

**Multimodality and Interactional Humor – Methods and Theories**  
**Friday, May 24, 2024, 8:00 am PDT**

**What's in a face? Exploring the role of facial expressions as multimodal markers in humorous interactions**

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Recent studies (Colston, 2020; Tabacaru, 2019, 2020) focus on the role facial expressions, especially eyebrow move, play in the creation and interpretation of humorous meanings. These non-verbal elements, called *gestural triggers* (Tabacaru & Lemmens, 2014) have been explored in scripted (Tabacaru, 2019) as well as non-scripted scenarios (Tabacaru, 2023) to examine their role in interaction. As such, they specifically highlight the fact that the speaker wants their message to be interpreted as humorous by the interlocutor/s or the audience. Consequently, they are considered markers of humor that allow the switch between different frames of meaning (Fauconnier 1984; Coulson 2005). The elements that the speakers choose to highlight through their non-verbal behavior allow shifting between a serious space and a pretense space (Clark, 1996; Brône, 2008).

Drawing on previous findings, the present talk deals with multimodality and humor in interaction, focusing on the facial expressions used by the speaker/s in different contexts. This allows a comparison with non-scripted interactions, which mainly come from the American presidential debates of 2016 and 2020 (Donald Trump vs Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump vs Joe Biden). Interaction between speakers in such a setting warrant them to enrich the common ground and “turn the tables” (Brône, 2008) on their opponent using (verbal) elements already introduced in the exchanges. Inferences are thus exploited for a humorous outcome, which Yus (2003) called “mind-reading ability” because the speaker is already aware of the cognitive processes the hearers will go through to interpret their utterances.

These multimodal markers are linked to humorous stance (see also de Vries, Oben, Brône, 2021) and the way speakers have to coordinate with each other's intentions and behaviors. They play a crucial role in intersubjectivity as the speakers need to constantly coordinate their meanings and expectations (Schelling, 1960).

### References

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## ISHS Webinar Series 2024

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