

Humour in Simultaneous Conference Interpreting

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1. Introduction

Humour as part of human communication is also used when people get together on the occasion of a large or small, informal or formal international conference. Where such meetings are conducted in more than one working language and participants rely on the services of conference interpreters to bridge linguistic and cultural barriers, various forms of humour may have to be rendered in the simultaneous mode of interpreting. Given the complexities of translating humour in general, rendering humour under the conditions and constraints of simultaneous interpreting (SI) is likely to pose a particular challenge. Nevertheless, the issue of humour in conference interpreting has hardly been addressed in the literature to date, and practically no systematic empirical research on this topic has been carried out.

This paper, which is based on a graduation thesis completed by the first author as part of the European Master's in Conference Interpreting in Prague (Pavlicek 2000), presents an initial attempt to gather empirical data about the phenomenon of humour in the practice of conference interpreting. Aiming at a somewhat broader sweep, we begin by reviewing what little work has been done on the subject of humour in Interpreting Studies and give an introductory presentation – and authentic examples – of some forms and functions of humour likely to be encountered in the conference setting. Against this background, we will report on a pilot survey conducted among a total of 50 conference interpreters. Based on the empirical findings and on previous contributions to the literature on SI, we will discuss some salient issues of humour in interpreting practice and research to pave the way for further and more profound investigations.

2. Humour and conference interpreting

In the growing body of literature on conference interpreting, most of which is devoted to the simultaneous mode, the phenomenon of humour has received hardly any attention. Within an overriding concern with the complex cognitive processes underlying the task, simultaneous interpreting (SI) has been investigated with regard to such issues as input rate and pausing, syntactic divergence, source-text density, or names and numbers as factors associated with processing difficulties on the part of the interpreter. Humour, in contrast, appears to be a negligible quantity in conference interpreting research. Bertone (1989), in her generally playful monograph on SI, mentions a case of an interpreter not rendering a joke but instead addressing the audience directly and asking listeners to laugh for the sake of the speaker. Bertone cites this case – without describing the joke as such – as an example of the interpreter's legitimate discretion to do whatever it takes in a given situation to produce the same effect as the source text, i.e. to make listeners erupt in laughter (cf. 1989: 92f).

With its focus on the predictable behavioural effect, the interpreting strategy discussed by Bertone (1989) could be linked up with Koestler's (1964) basic definition of humour as "the only form of communication in which a stimulus on a high level of complexity produces a stereotyped, predictable response on the physiological reflex level." This would mean that interpreting humour consists in adjusting the complex "stimulus" to produce the stereotypical "response". Whatever its merits, however, Koestler's bio-behavioural definition is hardly at the appropriate level of description for as complex a socio-linguistic phenomenon as the use of humour in mediated multilingual communication. Much better suited, in contrast, is the pragmatic perspective on humour as expressed by Norrick (1989: 118): "Humor depends not only on some funny stimulus, but also on the audience, the situation, and the cultural context." Indeed, what emerges as a basic point of departure from theoretical and empirical approaches to humour, in literate as well as oral communication (e.g. Kotthoff 1998), is the crucial role of shared linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge in humorists and addressees. Since humour is closely linked to a given socio-cultural community, the basic challenge of translating humour consists in establishing this linkage between humour and socio-cultural knowledge in two linguistic communities. Bicultural competence in the translator/interpreter, as posited by Niedzielski (1990) as a prerequisite to the rendition of humour, is obviously a necessary, but hardly a sufficient condition, nor is it specific to the phenomenon. What other assumptions have to be in place, then, to ensure a detailed and realistic account of humour in conference interpreting?

In the first empirical contribution on the subject, Pöchhacker (1993) applies a multi-level analytical framework, developed for the analysis of a conference case-study (Pöchhacker 1994), to the discussion of jokes in SI. To account for the situational complexity of conference settings, he makes a distinction between two broad contextual dimensions: the "hypertext" level of the conference, at which a number of meeting types (such as political assemblies, technical conferences, seminars, negotiations, etc.) can be distinguished on the basis of features like information flow, structural complexity and informational intensity, etc.), and the level of the "situation", or constellation of interacting parties at a given time and place, analyzed as a set of subjective situation models (cf. Pöchhacker 1992). Each interactant, including the interpreter, is represented in terms of his or her role(s), attitudes, expectations and intentions, all of which are seen to be grounded in and mediated by his or her sociocultural, technical and contextual knowledge base. The functional characteristics of the conference ("skopos") and of the text within a given situation of interaction are viewed as the top-level constraints on the communicative and translational fate of any particular message component, including instances of humour. Given the dearth of contextualized corpora for detailed descriptions and analyses of interpreting in professional practice, Pöchhacker (1993) essentially makes a plea for more product-oriented observational research, followed up by a discussion of three jokes in his fourteen-hour corpus of English-German simultaneous interpretation.

