INTRODUCTION

Humour has only begun to receive attention in second language learning research recently. Studies on first language (L1) communication have identified a variety of communicative functions in the use of humour. For example, Veatch (1998) maintains that humour has an important communicative function for social interaction. Both positive and negative judgements can be transmitted through use of humour, with corresponding social consequences, including on the one hand, release of tension and on the other hand, aggression, perceived superiority and ridicule.

Similarly, despite the role language play has to L1 development as it relates to language learning (Cazden, 1976; Nelson, 1989), and although language play (LP) has been claimed to be used regularly in second language informal conversations (Tarone, 2000), researchers of second language learning (SLL) have only begun to study the functions of LP for second language (L2) learners.

There has also been interest in humour in L1 computer-mediated communication (CMC), and although humour has been shown to play a particularly important role in community formation, group identity and solidarity in on-line communities (Baym, 1995, Rheingold, 1993; Wilkins, 1991), very little work has been done on humour in L2 CMC.

In addition, although language learning is part of a process of socialization through which the learner acquires particular status and relationships in the social environment where the learning takes place (Wan Shun, 2004), relatively little of past research on interpersonal processes, that is relations between individuals among members of a group, has focused on the educational domain, particularly in SLL, and even less when it relates to computer-assisted language learning (CALL).
Interpersonal processes are important because, at the individual level, can foster motivation and interaction. However, they can also produce anxiety about how one is perceived and accepted by others. At the level of whole groups, if well functioning they can promote enhanced self-efficacy and cooperation. However, a poorly functioning group can result in apathy and even due to high levels of anxiety, aversion to interaction (Ehrman & Dörney, 1998).

**Definition and Theory of Humour**

Definitions of humour focus either on the speaker intention, or on the audience interpretation. Others identify humour as utterances that are intended by the speaker to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants (Hay, 2001; Holmes & Hay, 1997). As this study explores the use of humour in socialization, Holmes and Hay’s definition has been selected for the exploration of humour as a mechanism for social support and affiliation.

Most theories of humour maintain that it arises out of sudden “appropriate incongruity” (Oring, 1992). However, not all instances of incongruity are found to be funny by all receptors. Humour is embedded in shared knowledge, shared codes and shared emotional significance that provide its meaning, and determine its appropriateness (Chiaro, 1992; Oring, 1992). Hence, as a situated performance, incongruities have meaning in a given socio-cultural situation.

Underlying this view of humour, as a social phenomenon is the theory of humour developed by Veach (1998). His theory of humour states that three sufficient conditions need to occur concurrently. The conditions describe 1. a subjective state of apparent emotional absurdity. 2. This absurdity is perceived as such as it constitutes a violation of some affective commitment of the perceiver (“subjective moral principle”) and 3. at the same time, the situation is seen simultaneously as normal. Both views, normality (N) and violation (V), are views of a situation that carry emotional or affective content. N and V interpretations are not independent, they interact and hence, the perceiver to identify the situation as humorous needs not to be strongly attached to the principle violated (that is, not to feel offended), in order to be able to hold both views at the same time.
From this view, shared humour requires shared affective evaluations. Hence, for shared humour to occur, active listening and agreement of moral interpretation is required. Moreover, since failure of shared humour may offend, or confuse, the speaker needs to tailor humour to the listener. Thus, shared humour implies high-quality communication as well as shared affect and attitudes.

**Sociolinguistic Functions of L1 Humour and L2 Humorous Language Play**

Humour serves a wide range of functions in social interaction. Besides entertaining (Holmes, 2000), humour can be used to negotiate identities (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997), to create and affirm affiliation (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997; Norrick, 1993), to communicate social norms or to criticize (Norrick, 1993), to protect one’s own identity, i.e. “save face” (Holmes, 2000; Norrick, 1993; Zajdman, 1995), to mitigate face-threatening acts (Holmes, 2000), or to hide embarrassment (Nijolt, 2002) and to dominate a discussion or change its topic as in Adelsward & Oberg (1998) study, where humorous events seemed to be related to discourse boundaries (topic shifts).

However, the primary function of much humour is to reinforce solidarity between group members (Holmes & Marra, 2002). In this context, humour is use in creating and constructing relationships by invoking fantasy and anecdotal humorous narratives. Both fantasy and narratives require time and many turns to be developed hence, they encourage participation in the joint construction of humour and in doing so they express commonality, in the sense of humour, solidarity and support (Hay, 2001; Holmes, 2000; Holmes & Marra, 2002).

