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Editorial: humour in contrast across languages and cultures

Kerry Mullan
RMIT University, Australia
kerry.mullan@rmit.edu.au

Laurence Vincent-Durroux
Université Grenoble Alpes, LIDILEM, France
laurence.durroux@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr

Caroline David
Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3, EMMA, France
caroline.david@univ-montp3.fr

The articles that make up this special issue of the journal have been chosen for their focus on a particular aspect of verbal humour across a number of different languages-cultures, a relatively recent but rapidly growing area of research in the field of humour studies. While some of the articles deal with terminological aspects of humour, others are concerned with the acquisition of humour. What all the articles have in common, however, is a *contrastive approach* to their examination of verbal humour across languages-cultures. The whole issue highlights the linguistically and culturally specific nature of humour, whether this be the way we talk about performing certain humour events in different languages-cultures (Chang & Haugh), how humour terms can be interpreted differently in and across languages-cultures and how we might address this (Goddard, Waters), or how we acquire and express humour in our first and second languages (Vincent-Durroux, Vincent-Durroux et al., Del Ré et al.). The authors employ various theoretical frameworks, methodologies and corpora to examine a number of languages and cultures: Oral Deaf, French, English, Japanese, Brazilian Portuguese, and Taiwanese Chinese.

The first three articles focus on semantic and terminological issues related to humour concepts and practices, where English is used as the main descriptive and conceptual metalanguage for scholarly humour studies. This problem has been written about before (Haugh 2016; Goddard 2018; Goddard & Mullan 2020) and is not restricted to humour studies (cf. Wierzbicka 2014; Levisen 2019), but as will be apparent from the discussions in this issue, is far from being resolved. One major challenge is that the metalanguage we use to talk about the humour practice being examined greatly influences our understanding of it (Haugh 2016), and, as Goddard has pointed out (Goddard 2018; Goddard & Mullan 2020), this metalanguage is very often based on English terms and practices of humour. Another problem (as raised by Chang & Haugh this issue) is that analysts use terms in ways that can "diverge from their

ordinary senses to refer to different or overlapping phenomena" (Sinkeviciute & Dynel 2017). These all pose a challenge when undertaking comparative studies of conversational humour across languages and cultures (Béal & Mullan 2013; 2017; Mullan & Béal 2018): what is really understood by the humour terms and how are the practices being performed in interaction by speakers of different languages? How can we be sure that we are comparing the same thing?

The first article to deal with this issue here is Melody Chang & Michael Haugh's examination of *teasing* - or at least what we understand by this in English - in Taiwanese Chinese. The authors employed a metapragmatic awareness approach by asking native speakers how they understand and talk about this concept. Six key metapragmatic labels were retained as relevant to conversational "teasing" in informal spoken interaction in Taiwanese Chinese: *cháoxiào* (嘲笑), *cháofèng* (嘲諷), *fèngcì* (諷刺), *tǔcáo* (吐槽), *tiáokǎn* (調侃), and *kāiwánxiào* (開玩笑). These terms were then cross-referenced with dictionary definitions and an extensive online corpus of Mandarin Chinese. The terms having been broadly separated into two semantic categories, the interviewees were asked to view two "teasing" events and then talk about them. It was found that these are conceptualised in complex ways by Taiwanese speakers. While in English we might understand "teasing" in terms of speaker intention to either wound one's interlocutor or bond with them, in Taiwanese Chinese, the difference was found to be more to do with the anticipated affective response(s) from the target of the "teasing", as well as the relationship between the producer and target of the "teasing". It was also found that different metapragmatic labels for "teasing" may be used to refer to the same practice. Chang & Haugh argue that, while these lay terms cannot be used in a scientifically rigorous manner to identify and analyse teasing, the way people understand and talk about this concept has an important role to play in any cross-linguistic comparison of teasing. The metalinguistic and metapragmatic approach to the analysis of humour terms demonstrated here allows us to avoid some common pitfalls in comparative humour research, such as relying on English as a scientific metalanguage and defining terms in isolation, both of which neglect important cultural interpretations.

