

# Eavesdropping on media talk: Microphone gaffes and unintended humour in sports broadcasts



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## Abstract

This paper deals with the phenomenon of the ‘microphone gaffe’ in the context of sports broadcast talk. This peculiar communicative event is characterized by the public mediation of live talk to media audiences without the speakers being aware that they are actually on air. Adopting a general pragmatic perspective, this paper analyses the microphone gaffe in terms of its specific participation framework and discusses its humorous potential. It is argued that the key element underlying these communicative situations consists of the momentary non-acknowledgement of the media audiences by the speakers. The audience, repositioned as non-participants, actually find themselves in the role of the ‘eavesdropper’ on a private conversation. On the production side of the communicative scheme, the mistaken belief in enjoying this momentary ‘private’ speech event is accompanied by a shift of footing, where the commentators’ institutional identities become replaced with their non-public personas, evidenced by forms of backstage talk that contrasts with their frontstage performance. This paper proposes that in case of microphone gaffes, humorous effect arises from the various incongruities between the actual and the presumed footings, as well as from the subsequent recontextualizations that enclose the original communicative act within an additional communicative level. The aim of the paper is to propose and elaborate a general theoretical framework for the analysis of unintended humour in media discourse.

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## 1. Introduction

While many of the modern media genres fall into the ‘entertainment’ category on account of their more or less evident humorous content, there are also genres and situations that lack obvious humorous intent and yet are perceived as funny or entertaining. This raises several theoretical points that are of interest to both pragmatics and humour studies, most urgently the question of ‘How do we account for the emergence of humour in genres and situations that are characterized by the absence of humorous intent?’. In order to understand this, we need to reconsider the relation between the text, the production and the reception sides of communication, and the presence/absence/emergence of the elusive phenomenon that humour is. The aim of this paper is to propose that humour can emerge from the structural set-up of a communicative situation itself despite the speakers’ patent humorous non-intent. The reception of non-humorous communicative acts as humorous is contingent upon the incongruity between the perceived and the actual participation frameworks in which a given communicative act is embedded.

The paper starts by locating humorous intent as a form of speaker intent that aims at achieving a specific effect. Since humorous acts occur within the play frame, which is frequently signalled by various contextualization cues, the humorous

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intent is typically signalled in some ways by the speaker and is met by some reaction from the recipient. The paper proposes a classification of the possible relations between humorous intent (on the side of the producer) and humorous effect (on the side of the recipient), which give rise to several types of humour, including incidental (unintended) humour that is subject to further analysis. It is argued that microphone gaffes classify as incidental humour on account of the mis-framed communicative situation.

As the analytical part of the paper illustrates, the interlocutors' (in this case the sports commentators') mistaken belief in enjoying a 'private', non-mediatised communicative frame is accompanied by a shift of footing, which drastically reorganizes not only their participant roles but also the identities they perform. Humour emerges out of the shift of footing: the interlocutors' backstage talk is significantly divorced from their frontstage performance of their official personas – in terms of both incongruous topics and language styles. These can turn out to be embarrassing to the speakers but entertaining to the eavesdropping recipients. While microphone gaffes bear a surface resemblance to such entertainment genres as the candid camera, they nevertheless differ in that no initial humorous intent is imputed into the speech event and the whole situation is entirely natural, without any pre-meditated set-up. Linguistically, this shift away from the frontstage performance towards backstage talk is accompanied by the emergence of features found in casual, i.e. non-performed conversation. While the conversational interactions of speakers involved in such situations lack humorous intent, the microphone gaffes committed by them are often perceived as funny and entertaining.

## 2. Intentionality and humour

In pragmatics, the analysis of intentional acts lies at the very core of the discipline (Searle, 1983; Levinson, 1983), with intentionality being central to the speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1965), the conversational implicature theory (Grice, 1967; Grice, 1969) as well as post-Gricean pragmatics (Levinson, 2000; Carston, 2002). While a number of authors have provided comprehensive accounts of speaker meaning and intentionality (cf., Arundale, 2008; Haugh and Jaszczolt, 2012; Haugh, 2013b), there still appear to be some gaps in pragmatic theory to account for the complex link between intent and humour, despite some recent work addressing this issue (cf. de Jongste, 2013). The starting premise in much research on humour is to automatically postulate the existence of humorous intent, and then analyze the ways humour is linguistically manifested or discursively constructed. Apart from the focus on the forms of humour as a 'product', much attention has also been paid to the emergence of humour in conversational interaction (Norrick, 1993, 2010; Baym, 1995; Kotthoff, 2006; Norrick and Chiaro, 2009).

Humorous intent is conventionally signalled in many ways through 'contextualization cues' (Gumperz, 1982, 1992; Levinson, 2003), which establish the 'play frame' (Bateson, 1953; Coates, 2007). Such humorous 'keying' (Kotthoff, 1999; Kotthoff, 2007) is a conventional indication to the recipient that the message is to be processed as humorous. The recognition of the humorous frame is crucial for the recipient's understanding and appreciation of the humour (Hay, 2001). However, the relationship between humorous intent and humorous effect is far from simple. Table 1 provides an outline of the possible combinations of the presence (+) and absence (–) of these elements and identifies the resulting types of humour.

As the table indicates, the congruence between humorous intent and humorous effect gives rise to successful humour (Zajdman, 1992), the most widely studied phenomenon that assumes that the speaker's humorous intent is correctly identified. Significant attention has also been paid to failed humour (Bell, 2009a,b, 2015; Priego-Valverde, 2009; Bell and Attardo, 2010), characterized by reception situations where humorous effect does not obtain. That may be caused, for instance, by the recipient's failure to recognize the humorous intent or his or her conscious resistance that blocks the emergence of humorous effect.

However, the taxonomy of humorous intent/effect relations also needs to operate with the absence of humorous intent. Where this is matched with the absence of humorous effect, there is, understandably, no humour. A similar situation on the production side of the communicative frame has been described as *bona fide* communication (Raskin, 1985; Raskin and Attardo, 1994), though the concept is not unproblematic from a pragmatic point of view (Dynel, 2009). Finally, the last

Table 1  
Humorous intent (HI), humorous effect (HE) and types of humour.

