I Took The Mickey But Now I’ll Take The Piss: The Marking of Jocular Mockery in Australian English

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Abstract

Australian English has evolved as a language in which the ability to relate both socially and individually comes from a universal understanding of the ways in which individuals are able to make fun or take the piss in social interactions. Jocular mockery has been identified as a conversational strategy that acts as a means of modulating involvement in conversation and a way of maintaining a joking relationship. This paper will analyse how jocular mockery is marked within spoken social interactions. In particular, it will focus on what constitutes jocular mockery and how this has evolved from what research more broadly defines as teasing and biting. This report will present an analysis of interactional data, identify the ways in which jocular mockery is framed and interpreted and observe corresponding connections that exist between participant-roles within a social interaction.

1. Introduction

Australian English has evolved as a language in which the ability to relate both socially and individually comes from a universal understanding of the ways in which individuals are able to make fun or take the piss in social interactions. Jocular mockery has been identified as a conversational strategy employed in interactions to modulate involvement and as a means of maintaining joking relationships between participants (Norrick, 1994). This report will analyse the pragmatic act of jocular mockery and how it is marked in spoken social interactions of Australian English. This paper will explore what constitutes jocular mockery and how this has evolved from what research more broadly defines as teasing and biting. In particular it examines how jocular mockery is constructed through conversation. Based on an analysis of interactional data, the ways in which jocular mockery is framed by the speaker and interpreted by recipient(s) will be identified and corresponding connections that exist between the two participant-roles will be presented.

2. Literature Review

Research conducted thus far in the field of linguistics has mainly pertained to the vernacular acts of teasing and biting in interactional conversation with limited research focusing specifically on the pragmatic act of jocular mockery. The term ‘mockery’ is used to denote the occasions in conversational interaction where the speaker makes some kind of teasing or mocking remark, often in response to a mistake or faux pas in the target’s performance (Everts,
2003:374). This was first noted in the research conducted by Drew (1987:250), who stated that in order for such mishaps to become an invitation for a tease, it must occur within a sequential nature through the participants. He goes on to imply that teases are specifically structured so as to identify the speaker’s scepticism with the previous speaker’s exaggerated version of claims, therefore essentially using the tease as a means to expose such claims. Interestingly, Drew (1987:248) also highlights that such a structure also acts as a functional element in social control, which is interdependent on the participants’ social positions (male/female; brother/sister; nurse/patient). The social positions of participants then, by sharing in the joke or tease, “simultaneously express their positive communality or conjunction” and in turn allow for the responses to mockery to be classified in three general categories; (i) rejecting the mockery as untrue or exaggerated, (ii) going along with or making the pretence of accepting the mockery, (iii) ignoring the mockery (Drew, 1987:248).

Following on from this, works by Norrick (1994, 2003) on the involvement of joking in conversation suggest that there are key issues concerned with conversational joking. These must be understood in order to successfully analyse their relevance and construction in such conversation. Norrick (2003:1333) proposes that such elements consist of: (i) humorous discourse structure, (ii) interpersonal functions of conversational humour and (iii) single and multi-stage processing of humour. It is claimed that such elements pertaining to the construction of joking must be considered in conjunction with knowledge of the participants’ relationship. Norrick (1994:411) states that “some people seem to joke anytime with anybody, while some pairs or groups maintain what I call a ‘customary joking relationship’ whereby they always joke when they are together in various forms”. Such views, as presented by Drew and Norrick reconstitutes that the ways in which teasing is both constructed and received in conversation, is interdependent on both participant relationships and knowledge of the structural boundaries that underlie the construction of a tease.

Boxer (1995:282) identifies conversational joking in terms of two the ways in which it can be potentially receipted by participants; as either biting or bonding, dependent upon by interlocutor variables. Her data suggests that if the joke and or tease is constructed in a manner where it is aimed toward a present participant in the conversation, this then has the potential of biting. The other, if directed toward an absent other, has the potential of bonding (Boxer, 1995:275). Her ideas fit almost identically with that of Norrick’s and Drew’s, although termed differently. This signifies the notion of a conclusive and commonly present ‘structure’ and consideration of participant-relationships, as part of the key elements involved in the construction of conversational joking and mockery in conversation.

Moreover, such structural constraints, particularly the ways in which interlocutors interplay in the construction of jocular mockery is theorised by more recent literature. Goddard (2009:32-33) describes jocular mockery as
involving, “an element of humour that the feelings of the target person are disregarded, and an expectation that others present will approve of the performance”.

Following on from such research, that conducted by Haugh (2010) is thus exceptional – in that it focuses on the analysis of spontaneous conversation, with specific focus on jocular mockery. Haugh (2010) describes jocular mockery as the, “complex array of simultaneously face-threatening and face-supportive speech practices that are framed and interpreted as non-serious and joking, and which can be directed at self, other, third- influencing a participant’s interpretation of evolving relationships. Like Norrick and Drew, he suggests that participants generally employ such use of various combinations of formulaic cues, lexical exaggerations, topic shift-markers and prosodic cues as a way of framing the mockery, so as to be projected as joking to other interlocutors.

