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Humour and language play

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Introduction and definitions

An intuitive link exists between language play, or humour, and linguistic creativity. When we think of people who make us laugh, it is often because they create something new (a quip) by making unexpected, but clever, links between disparate, seemingly incongruous ideas. Thus it seems that humour and language play are inherently creative, drawing as they do on originality and incongruity, which are also hallmarks of creativity. Furthermore, appreciation of humour has been likened to discovery, as the hearer unravels the meaning of a humorous utterance. The notion of play is also often linked with creativity, particularly in children’s development, but sometimes in discussions of adult creative behaviour as well. Research has confirmed our intuitive association of these concepts and practices; however, as will be discussed below, the precise nature of the connection remains unclear. Prior to beginning a review of the literature that examines humour, language play, and creativity, some delineation of humour and language play is necessary, as well as a brief consideration of the extent to which they might be considered creative.

Although humour and language play can be synonymous, this is by no means always the case. Both share non-seriousness as a defining characteristic, even in cases in which a serious message may be couched in play. However, the ostensible goal of humour is to elicit a feeling of mirth among the interlocutors – something that is possible, but not necessary for language play. Language play is thus the broader category, because it encompasses not only humorous utterances, but also those non-serious utterances that manipulate linguistic patterns at all levels of language (that is, phonology, morpho-syntax, semantics, and pragmatics). Furthermore, current understandings of humour see it as a matter of juxtaposing incongruities and then (at least partially) resolving them, with the result being a feeling of mirth (for example Attardo & Raskin, 1991; Oring, 2003; Suls, 1972). Language play, on the other hand, does not necessarily involve incongruities and their resolution, but might instead draw on and create linguistic patterns using, for instance, repetition, rhyming, and alliteration (for example Carter, 2004; Cook, 2000). Finally, although the issue will not be addressed here owing to space limitations, it is worth noting that there is some argument as to whether humour, in particular, is a specific type of creativity, or whether it should be conceived of as something wholly separate (O’Quin & Derks, 2011).

Although creativity is generally recognised as existing on a continuum, verbal humour, the focus of the chapter, is often simply assumed to involve creative uses of language. Yet it seems clear that not all humour is equally creative. Some attempts to amuse merely recycle...
worn-out phrases that have typically been used in the past, changing them only slightly, or perhaps not at all. For instance, one conventionally creative way in which to construct humour is to wilfully misinterpret the pragmatic force of a conventional expression as literal. Thus a would-be joker might answer the question, ‘Can I use your phone?’, with ‘I don’t know – can you?’ This is minimally creative, and in fact can be seen as a formulaic joking response to such questions. As such, it is unlikely to elicit much laughter, but a slight alteration that makes the joke specific to the situation might receive a few chuckles: ‘Probably not with your arms full of groceries like that!’ Again, however, this response involves a minor change to the original formulaic response and cannot therefore be seen as highly original. At the other end of the creativity spectrum, we find humour that meets with quizzical looks, or perhaps even passes unrecognised as an attempt at humour because it is overly novel. Some of Andy Kaufman’s performances, for instance, were not initially seen as humorous by many and were only widely recognised in this way as the broader culture caught up to his innovative style of humour. One example would be his foray into professional wrestling, first exclusively against women, and later against Jerry Lawler, a popular wrestler at the time. Although these bouts were staged, this was not apparent to most audience members at the time, and Kaufman’s outrageous and insulting behaviour towards his opponents and their fans upset many. It was only in later years and after the ruse was exposed that many came to appreciate his audacity as an innovative form of comedic entertainment. It appears, then, that humour may mark certain social, cognitive, and linguistic limits of creativity. Humour that is highly appreciated by its audience will likely be that which combines appropriate amounts of conventionality and originality to create something novel, yet recognisable to hearers.

In this chapter, I begin with a historical review of the mainly psychological research that has focused on teasing apart the links between humour and creativity. I then look at questions that persist about this relationship, despite the consistent evidence for it. The review then turns from psychological to linguistic contributions, examining current research on the relationship between humour and creativity from a cognitive and social perspective, respectively. Based on the research, recommendations for practice in workplaces, and in second and foreign language classrooms, are proposed. Finally, I suggest directions for future research.

