

# English for Specific Purposes and Humour



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Edited by

Shaeda Isani and Michel Van der Yeught

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# INTRODUCTION

SHAEDA ISANI  
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Studies in humour reach back to such great thinkers as Plato and Aristotle (4th century BC), Cicero (1st century BC) and include Hobbes (17th century), Bergson and Freud (20th century). However, humour studies as an academic research discipline in its own right gained momentum only in the late 20th century. The first ever conference on the subject – The International Conference on Humour and Laughter – was held in 1976 in Cardiff under the aegis of the British Psychology Society and the sceptical gaze of the public, prompting the editor of the Proceedings to confess that “The usual reaction was amazement and amused disbelief that scientists would be coming from all over the world to Cardiff to have a Conference on Humour and Laughter” (Foss 1977, xiv). Since then, humour studies has proved itself to be a dynamic and prolific area of academic interest with its own scientific journal, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, which began publication in 1987 (now joined by several other journals), and such flagship reference titles as Victor Raskin’s *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour* (1985), Salvatore Attardo’s *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (1994), Raskin and Attardo’s *The General Theory of Verbal Humour* (2009), followed by Attardo’s *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (2014), and *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor* (2017) published under his editorship.

As researchers and practitioners in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), we specialise in language and language teaching sciences. We thus approach humour studies as an adjunct field applied to the language, discourse and culture of specialised communities, borrowing from their theories to shed light on our own. Delving into the resources of disciplinary fields other than our own is nothing new for ESP researchers and practitioners since the defining characteristic of our area of studies is the symbiotic interdisciplinarity which exists between learners’ subject domains, on the one hand, and the specific linguistic, discursive and

cultural elements used to communicate about it, on the other. In this respect, this volume reflects the converging triangulation of three independent disciplines: linguistics, subject-domain specialisms, and humour studies. Linguistic elements such as semantics, syntax, phonetics, hyperbole, metaphors, metonymy, alliteration and more, are applied to subject-domain modes of expression and communication, and analysed through the prism of humour theories.

The three overarching theories which dominate humour studies are reflected in the analyses found in the chapters of this volume: the incongruity-resolution theory, the superiority theory and the relief theory. The incongruity-resolution theory is based on the “cognitive shift” triggered by an encounter between the expected and the unexpected, whether linguistic, cultural or situational, and its subsequent cognitive resolution. In its linguistic form, one of the richest sources of the incongruity-resolution form of humour is punning, as illustrated by the following examples of punning by eminent personalities:

- (1) “Immanuel doesn’t pun, he Kant.”  
(Oscar Wilde, a humorous reference to Kant who is largely associated with the incongruity-resolution theory)
- (2) “Peccavi.”  
(General Sir Charles Napier is reported to have sent the famous one-word dispatch “Peccavi” to his superiors after conquering the Indian province of Sindh in 1843 against their orders. “Peccavi” is Latin for “I have sinned” and can also be read as “I have Sindh”.)
- (3) “We must all hang together or assuredly we shall all hang separately.”  
(Benjamin Franklin in a call for solidarity during the signing of the Declaration of Independence.)
- (4) “For the past seven years I’ve established another tradition: Embarrassing my daughters with a corny-copia of dad jokes about turkeys.”  
(Barack Obama on the traditional pardoning of a turkey on Thanksgiving Day, November 2016).

Humour in advertising is a long-established practice and punning one of its most popular forms. Isabel Espinosa-Zaragoza’s chapter titled “Green Come True: Paronymic Colour Name Games in Nail Varnish Marketing” presents insights into how a US-based cosmetics company managed the feat of creating an international brand name through an advertising campaign based entirely on ingenious humorous punning in English! While the mechanisms of punning are common to all cultures, the

sticking point is the language: how does sophisticated punning in English stimulate purchase intention with consumers who are not familiar enough with the language to grasp the humour or the informational content of the pun? Far from being a case of failed humour, the analysis shows how affective responses based on a combination of “fun” perceptions linked to the use of humour and positive attitudes to the English language, can override cognitive and cultural barriers to actually understanding the pun, lending a fresh angle of interpretation to Shakespeare’s Rosaline when she says, “A jest’s prosperity lies in the ear/Of him that hears it, never in the tongue/Of him that makes it” (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Act V, Scene II). For the marketers of this global brand, the use of humorous punning in English is a calculated capitalisation of two high-value perceptions which target key advertising objectives, i.e. brand identification, buzz, and stimulation of purchase intention, recognition and recall.

