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Laugh your Mistakes Away

Using self-deprecating humour to mask occasional problems in public speaking

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An embarrassing situation during an oral presentation comes easily into being. Although it is better to prevent such situations, problems do arise. The positive image a speaker want to create is volatile. It is more easily destroyed than build. One possible solution to solve the arising problems is to make a joke on your own behalf, a self-deprecating remark. Self-deprecating humour is like any other improvisational technique not without risks. The irony of self-deprecating humour is probably its main weapon: the fact that the speaker does not mean what he or she literally says, creates a kind of tension or incongruity. The audience does not expect a presenter to make fun of him- or herself; solving the puzzle of this incongruity causes a humorous experience. Recent experiments suggest that poking fun on yourself is not a safe humour technique for beginning presenters [1]. However, in special occasions a few self-deprecating humorous remarks could easily clear the troubled sky that clouds a presenter when he or she makes a bothersome mistake. "Laugh at yourself first, before anyone else can", says the much quoted columnist Elsa Maxwell.

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the question: do humorous self-deprecating remarks help to recover from awkward presentational problems or is it better to keep your mouth shut and continue with the rest of the presentation? There has been done little experimental research on self-deprecating humour in presentations. Most of the research stems from the last century and produced mixed results. In a research review, Markiewicz showed that in some experiments, presentations with humour moments

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result in more positive speaker evaluations (character, expertise, trustworthiness, and dynamism) and in other experiments they do not [2]. She suggests that “the type of humour used is likely to influence source perceptions” and calls for more specific research (p 412). A recent experiment shows the problematic nature of the use of the self-deprecating presentation technique [1]. In the experiment a video registration of an 18-minute presentation was shown to a student audience. The experiment comprised of three conditions: a presentation without self-deprecating remarks, a presentation with seven remarks and a presentation with 14 remarks. The results showed that the image (ethos) of the speaker suffered by the self-deprecating remarks. The speaker’s expertise, reliability and trustworthiness diminished with the growing number of self-deprecating remarks. The interest of the audience in the presentation suffered as well. The analyses suggested that the audience took the words of the speaker for real. The experiment suggests that self-deprecating humour as a presentational style should be used with caution. But how about the repair function of self-deprecating humour? Does the technique help to overcome those awkward and embarrassing situations speakers sometimes find themselves in?

An experimental approach can help in determining to what extent self-deprecating humour can have a positive function. In a systematic experiment we tried to shed light on the questions. Three versions of a 16-minute presentation were written. a version which contained neither mistakes nor repairs (control version), a version in which three awkward situations (e.g. a problem with a mobile phone going of) occur *without* an attempted repair (mistakes version) and a third version with the same three awkward situations that the speaker tries to repair with self-deprecating humour (mistakes + repairs version). The hypothesis was that in the condition in which the speaker makes mistakes, the speaker’s ethos will be damaged; in the version with mistakes and the self-deprecating remarks in an attempt to repair them, the ethos will be restored to the level of the control version.

Did the mistakes and repairs have any influence on the speaker’s ethos? No. The three versions of the presentation did not differ significantly. The scores on the interest factor are in line with the scores on humour and ethos: no differences between the different versions were detected. Compared with condition where the speaker just ignores the problems and goes on with his lecture there are no differences to be seen. Experiments like these are seldom enough to rewrite text books. Theoretical and philosophical considerations about the healthy properties of laughing and humour in general [cf. 3], are more powerful than incidental experimental outcomes. “The burden of the self is lightened when I laugh at myself”, says Rabindranath Tagore. It is a bit troubling however that the experiment did not produce the outcomes that were expected. It seems that making mistakes is not as harmful as we teacher impress to our students. In the meantime though, presenters should stick to the traditional Chinese cookie wisdom: prepare for the unexpected. ■

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