Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, **12**, 2 (2020) 129–143

DOI: 10.2478/ausp-2020-0017

Power and Humour in Institutional Talk – A Comparative Analysis

Gabriela CHEFNEUX
Transilvania University of Braşov
gabriela.chefneux@unitbv.ro

Abstract. Power is a key concept in institutional talk as it structures both the discourse of that institution and the relationships within it. It influences the formation of identities and is highly indicative of the culture the institution promotes. Humour serves a wide range of functions within an organization and is closely related to power. The paper aims to investigate the relationship between power and humour in educational setting, namely a high school. It analyses two different meetings – a school board meeting and an evaluation meeting, both held in the same school; these meetings differ in terms of formality, number of participants, and purpose. The paper aims to identify the way humour is used by the more and less powerful participants in the meetings. The paper is structured into two parts – a theoretical presentation of power and humour and the data analysis. The practical part looks separately at each meeting and at the functions humour serves when used by the power holders and the subordinates.

Keywords: power, humour, institutional talk, functions

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Power – Definition

Dahl (1957) states that power is a concept that everybody understands but which proves quite difficult to define. He offers influence, control, and authority as synonyms to power, and he broadly defines power as a relation among people involving "a successful attempt by A [the powerful agent] to get B [the less powerful agent] to do something he would not otherwise do" (Dahl 1957: 204).

Van Dijk analyses social power as a relationship between "social groups, institutions and organizations" (van Dijk 2008: 65), a form of control over others' actions and thinking, applied in specific domains (for example, media, education, or business); it is a form of abuse as it involves preferential access to various resources (education, jobs, wealth, etc.) and is gradual as it increases in intensity

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

in stages. Van Dijk (2008) differentiates between the classical view of power, which mainly involves material possessions, and dominance by coercion and symbolic power, a way of control, defined as the preferential access to political, educational, legal, and commercial domains; the latter kind of power also ensures access to public discourse.

Fairclough (2013) identifies as a main feature of contemporary power a "simulated egalitarianism", which hides the overt markers of power. He believes that today power and control are exercised by consent, while Mayr (2008: 3) characterizes contemporary institutional discourse as relying on knowledge: "language is knowledge driven in new discourse type".

There is common agreement that a feature of contemporary society is the covert expressing of power. Mayr (2008: 11) defines social power as "the privileged access to social resources – education, knowledge and wealth", while Holmes and Stubbe (2015: 3) consider that power is the "ability to control others and to accomplish one's goal". Discourse has been analysed as the site where power relationships are enacted and contested: "in discourse power is negotiated and fought over, […] it is held or lost and […] power relationships constantly change" (Fairclough 2013: 36). Fairclough (2013: 32) states that employees of various institutions (schools, church, etc.) are given social identities, "subject positions", by means of discourse. This positioning as subjects is a process of which the participants are unaware and which is accomplished by means of ideology, defined as "the power to project one's practices as universal and common sense, coercing others to go along" (Fairclough 2013: 28); ideology lays an extremely important part in the subjects' consenting to existing power relationships.

1.2. Power and institutional talk

Institutional talk has been defined as the special kind of talk aimed at solving professional tasks, having prescribed participant roles, whose contribution are mainly predetermined, and having an asymmetrical turn distribution (Thornborrow 2013); by means of institutional talk, participants define their professional identities and status (Thornborrow 2013).

The relationship between discourse and institutional power is very complex as "discourse materializes in institutions" and "is the primary site for reality construction" (Mayr 2008: 4). According to Mayr (2008), discourse shapes the institution, and the institution, in its turn, is shaped by discourse; the power of the institution is often exercised through the discourse of its members, who use discourse as a way of legitimizing their institutional roles.

Holmes and Stubbe (2015) characterize the manifestation of power in institutional discourse as very explicit: "'doing power at work' is uncompromisingly direct" (Holmes and Stubbe 2015: 2).

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

Fairclough (2013: 36) states that power exists "in and behind discourse". "In discourse", power refers to face-to-face encounters, where power is actually exercised or contested, while "behind discourse" power refers to the way in which institutions and organizations have come to create discourses that legitimize their power, which is imposed on the participants. Fairclough (2013) also comments on the way in which such conventions are policed and enforced, adding that, although less overtly, power is constantly re-asserted by the power holders.