Production side	Reception side	Type of humour
+HI	+HE	Successful (felicitous)
+HI	–HE	Failed (unrecognized/resisted)
–HI	–HE	None
–HI	+HE	Incidental (unintended)

possibility refers to the emergence of humour despite the absence of any humorous intent. This leads to incidental or unintended humour in which the producer of humour may or may not participate.

Clearly, the absence of humorous intent from some communicative act does not preclude such an act from being perceived as humorous. The effect of a communicative act upon its recipient is not only dependent on the local context of reception but it may also be relatively individualized, based on the recipient's experience, level of knowledge or momentary disposition. A classic example of unintended humour in the broadcast media consists of microphone gaffes.

As shown in Section 3, the crucial concept for the understanding of this phenomenon consists of the dual frame of reference that characterizes media broadcasts. Section 4 then suggests that the shifts between the frames also entail shifts of footing, particularly where the status of the communicative act changes from public to private once the broadcast goes off-air. I argue that humorous effect arises as a result of the misinformed understanding of the set-up of the communicative situation by the participants, and the reception of backstage talk in a frontstage context by the eavesdropping audience. Finally, Section 5 illustrates the model of unintended humour in microphone gaffes with an analysis of a live recording of half-time talk between two sports commentators on a public TV.

### 3. Participation frameworks

No communicative act exists in a vacuum: it always appears within some communicative frame. This assumes that there are some communicative participants who differ in terms of their involvement in the speech event. Consequently, any utterance is adequately contextualized only as long as the specific nature of its communicative frame is taken into account.<sup>1</sup> Following Goffman's (1959, 1981) early analysis of the production and the reception sides of communication, which goes beyond the basic roles of the 'speaker' and the 'hearer', many researchers have postulated the organization of participation frameworks in diverse genres and the effect of the structuration of the speech event on the verbal interaction between the participants. This includes, among other, printed and broadcast news (Bell, 1984, 1991), broadcast talk (Scannell, 1991; Tolson, 2006), news interviews (Fetzer, 2006), film discourse (Bubel, 2008; Dynel, 2011a, 2012) and sitcoms (Brock, 2015). Not surprisingly, the arrangement of participant roles with respect to a speech act is an issue of central importance to pragmatics (cf. Levinson, 1988; Verschueren, 1999; Haugh, 2013a). Most recently, the advances of technology-mediated and computer-mediated communication have brought about the need to deal with some quite radical modifications of participation frameworks of existing genres to suit such novel communicative environments as internet newsgroups (Marcoccia, 2004), YouTube (Boyd, 2014; Dynel, 2014), online news media (Chovanec, 2011, 2015) and Twitter (Drauckner, 2015). As many of these studies have demonstrated, the technical affordances of the new media and genres result in the realignment of participant roles in what are innovative and sometimes very unexpected ways.

Goffman's approach emphasises the multiplicity of roles that are involved in the production of any speech act. Dyadic and polyadic acts are structured in more complex ways than the traditional roles of the speaker (producer) and the hearer (recipient). While a detailed overview of the different approaches to the dual-layered and multi-layered nature of communication and the specific participant roles in various genres is provided elsewhere (Chovanec and Dynel, 2015), let me give only a brief overview of the basic communicative roles that are eventually relevant for my analysis of microphone gaffes. On the production side, the classic models operate with the *animator* (the sounding box producing the message), the *author* (responsible for the textual form of the message) and the *principal* (whose interests, values and viewpoints are ultimately traceable behind the communicative act) – that is the model we find in traditional media (cf. Goffman, 1981; Bell, 1984), though in some situations the roles are more complex (cf. Bell, 1991 for the production roles of printed news texts). In common parlance, these are typically conflated into the roles of the speaker or writer. On the reception side of communication, there are four categories of recipients: *addressees*, *auditors*, *overhearers/bystanders*, and *eavesdroppers*. The criteria that distinguish between these roles are addressivity, ratification and knowledge of the recipient (Bell, 1984: 159). Thus, for instance, the overhearer is different from the eavesdropper in that the former is known to have the status of the recipient of a message (i.e. acknowledged) while the latter is both unratiated and unknown. In other words, the eavesdropper assumes the recipient role without the speaker being aware that there is another recipient beyond addressees (known, addressed and ratified), auditors (unaddressed, known and ratified) and overhearers (unaddressed, unratiated, known). While being anonymous to the speaker, the eavesdropper actually enjoys a superior communicative position over the speaker.

There is some debate about the arrangement of these participant roles in the contexts of film and media discourse, particularly with respect to the role of the audience (cf. Dynel, 2011b; Brock, 2015). While some scholars refer to the audience as having the role of overhearers (e.g. Bubel, 2008), others have pointed out that since film, drama and

<sup>1</sup> This contextualization has two dimensions. First, it is the overall participation framework imposed upon the interlocutors by the particular genre in which they are involved. Second, the participants themselves are often in a position to modify the framework; recipients may, for instance, re-mediate the messages (whether in the original or modified form) to other recipients.

broadcasts are staged for the benefit of the audience, the ultimate recipient status of the audience has to be sought in the superordinate communicative frame of the entire speech event (Dyner, 2011b). Both of these positions make sense: the ‘overhearing audience’ is a construct that prioritizes the dialogic interaction occurring among speakers within the more central speech act, such as the interviewer and the interviewee (in news interviews), the commentator and the pundit (in sports commentary), and the presenter and the guest (in talk shows). This also concerns the way the audience is positioned to receive talk between characters in film and drama (i.e. interactions between actors on the diegetic level of the characters). The role of the overhearer is, then, merely a discursive ploy – it is a participant role either constructed for the audience by the producers or arising from the technical format of the media. It is from that constructed position that the audience is assumed to receive the studio or on-screen conversations which are, ultimately, meant for the audience and not the other participants or interlocutors involved in the primary frame. After all, in media discourse, the audience is always ratified on account of the public nature of the mediated communicative act. Hence, the audience cannot – technically speaking – appear in the role of overhearers as defined by Bell (1984). They are always “official or ratified hearers even if they are not fully watching or listening” (O’Keeffe, 2006: 18).