The only other paper on humour in SI, by Sergio Viaggio, was published in the 1996 Special Issue of *The Translator* devoted to wordplay in translation. Viaggio (1996) discusses a number of authentic examples of what he categorizes as "metalingual use",

including puns, allusions and similar non-narrative forms of humour. His analytical framework is comprised of six factors influencing the rendition of wordplay and other stylistically marked features of speech: 1) the degree of spontaneity of the original (i.e. impromptu vs scripted style); 2) language-pair-specific differences; 3) the degree of shared linguistic and cultural heritage; 4) the situational relevance of form; 5) the interpreter's source-cultural knowledge, and 6) the interpreter's target-language skills. While Viaggio, unlike Pöchhacker (1993), singles out the interpreter as a distinct element outside the communicative constellation, he discusses a largely congruent set of analytical dimensions, such as the languages and cultures involved, the specifics of the situation (communicative function, audio-visual co-presence of source-language and target-language audience), and the textual features of the source speech.

Notwithstanding such basic agreement regarding key analytical notions for the study of humour in conference interpreting, the empirical research base as such is still tenuous, to say the least. With only two papers on the subject, each focusing on a particular form of humour, and only a handful of authentic discourse examples for analysis, some of the more fundamental questions have not even been asked. To wit: How common or exotic an occurrence is humour in interpreted conferences? Would every conference interpreter be faced with the task of simultaneously interpreting humour at all? Would the prevalence of humour vary with particular source languages? Or with particular types of meetings? And which forms of humour might be used in particular? With what sort of communicative function and effect? Most likely, and typically, there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence bearing on these issues, but there are no systematic empirical data. Hence the idea of conducting a pilot survey to tap interpreters' professional experience and assess the validity of some personal hypotheses regarding the prevalence, forms, and functions of humour in international conferences with SI.

Before reporting on the empirical study, the experience-based assumptions underlying the survey will be presented in the form of a review of common forms of humour which might be expected to occur in international conference settings. Rather than engage in a theoretical analysis of various types and mechanisms of humour, we will limit ourselves to suggesting some possible functions and effects of humorous speech in conferences as illustrated by a few authentic discourse examples. In the remainder of our paper, we will be concerned not with the linguistic anatomy or psycho-physiology of jokes, puns, etc., but with the professional epidemiology, as it were, of humour in interpreted conference discourse.

3. Forms and functions of humour in conference settings

Humour in oral discourse can manifest itself in many ways, and it has rightly been pointed out (e.g. Kotthoff 1998) that it often transcends neatly defined categories. While some types of humour, such as jokes and anecdotes, have acquired the status of communicative genres, others are much less dependent on a certain pattern and can be used in a variety of activity types with a wide range of discursive functions. For the purpose of the empirical investigation reported below, which relied on subjects' common understanding of

“humour”, we will introduce some of the most commonly known types of humour and discuss them with a view to their typical or likely communicative function in the course of an international conference.

3.1 Setting the scene

At the beginning of a conference, speakers and audience, often meeting for the very first time, may experience considerable distance, all the more so when part of the audience can join in only with the help of an interpreter. The tension resulting from this constellation is undesired and creates an obstacle to a fruitful communicative exchange. Anglo-American speakers, in particular, often seek to ease this tension by starting off with a joke or an anecdote so as to create a relaxed atmosphere. According to many a guide to good public speaking, a **joke** is the best way to win the audience’s favour and attention. In addition to establishing a rapport between speaker and listeners, jokes also forge emotional contact among the audience. With listeners sharing their laughter, possibly looking at each other to check if the others are laughing too, they become a more homogeneous group. By using humour, the speaker thus manages to reduce the distance between the participants and create a sense of community.

