Nancy Bell
We Are Not Amused

Humor Research

Editors
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Nancy Bell

We Are Not Amused

Failed Humor in Interaction

DE GRUYTER
MOUTON

Acknowledgements

Preface

Conan Doyle's *Silver Blaze* story, while a relatively minor component of the Holmes' canon, contains a memorable expression, namely "the curious incident of the dog in the night-time." The curious incident turns out to have been that said dog did not bark, while a race-horse was being stolen. Holmes deduces from this negative fact that the dog knew the perpetrator of the crime and proceeds to unravel the mystery.

Holmes does well to emphasize the importance of negative facts. Probably the biggest lesson of the Chomskian paradigm, cheerfully ignored by linguists of all persuasions, is that what sentences your grammar does *not* generate matters as much as those that it does. This applies particularly well to humor. To investigate what humorous texts do not succeed as such, and why, will both advance and complement our understanding of how humor works in a way that other studies, however good, cannot match.

It has been said that humor research suffers from an optimistic bias, so that researchers focus on the positive aspects of the phenomenon, ignoring, relatively speaking, its darker, negative aspects (Billig 2005). Billig's discussion is not without its flaws, but one point about which he is unquestionably correct is that the field of humor research had, until recently, systematically favored successful humor, humor that goes off as planned, that achieves, as I described it with a catchy definition, its perlocutionary goal. Very little attention had been paid to humor that somehow fails to achieve its perlocutionary goal, i.e., to elicit amusement or at the very least the detection of the intention on the speaker's part to do so.

In fact, in Attardo 2008, I had noted that failed humor was one of the areas of humor research that was badly under-researched and for no good reason, as the topic hid some interesting theoretical issues, as witnessed, for example, by Janet Holmes' (2000: 163) lucid and coherent throwing in of the towel on the matter. I myself, did little more than waving said towel in the air, but Nancy Bell has taken the towel, washed it, dried it, folded it, and put a little sprig of lavender on it. In all seriousness, we have now a treatment of failed humor that is definitive, comprehensive, and un-avoidable. Young scholars have now taken the habit of simply side-stepping research they don't like. To avoid this book on failed humor would be such an obvious mistake that it seems safe to predict that this will not happen.

Bell ties in the topic of humor failure with the more general category of mis-communication and shows convincingly and in painful detail that humor may fail at every level of communication (linguistic and not). This is a significant theoretical move, as it anchors the descriptive work and imbues it with explana-

tory power. Humor fails because communication fails and the latter fails because systems powerful enough to express what humans need to express cannot be fail-safe (i.e., they have to rely on input from the speakers/hearers).

Bell's book encompasses also the reactions to failed humor, or as she terms it its "management." The term is inspired because failed humor turns out to elicit a gamut of reactions ranging from the polite to the aggressive. Here Bell has recourse to face theory, the politeness approach that sees speakers "managing" their face (perceived social standing). Finally, Bell addresses how social variables affect the management of humor failures, with particular emphasis on social status and degree of intimacy.

Bell's work is thorough and detailed, and she must be congratulated for this, but where her dedication goes off the scale, in my opinion, is in one daring methodological innovation she introduced, i.e., the elicitation of responses to failed humor by exposing herself (and later her students—it builds character) to the willing humiliation of producing deliberately bad humor in order to record the reactions of the hearers. Much like the pioneers of vaccination research, who often inoculated themselves with their tentative concoctions, risking their health or worse their lives, Bell, in the spirit of science, risked her reputation as a funny person.

As with all good research, this study opens more questions than it closes. For example, now that we know that humor may fail at any level of the communicative edifice, it will be interesting to see how those who used laughter or smiling as the identifying feature of humor will deal with the fact that their methodology has a gaping hole at every level of the communicative gamut, since obviously some failed humor will not be accompanied by laughter or anything like explicit comments along the lines of "well, THAT attempt at humor failed!"

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1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Years ago, on a trip to Portland, Oregon, I was travelling downtown via the city's light-rail system. Somewhere on the train the doors were unable to close, causing the automated voice to repeat, "The door is closing. Please stand clear of the doors." After several iterations of this, I observed the following exchange between a woman in her early 50s and her seatmate, a girl in her early 20s, who was wearing ear buds[1]:

Example 1.1

Woman: the door is *trying* to close.

Girl: (removes headphones) huh?

Woman: ☺the door is *trying* to close.☺

Girl: (gives a short, half-hearted laugh) huh. yeah.

Silence fell again between them, the girl replaced her ear buds, and a few moments later, the woman moved across the aisle to sit with another woman and her baby. With no other changes afoot, I saw her motivation for doing so as rooted in the embarrassment and humiliation that can follow a failed attempt to amuse another. Clearly, failing at humor can have serious social consequences, as most of us have experienced. The girl's response indicated unequivocally that, while she recognized the woman's remark as a joke, she did not find it funny. We might ask why, when she was surely familiar with the emotions that would follow her rebuff, the girl chose to react in this way.

A different type of failure occurred in a sociolinguistics class when I asked students to tell the following joke[2] and report the response of their conversational partner:

> Every time the mail carrier comes to this one house a huge dog comes bounding out and jumps on him. He puts his paws on the mail carrier's shoulders and licks his face and sometimes he almost knocks him over. One day, the mail carrier comes to the house and walks into the yard, but there's no dog. Next day, same thing. The third day the owner's in the yard

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1 Transcription conventions used in this text can be found in Appendix A. In addition, see the discussion of transcription in section 1.5 of this chapter.

2 Many thanks to Alice Sheppard for suggesting this joke.

and the mail carrier, a little anxious about whether the dog's ok or not asks, "How's (house) the dog?" The owner replies, "I did."

Most people do not immediately understand this joke, failing to identify the ambiguity in the mail carrier's question. It is usually heard as an inquiry into the pet's well-being (i.e., "How is the dog?"), and hearers have trouble retrieving the owner's interpretation (i.e., "Did you house the dog?"). In fact, the goal of the exercise was for students to examine how people respond to an incomprehensible joke.

One student returned to class with the following response he had collected from his wife[3]:

Example 1.2

Respondent looks at the Investigator, and (3) looks away to the right, her concern is obvious. (3) Looks back at Investigator. Says: "Why am I not getting it?" (4) "Am I stupid?". Respondent starts to cry. Investigator immediately ends the experiment, explains the research. Respondent confides that she was "feeling inferior and humiliated."

Like the previous example, this reaction illustrates the strong effects that failed humor can have. As it turns out, the spouse had been having a very bad day and her inability to get this joke put her over an emotional edge. Yet, her response is perfectly in line with Sacks' (1974) assertion that humor is inherently aggressive, as it acts as a test of the hearer's knowledge. Rather than blame her husband for his poor choice of joke or for his inadequate delivery, she finds fault in her own intelligence. In addition, where she might be expected to feel "stupid" momentarily and then dismiss this feeling as unimportant, given the frivolous nature of the thing that she was unable to understand (a joke), she took this self-assessment to heart.

It is difficult to imagine failures of other types of linguistic behavior receiving the same sorts of emotional reactions that we have seen in these two examples. When living in Cameroon, acquaintances often told me, in approving terms, that I looked fat. I recognized their utterances were intended as compliments, and although I was unable to appreciate them as such, I responded with a simple,

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3 I greatly appreciate both participants consenting to allow me to use this data. In writing my Institutional Board Review protocol I had a difficult time imagining potential risks for this project. While this response is unique, it is serves as an important reminder that no research is without risk.

"Thank you," rather than upset the speaker by suggesting that I was hurt by their failed (for me) compliment. While it is possible that greetings, requests, suggestions, refusals, and apologies that fail in various ways will elicit highly emotional negative reactions, it seems that the failure of humor is much more likely to do so. Communication failures in serious discourse seem to be met with expressions of confusion or requests for clarification. Hearers of an odd or unclear serious utterance might assess the speaker's words as inappropriate or their own understanding as lacking, but responses such as those in the examples above would be surprising. Yet, as I have observed and collected more and more examples of unsuccessful humor, I have found such visceral reactions to be fairly common. Not only do the social norms and expectations surrounding humor seem to be rather different from those of other types of interactions, but personal preferences regarding what counts as "good" humor tend to be strongly held to the extent that those who do not share those preferences may be reviled, (Friedman and Kuipers 2013, Kuipers 2006a). It is the central aim of this book to examine the norms and attitudes involved in the negotiation of failed humor, and to describe the conditions under which humor fails in interaction.

1.2 What is failed humor?

Humorous communication can fail for many of the same reasons that serious communication fails. Misunderstandings occur when one participant uses words that another is not familiar with, when a hearer lacks the background information to make appropriate inferences, or simply when a factor such as noise interferes. However, as the two anecdotes above indicate, humorous interaction entails additional possibilities for failure. In the first example above, the failure occurred when the girl simply did not find the woman's reformulation of the automated voice amusing. Thus, failed humor can be understood as humor that is not appreciated. A related type of lack of appreciation that may also spring to mind as a type of failure to appreciate a joke is when an attempt at humor offends, rather than amuses the audience. In the second example provided above, it is not an inability to appreciate, but the wife's inability to understand the joke, specifically the incongruity that was supposed to be humorous, that resulted in its failure. Thus failed humor can be seen as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

Humor itself will be examined in more detail in the following chapter, and the relationship between failed humor and other types of miscommunication will be discussed in Chapter 3; however, at this point it is worth offering an initial definition of failed humor. Humor itself can be defined in terms of the speaker's intent to elicit a feeling of what is variously referred to in the literature as amusement

(Ruch 2009), mirth (Martin 2014), or nonseriousness (Chafe 2009) in the hearer, or by the audience's reception of an utterance as amusing (e.g., through laughter or other supportive comments). From this perspective, *failed* humor would include only utterances that were intended to amuse, but which did not succeed in doing so. This definition is helpful in that it excludes non-verbal humor, thus limiting the inquiry to conversational joking. In fact, however, despite the emphasis on verbal humor, this formulation becomes problematic when we look at all the ways that humor can fail in interaction. For instance, it is possible for a person to be genuinely amused by a joke, even without understanding it (Bell 2007b, Brodzinsky 1975, Brodzinsky, Tew, and Palkovitz 1979). Another case that would be overlooked with this definition would be jokes that disparage a certain group, or that refer to sex or bodily functions in a crude manner and that are greeted with both signs of appreciation, such as laughter, and negative evaluations that distance the hearer from the joke content (e.g. Hay 2001).

