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(Un)intended offence: speaker meaning and discursive scales in the negotiation of offensive humour

1. Introduction

Speakers are generally held to be committed to not only what they have said, but what they can have taken to have implied by what they have said in most accounts of speaker meaning in pragmatics (Grice 1957). However, it is widely recognised that humour is an important exception to that general rule, as signalling that what is said or implied by the speaker is being delivered in a ‘joking’ frame or key (Goffman 1974; Hymes 1972) enables that speaker to indicate they do not intend to be taken as committed to the truth of what has been said or implied (Carson 2006). Yet despite widespread recognition that ‘joking’ is very often not intended – ostensibly at least – to be taken ‘seriously’, others can and do sometimes take offence.

In order to manage that possibility, individuals often employ disclaimers such as ‘just kidding’ or ‘only joking’ to mitigate negative reactions (Skalicky, Berger and Bell 2015), or to claim their words were ‘taken out of context’ (Ödmark 2021). In labelling their humour as ‘not serious’ or any offence arising from it as ‘unintended’ (Culpeper 2011; Weckert 2007), they attempt to avoid responsibility for any hurt feelings their jokes might have caused. Yet in some instances a claim to have not intended to cause offence and to have only been ‘joking’ or ‘not serious’ is rejected as an inadequate or irrelevant response to the fact that offence was taken (AUTHOR 12; AUTHOR 16; Poggi and D’Errico 2018; Sinkeviciute 2019). Such cases fall under the purview of what might be broadly termed, ‘offensive humour’; that is, instances of joking that are perceived or construed as offensive irrespective of the claimed intentions of the speaker. Our interest in this paper is in considering the implications of such cases for how we go about theorising offence and its relationship to speaker meaning in conversational settings.¹

Consider the following case in which following the inaugural speech in the Parliament of NSW by the new member for Cabramatta, Tri Vo, who was born in Vietnam, the opposition spokesperson for multiculturalism, Mark Coure, quipped, “I thought that bloke [Vo] worked in catering.”² This comment was called out by the Minister for Women, Jodie Harrison, who interrupted question time to claim, “the member for Oatley [Coure] made an offensive, racist comment.” While Coure initially responded by withdrawing his comment, “if there was any comment that was offensive for the member for Cabramatta”, he subsequently characterised the offence as “unintended”, as illustrated in excerpt (1).

(1) (Parliament of NSW, Australia)

Mark Coure: “It was a poor attempt of humour. It was not intended to cause any offence...the comment I made was not intended or considered to focus on an individual’s background...As a former minister for multiculturalism, I celebrate our diversity in our society is our greatest asset...The comment I made was not intended

¹ By humour in conversational settings we mean instances of humour that arise in dialogic settings in interactions between two or more participants (AUTHOR 15). See Kapogianni, Elder and Reichl (this issue) for an analysis of offensive humour in performative contexts (such as stand-up comedy).

² <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/nsw/former-multicultural-minister-apologises-for-allegedly-racist-comment-20230524-p5davv.html>.

or considered to focus on an individual's background and again, I withdraw the comment and again apologise to the member.”

As seen in the quoted excerpt above, the offending comment itself was claimed by Coure to be “a poor attempt at humour”, and not intended to target Vo's ethnic background as a migrant from Vietnam. However, while Vo himself simply described the offending comment as “in poor taste”, these claims by Coure were explicitly rejected by others present. The member for Strathfield, MP Jason Yat-Sen Li, for instance, said he found Coure's comment to be “deeply offensive” for the reasons outlined in excerpt (2).

(2) (Parliament of NSW, Australia)

MP Jason Yat-Sen Li: “When my family came to Australia, we were in catering...That [comment] was deeply personal to me because it says to me that people like me, and people that look like me, and people that work hard and do catering in this place, it says to them, ‘you don't belong’.”

This was followed by calls by the Deputy Premier of NSW, Prue Car, among others, for Coure to resign as the Shadow Minister for Multiculturalism for making such an “offensive” remark.

(3) (Parliament of NSW, Australia)

Prue Car: “[It was a] racist, offensive, disgusting remark.”

Others: “Shameful.”

Prue Car: “I mean far out, far out, isn't it 2023?”

These responses illustrate the tension between Coure's comment being apparently intended to be interpreted as humorous for those in parliament who are likely aware of stereotypes about immigrants working in catering, and those who reject such stereotypes as offensive because they implicitly denigrate immigrant groups to Australia, including not only Vietnamese, but other ethnic groups. They also illustrate that despite Coure's claims to have not intended to offend Vo or anyone else present or watching the proceedings, his response was treated by others in the Parliament of NSW as inadequate, and his comment was claimed to be offensive, irrespective of his claimed intentions. For accounts of speaker meaning that treat humour as a means of signalling that the speaker is not committed to the truth of what has been said or implied by what has been said, then, the puzzle here is why despite making a claim to have not intended to cause any offence, the speaker in question is nevertheless held accountable for having caused offence?

In this paper, we report on a detailed interactional pragmatics analysis of four cases taken from a larger dataset of 25 incidents across institutional, broadcast and everyday settings in which the ostensibly joking utterances are construed as offensive through in situ or post facto claims that offence has been taken (or could have been taken). On the basis of these analyses, we propose that offence is a fundamentally *scalar* phenomenon (Blommaert 2007, 2010; Carr and Lempert 2016; Slembrouck and Vandembroucke 2020). In claiming offence is a scalar phenomenon, we do not simply mean scalar in the sense of particular talk or conduct being open to evaluation as more or less offensive (Author 1, 2), but scalar with respect to the morally ordered scope of that offence, including both who might legitimately

take offence at the humour in question and on what grounds (AUTHOR 14). Building on an understanding scaling as a discursive process, our interest is in how participants can (re)scale particular conduct in particular moments in time and space along other spatiotemporal dimensions thereby (re)specifying the scope or magnitude of the putative offence. On that view, the degree to which (perceived) offences become impervious to claims that the joking was ‘not serious’ or that the offence was ‘unintended’ is a function of the scope or magnitude of the discursive scales invoked through the joking itself and/or in subsequent responses to it.³

In the following section, we begin our paper by briefly reviewing prior work on the relationship between conversational humour, intentionality and offence. We then outline, in section 3, the data and methods that underpin our subsequent analysis of cases of offensive joking. After briefly introducing the notion of scales that informs our analysis, we then illustrate in section 4 the ways in which offence is ‘scaled’ in cases of (allegedly) offensive joking in ways that make it less amenable to claims that offence not intended. We conclude by considering the implications of this for the theorisation of the relationship between humour, offence and speaker meaning more broadly.

