Humor Scholarship and TESOL: Applying Findings and Establishing a Research Agenda

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Research in the areas of second language (L2) pragmatics and of conversational humor has increased in recent decades, resulting in a strong base of knowledge from which applied linguists can draw information for teaching purposes and undertake future research. Yet, whereas empirical findings in L2 pragmatics are beginning to find their way into textbooks, recommendations and activities, intended to integrate humor into the L2 classroom with the goal of increasing learners' proficiency in the use and understanding of L2 humor, remain based on intuition alone. Despite parallel developments in L2 pragmatics and humor studies, the two areas of scholarship have largely ignored each other, with humor scholars focusing mainly on native language uses of humor, and applied linguists avoiding the study of humor by L2 users. The purpose of this article is to bring these two fields together by outlining some major linguistic and sociolinguistic findings of humor scholarship, discussing how these understandings might help us integrate humor into the L2 classroom in a principled manner, and suggesting directions for future research on humor and L2 learners.
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The past 20 years or so have seen extensive growth in our understanding of second language (L2) pragmatic use and development; yet, despite recognition of the importance of L2 pragmatics in second language acquisition (SLA), as evidenced by the broadening research agenda, the study of the use and understanding of L2 humor has been largely neglected within this paradigm. This is surprising, because many English as a second language (ESL) instructors, in an effort to make learning enjoyable and to help their students understand particular grammatical, lexical, or cultural aspects of English, have turned to humor. In addition, the difficulties even advanced L2 users often have in understanding and creating humor—see the description by Vega (1990) of humor as the fifth component of

communicative competence—have also prompted teachers to explain and incorporate humor in an attempt to help their students overcome this challenge. The Web offers hundreds of sites containing jokes and humor for ESL students and teachers to aid in both of these types of endeavors, and scholars have regularly provided recommendations for the use of humor in the language classroom (e.g., Berwald, 1992; Deneire, 1995; G. Holmes, 1980; Medgyes, 2001, 2002; Richard, 1975; Schmitz, 2002; Trachtenberg, 1979; Vizmuller, 1980; see also Bell, 2009a, for a critique of many of these recommendations).

Research in intercultural and interlanguage (IL) pragmatics has led to a new understanding of the importance of teaching and learning L2 norms of use. Although much work remains, it is generally accepted that explicit instruction in pragmatics can aid in the learning of both production and perception of speech acts (for reviews see Alcón Soler & Martínez-Flor, 2008; Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Rose, 2005). Within this growing body of research, descriptions of pragmatic behavior have become richer. Having expanded rapidly since the 1970s, sociolinguistically based humor research has reached a similar point, in that descriptions of the ways in which humor is used in interaction are now much more detailed. These research findings should inform ESL textbook writers (cf. Cohen, 2005). Yet, although the integration of the findings of pragmatics research into ESL textbooks is occurring, albeit slowly (see, e.g., Boxer & Pickering, 1995; Kakiuchi, 2005; Vellenga, 2004), the substantial body of humor research remains largely ignored, with the majority of the efforts by ESL instructors to teach cultural norms of humor usage being based on intuition.[1] With our expanding recognition of what authentic language use entails, as well as the growing interest in the possible facilitative role of language play in L2 acquisition (e.g., Bell, 2005; Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Broner & Tarone, 2001; Bushnell, 2009; Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005; Cook, 2000; Lantolf, 1997; Lytra, 2007; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007; Tarone, 2000; Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2007), this seems an appropriate time to review the findings of humor scholars that may be of use for L2 research and pedagogy.

[1] One anonymous reviewer questioned the need to teach the norms of humorous interaction, suggesting that "much of what would be taught in a 'humorous interaction' curriculum would have to be taught anyway for other non-humorous purposes." Although this may be the case with regard to linguistic and cultural information required for humor, as I hope this review shows, humor scholarship now provides information particular to humor, such as ways in which it is contextualized, how and with whom joking relationships may be formed, and common responses to various types of humor. With this information, just as we teachers now make use of research findings to teach the norms of other types of interaction (e.g., academic) or speech acts (e.g., complimenting), we can begin to do the same with humor, a communicative mode that is pervasive.

The purpose of this paper is, thus, to outline some major findings of humor research and discuss how these understandings might help teachers integrate humor into the L2 classroom in a principled manner, with the goal of raising learners' awareness of the forms and functions of L2 humor, and possibly increasing their comprehension and, if they so choose, production of playful L2 interactions.[2] Humor is a worthy topic for L2 scholars and teachers because it is pervasive in interaction, but its complexity makes it challenging for L2 users (cf. Vega, 1990). Learners recognize this and often express frustration, as well as a desire to better understand humor. In addition, because the classroom is a safe site for experimentation, learners can discuss humor without fear of being positioned as "no fun" and attempt it without worrying about its reception. Finally, as noted earlier, the potential of humorous language play to facilitate language acquisition requires a closer look at this type of communication (see Bell, 2009a, for greater elaboration on reasons to address humor in the L2 classroom).

