

Over the edge? Subversive humor between colleagues and friends¹

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Abstract

Humor is used for a variety of functions in everyday social interaction. It frequently serves as means of expressing friendliness, solidarity or 'positive politeness' (Brown and Levinson 1987), but it may also function less positively, especially when used between people of different power or status. While the powerful may use humor to maintain control, it is also available to the less powerful as a socially acceptable means of challenging or subverting authority.

This paper examines some of the ways in which humor is used subversively between colleagues in two New Zealand organizations. The distribution of humor in meetings in these workplaces is compared with the frequency of humor in informal interactions between friends and apparent equals. The analysis suggests that while humor is much more frequent in informal contexts, subversive humor is proportionately much more frequent in workplace meetings. The analysis also demonstrates that subversive humor tends to be conveyed through discourse strategies which create social distance, and emphasize social boundaries between the speaker and the target of the humor. Potential social implications of these patterns are discussed.

Introduction²

Humor serves a very wide range of functions in social interactions (see, for example, Graham et al. 1992, Martineau 1972, Collinson 1988, Hay 1995). Perhaps the most obvious is its function as a means of expressing friendliness, solidarity or 'positive politeness' (Brown and Levinson 1987).

Indeed, humor could be described as the glue of relationships between friends.

But humor can also be used to reduce the face threat of a directive, a challenge or a criticism (Holmes 1998). In the workplace, where differences in power and authority are part of the fabric of interaction, humor is one useful strategy for getting a negative or critical message across in an ostensibly acceptable form. In other words, humor may finesse objections to an insult, or a criticism by presenting them in a form which frames the objector negatively: e.g., as lacking a sense of humor (Sollitt-Morris 1996, Holmes 2000a).

Example 1

Context: Manager, Beth, to administrative assistant, Marion, who is chatting to a secretary.

Beth: OK Marion I'm afraid serious affairs of state will have to wait we have some trivial issues needing our attention.

[General laughter]

While Beth's ironic comment elicits laughter, it also makes the point that it is time for the chat to stop and for the work to commence (Holmes 2000a).

It is this 'dark side' (Austin 1990, Cupach and Spitzberg 1994, Rodrigues and Collinson 1995, Ackroyd and Thompson 1999) of humor which is the focus of this paper. Our primary concern is the characteristics of subversive humor in the workplace, a context involving institutionalized relationships based on status and power. However, for comparison purposes, we have also examined the way subversive humor is used between friends, where the construction and maintenance of friendly relations is the primary goal of social interaction.

While politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987) provides a satisfactory framework for analyzing interactions which focus on the mutual preservation of face, critical discourse analysis (e.g., van Dijk 1993, Fairclough 1995) provides an approach which more adequately handles the relationships between language and power (Holmes 2000a). In particular, critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides a means of accounting for the use of humor as a subversive strategy especially in hierarchical contexts: i.e., an acceptable strategy for conveying critical or negative intent which undermines existing power relationships. In this paper, we use CDA to examine the ways in which humor is used to subvert the status quo and, at least symbolically, destabilize power relations in different social relationships.

Database

The core data for the analysis consists of twelve meetings between female and male colleagues who constitute workplace project teams in each of two large New Zealand organizations. This data is one component of the material collected by the Victoria University Language in the Workplace Project team. These twelve project team meetings are compared on different dimensions with thirteen mixed gender interactions between groups of friends in the home, which were collected and analyzed by Jennifer Hay (1994, 1995).³ Some of these recordings are included in the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English.⁴ The participants in all interactions are well-educated adults.

On a continuum from public to private discourse, the business meeting data can be located towards the public end of the continuum while the friendship groups involve more private discourse (cf. McElhinny 1997). In the project team meetings, individuals act in ways which are consistent with their roles and formal status in the hierarchies of their large corporate organizations. In the friendship groups, participants operate as private individuals.

Definition of humor

There is a large literature discussing different definitions of humor (see Hay 1995, Holmes 2000a), which we will not review here. For our purposes, the following definition has proved satisfactory:

Instances of humor included in this analysis are utterances which are identified by the analyst, on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discursual clues, as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants (Holmes 2000a).

