# Humor in Spoken Academic Discourse

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*This paper draws on the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) to empirically examine the different ways in which humor is manifested linguistically in spoken academic discourse in a North American university.[1] It examines the various discoursal and rhetorical functions humor plays, and the pedagogical implications of its prevalence. Contrary to stereotype, humor is actually frequent and pervasive in a variety of linguistic guises in many academic speech genres (Swales, 2004; Cutting 2000), where it may serve to illustrate an argument, state a point more memorably, establish rapport, create a sense of informality or enliven the atmosphere. Using corpus evidence, it is demonstrated that, far from being a peripheral aspect of academic speech, humor, broadly conceived, is recurrent and commonplace, and is successfully and strategically marshaled by proficient professors and other speakers through the use of witty phrases, colloquialisms, references to salient contemporary events or personalities, hyperbole, irony, etc. Much of the humor, however, may be opaque to international students studying in the USA, as humor notoriously does not travel well across cultures and languages. This paper presents illustrative examples of the way humor is deployed in academic speech and suggests a few strategies which may help international students studying in the US recognize and respond to some forms of humor, and thus participate more fully in their educational experience overseas.*

## Why study humor in spoken academic discourse?

> I understand everything that goes on in class except when everybody laughs. Then I'm a total alien again.
>
> Advanced ESL graduate student, University of Michigan

This quote[2] from a cultural and linguistic outsider to American academia illustrates the rationale behind this paper. It also exemplifies the fact that a good knowledge of the mechanics of the English language ("I understand everything that goes on") is not enough to ensure a full and rewarding participation in classes, lectures, and other events within the academy ("I'm a total alien"), as humorous moments may unwittingly exclude and alienate rather than include and engage. This paper addresses three issues in relation to the above quote: (i) the extent to which, contrary to expectations of stuffy, boring and jargon-laden spoken discourse, academic speech is in fact very often playful and filled with humorous moments; (ii) the different ways in which students and faculty use humor in a variety of academic speech genres (i.e., the types and functions of humor); and (iii) how this information can be used to help international students in the USA recognize and respond to humor, so as to enable them to more fully participate in their learning

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2   The author wishes to thank John Swales (personal communication) for this quote.

experiences.

As well as helping international students in immersion environments, this study of humor may also be of interest to people who are involved in public speaking; e.g., lecturers and graduate students who have to present at conferences. Frobert-Adamo (2002), in a study of conference presenters, notes that

> First and foremost, it appeared that the handling of humour was one among the typical difficulties or obstacles that [conference presenters] thought could inhibit the effectiveness of their oral presentations ... Secondly, adequate linguistic tools are required to create humour: puns, exaggerations, riddles, anecdotes and so forth; humour represents a linguistic achievement for both native and non-native speakers. (pp. 213-214)

It will be readily admitted that humor is to a large extent subjective, culture-specific and, in principle, boundless in terms of themes or subject matter. However, the current research was undertaken on the following two assumptions:

(1) that an informed awareness of the actual **strategies** or **methods** by which speakers in the academy create humor will allow ESL learners to **recognize instances** of humor more easily or at least **recognize where the humor lies**.

(2) that many of the **functions** of humor are, in fact, **universal and therefore teachable** to some extent (for example, it is likely that in most cultures humor is used in some situations to build rapport, reduce formality, or enliven the atmosphere).

This paper does not attempt an exhaustive listing of all the humorous instances in the data (which would be impossible), nor even a comprehensive classification of all the types of humor found. Instead, with pedagogical goals in mind, what is offered is one possible analysis of some samples of academic speech, showing the categories and functions of humor that international students are likely to hear or participate in while engaging in a variety of discourse events in a university setting. The types of speech event examined here include lectures, seminars, colloquia, dissertation defenses, advising sessions, office hours and even student study groups. More information about the data is given below.

Although humor is a topic that has recently become quite fashionable for linguistic research (e.g., Attardo, 1994 & 2001; Glenn, 2003; Mulder & Nijholt, 2002; Norrick, 1993; Ritchie, 2004; Ross, 1998), there is actually very little large-scale research on humor in academic speech beyond small studies of limited genres, as in Fillmore (1994), Cutting (2000) and Swales (2004), which examine specific speech events such as dissertation defenses and coffee break discussions among Master's students). A search on the keyword 'humor' in the *Journal of Pragmatics* returned a total of 29 articles relating to humor. None of these, however, deals directly and exclusively with academic speech. A search in the journal *Language in Society* also returned no clearly relevant papers, while a look at the *International Journal of Humor Research* gave similar results: there has been no prior quantitative research on humor across the whole spectrum of academic speech genres, no research describing how frequent or infrequent humor is in various academic contexts. The present paper therefore aims to fill the gap in the literature.

## The data: Academic speech & MICASE

Before going into the actual analysis, it is perhaps helpful to define 'academic speech' or 'spoken academic

discourse' and briefly characterize the nature of this discourse. 'Academic speech' in this paper is not restricted only to 'the language used by professors in lectures', which is what prototypical academic speech might be imagined to be. The genre-based view used here is broader, and encompasses any research or academically-oriented spoken discourse that occurs within a university setting. In other words, academic speech is the language which is used by the discourse community of scholars and students in academic settings for (mainly) academic purposes. The actual data examined in the present research, however, is slightly more circumscribed: the basis of this study was the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, or MICASE for short (Simpson, Briggs, Ovens & Swales, 2002), which contains recordings of speech events which took place at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, between 1997-2001. There is no reason to believe, however, that given a different set of data from other universities, the results would be radically different.