Since so little systematic work has been conducted on the phenomenon of failed humor, it seemed best to cast my net broadly for this project, and include not only failures specific to humor, but also the types of failure that occur in all communication, such as those described at the beginning of this section, as well as the aforementioned less clearly defined cases of failure. Because of this, I opted to maintain speaker intent (Attardo and Chabanne 1992) as focal to the definition, while broadening the conception of failure from lack of amusement to an any type of communicative disruption. Adapting slightly Schlesinger and Hurvitz's (2008: 569) definition of misunderstanding as "any departure from 'perfect' communication," failed humor can be seen as "any departure from 'perfect'" humor. This allows us to take into account partial understandings, half-hearted displays of appreciation, and humor that fails merely because the hearer was not paying attention. Thus, by combining the notions of intent and communicative imperfection, in this text I understand failed humor to consist of *any utterance that is intended to amuse, but that, due to interlocutor, environmental, or other factors, is not negotiated "perfectly."*

It is also worth noting here that I have not, in general, attempted to distinguish among particular types of utterances intended as humor. While I do occasionally refer to specific forms of humor, such as teasing or banter, when they are part of the analytic focus, in general discussion I use the terms such as "humor," "joke," and "quip" to describe any conversational utterances that are intended to amuse. Thus "joking" should be understood in Norrick's (1993) sense of "conversational joking." While such humor may include pre-scripted (canned) jokes, it is not restricted to that sense of the term "joke."

1.3 Why study failed humor?

The study of failed humor remains a neglected topic[4] (Attardo, 2008). This is probably due in part to a natural tendency to study the presence, rather than the absence of a phenomenon. The historic skepticism of the academy toward what many mistakenly see as a "non-serious" area of inquiry is also a likely contributor to the dearth of research. The founding of the International Society for Humor Studies and the Humor journal in 1988 signaled a growing academic interest in humor, and these venues have in turn contributed to the increasing visibility and acceptability of humor scholarship (see also the comprehensive surveys in Raskin 2008, Attardo 2014). However, this move away from the margins of academia has been fairly recent, and before this time, when researchers were unable to study prototypical, successful humorous interaction it seems even less likely that they would tackle failures. Disciplinary differences also influence the focus of research, and it is significant that this book is written from the perspective of an applied linguist. Unlike sociologists and psychologists, who have always taken an interest in deviance from the norm, linguists have historically tended to focus on describing and explaining typical linguistic behaviors and cooperative forms of communication (Kecskes 2010). Thus understanding received attention long before misunderstanding, communication before miscommunication, politeness before impoliteness, and humor before failed humor.

Still, despite arriving a bit late on the humor studies scene, research within linguistics has revealed a great deal about how humor works in everyday interaction, detailing the forms, functions, and negotiation of humor in local contexts (e.g., Adelswärd and Öberg 1998; Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997; Davies 2003; Drew 1987; Hay 1994, 2000, 2001; Holmes 2000; Holmes and Marra 2002a, 2002b, 2002c; Jefferson 1979; Jorgensen 1996; Knight 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2013; Kotthoff 1996, 1999, 2007; Long and Graesser 1988; Norrick 1993; Pogrebin and Poole 1988; Straehle 1993; Yus 2003; Zajdman 1995). These descriptions of the ways that humor is constructed in different contexts have enriched our understanding of this important element of human communication. The many serious functions of humor, such as constructing personal and group identities, regulating social

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4 As of July 2, 2014, a search of the Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts using the most directly applicable subject terms for this book, "humor" and "communication failure," obtains eight peer-reviewed articles, three of which are my own. A search of Google Scholar for the phrase "failed humor" results in 117 hits. Although very few of these deal with the topic in depth, in researching this book this and other related searches (e.g. "unsuccessful humor," "bad joke," "not funny") both in Google Scholar and various databases allowed me to find a number of instances in which failed humor was mentioned in passing in scholarly works. However, these figures and the lack of established search terms demonstrate the dearth of research into failed humor.

behavior, and establishing and maintaining relationships, are now recognized as a fundamental part of humor theory by humor scholars across the disciplines.

Yet, while the crucial role of humor in building and maintaining human relationships is well-recognized, we know virtually nothing about how humor fails in conversation and what the social consequences of such failures are. Exploring the various ways that humor may fail provides insight into human linguistic creativity and its socially constructed boundaries. Furthermore, understanding how and why humor fails is not only an area worthy of inquiry in itself, but is also important to understanding how and when humor succeeds. From a theoretical perspective, no theory of humor can be complete without taking into account its failure. In this volume, I aim to describe failed humor and, in doing so, address important questions that have thus far remain virtually unexamined. For instance, I ask:

– What are the different ways that humor can fail? For example, is failure due to a lack of understanding, a lack of appreciation, or an offensive message?
– In what ways is the failure of humor similar to or different from the failure of other speech acts or events?
– How do speakers manage failure of their attempts at humor and how do hearers react to unsuccessful attempts at humor? Are their reactions similar across different types of failures?
– How do social variables affect the negotiation of failed humor in interaction?

1.4 Background

This book is written for two primary audiences: those interested in the study of humor and those interested in the study of conversational interaction. Humor studies is quite broad, and in my analyses I will draw not only on the work from humor scholars housed in linguistics, but also those in sociology, psychology, communication, and anthropology, as well as other disciplines. My research methods and perspective on language and interaction come from my primary academic home, applied linguistics. Like humor studies, applied linguistics is a highly interdisciplinary field encompassing a broad range of perspectives and research methods. My own work tends to involve qualitative analyses of interaction, drawing from a foundation of pragmatic and sociolinguistic theories, although I have engaged in and will draw on quantitative work in this text, as well. The terminology I will necessarily introduce also comes mainly from applied linguistics; however, the ideas should be accessible to readers from adjacent fields, where similar phenomena are studied, often with the same conclusions, but using different methods and different names for various phenomena. In the

sections below, I present a fuller account of my views of language and interaction, so that readers may better understand the backdrop against which my analyses of humor lie. In addition, I provide a brief account of discourse analysis, an important tool for studying language in interaction and my primary method in this investigation.

1.4.1 Language and interaction

Language is both cognitive and social, a system as well as a process. While I acknowledge and embrace each of these aspects, my own research interests lie mainly in the latter two: language as a social process. As such, I am interested in the examination of language use embedded within a particular context. I seek to understand the ways in which meaning emerges from language-in-interaction and how these meanings are jointly constructed by all interlocutors. The view of language and interaction that I present here draws broadly on insights from pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, and discourse analysis. The perspective I develop below acknowledges the norm-based nature of sociolinguistic rules, yet recognizes that these rules are flexible and are realized in diverse ways as individuals co-construct interaction, and that sociohistorical factors shape and constrain interactional resources. In what follows I describe these concepts in further detail, providing illustrative examples from both successful and failed humor whenever possible.

1.4.1.1 Context and the emergence of meaning

Meaning does not lie in words or utterances themselves, but rather emerges locally, through interaction and is jointly constructed by conversational participants (e.g. Erickson and Schultz 1982, Goodwin 1981, Jacoby and Ochs 1995, Kendon 1990, Linell 1998). This does not, of course, mean that each utterance is wholly new and unexpected, requiring extensive cognitive effort to decode. Instead, we are aided in making interpretations by the conventionalized ways of interacting that have developed in response to various social situations. For example, speech acts such as greetings, apologies, and expressions of gratitude are routinely called for in particular contexts and tend to be both formulaic themselves, as well as having conventional responses. At a broader level of interaction, participants in a speech event embedded in a particular context, such as a university graduate seminar or a baby shower, also tend to adhere to certain norms of interaction that guide their verbal contributions.

A commonsense view of context sees it as closely related to situation, comprising such elements as the physical setting, the activity interlocutors are engaged in, and the conversational participants themselves, including both their demographics and their relationships to each other. From this perspective, contexts are often considered to range from formal to informal, with speakers calibrating their speech to fit the context. Although this view allows that some change in speech style may occur, such as when a speaker switches from addressing his or her spouse to addressing his or her boss, context is seen as relatively static. This conceptualization of context helps us to recognize the ways that the social world effects language use, but it is an oversimplification, and a more nuanced and dynamic view is necessary.

In their seminal article on context, Goodwin and Duranti (1992) provide a number of parameters that define context. Their first parameter, setting, encompasses the elements named above, and thus should be seen as consisting of both the social and the physical environment in which interaction takes place. Four additional elements are behavioral environment, the extrasituational context, and the linguistic context. The behavioral environment refers to the ways that interlocutors "use their bodies and behavior as a resource for framing and organizing their talk" (p. 7). Both verbal and nonverbal behavior are used to display attention and coordinate activities to accomplish shared goals. Extrasituational context involves the background knowledge that interlocutors bring to the talk. Linell (1998) helpfully specifies this further, naming participants' assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes about the topic, the goals of communication, and the people involved. He also includes the broader sociohistorical situation in which the interaction is embedded. Finally, the linguistic context, also known as the co-text, refers to the way that language itself invokes context. Through talk, speakers make certain aspects of the context relevant, while ignoring others. Each utterance alters the context, making it a dynamic, rather than static construct. While elements of the setting provide some clues as to expected and appropriate behavior, it is by no means a simple equation. Consider classes you have attended. There are likely a large number of similarities in the types of talk and activities that take place in them, but you can probably also recall classes where the interaction was markedly more playful or serious than others. An instructor can often set the tone of the class through his or her language use. Thus, context influences how we speak, but it is also created by how we speak, and therefore changes with each utterance.

