

**Humour in Selected Egyptian
Workplaces:
A Socio-Pragmatic Study**

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Abstract

Humour may occur in all kinds of human interactional processes, and its use creates a positive relationship among participants. The present study deals with humour in selected Egyptian workplaces from a socio-pragmatic perspective. It investigates the kinds of humour, whether supportive or contestive, used in three kinds of Egyptian workplaces and their functions. The study also presents a quantitative analysis of the kind of humour in each of the three settings. The study reveals many results, one of which is that in the analyzed Egyptian workplaces, supportive humour is used more than contestive humour.

Key words: Egyptian workplaces, contestive humour, supportive humour

المخلص

الفكاهة في أماكن عمل مصرية مختارة: دراسة اجتماعية تداولية

قد تظهر الفكاهة في كل أنواع الاتصال الانساني واستخدامها يخلق علاقة إيجابية بين المشاركين. ويهدف هذا البحث الي دراسة الفكاهة في أماكن عمل مصرية مختارة من المنظور الاجتماعي التداولي. فهو يدرس أنواع الفكاهة المستخدمة، سواء كانت داعمة أو اعتراضية، في ثلاثة أنواع من أماكن العمل المصرية ووظائفها. كما تقدم الدراسة تحليل كمي لأنواع الفكاهة المستخدمة في كل نوع من أماكن العمل الثلاث. وتوصلت الدراسة الي العديد من النتائج، منها أن في أماكن العمل المصرية قيد الدراسة يتم استخدام الفكاهة الداعمة أكثر من الفكاهة الاعتراضية.

(1) Introduction

Humour is a phenomenon that occurs in the daily conversations of all humans. Sometimes, the interaction process succeeds because of the humorous utterances or actions used by the participants. Thus, humour occurs in all kinds of social settings, one of which is workplaces. In such settings, humour is used as a way of creating a positive relationship among participants, and in getting work done smoothly. The present study is an attempt to study the kinds of humour used, and their frequency of occurrence in selected Egyptian workplaces.

(2) Aims and Methodology

Humour may occur nearly in all kinds of Egyptian workplaces. It occurs as one result of the participants' daily interaction. Thus, humour is a collaborative activity and a spontaneous one which is used to decrease tension and get the work done easily.

The present study aims at investigating the kinds and functions of humour that occur in selected Egyptian workplaces using the conversation analysis (CA) techniques. The study also presents a quantitative analysis of the kinds of humour that occurs in the analyzed data.

The workplaces chosen are the Faculty of Arts (FOA), Damanhour University, as an example of an academic setting, El-Ahly National bank (ANB), as an example of a financial setting, and a private trade company, as an example of a commercial setting. The data consists of 150 conversations, equally divided among the three workplaces. The length of the collected conversations is twelve hours, and the participants are all Egyptians. The focus is only on the humorous parts in the collected conversations. The

conversations have been recorded after obtaining the participants' permission. In the study, they are given pseudonyms to maintain their privacy. The number of participants in the analyzed conversations range from two to three participants. They all speak Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA).

(3) Theoretical Background

Humour is a feature which is found in all cultures. It is " a kind of mental disposition" (McArthur, 1998: 281). It is usually realized verbally in the form of jokes, puns, and riddles. It can also be realized through actions or movements in daily situations. Humour is used as a way of establishing communication and interaction in various settings. It is a positive face strategy, according to Brown and Levinson (1978). This is because it signals beliefs and attitudes among participants. Thus, it enhances the sense of belonging to a common group.

Speakers in any kind of verbal interaction usually follow Grice's (1975) maxims of Co-Operative Principle in order for their communication process to succeed. These are: maxims of quality, maxim of quantity, maximum of relation, and maxim of manner. Humour occurs in daily conversations if one of these maxims is violated. These violations are done on purpose to arouse a humorous effect in all kinds of settings, whether institutional or non-institutional (Zajdman, 1995: 331).

Humour is a "distinct discursive mode" (Crawford, 2003: 1419). Mulkay (1988) distinguishes between "the serious mode of discourse", where there is only a single reality that could be agreed upon in an ongoing interaction.

In this mode, speakers explain something, express an opinion, or provide information. The second mode is "the humour mode", which is a kind of controlled nonsense. Serious and humour modes can be easily distinguished linguistically by markers that signal the shift from one mode to another, such as "hear this...", "listen to this one...", as well as the speaker's tone of voice (Holmes, 2000: 163).

