

Dialogical Humour in Evening Service Encounters in the Hospitality Industry in Seville, Spain

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Abstract

Given that humour greatly impacts customer satisfaction and loyalty, this paper explores the dialogical forms of humour occurring in evening service encounters. It reports on a study focusing on interactions between baristas and customers. The latter belong to two groups: university students in their late teens and twenties, and regulars over forty years old. The establishments selected for the study are small cafes and small tapas bars in Seville. The study is based on unobtrusive observation and field notes, as the humour authenticity depends on naturalness and spontaneity. Although the interlocutors engaged in the encounters made use of dialogical forms of humour in order to achieve similar interactional goals, the results of the study reveal variation in terms of the quantity and categories of comical tokens. A series of individual and external factors explain this variation.

Keywords

Dialogical humour, service encounters, small cafes, small tapas bars, variational pragmatics

1 Introduction

Dialogical practices are intricate and sophisticated joint interactive accomplishments enabling interlocutors to fulfil a wealth of functions and attain countless goals, many of which need not have an informational nature. Dependent on the relative explicitness of verbal contributions, as well as their form and style, their success and effects are also contingent on a plethora of covert factors and unsaid, implicit elements, among which feature shared information, tacitly agreed-upon values and viewpoints, or common experiences and attitudes (O'Connell & Kowal, 2012). One of the dialogical practices that often facilitates tasks and contributes to goals, while originating several personally rewarding and socially beneficial effects, is *conversational or dialogical humour* (Hay, 2000; Attardo, 2002; Dynel, 2007; Ruiz Gurillo, 2013). Indeed, its utter irrelevance as regards transmission of new information and the cognitive effort that it takes to process it are offset with a variety of non-propositional effects that include not simply laughter and amusement, but also feelings and reactions like surprise, shock, admiration, happiness, contentment or pleasure, etc., and many shades of them (Yus Ramos, 2016; Wilson & Carston, 2019).

In the realm of the hospitality industry, and more precisely in service encounters in different establishments, humour is a non-material factor which, despite its non-task-focus, becomes great to achieve two fundamental goals for thriving businesses: customer satisfaction and loyalty (Bergeron & Vachon, 2008; Slåtten, Svensson & Sværi, 2011). To some extent, this may be due to its solidarity-generating potential, as in the case of establishments such as corner stores and small bars (Placencia, 2005, 2007; Placencia & Mancera Rueda, 2011). Unfortunately, the spectrum of dialogical humorous manifestations, their producers, functions and the encounter phases where they occur still remain underexplored from a

pragmatic perspective. This paper reports on an empirical study that looks into these issues in the latter establishments.

The study was conducted in two types of establishments, small cafeterias and traditional tapas bars, in the capital of the southernmost region of Spain, Seville. Since the former were located in the vicinity of two university campuses and the latter were in the city centre, the ranges of age among the clientele allowed for contrastive analyses of different age groups. Therefore, the study reported on in this paper also considers a macrosocial factor, namely age, in order to analyse variation in the use of dialogical humour in these establishments motivated by it. Thus, the study also falls within variational pragmatics, a branch of pragmatics that is informed by modern dialectology and contrastive studies, and focuses on interactional and discourse differences motivated by macrosocial and microsocial factors (Schneider & Barron, 2008; Barron & Schneider, 2009; Barron, 2014).

The following section discusses the impact of physical and personal factors on customer satisfaction. Since dialogical practices, and more specifically verbal humour, play a major role, Section 3 differentiates between *monological* and *dialogical* forms, and addresses the latter. Next, the methodology of the study is presented in Section 4, after which Section 5 details the findings. These are discussed in Section 6 and Section 7 makes some concluding remarks.

2 Dialogical Practices in Service Encounters and Customer Satisfaction

Researchers in both marketing and business and service management have shown that customer satisfaction with face-to-face service encounters, and hence loyalty, greatly depend on a series of factors. Some of them are connected with the physical characteristics of

establishments and basically have to do with their surroundings, appearance and arrangement, especially whether this favours spatial proximity between service providers and/or employees, and customers (Bitner, Booms & Tetrault, 1990; Bitner, Booms & Mohr, 1994). Other factors have a personal nature and pertain to the appearance and behaviours of service providers and employees themselves (Smith, Bolton & Wagner, 1999; Wu & Liang, 2009). How they are dressed or smell (Price, Arnould & Deibler, 1995; Price, Arnould & Tierney, 1995), as well as their non-verbal behaviours to show availability, promptness and willingness to help, attentiveness and unconcern about time are essential (Chandon, Leo & Philippe, 1997; Gabbott & Hogg, 2010; Sundaram & Webster, 2000; Dorat & Webster, 2015).

However, service providers and employees' dialogical practices play a major role, so how they interact with customers becomes a valuable asset. Customers seem to very seriously take into account their mood, formality, courtesy and authenticity, as well as whether they aim for personalised treatment and experience, and boost intimacy by engaging in role-related, more personal or small talk (Nikolich & Sparks, 1995; Mittal & Lassar, 1996; Mattila, 2000; Nickson, Warhurst & Dutton, 2005). These usually contribute to the smoothness of transactions, promote amicable relationships, create impressions of credibility, competence and/or empathy, and highly influence customers' feelings. While feelings of enjoyment foster customer loyalty, those of happiness lead to appraisals of relationship quality (Wong, 2004).

Favourable evaluations of service experience are also greatly affected by displays of positive emotions (Pugh, 2001). *Surface acting* –i.e., manipulating facial expression– and *deep acting* –i.e., simulating inner states and feelings– may result in negative perceptions and often create stress in service providers (Grandey, 2003; Barger & Grandey, 2006). But authentic expression and generation of surprise, pleasure, contentment and/or amusement,

to name but a few, foster impressions of friendliness and overall satisfaction with service (van Dolen et al., 2001; Grandey et al., 2005). Consequently, service providers and employees' *emotional labour* is often regarded as facilitative of task effectiveness and highly beneficial for self-expression, even if customers normally assess it through the lenses of their own culture and identity. This explains why it may be a source of dissonance and self-delineation at times (Furrer, Liu & Sudharshan, 2000).

Transactions with customers from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds are frequently felt as stressful, and may often give rise to negative attitudes like reluctance and distrust in both these and customers. Eventually, such attitudes may even cause shock and interactive conflict (Stauss & Mang, 1999; Wang & Mattila, 2010). In addition to being a common source of misunderstanding, different and/or unusual verbal responses and non-verbal behaviour, may give the impression of inequitable service (Baker & Härtel, 2004). However, attributions of cultural distance and lack of second language skills to service providers and employees help diminish the seriousness of misunderstandings and service failures (Warden et al., 2003; Tam, Sharma & Kim, 2014). In this context, cultural sensitivity, language choice and/or code-switching prove crucial allies for attaining satisfaction (Callahan, 2006; Holmqvist, van Vaerenbergh & Grönroos, 2014). In fact, those employees and service providers who manage to lower cultural and linguistic distance are perceived more positively (Sizoo et al., 2005; Sharma, Tam & Kim, 2012).

Owing to its multifunctionality, an element in dialogical practices that may significantly promote customer experience and satisfaction is humour. In sales encounters, for instance, financial advisors' good sense of humour has been found to clearly influence customers' perceptions of quality, satisfaction, purchase intention and word-of-mouth propensity

(Bergeron & Vachon, 2008). In turn, a humorous work climate has been revealed to foster employees' creativity, on which perceptions of service quality are also contingent (Slåtten, Svensson & Sværi, 2011). Unfortunately, the role of humour, its manifestations and loci in face-to-face service encounters have remained underexamined from linguistic, pragmatic, discourse or conversational perspectives.

