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Humour in Professional Academic Writing (with Some Implications for Teaching)

Abstract

Professional written academic genres are not typical sites of humour, especially in their final, published forms. In this paper, it is argued that academic discourse as construed today not only does not preclude humour in written research genres but—in some text segments or in response to specific communicative needs—is perfectly compatible with it. In particular, the discussion focuses on these occurrences which engage the reader and contribute to the writer-reader rapport: humorous titles, humorous comments or asides, personal stories, and literary anecdotes. It is also suggested that making university ESL/EFL students aware of the fact that "serious" writing tasks do offer some room for humour may draw their attention to the human face of academic writing, that is, to the interactive, dialogic, and personal aspects of written academic communication.

Keywords: humour, English for Academic Purposes, academic writing, professional academic genres

Humour in Academic Settings: An Introduction

Professional written academic genres are not typical sites of humour, especially in their final, published forms. Indeed, studies on humour in academic contexts have largely focused on academic speech. For example, Lee (2006) examines humour in the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), Nesi (2012) analyses laughter episodes in the lecture component of the British Academic Spoken English corpus (BASE), Fernández Polo (2014) carries out a multimodal analysis of conference presentations to identify episodes of humour or non-seriousness in the talks, and Ruiz-Madrid and Fortanet-Gómez (2015) discuss the humorous potential of autobiographic references in plenary lectures. The problem of humour in academic writing is addressed by Skalicky et al. (2016), who examine the potential of certain linguistic features to act as predictors of playfulness, but their study focuses on undergraduate student writing, that is, on “school genres” (Johns & Swales, 2002, p. 14; see also Johns, 1997) rather than on professional text types. In this paper, it will be argued that academic discourse as construed today not only does not preclude humour in written research genres but—in some text segments or in response to specific communicative needs—is perfectly compatible with it. It is also suggested that making university ESL/EFL students aware of the fact that “serious” writing tasks do offer some room for humour may draw their attention to the human face of academic writing, that is, to the interactive, dialogic, and personal aspects of written academic communication. The examples quoted below come from published English-language texts by both native and non-native speakers of English: articles and monographs, all of them subject to editorial peer-review procedures.[1]

The functions of humour vary with the type of humour and the context in which it occurs. It is used to improve, to avoid face threats, and to bring relief from tension, stress, and anxiety, but also to attack, inflict harm, and destroy. As Nash puts it:

> For many of us, it is more than an amiable decoration on life; it is a complex piece of equipment for living, a mode of attack and a line of defence, a method of raising questions and criticizing arguments, a protest against the inequality of the struggle to live, a way of atonement and reconciliation, a treaty with all that is wilful, impaired, beyond our power to control. (Nash, 1985, p. 1)

In many settings, including academic contexts (see, e.g., Lee, 2006; Nesi, 2012; Fernández Polo, 2014; Ruiz-Madrid, & Fortanet-Gómez, 2015), it helps create positive atmosphere, break the ice, bring people closer together, and grab the attention of the audience. Its potential as a social lubricant and an attention-grabber has also been noticed in the school environment, in particular, in a foreign language classroom.

The use of humour in second and foreign language teaching and learning has been found to offer many benefits. For example, Minchew (2001) shows the effectiveness of playful classroom activities in exploring vocabulary and developing the awareness of style. In a recent study, Solska (2019) demonstrates that some forms of humour can be used as a powerful teaching tool in grammar instruction at advanced levels. Apart from its use as an instrument

[1] Fillmore (1967) appeared in E. Bach and R. Harms (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Texas Symposium on Language Universals*. Texas: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

in language teaching, humour has been found to build classroom rapport and to foster individual learning outcomes. In particular, it has been observed that humour "brings students and teachers together" (McMahon, 1999, p. 70), helps create positive classroom environment (Minchew, 2001, p. 59), lowers learners' anxiety, increases their motivation for learning (Heidari-Shahreza & Heydari, 2018), and, as Tuncay (2007, p. 2) points out, "makes both teaching and learning far more memorable for all concerned." Making students aware of the fact that elements of non-seriousness can be successfully used in professional written academic communication may contribute to the demystification of academic writing, which, while inevitable at virtually all stages of education, too often seems to be perceived as purposefully abstruse, depersonalised, and stilted.

