Distribution and functions of humor in the Iranian spoken academic discourse

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Abstract

The present study investigated the distribution and functions of humor in Iranian spoken academic discourse. Due to lack of any academic corpora in the Iranian educational context, the data were collected through online observation and in-situ note-taking of humorous remarks across different administrative phases of 14 theses viva sessions and 4 student presentations held at a medical university in the 2014-2015 academic year. Subsequently, stimulated recall interviews were conducted with agents of humor on their intentions of using humorous remarks. The distribution of humor was presented in terms of frequency counts while the types, nature and functions of humorous episodes were identified based on their situational outcomes and informed by the existing literature. The findings revealed that, compared to its distribution in similar events in the American academic setting, humor was less frequent in the Iranian educational context though it served similar functions. Moreover, although no difference was observed in the distribution and functions of humor in thesis viva sessions, which were held in Farsi, and student presentations, which were made in English, a symbol of academic status, the types of humor used in these events varied. The study showed that the frequency of humor was a function of such factors as the amount of shared information among the participants of a communicative event, power relations, and the predominant educational milieu. Accordingly, pedagogical implications are discussed and some humor universals are proposed.

Keywords: humor; functions of humor; spoken academic discourse; thesis viva; student presentation

1. Introduction

Humor, as an integral part of human communication, prevails in formal and informal settings and plays functions other than simply adding fun to speech and writing. Contrary to common belief, humorous remarks are often originated intentionally to serve intended purposes (Holmes, 2000; Partington, 2006). Thus, the role of humor as a pragmatic device has become the focus of research studies (Attardo, 2003, 2008; Norrick, 2010). Since the functions of humor are perceived in relation to the features and norms of their situated settings of use (Kotthoff, 2006), different researchers have investigated the role of humor in a variety of contexts including conflict talks (Norrick & Spitz, 2008), male and female conversations (Hay, 2000), workplace (Holmes, 2006; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Lynch, 2002; Moody, 2014; Murata, 2014; Schnurr & Chan, 2011), and, even more recently, discussing political matters in social networks (Moalla, 2015). Likewise, the role of humor in academic contexts has attracted a large body of research (Carey, 2014; Chua, 2014; Glenn, 2003; Lee, 2006; Li & Seale, 2007; Nesi, 2012; Wang, 2014) and there are still calls for further empirical investigations in this area (Feak, 2013; Flowerdew, 2002; Lee, 2004; Limberg & Geluykens, 2008; Webber, 2005). Accordingly, the present study aims at examining the distribution and functions of humor in thesis viva sessions and student presentations, as two forms of spoken academic discourse, in the Iranian educational setting. Research on humor in Iran has mainly focused on English as a foreign language (EFL) educational context. These studies have identified EFL learners' and teachers' attitudes toward the use of humor (Ketabi & Simin, 2009) and its effects on the mastery of reading comprehension (Ghanei Motlagh, Motallebzade, & Fatemi, 2014), listening skills (Rafiee, Kassaian, & Vahid Dastjerdi, 2010), language functions (Azizifard & Jalali, 2012), and the acquisition of English vocabulary (Mahdiloo & Izadpanah, 2017) and idioms (Neissari, Ashraf, & Ghorbani, 2017). The current study, however, capitalizes on the frequency of humor in the Iranian spoken academic discourse in general and the functions it serves in such a context.

Three major theories of humor have been widely referred to by humor researchers (Meyer, 2000; Provine, 2000). First, relief theory (Eckardt, 1992; Shurcliff, 1968) proposes that people use humor to relieve tension and replace negative feelings with the good sensation caused by laughing. Next, incongruity theory (Deckers & Devine, 1981; Veatch, 1992) suggests that people laugh when things are out of place and do not fit the context. Finally, superiority theory (Gruner, 1997) postulates that people laugh at others' mistakes and inadequacies to win success for themselves and/or because they enjoy a preeminent position. The data collected for the current investigation are examined in light of

