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Building rapport and a sense of communal identity through play in a second language classroom

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David Hann

9 'Building rapport and a sense of communal identity through play in a second language classroom'

Abstract: Many teachers would recognize that a certain amount of laughter and play in a classroom is one of the signs of a socially cohesive and contented group of learners. However, on the face of it, language play in a multinational second language classroom would seem to be highly constrained by an apparent lack of common cultural reference points and, at the lower end of the proficiency spectrum, by the linguistic abilities of the learners.

This paper features an investigation into language play consisting of a teacher and two low-proficiency adult learners from different professional fields and nationalities, enrolled on an intensive Business English course. The analysis is informed by Goffman's concept of frame, by Bakhtin's ideas about the heteroglossic and dialogical nature of language, and by Bauman and Briggs's notion of recontextualization. It shows how the learners build a common pool of prior talk and reference points, alluding to them humorously. The data consists of a series of short episodes which together trace the development of one such shared reference point. Over two days, the learners transform an incident which highlights their shortcomings in the language into a celebratory resource that they playfully use to build rapport and to help in the construction of a shared sense of identity and culture.

I argue in this paper that the language play found in the featured data is very similar in kind to that in native speaker interactions.

1 Introduction

I spent many years teaching English to adult learners, most of whom needed the language for job-related purposes. As a teacher, it is important to develop a sensitivity to group dynamics and I soon became attuned to the signals which indicate how well things are going in the classroom. One encouraging signal is the emergence of a certain degree of playfulness and accompanying laughter among learners. Conversely, the absence of any such signals usually suggests that something is amiss. Given that my teaching context was one where course participants had to establish working relationships from scratch within a short period of time (see Section 4.2), I was curious about the role of humorous language play in facilitating

that process. This led to my undertaking the doctoral research (Hann 2013) of which the data presented here is a part.

I was particularly interested in seeing what forms humorous language play takes among second language (L2) speakers¹ and its role in the projection of identity, the building of rapport and the construction of a group culture. Given my focus on the social significance of play, I begin this chapter by looking at identity in relation to the L2 speaker. I then establish how humorous language play is understood for my research purposes and how it relates to the L2 user and the L2 classroom. I go on to set out the research questions and explain the setting and methodology before analyzing the data and discussing my findings in relation to the social significance of language play.

2 The L2 speaker and identity

As the American sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) observed, much of our interactional energy is taken up with constructing social identities and projecting them to the world. Of course, social identity is very important at all times but, as Block (2007: 21) recognizes, when people cross geographical and sociocultural borders “individuals often find that any feelings they have of a stable self are upset and that they enter a period of struggle to reach a balance”. The degree to which people feel a disequilibrium in part depends on their circumstances: a refugee who arrives on some foreign shore is more likely to feel that their established identity is threatened than someone who goes abroad for a short period to study another language. However, even in the latter case, as Pellegrino (2005: 9) makes clear, people can feel less able to control the social construction of self when operating in another language and culture: “Stripped of the comfortable mastery of their first language and culture and societal adroitness, learners in an immersion environment, such as study abroad, often report feeling as if those around them may perceive them to be unintelligent, lacking personality or humor,

¹ I use the term “L2 speakers” or “L2 users” rather than “non-native speakers”. Some view the term “non-native” as pejorative e.g. Jenkins (2000). Although such a debate is a valid one, it would side-track my focus to enter into here. For the purposes of this research, I take an “L1 user” of English to refer to one who has used the language for communicative purposes since childhood, whereas an “L2 user” is “..somebody who has an L1, or L1s other than English” (Seidlhofer 2011: 6). Furthermore, I often use the term “learner” or “learners”, especially when differentiating the L2 speakers within a group from their teacher. Again, this term is not uncontroversial. Given the constraints of space, it is a controversy I cannot enter into here but one I simply have to acknowledge.

or as having the intellectual development of a small child”. Although relating specifically to the experiences of university students on exchange programs, her words can equally apply to all those who find themselves in a different country, using another’s language. It is noteworthy, in terms of this chapter’s concerns, that Pellegrino mentions the importance of humor in retaining and projecting a sense of self. For some people at least, being able to generate humor in another language may be crucial in validating their identity in that language. Before discussing the phenomenon of humorous language play further, it is necessary to define the term as I use it.

3 Conceptualizing humorous language play

In the course of my introduction, I have talked of “laughter”, “play” and “humor” or their associated adjectives. A reading of the literature in the field of language play shows that these words, along with others such as “fun”, often seem to seek out each other’s company, thus demonstrating their close relationship. For example, although it would be misleading to see humor and laughter as synonymous, Glenn’s comprehensive examination of the latter includes a look at how various theories of humor laid the foundation for studying laughter in interaction (Glenn 2003: 18–23), Cook’s exploration of language play equates it with “verbal humour” (Cook 2000: 71–73) while Morreall’s collection of readings brings two of these concepts together in its title *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Morreall 1987). Indeed, as Swann and Maybin point out (2007: 492), researchers have been rather lax in their uses of terms such as “play”, “humor” and “creativity”. This is hardly surprising given that these associated phenomena are multi-functional and multi-faceted in nature. However, while admitting that a neat and watertight definition is doomed to failure, it is possible to identify some of the most salient characteristics of humorous language play (notice how I have slyly put together the concepts of humor and play in the same noun phrase).

It is useful to take an initially broad focus and consider the concept of play in general. The higher animals, as Cook (2000: 102) points out, share a proclivity for play. According to Goffman (1974), play is not one of our primary frameworks for understanding the world around us. Rather, he sees it as “a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary network, [which] is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else” (Goffman 1974: 43–44). This observation also applies to animals whose play is based on primary activities such as hunting or fighting. It is therefore vitally important that play is signaled as such, otherwise the play-instigator may find themselves in trouble. The concept of *frame*, originally conceived

by Gregory Bateson ([1955] 1972) and developed by Goffman, is central to his notion of play. A framework of interpretation allows participants, at any given moment, to answer the question “what is going on here?” (Goffman 1974: 8). When play is signaled – for example, by a dog’s wagging tail or a human smile – then the ordinary flow of events is disrupted. Huizinga asserts that play is not “ordinary” or “real” life, “it is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (Huizinga [1944] 1970: 26).

