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Humour in rugby union radio commentary: A micro analysis

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Abstract

Incidents of humour in the radio commentary of rugby union provide an example of semi-spontaneous humour that exists between informal conversation and professional performance. This is exemplified in analysis of the reporting, both quantitative and qualitative, of two teams of commentators providing commentary on the same three rugby union test matches. In order to account for the formal qualities and broadcast nature of this humour, the analysis develops a mixed method approach that combines quantitative analysis with both literary and conversational approaches to humour. The resulting analysis suggests that micro communities of practice evolve their own patterns of use for humour that draw on a common pool of strategies. It is argued that this particular form of conversational humour is best understood in relation to the social and cultural context of its broadcast, rather than in terms of the interpersonal dynamics of the participants.

Keywords

Humour; Commentary; Sports; Rugby; Conversation; Mixed Methods

1 Introduction

The language of sport covers a large territory from lexis in the form of dictionaries of the vocabulary of a sport, for example baseball terms (https://www.baseballmode.com/baseball-terms/), through to the genres specific to individual sports, for example basketball (Ferguson, 1983). In this study we focus on the sport of rugby union having been preceded there by, among others, Wilson (2013) who looked at the way in which players spoke to one another while playing, to File (2012) who looked at after match interviews in which an individual player is interviewed by a professional commentator, to Kuiper and Lewis (2013) who compared radio and television commentaries of the same game, to Kuiper et al. (2014) who examined the way

in which oral transmission accounts of the way in which the genre of rugby commentary has migrated from English to Māori. Each of these linguistic varieties has its own conditions of use and its own genre characteristics. For example, Māori rugby commentary is broadcast on Māori radio stations. The following study asks a new question: namely how is humour employed in live spoken commentary. Although there is a substantial body of work on humour in text commentary (Chovanec, 2008; 2011; 2012; 2017; 2018), to our knowledge there is no previous study of the intentional employment of humour in spoken sports commentary.

The main purpose of live sports commentaries is to provide for an audience a contemporaneous account of what is currently happening in a sports event. The manner in which that is accomplished differs from sport to sport. A horse racing commentary accompanying a televised horse race provides the names of the horses in the order in which they are coming in the race and the distance between the horses both relative to other horses in the field of runners and, at times, the distance of the runner from the rail on the inside of the track (Kuiper, 2009). Horse races are relatively short and there is no room for anything other than a basic account of the events the commentator is witnessing. Sports commentary of this kind, which directly recounts events the commentator is witnessing, is usually termed play-by-play commentary. Slower sports, which have times when the significant events of the sport are not taking place, such as breaks in play when a player is injured, allow for commentary which is not that of events currently taking place. Such commentary is conventionally termed colour commentary (Ferguson, 1983).

One of the recurring, though often relatively minor, features of colour commentary is the use of humour. Humour does not always fit easily into linguistic accounts of commentary as a form, which tend to characterise it in sets of terms such as description, explanation, and opinion (Crystal and Davy, 1969), narrating, evaluating, elaborating, and summarising (Delin, 2000) and description and elaboration (Chovanec, 2018). Such accounts make the (fair) assumption that the content of such commentary is overwhelmingly concerned with either describing the play or providing complementary analysis and explication. In the context of such accounts of commentary, humour appears as an exception or a disruption. However, what such accounts neglect is the extent to which commentary can and does function as a form of entertainment beyond or in addition to the provision of a direct account of the game and its wider sporting context. The concept of colour commentary thus points towards the potential of commentary to incorporate elements of performative entertainment in addition to the description of a sports event.

Even if only to a minor extent, sports commentators can fulfil the role of performers and entertainers: an aspect of their practice that can be more or less emphasised depending upon both the sociocultural and sporting context. In some forms of sports commentary, humour is an integral part of the commentary. For example, commentary on long-form cricket games tends to incorporate a substantial portion of gentle humour and banter (Smith and Higgins, 2020; Williams, 2011), while on-line football blogs feature humorous interchanges between the commentator and the readers of the on-line blog, commentators selecting contributions from readers' responses on the basis of their humour (Chovanec, 2017). In this study, by contrast, we examine incidents of humour which are rare. They are found in commentaries of the same three rugby union football games produced by two different commentary teams. By adopting a mixed methods approach to examine these incidents from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives, we characterize both the occurrence of this humour and a set of formal

features that speak to its wider role in the context of rugby union. This analysis not only documents the feature of this specific micro-genre, but also contributes to wider conversations regarding the production of humour in conversation-like contexts.

Our study is of the radio commentary of rugby union, a relatively slow sport, produced by teams of commentators in which the speaker changes from time to time. Live sports commentary can be relayed through a variety of media: radio, TV, on-line. Each of these offers its own affordances and imposes constraints on how the commentary may be produced. Within those constraints there are also further conventions. For example, on-line blog commentary is constrained by the commentator having to type the commentary (Chovanec, 2008). There is conventionally a set of relatively fixed formats for the way such a commentary might be presented in a particular medium by a particular provider for a particular sport. In this context, one commentator tends to be the leading play-by-play commentator while the others provide colour comment almost exclusively. During colour commentary periods, the play-by-play commentator, also provides such commentary. In such commentaries the speaker operates across two levels of interaction (Jacker and Locher, 2017; Landert, 2021: 72) with two distinct audiences: his fellow commentators and the radio audience. The radio audience is both a target audience and a set of recipients of the conversations conducted among the commentators.

