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A Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach to humour in conference presentations: the case of autobiographic references

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Abstract

Humour plays an important role in human-to-human interaction and as so it has attracted the attention of researchers when analysing discourse (Kyratzis, 2003; Long & Graesser, 2009). Yet, these analyses have focused on conversation (Attardo et al., 2011, 2013), taking the point of view of semantics (Kyratzis, 2003), pragmatics and cognitive linguistics (Attardo et al., 2011, 2013). There are very few multimodal discourse analyses that focus on oral academic research genres in general and therefore on the role of humour in human-to-human interaction, in particular. To our knowledge, only Frobort-Adamo (2002) studies the use of humour in conference presentations. The aim of our research is to look into the humorous role of autobiographic references when used in plenary lectures in conferences in English and in Spanish. We have followed a Multimodal Discourse Analysis methodological framework on spoken academic discourse (Querol-Julián, 2011; Querol-Julián and Fortanet, 2012).

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1. Introduction

Humour plays an important role in human-to-human interaction and as so it has attracted the attention of researchers when analysing discourse (Kyratzis, 2003; Long & Graesser, 2009), but most commonly these analyses have focused on conversation (Attardo Pickering and Baker, 2011; Attardo, Pickering, Lomotey and Menjo, 2013), taking the point of view of semantics (Kyratzis, 2003), pragmatics and cognitive linguistics (Attardo et al., 2011, 2013). However, only a few highlight the importance of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) and even fewer analyse spoken academic discourse. MDA argues that all discourse is inherently multimodal and it is not possible to achieve a comprehensive understanding of spoken discourse unless both linguistic and non-linguistic features are jointly analysed (Baldry & Thibault, 2006; O'Halloran, 2004; Querol-Julián, 2011; Querol-Julián and Fortanet, 2012). The study of multimodality in language and language systems often focuses its attention on interaction, which is examined from two perspectives: human-to-human interaction (Norris, 2004) and human-machine interaction (Roope, 1999). The present study focuses on the former. In this sense, the multimodal nature of this aspect of the communication process leads us to investigate how various semiotic systems such as speech, gesture, body position, and eye gaze (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992; Kendon, 1990; Martinec, 2001) are simultaneously deployed when conference speakers use humour in order to foster interaction in conference presentations. Attardo et al. (2011) distinguished two types of humorous turns in conversation:

- canned joke, which is a narrative partly separate from the rest of the conversation, with a punch line at the end of the text;
- conversational witticism, which is a brief sequence (one-liner) often supported on a previous turn by another speaker, or just introduced spontaneously; it is also called 'jab line'. Usually jab lines contribute to the development of the text, and they may include irony.

In its narrow definition, punch lines and jab lines consist of a “syntactic phrase within the sentence or turn in which humour appears which removes completely the humour if deleted, all the other things being equal” (Attardo et al., 2011: 226). Laughter is one of the strategies of humour support and a marker of humour and it has been used by many researchers in order to identify humorous sequences (Holmes, 2000; Reershemius, 2012). Shared laughter can also be used as a signal of group identity and intimacy, especially when what is funny is an 'improper' topic (sex, drunkenness, etc.) (Jefferson et al., 1987).

Some studies (Attardo et al, 2011; Attardo et al., 2013; Kyratzis, 2003) have analysed the components of a humour sequence, from the actual words being uttered and their intended meaning, to the paralinguistic and gestural elements of the utterance: pitch, volume, pause length, speech rate, smiles and laughter. Regarding acoustic and visual resources, results do not seem to show significant differences regarding these categories between humorous and non-humorous sequences (Attardo et al, 2011; Attardo et al., 2013). Attardo et al (2013) also study the use of smiles and laughter by the speaker in order to indicate humour. They conclude that, if the listener assumes this laughter or smile is spontaneous and genuine in a conversational exchange, they “can infer that the turn was meant humorously and that hence the speaker was in a play frame” (Attardo et al., 2013, p. 412). To our knowledge, only Frobort-Adamo (2002) and Reershemius (2012) study the use of humour in conference presentations. Conference speakers have the double mission of being both didactic and entertaining, and it is often related to this last function that humour is used intentionally.