Humour also fulfils significant psycho-social functions in relation to the workplace. The broad-angled approach to ESP studies embraces specialised cultures within its scope of enquiry, a perspective which extends to organisational cultures, and therefore to workplace humour. The superiority theory gains particular relevance here in view of the omnipresence of hierarchy in organisational cultures. This results in formal and informal power inequities characteristic of unequal encounters common to many ESP-related contexts (learner/teacher, doctor/patient, judge/accused, boss/subordinate, etc.). The superiority theory of humour is the oldest and most documented. Perceived since Aristotle as being essentially associated with such negative aspects of humour as disparagement and humiliation (“laughing at” as opposed to “laughing with”), it naturally originates from individuals in a situation of superiority, – whether through authority, hierarchy, class, knowledge, wealth or context – who thus feel empowered to belittle those who do not enjoy the same status. As Lippit (1995, 9) notes, humour in this context “can act as a very powerful ‘social corrective’, a weapon society can use to restrain those insufficiently flexible to adapt to whatever it demands of them”. Extreme cases of authoritarian humour in the workplace can lead to misuse and abuse of authority, resulting in bullying. Real-life examples of such humour are rarely disseminated in our watchful times, but the fictional US TV series *The Office* (2005-2013) provides an ample sampling of demeaning workplace superiority humour in the person of Michael Scott, the regional manager, whose so-called humorous sallies fail to be tempered by the classic decommitment, “Only kidding”:

- (5) “You are as creepy as a real serial killer. For real.” (Season 4, *Survivor Man*)

- (6) “Tonight, one of our most ethnic co-workers, Kelly, has invited us all to a Diwali celebration put on by her community. What is Diwali, you may ask? [...] Lot of gods with unpronounceable names. [It is] essentially a Hindu Halloween.” (Season 3, *Diwali*)
- (7) “If I had a gun with two bullets and I was in a room with Hitler, Bin Laden, and Toby, I would shoot Toby [the HR representative] twice.” (Season 6, *The Chump*)

Contrary to previously dominant views, the superiority theory of humour as an expression of authority is now seen as being both malign and benign according to the psycho-social functions it seeks to fulfil. In the following excerpt from Plester (2009, 97), contrary to the examples cited above, we have an example of benign humour used by a manager to turn an order into an occasion for laughter:

- (8) Team Manager (Adam) walks through the office calling in a loud voice: “Calling all terrorists, time for the meeting”. Susan: “That’s how he rounds them up—sometimes he teases them some more and calls them children”.  
Adam: “You should have been more organised and left 5 minutes ago—then I wouldn’t have caught you”.  
They all go into the meeting room smiling.

Focusing on the specificity of the courtroom as a place of workplace humour, Shaeda Isani’s chapter titled “‘He’s not. I am. You do’: Bench and Bar Power Dynamics in the Curial Humour of Common Law Cultures” studies both the benign and malign aspects of judge-generated authoritarian humour, while also shedding light on related issues such as self-deprecatory humour, contestive humour, and the role of hierarchy in initiating humour in the workplace.

In contrast to authoritarian humour related to the superior theory of humour, affiliative humour is a benign form of humour which is perceived as seeking to promote positive interpersonal relations, described by Zeigler-Hill et al (2016, 364) as:

[involving] the use of humor in social situations as a way to strengthen relationships, increase group cohesion, and reduce tension through strategies such as telling humorous anecdotes or engaging in witty banter in order to put others at ease. [...] The affiliative [...] humor styles – which are characterized by the use of benign humor – have been found to have positive correlations with a wide range of outcomes including happiness, satisfaction with life, resiliency and social competence.

As such, affiliative humour covers a number of psycho-social functions which impact workplace dynamics, notably with regard to forging an occupational group identity through community building, bonding, cohesiveness, solidarity, etc., and their corollary, insider/outsider gatekeeping.

Closely associated with affiliative humour is the relief/release theory, the third overarching theory of humour studies. The relief theory of humour, as its name suggests, fulfils the psycho-social function of releasing psychological tensions and, for Freud, by-passing our internal inhibitors. In the context of workplace humour, the relief/release theory of humour is of particular relevance with regard to high-risk occupations in which it serves the therapeutic and cathartic psycho-social function of helping to cope with exceptionally difficult working conditions by alleviating the everyday tension, anxiety and stress of the job through humour.

In this context, the highly transgressive nature of humour typically associated with professional communities which confront a high level of psychological stress is a rich line of enquiry. A 2019 survey conducted by CareerCast, an online recruitment agency, classified massage therapists, librarians, hair stylists and compliance officers, along with university professors, amongst those who hold low-stress jobs which “provide decent salaries without physical risks to one’s self or others, few deadlines, and low competition from co-workers on the job”. Inversely, the four most stressful jobs, defined as “careers in which people face common fears every single day” (ibid.), concerned enlisted military personnel, firefighters, police officers and airline pilots. Other jobs also known for the high degree of stress they entail on a daily basis are healthcare practitioners (surgeons, nurses, paramedics, mental health counsellors), undertakers, and prison guards, for example. Such professions generate a form of offensive and transgressive humour – variously called “gallows humour”, “black humour”, “sick humour”, “ghoulish humour” or “dark humour” – characterised by openly joking about socially or psychologically sensitive subjects. As Watson (2011, 37) puts it, “Gallows humor treats serious, frightening, or painful subject matters in a light or satirical way. Joking about death fits the term most literally, but making fun of life-threatening, disastrous, or terrifying situations fits the category as well”.

