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Humour in Power-Differentiated Intergroup Wage Negotiation

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This research examined the role of humour in power-differentiated wage bargaining conversations. We collected transcripts of wage bargaining between the local labour union and management negotiators of a multinational beverage company operating in the Philippines. Through conversation analysis, we determined how both parties utilised humor to challenge or maintain power relations even as both labour and management worked towards a wage bargaining agreement. Findings show that humour was used to maintain intergroup harmony, subvert authority and control the negotiation. Our findings may be useful for labour organisations and multinational corporations that operate in Southeast Asian countries with historically tumultuous labour relations such as the Philippines. Studies have shown how humour can play a significant role in various social interactions, such as business meetings (Rogerson-Revell, 2007), conversations between friends (Hay, 2000) and co-workers (Holmes, 2000), problem solving (Dunbar, Banas, Rodriguez, Liu, & Abra, 2012), conflict negotiations (Maemura & Horita, 2012) and price haggling (O’Quin & Aronoff, 1981). We note, however, that humour analysis rarely considers asymmetric features of social interactions occurring within the context of negotiation.

Keywords: peace, political psychology, positioning theory, social representations, social conflict

Our research examines the role of humour in power-differentiated wage bargaining conversations between company management on one side and a labour union on the other. We start this article with a brief overview of the dynamics of power relations in negotiations and how humour is utilised by unequal parties in interactions. We then argue why the lens of conversation analysis is particularly useful in examining how humour emerges and shapes the dynamics of power-differentiated wage bargaining conversations.

Negotiations and Power Relations

In negotiations such as wage bargaining, parties not only strive to get the most of the scarce resource (Thompson, 2000), but also endeavour to reach a mutual agreement (Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992) on how resources may be allocated. Negotiations tend to mix both cooperative and competitive stances (Bonaiuto, Castellana, & Pierro, 2003) as both parties consider common interests and points of conflict (Harbison & Coleman, 1951).

Negotiation allows for the exchange of information, arguments, and strategic manoeuvres (Jensen, 2009). During conversations, one party articulates an opinion and the other party may align or misalign with this position (Arminen, 2005). Hence, each party has to be certain of what it wants and then chooses what it deems is the best way to frame its arguments and counter-arguments (Alavoine, 2012), bearing in mind the other party’s tactical capacity and then making certain that it gets a positive response from that other party in the end (Wheeler, 2002).

Historically, industrial negotiations were introduced to democratise what used to be autarchic decision-making by management (Cordova, 1990). Collective bargaining thus turned into a space where both management and labour could decide jointly and share rule-making capacity (Duvall, 2009).

Power at the collective bargaining table, however, is rarely distributed evenly (Alavoine, 2012). We define power as the likelihood of being able to carry one’s will despite opposition (Weber, 1947), the potential to shape other people’s behaviours and thoughts (Norrick & Spitz, 2008), and control over resources (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). The party that is less dependent on its counterpart generally has more power at the bargaining table (Wolf & McGinn, 2005).

Asymmetries in power affect the process of negotiation (Daoudy, 2009). The party with greater power is usually the one who is able to gain more from the negotiation.
Humour in Power-Differentiated Interactions

Various researchers have investigated the utility of humour in asymmetric interactions. An integrative review of the literature on power-differentiated negotiations shows that humour functions as a mechanism of control, a strategy to subvert power, and a tool to maintain solidarity.

Humour as a mechanism of control. Humour has been used to compel people to adhere to or abide by certain patterns of behaviour as well as to behave as requested (Martin, 2006); for instance, teasing or joking to make another put itself in a more advantageous position over the less powerful. As such, when power relations are unequal, the one who has greater power can more easily get what it wants and address its interests during negotiations (Wolf & McGinn, 2005).

Humour used to subvert authority may also mean using it to artfully achieve the goal of the less powerful in the interaction, while de-emphasising the power gap (Holmes, 2000). For instance, in trying to bargain with administrators, workers may jokingly bemoan their poor working condition or express the shortcomings of management in enfeebling management authority during instances of employer hostility. Colinson (1988) likewise found that humour shared among shop-floor workers of a truck factory in England, besides being a means of finding fun and releasing tension, is also a way for them to express their antagonism and resistance towards management.

Humour as a strategy to subvert authority. While humour may be employed by the dominant to exert control, it may be used by the less dominant to challenge authority in a more socially acceptable way (Holmes & Marra, 2002). Another function of humour, as used in asymmetric interactions, is thus to provide the powerless with an avenue to challenge the hegemony of the powerful or the existing relations within the power structure (Holmes, 2000). Here, humour provides the less dominant with a discursive means of expressing opposition, protest, defiance, dissatisfaction, and recalcitrant and outrageous ideas in a non-threatening way (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Martin, 2006). It also helps the less dominant to articulate their criticisms and to contest the status of the more influential (Dunbar et al., 2012). These uses of humour can be construed as the less dominant’s version of doing power in conversations. For instance, in their study of humour in the workplace, Taylor and Bain (2003) found that labour unions’ use of humour is essentially instrumental in enfeebling management authority during instances of employer hostility. Colinson (1988) likewise found that humour shared among shop-floor workers of a truck factory in England, besides being a means of finding fun and releasing tension, is also a way for them to express their antagonism and resistance towards management.