A typical example of an American speaker starting off his keynote address with a joke is presented and discussed in Pöchhacker (1993). Example 1 below is another one from a different corpus:

Economist Alan Wolff addresses an academic audience with a background in international policy studies and business administration on the topic of “America’s Economic Interests in the Post-Cold-War Era” at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, Monterey, California, on 12 May 1992. Announcing that he would illustrate his main thesis by two stories, he tells the following “embedded joke” (ə = voiced hesitation, “uh”):

ONE, I WAS VERY INTERESTED IN LEARNING FROM ə PRESIDENT REAGAN ə ABOUT THE MYSTERIES OF INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC POLICY, BECAUSE HE WAS GOING TO GIVE A TALK ON THAT SUBJECT, SO I WENT WITH SOME ENTHUSIASM TO HEAR HIM SPEAK, AND HE TOLD THE FOLLOWING STORY. THERE WAS A MAN WHO, EVERY DAY ON THE WAY TO WORK, PASSED A WOMAN WHO WAS SELLING PRETZELS. AND EVERY DAY HE WOULD GO BY AND HE WOULD PUT A QUARTER IN HER PLATE, AND DID NOT TAKE A PRETZEL. THIS WENT ON DAY AFTER DAY, WEEK AFTER WEEK, MONTH AFTER MONTH. ONE DAY HE WAS REACHING DOWN WITH A QUARTER TO PUT IT DOWN IN HER PLATE, AND SHE REACHED UP AND SHE TUGGED ON HIS SLEEVE, AND HE SAID: I SUPPOSE YOU WANT TO KNOW WHY IT IS EVERY DAY I COME BY AND I PUT A QUARTER IN THE PLATE AND I NEVER TAKE A PRETZEL. NO, SHE SAID, I WANTED TO TELL YOU THAT PRETZELS HAVE GONE UP TO 35 CENTS. ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ ☺ PRESIDENT REAGAN HAS A GRASP OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE THAT A NUMBER OF US, OR THE REST OF US NEVER QUITE MASTERED. ☺ ☺

The joke in Example 1 is actually embedded in an **anecdote**, another form of humour which is often used by way of introduction. Unlike a joke, an anecdote need not aim at making people laugh, but it usually does lead up to some witty statement. Speakers

offering a narration of something they have experienced themselves make themselves appear more life-like to their audience. By touching on common values and aspects of the identity of the group, anecdotes can serve as a tool for community building, often at the beginning of the interaction. A similar function may be served by **self-irony**, which reflects the speaker's ability to laugh about him or herself and invites a sympathetic attitude. Both of the examples below were spoken as light-hearted introductions at the very beginning of a speech, making it all the more critical for the interpreter to "catch on" right away.

Example 2: The moderator opens a panel discussion on the 1996 US presidential elections with professors of policy studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, Monterey, California, in October 1996.

THIS IS OUR QUADRIENNIAL ATTEMPT TO PROVIDE AN OBJECTIVE, IMPARTIAL AND INSIGHTFUL EVALUATION OF THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PROCESS, AND I HAVE NO DOUBT THAT WE WILL FAIL THIS YEAR AS WE HAVE IN YEARS PAST IN ACHIEVING THAT OBJECTIVE. ☺ ☺ ☺

Example 3: Prof. Bruce Kirchhoff, President of the International Council for Small Business, starts off his opening address at the 36th World Congress of the ICSB in Vienna on 24 June 1991.

I AM AN ECONOMIST, AND THAT MAKES ME A DANGEROUS PERSON, I THINK, IN THE WORLD TODAY.

Once the speaker has gone into the heart of the matter, which may often be of a highly technical nature, various forms of humour may be used to make a difficult subject more lively and loosen up the atmosphere. In smaller, more focused meetings, in particular, humour may be used to reduce stress and boost a working group's morale (see e.g. White & Camarena 1989).

3.2 Dealing with others

Among the many moods on which various forms of humour are based, one that is involved almost by definition is aggression. This aggression can be aimed at an authority or else against someone who is considered inferior in some way. In this sense, humour may be wielded as a weapon, or as a shield against verbal attack. One of the more subtle ways in which speakers may demonstrate their intellectual superiority to others is the use of **irony** (cf. Nash 1985: 152). Most critically in the interpreting situation, ironic statements can always be understood in both the literal, counter-factual sense and the ironic sense intended by the speaker. And since the ironic interpretation often hinges on prosodic cues or the speaker's facial expression, irony may pose a particularly complex challenge for the simultaneous interpreter. A good illustration is in fact contained in Example 1 (see above). As the upshot of the "Pretzel Story" allegedly told by President Reagan, the speaker remarks: PRESIDENT REAGAN HAS A GRASP OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE THAT A NUMBER OF US, OR THE REST OF US NEVER QUITE MASTERED. Giving an interpretation of this or any ironic remark obviously requires considerable situational and world knowledge. Mistaking the statement as sincere, the interpreter would change an ironic (counter-factual) comment into an expression of (ostensibly sincere) **sarcasm**, even though, admittedly, the distinction

is much more clear-cut in the dictionary than in the reality of communication (cf. Nash 1985: 153).