Holmes and Stubbe differentiate between intraorganizational institutional power (power given by the organization itself) and societal institutional power, "the intrinsic and unquestioned institutional power of the dominant group in a society" (Holmes–Stubbe 2015: 154).

Power has been classified as coercive or persuasive. Thus, Mayr (2008) identifies two types of power – mainstream power (which has a corrective function) and second-stream power (which has a persuasive function). Vine (2004) mentions power over or coercive power, which allows its holders to decide the ways and the extent to which their power is expressed. She believes that coercive power has turned into "consultative power", which links power with knowledge.

In institutions, the types of power have also been classified as hierarchical (provided by the position in the institution) and expert (provided by professional knowledge that is recognized by others) (Holmes and Stubbe 2015, Vine 2004, Mayr 2008). Holmes and Stubbe (2015: 176) consider that subordinates take it as a norm on most occasions that managers express power: "when managers 'do power' participants in the interaction regard it as unremarkable for managers to do so". Similarly, Mayr (2008) classifies power as hierarchical power and relative power, which is assessed within the context and individual contributions.

Vine (2004) believes that hierarchical power, the ability to provide "rewards" to those in less powerful position, is a type of power that leads to achieving the expected results and claims that this kind of power is likely to provide far better results than coercive power. According to the institutional culture and personal features, she differentiates between three types of managers: authoritarian (they enact power overtly), participative (a combination of the first and third type), and laissez faire (allowing the team members to manage the tasks themselves).

Thornborrow (2013) differentiates between strategic discourse, characterized by relations of power and inequality, and communicative discourse, which places participants on equal positions.

1.3. Power – Ways of doing power

In terms of the linguistic ways of doing power, Fairclough (2013) identifies three types of constraints imposed by the powerful participants – namely on content, subjects, and relations. He also mentions the selection of the discourse type, formality level,

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

topic control, contribution control, turn allocation, interruptions, and evaluation. Van Dijk (2008) makes very similar comments when analysing linguistic ways of expressing power, mentioning genres, topics, speech acts, and style. Usually, it is the powerful élite who plan the communicative event, the setting of the event, and the interaction control, while the "powerless stay silent" (van Dijk 2008: 31).

Holmes and Stubbe (2015) discuss setting the agenda, summarizing progress, keeping the discussion on track, making and announcing decisions, while Vine (2004) analyses in a very detailed manner linguistic ways of expressing directives, requests, advice, etc.

Appeals to power and authority are particularly strong ways of doing power, and the more direct they are, the more emphatic they become. By appealing to institutional norms, to standard workplace practices, and to their own administrative position, power holders legitimize their power (Holmes and Stubbe 2015).

1.4. Humour – Definition

Holmes (2000) and Hill and Fitzgerald (2002) analyse humour by taking into account the speaker's intention and the audience's reaction. Holmes and Stubbe (2015) analyse humour as closely related to politeness, a covert way of expressing power: "[t]he boundaries between power and solidarity are often fluid and humour is an interesting indication of this" (Holmes and Stubbe 2915: 134).

Humour is a feature that is highly dependent on the organizational culture, varying in amount and type; its use in institutional discourse indicates that relations between people working together are important and carefully considered (Holmes and Stubbe 2015).

Holmes and Stubbe (2015: 109) define humour as "a valuable multifunctional resource in workplace interaction" and as such having a variety of functions, which are sometimes difficult to separate.

Humour varies in intensity and includes a variety of forms such as sarcasm, irony, teasing, banter, self-deprecating humour, jocular insults, deflating comments, all indicative of the existing relations in the organization (Holmes and Stubbe 2015: 170). Humour can be "gentle, unthreatening or abusive, robust and contestive, but all these instances have as their main effect to reduce power differences" (Holmes and Stubbe 2015: 128).

1.5. Humour – Use

Humour mainly contributes to a more harmonious atmosphere at work. It is often used to improve working relations, to create a pleasant atmosphere, and thus to promote task achievement and interpersonal goals. In an institution, it indicates the organizational norms, constructing participants as equal and playing down

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

power differences (Holmes and Stubbe 2015). Humour is also an "attention grabbing device", and laughter, as a reaction to a humorous utterance, may indicate appreciation (Holmes and Stubbe 2015).