ESP researchers’ and practitioners’ interest in black humour becomes obvious in light of the fact that it is a defining cultural feature of a number of professional communities central to ESP studies, as shown, for example, in Audrey Cartron’s chapter titled “A Study of the Psycho-Social Functions of Humour in British and American Police Forces” and

Anthony Saber's chapter on "US Military Humour as a Specialised Social and Linguistic Register". Both authors analyse the insider/outsider paradigm and the coping or stress-moderating functions that underlie the dark and offensive humour prevalent in these high-risk professions, which Barshay (1977, 57), writing with reference to cartoons, qualifies as a form of exorcism:

Perhaps one common characteristic of black humour applicable to all genres in which it is found is the transformation of the invisible into the starkly visible. [...] By wilfully attacking the jugular vein of culture, by becoming the lightning conductor of anxiety, and by embodying the moral outrage in reaction against an outrageous world, the radical sensibility exorcises the private fears, submerged fantasies and repressed taboos from the collective unconscious of society. [...] Cartoonists, like black humour, make public that which is ordinarily private through comic confrontation, and express visually that which has been suppressed imaginatively. [...] A cartoonist is a modern shaman who must perform the magic of exorcism.

Katia Peruzzo's chapter, "Who Says Talking about Depression isn't Fun?" Exploring Targets of Humour in TED Talks on Mental Disorders", discusses dark humour from a different stance, that of the patient. By choosing to analyse humour generated by patients and not health professionals, this chapter addresses one of the fundamental questions underlying ESP studies i.e. ESP specialists' familiarity with subject-domain knowledge or how specialised is "specialised"? By focusing on patients, this chapter foregrounds the relatively underexplored question in ESP studies, that of "experiential experts", i.e. "lay experts" whose expertise stems from personal experience, as opposed to professionals whose expertise comes from acquired knowledge. While it is clear that transgressive patient-generated humour fulfils the same psycho-social functions of coping and bonding as that generated by medical professionals, the focal point of interest here is that the humour is painfully self-targeted since it offers up to mockery and laughter the patient's own suffering. According to Demjén (2016, 22), writing in the context of cancer patients, joking about their health problems not only affords tension release for suffering patients, but enables them "to empower themselves, in the sense that, while they cannot control the physical changes, they can exert some control over the psychological impact these have on them". In this form of patient-generated, self-directed humour we note a significant shift in the insider/outsider paradigm in that transgressive humour generated by professionals working in high-risk contexts is habitually reserved for insider consumption only,

whereas in the case of the TED Talks analysed, these mental patients offer their self-inflicting humour to an audience of outsiders (albeit virtual, invisible and anonymous).

ESP scholars came late to considering humour to be a significant component of the specialised language, discourse and culture of professional/specialised communities, no doubt because humour is deemed “trivial” compared to the more scientific branches of ESP as specialised genres, terminology and syntax. But the link between humour and specialisms has been gathering interest over the years as illustrated by the growing number of research articles and titles published, particularly in the fecund area of the law, e.g. *Lowering the Bar: Lawyer Jokes and Legal Culture* by Marc Galanter (2005), or *Judges, Judging and Humour* by Sharyn Roach Anleu and Jessica Milner Davis (2018).

ESP examines the language, discourse and culture of professional communities in relation to their specialised knowledge and how they communicate about it and amongst themselves. The specialised content/language nexus thus becomes the rallying point around which members forge their group identity, leading to the inevitable insider/outsider power dynamics. In this context, specialised language plays a primordial role. While the dual nature of gate-keeping – exclusion and control but also inclusion and facilitation – is emphasised with regard to other disciplines, in linguistics it is essentially seen as primarily exclusionary and Bourdieusian. This is accentuated in the case of specialised discourse communities in that, given the prescriptive nature of specialised genres, the gate-keeping function of specialised language often serves to grant or refuse access on the basis of whether entrants can not only “walk the walk but also talk the talk” (Fought 2005). Workplace humour likewise plays an important role in fostering constructive or negative insider/outsider dynamics. In this respect, specialised humour is an even tougher gate-keeper because of its “historical, retrospective, and reflexive character” (Fine and de Soucey 2005, 1) based on a host of “embedded, interactive and referential” (ibid.) elements related to specific knowledge, language and discourse, and workplace culture, not to mention the personal intuitive capacity to seize allusions to shared specialised references. As demonstrated by Michel Van der Yeught in the chapter titled “Deciphering Insider/Outsider Humour in Specialised Languages: the Intentional Approach”, such specialised humour – like specialised language, discourse and culture itself – is a shibboleth which presents a serious gatekeeping challenge for all entrants, whether native or non-native speakers.

The identity shaping insider/outsider dynamics of humour becomes all the more intense in the context of Goffman's (1961) "total institutions" which refer to social systems isolated from wider society where life is organised around strict norms, regulations and schedules specific to the institution. Prisons, monasteries, and military units (see Anthony Saber in this volume) are typical examples of deliberately marginalised total institutions. Silvia Molina-Plaza's contribution, titled "Funny Tales from the Sea: A Multimodal and Cognitive Approach to Humour in the Marine Engineering Context" analyses humour in the most emblematic of total institutions, ships and submarines, providing insights into how humour reflects working conditions on board and shapes projections of professional self-identity.

