

The Effect of Contextual Cues on the Effective Deployment of Humor in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

A great deal of research in the field of communication has found humor to be a significant aid to interpersonal communication. However, the use of humor in the context of intercultural communication can be problematic, owing to various differences between the interlocutors including elements that may not be solely or directly connected with audiences' understanding of language. There is little research evidence as to the factors affecting the success (or otherwise) of humor in such situations, although specification of these could be useful in practice, therefore the study presented here explores the factors effective in the successful (or at least, less problematic) deployment of humor within intercultural communication. The study focuses particularly on the role of contextual cues, because these have been shown to exert positive effects on humor in intercultural communication. These positive effects include an increase in audience members' understanding and recognition of humor, and a reduced likelihood of "humor failure".

Keywords: humor, intercultural communication, interlocutor, contextual cues

1 Introduction

Many researchers have considered the importance of humor as a tool of interpersonal communication, particularly over the past 15 years. (Cann, Zapata, & Davis, 2009). In general, the fostering of a humorous atmosphere between people is helpful to the flourishing of interpersonal relationships and maintenance of good will and good feelings. (Miczo, 2009). Such behavior is deemed to be one of the most useful tools for generating thriving relationships between people (Dziegielewski, Jacinto, Laudadio, & Legg-Rodriguez, 2004). In interpersonal communication, humor often generates positive outcomes because it leaves a good impression and facilitates friendly communication (Cann, Zapata, & Davis, 2009).

Until recently, few researchers have examined non-native speakers' comprehension of humor in a second language (Bell, 2007b). The current paper investigates the success of humor in intercultural communication and attempts to create a better foundation of understanding for future research on humor in intercultural communication, and specifically the effect of contextual cues on humor success in intercultural interactions. It is hoped that this will aid the accuracy of future research on this topic, by clarifying the nature of humor comprehension and success in intercultural communication. This study suggests that when verbal humor in intercultural conversation lacks appropriate contextual cues, attempts at humor fail. In contrast, when verbal humor is accompanied by contextual cues, attempts at humor succeed.

2 Defining Humor

In communication, humor is defined as the "verbal and/or nonverbal messages that contain incongruous elements" (Miczo & Welter, 2006). There are two important aspects of humor, namely the creation of humor and the approval of that humor. The creation of humor refers to the process whereby a joke or other humorous deployment of words and/or behavior is generated, either verbally or non-verbally, whereas the approval of humor includes the reaction to it, such as smiling or laughter (Dziegielewski et al, 2004).

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There are two ways of reacting to humor; appreciation and comprehension. Kozbelt and Nishioka (2010) asserted that “Humor appreciation is the experience of finding something amusing. It is typically operationalized by intensity and duration of the ‘mirth response’.” (Nishiok, 2010, p.376). The “mirth response” includes smiling and laughter. In contrast, humor comprehension is the process of understanding or “getting” a joke. According to Hay (2001), recognition, understanding and appreciation are necessary and required in order to understand humor. For an individual to perceive a joke or a funny gesture, he/she will go through three steps. These are: (1) the recipient should recognize the effort made by the other party to be funny, (2) they must understand why it is laughable, and then (3) they must find out whether the effort was intended to be funny or not.

Without these three steps in perceiving a joke or a funny gesture, humor fails. Clearly, it is important to define “failed humor”. There are many discourse/conversation-based studies that suggest laughter is the indicator of whether humor succeeds or fails. In other words, when people who perceive humor do not laugh, then this humor has failed; when they laugh, the humor is successful (Bell & Attardo 2010).

Bell and Attardo (2010) describe seven levels of humor failure, having conducted a study to demonstrate the humor-related experiences of six international students in the United States. The students, each of whom was pursuing a master’s degree in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Foreign Languages), possessed a good command of the English language and had lived in the United States for around a year when the study was conducted.

The first level of humor failure defined in that study is the failure to process language at the locutionary level. Such failures are due to an inability to hear and digest the meaning of the linguistic expressions that are always used in verbal humor. The second level is failure to understand the meaning of words. The third level is the failure to understand the pragmatic force of utterances. The pragmatic force includes the illocution and the perlocution of the utterance; the illocution is the intention behind an utterance, perlocution is the effect or result of an utterance upon the listener. For instance, indirect and ironic speech, which are often associated with humor, generate examples of the pragmatic force of utterance which many non-native speakers fail to understand. Non-native speakers fail to understand the intention of the speaker to be funny, and so fail to perceive their speech as humorous.

The fourth level is the failure to recognize the humorous frame. This level is unrelated to the explicit and implicit meanings of humor, but rather with the interpretation of the situation as either humorous or not. It is important to note that this failure involves cultural differences, rather than linguistic ones.

