

“Got a date or something?”

An analysis of the role of humour and laughter in the workplace meetings of English language teachers

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This chapter brings instances of humour and laughter into relief using a corpus of authentic institutional interaction of English language teachers in school staff meetings. Humour is used within the meetings as a means of showing mutual support and creating solidarity. The corpus also contains a large proportion of subversive humour, or humour which is directed against the institution, individuals in the group, the group itself and the students. Identifying humour in the data is not a simple case of finding instances of laughter or assuming that it signifies either the intention of the speaker to elicit laughter, or to be humorous. However, wherever humour is manifested, laughter frequently occurs. The methodological issue of identifying and transcribing humour is discussed.

1. Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the institutional interaction of English language teachers, and therefore is limited to a specific feature of teacher language. While the dominant trend in the research into this locale of interaction is to collect and analyse discourse that occurs in the language classroom itself (teacher-student interaction, for example), this study differs in that it reaches beyond the classroom, with the aim of exploring other types of discourse situations that language teaching professionals encounter in the workplace. Obviously, the scope of workplace discourse within an organisation is extremely broad, and consequently this study focuses on a corpus of meetings in particular, as meetings are a genre readily identifiable with the workplace (for a more detailed account of meetings as genre, see Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris 1995, 1997). In addition, due to the fact that recording took place at two different locations during the preliminary stages of the study, it was necessary to adhere to a type of interaction that, from a generic point of view at least, was comparable for both locations. The first subcorpus of meetings was

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recorded in the English department of a public university in México. The university is, in the main, a technical university, with the vast majority of undergraduate students studying for science, engineering and computer engineering degrees. English language classes are compulsory for all students, and successful completion of the English course is a prerequisite for graduation. The second subcorpus was recorded in a private language school in the west of Ireland. The school offers a wide variety of courses; as well general level classes, there are business English, English for Academic purposes (EAP) and a variety of examination classes (for more detailed information on the corpus, see *Data and Methodology* below). Meetings were a common, if at times unpopular, feature of both workplaces. They were especially unpopular in the English department in México mainly because they were not perceived to serve any particular function, and were seen as a 'waste of time'. The meetings in the private language school in Ireland were seen more pragmatically as a forum for the transaction of some of the more esoteric business of language teaching, such as student placement. Indeed, it is the fact that the professionals at these meetings are discussing, negotiating and managing this 'esoteric' business of language teaching that is the defining feature of the study.

The preliminary quantitative analysis of this corpus using the wordlist function of WordSmith Tools (Scott 1999) highlighted an unexpected frequency in the data. The extralinguistic feature, laughter, that had been tagged variously as *laughs*, *laughing* and *laughter* (see *Transcription Issues* for details on the coding of these features) had a significantly high occurrence in the wordlist, and thus warranted closer attention from a qualitative point of view. Humour revealed itself as a significant feature of this study, and the way in which it builds, maintains, and more specifically, illuminates, the workplace relationships of the teachers in question will be illustrated. This unexpected frequency led to the analysis presented here, and highlights, albeit in microcosm, the compatibility of corpus-based/driven methodology and discourse analysis. Corpus methods can alert us to patterns, not just lexical or grammatical, but also, as in this case, interactional.

2. Humour and the workplace setting

Analysis of the phenomenon of humour has been undertaken across a wide variety of disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and organisational studies. (For an extensive overview of linguistic theories of humour and laughter, see Attardo 1994.) Perhaps inevitably, defining humour itself is problematic; there is some overlap in terms (wit, joking) and many studies focus on laughter specifically. Laughter has been proposed as the language of humour (Zijderveld 1983), though the equating of laughter with humour has also been criticised (Adelswärd & Öberg 1998; Osvaldsson 2004). What emerges from much of

the earlier work is the conception of humour as a "social lubricant" which "makes the routine flow of life possible" (Martineau 1972: 103) and this is relatively uncontested throughout a literature that has tended to focus on the functions of humour in interaction. Graham et al. (1992) synthesize much of this research, in spite of its diversity of provenance, and highlight three broad theoretical perspectives which have informed the analysis of humour: superiority theories, incongruity theories, and relief or arousal theories. Superiority theories suggest that laughter is always directed at someone and therefore the person that laughs is expressing their superiority; incongruity theories focus on cognitive processes involved in humour; and relief or arousal theories focus on the premise that laughter, as a physical event, is the release of nervous energy. They present an extremely broad-ranging overview of humour research in a variety of disciplines, and detail twenty-four functions of humour in interaction based on this research. Particularly salient for this study is the research cited by Graham et al. examining the relationship between humour and group cohesiveness. Pogrebin and Poole (1988; cited in Graham et al. 1992: 166) present the following three principal functions of group humour: (1) it allows members of the group to share common experiences and define their working ideology, (2) it promotes social solidarity and (3) it helps the group to cope with a variety of forces outside of their control. Humour in groups is summarised as serving the social functions of "defining and re-defining a group, clarifying status relationships, and easing the tension of new or novel stimuli" (ibid: 167). Research within the discipline of organisational studies has emphasised this potential of humour to provide interesting insights into not only group cohesion, but also the cultural values of the workplace, and even how social status within a workplace is negotiated (Duncan 1982). Vinton (1989) has also described how by assimilating and mirroring the type of humour used in the workplace, employees integrate into new work situations more successfully.