Recognizing that context is not a pre-existing set of conditions that interlocutors adjust their speech to accommodate, but a dynamic social construct points to the fact that communication involves ongoing monitoring and adjustments by all conversational participants. A certain amount of regularity in lan-

guage use allows speakers and hearers to communicate efficiently. Linguistic variation across social situations and according to interlocutor variables such as race, social status, and gender is, to a certain extent, somewhat predictable. As noted above, conventionalized words and expressions decrease the cognitive load on interlocutors and their routine use allows social interactions to take place smoothly. Yet, the meaning of even the most mundane or formulaic sequences must be negotiated among interlocutors. How, then, are interpretations constructed during conversation?

Words and utterances should be regarding as having meaning potential (Linell 1998). The situation itself, including the current activity and any prior or future discourse, helps to cue the meaning that is most immediately relevant. For example, when two people meet while walking down the street and one says, "Hello!" the other is likely to interpret this as a greeting. If, however, these same individuals are working on a jigsaw puzzle and one says, "Hello!" it is more likely that the utterance is signaling that a piece of the puzzle has been found. These interpretations are guided by the participants' culturally-determined definitions of an interaction, or the way that they "frame" the interaction (Goffman 1974; see also Bateson [1955] 1972). The frame would be the answer to the question, "What are we doing?" and is closely related to notions of scripts (Schank and Abelson 1977), schema (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983), and certain conceptions of genre (e.g. Bakhtin 1986, Hymes 1972a, 1972b). A related notion introduced by Goffman (1981) is "footing," which refers to "the alignment we take up to ourselves and the others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance" (p. 128). A concept closely related to footing is stance (Johnstone 2009). Within a frame, participants' footing is constantly changing, and often, but not always, changes in footing correspond to changes in frame. Within the jigsaw puzzle playing frame, for instance, participants may take up a collaborative or competitive footing. These footings would be reflected in the response to the finding of the puzzle piece ("Hello!"). An interlocutor who views the activity as collaborative might utter, "Oh, good!" whereas an interlocutor whose footing is competitive will be more likely to express dismay at not having found the piece him or herself ("Oh, no!").

The concept of the frame was introduced by Gregory Bateson ([1955] 1972), and his original formulation is particularly relevant to the study of (failed) humor. Bateson observed that otters at play engaged in many of the same behaviors as otters fighting, yet most of the time the play did not escalate into actual aggression because the animals were able to signal their playful intent. For humans, as well, the mutual construction of a play frame around otherwise aggressive actions allows for a different interpretation of them. Human interactive frames can also be quite complex, with serious frames embedded within play frames. Goffman

points out that much conversation is layered or "laminated" in such a way that participants can transform the interaction by performing different identities and making the conversation increasingly less "literal" (Goffman 1981: 153–154). This sort of embedding occurs frequently within a play frame and usually causes changes in footing as participants take up new identities in response to one individual's joking. For example, one person might (playfully) pretend to be reading very serious poetry and, in response, another might take up the stance of poetry critic and ask (mock) intellectual questions about the meaning of the poem.

Like contexts, frames and footings are not pre-existing, but must be continually (re)constructed using the resources at hand, many of which are linguistic. John Gumperz introduced the concept of contextualization cues to explain how frames and footing are negotiated in conversation. Contextualization cues are defined as "any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signalling of contextual presuppositions" (Gumperz 1982: 131). The meanings of the cues are conveyed implicitly through interaction. Gumperz emphasizes that the means through which intent is cued are culturally learned and dynamic. The meaning of any given cue is heavily context-dependent and interpretation lies not only in knowing the cultural conventions, but in being able to assess meaning within the immediate context. The meaning of any one contextualization cue can be conventional, but is not fixed. Cues must always be understood as relative to and shaped by the immediate context in which they occur. In the jigsaw puzzle example, for instance, although the activities would clearly aid in constructing an interpretation, the intonation of the word "Hello!" would also help signal whether the utterance functioned as a greeting or as an exclamation of surprise.

Research has uncovered a variety of conventional linguistic means by which humor is signaled, recognized, negotiated, and interpreted within any given context. Laughter and smiling have long been recognized as potentially contextualizing an utterance as humorous, although these are by no means consistently reliable signals (Ruch 1995, see also section 2.3, in the following chapter). Jefferson (1979) showed how speaker laughter, placed near the end of an utterance, is used as an invitation to invite joint laughter from the hearer. In multi-party situations, the preference is for someone other than the joker to initiate the first laugh, perhaps as a way of allowing the speaker to avoid the self-praise inherent in laughing at one's own joke (Glenn 1989). Recent acoustic analyses have confirmed the importance of laughter and smiling as cues of humorous intent, while also calling into question long-held beliefs about how humor is contextualized. For instance, both canned narrative jokes and spontaneous conversational humor tend to be marked by smiling or laughter, but not changes in volume or speech rate, nor are they preceded by a pause (Attardo, Pickering, and Baker 2011, Pickering et al. 2009). Humor may be signaled through repetition (Bertrand

and Priego-Valverde 2011), marked linguistic forms, such as the use of the third person to refer to someone who is present (Straehle 1993) and code, style, or register switching (Holmes 2000, Kotthoff 1999, Norrick 2007). Using the voice of another person, either a recognizable social voice (e.g. a teacher) or by imitating a specific individual, particularly in an unmarked manner, can also signal humor (Tannen 1984). Humorous intent is sometimes conveyed explicitly, as when an interlocutor adds, "I'm teasing you" in order to avoid being misunderstood. Humorous anecdotes are frequently prefaced with a comment such as, "It was so funny." Attardo, et al. (2003) have described what they refer to as "blank face" as an important marker of irony, thus the lack of a cue may also signal certain types of humor. This work also suggests that specific types of humor may correspond to certain types of cues. Speakers have a wide variety of linguistic and paralinguistic resources from which to choose when attempting to convey humor, allowing for extensive variation in the means of contextualization. In fact, clear contextualization cues may be lacking among familiar interlocutors who will be able to identify the speaker's intent through content alone (Flamson and Barrett 2008, Flamson, Bryant, and Barrett 2011). These insights into the signaling of humorous intent are crucial for recognizing unsuccessful attempts at humor, as well as for identifying instances in which the cuing (or lack thereof) contributes specifically to the failure.

The goal of this section has been to demonstrate how meaning emerges through interaction that involves continual, minute, moment-to-moment adjustments that both speakers and hearers make to the form of their utterances, to their understanding of utterances, and to their understanding of the context and goals of conversation. Although scholars have identified and described these processes, this micro-level monitoring and coordination of interaction remains largely unconscious in practice. As already noted, part of what makes the enormous task of processing language and coordinating linguistic action is the substantial amount of conventional language that is used. In the next section I explore the relationship between this formulaicity and creativity, and the role that they play in humor.

1.4.1.2 Linguistic creativity, formulaicity, and (failed) humor

Up to this point I have noted that language relies to a certain extent on conventionality, but have also suggested that rules of language use are quite flexible. Given that humor often involves an attempt to use language creatively, it is worth examining the relationship between creative and formulaic language more closely. The interplay between formulaicity and creativity in language use is widely recognized (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981, Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008,

Wray 2002). Creative play with and in language is often dependent on formulaic sequences. As Crystal (1998) describes it, "To play with language requires that, at some level of consciousness, a person has sensed what is normal and is prepared to deviate from it" (p. 181). This is how, for example, the phrase "sleight of hand" has undergone creative mutations such as "sleight of foot" and "sleight of word" (Veale 2012: 29). Wray (2008) notes that when a particular string that is associated with a particular situation or register is used outside of that context this "does not reduce its formulaicity. Rather, its formulaicity is what ensures its ironic interpretation" (p. 117). Thus, we might borrow language from airline scripts at the start of a drive (e.g. "Flight attendants, prepare for take-off.") and not be mistaken as serious.

Playful and humorous talk also involves not only the disruption of familiar language patterns, but also the creation of new patterns, because interlocutors echo each other as they recycle phrases over time (Carter 2004, Cook 2000). This can result in the creation of inside jokes, understood only by members of a certain social group, but it might also contribute to wider language change. For instance, Bell (2012) discusses how the reality television show Survivor, which originated in Sweden in 1997 and has since appeared in numerous other countries, spawned the phrase to "vote someone off the island." Given the popularity of the series, this string quickly became a formulaic way to humorously describe a situation in which a particular group of individuals is winnowed down, resulting in a winner. As an example of this, in an October 25, 2011 airing of the Jay Leno show, the audience laughed when Barack Obama explained that he had not been watching the Republican primary debates, as he was waiting until "everybody's voted off the island." Although this phrase still seems to be used exclusively in a joking manner at present, it is easy to imagine a future in which it becomes a common, non-playful way of referring to instances in which a field is narrowed.

Using computational linguistics, Veale (2012) has demonstrated how formulaic language is exploited for creative and humorous ends. He argues that linguistic creativity is inherently risky, as the speaker must construct an utterance with meaning that is unconventional, yet not so unusual as to be irretrievable by the hearer. This interplay is important for the study of failed humor, as it suggests that we might expect for failure to occur either when an attempt at humor is overly formulaic or is too creative and unusual for the given audience. In the first instance, a joke might not be found funny because it is stale, overused, or outdated. In the second, failure may occur because a joke relies on obscure knowledge or language, or is in a form that is unrecognizable (e.g., the anti-humor that riddles the internet). The failure of humor in interaction can be viewed as creating a socially-imposed limit on linguistic creativity, acting as a check to keep language use within certain boundaries.

1.4.1.3 Competence and Performance

Thus far I have described a dynamic model of communication in which speakers and hearers coordinate their actions, drawing on a set of linguistic and other resources to construct situated meanings. In this section I introduce two additional constructs from the field of linguistics that are useful in helping us understand communicative success and failure: Competence and performance. Linguistic competence refers to a speaker's knowledge of language, while performance describes the actual use of language. These two do not always match up. When an utterance contains, for instance, slips of the tongue, incomplete sentences, or stuttering, we can say that the speaker is not performing her or his competence. Although the speaker knows (is competent in) the linguistic forms, the actual deployment of them is less than perfect.

