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Candidates' humour and the construction of co-membership in job interviews

Dorien Van De Mieroop & Stephanie Schnurr

Abstract

In this article, we draw on audio-recordings of authentic job interviews to explore the various ways in which candidates use humour to establish, confirm or claim co-membership with the recruiter. We not only analyze whether these humorous comments are successful, but also how candidates use humour to construct various identities. We found that the humorous comments are all oriented to the construction of personalized – instead of professional – identities and that their success could be related to the various discourse types in which they occur. Overall, humour may contribute to the construction of multi-dimensional identities for candidates.

Keywords: humour, job interviews, co-membership, identity, activity type, discourse type, small talk

Introduction

Job interviews are a primary tool for personnel selection in a vast majority of organizations (Kirkwood and Ralston 1999). It is thus perhaps not surprising that they have attracted the interest of researchers across different disciplines. Since the 1960s, researchers in the fields of applied psychology and organizational sciences have developed an interest in job interviews, and have, for example, attempted to test the reliability and validity of various interview methods in order to improve selection tools and criteria (see e.g. Dunnette 1962; Palacios et al. 1966). However, most of these studies tend to be based on post hoc questionnaires (e.g. Ugbah and Majors 1992), simulated job interviews (e.g. Wong and Phooi-Ching 2000), or data obtained through experimental research designs (e.g. Purkiss et al. 2006). Only relatively recently have scholars begun to explore authentic job interviews. Building on the early work of Gumperz (1992b) on job interviews in intercultural situations, discourse analysts have attempted to tease out the interactional processes in job interviews, and recent studies have, for instance, analysed the influence of gender (Reissner-Roubicek 2012), ethnicity (Campbell and Roberts 2007), and language skills (Roberts 2013) on the negotiation of meaning in these interactions. In this article, we will adopt such a discourse analytical approach to explore the role of humour in job interviews.

The topic of humour in the workplace has also received considerable attention from scholars across disciplines, including psychology, organizational behavior, business and leadership studies, sociology, anthropology, and discourse analysis (e.g. Barsoux 1996; Westwood & Rhodes 2013; Plester & Sayers 2007; Martin 2001; Schnurr 2009b). In addition to the numerous beneficial functions that humour may perform in a workplace context (for an overview see Schnurr 2014), humour is also an excellent means to assist interlocutors in processes of identity construction (e.g. Schnurr 2009a; Richards 2006). In line with much of this research on humour and identity construction in the professional domain, we take a socio-constructionist stance and understand identities as emergent, fluid, and

dynamic processes that are co-constructed and negotiated among interlocutors as an interaction unfolds (e.g. Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Schnurr and Van De Mierop 2017).

Questions of identity construction and negotiation are, of course, also particularly relevant in job interviews because in these encounters candidates tend to try to present themselves in the best possible way, and equally, recruiters have a strong interest in portraying themselves (and their company) positively to attract the candidates' interest. Importantly though, these often relatively explicit attempts at constructing specific identities are not constrained to the candidates demonstrating their expertise and experience in a particular field, but also include attempts at showing that they are a likable person and would 'fit' in the organization where they are applying for a job. The candidates thus not only work on establishing their professional, expert identities, but they also construct specific social identities at the same time. Some of these identities are shared with the recruiter, and, as we illustrate below, candidates often highlight their co-membership with the recruiter on the basis of shared features (e.g. ethnicity, gender), background (e.g. geographical origin) or interests (e.g. hobbies) (Erickson and Shultz 1982: 17; see also Kerekes 2006). As various studies have demonstrated (Kerekes 2006; Lipovsky 2008), this construction of co-membership can be essential for the candidates' success in the job interview and we argue that humour may be an important means to achieve this.

This claim is supported by various studies of workplace interactions in which humour has been described to be frequently used to signal, create and reinforce solidarity among interlocutors, and to achieve bonding and create in-group membership, while at the same time potentially excluding others (e.g. Stallone & Haugh 2017; Holmes & Hay 1997; Holmes & Marra 2002; Wolfers et al. 2017). As such, successful humour (i.e. those instances that are responded to supportively (e.g. Schnurr and Chan 2011)) may be a useful tool for candidates to construct co-membership and portray themselves in a particular way. This hypothesis is also supported by studies on candidates' humour in job interviews conducted within psychology, career development research, and organizational studies. For example, Gallaher (2010: 67) found that "using affiliative humor [by candidates] leads to higher evaluations" in the experimental set-ups that she conducted her research in; and there is also some evidence that candidates with a sense of humour are preferred over candidates who do not display this trait (Barden 2007; Gallaher 2010). However, if an attempt at humour fails, the speaker's claims for co-membership and a particular identity are challenged, and the assumed or intended relationship between interlocutors is questioned (see also File & Schnurr *fc*). Thus, employing this discursive strategy in a relatively high stakes communicative event like a job interview is also potentially 'risky' as it may backfire and thus result in face-loss and a threat to the interlocutors' relationship (e.g. Schnurr 2009b; Bell 2015; Barden 2007). Because the repercussions of failed humour in job interviews could be particularly detrimental for the candidates, any attempts at humour initiated by the candidate are balancing acts in which positive and potentially negative effects of humour are weighed against each other. This paper aims to explore these balancing acts and gain insights into the ways in which candidates use humour in job interviews – in particular to establish, confirm or claim co-membership with the recruiter. We look at several instances where these attempts are successful and also where they fail, but first we describe the data from which these instances were selected.