Humour used to subvert authority may also mean using it to artfully achieve the goal of the less powerful in the interaction, while de-emphasising the power gap (Holmes, 2000). For instance, in trying to bargain with administration, workers may jokingly bemoan their poor working condition or express the shortcomings of management.
Humour in Power-Differentiated Wage Negotiation

(Martin, 2006). Here, the underdogs may utilise humour to articulate their thoughts, face up to authority, and shift the power symmetry.

In conversations, conveying strong arguments that are swathed in humour bring about less adverse effects because they are expressed in a lighthearted fashion (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). It is also not easy for a superior to dispute subversive humour as it could lead to embarrassment (Holmes, 2000). This makes humour an effective device for the powerless to subvert overt authority. Humour used this way has been given various labels by different researchers. Holmes (2000) called it contestive humour whereas Holmes and Marra (2002) termed it subversive humour. Dunbar and colleagues (2012), on the other hand, dubbed it rebellious humour, while Romero and Cruthirds (2006) labelled it mild aggressive humour.

Humour as a tool to create and maintain solidarity. Humour plays an important role in group dynamics (Romero & Pearson, 2004). It lessens hostility and enhances in-group bonding and collegiality (Cooper, 2008; Forester, 2004; Holmes, 2000; Holmes, 2006; Martin, 2006; Vuorela, 2005). This is true even in interactions between asymmetric parties. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) argued that humour is valuable for management in enhancing group cohesiveness in the workplace, and there are studies that appear to support this claim. For instance, Tang (2008) found that use of humour by management of Taiwan manufacturing firms in dealing with their employees significantly contributed to the solidarity of the group. Mesmer-Magnus and Glew (2012) also reported that management’s use of humour in handling workers is associated with reduced work withdrawal and enhanced workforce unity. Martin, Rich, and Gayle (2004) thus concluded that humour is vital to an organisation’s collective organisational climate. It can create the kind of cohesiveness and relational trust between management and workers that underpin the latter’s willingness to go beyond what their job description requires.

Creating and maintaining solidarity also means engendering a ‘we feeling’ among interactants. Humour shared by two parties conveys the message that both have something in common (Lipovsky, 2012; Martin, 2006) or that one is part of the group (Meyer, 2000). This leads to feelings of affiliation (Lipovskv, 2012) and identification with the other speaker or party and results in reduced tension (Meyer, 2000), especially during a heated discussion (Martin, 2006). Thus, jokes shared during wage bargaining interactions may highlight both parties’ shared values and give rise to feelings of affinity towards each other, thereby lessening the pervading friction and hostility.

The literature presented above demonstrates the existence of power relations in negotiations and the utility of humour in asymmetric interactions. However, there is a dearth of literature that looks at how humour shapes the dynamics of power-differentiated negotiations. More so, this concept is yet to be examined in the context of bargaining that involves naturalistic intergroup conversations on highly contested resource such as wages. Thus, this research sought to answer the following questions:

1. What functions of humour emerge in power-differentiated wage negotiations?
2. How does humour shape the dynamics of power-differentiated wage bargaining that concluded in an agreement?

In this article, we present conversation analysis as a fitting approach to examine how humour emerges and shapes the dynamics of power-differentiated wage negotiations.

Conversation Analysis: Talking as Doing

Engaging in interactions is one of the ways by which we strategically achieve goals (Wooffitt, 2005) such as desired gains in negotiation. As an approach to understanding how people manage their interaction with others, conversation analysis examines in detail how people co-construct realities, such as what is an acceptable way of allocating scarce resources, through talk-in-interaction (Grancea, 2007).

Conversation analysis assumes that talk or utterances do not merely state things but do things (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2003). As such, how conversation is locally managed by interlocutors may show how power operates and is used as a resource in interactions (Hutchby, 1996).

Conversations are characterised by having a structure composed of the participants’ successive utterances that can be construed as a series of action. What we say and how we say it invites succeeding actions or limits the range of actions that may follow (Wooffitt, 2005). The conversation structure demonstrates how people achieve orderly interactions (Wooffitt, 2005). Conversation analysts assume that orderliness is produced by the participants’ tendency to design their talk according to how they want it to be understood by its intended recipient (concept of recipient design). Thus, conversation analysis gives importance not just to what is being said but also to how and when utterances are expressed (Liddicoat, 2007; ten Have, 1999; Wooffitt, 2005). Locating conversation structures where humourous talk or laughter occurs in asymmetric wage bargaining interactions enables one to determine how humour shaped the dynamics of the negotiation.