these commonly applied theories though, as Attardo (2003) aptly observes, no theory of humor is capable of explaining it at different linguistic levels. Additionally, there are various taxonomies of humor proposed by different scholars. Lee (2006), for instance, categorizes humor in Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) into seven main types of self-effacing, sarcasm, tongue-in-cheek comments, wit and unusual turns of phrase, comic comparisons and contrasts, mixed lexis/registers, hyperbole and exaggeration, and references to contemporary or youth culture. Nesi (2012, p. 79), in turn, classifies laughter in British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus into the six categories of "teasing, lecturer error, self-deprecation, black humor, disparagement and word play". Joking about a third party and story-telling are two more types of humor introduced by Wang (2014). The present study makes a reference to these categories to describe humorous remarks, although establishing a one-to-one correspondence may not always be possible due to cultural variations. Operationally, following Wulff, Swales, and Keller (2009, p. 85), humor is conceptualized in the current study as speech events "in which a good part of the audience laughed". Spoken academic discourse, as described by Lee (2006) and Swales (2004), also, refers to any spoken discourse produced during academic events in which formal and technical language may be juxtaposed with elements of informal language.

2. Literature review

A review of the related literature of the last decade reveals that different scholars have identified variable distribution and a variety of functions for humor in academic contexts. Lee (2006) found that the top 20 most humorous MICASE texts lasted for 2115 minutes containing 2326 laughs; that is, 1.1 laughs/minute, on average. The 4 dissertation defenses and 11 student presentations in MICASE had an average of 0.37 and 0.36 laugh/minute, respectively, resulting in a laughter index of 1 laugh/3 minutes for each category. In terms of the functions of humor, Lee identified the eight functions of breaking the ice, building rapport, reducing formality, providing relief, making content memorable, showing individualism, giving contemporary relevance, and critiquing.

Nesi (2012), using data from BASE lectures, investigated why lecturers provoked laughter in their lectures with a view to identifying the differences between British and non-British educational contexts in this respect. For the purposes of this comparison, Nesi used Lee's study of MICASE. Data analysis showed that 24 of the 160 lectures included no laughter episodes. Overall, an average of 1 laugh/1.4 minutes was recorded in BASE lectures, while in Lee's study 1 laughter/5 minutes was reported in MICASE lectures. This was attributed to the rather scripted character of BASE lectures in which lecturers used their

repertoire of humorous remarks to generate laughter. Hence, Nesi concluded that there was a considerable difference between the American and British academic contexts in their use of humor in lectures. Laughter was also found to serve "as a means of maintaining social order, building rapport, relieving tension, and modeling academic and professional identities" (Nesi, 2012, p. 79). Additionally, Nesi examined the Malaysian component of the Engineering Lecture Corpus (ELC) containing lectures from around the world. She suggested that laughter might be less common in English-as-a-medium-of-instruction (EMI) contexts since lecturers used their first language (L1) for social and classroom management purposes.

In a reader response to Nesi, Carey (2014) observed that a word count of 2,646,920 reported by Nesi for the lecture component of BASE was over a million higher than the official word count of 1,644,942 for the total BASE corpus, which in turn resulted in erroneous frequencies for laughter. His corrections for the distribution of laughter showed 17 laughs/10,000 tokens in BASE lectures compared to 15 laughs/10,000 tokens in MICASE lectures reported by Lee (2006). The rendition of the results in terms of number of laughs per minute as used by Nesi culminated in one laugh/4.6 minutes, which was closer to Lee's findings of one laugh/5 minutes. Therefore, he suggested that the distribution of laughter in BASE and MICASE lectures was almost identical, challenging Nesi's speculations of the differences between British and American academic contexts in their use of humor in lectures. Nesi's claims about the relative infrequency of humor in EMI contexts and culture-specific attitudes toward humor in lectures were also disproved by Carey. His analysis of 10 English as a lingua franca in academic settings (ELFA) corpus lectures showed that a frequency of 16 laughs/10,000 tokens in monologic lectures and their ensuing discussions was very close to those in BASE and MICASE. Moreover, the examination of the number of laughs in ELFA seminars showed a laughter index of 55/10,000 tokens, which was significantly higher than an index of 4 and well over an index of 46 laughs/10,000 tokens in BASE and MICASE seminars, respectively. Therefore, it was concluded that despite relative infrequency of laughter in ELF monologues, ELF users had enough common scripts to generate humor. Nesi's results with respect to types and functions of laughter in BASE lectures, however, were described as "unobjectionable" (Carey, 2014, p. 120). Later, Nesi (2014) admitted Carey's corrections of her word count and acknowledged his observation on the inadequacy of her evidence to support the infrequency of laughter in EMI contexts. Nevertheless, she brought new evidence from Alsop (2013) who compared the frequency of humor in two British and New Zealand L1 setting lectures with that of one Malaysian second language (L2) setting in ELC concluding that humor featured in all three lectures but in widely varying types. In particular, sarcasm and self-deprecation were absent from L2 settings.