2 Commentary humour

The specific focus of this study is what we term 'incidental commentary humour', namely humour which is unplanned, unscripted, and arises occasionally within a commentary. It may relate obliquely to what is happening in the game but not necessarily. This kind of humour in sports commentary is neither entirely performative, nor entirely conversational. Rather, it occupies an ambiguous space between the two; an example of spontaneous humour talk that exists between informal conversation and professional performance. On the one hand, despite its orientation towards a prospective audience, it would be incorrect to characterize this humour as produced or planned in the manner of comic performances, such as stand-up, sit-com or sketch comedy. Indeed, even compared to a constitutively spontaneous comic form, like 'improv comedy,' the humour of sports commentary is still relatively unstructured and extemporaneous (Landert, 2021). It usually arises without clear motivation and is for the most part incidental to the main entertainment concern, which is the description of a live sports match. In addition, sports commentators are in no way professional comedians (and generally unlikely to be mistaken for them), and their ability to inject comedy into the proceedings is decidedly secondary in importance to their ability to accurately and efficiently describe the unfolding of the game.

On the other hand, commentary humour is not simply spontaneous and emergent as would be the case in the context of informal conversation or banter. While commentary humour shares many features of conversational humour – including a context bound nature, collaborative productive, and 'spontaneous outbursts of verbal play' (Beal and Mullan, 1997; Coates, 2007: 31) – its mediated nature complicates any straightforward explanation in terms of interpersonal conversational dynamics. For example, whereas conversational humour can be considered a type of informal play, commentary humour is quite literally a form of *work*: both because it is carried out by paid participants as part of their professional duties and because it is accordingly shaped by expectations regarding the entertainment role of the commentary broadcast. This humour does not simply emerge

spontaneously, but rather is generated reflexively by participants as part of their professional role as mediated entertainers. In this manner, incidental commentary humour somewhat resembles the humour of improv comedy: for while the commentators are spontaneously producing humour, they are doing it in a manner akin to fiction, insofar as the conversation is performed for an audience and need not reflect actual interpersonal dynamics (Landert, 2021).

Consequently, unlike the freeform potential of conversational humour, commentary humour is expected to adhere to the conventions of its genre and is orientated towards the knowledge and attitudes of an imagined audience for whom it is always in part performed. It is the inverse of a comic conversation in a sitcom or comic film; fictional entertainment that plays out as if it were a conversation (Dynel, 2011). Instead, incidental commentary humour is an actual semi-spontaneous conversation that plays out as if it were a performance.

2.1 Identifying commentary humour

The mixed-methods approach was necessary due to the formal expression of humour in this specific commentary context which was characterised by deadpan delivery and an absence of conventional conversational markers of humour. In keeping with sociocultural norms regarding Australasian humour, and to a lesser extent British humour, the instances of commentary humour observed are often deadpan in style, premised in irony and characterized by ambiguous delivery that did not mark them off from the surrounding conversation (Goddard, 2006; Holm, 2017; Mullan, 2020). Consequently, and in contrast to forms of humour studied in other conversational and quasi-conversational contexts (Dynel and Sinkeviciute, 2021), there is not always a clear instance of keying or a shift in frames to indicate that a particular remark was intended as humorous. The difficulty of clearly identifying humour in this context was further compounded by an absence of other 'contextualisation cues' (Gumperz, 1982: 131). Not only are cues such as gestures and facial expressions unavailable to the audience due to the radio medium, but often the marker of laughter is also absent due to 'the need to keep up an unbroken flow of speech and to sound interesting while doing so' (Crystal and Davy, 1969: 130), which minimises opportunities for extended digression from the description of the game. This means that laughter could not be used as a reliable marker of humour in the context of commentary.

The structured and purposeful nature of commentary talk also limits the forms of conversational humour that can be employed. Due to task-orientated nature of the commentary, there is little room for substantial departures from that topic, which would risk being construed as unprofessional. Consequently, instances of humour tend to take less disruptive forms such as irony and wordplay that do not interrupt the flow of conversation (Norrick, 2003). This emphasis on irony has further consequences for the interpretation of humour, insofar as ironic humour often relies upon assumed in-group knowledge as a requirement for recognition (Gal, 2019; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017) As discussed below, many of the instances of humour not only relied upon shared knowledge between performers and recipients, but also upon a set of shared attitudes towards the sport of rugby and its cultural meanings. Hence an interpreter unfamiliar with the conventional assumptions and behaviours expected in this particular rugby subculture would struggle to identify, let alone explain, the humour that emerges in this data set.

As a consequence of these formal and elements – which emerged as result of cultural context, the affordances of the delivery medium, and the formal requirements of

the commentary genre – it is particularly difficult to identify commentary humour in this sample in any unimpeachably empirical way. Instead, the subtlety and ambiguity of the instances of humour demanded a more reflexive and interpretive approach to both the identification and explication of humour by those conversant with the cultural and rhetorical context of this commentary and its humour. Accordingly, the instances of humour were identified through the interpretive analysis of the commentaries as if they were formal media texts with an emphasis upon shifts in tone, register, and content, especially in remarks that departed from the literal description of the game. Due to the specificity of the rugby commentary microgenre, and the reliance upon specific forms of (sub)community literacy (Gal et al., 2020: 14 – 15)., this analysis was undertaken by the two authors. Both authors read through the full set of transcripts, and instances of humour were mutually confirmed and extensively discussed during analysis.