Examining turn-taking, sequence, and turn-construction/design are usual ways of analysing the interactional organisation of talk (ten Have, 1999). Sequence organisation has been mostly used in negotiation studies (Arminen, 2005; Maynard, 2010) and research on humour and/or laughter in conversations (Glenn, 1989; Jefferson, 1979; Kangasharju, & Nikko, 2009).

Utterance sequence may show how engaging in humourous talk and conversational laughter help achieve wage bargaining agreement in this power-differentiated negotiation.
Transcribing, Selecting, and Coding Wage Conversations

The entire collective bargaining meetings were recorded through the union vice president’s laptop at first and then with the aid of a digital recorder that we provided. Recording the bargaining meeting for minute-taking is a common practice in collective negotiations in the Philippines (Edralin, 2003), so having the recorder remained unobtrusive to the bargaining process. A research assistant did the orthographic transcription of the bargaining proceedings.

We then lifted all conversations that pertained to wage rates and re-transcribed according to how the words were spoken. Of the 17 meetings, 9 had conversations about wages. After determining the conversation extracts, we then applied the transcription symbols developed by Jefferson (1979; see Appendix), which are commonly used in conversation analytic research (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2003; Wooffitt, 2005). The data were subjected to three rounds of review, with the help of another research assistant who was trained to apply the notation symbols to make sure that all conversation details were captured in the transcripts.

We then selected conversation sequences with instances of humour. We obtained 74 conversation sequences that were given numerical and letter codes to represent the date of the wage bargaining meeting and the temporal occurrence of the conversation in the meeting respectively (e.g., 1A, 1B, 2A).

Procedure for Data Analysis

To analyse our data, we employed the framework developed by Pomerantz and Fehr (1997) for conversation analysis but further tweaked it to fit the process of selecting and analysing conversation sequence with instances of humour. We described instances of humour as ‘utterances which are identified by the analyst ... as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants’ (Holmes, 2000, p. 163). Although laughter was an obvious clue for an occurrence of humour in conversations, other instances were identified through the tone of voice of the speaker as well as the manner of response of the recipient of talk (Holmes, 2000).

After selecting a sequence with instances of humour within wage conversations, we examined the actions in the sequence by determining how humourous conversations shaped the utterances of participants in a specific turn and in each succeeding turns. The third step focused on how speakers designed their talk and succeeding actions to ensure understanding of the actions and the subject of the talk. The design determined the options made available to the recipient by the preceding utterance. Finally, we examined how the actions were achieved through humourous conversations that invoked roles and/or relationships among the people involved in the conversations. The last two steps allowed us to examine the dynamics of the power relations in negotiations and to determine the utility of humour in these asymmetric naturalistic interactions.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code name</th>
<th>Ascribed role in the negotiation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>Union President, main labour negotiator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>Union Vice President, main labour negotiator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L3</td>
<td>Board Member, labour negotiator, appointed 'devil’s advocate'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L4</td>
<td>Board Member, labour negotiator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L5</td>
<td>Legal counsel for labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Other labour negotiators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M1</td>
<td>Director, Corporate Employee and Industrial Relations and Communications, main management negotiator for wage bargaining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2</td>
<td>Senior HR Manager, main management negotiator for non-economic benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Other management negotiators</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More specifically, analysing the occurrence of humour through humourous talk and laughter in intergroup conversations between labour and management may reveal if and how these establish control, subvert overt authority or maintain solidarity, as it invites or limits succeeding talk or action.

Method

The Data: Wage Bargaining Conversations

Conversations pertaining to wage increases are usually embedded in collective negotiations between management representatives and labour union. The data used for the study were wage bargaining conversations in a multinational beverage company operating in the Philippines. The negotiation occurred from March to July 2010 between the management and the local labour union, representing all regular rank-and-file non-sales employees in Metro Manila and its nearby provinces in the south. The labour union is informally affiliated to the most progressive and militant labour federation in the country. Although there is an active Labour-Management Council in the company, the union members have engaged and continuously participate in mass actions inside and outside of the company premises to express their dissatisfaction or disagreement with company/government policies or initiatives.

All negotiators were Filipinos. The negotiation data analysed in this research was an attempt to create a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) by the expiration of the 2007–2010 agreement.

Recorded proceedings of collective bargaining conversations are highly confidential and must be used only with the mutual consent of both parties. Thus, consent to use the data for research and identify the company in the manuscript was sought from and granted by the Union President and the company’s Senior Human Resources (HR) Manager.

Table 1 shows the list of negotiators and their ascribed role in wage bargaining. Code names were used to protect the identity of the people involved in the negotiation.
To enhance reliability of the analysis, two of the authors independently coded and analysed the data. We then conducted inter-coder discussions until agreements were achieved.

**Results**

Analysis of our data revealed how labour and management utilised humour to institute control over their interactions, undermine authority, and uphold intergroup camaraderie in the bargaining table. Results also point to how the use of humour facilitated agreement in power-differentiated wage negotiation.