L2 researchers on the other hand, have only recently started to examine the functions of humorous language play for L2 learners (Belz, 2002, Cook, 1997; Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996; Tarone, 2000). SLL researchers have defined language play in two senses. Lantolf (1997) uses the term in the sense of “rehearsal”. However, the term is more frequently used to refer to the use of language for fun and amusement, for example Sullivan (2000) frames it as play that entails fun and that it is often accompanied by laughter, including teasing and joking.
Similarly, Cook (1997) defines LP as a social, fun-loving, exuberant speech that first and additional language learners engage in regardless of age. In a later study, Cook (2000), explains that LP entails a broad range of activities and within those that not only entertain but cause enjoyment are duelling, jokes and narratives. These, he places in a category of LP that is termed “humorous language play”.

L2 researchers have suggested important roles of LP to SLL. Bell’s (2005) study, argues that LP may result in deeper processing of lexical items by making them more memorable, thus helping acquisition of vocabulary and semantic fields. Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) claim another role for L2 LP, that of raising learner awareness of the links between L2 forms and meaning.

Furthermore, although Tarone (2000) concludes that LP is not necessary for second language acquisition (SLA), she suggests that LP may facilitate SLA by a) creating a playful atmosphere that decreases anxiety, thus encouraging interaction, b) increasing the memorability of language associated with the positive affective state, c) encouraging the mastery of additional target language and registers through role-play and “double-voicing” and most importantly d) promoting creative language use which may, in turn, push reorganization of the interlanguage rule system.

From an interactional perspective, Norrick’s (1993) research suggests that humour plays an important role in socialisation. This has been corroborated by Bongartz & Schneider’s (2003) findings in L2 language play. These findings indicate that collaborative construction of humour as language play contributes to the achievement of affiliation and fulfilment of the affective function of language, ie constructing friendship by displaying social relationships.

Belz’s (2002) study, also illustrates from the perspective of the learner, how it can reveal the ways learners construct new selves and new social relations. The construction of social identity through humour is particularly important as it plays the pragmatic function of social inclusion and/or exclusion (Cook, 2000).
Features of L2 CMC for SLL

CMC research has examined some of the linguistic, interactional and interpersonal dimensions to second language learning. Research suggests that CMC can encourage learners’ participation in conversational exchanges, and that this can provide opportunities for the development of their communicative competence in the target language.

Learners’ communicative practices change significantly when discussions move online because of the medium, defined by its use and shaped by its users (Leh, 1999, Meskil, 1999). Some of those changes are due to the intrinsic characteristics of CMC. They include increased use of personal addresses, use of markers to relate to a conversational thread and in synchronous CMC (Chat) non-conventional turn-taking, which can engender coherence as participants do not follow linear sequencing and jump in and out of topics.

However, these changes in communication patterns are related not only to the characteristics of online communication (hybrid between oral and written communication) but also as the histories of use and practice have an effect on the processes of communication thereby also on the relationship building of communities (Thorne, 2000).

Overall, research indicates that the written nature of CMC and the possibility to participate at one’s own pace have been identified as providing a number of advantages, including:

a) reduced cognitive load due to reduced constraints such as sound recognition and additional time delay in composing messages (Abrams, 2003; Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999),
b) reduced anxiety as potentially intimidating non-verbal clues are absent and the presence of positive attitudes towards online communication (Finholt & Sproull, 1990; González-Bueno, 1998), and
c) increased equalisation as learners have greater control over their contribution and discourse management. (Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Warschauer, 1996).
While CMC has received recognition for its potential ability to promote SLL for the features described above, and has begun to illuminate the linguistic, interactional and interpersonal dimensions to text-based interaction (Blake, 2000; Chun, 1994; Herring, 1996; Kern, 1995, Kern & Warschauer, 2000; Ortega, 1997; Pellettieri, 2000, Thorne, 2000), some researchers (e.g. Sproull & Kiesler, 1991) have found CMC to be an inadequate tool for sharing emotion due to the lack of nonverbal “cues”, filtering out important paralinguistic aspects of communication that are present in face-to-face (FtF) such as stress, volume, intonation…etc, which also can define the social situation, and participant identities and affiliation.