Language-based research into the role of humour and laughter in the institutional context has also underlined its largely solidarity-based, collaborative nature. Adelswärd (1989) examines the social significance of laughter in a variety of institutional contexts and finds, among other things, that "mutual laughter is a sign of rapport and consensus" (p. 107), a finding that is also reflected to a certain degree in this study (see *Discussion and Results*). However, this is not to say that the use of humour is always by its nature benign. As Hay (2000: 716) puts it, every attempt at humour expresses solidarity but also involves constructing a position of respect and status within a group. Although Hay's humour research focuses on casual conversation, and highlights its solidarity-based, power-based and psychological functions, this view of the functions of humour can be extended to the workplace. Rogerson-Revell highlights how in current linguistic research into business communication there has been a shift in emphasis from the structural organisation of professional talk "towards a more pragmatic and functional analysis, focusing on

the strategic use of linguistic resources to achieve certain outcomes" (2006: 7). An example of how humour can be used strategically to achieve a particular purpose can be seen in Collinson's (1988) study of humour as a conduit to a masculine sense of identity in shop-floor relations. He suggests that the men were required to "give and take a joke, to swear and to retain their domestic authority" (p. 197). He also highlights the use of humour as a means to "control those perceived to be not pulling their weight" (ibid.). In a similar vein, Bonaiuto et al. (2003) investigate the organisation of humorous sequences in group negotiations and conclude that humour "enables people to cautiously avoid the use of obvious criticism" (p. 214), while at the same time providing a frame to undermine the proposals of others. Zajdman (1995) similarly considers humour as a "strategy" which can mitigate a face-threatening act (FTA), and illustrates the advantages that can accrue to the speaker in using humour strategically. Even where self-deprecating, or "self-directed" humour is used, it contains the circular message "I am weak. I admit it. To admit means to be strong. Therefore I am strong" (p. 338). The unifying theme in these studies is the idea that through this ostensible perception of humour and group laughter as solidarity based as well as solidarity building, a subtle means of expressing and wielding power in interaction is provided.

Holmes (2000:161), reporting on the Language in the Workplace Project in New Zealand, highlights the lacuna which exists in humour research of tape-recorded material from authentic workplace interaction. She also provides a definition of humour that has informed subsequent studies (see Rogerson-Revell 2006; Mullany 2004), and is adopted here: Utterances are defined as humorous by the analyst, "on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discursal clues, as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants" (2000: 163). Her theoretical framework combines insights from politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1995). The concept of 'face' is crucial in Brown and Levinson's work. They define face as "the public self-image that every member [of society] wants to claim for himself". It consists of two related aspects (1) negative face – the need for freedom from imposition and (2) positive face – the need for enhancement of a positive self-image (Brown & Levinson 1987: 61). These two basic face needs are satisfied by two different styles of politeness. *Negative politeness* is action aimed at non-interference and non-imposition. *Positive politeness* is action aimed at building on indexes of solidarity such as in-group membership (Blum-Kulka 1997: 143). Brown and Levinson's contention that humour (joking) addresses positive face needs and thus engenders solidarity is obviously most influential (though this has been contested elsewhere, see Austin 1990; Eelen 2001; Mullany 2004), as well as CDA's concept of "repressive discourse" which "tends to distract attention away from issues of power" (Holmes 2000: 165). According to Habermas (1984), institutional discourse is by its nature strategic, imbued with, and distinguished by

asymmetry – it is “power laden” (Thornborrow 2002:2). However, in today’s institutional environment with its veiled hierarchies and with what Fairclough (1992) has called the ‘conversationalisation’ of institutional discourse, humour provides a way of ‘doing power’ less overtly; in other words, it “can be used to achieve the speaker’s instrumental goal while apparently de-emphasising the power differential” (Holmes 2000: 165). While humour can be used by the institutionally powerful speakers who operate in an environment where “explicit orders” are no longer acceptable (ibid: 175), it can also be used by the subordinates in an organisation to challenge power structures. Thus, the potential of humour to fulfil both positive and negative politeness functions is underlined. To summarise, we can say that (1) as a positive politeness strategy it expresses solidarity or collegiality, as well as self-deprecation (by protecting the speaker’s positive face needs) and (2) as a negative politeness strategy it downtones or hedges a face-threatening act (FTA) or face attack act (Austin 1990) such as a criticism or insult. Holmes and Marra (2002a) explore how humour contributes to workplace culture by helping to create a distinctive identity for the group. Further research by Holmes and Marra (2002b) distinguishes between reinforcing and subversive humour in the workplace. It pivots on the use of subversive humour in the workplace, but also points out that the use of humour can not only reinforce existing solidarity relationships, but also existing power relationships (p. 70). (Reinforcing and subversive humour are discussed in greater detail in *Discussion and Results* below.) In fact, Holmes and Stubbe (2003:109–110) consider humour indexical of the power relationships in the workplace, where “humour typically constructs participants as equals”. This implication of humour in issues of power in the workplace is enlightening, and gives the tendency in earlier literature to equate humour and solidarity an added resonance. However, power and solidarity are not necessarily opposed, but mutually entailed (Tannen 2006), and humour seems to be the most regularly used strategy for hierarchically powerful participants in the interaction to downtone this power differential, as well as being a socially acceptable way for the less powerful to contest workplace hierarchies. Mullany (2004) has highlighted the tactical use of humour within the institutional context in relation to power using data from business meetings. Her research includes the additional variable of gender, in an investigation of how meeting Chairs use humour as a device to pursue compliance from the subordinates in the company.

