Marie Møller Jensen, Lotte Dam
Aalborg University
mariemj@ikl.aau.dk, ldam@ikl.aau.dk

Verbal humor in intercultural workplaces and second language learning: an overview of main research directions in the last 20 years

The aim of this article is to provide an overview of the work within the field of intercultural communication which specifically investigates interactions through verbal humor. By the term *intercultural* we mean encounters by speakers of different languages and we define verbal humor as natural (i.e. not pre–planned or scripted) and expressed via spoken language in face–to–face interactions. We have specifically sought to include studies published within the last 20 years, which rely on naturalistic data (as opposed to experimental data). We found that studies within the areas of workplace interactions and second language learning were the most prominent. We reflect on the reviewed studies and the methods employed. Finally, we suggest avenues for further research.

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1. Introduction

This article departs from the idea that humor is a universal human faculty (Martin 2007 and Moalla 2015), pervasive in our dealings with others in many aspects of our lives, both private and professional. Therefore, humor studies is today a multidisciplinary field of research that draws on diverse fields such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, and linguistics. According to Martin (2007: 5), "[h]umor is fundamentally a social phenomenon" as "[w]e joke much more frequently when we are with other people than when we are by ourselves". Sometimes these "other people" are individuals from other cultures whom we interact with. In this paper, we focus on verbal humor in intercultural interactions. Prodanović Stankić (2017: 29) suggests that the relationship between verbal humor and culture is under–researched as the cultural dimensions of humor "have not received enough attention". Similarly, Mullan and Béal (2018a: 452) argue that while different aspects of conversational humor have been studied, how culture influences

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the forms and functions of conversational humor has been neglected. Prodanović Stankić (2017) and Mullan and Béal (2018a) agree, however, that it is now a growing area.

Sinkeviciute and Dynel (2017) provide a survey of research in conversational humor within and across languages and cultures as well as a definition of conversational humor. Initially, they contrast conversational humor with (canned) jokes and add that conversational humor can also be termed *humor in interaction*. The latter, however, is often perceived as a broader term than the former as it also includes, for example, comics, memes and pranks (Sinkeviciute and Dynel 2017: 1). In their definition, conversational humor also encompasses both written and spoken interaction, face–to–face and computer mediated, private, and mass–mediated humor forms. However, in this paper, we narrow the scope even further and focus on interactions which are verbal (i.e. not written), face–to–face (i.e. not computer mediated) conversational humor.

Furthermore, Sinkeviciute and Dynel (2017) provide a distinction between *intracultural*, *cross–cultural*, and *intercultural* humor studies. *Intracultural* studies look at interactions between members of the same cultural group (e.g. Stallone and Haugh 2017 about Brazilian Portuguese). *Cross–cultural* studies are "comparative or contrastive studies of native speakers' interactions within their own cultural contexts" (Sinkeviciute and Dynel 2017: 2) and thus they compare different humor styles as associated with different cultural groups (e.g. Béal and Mullan 2017 about French and Australian English). Finally, *intercultural* communication "brings together participants from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and the focus of analysis is their interaction in a common language" (Sinkeviciute and Dynel 2017: 2). Intercultural studies thus investigate the interaction between representatives of different cultural groups (e.g. Cheng 2003 about workplace interactions between Hong Kong Chinese and English speakers). In this category we see that the language of interaction can be *a lingua franca* for both participants in the interaction (i.e. none of the participants are conversing in their native language) or it may be the case that the interaction can be defined as a meeting between a native and a non–native speaker of the language of interaction.

In this paper, we focus solely on intercultural encounters. In other words, we do not address works in humor studies without the interpersonal and interactional aspect, such as the works from Dynel and Sinkeviciute (2017), Ziv (1988), the majority of articles in Mullan and Béal (2018b), and Mullan, Vincent–Durroux and David (2020), regardless of their obvious importance to the research on humor and culture.

The area of humor in intercultural interactions has been approached from various perspectives with respect to the type of intercultural meeting and context (e.g. private/educational/professional). The aim of this article is thus to provide an overview of humor studies in natural, face–to–face intercultural encounters. Because we focus on natural encounters, we do not consider foreign language learning class-

room contexts which consist of scaffolded interactions for didactic purposes (such as Bell 2009, Bell and Pomerantz 2014, 2015, Reddington and Waring 2015). We do, however, still consider interactions which include both native and non–native speaker interactions. To structure the overview, we lean on Sinkeviciute and Dynel (2017), who in their study on conversational humor within and across languages and cultures already discovered that "most intercultural studies are devoted to either workplace humour […] or humour of language learners" (Sinkeviciute and Dynel 2017: 4). In our own investigation, we have also seen that the studies generally fall into these very different categories.