The MICASE corpus consists of 1.7 million words of transcribed speech (representing about 195 hours of speech) recorded at 152 speech events that span a variety of event types and disciplines. These 152 speech events can be categorized into 15 different types as follows ("#" shows the number of instances of that type of event recorded for the corpus):

| *Speech Event* | # | *Speech Event* | # |
|---|---|---|---|
| small & large lectures | 62 | Meetings | 6 |
| colloquia (public interdisciplinary or departmental) | 13 | advising consultations | 5 |
| student presentations | 11 | dissertation defenses | 4 |
| discussion sections | 9 | Tutorials | 3 |
| seminars | 8 | Interviews | 3 |
| lab sessions (undergraduate) | 8 | campus/museum tours | 2 |
| office hours | 8 | service encounters | 2 |
| study groups | 8 | | |

**Table 1    MICASE Speech Events and number of recordings/transcripts**

MICASE has already been used for many linguistic investigations and has served as the basis of pedagogical materials (cf. Reinhart 2002, the MICASE web site[3] and the UZ-BEST web site[4]). One overarching finding that has emerged from the collective research is that academic speech is, in fact, not very different from ordinary or non-academic speech in some respects. The manual to the corpus actually gives a hint of this in its definition of academic speech:

> In the MICASE corpus, academic speech is ... not pre-defined as something like "scholarly discussion." In academic settings, we might, for example, find such speech acts as jokes, confessions, and personal anecdotes, as well as definitions, explanations and intellectual justifications.[5] (Simpson, Lee & Leicher, 2003, p. 6)

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3   There are sample MICASE-based pedagogical materials at: http://www.lsa.umich.edu/eli/micase/teaching.htm (accessed February 06, 2006)

4   http://ice.unizar.es/uzbest/Pagina%20Principal.htm (accessed February 06, 2006)

5   It goes on to say, "Certain events that occur on campus may not qualify as academic speech events, either because they would not be significantly different if they had occurred in other locations, or because they are not particular to a university community's educational mission or research agenda [... e.g.,] food-ordering sequences in university food outlets or office talk among co-workers in various university support staff departments and offices."

In Swales (2004), the academic speech norm is characterized as a juxtaposition of formal phraseology ("I would now like to address the question of...") with everyday lexical bundles (Could you say a little bit about...") technical jargon intercalated with the contractions and hesitations of on-line everyday speech (pp. 148-149). By the end of this paper, it will become apparent how true this description is, and how elements of informal language and humor are juxtaposed with more serious presentations of academic identity and intellectual knowledge.

## Defining humor: Operationalizing an abstraction

The definition of *humor* used for the present research is crucial, and is therefore discussed in this section, which, together with the following section, constitute the 'method'. As a starting point, here is how 'humor' is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary:

> a. That quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun;

> b. The faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject.

Two possible points of view of humor are conflated above: that of the **receiver** and that of the **producer** of the humorous text (i.e., what the **audience** finds humorous, as opposed to what the **speaker** believed or intended to be humorous). The present research encompasses both perspectives. For classification purposes, a very simplistic and broad view of 'humor' was taken, covering what the speaker probably intended to be humorous, even though not all the intended humor may have been perceived or received as such by the audience. For the section on the quantification of **laughter** in the data, however, both points of view were conflated, and all instances of laughter (whether by the speaker himself/herself (self-laughter) or the general audience) were taken as indications of humor. It is true that audiences sometimes laugh at things which speakers may not have intended to be humorous, and general laughter may also arise from non-linguistic situational contingencies or accidents, such as a prop falling over or a wrong slide being projected. Conversely, audiences may not always laugh at intended jokes. For the purposes of the present research, however, practical compromises were made in order to capture, count and catalogue as wide a range as possible of the types and functions of humor, including the equation of laughter with humor. The present account is thus a broad sketch rather than a fine-grained, definitive picture of humor in academic speech, but it does represent a step forward and raises some consequential pedagogical issues.

## Mapping humor: The most 'laughter-filled' events

As mentioned above, in order to quantify which of the 152 speech events in MICASE contained the most humor, an operational simplification was made: it stood to reason that speech events with the greatest number of laughs could be taken to be the most humorous. Laughter is an event that is explicitly marked in all the MICASE transcripts, as the transcribers of the recordings were specifically instructed to note all such instances. Of course, "number of laughs" may not necessarily be the same as "density of humor", for the reasons mentioned earlier, and also because, as Swales (2004) notes:

> instances of laughter [by speakers or listeners] may have all sorts of different origins, such as anxiety, embarrassment, relief or repair. (p. 165)

This fact notwithstanding, "total number of laughs" was a quick and easy way to quickly identify the potentially most humorous corpus texts, which were then subjected to further manual analysis. The concordance package WordSmith Tools (Scott, 1999) was used to count the number of instances of laughter in each speech event through a search for the XML marker[6] for laughter used in the corpus: **DESC=LAUGH**[7]. The following table gives an overall view of the laughter rankings of individual MICASE texts, in descending order of number of laughs (Ls) per minute (only the top 20 events are shown):

| Rank Ls/Min | File ID | Description | Words | # of Ls | Ls/K wds | # of Mins | Ls/Min |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | sgr999su146 | Undergrad Social Science Thesis Study Group | 14,186 | 179 | 12.62 | 64 | 2.80 |
| 2 | sgr200ju125 | Organic Chemistry Study Group | 16,368 | 213 | 13.01 | 101 | 2.11 |
| 3 | tut150mu042 | Astronomy Peer Tutoring | 19,931 | 207 | 10.39 | 102 | 2.03 |
| 4 | sgr195su127 | Chemical Engineering Project Group | 10,431 | 110 | 10.55 | 77 | 1.43 |
| 5 | sem300mu100 | English Composition Seminar | 20,229 | 174 | 8.60 | 125 | 1.39 |
| 6 | col605mx132 | Christianity and the Modern Family | 12,294 | 104 | 8.46 | 78 | 1.33 |
| 7 | lel575mx055 | Golden Apple Award Statistics Lecture | 6,827 | 53 | 7.76 | 45 | 1.18 |
| 8 | adv700ju047 | Academic Advising | 25,856 | 140 | 5.41 | 124 | 1.13 |
| 9 | sgr999mx115 | Objectivism Student Group | 20,793 | 135 | 6.49 | 125 | 1.08 |
| 10 | lab175su026 | Biology of Birds Field Lab | 11,137 | 95 | 8.53 | 92 | 1.03 |
| 11 | sem140jg070 | Graduate Buddhist Studies Seminar | 24,732 | 171 | 6.91 | 167 | 1.02 |
| 12 | svc999mx104 | Media Union Service Encounters | 17,258 | 180 | 10.43 | 187 | 0.96 |
| 13 | ofc115su060 | Anthropology of American Cities Office Hours | 29,256 | 163 | 5.57 | 178 | 0.92 |
| 14 | tou999ju030 | Freshman Orientation Tour | 13,449 | 70 | 5.20 | 77 | 0.91 |
| 15 | lab500su044 | Biopsychology Lab | 9,060 | 46 | 5.08 | 52 | 0.88 |
| 16 | les565su137 | Sex, Gender and the Body Lecture | 13,877 | 64 | 4.61 | 73 | 0.88 |
| 17 | lab200ju018 | Chemistry Lab | 7,765 | 41 | 5.28 | 47 | 0.87 |
| 18 | les335jg065 | Graduate Online Search and Database Lecture | 18,506 | 127 | 6.86 | 147 | 0.86 |
| 19 | sgr565su144 | American Family Project Group | 13,451 | 72 | 5.35 | 85 | 0.85 |
| 20 | sem545mg083 | Graduate French Cinema Seminar | 23,112 | 139 | 6.01 | 169 | 0.82 |