In particular, interpretive attention was paid to how formal textual elements work in tandem performative techniques employed by the participants to mark specific utterances as expressions of humour, and how do those expressions rely upon wider forms of social and cultural knowledge (Kuipers, 2008; Lockyer and Pickering, 2005; Niewenhuis and Zijp, 2022). Following this method, rather than identifying humour through textual correspondence to pre-existing ideas about what constitutes joke-work or comic cues, humour is identified through long-form analysis through which the interpretive justification emerges out of the discussion (as is illustrated in section 4), rather than with reference to a stable set of cues or textual features (Holm, 2022: 360). Such work is necessarily to some extent interpretive, rather than strictly empirical (Palmer, 1987).

3 The data

The data on which this study is based consists of six transcribed radio commentaries. While the games themselves have a running time of 80 minutes, breaks in play when the clock is stopped mean that the commentaries run for just over two hours. The three games of international rugby union football were played between the New Zealand All Blacks and the British and Irish Lions in New Zealand in 2017. One team of commentators was from the United Kingdom (UK), the other from New Zealand (NZ). The commentary teams were from talkSPORT in the UK and Radio New Zealand Sport in NZ.

The transcripts of the six commentaries were verbatim but without prosodic features such as pausing being recorded, the rationale being that verbatim transcription contained sufficient detail to illustrate the factors germane to this study. The transcripts were subdivided into clauses and, where there was no clause in an utterance, phrases, for ease of later data coding and analysis. Each verb-based construction was given a separate cell as were small clauses (Williams, 1975) where the verb was 'understood' from context, as were clauses without subjects where the subject was 'understood'. Noun phrases such as the names of players, where they were not part of a clause, and interjections such as *Jee*, *Yea* and *Ooh* were each given a separate cell. Each match yielded around 3,500 units of analysis per commentary resulting in roughly 20,000 units in total, 10,000 from each commentary team. Speakers were coded as PP, play-by-play, CC1 – CC4, colour commentators. Units of analysis were coded as line numbers.

Humorous interpolations into the commentaries of these three games are distributed as follows. There were one hundred and four instances of humour in total, thirty one in the UK commentary and seventy three in the NZ commentary. Most instances were of a single commentator displaying humour. Of the cases where there was humorous dialogue between commentators, only two such instances appeared in UK commentaries while there were eleven in the NZ corpus.

4 Quantitative analysis

In table 1 we present data on the distribution of humour in each of the three games for each of the two commentary teams.

Table 1 Distribution and totals of incidents of humour for the two commentary teams

	Test 1			Test 2			Test 3		
	UK instances	**Line no.**	**NZ instances**	**UK instances**	**Line no.**	**NZ instances**	**UK instances**	**Line no.**	**NZ instances**
	0	1-500	3	1	1-500	3	0	1-500	3
	2	500-1000	2	5	500-1000	3	1	500-1000	4
	0	1000-1500	0	1	1000-1500	4	2	1000-1500	2
	2	1500-2000	0	0	1500-2000	2	1	1500-2000	2
	0	2000-2500	4	4	2000-2500	7	0	2000-2500	2
	0	2500-3000	4	2	2500-3000	6	5	2500-3000	6
	3	3000-3500	2	2	3000-3500	5	0	3000-3500	4
	0	3500-	1		3500-	4		3500-	
Totals	7		16	15		34	9		23

Table 1 shows that the UK commentary team is much less inclined to humour than the NZ team by a ratio about 1:2. The second test contains more humour for both commentary teams than the first and third tests and the distribution of humour throughout the commentary is uneven for both commentary teams but picks up later in the game for the NZ team. Humour is sometimes restricted to one speaker and less frequently more than one.

Table 2 Initiation of humour by single commentator.

	Test 1		Test 2		Test 3	
Role	**UK instances**	**NZ instances**	**UK instances**	**NZ instances**	**UK instances**	**NZ instances**
PP	6	11	15	15	6	15
CC1	1	1	0	8	1	1
CC2	0	2	0	5	0	3
CC3	0		0		0	

CC4	0					
Totals	7	14	15	28	7	19

Roles: PP, play by play commentator; CC1 - 4 colour commentators.

Table 2 shows that almost all instances of humour in the UK team's commentary are produced by the play-by-play commentator. While the PP commentator in the NZ team produces most of the non-collaborative humour, in the second tests there is more produced by the colour commentators. Note: the colour commentators in the second test are a different pair from those of the first and third tests.

Table 3 Collaborative creation of humour

Test 1			**Test 2**			**Test 3**		
Collaborative humour	**S**	**NZ**	**Collaborative humour**	**UK**	**NZ**	**Collaborative humour**	**UK**	**NZ**
Instances	0	2		0	5		2	4
Initiator			**Initiator**			**Initiator**		
PP		1	**PP**		1	**PP**	1	2
CC1		1	**CC1**		2	**CC1**		2
CC2			**CC2**		2	**CC2**	1	
Participants			**Participants**			**Participants**		
PP/CC1		2	**PP/CC1**		1	**PP/CC1**	1	2
PP/CC2			**PP/CC2**		3	**PP/CC2**	1	1
CC1/CC2			**CC1/CC2**		1	**CC1/CC2**		1

Table 3 shows who is collaborating with whom in collaborative instance of humour making. The UK team has only two instances where there is humorous dialogue compared with eleven instances in the New Zealand team. The UK team's dialogues are initiated by the play-by-play commentator (1) and by the Welsh colour commentator (1). The NZ dialogues are initiated by the full range of commentators, especially in the second test.