Any workplace has certain values and rules that govern participants' attitudes. Thus, a given workplace is said to have certain cultural values that includes "its social heritage, rules of behavior, customs and tradition" (Smircich, 1983: 339). This kind of knowledge is shared by all participants in a given workplace (Attrado, 1994; Clouse and Spurgeon, 1995: 3; Raskin, 1985).

A term related to a workplace setting is "the community of practice" that refers to a group of people who are engaged together in performing a certain act. This involvement includes ways of doing and dealing with things and knowledge (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1994: 464). Therefore, when a person joins a given workplace, rules of appropriate behavior must be learnt to correctly interact with other participants in the workplace.

Humour can occur in the workplace setting. This humour is related to contexts of use. Therefore, much of this humour can only be understood by people involved in this particular workplace. This creates solidarity among participants. It can also be used to manifest the power of the participants. So, it can signal respect and status within the group (Revell, 2007: 5).

In any workplace, one way in which participants interact is in official meetings which are held to exchange information, solve problems, or issue orders, etc. In such

meetings, humour is used to decrease tension among participants, or make them accept any bad or good news. This speeds up the decisions taken regarding the issues under discussion in these meetings. Thus, humour in the workplace maintains solidarity among participants, and expresses shared common beliefs (Kushner, 1990: 93). Hence, a strong sense of belonging is created. It can be said that humour in the workplace has a solidarity-based function (Hay, 2000: 716).

One feature of humour in the workplace is its style which relates to the participants' common ways of doing things together (Wenger, 1998: 125). One way of how people interact with each other is the way they interact in humorous situations that can either be collaborative or competitive. In the former, contributions are integrated in various ways, such as echoing, mirroring, or completing each other's utterances (Holmes & Marra, 2002: 1688). These features in humorous interactions are called "features of all-together-now" (ATN). In the latter, such interactions are called "one-at-a-time" (AAT) style of humour (Coates, 1988, 1996).

Different types of humour can also occur in a given workplace. It can either be supportive or contestive. In the former, the humorous comment agrees with or adds to the propositions in the previous utterances. However, in the latter the humorous comments challenge or disagree with the propositions in the previous utterances (Holmes & Marra, 2002: 1682; Holmes, 2006: 33-34).

Humour in the workplace has a lot of functions, one of which is to build positive relations with other participants (Holmes, 2006: 27). It is also used to amuse, express solidarity, or mitigate face threatening acts (FTAs), such as

criticisms (Kotthoff, 1996: 311; Holmes, 2006: 26). Humour is also used to manifest power relations. It is used by the more powerful to assert authority in a mitigated way. It is also used by the less powerful to express their disagreement with or objections to certain work regulations indirectly in an acceptable way so as to abide by rules of appropriate behavior at a given workplace. Humour is also used by the less powerful to challenge the more powerful to signal lack of interest (Holmes, 2000: 165; Holmes & Marra, 2002: 1690). In addition, humour is used in the workplace to relief tension and express repressed emotions, such as anger and frustration. It can also be related to feelings of superiority. For example, participants may laugh at the mistakes of their work colleagues (Ackroyd & Thompson 2003; Grindsted, 1997: 162).

There are a number of studies that dealt with various aspects of humour, such as its use in business contexts (Holmes, 2000; Holmes & Marra, 2002). There are also studies about humour and gender (Crawford, 2003; Kotthoff, 2006), as well as the relation between humour and face threatening acts (Zajdman, 1995). However, to the researcher's knowledge no study has dealt with the kind and functions of humour in the Egyptian workplace.

(4) Analysis

In this section, some of the humorous parts of the conversations under analysis are analyzed. In the analyzed extracts, the participants' conversations are first written in ECA, and followed by the English translation.

Extract (1) (In the private trade company, the manager is talking with his secretary about a cheque)

المدير: لازم تخاطبي الشركة تاني علشان حد ياخذ الشيك بتاعنا.
السكرتيرة: انا طلبتهم إمبراح والسكرتيرة بتقول إن الشيك نائص على إمضة المدير والمدير إمبراح مجاش.

المدير: يا تري ده صدفة ولا إيه؟ (ضحك)

السكرتيرة: واضح انه " ولا إيه". (ضحك)

The manager: You must talk to the company again so one can go and take our cheque.

The secretary: I called them yesterday, and the secretary told me that the cheque is missing the manager's signature, who didn't go yesterday.