As we are concerned with natural face–to–face–meetings, we will consider the methods and empirical foundations to evaluate these in relation to this point of interest. In our review, we consider articles published within the last 20 years.

Before delving into the reviews proper, we would like to expand on the topics of culture and cultural groups and their significance in relation to humor.

Globalization has led to an intensification of so–called intercultural encounters, such as when exchange students come to a foreign country, when professionals interact in international workplaces or when people move to other countries to live their lives. It is nothing new that the use of humor can give rise to misunderstandings when people are not familiar with the form of humor they are exposed to, and the intercultural setting is ripe for these kinds of encounters. As anyone who has tried to joke with speakers of other languages will know, it can bring us closer together or drive us further apart—a truly "double–edged sword" (Rogerson–Revell 2007: 4). DiCioccio and Miczo (2014: 388) suggest that "although humor is a universal communication act, it is deeply rooted in cultural context, whereby one's cultural lens informs one's interpretation of, perceptions of, and responses to humorous messages". In the same vein, Martin (2007: 4) puts forward that, "it is also evident that cultural norms and learning play an important role in determining how humor is used in social interactions, and what topics are considered appropriate for it". Similarly, Prodanović Stankić (2017: 29) finds that "[t]he way people use humour […] mirrors the shared beliefs and culture common to the speakers of a language, their communicative practices and style." In other words, each individual's sense of humor is influenced by the cultural groups they interact with and is therefore part of a socialization process.

While not concerned with humor specifically, Hall (1997b: 18)—from a perspective of cultural studies—suggests that people who belong to the same culture are able to communicate because they share the same cultural maps, broadly speaking. We see humor as being part of these cultural maps. Hall also points out that communication mainly occurs through a shared code, language, and that language represents the concepts and the conceptual relations between them and together they make up the meaning–systems of our culture (Hall 1997b: 18). To Hall, language thus plays an important role in relation to culture. It allows for the construction of meanings and the sustentation of the dialogue between participants "which

enables them to build up a culture of shared understandings and to interpret the world in roughly the same ways" (Hall 1997a: 1). We find this idea relevant to our review of research within verbal humor in intercultural settings, in which we specifically focus on cultural groups organized by common nation and language. It should be noted that while humor is related to national culture and language, there is no such thing as a single national humor. On the contrary, a national humor should be understood as features that recur in a society and thus one that in most cases is at least recognized by the citizens, even if they find it in poor taste.

2. Verbal humor in intercultural settings

As stated above, we have structured our overview around the distinction of Sinkeviciute and Dynel (2017: 4) between workplace humor and humor of language learners. Before turning to these, we will, however, briefly comment on two studies which also fulfill our criteria, but which are neither workplace nor learner related.

The first is Chiaro (2009) which focuses on humor in the interaction of bilingual, cross–cultural couples and asks if humor is a "cultural divide or unifying factor". Her results indicate that humor acts as a "bonding agent" in these couples where one party makes an effort to teach their "own brand of humor" to their partner and to learn to appreciate and use the humor of their partner's culture (Chiaro 2009: 229–230). Nevertheless, when the partner participates in humorous talk with speakers of their own language and from their own culture, their partner can feel excluded (Chiaro 2009: 229).

The second is Haugh and Weinglass (2018) who investigate how Americans and Australians handle humorous attempts in initial meetings, specifically "jocular quips" – defined as "non–serious side sequence[s]" (2018: 533). Haugh and Weinglass establish that affiliative responses were more frequent in the interactions between speakers from the same continent and thus non–affiliative responses more frequent in the intercultural dyads. They argue that for jocular quips to be successful (to receive an affiliative response), interlocutors must first establish a common ground on the basis of which social categories and predicates can be situated.

We now turn to workplace–related humor.

2.1 Workplace–related humor

In this section we will present work by Lita Lundquist, Santa Stopniece, Pamela Rogerson–Revell, Meredith Marra, and Janet Holmes.

2.1.1 Lundquist

Danish scholar Lita Lundquist has published pervasively on matters of work–place interactions and humor in relation to this. She has published articles in English (2010b, 2014, 2021), Danish (2010a, 2016) and French (2013, 2019) as well as

a book in Danish (2020) aimed at a non–scholarly audience (the main arguments summarized in English in (2021)). Below we introduce the main arguments presented in Lundquist (2010a, 2010b, 2014, 2020 and 2021). Lundquist's (2016) article, while still concerned with humor in interaction, departs from the others in that it focuses on simultaneous interpreting in the European Parliament from the perspective of disembodiment.