In another exploration of humor in BASE lectures with a focus on intercultural and educational matters, Wang (2014) investigated Chinese students' perception of humor in the British academic context. She observed, however, that BASE was not originally developed for the investigation of humor and its transcripts lacked relevant non-verbal cues and valuable information about participants. Therefore, she attended 13 hours of nine academic lectures, delivered by three lecturers from an applied linguistics department and four lecturers from a business school with at least two Chinese students among the audience in each lecture. All instances of humor along with participants' information and non-verbal elements surrounding each case were carefully observed and noted on-site while the lectures were audio-recorded for further consultation. Subsequently, 10 humor episodes were taken from five recorded lectures and all Chinese students and eight highly proficient non-Chinese students present in those lectures were interviewed about their accounts of humor they noticed in the lectures. Native English lecturers were also individually interviewed about the same humorous episodes. The results showed that teasing, joking about a third party, self-deprecation, and story-telling were the most common types of humor in BASE and recorded lectures, mainly used to improve self-image, save face, and enhance solidarity with students.

In yet another corpus-assisted study, Reershemius (2012) examined the distribution and functions of humor in academic research presentations in German and English with the intention of conducting a contrastive analysis between German and English research cultures in their use of humor. He analyzed the research presentation sub-section of GeWiss corpus by dividing the data into English and German sub-corpora. In the English sub-corpus, including 349 minutes of research presentations by eight speakers, 110 laughs, that is, 1 laugh/3.2 minutes on average, were recorded. Four of the eight speakers in this sub-corpus spoke German as their mother tongue and were educated in the German higher education system, but worked in the UK and were familiar with British research presentation culture and made their presentations in English. The 343-minute German sub-corpus included 24 laughs, that is, 1 laugh/14.3 minutes on average. All of the nine presenters (one presentation was a joint paper) were native speakers of German educated in the German higher education system and working in Germany; therefore, they represented the German research presentation culture. The study discovered a considerable difference between British and German research cultures in the frequency of humor. In fact, the British research presentation culture was found to be much less formal than the German one. The findings revealed that in both research cultures humor was used as an expression of discourse reflexivity through which presenters tried to engage the audience by asking questions during the presentation, rather than the discussion phase, turning the monologic presentation into a dialogic event (Mauranen, 2001).

Most research on humor, as stated by Murata (2014, p. 251), "has been conducted in English-speaking societies and/or Western countries". The current study, however, fills this gap by exploring the role of humor in an eastern educational context, hoping that other researchers will join in a combined effort to present a fuller image of the issue in this part of the globe. It is believed that a mutual understanding of the western and eastern academic cultures can bring about more fruitful results compared to focusing on one culture only. The idea is supported by prior studies on humor which recommend that western academic professionals adjust their use of humor to their audience needs and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the current study examines the use of humor in English as an academic status symbol (EASS) context. That is, four students, unlike the rest of the presenters in a conference at a medical university in Iran, made their presentations in English to demonstrate their knowledge of English as an academic status symbol rather than being institutionally required to do so or because the audience could not understand their L1 as in an ELF context. They were not educated or employed in an English-speaking context either. The present study, however, shares a common pedagogical interest with all the other previous studies. Thus, it seeks to answer questions pertaining to frequency, types, and functions of humor in the Iranian spoken academic context, and the impact of presentation language on the distribution and functions of humor in EASS contexts.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Background