Before considering academic communication as a potential site of humour, an important caveat must be made. Identification of playfulness or tongue-in-cheek comments in texts whose main purpose is not amusement of the reader is not an easy task. Firstly, unlike jokes, such episodes are, in a vast majority of cases, not self-contained but closely tied with the non-humorous co-text, which makes them more difficult to single out. Secondly, the perception of humour is subjective. What elicits humorous reaction from one individual on one occasion may not be perceived as funny or diverting by another, or even by the same person in a different set of circumstances (Chiaro, 1992, p. 5). Even if we are cautious to maintain the distinction between humour comprehension and appreciation, as advised by Dynel (2009, p. 8), identification of a passage as humorous in an essentially non-humorous text often relies on individual reaction to it, which again is dependent on the disposition, knowledge, and prior exposure to similar texts on the one hand, and on various context-dependent factors on the other, such as, for instance, the main purpose of reading or listening and the time pressure. Examples quoted below reflect my own reading.

Another potential problem is the apparently self-explanatory distinction between intended and unintended humour (Raskin, 1985, p. 27). In practice, it may often be difficult to tell whether the humorous effect produced by an utterance or passage was, from the sender's perspective, purely accidental or, conversely, strategic. Considering the type of communication discussed—written, professional, peer-reviewed, and revised—it is reasonable to assume that whenever humour appears, it is part of the author's strategy and is expected to enhance text effectiveness.

The rest of the paper is organised in the following way: The next section discusses two models of academic communication, drawing attention to those functions and features that appear compatible with humour. The section that follows focuses on elements of non-seriousness both in the titles of scholarly publications and in the (main) text: in the form of asides, personal stories, and anecdotes. The final section offers some conclusions.

Academic Discourse

The belief that academic communication does not go with humour (Skalicky et al., 2016) draws on the traditional view of academic discourse, according to which language used for communicating scholarship serves merely as a tool—transparent, objective, and impersonal—for reporting bare facts and transmitting thus obtained knowledge to others, with the aim of obtaining a faithful representation of an objectively given reality. This view, with the writing scholar virtually absent from the text, is grounded in the classical Aristotelian distinction between three fields concerned with arguments: logic, dialectic, and rhetoric, where logic is concerned with examining the formal links between premises and conclusions of arguments, dialectic with evaluating the soundness of arguments through criticism, and rhetoric with studying their persuasive potential (Walton, 2007, p. 7). Of the three, rhetoric was treated with suspicion and reserve, and dialectic lost much of its significance in the Enlightenment, which introduced a new model of scientific reasoning, where, as Walton (2007, p. 13) puts it, "theorems were to be rigorously deduced from self-evident axioms by deductive logic." This change in thinking about science imposed the view of scholarly language as an instrument of passing information in an objective, depersonalised way, reporting rather than generating knowledge, and virtually ignored the communicative aspect of scientific pursuits and the social context of knowledge production.

In contrast to this traditional perspective, however, there is the more recent approach according to which academic activities are fundamentally interactive and interpersonal (see, e.g., Hyland, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2010), with the aims of scholars going beyond describing the small fraction of reality with which they are concerned and including such elements as taking a stance towards other texts and points of view and convincing the reader that the text is worth reading, the methodology flawless, the data reliable, and the conclusions well supported. As Swales (1990, p. 175) observes, acts of reporting on the research done are in fact "complexly distanced reconstructions of research activities, at least part of this reconstructive process deriving from a need to anticipate and discountenance negative reactions to the knowledge claims being advanced." Writing science is thus much closer to a dialogue with other scholars on the one hand, and a projected reader on the other, than to a monologue account of facts and procedures.

This dialogue with the reader and other members of the academic discourse community (Swales, 1990) is propelled by two antagonistic forces: the search for consensus and the need for disagreement. On the one hand, to have their contributions recognised as academic, scholars must work within a certain consensus, which implies not only a certain level of shared knowledge but also shared beliefs as to what is a legitimate academic problem, what counts as scientific data, and what forms of argumentation are recognised as valid and appropriate. On the other hand, to publish their findings, they must create a research space through academic criticism, by offering a new perspective, or by presenting some data so far ignored or unavailable (Swales, 1990; see also Myers, 1989; Hyland, 2000; Martín-Martín & Burgess, 2004; Hunston, 2005). In other words, to be publishable, an academic contribution should indicate some faults, discrepancies, or omissions in previous studies, which it seeks to amend, explore, or fill in. If criticism helps create a research space in which new knowledge claims are presented, then consensus provides the background against which these new claims can be received as plausible and sound.