Humour is used in both similar and different ways by the powerful and powerless. For both categories, it serves as a sign of goodwill and of cooperative intention, being a way for participants to calibrate the relationships with their colleagues at work (Holmes and Stubbe 2015). In general, for both groups, the amount of humour is directly proportional to the level of threat: "the higher the threat the more likely the message will be presented at least in a superficially humorous packaging" (Holmes and Stubbe 2015: 34) as humour is far less likely to be attacked.

The powerful resort to humour to soften directives and criticism, to "sweeten" insults and challenges, to improve team relations, and to "diminish status and power differences" (Holmes and Stubbe 2015: 114).

The powerless resort to humour to criticize, reject proposals, attack managers, license challenges, and contest authority (Holmes and Stubbe 2015). The authors call it "a socially acceptable cloak for face attacks in the workplace", a "cover for protest", a "veiled protest" (Holmes and Subbe 2015: 119). Subordinates use humour in order to attack off the record since humour is difficult to challenge (Holmes and Stubbe 2015).

Meetings are "prime sites for doing power" (Holmes and Stubbe 2015: 58), and the relationship between power and humour is very obvious.

2. Data analysis

The data analysed below come from a project entitled *Communication at the Workplace*, which took place in several Romanian companies. The data selected for the analysis come from the same high school, where two different meetings were recorded. The first one is a Board Council meeting which brings together 14 participants – the school principal, the deputy school principal, and 12 teachers of various subjects. The second meeting, held in the same school, brings together a higher number of participants. The purpose of this meeting is the presentation of the school evaluation report by two representatives of the School inspectorate – the deputy school inspector, Valentina, and Victor, a school inspector, who actually presents the report.

The first meeting is smaller in size and less formal, the participants coming together on a regular basis in order to discuss administrative topics and to plan the school activity. The second meeting is more formal; its aim is to present the results of the school evaluation, and it is attended by most of the teachers in the school and two inspectors.

The analysis of both meetings considers as instances of humour the parts marked in the transcript with smile or laughter.

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

In the first meeting, the power holders are Adina, the school principal, Maria, the deputy school principal, Ileana, the trade union leader (both holding administrative power), and Cornel, the President of the Education Quality Evaluation and Insurance Board (considered an expert in the evaluation process), while the less powerful participants are the teachers (who are present) and also the students (who are not present).

In the second meeting, the power holders are Valentina, the deputy school inspector, Victor, the school inspector, who presents the report, and Nela, the school principal; the subordinates are the teachers attending the meeting.

The analysis is done separately for the two meetings and presents the way in which power holders and subordinates use humour in order to express power.

The school board meeting
Use of humour by the power holders

2.1. To promote good relationships with subordinates

Example 1

Adina, the school principal, chairs the meeting; she decides on the topics, controls the participants' contributions, takes decisions, and makes suggestions. She softens her interventions by resorting to humour.

In the example below, the topic is electing members in the Administration Board. Adina invites the participants to make suggestions, but she continues without interruption by making her own suggestions. She does that by resorting to self-deprecating humour, which does not cause any laughter from the participants:

> Adina: #eu am nişte propuneri#în legătură cu consiliul de administrație dacă veți fi de acord. UNDE-mi sunt propunerile. (Gheorghe–Măda–Săftoiu 2009: 18)
> 'Adina: #I have some proposals# related to the administration board if you agree. WHERE are my proposals.' (Gheorghe–Măda–Săftoiu 2009: 18)[1]

Adina announces that she wants to advance her proposals, a move that she mitigates with the phrase "if you agree"; she wants to read them but realizes that she cannot find her notes, a situation which she openly acknowledges by asking aloud "where are my proposals". This utterance, however, does not trigger any laughter.