In what follows, I focus mainly on humour production, rather than reception, because the research for the latter is considerably less (see, however, reviews in Martin, 2007, and O’Quin & Derks, 2011). In addition, although some of the work discussed here involves children as participants, owing to space considerations I have excluded any systematic examination of the large body of research that has examined children’s uses of humour, language play, and creativity from a developmental perspective (but interested readers may consult Bariaud, 1989; Bergen, 2006; Burriss & Tsao, 2002; Crystal, 1996; Martin, 2007: 229–41; Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010).

**Historical perspectives**

In his seminal work on creativity, Arthur Koestler (1964) examined humour, art, and scientific discovery, and saw each of these creative processes as ‘bisociative’. He coined this term to describe a type of thinking that essentially brings together typically incongruous elements to construct something new. Such thought processes, for Koestler (1964: 36), were emotional and potentially turbulent, and he described bisociation as ‘a double-minded, transitory state of unstable equilibrium where the balance of both emotion and thought is disturbed’. As
reported by Ferris (1972), Koestler published an initial discussion of these ideas in a 1949 book; building on that scholarship, Ferris lays claim to having been the first to empirically verify a link between humour and creativity in his 1957 dissertation. Although those early works were built on a number of understandings of humour and laughter that are no longer widely accepted, Koestler’s (1964) work, in particular, was seminal in linking creativity and humour. Since that time, a steady stream of empirical research has reliably established a link between the two.

These studies have often engaged participants in creating captions for cartoons, which are then rated for funniness. Creativity has been assessed using psychometric testing, and correlations between the two measures (funniness and creativity) have been established (Brodzinsky & Rubien, 1976; Treadwell, 1970; Ziv, 1980). Similarly, Jucová (1998) found a positive relationship between humour and creativity, looking as well at the use of humour to solve conflicts by rating the funniness of captions that participants wrote for drawings depicting conflicts. More recently, psychometric tests alone have linked sense of humour and creativity (Kováč, 1999). Furthermore, in a series of studies, Ziv (1976, 1983, 1989) found that when a humorous stimulus (such as a cartoon, film, or audio recording) was provided prior to taking a test of creativity, the adolescent participants performed significantly better than those who did not receive such a stimulus. Ziv (1983) also found that simply instructing the participants to provide as many funny answers as possible on the creativity test significantly raised their scores. Humour has also been operationalised in children through peer nominations of funny students (Hauck & Thomas, 1972; Ziv, 1980), or more elaborately by supplementing peer nominations with observations by teachers and trained observers, and teacher ratings of student humour (Fabrizi & Pollio, 1987). These types of humour rating were also found to correlate with scores on tests of creativity (although it should be noted that Fabrizi and Pollio established a correlation only for the eleventh-graders whom they studied, and not the seventh-graders). Using a psychometric test to measure sense of humour and a drawing completion test to assess creativity, Humke and Schaefer (1996) established a correlation between humour and non-verbal creativity in adults. A similar result was found by Trevlas, Matsouka, and Zachopoulou (2003), who used tests of playfulness and movement, respectively, to compare preschool children’s playfulness, of which humour was one component, against their motor creativity.

While these studies examined humour production in relation to creativity, a smaller body of work has focused on whether the ability to comprehend humour is linked to creativity, with mixed results. Rouff (1975), for example, found a strong positive correlation between a measure of creativity and humour comprehension for adults, as measured by scores on a task requiring participants to explain cartoons. On the other hand, using psychometric tests to assess both humour and creativity in eighth-graders, Couturier, Mansfield, and Gallagher (1981) found that one measure of creativity correlated positively with one of the measures of humour, but not the other. Furthermore, a non-verbal test of creativity showed a negative relationship with both humour tests, which the authors suggest is the result of that measure not tapping into an individual’s ability to construct new ideas quickly and coherently (that is, ideational fluency), a factor that they note is thought to relate to humour comprehension. The differences between the studies emphasising humour production and those examining comprehension is not surprising, because the relationship between the two is not necessarily symmetrical (Kozbelt & Nishioka, 2010; Moran et al., 2014). Having established that there is indeed a relationship between humour and creativity, we turn now to additional issues that complicate our understanding of that relationship.
Critical issues and topics

In social science research, definitions and parameters of phenomena under investigation can vary considerably, and the study of humour or language play and creativity is no different (Murdock & Ganim, 1993). Further complicating the issue is the potential for humour and creativity to be seen as overlapping constructs (O’Quin & Derks, 2011), or for other variables to link or intervene between the two. In this latter case, intelligence is most often investigated as the construct, and findings when the link between the three constructs is investigated are somewhat conflicting (Galloway, 1994). These issues can make it difficult to establish whether a given result is broadly applicable. However, a recent meta-analysis of research results on the link between creativity and humour confirms the persistence of the results discussed above and finds a modest positive correlation between the two, even when differences in methods of measurement are taken into account (O’Quin & Derks, 2011: 632). Although this finding is consistent, a number of issues, in addition to the aforementioned definitional problems, still prevent a full understanding of the precise relationship between the two constructs. These issues include directionality, the type of humour, and outcomes.