Lundquist's work investigates the interface between humor, language and society in intercultural settings and her overarching hypothesis is that national humor is formed by *humor socialization* in an interaction between a specific language and a specific society. Her work draws on insights from humor theory, linguistics, psychology and social science and is thus highly interdisciplinary. She is particularly interested in Danish humor, a humor style defined by irony and poking fun at oneself (2020: 59), a form of humor which to non–Danes can function as a *negative social mediator* (2020: 156). A social mediator is an unforeseen change which signals a transition of the humor situation from the individual plane to the social level. A negative social mediator thus has a negative impact on the social interactions between two interlocutors (2020: 30, 2021: 35).

Lundquist points out that "every individual is socialized into the group in which and with which it lives" (Lundquist 2020: 129, *authors' translation*). She explains that through interactions, first with family and friends, the individual is gradually socialized into a specific humor. This humor socialization also occurs through the mother tongue, "which offers fixed patterns for the tasks that the language has to solve in a given society" (Lundquist 2020: 129, *authors' translation*). The individual continues being influenced by educational institutions, media, literature, workplaces, etc. (Lundquist 2020: 129). Lundquist (2020: 130) furthermore explains that a further step in the humor socialization process is experiencing the humor of other cultures and through this unlearn inappropriate aspects from one's own culture and she suggests that problems with applying national humor to supranational and cross–cultural workplaces can be remedied as new localized, international forms of humor emerge. Lundquist thus suggests that these emerging new local forms of humor transcend national boundaries and peculiarities in intercultural settings and can function as a "positive social mediator [which] also unites" (2020: 179, *authors' translation*).

Lundquist draws on insights from historical sociology, in particular through the work of Norbert Elias, to find an explanation for why there are different forms of national humor. In particular, she is interested in the differences between the Danish "campfire humor" and the French "court humor" (as in a royal court, not a court of law). She explains how humor socialization in Denmark and France is characterized by the processes of civilization that have taken place in the two nations (Lundquist 2014, 2020).

Another aspect which Lundquist accounts for (Lundquist 2010a, 2010b, 2014, 2020, 2021) is the special discourse markers used in Danish that make the Danish

language particularly suitable for producing certain forms of humor such as irony and poking fun at oneself. These are unstressed, conversational one or two–syllable words, such as *jo, da, vel, vist, skam, mon* and *nok*. These conversational markers have been covered by a number of linguists such as Davidsen–Nielsen (1996), Hansen and Heltoft (2011) and Krylova (2007), who seem to agree that these small words are a typical feature of Danish (and Nordic) spoken language and that they work to regulate conversation and signal everything from stance and reservations about what is being said to intimacy and assumed shared knowledge. In using one or more of the above–mentioned conversational markers, speakers can communicate to other interlocutors that they should not rely on the literal meaning of the utterance in question but rather that other things are at stake. We thus see that the Danish language provides speakers with many opportunities for expressing a complex range of implied meanings. For speakers of other languages which do not afford their speakers the same opportunities, we can easily see how humorous statements made by Danes (in Danish) might be misinterpreted but also how Danes, conversing in English or another second language, may find themselves unable to precisely express these intricate implied meanings which are meant to guide the listener to a humorous interpretation.

The empirical basis for Lundquist's work, as reported in the selected articles, consists of qualitative interviews (collected 2008–2013), observations (collected 2012) and questionnaire surveys (collected 2010) with a total of 72 participants from 14 countries, mainly Denmark, France and Germany. The participants all have different experiences with the cultural crossroads that can arise when exposed to a new form of national humor in an international context, and the studies include both international and Danish students, Danish interpreters in the European Parliament and Danish, French and German Members of the European Parliament.

Overall, Lundquist's contributions to the field of humor research specifically within workplace or professional settings is vast and varied. In particular, the strength of her work lies partly in her broad data collection spanning several years, modalities and languages (although focused on Danish and French) and partly in the strong interdisciplinary approach she adopts in her interpretation of her data, borrowing insights from sociology, history and more.

Moving on from Lundquist's work, the remainder of this section will cover three other articles which also investigate the use of humor in professional intercultural settings.

