Humor in the workplace: How it works
and what if it doesn’t?

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A plethora of research investigated the roles of humor in the workplace and it was found that humor is commonly used as a discourse strategy to perform various functions. According to Politeness Theory proposed by Brown and Levinson, humor can be viewed as both a positive and negative politeness strategy. This paper provides insights into the roles of humor through analyzing authentic data from a television company in Hong Kong. It investigates the ways humor promotes collegiality and “does power”. Furthermore, instances of failed humor and their implications will also be explored.
1. Introduction

The stereotypical preconception of a workplace meeting is one with serious issues under discussion, and the occurrence of humor is expected to be minimal. Although it may seem that “humor” and “work” seldom go hand in hand, a plethora of research have revealed that humor is often manifested in various ways that serve important functions in the workplace.

To most people, laughter is perceived to be the typical response to and a support strategy of humor. As Hay (2001: 58) outlines, most literature on humor assumed that laughter is the normal and most appropriate support for humor attempts (see also Coser, 1960, Norrick, 1993). Many researchers have, however, questioned that the complexities of humor could be captured solely through laughter (see Schnurr, 2009: 06). In various language and gender studies, it was found that women respond to humor with laughter more frequently than men do (see Makri-Tsilipakou, 1994). Nevertheless, as Hay (2001: 61) exemplifies, the lack of laughter from men does not necessarily mean that they are unsupportive of the humor. Rather, numerous alternative support strategies to humor are used by men that may not be as explicit as laughter. Therefore, to define laughter as the sole support strategy may be too obscure. In order to provide a more comprehensive view on humor, this paper will employ the definition provided by Mullany (2004: 21) which is

instances where participant(s) signal amusement to one another, based on the analyst’s assessment of paralinguistic, prosodic and discoursal clues. Depending on the reaction of the addressee these instances can be classified as either successful or unsuccessful. It can be a result of either intentional or unintentional behaviors from participants.

The proposed definition overcomes some of the challenges of identifying humor as it ties in prosodic and paralinguistic features to identify instances of humor.

1.1 Humor as a tool to promote solidarity

Humor could be viewed as reinforcing both relational and transactional goals amongst workplace leaders and subordinates. It was found that humor could be used to strengthen, construct and maintain collegiality and bonds of friendship, while
diffusing tensions and anger (Holmes and Marra, 2006: 124). A plethora of data reveal that many instances of humor between equals served to express and strengthen solidarity and thus promote social cohesion (Holmes, 2000: 167). Moreover, humor was found to increase job satisfaction and performance (Caudron, 1992). Decker (1987, as quoted in Holmes, 2000: 160) argues that “humor is an essential tool for managers” as it helps workplace leaders to accomplish transactional goals while facilitating relational tasks effectively. Therefore, humor plays a versatile role in the workplace not only in getting things done but also in fostering collegiality. Both of these functions may contribute to delivering results and increasing productivity.

1.2 Humor as a tool to “do power”

Another prominent function of humor is to orient to the power dimension in a workplace by addressing participants’ need to maintain self-esteem or face. Humor is manifested in a variety of forms, one of which may be to mitigate “unwelcome news” (Holmes and Marra, 2006: 128). In other words, humor could be viewed as toning down face threatening acts thereby enacting politeness. As Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 99) describe, humor can perform the role of both positive and negative politeness1. Furthermore, power relations in the workplace could be analyzed as “repressive discourse” and “coercive discourse” being issued by the leader in a workplace. Both discourses attend to the negative face needs of the addressee but the former is characterized by mitigated directives while the latter is characterized by unmitigated ones (Holmes, 2000: 167). In this respect, humor comes into play to reduce conflict, retain goodwill, achieve willing compliance, and foster collegiality. However, as Marra (2007: 142) argues, humor could also adversely be used as an effective discourse strategy by subordinates to “ratify, challenge and question” the power of their leaders.

