

SPORTS
CULTURE AND
COMMUNICATION
RESEARCH
COLLECTIVE



Team cohesion & sports teams: How team members negotiate cohesion through humour

Sol Wolfers, PhD Candidate
Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick
One-day symposium for UK Coaching

Get ready to debate!

Is banter good for cohesion?

Outline

- ▶ Example I
- ▶ Example II
- ▶ Banter & cohesion
 - ▶ What do the players say?
- ▶ Some concepts & ideas
- ▶ Discussion
- ▶ Some advice

Example 1

- ▶ Context: During a running exercise some players speak about riots and raids of local stores happening in their city (due to a controversial event). They start joking about wanting to clear out a famous electrical store and what they would steal. Before the below excerpt, they have humorously named several items including mobile phones, game consoles and more to steal. Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black.

1. Vitali: [
2. Daniel: [e] // new fridge
3. / [Joint laugh
4. Kevin: [
5. Fabian: [
6. Kevin: C Right Daniel ?
7. Daniel: What ?
8. Kevin: Don't even need to put on a mask
9. Daniel: ...

Background information: The media coverage about the riots was focused on the so called "black bloc" among others. It describes a tactic used by protesters who wear black clothing as well as face-concealing or -protecting items. They are said to be ready to use violence.

Example 1

▶ Reminder: Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black.

1. Vitali: [laughingly] Woah what ?
2. Daniel: [laughingly] Here new fridge mum [in changed voice] //
new fridge yeess she'd be too happy then \
3. / [Joint laughter] \\
\\
4. Kevin: [smilingly] Daniel was also in riot right ?
5. Fabian: [laughs]
6. Kevin: One's gotta watch out ... Saw him at (area name) ... Right
Daniel ?
7. Daniel: What ?
8. Kevin: Don't even need to put on a mask
9. Daniel: ...

Example 1

► Reminder: Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black.

1. Vitali: [laughingly] Woah what ?
2. Daniel: [laughingly] Here new fridge mum [in changed voice] //
new fridge yees she'd be too happy then \
3. / [Joint laughter] \\
\\
4. Kevin: [smilingly] Daniel was also in riot right ?
5. Fabian: [laughs]
6. Kevin: One's gotta watch out ... Saw him at (area name) ... Right
Daniel ?
7. Daniel: What ?
8. Kevin: Don't even need to put on a mask
9. Daniel: Chiller cap's enough cap and hood
10. Kevin: [laughs]

Example 1

▶ Reminder: Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black.

1. Vitali: [laughingly] Woah what ?

2. Daniel: [laughingly] Here new fridge mum [in changed voice] //
new fridge yeesh she'd be too happy then \

3. / [joint laughter] \

CONTENT

- Stealing a fridge for his mother and gifting it to her

6. Kevin: One's gotta watch out ... Say
Daniel ?

7. Daniel: What ?

8. Kevin: Don't even need to put on a mask

9. Daniel: Chiller cap's enough cap and hood

10. Kevin: [laughs]

FUNCTION

- Humour support strategies: laughter & contributing more humour (banter)
- Irony: not literally meaning the said (laughter & tone of voice)

Example 1

▶ Reminder: Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black.

1. Vitali: [laughingly] Woah what ?

2. Daniel: [laughingly] Here new fridge mum [in changed voice] //
new fridge yees she'd be too happy then \

3. / [Joint laughter] \ \

4. Kevin: [smilingly] Dan

5. Fabian: [laughs]

6. Kevin: One's gotta watch out ... Saw him at (area name) ... Right
Daniel ?

7. Daniel: What ?

8. Kevin: Don't even need to put on a mask

9. Daniel: Chiller cap's enough cap and hood

10. Kevin: [laughs]

CONTENT & FUNCTION

- Humour support strategy: laughter

→ Up until here: Harmonious humour episode

Example 1

▶ Reminder: Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black

1. Vitali: [laughingly] Woah what ?
2. Daniel: [laughingly] Here new fridge mum [in ch...
new fridge yees she'd be too happy then
3. / [Joint laughter] \\
\\
4. Kevin: [smilingly] Daniel was also in riot right ?
5. Fabian: [laughs]
6. Kevin: CONTENT re
7. Daniel: SUGGESTIVE
8. Kevin: Don't even need to put on a mask
9. Daniel: Chiller cap's enough cap and hood
10. Kevin: [laughs]