It is clear from the commentary that the NZ commentators for the second test (Wellington team) are very familiar with each other, that the side-line commentator in particular is much more in evidence and that they have a more joking relationship than the Auckland team for the first and third tests. In terms of turn taking, the UK team's collaborative humour features only two turns: initiation and response while the NZ team's turn taking is as follows: test one: 3.5 turns on average; test two: 3.4, test three: 2.75. In other words, the NZ teams have more extended collaborative exchanges to create humour.

In summary, there are significant differences in the way in which the NZ and UK commentary teams 'do' humour and since there are two NZ teams one in Auckland and one in Wellington, even there, significant differences exist between the two NZ teams. This suggests that doing humour in these radio commentaries is a localised team-commentary practice.

5 Qualitative analysis

For the purpose of analysis, this commentary is treated as an example of broadcast talk that involves 'certain aspects of everyday conversation [that] are imported into

the broadcaster's discourse and modified according to the distinctive institutional contexts of broadcasting' (Hutchby, 2006: 12). Such humour transcends the binary between scripted-ness and authenticity (Dynel and Chovanec, 2021), because while it is spontaneously produced, the influence of the broadcast context means that it would be a mistake to treat it as an expression of true feelings and opinions of the participants. Instead, the humour that emerges from the commentary sits on a spectrum between informal conversation small talk and performed stand-up comedy (Brodie, 2014). This commentary is therefore not analysed as a conversation, but rather interpreted as a performed and produced media text that forms its own micro-genre: one that can be interpreted as an expression of an ideologically-inflected set of beliefs that are shared (or believed to be shared) by an audience (Gill, 2018).[1] Despite the relatively minor nature of the humour performances relative to the wider commentary, it is possible to identify and characterise a set of distinctive formal features of this micro genre through qualitative discourse analysis.

5.1 An example of analysis

Several of the main features of commentary humour as it emerges across this sample can be illustrated with reference to an exchange that occurred between the New Zealand commentary team during the second game of the tour. In this example, the participants discuss and develop the comic suggestion that the 'advantage law' (which governs the referee's discretion to allow play to continue following a penalty) has been written by the Chinese philosopher, Confucius.

Test 2, NZ

2363	CC2	I do have
2364	CC2	to say,
2365	CC2	when you read the advantage law in the world rugby rule book,
2366	CC2	it does appear
2367	CC2	as though it has been authored by Confucius.
2368		
2369	CC1	Hahaha
2370		
2371	CC2	OK?
2372		
2372	PP	Confucius actually made a bit of sense from time to time.
2374		
2375	CC2	Yea, yea
2376	CC2	but also once in a while too there was some stuff there

The humour here is initially premised on the incongruous statement by CC2 that the particular rule in question was authored by an ancient philosopher; given that Confucius's

[1] One of the consequences of this analytic approach, is that this humour is not understood to fulfil the interpersonal functions often invoked in the analysis of conversational humour. Instead, the participants are speaking as public performers and the commentary treated as a co-created, reflexive, and intermittently comic performance. The humour can therefore be considered 'defunctionalized' to expand upon the terminology offered by Marta Dynel and Valeria Sinkeviciute (2021).

authorship is not possible, it is ludicrous to suggest him as the author. PP then adds to the humorous exchange by repeating, and thereby emphasising, the unlikely comparison between the somewhat obtuse rules of an international sport and the writing of a renowned Chinese scholar.

There is more, however, to the Confucius remark than simply the proposal of an unlikely authorship. The reference to Confucius is not arbitrary, but rather evokes a specific set of connotative meanings that would be legible to many members of the audience for this radio broadcast. In doing so, this exchange adheres to a noted feature of spontaneous conversational humour which often 'relies on shared knowledge and in-group norms, which can make it opaque to outsiders' (Coates, 2007: 31). In particular, to an older generation of New Zealanders to refer to something 'as though it has been authored by Confucius', is to suggest that it is confusing, difficult to understand, or resists easy interpretation. Taking this assumed meaning into account, this humour is therefore not simply a case of incongruity, but also contains a secondary meaning: the comic comparison to Confucius also functions as a ridicule of the rule for being difficult to understand or even poorly communicated. In this instance, a comparison to Confucius provides the comic means to criticise the 'advantage rule' as difficult to understand.

It is also relevant to note that this secondary meaning draws upon xenophobic, and potentially racist, attitudes towards Chinese philosophy and culture more generally. In contemporary China, Confucius is not regarded as a confusing writer, but rather is celebrated as the foundational thinker of Chinese social and political thought. The assumption that Confucius can be used as a shorthand for something that is unclear or confusing is therefore unlikely to be shared by Chinese members of the audience (or scholars of philosophy). Instead, it serves to reproduce a form of casual racism whereby Chinese culture is associated with inscrutability. This is not to ascribe racist intentions or even conscious racist meanings to the commentators, but rather to note that the humour here employed relies upon an unexamined shorthand – one that is here used unreflexively – and which is embedded within inherited racist attitudes and assumptions.

This interpretation of the Confucius statement as a form of comic criticism – rather than a simple instance of nonsense – is reinforced by the follow-up comment that 'Confucius actually made a bit of sense from time to time'. While it is possible to read this as a refutation of the initial remark, such a contradiction would be out of place in terms of the general flow and tone of the commentary. Therefore, it makes more sense in this instance to read the remark not as a contradiction regarding the legibility of Confucius, but rather as an amplification of the previous criticism of the advantage rule. Rather than a rebuttal of the denigration of Confucius, this follow-up comment maintains a negative assessment of the clarity of his writing, while further emphasising the failure of the advantage rule, which is now declared to be not just *as* confusing as Confucius, but actually *more* confusing. In doing so, such an exchange not only confirms the implicit critical meaning of the first reference; it also illustrates how the commentary participants work collaboratively in the spontaneous co-production of humour.

