The Prosodic Framing of Humour in Conversational Narratives: Evidence from Greek Data

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Abstract

In this paper we investigate the role of prosodic means in framing humour within conversational narratives. In particular, we focus on whether, how, and why jab lines as basic *turn constructional units* in a humorous narrative turn are marked off by prosodic features. Our aim is twofold: a) to investigate, by means of statistical tests, if jab lines are systematically segmented by pauses and by differentiation in speech rate and intensity; b) to analyse the conversational and pragmatic functions of the prosodic features under scrutiny within humorous conversational narratives. The data examined comes from 3 conversations between 2 adolescent girls (different ones in each conversation) and includes 22 humorous conversational narratives. The conversational narratives contain 170 jab lines, which are checked for the occurrence of pauses before and after them, and are measured for speech rate and intensity using the Praat software. Based on the results of our quantitative and qualitative analysis, we argue that pauses surrounding jab lines and prosodic differentiation in speech rate and intensity, either in isolation or in combination with one another, are systematically employed by the narrators in order to signal, delimit, and underline jab lines.

Keywords

conversational narratives, framing of humour, intensity, jab lines, pauses, prosodic features, speech rate

1 Introduction

As Sacks et al. (1974) have convincingly shown, conversation is organised in and through a turn-taking mechanism that consists of two components: a) the *turn-allocation component* specifying the rules for speaker change; and b) the

turn-constructural component identifying the units available to speakers for turn construction.

The aim of the present paper is to contribute to the study of the turn-constructural component by examining the internal organisation of turns, in particular those which are included in Greek conversational narratives and designed as humorous. The organisation of turns, e.g. turn-size and turn-order, is not predetermined; it is interactionally controlled and governed by the principle of *recipient design*:

[T]he talk by a party in a conversation is constructed or designed in ways which display an orientation and sensitivity to the particular other(s) who are the coparticipant(s) (Sacks et al. 1974: 727).

Thus, the speaker uses a variety of verbal, prosodic, etc. means to show to his/her listeners how s/he organises his/her turns, while listeners, in turn, show whether and how they understand this organisation. In Day and Wagner's (2008: 37) words,

a next contribution to the talk will be heard as indicating the way in which the immediately preceding contribution has been taken to mean [...] and creates itself a possible space for the next contribution.

Focusing on the 'building blocks' used for the construction of a turn, turns represent someone's right to speak on the basis of turn constructional units (henceforth TCUs), like single words, phrases, clauses, or sentences. Based on their tacit knowledge, listeners perform a syntactic and prosodic analysis of the TCUs, which allows them to anticipate the upcoming possible completion point and seize the opportunity to become the next speaker (Sacks et al. 1974: 702, 710, 720–721; see also Zimmerman and West 1975: 107; Wooffitt 2005: 26–27). However, there are cases where the completion point of a TCU does not co-occur with a transition relevance point, i.e. a proper place for the next speaker to take the floor. This occurs when speakers who have interactionally gained rights for extended turns, use an array of TCUs to develop an argument or narrate a story (see, among others, Levinson 1983: 323). In such cases, speakers employ pragmatic cues to signal the borders of internal argumentative and/or narrative components. Thus, listeners recognise their interrelation and the coherence between them.

Although several studies have investigated how speakers handle the TCUs so as to indicate transition relevance points to their listeners (see, among others, Duncan and Fiske 1977; Ford and Thompson 1996; Schegloff 1996), as well as how they segment extended turns containing narrative or argumentative constituents via the use of pragmatic cues such as discourse markers (see, among others, Schifffrin 1987; Norrick 2000), the internal segmentation of

extended turns achieved by *prosodic means* remains a relatively unexplored area of study.

In this context, the aim of our study is to examine the role of the prosodic framing of TCUs in the architecture of humorous turns. In particular, we intend to investigate which prosodic means are used by the speakers to distinguish humorous TCUs from the surrounding non-humorous narrative utterances, and also to discuss their conversational and pragmatic function. Our data comes from conversational narratives, i.e. stories that are built mainly upon extended conversational turns. We have isolated the humorous stories from our corpus, i.e. stories containing units with incongruous content (Norrick 1993, 2004; Attardo 2001).

To this end, first, we present some key concepts of our analysis: we offer a brief definition of conversational narratives and a description of their main features (section 2.1). We also include a representative example from our corpus to specify the conditions under which an utterance or a narrative can be considered humorous. Our discussion is based both on *etic*, i.e. semantico-pragmatic, criteria, as well as on *emic*, i.e. interactional, criteria, in particular the occurrence of laughter (section 2.2). Then, we offer a brief overview of the research on prosodic features as pragmatic cues in interaction, including their use to convey a humorous attitude towards what is being said (section 2.3). In the same section, we define the intonation phrases, which are used as the main tool for the prosodic analysis performed, as well as the prosodic features investigated here, i.e. pauses, speech rate, and intensity. After the presentation of the data under examination (section 3), we proceed with their analysis. The quantitative analysis is conducted in order to provide empirical evidence on whether and how humorous TCUs are prosodically marked off from non-humorous ones (section 4.1), while the qualitative analysis of humorous conversational narratives from our corpus focuses on why such prosodic differences occur, i.e. what is their function in story-telling (section 4.2). Section 5 summarises the findings of the present study and explores areas for further research.

2 Key concepts

2.1 *Conversational narratives*

Prototypical conversational narratives seem to be different from typical talk-in-interaction in that turn-taking rules are suspended, thus giving the narrator the right to hold an extended turn. This can be achieved by specific

conversational techniques, such as a preparatory sequence where the narrator offers to tell a story (i.e. a story preface), and the audience's request for the offered story. A story-telling initiation can also be elicited by a recipient.¹ In either case, if turn-taking rules are suspended and speakers do not change for a while at transition-relevance places, stories can be conceived of as built by many TCUs in a multi-unit turn (Goodwin and Heritage 1990: 299).