FUNCTION

- Teasing tone of voice & smile indicate humorous intention
- Irony
- Explicitly 'others' Daniel excluding him from the in-group of non-protesters vs out-group of protestors
- Rising intonation → setting the scene for more humour
- Fabian supports the humour with laughter manifesting the out-group position of Daniel

Example 1

▶ Reminder: Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are

1. Vitali: [laughingly] Woah what
2. Daniel: [laughingly] Here new fr
new fridge yees she'd be

CONTENT

- Again suggestive of Daniel's criminal energy

FUNCTION

- Continuation of teasing initiated in line 4 with further irony
- By using the pronoun 'him' Kevin is further othering Daniel by speaking *about* him
- Then addressing Daniel directly, Kevin puts him 'on the spot' awaiting a reaction

6. Kevin: One's gotta watch out ... Saw him at (area name) ... Right Daniel?
7. Daniel: What?
8. Kevin: Don't even need to put on a mask
9. Daniel: Chiller cap's enough cap and hood
10. Kevin: [laughs]

Example 1

▶ Reminder: Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black.

1. Vitali: [laughingly] Woah what ?

2. Daniel: [laughingly] Here new fridge mum [in changed voice] //
new fridge yeess she'd be too happy then \

3. / [Joint laughter] \ \

4. Kevin: [smilingly] Daniel was also in riot right ?

5. Fabian: [laughs]

6. Kevin: One's gotta
Daniel ?

7. Daniel: What ?

8. Kevin: Don't even need to put on a mask

9. Daniel: Chiller cap's enough cap and hood

10. Kevin: [laughs]

CONTENT & FUNCTION

- Clarifying question → either he was Right
not listening before or he refuses to
'play along' here

Example 1

▶ Reminder: Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black.

1. Vitali: [laughingly] Woah what ?

2. Daniel: [laughingly] Here new fridge
new fridge yees she'd be t

3. / [Joint laughter] \\
\\

4. Kevin: [smilingly] Daniel was also

FUNCTION

- Finishes his humour frame (line 4) with a 'punchline' of racialised humour
- Suggestive, sharp remark → uses skin colour to mark differences
- In- and out-groups along racialised lines

CONTENT

- Suggestive remark → Links criminal activities / semblance of black bloc to Daniel's skin colour

8. Kevin: Don't even need to put on a mask

9. Daniel: Chiller cap's enough cap and hood

10. Kevin: [laughs]

Example 1

▶ Reminder: Vitali, Kevin and Fabian are white, Daniel is black.

1. Vitali: [laughingly] Woah what ?

2. Daniel: [laughingly] Here new fridge mum [in changed voice] //
new fridge yees she

3. / [Joint laughter] \\
\\

4. Kevin: [smilingly] Daniel w

5. Fabian: [laughing]

CONTENT

- Due to his black skin colour he only needs little face-concealing gear like a “cap and hood”

9. Daniel: Chiller cap’s enough cap and hood

10. Kevin: [laughs]

FUNCTION

- Humour support: Joins the racialised humour with *self-directed* humour
- Accepts out-group position based on skin colour → Shows he can ‘take it’
- Joins the in-group of ‘humourists’
- Humour support of Kevin through laughter
- Harmony and *cohesion* reinstalled

Example II

- ▶ Context: During a football match a player on the pitch (Jordan) who is out of earshot loses a ball to the opposing team, which is commented by some of the substitute players on the substitutes' bench. Jordan and Jonah are both black, while Yasin, Maxi and Peter are white.