To summarise, the idea of the strategic use of humour underlines Holmes and Stubbe’s contention that “humour is a *valuable multifunctional resource* in workplace interaction [...] many meetings are punctuated by bursts of humour, which tend to occur at *strategic points*” (2003: 109, emphasis added). This begs the question: at what point or points do these distractions occur? This issue is explored in the analysis that follows. Previous research contributes substantial evidence of the “fruitful line of investigation” (Mullany 2004: 13) provided by humour. While its

solidarity function is uncontested, it is complemented by a potential to be used repressively by those in power, and as a non-threatening means of subversion giving members of an institution an acceptable way of pushing the boundaries of workplace hierarchies. In the case of the teachers in this study, it supplies a safe way of criticising their colleagues, their students and the way the organisation works.

3. Data and methodology

The participants in this study are all qualified teachers, with a minimum of three years' experience. From the English language department in México, the first part of the corpus comprises three meetings with an average duration of thirty-five minutes. The teachers are all native speakers of English, although there are a variety of nationalities – American, English, Scottish, Irish, Ugandan, Jamaican and Canadian. There are also three meetings in the corpus from the private language school in Ireland, however the length of the meetings varies fairly dramatically as is reflected in the number of words in each meeting (see Table 1 below). The majority of the staff at this location are speakers of Southern Irish English.

As the data was collected with the co-operation of teachers from meetings which took place in very different countries, under very different working conditions, there is little divergence in the type of topics the teachers discuss. This is perhaps unremarkable, but the first reading of the transcripts was completed with the aim of ensuring that there was a sufficient similarity in the concerns of the meetings to justify a professional comparison between the two sites. The general topics that are discussed in these meetings are presented in Table 2 below.

Obviously, this context of language use is extremely sensitive, and consent was obtained in the first instance from the Director of Studies (DoS) to approach the

Table 1. Description of the Corpus of the Meetings of English Language Teachers (C-MELT)

	Meeting	No. of participants	No. of tokens	Total
Subcorpus 1 Public university, México	C-MELT 1	10	12,784	
	C-MELT 2	11	7,163	
	C-MELT 3	10	9,876	29, 823
Subcorpus 2 Private language school, Ireland	C-MELT 4	9	3,707	
	C-MELT 5	11	3,604	
	C-MELT 6	14	2,841	10,152
			C-MELT Total	39,975

Table 2. Overview of topics discussed in the meetings

Topics
Administration
Assessment/examination
Classroom issues
Extra-curricular activities
Future meetings
Pilot courses
Placing students
Professional development
Student attendance
Student motivation

teachers for recordings, and then from the teachers themselves. The participants in this study have complete access to the transcripts, and in the latter stages of the study have had the opportunity to expunge any utterances or sequences they do not want included. However, none of the participants wished to do so, and so the transcripts provide a complete audio representation of each of the meetings. All names and any references which could identify the exact locations of the data have naturally been removed. In all, approximately 3.5 hours of data, or just under 40,000 words, was transcribed and analysed, and stored together as the Corpus of Meetings of English Language Teachers (C-MELT). When comparison between the two locations in the corpus was necessary, C-MELT was broken down into its two constituent sub-corpora.

3.1 Transcription issues

The definitional dichotomy which exists in the literature on humour and laughter, and the disciplinary diversity of the literature on humour itself, can pose an initial problem. Does laughter in the corpus indicate humour? Or indeed, does humour always provoke laughter? As previously mentioned, some progress can be attempted in this vexed issue by consideration of the context in which the humour occurs. Adelswärd and Öberg (1998:412) point out that identifying laughter and humour can have its drawbacks, as although laughter can be associated with mirth, it can "just as well accompany feelings of embarrassment or expressions of maliciousness and spite"; in fact, laughter can also accomplish "complex interactional goals" (see Poyatos 1993 for a detailed treatment of these goals). Therefore, identifying humour in the data is not a simple case of finding instances of laughter, and of assuming that this not unambiguous indication of amusement signifies (a) the intention of the speaker to elicit laughter or (b) the interpretation of an utterance by the listeners as intended to provoke laughter. In Jefferson's (1985) treatment of

the transcription and analysis of the phenomenon of laughter itself, it is pointed out that, in creating a transcript, how, or whether, we “get things right” (an obscure concept in itself) is heavily dependent on what it is we wish to attend to (p. 25). Jefferson’s focus is the pervasive nature of laughter in talk, or the phenomenon of what Goffman (1961) calls “flooding out”: the way in which the word or utterance is “invaded” by laughter. As previously mentioned, the corpus-driven method by which the insight that laughter and, as a corollary, humour, should become a focus of study raised the issue of ‘retrospective’ coding for the transcripts. Although laughter had been selected as an extralinguistic feature to be tagged, there had been no specific attention given to how variations (type of laughter, whether it was part of an individual speaker’s utterance or whether one or more participants responded to an utterance with laughter, etc.) would be marked.

