

Carmen Popescu

Teaching and Learning English with Humour:

transcription, categorisation and analysis



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements / 4

Abstract / 5

Table of Contents / 7

PART ONE

1. Introduction / 13

1.1. Scope of the present study / 13

1.2. Motivation of the study / 14

1.3. Research Methodology / 14

1.4. Organisation of the study / 16

2. Review of Literature on Humour / 17

2.0. Introduction: Terminology / 17

2.1. Theories of Humour / 18

2.1.1. Linguistic approaches to humour / 19

2.1.1.1. Conversation analysis (CA) and humour / 19

2.1.1.2. Existing ways of transcribing laughter / 21

2.1.1.3. Transcribing classroom transcripts / 26

2.1.2. Psychological approaches to humour / 27

2.1.3. Psychoanalytical approaches to humour / 28

2.1.4. Sociological approaches to humour / 28

2.2. Educational Approaches to Humour: general / 29

2.2.1. Humour and learning / 30

2.2.2. Humour and affect / 31

2.2.3. Humour and performance / 32

2.2.4. Teaching with humour / 33

2.2.5. The sociology of humour in the classroom: types / 34

2.2.6. Categories of classroom humour / 35

2.3. Foreign Language Classroom Approaches to Humour / 37

2.3.1. Humour and affect in foreign language learning / 37

2.3.2. Humour and language teaching methodology / 38

2.3.3. Humour in textbooks and resource books / 42

2.4. Gaps in humour studies / 43

2.5. Investigating Humour in the Romanian Context / 44

2.5.1. Educational journals / 45

2.5.2. English textbooks in use in Romania / 45

2.6. Research Questions: this study / 46

2.7. Conclusion / 49

3. Methodological and Theoretical Approaches Drawn On / 51

3.1. Data Collection: Classroom Research / 51

3.1.0. Introduction / 51

3.1.1. Teacher as researcher / 52

3.1.2. Research ethics / 53

3.1.3. Triangulation / 54

3.2. Theoretical Approaches / 54

3.2.0. Introduction / 54

3.2.1. Classroom Discourse Analysis / 55

3.2.1.1. Sinclair and Coulthard's IRF system / 55

3.2.1.2. Mehan's notion of 'topically related sets' and turn-allocation system / 58

3.2.1.3. Van Lier's notion of 'topicalisation' and his contribution to the notion of structure of participation / 59

3.2.2. Conversation Analysis / 59

3.2.2.1. CA and research in education / 60

3.2.2.2. Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff's sequential analysis of laughter: the notions of *affiliation*, *disattention*, *escalation*, *inserted laughter*, *laughter absent at recognition point* / 61

3.2.3. Goffman's notions of *footing*, *frame* and *participation framework* / 64

3.2.4. Levinson's notion of *activity type* / 66

3.2.5. Grounded theory / 67

PART TWO

4. Data collection – the pilot and the main study / 73

4.1. Initial Explorations / 73

4.1.1. Introduction: participants and early considerations of data types / 74

4.1.2. Audio-recording / 76

4.1.3. The tasksheets / 77

4.1.3.1. Task Pilot 1: common task for students and teachers / 78

4.1.3.2. Task Pilot 2: tasks for students and task for teachers / 78

4.1.3.3. Task Pilot 3 / 79

4.1.4. Other data collection issues / 80

4.2. Main Study / 80

4.2.0. Introduction / 80

4.2.1. Audio-recording of the lessons, transcription and selection of humorous sequences / 81

4.2.2. Final tasksheets: form, administration and collection / 83

5. The Transcribing System / 85

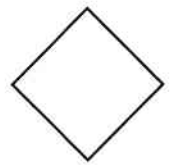
5.0. Introduction / 85

5.1. Developing a system for transcribing laughter in the classroom / 85

5.2. Piloting the transcribing system / 89

5.3. Changes resulting from the piloting of the transcribing system / 91

5.4. The final transcribing systems / 93



6. Developing the Analytical Framework: the category scheme and coding sheet / 97

- 6.0. Introduction / 97
- 6.1. The pilot / 97
- 6.2. The category system / 100
 - 6.2.1. Classroom-specific humour / 109
- 6.3. The coding chart / 111
- 6.4. Excel calculations / 120
- 6.5. Conclusion / 121

7. Categories of Humour. Findings and Discussion / 123

- 7.0. Introduction / 123
- 7.1. The humorous sequence / 123
 - 7.1.1. Findings / 123
- 7.2. The category system / 126
- 7.3. Classroom-specific humour vs. foreign language classroom-specific humour / 127
- 7.4. The distribution of the categories of humour occurring in the classroom in 'Misprints' / 131

