

Sorry, I just don't get it ...

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1 Introduction

While laughter can be elicited by various means, including laughing gas, (threatening to) tickle, stand-up comedy and joke-telling, it most commonly occurs in verbal exchanges between people in their daily lives. Not everyone can be funny on demand, but pretty much everyone laughs and generates laughter in general social interaction.

2 Why do we laugh with each other?

Broadly speaking, verbal exchanges that contain laughter are generally those in which all participants consider themselves to be in a cooperative social situation where they share common ground.

In departmental or committee meetings, or classroom discussions, we assume that our fellow participants are working towards a common goal: election to the chair, the allotment of funding to research students, transfer of knowledge. Laughter in these situations underlines the common goal, and the shared intention to achieve it. It also releases tension and acts as a distractor when goals, or strategies for achieving them, threaten to conflict.

Laughter in personal relationships is – as well as a sign of cooperation and shared goals – also a reference to the shared experience and shared opinions which reinforce and strengthen these relationships. It signals intimacy, solidarity, affection.

Whether at the workplace or at home, these moments of conversational laughter give a clear message: we understand each other. *We know what we mean.*¹

In fact, in verbal interactions in new situations with new people, introducing laughter is a message that says: I'm inviting you to laugh with me so that our interaction will be friendly and our relationship productive and enjoyable.

3 Where does it go wrong?

3.1 The academic subculture

At least, that's what I thought until I entered the intercultural subculture of academia about twenty years ago.

The Dublin Laughter Workshop is a multidisciplinary workshop, inviting work on laughter from the points of view of various disciplines, including phonetics, linguistics, psychology, conversation analysis, and human-machine interaction. I notice, with a raised eyebrow, that intercultural marriage counselling and conflict mediation in the international research lab are not on the list.

¹Of course, this kind of laughter is particularly bonding when we know that people outside the conversation would not understand why we are laughing in the first place ... but there are words for that kind of behaviour ...

When a person enters a relationship, whether professional or personal, in which they are of a different cultural background to the other(s), laughter might not be the silver tinkle of bonding or solidarity, whether in the bedroom, the barroom or the boardroom

While I had always unconsciously subscribed to the notion that the genial aspect of laughing derives from “the binding of companions laughing together in the mutual realisation of safety” [2], perhaps I should have acquainted myself better with van Hooff’s observation that, while a smile might be a sign of appeasement, laughter, with its open mouth and bared teeth, signals dominance and might even stem from “the savage shout of triumph and the cruel mockery over a conquered enemy”.

Perhaps more attention to perceptions of the appropriateness of laughter might also be prudent. The academic culture is a serious business where serious people do serious work to attain serious goals. I refer to the weighty tasks of generation and testing of new knowledge, the driving forward of the wheel of progress, the investigation and propagation of civilisation. Frivolity is not the order of the day. As Somerset Maugham pointed out: “Make him laugh and he will think you a trivial fellow, but bore him in the right way and your reputation is assured” [1]

3.2 Wheels within wheels

Any research group worth its citations will owe much of its creativity to influences from beyond the pale. But what are we to make of the cultures within this subculture?

A brief search on the internet will quickly confirm that Germans and women have no sense of humour. If, for example, Japanese or Vietnamese women *do* have a sense of humour, must they cover their mouth to make sure nobody notices? Or is it just inappropriate for women to open their mouths at all?

The particularly Irish custom of *slagging* is not on the list of ten most effective ways to make your Dutch colleagues feel included and valued, and yet *not* being slagged in Ireland – often misconstrued as a sign of politeness – is a very clear message that says “not in our gang”.

4 What to do, then?

In my talk, I will outline some of the cultural approaches to laughter and humour and suggest some ways in which we try to circumvent the communications that might arise in intercultural relationships in the academic world. I shall endeavour not to make sweeping statements and generalisations, and to avoid anecdotal evidence. However, since that is the stuff upon which this issue is built, with which it is reinforced, and without which it cannot persist ... I make no promises.

References

- [1] W. Somerset Maugham. *The Gentleman in the Parlour: A Record of a Journey from Rangoon to Haiphong*. Random House, 2010.
- [2] J. A. R. A. M. van Hooff. A comparative approach to the phylogeny of laughter and smiling. In R. A. Hinde, editor, *Non-verbal Communication*, page 211. Cambridge University Press, 1975.