

## Functionalist discourse analysis of humor

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### 1. Brief overview

Research conducted under the umbrella of functionalist discourse analysis selectively draws on different aspects of cognitive-perceptual, social-behavioral, and psychoanalytical theories of humor (Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1997; see [ch. 6 Linguistics and Humor Theory] for a more detailed account of these theories) and explores what functions humor plays in an interaction. For example, in a workplace context, functionalist discourse analysts have been interested in how humor may be used to exercise and display (and sometimes disguise or even challenge) power relations (Schnurr 2009; Holmes & Marra 2002; Mullany 2007), or to relieve tension and stress (Schnurr & Rowe 2008). Not being tied to one theory in particular but rather cross-cutting and combining understandings from different theories of humor, functionalist discourse analytical research contributes to developing a comprehensive conception of the complexity and multi-functionality of humor (Martin, 2007).

Early research on humor using functionalist discourse analytical approaches (as described in more detail below), mainly focused on identifying and describing the function(s) of humorous instances in a specific interaction without much criticality – often assuming that the effects and perceived impact of the humor instance are self-evident and obvious (Collinson, 2002). Much of this research has thus subsequently been criticised for oversimplifying the complexity and dynamics of interactional humor and for neglecting and overlooking more nuanced, deeper elements that may be operating either alternatively or even simultaneously. For example, in their book *Humor, work and organization* (2007) Westwood and Rhodes criticize the functionalist perspective for ignoring some of the critical and complex dynamics underlying much humor, especially workplace humor. They particularly comment on the neglect of considering critical elements such as power, control, resistance and dominance. However, while these criticisms may apply to some earlier functionalist research on humor, more recent developments in discourse analytical research have certainly picked up on those critical elements, and have begun to explore how humor is used (sometimes strategically) as a discursive strategy to enact, as well as challenge and resist power, control, and dominance – especially in a workplace context (e.g. Holmes & Marra 2002; Schnurr & Rowe 2008).

A second, closely related, development in research on functionalist discourse analysis is the move away from an exclusive focus on positive humor. Early humor research focused almost exclusively on the positivity that is often ascribed to humor – for example as a means to

create solidarity and group harmony (see Cooper, 2008; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006) – and commonly assumed that most humor is benign, supportive and well-intentioned. However, as the three historical theories of humor (see [ch. 6 Linguistics and Humor Theory]) indicate, many of the motivations behind humor contain elements of superiority, aggression and ridicule of others. And yet, this ‘dark’ side has long been neglected in discourse analytical research on humor. This may be due to the fact that, as argued by Billig (2005), the ‘dark’ side of humor is problematic and also difficult to access.

This neglect of the ‘dark’ side of humor has also been recognised by functionalist discourse analysts who have recently begun to conduct research on humor that is not primarily enjoyable but rather that is dangerous, disturbing and dark (see Priego-Valverde 2003; Plester, 2015b; Schnurr & Rowe 2008; Schnurr 2009; Dynel 2012). This research has identified and described some of the ways in which humor is used, sometimes strategically, as a means to challenge some of the ideas, topics and values that individual people or groups of people, perceive as taboo or sacred, or to question existing power relations and the status quo. Disturbing topics may be explored for comedic effect in deliberately transgressive humor (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013) which can be used to challenge common assumptions and protocols. These functions of humor make it an excellent device for those who are not normally in a position to articulate such challenges, such as subordinates in a workplace or newcomers in a friendship group who can utilize humor to criticize or even attack those in more powerful or more established positions. We elaborate this in more detail below.

Another area that is receiving increasing attention from discourse analytical researchers is the responses that humor generates. Moving away from earlier research that mainly focused on laughter as the prototypical response to humor, several recent studies have identified and discussed various other ways of responding – either supporting or rejecting the humor. Some of these other response strategies include, for example, the production of more humor, echoing the speaker’s words, heightened involvement in the interaction, agreeing with or rejecting the underlying message, offering alternative interpretations as well as non-verbal clues and facial expressions (such as a smile, a nod, or even a raised eyebrow) (Hay 2001; Schnurr & Chan 2011; Holmes 2000b; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006). The choice of response strategy depends on the situational context (including the relationship among interlocutor) and the type of humor used. Self-denigrating humor, for example, is typically not responded to with laughter but by disagreeing with the speaker’s self-directed criticism or offering sympathy (Hay 1995; Holmes 2000b; Schnurr 2009).