The Iranian academic context has been experiencing a transition from a highly teacher-fronted context into a dialogic one during the last decade. Recently, research and dissemination of its results have gained in importance and Iranian universities have taken every measure to increase the number of their publications in international journals. Moreover, student researchers are encouraged to participate in international academic events at home and around the globe. Student conferences organized under the supervision of experienced academic professionals and attended by university lecturers and students from all around the country are also increasing in number. Prior to the event, articles submitted to student conferences are reviewed by a special committee and accepted submissions are presented to the audience in the presence of a board of referees. Similarly, in a thesis viva session, students present the findings of their research projects carried out under the supervision of one or two experienced professional(s) to an examination board composed of their own teachers and/or guest examiners. The examination board assesses the whole research project and presentation style and assigns a

score of 0-20, which is translated into a band description of excellent (19-20), very good (17-18.99), good (14-16.99), and unacceptable (> 14). Copies of student theses are sent to examiners prior to the defense and students are supposed to answer the examiners' questions regarding different aspects of the study.

3.2. Data collection

The data for the present study came from 14 theses viva sessions, as partial fulfillment of a degree in General Dentistry, held at the dentistry school of a medical university in Iran and 4 student presentations by students of General Medicine and dentistry at two different conferences at the same medical university. The student presentations were made in English by students educated in the Iranian education system and attended by students and faculty members of the hosting university and medical universities all around Iran. The discussion phases of the student presentations were conducted in English and/or Farsi depending on the language used by the person posing the question. The student presentations were meant to represent the Iranian academic context and the EASS context. The rationale behind the selection of these two particular forms of spoken academic discourse was their dialogic nature as opposed to the monologic lectures.

To collect data, the on-site researcher, as a member of staff at the university, attended all the theses viva sessions and student presentations making online observations and taking in-situ notes of all cases of humor, their surrounding contexts, and their situational outcome(s) as clearly and carefully as possible. In order to gather data on the distribution of humor across various administrative procedures of the viva sessions and student presentations, blank copies of Tables 2 and 4 (based on Ventola, 2002) were taken to the events and incidents of humor were marked in the relevant cells. Moreover, notes were taken on the agents of humor. The rationale behind using online observation and on-site notes, rather than corpus data, was lack of MICASE and BASE equivalents in the Iranian academic context at the time of conducting the research. Additionally, the on-site researcher's familiarity with teachers, students, and their relationships provided the opportunity to take valuable non-verbal and participant information into consideration in the data analysis stage. The videos of the events, recorded by the university audio-visual center, were later consulted to examine the accuracy of the collected data. This initial stage of data collection was followed by stimulated recall interviews, mostly conducted within three days after the events by the on-site researcher in his office at the university, during which the videos of the occasions were played back and the agents of humor, excluding the examiners, were asked to elaborate on their intentions of using humor. The interviews lasted for 20 minutes on average and were audio-recorded for later consultation.

3.3. Data analysis

To answer the question relating to the distribution of humor in Iranian spoken academic discourse and the EASS context, the total frequency of laughter and the distribution of laughter episodes across different administrative procedures of the thesis viva sessions and student presentation were calculated. The taxonomies of humor proposed by Lee (2006), Nesi (2012), and Wang (2014) were also used to categorize the types of humor. Furthermore, the theory explaining each humorous case was identified based on the reason(s) why the episode was originated. Moreover, the functions of all cases of humor were inferred from their situational outcome(s). Finally, the laughter indices in the thesis viva sessions and student presentations were compared to explore the influence of the presentation language on the frequency of humor.

4. Results

4.1. Distribution of humor

The 14 theses viva sessions comprised a total of 546 minutes of talk, with the longest and shortest ones lasting 57 and 30 minutes, respectively; that is, 39 minutes on average. A total of 21 laughs were recorded for the 14 theses viva sessions. The most humorous viva session had 3 laughs and there were 4 sessions including no humorous remarks. The data showed an average number of 1.5 laughs per viva session, and a laughter index of 1 laugh/26 minutes. Table 1 summarizes these findings. The distribution of laughter in each phase of the thesis viva sessions and the agents of humor are presented in Table 2.

