Awkward! 😬
11:02 ✓

THE PRAGMATICS OF
#CRINGE HUMOR

ON THE SCREEN
AND ON DIGITAL MEDIA

cringe

ABSTRACTS

UNIVERSITÉ PAUL VALÉRY MONTPELLIER 3

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Keynote speakers

Pr. Salvatore Attardo (Texas A&M University-Commerce, USA)

"Hard to watch": Cringe and Embarrassment Humor

In this presentation, I will explore the definition of "cringe" or "embarrassment" humor as causing a mixed emotion consisting of both an embodied reaction of vicarious embarrassment and mirth. I will also explore it as a contemporary cultural phenomenon, since the period since the 2000s has been called the "age of cringe" (Schwanebeck, 2021). In particular, I will explore the consequences of viewing cringe humor as a mixed emotion in relation to various theoretical approaches to humor (Bergson, the Benign Violation theory, the Schadenfreude theory, and more). I will also test empirically the mixed definition using sentiment analysis (LIWC-22; Pennebaker et al. 2022) of a small corpus of comments on Youtube videos.

Pr. Alexander Brock (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Germany)

Dimensions and Loci of Cringe – The Case of *8 out of 10 Cats Does Countdown*

In view of the diversity of phenomena associated with cringe in the research literature and in practice, cringe is here treated as a complex, multi-dimensional and multi-factorial event. This paper uses several examples from the British crossover comedy panel show *8 out of 10 Cats Does Countdown* to discuss an open set of criteria to describe cringe incidences. These include genre, participation frameworks, victim and agency, norms, but also temporality and ascription. The paper finishes on a more speculative section on the relationship between cringe and humour (theories).

Pr. Marta Dynel (Łódź University, Poland & Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Lithuania)

From Communities of Practice to Affinity Spaces: Cringe Humour (or not) across Social Media

In my presentation, I focus on the formal definition of the notion of cringe humour, illuminating the distinction between a priori definitions and users' evaluations, together with their underlying premises. The discussion is centred on four practices representing two social media platforms, namely Reddit and Twitter. Specifically, I address the content of two controversial subreddits (r/RoastMe and r/IncelTears) conceptualised as two communities of practice engaged specifically with the production and reception of the rather peculiar humour that may be easily misinterpreted by non-members. This community humour is juxtaposed with provocative humorous tweets bearing either of two viral hashtags #HaStatoPutin and #FuckPutin, which I conceive of as hashtag affinity spaces. Thus, I point to the divergent reception patterns of humorous subreddit posts and humorous tweets, which may translate into "cringe" considerations from the user perspective, which should inform academic theorising. I propose that, in addition to users' idiosyncratic preferences, much depends on the affordances of the platform on which the humorous items are posted.

Speakers

Alice Cesbron

Heterocringe: Navigating the Limits of Humor to Question Heteronormativity

Following the #MeToo movement in 2017, social media saw a liberation of speech on matters regarding gender and sexuality. For example, this led to an increase in critical and humorous discourses on heteronormativity and heterosexuality, a manifestation of which was the creation of the Instagram account @heterocringe in early 2019. Similar to accounts or pages dedicated to sharing memes or humorous content found on the internet, the goal of @heterocringe is to resignify and decenter the assumption that heterosexuality is the standard and normal sexual orientation by sharing internet content that provides a cringe representation of heterosexual people and heteronormativity.

Based on the principles of Queer Linguistics (Motschenbacher & Stegu, 2013), which aims to uncover heterosexual norms of gender and sexuality passing as an unchallenged standard in discourse, and on French discourse analysis, which analyzes the ways in which discourse shapes reality (Née, 2017), we want to examine the multimodal discursive strategies through which the @heterocringe account navigates the boundaries of humor in order to reach its empowering goal.

Our analysis is based on a multimodal and multilingual corpus in English and French from Instagram, which consists of 1961 Instagram posts taken from the now banned @heterocringe account and on which we performed a quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis focused on word frequency, n-grams, key words and key n-grams, in order to give us an initial insight into the data. The manual qualitative analysis relies on the tools of French discourse analysis, specifically on how to analyze discursive otherness (Authier-Revuz, 2020), in order to look at the ways in which @heterocringe uses external discourses to convey its message. Digital discourse analysis (Marcoccia, 2016) will also be used to investigate digital traces of metadiscourse.

