Cliff Goddard*

“Joking, kidding, teasing”: Slippery categories for cross-cultural comparison but key words for understanding Anglo conversational humor

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ip-2018-0017>

Abstract: Terms like *to joke* (and *joking*) and *to tease* (and *teasing*) have a curious double life in contrastive and interactional pragmatics and related fields. Occasionally they are studied as metapragmatic terms of ordinary English, along with related expressions such as *kidding*. More commonly they are used as scientific or technical categories, both for research into English and for cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison. Related English adjectives, such as *jocular* and *mock*, are also much-used in a growing lexicon of compound terms, such as *jocular abuse*, *mock abuse*, *jocular mockery*, and the like.

Against this background, the present paper has three main aims. In the first part, it is argued that the meanings of the verbs *to joke* and *to tease* (and related nouns) are much more English-specific than is commonly recognized. They are not precisely cross-translatable even into European languages such as French and German. Adopting such terms as baseline categories for cross-cultural comparison therefore risks introducing an Anglocentric bias into our theoretical vocabulary. Nor can the problem be easily solved, it is argued, by attributing technical meanings to the terms.

Detailed analysis of the everyday meanings of words like *joking* and *teasing*, on the other hand, can yield insights into the ethnopragmatics of Anglo conversational humor. This task is undertaken in the second part of the paper. The important English verb *to kid* and the common conversational formulas *just kidding* and *only joking* are also examined. The semantic methodology used is the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach, which depends on paraphrase into simple, cross-translatable words.

*Corresponding author: Cliff Goddard, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia,
E-mail: c.goddard@griffith.edu.au

Building on the NSM analyses, the third part of the paper considers whether it is possible to construct a typological framework for conversational humor based on cross-translatable terminology.

Keywords: conversational humor, ethnopragmatics, Anglocentrism, NSM, joking, teasing

1 Goals and outline

This paper begins with a metalanguage critique of much current work in contrastive pragmatics and humor studies. In Section 2, it is argued that using English-specific terms as an informal descriptive metalanguage for non-English languages and cultures leads to Anglocentrism and, concurrently and inevitably, to descriptive and explanatory inadequacy. The main focus is on English speech-act terms such as *joking* and *teasing* (and related nouns), which, it is argued, are not precisely cross-translatable even into European languages such as French and German.

The larger premise of the paper is that solutions to these problems are available if we adopt an ethnopragmatic approach, based on findings of cross-linguistic semantic research conducted within the NSM framework (Wierzbicka 1996; Peeters 2006; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2002, 2014; and other works). This approach, which uses simple cross-translatable words as its descriptive metalanguage, allows contrastive pragmatics to detach itself from its current Anglocentric moorings and thereby achieve enhanced descriptive and explanatory adequacy. At the same time, the ethnopragmatic methodology can, and should, be applied to deconstruct and illuminate key Anglo English concepts such as joking (and related terms such as *kidding*), and *teasing*, and a thicket of other intertwined terms such as *funny*, *amusing*, and even the Anglo metacategory of *humor* itself. This task is undertaken in Section 3, which also serves to highlight the cultural and semantic specificities of the Anglo English terminology.

Section 4 explores the prospects for constructing a typological framework for conversational humor based on cross-translatable terminology. Unsurprisingly, this means abandoning the Anglo metacategory of humor and re-framing the domain of inquiry in terms of, roughly speaking, social practices based on laughing together and sharing good feelings typically associated with laughter. Section 5 contains a brief final comment.

2 A metalanguage critiques of conventional approaches to conversational humor

2.1 A confusion of terms, a confusion of concepts

A review of recent scholarly writing on conversational humor shows that it routinely employs a profusion of ordinary English words in its informal descriptive vocabulary. These include (i) speech-act verbs such as *joke* and *tease*, and derivatives such as *jocular*, (ii) nouns designating speech-acts or mini-genres, such as *quip*, *pun*, *joke*, *anecdote*, *banter*, *wisecrack*, *wordplay*, *repartee*, (iii) adjectives describing or attributing intent or effect, such as *funny*, *amusing*, *not serious*, *witty*, *ironic* and *sarcastic*, and related nouns, such as *irony*, *sarcasm*, and *amusement*. Often such terms are used without any attempt at definition, but when definitions are offered they leave much to be desired. A sample of such definitions is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample of conventional scholarly definitions of some key humor terms.

<i>teasing</i> : “a personally addressed remark with a bite, often performed in front of a public” (Kotthoff 2007: 271)
<i>quip</i> : “a short, witty but also ironic comment about the on-going transaction or topic under discussion”, “a witty aside” (Holmes and Marra 2002: 75)
<i>banter</i> : “rapid exchange of humorous lines oriented toward a common theme, though aimed primarily at mutual entertainment, rather than topic talk ...” (Norrick 1993: 29)
<i>humor</i> : “can be defined in terms of the speaker’s intent to elicit a feeling of what is variously referred to in the literature as amusement Ruch (2009), mirth (Martin 2014), or nonseriousness (Chafe 2007), or by” (Bell 2015)
<i>amusement</i> : “the state of experiencing funny and often entertaining events or situations ... most frequently associated with laughter ...” (Ruch 2009: 27)

The definitions in Table 1 exhibit the usual faults of non-systematic lexicography, especially reliance on complex, language-specific terms, with consequent vagueness and, in many cases, circularity. For instance, Holmes and Marra’s (2002) definition of *quip* relies on equally problematical words such as *witty* and *ironic*, not to mention technical locutions such as ‘ongoing transactional topic.’ Norrick’s (1993) definition of *banter* depends on the English-specific words *humorous* and (*mutual*) *entertainment*. Without laboring the point, in these definitions we see a maze of interrelated and overlapping English terms and no attempt whatever to be systematic.

So far we have been talking about the use of English terms as informal descriptors. Some English terms achieve a more prominent status when they are elevated to technical or semi-technical terms. In pragmatics, the most discussed example is of course *politeness*, and it is now established practice to distinguish between *politeness*₁ and *politeness*₂, referring to the everyday and technical meanings, respectively. In the subfield of conversational humor, perhaps the most notable applications of politeness are the following equations (from Culpeper (1996: 356) and Bousfield (2008); respectively, both following Leech (1983), cf. Leech (2014)):

sarcasm = *mock politeness*

banter = *mock impoliteness*

Clearly, a definition such as *sarcasm* = *mock politeness* would have no plausibility if the word *politeness* is used in its ordinary language sense, as witness everyday sarcastic expressions such as *My heart bleeds for you*. Taylor (2015: 127) comments:

the equation of mock politeness with sarcasm/irony is problematic because the label of sarcasm is simultaneously too broad, because behaviors labeled as sarcastic do not always perform mock politeness, and too narrow because there are mock polite behaviors which would not be labelled as sarcastic in either the lay or academic/theoretical senses; cf. Goddard and Levisen (Forthcoming).

The above “equations” also illustrate another common terminological practice, namely, the coining of new compound terms with the aid of modifiers such as *mock*. In addition to *mock politeness* and *mock impoliteness*, current literature employs the expressions *mock abuse* and *mock sarcasm*, and a number of other *mock*-terms. But what is meant by *mock* in these uses? Haugh and Bousfield (2012) adduce definitions from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: “having the character of imitation” or being “simulated” or “feigned ... to look like the real thing” or “not based on real feelings”. Aside from their problematical complexity, these definitions surely leave out a crucial element, namely, that “mock” performances are intended to be recognizable as mock by the audience, in order to achieve a special effect.

