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The use of humor in online discussions about a specialized technical topic

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Abstract. The present paper scrutinizes humor as used in discussion board messages dealing with a specialized technical topic. The empirical data were gathered from two Finnish discussion boards where the question of domestic heating and especially heat pumps was discussed. One requires registration from participants whereas the other allows participants to write messages without registration and be completely anonymous. The results show that opening messages included both reinforcing and subversive humor. Reinforcing humor was used especially in order to show goodwill and politeness towards the readers and establish a common ground. Subversive humor was used for questioning and criticizing things and attacking against other groups. It worked as conveying a feeling of superiority over another group and also conveying a negative or critical message in more appropriate form. The humor in online discussions about a specialized technical topic is strongly tied to a topic of the discussion and it is intertwined with the knowledge about the special field. In this case humor and communicating the information of the special field cannot be seen as contradictory areas but humor instead has a role in conveying the knowledge of the special field.

Keywords. Discussion boards, heat pumps, humor, languages for special purposes, opening messages.

1. Introduction

How to use humor in an appropriate way is important in the group socialization process in a new environment (see e.g. Schnurr & Mak 2009: 140). Humor is also an important part of online communities. It relies upon shared meanings and by referencing to common knowledge it can strengthen the shared bases which the group is built on. (Baym 1995) Also the structure of the online community is influenced by humorous discourse through its presupposed knowledge and implied values (Hübler & Bell 2003: 278). Previous research has found evidence that irony and sarcasm are used more often in computer-mediated than in face-to-face settings (Hancock 2004: 458–459).

The subject of this paper is the use of humor in discussion boards dealing with a specialized technical topic. The paper is a part of an ongoing research, which focuses on requesting and providing domain-specific information in online communities. The aim of this paper is to map out how humor is used in the opening messages of the message threads and what kind of functions the humor has in these messages.

The study examines online discussion boards. They are popular and useful tools for information sharing, problem solving and peer advice (see e.g. Savolainen 2011: 863) and they often deal with a certain specific interest or a special domain. Opening messages have an important role in the discussion boards: their purpose is to start new discussions where information, advice or opinions can be shared. They define the topic of the discussion and create an image of their writer.

The present study examines the combination of humor and the knowledge of the special domain. Humor in online communities has been studied before (e.g. Baym 1995; Hübler & Bell 2003), but using humor in communicating the knowledge of the special field has been studied much less and there is especially few studies of it in the online communication settings. That is probably

because humor and communicating exact information of the special field have generally been regarded as contradictory areas.

2. Humor

This chapter begins with the most abstract level of humor, namely the different theories behind humor that explain what the humor is and where it emerges from. When humor is used in a communication situation it has various communicative functions concerning an individual using humor or the group that he belongs. The different types of humor represent the concrete form in which the use of humor emerges. The humorous intent of an utterance can be signaled to the receiver through communicative cues, which represent the most concrete and visible level of humor in communication, and through which the use of humor can be identified on the textual level.

2.1. Theories of humor

The commonly accepted principal theories of humor can be divided into three groups: incongruity, superiority and release/relief theories (Attardo 1994: 46–47). In the incongruity theory, humor is based on the mismatch between two ideas (Attardo 1994: 48). The amusement is derived from unexpected elements or feelings (Shelley 2003: 352; Perks 2012: 120).

In the superiority theory, which is also called aggression or hostility theory, amusement emerges from elevated feelings of self-worth. Laughter is brought about by feelings of superiority over another or by elation at another's misfortune. (Attardo 1994: 49–50; Shelley 2003: 352) Aggressive humor is also known as "exclusive" humor, since it excludes the target of the humor (Attardo 1994: 50).