As this brief overview of just some of the developments in humor research from a functionalist discourse analytical perspective has shown, humor is clearly a highly complex, and ambiguous strategy which may be used to perform a diversity of functions. And it is precisely this complexity and ambiguity that makes humor such an interesting topic for

discourse analytic enquiry. In the next section we briefly discuss some of these diverse functions that humor may perform in an interaction.

## 2. Core issues and debates

One of the major contributions of functionalist discourse analytical studies to research on humor in general lies in the insights it provides into how humor is actually *done* in an interaction, and in its ability to identify and describe the various discursive processes through which the different humorous functions are performed. In other words, by analysing discursive aspects of humor, discourse analytical research illustrates some of the complexities of constructing, enacting, negotiating and also responding to humor. It thus goes beyond asking what function humor plays in a particular encounter, to an interest in understanding how these functions are achieved, how the humor is (co-) constructed among participants and how it is responded to.

In line with these general aims and objectives, research on humor taking a functionalist discourse perspective is mainly interested in identifying and discussing the functions that humor performs in different social environments, such as the workplace (Holmes & Marra 2002; Fine & de Soucey, 2005; Mullany 2004; Schnurr 2009; Rogerson-Revell 2007), the classroom (Schmitz, 2002; Davies 2015), and among family and friends (Everts, 2003; Sanford & Eder, 1984). In this section we discuss just some of the many functions that humor may perform, and although this may seem like a relatively straightforward undertaking, identifying, describing and perhaps even classifying humor are rather complex tasks, as we elaborate in more detail in section three below – not least because humor is incredibly versatile and any one instance may perform multiple functions – sometimes even simultaneously. As Kuipers (2011: 41-42) remarks: ‘Humor can never be reduced to one single function, meaning or purpose’ (see also Fatt 1998) and such ambiguity and ambivalences suggests that humor can be simultaneously ‘attractive and repulsive’ (Gournelos and Green, 2011: xix). The following example briefly illustrates this.

### Example 1 (from Plester 2015b)

*Context: In an IT organization, Alf, a salesman, had been overlooked and did not receive tickets to a company movie premiere event that Kara, one of his colleagues, had organized. In this excerpt Alf walked up to a group of his colleagues, and with no greeting or opening pleasantries directed the following remark to Kara:*

Alf [grinning widely]: You’re a bitch!

All: ((laugh))

This provocative and profane remake caused loud laughter among all assembled who correctly interpreted it as humorous. Kara, the target of the remark, also laughed loudly. Although Alf's quip was presumably intended to be both provocative and amusing to the group, the use of the term '*bitch*' is potentially hostile and in this case was used to deliver the message that he felt aggrieved at missing out and that he laid the blame directly with Kara. Using humor to convey his disappointment and criticism, Alf managed to express his displeasure both 'forcefully and lightly at the same time' (Plester, 2015b: 57) while avoiding a negative response from Kara.

Broadly speaking, humor has been categorised into verbal, visual and physical humor (Fatt 1998), but in line with most research from a functionalist discourse analytical perspective, we focus here on verbal humor only. Most of the functions that humor performs fall into one (or more) of the following categories: creating solidarity, doing power, and performing psychological functions (e.g. Duncan, Smeltzer & Leap, 1990; see also Fine, 1983; Hay, 1995a; Sanford & Eder, 1984 ). Discourse analytical research on humor is mainly interested in the first two of these functions and several studies exist which explore the multiple uses of humor as a means to create and reinforce solidarity, and to exercise as well as challenge and subvert power. We briefly discuss both of these functions from a discourse analytical perspective here.

### **2.1 Creating solidarity**

The ability of humor to create, maintain and reinforce solidarity among interlocutors is often described as the most basic function of humor which is central to all instances – even subversive or challenging humor (Holmes, 2000b: 159). This function is particularly relevant in relation to establishing and signalling membership in different groups – be it a family, a circle of friends or a workplace team (Everts, 2003; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). Since different groups have developed distinct ways of using humor (as reflected for example, in inside jokes, but also in norms about who is allowed to use what type of humor towards whom, and norms about what constitute appropriate ways of responding to humorous instances), using humor appropriately is an important aspect of signalling group membership, and of establishing boundaries among different groups.