One important question is whether, and to what extent, humour and language play induce creative behaviour, or whether the relationship works in the opposite direction, with creativity resulting in an increase in humour and language play. In fact, as the studies reviewed so far indicate, humour does seem to increase creativity, but research has also confirmed that the ability to construct humour relates strongly to creativity (Feingold & Mazzella, 1991). Even setting aside the issue of directionality, questions remain as to whether humour or playfulness most accurately describes the construct relating to creativity. Fredrickson (1998, 2001) reviewed a considerable body of evidence demonstrating that a more general factor, positive emotions, increases creativity by broadening thought patterns. Similarly, Isen (2003) found that positive affect increases creative problem-solving skills in a variety of contexts, including studies outside of controlled laboratories. In other words, any method of evoking positive emotions seems likely to result in greater creativity, and humour can simply be one way of doing that.

Although positive affect does indeed seem to increase creative, divergent thought processes, there is no guarantee that humour and language play will create positive emotions. Humour is not a unitary construct and there are many different types of humour serving many different functions. Outside of laboratory conditions, humour and language play are not always affiliative and may frequently be aggressive. Aggressive verbal play can range from teasing, used as a mild social corrective, to the bullying taunts of children or the cruel pranks of adults, ‘playful’ only to those who are not the target. Aggressive humour and language play are unlikely to encourage creative thought patterns. In fact, Janes and Olson (2000) demonstrated that merely seeing another person being teased can result in greater conformity in the behaviour of the observer. Thus it seems likely that only positive, affiliative humour and language play will encourage divergent thinking, while negative and exclusionary humour and play will create convergent thought (see also Lang & Lee, 2010).

Further complicating the issue of how different types of humour may relate to creativity is the work of Willibald Ruch and his colleagues (Hehl & Ruch, 1985, 1990; Ruch & Hehl, 1998; Ruch & Köhler, 1998), which has demonstrated that appreciation of different types of humour correlates with different personality types and traits. Of particular interest here is the distinction between nonsense humour and incongruity resolution humour. Nonsense humour is, essentially, absurd. Incongruity is present, but is either not resolved to create a
coherent whole, or is only partially resolved. *Incongruity resolution humour*, on the other hand, satisfies this requirement, because the two incompatible elements are brought together to make some sort of sense, if only within the joke – that is, the incongruity is fully resolved. While not singled out for analysis, as in some other studies, creativity is one aspect of a bundle of qualities referred to as ‘openness to experience, culture, or intellect’ in the five-factor personality model. Individuals possessing this trait tend to appreciate nonsense humour to a greater extent than those who do not score highly on this trait. They also tend to score more highly on scales of liberalism, sensation seeking, and tolerance of ambiguity. On the other hand, individuals preferring incongruity resolution humour tend to have low scores in these traits, but higher in their counterparts. Thus, if the goal is to identify creative individuals, a test of humour appreciation may provide an indication: those who enjoy nonsense humour will be more prone to creativity.

Much of the research has considered creative thinking in relation to language play and humour, as well as intelligence. Given the strong links among these three constructs, we might expect individuals who exhibit these traits to engage in the types of intense, thoughtful behaviour that often results in creative insights. However, Wycoff and Pryor (2003: 39) suggest that ‘those who tend toward expressing smiles or laughs frequently may not be the same individuals who engage in and enjoy effortful thinking’; rather, a humorous outlook may be more a feature of one’s personality. Furthermore, as Ziv (1980, 1989) points out, creative thought alone is not necessarily an adequate way in which to assess creativity, asserting that action and outcomes must also be considered. As Ziv (1980: 162) explains, ‘creative behaviour involves the transformation of an idea – generally arrived at using divergent thinking – into a product which has a certain social value’. Does humour also spur creative action? On this topic, little work has been done. Ziv’s (1980, 1989) research suggests that creative thinking, but not behaviour, is aided by humour; however, this would seem to be an area in which further investigation is merited – particularly that which would take into account factors such as group vs individual effort, social factors, and the precise nature of the task.

