
Research Reports

Laughing Matters: A Case Study of Humor in Multicultural Business Negotiations

Taina Vuorela

This article reports the results of an ongoing study of multicultural business negotiations. Two meetings were under scrutiny: (1) the internal strategy meeting of a company's sales team (sellers' internal meeting or SIM); and (2) a negotiation between the same sellers and a potential customer (client negotiation or CN). The analysis revealed that there were interesting differences in the ways humor was used at the two meetings. The meetings lasted equally long, but SIM featured more humor than CN. Based on the analysis of these meetings, humor seems to have strategic potential for negotiations: it can be used to diffuse tension, mitigate a possible offense, introduce a difficult issue, and thus to pursue one's own goals. Among the most common subjects of humor were the national characteristics of the Finns (the parent-selling company is Finnish), the project itself, and the selling activity. The most common types of joking in the two meetings were ironic exaggerations and jokes expressing an incongruity. Irony, however, was used more cautiously in CN, where outsiders were present, than in SIM. Joking seems related to power, and power is a factor that influences who has the right to begin and end a joke, and also seems to determine whose joke is laughed at. It is also, not surprisingly, in the sellers' interest to humor the buyers in the competitive stages of the buying process (e.g., supplier search) in order to "stay in the game," which is reflected in the use of humor during the meeting.

Taina Vuorela is principal lecturer in the School of Business Studies at Oulu Polytechnic in Oulu, Finland and a Ph.D. student at the Helsinki School of Economics. Her e-mail address is taina.vuorela@oamk.fi.

Humor would seem to be an unimportant element in negotiating, particularly if the focus is on negotiating in a multicultural setting. This conclusion is based on a review of the consultative literature in the field, in which discussions of humor's role in negotiation is sparse. Likewise, humor does not feature in the negotiation skills textbooks that are studied by future negotiators in educational institutions. In fact, negotiators are often warned against engaging in humorous communication because of the potential risk of offending the other party in a context where the participants do not share the same cultural background. Humor would appear to be risky in business.

The present study seeks to systematically investigate humor in multicultural business negotiations. Some previous research has suggested that laughter and humor have an important role in business negotiations particularly regarding the management of interpersonal relations (e.g., Adelswärd and Öberg 1998). The main aim of the study is to investigate the case of humor further in order to discover if humor is used strategically in business negotiations, that is, does it serve the business goals of the negotiation? The working hypothesis underlying the study is that humor is such an inherent part of human interactions, negotiations included, that successful negotiators cannot afford to ignore it.

Defining Humor

Humor comes in many forms — narrative jokes, nonsensical slapstick, irony, and sarcasm, to name but a few — and is generally reflected in the behavior of the participants with smiling and laughter. Humor can be defined as a state of mind, as the quality of causing amusement, and as the ability to understand and enjoy what is funny and makes people laugh (*Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* 1998).

Most commonly, in humor we expect one thing, but another is said, and the surprise this involves makes us laugh (cf. Cicero in Critchley 2002). The three most common theories of humor involve humor as a feeling of superiority, humor as a release of nervous energy, and humor as incongruity (cf. Cicero above; for more details, see Critchley 2002).

One specific type of humor that is particularly relevant to this study is irony. Irony is the “use of words which are clearly opposite to one's meaning, usually either in order to be amusing or to show annoyance” (*Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* 1998). Understatements and exaggerations can also be seen as ironic types of humor; such statements “under the truth” and representations of “things beyond the truth” express a desirable state of affairs in their literal meanings but in an amusing way.

Humor and Negotiation: Theoretical Considerations

Humor can be a powerful tool in negotiating: it can function as “a bouquet, shield, cloak, incisive weapon” (Holmes 1998). Superiors can maintain

their power with humor through “repressive humor;” subordinates can challenge that power through “contestive humor” (Holmes 1998). The power of humor is its flexibility as it can be used both cooperatively and competitively. This could be particularly relevant to the act of negotiating.

Through the study of humor in different types of meetings, previous research has shown that different workplaces use humor differently (Holmes and Marra 2002). The differences reflect, according to Holmes and Marra, the kinds of relationships that workers have with each other as well as the different values and orientations of these organizations. Besides enabling the expression of criticism (Kervinen 1997), humor has also been recognized as a “survival technique” (see also Cann, Holt, and Calhoun 1999; Martin and Lefcourt 1983) as it offers new viewpoints and solutions in changing situations.

Although humor and laughter appear to be linked to expressions of negative as well as positive experiences in a negotiating context (e.g., Adelswärd and Öberg 1998), it has been empirically shown that humor can have a positive effect on a person’s physical and psychological well-being. Laughter has been shown to decrease the levels of stress-related hormones in the blood (Berk et al. 1989). Humor has also been found to increase a person’s feeling of hope (Vilaythong et al. 2003; see also Abel 2002). A sense of hope, the ability to reframe difficult situations, and an efficient use of problem-solving strategies would all seem to be important in a business negotiation environment. If such abilities and feelings are brought about by the use of humor, studying the matter further in the context of negotiating is certainly a worthwhile undertaking.

Humor and Power in Negotiating

Although the freedom of expression is a basic human right, the idea of completely free speech — that anyone is free to say whatever she wants whenever she wants — is an idealization, especially if one wants to negotiate successfully. Discourse is a part of social practice and reproduces social structures (Fairclough 1989). Consequently, on the one hand, negotiation discourse reflects power relations, and, on the other hand, power struggles also occur in negotiating. Power dynamics in negotiating reflect the fact that powerful participants control and constrain what nonpowerful participants can say, as well as when and where they can say it.

Humor would seem to have links with power in negotiating contexts (e.g., Holmes 1998). Different joking relationships have been identified (Radcliffe-Brown 1949 in Knuuttila 1992) as symmetrical or asymmetrical. For example, the relationship is asymmetrical when the parties involved cannot mock each other to a similar degree. These joking relationships are also linked to the types of joking and the content of the joke. This could be expected to be particularly relevant in business relationships, where the power held by opposing sides — sellers and buyers — fluctuates during the negotiation process (see e.g., Charles 1996).