**Table 2    Top 20 MICASE Speech Events with the highest number of laughs per minute**

If we were to rank these events in terms of laughs per thousand words ("Ls/K wds") instead of per minute, the overall pattern would still be roughly the same. One noticeable exception, however, is "Media Union Service Encounters" (rank number 12 in the first column), which seems to have an inordinately high number of laughs when measured per thousand words. This and the only other "service encounter" in the corpus (not included in the above table) should be set aside and treated differently, however, because they

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6    XML, related to the HTML currently used to write web pages, stands for "eXtensible Mark-up Language", and is poised to become the standard format used for all linguistic corpora. Audible laughter picked up by a transcriber is marked by the XML "EVENT" element. It can be either <EVENT DESC="LAUGH" /> (when the speaker himself/herself laughs) or <EVENT WHO="XXX" DESC="LAUGH"/> when people other than the speaker laugh (the "XXX" can be "SS", for general laughter by many people or by an unknown person, or else is a unique speaker ID).

7    With the tag filter (<*>) switched off in the "Settings" menu of WordSmith Tools.

represent a collection of many different "mini-speech events" rather than a single, bounded speech event. The two corpus files represent recordings made at "service desk/help desk" locations in the university, where students went to check out books or other media or to make enquiries, and thus consist of many different short exchanges recorded over a two- or three-hour period. A manual analysis revealed that these short exchanges are often characterized by speaker-laughs, which served to oil or smooth over the short social encounters. These two events are actually quite marginal in their status as "academic speech" (an opinion shared by the compilers of MICASE) and will therefore not be considered further.

Taking a bird's-eye view of the 152 speech events recorded in MICASE, 144 contained at least one "laugh" event, thus leaving only eight which must have been really, painfully, serious. Interestingly, in concord with common stereotype, all the bottom 20 laughter-scarce events are lectures (large and small lectures). However, note that three lectures and one colloquium lecture make it into the top 20 events in Table 2, so it certainly cannot be said that all lectures are humorless and laughter-free (if we consider the top 50 events, we find 8 lectures and 6 colloquia). It is also noteworthy that 11 different speech events are represented in this top 20 list, thus suggesting that humor is present in practically all speech genres in the academy, and not restricted to just tutorials and student study groups (which, perhaps predictably, top the list). Among the top 20 events are those which are more interactive and dialogic in nature, involving small groups of people (study groups (sgr), tutorials (tut), laboratory sections (lab), graduate seminars (sem), and service encounters (svc)), but traditionally less interactive ones also make it into the list: large lectures (lel; $\geqq 40$ students), small lectures (les; $\leqq 40$ students), and colloquia (col; lectures given by invited speakers).

## A closer look: Laughter in academic speech genres

The above table shows us only individual events, not overall figures for the different categories of academic speech event. Further analysis was therefore conducted to discover which speech genres were particularly humor-filled. Below is a detailed breakdown of the prevalence of laughter in all the 15 distinct speech event categories in MICASE:

| Speech Event Category | Laughs per min | Approximate Laughter Index | Laughs /1000 words (raw figures in brackets) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Tutorials (3) | 1.35 | 1 laugh per min | 8.5 (233/27,537) |
| Study Groups (8) | 1.12 | 1 laugh per min | 6.9 (892/130,033) |
| Seminars (8) | 0.73 | 2 laughs every 3 mins | 4.6 (729/158,192) |
| Advising Sessions (5) | 0.73 | 2 laughs every 3 mins | 4.0 (238/59,089) |
| Service Encounters (2) | 0.70 | 2 laughs every 3 mins | 8.6 (215/25,070) |
| Tours (2) | 0.69 | 2 laughs every 3 mins | 4.4 (99/22,493) |
| Lab Sections (8) | 0.64 | 2 laughs every 3 mins | 4.9 (374/76,835) |
| Interviews (3) | 0.59 | 1 laugh every 2 mins | 3.8 (50/13,274) |
| Office Hours (8) | 0.55 | 1 laugh every 2 mins | 3.6 (431/120,458) |
| Meetings (6) | 0.54 | 1 laugh every 2 mins | 3.3 (242/72,535) |
| Colloquia (13) | 0.52 | 1 laugh every 2 mins | 3.1 (505/160,891) |
| Dissertation Defenses (4) | 0.37 | 1 laugh every 3 mins | 2.2 (125/57,579) |
| Student Presentations (11) | 0.36 | 1 laugh every 3 mins | 2.3 (337/149,646) |
| Discussion Sections (9) | 0.31 | 1 laugh every 3½ mins | 2.1 (164/78,290) |
| Lectures, all (62) | 0.21 | 1 laugh every 5 mins | 1.5 (908/614,376) |

**Table 3   Laughter Index for MICASE speech event categories (in descending order of laughs per min)**

One interesting statistic to arise out of this data analysis was that the number of laughing episodes in the corpus averages out to about a chuckle every two minutes (5,542 episodes over 195 hours of speech). This

high frequency of laughter came as something of a surprise, and is an example of the kinds of discovery that corpus collections, as opposed to linguistic intuition alone, can provide.

As noted earlier, all the individual speech events which did not contain any laughter whatsoever were lectures. The above table allows us to generalize further: that lectures as a genre do tend to evoke the fewest laughs overall. A manual examination of one of the 'no laughter' events, an introductory lecture on Latin (les215mu056), found that it was indeed devoid of any humorous quips, remarks, anecdotes, etc., and this was in spite of the fact that the subject matter discussed included such potentially comedic topics as "Hercules and the golden apples" and "nymphs". Examining the above hierarchy of events, it would seem that, in general, the smaller the group, the greater the familiarity among participants, or the smaller the distance in terms of status or role, the greater the potential for laughter or humor. Study groups are informal, and involve only peers, thus allowing the greatest amount of general merry-making. Tutorials and advising sessions tend to be one-on-one or small-group sessions, and are more intimate, thus perhaps encouraging more laughter to ease tensions. Student presentations and lectures, on the other hand, are by design relatively more formal and typically more academic or information-focused, and thus afford less potential for laughter. Similarly, discussion sections seem to be relatively serious and information-focused, thus providing fewer opportunities for humor. It seems, however, that when it comes to colloquia, which are usually public lectures involving invited speakers, the speaking style tends to involve many humorous quips and asides: the 'colloquia' event scores the highest among the monologic speech events. Finally, it is perhaps surprising to note that that all-important Rubicon of postgraduate study, the dissertation defense, appears to be less serious, formal or staid than people might imagine: the defenses recorded for MICASE contained on average a laugh every three minutes. Even granting that some of these laughs are likely to have been nervous chuckles, there still appears to be an overall level of informality and good-natured conviviality amongst participants that perhaps reflects the nature of the American dissertation defense (as opposed to, say, many formal European ones) where all participants involved are already known to one another and will have already communicated in writing prior to the actual defense. As Swales (2004, p. 165) observes, many opening segments in the defenses involve multiple "opportunities for humor as a way of relaxing tension, creating a non-adversarial interactional framework, and/or 'deformalizing' the ceremonial aspects of the genre."

