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Humour in Negotiations: A Pragmatic Analysis of Humour in Simulated Negotiations

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Background

Many international development projects are a complicated affair, with various interdependent actors involved in a long and complicated process. Accounting for the conflicting interests of vast numbers of stakeholders proves to be a very difficult task. Conflicts of interest often materialize into an obstacle that can impede the planning, design, or implementation phases of a project. International development initiatives must deal with these potential obstacles to ensure the successful completion of a project.

Objectives

The most common method of solving bilateral disputes is for parties to engage in negotiations. This thesis attempted to shed light on the possible ways of improving the negotiation process with the use of humour. This was done by observing and analyzing naturally occurring humour in simulated negotiations. Observations were made to analyze the pragmatic effects of verbal humour in negotiations, and to provide a better understanding of the roles of humour in conflict.

Methodology

Conflict scenarios were created to reflect some of the common conflicts that can occur throughout international development projects: differences in priorities and beliefs; dealing with unhappy stakeholders; and the allocation of limited resources. These interactions were recorded to identify, analyze, and categorize instances of humour and laughter. The content of the humorous utterances were analyzed using a linguistic theory of humour (the General Theory of Verbal Humour). The affects of the humour were then evaluated in the context of interactional negotiations.

The negotiations that displayed uses of functional humour were organized into argument trees (see figure below).

Scenario 3-4

W: The money should be used to organize another event
-V: 200thous is not enough for another event [L]
V: We should use the money ourselves
+V: We worked a long time [L]
+V: We should be compensated for our costs [L]

Figure 1 - Example of Argument tree

It was clearly observed that notable moments of laughter would change the nature of an argument. By organizing the negotiations into argument trees, the impact of the humour

and laughter on the structure of the negotiations can be observed. It has been observed that humour and laughter can be associated with the following types of argumentation structure in negotiations: (1)Counterclaims (2)Clarifications (3)Formations (4)Agreement and (5)Tension-relief.

The Significance of Formations

After observing humour and laughter in relation to the structure of the argument trees, it was found that the schematic representations displayed a structural reformation concentrated around acts of humour and laughter. The (3)Formations were able to end an argument 'chain'. This would form a new 'issue/intermittent node', or allow the negotiation to move on to another topic. An efficient use of this function can help negotiations explore new issues, break out of deadlocks, or prevent circular argumentation.

Additional Findings

Other findings generated from a pragmatic analysis include:

- Self-deprecating humour can be used to victimize oneself, and gain sympathy from other members involved in the process.
- Saying the unexpected, or violating conventional practice in an unthreatening way can set a playful and cooperative tone for the rest of the process.
- Emotionalizing statements with laughter can help delegitimize or attack the credibility of opposing positions.

- Humour can be used to highlight the interpretive holes in arguments. This can emphasize the strength of one's own argument, or the weakness of others.
- A well-timed humorous utterance can break tension, and allow for negotiations to move in a new direction, or proceed at a different pace.
- Emphasizing the obviousness of a statement with rhetorical questions or tone of voice can encourage others to apply the same logic, and steer them towards agreement.

By incorporating concepts from conflict talk, negotiation theory and structural argumentation, it has been proposed that Humour and Laughter can be effectively used to affect negotiations in terms of structure, content, and process. It has been argued that (1) humour can reflect and potentially be strategically used to alter the negotiation process, and (2) that a conscious grasp and efficient use of humour can be used to encourage better negotiation practices.

References

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