Insider/outsider gatekeeping functions of specialised humour also fluctuate according to whether the specialised subject domain belongs to the area of hard or soft sciences. Humour related to the hard sciences is regarded as presenting a greater insider/outsider divide in comparison to the social sciences whose content, closer to human and social interests, is relatively more accessible to non-specialists. US lawyer jokes, surely the most prolific area of specialised humour, are generated by and for a general public largely familiar with American legal culture, as demonstrated by Miguel Ángel Campos-Pardillos' chapter in this volume on humour in legal English.

The hard sciences are, nevertheless, also adept at creating humour embedded in their specialisations. In the field of artificial intelligence (AI), robots are apparently being endowed with a sense of humour, thus validating French Nobel scientist Pierre-Gilles de Gennes' (2012) claim that science is "une histoire d'humour"<sup>1</sup>. Such humour is generally perceived as being notoriously difficult of access for non-specialists due to the highly technical nature of subject-domain content. However, accessibility fluctuates according to the level of specialised knowledge as we see in the following examples of question-and-answer joke cycles compiled by LabNotes: (9) represents chemistry humour with a relatively low gatekeeping function since even outsiders can appreciate the humorous twist given to the specialised terms used; (10) functions at an intermediate level since not everybody links carbon to diamonds; (11) and (12), on the other hand, clearly qualify as tough gatekeepers which single out the non-specialists:

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<sup>1</sup> A play on words in French between the quasi-homophonic/homographic "une histoire d'amour" (a story of love) and "une histoire d'humour" (a story of humour).

- (9) Q: What do you do with a sick chemist?  
A: If you can't helium, and you can't curium, then you might as well barium.
- (10) Q: What element is a girl's future best friend?  
A: Carbon.
- (11) Q: What was Avogadro's favorite sport?  
A: Golf, because he always got a mole-in-on.
- (12) Q: Why did the white bear dissolve in water?  
A: Because it was polar!

The same insider/outsider gradations in accessibility to specialised humour can be seen even in the daunting field of quantum physics: in the examples below from the *Quantum Jokes* website, (13), related to the term "quark" evoked in Larissa Manerko's chapter on scientific humour titled "Humour in Scientific Academic Discourse", is of general access, while the specialised humour behind (14) acts as a gatekeeper which makes it accessible only to quantum physicists:

- (13) Q: What noise does a quantum duck make?  
A: Quark Quark.
- (14) Q: What's a quantum physicist's favourite trend?  
A: Plancking.

The use of humour as a teaching tool in ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) is a well-documented and rich area of research. Overall, and in spite of reservations regarding appropriateness (Deneire, 1995; Wanzer et al, 2006), there is an extensive body of research which shows that humour in the language classroom is generally perceived by both teachers and learners as favourable to positive classroom dynamics and effective in promoting linguistic and cultural acquisition in the Target Language, a dual function summed up by Harakchiyska and Borisova (2020, 0771) when they write, "In the field of second language (L2) teaching and learning, humour is viewed as a factor that increases the motivation of students, that creates a conducive learning environment, or that facilitates the process of acquisition of the target language grammar and vocabulary". Additionally, for Wanzer et al (2006, 179-180) "use of humor in the classroom has been linked to improved perceptions of the teacher, enhanced quality of the

student/teacher relationship, higher teaching evaluations, and affective learning [...].”

With regard to ESP studies, EAP (English for Academic Purposes) is the field which has shown the most interest for this area of research. Belinda Crawford Camiciottoli pursues this line of enquiry in a chapter titled “Analysing Humour Across ESP Genres and Discourse Domains: An Exploratory Corpus-assisted Analysis” in which she compares humour present in three instruction/informational genres: university lectures, TED Talks, and Talks at Google. Curiously, given that ESP is traditionally a classroom-based discipline, the use of humour in other disciplines of ESP teaching appears to be a less documented area of research, with the exception of occasional accounts of classroom practices such as, for example, Mathieson and Bolstad’s (2020) account of humour in medical English classes. Even in the area of law where lawyer jokes abound, there is relatively little literature about research into the pedagogical use of this unique phenomenon. Building up on his experience of remote teaching during lockdowns, Miguel Ángel Campos-Pardillos contributes to filling this vacuum in his chapter titled “Learning Legal Language Through Humour: I Wish You a (reasonably) Merry Christmas, And a Happy New Year (Twelve (12) Months from the Date Hereof)” in which he describes a preliminary experimental protocol set up to test to what extent exercises based on a wide range of US lawyer jokes can stimulate learner motivation and engagement while developing both legal language and culture proficiency in a potentially tedious context.

Just as language competency is the sum of its linguistic, socio-linguistic, discursive, pragmatic and cultural parts, humour competency – i.e. the capacity to recognise, comprehend, appreciate, respond to, and produce humour – relies on all the language competency subsets mentioned above, plus the God-given gift of possessing a sense of humour: one may be a native or ambilingual speaker and still fail to get the joke!