Even more prolific than *mock* is the modifier *jocular* (roughly, “like people do when they are joking”); for example, in expressions like *jocular irony*, *jocular abuse*, *jocular mockery*, *jocular insult*, *jocular deception/provocation*, *jocular teasing*. By the way, to fend off accusations of any “holier than thou” attitude, I am happy to confess that I have published a study about “deadpan jocular irony” in Australian English (Goddard 2006).

So briefly, the terminological cycle goes something like this. (i) One starts with ordinary English words, poorly defined or undefined, then (ii) “technicalizes” them and extends their range, often making some formal adjustments along the way, e.g. using adjective + nominalization combinations or coining back-formations such as *a tease*, or *a bant*. (iii) Subsequently there is uptake, i.e. different scholars begin to employ the terms, often using them in slightly different ways from the original authors.¹ (iv) Scholarly debate begins about what the new terms mean or should mean, how the terms relate to one another, etc.

It may be swimming against the tide to say so but in my view the confusion of terminology betokens a confusion of concepts.

2.2 Anglo English speech acts are not cross-translatable even into French and German

Surprising as it may be to many Anglophone scholars, semantically complex terms like *joke* and *tease*, *wit* and *humor*, are English-specific in their meanings to a greater or lesser degree. Not one of them has precise equivalents even across a sample of major Indo-European languages, such as French, German, and Russian, let alone across the diverse languages of the world. Conversely, of course, these and other languages have words which cannot be well rendered into English (cf. Cassin ed. 2014).

For instance, French has no verb which closely matches English *to joke* (in the sense of conversational joking, as opposed to “telling a joke”). Goddard and Mullan (In press) provide a detailed examination of some of the nearest dictionary equivalents – *plaisanter* “joke, kid, speak light-heartedly” and *rigoler* “laugh, kid around, have fun together” – finding that both are significantly different in their meanings to the English verb *joke*. Likewise, French has no single word in this arena that is a perfect match for English *teasing*. Roughly speaking, “sharp” teasing can be described as *taquiner*, but most light, conversational teasing would be covered by the more general verb *plaisanter*.

German, too, has no verb comparable to English *joke*. One uses expressions based on the nouns *Witz*, which is a bit like *joke* (also *wit*), or *Spaß*, usually translated as “fun”.

¹ Even if a particular analyst does an exemplary job of specifying what a term (say, *mockery* or *sarcasm*) means for him or her, once that term gets out into the “wild” of scholarly discourse, there is no controlling its meaning and uses anymore.

Ich mach doch nur Witze. ‘I am only making jokes’.

Ich mach nur Spaß. ‘I am only making jokes’.

Das war doch nur ein Witz ([ein] Spaß). ‘That was only a joke’.

One of the great canonical texts of Freudianism was *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (1905), but the translation of *Witz* has caused no end of problems, both in French and English. English translators have generally settled on “jokes” (cf. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*), but Freud’s translator Strachey recognizes that “*Joke* ... is too wide and seems to cover the German *Scherz* as well” (Pons 2014: 487, 489).

2.3 The dangers of using “technicalized” English as a descriptive language

Humor studies is today dominated by Anglophone discourse, and, arguably, by Anglocentric categories. Despite the numerous published studies of humor practices in non-English linguacultures, the taxonomies and overviews of humor forms provided in Norrick (1993), Dynel (2009), and Langlotz (2015), for example, hardly mention any languages other than English. In principle, these oversights could be remedied by simply adding more references to languages other than English, but I would contend that the problem runs deeper. This point cannot be fully argued here, but NSM researchers have persistently argued that taking English-specific words as a starting point for theory construction – in any domain – inevitably leads to a skewed Anglocentric view of the phenomena (Wierzbicka 2009, 2014a).

A second danger of using English, including technical English, as a descriptive metalanguage is that in so doing one inevitably loses touch with the insider perspective, as it is termed in linguistic anthropology. That is, one loses touch with how things appear to the actual participants. The process was revealingly described by Weider and Pratt (1990), using the expression “the inverted gloss”. Weider and Pratt quote Garfinkel and Sacks (1986: 186), who observed how the analyst creates a glossary of approximate translations of the natives’ terms and then “recommends to colleagues that *he* will mean by *his* translations of natives’ terms what the natives were really talking about”. Weider and Pratt (1990) comment:

By inverting this gloss, the analyst (generally tacitly) asserts that what the native means by some remark is what the analyst means in his or her analysis the logical properties that would obtain for the theorist’s questions and answers are attributed to the members’ talk. (Weider and Pratt 1990: 66)

Clearly, if we as Anglophone analysts apply English-specific categories and descriptors to discourse practices of French, German, Chinese or Persian, in place of the local categories and descriptors, then we are guilty of this failing. And, paraphrasing Weider and Pratt (1990), we end up attributing or projecting our issues, as theorists, onto the “members’ talk”, i.e. onto the non-Anglo participants.

I contend that the critique of the “inverted gloss” is applicable even within a single language, as, for example, when English words like *banter* and *sarcasm* are glossed as “mock impoliteness” and “mock politeness”, respectively (cf. Taylor 2015). In short, using “technicalized English” allows – even encourages – slippage between insider/participant interpretation and outsider/scientist interpretation. Despite the distinction between “first-order” and “second-order” uses of terms, scholars keep getting mixed up between technical and ordinary language meanings of terms.

Finally, it should be obvious that untranslatable English-specific terms are not suitable as a theoretical vocabulary for intercultural or cross-cultural pragmatics.

3 *Joking, kidding, teasing*: Some key words for understanding Anglo conversational humor

This section proposes NSM semantic explications, i.e. explanatory paraphrases consisting of simple cross-translatable words, for English verbs *joke*, *kid* and *tease*, in the relevant senses. The purpose is two-fold: first, to separate and make explicit the various meaning components that are bundled together in these words, and second, to see what these meanings may be able tell us about the ethnopragmatics of Anglo English.

3.1 Method

Briefly, the NSM approach is a systematic approach to lexical semantics, based on a highly constrained metalanguage of 65 primitive word-meanings which appear to be expressible lexically in all or most languages. Examples include: SOMEONE, SOMETHING, THIS, PEOPLE, SAY, WANT, FEEL, GOOD, IF, BECAUSE and CAN. The full list is given in Appendix 1 in English. Comparable tables exist for French, German, Russian, Farsi, Finnish, Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Ewe (Ghana), and Koromu (Papua New Guinea), among other languages. Because they have

equivalents in all or most languages, framing explications in terms of semantic primes wards off the danger of terminological Anglocentrism.

NSM research recognizes that certain non-primitive meanings can function alongside semantic primes as building blocks of meaning. In NSM parlance, these are termed “semantic molecules”. The selection of semantic molecules is non-arbitrary and it must be demonstrable that they can themselves be explicated down to the level of semantic primes without circularity.² These aspects of the NSM theory cannot be dealt with here (cf. Goddard 2016), but for present purposes, it is important to note that the verb *laugh* is a proposed semantic molecule (see Appendix 2). This means that it can be used in semantic explications for words like *joke*, *kid*, *tease* and other “humor-related” concepts.

