Hungarian teachers’ use of humour in the business classroom

Summary: Several articles have been published on the benefits of using humour in teaching. It is a common way of raising students’ attention during classes, and this can enhance memorization. Reducing the level of stress facilitates the learning process. This paper focuses on the way university lecturers employ humour in business education. The aim is to develop a taxonomy of the tactics that can be applied and the topics treated so that we can see what kind of content and arrangement can trigger a humorous effect. Special attention is paid to the linguistic tools used by teachers. The analysis is based on a corpus of over 300 humorous utterances that were recorded by university students in the classroom and later published in an in-house magazine.

Introduction

Teaching in higher education is usually not associated with humour. The issues discussed by university lecturers and professors seem to be too serious, intellectual and lofty to give rise to laughter. That could be one of the main reasons why little attention has been paid to the analysis of verbal humour in higher education. However, as this paper aims to point out, university lecturers employ a variety of tactics and topics to sound humorous, relying both on low-risk and high-risk forms of humour.

For years, students have been recording and publishing witty remarks made by university lecturers at the Faculty of Business and Economics of a Hungarian university. These humorous utterances regularly appear in the in-house published student magazine, which is available free on campus. There is usually a separate column dedicated to teachers’ wisecracks, listing the latest humorous remarks together with the name of the teacher. The analysed corpus contains over 300 humorous utterances made by 48 university lecturers between 2005 and 2008.

This paper seeks to address the following questions: (1) What/who are the usual targets of university lecturers’ humorous utterances? (2) From a linguistic...
point of view, what are the most frequent ways of creating humorous effects? (3) What are the underlying reasons for being humorous in class? (4) What is the rate of high-risk and low-risk humour in these remarks? Before elaborating on these issues, an account will be given of the results of previous studies and surveys related to the topic.

Role of humour in education

Several studies have pointed out the benefits of using humour in education. Loomans and Kohlberg (2002), for instance, devoted a whole book to the topic under the title *The Laughing Classroom*. They believe that humour is a means of projecting enthusiasm, acceptance and caring. A class – even in higher education – can easily have an atmosphere radiating monotony or even stress. Humour, however, can be an effective way to reduce tension and to awaken students’ interest.

Humour is a social phenomenon (Tancz, 2008) and the best way of coping with school (Zsolnay, Zsolnay, 1989: 124–129, cited by Tancz, 2008). Humour creates immediacy, which facilitates learning and communication in the classroom. The advantages of using humour in the classroom have become so widely accepted that nowadays humour has become a “teaching norm” in pedagogy (Torok et al., 2006, cited by Séra, 2008). It helps learning by (1) raising students’ attention, (2) reducing strain, (3) improving the attitude to the given subject, (4) developing problem-solving skills, (5) reducing disciplining problems, (6) increasing the credibility of the teacher, (7) improving teacher-student relationship, (8) creating a more supportive learning environment and a more open atmosphere (Ziv, 1998; Berk, 2000; Pollio, 2002; Powers, 2005; Garner, 2006; Shatz, LoSchiavo, 2006; Torok et al., 2006; all cited by Séra, 2008, 265–266).

However, teachers must be careful when using humour. In his book entitled *Professors are from Mars, Students are from Snickers* Berk (2003) differentiates between low-risk and high-risk forms of humour. A witty remark can be characterised as low risk if it cannot endanger one’s professional reputation and its acceptance by the audience is likely to be favourable. Berk believes that using quotations, questions, anecdotes or putting oneself down typically belong to this category. High-risk humour is usually delivered by teachers’ spontaneous responses to interruptions and distractions. These responses, however, carry the risk of distracting students from the main line of thought, and may even offend them (Berk, 2003: 22). Berk (2003) claims that offensive humour is inappropriate in the classroom since it can trigger the opposite effect. Instead of projecting a positive image and creating immediacy, this kind of humour can backfire.