Finally, there is one last element that is important for understanding the humour of this short exchange at the level of formal expression. In his initial introduction of Confucius, CC2 adopts a mode of speaking characterised by exaggeratedly indirect phrasing. Rather than saying that the advantage rule has been 'written by Confucius', he instead states that 'it does appear/ as though it has been authored by Confucius'. In the context of sports commentary, where language is often straightforward and direct in order to capture the flow of the game, this circumlocutionary phrasing stands out from the

surrounding discussion in terms of not only its indirectness, but also its pretensions to formality. This is an example of what Marta Dynel refers to as 'register clash', specifically 'upgrading', whereby language and phrasing from a 'higher register' are employed in the discussion of subject matter for which such formality would otherwise be considered inappropriate (2009: 1291). In the case of the transcripts here examined, such forms of register clash, especially those involving ornate or euphemistic language, are frequently employed as a means to generate humour in the context of the ongoing description of the rugby game through the incongruous adoption of an unexpected form of address.

This comic allusion to Confucius thus demonstrates three key features of the incidental commentary humour more broadly. First, it emerges spontaneously between participants who are not solely or even primarily humourists, but rather integrate humour into a conversation-like verbal exchange that is primarily concerned with the accurate description of a rugby match. Accordingly, this humour is predominantly premised on elements associated with conversational humour, including teasing, banter, retorts and allusion. Second, and also in common with conversational humour in general, this humour relies upon 'implicit references and the shared knowledge between the participants' (Beal and Mullan, 1997: 119). However, in this instance the relevant participants also include the radio audience as well as the immediate conversationalists. This humour therefore cannot depend upon the sorts of highly local or intimate knowledge that would be present in an actual informal conversation. Instead, it relies upon more broadly shared cultural norms that it nonetheless evokes as if they were more tightly controlled in-jokes. Third, this example demonstrates the particular importance of 'register clash' as a central and recurring feature of rugby commentary humour: one that is indicative of a common orientation that shapes much of this humour and points towards a common and consistent motivation. Hence, although, this particular example is more formally complex than most instances of humour in the commentary, the manner in which this instance of humour is produced is indicative of several key themes that characterise the humour of the transcripts more broadly.

5.2 Getting the set pieces right

The possibilities of commentary humour are determined by the flow of the conversation in which it appears. That is, in turn, often determined by the external reference point of the game itself. Given this context, there is limited space for extended digressions or complicated joke-work and any humour must fit within and alongside the rhythms of the sport. In the absence of substantial time or conversational space in which to develop, the form of commentary humour is often limited to uncomplicated shifts in tone or phrasing. In addition, because this humour emerges in the context of an ongoing conversation, it is often only weakly marked as such; there are rarely clear setups, punchlines or even any indication of a firm delineation regarding when humour starts or stops. As a consequence of these two characteristics – opacity and simplicity – the humour of these transcripts is in theory easy to miss; for both audiences and analysts alike. Yet, in practice, this ambiguity is minimised by the way in which the instances of humour tend to fall into well-defined patterns that repeat and riff on two strategies for creating ironic humour that recur across the coverage: formal speech and alcohol consumption. Following the language of rugby, we will refer to these strategies as 'set pieces': repeated elements of the performance that recur multiple times throughout the game with different variations.

5.3 Register Clash

As noted above, one of the most prominent recurring elements of commentary humour is the affectation of formal speech, or other associated forms of register clash, when describing the actions of the game. There are several different ways in which this humour manifests itself.

The simplest is the use of unnecessary (and unhelpful) technical terms. For example, across the games, the New Zealand PP commentator refers to rain as 'precipitation' (Test 2, NZ, PP, l.2942), the 'water-boy' (who provides drinks for players on the field) is referred to alternately as a 'hydrologist' (Test 2, NZ, PP, l.1406) and a 'water technician' (Test 2, NZ, PP, l.1408), and a player who has been tackled across the wet pitch is described as having been 'aqua-planed' (Test 2, NZ, PP, l.3167). What these instances all bear in common (besides involving water – a common feature of rugby in New Zealand) the use of overly technical language that does not provide any additional information about what is being described. Such description therefore does not serve any pragmatic function, but rather can be thought to intentionally break with the conversational maxim of manner, by providing information in a manner that obscures rather than illuminates the point in question (Eco, 1988: 273). Moreover, while a single violation of this maxim would not necessarily be interpreted as comic if experienced in isolation, the cumulative effect over time works to suggest that such remarks are not mistakes, but rather should be understood as a form of play, a recurring comic motif that serves to enliven the description of the game for both the commentators and the audience.

The comic nature of this indirect language can be seen in other instances where the commentary team inject humour into their conversation by interpreting on-field action in terms that imply a greater deal of etiquette than would be expected. In comparison to the use of technical language vocabulary above, these passages of humour are slightly more complex. This is because they not only involve the substitution of words, but rather the temporary adoption of an excessively polite or mannered form of speaking that implies a particular form of social relations. For example, when describing a period of play, the commentary team reinterpret the actions of players as if they formed part of a polite conversation:

Test 2, NZ

2256	PP	Aaron Smith says,
2257	PP	I'll take care of the half back duties thanks, Sam.
2258	PP	You go
2259	PP	and clear out from that lovely carry
2260	PP	Cody Taylor's just done for us.