The Relevance of Humor in Multicultural Negotiations

Any effort to understand the use of humor in negotiation interactions must consider the concept of “face” (Goffman 1955), politeness theories (Brown and Levinson 1987), and the cooperative principle (Grice 1975, 1989). Verbal interaction has been shown to be governed by norms and principles; this is particularly true of professional discourse (e.g., Charles 1994; Raevaara, Ruusuvuori, and Haakana 2001). Humor can be seen to be a violation of Paul Grice’s cooperative principle: the maxims of quality, quantity, manner, and relevance. Speakers, if they follow the cooperative principle, aim to be truthful, informative, clear, and relevant, and these are often not the characteristics of humorous communication.

However, the cooperative principle has been criticized (e.g., Sperber and Wilson 1986) for describing interaction inadequately because the essential concepts mentioned in the maxims are left undefined, particularly that of relevance. Relevance would appear to be particularly important in business negotiations where the participants can be expected to be cautious about when to reveal information to the opposing side. The degree of cooperation described by Grice (1975) cannot be automatically expected of communicators. In fact, negotiators who do not give us all the information we wish they would are *not* violating the principles of communication. They are, quite simply, negotiating strategically. According to Attardo (2000: 820–822), Grice’s cooperative principle as well as Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s theory of relevance should be complemented with the concept of “relevant appropriateness.”

According to Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987: 232), the three most important factors that influence interactions between people and create ambiguity in these interactions are social distance between people (familiarity), power (vertical distance), and risk, that is, how threatening the interaction is. They argue that their notion of face — which comprises two desires or “face wants,” the need to be accepted and the need for respect — is universal, although there are cultural differences about what it means to be a person and the kinds of actions that can discredit a person’s worth in public situations (1987: 11–12). The need to protect face explains why so much of verbal interaction is modified with “redressive action,” through joking, for example. Humor may minimize threatening interactions; consequently it may be used as an exploitation of politeness strategies in attempting to redefine how threatening speech is (e.g., a complaint).

Humor and irony are often felt to be the final obstacles before achieving near native-speaker fluency in a foreign language (e.g., Burke 1995: 4–5, 10; Chiaro 1992). Speakers want participants in a negotiation, for example, to “read between the lines” in order to recognize the function of a humorous utterance, and it is this ambiguity that enables “saving face.” However, with nonnative speakers, all participants might not recognize the

irony. Recognition of irony is often culturally dependent, and what makes it hard to define is the fact that, like humor in general, understanding irony can be a subjective process.

Humor may, therefore, hold important strategic potential in the context of business negotiations. The essence of joking relationships is that they are felt to be nonthreatening (e.g., Goody 1978). According to John Maynard-Smith (in Brown and Levinson 1987), controlling internal aggression, while at the same time retaining the potential for aggression in external competitive relations, is a problem for social groups, for example, a sales team. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness, humor included, makes communication between potentially aggressive parties possible (see also Austin 1990).

Research Methods and Questions

The present study seeks to investigate whether the members of a professional discourse community, such as business negotiators, use humor in order to manage business transactions, where financial considerations are of great importance. The issue is particularly interesting in the context of multicultural business negotiations where some of the participants are nonnative speakers of the language being used because humor tends to be experienced by language learners as very challenging. The subjects of the study originate in three different countries, namely, the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, and Finland. Only one of the participants, the Finnish sales manager, is a nonnative speaker of the English language.

The research material consists of two types of data: authentic audio-recorded meetings and participant interviews. Two meetings were recorded in the middle of a business transaction between a British buying company and a Finnish selling company. The company's internal meeting, *sellers' internal meeting* (SIM), had five participants. The meeting with a potential customer, *client negotiation* (CN), had seven participants, three of whom also took part in the SIM. All participants were men. Both meetings had been part of a long chain of meetings and negotiations concerning an industrial project, in which the sellers were supplying an engine to a power plant. The company's internal meeting (SIM) was a strategy meeting, where the sellers discussed the agenda of their future negotiation with potential buyers (CN). In CN, the same agenda is covered with the buyers. Both meetings were recorded within forty-eight hours, with SIM taking place before CN. The meetings were audio-recorded in the United Kingdom in 1996. They both lasted for approximately eight hours, and together totaled sixteen hours of tape-recorded data.

The essence of the two meetings is an effort to clarify the sellers' offer to the buyers. They go over the technical details of their offer, as well as the technical specifications of their product and the scope of supply. They also discuss the commercial conditions of a possible contract, for example,

the price of the product and delivery times. The CN is the fifth meeting in the buying process between the buyers and the sellers, which, at the time of the audio-recording, had been under way for two years. These data are unique because in both SIM and the CN, the sellers discuss the same agenda items but in two different business contexts, which enables a comparison of their speech behavior in two separate “archetypal” business meetings. Although both meetings contain negotiating, that is, discussion designed to settle a question (cf. Wagner 1995), only CN is called a negotiation in the study.

In addition to the two meetings, the research corpus was supplemented with participant interviews with the sellers, which took place right after the meetings. Also, the Finnish participant was interviewed throughout the analytical phase of the research as a specialist informant. The author was present in the two meetings while they were recorded. This is helpful because the study relies on ethnographic background material in the analysis of the meetings and my presence should have facilitated the appropriate interpretation of the communication (cf. Davies 1999).

The participants are all native speakers of British or Irish English, except for one seller who is a Finnish businessman with several years’ experience conducting business in English. The sellers’ speech behavior is the main object of study because researchers had access to the SIM but not to an internal meeting of the buyers.