What is so remarkable about these tables? The figures shown are impressive because they represent only audible laughter, and do not include humorous or witty remarks that did not result in laughter. Thus, these figures probably undercount and under-represent the amount of humor, wordplay and bantering that is deployed in academic speech genres. This has implications for teaching academic listening because international students who have previously only read academic research papers may be unprepared for the amount of informal chatter, joking and playfulness that abound in academic speech[8]. The prevalence of humor suggests that it integrally structures and scaffolds academic talk and relationships and everyday interactions between and among faculty and students, and is thus part and parcel of the presentation and construction of academic identity and intellectual interaction.

## Types of humor

Now that we have had an overall look at the MICASE data and at the prevalence of laughter across a variety of speech events, we can turn our focus to a closer analysis of the kinds of humor that tend to be

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8    It would be a challenge for anyone to find a written research paper that contained a laugh every two or even every five minutes.

used. The analysis in this section was not based on overt instances of laughter in the corpus, but on close reading and scrutiny of the language used, thus including examples of humor which the audience did not in fact laugh at but which may nevertheless be counted as attempts at humor. Sample texts were chosen from a number of different speech genres which ranked high in laughter, as indicated by the 'laughter index' reported above. In addition, a number of transcripts were also chosen at random for manual analysis, in order to ensure that as wide a variety of humor devices as possible were captured. This analysis was carried out in spite of the widely held belief that analysis kills humor, as Foot (1986) observes:

> There is, of course, also a prevailing view that just because humour is ephemeral, spontaneous, catching the mood of the moment, its very essence is stripped away or killed off as soon as we try to analyse it. (p. 259)

As might be expected, analyzing humor is fraught with difficulties, and one major one is that there are many different ways of categorizing humor. An examination of some of the literature in the field revealed that the number and types of categories are as many and varied as the number of analysts. For the present research, the categories used and the relatively fine-grained level of analysis adopted were both chosen on the basis of what would be pedagogically most useful, given what was actually present in the data.

The types of humor found fit in with what Fillmore (1994) describes as humor-creating maneuvers, which involve the manipulation or choice of language in one way or another. Scenario-based or language-external kinds of humor were thus deliberately left out of this categorization scheme, an example of which would be the following excerpt from the opening of a lecture in the physical sciences where the lecturer is so 'inspired' by the fact that he was being recorded that he walks over to the microphone and starts singing:

> I really wanna go over here and, <SINGING> feelings <END OF SINGING> oh sorry. <GENERAL LAUGHTER> <PAUSE 4 SECONDS> but I'm gonna restrain myself.
>
> (lel195su120) Separation Processes Lecture[9]

(A point to note here is that in the MICASE transcription system, a comma is used to signal a brief pause with non-phrase-final intonation, while a period indicates a brief pause accompanied by a falling intonation contour. Punctuation marks in all the quotations from the MICASE corpus therefore do not conform to written norms.)

What follows are the categories of linguistic humor (or techniques in creating humor) that were identified from the data.

| Categories of humor in MICASE | |
|---|---|
| 1. | Self-effacement and in-jokes |
| 2. | Sarcasm, tongue-in-cheek comments |
| 3. | Wit & unusual turns of phrase |
| 4. | Comic comparisons and contrasts |
| 5. | Mixed lexis/registers |
| 6. | Hyperbole & exaggeration |
| 7. | References to contemporary or youth culture |

Table 4    Categories of humor in MICASE

9    In this paper, the simplified XML label <GENERAL LAUGHTER> is used to indicate points where many people in the audience laugh.

In the following sections, examples will be given for each of the above categories of humor, with a brief discussion of how these humor devices work.

### (a) Self-effacement and in-jokes

Most academic events include in-jokes, usually pertaining to the location, the equipment or the current time. Additionally, good-natured humor at the expense of other people involved with the event is also common. This form of humor is different from what Koller (1988) and Mintz (1999) describe as humor for the purpose of insulting or humiliating people, which is rare in academic speech. In the MICASE data, the humor often comes in the form of self-effacing jokes used to express excessive humility, as in the following opening speech by a professor who is introducing the distinguished guest speaker:

> ...recipients of Nobel Prizes frequently say things that the rest of us follow, unduly. One of the things that Nobel Prize winners are inclined to say in response to, when did you first discover this? It's typical for them to say things like, it was in a parking lot outside a grocery store, as I sat there suddenly it occurred to me. I personally have sat in many parking lots, many many years and never had that experience though I'm still, still trying.
>
> (col485mx069) Nobel Laureate Physics Lecture[10]

Later on in the lecture, another self-effacing statement is made, this time by the Nobel Laureate himself:

> ... for this long lecture I really had a hard time, of preparing it. ... before I got this prize I really had no inkling I would would be standing here at this time, even if I might have been thinking about a Nobel Prize I didn't think of its consequence see so you understand what I'm saying. <GENERAL LAUGHTER> so it's it's it's not prepared to my satisfaction but I'll do my best and I ask you for a certain amount of clemency, and uh, in delivering this.
>
> (col485mx069) Nobel Laureate Physics Lecture

Another example, from a different event, is the following:

> When I received the award in 1993, I was permitted to talk as long as I wanted to, but I was advised to be brief, this evening and I will be brief difficult as that is for a professor or at least for this professor.
>
> (lel575mx055) Golden Apple Award Lecture

As the above examples illustrate, this brand of humor is not difficult to understand, and adds to community-building, but it may not always be immediately obvious to international students whose cultural norms for public speaking differ.

