Humor and funny stories: A sociolinguistic study of newcomers’ socialization into Hong Kong workplaces

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There has been a growing literature on workplace humor and storytelling in this decade, yet it is unclear how newcomers learn the relevant customs of their new workplaces. The overall objective of this study is to explore workplace socialization of newcomers from a sociolinguistic perspective. The data was drawn from 14 extensive interviews with newcomers in different Hong Kong workplaces. Preliminary results shed light on the phenomena that 1) newcomers in Hong Kong workplaces tend to be interested in people-based humor and funny stories about miscommunication, 2) they are primarily concerned about who has the rights to initiate humor and funny stories, and 3) they prefer partly participating in these informal activities.

1. Introduction

Language and communication play a crucial role in the workplace (e.g., Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Mullany, 2007; Richmond and McCroskey, 2001). Given today’s fast-paced society, change of workplace has become more common than it used to be. As a consequence, people are increasingly faced with the specific language and communication patterns that characterize their new working environment (Wenger,
Such a socialization process can be generally carried out in two ways: 1) relatively formal individual learning that is separated from social activities and 2) relatively informal social learning that relies on participation and learning the shared repertoire in communities of practice (CofPs) (Iverson and McPhee, 2002; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1996, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). Nonetheless, recently the research focus has gradually shifted from formal learning to informal learning or less formal learning (see, for example, Bauer et al., 1998 for a review). Although growing attention has been drawn to the importance of workplace research over the past four decades, examination of workplace socialization from a linguistic and CofP perspective is still in its infancy (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Wenger, 1996). There is thus a clear need to give insights into the ways in which newcomers informally acquire such rules and/or strategies. This article aims to account for newcomers’ informal learning of workplace humor and funny stories from a sociolinguistic point of view.

2. Literature review

Much research has been carried out on the topic of workplace humor and storytelling. Since workplace is a special context that involves both business and rapport, the use of humor and storytelling in it can be highly strategic and context-based.

2.1 Humor and storytelling in the workplace

Office workplaces have been characterized by specific ways of dropping lines and telling stories. Linstead (1985), for instance, said that joking is used as a standardized or situational device that can help employees remind themselves what should (not) be done in the workplace. Vinton (1989) evidenced that humor can be used as a form of entertainment, a tool to get tasks pleasantly done, and a strategy to deflate the status differentiation in the workplace. Although Brown and Keegan (1999) claimed that humor might not help newcomers integrate into their new workplaces because of its informal nature (also see Linstead, 1985), they acknowledge that humor can play a role in oiling both top-down and bottom-top communication. More recently, Holmes and Marra (2002) outline that humor can be used to show agreement or disagreement; at the same time they suggest that in some workplaces, such as government departments, there will be relatively less humor due to the seriousness of their
everyday agenda. The findings demonstrate that humor is a multi-functional tool that varies from workplace to workplace.

While research on workplace humor is certainly fruitful, storytelling has also been regarded as playing a vital role in the workplace. Brown’s (1985) groundbreaking study emphasizes that stories, on the one hand, help old-timers express their knowledge and, on the other hand, help newcomers make sense of their new environment. Although in the proposed model stories can be told in different styles and involve topics with different goals, Brown found that newcomers were likely to be more interested in task-related stories (see also e.g., Helmer, 1993; Meyer, 1995; Morgan and Dennehy, 1997; Swap et al., 2001). However, later research tends to have intensive discussions on the functions and categories of workplace stories. Helmer (1993) affirms that stories can reinforce the power relationships, maintain the gender tensions, and draw a line between good employees and bad employees. Meyer (1995) also stresses that stories can describe both good events and bad behavior. Morgan and Dennehy (1997) put forward that storytelling helps to create entertainment. In a more recent study, Taylor et al. (2002) elucidate that workplace stories can create resonance among co-workers in CofPs. They further speculate that stories with both meaning and enjoyment are likely to be good (i.e., effective) workplace stories.

However, humor and storytelling tend to vary with workplaces and/or roles. Every time people change their workplaces they need to learn how to comprehend and react to their new surroundings (e.g., Bullis and Bach, 1989; Louis, 1980, 1990; Miller and Jablin, 1991; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) – acquiring appropriate ways of using humor and telling stories. Such learning, as theorized and delineated by Lave and Wenger (1991) and elaborated by Wenger (1996, 1998), can be carried out informally via social activities (e.g., Fuller et al., 2005; Lesser and Storck, 2001) in CofPs (e.g., Blaka and Filstad, 2007; Soekijad et al., 2004; Wilson et al., 2005; Yandell and Turvey, 2007).

