

Offensive humour

Theoretical and practical challenges

Chi-Hé Elder¹, Eleni Kapogianni² and Ibi Baxter-Webb¹

¹ University of East Anglia | ² University of Kent

In this special issue, we view ‘offensive humour’ as a purposefully broad, catch-all category that includes teasing, sarcasm, put downs and jocular insults (e.g., Dynel & Sinkeviciute 2021). While both ‘offence’ and ‘humour’ are notoriously difficult to define, across the papers in this collection we find the common threads that identify offensive humour are (a) a speaker’s (assumed) intent to amuse, and (b) recipients’ judgements or reactions to the humour as offensive. Crucially, offensive humour typically focuses on attempts to produce amusement through a seemingly faux negative attitude towards some target but without claimed malicious intent, differentiating offensive humour from insults proper, which purposefully – or at least overtly – seek to offend (cf. Dynel & Poppi 2020).

This issue raises a number of interrelated theoretical questions regarding the nature of offensive humour and how it is negotiated by participants across different communicative domains. From the outset, characterising offensive humour through a speaker’s humorous intent presents an immediate – practical and theoretical – challenge: since neither recipients nor analysts have access to a speaker’s private intentions, was the denigrating humour meant to be offensive (e.g., Zajdman 1995)? One difficulty for recipients is that by framing (purposefully) offensive messages through the lens of humour offers perpetrators deniability for having intended any offence, and hence relieves them from being held accountable for the problematic content of their joke: they can always claim to be ‘only joking’. Indeed, it is exactly by invoking a non-serious frame that a speaker may disguise any disparaging and discriminatory attitudes (e.g., racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia), which may be present at a conscious or unconscious level. However, the ‘only joking’ defence is not always successful, leaving open the question of how far this strategy is truly plausible as deniable (see Haugh & Márquez Reiter, this issue; Horn, this issue).

From the perspective of the recipient, feelings of offence may be experienced without necessarily either (a) attributing offensive intentions to the speaker, or even (b) attributing a clear offensive meaning to the speaker’s utterance. Of

course, what counts as ‘offensive’ is subjective, and what might be considered offensive in one context may be viewed as playful teasing in another (Biri & Taniskanen, this issue). The ‘intergroup sensitivity effect’ means that it is more permissible for an in-group member to make a joke at that group’s expense than it is for an out-group member to do so (Thai et al. 2019). The matter of ‘who’s listening’ is equally important: while some people – who are typically not the targets of the joke – may find it funny, others may be offended (Dynel 2013). And while some might be offended, others may not be, simply because they don’t understand the (potential) offensive import of what has been said (Howes et al, this issue).

For those recipients who experience feelings of offence, the guise of humour can make it difficult for them to flag and register having taken offence (Haugh 2015). This is partly because offensive content is often backgrounded as an underlying prejudiced attitude, which makes the act of explicitly calling out the offensive content interactionally difficult (Elder 2021). Furthermore, while what counts as funny is both context-dependent and subject to individual interpretation, to take offence is generally met with disapproval in society (Stollznow 2020). To criticise offensive humour can be seen as ‘political correctness gone too far’, encouraging censorship and posing a threat to free speech, and to refuse to laugh is to be charged as lacking a sense of humour. The so-called ‘snowflake generation’ are labelled by their supposed sensitivity and proneness to offence, being associated with terms such as ‘sensitive’ and ‘triggered’. At the same time, in the wake of #MeToo and global awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement in the past decade, there is greater sensitivity in society towards certain kinds of humour, and it can be argued that making the jokes in the first place contributes to shaping and reinforcing broader societal attitudes towards certain social identities. Indeed, psychological studies have shown that humour that disparages particular groups of people can evidence tolerance and even encouragement of discrimination towards social groups who are the target of such humour (e.g., Ford & Ferguson 2004), and to laugh at a joke can be considered a way of endorsing its ideology. This opens the question of how far speakers can and should be held accountable for their (potentially) offensive humour, especially when that humour is aired in the public domain (see Assimakopoulos et al., this issue; Kapogianni et al., this issue).

Finally, it has to be acknowledged that humorous frames arising in spontaneous interaction, whether that is face-to-face or in written communication, differ from the humorous frame in scripted and/or live-performed comedy. While the humorous frame in spontaneous interaction is under constant negotiation, in comedic settings, the audience opts-in to the humorous frame (Kapogianni et al., this issue). However, live audiences and post-performance audiences opt-in to the humorous frame in different ways. Several papers in this special issue focus on

offensive humour in both scripted and live-performance comedy, addressing how offensive humour is viewed and received is relative to joker persona and identity.

