A Microanalysis of Comical Hypothetical Direct Reported Speech in Storytelling

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Abstract
This paper explores the interactional practices, sequential organization, and interactional functions of hypothetical direct reported speech (HDRS) in storytelling during one episode of the comedic, conversational podcast *Sad Boyz*. Excerpts are analyzed using conversation analysis, complemented by Goffman's notion of production format. The analysis shows that HDRS differs from non-HDRS in that it involves the speaker marking their direct reported speech as belonging to a specific principal, and then subverting the expectations of that role for comedic effect. Participants typically enter HDRS after direct reported speech and move out of HDRS by producing laughter and agreement markers. HDRS are used to uptake direct enactment of real speech, to build mutual affiliation among the recipients and the storyteller, and to create humor to entertain the larger audience. These findings can inform English language learning and teaching by showing how HDRS functions in conversations.

Introduction

To be able to tell when others are being literal or humorous is an important part of the ability to carry out successful conversations, from those among friends to those in business settings. This paper analyzes a specific conversational phenomenon where hypothetical direct reported speech (HDRS) is employed in a comical manner. Comical HDRS is a highly contextual phenomenon that would be easy for an English Language Learner (ELL) to miss if they do not know what clues to pay attention to. This paper will first discuss previous research on this phenomenon in conversations. Following the research questions and description of the methodology, I will present an analysis of HDRS in a podcast conversation between two hosts and a guest. The analysis will show interactional patterns associated with HDRS and draw conclusions on how it can be approached in an English language classroom to help language learners understand and use this creative form of language.

Reported Speech in Conversations

Goffman's (1981) definition of the "production format" of an utterance is relevant to understanding reported speech. In an utterance, there is first the "animator," the person who simply utters the words, then, the "author," who "selected the sentiments that are being expressed and the words in which they are encoded" (p. 144). Finally, there is the "principal," whose

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position and responsibility is established by the words that are spoken. Goffman notes that, regarding the principal, "one deals … not so much with a body or mind as with a person active in some particular social identity or role, some special capacity as a member of a group … some socially based source of self-identification" (p. 145). Simply put, the animator is the person who says the words, the author is the person who composes the message, and the principal is the person responsible for the message. As an example, imagine students are clarifying classroom instructions. Student A says to Student B, "Professor X wants us to wear safety goggles." In this case, Student A is the animator and the author, and Professor X is the principal. Then, Student B turns to Student C and says, "Professor X wants us to wear safety goggles." Now, Student B is the animator, Student A is the author, and Professor X remains the principal. The "occasion," *when* a thought is being made, is also relevant. The animator of a thought can be reporting from an author and principal that exist in the time period of a past occasion. An utterance can also have multiple production formats embedded within each other. For the previous example, this would occur if, when Student B turned to Student C, they said, "Student A says that Professor X wants us to wear safety goggles." Now, Student B is animator and author of their own thought, with Student A as the principal, but within that thought, there is still an utterance where Student A is the author and Professor X is the principal.

Goffman also specified different roles for the "listener" or "hearer." The listener could be the "addressed," who a speaker is talking to, or they may not even be an official member of the party, eavesdropping or passively listening instead. In any group larger than two, there may be both "addressed" and "unaddressed" listeners, and the difference is often discerned using visual cues. At different times, a listener may choose to step up and take a turn to speak. In the case of something like a podcast, there are unidentified listeners, who the speakers are aware of but do not know the exact identity of.

Goffman's notion of a participation framework provides a more nuanced understanding of the various roles participants might take in social interaction that go beyond the simpler roles of "speaker" and "hearer." However, Holt (2007) noted that this framework does not always effectively account for interactional shifts in role alignment, and does not properly value the hearer's contribution to conversation: "An alternative approach is to focus on the procedures participants employ to take different stances within their talk, and on how recipients understand and contribute to the ongoing series of action this involves as displayed in subsequent contributions" (p. 63). In a situation like a podcast, while the hearer may not be in the room, their presence is felt by the speakers. An eclectic approach is required so that all perspectives, actions, and procedures are taken into account during analysis.