What the various approaches share, however, is the understanding that mediated interactions are organized in terms of two or more communicative frames. Goffman (1981), for instance, refers to the embedding of interactional arrangements that can lead to the recursive nesting of discourse representation – the reporting of the speech utterances produced by others. As far as broadcast talk is concerned, Scannell (1991) introduces the notion of dual articulation to refer to the hierarchical organization of the speech event on the level of the dialogic interaction between two or more interlocutors (e.g. in a studio) and the higher-level frame of the mediation of this interaction to TV audiences. The communication is thus organized in terms of two communicative levels or frames (cf. Fetzer, 2006).

Fig. 1 represents the two nested frames found in any media broadcast of dialogic interactions. This is the shape of the participation framework that all the participants are aware of. More specifically, they know that the embedded frame (Frame 1) is part of a higher-level frame within which the embedded interaction (e.g. talk in the studio in front of live audience) is broadcast to the media audiences. Needless to say, the figure intentionally condenses the multiplicity of production roles that are embodied within the participant labelled as Interlocutor 1.

As described above, the broadcast audience is positioned as the overhearing audience, even though all the first-frame talk is ultimately intended for them: it is the broadcast audience that has the role of addressees on the higher-level frame of the mediated speech event. Moreover, the audience also commands an effect over the linguistic forms that are produced by speakers within the first frame. As shown by Bell (1984), this takes the form of ‘referee design’, i.e. the accommodation of certain linguistic features by the speakers to approximate those used by the intended absent audience.<sup>2</sup> In some communicative contexts, there are multiple levels of mutually embedded communicative frames. The multi-level organization affects, for instance, the manner in which discourse from the deeper frames is represented. Occasionally, there are technical means available that enable communication to be reversed, with participants from higher-level frames being able to access the embedded frames in ‘across-the-frame interactions’ (cf. Chovanec, 2015).

The dual communicative frame is the rule in most mediated interactions, as well as in telecinematic discourse. Where humour is involved, it relies on the underlying premise that humorous effect is to arise on the part of the broadcast audience, regardless of whether the programme format or the first-frame interlocutors acknowledge the presence of the audience or not. Thus, humorous intent in these programmes is designed to go ‘beyond’ the speakers themselves and is meant to reach the audience. Humorous intent is a matter of the production format, with the interlocutors complicit in the performance of situations and the production of talk that may achieve the desired effect on the audience. In some programme formats the first-frame participants may pretend to be serious and keep the humorous intent tacit on their communicative level. In that case, canned laughter can sometimes serve as a contextualization cue of the humorous

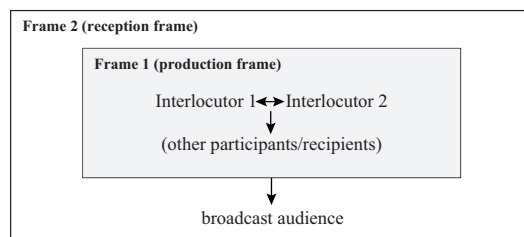


Fig. 1. A simplified participation framework for dialogue on-stage in the broadcast media.

<sup>2</sup> This holds for written media discourse as well: all public media messages are written by journalists with the readers ultimately in mind (Cotter, 2010: 114).

intent for the audience (that is the case with sitcoms; cf. [Kozic, 2012](#); [Dyrel, 2011b](#)). In telecinematic discourse, by contrast, it is typically up to the audience to work out the humorous intent of the first-frame interactants (and, by extension, the whole production side). In talk shows, stand-up comedy and other forms of on-stage entertainment, the first-frame participants may also indulge in an open enjoyment of the humour they are producing, as well as in its evaluation through various forms of metalinguistic commentary.<sup>3</sup>

There are some types of programmes, however, where the first-frame participants have a limited complicity in the projection of their humorous intent to the audience. In candid camera, for instance, a prank is played on an unsuspecting individual who is aware of neither the humorous set-up of the situation nor the dual articulation of the entire event as a staged performance for the benefit of the absent mass media audience (cf. [Brock, 2015](#)). However, while the victim of the joke is (initially) unaware of the participation framework and the humorous intent, the production team, the prankster and the audience jointly partake in this knowledge. There is nothing unexpected about the emergence of humour, then, since the existence of humorous intent is inherent in the format of the genre. While the humour also emerges, at least partly, out of the clash – or incongruity – between their perception of the situation as *non bona fide* and the victim's wrongful assumption of its *bona fide* status (cf. [Raskin, 1985](#); [Raskin and Attardo, 1994](#)), this is a pre-planned and calculated effect and it is central to the programme's purpose. Somewhat different from candid camera, yet related to microphone gaffes, are TV programmes and YouTube recordings that show the footage of accidental 'fails'. Here, comic effect arises from the audience watching a broadcast of an entirely accidental mishap affecting individuals who are engaged in mostly non-verbal activities that are not intended to be, in the first place, humorous. Yet, the remediation of these fails is an act of recontextualization that typically is motivated by humorous intent on the part of the re-mediator.

The incongruity between interlocutors' perception of the set-up of the communicative situation and the actual participation framework is also found in case of microphone gaffes in TV broadcasts. However, in contrast to candid camera, the participation framework has a distinctly different arrangement because of the non-existence of the dual framework in off-air interactions. Thus, there is no assumption whatsoever on the part of the production team or the first-frame interlocutors that the speech event might possibly involve some other recipients, and, even, result in some (unintended) humorous effect.