The nature of the data allows for an investigation of the phenomenon of “in-group” and “out-group” humor in the context of a business transaction, which involves several stages of the negotiation process. “In-group” refers to communication that takes place within a particular group, in this case a company group, the SIM. “Out-group” stands for communication with those members of the business community who are external to that company group, in this case, the potential buyers in the CN. Based on several listenings of the recorded material of the two meetings, the sellers’ humor *seemed* to be different in SIM than in CN. As a result, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Is humor in the sellers’ internal meeting really different from that of the client negotiation? If in-group humor and out-group humor are different, how is the difference manifested?
2. Who jokes in multicultural business negotiations and when?

The methodology used is a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Humor, humorous communications, joking, and jocular events are defined as anything said or done verbally in order to cause amusement, intentionally or unintentionally, for example, a narrative joke, a joking tone of voice, and “quips,” such as a funny word choice. Although the functions of laughter have been shown to be ambivalent in business meetings (e.g., Adelswärd and Öberg 1998), in the present study, laughter has been used

as a signal of humorous communication, unless another interpretation of laughter has been found more appropriate because of the situational, interactional, or business context. Sometimes, the participants seem to be laughing at the awkwardness of the situation, and nobody is actually trying to intentionally be funny.

The sixteen hours of recorded data from the sellers' internal meeting and the client negotiation were analyzed for the participants' use of humor. The jocular events were identified and classified according to type and subject (content). Attention was also paid to who in the selling and buying teams began and ended joking and who continued another interlocutor's humorous communication. The results are given in Tables One-Six.

While identifying humorous communication, the reactions of all the participants have been taken into consideration; signals of accommodation or rejection of humor have been quantified whenever possible. Because the SIM and the CN were audio-recorded and not video-recorded, such visual indications of humor as smiling have not been recorded.

Role of Humor in Business Negotiations

Impact of Humor on Relationships

The participants seem to use the segments of a negotiation that are normally reserved for "small talk" (topics such as weather, travel, etc.) that often occur at the beginning and end of the meeting, as well as during coffee and lunch breaks, for humor-driven management of interpersonal relationships with the opposing side. Although both the meetings were task-oriented, this task orientation is especially in the forefront during CN, where the diversity of interests is explicit. Consequently, the CN participants proceed somewhat faster than in SIM to the core of the meeting by going over the agenda without much delay. During the core of the meetings, when the participants go through the agenda, the intervals between joking incidents increase, particularly in CN but also in SIM, but the use of humor to enliven the communication by no means ends there.

Brown and Levinson point out that humor is a means of attending to interlocutors' "face" (Brown and Levinson 1987; see also Scollon and Scollon 1995), by involving others in the interaction and thus indicating acceptance of them or showing deference to them through indirectness. Previous research has also shown that participants in a business negotiation use humor to manage their relationship with the opposing side (e.g., Adelswärd and Öberg 1998). These observations seem to be corroborated by the current data. When the participants engage in humorous communication in the SIM and the CN, the humor seems to "put the negotiators at ease."

At the time of SIM and CN, the present business transaction was in the fourth stage of the buying process, namely, "supplier search" (Kotler 2002); the deal had not yet closed, and the sellers were still competing with other potential suppliers. Consequently, it is in the sellers' interest to

keep the buyers happy in order to facilitate entry into the next stage of the buying process. In addition to engaging in humorous communication during the breaks, they seem to be humoring the buyers throughout the negotiation and seem to be forging relationships with the help of joking, probably for strategic reasons. For example, describing the operation of the selling company's service department, SellerJ emphasizes its efficiency through amusing imagery, that is, *joking word choice* (Extract One, lines 3 through 6), which is used often in both CN and SIM in order to amuse. (For an explanation of transcription conventions, see Appendix.)

Extract One: Client Negotiation

- 1 SellerJ So we in the U.K. we've got about just
2 (SIPS COFFEE)
3 round about seventy people working for
the company **we've got**
4 **forty-two service engineers running**
about in little white vans [an'
5 **things like that**
6 BuyerM **right ha**

Joking is believed to have worked if the audience responds as they are expected to, by laughing. In Extract One, BuyerM finds the image of efficiency amusing (line 6), so the tactic seems to be working. Strengthening the feeling of togetherness in a buyer-seller negotiation through humor appears to be an important relational (i.e., interpersonal) goal for both the selling and buying sides. Particularly for the sellers, forging relationships in this way is important strategic work. If the buyers and sellers see the potential deal as a common goal, to be achieved together, they are more likely to try to solve all the obstacles in their way together in order to close a deal. Humor seems to play an important part in such interactional work.

Although all verbal interaction requires cooperation, this is particularly important in humor, which is often produced by the buyers and sellers together. For example, in a jocular event in the CN, the buyers start to describe the construction site of the project with a *joking word choice*: the site was designed according to Nordic standards, which to them seem "exotic." The sellers continue the quip with an *ironic exaggeration*, joking about the idiosyncrasies of the Nordic countries regarding the facilities considered necessary on an industrial site (the Swedes would like to have four toilets; the Finns would like a sauna).

Strengthening team spirit is an important overall goal of the SIM. A close-knit team could be expected to function better than a loose one, and the sellers seem to use humor in order to build up a team spirit before encountering the buyers. They use an *ironic tone of voice* when talking about their company's official selling tactics: the "win" strategy and the conferences that the company organizes in order to train its sales staff.

They laugh about being “indoctrinated;” they see the “win” strategy that they are instructed to use as a tool for improving sales and yet they are ironic about it.

Impact of Relationships on Humor

As mentioned earlier, humorous communication is often cooperative, a “joint venture.” One person, for example, initiates a quip and another continues it. Ending or cutting off humorous speech, however, such as a joke or quip that someone else has initiated, could be seen as uncooperative interactional behavior. In a task-oriented encounter such as a business negotiation, ending a quip means controlling the other negotiators. But such powerful interactional behavior could also be seen as cooperative, at least in some contexts, because it could contribute toward the attainment of the overall goal of the negotiation, which is getting through the agenda of the meeting on time. Such interactional power would most naturally be employed by powerful negotiators. Examining who participates in humorous communication during a negotiation from the point of view of interactional power (who seems to have the *right* to initiate and end joking in business meetings) may reveal interesting information about the norms governing the strategic use of humor.