However, it would be unwise to extrapolate from this that play does not have consequences in the world beyond the play frame. People and animals may not seriously hurt each other when playing but this does not mean that their play has no effect on the power dynamics within their social group (e.g. Symons 1978). As Gordon (2008: 324) citing Bateson (1972) observes, the play bite is not real but it is also *not* not real. This means that play gives its participants the freedom to do and say things which would not otherwise be allowed: “I was only joking” is a very useful get-out clause, a characteristic of humor which Attardo (1994: 322–330) calls “decommitment”. This makes play’s ambiguity a particularly powerful social tool as it allows the player more leeway than might otherwise be tolerated.

Goffman’s notion of frame recognizes that context is not simply something “out there” but is also created and shaped by its participants. Play frames can be brought into being by what Gumperz (1982: 131) calls *contextualization cues* including smiles (Bell 2007: 39), laughter (Cekaite and Aronsson 2005: 174) and exaggerated gestures (DaSilva Iddings and McCafferty 2007: 42).

The idea of the frame can throw light on what is called the “incongruity theory” of humor (e.g. Morreall 1987: 6; Raskin 1985: 15–16): we are often amused at that which seems out of place in some way, which surprises us or destabilizes our expectations. Language is one means of combining incongruous elements, in part, because its symbolic nature (Saussure [1916] 1959) allows words to be homonymous. This, in turn, means that, through language, we are capable of amalgamating two conflicting frameworks of interpretation in a word or phrase by, for example, punning on different meanings. However, my definition of humorous language play goes beyond what I call *wordplay*, that is, the manipulation of surface features. After all, a disjuncture between what is said and what is meant can also be communicated simply through a mismatch between the surface meaning of an utterance and the context in which it is uttered, giving rise, for example, to irony (e.g. Kotthoff 2003: 1389). Language play, therefore, must be looked at in the relationship between language use and its context.

With regard to these contexts of use, Bakhtin ([1935] 1981) roots language firmly in its socio-cultural milieu. He sees it as *heteroglossic* – many voiced – in nature, its meanings forged and altered by usage, so that words carry within

them previous intentions, connotations and contextual flavors. This is important in relation to the figurative dimension often at work in play, and especially in relation to the role of *metonym* which Chandler (2002: 130) defines as “a function which involves using one signified to stand for another signified which is *directly related* to it or *closely associated* with it in some way” (original author’s italics). For example, researchers have noted how language play often seems to involve references which only the group understand (e.g. Baynham 1996: 194; Coates 2007: 31). I can vouch for this from personal experience: many is the time when I have taken over a class from another teacher and initially failed to understand allusions which its members have found amusing. In the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research, this incremental dimension to play is glimpsed in Victoria’s investigations (2011: 192–196), where particular words and phrases gain significance as humorous reference points for immigrants on an employment preparation program in Canada. An episode or scenario can be evoked from a group’s shared history with a word or phrase which is associated with that moment and which comes to metonymically stand for it. However, such research is rare and most of the literature in the field analyses discrete episodes of playful behavior. Even when the cumulative nature of play is alluded to, the development of in-group language is not traced in detail. Thus, its social significance is not plotted.

In summary, the term humorous language play is used in this chapter to refer to a phenomenon that includes but goes beyond the manipulation of the surface properties of language that can be found in wordplay. It also encompasses play with the flavors of past uses of words or phrases, and play with the interpretative frameworks that a particular context allows.

3.1 Language play and the L2 speaker

L2 users face various challenges when playing in another language. They may not know the multiple potential meanings of particular words and phrases that will allow the simultaneous bringing together of contrasting interpretations of the same utterance, such as can be found in the manipulation of puns that Raskin (1985) is interested in. Furthermore, in instigating play, speakers have to be able to communicate the contextualization cues that signal a play frame. In an L2 context, these indicators of play may well be more crucial than in L1 interactions because participants cannot rely on each other’s linguistic and socio-cultural antennae for intended play to be particularly fine-tuned, especially given play’s ambiguous nature. Needless to say, in an interactional context, if only the play

instigator recognizes the play frame, there is no play. The challenges of playing therefore are not only productive but also receptive.

Despite these challenges, play's potential benefits are significant for the language learner. The most obvious of these is social. If speakers are able to play, then this can build relationships. Play's ambiguity may be a challenge but it carries a handsome social payoff: "getting" the humor of another's utterance is an indicator of shared knowledge, allusions and values (Cook 2000: 72; Norrick 1993: 69). When meanings do not need to be spelt out, this generates a sense of communion between speaker and hearer, a feeling of being on the same wavelength. Fortunately, the language classroom has particular potentialities in terms of play.

3.2 Language play and the L2 classroom

A noteworthy feature of the language classroom is that it is, in Goffman's terms, a frame-rich environment. During a lesson, the language teacher may well establish a role-play frame in order to practice particular functional or structural features, such as giving advice or the simple past. Such simulated scenarios are seen by many experts in the field of SLA as an important teaching tool, from disciples of the sociocultural approach such as Lantolf (e.g. 1997, 2000) to the advocates of task-based learning (e.g. Long and Crookes 1992; Skehan 1998). A role-play set up in the language classroom, whether a full-blooded negotiation or a fleetingly created hypothetical situation, is a *keyed* activity (Goffman 1974: 40–82), that is, the actions that typically refer to one activity such as a negotiation are actually referring to another, the learning of another language.