Teachers are role models for students. If they habitually make funny remarks about any individual or any group based on ethnicity, race, gender, religion or sexual orientation, or touch upon sensitive issues such as AIDS, sex or abortion, or speak in a profane or vulgar manner, they project a distorted and objectionable worldview, which does not have a place in the academic world. Berk (2003: 47) suggests that academics should use self-effacing humour instead:

- **Given your lofty position as academician (...)**, such humour gives the audience the impression that you are human, real, approachable, in other words, one of them. (...) It gives your audience a feeling of comfort to see their faults reflected in a person of power like their professor or teacher. (...) It does not diminish their respect for you. (...)

You project a sense of confidence and security by being able to make fun of yourself.

At the end of the 1980’s Gorham and Christophel (1990) asked 206 American college students to take note of all the humorous remarks made by instructors during classes. They found that more than half of these utterances were tendentious: the target was a person (including the teacher, i.e. self-directed), a group of people, or an institution. Around 20% of the comments made fun of a student or the class itself as a whole, 12% targeted the instructor in the form of self-deprecating or self-defeating humour, others were related to the topic or subject of the course, the academic department, the university, the state or famous people. The remarks without any target were jokes and stories told by the teacher in class. Only 30% of all the humorous utterances could be connected to the topic of the lecture itself.

To summarize the above, humour is a wonderful tool that can enhance the learning process. Teachers, however, should be careful because certain forms of humour can easily hurt students or have a negative effect on their way of thinking. In the next section the use of humour in business education will be discussed, with special attention to students’ and teachers’ opinions.

Humour in business education

Listening to lectures can be tiring at universities. The length of a university lecture is usually 75–90 minutes, with the teacher doing most of the talking. In contrast with interactive seminars, in these sessions students are expected to take notes and listen attentively.

In Hungarian business education, most subjects are based on socio-economic and business theories, mathematical calculations, statistical methods and data analysis. There seems to be only limited scope for the teacher to indulge in humorous anecdotes. Nevertheless, as will be shown in this chapter, humour can find its place even in a business lecture.

Business students attending the Hungarian faculty under discussion were so convinced of the connection between economics and humour that they published a special issue of the student magazine on the topic. In addition to discussing the
effects of funny advertisements and the difficulties of translating humorous utterances, this special issue also discussed the importance of humour in business education. It presented, for instance, the results of a survey, in which students were asked different questions connected to humour. Two questions dealt with teaching:

1) How important is it to you that a lecturer should be humorous?

2) Which lecturer is the most humorous?

On a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 6 (very important), the average score was 4.56 to the first question. Some comments were also reported:

It is not an easy task for a twenty-year-old university student to remain seated for an hour and a half. We appreciate it if besides academic things teachers crack a joke or two. If they do so, those of us staring at our laptops or those of us who fell asleep will perk up in the middle of the lecture.

Thus, students interpreted humour as one of the basic means of preventing dullness during their lessons.

Three teachers were also interviewed on the topic of humour. The following aspects of using humour were mentioned by them: (1) the importance of considering the situation and the students (avoiding offensive remarks), (2) the contextual advantage of connecting humour to the topic of the lecture, (3) humour as a means of reducing stress, (4) the personality of the teacher as a determining factor. The teachers interviewed were aware of the benefits of a good atmosphere in class, and claimed to abstain from making offensive humorous remarks during classes. They emphasized that humour can help students understand and remember the most important points of the lecture.

To conclude, both students and teachers seem to agree on the fact that laughter can help understanding and learning. Students saw its main advantage in preventing boredom, while teachers emphasised its contextual and anxiety-reducing aspects. In short, humour not only helps keep students awake, it can also highlight the gist of what has been said.

**Forms of humour used in business education**

To understand the tools that lecturers use to make their audience laugh, a corpus of 329 humorous utterances will be analysed. The collection is based on business students’ records that were later published in a student magazine between 28 February, 2005 and 26 March, 2008. The corpus has been reviewed and filtered to avoid repetitions.