**Management Controlling Tensions and Deadlocks Through Humour**

Management used humour to lessen the tension and break free of an impasse at the bargaining table. An example of how management used humour to manoeuvre the course of the discussion was when the parties were negotiating for the rate of wage increase in Extract 2S.

**Extract 2S:**

1. M1 tingnan nyo yung two thousand di ba? as a look at two thousand right? as a
2. 1 percentage (1) percentage of two three. tingnan nyo two three. you look
3. 1 ahhh percentage rate of ah at your percentage of two four
4. yung sa inyo percentage of two four
5. L3 magagalit ang tao nito boss. people will be angry with this
6. magpipikit yan sure hold a picket that is
7. sigurado kaya nga inaanong why we are insisting
8. pilit eh
9. 8 () ((simultaneous laughter))
10. M2 sinong nakapikit? who is closing his eyes?
11. 7 M1 now ahhh percentage rate of ah
12. of ahhh pay increase
13. (1) ahhh (5) ahhh (as four point nine?)
14. di ba? of positions and
15. clarifications ahhh principally
16. on the issue
17. of ahhh pay increase ahhh at this ahhh (5) ahhh
18. we are pleased ahhh to
19. inform the union
20. negotiating panel that we will already lay
21. down our (1) off the record
22. okey? maximum and final, offer on the issue of pay increase.
23. of pay increase.
24. which is ahhh the principle or the core or the central ahhh subject matter of our cba negotiation. okey? >off the record yan
25. ha? < pero bibigay namin para may easy reference na kayo.
26. (final) yan ha.
27. 18 L1 ha?
28. 17 M1 now ahhhh bago ko makalimutan yung (h)
29. (5) ahhh di ba? remember in the course of our meetings okey
30. ahhh (1) we had some exchange.
31. negotation. okey? >that is off the record.
32. right? of positions and clarifications ahhh principally
33. on the issue of ahhh pay increase ahhh at this ahhh (5) ahhh
34. we are pleased ahhh to inform the union negotiating panel that we will already lay down our (1) off the record
35. okey? maximum and final, offer on the issue of pay increase.
36. of pay increase.
37. which is ahhh the principle or the core or the central ahhh subject matter of our cba negotiation. okey? >that is off the record.
38. right? but we will give this so that you have easy reference. that’s (final) already
39. what?
Lines 1 through 20 present the exchanges between labour and management as they tried to negotiate for the employee wage increase. In line 21, M1 put a halt to the interchange by saying that they had reached the bargaining limit. His ‘kahiit saan pa kayo umakayat’ (no matter where you go up), even if said in a lighthearted manner, pointed to management as the one in authority and in charge of the negotiation process.

Humour as Labour’s Means to Defy Authority

Labour used humour to express the voice of the underdog and challenge the power of authority. Its application of humour helped labour state its demands, legitimise its bargaining position, delegitimise and refuse management’s offer, as well as express doubt on management’s sincerity. Labour was also able to draw on humour to actually threaten management.

Extract 6K:

1 M1 yung request namin na ano di ba nag nag ahhh (informally ahhh during our break nag)
2 Request that::: please noh. seriously reconsider
3 kami na::: coming up with ahhh (informally ahhh during our break we Requested)
4 ehhh (1) coming up with ano
5 (h) [huh. (there is none) (you’re fibbing)]
6 our request of remember we
7 ahhh ahhh
8 (h) [huh. (wala) (bola) [huh. (there is none) (you’re fibbing)]
9 (1) coming up with ahhh (informally ahhh during our break we Requested)
10 [looks like you do not want this to end! (h)]
11 [that::: we really do.:::]

The above extract is an example of how labour applied humour to assert and demand action from the management. In lines 1 through 5, M1 asked labour to reconsider management’s wage increase proposal. Labour answered by joking about there being ‘nothing new’ in management’s proposition (lines 7 through 10). Then, good-humouredly, L1 said in the next turn that it looked like management did not want the bargaining process to end yet, to which M1 responded (line 12) with an assurance that management, like labour, also wanted both parties to come to an agreement soon. In a lighthearted manner, labour pressured management to increase its offer and hasten the negotiation process. An example of how labour displayed doubt about management’s sincerity is found in Extract 2C, where aside from laughing at M1’s every line, labour also goaded him at every turn with words like ‘ikaw lang naman ang lumalayo’ (you are the one who is moving farther) in lines 4 and 5, and ‘bola’ (you’re fibbing) in line 7. Labour even mocked management by suggesting an exorbitant amount and following it with laughter. M1’s answer of ‘hindi naman’ (that can’t be) was drowned in L’s laughter.

Labour also used humour to pressure and threaten management. The following excerpts are examples of this.