The methodological issue of identifying humour in the corpus was addressed as follows. The meetings of which the corpus is comprised were analysed for the phenomenon of laughter; where it was identified, the cause for the laughter was isolated, as shown in Table 3. If only one speaker laughed, the tenor of the laughter was analysed to get at its actual meaning. Group laughter was taken to indicate that the group interpreted an utterance or sequence as humorous, and this was the most obvious starting point. Other cues which helped to identify whether or not an utterance was intended humorously included “smile voice” (Crystal 1969). Ultimately, the phenomenon was tagged in three different ways:

- as part of the utterance if a speaker laughed during or at the beginning/end of an utterance (<E> laughs <\E>), or during an utterance (<E> laughing <\E>)
- separately, if the other participants responded with laughter to an utterance (<E> laughter <\E>)
- if the laughter was weak or prolonged (or in some other way marked), this too was noted (e.g. <E> prolonged laughter <\E>).

All this seems to ignore Adelswärd and Öberg’s admonition regarding the interpretation of laughter, and its inherent ambiguity. However, I would argue that the context in which the humour is essayed, the workplace, increases the likelihood that it be supported by laughter. That is to say, the preferred response to an utterance which is intended as humorous is laughter, and in the interests of solidarity, and basic politeness (rather than linguistic politeness), colleagues are likely to provide this response. Indeed, Norrick (1993) claims that joking and laughter are an adjacency pair. Hay (2001) discusses a number of ways in which humour can be supported, focussing on the way in which participants contribute more humour, play along with the gag, use echo or overlap, offer sympathy and contradict self-deprecating humour. Some of these supporting functions, such as contributing more humour, are found in the data presented in this chapter, but the overriding

trend is to recognise and support humour with laughter, hence its significance in frequency counts and the focus on it in this chapter.

4. Discussion and results

As laughter was used as an indicator of humour, this was how humorous episodes were initially identified in the transcripts. During a more detailed examination, instances of failed humour were omitted from the final count of these episodes, and in total 73 humorous episodes were isolated, as shown in Table 3. In each case, the speaker who initiates the humour was noted, however no particular pattern emerged until the status of the speaker within the organisation was given attention. Even given the fact that three of the meetings, C-MELT 2, 4 and 6 respectively, were not attended by the Director of Studies (DoS) or Head of Department (HoD), of those 73 episodes, 60 were initiated by the teachers and only 13 by the DoS/HoD. Even taking into consideration the fact that the DoS/HoD is not present at half of the meetings in the corpus, the proportion of humour initiated by the teachers is still significantly higher. It should be noted here that the counts referred to initiation of humorous episodes rather than initiation in general. From this perspective, the DoS/HoD holds more discursive power than the teachers in their ability to initiate, direct and change topics.

Richards' (2006) study of language and professional identity focuses in one chapter on varieties of humour in collaborative talk. The study is particularly interesting because it is based on the staffroom interaction of English language teachers, though, unlike the present one, it deals with a variety of different types of interaction, rather than meetings in particular. Richards points out not only where humour occurs, but also where it does *not* occur, that is in the discussion of arrangements, agreeing procedures and similar business (p. 103). This is also the trend in C-MELT where there is a marked absence of humour in weekly meetings (usually fairly brief, the longest is twenty minutes) that are dedicated to student placement (see C-MELT 4, 5 and 6 above), deciding which students will stay in

Table 3. Initiation of humorous sequences

	Initiated by DoS/HoD	Initiated by teachers	Total
C-MELT 1	5	17	22
C-MELT 2	–	17	17
C-MELT 3	7	5	12
C-MELT 4	–	2	2
C-MELT 5	1	8	9
C-MELT 6	–	11	11
Total	13	60	73