Our preliminary analyses show how these discourses serve primarily to empower a community of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992) with the shared goal of decentering heterosexuality. This can be seen through the existing dialogue between the account creator and the followers, and through the use of a common frame of reference in which LGBTQIA+ values are implicitly presented as the norm. We also note that achieving this goal of empowerment involves a delicate play with humor, often crossing the line of simple cringe humor, which can range from being simply not funny to causing distress.

Corinn Columpar

"When that memory fills me with horror and dread, I do the cringe": Retrospective Temporality in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and *PEN15*

In one of the 157 musical numbers featured in the CW network's cringe comedy *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (Rachel Bloom and Aline Brosh McKenna, 2015-2019), a cemetery security guard introduces the four women at the center of the series to a dance called "the cringe," a clever riff on "the monster mash" featured in Bobby Pickett's famous

song. After claiming that people are far more haunted by their personal histories than by supernatural forces, he sings about a transgression from his own past and then concludes, "When that memory fills me with horror and dread, I do the cringe." Taking my cue from this musical number, I plan to explore the idea of cringe as something that is, in certain media texts, tied to a retrospective temporality and thus shares ground with, while also differing appreciably from, phenomena such as nostalgia and regret.

In her essay on the aesthetics of the awkward, Pansy Duncan effectively conflates the category of cringe comedy and that which Brent Mills labels "comedy verite" when she argues that "cringe comedy relies on many of the aural and visual cues of *cinema verité* to blur the boundaries between the comic and the non-comic world" (38). As much as this conflation makes sense in the case of a landmark series like *The Office* (2001-2003), other cringe comedies, such as *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and *PEN15* (Maya Erskine, Anna Konkle, and Sam Zvibleman, 2019-2022) insist on cordoning off their comic worlds by self-reflexively foregrounding the acts of narration in which they are engaged. Going hand in hand with this difference in approach is the temporality thereby produced: while its documentary aesthetics allow *The Office* to speak insistently in the present tense, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and *PEN15* tell, or even more to the point retell, stories about cringe-worthy events in the process of reflecting on them from a temporal and formal remove and, in the process, reframing them. In keeping with the themes taken up by both series -- themes related to mental health and the construction of female identity and desire -- this reframing has significant effects both therapeutically and politically.

In short, in "'When that memory fills me with horror and dread, I do the cringe': retrospective temporality in *Crazy Ex-Girlfrien*d and *PEN15*" I intend to explore the formal means (for example, musical numbers in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and unconventional casting in *PEN15*) by which a retrospective temporality of cringe is achieved in these series and the effects it produces for their creators and spectators alike.

Theresa Heyd

Cringe and the Uncanny: the Posthumanist Pragmatics of Reborn Doll Videos

Being involved in linguistic acts of cringe constitutes embodied, and most importantly affective, arrangements, where language users experience discourse as being incongruous, inappropriate, disturbing or otherwise "hard to watch". One way of understanding this discursive phenomenon is that it confronts us with the boundaries of being – and performing – as a human. In other words, cringe bears resemblances to experiencing the *uncanny*, with its disturbing, transgressive and decentering effects. Thus the affective and embodied effects of experiencing cringe are similar, and sometimes linked to, experiencing (linguistic) uncanny valley effects (Mori et al. 2012 [1970]), for example when we encounter the inadvertent humor of autocorrect effects or glitches in the linguistic production of digital assistants.

Understanding cringe in conjunction with the uncanny is particularly relevant with regard to the digital and intensely mediatized discursive arrangements of late-modern societies (Heyd 2021). Where the boundaries between human and machine (or otherwise not-quite human) modes of interaction become blurry, we experience moments of uncertainty and disturbance – a form of cringe linked to the blurry lines of posthumanist linguistics (Pennycook 2016).