For example, in a study of banter, jocular mockery and jocular abuse among all male interactions in Australia and the UK Haugh and Bousfield (2012) found that these practices were recurrent in their data, and that their use was closely related to the ethos of 'not taking yourself too seriously' that these groups of friends shared. Among the members of these groups, thus, regularly using these kinds of humor contributed to creating solidarity and to 'strengthen and confirm (among other things) the social bonds of friendship' (Haugh & Bousfield 2012: 1112). A similar tendency was observed by Habib (2008) who noted that the frequent teasing among a friendship group of members from different socio-cultural

backgrounds also served as an important means to bond and to create solidarity (see also Example 2 below). Likewise, in Evert's (2003) study of family humor, she found that a Kansas family used seemingly aggressive humor to create solidarity and intimacy. Mocking remarks and quips were used to draw family members into humor interactions with the 'interactional goal' of creating 'relational harmony' (Everts, 2003: 369).

In workplace humor research Plester and Sayers (2007) observed that in the IT company where they did their research, colleagues enjoyed '*taking the piss*' out of each other in banter that pokes fun at personal attributes, characteristics and behaviors. In this particular workplace, enjoying banter and making jokes about sensitive topics such as race, sex and physical characteristics signaled inclusion and acceptance in the company's work culture and individuals excluded from such teasing are consigned to the 'out-group' (see Plester & Sayers, 2007, Terrion & Ashforth, 2002; Schnurr 2009a). Thus, rather than being perceived negatively as face-threatening and inappropriate, these frequent insulting jibes among colleagues were interpreted as *pseudo* insults and taken as compliments by interlocutors, who see each other as a 'good sports' who can *take* a joke (La Fave et al. 1976 ). At the same time, this targeted banter also offered people a release from everyday work pressure and the highly personal nature of some banter signifies in-group status (see also Schnurr et al. 2007). However, humor is not only a means to reinforce solidarity and signal in-group membership, but it may also be used to perform very different functions, such as doing power, which is particularly useful in a workplace context.

## **2.2 Doing power**

The relationship between humor and power is a close one, and humor is indeed a versatile tool for exercising power – for example through getting things done (e.g. Barsoux, 1993) but also for establishing group norms and marking those who deviate from these norms (Lynch, 2002: 436; Holmes & Marra, 2002b), and, as we mentioned above, for challenging existing power relations and the status quo (Schnurr & Rowe 2008; Holmes & Marra 2002b). In this last function, as Holmes and Marra (2002b: 65) maintain, humor 'is also available to the less powerful as a socially acceptable means of challenging or subverting authority'. In addition to this subversive function, however, humor may also be used to downplay power relationships and to 'achieve the speaker's instrumental goal while apparently de-emphasising the power differential' (Holmes, 2000b: 165). All these diverse, and sometimes apparently contradictory, functions illustrate the multifunctionality of humor. Its beauty and attractiveness for users, as Holmes (1998) notes, thus 'lies in its flexibility' as 'it can function as a bouquet, a shield, and a cloak, as well as an incisive weapon in the armoury of the oppressed.

This ability of humor to be used as a means to do power and to express solidarity makes it a particularly useful tool in workplace settings where the discourses of power and solidarity

prevail and are interrelated with each other in complex ways (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003: 117). Thus, since it assists the speaker in expressing both, power and politeness, it is not only of interest to functionalist discourse analysts but has also been looked at by humor researchers more widely (e.g. see [ch. 17, Politeness and Humor]). From a functionalist discourse perspective, however, various studies have been conducted to identify and describe some of the discursive strategies through which humor may threaten, save or even enhance interlocutors' face (Schnurr & Chan 2009; Haugh 2010; Dynel 2012). For example, wrapping negatively affective speech acts, such a criticism or disagreement, in humor, or using humour to dissolve conflict mitigates the negative impact of the illocutionary force on the interlocutors and helps saving face as well as maintaining a positive relationship (Holmes, Marra & Burns, 2001; Schnurr & Chan 2009, Norrick & Spitz 2008; Habib 2008). This function of humor is particularly useful when uttering negatively affective speech acts towards more powerful interlocutors, such as from subordinates to superiors in the workplace context (Smith et al., 2000: 609; Holmes & Marra 2002). Butler (2015) highlights the power of laughter and concludes that laughter may be used to rectify people's workplace behavior as it plays a 'socially normative role in organizations through processes of ridicule and embarrassment' (2015: 1). He asserts that people can be controlled by humor because non-conformist behavior may be ridiculed and as most people do not enjoy being laughed 'at' they avoid actions that could invite ridicule, mockery and teasing. Therefore one specific function of teasing is to exert social control that ranges from 'bonding to nipping to biting' (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997: 276; Schnurr 2009a).

