

# FLINDERS UNIVERSITY

---

## FIRTH HUMOUR STUDIES SYMPOSIUM: PROGRAM



**ROOM 101, HUMANITIES BUILDING  
MONDAY 24 - TUESDAY 25 FEBRUARY 2014**

(\*PLEASE NOTE THAT ALL TEA AND LUNCH BREAKS  
WILL TAKE PLACE IN ROOM 133 HUMS,  
IMMEDIATELY ADJACENT TO ROOM 101 HUMS\*)

**ENQUIRIES: Christine Nicholls**

[christine.nicholls@flinders.edu.au](mailto:christine.nicholls@flinders.edu.au)

---

### **AIM OF THIS SYMPOSIUM:**

**PUBLICATION OF PAPERS IN  
QUALITY JOURNALS OR EDITED BOOKS**

**Symposium Respondent: Dr Jessica Milner-Davis**

# TWO-DAY FIRtH HUMOUR STUDIES SYMPOSIUM

## ~ PROGRAM ~

---

*It is better in the long run to possess an abscess or a tumour*

*than to possess a sense of humour* - Ogden Nash

## DAY ONE, MONDAY 24 FEBRUARY, ROOM 101 HUMS

---

**9.35am for 9.50am**

**Tea and Coffee, Room 133**

**9.50am - 10.00am, Room 101**

Professor Diana Glenn, Dean of Humanities, to open the Symposium, followed by Dr Craig Taylor who will speak briefly about FIRtH; Dr Christine Nicholls then to speak briefly about the role of the Symposium Respondent, Dr Jessica Milner-Davis.

### **IMPORTANT NOTE REF. SESSIONS:**

Please note that each speaker has a maximum of 45 minutes to deliver his or her paper, with a maximum of 15 minutes for discussion. Session Chairs will ensure strict adherence to time.

### **Session One, Monday 24 February**

**10.00am - 11.00am, Room 101**

**Dr Jessica Milner-Davis, School of Letters, Art and Media, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia**

**'Transgressing the Boundaries: Attraction and Repulsion in Humour'**

**Chair: Associate Professor Robert Phiddian**

## Abstract

All humour in some way is subversive, even when appearing to be innocent. Subtle linguistic humour plays with what we innately know (or expect) to be the forms of the language concerned. Nonsense humour, so beloved of the English as to be perhaps their special creation (Malcolm, 1997), is especially good at subverting the primary rules of communication – to be serious, co-operative and mutually informative (Raskin, 1985, Attardo, 1884, both quoting Grice, 1975). Classroom humour succeeds as all teachers know to their cost because the class clown plays to a captive audience when challenging their authority. Christie Davies (2010) points out that regardless of topic and form, all humour in fact “plays with deviance and rule breaking. It evades all the rules that constrain how we are expected to speak or write including those of logic”.

Why should this evasion exercise so irresistible an attraction for us all, not merely for children? Dedicated volumes have documented the long-lived nature of forbidden jokes, whether political, racist, sexist, ageist, anti-handicap or merely anti-sympathetic. They simply refuse to die, however strong the coercive powers ranged against them. In the time of the Puritan Commonwealth in England, theatres and fair-ground stages were shut to suppress public laughter at their bawdy jigs and comedies, but they re-opened less than two decades later and have never shut since (1642–1660). Kremlin officials, like Nazi Party members before them, and like present-day Chinese Communist Party cadres, privately enjoyed banned anti-Party jokes. Generals in Myanmar today have found it a popular move to release imprisoned cartoonists and permit the Thee Lay Thee troupe of political satirists to return home (11 September 2011). During the 2009 US Presidential campaign, public outcry at tasteless joking by American TV comedian David Letterman about the loose sexual morals of Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin’s teenage daughters only served to increase his commercial ratings (NYT June 16, 2009). Dumb blonde jokes continue to circulate on the web even if banned from office corridors and tearooms. And the Anglican web site, Ship of Fools <http://www.shipoffools.com/index.html> when it ran a competition in 2006 to find the funniest anti-Christian joke, found the winner rated both most offensive and funniest.

It is not the simple satisfaction of one side calling the other names: Susan Seizer has written eloquently of “the particular exhilaration many [contemporary] women find in transgressing normative gender roles through public performance, whether that be in Tamil Nadu or the USA (Seizer, 2005). The appeal of this forbidden fruit is evidently complex. Is it powered by the freedom-loving human spirit demanding an outlet? Is it the communal pleasure of joining a gang of fellow conspirators and sharing guilty secrets? Is it an adult way of playing (safely) with fire to see what it feels like? Or is it the satisfaction of Schadenfreude – pleasure in provoking and painning others? Perhaps all of this and more.