Table 1. *The data set*

	Number of meetings	Average length of excerpts
Organization 1	6	98 mins
Organization 2	6	47 mins
Friendship group 1 (Hay 1995)	6	20 mins
Friendship group 2 (Hay 1994)	7	126 mins

A wide range of contextual and linguistic clues are relevant to identifying instances of humor, including the speaker's tone of voice and the audience's responses (see Marra 1998, Holmes 2000a).

Using this definition we identified a total of 217 instances of humor spread throughout 875 minutes in the business meeting data set. By contrast, the groups of friends analyzed by Hay (1995)⁵ produced 266 instances of humor in a much shorter total amount of time i.e., 120 minutes. Table 2 indicates the relative proportions of instances of humor in these different contexts.

Clearly, the proportion of humor in the workplace interactions is dramatically less than the amount in informal friendship groups. Business meetings are transactional rather than social interactions (Holmes 2000b); they have a task-focused, overt purpose, and humor is not conventionally regarded as a relevant component of such interactions. We have many examples of meetings in our workplace database in which there is little or no humor. Indeed, humor in workplace meetings, though often very welcome because entertaining, can be regarded as 'marked' in that typically it temporarily distracts attention from the meeting's business. As Pizzini notes, 'For a work group or a group of people involved in a serious task, a joke can offer a moment of collective withdrawal from the job at hand' (1991: 478).⁶ Tolerance for humor in meetings varies considerably according to the seriousness and urgency of the core business of the meeting.

The personalities of participants are also a factor in how much humor characterizes a particular workplace interaction (Turner 1980, Ruch 1998, Smith and Goodchilds 1963). In larger meetings, it tends to be more confident personalities who contribute most. In each of the workplace meetings, for instance, regardless of status, one particular participant contributed more humor than the others. This is apparent in Table 3, which identifies the individuals who instigate the humor in our data set. Eric in organization 1 and Peg in organization 2 contribute a disproportionately greater amount of humor than others in these larger

Table 2. *Proportion of humor in workplace team meetings versus friendship group meetings*

	Ratio (proportion of instances of humor per 10 mins)	Raw scores
Organization 1	2.2	130
Organization 2	3.1	87
Informal friendship group 1	22.2	266

Table 3. Breakdown of instances of humor by individuals

	Name	Instances/ no. of meetings	Average	Subversive instances/ no. of meetings	Average
Organization 1	Barry (Chair)	36/6	6	10/6	1.7
	Eric	22/2	11	14/2	7
	Dudley	19/4	4.8	7/4	1.8
	Lindy	9/2	4.5	1/2	0.5
	Callum	21/6	3.5	11/6	1.8
	Jacob	16/6	2.7	7/6	1.1
	Duncan	3/2	1.5	0/2	0.0
	Marco	4/6	0.7	1/6	0.2
Organization 2	Sandy (Chair)	12/4	3	5/4	1.3
	Clara (as Chair)	10/2	5	3/2	1.5
	Clara (when not Chair)	9/3	3	5/2	2.5
	Peg	19/4	4.8	9/4	2.3
	Rob	7/5	1.4	2/5	0.4
	Marlene	7/5	1.4	2/5	0.4
	Renee	4/3	1.3	2/3	0.7
	Neville	4/3	1.3	1/3	0.3
	Seth	7/6	1.2	4/6	0.7
	Vita	2/2	1	1/2	0.5
	Ange	3/6	0.5	0/6	0.0
	Kane	1/2	0.5	0/2	0.0
	Benny	2/6	0.3	1/6	0.2

meetings. The number of contributions they make are best accounted for by their extroverted and confident personalities, rather than by other social factors such as status.

Other participants initiate little or no humor in these larger meetings, although they support the humorous contributions of others, e.g., Troy and Daisy. In other smaller meetings we recorded, however, Daisy was responsible for a relatively large proportion of the humor. The interaction of group size and personality is thus a relevant consideration in the analysis. In general, contributions to humor in larger groups were made by more extroverted and confident personalities.