The work discussed thus far has its home largely in cognitive and experimental psychology, the historically dominant discipline for inquiry into both humour and creativity. As such, the research discussed up to this point has focused largely on humour and creativity as personality traits, the components of each, and the extent to which they are interrelated or influence each other. In the following section, I consider what linguistics is adding to the insights from psychology.

### Current contributions and research

Despite arriving a bit late to the party, linguists have made important contributions to our understanding of humour, including the development of linguistic theories of humour (for example Attardo, 1994; Dynel, 2008), and detailed descriptions of humorous and playful linguistic practices and their negotiation in interaction (for example Chiaro & Norrick, 2009; Norrick, 1993). Because of this work, we now have a better understanding of the linguistic mechanisms of humorous incongruity, the structure and social functions of conversational humour, and the ways in which humour is supported or rejected in discourse. However, in terms of the intersection of creativity and humorous or playful uses of language specifically, there are presently strands of research rooted in cognitive and social perspectives on language and interaction that are pushing the boundaries of inquiry and demonstrating how the study of playful linguistic creativity can contribute to our
understanding of fundamental questions in linguistics, including the nature of language, language knowledge, and interaction. Although linguistic study moves steadily toward a conceptualisation of language as simultaneously and inextricably social and cognitive (for example Langacker, 1997; Tomasello, 2009; Tomasello et al., 2005), most scholars continue to emphasise one end of the spectrum or another in their analyses. Thus I begin below by discussing recent contributions to the study of humour and linguistic creativity by cognitive linguists, then turn to recent work from sociolinguistics.

**Cognitive linguistics**

Cognitive linguistic theorists (see Langlotz, Chapter 2) seek to understand how language is internally represented and processed, and they do so by examining actual instances of language use, taking into account the social context and the goals of language users as they seek to create meaning. As a usage-based approach, cognitive linguistic theory is particularly adept at delineating the relationship between formulaic or conventional and creative language uses, and defining the cognitive mechanisms used to construct humour, in particular. Furthermore, these scholars see the study of non-serious language use as a way of advancing (cognitive) linguistic theory in general.

Bergen and Binsted (2004) represent one of the first examples of this sort of research. They examined scalar humour, in which some entity is described using some form of the structure ‘so X that Y’, as in ‘The reception to my talk was so cold that I saw students huddling together for warmth’ (Bergen & Binsted, 2004: 7). Their analysis indicated that the cognitive mechanisms used to create this type of humour are the same as those used in serious discourse, but that the incongruity created between the typical (serious) use of a particular construction expected by the hearer and the actual, unusual realisation, as well as the resulting imagery (a phenomenon explored in greater depth in Bergen & Binsted, 2015), created the humour. Thus speakers exploited a regularly occurring construction creatively. In addition to the important assertion that humour relies on general-purpose cognitive mechanisms, they suggest that the study of humorous language serves as evidence of cognitive representations of language (Bergen & Binsted, 2004: 12), in much the same way as speech errors have been used as evidence of linguistic knowledge (for example Fromkin, 1973).

Bergen and Binsted (2004, 2015) call for an examination of language use that involves creative and playful manipulations across the full range of linguistic practices, and this call is echoed by Feyaerts (2006). He too finds that the same general cognitive mechanisms used to construct conventional, serious texts are called upon for humour. He focuses specifically on the figure-ground reversals (see also Veale, 2008) found in formulaic sequences used in both witty headlines and in the conversational practice of ‘trumping’, in which the hearer exploits some ambiguity in the speaker’s utterance in order to express disagreement. His examination focuses on the semantics of conventional phrases and, like Bergen and Binsted (2004, 2015), shows how the creative manipulations of them provide evidence for a generalised set of cognitive mechanisms to explain both humorous and serious language use and understanding.

The interplay between formulaic or merely typical constructions and their creative instantiations is examined in relation to literary texts by Antonopoulou and Nikiforidou (2009; see also Bröne & Oben, 2013) to further specify the ways in which semi-productive and semi-idiomatic constructions can be exploited for humour. For instance, they demonstrate that treating a count noun as a mass noun contributes to a humorous interpretation, with repeated constructions of this sort creating humorous coherence within a text. They focus
on a passage from Martin Amis’s *Dead Babies*, in which an obese family struggles to fit into a car. Normally countable body parts are presented as mass nouns, for example ‘arse all over the gear-lever’, ‘a bit of arm’, and ‘some of my leg’ (Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou, 2009: 302). They note that this repetition is what creates humorous coherence within the text. More recently, they have extended their analysis in an attempt to describe events larger than the clause (Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou, 2011).