Aside from the more fundamentally negative tangent of **cynicism**, the most aggressive form of humour dealing with others is **parody**. As a verbal caricature giving a distorted picture of a person and exaggerating negative character traits for the listeners' entertainment, parodies may be used to ridicule or at least express a speaker's critical attitude towards another person, as in Example 4:

Prof. Peter Grothe speaks about US presidential candidate Bob Dole in a panel discussion with professors of policy studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in October 1996.

WHEN HE IS GIVING A SPEECH IT SOUNDS LIKE HE IS READING A TELEGRAM.
HE HAS THIS INTERESTING WAY OF REFERRING TO HIMSELF CONSTANTLY IN THE THIRD PERSON: VOTE FOR BOB DOLE, HE'S GOOD MAN, HE'S BEEN TESTED, HE'LL REDUCE YOUR TAXES, VOTE FOR BOB DOLE! ☺ ☺ ☺ THAT'S A BOB DOLE SPEECH. ☺ ☺ ☺

3.3 Creating (inter)texture

Parody as exemplified above is a very explicit manifestation of allusion, which in turn is one of the most powerful discursive mechanisms in oral group communication. By means of allusions, or indirect citations of particular elements of sociocultural knowledge, speakers assume a position of authority and, consciously or unconsciously, submit their audience to a test, "proving the credentials of the initiated, baffling the outsider" (Nash 1985: 74). In the conference setting in particular, allusions of an intertextual nature may be made to prior stages or passages in the hypertext of the communicative event. In Example 5 below, the allusion is in fact to the self-ironical statement in Example 3 from a speech earlier that morning:

Wolfgang Schüssel, Minister of Economic Affairs, leads into his keynote lecture at the 36th World Congress of the ICSB in Vienna on 24 June 1991.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, LET ME INTRODUCE MYSELF, I'M A MUCH MORE DANGEROUS PERSON THAN AN ECONOMIST, I'M A POLITICIAN.

An even more striking example of such hyper-intertextuality in the ICSB corpus (Pöchhacker 1994) is the "talking frog", a joke made by the opening speaker on the first day of the conference, which is alluded to more than once in the proceedings and turns up again in the closing plenary of the three-day event.

The same session includes an example of a linguistic-textual allusion, or **wordplay**, as discussed also by Viaggio (1996).

Example 6: Prof. Raymond Kao speaks in the closing plenary of the ICSB Congress on 26 June 1991 as the host of the forthcoming ICSB Congress in Toronto.

DO YOU ALL KNOW MY NAME NOW? IF YOU DON'T, I TELL YOU: OAK SPELLED BACKWARDS, O-A-K.

Verbal humour as exemplified above is linked by definition to a particular language system. It is thus discussed most often in terms of its untranslatability, not least under the conditions of SI. As highlighted by Viaggio (1996), however, **puns** and similar expressions of linguistic wit, including the use of original **metaphors**, must be viewed in the same multi-dimensional context as any other communicative element in the discursive event of an international conference. In other words, factors like the type and size of the meeting, the socio-psychological constellation of the interacting parties, the language pair and the degree of shared socio-cultural heritage need to be taken into account – by the simultaneous interpreter in situ as well as the analyst – for a meaningful attempt to tackle the challenge of verbal humour with one strategy or another.

Needless to say, the above sketch of various forms and functions of humour in conference settings is neither an exhaustive discussion nor a complete taxonomy of humour types in international conferences. Rather, it is meant to set the conceptual stage for a much more basic inquiry aimed at checking personal experience-based assumptions about the prevalence and role of humour in conferences with SI against the collective judgement of a small sample of professional conference interpreters.

4. Pilot survey

4.1 Subjects and method

A one-page questionnaire was distributed in the first months of the year 2000 to a personal sample of conference interpreters working from German and/or English. Some of the questionnaires were handed out to experienced conference interpreters based in Prague, including teaching staff of the Euromaster's Course in Conference Interpreting at Charles University. Additional copies were distributed by e-mail to staff and freelance interpreters at the European Parliament and the European Commission.