The fifth level is failure to understand the incongruity of a joke. This level is concerned with failure to understand the absurdity of humor that makes it laughable or apparently ridiculous. Even if the language of humor is clear and understandable, it may include phrases or sounds that have implicit and cultural meanings. If the non-native audience does not understand these meanings, the humor fails.

The sixth level is the failure to appreciate the joke. At this level of failure, the listener does not laugh, or does not perceive humor as being laughable even though he/she knows that the speaker is trying to be funny. This is usually due to differences in cultural background, which can make some jokes funny to some but offensive to others.

The seventh, and final, level of failure is failing to join in with the joke. This failure occurs due to the fast pace of conversation among native speakers, and the slow process of comprehension among the non-native speakers. Hence, the non-native speakers may perfectly understand the joke but fail to engage in laughter at the “correct” moment or in a timely manner.

3 Intercultural Communication

Humor is a special circumstance within intercultural communication. To understand why, it is important to define intercultural communication and differentiate it from interracial and interethnic communications. Intercultural communication is the communication between people who have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Nwankwo, 1979). According to Bell (2007b), in intercultural communication, humor is often misunderstood and sometimes problematic. This is attributed to the fact that the use of humor in intercultural contexts requires sociolinguistic competency. Humor entails not only a high level of linguistic skill, but also social and cultural understanding. Even though humor exists in every culture and it is universally common, it maintains different aspects in different cultures (Bell, 2007b).

Language plays an essential role in intercultural communication when one of the people involved is using a foreign language. For second-language speakers, understanding humor may not be as easy as many native speakers imagine. Many second-language learners and speakers say the difficulty in understanding humor in their second language has several implications. Those implications include difficulty in comprehending the cultural context of humor in the second language. There is also the issue of incomprehensible words that are often used with humor, and the fact that the way the act of humor is made or said can also make it hard for the second language learner to understand (Bell & Attardo, 2010).

Studies show that many non-native speakers, although they have a strong command of the language they are learning, find it difficult to fully comprehend or feel humor in that second language (Bell, 2002; Nelms, 2001). This difficulty is understandable, since humor involves social and intercultural aspects that may be unfamiliar to the listener, in the course of intercultural communication. Bell (2007a) states that “The construction and comprehension of verbal humor in an L2 [second language speaker] constitutes a great challenge even to advanced L2 learners, as it often requires sophisticated linguistic, social and cultural competence” (Bell, 2007a, p.28). However, the difficulty and unpredictability of perceiving something as humorous in a second language does not lie in linguistic and cultural elements alone; it involves additional factors.

Verbal humor in intercultural communication requires communicative competence in both the native and the non-native speaker. This competence can be problematic. According to Bell (2007a), intercultural interaction, whether humorous or serious, can be constructed in a simple or a difficult way, depending on the native speaker and the language used in the interaction. This construction depends entirely on the native speaker because he/she is the participant with greater linguistic competence. Thus, he/she can make the second language speaker feel excluded or included in the conversation. Another problem related to verbal-humor in intercultural communication is the fact that some native speakers may make excessive adjustments to further their attempts to make their humor successful, with the unfortunate result that their listener is unable to understand the humorous interaction.

3.1 *Contextual Cues*

Intercultural conversation that contains verbal humor without contextual cues is more likely to fail, because contextual cues are essential to the success of humor attempted in intercultural conversation. Those contextual cues, according to Cheng (2003), include funny non-verbal expressions, humorous tone, and laughter. She asserts that such cues are significant when incorporating humor into the conversation. Laughter is considered one of the commonest non-verbal cues in the play frame. In other words, the speaker laughs more than the listener, as an indication of his humorous attempt and as part of the play frame (Miczo, 2004).

A substantial volume of research has highlighted the importance of the contextual cues for humor and generated several definitions of these cues. Some cues are verbal, others are non-verbal. Contextual cues in humor include the different ways of pronouncing words when telling a joke, use of slang, a modified level of formality and – last but not least – the use of facial expressions to signal satire (Bell, 2007b). Gumperz (1982) asserts in his book *Discourse Strategies* that these contextual cues often have cultural roots, and are dynamic. Moreover, understanding of these cues does not necessarily entail an understanding of the culture in which they originated, but can come through analysis of the situation in which they are contextualized.

Miczo (2004) emphasized the role of the play frame, and believes that the conceptualization of humor basically refers to the context in which the play frame is made. Furthermore, the nature of a play frame involves deliberate action whereby the person who is making the humor displays. He acknowledges that humor is multitasking; for people to generate humor in their conversation, they have to make a play frame that contains communicative cues, which indicate the attempt at humor. Some of these cues are verbal, but most of them are nonverbal (Miczo, 2004).