Although the distinction is present in Saussure's *langue* and *parole*, the terminology originated with Noam Chomsky (1965), whose interest lay in understanding language as a system, and who therefore needed access to language users' understandings of it (i.e., their linguistic competence). Linguistic performance was thus important mainly as a representation, albeit an imperfect one, of a speaker's competence. Because of his interest in understanding language itself, Chomsky viewed linguistic competence narrowly, as the underlying grammatical knowledge (phonology, morphology, syntax) of a hypothetical, ideal native speaker-hearer. Sociolinguist and anthropologist Dell Hymes (1972a, 1972b) took a broader view, showing that in order to communicate effectively a speaker needs to be able not only to form grammatically correct sentences, but to apply them in conjunction with rules of use. In other words, the speaker must know how, when, where, and with whom to use various linguistic forms. Consider, for example, the following joke:

> A vampire walks into a bar and orders a Bloody Mary. He drinks it and leaves. The next day, he does the same. The third day he asks for hot water. The bartender asks, "What? No Bloody Mary?" The vampire pulls a used tampon out of his pocket and says, "No, I'm having tea."

From a Chomskian perspective, an imperfect performance of this joke would occur if, for example, the speaker misspoke and described a werewolf rather than a vampire, or if false starts occurred in the narrative. Taking Hymes into account, we would also consider the context of the telling. A competent speaker in this broader sense would be aware that this is not humor that is appropriate for all situations and all audiences. However, even a competent language user might slip in his or her performance, misjudging the hearers' acceptance of this type of humor or perceiving the situation as more casual than others do. Competence,

thus, can be seen as entailing both knowledge of language and knowledge of language use. It is not only the ability to construct grammatically correct utterances, but to construct utterances that are linguistically appropriate to the context. Furthermore, competence and performance are interdependent, and successful communication requires that a speaker has certain level of proficiency in both.

Performance is easily recognized as being prone to all sorts of variability. We all speak more easily and comfortably with certain people, on certain topics, or in certain situations. Being sick, tired, or injured can also affect our ability to speak fluently and without errors. Competence, on the other hand, has sometimes been conceptualized as a fairly stable state of cognition. We should recognize, however, that competence, too is variable. A speaker may use his or her language in more or less "competent" ways depending on the setting, topic, or interlocutor, thus rather than conceptualizing competence as a uniform, mental construct, we can see it, like performance, as dynamic. Competence, again, like performance, is continually recreated and co-constructed between conversational partners in interaction (Shea, 1994). This is particularly clear in the case of humor, where we can all think of people with whom we laugh and joke a great deal, and have equally encountered others with whom we can develop no such rapport. We are simply not competent in constructing humor with those individuals.

When examining communicative failures, the constructs of competence and performance can help us identify the source of the trouble. In some cases it is clear which to attribute the miscommunication to, such as when one person obviously misspeaks. More often, however, it is possible that both competence and performance create conversational trouble. For instance, in Example 1.1, in the exchange between the older woman and her young seatmate on the light-rail regarding the automated recording, we might place the blame on the woman, for having put forth a rather poor attempt at humor. However, it is likely that some interlocutors might have found this amusing, thus we might also consider that responsibility for the failure lies with the girl, whose sense of humor may be lacking. In the second example involving the wife who cried after not understanding her husband's joke, not having witnessed the actual telling of the joke, the husband's performance might be a contributor to the failure, yet the wife's extreme response strongly suggests that she felt the blame lay with her and her own (lack of) humor competence. In chapter two, the concepts of competence and performance will be extended and considered specifically in terms of humor.

1.4.1.4 Face, politeness, and (failed) humor[5]

Also important to understanding failed humor in interaction are the related notions of face and politeness. These are often associated with the seminal work of Brown and Levinson (1987); however, their original conceptualizations have been reconsidered in light of developing views of language use. Current approaches see politeness as an interactional phenomenon, grounded in the dynamic, situated, and *value-laden* interpretations and negotiations that occur between interlocutors within a given context, in keeping with the view of language and interaction outlined thus far in this chapter. Utterances are thus no longer seen as inherently polite or impolite, rather these assessments are judgments made based on community norms (e.g. Arundale 1999, 2006, 2010; Fraser and Nolen 1981, Holmes 1995, Locher 2004, Locher and Watts 2005, Mills 2005, Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2005, Watts 2003). Current definitions reflect this emic shift. Spencer-Oatey (2005: 97), for example, defines politeness as "the subjective judgments people make about the social appropriateness of verbal and non-verbal behavior." Similarly, Locher and Watts (2005: 10) see politeness as "a discursive concept arising out of interactants' perceptions and judgments of their own and others' verbal behavior." Such definitions situate analysis in interaction, and, by focusing on judgments, help us better understand interlocutor reactions, which can be particularly revealing when communication does not proceed smoothly, as in the case of failed humor.

Spencer-Oatey's (2000, 2002) discussion of rapport management is one example of these reconceptions, and has led to a more culturally sensitive and theoretically sophisticated approach to politeness phenomena. She sees rapport management as "the use of language to promote, maintain, or threaten harmonious social relations" (2000: 3). As described above, this is not a one-sided endeavor, as any such linguistic behavior is judged by all interlocutors, which highlights the jointly constructed nature of politeness. Building on this earlier work, Spencer-Oatey (2005: 98) identifies behavioral expectations as the primary source of our assessments regarding appropriacy. These expectations, in turn, are based on contractual/legal requirements, role specifications, behavioral conventions, and interactional principles. The latter three are of particular interest here in understanding how people perceive attempts at humor as unamusing and how they frame their subsequent response. With regard to role specifications, the types of humor that are appropriate vary according to the teller. For example, riddles are not normally shared between adults in the U.S., and such humor will likely be judged quite differently than if it were told by a child. Behavioral norms can influence, for example, whether humor is even acceptable within a certain

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5 This section was adapted from Bell 2009a: 144–146.

context, or what type of humor is appropriate. In some communities, canned jokes are a common genre, whereas in others this type of behavior will be seen as juvenile and spontaneous humor will be valued. Finally, Spencer-Oatey likens interactional norms to conversational maxims, but stresses their link to personal and community values. She proposes the association principle as one guide to interactional norms: "people have a fundamental belief that they are entitled to an association with others that is in keeping with the type of relationship that they have with them" (2005: 100). This principle is made up of components of involvement, empathy, and respect.

Like politeness, face, too, has shifted from being conceived of as a primarily individual trait to a social one (Arundale 2006, 2010). Spencer-Oatey (2007) is among those who tie the concept of face closely to identity. In contrast to Brown and Levinson's (1987) fairly static conception of positive and negative face, both face and identity are related to self-image; however, face is restricted to those aspects of a person's personality that she or he values positively and wishes others to do as well. A relevant example here would be the quality "good sense of humor." The speaker who wishes to be seen as someone with such a trait will perceive a face threat or loss when his or her joke is not appreciated. Similarly, Spencer-Oatey (2007) points out that the ascription of a quality with which an individual does not want to be associated, such as a "bad sense of humor," will also impinge on his or her face. Because people will value different qualities differently across different contexts, face must be seen as a dynamic notion and can only be assessed interactively.

1.5 Discourse analysis and the study of (failed) humor

Discourse analysis was the primary research method used to analyze the data presented in this book, and I introduce it here as it relies on the understandings of language and communication laid out in this chapter. Discourse analysis is a form of inquiry that involves close, systematic examination of interaction. It can utilize both quantitative and qualitative procedures, and both are found within this text, although qualitative analysis predominates. Discourse analysis can be undertaken for a variety of reasons. Tracking patterns of language across contexts helps us understand how conversation is organized and what types of knowledge are needed for successful communication to take place. These patterns also reveal the norms and values of a discourse community. These may be values with regard to interaction, but also the choices we make in our speech reveal a great deal about our broader world view, the ways that we wish to position ourselves, and how we see others. The language we use both reflects and constructs our social

reality. Furthermore, and of special interest to research on failed humor, the study of trouble spots in conversation can be particularly revealing with regard to conversational norms, as it is often only when those norms are violated that we are able to recognize them. Discourse analysis was used for the present project with the following goals in mind:

1. to identify the ways that humor can fail,
2. to identify the interactive structure of episodes of failed humor, and
3. to examine the social consequences of failed humor.

Thus, discourse analysis was helpful here for both the purpose of understanding interaction, as well as understanding the wider social values that are revealed through language use. There are a variety of schools of discourse analysis and, like many scholars, I draw from a number of them, using an eclectic selection of tools to accomplish my analysis. Here I highlight three that are central to my methodology: interactional sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, and ethnographically-informed discourse analysis.

Interactional sociolinguistics is strongly associated with the work of Erving Goffman and John Gumperz, and thus some of its analytic concepts have already been introduced. Interactional sociolinguists assume that language both indexes and constructs the social world, and that, while communicative norms exist, these are jointly negotiated by interlocutors in local contexts. Changes in language use result in changes to the participation framework, participant roles and alignments, and relevant identities. The concepts of framing and contextualization cues discussed above are normally associated with interactional sociolinguistics, and are used to examine how meaning emerges in interaction. In addition, interactional sociolinguistics focuses on the ways in which language use varies systematically across contexts and interlocutors, highlighting norms of use and how violations of these norms are treated in interaction. Evidence to support an interactional sociolinguistic analysis can come from prior research demonstrating how language is used, from participants' own displayed understandings, and from the analyst's knowledge of the situation. Examples of studies of humor that have drawn from this perspective include Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997), Davies (2003), Everts (2003), and Straehle (1993).

Conversation analysis (CA) has its roots in ethnomethodology and focuses on the organization of talk-in-interaction, that is, *how* interlocutors actually accomplish conversation. CA requires the analyst to pay close attention to the sequential unfolding of conversation, as each utterance is contingent on what came before it. This method is particularly helpful in providing procedures that help create strong textual evidence to support an analysis. To provide just one example, the concept of next-turn validation helps to keep the analysis focused

on the participants' interpretations, rather than the analyst's. Although we can never fully identify a speaker's motives or intentions, speakers do display their understandings of prior utterances, as in the following two (invented) examples:

1   A: Hello!

     B: Hi!

2   A: Hello!

     B: Oh, did you find it?

