subordinates (Graham et al., 1992; Hay, 1995; Martineau, 1972; Murphy, 1986). Because it is no longer acceptable in many communities to use explicit orders when addressing professional clients, for example, attenuation devices, such as hedges and humour, are necessary tools for those who wish to achieve particular goals, but who do not wish to appear authoritarian in doing so. The gynaecologists mentioned above who used humour to gain patients' compliance in Pizzini's (1991) study provide one example.

Where power relations are especially salient, humour used downwards by those in authority is often most accurately analysed as evidence of 'repressive discourse', a disguise for a less acceptable message. Context is crucial in identifying the nature of the power relationships, as Excerpt 14 illustrates.

### Excerpt 14

Context. Barry, Callum's manager, has asked Callum to speed up his team, which Callum has done by phoning all of them to put the pressure on. When Barry walks into a meeting later in the day, Callum takes the opportunity to protest to his boss.

1  Call:   everyone has been running around like crazy men since
2          our phone call this morning
3  Bar:    not altogether a bad thing [laughs]

Barry's response (line 3) is unsympathetic and unpalatable to Callum, but he presents it as a humorous comment, making it difficult for Callum to challenge without losing face or appearing to be a whinger. The humorous tone masks

Barry's impatience with his subordinate's earlier handling of the situation. The humour provides a 'cover' for a remark which might otherwise be considered unreasonably oppressive in the work context.

As discussed earlier, criticism is a more extreme instance of face threat, often more accurately described as face attack. If criticism is regarded as unavoidable in order to further some goal other than that of good interpersonal relations, then the speaker may choose to hedge it. Humour is one available attenuation strategy, as illustrated in Excerpts 10 and 12. But where a superior is criticizing a subordinate, to some extent the effect must always be a demonstration of power and authority, or 'oppressive' in Pateman's (1980) terms. Humour can be used then in the service of power to minimally disguise the oppressive intent, i.e. as a repressive discourse strategy. Even Excerpt 9 earlier can be analysed from this perspective, despite its positively polite components. And Excerpt 15, where the critical intent is very manifest, certainly illustrates this use of humour.

**Excerpt 15**
Context. Neil, the boss, has come to collect his administrative assistant, Ken, for a meeting for which Ken is late. Ken is working at his computer.

```
1   Neil:   hate to drag you away when you're obviously having so much fun
2           but it IS after ten
3   Ken:    [laughs] some fun
```

Neil's comment is ironic, as Ken's response recognizes. The irony provides an acceptable cover for the reprimand, which is clearly evident in the tone of voice. The fact that humour is often used to disguise the force of criticisms in asymmetrical interactions underlines the extent to which criticism is experienced in our data (and our culture) as a very heavily weighted threat to face. Though criticism is an activity one might expect to be a normal component of the feedback mechanism in an asymmetrical relationship in workplaces, the fact that it is regularly attenuated suggests it is more accurately classified as an FAA. In Pateman's terms, humour in this context is clearly acting as a repressive discourse device; it is used to disguise the fact that the speaker has the authority to explicitly require the addressee to behave as s/he orders, and to reprimand the addressee who fails to behave as directed or meet required standards.

An analysis which considers the possibility that humour may function as repressive discourse, thus involves examining the underlying power relationships, their salience in the particular context, and the explicitness with which they are being enacted. As the examples involving directives and criticisms in sections 2.1 and 2.2 make clear, humour is one way to 'do power' less explicitly – a way that is generally more acceptable in a context where informality is valued and status differences are played down. However, the underlying intent is coercive, and so this use of verbal humour clearly qualifies as 'repressive discourse'; it functions to gain willing compliance, while, at least superficially, expressing solidarity and de-emphasizing the power differential.

4. CONTESTIVE HUMOUR

Finally, humour may be used to challenge existing relations within the institutional power structure. In such cases, it is used not so much as a politeness device, attending to participants' positive or negative face needs, nor as a repressive discourse device, disguising an underlying power relationship, or conveying a directive or a negatively affective speech act with a sugar coating.[12] Rather, it functions as a critical discourse device, *a contestive strategy*, using one of the few acceptable means available to subordinates who wish to challenge, if only temporarily, the existing authority structures.

Humour is used contestively in the workplace when it serves as a cloak for the expression of 'socially risky' opinions (Winick, 1976), or as a shield for criticism of a superior. In Excerpt 16, Bob casts doubt on his senior's judgement.

**Excerpt 16**
Context. Chairperson, Henry, planning with Bob, a more junior staff member, a strategy to trounce opposition at a meeting.

```
1   Hen:   they're bound to fall over as soon as you present this stuff
2          it can't be refuted
3   Bob:   let's just hope they've been reading the same textbooks as you
4          [Both laugh]
```

The humour serves as an instance of contestive discourse, attenuating and thus concealing what could be considered the effrontery of a critical speech act in such a context. Bob is effectively conveying scepticism about Henry's views, and indicating that he is less confident than Henry about the predicted outcome. By embedding his different judgement and sceptical evaluation of their chances of success in a humorous utterance, Bob renders it more acceptable. Humour also renders Bob's implied critical judgement and different opinion less accessible for challenge by Henry because it is not explicitly 'on record'.