2.1.2 Stopniece

In Stopniece (2016), the focus is on the use of humor and laughter in business negotiations between Finnish and Chinese speakers. The study also utilizes interview data and implements both positioning and politeness theory in order to investigate how humor and laughter can be framed as sites for the search for common ground and power in these business and negotiation contexts. Specifically,

Stopniece finds that the use of humor in co–operative negotiations is both a simple and complex area. If humor is used successfully, it can improve the "negotiation climate" (Stopniece 2016: 32) as it builds common ground and Stopniece found that humorous interactions often focused on national stereotypes (e.g. *Finnish people drink a lot of alcohol, Chinese food is very spicy*) and comparisons between the two nations (e.g. *China is very large, the weather in Finland is very cold*) (Stopniece 2016: 32). Stopniece also found that both the Chinese and the Finnish speakers tried to accommodate to the other's humor style and were aware of which topics were safe to joke about. Indeed, she hypothesizes that this could also be a reflection of the situational context of the interaction, i.e. if the Chinese speakers are visiting Finland, they may feel the need to adjust to the local humor style (and vice versa). Finally, Stopniece also remarks on an important point, namely the factor of English language proficiency. Communication between the Finns and Chinese speakers (it can be surmised) took place in English so any misunderstandings of attempts at humorous interaction may also be misunderstood (or not understood) due to the language barrier.

2.1.3 Rogerson–Revell

The work reported in Rogerson–Revell (2007) also echoes the observation that humor can be used to facilitate collaboration across cultures in professional settings. However, the argument presented here is somewhat more nuanced, as it is suggested that humor in business is "a double–edged sword" (Rogerson–Revell 2007: 24) which can also "mark exclusion and superiority, signal mockery and ridicule, mask criticism, directives and aggression, and be culture–bound" (Rogerson–Revell 2007: 24). The study reported in Rogerson–Revell (2007) looks not only at intercultural communication but also considers other social aspects in communication such as gender, ethnicity, and professional hierarchy. In this brief overview, however, the focus will be on observations made regarding intercultural factors. The study adopts a pragmatic approach to discourse analysis, mirroring developments in the study of business communication as well as sociolinguistics (in particular CA and CDA) in the 1990s and early 2000s and thus sees language and communication as strategic and used to achieve "relational and transactional goals" (Rogerson–Revell 2007: 7). The study is based on data recorded in four management–level meetings in an international airline corporation based in south–east Asia (2007: 9). The four meetings varied in terms of their formality level, number of participants, presence or absence of female colleagues and presence or absence of non–native English speakers. While situated in south–east Asia, the majority of the staff present at these meetings were male, Anglophone expatriates. Additionally, three of the four meetings were also chaired by a native speaker.

The meeting data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis mapped the "procedural aspects of the discourse" (Rogerson–Revell 2007: 11), i.e. the turn taking procedures, interruptions and the like. The

qualitative analysis then further investigated speakers' strategies for interaction (e.g. reservation or contextualization). The overall results showed "considerable variation in interactive style, despite the overall similarity in structure and function of the meetings. These stylistic variations related to differences in the level of formality between meetings and stylistic shifts from formal to informal episodes within meetings." (Rogerson–Revell 2007: 11). Indeed, from an intercultural perspective, it would be obvious to conclude that this difference in the meetings would be due to differences in professional, interactive style between the non–native English speaker (Chinese, in this case) and native English speakers. And while this observation is indeed correct, there are several other complex factors at play in the interactions displayed in the individual meetings, between individual participants. The different outcomes of the meetings and how they progressed seemed to be more influenced by the construction of an in–group using a dominant interactive style (e.g. use of a humorous style) and an out–group of non–users (2007: 11).

Rogerson–Revell (2007: 20–23) summarizes her conclusions in the following four statements: 1) the style of humor varies between meetings, 2) occurrences of humor signal a shift towards a more informal style, 3) humor is used to both include but also exclude, and, finally, 4) humor is 'culture'–bound with 'culture' here being understood in a broad manner to include several socio–cultural aspects (ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, etc.).

2.1.4 Marra and Holmes

The final study reviewed in this section also focuses on the cultural values of the participants observed and how humor styles reflect and enforce these. Marra and Holmes (2007) investigate the use of humor in two multicultural workplaces in New Zealand, focusing on two workplace teams. One team consists of mainly Māori workers in an organization "committed to supporting and promoting Māori issues within a mainstream (and predominantly Pākehā) industry" (2007: 153). The other team consists of shift workers working in a multicultural factory with staff of mainly Samoan but also Pākehā, Tongan and Māori origin. The data stems from a larger project, *The Wellington Language in the Workplace Project,* which started in 1996. The data was collected by volunteer workers who recorded parts of their workday interactions themselves. Each dataset is also supplemented by video recordings and ethnographic observations in certain instances. Overall, the project database comprises around 1500 interactions.