2. Conversational humour, intentionality and offence

Conversational humour is broadly defined as (sequences of) utterances that are designed to ‘amuse’ participants, or are treated as ‘amusing’ by participants, in various different kinds of co-present and digitally-mediated forms of social interaction across everyday, institutional, and broadcast settings (Dynel and Sinkeviciute 2021; AUTHOR 15). The analysis and theorisation of conversational humour has often been closely tied by researchers to the (perceived) intentions of speakers. The focus of analysts has thus been largely on identifying the various paralinguistic, prosodic and discursal clues by which speakers signal that what they are saying is “intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants.” (Holmes 2000: 163). It follows, on that view, that conversational humour may be treated as either “successful” or “unsuccessful” (Mullany 2004: 21), depending on the reaction of recipients, with the latter coming under the umbrella of the study of “failed humour” (Bell 2015; Priego-Valerde 2009).

In discussions of the relationship between conversational humour and speaker meaning it has been argued that humour crucially involves signalling what is said is being delivered in a ‘humorous’ or ‘non-serious’ mode, frame or key (Dynel 2009, 2013), and thus “speakers need not genuinely mean what their humorous verbalisations convey” (Dynel 2009: 1286). This draws on Goffman’s (1974) insight that humorous frames are ones in which the meaning of “playful deceit” or “benign fabrication” is keyed as truthful in a metaphorical sense only, and that those present appreciate that and adjust their responses accordingly. Other scholars have also pointed out that humorous intent is open to negotiation by participants (de Jongste 2013). In some cases cues or signals from speakers that their talk is meant to be taken as a joke may be somewhat ambivalent, leading recipients to question whether what is being said or implied is indeed entirely non-serious (Bateson 1955; Sacks

³ The notion of discursive scales, which we are borrowing from sociolinguistics, should be distinguished from lexical scales, which have been invoked in accounts of scalar implicatures and related phenomena in pragmatics (Horn 1972, 1989).

1972). Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that while speakers may not be expected to be held committed to what they have said when it is delivered in a joking or non-serious frame or key, serious messages may nevertheless be delivered through joking utterances (AUTHOR 9; Billig 2005; Dynel 2011; Emerson 1969; Holt 2013). This is because what is taken to be meant by the speaker in the case of conversational humour is also based on shared experiences and relationships among the parties involved, and thus, inevitably, what is taken to be meant is never a single proposition, but ties in with past and (anticipated) future messages.

The relationship between speaker meaning, commitment and truth is thus complex in the case of conversational humour (Dynel 2018; Horisk 2024; McTernan 2023; Moeschler 2021). On the one hand, conversational humour has been theorised as a key or frame in which the speaker is not taken to be committed to the truth of what has been said (or implied by what is said). On the other hand, conversational humour may be used as a vehicle to deliver serious messages, and recipients may come to understand that the speaker is in fact (covertly) committed to the truth of those messages. The distinction Horisk (2024) draws between joking in the saying-something-false sense (joking₁) versus joking in the truth-in-jest sense (joking₂) is perhaps instructive in that regard. As Horisk (2024: 86) observes,

the fact that one does not warrant the truth of a statement is not the same as guaranteeing that it is false, or even guaranteeing that one believes it to be false. Rather, if the truth of a statement is not warranted, one neither guarantees that it is true nor guarantees that it is false.

Notably, in some cases, then, the speaker “leaves it open as to whether they were joking in the truth-in-jest sense or the saying-something-false sense” (Horisk 2024: 87). The essential ambiguity of conversational joking can thus be exploited, deliberately or otherwise, by speakers to communicate inappropriate or offensive messages without necessarily being held committed to the truth of what they have said (Billig 2005; Horisk 2024; Baxter-Webb, Elder and Kapogianni forthcoming).

Studies of humour perceived to be offensive, otherwise known as ‘offensive humour’, have to date generally categorised it as a form of disparaging (Zillmann 1983), face-threatening (Zajdman 1995), or disaffiliative humour (Dynel 2013), or, alternatively, as an attack on the social standing of the target of that humour (McTernan 2023).⁴ Once again, the (perceived) intentions of speakers are taken to be crucial for analysts to determine whether the humour in question is meant to be disparaging or disaffiliative (Dynel 2016, 2021). According to Dynel (2016: 142), for instance,

humour may serve politeness and/or impoliteness depending on the speaker’s intention and awareness of the consequences his/her utterance may carry, and the hearer’s recognition of the speaker’s intention, as well as his/her ultimate amusement or taking offence.

⁴ There are also related studies of offensive humour in performative settings, such as in stand-up comedy or film/television shows (Pérez 2013; Szabo 2020). See Kapogianni, Elder and Reichel (this volume) for further discussion.

However, other work suggests that whether conversational humour is taken to be affiliative or disaffiliative depends just as much on how participants respond to it, as it does on whatever the putative intentions of the speaker may have been (AUTHOR 17).

