STUDYING HUMOUR FROM A CONVERSATION ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *Humour is a complex and dynamic phenomenon prevalent in social interaction in various settings, such as mundane talk and institutional contexts. It has been a focus of interest in social interaction research for decades. To date, scholars have sought to gain insights regarding what counts as humorous and why we find certain utterances funny (e.g., Carroll, 2014; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016). As such, scholars from various fields ranging from philosophy, sociology, psychology, pragmatics, and linguistics, to name a few, have adopted different approaches in the examination of humour. One of the new perspectives that offers unique insights into humour scholarship is Conversation Analysis (CA) methodology. CA is a method and a research field in itself deriving from ethnomethodology, and it provides valuable opportunities for researchers to investigate humour in interaction. Thus, the main aim of this study is to present Conversation Analysis as a candidate methodology to be used for analysing humour in interaction. It also provides a critical discussion of how CA approaches 'humour'.*

Keywords: *Conversation Analysis, Ethnomethodology, humour, humour theories, social interaction*

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Humour in interaction: An overview

Humour is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that is prevalent in social interaction in various settings, such as mundane talk and institutional contexts. It is not a straightforward job to define humour as what is considered humorous varies depending on culture, people, and even the time (e.g., Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Bell, 2007). Therefore, scholars from various fields have sought to understand why we find certain utterances humorous and what, in effect, counts as humorous (e.g., Carroll, 2014; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016).

To date, studies in various fields, including philosophy, sociology, psychology (e.g., Martin, 2007; Warren et al., 2020), pragmatics (e.g., Hay, 2001; Dynel, 2009), linguistics (e.g., Norrick, 2010; Attardo, 1994; Raskin, 1985), and literature, (e.g., Kotthoff, 2007) to name a few, have provided invaluable observations regarding humour in interaction. By examining this phenomenon from different standpoints, humour theorists have sought to conceptualize it by basing their findings on different domains (Moalla, 2015). For example, some scholars addressed the cognitive-perceptual aspects of humour, such as General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) (Attardo & Raskin, 1991; Attardo, 2001) in linguistics. Some studies (e.g., Martin, 2007; Raskin, 1985), on the other hand, have focused on the emotional perspective, for example, the Release (or Relief) Theory in psychology, which argues that humour releases tensions and dissipates from an excessive nervous energy in our bodies. From a sociocultural perspective, humour is generated through linguistic and non-linguistic means that are defined by politeness theory, face, and footing (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011).

The pioneering theories of humour, namely, superiority theory, the release (or relief) theory, and the incongruity theory (Carroll, 2014; Martin, 2007), stem from psychological studies. To briefly introduce them, superiority theory suggests that humour emerges from feeling superior to and laughing at other people's inadequacies or stupidity. According to release theory, as mentioned earlier, humour releases tensions and dissipates from excessive nervous energy (e.g., Carroll, 2014; Martin, 2007). Finally, proponents of incongruity theory suggest that humour emerges at the juxtaposition of elements (e.g., an idea, image, text, event) which are perceived to be absurd, unexpected, odd, and, thus, inconsistent and contradictory with expectations (e.g., Martin, 2007; Forman, 2011; Bell & Pomerantz, 2016). These theories in various fields overlap and also build on each other. As an example, text-based theories draw on the analysis of interactions and the methodological and theoretical assumptions of pragmatics and discourse analysis (Ritchie, 2004).

Thus, various methods are applied to examine humour in different contexts. For instance, through applying methods including discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis and ethnomethodology, discourse studies have provided significant observations in various settings such as the workplace (e.g., Schnurr

& Chan, 2011; Schnurr, 2009; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Holmes, 2007, 2006), computer-mediated communication and human-computer interaction (e.g., Morkes et al., 1999), gender studies (e.g., Holmes, 2006; Hay, 2000). In these studies, the main analytic focus has been on the functions of humour, suggesting that it mitigates conflicts (e.g., Norrick & Spitz, 2008), reduces stress (e.g., Lynch, 2002), and establishes social bonds (e.g., Van Praag et al., 2017; Martin, 2007).

