

1st International Summer School on

**Humour and Laughter:
Theory, Research and Applications**

**at Queen's University of Belfast,
Northern Ireland, UK**

Colloquium

30th June 2001

Colloquium moderators: Willibald Ruch & Paul McGhee

Book of Abstracts



**1st International Summer School and Colloquium on
Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications
at Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland**

Colloquium date: 30th June, 2001; 11:30-5pm

Location: G48, David Keir Building, School of Psychology

Timetable

- 11:30-11:50 Dave O'Mara: Computer facilitated humour to improve the conversational effectiveness of augmented and alternative communication users
- 11:50-12:10 Ching-sheng Huang: The study of jokes on the four books in early modern China
- 12:10-12:30 Josiane Boutonnet: Gender and conversational humour: Towards a new methodology?

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Lunch break

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- 2:00-2:20 Barbara A. Gibson: Humour, laughter and conformity: Whose line is it anyway?
- 2:20-2:40 Jason Goodson: An investigation into the effects of humor on depressive symptomolgy
- 2:40-3:00 Gregory Fried: Humour and knowledge

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Coffee break

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- 3:20-3:40 Martin Führ: Coping humor in early adolescence
- 3:40-4:00 Maria C. de Almeida: Usage of ironic jokes to foster educational ideas
- 4:00-4:20 Birgit Rissland: The importance of humor for the teaching profession
- 4:20-4:40 Maria Chik: Correlates of children's humor appreciation in Hong Kong
- 4:40-5:00 Paul Kusterman: Clowning for geriatrics, laughter is life

END OF COLLOQUIUM -- END OF SUMMER SCHOOL

Computer facilitated humour to improve the conversational effectiveness of augmented and alternative communication users

Dave O'Mara

Applied computing, Dundee University, UK

The majority of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems can be effectively used to deal with the needs and wants aspects of communication but any real resemblance to natural, social and interactive communication requires great effort, skill and commitment by the user. This goal is achieved by some individuals but many more resort to the simpler use of one word or short sentence responses. Language impaired children and adolescents have been found to have significantly poorer comprehension of humor than their peers with normal language development (Bernstein, 1986; Nippold, 1985; Spector, 1990, 1992). The opportunity to play with language is not easily available to the augmented speaker of any age. Being unable to play with language as a child may be particularly problematic as this excludes the developing child from learning the rudiments of social interaction through using language. The ability to use puns, punning riddles and jokes is a sign of increasing confidence and skill with language. It is clear that the verbal humour of puns and riddles relies on clever word play but what is less clear is just how much clever word-play depends on verbal humour. Two research questions are explored in depth. Firstly, is there a difference in the appreciation of punning riddles between AAC and non-AAC users? Secondly, can computer facilitated humour be effectively used to introduce the pragmatics of story telling to aid the development of conversational skills in children with emerging literacy who use AAC? The methodology used to answer the first question is designed to reveal the comprehension of verbal humour technique of children of all abilities. Results will be applied to aid the introduction of computer facilitated humour to high-tech AAC systems.

Keywords: Augmentative & alternative communication, impaired language, punning riddles, storytelling

The study of jokes on the Four Books in early modern China

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Confucian Classics have exerted profound influences on Chinese political institutions, intellectual tradition, and cultural mentality in last two milleniums. The Four Books had been the primal Classics of Neo-Confucian education and philosophy since Chu Hsi (1130-1200) grouped them together and compiled scholars' and his own commentaries for the texts. Thereafter, the Four Books along with Chu's remarks served the rulers of the late Imperial China as a standard textbook for recruiting officials through civil service examinations and for shaping the regimes' dominant ideology from 1313 to 1905.

Although orthodox Confucian Classics, particularly the Four Books, were upheld as philosophical as well as ideological doctrines, some literati still made fun of them, and turned their own life-savior, the means of acquiring an official post, into a weapon which satirized the sterilized educational and recruiting systems. The extant collection of jokes on the Four Books, Ssu-shu hsiao, compiled and commented by anonymous editors and commentators, testified that some intellectuals enjoyed the pleasure of blasphemy and mocked the canons through distorting and parodying the sages' words. The jokes on the Four Books represent the counter-discourse of the orthodox canon. For example, the jokes on the Four Books reflect comic attacks on the civil service examinations, ineligible teachers, incapable examinees, Neo-Confucian thinkers, and even Confucius himself. Besides, bawdy jokes reveal the gender bias, male-centered ethical precepts, contemptuous attitude toward male same-sex sexuality, and religions in traditional Chinese society. The parody and criticism of an enduring cultural heritage and aphoristic wit mark these jokes with particular trait of national humor essentially different from other nations' jokes.

Keywords: the Four Books, canon, jest-book, wit and humor

Gender and conversational humour: towards a new methodology?