In the first instance, B's response demonstrates an understanding of A's utterance as a greeting. In the second, B responds as if A's utterance was meant to indicate that something (such as a jigsaw puzzle piece) had been found. Whether or not B's interpretations are those that A intended would likely be apparent in A's next turn. If B had responded in a manner that indicated an understanding other than what A had intended, A would likely display some confusion and initiate a corrective sequence. CA is particularly useful in the study of failed humor due to the rich body of research that has already been developed with respect to laughter (e.g. Glenn 2003; Glenn and Holt 2013, Jefferson 1979, 1984) and to miscommunication (e.g. Bolden 2012, Drummond and Hopper 1991, Schegloff 1987, 1992).

A strong version of CA restricts the analyst to only that information found in the text. In other words, if the speakers have not made gender relevant through their talk, it cannot be invoked in the analysis. I side, however, with those who support a less strict view (e.g. Moerman 1988), and at times draw on my own knowledge of the context and participants, or on ethnographic information reported by informants in understanding specific instances of failed humor. This is especially crucial, for example, when naming a particular utterance as an attempt at humor when there are no textual cues, as it has gone unnoticed by the other participants (see, e.g. Priego-Valverde 2009).

No matter what type of discourse analysis, the transcription of talk is a crucial theoretical and practical issue (Ochs 1979). Video and even audio recordings contain an infinite amount of information that could be included in a transcription. These include not only the words that were uttered, but their intonation, volume, pitch, and speed. Pauses of various lengths, stuttering, false starts, and various non-word sounds occur regularly, and only some of these are identifiable as things like clearing the throat or coughing. Furthermore, nonverbal behavior supports linguistic communication, and gestures and facial expressions can be crucial to understanding a conversation. The analyst must make choices about what to include or exclude and how to represent what is included. We aim for a

transcript that provides an accurate representation of the interaction, with enough information to perform an analysis, but not so much detail that the resulting document is difficult to read. For this project, I have erred on the side of readability, given the broad audience for this book, which is likely to include some readers who are unfamiliar with reading transcripts that represent talk as it occurs, rather than edited transcripts. I have also standardized transcriptions that I have taken from other publications, and this has often meant stripping them of information. Thus, interested readers will often find more detailed transcripts in the originals. In addition, some examples are not taken from recordings, as these were either reported to me or come from the transcripts provided by media outlets, which are considerably less detailed than linguists prefer, and no audio or video was available so that they could be embellished. In these cases the transcription conventions used in this text and provided in Appendix A do not apply. Such transcripts will be recognizable by their use of conventional punctuation, including capital letters at the beginnings of turns, which are not used in the full transcripts.

1.6 Structure of the book

The following chapters build on the understanding of language and interaction presented here to examine failed humor. Chapter 2 more fully develops the concept and definition of failed humor, beginning with a short survey of humor theories in order to discern what they might have to offer with respect to understanding failed humor. This chapter also describes the data set used in this book, and includes a discussion of some of the challenges inherent to identifying failed humor. Chapter 3 continues with background information by couching failed humor within a larger model of miscommunication. Based on the review of prior work on conversational trouble, Bell and Attardo's (2010) framework for classifying failed humor is expanded and its elements are conceptualized as potential triggers to failure. The revised framework is then used in Chapters 4 and 5, where examples of each type of trigger are presented and analyzed. Chapter 4 presents those triggers that are inherent to all communication, but describes how these may or may not play out differently in humorous interaction. Chapter 5 focuses on those triggers that are particular to humor. While the earlier chapters tend to take the attempt at humor as the analytic focus, Chapter 6 takes a closer look at the negotiation of unsuccessful humor, paying special attention to the ways that interlocutors respond to different types of failed humor. The local interactional effects of a failed attempt at humor are apparent in the analyses in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Chapter 7, therefore, considers the broader social consequences of failed humor, delving into questions of social norms and values and their role in the

construction of power relations. The final chapter brings together the findings in this volume, and discusses the limitations and implications of this work for humor studies and research on language and interaction, as well as suggesting directions for future research.

2 Conceptualizing Failed Humor

2.1 Approaches to failed humor

As a general issue, humor has been a topic of scholarly interest since (at least) the time of Greek philosophers, and despite some nuances in specific approaches, it is generally accepted that the theories proposed fall into one of three types: superiority/hostility theories, release theories, and incongruity theories (Attardo 1994, Keith-Spiegel 1972, Martin 2007, Raskin 1985). This rich history of thought is the logical starting point, even if these theories do not directly address failure. What can the major theoretical approaches to humor tell us regarding its failure, even if only implicitly? Moreover, in the previous chapter I noted that no theory of humor could be complete without including an account of failure. By examining each of these theoretical perspectives in turn, we may not only be able to learn something about failed humor, but also to judge the viability of each approach as a general theory of humor. In the following sections I briefly describe each theoretical position and then, turning the theory upside-down, outline the implications for failed humor. It is worth noting that many of the theorists reviewed here do mention specific conditions under which humor may fail – for instance, if a joke is old or overused – however, I attempt to focus on the place of failed humor in light of the overarching theories.

2.1.1 Superiority/hostility theories

Superiority or hostility theories of humor are the earliest documented attempts to explain humor, having been put forth by Plato and Aristotle (see Morreall 1987 for significant excerpts). Others whose approaches fall under this umbrella include Thomas Hobbes (1840) and Henri Bergson (1900/2008). Essentially, in this view humor is seen as arising from one person's negative feelings towards another or another's behavior. Thus, we may make jokes at the expense of the less fortunate, ridicule the mishaps of others, or even deride entire groups out of a feeling of happiness (or as Hobbes put it, the "sudden glory") that their misfortunes are not ours. Humor, thus, involves some degree of aggression. Bergson adds the idea that laughter at another's expense works as a kind of social corrective. Those who are most often identified by him as being on the receiving end of laughter are individuals to whom accidents befall, and these accidents disrupt that person's otherwise (excessively) orderly behavior.

If the misfortunes of others are funny because they make us feel superior toward them, then humor must fail if something unfortunate occurs to someone to whom we do not harbor such feelings. This would seem to explain certain instances of humor. For example, I am much more apt to laugh when a politician whose views I disagree with is caught up in a scandal than when this happens to one I support. However, humor occurs frequently among intimates – close friends and family – and superiority theories fail to account for all the occasions when we share laughter in these contexts as we banter together. Humor is too pervasive to be accounted for in this limited way. If humor failed when its hearer did not feel superior to the target, failed humor would likely be as common as successful humor. In addition, the theory is unable to account for (failed) humor that does not have a target, such as many types of wordplay.

Bergson's insistence on laughter's function in societal regulation suggests that we do not find humor in individuals who behave in socially normative ways, and thus are not in need of the correction laughter can provide. Humor would fail, then when the target is "normal." Again, this may provide a partial explanation for some failures. Teases, for instance, often contain an element of truth to them and their function as a social corrective or socializing agent is well-documented (e.g. Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997, Eder 1993, Eisenberg 1986, Fine and de Soucey 2005, Franzén and Aronsson 2013, Goldberg 1997, Holmes and Marra, 2002c, Miller 1986, Norrick 1993, Schieffelin 1986, Tholander 2002, Yedes 1996). Teasing someone about an annoying habit allows the speaker to present a criticism in a less direct, and thus less threatening manner, perhaps resulting in a change of behavior. Teasing someone about a perfectly normal behavior would seem to be less likely to amuse and would have no function as a social corrective. (Although, in fact, it is certainly possible to "tease" someone about a perfectly usual behavior, for instance telling someone who walks perfectly normally that she or he is bad at walking. This, however, would be a type of anti-humor.). In addition, Bergson's position suggests that we can also view failed humor as humor that does not succeed in altering the behavior of its target.

Further complicating Bergson's perspective is the evidence that teasing can not only be used to deliver criticisms, but also to bond with the target (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997, Dynel 2008). Teasing not only demonstrates that a relationship is strong enough to bear this type of aggression, but can also reveal the interlocutors' shared knowledge of each other, as the following example demonstrates:

Example 2.1

Carol: Ooh, my feet got cold, I don't know why my feet got cold all of a sudden.

Jane: You need a hot drink. You're drinking cold soda.

Carol: I know. I can't drink a hot drink.

Jane: You don't drink hot drinks, it's not part of your religion.

Carol: Right (laughs).
(Adapted from Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997: 285)

On a ski retreat, Jane's teasing of Carol contains no suggestion of aggression. Instead, the tease works to reinforce the bond between these two close friends, as it indexes their shared history and knowledge of one another. Superiority/hostility theories of humor thus only seem to be able to explain a small number of certain types of unsuccessful humor.

2.1.2 Release theories

Sigmund Freud is the most well-known proponent of release theories of humor (see also Fry, 1963), although limited forms of the theory continue to play a role in certain areas of psychology, where humor's role as a coping mechanism is emphasized. These theories of humor view laughter as the release of pent-up nervous energy resulting from societal constraints which cause us to suppress many of our desires, such as feelings of aggression or sexual desire. The emotional energy does not, however, have to have been present in audience members before entering the conversation, but may also be aroused in them during the course of even a non-aggressive, non-hostile narrative (Morreall 1983: 22). During the telling of a joke or humorous story, for example, listeners may develop feelings about the characters, which, upon hearing the punch line, are shown to be false. In this case, the unexpected nature of the ending causes a build-up of nervous energy, which must then be released through laughter.

From this perspective, humor would fail under two conditions. First, an attempt at humor would be expected to fail if it involved a topic about which the hearer was not repressed. Thus, a person who feels relaxed about sex and talk about sexuality should not appreciate sexual humor. In fact, as Ruch and Hehl (1988) found, the opposite is true: Individuals who were comfortable with sex appreciated sexual humor more than those who were sexually inhibited. It has also been suggested that very strong repression might also prevent individu-

als from understanding or appreciating humor (Levine and Redlich 1955, 1960); however, credible research has generally not supported hypotheses generated from Freud's theories (see Martin 2007: 36–43 for a review).