Interaction analytic studies – for example, studies using Conversation Analysis (CA) – have provided valuable insights about how interactants produce and/or treat utterances as humorous. These studies are conducted in various settings such as classrooms (e.g., Reddington & Waring, 2015; Çopur et al., 2021; Matsumoto et al., 2022), workplace (Schnurr & Chan, 2011), and mundane talk (e.g., Haugh, 2010). One of the major areas of research in CA studies has been the sequentiality of laughter and smiling, and scholars have mainly attempted to understand how laughter and smile function in interaction (e.g., Glenn & Holt, 2013; Clift, 2016; Walker, 2017; Matsumoto et al., 2022). However, due to its principles, CA has been cautious when approaching 'humour' in interaction, which will be discussed in the following sections.

In addition to CA, critical discourse analysis (e.g., Khan & Ali, 2016) and multimodal discourse analysis (e.g., Ruiz Madrid & Fortanet-Gomez, 2015) have also been employed in examining humour in interaction drawing on recorded naturally-occurring data. For example, in workplace communication, various methods such as critical discourse analysis, multimodal interaction analysis, ethnography, and pragmatics (e.g., Holmes, 2007; Schnurr & Chan, 2011; Haugh, 2016) have been adopted. As such, scholars have advanced our understanding of humour in these settings. However, there is still a need for further research into the phenomenon of humour in these settings and many other contexts of interaction.

Conversation Analysis

The History and Development of CA

CA is one of the several approaches in Applied Linguistics that specifically study spoken language and non-verbal interaction. In CA, the participants and context can be anybody and anywhere, as long as there is interaction, and it is not necessarily verbal. As it is a naturalistic approach, interventions are not favoured, and the world is studied as it is. Traditionally, linguistic approaches focus on the written language due to the implicit assumption that spoken language is not orderly. However, over time, studies focusing on the social aspects of language put forward that the spoken aspect of a language is essential and indeed primary. These perspectives, and thus CA, emerged from sociological

studies that were based on Goffman and Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (e.g., Goffman, 1967). These researchers were not linguists but ethnomethodologists who studied members of societies and their practices to understand how they interacted as social beings (Ten Have, 2007). Ethnomethodological studies aim to find out how ordinary people achieve their interactional goals in mundane talk. Hence, language was not the focus of their studies. They considered language a resource human beings resort to achieve social functions. Garfinkel aimed to understand how ordinary people achieved their interactional goals in everyday life (Gardner, 2004).

These pioneering studies were followed by Harvey Sacks and Emanuel Abraham Schegloff in the early 60s and 70s (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 1979). Thanks to their studies, CA has become a distinct discipline, and it has turned into a naturalistic approach whose main aim is to observe, describe, analyse and understand talk as a default component of human social behaviour (Sidnell, 2010). To exemplify, CA studies such as Sacks et al. (1974) and Schegloff (1979) observed and described how human beings achieved mutual understanding in a bottom-up fashion without relying on linguistic competence. Hence, interaction is not analysed according to some pre-defined prescriptive rules, but there is room for finding out new patterns based on grounded theory. This is where CA differs from traditional linguistic approaches to language.

After the social turn in the 90s (Firth & Wagner, 1997), sociolinguistic studies have gained momentum, and CA has attracted more and more interest since then. Especially after 2000, there was a boom in CA-informed studies that focused on educational contexts. The seminal book that studied classroom interaction from a CA perspective by Seedhouse (2004) may be considered a significant step in adapting and adopting CA methodology into pedagogic circles in that it is the first book that analysed classroom interaction from a totally novel methodology, namely, CA. The suggestion of the Self Evaluation of Teacher Talk (SETT) framework by Walsh (2011; 2013) and his CA-informed analysis approach in comparison to pure CA studies may have been argued to contribute to the adoption of CA studies in pedagogic circles, too, as this approach enabled researchers to conclude practical benefits for teaching, which is usually not the primary focus in pure or traditional CA studies. Some examples of these pedagogic benefits are focusing on locality and considering interaction as something that is dealt with in a reflexive fashion. This is the focus in the SETT framework, for instance. Teachers are not taught 'the best ways' of teaching. Rather, they are informed about some 'resources' that may be utilized depending on the context and the other elements of communication. This explains why reflective practice and individual development are the key terms in the SETT framework.

Precepts

There are three main principles in CA that were borrowed from ethnomethodology. They are accountability, indexicality, and reflexivity (for detailed reading, please refer to Gardner, 2004, p. 266). These rules are the underlying rules of Conversation Analysis. In line with them, CA has primarily three aims.

