

Title: Pragmatics of L2 Humor
Author: Maria Shardakova, University of Pennsylvania

This study explores how American learners of Russian use humor while engaging in communication with native Russian speakers. In particular, it examines how humor is used to accompany requests, invitations, compliments, and apologies.

The study adopted interactional sociolinguistics as a theoretical framework and utilized the general theory of verbal humor (Attardo & Raskin), postulates of politeness (Brown & Levinson), and theory of speech act pragmatics (Searle). Ninety transcripts of oral exchanges and text messages between Russian native speakers and American learners of Russian have been analyzed along the following lines: 1) form of conversational humor (i.e., wisecracks, teasing, jokes, irony, etc.), 2) the pragmatic force of humorous contributions in relation to the main speech act (i.e., supportive vs. contestive); 3) the discursive role of humorous sequence (i.e., compact vs. extended, cohesive vs. disruptive); 4) methods of signaling a humorous sequence (i.e., exaggeration, style shift, metaphors, comparisons, foreign words); 5) target of humorous sequences.

The analysis revealed teasing and wisecracking as the most used forms of conversational humor for both Russian native speakers and American learners of Russian. While quantitatively American and Russian samples were incommensurate in their use of humor, they utilized comparable strategies. With American female learners refraining from humor, male participants gravitated toward contestive humor. The significant difference being that American learners often directed their humor against their conversationalists. Linguistic realizations also differed: American men used profanities and comparisons.

The Russian male speakers in the study used contestive strategies subverting and emancipating from the main speech acts that humorous elements might mitigate. This type of humor had multiple targets including the speakers themselves. The illocution was a self-presentation: the speaker sought the audience's appreciation of his wit and linguistic creativity. This type of humor required the hearer's sustained attention.

Most Russian women in the study employed supportive strategies. Their humorous sequences never challenged the illocution of the main speech act, nor did they interfere with the discursive flow. The women employed a stylistic shift and used profanities. Their type of humor placed little imposition on the hearer.

In conclusion the author discusses pedagogical aspects of teaching humor and word play in an L2 classroom.

References:

Attardo, S. & Ruskin, V. (1991) Script theory revis(it)ed: joke similarity and joke representation model. *Humor*, 4:3-4, 293-347.

Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1987) *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press.

Searle, John R. (1979) *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.