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### **Indirect Evidentiality in Wikipedia articles on *humour***

#### **Introduction**

Nowadays, the Internet seems to have replaced or at least undermined the part played by traditional forms of communication or information: some of us do not post any more letters, because it is much easier to send an e-mail; the term e-book tends to overcome its paper counterpart (can we imagine that paper will have the same destiny as papyrus had centuries ago?). More often than not we search for a piece of information on the Internet instead of opening a dictionary or an encyclopaedia.

This paper focuses on one of the information tools provided by the Internet, namely Wikipedia, with a view to point out the way the source of knowledge is indicated in a given piece of theoretical discourse in order to convey trustworthy information. The approach fits in the general framework provided by the study of evidentiality, seen as a linguistic category pointing at the way the source of information is marked in discourse.

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Within this general framework, we are taking into account the articles found on *humour* in Wikipedia, in the attempt to identify what type of evidentials this web-based encyclopedia appeals to, in order to show that the message is based on the statement of a specified / non-specified third person, on a rumour, a clue or a reasoning.

Wikipedia is the world’s largest on-line free content encyclopaedia: “Wikipedia strives to be an authentic encyclopaedia. This means that the content consists of encyclopedic articles. The text, in other words, is a compendium of human knowledge written in an accessible format” (Mejias, 2005). Since Wikipedia is an encyclopaedia, it is to be said that its main purpose is to inform readers on all branches of knowledge. Therefore, we may assume that the informational content transmitted must be derived from reliable sources and these sources should be explicitly stated in discourse. Many of the articles are written by amateurs, yet many of them reveal specialist knowledge in a particular field.

According to the way the source of information is marked in discourse, we may deal with direct evidentiality (when the speaker himself has visually or auditorily witnessed the action) or with indirect evidentiality (when the speaker hasn’t been a personal witness to the action). In the latter situation, the information in the statement may be either inferred (when the speaker deduces the action) or reported / quoted (when somebody else is the provider of information, in which case the polyphonic characteristic of the discourse becomes manifest). These two categories represent different degrees of commitment to the truth of the action: indirect evidentials show that the speaker is not as committed to the truth of what he / she is saying as when direct evidentials are used.

An utterance such as *Peter entered my house when I was away* doesn’t show where the speaker has got the information from: are we dealing with a visual source (the speaker was actually able to see Peter enter his house), with an auditory source (the speaker has been told that Peter entered his house) or with an inferred knowledge (since there was no more food in the fridge and Peter was the only one to have the key)?

Taking into account the features of an encyclopaedia, it is to be assumed that, in Wikipedia, we are mainly dealing with indirect evidentiality. To put it differently, we may say that reportative evidentiality is a constant technique used by the creators of Wikipedia (any reader might become a contributor to enrich and update its content) with the view to convey reliability to the created discourse.

In our analysis of the articles on humour, we attempt first of all to point out how quotations themselves do / do not obey the standards imposed by Wikipedia. Secondly, we will focus on the way reported evidence is marked in discourse, by use of specific phrases (*X said that*) or less precise ones (*people say that*). The studied corpus has consisted of articles from three Internet pages: humour, laughter and theory of humour. (see bibliography)

## 1. Wikipedia's standards regarding Quotations

In Wikipedia's Manual of Style, there are specific indications concerning quotations to be used in articles. According to the manual, the rules refer to the following issues:

- minimal change: wherever reasonable, preserve the original style, spelling and punctuation. Where there is a good reason not to do so, insert an editorial explanation of the changes, usually within square brackets;

- attribution: the author of a quote of a full sentence or more should be named; this is done in the main text and not in a footnote. An exception is that attribution is unnecessary for well-known quotations (e.g., from Shakespeare) and those from the subject of the article or section. When preceding a quotation with its attribution, the article contributor should avoid characterizing it in a biased manner;

- quotation within quotation: when a quotation includes another quotation (and so on), the contributor should start with double-quotes outermost and working inward and alternate single-quotes with double-quotes;

- linking: unless there is a good reason to do so, Wikipedia avoids linking from within quotes, which may clutter the quotation, violate the principle of leaving quotations unchanged, and mislead or confuse the reader;

- block quotations: a long quote (more than four lines, or consisting of more than one paragraph, regardless of number of lines) should be formatted as a block quotation, which Wikimedia's software will indent from both margins. Block quotes are not enclosed in quotation marks.