The humour here is premised on the narration of the on-field action as if it took the form of a civil conversation between the players. The listening audience is not expected to believe, however, that the players literally engaged in a polite conversation regarding their respective duties. Rather, by re-interpreting the on-field action in those terms, the commentators create a comic effect by comparing the rough and fast-moving nature of the game and the probably short and to-the-point on-field chat to a mannered conversation. It may even be that the commentator picked up by lip reading a monosyllabic expletive utterance indicating Aaron Smith's displeasure at having his

duties taken over. As with the use of unnecessarily technical language, the humour here is a result of the contrast between the roughness of the action and on-field talk, and the civility of the description.

An almost exact parallel is to be found in the UK transcripts.

UK, Test 3

1994	PP	And Andy Farrell
1995	PP	shall we say
1996	PP	was fairly sure
1997	PP	that wasn't forward.
1998	CC1	He said that a lot quicker than you though.
1999	PP	Yea
2000	PP	He used slightly less words
2001	pp	than I did.
2002	PP	Put it that way.

Elsewhere, a similar comic effect is achieved when the commentators feign to adopt a similar form of polite conversation when addressing either the audience at home or one another. This can be seen in the following exchange, where the commentators discuss what they frame as player's unproductive enthusiasm:

Test 2, NZ

3459	PP	Well I think
3460	PP	someone just needs
3461	PP	to grab TJ
3462	PP	and say
3463	PP	do chill.
3564	PP	Just chill.

Or in this statement regarding the presence of a former high-profile rugby player in the stands:

Test 3, NZ

2332	PP	I noticed
2334	PP	that Richard Hugh McCaw was in attendance, Charlie (CB heh heh heh).

In both these instances, the commentators themselves adopt the excessively polite mode of speaking which they attributed to the players in the previous example. In the first example, the most important section in the passage is the phrase 'do chill': a phrasing that implies a mannered form of speaking through the use of 'do' as an indirect expression of an imperative. The unlikely nature of this language construction is further emphasised when the PP reverts to what might be the expected informal expression, 'just chill', in the next line. In the second line, the polite formality manifests in both the use of the player's full name and the excessively formal phrasing that he is 'in attendance' (as opposed to the more succinct and conventional expression that he is 'here'). Whereas the player in question is usually conventionally referred to as 'Richie McCaw', here the commentators not only refer to him by his full first name, but also include his middle name. The comic

nature of this remark – where the commentators adopt a mode of unwarranted formality – is confirmed by the laughter in response.

Such linguistic play through register clash is not restricted to the New Zealand commentary team. It can also be found in the conversation of the British commentators. Although, humour is less present overall in the UK commentaries, when it does appear it tends to conform to similar patterns to the New Zealand discussion. For example, there is a similar tendency to gesture towards etiquette as a site of comic incongruity in the following passage:

Test 2, UK
500 PP It's not quite the etiquette
501 PP if you're on a golf course,
502 PP but if you're in the rugby set
503 PP it's all fair in love and war.

Operating much more directly than in the New Zealand discussion, here the mismatch between the concept of etiquette and the expectations of the sport of rugby is made explicit. Although the direct reference to the question of etiquette renders the remark less immediately humorous – comic effect tends to be more successful when a 'rule is not cited but assumed as implicit' (Eco, 1988: 274) – this play in contrast nonetheless conforms to the patter of the previous remarks. In a second example, the British commentators again achieve a similar form of humour through the use of euphemism that then leads into an anecdote:

Test 2, UK
710 PP Mako Vunipola appearing
711 PP to grab um
712 PP shall we say the gentleman's area
713 PP of Owen Franks during a scrum in the first test.
714 PP He was asked about it in his press conference
715 PP and his response was
716 PP well if I don't
717 PP I'm going
718 PP to give away a penalty
719 PP for not binding
720 PP so I'd better grab something.
721 PP I don't know if Owen Franks entirely agreed with that.

As with the initial Confucius example, the full humour of this section can only be understood with reference to the 'tendentiousness' of these remarks (Billig, 2005). Not only is this a discussion premised on a particularly polite manner of speech, but it is also concerned with an incident where a man grabs another man by the testicles. The humour of these remarks is therefore not only premised on the incongruity between the physicality of the action and the delicate language used to describe it, but also is informed by the taboo nature of the act under discussion. The nature of the event described therefore gives this humour an added level of 'frisson' that goes beyond the incongruous delicacy that it shares with the other examples.

The final example of register change manifests through the use of metaphors, which work to civilise the proceedings. One way this is achieved is by transplanting the action elsewhere, for example, describing a brief strategic conversation between players as *a board meeting* (Test 2, NZ, CC1, l.2513), or describing a player as standing behind a scrum *like he's in the lobby of a hotel* (Test 1, NZ, PP, l.270). Such accounts metaphorically shift the action to more corporate or urbane contexts in a way that contributes to the wider comic work here of drawing distinctions that emphasise the rugged nature of the sport. A similar tendency towards euphemism can also be seen in the UK commentaries, although they tend towards metaphors of childhood, rather than urbanity. For example, the bench to which players are sent when they have received a yellow card is called the 'naughty seat' (Test 2, UK, 2138). A player's stomach is called his 'breadbasket' (Test 1, UK, 509).

This use of metaphor is even more present in the final example which constitutes an extended exchange constructed around the unlikely image of a tea service in the description of a player who has just flattened an opposition player and then stands demonstratively showing off his barrel chest:

Test 2, NZ

837	CC2	Have another look at it.
838	CC2	It wasn't the tea pot.
839	CC2	It was the tea set.
840	CC2	He gave him the full.
841	CC2	He gave him the full.
842	CC2	He gave him the lot of the finest bone china.
843	CC2	Grandma's emptied the Royal Doulton.
844	CC2	He's got the full set out.