Josiane Boutonnet

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Until the 1990s research on gender and conversational styles, whilst agreeing on gendered ways of speaking, resulted in the dichotomisation of two approaches known as the Dominance vs Difference Models. Since the 1990s there has been a broadening of theorising about gender and language, largely as a result of innovative work published in other disciplines. Anti-essentialist views of gender are now in favour, with the Performativity Model challenging definitions of the concept of gender. This paper acknowledges research done on gender and humour within the context of the debate on gender and language. The author proposes to consider the complexity of the interplay of variables contributing to the performance of impromptu humour by taking one case study as an illustration. It is argued that the distinction between asymmetrical talk and conversational talk is irrelevant due to the importance of discourse goals in face to face exchanges. Humour is an essential device in the management of multiple goals in discourse, and within the context of gender relations may be performed in a variety of ways in different settings. Individual roles are always transient and partly explain the multifaceted nature of humorous encounters. The paper concludes with an emphasis on research which is less context specific, allowing for a more holistic view of interpersonal competence. It argues for a nomothetic approach capturing the importance of culture and experience, if the researcher is to comprehend the role of humour in men and women's lives.

Keywords: Performativity, discourse goals, interpersonal competence, new masculinities

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12:30- 14:00 Lunch break

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Humour, laughter and conformity: Whose line is it anyway?

Barbara A. Gibson

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Humour offers a less stressful but universally familiar medium with which to measure the effects of social influence and levels of conformity. Forty-eight participants (25 females & 23 males) took part in this experiment, which replaced line lengths with a selection of previously validated cartoons. The aim was to measure conformity by partially replicating the Asch (1951) paradigm in a mixed design, with factors of sex and perceived humour (funny or non-funny). Participants in the experimental group rated cartoons in the presence of 3 confederates, who responded inappropriately by laughing loudly and giving high ratings to the 'not funny' cartoons and vice versa. Control group participants were run individually.

As hypothesised, significant levels of conformity were observed in the experimental group, in response to both 'not funny' and 'funny', cartoons. Contrary to predictions, a two-way ANOVA revealed a main effect for sex, with males conforming more than females. A main effect for conformity opposite to predictions was also obtained, with higher overall conformity scores for 'funny' cartoons (laughter absent). A significant interaction between conformity and sex was obtained. In addition, analysis of recorded experimental observations revealed a main effect for the number of participant laughs, with increased humour expression (both laughter and smiling) evident in the experimental group.

Results are discussed in relation to evolutionary theories of laughter and conformity.

Keywords: Humour, laughter, conformity

An investigation into the effects of humor on depressive symptomology

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Considerable empirical research suggests that humor and laughter may help alleviate a number of physical and psychological problems. However, minimal research has directly investigated the potential ameliorative effects of humor and laughter on depression. The current study was designed to test the theory that daily exposure to humorous material will reduce depressive symptomology. 38 undergraduate students endorsing depressive symptoms were randomly assigned to either a humor or comparison group. Dependent variables were scores on the Beck Depression Inventory and the Social Activities Scale from the Interpersonal Events Schedule. Interventions were take home video-taped recordings. The humor interventions were comprised of various humorous vignettes (lasting from 1-12 minutes), compiled into half-hour segments. Each vignette had been rated as "funny" by a panel of three to five judges. The comparison group interventions consisted of various segments of educational materials with motivational themes (i.e. revolutionary war, civil rights movement). Participants watched one half-hour segment of tape each day for four weeks. Preliminary data analysis suggests both humor and comparison groups showed significant reductions in depressive symptomology. Possible explanations for these findings are discussed along with the limitations of the present study and implications for future research

Keywords: Humour, laughter, depression

Humour and knowledge

Gregory Fried

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Philosophers often think that humour and laughter can't help us to gain knowledge. Learning is a solemn affair; at best, humour only gives us a refreshing break from our epistemic labour.

But a reading of Freud suggests that we can learn from humour in at least three ways:

1. People reveal their mental states by means of the humour they produce and enjoy.
2. Facts about human nature or particular people can be expressed humorously.
3. There's a humorous way of seeing the world. It provides not propositional knowledge, but an ability; not knowledge *that*, but knowledge *how*.

Can humour really teach us in these ways? It can. Indeed – and this is a much stronger conclusion – sometimes humour is the *only* way to learn something. Without humour, there would be some things we could not know.

But we should be careful. Humour is a dangerous tool. When we try to learn from it, humour can lead our beliefs astray, and may even endanger our morals.

Keywords: philosophy, knowledge, Freud

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3:00- 3:20 coffee break

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Coping humor in early adolescence

Martin Führ

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The present study provides evidence for the appearance of humor as a coping tool in early adolescence. 960 participants aged 11-14 years answered a self-report questionnaire including the Coping Humor Scale (CHS) and the Children Coping Humor Strategy Survey (CCHSS), introduced in this study. A three factor solution was found for the age group investigated, including coping humor with uncertainty and stress, making fun at others and getting cheered up. Where the study overall provides evidence for the concept of coping humor in early adolescence, significant gender and age differences were found. Where boys tend to use more aggressive and sexual related strategies in coping humor, girls prefer to get cheered up by humor and this tendency increased with age for girls but not for boys. The use of humor as a coping tool when focussing uncertain and stressful situations shows an overall significant increase at the age of 12 for both genders. Focussing on the appearance of humor as a reflective chosen strategy in various situations and emotional states for the age group investigated, this study strongly suggests the view of coping humor as multidimensional in early adolescence. Suggestions for necessary future research are given.