This paper sets out to explore a number of cross-cultural instances of taboo-violation in humour, and the nexus between offensiveness and intensity of amusement. It asks, what practical evolutionary purpose might be served by this attractive/repulsive power of humour?

## References

Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic theories of humor*. Berlin and NY: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994

Christie Davies, "Translating English into English in jokes and humour", in Delia Chiaro, ed., *Translation, humour and literature*, vol. 1, London: Continuum, 2010, 49-73

H. Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation", in Peter Cole and Jerry Morgan, eds., *Syntax and semantics*, vol 3, "Speech acts", N. Y.: Academic Press, 1975, 41-59

"As furor over Palin joke rages, Letterman rises in the ratings", *NYT* June 16, 2009 (accessed 17 November 2011)

<http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/16/as-furor-over-palin-joke-rages-letterman-rises-in-the-ratings/?scp=4&sq=David%20Letterman%20Bristol%20Palin%20joke&st=cse>

Victor Raskin, *Semantic mechanisms of humor*, Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985

Susan Seizer, *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India*, Duke University Press, 2005

## Bio-Note: Dr Jessica Milner Davis, BA PhD

---

Jessica Milner Davis is an Honorary Associate in the School of Letters, Art and Media at University of Sydney and a Life Member of Clare Hall, Cambridge. A former President of the International Society for Humor Studies (1996 and 2001), she founded and co-ordinates the Australasian Humour Studies Network <http://www.sydney.edu.au/humourstudies>

Her research interests span the history and theory of comic genres, humour-styles across cultures, and multi-disciplinary research on humour and laughter. She published her first book (on farce as a genre) in 1978 (updated edition in 2003) and her most recent is *Humour in Chinese Life and Letters* (with Jocelyn Chey, Hong Kong UP, 2011). She is a member of the Board of Consulting Editors and Associate Book Review Editor for *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* (Mouton de Gruyter), and a member of the Editorial Board for the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (Sage Publications)

E-mail: [jessica.davis@sydney.edu.au](mailto:jessica.davis@sydney.edu.au)

**11.00 - 11.30am**

**Morning Tea, Room 133 Hums**

**Session Two, Monday 24 February**

**11.30am - 12.30pm, Room 101**

**Associate Professor Robert Phiddian**

**'The emotional contents of Swift's *Saeva indignation*'**

**Chair: Dr Jessica Milner-Davis**

### **Abstract**

Satire is generally perceived to be a practice within the broad ambit of humour, but it is also characterised by expressions of anger, disgust, and contempt – emotions not often associated with humour. This paper seeks to explore this seeming impasse in the context of Jonathan Swift's presentation of satirical motivation in his epitaph and one of his poems. In particular, it will focus on whether and how satire can channel these emotions through the play-space of humour into peaceable (or at least contained) expressions of free speech.

In his epitaph, Jonathan Swift histrionically described death as a place where '*saeva indignatio ulterius cor lacerare nequit*' (savage indignation can no more lacerate his heart). The hypothesis to explore about the spectacular and ironic anger performed by the

Scriblerians against the Walpole administration is this: can they be seen as bringing public passions that might once have been expressed by rebellion or revolution within a print economy of accepted opposition?

The research question is whether the *saeva indignatio* of which Swift speaks can be usefully discussed in the light of cognitive understandings of anger and disgust as basic emotions. Some of the most memorable sentences in works like *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) (for example the King of Brobdingnag's sentence that finishes 'I cannot but conclude the bulk of your natives to be the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth') depend on a performance of powerful negative emotions in the readers for their oddly exhilarating effect. There is a seeming paradox in the intensity of satirical ridicule in the Scriblerians and the simultaneous development of political stability under the government of their target Sir Robert Walpole.

This paper will focus particularly on Swift's epitaph and on his 'Beautiful Young Nymph going to Bed'. In these and other poems he addresses the anger and disgust that animates his satire more directly (though only more directly) than he does in the prose satires. This will involve a cross-disciplinary intersection between findings from literary and historical criticism of Swift's work and current cognitive analyses of disgust and anger as basic emotions.