Focusing on the structure and content of prototypical oral narratives, Labov (1972: 360–361) suggests that a narrative consists of a sequence of at least two clauses which are temporally ordered. This narrative skeleton, i.e. the *complicating action*, can be surrounded by other components, such as *orientation* (i.e. identification of time, place, persons, and their activities) and *evaluation* (i.e. revealing the narrator's attitudes and emotions towards the point of the story).

More specifically, Labov (1972: 360) defines narratives as “one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred”. On the other hand, as Schegloff (1997: 107) critically points out, Labov and Waletzky (1967) “disattended the fact that [...] in the natural social world, narrative—in the form of the telling of stories in ordinary talk-in-interaction—is an organic part of its interactional environment”. Thus, in ordinary conversational narratives, far from simply recapitulating past events, narrators often seem to relive, re-evaluate, and reconstruct remembered experience. In this context, turn-taking suspension does not seem to be the rule: conversational narratives are often co-determined by the current audience and emerge in ‘atypical’ forms as *interactional achievements* between the speaker and the listener(s). Narrators always try to secure listeners’ interest by relating, or even performing, tellable events. On the other hand, listeners quite often respond to the tellability of the story by offering evaluation comments, whether verbal or non verbal (e.g. laughter). Furthermore, if they share common experience with the narrator, they may also launch a relevant second story (Sacks 1995; Coates 2001), or even become co-narrators by contributing to the story's construction in a high-involvement manner (Norrick 2000; Georgakopoulou 2007).²

¹ See, among others, Jefferson (1978), Levinson (1983: 323, 354), Sacks (1995 v. I: 682–684, v. II: 18), Terasaki (2004), Archakis and Skarvelaki (2009).

² Conversational narratives more often than not present a fascinating variety. As Georgakopoulou (2006: 84) points out, stories from everyday talk “span the continuum from highly monologic to highly collaborative tellings; from past to future and hypothetical events; from long and performed to fragmented and elliptical tellings”.

2.2 Humour and laughter

Since the data of this study consists of humorous conversational narratives, we need to clarify under which conditions an utterance, and more particularly a (narrative) turn, can be characterised as humorous. Humour is based on incongruity between what is expected to happen and what actually happens (see, among others, Attardo 1994, 2001). In other words, it is based on a deviation from what is considered to be the norm, i.e. a widespread assumption or a valid convention inside a group. Therefore, the main criterion for the characterisation of an utterance as humorous is a semantico-pragmatic one, i.e. its incongruous content.

According to the *General Theory of Verbal Humour* (Attardo 2001), the incongruous content of a text is included either in *punch lines* or in *jab lines*, i.e. words, phrases, or sentences forming TCUs. The main difference between the two kinds of lines resides in their text position: punch lines are disruptive elements, always found at the end of a text or text unit (e.g. a conversational narrative), and forcing the reader/listener to backtrack and reinterpret the text; jab lines are found everywhere else in the text (unit) besides its ending, they are fully integrated in the text and indispensable to the development of its plot, without, however, causing its reinterpretation (Attardo 2001: 82–83; Tsakona 2007). Given that no punch line was found in the corpus under examination, the only term employed here is the *jab line* (cf. Archakis and Tsakona 2005, 2006).

Jab lines (appearing in italics) are exemplified in extract (1) from our corpus (see section 3). Two close friends, Niki and Chara, interact in the presence of a researcher, Maria. The extract is part of an extended narrative where Chara relates a funny incident that happened to her when she visited the store where the boy she liked worked. In her description of the boy, Chara focuses on the similarities between him and another boy who lives in her neighbourhood:³

³ The Greek extracts analysed here are translated into English by the authors. The following conventions are used for the transcription of the data (see Jefferson 1989, 2004; ten Have 1999; Pavlidou 2006: 215–217):

Italics: jab lines

- : interruption and self-correction

:: : prolongation of a sound

Underlining: the stressed parts of utterances

CAPITALS: extra loudness

((comments)): explanatory contextual information

[: overlap

] : end of an overlap

= : latching of one person's utterance

(.): pause less than half a second

(1)

1. Chara: >(opote pao)< mja mera, (0.76) ↓af tos (0.436) eçi sosia
 2. peði mu, den gzero ti ine. Ksaðerfja ine, (0.41) ine
 3. olo iðji.(.) Olo- >milame oloiðji ðe-< (0.436)
 4. mali::, ruça, ta pada.(0.43) >*Bori na ne*
 5. *ce o iðjos jati<(.).ce afton Panajoti ton*
 6. *le(hhh)ne.*
 7. Maria & Niki: ha ha ha
 8. Chara: ha ha ha *pe(hhh)ðja, malon ine o iðjos.* (0.7)
 9. telospadon, (0.51) >o[pote meta<]
 10. Niki: [m are(h)si pu a]pe(h)klise
 11. to jeço(h)nos na in(h)e o i(h)ðjos ce i(h)pe
 12. oti e(h)çi sosi(hhh)a.
 13. All: ha ha ha
-
1. Chara: >(Well I go)< one day, (0.76) ↓h e (0.436) has a double you
 2. guys, I don't know what they are. Are they cousins, (0.41) they
 3. are i dential.(.) ide- >you know identical I d--< (0.436) Their
 4. hai::r, their clothes, everything.(0.43) >*They may be the same*
 5. *person because<(.).Panagiotis is also the name of the other*
 6. *o(hhh)ne.*
 7. Maria & Niki: Ha ha ha
 8. Chara: Ha ha ha *Gu(hhh)ys, they must be the same person.* (0.7)
 9. Anyway, (0.51)>th[en later<]
 10. Niki: [The fu(h)nny th(h)ing is that she e]lim(h)inated
 11. the poss(h)ibility that th(h)ey are the sa(h)me pe(h)rson and she
 12. sai(h)d that he ha(h)s a dou(hhh)ble.
 13. All: Ha ha ha