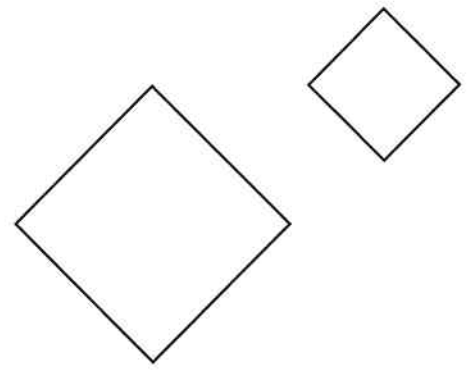
8. Humour and the IRF. Findings and Discussion / 135

- 8.0. Introduction / 135
- 8.1. The prototypical classroom exchange: general / 135
 - 8.1.1. Findings / 136
- 8.2. 'Topicalisation' and 'Humorous Expansion': general / 137
 - 8.2.1. Findings / 138
- 8.3. The 'serious' frame vs. the 'non-serious' frame / 139
 - 8.3.1. Findings / 141
- 8.4. The picture overall: the unwritten rules of interaction in 'Misprints' / 142

9. Further Discussion and Conclusions / 147

- 9.0. Introduction / 147
- 9.1. Summary of findings / 147
- 9.2. Pedagogic considerations / 149
 - 9.2.1. Teaching materials and topics / 149
 - 9.2.2. Suggestions for textbook writers / 152
 - 9.2.3. Suggestions for teachers / 153
 - 9.2.4. Effects on classroom life / 154
- 9.3. Generalisability issues / 155
- 9.4. Contributions of this study / 155
- 9.5. Suggestions for further research / 156
- 9.6. Conclusion / 156

References / 157



Chapter One Introduction

Translated into Romanian, the quotation above can have two readings. It can refer to the dullness of a life in which humour has no place, or to the dryness of a solemn examination of life. If from a syntactic point of view the sentence is controversially ambiguous and lends itself to analysis and discussion, I think its message is equally food for thought.

This book has been written on the assumption that both interpretations are true. In my understanding, in either of them, the idea that is unambiguously expressed is that a view of life based on the humorous acceptance of a *plurality* of meanings is more comprehensive and rewarding than one which “takes for granted the existence of *one* real world” (Mulkay (1988: 22-26) and which separates humour from the realm of the serious. This view can constitute the source of an interest in the examination of humour in a social setting traditionally associated with solemnity, i.e. the classroom.

The present study is about the role of humour in teaching and learning English in the Romanian context.

1.1. Scope of the present study

The main objective of this project is to analyse classroom humour, to try to identify, define and categorise it and look at its implications for language teaching and learning in the Romanian context. My research questions focus on categorising instances of classroom humour. Peripherally, they also consider the issues of teaching and learning with humour; whether humour can release tension in the classroom and if it does, whether this is conducive to learning in general (being a memory support, an attention focuser, a means of lowering the affective filter, and/or an effective means of conveying or reinforcing information); whether it can lead to a more positive attitude to learning (helping reduce barriers, increase networking potential, building positive relationships, refreshing the mind after ‘serious activity’, releasing stress); whether it can in particular enhance learners’ linguistic, communicative and cultural competence, develop awareness and creativity, change interpersonal relations; or whether it can have negative effects, for example being a distractor from serious work, interruptive of the regularities of the classroom exchange structure, an inadmissible teaching technique.

My premise is that humour makes classroom discourse quite similar to casual conversation. The discourse of the institution of education delimits what is possible to say or do and what it is not in the classroom setting and the participants assume roles marked by the unequal distribution of power. Where humorous exchanges are accepted, initiated or encouraged, the settled structure of the classroom discourse becomes more relaxed and students have, for the duration, more rights to initiate talk, humorous exchanges,

◆
*Life without laughter is not worth
examining.*

(Robinson 1977 cited in
Weaver and Cotrell 1987)

off-task commentaries, thus bringing classroom discourse closer to conversation, a genre with least or no power difference. This type of interaction is beneficial for the acquisition of the foreign language, although risky for the teacher who can be exposed to losing face.

The reasons why I am doing this research are both disciplinary and personal. To start chronologically, I think that personal reasons aroused this interest in the first place. I have been an anxious student and I have always appreciated the teachers who knew how to create a relaxed atmosphere in their classrooms, using humour among other things. This was not the norm in pre- '89 Romania, since dictatorship can hardly be associated with anything humorous, except perhaps underground humour, which did not happen in classrooms anyway. Since my French teacher was such an exception (and I should add that the majority of English and French teachers were, maybe because of their contact with Western cultures), this may have been one of the reasons why I have taken up this profession myself. As a teacher I use humour a lot in my lessons because, after 20 years of experience at primary, secondary and tertiary level, I find it beneficial to my students' attitude towards learning English. A relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, in which humour plays an important part, has always helped me to establish a good rapport with my students and to have a high attendance rate even when attendance was optional. The feedback questionnaires to my sessions mention the relaxed atmosphere and the teacher's sense of humour as a strength. Gradually, this intuition has taken the form of a research interest.

