# The 'Humour' element in engineering lectures across cultures: An approach to pragmatic annotation

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# THE 'HUMOUR' ELEMENT IN ENGINEERING LECTURES ACROSS CULTURES: AN APPROACH TO PRAGMATIC ANNOTATION

**ABSTRACT**

Humour is one of the most difficult pragmatic devices for lecturers and students to engage with, and for researchers to identify systematically. Humour does not always travel well across cultures. It can cause particular problems of miscommunication for the lecturers delivering and students receiving it in unfamiliar cultural contexts. This paper demonstrates the use of pragmatic annotation for mapping the distribution, duration and specific function of humour based on nine attributed types. The analysis looks at 76 English-medium lectures from the UK, Malaysia and New Zealand, which form part of the Engineering Lecture Corpus (ELC). Differences in preferred humour type, amount, and laughter response rate are evident across the three cultural subcorpora. In the increasingly globalised academic setting, understanding of such cultural differences is important to all academics and students *on the move*.

**INTRODUCTION**

Alongside queuing and politeness, dry humour is often flagged up as a particularly British trait – one which students visiting from overseas are explicitly warned may be baffling to them (University of Sheffield International Student Support 2013). Current internationalisation drives in universities result in increased staff and student mobility. In

turn, in different cultural settings, the need to understand the nature and extent of potentially tricky pragmatic devices (such as humour) grows.

In the Engineering Lecture Corpus (ELC)[1], a cross-cultural corpus of English-medium lectures, nine types of humour are manually identified. Indexing the location of humour episodes gives an overview of occurrence and distribution, which guides more fine-grained investigation into function. The aim of identifying and characterising humour in the ELC is to determine whether there is any difference in its use when the discipline, level, and language medium are constant, but the educational context differs.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Modelling humour theoretically

Discussions of humour and laughter in the academic context commonly draw on and extend theoretical models based on classical philosophy (superiority/hostility) cognitive science (incongruity) and physiological or psychoanalytic studies (relief). From a linguistic point of view, the theories are not necessarily exclusive; incongruity can often explain *how* humour occurs, while theories of superiority or hostility explain *why* it occurs and the notion of relief can account for its effect.

Superiority/hostility theories consider humour or resulting laughter to be indicative of triumph. The teller gains success through the identification of weakness or failings in an 'other'. The roots of such thinking are traced back to Plato and Aristotle (Attardo 1994: 50, Glenn 2003: 19, Meyer 2000: 312, Partington 2006: 232). Hobbes treated laughter as a

[1] The ELC is under development at Coventry University. The project is directed by Hilary Nesi with funding from the British Council (RC 90). www.coventry.ac.uk/elc.

sign of social superiority, describing it as "the sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (cited in Morreall 1983: 5, Raskin 1985[1944]: 36). Listeners as well as tellers can gain a feeling of superiority through recognising humour.

Superiority/hostility can also be an abrasive form of humour, causing conflict not consensus (Martineau 1972: 103). In this case elements of malice, disparagement or derision are central to boosting the teller's sense of power through attacks on individuals, groups, or on the self.

In terms of the mechanism of humour, incongruity theories identify particular cognitive demands: incompatible frames of reference (or planes (Koestler 1989[1964]), or schema/scripts (Norrick 1986: 229) are received, semantic processing stumbles over competing meanings, commonality is sought, and, if the contradiction can be resolved, new meaning arises. The absurdity of competing frames causes discord in expectations and humorous results (Attardo 1994: 230, Ross 1998: 7). The process is distinguished from simple associative thinking because incongruity lies in the "sudden bisociation of an idea or event with two habitually incompatible matrices" (Koestler 1989[1964]: 51), or a shift of mode, narrative, role, or register (Partington 2006: 25). At the pragmatic level in terms of speech act theory, incongruous humour marks a gap in the sense and the force of an utterance (c.f. Austin 1962, Searle 1969) and flouts the co-operative principle (c.f. Grice 1975). It can also occur at the level of register by mixing styles or references (Lee 2006, Ross 1998).

The subconscious process of combining incongruous planes creates an emotional reaction. Relief theory emphasises this response, as the moment of realisation/resolution of

incongruity results in release. Laughter is most simply considered to be the expression of "suddenly perceived incongruity" (Schopenhauer 1966[1959]: 59), and built up tension "gushes out in laughter" (Koestler 1989[1964]: 51) acting as a vent through which constraint is relieved (Morreall 1983: 20), or through which the forbidden or suppressed is released (Freud 1976[1905]: 183). Successful humour and a laughter response are commonly linked (Raskin 1985[1944]: 4). After the resolution of incongruity, then, a physical response is expected.

At this level of effect, there is some agreement across frameworks that humour and laughter can modify behaviour and regulate the unacceptable. Control is explicitly identified as a function of humour and laughter (Martineau 1972, Stebbins 2012[1980]). Morreall notes that classical thought viewed laughter as a "social corrective to get wrongdoers back into line" (1983: 5). Bergson echoes the notion of laughter as a "social corrective" through which humiliation is intended and in which sympathy is devoid (1899, cited in Raskin 1985[1944]: 17). Certain types of humour and laughter can indicate social hierarchy; a form of aggression towards those of lower status. Hostile joking can serve the purpose of aggressiveness, satire or defence (Freud 1976[1905]: 97).

Humour has specific functions in particular settings. In interactions between journalists and White House spokespersons, for example, Partington found that sudden bisociative switches were "performed for a precise rhetorical purpose'': persuasion (2006: 226). Meyer concurs that the recurring presence of humour in rhetoric attests to this persuasive function (2000: 310). Here focus shifts from theoretical concepts to function as a pragmatic device in spoken genres. Within academic institutional discourse, particular humour types perform specific, often very different, communicative functions. They can

enable rapport-building, construct in-group cohesion, mitigate conflict or model identities (Kotthoff 2007, Martineau 1972, Nesi 2012, Norrick and Spitz 2008, Partington 2006, Reershemius 2012, Stebbins 2012[1980]). Identifying where and to what extent specific functions of humour occur enables better understanding of the dynamic of the academic lecture across cultural settings.

