HUMOUR IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

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Résumé : *À l'aide d'une analyse pragmatique, cette étude qualitative examine la manière dont les professeurs d'université construisent l'humour dans leurs interactions écrites. Cet article s'appuie sur un corpus auto-compilé de 100 messages électroniques choisis dans une base de données de plusieurs centaines pour examiner empiriquement les différentes manières dont l'humour se manifeste linguistiquement dans la communication professionnelle. Sur la base des preuves textuelles, l'étude aborde la question de la politesse au travail et le rôle de l'humour dans ce contexte et conclut que l'utilisation de l'humour est une stratégie réussie pour atteindre et maintenir la solidarité et minimiser les éventuels désaccords au sein du personnel académique. Un résultat potentiel de l'utilisation de l'humour comme stratégie de communication professionnelle pourrait représenter un outil d'amélioration des relations au travail.*

Mots-clés : *humour, politesse linguistique, actes menaçants (Face Threatening Acts), communication professionnelle, discours professionnel*

1. Introduction

1.1. Professional Discourse

Communication plays a central role in the workplace and many of the tasks people typically perform in their everyday workplace lives are in one way or another related to communication. This crucial role of communication is particularly obvious in those professional contexts where doing work means doing communication and where tasks are accomplished in and through communicating with clients, colleagues and other professionals. In her book *Professional Discourse*, Gunnarsson (2009) asserts that this type of discourse includes different modes of communication produced by professionals, 'as covering text and talk', and the intertwinement of these modalities, in professional contexts and for professional purposes (2009: 5). In these professions, which include the academia, communication is the main tool for getting work done and electronic messages (e-mails) constitute essential means through which work is accomplished. Likewise, in the introduction to *The Construction of Professional Discourse*, Gunnarsson *et al.* (1997) defines professional

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discourse as the language used by a diverse range of 'professional areas' or 'domains' such as legal, medical, educational, and scientific fields, which are marked by 'a unique set of cognitive needs, social conditions and relationships with society at large' (1997:5). This definition emphasizes Gotti's view (2003), who refers to 'specialist discourse' as 'the specialized use of language in contexts which are typical of a specialized community stretching across the academic, the professional, the technical and the occupational areas of knowledge and practice' (2003: 24). Since any profession may represent a 'discourse system' (Scollon&Scollon 2001), which links members through a shared ideology, socialization, face systems and discourse forms, *professional discourse* captures how people in a workplace setting communicate with each other and with their clients, stakeholders and the wider public (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, & Planken, 2007), using different media such as e-mails, face-to face interactions etc. In this paper, *professional communication* is used as an umbrella term to describe written interactions which take place in an academic workplace context and involve participants who are engaged in work-related activities, such as e-mail exchanges between colleagues at the educational institution.

1.2. The Genre of E-mail in the Workplace

In the educational, business, and other workplace settings, e-mails are routinely seen as 'providing a more convenient professionalism', one that can 'speed up decision-making' and 'build strong daily working relationships' (Crystal, 2004:128). Based on Mulholland's (1999) study on the increasing role the language of e-mail plays in university life, this paper examines the way humour is used as a strategy in the genre[1] of e-mail, which has come to prominence in the modern workplace as a major element in business use. This particular kind of genre was selected because it could be predicted to contain a high degree of formality, while nonetheless attempting to incorporate some humorous strategies, and thus to differ from the previous research data on electronic communication, which has focused mainly on informality of use (Murray, 1991; Crystal, 2004). The present study assumes that texts exchanged via e-mail are 'socially important verbal actions' and that their language has a significant role to play in providing that 'the acts are performed well' (Searle, 1969).

1.3. E-mail Corpus

Humour is not frequently used in written interaction in the academia; therefore, it was rather challenging to build a substantial corpus of instances for analysis. Specifically, the corpus compiled for this study involved a selection of 100 e-mails, chosen from a collection of several hundreds, written by the administrative and academic staff of a North American university over a three-month period. The study reported here is an empirical, qualitative examination of the selected group of e-mails and comprises an analysis of the humorous face-threatening acts (FTAs) of e-mail texts as they were sent and received. The author of the paper adopted a participant position in the study, being both a sender and a receiver of e-mails.