1 The translations are my own throughout the article.

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

2.2. To criticize

Example 2

The next example in this meeting analyses an instance of power expressed over people who are not present. The topic of the meeting is nominations of students for the School Board. There are no students attending the meeting, and the teachers weigh different options in order to decide who is the best student to be appointed. During this discussion, most participants make critical remarks related to the students, all these criticisms being prefaced by the speakers' smiling. The discussion starts with proposals for possible nominations, and the name of student X is advanced. Several teachers begin to talk about him, their comments being covertly critical.

> Marcel: i-am trimis un preaviz de exmatriculare pentru douăzeci de absențe # şi pînă la şedința cu părinții a ajuns la şaizeci de absențe
> […]
> Mihai: poate ajunge şi senator.
> Adina: da#în mod uimitor pentru mine l-au ales elevi din tot județu. s-a dus la şedințe↓ s-au prezentat nişte candidaturi↓ el s-a prezentat fără nicio hîrtie în mînă şi-a pledat <@ cauza frumos>şi l-au votat pe el.
> Dana: probabil că-i bun de gură […]
> Nicolae: dacă nu vine la şcoală nu avea de <**MARC** ce să fie în consiliu> (
> […]
> Ileana: totuşi↓ dacă e atît de solicitat n-are rost să-i mai dăm o sarcina în plus (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 21)

> 'Marcel: I sent him a notice of expulsion for 20 absences# and by the time of the parents meeting he had reached sixty absences
> […]
> Mihai: maybe he will become even a senator.
> Adina: yes# surprisingly to me the students in the entire county elected him. he went to the meetings↓ some nominations were made↓ he came without any notes in his hands pleaded his <@ cause nicely>and they voted for him.
> Dana: probably he is a smooth speaker […]
> Nicolae: if he doesn't attend school there was no reason<**MARC** why he should be on the board>
> […]
> Ileana: still↓ if he is so busy there's no point in giving him an additional responsibility' (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 21)

Student X is the one currently holding the position of representing the students in this high school, and he has organized many activities related to the students'

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

consultative board; he was elected in the same position for the second time. This information comes as a surprise for Adina – "surprisingly to me" – as he managed to be elected without any preparation: he "pleaded his cause nicely". Adina's remark starts a series of criticisms related to this student; Marcel condemns him for skipping classes (the student "has reached sixty absences"), Mihai expresses ironically his belief that he may be successful in politics, and Dana characterizes him as "a smooth talker", a phrase carrying negative connotation. The student has low grades and seems to be less interested in school and more interested in organizing high school student meetings. The conclusion of the participants is to nominate another student, who is not as busy as the current representative – "if he is so busy, there's no point in giving him an additional responsibility".

The participants who have made no contribution to the discussion so far interfere when it comes to commenting on students, and the way in which their remarks complement one another points to their critical position towards the students.

Use of humour by the powerless

2.3. To criticize official regulations

Example 3

During the last part of this meeting, the discussion moves to other topics, and the one currently discussed is fire safety.

Maria, the deputy headmistress, explains that in the case of a fire the accounting department employees have to leave the office carrying their computers with them.

> Maria: serviciu contabilitate are obligația chiar în caz de incendiu↓ ni s-a spus îşi ia calculatoru sub brat şi pleacă contabilitatea cu calculatoru. ((se rîde)) nu rîdeți aşa ni s-a comunicat. (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 57)

> 'Maria: the accounting department has, even in the case of a fire↓we were told they take their computer under their arm and the accounting department leaves with the computer ((laughter)) don't laugh this is what we were told'. (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 57)

Maria is not explicitly critical of the regulations, which she derides in an indirect way, namely the manner in which she phrases the regulation: "they take their computer under their arm".

The participant's reactions can be interpreted as subversive criticism of the educational authority that has issued the regulations.

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

2.4. To promote good relationship

Example 4

The topic of the discussion is that the high school should aim to become a representative school and thus attract more students. Cornel, the President of the Quality Assurance Board, adds the adjective "neighbourhood", which totally changes the meaning – instead of being a representative school for the city, Cornel moves it to the school being a representative school in the district, thus diminishing the importance of the school and adding a negative evaluation.