Freud's theory would place the blame for not appreciating humor, in the first case, on the hearer. With the second reason for failed humor, the onus would seem to lie with the speaker, who, through inadequate skills as a humorist, fails to build up enough energy in the hearer for that energy to necessarily be released through laughter. As a literal account of mental functions, Freud's descriptions of psychic energy are not in line with modern understandings. However, if interpreted more broadly, it is clear that a humorous joke or story might be ruined if told with insufficient build-up. Again, however, this provides an explanation for only a very small subset of all humorous failures. Indeed, some forms of humor actually rely on the lack of build-up, and instead use the element of surprise to achieve a humorous effect. In short, release theories cannot fully account for failed humor.

2.1.3 Incongruity

Incongruity theories stem from occasional remarks made on humor by Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, and more recent such theories include Koestler's (1964) bisociation theory and the two-stage model proposed by Suls (1972) and propagated in the psychology of humor at that time. While Raskin would dispute the classification, his (1985) semantic-script theory, as well as Attardo and Raskin's (1991) General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) have also often been included in lists of incongruity theories. Rather than emphasizing the participants, incongruity theories of humor spotlight the humor stimulus. Proponents of these theories assert that humor arises as a reaction to something that does not meet our expectations or is inappropriate to the context. Humor, in this view, requires that two incongruent elements be juxtaposed and, for some incongruity theorists, be revealed as similar in some way.

From this perspective, we could identify failed humor as any attempt at humor that did not contain incongruity or where the incongruity remained unresolved. Humor preferences are, however, not only cognitive, but also social and cultural. Thus we find individuals who find amusement in rambling, pointless, Shaggy Dog stories and other anti-humor where incongruity is not resolved. Furthermore, the construction of incongruity relies on information gained through experience and interaction, thus perceptions of incongruity are not necessarily shared by all members of a discourse community. This issue is considered in some detail by Raskin (1985, [1998] 2007), who describes how, within his semantic-script

theory of humor, a person without a sense of humor (i.e., someone for whom humor will likely fail) might be identified. In order to understand this, I will first briefly outline his theory, beginning with the notion of script, or schema, which is "a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it" (Raskin 1985: 81). In order for a text to be considered humorous, the speaker must switch from the bona-fide mode of communication into the non-bona-fide mode. This might also be referred to as constructing a play frame (Bateson [1955] 1972) around an utterance. The joke text must contain two overlapping scripts that are compatible with the text and opposite in some way. The audience is normally meant to initially understand the text in terms of one of the scripts until a trigger forces them to switch their interpretation to the other script, thus creating the humor (see Raskin 1985 for a full account).

From this perspective, Raskin proposes, humor may fail for individuals who

i.   refuse to switch from the bona-fide mode of communication to the joke-telling mode,
ii. have fewer scripts available for oppositeness interaction,
iii. have fewer oppositeness relations between scripts available (Raskin 1985: 128).

These ideas are further developed in Raskin ([1998] 2007), where he distinguishes among cognitive, communicative, experiential, and volitional aspects of the sense of humor. Under (i), we find people who we might describe as chronically "serious." In addition, however, the context may cause some normally jolly people to feel that it is inappropriate to switch to the playful communicative mode. A racist joke is another example of something that might cause someone to refuse to make that switch. Raskin points out that the refusal to switch modes may be unconscious in the case of people who genuinely find very few things amusing, or "hypocritical" in the case of people who are privately amused by the humor, but who opt to hide this in public in order to signal a particular political stance (p. 104; see also Kramer 2011 on humor ideologies). Thus, under (i) humor may fail due to a lack of familiarity with communicative norms or an inability (or conscious refusal) to engage with those norms.

The next two conditions depend upon individual life experiences, which allow a person to develop schema and oppositions, as well as on the person's cognitive ability to access scripts and oppositions. For instance, a person whose script for "standard poodle" contains only information associated with them as show dogs and those accompanying stereotypes (e.g., overly-pampered, prissy, and wearing a complicated hair style), will not be able to understand jokes based on other possible scripts associated with standard poodles (e.g., strong swimmers, good hunting dogs, or highly intelligent tricksters). Access to a broader

range of scripts might also prevent the success of humor, as a personal, standard poodle-related example will illustrate. In the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign, the National Rifle Association created an ad with a picture of a standard poodle wearing a pink bow and a "Kerry for President" sweater with the caption "That dog don't hunt." The ad was designed to trigger derogatory associations of John Kerry as an elite, wealthy speaker of French, and thus out of touch with the concerns of ordinary Americans, particularly those who were focused on preserving their rights as gun owners. The humorous implication, which hinged on the activation of the "pampered show dog" script for standard poodles, was that Kerry was not a hunter and could not be relied upon to uphold gun rights. However, as someone quite familiar with the standard poodle as an excellent hunting dog, this ad was only confusing to me when I first encountered it. Finally, familiar scripts may also be excluded due to certain associations, such as when personal experience with a particular affliction renders that script unavailable for humorous use.

Raskin's semantic-script theory of humor, coupled with his discussion of the implications of the perspective for conceptualizing a sense of humor (or lack thereof) go much further than the previously discussed theories in explaining failed humor. Both superiority and release theories were not only unable to account for more than a few specific instances of failure, but they also focused only on one type of failure – humor that fails because it is not appreciated by the hearer. Raskin is not only able to account for a lack of appreciation, but also to provide an explanation, in terms of scripts and script opposition, as to why a particular interlocutor may fail to be amused by a certain joke. In addition, he points to a variety of different types of factors that may contribute to failure, suggesting, too, that failure can be a very complex phenomenon, with hearers opting to display a lack of appreciation or even to express offense at a joke that they had secretly been amused by. Script opposition, which is also a crucial component of Attardo and Raskin's (1991) GTVH, plays an important role in understanding some types of failed humor. While incongruity models acknowledge the importance of interaction in the construction and reception of humor, their focus is on the texts themselves. In order to more fully understand the diverse ways that humor can fail, a discussion of the concepts of communicative competence and performance with regard to humor is necessary.

2.2 Competence, performance, and failed humor

The distinction between competence and performance was introduced in the previous chapter as a way of understanding language use, language knowledge, and

the relationship between the two. It has also been proposed that these concepts be extended to form the basis of a complete theory of humor (Attardo 2008, forthcoming). The proposition proves analytically useful in the examination of failed humor, where hearers may not perform their competence. That is, for example, while an audience member may recognize a text as humorous and find it amusing, he or she may choose not to laugh (cf. the discussion of Raskin [1998]2007 above). In the next two sections I discuss failed humor in light of the concepts of humor competence and performance, and in doing so review some of the small body of scholarly work that more or less directly addresses failed humor.

2.2.1 Failed humor and humor competence[6]

In Chapter 1, linguistic competence was introduced as knowledge of language, including not only the grammatical structure, but rules of use, as well. Knowledge of humor has been proposed as a component of our general communicative competence (Vega 1990). While this is useful for considering the elements of linguistic competence, in terms of humor studies it has proven more fruitful to conceptualize a competence specific to humor. Building on Raskin's (1985) initial discussion of humor competence, Carrell (1997) proposed two levels of competence related to humor: joke competence and humor competence. She described joke competence as a relatively static construct that is necessary for a speaker to be able to recognize that a text is intended to be interpreted as humorous. Once a text has been identified as an attempt at humor, the hearers use their humor competence to pass judgment as to whether or not the text was amusing. Carrell's model, thus, posits two stages of processing: recognition and appreciation. Although this processing usually takes place at the unconscious level, a hearer may sometimes experience uncertainty at either stage. Hearers who experience difficulty with respect to joke competence may ask, for example, "Are you joking?" At the level of humor competence, a confession may follow (e.g., "I don't get it.") or a negative evaluation (e.g., "That's not funny.").

Carrell's (1997) framework thus identifies potential failure points, and she proposes reasons why an intended joke may fail at either level. When humor does not clear joke competence, she suggests it may be due to the hearer's lack of familiarity with the form of the text which makes it impossible for him or her to recognize it as such. For instance, someone unfamiliar with the format of riddles may be unable to interpret the question that makes up the first part as the beginning

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6 This section has been adapted from Bell (2007b).

of a joke. Problems may also arise when the hearer does not possess one or more of the semantic scripts necessary to interpret the text as an attempt at humor. Humor that relies on professional knowledge, for example, might be interpreted as serious to outsiders.

For a joke to pass the second level, humor competence, depends "almost exclusively on the availability of the audience's scripts *for humor*" (Carrell 1997: 181, emphasis in original). In other words, it is not enough that the hearer merely possess the scripts, but the scripts must not be restricted to non-humorous uses only. Some people will not be amused by jokes that involve disparagement of their religion, for instance. Their scripts on this topic are restricted to serious use only. Carrell suggests that while joke competence will remain fairly static, humor competence is a dynamic construct, and a script that is unavailable at one point may, years later, become available. Other reasons a joke may be judged unamusing, according to Carrell, are because the audience is unwilling to reprocess the joke through humor competence, or because they are already familiar with the joke. Although Carrell focuses on the reception of humor, humor competence is clearly also important for the production of humor. The availability of a wide variety of scripts for humor and the ability to identify appropriate incongruencies among them, for instance, will figure into an individual's ability to create jokes (see also Veale 2012).

Hay's (2001) discussion of humor support recognizes an additional step between recognition of a joke text and appreciation of it. Before appreciation can occur, she notes, the text must be understood. In other words, an attempt at humor might be recognized as such, and the joke might be understood, but this does not guarantee that the hearer will find it amusing. Hay also observes that a speaker who expresses full support for humor is implicating agreement with any messages contained in the joke, as well. This is why a hearer might simultaneously laugh and cringe at a sexist joke. Such a mitigated response allows hearers to demonstrate full joke and humor competence, but to also express disagreement with the message. The hearer's ability to respond by participating in the humor forms a final stage, at which full support for the original attempt at humor is expressed. Actually doing so is a performance issue, but judgments concerning the appropriateness of different types of participation are questions of competence.

Hay's (2001) model, presented as a set of scalar implicatures, refines Carrell's (1997) proposal and thus adds additional failure points. Within this new framework, humor may fail when it is a.) not recognized, b.) not understood, c.) not appreciated, d.) not fully agreed with, and c.) not engaged with. It is important to note that this is an idealized model, and in practice not only is the notion of competence dynamic (as noted in the previous chapter), but the failure points

are neither linear nor mutually exclusive, as will become apparent (see also Bell 2007b). However, analysis must be reductive to a certain extent, and these potential points of failure form the foundation of the model used in this book, which will be fleshed out with further points in chapter three. We turn next to a short discussion of humor performance.