In the relief theory amusement comes from the release of built-up emotion. Humor releases tensions and nervous energy after a struggle, tension or strain and also releases one from inhibitions, conventions and laws. (Attardo 1994: 50; Perks 2012: 120)

2.2. Functions of humor

The use of humor has various communicative functions. At the individual level the appropriate use of humor is important in group socialization process in a new environment (Schnurr & Mak 2009: 140). Humor helps the potential new members to build a rapport with the group and to gain approval (Robinson & Smith-Lovin 2001: 141–142). Humor can help an individual to raise his own status and gain attention and popularity. The performer of a successful joke shows cleverness and gains prestige and power to the audience. Humor requires extra processing and therefore producing and understanding it connote cleverness. (Attardo 1994: 324; Bauman 1975: 305) Joking thus conveys the speaker's intelligence, character and goodwill, which in turn influences the audience's receptivity towards the message (Hübler & Bell 2003: 293). By laughing at the same joke, individuals can identify with each other and share a kind of affinity. In these cases humor is based on shared knowledge or mutual shared background. Making oneself the butt of a joke in turn shows goodwill. (Hübler & Bell 2003: 281; Attardo 1994: 324–235) According to previous research, participants in computer-mediated communication situation rated the interaction partners using humor as more likable, responded in a more polite and friendly manner, and reported greater cooperation. The result concerns only "innocent" humor, which does not express aggressive or derisive meanings. (Morkes, Kernal & Nass 1999: 403; 419)

Humor can also function as protecting a face and as a strategy to conveying a negative or critical message in an appropriate form (Holcomb 1997: 4). Issues that might be too threatening to be handled overtly can be negotiated by means of humor. The deniability of the humorous mode allows the speaker to deny the responsibility for what he is saying by claiming that he is only kidding. (Attardo 1994: 325–327)

At the group level humor relies upon shared meanings and by referencing to common knowledge it can strengthen the shared basis which the group is built on (Baym 1995). Jokes can also function as informal means of social control. Predominant conventions and social norms are reinforced by means of a joke embarrassing those who violate them. Joking can thus function as a part of defining boundaries and create a base for communicative rules. (Attardo 1994: 323; Holcomb 1997: 9) People can be divided into hierarchically differentiated groups by the means of humor. Laughing at something that the other person does not implies that participants of the conversation belong to two different groups. In aggressive humor the other person is the target of the humor, which is usually perceived insulting. (Attardo 1994: 323; Holcomb 1997: 4) Humor can work against other groups by making them ridiculed. This kind of humor can have two coincident functions: on the other hand it strengthens the solidarity of the dominant group, but on the other hand it does that on the expense of excluding some other group. (Holcomb 1997: 14) Humor targeted against other groups increases the joking group's cohesion (Robinson & Smith-Lovin 2001: 141–142).

According to its function, humor can be divided to reinforcing and subversive humor. *Reinforcing humor* maintains and reinforces the prevalent situation. It divides up to two subclasses: humor which reinforces existing solidarity relationships and humor which reinforces existing power relationships. Both types maintain the prevalent situation or group norms. The humor that reinforces solidarity emphasizes friendly relationships between the participants. (Holmes & Marra 2002: 66, 71)

Subversive humor in turn challenges and subverts the status quo. Its target may be individual, group, or the wider society. When targeting an individual, subversive humor may undermine the power or status of an individual in the group. Humor may also isolate individuals, identifying ways in which they do not fit into the group or conform to group norms. (Holmes & Marra 2002: 72) Humor targeting a group in turn challenges or criticizes the relevant values, attitudes or goals of the group. At the societal level humor can question the ideology of the community, and often broader institutional and societal values. (Holmes & Marra 2002: 73–74)

2.3. Types and signals of humor

Conversational jokes, also called spontaneous jokes, are humorous utterances, usually witty, off-the-cuff remarks occurring in conversation. They typically comment on the conversational setting itself and therefore have strong contextual ties. (Attardo 1994: 321; Holcomb 1997: 4) Also the figurative forms of language, which can convey multiple meanings with a single expression, can be used as humor. Eight types of nonliteral language can be identified that have emerged in the psychological literature and that according to Roberts (1994: 159) seem to form the basic categories of nonliteral language: hyperbole (exaggeration), understatement, metaphor (implicit comparison), simile (explicit comparison), idiom, indirect request, rhetorical question and irony. (Roberts 1994: 159) Previous research has shown that speakers can use an idiom, a simile, hyperbole or irony in order to be humorous (Roberts 1994: 162).