In this paper, I present a form of digital engagement that many viewers experience as cringe and/or disturbing: a specific YouTube community, specifically the so-called Reborn community, built around the making of, selling, and engaging with hyperrealistic dolls. This real-life community has found a productive outlet in the form of YouTube channels, where Reborn dolls form the basis for interaction. The dolls are sometimes used for decorative and emblematic goals, but many members of the community engage in intense and sometimes elaborated role-playing centered around performing parenthood, including routines of feeding, dressing, hygiene, and playtime. All of these activities, captured in videos, involve complex uses of language at the intersection of human, non-human and digital, including voice-overs, artificial voicing of the dolls, and embedding into the algorithmic environment of YouTube as a platform. While these videos are not intended to be humorous or uncanny, they attract – and interact with – viewers from outside the reborn community and their reactions to this practice. Based on multimodal discourse analysis of a video corpus, my paper explores the link between uncanny and cringe effects in these videos at the intersection of human and nonhuman interaction by analyzing both the pragmatic mechanisms of the linguistic material produced in the videos and the comment sections, as well as the multimodal and embodied nature of the videos themselves.

Elise Kramer

Showing How the Social Sausage Gets Made: Cringe Humor as Anthropology

In recent years, a particular type of cringe humor has become increasingly popular: comedy that follows a socially awkward person's bumbling attempts to navigate social situations, and their blithe unawareness of their failures. The figure is most famously embodied by Ricky Gervais in both "Extras" and "The Office" (and by Steve Carell in the American version of the latter), but more recently by the protagonists of shows like "Girls," "Nathan for You," and "PEN15."

Drawing on the work of Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu, I argue that these performances are equally adored and reviled because they reveal the seams of the social fabric. Bourdieu's concept of the habitus is premised on fully internalized "dispositions" shaped by external power dynamics. One of his crucial observations is that a fluent performance is one that appears *effortless*. Goffman's body of work expands this notion from the shibboleths of social class to the everyday rituals of social interaction, showing that being "normal" is in fact a tremendous performative achievement that requires both thorough enculturation and constant awareness of our place in the social world. He writes that "a logical place to learn about personal proprieties is among persons who have been locked up for spectacularly failing to maintain them" (1956: 473); although he was referring to patients in mental institutions, we might also look to these social bumblers imprisoned in their comedic narratives.

These characters' attempts to be cool, powerful, attractive, or friendly inevitably fail due to disfluency. Their effort is visible; their performances are hypercorrect or inconsistent. Their disfluencies highlight the social rules that normally go unspoken, the rules we typically follow without a second thought — and their cheerful ignorance of their violations reveals these rules as contingent and violable.

Drawing on the embedded scales of approval and disapproval within these comic frames, I further suggest that our laughter may not always be in *response* to a benign violation; rather, our laughter has the power to actively *render* the violation benign.

Thomas C. Messerli

Cringe and Refraction: Ambivalent Comedians and their Streamed Comedy Specials

To do cringe or embarrassment comedy is arguably to walk a tightrope between the humorous and the serious. Humour does not only rest on incongruity and resolution, but also of the discursive creation of a space in which it is permissible or even encouraged to look at the incongruous favourably and to respond with humour support to its resolution.

One way in which we can look at the relationship between humorous and play frames, to use the terms of Bateson (1972), is through Clark's (1996) notion of *layers of action*, with humour being a prime example of a higher-level layer co-constructed by interactants in order to communicate on a level separate from a level subject, among other things, to truth-conditional assessments.

Comedy as an artefact with which viewers engage is typically positioned paratextually as humour, with explicit genre labels and implicit alignment with other comedy making sure that we already expect humorous discourse before we even start watching. Seen in this context, famous examples of cringe humour stand out as being notably ambivalent in their positioning. *The Office* (UK, 2001–2003), for instance, oscillates between the genres of sitcom and documentary in order to simultaneously activate humour and embarrassment in viewers; *Da Ali G Show* (UK, 2000) achieves similar effects by juxtaposing the comedian-protagonist in situation with interactants often not fully aware that they are participating in comedy and thus acting on a layer of action different from that of Ali G.

As part of a project on streamed stand-up comedy specials, this paper explores the trend that Bennett (2022) calls refractive comedy and its connection to cringe. Moving from observational comedy to comedic observation, refractive comedians like Hannah Gadsby and Bo Burnham are no longer simply performers, but leave the viewers wondering to what degree they need to perceive the comedy special as separate from reality or as part of serious sociocultural discourses about shared experiences and the role of themselves and the comedian. Aspects of the border between the humorous and the serious foregrounded in these examples can be and have indeed been understood as cringe humour, but cringe in this case seems part of a larger tendency towards a performed uncertainty of where humour starts and ends.