By describing such a physically confrontational moment in terms of a tea set, the commentators use humour to emphasise the physicality of this moment by leaning into a metaphor that invokes a sense of genteel civility. The meaning of this metaphor is then further emphasised through a process of elaboration whereby the metaphorical teapot becomes increasingly exclusive and refined. Moving from the image of a tea pot, to a tea set, to a bone china tea set, to finally a particularly distinguished brand, the commentators clarify that this is not an everyday tea set that is being referred to, but rather the 'good china' as it were. Moreover, given the construction of this comic metaphor, every increase in the refinement of the image corresponds, through the logic of this comic construction, to a greater sense of the visceral and physical nature of the sporting contest. The extension of the metaphor thus corresponds to an escalation of humour on two fronts: both the verbal play of the metaphor and the increasingly incongruity of the image as a means to describe the action on the field. In summary, both commentary teams use register clash with humorous intent.

5.4 Alcohol and drinking culture

Complementing the sustained use of register clash in commentary humour, the other recurring set piece is premised on references to alcohol and the drinking culture that is often associated with rugby (Dunning and Sheard, 1973; Novitz and Willmott, 1989). In contrast with the different ways in which the humour of register clash is constructed,

references to alcohol are much less diverse in their expression. Therefore, while such references are just as prevalent in the humour commentary, they require relatively less explanation because they tend to follow a stable pattern; one that is premised on faux coy references to alcohol as if it were somehow forbidden (despite the prominent role of alcohol sponsorship and advertising in rugby). Thus, for example, the commentators will often suggest that the players have a preference for non-alcoholic drinks:

Test 2, NZ
1229 CC2 Sonny Bill Williams is going
2230 CC2 to need
1231 CC2 to be supplying Jerome Kaino with a lot of green tea this week
1232 CC2 because Jerome Kaino has just been subbed off.

A second example:

Test 2, NZ
2427 PP Owen Franks gets a handshake, a banana and a protein shake,
2428 PP puts on a jacket,
2429 PP sits down
2430 PP and rests up.
2431 PP I may have exaggerated the banana and the protein shake.
2432 PP That will come later.

And this account which repeats the reference to the apocryphal 'green tea', which recurs as if it were the archetypal expression of a non-alcoholic drink or a substance so unlikely to be imbibed by a professional rugby player that its mere suggestion is humorous.

Test 3, NZ
2757 PP He's spoken about
2758 PP how they get together
2759 PP and they have their different drinks.
2760 PP Bring on the green tea and coffee.

Such humour has a similar structure to that of the 'register clash' in that it plays down or denies the rough-and-tough nature of the game. However, rather than manifesting through a performance of a particular mannered or urbane way of acting, in these examples the humour comes from the knowing substitution of alternatives such as green tea as a way to both talk about and not talk about the drinking culture of rugby.

Nor are these references to the green tea and protein shakes the only way in which the commentators indirectly refer to the drinking culture of rugby. Another frequent construction involves oblique allusions to the drinking practices of the fans, as well as the players. An example of this can be seen in a discussion of fan interaction in the second test:

Test 2, NZ
983 CC1 Nice little high fives as well between an All Black supporter and a Lions supporter down there
984 CC1 with sportsmanship being shown in the stands.

985 CC1 There was plenty of it at Courtenay Place last night
986 CC1 I'll bet you there was.
987 CC1 They don't mind a jar, the visiting Lions' fans,
988 CC1 do they.

The humour of these remarks begins with the reference to Courtenay Place – an entertainment and nightlife district in Wellington noted for a high concentration of bars – which provides the impetus to discuss the (somewhat infamous) drinking practices of the fans of the touring Lions team. This proceeds initially through play with the concept of 'sportsmanship', which is evoked in line 984 to describe a sense of shared good will and camaraderie between the fans of the opposing teams. The concept then reappears in line 985 as the subject of the pronoun 'it', but its meaning subtly changes to evoke a more general sense of bonhomie as the location switches from the stadium to the bar. Line 986 then acts as something of a pivot in terms of the reference: while it theoretically works to reaffirm the previous sentiment, its ambiguity allows for a full transition to the metonymic discussion of drinking practices ('They don't mind a jar') in line 987. Across these four lines the topic of conversation shifts from camaraderie to drinking practices which are presented in a humorous fashion through the use of unnecessarily indirect and coy language.

Near the end of the same game, there is a similar moment of humour that is premised in an ironically demure reference to drinking. Following an eventful period of play where the Lions have taken the lead, the colour commentator exclaims that:

Test 2, NZ
3747 CC2 Every publican in Wellington celebrates.

Although this statement lacks any clear formal indication of comic intent, the fact that it is met with laughter strongly suggests that it is understood to be humorous by the involved parties. The implication here appears to be that a Lions victory will result in a profitable night for the bar and pub owners of Wellington as the Lions fans celebrate (the use of 'publicans' also again demonstrating the use of excessively formal language). A reference to the possibility of the celebratory consumption of alcohol thus here functions as humour even in the absence of any formal framing as such, the slightly indirect expression of the remark setting up an ostensibly tendentious reference to rugby's drinking culture. A parallel example can be seen in the English commentary set:

Test 1, UK
1987 PP Get yourself a cold one
1988 PP Settle in.
1989 PP Have one for us.
1990 PP You've got permission

The instruction is addressed to the audience and *a cold one* is a partly metonymic allusion to a cold beer. This invitation can be understood to be extended to both the fans in attendance at the game, and those listening to the broadcast at home.