Marra and Holmes (2007) adopt a sociolinguistic approach in their study, specifically focusing on how *communities of practice* are constructed and maintained through discursive practices. In their analysis, Marra and Holmes focus specifically on how different types of humor 1) distinguish the two workplaces but also 2) reflect the cultural values of the minority ethnic groups which make up the teams. Their analysis shows that "[h]umour contributes to the distinct characteristics of a workplace team" (2007: 164). In the mainly Māori team, the style of humor was

found to be supportive, non–confrontational and collaborative, which mirrors cultural norms in the Māori community (where emphasis is placed on ensuring the wellbeing of the group). Conversely, in the mixed but mainly Samoan team, the humor was found to be more competitive and contestive and used to single out individual members of the team. The analysis also shows how the team leaders of the two teams conformed to different cultural norms: the Māori team leader avoided self–promotion and played down her own importance whereas the Samoan team leader showed pride in her status and overtly marked her position (2007: 165).

Whilst the above studies are all covered by the heading of workplace, there are also differences between them; in some, the intercultural meeting takes place in the workplace itself between colleagues, in others, the intercultural meeting is found between partners in business negotiations.

The studies in the following section are defined by dealing with a specific group as one party in intercultural communication, namely learners of a foreign language, and in most of the studies the other party is a native speaker of this language, who as such is in a different position.

2.2 The humor of language learners

In this section, we will present work by Nancy D. Bell, Catherine Evans Davies, Asma Moalla, and Rania Habib.

2.2.1 Bell

Focusing on humor in relation to second language learning (SLL), Nancy D. Bell is one of the most productive researchers in humor in intercultural interaction. In her work, she focuses particularly on the interaction between non–native speakers and native speakers and the concept of language play is central in much of her work. In this review, we focus on those publications that do not directly relate to formal education/didactics, because we are interested in natural communication, although there may be overlaps, of course.

Her doctoral dissertation about how second language (L2) humor is perceived and negotiated by adult non–native speakers of English in interaction with native speakers of English outside the classroom (Bell 2002) creates a basis for her later work described in the following. Bell (2005) departs from Tarone's (2000) suggestion that not only studies of L2 language play within the classroom, but also studies of adult L2 speakers' play with language outside the classroom are relevant in order to increase the knowledge of the contribution of language play to SLL (Bell 2005: 193). The primary data set from Bell (2005) (as well as from Bell 2002, 2007a) consists of tape recordings of three highly advanced non–native speakers of English interacting with native speakers of English. Based on the examples of her study, she concludes that language play is "indicative of proficiency" (Bell 2005: 212) and that "humorous language play that arises outside the classroom may provide opportunities that are especially conducive to the acquisition of vocabulary". The first

conclusion may be expected, but based on her examples, Bell suggests more specific details about differences between learners with different levels in English. It is also very interesting that the language play in naturalistic settings seems to be different from that which arises in classrooms (Bell 2005: 213). This indicates that studies about L2 learners outside the classroom can be a good supplement to studies about L2 learners within the classroom.

Bell (2006) focuses on adjustments made by native speakers in humorous interactions with non–native speakers. She argues that humor has an important role in developing and maintaining relations, but "the linguistic and cultural resources used to construct it may not be shared or may not be grasped by the NNSs [non–native speakers] to the extent that they are ready to playfully manipulate them" (Bell 2006: 2). Her study shows different ways in which native speakers make adjustments for humor in interaction with non–native speakers and that the adjustments often are not appropriate for the non–native speakers, because the native speakers overestimate the amount and types of adjustments that are necessary and thereby underestimate the non–native speaker's ability to engage in playful interaction. As a consequence, L2 users sometimes become marginalized and constructed as less competent.

In Bell (2007a), she focuses on humor as a potential cause of conflict because of adjustments made by speakers to their speech. Her examples show that both native speakers and non–native speakers in interactions with each other tend to avoid potentially controversial topics and "dangerous" forms of humor (Bell 2007a: 33–34). She employs Harder (1980)'s notion of "reduced personality", which refers to non–native speakers being accorded a lower status simply because of their language ability (Bell 2007a: 28). She notes that the leniency to humor on the part of the native speakers "should not be taken to imply that the L2 speakers were treated as equal conversational participants", but rather "be interpreted as yet another form of condescension that is directed at the NNS, due to her "reduced personality"". The results from Bell (2006) and (2007a) suggest that native speakers have "good intentions" but that sometimes non–native speakers are not considered equals.

