

The role of ‘familiarity’ in Mandarin Chinese speakers’ metapragmatic evaluations of Australian conversational humour

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Abstract

Although research on humorous practices of Anglo-Australians has received much attention, the understanding of those practices by members of various multilingual communities in Australia has not been much studied. In this paper, we look at metapragmatic comments on concept familiarity in relation to conversational humour, particularly focusing on Mandarin Chinese speakers’ perceptions of conversational humour in Australian English. In order to explore what role ‘familiarity’ plays in (inter-)cultural conceptualisation of humour, we analyse interview data where speakers of Mandarin Chinese provide their metapragmatic comments on humorous exchanges among Australians. Drawing on approximately 8.2 hours of interview data elicited by a segment from the reality television gameshow Big Brother 2012, i.e., a teasing sequence between two acquainted persons, it is suggested that the concept of familiarity is the one most frequently alluded to in the theme of how participants ‘draw the boundary’ between intimates and acquaintances. From the analysis it emerged that Mandarin Chinese speakers’ evaluations of humorous exchanges in Australian English are driven by their culturally-informed perceptions that are conceptualised through various emic notions, e.g. guanxi (‘interpersonal relationship’), various labels for classifying different relational distance, and qiji (‘opportune moment’). The findings of this exploratory paper suggest that the role of ‘familiarity’ in relation to humour is crucial in the perception of appropriateness of humorous practices in interaction, especially across cultures.

Keywords: familiarity, Australian conversational humour, Mandarin Chinese, metapragmatics

1. Introduction

Different forms of conversational humour and their impact on interpersonal relations between the interlocutors have been a focus of many studies in the area of pragmatics. With a few exceptions (Rogerson-Revell 2007; Habib 2008; Lundquist 2014), the research into intercultural humour and its conceptualisation by the speakers coming from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds has not received as much attention to date. The importance of intercultural perspectives on humour is essential, especially in multicultural societies such as Australia. One of the ways to gain access to those intercultural perspectives is through metapragmatic evaluations of various interactional behaviours, i.e., when language users offer their evaluative reflexive commentary on a particular phenomenon, in this case, conversational humour. In order to contribute to this under-researched area, this exploratory paper focusses on the metapragmatic evaluations that Mandarin Chinese speakers who live in Australia foreground in relation to a particular instance of Australian humour in interaction.

This paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we present an overview of the studies of humour in interaction, focusing on humour and interpersonal relations, intercultural studies of humour and the use of humour in Australian cultural context. Section 3 is devoted to the description of the dataset that informs this analysis and the methodological approach used here. The role that ‘familiarity’, an essential aspect of interpersonal relationships, plays in the intercultural evaluations of humorous practices in interaction is explored in a detailed analysis in Section 4. It is followed by the concluding remarks in Section 5.

2. Humour in interaction

While there are various forms of humour (e.g., canned jokes, puns or wordplay), pragmatic studies have particularly been interested in humorous instances that are co-constructed by participants in interaction. Research on such types of humour as teasing, mockery, banter or *taking the piss* illustrates the complex nature of humour that combines seriousness and non-seriousness (Holt 2013) and humorous and non-humorous frames (Dynel 2011). Those types of humour can be perceived differently by the interactants, thus either contributing to bonding or resulting in someone (mostly, the target) taking offence (e.g., Haugh & Bousfield 2012; Plester & Sayer 2007; Sinkeviciute 2016, 2019a). This shows that, even though conversational humour is largely regarded as being playful and jocular, it is, undoubtedly, a face-threatening practice that can be used to express criticism and can be negatively perceived.

2.1. Conversational humour and interpersonal relationships

Since the key element in the humorous instances that occur in interaction is the target (whether present or not), the (co-)construction and negotiation of conversational humour is an interpersonal phenomenon. It has been suggested that while directing humour at a co-present party can display superiority and promote distance, laughing together with someone (e.g. targeting the (non-)present third party) can be seen as a more bonding activity (Glenn 2003). It does not mean, however, that all the instances of humour that have a specific target should be seen as disaffiliative or would occasion evaluations of impoliteness. For instance, it has been shown that humour can have a bonding capacity not only among intimates, but also when teasing is directed at all the participants or an absent third-party (e.g., Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997; Haugh & Bousfield 2012; Schnurr 2009). This type of humour increases intimacy and is said to mostly occur among family members and close friends whose orientation towards the building

of relationships outweighs any possible face loss (e.g., Keltner et al. 1998; Kowalski 2004). In such cases when teasing or a mocking comment, on the surface, seems to be impolite, it is the contextual information (degree of the relationship, situation, etc.) that facilitates the target's understanding of the meaning and guides him/her towards a non-serious interpretation of what has been said (see Culpeper et al. 2017).

Apart from instances of conversational humour in informal settings, the use of humour and its connection to interpersonal relationships has also been studied in the workplace. For example, workplace humour can serve to promote (group) solidarity (Marra & Holmes 2007; Schnurr & Chan 2011), but it can also be used to display and maintain power (Schnurr 2009), exclude (Holmes & Hay 1997) or gain control over participants in interaction (Holmes & Marra 2002). In such cases, subversive humour can be employed in order to criticise uncooperativeness (Holmes & Marra 2002) or comment on some deviations from normative behaviours (Geyer 2010).

Interestingly, even though it has been claimed that interactants with the already established relationships are more likely to tease each other, research has also shown that teasing can be frequently observed among people who are not acquainted (e.g., Haugh 2011). The instances of humour directed at self or the co-present interlocutor indicate a clear link between humour and interpersonal dimensions of communication in initial interactions. For example, in her cross-cultural study, Mullan (2020) found that the French participants use humour in order to save face, while Australians tend to orient to rapport-building. This is in line with Haugh and colleagues' work that convincingly demonstrates that, through the use of humour, Australians not only issue "an invitation to intimacy" (Haugh & Pillet-Shore 2018), but also interactionally achieve "relational connection" (Haugh 2011:172). Furthermore, the importance of common ground proves crucial in establishing interpersonal relationships through humorous practices. This is illustrated in Haugh & Weinglass (2018) who, exploring responses to jocular quips in intracultural and intercultural contexts, notice that while the interactants in the former situations display more affiliative responses, the participants in the latter predominantly show non-affiliative reactions. This, undoubtedly, can have implications for the process of rapport-building and the construction of interpersonal relationships.