These different functions may, of course, be performed simultaneously, and an instance of humour may easily be used to do power while at the same time creating and reinforcing solidarity among interlocutors, as we show in Section 4 below. However, in addition to and often cross-cutting these functions of humor is its ability to assist interlocutors in constructing and negotiating identities. This ability of humor to do identity work and to portray interlocutors as well as non-present others in particular ways, is increasingly attracting researchers' attention (e.g. Schnurr 2009a, Habib 2008; Moody 2014; Holmes et al. 2003; Rogerson-Revell 2011). In this function, humour is not only a valuable strategy to express personal identities (Habib 2008; see also Example 2 below), to create in-group membership among friends and to draw boundaries between other groups and distance themselves from them (e.g. e.g. Holmes et al. 2003), but also to construct professional identities (e.g. Schnurr 2009a), and to successfully combine the sometimes competing expectations of different identities – such as professional and gender identities (e.g. Schnurr 2008).

### **3. Methodology**

Research under the umbrella of functionalist discourse analysis draws on a range of different discourse analytical frameworks, such as Interactional Sociolinguistics (e.g. Holmes 2000; Schnurr 2009; Davies 2015), CA (see for instance, [ch. 22, Conversation analysis of humor]) and CDA (e.g. Schnurr & Rowe 2008; Ladegaard 2011) just to name a few. The choice of the specific framework and approach largely depends on the researchers' specific interest and the aims and objectives of their study. However, in spite of these differences, discourse analysts generally work with authentic, naturally occurring (rather than artificially elicited) instances of humor and they pay particular attention to the interactional context in which the humor appears. In contrast to other ways of collecting humor, such as via interviews (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013; Plester, 2009; Rosenberg 1998), self-report data (Smith et al 2000), and participant observation (Hatch & Ehrlich 1993; Plester 2015a & b), discourse analytical researchers tend to audio- (and sometimes also video-) record instances of naturally occurring humor. These naturalistic methods are useful, and since research findings are co-created between researcher and respondent(s) (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), such research must consider 'the circumstances that form the backdrop' against which the humor occurs (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000: 6). This methodological approach thus leads to rich data which, in turn, enables the researchers to grasp the 'dialogical character' of humor (Kotthoff, 2006), and to analyse it – not in isolation – but by paying close attention to interactional and socio-cultural context, in which it is embedded.

This focus on naturally occurring data, however, leads to several issues regarding collecting and identifying humor. For example, one major drawback of recording naturally occurring interactions is that the researchers often have relatively little influence on interactional topics and the overall development of the interaction, and they also simply do not know what kind of data they may be getting – that is, they cannot easily control how many instances of humor their recorded interactions will entail. But in spite of these drawbacks, which can be alleviated to some extent by collecting relatively large quantities of data, the collected data is generally very rich and provides an excellent source to conduct the qualitative in-depth analyses that are typical for discourse analytical approaches. And rather than making grand claims and generalizations about, for example, functions and usage of humor, insights gained through these analyses are generally used to contribute to a better understanding of the specific processes through which humor works in a specific interaction.

In addition to these methodological challenges, another, equally complex issue that discourse analysts often face when researching humor is the question of how to identify humorous instances in the data. Since there exist various response strategies to humor, as we have briefly mentioned above, deciding whether a particular utterance is humorous or serious is not always easy and straightforward. This is particularly true for those instances that are not responded to by laughter but by some other, perhaps less explicit or non-

audible strategy (such as a smile or a raised eyebrow). In order to address this issue and to find systematic ways of identifying humor in spoken interaction, researchers often rely on a range of 'paralinguistic, prosodic and discoursal clues' (Holmes, 2000b: 163), and pay specific attention to the speaker's tone of voice, and the audience's auditory as well as (where possible) gesticulatory responses (Schnurr 2009b; Holmes & Marra, 2002b) (see [ch. 29: Prosody and Humor]).