Following the principal question whether they had ever encountered humour in simultaneous interpreting, respondents were asked to indicate the frequency of occurrence as well as the types of meetings at which they had interpreted humour. The latter included: 1) high-level political meetings, 2) solemn events, 3) press conferences, 4) technical / specialised conferences and 5) working groups. The next question included a list of various forms of humour (jokes, anecdotes, irony, sarcasm, cynicism, parody, puns, and metaphors), and respondents were asked which of these they had encountered on which of the occasions listed in the previous question. The final question was designed to confirm assumptions about the most likely functions of humour in the conference setting: 1) introducing the subject or speaker, 2) easing tension, 3) team-building, 4) loosening up difficult subjects and 5) verbal attack or defence. Each of the three list-based questions had an extra line for respondents to add further items, and space was provided for the addition of personal comments.

The questionnaire, which was made available in an English as well as a German version, included some items which proved difficult to answer. Asked to give figures (from 1 to 6)

to indicate either occurrence at various meeting types or relative importance, some respondents did not use numbers at all but only ticked the boxes. Moreover, the request for numerical indications in the question relating humour types to occasions proved very misleading in the German version, making it very difficult to analyse the results. Some of the interpreters working at the European Parliament used the German questionnaire to make responses on interpreting *from English*, making them equally susceptible to the problematic formulation. In hindsight, the decision not to make the extra effort of submitting the questionnaire to pilot testing probably resulted in considerably more additional work at the time of processing the results.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Frequency of occurrence

A total of 50 questionnaires, 25 each for English and German, were available for analysis. The fundamental question – whether respondents had ever faced the task of interpreting humour in the simultaneous mode – was answered in the affirmative by all respondents.

Asked about the frequency of occurrence of humour in SI, most respondents (60%) indicated that they “sometimes” encounter humour in speeches they interpret simultaneously. 16% responded that they “often” had to render humour in the simultaneous mode, while 24% felt that this was “seldom” the case (Fig. 1).

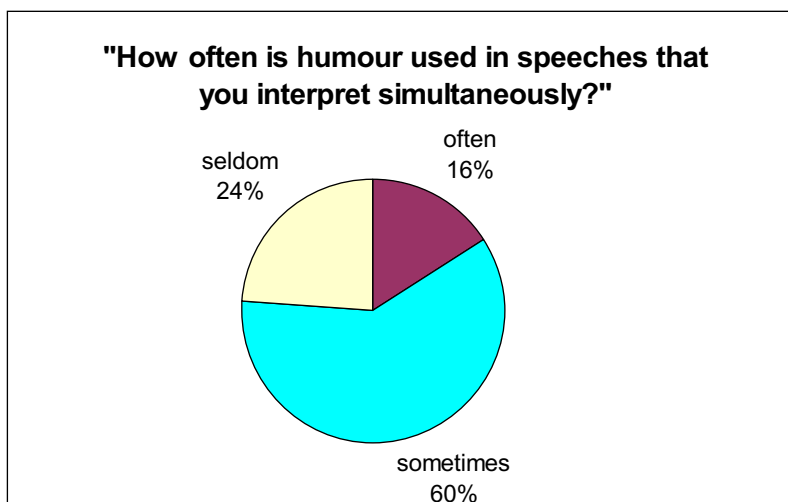


Fig. 1: Frequency of humour in simultaneously interpreted speeches (N=50)

A separate analysis of the data by source language (i.e. interpreting from English vs interpreting from German) yielded a clearly differentiated picture (Fig. 2).