2.2 Communities of practice and research focus

According to Wenger (1998) and Wenger and Snyder (2000), a CofP is fundamentally informal and usually has three key elements which foster (informal) learning:

1) Mutual engagement – which comes from the regular or by-chance interaction of members and then cultivates shared meaning and enacted knowledge,
2) Shared repertoire – meaningful stories, jargon, theories, forms, etc. which can be utilized by inside members to different degrees and then form a stock of understood information and a proof of membership, and

3) Joint enterprise – recognition, passion and bonding through time and space which is directed at a common purpose.

The focus will be on humor and funny stories. Seeing that the design that humor and storytelling are studied together, the scope of storytelling is narrowed to “funny-story-telling”, because effective workplace stories are often funny stories (i.e. stories with aesthetic experience) after all (see Taylor et al., 2002).

3. Data and methods

In order to explore the ways in which newcomers acquire knowledge of humor and funny story-telling in their new workplace, interviews were conducted with 14 newcomers in different companies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted (i.e., a combination of standardized interviews and active interviews, see Kasper, 2000 and Mullany, 2007 for advantages and disadvantages), and follow-up interviews were done where necessary. Each of the semi-structured interviews lasted about 15 to 20 minutes. 12 of them were face to face tape-recorded. Follow-up interviews were conducted by phone, and information was noted down by handwriting. After the interviews were finished, the data were transcribed and sent to interviewees individually to check if they wanted to make any changes. For interviewee profiles, standardized interview questions, and the summary of interview results please see the appendix.

4. Learning of workplace humor and funny stories

4.1 What are the topics of humor and funny story in the eyes of newcomer?

Topics of humor can vary from workplace to workplace. Newcomers in Hong Kong workplaces appear to be interested in people-based humor. In my data, the topics of
humor that concerned them were usually about nicknames of colleagues (e.g., intentionally calling each other’s nicknames at work) and good-/ill-will tease (e.g., joking in one to two sentences about each other’s role-related shortcomings). In some workplaces, in addition, even customers could be the topic of humor:

(1) “There was once a fat woman coming into our store. She was so clumsy that she knocked against some glass-made products. We needed to sweep up after that, and she bought nothing finally. All workers in the store recognized her. After a few days, this fat woman came again, and then the worker near the entrance said with smiles, ‘sweeping time’. All of us immediately laughed […]” (from Wendy1, a new supervisor of a chain grocery store)

Newcomers in Hong Kong workplaces seem to be less concerned about task-oriented humor. Rather, they pay more attention to humor which is closely directed at the people in their new workplaces. National culture can influence workplace culture and learning (e.g., Bauer et al., 1998; Bauer and Taylor, 2001); compared to Western people Chinese people are generally more concerned about human emotion and relationship than technical affairs. As mutual engagement towards CofPs comes from information exchange, colleagues’ nicknames and shortcomings are probably the ones which cultivate the shared repertoire in the learning process of newcomers in Hong Kong workplaces. To put it another way, newcomers in Hong Kong integrate into their new working environment through knowing the nicknames of their colleagues, observing bantering, and participating in bantering.

Similar to humor, funny stories can differ from workplace to workplace. They can be serious and impersonal. However, topics of funny stories in Hong Kong workplaces are usually “interpersonal” and “problematic”. They were often about miscommunication between colleagues and foreign co-workers (e.g., local security guards giving wrong information to non-local teaching staff in universities), misunderstanding between colleagues (e.g., misinterpretation of colleagues’ absenteeism), business failure due to wrong language use (e.g., local sales scaring Mainland Chinese customers away because of awkward spoken Mandarin), and gossip of colleagues (e.g., the mean manager’s fearsome wife).

Newcomers in Hong Kong workplaces seem to be less concerned about stories which have serious underlying organizational messages. Rather, they pay more attention to funny stories which are about people’s ridiculous mistakes and gossip. It may be true

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1 All interviewee names in this paper are pseudonyms.
that deep knowledge is very difficult to transfer via stories (Swap et al., 2001), let alone the funny ones. Also as Taylor et al. (2002) pinpointed, for newcomers, interesting stories are the firsthand good stories since they create aesthetic experience and hence are likely to be remembered. Perhaps as some literature unravels as well, newcomers tend to learn when encountering problems and mistakes which foster conversation (Louis, 1990; Middleton, 1996), although in my cases the problems and mistakes were not theirs. This finding suggests that funny stories about miscommunication can be an essential part of the shared repertoire which fosters newcomers’ learning in their CofPs. In other words, newcomers in Hong Kong integrate into their new working environment through hearing, telling, and/or retelling funny stories about miscommunication between their colleagues.