In this respect, it is national cultures which often prove to be a formidable humour barrier as evidenced by the large body of literature devoted to failed humour in cross-cultural contexts. In the ESP context, the place of culture, whether specialised or national, is largely dependent on the approach adopted. On the one hand, we have the traditional narrow-angled lexico-grammatical approach largely prevalent in countries of the Anglosphere that aims at equipping foreign workers and students with the minimal linguistic competency required to perform their jobs in the host country (ESL or foreign context). Humour studies here are of little relevance. On the other hand, we have the broad-angled holistic European

approach based on a language-discourse-culture triangulation that is often designed for learners at academic level in their country of origin (tertiary EFL in domestic contexts), and aims to turn them into fully functioning members of an international discourse community (Isani and Wozniak 2020). In the context of the latter, professional or otherwise specialised culture related to the people, places, institutions, landmark events, values, rites and rituals, past and present issues, etc., of the target professional culture plays a crucial role in achieving the objective of integrating the community, as does developing a relevant humour competence.

A key issue with regard to ESP humour is its relation to native or otherwise “general” humour. As underlined by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) in their seminal work on the subject, ESP is not a language created *ex nihilo* but arises from and is embedded in English for General Purposes. Likewise, if admittedly specialised humour can be self-contained (e.g. the frequent chemistry joke “Question: What is HIJKLMNO? Answer: H<sub>2</sub>O”), specialised humorous references are often embedded in native or “general” cultures. In a reversal of the usual lay/specialist situation, it is the non-native specialist’s deficit with regard to this latter cultural framework which becomes a humour barrier, as illustrated by the following jokes which were part of a classroom activity for 3rd year law-and-advanced language students: (15) and (16) are legal jokes which refer to the archaic, often perplexing and much debated role of the barrister/solicitor tandem in Britain’s legal culture. The students, well-versed in the professional culture of the British legal system, had little difficulty seizing the humour underlying (15), but tended to trip over the suggestive pun on “briefs” and “solicitor” in (16) in which specialised legal humour spills over into the general domain; on the other hand, concerning (17), a positively connoted humorous reference popular on the occasion of the first mixed marriage in the British Royal family, and totally transparent for the British lay public at least, none of the students present managed to catch the richly layered pun of “makes a ginger snap”:

- (15) An IT expert asked a user to choose a password of 8 characters.  
The user replied: “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves”  
“I can see that you are a Solicitor.”  
“Yes, you’re right. But how did you know?”  
“The answer you gave is 100% accurate and 100% useless.”
- (16) Is a lady barrister without her briefs a solicitor?
- (17) I hope they serve cookies at the Royal Wedding this weekend.  
Just to show how a touch of brown sugar makes a ginger snap.

ESP was, for a long time, considered to be “accultural” (Kavalir 2013). However, this was to forget that in the diversified global discourse communities of ESP, specialised cultures constitute the common cultural denominator for the scattered members of professional communities. Accordingly, it may reasonably be argued, the culture-specific aspects of native Anglosphere societal cultures from which the language arose matter little compared to the specialised culture which unites a Czech, a Spaniard and a Belgian involved in negotiations carried out in English regarding EU pesticide regulations. That is certainly true, but only to an extent since national cultures associated with the English language or Classical cultures continue to occupy a space in ESP culture (see Van der Yeught in this volume), albeit an increasingly unstable one. Consequently, professional interaction in multicultural contexts is mined by underlying cultural power dynamics as, for example, establishing which national culture to consider the culture of reference in situations of discourse which extend beyond the locus of production. In this respect, Laurence Harris’s chapter titled “‘My Word is my CDO-squared’: Bankspeak Humour in the Governor of the Bank of England’s Mansion House Speeches” provides interesting insights into the cultural undercurrents of high-level public speaking today. Amongst other significant elements, the chapter underlines the fact that while the audience of bankers, financiers and specialised journalists are all probably familiar with the specialised reference to “My word is my CDO-squared” mentioned in the Governor’s annual speech from Mansion House, for many of the primary and secondary addressees in the global village of economics and finance, the typically English humour behind the recurrent cricketing metaphors definitely represents a “googly”!

To our knowledge, *ESP and Humour* is the first title to gather together chapters relating to humour from different ESP domains within the covers of a single volume. The cross-disciplinary approach which characterises the editing of this volume reflects that of ESP studies and the increasing inter- and multi-disciplinarity of ESP subject-domains as, for example, the ever-expanding field of environmental sciences which includes not only biology, chemistry and geology but also geography, economics and political science, not to mention a host of adjunct disciplines. In the same cross-disciplinary approach, by leafing through the pages of this volume, researchers interested in gallows humour in the medical field can gather insights into the same form of humour in other fields like the military and the police forces. Likewise, using specialised jokes for teaching law classes may inspire teachers of other ESP subject domains to do the same. Seen in this light, we would like to describe this volume as a study of humour in and across the disciplines.