1. Maxi: Jordan you little... asylum(seeker)
2. Peter: [laughs]
3. Yasin: Dude that's common in Africa dude
4. [Joint laughter]
5. Maxi: Searching and // finding haha \
6. Peter: / Haha they're playing \\ with paper dude haha
7. [Joint laughter]
8. Peter: Building paperballs for themselves dude
9. Maxi: // Like out of newspaper \
10. Jonah: / Some are bringing \\ [that] over from Germany dude making balls out of paper and paste
11. Yasin: They don't even have a street-walkers' patch dude
12. [Joint laughter]

Example II

- ▶ Reminder: Jordan and Jonah are both black, while Peter and Yasin are white.

1. Maxi: Jordan you little... asylum(seeker)

2. Peter: [laughter]

3. Yasin: Dude

4. [Joint laughter]

5. Maxi: Sea

6. Peter: / H

7. [Joint laughter]

8. Peter: Building paperballs for themselves dude

9. Maxi: // Like out of newspaper \

10. Jonah: / Some are bringing \ [that] over from Germany dude making balls out of paper and paste

11. Yasin: They don't even have a street-walkers' patch dude

12. [Joint laughter]

CONTENT

- Reference to earlier conversation about asylum homes close to the pitch
- Draws connection between Jordan and asylum seeking

FUNCTION

- Assigns “asylum seeker” identity to Jordan based on perceived foreignness/black skin colour → negative stereotype
- Associates poor performance with “race”/foreignness
- Others Jordan based on skin colour and assigns outsider position to him

Example II

- Reminder: Jordan and Jonah are both black, while Yasin, Maxi and Peter are white.

1. Maxi: Jordan you little... asylum(seeker)
2. Peter: [laughs]
3. Yasin: Dude that's common in Africa dude
4. [Joint laughter]
5. Maxi: See
6. Peter: / H
7. [Joint laughter]
8. Peter: Building paperballs for themselves dude
9. Maxi: // Like out of newspaper \
10. Jonah: / Some are bringing \ [that] over from Germany dude making balls out of paper and paste
11. Yasin: They don't even have a street-walkers' patch dude
12. [Joint laughter]

CONTENT

- Associates asylum seeking with Africa → negative stereotyping

FUNCTION

- Humour support strategies: laughter and adding more humour building on Maxi's humour frame
- Negative stereotype of Africa: 'developing continent' = poor performance
- Othering Jordan based on skin colour

Example II

► Reminder: Jordan and Jonah are both black, while Yasin, Maxi white.

1. Maxi: Jordan you little... asylum(seeker)
2. Peter: [laughs]
3. Yasin: Dude that's common in Africa dude
4. [Joint laughter]
5. Maxi: Searching and // finding haha \
6. Peter: / Haha they're playing \\ with paper dude haha
7. [Joint laughter]
8. Peter: Building paperballs for themselves dude
9. Maxi: // Like out of newspaper \
10. Jonah: / Some are bringing \\ [that] over from Germany dude out of paper and paste
11. Yasin: They don't even have a street-walkers' patch dude
12. [Joint laughter]

CONTENT

- Further derogatory comments about Africa (and per default Jordan)

FUNCTION

- Humour support strategies:
 - Joint laughter
 - Collaborative development of humour (adding more humour)
 - Overlaps (heightened involvement)
 - Finishing each other's turns
- In-group of 'humourists' on the substitute's bench vs. Jordan on field/Africans
- More negative and potentially threatening stereotypes

Example II

- ▶ Reminder: Jordan and Jonah are both black, while Yasin, Maxi and Peter are white.