In order to understand the operation of humour in such microphone gaffes, the next section draws on the related concepts of shift of footing and frontstage/backstage talk to propose a participation framework model of microphone gaffes. In this model, the audience enjoys the status of eavesdroppers, i.e. a superior communicative role that enables the recipients to assume a unique vantage point from which they may experience linguistic and stylistic incongruities that have an unintended humorous effect on them.

#### 4. Change of footing: from frontstage to backstage

The traditional dialogic communication between individuals within the media frame is a 'dialogue on stage' that is meant for the mass audience as the ultimate recipients. The talk is a public speech event, with speakers being 'on air' – this is the classic situation found in TV and radio broadcasts. To use Goffman's terminology, this is frontstage talk through which interlocutors construct and sustain their identities in the public sphere. In media contexts, arguably, all talk constitutes frontstage performance because the interlocutors are at all times aware of the public nature of their utterances and their mediation to the ultimate audiences. While speakers often try to project their authentic selves and some production formats may strive to reveal the interlocutors' non-performed identities (e.g. some types of reality TV), the presence of the camera and the implicit existence of the overhearing audience as the ultimate recipients mean that such talk needs to be considered as staged. It is a public performance because the participation framework includes overhearers – participants whose presence in the communicative frame is known, even though they are not individually ratified.

However, the arrangement of the communicative situation described above is valid only as long as the speech event is actually broadcast – and thus mediated – to the audience within the second frame. The moment the first-frame participants are taken 'off air', the second frame literally dissolves and ceases to exist. This situation is represented in [Fig. 2](#). The disappearance of the audience means that the participation framework changes radically: while the audience had previously enjoyed the role of the recipient, the termination of the live link to the studio brings about a shift in their role from recipients to non-participants. At the same time, by being taken off air, the interlocutors within the first frame become liberated from their frontstage talk since they know that the communicative channel is closed: a definite, impermeable

<sup>3</sup> However, humorous effect may also arise on the part of the audience even in the absence of any humorous intent on the part of the producers/first-frame interactants. Such unintended humour may involve the audience's subversive reception, criticism or ridicule of the programme. In that sense, the mismatch between the patent humorous non-intent and the unexpected humorous effect may be indicative of the programme's partial failure since what is meant as 'serious' is received and processed in a way that is unforeseen and possibly unwanted by the producers.

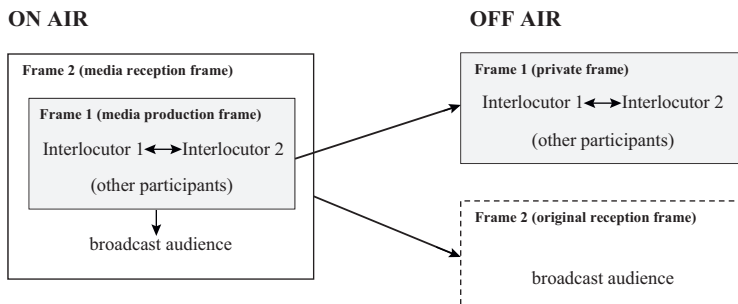


Fig. 2. A simple participation framework for 'going off air'.

boundary has been established between them and the distant media audiences. For that reason, the figure refers to their situation as 'private frame'.

In fact, in the absence of any content mediated to it, the audience ceases to exist as an identifiable entity: it does not occupy a participation role in any framework. Thus, the original reception frame disappears (cf. the interrupted lines). The audience will, of course, continue participating in their own communicative frames, which are as numerous as the individual situations in which broadcasts are received (cf. Gerhardt, 2012).

Quite often, however, the media production frame is replaced with another media frame that takes the place of the original one, as illustrated in Fig. 3. Two embedded frames thus shift in and out of the overall media frame constituted by the mediation of a broadcast to the audience. This situation is very common in sports broadcasting when a frame made up of the commentators describing a sports event from the stadium is replaced by another frame consisting of a group of pundits and journalists in the studio. These frames are quite independent, even though an occasional connection can be made between them, e.g. by means of a live-link between a studio and the stadium (cf. Lombardo, 2015 who describes a similar case with live-links in news bulletins).

Interactions that occur off-air are backstage rather than frontstage performances. Interlocutors engaged in off-air talk are aware of the non-mediatization of their frame and the non-existence of any audience (beyond the overhearing technical personnel and other colleagues who may be present within the frame and who have, on most counts, an insider role in the media production frame). As suggested above, the mismatch between the interlocutors' perception of the communicative situation and the actual participation framework is, of course, a well-known device in certain comedy genres, such as candid camera, that rely on actors (and the production crew) tricking unsuspecting individuals (cf. Brock, 2015). This form of intentionally constructed humour has recently become popular among the broad public, cf. the staging of various pranks and practical jokes and the subsequent sharing of these on social media sites and internet platforms such as YouTube.

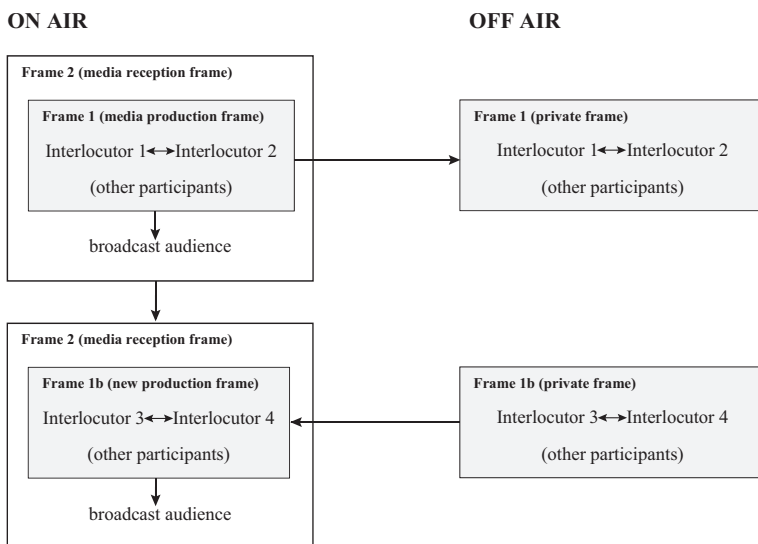


Fig. 3. A participation framework for 'going off air' with a change of embedded frame.