Some CMC research has also argued that the nature of the system leads to depersonalisation (Baron, 1984, Parks & Floyd, 1996), takes time away from “real-life” human interaction (Stoll, 1996) and “cultivates” argumentative discourse such as flaming (Mabry, 1997). However, it has also been noted that adhesion to social conventions such as politeness is in fact enacted in online interaction between participants that do have FtF contact (Campbell and Wickman, 2000).

Furthermore, CMC is also claimed to have a highly intimate content and a purely social function (McCormick and McCormick, 1992). Participants in online networks, according to Wellman & Gulia (1995), have reported to seek not only information but also social support, and a sense of belonging.

**Humour and Social identity in CMC**

Online tools such as “chat” have been argued to be more about building and solidifying relationships than exchanging information (Meakins & Rintel, 2000). Conversational use of humour has been reported to foster just this. Baym’s (1995) study provides evidence of community formation and how L1 humour can be critical to creating social meaning on-line. She describes how group identity is created through references to shared knowledge, as participants drew on previous messages to ground their humour. Moreover, humour became a mechanism for the establishment of solidarity as all participants positioned themselves and perceived each other as competent viewers of the soap opera genre they discussed.
L1 CMC researchers have also claimed that synchronous CMC or “chat” is an inherently playful medium” (Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright & Rosenbunbaum-Tamari, 1997). Herring’s (1999) study corroborates this claim suggesting that the nature of CMC, as an interactionally less coherent medium than oral conversation in terms of turn-taking, is conducive to humorous play. She explains that this is so as relaxed norms of coherence can be perceived as liberating, giving rise to the exploitation of the loosened coherence by users in the form of language play.

A particularly interesting CMC study, Darhower (2002), has explored some of the interactive features of CMC for L2 learners. Amongst these, various form of humour such as joking and teasing as well as humorous “flaming” (defined by Sproull & Kiesler (1991) as inappropriate or excessive emotionalism, bluntness or hostility) are reported to contribute to the social cohesiveness of the group. However, the use of humour, particularly in flaming, has a potential to develop positive as well as negative feelings. In his study, humour played an important and positive role in social cohesion, and most importantly, learners’ engagement fostered not only solidarity and enjoyment but also development of sociolinguistic competence.

In the subsequent sections, a proposed study is presented. It is intended to explore whether and how L2 learners use humorous language play in both synchronous CMC (i.e. Chat) and FtF modes, and if in turn may promote social affiliation. First, the aim of the study will be stated and the research approach and research questions presented. Then, the rationale that guided the design of instruments and procedures for data collection and analysis will be explained. Finally, examples of unexpected preliminary results derived from another broader thesis project that prompted the design of this study will be provided.
PROPOSED STUDY

This project aims to assist in developing a better understanding of the role of interpersonal processes play in L2 CMC and FtF interaction. In particular, the use of supportive peer interactive strategies such as humorous LP in creating classroom communities. These strategies are claimed to have a role in socialization and SLL. The study will explore patterns of humorous LP interaction from an ethnographic, longitudinal, mixed-design research and learner centred approach. Thus, it takes a holistic view on the investigation of people, in this case L2 learners, and their interactional and social behaviours from the learners’ perspective, in the naturalistic setting of their L2 class.

The notion of humorous LP thus becomes a useful approach to investigating interpersonal processes and L2 classroom community formation. Accordingly three research questions guided the present study:

1. Do learners engage in use of humorous language play in L2 online Computer-Mediated Communication? And in FtF interaction?
2. If so, what types of humorous LP do these learners use in both modes?
3. Is there evidence of solidarity and community formation through the use of humorous language play in L2 Computer-Mediated Communication? And in FtF interaction?

Participants

Intermediate Spanish learners, attending classes taught by the researcher at Flinders University and The University of Adelaide, will be invited to participate in the study. The participants will compromise two intact classes (i.e. not randomly selected) from an anticipated population pool of 50 to 60 intermediate-level students.
However, only participants who speak English as their first language, and will have had studied Spanish for two semesters, at university level prior to this study, will be included in the project. The choice made represents an attempt to include only students with a similar second language background, eliminating the necessity to administer a Spanish proficiency pre-test, which in turn will avoid the pitfalls associated with the measurement of proficiency (Skehan, 1998).