2.2. Intercultural studies on humour

While there are a number of interactional studies that examine humour in one language or culture from an intracultural perspective, research on intercultural humour itself has received less attention, although it is a growing area of humour studies. It can be divided into two types of studies: (1) interactions between speakers coming from different cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds, for example, using English as a lingua franca; and (2) perceptions of humour in one language or culture by language users from another language or culture.

Research on intercultural humour in interaction has been done in both informal and institutional settings. While some studies show evidence of various degrees of difficulty in producing or comprehending humour by language learners as well as different levels of engagement in humour sequences (Davies 2003; Bell 2005), jocular conversations in intercultural settings should be seen as jointly constructed interactional practices (Cheng 2003; Matsumoto 2014). For instance, humour in English as a lingua franca in Asia in the form of teasing, banter or jocular mockery has been found to be frequently used in informal conversations and those attempts at humour tend to be constructed and perceived as jocular (Walkinshaw 2016; see also Matsumoto 2014; Moalla 2015). While studies of casual interactions are very few, institutional interactions have received more attention. Studies in

workplace settings have shown that different kinds of humour (e.g., mockery, quips, sarcasm) are used in interaction in order to promote solidarity, build rapport, manage power relations or reduce distance (Pullin Stark 2009; Pullin 2017; Rogerson-Revell 2007; Chefneux 2015). Additionally, the use of humour in intercultural settings can be seen as reliant on some shared cultural or situational knowledge that creates common ground between interlocutors within their interactional context, for example, workplace culture as a community of practice (Marra & Holmes 2007; see also Matsumoto 2014).

The second type of study focusses on how humorous practices are perceived and evaluated by language users who come from a different cultural or linguistic context. Such studies largely use qualitative interviewing to elicit the interviewees' evaluations. In order to examine the perceptions of humour, Lundquist (2014) conducted interviews with Danes working in France and French working in Denmark. Results indicate different types of humour that interviewees observed, with Danes being said to use more irony and the French to employ wordplay and puns. Further research findings show that the same humorous instance can receive different evaluations by cultural insiders and outsiders, even when there is no difference in language. For example, while talking about the same humorous event, speakers of British English tend to refer to it more negatively and evaluate it from the perspective of situation-appropriateness, whereas Australian interviewees are more likely to conceptualise that same conversation as culture-specific and appropriate (Sinkeviciute, 2017a). Because this line of research is still under-developed, this article aims to contribute primarily to it.

2.3. Conversational humour in Australian cultural context

Humorous practices in Australian English (that can be observed very frequently in interaction) have probably received much more attention than conversational humour in other linguistic and cultural contexts. Researchers have explored the interactional practices of teasing, jocular mockery and taking the piss among others in different contexts, ranging from getting acquainted interactions to conversations among already acquainted parties, both in face-to-face and online settings (Haugh 2010, 2014; Mullan 2020; Sinkeviciute 2014, 2019a). Such studies have revealed not only a widespread orientation by the interlocutors towards the use of humour, but also a tendency not to take oneself too seriously, thus being able to laugh at oneself and not taking or, at least, not showing offence at an attempt at humour (Goddard 2009; Haugh & Bousfield 2012; Sinkeviciute 2014).

The importance of not taking yourself too seriously has been regarded as part of the Australian identity and “national self-image” (Goddard 2009: 31) and has been examined in relation to various interactional behaviours (e.g., Haugh 2010 2011; Sinkeviciute 2014). It is also closely linked with self-deprecation or the ability to laugh at oneself, i.e., being able to ‘take a joke’ while being a target thereof. In other words, in Australian cultural context, it seems essential to realise humorous potential of what is said as well as to be able to jocularly target other interlocutors, which can be differently perceived by someone coming from another cultural context (Sinkeviciute 2017a, 2019b). It has been observed that the same instance of jocular abuse, while being referred to as banter and situation-appropriate by the speakers of Australian English, can be treated as a putdown even by the speakers of other varieties of English, for example, British English (Sinkeviciute 2017a).

Various forms of humour are employed in interaction in Australian English but teasing and the social action of jocular mockery accomplished through it are seen as a recognisable and recurrent practice in everyday conversations among Australians (Haugh 2014). While responses to teasing or mockery range from rejection to elaboration to disattending, the most common

(preferred) reaction to such practices among the speakers of Australian English has been found to be ‘going along with it’ (Haugh 2014), ‘laughing along’ and further engaging in the humorous activity (Sinkeviciute 2019a). Similar interactional practice that particularly stands out is taking the piss (that is frequently accomplished in a form of teasing or mockery) that has been regarded as “the great Australian pastime” (for a comprehensive overview, see Haugh & Weinglass 2020). It is largely directed at a present interlocutor and is occasioned when the target ‘overdoes’ something, for instance, exaggerates his/her importance or complains too much (Haugh & Bousfield 2012; Sinkeviciute 2014). This interactional ‘sin’ tends to be discursively oriented to, i.e. it is likely to be jocularly targeted in conversation, which, in turn, is expected to be appreciated or at least positively received by the target (Olivieri 2003; Sinkeviciute 2014). This has been referred to by the speakers of Australian English as the preferred reaction to humorous behaviours directed at a co-present participant (Sinkeviciute 2017b).

Given the link between conversational humour and interpersonal relationships as well as the role of humour in Australian cultural context, this exploratory study aims to examine how certain instances of humour that can be regarded as ‘typical’ in Anglo-Australian interactions are perceived and talked about by members of a large speech community in Australia – speakers of Mandarin Chinese. The importance of this study lies in the fact that, while humorous practices of Anglo-Australians have been explored, their understanding by various multilingual communities in Australia has not received any attention to date. Furthermore, in general, studies on Chinese speakers’ perceptions of humour have been scarce, with only a few of them, using questionnaires, examining the perceptions of jokes in Mandarin Chinese between females and males (Liao 2005). Thus, with a focus on the role that ‘familiarity’ plays in the perception of humour in interaction, this analysis contributes not only to the growing area of intercultural humour, but also to an emic metapragmatic understanding of humorous practices.