Rather, attention has mainly been paid to verbal acts like requests, orders or complaints (Taylor, 2015; Geluykens, 2020), forms of address (Murillo Medrano, 2020), paralanguage (Dorat & Webster, 2015; Loth, Huth & de Ruitter, 2015), interactive and relational issues (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2006; Carmona Lavado & Hernández López, 2015; Félix-Brasdefer, 2015; Escalona Torres, 2020), or cross-cultural, cross-regional, age and gender differences (Placencia, 2005, 2008; Félix-Brasdefer, 2012; Yates, 2015; Félix-Brasdefer & Yates 2020; Fernández-Amaya & Hernández-López, 2020; Kaiser, 2020; Michno, 2020). Research has even explored how second language learners could use their target language in visitors' centres in order to fulfil certain goals (Martínez López & Padilla Cruz, 2012; Padilla Cruz & Martínez López, 2017). Although humour has mainly been approached as a rapport-building dialogical device frequent in small talk in certain establishments (Placencia, 2005, 2007; Placencia & Mancera Rueda, 2011), it has not been duly analysed, except for a recent investigation that has delved into its producers, types and loci in small bars and cafés during morning service encounters, and which also examined age-motivated variation (Padilla Cruz, 2020). The present work purports to add to this research and aims to continue filling the existing gap.

3 Monological and Dialogical Humour

Often, humour is purposefully sought in a wealth of contexts through a wide range of monological, dialogical and even multimodal complex forms of little or no relevance in informational terms.¹ Processing them requires *cognitive effort* that is counterbalanced through a variety of *non-propositional effects* (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). These comprise sensorimotor reactions like laughter, amusement, enjoyment, pleasure and even mental imagery (Yus Ramos, 2016; Wilson & Carston 2019).

In monological forms, a speaker holds the floor for some time. What could be considered the paramount cases are staged *humorous monologues*, where a comedian addresses distinct topics with a view to offering funny narrations rife with, among others, jocular anecdotes, cunning witticisms, ingenious and unexpected similes, or surprising, highly idiosyncratic, and thus rather innovative, metaphors (Ruiz Gurillo, 2013; Yus Ramos, 2016). Other pervading examples are *punning*, or wordplays simply exploiting the ambiguity of lexical items due to homonymy, polysemy, homophony, paronymy, or a combination of these with other figures of speech (Bucaria, 2004; Solska, 2012), and jokes, which are purportedly funny texts interspersed in conversations (Attardo & Chabanne, 1992; Davies, 2011; Dynel, 2011; Yus Ramos, 2016).

Jokers take advantage of spread cultural information, available mental frames providing some events with sense, and the ambivalence of certain words or structures in order to produce a narration that biases the audience towards an initial interpretation that appears plausible. The introduction of some incongruous element, usually in the *punchline*, however, shocks the audience and causes them to backtrack so as to reanalyse the text and search for alternative cultural information, activate a different frame, formulate another interpretation,

¹ Owing to the scope of this paper, multimodal forms of humour will be left aside of the discussion.

or a combination of any or all of these. Thanks to this the audience can resolve the incongruity and make sense of the narration (McGhee, 1972; Suls, 1972; Ritchie, 2005). If the audience are alerted to an upcoming joke by means of an introductory phrase, the joke is *canned*. It is *non-canned* when it comes unexpectedly, often interrupting the conversational flow, perhaps with an abrupt topic shift that may surprise the audience, but also trigger undesired reactions like non-appreciation, indifference or anger (Attardo, Pickering & Baker, 2011).

Dialogical forms bring together the humorist and some other party as a way of co-constructing hilariousness and achieving laughter, amusement and jolliness in a joint multi-turn activity. Well-known cases are *teases*, or fake attacks, mockeries and critiques of a playful nature aimed at bonding intimate interlocutors through *mock impoliteness* (Slugoski & Turnbull, 1988; Dynel, 2008). Teases amount to jocular provocations touching upon fictitious behavioural, normative and social differences in order to engage the target in a humorous exchange (Kotthoff, 2007; Dynel, 2008). They should not be confused with *putdown humour*, which threaten the target's face by ridiculing or denigrating them by means of an overt censuring of their behavior (Dynel, 2007). When teases are retorts or give rise to a longer exchange that unfolds throughout consecutive turns produced rapidly, they become *banter* (Norrick, 1993). If the interlocutors strengthen, elaborate on or emphasise a claim, image or point, banter is *supportive*, but if they keep on challenging each other as a way of outwitting one another, it is *contestive*. Depending on their degree of collaboration or competitiveness, banter may also be *maximally* or *minimally collaborative* (Holmes, 2006).

Punning may also become a joint *interactional* or *conversational* achievement when the wordplay appears in an adjacency pair wherein the second turn reacts to a first one

containing the lexical ambiguity (Norrick, 1993, 1994). In that second pair part, the speaker highlights a contextually inappropriate interpretation that went unnoticed by the first speaker. If the second pair part is formulated on the grounds of the pragmatic ambiguity of the preceding turn, there arises *trumping*, a verbal game relying on one of the interlocutors' ability to detect potentially alternative interpretations (Veale et al., 2006).

Finally, the quintessential type of dialogical humour is *conversational* humour, which amounts to discursive moves or whole conversational episodes that unfold within a *playful frame* (Yus Ramos, 2016) and hence contain purposefully funny utterances like witticisms, anecdotes, similes, hyperboles, metaphors, or jokes, and non-humorous utterances that turn out hilarious because of their unexpected, weird, surprising, etc., content (Dyrel, 2011). Generation of laughter greatly depends on the speaker's acquaintance with the audience and their abilities to attribute to them a certain knowledge about and attitudes towards specific people, issues or events -i.e., *metarepresentational* abilities (Sperber, 2000). Hilariousness is somehow guaranteed if the interlocutors share a *mutual cognitive environment* where particular assumptions are manifest (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). If not, the speaker must supply, or lead the audience to access, the information or frames that are necessary to duly contextualise what they say (Cundall, 2007; Chiaro, 2011)

Monological and dialogical forms of humour often show superior communicative skills and pose cognitive challenges, but also diffuse tensions and pave the way for individual or common interactive goals. They may soften the expression of (controversial) opinions and claims, mitigate the accomplishment of certain actions, bind interlocutors and indicate membership to a common group, especially in social and friendly gatherings, in the workplace and in service encounters (Attardo, 2002; Ruiz Gurillo, 2013; Yus Ramos, 2016).

Also, they may be resorted to as self-protecting devices when contextual and/or general problems put the interlocutors' faces at risk (Hay, 2000; Dynel, 2007). Their solidarity-generating effects stem from personal revelations, similarities and affinities, as well as the celebration of shared experiences, viewpoints, interests and standards (Hay, 2000; Dynel, 2007; Yus Ramos, 2016).² Regardless of the (un)suitability of the addressed topic for a particular occasion, for humour to surface a number of factors must apply. External ones include time availability, group size and acquaintance with group members. Personal factors include background knowledge and beliefs, gender and ethnicity, sense of humour, relationships, mood, and individual traits and skills (Ritchie, 2005; Dynel, 2007; Yus Ramos, 2016).

4 Methodology

This research adopts the methodology that was originally devised for a previous study by the researcher (Padilla Cruz, 2020). The sole difference concerns the time segment during which the data were collected. This was intended to enable data-comparison, as said study gathered data produced in morning service encounters. What follows describes the establishments where the data were collected, the participants in the study, the data collection process itself, some ethical issues and how the data were analysed.

4.1 The Establishments

² Yet, humour may also generate or foster conflict through personal attacks and be a means of exerting power and challenge social boundaries (Hay, 2000).

The data for this study were collected in sixteen establishments. For the sake of privacy, their names will not be given. Eight were small cafeterias located by the Social Sciences and the Humanities campuses of the University of Seville. Despite likely heterogeneity, their clientele mainly consisted of young people, chiefly university students. The other eight establishments were small tapas bars in various neighbourhoods in the city centre of Seville. Despite likely heterogeneity too, they were frequented by middle-aged and older people. The establishments were not fast-food restaurants or gourmet bars serving *haute* or *nouvelle cuisine*, nor did they have a checkout area where clients place and pay for orders. Rather, they were traditional establishments divided in two distinct areas: the counter, behind which baristas attended the clients, and where these could even consume their orders, and a space equipped with tables and chairs or stools.