Holt (2000) used conversation analysis to examine how direct reported speech occurs in complaints and the telling of amusing stories. She made the distinction that indirect reported speech is not always intended to be an accurate representation of another's speech, but direct reported speech usually claims to reproduce an utterance directly. Indirect reported speech is usually marked by a combination of tense markers in the reported speech, such as "then," and introductory markers that indicate another speaker, such as "X said" or "X went." Holt also acknowledged the difficulty in verbatim recall of a previous utterance as well as the presence of

the speaker's perspective or agenda on what they are reporting. As such, direct and indirect reported speech are *both* always constructed on some level.

Holt considered reported speech as part of an *enacted interaction*. In an enactment, reported speech is generally framed by a reporting verb plus a pronoun or name, which she refers to as the "pronoun-plus-speech-verbs"(Holt, 2007, p. 65). Importantly, during talk-in-interaction, after the first reporting verb that frames reported speech, the following enactment exists within that same framework. Shifts in prosody and word choice can also indicate a shift in footing (Holt, 2007).

Holt found two situations where direct reported speech often occurs: making complaints and telling amusing stories. She noted that using DRS in complaints implies the speaker's attitude toward a previous situation and invites recipients to react in a particular way. Regarding amusing stories, Holt mentioned that speakers can embed their view on what they are reporting, such as by inserting laughter particles.

In Nguyen's (2015) analysis of source marking in reported speech in Vietnamese narratives, bare (direct) reported speech serves to recreate scenes, support the narrator's actions, show affiliation with a character, and dramatize narratives. Similar to Holt's observations on DRS, Nguyen found that speakers may mark the source of their reported speech only at the start of a lengthy narrative, then omit the source in subsequent reported speech.

Focusing on the interactive nature of reported speech, Holt found that after a DRS has been produced, explicit assessment of the reported utterance is often made by the recipient in the next turn, and the reporter will tend to affirm the recipient's response by creating another reported utterance similar to the recipient's.

Comical Hypothetical Direct Reported Speech

Winchatz and Kozin (2008) defined comical hypothetical speech as speech that is "created in an impromptu fashion by one or several speakers who discursively create hypothetical or … highly improbable scenarios" (p. 383). The comical hypothetical is characterized as playful, imaginary, and discursively created in the moment. They noted the use of a preface like "just imagine if…" or "wouldn't it be funny if…" While the comical hypothetical does not usually or always include HDRS, it can serve a similar role in that it joins participants in laughter.

Holt (2007) examined the enactment of joke initiation in particular in reported speech. She observed, "In the majority of instances the enactments follow the introduction of a hypothetical situation involving one of the participants suggesting something that could happen, or is happening, but which is not a serious proposal" (p. 80). The lack of seriousness is key in these hypothetical situations. The situation can be brief, only a turn or two, or a very elaborate hypothetical. She noted that a joke suggestion is usually followed by laughter from the other participant, who also can choose to extend the joke in enacting a response to the hypothetical. With each new enactment, laughter is usually invited to show collusion with the joke. Eventually, laughter and forms of agreement are used to close the sequence before returning to the previous topic or initiating a new one. Holt (2007) says that "consideration of the activities the participants engage in to achieve this transition from serious talk to these joking scenarios demonstrates the high degree of collaboration and affiliation they display in the face of actions that could be seen as potentially tricky" (p. 94). Thus, comical hypothetical DRS has the ability to show that the

relationship of participants in a group is comfortable enough to discuss a number of topics that could be considered "tricky." This could be a joke about another person, a political opinion, or a difficult circumstance that one of the participants experienced.

Research Questions

Motivated by previous research and an interest in helping learners of English as a second language understand HDRS, this paper aims to address the following interrelated questions:

1. How do participants signal to one another that they are entering HDRS?
2. How do recipients of HDRS respond to it?
3. How do participants move out of HDRS?
4. What are the interactional functions of HDRS?

Methodology

The data examined here are from a comedic, casual talk podcast called *Sad Boyz*. It is co-hosted by Jarvis Johnson (JAR) and Jordan Adika (JOR), two young adult men. The episode examined, "Chad Chad Got Trapped At Disney," features a guest appearance by Chad Chad (pseudonym), who is a young adult woman and will be referred to in transcripts as CHA. Jarvis and Chad Chad are American, and Jordan is British. The episode was one hour and 18 minutes long and published on YouTube and Spotify on July 14, 2023.