Will Noonan

"And so … our hero bids a fond 'Adieu' to his latest collection of adventures and miserable puns": *Quest for Glory* and the Afterlife of Point-and-Click Cringe Humour

Created by Lori and Corey Cole and originally released in five instalments from 1989-1998, the *Quest for Glory* videogame franchise is distinctive among offerings from publisher Sierra in that it incorporates RPG elements into an adventure game format but also for its particular brand of self-consciously feeble humour. However,

within a universe that blends quest-based storylines, mythological elements and RPG-style fighting mechanics, this humour is largely restricted to specific contexts, in the personae and dialogue of specific non-player characters (e.g. a magician named Keapon Laffin), in narrative cutscenes (as in the example above, from the end scene of 1990 release *Quest for Glory II: Trial by Fire*), incongruous situations (a dinosaur-like riding animal named Roget the Saurus) and especially in messages addressed by the game to the named player character and/or player (such as the dialogue "Your nose is now open" after using a lockpick to carry out the command "pick nose", discussed by Murphy, 2022). While such examples reliably elicit groans three decades after the games' initial release, the ambiguous position of the player/player character as both laughing subject and comic object (cf. Van de Mosselaer, 2022) raises questions for their characterisation as cringe humour in the sense that an interactive role-playing environment makes the distinction of communicative levels particularly challenging.

Point-and-click adventures are well-represented in the relatively recent convergence between humour studies and videogame studies (Stobbart and Evans, 2014; Dormann and Biddle, 2014; Kallio and Masoodian, 2018; Bonnello Rutter Giappone et al., 2022), and offer an interesting example of how digital cringe humour has evolved since the early 1990s. The intervening period has seen significant changes in how games are distributed, enjoyed and appropriated by players, on the internet, giving rise to fan communities, fanmade sequels and derivatives, and more recently on specialised platforms such as Steam and Discord, which have also arguably facilitated recent remakes of classic adventure game franchises. These include Terrible Toybox's *Thimbleweed Park* (2017) and *Return to Monkey Island* (2022), which revive the self-consciously humorous universes of LucasArts' *Maniac Mansion/Day of the Tentacle* (1998/1993) and *Monkey Island* (1989-2009) franchises in an environment where the online sharing of game-related humour constitutes both a further communicative level and, arguably, a source of inspiration for the specific blend of self-conscious (and often cringingly humorous) nostalgia to be found in remade games. While other studies currently underway focus on the intergenerational dimension ("dad jokes") of game franchises revived three decades after their original incarnations, this paper will focus particularly on the "afterlife" of cringe humour derived from the *Quest for Glory* universe in the fanmade parody *Quest for Glory 4½: So You Thought you Were a Hero* (2001) and in Lori and Corey Cole's own *Hero-U: Rogue to Redemption* (Transolar Games, 2018). The latter game frequently, though obliquely, references the *Quest for Glory* universe, often using self-consciously feeble humour as a tool to reinforce links between characters and events and its developers maintain an active Discord community dedicated to the preservation of past adventures, the development of future game lore and to the production of miserable puns for all ages.

Jacob Rigal & Dima Al-Khateeb

Interview-Style Cringe Comedy *Between Two Ferns with Zach Galafianakis*: A Multimodal and Pragmatic Analysis

This study identifies gestural and linguistic cues co-occurring with face-threatening acts (FTAs) uttered in the interview-style cringe comedy *Between Two Ferns* with Zach Galafianakis. We examined a multimodal corpus of six interviews with Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Brad Pitt, Steven Carell, Justin Beiber, and Ben Stiller. The videos were transcribed and annotated using ELAN for various gestures

as well as FTAs. We analyze instances where the humorist targets both his interlocutor, or himself, and theorize how Galafianakis layers these verbal and paralinguistic cues to provide a humorous context for the FTA, thus creating cringe humor.