It will be helpful to highlight two different ways in which the semantic molecule *laugh* can enter into humor-related explications, depending on whether the speaker’s (ostensible) intention is for the addressee or audience (a) to feel something good and laugh, or (b) to feel something good “like people often feel when they laugh.” These components are appropriate for different purposes. For example, Goddard (2017) argues that the former is appropriate for the meaning of the English word *funny*, while the latter is appropriate for the meaning of the English word *amusing*.

In this section I will propose NSM explications for English verbs *joke*, *kid* and *tease*. It is not possible here to fully explain the process by which explications are devised and refined. The following brief observations will have to suffice. The development process involves taking various kinds of linguistic evidence into account (such as collocations, grammatical characteristics, contrasts with related words, and substitutability into contexts of use), deciding on issues of lexical polysemy, and ensuring that successive versions of the explication conform with NSM grammar. Taking account of these different aspects means that explications are time-consuming to construct. Typically, a published explication will have passed through 6–10 versions before reaching a form deemed suitable for publication. Essentially the NSM analyst faces the same challenge as a lexicographer, i.e. formulating a paraphrase that matches the range of use of a word, but under the added constraint of doing so using a small controlled vocabulary of cross-translatable words.

The present analysis was corpus-assisted. Collocational and frequency data, and many naturally occurring examples, were obtained from WordBanks Online, a commercially available corpus of English. They were augmented by examples taken from the internet and from personal observations.

² As well as semantic primes and molecules, NSM explications can also include portmanteau expressions such as ‘often’ (=at many times), ‘they’ (=these people), ‘then’ (=at this time).

3.2 Explicating *joking* and *kidding*

To begin, here is an overview of the grammatical properties of the two words addressed in this subsection. (i) They are both verbs. (ii) *Joke* is intransitive, while *kid* may take an addressee object. (iii) *Joke* can take a prepositional phrase for topic, e.g. *joking about the boss* and/or co-participant, e.g. *joking with his customers*. This is only marginally possible with *kid*, though there is some dialect variation on this point. (iv) *Joke* has nominal counterpart(s), i.e. *joke* and *jokes*. Both forms, especially the plural form, *jokes*, can refer to generalized “things said while joking,” i.e. it doesn’t necessarily refer to so-called “canned jokes”, as in the fixed expression *tell a joke*. (v) *Joke* can take agentive *-er*, i.e. *joker*, while *kid* cannot, cf. **kidder*. (vi) *Joke* has adjectival and adverbial forms, i.e. *jocular* and *jokingly*. As for *kid*, corresponding forms are marginal, though in the 2016 American election, Donald Trump famously remarked “Well, I said it kiddingly”.

3.2.1 Joking

Here are some representative examples of the verb *joke*, in the sense under consideration here.

- (1) *It was a little awkward at first but they were soon laughing and joking.*
[WordBanks]
- (2) *He likes to joke with his staff (friends, family, etc.).*
- (3) *Let’s stop joking about depression. Let’s stop joking about any and all mental illnesses. And let’s stop joking about suicide.* [thetempest.co/2017/04/28/entertainment/pepsi-messed-up-big-time-and-so-did-all-of-these-other-brands/]

As observed by Wierzbicka (1987), *joking* cannot be explicated simply saying something “in order to excite laughter”, in the style of many dictionaries, because we need to distinguish *joke* from *ridicule* and from *mock*, for example. Clearly the intention to induce laughing is part of the meaning, but more detail is required to make it clear that the apparent intention is simply to induce good feeling in the addressee or audience, rather than to serve some more complex motivation (as with *ridicule* or *mock*).

Consider explication [A] below. It is based on the idea that *joking* is, roughly speaking, a way of saying things which is prototypically expected and intended to cause people here to want to laugh and to feel good for a short time, i.e. it anticipates an “audience reaction”.

[A] *He was joking.*

he said some things at that time

he said it like people often say something when they think like this:

“when people here hear this, they can want to laugh [m] because of it, they can feel something good for a short time because of it

I want this”

it can be good if people do this at some times when they are with other people

A number of subtle aspects of explication [A] warrant comment. First, the intention components (the indented lines) are not being attributed directly to the person described as *joking*. Rather, that person’s manner of speaking is being described with reference to a prototypical scenario of someone who speaks with that intention (like people often say something when they think like this: ...). Second, the presence in the prototypical scenario of the expression ‘people here’ implies that the prototypical situation is being construed as a “social” one; the expression people here can of course include the speaker, as well as any others present. Third, the final component adds a measure of cultural endorsement. Finally, it may be worth noting that to describe people as *joking* doesn’t necessarily imply any great sophistication or verbal artistry.

The claim that the meaning of *joking* involves laughing (strictly speaking, wanting to laugh) as an anticipated outcome is supported by collocational data from WordBanks, in which the expression *laughing and joking* (as in example (1) above) is common, with 200 tokens. On the other hand, in the same corpus, the expression *laughing and kidding* does not occur at all. Likewise, *smiling and joking* also occurs, albeit much less commonly, while *smiling and kidding* does not.

It is also notable that according to the WordBanks Word-Diff tool, *joke* occurs fairly frequently conjoined (with *and* or *or*) with the verbs *talk* and *chat*, implying ongoing verbal interaction. This is not the case with *kid*.

Due to space restrictions, we cannot pursue other aspects of *joke* here; for example, its use as a verb of report (e.g. “XXX”, *he/she joked*), or how it relates semantically to derivative forms, such as the noun *joke* in its several uses. We turn now to *kidding*.

3.2.2 Kidding

Here are some representative examples of the verb *kid*. Clearly there is a close relationship between *kidding* and *joking*, evidenced by the fact that *joke* could be substituted for *kid* in (4) and (6), and by the coordinated *joking* and *kidding* in (5). It is quite typical that two out of three of these examples use the phrase *just kidding*. This will be addressed further below.

- (4) *“I think it just comes down to being female ... no, no, just kidding”, she said.*
[WordBanks]
- (5) *She was fun loving and enjoyed joking and kidding around.*
- (6) *You should have seen the look on Bill’s face when Allen told him he was just kidding! Boy, was he relieved!* [WordBanks]

A first glance at explication [B] for *kidding* will show that it is lengthier and more complex than explication [A] for *joking* and that it is directed towards a specific addressee (‘he said something to someone’). This is of course consistent with the fact that, unlike *joke*, *kid* can take a direct object, e.g. *I was just kidding you*, *You’re kidding me*, vs. **I was just joking you*, **You’re joking me*.

[B] ***He was kidding.***

he said something to someone
 when he said it, he thought like this:
 “when this someone hears this, he/she can think like this: ‘this can’t be true’
 at this moment, he/she won’t know why I said it
 a moment after, he/she can know why I said it
 he/she can then feel something good for a short time, like people often feel when they
 laugh [m]
 I want this”

Looking at explication [B] more closely, one can see that, unlike *joke*, it attributes a specific, fairly complex, intention to the subject, and moreover, that it involves, to use an informal expression, “messing with the addressee’s head”. According to the explication, when *kidding*, the subject’s apparent intention is for the addressee to be momentarily disbelieving and confused, before realizing what is going on and feeling “amused”, i.e. briefly “feeling something good like people often feel when they laugh”(Goddard 2017).