> Cornel: da↓ nu↓ da' de cartier are altă conotație
> Adina: <@da↓ a zic aşa paradoxal. da↓ să inventăm un paradox>
> Cornel: <@şi eu mă consider tot băiat de cartier> (xxx)
> Adina: deci să adunăm noi tot ce e mai bun în cartier↓ asta am vrut să zic<**MARC** reprezentativ pentru>
> Maria: elevii<**MARC** din tot oraşul> (p. 42)
> [….]
> Cornel: [deci tot cartierul↓ aşa cum spuneam noi băieții de cartier venim aici şi votăm şi
> Grupul: ((rîs))
> Adina: suntem şcoala reprezentativă a cartierului (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 42–45)

> 'Cornel: yes↓ no↓ but neighbourhood has a different connotation
> Adina: <@yes↓ I say if paradoxically. yes↓ let's invent a paradox>
> Cornel: <@ I consider myself a neighbourhood boy too> (xxx)
> Adina: so to collect what is best in the district↓ that's what I meant <**MARC** representative for>
> Maria: the students <**MARC** from all over the town >
> [….]
> Cornel: [so the entire neighbourhood↓ as we the neighbourhood boys used to say come here and vote and
> Group: ((laughter))
> Adina: we are the representative school of the district' (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 42–45)

So, initially, Cornel corrects Adina, who does not use the exact term "representative school". He explains that a neighbourhood school has a negative connotation, and Adina accepts his correction and explanations by stating "let's invent a paradox". Cornel continues by smilingly saying that he considers himself to be a neighbourhood boy, which indicates that he does not want his previous

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

intervention to be considered as a criticism. This is a joint humorous sequence produced by Adina and Cornel, a sequence interrupted by Maria, who defines the term as attracting students from all over the city. However, Adina and Cornel continue this sequence several seconds later; they both keep using neighbourhood – Cornel speaks about "neighbourhood boys", and Adina refers to the school as a "neighbourhood school". This exchange triggers laughter from all the participants.

This example illustrates a joint humorous sequence initiated by Cornel and taken further by Adina. They both indicate that they want to have a good working relation, and they continue the sequence after being interrupted by the trade union leader. However, the same example can be also interpreted as having a second function, namely of indirect criticism – Cornel indirectly attacking the principal for not knowing the official terms.

In conclusion, the instances of humour in this meeting point to good working relationships as the power holders usually mitigate their power by resorting to humour. Adina, the principal, does that more frequently than the deputy principal, who is more direct in her interventions, and Adina also produces a joint humorous sequence with Cornel.

The less powerful participants tend to be ironical of administrative regulations, and all the teachers (the powerful and the less powerful) tend to be critical when it comes to the students' activity.

The Evaluation Report Meeting

This meeting is very long and is attended by all the teachers in the school; its aim is to present the results of the evaluation conducted in the school.

Use of humour by the power holders

2.5. To criticize

The humorous strategies used by the power holders are very limited.

When criticisms are made or bad school results are presented, the inspectors smile, attempting to soften their message. They use inclusive we and smile, but the words are harsh – "I accuse you", "do you take responsibility" – and they bang their fists against the table to emphasize their message.

Example 5

Valentina: aici este semnătura dumneavoastră↓. Vă asumați acest lucru? (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 100)

'Valentina; this is your signature↓. do you take responsibility for it?' (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 100)

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

Example 6

In the example below, Valentina answers a teacher who has explained why the school-based curriculum does not fully observe the regulations:

> Valentina: stimată: colegă↓deci n-ați înțeles mesajul nostru↓ nu vă incriminează nimeni că aveți aceste ore dar n-ați făCUT-o↓ erați obligați să o FAceți↓ n-ați făcut-o# deci dumneavoastră NU dispuneți de oferta şcolii# mi-e greu să înțeleg că<z din acest colectiv> nimeni nu doreşte să ofere altceva copiilor↓ mi-e greu şi pentru asta vă acuz (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 118)

> 'Valentina: esteemed: colleague↓ so you didn't understand our message↓ nobody accuses you for having these classes but you didn't DO it↓ you were obliged to DO IT ↓ you didn't do it# so you DO NOT have the school curriculum# I find it hard to understand that<z from this department> nobody wants to offer anything else to the kids↓ I find it difficult and for that I accuse you'. (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 118)

So, Valentina becomes increasingly critical; she prefaces her intervention with a smile. She starts by addressing the teacher with "esteemed colleague" but accuses her of not having properly understood what she said. Valentina legitimizes her power by mentioning regulations ("you were obliged to do it"), and she appeals to procedures and threats when she describes how similar situations are dealt with in other schools – if the school-based curriculum is not adequate, the teachers responsible for it are sacked.