Data

The data that we report on in this article consist of 26 authentic job interviews, resulting in a corpus of more than 200,000 words, covering more than 17 hours of recordings. The interviews were all audio-recorded between 2013 and 2016 at various blue collar and white collar workplaces, as well as

in several different recruitment agencies in the north of Belgium. They were originally in Dutch and French and have been transcribed (and translated into English) using conversation analytic transcription symbols (Jefferson 1984).

It is important to note that in our analyses, we only focus on the *local* success of the candidates' humour, but we do not consider the candidates' *global* success (i.e. whether they were offered the job). One reason for this decision is that 'success' may have quite different implications depending on the specific interview type. For instance, in the case of the interviews taking place at recruitment agencies, this is often just a first step in the recruitment process and the final outcome can be extremely varied. Moreover, 'success' may not always be related to a successful interview, as there were a few cases in our data where a candidate got the job even though the recruiter commented on the job interview in very negative terms to the researcher afterwards. Reasons for the success of these candidates were often related to candidate scarcity or an unexpected surge in the need for employees. Finally, as we discuss only relatively short fragments from each interview, it would be difficult to make any claims about the relevance of these excerpts to the overall outcome the interview – in particular since the length of these fragments is less than a minute, while the average length of the job interviews in our data is 40 minutes. Overall, the actual selection decision is based on a wide range of factors, including not only the candidate's performance in the interview but also their CV, experience and age in relation to expected labour costs, and the other candidates who applied for the same position.

Analyses

In order to explore how candidates' humour may be (un)successful in constructing co-membership in job interviews, we draw on the related concepts of activity type and discourse type. Introduced by Levinson (1992), the notion of activity type refers to relatively conventionalized communicative activities which are goal defined and which take place in a particular context. Activity types can be "institutionalized to various degrees" (Nissi and Lehtinen 2016: 2) and they are characterized by a number of constraints about "what will count as allowable contribution" (Levinson 1992: 73) in a specific encounter, and how these contributions are interpreted by participants (Levinson 1992: 73, 97). In our analyses below, we combine the notion of activity type with the related notion of discourse type, which describes the "recurrent patterns of linguistic practices: the patterns of linguistic form, meaning and structure used by speakers in social activities" (Maley, 1995: 94). Discourse types are typically embedded in activity types and refer to specific types of utterances, the sequential organization of talk, and different stylistic features of specific types of talk. More specifically, an activity type may comprise of various stages, each of which, in turn, may be characterized by a particular discourse type. According to Culpeper et al. (2008: 301), the difference between an activity type and a discourse type is that the former is a means for characterizing a particular context or setting (such as a job interview), while the latter describes the "forms of talk" that are involved in a particular activity (such as providing information, building rapport). Moreover, as job interviews have been described as "hybrid activity types" (Roberts and Sarangi 1999), it is important to take these various discourse types into account in our analyses. In particular, researchers have shown that job interviews consist of a mix of institutionally oriented discourse types (in which the interlocutors mainly exchange information regarding the candidate's experience and the job on offer) and personally oriented talk or relational discourse types characterized by a more conversational style (Roberts 2013; Van De Mierop et al. *fc*). This mix of discourse types can be conceptualized as a continuum, in line with research on small talk (Holmes 2000), with purely transactional information exchanges on the one hand, and highly phatic small talk sequences on the

other, and a variety of mixed discourse types in between. In our analyses below, we have grouped instances of humour together depending on the particular discourse type in which they occur.

1. Humour in 'information exchange'-discourse types

We first discuss two excerpts that were selected from the mainly transactional 'information exchange'-parts of the job interviews. In these parts, recruiters typically aim to gain insights into the professional capacities of the candidate (see excerpt 1), or into their personal situation, which may also be relevant to the job on offer (see excerpt 2). In the first excerpt, the candidate's language skills are being tested on the spot: in the middle of this interview, the recruiter switches from Dutch to French and accounts for this by saying that she wants 'to see orally' (line 3: *pour voir oralement*) the candidate's proficiency in this language.

Excerpt 1 - C= candidate, R= recruiter

(*** interview 1 – r 598 – making fun of the Walloons' language skills – 22:35' – 23:05)

	1	R	<i>maintenant on va parler en français un</i>
	2		<i>tout petit peu ((first name C))</i>
	3		<i>(pour voir) oralement</i>
	4		<i>je suppose que vous avez pleins de</i>
	5		<i>contacts en français (je pense)=</i>
	6	C	<i>=oui (.) parce que: °presque° tous mes chefs</i>
	7		<i>sont francophones</i>
	8	R	<i>oui</i>
	9	C	<i>euh presque tous les conversations e-</i>
	10		<i>ça se passe en en français</i>
	11	R	<i>oui</i>
→	12	C	<i>parce que leur néerlandais £n'est pas °@° vraiment bon£</i>
	13		<i>[.hh @@ () @[@</i>
	14	R	<i>[et [£oui£=@</i>
	15		<i>et la communication euh écrit au↑ssi</i>
	1	R	now we are going to talk French a
	2		very little bit ((first name C))
	3		(to see) orally
	4		I suppose that you have plenty of
	5		contacts in French (I think)=
	6	C	=yes (.) because: almost all my bosses
	7		are French speaking
	8	R	yes
	9	C	erm almost all the conversations e-
	10		that happens in in French
	11	R	yes
→	12	C	because their Dutch £is not °@° really good£
	13		[.hh @@ () @[@
	14	R	[and [£yes£=@
	15		and the written erm communication as ↑well