In friendship groups where participants choose to interact together, humor is almost expected — it is a much more predictable and typical component of interaction between friends. Constructing and maintaining good relationships is a central function of social encounters between friends, and humor is an important strategy for attaining this end (Hay 1994, 1995). This is very clear from Table 2 which indicates that the

amount of humor per ten minutes is ten times as great in the informal friendship groups as in the project team meetings analyzed.

Having established that humor occurs much more often in the friendship groups than in the workplace meetings, we turn now to examine more specifically the subversive function of humor.⁷

Subversive humor

There is an extensive literature on functions of humor.⁸ Recognizing that all humor serves a very general function of amusing others (thus contributing to solidarity and enhancing the individual's status), Hay (1995: 97–98) makes a broad distinction between humor which further contributes to solidarity, humor which contributes to power, and humor which serves a psychological need. Many instances are, of course, multifunctional, simultaneously serving a range of functions.

The distinction between solidarity and power is widely used in sociolinguistic analysis. However, from a CDA perspective, the crucial distinction, and the one we have adopted in this analysis, is the distinction between humor which maintains or reinforces the status quo, which we have called 'Reinforcing' humor, and humor which challenges or subverts the status quo, here labeled 'Subversive' humor.⁹ It is the latter which is the main focus of this analysis.

Reinforcing humor

Reinforcing humor includes two subcategories:

- (i) humor which reinforces existing solidarity relationships
- (ii) humor which reinforces existing power relationships.

Both types of humor maintain the status quo or group norms.

Solidarity humor is positive politeness humor which maintains and emphasizes friendly and collegial relations between participants.

Example 2

Context: Project team members at the start of a meeting

Sandy: we should start in the traditional way and have Neville tell us a story about his weekend.

[General laughter]

Neville obliges with an amusing anecdote, reinforcing and further developing collegiality and friendliness within this team.

Reinforcing humor also includes humor which is used 'repressively'. Repressive humor is used to control others; it emphasizes existing power and authority relationships, and keeps people in their place, albeit using a pleasant strategy (see Sollitt-Morris 1996, Holmes 2000a).

Example 3

Context: Project team members are discussing a long report they have been sent

Dudley: have you read it?

Barry: I have

Dudley: have you already?

Barry: [laughs]

Dudley: you don't have enough work to do Barry.

[Barry and group laugh]

Dudley is higher in the organizational hierarchy than Barry. Dudley's humorous comment implies that more senior people have too much work to have time for reading such long reports, and could also be interpreted as hinting that Barry's workload may need increasing.

Subversive humor

Subversive humor challenges existing power relationships, whether informal or formal, explicit or implicit; it subverts the status quo.

Example 4

Context: Project team member (acting as chair of this meeting) calls his manager, Clara, to order

Sandy: can we get back to business

Clara: [laughs] sorry sorry.

[General laughter]

Sandy is here taking the opportunity to reprimand a superior. He criticizes Clara for digressing, a fault she often pulls him up on in meetings when she is chairing, which is the usual scenario. This kind of subversive humor in the workplace is the main focus of the analysis which follows.

Each instance of humor was classified independently by both authors, and then re-checked at a later date. The level of inter-rater reliability was 95 percent, an acceptable rate for this kind of functional classification.

Almost 40 percent of the humor in the organizational meetings consisted of subversive humor. In other work contexts, subversive humor is apparently much less frequent. Pizzini (1991: 484) for example comments that witticisms directed upwards are rare in a status-marked medical setting. And, not surprisingly, relatively little of the humor in the friendship groups was of this type. Hay (1995: 186) comments that humor was rarely used to control others or foster conflict in her data (friendship group 1), and that even 'teasing for power' (the equivalent of our category of subversive humor) was not common in mixed gender friendship groups.