Finally, there are also instances where references to alcohol are incorporated into incongruous remarks. For example, near the end of the third test, the commentators engage in a discussion of the 'sport's gel' the players consume during the game. The PP

notes the player's preference for a particular flavour, and then immediately reframes the remarks through self-demeaning humour, followed by a mock challenge:

Test 3, NZ
3054 PP They favour lemon lime.
3055 PP Is the preferred flavour for the gel.
3056 PP How's that for excitement, Ant Strachan.
3057 PP Beat that buddy.

The CC then responds to the mock challenge with an insult, referring to the PP as a 'train spotter', before then adding to the exchange with a jocular remark about alcohol consumption:

Test 3 NZ
3063 CC1 They don't put bitters in it as well - the lemon and lime stuff [ha ha ha ha] with the gel?

The humorous nature of this remark, which is confirmed by the accompanying laughter, is premised on a reference to the Antipodean non-alcoholic drink – lemon, lime and bitters – which is evoked via the flavour of the sport's gel. As with the previous examples, the humour of this statement relies to some extent on the proposition that references to alcohol are comic in the context of rugby commentary: a statement that itself relies upon a shared conceit that it is inappropriate or 'naughty' to discuss alcohol in relation to rugby. It is also part of the humour that, as with raised formality, the 'place holders' for alcohol are green tea and lemon, lime and bitters since these beverages can be parsed as effete middle class drinks, unlike beer with its association with working class manly culture.

6 Discussion

The quantitative analysis shows that the UK team use significantly less humour than the New Zealand team and that the incidents of humour appear to be differently distributed. The qualitative analysis shows that the highly fluent nature of rugby commentary means that moments of humour are at heightened risk of being missed or misunderstood in the rapid flow of monologue and dialogue. This possibility is further emphasised by a tendency towards ironic modes of humour – often only marked by minute variations in tone – rather than formally distinct joke construction. In practice, this ambiguity is minimised through the use of 'set pieces'; repeated comic themes and forms that ensure relative ease of interpretation within the specific and informed audience by aligning the majority of instances of commentary humour with a set of established conventions and expectations. This use of repetition works to 'stabilize' the potentially ambiguous irony of this humour in favour of clear and consistent comic meanings (Kreuz, 2020: 40).

Furthermore, not only were both strategies used repeatedly across the commentaries analysed, they can also be understood as related to the informal broadcast nature of these commentaries and their relation to a wider imagined audience. These shared assumptions are not simply related to the construction of humour. They also function to reaffirm a shared understanding of rugby as a social and cultural form. Both the sustained use of register clash and the faux-coy remarks regarding alcohol play upon an ironic refutation of rugby as a rugged and unpretentious sport. For example, in the case

of the raised formality of the register clash, such remarks are only comic to the extent that formality is thought to be alien or unsuited to rugby. If remarks of this nature were made with regards a sport like cricket (often figured in more genteel terms), they would be less immediately recognizable as humorous, because there is less immediate incongruity. Thus the set pieces foreground the vernacular nature of rugby culture by pretending to undercut it. More broadly, this use of humour is indicative of a broader injunction against 'taking yourself too seriously' which has been observed as a common aspect of humour use in New Zealand, the UK, and Australia (Sinkeviciute, 2004). By interspersing the commentary of an important game of sport with ironic and humorous remarks the commentators affirm for themselves and their audience that they are taking neither the event nor their own professional conduct 'too seriously'.

The ambiguous status of sports commentary humour makes it an especially productive context for exploring the limits and complications of humour that emerge in the space between informal conversation and formal performance. This is a relatively uncommon form of humour. Most instances of ostensibly spontaneous humour that are broadly distributed –such as banter on UK-style panel shows or interviews on US late-night comedy programs – are stage-managed and even lightly scripted. A study of the incidental humour of rugby commentary – conversational humour that is performed for an audience in the wider context of a non-humorous interaction – thus helps to further study the continuities between spontaneous conversation and scripted fiction previously identified in improv comedy (Landert, 2021).

This study raises other questions of interest. We are dealing here with a micro genre, commentaries by two commentary teams of a particular sport. It may be that these particular varieties of humour are restricted to radio rugby union commentary teams. Similar teams also provide commentary on television. Association football commentary is also broadcast on radio. Do they use such forms of humour or is association football too serious a subject matter for humour? The blog commentaries of football which were referred to earlier show that this is not the case. It may still, however, be the case that television commentators of rugby do not employ humour in their broadcasts. We suggest that each subgenre of sports commentary may have its own conventions for incidental commentary humour or even that individual commentary teams may adopt such conventions.

7 Conclusion

Rugby union radio commentary is the site for rare incidental moments of humour in an otherwise functional discourse produced for the listening audience. By combining both quantitative and qualitative interpretive approaches, this article has considered how such humour manifests and how it might be productively characterised. The humorous moments of the commentary are unscripted and arise spontaneously, initiated by a member of a commentary team sometimes without dialogue with other members of the team and sometimes co-operatively. They are drawn from a limited set of micro-genre specific possibilities as to form and content. They are also ambiguous as to their intended audience. It seems that the other members of the commentary team are usually the primary audience with the listeners taking the position of a secondary audience. The strategies for producing humour include raised formality – a fancifully formal use of language - and oblique reference to alcohol to not only give rise to humour, but also to

thereby reaffirm the ethos of rugby (and rugby commentary) as a social site that is inherently opposed to formality and other forms of ostensibly unmasculine affectation.

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