The intention to induce a moment of confusion or disbelief helps explain why in interactional data, there is often slightly delayed laughter, following instances of declared *kidding* (Haugh 2016). The component “a moment after, he/she can know why I said it” implies that it may require a little thinking for the addressee to see the speaker’s intention.

Note that the penultimate components attributed to the subject (“he/she can then feel something good for a short time, like people often feel when they laugh [m], I want this”) are very similar to the corresponding components in the explication for *joke*. This accounts for the fact that *kidding* can be seen as a kind of *joking*. Indeed, it would be fair to say that *kidding* is a “micro-genre” of *joking*.

I close this subsection with an observation about a non-obvious grammatical/collocational difference between *joke* and *kid*, turned up by WordBanks Word-Diff tool. It is that the verb *joke* is compatible with manner adverbs which attribute a psychological state to the subject, whereas the verb *kid* is not. Compare: *joke nervously*, *joke bitterly*, *joke wryly*; **kid nervously*, **kid bitterly*, **kid wryly*. It seems likely that this difference is correlated with the different explication structure. With *joke*, as explicated in [A], one says that the subject spoke as people often do when they anticipate the people present laughing because they say something and want this outcome. No actual intention is attributed to the subject. This is compatible with adding an attribution of the subject’s individual mental state. With *kid*, on the other hand, as explicated in [B], one attributes a particular, fairly complex, mental state to the speaker and this, it seems, blocks any further, competing, attribution.

3.2.3 *Only joking!, just kidding!*

Only joking!, *just kidding!*, and variants, are important English speech formulas (cf. Skalicky et al. 2015; Haugh 2016). *Just kidding!* appears to be by far the most common.

They are explicated in [C1] and [C2] below. Notice that the first line of both explications includes ‘I’ and ‘you’, i.e. the message is interactional, and that it is hinged around the semantic prime BECAUSE, i.e. the speaker is explaining why he/she spoke as he/she did. The explanatory aspect is reinforced by the final component ‘I didn’t say it because of anything else’, which corresponds to the words *just* and *only* in the phrases *just/only kidding* and *just/only joking*.

[C1] ***Only joking!***

I said it to you because I thought like this:

“when people here hear this, they can want to laugh [m] because of it
they can feel something good for a short time because of it

I want this”

I didn’t say it because of anything else

[C2] ***Just kidding!***

I said to you because I thought like this:

“when this someone hears this, he/she can think like this: ‘this can’t be true’

at this moment, he/she won’t know why I said it

a moment after, he/she can know why I said it

he/she can then feel something good for a short time, like people often feel when they
laugh [m]

I want this”

I didn’t say it because of anything else

Needless to say, these and other explications do not necessarily represent the true situation. They are simply modelling the speaker’s expressed meaning. It is entirely possible for someone who has deliberately said something nasty or ill-intentioned to “take cover”, as it were, by claiming that they were *only joking*, *just kidding*, etc.

3.3 Explicating *teasing*

Teasing is a very important word in English, and it is one of those words which is heavily technicalized in scholarly use. There is a large literature on *teasing practices* in anthropology and social psychology, as well as in pragmatics; for an overview, see Haugh (2017). From a lexicographic point of view, the puzzle posed by the word *tease* is that it designates a verbal practice which can be enacted with apparently contradictory motives or attitudes: as the Australian Oxford Dictionary puts it “playfully or unkindly or annoyingly”. Consistent with this, the word *teasing* is compatible with wide range of different, and apparently inconsistent, adjectives, e.g. *playful teasing*, *hostile teasing*, *friendly teasing*, *vicious teasing*.³ Many writers simply make a distinction between “pro-social”

³ We of course exclude from consideration the distinct meaning associated with flirting, i.e. roughly, sexual teasing; cf. the noun *a tease*, used about a person.

and “anti-social” teasing, e.g. Keltner et al. (2001), but this sidesteps the lexical-semantic issue: is the verb *tease* polysemous, with two distinct-but-related meanings, or does it have a single meaning which is compatible with different motives and attitudes?

Here are a few representative examples. From a grammatical point of view, it is notable that the “target” appears as a direct object and that the “topic” of the *teasing* can be indicated in a prepositional phrase with *about*.

- (7) ... *there is an interview from my school friends, they were teasing me about, when I was about seven and I said, ‘I’m going to win the Melbourne Cup’ ...* [www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-03/melbourne-cup-michelle-payne-profile/6909264]
- (8) *When the buzzer sounded, they mobbed Brown, mussing his hair and patting him on the back. “They were teasing me about winning my first game,” said Brown,* [www.newsday.com/sports/knicks-105-kings-95-1.593287]
- (9) *She never called it bullying but she would always come back and tell me they were teasing her about things and me in particular.* [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3273706/Macclesfield-schoolgirl-took-overdose-writing-classmates-mocked-poor.html]
- (10) *Too often, children with Asperger’s (AS) and High-Functioning Autism (HFA) get teased by their peers, but they may not fully understand why they are being targeted – or worse yet – when teasing crosses the line into bullying.* [www.myaspergerschild.com/2013/05/teaching-children-on-autism-spectrum-to.html, accessed 25/07/2017]

The semantic explication presented in [D] follows Olivieri (2003) in upholding the single meaning interpretation for *tease*. Shortly, we will work through this explication [D] in stages, but for the moment note that the wording of the first two components (‘he said some things about this someone, he wanted this someone to hear it’) reflects the fact that *teasing* often employs so-called “tangential address” (Günthner 1996; cited Kotthoff 2007), i.e. the teasing utterance may be ostensibly addressed to other people present. A typical example would be: *Oh look! Here comes Katie’s boyfriend!* (said to Katie’s friends, but in Katie’s presence).

[D] *He was teasing her (about something).*

he said some things about this someone (her)

he wanted this someone to hear it

when he said it, he thought like this:

“I know that this someone doesn’t want people to say such things

I know that when I say these things, this someone will feel something bad because of it,
not something very bad

at the same time, I know that someone else here can feel something good because of it
like people often feel when they want to laugh [m]

I want to say it because of this”

After the initial two lines, the explication continues with a set of assumptions and intentions that are attributed to the subject (‘when he said this, he thought like this: ...’). The first two assumptions (introduced by ‘I know ...’) concern what is termed in the literature the “provocative” content of a *teasing* utterance. It is important to allow that the teasing person does not necessarily have to be saying something bad about the target: it can be anything that the target is “sensitive” about. It is quite possible to *tease* someone about something good, provided it is assumed that the target doesn’t want people talking about such things. For example, in Australia one can *tease* someone about an award or distinction they have received. Nevertheless, the majority of topics that are teased about are no doubt characteristics which are not generally admired, such as certain physical attributes (e.g. having big ears), mild disabilities (e.g. stuttering), or belonging to a minority race, religion or ethnicity.