This general issue will lead to a specific definition of what counts as humour for the present study. Thinking about real classrooms and situations I realised that there are several possibilities deriving from the asymmetric roles of teacher and student and that jokes code differently according to the teacher's and the student's point of view respectively. For example there are cases when students do not dare laugh although they find the situation funny, or on the contrary, they feel they have to laugh because this is expected from them by the teacher. There are also the famous instances, which we can all remember, when students laugh at the teacher. Sometimes the teacher intends to be humorous, some other times he/she does not. In response, the students can find the teacher humorous or not. There are other cases when humour makes only the teacher or only the students laugh. Although the relationship between humour and laughter is not symmetrical, given the complexity of humour and the large number of variables involved I decided to focus on instances of *collective laughter*.

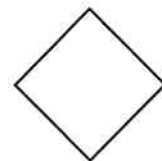
1.2. Motivation of the study

While there are a relatively small number of studies that deal with relationships between humour and areas in education such as: learning, affect, performance and teaching, at the time of writing I have not identified any study that examines humour in the foreign language classroom aiming to categorise humour in the classroom. The aim of this study is therefore to identify categories of humour occurring in the foreign language classroom, to look at the changes that teaching with humour brings to the structure of the discourse in this classroom and to consider the implications that designing lessons around humorous materials has for teachers, textbook writers and teacher educators.

1.3. Research Methodology

The present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. *What categories of humour occurring in the classroom can be identified?* In order to do so it uses selected extracts of classroom transcripts of six audio-taped sessions taught by myself using humorous materials. My dataset consists of 232 humorous sequences, a sequence being a group of related occurrences of laughter by more than one person, hence collective laughter, which shares a common topic and which is preceded and followed by serious talk, across the six lessons. In these transcripts laughter is transcribed as a turn.



The aim of the question is to develop a system of categories and to illustrate it with examples throughout the data. This was done by cross-sectional indexing of the data, i.e. by creating “a collection of all sections of data which had been indexed under a category” (Mason 1996: 115), which helped me identify themes in my dataset. The indexing was done manually and then transferred to Excel in order to calculate frequencies and proportions of the categories in the whole dataset.

The theoretical approaches that I drew on in the detailed analysis of the humorous sequences are classroom discourse analysis and conversation analysis. I started by investigating participants’ orientation to the talk with tools provided by conversation analysis in the documents of their real time interaction, i.e. the transcripts. As categorising and attributing meanings to laughter in the classroom context implies interpretation of the recurrent patterns, concepts from classroom discourse analysis (to be discussed in 3.2.1.) help by highlighting ways in which the kinds of interaction which have been found through conversation analysis are or are not typical of classroom interaction (described in classroom discourse analysis, e.g. Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Van Lier 1988: 137).

I answer RQ1 in the process of developing the categories and the analytical framework, in the tradition of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1987). Levinson’s notion of ‘activity type’ was central in starting my category system, as I suggest that the constraints of the activity type and the allowable contributions of the participants, both at the level of the form of the discourse and at the level of its content are the source of what I called *classroom-specific humour* in general and *foreign classroom-specific humour* in particular.

The aim of the second Research Question of this study, i.e. *How does humour, i.e. laughter for the purposes of this study, affect the prototypical ‘Initiation-Response-Feedback’ classroom exchange in lessons which include repeated occurrences of Initiation, Response and Feedback moves?* is to bring empirical evidence supporting the working hypothesis that humour affects the structure of the classroom discourse by encouraging more conversational patterns. To do so I used the notion of turn-taking to compare and contrast the two types of discourse identified in the data, i.e. the prototypical classroom exchange and the conversational patterns. The insights from classroom discourse analysis and conversation analysis were complemented with Goffman’s notions of ‘footing’, and ‘frame’, that I used in my attempt to explain the participants’ definition of the situation they are in when they shift from one turn-taking system to another.



A very important part of the book is its methodological contribution to this relatively unexplored area, hence the three subquestions of Research Question 3, i.e. *What is a) an appropriate approach for investigating humour in the classroom?, b) an appropriate system for transcribing laughter in the classroom?; c) an appropriate analytical framework for analysing humour (i.e. laughter for the purposes of this study) in the classroom?* The development of a methodology, in terms of data collection and the analytical framework, with its many categories, is very important.

RQ 3a was addressed by collecting written responses to tasks about classroom transcripts from participant students and non-participant teachers. The final form of the tasksheet questions is the result of a long and laborious piloting process which resulted in an ethnographic view whereby emphasis is placed on the respondents’ *perceptions* of the lesson, that informed the findings of the study. This methodological issue is one of the three that the study addresses and is presented in chapter four.