One particular remark is that, in the middle of the Wikipedia article on *humour*, the reader is warned that "This section may require cleanup to meet Wikipedia's quality standards".

The study of quotations in Wikipedia articles on *humour* allows us the following observations:

1.1. The author of the quote is always mentioned in the main text (as prescribed by the manual of style). Still there are problems as far as the full reference is concerned. Compare the examples below:

(1) *Alastair Clarke explains*: "The theory is an evolutionary and cognitive explanation of how and why any individual finds anything funny. Effectively it explains that humour occurs when the brain recognizes a pattern that surprises it, and that recognition of this sort is rewarded with the experience of the humorous response, an element of which is broadcast as laughter. " The theory further identifies the importance of pattern recognition in human evolution as Clarke explains: "An ability to recognize patterns instantly and unconsciously has proved a fundamental weapon in the cognitive arsenal of human beings. The humorous reward has encouraged the development of such faculties, leading to the unique perceptual and intellectual abilities of our species."

(2) *Author E. B. White* once said that "Humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."

For (1), Wikipedia provides us with the complete reference of the two quotations presented as belonging to the same author. This reference is given under the form of an external link that takes the reader to the entire article where the quotation was taken from.

However, there is no reference meant to trace example (2), except for an external link from the author's name. What would be the difference between the two examples that led to the marking vs non-marking of the reference in discourse?

The answer seems to come down to the content of the quotation. When the quotation deals with a particular theory developed in the field of *humour* in order to explain how the effect of funniness is triggered in discourse or how individuals perceive a discourse as being funny or not, Wikipedia provides the whole reference. When the quotation acquires the status of a maxim whose purpose is to convey a general truth or a fundamental principle, Wikipedia would only give a link from the author's name without any further information related to what specific work the fragment was taken out from. The *verba dicendi* used as quote introductory tools seem to reinforce the aforementioned assumption: a theory is meant to be *explained*, while a maxim is prone to be *said*.

The two examples taken into account above are not the sole cases that bring to the fore the reference issue. They can be easily accompanied by some others pointing to the same aspect:

(3) Non-satirical humour can be specifically termed "recreational drollery". (Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World* [1941, 1965]. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p.12)

(4) 18th-century German author *Georg Lichtenberg* said that "the more you know humour, the more you become demanding in fineness."

Example (3) is similar to example (1), while example (4) is similar to example (2). The motivations for indicating the source of information as such seem to be the same as in the previous issued cases.

1.2. When *humour* is dealt with from a scientific or a medical perspective, the quotation is preceded by the full bibliographic reference of the journal it was taken out from, being not always accompanied by the exact name of its author, given in the main text or as a reference:

(5) *The December 7, 1984 Journal of the American Medical Association* describes the neurological causes of laughter as follows: "Although there is no known 'laugh center' in the brain, its neural mechanism has been the subject of much, albeit inconclusive, speculation. It is evident that its expression depends on neural paths arising in close association with the telencephalic and diencephalic centers concerned with respiration."

(6) *In 1989, the Journal of the American Medical Association* published an article, wherein the author wrote that "a humor therapy program can increase the quality of life for patients with chronic problems and that laughter has an immediate symptom-relieving effect for these patients, an effect that is potentiated when laughter is induced regularly over a period". ("Laugh If This Is a Joke", JAMA, Jan 1989, 261: 558., by Lars Ljungdahl)

The scientific or medical sources (such as journals) are usually given before the beginning of the quotation, while the name of its author may or may not be present.