Similarly, humour may be used in this way to license a challenge to a superior's definition of the situation. Sollitt-Morris (1997) provides a very clear example of such a challenge in a school department meeting where one teacher contests another's attempt to speak for her.

**Excerpt 17** (Sollitt-Morris, 1997: 17)
Context. School department meeting. Zeb is the Head of Department and Chair.

```
1   Zeb:   okay let's have a look at this agenda + + exams right we've all got a
2          copy of the third form [laughter] what about the fourth
3   Bet:   no Ann hasn't got one yet
4   Ann:   no I haven't [with fake American accent] mom
5          [laughter]
```

Sollitt-Morris comments (1997: 17–18)

> In this example Bet takes it upon herself to answer for Ann, which Ann clearly does not appreciate. Rather than tell Bet overtly that she does not want Bet to speak for her, Ann agrees with Bet then calls her 'mom' in a silly voice. 'Moms' speak for children,

and 'moms' have a higher status in relation to their children. By addressing Bet as 'mom', which she is patently not, Ann is able to undermine Bet's interference.

In Excerpt 18 May uses humour to direct Jenny, her superior, to take responsibility for the next presentation.

**Excerpt 18**
Context. Forward planning meeting involving Manager, Jenny, and her team.

```
1   May:   I'm sure you would just love to show off your new whizz-bang
2          computer with all its special effects wouldn't you Jenny
           [General laughter]
```

May does not have the right to tell Jenny what to do. In this case the humour in the form of an ironic assertion serves as a useful disguise for what could be regarded as an implicit challenge to the superior's authority. Support for this analysis can be found in an account of directives in a hospital setting by Maureen Mooney (1980) where, in a meeting between medical personnel, all instances of subordinates giving directives to superiors were treated as humorous. So when a senior nurse used an imperative to suggest that a doctor add a particular patient to his workload (*You do that one*), this elicited general laughter. Nevertheless, in such situations the socially 'unacceptable' or norm-breaking message is effectively put across. Indeed, one of our informants commented that humour was a useful non-threatening strategy for floating subversive or 'outrageous' ideas. And, as with jocular abuse, it is difficult for a superior to challenge contestive humour without losing face.

As analysed above, humour is a common strategy for attenuating insults in the workplace. Because it constitutes such a threat to face, jocular abuse tends to be restricted to those who know each other well, and is most common between equals, where it serves as one means of 'doing collegiality'. However, there are cases in our data where jocular abuse occurs upwards as well as between equals.[13] Subordinates sometimes complained about tasks assigned to them, for instance, or criticisms made about them, by humorously abusing their superiors (e.g. *oh shut up., what a rotten trick to play on a girl*). These jocular insults have different force between status-differentiated participants from between equals. They are always slightly risky and, however jocular, there is an underlying contestive, challenging or 'dark side' to the message which is not adequately analysed within Politeness Theory framework.

To sum up, then, in work contexts humour can be used by subordinates as a subtle (or not so subtle) license to challenge the power structure, as well as by those in power to achieve the speaker's goal while apparently de-emphasizing the power differential. Humour is one very effective way of 'doing power' less explicitly, a subtle device for getting things done while also conveying important messages about power relations. An analysis which treats humour as basically a negative politeness strategy, a device for attenuating a FTA, and purely an expression of concern for the addressee's face, risks under-analysing the interactional social significance of the exchange.

# Conclusion

Humour is always intended to be amusing, but it may also serve a range of more complex functions in the workplace. Humour generally creates and maintains solidarity or collegiality; and it may hedge or attenuate face threatening acts such as directives, and negatively affective speech acts such as criticisms and insults. In all these functions humour contributes to social cohesion in the workplace. Humour is sensitively oriented to participants' face needs. It is a dynamic means of expressing and constructing solidarity, and an effective strategy for reducing potential offence.

In interactions where relative power is particularly salient, however, the way humour functions in constructing and negotiating relationships is often more complex. Humour is a means of embedding a risky or unacceptable proposition in a superficially innocuous utterance; it is thus particularly useful in the management of unequal work relationships. Humour may be used by the powerful to maintain authority and control while continuing to appear collegial, and by the repressed to license a challenge which subverts that control. Humour may be used by those in authority as a repressive discourse device, concealing the authority structures or power relations involved in order to gain the addressee's compliance. In this case, humour functions strategically, encoding a directive or criticism in a more acceptable form. Alternatively, humour may be used by subordinates in an asymmetrical power relationship as a critical discourse device, functioning to facilitate a challenge to the positive or negative face needs of the addressee. In such cases, humour provides an acceptable form for a challenge to the status quo, questioning the validity or accuracy of statements from a superior, for instance, or clothing an insulting attack on the positive face of a superior with a pretence of play. Humour permits the subordinate to embed the challenge, criticism or insult in a socially acceptable form, which makes the negative communicative intent less easy to challenge.