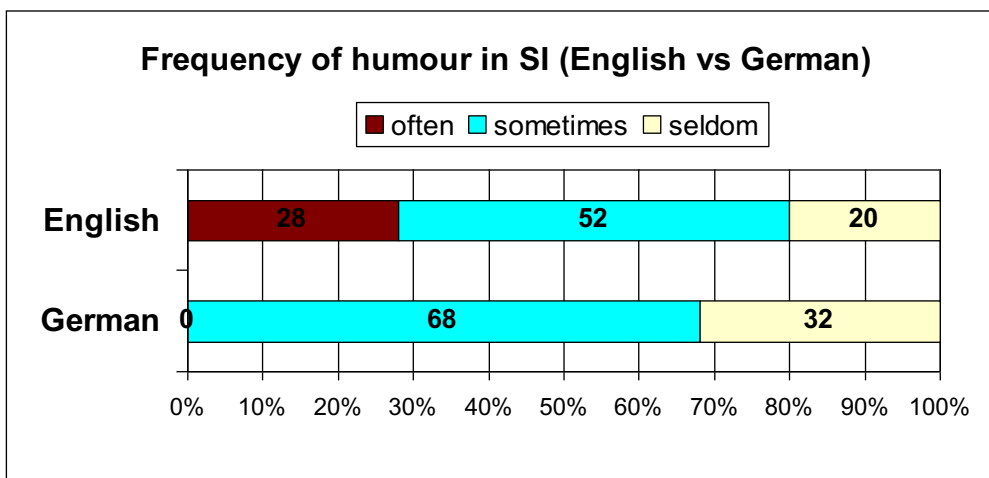


Fig. 2: Frequency of humour by language: English (n=25) vs German (n=25)

As many as 28% of those responding for English source speeches encountered humour “often”. 52% of the respondents “sometimes” interpreted English humour while for 20% this was “seldom” the case. Those rating the occurrence of humour when interpreting from German, in contrast, never indicated that this was “often” the case, and responses were divided roughly in a ratio of two thirds to one third between “sometimes” (68%) and “seldom” (32%). Humour is thus encountered more frequently in English rather than German speeches.

As regards the occasions on which conference interpreters are likely to face the challenge of rendering humour in the simultaneous mode, most respondents (84%) pointed out meetings of “working groups” as the most humour-prone conference type. All but two respondents did so for English, and 19 (out of 25) for German source speeches. Other occasions which were mentioned by some two thirds of the interpreters in the sample were “technical conferences” (72%) and “high-level political meetings/formal meetings (64%). While for these two occasions responses for interpreting from English vs. from German were roughly of the same order of magnitude, the results for “press conferences” and “solemn events/commemorations” showed marked differences, with English drawing a considerably higher response in the former category and a much lower one in the latter. For the 25 respondents working from English, then, humour is as likely to occur at “press conferences” as on the three most humour-prone occasions for the sample as a whole (Fig. 3). The “other” occasions mentioned by the respondents included “group or committee meetings at the European Parliament”, “technical meetings” and “drafting groups”, all of which could be said to fit into the predefined categories (in particular “working groups”), thus underscoring their relative importance. Two types of assignments that were added by respondents in both the English and the German source-language group were “training seminars” and “films”.

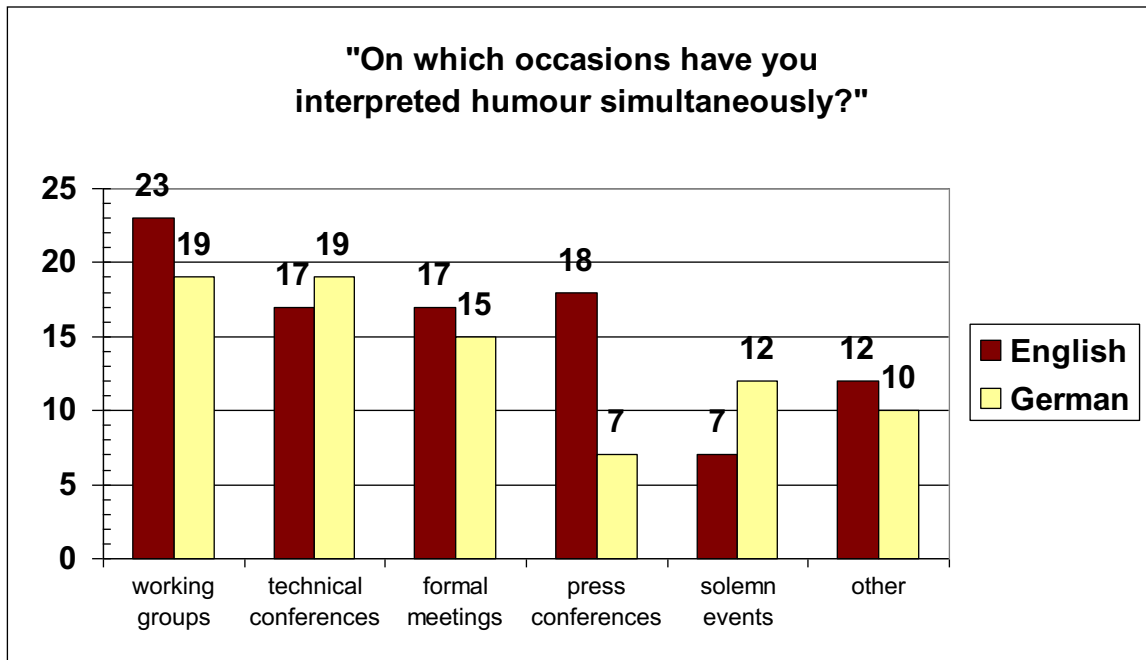


Fig. 3: Occasions on which humour is interpreted simultaneously (number of responses)