The chapters presented in this volume are a wide-open invitation to pursue humour research in the diverse fields of ESP studies. Apart from further exploration of humour in the subject domains presented in this volume, there are a host of others brimming with humour analysis potential which have not been touched upon here, e.g. economics (that dismal science?), philosophy (“How do philosophy students feel when they fail an exam on empiricism? Hume-iliated”), or mathematics (e.g. the well-known one-liner, “I’ll do algebra, and I’ll do trig. I’ll even do statistics. But graphing is where I draw the line!”), in addition to hundreds more recorded in the astonishing number of books on the subject). Computer science is yet another area rife with humour: computer jokes related to computer instruction for children, as, “What does Steve Jobs like to order from McDonald’s? A big Mac”, and “How did the prisoner escape computer jail? He pressed the escape key” or, on a more sophisticated plane, “Bill Gates teaches a kindergarten class to count to ten: “1, 2, 3, 3.1, 95, 98, ME, 2000, XP, Vista, 7, 8, 10”. Not to mention the emerging passion for discovering “Easter eggs”<sup>2</sup>, i.e. little nuggets which the irrepressible humour of IT engineers buries deep down in search engines (*The Economist*, April 30th 2022).

ESP support disciplines also present rich potential with regard to humour analysis. One noteworthy example in this context is the highly complex field of translation studies which, according to Chiaro (2017, 428), “can be seen as a problem-solving activity that, in itself, as a process, is riddled with problems”. Inevitably, it is anecdotal translation errors, especially with regard to machine translation (MT), which largely fuel humour in this field. There are the howlers (e.g. the apocryphal MT back translation from English into Russian of “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” resulting in “The vodka is good, but the meat is rotten”), but also the pearls as, for example, the computer-generated riddle, “What do you call a strange market? A bizarre bazaar”. Already “polyhedral” in nature (Martinez Sierra and Terran 2017), translation studies in humour have considerably broadened their domains of application with the new internet genres such as memes and image macros, for example, which present translators with new challenges. Additionally, a more epistemological approach to humour and translation scholarship addresses the complex question of how the theories, approaches and methods underlying translation studies adapt to a domain as intricately language- and culture-bound as humour.

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<sup>2</sup> Google, in particular, has hidden small humorous features and games called “Easter eggs” in its pages. E.g. if one types “askew” into the Google search tab, the results appear askew on the screen.

And finally, in a self-reflexive meta perspective, academic research itself represents a promising field of humour analysis research, as illustrated in this volume by Larissa Manerko's chapter on humour in titles and abstracts of scientific research articles. Heard (2014) and Berk (2018) suggest moving away from the "arcane and unintelligible" (ibid. 60) style sacrosanct to scientific research writing towards a lighter more humoristic approach, with greater promotional "catch, retain and recall" potential. Though not all scientific journal editors endorse humour in abstracts, the trend concerning research article titles has clearly moved away from the practice of squeezing a maximum number of key words into resultingly incomprehensible titles towards creating titles which reflect a degree of humour – as evidenced by a number of humorous titles in this volume.

To conclude, we would like to say how much we enjoyed editing this volume. First of all because few editors of scientific publications get to enjoy the rare privilege of working on a "fun" subject like laughter and jokes or sharing the daily pleasure of being immersed in the stimulating humour encountered across chapters and disciplines. And secondly, in a more epistemological perspective, because this foray into a relatively underexplored aspect of ESP studies brings to light the importance of the psycho-social functions of humour in the workplace and the essential role it plays in the creation, consolidation and perpetuation of specialised communities. In this respect, specialised humour places itself on par with language, discourse and culture as an invaluable means of gaining meaningful insights into the ethos of specialised communities.

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**PART I**  
**COURT JESTERS**



## CHAPTER ONE

### LEARNING LEGAL LANGUAGE THROUGH HUMOUR:

I WISH YOU A (REASONABLY) MERRY CHRISTMAS,  
AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR  
(TWELVE (12) MONTHS FROM THE DATE HEREOF)

MIGUEL ÁNGEL CAMPOS-PARDILLOS

#### **Introduction**

Using a humour-based approach to language learning is a well-documented area of research (Powell and Andresen 1985, Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2011), but less so in the context of languages for specific purposes (LSP). In this chapter we seek to narrow this gap through an exploratory experiment carried out as part of on-going research on humour and law. We look at the possibilities offered by humour in teaching legal English, either in itself or as the foundation of legal translation courses. After a general overview of the role of humour as a means of introducing specialised terminology and content-specific knowledge and the potential problems entailed by the use of humour in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching contexts, we review the specific case of humour in law and legal language. We then present classroom-based research regarding a number of teaching activities aimed at creating awareness of the relationship between humour and law, as well as potential negative or passive responses to humour-based language strategies aimed at learning legal language through a metalinguistic approach.