Allen, Lon, O’Mara, and Judd (2001) studied verbal and non-verbal orientations toward communication, and the development of intracultural and intercultural relationships. Notably, their study supported the claim that in intercultural communication, non-verbal cues are more easily understood than the verbal language. Their study compared a group of Americans with non-American people. Both groups exhibited positive attitudes and views about the other’s nonverbal relational communication. The study showed contextual cues in communication to be easily perceived by the different groups.

In attempting to understand the important role of contextual cues in verbal humor and its role in reducing uncertainty, Bell (2007b) analyzed a conversation in which humor took place in an intercultural context. That conversation is reproduced below: the people talking are two native English speakers, Jake and Louis, and a native of Thailand named Pum, who has advanced proficiency in English:

- 1- Jake: all we do is sit around and smoke and drink
- 2- Louis: [smoke and drink
- 3- Pum: The best part uh [huh huhhuh
- 4- Jake: (gruff voice) [and we take out our guns
- 5- Louis: yeah
- 6- Jake: drive my pickup truck
- 7- Louis: (gruff voice) I wish I was in the desert right now
- 8- with a gun and a knife
- 9- Jake: [u::h huh huhhuhhuhhuh
- 10- Louis: and that orange and white parachute
- 11- Jake: uh huh huhhuh
- 12- Louis: and a book on
- 13- what types of d[esert animals are out there.
- 14- Pum: [uh huh huhhuhhuhhuh

According to Bell (2007b), Pum, who is a native of Thailand, did not actually understand what Jake and Louis were saying; theoretically this was due to her uncertainty. Although she was fluent in English, the conversation between Jake and Louis was culturally implicit, which hindered Pum's comprehension. However, Pum—surprisingly—laughed. When asked why she had laughed, Pum said she did so due to the facial expression that Louis was making while chatting with Jake. This indicates that Louis' (non-verbal) facial expressions reduced Pum's uncertainty about the humor, and so she laughed.

Another reason for her laughter, Pum reported, was Louis' tone when talking. While this case proves that appreciation of humor does not require full comprehension of the joke, and that mere recognition of the humorous intent may be the only reasons for Pum's laughter, there is another fact that this case may prove. That fact pertains to the main argument of this research, which is the effect of contextual cues in verbal humor.

4 Study Hypotheses

Previous research on humor in intercultural communication indicates the importance of contextual cues in humor's success. This indication supports the four hypotheses of this study, which are:

- H1: Contextual cues increase the level of understanding of humor in intercultural communication.
- H2: Contextual cues make the delivery of humor more engaging in intercultural communication.
- H3: When an attempt at verbal humor in intercultural communication lacks contextual cues, it is more likely to fail.
- H4: Contextual cues make the joke clearer in intercultural communication.

5 Methodology

The study is of a quasi-experimental design, to compare two groups of participants. Group one watched a video clip with a joke that applies contextual cues. Group two read a transcript of the same joke. The survey used a Likert-type scale that was developed to measure levels of understanding, delivery, failure and clarity of humor. To recruit the participants, two online surveys were sent to two separate groups of international students, from non-English speaking countries and studying various majors. These students were attending Western Illinois University, and Western's English as a Second Language (WESL) Institute. A total of 26 participants responded to the surveys; of these, 40% were male and 60% were female. Participants came from diverse countries, such as Saudi Arabia ($n = 5$), Nepal ($n = 2$), Sudan ($n = 2$) and other non-Anglophone states ($n = 13$). Some students did not report their country of origin. The average age of the participants was 27 ($SD = 7.13$).

To measure each variable, the study used a survey comprising 9 questions, measuring the level of understanding, delivery, failure and clarity of humor. The scale was Likert-type, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Two questions were intended to assess the level of understanding. These explored whether (or not) the humor that the participants experienced was understood and recognized as humorous.

Three questions assessed delivery and were designed to establish whether the participants had found the delivery of the joke easy, with no confusion. Three other survey questions asked the participants to report their impressions of the joke with regard to its failure. A further question asked the participants to report their impressions regarding the clarity of the joke.

Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to determine the reliability of the measurement of understanding. The questions were found to be reliable, with a Cronbach's Alpha level of .83. For delivery, the questions were found to be reliable with a Cronbach's Alpha level of .67. For failure, the questions were found to be reliable with a Cronbach's Alpha level of .91.