4.2 The Participants

Since authentic and effective humour must come naturally and spontaneously (Dyrel, 2007, 2011; Attardo et al., 2011; Yus Ramos, 2016), no recruitment was carried out. Rather, the participants were the actual baristas and customers in the establishments. Except for five, the baristas at near-campus establishments were in their twenties, thirties or early forties, while those in the city centre establishments were all over forty. In turn, customers in the former group of establishments were in their late teens or twenties, whereas those in the latter group were people over forty.

4.3 Data Collection

The data for this study were collected by the researcher during a period of 12 weeks between February and May 2018. They come from public, easily audible discourse engaging customers with waiters or other customers (Ide, 1998). For the sake of naturalness, authenticity and spontaneity, no recording equipment was utilized (Bell, 2009, 2013). Rather, the data were collected through tools that are widely used in various disciplines: observation and field notes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; Van Maanen, 2011). The reliability of these, however, is somehow limited because of attention and memory constraints, the length of conversational episodes and the abundance of accompanying paralinguistic features (Tessier, 2012).

The researcher visited each establishment five times on different days and weeks between 21:00 and 22:30. He was accompanied by another male friend, with whom he made as if chatting while they had drinks and tapas, either at the counter or at a table within hearing distance from it. Notes were made while or immediately after humorous episodes were observed. In addition to reproducing them, notes included information about the encounter phase where humour appeared –opening, transactional, post-transactional or closing– and its producer.

4.4 Ethical Issues

This study relies on unconstrained data collected in a manner that protects the participants' privacy. In order to avoid inhibition and ensure behavioural authenticity, waiters were not informed about the study beforehand, and no informed consent to participate was gained from them. Likewise, for the sake of the customers' naturalness and spontaneity, no public notice alerting that the study was being conducted or data were being collected was

displayed in the establishments, and neither was consent solicited from customers when they approached them (cfr. Crow et al., 2006; Flick, 2014).

However, the researcher duly informed customers about his purposes, showed them his notes and requested verbal consent to reproduce the anonymised data when they left the establishments. He also checked their age and whether they regularly went to the establishment, as this may affect production and type of humour (Yus Ramos, 2016). As for waiters, the researcher similarly informed them about his purposes, solicited consent to use the anonymised data after the five visits and checked their age.

4.5 Data Analysis

The collected tokens of humour were fully anonymised by deleting proper names or details that could enable participant recognition. They were also coded in a manner facilitating identification, so the humour tokens collected at the near-campus establishments were labelled 'UC' and those collected in the city centre were labelled 'CC'. These labels were followed by the number assigned to each establishment in each group. Then, humour tokens were also given a parenthetical number next to the establishment number. They were added 'C' when they were generated by customers and 'B' when they were produced by baristas. Finally, humour tokens were sorted depending on the encounter phase where they occurred, their dialogical nature and their type. Since inter-rater reliability was not checked, this classification relied on the researcher's own judgements and intuitions.

5 Results

5.1 General Findings

40 visits of approximately one hour and thirty minutes were made to the establishments in the evening during the 60 days of fieldwork. During them, 37 manifestations of dialogical humour were observed and collected. In the establishments in the vicinity of the two University campuses, humour appeared in 10 encounters (27.02%), while in the city centre establishments humour occurred in 27 encounters (37.03%). No manifestations of humour were observed in five of the establishments in the first group and in four of the establishments in the second group. The overall distribution of manifestations of dialogical humour is shown in Figure 1:

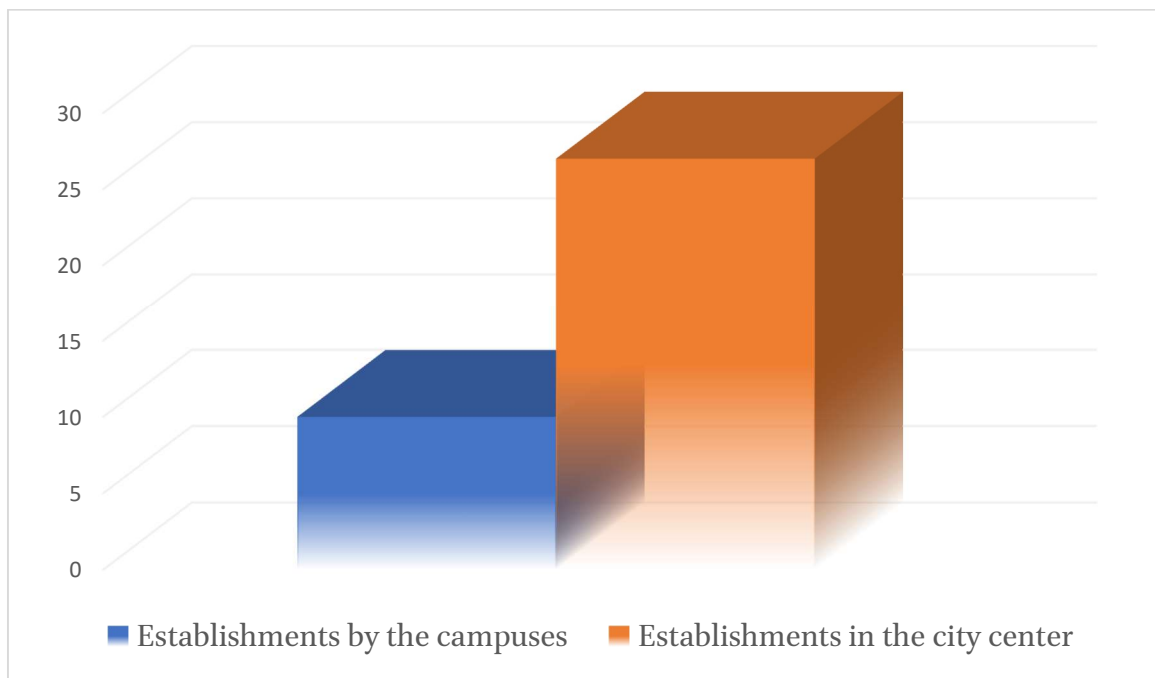


Figure 1. Manifestations of dialogical humour per establishment

In turn, Figure 2 exhibits the distribution of manifestations of dialogical humour per establishment in the vicinity of the University campuses, while Figure 3 displays that per establishment in the city centre:

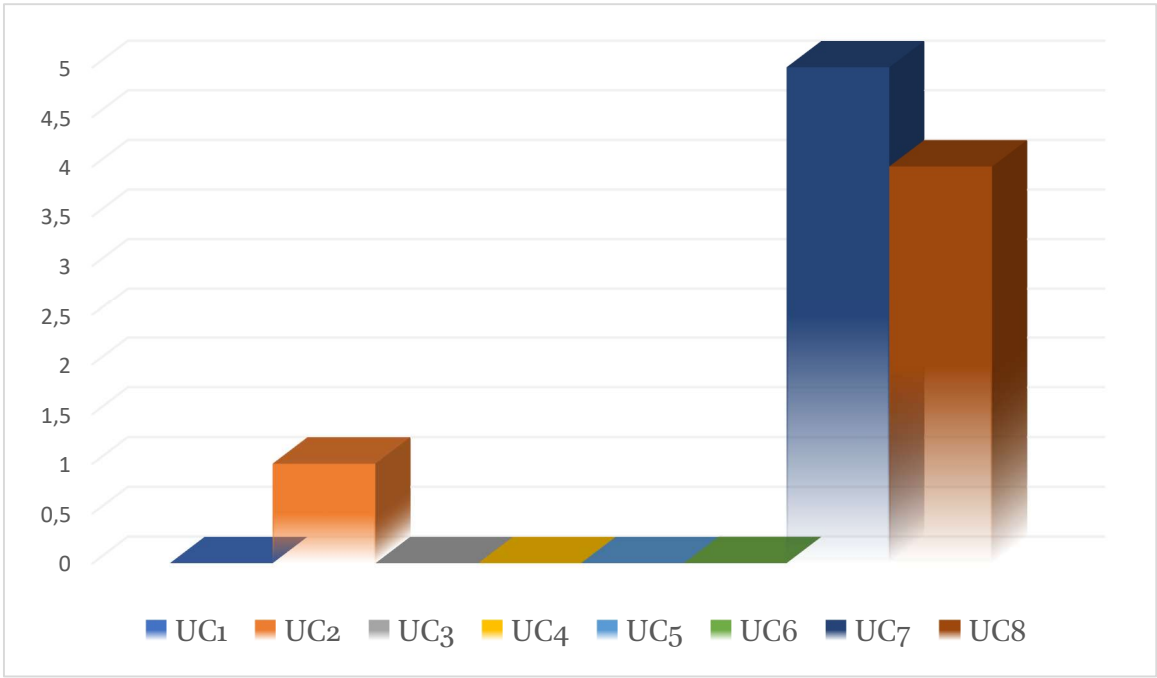


Figure 2. Distribution of manifestations of dialogical humour per establishment by the University's campuses

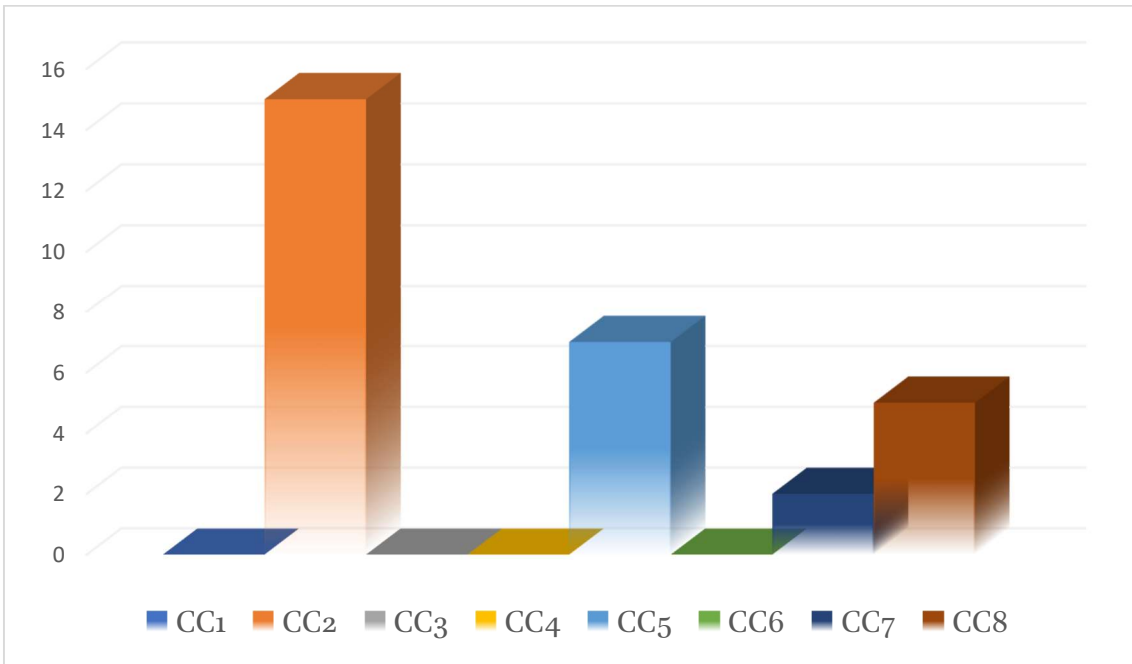


Figure 3. Distribution of manifestations of dialogical humour per establishment in the city centre

In the establishments next to the campuses, dialogical humour surfaced four times at the opening phase of encounters (4/37, 10.81% of the total), only once during the transactional one -i.e., while orders were placed- (2.7%), never during the post-transactional phase -i.e., as the students consumed their orders- and five times at the closing phase (13.51%). Figure 4 displays these findings, while Figure 5 shows the distribution of dialogical humour per phase and establishment:

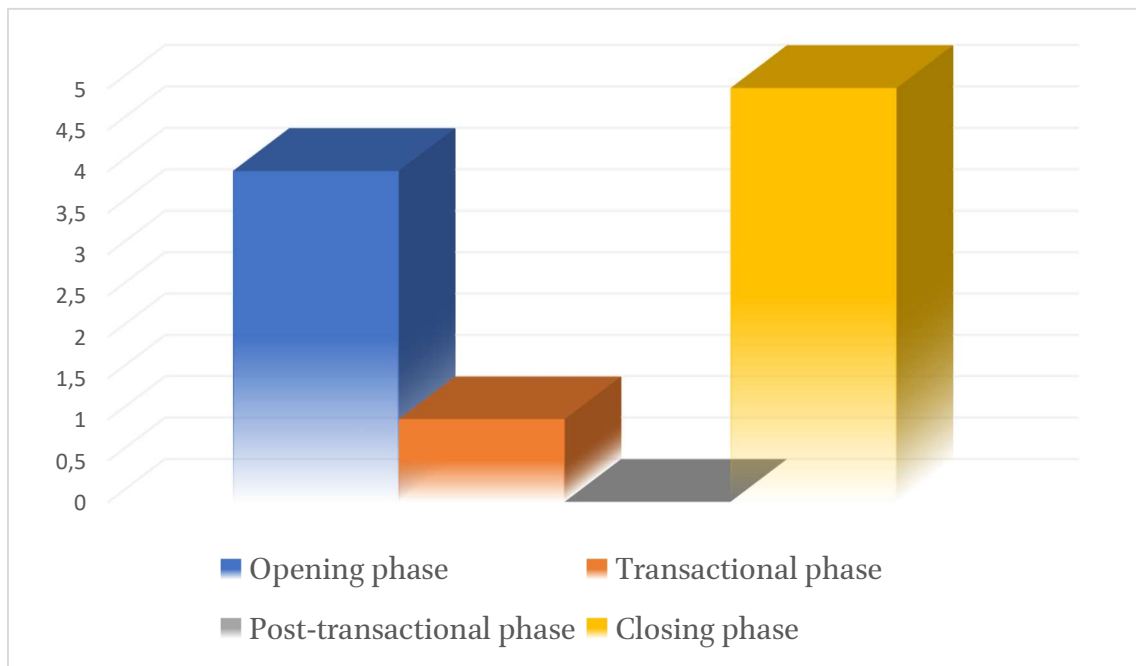


Figure 4. Distribution of dialogical humour per encounter phase in the establishments by the campuses