Goffman categorizes such role-plays as "a kind of utilitarian make-believe" (1974: 59). In such a situation, the context is multi-layered. It contains a *lamination of frames* (Goffman 1974: 82) where the outer frame is the English lesson and the inner layer is the simulated exchange or exchanges (Appel 2007: 282). Of course, depending on which of these frames the participants understand themselves to be in at any one moment, the roles that they take up with each other will vary. For instance, the teacher/learner relationship will operate at the outer layer (what Goffman 1974: 82 calls the "rim") of the classroom context while, for example, that of customer/supplier will pertain in the inner layer of the simulation. It is clear that the dynamic between participants is different in each frame. Goffman uses the term *footing* to help explain this, something he describes as "the alignment we take up to ourselves and others present as expressed in the way we manage the production and reception of an utterance. A change in our footing is another way of talking about a change in our frame of events" (Goffman 1981: 128).

The notion of footing then carries within it the potential for the speaker to shift and blend frames for their own social and communicative ends.

There is a striking parallel between the role-play-as-practice frame of the classroom and the play-as-fun frame. Both afford a spectrum of different roles from the participants. A difference between them, of course, is that the role-play-as-practice frame forms part of the official classroom business of learning and is initiated and managed by the teacher, whereas a play frame is usually unofficial in that it forms an interlude in the main activity, even though it may be sanctioned by the teacher. The relationship between these frame types is one which will be revisited when discussing the data.

The often unofficial nature of play makes it a particularly risky undertaking in the classroom. Although classrooms vary greatly, they have one thing in common: there is a simple hierarchy in such settings where authority tends to be embodied in the figure of the teacher. Of course, teachers may wish to exercise or relinquish that authority, but if it is usurped, it could be argued that the classroom is no longer functioning as it should be and is, in effect, no longer a classroom. This simple power dynamic may be one reason why the classroom has been neglected as a setting for investigations into play. It seems reasonable to suggest that the stepping-outside-the-norm nature of play-as-fun may be regarded as a disruption, an aside from the prevailing business of learning the target language (TL). Indeed, play is often subversive, its deniability allowing it to question the prevailing institutional ethos, whether in the workplace (Holmes 2007) or the school (Rampton 2006a).

4 The research focus, approach and context

My approach to the research was determined by my focus on the social dimension to language play, something for which my research setting provided particular investigative advantages.

4.1 The research questions

The research seeks to answer the following questions:

- *What role does humorous language play have in helping to build rapport, project identities and develop group culture?* Rampton (2007: 588) asserted that “Relatively little attention is given to the classroom as a cultural context”. Although his words were primarily used to describe the shortcomings of research into child-adult interactions in the classroom, they could as easily apply to the

adult classroom. Furthermore, despite a growing interest in recent years in the phenomenon of language play (as witnessed, for example, by the publication of which this is a part), its role in contributing to the social and cultural identity of an L2 learning classroom has been largely overlooked, especially in relation to the ways in which language play builds upon prior talk.

- *How do L2 users overcome their limitations in the TL in order to play?* L2 users at the lower end of the proficiency spectrum, *ipso facto*, have fewer linguistic resources than those at the higher end of that spectrum. So, how they manage the projection of their social selves through play and the ways in which they exploit contextual resources, such as the frameworks of interpretation available to them, is central to the focus of this research.

4.2 The physical and cultural research setting

BizLang (not its real name) is a staff-owned private language school where I was a teacher for over twenty years of my professional career. From its establishment in 1965, it has specialized in English language training for business people. The research for this study was undertaken in its London premises.

The specific investigative setting is the English-for-Business course which is open to participants from all sectors and nationalities. Role-plays – telephone calls, meetings, emails, presentations – are central to the course and form a big slice of the program, consisting of setting up, enacting and feeding back on the types of situations the participants typically encounter in their work. The learners who are enrolled (usually by their companies) are sorted into groups of between two and six members according to their proficiency. Where possible, those with the same nationality or a common first language are separated. Group members have to establish their relationships from scratch exclusively in English over the duration of the course, which can last from three to ten training days. The members of a group have long contact hours relative to their total stay: they study in class from 9:00 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. and are rarely out of each other's company, remaining together even during their lunch hour. Thus, the research setting is a relatively enclosed one where the interactions between participants can be captured from the group's birth to its demise. As a result, its shared history can be recorded, and the extent to which that history is used to create reference points for play and the building of a common culture can be investigated.

The physical environment, unlike the settings of most other classroom research, does not allow for "unofficial spaces" (Maybin, 2006: 13): very little can be said that is not overheard by the teacher, for example. This makes it distinct from some of the other settings for research into spontaneous play in the language

classroom which often occurs away from the gaze of authority (Broner and Tarone 2001; Cekaite and Aronsson 2005; DaSilva Iddings and McCafferty 2007).

Given that my research interest lies, in part, in the role of humorous language play in developing a sense of communal identity, the cultural status of a typical group on a BizLang English-for-Business course needs to be considered. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) definition of a *community of practice*, itself influenced by Lave and Wenger's (1991) conceptualization, seems closely to describe what such a group is for: "A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short – practices - emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464).

This is a definition which foregrounds the shared aim of the group. Without having in common a perceived need to improve their English, the members of the BizLang group would not come together in the first place. Secondly, the emphasis on the emergent nature of the norms which help define a community of practice is particularly apt given that a BizLang group has to start from scratch in forging a cohesive working relationship and culture. True, there is already an established institutional culture that frames the development of the group, but its particular practices are, to some extent, established by its members. I would include a group's teacher as well as its learners in this community. After all, the former shares the latter's main aim, although, of course, the role designated to her or him in the achievement of that aim is rather different. The teacher is also usually a constant for the BizLang group's duration. The notion of community of practice makes the group's members, at least within the constraints of the larger BizLang institution of which they are a part, creators of their own socio-cultural community. As such, culture can be regarded as a verb rather than a noun (Street 1993).