Looking at humorous sequences, I identified a set of recurrent patterns in the data. In order to be able to do this, I developed a personal transcribing system to suit the focus of my research, which is humour, i.e. laughter for the purposes of this study, in the classroom, a system which covered in itself a gap. The development of the two transcribing systems, one for the analyst’s use and one for the respon-

dents' addresses RQ 3b. The stages that led from the initial version used in the pilot study to the final one used in the main study are described in Chapter 5.

Research Question 3c addresses the issue of the analytical framework for analysing humour, i.e. the development of the category system and of the coding scheme and charts, drawing on the theoretical approaches mentioned. I then completed the charts using annotations, transferred these charts to Excel and asked Excel to perform operations in relation to the RQs. During the process of developing the analytical framework and the category system, RQ1 was directly addressed in the spirit of grounded theory, which allowed the categories to emerge from the data. In terms of the organisation of the book, this is done in chapter 3.2 (theoretically) and 6 (practically).

Out of the possibilities of undertaking this kind of research I have chosen the situation in which there is an identity between the teacher and the researcher, in other words, I used my own situation for data. This allowed me to translate my ideas into action in my own classroom and to monitor the simultaneous process of teaching and researching by a variety of mechanisms (transcripts, responses to tasksheet questions). Participant observation, although criticised for its subjectivity, has the advantage of offering a deep insight into the phenomenon investigated.

1.4. Organisation of the study

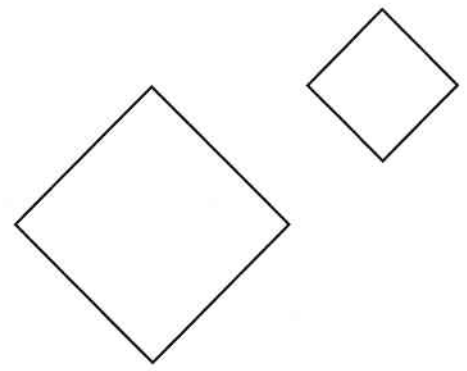
The book is organised in nine chapters. Chapter 2 reviews issues in the main theories of humour, and refers specifically to educational approaches to humour and to foreign language classroom approaches to humour, identifying gaps in humour studies and anchoring the study in the Romanian context.

Chapter 3 locates the study in the tradition of classroom research and describes the notions drawn on from the theoretical approaches taken in the process of research. The methodology adopted is 'hybrid', in the sense that the qualitative analysis of the data draws on some numerical information.

In the second part of the study I describe the process of data collection during the pilot study and the main study (chapter four). As indicated, chapter five addresses the methodological question of the transcribing system used in this study.

The role of Chapter 6 is rather complex in the book, as it addresses two research questions simultaneously. The development of the analytical framework addresses the second methodological issue, i.e. RQ 3b. This is paralleled by the discussion and illustration of each category, which address RQ1 directly, describing the established system. While in chapter 6 the development of the category system and their description is based on one lesson, Chapter 7 looks at the categories established in the previous chapter in terms of their breakdown across all 232 humorous sequences in all six lessons, at frequencies and distributions arrived at through Excel. In this chapter, as well in chapter 8, looking at the changes in the discourse structure, quantitative analysis plays an important part and offers a broader view on the dataset. This perspective on the data would not have been possible without the Excel calculations. In chapter 8, a separate section deals with the unwritten rules of interaction to which the students align.

Chapter 9, Conclusions, summarises the main findings and considers potential applications of these interpretations to classroom practice: the role of humorous materials in the interaction between the students and the teacher, their attitude towards the teacher's use of humour and of certain topics and their reaction to the various humorous teaching material used.



Chapter Two Review of Literature on Humour

2.0 Introduction: Terminology

The purpose of this chapter is to locate my study, dealing with humour in the language classroom, in the field of humour research in general and educational research in particular. I will review first *approaches relating to humour outside education* (linguistics, psychology, sociology) and then *approaches relating to humour inside education*, with special emphasis on how humour can help learning, especially foreign language learning. Given the empirical nature of my study, I will review in greater detail *classroom studies* and especially *foreign language classroom studies*, emphasizing the relationship between humour and learning. Although these studies are not numerous in comparison with the literature about theories of humour, they will serve to integrate my topic into existing research in the field, pointing to the gaps, hence to the particular niche which my study fills. As one of the foci of my study is the identification of categories of humour in the language classroom built around materials using humour, a special subsection deals with *categories of humour* in the classroom available in the literature. I will also look at the way humour has been investigated in the Romanian context.

Work on humour ranges across a number of disciplines including philosophy, psychology, psychotherapy, physiology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, mythology, religion and education. Because of the huge literature available, one of the biggest problems I have been confronted with is that of *terminology*. I have found it extremely difficult to forge a path through the theories, themes and functions identified in the various literature reviews. There is also an enormous amount of both overlap and inconsistency even in the classifications or terms used by one and the same author:

...another blow humour deals to its researchers is the terminological chaos created by an abundance and competition of such similar and adjacent terms as humor, laughter, the comic, the ludicrous, the funny, joke, wit there is no terminological agreement among different researchers, and one man's 'humour' may be another man's 'laughter'. (Raskin 1985: 8).