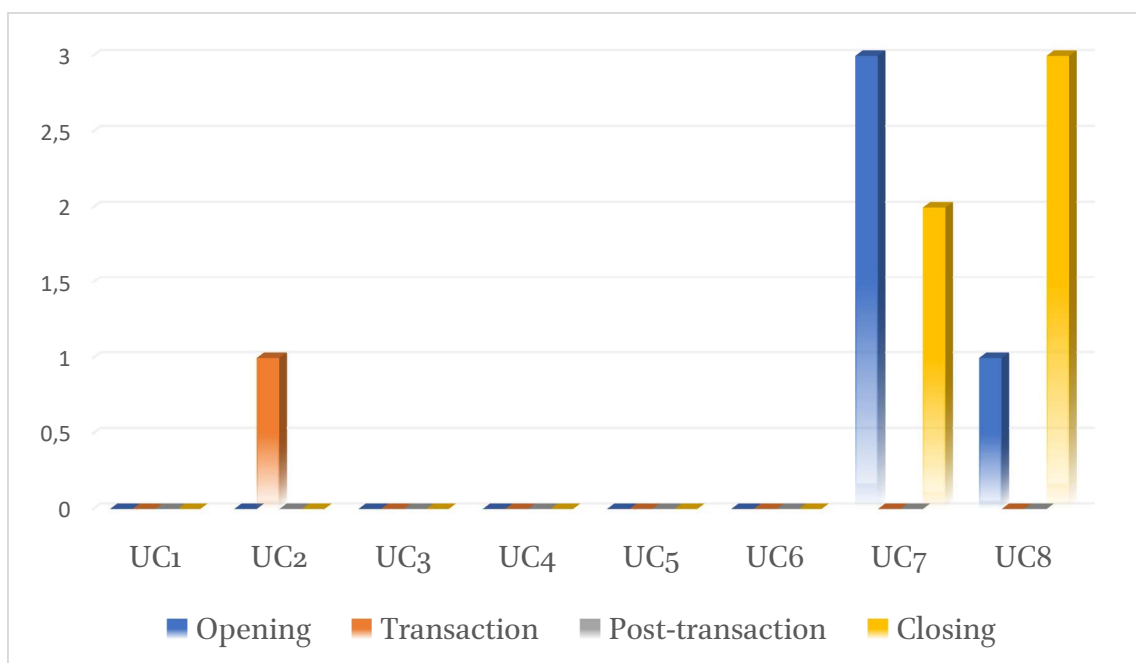


Figure 5. Distribution of dialogical humour per encounter phase and establishment by the campuses

In the establishments in the city centre, 16 examples of dialogical humour were collected at the beginning of the encounters (16/37, 43.24% of the total), one at the transactional phase (2.7%), four while customers ate and drank (10.81%) and six when customers settled the bill (16.21%). These findings are shown in Figure 6, whereas Figure 7 exhibits the distribution of dialogical humour per phase and establishment:

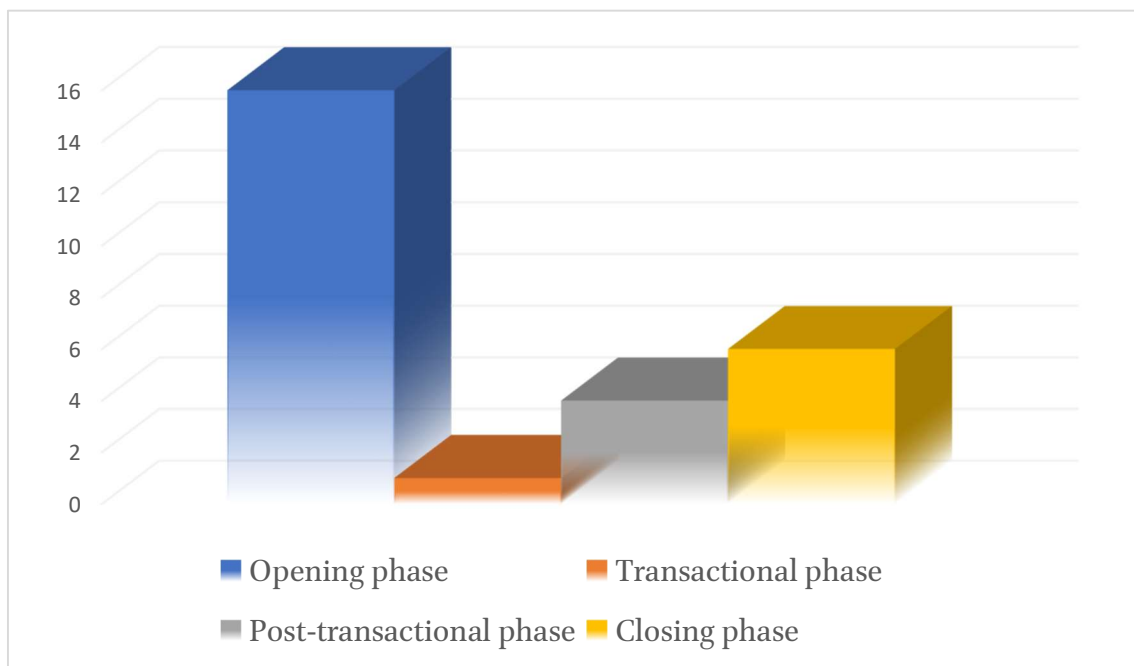


Figure 6. Distribution of dialogical humour per encounter phase in the establishments in the city centre

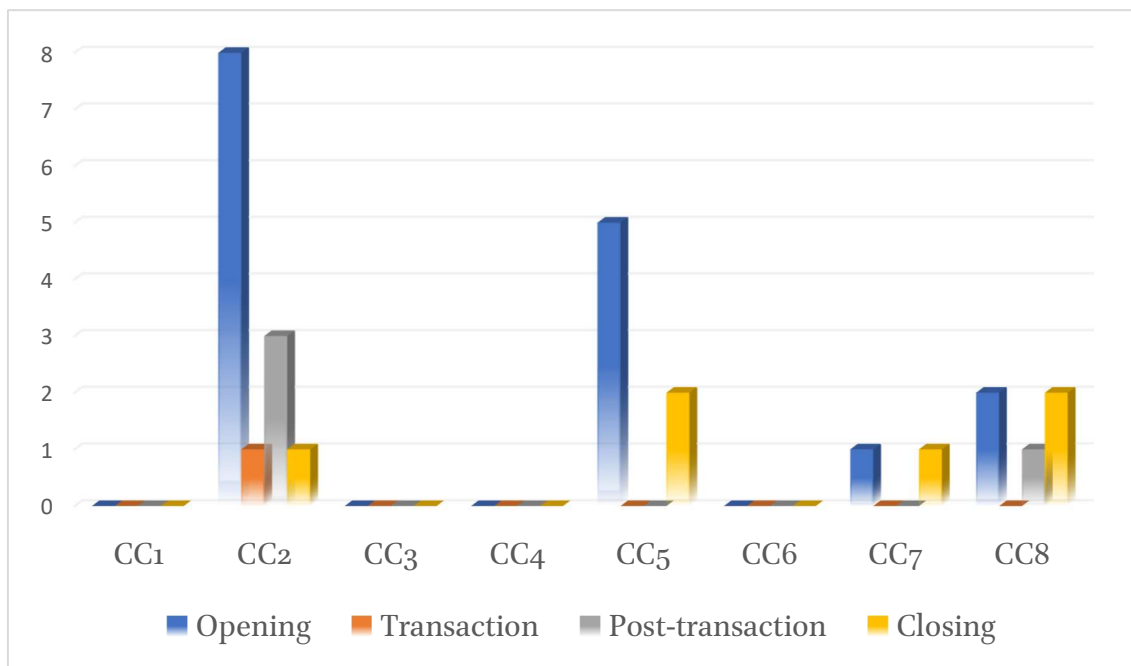


Figure 7. Distribution of dialogical humour per encounter phase and establishment in the city centre

5.2 *Dialogical Humour in the Near-campus Establishments*

Of the 10 manifestations of dialogical humour collected in the near-campus establishments, banter was the form preferred at the beginning of the encounters and it was customers who initiated all the four cases witnessed (40%). An example is (1), where the customer, a man in his early twenties, mocks the barista, a man in his early thirties, for still being at work and not at home. The barista's retort seeks to counterattack the customer by suggesting that this is of a well-off family:

(1) UC7(1)C

C: ¡Illo, compare! ¿Todavía estás tú aquí? ¡Vete ya pa tu casa, ome, vete ya! ¡Que tienes a la parienta abandoná!³

'Hey, man! Still here? Go home now, man, go home! You have abandoned your partner!'

³ Non-italicised words indicate characteristics of the southern Spanish variety of Seville.