The inspector emphasizes the negative words ("so you DO NOT have the school curriculum), and she repeats them. Valentina resorts to affective reasons – she refers to the students using the term "kids" –, and she says that the students are not offered what they are entitled to, which is something the inspector finds difficult to understand. Valentina's last words, "and for that I accuse you", are very strong and unmitigated and she appeals to fear. So, in this sequence, there is a combination of various ways of doing power – repetition, intonation, directness, and use of strong words.

Use of humour by the powerless

The teachers in the meeting use humour for different purposes as compared to the two inspectors.

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

2.6. To criticize

Example 7

Victor: deci sar peste acest pasaj
Valentina: dumnevoastră alegeți?
Victor: [aşa ă:
Valentina: dar de CE dacă sunt cuvinte de laudă să le-audă colegii↓
Victor: BUN atuncea le citesc. vroiam s-ajung la (xxx) ((râde)) ((râsete)) (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 82)

'Victor: so I'll skip this part
Valentina: is this your choice?
Victor: [well, eh:
Valentina: but WHY if there are words of praise let the colleagues (hear) them↓
Victor: GOOD then I'll read them. I wanted to get to (xxx) ((laughs)) ((laughter))' (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 82)

Victor is asked by the deputy inspector, his manager, to read a part of the report which he wanted to skip. He explains that he did not want to read that part in order to get to another section, and he does this smilingly in order to diminish Valentina's criticism. The participants' laughter is interpreted as a critical reaction to the lengthy report; Victor has been reading the report for a long time, and him saying that he wanted to move faster produces laughter. The teachers laugh but utter nothing.

2.7. To attack

Example 10

The example below provides an illustration of how Victor is attacked by the school principal and the participants while reading the report.

Victor: despre CUM vă simțiți în colectiv↓ majoritatea afirmați că vă simțiți FOARTE bine↓ deci un procent de optzeci şi doi virgule cinşpe la sută paişpe virgule douăşopt la sută bine: îs un! Unul singur se simte: satisfăcut acuma: ((râsete)) <z probabil că era supărat la momentul respectiv> ## da# [da## deci ă:
Nela: [e MARE lucru să poți să spui şi tu↓ ((râde))
Victor: a fost chestionaru: pe care l-ați! la întrebările din chestionar la care dumne'astră ați răspuns↓ a fost exact ca o: OGLINDĂ↑ deci: CEEA CE ați simțit↓ ați răspuns↓ zic eu cinstit# că sunt situații în care colegii se feresc să dea răspuns la acest [lucru
XF5: [totdeauna↑ ((şoptit)). (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 81)

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

> 'Victor: about HOW you feel in our team↓, most of you state that you feel VERY good↓ so a percentage of eighty-two point fifteen percent fourteen point twenty-eight percent good; only one feels: satisfied now: ((laughter)) <z probably he was upset at the time>## yes# [yes## so:
> Nela: [it is REALLY good to be able to say↓ ((laughter))
> Victor: it was the questionnaire: which you! the questions in the questionnaire which you answered ↓ it was exactly like a: MIRROR↑ so: HOW you felt ↓ you answered ↓ honestly# I would say as there are cases when colleagues avoid answering [it
> XF5: [always↑ ((whispering))'. (Gheorghe et al. 2009: 81)

This example illustrates how all the teachers in the school side against the inspectors. The sequence starts by the use of the word "satisfied", interpreted differently by the teachers and the inspector. Victor acknowledges the teacher's interpretation by smiling, but he continues reading. At this moment, Nela, the school principal, openly intervenes by adopting the teachers' interpretation of the word, but Victor disregards her intervention. At this moment, another participant whispers to her colleague that people always avoid answering questionnaires honestly, which actually implies that the whole report is based on incorrect information. The contrasting attitude is lexically realized by the choice of adverbials: when considering whether respondents answer questionnaires dishonestly, Victor uses "there are cases", while the teacher uses "always".