In the CN, the buyers controlled the interaction at this stage in the buying process because the contract had not yet been signed. They had called the meeting, and BuyerS, the project leader and the most powerful negotiator on the buyers’ side, allotted turns to talk to the other participants throughout the duration of the meeting. He also *initiated* joking the most often. His joking seems power-related; he is powerful and could *afford* to joke. He also used his power by *ending* the humorous exchange if he felt that it was getting in the way of “serious” business. He was the chairman of the meeting. As chair, his humorous communication was powerful; it required the response that is most appropriate in the context of humor, which is laughter. BuyerS’s powerful role in the negotiation at this stage in the buying process was reflected in the fact that everyone present in the CN laughed at his jokes. (Some would argue that perhaps some of those present laughed because his jokes were actually funny. Based on my observations as a researcher who sat in on the negotiation, however, the quality of his quips did not earn the level of laughter they received, and the sellers seemed to be showing their respect for the head buyer in this way, even more so than with the other buyers.) It seems that strategic use of humor involves not only initiating humor but also reacting to it appropriately in appropriate circumstances.

The distribution of participation in instances of joking in the CN can be seen in Table One below, where BS stands for BuyerS and SJ for SellerJ, both of whom are project leaders. As can be seen in Table One, the project’s leaders (BS and SJ) took an active role in the initiation of humor.

Table One
Distribution of Participation in Humorous Communication in Client Negotiation

	BS: Project Leader	BL	BM	BG*	SP	SJ: Project Leader	SA	Everyone	Total
Who initiates	30	7	10	7	13	28	21	4	121
Who laughs	12	2	30	8	2	28	3	36	121
Who continues joking	6	4	12	2	11	7	15	0	57
Who ends joking	5	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	7
Total participation	53	13	52	18	27	63	39	40	306

* BG was absent during the commercial part of client negotiation.

Those who had only temporary roles in the negotiation, such as BL, who was interim project manager, or BG, who was a consultant, took more passive roles in humor initiation.

The frequencies of total participation in instances of joking in SIM indicate that the participants who knew each other best engaged most frequently in humorous interactions. Familiarity and shared knowledge seem to increase the amount of humor used in interaction. The older the professional relationship, the more humor can be expected in verbal interaction. This observation is in accordance with Mirjaliisa Charles (1994) on the relevance of old and new relationships on interaction in negotiations. Naturally, the personality features of the individual team members can also be expected to be relevant. However, in the present study such psychological considerations have not been under scrutiny. Table Two focuses on the SIM and gives the same details on participation in humor as did Table One for the CN.

As can be seen from Tables One and Two, there was more humor in SIM than in CN. The sellers seemed aware of the strategic potential of humor when negotiating with the potential client; they were eager to resort to it, but were still more careful about initiating humor than they were in SIM. Ending humorous communication is seldom resorted to in both meetings and only by powerful negotiators (SP, SJ, BS) or outsiders (BG). Even then, humor was never ended by interrupting a quip.

Motivation for Humor

It is evident that from the very beginning of both meetings, expressing humor was an important speech activity. Humorous communication, however, is time-consuming. Even if most of the joking was carried out

Table Two
Distribution of Participation in Humorous Communication in Sellers' Internal Meeting

	SD	ST*	SSCR*	SP	SJ	SA	Everyone	Total
Who initiates	27	7	1	37	58	29	2	161
Who laughs	34	0	1	12	45	22	26	140
Who continues joking	7	1	1	19	15	14	1	58
Who ends joking	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total participation	68	8	3	68	119	65	29	360

* ST (SellerT) and SSCR (selling secretary) were only present during a part of the meeting. SD stands for SellerD, who is the manager of the sales team but did not attend CN.

through quick “quips,” if we assume that the quips lasted one minute each with accompanying laughter, pauses, etc., this would mean that out of eight hours (480 minutes), 25 percent of CN and 34 percent of SIM was spent in joking. This slows down the process of going through the agenda of the meetings, so why do the negotiators resort to humor? Humorous communication does produce laughter, which is a pleasant physical activity, but with a task-oriented business negotiation, this has limited explanatory power.

In SIM, the sellers did not actually plan how to use humor in CN in order to win the deal. Thus, their humor in both SIM and CN is, on the one hand, spontaneous. On the other hand, when the instances of humorous communication are analyzed in context, the humor does seem largely instrumental. The participants seemed to want to use humor whenever feasible in both meetings. Arguably the strategic use of humor is something we all learn early in life. Humor is one technique that children learn to manage their relationships with peers and authorities, “If I manage to make you laugh (or smile), I will win you over.” If this works at home and at school, it can also be expected to succeed in the workplace. Clearly, some of us are more adept at making jokes than others, but most of us engage in it to some degree.

So, although humorous communication can seem *spontaneous* when it is clearly not planned, participants appear to use it strategically whenever they can. They *pursue difficult goals* with the help of humor (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987) by masking a threatening goal as an unthreatening one. Humor has been shown by previous researchers to have a discourse function; negotiators have been found to *end difficult phases of negotiation with joking* (cf. Adelswärd and Öberg 1998). The results of the present study support this. Engaging in humorous communication right after a difficult agenda item is addressed can also work as a *release*

of tension. It may also be a way of *managing interpersonal relations* between opposing negotiating parties by indicating that the parties can be cooperative even if they disagree. In these studies, the participants also seem to have *avoided difficult issues* with the help of humor. On occasion, one party would try to bring up a difficult topic but the other party would not discuss it meaningfully, preferring only to touch upon it via joking. This was particularly true in the SIM. This can again be considered strategic use of humor — direct accusations could be offensive and might jeopardize the atmosphere and the negotiation outcome.