### (b) Sarcasm, tongue-in-cheek comments

Sarcasm is a familiar form of humor and is found in practically all academic genres. It is commonly not heralded by any kind of linguistic cue, and may thus be difficult to spot or anticipate. Sarcasm tends to come in the form of an understatement, or an aside, and is easily recognizable only when it conveys something explicitly absurd or openly mocking. The instances of sarcasm with an element of irony fit in

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10    This is the colloquium with the highest number of laughs in MICASE.

with what Cutting (2000) calls "flouting humor," i.e., linguistic humor that arises out of the pragmatics of the situational context rather than through telling funny stories or using funny or parodic voices. In the following example, the illogicality of the advice being given marks this out as humorous:

> we may also wanna put a light, on our property, that will help burglars see better when they're trying to break into our house Some people like to do that. They're considerate.
>
> (lel175ju086) Practical Botany Lecture

Another example of tongue-in-cheek comments is given below, the humor complemented by the use of highly informal lexis:

> I think that, America's as a whole is terribly ethnocentric I mean every time we get into a war, we go in there and we say, we're gonna kick Saddam's butt and let's go in there and kick the Commies' butt because they're wrong and, democracy and America's, the greatest thing in the world
>
> (dis495ju119) Intro to American Politics Discussion Section

Such examples of sarcasm or tongue-in-cheek humor are probably not difficult for students to grasp because the strong language or the obvious absurdity of the proposition provides a handle for interpreting the remarks as being ironic. Some sarcasm, however, involves the manipulation of language to make witty statements or plays on words, for example:

> Sudden wealth syndrome, it's also called affluenza.
>
> (lel115ju090) Intro Anthropology Lecture

The joke here involves a morphological blend (from 'affluence' and 'influenza') and can be appreciated only by students familiar with both words. This kind of language play requires a fairly high level of proficiency in English, and may thus be difficult for international students new to the American lecture culture.

### (c) Wit and unusual turns of phrase

Another humor maneuver is the display of wit: for example, by adding a twist to a familiar expression. This technique sometimes involves a high cognitive load on the part of the speaker, but is usually relatively easy for listeners to understand, except where the humor requires highly culture-specific knowledge or sophisticated linguistic ability to decode. Clever turns of phrase are common in academic speech, and found in most of the genres in the present study. The following are some examples:

> one man's music is another man's noise.
>
> (lel175ju086) Practical Botany Lecture

> epidemiology practices rigor to the point of rigor mortis. <GENERAL LAUGHTER>
>
> (lel115su005) Medical Anthropology Lecture

> we did we did a uh, a study of this in one of the uh, American Academy of Religion sessions or maybe it was the Early Christian Session I forget. but anyway we titled it, Have Celibacy Will Travel <GENERAL LAUGHTER>
>
> (col605mx132) Christianity and the Modern Family Colloquium

Humorous expressions of this sort are usually novel, and work because they play on expressions already known to most members of the audience. In the case of the last example above, the unusual, elliptical syntax gives a clue that a pre-existing expression is being exploited.

### *(d)    Comic comparisons and contrasts*

Incongruous comparisons evoke humor and make academic content more memorable, as the following example illustrates:

> ...to issue an edict of proscription which made anything that Sulla did look like a Christmas party.
>
> (lel215su150) Sports and Daily Life in Ancient Rome Lecture

Here, the juxtaposition of history with modernity sparks off humor. In some cases, a certain amount of familiarity with North American culture and history is required to understand the humorous comparisons, but, on the other hand, the references are usually not to obscure figures in USA history but to world-renowned personalities:

> ...he was something of an outsider. Blue blooded Roman aristocrats the Rockerfellers or the Fords of the Roman world couldn't stand it. They looked at him as a guy who had risen to power but didn't have the kind of social background or education that they did. There was always a tendency of Marius to favor slightly left wing politicians.
>
> (lel215su150) Sports and Daily Life in Ancient Rome Lecture

Here, listeners would have to be familiar with the place of the Rockerfeller and Ford families in North American (high) society and history to fully appreciate the oblique reference to snobbishness against the nouveau riche.

### *(e)    Mixed lexis/registers*

This technique is what Fillmore (1994) calls the use of inappropriate register, which he says is the most popular technique used by academics to create humor. Some examples are:

> Pompey's rules of order Okay you will say good morning to the senators. You will stand up. You will sacrifice. You will do this. You will not be a boob.
>
> It didn't help that Antony had a thing for Cleopatra.
>
> (lel215su150) Sports and Daily Life in Ancient Rome Lecture

Sometimes Biblical language and Biblical allusions, which are usually reserved for lofty arguments with serious intent, are used in conjunction with mundane matters, and the incongruity leads to humor:

> ...but for now, go forth and enjoy your time, and I will see you in March.
>
> (lel115su005) Medical Anthropology Lecture

In this particular case, students (or, indeed, anyone) not familiar with (the King James version of) the Bible will fail to pick up on the attempt at humor.

In terms of comprehensibility by international students, this brand of humor can be difficult because students may be unfamiliar with overly colloquial language ("had a thing for", "boob") and Biblical allusions, and thus miss the conscious efforts at injecting humor through the juxtaposition of the high and the low. One sub-type of this category of humor, however, is the use of mild vulgarity or profanity, mixing the serious with the vulgar, the sacred with the profane. The "vulgarity" in MICASE, however, consists only of old-fashioned or time-worn swear words, not colorful four-letter ones:

> In my first literature course in college, I thought I'd written a damn good paper on Homer's Odyssey.
>
> (lel185su066) Behavior Theory Management Lecture

> ...you can work your butt off and you're not gonna get 95.
>
> (lel185su066) Behavior Theory Management Lecture

> that's where I more or less want to terminate let's see, what for other slides that I still have, up there. And can we go one further just for the hell of it?
>
> (col485mx069) Nobel Laureate Physics Lecture

Such mild swearing is arguably part of common English usage, and international students will have little difficulty in grasping such attempts at informality. Sometimes the humor comes from the opposite process, as when taboo topics are explained in a slightly formal or periphrastic way:

> he had the tendency unfortunately to do this when he talked <GESTURE> <GENERAL LAUGHTER> uh which if you are a Roman means, would you please penetrate me anally immediately. <GENERAL LAUGHTER>
>
> (lel215su150) Sports and Daily Life in Ancient Rome Lecture

In this same lecture, the professor also uses direct, earthy language when the comedic effect necessitates it:

> ...he suddenly found that he had a bucket of shit poured over his head. Not even Romans carried buckets of shit around with them on a regular basis.
>
> (lel215su150) Sports and Daily Life in Ancient Rome Lecture

As might be expected in academic discourse, the frequency of this sub-type of mildly vulgar humor is low, and when it does occur should not present particular difficulties for international students. It is interesting, however, to note in passing its presence in a corpus of academic speech.