The recruiter starts with an introductory question in which she displays her assumption about the candidate's extensive contacts in French (line 4-5). The candidate latches on her affirmative answer and then accounts for this by saying that the native language of most of her bosses is French (line 7: *francophones*, 'French speaking') and by stating that her French speaking bosses' command of Dutch is 'not really good' (line 12). This evaluation is uttered in a smile voice, which can be defined as "a markedly higher pitch and an intonational contour comparable to laughing during speaking but without any laughter tokens" (Buttny 2001: 317) and it is interrupted as well as followed by laughter tokens, thereby indicating that the utterance is formulated in a humorous frame and that it should be interpreted as an understatement.

This understatement draws on particular preconceived notions about the limited command of Dutch among the French speaking community, the Walloons. This preconceived notion is widely circulated in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium, both via informal comments (e.g. on online forums) and via official studies about the Walloons' limited interest in language learning, earning them the questionable title of *champions de l'unilinguisme*, or 'champions of monolingualism' (Taalunie 2006). Thus, the candidate's comment about the language skills of her French speaking bosses could be interpreted as accounting for her own experience with French in professional contexts, as well as invoking the preconceived notion of the Walloons typically shared by the Flemish community. She thereby implicitly makes her membership of this Flemish category relevant, thus bidding for co-membership with the recruiter, who is also Flemish. In particular, the humour here assists the candidate in performing these interpersonal functions and to draw a boundary between the different groups (e.g. Vine et al 2009) thereby emphasizing shared ground with the recruiter. By making fun of an absent third party, the candidate actively creates an in-group in which she places the recruiter and herself, and which is positioned in opposition to the out-group of Walloons.

Initially, the recruiter overlaps with *et* (line 4: 'and'), thus showing her orientation to the activity of questioning the candidate. However, she then overlaps the candidate's turn-final laughter with an affirmative particle, uttered in a smile voice, on which she also latches one laughter particle. As such, she briefly acknowledges the candidate's humorous comment, before continuing with her next question. She thus almost immediately closes the humorous frame and re-initiates the questioning format, in which she executes a stepwise topic shift to another aspect of the candidate's language skills.

In this fragment, then, the candidate initiates a humorous comment in a sequence that can be characterized as transactional and institutional (viz. as an 'exchange of information'-frame), and with this comment, she performs an activity (viz. mocking the Walloons' perceived language skills) that indexes her Flemish identity. As such she makes relevant a non-professional identity that she shares with the recruiter, thus bidding for the construction of co-membership. However, although the recruiter acknowledges the humour in line 14, she quickly returns to the 'business at hand', thus neither explicitly confirming nor refuting her shared membership in the category of Flemish people.

In this case, it is thus not unequivocally clear whether the humour is successful, and whether co-membership is established. This is quite different in the next extract, in which the candidate's humour clearly fails. The following excerpt was taken from the initial part of an interview with a fairly young candidate. At this point, the recruiter is checking the candidates' personal information (viz. where he lives (line 1), whether he still lives at home or whether he is cohabiting with a partner (line 4), what his parents' jobs are (line 19)). This part of the interview is an information exchange oriented at correcting any potential mistakes in the recruiter's file.

Excerpt 2 - C= candidate, R= recruiter

(**interview 10- r71 – too early to be cohabiting - 01.05-01.30')

1	C	<i>ik ben van ((stad)) ja=</i>
2	R	<i>=ja ik zie samenwon↑end:</i>
3	(0.5)	
4	C	<i>e:h nog nie samenwonend nee</i>
5	R	<i>ah ['k ga da hier aanpassen</i>
6	C	<i>['k woon nog bij m'n ouders thuis</i>
7	R	<i>↑ah [ok</i>
8	C	<i>[da's eu:h £.h£ waarschijnlijk een fout[je @@</i>
9	R	<i>[ja</i>
10		<i>@@ £nee:: geen probleem</i>
11		<i>'k ga da ier aanpassen dan£</i>
→ 12	C	<i>'t zou nog een beetje vroeg ↑zijn (.)</i>
13		<i>alhoewel °@@°</i>
14	(1.2)	
15	C	<i>°e::uh°</i>
16	R	<i>£wij mogen daar <u>noo</u>::it geen conclusies uit</i>
17		<i>[trekken£</i>
18	C	<i>[ja tuurlijk daar nie van</i>
19	R	<i>£dat is e:h£ (.) mag ik vragen wat de ouders doen</i>
1	C	<i>I am from ((city name)) yes=</i>
2	R	<i>=yes I see cohabit↑ing:</i>
3	(0.5)	
4	C	<i>e:rm not yet cohabiting no</i>
5	R	<i>ah [I'll adjust that here</i>
6	C	<i>[I still live at my parents' home</i>
7	R	<i>↑ah [okay</i>
8	C	<i>[that's e:rm £.h£ probably a little mista[ke @@</i>
9	R	<i>[yes</i>
10		<i>@@ £no:: no problem</i>
11		<i>I'll adjust that here then£</i>
→ 12	C	<i>it would still be a bit ear↑ly (.)</i>
13		<i>although °@@°</i>
14	(1.2)	
15	C	<i>°e::rm°</i>
16	R	<i>£we are <u>ne</u>::ver allowed to draw any conclusions</i>
17		<i>[from that£</i>
18	C	<i>[yes of course not because of that</i>
19	R	<i>£that is e:rm£ (.) may I ask what the parents do</i>