**12.30pm - 1.00pm**  
**Lunch, Room 133 Hums (fully catered)**

### **Session Three, Monday 24 February**

**1.00pm – 2.00pm, Room 101**

**Dr Colette Mrowa-Hopkins and Dr Antonella Strambi**

**'Ambiguity of humour in conflict interaction'**

**Chair: Dr Christine Nicholls**

#### **Abstract**

Humour can be used for both mitigating as well as instigating conflict (Norricks & Spick 2008). Humour can also be perceived as contributing to social relationships (such as establishing or reinforcing group solidarity) as well as contesting power in the workplace (Holmes & Mara 2002).

In this presentation we will explore the duality/multiplicity/ambiguity of pragmatic effects

of humour as it is deployed in verbal interaction across a range of contexts. Our data is drawn from our previous research, which has focussed on emotion communication in conflict situations in various cross-cultural contexts including male friendship groups, work meetings, and football talk shows in Italy, France and Australia (Mrowa-Hopkins & Strambi 2014; Strambi & Mrowa-Hopkins 2012).

Based on an interactional view of communication as a joint collaborative activity (Heritage 2001) and using conversational analysis as a methodological tool, our approach consists in paying close attention to the details of conversational structure and sequences and invoking relevant details of the situational context for interpreting naturally occurring interaction, and quasi-conversation which may be scripted. This approach provides an interesting means of distinguishing between the seemingly contradictory pragmatic effects of humour in interactional sequences that are adversarial/combatative in content.

The analysis will highlight in particular the extent to which humour mitigates, or instigates conflict, and thus contributes to research on conflict negotiation. Such analysis also offers potential for identifying characteristic styles from a cross-cultural perspective.

## References

Heritage, J. (2001). Goffman, Garfinkel and conversation analysis. In Wetherell, M., Taylor, S., Yates, S. (eds), *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*. Sage, London, pp. 47–56.

Holmes, J. and Mara, M (2002). Having a laugh at work: How humour contributes to workplace culture. *Journal of Pragmatics* 34, pp. 1683-1710.

Mrowa-Hopkins, C.M. and Strambi, Antonella (in press March 2014). Verbal aggressiveness or cooperative support? In Fabienne Baidier and Georgeta Cislaru, eds. *Linguistic Approaches to Emotions in Context*. Antwerp: John Benjamins, pp. 279-308.

Norricks, N.S. and Spitz, A. (2008). Humour as a resource for mitigating conflict in interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics* 40, pp. 1661-1686.

Strambi, A. and Mrowa-Hopkins, C.M. (2012). Processing anger in interactions between Italian and Anglo-Australian male friends: Some preliminary results. *Italica: bulletin of the American Association of Teachers of Italian*, 89(1), pp.1-20.

## **Session Four, Monday 24 February**

**2.00pm - 3.00pm, Room 101**

**Ms Beatriz Carbajal Carrera**

**Chair: Ms Karen Austin**

### **'Assessing non-native speakers' strategies and communication styles in cartoon interpretation'**

#### **Abstract**

Humour discourse is commonly based on taboo, negative stereotypes and borderline topics within cultures. Intercultural communication, however, increases the difficulties of determining the appropriateness of humour due to the outsider perspective of the interlocutors. This paper presents a newly designed questionnaire to analyse cases of humour in order to identify sources of misunderstanding for non-native speakers. Not every factor can be objectively measured in humoristic communicative acts. Many individual variables play a central role during the process. This study explores the influence of the message's communication styles (Spitzberg, 2000) and non-native speakers' strategies (Bell, 2009) on the success of the comic cartoon. The methodology of research intends to test the validity of a cross-cultural communication theoretical framework on multimodal units, namely comic cartoons. Previous research on humour styles has mainly focused on drawing a speaker's personality profile (Martin et al., 2003). This new questionnaire, though, will measure the impact of politeness on the success of the humoristic message from the Pragmatics' perspective, a linguistic approach that places the emphasis on interpretation.

Conflicting samples have been deliberately included in the suggested questionnaire with the aim of covering all ranges of appropriateness and effectiveness. During the design process, the study addressed the challenge of selecting accurately representative models. Can subjective factors be standardized to some extent? And if so, how? In practical terms, the participants' responses will test the hypothesis for each item. As a result, the questionnaire is expected to contribute to the existing taxonomies with the subjective component, which is necessary to complete a holistic insight of the interaction between cartoons and non-native speakers.