The teaser’s starting assumptions are, first: “I know that this someone doesn’t want people to say such things”, and second: “I know that when I say these things, this someone will feel something bad because of it”, with the proviso that it is “not something very bad.” Even with the (attributed) mental proviso that the target’s bad feeling won’t be very bad, the content of the explication to this point poses the question: why is the subject willing to disregard the target’s anticipated negative reaction? Is it because he or she wants to hurt the target, as would be the case with verbs such as *insult* or *abuse*?⁴ Not according to the following components, which set out the subject’s ostensible motive as follows:

⁴ The fact that the explication has the subject expecting (and disregarding) some “bad feeling” in the target person allows the word *teasing* to be used to describe so-called “mock abuse”. It would not extend to cover real or serious *abuse*, however, because the intention components for literal *abuse* would not be satisfied; cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014: Ch7).

“at the same time, I know that someone else here can feel something good because of it
like people often feel when they want to laugh [m]
I want to say it because of this”

This set of components is, in many ways, the key to understanding the semantic “essence” of *teasing* – and they also, of course, make explicit the semantic link between *joking* and *kidding*, on the one hand, and *teasing*, on the other; namely, that all of them are intended or anticipated to bring about some good feeling, and that they are all connected, albeit in slightly different ways, with laughing.

Overviewing explication [D] in full, one may say that it represents a finely balanced set of components that contrast and offset each other to achieve a kind of marriage of opposites: a speech practice which goes against the wishes of one person (the target) and imposes a measure of bad feeling upon this person in the interests of bringing about amusement and laughter for others.

From the point of view of pragmatic function, someone who defends themselves against an accusation of nastiness or bullying by saying *I was just teasing* is, in a sense, “taking cover” under the word *teasing*, claiming that their intention was relatively mild, even innocuous. From a psychological point of view, one may argue that the existence of the *teasing* concept may encourage mean or nasty speech behaviors, inasmuch as a mean-spirited or unsympathetic person can easily tell him or herself that the target will not suffer very much and proceed without scruples. These aspects (discursive and psychological affordances) are beyond the scope of lexical semantics proper and cannot be pursued here.

What should be apparent, however, is that the particular configuration of components in explication [D] is compatible with a wide range of attitudes and manners of implementation. It seems highly unlikely that such a finely balanced set of components would have exact lexical equivalents in most languages.

3.4 Implications for Anglo ethnopragmatics

The results reported so far contribute to an on-going project of de-naturalizing Anglo English speech practices, not only in relation to “humor” (Goddard 2006, 2009, 2017; Goddard and Cramer 2017; Goddard and Mullan In press), but in relation to forms of address, directives, emotional expression, epistemic attitudes, arguing and advice-giving, interactional routines, and many other areas (cf. e.g. Béal 1992; Goddard 2012; Farese 2017; Peeters 2000; Wierzbicka 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2016; Levisen 2012; for a brief overview, see Goddard and Ye (2015).

Specifically in relation to Anglo “conversational humor”, the key thing to bear in mind is that Anglo speakers approach “conversation” with a lexicon of guiding

ideas in their heads. The lexical semantics of *joking* (in the sense explicated here) designates a culturally approved speech activity which is socially oriented, i.e. ostensibly intended to amuse/entertain (not, for example, to display one’s cleverness or wit). The lexical semantics of *kidding* establishes a micro-genre of *joking* based, roughly speaking, on momentary deception. The lexical semantics of *teasing* designates a social activity, linked with laughter, that targets a particular person present and is capable of being construed in a positive light on account of the ostensible intention to be “amusing”. In Bahktin’s memorable phrase, these lexical categories establish “ready-made forms of the utterance”.

Needless to say, it would be wrong to assume that any language is monolithic and devoid of cultural and sociolinguistic variation. If we look to more local lexical categories, including fixed phrasal expressions, in the same broad domain as *joking*, *kidding* and *teasing*, we will find ourselves rewarded with a rich harvest of dialectal expressions, including the following from Australian English and American English alone (some of these belong only to sub-varieties of these two broad “national” categories).

Australian English: *take the piss*, *gee up*, *stir up*, *chiack*, *pull someone’s leg*,
have a lend of someone, *send up*, ...

American English: *razz*, *josh*, *wisecrack*, *roast*, *pick at*, *rile*

Of these, *take the piss* has so far attracted the greatest scholarly attention (Davis 2009; Goddard 2009; Haugh 2014), with a smaller number of studies touching on *gee up* and *stir up* (Rowen 2012; Goddard 2017), *chiack* (Wierzbicka 1997: 202–206), *leg-pulling* and other jocular deception (Goddard 2006, 2017). Evidently a great deal remains to be done.

4 Contrastive ethnopragmatics of “laughing with other people”

4.1 Re-framing the field of inquiry

Though ethnopragmatics can be fruitfully practiced within a single linguaculture, it does so using culture-independent tools. This makes contrastive ethnopragmatics a methodologically sound framework for cross-cultural and intercultural comparison in diverse areas of study. Is it possible, then, to envisage a contrastive ethnopragmatics of conversational humor, leading in due course to a broad typology of conversational humor (as envisaged by Béal and Mullan (2013), for example)? No,

actually. From an ethnopragmatic point of view, it would not be right to base a field of inquiry on such highly English-specific terms as “humor” and “conversation”.

From an Anglo point of view, it may be hard to see the problem, especially in view of the frequent claims in Anglophone anthropology, psychology and linguistics (e.g. Apte 1985; Attardo 2004; Martin 2007) that “humor” is a human universal, just as “politeness”, “rights”, “altruism”, and any number of similarly English-specific terms, have been claimed to designate human universals (Wierzbicka 2014a).

According to the analysis in Goddard (2017), the lexical semantics of the everyday English word *humor* implies (i) speakers often setting about to induce a feeling of “amusement” in those present, i.e. speaking with the intention of inducing a good feeling ‘like people often feel when they want to laugh’, and (ii) this being generally seen as a good thing. Many – probably most – languages and cultures do not have any exactly matching word or concept (see Appendix 3).⁵

To be fair, scholars in humor studies often appear to be working with a broader concept in mind. Attardo (2004), for example, says explicitly that “humor” is a technical term with a broader meaning than in everyday English, and although he declines to define it, it seems to me that it may be roughly glossable as: “joking or something like joking”. In view of the discussion and analysis undertaken in Sections 2–3, we know that *joking* is not a cross-linguistically stable anchor point, but equally we know that laughter (strictly speaking, *laugh*) is.

All this leads to the following conclusion: we need to re-frame the research field, basing it, roughly speaking, on “social laughter” or “laughing with other people”. It is generally agreed that laughter is a universal human behavior with a biological basis, that it is prototypically associated with good feeling, and that it is pre-eminently social, even to the point that people are much more inclined to laugh when they are with other people than when they are alone (unlike crying). There is a vast literature on laughter, reaching back to classical times and embracing philosophical, psychological, and sociological aspects. Useful overviews can be found in Plessner (1970), Provine (2000) and Chafe (2007). In recent times, a vigorous literature on laughter has grown up in biology. It seems likely that social laughter releases brain chemicals known as endorphins, a mechanism which underlies the pleasant and stress-releasing phenomenology of laughter (Manninen et al. 2017; cf. Dunbar 2012). As for the semantics of the word *laugh*, an explication is given in Appendix 2. See Goddard (2017) and Wierzbicka (2014b) for discussion.