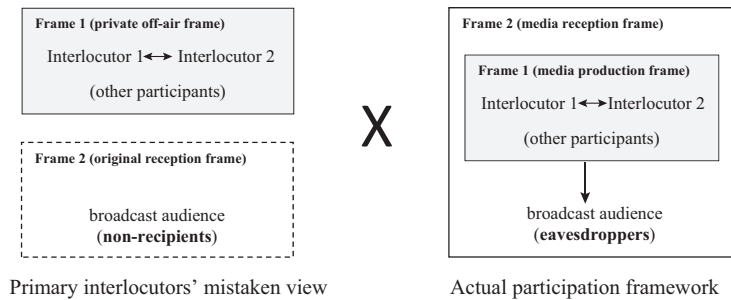


Fig. 4. A participation framework for microphone gaffes: two divergent perspectives.

In microphone gaffes, there is an incongruity between the interlocutors' perception of the communicative situation and the actual participation framework in which the talk occurs (see Fig. 4). While the interlocutors believe that they are engaged in a private interaction after being taken off-air (as illustrated in Figs. 2 and 3), the real arrangement of roles is different because their communicative frame continues to be embedded within the broader media reception situation. The broadcast audience thus find themselves re-positioned, most typically as a result of a technical fault or mismanagement (cf. Goffman, 1981: 302), into the role of eavesdroppers: they are unaddressed, unknown, and unratified. In this role, the eavesdropping audience can become recipients of backstage talk in which the interlocutors, such as sports commentators, can 'be themselves', without the need to care about creating and managing the impressions given off in their frontstage performance. The presumed uni-vocality of the media yields to double-voicing (Goffman, 1981) that allows the eavesdropping audience to catch a glimpse of how the backstage operates (Talbot, 2007: 139). However, this is also an ideal set-up for the emergence of unintended humour: the audience may find humour in the incongruity of publically hearing talk that deviates from the usual norms of broadcast interaction.

## 5. Eavesdropping on backstage talk

Let us illustrate the model of the participation framework proposed above for the role of the eavesdropping audience with a brief analysis of dialogic interaction in a sample microphone gaffe. The recording analyzed here comes from a half-time break during a TV broadcast commentary of the football match between the Czech first league teams of Mladá Boleslav and Slavia Praha, with the commentators being the sports commentator Jaromír Bosák (JB) and the pundit Václav Táborský (VT).<sup>4</sup> Due to a technical fault, the broadcast continued throughout the whole break. While the video track showed the empty stadium, the two commentators chatted informally over football-related issues. The speakers were thus engaged in what they believed to be a private conversation, whose form and content turned out to be quite funny to the eavesdropping audience on account of the non-correspondence between the expected norms of the commentators' frontstage performance and their non-performed, 'authentic' backstage selves. The recording was subsequently shared and mediatized beyond the original context in which it appeared, much to the embarrassment of the sports professionals.

An analysis of the broadcast shows that despite the patent humorous non-intent of the speakers, the mis-framed communication contains several features that hold a significant humorous potential when considered within the context of the commentators' professional roles. The linguistic features, which are interpreted as representative of genuine backstage talk, appear at all levels of analysis. They involve the speakers' choice of code, use of lexical forms, fragmentation of syntactic structures, occurrence of silences and overlaps, as well as selection of topics for discussion. These are all indicative of the unstaged and non-performed nature of the talk. The humour emerging from this interaction stems from the incongruity between the conventional classification of these linguistic forms within a given speech community and the actual appearance of such forms in the broadcast. Since the media audiences share the background knowledge of the norms of language use in public contexts, they are aware of the appropriateness of specific forms and interactional formats in various types of broadcasts. They are, hence, able to perceive their unacceptability in a publically aired broadcast. Coupled with the awareness of the speakers' misjudgement of the nature of the speech event as backstage talk, this gives rise to the incongruity that lies at the centre of the perception of the scene as marked and deviant from the norm, and hence humorous.

<sup>4</sup> The match was played and broadcast live on the Czech public TV channel on 20 November 2010. The video recording of the half-time microphone gaffe is available on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/OBLTcKys0GE> (link functional as of 25 June 2015).

Extract 1 illustrates the junction point between the moment the official commentary ends and the on-air broadcast changes into the presumably private, off-air conversation.<sup>5</sup>

**Extract 1. (0.00–0.18).**

- 1 JB Jestli se změní něco do druhého poločasu, to uvidíme za  
maličkou chvíli. Teď předáváme na †Kavčí hory. (3.0)  
*Should anything change in the second half, we are going to*  
*see that in a short while. Now we're handing over to †Kavčí*  
5 *hory. (3.0)<sup>1</sup>*
- JB Voni by to tam chtěli dovýzt [na saních.  
*They'd like to transport it there [on a sledge.*
- VT [Noo:, ale... to je (.) to je šk...  
[Yeah, but... that's (.) that's a pit...
- 10 To mi řekni trénujou voni střelbu vůbec, ty vole, to voni  
mají za†kázáno vod doktora nebo já ne†vím ty vole.  
*Now tell me do they train shooting at all, fuck, it's*  
*something for†bidden to them by the doctor or I don't*  
*†know, fuck.*

The opening part<sup>6</sup> of the microphone gaffe contains a clear contrast between two speech styles. The very first utterance, which marks the termination of the frontstage performance of the broadcast commentary produced by the speakers for the TV audience, is formulated in Standard Czech, which is the expected choice of code for all public media communications. By default, all official utterances in the media sphere are in this code. However, the first utterance made by the sports commentators after they are supposedly taken off-air is in Common Czech, as indicated by several features within the utterance (namely the prothetic *v-* in 'voni' instead of the standard 'oni' [they] and the change of the stem vowel in 'dovýzt' instead of 'dovézt' [transport], cf. line 5).<sup>7</sup> The two speakers continue using Common Czech throughout the entire conversation as long as they believe they are off-air. In some segments where the speakers become rather emotional, their non-standard code choice is also accompanied by a drastically modified sing-song intonation pattern that is considered as vulgar and hence inappropriate in publicly performed talk. On the prosodic level, the slurred pronunciation of some syllables contrasts sharply with the careful pronunciation of all sounds during frontstage broadcast talk. All this is evidence of the speakers' conviction that they are engaged in backstage talk that is not intended for the ears of the public and of which they are the only recipients.