4.2 What are the functions of humor and funny stories in the eyes of newcomers?

As shown in the literature, humor has varied functions in different workplaces, and so do funny stories. Newcomers in Hong Kong workplaces appear to appreciate rather than downplay humor and funny-story-telling in their new workplace. In my data, from the newcomers’ point of view humor and funny stories are functional in that they, for example, create working experiences, teach them lessons, release pressure, increase fun, fill silence, boost the relationship between colleagues, relieve the conflict between colleagues, fill time when there is no immediate task to do, and enhance their knowledge as well as cultural understanding towards their new workplaces. Even when they had not heard humor talk, they still desired their workplaces to have some, for instance:

(2) “We can work more happily. [...] They (i.e., humor and funny stories) can create a friendly atmosphere which can make our cooperation easier and can decrease the chance of argument.” (from Grace, a new business analyst of a bank)

Some newcomers considered funny stories as a teaching instrument:

(3) “They can enhance my knowledge of the store and organization, though they are other people’s experience but not mine. [...]” (from Theresa, a new sales clerk of a jewellery store)

Only a few newcomers could see the dark side of humor and funny-stories:
Thus at least in some Hong Kong workplaces inappropriate humor and funny stories can worsen the relationship between colleagues. The supposed functions of humor and funny stories are dependent on the organizational goals and/or workgroup norms; any inadequate behavior will place a burden on old-timers or other newcomers (Yandell and Turvey, 2007). In their CofPs, newcomers need to carefully handle the shared understanding towards the use of humor and funny stories; that is to say, newcomers in Hong Kong integrate into their new working environment through knowing how to interpret humor and funny stories as well as exercising them in normative ways.

4.3 What kinds of context are suitable for telling humor and funny stories in the eyes of newcomer?

Newcomers in Hong Kong workplaces seem to frequently notice the humor and funny stories during lunch time and when they are less busy at work. In my data, only a few newcomers were aware of the humor which they heard during busy working hours. The participants reported that the duration of humor and funny story could last from a few conversation turns to ten minutes. However, in some Hong Kong workplaces, newcomers might have few chances to experience workplace humor or funny stories due to their CofP norms:

(5) “We have few jokes because colleagues are not allowed to joke. We need to look professional.” (from Howard, a new interpreter of a department store serving tourists)

(6) “Workers in this store are prone to seriousness and aggressiveness. They do not create an atmosphere of joking or peacefulness. […]” (from Sam, a new sales associate of a department store selling brand-name products)

This finding concurs with previous research which suggested that learning tends to be carried out by out-of-work activities after working hours, because this gives people a better understanding of how to communicate with each other (Alas and Vadi, 2003). In Hong Kong workplaces, lunch time seem to be a regular time to tell funny stories and/or use humor. Times when people are without immediate tasks to perform seem to
be the preferred environments for such social activities. Newcomers in these workplaces tend to treat these moments as learning and practicing time in their CofPs (Lesser and Storck, 2001). However, some Hong Kong workplace may not allow humor or funny stories. Not engaging in humor or funny stories may also be a kind of shared repertoire which is for the common goal of the employees (e.g., fighting each other for quota of customers) or their organizations (e.g., looking professional). Newcomers in these “extreme” workplaces tend to integrate into their CofPs through non-participation or avoidance of telling jokes or funny stories.

Interestingly, newcomers in Hong Kong workplaces appear to be particularly aware of who takes the initiative in humor and funny-story-telling in their new workplaces. In many workplaces in my data, these kinds of informal talk were initiated by colleagues at lower status level:

(7) “Usually it is the normal staff members who raise them first. The ICs (i.e., superintendents) and administrative staff need to retain their dignity.” (from Lillian, a new security guard in a university)

In different workplaces, however, there could be a totally different picture:

(8) “Most likely it is the ICs or other superiors who raise these jokes and conversation first. We normal colleagues dare not raise them sometimes, because some ICs are not happy with these things.” (from Wanda, a new caretaker in a residential area)

In yet other workplaces, the initiation of humor and funny stories was dependent on the personality of staff members, but not the hierarchy:

(9) “They are not raised by any particular person. But usually the talkative receptionist talks about these things. […]” (from Harry, a new account executive of a finance limited company)

One of the influential matters in workplace socialization is whether a workplace is centralized or not (Bauer et al., 1998). If workplaces in eastern culture are more centralized, it is possible that the humor and funny-story-telling traits are controlled by the superiors. Yet, for newcomers, the problem appears to be who has the right to initiate humor and funny stories. My data reveal that different workplaces have different “rules”; these rules are supposed to be understood by everyone in the

2 See also Sandy Tsang’s paper on small talk in the workplace in volume two.
workplace. Therefore, they form part of the shared repertoire of the CofPs in the newcomers’ new workplace. In turn, the strength and direction of the mutual engagement are determined by this kind of shared repertoire. To put it another way, newcomers in Hong Kong integrate into their new working environment through knowing who has the “rights” to initiate humor and funny stories as well as who can be used as targets.