The manger: Is this a coincidence or what? (laughs)

The secretary: It is obvious that it's "or what". (laughs)

In this extract, the manager is asking about a cheque his company is supposed to get from another company. The secretary clarifies that the cheque is missing the signature of the other company's manager. Thus, the manager asks humorously if this is a coincidence. The secretary also responds humorously using the ECA tag question, "or what". Humour is achieved by the collaborative interaction between the two participants to criticize the behavior of the other company's manager. The secretary's humorous response is supportive to the manager's question. She uses repetition in "or what" to indicate her agreement with the manager's opinion. The humour used indicates solidarity between the manager and his secretary.

Extract (2) (In the private trade company, the manager is talking with his employees about a report)

المدير: ياللا يا جماعة خلصوا التقرير اللي في ايديكم.
محمد: حاضر.
علي: حاضر إحنا مش بنلعب.
المدير: مانا شايف إن أنتم هاريين نفسكم شغل. (ضحك)
علي: شفت أديك اعترفت. (ضحك)
محمد: أبوة. (ضحك)
المدير: ماشي خلصوا بأه. (ضحك)

Adel: Come on folks finish the report in your hands.

Mohamed: Ok.

Aly: Ok. we're not playing.

Adel: I can see. You overwork. (laughs)

Aly: See. You confess. (laughs)

Mohamed: Yes. (laughs)

Adel: Ok. Finish your work. (laughs)

In extract (2), the manager wants the other two employees, Mohamed and Aly, to finish a report. The two employees respond humorously saying "Ok", and then add "*We're not playing*" to show that he does not like being pushed to finish quickly. This reflects that they share the same values and attitudes regarding their work. The manager, then, criticizes them humorously saying, "*I can see. You overwork*". He says this to draw their attention indirectly that they must work harder and faster. Aly responds humorously saying, "*You confess*", and Mohamed expresses his agreement by "Yes". This is jointly constructed humour used to show that they do not like being criticized for their late work. Thus, humour is used, in this part of the conversation, to express their disagreement with the manager's proposition that they do not work hard enough. Humour, in the extract, expresses a harmonious relation between Mohamed and Aly, the employees.

Therefore, humour in the workplace can also be an indirect way to refuse what superiors want or claim. In the extract, humour used is contestive because it is used by the manager to criticize the way the other two participants do their work, who also use humour indirectly to challenge what the manager says.

Extract (3) (In the private trade company, the manager is talking with his secretary about the signature of a letter by the company's owner)

المدير: مضيت الجواب من الرئيس الكبير صاحب الشركة؟
السكرتيرة: أيوه طبعا.
المدير: طبعا اره كل كلمة؟
السكرتيرة: طبعا ما هو الرئيس الكبير بأه. (ضحك)
المدير: ايوة طبعا. (ضحك)

The manager: have you signed the letter form the big boss, the company's owner?

The secretary: Yes, of course.

The manager: Of course, he read every word?

The secretary: Of course. He is the big boss.(laughs)

The manager: Yes, of course. (laughs)

In this extract, the executive manager asks the secretary if a given letter has been signed from the company's owner. The secretary says with a laugh that he- the company's owner- has read every word in it saying "*Of course. He is the big boss*". It is obvious that the two participants share the same negative attitude towards the company's owner. They are both satirical in their humorous comments regarding their manager. This also shows that they indirectly criticize him. The humour manifested in the

extract is supportive because the two participants agree with each other in their negative evaluation and satire concerning the company's owner.

Extract (4) (In FOA, a staff member is asking his colleague about the whereabouts of another colleague).

دكتور محمد (باللهجة العربية الفصحى): سأذهب لأجري مكالمة تليفونية.
دكتور باسل: اتفضل يا دكتور.
دكتور شهدي: فين دكتور محمد؟
دكتور باسل (بلهجة عربية فصحى): ذهب ليجري مكالمة تليفونية. (ضحك)

Dr. Mohamed: (using Classical Arabic) I will go to make a phone call.

Dr. Basel: Go ahead doctor.

Dr. Shohdy: Where is dr. Mohamed?

Dr. Basel (using Classical Arabic): He went to make a phone call. (laughs)

In extract (4), When Dr. Shohdy asks about Dr. Mohamed, Dr. Basel uses echoing in saying, "*He went to make a phone call*". He laughs and imitates Dr. Mohamed's way of speaking, as it is known that the latter always uses Classical Arabic (CA) in his speech. In Dr. Basel's humorous answer, he makes fun and is being satirical of Dr. Mohamed's way of speaking. The humour in the extract is contestive as it expresses the speaker's negative evaluation regarding his colleague's way of speaking.

Extract (5) (In FOA, a staff member is asking his colleague about a report she is supposed to finish)

دكتور علي : يا تري اخبار التقارير إيه؟ أنا متأكد ان الدكتورة مي خلصته
ولا إيه؟
دكتورة مي: أيوه خلصتها. أنا شطورة خالص. (ضحك)

Dr. Aly: What about the reports? I'm sure Dr. Mai has finished them or what?