[1] The analysis carried out in this paper is based on the following definitions of the term 'genre': "typified rhetorical actions based on recurrent situation" (Miller, 1984: 159); "how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them" (Martin, 1985: 250); "a socially ratified way of using language in connection with a particular type of social activity" (Fairclough, 1995: 14).

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2. Politeness and Humour

Humour is a common element of human interaction as a means of constructing identities and its exact nature arises through the interplay of a variety of factors, which include the genre of humour used, the context, and the interlocutor factors such as gender, ethnicity, and social relationship. The decision to joke as well as the types and content of jokes reveal a great deal about their teller or sender (Norrick 1989, Norrick&Chiaro, 2011). Thus, humour may become an FTA for individuals who want to claim 'good sense of humour' as a part of their face (Spencer-Oatey, 2007).

Brown&Levinson (1987) describe joking as a positive politeness strategy, stating that humour builds on and exploits shared understandings; humour can be used to mitigate face threats by making participants feel comfortable (1987: 124). This position has received a great deal of support from empirical studies on humour (Holmes and Marra, 2006; Holmes, 2007). Also, Nash (1985) considers that, in the act of humour, the sender plays 'with various dualities' i.e. ambiguities and homonymy (1985: 9), while Chiaro (1992) claims that 'ambiguity can be exploited to create verbal duplicity' (1992: 122).

Humour can thus be regarded as a positive politeness strategy that can minimize an FTA as well as social distance, which could maintain someone's positive face. In this respect, Martineau (1972) asserts that 'constructive humour' can maintain a group's positive face, encouraging solidarity inside the group members and smoothing social relations while tightening ties among them by relieving tensions. Therefore, humour may have an impact on work groups and organizations, which can use it to reduce stress and enhance leadership, group cohesiveness, communication, creativity, and organizational culture.

As regards the notions of politeness and 'face threat', the present study mainly sticks to the theories developed by Goffman (1955, 1967) and by Brown&Levinson's politeness research (1978, 1987). The concept of 'face threat' was introduced by Goffman (1955), who focused his seminal work on understanding how participants avoid or reduce face threats in interpersonal interactions. He distinguished between intentional, accidental (unintended), and incidental face threats, regarding intentional face threats as underpinning face aggression or attack (1955: 217-222). Brown&Levinson (1987) formulated a theory of politeness as avoiding or reducing FTAs and defined the notions of positive and negative face, namely, the want that one's "wants be desirable to at least some others" (i.e., "approval") and the want that one's "actions be unimpeded by others" (i.e., "self-determination") (1987: 62, 77). The notion of 'face threat' has been used in describing practices in which participants maintain or save face in the case of politeness research, or in analyzing practices in which participants attack or damage face, commonly referred to as impoliteness. Some of the strategies people may use to manage threats to other people's faces include discretion, explanation, solidarity, tact, and joking. Goffman (1967) believed that we might deliver a threatening message in a joking manner and thus help to reduce the 'face threat'. Therefore, the analysis carried out has applied the Linguistic Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which argues that senders of messages make language choices to soften potential FTAs, but these claims have not been empirically examined in regards to humour used as a strategy to mitigate FTAs in an academic workplace.