3. Analysis of interactional data

The following analysis will examine the construction of jocular mockery in three examples of interactional data. This will be analysed in terms of key linguistic framing and response cues exploited by participants and the corresponding connections that exist between the participant-roles will be established.

(1) GCSAusE23: Three friends, two female and one male are talking about recent events in a college dormitory room.

33 R: [I think it’s \textit{more} \textit{aimed at} like the football kind of=
34 J: =yeah that are like just like(.)↓\textit{du:hhh}
35 R: mm yeah [\textit{hhhhh}
36 J: =\textit{hhh}
37 S: The what
38 J: .\textit{hh}↑Footballers \textit{hhh}
39 S: ↓\textit{du:hh}
40 J: I play ↓\textit{football}=
41 R: =\textit{hhhhh}
42 S: =I’m telling \textit{Troy} you said that=
43 J: =uh ha I throw the \textit{ball} (0.3)
44 R: hhhhh(.) and I ↑\textit{catch} too
45 S: very stereotyp (0.2) typical of you
46 J: =\textit{o:hh}
47 R: Yeah ↑[Jane don’t be ↑me:an to footballers?] (0.9)
48 J: I was jo:king?

The following excerpt provides an example of jocular mockery at an absent third party (Haugh, 2010). The excerpt begins with Rachel saying that a talk that they had recently listened to was not beneficial for anyone apart from the stereotypical football jock group. In line 2, Jane first frames her mock by using a dead-pan intonation on the word “duhhh”, as if meaning to highlight the stereotype of footballers further (Drew, 1987:226). The mock is then receipted by laughter from Rachel in line 3. The other participant, Sam, unsure of the joke in line 4, then seeks to clarify by asking a question. Once this has been clarified, he then acknowledges the initial mock through repetition of Jane’s “duhhh” (line 2).

The mockery is again continued and built upon in lines 11 and 12 by Jane and Rachel. It is here that Rachel appears to be aligning her response to the follow-up mock by latching her mocking, “and I catch too” onto Jane’s (line 11). Through this framing and response construction, it suggests that Jane and Rachael are also displaying affiliation with each other, by using joking as an instrument through which social identity and relationships are displayed (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997:275). It can also be seen that mockery can be interactionally perceived as jocular in certain social, sequential contexts, given the nature and understanding of the social relationships (Haugh, 2010).

The data also presents another example of jocular mockery that uses the mocking of an absent third party as a means of initiating further mocking, but at a present participant. Sam begins framing the mock by using dead-pan intonation to highlight that he thinks Jane is being very stereotypical in her mocking. It also suggests that there has been an affiliative shift between the two participants (Jane and Sam) and that Sam is now in mild opposition of the initial mocking.

This is a shift to a more disaffiliative relationship and it is reinforced when Rachel (in line 15), shows support by agreeing that Jane has overdone her mocking and is in fact, being mean. Rachel, in this instance, is more equivocal in aligning her response with Sam. While Sam employs only dead-pan intonation to state that Jane is being stereotypical, Rachel here uses prosodic intonation, while also giving an account as to why she should be mean to footballers, given the current stereotype (Norrick, 1994:414). The use of dead-pan and prosodic intonation by the two participants in this case is interpreted as joking where Jane receipts both comments by giving a po-faced response, “I was only joking” (line 16). Drew (1987) argues that po-faced receipts occur even if the recipients recognise that the tease was meant in humour. They will then attempt to deny or correct the tease, as this is directly interlinked with the sequential environment in which teasing occurs (Drew, 1987:219). In this case, the mock is abandoned and
Jane goes on completing the conversation with her po-faced correction, with an explanation for her previous mocking as being only a joke.

(2) GCSAusE23: Three friends, two female and one male are talking about recent events in a college dormitory room.

148 S: [um when we went to the casino there was this guy out
the front playing steel drums(1.5)
149 R: yeah (0.2) [on Saturday night
150 J: o:h ↓ye[:ah he’s there like everyday
151 S: he’s there- yeah he is(.) there everyd-
152 J: like all day ever(h)iday
153 S: yeah um we were paying him o:ut (0.1) and then [u:m
(0.2) when we came
154 J: [↓oh
155 S: yeah like actually paying him out like saying to him
like oh: you’:re(0.5) look at that idiot.
156 J: oh
157 S: we were just like o:↓o:h°
158 J: (.04)
159 R: And then we were comin out and he had like money
is his thing and I was like he’s got more money than
me.
160 J: hhhhhhh
161 R: hhhhh