2.2.2 Failed humor and humor performance

While a theory of humor competence illuminates the abstract idea of what humor is, a theory of humor performance provides us with a lens through which to examine how humor – both failed and successful – is instantiated and negotiated in situated interaction. It helps us understand how we do humor. Discourse analytic studies of humor in interaction have made considerable headway in describing and explaining the performance of successful humor. Much of this work documents the forms, functions, and structure of humor used by specific social groups such a friends and families (e.g. Everts 2003, Kotthoff 1996, Norrick 1993, Straehle 1993), or specific discourse communities (Fine and de Soucey 2005, Franzén and Aronsson 2013, Pollner and Stein 2001, Sutton-Spence and Napoli 2012, Wennerstrom 2000), or in particular contexts such as classrooms (e.g. Baynham 1996; Bucholtz, et al. 2011; Doerr 2009; Nesi 2012; Norrick and Klein 2008; Pomerantz and Bell 2007, 2011; Poveda 2005; Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2008) or workplaces (Holmes 2000, 2006; Holmes and Marra 2002a, 2002b, 2002c; Holmes and Schnurr 2005; Lynch 2010; Plester and Sayers 2007; Pogrebin and Poole 1988; Richards 2010); or in intercultural communication and interaction between native and non-native interlocutors (e.g. Adelswärd and Öberg 1998, Cheng 2003, Davies 2003, Habib 2008). In addition to highlighting the complex ways that humor is constructed and its multifunctional nature, much of this work has also demonstrated the ways that (successful) humor is responded to and often elaborated upon by audience members (e.g. Hay 2001, Schnurr and Chan 2011). Conversation analysts, who often focus on laughter, rather than the somewhat more analytically slippery notion of "humor," have also contributed a great deal to humor scholarship by describing the sequential organization of humorous episodes and identifying the myriad ways that laughter is used in conversation, both humorous and non-humorous (e.g. Drew 1987; Glenn 2003; Glenn and Holt 2013; Greatbatch and Clark, 2003; Haakana 2010, 2012; Holt 2010, 2011; Jefferson, 1979, 1984; O'Donnell-Trujillo and Adams, 1983). In doing so, they have added analytic precision to our identification of humor in interaction and to the notions of seriousness and nonseriousness, highlighting the ways that the two appear, shift, and blend in conversation.

In comparison to the rich and growing body of research described above, similar scholarship that focuses on the performance of failed humor remains scant. Systematic reports that document the ways that humor can fail in interaction and what types of responses different types of failure tend to receive are few and far between. Instead, unsuccessful humor tends to be treated largely as an aside or merely anecdotally. However, in this section, I review the studies that have worked toward making substantial contributions to our understanding of the performance side of failed humor. I begin with two studies whose emphasis is on humor production, followed by those works that have examined the reception of failed humor.

Palmer (1994) confronts failed humor directly, devoting a full chapter to describing how "performative inadequacy" (p. 161) can cause humor to be unsuccessful. He suggests a number of ways that a joke may fail due to its delivery, including a miscalculation of the situation as appropriate for humor and an inability to tell the joke well. Much of his discussion, however, focuses on humor that fails because it has caused offense and he finds three main reasons why humor may do so. First, the content or structure of a joke may be inappropriate. Second, the context in which the humor is delivered may be inappropriate. Finally, he identifies participant issues as a source of offense, explaining that the relationship among the joke-teller, the butt, and the audience may not permit joking. Although I would not argue with these assertions, I would also add that the factors that he names as crucial to identifying whether or not an attempt at humor will cause offense (linguistic content, social situation, and participant roles and relationships) are the same factors that contribute to determining the way that any utterance is produced and received. Furthermore, due to the lack of empirical studies Palmer's assertions and conclusions are, by his own admission, based on "various examples" (p. 149). By this he seems to mean an unsystematic set of post-hoc reports of failed humor, rather than systematic observations. Many of these reports involve attempts at humor made by public figures that resulted in gaffes, and thus represent a very specific type of interlocutor and situation. Moreover, some of the examples that he uses occurred in private, and were only deemed offensive when they were later made public. These instances would not necessarily be considered failed in their original context. Given the choice of data, an analysis of the actual interaction (which Palmer does not attempt) is clearly impossible and such analyses often reveal a social reality quite different from the one we imagine. Palmer's assertions therefore serve mainly as reflections from which research questions might be formed and empirical answers sought.

Priego-Valverde (2009), on the other hand, draws on a rich set of detailed recordings of casual conversation among friends to identify and describe the performance of failed humor. She grounds her analysis using Bakhtin's model of

language and his concept of double-voicing in particular, in order to understand the ways in which humor may be misconstrued. She describes humor as created with two voices. The first produces the utterance and the second comments on the utterance, perhaps mocking it or taking an ironical stance toward it. It is the second voice, she asserts, that can confound humorous communication, as the hearer may not be able to discern which voice the speaker aligns him or herself with, and thus whether or to what extent the speaker is joking. Priego-Valverde's status as a participant in the group she recorded allowed her to identify two types of failed humor: Humor that was not recognized and humor that was recognized, but ignored. The first type of humor is fairly straightforward, although virtually undocumented prior to Priego-Valverde's work. In her examples, hearers fail to recognize that an utterance was intended to be understood as playful, or, in Priego-Valverde's terms, they detect only the first, serious voice and merely continue in the bona-fide mode of communication. The second type of failure she identified was humor that was recognized by the hearer, but rejected. This may happen in teasing, because the target of the tease refuses to play along with the particular way that the tease positions her or him. In addition, an attempt to joke might be ignored when it interferes with or has the potential to disrupt the hearer's conversational trajectory. Priego-Valverde's analysis is particularly useful in demonstrating the subtle negotiation that takes place among interlocutors as humor balances on a knife edge between playfulness and aggression.

In comparison to humor production, the reception of failed humor has received much more attention. While comprehension of humor is largely a question of competence, performance must also be considered in examining the actual responses of hearers. The body of research on reactions to failed humor allows us make some initial claims about the preferred responses to specific types of failure, and the systematic ways that humor responses tend to vary across sociolinguistic variables. Hay's (2001) work on humor support, while not solely devoted to the study of responses to failed humor, was ground-breaking in this respect. In contrast to previous mentions of reactions to poor attempts at humor, which suggested only groans or fake laughter as possible responses, Hay's (2001) analysis was based on naturally-occurring conversational data, and demonstrated that responses to unsuccessful humor are quite varied. She described, for example, silence, ironic expressions of appreciation, and statements of understanding delivered flatly.

Moreover, Hay's (2001) examples illuminated the delicate situation that hearers face when choosing whether and to what extent to support an attempt at humor, thus emphasizing that failure (and success) can be partial. Hearers also face a task in which showing that they not only recognized the attempt at humor, but also understood the joke, is important, as it demonstrates their own compe-

tence with regard to humor and social situations: For most people it is desirable to be seen as someone with a sense of humor. At the same time, if a hearer considers the quip to be "bad" in some respect (e.g., childish, offensive, over-used), it is likely that she or he will want to find a way of expressing a lack of appreciation. Displaying recognition of a joke demonstrates a sense of humor, but displaying taste preferences demonstrates a "good" sense of humor, if only through *not* expressing appreciation. This balancing act on the part of joke recipients received further support from one of my own studies (Bell 2009a, b), in which responses to an unfunny joke were collected and analyzed. The study is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Hay's (2001) model, introduced in the previous section, put forth that support of humor implicated recognition, understanding, and appreciation, all of which fall under competence. She included, however, a fourth implicature relevant to the performance of (failed) humor: agreement. As she explains, "Unqualified support of humor implicates agreement with the message, including any attitudes, presuppositions or implicatures contained in the humor" (p. 72). Thus, individuals who laugh and join in the derisive joking about a certain political figure, display not only their appreciation for this humor, but also their political alignment against this person. Still, it is certainly possible that hearers may express both appreciation for the joke, say, through laughing, while simultaneously disassociating themselves from the message by voicing disagreement with it. Sometimes, however, disagreement with the message is strong enough to eclipse any mirth a hearer might feel, and instead causes only feelings of offense.

Finally, two studies of reactions to offensive humor illustrate how the responses in these situations are somewhat different from those that occur when a person simply does not appreciate the humor. Lockyer and Pickering (2001) used a collection of letters sent to a satirical magazine (Private Eye) in which the writers complained about the offensiveness of certain features published in the magazine. Given the importance society places on having a good sense of humor, they note that writers who wish to complain about a joke put themselves in the precarious position of identifying themselves as people without a sense of humor. They found that most writers used a number of strategies to carefully negotiate the need to position themselves as people with a normally robust sense of humor with the potentially contradictory desire to complain about offense taken at a particular joke. Kramer (2011) makes similar observations based on online arguments about rape jokes. She carefully examines the positions of those who defend the jokes as funny, those who find them funny only under certain conditions, and those who argue that rape jokes can never be amusing. The result is a fascinating set of "humor ideologies" – folk beliefs about the power of humor and the conditions under which it is appropriate to laugh.

Although the body of research on failed humor is minimal, it does allow for an initial set of claims to be made regarding failure using the theoretical lenses of humor competence and humor performance. The work discussed above suggests a number of potential points at which humor is likely to fail, as well as identifying normative responses to unsuccessful jokes and how these reflect and construct the social context of humor. In the final two sections of this chapter, I present the corpus of failed humor from which the examples in this book are drawn, describing how I identified failed humor and the diverse set of sources I used to construct the data set.