Focus of the humor

Humor may operate at a number of different levels. Hence, subversive humor may (i) challenge the individual, (ii) subvert or challenge the group, team or organization, or, in some cases, (iii) subvert the wider society.¹⁰ These analytical levels are obviously of more relevance in business meetings than in friendship groups where almost all the humor was directed towards individuals. Within the business meetings, subversive humor can be illustrated at each of the three levels.¹¹

(i) Focus on the individual

Subversive humor may undermine the power, status or mana of an influential individual in the group. Humor may isolate an individual, identifying ways in which they do not fit into the group, or conform to group norms. In example (5), an individual, Callum, is the focus of subversive humor.

Example 5

Context: Eric teases his superior for his tendency to be pedantic

Eric: [smiling voice] Callum has to ask.

Callum is renowned for being pedantic. Here Eric teases his superior about clarifying a small detail which Eric sees as unimportant.

Though it is basically friendly, this kind of ‘teasing’ has a dark side too. The comment is a put down, suggesting Callum fails to measure up to Eric’s standards. A challenge of this kind to an individual in a team can be regarded as destabilizing the team, thus subverting its functions in relation to the larger organization.

(ii) Focus on the group or organization

Humor may focus on the group or organization, challenging or criticizing the relevant values, attitudes or goals.

In example (6) Eric makes quite explicit his disagreement with what the team is proposing.

Example 6

Context: The team members discuss a proposal and come to a decision

Eric: don’t do it

Jacob: no?

Eric: please put it in the minutes that Eric does not think this is
[laughs]: a good idea:

[General laughter]

Eric here uses a much more formal strategy than is usual for the group, thus making his disagreement with the group decision very explicit. He challenges the group and thus potentially destabilizes it.

In example (7) the humor questions the organization’s integrity.

Example 7

Context: The team members discuss a proposal to record incoming telephone calls. Peg uses Troy’s question on the logistics of recording for a cynical retort.

Troy: how far do you get before you know it’s a personal call

Peg: [laughs]: right at the end:

[General laughter]

The organization has proposed recording incoming telephone calls in the section, purportedly in order to monitor the business aspects of these calls. These group members are skeptical about the organization’s assurance that they will not listen to personal calls. This type of humor has the effect of subverting or challenging the values of the larger organization of which the team is a component.

(iii) Focus on the societal level

There are also some examples where the humor is more explicitly focused at the societal level, implicitly questioning the ideology of the business community, and often broader institutional and societal values. Example (8) illustrates this kind of humor. Eric criticizes a society where highly trained expertise is allowed to disappear from New Zealand. His specific focus is young New Zealanders who leave for overseas once they have acquired marketable skills.

Example 8

Context: Jacob is a member of an American company working on a project in New Zealand.

Jacob: [Specialists] for some reason are rare in New Zealand no matter what

Eric: it's because we train them so highly and then they bugger off overseas.

[General laughter]

In (9), Peg's humor broadens the focus to a criticism of men in general rather than the specific individual Clara was commenting on.

Example 9

Context: Two female team members discuss the limitations of males.

Clara: [smiling voice]: he can't multi-task:

Females: [laugh]

Peg: it's a bloke thing

[General laughter]

Clara: [laughs]: yeah yeah:

The humor constructs and emphasizes female solidarity, while simultaneously subverting wider societal values which, especially in business organizations, tend to value male skills more highly than female.

Examining the data set, it was clear that most subversive humor, both in the project team meetings and in the friendship groups' interactions, focused on individuals. In the more public domain of the workplace, however, a considerable amount of humor was focused at the organizational level, with a smaller proportion at the societal level (48 percent, 42 percent and 10 percent for individuals, organizational and societal levels respectively).

Discourse strategies used in subversive humor

Examining the examples of subversive humor in the data set, we were struck by the ways in which participants drew on particular discourse strategies in subverting and challenging power relationships (cf. Hay 1995). Here we briefly illustrate just four such strategies: (i) the quip, (ii) jocular abuse, (iii) roleplay, and (iv) terms of address. (A more extensive analysis of discourse strategies used in expressing humor will be provided in Holmes and Marra forthcoming.)

(i) Quips

One marked difference between the business meetings and the friendship groups was the predominance of quips as a way of expressing subversive humor in the business meetings. Quips are short, sometimes witty, and often ironic comments about the on-going action, or the topic under discussion.¹² They often involve exaggeration. In (10) Callum responds ironically to a criticism.