4.3 The research participants

The data in this paper features the interactions in a class consisting of a pair of learners and me as their teacher over two of their three-day course together. The learners were:

- Juan, a Spanish Business Intelligence Unit manager for an IT and consultancy firm
- Marek, a Czech Chief Executive Officer for an international construction company

In terms of the widely recognized standard of the European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), Juan and Marek (pseudonyms) had proficiency

levels in English which could be categorized as that of B1 Independent Users who are able to express opinions and ideas on topics with which they feel at home.²

4.4 Data collection and analysis

My particular interest in the social dimension to language play dictated that I record and investigate the ordinary cut-and-thrust of everyday classroom interaction. As Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997: 277) point out, “[i]n situational humor *being there* becomes a very important part of *getting it*.” However, being there at any one moment is not enough. As the term “in-joke” indicates, humor often has an exclusive quality which grows out of shared experiences. So, it is not just a question of *being there* but also of *having been there*. Therefore, there was a strong rationale for recording and analyzing interactions over a continuous period. So, the data that features here comes from recording the group continuously for the whole of the second and third days of the three that it was together, amounting to about fifteen hours of recorded classroom time. I also decided that I would teach the group rather than merely observing them as I had done with the other groups in the study. I felt that this would interfere less with the natural flow of classroom activities, given the intimacy of the context. The continuous period of recording and my role as part of the group allowed me an insider’s perspective and gave me the chance to witness and record the birth and growth of a number of threads of humorous play, one of which features in this chapter.

4.5 Identifying significant moments of play

As previously discussed, looking at the surface forms of language is not in itself a reliable means of identifying play episodes. Play can only be so classified if the participants in it regard it as such. Cook (2000: 101) comments “[p]eople are playing when they say and believe that they are playing”. As already mentioned, “humour often lies in the gap between what is said and what is meant” (Coates 2007: 32) where people derive pleasure from understanding each other without having to articulate everything being communicated. This leaves a problem. It means that an “etic” classification of what constitutes humorous language play i.e. one based on criteria formulated outside the group, is, on its own, inadequate.

² See p. 24 of the Council of Europe’s guidelines http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf (accessed 07.08.2014)

However, the fact that I was a participant as well as an observer allowed me an insider's view – an “emic” perspective (Cook 2000: 67). Furthermore, as noted previously, play, being a stepping away from the norm, is usually carefully signaled by its instigator through contextualization cues (Goffman 1974: 45). Laughter is one such cue (e.g. Carter 2006; Bell 2005: 198; Cekaite and Aronsson 2005: 174), and all the episodes analyzed below feature laughter. Although laughter is a useful pointer to play, it is, of course, by no means fool-proof as a detection device as it may, for example, merely signal support or something less benign such as embarrassment or even anger. A further indication of play lies in its potential to affect the structure of talk, disrupting the normative features of a particular type of classroom activity. For instance, the learner may “topicalize” (van Lier 1988: 152) – assume control of the topic of communication – at a moment where, ordinarily, he or she would not have the right to do so. Smiling is a further signal that a play frame is being or has been instigated (Bell 2007). In isolation, these cues are not in themselves infallible indicators of play. However, identification was facilitated by two other considerations. Firstly, play has a tendency to occur in clusters (Carter 1999: 199–200; Holmes 2007: 530; Norrick 1993: 42). This seems to arise from an impulse to join in the fun and as a signal of camaraderie, facilitating its identification. Secondly, in the data featured here, the play on a particular event (see the data and analysis section) would have been clear to even the most unobservant by the time it had been referred to five or six times. Once identified, it was comparatively straightforward to trace back the origins of the play, even if the trigger to subsequent play had been unremarkable at the time, making selection a partly retrospective process.

In sum, although the researcher has to be wary of risks in identifying play – contextualization cues do not necessarily carry the same meanings across cultures (Gumperz 1982: 130–152) and body language especially is open interpretation (Adolphs and Carter 2007: 136) – the phenomena discussed in the previous paragraph helped me to pinpoint play episodes.

There is no absolute truth in any investigative pursuit, especially one involving the inter-subjective world of human relations and interactions. Nevertheless, I counteracted the danger of over-interpreting the collected data by means of investigator triangulation (Janesick, 1998: 46). A BizLang colleague looked at the recordings, playing a valuable part in providing inter-rater reliability in the identification of significant episodes of play and bringing her own interpretations to those events. Her perspective helped towards what van Lier (1988: 46) calls “truth-as-agreement” (one of her emailed reflections appears in this chapter).

What follows in the next section is a description and analysis of one humorous thread that emerged on the first day of recording (the second day of the course) and continued to develop over the following day.

5 Creating an in-group cultural reference point through play

The humorous thread analyzed in this chapter is a particularly significant one in a greater tapestry of references which are woven together over the research group's brief lifespan. In this one, Juan, the member of the group with the greatest proclivity for play, takes a dominant role.

In order to provide a sense of progression, these episodes are presented chronologically and start when the learners each take part in a simulated telephone call, the scenario for which is the same for both Marek and Juan. These calls, and especially Marek's, become the subject of a number of subsequent playful exchanges. In the world of the simulation, the learners have to speak to a work colleague called Harry. Their objective is to ask Harry to send some figures earlier than planned because they are urgently required for analysis. The calls are recorded with David³ playing their interlocutor while speaking on the phone from another room.