3. Data and methods

In order to investigate Mandarin Chinese speakers’ perceptions of interactional humour in Australian English, ethnographic interviews were carried out with 15 native speakers of Mandarin Chinese who live in Australia. All the informants were shown the same video recordings of two typical examples of jocular mockery and teasing in Australian English and then were asked to talk about their understanding of those humorous practices. The video extracts used as prompts in this study were deliberately chosen from two situations involving different contextual relationships, one between the unacquainted and the other between the already acquainted parties. In this paper, we focus on the perceptions of humour in relation to the second video, which was selected from the Australian version of the reality television gameshow *Big Brother 2012* (for a detailed analysis of this episode and the reactions to it by the speakers of Australian and British English, see Sinkeviciute 2017a). In the extract, it is day 77, which, in the context of reality gameshow, means that the housemates have spent almost three months constantly communicating with each other. The extract shows the two interactants – Ben and Zoe – talking in the backyard. It is important to mention that, apart from spending a lot of time together in the house, they have also formed a friendly relationship. In the video, Zoe is talking about her weight, claiming “I’m not worried [...] I could lose a little bit of [...] weight [...] whatever”. This is immediately followed by Ben, the other housemate, who says in a smile voice “It’s probably a good thing considering that you are just sitting on the treadmill and not running on it”. After a short pause, Zoe reacts with laughter. What is crucial here is that in the previous research (Sinkeviciute 2017a), this episode, i.e., Ben’s interactional practice and Zoe’s

reaction to it, was repeatedly referred to by Anglo-Australians as a recognisable humorous behaviour.

The interviews were carried out by the present authors. The interview data consists of a total of 8.2 hours of recordings, with each recording ranging from 25 to 48 minutes approximately. The participants came from different occupation-related backgrounds, including eleven university students, two PhD students, one homemaker with a Bachelor's degree and one general administrative officer with a Master's degree. Four informants were males and eleven were females, aged from early twenties to mid-forties. All the participants had been in Australia for at least one year and are proficient in their English. Participants could choose the language of the interview or could code-switch from English to Mandarin Chinese, which, as will be seen in the data analysis, most of them did. The interviews were all audio-recorded and transcribed in full following the simplified version of transcription conventions by Jefferson 2004 (see Appendix for details).

The analytical approach adopted in this discourse-analytic study is metapragmatics, which is concerned with the reflexive awareness on the part of users and/or observers about the use of languages which is displayed through various ways in which we use language to refer to our use of language (Culpeper & Haugh 2014; Haugh 2018:619). Although the methodology of metapragmatics has been used in an increasing manner in the field of (im)politeness research (e.g. Obana & Tomoda 1994; Culpeper 2011; Spencer-Oatey 2011; Fukushima & Haugh 2014; Chang & Fukushima 2017; Su 2019), the perceptions of humorous practices have not yet been paid much attention to from a cultural insider's perspective (Haugh 2017; Sinkeviciute 2017b, 2019b).

The metapragmatic analysis in this paper involved showing the interviewees one event where humour occurred and asking them to comment on their understanding of the humorous practices, as well as encouraging them to refer to their own personal experiences. The interviewees were particularly asked to further describe and comment on the humour practices through which native speakers of Mandarin Chinese demonstrate one's perception of social practices. It is worth noting that metapragmatic approach was also adopted in the recent paper by Chang and Haugh (2020) examining "teasing" in Taiwanese Chinese conversational humour. In the analyses of interviewees' metapragmatic commentary on "teasing" events in Taiwanese Chinese conversational humour, it appeared that the interviewees employ various metalinguistic resources to describe the events they perceived, of which their affective responses particularly were found to be the most salient. More specifically, the affective responses of the target and the presumed relationship between the producer and the target of the "tease" were frequently invoked by the interviewees (Chang & Haugh 2020). This convincingly supports the argument that metapragmatic studies on conversational humour can "help identify phenomena without bleaching out their cultural properties" and also "enable researchers to calibrate empirical studies and to undertake comparisons of conversational humour across languages" (Chang & Haugh 2020: 25-26).

Therefore, by employing a metapragmatic perspective on conversational humour, our goal in this paper is to explore metapragmatic awareness on the part of speakers of Mandarin Chinese about a particular use of language, i.e., humour practices in Australian English. The various ways in which they refer to and comment on this social practice simultaneously display awareness of their own use of language (Culpeper & Haugh 2014; Hübler & Bublitz 2007; Verschueren 1985, 2000). Using a metapragmatic approach to provide insight into cultural insiders' perceptions of humorous practices, this paper aims to tease out the conceptualisations of humour which lie behind their evaluation of those practices from an emic perspective and thereby to contribute to humour research in intercultural and cross-cultural settings. These

factors were also important to address in the process of conducting the interviews, particularly with regard to the interpretive process of talking about cultural perceptions, where emergent themes were inevitably co-constructed by the interviewers and the informants. Accordingly, we regard the interview process as an interaction between all the parties, where the formed understanding is jointly achieved (Potter & Hepburn 2005). Thus, the excerpts in the following section include both the interviewers' and the informants' turns.

4. The emic conceptualisation of 'familiarity' in Mandarin Chinese

Familiarity is the umbrella analytical concept that emerged from the interviewees' evaluations of interactional humour practices in Australian English. In other words, in their reactions to the video, some of the informants spontaneously brought up emic notions and ideologies in relation to the role that the concept of *familiarity* plays in humorous instances. Those descriptive notions and ideologies become salient when they are mentioned in the evaluation of the use of as well as response to humour. These folk notions and ideologies can give us more insight and understanding of the cultural concepts which inform the Mandarin Chinese speakers' perceptions of Australian interactional humour. The analysis has shown that the key concept associated with humorous practices such as teasing or jocular mockery is what can be broadly referred to as 'familiarity' ('*shu/shuxi*', 熟/熟悉)¹, which is particularly construed as a criterion to "draw the boundary" regarding the appropriateness of situational teasing. The following two excerpts demonstrate how the concept of familiarity emerged in the course of the interviews and how it is construed to justify or explain perceptions of Australian interactional humour.