Bell (2007b) argues for a view of humor comprehension that takes into account the social, as well as the cognitive, because "understanding, like language use, is interactively constructed" (Bell 2007b: 367). In other words, it is a dynamic construct that changes and develops to individuals as they are exposed to new forms of humor and to new interlocutors with different conversational styles (Bell 2007b: 384). An important point in this article is that the phenomena that occur between native and non–native speakers can be found between speakers of the same language as well because speech communities are not homogeneous, and their members can encounter in each other "culturally different ways of speaking" (Bell 2007b: 384). Nevertheless, regarding the interaction between native and non–native speakers, as in her earlier investigations, Bell (2007b) finds problems of inequality between native and non–native interlocutors.

Focusing on failed humor, Bell and Attardo (2010) seek to understand the difficulties that L2 learners face in the comprehension of L2 humor by examining six advanced non–native speakers' experiences with humor in English. The investigation is based on diaries from the participants combined with interviews. Based on their results, Bell and Attardo (2010) construct a typology of failed humor, which identifies "seven levels at which a speaker may fail to successfully engage in a humorous exchange" (Bell and Attardo 2010: 429). An interesting conclusion is that the failures of the non–native speakers largely differ from the failures of the native speakers quantitatively, but not qualitatively.

In conclusion, Bell's work is an important contribution to the field as, on the one hand, it focuses on the narrow and specific area of naturalistic interactions between native and non–native speakers, but, on the other hand, it also adopts a broader approach through different perspectives on this area. As already mentioned, Bell also has an interest in humor in relation to didactics in second language teaching (Bell 2009, and Bell and Pomerantz 2014, 2015) and she has taken an interest in failed humor (see Bell 2015, 2017 for more on this).

2.2.2 Davies

Also working within SLL, Davies (2003) examines humor in conversations between language learners of English at an intensive English program and American peers as part of a voluntary program which provided the language learners opportunities to communicate with native English speakers, American students, employed by the English Language Institute. The groups did not meet in regular classrooms and were "informal and egalitarian" (Davies 2003: 1370), and the American students were actively discouraged from "language teaching behavior" (2003: 1370). It is also worth mentioning that the American students met with a faculty coordinator on a weekly basis with the aim of developing cross–cultural and communication competences (2003: 1370). The conversations were videotaped and subsequently analyzed.

Davies' (2003) approach to humor is grounded in interactional sociolinguistics, and she employs a linguistic analysis based in John J. Gumperz's theory of conversational inference. For Davies (2003: 1362), collaborative joking seems to "be the ultimate locus of conversational involvement", referring to a notion within Gumperz's theory of conversational inference.

Davies (2003) suggests language learning primarily to be a socialization process in contrast to memorization of vocabulary and grammar (Davies 2003: 1368). Collaborative discourse plays an important role in this process, which occurs with native speakers of the language in question, which help the learners to construct discourse through a kind of scaffolding (Davies 2003: 1368). She argues that "conversational joking is a key place where collaborative discourse is being produced" (2003: 1368).

Davies' study shows the ability of, English learners (even beginners), under appropriate circumstances, to collaborate with native speakers in the construction of conversational joking discourse. Learning how to engage in the joking activity and to experience its social meaning in American society, learners can develop their "cross–cultural communicative competence" (Davies 2003: 1382). Her analysis highlights "the value in a language program of providing opportunities for structured informal interaction" (Davies 2003: 1381) and the results enhance the role of the native speaker in intercultural interactions, both in terms of the language learning itself as well as verbal humor as part of language.

2.2.3 Moalla

Moalla (2015) focuses on the way humor is co–constructed and understood within a group of Americans and Tunisian learners of English. The data set consists of tape recordings of interactions between the two participant groups and interviews and conversation analysis and ethnography of communication approaches are used. Moalla's results show that both the Tunisian L2 learners and the native speakers found difficulties when creating and understanding humor in their communication with each other, but that they used accommodation strategies to avoid intercultural miscommunication (Moalla 2015: 381, 383). One of the main points in the paper is that "participants' awareness and recognition of the existence of cultural differences and their tendency to make sense of each other's social activities is what inspires them to use accommodation strategies to avoid cultural misunderstandings." (Moalla 2015: 381). In her opinion, researchers in the field of intercultural communication should focus on "the way people from different cultures collaboratively share, interpret, and negotiate meaning to solve interactional difficulties, to strengthen group cohesion, and develop intercultural relational identities" (Moalla 2014: 383) rather than on "the sociolinguistic norms, the rules of speaking, and on the politeness and cooperation principles that NNS have to acquire to be able to behave appropriately with NS [native speakers]" (Moalla 2014: 383–384).