the classes they have been assigned to, or if they will be moved up or down a level. Richards highlights many functions of humour in his data, but two that stand out as highly applicable to C-MELT are the use of humour to deflect professional concerns, and the tendency to use outside agents, whether individual or institutional, as the butt of jokes. Rogerson-Revell (2006) points out the use of humour to mark a shift in style from formality to informality within a meeting. Within C-MELT, humour occurs at topic transition phases, but it also appears to maintain the flow of the meetings (this is also noted by Kushner; cited in Rogerson-Revell 2006), and is used, for example, to relieve tension. Plotting the distribution of the *laugh* tag (and each of its lemmas) showed a marked tendency for laughter to occur during the opening and closings of the meetings, a finding also reported in Holmes (2000: 179). When humour occurred at other points, it was invariably in response to problematic issues. Although humour, as has been previously stated, is multifunctional, Holmes and Marra's (2002a: 70) distinction between (1) reinforcing humour and (2) subversive humour is particularly useful here as conceptual prisms through which to view and interpret the data in the following analysis. As mentioned, reinforcing humour maintains or reinforces the status quo and can be divided into two sub-categories: (a) humour which reinforces existing solidarity relationships and (b) humour which reinforces existing power relationships. In general, the main focus of reinforcing humour is on solidarity and the maintenance of friendly collegial relations. Subversive humour, on the other hand, is used to challenge the existing status quo, and can be viewed as a subtle strategy available to those who are not in power. Using humour subversively does not necessarily require the speaker to mount an explicit challenge, however, so it is a relatively risk-free tactic. The teachers tend to use it, for example, as a way of criticising each other and undermining the decisions of the group. The people in the meetings with the most hierarchical power (DoS/HoD) sometimes had to enforce decisions taken at institutional or departmental level, or criticise the actions of the teachers. In order to do this, the preferred strategy is to use reinforcing humour. Table 4 below illustrates the most common functions of humour in the meetings, and the strategies used to realise them.

In some cases in this data, the teachers' use of humour can be viewed as both reinforcing and, at the same time, subversive, as can be seen in extract (1).

4.1 Subversive humour

In the extract below, the senior administrator, Rachel, interrupts a meeting where student placement in being discussed. When students pay for a course in the school, they are also required to purchase the textbook used by the class; however, in some cases students are tardy about doing this. The administrator has decided that students are not allowed to attend classes until they have paid for the book.

Table 4. Functions of humour/laughter in C-MELT

	Used by teachers to:	Used by DoS/HoD to:
Subversive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - resist each other's ideas - criticise/mock students - criticise the decisions of the group - criticise/mock institution - express jocular abuse (mocking/ double entendre) - allude to money 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - criticise the institution - acknowledge how unpopular and ineffective meetings are
Reinforcing (power/solidarity)	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>solidarity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - highlight commonality of experiences (problem students/classes etc.) - problem-solve - relieve tension 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>power</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - issue a directive - make criticism of teachers - implement decisions - move meetings forward <p style="text-align: center;"><i>solidarity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - downtone power - create harmony in group (thus moving meeting forward)

(1) Rachel: They need to come down to buy the book. That's how you solve the problem of making sure everybody buys it. **So like it or not that's how we're going to deal with it.** Em. Tom and John.

Tom: Oooh.

<E> laughter <E>

Daniel: Scary yeah.

As Rachel's unequivocal *So like it or not that's how we're going to deal with it* is an obvious FTA, one of the teachers responds to it by making fun of the tone in which it is delivered, and the laughter that follows is both supportive of Tom's joking reaction to this, and also serves to break the tension that is created both by the interruption and the FTA. The exchanges that follow this extract highlight the teachers' reaction to the decision taken at an administrative level. While the decision is unpopular, it is not explicitly resisted. The humour in this extract, and its support by the other teachers present, shows that the teachers use humour as a strategy to signal their resistance. It is also interesting to note that while Rachel attempts to make this statement and move the discourse on by addressing two of the teachers (*Em. Tom and John*) in order to tell them something else, she is prevented from doing so by the laughter that follows Tom's *Oooh*. In one respect, this humour can be classed as subversive, in that there is an implicit resistance to the hard line taken by the administrator – however, it can also be argued that the teachers 'close ranks' when they support Tom's utterance, and it reinforces a feeling of solidarity among them.

While in extract (1) the resistance is against the strictures of the institution, extract (2) illustrates subversive humour being used by a member of staff as a comment on decisions taken at a departmental level. In this meeting, the teachers are discussing student attendance, which at the university in México was often quite low. This caused countless administrative headaches as although their attendance was compulsory and, as mentioned above, a prerequisite for graduation, students frequently had classes scheduled at the same time as English or did not attend as their workload for other courses was prohibitive. At the beginning of the semester, it was decided that students would only be permitted to take the end of semester exam, which would allow progression to the next level, if they attended a certain number of classes. Those who did not would have to pay a nominal fee to take the exam. This system did not work, but as the decision was made, it would now have to be enforced. Whether or not this would encourage attendance was disputed.

- (2) Barry: What are we going to do? Threaten them? Bully them?
 Julia: No.
 Peter: Yeah it gets kind of <E> laughing <E>.
 <E> some laughter <E>
 Barry: Are you supposed to go down on your hands and knees? Bribe them? Give them back their two pesos?
 <E> laughter <E>
 Kate: What what well we're powerless really.