Humor has been seen, paradoxically, as a way of controlling aggression (Brown and Levinson 1987), but also as a way of expressing it. This is particularly true of ironic or sarcastic humor. Humor not only reflects existing power relations but is also a tool for contesting them, especially in an asymmetrical professional context (Holmes 1998; Holmes and Marra 2002; see also Austin 1990). When questioned about the SIM, the specialist informant described the meeting as a “typical” company internal meeting within the company group; it contained both “business and fun.” Ironic humor seems to be used here, as well as in CN, to *express frustration or concern* about the difficulties that the negotiating parties faced. It was a “safe” way to express discontent because it permitted the speaker to express a problem while at the same time saving his face or that of the interlocutor because the joke was “off-the-record” and not an official part of the negotiation (see Brown and Levinson 1987). For example, SellerP employed an *ironic exaggeration* to describe the clear problem his team faced obtaining adequate information about the product so that they could communicate it to the buyers. He stated about the buyers that “they don’t know what they are buying, and we don’t know what we are selling so we are pretty close.”

Humor was commonly used to express frustration or concern in both SIM and CN. In Extract Two below from SIM, the sellers discussed whether they should leave the names of the software that is needed to maintain the engine in their offer. They were hesitant to emphasize the fact that the software is separate from the rest of the engine protection system because this might have meant that they would have to pay for the software instead of the buyers. SellerJ found that his argument was not succeeding, and he expressed frustration by blaming the Finnish participant, SellerP, through a joking word choice in line 9. Although SellerJ’s wording is aggressive, SellerP seems to take no offense and laughs with the others, probably because SellerJ’s tone of voice and body language were not aggressive.

Extract Two: Sellers’ Internal Meeting

- 1 SellerJ shall I write in brackets ⟨product name 1⟩ and
- 2 ⟨product name 2⟩
- 3 SellerA mm * I’d I’d just leave it
- 4 SellerP no

-
- 5 SellerA leave it
6 SellerP leave it
7 SellerA then it's as simple as that there's just this engine
monitoring
8 system
9 SellerJ okay * okay (LAUGHS) **bloody foreigners**
10 (general
laughter)

Humor has, indeed, been identified as a way of dealing with aggressive feelings (Cann, Holt, and Calhoun 1999; Holmes 1998) and the present study supports this finding, as we can see from extract two above. The fact that the humor in the two meetings is quite often *ethnic* is interesting and will be dealt with later in this article.

Besides being used instrumentally, humor may also serve as a tool for diagnosing the success of a single negotiation or even the whole buying process. Synchronizing one's speech with that of one's interlocutors is an interesting technique. It is a common feature of verbal interaction, for example when taboo words (swearing) are used and seem to work in connection with humor as well. Humor is contagious, so one instance of joking easily leads to more joking. Because laughter is a pleasant physical activity, the participants generally join in the fun unless they have a good reason not to, and the participants often adopt each other's jokes. This was particularly true in SIM, as shown in Extract Three below:

Extract Three: Sellers' Internal Meeting

- 1 **SellerD on smaller projects it's just not**
2 **worth getting out of bed for**
3 SellerP yeah * it's the same thing for me in Finland if
somebody
4 wants me to * uhm make a proposal of um
(name of product)
5 SellerD (LAUGHS) yeah
6 **SellerP and they just want to ha the (part of**
product) * then
a all of
7 **a sudden I have to go by bus to the**
customer
8 SellerD (LAUGHS)

In this extract, SellerD talked about the fact that sometimes the margin of a deal is so small that the business transaction is hardly worth the effort (lines 1 and 2). SellerP continued in the same vein on lines 6 and 7. Engaging in such humorous communication may involve a risk. In CN, for example, the buyers were cautious about committing themselves to the deal as yet. Synchronizing their humor with that of the sellers might have given misleading signals in that regard. The participants, on the one hand, adopted each others quips if they were neutral and seemed "harmless."

On the other hand, they were careful not to laugh at unilateral joking in connection with “buyer joking” and “seller joking” (see section below), where the opposing team seemed to be pursuing its own goals by mocking the other side’s viewpoints, and where they did not intend to concede. Such interactional cooperation across opposing teams could help them determine how likely they are to close a business deal (cf. Öberg 1995, Vuorela 2004). In these meetings, joking seemed to reflect the participants’ power relations. It could also be used as a tool to diagnose the success of the negotiating process because any shifts in these power relations that take place at different stages of the buying process could be expected to be reflected in the participants’ use of humor.

According to Critchley (2002; see also Holmes 1998; Holmes and Marra 2002), humor can bring forth a “change of reality” as it helps people see the world in a different light and thus enables them to *find solutions* to problems. The sellers seem to have attempted to use humor for this purpose in SIM, and some of the ideas they put forth there through humor are both creative and a bit ridiculous. For example, the noise requirements of the project might have created a challenge for the sellers so SellerA suggested that, instead of measuring the noise of their product at the actual future power plant site on the coast of Ireland, they should measure it on the English coast. In CN, however, the sellers were more cautious about initiating such joking.

Unsuccessful Humor

The most natural responses to successful humor are laughing or smiling. A speaker often feels that if listeners have not laughed at her joke, then something has gone wrong either with the joke or with her telling of it. In negotiating, however, the situation is more complicated. The humor’s effectiveness, as previously discussed, seems to be linked to power; the most powerful participant in CN, BuyerS, was the most successful in inviting others to laugh at his humorous communication. Interestingly, the new member of the buying team, BuyerM, who is less powerful than BuyerS, had more difficulty in his attempts at joint merry-making. He spent a considerable time laughing unilaterally. Like BuyerS, SellerJ, a project leader on the sellers’ side, is also a powerful negotiator. Throughout the meeting, he seemed ready to start joking if the situation allowed it and sometimes even when it did not. Apparently, his humorous communication was felt to be inappropriate or just not amusing enough because at times no one else laughed. Still, he is clearly the type of person who enjoys joking and laughing — the “clown” of the sales team.