### (f)  Hyperbole and exaggeration

The humor here lies in the exaggerated nature of the descriptions, as in the following:

> [Prof. Veltman] said that it was odd, being in, his house, in Holland, utterly anonymous on one day and having the world at his doorstep the next.
>
> (col485mx069) Nobel Laureate Physics Lecture

> ...have a tremendous, superior, jejune, prosaic, wait I don't know what I'm talking about weekend.
>
> (lel195su120) Separation Processes Lecture

In the data examined, the use of exaggeration seems to be particularly common in the openings and clearly-marked asides of speech events, rather than embedded within serious academic explications. The first example above, for example, come from an introductory speech and the second from the end of a lecture. Some researchers of the MICASE corpus (Ohlrogge & Tsang, 2004) have found that the categories of hyperbole they investigated (viz., overgeneralization, as in "Everybody wants to be an engineer", exaggeration in number, as in "You've probably had hundreds, thousands, of those error messages", and exaggeration to an extreme extent, as in "I'm starving") were actually not very prevalent in academic speech, confirming their initial hypothesis that in educational academic contexts hyperbole would tend to be avoided. As they conclude, most academic speakers endeavor to be accurate in their representation of ideas, and do not grossly exaggerate when expounding on their subject matter. Given this empirical finding, it may be a useful tip for international students to consider any use of hyperbolic language in academic speech as a likely attempt at humor.

### (g) References to contemporary or youth culture

Most academics seem to enjoy a good-natured laugh at famous people or events (whether currently famous or historically famous), and sometimes refer to things in contemporary or youth culture. These references are sometimes subtle and indirect and are calculated to draw the interest of students or offer a break from academic seriousness:

> If you go to the gym everyday to work out, you become very very big. Very buff, and then you marry Maria Shriver, and your kids all come out looking like that, right?
>
> (lel175ju154) Intro to Evolution Lecture

Here, Arnold Schwarzenegger is not mentioned explicitly, so students would have to be familiar with contemporary culture and personalities in order to catch the oblique reference. This form of humor relies on a facet of American life: the all-pervasive influence of the media and media personalities. Keeping abreast of contemporary events is part and parcel of university life, so these references should not be too difficult for international students to grasp after a period of immersion in the USA, as the following example which makes reference to the quiz show "Jeopardy" shows:

> Now I'll just stand here and sing the Jeopardy theme song <GENERAL LAUGHTER> Did you wager all or only half?
>
> (lel115su005) Medical Anthropology Lecture

Modern American culture is highly influenced by television and the movies, and academics often try to confer contemporary relevance on their discourse by referring to them. Sometimes, the humor comes from references closer to home, alluding to aspects of university life that students are all too familiar with:

> ...led by Mark Antony who you can see there at the top looking as if he'd been at one too many parties.
>
> (lel215su150) Sports and Daily Life in Ancient Rome Lecture

References to famous people and events or to youth culture for humorous effect are commonly found in lectures, and are, for the most part, easy to recognize, although perhaps overly studious international students who only study and never immerse themselves in pop culture may not notice these attempts by professors to make connections with students' lives.

## Theories of humor

Humor as a phenomenon has been the subject of theorizing for centuries across many different disciplines. Nowadays, even computational linguists (Mulder & Nijholt, 2002) are busily trying to come up with computational models of verbal humor. Humor researchers (e.g., Glenn, 2003; Mulder & Nijholt, 2002) generally agree that there are three overarching theories of humor that can be said to subsume practically all others: the superiority theory, the relief theory, and the incongruity theory. The superiority theory, which includes in its lineage the philosophers Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes, posits that people laugh at others out of a feeling of pre-eminence, that humor sometimes comes from malice, or, at the very least, the realization of the shortcomings of others (as, for example, when someone makes a mistake). This is thus humor with a 'winner' and a 'loser'. The relief theory, as Mulder & Nijholt (2002) point out, is better thought of as a theory of laughter, since it proposes that people laugh to release tension (in Freudian terms, 'psychic energy' built up through suppressed thoughts), or because laughter gives a good sensation, especially when faced with sad, serious, or painful situations. This theory may explain the function of laughter, but it does not explain why something would in the first place be perceived as funny. The last theory, the incongruity theory, is the most promising of the three, and can be traced back to Kant and Schopenhauer. This theory, also known as the 'incongruity-resolution theory', proposes that dissimilarity between two objects or phenomena placed within a single frame of reference produces an incongruity which, when resolved, results in the situation being perceived as funny.

In the data examined, the workings of the linguistic manifestations of humor can be explained by the superiority and incongruity theories, by and large, and the reasons for laughter can be explained by the relief theory. The superiority theory applies here because academics (and students, as budding academics) perform as high-status role models in some ways: from their intellectual peaks of achievement, they are quite entitled to pass judgment on current affairs, politicians, pop stars, etc. in gently mocking, ironic ways (e.g., the instances of sarcastic humor cited earlier). However, they do not generally look down on people or sneer in a malicious way: the humor is dry, ironic, erudite or matter-of-fact, not acidic or spiteful. The incongruity theory also explains how a lot of the humor in MICASE works a lot of the time. Incongruity involves something unexpected in form or content: comic comparisons and contrasts, witty turns of phrase for comic effect, the use of mixed lexis or register, the interjection of contemporary references or student-related concerns into a formal exposition—all these would fit under the incongruity theory. The relief theory, taken from the point of view of the people making the humorous remarks (who may want to provide some comic relief to their audience) also explains types of humor such as the self-effacing jokes and the hyperbolic remarks and exaggerations made by professors. Academic events are by nature expected to be serious and formal, and hence some faculty choose to provide comic relief. Among students in all-student discussion groups, some good-natured ribbing does occur which might be explained by the superiority theory, but a lot of the laughter can be explained by the relief theory: students laugh among themselves because they need to relieve some work tension or boredom, or because jokes help them get along and work more cooperatively.