In idiom, a statement's meaning is not obtainable from a literal interpretation (Roberts 1994: 159). *Metaphors* and *similes* are based on shared properties and similarity between two things. *Irony* instead is based on a difference or a contrast. (Giora, Federman, Kehat, Fein & Sabah 2005: 24) In irony, speaker's intended meaning is something other than what is literally said and what is usually associated with the utterance (Hancock 2004: 447–448). Gibbs (2000: 12–13) classifies different types of irony as sarcasm, understatement, hyperbole and rhetorical questions. In *sarcasm* the speaker means the opposite than he says in order to convey a negative attitude, in *understatement* the speaker expresses less than is the case and, *hyperbole* the speaker exaggerates the situation and in *rhetorical questions* the speaker ostensibly asks a question in order to express an attitude but do not expect an answer. (Gibbs 2000: 12–13) *Satire* refers the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule which exposes and criticizes people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues (Oxford Dictionaries 2013).

The speaker can signal his ironic intent by using a diverse range of communicative cues, which can be divided up to paralinguistic, contextual and verbal cues. Paralinguistic cues include for example tone of voice and facial expressions. Contextual cues include for example discrepancies between the utterance and the circumstance in which it is uttered. Verbal clues include adverbs and adjectives that amplify an utterance's evaluative intent. (Hancock 2004: 448–449) Burgers, van Mulken and Schellens (2013: 46) divide cues signaling the use of irony to four categories. The first category is different kinds of tropes, for example hyperbole and rhetorical questions. The second category is schematic markers, such as repetition and the change of register, third is morpho-syntactic cues, such as interjections and tag questions, and fourth typographical cues, such as question marks and emoticons. (Burgers et al. 2013: 46) Also co-textual cues appearing in the textual environment of the ironic utterance can imply to the recipient of the forthcoming ironic utterance. Previous ironic utterances and tropes can work as co-textual cues. Cues related to atmosphere include for example the change of register and cynicism. (Burgers et al. 2013: 63)

2.4. Humor in online communities

Playful behavior and joking are important features in communities, because they create immediate atmosphere and support getting acquainted with other members (Heinonen 2008: 152). Also in online communities humor is important (Baym 1995). Research shows that there is a significant amount of playfulness and humor in electronic communication (Morkes ym. 1999: 402). Online communities are usually based on a common interest, which increases rapport and helps understanding the humor (Hübler & Bell 2003: 279). Humor often references to common knowledge, which can be related to the topic of the online community or the earlier discussions of the group. The target of the humor and also its aims often rise from the topic of the discussion. Also the group identity and the feeling of solidarity emerge from the topic. (Baym 1995)

Paralinguistic and extra-linguistic cues, which usually are associated with laughing, such as smiling, clapping hands and tone of voice, are missing from the text-based communication. Computer mediated cues of the humor include for example abbreviations, punctuation marks, emoticons, and vocalization. (Hübler & Bell 2003: 279–280) The humor of online communities differ from spoken discourse also in spontaneity, as there is more time for understanding and expressing humor. Humor can easily be prolonged and developed. Messages are saved on the discussion boards, so humoristic messages can be followed for weeks and even for months. (Hübler & Bell 2003: 279)

Previous research has found evidence that irony and sarcasm are used more often in computer-mediated than in face-to-face settings. This phenomenon has two explanations. Irony is “a risky form of language”, and speakers may be less concerned about their social impression in the face of addressees if they do not expect to meet face-to-face. In another explanation irony may be used as a compensatory strategy to overcome the lack of nonverbal cues that are normally used to express relational information. (Hancock 2004: 458–459)

3. Research data and methods

The special field chosen for this study is domestic heating and especially heat pumps. Heat pumps have recently increased their popularity in domestic heating and generated a lot of discussion in Finnish online communities (see e.g. Lampopumpu.info 2013). *Heat pumps* are devices that transfer heat from natural surroundings such as air, water or ground to buildings such that the heat flows from a lower to a higher temperature (Official Journal of the European Union 2010: 19). Heating system is a big purchase in many people's life both financially and because of the effects on the buyer's everyday life. Heating system can thus be regarded as a kind of purchase that requires a lot of information seeking by the buyer: the purchase is expensive, bought infrequently, risky, and also in a way self-expressive or tied to the buyer's personality (see, e.g. Kotler 1997: 190–192).

