

Linguistic humor at work – A socio-cognitive model of creative social positioning

Many studies of workplace discourse have highlighted the fact that linguistic humour is a powerful “multifunctional resource in workplace interaction” (Holmes & Stubbe 2003: 109). Allowing interactors to take a “momentary mental vacation” (Eastman 1936), humour is a tool to alleviate stress and tension, to negotiate face, to establish social cohesion through bonding, to express solidarity, and to downplay power differences (see, e.g., Holmes & Stubbe 2003: Ch. 6; Koester 2004; Richards 2006). Accordingly, these social interactional approaches have mainly focused on the joint performance of humour in workplace conversations such as small talk or business meetings while they usually ignored the cognitive representations, processes, and mechanism that allow humour to become functional as a communicative strategy. In contrast, cognitive-linguistic approaches to humour have mainly modelled these cognitive correlates in terms of incongruous semantic scripts (Norrick 2006: 425; see also Brône & Feyaerts 2003) or sudden semantic leaps between radically distinct mental spaces (Coulson 2000). However, they have hardly addressed the interactional correlates or their social functionality.

This paper attempts to link the creative cognitive dimensions of linguistic humour with the social interactional dimension of joint meaning construction in institutionalized workplace settings. Linking Barsalou’s (2005) model of situated conceptualization with mental space theory (Fauconnier 1997) and Clark’s notion of action layering (Clark 1996: Ch. 12), it is argued that linguistic humour is the emergent socio-cognitive product of evoking creatively layered conceptualizations across different mental spaces. These mentally simulated action-layers, are constructed against the norms of the speech-activity types that define the workplace interactions in which they occur (Levinson 1992). Relative to the internalized expectations for the given speech activity, linguistic humour is based on creative ‘spacebuilding’. Humorous, norm-deviating linguistic cues invite the joint construction of mental spaces that work as alternative – but only hypothetically simulated - action scenarios (action layers) that open conceptual niches for mental vacations (see also Langlotz 2007). The above-mentioned social functions of humour thus emerge through the creative tension between the social relationships that are simulated in these ‘conceptual vacation spaces’ and the actual social relationships that shape the reality of the business at hand. In other words, the social positions that are reflected in the mentally constructed conceptual niches counteract (alleviation, downplaying power) or reinforce (social bonding, solidarity) the role models in the institutionalized, discursive reality-space.

The socio-cognitive model is derived from and exemplified on the basis of interactional data collected from service encounters in tourism and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (forum postings) in a cooperative workgroup. These alternative work environments cause different challenges for creative social positioning. While the social roles in tourist information transactions are highly constrained by the institutionalized setting, asynchronous computer-mediated communication implies the absence of immediate social input. As a result, these different communicative habitats invite alternative strategies for the joint socio-cognitive construction of situated social roles through humour.

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