After having discussed where the candidate lives, the recruiter initiates the topic of the candidate's social situation as 'cohabiting'¹. The rising intonation at the end of the turn indicates that the candidate is required to either confirm or negate this factually formulated statement (line 2). After a brief pause and hesitation, he refutes this social status by sayings *nog niet* ('not yet'), thus implicitly making his young age – the candidate is in his early twenties – relevant to the interaction.

¹ This is an official term in Belgium to denominate that two people are officially registered as a couple, even though they are not married.

The recruiter then utters a news receipt marker (Heritage 1984) (line 5: 'ah') and says she will make the required correction in her file. The candidate overlaps to provide another piece of information about his housing situation (line 6), which is again met with a news receipt marker and the topic closing device 'okay' (line 7). In the subsequent line, the candidate then categorizes the issue as *een foutje* ('a little mistake') and produces a few brief laughter tokens. This initiates a more informal frame, as the recruiter subsequently also laughs and then utters her turn using a smile voice, in which she again states that she will correct the mistake.

The candidate then further comments on the matter, viz. that 'it would still be a bit early' to be cohabiting, thus again making his age relevant. The rising tone at the end of his utterance invites a second turn, which, in its preferred form, would be a corroborating answer by the other participant. However, instead of this, there is a short pause, after which the candidate utters a conjunction expressing a concession (line 13: *alhoewel*, 'although'). Yet, he never completes the subordinate clause that such a conjunction usually introduces, but instead utters two silently pronounced laughter tokens. So the candidate immediately attempts to mitigate his statement, which emically displays his orientation to his previous utterance as problematic. This is further confirmed by the pause in line 14, when there is a noticeable absence of a response, and the candidate's utterance of a quiet hesitation marker in line 15.

Finally, in line 16, the recruiter responds to the candidate's comment. Interestingly, she switches to the 1st person plural pronominal form here (line 16: *we*), as such invoking her incumbency of a professional membership category, and thus making relevant her identity as a professional recruiter. She thus underlines her institutional identity and breaks up the humorous frame that emerged through the candidate's comment in line 12. Furthermore, she claims that the candidate's statement is inappropriate. This is underlined by the prosodic stress and lengthening of the vowel in the word *noo::it* (line 16: 'ne::ver') and the double negation, which is ungrammatical in Dutch (line 16: *nooit geen*, 'never any') and which thus gives further emphasis to the recruiter's turn. The only element that mitigates her response is her use of a smile voice, thus downplaying the challenging nature of her reply.

The candidate overlaps with the last part of the recruiter's reply with an explicit and boosted agreement, and adds a continuation which vaguely denies that 'drawing conclusions' was the point of his utterance. The recruiter then initiates a continuation in the subsequent line, still using a smile voice before hesitating and breaking off. After a brief pause, she initiates a discussion of the next topic on her list, abruptly breaking off the preceding discussion and moving to the next topic.

Thus, in this fragment an informal frame emerged because of a mistake about the candidate's social situation in the recruiter's records. The candidate elaborates on this and subsequently initiates a humorous frame with a comment in which he implicitly refers to age being a normative criterion for the appropriateness of cohabiting. As such, he implicitly invokes a general norm which, in case of agreement by the recruiter, could function as a co-membership device underlining a joint orientation to shared social norms. However, after a noticeable absence of a reply, thus already marking the following turn as dispreferred, the recruiter abruptly breaks off this informal humorous frame by constructing her institutional identity and condemning the candidate's contribution. Interestingly, she continues to use a smile voice, thus downplaying the challenge and seemingly staying within the humorous frame. However, the candidate's attempt at humour failed and it did not signal co-membership, especially as it caused the recruiter to explicitly construct her institutional identity. Thus, instead of achieving co-membership, the humorous comment actually results in the recruiter's implicit construction of a dichotomy between herself, as a member of the group of professional recruiters, and the candidate.

This excerpt thus illustrates the potentially risky nature of humour in job interviews since it may achieve the opposite of establishing co-membership. Like in the previous example, it is not clear whether the humour was successful, as the recruiter merely acknowledged it but did not further elaborate. In both cases, the recruiters quickly broke off the humorous frame and immediately proceeded to move the 'information exchange'-discourse type forward. This indicates that humour may not be considered an 'allowable contribution' (Levinson 1992) in these parts of the interviews, which can be categorized as transactional and institutional discourse types. We now move to the discussion of candidates' humour in quite a different discourse type.