As modern Czech can be characterized as a diglossic language situation (Nekvapil and Neustupný, 2005: 253), the Common Czech is the 'low' variety that is deemed as inappropriate in public contexts. The appearance of this variety within the broadcast sports commentary violates the culture-specific linguistic conventions regulating language use that are shared across the speech community. The unexpected use of the low variety in situations requiring the high code creates a basic contrast – this is the incongruity that is essential for the emergence of the humorous effect of the microphone gaffe. Needless to say, the diglossic situation of modern Czech holds much potential for creating humorous effects or for language-focused meta-debates about the politics of language use (cf. Sherman and Švelch, 2014). Thus, the speakers' code choice is directly representative of their discursive construction of the speech event as either private or public.

On the level of lexical choice, the humorous effect of the microphone gaffe is enhanced by some other linguistic features of backstage talk. The most noticeable is the occurrence of the expletive '(ty) vole', which is used by both speakers 26 times in just 6 minutes of their half-time talk.<sup>8</sup> This expletive, used in various functions as a pragmatic (discourse) marker, belongs to a very informal register. It commonly occurs as a filler, whose use in informal conversations is almost unnoticed, and a booster of emotional involvement to express a speaker's surprise. As regards public, official and institutionalized contexts, this expression is avoided for its strong negative connotations, such as the lack of education, sophistication and culture associated with people who overuse it. Its omnipresence in the conversation between the two sports commentators is, once again, indicative of their understanding of the speech situation as an occasion of private talk in which they can switch away from the standard form of the language – which, for them, is

<sup>5</sup> The English translations in all these extracts strive to represent the original utterances as much as possible rather than to recreate a functionally corresponding effect.

<sup>6</sup> Kavčí hory is the headquarters of the Czech TV. The whole phrase is conventionally used in sports broadcasts to mark the termination of a live link and the return of the floor to the studio.

<sup>7</sup> Some of the other Common Czech forms used by the speakers during their conversation include: 'stoje' instead of 'stojí' [they're standing], 'zejtra' instead of 'zítra' [tomorrow], 'malej' instead of 'malý' [small], etc. The differences between the two codes are thus mainly on the level of morphology of the individual words.

<sup>8</sup> Used as an unmotivated address form, the expletive literally translates as '(you) ox'. Functionally, it broadly corresponds to the English insert 'fuck' (and its emphatic variant of 'fuck you'), which are likewise semantically demotivated and appear in a number of pragmatic functions.



associated with the frontstage performance of their institutional identity – towards the much more colloquial code (Common Czech in this case) in which they converse in their everyday, non-mediatized interactions. The latter code is, of course, associated with the speakers' enactment of their personal identities as friends engaged in small talk. A similar conclusion is reached by Coupland (2014: 246), who notes that “backstage is the appropriate arena for dropping your front, and because reciprocal admissions of ‘not-niceness’ reinforce solidarity” (Coupland, 2014: 246). This is further illustrated with data in Extract 2:

**Extract 2.** (0.42–1.08).

- 1 JB Voni neví, co maj udělat, tam není, že by se ↑zkřížili nebo  
↑něco vole.  
*They don't know what to do, there's nothing like they would  
↑cross or ↑something, fuck.*
- 5 VT Tedka jsem se koukal schválně, jak šli ze hřiště, jo. Ten  
se směje, ten ten malej Černý jo ten ten od jde s tím, já  
bych byl °nasranej°, a von s tím boleslavákem de a směje se  
*Now I was watching, on purpose, as they were leaving the  
pitch, yeah. That one's laughing, the short one, Černý,  
yeah that one that one he goes with the other one, I'd be*
- 10 °pissed off°, and he goes off with the Boleslav guy  
*laughing*
- JB kam půjdem večer  
*where we gonna go tonight*
- 15 VT kam půjdem večer, nebo co děláš ráno  
*where we gonna go tonight, or what'ya doing in the morning*
- JB heh heh heh  
*huh huh huh*
- JB Tenis vole,  
*Tennis, fuck.*
- 20 VT Přesně. Relax, vole.  
*Exactly. Relaxation, fuck.*
- JB Vodpočiň si, moc se neunav, zítra máme zápas heh her heh  
*Have a rest, don't get tired too much, tomorrow we're  
playing a match huh huh huh*
- 25 VT Takhle se hraje vo záchranu v Boleslavi?  
*Is that how you play to escape relegation in Boleslav?  
zejtra máme zápas  
tomorrow we're playing a match*

In this segment, the commentators are openly criticizing the performance of the players and their lack of professional commitment. Not only do they both use the expletive ‘vole’ on a number of occasions (lines 2, 19, 21), but one of them uses a vulgar expression (*I'd be pissed off*, lines 10–11). This expression is uttered in a somewhat lowered (hushed) voice, as if the speaker did not consider that word to be entirely appropriate even within the supposedly private context of their backstage conversation. Their criticism of one particular player (*That one's laughing, the short one, Černý, yeah that one that one*) centres on his inappropriate behaviour with the other players. The commentators interpret this as a result of excessive camaraderie between the players and their lack of commitment to the match. The vague deictic expressions in one of the utterances (line 10) are linked to the concrete referent in the field (*yeah that one that one*). This indicates that the commentators design their talk to help each other's understanding, possibly using physical gestures to specify the player within a visually shared context of reference. At this point, the audience does not have any visual feed from the field: the commentators' talk is evidently intended for each other only.