One of the most confusing area is that of the *functions* of humour. For example, in his *Humor Scholarship - A Research Bibliography*, Nilsen (1993), whose work is in literary humour, concludes that there are four basic functions: physiological, psychological, educational and social, as follows (p. 293):

- physiological functions : exhilaration, relaxation, healing;
- psychological functions: relief, ego defense, coping, gaining status;
- educational functions: alertness, arguing and persuading, teaching effectively, long-term-memory learning;
- social functions: in-bonding, out-bonding, promoting social stability, promoting social change.

...another blow humour deals to its researchers is the terminological chaos created by an abundance and competition of such similar and adjacent terms as humor, laughter, the comic, the ludicrous, the funny, joke, wit there is no terminological agreement among different researchers, and one man's 'humour' may be another man's 'laughter'.

(Raskin 1985: 8).

Nilsen's classification of functions is relevant to my study, as it includes the educational function of humour, not present in other classifications.

Referring to the social functions of humour, i.e. to its effects on the communicative process, Attardo (1994) uses a completely different terminology: 1. *social management* (humour is used to facilitate in-group interaction and bonding); 2. *decommitment* (the retractability property of humour, i.e. the possibility of denying its serious content with the aim of either probing or salvaging a situation); 3. *mediation tool* (the approach taken by Mulkay 1988) which allows the introduction of 'difficult topics'; 4. *defunctionalization*. The overlap and ambiguity in the terminology is evident here in that 'defunctionalized' language for Attardo refers to language that is not used to transmit information, but with a ludic purpose. This function is in turn associated with the names of Freud and Fry, which appear *again* in Attardo's classification of theories of humour under 'psychoanalytical', 'release' theories of humour. The same function, i.e. humour as a 'play' framework contrasting with serious discourse which allows messages to be 'risked', is identified by Linstead (1988) as one of the major 'themes' recurrent in humour research.

There is also overlap between what Nilsen calls *in-bonding* and *out-bonding* and Attardo's *social management*, *decommitment* and *mediation tool*, which all refer to the instances when humour is used as a tool to facilitate in-group interaction and out-group rejection, sometimes by means of its retractability, i.e. the possibility to deny its serious content.

In his article "Jokers wild: resistance and control", Steve Linstead (1988) presents "the major and most relevant *themes* traversing the study of humour" in society, which, although referring to the social world, do not coincide with other classifications:

- as a 'play' framework contrasting with serious discourse and which allows messages to be 'risked'
- as exploration of new ideas and negotiation of taboo topics, sensitive issues
- as performing a boundary function, policing groups in terms of membership and competence behaviour
- as a coping device to release tension or distance the unpleasant (1988: 124)

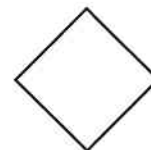
Attardo (1994) notes that classifications of humour are so numerous and diverse that they have become the topic of reviews of literature (see also Keith Spiegel (1992), quoted in Attardo (1994)).

Surveys of *humour theories* have been carried out by McGhee (1979) stressing psychological issues, Apte (1985) from an anthropological perspective, Morreall (1987) from a philosophical point of view, and Raskin (1985) and Attardo (1994) from a linguistic perspective.

2.1. Theories of humour

In the literature there does seem to be agreement on three *families* of theories of humour (Attardo: 47), i.e. cognitive (incongruity), social (hostility/disparagement), and psychoanalytical (release). Ziegler (1998) makes a distinction between theories which can be accommodated in an approach based on discipline, e.g. biological, psychoanalytical, sociological, historical, philosophical, anthropological, linguistic, psychological or physiological, and theories which cannot be classified as belonging to a discipline or another, e.g. those based on incongruity, superiority, surprise, shock or ambiguity. Although humour and language are inextricably related, as most humour is verbal, linguistic theories of humour are rather recent. As Attardo notes, "linguistics as such was not an independent player on the scene until the 19-th century, and then showed little, if any, interest in humour" (1994: 46). He deals separately with two thinkers who not only have shaped modern thought on humour, but have also provided insights into linguistic humour, i.e. Bergson (1994: 57) and Freud (1994: 53).

Because of the applied linguistics focus of this book, I did not consider it necessary to review all the theories of humour in depth or even systematically. In the following section, I focus on reviewing in greater detail the literature on humour *in interaction*, which I consider directly relevant to my study. I will then briefly review psychological (2.1.2), psychoanalytical (2.1.3) and sociological approaches to humour (2.1.4).