The following extract occurs after the role-plays, when the three members of the group are listening together to the beginning of Marek's recorded conversation. During the feedback, David occasionally pauses the recording, sometimes asks the pair to repeat what they have heard, comments on what has been said and, where appropriate, advises them on how they might say things more effectively:

Episode 1: It's not My Problem

(“@” represents one syllable of laughter. See Appendix for full transcription conventions)

- 1 David: ((recorded voice)) *because I'm afraid he's not very well* (.)
- 2 David: ((pauses recording)) I'm afraid he's (1)
- 3 Marek: not very well (2)
- 4 Marek: ((recorded voice)) *OK* (.)
- 5 David: ((pauses recording)) <@ OK? (2) that's alright actually > (.) I'm afraid he's not very well.
- 6 Juan: ((shrugs shoulders)) <@ OK > =
- 7 David: = [OK*
- 8 Others: [@* @
- 9 David: I'm afraid he- =

³ I use the third person pronoun to refer to myself when I feature in the data. Otherwise, I use the first person.

- 10 Juan: = <@ it's not my problem (.) my problem is the figure > =
 11 All: = @@@@

In the simulation, Marek's initial response of "OK" (line 4) to the news of Harry's ill health seems to signal a lack of interest. In fact, a common problem that learners in such phone calls have is that they are so preoccupied with communicating their own message that they often do not listen to or hear what their interlocutor is really saying. Juan plays with this moment by rekeying Marek's response as a deliberate act rather than the result of shortcomings in performance. He does this by seeming to voice Marek as if in the simulation itself. Bakhtin [1929] 1984a: 193) would call this "double-voicing" as it carries the intentions of both speakers. When the meaning of the original speaker contrasts with that of the speaker voicing her or him, Bakhtin categorizes this as "vari-directional double-voicing". This is often ironic and humorous in intent (e.g. Rampton 2006b: 138). In this instance, Juan initially repeats Marek's "OK". However, he accompanies this utterance with a shrug to signal indifference (line 6). In so doing, he rekeys Marek's original utterance as indicative of this supposed indifference. Furthermore, in order to reinforce this rekeying, Juan adds "it's not my problem. My problem is the figure" (line 10). Ostensibly, this is a face-threatening act where Juan seems to be making fun of Marek. Even so, it is unclear whether the first person possessive pronoun in "my problem" refers to Marek or to Juan himself. In fact, it emerges as the telephone calls are revisited over the course of two days that Juan's utterance is one born of the impulse to laugh *with* rather than *at* Marek.

This episode seeds the idea that the two learners are insensitive to the predicament of their interlocutor, Harry. What happens moments later is instructive from this viewpoint. The group is still listening to Marek's call:

Episode 2: MMM-HMMM

- 1 David: ((recorded voice)) *and so yeah I'm afraid he's-he's not very well he had to go home* (2)
 2 Marek: ((recorded voice)) *mmm-hmmm* (.)
 3 All: @@@@

Juan and Marek both laugh when they hear the latter's original monotone reaction. It seems very unlikely that this would have occurred if it had not been for the previous episode priming them for it. Although this brief episode contains no play, it reinforces the comic potential in the idea of the learners' seeming lack of interest in Harry's predicament. It is only a matter of another five or so minutes before this

potential is actually realized in play in Episode 3. During the feedback, David has just paused the recording and explained the meaning of “short-staffed”:

Episode 3: But Before You Died

- 1 David: we're short-staffed (1) OK (5) (*resumes playing the recording*)
- 2 David: ((recorded voice)) *as you can imagine* (.)
- 3 Marek: ((recorded voice)) *yeah yeah* =
- 4 David: ((recorded voice)) = *yeah* =
- 5 All: = @@@ =
- 6 Juan: ((*dismissive hand gesture*)) = < @ yeah yeah > (2)
- 7 David: <@ yeah yeah yeah OK > =
- 8 All: = [@*@@ =
- 9 Marek: = [(xxx)*
- 10 Juan: = <@ but before you (died) you can (xx) and send me the figures please > =
- 11 All: = @@@@@ =
- 12 David: = you're having a heart attack now? (.) oh really? (.) OK (.) send me the figures first =
- 13 Others: = @@@ =
- 14 Juan: = <@ please > (.) (*raises hands in placation*)) please

As with his previous utterance “mmm-hmm”, Marek’s “yeah yeah” (line 3) triggers laughter. However, on this occasion, Juan transforms Marek’s seeming indifference into cold-hearted callousness as he plays out a scenario where the latter presses for a favor while his interlocutor breathes his last. This is reinforced by a dismissive hand gesture (line 6). The absurdity of the created scenario is added to by Juan as he juxtaposes incongruous elements, imagining the need to remember the social niceties in such an exchange by adding “please” (lines 10 and 14). Interestingly, it is again Marek’s mistake which Juan is happy to exploit here. Marek laughs freely at these episodes rather than taking offence. In part, this seems to be because Juan’s contributions give the impression that he is humorously pointing to their common predicament, something that becomes explicit some hours later at the end of training, when the group is packing up and disbanding for the day:

Episode 4: The Call Exercise was Very Fun

- 1 Juan: the (.) the (.) the call exercise was er was very fun @@@ <@ was very very fun > (2)
- 2 David: the core exercise (.) did you say? (.)

- 3 Juan: the? (.)
 4 David: the what exercise? (.)
 5 Juan: the call (.)
 6 David: oh the call (.) yeah yeah =
 7 Juan: = was very fun(.) for me (2)
 8 David: yes I think we had a (2) a slight identity crisis but (1)
 9 Marek: < @ yeah we had > (2)
 10 Juan: < @ and you have the video > =
 11 David: = < @ I have (.) I have all the evidence I need > =
 12 Others: = @@@@ =
 13 Juan: = Harry is dead (.) OK =
 14 All: = @@@@ =
 15 Juan: ((*over laughter*)) < @ where is my figure (.) I have no computer (1) OK
 (2) it's your problem

It is noteworthy here that Juan explicitly says how much he enjoyed the telephone calls. Yet, as his comment about the video (line 10) suggests, he is aware of the way in which the simulations highlight the learners' own shortcomings when communicating in English and, thus, have the potential to embarrass and even humiliate. Despite this, he takes pleasure in evoking the moment through reconstructing and voicing the conversations. Again, he utters something which was not said in the simulations themselves – “Harry is dead” (line 13). However, this reinforces a scenario which, of course, is of his own invention (see Episode 3). Furthermore, he evokes his own particular telephone call when Harry told him that the computer was down. It is noteworthy here that “OK” is beginning to assume a metonymic status, representing the seeming indifference to their interlocutor that both he and Marek display during their phone conversations.

