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Fictive Interaction in Humorous YouTube Comments: A Preliminary Investigation

Ash L. Spreadbury

1. Introduction

Recent work (Vandelanotte 2020, 2021) has explored the use of “fictive mini-dialogues” (Vandelanotte 2020: para. 23) by users of the social networking service Twitter. These mini-dialogues involve the creation by the writer of an interaction which is non-genuine or fictive in the sense that it depicts a made-up rather than actually occurring interaction. The fictive interaction is typically set out in a script- or interview-like format in which each ‘utterance’ in the dialogue is set on a new line with the ‘speaker’ being identified before a colon (Vandelanotte 2021: 183-184). The function of such non-genuine interactions is to, often humorously but sometimes more seriously, “represent attitudes and stances and to respond to these” (Vandelanotte 2020: para. 42).¹

(1) is a somewhat extreme example but illustrates well the above-mentioned characteristics of these mini-dialogues. The writer creates an imaginary interaction between a reporter and *Harry Potter* series author J.K. Rowling. The quote attributed to Rowling in the interaction is not genuine but rather serves to caricature the author, drawing attention to her perceived tendency to seek “attention by revisiting published work and adding new interpretations to it” (Vandelanotte 2020: para. 23). By presenting this long ‘utterance’ by Rowling as a response to a simple greeting by a reporter, the writer appears to criticize and mock this perceived tendency of Rowling’s by suggesting that it is “unprompted and likely not of much interest to anyone” (para. 23).

- (1) reporter: hello
jk rowling: there was actually a fifth hogwarts house that no one knew about. it was called sex house and it was where the horniest wizards were sorted into. they spent their days fucking and sucking and not learning much magic at all
(Vandelanotte 2020: figure 13; minor formatting changes)²

This short paper analyzes a similar type of fictive mini-dialogue commonly found in comments sections on the video-sharing website YouTube. It will be shown that YouTube users generate intertextual humor and convey subjective responses to events by creating mini-dialogues featuring people from—or entities related to—the video to which the comment is posted. The reader’s understanding of these mini-dialogues thus relies on knowledge of other texts, typically the video to which the comment is posted but also often other related texts (such as other YouTube videos).³

This paper identifies several sub-regularities in form and function in these YouTube fictive interactions and highlights similarities and differences with such constructions on Twitter. This preliminary study limits its focus to two-line fictive interactions. While (as on Twitter) longer instances can be observed, two lines (one entity responding once to another) appears to be the most common format. This paper aims to add to our knowledge of fictive quotation practices in online discourse. Further, this paper discusses the importance of such supra-sentential schematic patterns as part of the conventional linguistic knowledge of language-users.

2. Methods and data

On YouTube, users are able to post comments underneath videos uploaded to the platform. 50 comments each were examined from 50 videos for a total of 2500 comments. The videos used were chosen in order from the ‘Trending (Now)’ page with location set to ‘United States’ several times over the period of November and December 2021. Comments were examined in order from the top of the comments section with ‘Sort by’ set to ‘Top comments’ (the default setting which most users will be using).

Among the 2500 comments examined, 118 instances (4.7%) of unambiguous fictive

interaction made up of two lines were identified. These 118 instances were examined for this study. This number excludes numerous instances of genuine quotation, as well as less numerous instances of non-genuine quotation of three lines or more. Also excluded in this study are comments in languages other than English.

3. Analysis

It is notable that, even with this study's limited focus on two-line fictive interactions, almost 1 in 20 comments contained a relevant instance. This speaks to the prevalence of this pattern of communication in the particular communicative situation. Among the collected instances, several sub-regularities in form and function were observed. The three most frequent patterns will be examined below.

3.1. Fictive interaction between related entities

The most frequently observed pattern involves non-genuine mini-dialogue between two different third-party entities, both related to the video and its contents. These related entities were wide-ranging, including people or characters seen in the video, the person or company which created the video, other YouTubers, related organizations and groups, and so on. The resulting fictive interaction is thus highly intertextual, the resulting humor relying on the reader's knowledge of texts outside of the comment itself. This pattern describes 73 (61.9%) of the observed instances of non-genuine interaction.

Take examples (2a) and (2b), for instance. These two comments are posted to a video from UFC Embedded, a behind-the-scenes style show looking at UFC athletes. Many commenters picked up on the long, 'deep' comments of one athlete, Chandler, shown in the video. The comments shown in (2a) and (2b) are not genuine quotations from the video; rather, the commenters are creating fictive mini-dialogues of *the kind of* response Chandler might give to a simple question from the show. The commenters can be said to be creating a caricature in a manner similar to that already seen in (1). The humor here is intertextual, relying on the reader having watched the relevant video which these comments are parodying.