1.3 Failed humor

However, despite the numerous benefits of humor, it has been found that some instances of humor may fail to generate any humor support. As Hay (1995) outlines, trying to revive “dead” humor, lack of contextualization and comprehension of the

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1 The theoretical framework used in the analysis of humor in this paper is based on Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory (1987). It will be further discussed in the methodology section of the paper.
humor, differences in culture and shared background as well as misjudging the relationship between interlocutors are some of the reasons that tend to account for failed humor. Moreover, both Hay (2001) and Eisterhold et al. (2007) found that reactions to failed humor included nonverbal reactions, metalinguistic comments or comments that evaluated the speaker or utterance. Bell (2008: 04) finds that laughter,ironically, is the most common response to failed humor as it helps the hearer show their “recognition of the speaker’s attempt at humor” and softens the negative evaluation present in the response. Failure in humor may be seen as a transgression towards a “darker” side of humor as it may cause “misunderstandings, disruption of involvement and loss of rapport” (Norrick, 1994: 411, as quoted in Schnurr, 2009: 57).

Based on authentic data recorded in a workplace meeting in Televista, a TV broadcasting company in Hong Kong, this paper will analyze how humor orients towards promoting collegiality and doing power in the workplace, including some instances of “failed humor” and their effects. I will first present the research methodology followed by an in-depth analysis of the data collected and a discussion of the findings; this research paper closes with a conclusion.

2. Methodology

This section will briefly introduce the procedures of data collection, and will discuss some advantages and disadvantages of the chosen methodology.

2.1 Setting

The data collected for this research is in the form of a tape-recording of a business meeting at a broadcasting corporation. The meeting lasted for one hour and a half approximately. In one of the company’s departments, the weekly meeting is held to report any events, complaints or problems employees are facing. In total, there were eleven participants from different ethncal backgrounds present at the meeting namely: Hong Kong, India, Pakistan and Malaysia.
2.2 Data collection

In order to collect data in a large meeting effectively, two collection methods were employed in this research: audio recording and note taking. To ensure good quality recordings of the data, two recorders were placed in the middle of each table with a microphone attached to them. Also, two researchers were present in the meeting to take notes and monitor the recording. In addition, the researchers were charged with observing sitting arrangements, interaction patterns and some of the paralinguistic features exhibited by some of the participants. This may prove to be effective because interaction patterns and crucial features of the participants can be juxtaposed.

The collection of authentic discourse through the audio recording method is very convenient and economical. When transcribing the data, the recordings can be played over many times to fully comprehend what is being said (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003: 21). Also, it was hoped that the presence of tape recorders would not cause any disruptions or distractions during the meeting in order to avoid interfering with participants’ discourse and to ensure the data’s authenticity would not be affected.

Despite the fact that audio recorded data provides some advantages, this method may offer some limitations too. At times it may be hard to identify the speakers; this is particularly complicated when more than three participants are present, so at times interlocutors produced complex interaction patterns that could not be distinguished during the transcription process. Furthermore, non-verbal behavior and paralinguistic features such as facial expressions and body gestures which are important for certain aspects of data analysis are not captured by audio recordings (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003: 24). Had it been possible to utilize audio- and video-recording this might have yielded good visual and oral coverage of the data collected. However, due to time constraints and the unavailability of visual equipment, only audio recording was used.

Moreover, the presence of strangers in the room may have influenced participants’ behaviour. In addition, having included in the participant’s authorization form the purpose of the study and having provided the participants with detailed information of the aims of the research may have affected their disposition and altered their interactions. Therefore, the observer’s paradox may have occurred. Nevertheless, the data that we obtained is authentic workplace discourse and is thus very suitable for addressing my research question. Alternative types of data, such as role-play, interviews or survey questionnaire may not have yielded the same insights.

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2 The same data is also used in the research discussed in Valencia (this volume).
2.3 Theoretical framework

In this research I use the Politeness Theory developed by Brown and Levinson (1987). This theory is based on the concepts of positive and negative face. Positive face refers to a person’s need to be accepted and to share common ground with members of the social group, whereas negative face is the desire to attain independence and not to be imposed on. In this respect, positive politeness orients to saving the positive face of others, while negative politeness is doing face saving act oriented to other’s negative face.

In this light, Politeness Theory provides a basis for an analysis of how humor takes account of the positive face needs of the speaker and the addressee. More importantly, Politeness Theory accounts for the ways in which participants manage face threats. These illocutionary acts that are capable of damaging other people’s face are called Face Threatening Acts (FTAs). As Brown and Levinson (1987: 102) exemplify, humor claims common ground among interlocutors. Thus, like other positive politeness strategies, it emphasizes shared values and may be used to attenuate Face Threatening Acts (FTA) of various kinds. In this light, Holmes (2000: 167) regards humor as an expression of politeness and proposes a framework of analysis based on the Politeness Theory that will form the basis of analysis of this paper:

2.3.1 Humor as positive politeness

Humor may address the positive face needs of the hearer/addressee through expressing solidarity and collegiality. It may also protect the speaker’s positive face needs by expressing apologetic sentiments.