**Task Design**

Over the course of a two semester academic year (totalling 24 weeks), students will participate in six 30 minute online and six 30 minute face-to-face discussion tasks that will be part of the normal class activities for the Spanish 2, Part 1 and Part 2 topics.

Students will work in groups of threes. Group composition will be changed for each open discussion task in order to heighten the collaborative nature of students’ interactions, and to avoid any personality clashes.

Before each CMC and FtF session, learners will view a 20-minute short film by a Hispanic filmmaker or read a one-page authentic short story written by a Spanish-speaking writer. The themes of these short films and texts will be related to the cultural content of the course syllabus and textbook.

Preparatory exercises will set the scene for the short films providing key background information, including a vocabulary list, as well as cultural notes explaining the historical context central to the texts and readings, and will be followed by post-viewing and post-reading activities that will ensure comprehension, preparing students for the discussion of the film and text themes. FtF and CMC discussions will be scheduled at the beginning, as well as at the end of units of work, and to link the CMC discussions not only to written texts, but also to films.
Data collection and Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data will be collected over the course of one academic year, through 6 Chat-logs and Transcripts of 6 FtF interactions, 12 Feedback Forms, as well as through direct observation by the teacher / researcher and 2 interviews.

Chat-logs will be saved on diskettes and FtF interactions audio recorded and transcribed. Students’ feedback on both online and FtF tasks will be collected at the end of each CMC and FtF discussion.

Feedback Forms will be collected at the end of each CMC and FtF discussion and will elicit information on students’ attitudes towards participation and perceptions of difficulty of discussions. Self-report data will be also supported by observations in order to ensure triangulation and provide greater validity to the study. Observations of student participation in language learning tasks will be carried out during the 6 CMC and 6 FtF class discussions.

Individual interviews will be carried at the end of both semesters that is, after participating in two sets of three CMC and three FtF discussions, and will be recorded. They will gather information on learners’ attitudes and expectations towards participation in the CMC and FtF discussions as well as learners’ affective variables.

Interaction in the CMC and FtF discussions will be measured quantitatively in terms of number of words, and number and length of turns. Discourse Analysis will be used as the principal approach to the qualitative analyses of Transcripts and Chat-logs. Qualitative analyses of CMC and FtF discussions will intend to examine the co-construction of discourse and solidarity relationships in terms of use of social interactive features such as humorous language play in both modes.

Instances of humorous interaction will be identified according to features reported to be indicative of having a humorous intention in CMC literature, as in Baym’s (1995) study. These include use of non-verbal paralinguistics (expansion of letters, use of quoted speech, bracketed commentary, formatting – such as upper-case, exclamation, emoticons) and echo or overlapping turns.
In addition, instances of humorous language play will also be identified according to Cook’s (1997) distinction between form-based LP (sound and word play) and meaning-based LP (fictional discourse and narratives created for enjoyment as in stories, jokes, amusing informal conversation and irony).

Other categories illustrated in other studies will be added to the previously mentioned categories, as they also emerged in the initial analysis of the data collected for the thesis that prompted this project. These include insults (Bongartz & Schneider, 2003) -commonly referred to as flaming in CMC terminology-, sarcasm, irony and teasing (Darhower, 2002; Hay, 2001), amusing conversation such as playing along the gag (Hay, 2001) and self-deprecation (Hay, 2001, Norrick, 1993).

Students’ feedback forms and interviews will be analysed qualitatively. Feedback forms will be analysed in order to ascertain learners’ perceived usefulness of the tasks in relation to language learning. The interviews will explore the role played by learners’ attitudes and affective variables in their engagement in CMC and FtF discussions in order to ascertain which mode is perceived to be most conducive to the development of students’ social interaction.

PERUSAL OF RAW DATA

Following some instances of observed humorous language play will be identified in order to illustrate the potential role of humorous language play for interactional and social dimensions of language learning. These examples have been chosen from the data collected for the mentioned thesis, in particular from two CMC discussions of the four Chat-logs collected in Semester 1, 2005.

Example A: use of humorous LP in the form of teasing, joking and flaming.
Topic: Personal details

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>--Khjaic es de Bosnia?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>--No, Kljaic es de Serbia!!!!!!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>--es un nombre de la europea, o?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>--Serbia, no Bosnia!!!!!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>--OK!!!!!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Is Khjaic (a city) of Bosnia?
No, Kljaic is in Serbia !!!!!!
It is a European name, isn’t it?
Serbia not Bosnia!!!!!
--Como se dice “almost”?  
How do you say “almost”?