### Table 1. The main targets of university lecturers’ humorous remarks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main target</th>
<th>Cases (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course material</td>
<td>57 17.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student(s)</td>
<td>48 14.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher (self-directed)</td>
<td>47 14.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language use</td>
<td>45 13.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society and social/ethical norms</td>
<td>30 9.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching situation</td>
<td>17 5.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>15 4.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic professions</td>
<td>14 4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>14 4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General wisdom/truth</td>
<td>13 3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>10 3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse and family</td>
<td>7  2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Famous/historical people</td>
<td>6  1.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign nations/people</td>
<td>4  1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>2  0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>329 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the categorization of university lecturers’ humorous utterances. During categorization the following problems had to be faced:

- the utterances were taken out of their context; as a result, it was sometimes hard to decide what or who was originally targeted;
- some of the humorous utterances involved more than one target.

To overcome these difficulties, the cases in which the target of the humorous effect was not obvious and/or the contextual reference could not be identified were separated into a different category called “others.” Also, if more than one trigger was present, the main focus of humour was chosen. The categorization resulted in 15 categories as displayed in Table 1.

The term “target” is used in this paper as the focus of humour, which embodies the topic subject to laughter. This is at the same time the main trigger around which the context is built. In the following example, the target is the teacher:

*Ki az a hálye, aki csütörtök reggel bejön? Én, mert az a dolgom...*  
[Who is the jerk who comes in early on a Thursday morning? Me, because I have to...]

The trigger might also be the Hungarian language itself, as was often the case in the puns used by the teachers:
Table 2. The use of high-risk and low-risk humour by university lecturers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High-risk humour</th>
<th>Low-risk humour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Course material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Language use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse and family</td>
<td>Society/social norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Famous/historical people</td>
<td>Teaching situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign nations</td>
<td>Academic professions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>General wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative frequency (314 = 100%)*</td>
<td>Relative frequency (314 = 100%)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.98%</td>
<td>71.01%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*not including the category of “others.”

Pumukli mondja, hogy jobb egy ötlet, mint öt egylet.1
[Pumukli says, one idea is better than five associations.]

The examples in which language use was targeted and no other target could be identified were placed in a stand-alone category.

Table 2 presents a division of the corpus according to the extent of the potential risk embedded in the humorous utterances. The category of high-risk humour contains verbal statements that might hurt the feelings of individuals or groups of people (e.g. hints aimed at students or women). Low-risk humour is the group of neutral utterances that do not carry such inferences (e.g. referring to the course material or the teaching situation).

As can be seen from Table 2, the rate of occurrence of low-risk humour significantly exceeds that of high-risk humour. University lecturers tend to favour neutral humorous utterances, which is an obvious indication of their being aware of the morals and ethics of the teaching situation. However, the presence of utterances containing high-risk remarks shows that in certain cases teachers can deviate from the norms for the sake of sounding humorous, even in a controlled situation such as teaching. Though in most cases students do not resent listening to such remarks, this kind of humour involves the risk of offending others and might indirectly contribute to the communication of biased and stereotypical views.

1 Humour is based on the play with morphemes: egy ötlet = one idea, öt egylet = five associations; Pumukli is a well-known goblin from a TV-series made for children.

Course material
The most frequent targets of teacher’s humour were the course material and the course content itself (17.32%). The most frequent strategies used to achieve humorous effect were the following:

- personification of a concept:
  Ha szembejön a Király utcában egy függvény, mi jut eszünkbe róla először? Hát, hogy konvergál-e?
  [If you see a function approaching you on Kiraly Street, what comes to your mind first? Well, is it converging?]

- simplification or degradation of a complex issue:
  A számítástechnika olyan, mint a bikini: sok mindent megmutat, de a lényeget eltakarja.
  [Statistics is like a bikini. They reveal a lot, but hide the essence.]

- creating funny similes:
  A macska még jelenleg analóg.
  [Uptonow, the cat is still analogue.]

- using weird or funny examples:
  A macska még jelenleg analóg.
  [Up to now, the cat is still analogue.]