Appropriateness is an issue in both unilateral “seller joking” and “buyer joking.” For example, there were differences in how both sides responded to unfavorable depictions of the sellers’ product. The sellers allowed themselves to joke about their product in SIM, but did not find such humor

appropriate in CN. They did not laugh in connection with any such humor, which they might have seen as a threat to the possible future transaction. Laughter in such instances might be taken to implicate agreement with the implied criticism or acceptance of the other party's goals. In Extract Four below, the sellers and buyers disagree about payment terms and the buyers' use of humor is unilateral — the sellers do not respond to it.

Extract Four: Client Negotiation

- 1 SellerA an' there's a lot of people that
- 2 [we don't even
- 3 BuyerL (-)] (MUMBLES)
- 4 SellerA do business with
- 5 **BuyerL well I can understand that if you're dealing**
- 6 **in**
- 7 **[in in in the third world**
- 8 SellerA [no no not]
- 9 **BuyerS (LAUGHS)**
- 10 SellerA not * in this] in this country's [(-)
- 11 SellerJ it's Glasgow]
- 12 SellerP in those countries [we get one-hundred percent
- 13 up front
- 14 **BuyerM (LAUGHS) Glasgow's the third world yeah ha**
- 15 **ha**

In this extract, the buyers quite openly mocked the sellers' preferences regarding payment terms with seemingly irrelevant remarks and laughter to which the sellers did not respond. The sellers and buyers pursued goals with the help of such humor and hence used it strategically. Joking was not a joint activity there but was instead used by only one party with the opposing side as their audience. Humor failed here in that it did not become "multilateral." However, the participants managed to pursue their goals with the help of humor in such instances "unthreateningly." Whether sarcastic humor is felt to be unthreatening by the other side is another matter.

Humor in Multicultural Settings

All cultures seem to use humor, but humor is often context-specific and consequently, certain types of humor, at least, are difficult to translate into another language. Humor is often based on inside knowledge of a culture, and its use also reinforces the sense of group identity. Having a common sense of humor can be experienced as sharing a "secret code" (Critchley 2002). Although recognizing humor is apparently universal in some instances (Critchley 2002), its manifestations can differ from culture to culture and among different social, generational, and professional groups, and can also vary from one historical period to another. "Getting the joke" requires a certain amount of shared background knowledge, and this helps

explain why nonnative speakers of a language find that it is difficult to joke and understand humorous behavior in a foreign language (cf. Chiaro 1992). Through humor, we identify ourselves with a particular people who share a set of customs and characteristics, hence the relativistic nature of humor. Ethnic humor, which is oriented to differences in national culture, shows the prejudices that we hold and demonstrates how these prejudices continue to define at least partly our sense of who we are.

Culture reflects not just national identity but can also reflect various social groupings (Brett et al. 1998). According to Holmes and Marra (2002: 1685), different workplaces have their own cultures, which are continuously modified in social interaction. Becoming a member of the community of a particular workplace happens as one gains control of the discourse of that community, its humor included. Workplace communities also appear to have their own humor, which seems to override national culture and humor (Laitinen 2000). According to the specialist informant of the sales group of the present study, differences in national cultures do not normally cause any major difficulties in negotiating because sales engineers seem to form a subculture themselves, and this subculture is seen to override national cultures.

Humor is, on the one hand, a reactionary “comedy of recognition” that seeks to strengthen consensus and confirm the status quo. According to Simon Critchley (2002: 12, 41), this is particularly true of ethnic humor where often the powerful laugh at the powerless. On the other hand, critical humor, that is laughing at power, seeks to produce a change in a situation often through showing the “capture of the human being in the nets of nature” (see Holmes 1998).

British Humor

Verbal play is widespread in British culture and this type of humor nonplusses foreigners (Chiaro 1992). The British are renowned for their use of humor, and the British sense of humor has been translated into other languages, more or less successfully, from literary classics by Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare to the routines of such modern British comics as the Monty Python troupe and Mr. Bean, to name but a few. The British sense of humor is stereotypically seen to revolve around topics such as laughing at themselves and others, including foreigners, and sex (*Images of Britain* 2003), but the most common jokes in any language are the ones about happenings at the time, i.e. topical jokes (King, Ridout, and Swan 1981).

Finnish Humor

Finns have a reputation of being silent and serious-minded, except perhaps for the population in the eastern part of the country. According to a stereotypical view of Finnish humor, it is rather serious merry-making and is often linked to an ample use of alcohol (*Lonely Planet World Guide*

Table Three
Distribution of Content of Humor in Client Negotiation

Content of Humor	Total
Selling/buying process	30
Participants in the meeting	22
Cultural differences	19
The project	16
Selling company group internal relations	12
General interest	10
The language/research project	9
The meeting	8
Selling company	7
Alcohol	6
The contract	5
The product	5
Business travel	5
Training of staff	2
Gender	2
Business in general	1
The sellers	1
Product maintenance	1
Power plant building	0
Payment terms	0
Weather	0
Total	161

2003). The dry and rather “serious” sense of humor of the Finns has been successfully depicted in the films of the Finnish film director Aki Kaurismäki (e.g., *The Man without a Past*).

Ethnic Humor in Sellers’ Internal Meeting and Client Negotiation

In both the SIM and the CN, the participants commonly joked about *cultural differences*, and such ethnic humor was the third most common subject of humor in both CN and SIM. (See Table Three above and Table Four below.) Zero frequency for some subjects at the bottom of the table shows that they did not feature at all in one of the meetings, although they featured in the other.