Bookended by two papers that survey offensive humour occurring in a range of private and public settings (Haugh & Márquez Reiter; Horn), the publications in this issue also focus on comedic performance (Kapogianni et al.; Constantinescu; Filani), scripted TV dialogue (Saloustrou & Tsami), online platforms (Tanskanen & Biri), and political discourse (Assimakopoulos et al.; Howes et al.), thus covering a wealth of contextual and discursive perspectives.

Contributions to the special issue

Our special issue starts with a theoretical paper by Haugh & Márquez Reiter, who propose a novel approach to the study of offensive humour by treating offence as a scalar phenomenon. Motivated by the question of how a speaker who claims not to have intended any offence by their humour can still be held accountable by audiences for having caused offence, they undertake a close interactional pragmatics analysis of four cases of offensive humour from different discursive settings. They illustrate how participants use scale as a communicative resource, upscaling or downscaling the content of what is said both through the joke itself and by subsequent reactions. It is through the invoking of such scales that humour may be licensed as offensive, in turn providing a theoretical rationale for why and how a speaker can be held accountable for that offensive humour irrespective of their (claimed) intentions.

The next three papers in this issue turn to comedians performing offensive humour. First, Kapogianni, Elder & Baxter-Webb analyse how comedian persona, framing, and audience dynamics complicate the question of accountability in stand-up comedy, taking Jimmy Carr's 2021 'holocaust joke' as their central case study. They examine the entire life cycle of the joke from the live performance to its reception in the public sphere, demonstrating how while Carr uses comedic framing and meta-commentary to distance himself from the offensive content, these strategies simultaneously acknowledge the joke's potential to offend, thus undermining his plausible deniability. In their discussion of audience commentary, the authors discover that attribution of accountability is dependent on a variety of factors, including not just the attribution of intention and personal beliefs, but also a joke's offensive potential and a joker's normative commitment to it.

Next, Filani's case study analyses Trevor Noah's *France World Cup* joke from a socio-cognitive perspective. Filani argues that the performer's institutional identity is key for contextualizing controversial jokes, while the resulting (mis)interpretation and offence-taking is often a sign of egocentric interpretation on behalf

of the audience, who may have failed to suspend their own identity affiliations (ethnic, national, gender, professional, etc), which in turn disrupts the cooperative dynamic that is expected in performance humour.

The third paper on comedic performance takes a socio-pragmatic perspective. Constantinescu investigates how Romanian comedians in the UK create comedic personae that rely on negative ethnic stereotypes, performing self-deprecating but also potentially offensive humour. While appearing to critique social norms, she finds that their performances often reinforce existing power structures, seeking mainstream acceptance. Constantinescu finds that these 'backwards' comic personae, which may rely on racist and sexist jokes, are often replaced on-stage by a second meta-comedic and critical persona, taking the audience through a journey of negotiating identity, affiliation, and social critique within a hegemonic framework.

The next paper in this issue moves to offensive humour in fictional (scripted) TV comedy. Saloustrou & Tsami take an interactional pragmatic approach to examine how claims to non-seriousness ('just kidding') function in (scripted) teasing sequences, showing that such claims typically follow serious rejections and are met with low-aligning responses, prompting teasers to perform affective, identity, and relational work to preempt the potential taking of offence. Focusing on Greek sitcoms as a separate genre, the authors highlight the roles of both targets and tease-witnesses in negotiating humour and offence, revealing how these teasing sequences are shaped by both micro-level interactional dynamics and broader socio-cultural and genre-specific expectations.

Continuing on the topic of 'only joking' claims, Biri & Tanskanen turn to interactions on the social platform Reddit. Using corpus and close analysis methods, the authors show that the success of such claims depends on subreddit-specific norms and the interactional context, with users collaboratively interpreting and regulating humour through both text and upvotes/downvotes. Ultimately, the study highlights how social platform humour involves dynamic boundary work, where the macro-context plays the most important role in determining a joke's offensiveness. Users whose posts are deemed offensive are still held accountable within the community, even when the humorous nature of their comments is acknowledged.

Next, we turn to two papers about controversial (political) public discourse. Assimakopoulos, Piata & Serafis examine a case from *The Daily Show* (delivered by Trevor Noah; cf. Filani, this issue), with a special focus on the public reception of Noah's commentary regarding racist reactions to Rishi Sunak's election as UK Prime Minister. The authors argue that ascribing humorous intent to the comedian is not a deciding factor for whether or not the commentary is perceived as offensive and, instead, they highlight the importance of influential social actors

in shaping the public's reception of the joke. Placing emphasis on recontextualization (once the joke enters the public sphere; cf. Kapogianni et al., this issue) and epistemic vigilance, this paper demonstrates that audiences are more likely to align their interpretation (and offence-taking) with whoever they consider most trustworthy, rather than relying on the joke's initial context.