- applying absurdity:
  Senki sem születik úgy, hogy elvágják a köldökszinórt és megszólal, hogy 4P.
  [No one says 4Ps the minute the umbilical cord is cut.]

Humour related to course content can definitely help students memorize and remember those difficult concepts and connections that otherwise would require long and boring explanations. The latest research on the role humour plays in learning has also revealed the positive effect of humour on the course material (Séra, 2008). If students can associate boring concepts with funny interpretations, they will recall them more easily later. There are several reasons for this: (1) humorous material surprises the audience, (2) the understanding of humour requires increased elaboration, (3) humorous material is also distinctive and specific, (4)
humorous material facilitates students’ alertness (Séra, 2008). Most of the theoretical subjects in business education such as statistics, math, microeconomics and accounting involve the memorization of abstract knowledge, which can be encouraged by humour. The above examples clearly show how creative lecturers can be.

**Students**

Targeting students in humorous utterances ranked second in the list. Making funny remarks about students belongs to the category of high-risk humour. The danger is obvious: humour can easily backfire – an individual or a whole group might be hurt. Teachers nevertheless often tend to target students in their humorous utterances in class: it is a common way of disciplining and attention-raising. In the analysed corpus, most of these utterances targeted the class as a whole (35 cases), and only 13 examples could be identified in which an individual was the focus of a humorous remark. Lecturers mostly commented on students’ learning skills, their lack of motivation, undisciplined behaviour, their low level of alertness, their youth or passiveness in class. It should be pointed out, however, that all of the recorded comments were made to generate laughter and did not ridicule anyone.

Examples:

A múltkori zh-val az volt a legnagyobb baj, hogy nem tudták megoldani a feladatot. 
[The biggest problem with the latest test was that you couldn’t solve it.]

Az önök beszédét számítjuk pozitív korrelációt mutat az enyémmel, ami azt jelenti, hogy ha én beszélünk, akkor önök is.
[There is a positive correlation between your speaking skills and mine: we both talk at the same time.]

Ha olyan eredményesen tanulnának, ahogy felejtenek...
[If you could learn as easily as you forget...]

(Diavetítés közben) Mindenki bírta írni? Esetleg olvasni is?
[(During a slide-show) Could everyone write it down? And also maybe read it?]  

Compared to the findings of Gorham and Christophel (1990), the rate of student-targeted humour was lower in this corpus (14.58%) than in their survey (20%), which might lead to the conclusion that Hungarian teachers are less inclined to target students. However, the two data sets are not comparable because of the differences in cultures, data collection methods and the almost 20 years of difference between the two surveys. The collection made by Gorham and Christophel (1990) was carried out by asking students to take notes of all humorous remarks, while this corpus is based on humorous utterances that have been published at the request of students. Therefore, the former data base is an intentional recording of utterances, while the latter is a result of a selection.

**Teachers: self-directed humour**

Making fun of sameness is considered to be a risk-free activity. It does not offend anyone, and it does not diminish students’ respect for the teacher (Berk, 2003). Self-effacing humour is “always at hand,” and can be a highly effective way of creating an informal atmosphere in class. If this kind of humour is kept under control and is not overdone, it helps students see their instructor as a human being, which increases immediacy.

In the analysed corpus, teachers used several techniques when applying self-directed humorous utterances:

- referring to themselves with the help of metaphors: the teacher as a singer, registrar, jerk, comedian, priest, etc.:
  
  Nem vagyok hajlandó használni a mikrofont! Nem vagyok én táncdalénekes?!
  [I object to using the microphone! I am not a pop singer, am I?]

- targeting their handicaps: being bald, old, colour-blind, etc.:
  
  Nagyon megyünk, mi? Csak úgy lobog a hajunk!
  [We’re progressing fast, aren’t we? Our hair is blowing all over!]

- exaggerating features related to their mental or social status: being very poor, stupid, etc.:
  
  Én csak négy évig jártam egyetemre, azért vagyok ilyen buta.
  [I only went to university for four years, that’s why I’m so obtuse.]