**Humour across Cultures**

Understanding humour is considered to be one of the most complex cultural adjustments. We learn what to laugh about from our family, peers and culture (Norrick 1986: 228), so although humour as a field of investigation is regarded as central to understanding communication (Attardo 2003: 1292), it is often specific to certain cultures and attitudes and may not travel well across these boundaries (Chafe 2007: 127, Lee 2006: 49, Ross 1998: 2, Zhang 2005). Studies of Chinese students in New Zealand, for example, report that lecturers' humour style can be difficult to understand (Andrade 2006: 139, Holmes 2004: 299), and Chinese students attending lectures in a British University were reported to completely miss some attempts at humour, which resulted in alienation (Wang 2014). Yusoff found that misunderstanding humour contributed to problems in the socio-cultural adjustment process for international students in a Malaysian public university (2010: 38), and in a report on the needs of International students in New Zealand, Butcher and McGrath identify humour as an area of particular concern (2004: 544).

Humour is also mentioned in the support materials for international students visiting British universities. Warnings are issued that immediate comprehension should not be expected, especially of irony and sarcasm, which are "definitely not cross-culturally funny

at first" (University of Sheffield International Student Support 2013). Careful listening for cues indicating wit, self-deprecation, disparagement and teasing are advised to cope with the ever-present discourse feature of humour (Cardiff University Careers Service 2009: 13, University of Northampton Student Services 2012: 20-21).

Studies of the reception of academic language confirm that it is not always the technical jargon that students struggle with, but getting used to the pragmatic applications of everyday language (Ehlich 1999, cited in Reershemius 2012: 856). Lee observes that it is particularly the use of incongruous registers or references in humour that international students find difficult to comprehend, or completely fail to decode. Self-effacing humour is also identified as problematic for students with different cultural norms for public speaking (2006: 60, 57).

## Humour in Spoken Academic Discourse

Linguistic research in spoken academic discourse shows that humour is used as a pragmatic device in academic lectures and presentations. In MICASE, one of the largest corpora of English-medium academic speech, 'humor' was originally identified as one of 25 relevant linguistic/pragmatic functions and discourse features. It was excluded from the final set of features for pragmatic annotation only because there were too many instances of humour in MICASE to encode (Maynard and Leicher 2007: 109, 112).

Also using MICASE, Lee (2006) discusses the discoursal and rhetorical functions of humour in spoken academic discourse, and its impact on pedagogy in higher education. Lee applied a "broad brush" approach to the definition of humour when identifying the

occurrence of laughter by producer or receiver (2006: 52). Speech events are ranked for humour density by calculating the normalised number of laughs per minute or per 1000 words, to create a 'laughter index', and humour categories are determined through a qualitative analysis of a sample of humour-dense speech events. Mastery of the range of categories is deemed to be a skilled and powerful rhetorical device in the academic setting, which occurs more often than may be expected, and may be difficult for international students in the USA to fully grasp.

Nesi (2012) looks specifically at 'laughter episodes', largely from the cross-disciplinary British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus: 160 lectures from the arts and humanities, life sciences, physical sciences and social sciences. Like Lee, humour was retrieved from the structural markup of laughter. Episodes are analysed in light of notions of Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson 1987), 'face' (Goffman 1967), social management and anxiety management. Six humour types performing a variety of different functions are identified: lecturer-student teasing, lecturer error, lecturer self-deprecation, black humour, disparagement of out-group members, and register and wordplay.

Reershemius (2012) studies humour in research presentations, drawing on a subcorpus from the GeWiss (Gesprochene Wissenschaftssprache kontrastiv) corpus of spoken academic discourse. The subcorpus comprises 1800 minutes of presentation speech divided equally between speakers from England, Germany and Poland. In the first instance of quantitative analysis, humour was again identified based on the presence of markup for laughter. All data were then revisited for a qualitative analysis, looking for occurrences of humour based on the presence of laughter in context. Findings reveal cultural differences in distribution and function. Humour was identified as a means of pushing genre

boundaries by the British presenters studied, for example, who also applied it more frequently than their German counterparts.

Common practice in spoken corpora, then, is to recover humour via the structural markup of laughter. Koestler, Schopenhauer, and Raskin expected a laughter response to humour, and the analyses of Lee (2006), Nesi (2012) and Reershemius (2012) heavily rely on this vocal indicator. Laughter and humour may be understood as part of the feeling of 'nonseriousness' (Chafe 2007). Their conflation, however, is potentially erroneous (Glenn 2003: 18-19, Partington 2006: 231), because laughter and humour "are by no means coextensive" (Attardo 2003: 1288). Laughter may also indicate other states such as embarrassment, anxiety, relief or repair (Meyer 2000: 311, Ross 1998: 1, Swales 2004: 165).

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The ELC contains 76 transcripts of English-medium lectures delivered at three universities in different parts of the world, as shown in Table 1. Although we do not have exact figures, the majority of the students in each setting were local as these are undergraduate programmes that do not attract international students. The audience was predominantly male in the UK and New Zealand context. Although still in the minority, there appeared to be more females in the Malaysian context.

| identifier | 1001-1030 | 2001-2018 | 3001-3028 |
|---|---|---|---|
| origin | Coventry University, United Kingdom (UK) | Universiti Teknologi, Malaysia (MS) | Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand (NZ) |
| number of lectures | 30 | 18 | 28 |
| token size | 265, 000 | 129, 000 | 171, 000 |

| number (gender) of speakers | 5 (5 male) | 9 (2 female, 7 male) | 4 (4 male) |
|---|---|---|---|

Table 1:        ELC holdings

The video data was locally transcribed in plain text, and markup was then added to create a corpus of Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) -compliant XML files. Finally, inline XML was used for the 'pragmatic annotation' (c.f. Maynard and Leicher 2007) of the corpus. Humour was annotated regardless of whether there was any record of laughter in the surrounding context. Enough context was included to allow the indexed chunks of text to make sense as stand-alone units.

