The paradoxical role of jocular wordplay in intercultural L1-L2 initial interactions

Michael Haugh and Wei-Lin Melody Chang (The University of Queensland)

Conversational humour – including various forms of play with language (Haugh 2017) or wordplay (Winter-Fromel 2016; Winter-Froemel et al. 2018) – has been observed to constitute a key means of 'breaking the ice' and establishing rapport in initial interactions (e.g. Haugh 2011; Mullan 2020; Usami 2002). However, recent work has also demonstrated that the uptake of conversational humour may sometimes be more complex in the case of intercultural initial interactions (Haugh and Weinglass 2018; Sheikhan 2023, 2024; Sheikhan and Haugh 2023). Given the uptake of wordplay has also been observed to pose particular challenges for L2 speakers (Bell 2017; Shively 2018), this raises questions about what role, if any, is played by jocular forms of wordplay in intercultural initial interactions.

In this presentation, we examine the role of jocular wordplay in the accomplishment of rapport in intercultural L1-L2 initial interactions between Australian/American speakers of English and Mainland Chinese/Taiwanese speakers of Mandarin Chinese. Drawing from approaches in contrastive and interactional pragmatics (Béal and Mullan 2013; Haugh and Weinglass 2018), we analyse instances of jocular wordplay identified in a corpus of 25 audio/video recorded intercultural interactions involving L1 and L2 speakers of English getting acquainted, and compare these with instances of jocular wordplay in a reference contrastive dataset of 50 initial interactions in intracultural L1-L1 settings (25 recordings of Australian/American L1 speakers of English, and 25 recordings of Chinese/Taiwanese L1 speakers of Mandarin Chinese). We first undertake a contrastive analysis in which we examine the role of jocular wordplay in intracultural initial interactions among Australian/American L1 speakers of English and Chinese/Taiwanese L1 speakers of Mandarin Chinese. We then examine the role of jocular wordplay in Australian-Chinese L1-L2 intercultural initial interactions, and the extent to which rapport is interactionally accomplished through it compared to other forms of conversational humour.

A key finding to emerge from our analysis is that while jocular wordplay is used by participants to accomplish rapport or relational 'connection' in both intracultural and intercultural settings, it almost invariably also implicates 'separation' in the latter as it brings to the fore epistemic asymmetries and their respective L1-L2 status. The 'distancing' subtext of jocular wordplay observed in L1-L2 intercultural initial interactions is largely absent, however, in the case of L1-L1 intracultural initial interactions. It thus emerges that jocular wordplay takes on a paradoxical role in L1-L2 intercultural initial interactions: it accomplishes relational 'connection' while also simultaneously foregrounding relational 'separation'. We consider the implications of these findings in light of assumptions about the role played by conversational humour more generally in interactions between people meeting for the first time.

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