Because of space considerations, as well as the fact that the scholarly literature on L2 pragmatics is more familiar to most readers, this review focuses on humor. In addition, it is important to note that humor research is broad and highly interdisciplinary, and the findings presented here represent only a small fraction of the work being done. I have selected what I consider to be the most relevant work for applied linguists, ESL teacher educators, and ESL instructors. In doing so the focus is largely on the linguistic, and especially sociolinguistic studies, that complement much of the scholarship in L2 pragmatics. In each section I review major findings, and, where possible, discuss these findings in relation to L2 learners. Unfortunately, the paucity of research into L2 humor makes many of these discussions both brief and tentative, thus this paper should also be read as an outline of a research agenda for humor in applied linguistics.

WHAT MAKES IT *HUMOR*?

The intrigue, as well as the frustration, humor holds for many L2 learners may lie in its simultaneous universality and particularity. On the one hand, people everywhere laugh. Humor is generally recognized as a way of establishing and maintaining friendly relationships (although this is certainly not always the way it functions, as we will see below), something that newcomers are often eager to do. At the same time, this common tool often becomes unusable, in that its particular instantiation

[2] As noted in the previous paragraph, accounts of the ways in which language play may facilitate SLA are growing and should soon be in a position to provide guidelines for teachers who wish to draw upon humor to help their learners acquire L2 syntax and lexis.

within a culture makes it inaccessible to learners. Certain forms of joking, such as the *knock knock* jokes of American children, may be unfamiliar, as might the specific language or cultural information used to create humor. Whereas it is certainly possible to make friends without a keen grasp of L2 humor, its cultural specificity is an additional attraction for many learners, in that understanding humor is often thought to be key to a deeper understanding of a culture. As anthropologist Edward Hall (1959/1973) described, "if you can learn the humor of a people and really control it you know that you are also in control of nearly everything else" (p. 52; see also Cook, 2000).

Although humor varies a great deal among cultures and individuals, scholars are working to develop a theory able to explain how diverse phenomena can all be classified as amusing. The literature is vast and multidisciplinary, and those new to the field would do well to consult Raskin's (2008) edited collection of reviews of humor research, which includes chapters surveying developments in psychology, sociology, literature, folklore, translation studies, and communication, as well as linguistic perspectives not reviewed here, all relevant to TESOL practitioners. In addition, Morreall (1983) and Martin (2007) provided excellent overviews of the major perspectives, whereas further reviews that focus on linguistic theories can be found in Attardo (1994), Ritchie (2004), and Dynel (2009a). Important contributions to the understanding of humor are also currently coming from cognitive linguistics (e.g., Brône, Feyaerts, & Veale, 2006, and other articles in that special issue; Giora, 1991), as well as neuro- and psycholinguistics (e.g., Coulson & Kutas, 2001; Uekermann, Daum, & Channon, 2007; Vaid, 2000; Vaid, Hull, Heredia, Gerkens, & Martinez, 2003). Relevance theoretical (e.g., Yus, 2003, 2008) and (neo-)Gricean (e.g., Attardo, 1993; Dynel, 2008; Wilson, 2006) analyses are among the perspectives from pragmatics that are being explored. However, given limited space, I focus on what is currently the dominant linguistic account, known as the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH).

The General Theory of Verbal Humor

Theories of humor have long been based on the idea of incongruity, with humor deriving from the resolution of that incongruity or ambiguity. The GTVH (Attardo, 2001; Attardo & Raskin, 1991; for critiques of the theory, see Brône & Feyaerts, 2004; Dynel, 2009b; Oring, 2009; Ritchie, 2004) follows in this tradition. The theory posits six knowledge resources which are hierarchical, with each restricting the possibilities for the one following:

Briefly and in reverse order, *language* refers to the actual phonetic, lexical, morphosyntactic, and pragmatic choices that are made in creating the humorous utterance. *Narrative strategy* is used to describe what others might refer to as genre, although it also operates at a level below genre to describe the different forms that say, a riddle can take (e.g., question-answer or knock-knock). *Target* is an optional knowledge resource that identifies what is more commonly referred to as the butt of the joke. Targets may be actual individuals, groups of people, or even a fictional entity. *Situation* refers to the setting, characters, and activity in the joke. *Logical mechanism* is the means by which the humor is created, for example, through analogy, as it resolves the incongruity. This is the least understood and most difficult to identify of the knowledge resources. At the top of the hierarchy, *script oppositions* are not only the most basic and abstract of the knowledge resources but are also key to understanding what makes a text funny and the most likely to create difficulties for L2 learners, and thus are discussed in greater detail.

As most readers will recognize, each word in a speaker's vocabulary is associated with a script, which is "a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it" (Raskin, 1985, p. 81). Scripts, or schema, represent a speaker's knowledge of the world; therefore, although many scripts will be shared among members of a particular community, some will be restricted to a smaller group, perhaps the family, and will reflect individual experience. For example, the word *dog* may evoke a range of related ideas, depending on an individual's experiences, including fur, walking, fleas, rabies, feeding, or biting, to name a few of the possibilities. For those who grew up with a dog as their family pet, the word may also evoke scripts that will be familiar only to those who also knew the dog well. For instance, dog may be associated with a specific name, or an unusual trick or behavior of the pet. Scripts are fairly stable, but do develop and change with experience. For humor based on a particular script to succeed, the hearer must have that script available for humor. For example, a joke involving a car accident may not be found amusing by someone who was recently involved in one.