Humorous acts in general are thought to mitigate FTAs. They are also believed to induce acceptance on the part of the addressee or speaker, who both suspend face demands to some extent for the sake of humor (Zajdman, 1995). Humour has also been found to be a positive face-saving strategy used by dementia patients (Saunders, 1998). Attardo (2020) notes that humor appears to function as a positive politeness strategy that can help build common ground (p. 274). However, cringe humor is associated with the creation of discomfort, awkwardness, embarrassment, spuirmishness, and psychic unease, which requires more labor to appreciate (Duncan, 2017; Pansy, 2017; Schwind 2015).

The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) specifies that verbal humor may or may not have a target (Attardo, 2017). However, we find that the conditions for verbal cringe humor to be felicitous require a target (at least implicitly). Additionally, the strength of the keying of the play-frame appears to define the extent to which rapport-neglect (Spencer-Oately, 2005) can be used to humorous effect. Finally, one novel aspect of cringe humor is that the play/serious mode and the two overlapping scripts are themselves in superposition.

Our preliminary results indicate that the use of overexaggerated straight-face, tilting the head back, forrowing the brow, raising the eyebrows, slumping, tilting, shifting, ascance looks, grammatical deviations, non-standard prosody, double-voicing, and perceptual changes in voice quality, frequently accompanying the FTA. However, the non-bonafide mode is also sometimes keyed only by the comedian's ensemble, various props (ferns), or the setting itself. This lends support to the theory that cringe humor requires, minimally, an implicit face threat to one or more interactants, couched in the general key of humor (with a great deal of variance as to how this keying is performed). This study is significant because it offers a theory specifying the conditions needed for verbal cringe humor and correlates those conditions with the gestures, speech, and context that create them perceptually.

Sabina Tabacaru

The Limits of my Humor Mean the Limits of my World: Is Politically Incorrect Humor Cringe?

From ancient philosophy to present day, researchers, philosophers, linguists etc. seem to agree that the key element to humor is incongruity (Koestler, 1964; Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1997, and many others). The cognitive side of humor is thus reinforced as the speaker needs "mind-reading ability" (Yus, 2003: 1308) in order to play with the different meanings the hearer/s will infer from what is said. This is also emphasized through the importance of common ground (Clark, 1996; Brône, 2008) that speakers share in order to link different mental spaces (Fauconnier, 1994) through humor.

However, these theories explain humor and humorous mechanisms on a conceptual level, focusing on the ways different concepts are linked through intricate mental spaces, thus resulting in an unexpected outcome. A first interpretation is replaced by another, surprising one, through means of implicature (Grice, 1975) and salience (Giora, 1999). But what happens on a more general level, regarding the topics discussed? As pointed out by O'Driscoll (2020), for instance, there are taboo

words and references that people find offensive: would the cognitive mechanisms of humor stop 'working' if/when such topics are discussed by the speaker? Would the hearers find these topics cringe in terms of social conventions and norms of politeness?

The present paper explores the limits of humor in today's society, where certain topics are considered cringe/offensive/politically incorrect. The examples presented come from TV shows and stand-up comedy as speakers joke about topics that are considered taboo (death, suicide, sexual references, etc.). Both successful and unsuccessful (*i.e.,* failed humor, see Bell, 2015) instances of humor are discussed, from the perspective of Cognitive Linguistics, in order to explain the mechanisms at play in the process of humor creation and interpretation. I argue that humorous communication depends on different factors, and its complex nature allows us to better understand the human mind.

Adeline Terry

From Cringe Humour to Empathy in *Fleabag*

Fleabag (2016-2019) is a two-season British comedy-drama television series created and written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who also plays the main character, Fleabag. The female protagonist as well as the other characters frequently violate social and verbal taboos (Allan & Burridge, 1991; 2006) by bluntly mentioning topics such as sex, death or disease or by being intoxicated in public, for instance. McGraw & Warren (2010: 1142) argue that when there is a "breach of norms" or "taboo content", a humorous interpretation is favoured as long as the situation is "perceived to be safe, playful, nonserious, or, in other words, benign". McGraw, Williams & Warren (2013: 567) further claim that psychological distance plays a crucial role in the humorous interpretation and they define four types of distance: "temporal (now vs. then), spatial (here vs. there), social (self vs. other), and hypothetical (real vs. imagined)."