The process of pragmatic annotation of the ELC entailed close multiple readings of all the transcripts, with reference to the video footage. Three iterations of inter-coder reliability testing were undertaken, involving raters with expert competencies in linguistics and pragmatics, and subject and cultural awareness. Differences were resolved, if necessary, by adjusting the working list of pragmatic categories. This list was originally derived from Nesi and Ahmad's (2009) list, but was gradually refined to better reflect the occurrence and weight of pragmatic categories in the corpus as a whole.

Humour in the ELC was tested based on whether the text was 'funny' in some way (does the incongruity / relief cause amusement?) *and* whether there was an additional non-explicit message of some sort. In the current 2014 working list there are nine attributes to the humour element: bawdy, black, disparaging, ironic/sarcastic, joke, playful, self-deprecating, teasing/mock-threatening, and wordplay. The aim was not to identify and describe all possible types of humour, only those that are interesting and recurring.

Umbrella categories in the ELC (such as humour) describe discourse function, and the attributed types refer to content. For example, text annotated as "humour type=bawdy" will contain content that is bawdy. Where partial overlap in content type occurs, such as humour that is mainly bawdy but has an aspect of mock-threat, the annotation reflects the main type identified.

The annotation excludes humour episodes that make explicit reference to the artificiality of the setting, such as the camera or operator, as in the following example:

> [lecturer] there's a very old saying about lectures it is there is only one thing more boring
> than a lecture and it's
> [student] a lecturer
> [students] [laughter]
> [lecturer] no it's not a lecturer [laughter] it's a video of a lecture [1029]

Such instances are a direct consequence of the data collection process, and tend to occur at the beginning or end of lectures.

The annotation also excludes humour that arises external to language, such as an unexpectedly ringing phone. In some studies unintentional humour is identified as a separate category, for example 'howlers' in student writing (Ross 1998: 12). Humour in the ELC is restricted to the deliberate and the linguistic – the "humour-creating manoeuvres" (c.f. Fillmore 1994) that the lecturer makes through language choice.

## RESULTS

Humour of some type is more likely to occur in the UK ELC lectures than in the lectures from Malaysia or New Zealand. Using a token count, humour makes up 3.37% of the UK subcorpus, 2.42% of the Malaysian subcorpus and 1.92% of the subcorpus from New

Zealand. A further breakdown into types is given in Figure 1. There are an average of 10 humour episodes per lecture in the UK subcorpus, compared to 5 in the lectures from Malaysia and 4 from New Zealand. The average lecture length in tokens varies across subcorpora (UK: 8830, MS: 7160, NZ: 6100) due to factors such as time length, speed of delivery, and time allotted for non-verbal tasks. However, humour is most frequent in the lectures from the UK whether measured by total token count or number of episodes.
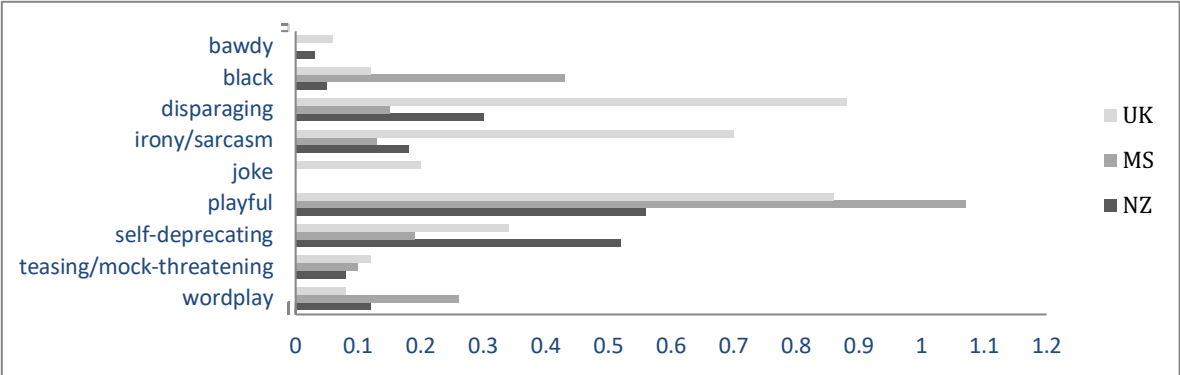


Figure 1:        Breakdown of humour type normalised (by tokens) as a percentage of each subcorpus

Playful humour is the most popular type across subcorpora, and occurs relatively most often in the Malaysian lectures. Black humour and wordplay are also relatively most frequent in the Malaysian subcorpus. Bawdy humour does not occur at all in the Malaysian subcorpus. Disparaging and ironic/sarcastic types are significantly more common in the UK lectures; jokes are only found in the UK lectures. Teasing/mock-threat has low occurrence across all three subcorpora. Self-deprecation is relatively most frequent in the New Zealand lectures.