Attardo and Raskin (1991) refer to scripts as "an interpretation of the text of a joke" (p. 308). For a text to be humorous, it is thought to be compatible with two scripts, which are opposed to each other in some way. Consider the following joke:

> A man and a woman who had never met before found themselves in the same sleeping carriage of a train. After the initial embarrassment they both went to sleep, the woman on the top bunk, the man on the lower. In the middle of the night, the woman leaned over, woke the man and said, "I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm awfully cold and I was wondering if you could possibly get me another blanket?" The man leaned out and, with a glint in his eye, said, "I've got a better idea — just for tonight, let's pretend we're married." The woman thought for a moment. "Why not," she giggled. "Great," he replied, "Get your own damn blanket!"

This text exhibits an opposition commonly found in canned jokes between *sex* and *no sex*. The reader is initially led to expect that the man is suggesting that the two share a bed, with the implication that they will have sex—sometimes euphemistically referred to as *marital relations*. This impression is reinforced by the "glint in his eye" and the woman's flirtatious giggle. The final line, however, reveals an alternative conception of marriage, in which sex is off the table, although intimacy remains in the directness of the address. The man seems to have been imagining a long-established and perhaps unhappy marriage, in which sex has long ceased to play a role and bickering predominates. The glint in his eye might now be read as malicious rather than mischievous.

The opposition in the train berth joke is likely to be widely accessible, given the common human experiences of sex and the changes that occur in long-term relationships. Many script oppositions, however, require specific cultural knowledge to appreciate, as in the following excerpt from Jay Leno's monologue on the *Tonight Show*:

> Of course, a lot of famous sound bites will be remembered for this campaign. There were some good ones. Barack Obama saying, "We are the change that we seek." John McCain saying, "I would rather lose an election than lose a war." Sarah Palin saying, "Do you have this in size 6?" (Leno, Coen, & Ross, 2008)

Here the opposition is between normal and abnormal (as well as real and unreal) political behavior. Whereas someone unfamiliar with the names mentioned in this joke might be able to deduce that the quote attributed to Sarah Palin represents deviant behavior, the humor would be difficult to retrieve without the knowledge that she was thought to be a poor and rather shallow candidate. More importantly, the joke indexes the large sum that was spent by the Republican party at expensive stores on new clothes for her. It would also be difficult for an outsider to know

that the first two examples are actual candidate quotes, while Palin's is invented.

In conversation, humor is often created when one interlocutor sees a script and an obvious trigger in place and must only create a text with an opposite script. This occurs in the following example when Speaker B exploits the phonological similarity between *farmer* and *father* to recontextualize Speaker A's utterance as prayer:

> Participant A: Our farmer
> Participant B: Who art in heaven (Chiaro, 1992, p. 116)

The relative ease with which puns are formed explains why they are so often derided, but the less obvious the script opposition, usually the more amusing the resulting joke, as demonstrated by this last example (Raskin, 1985, p. 141). This understanding helps explain why L2 learners often find themselves most left out of the very humor that results in the greatest laughter from native speakers, as these tend to be constructed from more obscure scripts, or to have less apparent links between the trigger and the scripts.

Although the details of the GTVH are not necessary for every student, many do wish to understand why certain comments are funny to others. Practice identifying opposing scripts, beginning with humor from their first language (L1) and proceeding to simple, then more obscure examples in the L2, may aid this process. This, in turn, could result in rich and rewarding discussions of cultural conceptions of appropriacy, because humor often plays upon transgressions of social norms, thus revealing them. The potential benefit to learners of such study remains an empirical question; however, teachers who engage their classes in explorations of L2 humor should be aware of the theory. The GTVH explains the mechanism through which humor is created, but to fully understand humor, its topics, forms, functions, and use within specific contexts must also be examined.

TOPICS OF HUMOR

Given an appropriate context, virtually any topic may be exploited for humorous ends. Of course, some do occur more frequently than others, and in many cases these preferred topics may cross cultural boundaries. Driessen (2004) suggested that the following six areas are most commonly used for humor around the world: sex or gender, age, language, politics, religion, and ethnicity. This *universality* is deceiving, however, because each culture differently defines what falls into each category, as well as which aspects are available for joking, and how. For

instance, in some cultures it is common for two men to hold hands, but for many in the United States, who tend to see relatively restricted physical contact between heterosexual men as appropriate, this behavior, seen as nonsexual by its participants, may be amusing or even prompt teasing about homosexuality. As this example suggests, this aspect of humor is further complicated by the fact that the subjects exploited for humor are generally those that are uncomfortable for members of a particular culture, if not taboo. A perhaps less obvious example from U.S. culture is provided by Oring (2003), who traced the way that the overt sentimentality of the Victorian era gave way by the mid-twentieth century to an avoidance of any such displays of earnest feeling. As such *corny* displays have come to be viewed with embarrassment, these emotions instead find their expression in humor.