- making fun of their surnames:
  
  Jobb ma egy veréb, mint holnap egy tizok, csak, hogy “Madárás” példát hozzak.
  [A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, just to mention an example connected to “Birds.”]

- projecting the image of a too strict/aggressive or a too kind/polite/playful teacher:
  
  Három dolgot tudok rajzolni: halat, tulipánt és standard normális eloszlást. A halat megmutatom, a tulipán is legalább ilyen szép.
  [There are three things that I can draw: a fish, a tulip and the graph of standard normal distribution. I’ll show you the fish, but the tulip is just as nice.]

2 A remark made by a balding teacher.

3 The teacher’s surname is Madár (= Bird) in Hungarian.
Language use

Playing with words and expressions is a clear manifestation of a teacher’s wittiness. In the corpus, a group of humorous utterances could be identified in which the lecturer’s language use was the trigger of laughter. Teachers proved to be masters of creative language use; they employed various techniques when playing with words. The most frequent forms of punning were the following:

- creating neologisms, e.g. bekreppantyúzott a piac (the market has cracked, modifying the word bekrepált, meaning pegged out), kifukkadt (blending of kifulladt and kipukkadt, meaning winded and burst)
- new interpretation of meaning (occasional polysemy) usually by artificially dividing words and creating new boundaries of morphemes, e.g. közösülés (intercourse) and közös+ülés (shared+seat), karizma (charisma) and kar+izma (arm+muscle)
- creating impossibility by distorting and contaminating word combinations, e.g. csukodt szemmel pislogni (to blink with closed eyes), mondja valaki kőrusbán (someone says in a chorus), szemembe sügni a választ (to whisper the solution in my eyes)
- using paronomasia, e.g. instead of saying Rákóczi Road, the teacher says Rákosi Road (Rákóczi – the name of a Hungarian national hero, an Imperial Prince, Rákosi – the name of a disreputable Hungarian communist politician)
- saying anti-proverbs, e.g. A társadalom is őrülhet, mint egy rendes whiskas macska a kájának. (Society should be as happy as a cat in front of a bowl of Whiskas), Ritkán látja, mint Baumgartner a kockás záslóit. (He sees it as rarely as Baumgartner sees the chequered flag.)
- creating strange rhymes, e.g. Akinek nincs esze, legyen notesze. (If you don’t know, you need to note.)

Society and social norms

The targeted subjects of humorous remarks associated with society and social norms were mainly life under socialism, the black economy, current bureaucracy, Hungarian products and EU regulations, subjects closely connected to the curricula of business education. Finding them in a humorous context, students can better understand Hungarian society as it is today and as it was in the past.

Example:

Mert azon kívül, hogy a mi autónk, tudjuk, mi a véleményünk a Suzukiról: a kapitalizmus Trabantja, és akkor még ez volt a nap eufémizmusa.

[In addition to the fact that it’s ours, we know our opinion of the Suzuki: it’s the capitalist Trabant. And this remark of mine was the euphemism of the day.]

In the above example, the common background knowledge of the cultural and socio-political environment (Hidasi, 2008) helps students understand the relationship between the two cars and the two socio-economic eras.

Further targets

Among the main topics present in humorous remarks, reference to the teaching situation, future profession, women, politics, general wisdom, spouse and family members, famous people, foreign nations and colleagues can be identified.

Anything can go wrong during the lecture, from a power-cut to a non-functioning microphone. Humour can help teachers overcome such unexpected events: a spontaneous humorous remark reduces stress both in the lecturer and the audience. In one situation, when students opened the window and the traffic noise from the street interrupted the lecture, the teacher said, “All right, then I’ll say just one sentence every time the lights go red.”

The students’ future professions are also given a down-to-earth interpretation with the help of humour: teachers present the lives of economists, businessmen and academics as those of ordinary people. Example: “Our profession is good. If something comes true, people think we’re gods, and if it doesn’t, we can always find an excuse and talk about it.”