2.3.2 Humor as negative politeness

Humor may be used to attenuate the threat to the hearer’s/addressee’s negative face needs through hedging or softening an FTA such as a directive. It may also attenuate the threat to the hearer’s/ addressee’s positive face by hedging an FTA such as criticism or insult.

Hence, humor may function as a positive politeness strategy to express solidarity or a hedging strategy to express negative politeness.
3. Discussion

After a thorough analysis of the data, it is found that humor was extensively used among the boss and the subordinates. Humor facilitated the dual process of promoting collegiality and “doing” power. The boss frequently initiated humor during the meeting to achieve both relational and transactional goals while the subordinates continued and supported the humor. It was also revealed that some subordinates used humor as negative politeness strategies to attenuate the threat to the leader’s negative face. In other instances, some of the subordinates transgressed towards the “darker” side of humor by questioning the authority of some of their colleagues. And, some humor instances failed, which might have brought about tensions between some colleagues. In order to provide an extensive analysis of the functions of humor in the workplace meeting, the following discussion will be divided into three parts: humor oriented to nurture solidarity, humor oriented to “doing power”, and failed humor.

3.1 Humor oriented to nurture solidarity

The examples in this section are taken from the beginning stages of the meeting. They demonstrate the role of humor in building rapport effectively in this workplace team.

Excerpt 1

Context: John, Alice and Mary are the programme officers while Andy is the boss. Before the meeting starts, Andy gives details about the research to his subordinates and introduces the three researchers present in the meeting room. John queries one of the researchers, Alex, on the whereabouts of another researcher, Don.

1 John: where’s Don?
2 Alex: oh, Don’s actually + having a class (laughter)
3
4 John: is he hiding somewhere?
5 Alice: [ya] / maybe with a camera\ + you never know [laughs]
6 Mary: //with a camera\ [laughs]
7 John: he’s stooping somewhere
In this example, it could be seen that John initiates the humor after realizing that one of the researchers was absent. Instead of taking it merely as a question, all participants reacted to this comment by generating laughter (line 3). This indicates the humoristic nature of John who used paralinguistic features (making a curious face) when posing the question. He continues with the humor by literally searching for Don in the room. It could be seen that both Alice and Mary join in the humor and extend the humor by suggesting that Don might be hiding with a camera (lines 5 & 6). This only generates more laughter from the participants.

It is interesting to see that even after Alex clarifies the status of Don. It is the boss, Andy, who prevents the humor from dying out. As seen from line 9, Andy expresses his disbelief humorously by reiterating the word “mature”. This is quickly backed up by John’s question (line 10) which is received with laughter from others in the room. It could be said that this instance of conjoint humor exemplifies how some members of this group build rapport with each other. It is intriguing to see how the leader actively participates in the humor with his subordinates. Andy’s inclination towards continuing the humor shows how he is downplaying his status and depicting himself as “one of them” (Schnurr and Chan, 2009: 16). Through the responses provided by members of this working group, it is shown that members of this workplace are building solidarity and collegiality amongst themselves. This is also illustrated in the next example.

Excerpt 2

Context: The researchers present the group with a box of chocolate as a token of appreciation and then ask them to fill out a consent form. Immediately after this, Andy talks to his subordinates.

1 Andy: if, unfortunately, Don is here + otherwise we may have a cup of coffee + I think
2 John: I think so+ /with chocolate?
3 Andy /yes with chocolate\ ++ coffee with chocolate + (combo)
4 Mary: let me try it + I smell coffee [laughs] you want?
On receiving the chocolate box, Andy initiates the humor by making a link between Don and *having a cup of coffee* (lines 1-2). Since Don originates from South America, which is also the source of most coffee beans, Andy suggests that the presence of Don at the meeting would mean the participants would have been served with *a cup of coffee* in addition to the chocolate. However, since Don is missing, Andy expresses his disappointment of not being served a cup of coffee. Such inexplicitness is a common attribute of workplace humor as it reflects shared background and knowledge (Bell, 2008: 02). Andy uses the word *unfortunately* (line 1) in an ironic sense to express his regret at Don’s absence. This opinion is immediately supported by John who further asks if coffee would be served with *chocolate* (line 3). Another subordinate, Mary, adds sensory details (line 4) and develops the humor through the enactment of smelling coffee and offering it to her colleagues. This is well-received by the other members in the group as they respond with laughter.

