

Watch out for humour! Interaction of gaze and laughter functions

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Extensive research emphasizes the essential role of humour and laughter in fostering bonds, as well as in building and maintaining relationships. Nevertheless, they can be risky! Both the production and perception of humour are pragmatically complex, demanding inferences about others' intentions and mental states, contextual reasoning, and often going beyond the most probable meaning of dialogue-acts. The first risk from the producer's standpoint is therefore the potential misinterpretation of their humorous intentions. In spontaneous interactions, humorous intentions can be cued by various linguistic and multi-modal markers, including laughter, though none are necessary for humour to occur.

Laughter, while commonly associated with humour, is a highly multifunctional signal, potentially ambiguous, not necessarily related to humour. Laughter itself can be a risky matter, given for example the judgemental moral, and cognitive aspects related to laughter production: not everything can be a subject for laughter, it is silly to laugh at some things etc. Moreover, laughter could have a negative valence when produced with the intention of ridicule or mock someone. How to navigate through all these risks and ambiguities?

Since gaze is known to accompany differently diverse dialogue acts, we explored whether gaze at the partner would help in discriminating the laughter function in two different cases: when related to humour (dubbed Pleasant Incongruity, PI) or to face-threatening acts (FTA) produced with the aimed effect of reducing the potential threat (e.g. criticisms, apologies, embarrassment). We conducted an event related analysis centred around the onset of the laughter. Our analysis (mixed-effects logistic regression) revealed distinct gaze patterns for laughers and their interlocutors depending on laughter's function. Laughter related to an FTAs prompted more partner-directed gaze from the laugher, possibly to evaluate its aimed positive effect. On the other hand, for laughter related to PI, laughers were significantly more likely to look at the partner before the onset of the laugh (potentially to assess the appropriateness of their laugh) and less likely to look at their partner while laughing (mirroring data reported in Gironzetti, 2017, during humorous exchanges). Given laughter's potential as an FTA, particularly in instances of mockery, our hypothesis suggests that avoiding direct gaze in such contexts may disambiguate from negative interpretations. Supporting our interpretation, Becker-Asano & Ishiguro (2009) showed that PI-related laughter paired with direct gaze is perceived negatively by the interlocutor.

In conclusion, our study offers empirical data for debates about gaze aversion causes and functions in interaction, suggesting that social stress may not be the only explanatory factor. Most importantly, our data highlight how multiple modalities are mobilised during conversational humour and how these are evaluated in terms of their face-threatening potential, and corrected for it, multi-modally: Laughter can be a marker of humour (production or appreciation) or smooth face-threatening speech-acts, yet it can also constitute a face-threatening act itself, with gaze playing a pivotal role in clarifying the laugher's intentions.