Example 10

Context: Callum has been criticized for leaving the wrong date on a memo.

Callum: I find it hard being perfect at everything.

[General laughter]

Understatements are examples of ironic quips where the humor derives from the fact that the reality is in fact much worse than the speaker suggests.

Example 11

Context: At the end of a long account of the negative consequences of a proposal

Eric: so you can understand why we're not that [laughs]: keen:

Barry: [laughs]: not that keen:

Eric is challenging a proposal which the wider organization supports. His understatement is particularly amusing given its position at the end of his extensive account of the raft of reasons why they should not proceed with the proposal. Ironic quips such as these are ideal vehicles of

subversive and challenging humor. They are concise and subtle ways of criticizing or challenging others.

Two further examples achieve their effect by stating the obvious: i.e., they make explicit something which does not need to be overtly stated, thus making a particular point in the context. Such humor often depends on considerable shared background knowledge among the participants for its effect.

Example 12

Context: Callum suggests Eric's role in signing off a document is trivial.

Callum: although we've agreed Eric's just got to go [smiling voice]:
squiggly wiggly: on the document

Barry: sign off

Eric: Eric has to read it [laughs]: and sign it:

In this example Callum challenges Eric's role and status. Interestingly Eric responds by correcting Callum, stating literally and explicitly what he sees his role as involving. In other words, Eric uses humor to re-assert control after the attempt at subversion.

Example 13

Context: Eric has raised a contentious issue which the group members all know will elicit a negative reaction from Dudley. Barry comments on this.

Barry: [laughs]: you're trying to wind up Dudley are you: [laughs]

Once again the quip states the obvious in a context where it is likely to further fan the flames rather than the opposite — its apparent avowed purpose.

Because so much is assumed or taken for granted in groups who work together regularly, stating the obvious in this way is a rich potential source of humor for the groups. Such comments have more than one level of significance. By stating something explicitly in a situation where it should 'go without saying', they signal that more is implied than their surface meaning. In Grice's (1975) terms they clearly flout the quantity maxim, and perhaps the relation maxim too. Often an element of sarcasm or situational irony is involved. At the very least they draw attention to something which would normally have gone unremarked, and to that extent imply listeners should seek another meaning beyond the surface meaning.

Quips are perfectly adapted to business meetings; they are short and so can be interpolated neatly into the discussion with minimum disruption.

Unlike most other types of humor, they are minimally distracting since they are often on-topic contributions. While the amusement they cause could be regarded as disruptive in terms of the meeting's overt goals, their content is often perfectly appropriate to the discussion. They allow the speaker to be rather subtly subversive in contrast to strategies such as insult and roleplay (see below), which are much more overt examples of face attack.

Quips of this sort constituted 74 percent of all the subversive humor in the project team meetings. By contrast, quips were comparatively infrequent overall in friendship group 1 (13 percent with only seven instances within the category of subversive humor). A much wider range of types of humor characterized interaction in the friendship groups, with anecdotes and fantasy by far the most frequently occurring types (see also Hay 1995: 82). Together anecdotes and fantasy humor accounted for 69 percent of all the humor in Hay's (1995) sample.

There were relatively few instances of fantasy in the business meetings (only nine instances, i.e., 10 percent of the subversive humor), and there were no instances of humorous anecdotes used for subversive humor in our data set of business meetings.

(ii) Jocular abuse

Jocular abuse involves an insult or a negative or put-down remark aimed at someone present (cf. Hay 1994, 1995: 70). In contrast to ironic quips, jocular abuse is a very overt and unsubtle type of subversive humor.

Example 14

Context: Dudley insults Barry by commenting critically on his lack of concentration

Dudley: [smiling voice]: the heart was there but the mind wasn't:

Example 15

Context: Matt accuses Sandy of rudeness

Sandy: did you get everything done last week?

Matt: if you weren't so rude as to interrupt I was going to say ...