3. Realizations of Humorous FTAs in Professional Communication

Since jokes are based on 'mutual shared background knowledge and values' (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 124) and positive politeness is the "kernel of 'familiar' and 'joking' behaviour" (1987: 129), humour may be used in professional e-mails to emphasize that shared background or those shared values in 'friendly jokes' or 'inside jokes':

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(1) "I've made 48 copies of each exam. *That should cover all and one ghost.*";
(2) "The topic suggested by Janet sounds okay to me. *Can we add how much time the patient has to live so that students don't say we will all die eventually? :)*";
(3) "We may need more than 25 minutes to discuss both exams and *vent. :)*";
(4) "*I'm going to grit my teeth* and face the listening final after supper.";
(5) "*Gone are the "good old days"* when I could just get things done without extended higher-level consultation. :)";
(6) "Norming and marking does take more time than I thought. *But I will survive.*";
(7) "See you at our meeting at 1! (*Yes, this is a friendly reminder :).*"

In the context of mutual vulnerability of face, any individual would try to avoid FTAs or would seek to use certain strategies to minimize the threat, such as joking or teasing. In a pragmatic approach, jokes are treated as speech acts, where sender (S), recipient (R), and situation must be considered. In Brown and Levinson's view (1987), joking can be perceived as a positive politeness technique, that is as a humorous strategy that can minimize the threat to one's positive face. Humour may also act as a way of minimizing social distance, for instance when S is joking to put R 'at ease' in a rather tensed situation concerning job offers:

(8) "Just to let you know, Jackie and I are working on the assignments today. I am sorry for the delay. If you have not heard from us yet, *do not despair* - I may still be contacting you with an offer of hours.";
(9) "Just to clarify the sessional posting for the Fall semester, [...] all I can say is wait for Deb to return and give her an opportunity to get caught up and review the situation. *Please don't all inundate her with your concerns/questions* etc as I am positive she understands your position and will get back to you before too long."

Thus, the receivers of these e-mails do not feel that their faces are threatened in any way even though joking can potentially present a threat as it is performed under the condition of uncertainty: R may not get the joke and S may be a risk of being misunderstood. Instructors may also remember the information sent out better when they perceive it as humorous or even get increased interest in the matter at hand. For instance, in response to a mistake of *R*'s, the Academic Coordinator of the program may joke:

(10) "*050 UR courses has gremlins*...we can't find any other explanation. Someone must have played around and opened all of the Eyes for 050. I will let you know *when I solve the mystery*, but for now tell your students the Eyes shouldn't be open and they shouldn't see their marks yet. :)"

Also, a joke may minimize an *FTA* of requesting, as in:

(11) "Just a reminder that *Mickie and Minnie have been seen around campus*. Please do not leave any perishable items [...] in your drawers or anywhere in your office, especially over the holidays. Also, unplug all appliances, shut down all computers, and leave extended absence greetings on your phone and in your email. *Mickie and Minnie will go back to Florida if they find nothing to eat.*"

Thus, using humour in a professional e-mail may be regarded as an opportunity to show off one's wit and creativity, which can make others more empathetic towards the

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sender. Having a sense of humour can also make leaders more approachable and ending an e-mail on a funny note leaves a good impression, as illustrated in the examples above. Consequently, humour can be considered a basic positive politeness technique in an academic workplace where leaders may have the intention to amuse or make subordinates laugh to puts them 'at ease'.

Another example of socially acceptable humour used in professional communication comes in teasing or joking where bald-on record[2] (without redressive action) occurs. In this case, S's want to satisfy R's face is small, either because S is powerful and does not fear retaliation or non-cooperation from R or S wants to be rude and does not care about maintaining face. For example, the Academic Coordinator may tease the instructors without the risk of offending[3] as joking relationships[4] are 'a form of familiarity' (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952: 107), as in:

> (12) "On that note, if you have copies of ESL program texts in your office or home, please bring them back to the Campion office ASAP. We do not want to buy more books when there are copies readily available - *our money can be used for much better things, like hiring more teachers:).*"

Besides, when maximum efficiency is very important, this being mutually known to both S and R, no face redress is necessary, as illustrated in the following message:

> (13) "If at least 4 full time instructors could come to the ESL boardroom when you are finished lunch to complete grading of these exams, that would be most appreciated. Perhaps those with a lighter teaching load to prepare for *could do the honour:)*".