Table 1 Distribution of humor in thesis viva sessions

Number of viva sessions	Total time (minutes)	Average time/defense (minutes)	Total number of laughs	Average number of laughs/viva	Laughter index
14	546	39	21	1.5	1/26 minutes

Table 2 Number of laugh(s) and agents of humor in thesis viva sessions

Presentation phase	Number of laugh(s)	Agent
1. Opening section (Chair)	4	Chair
2. Introduction of speaker (Chair)	1	Supervisor
3. Thanking for introduction (Speaker)	----	----
4. Contextualizing paper (Speaker)	----	----
5. Paper (Speaker)	----	----
6. Thanking the audience (Speaker)	----	----
7. Applauding the speaker (Audience)	----	----

8. Thanking the speaker (Chair)	3	Chair
9. Opening the discussion (Chair)	2	Chair
10. Question/comment (Discussant)	9	Chair/supervisor/audience
11. Answer/response (Speaker)	----	----
12. Closing the section (Chair)	2	Chair
13. Applauding the speaker (Audience)	----	----
Total	21	----

The 4 student presentations in English encompassed a total of 75 minutes of presentation (18.75 minutes on average). There were 3 laughs in the presentations which gave a laughter index of 1/25 minutes and 0.75 laugh per presentation. This is summarized in Table 3. Table 4 shows the distribution and the agents of humorous events in the student presentations.

Table 3 Distribution of humor in student presentations

Number of presentations	Total time (minutes)	Average time	Total number of laughs	Average number of laughs/presentation	Laughter index
4	75	18.75	3	0.75	1/25 minutes

Table 4 Number of laugh(s) and agents of humor in student presentations

Presentation phase	Number of laugh(s)	Agent
1. Opening section (Chair)	----	----
2. Introduction of speaker (Chair)	----	----
3. Thanking for introduction (Speaker)	----	----
4. Contextualizing paper (Speaker)	----	----
5. Paper (Speaker)	1	speaker
6. Thanking the audience (Speaker)	----	----
7. Applauding the speaker (Audience)	----	----
8. Thanking the speaker (Chair)	----	----
9. Opening the discussion (Chair)	----	----
10. Question/comment (Discussant)	2	audience
11. Answer/response (Speaker)	----	----
12. Closing the section (Chair)	----	----
13. Applauding the speaker (Audience)	----	----
Total	3	----

4.2. Functions of humor

4.2.1. Functions of humor in viva sessions

Three out of four instances of humor in the opening section of thesis viva sessions served the purpose of *breaking the ice*. In all of these superiority theory cases of humor, the chairs tried to give a good start to the viva sessions using humor. In two of these instances, the chairs asked the presenters to finish their

presentations very quickly as the board of examiners were in a hurry. One of them is presented below (all extracts are translated from Farsi into English):

> Extract 1: Tell us about your thesis in about seven minutes because we have to run.

This remark sparked off a general laughter since everybody shared the common knowledge that faculty members, who owned a dentistry office, were always in a hurry. In another event, the chair made a humorous remark on the refreshments brought to the session by the student, which invoked laughter among the audience. It was an instance of reference to the local culture at the university where students brought different kinds of refreshments to viva sessions.

The last instance of humor in the opening section of viva sessions was an instance of relief theory humor, which was originated by the chair to *relieve tension* among examiners. In this case, a supervisor was late and the chair stated:

> Extract 2: The supervisor is late because he does not have any answers to the examiners' questions.

The chair tried to relieve the tension among the waiting examiners and he was successful since the remark generated laughter among the audience and some examiners. This type of humor was referred to as joking about a third party by Wang (2014).

The only instance of laughter in the introduction of the speaker phase occurred when the late supervisor arrived saying:

> Extract 3: Sorry, I got stuck in an early morning meeting.

Members of the audience and the waiting examiners burst into laughter. Incongruity theory could be used to explain this humor episode as everyone believed that the supervisor got stuck in traffic.

All of the three cases of laughter during thanking the speaker section of the viva sessions transpired when the chair turned to the presenter and said:

> Extract 4: You have the potential to become a successful news announcer because of the seriousness in your voice.

These instances of comic comparisons and contrasts where presenters were compared to news announcers could be contextualized within incongruity theory. The chair intended to *enliven the atmosphere* after a long presentation made by the defender.

The two instances of laughter in the opening the discussion phase were related to similar events. To open the discussion, the chair looked at the members of the examination board noticing that three out of five were co-researchers in the theses projects. In the first instance, the chair commented:

Extract 5: The presenter is in good company and it is me who needs support.