[General laughter]

Like a quip, jocular abuse is generally concise and can be inserted neatly into an ongoing discussion. Jocular abuse or insult constituted almost the same proportion of subversive humor in the workplace meetings and in

the friendship groups (7.0 percent versus 6.1 percent overall and four instances in the category of subversive humor), suggesting both groups prized other more subtle types of humor more highly.

Jocular abuse was typically directed at the meeting chair or the managers in the business organizations: i.e., those with most status in the organization or in the specific meeting context. A similar pattern was evident in Hay's analysis of jocular abuse in a friendship group which met weekly (friendship group 2 in Table 1). She found those to whom most abuse was directed were the most highly integrated group members: i.e., those who had been members longest and who saw each other most often (Hay 1994).

(iii) Roleplay

Another interesting discourse strategy which functions effectively as a vehicle of subversive humor in group interaction is the use of roleplay (see Hay 1995), where a speaker quotes another person, typically using paralinguistic signals to parody their speech style.

Example 16

Context: Josh is known for his capitalist market-driven approach. Eric predicts what his response will be to Barry's request.

Barry: I've sent an e-mail to Josh as well so it'll be interesting to see what I get back from Josh [laughs]

Eric: Josh'll look at it going 'uh I can't sell anything'
[General laughter]

This type of humor serves as a very effective means of expressing subversive humor. The behavior of the butt of the humor who is quoted in such roleplay, and their attitudes and values, are parodied, implicitly criticized and subverted. In the data we examined, those quoted in this way were typically members of out-groups (cf. Tajfel 1974).

Roleplay was a relatively infrequent category of humor (less than 5 percent in both the more public organizational meetings and the friendship groups, with only one instance in the subversive humor between friends). We include it because it is so obviously serves as a distancing device, a feature which all three strategies discussed in this section have in common. Irony is a very obvious distancing strategy (Leech and Short

1981, Kotthoff 1998), and the quips in our data typically used irony for their effect; jocular abuse is also a distancing device since it involves overt face attack (cf. Austin 1990, Kuiper 1991). And roleplay is also a discourse strategy which distances the speaker from the person whose words are 'quoted', thus emphasizing boundaries between the speaker and the butt of the parody. We return to this point in the discussion below.

(iv) Terms of address and reference

A speaker's choice of names and pronouns may also contribute very directly to the distancing effect which is one important aspect of subversive humor. Here we focus on the speaker's deliberate selection of a proper name, often in a context where a pronoun would have been expected or considered more appropriate.

In directing subversive humor to individuals, one frequently used linguistic device was to identify the individual explicitly by their name. This is clearly a linguistic strategy which has the effect of distancing the referent, since it is also a strategy for referring to someone not present at the meeting. Note the effect of the name in example (17).

Example 17

Context: Barry, the team manager, has let one of his team take the blame for not picking up on a particular point near the end of a long report.

Eric: [smiling voice] Barry sees those sorts of things too by the way notice that

All: [laugh]

Barry: I don't read them through [laughs] I rely on you guys to read them.

Eric here points out that Barry also missed this point. In criticizing his superior in this way, he uses humor to reduce the level of face attack. He also refers to Barry by name rather than using the pronoun 'you' which would make the attack far more direct. The use of his name as a distancing device thus facilitates the expression of the subversive humor.

When they are present and part of the group which is interacting, the use of a person's name, as opposed to a pronoun such as 'you', or the inclusive 'we', constructs a temporary boundary between the individual and the rest of the group.

In example 6 (repeated here as (18) for convenience) Eric uses this strategy as a deliberate device to distance himself from the decision that the rest of the team has reached.

Example 18

Context: The team members discuss a proposal and come to a decision

Eric: don't do it

Jacob: no?

Eric: please put it in the minutes that Eric does not think this is
[laughs]: a good idea:

[General laughter]

The humor here derives from the contrast between Eric's directness 'don't do it', signaling mock panic, contrasted with his subsequent use of a level of formality which is inappropriate for the group. He makes his disagreement with a group decision quite explicit referring to himself by name instead of using the pronoun 'I'. While the humor softens what might otherwise be regarded as an uncomfortably explicit criticism of the team's attitude, Eric is clearly distancing himself from their position. Example 13 above provides another such example.