The humorous content of extract (1) is based on the following incongruity: the narrator, Chara, is talking about the boy she likes, Panagiotis, as the double of someone else (line 1). While she refers to the similarities between the

(0.0): pause of length in approximate seconds

. : falling intonation

, : ongoing intonation

; : rising intonation

↑↓: high/low onset of pitch

> < Indicate that the talk is speeded up or 'compressed' relative to surrounding talk

< >: Indicate that the talk is slower or "stretched" relative to surrounding talk

Wo rd: slow production

°word°: lower voice intensity

wo(h)rd /wo(hhh)rd: integrated laughter

ha: laughter particle

(): incomprehensible utterance

(word): uncertain transcription

two (lines 2–4), she realises that even their name is the same (lines 5–6), without, however, considering the obvious possibility that they are the same person. Only after having finished with their description, does it occur to her that ‘they’ may be the same person (line 8). This incongruity is included in two jab lines: the first one is in lines 4–6, where it suddenly occurs to her that Panagiotis and his ‘double’ are actually the same person. Chara integrates laughter in jab line 6 to invite all interlocutors to laugh; they accept the invitation in line 7. This laughing reaction incites the narrator to repeat the jab line in line 8, thus highlighting it, and then to conclude with much certainty that the two supposedly different people must be the same person. This claim invites an explanatory comment including laughter (lines 10–12) by one of the listeners that leads to everybody’s laughter (line 13) (on laughter sequences, see Jefferson 1979; Holt 2000: 440).

Elaborating on the relation between humour and laughter, it should be underlined that incongruity as the basis of humour may not always result in laughter: incongruous events or situations may also cause embarrassment, fear, panic, disgust, indignation, pity, moral disapprobation, confusion, etc. (Morreall 1983: 13). Thus, the laughter infiltrating an incongruous event or utterance may frame it as non threatening and potentially enjoyable and humorous.

On the other hand, laughter serves various functions and purposes in discourse. Conversation analytic approaches to laughter in interaction reveal that laughers place their contributions carefully and methodically, so as to achieve a wide variety of interactional and interpersonal goals: to demonstrate that laughter is appropriate at a certain point in interaction (Jefferson 1979); to close a topic in conversation and/or introduce a new one (Holt 2010); to establish close interpersonal relationships (Jefferson et al. 1987); to convey evaluation, stance, and different aspects of pragmatic meaning (Glenn 2003; Greatbatch and Clark 2003; O’Connell and Kowal 2004, 2005).⁴ Most importantly for the present study, laughter constitutes the most common and typical contextualisation cue for humour (Kotthoff 2000; Coates 2007; Norrick 2010). As Glenn (2003: 33) insightfully puts it,

the occurrence of laughter marks its referent [...] as humorous. Funniness becomes understood not as an inherent property of a message, or the internal state of a social being, but rather as a jointly negotiated communicative accomplishment.

⁴ An overview of the study of laughter in interaction from a conversation analytic perspective can be found in Vöge and Wagner (2010).

Laughter may thus come from a speaker while producing his/her own utterance (see example 1, lines 6, 8), or from the audience as a reaction to what is being said (lines 7, 13).

Therefore, we suggest that the combination of incongruity and laughter can establish a humorous frame of interpretation for a particular utterance: the presence of laughter reveals that the interlocutors adopt a humorous attitude towards incongruity and, hence, constitutes a secondary criterion in order to characterise a piece of discourse as humorous (Mulkay 1988: 93–119). Following Pike's (1967) distinction between "etic" and "emic" analysis, incongruity is an "etic", i.e. analyst oriented, criterion, while the presence of laughter is a more "emic", i.e. participant oriented, criterion for identifying humorous utterances (Archakis and Tsakona 2005: 47).

To sum up, among the TCUs used to build a conversational narrative, there are some jab lines which bear the incongruous content and cause, or are framed with, laughter. In extract (1), two jab lines (lines 4–6 and 8) take the form of two TCUs, the first one being a complex sentence and the second a simple one. In what follows, we investigate whether, how, and why the jab lines in our corpus are prosodically framed and, thus, we intend to contribute to the understanding of how the segmentation of jab lines is achieved in conversational narratives.

2.3 Prosody in (humorous) conversation

Prosody is one of the orderly details in interaction. Prosodic features can be treated as *cues* by which speakers signal, and listeners interpret, communicative orientation. In this light, prosodic features constitute a resource for the management of situated, interactional meanings (see, among others, Gumperz 1982: 131–152; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 1996; Couper-Kuhlen 2001). More specifically, Gumperz (1982: 104) points out that prosodic cues do "not 'mean' anything in isolation, i.e. by being an instance of a particular type, but by having a signaling value dependent on discourse context". For the purposes of the present study, we investigate the role of *pauses*, *speech rate*, and *intensity* in the delimitation of jab lines in our corpus. The choice of those features is due to their multiple functions in discourse and their attested significance in various discursive phenomena.

Pauses arise when speakers try to deal with problems in producing speech, providing more time and opportunity to speakers in order to formulate their next utterance (Clark 2006) or engage in self-repair (Schegloff et al. 1977). Speakers may also pause in order to express, among others, hesitation, embarrassment, or astonishment, or as a way to emphasise a point or heighten the suspense of a narrative (O'Connell and Kowal 1998).