In the beginning, this podcast session was chosen for no particular reason, aside from the fact that the video was one continuous session with no cuts, the audio was clear, the content is interesting, and that the speakers' language might serve as a good model for language learners. In accordance with the principle of 'unmotivated looking' (Sacks, 1984), the podcast session was examined to look for a recurrent phenomenon. Through this process, the frequent use of HDRS was noticed, and that became the focus of this paper.

Once a focus was identified, the podcast was listened to multiple times to identify segments in which reported speech was used. This yielded 16 segments. Then, these segments were transcribed, following Jefferson's (2004) convention for conversation analysis. Three of the most representative segments have been analyzed in this paper.

The analysis of the selected segments followed the methodology of conversation analysis (ten Have, 2007). Conversation analysis is a microanalysis of the fine-grained details of talk from participants' perspectives in order to discover patterns of social interaction, in which language plays a key role. Specifically, the analysis focuses on (1) "a formulation of what action or actions are being accomplished," (2) "a grounding of this formulation in the 'reality' of the participants," (3) "an explication of how a particular practice, i.e. an utterance or conduct, can yield a particular, recognizable action" (ten Have, 2007, p. 121). Analysis of the data will also be informed by Goffman's (1981) notion of "production format" as discussed in the literature review.

Analysis

Many instances of comical HDRS are responses to non-hypothetical DRS. In Excerpt 1, Chad Chad is telling a story about getting stuck on a ride at Disneyland and being unable to leave her

seat despite announcements telling her to do so. In this and other excerpts, bold, italicized text indicates non-hypothetical reported speech, and bold text indicates hypothetical reported speech.