(2) a. Embedded: How was your day?

Chandler: What I do in a day is not definitive of who I am, it's what I do in days that are dark that forge me to be the machine that will unleash inside that octagon on Saturday.

b. Embedded: How is the weather?

Chandler: You know the sun is not always out, training means dark times, but you gotta pick yourself up in losses too, no matter what. That is what fighters are man. My motto is “work hard, love your family and neighbour and don't punch your dog”

Example (3) similarly uses the mini-dialogue format to create intertextual humor. The first line is quoted directly from the video to which the comment is posted (note the lack of name before the quotation; the speaker is assumed to be obvious to those who watched the video). The second line of the mini-dialogue is attributed to another YouTuber, Tom Scott, who does not appear in and is not involved with the video to which the comment is posted.

The humor of the comment in (3) becomes clear once one learns that Tom Scott had recently posted a video about finally learning to ride a bicycle as an adult (Scott 2021). The comment, in fictively depicting Scott's nervous reaction, can be seen as pointing out the humor in the fact that the video states that “most of us can ride a bicycle” when Scott had only recently posted a video learning to do so. The humor is highly intertextual, relying on the reader's knowledge not only of the video to which the comment is posted but also of the recent video of an entirely different YouTuber.

- (3) “Since most of us can ride a bicycle”
Tom Scott: *nervous sweating*⁴

Examples (4a)-(4d) are from a trailer video for the show *Stranger Things 4*. The trailer starts on a light tone exemplified by the character Eleven's line, “We will have the best spring break ever”. This initial optimism is then humorously undercut by some darker scenes of conflict before the trailer quickly ends. The comments in (4a)-(4d), then, humorously refer to this misplaced optimism. What is interesting is that despite starting their mini-interactions

in largely the same way (referencing Eleven's optimism), the second entity brought in to complete the interaction differs in each comment. In (a) it is the streaming platform, in (b) it is the plot personified, in (c) a plot point, and in (d) an antagonist of the series. In particular, the second entities in (c) and (d) are not shown or referred to directly in the trailer itself and thus come from additional knowledge which the commenters had, presumably as fans of the series.

- (4) a. Eleven: *Tries to be happy for once*
Netflix: "We don't do that here"
- b. "This is going to be the best spring break ever"
Plot: Hmmm
- c. "The best spring break ever!"
Chernobyl: *happens*
- d. "we will have the best spring break"
Demogorgon: *laughs in russian*

In this way, YouTube commenters use the fictive mini-dialogue format for humor in a highly intertextual way, often creating humorous juxtapositions between the video text and other related texts. The use of intertextuality in humor is frequently observed (Norrick 1989; Fonseca et al. 2020; Tsakona 2018, 2020) and its function has been analyzed variously. In challenging readers to recognize allusions to other texts, it functions to highlight common interests and establish common ground (Norrick 1989; Tsakona 2018, 2020). However, this can also be framed in 'elitist' terms: responsibility for meaning making is thrust onto the reader who must have the necessary knowledge of other texts in order to enjoy the humor. Group boundaries are thus created. Readers with the relevant knowledge enjoy the feeling of being part of the in-group 'elite' while other readers are put into an out-group excluded from the humor (Adami 2012; see also Duff 2003).

Regarding the intertextual humor in our YouTube comment data, the 'elitist' explana-

tion may be largely unwarranted. The main other text alluded to in the comments is the video to which they are posted, as well as other closely related texts. It is reasonable to believe that most commenters *expect* readers to understand the allusions and enjoy the creation of common ground based around shared knowledge of a text (the video which presumably both commenter and reader will have watched). Given the online and asynchronous nature of the communication, commenter and reader may never be able mutually acknowledge their common ground or have further interactions based on it. However, Tsakona (2020) points out that intertextual humor in online environments serves to create “ambient affiliation” (p. 182), establishing “familiarity bonds among strangers through the . . . negotiation of common perspectives, values, and standpoints” (p. 182).

3.2. *Me reacts*

The second most common pattern, comprising 18 (15.3%) of the observed instances, takes the writer themselves (*me*) as the second party in the mini-interaction. The first line of the mini-interaction is typically a genuine quotation from the relevant video. Thus, with this pattern, the writer creates a fictive interaction in which they ‘respond’ to an utterance from the video, functioning to display their thoughts about and attitude toward the quoted segment of the video.

A similar pattern used to humorously report one’s ‘reaction’ is observed in Twitter discourse by Vandelanotte (2020). For example, in (5), the writer humorously (and multimodally through the use of images)⁵ reports their reaction to a notification that their order has been shipped. The YouTube examples examined here differ in that, given the video-streaming purpose of the website and the fact that comments are posted to and appear under specific videos, the use of this pattern appears to be limited to reacting to part of the relevant video.