## Functions of humor

Interesting as the above three theories of humor are, they are a little too high-level and general and do not add much to our understanding of **why** humor is deployed with such prevalence in academia in the first place—as we have seen, the number of laughing episodes in the corpus averages out to about a chuckle every two minutes. A more enlightening and pertinent theory, perhaps, may come from the field of critical

**Example 11 – NES Writing Sample**

> Our species is doomed to believe that there must be a higher reason for living – simply surviving and procreating is simply not enough to fulfill the requirement of a productive life.  (NESA3)

**Example 12 – NES Writing Sample**

> I came into college with the same mindset about race that I had in high school: race doesn't really matter, only the persons characters.  (NESA23)

This type of rhetorical manipulation is not utilized by the ESL writers very much. The ESL writers seldom use punctuation marks (0.50) as a sentence-combining device in connecting an independent clause added to the first T-unit.

Because stance adverbials function as an important and effective means of expressing the writer's attitudes and evaluations, the ESL writers' use (underuse, incorrect use, or inappropriate use) of stance adverbials indicates their lack of both linguistic and rhetorical control in expressing their stance in academic writing, and the reformulators seem to adjust the sentences involving stance expressions (or the lack of stance expressions).  The reformulators often add stance adverbials or other features (e.g., use of punctuation marks) or rephrase the ESL use of stance adverbials to transform the ESL writing into the texts that are more native-like in expressing writers' stance and positions in academic essays.  The reformulators also employ punctuation marks in order to improve the quality of ESL writing both structurally and stylistically.

For example, in Example 8 presented earlier, the stance adverbial *in fact* is inserted in sentence 8 of the reformulation, which definitely strengthens the concluding sentence.  In the next example (Example 13), all three reformulators add stance adverbials (*indeed, in fact*, and *like it or not*) to achieve effective expressions of the writers' stance.  The reformulators also delete the use of sentence-initial conjunction *and* (Sentence 2 of ESL), another example of changes to remedy the overuse of sentence-initial conjunctions discussed earlier.

Furthermore, Example 13 illustrates the use of punctuation marks in sentence-combining. Reformulator A employs dashes in sentence numbers 1 and 3, an example of attaining rhetorical effects by using punctuation marks as a sentence-combining device.  Reformulators thus seem to add some kind of stance expressions in order to make up for the ESL writers' lack and/or inappropriateness of adverbial use in expressing their stance.  Adding stance adverbials, therefore, is another strategy commonly used in the reformulations, and this is consistent with the quantitative findings that show that the Japanese writers do not use sentence-initial stance adverbials appropriately and adequately in their ESL essays.

building a rapport with the students, reducing formality, and enlivening the atmosphere.

The following description of American humor, in the book *A Fearless Guide to Understanding the United States of America* (Bosrock, 1999), goes some way towards accounting for many aspects of humor as found in the American data examined for this paper:

> Many Americans will make fun of themselves and tell funny things that they did. They may even make themselves look stupid. A humorously [self-deprecating] person is viewed as having a great sense of humor. (p. 124)

Some of the most humorous lectures in the data examined are given by speakers who make fun of themselves, tell funny things that they did, and generally try to paint a picture of themselves as ordinary and humorous. At the beginning of the lecture given by the Nobel Laureate, for example, the speaker made a self-deprecating appeal to be excused for not having prepared a really good lecture. This is typical of this tendency of speakers to use humor to endear themselves to their audience, and this function is something which may be alien to students coming from a different pedagogical and cultural environment.

The following table is an attempt to analyze the main functions of humor in spoken academic discourse and how the various types of humor categorized earlier typically map onto these functions. The eight functions listed show the main roles of humor as both an interpersonal and a pedagogical tool in academic discourse.

| Functions of Humor | | Forms of Humor |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Breaking the ice | self-effacement, in-jokes, wit, mixed lexis/registers, hyperbole, references to student life |
| 2. | Building rapport | |
| 3. | Reducing formality | all forms of humor |
| 4. | Enlivening the atmosphere, creating a diversion, providing relief | |
| 5. | Making content memorable | wit, comic comparisons, hyperbole, references to contemporary or youth culture |
| 6. | Demonstrating individualism | self-effacement, in-jokes (anecdotes and autobiographical information), sarcasm, wit, references to contemporary or youth culture |
| 7. | Giving contemporary relevance or immediacy | mixed lexis/registers, references to contemporary or youth culture |
| 8. | Critiquing | sarcasm, wit, comic comparison, hyperbole, references to contemporary events |

**Table 5    Typical functions of humor in academic discourse**

Any one function of humor may, of course, be realized in a variety of ways, and, conversely, any type of humor device may serve any of the above functions (or several functions at the same time). The table merely shows what is typical, based on an analysis of the data studied, and suggests that the use of humor and the outright cracking of jokes are integral to many academic speech genres nowadays, performing functions such as breaking the ice, building rapport, or giving contemporary relevance. Although there is no hard evidence for this, one may with reason suspect that, compared to traditional stereotypes of what spoken academic discourse was like even a decade ago, humor has probably made many more inroads into the domain of higher education. For example, critiquing is a serious academic task, and humor is nowadays one of the vehicles used to perform this function in academic speech events. As suggested earlier, this is probably because of the general society-wide tendency towards informalization and conversationalization

of discourse in all kinds of domains, including academia. This thesis is confirmed by Swales' (2004) analysis of the research-related genres in MICASE, which found that contemporary academic spoken discourse has an overall "prevailing collegial tone", and rather lacking in "bald-on-record" negative criticisms or "adversarial cut-and-thrust" debates (p.163), even in events such as the dissertation defense. Using humor is part of this informalization process, and contributes to the overall congeniality of academic speech. Teaching 'humor awareness' or strategies for recognizing, responding to, and even producing humor, therefore, would seem to be an essential component of courses or programs aimed at helping international students feel that they belong. As the earlier frequency tables demonstrate, humor is more prevalent than most people think, and although it is difficult to prove that missing out on jokes necessarily means missing out on academic content, international students surely cannot function on an equal footing with other members of the academic discourse community if they feel left out whenever there is non-inclusive laughter around them.

## Pedagogical applications: Strategies for international students

The main problem with a phenomenon such as humor is that it cannot be directly taught: not only is it by nature a private, personal and culturally conditioned experience, it is also not a topic for a naturally circumscribed syllabus. It is probably not possible to directly instruct a learner into having or developing a sense of humor if he or she is not that way inclined, and even more impossible to teach people from disparate cultures to fully appreciate particular kinds of humor. What is suggested, therefore, is something less ambitious: pedagogical consciousness-raising exercises aimed at helping international students become more aware of the different types and functions of humor in academia, including an awareness of the different social norms regarding humor in the USA. Culture-specific manifestations notwithstanding, humor is a universal phenomenon, and universally disarming and affinity-building in function. Exercises therefore could be created which foreground cross-cultural similarities in types and functions of humor, while also addressing differences, including differences in frequency of humor in corresponding academic speech genres in other countries. Students would be given the opportunity to consciously reflect on their own cultural norms and discuss their reactions to real examples of humor, such as those drawn from the MICASE corpus.