This rhetorical perspective on academic communication makes at least some room for humour. Firstly, there is the turn to the reader, whose attention, interest, and appreciation the writer seeks. Secondly, there is awareness of important others—the authors of the works the writer refers to in order to situate his or her contribution in the research field. This involves the need to reconcile academic criticism with such values as politeness, respect for fellow academics, spirit of cooperation, and at least professed priority of the development of the discipline over personal career. In what follows, I will attempt to show how humour can serve some of those aims. In particular, the discussion will focus on these occurrences which engage the reader and contribute to the writer-reader rapport: humorous titles, humorous comments or asides, personal stories, and literary anecdotes.

Elements of Humour in Published Research Genres

The aim of this section is to discuss elements of non-seriousness in published academic texts, drawing attention to their pragmatic functions in various text positions. The analysis is based on examples drawn from two monographs, two chapters, and four journal articles published in English throughout the past fifty years in the following disciplines: (applied) linguistics, literary theory, and translation studies. All the texts were subject to peer and editorial reviews. The material is limited, which reflects the fact that humour in academic writing is still a rare phenomenon (although, as this paper attempts to show, not at all incompatible with academic discourse) and that elements of non-seriousness in texts which are essentially non-humorous are notoriously difficult to identify using text analysers. Although some linguistic features have been demonstrated to function as predictors of humour in digitalised text corpora, Skalicky et al. (2016) point out that such analyses are usually conducted on short text samples and not necessarily prove successful with more complex forms of humour. In the present case, manual analysis seemed the only reasonable choice. As noted in the introductory section, taking into account the type of texts (academic, professional, serious, and reviewed), it is assumed that the humorous effect produced was planned and used strategically to further the writers' goals. The following subsections focus on elements of non-seriousness in titles, on humorous comments and personal stories embedded in the text, and on literary anecdotes, here used as an introductory move.

The Title

The title provides a "situational frame" (Duszak, 1998, p. 129) for the entire text, thus setting the reader's expectations towards it and facilitating interpretation. It is also the first part of the text with which readers come into contact. It is on the basis of the title that they decide whether the article corresponds to their academic interests and whether it is likely to be interesting. As Swales and Feak (2004, p. 205) put it, authors realise that a research paper "will be known by its title" and that "a successful title will attract readers while an unsuccessful one will discourage readers." Elements of humour or wordplay are sometimes used in titles to seduce the audience, as in (1)–(5).

(1) The care and maintenance of hedges (Skelton, 1988)
(2) What 'must' and 'can' must and can mean (Kratzer, 1977)
(3) The case for case (Fillmore, 1967)
(4) Different strokes for different folks: Disciplinary variation in academic writing (Hyland, 2007)
(5) Short people got no reason to live: Reading irony (Fish, 1983)

The title in (1) introduces a relatively early article concerned not with gardening but with hedging in discourse, and arguing for more attention being devoted to teaching the use and function of qualifying expressions to non-native students writers. It is based on lexical ambiguity, with *hedge*, the ambiguity trigger, going well with *care* and *maintenance* under both interpretations. Example (2) involves a wordplay founded on the opposition between mention and use—the paper discusses the meanings of two modals, *must* and *can*, within the framework of possible worlds semantics. Wordplay based on polysemy underlies example (3), with *case* being used as part of the academic phraseme *the case for* and as a grammatical term. The two-part title in (4) plays with registers: the proverb in the first "catchy" part ('Different things appeal to different people,' *Oxford Dictionaries Online*, 2017) brings associations with folk wisdom and grandma's common sense, which are considered as extraneous to western science, if not necessarily wholly incompatible with it. The second, academic part of the title demonstrates the validity and aptness of this unconventional opening. Example (5) is structurally similar: the first part is a line from a song by Randy Newman, blatantly incompatible with academic register and, broadly speaking, academic standards in being not only colloquial but also chauvinist. The second part of the title provides justification for its beginning: Newman's song was received as an insult despite his attempts to explain that his intention was not to ridicule short people but, conversely, to reveal the absurdity of all forms of prejudice. Thus, it provides a real-life example of misread irony. In all these cases, elements of humour capture the reader's attention, provoke curiosity, and raise interest in the content of the article.