## **Humour and ESP: A novel way to approach specialised domains**

The response to the question as to whether humour is an effective teaching tool in the ESP classroom should, in principle, be in the affirmative. Different authors have pointed out the numerous and varied arguments in favour of its use, such as the fact that humour holds learners' attention, contributes to creating a positive environment, encourages student involvement, and fosters an image of the teacher as a communicator. To this may be added Powell and Andresen's all-important finding that humour in the classroom helps learners to understand and remember what they are learning (1985, 80). Additionally, and on another plane, teachers may need to consider adopting humour in the classroom since empirical studies carried out in tertiary education contexts show that a humour-based teaching approach plays an important role in conditioning student course evaluations (Bryant et al. 1980; Wanzer and Frymier 1999).

Humour presents a certain advantage in the context of LSP teaching, notably with regard to the ever-present, all-pervading question of subject domain proficiency: in the ESP classroom, the teacher is, generally speaking, not a specialist in the learner's specialism (whether business, medicine or law) and humour can be a way to lessen the burden of disciplinary inadequacy which ESP teachers often face. This may, likewise, apply to the learners as well, either because they are in the initial stages of their learning process (i.e. in the first years of their university degrees), or because, in certain cases, they will never be "specialists" as is the case of legal English for linguists or translators, one of the categories analysed in this chapter. In such contexts, the complexity of the specialism and resulting sense of inadequacy may be allayed by the use of humour (Deneire 1995; Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2011).

Humour may also be a way of diminishing apprehension related to certain specialisms which, due to their very nature, are linked to the learners' innermost fears, such as medicine and law. These are subject domains which concern the life, ruin or death of human beings, where miscommunication can result in loss of assets or freedom. Additionally, the general perception of the "seriousness" of law and medicine is enhanced among learners by teaching approaches which emphasise the disastrous consequences a single mistake may entail. While we would not argue with this, such images of doom are rarely conducive to learners developing a positive impression about areas they know little about. On the contrary, we believe that the same reasons that lead to the very existence of jokes about law and medicine – to quote scientist Neils Bohr,

“Some subjects are so serious that one can only joke about them”; cited in Pais 2000, 24) – might be used to broach such areas and the specific language appertaining to them.

### **Reservations about the use of humour (and how to offset them)**

In view of the apparent agreement about the benefits of humour in teaching, the question arises as to why it is not more frequently resorted to. According to Morrison (2008, 72), teachers are affected by a sort of “humourphobia”, a fear of using humour in the classroom due to factors such as lack of time, appearing non-professional, losing control of the class, a feeling of inadequacy, or even fear of administrative reprisals for being “frivolous” in classroom settings. Such fears are probably an instance of the “humour paradox”, which the same author describes as placing “a high value on humour”, while at the same time harbouring reservations that prevent us from “initiating and sustaining humor practice” (op. cit., 73). In this respect, even learners, while generally supportive of humour, recognise that excessive use may lead to saturation and lack of motivation (Gonulal 2018, 156).

Using humour undoubtedly entails risk and, almost invariably, even scholars writing about the positive aspects of humour warn of the potential pitfalls involved (see, for instance, Lovorn and Holaway 2015). This, however, is an extension of what happens in real life: as a taboo-breaker and an anti-system form of transgressive discourse, humour often has uneasy relations with the powers that be. In the past, in spite of their official role, jesters or “licensed fools” were banished, flogged or hanged when their jokes were not to the taste of their masters (Otto 2007, 133ff). In modern times, civil or criminal actions have been brought against comedians for defamation (Atkinson 1992; Glasberg 1989), or glorification of terrorism, and the courts, including the European Court of Human Rights (Leroy v France), have ruled that states may impose restrictions on what is acceptable as humour in order to protect those aggrieved. At both ends of the ideological spectrum, there are considerations of political correctness and good taste: humour is not necessarily “polite”, and dealing with taboo topics, such as bodily functions, sex, gender or race may easily offend. As pointed out by Ridanpää (2020, 298ff), even at the height of the pandemic and its heavy death toll, Covid-19 attracted humour. Such reasons help to explain why some teachers would prefer to play it safe by eschewing humour in the classroom.

Another serious concern linked to the use of humour is that, more often than not, it plays on stereotypes, thus enhancing the risk that people are often disposed to believe that jokes, however stereotypical, still contain “valid cultural information” (Deneire 1995, 288). This is invariably the case of ethnic/nationality humour, which tends to create ready-made views of groups (see, for instance, Weaver 2011). More important from the point of view of LSP teaching, this also applies to the professions, which are often ridden with clichés in popular culture and fiction. Similarly, jokes based on stereotypes have preyed on various trades and professions; probably the most common jokes are those about politicians – a universally distrusted profession – already present in ancient Greek comedy (Storey 1998). It comes as no surprise to see that some of the jokes told about politicians are transposed to lawyers (another ill-perceived profession), as we see by comparing a joke about politicians with one of the jokes in our sample:

Three men were arguing about which represented the oldest profession. The first stated that the first act involving man was a surgical act—the carving of a rib out of Adam to create Eve. Therefore, as a surgeon, he represented the oldest profession. The second claimed that before this act could have taken place, someone needed to bring order out of chaos. Since this is an engineering job, he claimed that as an engineer he was a representative of the oldest profession. The third smiled at the other two and said, “Gentlemen, I am a politician—and where do you think the chaos came from in the first place?” (Preston 1975, 234)

A physician, an engineer, and an attorney were discussing who among them belonged to the oldest of the three professions represented. The physician said, “Remember, on the sixth day God took a rib from Adam and fashioned Eve, making him the first surgeon. Therefore, medicine is the oldest profession.” The engineer replied, “But, before that, God created the heavens and earth from chaos and confusion, and thus he was the first engineer. Therefore, engineering is an older profession than medicine.” Then, the lawyer spoke up. “Yes,” he said, “But who do you think created all of the chaos and confusion?”