2.2.4 Habib

Habib (2008) also investigates verbal interactions in naturalistic settings, but in this case the participants are a group of near–native speakers of English, and the focus is on disagreement and humor (primarily teasing). The participants are friends, and the data consists of audio–taped conversations recorded during private Greek lessons provided by one of the participants (a Greek native speaker). The interactions, which, in addition to the lessons, cover conversations before, during and after the lessons, are in English. Among her results are that 1) disagreement and teasing can be used jointly among group members to establish and develop relational identity and to reaffirm already existing identities, 2) disagreement and teasing can be a way for speakers to express their first language culture in an attempt to, on the one hand, hold on to it but, on the other, also adapt their first

language culture to their new second language environment, and 3) disagreement and teasing could be used as educational tools and as such facilitate the learning process for L2 learners through the cultural knowledge employed in interaction (Habib 2008: 1142).

3. Reflections

In this article, we have focused on intercultural humor research in verbal face to face–communication in natural settings published within the last 20 years. Overall, this research concerns the interface between humor, communication, language, and culture.

Within the contexts of workplace interaction and SLL contexts, different settings have been studied. Intercultural meetings in workplace–related or professional settings, for example, can be between colleagues (in the European Parliament, for example) and between partners in business communication (for example, between the Finnish and Chinese speakers in co–operative negotiations). In SLL contexts, we saw studies of interactions between native and non–native speakers of English outside the classroom (Bell's work) and interactions between American peers and language learners of English at an intensive English program (Davies 2003). In other words, the intercultural setting takes many shapes. What seems to recur, however, is what we have already mentioned in the introduction: that humor functions as a "double–edged sword" (Rogerson–Revell 2007: 4). It can be used as both a positive mediator but also as a negative mediator (in the words of Lundquist). We will suggest, however, that this function applies to both intracultural and intercultural contexts and is a key feature of humor more broadly speaking. From the workplace section, we saw Stopniece's (2016) suggestion that humor can improve negotiation climates, but also be a minefield. From the sections about SLL, we learned that, in humorous interactions with non–native speakers, native speakers often overestimate the amount and types of adjustments that are necessary, and as a consequence, L2 users sometimes become marginalized in spite of the native speakers' good intentions (Bell 2006, 2007a). From a more private sphere, i.e. Chiaro (2009)'s study on humor in the interaction of bilingual, cross–cultural couples, we learned that, generally speaking, humor acts as a "bonding agent" within the couple, but can make one party feel excluded if his or her partner participates in humorous talk with a compatriot.

In terms of humor in the intercultural context, some of the phenomena attested in the reviewed articles might however result from aspects of the intercultural communicative situation proper, i.e. not humorous aspects specifically. On the positive side and commonly found within studies of intercultural competence is a readiness for something "unknown", in other words, individuals have *a priori* assumptions regarding what they might encounter in intercultural meetings. Additionally, when individuals are also positively motivated to achieve a goal (work,

business, learning), any differences (cultural, personality, other) are not prone to cause any hindrance due to the motivation of the end goal and the mental preparedness for meeting something different from oneself. In the set–up presented in Davies (2003), for example, it can be assumed that the foreign students (participating in a voluntary program and eager to learn) as well as the American peers (employed by the department and provided with a specific task) had a positive and open–minded approach to the intercultural meeting. On the negative side, when humor functions as a negative mediator, this may actually be caused by cultural differences or a lack of cultural knowledge or intercultural communication skills on the parts of the interlocutors.

As also referenced by Bell, another aspect of intercultural meetings, specifically involving users of a foreign language, is the assumption of a reduced personality due to a lack of language proficiency (Harder 1980). The combination of a lack of fluency in a foreign language and a different cultural background can lead to unfortunate interactions across a variety of settings (professional, private) where the non–native speaker is seen as somehow not a full member of the social interaction as they may not be able to interact freely or follow the flow of conversation between native speakers who also share the same cultural background. This can be frustrating and demotivating for the non–native speaker but also requires extra effort on the part of the native speaker interlocutors, something which also comes at a cost.

Furthermore, we would like to comment on the research methodology employed in some of the studies reviewed. One of our selection criteria was that studies should investigate natural (i.e. non–scripted) humor occurring in face–to–face interactions. It must be assumed that studies which rely on recorded interactions of the participants, such as a number of Bell's studies and Haugh and Weinglass (2018), cannot be said to be 100% naturalistic as the presence of a recording device or the fact that the meetings were somehow mediated or facilitated by the researchers is likely to impact the interactions to some extent. Furthermore, in Davies (2003), the setup itself, although the American students were discouraged actively from "language teaching behavior" (Davies 2003: 1370) and the sessions were informal, the meetings cannot be said to be completely natural as the American students were employed and instructed with an inviting approach to the English learners. In Haugh and Weinglass (2018), interlocutors met in an observational setting and while they were free to interact, the encounter and the circumstances under which it took place cannot be said to be 'naturalistic' or assumed to be unaffected by the circumstances.