(5) “your order has been shipped”

me:

[IMAGE OF DOG WAITING BY THE DOOR]

(Vandelanotte 2020: figure 12; minor formatting changes)

In (6), the writer uses the format to humorously point out misinformation, and in (7), the writer appears to be pointing out the verbal misstep of the speaker (i.e., that including *also* when talking about the existence of a punishment for the loser implies the existence of a punishment for the winner). In both examples, the first line is a direct quotation from the video.

(6) Matpat: Arthur is the only character with an “a” in their name...
Me: what about Andy?

(7) Zack: “There’s also a losing punishment”
Me” So theres a punishment for the winner too?

In (8), the first line paraphrases the YouTuber’s analysis of the story of a video game. In the second line, the writer humorously reacts to what they perceive as mistaken analysis.

(8) MatPat- “you killed the planet!”
Me- “ah yes, tell that to the big gun that shot us and our rescue ship down.”

Finally, (9) is a comment posted to a video which humorously contrasts the attitudes of British and US physical education teachers to bad weather. In the video, the US teacher is depicted sending the students back inside ‘for milk and cookies’ in response to the cold weather. The writer of (9) creates a mini-dialogue, first paraphrasing part of the video then reacting with *I wish*, displaying their attitude toward that part of the video (presumably that they believe that it is not true but think that it would be nice if it were).

(9) Him:”Let’s go in for milk and cookies”
Me:”I wish”

3.3. Pointing out incoherence with *also*

The third most common pattern in the data, comprising 11 (9.3%) of the observed instances, takes the form [X / Also X]. This form presents two quotations or actions from the same

entity and typically functions to humorously point out the contradiction between them.

In his analysis of non-genuine interaction in Twitter discourse, Vandelanotte (2020, 2021) also notes the [X / Also X] pattern, with the form [Me / Also me] being particularly prevalent. Typically used in a lighthearted, joking manner as seen in (10), Vandelanotte also observes the use of this pattern in more serious criticism as seen in (11).

(10) me: who am I to judge?

also me:

[IMAGE OF FAMOUS TALENT COMPETITION JUDGE SIMON COWELL]

(Vandelanotte 2021: 185; minor formatting changes)

(11) Partisan twitter: “Digging up old tweets by [politician I like] and quoting them out of context is nasty and malicious.”

Also partisan twitter: “I have dug up and criticized old tweets by [politician I dislike]. This is a necessary process of transparency and accountability.”

(Vandelanotte 2020: figure 11; minor formatting changes)

In the YouTube comment data, the pattern is solely used to point out, in a light-hearted manner, perceived funny contradictions or incoherence in the speech and actions of entities related to the relevant video, typically those of characters in the video. Several examples follow.

(12) and (13) are both clear examples of the writer’s drawing attention to a discrepancy between what a person in the video says and their later actions shown in the video.⁶

(12) Him: subway breads are made of yoga mats

Also him: causally eats it after telling that

(13) Eugene: wants to be evil and cooks with bugs

also Eugene: adds seasoning so that people might actually like the bugs

(14) is a comment posted to a video in which a person, Leo, wins a monetary prize.

The comment can be understood as using the format to point out the discrepancy between the winning of a large monetary prize (first line) and the winner’s unexpectedly mild reaction (second line).⁷

- (14) Leo: Wins \$50k
Also Him: “cool?”

(15) is a comment posted to a video in which YouTuber Mr. Beast plays a game in which he is being hunted. The commenter uses the pattern to humorously point out the discrepancy between the YouTuber’s words and actions in the video. The YouTuber tells his hunters his location (first line) but still reacts negatively upon being found (second line).

- (15) Mr. Beast: Tells them exactly where he is
Also Mr. Beast: “Oh God, not like this!!”

4. Discussion

We have seen that the use of fictive mini-dialogues in order to humorously express attitudes and make intertextual jokes is highly pervasive in YouTube comments. This echoes Vandelanotte’s (2020) observations regarding similar patterns of language use on Twitter: such patterns are “pervasive on Twitter, and for many users of the platform [have] become second-nature” (para. 26). Such schematic patterns must be taken seriously as part of the conventional linguistic knowledge of members of the relevant communities.

This fits well within expanding definitions of form and function in Construction Grammar. Recent constructionist work looks at supra-sentential conventional patterns (e.g., Hoffmann & Bergs 2018, Imo 2010; Nikiforidou & Fischer 2015; Spreadbury 2021, in press) and emphasizes (as part of form) the visual layout of the text (e.g., Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou 2011; Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017; Östman 2005). Horiuchi & Nakayama (2021) also note punctuation as part of the conventional form of a construction. A constructionist description of the schematic form of the fictive interaction pattern examined in this study would include its visual layout (utilizing separate lines for each quotation) and

its punctuation (often using colons to denote participants, quotation marks around utterances, and asterisks around actions).