In Excerpt 1, a big part of the interview was initially conducted in English. However, when the informant was asked to share his personal experiences of teasing, he immediately code-switched to Mandarin Chinese. In his discourse, as we will see, Jeff explicitly suggests that familiarity is the one of the criteria which "draw the boundary" between intimates and acquaintances.

Excerpt 1[182505]25:11

- 1 Jeff: I mean in Chinese background (.) % 就是說如果兩個人剛開始大家
2 都會相敬如賓我不知道怎麼說那種
3 I1: 嗯
4 Jeff: 只有當很熟了那種才會互相開玩笑啊
5 I1: 嗯
6 Jeff: 然後對方不會嫌棄對方%

- 1 Jeff: I mean in Chinese background(.) % I mean when two people at the
2 beginning everyone pay mutual respect I don't know how to say that

¹ Familiarity between informants has been argued as being the core concern in Chinese social organisation, whereby Chinese speakers adopt particular ways of interacting in interpersonal relationships, such as in the distinction between insider and outsider (Gabrenya & Hwang 1996; Gao, Ting-Toomey, & Gudykunst 1996; Goodwin & Tang 1996; Scollon & Scollon 1991; Ye 2004). While the insider-outsider distinction has been considered as being one of the important factors affecting Chinese social interactions, distinctive patterns of communication based on this relational principle vary accordingly (Chang 2016: 19). In other words, the social expectation among Chinese speakers is that the insider and outsider are treated in different ways (Gao, Ting-Toomey, & Gudykunst 1996: 228; Yang 1992), and this thus determines the ways of communication, which differ based on this dichotomy.

- 3 I1: mm
4 Jeff: Only when [you are]very familiar with each other, then [can you] tease
5 I1: mm
6 Jeff: and you don't dislike each other%

The code-switching indicates the informant's orientation towards his language-related identity (De Fina 2008), which might signal his lack of linguistic resources to contextualise the situation when speaking in a second language (Myer-Scotton 2006). Interestingly, while Jeff starts with indicating that people with Chinese background would pay mutual respect (“*xiang jing ru bin*”) at an early stage of developing interpersonal relationships, this is accompanied by the metapragmatic commentary ‘I don't know how to say that’, signalling that he might not be entirely sure about how to describe interpersonal relationships when referring to Chinese conceptualisations. Nevertheless, having received the minimal response ‘mm’, which he has treated as a continuer (Gardner 1997), Jeff provides a more elaborated comment in relation to the appropriateness of the presence of humour in interaction, i.e., only when people become very familiar (‘*shu*’, 熟) with each other, can teasing become allowable. This not only indicates that, according to Jeff, the tease in the video might be perceived as inappropriate, given the contextual relationships, but also that paying mutual respect (“*xian jing ru bin*”) does not include the use of humour in interaction.

Similar to Excerpt 1, in Excerpt 2, Tina, while sharing her personal experience, suggests that humour can only take place among Chinese speakers when ‘familiarity’ is indexed.

Excerpt 2 [181611]28:13

- 1 Tina: 但是華人感覺好像就是(0.6)你要有熟:::
2 有會有那個幽默(1.6)才有辦法(1.0)
3 開玩笑啦(1.3)如果不熟的話
4 好像就沒辦法(1.4)你沒辦法開什麼玩笑(.)嗯

- 1 Tina: but Chinese seems that (0.6) you need to be familiar::: [with each
2 other]to have that humour (1.6) then [you] are able (1.0) to
3 joke (1.3) if [you are] not familiar [with each other] it
4 seems [that you] can't (1.4) you can't joke (.) mm

The informant here provides her metapragmatic evaluations of the expectations in her own cultural context. She points out that, from the Chinese speaker's perspective, humour can only be present if the interactants are *familiar* with each other (‘then [you] are able to joke’). In other words, ‘familiarity’ seems to be conceptualised as a pre-condition for humorous practices to occur in interaction and is taken as one of the key factors determining *how* people talk and interact with each other (Mapson & Major 2021).

The above excerpts show that the concept of familiarity plays a significant role in the perception of conversational humour in Chinese cultural context and is also construed as one of key criteria for teasing to occur in interactional practices. While the emic conceptualisation of familiarity was frequently evoked by the informants, interestingly, a number of other folk notions and ideologies particularly associated with the role of familiarity also emerged from the analysis of the interview data when they reflexively reported their personal experiences. These include *guanxi* (‘interpersonal relationship’), a continuum from *moshengren* (‘stranger’) to *sidang* (‘best friend’), and *qiji* (‘opportune moment’ or ‘turning point’). These folk notions,

and their associated ideologies, are further discussed in detail in the following sections, which allows us to tap into the cultural nuances as the main underpinnings of how Mandarin Chinese speakers perceive Australian conversational humour.

4.1. *Guanxi* ('interpersonal relationship')

One of the most salient folk notions evoked by the informants is *guanxi* ('interpersonal relationships'). *Guanxi*, according to Chang and Holt (1994: 106), can be literally translated as relations or relationships between human beings. To say that people have *guanxi* indicates that they are interconnected as a group which has implications for their relationships with each other, namely, an interlinkage which brings along with its interactants' special rights and obligations (Chang 2016).

The following excerpt comes from Zara, who is asked to imagine herself as the target of the tease from the video. It is worth mentioning that, prior to this point, she voluntarily labels the teasing events from both video extracts as "*tiaokan*" in Mandarin Chinese which is construed as a combination of "ridiculing" and "joking" and often occurs between intimates (Chang & Haugh 2020)². However, as attested by the informant below, the perception of this kind of "teasing" is dependent on the interactants' perceptions of their *guanxi*.