2. Humour in relational discourse types

In this section, we discuss an excerpt in which humour occurs in a relational discourse type. Previously in this job interview, the recruiter and the candidate have established that they are from the same village (pseudonym: Waregem). The participants subsequently engage in a long, informal small talk sequence about the village and their common acquaintances, from which we selected excerpt 3. In the initial line of this extract, the recruiter states that her husband (pseudonym: Tim Barker) is also from the same area.

Excerpt 3 - C= candidate, R= recruiter

(*interview 19 – r 281 – local name + local dialect of village 07.10-07.35)

1. R *en mijne man trouwens ook*
2. *dien is euh geboren en getogen in Waregem*
3. *Tim Barker kweet ni of da ge °dieje kent toevallig°*
4. *da was wel meer Leonard-hoo↓d en bij ons was da*
5. *wij waren dan zowa centrum Waregem*
6. *en Leonard-hood voor ons*
7. *wasda zo (.) [*wadisda Leonard-[hood**
8. C *[>jajajaja:< [>jajajaja:<*
9. R *@@ .h[hh*
10. C *[lenny's=lenny's ho(h)od ge[lijk Eda [ze zegge*
11. R *[ja [@@@*
12. C *lenny=lenny's hoao:d£=*
13. R *=£ja£ (.) £j[a£ (.) j[a*
14. C *[£ja£ [ja*
15. C *nee ik woon nu midde midde Leonard-hood*
16. *an dinge vlak an an de voetbal van Leonard-hood*

1. R and my husband by the way as well
2. he is erm born and bred in Waregem
3. Tim Barker I don't know if you °happen to know him°
4. that was more Leonard-hoo↓d and at ours that was
5. we were then sort of centre Waregem
6. and Leonard-hood for us

7. that was like (.) [*what is that Leonard-[hood*
8. C [>yesyesyesye:s< [>yesyesyesye:s<
9. R @@ .h[hh
10. C [lenny's=lenny's ho(h)od [like £th[ey say
11. R [yes [@@@
12. C lenny=lenny's hoao:d£=
13. R =£yes£ (.) £y[es£ (.) y[es
14. C [£yes£ [yes
15. C no I live now middle middle Leonard-hood
16. at things close to to the football of Leonard-hood

In the initial lines of the fragment, the recruiter discusses who her husband is (line 1-3). Not only does she thereby initiate a bid for co-membership through a common acquaintance (line 3: 'I don't know if you °happen to know him°'), but she also adds the name of the particular hamlet her husband is from (pseudonym: Leonard-hood, structurally analogous with the Flemish original). She then sets up an ingroup-outgroup distinction between the two, situating herself in the ingroup of the village (Waregem) – as the many first person plural pronominal forms indicate (lines 4, 5 and 6) – and performing by means of a creaky voice how they used to talk derogatively about the hamlet. She closes her turn with two laughter tokens (line 9) and an audible in-breath.

So in this excerpt, it is the recruiter who initiates humour in lines 7 and 9. On the one hand, the comment is a bit risky, as it demonstrates her feelings of superiority, viz. as an inhabitant of the *main* village vis-à-vis the hamlet people, thereby constructing her identity as a snob. Yet, on the other hand, she just admitted that she married someone from the hamlet, as such allowing a reading of this comment as self-denigrating, viz. as making fun of a younger, snobbish version of herself. The comment is thus fairly ambiguous, but it certainly demonstrates the recruiter's knowledge of the area and it constructs her identity as 'a local'.

Interestingly, the candidate continues by providing an informal nickname of the hamlet (Leonardhood becomes Lenny's hood). He then adds: 'like they say', thus indicating that this is a generally shared nickname and at the same time distancing himself from this particular naming practice by setting himself apart from the 'they'-group. Within this part of the turn, the candidate shifts to a smile voice, and the recruiter overlaps with an affirmative particle and laughter tokens (line 11), thus reciprocating the laughter. Then, in line 12, the candidate repeats this nickname in a smile voice, but utters it with an explicit vernacular pronunciation (spelled 'oao' instead of 'oo'). This vernacular alternative is emphasized by the lengthening of this divergently pronounced vowel. As such, the candidate mirrors the ambiguous nature of the recruiter's earlier humorous comment by making fun of and implicitly distancing himself from the naming practices of the hamlet people, while also demonstrating his knowledge of this locality and the habits of its people.

This is followed by a latched-on affirmative particle uttered by the recruiter in a smile voice, ratifying both the vernacular variant as well as the humorous frame. In lines 13-14, both participants jointly establish the end of the humorous frame by gradually shifting from a smile voice to a regular voice, and the candidate then explicitly marks the shift back to a non-humorous frame with the turn-initial negative particle *nee* (line 15: 'no'). He continues the small talk sequence and thus further contributes to the construction of his identity as 'a local', but the humour has come to an end.

So in this extract, the humour is initiated by the recruiter (line 9), and is then followed up by the candidate with a comment that is topically closely related to the recruiter's preceding discussion. The candidate thereby *does* co-membership as he mirrors the recruiter's ambiguous, slightly mocking

tone, and he also displays his in-depth knowledge of the linguistic customs of the area of which he shares citizenship with the recruiter and her husband. Interestingly, in this instance the target of the humour is not an out-group (as in excerpt 1), but actually the very in-group to which both interlocutors belong – but with which both demonstrate to have a somewhat ambiguous relation. Still, in spite of this, both interlocutors construct themselves as ‘locals’ with extensive knowledge of the area, and as such further strengthen their geographical co-membership.