B: [Laughter] *¡No te jode! ¡Compare, que los pobres tenemos que currar! No como tú.*
[Laughter]
'Oh, fuck! Man, poor people must work! Not like you'

In contrast, during the transaction, it was the barista who produced the only token of dialogical humour observed (10%). He, too, was in his early thirties and was attending a female customer in her late teens, who hesitated as to what to order. She enquired about a meat tapa, to which the barista replied that her question had an obvious answer, thus appearing to suggest stupidity. He then jokingly offered to serve her a children's meal, to which the customer immediately reacted by deciding on another tapa:

(2) UC2(1)B

C: *¿Y el solomillo al whisky cómo va?*

'What does whisky sirloin come with?'

B: *Pues con salsa al whisky, chiquilla. ¿Con qué va a ir?*

'With whisky gravy, girl, doesn't it?'

C: *¡Ay, no sé no sé!*

'Oh, I don't know, I don't know!'

B: *¿Te pongo un Happy Meal?*

'Shall I give you a Happy Meal?'

C: [Laughter] *Sí, hombre, un Happy Meal.* [Laughter] *Mejor me pones un serranito de pollo. Venga, sí, un serranito de pollo.*

'Yeah, right, a Happy Meal. Actually I'll have a serranito de pollo'⁴

Finally, the five tokens of dialogical humour at closings (50%) were also initiated by baristas and were cases of banter. An example is (3), in which the barista, a man in his early thirties, offers another beer to the customer, a man in his early twenties, thus appearing to incite him to drink more and perhaps get drunk. Since the customer had already had some beers, he refuses the offer by arguing that he was going to class the following day and could have a headache:

⁴ A grilled chicken steak sandwich with green pepper and a slice of cured ham.

(3) UC7(4)B

B: *Te pongo otra, ¿no?*

'Another one, right?'

C: *No, no, no, tate ahí, que mañana tengo clase temprano y la cabecita me hace pum-pum-pum. ¿Qué te debo?*

'No, no, no, hold on, I have class early tomorrow and it makes my head go boom-boom-boom'

B: [Laughter] *¡Anda, que vas a ir fino tú mañana a clase! 2.40€, como siempre.*

'You will go happy to class! €2.40, as usual'

Figure 8 exhibits barista/customer-initiated dialogical humour in these establishments:

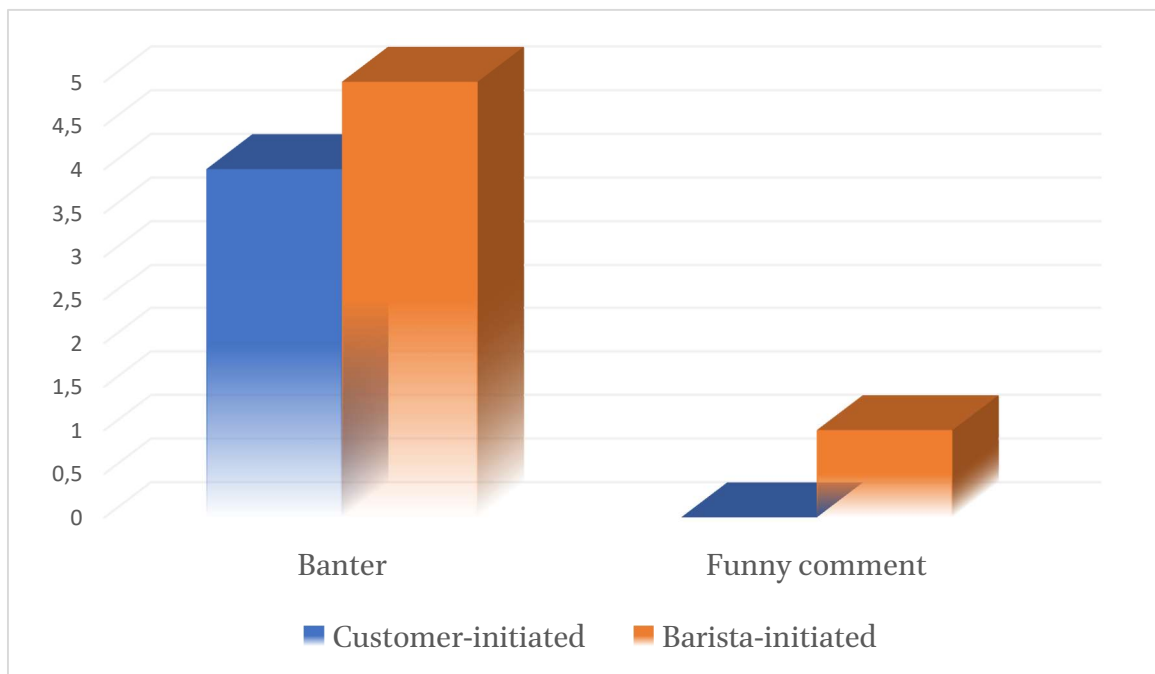


Figure 8. Customer/waiter-initiated dialogical humour in the establishments by the campuses

5.3 Dialogical Humour in the City Centre Establishments

Of the 27 tokens of dialogical humour collected in the establishments in the city centre, 16 (59%) were jocose openings. Two of them (12.5%) were initiated by baristas (4), while the

other 14 (87.5%) were begun by customers (5). 15 of these openings (93.75%) consisted of funny remarks and comments (4), while the remaining one was a case of customer-initiated teasing (6):

(4) CC2(2)B

B: *¡Ejé! ¡Olé los tíos grandes con arte y señorío!*

'Wow! Bravo for great elegant and graceful men!'

C: [Laughter] *No tienes tú guasa ni ná. Anda, ponme una.*

'You're always joking around. Come on, give me one'

(5) CC5(3)C

C: *¡Madre mía, [proper name]! Tendrás tú queja de cómo tienes hoy esto.*

'Oh, gosh! You can't complain about how this place is today'

B: *Más gente tenía que venir, que le tengo que dar de comer a mis chiquillos.*

'More people should come in. I have to feed my kids'

(6) CC2(8)C

C: *A ver si trabajamos un poquito más, que mira cómo está esto* [Laughter]

'Let's work a bit more; look how this place is'

B: *A ver si damos un poquito de menos porculo que me entretienes* [Laughter]

'Let's screw around a bit less; you hold me up'

The only case of at-transaction humour (3.7%) was a comic exchange that took place as a waiter attended on a female customer. She asked about the freshness of red mullets, so he took some out of the display case, showed them to her and replied that he had fished them himself the night before, and hence even knew their names. Thus, he seemed to suggest that, upon fishing them, the red mullets were so fresh that they could even speak to him:

(7) CC2(7)B

C: *¿Están frescos los salmonetes?*

'Are the red mullets fresh?'

B: *Frescos, fresquísimos.* [Shows a plate with some] *Mira, yo mismito los pesqué anoche ahí en el Guadalquivir. Frescos, fresquísimos. Mira, se llaman Sebas, Pepe y Juan. ¿Te los pongo? Se te van a saltar las lágrimas cuando los pruebes.*

'Fresh, very fresh. Look, I fished them myself tonight in river Guadalquivir. Fresh, very fresh. Look, their names are Sebas, Pepe and Juan. Would you like them? Tears will come to your eyes when you try them'

C: [Laughter]

On the four occasions on which dialogical humour surfaced as customers consumed orders (14.81%), they mainly led the conversations by telling bartenders about (comical) issues or events. Bartenders basically listened attentively and contributed to conversations by just making funny comparisons. An exception was (8). As the waiter was talking to a couple, a foreigner approached the bar and attempted to order in English. The waiter's failure to understand and use the language prompted another female customer to translate, to which the waiter reacted by making comments that in turn incited the couple to tease him:

(8) CC(2)B

B: *¡Viva el Betis! ¡Viva el Betis! Esta mujer va a llegar lejos, verás tú. Esta mujer pa presidente del gobierno. ¡Viva el Betis! ¡Niño, cómo parla! ¡No veas tú!*

'Hurray for Betis! Hurray for Betis! This woman will go far, you'll see. This woman for president. Hurray for Betis! Man, how she speaks!'