Keywords: Coping humor, children, multidimensional

Usage of ironic jokes to foster educational ideas

Maria da Conceição A. Ramalho de Almeida

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I have long been using jokes and cartoons to illustrate some educational ideas. I am mainly interested in two categories: the ones that depict mathematical concepts, and the ones that refer to the way in which students learn and to teaching approaches. Some of the jokes and cartoons that I have been using seem to have been useful to illustrate quite well the worthlessness of certain teaching approaches like exaggerated authoritarianism or tiresome repetition in opposition to a collaborative and constructivist approach.

My questions are: what are the characteristics of such jokes? What makes them good illustrations of educational ideas? I claim that ridicule and irony are strong factors in conveying educational ideas. However more questions arise: how strong can ridicule and irony be so that jokes are not offensive? Considering particular ridicule and ironic jokes, what distinguishes people who find them humorous from people who feel offended by them? These are the questions that I will try to address.

Keywords: Jokes, irony, teaching, learning

The importance of humor for the teaching profession

Birgit Rissland

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Asking pupils about the most important personality trait of the ideal teacher most name humor. The pupils gave reasons for their decisions by statements such as "Humorous teachers don't take offense easily" or "A humorous teaching style makes the material more interesting". Humor creates a social atmosphere, which can enhance both the creative and learning processes. Humor reduces anxiety, however it increases attention and promotes the ability to remember. Thus one can suggest that humor influences the relationships between teachers, parents or colleagues as well as the quality of teaching. Furthermore, a sense of humor turns out to be some kind of 'self-help' for teachers. It allows a change of perspective in difficult situations at school. The situation can be perceived from a distance so one can recognize the incongruent and amusing elements of it. Therefore, negative feelings such as fear, aggression or helplessness can be

reduced. Humor seems to be a constructive coping strategy for a teacher to deal with his daily life. It offers a possibility to cope with stress in a more effective way and to prevent the burnout syndrome. It is worth mentioning that humor respectively is not only a style of education and a teaching method but also an important goal of education. By using a humorous style of education pupils ought to learn how to deal with daily hassles and conflicts in a more humorous and relaxed way.

Due to these assumptions mentioned above, I want to present my study, which is part of a project concerned with the quality control of teacher's education. This study is an attempt to examine the following questions: Do high humored teachers describe themselves to be more resistant to strain and distress than less humored teachers? Do high humored teachers attribute themselves to a higher commitment to their jobs and are they more content with their jobs and lives than less humored teachers? Do high humored teachers consider themselves to be more competent in regard to structuring their classes, controlling of pupils' behavior and fostering of social relationships? First results of the study shall be presented and discussed.

Keywords: Teaching profession, coping strategies, quality of teaching

Correlates of children's humor appreciation in Hong Kong

Maria Chik

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To explore the nature and functions of humor to children in a Chinese context, the relation of humor appreciation with 140 boys & girls (71 third graders, 69 sixth graders) in Hong Kong was examined with self-perception of their sense of humor as well as their performances in selected standardized scales: Raven's Progressive Matrices, Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scales, and Junior Eysenck Personality Inventory. Teachers' perception of these children's sense of humor, academic performance, self-concept, aggression, and sociability will also be considered. Group and individual differences in these children's humor appreciation in relation to pictures of Hong Kong celebrities (being modified to create visual incongruities) are examined.

Keywords: Humour appreciation

Clowning for geriatrics, laughter is life

Paul Kusterman

CLiK e.V., Clowns im Krankenhaus, Berlin, Germany

I am a clown on a geriatric ward, and recently my wife and I took my mother in to live with us so we could care for her as she navigates the final stages of winding down that clock called life. You might call this taking work home. She is 90 years old, and every morning when she wakes she asks in her meek cracking voice with a twinkle of mirth in her nearly blind eyes, "Am I still living, or have I died and gone to heaven?" "Oh you're in heaven mom," I answer. "Want coffee or prune soup for breakfast" She laughs and admonishes me, as if I didn't know the answer: "Coffee! and orange juice." To which I answer "I guess you're still alive then. You're laughing, and I never saw a dead person laugh." She laughs again and I am confirmed that laughter is life. Illness teaches vulnerability and humility. It teaches the value of surviving as it leads us through stages of failure, hope, courage, fear, and acceptance. Humor does pretty much the same thing. So clowning for Geriatric patients is a process of using humor to help navigate the pitfalls of life's terminal illness — death. Simply put, death is your last breath. So being there with humor along the way means making at least some of those breaths be filled with lightness. Surviving death and getting out with grace and dignity is a process of conquering fear and letting go. Laughter is a good way to practice. No grave matter. Just gray matter fun.

Keywords: Improvisation, laughter, death, gerontology

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