In the second case, the same chair turned to the presenter and said:

Extract 6: The examiners do not have any questions and I cannot ask mine. So, you are done.

Everyone laughed at these examples of self-effacement, or self-deprecation, type of humor in which the chair made a joke about himself to enliven the atmosphere. These instances of humor, rooted in relief theory, prepared the presenter for a potentially challenging question/comment stage.

In another case in the discussion section, one of the examiners made a humorous remark on the presenter's slides asking:

Extract 7: Which one took you longer: conducting your research or writing your presentation book?

As an example of exaggeration type of humor, this could be classified under incongruity theory where the humor resided in the likening of the presenter's lengthy presentation file to a book.

The next instance of humor that can be explained in terms of relief theory happened when one of the examiners had a sore throat, and without asking any questions, he simply expressed his gratitude to the speaker. The chair, then, turned to the speaker and said:

Extract 8: Lucky you!

Five out of nine humorous events in the discussion section were intended to *mitigate conflicts* among examiners, supervisors, and presenters. The first of these humorous instances emerged when an examiner asked a lot of questions and was not satisfied with the answers while all the other examiners accepted the student's and his supervisor's responses. Here, the chair interrupted the discussion saying:

Extract 9: The examiner will take up the same topic in future and find answers to his questions.

Everybody, except the examiner, laughed and there were no more questions put forward by that examiner.

In the second event, it was the chair's turn to ask his questions and the members of the audience, who knew him as a strict examiner, applauded while laughing before he posed his questions. The examiner turned to the audience saying:

Extract 10: I am just going to ask *a few easy* [emphasis made by the speaker] questions.

This incident of laughter repeated itself, with only minor modifications in the kind of exchanged interactions, in three more viva sessions. As examples of sarcasm where the chair said something while he meant something else, they were contextualized within superiority theory since they were originated by a power person (the chair). Stimulated recall interviews with the students confirmed the examiner's interpretation that the audience wanted to put an end to the question stage. In yet another case of sarcasm of this kind, the chair asked an anxious supervisor to,

Extract 11: Let the speaker become a doctor by answering the questions herself.

Two instances of relief theory humor in the closing section of thesis viva sessions occurred when the scores were announced. The members of the audience, who expected the defenders to get the highest score, did not applaud 19.33 and 19.75 out of 20. The chair turned to the audience and, without saying a word, signaled to them to clap for the speakers. Then, everyone began to laugh and clap. The speakers simply smiled, however, trying to hide their negative feelings caused by not achieving the highest score. These were examples of relief theory humor to suppress negative feelings of anxiety in the presenters.

4.2.2. Functions of humor in students' presentations

One of the three humorous cases in the student presentations ensued in the paper phase when the speaker said:

Extract 12: Good afternoon.

This was while the presentation was being made in the morning. Stimulated recall interview with the speaker disclosed that he made this mistake due to high levels of stress. The speaker, however, stated:

Extract 13: Later chat with my friends showed that they had perceived my mistake as a joke about the dark presentation hall.

Viewed from the speaker's perspective, this was an instance of superiority humor as the audience laughed at the speaker error. However, it was an example

of incongruity humor in the form of comic comparisons and contrasts when viewed from the perspective of the audience since they believed the speaker had likened the dark presentation room to a dark evening. This double-edged humor was specifically found in the present study.

In an instance of incongruity humor caused by a *non-verbal stimulus* in the question/comment phase, an examiner inquired,

> Extract 14: What are the strengths of your research project?

The presenter paused for a while to come up with a careful answer, but his pause was interpreted as having nothing to say, leading to a general laughter.

The other two incidents of laughter caused by non-verbal stimuli occurred during the question/comment section of the student presentations. In one instance, a speaker who began to ask a question in English switched into Farsi in the middle of her talk due to her deficient English proficiency. In another case, a member of the audience stood up to ask a question, but sat down without uttering a word. These could be contextualized within superiority theory since it was inadequacy in English proficiency which brought about laughter among others. This was proved by evidence from a later interview with that individual who commented:

> Extract 15: I wanted to ask a question in English, but I couldn't.