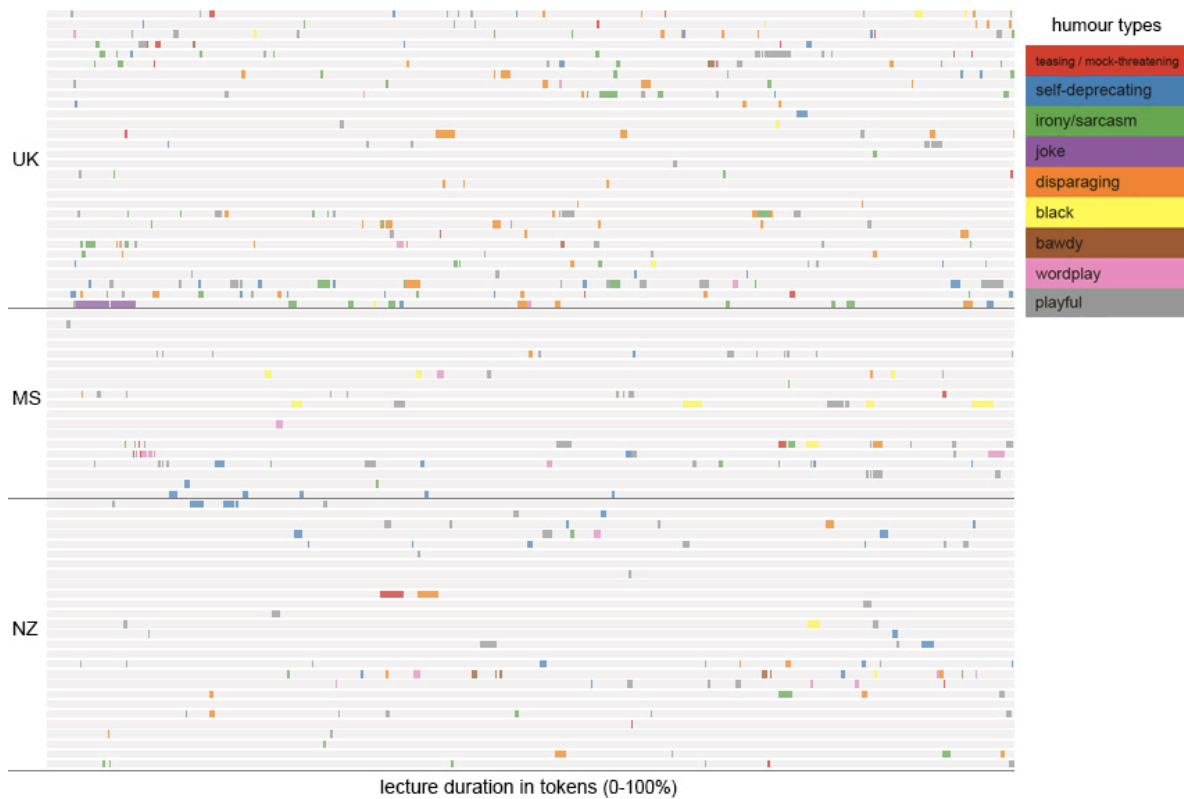Where and for how long each humour episode occurs is plotted in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Dispersal and duration of humour types in three components of the ELC

The ELC data supports the hypothesis that not all humour elicits laughter, and not all laughter indicates humour; both phenomena can occur separately or in conjunction, but the relationship is not dependent.

Seventy-eight instances of non-humour related laughter were identified. Lecturer error is a common cause, but attempts to save face through humour are not always made, and so laughter functions only as tension release. Recurring themes include calculation errors (1006, 2005, 3007) and mistakes with acronyms (2007). Student discomfort also triggers laughter as a means of release only: poor attendance (1014), failure to grasp concepts (1008, 3014), surprise (1021) and embarrassment at incorrect coursework (1030) all lead to laughter. Technical equipment failure causes laughter outside the remit of our

definition of humour (1012, 3013), and there were a number of non-linguistic humorous occurrences such as ringing phones (1005, 3005), dropped objects (1024, 2008) and, for one unfortunate lecturer, electric shocks (3001 – multiple).

There was some unexplained laughter where the cause could not be recovered from the video data. Some events happened off camera (1010, 1014, 1015, 3028) or were inaudible (1020, 1025, 2005, 3005), and it was not possible to ascertain whether the resulting laughter was triggered by humour. In other cases the motivation for laughter was clear but the episode was not categorised as humour because it was not deliberate. The use of certain terminology, such as "wide flanges"(1026) and "lubrication" (3019), for example, provoked a 'juvenile' response, as did reference to the use of urine as first aid (2010). A notable laughter response was received in one lecture from New Zealand:

> [lecturer] […] I would get my hammer ready because I must press fit the bush in the housing so I I whack (hammering action) that in there and then I do expect when I put (points to board) my shaft in the bush it should just
> [students] [laughter]
> [lecturer] slightly slide in (sigh) oh man
> [students] [laughter]
> [lecturer] [researcher name] say something
> [students] [laughter]
> researcher: it's the language
> [lecturer] it's the language yeah exactly yeah ambiguity of language [3019]

This example contains both laughter and two competing planes: engineering equipment/sexual innuendo (bush, housing, shaft). However there is no deliberate incongruity; the long-suffering lecturer repeatedly tries to use the terminology seriously. With increasing frustration he eventually admonishes the students: "you guys can't go on laughing forever four years when we're talking about shafts it's just what they're called" (3019). This elicits even more laughter.