While Julia responds seriously to Barry's joking suggestion that they *threaten* or *bully* the students, Peter's laughing support of Barry's utterance provokes some laughter, as does the exaggeration that Barry follows up with, warming to his theme, that they *bribe them*, or *give them back their two pesos*. This last reference to the decision that has proved so unpopular provokes more laughter than his first utterance. Barry is clearly critical of this decision to make students pay, and the real "butt" of his criticism is the department of which he is also a member. It is not unusual for subversive humour to be directed by a member of the group against the group itself. Moreover, the criticism, couched as it is humorously, is accepted implicitly in the laughter that supports it and the exchange concludes with Kate's *well we're powerless really* – an explicit acknowledgement of the futility of any such decisions.

The instance of subversive humour in (2) is directed by a member of the group against the group itself, but subversive humour can also be directed at an individual, or the organisation as a whole. In extract (3), the agenda of the meeting has been established by the Chair, however, a different member of the group suggests that they proceed to the main business of the meeting.

- (3) Rose: Shall we start?
 <E> laughter <E>
 Barry: Shall we?

Here the humour takes the form of jocular abuse. Rose's utterance provokes laughter because of its incongruous formality; Barry repeats the *Shall we?* in a high-pitched voice and an impersonation of Rose's accent. Within the data, there are several examples of this type of jocular abuse between Rose and Barry, which belies the very positive working relationship they had. There is yet another element to his contribution as Barry is Irish, and *shall* is marked in Hiberno-English as evidenced in this exchange from Clancy's (2000) corpus of family discourse where the family are discussing an acquaintance who is ridiculed for being 'posh':

- (4) Susan: What d'you call him that talks in 'shall I shall we say this'. He'd be great for it. 'Shall we go sailing or shall we do this or shall we'.
 Steve: What do they call him? <E> said in a posh voice <E> Bernard?
 <E> laughter <E>
 Susan: 'Shall we shall we say am we'll go sailing at around two. Twoish'.

Humour which is directed against the organisation in this data is indicative of a 'them versus us' dynamic and in this case constructs both the other departments in the university and the students as out-groups. What is interesting is that, on the one hand, as we can see in (1), if the administration makes a decision that could affect their students negatively, the teachers close ranks against the administration, and yet, during their meetings, the teachers also frequently direct humour against the students. In some ways, it is a safe method of framing negative evaluations, but it is also a safe way of presenting professional problems or failures. In (5), the teacher is talking about a student who has just joined the class and has clearly been placed in the wrong class. Having the student in her class that morning has been very frustrating, and she is venting some of that frustration as part of the weekly placement meeting.

- (5) Niamh: He's [he has] no comprehension. He doesn't understand what I ask him <E> ironically <E> he understands because I'm standing in front of him that I'm asking him if he understands.
 <E> laughter <E>
 You know.
 Ciarán: Okay.
 Siobhán: Oh God <E> laughs <E>.
 Michaela: He has no idea.
 Siobhán: Bad scene.

Ciarán as the acting DoS accepts her evaluation of the student's comprehension but offers no other support whereas the other teachers in the exchange support not

only her humorous retelling of the situation in the class but also offer sympathy by echoing what she has said *he has no idea*, and by summarising the situation as a *bad scene*. It is in no way unusual for the students to be the butt of humour as (6) and (7) further show, and there is a sense in which these situations are accepted, through the laughter which support them, as occupational hazards that all the teachers recognise.

- (6) Jessica: What's her name?
 Ciarán: Fugit?
 Jessica: Fergit yeah.
 Ciarán: Yep.
 Jessica: She's a bit difficult. She's a bit cross lookin'.
 <E> laughter <E>
 She just sat in the class looking <E> makes a face <E>.
 <E> laughter <E>

The way that Jessica talks about her student is completely acceptable in the meeting, and these sorts of characterisations are common in the corpus. Another example occurs when two of the teachers, Ciara and Emma, team-teach a class and are talking about two new students who have just started. One of them, Mariana, has been placed adequately, but is not a positive addition to the class:

- (7) Ciara: And just Mariana is a bit moody.
 Emma: Yeah <E> laughs <E> a bit limited as far as personality goes.
 <E> laughter <E>

That is not to say that the teachers only report negatively on students as (8) shows:

- (8) Ciarán: The new one? Aimée?
 Ciara: She's grand she's eh very good actually.
 Emma: Yeah.
 Ciara: She's only sixteen or something she was saying but her comprehension is great. She's just a little shy on her first day. But she'll be fine.