In this case of urgency, redress would actually decrease the communicated urgency. Another case where non-redress occurs is when S's want to satisfy R's face is small because S wants to be rude or does not care about maintaining face. A good example of socially acceptable rudeness comes in teasing or joking without risk of offending, as in:

> (14) "Just a friendly reminder that if you use anything in the kitchen, it needs to be washed, dried and put away. Neither Lisa nor Melissa should be responsible for cleaning up the kitchen. I realize most of you do clean up, but *there are some repeat offenders.*"

or with risk of offending, as illustrated in:

> (15) "Here are your printing stats for September. [...] Now that Raj is gone, we had hoped printing costs would go down but it seems some of you, not naming names, *are seeking to replace him as the #1 printer. Not sure that is a title Harvey or Jackie want you to pursue*."

where one of the instructors' reply clearly shows offence:

> (16) "Brad, *I am not sure that ridiculing present or past instructors in a public email forum is the best way* to approach the difficulty regarding the high number of photocopies that were

[2] For our analysis, we will treat the bold-on record strategy as speaking in conformity with Grice's Maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relevance, and Manner (Grice, 1975).

[3] Goody suggests that the essence of 'joking relations' is that they carry the 'presumption of non-threatening intention'. (1978a: 15).

[4] Brown&Levinson relate respect and familiarity to general considerations of social distance (D) and social hierarchy (P) (1987: 296).

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made in September. [...] I am sure that any of the instructors would be pleased to discuss this issue with you or with either one of our supervisors privately."

In this case, the FTA is redressed with an apology for transgressing, which gives the addressee an 'out', 'a face-saving line of escape' (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 70), permitting her to feel that her response was adequate:

(17) „*My apologies* if I have offended anyone. For anyone who prints over and above what we have determined to be an acceptable level of printing, we will follow up privately with those people."

or turned into a joke to minimize the FTA:

(18) "Thanks for explaining. *I'm not really the printing police*...we just told Harvey that we would keep an eye out on it."

Furthermore, humour appears to be used in professional communication to distract people from negative emotions such as anger or anxiety that people might experience when processing certain information. Thus, the instructors may focus on the joke rather than on the FTA that they would otherwise undergo. For instance, in the corpus analyzed the news that the teachers will have to do an extensive load of marking or have strenuous meetings is announced with emoticons and mild humour:

(19) "Thank you so much to those of you who did invigilating and grading of the late placements tests today. I know that doing the late placement test today was not ideal for you, the teachers, and I apologize. [...] *The good news is there will be no extra marking to do on a Friday??:):)* ";

(20) "I know you are very busy, but please let me know if you think we should meet again to discuss the 050 curriculum in more depth. [...] we could perhaps try to see each other next Friday...? (*I know, another dreaded Friday meeting:)*".

In the above emails, cracking a joke was also meant to create feelings of friendship and familiarity by calling attention to the group's shared professional values and background knowledge. Another purpose for using humour in professional communication is targeted at developing empathy within the group members and sharing common attitudes. All in all, humorous strategies that put the receiver 'at ease' can be regarded as examples of how humour can preserve the positive face of a group as it may relieve tensions, convey solidarity and strengthen ties between the members of that group (Martineau, 1972).

In the next examples, the instructors' positive face is threatened by the allusion conveyed by the Academic Coordinator that some of the teachers are negligent with taking proper care of the materials given to them. The frame of reference is that of negative politeness, in which official correspondence between the leader of a group and its members takes place. However, the Academic Coordinator's messages may be decoded as rather humorous, e.g.:

(21) "As I mentioned, in order to have a clear inventory, I will be going from office to office to ask teachers which of the core and skills resources they have in their offices [...]. *I will not snoop through your office* without an office member present, but I do want to have a good look on shelves as texts may have been forgotten or left behind by another instructor. I must say *it seems a little bonkers* that so many texts are missing and need to be

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replaced. The more books we replace because someone forgot to bring theirs back, the less money we have for other things in the department, so please check your desk, shelves, car, and home carefully for these missing texts! *Happy book hunting:)*";