1.3. The importance of a quotation (accompanied by a bibliographical reference) for enlightening a statement is usually pointed out by the mention "citation needed" whenever the information transmitted seems to be lacking sustainability or / and whenever the statement is likely to be challenged, as there is the case with the following examples:

(7) Humour is also sometimes described as an ingredient in spiritual life. Humour is also the act of being funny. Some synonyms of funny or humour are hilarious, knee-slapping, spiritual, wise-minded, outgoing, and amusing. Some Masters have added it to their teachings in various forms. A famous

figure in spiritual humour is the laughing Buddha, who would answer all questions with a laugh.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

(8) Laughter is a rich experience and expression in human beings. Thus there are several shades of smiling and laughing expressions. They involve elaborate neurophysiological and physiological processes. Such laughter is not often seen in animals. Nevertheless, one can not deny occurrences of primitive laughter in terms of experience and expression in animals. Owners of pets can vouch on this point, if they understand when their pet is happy and how it expresses the same.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

As far as the status of this mention is concerned, we may say that it is added by a Wikipedia editor who feels that the statement might be questioned. Therefore, the citation may function as an argument whose purpose is to impose a standpoint as an acknowledged truth in a particular ontological or scientific field.

1.4. Either with a full reference or with only its author's name given in the main text, a quotation may be used: to back up relevant statements (when dealing with theories on *humour*); to introduce relevant ideas which thus become more credible since coming from an authority in the area whose expertise cannot be questioned; to communicate knowledge under the form of maxims or aphorisms.

In terms of meeting or not Wikipedia's quality standards, we may say that quotations related to *humour* seem to obey the rules established by the online encyclopaedia: there is no quotation without having its author's name mentioned; the block quotations obey to their specific formatting; linking from within quotes is largely avoided; in unfrequent cases of quotation within quotation, double-quotes alternate with single-quotes.

One can argue that if the standards are met in term of quotations in the articles on *humour*, this would not be however a general feature of all Wikipedia articles. In order to answer this question, further research needs to be performed involving notions from different areas and some quantitative research.

## 2. Reportative evidentials in Wikipedia's articles on *humour*

According to Aikhenvald (2003), the notion of evidentiality seen as a linguistic category to which an evidential system corresponds refers to the nature of the evidence supporting a statement. The information that is not personally observed or experienced by the speaker (as opposed to the information obtained by the speaker through visual, auditory, olfactory experience) would be presented in discourse either as the result of an inference or as being reported to the speaker by another person. This author makes use of the term *reportative evidentials* which refers to both hearsay evidentials (in this case the reported information may or may not be accurate) and to quotative evidentials (the reported information is accurate and not open to interpretation). Yet, in both cases, the speaker receives verbal auditory input, namely a description of an event relayed by a third person. (cf. also de Haan 2005)

Reportative evidentials serve to "mitigate speaker's responsibility for the truthfulness of the reported utterance" (Hill and Irvine, 1993, quoted by Michael, 2006: 2).

Chafe closely relates reported information to hearsay evidentials seen as specific devices meant to "qualify knowledge as having been acquired through language rather than direct experience" (1986: 286).

In this part of the paper, we will focus on how English in Wikipedia's articles on *humour* marks a subcategory of indirect evidentiality, namely reportative evidentiality. We will thus aim at pointing out the ways of indicating reported knowledge, taking into account the aforementioned distinction between hearsay and quotative evidentials.

## 2.1. Hearsay evidentials

As previously mentioned, English has a large variety of phrases which can perform the function of indicating that the information communicated was acquired through language and not through direct observation.

Since we are dealing with a piece of discourse corresponding in most respects to academic writing, hearsay evidentials identified in the articles on *humour* belong more to the category of *X stated that* and less to the category of *X said that*.

Taking into account the criterion of the degree of specificity of hearsay evidentials, we distinguish the following classes:

2.1.1. *Very specific hearsay evidentials*: the reported knowledge comes from a person whose name is given in the discourse; this person is more often than not an authority in the area and one can hardly cast any doubt on his/her expertise. These evidentials are expressed "in their most precise and deliberate form". (Chafe, 1986: 269)

(9) Later in Greek philosophy, *Aristotle* in the *Poetics* (1449a p 34-35) *suggested that* an ugliness that does not disgust is fundamental to humor.