Excerpt 1: Disneyland 1 (13:13)

```
1 CHA: yeah. they're tell- the whole thing
2      is like just a repeat message of
3      them telling us to lea:ve. and that
4      we >need to get out of the< bui:lding.
5      and we're like. (.) that's super
6      helpful. thank you:.
7      (0.2)
8 CHA: uh:m=
9 JOR: =by the way: your belt doesn't come off.
10     did you know that? beeee[eeeh
11CHA:                          [>by the way: you're stuck.<=yeah and they were
12     acting like <we sho:uld have been able> to get out of our seatbelts,
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At first, Chad Chad produces indirect reported speech in lines 3 and 4, indicated by the use of "that" (line 3). This use of indirect reported speech serves to set the scene for the story (Wong & Waring, 2020). Then, in line 5, Chad Chad switches to direct reported thought with the verbum-dicendi "we're like" and present tense about how her and her friends were feeling at that moment ("that's super helpful. thank you," lines 5-6).

At the end of her TCU (turn construction unit), Jordan jumps in with latched speech, "=by the way: your belt doesn't come off" (line 9). Jordan's interjection transition of "by the way" not only secures his turn, but also responds to the reported thought Chad Chad shared in lines 5-6, implying a continuation of Chad Chad's DRS. This moves Jordan into hypothetical reported speech. Jordan's alarm noise at the end of his turn enacts the announcement voice and marks it as a Disney announcement (line 9-10). His use of "your" is heard as referring to guests from Disney's standpoint. Thus, Jordan is the animator and the author, but the principal in this instance would be heard as the announcement Disney puts through the speakers to Chad Chad and friends. Jordan's DRS can be interpreted as hypothetical based on a few clues. First, it has been understood at this point that this is not a co-telling of the story, and Chad Chad was the only one experiencing the event. Thus, Jordan would not have knowledge of what Disney announced. Second, his DRS is the explicit admission of a dangerous equipment malfunction without any apology or consolation to the distressed guests, as would normally be expected. This violation of social norms and corporate behavior expectations in Jordan's DRS signals that it is hypothetical. Finally, Jordan's DRS uses a casual formulation, with the expressions "by the way" and "did you know that," which is not typical of public announcements by an establishment such as Disney. All of these cues by Jordan signal to the other participants that his DRS is not an actual one, and the blatant norm violation creates the humor.

In line 11, Chad Chad orients to and extends Jordan's comical HDRS by repeating his phrase "by the way," and continuing the casual tone with "you're stuck," while assuming the same principal role of the Disney staff. The casual and non-apologetic tone maintains the norm violation set up by Jordan and thus makes it possible to interpret Chad Chad's DRS as hypothetical. This is Chad Chad's acknowledgement of and orientation to Jordan's HDRS.

After Chad Chad's response to Jordan's HDRS, Chad Chad transitions back into storytelling with "yeah and they were acting like" in line 11. The filler word "yeah," which is latched to the word "stuck" at the end of her HDRS phrase, secures her storytelling turn. The continuer "and," the shift in pronoun back to "they," and the use of past tense index her return to the story.

Excerpt 2 illustrates the same pattern of HDRS, in which the sentiment of the principal is the opposite of the expected sentiment in the situational context. This is a segment of the same storytelling sequence, a few seconds after Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 2: Disneyland 2 (13:43)

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1  CHA: uhm and so after like twenty five
2       minutes (.) somebuddy: we heard people
3       outside with that.  and
4       >they were like.<hello:?> their-
5       they started kn:ocking on the
6       door:? which doesn't make any [sense?
7  JAR:                               [>oh you're like, < oh:,
8        come in.
9       [((leans forward and waves hand))
10      [heh heh >°come in.°< we're just hanging out.
11 JOR: [xxxx
12 CHA: [yeah, lemme just, lemme open-
13      lemme pop the latch for you.
14 JOR: ((breathy)) oh: we should leave
15      >you say?<
16 CHA: oh:: [you said.  ↓oh sorry.
17 JOR:       [oh:
18 CHA: we've been (.) hanging o:ut,
19 CHA: ↓°yeah°. I
20      don't know. but (.) they finally came and got us.
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Chad Chad continues the story with DRS, signaled by the verbum-dicendi marker "they were like" (line 4). After this DRS, she adds a few more descriptions of what happened, including the detail of people knocking on the door (lines 5-6). This description seems to occasion Jarvis's DRS (line 7) of Chad Chad's thought in response to the knocking. Jarvis ties his DRS to Chad Chad's prior DRS with the same preface marker, "you're like." This marks entry into DRS. Jarvis's DRS is heard as hypothetical because he authors the thought, but the principal is attributed to be Chad Chad, shown by the second-person pronoun, although Chad Chad has not indicated this kind of sentiment about the situation. It is proven to be a comical HDRS by how he leans forward and waves his hand theatrically, laughs, and modulates his speech as he says ">°come in.°<" (lines 9-10). Jordan and Chad Chad both jump in immediately, although it is difficult to discern what Jordan says in line 11. Chad Chad's turn (line 13) is heard as a continuation of Jarvis's DRS as it begins with "yeah," mentions a next action that is consistent with the hypothetical scenario conjured up by Jarvis, and orients to the same principal role in Jarvis's DRS, which is "Chad Chad trapped on the ride." Jordan's DRS (line 14) is produced with

breathy voice and stress on "oh" and "leave," adding drama to his speech through voice modulation. His DRS continues the hypothetical frame created by Jarvis and Chad Chad. The comical nature of these HDRS enactments stems from the content and how it clashes with the principal's role and expectations. In the real-life context, Chad Chad and her friends would reasonably want to leave an unsafe situation; the relaxed responses of "we're just hanging out" and "we should leave, you say?" conflict with the expected position of the principal, and thus create the comical effect.

Excerpt 3 comes from another point in the conversation, where Chad Chad is recounting a rather unfortunate travel experience from her home to Anaheim for VidCon. The participants' use of comical HDRS continues the pattern of conflict with societal expectations and the use of verbum-dicendi to initially establish it.

Excerpt 3: VidCon Flight (18:19)

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1  CHA: =and the >pilot is like.< uhh acshully we're just gonna
2       flo:at arou::nd (.) dallas texas, for a little bi:t? cuz we're
3       not allowed to land (.) right no:w (.) uhm cuz of (.) weather.
4                                  [and
5  JOR: ((microphone to mouth)) [↓u::h to all the passengers i've
6       forgotten >how to< land,=
7  CHA: =hhh ye[ah.
8  JOR:         [i don't kno:w whe:re the:? special wheels
9       are? and they might've (flown) off,
10 JAR: ((mic to mouth)) ↓uhm (.) uh attention passengers, i just wanna
11      float (.) a little [bit,
```