Dr. Mai: Yes, I finished them. I'm very hard working.
(laughs)

In the above extract, Dr. Aly is asking about the reports Dr. Mai is supposed to finish, and adds he is sure she has finished them. He uses the ECA tag question " *or what?*" He says this so as not to criticize Dr. Mai directly to maintain the positive relation between them. Dr. Mai answers humorously saying, "*Yes, I finished them. I'm very hard working*" to show that she is hard working to indicate to Dr. Mohamed that she does not postpone any work, which is the criticism he is indirectly implying. The humour used in the extract is contestive as one speaker indirectly criticizes the other, who in turn, indirectly refuses the criticism.

Extract (6) (In FOA, two staff members are not interested in attending a meeting)

دكتور محمد: ياللا بينا نحضر الاجتماع.
دكتور علي: أيوه مافيش مفر.
دكتور محمد: ياللا نقعد في الاخر علشان مش عايزين مشاكل. (ضحك)
دكتور علي: عندك حق يا دكتور. (ضحك)

Dr. Mohamed: Let's attend the meeting.

Dr. Ali: Ok. There's no way out.

Dr. Mohamed: Let's sit at the back. We don't want any trouble. (laughs)

Dr. Ali: You're right, Dr. (laughs)

In this extract, the two speakers talk about attending a meeting that they do not like to attend. Dr Mohamed says humorously "*Let's sit ... trouble*". Dr. Ali agrees with him and laughs. Both speakers share the same negative attitude concerning the meeting, and they use humour to express this. The humour they use is supportive since they agree with each other. The humour they use expresses solidarity between them, and helps in maintaining a positive relation between both of them.

Extract (7) (In ANB, a customer wants to issue a saving certificate for his son)

محمد: من فضلك أنا عايز أعمل شهادة لابني.

أحمد: تحت أمرك.

محمد: هي الفائدة لسه ٢٠%؟

أحمد: أيوة.

محمد: طيب عمل واحدة بمية و المبلغ في الحساب.

أحمد: مية بس يا فندم؟

محمد: أيوة. أنا مش البنك المركزي.. (ضحك)

أحمد: ماشي (ابتسامة)

Mohamed: Please, I want to issue a saving certificate for my son.

Ahmed: OK.

Mohamed: Is the interest still 20%?

Ahmed: Yes.

Mohamed: Ok. I'm going to issue one with one hundred thousand. The money is in the account.

Ahmed: Only one hundred thousand, sir?

Mohamed: Yes. I'm not the Central Bank. (laughs)

Ahmed: OK. (smiles)

In extract (7), Mohamed wants to issue a twenty-percent interest saving certificate for his son. When the bank employee, Ahmed, asks Mohamed if he wants it only with an amount of one hundred thousand, the latter responds humorously saying that he is not the central bank. Mohamed's humorous comment "I'm not the Central Bank" takes the form of a metaphor which increases the extent of the refusal. It can also be deduced that Mohamed expresses his desire to be rich. The humour in the extract is supportive as the bank employee agrees and smiles.

Extract (8) (In ANB, two employees are talking about women's ability to run a bank)

علي: الإدارة في البنك ده ماينفعهاش إلا رجالة.

علياء: مالهم الستات يعني؟

علي: مالهومش. (ضحك)

علياء: أبوة كل حاجة اتغيرت دلوات. (ضحك)

Ali: Administration in this bank requires only men.

Aliaa: What's wrong with women?

Ali: Nothing is wrong with them. (laughs)

Aliaa: Yes, everything has changed now. (laughs)

In the above extract, Ali has the misconception that men are better than women in administration. He implies that women are less capable than men at work. Aliaa responds humorously with a question "*What's wrong with women?*" She does this to challenge Ali's claim, and express her disagreement with him. Ali, in turn, to decrease the tension, responds saying that there is nothing wrong with women. Aliaa responds humorously saying that everything has changed nowadays. Humour is used to challenge certain

misconceptions in society. The humour used is contestive as the two participants have opposite views regarding female leadership at work.

Extract (9) (In ANB, two employees are talking about some letters)

فكري: في أخبار عن الجوابات الخاصة بالقرض ه؟
محمد: استلمتها وإديتها لمدير الإدارة.
فكري: وبعدين؟
محمد: هو حيددها لمدير البنك لأن المبلغ كبير.
فكري: أنا حاسس إن الجوابات تعبت من مكتب للتاني صعبانة عليه الجوابات دي. (ضحك)
محمد: وأنا كمان. (ضحك)

Fekry: Are there any news concerning the letters of the loan?

