

Menstruating vampires: What talk about taboos can tell us about dialogue

Christine Howes, Vladislav Maraev and Ellen Breitholtz
Department of Philosophy, Linguistics and Theory of Science
University of Gothenburg

christine.howes@gu.se, vladislav.maraev@gu.se, ellen.breitholtz@ling.gu.se

1 Introduction

We argue that humour cannot be understood – or analysed – without considering the interactional and cognitive resources, including low-level repair mechanisms and higher-level inferences, which underpin any conversational exchange. To account for incongruity – often argued to give rise to humorous effect – we use common-sense inferences linking background knowledge, beliefs and context to the ongoing dialogue. How any utterance should be interpreted relies on underpinning assumptions warranting these inferences, principles of reasoning called *topoi* (Aristotle, ca. 340 B.C.E./2007; Ducrot, 1988). Topoi are cultural affordances accessible to members of a community which licence certain inferences. Accessing or accommodating an appropriate topos to interpret an utterance is crucial for successful dialogue (Breitholtz, 2020). As there is usually more than one potentially applicable topos this can lead to a mismatch between interlocutors' interpretations (Breitholtz et al., 2017). This potential for mismatch is exploited in the case of humour where it may result in incongruity (Attardo and Raskin, 1991; Maraev et al., 2021).

2 Taboo

In any community, there are subjects which it is not normally considered acceptable to talk about. These may be repulsive (e.g. faeces, vomit) or actions that are considered morally deviant (e.g. cannibalism, incest). One such taboo that we will focus on in this paper is menstruation.

What counts as a taboo depends heavily on the context of the interaction. For example, bodily functions may be the legitimate subject under discussion between a doctor and their patient. Taboos are also gradient with certain topics more or less improper depending on the situation, including the (social) identities of the participants.

For example, discussion of menstruation may be

unproblematic or humorous between women, but embarrassing or offensive with men present. How we negotiate the contexts which situate how mentions of taboo subjects are interpreted demonstrates the complex interplay of personal relationships and identities that we navigate in all interactions.

3 Menstruation and humour

One way in which talk about taboos can be licensed is through humour, and this can be facilitated by using readily available topoi which share some underlying features. Menstruation is no exception, and can be constructed as dirty/mysterious in jokes: “Confucius says never turn your back on anything that can bleed for five days straight and still live” (Bemiller and Schneider, 2010).

As with any domain which is as essential to the human condition there are a large number of topoi associated with menstruation. These are culturally and context specific. For example, in some contexts menstruation signals fertility (a woman on her period has not reached menopause), but in other contexts signals a lack of fertility (getting one's period when one is hoping to conceive). In situations which require one such topos to be accommodated for the discourse meaning to be correctly interpreted humans generally have no problems identifying and accommodating a relevant topos.

4 Talk about tampons

Our first example, taken from the British National Corpus 2014 (BNC2014; Love et al., 2017) occurs in a family home, between a mother (F1) and her daughters (F2 and F3), along with a male family friend (M1). Also present are the father of the family and a 32 year old male. The dialogue at the start between the mother and her daughters, is quite matter of fact about the tampons. It is only when two of the men join the conversation with non-sequitur questions and bad puns that F1 and F2 laugh to defuse any potential awkwardness.

- (1) From BNC2014 SE68. F1 (female, 49), F2 (female, 24), F3 (female, 21), M1 (male, 53)
- 1 **F1** why have we got a packet of this Tampax here?
 - 2 **F2** it's not mine <F3/>'s
 - 3 **F1** are those yours <F3/>?
 - 4 **F3** yeah
 - 5 **F1** on the table <laugh/>
 - 6 **UNKMALE** what are they for then?
 - 7 **M1** are we are we eating in there?
 - 8 **F3** yeah Tampax
 - 9 **UNKMALE** yeah
 - 10 **F3** for your periods
 - 11 **UNKMALE** oh
 - 12 **F2** <laugh/>
 - 13 **M1** well you did ask
 - 14 **F1** box of Tampax on the table I take it <F3/>'s on her period
 - 15 **UNKMALE** do you get them periodically?
 - 16 **F2** <laugh/> oh that's a good one
 - 17 **F1** <laugh/>
 - 18 **F3** funny
 - 19 **F2** <laugh/>

4.1 Vampires and menstruation

The aim of the dialogue in (2) is to be funny, but without using obviously scripted jokes. To understand the joke, you have to know that vampires are associated with Transylvania, that Vlad the Impaler was also known as Vlad Dracula (and that Dracula is a vampire), and about the infamous hacked phone conversation (then) Prince Charles had with his (then) mistress Camilla (“tampongate”).