The research data consist of 300 message threads related to heat pumps. The data were gathered from two Finnish discussion boards dealing with domestic heating and especially heat pumps. The discussion boards selected are *Lampopumput.info* and *Suomi24*, where participants discuss for example choosing, installing, using and fixing heat pumps. Suomi24 is one of the most popular websites in Finland (TNS Gallup 2013), and there is almost innumerable range of discussion topics. Lampopumput.info in turn is specialized in heat pumps. It requires registration from participants whereas Suomi24 allows them to write messages without registration and be completely anonymous.

In this study humor is defined as an incongruous comment that is recognized by the receiver as an attempt to amuse (see Morkes ym. 1999: 403). Also language play is included in humor. Humor supposes shared knowledge between humorist and audience. It is always possible that humor is not understood, because the recipient is ignorant of the suppositions underlying the message. Especially in fine irony, the recipient does not always understand whether the message is seriously intended or not. (Nash 1985: 4; 153) Thus it is also difficult for an analyst to identify some instances of humor and the result depends eventually the analyst's interpretation.

The method applied for the study combines theory-based and data-based approaches. The data was analyzed by reading carefully through all the opening messages of the data. The categories in the Fig. 1 were used as a tool for the analysis. The categories have been formed on the basis of the theories and literature described in the chapter 2. Paralinguistic cues were left out from the analysis because they are missing from the text-based communication.

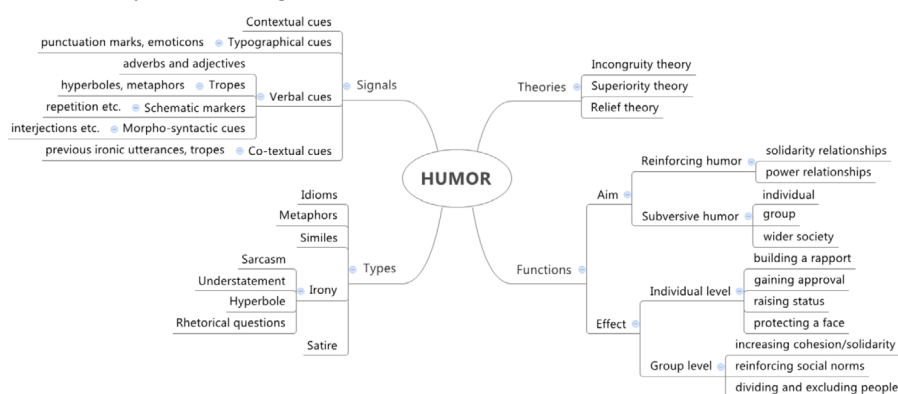


Figure 1: The categories for the analysis of humor

At the first stage the messages including humor were identified. The various signals of humor were utilized in identifying the instances of humor in the research data. At the next stage, the messages containing humor were analyzed in order to identify the type of humor used and the function of the humor in the message. The different theories of humor were applied in identifying the instances of humor and their functions. The messages were classified according to the function of the humor to reinforcing and subversive humor. Also functions on the individual and group levels were identified.

4. Findings

This chapter introduces examples of using humor in the opening messages of the research data. The chapter begins with examples of reinforcing humor that aims at building a rapport, giving a friendly image of the writer and gaining good relationships to other participants. The next sub chapter scrutinizes examples of subversive humor that aims at questioning or criticizing the prevalent situation. Humor was used in 61 opening messages of the total 300, which means one fifth of the messages (20 %). There was no difference between the two discussion boards in the amount of humor in opening messages (*Lampopumput.info*: 30, *Suomi24*: 31).

4.1. Reinforcing humor

Reinforcing humor has a function of maintaining and reinforcing the prevalent situation. It typically aims at building a rapport, giving a friendly image of the writer and gaining good relationships to other participants. In example 1, self-deprecating humor creates a polite image of the writer. It shows that he appreciates the experts on the discussion board and their knowledge. The examples have been translated from Finnish to English. Punctuation is marked according to the original texts.