Overall, in this instance the candidate’s humorous comment is successful, which could be related to many factors. For example, his humour reciprocated the recruiter’s own humorous comment, and thus occurred in an already humorous frame. Responding to rather than initiating humour is of course a fairly safe move. Moreover, the candidate’s humour was not a ‘fresh’ bid for co-membership, as this was already established long before this fragment. As such, it can be seen as a bid for further confirmation of co-membership, which again is potentially less risky than initiating a new bid. And lastly, the relational nature of the discourse type in which the humour occurred is also relevant as humorous comments are more likely to constitute ‘allowable contributions’ in this discourse type than in more transactional information exchange discourse types.

3. Humour in mixed discourse types

While the examples above presented the different poles of the ‘discourse type’-continuum typical for job interviews, we now discuss two instances that occurred in mixed discourse types and are thus located somewhere in the middle of the continuum. Excerpts 4 and 5 occurred at the final part of a job interview within just over one minute from each other. In both excerpts, the recruiter is listing the extralegal advantages related to the job on offer.

Excerpt 4 - C= candidate, R= recruiter

(**interview 18 – r3599 - 1.05.04-1.06.15)

1	R	.hh euh na vier maand krijgde nen eigen X
2		hospi-hospitalias- goh tga ni
3		t'is middag <↑ <u>hospitalisatieverzekering</u> >
4	C	@@
5	R	euhm eventueel goedkoper voor partners of kinderen
6		mocht da al van toepas[sing
7	C	[ne[e
8	R	[zijn
→ 9	C	gelukkig ni t[hank god (nee)
10	R	[en eu:h
11	R	@@ £.h maal(h)tijdcheques£ van zeven euro
1	R	.hh erm after four months you get an own X ²
2		hospi-hospitalias- goh it does not go
3		it is noon <↑ <u>hospitalization insurance</u> >
4	C	@@
5	R	erm possibly cheaper for partners or children
6		should that already b[e

² This is the name of an insurance company.

	7	C	[n[o
	8	R	[applicable
→	9	C	fortunately not t[hank god ³ (no)
	10	R	[and e:rm
	11	R	@@ £.h mea(h)l vouchers£ of seven euro

The fragment starts when the recruiter introduces the third item on her list of extralegal advantages, viz. the hospitalization insurance. She mispronounces this word in line 2, and has also repeatedly tripped over her words before this excerpt. She uses this as the source for a self-denigrating comment (lines 2-3) and self-repairs by pronouncing the words slowly, in a loud voice and with a marked rising onset (line 3). The candidate treats this turn as laughable (line 4), and both the laughter as well as the recruiter's self-mocking comments mark this part of the interaction as fairly informal.

The recruiter then provides more details about the hospitalization insurance regarding family cover (line 5), but immediately adds a conditional clause of which the introductory verb *mocht* (line 6: 'should') displays the recruiter's expectation that this will not be relevant for the candidate, and the temporal adverb *al* (line 6: 'already') implicitly relates this to the candidate's young age⁴. She thus implicitly displays an orientation to general norms regarding appropriate ages for starting a family.

In line 7, the candidate overlaps the final part of the recruiter's turn with a negative particle, thus corroborating the recruiter's expectations. She then self-selects to comment further on this, in this case by providing a positive evaluation of this situation (line 9: *gelukkig ni*, 'fortunately not') and by repeating this evaluation with the expressive exclamation *thank god* (line 9), followed by another negative particle. Interestingly, right after the first possible completion point of the candidate's turn, the recruiter overlaps with *en eu:h* (line 10: 'and e:rm'), thus initiating an and-prefaced turn, demonstrating that she was about to continue her list (Neville 2006). However, she breaks off and utters two laughter tokens, after which she continues with the next item on her list. The laughter briefly permeates into this turn, as the audible in-breath as well as the smile voice and the aspiration in the formulation of this next item (line 11: *£.h maal(h)tijdcheques£*, '£.h mea(h)l vouchers£') demonstrate. Given this relatively extended reaction (laughter + smile voice), the recruiter not only acknowledges, but also implicitly ratifies the candidate's humour, even though the institutional 'exchange of information'-frame is hardly interrupted.

So in this case, the humour is ratified and expresses co-membership as it functions as a confirmation of and affiliation with the recruiter's views regarding the appropriate age of starting a family (cf. line 6, 8: 'should that already be applicable'). Like in excerpt 3, the candidate's humour does not constitute a new bid for co-membership in itself, and could thus be regarded as another successful and relatively safe way of signaling agreement and displaying an orientation towards shared values. Interestingly, 17 lines later in this discussion of extra-legal advantages, another humorous comment by the candidate emerges, which seems to construct co-membership in a rather coincidental way. In this excerpt, the recruiter is discussing company cars.