5. Discussion

A closer look at laughter indices of 1/26 minutes and 1/25 minutes in Tables 1 and 3 for thesis viva sessions and student presentations, respectively, reveals that humor is apparently less common in the Iranian educational context compared to a laughter index of 1/3 minutes reported by Lee (2006) for similar events in the American academic context. Nevertheless, there are important caveats to be mentioned. First, the current research is based on a very limited set of data and any generalizations from the present results to the entire Iranian spoken academic context have to be viewed cautiously. Next, considerable differences exist between the Iranian and American academic contexts regarding their levels of formality. Lee (2006) attributes less than expected formal nature of dissertation defenses in the American context to smaller status distance. In the Iranian academic context, however, a certain degree of distance is constantly preserved irrespective of how informal the relationship between teachers and students might be. Therefore, it may be argued that the infrequency of humor in the Iranian academic context is due to its generally formal nature. High levels of stress induced as a result of focusing on the need to demonstrate competence also affects the frequency of humor in viva sessions and student presentations.

Interestingly, most humorous remarks are distributed in the discussion section of thesis viva sessions and student presentations rather than the monologic phases. This finding is in line with what Carey (2014, p. 121) found in his study of ELFA where laughter index "more than triples" when the monologic sections of lectures and seminars end and their discussion sections begin. The opening section of thesis viva sessions appears to be very humorous, too, mainly because the agent of the opening is the chair who enjoys a power position. The stage of thanking the speaker also provides the chair with another opportunity to enliven the atmosphere using humor.

Moreover, the study reveals that different types of humor are used in the Iranian academic context among which comic comparisons and contrasts, self-effacement, or self-deprecation, exaggeration, joking about a third party, and sarcasm are the most common. The same types of humor have been found by Lee (2006) in MICASE and Nesi (2012) and Wang (2014) in BASE. However, wits, mixed lexis/registers, found in MICASE by Lee (2006), and story-telling, identified by Wang (2014) in BASE, and her own recorded lectures are among the missing types of humor in the current study. This, nevertheless, is not to say that these types of humor are absent from the Iranian academic context since more comprehensive studies concerning various academic disciplines need to be conducted before arriving at such generalizations. A new type of humor identified in the present study is "references to the specific culture of the local community". The reference to refreshments is an example of this type of humor. Reference to local community culture may be the most difficult to perceive since it requires knowledge of that particular local culture, the lack of which may lead to confusion. Moreover, there are instances of humor in the current study caused by non-verbal stimuli not reported by any of the previous studies. Regardless of these exceptional cases, it seems that the categories of humor used in the Iranian and western academic contexts are almost identical.

Regarding the functions of humor, the present study unveils that humor is used to break the ice, relieve tension, enliven the atmosphere, mitigate conflicts, and suppress negative feelings in the Iranian spoken academic context. Humor is used to serve identical functions in American and British academic contexts, as observed by Lee (2006), Nesi (2012), and Carey (2014). Similar functions of humor are also identified by Wang (2014) in BASE and her own recorded lectures, though she uses different terms to describe them. Another rather different function of humor, found by Reershemius (2012), is its use for the expression of discourse reflexivity. This function of humor has not been observed in the present research and the studies reviewed above. This may be justified on the grounds that the study by Reershemius (2012) focuses on research presentations made mostly by experienced presenters, whereas the present study investigates

the use of humor by junior researchers. Nevertheless, Reershemius (2012, p. 873) emphasizes that "humor can also be applied for purposes other than increased discourse reflexivity". This means that the absence of one form or function of humor in a specific data set cannot be equated with the absence of that form/function in the entire academic context the data set represents.

As to the frequency of humor in EASS contexts, the present findings are consistent with Carey (2014), who believes non-native speakers of English in ELF settings are capable of and have enough common scripts to generate humor. Nesi (2012) and Alsop (2031), on the other hand, propose that humor is less frequent in L2 and EMI settings. However, in the present study a comparison of the laughter index of 1/25 minutes in student presentations in English to the laughter index of 1/26 minutes in thesis viva sessions in Farsi shows almost no difference in terms of the frequency of humor in EASS settings and native language contexts. This is to say, non-native speakers of a language can provoke humor in that language as long as they have common knowledge and experience to share. In the case of Iranian speakers of English, the common experience is to use code-switching and avoidance as compensation strategies for deficiency in English proficiency, which was the main cause of humor in student presentations in the current research. Similarly, Reershemius (2012) observes that native speakers of German who are familiar with British academic culture use humor more frequently than native speakers of German who lack this familiarity.