In this regard, it is useful to introduce a couple of useful concepts from linguistic anthropology. These are the related notions of *entextualization* and *recontextualization*. The first of these is defined by Bauman and Briggs (1990: 73) as “the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit – a text – that can be lifted out of its interactional setting”. In this case, the entextualized unit is the word “OK”, rendered memorable and extractable by the play around it in Episodes 1 and 3. This is then taken from its original context and recontextualized in yet another of Juan's invented dialogues. The laughter that Juan triggers in Marek and David is precisely because of the significance it has accrued with each recontextualization. Furthermore, the utterance “it's your problem”, like “OK”, explicitly embodies the attitude that he and Marek inadvertently create during the telephone conversations rather than echoing anything they actually say at the time of the calls.

It is noteworthy that Juan seems to actively seek out moments where he can indulge in self-denigrating humor. This seems to be an important strategy in terms of what Brown and Levinson call “positive face” which requires that the individual’s “wants be desirable to at least some others” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62). Although, in explaining their influential politeness framework, they say nothing about humorous language play, they do make a passing reference to joking as a positive politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson 1987: 102). It has been left to others (e.g. Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997: 281; Norrick 1993: 47) to point out that such behavior can actually enhance the speaker’s positive face by showing him or her not to be a threat and to be approachable. In addition, admitting to such failures shows a certain composure and control in that it demonstrates self-awareness, even under stress (Dynel 2009: 1295). Furthermore, by sharing their weaknesses with others, speakers implicitly send out the message that they have trust in their audience (Holmes 2000: 170). The self-denigrating nature of much of the humor between this pair is further evident in the anecdotes they tell each other (Hann 2013: 273).

Immediately following on from Episode 4 are a series of exchanges as the group takes leave of each other which shows Juan blending the simulated world and the here-and-now of “reality”. David refers to an important football game that evening between Chelsea and Barcelona which Juan, a keen supporter of the Spanish team, is planning to watch:

Episode 5: Tomorrow Juan is Going with Harry

- 1 David: OK guys (.)
- 2 Juan: <@ (xx xx)> (.)
- 3 David: so have a good eveni- are you beginning to feel nervous? (1) is the stomach going? (2)
- 4 Juan: yes (2) [I’m concentrate*
- 5 Marek: [@@@*]
- 6 David: how long have you got (.)
- 7 Juan: I’m concentrate (2)
- 8 David: mm (.) it’ll all be over tomorrow (.) If er (.) we will know the result if- if Juan doesn’t turn up
- 9 tomorrow [morning*
- 10 Others: [@@@* (2)
- 11 Juan: I have butterfly in my [stomach*
- 12 David: [butterflies in* your stomach (3)
- 13 Marek: <@ don’t laugh > @@[@*]
- 14 David: [it’s a* serious matter (.)

- 15 Marek: in every case (.) <@ in each case (.) [(xx xx)*
 16 Juan: [it's possible tomorrow* Juan is
 going with Harry (.)
 17 David: <@ OK > =
 18 Juan: = [OK?]*
 19 Marek: [@*@@@ =
 20 Juan: = you understand me? @@[@*
 21 David: [to have* the afternoon off you mean? =
 22 Juan: = yes =
 23 David: = yeah OK

David speculates that Juan may not show up for the next day's class if his football team lose (lines 8 and 9). Juan then brings in the details of Marek's simulated telephone call with Harry (line 16) where the latter had to go home because he wasn't feeling well. Juan's wit lies in making the connection between that simulated scenario and the possible consequence of his team losing, and the humor is triggered by the blending of the two. This ability to blend frameworks of interpretation for comic effect has been noted by Hoyle (1993) in children as young as eight. There is a blurring of the fictional and the real, where boundaries become fuzzy and the footing between participants is shifting and ambiguous. This is somewhat reminiscent of Bakhtin's notion of "carnival", where the established social order is suspended (Bakhtin [1965] 1984b: 122–123).

A significant element of the series of references to the learners' simulated telephone calls is that they carry over to the next day's training. Unsurprisingly, they re-emerge during the revision session on the following morning when the students are taken through the learning points which had emerged in the previous days learning activities. Revision is a feature of many L2 classrooms and, in this case at least, it allows the learners to "re-play" the fun they had previously had with the telephone simulation. At this point, David is reminding them of the need to listen actively and provide appropriate reactions when on the phone:

Episode 6: OOOH... Ok

- 1 David: so I think the main point there (.) and I think we mentioned this (.)
 just that reaction ok
 2 (.) just more reaction (1) Harry's ill (3)
 3 Marek: ((smiles)) [how is he ill*
 4 Juan: ((smiles)) [ooh (.)* ooh (.)
 5 David: oh really? =

- 6 Juan: = oooh OK (.)
 7 David: <@ OK> =
 8 Juan: = oh [I'm sorry*
 9 David: [@@*@ he's dead (.) OK (.)
 10 Juan: <@ poor Harry (.)> where are my figure

There is a three-second gap between David's first prompt and the simultaneous reactions of Marek and Juan. They both utter their words simultaneously and smile as they do so (lines 3 and 4). The juxtaposition of the initial reaction of concern with the seeming indifference of the follow-up word in "oooh ok" (line 6) symbolizes the gap between what was meant by the learners in their telephone calls and what was said. This recurs in "poor Harry... where are my figure" (line 10). As noted with previous examples, these voicings make no attempt to accurately reflect what was said in the calls. In fact, in the original conversations, one criticism that could be levelled at the learners is that they did not utter words of sympathy such as "oooh" or "poor Harry". Thus, through these evocations, Juan is not recreating the event but demonstrating an awareness of the indifference that he and Marek originally and inadvertently communicated. He does this with humor by juxtaposing contradictory phrases, the first being words of sympathy, followed moments later by those which actually indicate a callous self-interest.