Excerpt 5 - C= candidate, R= recruiter

30	R	<i>krijgde nen euh bedrijfswagen ter waarde van ne Mini</i>
31		<i>als da op da moment nen Audi weet kik veel wa is</i>

³ 'thank god' is uttered in English in the Dutch original as well.

⁴ This candidate is in her early twenties.

32 *dat dan zelfde prijs is dan is da nen Audi*
33 *[euhm*
34 C *[°<ma dan moet ik mijn Volvo afgeven>°*
35 R *°<ge moogt uwe Volvo ook bijhouden>*
36 *ge krijgt ne auto°*
37 C *[°ze ze ze heeft een ↓naam°*
38 (2.1)
39 R *£hh.£*
40 C *nee das echt ni om te lachen*
41 *ik heb die oo[i-*
42 R *[>ja ma ik vind (zo) frappant*
43 *want ik gaf mijn auto's vroeger ook altijd<*
44 *een £na(h)a[m£ @@ .hh*
45 C *[£ja ↑echt£ @@*
46 *ma ik heb die das zo de de werkauto*
47 *van mijn mama eigenlijk hé*

30 R *you get a erm company car at the value of a Mini*
31 *if that is at that moment an Audi I don't know what*
32 *that then is the same price then that is an Audi*
33 *[erm*
34 C *[°<but then I have to give away my Volvo >°*
35 R *°< you can also keep your Volvo>*
36 *you g[et a car°*
37 C *[°she she she has a ↓name°*
38 (2.1)
39 R *£hh.£*
40 C *no that is really not for laughing*
41 *I have that on[c-*
42 R *[>yes but I think (so) striking [sic*
43 *because I used to give my cars also always<*
44 *a £na(h)[me£ @@ .hh*
45 C *[£yes ↑really£ @@*
46 *but I have that that is like the the work car*
47 *of my mum actually hey*

In the initial three lines of the fragment, the recruiter is providing details about this extralegal advantage. As in the previous fragment, her tone is quite informal, as the use of vernacular pronominal forms (lines 30-31: *krijgde* 'you get', *kik* 'I') as well as the imprecise reference to the type of Audi (line 31: 'Audi I don't know what') indicate. After her turn is finished, the candidate gains the floor and utters a retort, which is quite unexpected as the recruiter is actually listing job benefits. This retort is uttered in a low voice, using a slower speaking pace as well as a particular marked tone, which could be described as a pouting voice. All these elements, as well as the fact that the candidate seems to be challenging an advantage of the potential job, indicate that this utterance should be understood as humorous.

The recruiter replies by mirroring the candidate's slow speaking pace and low voice and responds to this by explaining how the scheme works (lines 35-36). As she is stating the obvious here, she can be seen as joining this humorous frame by retorting the candidate's mock retort. However, it turns out that the candidate had not yet finished, as she overlaps the final part of the recruiter's turn by silently adding that her car has a pet name. Interestingly, she uses a (three times repeated) personal pronoun to refer to the car (line 37: *ze*, 'she'), thus being consistent in her anthropomorphic

remark and continuing the humorous frame. This remark functions as an account for the candidate's mock retort to the extra-legal advantage of a company car, and it also adds another layer to her preceding humorous remark. In particular, this account is a form of humorous, self-denigrating disclosure oriented at herself personally (rather than at a larger group of which she is a member as in excerpt 3). This is noteworthy as it is in contrast to the findings of psychological research which argues that "[i]t is less likely applicants will put themselves down in an interview, as the goal is to boost themselves up to gain the interviewer's approval" (Weiss & Feldman, 2006)" (Gallaher 2010: 18). While these concerns are certainly justified, self-deprecating humour has also been described as a "strategic discourse performance in enhancing one's likability" (Matwick and Matwick 2017: 34) and, as Barden (2007: 2) maintains, in a job interview, "self-deprecating humor can be the most powerful tool of all if it displays a level of self-knowledge and self-confidence and, at the same time, succeeds in making the speaker seem more accessible." Hence, this type of humour can either be very successful, or fail miserably.

Intriguingly, this is not immediately clear, as the candidate's humorous confession is followed by a long pause – potentially marking the dispreferred turn shape of the upcoming turn – after which the recruiter utters an audible outbreath in a smile voice (line 39). The candidate responds to this by saying that it is 'really not for laughing' (line 40), thereby refuting a counterfactual interpretation of her previous comment. She then continues by providing further evidence in line 41. However, the recruiter interrupts this elaboration by providing an account for her laughter in line 39, in which she repairs the candidate's interpretation (lines 42-44). Interestingly, in this explanation, the recruiter mirrors the candidate's self-disclosure and identifies herself as someone who used to have the same anthropomorphic tendencies with her own cars. She uses a smile voice in the final part of her utterance (line 44), thus displaying that she is continuing the humour, which is overlapped by the candidate who uses a mirroring smile voice. This subsequently results in joint laughter. The candidate then self-selects to further elaborate on the details of her car (lines 45-47).

