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A Theory of Humor in Interaction

Humor is a prevalent feature in many forms of interaction. Banter, teasing, irony and sarcasm frequently surface in everyday talk, and conversationalists often engage in telling funny stories if not outright joke-telling. Any complete theory of humor must include its exploitation in and effects on interaction, taking into account such matters as gender, power, solidarity, politeness and identity. Such an interactional theory of humor goes beyond a purely pragmatic description of jokes and joking.

The data for an interactional analysis of humor can not be limited to joke texts in books. Humor competence must include knowing how to perform *and* how to receive and respond to humor and jokes, and this will encompass an account of timing for both the tellers and recipients.

Research on humor in interaction has experienced a steady progression from the time that recordings and transcriptions of behavior became available in 1970s. Methods of analysis developed in Conversation Analysis, discourse analysis and interactional sociolinguistics allowed for the detailed examination of talk-in-interaction, and this enabled the description of humorous activities. Research has shown how joking can work as a strategy for enhancing intimacy, but also for controlling a conversation; an account of humor in conversation highlights the interactional achievement of puns, irony and sarcasm along with personal anecdotes and joke-telling between participants and the mutual construction of identity they accomplish in the process. Conversational joking – especially teasing and sarcasm – has a dual force: because it plays on relational identity, teasing directed at intimates can have the potential to hurt, even as it ratifies the bond between the interactants. Still, generally, humor facilitates friendly interaction and helps participants negotiate identity.

Humor can be characterized as a gendered discourse resource on which both men and women regularly draw when negotiating their gender identities in interaction; Women and men deploy humor differently, just as those with more power or control in a particular interaction use humor differently than those who are one down. Researchers have noted significant differences in the characteristics of men's and women's self-targeted humor, and shown that women and men tell different kinds of stories illustrating different types of humor;

The performance of a joke follows the pattern for storytelling generally; the major difference consists in the expectation of laughter at the conclusion. Jokes are told as 'understanding tests', since not everyone necessarily gets every joke, and getting jokes involves background knowledge and rational processing. This testing routinely aims to find common ground, rather than to embarrass the hearer, and both the teller and the hearer learn something about each other. Jokes allow group members to direct aggression at a third party, they can help create and enhance feelings of rapport.

The conversational joke performance represents a particularly salient example of interaction between the teller and the listeners. Timing in the performance of a joke is compounded of elements depending upon both the teller and the recipient: there are standard joke prefaces, characteristic patterns of syntax and discourse organization in the areas of tempo, fluency and information flow, and customary reactions at the completion of the joke. Further, there are characteristic points where a teller and/or a listener may laugh before the punch line: both tellers and recipients of jokes sometimes laugh about problems in the telling of a joke, and listeners may laugh in response to the preface of a joke, and at various incongruities during

the performance. All these features of joke-telling affect the overall timing of the performance: they guide the teller in how to construct and pace the performance, and they act as cues to the recipients of the joke, helping them respond to the performance in appropriate ways and to get the joke, so that they can laugh (or perhaps withhold laughter) at the right time.

Our everyday talk thrives on all kinds of stories, especially humorous ones. In exchanging anecdotes about our personal lives, we present personal identities for ratification by the other participants in the conversation. Personal anecdotes present an amusing scene which invites listeners to laugh and offer comments of their own. A story by one of them may spawn collaborative narration, whereby two or more participants contribute to or comment on a story in progress. Frequently the details, dialogue and comments tend to introduce humor to a serious story or to render an already humorous story even funnier. Humor makes any story more tellable, even a familiar story, and humorous stories have characteristic patterns of participation: in particular, co-narration is acceptable whenever it creates humor. Familiar humorous stories regularly appear, and co-narration of such stories occurs quite commonly as well. The tellability of familiar stories hinges not on their content as such, but on the dynamics of the narrative event itself, and humor makes communal retelling desirable.

Personal narratives allow conversationalists to demonstrate group membership and present an identity on various levels; funny personal anecdotes add to these the introduction of entertainment and fun into the interaction and demonstration of a sense of humor as well as offering opportunities for active participation by others. One personal story often leads to another by a previous recipient, and two or more participants may co-construct a story about a shared experience: such collaborative narration serves to ratify group membership and modulate rapport in multiple ways, first because it allows participants to re-live pleasant common experiences, second because it confirms the long-term bond they share, third because the experience of collaborative narration itself redounds to feelings of belonging, and fourth because communal retelling serves to solidify shared stories and their significance for the members of the group.

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