**3.00pm - 3.15pm**

**Afternoon tea, Room 133 HUMS**

**Session Five (Final Session, Day One) Monday 24 February**

**3.15pm - 4.15pm, Room 101**

**Associate Professor Haydon Manning**

**'The political satirists' eye on the 2013 campaign'**

**Chair: Associate Professor Robert Phiddian**

**Abstract**

Cartoonists and political satirists working in a liberal democracy have a licence to be satirical, comic, and even outrageous because they are the modern day court jesters. In her insightful account of the Danish cartoon furor in 2005 Klausen notes that 'Political cartoons tell a story or make a comment on current events [they] are wordless line drawings that use exaggerated physiognomic features to make a statement about the fundamental nature of a person or thing' (Klausen, 2009 p. 6). The same may be observed in relation to election campaign commentary offered by the satirists working as part of The Chaser production team who over the past decade presented on prime time ABC television their interpretation of the political spin voters endure. Cartoonists, comics and satirists work with different media but all are invariably idiosyncratic campaign spectators forever keen to present an undisciplined, amusing, and critical view of the leaders and their campaign strategists' best endeavours to conjure a narrative high on rhetoric and low on substance. They take up the 'citizens' perspective' on the policy sales campaign and leaders' efforts to scare voters into jumping at policy shadows. A common theme found with comic commentary on the campaign is the level of impatience artists express with the political classes' debasement of national political life at a time that should be a celebration of democracy. Our presentation looks to offer some insight into the 2013 campaign's machinations mainly through the eyes of the political cartoonists, as they tend to be the more insightful, but also an array of other media, including freelance efforts by satirists using YouTube.

## **DAY TWO, TUESDAY 25 FEBRUARY, ROOM 101 HUMS**

---

### **Session One, Tuesday 25 February**

**10.00am - 11.00am, Room 101**

**'Gender, Reception, and TV comedy'**

**Dr Julia Erhart**

**Chair: Dr Antonella Strambi**

#### **Abstract**

Proceeding overwhelmingly via textual analysis, studies of television comedy do not typically recognize the diversity of fan bases that contribute to a show's or performer's popularity. Instead they tend to rely on evidence drawn from textual mechanisms, divorced from considerations of audience consumption. The question of specific, individuated, fan practice is not high in media satire studies generally, I would argue, in spite of various claims made about satire's efficacy and in turn real world effects (though there are some exceptions, largely in the area of cross-cultural comedy studies). Possibly scholars have wanted to legitimate what they feel is a marginal object of study, but such a de-contextualized approach may wind up projecting an idealized audience that does not include the full diversity of an object's or performer's viewership.

What are the pleasures available to 'ordinary' (non-academic, non-critic) viewers of television satire? Chris Lilley's humor in particular, it has been suggested, holds special appeal for a youthful and possibly male viewership (Radio National). How might we begin to discover the value of this humour for particular viewerships (and is it folly to try)? This presentation will consider a few approaches – in relation to Lilley's reception and other popular texts.

**11.00 - 11.30am Morning Tea, Room 133 Hums**

### **Session Two, Tuesday 25 February**

**11.30am - 12.30pm, Room 101**

**Dr Christine Nicholls**

**'Towards a Typology of Warlpiri Humour'**

**Chair: Dr Colette Mrowa-Hopkins**

## Abstract

In writing about Aboriginal humour (1956), W.E.H. Stanner had this to say:

*"...We are dealing with human universals [in terms of what constitutes humour]. It is therefore, perhaps, as well for me to begin by saying that there were of course major differences."*

This paper will involve a discussion of Warlpiri humour that focuses on those so-called 'human universals' while not forswearing the legitimacy of difference. When, in 1982, I went to live and work (initially as a linguist and then, from 1984-1992, as the Principal of the local school) in the remote Aboriginal settlement of Lajamanu in the Tanami Desert of the Northern Territory, I was struck by the eloquence of Warlpiri people of all ages and how most people commanded, apparently effortlessly, an extensive repertoire of creative linguistic resources. Verbal dexterity and acuity, wit and humour, especially in terms of Warlpiri people's ability to discern and linguistically 'skewer' people's physical, linguistic or other idiosyncrasies, their moral weaknesses, or their personal flaws (or, occasionally, individual gifts or achievements) were highly prized forms of linguistic and cultural capital. Inventive, ironic oral expression was universally highly valued in what was and still is essentially an oral culture. Gifted users of language were revered, whereas no special prestige attached to the acquisition of even basic literacy. By and large this remains the case to this day.