Speech rate also has different functions in discourse and is often used as a prosodic cue of relative importance (Uhmman 1992). In discourse, some utterances may be produced faster or slower than others. Interestingly, this variability in speech rate seems not to be accidental, although it may have a different meaning or function in different (social or cultural) contexts. In particular, Couper-Kuhlen (2000) observes that, compared to surrounding units, turn-constructional units uttered with a sudden increase in speech rate will come across as less important or less central to a speaker's goal than the ones lacking this marking. Conversely, turn constructional units with a noticeable decrease in speech rate will be heard as the main point. When it comes to humour, it appears that, at least in the Greek data examined here, jab lines are uttered with a decrease in speech rate, compared to non-humorous utterances (see example 1, lines 4–5). We elaborate on this point later on (see sections 4.1–4.2).

Intensity has been found to have many functions in discourse as well (Couper-Kuhlen 2001). Recent research has shown that differentiation in the prosodic features of (speech rate and) intensity within direct speech quotations in conversational narratives contributes to the construction of discourse and situated identities (Archakis and Papazachariou 2008a, 2008b). Such a differentiation can also be employed by narrators in order to distinguish direct speech quotations from the preceding narrative speech within narratives (Archakis and Papazachariou 2007). Both these functions have a common base: intensity differences frame something as salient and significant.

Before proceeding with the definition of the three prosodic features under examination, we have to determine their prosodic environment, i.e. the prosodic locus of their appearance. The prosodic equivalent of a jab line is the *intonation phrase*.

The intonation phrase is defined as a stretch of speech pronounced under a single coherent intonation contour (Du Bois et al. 1993). The boundaries of the intonation phrase can be: a) a pause; b) an abrupt change of the intonation contour resetting the baseline of the intonation phrase; c) a lengthening of the final syllable of the intonation phrase; or d) a combination of the above parameters (Chafe 1980; Cruttenden 1997; Du Bois et al. 1993). Its pragmatic function involves the presentation of one piece of focused information and –most of the times– its incorporation in the shared knowledge of the recipients (Givon 1984; Du Bois et al. 1993; Chafe 1994). The length of the intonation phrase is not fixed; it can maximally coincide with the entire length of the utterance.

According to the above description, a *pause* can appear as a boundary of an intonation phrase. It can be defined as a brief silence in producing speech

and is measured in seconds (secs). Any brief silence longer than 0.3 sec is here considered as a pause. We determine this threshold following Psathas and Anderson's argument (1990: 82, 86–90) about the relative calculation of pause length, i.e. we take into consideration *the pace of talk* in the dialogues under investigation. In particular, these young females speak quite quickly: their average syllable length is 104 msec. Their breathing gaps are three to four times shorter than 0.3 secs (i.e. from 75 msec to 100 msec), a difference which can easily be proved statistically significant.

The second prosodic feature under investigation is *speech rate*, which refers to the tempo of speech production, i.e. it determines how fast or slow somebody speaks. Speech rate is calculated here by dividing the time of every jab line/intonation phrase under examination by the number of syllables uttered (cf. Crystal 1997). The result shows the average syllable time per jab line. Speech rate is calculated in milliseconds (msec).

Finally, *intensity* refers to the average loudness of each jab line/intonation phrase and is measured in decibels (db). In order to make the measurements from different recordings comparable and to equalise differences due to different recording levels, this value is also normalised. In particular, we a) calculate the intensity of speechless noise in each recording; b) subtract this value from the measurement of every average intensity; and c) add the same value –i.e. 40 db– as common baseline intensity.

In sum, changes in prosody can be shown to function as part of a signalling system which is used to construct, delimit, and interpret turn-constructional units or even whole turns (Selting 1992, 1995; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 1996; Holt 1996). Thus, within a humorous conversational narrative turn, jab lines are expected to be delimited by specific prosodic features.

Although research on the relation between humour and prosody is limited, there are a few findings suggesting that humorous turns can be identified on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic, and discoursal clues, which play an important role in the transmission of the speakers' humorous orientation (Holmes 2000; Hay 2001; Holmes and Marra 2002). Moreover, Purandare and Litman (2006) claim that, compared to non-humorous turns, humorous turns tend to have higher tempo, smaller internal silence, and higher peak, range, and standard deviation for pitch and energy. Mischler (2008) argues that not only laughter, but also expressive phonology, such as exhaled and audible breath, vowel lengthening, long pauses, and glottal stops, are systematically and strategically used as a form of internal evaluation to frame discourse as humorous. Such features often occur in clusters marking not only the humorous content of a narrative, but also its tellable point(s). It is,

therefore, obvious that it is not only the semantico-pragmatic content of the turns that marks discourse as humorous, but also its prosody.

3 The data of the study

The data comes from audio recordings of 3 spontaneous, unstructured conversations of 6 Greek girls between 15 and 17 years old. Each conversation lasts about 1 hour. The girls (2 in each conversation) interact in the presence of the researcher. All of them had either affinity or friendship bonds with the researcher, who was a university student of about their age (21 years old). Due to the nature of this relationship, we can safely assume that the emergence of the interview schema between the researcher and the informants has been avoided (Giakoumelou 2009).

Our informants are high-school students, intimate friends, and school-mates: they spend together most of their time in and out of school and share and discuss their school problems, family issues, friendships, affairs with the opposite sex, dreams, and aspirations. They also follow the same rules of conduct (e.g. they avoid the use of insulting language) and have the same ideals and beliefs (e.g. they show respect for family norms).

In this corpus, 22 humorous conversational narratives were isolated, within which 170 jab lines were identified.