Working at the intersection of cognitive and computational linguistics, Tony Veale, along with his colleagues, is developing an extensive body of research related to humour, creativity, and cognition. I focus here specifically on his work with humorous and ironic similes, which highlights the risky nature of humorous language use and identifies the strategies that speakers use to reduce the chance of miscommunication. As such, it also explores the boundaries of linguistic creativity. Similes exist on a continuum from almost completely formulaic (for example ‘as cute as a button’) to so creative as to require explanation (for example Jerry Seinfeld’s description of comedian George Carlin as being ‘like a train hobo with a chicken bone’, cited in Veale & Hao, 2009: 1376). Achieving the appropriate degree of creativity is particularly crucial in the case of humour, where too little creativity will result in a bland, unamusing simile, while an overly novel simile will require explanation, likely ruining any humorous effects. In their analyses of thousands of similes harvested from the Internet, Veale and Hao (2009; Veale, 2013) demonstrate how the use of ‘about’ in similes (for example ‘about as enjoyable as a funeral’) acts as a signal of playful or humorous intent, indicating to the audience that a comparison is likely facetious. Although many of the similes incorporating ‘about’ were indeed ironic, Hao and Veale (2010: 646) describe it and other markers as ‘no more than heuristic clues’, and emphasise the need to examine the conceptual basis of similes to determine whether they are not merely playful, but specifically ironic. They suggest that a strong clue to the presence of irony is likely to be that a simile has been constructed using a descriptor and an entity with incompatible or contradictory qualities (as in ‘exciting’ and ‘funeral’), and that this is particularly likely to be the case when either of the two parts already has a strong record of use for non-ironic similes. This finding demonstrates again the interplay between formulaic or collocational sequences and more creative constructions (for a review of computational creativity, see Veale, Chapter 22).

Finally, although not working from a cognitive linguistic perspective, Ronneberger-Sibold’s (2006) work on lexical blends is also worth mentioning here, because, like the previous authors, she suggests that the study of playful and creative language use can contribute to linguistic theory, specifically by providing evidence for linguistic competence, as noted by Bergen and Binsted (2004) as well. Lexical blends are considered part of extragrammatical morphology because the constructions do not follow rules of morphology, and Ronneberger-Sibold (2006) demonstrates how their degree of transparency is deliberately – if intuitively – manipulated by language users. As evidence, she points to the differences in her corpus of 612 blends between the more transparent literary blends and less transparent blends created as brand names. She argues that the construction of literary blends, most of which were satirical, must be somewhat apparent in order for the readers to grasp the satire. Brand names, on the other hand, can be less transparent, because their function of product identification can be fulfilled even if language users are unable to parse the blend. These regularities provide evidence of an extragrammatical competence that allows users to intuitively construct blends along a continuum of transparency.

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, then, the study of humorous creativity offers not only a way in which to better understand the mechanisms of humour, but also a way
in which to advance semantic theory. Complementing the perspectives discussed here are those from scholars in sociolinguistics.

**Sociolinguistics**

Although language play and humour have long been appreciated in child language research and studied from the perspective of development, as noted above, it is only more recently that applied linguists and sociolinguists have begun to embrace those practices that deviate from the norms associated with transactional speech, and which question the boundaries of what is considered typical, normal, and often even acceptable or appropriate speech. In particular, discussions of multilingualism, linguistic diversity, and globalisation are increasingly identifying language play as central to the linguistic practices of multilingual societies and individuals. This recognition shows up in a variety of different works and goes by a number of different names. What these perspectives share, however, is a commitment to examining linguistic and social diversity, including issues of identity. Increasingly, scholars refer not only to the ways in which individuals deploy their linguistic resources, but also to how they play with them. Furthermore, they often note how resources are used for purely ludic ends, as well as for identity construction, critique, and resistance.