Together, the two commentators then go on to create a fictional scenario of the verbal interaction between the players. The first commentator starts by putting hypothetical words into the mouth of one of the footballers in a mock form of direct speech (*where we gonna go tonight*, line 14). This is instantly echoed and expanded on by the second commentator, who – by concurring in his colleague's criticism – confirms the negative evaluation of the players (*where we gonna go tonight, or what'ya doing in the morning*, line 16). The absurdity of this mutually constructed imaginary scenario is rewarded by a laughter token (cf. line 25). However, that does not mark the end of the topic: the discussion is developed even further, with each commentator proposing what it is that the players probably see as a more important activity than the football match (*Tennis, fuck* – *Exactly. Relaxation, fuck*, lines 20–22).

What is characteristic of this very spontaneous exchange is that the joint fictionalization (Kotthoff, 1999; Chovanec, 2012) extends over a number of subsequent turns, with the speakers developing the idea on and on (*have a rest, don't get tired too much, tomorrow we're playing a match*). This is interrupted with an evaluative comment in the form of a rhetorical question (*Is that how you play to escape relegation in Boleslav?*) prompting the other interlocutor to infer a negative

answer. The commentators' speculation then continues for another 20 seconds. This kind of sarcastic criticism does not benefit professional sports commentators, as far as the norms of their public performance are concerned. The disparity between the audience's expectations of the roles of the commentators and the actual comments heard constitutes an incongruity that may create a humorous effect on the audience, who find themselves eavesdropping on apparently honest – but publically embarrassing – criticism produced by the commentators at a moment when they temporarily abandon their professional personas.

The commentators' criticism is extended in the rest of the passage to other players and even the coach. In Extract 3, the extreme criticism of the coach is done in a way that is hardly openly acceptable ('*So this Petrouš has gone crazy*' in line 8) and continues with the commentators speculating on the line-up of the team and the responsibilities of the management.<sup>9</sup>

**Extract 3.** (2.19–3.07).

- 1 JB A jemu to fakt uškodí v tom, že si lidi budou pamatovat, to  
je ten jan si nekop v Boleslavi tak už ho nestavte. Tak ten  
Petrouš se zbláznil vole. Když tam má toho Zákosteleckého,  
který už chvíli kopal vole tak proč no nepostaví navíc  
5 [von je vysokej].  
*And it's gonna do him real harm, as people will say that's  
the one who did not kick in Boleslav, so don't stand him.<sup>2</sup>  
So this Petrouš has gone crazy, fuck. If he's got this  
Zákostelecký, who had been playing before, why does he not  
stand him, moreover [he's tall.*
- 10 VT [Proč je teda... Když už je, tak ať tam na tu lavici dají  
vopravdu celý béčko. Proč jsou ↑na lavici, vysvětli mi,  
proč jsou ↑na lavici, to mi nikdo nevysvětlí proč jsou na  
lavici.  
*[If he's there, so let them put on the bench the entire B-  
team, really. Why are they ↑on the bench, explain to me,  
why are they ↑on the bench, nobody will explain to me why  
they are on the bench.*
- 15 JB Těžký vole, těžký.  
*Tough, fuck, tough.*
- 20 VT Na poloviční prémie nebo něco já nevím, tak  
*Half-bonuses or something like that I don't know*
- JB No ono něco takovýho v tom bude ty vole. (3.0)  
*Well something like that is gonna be in it, fuck you. (3.0)*
- 25 VT No jo tak kdo ↑jim to udělal ty ↑smlouvy?  
*Oh yeah so who could have done it for ↑them, the  
↑contracts?*
- JB No Karel  
*Well, Karel*
- VT ↑Takovýhle ↑smlouvy? Jo?  
30 ↑Such ↑contracts? Yeah?
- JB Karel s Dohodilem, no, no. (6.0)  
*Karel and Dohodil, yeah, yeah.*

Throughout this conversation, there are other features of spontaneous talk that attest to the backstage status of the interaction. This involves some of the discourse-level phenomena such as overlapping talk, which is purposefully avoided in mediatized broadcast talk. Not waiting for the appropriate turn transition points, the speakers also tend to interrupt each other. They are often vague, using semantically indeterminate forms ('*Half-bonuses or something like that*' in lines 22 and 24), and repeat phrases in order to indicate their heightened emotional involvement, e.g. disbelief (cf. the triple repetition of '*why are they on the bench*' in lines 16–18, pronounced with a markedly agitated intonation). There are also several periods of extended silence (three to ten seconds) between turns in which the speakers develop the same topic, with some turns added almost as afterthoughts. Such degree of non-fluency and fragmentation is untypical of publically broadcast talk, where utterances tend to be more structured and unified into a coherent whole. The discrepancy between such features of spontaneous (backstage) conversation contrasts sharply with the much more conscious performance of dialogic interaction in frontstage talk. This is particularly noticeable in the case of media professionals: their non-scripted public broadcast conversations are characterized by a conscious attention to fluency and smooth transition of turns

<sup>9</sup> To stand someone = to include a player in the starting line-up.

between the speakers. As noted previously, where the speakers' utterances do not conform to the audience's expectations of what the norms for public performances are, the resulting incongruities can lead to the creation of unintended humorous effects.