C: [Proper name] *Ésta te quita a ti el trabajo. ¡A ver si espabilas, macho!*

'This one'll take off your job. Pay attention, man!'

At the end of encounters, the amount of tokens of dialogical humour was notably less.

The six of them that appeared (22.22%) were produced by bartenders and waiters. They consisted of jocular greetings and comments:

(9) CC8(3)B

C: *Aquí tienes. ¡Hasta otra!*

'Here you are. See you next time!'

B: *¡Adiós, blanca flor!* [Laughter] *Vete por la sombrita.*

'Bye, white flower! Make sure to walk in the shade'

Figure 9 captures barista/customer-initiated dialogical humour in these establishments:

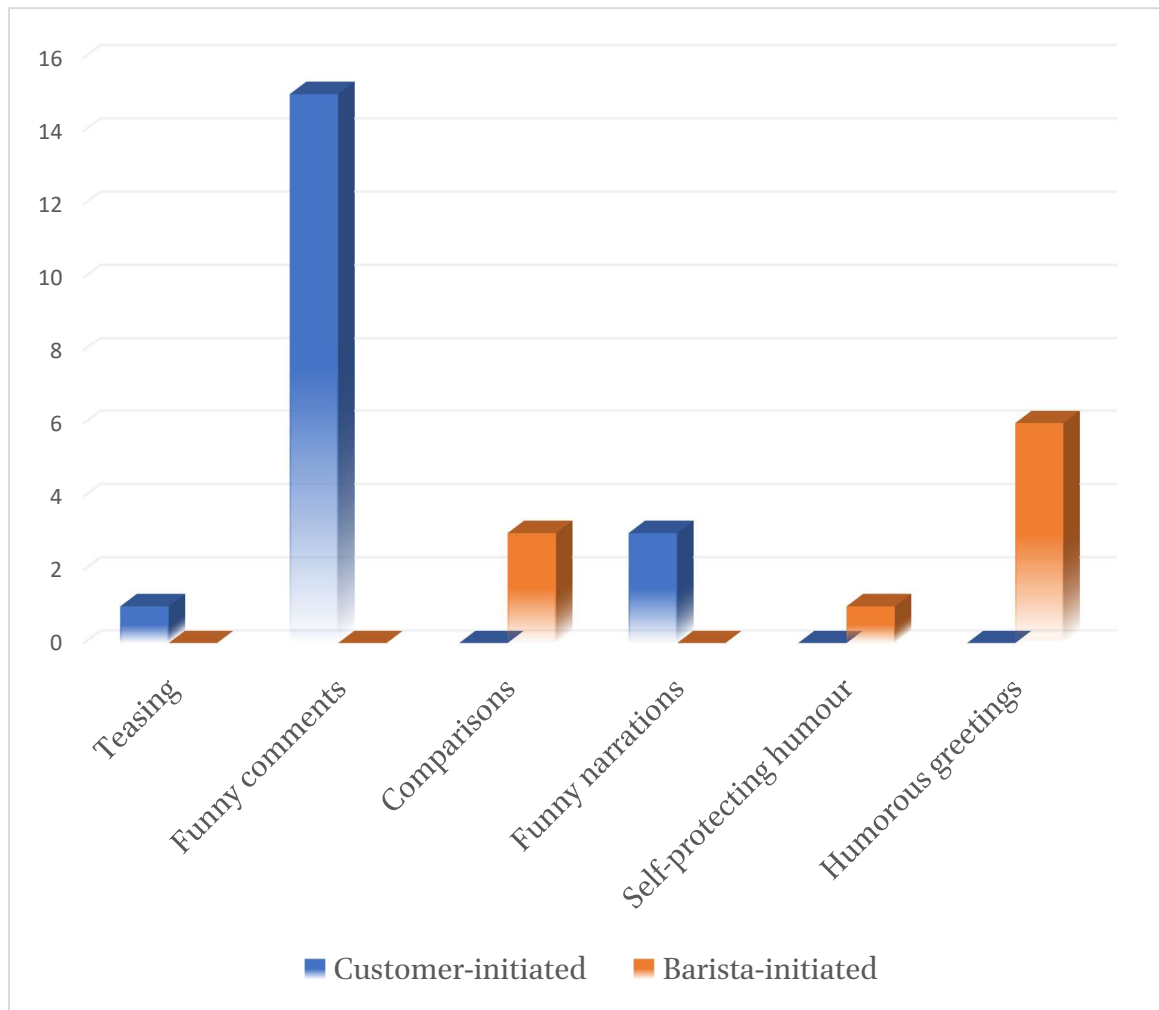


Figure 9. Customer/waiter-initiated dialogical humour in establishments in the city centre

6 Discussion

As has been seen, dialogical humour did appear in the two groups of establishments, thus proving some awareness in owners, employees and clientele of its positive effects on ambiance and, hence, on customer experience and satisfaction (Bergeron & Vachon, 2008; Slåtten, Svensson & Sværi, 2011). To baristas, humour was a valuable tool to evidence a good and optimistic mood, a helpful attitude, as well as their intention to treat customers in a close and personalised style (Mittal & Lassar, 1996; Mattila, 2000; Nickson, Warhurst & Dutton, 2005). The data reveal that baristas even used it, albeit sparingly, to diffuse any

tension and/or attenuate any face threat that could stem from actions such as stating the obvious or upselling, which could turn out risky to themselves or be perceived as imposing from the customers' perspective (Attardo, 2002; Ruiz Gurillo, 2013; Yus Ramos, 2016).

Furthermore, in an intercultural encounter where a barista failed to reduce cultural distance because of his inability to code-switch and/or speak the customer's language, dialogical humour became an effective self-protective resource that enabled the barista to safeguard his own face in front of other clients (Callahan, 2006; Holmqvist, van Vaerenbergh & Grönroos, 2014).

Both baristas and customers resorted to humour in order to maintain or enhance a degree of camaraderie and intimacy that became essential for boosting amicable relationships and paving the way for smooth transactions (Nikolich & Sparks, 1995). When they jokingly greeted each other and engaged in comical small and personal talk, they did not behave superficially, but exhibited spontaneity and authenticity, thus favouring self-disclosure and avoiding unfavourable impressions that are likely to detract from task effectiveness (Grandey, 2003; Barger & Grandey, 2006). Their funny comments, comparisons and revelations greatly contributed to solidarity, as they suggested shared viewpoints and experiences (Hay, 2000; Dynel, 2007). Overall, not only were positive emotions like happiness, on which judgements of relationship quality highly depend, generated through the varied dialogical forms of humour produced, but also feelings of contentment and friendliness that greatly benefit customer loyalty (Pugh, 2001; van Dolen et al., 2001; Wong, 2004; Grandey et al., 2005; Barger & Grandey, 2006). However, there were differences in both groups of establishments as regards the amount of tokens of dialogical humour observed, the encounter phases where they appeared, their types and initiators.