(1) **Ultimate 5500 + Böro 320 sufficiency?** (*Newcomer, 2 messages*)

Hi, I'm writing here for the first time and I don't really have any deeper knowledge about these devices. [the question]

I have tried to read a little bit about the subject, but I can't get all kinds of gas loops etc. into my head 😊 [...]

The writer is a newcomer on the board, which emphasizes his need to get approval. There is a special term "gas loop" in the message and otherwise it is written in standard language. A winking emoticon is used as an extra-linguistic cue of humor. The humor of the message emerges from the commonly known fact, that the technology related to heat pumps is complicated and not usually comprehensible to a layman. In example 2, the writer also makes himself the butt of a joke.

(2) **Curtain track casing beside the indoor compartment** (*Newcomer, 1 message*)

[...] The pump was installed on the wall, where there is a kind of a casing up by the ceiling, which is about 15cm deep and about 20cm high. [...]

Yesterday I started in the traditional Finnish way doing first and thinking later..

[the question]

The humor in the message is based on common cultural knowledge, according to which especially Finnish people tend to start doing without thinking, which in turn may lead to mistakes.

Also irony was used in the opening messages of the research data. In example 3, the writer describes the house he has bought and states that he wants to lower the heating costs by means of additional insulation and air source heat pump.

(3) **Air source heat pump to a hillside house** (*Unregistered user*)

Greetings, so I just bought a hillside house of about 192 square meters with electric heating built in 1990.. Oh, I will enjoy the electric bills so much, but anyway*, I would now like to lower the heating costs already in the moving stage (within 2 months), so besides additional insulation I thought about an air source heat pump, where can I get up-to-date information about which ASHP would be suitable for my house? [...]

* Original in English

The writer states ironically that he will enjoy the electric bills. It is obvious that the writer means exactly the opposite he says, as based on the other parts of the message it becomes clear that the electric bill will be high, which causes the payer more probably harm than pleasure. The humor is based on the fact known within the special field that the type of buildings described in the message consume a lot of energy and on the other hand the commonly shared experience of the annoyance caused by high electric bills.

In example 4, the humor is based on the common experience that the loud noise from the neighbor can be very irritating, which in turn can in some cases lead to big conflicts between neighbors.

(4) **How long has the compressor endured?** (*Newcomer, 8 messages*)

I would be interested to know how long the compressor in an awhp* has endured? I have a 3,5 year old Ulti 9000E (Copeland compressor?) squealing so that it had to be shut down to prevent a neighborhood war. [...]

* Air–water heat pump

Here a hyperbole is used as a means of humor, for the sound of the broken compressor is very unlikely to be loud enough to start a big conflict.

4.2. Subversive humor

Subversive humor typically aims at questioning or criticizing the prevalent situation. In example 5 the writer questions the installers of the air source heat pumps.

(5) **(outdoor)air radiator a.k.a. Do-it-yourself-ASHP ...** (*Registered user*)

... but can be changed to cool down the interiors in the summer. [the description of the device] the device wishes farewell to the ASHP-installation mafia? [...]

The questioning is done by referencing to the installers of the air source heat pumps with the expression “ASHP-installation mafia”. By juxtaposing the installers to the mafia, the writer creates an image of them as a unified group, organization or conspiracy, which aims to gain profit in questionable means.

In example 6 the target of the humor is *The Geological Survey of Finland* and its project, in which it starts mapping the best geothermal areas in Finland.

(6) **Searching for a top-COP*** (*Active user, 861 messages*)

GTK** starts mapping the best geothermal areas in Finland. Accordingly, the top performance is influenced by devices,adjusting,heatingnetwork,adjusting, discussion board,excel,adjusting,basiccube,minimuminsulation,adjusting and what everything there still is besides adjusting, also where in Finland the croft happens to be located! ;)

[link to news]

* Coefficient Of Performance

** The Geological Survey of Finland

As a cue of the humor the word “adjusting” is repeated several times and there is also a winking emoticon in the end of the clause. The humor is based on unexpected and incompatible things. The factors affecting to the top-performance that the writer has listed include unexpected elements, such as “discussion board”, which give a humoristic impression, because they are incongruous with the reader’s expectations. By the means of humor and comic the writer thus questions the sensibility of the project in question.