- (2) BBC Radio 4 Friday Night Comedy “The News Quiz” 5th May 2023 discussing the coronation of King Charles
- 1 **Ria Lina:** ... Charles likes to holiday in Transylvania and he's paid for this brand new really eco friendly water treatment for this village <laugh> not that we have a problem with our waterways at all, do we?
 - 2 **Audience:** <laughter>
 - 3 **Ria Lina:** Erm I'm not saying that it proves he wants to be a vampire because it's in Transylvania
 - 4 **Audience:** <laughter>
 - 5 **Ria Lina:** [He goes every year to Transylvania]
 - 6 **Rachel Cunliffe:** [He he] goes every year to Transylvania and he is distantly related to Vlad the Impaler
 - 7 **Ria Lina:** Is he?
 - 8 **Rachel Cunliffe:** Yeah
 - 9 **Ria Lina:** Well I'm not saying it proves he wants to be a vampire but he did once want to be a tampon, so.
 - 10 **Audience:** <laughter and groaning>

In contrast to our previous examples, the context of example (3) is a specific joke-telling one, between teenagers. Adolescents gain knowledge about menstruation and related experiences from their peers through talking, storytelling and joking (Fingerson, 2012).

- (3) BNC KPG 2498-2529 Josie (14, F), Shelley (15, F), Sean (12, M)
- 1 **Josie** Right, three vam , a vampire walks into a pub and goes erm
 - 2 **Shelley** Oh yeah. I know.
 - 3 **Josie** excuse me, <mimicking Romanian accent> I want a pint of blood.
 - 4 **Shelley** Yeah.
 - 5 **Josie** And the man goes sorry mate we don't do blood. And he goes, I want a pint of blood! So the man goes <pause> ah, chops the dog's head off.
 - 6 **Unknown** <laugh>
 - 7 **Josie** Sticks it in the cup, goes and gives it to him, he goes, <mimicking Romanian accent> thank you. And goes and sits in the corner. Second vampire comes in, <mimicking Romanian accent> I want a pint of blood.
 - 8 **Unknowns** <laugh>
 - 9 **Josie** He goes alright. Gives it to him. He goes, <mimicking Romanian accent> thank you , and go and sit down. Third vampire comes in, right, the other one goes and sits down, the third one comes in, he goes <pause> yo! What's going down man? I want a pint of water. He goes, pardon? He goes, I want a pint of water.
 - 10 **Shelley** <laugh>
 - 11 **Josie** So he gives him a pint of water, he goes and sits with the other ones. And the other ones look at him, and they sort of look in their cups and going <pause> er, how comes we got blood <pause> and you got water? <laugh> <pause> He goes, nah mate! Ain't you lot ever heard of tea bags? And he puts a Tampax in the water.
 - 12 **Unknowns** <laugh>
 - 13 **Unknown** Very good.
 - 14 **Sean** How comes your jokes are sick?

5 Conclusions

In this paper we have provided examples of dialogues in which menstruation is discussed. This topic can cause a range of responses from embarrassment to enjoyment which are not because of the topic per se but rather a complex interplay of the context and purpose of the dialogues and the interlocutors and their inter-relationships across a range of dimensions. These include factors about the speaker (are they a member of an in-group or out-group? What is the projected persona?), relationships between speakers and their roles (How intimate are they? Are they performing roles associated with particular rights and obligations, e.g. teacher-student)

Although there is an increased interest in incorporating such socio-cultural knowledge and beliefs in semantic analyses of language (see Burnett, 2020; Davis and McCready, 2020; Noble et al., 2020) there is, as yet, no formal theory which encompasses all of these factors. As ever, much remains to be done.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by an ERC Starting Grant, *DivCon: Divergence and convergence in dialogue: The dynamic management of mismatches* (10977927) and a Swedish Research Council Grant for the establishment of the *Centre for Linguistic Theory and Studies in Probability (CLASP)* (2014-0039).

References

- Aristotle (2007). *On Rhetoric, a theory of civic discourse* (translated by George A. Kennedy). Oxford University Press, Oxford. (original work published ca. 340 B.C.E.).
- Attardo, S. and Raskin, V. (1991). Script theory revis (it) ed: Joke similarity and joke representation model. *Humor-International Journal of Humor Research*, 4(3-4):293–348.
- Bemiller, M. L. and Schneider, R. Z. (2010). It's not just a joke. *Sociological Spectrum*, 30(4):459–479.
- Breitholtz, E. (2020). *Enthymemes and Topoi in Dialogue: The Use of Common Sense Reasoning in Conversation*. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands.
- Breitholtz, E., Howes, C., and Cooper, R. (2017). Incrementality all the way up. In *Proceedings of the Computing Natural Language Inference Workshop*.
- Burnett, H. (2020). A persona-based semantics for slurs. *Grazer philosophische studien*, 97(1):31–62.
- Davis, C. and McCready, E. (2020). The instability of slurs. *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 97(1):63–85.
- Ducrot, O. (1988). Topoi et formes topique. *Bulletin d'études de la linguistique française*, 22:1–14.
- Fingerson, L. (2012). *Girls in power: Gender, body, and menstruation in adolescence*. State University of New York Press.
- Love, R., Dembry, C., Hardie, A., Brezina, V., and McEnery, T. (2017). The spoken bnc2014: Designing and building a spoken corpus of everyday conversations. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 22(3):319–344.
- Maraev, V., Breitholtz, E., Howes, C., Larsson, S., and Cooper, R. (2021). Something old, something new, something borrowed, something taboo: Interaction and creativity in humour. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12:1443.
- Noble, B., Breitholtz, E., and Cooper, R. (2020). Personae under uncertainty: the case of topoi. In *Proceedings of the Probability and Meaning Conference (PaM 2020)*, pages 8–16.