Extract 2D:

1 M1 [dapat maglabas kayo ng ng desire nyo]
2 na::: naayon doon sa ano ng ng desire nyo
3 sa core
4 mag de-demonstrate ahhh ng ng ng desire nyo
5 na di ba?
6 (3) na ma conclude natin (1)
7 promptly. ha? -so pakiusap lang,<
8 L sa sa ngayon[kasi ahh M1 M1 M1 ahh ang union ay union is [ahhh not yet:::umm]
9 [ahhh hindi pa::: ano]
10 [huh:::::::::::::: ah you
11 [that::: that is in line with our the core] that will demonstrate ahhh
12 you really did as
13 [ahhh not yet:::umm]

In lines 1 through 7, M1 tried to coax labour negotiators to cooperate to hasten the bargaining process. L1 replied that labour was not yet ready. Then L, picking up on what M1 said in lines 4 to 5 (demonstrate), said in line 13 that they will indeed protest (demonstrate is a word used to describe protest), to which L2 laughed (line 14). L’s
declaration of possible demonstration is clearly a show of warning to management.

Extract 6A:

1. M1 i-double check ko lang para::: I will just double check so::: I will know ano. alam ko exactly what you want.  
2. L3 ( ) the next negotiators. ite-turn over pa namin sa  
3. M1 ha::? what::?  
4. L2 hiiii::;  
5. L3 pagka hindi ko hindi ako nasiyahan sa bigay ni::: M1 mamumundok ako.  

Similarly, with L3 saying that labour would have another representative in the next negotiation (lines 3 to 4 in Extract 6A) supported by L2’s ‘pagka hindi ko hindi ako nasiyahan sa bigay ni::: M1 mamumundok ako’ (if I won’t be happy with what M2 will offer, I will go to the mountains) and simultaneous laughter from the other interactors, labour was openly threatening management to make certain that labour should be pleased and satisfied with the end result of the negotiation. Going to the mountains in this context implies joining the anti-government armed struggle in mountainous rural areas in the Philippines.

Extract 6E:

1. L2 magrerequest muna kami ng break. we will request for a break first.  
2. M1 yes. yes. of course yes. yes. of course  
3. L2 para pagusapan namin yung la:::test death so we can discuss the la:::test death  
4. M1 di naman sa amin na threat (h) threat (h)  
5. L2 latest offer ng ano ng latest offer of the the management panel. management panel.  

In the above excerpt, L2 requested M1 for a break (line 1) to which M1 readily concurred (line 2). In the next turn, however, L2 added that the reason for the break was so labour could discuss the latest death threat of management. The statement was followed by a short laugh at the end to indicate that he was actually just joking. M1’s reply of ‘di naman death threat’ (it is not death threat) followed by a particle of laughter confirmed that he understood the joke and that he did not take offence to L2’s statement. Labour can be seen here drawing on humour to express criticism of management’s proposal.

Labour also tried to draw on humour to do power by de-emphasising the power gap between labour and management. Instances in the data where humour was used by labour in doing power were observed during discussions on the amount of employee wage increase, as can be seen in Extract 1F.

Extract 1F:

1. L2 sir kasi kung kung sinasabi you are proposing ((shuffling of paper)) an nyo na ano dic::: you are proposing ((shuffling of paper)) an  
2. M1 lumalabas na six percent lang you are only giving us six ang ibibigay nyo percent na naman sa amin na increase.  
3. L3 nakaraan kasi (five percent) [last time it was] five  

In the above example, lines 1 through 6 show labour as trying to convince management to increase the proposed salary hike to more than 6%. In the next turn, M2 protested that it was too high, which L2 jokingly countered in line 8 with a question, ‘ang taas ba?’ (is it?). Here, L2’s question was aimed at legitimising labour’s proposition. Ending his sentence with a full laugh (huh) indicated that L2 meant the question to be humourous, so as to soften the impact of his message. In this instance, use of humour helped achieved the goal of establishing the validity of labour’s proposition.

Below is an example of an instance when labour tried to delegitimise management’s offer as well as to express its opinion. Humour, however, helped temper the impact of labour’s statement.

Extract 3A:

1. M1 you are proposing ((shuffling of paper)) an increase in the monthly earnings of ah cba  
2. Covered Covered  
3. employees at an average rate of two point zero employees at an average rate of two point zero  
4. percent okey per year. percent okey per year.  
5. (>) average yan ha? (>) that’s average?  
6. L3 talaga ( ) Now but ahhh ahhh (h). oh (>)  
7. L3 ( ) (simultaneous laughter) (simultaneous laughter)  
8. L3 nagongopya ka sir eh. sir, you are copying eh. (simultaneous laughter)  
9. L2 baka naman meron pang mas (simultaneous talk and maybe you still have a bigger offer? laughter presumably)  
10. L2 baka naman meron pang mas L3 ( ) (simultaneous talk and (lawyers presumably) laughter presumably)  
11. L2 baka naman meron pang mas by labour negotiators)  
12. L2 baka naman meron pang mas by labour negotiators)

In lines 1 through 6, M1 was trying to go over labour’s proposal when in line 8, L3 cheerily cut M1 off by saying he was actually just mimicking what labour was saying, producing laughter from the other negotiators. Such usage of humour allowed labour to bravely articulate its thoughts and face up to authority. In the next turn (line 10), L2 took advantage of the lighthearted mood by good-humouredly asking management if it could increase the pay hike some
more. Such an act allowed labour to insist on a bigger offer and persuade management to provide a better deal.