In example 7, humor is based on the fact commonly known on the board, that certain type of messages may be moved to so-called “hothead section”. It refers to a special discussion area, which is made for the discussions that easily lead to fights, so that other discussions on the board would stay appropriate.

(7) **geothermal in apartment house, does it make any sense?** (*Active user, 1127 messages*)

I’ll try this here at first but it doesn’t matter if this goes to the hothead section, the most important thing is that we talk about it 🙄🙄🙄 [...]

As a cue of the humor there are three subsequent “grinning” emoticons. The writer implies by means of humor that his message is somehow controversial and may thus irritate some readers causing a heated dispute. Humor also works as lightening the atmosphere and thus makes bringing up a potentially controversial topic more acceptable and safe.

In example 8, the writer describes his experiences of a geothermal heating system that has been installed in his apartment.

- (8) **Geothermal heating was installed in a terraced house.** (*“Disappointed”, Unregistered user*)

Now I know why switching to geothermal is economical. For two weeks now we have watched telly wearing quilted suits and hot water is as hot as 40 degrees in celsius.

It pays off to get geothermal heating so you save a whole lot on electricity.

The writer uses irony, which shows in the mismatch between the different parts of the message. The writer’s pseudonym “disappointed” describes his real state of mind. The expression *“For two weeks now we have watched telly wearing quilted suits and hot water is as hot as 40 degrees in Celsius”* is in line with the pseudonym, because the writer describes in it the apparent reasons for his disappointment. At the end of the message the writer states: *“It pays off to get geothermal heating so you save a whole lot on electricity”*, as if he was recommending geothermal heating, which is in conflict with his disappointment and the situation that he describes. The writer thus means exactly the opposite that he says.

Some of the opening messages attacked other groups. The humor targeted to other groups used for example the means of satire. In example 9, the writer pretends to be an owner of an exhaust air heat pump (EAHP) and in that way gets the exhaust air heat pump users seem ridiculous.

- (9) **Face in the soot, but November ...** *PILPpppaja (“EAHPuser”, Unregistered user)*

may just go under 1000kWh!! The fireplace has been blazed and we have been showing off to the neighbor that we’re going merely with the EAHP* compressor ;c) Must light the fireplace always when the neighbor is at work, so that I won’t get caught on lying. Direct-electric-neighbor is pissed off, because as much as 1300kWh was reputedly already spent this month.

EAHP is an excellent gadget, as long as the face is in the soot and firewood is burning in the fireplace :c)

* Exhaust Air Heat Pump

The writer for example portrays EAHP-users as liars that heat their house secretly with firewood, so that the poorness of their heating system would not be revealed. Also in example 10, the target of the humor are the owners of the specific heating system, in this time the users of the air source heat pumps (ASHP).

- (10) **A horrible nightmare** (*“Stephen Ping”, Unregistered user*)

I woke up in the morning to the rattle of the garbage truck, got off the bed and put on my thick wool socks that my wife made for me and walked silently to the living room, checked the thermometer, -15 outside and +18 inside, swearing I figured out that the ASHP was dead, no wonder I got to sleep until the visit of the garbage truck, muttering I put on the coat and dragged hot water in a bucket outside, poured the water on the ASHP outdoor compartment that had turned into an ice cube, I went back inside and turned on the ASHP and the familiar wailing noise rang out. I thought that I might turn up the floor heating but then I recalled the cost of electricity and gave up such a radical resolution. With numb fingers I loaded the fireplace full with firewood and lighted it, just when I was making coffee dark smoke started to push into the house from the fireplace, damn the WHRU-machine froze again and it began

melting by turning off the supply air fan, I opened the entrance door and the coming of the smoke stopped, I thought in my mind that I shouldn't have turned off those electric resistors from the WHRU machine, after half an hour WHRU was melted again.

At last I got to enjoy the morning coffee and just then the alarm clock of the mobile phone started buzzing and I had time to think.....I woke up and sat on the edge of the bed, gave a laugh and went to make the morning coffee, wasn't that a formidable nightmare fortunately I chose geothermal heating after all.