This suggests a minefield for L2 learners who hope to use and understand humor. How are they to learn appropriate ways of approaching these topics humorously? In fact, research on humor between native and nonnative speakers suggests that perhaps learners need not worry. Humor seems to be one area that native speaking interlocutors recognize as difficult for L2 learners, and one study showed that potentially offensive attempts at humor by nonnative speakers were ignored or laughed off. In addition, both native and nonnative speakers avoided taboo topics. Thus, accommodation by both parties helped them avoid conflict (Bell, 2007a). Although this does not mean that L2 learners will be forgiven any social blunders in their attempts at humor, it does suggest that they may not cause the same kind of rift that might occur had the comment come from a native speaker. The work of Norrick (2007; see also Habib, 2008) also suggested a way that L2 learners can construct humor, despite a lack of familiarity with topics considered appropriate for such treatment. Rather than attempting to follow the norms of the target community, learners can emphasize their outsider status, exploiting linguistic and cultural differences for humor. In addition, because the precise nature of taboos even within the same domain differs, L2 users may in fact feel freer to create humor on topics that are considered taboo in their L2, because they do not carry the same "baggage" as those who were socialized into that community (Vaid, 2006).

Although it is possible to find some scholarly accounts of the humor preferences of various cultures (e.g., Davis, 2006; Mizushima & Stapleton, 2006; Ruch & Forabosco, 1996; Ruch, Ott, Accoce, & Bariaud, 1991; Ziv, 1988), more often teachers encounter descriptions that seem to be largely based on personal impressions (e.g., Lewis, 2005). The paucity of research into the topics of humor does not allow for teachers to provide guidelines in this area for L2 students. Instead, at present, the six areas named by Driessen (2004) could be used as a way of opening discussion and as a basis for students to begin their own

ethnographic research into humor topics in the L1 and L2 communities to which they have access. By collecting and analyzing the topics of humor that they hear in their daily lives, L2 learners can begin to identify differences in the subjects that are treated playfully and the specific ways in which this is done in order to compare these to their L1. Applied linguists with an interest in humor can conduct such studies as well, complementing them with large-scale explorations.

CONTEXTUALIZATION CUES

A more extensively researched area is that of the ways in which humor is framed in conversation. Laughter, although not always indicative of a playful key, is one cue that has long been recognized as contextualizing an utterance as humorous. Work in conversation analysis has demonstrated more precisely how this is done. Jefferson (1979) showed how laughter is used to invite laughter. By placing a small laugh near the end of an utterance, a speaker indicates that laughter is an appropriate response on the part of the hearer. Glenn (1989) built upon Jefferson's work by showing how, in multiparty situations, the preference is for someone other than the joker or teaser to initiate the first laugh, perhaps as a way of allowing the speaker to avoid the self-praise inherent in laughing at one's own joke.

Other contextualization cues for humor include repetition, unusual or exaggerated prosody, marked linguistic forms, such as the use of the third person to refer to someone who is present (Straehle, 1993), and code, style, or register switching (Holmes, 2000; Kotthoff, 1999; Norrick, 2007). Tannen (1984) noted that the use of another's voice, especially if unmarked, can signal humor. This might be a recognizable social voice, such as a mother, or it might be an imitation of a specific individual known to those present. Humorous intent is also sometimes conveyed explicitly, as when an interlocutor notes, "I'm teasing you" in order to avoid being misunderstood. Humorous anecdotes are frequently prefaced with a comment such as, "It was so funny." Other indications that a comment is intended as humorous are nonverbal, for example smiling and smirking, or exaggerated facial expressions. Attardo, Eisterhold, Hay, & Poggi (2003) described what they refer to as "blank face" as an important marker of irony; thus the lack of a cue may also signal certain types of humor.

Recognizing that a play frame has been put into place is the first step toward being able to appreciate and participate in the play, and L2 learners sometimes do not achieve this. Practice analyzing actual examples of humorous interaction, noting how it can be identified as such, may help learners cope with it better. Because precise wording and

fleeting nonverbal cues signal humorous intent, videotaped examples will best serve this purpose. With regard to compliments and responses, Rose (2001) found that data from films represented the forms found in naturally occurring speech fairly accurately. If similar patterns are seen with regard to humor, films will be a rich source of information for L2 learners. It is important to note, however, that research must be done to confirm this and that the content, types, and functions of humor in films are less likely to be representative.

Research into contextualization cues for humor must also examine the extent to which particular cues are actually used and, as with the blank face for irony, used with particular forms. The nonverbal examples suggest that the use of videotaped examples is important for analyzing the means by which humor is contextualized. Cross-cultural research on contextualization cues is an area that has not yet been examined, but would be of great help for pedagogy. Also with regard to ESL learners researchers should investigate to what extent (mis)identification of contextualization cues actually contributes to (mis)identification of humor.