Similar efforts by labour to de-emphasise the power gap can be seen in the continuation of Extract 6B below.

Continuation of Extract 6B:

In an attempt to end the discussion on employees' wage increase, M1 in line 30 declared they had already reached maximum limit with his 'kahit saan pa kayo umakyat' (no matter where you go). L's answer in line 33 showed how labour tried to shift the power symmetry, drawing on a joking tone. With L3's support (line 35) of 'umakyat' (you go up). L's answer in line 33 showed how they share something in common, making them identify with each other, bringing to light the verity that both parties agreed with each other as well.

Negotiators Sharing a Laugh to Promote Harmony

Management and labour also brought humour into play to enhance esprit de corps and promote harmony among the negotiators. Both parties engaged in bantering and playful teasing, creating a blithe atmosphere during the negotiation process. They also tended to play the power symmetry, drawing on a joking tone. With L3's support (line 35) of 'umakyat' (you go up), M1 in the next turn (lines 36 to 37) acceded by trying to explain his prior statement. Humour thus served as an instrument for labour to scale down the power disparity between them.

Extract 6L:

1 M1 palagi ngyong iano yung cost impact ng ano ha?
2 ng lump sum.
3 L1 OFF THE RECORD (h)
yung lump sum ha (h)
4 L2 OFF THE RECORD (h)
5 L1 OFF THE RECORD (h) ahhhh latest
6 M1 off the record latest
7 M2 pwede bang si L3 ang mag(h)
8 L1 game oh(h)
9 ((simultaneous talk and laughter) presumably
10 by all negotiators — joking about
11 M3 presenting)) L3 presenting)

Lines 3 through 6 showed both management and labour making light teasing remarks about their deal being off the record. The short laugh at the end of L1 and L2's utterances in lines 3 and 4 hinted this. M1's joining in, in line 6, suggested that both parties were amenable to it. In the next turn (line 7), M2 jestingly asked for L3 to do the presentation, which L1 instantaneously agreed to, as can be seen in line 8. The laughter that followed in line 9 denotes that the interactants shared a private joke about L3's capability to present. Both parties likewise exchanged jokes (see Extract 6H). The humour behind the joke did not just hint at some form of connection, but conveyed that both parties agreed with each other as well.

Extract 6H:

1 M L3 nakaka ( ) na tong proposal mo
2 Eh
3 L3 eh yan ang maximum ko eh
4 ((simultaneous laughter))
5 M (ano yan) ang maximum mo?
6 L3 authority ko ima-maximum ko
7 L off the record.
8 M basta si L3
9 bababa pa yan.
10 L3 huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu
11 ((simultaneous talk and laughter))
12 M2 [magaling! magaling! magpataas yan eh!]
13 [ ([ simultaneous talk and laughter ] ) ]
14 M2 [ mabuti na lang L3. thank you ha? ]
15 [ ([ simultaneous talk and laughter ] ) ]
16 M2 [dapat itong guhit na ito eh dapat dito lang]
17 yan eh.]
18 [ ([ simultaneous talk and laughter ] ) ]

Lines 1 through 11 show M and L3 bantering about L3's skill as a negotiator, with the other interlocutors laughing with them in the background (lines 4 and 11). M2 joined in the exchange in lines 12–18, praising L3's knack on the bargaining table. Even though M2 was commending L3, he was also good humouredly saying that L3's ability can actually be to management's advantage. Seeing the joke behind the comment, the rest of the negotiators responded with simultaneous laughter (lines 13, 15 and 18). Laughing together at L3's negotiating ability showed that both parties shared the joke.

The next two excerpts are instances where labour and management were actually haggling, expressing a critical
bargaining position, yet the humour behind their jokes denoted a move towards solidarity from both parties.

**Extract 7F:**

1 M2 tumaas tumaas it has gone higher it has gone higher
2 (L) oo nga tumaas pero yung sa amin two five pa rin yes it has gone higher but we are still at
3 Kami two five
4 M3 malapit na tayong magkita sa (h) ( ) we will be meeting soon at
5 (L) siguro mga:: dalawang maybe in about:: two months
buwan (h)
6 (inaudible simultaneous talk (inaudible simultaneous talk
and negotiators and negotiators)
7 (laughing)) (negotiators laughing)
8 (L) two weeks? two weeks?
9 L3 ( ) huuuuuuuu: (3) ( ) huuuuuuuu: (3)

In lines 2 and 3, labour seemed to be expressing discontent with the turn of the bargaining process. M3’s response was to reassure him that they were almost reaching an agreement with ‘malapit na tayong magkita’ (we will be meeting soon), in a deprecating manner, as shown by his short laugh at the end of his sentence. Labour’s response was to jokingly suggest possible target dates (lines 5 and 8). Although there was a bit of seriousness there indicating that labour was not happy with the delays, the short laugh at the end of line 5 and the laughter from other interac-tants hinted at humour, willingness to cooperate from the labour’s side, as well as understanding from the rest of the negotiators.