4 The analysis of the data

Based on the preceding theoretical discussion, our hypothesis is that jab lines in conversational narratives are prosodically marked off from the rest of the surrounding non-humorous narrative discourse. Changes in prosody are expected to display participants' humorous orientation to their utterances. In what follows, we explore our research question both quantitatively and qualitatively.

4.1 Quantitative analysis

For the purposes of our study, we investigate the presence of pauses before and after jab lines, and we measure them for speech rate and intensity using the *Praat* software for speech analysis (Boersma and Weenink 2009). We also measure the speech rate and intensity of the preceding non-humorous utterances, so as to clarify if there is a noticeable differentiation between them.

In order to quantitatively check the possible significant correlations between the dependent (pauses, speech rate, and intensity) and the independent (jab lines) variables in our sample, three statistical tests were used. More specifically, in order to investigate the systematic occurrence of pauses before and after jab lines, we conducted a non-parametric Chi-square (χ^2) test, since our dependent variable is nominal (presence of pauses before and/or after jab lines, absence of pauses). For speech rate and intensity, the T-test was considered to be the most suitable parametric test, since the values of the dependent variables are scalar (i.e. *msecs* for speech rate and *db*s for intensity) and the independent variable consists of two categorical sub-groups (i.e. jab lines and non jab lines) (see Hedderston 1991).

As far as the prosodic feature of pause is concerned, our first aim is to investigate how many jab lines in our data are marked off by pauses and compare them with another set of narrative intonation phrases that are not humorous. A non-parametric Chi-square (χ^2) test reveals if there is a statistically significant differentiation between jab lines and non-humorous narrative intonation phrases, on the one hand, and the occurrence of pauses before and after them, on the other. For the purposes of the statistical analysis, we also picked semi-randomly one hundred non-humorous narrative intonation phrases. We collected non-humorous narrative intonation phrases from every humorous narrative. The number of intonation phrases ranged from two to ten, depending on the size of the narrative. We avoided intonation phrases from the beginning and the end of a humorous narrative, as well as intonation phrases that preceded and followed jab lines, as these intonation phrases would necessarily have a pause either at their starting point or at their end.

Furthermore, in our data, the presence of pauses can be described in terms of the following categories: a) pauses occurring before and after the intonation phrase (e.g., jab lines/ humorous intonation phrases in extract 1, lines 4-6, 8; extract 2, lines 3, 10; extract 3, lines 13, 14, 17-18; extract 4, lines 2, 3; extract 5, line 5-6); b) pauses occurring only before the intonation phrase (e.g., non-humorous intonation phrases in extract 2, lines 1-2; extract 3, lines 11-12); c) pauses occurring only after the intonation phrase (e.g., jab line/ humorous intonation phrase in extract 2, lines 6-7; non-humorous intonation phrases in extract 2, lines 15-16; extract 3, lines 8, 10-11); and d) no pauses at all (e.g., non-humorous intonation phrases in extract 2, line 2).

Table 1 shows that there is a highly significant differentiation between non-humorous intonation phrases and jab lines, pertaining to the presence of pauses at their boundaries (Sig. = .000 < 0.05). First of all, 166 (97.6%) out of 170 jab lines of all the narratives of our data are marked off by pauses, a

Table 1. A statistical comparison of jab lines and non-humorous intonation phrases on the basis of pauses (Chi- square)

	Pauses				Total
	Pause before	Pause after	Pause before and after	No pauses	
Non-humorous intonation phrases	15	25	16	44	100
Jab lines	25	37	104	4	170
Total	40	62	120	48	270
<i>Chi-Square Tests</i>	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)		
Pearson Chi-Square	90,633	3	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	97,626	3	.000		
N of Valid Cases	270				

percentage that could not be accidental, as opposed to non-humorous intonation phrases, where pauses appeared in 56 instances (56%), a percentage that indicates no correlation between non-humorous intonation phrases and the appearance of pauses. Moreover, pauses before and after jab lines were observed in the majority of jab lines, i.e. in 104 instances (61.2%), while the presence of this pattern at the non-humorous intonation phrases is rare (i.e. only in 16% of the cases). It is noteworthy that only in 4 instances (2.4%) of jab lines no pauses at all were observed, by contrast to the non-humorous narrative intonation phrases, where pauses at boundaries were absent at a rate of 44%.

In order to investigate whether jab lines are systematically marked off in terms of speech rate and intensity in our data, we measured speech rate and intensity in every jab line, as well as in the non-humorous intonation phrase preceding the jab line. T-tests were conducted to quantitatively check the hypothesis that jab lines and non-humorous intonation phrases within a turn are significantly distinct in terms of speech rate and intensity. In particular, the first T-test, which compares jab lines and their preceding intonation phrases in terms of speech rate, shows whether there is a statistically significant difference between these two kinds of utterances (see Table 2).

The results of the T-test are statistically highly significant (Sig. = .000 < 0.05), indicating that jab lines and non-humorous utterances differ in terms of speech rate. Table 2 shows that the mean speech rate of the production of jab lines is about 161 milliseconds per syllable, while the mean speech rate of non-humorous intonation phrases is about 136 milliseconds per syllable, i.e. jab lines are produced at a slower speech rate than the surrounding

Table 2. Distinguishing jab lines from non-humorous intonation phrases on the basis of speech rate (T-test)

	Type	N	Mean	S.D.	S.E.	Sig. (2-tailed)
Speech rate	jab lines	170	161.624	59.93	4.59	.000
	non-humorous	72	136.551	28.82	3.39	
	inton. phrases					

non-humorous utterance (e.g. jab lines in extract 2, lines 3, 6-7, 10, 25, 28; extract 4, lines 2, 3).⁵

The second T-test compares jab lines with non-humorous intonation phrases in terms of intensity. Table 3 presents the results of the test:

Table 3. Distinguishing jab lines and non-humorous intonation phrases on the basis of intensity (T-test)

	Type	N	Mean	S.D.	S.E.	Sig. (2-tailed)
Intensity	jab lines	170	70.75	6.93	.531	.001
	non-humorous	72	67.64	5.24	.618	
	inton. phrases					

Table 3 shows an overall significant difference (Sig= .001< 0.05) between jab lines and non-humorous intonation phrases in terms of intensity. The mean intensity of jab lines is about 70 db, while the mean intensity of the non-humorous lines is about 67 db, i.e. jab lines are produced at a higher intensity level than the surrounding non-humorous phrases (e.g. jab lines in extract 1, line 8; extract 2, lines 3, 6-7, 25, 28; extract 5, lines 3-7).