Another point worth mentioning here is that the vocal realization of what could be called "the indifferent OK" has progressively become more stylized with each repetition. Juan delivers it with a flat monotone that helps to contrast it with its co-text. This entextualizes it, allowing it to be decoupled from its textual environment and primed for recontextualization elsewhere. One of the reasons for the distinctive and stylized delivery may be the fact that "OK" is such a common filler in everyday talk that it is necessary to differentiate the use to which Juan puts it in these exchanges from the other frequent instances where it is uttered. It would not be fanciful here to say that such a quality shows that it is beginning to assume one of the characteristics of the language of ritual in its "stylized intonation contour" (Du Bois, 1986: 317). As such, it is indicative of a distinctive linguistic repertoire that is emerging within the group.

That "OK" has come to be part of the pair's collective identity (the nature of which is discussed below) becomes explicit some time later that morning when they are doing a comprehension exercise together, part of which involves listening to and repeating elements of a pre-recorded dialogue:

Episode 7: And For Us Ok

- 1 Tape: *really?* (.)
 2 Marek: really? =

- 3 David: = yeah second most useful word in English (.) really (2) what's the most useful word in English? (.)
- 4 Juan: sorry =
- 5 David: = absolutely (1)
- 6 Marek: @[@@*
 7 Juan: ((gestures to himself and Marek)) [<@ and for us* OK > =
- 8 Others: = @@@

By now, the flat delivery for “OK” is already established. However, what seems more significant is Juan’s use of the collective pronoun when referring to himself and Marek in relation to the word (line 8). “OK” has become part of who they are, something emphasized by the accompanying gesture.

The final references to the telephone calls and to the special status of “OK” in the collective culture and identity of the pair occur, aptly enough, very near the end of Juan and Marek’s training time together. David explains to them both that he will be speaking to the teachers who will be tutoring each of them over the final two days of their stay:

Episode 8: Be Careful with the Ok

- 1 David: I’ve (.) written a little email but I will speak to them this evening to say who you are (.)
- 2 OK (.)
- 3 Others: @@@@ =
- 4 Juan: = <@ be careful > (.)
- 5 David: just to- yeah (.) I will I will give them a warning (.) [yeah (.) prepare them for*
 6 Others: [@@@@* =
- 7 Juan: = < @ good guys but but not (.) so much pol- polite > =
- 8 Others: = @[@@*
 9 Juan: [don’t worry* =
- 10 David: = < @don’t worry don’t worry (.) don’t take it personally (.) OK (.)
- 11 Juan: be careful with the OK =
- 12 Marek: = @@@ < @ OK >

Both learners laugh at the prospect of David speaking about them to their respective future teachers. Juan pinpoints their use of “OK” as something that characterizes them both. He does this by voicing David in the imagined conversation to come. As in Episode 7, the use of the collective pronoun to associate them both with the expression is significant, as is the distinctive realization of “OK”. Unlike

the previous examples of Juan re-enacting the telephone call, he does not reframe their use of “OK” as indicative of an indifferent attitude. Indeed, his reference to them being “good guys” implicitly concedes that their use of the term shows up their shortcomings when using English rather than revealing anything about their characters. Throughout the exchanges featuring the use of “OK”, Juan’s humor lies in pretending that he and Marek were intentionally rude and, in so doing, acknowledging that they were, in fact, unintentionally so.

In the preceding episodes we see the gradual development of the significance of the word “OK”, until it becomes an integral part of the pair’s identity. In this regard, my BizLang colleague observes:

there is that ‘running joke’ feel to this... there is a voicing, reliving of the earlier conversation, a reinvention.. and it has become a ‘humor touchpoint’... all they will need to say is ‘OK’ for the rest of the week, and they will have this release of laughter. There’s a joy in discovering these touch points, and playing on them.

Juan uses “OK” to represent their collective shortcomings in the telephone simulation. He evokes the conversation by re-enacting it. However, it has been noted before that reported speech in everyday conversation is, in effect, a construction (Tannen, 2007: 132). Juan’s re-enactments are not attempts at an accurate recreation of what was originally said but creative and symbolic constructions of his own making, for social and humorous ends.

It is noteworthy that the errors that are playfully exploited in the data can be categorized as performance mistakes. They involve pragmatic shortcomings in the learners’ reactions to particular moments. They do not involve errors with formal properties of the language, such as tense, word order or semantic meaning (Corder 1981).⁴ Furthermore, they cast doubt on Aston’s (1993: 229) assertion that “[r]ole-played interactions are without effective social consequences, since the relationships between characters are, in the final analysis, fictional and temporary”. In one sense, role-plays are indeed fictional and temporary. However, the comment fails to take account of the lamination of frames (Goffman, 1974: 82) pertaining at any one time in a classroom simulation which allow real relationship work to be undertaken in imagined scenarios.

⁴ Corder (1981) differentiates “errors”, which he says as reflective of the learner’s present state of language knowledge, from “mistakes” which are simply indicative of moment-to-moment performance. I do not differentiate these terms in my discussion.