However, cringe humour differs from traditional forms of humour because it is "closely related to embarrassment and awkwardness" (Schwanebeck, 2021: 2). Hye-Knudsen (2018: 20) relies on McGraw, Williams & Warren (2013) to explain that a comedy becomes a cringe comedy "when, and only when, it simultaneously produces amusement and high levels of vicarious embarrassment in its audience. The embarrassing violations of cringe comedies must therefore be psychologically close enough to produce high levels of vicarious embarrassment yet distant enough to still register as benignly humorous." In *Fleabag*, spatial distance decreases during close shots, for example, and social distance varies as Fleabag interacts with different characters she feels more or less close to. More importantly, the protagonist decreases hypothetical distance by regularly breaking the fourth wall and addressing the viewers.

All of these elements contribute to the cringe dimension in the series, and I will analyse several scenes to demonstrate how the breaking of the fourth wall allows the viewers to laugh with Fleabag at other characters and to share the pleasure she takes in cringe situations; as Havas & Sulima (2020: 85) noted, "Fleabag enjoys and thrives on awkwardness in any social encounter." From the very beginning, the privileged relationship viewers have with Fleabag creates a sense of complicity, but the distance between the viewers and Fleabag decreases as they gradually learn to know her more and more intimately: they can only feel sympathy for this "imperfect", "broken antiheroine" (Keyser), who lost her mother, her best friends, and struggles

to connect with anyone in her life, and the balance between amusement and empathy becomes difficult to maintain as topics become serious, and violations, not-so benign.

Neil Washbourne

Exploring Pragmatics' Contribution to a Reformulation and Development of (a) Superiority Theory of Comedy and Humour in the Context of 'Cringe Humour'

Superiority theory (ST) has been firmly rejected on supposed theoretical (Carroll 2014; Hye-Knudsen 2018) and ethical grounds (Hutchison 1750; Quirk 2015) and largely abandoned in studies of comedy / humour (hereafter just 'humour' but also always meaning 'comedy' too). However, I argue that this is based upon various misunderstandings. For instance, usually the reference is to '*the* superiority theory' as if one agreed version had been fully developed, promulgated, found wanting then discarded. This is not the case. Even 'known' contributors to 'the' superiority theory often made no such (however limited) contribution and furthermore, there are very few examples of any extended, developed, clearly articulated and exemplified version of such a theory (Lintott 2016). However, I argue that such a theory is needed even more in both the context of the rise of 'cringe humour' and in order to analyse cringe humour. I agree that such a theory might require attention to Communicative level 1 as well as 2 (Dynel 2011) though this paper will largely be confined communicative level 2 (but with attention to the *implied* listeners / viewers of humorous programmes / performances.)

This paper draws on social (and sometimes from 'theoretical') pragmatics in order to establish a version of ST that will be of use theoretically, methodologically and even ethically to scholars of humour. It does so via a substantial critique and development of the under-recognised and largest attempt to create such a theory, F.H.Buckley's (2005) *The Morality of Laughter*.

The paper draws on work in pragmatics to explore key components of, and further specify and theoretically enhance, Buckley's model in relation to:

- A richer and deeper conception of *contexts* informing and enabling humorous utterances. Here work in both social (or socio-) and theoretical pragmatics is central though I have yet to see such concerns addressed full on in any discipline.
- A fuller and more precise analysis of the *texts* of humorous utterances
- A more critical account of the norms intertwined with and underlying some of the utterances and their contexts drawing both on pragmatics and recent philosophy of social norms (Brennan, Eriksson, Goodis and Southwood 2016)

This redeveloped theory will offer to pragmatics (and other humour studying disciplines) a specific social model of humour based upon full and careful analysis of texts and contexts, with due attention being paid to questions of superiority, power and inequality in humour's role as subjects (disciplines) of analysis as well in relation to people's 'subjection' to / through humour. It will therefore be in a tradition both of recognition and acceptance of humour *and* its critique (cf Billig 2001, 2005) that recognises that any easy identification of a singular community of laughter is (has always been?) fraught with difficulties – much more so in the contexts of cringe humour (cf. Schwanebeck 2015.)