Many other aspects of the way humour is used in the workplace merit attention. The distribution of humour is not random, for instance, and varies according to many factors, including the type of interaction. In general, humour is most likely to occur in the opening and closing sequences of meetings, and at points of change within an interaction, but some meetings are regularly punctuated with banter. There are particular types of humour which seem to be preferred in particular workplaces; and while the types of humour which occur in mixed-gender and single gender interactions overlap, there appear to be preferred styles in some organizational contexts. The predominant functions of humour also seem to vary in different contexts. Defusing tension is an important function of humour in some meetings, while in others more frequent functions of humour may include facilitating difficult negotiations, and conveying criticism or instructions in an acceptable form.

Another area of further research only briefly touched on in this paper is the extent to which humour is jointly constructed in workplace settings (Marra,

1998), and how it often serves as a remarkably powerful solidarity building device in the business context. A related factor is the relationship between the use of humour and the relative integration of different participants into the workplace culture or networks. It seems likely that the most frequent targets or butts of banter are also the core members of the organizational networks (cf. Hay, 1994). There is also a distinctly creative aspect of humour, especially evident in some of the larger meetings in our data, where participants were required to brainstorm new projects or produce innovative ideas. This, too, merits further attention.

So, to conclude, this analysis of humour has identified a number of different functions served by humour at work. While Politeness Theory accounts satisfactorily for the positive politeness functions of humour, it is clear that an alternative model is often necessary to analyse the functions of humour in situations of asymmetrical power. I have suggested that an adequate model must integrate politeness theory with a more critical approach to the analysis of humour. In other words, we must be able to account not only for cooperative, face-oriented discourse in a range of contexts, but also for the dark side of politeness – the repressive discourse of manipulative superiors in asymmetrical contexts, as well as the impolite manifestations of the less powerful, the critical challenges to those in power from those in subordinate positions. The power of humour lies in its flexibility for all these purposes – it can function as a bouquet, a shield, and a cloak, as well as an incisive weapon in the armoury of the oppressed.

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

All names are pseudonyms.

| | |
|---|---|
| YES | Capitals indicate emphatic stress |
| [laughs] | Paralinguistic features in square brackets |
| [drawls] | |
| + | Pause of up to one second |
| ++ | Two second pause |
| /so how\ | Simultaneous speech |
| /yes but\ | |
| (hello) | Transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance |
| ? | Rising or question intonation |
| publicat- | Incomplete or cutoff utterance |
| . . . | Some words omitted |

NOTES

of some of the points in this article appears as Holmes (1998). The research was supported by a grant from the New Zealand Foundation for Research Science and Technology.

1. Gibson (1994) provides an interesting critique of such approaches.
2. Mott and Petrie (1995: 329) adopted a similar methodology and make the same point.
3. Pakeha is a Maori word used in New Zealand to refer to people of European (usually British) descent.
4. See Graham, Papa and Brooks (1992) and Hay (1995) for a good discussion of this issue.
5. Obviously, this analysis is confined to auditory signals of listener response.
6. Attardo (1993) analyses jokes as involving deliberate violations of Grice's maxims.
7. For a sophisticated discussion of the complexities of participants' communicative goals, and the relevance of goal conflict, see Tracy and Coupland (1990).
8. As Sinclair (1985: 16) argues 'The problem is mainly where to stop. Language activity is but one component of our general activity'.
9. For further discussion of ways of 'doing collegiality' at work, see Holmes (in press), Holmes, Stubbe and Vine (1999).
10. Austin notes that Brown and Levinson's model of politeness assumes that 'the speaker wants or needs to maintain the hearer's face, that the hearer poses a threat to the speaker's face, and that the speaker cares what the hearer does in retaliation' (1990: 279). FAAs are not based on such assumptions. Indeed, they account for situations where mutual interest does not govern the conduct of the interaction, and what the speaker wants to communicate is not necessarily cooperative (1990: 278–9).
11. See, for example, Labov (1972), Kiesling (forthcoming), Kuiper (1991).
12. See Holmes (1984) for a discussion of positively affective and negatively affective speech acts.
13. It is interesting to note that jocular abuse downwards from superior to subordinates was rare in the workplaces which have been analysed. It is possible that insults, even if attenuated by humour, would too obviously constitute abuses of power in the workplace, and that they are thus avoided due to legislative restraints. However, this pattern was also noted by Hay in her analysis of jocular abuse in friendship groups. Newer and less well-established group members received less abuse than longer standing and well-integrated members.

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