6 Conclusion

Some might question whether the utterances featured in this chapter are humorous or have very much to do with language. After all, on the face of it, Juan's repetition of the word "OK" hardly seems linguistically inventive. However, such an observation would not take account of the way in which he uses the word metonymically. It is distilled to represent the learners' shared experiences together and their shared limitations in the TL. As such, its significance can only be truly appreciated by those within his group. Furthermore, he *re-creates* dialogue for humorous (or perhaps I should say, *recreational*) purposes and nimbly moves between and exploits different frames. Through his recreations, Juan highlights something which William Hazlitt, the early 19th century writer and critic, sees as being at the heart of the nature of comedy. He describes humans as "the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be" (Hazlitt, from a lecture in 1818, cited in Morreall 1987: 56). Thus, Juan's use of the word "OK" represents the difference between the English level he has reached and the level he strives for as he re-imagines the unintentional impression the word creates as an intentional self-centered response to his interlocutor's plight. Also, by turning this gap into comedy, he cathartically transforms the learners' potentially negative experiences into positive ones which they can literally laugh off. Indeed, he is able to take his and Marek's shortcomings in performance and make them part of their playful repertoire. In doing so, he takes control of a situation in which he might otherwise feel helpless. So, despite the learners' pratfalls, or indeed, maybe because of them, Juan is able to declare in all sincerity that "the call exercise was very fun".

This psychological dimension to play helps explain why it can be found in the seemingly unpromising context of an intensive hot-housing English-for-Business course as well as the more informal, relaxed settings where it is usually thought to thrive (Carter 2004: 165). The data here, like Holmes' (2000; 2007) investigations among L1 users in the workplace, seems to suggest that humorous play can relieve tension, indicating that work and play are perhaps not as mutually exclusive as some might think and, indeed, as Cook posits (2000: 150), may overlap.

In terms of the group's culture, Juan's stylized realization of the word "OK" shows how allusions to shared experience can be ritualized with their repetition. As such, they begin to symbolize a common history and sense of community. Although it is primarily Juan who plays in the featured episodes, his play is validated by the other members of the group: David sometimes builds on his contributions, and both David and Marek demonstrate their appreciation of them through laughter. In the latter's case, this appreciation is despite Juan's potentially face-threatening act of making fun of Marek's mistakes. Juan transforms his references to these mistakes into an act of solidarity with his fellow learner by making clear that Marek's shortcomings

are also his own. In addition, Juan's reconstructed dialogues create a mythology rather than a history, one that the learners feel free to revisit. As Armstrong (2005: 111) comments when discussing the importance of myth in human history, "a myth (...) is an event that – in some sense – happened once, but which also happens all the time." For the learners in this group, the myth of their indifferent attitude on the telephone is one which endures for the length of their stay together. In this mythologizing process, the word "OK" is an integral part: the event which "happens all the time" is one evoked by its frequent recontextualization, allowing the original context to be re-imagined every time it is referred to. Play, therefore, seems to be central to the process of making a community of practice with its own culture, one with an emergent history, language, mythology and ritual. It is noteworthy that the typical language class often has role-plays and revision sessions, making it an environment which is rich with possibilities to playfully recycle and recontextualize language items as part of the culture-building process.

The humorous language play featured above is not simply of a type that L2 users fall back on because they lack the verbal dexterity of an L1 quipster. As Baynham (1996) comments on the native-speaking adult numeracy classes that he investigates, "[t]here are examples in the data of exchanges that clearly refer to on-going, in-group, joking, the full meaning of which it is hard for the analyst/outsider to gain access to" (p. 194). Indeed, the incremental nature of much play can be evidenced not only in social groups such as language classes or family units, but also in contexts where the in-group may be far more ephemeral. Take, for example, a radio or TV audience. Tune into a comedy program in either of these media when it is halfway through and see how much of the humor you understand. You may well be surprised to find out that it often depends on preceding talk or events within the program which you won't have access to unless you have watched or listened from the beginning.

Needless to say, it is a risky business to make generalizations about humorous language play among L2 learners based on the evidence of only one pair of learners and their teacher. For a start, it is clear that there are differences in the play behavior exhibited by Marek and Juan: the former plays far less than the latter (although the "OK thread" does not do justice to his playful side, occurring elsewhere in the original collected data). Furthermore, in the broader research of which this is a part (Hann 2013), there are clear differences in the collective playful behavior of the four groups investigated. However, all of them exploit the frame-rich environment of the classroom for their own comedic ends and all make particular words and phrases into important collective reference points that they can return to and have fun with.

The possible role of humorous language play in the language acquisition process has been beyond the scope of this chapter. However, even the limited

evidence here suggests that playing in the TL can aid acquisition. Juan's extending and enacting of particular scenarios indicates that he was able to extend his own repertoire through play. Hall (1995: 218) posits the notion that becoming competent in a language involves "ventriloquating" i.e. developing a range of voices. Furthermore, it could be posited that the heightened affective sense that seems to accompany play may well help in making language memorable, given the importance in SLA literature of such concepts as noticing (Tomlin and Villa 1994) and attention (Schmidt 1998). The role of humorous language play in the acquisition process is an avenue for further investigation. Suffice it to say for the moment that its role in making a classroom of learners into a cohesive social group must be of benefit: the members of such a group have a far greater chance of working together efficiently in the task of learning a TL than those who have not cemented their relationships with the social glue of humorous language play.

Transcription conventions

rising intonation	?
pause (shorter than a second)	(.)
pause (a second or longer, timed to the nearest second)	(2)
starting point of an overlap	[
ending point of an overlap	*
turn-continuation or latching (no discernible gap between turns)	=
speaker's incomplete utterance	te-
paralinguistic and non-verbal activities	((activity))
laughter (each '@' representing one 'syllable' of laughter)	@@@
spoken while laughing	<@ text>
unintelligible speech; x marking approximate syllable number	(xxx)
assumed utterance	(text)
heard through speakers (recorded or on phone)	((speaker's name)) text

Note: Capitals are used for the first person subject, for proper nouns or to indicate the use of acronyms e.g. 'IT department'

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