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Laughing on the Inside:

Humour and Internal Politics in the Workplace

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Occasional Papers

This series of occasional papers is aimed at providing a wide range of information about the way language is used in the New Zealand workplace. The first paper outlines the aims and scope of the core project, the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project, and describes the approach adopted by the project team in collecting and analysing workplace data. The second describes the methodology adopted to collect workplace interaction, and its developments and adaptations to the very different demands of disparate workplaces. Subsequent papers provide more detailed analyses of particular aspects of workplace interaction as well as descriptions of methodologies for researching workplace communication.

These include

- an analysis of varied ways people get things done at work, or the forms which directives take in different New Zealand workplaces
- an exploration of the functions of humour in workplace interaction
- an analysis of the structure of formal meetings in relation to the way decisions are reached
- an examination of the varied literature on the role of e-mail at work
- an analysis of problem-solving discourse

The series is available in full text at this website: http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/lwp

The Research team includes Professor Janet Holmes (Director), Maria Stubbe (Research Fellow), Dr Bernadette Vine (Corpus Manager), Meredith Marra (Research Officer), and a number of Research Associates. We would like to express our appreciation to all those who allowed their workplace interactions to be recorded and the Research Assistants who transcribed the data. The research was supported by a grant from the New Zealand Foundation for Research Science and Technology.

Abstract

In our lives we are continually "politicking", manoeuvring for our own objectives. One of the ways we do this is by allying ourselves with different groups. Appearing to "belong" has privileges, whether it is inside knowledge or the ability to influence those in power.

Within organisations, workers regularly emphasise different aspects of their identity in their discourse, aligning and realigning themselves with the 'right' group(s) for their particular purpose. At any point in a given interaction they may accentuate a particular social identity such as manager, female, Maori, or one of the team. As a social setting, the workplace is full of such ingroup/outgroup dichotomies: groups are constantly formed and reformed in terms of status, gender, ethnicity and the organisation, and participants' discourse orients them towards many different groups even within a single interaction.

One of the important and recognised functions of humour in the workplace is to build ingroup solidarity. As such it is also an effective discursive strategy for highlighting the boundaries between ingroups and outgroups. Using examples drawn from Victoria University's Language in the Workplace Project, this paper will illustrate how those in the workplace use humour to create and manipulate us/them boundaries in their interactions.

Introduction

'Politicking' occurs in all aspects of life as attested by the variety of papers presented here today. As a particular social context, the workplace is no different and we are all aware of internal politicking whereby those in the workplace manipulate situations to get what they want. One of the ways this is achieved by workers is by allying themselves with the "right" group for their particular purpose, since belonging has certain privileges, whether it is inside knowledge or having the ability to influence those in power.

There are many strategies that individuals can draw on in order to create these groups in their discourse. Here we focus on just one strategy: the use of humour. One of the most important and widely recognised functions of humour in the workplace is developing solidarity. For workers, therefore, it is a useful discourse strategy for building in-group cohesion while simultaneously highlighting their position within the group and forming boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

The following excerpt provides a nice illustration of this particular use of humour. In this example we see Clara painting a picture of herself as a true team player, very much part of this group despite her status as manager and her parallel membership within the group of senior managers.

Example 1 Clara is not one of "them"

Context: As the manager of this team, Clara is also on the company's senior management committee

(1)	Clara:	I'm out of the office for the last two days of next week and that's one
(2)		of the things we'll be doing + as well as getting to know each other
(3)	All:	[quiet laughter]
(4)	Marlene:	who's getting to know each other you and them?
(5)	Clara:	Keely and her directors
(6)	Marlene:	oh okay
(7)	Clara:	[laughs]: moving right along:
(8)	Marlene:	//team building is it\
(9)	Sandy:	/pub pub crawl or something\ //is it\
(10)	Clara:	/[laughs]: super:\\
(11)	Marlene:	where are you going
(12)	Clara:	I think it's unlikely to be a pub crawl
(13)	All:	[laugh]
(14)	Clara:	I made it really clear that I didn't want to play golf and I didn't want
(15)		to go fishing and all I've been told is we're not playing golf and we're
(16)		not going fishing //so I have\ no idea what we're doing
(17)	Sandy:	/I wouldn't go\\
(18)	Peg:	[laughs]

By telling her team that she finds golf and fishing boring, activities associated with the stuffy senior management, Clara aligns herself with this group and earns herself loyalty from within the team.