In conclusion, this meeting displays very crude power relations; the two inspectors formally soften their criticisms, use inclusive "we" but resort to harsh words – "I accuse you". They appeal to their administrative power. The less powerful in this meeting, the teachers, do not say anything but laugh, expressing their critical attitude. The only person who indirectly criticizes aloud is the school principal, who during this meeting sides with her colleagues, not the inspectors.

Conclusions

The two meetings are both held in the same high school and are both attended by the same participants, the difference being that the second one is also attended by two inspectors from outside the school.

The first meeting, bringing together teachers who have worked together for a long time, indicates that the participants have good working relations. Humour is mainly used by the principal, while the teachers usually react by laughter. They themselves do not trigger any humorous sequences. The principal tries to mitigate her power and promote good relationships with her colleagues as indicated by the joint humorous sequence and her use of self-deprecating humour. All the participants are

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

critical of students over whom they hold institutional power. There are no appeals to legitimizing power, and the type of power in the meeting is administrative (the principal) and expert (Cornel).

The second meeting includes very few instances of humour. The power holders frequently legitimize their power by resorting to their official position, to institutional rules and regulations, to which they appeal when they criticize the school. The inspectors preface their negative comments with a smile, but their smile does not cause any laughter, and their words and gestures contradict the smile.

The teachers do not verbally attack the two inspectors, the only attacking strategies being laughter and indirect comments. They make private critical remarks so as not to be heard, and they laugh only twice during the meeting, on both occasions as an indirect criticism of Victor's lengthy presentation and his misinterpretation of a word in the report.

The second meeting displays very strong power relations, where the institutional power is observed and re-enforced repeatedly by the two inspectors' discourse. Humour is mainly used by the power holders formally.

Overall, the use of humour is related to the purpose of the meeting, its size, and the relationships between participants. The analysis indicates that administrative power is highly respected, and the relation between humour and power are indicative of organizational culture.

References

Dahl, Robert. 1957. The concept of power. *Behavioural Science* 2(3): 201–215.

Fairclough, Norman. 2013 [1989]. *Language and Power*. London–New York: Routledge.

Gheorghe, Mihaela–Stanca Măda–Răzvan Săftoiu (eds). 2009. *Comunicarea la locul de muncă. Corpul de interacțiune verbal în mediul professional* [Workplace Communication. Corpus of Verbal Interaction in Professional Context]. Braşov: Editura Universității Transilvania din Braşov.

Hill, Brooks L.–Brandon Fitzgerald. 2002. Humour reconsidered with prospects for interethnic relations. *Intercultural Communication Studies* 11(4): 93–108.

Holmes, Janet. 2000. Politeness, power and provocation: How humour functions in the workplace. *Discourse Studies* 2(2): 159–185.

Holmes, Janet–Maria Stubbe. 2015. *Power and Politeness in the Workplace – A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Talk at Work*. London–New York: Routledge.

Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, Liliana (ed.). 2002. *Interacțiunea verbală în limba română actuală. Corpus (selectiv)*. Schiță de tipologie [Verbal Interaction in the Current Romanian Language. (Selective) Corpus. A Typology Outline]. Bucharest: Editura Universității din Bucureşti.

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)

Mayr, Andrea. 2008. *Language and Power: An Introduction to Institutional Discourse*. London: Continuum.
Thornborrow, Joanna. 2013. *Power Talk. Language and Interaction in Institutional Discourse*. London–New York: Routledge
Van Dijk, Teun. 2008. *Discourse and Power*. Basingstone: Palgrave Macmillan.
Vine, Bernadette. 2004. *Getting Things Done at Work. The Discourse of Power in Workplace Interaction*. Amsterdam–Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Appendix

Transcribing Conventions
Intonation:

↓	falling intonation
↑	rising intonation
#	pause
<@>	laughter simultaneous with speaking
<z>	smile simultaneous with speaking
<R>	fast speech rate
<xxx>	unclear text
[...]	words not transcribed
TEXT	emphasis
?	sentence-rising intonation

(The conventions are those used by Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2002).

BDD-A31527 © 2020 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:45 UTC)