One respondent stated that at EU Council meetings, humour was used to relax the atmosphere, though humour at high-level political meetings tended to be somewhat “stiff”. Another respondent wrote that interpreters at highly technical meetings at the EU sometimes interpreted humour word for word without really understanding what it was about; listeners then laughed, but only with some delay, and not always.

4.2.2 *Forms and functions of humour*

Of the various forms of humorous language use listed in the questionnaire (jokes, anecdotes, irony, sarcasm, cynicism, parody, wordplay, and metaphors), “anecdotes” and “irony” were seen as most common in both English and German source speeches. Respondents working from German also indicated “jokes” as a more frequent form of humour, whereas interpreters working from English pointed to the special significance of “puns”. “Sarcasm”, “cynicism” and “parody” were not a common occurrence in the experience of the conference interpreters in the sample, though one respondent remarked that sarcasm was often used at the European Parliament to ridicule an opposition party. Under “other forms of humour”, one respondent listed the intellectual punch line, often linked to a quote and favoured by highly educated speakers.

A number of respondents offered additional comments bearing on language-related aspects of humour. Thus, one interpreter remarked that German humour was used particularly frequently by keynote speakers and in speeches prepared in advance. It was also stated that humour was not used spontaneously in German speeches very often, except perhaps in the case of wordplay, and that the German language simply did not allow for the typically English, playfully cynical way of speaking. In contrast, another interpreter remarked that no British speaker will ever make a speech without inserting some form of humour into it.

The last item on the questionnaire, which addressed the function of humour in simultaneously interpreted speeches, asked respondents to rate the frequency of various functions from 1 (most) to 6 (least). Despite their inconsistent use of numerical indications (as a result of the somewhat ambiguously phrased request), respondents clearly saw “introducing a subject or speaker” as the most frequent function of humour, followed by “breaking up a difficult subject” and “easing tension”. The latter function was viewed as less relevant by interpreters working from German, whereas all other scores were largely balanced between the two language groups. “Team-building” and “verbal attack or defense” were seen as relatively infrequent functions of humour.

The comments invited from respondents under “other functions” included a number of further “uses”, such as the use of humour for reasons of self-importance (bragging, demonstrating one’s wit and intelligence), as an apology for late arrival, as a means of regaining the audience’s attention after a break, or for the purpose of testing the interpreter.

Finally, in the space provided for additional remarks, one respondent stated that humour is sometimes not interpreted for lack of time or because of doubt about the punch line or the level of language, and that listeners often laugh about unintentional humour, i.e. expressions that have a double meaning in the target language. With regard to German humour, it was stated that interpreters panic when speakers try to be funny, and that even when some witticism is rendered correctly, there is no guarantee that the listeners consider it funny. Yet another interpreter commented that translated humour was not always understood and laughter often a matter of social decency.

4.3 Discussion

Though obviously limited in scope and methodological sophistication, the pilot survey among a total of 50 experienced professionals working from English or German confirmed that humour is a challenge which the simultaneous interpreter sometimes has to confront. The findings suggest that English speakers have a much stronger inclination towards humorous language use than speakers using German, and that humour is most likely to occur in meetings of working groups and, to a lesser extent, in technical conferences and formal meetings. In the experience of the respondents in the sample, humour at international conferences most often takes the form of anecdotes, irony and jokes, mainly for purposes like introducing a subject or speaker, easing tension, or breaking up a difficult subject. Considering the complexity of the phenomena involved, and the rough-and-ready method used for eliciting data, the survey findings do not aspire to precise quantification; they do however supply some empirical evidence to be taken into consideration in any broader discussion of humour in professional practice and research.