Less than 40% (191/489) of humour episodes identified in the ELC elicited a laughter response (LR). In Table 2, LR is defined as the identification of at least one vocal description of laughter from either speaker or audience during the episode. NLR means that there is no vocal description of laughter.

| | | bawdy | | black | | disparaging | | irony/ sarcasm | | joke | | playful | | self-deprecating | | teasing/ mock-threat | | wordplay | | total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | NLR | LR | NLR | LR | NLR | LR | NLR | LR | NLR | LR | NLR | LR | NLR | LR | NLR | LR | NLR | LR | |
| UK | raw | 1 | 4 | 7 | 2 | 44 | 19 | 62 | 7 | 4 | 0 | 41 | 40 | 26 | 5 | 11 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 284 |
| | % | 20 | 80 | 78 | 22 | 70 | 30 | 90 | 10 | 100 | 0 | 51 | 49 | 84 | 16 | 73 | 27 | 86 | 14 | |
| MS | raw | 0 | 0 | 5 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 16 | 34 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 95 |
| | % | 0 | 0 | 50 | 50 | 29 | 71 | 33 | 67 | 0 | 0 | 32 | 68 | 50 | 50 | 60 | 40 | 50 | 50 | |
| NZ | raw | 4 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 10 | 3 | 7 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 14 | 26 | 17 | 8 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 106 |
| | % | 100 | 0 | 0 | 100 | 77 | 23 | 70 | 30 | 0 | 0 | 35 | 65 | 68 | 32 | 75 | 25 | 63 | 38 | |
| total | raw | 5 | 4 | 12 | 9 | 56 | 27 | 72 | 16 | 4 | 0 | 71 | 100 | 47 | 17 | 17 | 7 | 14 | 7 | 485 |
| | % | 56 | 44 | 57 | 43 | 67 | 33 | 82 | 18 | 100 | 0 | 42 | 58 | 73 | 27 | 71 | 29 | 67 | 33 | |

Table 2:     Humour episodes (by occurrence) accompanied by speaker/audience laughter (LR) or not

(NLR)

Different types of humour elicit different LR, which again differ across cultural components. Self-deprecating humour, for example, does not elicit laughter in almost three quarters of occurrences overall, particularly in lectures from the UK (NLR=84%). Irony/sarcasm is generally met with even less laughter (82% NLR overall and up to 90% NLR in the UK lectures). The Malaysian lectures, however, show a LR in two thirds of occurrences of irony/sarcasm. The same pattern emerges in disparaging humour: overall there is no LR in two thirds of cases overall, but the Malaysian lectures reverse this and show a 71% LR. Bawdy, joke, teasing/mock-threatening and wordplay types show a general pattern of NLR in over half of all occurrences. Significant variation exists, however, in the case of playful humour, which has an overall LR of 58%. The lowest LR rate was

recorded in the UK lectures (28%) and the highest response is again in the Malaysian subcorpus where laughter accompanied humour in well over half of all occurrences (62%). We do not know why this is the case, but it is possible that the lower overall incidence of humour in the MS corpus makes students more disposed to laugh when it does occur.

**HUMOUR TYPES**

**Playful and joke**

In the ELC the most common humour type identified is playful, which also elicits the highest LR. Conflation of humour and joking is common. Even the lecturers refer to "a little bit of a joke" (1001) or add "just joking" (2001) when instances are actually identified as playful humour, which is defined as good-natured (uncritical, untargeted) banter intended only to amuse, entertain, and establish good rapport. In the following excerpt, for example, play is introduced as the lecture theatre becomes a gambling arena:

> [lecturer] we'll say fun-sized Mars bar if you hav- if you write something down but get the wrong answer family pack Mars bar double whammy if you don't even try it and because no one complained this is a formal wager [1005]

Elements of mock-threat and self-deprecation are detectable but play is the primary intention. This type of humour is constructive and cohesive, and builds the positive face of the group. Although the play is mildly coercive, there is no explicit threat.

A similar pattern exists in most of the playful humour identified, for example:

> [lecturer] anyone give me a common problem with timber floors they squeak you know why they squeak is it the little rodents inside them [1009]

Incongruity exists in the unexpected script (gambling/small mammals), but there is no punchline, and no resolution. The playful type emerges as a catchall for episodes that are

humorous but serve no particular function. Unlike other types identified, the lecturer does not appear to be positioning themselves, the audience or a third party, or playing to a script. The listener needs no particular skill to decode the humour, and it is not exclusive.

Unlike playful humour, jokes in the ELC are narrowly identified as a structured oral genre with a set-up and punchline (c.f. Kotthoff 2007: 268, Raskin 1985[1944]: 99). They seem to function as a time-out. Incongruity accords with the disjunctor model in which one coherent script is developed, and a second, disturbing, script is then activated by a disjunctor. Coherence is restored by a connector (Attardo 1994: 95). For example:

> [lecturer] at ten o'clock the second lecturer came and he said you know seeing these TV sets reminds me of that um story about ah how we're heading towards an automatic world you know the people are in the plane and the voice comes over the tannoy ah this is a fully automated flight ah we took off ten minutes ago and there is not a single crew member on board this plane everything is automatic but all the systems have been designed to be sophisticated and um fail safe so be assured that nothing can go wrong uh go wrong uh go wrong uh go wrong [1030]

The two compatible scripts are the achievement/danger (of automation). The setup conjures a sophisticated and reliable automatic world. The punchline begins on the second repetition of "go wrong", which activates a script for faulty machinery stuck on a loop and the potential disaster heralded by onboard announcements. The abrupt switch forces reconsideration of the verity of information taken at face value. Bisociatively the listener must process competing scripts and arrive at the new meaning that automated announcements cannot be trusted. Through jokes, as in playful humour, the lecturer intends only to amuse: the telling is not overly pedagogic, complex, or motivated by control or positioning.

**Irony/sarcasm**

In contrast, the main functions of sarcasm/irony are behaviour modification and self-aggrandisement. Irony violates Grice's first maxim: "[d]o not say what you know to be false" (1975: 46). In doing so its purpose is to deliver an implicit message. Saying the opposite of what is meant masks the intention to criticise or self-promote. The presence of at least one of the conditions of failed expectation, pragmatic insincerity, negative tension, and presence of a victim (Campbell and Katz 2012: 459) are likely but not prerequisite in the ELC examples.