4.4 How to appropriately respond to humor and funny stories?

Feedback is important in any communication event, including humor and funny stories. Although overall newcomers seemed to be willing to participate in humor and funny-story-telling, the degree of participation varied from person to person and from place to place. Most newcomers reported that they would prevent themselves from full participation. Some newcomers would give non-verbal response only to maintain minimum social bonding:

(10) “If they are joking I will laugh on the face of it. But I will not laugh from the bottom of my heart. […] After all we are working in the same place, so I am likely to be forced to laugh.” (from Sam, a new sales associate of a department store selling brand-name products)

To avoid misunderstanding, some newcomers would not participate in the funny-story-telling when the “butts” were present:

(11) “We will not talk about those stories to the face of the ‘victims’.” (from Lillian, a new security guard in a university)

To keep a distance from others, some newcomers would only participate in humor or funny-story-telling when they were close with the other parties:

(12) “For those who have a good relationship with me, I will join in their jokes or humor talk. But for those whom I am not familiar with, I will not even laugh with in order to avoid creating any embarrassing circumstances.” (from Cass, a new management trainee of a property management limited)

To avoid criticism by superiors, some newcomers would prevent themselves from taking the initiative in humor or funny-story-telling:
(13) “I will participate, at least nodding and smiling, to some extent. [...] I prefer joining in halfway to initiating them [...]” (from Howard, a new interpreter of a department store serving tourists)

Some newcomers would avoid humor or funny-story-telling involving gossip:

(14) “[...] I will initiate them, but I will avoid gossip talk. [...]” (from Wanda, a new caretaker in a residential area)

The different opinions given by my interviewees are in line with the observation that in CofPs members can have different degrees of participation, which leads to different levels of learning and different kinds of membership. This justifies the basic notion of the theory that newcomers’ learning is prone to being informal and context-based. In CofPs, nobody can be forced to participate (Hara and Schwen, 2006; Lesser and Storck, 2001; Wenger and Snyder, 2000). Additionally, this finding proves the core argument that “expertise” is developed through learning-by-doing. That is, newcomers in Hong Kong integrate into their new working environment through partly participating in humor and funny-story-telling. The degree of participation can depend on personal choices and/or workplace norms.

5. Conclusion

Humor and storytelling are common phenomena in the workplace. However, workplaces differ with regard to predominant humor use and storytelling patterns. Whether they are used to get things done or to improve the relationship between colleagues, humor and storytelling pose a real challenge to newcomers in some if not most workplaces. Newcomers in Hong Kong workplaces are more interested in people-based humor and funny stories about miscommunication. In general, they appreciate the humor and funny stories in the workplace. They tend to pay particular attention to them when they are less busy at work, and they are also especially concerned about who has the right to initiate humor and funny stories. Newcomers prefer partly participating in these informal activities.

This workplace study from a sociolinguistic point of view advances our understanding of workplace socialization. It lends support to the idea that workplaces have different cultures as well.
Appendices

Summary of interviewee information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names of interviewee (pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Names of organization (pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Work Sites</th>
<th>Collars</th>
<th>Positions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lillian (F)</td>
<td>About 50</td>
<td>GHI Guard Security Limited</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Pink</td>
<td>Guard</td>
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<td>Store</td>
<td>Pink</td>
<td>Sales clerk</td>
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<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>merchandiser</td>
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<td>Wendy (F)</td>
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<td>Store</td>
<td>Pink</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
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<td>Karen (F)</td>
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<td>Name of interviewee (pseudonyms)</td>
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Summary of interview results (continued)

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<tr>
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<th>Special features of humor and funny stories noticed</th>
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<tr>
<td>Theresa (F)</td>
<td>time without important tasks in hand dinner time</td>
<td>raised by subordinates</td>
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<td>Helen (F)</td>
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<td>Lillian (F)</td>
<td>time without important tasks in hand lunch time</td>
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<td>Cass (F)</td>
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<td>Rose (F)</td>
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Standardized interview questions*

How long have you been working in this new workplace?
How much time do you spend approximately in this new workplace every week?
Are there any jokes and/or funny stories that colleagues (regularly) talk about? What are they?
What do you personally think is their function (if any)?
Do you feel you will (in the long run) participate in joking and funny-story-telling (if any)?

*Follow-up interview questions depended on the answer provided by each interviewee.

References


Mullany, L. 2004. Gender, politeness and institutional power roles: Humor as a tactic
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