Indeed, while analysts may seek to categorise conversational humour into different types (disparaging, face-threatening, disaffiliative etc.), participants themselves resist such categories through contesting what counts as offensive humour. This can be observed in cases where there are (metapragmatic) debates about conversational jokes that ‘go too far’ or are ‘too close to the bone’ (AUTHOR 3; Hopper 1995; Horisk 2024; Kramer 2011; Marsh 2014; McTernan 2023; Smith 1995). Such debates often centre on assertions that the joke in question is inherently offensive no matter what the intended meaning of the speaker might have been. As Smith (1995) observes, “even when the playful or joking intention of the joker is not in question, the joke itself may still be censured because it deals with a topic that is supposedly inherently tasteless or not funny” (Smith 1995: 124). Unsurprisingly, offensive humour is often closely associated with cases of joking that are perceived as racist or sexist due to the use of taboo language such as slurs (Technau 2018; O’Driscoll 2022). However, it is not limited to such cases. There is a growing body of work examining responses to (putative) cases of offensive humour (Canestrari and Viana 2019), including where participants dispute whether instances of jocular teasing or banter are offensive (AUTHOR 3; Sinkeviciute 2017, 2019; Technau 2017). What lies at the heart of such debates are questions about *who* is taking offence and on *what* moral grounds (AUTHOR 8, 21).

Studies of the relationship between offensive humour and speaker meaning thus centre on two key questions (Elder 2021; Kapogianni, Elder and Baxter-Webb forthcoming):

- (1) what licenses a claim by a recipient that a particular instance of joking is offensive and for whom?
- (2) what licenses a claim that the offence taken in response to a particular instance of joking was unintended or the result of a misunderstanding?

It has long been noted that framing offensive messages through humour affords the joker with varying degrees of plausible deniability for having intended to cause such offence. However, whether those potentially offensive messages are plausibly deniable in practice depends not only on the extent to which the speaker is taken to be committed to the truth of what is being communicated (Horisk 2024), but on the degree of implicitness of the offensive message in question (Elder 2021), as generally speaking the more explicitly a meaning is communicated, the more difficult it is to deny (Sternau et al. 2015). Yet even if some degree of plausible deniability is afforded by the (allegedly) offensive message having been implicitly communicated (Camp 2018), what exactly is being denied is not always clear, as non-representational aspects of speaker meaning, that is, those relating to interpersonal attitudes and emotions, such as offence, are very often difficult to pinpoint (Elder 2021; Kapogianni, Elder and Baxter-Webb forthcoming; O’Driscoll 2013, 2022). This is because offence is a complex moral emotion encompassing negative feelings (e.g. anger, indignation) and judgments (Barrow 2005; McTernan 2021; Weckert 2007), while the taking of offence is a morally-loaded social action through which the conduct in question is registered as offensive to some party and sanctioned as morally transgressive (AUTHOR 8; AUTHOR 16; see also AUTHOR 13).⁵ In addition, denials or disclaimers themselves not only provide evidence of

⁵ It’s worth noting that just like the taking of offence, conversational joking is also morally loaded insofar as the nature of the joke may indicate the joker’s own sense of morality, especially if its content is perceived to be morally objectionable or problematic.

the different kinds of meanings that are inferable from utterances by putting ‘on record’ (to varying degrees of explicitness) the very thing they are attempting to deny (Elder 2021, 2024; Elder and Beaver 2022), they are also a complex, nuanced form of social action in their own right (AUTHOR 5; AUTHOR 7, 9).

Cases of offensive humour thus offer challenges for extant accounts of speaker meaning, as what a speaker is taken to have meant clearly goes beyond representational or propositional dimensions of meaning to encompass more ineffable, non-representational elements (Wharton and de Saussure 2024). It also takes us into the realm of a commitment-based or deontological notion of speaker meaning that encompasses moral or ethical concerns, such as social rights, obligations, responsibilities and so on, which have real-world consequences for participants in interaction (Elder 2024; AUTHOR 7). Elder (2021), for instance, suggests that microaggressions and other related phenomena that carry offensive implications can be theorised through appeals to other kinds of inference beyond those which have standardly been taken to be a part of speaker-intended meaning. These include implicated premises (Sperber and Wilson 1995) - inferences supplied by the hearer in order to enable the recovery of implicated conclusions - and background assumptions (Ariel 2016) - implicit knowledge about “how things must be for the states of affairs depicted by the speaker’s utterance” (p.12), which the speaker is taken to be committed to “not by virtue of what the speaker says, but rather by virtue of what interlocutors assume about the world (p.13). Notably, in such cases, it may be the hearer who is taken to be responsible for the inferences in question, or the presumption that the speaker is committed to those inferences, raising questions about whether we are in fact dealing with speaker or hearer meanings (Mosegaard Hansen and Terkourafi 2023), or, perhaps more likely, both.

In this brief overview of research on conversational humour, intentionality and offence to date, it has become apparent that the difficulties in pinpointing what can be legitimately denied and who can be held responsible for those inferences in the case of implicated premises and background assumptions underpins, in part at least, the complex relationship that holds between offensive humour and speaker meaning. However, in the remainder of this paper we go on to argue that the complexity of the relationship between offensive humour and speaker meaning is also a function of the grounds on which people license the taking of offence in response to a particular instance of joking in the first place. We propose that we can start to develop a more systematic account of the appeals to (presumed) world knowledge or background assumptions that are found in extant accounts of offensive humour by drawing on the notion of discursive scales to understand the sociopragmatic *mechanisms* by which people license such claims.