The speaker's choice of one pronoun rather than another may also serve the same distancing effect as the choice of a proper name over an otherwise appropriate pronoun. The most obvious examples involve skilful contrasts of 'we' versus 'you' at different points in a discussion, as well as contrasts of 'us' versus 'them' which construct relevant in-group versus out-group boundaries, sometimes along shifting dimensions at different points in an interaction (Ng and Bradac 1993: 159, Tajfel 1974).

The construction of social identity is an on-going process (Giles and Coupland 1991: 105). Shifting pronoun usage over the time period of a meeting illustrates that process in action; the shifting alignments of a team are reflected in the ways they humorously parody the behaviors or subvert the values of other groups within and outside the organization. Examples require extensive discourse context to fully understand how they achieve their effect and so cannot be provided here. But we identify this as a promising area for further research (see Holmes and Marra forthcoming).

Discussion

Amount of subversive humor in different contexts

While overall the amount of humor in friendship groups is considerably greater than that in workplace meetings (an average of 22 instances per ten minutes versus two or three instances per ten minutes), subversive humor constitutes a much greater proportion of the humor in business meetings than of the humor in friendship groups. Subversive humor is one means of controlling participants in an interaction. Hence, as Hay (1995: 106) comments on the basis of her detailed analysis of eighteen friendship groups, 'one would expect to find much more controlling humor in the workplace, or some other hierarchical environments, and it is not surprising that this seldom occurs in friendship groups'. Subversive humor operates as a socially acceptable mechanism for commenting on non-conformist or uncooperative behavior, and it is particularly useful in the workplace. Building solidarity is a much more explicit focus of friendship groups and the distribution of the different types of humor reflects this clearly.

Levels of subversion

Three levels of subversion were identified — the individual, the group or organization, and the wider society. When the focus of subversive humor was an individual, in the business meetings it was typically the group leader or person with most status who was the target of the humor. Similarly the most highly integrated group members tend to be the focus of subversive humor in friendship groups. Ironic quips were common strategies used for this purpose in the business meetings while in friendship groups, jocular abuse seemed to be a more common strategy.

When the focus of subversive humor is at the group or organizational level, the humor serves to emphasize in-group versus out-group boundaries (see Holmes and Hay 1997). Subversive humor is a means of expressing dissatisfaction with official organizational attitudes and values, or indirectly criticizing the goals of the wider organization. Ironic quips, and the use of linguistic distancing devices such as 'us' versus 'them' pronominal choices, were common strategies for distinguishing the values of outsiders from insiders among participants in the business meetings.

Distancing strategies

The discourse strategies used for subversion differed in the more formal business meetings of public corporate organizations as opposed to the less formal private friendship groups. As mentioned above, business meetings have a formal or informal agenda which defines their core business as on-task talk (Holmes 2000b). There is always some pressure to stay on-topic, and humor is conventionally treated as off-topic; it is a distraction from the serious business. Consequently, humor in business meetings is generally expressed concisely; short quips and ironic comments abound.

The more relaxed time frame of friendship groups, together with their primary function of creating and constructing good relationships and building solidarity between participants, mean that different types of humor predominate. Fantasy and anecdotal humor are much more common in these contexts. These types of humor extend over several turns: anecdotes and fantasies take time to develop. They also encourage participation; there were many examples of the joint construction of humor with a number of participants contributing (see Marra 1998).

The predominant strategies for expressing subversive humor were quite different. While solidarity-enhancing humor often entails extended sections of jointly constructed discourse with several participants contributing, subversive humor is typically distancing in its effect and involves individual contributions. Short witty quips and pithy ironic comments are excellent vehicles for subversion. Similarly jocular abuse and roleplay effectively express distance from the target of the humor, generally in a concise and compact way.

Subversive humor is essentially distancing humor. It provides a socially acceptable means of encoding critical intent. While the humor amuses participants and softens the face attack act, it is encoded in a strategy which emphasizes the distance between speaker and butt. The humor and the distancing effect may be simultaneously expressed by the selection of particular linguistic devices, such as the strategic use of the name of the individual who is the focus of the humor, the choice of pronouns which emphasize in-group versus out-group boundaries, or the use of roleplay to parody the attitudes or behavior of others. These devices contribute to the effect of the humor in isolating the butt of the humor as 'other' or outsider.