The occurrence of such unintended humour, however, needs to be distinguished from situations where some humour can actually be identified within the speakers' backstage talk itself, even if the humorous intent is limited to the amusement of the interlocutors themselves. Thus, for instance, Extract 2 above contains a token of laughter (line 25) that accompanies the interlocutors' impersonation of the imagined utterances of the players. While the joint fictionalization is, in itself, a form of conversational joking aimed at a mutual amusement, the laughter is an indication of the interlocutors' understanding of the absurdity of the discrepancy between the players' ideal performance and the actual reality in the field, as pointed out by the speakers' fictional and hyperbolic utterances. Similarly Extract 4 contains an exchange that elicits laughter from one of the speakers, although there is apparently no humorous intent on the part of any of the speakers:

**Extract 4.** (3.07–3.35).

**Extract 4.** (3.07–3.35)

- 1 VT To je právě v tom, proč je Sparta před nima, jo. Ta hraje  
mizerně, mizerně, třeba, ale tou silou, jo, ten Kucka, ten  
se zblázní v tom předu hřiště von to tam porazí hlavičku  
[všecko  
5 *That's it, why Sparta is ahead of them, yeah. It plays  
terribly, terribly, maybe, but with a strength, yeah, that  
Kucka, he will go mad in the front of the field, he will  
push through, a header, [everything*
- JB [máš dva ↑silný [útočníky,  
10 [you've got two ↑strong [offenders.  
VT [no  
[yeah  
JB dva silný [vole  
two strong [fuck  
15 VT [ten Černe] vepředu taky, že jo. To jsou  
↑takoví... Nebo ten Kušník, a tydlencti, no ale ukaž mi na  
↑někoho, uKAŽ mi na ↑někoho... (3.5) He (1.0) he he he he he  
[*That Černe] in the front, too, right. Those are*  
↑such... Or that Kušník, and those ones, but show me  
20 ↑someone, SHOW me ↑someone... (3.5) Huh (1.0) huh huh huh huh  
huh  
JB [Ať] párek nezaskočí, ty vole.  
Don't choke on the hot dog, fuck.

In this emotionally charged segment of their conversation, the speakers elaborate on their criticism of the team. The talk contains some unfinished utterances ('*those are such...*' in line 17), vagueness ('*maybe*' in line 6; '*those ones*' in line 19), pauses (line 20) as well as overlapping talk as the speakers collaboratively construct their turns (lines 9–14). All these are linguistic features of authentic backstage conversational interaction that has not been modified for the purpose of frontstage stylization and performance. The pundit's laughter in line 21 does not come as a response to any successful or even failed humour (cf. Bell, 2009a). Rather, it may be read as a way of expressing embarrassment (cf. Hay, 2001) or some other form of negative emotion such as incredulity, disbelief or hopelessness felt by the speaker, particularly since the laughter is not induced by the other interlocutor. By contrast, the sports commentator reacts with a good-natured, potentially humorous remark ('*Don't choke on the hot dog*' in line 23), possibly motivated by the guttural sounds of laughter produced by the pundit.

However, while there may be specific, locally-based humorous moments appearing in their talk, the speakers do not generally aim to amuse each other and their talk – which is meant to be received only within their own communicative dyad – is certainly not intended to have any humorous effect beyond the speakers themselves. Yet it does: as the analysis shows, this is an instance of unintended humour that becomes funny on the basis of the incongruity between the norms of linguistic performance that is expected of media professionals in on-air broadcasts, and their spontaneous behaviour characterizing their usual off-air talk. As argued earlier on, the interlocutors' misjudgement of the momentary status of the participation framework of their interaction results in their adoption of authentic, non-performed talk representative of their more genuine backstage behaviour.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have defined the microphone gaffe as a rather peculiar instance of broadcast talk that is characterized by the primary interlocutors (i.e. speakers within the first media frame) holding a wrong view of the momentary

participation framework of their communicative situation. They misclassify the audience as non-participants, while the latter actually find themselves in the unexpected role of eavesdroppers. The divergent recipient status of the audience arising from their assumed and actual roles (non-participants v. eavesdroppers) constitutes a shift of footing that is accompanied by a change in the primary speakers' behaviour: their frontstage performance gives way to backstage talk. The speakers can project two different, sometimes radically diverging, identities: their public on-air personas and their off-air identities that are much closer to their actual selves. This is the basis of the fundamental incongruity mechanism that underlies the unintended humour that microphone gaffes often contain.

On a more theoretical level, the findings indicate that speakers are ultimately not in control of humorous effect. In unintended humour, some humorous effect can arise even in the absence of any humorous intent on the part of the speakers – sometimes the speakers will not even know that their verbal production has such an effect or will learn of this effect only subsequently. While their utterances are produced with no humorous intent, the humour arises from their ignorance of the mediatized nature of their supposedly private talk, and from the incongruity residing in how the backstage talk contrasts either with their frontstage performance or with the expectations that the ultimate recipients (the eavesdropping audience) may have of the speakers or the situational/genre conventions of their interaction. Arguably, microphone gaffes can reveal spontaneous and unperformed talk because the interlocutors do not need to attend to their public faces – their professional on-air personas. They adopt a different mode of speech and address topics that they would not otherwise deem as appropriate for public talk. The uncensored honesty that we often find in speakers' microphone gaffes, which stems from the mistaken belief of a non-mediatized speech event, is incongruous with the eavesdropping audience's experience and expectations of official talk produced by media professionals and other public figures. This creates a humorous effect for the audience, often counterbalanced by embarrassment for the speakers. A part of the humour derives from the audience's superior communicative position: the audience is able to enjoy the mistake of the other interlocutors, sometimes with malicious joy at seeing how others make fools of themselves or how they unwittingly reveal their true thoughts and behaviour.

The theoretical model of divergent conceptualizations of the participation frameworks, and the possible unintended humour arising from the individual participants' misjudged understanding of the actual complexity of the entire communicative frame, are applicable to an ever-increasing number of situations beyond the genre of microphone gaffes involving public media individuals. As a result of the development of recording technologies over the past few years, coupled with the quick and easy sharing of content via social networks and other means of technology-mediated communication, an increasing number of verbal interactions are remediated to audiences unknown and unforeseen by the original speakers. Since any remediation results in the recontextualization of the original message, it is also accompanied by a modification of the participation frame as well as of the communicative purpose. New contexts imply new participants – hence also new intents and new effects.

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### *Transcription conventions*

[say]:	overlapping talk
°word°:	quiet talk
SAY:	very loud talk
(.):	short pause
huh huh huh:	laughter
↑ say ↓:	marked pitch movement
<u>say</u> :	emphasis or stress

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