However, identifying humor is potentially even more complicated in written interactions, such as emails or letters where the researcher cannot draw on prosodic features. One way around this is to rely on other contextualisation cues (Gumperz, 1999), including for example, the use of emoticons (e.g. ☺), abbreviations (e.g. 'lol'), meta-comments (e.g. 'just kidding'), or unusual choice of lexical items (e.g. the use of official title and surname in an informal email to a friend). Another possible way of detecting humor in written interaction is to consider (where possible) the (visual or textual) response a specific text generates. A third possibility is, of course, checking with the author and receiver of the text about their humorous intentions and perceptions. This verification process is known as 'member checking' which involves the researcher checking their interpretations of the phenomena under examination with the actual people who are the source for the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This can be a useful validation of the findings and offers the researcher a chance to further refine or alter interpretations to more accurately portray the humor creators' perspective.

One considerable advantage of collecting naturally occurring authentic interactional data, whether spoken or written, is that it enables the researchers, once they have identified the humorous instances, to conduct an in-depth analysis to better understand the ways in which humor is performed, i.e. how it is constructed – sometimes collaboratively among interlocutors – and how it thereby performs various functions – often simultaneously, as our analysis of two short examples below illustrates. Moreover, looking at a humorous sequence in its entirety (rather than focusing at a witty comment out of context), enables researchers to describe the complex interplay of different types of humor and the different functions they perform within a humorous instance.

#### **4. Analysing humor**

We have chosen two examples here to briefly illustrate some of the ways in which functional discourse analysts analyse and make sense of humorous instances. Example 2 is taken from an interaction among friends (Habib 2008), and example 3 is part of an email exchange that took place in a workplace (Schnurr & Rowe 2008). Both humor instances perform multiple functions, including creating solidarity and doing power.



Example 2 (from Habib 2008: 1130)

*Context: During a conversation among a group of friends who know each other fairly well and who have been meeting regularly once a week for a Greek lesson offered by one of the participants. Prior to this excerpt there was a lot of teasing of Beatriz for pronouncing some Greek words like people living in the mountains who are stigmatised by the general (Greek) public for their 'odd' pronunciation.*

1. Beatriz: Well, I'm, you know; you can go, I can, you know, talk like a peasant girl in Greek
2. Altina: yes, but still, I don't talk like intel- intel- intel- intellectual in English, I mean. I have problems. I mean, we have, we have ( )
3. Beatriz: (interruption) Oh. That's a dirty joke.
4. Altina: NO, why?
5. Beatriz: ((laughs))
6. Dee: What an intellectual means?
7. Beatriz: See. This is dirty joke. You wheezle.
8. Altina: No, I didn't say it as a joke
9. Beatriz: If you have something to tell me, just tell me in the face.
10. Altina: I didn't say
11. Beatriz: ((laughs))
12. Altina: I didn't say that. I was only trying to say that, you know, I have an accent in English.
13. Beatriz: I am not an intellectual; I am an artist, you know.
14. Altina: I didn't say. Who- why did you think you are an intellectual? I mean ((laughs loudly))
15. Annabelle: Yeh. That is true. What made you think you are an intellectual? ((laughs))
16. Altina: I'm kidding ((laughs))
17. Beatriz: I thought- I thought that was a correspondence. You know with ( )
18. Altina: ((laughs)) You know what. You were- you were knocking for a joke. ((laughs))
19. Beatriz: but not only that because we discussed before like you know, ah, the

This is a good example of how humor (in this case teasing) may be used to reinforce solidarity among friends and also to negotiate disagreements and do facework. In line 1 Beatriz uses self-denigrating humor when complimenting Altina on her authentic Greek pronunciation. However, rather than accepting the compliment, Altina disagrees with Beatriz and puts herself down (line 2). Her reference to talking like an intellectual in English which is uttered with several re-starts (line 2), is then interpreted as 'a dirty joke' by Beatriz (line 3). What follows is a clarification and negotiation of meaning among interlocutors (including Dee who has not yet contributed) as to why she considers this to be a 'dirty joke'.