FORMS OF HUMOR

Many taxonomies of humor exist, from collections of folk and literary categorizations, to those developed through observation of interaction (e.g., Attardo, 1994; Chiaro, 1992; Dynel, 2009a; Kotthoff, 2007; Long & Graesser, 1988; Nash, 1985). Examples of types of humor commonly found on these lists include jokes, narratives or anecdotes, one-liners, puns, riddles, irony, banter, hyperbole, teases, pranks, wordplay, mockery, and parody. These taxonomies may lend insight into the ways that a particular group perceives and classifies humor and, as such, they can serve as useful starting points for describing and comparing humor cross-culturally. However, as Norrick (1993, 2003) has noted, typologies do not always reflect the forms that humor takes in interaction. The canned jokes that have often been used by humor scholars to understand the mechanism of humor are actually rare, at least in most American discourse. Instead, in conversational humor, blends of humorous types are common and even develop from one another. Thus, an ironic pun from one context may be recycled as an anecdote in another, with the pun as its punch line. The development of such intertextual links is, in fact, an important means of creating humor.

At present, very little research has been done investigating the forms that particular types of humor take in interaction (although see Dynel, 2009a; Kotthoff, 2007). Part of this is likely because of the very broad

types of and ways that amusing utterances can be constructed in conversation, compared, for instance, with the relatively pithy, easily identifiable, and (hence) well-researched compliment. Given the difficulty in specifying forms of humor, teachers may do better to work with a broad set of features as a heuristic for describing humor. Cook (2000) provided a list of such features that can be used to identify the broader category of language play (note that nonlinguistic humor is excluded here):

> *linguistic form:* patterning of forms, emphasis on exact wording, repetition
> *semantics:* indeterminate meaning (e.g., ambiguity or obscure words), vital or important subject matter, reference to an alternate reality, inversion of language/reality relation
> *pragmatics:* focus upon performance, use in congregation and/or intimate interaction, creation of solidarity and/or antagonism and competition, no direct usefulness, preservation or inversion of the social order, enjoyment and/or value (adapted from Cook, 2000, p. 123).

This set of characteristics overlaps with the ways that humor is contextualized. It also demonstrates that linguistic humor can involve play with forms or meanings and may provide a useful heuristic for students' own classification and descriptions of humor, raising their awareness of the many forms it can take.

Despite—or perhaps even because of—the nebulous and diverse nature of humor forms, it is an area worth discussing with L2 learners. As descriptions of spontaneous conversational humor become available, these can be used for pedagogical purposes. For instance, a rare example of such an account is found in Winchatz and Kozin's (2008) description of what they refer to as the comical hypothetical in which an amusing imaginary scenario is co-constructed (this has also been referred to as joint fictionalization [Kotthoff, 1999] or fantasy sequences [Hay, 2001]). This research provides specific information that might be used for instructional purposes, for example, showing that such sequences are often introduced with, "Imagine . . . ." These researchers also note that, although there is no folk name to describe this form of humor, it was readily recognizable as a genre by their informants. Thus, both naming types of humor, as noted above, and identifying types of humor for which there is no agreed upon name, may help students identify similarities and differences between humor in English and their native language. This might be particularly helpful for humor that is difficult to identify. Irony, for example, seems to be overlooked by ESL students (perhaps because of the manner in which it is sometimes contextualized, as noted above), who then believe that it is rarely used by Americans (Bell, 2005, 2007b; Nelms, 2002). In addition, some

humorous forms may be easier for L2 users to engage with and create. For example, in examining the humor of four bilingual women, I found that narratives were the most common form, and hypothesized that this might be because they allowed the speakers to obtain and hold the floor, unlike other forms of humor which often require quick responses (Bell, 2007c).

Recognition of the forms that humor can take may lead to greater awareness of what is going on in conversation and fruitful intercultural discussions and thus learning of culture. However, in actual interaction interlocutors do not work toward naming speech acts, but toward achieving communication and understanding intentions. Thus, this avenue may be of limited use, although research must be done to learn to what extent discussion of humorous forms can be beneficial to learners.

FUNCTIONS OF HUMOR

In contrast to the previous two topics, research on the functions of humor is abundant. At the micro level, humor can be used for any type of communication. One can use humor to order steaks done medium-rare, to demand silence, or to advise a friend to avoid a particular person. Some functions, however, are more common and better documented than others. Martin (2007) classified them into three categories: "(1) cognitive and social benefits of the positive emotion of mirth, (2) uses of humor for social communication and influence, and (3) tension relief and coping" (p. 15). I briefly examine each of these in turn.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the main function of humor is generally thought to be to amuse and entertain interlocutors. However, in doing so it plays a vital role in the regulation of human relationships, because humor establishes affiliation and maintains and strengthens social bonds (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997; Hay, 1994, 2000; Holmes, 2000; Norrick, 1993; Straehle, 1993). Through it one is able to identify common ground on which to build relationships (Norrick, 2003). These positive functions of humor are those that are most apparent, and also the reason why L2 users often feel frustrated or isolated when they are unable to participate in the humor that is used around them. This function, thus, likely needs little more than a mention in the classroom.