3. Data and method

The collection of 25 cases of offensive joking we examine in this paper are drawn from a diverse range of sources, including media reports and broadcasts, as well as corpora of spontaneous, conversational interactions in English (primary in Australian English). Our collection was initially assembled through identifying cases of conversational humour using a combination of semantic (e.g. incongruity), prosodic (e.g. marked intonation), paralinguistic (e.g. laughter), and nonverbal (e.g. smiles, marked facial expressions) cues (Attardo 2020; Dynel and Sinkeviciute 2021). Instances of offensive joking were defined as cases in which

conversational humour is responded to or treated as offensive by one or more the participants themselves. The collection itself consists of audio or video recordings, and associated transcripts, of co-present or digitally-mediated interactions occur across a range of different settings, including institutional contexts (n=8), broadcast settings (n=6), everyday talk between family, friends and colleagues (n=6), and first conversations (n=5).⁶ Our aim in drawing from this diverse range of data sources is to demonstrate that while the stakes involved across these various situated contexts are clearly quite different for those parties concerned, the sociopragmatic mechanisms we identify as underpinning offensive humour are recurrent, and thus are not necessarily limited to particular discourse settings. It is important to note that the categorisation of these as instances of offensive humour was based on their construal as offensive either *in situ* by addressed or unaddressed recipients, or *post facto* by (un)addressed recipients or bystanders who brought it to the attention of other parties (including in some cases the media).⁷

Cases of offensive joking in our collection were analysed through an interactional pragmatics lens, which draws attention to the sequential and indexical properties of the phenomena in question (AUTHOR 6; AUTHOR 11), and the larger context in which they are embedded (AUTHOR 18, 19). Taking the broader context into account is important as negotiations about whether the joking in question is taken to be offensive (or not) frequently draws on elements of the wider social context in which those social interactions come into being. Our analysis thus involved undertaking detailed case studies of the 25 examples of offensive humour in our collection. This entailed, in turn, using CA transcription conventions (Hepburn and Bolden, 2017), because not only what is said by the participants, but how and when it is said is also important for warranting our analysis. However, in this paper, due to space constraints, we only report detailed analyses of four cases that are taken from this collection of 25 incidents of (allegedly) offensive humour. These examples were selected on the basis that they exemplify how the taking of offence or its deniability is scalarly accomplished, although the same processes were observed in our analysis of all 25 cases (albeit with potentially different stakes for the participants).

Finally, although we acknowledge that analysing instances of offensive humour does raise somewhat of a potential ethical quandary for researchers in that in doing so we are reproducing offensive materials in yet another context (Horisk 2024), we think it is important to call out the fact that despite protestations to the contrary, conversational humour does indeed reveal instances of underlying prejudices in the respective societies in which they occur. Notably, while some groups or communities treat this kind of ‘profanity’ as a legitimate form of communication, the resistance we see in many of the examples we analyse is suggestive of efforts to change the local worlds of these speakers by discursively linking what was said in the here-and-now to the wider social context in which such utterances would be undeniably offensive, as well as counter-resistance to just that in other cases.

4. Scaling and offensive joking

⁶ The 25 cases of offensive humour in our collection are summarised in Appendix 1.

⁷ Cases where instances of offensive joking were reported and commented upon in the media provide additional evidence that the joking in question was construed as offensive by other observers (i.e. who were not co-present) (AUTHOR 10).

The notion of scale was borrowed into sociolinguistics from geography (Slembrouck and Vandenbroucke 2020), where the focus has been on scales of size, power, scope, spread, and so on.⁸ As Carr and Lempert (2016) observe, “people use language to scale the world around them” (p.3) vis-à-vis scaled hierarchies. In sociolinguistics, scales are widely regarded as socio-historically loaded (Blommaert 2007, 2010), and so have become closely aligned with the notion of chronotope (Blommaert 2015; Goebel and Manns 2020), and, in particular, the degree of communicability or understandability of indexical dimensions of language within and across different social groups or levels of social organisation (Blommaert, Westein and Leppänen 2015). This is because scales are mainly used in sociolinguistics to further our understanding of the position of speakers, languages and linguistic practices at various levels (global, national, local) and their corresponding value.

However, in our application of scales to understanding the pragmatics of offence, we are primarily interested in scaling as a discursive process rather than a product (Carr and Lempert 2016; Gal 2016; Slembrouck and Vandenbroucke 2020). Offence is fundamentally scalar in nature as transgressions can be evaluated as more or less offensive on both horizontal (e.g. scope) and vertical (e.g. hierarchized value, magnitude) scales. However, in this paper, we focus on the process by which participants (and observers) *scale* and *rescale* conduct, thereby recontextualising the construal of particular conduct in particular moments in time and space as offensive along other spatiotemporal dimensions. Scale is thus used here in its operational or procedural sense, as one of the (communicative) resources participants deploy or invoke in order to initiate or react to offensive humour.

In the example we briefly considered in the introduction, for instance, “I thought that bloke [Vo] worked in catering”, Coure subsequently claims that he was drawing attention to Vo’s lack of expertise and experience in the parliamentary context through making reference to “catering.” Notably, this downscaling is further reinforced through referring to Vo as “that bloke”, which also has connotations of ordinariness. In short, he was downscaling Vo on an implicit hierarchy of experience. However, as alluded to by Li, a reference to “catering” also invokes another kind of hierarchical scale, specifically, one in which migrants from South East Asia to Australia (stereotypically) took up manual jobs like catering and cleaning that are implicitly less valued than white-collar jobs. The implication is that Vo is being downscaled as someone who doesn’t belong in parliament *because* he is a migrant and not part of an overwhelmingly white parliament. And it is this that licenses the taking of offence. However, it goes further than that. In invoking shared migrant experience through reference to his own personal experience, Li also alludes to the fact that this reference to “catering” is broadly understandable in those terms. The offensiveness of Coure’s quip is thus grounded not only in downscaling Vo’s background as a migrant, but in upscaling the spatiotemporal scope of this shared experience to other migrants to Australia. This means that this quip is not only offensive to Vo, but to other migrants, especially those who are presumed to typically take up such positions, because it is readily hearable in that way to that group (or at least so it is claimed). And it is on those grounds that other members of the parliament also claim Coure’s quip was offensive, irrespective of whatever intentions he may have had, and thus on those grounds that he is held accountable for the offensive implications of his quip.