In work grounded in language ecology, for instance, Kramsch (2008: 402, emphasis added) defines symbolic competence as ‘the ability to manipulate the conventional categories and societal norms of truthfulness, legitimacy, seriousness, and originality, and the ability to reframe human thought and action’. Her concerns lie with foreign language learners, and the authenticity and legitimacy of language use in a globalised world. She sees second language use as potentially liberating, because it allows for ‘play, irony, distance, and the integration of language use into a freer realm of subjective perceptions and meanings – the realm of the trickster’ (Kramsch, 2009: 43). Playful linguistic creativity is also highlighted when multilingual practices are conceived of as ‘metrolingualism’ – a term that Otsuji and Pennycook (2010: 244, emphasis added) explain ‘describes the ways in which people of different and mixed backgrounds use, play with and negotiate identities through language’, adding that ‘the focus here is not on elite game playing but the ludic possibilities in the everyday’. Makoni and Pennycook (2012: 449) extend these definitions and also call for an emphasis on creativity more generally, noting that ‘variability in the use of and facility in the use of multilingualism as play compels us to reintroduce the idea of individual creativity within multilingualism’. Similarly, scholarship that sees multilingual practice and linguistic diversity through the lens of the Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia often emphasises, examines, and describes such (potentially) playful and often humorous language practices as revoicing, parody, stylisation, irony, and crossing (for example Blackledge & Creese, 2014; Blackledge, Creese, & Takhi, 2014; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Rymes, 2014).

Sociolinguistic investigations that centre on diverse, playful, and humorous language use can contribute to a reconceptualisation of language and linguistic diversity, an understanding of the sociocultural and political significance of such creative practices, and greater insight into the processes of language change. Creative language use demonstrates evolving norms and values through the changes that take place to linguistic norms that are used in new, playful ways. As Blommaert and Rampton (2011: 7) explain, we can observe ‘the emergence of structure out of agency’. Much of Rampton’s own work has illustrated these processes and their social consequences (for example Rampton 1995, 1999, 2002, 2009). Sharma’s (2012) inquiry into the use of language on Facebook by
Nepalese college students provides a multimodal example of language users adopting a diverse set of linguistic and other semiotic resources to construct bilingual identities, often through humour. Her participants’ playful use and mixing of English and Nepalese in their online interactions is complex, and suggests an appropriation of English to construct both global and local identities. Jaspers (2005) examines how Moroccan teenaged boys in Belgium ‘do ridiculous’: a set of linguistic practices used to induce the teachers to digress, to lead outsiders to form inaccurate impressions of the boys, and to generally relieve the boys’ boredom. Switching among and playing with different varieties of Dutch formed an important part of ‘doing ridiculous’ and allowed the boys to demonstrate their competence in this language, thus challenging racist stereotypes about themselves.

While the aforementioned works tend to celebrate language play and see its use as liberatory, it is important to recognise that humour and play can also be powerful agents of normativity. Bennett (2012), for instance, examines stylisations of ‘chavspeak’, a term used to designate the imagined speech of a particular type of working class individual (the ‘chav’) in the United Kingdom. While humorous portrayals of stereotypes, such as those that he examines, are often dismissed as trivial and having little or no social consequence, he argues to the contrary: that the humorous depictions reinforce existing ideologies that marginalise members of the working class. Furthermore, the use of ‘non-standard’ features of English reinforces linguistic ideologies of correct and incorrect speech. Research into such contentious uses of humour helps us to identify the socially constructed boundaries of linguistic creativity.

**Recommendations for practice**

Workplaces and classrooms tend to be goal-oriented sites that also often (purport to) appreciate creativity in their employees and students. Humour, however, can be viewed negatively, as something that takes away from serious activities of these venues, and indeed humour often does represent a diversion away from the goals at hand – and not necessarily one that is, or eventually will be, beneficial in terms of those goals. Yet, as the evidence reviewed in this chapter suggests, when students or employees are engaging in tasks that require creative thought, such as brainstorming ideas for a project or finding solutions to problems, both venues might benefit from an atmosphere that encourages humour as a way of increasing creative output.

Despite the documented relationship between humour and creativity, a study by Holmes (2007) suggests that, even in workplaces that value energetic, playful interactions, the use of humour as a driver of creativity in the service of workplace goals is rare. Holmes’ study is unusual in that it examines situated language use, rather than laboratory tasks or psychometric tests. As such, she is able to demonstrate how humour in interaction can foster creativity in terms not only of addressing workplace tasks, but also of challenging existing norms and encouraging progressive organisational change. Her work demonstrates that leadership styles play an important role in the extent to which humour is valued in the workplace (see also Holmes & Marra, 2006; Holmes et al., 2003). This suggests that leadership training that helps those in charge to move from merely tolerating behaviour that they may see as off-task towards appreciating, and even celebrating, the energising and resourceful potential of such behaviour is in line. At the same time, Holmes (2007) notes that good leaders also exhibit a talent for knowing when to rein in their employees’ playful tendencies. Along these lines, it is worth noting that although a specific prescription is impossible to provide, some research suggests that obtaining a greater quantity of creative, amusing responses will also improve...
the quality of responses (Derks & Hervas, 1988). Thus, in brainstorming types of activity in which creative output is at a premium, leaders may want to allow humorous contributions to continue, even when their instincts tell them that it is time to bring the interaction back into a serious key.