The workplace is full of such ingroup/outgroup dichotomies. In this example the dichotomy is middle-management/senior management, but it could just as easily be male/female, this organisation/other organisations, superior/subordinate. And these groups are also very fluid: At any given point in an interaction we can highlight different aspects of our identity which show our membership in particular groups.

This inherent ambiguity is well handled by drawing on the concepts provided by two different theoretical frameworks: intergroup theory and social constructionism.

Intergroup theory, as developed by Tajfel and his associates in the 1970s (eg Tajfel 1974, 1978, 1982; Tajfel and Turner 1979), is a particularly useful framework to account for the socio-psychological significance of intergroup boundaries. Its roots lie in discrimination and prejudice, where boundaries are drawn to positively highlight the ingroup in contrast with the outgroup.

Social constructionism on the other hand emphasises the dynamic nature of social identity. It provides a framework for examining how individuals construct their identity in interactions through their presentation of self including linguistic choices eg the content of what they say and the way they say it.

What these approaches offer is a framework which allows us to unpack the way people form ingroups through discourse. Since my emphasis in examining internal politics is on the concept of appearing to belong, the way participants create groups and boundaries is integral. In the following examples which illustrate groups formed on the basis of various factors in the workplace, we will draw on the two approaches to different degrees to emphasize different facets of group identity.

Ingroups

Ethnicity

We begin the discussion of ethnicity with a section of discourse from two Maori men which shows the men using humour to construct themselves as Maori, and clearly differentiating themselves from their Pakeha environment. In this example, Vince and Aidan laugh at the problems caused for the white dominant bureaucracy because Vince signs his name differently on different occasions.

Example 2 Standard signature

Context: Meeting of programme assessment review team.

(1)	Vince:	I've never had a standard signature eh bro
(2)		and ( ) got into trouble recently [whispers]: fuck:
(3)	Aidan:	over your //signature\
(4)	Vince:	/I think it\\ was er
(5)	Aidan:	cheques and stuff?
(6)	Vince:	[laughs]: yeah: [laughs]
(7)		it's just on everything: your passports and bullshit like that

(8) Aidan: well that's [in Maori]: hoohaa: paperwork eh

Ethnic solidarity is linguistically signalled in this excerpt at a variety of linguistic levels: it is evident in the use (lines 1,8) of the tag *eh* (Meyerhoff 1994), and the address term *bro* (line 1), which is much more frequent in the speech of young Maori than Pakeha New Zealanders. These men are using these linguistic signals as a way of constructing themselves as Maori. This is most explicit in the choice of the very Maori term *hoohaa* ('boring, pesky'), to express irritation with Pakeha bureaucracy (line 8).

The subversive humour here serves to express solidarity between the two Maori men, while simultaneously undermining the status of the dominant group. Thus the two men collude in constructing a picture of themselves as victims of excessive bureaucracy and paperwork: they position themselves very clearly on one side of the fence with Pakeha bureaucrats on the other. Moreover, the excessive demands of the Pakeha bureaucracy and the attendant paperwork it generates is an on-going and recurring source of humour in this team; this short excerpt is just one example of many where a recurring humour topic expresses team solidarity and cohesion. Humour functions as an acceptable strategy in the work environment for expressing "subversive" sentiments. Here it permits the demarcation of ethnic boundaries, constructing and reinforcing solidarity between the young Maori men, while indicating their feelings of alienation from some aspects of their Pakeha work environment.

This example sees humour building high solidarity between colleagues by bringing ethnicity into focus and simultaneously distancing the men from the Pakeha environment in which they are situated.

Gender

Gender is another salient issue in the workplace. The following examples show how humour can serve to emphasise gender boundaries.

Example 3

Context: Regular meeting of project team within a commercial organisation.