Hence, it can be seen that the humorous scenario is jointly constructed as both John’s (lines 1-2) and Mary’s contribution (line 5) build on the humorous suggestion by Andy. However, both John and Mary’s roles could be seen as largely supportive as they endorse Andy’s comments which receive enjoyment and support from his subordinates. Andy’s elicitation of humor from the subordinates could be seen as “dissolving power differences” in the group and promoting social cohesion at work (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003: 110). In addition, this type of shared humor suggests that the speakers share a common view about the notion of amusement with others thus creating and strengthening collegiality (Holmes, 2001: 167). Therefore, the role of humor is of great prominence in maintaining good work relationships in this workplace.

### 3.2 Humor oriented to “do power”

The following excerpt reveals how subordinates use humor to mitigate the impact of face threats.

**Excerpt 3**

*Context:* Andy talks about the shift duties of John and the need for one of the staff members to be a standby. He asks Venice if she is willing to act as back up.

1 Andy: so, John will come back on next Saturday ok between 8 and 10
In the first half of this excerpt (lines 1-8), it can be seen that Andy is conversing with Venice about the need for a standby and whether she would take up the job. It is interesting to see that at the time during the meeting, Andy paused for a while (line 2) before consulting Venice as it appeared that no one in the room was willing to come to work on that Saturday. She agrees swiftly (lines 5 and 8) but is reassured by Andy that she would be a standby only if John has “something important to do” (lines 6-7 and 9-10). However, Venice then, humorously looks across to John and teases him by claiming that he better won’t have anything to do (line 8), hoping that she definitely would not need to come back. John, on the other hand, is content (line 12) to hear that there would be a standby and teases Venice back by asking her to come back anyway (line 14), which is then received with laughter from the others in the room. Andy then humorously explains that they could not take the extra holiday they earn for coming in on a Saturday together with their annual leave. This humor is then extended by John who amusingly complains that his annual leave is too short (line 19).

Instead of directly telling Venice to come back on Saturday, Andy mitigates his directive by using linguistic hedges such as just in case (lines 3 and 4), modal verbs like can (line 3 and 10) and filler items for instance I mean (line 3). In addition to these devices, Andy’s use of humor (line 15) could also be seen as a strategy for
downtoning his directive. As directives are canonical instances of FTAs, Andy could be seen as soothing the threat to Venice’s negative face needs (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003: 114). Moreover, in line 8, Venice’s teasing that John won’t have anything to do suggests that she may be expressing her unhappiness with the decision that she has to be a standby, especially on a Saturday. This could be seen as an expression of criticism towards Andy and his decision. However, the use of humor in this instance might be viewed as a hedging device to mitigate Venice’s criticism in order to attenuate the threat to Andy’s positive face. The use of humor in this instance demonstrates a team building solidarity with many team members contributing and extending the humor to a jointly constructed sequence.

However, despite the example’s tendency towards exhibiting the team’s collegiality through maintaining the positive face needs of the addressee, this excerpt could also be interpreted from a different point of view. As Venice is of higher hierarchical position than John, this example could also be analyzed as “repressive discourse”. As Venice demonstrates through linguistic and paralinguistic features, she is expressing her disagreement overtly by threatening the face needs of John. In asymmetrical power relationships, humor used downwards by those in authority may be a disguise for a less acceptable message (Marra 2007: 139). That is to say, in this instance, Venice’s criticism is relaying the message to John that he should better not have anything to do on that day. As a device of repressive discourse, humor in this context is used to express Venice’s authority to require John to behave as she orders. Although the main function of humor in this instance is doing collegiality and deemphasizing power differences on one level, it also serves to gain compliance (Holmes 2001: 176).