Playful Comments and Asides

Humorous comments and juxtapositions used in the body of text may help to keep readers focused by deautomatising reading, keep them engaged by provoking a spontaneous reaction, and provide additional gratification in the form of amusement. This reader-oriented function is illustrated in examples (6)–(9).

(6) Still others turned to psychology and explained that while Newman perhaps *thought* that he was free of prejudice, his song displayed his true feelings, feelings he had hidden even from himself. In short (<u>a phrase that should, I suppose, be used sparingly in this paper</u>), rather than providing a point of clarity and stability, Newman's explanations (not heard as explanations at all, but as rationalizations or lies) merely extended the area of interpretive dispute. (Fish, 1983, pp. 175–176)

(7) Clearly there is both real assurance and confident ease in this writing which perhaps comes with experience. I haven't been able to study diachronic changes in this corpus, but it is widely believed that the options open to established researchers are probably much wider than those available to beginning ones; <u>a phenomenon John has referred to as "Young Turk" versus "Old Fart" approaches</u> (Swales, 2002). (Hyland, 2008, p. 147)

(8) There is a time in the career of every academic when you are supposed to have authored a monograph. Although it is not an official requirement, it fits into the general "publish or perish" adage. The main problem with this, in my view, is the need to find proper balance between <u>trying to publish mediocre works that have not been devoted enough blood, sweat and tears, and aspiring to create an *opus magnum*</u>, something a scholar can genuinely be proud of as a pinnacle of his/her academic achievement. (Bartłomiejczyk, 2016, p. 7)

(9) A simple frequency count of content words throws up items which might lead us to identify John in a 'name-the-linguist' parlour game. The top eight content items are: research, genre(s), English, discourse, language, academic, writing and students. (Hyland, 2008, p. 145)

Example (6) comes from the opening paragraphs of "Short people got no reason to live: Reading irony" by Stanley Fish, an article quoted in the discussion of non-serious titles in Section The Title. The humorous parenthetical remark refers to a standard academic metatextual phraseme *in short*, which forms a pseudo-cohesive tie with *short people* and the title of the song that served as a source of inspiration for the author. The comment in (7) humorously encapsulates the idea of posited differences between discourse practices applied by novice and experienced academic writers using metaphorical (*Young Turk*) and strongly colloquial (*Old Fart*) labels. If the comments in (6) and (7) are inessential (they may be omitted from the text without major information loss), the ones in (8) and (9) are not parenthetical but form the core of the argument. In (8), the contrast between working at a low effort level on the one hand, and endless revising and polishing on the other, is boosted by the juxtaposition of the emphatic, emotional phrase *blood, sweat and tears* (itself an unlikely choice in an academic work) and the Latin expression for masterpiece—formal, marked, and suggestive of spectacular achievement, grandeur, and triumph. Example (9), drawn from a corpus analysis of John Swales's academic style, refers playfully to the possibility to use lexical frequency analysis to identify the principal research themes and, in this way, the author of the texts analysed. The humorousness of this fragment is based on the juxtaposition of two spheres of life: science on the one hand, and leisure and social life on the other.

Personal Stories

The humorous potential of autobiographic references—or "personal anecdotal humor" (Minchew, 2001, p. 62)—in academic settings has been recognised by Minchew (2001) and Ruiz-Madrid and Fortanet-Gómez (2015), who report that they are used to keep the attention of the audience, build a sense of shared identity, and maintain a friendly, relaxed atmosphere. Examples (10) and (11) demonstrate their effectiveness in published professional academic texts.