Of course, as anyone who has been the butt of a cruel joke knows, humor is not always employed for such happy ends. Although sometimes painful, aggressive forms of humor play an important role in regulating the behavior of group members. A tease offers a powerful means of

expressing negative feelings or criticisms gently or indirectly (Holmes, 2000; Jorgensen, 1996; Yedes, 1996). This is because the negative message that has been communicated is easily deniable as *just joking*. For the powerless, cutting humor can be a way of challenging authority, as studies of humor in the workplace have demonstrated (Holmes & Marra, 2002c; Plester & Orams, 2008). Both aggressive and soothing forms of humor are important for negotiating individual and group identities and, in doing so, socializing new or potential members to group norms (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997; Fine & de Soucey, 2005; Holmes & Marra, 2002a, 2002b; Wennerstrom, 2000). Of course, creation of an in-group requires an out-group as well, and humor can be used to exclude and marginalize certain groups or individuals.

Nonnative speakers, especially those of primary or secondary school age, may be particularly susceptible to humor used for these functions and may find it difficult to develop appropriate ways of responding to such treatment. Because humor is often associated with the positive functions mentioned above, the social messages its speaker may be intending to send can get lost. This may be particularly true for L2 learners who, struggling with the language itself, may not have the processing capacity available to quickly determine meaning behind a gentle barb, or for whom a smile may be more salient than the tone of voice or choice of words that contradicts it. These functions, thus, are worth addressing in the classroom, perhaps by using humor gleaned from film or television and having learners identify what messages it sends and later moving on to learners' own data. Being able to identify the message is crucial to constructing an appropriate response, which may require defending oneself against an unfair charge.

Finally, humor is a powerful means of coping with stress. Jefferson (1984) initially noted the odd presence of laughter in *troubles-talk*. Although the person with the problem laughed, the listener did not. This allowed the speaker to present her- or himself positively, as someone persevering under adversity. Humor regularly shows up in stressful conditions such as following a medical trauma (Heath & Blonder, 2003), in demanding workplaces (Pogrebin & Poole, 1988; Yedes, 1996), and in challenging educational contexts (M. Booth-Butterfield, S. Booth-Butterfield, & Wanzer, 2007). Although I am not aware of any research that has examined this aspect of humor for L2 learners, it is likely that humor can be used to alleviate the stress of communicating in a new language, which for some entails living in a foreign country as well. It is worth mentioning this function, because, as noted above, the very cultural and linguistic differences that L2 learners are encountering can also be fodder for the construction of humor.

The function of humor is often related to its form, and this relationship should be elucidated for L2 learners. Teases, for example,

are probably more likely to contain a criticism than are narratives or canned jokes, and are thus used to regulate group behavior more directly. It is thus crucial for learners to be aware of the messages that might be contained beyond the humor. It is not, however, enough to draw simple lines linking particular forms of humor with specific functions, because meanings are constructed in situated social contexts. Again, collection and analysis of examples may help to raise learners' awareness of these aspects of L2 humor.

HUMOR AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Status, role relationships, interlocutor familiarity, and setting all play an important part in determining who can joke with whom. Given the ambiguity of much humor, and thus the potential danger for misunderstandings, it is not surprising that some studies have found that, in hierarchical relationships, little joking is directed upward in the ranks. An early study of humor during staff meetings in a mental hospital (Coser, 1960) found this pattern to be adhered to quite strictly. Studies of business negotiations show similar patterns, wherein the person with the upper hand laughs more and initiates more shared laughter (Adelswärd & Öberg, 1998; Mulkay, Clark, & Pinch, 1993). Other studies, however, have found less extreme results, suggesting that familiarity between interlocutors may allow joking to be directed at superiors (Goldberg, 1997; Seckman & Couch, 1989) and that group values may allow joking to take place in both directions (Pogrebin & Poole, 1988; Yedes, 1996). Holmes (2000), as well, noted the prevalence of this pattern in her data, and added the observation that, in modern workplaces where it is not appropriate to issue direct orders to subordinates, humor is a necessary tool in softening requests.

In addition, given the possibility discussed above of humor's having both affiliative and disaffiliative functions, the type of humor being used strongly influences to whom it can be directed (cf. Seckman & Couch, 1989). Thus, whereas humor that creates and affirms solidarity may be directed at both equals and superiors, humor that increases social distance must be used with greater care. Using data from two New Zealand workplaces, Holmes and Marra (2002c) showed how leaders and those under them draw on humor that creates social distance to express unpalatable ideas in an acceptable manner, thus maintaining a congenial working environment. Supervisors often use humor as a means of maintaining power. Rather than issue explicit orders or direct criticisms of an employee's work, they soften the force of their utterance by framing it playfully. For their part, workers can challenge

expectations or orders through what Holmes and Marra referred to as *subversive* humor, which they found is more common in the workplace than in casual settings. Thus, humor becomes an important tool for doing politeness in more formal situations (see also Holmes, 2000, 2006; Holmes & Marra, 2002a; Holmes & Schnurr, 2005).