The meetings provide a forum for the teachers to talk about students in a way that helps them to go about the business of running effective classes (see also Vaughan 2007), and also provides them with an opportunity to vent some of the inevitable frustrations engendered in working with people. Humour is clearly an effective means of doing this, and there is no point at which it is not supported with knowing laughter, or a sympathetic remark. The following exchange highlights the complete acceptability of making humorously negative comments, and the purpose they serve in the meetings:

- (9) Ciarán: So anyone to go down?
 Michaela: No but it would cheer us up a lot if you could tell us when Juan is leaving.
 <E> laughter <E>
 Siobhán: That's exactly what I wanted to know.
 Ciarán: <E> laughing <E> I'll check that out for ye.
 Siobhán: Please do <E> laughs <E>.
 Michaela: It would make it worth the time.
 Siobhán: Oh he's unbearable. He's unbearable.
 Ciarán: I think actually he wants you for two hours private. I was only joking.
 Siobhán: <E> laughs <E> I would say oh well depends how much <E> laughs <E> maybe all it would take would be a bribe <E> laughs <E>.
 <E> laughter <E>

Part of the humour near the end of the exchange is based on Ciarán's quip that not only does Siobhán have to put up with an 'unbearable' student in class, but may also have to teach him one-to-one two hours a week. Siobhán retorts that *maybe all it would take would be a bribe* to convince her to teach him. This allusion to money is a source of humour – perhaps because English language teaching is seen as more a vocational 'labour of love', than a career that is well paid.

A similar allusion to money is also evident in the highly subversive humour derived from the following comment made by a teacher at the end of what has been a difficult meeting. As previously mentioned, in México student attendance is an intractable problem in the English department, and the teachers have been discussing at great length how they can motivate the students to attend classes, as well as the sort of excuses they will accept for absences. The meeting has reached something of an impasse in this discussion of acceptable excuses for absences:

- (10) Jack: They have to get their hair done or go to the dentist.
 <E> laughter <E>
 Sam: It's a grey area.
 Gillian: But we get paid anyway.
 <E> prolonged laughter <E>

The laughter that follows *but we get paid anyway* goes on for twenty or thirty seconds – far longer than laughter anywhere else in the corpus, presumably because of the extremely subversive nature of the comment. It is interpreted here as subversive due to the fact that salary and remuneration are not considered principal aims in English language teaching. The teachers in the study are all dedicated professionals, and the subversive laughter and humour they produce in the exchanges discussed provide a legitimate means of criticising the institution and one another,

venting their frustrations and, consequently, serve a therapeutic function. The relief provided by this type of humour is often essential to maintaining collegiality, and so even though the comment is subversive, the laughter reinforces solidarity. In the following extract (11), there is a subversive element to the humour, but also a sense in which it functions to relieve frayed tempers at the end of a meeting that, rather than resolving an issue, created more administrative problems.

- (11) Olivia: ...have we achieved what we came to achieve?
 Anna: Got a date or something?
 <E> laughter <\E>
 Olivia: No just confused here.
 <E> laughter <\E>
 Jack: <E> ironically <\E> I thought the meeting was about Monday.
 <E> Laughter <\E>

Anna's playful *got a date or something* is interpreted both as a comment on the formality of Olivia's *have we achieved what we came to achieve?* and as jocular abuse (Do you need to get out of work because you're meeting your boyfriend?). The laughter that occurs in response leads Olivia to join in and humorously explain that she is trying to summarise what the group has decided because she is *just confused here*. Jack's wry *I thought the meeting was about Monday* confirms that she has every reason to be confused and implicitly criticises the course of the meeting. The overall purpose the laughter serves can be said to be at once subversive, in that the activities of the group are being negatively commented on, as well as reinforcing in that it re-establishes group harmony. Reinforcing humour, discussed in the next section, is similarly dualistic in character, as it may well reinforce solidarity but it can also reinforce power relationships.

4.2 Reinforcing humour

In México, the HoD's use of humour is occasionally used as a means of downtoning his power status within the group, as is evidenced in extract (12). He has been working with three other teachers on a pilot course and in this meeting they are reporting back on their progress. He has taught an ESP course and has encountered what he feels are setbacks which are familiar to all teachers. He invokes this commonality of experience during his report:

- (12) Peter: And eh basically what I worked with them was the <name of publisher> book on teaching computers to students and it's about as dry as you could probably get. You know it's very hard to get make oscilloscopes and analogue systems sound very very interesting.
 <E> laughter <\E>

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Eh related to kind of typical to eh to academic texts and the language they had problems with invariably was language from ordinary English or everyday English you know. So em I'm glad tis [it is] over.

<E> laughter <E>

I'm sure they are too.

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His humorous retelling is responded to with supportive, knowing laughter from the teachers on his staff, as he is reinforcing his identity as a teacher like the others in the group and deflecting attention from his power status within the organisation. This is also emphasised by his stating that he is sure that the students are glad the course is over too, suggesting that despite his being the 'boss' that he has the same classroom problems as any other teacher. Although he uses this type of humour to align himself with the teachers as a group, he also uses reinforcing humour to other ends.

Reinforcing humour can also include humour which is used repressively, or to control others, therefore this aspect of it can reasonably be restricted to those who have an interest in maintaining power. This tactic is evident in (13). Peter is discussing the issue of allocating mentors to new staff, as one teacher has just joined the group and two more new teachers are expected the following week. There have been staffing shortages, so the HoD has been taking extra classes. Gaby is the new teacher in the group.

(13) Peter: And did we get anybody for you?

Gaby: You were for me Peter.

<E> laughter <E>

Peter: No I'm supposed to be getting out of work okay right.