In the same vein, questionnaires and interviews are not direct renderings by a researcher of face–to–face interactions but rather mediated observations which pass through an informant before reaching the researcher. Indeed, it is important to consider the suitability of these types of collection methods where participants share memories and experiences of successful or failed humor in intercultural exchanges (e.g. Lundquist 2010a, 2010b, 2014, 2020, 2021, Stopniece 2016, Chiaro

2009). First of all, it is prudent here to distinguish between studies within the field of communication and studies within linguistics. If one's object of study concerns speakers' experiences with and attitudes towards intercultural interactions, then interview or questionnaire data is a good data source. We see this exemplified in Chiaro (2009) and Stopniece (2016) as well as parts of a number of studies reported by Lundquist. If, however, one's object is a linguistic analysis of which linguistic resources speakers utilize in intercultural verbal encounters, then questionnaire or interview data is not suitable, as, with this kind of data, it is very difficult to say anything meaningful about the linguistic interactions which took place, as the data consists of retellings of perceptions of certain situations. Lundquist (2020) even takes this a step further in what she terms *hypothetical reconstructions* (authors' translation) in which she hypothesizes about what potentially humorous comments said by Danes to non–Danes (in English) might have sounded like in Danish. One grave example (2020: 94) concerns a Frenchman who, in French, tells of a comment made by a Danish colleague which, likely, was uttered in English. The comment was intended to be humorous, but the Frenchman found it rather offensive. However, on the basis of the retelling, Lundquist then surmises what the Danish interlocutor might have said were they to have made the comment in Danish. While data such as this (retellings of encounters) is adequate to investigate perceptions of humor, it seems a stretch to suggest that it is a suitable basis on which to investigate the use of conversational markers in Danish.

In terms of prospective avenues for further research, we wish to conclude this article by highlighting two such areas. One thing that has become clear is that culture can be seen as more than simply national differences but also encompass social hierarchies on a local level, gender roles, ethnicity etc. Thus, further research could attempt to tease apart these intertwined cultural aspects. It is important that future studies take this into consideration.

Another aspect which has become evident is the seeming dichotomy of on the one hand the wealth of studies concerning the areas of L2 learning and workplace interaction (and a scarcity of studies within other fields) and on the other hand, these two areas are highly heterogeneous and share very few similarities.

We would imagine that studies investigating the more private sphere, for example, among friends, at sports and leisure clubs and activities, parent–teacher conferences, and similar would yield interesting results given that the stakes involved and motivations for engaging in intercultural humorous interaction would be quite different than in the two settings, which we have presented here.

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Verbalni humor na interkulturnim radnim mjestima i učenje drugog jezika: pregled glavnih smjerova istraživanja u posljednjih 20 godina

Humor je univerzalna ljudska sposobnost pa je i područje istraživanja humora stoga multidisciplinarno područje, koje se oslanja na spoznaje iz filozofije, psihologije, sociologije i lingvistike. Cilj je ovog članka pružiti pregled radova u području interkulturne komunikacije, koji su osobito usmjereni na istraživanje interakcije kroz verbalni humor. Pod pojmom interkulturnog mislimo na susrete govornikâ različitih jezika, a verbalni humor definiramo kao prirodan (tj. ne unaprijed planiran ili napisan) i izražen govornim jezikom u interakciji licem u lice. Istražile smo to područje s posebnim nastojanjem da uključimo studije objavljene u posljednjih 20 godina, koje se oslanjaju na naturalističke podatke (za razliku od eksperimentalnih podataka). U početnom dijelu istraživanja utvrđeno je da prevladavaju studije u području interakcije na radnome mjestu, kao i u području učenja drugoga jezika pa su stoga ta dva područja u središtu interesa ovog članka. Donose se sažeti prikazi odabranih radova te se razmatraju metode korištene u istraživanjima koja oni opisuju. Naposljetku se predlažu mogući smjerovi daljnjih istraživanja, primjerice o uporabi humora u privatnim sferama u interkulturnim okružjima.

Keywords: verbal humor, intercultural communication, professional communication, second language learning

Ključne riječi: verbalni humor, interkulturna komunikacija, profesionalna komunikacija, učenje drugog jezika