5 Humour in interpreting practice and research

Humour is a feature to be reckoned with by interpreters at international conferences. What indirect evidence on the incidence of humorous language use at simultaneously interpreted

technical conferences (Pöchhacker 1993) and United Nations meetings (Viaggio 1996) has been available, is extended and confirmed in this pilot survey involving 50 professionals working in Prague and the European institutional market. The fact that speakers of English, at least in contrast to German speakers, are particularly likely to adopt humour as a discursive strategy, reinforces the significance of these findings, given the undisputed role of English as the language most often spoken on the conference floor. At the same time, the question arises how humour is used by the high proportion of non-native speakers of English at international conferences. Would they shy away from the delicate task of “being funny” in a foreign language, or would English prove a suitable *lingua franca* also for the expression of humour, possibly giving rise to complex cross-cultural blends? Apart from anecdotal evidence, little is known about this and other issues touched on in our survey.

In addition to the crucial dimension of specific languages and cultures, the issue of humour in international conference settings must also be discussed with reference to particular types of conferences. There is evidence from our findings that smaller and more focused meetings, with participants often knowing one another from previous occasions, may present a particular challenge in this respect. One might assume that seminars, a type of meeting not explicitly covered in the survey, are also fertile ground for the use of humour, offering an ideal forum to leverage amusement for didactic purposes.

While a focus on the hypertextual dimension may thus guide our attention towards particular humour-prone types of meetings, it is obvious from functional considerations on the use of humour, as touched upon in the survey, that it is the specific communicative situation, or constellation of interacting parties, that will determine the use and effect – and the translational effectiveness – of various types of humour. Aspects of role, intention, attitude, and, most of all, the degree of shared socio-cultural (general, technical, contextual) knowledge will make every manifestation of humour a unique occurrence. Hence, there will be no recipes specifying when to recreate, substitute, explain or omit a joke, an ironic remark or a pun. Rather, the interpreter will have to make strategic choices based on the functional characteristics of the meeting, the specifics of the situation, and the processing conditions typical of the simultaneous mode.

These considerations for the rendition of humour in professional practice also have some fairly obvious theoretical and methodological implications. Given the constraints operating at multiple levels, from the socio-cultural and institutional to the situational and textual and to the paralinguistic and non-vocal dimensions, humour is an ideal test case for a holistic account of interpreting as applied to themes like the pragmatic effect of the interpreting service or the quality of an interpreter’s output. While observational studies such as the survey presented here can be relied on for some quantitative indications about the phenomenon, in-depth case studies, involving dual-track (video) recording, interviews and participant observation, will be required to capture the complex reality of humour in conference settings and to analyse its fate in translation under the conditions of SI. How else would one make sense of the following case of humour for the purpose of testing the interpreter?

At a seminar on Austria held in the European Parliament in January 1996, an Austrian politician (may he remain unnamed) concludes his (English) statement

with a witticism at the expense of the interpreters. In an effort to demonstrate the “untranslatability” of localisms, he cites the names of a beef-and-bean dish (“*Schieferschwanzlerl mit Fisolen*”) and a sweet omelet (“*Kaiserschmarrn*”) as well as a slang expression for “I don’t care” (“*ist mir wurscht*”), strikingly collocated with “whether you understand this” (“*ob sie das verstehen*”).

MAY I CLOSE WITH ONE REMARK IN GERMAN AND THAT IS FOR YOU, THE INTERPRETERS, PARTICULAR. I JUST CAME BACK FROM A WEEKEND IN VIENNA, UND HABE MIT MEINER FAMILIE GESTERN ZU MITTAG EIN GANZ HERVORRAGENDES SCHIEFERSCHWANZERL MIT FISOLEN GEGESSEN UND NACHHER DEN KAISERSCHMARRN, UND ES IST MIR EIGENTLICH WURSCHT, OB SIE DAS VERSTEHEN. MY COLLEAGUE NOWAK, IL SERA PRET A FAIRE UNE INTERPRETATION. MERCI.

6 Conclusion

Reconciling the complex phenomenon of translating humour at international conferences with the stringencies of empirical data collection by way of a self-administered questionnaire may seem to resemble what Kotthoff (1998: 167), defining a punch line, calls a “clash of two perspectives”. Nevertheless, our paper is intended not as a joke but as an overdue attempt to highlight the issue of humour as a topic of – serious – research in Interpreting Studies. We hope that the quantitative findings from the pilot survey as well as our broader discussion may help bring this complex phenomenon into focus and pave the way for further and more detailed investigations.

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