To some extent, Venice’s expectations of John comprehending the underlying intent of her humor may not have succeeded as John effectively uses humor to question her authority. Since Venice and John are teasing each other throughout the conversation, John’s response could be seen as a support of the humor while explicitly commenting on the message. In line 14, John humorously teases Venice to come back anyway which suggests that he shows no sympathy with her unhappiness of the decision. In this case, John may be responding to Venice’s tease but shows a serious rejection about whatever is proposed (Hay, 2001: 73). Therefore, the humor here is used contestively: it serves to cloak ‘socially risky opinions’ which may harm the existing relationships between interlocutors (Winick, 1976, as quoted in Holmes, 2001: 177). John’s critical remark is not further contested by Venice as it is not explicitly “on record”. Thus, in this case, humor serves to render John’s challenge to his superior, Venice.
After discussing some of the functions of humor in this workplace, an instance of humor that failed to evoke responses from the audience is discussed in the next section.

### 3.3 Failed humor

In the data, two instances of humor failed. The following example illustrates one of them.

**Excerpt 4**

*Context*: Joey, one of the workers, is delivering her report to the audience.

1. Joey: they also said that they will get us the test report about the
2. temperatures and the (bags) and the + shipping figures
3. John: is it meant for arctic?
4. Joey: erm? + [laugh]: and they said they: will give us the report today
5. or yesterday but so far we haven’t received anything yet +
6. that’s it
7. John: they’re all for eskimos
8. [laughter from a few participants]

John creates humor by associating Joey’s report with the *arctic* (line 3) as well as with *Eskimos* (line 7). The intention of this humor might be to ease the tension and to get other members to pay attention during the meeting; however it was not well received as Joey indicates that it is inappropriate for this context. Moreover, the utterance *erm?* together with the pause (line 4) suggest that Joey thinks about the humor but does not comprehend it. She laughs after a pause to indicate her embarrassment about not understanding the humor. It is clear that John tried to use humor but it fails to provoke laughter from the participants.

The lack of reaction from Joey and other participants in the room towards the intentional humor may prove to be face-threatening towards John. By simply uttering *erm?* and continuing with the report, Joey chooses to ignore John’s attempt. This is in synchrony with the lack of laughter or reaction from any of the other participants. Thus, these illocutionary acts may imply that John failed at his attempt at humor thus
threatening his positive face needs (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 102). In other words, by failing at his attempt at humor in this instance, John might have lost face. However, John continues the humor as she suggests that the company is “all for Eskimos” (line 7). It could be seen that John’s second attempt at humor is acknowledged by some participants in the room (line 8). This reaction may restore John’s positive face needs and his dignity.

Conversely, Joey’s lack of reaction to John’s humor (line 4) may also be due to the lack of shared background knowledge. Hence, Joey’s silence and embarrassed laughter may implicate that she didn’t recognize the humor. In this context, it is clear that the misunderstanding between both interlocutors did not lead to increased productivity; on the contrary it might have led to an increase in the social distance between both parties, confirming one of the possible negative effects of failed humor. It could be said that one of the merits of humor is not to attend to anyone’s face needs, but to ease the atmosphere of the meeting (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003: 109). In this context, John is recognized as a tension reliever or the “joker” and his intentions are to shorten the social distance between different colleagues; an intention that may lead to improved collegiality. However, in this instance, possibly due to a lack of shared background knowledge, this humor somehow failed to spark.

4. Conclusion

This research was implemented with the purpose of investigating the functions of humor and the effects of failed humor in the workplace. Half of the time, humor is found to be an effective strategy in the workplace to maintain and promote collegiality amongst the subordinates and leaders. It dissolves power differences and aims at lightening the atmosphere during meetings. Moreover, it was found that humor was strategically used to manage face threats in the forms of positive and negative politeness. However, in this respect, humor sometimes functioned as a device for repressive discourse where leaders imposed their authority on their subordinates. Humor was also used as a strategy for subordinates to challenge their leader’s authority less explicitly. As for instances where humor failed, it was seen that the need for shared background knowledge was crucial in order for humor to succeed. Henceforth, it could be seen that the use of humor in the workplace serves various functions that benefit both subordinates and leaders.
Appendix

Transcription conventions

= Equal signs indicate latching
+ A plus sign, indicates a pause between utterances
++ Two plus signs indicate two pauses between utterances
:: Colons, indicate prolongation of sound
(-) A dash, indicates a sharp cut-off of the prior word or sound
? A question mark, indicates raising in intonation
! Exclamation marks are used to indicate an animated or emphatic tone
(( )) Double brackets; contain transcriber’s descriptions additional to transcription
. A period, indicates a stopping fall in tone

References