This is followed by Howes, Breitholz & Maraev's *topoi*-based analysis of three cases of offensive (political) humour. The authors propose a procedure for approaching the fundamentally subjective matters of humour and offence (and their intersection) which do not rely on individual intentions, but rather map a cluster of *topoi* ('topoplex') salient to each individual hearer (e.g., perceived persona of speaker, relationship between speaker and target of the joke/potentially offensive message, relationship between hearer and target). Through this dialogue-semantic lens, the authors tease apart the different assumptions, cultural experiences and social relationships that account for diverging interpretations of humour and offensiveness, offering a replicable analytical framework for future work.

The special issue is rounded off by Horn's analysis of sarcasm and 'just kidding' as a plausible defence from accusations of lying, enabling the speaker to 'uncommit' themselves from the truth of an utterance. Through theoretical linguistic and empirical observations from across history, he demonstrates how in low stakes situations, a speaker may successfully claim insincerity when the addressee has direct access to the truth (and therefore clearly recognises the insincerity), or by (more or less ambiguously) flagging their insincerity via prosody, winking eyes, or more recently on social media via paralinguistic indicators (e.g. /s to denote sarcasm, winking emojis, or <jk> as a 'just kidding' tag). He highlights how an important factor in the success of the defence strategy may be determined by the double audience, to which different messages are communicated via the same utterance to different members of that audience. But in high stakes, consequential situations, he concludes that the deciding factor comes down to who controls the narrative – court judges, news reporters, or political campaigners – even when the defence isn't plausible at all.

Overall, this special issue's contributions shed light on offensive humour from a variety of theoretical and empirical perspectives, with approaches ranging from interactional sociopragmatics over post-Gricean pragmatics to formal models of inference. Crucially, it covers the interpersonal issue of *negotiating* offensive humour in interaction, bringing together debates regarding the nature of offensive humour, the plausibility of the 'only joking' defence, alongside critical issues of communicative intent, accountability and deniability.

Funding

Open Access publication of this article was funded through a Transformative Agreement with the University of East Anglia.

Acknowledgements

The papers in this special issue were originally presented at a panel on offensive humour organized by the editors at the 18th Conference of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA, Brussels, July 2023), funded by a British Academy/Leverhulme Small Research Grant. Thank you to all the scholars who contributed to this panel both as speakers and as audience members, and to the authors and reviewers who contributed to this special issue.

References

-  Dynel, Marta. 2013. Impoliteness as disaffiliative humour in film talk. In Marta Dynel (ed.), *Developments in linguistic humour theory*, 105–144. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
-  Dynel, Marta & Fabio I. M. Poppi. 2020. Arcana imperii: The power of humorous retorts to insults on Twitter. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 8(1). 57–87.
-  Dynel, Marta & Valeria Sinkeviciute. 2021. Conversational humour. In Michael Haugh, Dániel Z. Kádár & Marina Terkourafi (eds), *The Cambridge handbook of sociopragmatics*, 408–429. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
-  Elder, Chi-Hé. 2021. Microaggression or misunderstanding? Implicatures, inferences and accountability. *Journal of Pragmatics* 179. 37–43.
-  Ford, Thomas E. & Mark A. Ferguson. 2004. Social consequences of disparagement humor: A prejudiced norm theory. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8(1). 79–94.
-  Haugh, Michael. 2015. Impoliteness and taking offence in initial interactions. *Journal of Pragmatics* 86. 36–42.
-  Stollznow, Karen. 2020. *On the offensive: Prejudice in language past and present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
-  Thai, Michael, Alex M. Borgella & Melanie S. Sanchez. 2019. It's only funny if we say it: Disparagement humor is better received if it originates from a member of the group being disparaged. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 85. 103838.
-  Zajdman, Anat. 1995. Humorous face-threatening acts: Humor as strategy. *Journal of Pragmatics* 23(3). 325–339.

Address for correspondence

Chi-Hé Elder
School of Media, Language and Communication Studies (MLC)
University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
England
c.elder@uea.ac.uk

Biographical notes

Chi-Hé Elder is an Associate Professor in Linguistics in the School of Media, Language and Communication Studies at the University of East Anglia (UEA), UK. Her main research interests lie in the field of pragmatics with a focus on misunderstandings and the negotiation of utterance meaning in social interaction.

Eleni Kapogianni is a Lecturer in English Language and Linguistics at the University of Kent, UK. Her main research interests lie in the fields of pragmatics and discourse analysis, with a special focus on nonliteral language, especially verbal irony and humour.

Ibi Baxter-Webb is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of East Anglia, UK. Her main research interests lie in the field of (interpersonal) pragmatics, with a focus on the interactional achievement of pragmatic meaning, especially in relation to linguistic conflict and its resolution.

Publication history

Date received: 2 July 2025

Date accepted: 3 July 2025

Published online: 26 September 2025