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Joint Construction of Humorous Fictions in Conversation. An Unnamed Narrative Activity in a Playful Keying

The topic of this article is a special type of storytelling which consists in the collaborative construction of a coherent fantasy scenario. Characteristic of this highly entertaining genre is that several conversational participants make brief contributions that distance the scenario from reality and turn-by-turn (step-by-step) shape and intensify its absurdity. Such co-constructed stories are not based on an actual amusing event in the past, but rather an amusing scene is jointly created »on-line« by various participants cooperating with and orienting themselves to each others' turns at talk. The article discusses the structure and function of joint fictionalizations in the frame of conversation analysis and of an anthropological-linguistic genre concept and highlights the artistic dimensions. The article relates this non-prototypical type of story to »verbal art«, well aware that oral stories generally make use of different strategies than written stories, for example, sound strategies. Collaborative participation makes another important difference in comparison to written narratives. In this narrative sub-type tellers even cooperate on the level of formulation: A specific syntax seems to belong to the performative details. Often speakers use short syntactical ellipses with omissions that have a particular effect. Cooperatively they develop »imagery«, in Tannen's sense (1989). Only by adopting a broad concept of the story can the examples discussed below be treated as stories at all. In co-creating fictions, participants react quickly and coherently. Stylistic particularities are often obvious: speakers take many short, elliptical turns in rapid succession. This narrative subtype reveals how strongly interlocutors orient themselves to what has been said previously in the conversation and build upon comments others have already made by drawing on the appropriate (con-) textual knowledge, so that they can immediately top the fantasies of other participants. Meta-communicatively they signal »this is play« (Bateson 1954) from the beginning of the story to its end. The group members increase their amusement by making their contributions more and more absurd. The article describes the core activities of fictionalization, such as introducing the fantasy scene and confirming the scene by presenting absurd details; several further turns detach the scene from reality and magnify its absurdity. The fictitious scenarios are always anchored in reality, but are stepwise detached from it. In one scenario discussed, for example, the participants begin sharing experiences about their eating socialization and gradually develop a joint pretense, including fantasies such as of feeding children only under running water and feeding them only white food to match the color of the white walls on which they often spit their food. In humorous distancing, speakers develop a

shared stance towards ideologies of healthy food and clean places. At the same time, the group members' willingness to join in and play along shows their affiliation within the group. We agree with Winchatz and Kozin (2009, 401) that in this genre participants display their knowledge of particular cultural artifacts. At the same time, they also negotiate their stances about the behavior they are talking about. As Bergmann and Luckmann (1998) have noted, explicit moralizing is dispreferred in the postmodern world. Engaging in humorous fiction could be a preferred way to give hints as to what one thinks and how one feels in regard to certain topics.

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