⁵ The fact that some languages have borrowed the word “humour” from English, e.g. Chinese *yōumò* 幽默, Japanese *yūmoa* ユーモア, reinforces this point, as well as highlighting the growing dominance of Anglo discourse categories. The same applies, less visibly, when an existing word like French *humour* acquires a second meaning under contact influence from English.

Above, I described the re-framed research field as “social laughter” or “laughing with other people”. To be a little more precise, one could describe it as the research field that studies culturally shaped situations in which people laugh or can laugh with good feeling in response to something someone says or does. This characterization casts a wider net than humor studies as presently practiced, while being more restricted than simply the study of laughter *per se*.⁶

If it were necessary or convenient to further restrict ourselves to “conversational” settings, this could be done by reference to a situation script like the following:

someone is with someone else in a place for some time
there can be some other people with them
during this time, these people are saying some things as people often do in many places
at many times when they are with other people

This little bundle of components enables us to focus on ordinary everyday interactions, excluding public forms and performances, written genres, and the like.

4.2 Importance of culture-specific communicative values

At the same time as advocating that when we embark on the contrastive ethnopragmatics of “laughing with other people” we should leave the concept of “humor” behind, it seems important to (re)emphasise that one should always approach ethnopragmatics with an eye to any local cultural values that carry implications for communication style (Carbaugh 2017).

The point is that people may engage in verbal practices that trigger laughter not in the interests of “humor”, but as a by-product of pleasant interaction or in pursuit of some other interactional or social ideals. To make this more concrete, consider two brief examples. It seems that some cultures have ideals of speaking with cleverness or wit: roughly, saying something which shows that one can think very well and very quickly, and/or saying something very well phrased and perfectly suited to the moment. For example, in French the cultural key word *esprit* designates a special “liveliness of mind” which would manifest itself

⁶ A reviewer points out that the field of humor studies also embraces non-verbal humor, such as practical jokes, pranks, and hoaxes, and complex cultural forms such as satire, all of which go beyond “conversational humor”. This issue requires more detailed discussion than is possible here. I would only make the point that semantic analysis of genre words such as *prank*, *hoax*, and *satire*, can help bring to light the cultural assumptions behind such forms.

in such a way of speaking (Pons 2014). In Persian (Farsi), it is a cultural ideal to speak *bā maze* [lit. with taste], which designates an artful and appealing verbal skill (Arab Forthcoming). Now, when someone speaks with *esprit* or *bā maze*, this is likely in many instances to elicit a certain measure of laughter as a reaction of “delight”, so to speak, i.e. to a sudden good feeling. That is not, however, the point of speaking with *esprit* or with *maze*.

Conversely, there can be cultural values that inhibit or circumscribe social laughter, making it unsuitable or unseemly outside a narrow range of contexts. In German business and working contexts, for example, jokes and social laughter conflict with the value of being *ernsthaft* “serious, intent on giving careful thought” (Cramer 2015: 64–69), one contributory factor to a common Anglo perception of Germans as “serious-minded” (cf. Lewis 2006: 224; Davies 2004: 221–224).

In all three cases, it would be misguided to interpret what is going on through the lens of the Anglo cultural ideal of “humor”. To do so would lead at worst to distortion and at best to distraction. To develop a full, culturally anchored understanding of social laughter in different cultural settings, one needs to work through the local cultural values and concepts.

5 Final comment

One practical difficulty with the ethnopragmatic approach is the level of difficulty and effort required to produce plausible semantic explications. It would hardly be realistic to expect researchers in pragmatics or humor studies to become trained and skilled semantic analysts before they can proceed with their work. This is not to say that a moderate level of semantic know-how is an unrealistic expectation, especially for next generation researchers. In this respect, I am encouraged by the spread of basic knowledge about statistics and corpus techniques as tools of the trade in pragmatics and linguistics generally over the past 30 years. It is reasonable to look forward to the gradual diffusion of basic principles and skills of semantic analysis, especially to the principle of reductive paraphrase and to the realization of the advantages of formulating research questions and findings, as far as possible, in simple, cross-translatable words.

Even so, detailed lexical-semantic analysis is going to remain the province of specialist semanticists for the foreseeable future. In this situation I can offer only two suggestions. First, we need to encourage greater collaboration between researchers in cross-cultural pragmatics and cross-linguistic semantics. This means not only team building and collaborative projects, it also means reading into each other’s literatures, encouraging one’s graduate students to learn into

the other field, organizing joint workshops and seminars, and the like. To adapt an old saying about real estate: collaboration, collaboration, collaboration. The second is to recognize that full semantic accuracy and full semantic explications are not always needed in order to make progress. Approximations and partial explications (sometimes just a single component, see Appendix 4) can often be very useful, as can be the use of Minimal English (Goddard 2018) rather than the stricter Natural Semantic Metalanguage. The main guideline is to try to minimize reliance on complex, technical and English-specific language.

Acknowledgements: The explications were developed in collaboration with Anna Wierzbicka, who contributed many other insightful comments. I would also like to thank Michael Haugh and Lara Weinglass for discussion of various points, Tine Junker for assistance with German, and Bert Peeters and Kerry Mullan for assistance with French. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Workshop “Conversational humor in French and other languages: a comparative approach”, October 19, 2015, Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier, France. Two reviewers for *Intercultural Pragmatics* provided valuable comments.

References

- Apte, Michael. 1985. *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.
- Arab, Reza. Forthcoming. *To Be with Salt, To Speak with Taste: The ethnopragmatics of some valued speech practices in Persian (Farsi)*. PhD Thesis, Griffith University.
- Attardo, Salvatore. 2004. *Linguistic theories of humor*. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.
- Béal, Christine. 1992. Did you have a good weekend? Or why there is no such thing as a simple question in cross-cultural encounters. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* 15(1). 23–52.
- Béal, Christine & Kerry Mullan. 2013. Issues in conversational humor from a cross-cultural perspective: Comparing French and Australian corpora. In Bert Peeters, Kerry Mullan & Christine Béal (eds.), *Cross-culturally speaking, speaking cross-culturally*, 107–139. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.
- Bell, Nancy. 2015. *We are not amused. Failed humor in interaction*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Bousfield, Derek. 2008. *Impoliteness in interaction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Carbaugh, Donal (ed.). 2017. *Handbook of communication in cross-cultural perspective (ICA handbook series)*. New York: Routledge.
- Cassin, Barbara (ed.). 2014. *Dictionary of untranslatables: A philosophical Lexicon*. (Translation edited by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra & Michael Wood). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Chafe, Wallace. 2007. *The importance of not being earnest: The feeling behind laughter and humor*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Cramer, Rahel. 2015. *Why Australians seem “laid back” and Germans rather “serious”. A contrastive semantic and ethnopragmatic analysis of Australian English and German, with implications for language pedagogy*. Hamburg: Masters of Arts in Multilingual Educational Linguistics, U.