These measurements clearly show that *jab lines are prosodically marked off from the surrounding non-humorous intonation phrases*. More specifically, *they*

⁵ At this point, we should make a comment about the jab line in extract 1, lines 4-6, which appears to contradict our findings. In this case, the jab line is prosodically divided into two parts; the first part, i.e. *Bori na ne ce o iðjos jati* ‘They may be the same person because’, is produced faster than the previous non-humorous intonation phrase *mali, ruça, ta pada* ‘their hair, their clothes, everything’, while the second part, i.e. *ce afton Panajoti ton lene* ‘Panagiotis is also the name of the other one’, is produced slower than the first. We argue that the narrator aims at emphasising the second part, a point which is further confirmed by the presence of the short pause before it (on the function of pauses, see section 2.3).

she was in danger (e.g. slippery ground, a banana peel, etc.). Furthermore, whenever a child stumbles and falls and hurts him/herself, s/he gets scared and usually bursts into tears. The protagonist of the story reacted in an unexpected way. Despite her injury that shocked everyone present, she was worried for the wasted ice cream that fell from her hand (lines 25, 28). Given that the narrator does not suffer any permanent and irreparable damages, all the above incongruities can be interpreted as humorous. By laughing at her incongruous past behaviour, in particular at her obsession with ice cream, Chara frames her story as humorous.

Focusing on the prosodic features of the jab lines identified, we observe that the first jab line *imuna ce aḏinati* ‘I was also thin’ (line 3) is marked off by pauses longer than half a second. As to the prosodic features of speech rate and intensity, measurements showed that the jab line is produced much slower (187.87 milliseconds/ syllable) and louder (68.42 dbs) than the preceding non-humorous utterance *Opote katevena, etrexa eyo* ‘well I was coming down, I was running’ (speech rate: 109.37 milliseconds/ syllable, intensity: 64.73 dbs). The second jab line *pada me ena payoto sto çeri* ‘always with an ice cream in my hand’ (lines 6–7) is one of the few cases in our data that is not marked off from the previous non-humorous utterance by a pause. Nevertheless, it is produced in a lower speech rate (113.47 milliseconds/ syllable) and in a much higher intensity (77.87 dbs) than the previous non-humorous utterance *opote na muna me to payoto sto çeri to ksilaci* ‘and well there I was holding an ice cream in my hand stick in hand’ (speech rate: 103.27 milliseconds/ syllable, intensity: 69.47 dbs). The next jab line *ce troo mja tumba* ‘and I stumble and fall’ (line 10) is marked off by pauses (0.634 sec. before and 0.482 sec. after it) and is also produced slower (179.83 milliseconds/ syllable) than the preceding non-humorous line *Opote katevena etsi ce trexo* ‘well I was going down like this and I was running’ (speech rate: 140.5 milliseconds/ syllable). As to the prosodic feature of intensity, measurements did not show a remarkable differentiation between the jab line and its previous non-humorous utterance. The last two repetitive jab lines included in direct speech, i.e. *Peðja to payoto* ‘Guys [look out for] the ice cream’ (lines 25, 28), are segmented from the preceding non-humorous utterance by a pause (0.84 sec.). Compared to the preceding non-humorous utterance *çtipao eðo pera ce ta yonata mu* ‘I hurt myself right here and my knees’ (lines 23–24; speech rate: 122.58 milliseconds/ syllable, intensity: 71 db), both are produced slower in terms of speech rate (194.32 milliseconds/ syllable, 183 milliseconds/ syllable respectively) and louder in terms of intensity (76.87 db, 72.9 db respectively).

In sum, the analysis of extract (2) shows that jab lines are prosodically delimited in terms of pauses, speech rate, and intensity from the surrounding

non-humorous utterance of the narrative in a systematic way. Every jab line in our data is marked off from the surrounding discourse by such prosodic features, which occur in clusters rather than in isolation.⁷

Our next research question is why the presence of such prosodic features is so systematic when a jab line occurs within a humorous narrative. In what follows, we discuss the conversational and pragmatic functions of prosodic features and, more specifically, the interpretation they cue in interaction.