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The group reacts to Gaby's comment with laughter as there is an element of double entendre in relation to Peter being 'for' Gaby. Although Peter also laughs at this comment, his next comment is quite unambiguous, despite his tone of voice being playful. This is further strengthened by the presence of the boundary markers *okay right*, indicating that he is exercising his right to move the interaction on and have no more discussion on whether or not he will be acting as mentor to Gaby. There is a surface sense of self-deprecation here also. Generally speaking, a boss would not be expected to represent himself as wanting to 'get out' of work, but earlier in this sequence Peter referred to the fact that he has been covering classes whilst awaiting the new teachers, so the implication of this ostensibly self-deprecatory comment is that Peter has more important work to do, thus distancing himself from the lower-status teachers whose work it is. This in effect reinforces the existing power relationships in the department. This is also evident in the strategies he employs to give directives, illustrated by extract (14):

- (14) Peter: So just a few quick little *avisos* as they say in Spanish and then we'll get down to the main item on the agenda eh where are they oh God. Right eh number one eh one of the eh this is kind of a general issue by the way . . . Eh about people taking days off eh just I want you to know that personally I have absolutely no problem about it taking days off.. I kind of feel myself that even though sometimes we can't always do it that just sending them to the lab isn't the most productive way of doing it. Now it is a good way of getting it done <E> ironically <\E>.
<E> laughter <\E>

By the humorously ironic way he says *Now it is a good way of getting it done* (with the emphasis on *is*), he softens the force of the directive, and its implied criticism. The pill is also sweetened by his opening reassurance that *this is kind of a general issue* rather than directed against the actual teachers who were taking an inordinate amount of time off. His directive is heavily hedged (*kind of a general issue, kind of feel myself*), but the laughter that he invites with the ironic tone of *now it is a good way of getting it done* breaks the tension, emphasises his understanding of how sometimes best practice is sacrificed to practicality, thus underlining his solidarity, as a teacher himself, with the other teachers.

Although reinforcing solidarity is important to the DoS/HoD, they also use humour as a subtle and non-threatening way of highlighting their power in these meetings. Sometimes this is necessary to get meetings back on track where a distraction has occurred, as is clear from extract (15) below:

- (15) Rachel: Oh and Sally I have an e-mail for you in my office whenever you come up down for it. Daniel says hello.
<E> A few speakers say 'ooh' then laugh <\E>
Ciarán: Well well well Sally.
<E> laughter <\E>
So. Where were we in this exciting meeting?
<E> laughter <\E>

Rather than explicitly saying 'Right. Back to work', Ciarán, the acting DoS, uses humour to gently steer the meeting. This is arguably a more successful strategy than being more forceful would have been.

While some alternative interpretation could be admitted for many of these extracts, what is clear is the multifaceted ways in which humour is used in the meetings. It is highly strategic in a context that, by its nature, requires speakers to be tactical discursively. Humour and laughter can highlight existing solidarity structures in the workplaces described here, but it also underpins that solidarity, as well as allows for its creation.

5. Conclusion

Richards (2006:92) claims that "embedded in, arising from and flowing through many of the routines and rituals of professional life, the stream of humour is one of its most distinctive features" and this is certainly borne out in this corpus of meetings. The pervasive and multifunctional nature of the humour in the staff meetings cannot be over-emphasised. In fact, humour and laughter are multifunctional to the point that any one instance of either or both together could reasonably be interpreted in a number of different ways. The Chair, DoS or HoD can use humour, *inter alia*, to soften criticisms or directives, while the teachers use it to push the boundaries of institutional power, to define themselves as a group, and to identify the out-group, in this case, the students. It is used as a salve for the marked tension between professional imperatives and institutional power (or lack thereof).

Tagging and transcribing extralinguistic information within a corpus can be as detailed or as minimal as the researcher chooses, depending on the purpose being served. However, the potential for a corpus to bring into relief unexpected interactional patterns cannot be underestimated. Nor indeed can the benefits of applying a number of different analytical perspectives to any data, and for each of these perspectives to contribute to a much richer understanding of the interaction itself. There is certainly an argument for providing detailed transcription, and this includes the transcription of extralinguistic information. As this chapter shows, though this extra detail may have not been included in the initial transcription, it is possible to tag significant features retrospectively.

This chapter has attempted to show how typical humorous exchanges are in the meetings and to present the ways in which teachers use them as a way of defining professional boundaries and resisting institutional power. It is used to create and reinforce solidarity within the group, and is therefore a potentially significant index of group cohesiveness. When this data is presented to teachers, and English language teachers in particular, there is a high level of identification with the issues discussed. There is also, informally at least, identification with the humour that is enacted. Further studies which consider the meetings of English language teachers as professional interaction would be extremely interesting to compare with this one, most obviously from the point of view of convergence and divergence in terms of topics which are discussed and the professional concerns of the teachers. However, it would also be interesting to investigate whether humour and laughter are as prevalent in other settings as in the one reported on in this study. Given the growing canon of research that shows just how significant humour is in workplace interaction, for researchers interested in studying workplace interaction, the transcription and tagging of humour and laughter is clearly and important issue.

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