As part of the "humor awareness" exercise, some general strategies for recognizing and coping with humor could be recommended to international students. The following are four general suggestions which may be helpful.

### (1) Immerse yourself in the culture

International students studying in an English-speaking country should be encouraged to make the most of their cultural immersion situation and grasp every opportunity to engage with all aspects of the host culture, not just the linguistic aspects. This will allow them to deconstruct humor based on events, people, places or stereotypes prevalent in the culture. Many instances of humor, rightly or wrongly, revolve around stereotypes of blondes, Blacks, Asians, city people, rural people, specific cities/towns, etc. In theory, virtually anyone and everyone can be the butt of a joke, or the victim of a stereotype that lends itself to humorous quips or word play, but politicians and celebrities are particularly susceptible, so watching television and movies, and reading magazines and newspapers, should be part of the immersion and acculturation process. Humor can also be 'an age thing' (not all age groups will catch a particular joke, even among native speakers), or could be specific to particular subcultures or co-cultures (e.g., slang, lingo,

argot, jargon, ghetto talk, etc. are designed to exclude), so it is important to remind international students that they should not expect to understand everything or to catch every joke.

### (2) Focus on the functions of humor

One important strategy to stress to international students is that it is almost always more important to 'get' the reason for the humor being used (its function) than to completely 'get' how the humor works (its form). Jokes need not be fully understood for the 'bonding moment' to happen: it is well-known that even native speakers may sometimes fail to get a joke, but still laugh anyway, just out of politeness or to share in the moment. Part of the job of the humor awareness-raising exercise, therefore, is to convey to international students that even if they do not understand the joke straightaway, as long as it is not personal or aimed at their expense, they should not feel like 'a total alien' or someone who is totally 'out of it'. They can be taught the difference between being laughed *at*, and laughing *with* the rest of them. More importantly, they should be taught to ask questions (to the person making the joke, or to fellow students if more appropriate) if they suspect the joke serves a pedagogical purpose (e.g., to illustrate an argument, to emphasize a point, etc.). Remaining silent and ignorant out of politeness should not be the default response.

### (3) Draw from L1 resources: Recontextualize L1 humor forms and functions

Looking at the categories of humor identified in this paper, international students should be able to reflect on how similar these are to those of their own native first language (L1). They can be taught to draw upon what they already know, and focus on the functions of humor in various situations and how they would or would not be realized linguistically in their own L1. There is potential here for cross-cultural sharing and swapping of jokes and humor devices—which should prove stimulating and rewarding.

### (4) Learn some specific linguistic cues

Identifying or recognizing when humor is being used is a necessary first step in appreciating humor, and there are a number of linguistic phenomena which can specifically cue people in. The following are some examples for English:

- **proper nouns**: Students should recognize when a specific name, personality, brand, place or event is mentioned in a context where it is somewhat out of place. This is related to the first strategy of cultural immersion: when international students have familiarized themselves with local personalities, places and events, they will be able to recognize and understand some humorous quips more easily. Comedy programs and talk shows in the US, such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The David Letterman Show*, revolve around current events and contemporary personalities, and are good testing grounds for how culturally attuned you are. They can even be educational if you can find a patient-enough informant willing to explain whatever you miss.
- **informal language, slang, taboo language**: As mentioned in the section on forms of humor, these are frequently used in creating humor. Such language, fortunately or unfortunately, seldom needs to be taught to international students, but some examples could be offered for analysis and the functions of the jokes explored.
- **hyperbole and exaggeration**: Unqualified extreme statements are seldom meant to be taken at face value, so they are usually cues to some attempt at humor. For example, unusually rude remarks are usually meant to be ironic, most uses of the word 'literally' are actually not, and excessive humility or bragging will usually be an indication of play-acting.

- **voice and prosodic features**: A change in pronunciation, accent, pitch, loudness or rhythm can signal a humorous move. Some, but by no means all, aspects of these features are readily accessible to international students. Exposure to some examples from the MICASE corpus should prove instructive.
- **paralinguistic and kinesic events**: Singing, gesturing, miming, and so forth, though rare, are clear signals of humor when they do occur. These cues should not be difficult to pick up on, but, again, examples could be given to raise awareness of their usage.

This paper was an attempt at giving a concrete characterization of the prevalence, types and functions of humor in spoken academic discourse, as evidenced by the MICASE corpus. Through the empirical data analysis and examples, it has been demonstrated that humor has an integral role to play in both scaffolding and constituting academic speaking, teaching and interacting among faculty and students, and is thus not a peripheral aspect of language use in academic contexts. In many of the instances examined, it is hard even to consider the humor as diversionary or tangential, since pedagogical goals are being served. Given that academic discourse is liberally sprinkled with humor (or attempts at humor), what should the response of EAP teachers be? We cannot directly teach humor, or expect international students to always understand every humorous quip. However, helping students gain an explicit understanding of the types of humor and how they function can certainly be beneficial, and can lead to a greater sense of belonging, and, in some cases, even better appreciation of academic content. For this reason, this paper has suggested the pedagogical utility of consciousness-raising exercises which can be deployed in the classroom, aimed at helping students recognize instances of humor and thus use them as a learning resource (e.g., they can learn to recognize when instructors are trying to establish rapport with them, and thus try to meet them half-way).

Based on the author's investigations and teaching experience, it would be fair to say that the biggest challenge to international students new to North American universities would be gaining familiarity with some culture-specific references and coming to grips with some of the more sophisticated linguistic devices such as sarcasm and wit. With time and increased exposure to the language and the general culture in which the students are embedded, however, these challenges are not insurmountable. On the other hand, the greatest asset in appreciating humor is probably the world-wide dominance of American pop and corporate cultures in terms of Hollywood, KFC, McDonald's and Bill Gates—many people who visit the United States for the very first time often remark on how oddly familiar and recognizable a lot of things are, having been weaned on a diet of Hollywood movies, American brands and advertising, and American fast-food. In any case, it is hoped that this paper has opened a little pathway into this difficult area of teaching the communicative impact of humor across cultures and that others will join in this enterprise.

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