6 Results

6.1 Understanding

Hypothesis one suggested that the scores for the video-watching group ($n = 11$) in terms of understanding the joke would differ significantly from those of the group that simply read the transcript ($n = 12$). To test this hypothesis, an independent samples t -test was calculated. Results of the t -test support the hypothesis, ($t(21) = 3.85, p < .001$). Based on this result, we reject the null hypothesis. Cohen's d was calculated to evaluate the magnitude of difference between the group that watched the video ($M = 4.09, SD = .83$) and the group that read the transcript ($M = 2.46, SD = 1.16$). Cohen's d ($d = 1.6$) indicates a large difference between these (joke understanding) scores for the group that watched the video and the group that read the transcript.

6.2 Joke Delivery

Hypothesis two suggested the scores for joke delivery from those who watched the video ($n = 13$) would be significantly different from those given by participants that read the transcript ($n = 13$). To test this hypothesis, an independent samples t -test was applied. Results of the t -test support the hypothesis, ($t(24) = 2.88, p < .01$) and based on this result we reject the null hypothesis. Cohen's d was calculated to evaluate the magnitude of difference between the group that watched the video ($M = 3.67, SD = .62$) and the group that read the transcript ($M = 2.79, SD = .90$). Cohen's d ($d = 1.47$) indicates a large difference between the groups on joke delivery.

6.3 Failure

Hypothesis three posited that the video-watching group ($n = 11$) would give scores regarding joke failure that differed significantly from those of the group that read the transcript ($n = 13$). To test this hypothesis, an independent samples t -test was carried out. Results of the t -test support the hypothesis, ($t(22) = -2.95, p < .01$) and based on this result, we reject the null hypothesis. Cohen's d was calculated to evaluate the magnitude of the difference between the group that watched the video ($M = 1.97, SD = .72$) and the group that read the transcript ($M = 3.15, SD = 1.15$). Cohen's d ($d = -0.02$) indicates a small difference between the group that watched the video and the group that read the transcript scores, regarding joke failure.

6.4 Clarity

Hypothesis four posited that the scores on the dependent variable from the group that watched the video ($n = 12$) would be significantly different from those given by the group that read the transcript ($n = 13$). To test this hypothesis an independent samples t -test was applied. Results of the t -test support the hypothesis, ($t(23) = 2.28, p < .05$), so we reject the null hypothesis. Cohen's d was calculated to evaluate the magnitude of difference between the group that watched the video ($M = 3.75, SD = .87$) and the group that read the transcript ($M = 2.69, SD = 1.38$). Cohen's d ($d = 0.80$) indicates a large difference between the two groups regarding the clarity of the joke.

7 Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that contextual cues make a difference to the success of humor within intercultural communication, and that this effect is positive. The current study shows that when contextual cues are used in delivering humor in a second language, the level of success (in terms of perception by the audience) increases. This is because, when humor is delivered with contextual cues in a second language, the attempt becomes more recognizable and clear to those watching and hearing and thus, it succeeds. In contrast, when jokes in a second language lack contextual cues, they fail because they become less clear and recognizable to the recipients who are not cultural or linguistic natives. In short, the presence of contextual cues in humor increases non-native speakers' comprehension of that humor.

The literature on humor in intercultural communication agrees with the results of this study. The importance of contextual cues in humor during intercultural communication has been highlighted in previous research (Cheng, 2003; Miczo, 2004; Allen, Lon, O'Mara, & Judd, 2001). That recognition and understanding are essential for the appreciation of humor has been indicated in previous research (Hay, 2001). This study found the effect of contextual cues on humor to be an increase in the level of recognition and understanding of humor in a second language. On the other hand, when the deployment of humor attempt lacks contextual cues, the level of recognition and understanding decreases, which results in the failure of that humor. This corroborates previous research on humor failure (Bell & Attardo 2010). A lack of contextual cues in a second-language humor makes it difficult for the audience to recognize the humorous frame and interpret the situation as either humorous or otherwise. A lack of contextual cues also increases the level of uncertainty felt by the intercultural audience, whereas the presence of contextual cues reduces such uncertainty. The current study also agrees with existing literature that indicates non-verbal cues are more easily understood in intercultural communication than purely verbal communication (Allen, Lon, O'Mara, & Judd, 2001).

7.1 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The limitations of this study include the sample size which is relatively small – 26 students participated in the study. A greater number of participants would have added power to the study and increased the likelihood of accuracy. Also, the measures used to collect data could have been more sophisticated. The measures used in this study included 9 items and were wholly original rather than taken from previous research. Perhaps a better measure, with more items, would have provided more significant results.

Future research on humor in intercultural communication could examine the effects of contextual cues in intercultural communications via study of genuine life experiences, rather than online survey. A longitudinal study would bring better and more solid results because it would explain in greater detail how contextual cues positively affect humor within intercultural communications.

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