This negotiation is characterized by the repeated occurrence of laughter – mostly by Beatriz in what seems to be an attempt to mitigate the disagreement and solve the confusion, and perhaps also to save her face and that of Altina (e.g. lines 5 and 11). After Altina justifies her choice of words and explains their intended meaning in line 12, Beatriz replies with more self-denigrating humor ‘I am not an intellectual; I am an artist, you know’ justifying and perhaps even apologizing for the misinterpretation (line 13). She thereby at the same time does identity work and portrays herself as ‘an artist’ which she sets in direct opposition to ‘an intellectual’ – an identity that she vehemently rejects. However, in spite of her clear rejection of the latter identity, her friends pick this up and Altina starts teasing her for (allegedly) thinking that she is ‘an intellectual’ (line 14). The teasing is then picked up by Annabelle who agrees with Altina’s challenging teasing remark (line 15). In both cases the teasing is accompanied by some laughter which mitigates the potential negative impact or face-threat targeted at Beatriz. This mitigation is further enhanced by Altina’s final comment ‘I’m kidding’ (line 16) and her subsequent laughter. In line 17 Beatriz then explains herself and refers back to some earlier teasing and humor that occurred among the group of friends (not shown here) which she thought was related to this instance. The humorous instance ends in Altina’s further teasing of Beatriz for ‘knocking for a joke’ – i.e. that the situation just asked for some humor (Habib 2008: 1131).

In analyzing this humor it is also important to consider the context in which it occurred. Often, when simply reading the words used in an utterance, the humor is not easily conveyed and the reader could question whether this is in fact *humor* (Schnurr 2009b). In these instances, especially in spoken interactions, researchers rely on a range of contextual elements, such as facial expression (e.g. a wide grin) and body language which are often important indicators or *frames* (see Everts, 2003) that signal to the audience, that a comment is meant humorously. Other contextual elements include ‘prodosic cues... linguistic devices... and nonverbal displays’ (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006: 56). If these cues are absent then teasing is more likely to hurt people (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997). Additionally, as found by Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006: 55) playful teases using epithets ‘such as *bastard*, *faggot* and *nigger*’ (see also Example 1 above) rely on familiarity between the protagonists. While non-friends might interpret such exclamations as insults, people who know each other well often experience them as signs of closeness.

We have included Example 2 here as an instance of spoken humour to illustrate some of the benefits of functionalist discourse analytical approaches to humor. In our analysis we have identified and described the various functions of the different kinds of humor (e.g. teasing to create and reinforce solidarity among the friends, and perhaps also to criticize each other; and self-denigrating humor to save face and construct certain identities; as well as laughter to mitigate the negative impact of the criticism and disagreement). And we have also shown how the humor is constructed – sometimes collaboratively (e.g. between Altina and Annabelle) – and how it is responded to. All of these aspects ultimately contribute to

the multifunctionality of the humor in this interaction. Moreover, as our analysis has shown, humor is often a complex issue, and different types of humor may co-occur within the same fragment (e.g. teasing and self-denigrating humor as in this excerpt).

The last example that we briefly analyze here is an instance of written humor that occurred in a workplace context.

Example 3 (from Schnurr & Rowe 2008)

*Context: This email was written by Richard, the Head of Department at an Educational Institution to one of his close colleagues, Kevin. A new online performance review for staff had just been introduced institution-wide which involved a substantial amount of additional work for Richard (such as attending workshops and familiarising himself with the system).*

Subject: **blood pressure**

Kevin I tried to input reviewers but the system is not up yet, **at least as far as I can tell in my shufflings along the crepuscular corridors of the [performance review] – I felt a slight spike in the blood pressure** but will try to look into this this afternoon Rich

This email is a good example of how humor (highlighted in bold) is sometimes used in a workplace context to do power and create solidarity, as described above. This email was written by Richard to one of his long-time colleagues, Kevin, to complain about some of the problems he is currently experiencing with the online system of the performance review and to vent his frustration. After initially providing some important information (about the online system not yet being fully functional), Richard uses humor to make fun of this situation. His humorous description of his unsuccessful efforts to understand the system as ‘*shufflings along the crepuscular corridors of the [review system]*’ and the fact that he ‘*felt a spike in the blood pressure*’ clearly show his frustration with the system. It is especially his use of unusual adjectives (such as ‘*crepuscular*’) and nouns (such as ‘*shuffling*’ and ‘*spike*’) together with his metaphorical language use that make this email humorous (e.g. describing his attempts to work with the system as ‘*shufflings*’ through the ‘*crepuscular corridors*’ invoke the frame of a labyrinth or cavernous structure, whereby one must feel one’s way slowly and ploddingly in the dark with a sensation of non-progression and near-futility). Moreover, the clearly tongue-in-cheek subject line ‘*blood pressure*’ rather than a more serious one, such as for example ‘*performance review system*’, sets the humorous tone of this email right from the start.