In CN, joking about the Finns was initiated by the Finn, SellerP, or by the British sellers (SellerA and SellerJ) who are employed by the Finnish

Table Four
Distribution of Content of Humor in Sellers' Internal Meeting

Content of Humor	Total
The project	25
The product	22
Cultural differences	11
The language/research project	9
Selling/buying process	8
The contract	5
General interest	5
Payment terms	5
Selling company	5
Training of staff	5
Gender	4
Weather	4
Product maintenance	3
The sellers	3
Business in general	2
Power plant building	2
The meeting	2
Business travel	1
Participants in the meeting	0
Alcohol	0
Selling company group internal relations	0
Total	121

selling company. Joking about your own national characteristics seems to be an acceptable way to produce ethnic humor. (There was also some joking about the Scottish and the Irish, again initiated by the negotiators who are either Scottish or Irish or who represent companies that operate in Scotland or Ireland.) Interestingly, however, there was no joking about the English, although three members of the buying team are English. This could be due, at least partly, to their professional role as buyers in the negotiation and to the stage of the buying process. These factors endow them with power, which can be expected to shift, however, when the contract is signed. Yet, instances of joking about the Finns outnumbered those about other nationalities. The exotic characteristics of the Finns almost seem to have been used for a marketing purpose, as if it were somehow particularly interesting to do business with people from Finland because of their cultural "idiosyncrasies." Extract Five below is an example.

Extract Five: Client Negotiation

- 1 BuyerL is Finnish similar to any other] European language
2 SellerP no it's very unsimilar . . .
3 BuyerL did an invading tribe take it up north . . .
4 **SellerP** **no act- actually what's the reason er we must
have done so-
something wrong***
5
6 [(general
laughter)
7 **SellerP** because they sent us (you know) up there] . . .

In Extract Five, SellerP started to describe jokingly the cultural history of Finland (lines 4 to 7) as he responded to BuyerL's question about the history of the Finnish language. The sellers played along with the buyers while informing them about the cultural history and national characteristics of their potential future business partner. It seems likely that, in addition to situational factors, historical considerations often have a bearing on which nations are the target of humor that emphasizes cultural differences. The future operator of the power plant is an Irish company, and they will have the final word about whose engine will be bought for the plant. They were represented by one member of the buying team (BL). Interestingly, however, in CN, the Irish were joked about but not the English.

In SIM likewise, both Finns and non-Finns initiated jokes, and all the participants are employed by the Finnish selling company. Although experts warn against the use of ethnic humor in negotiations because it can imply the inferiority or superiority of one group versus another (see e.g. Critchley 2002), the Finnish negotiator did not seem insulted. On the contrary, he happily *initiated and continued* such joking. The phenomenon could be, as it is in CN, power-related. The Finn was the most powerful seller because he represents the Finnish parent company, and, because *he* joked about the Finns, he implicitly gave the others permission to cooperate and continue in the same vein. The fact that the British participants joked about the Finns openly when negotiating seems to show that being employed by the Finnish company, in a way, has created membership for them in that "national community." The participants in SIM are all, in this way, part of the same culture — they are well-acquainted with at least the professional culture of a Finnish company. "Finnishness" has thus become an "inside" characteristic linking the team.

Stereotypical British or Finnish humor could not be detected in the data. Rather, the content of humor seems to support the specialist informant's statement that sales engineers constitute a subculture, which helps sales interaction. The only negotiator who is not a native English speaker, the Finnish SellerP, did not appear to have difficulty in contributing and responding to humorous communication in SIM and CN. (See Tables One and Two.) He laughed slightly less than some participants, which could be

related to his nationality, but it could also be a feature of powerful negotiator behavior or a reflection of his personality.

In sum, although largely similar issues were dealt with in both SIM and CN through humor, there were differences in which aspects of these issues were addressed and how. SIM and CN, although part of the same negotiation process, can be seen as representing “cross-cultural” communication, not only because of the different nationalities represented at the table but because the participants have a different amount of shared knowledge about the various factors influencing the possible future deal.

In-Group and Out-Group Differences

Although there were similarities in the use of humor in CN and SIM, for example, both meetings included very few *narrative jokes* or *word plays (puns)*. The results of the present study also showed that in-group and out-group joking in a negotiation process is different. There were some differences in the *type of humor* in the two meetings; generally more neutral humor was preferred in the CN, for example, *joking tone of voice or word choice*. This seems a safer way to use humor than irony and *ironic tone of voice or word choice* was seldom used in CN.

The distribution of types of humor in CN and SIM is shown in Tables Five and Six below.

As we can see from Tables Five and Six, *joking tone or word choice* and *ironic exaggerations* were common in both SIM and CN. *Ironic tone of voice or word choice*, however, was used more sparingly in the CN. This is understandable because it could be interpreted as offensive because it implies criticism. Irony (*ironic exaggeration, ironic tone of voice or word choice, and ironic understatement*) accounted for 34 percent of the quips uttered in the CN, while, as Table Six shows, in the SIM, irony was the most common technique used for causing amusement (*ironic exaggeration,*

Table Five
Distribution of Type of Humor in Client Negotiation

Type of humor	Total
Joking tone of voice/word choice	36
Ironic exaggeration	33
Incongruity	33
Word play	9
Ironic tone of voice/word choice	7
Narrative joke	2
Ironic understatement	1
Total	121

Table Six
Distribution of Type of Humor in Sellers' Internal Meeting

Type of Humor	Total
Ironic exaggeration	53
Joking tone of voice/word choice	38
Incongruity	36
Ironic tone of voice/word choice	20
Word play	7
Ironic understatement	5
Narrative joke	2
Total	161

ironic tone of voice or word choice, and *ironic understatement*), accounting for almost 50 percent of the quips. It would seem that the type of humor used in negotiating with a client needs monitoring as it involves a risk.

The *content of humor* (see Tables Three and Four) in SIM joking was more personal and open. The *participants* themselves were a common subject as was the *selling/buying* process, the transactional activity itself. In fact, the sellers joked quite “mercilessly” about both, in ways that, to an outsider or someone from the buying team, could have appeared offensive. No one seemed offended here, however, and the “low-distance factor” (see Brown and Levinson 1987) could at least partly explain this: the sellers are part of the same team, work for the same company, and know each other quite well. In a professional context, it seems that the more familiar with each other the participants are, the more openly they can joke with each other.