2.1.1. Linguistic Approaches to Humour

Verbal humour represents a neglected area of research in linguistics and this topic has been often limited to semantic concepts such as polysemy or homonymy (for an exhaustive review of the literature about the linguistics of humour see Raskin 1985 and Attardo 1994). Modern analysts of linguistic aspects of humour have devoted entire books to this topic and have investigated areas such as the structure and the typology of jokes, riddles, puns, parody, allusion, irony and translating word play (Nash 1985, Chiaro 1992, Redfern 1984).

Also to be noted is Raskin's (1985) contribution to the semantic aspects of humour, through his theory of scriptal ambiguity (see Cook 2000 for a review and critique of Raskin's theory and Latta 1999 for a detailed criticism of incongruity theory). One of the ideas that I have found relevant to my study as it helped me identify a pattern in my data, i.e. 'pre-sequences of humorous expansion' (see 8.2.), is that entering the humorous mode is marked not only by recipients' laughter, smiling or some related token of appreciation, but also by the speaker, through verbal and non-verbal signals, e.g. a wink or smile, which may indicate that the recipients should interpret what is going on as a 'play frame' where events are not to be taken seriously. Often there is a change in the speaker's normal voice pattern, e.g. verbal inflection, dialect, a gurgle in the voice. As Raskin notes:

although it is difficult to describe in detail what vocal changes are used to signal the occurrence of humor, there is no doubt that we are able to recognize and employ these changes effectively in the course of social interaction. (Raskin 1985: 47)

Most intended humour, Raskin argues, is accomplished through a combination of humorous cues or signals and a verbal (or visual) text that encourages or at least allows some element of interpretative bisociation, a concept to be detailed later in this section. In the case of irony the cues are very important because it is by their use alone that the speaker implies the need for an opposing script.

Crystal (1998) and Cook (2000) include humorous language play in their treatment of language play in general. The approach that they take is extremely relevant to my study both for the linguistic perspective and for the fact that they explicitly address the issue of the implications of using language play in language pedagogy.

Crystal (1998: 12) analyses jokes, dialect humour, funny sounds, nonsense humour, advertisements, comic writers and comedians' humour. He makes an important distinction between *language play* and *humour*, which involves far more than just language play, e.g. non-verbal humour which excludes language altogether, or humour which is not linguistically based, but results from the unexpected nature of the situation (see also Cook 2000: 73 for the same distinction).

Cook (2000: 123) observes that the features that define language play (humorous language play included) reside at the levels of: a) linguistic form (patterning of forms, emphasis on exact wording, repetition), b) semantics (indeterminate meaning, important subject matter, reference to an alternative reality, inversion of the relation between reality and language), and c) pragmatics (focus upon performance, use in intimate interaction, creation of solidarity and/or antagonism, preservation or inversion of the social order, no direct usefulness, enjoyment and/or value). This "defunctionalised" (cf. Attardo 1994) use of language, i.e. the ludic function, can be seen to have a great potential for language teaching (see 2.3.2.)

I will now review the work in Conversation Analysis addressing humour in general and laughter in particular (2.1.1.1), and then work on ways of transcribing it (2.1.1.2).

2.1.1.1. Conversation Analysis (CA) and humour

Research on humour in natural conversation has focused either on the location of joking and laughter within the talk exchange or on the internal organization of jokes. Attardo (1994: 330) notes that CA is

although it is difficult to describe in detail what vocal changes are used to signal the occurrence of humor, there is no doubt that we are able to recognize and employ these changes effectively in the course of social interaction.

(Raskin 1985: 47)

only marginally interested in the structure or the nature of the joke, but that however CA is relevant as a tool in the study of conversational jokes, i.e. jokes or witticisms that occur in conversation and have strong contextual ties, and of their interaction with the rest of the text. Conversation analysts who have dealt with humour include Sacks (1972, 1974), Jefferson (1972, 1979, 1985), Glenn (1989), Sherzer (1978, 1985) and Tannen (1984).

I will now briefly review some issues addressed by conversation analysts that relate to the methodology or to the findings of my study. (Because of the empirical nature of my study, which required working with transcripts, the literature about existing *transcribing* conventions of laughter is reviewed separately in 2.1.1.2.)

Sacks (1974) provided the first examination of the course of joke telling in conversation. He argues that the performance of a joke follows the pattern for story telling in general and that the major difference lies in the expected response of laughter at the joke, at a precise point after the delivery of the punchline. Jokes are told as 'understanding tests' as 'getting' them involves utilising certain items of background knowledge and processing. He sees them as forms of aggression directed at the audience and at a third party, the butt of the joke. I have found this idea very relevant to the reality of the classroom: testing understanding being an expected routine of the classroom situation, any 'aggressive' element of the humour of jokes may no longer be perceived as aggressiveness, but as a natural part of this setting. Another interesting idea is that of the exact placement of laughter in a certain slot. Thus the absence of laughter after the punchline can signal either a sign of disapproval or a failure to understand. 'Mirthless laughter' in the appropriate slot on the other hand constitutes an attack on the teller because it has the double purpose of demonstrating understanding and a lack of appreciation from the recipient. (These ideas prompted the guideline for my study for distinguishing between 'laughter generated by the materials' *per se* and 'laughter resulting from the interaction'. Also, Sacks' distinction between joke-telling and joke-reading, was useful in the analysis that led to the development of the category system.)