Sophia Waters's contribution is a lexical semantic study of the French verb *blaguer*. While bilingual dictionaries often translate *blaguer* as 'to joke', the author argues here that this is overly simplistic and demonstrates how this translation fails to capture the insider French perspective of this speech practice of *blaguer* and the related noun *blague*. Waters begins with a discussion of the problem of Anglocentrism being inherent in the categorisation of humour terms, and indeed in the term and very idea of *humour* itself, where translations of this term into other languages (especially cognates) are erroneously taken to mean exactly the same thing as in English. Waters argues that an ethnopragmatic approach can help to rectify this and better inform us of distinct humour practices across languages-cultures. This approach combines linguistic evidence, what speakers themselves understand by the practice, and the culturally neutral Natural Semantic Metalanguage (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014) as the tool for analysis. Beginning with a discussion of the different French and English historical and contemporary meanings for the shared word *humour*, the author then introduces the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) methodology, and its components – semantic primes and molecules. Based on a corpus of approximately one hundred authentic examples of uses of the words *blague* and *blaguer* found through Google searches, Waters presents a semantic profile of these terms. She then examines a number of examples and proposes NSM explications[1] for these two terms, showing how the French way of performing humour, as encoded in the terms *blaguer* and *blague*, places a focus on sociability, linguistic skill, and cleverness. There is also an

[1] NSM semantic definitions are known as *explications*.

emphasis on register, and a sense that *blaguer* is something usually performed with someone the speaker is close to, none of which is aptly conveyed by the English translation ‘to joke’.

The third author to deal with this problem of Anglocentric terminology is Cliff Goddard, who has written about this issue previously (Goddard 2018; Goddard & Mullan 2020). Goddard develops his earlier arguments further here, claiming that this problem extends beyond humour studies and is part of what he describes as “the global Anglicisation of humanities and social science discourse” (Goddard this issue). Goddard argues that when English-specific linguistic categories are treated as if they were neutral and universally applicable, this goes so far as to influence research: not only in the framing of questions and methods, and in data analysis and interpretation, but also in the wider scholarly discourse. (He refers us here to the field of im/politeness studies in pragmatics, which is based on the Anglo cultural key word *politeness*.) Goddard proposes a solution which entails: (i) becoming more aware of untranslatable, English-specific meanings and terms; (ii) acknowledging and reflecting whenever one uses one; and (iii) explaining one’s intended sense of it using Minimal English (an offshoot of the aforementioned Natural Semantic Metalanguage), which he describes as “de-Anglicised English”. He goes on to demonstrate how this might be done with *wit/wittiness* and *fantasy/absurd humour*, complex terms which often have different interpretations across languages-cultures and/or which are used in the literature to designate a wide range of practices. Goddard’s contribution presents strong arguments and raises important points. It is to be hoped that his article can help advance the debate around this thorny issue of Anglocentric terminology in humour studies.

The final three articles in this special issue focus on the acquisition and performance of conversational humour in one’s first (L1) or second language (L2). As Del Ré et al. (this issue) point out, humour is transmitted as part of a culture and an identity, “since it often results from transgressions of common ground and norms”. While this may appear obvious, studying the acquisition of verbal humour is less straightforward, and to date there has been less research on children’s humour from a linguistic point of view than from a psychological and psychoanalytical perspective or with an experimental approach (for an overview, see Del Ré et al. this issue). In L2 research, most previous studies have looked at the understanding of humour and at its close link to proficiency (Bell 2009; Fadel & Al-Bargi 2018), and while humour expression in sign languages has been looked at extensively (see Vincent-Durroux this issue), less is known about humour expression in deaf people who use an oral language. Although the researchers in this issue all employ different methodologies, and study quite distinct groups of participants, the studies all share a contrastive approach across languages-cultures, and work with naturally occurring conversational data. As well as a cross-cultural comparative approach, one study also includes an intercultural aspect. The participants include young French and English Oral Deaf (to the age of fifteen), French and English adults, and French and Brazilian children (to the age of seven).