The writer uses satire and has put his statement of the heating system in a form of a narrative. The writer's pseudonym "Stephen Ping" refers to a famous horror novelist, Stephen King, and the heading "Horrible nightmare" also refers to horror stories. By using elements of a horror story the writer juxtaposes the life as an ASHP-user with a horror story or a nightmare. As a cue of the humor the writer uses hyperbole concerning the misfortunes and difficulties described in the message. At the end of the message the writer states: "*wasn't that a formidable nightmare, fortunately I chose geothermal heating after all*", which makes clear his opinion and the message of the narrative. Satire is used also in example 11.

(11) **There is still neighborhood harmony** ("*Neighbor support*", *Unregistered user*)

My neighbor who has electrical heating sat on the stairs of his cabin looking sorrowful on an autumn day. When fetching the newspaper I asked him, where such a melancholy stemmed from: Well, he said that the electricity company had raised the electricity price and the increase would also concern the transmission charges so he wouldn't necessarily survive the upcoming winter. One bill had even gone to a debt recovery process because cubic meters of free firewood hadn't been burned daily.

I myself have geothermal heating so I promised to help the neighbor in heating costs. I myself have so little heating costs that I promised to help in fetching free firewood and chopping them to the storage.

The best thanks were though when the neighbor said that I had saved him from freezing to death. Free firewood is so rare anyway elsewhere but on the suomi24-discussion board.

Let's take care of our neighbors and not just dig our own belly buttons!!!

The writer shows himself as a compassionate neighbor, who offers help to his neighbor, when he is gotten into trouble because of a poor heating system. In this way the writer emphasizes the superiority of his own heating system. As a cue of using humor is a hyperbole. The consequences of the heating system are exaggerated by stating for example that the neighbor was saved from "*freezing to death*". At the end of the message the writer states that "*free firewood is so rare anyway elsewhere but on the suomi24-discussion board*", which refers to the earlier messages on the discussion board.

In example 12 the targets of the humor are the opponents of heat pumps.

(12) **facts about compressor** (*Unregistered user*)

i have followed with interest the discussion about heat-pumps and their compressors. the opponents of heat pumps appeal to the poor durability of the compressors and frighten others with expensive repairs. the fact is however that compressor has been invented already in the late 19th century and the apparatus is reliable nowadays. it just came to my mind that do the people that question the compressor store their food in a hole on the ground or if they dare to buy a refrigerator?

The writer aims at getting the opponents of heat pumps look ridiculous. At the end of the message he juxtaposes heat pump with refrigerator and suspicion of heat pumps with storing food in a hole on the ground. In this way he implies that opposing heat pumps is as outdated and uncivilized as storing food in a hole on the ground.

5. Discussion

The opening messages of the research data included both reinforcing and subversive humor. Reinforcing humor was used in order to show goodwill and politeness towards the readers, establishing a common ground and building a rapport. The types and means of reinforcing humor included funny tropes, idioms and personification of technology. Also self-irony and self-depreciation were used. Many messages referenced to shared knowledge and experiences in order to establish common ground and build a rapport.

Subversive humor was used for questioning and criticizing things and attacking against other groups. It worked as conveying a feeling of superiority over another group or on the other hand conveying a negative or critical message in more appropriate form. The types of humor included for example juxtapositions, irony and satire, used for example in a form of a narrative.

Opening messages of the discussion boards usually aim at getting answers from the readers. Using humor in the opening message can serve this purpose and thus humor may have an instrumental function in the interaction of online community. Reinforcing humor may help to create a friendly and sympathetic image of the writer which in turn may increase the readers' motivation for answering the message. Subversive humor in turn may help to provoke discussions about controversial topics.

The humor in online discussions about a specialized technical topic is strongly tied to a topic of the discussion: almost all instances of humor in the research data were related to the specialized technical topic of the discussion. In these discussions humor is intertwined with the knowledge about the special field: understanding humor requires some knowledge about the topic and the aims of the humor also rise from the topic. In this case humor and communicating the information of the special field cannot be seen as contradictory areas, but humor instead has a role in conveying the knowledge of the special field.

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