As before, the humor begins when Chad Chad uses direct reported speech in her storytelling, starting with a pronoun-plus-speech-verb phrase of "the pilot is like" and recounts an approximation of what he actually said. At a potential TRP (transition-relevance place), Jordan overlaps with her, using "u::h" to claim the turn, and holds a microphone to his mouth, so it sounds as if his voice is coming from over an intercom. He orients the recipients to his principal role as the pilot by using the stock phrase "to all the passengers," and then violates the normal expectations of a pilot by saying "I've forgotten how to land" (lines 5-6) Chad Chad orients to the joke by laughing (line 7), and Jordan continues to speak, upgrading his previous statement by further expressing an unrealistic lack of competence by the pilot ("I don't know where the special wheels are") and indicating an absurdly serious malfunction ("they might've (flown) off," lines 8-9). Jarvis continues the joke by adding to the pilot's hypothetical announcement (lines 10-11). His imitation of Jordan's mic-to-mouth gesture and recycling of Jordan's stock phrase ("attention passengers") signal his turn as a continuation of what Jordan set up. In doing so, Jarvis also authors what the principal role said in a hypothetical frame.

Discussion

There are several patterns in the above excerpts that can show where comical HDRS is occurring. Firstly, comical HDRS usually occurs after a non-hypothetical enactment of direct or indirect reported speech. In most excerpts, Chad Chad was in the process of storytelling and

enacted DRS or IRS (indirect reported speech), and then Jarvis or Jordan enacted a comical HDRS in response.

As seen in Holt's (2007) and Nguyen's (2015) work, represented talk or reported speech is often marked with verbum-dicendi, especially in the first instance. Not every instance of comical HDRS had these markers, but if they did not, the preceding DRS or RT usually did.

Other markers that commonly occur in conjunction with pronoun-plus-speech-verbs and proximity to DRS were voice modulation, body language, laughter, upgrading, and repetition. These actions are used to enact, embellish, and orient to other speakers.

Lastly, conflict with social expectations about the principal role is one of the strongest indications of a comical HDRS. All the examples of this phenomenon above involve situations where the principal role of the participation framework is used in ways more versatile than Goffman initially outlined in *Forms of talk* (1981). While Goffman set out to define the principal role as that which "deals … not so much with a body or mind as with a person active in some particular social identity or role" (Goffman, 1981), in these video excerpts, the principals are invoked to provide a set of expectations that stand in contrast with the hypothetical statements that participants create and assign to the principals. It is this collaboratively constructed contrast that serves as the basis of shared humor.

Conclusion

The enactment of comical HDRS in responses to public storytelling works to display the speaker's understanding of the point of the story detail, show affiliation with the storyteller, and provide entertainment for the larger audience. The analysis above has revealed specific interactional practices that speakers employ to achieve these actions. As such, it has useful implications for language learning and teaching.

In a classroom, one of the most effective ways to make the phenomenon of HDRS clearer to ELLs is to start with direct reported speech and the ability to identify "pronoun-plus-speech-verbs" markers such as "he goes," "they said" and so on. The phrase "she was like,", while not a verb phrase, is also often used for quotations in informal English and should also be mentioned. Activities could ask students to recount a previous experience (possibly related to the topic of a unit) where they have to use one of these speech markers. Then, other students have to raise their hand when they identify that the direct reported speech is happening.

After students are comfortable identifying and using DRS, the hypothetical and comical aspects of the phenomenon can be added onto these foundations. Students can be given the beginning of a conversation and then complete it off the cuff using a comical HDRS. Including authentic examples of the phenomenon such as the data excerpts above will also improve students' cultural competence with regards to knowing what English speakers may find humorous.

While hypothetical direct reported speech and comical hypotheticals have been named and discussed (Winchatz & Kozin, 2008), the comical use of HDRS is a unique phenomenon that has not yet been addressed explicitly with regards to English language learners. Discerning seriousness and humor in a second language can be a great challenge for learners, and naming

and outlining these phenomena and the patterns that indicate them will hopefully help generate more laughter inside and outside of the classroom.

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