**Extract 8D:**

1 M1 ahhh the management negotiating panel ahhh ahhh the management negotiating panel ahhh
2 regrets to inform the union that regrets to inform the union that
3 cannot reject your proposal. cannot reject your proposal.
4 (simultaneous very loud laughter, cheering (simultaneous very loud
and clapping) laughter, cheering
5 and clapping)

Lines 1 through 3 above showed management’s way of communicating its bargaining position, stating it negatively to employ humour. The message was an action showing acceptance of labour’s proposition. The simultaneous loud laughter, cheering and clapping in the next turn revealed that everyone was pleased with the end result of the negotiation.

**Discussion**

Findings show consistencies in the functions of humour in wage bargaining and in other power-differentiated interactions discussed in the review of literature. Humourous conversations were consciously or subconsciously used by labour and management to maintain solidarity. Humour was likewise employed by labour to subvert authority through exerting pressure on and expressing doubt and criticism of management, and by the management negotiators to control the dynamics of the negotiation by break-

ing free of an impasse and subduing labour. Through conversation analysis, the study was able to determine how humour was utilised by both parties to challenge or maintain power relations in a manner that does not undermine their shared goal of achieving a wage bargaining agreement.

**Humour as Management’s Means to Maintain Power**

Because management exercises control over company re-sources, power in wage bargaining conversations is usually tipped to their side (Alavoine, 2012). Research on humour in power-differentiated interactions suggests that in conversations between asymmetric groups, it is those who wield power who use humour to exert control over conversations. This is done to suppress the undesired behaviour of the less dominant (Dunbar et al., 2012) and manage interactions to break free of an impasse (Maemura & Horita, 2012). As a way of managing conversations, humour seems to enable management to put forth their competitive goals to gain more from the negotiation (Adair & Loewenstein, 2013) while pursuing the shared goal of arriving at an agreement.

Achieving competitive goals can be seen in conversations that show management as doing power and sub-duing labour. Management’s direct criticism of labour’s claim for a ‘high’ wage increase (e.g. Extract 6B) is an ex-ample of doing power. In this instance, management used joking as a way of standing firm on their bargaining posi-tion and attacking labour’s position. The use of humour shifted and/or maintained the light atmosphere on the bargaining table as the conversation sequence concluded with simultaneous laughter.

On the other hand, efforts to suppress labour’s undesired behaviours of engaging in protest action can be seen in Extract 2S, wherein labour’s explicit warning to hold a picket was jokingly dealt with by a management negotiator. This was done by emphasising a mispronounced word (piket instead of piket), which was similarly followed by simultaneous laughing of the bargaining parties.

As the high-power group, management negotiators are expected to behave competitively to enhance their gains (Olekalns & Adair, 2013). Of all the possibilities in the conversation extracts presented above, management could have used a more offensive and confrontational approach in criticising labour’s claims for a bigger wage increase and threat of protest action. By using humour, manage-ment was still able to put forth its competitive goals while keeping the negotiation going. It is also through humour that management negotiators were able to break free of gridlocks (e.g., Extract 6C), which if not handled properly may at the extreme lead to a breakdown in negotiation (Edralin, 2003; del Rosario, 2007).

**Labour Expressing Its Voice and Challenging Hegemony Through Humour**

Using humourous talk allowed labour to put forth its bargaining position and tilt power to their side, without...
putting the negotiation at the verge of a deadlock. As seen in literature, humour allows the less dominant group to challenge hegemony, resist authority and do power in a non-threatening way (Holmes, 2000; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Martin, 2006).

Doing power through humour can be seen in labour’s justification of their claim for a bigger wage increase (Extract 1F) and in their efforts to persuade management to present a better offer (Extracts 3A), through teasing and joking. Similarly, labour used humour to lightheartedly challenge management’s claim of reaching their bargaining limit in Extract 6B. Doing so showed a successful move by labour to shift the power asymmetry. The preceding humorous talk shaped the succeeding utterance of the main management negotiator (M1), forcing him to take a softer stance in lines 36 and 37.

Humour also served as a useful way of expressing labour’s voice to challenge management authority. This was seen in how labour articulated potentially offensive opinions of management, such as management’s seeming disinterest to hasten the negotiation process (Extract 6K), the unacceptable wage offer (Extract 6E), and their doubts about management’s sincerity (Extract 2C). Labour likewise conveyed through humour their readiness to engage in protest actions (Extracts 2D and 6A).

As seen in other power-differentiated interactions where humour was utilised by the less dominant group to effectively communicate criticism and dissatisfaction, contest the status of the more influential, and express defiance in a non-threatening way (Dunbar et al., 2012; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Martin, 2006), labour was able to artfully use humour to put forth its bargaining position and defy management authority. In using humour rather than direct confrontation, labour was able to express bargaining positions and challenge management authority in a way that demonstrated its desire to keep the negotiation going. Similar to management, this reflects how labour put forth its competitive goals in a manner that conveyed its desire to eventually reach a wage bargaining agreement.