Excerpt 3 [180824_001]16:00

- 1 I1: OK(0.7)如果妳是 Zoe 呢(0.7)妳也會覺得是調侃嗎(0.6)如果妳是 Zoe
2 Zara: 他如果跟我關係很好的話就還理解如果他(.)跟我關係不好還
3 要講這種話(.)我就-
4 (1.0)
5 I1: 嗯(1.5)那我們再-就是妳剛剛說這是就是說(0.8)如果(.)關係很好
6 Zara: 嗯
7 I1: 妳也覺得這是調侃嗎
8 Zara: 嗯
9 I1: 關係不好也覺得這是一個調侃嗎
10 Zara: 關係不好就覺得他在講風涼話
11 (0.3)
12 I1: 風涼話(.)所以妳覺得調侃跟風涼話感覺不一樣
13 Zara: 唔(.)不太一樣
14 I1: 可以(0.5)給我一些妳覺得為什麼不一樣的地方嗎
15 Zara: 就風涼話就是(.)怎麼講別人有困難或者是需要你幫助的時候
16 你不僅不幫還要站在旁邊諷刺他(0.9)但調侃可能只是覺得為了
17 幽默一下什麼的

² While the humour practices shown in the videos are broadly termed "jocular mockery" or "teasing", they can be translated with multiple native terms in Mandarin Chinese. Please see a detailed analysis of the metalinguistic label *tiaokan* in Chang and Haugh (2020).

- 1 I1: okay (0.7) if you were Zoe (0.7) would you also take it as *tiaokan* (0.6) if you were
2 Zoe
3 Zara: if he has a good *guanxi* with me(.)then it's understandable. If not, when he
4 said such thing (.) I would-
4 (1.0)
5 I1: mm (1.5) Then- you mentioned that (0.8) if (.) [you] have a good *guanxi*
6 Zara: mm
7 I1: do you also find it as teasing
8 Zara: mm
9 I1: [do you] find it as teasing if you don't have a good *guanxi*
10 Zara: [I take it] as he was making cynical remarks if we don't have a good *guanxi*
11 (0.3)
12 I1: cynical remarks (0.5) so you find cynical remarks are different from teasing
13 Zara: mm (.) not quite the same
14 I1: can (0.5) you tell me what the difference is
15 Zara: making cynical remarks (.) is that when someone has trouble or needs your help,
16 however not only you wouldn't help him/her, but you also satirise the person (0.9)
17 but teasing is just for humorous effect

It is notable that Zara emphasises that this type of humorous practice can only be perceived as teasing if there is a good *guanxi* between interactants, i.e., the interpersonal relationship between participants is considered positive and close. This is in line with Chang and Haugh's (2020) claim that this type of teasing ('*tiaokan*') is only allowable in close relationship where *tiaokan* is associated with having "fun" at the expense of both others and self. In other words, having a good *guanxi* is construed as a crucial factor allowing interactants to conduct certain communicative acts, such as teasing here, by the means of one's *guanxi* (Chang 2016). Studies (Chang 2016; Chang & Haugh 2011) suggest that potentially face-threatening acts, such as criticisms and strategic embarrassment, can be perceived as positive between interactants who have good or long-term *guanxi* as *guanxi* itself is emotionally charged with intimate attitude. Such teasing is thus recognisable and acceptable, and it is meant for humorous effect, as stressed again by Zara in lines 16-17. On the other hand, if *guanxi* between interactants is taken as not close, the situated teasing can be perceived as making cynical remarks ('*fenglianghua*'). This can be possibly regarded as inappropriate, as it would be understood as ridiculing the recipient, even when the recipient has difficulties or is in need of someone's help. Thus, the importance of *guanxi* lies in the fact that its presence or absence can occasion different conceptualisations of the same utterance, i.e. either leading to its perception as a humorous behaviour or cynical remarks.

Interestingly, when the informant is asked about what reaction she would display if she was in the target of the teasing in the video, Zara once more emphasises that her reaction would be dependent on the mutual *guanxi*.

Excerpt 4 [180824_001]17:26

- 1 I1: 所以今天如果妳是 Zoe 妳會怎麼感覺(.)我們再回答剛剛那個問題
2 Zara: 很火大[hhh]

[section omitted]

- 6 I1: 妳會表現出來嗎
7 (1.5)
8 Zara: 唔::如果跟他關係不好(0.3)就是沒有關係那麼近的話(.)可能就(1.2)不理
9 他就好了
10 I1: 噲(0.3)妳會怎麼樣反應
11 Zara: 就沈默(0.7)不回答
12 I1: 噲
13 Zara: 如果關係特別好的話就[hhh]可能會吵起來吧[hhh]
14 I1: 噲

- 1 I1: so if today you were Zoe, how would you feel(.)we can go back to the
2 question before
3 Zara: furious[hhh]

[section omitted]

- 7 I1: Will you show it
8 (1.5)
9 Zara: mm::if we don't have a good *guanxi* (0.3)meaning that [if we]are not
10 that close(.)maybe[I] would just (1.2) ignore him
11 I1: mm (0.3) how would you react
12 Zara: then keep silent (0.7) [I] wouldn't respond
13 I1: mm
14 Zara: if we have a particular good *guanxi* [hhh] (0.6) maybe [I] would start arguing
15 [hhh]
13 I1: mm

While explaining her reactions to teasing, Zara indicates that it depends on *guanxi*. If *guanxi* is not close, then a tease and the instigator could be ignored. On the other hand, if their *guanxi* is “particularly good”, Zara thinks she might “start arguing” with the teaser. This echoes the traditional view on Chinese communication in relation to the dichotomy of insider-outsider distinction which determines the ways of communication (Gao, Ting-Toomey, & Gudykunst 1996: 228; Yang 1992). While the insider-outsider distinction has been considered as being one of the important factors affecting Chinese social interactions, distinctive patterns of communication based on this relational principle vary (Chang 2016), such as imperative requests are more appropriate in close *guanxi* whereas interrogative requests are expected to be used with those who are less close (Wierzbicka 1996). The action of ‘arguing’ hypothetically claimed by Zara is thus considered to be relationship-appropriate (cf. Tracy, 2008) in interactions between people who have close or intimate *guanxi* (Chang & Haugh 2011). However, as outsiders and strangers would not be taken into consideration when practising politeness (Chang & Fukushima 2017), Zara would rather ignore the situation and display no reaction (cf. Australian and British choices in Sinkeviciute 2017a). Haugh (2015: 268-271) also refers to this practice as “disattending”. It is a way of politely implying a prior utterance/action

was impolite/offensive. This indicates that although negative perception can arise from teasing, no reaction would be provided between the interactants who do not hold close *guanxi*.