As the advice literature to visiting students predicts, a disproportionate amount of this humour type occurs in the UK subcorpus (0.70%, 0.13% MS, and 0.18% NZ). Sometimes the incongruity is obvious, as in the following examples:

> [lecturer] and the formula for calculating bending stress (writes on board) M over Z don't worry its only two weeks ago we were doing it I don't find it embarrassing at all you shouldn't [1009]

and

> [lecturer] there's delta and there's rectangular and obviously those words are quite similar so it's easy to er be confused when you look at the words [1029]

Only very occasionally is irony/sarcasm explicitly signalled, however, for example by the use of 'not' in "it's really important I can tell you're very excited to do this group work **not**" (3028) and the metastatement at the end of "the code gives us a very useful set of equations **I say useful cynically**" (1020).

Generally irony is easy to misinterpret because there is no change in tone or facial indicator to signal that the meaning is not literal. Moreover in the UK lectures 90% of

instances of irony/sarcasm did not receive a laughter response. From context, it can be surmised that the function of ironic utterances such as "we have been working hard on those questions in the book haven't we" (1002), "whenever you're ready thank you" (1006), "no question oh very good yeah" (2008) is to correct behaviour. The lecturer is really telling his audience to *work harder, pay attention, ask questions*.

Aside from the student audience, irony is also used to mock other professionals, such as:

> [lecturer] does not make sense but hey this is out of the [name removed] book must be right yeah [3019]

and

> [lecturer] every time there's an earthquake in the world lots of engineers fly out there on gallivanting holidays in all the distraught local population taking photos of how their structures have failed [1026]

The recognition of incompetency or questionable ethics through irony elevates the lecturer above their peers.

To a lesser extent, irony/sarcasm is also used to establish solidarity, especially through implied syllabus critique. Ironic descriptions of current lecture content as "the sexy stuff" (1022), and statements such as "today you're going to get another portfolio question from me whoohoo" (1005) re-position the lecturer from authority figure to sympathiser.

Irony/sarcasm type episodes are the lowest in average length (25 tokens) of all types. As illustrated by Figure 2, these episodes regularly punctuate the lectures, especially in the UK subcorpus. Largely the lecturers weave in the short sharp digs to make subtle corrections to behaviour and to reinforce a position of authority/superiority.

**Teasing/mock-threatening**

Nesi identifies lecturer-student teasing either as a face-threatening act that challenges competence or as flattery that rewards 'typical' student behaviour: drinking and hangovers, over-sleeping, a lack of hard work (2012: 88). For Eisenberg, teasing is a device used by adults to either control or have fun with children (1986: 182). Similar patterns exist in the ELC where teasing a specific audience member both confirms their adherence to the 'typical' student script and also admonishes this as the lecturer assumes the role of impatient parent:

> [lecturer] I can see that you're drifting away people are not listening very much so I'm going to ask you some questions and try and wake you up I'll ask you a question and then I'll wait and I'll pick on somebody who looks most sleepy [3011]

Teasing tends to take the form of gentle mockery of an audience member or the audience, whereas mock-threat manifests in exaggerated threats made in jest to underline a requirement or concept.

Teasing can be closely associated with play through features such as mock challenge, insult through the detraction of valued abilities (Eisenberg 1986: 183-184), and exaggeration (Kotthoff 2007: 274). Teasing/mock-threat in the ELC is differentiated from gentler playful humour if an intended victim/group and some element of exaggerated threat or punishment exists. This type is colourfully exemplified in one of the UK lectures:

> [lecturer] kilonewton dot M if I see you write kilonewton slash M I'm going to come round your house with a baseball bat and break your fingers (pause) because that is not the unit of moment that is the unit of load (pause) per metre length do not confuse the two [1002]

In terms of function, behaviour modification is usually the aim if the recipient of the teasing is present (Eisenberg 1986: 185, Kotthoff 2007: 275). In the ELC the threat is

almost always direct and not overheard, as humour is delivered through monologic speech and the lecturer rarely co-opts student conspirators.

More common is the group-threat in which the message is applied to the entire audience or sections of it. The message in this type is always aimed at behaviour modification, such as: "so an- any thoughts on that before I inflict a bit of pain on you" (1017) and "if you give me the correct value but it has a plus sign then all my sadistic tendencies come out and I will give you nil points" (1029).

Kotthoff suggested that teasing usually elicits laughter (2007: 274), but teasing/mock-threat in the ELC was met with a laughter response in less than half of all episodes. The element of threat identified in teasing sets it apart from the more playful banter that elicited high laughter responses. The weight of the implicit messages carried within teasing perhaps inhibits student/lecturer laughter.

**Disparaging humour**

Disparaging humour is linked to power. In BASE, the disparagement of out-group members is identified as a particular form of humour that encourages bonding in the lecture theatre, and reinforces in-group identity (Nesi 2012: 86). This type and function is also evident in the ELC, where, for example, lecturers may treat bricklayers ('brickies') as an outsider group to which neither the audience nor the lecturers belong for humorous effect:

> [lecturer] when we were actually on that job um we bought a load of proper branded super- well mortar plasticiser um which the brickies I don't know they drank it or something
> [students] [laughter]
> [lecturer] they got rid of it in weeks um i- i- it disappeared in no time I think they used it to wash their hands because it is detergent after all it just disappeared [1013]

The ELC definition of disparaging humour allows space also for attacks on in-group members. It is distinguished from teasing by the lack of threat and strongly linked to establishing (lecturer) position and superiority in the field of engineering rather than academia:

> [lecturer] task three was very badly done even [name removed] didn't get the right answer and I would like to explain to him why he didn't get the right answer the rest of you are allowed to listen a lot of you won't understand what I'm saying but what else can I do here [1030]

The general attack on the audience evokes the script of the unintelligent or lazy students, those beyond help. Even the best student must be addressed and his flaws explained. Humour lies in the outrageousness of the implication. The lecturer departs so far from the script of nurturing educator that the shock of his rudeness causes amusement.