First, we examine the way pauses function in the humorous narratives of our corpus. The following narrative comes from a conversation between Niki and Chara. The two friends talk about incidents that made them feel embarrassed. Here, Chara relates an incident which took place on a night out and which was the result of her obsession with her appearance:

(3)

1. Maria: i apo tin ali to:::, (0.43) ton gaθrefti tu aftocinitu
2. mu eleje re i nici,
3. Niki: a, (.) oçi, [pu-]>sto dzami tu aftocinitu pu
4. citazo(hhh)suna<. =
5. Chara: [pjo?] =i:: n(h)e, n(h)e n(h)e. lipon.(.) [...] pao mja
6. mera, (0.89) >ce ksero ɣo (0.73) kaθomuna, (.) proxoraya
7. sto δromo. (0.56) >(opote leo)<
8. katse na citaxto, (0.64)
9. Niki: ha ha ha
10. Chara: epiði itane vraði ce ↑den evlepa oti itan mesa oðiɣos
11. ce:: sinoðiɣos, (0.93) ce citazome ce kano etsi
12. ftjaxno ta malja mu ° kano etsi afta (ce kano) (0.61)
13. «a:::i sto δjaolo, pos ise etsi.» ° ((she imitates herself))
14. (0.86) ((hhh)) mudz(hhh)ono [co(hhh)las] (0.46)
15. Maria: [mudzones] colas=
16. Maria & Niki: ha ha ha
17. Chara: = c(hhh)e vle(hhh)po en(hhh)a pra(hhh)ma >vjeni sto
18. paraθiɣo< (0.4) «↑↓Ti:::.....?» ha ha ha
19. Maria & Niki: ha ha ha
1. Maria: Or like the other time the:::, (0.43) the car mirror like Niki was
2. telling me
3. Niki: Oh, (.) no, [when-]>when you were look(hhh)ing at yourself in
4. the car window<. =
5. Chara: [What?] =E:: Yea(h), yea(h) yea(h). Well.(.) [...] I go one day,
6. (0.89) >like, you know< (0.73) I was standing, (.) I was
7. walking down the street. (0.56) >(And then I say to myself)<
8. let me check how I look, (0.64)

⁷ Such cases were not attested in (2), but do occur in other narrative extracts of our corpus.

9. Niki: Ha ha ha
 10. Chara: Because it was da rk and ↑and I couldn't see that the driver was
 11. inside ((the car)) a::nd the co-driver as well, (0.93) and I look at
 12. myself and I do like this I fix my hair ° I do like this (and I go)
 13. (0.61) «*Bloo::dy hell, look at you!*» ° ((she imitates herself))
 14. (0.86) (hhh) *I make a gestu(hhh)re*⁸ [*too(hhh)*] (0.46)
 15. Maria: [You make a gesture] too=
 16. Maria & Niki: Ha ha ha
 17. Chara: = *A(hhh)nd I see(hhh) a(hhh) thi(hhh)ng >coming up at the*
 18. *car window*< (0.4) «↑↓*Wha:::t?*» Ha ha ha
 19. Maria & Niki: Ha ha ha

Humour in narrative (3) evolves around the following event: one night Chara was walking down the street, when she decided to check the way she looked in a car window. Since she did not approve of the way she looked, she made a very common, but also very rude, Greek gesture at her mirror image. People do not disapprove so strongly of their looks, especially in public, so her reaction could be considered incongruous (lines 13–14). Furthermore, she had not realised that the driver was inside the car and he thought that the gesture was intended for him, so he unexpectedly opened the window to respond to her gesture (lines 17–18). In her telling, Chara imitated her gesture (see lines 13–14).⁹

The jab lines in (3) (lines 13–14, 17–18) are produced between pauses. It appears that the narrator employs pauses in order to indicate the boundaries of the jab lines she produces, thus marking them off from the surrounding non-humorous utterance and underlining their role within the narrative. Moreover, by using pauses, the narrator emphasises the main points of her story (cf. Mischler 2008). This is further supported by the fact that, after every jab line including a laughter invitation, the audience burst into laughter, thus accepting the invitation (lines 16, 19). In line 15, Maria, who has initiated the story and at this point acts as co-narrator, even repeats the jab line, thus showing her support for the humorous effect produced by the narrator. Such reactions reveal that the narrator manages not only to orient her listeners towards the most important points of her story, but also to secure their high involvement in the humorous story-telling.

⁸ The gesture referred to here is called *μούτζα* [*mudza*]. It is a very insulting gesture which involves stretching one's fingers towards the other person's face.

⁹ Audio recordings obviously do not provide paralinguistic information (e.g. gestures). Nevertheless, such information was accessible to the fieldworker who is a co-author of this paper and was present during the recordings (see Giakoumelou 2009).

The relative importance of speech rate (discussed in section 3.3) is also attested in our corpus. Extract (4) is part of humorous narrative, in which Niki refers to a 15-year-old schoolmate of hers, who, due to lack of a sense of orientation, was unable to find his way and to follow the group during a school excursion, thus forcing his teachers and schoolmates to go search for him all the time:

(4)

1. Niki: aftos ðe boruse na prosanatolisti >to peði< to xaname si-
 2. (0.32) *se mja ekðromi to xasame tris fores.* (1.054) >Διλαði< ,
 3. *akoma ce sta gudis xanotane.*
 4. Chara: ha ha ha
 5. Niki: (1.1) ðen gzero pos ta kataferne. (0.82)
 6. Maria & Chara: ha ha ha
-
1. Niki: He could never find his way >this guy< we would lose him all¹⁰-
 2. (0.32) *in an excursion we lost him three times.*¹¹ (1.054) >That is
 3. to say< , *even in Goody's he would get lost.*¹²
 4. Chara: Ha ha ha
 5. Niki: (1.1) I don't know how he did it. (0.82)
 6. Maria & Chara: Ha ha ha

The incongruity in extract (4) is based on the fact that Niki's schoolmate could not find his way and got lost all the time, even in indoor spaces he was very familiar with. Lines 2–3 include two sequential jab lines where the second one elaborates on the incongruity of first one (as shown by the discourse marker *Διλαði* 'That is to say'). The two jab lines are marked off by pauses from the previous non-humorous utterance *Aftos ðe boruse na prosanatolisti to peði to xaname si(neçia)* 'he could never find his way we would lose him all (the time)' (line 1) and from one another. These jab lines are also characterised by a decrease in speech rate. The speech rate of the first non-humorous utterance was measured in 120.5 milliseconds/ syllable, while the speech rate of the following two jab lines was measured in 139.75 and 170 milliseconds/ syllable respectively (see notes 10–12). This remarkable decrease in the speech rate of the jab lines, combined with the presence of pauses, is used by the speaker to highlight the fact that these jab lines bear the humorous points of the story, and call for audience attention. The presence of laughter in lines 4 and 6, i.e. after the jab lines, shows that the narrator's attempt to attract and secure audience attention and to share her point of view with them is successful.