In contrast to workplaces, classrooms – and perhaps language classrooms in particular – can often be places in which humour occurs, whether sanctioned by the teacher or not. Here too, as with the workplace leader, the teacher’s challenge is to productively harness that energy for learning. Creative play with language may be particularly important in the second language classroom in which students often grapple with questions of identity, because playful language practices may help them to explore this. Along these lines, Kramsch (2008: 404) encourages teachers to ‘leave room for and, indeed, encourage stylistic variation, irony, humor, subversion’. Such spaces may not only broaden language learner repertoires, allowing learners to express themselves in subtler ways with a range of linguistic resources, but these types of interaction may also help learners to retain the meanings of new lexical items (Bell, 2012). In addition to recognising the educational potential of language play for students, its contribution to the well-being of teachers is a less explored, but noteworthy, topic (Bullough, 2012). Teaching is a profession that requires creativity, flexibility, and innovative problem solving, yet increasingly many teachers work under highly regimented conditions, particularly when standardised tests are of great importance. An infusion of humour into classrooms that work under these conditions may contribute to an opening up of the structures imposed on teachers and may increase their well-being.

**Future directions**

Numerous specific questions about the nature of, and relationship among, language, humour, and creativity can be identified through this review. Here, however, I touch on two broad areas of inquiry that seem promising from an applied linguistic perspective: social aspects; and language change.

While cognitive aspects of the intersection of humour and creativity have received ample attention from psychologists, the social aspects are only starting to be explored. This will require the use of a broader range of research methods, including corpus linguistics, ethnographies, and discourse analyses. These studies must be conducted across a variety of contexts and language groups in order to provide the greatest insight (see, for example, Chang, 2003, on Chinese linguistic creativity, and Maynard, 2007, on Japanese). The rich descriptions of creative and humorous language that such research can yield will illuminate the relationship between creativity and formulaicity in the construction of humour. Failed humour, which can lend insight into the social and cognitive limits to creativity in humour, can also be studied in this way (Bell, 2015). With a greater understanding of the relationship between humour and creativity in interaction, we are likely to find additional workplace, pedagogical, and therapeutic applications.

The study of humour, language play, and creativity can also lend insight to our understanding of language, as suggested above, and, more specifically, language change. Hints of this are already seen in some of the literature on language play and creativity. For instance, Ronneberger-Sibold’s (2006) work on lexical blends, discussed earlier, notes that, despite their deliberate, planned development, the structure of blends by individual innovators is the same as that which emerged in German diachronically. She suggests that a combination of individual language users’ intuitions about the transparency of different types of blend, coupled with their language-using experiences, which signalled to them which forms allowed
them to be more or less comprehensible, led both the deliberate and the spontaneous blend creators to the same end point. Thus her examination of language play revealed new patterns created from the same types of knowledge and communicative pressure. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) articulate more clearly what was merely suggested by Larsen-Freeman (1997) regarding the possible relationship between playful language practices and change in linguistic systems. They suggest that, for example, when the innovations that teenage language users develop are repeated, broader change can result, particularly as innovations spread quickly among and across groups. Although humour and language play are creative practices that have been largely undervalued by the linguistic community, it is becoming clear that their study may have more to contribute to many areas of linguistic inquiry.

Related topics
computational approaches to language and creativity; creativity in second language learning; everyday language creativity; language, creativity, and cognition

Further reading

Cook’s seminal work on language play provides a thorough review of the concept, as well as consideration of its significance for second language development.


This entry provides a brief, interdisciplinary review, similar to that presented in this chapter, but grounded in humour research.


Designed as an entry point into humour scholarship, this volume provides in-depth reviews of humour research conducted within specific disciplines.


In this text, Veale provides an accessible overview of the work that he has done on cognition and creativity, with one chapter devoted specifically to humour.

References