This seemingly rough form of disparagement is not uncommon, especially in the UK lectures. Disparagement in general is around three times as likely to occur in the UK subcorpus. Students particularly are admonished for crimes such as giving "stupid" answers (1022), mocked for "brown-nosing" (1029) and for being "a bunch of dippy nonces" (1002). Even pre-emptive disparagement can be found:

> [lecturer] I was waiting for someone to ask if I would kindly derive these two equations and um my answer to that was going to be er A we can't spare the time B you wouldn't understand it so there really isn't any point [1029]

Yet if there is an element of seriousness in the 'tough love' approach, it seems that the lecturers are playing out the script of site humour – as the abrasive foreman – rather than trying to gain status over the students. The same kind of low register references were evident in the mock-threat humour of UK lectures. When disparagement is directed to

others outside the lecture theatre, the level of aggression is maintained in references to other nations (1012, 1013) or other members of staff (1014).

In the lectures from Malaysia and New Zealand, where disparaging humour does occur, it tends to be aimed outside the group, or towards gentler aspects of the 'typical' student script. Focus is on mistakes or poor examples in textbooks (3019, 3021, 3023), bad money management (2007) or lack of experience (2009). As with the teasing and ironic types of humour, direct and biting attacks on students happen more often in the UK lectures, where it seems that any attempt to create in-group cohesion adheres to the wider script of what is to be a young engineer (a form of resilience training), rather than an academic.

**Bawdy humour**

Bawdy humour in the ELC also accords with notions of a specific mixed or inappropriate lexis/register which juxtaposes the high and the low (Fillmore 1994, Lee 2006, Nesi 2012). It relates specifically to the vulgar or lewd (direct or implied), and often references sex. It constitutes only 0.06% in the UK and 0.03% in lectures from New Zealand, with no representation in the Malaysian subcorpus.

Much like disparaging and mock-threatening humour from the UK, the bawdy type seems to echo a form of site humour and relates to behaviour that is out of place in the university setting. Ringing phones make the student particularly fair game for the reception of lewd rebukes, such as "are we done switched off or inserted on vibrate" (1004) and "it's like it's trying to say please insert me in orifice" (1005).

Instances of bawdy humour are also often unprompted, for example in 1024:

[student] I need glasses though they're on order

[lecturer] it's a bit blurry because of th- there's not enough contrast with the light on but
[student] but I'm just totally blind
[lecturer] okay we won't go into the possible causes for that we'll just let it lie

The script shifts seamlessly from housekeeping to masturbation. Jokes often have an element of shock – the taboo or personal attacks - which may cause offence (Ross 1998: 4). The exchange above echoes the set-up and punchline of a joke format, made at the expense of the unknowing co-constructor. There is also an element of teasing as the lecturer directs the humorous attack at a single victim.

In bawdy humour, the conversational tone is lowered sharply as responses are fired back to impromptu situations. By shifting the register quickly between 'man-banter' and the serious work of principles of civil engineering, the lecturer displays full control over language and audience. Connection can be made at the level of the low and inappropriate, and this can also be used to embarrass and establish hierarchy.

**Black humour**

Nesi identifies black humour as a means through which the taboo and embarrassing can be dealt with, particularly in the life sciences (2012: 88). Lecturers in the ELC use it to satirise dark topics, such as the lecturer who explains "in Japan they call it karoshi that mean death attributed to uh stress at the work place so just like me come here and teach and collapse and pass away" (2010).

This type of humour largely occurs in discussions of health and safety, such as lecture 2010, which accounts for most of the 0.43% black humour in the Malaysian subcorpus. The lecturer provides commentary on a series of images of events with grave consequences:

> [lecturer] this this slide show how children go to school in India yah and then again from here we can see that er this is quite a hazardous way to cross the river if say er if this is in Malaysia then Sarawak for instance then there'll be some crocs waiting underneath here so if the any one of the children fall then the croc will surely have a very heavy meal [2010]

Black humour is used when discussing life-threatening situations.

> [lecturer] immediately after you release the radioactive you must run as fast as possible within one hundred yards around ten second so if you are fat fat okay big size yeah if the the construction area okay not so nice okay it's not easy to run hundred metre within ten second [2007]

Making light of potential tragedy through black humour emerges as a useful tool for coping with and illustrating the more serious aspects of the physical science of engineering.

**Wordplay**

The purpose of wordplay is dual: to gratify the listener and to establish the superiority and skill of the teller. Included in this category are aspects of wit and unusual turns of phrase that cleverly twist the familiar, and incongruous/ambiguous comparisons and contrasts (Lee 2006: 62, Ross 1998: 4). Wordplay in the ELC constitutes a display of wit for amusement where meaning centres on word choice.

In wordplay bisociation is followed by a punchline that both surprises and resolves the conflict. Koestler's concept of "two strings [that] are tied together by an acoustic knot" (Koestler 1989[1964]: 65) is enacted:

> [lecturer] normally this gets gets machined out you know bored out with a boring tool not a boring tool (laughs) but is er bo- bores out a hole [3019]

The homonymic pun relies on ambiguity between a tool that creates a hole and a tool that causes/is attributed with tedium. Humour lies in the absurdity of the clarification between

equipment and tedium planes. It could be argued that 'funniness' is limited by the extent of incongruity, which is perhaps reflected by the lack of laughter response. Similar examples of wordplay receive similar responses; as one lecturer laments regarding his pun on the concept of "mating" parts, there's an "opportunity to laugh", but "no laughers today" (3020). Students may be more likely to remember the distinction when the pun is notably bad, and this may offer a pedagogic motivation for its use.

It was hypothesised that wordplay would be a less common humour type in lectures delivered by and to non-native speakers of English because it requires a high level of proficiency to decode the language in the first instance and then to resolve the inherent incongruities – which may also demand culture-specific knowledge. In the ELC, the complexity of the type primarily offers lecturers an opportunity to demonstrate linguistic skill.