Firstly, the dialogical forms of humour produced by the middle-age interlocutors in the establishments located in the city centre of Seville outnumbered those produced by the younger interlocutors in the establishments near the campuses. Although this does not necessarily mean that the individuals in the former group were funnier, a number of factors might explain this divergence:

- a) Customer influx. This was visibly inferior in the establishments located in the city centre than in those near the campuses. As a result, the waiters' workload was lower because they had to attend fewer customers and hence focus less on their duties. In fact, lack of humour in some establishments in both groups could have been motivated by the waiters' need to attend a higher number of customers promptly.
- b) Company and group size. Some middle-aged customers were 'solo-customers', but the majority of customers who went to the city centre establishments did so in pairs or groups of three or four at the most. Moreover, all of them seemed equally involved in ordering drinks and food. In contrast, the students who visited the cafeterias next to the campuses did so in larger groups and mainly chatted among them, which reduced the opportunities for interaction with baristas. Indeed, in many cases there seemed to be a representative who placed orders for the group (Ritchie, 2005; Dynel, 2007; Yus Ramos, 2016).
- c) Residence. Most customers in the tapas bars in the city centre lived in the same neighbourhood or in close ones, which seems to favour regularity and acquaintance with baristas. However, except for a few cases, the students who entered the near-campus cafeterias generally resided farther from these establishments.
- d) Age. While that of waiters was similar to that of customers in the establishments in the

city centre, thus fostering a feeling social closeness, waiters and customers' respective ages in the near-campus establishments differed, thus hindering that feeling.

- e) Baristas' type of job. In the city centre establishments, the baristas were the owners or full-time employees, whereas in near-campus ones they tended to be part-time employees working in different shifts. Therefore, while the middle-aged customers normally found the same person or team behind the bar in the city centre establishments, the younger customers were likely to find different ones in the near-campus establishments.

Concerning encounter phase and type of dialogical humour, in the establishments frequented by younger clientele, customers and waiters were found to take advantage of dialogical humour chiefly at the opening and closing phases, and to mainly opt for banter. On most occasions it even replaced the ritual exchanges and more person-oriented phatic chit-chat that are often heard on the verges of conversations. At the opening phase, banter indicated and underlined mutual acquaintance and camaraderie, while aiming for, and ultimately achieving, a friendly and relaxed atmosphere through an overt incisive playfulness for which the interlocutors allowed each other innocuous provocations and teases (Norrick, 1993; Kotthoff, 2007; Dynel, 2007). Indeed, banter was overall contestive and collaborative, as the interlocutors mockingly attacked and counterattacked one another (Holmes, 2006). At the closing phase, banter additionally suggested contentment and satisfaction with service because of the perceived atmosphere of closeness and friendliness, thus paving the way for future visits and somehow securing customer loyalty (Pugh, 2001; Wong, 2004; Barger & Grandey, 2006). Overall, banter did not appear to threaten or put anybody down because of the real harmlessness of the jibes it relied on (Hay, 2000; Dynel,

2007); rather, it became a powerful cohesive and integrative element that unveiled a certain intimacy accrued over visits to the establishments and based on shared values and background knowledge (Norrick 1993; Dynel 2008). Yet, its success required that the target discarded the apparently offensive and provocative message in favour of the implicit message that its producer had humorous and playful intentions (Norrick, 1994).

Customer influx and company, on the one hand, and waiters' own concern for promptness and efficiency, on the other hand, might have deprived waiters of the necessary time to calmly socialise with customers. Consequently, only one case of dialogical humour surfaced during the purely transactional phase and none at the post-transactional phase. By means of the witnessed example, the barista clearly attempted to counterbalance the face-threat that could likely have arisen from his reaction to a question by a female client (Attardo, 2002; Ruiz Gurillo, 2013; Yus Ramos, 2016). Although the barista might have purported to be funny, absence of laughter on the customer's part revealed that his response failed to attain his actual goal and could have offended and disparaged the customer (Bell, 2009, 2013). Therefore, the barista's ensuing unexpectedly absurd offer was intended to restore harmony and smoothness in the transaction, thus working as an interactive balm.

In the establishments frequented by middle-aged customers, in contrast, lower customer influx and hence waiters' time availability, and waiters and clients' familiarity, age-similarity and sense of humour, favoured a higher number and more varied forms of dialogical humour. As opposed to the establishments frequented by the younger clientele, in those in the city centre customers avoided banter and seemed to prefer jocular teases, remarks and comments to begin the encounters. Banter was likewise replaced with comical comments by the waiters upon bidding farewell to the customers. However, as in the case of the near-

campus establishments, these forms of humour fulfilled similar rapport-building and -reinforcing functions, and evinced mutual acquaintance and amicable relationships. Indeed, the mocking, hyperbolic and unexpected elements present in them pointed to shared knowledge and expectations of varied content.

At the transactional and post-transactional phases, dialogical forms of humour were also mobilised in the establishments in the city centre so as to do facework benefiting the baristas. However, instead of compensating for a faux pas, in-transaction humour helped a barista upsell a product, while post-transaction humour softened the bad impression given by the other barista's lack of skills (Sizoo et al., 2005; Sharma, Tam & Kim, 2012). In the case of post-transaction humour, furthermore, it worked as an effective device to overcome a likely service failure (Warden et al., 2003; Tam, Sharma & Kim, 2014). Nevertheless, in both cases the unexpectedness of the facts that the barista might have fished the red mullets and that a customer spoke English, thus showing up the barista in front of the other customers; the absurdity of the fishes having names and the barista's reaction to the customer's linguistic skills, and the authentic, positive feelings and emotions expressed by both baristas -e.g., optimism, admiration- played a crucial role and facilitated the achievement of their goals (van Dolen et al., 2001; Grandey et al., 2005).

However, the most noteworthy difference from the near-campus establishments at the post-transactional phase was the occurrence of hilarious episodes narrated by the customers. These touched on common acquaintances, experiences, viewpoints, fears and attitudes. Their appearance was certainly fostered by physical proximity, age-similarity and familiarity with the waiters, who basically contributed to them by means of rather witty similes and unexpected comparisons that revealed tacitly shared attitudes and standards.

Both the narrations and the waiters' contributions triggered positive emotions like surprise and merriment, as well as feelings of amicability and closeness, which tightened social bonds and secured future visits to the establishments (Pugh, 2001; van Dolen et al., 2001; Wong, 2004; Grandey et al., 2005; Barger & Grandey, 2006). By engaging in this phatic talk, baristas exhibited a good mood, stressed familiarity with customers and offered a personalised treatment, thus fostering the smoothness of transaction while giving impressions of empathy and credibility (Nikolich & Sparks, 1995; Mittal & Lassar, 1996; Mattila, 2000; Nickson, Warhurst & Dutton, 2005). The feelings of enjoyment and happiness that they could have achieved had an impact on customers' appraisals of relationship quality, satisfaction and, ultimately, loyalty (Wong, 2004).

7 Conclusion

Despite the absence of dialogical forms of humour in some of the visited establishments, their presence in the others attests to an obvious awareness of their goal-contributing and task-facilitative nature by both baristas and customers. In the evening service encounters observed in this study, younger customers mainly resorted to dialogical forms of humour at the opening and closing phases, and selected banter, thus expecting their addressees to catch an implicit message pertaining to the fact that its inoffensiveness results from an allowance reciprocally made over repeated visits to the establishments. In contrast, middle-aged customers and baristas tended to make funny remarks and comments to begin and end the encounters, and mobilised a wider gamut of dialogical humorous forms at the transactional and post-transactional phases. These included mitigating and self-protective humour, and funny narrations whose effects depended on tacitly shared and accepted

viewpoints, experiences and standards. Hence, dialogical humour in Sevillian small cafeterias and tapas bars is a clear case of empractical speech fostering and/or enhancing feelings of happiness, enjoyment and empathy, as well as impressions of competence, personalised experience, social proximity and camaraderie, which greatly influence customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Certainly, the findings of this study could be compared to those of the previously mentioned study analysing humour in these establishments in the morning segment (Padilla Cruz, 2020). This could clarify if a factor like time of the day has a serious effect on humour occurrence. Future studies could also consider macrosocial factors such as gender, ethnicity, race or geographical provenance with a view to shedding light onto their actual effects on the type of humorous tokens used, their producers and the encounter phases where they appear. Additionally, future studies could also survey participants to view their perceptions more directly. Thus, deeper and more critical insights will be gained about the impact of dialogical humour on service quality and on customer satisfaction.

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