There are also jokes based on clichés about many other professions. Doctors, for instance, are sometimes described as cynical or venal (Maurin et al. 2014), accountants are allegedly dull and boring (Miley and Read 2012), bankers are money-hungry, and real estate agents and car salesmen are inveterate fraudsters (Davies 2011). Not all stereotypes come from outside the professions: there are frequent examples of intra-professional

targeting also with some subgroups preying on others: for instance, studies on doctor jokes told by doctors themselves show that anaesthetists are portrayed as lazy coffee-drinkers, surgeons as tyrannical, and psychiatrists as mentally deranged (Maurin et al. 2014).

As said earlier, humour based on gender stereotypes is particularly questionable. In addition to the damaging effects of gender-based humour (see, for instance, Hemmasi et al. 1994), there is the fact that tolerance for this type of humour is clearly decreasing among Western societies. An important point that teachers need to bear in mind in connection with humour based on gender stereotypes is that reactions do not arise only with regard to learners' gender, but also with their ideological stance (Sev'er and Ungar 1997), which might not be apparent at first sight. In this context, the age divide between the teacher and the learners is usually a relevant factor (as noted, for instance, by Berk 2002, 12), since gender jokes that were perfectly normal and acceptable when the teacher was a student are highly unlikely to be so anymore (for rape jokes, see Lockyer and Savigny 2019).

Regarding the use of humour in L2 language learning, another limitation which has been aptly pointed out in the literature is the intercultural component. Humour is usually developed by native speakers, and therefore its reception and enjoyment by L2 speakers is conditioned by humour competence in the second language, a competence which is simultaneously linguistic, social and cultural (Bell 2007, 28). However, as pointed out by the same author (Bell and Attardo 2010), irritation and misunderstanding, while possible, are not as frequent as may have been expected, and accommodation may occur, something also found in previous studies (Davies 2003).

## **Law and humour**

The relationship between law and humour can be a surprising one: within the profession, humour is not particularly favoured, least of all in legal training (Offer et al. 2017, 253). Indeed, there have been instances of judges ordered off cases because of their failed attempts at being funny, such as the unfortunate suggestion that an Arab defendant might depart on a flying carpet (BBC News 2007). This does not mean that legal professionals do not use humour: they certainly do, like many other professions (Schmitz 2002, 99), if only to psychologically survive the stress of their daily tasks (Seto 2012, 2).

Nevertheless, what is particularly striking, at least as seen from other countries, is the number of jokes in the United States about lawyers, especially towards the end of the 20th century. For instance, given the bad reputation of real estate agents and car salespeople (who have inherited the bad name of horse-traders of the past), people from other countries might not understand the sub-text of these two-liners:

- (1) Q: Why did God invent lawyers?  
A: So that real estate agents would have someone to look down on.
  
- (2) Q: What are lawyers good for?  
A: They make used car salesmen look good.

Some scholars have attempted to explain why, in spite of the wide-reaching influence of American culture, legal humour has not been “exported”, like other types of jokes or cultural images. Davies (2008, 327) hypothesises that this is due to the fact that lawyers are “commonplace” in many countries, whereas in the USA the legal system is entrusted with finding the solution to problems that, in other countries “are the business of politicians, welfare agencies, the ombudsman, and arbitrators”. This may indeed be said about societal issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, etc., which have eventually come to be determined in the USA by the Supreme Court and not by legislators, as is the case in other countries. However, this runs counter to the fact that most, if not all the jokes, do not target Supreme Court Justices but everyday lawyers handling divorces, theft, forgery, etc. One explanation may lie with the fact that the USA is seen as probably the most litigious nation on earth, a concept which is not necessarily supported by evidence (at least, not of the type available to the general public), but widely accepted because of folklore and media dissemination (Galanter 2005, 5). What is certainly true is that the negative image of the US lawyer has been incessantly projected for years and is now an integral part of the global perception of American legal culture. Interestingly though, it is closely linked to its American sources and does not seem to have led to similar humour in other countries. In the teaching context of English for Legal Purposes (ELP), this culture-specific aspect of lawyer jokes regarding American lawyers makes it necessary to situate the phenomenon as a culture-specific aspect of the US legal system and so endeavour to contain the tendency for learners to over-generalise to other – including their own – legal cultures as well (see Isani 2011).