--Comprendes, serbiaaaaaaa!!!!!  
Do you understand, Serbia!!!!

--almost es casi  
“almost” is almost (in Spanish)

--si, perdon!  
yes, sorry!

--eso OK!  
It’s OK!

--pero estuvo antes lo mismo país, o?!!!!!!!!!!!  
But it used to be the same country, didn’t it????????

--problemas, problemas...  
problems, problems...

--no comprendo  
I do not understand

--politica no es una buena materia aqui, creo...  
politics it’s not a good subject (to talk about) here, I believe ...

--Yo soy muy furioso, grrrrrr!!!!!  
I am furious, grrrr!!!!!

--que interessante es esta país!  
What an interesting country!

--yo tengo miedo de ti ahora!!!  
Now I am fearful of you!!!

--no no es serioso  
(I am) not serious

--hay muchas fronteras, pero no son la verdad o?  
there are many frontiers, but they are not true, are they?

--Ninos, por favor!!!  
Boys, girls, please!!!

--CCCCC!!!  
CCCCC!!!

--que significa CCCCC?  
What does CCCC mean?

--si??  
Si?? (so??)

--:)  
:)

--???  
???

--UPS  
UPS

--CCCCCclaro!!  
Oooof course

--ahah!!!  
(C and L continue the conversation joking about being “fierce female big cats”)

--Por favor, serioso conversation!!!  
Please, serious conversation!

--no se como respuertar a ti!!!  
I do not know how to answer you (to you)

--pero serioso no es divertido!!!  
But serious it’s not amusing

--Si, pero Olga dice que nosotros tenemos hablar serioso!  
Yes, but Olga says that we should speak serious (seriously)

Example B: playing along the gag and engaging in amusing informal conversation
Topic: Environment
--tambien, un problema en el mundo es los huevos de tortugas (get eaten!)
Also, (another) problem the world faces is related to (the fact that) turtle eggs (get eaten!)

--los tortugas son animales (como se dice “endangered”?)
Turtles are animals (how do you say endangered?)

--quien comi el huevos de tortugas?
Who eats turtle eggs?

--los cocodrillos
crocodiles

--los humanos!
Humans!

--en mi casa tengo un recete por tortuga sopa
At home I have a recipe for turtle soup

--para le cena!
For dinner!

--el huevos de tortugos son delicious, mi piachen mucho
Turtle eggs are delicious, I like them very much

--pero con tortuga carne..no tortuga huevos
But with turtle meat .. not turtle eggs

--que? tortuga sopa? ew!
What? Turtle soup? Ew!

--si! humanos muerte los tortugas (como se dice “kill)
Yes! Humans die (kill) turtles (how do you say “kill”)

--morir
To die

--morir means kill?
To die means to kill?

--pienso
I think so

--comiste tortuga?
Have you eaten turtle?

--morir se dicen to die
To die is “to die”

--gracias
Thanks

--TORTUGAS GRANDES!! me da mieod
BIG TURTLES!! I am scared of them

--miedo
(spelling self-correction)

--haha

--que problemas medioambientales tiene australia?
What are the environmental problems in Australia?

--miedo...estan tortugas....!
Fear (fearful)… are these turtles

--ummm.......desperdicios!
Ummm… waste (environmental waste)

--tortugas son “cute”
Turtles are cute

--me gusta tortugas!
I like turtles

--tortugas son vicious mouths
Turtles are (have) vicious mouths

--bocas
(self-translation/correction)

--cuales son las causas da la polucion??
What causes pollution??

--tortugas no son bocas vicios..so simpatico y divertido
Turtles are (have) vicious mouths… they are not nice and amusing

--tortugas son stupido
Turtles are stupid

--snapping tortugas?
Smapping turtles?
Both examples display use of paralinguistics in the form of emoticons, expansion of letters and use of formatting (upper-case, dots and exclamation marks). Form-based LP is also used in sound play (noises, laughing and word play (repetition of pattern, invented and repeated words). However, most cases of humorous language play are meaning-based. These include narratives, amusing informal conversation, joking, playing along the gag, flaming, teasing and irony.

It is hoped that findings from the proposed analyses of data to be collected will illuminate whether and how humorous language play can facilitate social affiliation and promote SLL.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