¹⁰ Speech rate: 120.5 milliseconds/ syllable

¹¹ Speech rate: 139.75 milliseconds/ syllable

¹² Speech rate: 170 milliseconds/ syllable

Example (5) illustrates the function of intensity in humorous turns. It comes from a conversation between two close friends, Sofia and Dimitra, in the presence of the researcher, Maria. It is part of an extended narrative, in which Sofia refers to a trip she made with Maria during the previous summer. The narrator mockingly refers to a person who had not changed his clothes for ten days during the whole trip, which reflects her disparaging attitude towards this behaviour which is considered socially non-acceptable:

(5)

1. Sofia: [...] *ce tin enðekati mera*, (0.5) *ti kani?*
 2. Maria: *sto plio ha ha ha*
 3. Sofia: *sto plio*, (0.4) *ALAKSE BLUZA!* (.) *E, OÇI,*
 4. *E OÇI RE FILE!* *s exume toso gero, s exume*
 5. *siniθisi* (0.47) *s exume aγapisi jafio pu ise,*
 6. *ja aftio pu foras.* (0.56) *<ti pas ce tin alazis ti*
 7. *bluza? > jati mas to kanis aftio?*
 8. All: *ha ha ha*
-
1. Sofia: [...] And on the eleventh day, (0.5) what does he do?
 2. Maria: On the boat Ha ha ha
 3. Sofia: On the boat, (0.4) *HE CHANGED HIS SHIRT!*¹³ (.) *OH NO,*
 4. *OH NO MAN! We have you ((with us)) all this time, we've*
 5. *got used to you* (0.47) *we've loved you for what you are, for*
 6. *what you wear.*¹⁴ (0.56) *<Why do you have to change your*
 7. *shirt?*¹⁵ *> Why are you doing this to us?*¹⁶
 8. All: Ha ha ha

Incongruity here is based on two different, but interrelated facts: first, the man in question kept on wearing the same clothes for several days; and, second, on the last day of the trip, he unexpectedly decided to change them. The majority of the jab lines in lines 3–7 are produced in higher intensity (88.88, 85.46, 83.2, 77.31 db respectively; see notes 13–16), compared with the previous non-humorous utterance (line 1), which is less loud (80.15 db). By producing the jab lines with a higher intensity, the narrator clearly indicates and emphasises the humorous points of the narrative, aiming at enhancing audience involvement. Listeners respond with laughter (line 8).

To sum up, in the humorous conversational narratives of our corpus, pauses and differentiation in speech rate and intensity indicate the boundaries of jab lines, i.e. TCUs including incongruity. The clustering of such prosodic

¹³ Intensity: 88.88 db

¹⁴ Intensity: 85.46 db

¹⁵ Intensity: 83.2 db

¹⁶ Intensity: 77.31 db

features aims at emphasising humorous and tellable aspects of the story. Therefore, prosodic features combined with the incongruous content of the jab lines highlight the narrator's orientation towards attracting the attention of the audience and proposing a specific (in our case, humorous) interpretation of the narrated events. Audience laughter following every jab line confirms that they recognise the narrator's orientation towards framing these utterances as humorous and that they share her perspective.

5 Concluding remarks

In the present paper we examined whether, how, and why jab lines are prosodically marked off from the surrounding non-humorous utterances.

Our analysis confirms our hypothesis that prosodic features are used in humorous narrative turns in order to distinguish the humorous part(s) from the surrounding non-humorous parts of a turn. More specifically, we have shown that the presence of pauses before and/or after jab lines, along with differentiation in speech rate and intensity, distinguish jab lines from the preceding non-humorous utterance in a systematic way. As a result, listeners are provided with cues to help them recognise the transition from non-humorous parts of a turn to humorous ones – and back. Moreover, apart from signaling humorous stance, the clustering of prosodic features in jab lines creates vividness and enhances audience involvement. It, therefore, becomes clear that, through their prosodic choices, speakers design their humorous turns with a clear orientation to their recipients.

The findings of the present study confirm earlier research on the use of prosodic features to convey pragmatic meaning in everyday conversation, as well as on the prosodic particularities of humorous utterances (see section 2.3). Further research is required along these lines. It would be particularly interesting to investigate, among other things, whether the same or other prosodic features are employed to frame *non-narrative* humorous interaction (such as irony, mocking, teasing, banter, parody) or whether different linguistic and/or cultural communities use prosody in different ways. Intercultural miscommunication and/or 'lost' or 'unsuccessful' attempts at humour may result not only from what the members of a particular community tend (or are 'allowed') to frame as humorous, but also from differences in the prosodic conventions and norms speakers develop and accept as part of their communicative competence.

Finally, it appears that conversation analysis can be fruitfully combined with approaches coming from different, but eventually not incompatible, fields of research, such as narrative theory, prosodic analysis, statistics, and humour

research, in particular discourse analytic approaches to humour. The interaction between the analytical tools and methodology coming from such different research areas can be put to use to confirm and complement findings from conversation analysis and even to provide solid empirical evidence in support of the fine-grained analysis performed by conversation analysts.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Eleni Antonopoulou and the two anonymous reviewers for helpful suggestions on the present paper.

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