Using subversive humor here to express his negative sentiments over having to deal with these administrative, bureaucratic, and (in Richard’s view) rather irrelevant issues, provides not only a channel for him to articulate his frustration and annoyance but at the same time also enables him to challenge the dominant discourse (propagated by the organisation) which promotes the system as being easily accessible and having been implemented in order to

facilitate staff efficiency. Moreover, in addition to achieving these subversive functions, the humor also, on a more interpersonal level, contributes to reinforcing the positive and collegial relationship that Richard has with the receiver of this email. Thus, like in the example above, the humor in this excerpt is multifunctional and reinforces solidarity among interlocutors as well as functions as a means to communicate negatively affective speech acts (such as criticisms and disagreements).

## **5. Future research**

In spite of the attention that humor has been receiving from a functionalist discourse analytical perspective, as outlined above, it remains a largely under-researched area of interest. We mention just some current trends and some possible avenues for research here.

One particularly important development in humor research from a functionalist discourse analytical perspective is the move towards analyzing the uses and functions of humor in languages other than English (e.g. Japanese (Maemura 2014); Korean (Kim 2014; Kim & Plester 2014), Cantonese (Schnurr & Chan 2009), and Greek (Antonopoulou & Sifianou 2003)). This research is not only likely to generate interesting new insights into the complexities of humor by identifying and describing the specific strategies through which humor is constructed and responded to in these languages in a diversity of different contexts, but it also provides new data and generates additional perspectives to support or challenge established thinking about ‘humor’ – which, in the past, all too often equated with ‘humor in English speaking contexts’. But in spite of this positive development, more research is needed on humor in languages other than English to more comprehensively understand the various functions of humor and how they work in interaction.

Equally interesting is recent research on humor in inter-cultural communication in a range of different contexts, including the classroom, the workplace and among friends (Wang 2014; Davies 2015; Rogerson-Revell 2007; Habib 2008). But again, more research is needed on humor in these contexts. In particular, due to the claim that humor is culture- and language-specific, this line of research promises to provide some fruitful insights into the role of culture in interaction which should be of interest to researchers beyond humor studies.

Another interesting trend in recent research on humor from a functionalist discourse analytical perspective is the increasing focus on specific types and functions of humor, such as failed humor (e.g. Bell 2009; also [ch. 26, Failed Humor]), as well as teasing – a particularly complex and ambiguous type of humor (e.g., [ch. 16, Teasing]; Haugh 2010; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006; Schnurr 2009a; Schnurr & Chan 2011) and irony (e.g. Dynel 2014; Gibbs et al. 2014; Burges et al. 2013) – and also on ‘dark aspects’ of humor – i.e.

humor that deliberately seeks to hurt or transgress boundaries (see for example the contributions in Ford (2015)). By exploring the various aspects of these types or functions of humor, often in particular situations and contexts, such as the workplace, a family or a circle of friends, this research provides much needed insights into the workings of humor on the micro-level.

However, most of this research from a functionalist discourse analytical perspective focuses on spoken, and to a lesser extent written, interactions. There are very few studies which explore the various uses and functions of humor in online environments, such as emails, facebook and twitter. While there is some research on humor in this context from other perspectives (e.g. Strain et al 2015; Moalla 2015), functionalist discourse analysts have so far largely avoided these online contexts (but see for example, Mak & Chui 2013). But with the increasing relevance of the online environment for both social as well as professional interaction, this context provides an important avenue for future research.

Clearly, this list of current trends and avenues for future research is far from being exhaustive. And while this recently increased attention that humor – as a not so inconspicuous and clearly not superfluous discursive strategy – is receiving from recent scholarship is a welcome development which also contributes to putting humor back on the agenda for discourse analysts, we hope that more researchers will follow suit and contribute new insights into the complexities of humor.

#### **Transcription conventions (from Habib 2008)**

( )	Incomprehensible word or phrase.
(Some word)	A word or phrase within parentheses indicates that there is uncertainty about whether the phrase or the word have been heard correctly.
((Laugh))	Non-linguistic occurrences such as laughter are enclosed within double parentheses.
<u>No</u>	Underlining a word or phrase indicates that it was said loudly and with force.

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