The issue of wage increase is described in literature as one of the most contested topics in labour-management negotiations (Edralin, 2003). Using more explicit means of doing power, controlling the bargaining conversations and subverting authority such as through impositions and offensive talk may push the bargaining parties to a more direct show of force. In the case of labour, this can be by engaging in protest actions to even out the positioning of both parties at the negotiation table. In the Philippines and in other Southeast/East Asian cultures, conversations that emphasise the less dominant position of labour or that explicitly challenge management authority may be perceived as going against the norms of saving face and maintaining harmony (Aslani et al, 2013). While labour may perceive this as a blatant display of power, management may see it as disrespectful, and both may view it as lacking in value for a long-term relationship. In using humour, management and labour were still able to put forth their competitive goals through talk that preserved or defied asymmetry in power, while indirectly shaping the succeeding positive responses of the other party. This is because interactional norms dictate that humour in conversations is responded to in a humourous or agreeable way rather than in an antagonistic manner (Barnes, Palmary, & Durheim, 2001).

The Importance of Maintaining Harmonious Intergroup Relationship

Utilising humour to pursue competitive goals and at the same time work towards signing a wage bargaining agreement may not have been possible if the negotiating parties did not have a historically agreeable relationship. This harmonious relationship is reflected in instances where labour and management negotiators engaged in humourous talk that brought to light what they share in common and how much they identify with each other. Instances where both parties shared private jokes, bantered and teased each other or one of the negotiators (Extracts 6L, 6H and 7F) highlighted commonality and harmony. As pointed out in the literature, humour shared by interacting parties conveys the message that they share something in common and engenders a ‘we-feeling’ among the negotiators (Lipovsky, 2012; Martin, 2006). These feelings of affiliation (Lipovsky, 2012) reduce tension in potentially heated discussions (Martin, 2006; Meyer, 2000) such as in wage bargaining.

The findings of the study point to the utility of humour in managing wage bargaining conversations that put forth the competitive goals of negotiating parties, while aiming to achieve a shared agreement. Humour in power-differentiated bargaining seems particularly useful in cultures that value face-saving and preserving harmony. Through humourous talk, efforts to maintain and challenge the power dynamics are achieved but are camouflaged in lighthearted conversations that make agreement constantly possible. Humour in a conversation sequence leads the other interlocutors to positively respond to utterances that if stated in another way might elicit antagonistic responses.

Implications for Practice

The findings are particularly useful for multinational corporations that operate or seek to operate in Southeast Asian countries with historically tumultuous labour relations, such as the Philippines. These results may be used to select management negotiators and to orient them on the utility of humour in effectively navigating through wage bargaining conversations. Findings also point to the importance of maintaining harmony inside and outside wage bargaining. Conversations characterised with humour seem possible if positive relationships are constantly nurtured. This implies that management must promote programs that will encourage constant dialogue and
intergroup teambuilding that creates a ‘we-feeling’ among the management and labour negotiators.

The findings can also be useful for choosing and training labour negotiators in similar contexts. Insights from the study may guide labour in devising strategies to express their voice as the underdog in the negotiation and to challenge asymmetries in power without prejudicing the goal of achieving wage bargaining agreements.

Limitations and Implications for Research

The study examined the role of humour in power-differentiated wage bargaining conversations that successfully achieved a wage bargaining agreement. Due to the difficulty of acquiring audio-recorded data and the permission to use these from both labour and management groups, we utilised data from one organisation only. Although the current findings demonstrate the utility of humour in this kind of interaction, it may be interesting to compare the occurrence of humour in successful and unsuccessful wage negotiations longitudinally in one organisation or across organisations.

Also, because culture was found to influence the bargaining conversations through humourous talk, future research may take a cross-cultural perspective and explore if and how humour is utilised in bargaining among negotiators of varying national cultures.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix

Selected Transcription Keys for Data Extracts

(adapted from Wooffitt, 2005, and Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[]</td>
<td>overlapping talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>no space between turns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>the number in brackets indicates a time gap in seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>::::</td>
<td>extension of preceding sound (the more colons, the greater the extension)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>closing intonation (not necessarily the end of a sentence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>rising intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>!</td>
<td>animated tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>abrupt cut-off of sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↑↑</td>
<td>marked rise or fall in intonation, immediately following the arrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>here</td>
<td>underlining for emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HERE</td>
<td>capitalisation to indicate loudness, relative to the surrounding talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘here’</td>
<td>degree signs to indicate softness relative to surrounding talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; &lt;</td>
<td>Indicate that the talk they encompass was produced noticeably quicker than surrounding talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huh</td>
<td>full laugh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(h)</td>
<td>laughter particle inserted into talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hhh</td>
<td>audible inbreath (no. of h’s indicate length)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