Guanxi not only pertains to interpersonal relationship that people have established but also holds the feature of frequent contact in the development of relationships, as claimed by numerous informants. Regular contact is one of the critical aspects highlighted by the informants when they comment on familiarity. In the following example, when being asked about whether the tease from the Anglo-Australian interaction would be recognisable in Chinese contexts, Tina, draws on her personal experience.

Excerpt 5 [181120]22:47

- 1 I1: 所以朋友之間呢譬如華人在朋友之間(.)有沒有這個調侃吶(.)
2 這個(.)反諷的(.)妳所觀察的
3 (2.4)
4 Tina: 我覺得除非很熟很熟很熟的朋友才會有-有辦法這樣做(1.7)對如
5 果你不是很熟的像這種認識七十七天應該很難(1.1)你很難-
6 你很難調侃
7 I1: 妳所謂的很熟很熟很熟這個是
8 (0.1)
9 Tina: 很多::年的朋友或是說(0.5)其實你們已經那種
10 是很好的朋友(0.8)不是不只是多年的朋友而是(0.7)
11 你很-很常在聯絡很常在講話(1.3)
12 對(.)那種熟到不行的朋友才有辦法這樣吧
- 1 I1: So what about among friends? For example, any tease or
2 sarcasm among Chinese friends from what you have observed³?
3 (2.4)
4 Tina: I think, unless between those friends who are very very very
4 familiar with each other, it then will be allowable.
5 If you are not very familiar with each other, like these two who only
6 know each other for 77 days (1.1) it's very hard- very hard to tease [each other]
7 I1: Your so-called very very very familiar means
8 (0.1)
9 Tina: many:: years of friends. Alternatively (0.5) you are very good friends (0.8) Not
10 just being friends for years (0.7) but you have been regularly contacting each
11 other and talk to each other very often (1.3) Yes, [Such tease]is only allowable
12 between friends who are extremely familiar with each other.

After the interviewer's question about whether the informant has observed any similar instances of behaviours among Chinese speakers, Tina explicitly opines that it would not occur among friends unless they are very familiar with each other. She repeatedly emphasises the concept of familiarity, which suggests that being very familiar ('*hen shou*') requires not only a

³ It is worth noting that the metapragmatic terms *tiaokan* and *fanfeng* were voluntarily offered by the informant prior to this point.

good and long-term friendship but also a regular contact between interactants. In other words, if the interactants have ‘extremely familiar relationship’ (*shou dao buxing*), then teasing can be considered allowable or be regarded as jocular or non-serious (Haugh 2014). Interestingly, the situated context of being 77 days in house is not treated as the sufficient time to gain familiarity and, thus, engage in teasing. This conceptualisation shows, thus, a robust contrast with Australian cultural context where teasing can be strategically deployed as a way to invite intimacy between people who are not yet well acquainted (Haugh & Pillet-Shore 2018), and commonly understood as a social practice involving non-serious intent among Australian speakers of English (Haugh 2011; Haugh & Weinglass 2018; Sinkeviciute 2014, 2017b).

One of the key implications emerged from the above excerpts is that the emic concept of familiarity is built on the basis of *guanxi*, the presence/absence of which enables interactants to perceive the tease as either allowable or inappropriate. From the informants’ perspective, negative evaluation can arise from the tease if not a close *guanxi* is perceived. In other words, whether tease in Australian English is perceived positively or negatively, *guanxi* is construed as one of the key determinants of the Chinese speakers’ perception.

4.2. From *moshengren* (‘strangers’) to *siding* (‘best friend’): orientation to different classification of relational distance

After being asked about their perceptions of the teasing instance shown in the video, some of the informants start classifying interpersonal relationships into different categories using the folk terms such as strangers, ‘normal friends’, good friends, *sunyou* and *sidang* which inform different relational distance between interactants. An orientation towards different classifications of relational distance is thus another key theme emerged in the interviews where the informants talk about their perceptions of the humour practices.

Figure 1 below broadly outlines the relational labels that emerged in these interviews, based on which informants classify interpersonal relationships in Mandarin Chinese. Based on this continuum, these labels index different degrees of relational *familiarity*, ranging from complete strangers (with no familiarity) through to *sidang* (with greatest familiarity). Specifically, speakers of Chinese appear to make distinctions of their perceptions of humour based on the interpersonal relationship that is presumed to exist between the teaser and the target of the tease.

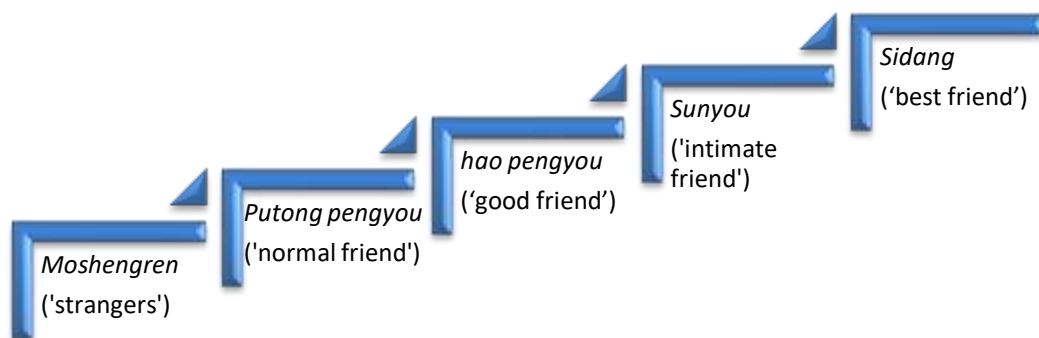


Figure 1. Classification of relationships based on the concept of *familiarity* in Mandarin Chinese

In the following excerpt, we can observe Nicole who comes up with the labels of *siding* (‘best friend’) and *sunyou* (‘intimate friend’) when providing her assessment about the tease:

Excerpt 7 [182206]4:38

- 1 I1: 那妳覺得這個調侃(0.5)呃::好笑嗎
2 Nicole: 呃(4.0)還:::還行吧(.)不過可能(.)其實我覺得可能是個性的原
3 因一般來說如果是兩個中國人之間說的話可能不會笑成那個樣子

[section omitted]

- 7 Nicole: 對(.)如果是他們兩個都是很熟悉了(.)我們所謂的死黨啊損友啊
8 那種關係的話(0.5)可能會就這個話題展開更多的調侃

- 1 I1: Do you find this teasing (0.5) er::funny
2 Nicole: Er (4.0) It's:::It's alright (.) But maybe (.) it's to do with personality. Generally
3 speaking, it would probably not happen between two Chinese speakers

[section omitted]

- 7 Nicole: Yes. If they are both very familiar with each other, like our so-called
8 *sidang*, *sunyou* like that kind of relationship (0.5) there might be more teases
followed

In Excerpt 7, after the interviewer's question about her assessment of the tease observed in the video, Nicole first refers to the instigator's interactional behaviour as "alright". Then she opines that the laughing reactions to such a tease would possibly not occur between two Chinese speakers the way it appeared between the Australian speakers in the video. Subsequently she brings up the folk terms in Mandarin Chinese, orienting to different classifications of interpersonal relationships, suggesting different reactions can be prompted accordingly.

When assessing the tease through reflecting on personal experience, interestingly, Nicole first makes a reference to Chinese context which further justifies why she thinks the tease is not so funny ('It's alright' in line 2, '*hai xing ba*'). She subsequently notes that such a tease would not 'happen between two Chinese speakers', however, could occur between two 'very familiar' friends, such as *siding* or *sunyou*. *Sidang* is composed of two characters: *si* ('die') and *dang* ('party'). According to the Ministry of Education Dictionary (MOE 2015), this folk term refers to "friends who would die hard to help each other; friends who have deep and profound relationship", which is normally translated as 'best friend'. *Sunyou*, on the other hand, is also composed of two characters: *sun* ('decrease' or 'damage') and *you* ('friend'). According to the Ministry of Education Dictionary (MOE 2015), interestingly, it refers to 'bad friend' or can be found translated as 'crazy company' in google search. *Sunyou* first appears in *The Analects of Confucius*⁴, where a differentiation between good friends ('*yiyou*') and bad friends ('*sunyou*') is made. In other words, the traditional use of this term, *sunyou* means 'friends who have bad influence or bring harms. However, in contrast to the traditional use of the term, the modern connotations of *sunyou* alternatively refers to intimate friends who likes mocking or teasing for

⁴ *The Analects of Confucius*, is an ancient Chinese book composed of a large collection of sayings and ideas attributed to the Chinese philosopher Confucius and his disciples, traditionally believed to have been compiled and written by Confucius' followers. It is believed to have been written during the Warring States period (475–221 BC), and it achieved its final form during the mid-Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD).

fun as claimed by the informant. It is thus made explicit that such tease can be perceived as appropriate or allowable between people who are labelled in these two categories.

In Excerpt 8, Zara also provides folk terms for classifying different categories of interpersonal relationships. However, contrary to the previous excerpt, she invokes folk labels for the situations in which people would not use teasing.

Excerpt 8 [180824_001]18:45

- 17 I1: 那妳剛剛談到說關係好跟關係不好(.)妳怎麼樣去界定這個東西呢
18 Zara: 唔:就是好朋友(0.7)就(.)不會很(1.6)但是(0.9)嘖關係一般的普通朋友或
19 者是陌生人的話(.)講話就要注意一些分寸[hh]
20 I1: 嗯
21 Zara: 不能太過分

- 17 I1: you were saying good relationship and not good relationship(.)how do you
18 define these two
19 Zoe: mm:between good friends (0.7) then [you]wouldn't (1.6) but (0.9) tse
20 between general friends or strangers(.)[you]need to be cautious of
21 appropriateness when talking[hh]
22 I1: mm
23 Zara: [you]can't go too far

This excerpt is a continuation of Excerpt 4 where Zara previously talked about her reactions to the tease which would be dependent on her *guanxi* with teaser. When she is asked to further elaborate her definition of good and bad *guanxi*, she explicitly points out that people labelled as normal friends (*putong pengyou*) or strangers (*moshengren*) need to be cautious of appropriateness and not “go too far” when teasing. In other words, the Australian teases shown in the videos can be perceived as not allowable or inappropriate between interactants who are categorized in these two categories according to the informant. Interestingly, what we have observed from the above two excerpts, a linear continuum of relationship classification that emerges above is that Nicole and Zara provide two different ends of an interpersonal relationship, from *sidang* (‘best friends’) through to *moshengren* (‘strangers’).

4.3. *Qiji* (‘opportune moment’)

Qiji is also one of the notions/concepts that emerged in interviews where the informants talk about what constitutes *familiarity*. This folk term can be translated as ‘opportunity’ or ‘turning point’. It arises from interactions that provide an opportunity or chance to elevate the degree of *familiarity* between people. In Excerpt 9, the informant explicitly associates *qiji* with *familiarity*.

Excerpt 9 [180609_001]5:08

- 1 Ken: 臺灣人可能需要(.)某個契機認識了之後然後才有可能熟起來
2 I1: 嗯
[section omitted]
9 I1: 就是說(.)以臺灣人來說比較不熟悉的人就是比較不會發生