A particular case within the very specific hearsay evidentials refers to a different type of formal device of citing a reference, *i.e.* the phrase *according to X*:

(10) *According to* Dr. Shrinivas Kashalikar, self awareness is conscious concomitant of the physiological processes involving laughter or smiling reflex [response] and its grades, degrees or spectrum varies according to phylogenetic development, with no clear cut demarcation.

2.1.2. *Specific hearsay evidentials*: 1) the reported knowledge belongs to a given category of people (socio-professional category) who are presented as sharing the same opinion; 2) the reported information derives from a branch of science or a theory brought to the fore as the very source of knowledge.

(11) However, *some behavioral psychologists argue that* self-awareness of one's situation, or the ability to identify with another's predicament are prerequisites for laughter, and thus certain animals are not laughing in the "human manner".

(12) *Modern neurophysiology states that* laughter is linked with the activation of the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, which produces endorphins after a rewarding activity.

(13) *The incongruity theory states that* humor is perceived at the moment of realization of incongruity between a concept involved in a certain situation and the real objects thought to be in some relation to the concept.

In most of the situations, it can be argued that the specific standpoint expressed through such use of evidentials belongs to a particular class of people representing a socio-professional category. In cases where such a claim is defended or attacked, mention of this particular source of information should be made and reference to a wider, more general standpoint, with a larger scope could be advisable.

2.1.3. Less specific hearsay evidentials: *they say that, people say that*.

(14) *Some claim that* humour cannot or should not be explained.

The hearsay evidentials identified in Wikipedia's articles on *humour* are represented by verbs of saying that fully illustrate a common characteristic of scientific writing, namely that standpoints are assigned to the writer / author who initially claimed it or defended it as

such. Therefore, the most commonly used verbs in the hearsay evidentials are: *state*, *claim*, *argue* that can be preceded either by a human actor or by an abstract entity (*cf. supra*).

(15) Koestler *argues that* humour results when two different frames of reference are set up and a collision is engineered between them.

(16) The Incongruity Theory originated mostly with Kant who *claimed that* the comic is an expectation that comes to nothing.

(17) The term derives from the humoral medicine of the ancient Greeks, which *stated that* a mix of fluids known as humours controlled human health and emotion.

Besides the three classes of hearsay evidentials mentioned above, we can notice the use of other evidentials which transgress the sole function of pointing out that the knowledge stems from the sayings of a third instance. In other words, there are evidentials that indicate that knowledge can be derived either through hearsay or through inference (or from both sources at the same time) and the degree of reliability of the transmitted information is obviously inferior to the specific hearsay evidentials:

(18) Laughter is sometimes *seemingly* contagious, and the laughter of one person can itself provoke laughter from others as a positive feedback.

In this example, the adverb *seemingly* points to two plausible interpretations: since it is known that many people start laughing when they see / hear someone laugh, it is inferred that laughter is contagious; many people say that laughter is contagious because they have experienced it themselves, but they cannot fully explain it. The overall effect of the use of *seemingly* ("as a lexical way of referring to information source" Aikhenvald, 2006: 321) is that the knowledge communicated (obtained from two different indirect sources, *i.e.* hearsay and inference) has a questionable degree of certainty.

## 2.2. Quotative evidentials

As a subcategory of reportative evidentials, quotatives are used to introduce a direct quote. Therefore, they are highly specific evidentials because the knowledge is presented as stemming from a mentioned given source whose words are quoted without any intervention from the speaker. The verbs of saying employed point to both academic writing and to standard English:

(19) Raju Mandhyan *states* "The physical and psychological benefits of laughter come second only to the physical and psychological benefits of sex."

(20) "The research suggests men and women differ in how humour is used and appreciated," *says* Allan Reiss, M.D.