- Culpeper, Jonathan. 1996. Towards an anatomy of impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics* 25. 349–367.
- Davies, Catherine Evans. 2004. Developing awareness of crosscultural pragmatics: The case of American/German sociable interaction. *Multilingua* 23. 207–231.
- Davis, Jessica Milner. 2009. ‘Aussie’ humor and laughter: Joking as an acculturating ritual. In Fran De Groen & Peter Kirkpatrick (eds.), *A serious frolic: Essays in Australian humor*, 31–47. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press.
- Dunbar, Robin. 2012. Bridging the bonding gap: The transition from primates to humans. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 367B. 1837–1846.
- Dynel, Marta. 2009. Beyond a Joke: Types of conversational humor. *Semantics & Pragmatics, Language & Linguistic Compass* 3(5). 1284–1299.
- Dynel, Marta (ed.). 2013. *Developments in linguistic humor theory*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Farese, Gian Marco. 2017. The cultural semantics of forms of address: A contrastive study between English and Italian. PhD thesis. The Australian National University.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1960[1905]. *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. [*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*]. (Trans. James Strachey). Hammondsorth, UK: Penguin.
- Garfinkel, Harold & Harvey Sacks. 1986. On formal structures of practical actions. In Harold Garfinkel (ed.), *Ethnomethodological Studies of Work*, 160–19. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Goddard, Cliff. 2006. “Lift your game, Martina!” – Deadpan jocular irony and the ethnopragsmatics of Australian English. In Cliff Goddard (ed.), *Ethnopragsmatics: Understanding discourse in cultural context*, 65–97. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Goddard, Cliff. 2009. *Not taking yourself too seriously* in Australian English: Semantic explanations, cultural scripts, corpus evidence. *Intercultural Pragmatics* 6(1). 29–53.
- Goddard, Cliff. 2012. ‘Early interactions’ in Australian English, American English, and English English: Cultural differences and cultural scripts. *Journal of Pragmatics* 44. 1038–1050.
- Goddard, Cliff. 2016. Semantic molecules and the NSM approach to lexical definition. *Cahiers de lexicologie* 2016 – 2(109). 13–36.
- Goddard, Cliff. 2017. Ethnopragsmatic perspectives on conversational humor, with special reference to Australian English. *Language & Communication* 55. 55–68.
- Goddard, Cliff (ed.). 2018. *Minimal English for a global world: Improved communication using fewer words*. London: Palgrave.
- Goddard, Cliff & Rahel Cramer. 2017. “Laid back” and “irreverent”: An ethnopragsmatic analysis of two cultural themes in Australian English communication. In Donal Carbaugh (ed.), *Handbook of communication in cross-cultural perspective*, 89–103. New York: Routledge.
- Goddard, Cliff & Carsten Levisen. Forthcoming. The semantics of “sarcasm” in English and Danish.
- Goddard, Cliff & Kerry Mullan. In press. Explicating verbs for “laughing with other people” in English and French (and why it matters for humor studies). *Humor*.
- Goddard, Cliff & Anna Wierzbicka (eds.). 2002. *Meaning and universal grammar – Theory and empirical findings*, vol. Two. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Goddard, Cliff (ed.). 2006. *Ethnopragsmatics: Understanding discourse in cultural context*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Goddard, Cliff & Anna Wierzbicka. 2014. *Words and meanings. lexical semantics across domains, languages and cultures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goddard, Cliff & Anna Wierzbicka. 2016. Explicating the English lexicon of “doing and happening”. *Functions of Language* 23(2). 214–256.
- Goddard, Cliff & Zhengdao Ye. 2015. Ethnopragsmatics. In Farzad Sharifian (ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and culture*, 66–83. London: Routledge.

- Günthner, Susanne. 1996. Zwischen Scherz und Schmerz. Frotzelaktivitäten im Alltag. In Helga Kotthoff (ed.), *Scherzkommunikation. Beiträge aus der empirischen Gesprächsforschung*, 81–109. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Haugh, Michael. 2014. Jocular mockery as interactional practice in everyday Anglo-Australian conversation. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 34(1). 76–79.
- Haugh, Michael. 2016. “Just kidding”: Teasing and claims to non-serious intent. *Journal of Pragmatics* 95. 120–136.
- Haugh, Michael. 2017. Teasing. In Salvatore Attardo (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, 211–226. London: Routledge.
- Haugh, Michael & Derek Bousfield. 2012. Mock impoliteness, jocular mockery and jocular abuse in Australian and British English. *Journal of Pragmatics* 44. 1099–1114.
- Holmes, Janet & Meredith Marra. 2002. Over the edge? Subversive humor between colleagues and friends. *Humor* 15(1). 65–87.
- Keltner, Dacher, Lisa Capps, Ann M. Kring, Randall C. Young & Erin A Heerey. 2001. Just teasing: A conceptual analysis and empirical review. *Psychological Bulletin* 127(2). 229–248.
- Kotthoff, Helga. 2007. Oral genres of humor. On the dialectic of genre knowledge and creative authoring. *Pragmatics* 12. 263–296.
- Langlotz, Andreas. 2015. *Creating social orientation through language. A socio-cognitive theory of situated social meaning*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. [esp. ch 7, ‘The creation of social meaning through humor’, pp. 243–283].
- Weider, D. Lawrence & Steven Pratt. 1990. On the occasioned and situated character of members’ questions and answers: Reflections on the question, “Is he or she a real Indian?” In Donal Carbaugh (ed.), *Cultural communication and intercultural contact*. Hillsdale, NJ: Routledge.
- Leech, Geoffrey. 1983. *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Leech, Geoffrey. 2014. *The pragmatics of politeness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Levisen, Carsten. 2012. *Cultural semantics and social cognition. A case study on the Danish universe of meaning*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Levisen, Carsten. This volume. Black, Dry, Sick, and Fat: Ethnopragmatic Perspectives on Danish Conversational Humor.
- Lewis, Richard D. 2006. *When cultures collide*, 3rd edn. London/Naperville, ILL: Nicholas Brealey.
- Manninen, Sandra, Lauri Tuominen, Robin Dunbar, Tomi Karjalainen, Jussi Hirvonen, Eveliina Arponen, Riitta Hari, Iiro P. Jääskeläinen, Mikko Sams & Lauri Nummenmaa. 2017. Social laughter triggers endogenous opioid release in humans. *The Journal of Neuroscience*. 23 May 2017. 0688–16. Doi:10.1523/JNEUROSCI.0688-16.2017.
- Martin, Rod. 2014. Mirth. In Salvatore Attardo (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, vol. 2, 510–512. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Martin, Rod A. 2007. *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*. Burlington, MA: Elsevier.
- Norrick, Neal R. 1993. *Conversational joking. Humor in everyday talk*. Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press.
- Olivieri, Kate. 2003. A semantic analysis of teasing-related speech act verbs in Australian English. BA Hons thesis, University of New England.
- Peeters, Bert. 2000. “S’Engager” vs. “To show restraint”: Linguistic and cultural relativity in discourse management. In Susanne Neimeier & René Dirven (eds.), *Evidence for linguistic relativity*, 193–222. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- Peeters, Bert (ed.). 2006. *Semantic primes and universal grammar: Evidence from the Romance languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Plessner, H. 1970. *Laughing and crying: A study of the limits of human behavior*. Evanston: North Western University Press.
- Pons, A. 2014. Wit and/or humor. In Barbara Cassin (ed.), *Dictionary of untranslatables: A philosophical Lexicon*, 487–488. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Translation edited by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra & Michael Wood)
- Provine, R. R. 2000. *Laughter: A scientific investigation*. New York: Penguin.
- Rowen, Roslyn. 2012. “Shit bloke! You’re always geeing me up like that”. A lexical semantic analysis of negative personal descriptors and “jocular” speech-act verbs in informal Australian English. BA Hons thesis, Griffith University.
- Ruch, Willibald. 2009. Amusement. In David Sander & Klaus Scherer (eds.), *Oxford companion to the affective sciences*, 27–28. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Skalicky, Stephen, Cynthia M Berger & Nancy D Bell. 2015. The functions of ‘just kidding’ in American English. *Journal of Pragmatics* 85. 18–31.
- Taylor, Charlotte. 2015. Beyond sarcasm: The metalanguage and structures of mock politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics* 87. 127–141.
- Wierzbicka, A. 2009. Language and metalanguage: Key issues in emotion research. *Emotion Review* 1(1). 3–14.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 1987. *English speech act verbs. A semantic dictionary*. Sydney: Academic Press.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 1996. *Semantics: Primes and universals*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 1997. *Understanding cultures through their key words*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 1999. *Emotions across languages and cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 2003. *Cross-cultural pragmatics: The semantics of human interaction. (Expanded second edition)*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 2006a. *English: Meaning and culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 2006b. Anglo scripts against “putting pressure” on other people and their linguistic manifestations. In Cliff Goddard (ed.), *Ethnopragmatics: Understanding discourse in cultural context*, 31–63. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 2010. *Experience, evidence, sense: The hidden cultural legacy of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 2014a. *Imprisoned in English: The hazards of English as a default language*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 2014b. “Pain” and “suffering” in cross-linguistic perspective. *International Journal of Language and Culture* 1(2). 149–173.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 2016. Making sense of terms of address in European languages through the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM). *Intercultural Pragmatics* 4. 499–528.
- Ye, Zhengdao. 2006. Why the ‘inscrutable’ Chinese face? Emotionality and facial expression in Chinese. In Cliff Goddard (ed.), *Ethnopragmatics: Understanding discourse in cultural context*, 127–169. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Bionote