As we can see from this example, then, at any point in time different scale(s) may be made relevant in the taking of offence, as participants can position themselves interstitially

⁸ As previously note in footnote 3, the discursive notions of ‘scales’ and ‘scaling’ should be distinguished from the lexical notion of scale that is used in pragmatics to analyse scalar implicatures (among other things).

along those scales. However, since scales are not invoked in linear ways, the magnitude of those scales also matters, thereby giving rise to cumulative effects in the degree of offensiveness instigated through invoking various scales at any one time. Our point here though is not that scales exist independently of the discursive processes by which they arise, although some may indeed be reified through ongoing, recurrent discourses about them, but rather that through talk people are using language and other discursive resources in *(re)scaling* the offensiveness of what speakers are being taken to mean. In short, while participants (and some scholars) may talk of scales as discursive products, we are interested in scales as a discursive process, as it is the latter that arguably constitutes the underpinning sociopragmatic mechanism by which people license the taking of offence.

In this section, we examine four selected cases from our collection of offensive joking in order to illustrate how scales can be drawn upon as a resource by speakers in instigating potentially offensive humour, and how scales are drawn upon by targets and others to construe that joking as offensive, as well as in efforts by speakers to counter such attempts to hold them accountable for offensive humour. Our aim in this analysis is to draw particular attention to the discursive processes by which offence is scaled, and way in which attempts to counter this through drawing on the very same sociopragmatic mechanisms.

Case 1: “Let’s hope Ebola works”

The first case of offensive joking we examine is taken from a set of audio recordings made at the Brisbane city police watch house, which were leaked to the media by an anonymous bystander to those conversations who was working as a police officer in the same watch house at that time. The release of these conversations spurred the launch of an inquiry into the use of racist slurs and offensive language by Queensland Police Service (QPS) officers while working in the watch house.⁹ The reports generated significant public outcry, and denunciations of the recorded conversations by both politicians in Queensland and senior leaders in the QPS. It is worth noting that discursive *upscaling* was accomplishing through leaking recordings of these officers using racist slurs and other offensive language to the mainstream media, as these *in situ* micro-moments were recontextualised from co-present interaction in a Brisbane watch house to a different spatiotemporal context in which the public becomes witness to what was apparently intended to be a conversation between officers in a workplace setting, and subsequently became the target of (online) public denunciation (Author 10). Our interest here, however, is in how the joking by the officers was itself scaled *in situ* to be hearable as offensive to bystanders.

In the following excerpt, three police officers were recorded discussing overpopulation in places around the world, including Africa.

(4) (Brisbane city police watch house, 1 December 2019) [2:58]

01 01: I don't understa:nd. (0.2) how
02 do they breed in Africa? they've
03 got all that poverty and
04 fuckin sta:rvation and shit.
05 (0.2)
06 03: they do it by statistics. they

⁹ Gillespie and Smee (2022): <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/nov/13/queensland-police-service-qps-leaked-audio-recording-tape-brisbane-city-watch-house>.

30 O2: Let's just hope Ebola works. [proposal 2]
31 O1: he he heh [laughter]

In that way, then, the offensiveness of this ostensibly joking proposal is discursively upscaled through the contrast it implicitly sets up between the initial proposal by O1 and the second proposal delivered through O2's jocular quip. It is also worth noting that while O2's quip is apparently received as joking in the saying-something-false sense, as the other officer responds only with laughter (line 31), it nevertheless communicates an attitude of (callous) indifference to the historical and current suffering of certain populations in Africa.¹¹

Overall, in this example we can observe the way in which scales can be drawn upon by speakers to bring about an instance of offensive joking. In this case, offence was taken *in situ* by the officer who made the recordings and leaked them to the media, and then *post-facto* in news reports where the comment was construed as offensive, and in responses from the broader public upon its publication.¹²

In the next case we examine, we can observe how offence can also be taken in response to joking *in situ* through drawing on scales.

Case 2: "Greek mate"

The second case of offensive joking we examine is taken from an episode of the reality television show, *Real Housewives of Sydney*. The excerpt in question comes from an early outing of the group. While some of the cast members know each other already (e.g. Melissa and Athena), others do not, so they initiate a series of mediated introductions (Pillet-Shore 2011) between Melissa and other cast members in which ethnic categorization plays a large part. It is within this ostensibly cordial getting-to-know-you frame that the instance of offensive joking in question occurs.

The excerpt begins with Victoria introducing Melissa to Nicole as "the Lebanese" (Nicole) and Matty as "the Persian". After Krissy intervenes to claim she thought Matty was Swiss, she goes on to jokingly introduce Athena as "the Greek" in a highly stylized faux Greek accent. While we can observe downscaling, and resistance to those downscalings, in the introductions that precede this (AUTHOR 14), in which there is a discursive struggle over the role of ethnicity versus ancestry in categorizing each other (Malhi 2024), it is the joking introduction of Athena by Krissy, and what subsequently follows, that is the primary focus of our analysis here.

(6) (Real Housewives of Sydney, Episode 1, Season 1, 2017) [43:29]

¹¹ As one of the reviewers pointed out this particular case could also be considered to be an example of 'racist humour' (i.e. it is offensive because it is racist). However, the focus in this paper is on the sociopragmatic mechanisms by which offence is caused, taken or denied in general. While perceived racism (and other forms of prejudice, including sexism, fat shaming, mental health shaming, and so on) may indeed play a role, further consideration of these factors lies beyond the scope of the current paper.

¹² For instance, the leaked audio recordings were described as follows in the original news report: "A series of tapes, leaked to Guardian Australia by a whistleblower, record several [Queensland](#) police service officers using **racist** slurs and **offensive** language while working in the holding cells. The audio – which we have published below – features comments by several watch house officers (a non-policing role) and sworn police. It includes jokes about one officer's desire to 'skull drag' protesters, discussions of fears of 'outbreeding' by Muslim immigrants, and, when speaking about African population growth, the comment '**let's just hope Ebola works**'." (Gillespie and Smee 2022).