Conclusion

Humor is generally welcomed in social interaction because of its predominant function to amuse. In this paper, we have examined some aspects of a darker side of humor, namely its function in providing a socially acceptable 'cover' for criticisms of individuals, and for subverting and challenging established norms and practices. In formal meetings, humor provides an acceptable means by which subordinates may challenge or criticize their superiors. Between those of different status, humor can be a double-edged weapon, providing a legitimate means of subverting authority. Even among friends, humor can provide a means of challenging or contesting a group member's status or standing in the group.

It is clear that humor occurs much more frequently in friendship groups meeting in private contexts than in the business meetings of public organizations. This is not surprising since the primary function of much humor is to reinforce solidarity between group members. However, subversive humor, humor which challenges and subverts rather than reinforces and confirms existing social relationships, constitutes a substantial proportion of the humor which occurs in the meetings of business project teams. In such business contexts, subversive humor is a flexible strategy which can be used to pressure individuals to conform to group patterns of behavior, or to express a group's skepticism or discomfort with the expectations, attitudes and values of the organization within which they are operating.

In other words, in business meetings, humor provides an acceptable means of disagreeing with the direction the discussion is taking, and an appropriate strategy for questioning the decisions reached by the group. It provides dissidents with a discursive means of 'doing disagreement'. It also provides a socially acceptable means of challenging and contesting the authority of the chair or the group leader. This can be valuable in releasing tensions in groups of experts brought together for particular projects or where authority relationships are tenuously held in stasis. Humor is valuable in such contexts in maintaining effective working group relationships.

A range of interesting discourse strategies and linguistic devices are used to express subversive humor. In every case, these function as distancing devices which emphasize boundaries between the speaker and the target of the humor, and in some cases between the group or organization and the target of the humor.

Subversive humor emerges, then, as a very interesting component of workplace interaction. Cameron (1994) has noted in relation to sexist language that when speakers are faced with a range of variants, there is no neutral or unmarked choice. Rather, 'every alternative is politically loaded, because the meaning of each is now defined by contrast with all other possibilities' (Cameron 1994: 26). We have explored in this paper, the proposition that this is equally true of discourse more generally. Every utterance can be analyzed as a reinforcement of or a challenge to the status quo. Humor is no exception. As we have demonstrated, it is a very effective means of challenging the status quo in socially acceptable and linguistically sophisticated ways.

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Notes

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1. This paper was originally presented at the International Humor Conference 1999 and has benefited from comments and discussion by conference participants, as well as suggestions from the anonymous reviewers to whom we express our appreciation.
2. We are grateful to the workplaces which permitted us to record their meetings and to Jennifer Hay who made available her detailed analyses of humor in friendship groups to provide us with comparative material.
3. The data from Hay (1994) was analyzed only for jocular abuse.
4. The Wellington Corpora of Written and Spoken New Zealand English are available on CD Rom from the Wellington Corpus Manager: corpus-manager@vuw.ac.nz
5. Hay (1994) analyzed only jocular abuse or insult in seven meetings of one friendship group.
6. Compare Max Eastman's (1937) comment that humor involves a 'momentary mental vacation'.
7. While acknowledging that all humor is multifunctional, we concentrate here on what we consider to be its primary function in the examples analyzed, namely its function in reinforcing or challenging group norms.
8. See Hay (1995) for a thorough review.
9. Bergvall and Remlinger (1996) discuss the use of subversive humor from a sender perspective in classroom discussion.
10. Politeness humor may also operate supportively at these three levels, but this is not our focus here.
11. These categorizations were checked by both authors.
12. If irony is defined as 'a double significance which arises from the contrast in values associated with two different points of view' (Leech and Short 1981: 278), quips are ideal vehicles for conveying irony, and thus for expressing subversive humor which often exploits a conflict of values.

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