The first principle is studying naturally-occurring interaction as the principles of ethnomethodology are applied to naturally-occurring talk. CA methodology is strictly against artificial or made-up contexts unless that is the goal of the interaction. This perspective helps conversation analysts better understand real-life social actions (depending on the research aims, of course e.g., one may aim to study artificial contexts) as it provides real-life accounts. In other words, the focus in CA is the naturally occurring talk in contrast to traditional linguistic and discourse-analytic approaches that investigate language competence in an ideal context or experimental contexts (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). The next principle is concerned with finding out the organization and order in interaction. CA puts forward that there is order in interaction, and interaction is patterned at every level, similar to the organizations in linguistics as in syntax or morphology. However, this order is a reflexive one in that it creates the context, and it is also renewed and reshaped by the context via local contributions of the interlocutors. The final aim of the CA methodology is to understand how interlocutors interpret the other interlocutors' turns and actions. This contrasts with the concept of communicative competence in that competence is seen as shared among the interlocutors. Hence, achieving intersubjectivity, also called mutual understanding or shared understanding, is a co-constructed activity.

These precepts and primary aims have some implications for research studies. As mentioned above, the data in a CA study should come from real-life. This is in contrast to traditional linguistic and discourse-analytical studies as they tend to focus on made-up contexts to discuss grammaticality or acceptability. Discourse Analysis studies sometimes utilize made-up tasks to collect data about a specific function or act. CA, on the other hand, prioritizes studying only what is natural without any experimental design.

The Interactional Organization in CA

As mentioned above, the primary goal in CA is to unearth how social interaction is ordered and the consequences of this order for talk-in-interaction (Liddicoat, 2011). This is achieved by four analytic tools in CA: Sequence organization, turn-taking, the repair mechanism, and preference organization.

The first interactional organization is turn-taking. This organization is concerned with the rules for interlocutors to participate in talk. Primarily, there are two rules that focus on who can allocate a turn and who can take the turn.

It also focuses on the questions: "How do interlocutors take turns?", "What are the types of the turns?" and "What is the turn size?". The answers to these questions can provide many insights into the nature of interaction in a particular setting. Please refer to Liddicoat (2011) for a detailed reading on turn-taking.

The next organization is sequence organisation. In sequence organization, all the actions are seen as a part of adjacency pairs although there may be some other possible sequential organisations (Seedhouse, 2004). As Heritage (1984) points out, adjacency pairs are the building blocks of sequence organisation consisting of two parts: the first pair parts and second pair parts. The main concern of sequence organization is understanding how the two parts of an adjacency pair are preceded, interrupted, or followed by other turns or sequences. On the other hand, the repair mechanism is concerned with understanding how interlocutors deal with problems that occur in interaction. To define it more specifically, Schegloff (2007, p. 101) describes it as 'efforts to deal with trouble sources or repairables marked of as distinct within the ongoing talk'. The final one is preference organization. The main idea in preference organisation is that responding to a turn may be done in several different ways. However, all these ways are not equal from a psychological and social perspective. Some of them are preferred more due to some reasons such as social norms or politeness. For example, when there is an invitation, potentially, it can be accepted or rejected. However, accepting and rejecting are not equal options since acceptance is "preferred" more than a rejection. That is why interlocutors need to resort to other resources, such as making excuses or mentioning some problems in rejection sequences, while an acceptance tends to be more straightforward (Liddicoat, 2011).

To summarize CA is a qualitative and inductive approach that mainly studies naturally occurring talk-in-interaction (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Liddicoat, 2011). Thanks to its inductive and emic approach, CA enables researchers to observe and find out novel patterns in the use of language. Hence, it is specifically qualitative, inductive, and empiricist. The goal is to understand how human beings achieve mutual understanding as a part of social practices. Accordingly, from a CA perspective, languages are not grammar or functions; instead they are a tool we use to maintain our life in our social groups. Hence, the goal in CA is to find out how human beings achieve this.

CA approach in studying humour in interaction

Unlike various disciplines, such as pragmatics and linguistics, in which humour is an established phenomenon, it is not treated as a social practice in conversation analytic studies. Since it does not represent a specific social action that can easily be described, conversation analysts consider humour an abstract and conceptual category and use it as an initial gloss of interactive sequences

rather than an analytic category (Glenn & Holt, 2017; Kaukomaa et al., 2013). To put it differently, in CA, using 'humour' as an analytic category reflects the analyst's judgement – instead of focusing on the participant's observable behaviours – due to which it is considered as 'labelling', and this does not align with the principles of CA approach.