The aim of our research is to find out how autobiographic references are used as a recurrent humorous strategy in plenary lectures in conferences in English and in Spanish. We have selected two plenary lectures by very well known researchers in English and Spanish Linguistics. Both are senior lecturers and both lectures have many parallelisms in their structure and in the way they are delivered, partly reading and partly speaking spontaneously. We will carry out a multimodal analysis of the lectures following a methodological framework for analysis already employed in previous MDA studies on spoken academic discourse (Querol-Julián, 2011; Querol-Julián and Fortanet, 2012).

2. Method

In order to reach our objectives, we selected two plenary lectures at conferences in Linguistics, one in Spanish, the other one in English. The first one was delivered by Dr. José Manuel Blecua, at the Congreso ASELE 2012 in Girona (Spain) and it is available online (<http://diobma.udg.edu/handle/10256.1/2692>) This is the annual international conference of the *Asociación para la Enseñanza del Español como Lengua Extranjera/ Association for Teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language* (ASELE) which in this edition had as a theme multilingualism and the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language in multicultural contexts. The audience was formed by members of this association coming from over 50 countries, mainly university lecturers and researchers on Spanish as a foreign language. The title of the lecture was “Multilingüismo y creación literaria” (Multilingualism and literary creation) and its duration was 1 hour and 36 seconds.

The second lecture was delivered at the 47th Annual International IATEFL Conference & Exhibition in 2013 in Liverpool (England) and it is available online (<http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2013/sessions/2013-04-09/plenary-session-david-crystal>). Permission to download this lecture has been granted by British Council and Prf. Davis Crystal. IATEFL is the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language. The audience was formed by members from over 100 countries, mainly university lecturers and researchers on English as a foreign language. The title of the lecture was “The world in which we live in: Beatles, blends and blogs” and its duration was 59 minutes and 53 seconds.

As can be seen, there are many parallelisms between these two lectures and the speakers delivering them. We will also try to find out if there are also parallelisms in the humorous role of autobiographic references in each of them. Regarding the speech event, both speakers are standing behind a lectern but there is one outstanding difference between both events: Dr Blecua does not use any visual support material, while Dr Crystal uses slides in the form of an electronic presentation, and a handout (both available online). As mentioned before, we establish laughter as a marker of humour support, and we identify humorous sequences related to autobiographic references from this marker. In order to analyse the paralinguistic and kinesic features found in the selected sequences, we followed Querol-Julián’s (2011) framework, although in this particular case the analysis of paralinguistic elements was narrowed to the role intonation plays in the discourse, following Brazil’s (1984;1997) approach to Discourse Intonation (DI). Concerning kinesics, Querol-Julián’s (2011) taxonomy follows McNeill’s (1992) classification of gestures, that distinguishes four types: i) *iconic*; ii) *metaphoric*, iii) *beats* and iv) *deictic*. The identification of other kinesic aspects such as head movement, facial expression, and gaze does not follow any taxonomy and are categorised according to previous studies on gestures. This framework of analysis is completed by the rules governing interaction between speech and gesture (Kendon, 2004; McNeill, 1992; Schegloff, 1987): i) kinesics combines with verbal and contextual meaning, showing semantic or pragmatic synchrony, ii) kinesics goes beyond the meaning of the utterance, and iii) kinesics adds meaning or pragmatic meaning beyond the utterance. Taking into account this framework of analysis we attempt to bring to the fore the contribution of MDA by responding to the following research questions:

- Are autobiographic references used as humorous sequences, or humour bits, in both lectures?
- How are they conveyed? Is it a consequence of the use of certain words and phrases or is it the result of a multimodal combination of elements?
- Are they intentional or unintentional? Canned humour or witticism?
- What is the function of these sequences in plenary lectures?