01 VIC: [(we've got)] the Lebane:se,
02 (.)
03 VIC: [the Pe:rsia:n]
04 MAT: [the Pe:rsia:n]
05 NIC: [LEbanese SWed]ish
06 (.)
07 VIC: Le[banese S_wedish]
08 KRI: [oh:: look at] that (.) I kept
09 calling you: ah: (.) [Sw-] S- [Swiss]
10 MAT: [yep]
11 NIC: [Swiss]
12 KRI: Swiss
13 MAT: °°.ohh°° ((jaw drops))
14 KRI: -> **and we've got the *grreek mate*?**
15 **((*faux Greek accent))**
16 (0.2)
17 VIC: [Gree:k]
18 KRI: [*chento] pochento ↑grreek*
19 ((*faux foreign accent))
20 (0.3)
21 ATH: <↑I don't speak like ↓that [I'm:]
22 KRI: [°hh]hh hh hh°
23 (0.4)
24 ATH: from Athens and MY GREAT GRANDparents
25 arrived [in Athens>.]
26 NIC: [ha ha ha ha] ha ha ha
27 ATH: in the eighteen hundreds. (.) but
28 they were from Denmark originally.
29 KRI: wō::w
30 ATH: so the rea[son why:]
31 KRI: [so you're] not even ↑Greek
32 (0.2)
33 ATH: so th-
34 (0.3)
35 KRI: ((wide smile)) hh hh
36 ATH: we are all ↑human that's- that's-
37 ↑that's- the mys[tery here]
38 NIC: [(so how d']you know)
39 KRI: ↑totally. ((shaking head))

It is worth noting that, similar to the first case we examined, the jocular tease in line 14 is discursively primed to be offensive, as the prior introductions have been oriented to as instances of downscaling. However, in this latter introduction the downscaling is much pronounced, as Krissy engages in playful dramatization (Goffman 1974) through a highly stylized form of mock Greek (Coupland 2001). The downscaling in this case is accomplished through the ethnic-national reference to “the Greek” and faux Greek accent, which invokes a less “prestigious” ethnic category, thereby othering Athena. The use of the vocative, “mate”, also contributes to this downscaling, and together with the faux Greek accent, constitutes an indexical reference to the stereotypical 1990s television character, “Con the Fruiterer” (Mitchell 1992), thereby also upscaling the recognizability of this stylization and its offensive implications for the other participants (and the overhearing television audience we might add).

The discursive mechanism in question is highlighted in extract (7).

- (7)
- | | | | |
|----|--------------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| 01 | VIC: we've got the Lebanese | [introduction 1] | } <i>downscaling</i> |
| 03 | VIC: the Persian | [introduction 2] | |
| 14 | KRI: and we've got the *Grreek mate* | [introduction 3] | |

We can also see that the offensiveness of this ostensibly joking introduction is discursively upscaled through a three-part listing (Jefferson 1991).

That this joking is treated as offensive becomes apparent through Athena's subsequent response in which she first denies that she speaks "like that" (line 21), thereby also orienting to Krissy's jocular tease as joking in the truth-in-jest sense (i.e. that she is indeed Greek). Athena then goes on to counter Krissy's ethnic ascription by doing ethnicity on the same scale previously invoked by Nicole in claiming she is "Lebanese-Swedish" (i.e. Athena is Greek but from Denmark, and so white like Nicole and Krissy). In lines 24-28, Athena invokes a spatiotemporal scale (i.e. her great-grandparents were from Denmark), thereby upscaling to northern European descent, but further modulates that time scale to justify her Greek cultural affiliation through making reference to their arrival "in the 1800s" (line 27). In invoking a higher order, historical scale of when her family came from Denmark, the moral universe where the discourse of the 'privileged White' circulates is delegitimised, thereby licensing this escalation in taking offence.

However, Krissy's subsequent response, indicates that Athena fails to depict Krissy's joking as transgressive or Krissy as a racist. The response cry (Goffman 1978) from Krissy (in line 29) is indexically loaded, signalling that she understands Athena has taken offence. However, Krissy next attempts to 'turn the tables' on Athena by teasing her that she is not a "real" Greek, thus downscaling her status with respect to other 'proper' Greeks, thereby repositioning Athena as not entitled to take offence (line 31).

The discursive contestation of the degree to which Athena is licensed to take offence is highlighted in extract (8).

- (8)
- | | | |
|----|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 14 | KRI: and we've got the *Grreek mate* | } <i>upscaling</i> |
| 24 | ATH: my great grandparents | |
| 25 | arrived in Athens | |
| 27 | in the eighteen hundreds but | |
| 28 | they were from Denmark originally | ← |
| 29 | KRI: wow | } <i>rescaling</i> |
| 31 | so you're not even Greek | |

The sequence in question concludes, when Athena avoids directly responding to that second tease by upscaling to a claim that all of them are human beings in an attempt to exit the conflict (lines 36-37). The use of the quasi-idiomatic phrase, "that's the mystery here", further underscores this attempt to close off the topic (Drew and Holt 1998).

In the second case of offensive joking we have examined we can thus observe how licensing the taking of offence can draw on different spatiotemporal scales, and that these scales may be interactionally hierarchized (e.g. "Greek" versus "Greek of Danish descent")

by the participants themselves. However, we can also observe that invoking scales does not necessarily guarantee success in licensing the taking of offence, nor in holding a speaker accountable for offensive joking, as participants can counter through further upscaling or rescaling such attempts to legitimize the joke or the taking of offence.

In the following case, we examine how taking offence *post facto* may also be licensed through invoking scales.

Case 3: "I've hired Indians"

The third case of offensive joking we examine is taken from a first conversation between an Australian (Nathan) and an American (Tammy) who are meeting for the first time. In analysing this case our aim is to demonstrate that (re)scaling is drawn upon in the same way when instigating offensive humour or licensing the taking of offence in first conversations. While it is evident that taking offence in a first conversation is regularly treated as a delicate social action (Author 1; Author 8), the taking of offence draws on the same sociopragmatic mechanisms that we have observed in other discourse contexts.