In CN, the most common subjects of joking involve the *product* and the *project*, that is, the potential future business transaction, and the joking is, in general, more careful and neutral. For instance, if the buyers or sellers initiated a quip about the sellers' product, it was to deal jokingly with its minor features and not to ridicule the product itself — something that the sellers allowed themselves to do in their internal meeting. So although the same subjects featured in SIM as well, the quips there were significantly different: through them the sellers openly voiced their anxiety about the project and their product. It would seem that humor about such topics may serve different ends. In CN, the goal was cooperative (Holmes 1998) and interpersonal — the sellers humored the buyers (which is strategic behavior in the end as well). In SIM, the sellers “let off steam,” diffusing tension and expressing areas of concern. In addition, they arguably used humor creatively, to find new ways of approaching problems. It also

appears to have helped the sellers tolerate the complexity of difficult situations. This is occasionally done in CN as well but more carefully.

As mentioned above (see Table Four), the selling activity itself was the most common subject of humor in SIM. Here the sellers seem to have taken every opportunity to joke and laugh about any difficulties that they may have had in the deal. In Extract Six below, they were ironic about their pricing policy and the way that they intended to argue this to the buyers. (The sellers often used phony ironic coughs to mark off ironic statements in the SIM meeting as line 11 in Extract Six below indicates.)

Extract Six: Sellers' Internal Meeting

- 1 SellerD because I know for (-) I'm sure he's
going to be looking
2 for reductions he came out and told
me so
(some text has been omitted)
3 SellerD so the price was over two million
4 SellerJ yeah
5 SellerP yeah
6 SellerD it's now 1.7
7 SellerJ 1.8 say it's 1795 * the argument is our
pricing policy's
8 been fair and due to negotiations with
sub-suppliers etc. bulk
9 purchasing agreements and er
resulting in reduced pricing and
10 the benefits of which we've passed on
without being asked **
11 because we knew **(COUGHS**
IRONICALLY) that you know
12 the whole project might not have
flown if you know the price (-)
13 SellerP we always try our best
14 **SellerJ so we've done some honest**
engineering ***
15 **SellerA that's another word I'm sure you**
don't know the meaning
16 **of**
(general laughter)

In SIM, the sellers joked about their pricing policy while they planned their strategy. In CN, the issue was dealt with almost exactly according to the plan developed by the sellers in SIM but without the use of ironic humor. In both CN and SIM, the participants clearly seemed to joke about what is important to them, that is, what is relevant (see Attardo 2003). Consequently, humor often reveals not only problems but also interests. On the one hand, it seems to have helped to distance the sellers from problematic situations and circumstances. On the other hand, humor enabled them to maintain a certain realism about their aims — for example, helping them to accept they may receive a lower price than they had originally hoped.

Some subjects of humorous communication used in SIM are avoided altogether in CN. Within their company group, the sellers joke quite frequently about the problems related to the relationships of “network companies” to the parent company. The representatives of the British network company try to pressure the representative of the selling parent company into granting them a bigger commission, for instance, through humor. However, in CN, it is in the sellers’ interest to present a convincing, united image of their company to the potential buyers, so such “contestive” joking (Holmes 1998) was not a feature of CN (nor would those issues have been relevant to the topics discussed in that meeting).

Previous research has shown that the age of the business relationship and the stage of the buying process have a bearing on the way buyers and sellers behave when interacting with the opposing side (Charles 1994, Yli-Jokipii 1998). The SIM and the CN can be seen to represent different stages of the process of negotiation: SIM takes place before CN and is “in-group” communication, whereas CN represents “out-group” communication. This seems to be reflected in the communication and the use of humor within that communication.

Conclusion

Although consultative business communication guide books warn negotiators against using humor in multicultural negotiating, the data from this study indicate that disregarding humor in such business meetings would leave a negotiator on the “outside” of the process. In light of these results, it seems clear that humor can be an important strategic tool for a business negotiator. It helps the negotiator to pursue goals effectively, sometimes through contestive humor or repressive humor (see Holmes 1998), as in asymmetrical humor relationships. In our example of seller-buyer negotiating, the sellers accepted the fact the buyers had the upper hand at a stage in the negotiation process where the contract was not yet signed and used humor to manage the situation.

Humor also facilitates the maintenance of interpersonal relationships. In these results, the buyers and sellers used cooperative humor to work together as a team. Furthermore, the sellers were able to humor the buyers, a necessity created by the power dynamics inherent in the buying and selling process. Humor has been described as a nonthreatening way of pursuing goals. Just how nonthreatening such manifestations of humor as ironic exaggerations actually are when they are carried out unilaterally should be investigated in further studies because laughter at another’s expense can feel quite threatening indeed.

It would be useful for business negotiators to be aware of the possibilities of using humor strategically in business negotiating, nonnative speakers included. Whether humor can actually be *learned* is an interesting question and one that this study cannot answer. However, learning about possible patterns in the use of humor in a particular culture —

national and professional — would seem important for aspiring negotiators. The link between the use of humor and laughter with institutional power in a negotiating context, particularly in regard to the possible differences in buyers' and sellers' use of humor, would also seem to be worthy of future study. Also, the frequent use of ethnic humor was an unexpected finding that merits further closer examination. Finally, in this case study, a greater emphasis was placed on sellers than on buyers, because of the researchers' access to the sellers' internal-company meeting. Clearly, these results should be tested on a larger population of subjects.

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Appendix: Transcription Conventions

Punctuation has not been used in the transcription of the corpus data. Capital letters have been used for proper nouns or names only (real or invented names of products, companies, and people).

[]	overlapping speech
*	pause, one second or less
**	pause, two seconds
***	pause, three seconds or more
-	truncated speech
(highway)	possible transcription of unclear words
(-) (-)	unintelligible word / two words / a stretch of speech comprising three or more words
(laughter)	transcriber's comments about the text