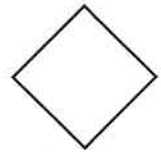
Tannen (1984) presents a more comprehensive discussion of conversational humour, disregarding classifications such as 'canned'. In her study of the conversations held at Thanksgiving dinner, Tannen records and analyses all the humorous occurrences. She makes several important points. By affecting a style different from one's own and/or appropriate to the situation, one may convey the implication that one 'disagrees' with what one is actually saying, i.e. that one does not endorse the literal interpretation of one's utterance (very close to the concept of 'deniability' or 'retractability' of humour mentioned above). Tannen's quantitative analysis, used rarely in humour research, reveals that humour has a larger role than expected in conversation. Her conclusion was that in a normal conversation people spend 10% of their time joking. Her work prompted the idea of using quantitative analysis in my study to describe a humorous conversational situations in terms of the frequency of occurrence humorous conversational turns (see chapter 8).

◆
... a text is humorous whose perlocutionary effect is laughter

In his attempt to define humour, Attardo (1994: 4) notes that this is "an impossible definition". However, he qualifies humour as an "all-encompassing category, covering any event or object that elicits laughter, amuses, or is felt to be funny." Although one common criterion to all definitions of humour is laughter, Attardo argues that the relationship between humour and laughter is not symmetrical. He concludes by quoting the pragmatic definition belonging to Kerbrat-Orecchioni and Roventa Frumusani that a text is humorous whose perlocutionary effect is laughter. Equating humour

with laughter is a very controversial issue. However, wherever there is laughter it is interactionally significant and constitutes at least the offer of a potentially humorous situation.

The equation of humour with laughter led to conversation analysts' researching it in detail. Jefferson (1979, 1984, 1985, 1987) looked at the way in which laughter enters into social interaction in a patterned way or at how participants systematically use laughter as an interactional device (1987: 156), i.e. basically at two issues: a) the placement of laughter, and b) its functions in conversation. Laughter can be located in the last of the three phases of the conversational turn, i.e. 'the response' (the other two being the



preface and the telling, according to Sacks, 1974). The response phase is characterised by the presence of two conflicting tendencies: laughing immediately to display understanding of the joke, and waiting to see how the rest of the hearers present react. Laughter has multiple functions in conversation, i.e. it may signal nervousness, resistance to troubles, i.e. managing when in trouble (Jefferson 1984: 351), non-serious intent, and it may mark moving to a new topic.

Jefferson (1979) shows how speakers may use laughter at the end of their utterance as an invitation to laughter from them. Recipients will show appreciation by joining in after the onset of laughter or they will decline the invitation by pursuing serious talk. Recipient silence may elicit further attempts to invite laughter. By showing that laughter is an appropriate response to what he/she has just said, the speaker implicitly validates the response. Another ‘technique’ involves ‘within speech laughter’, which is the delivery of an utterance interspersed with laughter. Jefferson (1984) investigates the use of laughter to reduce tension in talk about troubles and to move to a new topic. On such occasions speakers may laugh to show that they are ‘trouble-resistant’, while the recipient generally declines the invitation to laugh and attends to the serious aspect of troubles. Jefferson (1985) explores several issues surrounding the transcription of laughter and shows that laughter can be voluntary and can be used for a variety of communicative functions, e.g. covering delicate passages in conversation, showing understanding. She has been particularly interested in the minute transcription of every day talk, including laughter, and her transcription conventions have been widely used in transcribing conversations by researchers in the field, being the most influential in the field of CA (see 2.1.1.2.). Attardo (1994: 308) notes that “the picture that emerges from Jefferson’s transcripts is that of an active speaker negotiating the humorous interpretation of his/her hearer and actively prompting a ‘humorous’ decoding of the utterance”. (For an exhaustive bibliographical essay on humour and conversation see Norrick 1993 and for a review of the major theories of the mechanisms of humour and laughter see Paulos (1980).)

In the next subsection I will review articles that deal with the transcription of laughter, such transcription being an indispensable instrument for my study.

2.1.1.2. Existing ways of transcribing laughter

First I will look at various ways in which laughter has been transcribed, paying special attention to conversation analysts’ work on laughter in two-party or multi-party casual conversations, a transcription termed as *typographic*; secondly I will review classroom transcribing conventions and their dealing with laughter, i.e. the *discursive* representation (Hutchby, J. and R. Wooffitt 1998: 89), aiming to show that choosing a certain transcribing set of conventions represents in itself a theoretical choice and is influenced by the focus of the research. One should not neglect the close relationship between data, transcription and analysis. The system evolves, changes and is adapted by the analyst who tries to understand new features of interaction and therefore develops new means of transcribing these features.