1. Maxi: Jordan you little... asylum(seek

2. Peter: [laughs]

3. Yasin: Dude that's common in Africa du

4. [Joint laughter]

5. Maxi: Searching and // finding haha \

6. Peter: h p

7. [Joint

8. Peter: selv

9. Maxi:

10. Jonah: / Some are bringing \ [that] over from Germany dude making balls out of paper and paste

11. Yasin: They don't even have a street-walkers' patch dude

12. [Joint laughter]

CONTENT

- Further derogatory comment about Africa in contrast to a resourceful Germany

FUNCTION

- Humour support strategy: Adding more humour (collaborative & harmonious)
- By joining the humour, Jonah (who is black himself) promotes the nonseriousness of the potentially threatening & racist humour
- In-group of 'humourists' on the substitute's bench vs. Jordan on field/Africans

Example II

▶ Reminder: Jordan and Jonah are both black, while Yasin, Maxi and Peter are white.

1. Maxi: Jordan you little... asylum(seeker)

2. Peter: [laughs]

3. Yasin: Dude that's common in Africa dude

4. [Joint laughter]

5. Maxi: Searching and // finding haha \

6. Peter: / Haha they're playing \\ with p

7. [Joint

CONTENT

8. Peter: • Slight shift in topic

9. Maxi: • Still negative stereotype

10. Jonah: about *how* developmental Africa is

FUNCTION

- Humour support strategy:
 - Adding more humour
 - Joint laughter
- Denouncing out-group further
- Manifesting the before established in- and out-groups

11. Yasin: They don't even have a street-walkers' patch dude

12. [Joint laughter]

Example II

- ▶ Reminder: Jordan and Jonah are both black, while Yasin, Maxi and Peter are white.

1. Maxi: Jordan you little... asylum(seeker)

2. Peter: [laughs]

3. Yasin

4. [Join

5. Maxi:

6. Peter

7. [Join

8. Peter

9. Maxi: // Like out of newspaper \

10. Jonah: / Some are bringing \ [that] over from Germany dude making balls out of paper and paste

11. Yasin: They don't even have a street-walkers' patch dude

12. [Joint laughter]

What does this humorous episode mean for cohesion?

- Collaborative and harmonious floor management constructs cohesion among substitutes
- Cohesion of the team as a whole is *temporarily* threatened by sub-groupings (on-pitch players, 'Africans', substitutes)

Going back...

- ▶ Is banter good for cohesion?

What do the players say?

„I think one shouldn't take everything abnormally serious there are some who get carried away but“

“We all get along really well no one ever gets excluded no one is ever bullied”

“That's just the way it is with us ... it's just a joke ... it will never be serious“

„That exists in any team [...] one always laughs about one (or) two but those know that I believe ... just don't show it ha ha [...] but one shouldn't wear someone out the whole time or so [...] some just can't help it ha ha ha“

Some concepts & ideas

- ▶ The humour norms of any social group are context-specific (e.g. Dynel, 2008, Schnurr, 2009, 2010) → what counts as acceptable behaviour is continuously being negotiated in these contexts (Schnurr & Chan, 2011)
- ▶ Despite divisive content of humour, it may functionally unite the team → cohesion is discursively negotiated (constructed, enhanced, and threatened)
- ▶ Humour as a 'double-edged sword' simultaneously uniting and dividing (e.g. Meyer, 2000, Rogerson-Revell, 2007, Wolfers, File & Schnurr, 2017) → complex and multifaceted

Let's discuss!

- ▶ You are with a coach and their team and you notice a lot of banter that you feel crosses the line
- ▶ What would you do?

Some advice

- ▶ When designing a response strategy, consider the *context*
 - ▶ What is the make-up of the team?
 - ▶ What performance level are they playing?
 - ▶ What is the point in time (pre-season, mid-season, etc.)?
 - ▶ What are the team goals?
 - ▶ Who is involved in the banter?
 - ▶ ...
- ▶ Listen to *what* is being said, *how* it is being said and how it is *reacted to*

Thank you!

Want to hear more from me?

Drop me an email:

s.wolfers@warwick.ac.uk

Follow me on twitter:

[@solvejgwolfers](https://twitter.com/solvejgwolfers)

Look at what I am doing on my

[ePortfolio](#)

SPORTS
CULTURE AND
COMMUNICATION
RESEARCH
COLLECTIVE