- 10 Ken: 對啊
11 I1: 然後
12 Ken: 在陌生人中間是
13 I1: 嗯
14 Ken: 沒有一個契機就是(.)很難發生這個事情(.)這個契機可能是一種關係
15 I1: 嗯
16 Ken: 對(.)例如說是朋友的朋友
17 I1: 嗯
18 Ken: 餵那-那個那種距離一下就會拉近(.)然後就會熟起來(.)
19 I1: 還有沒有其它的
20 Ken: 對那在澳洲的話(.)就是因為大家都在異鄉(.)所以你會發
21 你突然發現(.)呃(.)對方是講閩南語的(.)講臺語的(.)
22 就是自己人可能就會跟他多聊兩句
- 1 Ken: Taiwanese probably need (.) a *qiji*. After you know each other, then it's more
2 likely to get familiar with each other
3 I1: mm
[section omitted]
9 I1: you mean (.)it's more unlikely to happen between unfamiliar people for Taiwanese
10 Ken: Yes
11 I1: then
12 Ken: between strangers
13 I1: mm
14 Ken: without a *qiji* (.) [the tease] is very unlikely to happen (.) this *qiji* could be *guanxi*
15 I1: mm
16 Ken: yes(.)for example, a friend's friend
17 I1: mm
18 Ken: so that- that can shorten the distance immediately (.) and [you will] become
19 acquainted(.)
20 I1: anything else
21 Ken: yes and then in Australia(.)because everyone lives far from home (.) when you
22 realise (.) well (.) the other person who also speaks Southern Min (.) speaks
23 Taiwanese(.) [you will consider the person] as insider and will talk more with
24 him/her

Prior to this point, the informant was asked whether the humorous practice that he observed among the Australians could happen among speakers of Mandarin Chinese. In his response, Ken immediately provides the folk term, '*qiji*', which is required in building a familiar relationship with others in line 1, particularly among Taiwanese speakers of Mandarin Chinese. In lines 9, 12 and 14, he further emphasizes that it is very unlikely to allow such a tease to occur between unfamiliar interlocutors or strangers if there is no *qiji* occasioned in interaction.

Qiji, as subsequently claimed by the informant, could be *guanxi* which concerns relational or cultural connections, namely, involving an interpersonal network or speaking the same dialect or language. Through *qiji*, which gives rise to the chance of getting people connected, the social distance between interactants can be immediately bridged and they can become *familiar* with each other, as stressed by Ken in line 18. He further exemplifies his claim through reflecting on his own personal experience, i.e., being a sojourn in Australia, he interacts more with the people who share the same language, i.e., speaking Southern Min or Taiwanese.⁵ People who share the same language is thus considered as *zijiren* (lit. insider⁶) who Ken would be more inclined to talk more with. The emic concept of *zijiren* refers to in-group members who either have kinship or connective ties (Gabrenya & Hwang 1996: 311) with which people share a sense of unity, interdependency and affiliation, and are more affection-oriented. This thereby indicates that *qiji* can be a spark, with which people find connections, triggering an opportunity to index familiarity in social interaction.

5. Concluding remarks

Focussing on the link between conversational humour and interpersonal relationships, this paper has explored emic metapragmatic understanding of Mandarin Chinese speakers living in Australia in relation to instances of teasing produced by Anglo-Australians. The analysis of the interview data showed the importance of the role of ‘familiarity’ (*shu/shuxi*, 熟/熟悉) that Mandarin Chinese speakers emphasised in the perception of the appropriateness of humour in interaction (Excerpts 1-2). The data analysis demonstrated that this role of ‘familiarity’ is constructed through a number of emic conceptualisations in relation to it, namely *guanxi* (‘interpersonal relationship’), a continuum from *moshengren* (‘stranger’) to *sidang* (‘best friend’), and *qiji* (‘opportunity’ or ‘turning point’).

Guanxi, signalling interconnectedness of people as a group, was one of the most salient concepts referred to by the informants in our study. The perception of teasing instances was said to depend on how good/close *guanxi* is (including regular contact; Excerpt 5) between the interlocutors, with teasing being evaluated as ‘understandable’ if *guanxi* is good (Excerpt 3), but receiving no reaction if the interactants’ *guanxi* is not close (Excerpt 4). The levels of interpersonal relationship (*guanxi*) were clearly specified by the informants as well. They include the following categories indicating relational distance: *moshengren* (‘strangers’), *putong pengyou* (‘normal friend’), *hao pengyou* (‘good friend’), *sunyou* (‘intimate friend’) and *sidang* (‘best friend’). The level of the interpersonal relationships not only influences the evaluations of teasing, but importantly, also determines whether it would be appropriate to engage in this type of conversational humour. For instance, while being *moshengren* (‘strangers’) or *putong pengyou* (‘normal friend’) might not warrant any attempt at teasing (see Excerpt 8), the relationship conceptualised as *sunyou* (‘intimate friend’) or *sidang* (‘best friend’) is more likely to make teasing ‘allowable’ (Excerpt 7). Finally, another crucial aspect of familiarity that was conceptualised by the informants in this study is *qiji*. This folk term refers to an opportunity, often in terms of sharing the same language (Excerpt 9) or other background or contextual commonalities, which helps to enhance closer relationships, i.e., familiarity. Having analysed

⁵ Southern Min dialects, which originates from Fujian, China, spoken in Taiwan, collectively known as Taiwanese.

⁶ *Wairen*, ‘out-group member’ is the contrast to *zijiren*. The *wairen-zijiren* distinction heavily impact on the communication among speakers of Mandarin Chinese that social practices can vary based on this dichotomy (Chang 2016).

the intercultural perspectives on Australian humour by the speakers of Mandarin Chinese who live in Australia, the findings of this exploratory paper suggest that the role of ‘familiarity’ in relation to humour plays a crucial role in the perception of appropriateness of humorous practices in interaction. The findings are of significance as they show certain similarities and differences between how speakers of Mandarin Chinese, and Australian and British English evaluated the same dataset (see Sinkeviciute 2017a). While Australian and British interviewees pointed out that such humorous behaviour can be seen as Australian and justified, they also referred to it being appropriate when the relationship between the interlocutors is close. However, Australian and British interviewees did not specify types of relationships, which shows that a different degree of importance is placed on familiarity by speakers of Mandarin Chinese. Undoubtedly, more research into metapragmatic evaluations should be done in order to further advance our understanding of the complexity of intercultural humour”. This might include the comparison between how native speakers of Australian English and how speakers of Chinese perceive the conversational humour in their respective languages, as well as how humour is perceived in situ.

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Appendix

Transcription symbols (simplified version of Jefferson 2004)

(.)	micro-pause
(0.2)	timed pause
-	cut-off of prior sound in a word
underlining	stressed word or emphasis
:	stretching of sound
%	code-switching

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