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

(2) Females: [laugh]:

(3) Peg: it's a bloke thing

(4) [general laughter]

(5) Clara: [laughs]: yeah yeah:

Clara begins by specifically teasing Harry about his limitations in not being able to take on additional tasks; her comment *he can't multi-task* (line 1) elicits laughter from the other women in the group. The need for multi-tasking skills in the workplace has been a focus of discussion in the New Zealand media over preceding months, with feminists pointing out that

women have always had to multi-task because of the normal demands of running a household. It is thus an issue which immediately makes gender differences salient. Peg makes this quite explicit by generalising the point; she draws an explicit gender boundary with her comment *it's a bloke thing* (line 3), which elicits laughter from the whole group.

In this excerpt, the gender boundary is first covertly indicated by the word *multi-task*, and then overtly labelled with the distancing grammatical construction, it's *a bloke thing*. Used by professional women in a white collar workplace, the term *bloke* has somewhat pejorative overtones (cf. *guy* or *male*), further emphasising the distancing effect of the construction. The gender boundaries are clearly identified. This is a brief and concise example of a pattern evident elsewhere in the data, where women cooperatively develop an extended humour sequence, often with a gendered agenda. Peg's contribution extends the humour and supports Clara's proposition, reinforcing and elaborating the meaning of Clara's utterance in line 1.

This example can be compared with one from a different workplace. In this next example, *bloke* takes on different meanings for the females and males.

Example 4 The old boy's network

Context: regular meeting of mixed gender group of 13 people

(1)	Jake:	he's also very popular locally as well
(2)		'cause he actually looks after his workforce he's //kept them\
(3)	Stu:	/oh right\\
(4)	Jake:	he's kept them on payroll while there's been no stuff
(5)		going through the factory he's he employs far more people than
(6)		than COMPANY NAME across the ro- er
(7)	Stu:	no
(8)	Jake:	across the way he's he's got a quite high profile
(9)		and he's considered to be + //you know\
(10)	Connie:	/a good chap\\
(11)	Stu:	//a good guy\
(12)	Jake:	/a bloody\\ good bloke
(13)	Stu:	a good guy //oh okay\
(14)	Jake:	/and the\\ Minister thinks so as well so you know

(15)		//an- and\ he's quite an honourable guy
(16)	Wendy:	/( )\\
(17)	Connie:	Connie: [quietly] mm
(18)	Jake:	he's a sort of a handshake and I trust you type guy
(19)		so you know + when you've got another good bloke
(20)		talking to another good bloke then you've got a
(21)		[general laughter]
(22)	Stu:	they didn't go to the same school //did they\
(23)	Jake:	/us good\\ blokes have gotta stick together
(24)		[general laughter, buzz of sceptical noises and comments including
(25)		"oh right" from more than one woman]
(26)	Wendy:	//bloody good bloke\
(27)		/[general laughter]\\
(28)	Jeff:	bet he doesn't employ many women workers
(29)		[general laughter]
(30)	XM:	no
(31)	Connie:	(oh) I probably wouldn't want the job //either\
(32)	Jake:	/it\\ depends on your definition of //good bloke\
(33)		/[general laughter]\\ (.....)
(34)	Jake:	//yeah no a good good\ bloke
(35)		/[general laughter]\\

In this extended humour sequence, gender very gradually emerges as the focus of attention. The women's contributions to the humour increasingly indicate their unwillingness to accept the values implicit in the picture of how the business world works, as constructed largely by the men at the meeting. Jake develops the concept of *a good bloke* (lines 15, 18-20), evoking a taken-for-granted male stereotype in the world of business, which elicits laughter. The issue of gender becomes gradually foregrounded, allowing Stu an opportunity for further humour with a reference to the stereotyped source of the old boy's network, *they didn't go to the same school did they* (line 22). Jake picks this up with an overlapping turn *us good blokes have*

gotta stick together (line 23), an explicitly gendered development of the humorous comment, and one which makes the gender boundary highly salient.