Wordplay occurs with most relative token frequency in the Malaysian subcorpus, however (MS 0.26%, UK 0.08%, NZ 0.12%). The quantitative data suggests that the cognitive load in formulation and processing is not a barrier to its use in this L2 context. The lecturers seemed to gain a certain amount of pleasure from accurately delivering complex and extended sequences, such as:

> [lecturer] if a heat engine is a reversible heat engine if you reverse that reversible heat engine this is a tongue twister here if you reverse a reversible heat engine then it will become a reversible refrigerator [2018]

Words become a game in which the engineering lecturer demonstrates their grasp of the language and its usage by taking on the role of knowledgeable English teacher.

> [lecturer] so circumferential or as call the hoop stress okay stress American call it hoop the British call it circumferential […] remember hula hoop [2012]

Common sayings are carefully reconfigured:

> [lecturer] an apple a day keeps the doctor away but if the doctor is handsome keep the apple away […] that's for the girls [2017]

There is little evidence of culturally-specific themes in wordplay, but some indication of culturally-specific usage, and a definite nod towards the employment of wordplay to establish the script of the skillful academic.

**Self-deprecating humour**

One of the strategic advances of self-deprecation/denigration is that the revelation of weakness can paradoxically garner respect and trust. Self-denigrating Humor Schema (SHS) is identified as a culturally-specific strategy for developing relationships and dealing with non-serious threats to self-esteem (Niwa and Maruno 2010), or face. It allows the reduction of tension and creation of a friendly atmosphere, the construction of cohesion through group laughter, and the approachability of and trust in the teller is increased through risking ridicule (ibid.: 80). Such functions are identified in self-effacement and in-jokes in MICASE (Lee 2006) and lecturer self-deprecation and lecturer self-aggrandisement in BASE (Nesi 2012). Although linked to a feeling of non-seriousness without humour by Chafe (2007: 76), in the ELC self-deprecation functions as a non-serious defence mechanism which normally involves a negative reference to the self for comic effect.

The type is most probable in terms of tokens in lectures from New Zealand (NZ 0.52%, UK 0.34%, MS 0.19%). Lecturers cover mistakes in calculations with exaggerated jabs at their own inadequacy. One lecturer, for example, repeats in two lectures that "no man is infallible" (1029), "I keep telling you that no man is infallible" (1028) as students point out errors. Lack of preparation is also acknowledged then glossed over with good humour:

> [lecturer] I'm not prepared today just I haven't I have been working for the past two weekends […] I may do the mistakes er purposely or accidentally [2020]

Self-deprecation is commonly linked to both cognitive abilities and physical attributes. A particular thematic preoccupation is hair (or lack of), particularly in the New Zealand lectures. Reference is made to "the few places I I do have hair left" (3001), "fond memories" of hair combing, (3001), the wonderful hair of others (3002), and pulling out the "few" hairs left (3019).

Explicit reference to the pedagogic role of the lecturer is also made. Lecturers express doubt in their linguistic ability, for example "I hope I didn't pronounce it wrongly" (2018), or doubts about their own domain-specific knowledge:

> [lecturer] the only time you shouldn't do that is if you're a hundred percent certain you're gonna get the right answer and I don't think anyone's at that position yet in this room I include me in that [1004]

Laughter responses for this type of humour are not high (UK 14%, MS 50%, NZ 32%), but the themes of the self-deprecation are lighthearted. In the ELC lectures, fault-picking with the self is delivered with a confidence that suggests power not weakness.

### CONCLUSION

The current conclusions are based on patterns identified from quantitative data with some qualitative analysis. Humour is identified as more common in lectures from the UK subcorpus of the ELC, but there is scope for more detailed qualitative analysis of the features of individual subcomponents, for example the use of humour in code-switching in the Malaysian lectures. As the corpus expands we hope to be able to make not only stronger quantitative claims, but also more nuanced qualitative comparisons. The inclusion of further metadata - such as specific figures for the L1 of students and lecturers

and the gender status of students – would also give more insight into the reported findings.

In the increasingly globalised field of English medium lecture delivery, understanding differences in the way pragmatic features such as humour function is valuable to both students and staff. Knowing more about what to expect – as deliverer or receiver – can only enhance the positive communicative effects intended, and reduce unwanted effects such as alienation.

All humour types flout Grice's (1975) maxim of manner; use of language to communicate clearly is not the aim as speakers deliberately subvert conversational expectations. The humour of the ELC lectures relies heavily on switching and incongruity. The same abruptness that echoes throughout Hobbes' "sudden glory" of winning, Koestler's "sudden bisociation" of - and Schopenhauer's "suddenly perceived" - incongruous planes, and Kant's "sudden transformation" to unexpected outcome is apparent in the ways in which the lecturers modify the behaviour of their students, and establish roles and coherence.

Humour episodes often depend on incongruous slips in expected register as the lecturer departs from the academic to the 'everyday' script. The switch causes surprise and amusement, and can result in laughter. Yet laughter was not found to be a reliable indicator of humour, particularly of types such as self-deprecation and irony.

Both humour type distribution and laughter response rate differ across cultural components. The findings justify the decision to flag up certain problems with humour in the preparatory literature given to international students when they come to UK

universities, but they also suggest that humour culture-shock may be multi-directional. Irony in UK lectures, for example, may be difficult for non-UK students to distinguish, but wit and wordplay occurs for longer durations in the Malaysian ELC lectures, whilst self-deprecation takes up more space in the New Zealand ELC lectures.

It is impossible to come to any final conclusions about the reasons for these types of variation because it is likely that the students and lecturer themselves cannot really account for their selection of humour types or their decisions to laugh or not to laugh. Moreover, this is a very small sample and there are doubtless individual differences between lecturers regardless of the context in which they are operating. Nevertheless, it does seem clear from this small study that there are differences in lecturing style that it is useful to identify and discuss.

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