Another interesting result is that one out of three instances of humor in student presentations is a speaker error type of humor occurring in the paper phase of the presentation, whereas there is no single instance of humor of the same type happening in thesis viva sessions. This suggests that, despite approximately equal distribution, the nature of humor in non-native speaker academic settings may be different from that of native speaker contexts. In a similar vein, Nesi (2014) concludes that greater variety of humor types, particularly sarcasm and self-deprecation, can be found in L1 settings which in comparison to L2 contexts.

Furthermore, the study reveals that humor is mostly originated by people who occupy the power position and have friendly relationships together. These results are consistent with those of dissertation defenses in MICASE in which laughter is common among committee members who appear to have amicable relationships (Swales, 2004). In non-academic contexts such as the workplace, superiors use humor to show collegiality and control over the situation while subordinates sometimes use humor to challenge that control (Habib, 2008; Holmes, 2007). An example of using humor to challenge control in the present study occurred when members of the audience applauded the chair to signal the end of question stage though it did not serve the intended purpose. Contrary to these findings, Reershemius (2012) reported that in the British presentation culture

humor is distributed across almost all phases of generic structure of research presentation being originated by different parties.

There are already calls for the application of research findings on humor for pedagogical purposes. Wang (2014), for instance, stresses the importance of open conversation and negotiation about humor in intercultural academic contexts. Nesi (2012), in turn, believes that the opportunities offered by English for academic purposes programs are unlikely to prepare international students for culture-specific uses of laughter in educational settings unless they are supplemented with explicit training particularly on shared cultural scripts. In a similar vein, Reershemius (2012) emphasizes that these findings should be taken into account in training research students in the prevalent multilingual globalized academic context. Thus, the current research points to the need for explicit training of strategies on application and perception of humor in educational programs. To this end, videos and audios of successful presentations in different cultures and languages can be analyzed to single out the pragmatic means that, along with the specialized linguistic resources, form discipline-specific discourse literacy (Hyland, 2009; Hyland & Tse, 2007).

Conversely, the inclusion of pragmatic instruction, particularly humor, has always been a serious challenge for educators. Lee (2006, p. 65) points out that it may not be practical "to directly instruct a learner into having or developing a sense of humor if s/he is not that way inclined and even more impossible to teach people from disparate cultures to fully appreciate particular kinds of humor". This implies the role of personality as yet another influential factor in the application of humor. Hence, Lee (2006, p. 65) recommends immersing oneself in the culture, focusing on the functions of humor, drawing from first language humor forms and functions, and using linguistic and paralinguistic means such as tone of voice and kinesthetic events as some strategies to raise "humor awareness". The findings of the present study lend particular support to the last of these strategies. To this list, careful attention to the setting and use of generally shared human experiences can be added. Learners must also try to participate in as many national and international academic events as possible paying close attention to presentation strategies used by experienced researchers. Subsequently, they need to practice those strategies in their small-scale presentations such as classroom lectures. By so doing, they can transfer these presentation skills to other large-scale educational events.

6. Conclusion

It must be noted that due to the lack of any MICASE and BASE equivalents for the Iranian academic context, conducting studies like this is very time consuming and they are inevitably limited in scope. Hopefully, the need to compile Farsi academic corpora provides future researchers with the opportunity to conduct

similar studies across various disciplines and spoken academic genres. The real nature of the Iranian academic culture can be delineated only after similar studies complement this pioneering research.

In conclusion, the following humor universals are drawn from research findings on humor to date:

- The perception of humor requires shared experience, common cultural background, and an awareness of the interpersonal relationship among participants.
- Although the distribution of humor is different across cultures, it performs almost the same functions.
- The study of humor is no easy undertaking and there are many complications involved in terms of theories, taxonomies, and functions of humor.
- The contributions of academic corpora to research in this area cannot be neglected.

These humor universals can be used for pedagogical purposes as, hopefully, a clear understanding of different educational contexts can aid dissemination of academic knowledge among individuals from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

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