This comment elicits a swell of reaction: there is laughter and "knowing" noises such as *aaah* from the men, together with protesting comments such as *oh right,* and sceptical noises *nah, from* the women. Wendy can be heard (line 25) contributing a contestive and sarcastic echo *bloody good bloke*. The gender boundaries are quite explicit and Jeff joins in (line 27) with a taunt to the women bet *he doesn't employ many women workers*, to which Connie responds challengingly *I probably wouldn't want the job either* (line 30). The humour is sustained with Jake's ambiguous comment *it depends on your definition of good bloke* (line 31), which elicits another gale of laughter, indicating that gender is still to the fore. The comment underlines the other indications that the women and men at this meeting have recognised in the course of the exchange that they have rather different views about at least some of the characteristics of a *good bloke*.

In each of these examples, humour highlights gender distinctions. In terms of internal politics, the humour provides an acceptable strategy for demarcating groups, reinforcing the solidarity of those of the same gender and excluding the opposite gender.

Professional status

As well as gender and ethnicity which are relevant aspects of social identity in many interactions, the hierarchical nature of the workplace means professional status, or each workers position within the organisational structure, is also a potentially important source for constructing identity and drawing boundaries.

In one of the corporate organisations where we collected data, the manager, Clara, frequently used humour to encourage lively interaction through the development of collaborative humour sequences, and by responding appreciatively to creative quips. Interestingly she harnesses humour in the enactment of her professional identity. Example 5 is a very explicit illustration of this. One sub-group of the project team (the IT specialist group) has been developing a computer programme. Some of the clients for the programme have asked for printed "screendumps" to be included, so they can see what they should fill out at each stage of processing. Clara, the project manager, is adamant that there will be no screendumps.

Example 5 No screendumps

Context: regular weekly meeting of project team in white collar organisation

(1)	Harry:	look's like there's been actually a request for screendumps
(2)		I know it was outside of the scope
(3)		but people (will be) pretty worried about it
(4)	Clara:	no screendumps
(5)	Rob:	we-

(6)	Clara:	no screendumps
(7)	Peg:	thank you Clara
(8)	Clara:	no screendumps……
(9)	Sandy:	so that's a clear well maybe no
(10)	Clara:	it's a no
(11)	Sandy:	it's a no a royal no
(12)	Clara:	did people feel disempowered by that decision
(13)	Peg:	no

Clara is uncompromising in her opposition to screendumps. She does not argue or provide any justification for her decision, she simply re-iterates it firmly, but in a good humoured tone (lines 6 and 8). Bald, exact repetition of this kind is unusual, and thus "marked", in meeting discourse, as indicated by Peggy's sarcastic *thank you clara* (line 9). Members of the sub-project team go on to provide further reasons why they should provide screendumps for the clients, but Sandy's humorous suggestion that Clara may be wavering *so that's a clear well maybe no* (line 9) simply leads Clara to restate her position even more forcefully *it's a no* (line 10).

Clara is "doing power" very explicitly in this excerpt. She makes it quite clear that she will not tolerate screendumps, and hers is the final word on the issue. The veto is one of the most direct and overt in our data. Nevertheless, while the message is heavy, the tone is light. Her exact repetition so clearly breaks the usual discourse rules that it invites a smile or laugh in response. An ironic tone is also evident throughout, introduced by Peg's comment *thank you clara* (line 5), and picked up by Sandy's internally contradictory phrase *a clear well maybe no* (line 9) and Sandy's humorous hyperbolic comment in line 11 *it's a no a royal no* (line 11), echoing a reference to an earlier humorous episode in which Clara's role had been satirised as the *queen.* Finally, Clara too contributes to the defusing of the tension with a humorous comment which draws explicit attention to feelings which people usually conceal in a business context did *people feel disempowered by that decision* (line 12). Humour is used here very clearly in the service of power. This is a typical example of the way Clara performs her professional identity. She consistently provides clear direction and never fails to act authoritatively, but she also manages to maintain good, positive relationships within her team. Her management of humour plays no small part in this achievement.

In this particular example Clara uses humour to assert her control over the group. As a representative of management, she emphasises the boundary between her position of power and the subordinate position of the rest of the team. Humour enables her to achieve this in an acceptable way in this dynamic and friendly but competitive workplace.