Ochs (1984) also maintains the idea of selectivity in transcription according to one’s research interests and theoretical assumptions. One of the examples that she gives is that of the use of standard orthography “rather than phonetic representation of sounds” (p.168) in the representation of sound play, where the shape matters more than the content because the function of language is playful and phatic and not informative.

Laughter is a non-verbal but vocal action (different from ‘non-vocal’, e.g. applause) and the most obvious indication that something is humorous (although not all humour is indicated by laughter and not all laughter indicates humour). Cook (2000: 44-45) includes laughter among paralinguistic signs, generally defined as ‘non-vocal phenomena’ (*Dictionary of Language and Applied Linguis-*



This is CNN, live from inside the tornado!

tics 1992: 262) together with intonation and rhythm which are “instances of the paralinguistic which inevitably accompanies spoken interaction” (Cook 2000: 14). The examination of various transcribing conventions shows that *double parentheses* or *square brackets* normally enclose transcriber comments (Nofsinger 1991), or a description of some phenomenon “with which the transcriptionist does not want to wrestle” (Atkinson, J.M & Heritage, J. (1984: xii), e.g. vocalisations ((coughs)), ((sniff)), ((snorts)), ((telephone rings)), laughter included. The most common notations to be found are ((laughter)), ((laugh)), ((laughs)), ((chuckles)) or comments like ((continuing laughter)), [giggle], [loud laughter] (see Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson. (1974: 733), Lier. (1988: 244), Atkinson. (1984: XIII), Tannen. (1984: 139)).

Du Bois et al. (1993) propose the symbol @ for the representation of laughter, as such or between the angle bracket pair, i.e. <@>, owing to its “mnemonic resemblance to the pervasive ‘smiley face’ icon” (1993: 67). They suggest two possible uses of this symbol, i.e. either a single laugh symbol followed by the duration of laughter for extended sequences (e.g. ALL: @ (12.7)) or one token of the symbol @ for each ‘syllable’ of laughter, allowing the duration of the laughter in syllables to be represented iconically:

K: @@@

...From which you haven’t recovered. (1993:67)

The authors point out that the placement of laughter can be of great consequence for conversational interaction and therefore it deserves its own distinctive symbol. The amount of detail in the transcription of this nonverbal vocal tract sound varies according to the investigator’s interest. The examples that they offer are: the necessity of showing or not how many syllables of laughter there are (@ vs. @@@) and the usefulness of distinctions among kinds of laughter, i.e. laugh quality (@N for nasal laughter).

An interesting issue related to ‘transcribing the untranscribable’ is discussed by Cook (1995), i.e. the relation of graded (paralinguistic) to discrete signs (language). He argues that paralinguistic signs, laughter included, unlike linguistic signs, are graded and “create meaning by being more or less rather than either/or. It follows that they cannot be represented in a semiotic system using discrete signs without simplification and approximations” (1995: 44-45). Whereas words have a unique representation, paralinguistic can be transcribed in several ways, all being valid representations, as will be shown in the review of variants used in its transcription. Cook emphasizes the necessity of being consistent in applying a symbol which is arbitrary. The process of transcribing paralinguistic is parallel to that of translating “virtually infinite points on a graded line into discrete units”. Therefore, he concludes, simplification is inevitable. The issue of *type* of laugh is also referred to and Cook supports the idea that the perceiver’s perception of it is of paramount importance. He argues that ‘giggle’, ‘titter’, ‘snigger’, ‘cackle’, ‘chuckle’ and ‘guffaw’ denote different types of laughter by reference to “gradable physical parameters such as loudness, pitch, frequency of exhalation.” (p. 44-45) He also maintains a point of view that contains an implicit attack on a conversation analysis tenet, i.e. that in order to be scientific, transcribing must not place any interpretation on the data:

They [symbols] say something about the intention and attitude of the person laughing, and the perceiver’s perception of it We cannot avoid this by retreating into some pseudo-scientific neo-behaviourist pretence that the transcriber should represent only an objectively verifiable physical phenomenon ... if someone perceives a laugh as a snigger, then it *is* a snigger for them. Clearly, what matters in laughter – as in other aspects of communication – is not only the physical form it takes, but the intention behind it and the effect which it has. To indicate only the sound is to say almost nothing. (Cook 1995: 46)

However, Cook admits that the *translation* of these verbs could be misleading as the intention and effect behind them are culture-specific. His conclusion is that, paradoxically, “certain elements of spoken communication both must be transcribed and cannot be transcribed” (1995: 52-53).