## 2.3. Further remarks on reportative evidentials

The function of reportative evidentials (in this academic discourse they might be called readwrite evidentials) is such that the assertion referred to could be either defended with supplementary evidence and arguments or criticised by means of counterarguments. In either case, the quotation serves as a standpoint with respect to which the contributor places him / herself by adopting an argumentative attitude in the framing of a communicative behaviour marked evidentiality. In Wikipedia articles on *humour*, it is to be pointed out that the first attitude usually becomes manifest, *i.e.* the contributor chooses to back up a

standpoint by means of some statements belonging to somebody more credible than he / she may be.

In terms of knowledge reliability of and in this particular case of encyclopaedic articles, we may state that hearsay evidentials leave a doubt (as slight as it may be) that the information is not as accurate as it is when quotatives are used. It means that the difference between the two classes of reportative evidentials does not involve the issue of using modality evidentials (since the speaker may adopt the same attitude regarding the content of its utterance), but it resides in the credibility of the knowledge. This difference (if any) should be therefore judged according to the interlocutor's / reader's perception.

## Conclusions

In the Wikipedia articles on *humour*, the reported information (direct quotes and indirect speech) is a common way of presenting knowledge as reliable as possible. It also comes to clear up some theories or notions and, due to this reason, the reported information can be ranged in the same category as the metalinguistic operations.

As far as the direct quotes are concerned, they meet the quality standards imposed by the Wikipedia Manual of Style, in the sense that the author of the quotation is always referred to in the main text and is accompanied by the full reference presented as an end note. The format is conforming to the type of quotation. We have distinguished between quotations that explain a theory in the field of humour, in which case the full reference is given either as an end note or as a link, and quotations that become maxims or aphorisms, in which case only their author's name is provided in the text. This distinction is reinforced by the *verba dicendi* used, namely *explain vs say*. When the quotations are taken from a scientific or medical journal, the full reference appears in the main text, before the quotation. The mention *citation needed*, coming from a Wikipedia editor, is usually added when the standpoint developed is likely to be challenged.

The concept of evidentiality has been used to cover the set of linguistic devices pointing to the source of knowledge. Indirect evidentiality has been seen as overarching two categories of non witnessed information: inferential evidentials (not dealt with in this paper) and reportative evidentials. Although the literature (de Haan 2005) often gives as synonyms the reportative / quotative / hearsay evidentials, we have adopted Aikhenvald's typology and therefore we assume *reportative* is an umbrella term for both hearsay and quotative evidentials.

Reportative evidentials indicate that a particular item of knowledge has been arrived at through language. In the Wikipedia articles on *humour*, hearsay evidentials range, in our opinion, from very specific evidentials (*X states that*) to less specific ones (*Some say that*). Since Wikipedia articles are a piece of academic discourse, we assume that hearsay evidentials belonging to the category of *X stated that* are more numerous than *X said that* evidentials. Quotative evidentials (*X states:*) are always very specific and precise since they introduce direct quotes.

In both cases, the speaker does not seem to commit to the truth of what is being communicated. He / she chooses to state / quote the sayings of a third instance who seems more entitled to convey credibility to the message.

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## Appendix Categories of evidentials

<b>Direct evidentiality</b>
<b>Visual evidentials:</b> I saw Peter go into his apartment.
<b>Auditory evidentials:</b> I heard Peter go into his apartment.
<b>Olfactory evidentials:</b> I feel something is wrong.

<b>Indirect evidentiality</b>		
<b>Inferential evidentials:</b> Peter came back home. (I assume he came back home because his mail box is empty.)		
<b>Reportative evidentials</b>	<b>Hearsay evidentials</b>	<b>Very specific hearsay evidentials:</b> <i>X suggested that, X stated that, according to X</i>
		<b>Specific hearsay evidentials:</b> <i>some scientists argue that, modern science argue that</i>
		<b>Less specific hearsay evidentials:</b> <i>some claim that</i>
		<b>Quotative evidentials:</b> <i>X states: ", X says: "</i>