Laurence Vincent-Durroux examines the expression of humour in young Oral Deaf people with cochlear implants (devices which give access to the sounds of speech and facilitate speech production and interaction). This study looks particularly at whether delayed linguistic input was an obstacle to the profoundly deaf cochlear implant recipients using humour in their spoken language, and to what extent they expressed humour in the same way as Deaf signers and/or hearing people. There is a further comparative aspect to the study: the data was collected from profoundly deaf French and English cochlear implant recipients. The author presents a number of examples from the data, which she analyses according to the four-dimensional model devised by Béal & Mullan (2013) for comparative studies of conversational humour across languages-cultures. Vincent-Durroux found that, with age, the children tended to grow

out of jokes about the deaf experience and visual jokes (common features between sign language humour and humour in young children with cochlear implants). In their use of humour, the children were also already showing cultural tendencies reported in previous studies (Béal & Mullan 2013; 2017; Mullan & Béal 2018): discursive strategies for the English, third-party target for the French. The French participants did not engage in linguistic play as much as their hearing counterparts might, however. These findings indicate that cochlear implant recipients can increasingly access and perform speech-based, co-constructed humour, while deafness and limited linguistic input are possible causes for the preference for discursive strategies over play-on-words in humour expression.

The following article is by Laurence Vincent-Durroux, Kerry Mullan, Caroline David, Christine Béal & Cécile Poussard, and focuses on the performance of L2 humour by French native speaker students learning English. While much of the previous research into L2 performance of humour has been conducted in the classroom, this study is based on three comparable corpora of semi-structured interviews: two corpora with native speakers of French and English; and one corpus with second language students of English. The three main aims were: (i) to ascertain whether any differences were observable in the type and use of humour in L1 vs L2 learner speech; (ii) to determine to what extent the L2 speakers were able to perform humour in the target language; and (iii) to compare the features of humour in the L2 speakers with previously observed cultural tendencies in L1 humour in French and English (Béal & Mullan 2013; 2017; Mullan & Béal 2018). As with the previous article, the authors analysed the data according to Béal & Mullan's (2013) cross-cultural comparative model and presented a number of illustrative examples according to each of the four dimensions. Vincent-Durroux et al. found that the humour in the L1 interviews served to create a connection between the participants in an attempt to distance themselves from the experimental situation, and that the French students speaking English as L2 tended to use self-oriented humour as a face-saving device to deflect from their production or comprehension difficulties. Many of the cultural trends previously identified for French and English speakers were in evidence (i.e. a preference for third-party oriented humour in French and for self-deprecating humour in English). It was concluded overall that the French learners of English had mastered some aspects of humour in their L2, but still mostly exhibited characteristics of verbal humour from their native French.

We close with an article by Alessandra Del Ré, Christelle Dodane, Aliyah Morgenstern & Alessandra Jacqueline Vieira, who undertook a longitudinal study on two children, one French-speaking and one Brazilian Portuguese-speaking, from the ages of two to seven. The authors trace the development of humour in these children from the first instances of amusement expressed as laughter at something initiated by an adult, to the children's own production of successful conversational humour. This period covers the first three of four stages in the development of children's humour (Piaget & Inhelder 1966). Del Ré et al. coded and analysed just over 100 examples of humour produced by each child, observing that the various social-cognitive parameters required for full comprehension and production of humour were found to have developed between the ages of 28 months and 4 years, and that the production of humour evolved towards being more deliberate and more controlled at the end of their fifth year. The authors clearly cannot draw any cross-cultural conclusions from a study based on two participants, but their findings demonstrate that the production of children's humour is closely linked to the family input (their micro-culture), and to their linguistic and meta-cognitive development. The effect of the macro-culture requires a more sophisticated knowledge of the world and higher cognitive capacities, not yet available to these children. Nevertheless, the language addressed to them plays a fundamental role in their development of humour, since it transmits cultural values, and while Del Ré et al. found many similarities between the children

at this age, they conclude by hypothesising that as their cognitive and linguistic capacities develop, their humour will start to diverge and more closely resemble that produced by the adults in their respective cultural environments.

The articles in this special issue cover a diverse range of topics, methodologies, corpora, and languages-cultures, and deal with some important complex questions facing the field of humour studies today. From the macro-level theoretical discussions on terminological problems and Anglocentric metalanguage to the micro-level practical semantic analyses and examination of humour in interaction, the contributions lay the groundwork for future research. The guest editors are pleased to be able to make this modest but valuable contribution to the growing body of work on comparative/contrastive research on verbal humour across languages-cultures.

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