In this presentation Warlpiri nicknaming, a resilient pre-contact practice that has survived colonisation, will be discussed in terms of its various categories or genres, its relationship to Warlpiri humour and to Warlpiri linguistic productions more generally, and also in relation to the broader category of Australian humour. Nicknaming practices will be presented as a case study. Examples will be provided throughout the presentation, with discussion focusing on specific nature of Warlpiri nicknaming and Warlpiri humour, as differentiated from other groups' practices. The question of the portability or otherwise of Anglo-European theories and typologies of humour will also be canvassed in relation to Warlpiri practices. It will be argued that Warlpiri nicknaming, like Warlpiri humour, is ultimately predicated on an all-powerful Warlpiri *esprit de corps*, which means, in practice, that scores of individual casualties are to be found strewn along the lexical pathways, sacrificed for the greater good.

In this presentation I will be working my way towards identifying a typology of Warlpiri humour.

**12.30pm - 1.00pm**  
**Lunch, Room 133 Hums (fully catered)**

### **Session Three, Tuesday 25 February**

**1.00pm - 2.00pm, Room 101**

**Ms Karen Austin, Ph.D. Candidate**

**Chair: Ms Beatriz Carbajal Carrera**

**'The key role of humour in contemporary Indigenous performing arts'**

#### **Abstract**

Whilst government interventions, coupled with economic hardship, assisted to obscure the existence of Aboriginal humour in postcolonial Australia; humour emerged as a significant 'weapon' in the armoury of Indigenous fights for recognition and self-expression in mainstream from the late 1960s. The Performing Arts were a natural avenue for Indigenous self-expression that often employed humour. From the 1980-90s, Indigenous artists began to produce their own independent theatre following better access to mainstream education and government funding support. In particular, the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games gave them significant opportunities and financial backing to create a diversity of contemporary performances.

Initially, this presentation looks at several Aboriginal theatre productions from the 1990s that have used humour as a specific tool to raise some socially unpalatable issues pertinent to Aboriginality. Some significant monodramas were created for the Festival of Dreaming; Australia's cultural entrée to the Olympic Games. Several of these productions are discussed with reference to their ongoing use of humour. Importantly, these productions assisted to showcase the abilities of Aboriginal artists both nationally and internationally. The significance of humour in these endeavours cannot be ignored. Primarily, this presentation celebrates the important contributions Indigenous Australians have, and continue to make, towards this nation's humorous discourse, enhancing Indigenous cultural value and contributing to national identity.

## **Session Four, Tuesday 25 February**

**2.00pm - 3.00pm, Room 101**

**Dr Paul Jewell**

**'Some contrasting examples of Asperger syndrome in popular humour'**

**Chair: Dr Julia Erhart**

### **Abstract**

Key characteristics of Asperger syndrome, an intellectual disability related to Autism, are poor social skills and inappropriate literal interpretations. Recent studies have shown that people with Asperger syndrome have difficulty recognising jokes. They face a double difficulty with regard to humour: the likelihood that they will not get jokes and the likelihood that they will be the butt of jokes. People who take things literally have long been ridiculed in comedy, ranging from the ancient Greek book *Philogelos* to current television. A joke in *Philogelos* appears again in the novel *Catch 22* but the novel reverses the target of the ridicule to comment on the absurdity of war. A current television series *Doc Martin* goes further by celebrating the intellectual difference of the eponymous hero and using it as a vehicle for satire.

**3.00pm - 3.15pm**

**Afternoon tea, Room 133 Hums**

## **Session Five Tuesday 25 February**

**3.15pm - 4.15 pm, Room 101**

**Associate Professor Robert Phiddian and Honours Students (to be confirmed)**

**Chair: Dr Paul Jewell**

### **Abstract**

To what extent do young people get their current affairs and news from satirical sources rather than traditional media? A survey of research in the US and Australia (review of the literature).

## **Session Six, Tuesday 25 February**

**4.15pm - 4.45pm, Room 101**

**(FINAL SESSION OF TWO-DAY SYMPOSIUM, ROOM 101 Hums.)**

**Dr Jessica Milner-Davis:**

Summing Up and Future Directions, with Specific Reference to Publication

## **Conference dinner: Tuesday 25 February**

**7.30pm**

**Wah Hing Chinese Restaurant**

**85 Gouger Street, Adelaide**

### **IMPORTANT NOTE:**

**\*\*\*Please email Christine Nicholls by 5pm on Monday 24 February if you intend to come to the conference dinner, so that the number coming can be confirmed – a booking has already been made. This is a relatively cheap restaurant and attendance will be self-funded. Family/partners/friends will be welcome to attend.\*\*\***