Humor occurs much more frequently when social distance is low, such as in informal gatherings of friends, than it does in more formal environments, such as the workplace (Holmes, 2000; Norrick, 1993). In contrast to the formal contexts, humor in friendship groups regularly breaks expectations of conventionally polite behavior. Playful insults, stinging teases, and other forms of what Hay (1994) referred to as *jocular abuse* are common and actually index the intimacy of the relationship (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997; Kotthoff, 1996). This is also attributed to humor's important function, as discussed earlier, as a marker and creator of group identities.

However, even in such casual, friendly settings, restrictions on who may joke with whom may still hold. For example, Straehle (1993) examined the humor employed by three adults, two of whom were meeting for the first time through their good friend, the third adult. She found that a striking pattern in the teasing occurred. Despite a generally jovial atmosphere in which a great deal of laughter occurred, the two new acquaintances directed their humorous barbs exclusively at their mutual acquaintance, rather than at each other. Although they had learned a great deal about each other through their mutual friend, their roles were technically as strangers. Social distance was therefore considerable and this was reflected in their patterned use of humor. This finding should not be taken to imply, however, that humor is not likely to be found among strangers. Humor may be pervasive in the conversation of some new acquaintances, but in these cases it is likely that joking will be based on general topics, or the butt of the joke will be absent (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997).

As with the teaching of any sociopragmatic behavior, the situation is complex and there can be no easy prescriptions for students, who instead must engage in activities designed to raise their awareness of the links between social context and language use. Nonnativeness creates an additional dimension conducive to critical analysis. Adelswärd and Öberg's (1998) study of laughter in international negotiations found that, despite reporting some difficulty understanding joking interactions, nonnative speakers who had the upper hand in business negotiations produced more joint laughter and joking than their native speaking counterparts, and this despite their "wavering" (p. 425) proficiency. Thus, power may trump linguistic competence. In addition, studies of humor in the interaction of supportive or egalitarian native speaking–nonnative speaking interlocutors also show successful

participation by L2 users (Cheng, 2003; Davies, 2003). Yet, the ascription of nonnative speaking status can frequently be marginalizing, and this has effects on learners' ability to participate in humorous interaction (Bell, 2006; Rogerson-Revell, 2007). Bell (2006) showed that native speakers may in fact (unintentionally) exclude nonnative speakers through the very adjustments that they make to their conversation with the intention of helping the L2 user participate. In addition, forms of humor used for particular functions by native speakers may not be available in the same way for learners or have the same effects. For instance, whereas self-deprecating humor can serve as a means of protecting one's positive face, one study I conducted showed that such humor was avoided by the four women, who instead often used self-aggrandizing humor. To explain this, I suggested that, for those who are already at risk of marginalization, self-deprecating humor may be a dangerous strategy for the presentation of self (Bell, 2007c).

The findings on humor in intercultural and native speaker–nonnative speaker interaction are sparse, but they do offer initial insight into the phenomenon. Areas for future investigation, both by language learners for class projects and by researchers, include when and how L2 users are able to gain access to and participate in humor, the ways in which different types of humor used by nonnative speakers are perceived, and how different types function in a variety of contexts. For such research to be done, the ways in which the construction of power relations and identities intersect with humor must also be considered. In addition, humor in learner–learner and lingua franca interactions should be examined.

HUMOR COMPREHENSION AND RESPONSES TO HUMOR

The ability to appropriately engage in playful interaction requires, according to Hay's (2001) model, that the humor first be recognized as such, then understood, and finally appreciated. In addition, she noted that an expression of appreciation also implicates agreement with any message contained in the humor, although recipients can use strategies to distance themselves from an undesirable message. For example, laughter following a tease directed at a friend might suggest a positive response at all four levels. Laughter accompanied by a chastising comment, such as "that's not true!" would suggest that, although the jibe had been recognized, understood, and appreciated, the hearer was not in agreement with what was communicated through it. Full support of humor is often demonstrated by adding more humor, to create an extended sequence (Holmes & Marra, 2002a). Certain types of humor

may be more conducive to this sort of response than others. For instance, puns (Chiaro, 1992; Norrick, 1993) and fantasy sequences (Hay, 2001; Kotthoff, 1999) seem to encourage further humor of the same type, whereas irony does not regularly elicit more irony (Attardo, 2001; Eisterhold, Attardo, & Boxer, 2006). Playing along is also not a common reaction to teasing, which tends instead to elicit a serious response defending oneself against the (playful) accusation contained in the tease (Drew, 1987; Hay, 1994).

There is some pressure on listeners to at least indicate their recognition and understanding of an attempt at humor, because doing so constructs them as competent interlocutors, and even an utterance that is not found amusing will often receive laughter in addition to a negatively evaluative comment (Bell, 2009b). Although native speakers may be able to communicate their disapproval or lack of amusement with silence or a minimal response, some work suggests that these strategies may backfire for nonnative speakers, who are instead perceived as not having understood the joke (Bell, 2006). Whereas smiles and laughter may suffice when humor is appreciated, where failed humor is concerned it may be useful for L2 users to learn how to use responses such as sarcastic comments (e.g., "you're funny") or fake laughter to signal their understanding, but lack of appreciation.