These four questions will be answered for both lectures in order to find similarities and differences that can be associated to the use of a different language or to other factors in the case of autobiographic references.

3. Results

For the purpose of this paper, we are going to focus on the analysis of those humorous sequences referring to autobiographic references. In both cases it is easy to find examples in which both speakers resort to the combination of gestures, intonation and language to convey a more effective communicative message when mentioning any

autobiographic reference. In the case of Crystal for instance, he makes fun of himself by remembering his teenage years at the cinema:

1. and teenagers – and I was one – rocked away in the cinema aisles and had to be hosed down by the firemen to calm us down. (DC 2, 6:05-6:16)

The MDA analysis of this humour excerpt reveals an interesting and effective combination of paralinguistic (i.e. loudness/stress) and kinesics (head up and down movements as beats with pragmatic function) in order to show semantic and pragmatic synchrony (Kendon, 2004; McNeill, 1992; Schegloff, 1987). In this example, Crystal is referring to music and when he refers to this specific situation he slows down his speech and, by means of a recurrent pattern of stress and loudness beats (Brazil, 1997) in some syllables that are also rhythmically accompanied by head beats (McNeill, 1992) (see Figure 4) that come to an end at the same time, he uses a low-key intonation (Cauldwell, 2002). One can think that he is trying to create a soundtrack for his speech and in that way transmit his emotions and feelings when remembering memories of his life.



Figure 1: Stress and head beats to convey a pragmatic function

Regarding Blecu, we refer to the following example:

2. Para mí, volver a esta casa es volver a algo mío, vine aquí antes de que existiera. (JMB 1, 5:34-5:47)

The speaker's significant intonation choice adds interpersonal meaning to the discourse between speaker and hearers. In this particular example, the speaker chooses a high-key intonation (Brazil, 1997: Vii) in two key words of the excerpt: “mío” and “existiera”. Cauldwell (2002) summarises the interpretation of the choice of a high key intonation as a discourse-initial marker, as it is clearly the case in this example. The speaker is opening his discourse and defining his relationship with the audience. This is also emphasized by two particular gestures when uttering these same two words: head nods and lateral movements with the head as seen in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Head nods and lateral movements with the head that intensify the semantic interpretation of the discourse

These gestures are in pragmatic synchrony with the speech and the intonation showing, as the semantic meaning of *'no les tengo que decir'* (there's no need to tell you) shows, intensification of the confirmation of his words and tries to include the audience (a ustedes / nosotros) (to you / us) using what is called pluralisations markers (McClave 2000) (lateral movements with inclusive pronouns). These results are in line with previous studies (Querol-Julián, 2011; Fortanet and Querol-Julián 2012), which show how head nods intensify the semantic interpretation of the discourse.

4. Conclusion

By analysing these two lectures, we have found that humour is present in both, answering so the first of our research questions. There is some humour at the beginning of the lectures, but it is reinforced especially at the end.

Answering question b, the lecturers select the phrases and words they use in order to provoke laughter in the audience. It is not something that happens by chance. They have prepared these autobiographic references in advance, and they use several types of resources: words with exaggerated meanings, face expressions such as the grin in the case of Blecua, intonation, pauses and stress in order to highlight certain phrases, and also visuals such as those used by Crystal. Most of the humour found in these two lectures would be very difficult to grasp by just reading a transcript, where most of the non-verbal resources cannot be included.

From our analysis, we can say that the role of these autobiographic references might be to provoke intentional humour, and most of it has been prepared in advance. Finally, the function of laughter in lectures is mainly keeping the attention of the audience and, in the case of autobiographic references, sharing an identity and contributing to a relaxed atmosphere could be secondary aims. This study has been limited to two plenary lectures in Linguistics in English and in Spanish with many parallelisms, which are also reflected in the resources used for humour. In the future, further research on other disciplines and languages, and with larger corpora can shed more light on the similarities and differences in spoken academic discourse considering MDA as a tool that can provide a global view of these speech events.

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