In contrast to the previous excerpt, example (2) highlights a construction of jocular mockery that is not specifically interlinked with the fostering of group solidarity but more so interpersonal solidarity (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997:282). In this excerpt, the participant, Sam, begins with a story preface about when he was at the casino the previous night. The other two participants then show an understanding of what Sam is talking about (lines 2, 3 and 5 demonstrate that they know the person whom Sam is implying). They then add to the story preface started by Sam in line 1, by making the observation of when they have also seen the person playing drums at the casino. It is then in lines 6 and 8 when Sam continues his story by saying that he was paying out the man busking, that the other participants begin to show disapproval of his actions. This is suggested (in line 7) through a falling intonation of the word “oh” and then by an extended pause in line 11, following Sam repeating that he was paying out the busker.
Following this extended pause, Sam uses mocking intonation in line 12 to frame a self-mock (Drew, 1987:230). Here, Sam mocks himself by implying that as a result of gambling, he is now worse off financially than the busker he was originally paying out. Also, the mocking intonation used by Sam acts as a possible account for his story preface and that this was not meant to discredit the busker but as a means of accounting for the jocular irony in his final utterance (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997:282). The laughter following this by the other participants (line 13) authenticates that it had been receipted and accepted as self-jocular mockery.

Consequently, despite that in this example, self-jocular mockery is used, it is evident that the speaker is still attempting to affiliate himself with the other participants in the conversation. As Haugh (2010) argues, “in the case of jocular mockery, it appears that both affiliative and disaffiliative stances may be interactionally achieved”. In this instance, Sam has affiliated himself with the other speakers by using jocular mockery to divert from what he seems to be framing as an account of paying out a busker. Instead it can be inferred, that due to the initial responses from the other participants, that it was in fact offending such participants. Therefore, by employing self-mockery, Sam shows that he is aligning his response to agree with the other participants. Through the alignment of these various responses to the initial story preface and subsequent jocular mockery, the participants are able to “concurrently index affiliative stances with other participants in this local sequential context” (Haugh, 2010).

(3) GCSAusE01: Two mature-aged students talking at lunchtime at university

64 H: yesterday we talked wi- there was this girl I don’t know what her name is but she
65 was in (.) second semester Chinese classes? (0.2) really good at languages she was
66 already doing Japanese↑ (0.4) biggish giːrl
67 (0.4)
68 S: >what was that?< (0.2) like I would know her?
69 (0.3)
70 H: you miːght know her=
71 S: =ʊːh*
72 (0.4)
73 H: she was saying that she that has a- (.) a mental
74 illness and she took last semester off.
75 (0.2)
76 S: it’s not me
77 H: no no [it’s a: ] not you=
78 S: ["I’d be in trouble"]
77 H: she probably does a spazo ‘n exams
78 S: HHHh[hh]hh (like yhh.ou dh.o)
80 S: u::m "I don’t think I’ve noticed her"

In the final data example, jocular mockery occurs between two mature-aged students who are talking about a girl who is also studying the same degree. One participant is attempting to describe the girl to the other participant as she is unaware as to who it is. In line 76, following an extended pause and after an explanation stating the unknown third party had a mental illness, Sarah responds defensively with an account claiming “it’s not me” (line 76). This account suggests that a disaffiliative response has been created and that there is also subsequent loss in social solidarity present within the conversation. This is a result of Sarah interpreting the pause as a provocation rather than a reasonable pause in the conversation (Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1994:285). However, through further sequential progression of the conversation, jocular mockery is constructed and accepted and the group solidarity is re-affirmed (Norrick, 1994:415).

Group solidarity is achieved when Helen provides an account, stating that she was not implying that the student in question has a mental illness (line 77). The account is then countered with a mock of the absent third party, “she probably does a spazo ‘n exams (line 79) and in the succeeding lines is receipted with laughter (line 78). Jocular mockery is therefore occasioned by the ambiguity of the student Helen was describing. This then acts as a means to exploit the ambiguity through exaggerated lexical choices, thus making it jocular in nature (Drew, 1987:250). Such construction, resulting in the mock being deemed jocular, has also allowed Helen to realign her response with Sarah. In doing this she also reconfirms the solidarity in the conversation that could have been potentially lost, due to misinterpretation within the conversation (Norrick, 1994:415).

4. Conclusion

This research has attempted to demonstrate increased depth of understanding surrounding the construction of jocular mockery in conversation, while also establishing connections that exist between dis/affiliation within conversational relationships. Based on the analysis of the interactional data, it reaffirms previous literature findings. This highlights that through the use of differing framing and response cues, jocular mockery can be constructed in various ways so as to solidify or remove participants from aspects of the relationships established as a part of the conversation (Drew, 1987:231). This data also demonstrated that the nature of the relationship can also affect the nature and interpretation of jocular
mockery. Jocular mockery although appearing somewhat candidly in conversation, nevertheless occurs as part of a well-constructed, sequential environment (Norrick, 1994:428; Boxer & Cortes-Conde, 1997:290). Consequently, above all, jocular mockery has been evidenced as an effective means to building and maintaining individual and group solidarity within conversational interaction.

*Author notes*

Roslyn is currently a 2nd year linguistics student at Griffith University. She has found a particular interest in the area of Pragmatics while working toward her degree. With a year remaining in her degree, she hopes to continue studying in this area, with the prospect of later extending into a more research-based focus.

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References