Leading into this excerpt, Tammy has been asking what Nathan does and he has responded that while he is working in advertising he'd like to get into something else. The excerpt begins when Tammy asks what else Nathan does with his time.

(9) CAAT: AmAus13 [3:53]
 01 TAM: what do you um. (0.4) what are you
 02 looking: to get into:
 03 (0.5)
 04 NAT: [tsk .hhh::]
 05 TAM: [else like] what else are you
 06 interested in.
 07 NAT: um: ↑at the moment I've got s-::
 08 oh I'm making an iphone app.
 09 (0.4)
 10 TAM: really? ha ha ha [°ha ha°]
 11 NAT: -> [well] when I
 12 **say that I mean (.) I've hired**
 13 **£Indians to make [it for me]=**
 14 TAM: [.hhhhh
 15 ha ha ha °£nice£ ha ha°

When Nathan responds that he's making an iPhone app (lines 7-8), Tammy responds, in line 10, with a marked response cry through which she signals surprise (Goffman 1978), along with laughter that modulates the potentially problematic implications of displaying surprise (Shaw, Hepburn and Potter 2013), thereby implying surprised appreciation that Nathan is doing this work (line 10). It is Nathan's joking deflection of this surprised appreciation through downgrading his own involvement in actually making the app (in lines 11-13), along with Tammy's immediate *in situ* response and her subsequent *post facto* response to this joking deflection, that is the the primary focus of our analysis here (cf. AUTHOR 1).

At first glance, Nathan's joking deflection appears to be designed to navigate between cross-cutting preferences in responding to compliments or appreciations, namely, the preference for agreement and preference for avoidance of self-praise (Pomerantz 1978). On the one hand, in clarifying that he is not actually making the apps himself, he avoids agreeing

with Tammy’s surprise appreciation, thereby aligning with the preference for avoiding self-praise. On the other hand, in prefacing that clarification with *well* (Heritage 2015) and *I mean* (Maynard 2013), along with delivering the clarification in smile voice that acknowledges but does not join in with Tammy’s prior laughter (Jefferson 2004), Nathan orients to his clarification as disaligning with the preference for agreement.

However, closer examination of the design of his turn indicates that scaling is also playing a critical role in the design of this joking self-deprecation, thereby priming it as potentially offensive. In deflecting Tammy’s surprised appreciation Nathan draws a contrast between himself as the ‘hirer’ and a non-specific reference to “Indians” as the actual ‘makers’, thereby downscaling himself on a scale of IT expertise. However, while this might appear to be an upscaling of the value of getting expert assistance from “Indians”, it is arguably an example of “banal interculturalism” (AUTHOR 20; cf. Billig 1995), that is, erasing individual differences through over-generalisation (e.g. all Indians are good at IT). The banal interculturalism that is perpetuated through this joking deflection is further exacerbated by the fact that this appears to be an instance of joking in the truth-in-jest sense, namely, that Nathan has indeed asked some IT experts who are Indian (either in Australia or based in India).

The discursive mechanism in question is highlighted in extract (10).

(10)

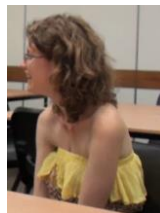
12 NAT: when I say that I mean I’ve hired
 13 Indians to make it for me

┌ *downscaling self/*
 └ *upsaling other*

That this joking is treated as offensive becomes apparent somewhat subtly in Tammy’s *in situ* response, as illustrated in a more detailed analysis of Tammy’s response below, which draws attention to shifts in her facial expressions and other non-verbal cues.

(11) CAAT: AmAus13 [4:03]

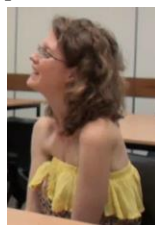
12 NAT: I mean (.) *I’ve hired



((*fig. 1: smiling)

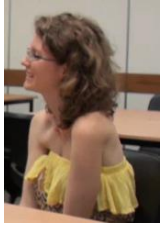
13 £Indians to make [it for me]=

14 TAM: [* . hhhhh



((*fig. 2: head back and shrug)

15 ha *ha ha °£nice£ ha ha °



((*fig. 3: grimace smile)

On the one hand, Tammy appears to be ostensibly affiliating with Nathan's jocular self-deprecation through a positive assessment ("nice"), laughter and smiling, thereby treating it as laughable and avoiding any orientation to its potentially offensive implications. On the other hand, however, while she initially responds with laughter and a positive assessment, her smile subsequently shifts from an open smile (figure 1) to somewhat of a grimaced or forced smile (figure 3). At the same time, she also moves her head back and shrugs (figure 2), thereby signalling disengagement with or resistance to the putative laughable (Debras 2017; Ford and Fox 2010). There is thus incongruence between what she says and her laughter, and the way in which the quality of her smile shifts she moves her head and shoulders. This incongruence is indicative of a tacit orientation on her part to the offensiveness of Nathan's joking deflection.

That Tammy indeed treats Nathan's joking as offensive is further attested in a subsequent interview between Tammy and the research assistant who helped set up and record that first conversation. Following prompting by Lara as to whether there was anything "out of the ordinary" or "rude" that happened in her interaction with Nathan, Tammy brings up Nathan's joke about getting "some Indians" to make the iPhone app.

(12) CAAT: AmAus13_Followup(Am) [19:26]

01 TAM: and then one thing that >it< kind of (0.4)
02 caught me: (.) a bit was he sai:d um: (0.2)
03 oh well I paid some (0.6) £Indians to do it?£
04 LAR: yeah.
05 TAM: .hh and like (1.1) I dunno I'm (.) fr- from
06 the States like we're very (0.7) multicultural
07 [and]
08 LAR: [>yeah] yeah yeah.<
09 (0.3)
10 TAM: u:m. (.) >like I know he was just joking< but
11 >that was something I was< like °↑oh (.) okay (.) so°
12 LAR: >ha ha ha ha ha<
13 TAM: maybe a bit offensive but
14 (.)
15 LAR: oh: right. (.) ha ha [ha]
16 TAM: [ye]ah=
17 LAR: =yeah

While Tammy claims she recognises that Nathan was "just joking" (line 10), she construes Nathan's joking deflection as something that "caught me" (line 2) and then explicitly assesses it as "maybe a bit offensive" (line 13), albeit with a highly granular design that orients to the taking of offence as a delicate social action. What is of note here though is the way in which

Tammy invokes scales in order to license her taking of offence in spite of the fact that she explicitly recognises Nathan's 'joking' intention.