Mohamed: I received them and gave them to the manager of the department.

Fekry: Then?

Mohamed: He'll give them to the bank manager because the amount is big.

Fekry: I can feel that these letters got tired moving from one office to the other. I pity these letters. (laughs)

Mohamed: Me too. (laughs)

In this extract, Fekry is criticizing the red tape of the many signatures that some letters need to be signed. He criticizes the situation humorously saying, "*I can feel ... letters*". Mohamed agrees with him. Thus, he supports what Fekry is maintaining. The humour used is supportive as the two participants express their common agreement regarding red tape.

(5) Results and Discussion

The data reveals that in the Egyptian workplaces, supportive humour is used more than contestive one (84 vs 66 times). This manifests that supportive humour is preferred more to create solidarity between speakers, and to maintain a positive relation between work colleagues. It also helps in getting the work done smoothly and quickly without causing any problems. This creates a positive atmosphere in a given workplace.

Table (1) represents a quantitative analysis of the kind of humour that is used in the three kinds of workplaces; commercial, academic, and financial.

Table (1): Kinds of Humour Used in the Three Analyzed Workplaces

Setting	Supportive Humour	Contestive Humour	Total
Commercial	20 (40%)	30 (60%)	50 (100%)
Academic	29 (58%)	21 (42%)	50 (100%)
Financial	35 (70%)	15 (30%)	50 (100%)

Table (1) shows that in the three analyzed workplaces, supportive humour is used more in financial workplaces (70%), followed by academic (58%) and commercial ones (40%). This may be because of the strict laws and regulations that govern financial institutions. Thus, there is no chance to use contestive humour to disagree with or challenge something. Regarding contestive humour, it is used more in commercial workplaces (60%), followed by

academic (42%) and financial ones (30%). This is due to the competitive overt and covert relation that may exist among participants to gain more benefits in commercial institutions. This decreases in academic and financial workplaces.

Table (1) also clarifies that in the commercial setting, contestive humour is used more than supportive one (60% vs 40%). This can be attributed to the competitive relationship between participants in these settings as each participant tries to achieve the greatest benefits for himself or his company.

In the academic setting, supportive humour is used more than contestive one (58% vs. 42%). This may be because academic workplaces mainly have a conservative nature due to the formal relation between academics in these settings. This does not allow challenges or disagreements except in administrative issues that are usually governed by administrative laws.

In the financial setting, supportive humour is used more than contestive one (70% vs. 30%). This can be due to the rigid nature of laws and regulations in the financial institutions that cannot be ridiculed because financial issues are very sensitive and rules are tough. Thus, there is no place for any disagreements or challenges. In addition, many of the situations take place between customers and bank employees, and the latter are forced to agree with and abide by their customers' opinions because financial issues are personal. Also, the relation between the customers and the bank employees are formal, and this relation does not permit any challenges or disagreements.

(6) Conclusion

The study reveals that supportive humour is preferred more in the selected Egyptian workplaces than contestive humour. Supportive humour is used more in financial workplaces, followed by academic and commercial ones, while contestive humour is used more in commercial workplaces, followed by academic and financial ones. Therefore, every workplace has its own rules which are acceptable by its participants. This is reflected in the kind of humour dominant in every workplace.

In the Egyptian workplaces, humour is not only an amusing device, but has other functions, such as to maintain solidarity and mitigate face threatening acts. It can also be used by those in authority to issue orders, and to make their employees comply with them to get work done quickly and easily. Humour is also used by the less powerful to criticize orders from their superiors, or even their colleagues, or challenge them indirectly. It can be said that humour is used to indicate the hierarchical relation of power as well as the positive relations of solidarity among participants who work in the same workplace.

The data reveals that humour occurs more in the opening and closing sequences of the analyzed conversations, but not in the middle. This may be done to lighten the work tension that occurs in the opening and closing sequences. Tension occurs in the opening sequence as participants may be anxious about what the meeting will be about or the way the interview or the conversation will proceed. It may also occur in the closing sequences to create a joyful atmosphere to lighten the stress after the discussions that took place during a given meeting or a given conversation.

Humorous instances are initiated by either the more powerful and/or the less powerful employees. Thus, humour is not restricted to specific participants in the analyzed data.

Further studies can examine humour in other Egyptian workplaces. They can also analyze the linguistic devices used by participants to achieve both supportive and contestive humour in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic or in any language.

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