Further, we have seen that the form of the fictive mini-dialogue is influenced to some extent by the affordances of the online platform being used. The Twitter examples analyzed by Vandelanotte made use of various Twitter functions such as the ability to include images, GIFs, and to quote the tweets of others. The YouTube comments collected for this study, on the other hand, included only text and emojis. The inclusion of images in one's comment is not a feature of the platform.

Regarding function, recent work includes conventionalized links with particular communicative situations as part of the functional pole of a construction (e.g., Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou 2011; Imo 2010; Spreadbury 2021). In other words, it is recognized that linguistic form can conventionally *evoke* particular situations. Given a usage-based approach (Bybee 2006; Langacker 2000), it is not surprising that aspects of the communicative situation are remembered and can form the basis for generalizations across usage events. Thus, regarding the fictive mini-dialogue pattern examined in this study, a constructionist description of its function would include its links to particular sections of particular websites (e.g., Twitter tweets, YouTube comments) and the more general communicative situation and register (e.g., informal online posts).

Further, we have seen that these mini-dialogues function to create “ambient affiliation” (Tsakona 2020: 182), highlighting the common ground between strangers who have watched the same YouTube video and likely have knowledge of other entities related to that video and its contents. This interpersonal function appears to be common to all the YouTube comments observed, which make light-hearted jokes referencing the video and related entities. Thus, we can also say that the mini-dialogue format in YouTube comments conventionally primes the reader to (i) expect humor, and (ii) expect intertextual allusions. Intertextual humor appears to be the primary function of this format on this platform.

A usage-based constructionist account further allows us to account for the multitude of related patterns observed. Our knowledge of constructions forms a “structured inventory of conventional linguistic units” (Langacker 1987: 79) connected via inheritance links. More concrete constructions inherit aspects of their form and/or function from those more schematic (Goldberg 1995, 2006). More substantive (lexically specified) patterns such as the [X /

Also X] pattern described in §3.3 elaborate on the more schematic pattern of mini-dialogue, which itself inherits some characteristics from patterns of conversation and interviews (see Vandelanotte 2021 for related discussion).

Finally, while this study limited its focus to English, similar instances of fictive mini-dialogues were observed also in Spanish and Japanese during data collection. Further work is needed to analyze how online fictive mini-dialogues manifest in other languages and to uncover the extent of the cross-linguistic similarities in form and function. Depending on the extent of the cross-linguistic similarities, it may prove fruitful to analyze this pattern as a “‘language’-agnostic construction” (Wiess 2021: 30) in the sense that the conventional pairing of function and schematic form can be instantiated in various languages.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined a pattern of non-genuine interaction found in YouTube comments. The pattern utilizes a script- or interview-like format to present an interaction (which did not actually occur). It was shown that this pattern is frequently used in YouTube comments in order to create intertextual jokes (relying on the reader’s knowledge of the YouTube video, other YouTubers, and other related entities), cultivating common ground while humorously conveying one’s attitude towards part of the video to which the comment is posted.

This preliminary study limited its focus to two-line mini-interactions in English YouTube comments. Additional analysis is needed regarding three-line or longer instances. Further studies could also provide additional insight into the fictive mini-dialogue pattern by analyzing instances from other online platforms. Finally, further work is needed to uncover cross-linguistic generalizations regarding this online fictive mini-dialogue format.

Notes

- 1 Language use—be it in everyday conversation, advertisements, courtroom discourse, and more—abounds in the use of fictive interaction. For more on fictive interaction phenomena across a wide range of genres and situations, see Brandt (2016), Fonseca et al. (2020),

- Pascual (2006, 2008, 2014), Pascual & Królak (2018).
- 2 Examples will be presented as found, including original non-standard spelling, punctuation, and so on. For *loosing* in (7), read *losing*. For *causally* in (12), read *casually*.
- 3 See Bakhtin (1986) and Kristeva (1986) regarding the connection of texts to other texts through references both implicit and explicit. Tsakona (2018) usefully extends this concept to cover a text's references to public events, beliefs in wide circulation, and so on. Comprehension of texts requires the background knowledge to recognize such intertextual allusions.
- 4 Enclosing with *asterisks* in this manner is one typical way of denoting actions (as opposed to utterances) online.
- 5 See Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2017) for further work on multi-modality in online discourse.
- 6 Note that in the following examples the third person singular present verb form (*eats*, *wants*, *adds*, etc.) is used to denote actions.
- 7 The second line is a paraphrase of Leo's mild reaction. The actual utterance from the video is *OK. That's nice*.

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