Thus, in this excerpt, the candidate's self-denigrating humour performs a range of positive interpersonal functions and portrays her as a very likeable – even if slightly quirky – person. Interestingly, her humorous comments result in a situation in which both interlocutors engage in self-disclosure and identify themselves as 'former/current pet name givers to cars', thus constructing co-membership in this category. This is clearly a non-professional, and quite unexpected category for which co-membership is claimed during a job interview, which illustrates – once more – the fluid and locally constructed nature of identity work. Furthermore, it is important to remark that the candidate's humorous comments in this excerpt come after the perhaps *safer* humour discussed in excerpt 4, and so it was already established that humorous comments form 'allowable contributions' in this mixed discourse type, perhaps facilitating the candidate's use of slightly more risky forms of humour here.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper explored the largely under-researched topic of humour in authentic job interviews. Our particular interest was the candidates' use of this discursive strategy to claim co-membership with the recruiter and to construct shared identities, as these activities have been identified as being crucial for the candidate's success in the interview (Kerekes 2006; Lipovsky 2008). Our analyses of five examples of humour in different job interviews shed light on the ways in which the candidates utilise this inconspicuous device in the different discourse types that characterise the activity type of job interview. In most cases the candidates' humour was successful in the sense that it was responded to positively by the recruiter (Schnurr & Chan 2011) and assisted the candidate in successfully establishing co-membership with them in a relevant social category. However, there are also instances in our data where the candidate's humour and associated claims for group

membership failed, leading to potentially negative effects regarding their attempts to construct professional and social identities (Bell 2015; File & Schnurr fc).

Moreover, those humorous instances that occurred during relational and mixed discourse types located towards the more social talk end of the continuum of workplace talk (c.f. Holmes 2000), were successful, while none of the humorous attempts that occurred during the largely transactional information-exchange discourse type located at the transactional end of the continuum, was unequivocally successful. These findings are noteworthy since previous research in professional contexts has observed that humour occurs at different stages (and often in different discourse types) during an interaction, including transactional interactions, such as decision making (Holmes et al. 2007; Schnurr & Mohd Omar fc), as well as relational interactions, such as small talk (e.g. Holmes 2000; Schnurr 2009b). So, unlike this previous research which observed humour throughout interactions – albeit with tendencies for it to occur more frequently at the beginning, end, and transition phases (Marra 2003) – we found a clear impact of the discourse type on the use and success of humour in job interviews.

In addition to the discourse type, the immediate interactional context in which the candidate's humour occurred also influenced the ways it was interpreted and responded to by the recruiter. It was often the candidate's "ability to go beyond the surface, pick the relevant cues" (Akinaso and Seabrook Ajrotutu 1982: 128) in the recruiters' turns that contributed to the success of their humour. Thus, in hybrid activity types, such as the job interview, what counts as 'allowable contribution' (Levinson 1992) is changing from one moment to the next. More specifically, and perhaps not surprising given the power asymmetry between interlocutors in job interviews (REF), those instances of candidate humour which build on and elaborate either the recruiter's preceding humour or their earlier attempts to construct co-membership, were more likely to be successful than those attempts at humour and constructing co-membership which were initiated by the candidate without this build-up and which often occurred in an interactional context where the humorous frame had not been previously established. Interestingly, those instances where the humorous frame was established prior to the candidate's humour sometimes led to relatively risky – i.e. potentially face and identity threatening – humour (such as in excerpt 5). This observation is perhaps rather surprising given the high stakes of the job interviews (REF) and the potentially detrimental effects of failed humour with regards to the candidate's attempts to portray themselves in a particularly good light.

Lastly, our findings are in line with previous – largely psychological – research on humour in job interviews, which observed that humour is an ambiguous and potentially risky strategy, which – albeit being appreciated by most recruiters also has the potential to back-fire (Barden 2007; Gallaher 2010). In light of these constraints it is perhaps not surprising that self-denigrating humour, where the speaker is the target, seems to be the safest form of humour in this context and was the most successful in our data (extracts 3 and 5), while boundary marking humour directed at absent others appeared to be riskier and sometimes failed (excerpts 1 and 2). But regardless of the types of humour used, in all instances the humour contributed to constructing the candidate's multi-dimensional – professional and social – identities. These identities, however, overlap and feed into each other, and since "it is professional to be personal" (Scheuer 2001: 238) in job interviews, they both assist the candidates in portraying themselves in the best light. As we have shown, humour is a valuable discursive strategy that facilitates this.

While this paper has been a first step towards exploring the complexities of humour in the hybrid activity type of job interview from a discourse analytical perspective, more research is necessary to understand some of the complexities that we have identified here – especially with regards to humour and identity construction. For example, although in our data we found no evidence of the

candidates using humour to construct co-membership with the recruiter in terms of shared professional identities (e.g. as workaholics, computer nerds, experts, perfectionists), future research might want to explore this further and discuss the multiple functions of humour in this respect. Moreover, since much research on job interviews has focused on the effects of cultural and linguistic diversity (see e.g. Campbell and Roberts 2007; Gumperz 1992b; Roberts 2013) and much research on humour has also taken an interest in this matter (for an overview, see Sinkeviciute and Dynel 2017), it would be a particularly interesting avenue for future research to move from an analysis of *intra*-cultural humour in job interviews, as in this article, to an exploration of *inter*-cultural humour. Exploring the different forms and functions of humour in culturally and linguistically more diverse job interviews, we believe, has the potential to further tease apart the interrelated and complex processes of identity work across the different discourse types that constitute the hybrid activity type of job interview.

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