(22) "On that note, if you have copies of ESL program texts in your office or home, please bring them back to the Campion office ASAP. We do not want to buy more books when there are copies readily available - *our money can be used for much better things, like hiring more teachers:)".*

In this case, the humorous FTA has been managed by manipulating the distance between S, the leader of the organization, and R, the instructors, by using *"Happy book hunting!"* and a smiley[5] in (21) and a friendly joke *„our money can be used for much better things, like hiring more teachers:)"* and again a smiley in (22). The redressive action for this FTA involved an indirect form of politeness that has aided to minimize the threat. It also should be noted that the corpus displays an abundant use of smiley faces to give an overall atmosphere of positive politeness in this group of co-workers, contradicting in a way Angell&Heslop's (1994) opinion that emoticons (i.e., smileys) are 'the equivalent of e-mail slang' and 'should not be used in formal business e-mail messages' (1994: 111).

Another example of humorous FTAs encountered in the corpus is humour directed against one's self: when S uses a self-denigrating FTA, this may be interpreted as humorous and he/she does not seem to be concerned about losing face. The corpus has a few examples of self-deprecating humour, e.g.

(23) "Do you remember where my students need to go today? I have spent the whole weekend studying and marking, so I have no idea what is going on with this trip. *I will just agree to the final decision. :-)*";

(24) "I would like to have an answer about the speaking "thing" we have this week. Can somebody remind me of how this speaking activity goes before I ask you all questions *that might confuse me more? :-)*".

Finally, according to the Maxim of Relevance, that is being 'to the point', (Grice, 1975) and the Relevance Theory (Sperber&Wilson, 1986, 1995), the concepts typically encoded by the words in a statement, as found in dictionaries, differ from the concepts that S wants to communicate with them. Consequently, the humorous effect of a joke may depend on the adjustment of the information attached to the ad hoc concepts communicated and not on the processing of the typical concepts encoded by the words in the utterance (Yus, 2012). Thus, R needs to adjust them, which leads to the so-called ad hoc concepts, that is *conceptual adjustment* (2012: 281), which may be done in two directions:

I. *conceptual broadening*, where the concept communicated may be broader, that is less exact, than the concept encoded by the word in the statement, as in:

(25) "I know it seems *eons* away, the end of term that is [...]"
[not literally eons; rather, a few weeks away];

II. *conceptual narrowing*, where the concept communicated is narrower, that is more exact, than the concept encoded in the statement, as in:

[5] *Smiley*: a symbol representing a smiling face that is used in written communication to indicate that the writer is pleased or joking, especially one formed by the characters :-). (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010).

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(26) "At least, *the end* is near! ;)" [specifically, end of term];
(27) "Finally, it is *the final*!" [specifically, the final exam].

In examples (26) and (27), the ad hoc concepts communicated are more exact than the concepts typically encoded by the words *end* and *final* (*end of term* and *the final exam* respectively). Consequently, the main point of humour in professional communication lies in the amount of assumptions that the reader needs to extract from the context to understand the joke and draw relevant conclusions.

Conclusion

The paper has investigated humour as a politeness strategy used among co-workers in collaborative relationships, analyzing a number of 100 emails from a relatively small group of university instructors. While other qualitative studies on humorous discourse exist (Zajdman, 1993; Ortega, 2013; Yus, 2012) and other research studies have considered the effects of humour in the workplace (Holmes&Marra, 2002; Romero&Cruthirds, 2006), this study is distinct in analyzing humorous FTAs in the genre of e-mail in an academic workplace and in showing how humour can have an impact on interpersonal relations in this academic setting. This investigation demonstrates the importance of the study of humour in professional communication, by emphasizing how humour is constructed and regulated by the academic community. In the corpus of e-mails analyzed, humour has been used to state a point more memorably, get things done and achieve outcomes, at the same time aiming at enhancing interpersonal relationships and creating a positive working atmosphere. All in all, humour may enhance group cohesion, foster consensus, and control conflicts in professional communication.

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