Tammy first draws attention to Nathan's reference to "Indians" as something that "caught me" (lines 2-3). In so doing, she orients to the banal interculturalism of Nathan's reference to "Indians" which erases individual difference through his over-generalisation. In her reformulation of Nathan's joking deflection she also reports him saying, "oh well I paid some Indians to do it", with the *oh well*-prefacing attributing a somewhat flippant attitude on Nathan's part. Thus, while Nathan's joking deflection is ostensibly upscaling the value of Indian IT specialists, Tammy rescales this as downscaling their value (alluding to the tacit background assumption that Indians are well-known to be a source of cheap, well-qualified labour).

This rescaling is further nuanced by Tammy through invoking another spatiotemporal scale through her assertion that in the States "we're very multicultural" (line 6), which is implicitly contrasted with the situation in Australia. The scale being discursively invoked here is not one in which the US is more multicultural than Australia though, but rather is alluding to degrees of sensitivity about the kinds of references to ethnicity or race that can or should be made in a multicultural society. The implicit claim being made here by Tammy is that there is greater value or premium placed on racial sensitivity in the US.

We can observe once again, then, in this third case of offensive joking how scales once again trump claimed or attributed intentions on the part of speakers to have not been 'serious' or have been intending to offend others through that joking. It is also clear that licensing the taking of offence often draws on multiple spatiotemporal scales, which in some cases are interactionally hierarchized by those participants.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have offered an in-depth examination of the ways in which participants deploy or invoke scales to initiate or react to offensive humour. We have outlined the spatiotemporal attributes conversationalists implicitly or explicitly avail themselves of in taking offence, and how these allow the offended party to hold the moral high ground and treat the 'offender's' excuses or justifications that the 'joke' in question was not meant to be taken 'seriously' or any offence was 'unintended' as inadequate or redundant. The upshot of this is that scaling trumps claimed or attributed speaker intentions. We have argued that the sociopragmatic process of (re)scaling in the giving and taking of offence provides a principled account as to why speakers can be held accountable for offensive humour even when the speaker's intention to 'joke' is recognised by others. This arguably has implications for both the way we go about studying offence and for the theorisation of speaker meaning more broadly.

In the account of offence we have developed in our paper we have distinguished between scales as a 'product' and as a 'process'. The former captures the fundamentally scalar nature of offence (as product): both with respect to its magnitude or seriousness and the scope of who is taken to be offended. However, our argument has been that not only is offence a scalar phenomenon, but that instigating offence and licensing offence is accomplished through scaling (as process). The instigating and taking of offence in the case of offensive humour has been demonstrated to occur on multiple scales that are

interactionally hierarchized by those participants. Scales thus connect the local activity level, the discursive resources that are deployed, and the normative dimensions which are invoked by those discursive resources in licensing the taking of offence. Scale as a contrastive relation is of particular interest here as it allows us to move away from level and size to understand what difference, if any, spatiotemporal dimensions make in the process of taking offence and holding the moral high ground. In other words, it offers us a window into which scales may be at play and how they are assembled by the participants in ordered and layered ways, and to argue that scale mobilisation is fundamentally multifaceted - that is, scales are not parsimonious. They also enable us to capture the spread and influence with which participants react to offensive behaviour. In that way we argue they provide principled grounds for the observation that instances of purportedly unintended offence occasioned by joking are not always straightforwardly deniable.

Scales also provide principled grounds for the observation that perceptions of the degree of offensiveness of particular instances of conversational joking and thus reactions to them can vary considerably across different people. For some the conversational humour in question may be considered deeply offensive, while for others it may be dismissed as not at all offensive or somewhere between. Given discursive scaling is arguably motivated by the different life experiences of individuals, their emotional and moral dispositions, and other sometimes quite inchoate aspects of how we come to perceive and evaluate the conduct of others, such variability is perhaps hardly surprising. It suggests, however, that scaling as a discursive process undertaken by recipients as they evaluate instances of conversational humour as offensive (or not) has important implications for how we go about modelling the cognitive processes that enable such evaluations. There is clearly much more to offensive joking than simply attributing offensive intentions to speakers.

Our analysis thus further demonstrates that what a speaker is taken to mean in interaction goes well beyond the intentions that may be attributed to them or the veracity (or otherwise) of information to include other moral concerns, such as social rights, obligations, responsibilities, and so on (AUTHOR 7). This aligns with calls for a commitment-based or deontic conceptualisation of speaker meaning that is grounded in social action (AUTHOR 7), and an interactional account of the cognitive-discursive processes by which such meanings are accomplished (Elder 2021, 2024; AUTHOR 4, 5). There is much more work to be done though, for sure, in further developing a commitment-based or deontic conceptualisation of meaning that complements extant work on speaker meaning as emerging through cognitive processes. Our view is that studying phenomena like offensive humour provides us with a useful means of furthering our understanding of the complexities of the sociopragmatic processes that lie at the heart of speaker meaning.

It is important to acknowledge, of course, that our analysis has been limited to instances of offensive joking in English (in particular Australian English) in a limited range of contexts. It is apparent from research to date that offence is a culturally and situationally specific phenomenon, and so more work needs to be undertaken to explore the extent to which our account of scales can be brought to bear in analyses of offensive humour in other contexts, languages and cultures. Yet despite the need for further work, our hope is that this approach nevertheless further inspires researchers aiming to understand the discursive manifestations and cognitive mechanisms involved in taking offence.

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