As Heritage (1984) puts it, humour is considered a sort of 'typification' (pp. 144-150) in CA studies, which is a kind of abstract category that is "insufficient to describe social actions and sequences, or visible orientations of the participants" (Glenn & Holt, 2017, p. 295). Thus, using action-oriented terms such as 'laughable' (Glenn, 2003, p. 4) – a term referring to the source of the laughter- is more preferred in CA studies.

However, even though humour studies have been informed by interaction analytic research on laughter (e.g., Glenn, 2003; Jefferson, 1979; Hay, 2001; Holt, 2012), relying on action-oriented terms such as laughables and/or smilables may not always be enough in examining cases where, for instance, interactants produce a turn as 'dead-pan'. Moreover, existing studies (e.g., Reddington & Waring, 2015; Lehtimaja, 2011; Haakana, 2010; Kaukomaa et al., 2013) have demonstrated that interactants can employ various verbal and nonverbal conduct to mark a turn as humorous, as in Ford and Fox (2010, pp. 355-357) demonstrating 'swinging the torso while smiling',' throwing back the head' as nonverbal resources used by the participants. Similarly, drawing on data from Finnish-as-a-second-language classrooms, Lehtimaja (2011) presents how students' reproach turns, including a mid-TCU (i.e., turn construction unit) or TCU-final teacher-oriented address terms, could be produced as humorous through various prosodic and nonverbal elements. Thus, humour can be considered a more comprehensive social interaction phenomenon requiring a more holistic approach. In this sense, CA has a lot to offer to humour scholarship.

As in all methods that stem from ethnomethodology, CA treats talk-in-interaction and all other conduct (e.g., nonverbal, situational) as indexical. Accordingly, participants accomplish understandings procedurally and contextually, which suggests that talk is context-shaped and context-renewing (Seedhouse, 2004, p.14; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). This emic approach allows the researcher to see the interaction as a whole rather than in isolation. Hence, when applied to humour research, it allows the researcher to see what is produced and/or treated as humorous by the participants. The researchers can comprehend and gain insights into the dynamics of humour in interaction through unpacking sequential details such as verbal (e.g., voice quality) and nonverbal conduct (e.g., gaze, a particular body movement) provided in CA analysis. CA approach insists on documenting evidence for analytic claims in participants' orientations. This may – at first sight – seem to be limiting the analyst (Glenn & Holt, 2017). However, this insistence, in fact, enables the analyst to conduct a reliable

approach in the examination of humour by avoiding external claims and/or assessing actions as 'humorous' in the analysis. As such, the analysts can gain an analytic grounding of what is oriented to as humorous by the participants (e.g., Reddington & Waring, 2015; Norrick, 2010).

All in all, despite all the debates about how to identify 'humour' in CA approach, it is still a social and prevalent phenomenon in interaction, and CA can be a valuable approach to explore it. It has proven to be a powerful method as it enables researchers to unpack how participants mark turns as humorous through deploying multimodal resources (e.g., Kaukomaa et al., 2013; Reddington & Waring, 2015; Norrick, 2010).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has discussed CA approach in humour studies. It started with a short overview of humour research highlighting the different approaches and methods used to examine the phenomenon. Later, the study has continued with a brief introduction to CA methodology and approach. Accordingly, CA stemmed from ethnomethodology and was used as a research method. Later, it turned into a research field itself. The precepts and the interactional tools of CA have been discussed briefly. The roots of CA, which is based on ethnomethodology and partially sociology, have some effects on its analysis mechanisms which also affect the study of humour. To exemplify, CA utilizes the emic perspective, and it is qualitative and inductive by nature. Accordingly, CA differs from other deductive approaches and methodologies because it does not start the analysis of humour with pre-defined categories. Rather, individual instances of humorous turns are collected and only after forming a sound collection are these instances analysed to come to a conclusion. This approach to data analysis potentially helps researchers come up with unique findings as their analysis is not limited to a pre-defined category.

Finally, in the paper, we discuss how CA approaches humour and highlight the strengths. As such, we propose that CA proves to be a powerful tool to investigate humour through its principles of looking at interaction. The emic approach taken in conversation analytic studies has much to offer in humour research as it enables researchers to gain insights with regards to what is produced/treated as humorous by the participants in the stretches of talk-in-interaction through unpacking the sequential details (verbal, nonverbal, and situational) of interaction.

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