DISCUSSION

I neither advocate nor expect that instruction might make funny L2 users out of individuals who were not previously considered comedians, nor am I suggesting that our goal should be for L2 learners to use humor in the same way as do native speakers of the target language. Indeed, research suggests that native-like pragmatic behavior is not necessarily expected or even desired by native speakers, who may see it as a kind of linguistic infringement (Chiaro, 1992; Giles & Smith, 1979). This is likely to be the case with humor, because it is a strong marker of group membership. Attempting humor is always a risk, and L2 users may be particularly vulnerable when attempting to participate in such interaction, because their attempts at humor risk not being recognized as such (or worse, being interpreted as errors, cf. Piller, 2002, p. 198) or not being appreciated. Thus, the goal should be the same one that is used for teaching other areas of pragmatics, where, rather than presenting the learners with specific formulas for appropriacy, language is taught as a set of choices, and learners are allowed to choose those that allow them to feel most at ease in the L2. As Kramsch (1993) has pointed out, the language teacher's job may not

be to help learners become as native-like as possible in their speech, but rather to assist them in finding a "third place" in which the cultural norms of both the L1 and L2 intersect (p. 257). In this third place, learners can be at ease, comprehensible, and not sociolinguistically *in*appropriate, although not necessarily completely native-like. For some this will even mean avoiding certain language or interactions entirely.

With this goal in mind, there is no reason to expect, given that instruction has been found to be helpful for SLA in general (Norris & Ortega, 2000) and pragmatics in particular (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Rose, 2005), that it would not also prove effective in improving L2 learners' abilities to identify, comprehend, produce, and respond to humor. At present we can begin to formulate pedagogically sound activities that incorporate humor, based on activities that have succeeded in other work in IL pragmatics (see, e.g., the tasks used by Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006; Koike & Pearson, 2005; Soler, 2005; Takimoto, 2009). An initial activity might use students' L1s as a starting point in order to begin to define humor and recognize its different forms and functions. Students might read or view examples of humor and identify the type, the script oppositions that are present, and any underlying messages that are conveyed. In general, tasks that seek to raise learner awareness of the forms and functions of L2 humor and the sociolinguistic norms surrounding their use should be developed (cf. Crandall & Basturkmen, 2004). Although for some aspects of humor, such as contextualization cues, examples from film may be appropriate, until research can confirm this, authentic discourse will normally be a better choice. Explicit instruction can be used, based on the current findings in humor research, and, rather than relying on manufactured examples, Huth and Taleghani-Nikazm (2006) suggested the use of techniques from conversation analysis to analyze naturally occurring conversations for pragmatic insight. More advanced learners can begin to collect and analyze their own samples of L2 humor.

Although such activities have been found to facilitate development of pragmatic awareness of particular speech acts, they are recommended with caution here, because it remains an empirical question as to whether or not those activities will also help learners become more proficient in the use and understanding of L2 humor. Thus, with regard to directions for future research, all of the suggestions here must be explored through carefully designed studies in order to identify the ways in which they may be effective in helping learners recognize, understand, and construct L2 humor. Researchers might also ask whether and how the study of L2 humor might foster greater intercultural understanding and continue the research that has already

begun into the relationship between language play and L2 development. In the 1990s researchers in IL pragmatics made great strides in understanding the challenges of L2 pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics, and research on L2 humor can begin by working through some of the same issues that were addressed at that time, such as describing the forms and functions of humor. Keeping in mind the limitations that have now been recognized in data gathered via discourse completion tests, these tests still might serve in the study of humor in much the same way they did in initial studies of IL pragmatics. In addition, researchers can ask many of the same questions that remain in IL pragmatics, but with a specific focus on humor. For instance, the research agenda should include a description of developmental patterns and routes for L2 humor, and whether or how different types of input can affect these patterns and routes. We researchers must investigate whether some forms of humor are less cognitively complex and thus developed more quickly and whether routine formulas are of use in humorous conversation (see also the questions posed by Bardovi-Harlig, 1999).

CONCLUSION

Although instructors have long used humor in the L2 classroom, until recently little was known about the ways that humor actually works in interaction. Thus, any statements regarding its use have had to rely on intuition. As this review has shown, a rich body of work is developing in this area and must be drawn to the attention of ESL instructors and textbook writers, both in the construction of example conversations and for use in teaching the norms of humorous interaction about which students are so often curious. At the same time, I have also presented the numerous gaps in this body of knowledge. These offer rich opportunities for collaborative research between scholars with expertise in humor and those who have an interest in IL and intercultural pragmatics. Far from being merely *for fun*, humor is a pervasive and fundamental aspect of the human experience and, as such, merits greater attention in TESOL.

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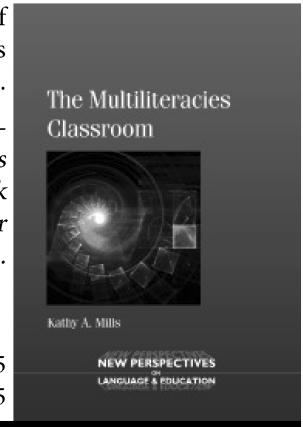

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