Cliff Goddard

Cliff Goddard is Professor of Linguistics at Griffith University, Australia. He is a proponent of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach to semantics and its sister theory, the ethnopragmatic approach to pragmatics. His major publications include the textbook *Semantic Analysis* (2nd ed., 2011 OUP), *Words and Meanings: Lexical semantics across domains, languages and cultures* (co-authored with Anna Wierzbicka; 2014, OUP) and *Ten Lectures on Natural Semantic Metalanguage: Exploring language, thought and culture using simple, translatable words*. (2018, Brill).

Appendix 1: Table of semantic primes (English exponents), updated from Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014)

I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY	substantives
KINDS, PARTS~HAVE PARTS	relational substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	determiners
ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW	quantifiers
GOOD, BAD	evaluators
BIG, SMALL	descriptors
KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	mental predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE	actions, events, movement
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	location, existence, specification
(IS) MINE	possession
LIVE~LIVING, DIE	life and death
TIME~WHEN, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	time
PLACE~WHERE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH	place
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	logical concepts
VERY, MORE	intensifier, augmentor
LIKE~AS~WAY	similarity

Notes: • Exponents of primes can be polysemous, i.e., they can have other, additional meanings. • Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes. • They can be formally complex. • They can have combinatorial variants or ‘allolexes’ (indicated with ~). • Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

Appendix 2: Semantics of *laugh*

Cross-linguistic semantic research indicates that ‘laugh’ is likely to have close lexical equivalents in all or most languages (Wierzbicka 2014b; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2016). This is not to deny that linguacultures vary in their attitudes towards laughing, how it is regulated, deployed, etc. (cf. Wierzbicka 1999: 217ff). The explication below is specifically for “imperfective/durative” uses of *laugh*. Slightly different, but closely-related, explications are needed for “perfective/punctual” uses like *He laughed nervously*, and for expressions like *laugh at (someone)*. See Goddard (2017) for detailed discussion.

Mary is laughing.

- a. this someone (i.e. Mary) is doing something for some time (at this time)
 - something is happening to some parts of her body because of it
- b. people often do this when they feel something good for a short time because they think like this:
 - “something is happening here now
 - things like this don’t happen very often
 - people here can feel something good because of it”
- c. when someone does it, it is like this:
 - some parts of this someone’s mouth [m] move for some time
 - other people in the place where this someone is can see it
 - at the same time these people can hear something because of it
 - like people can hear something when someone says something

The word ‘often’ at the beginning of section (b) implies not always, i.e. a prototypical situation. Briefly, the components in (b) firstly imply a construal by a prototypical experiencer of an “unusual happening”: ‘something is happening here now, things like this don’t happen very often’. The following component (‘people here can feel something good because of it’) implies recognition that the event is construed as “pro-social” in a broad sense. Section (c) gives a physical description. It includes visible movement of the mouth and, typically, an audible “vocal” sound. In some languages, the components about audibility vary slightly, as in the case of Chinese *xiao* ‘laugh/smile’ (cf. Ye 2006).

Appendix 3: Some key English-specific “humor” words (from Goddard 2017)

John said something funny at school yesterday.

John said something in this place (school) at that time (yesterday)

people don't say things like this very often

when people in this place heard it, these people wanted to laugh [m] because of it
at the same time they felt something good because of it

Mary said/did something amusing yesterday.

this someone (i.e. Mary) said/did something at that time (yesterday)

a. when someone thinks about this, this someone can think about it like this:

b. “people don't say/do things like this very often

c. someone can feel something good because of it
like people often feel when they want to laugh [m]”

humor (a partial explication)

it can be like this:

a. someone says something to some people

b. when this someone says it, he/she thinks like this:

“if I say this, these people can feel something good because of it
like people often feel when they want to laugh [m]
I want this”

c. because this someone says this, these people can feel something good
as this someone wanted

d. this is good

Note that a separate explication is needed for the phrase *sense of humor*, partly on account of the highly English-specific semantics of the word *sense* (Wierzbicka 2010: 184–192).

Appendix 4: Some components to help reduce problematical terminology and ease cross-linguistic comparison

This is a selection of key components, written in Minimal English (Goddard ed. 2018), related to some commonly used terminology in humor studies. Most of them have been extracted from published NSM studies.

- *abuse, mockery*:
saying something bad, or very bad, about someone else
- *trickery, deception*:
saying something about something when one knows that it is not true
- *cleverness, wittiness*:
when people hear it, they can think: this someone can think very well, this someone can think very quickly
when people hear it, they can think: this someone can speak very well, people can't speak like this if they can't think very quickly
- *sarcasm*:
saying something like (as if) one thinks something good about something when one doesn't think like this, one thinks something bad about it
saying something like (as if) one feels something good towards someone when one doesn't feel like this, one feels something bad towards this someone
- *fantasy, absurdity, obscurity*:
saying about something "it is like this:", when people can know that it can't be like this
saying about something "it is like this:", when everyone knows that it can't be like this, they can't not know it
- *imitative, performance-based manners of speaking*:
saying something like someone else often says something like this
saying something so that when people hear it, they can think: this is not this person's voice, it is someone else's voice
- *word play: puns, ambiguity, double entendre*
when people hear these words, they can think: I know what this someone wants to say with these words; at the same time, they can think: people can say something else with these words