Institutional identity

In this final example, the ingroup is the organisation; the outgroup is the American organisation from which Jacob has been seconded.

Example 6 Going incognito

Context: Six men from a large corporation in a regular project team meeting are discussing an "outside" meeting they plan to attend.

(1)	Jacob:	do you want me to come as well?
(2)	Callum:	um hmm /[laughs]\
(3)	Dudley:	/don't wear a \don't wear a COMPANY NAME tie
(4)	Barry:	[laughs] yeah you can go incognito
(5)		[general laughter]
(6)	Jacob:	hide in the back row
(7)		[general laughter]
(8)	Barry:	just don't say anything.....

Each contribution in this jointly constructed sequence expands and elaborates the underlying proposition "you can come only if you don't identify with us", an insulting suggestion, and an example of jocular abuse which is the primary source of the humour. Each participant competes to outdo the previous speaker with a witty contribution (lines 3,4,6,8). The basic message conveyed is that Jacob is an outgroup member; he belongs to an outside organisation, and the team members here repudiate - in a jocular way - the validity of his membership of *their* team. Humour softens the negative message. Jacob, however, knows this group's membership criteria, and he is able to join in the humorous sequence with his own contribution, using a similar grammatically minimal clause, *hide in the back row* (line 6). He thus effectively sabotages the ingroup vs outgroup boundary that the team is attempting to construct.

Conclusion

Turner has indicated, "… the mere perception of belonging to one group in contrast to another … can be sufficient for intergroup discrimination in which members favour their own group over the other" (Turner 1996: 16). As described above, humour is an important strategy for highlighting aspects of identity to indicate our position in the ingroup and to create and recreate group boundaries.

In this paper we have illustrated several of the ways group boundaries are constructed through the way language is used in the workplace: in terms of ethnicity and gender as well as hierarchical status and at an organisational level. In each example the participants use humour to signal who belongs and who should be considered an outsider; who is the ingroup and who is the outgroup.

Some of the proponents of the two frameworks used in this analysis might well argue that the theories of intergroup theory and social constructionism approach data in vastly different ways. Nevertheless we have demonstrated that they can be usefully integrated to indicate the dynamic nature of groups in the workplace. By allying ourselves with different groups and highlighting the boundaries between ourselves and outsiders we gain a sort of power and influence. We create a sense of belonging as well as a sense of exclusion through humour. In other words we are "politicking", manoeuvring and manipulating situations in ways which help us achieve our own objectives.

Notes

This paper was presented at the Australasian Humour Scholars' Network Colloquium 2000. Examples 2-6 and the corresponding analysis are drawn from the following article:

Holmes, Janet and Meredith Marra (In press). Humour as a discursive boundary marker in social interaction. (To appear in A. Duszak (Ed.), *Us and Others*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins).

Some of the examples have been analysed for different purposes elsewhere:

Example 2 in Holmes, Janet and Jennifer Hay 1997. Humour as an ethnic boundary marker in New Zealand interaction. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 18(2): 127-151.

Example 3 in Holmes, Janet and Meredith Marra (forthcoming). Over the edge? Subversive humour between colleagues and friends. (To appear in *Humor*.)

Example 4 in Holmes, Janet (forthcoming). Sharing a laugh: Pragmatic aspects of humour and gender in the workplace. (To appear in *Journal of Pragmatics*.)

Example 5 in Marra, Meredith (forthcoming). Decisions in NZ Business Meetings. PhD Thesis in progress. Victoria University of Wellington.

Appendix

Transcription conventions

YES	Capitals indicate emphatic stress
[laughs] : :	Paralinguistic features in square brackets, colons indicate start/finish
+	Pause of up to one second

... //.....\ ...	Simultaneous speech
... /.....\\ ...	
(hello)	Transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance
?	Rising or question intonation
-	Incomplete or cut-off utterance
… …	Section of transcript omitted
XM/XF	Unidentified Male/Female

All names used in examples are pseudonyms.

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