The appearance of women (also references made by male teachers to their wives) and the political content in humorous utterances carry a certain amount of risk. Women are described just as they are in stereotypical Hungarian jokes: stupid, sex-oriented, annoying and over-talkative. All of the gender-related remarks in the corpus could be attributed to male lecturers, while females avoided such utterances. Of all the humorous utterances collected by students, the most remarks (96.6%) were made by males. However, the corpus was not balanced from the aspect of gender since there were 42 (87.5%) male and only 6 (12.5%) female lecturers involved. Therefore, the results are not representative enough to indicate differences between genders in using humour. Nevertheless, it should be noted that other researchers in this field have pointed out gender-based differences in verbal behaviour (cf. Lakoff, 1975): men tend to tell more jokes, tell them more frequently, and prefer more gender-based humour than women (Ziv, 1984; Dundes, 1987 cited by Sever, Ungar, 1997: 89). Men usually use sexist humour to express...
and strengthen their power: “Gender-based humour is seen as a manifestation of power imbalances between men and women, which in turn helps to solidify and perpetuate that power disparity” (Sever, Ungar, 1997: 88).

Targeting women under the auspices of humour can be a means of expressing male power and male solidarity in the classroom. The question whether female students tolerate such witty remarks requires further research.

From the point of view of content, the utterances of the corpus also involved examples that referred to colleagues, famous people (e.g. politicians, Hungarian kings), and foreign nations. Sayings, including general wisdom and clichés, e.g. Ha az ember kitartóan buta, lehet, hogy az élet megjutalmazza (If you are persistently stupid, life may reward you for it) or Isten keményen bünteti azt, aki nullával oszt (God will severely punish those who divide by zero) could also be found. They were, however, not frequent.

**Conclusion**

Humour can be an organic part of a business lecture. It can enhance learning, reduce stress and prevent boredom. The findings have revealed that university lecturers’ humour involved various targets. The most frequent triggers of humorous effect were the course material, students, the teacher and the Hungarian language. The proportion of low-risk humour exceeded that of high-risk humour, which shows that teachers mostly avoided inappropriate and offensive subjects. Even when targeting students, lecturers did not employ humour to hurt or ridicule anyone. However, some of the humorous utterances reflected stereotypical thinking, especially with respect to remarks about women.

Since verbal humour is a dynamic genre in which function is determined by both its production and reception (Hidasi, 2008), further research should be done on students’ reception of university teachers’ humour. This would enable us to understand whether high-risk humour really has an actual risk-potential, or if students are indifferent to such remarks.

**References**


The development of humour competence in Hungarian children – a cognitive approach

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Summary: The present chapter investigates the pragmatic competence of Hungarian preschool children from a cognitive and developmental aspect. It aims to map the cognitive background mechanisms that are responsible for the complex and smooth handling of non-literal language use in general, and of metaphorical meaning construction, along with humour understanding, in particular. On the basis of the results of an empirical investigation we shall argue for the crucial role of mentalization, a symbolic, representational competence that allows for flexible interpreting strategies and versatile meaning construction in everyday, often humorous and thoroughly indirect discourse.

Cognitive, developmental and linguistic issues in humour research

Humour is a versatile phenomenon. It is in the centre of attention of cognitive psychology (concerned with perception, language use and mental operations, memory, problem solving, creativity, play and emotions), developmental research (what cognitive milestones enable productive humour competence and perception, at what age), and cognitive pragmatics (social goals fulfilled by humour, non-literal language use, discourse organization and social cooperation in interaction).

Humour, therefore, is a cognitive linguistic issue, since decoding the intended meaning is crucial in its smooth handling and coordination. It is not based on a simple bipolar coding-decoding paradigm as has long been hypothesized by traditional views in linguistics and communication studies (Jacobson, 1960). New research has demonstrated that social and contextual factors are crucial in the dynamic meaning construction of everyday discourse. All these cognitive and interpersonal strategies boil down to pragmatic competence: a cooperative ability between speaker and listener in monitoring each others' messages, attitude and intentions,