(10) My late grandmother was particularly sensitive to the use of asymmetrical *ty* as a face threat. She made a point of never addressing others with this form, and whenever she was addressed as *ty* by someone who intended to emphasise the power distance, she pretended to construe this as an invitation to a more friendly relationship and immediately

addressed her interlocutor as *ty*, too. This was normally a very effective strategy to save her face by making the other person quickly switch to the polite form *pani*. Sometimes, the interlocutor was too embarrassed or perhaps too thick-skinned to do this, in which case the relation continued as a symmetrical one. (Bartłomiejczyk, 2016, p. 136)

(11) My own early attempt to be a full member of the [philatelic] community were not marked by success. Early on I published an article in the [philatelic] journal which used a fairly complex frequency analysis of occurrence—derived from Applied Linguistics—in order to offer an alternative explanation of a puzzle well known to members of the HKSC [Hong Kong Study Circle]. The only comments that this effort to establish credibility elicited were "too clever by half" and "Mr Swales, we won't change our minds without a chemical analysis." (Swales, 1990, p. 28)

Examples (10) and (11) recall episodes of the writer's family history and the writer's early publishing experiences, respectively. It is worth noting that apart from their humorous nature, both play an important function with respect to the content. Example (10), placed in a footnote, helps to clarify the significance of the T/V distinction in Polish and its possible effects on the perceived politeness or impoliteness of forms of address; (11), in turn, illustrates the bumpy process of earning membership in a discourse community and learning its communicative conventions. By sharing with the reader some of the author's personal experiences, they establish a certain rapport that goes beyond a scholar-to-scholar exchange, keep the problems discussed close to life, and introduce a welcome change from serious, technical exposition.

(Literary) Anecdotes

An anecdote or a fragment of a literary text may be used as an introduction to a problem, that is, at the beginning of a text, presumably to interest the reader in the topic, promise enjoyable reading rather than a dry, technical style, and ensure that the audience is well-disposed towards the text from the outset, as shown in example (12).

(12) In one of my favourite novels, *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared* by Jonas Jonasson, there is an episode in which the main character, Swede Allan Karlsson . . . , ends up in Moscow, having dinner with Stalin, the boss of the Soviet security Lavrenty Beria, and the head of the Soviet nuclear programme Yury Popov. Apart from the aforementioned, at the table sits "a little,

almost invisible young man without a name and without anything either to eat or to drink"—the interpreter, and the others pretend he is not there at all, although he makes the friendly conversation possible in the first place. During the dinner, the amicable atmosphere is suddenly completely spoiled as Allan quotes an inappropriate, imperialist poet, and Stalin flies into a fury. Allan is immediately accused by his moody host of being a filthy capitalist and a long tirade results, which ends as follows:

'I've been thinking,' said Allan.
'What,' said Stalin angrily.
'Why don't you shave off that moustache?'
With that the dinner was over, because the interpreter fainted.

. . . The episode from Jonasson's amusing novel illustrates very wellthe main question I will try to answer in this study: except fainting, what can the interpreter do when s/he is required to voice a statement that may likely offend the addressee . . . and is, in fact, intended to do just this? (Bartłomiejczyk, 2016, pp. 9–10)

Example (12) comes from the introduction to a book that studies the ways in which interpreters deal with face threats in political contexts. It grabs the reader's attention, illustrates (if somewhat hyperbolically) the significance of the problem, and produces the impression that the author is presumably not only a competent scholar but also a clever writer.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this paper was to demonstrate that although they are not typical sites of humour, written, professional, career academic genres do introduce its elements to attract the reader and to increase the text's effectiveness. Elements of humour in titles instantly catch the readers' attention and provoke curiosity, which means that the reader is more likely to read the rest of the text. Used in the main text, they deautomatise reading and engage the reader emotionally by provoking a spontaneous reaction. Humorous autobiographical references build the writer-reader rapport and may provide a valuable, real-life exemplification of the problems discussed. Finally, a literary anecdote may function as a lead-in to the topic, signalling the main problem and promising an interesting reading. All these elements work for the ultimate success of the text, encouraging the reader to start reading and to continue, making the main point of the discussion more memorable, and leaving the reader with the impression that the text was well written and well-worth reading. Drawing students' attention to these not very frequent but very effective mechanisms may help overcome the fear of writing they often experience at the beginning of their academic lives, dismantle the detrimental stereotype of academic communication as necessarily stilted, dull, and pompous, and bring a welcome element of fun into the academic writing class.

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