2.3 Identification of failed humor

Despite the conventional means available to interlocutors for signaling their intent, as discussed in Chapter 1, these contextualization cues are used flexibly and their meanings must be negotiated anew from moment to moment. Utterances may be marked as serious, playful, or some combination of the two, blurring the lines between serious and unserious activity to the point that participants may be unsure as to the status of the interaction (Bateson [1955] 1972: 179, Sacks 1972). This poses a challenge for the identification of failed humor which begins, of course, with being able to identify an intent to amuse. The problems of identifying humor in interaction have been considered at length by humor scholars and discourse analysts (e.g. Attardo 1994, Holmes 2000, Schnurr 2010) and it is generally agreed that there can be no fool-proof method for identifying all instances of humor, but that the analyst can rely on certain cues in the interaction, as described in the previous chapter. These can include laughter, smiling, unusual or exaggerated prosody, and marked linguistic choices. The audience reaction and/or ethnographic knowledge that the analyst has of the interaction can also help to recognize the existence of a play frame.

Once it is established through the use of these contextualization cues that an utterance was intended as humorous, failed humor can be similarly identified through the examination of subsequent reactions of both speaker and hearer. The hearer is likely to give some signal of failure through lack of uptake or perhaps through an explicit negative evaluation of the quip. The speaker may react to the hearer's lack of uptake by explicitly naming the prior utterance as a joke (e.g., "I'm just kidding") or may make another attempt at the humor. Contextualization cues, too, are again important. Words that suggest a positive reception of a joke, for example, may be belied by unenthusiastic prosodic cues. The "post-failed joke hitch" can be another indication that humor has failed. Schegloff (1996) finds that often unsuccessful humor is followed by some conversational disflu-

ency (e.g., stammering, pauses) on the part of the speaker before the conversation continues. This is illustrated in the following example:

Example 2.2

01	Marsha:	I- I, I told my ki:ds. who do this: down at the Drug Coalition I want the
02		to:p back. hhhhhh (1) (breath) SEND OUT the WO:RD. hhh hnh (0.2)
03	Tony:	yeah
04	Marsha:	hhh bu:t u-hu: ghh his friend Steve and Brian are driving up. right
05		after::

(Adapted from Schegloff 1996: 94)

Marsha has given an emphatic dramatic utterance in lines 01 and 02, marked by the lengthening of vowels, louder speech, and laughter. This utterance is followed by a 2 second gap, which normally would be expected to be filled with Tony's reaction. Eventually Tony provides a minimal response of "yeah," although, given Marsha's delivery, a more emotional response would have been expected. At the start of her ensuing turn, the failed uptake is registered through Martha's aspiration, hesitant beginning ("bu:t) and disfluent sounds ("u-gu: ghh").

Thus far I have presented the identification of failed humor as a fairly straightforward procedure, but it should in fact be treated with caution. First, the role of the analyst in the identification of humor must not be ignored or underplayed (cf. Holmes 2000: 163). In some cases, such as when one speaker's humorous utterance is not recognized as humor by the other interlocutors, only that speaker will be able to identify the utterance as an unsuccessful attempt at humor. Thus, in some situations it may be crucial for the analyst to be part of the interaction (see, e.g., Priego-Valverde 2009) or for the analyst to be able to perform post-interaction interviews with the participants in order to identify all attempts at humor. Linell (1995), in fact, classifies misunderstandings as latent, covert, or overt in recognition that some may pass unnoticed by interlocutors and leave no (latent) or few (covert) signs in the conversational data. Thus, in the case of disrupted communication, the researcher's interpretation might be used as a kind of neutral perspective, as someone observing, rather than participating in the troubled interaction (Schlesinger and Hurvitz 2008). Clearly textual evidence is key, but it can be aided – or confounded – by the analyst's own biases, causing failed humor to be overlooked.

Just as failed humor is subject to being missed by the analyst, there is also a risk that successful humor might get miscategorized. Below is an example of humor that might have been miscategorized had the data collection only relied

on transcripts. While vocal cues, as well as contextual understandings might have enabled the identification of Ripeka's utterance as ironic, the lack of verbal uptake might have resulted in its classification as a failed attempt at humor:

Example 2.3

01 Tracey: it's always been like that though eh / / [I don't know] how many

02   reviews=

03 Hera: [it's a political issue]

04 Tracey: =there's been

05 Ripeka: just like the Māoris

06 (people smile and look amused)

07 Hera: it's a political issue not a not an issue it's not it's not it's got nothing

08   to do with logic

09 Tracey: no
(Adapted from Vine et al. 2009: 133)

Another potentially confounding issue is that of meta-humor or anti-humor. This type of joke is deliberately unfunny. Gregg Turkington's character, stand-up comedian Neil Hamburger, is one example of this. Hamburger's act consists mainly of strings of questions and answers, often involving celebrities. The answers are either corny, potentially offensive, or blatantly unfunny, and the delivery is awkward. Although I have not recreated the delivery, the following is an example:

Example 2.4

Why did God create the Paris Hilton sex video tape?

So that the mentally retarded would have something to masturbate to.
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_jHptcdhYg&feature=related)

The term meta-humor can also refer to (again, usually unfunny) jokes constructed on the templates of other jokes, for example:

How many electricians does it take to change a light bulb?
One.

It can be difficult to distinguish whether humor is unfunny on purpose (anti-humor) or whether the speaker genuinely intended the utterance to be funny (but not due to its unfunniness). In addition, there may be borderline cases where a speaker says something intended as genuine humor, but ends up couching it as meta- or anti-humor, perhaps by re-assessing its funniness or by noting a tepid response from the audience. The following is such a borderline case. Here, the wife has left the fireplace damper open wider than husband thinks is appropriate:

Example 2.5

Husband: okay, leave it open, burn through our wood real fast. it's not like wood grows on trees. (.) (fake laughter)

Wife: (eye roll)

Given the lack of positive response from the wife, this might be seen as failed humor. Yet, the husband himself is the first to offer a negative assessment in the form of lexicalized (fake) laughter, which suggests he is signaling his recognition of the questionable quality of his joke (Haakana 2012). The slight pause before the fake laughter might have given the wife a chance for uptake, and, receiving none is what prompted the fake laughter. In any case, such unclear examples were excluded from the data set, unless useful for illustrating some particular point.

Laughter and smiling are far from unitary phenomena, exhibiting a great deal of variability in their expression (Bachorowski, Smoski, and Owren 2001; Ekman and Friesen 1982) and signaling a variety of emotional states (Platt and Ruch 2014; Ruch, Hoffman and Platt 2013). Recipients are sensitive to the acoustic and visual differences in smiling and laughter, and assign them different meanings (Bachorowski and Owren 2001; Frank, Ekman, and Friesen 1993; Szameitat, et al. 2009). The Duchenne smile has been considered the marker of genuine pleasure (Ekman, Davidson, and Friesen 1990); however, some recent studies suggest that it may be feigned (Krumhuber, Likowski and Weyers 2014, Krumhuber and Manstead 2009). Laughter, too, can be faked in ways that are convincing, unlike the deliberate display of lexicalized (non)-laughter in the previous example. Further complicating the issue is that fact that laughter tends to be contagious, and laughs that begin as a contrived attempt to join in the enjoyment of others may evolve into the laughter of genuine mirth and pleasure (Ruch and Ekman 2001) Thus, a final problem in the identification of unsuccessful humor springs from the aforementioned fact that responses indicative of understanding or appreciation can be feigned. In such cases an instance of

failed humor will be overlooked. In the following example, Pum's hearty laughter belies her lack of understanding of the joke. As this extract begins, Jake playfully worries that, in listening to their tape, I will think that all they do is smoke and drink. He and his brother, Louis, proceed to construct an imaginary scenario around this:

Example 2.6

01 Jake: ☺ all we do is sit around and smo[ke and drink ☺

02 Louis: [smoke and drink

03 Pum: the best part uh [huh huh huh

04 Jake: (gruff voice)   [and we take out our guns

05 Louis: yeah

06 Jake: drive my pickup truck

07 Louis: (gruff voice) I wish I was in the desert right now with a

08   gu[n and a knife

09 Jake: [u:::h huh huh huh huh

10 Louis: and that orange and white parachute

11 Jake: uh huh huh huh

12 Louis: and a book on what types of d[esert animals are out there.

13 Pum: [uh huh huh huh huh huh

It was only because of the retrospective interviews that were part of this study (Bell 2002, see also Bell 2007b for discussion of this extract) that it was possible to identify this as failed humor. Although Pum, a native of Thailand and not an avid survivalist, appreciated that a play frame was in place and enjoyed the voices the men were using, her closest understanding of the topic was that it had something to do with camping. This example is particularly interesting, because although Pum did not understand the humor, her appreciation (expressed through laughter) was genuine. We must therefore remain cautious when following Hay's (2001) scalar implicatures. This example demonstrates that appreciation does not always implicate understanding and may in fact co-exist with failure at some level.

　　Similarly, interlocutors may feign a *lack* of comprehension or appreciation, despite their understanding and enjoyment of a joke. Raskin ([1998] 2007) points

out that a hearer may do this in order to make a point about his or her political stance. Thus, despite feeling amused by a joke that denigrates women, for instance, a person may withhold laughter in order to express disapproval of sexism. In these instances, humor will correctly be identified as failed, but for the wrong reasons. The analyst will see that the humor has failed for lack of appreciation, but the real reason will be that the hearer disagreed with the meta-message contained in the joke (see Chapter 5, section 5.4). These issues cannot be completely resolved, but must simply be acknowledged here; however, in the following section I describe the procedures for compiling the data set used here, which to some extent mitigate these problems.

2.4 Data set

The ideal data for studying interaction is video or audio recordings of conversations. Unfortunately, such data is not always readily available or easily attainable. Although humor peppers many of our conversations, failed humor appears more rarely, making data collection difficult. In order to overcome this hurdle, I have drawn from a variety of sources in compiling the data used to make the claims in this book. Each type of data comes with different advantages and disadvantages, but taken together they provide a rich and fairly representative portrait of failed humor:

1. Observations: These include interactions that I participated in, or that I overheard. For several years, each time I encountered an instance of failed humor as I went about my daily life, I made detailed fieldnotes on the interaction as soon as possible. This data has the advantage of spontaneity, and is usually transcribed in some detail, despite not having been audio recorded. In addition, some examples from internet interaction are included here, such as videos posted on Youtube or comments on Facebook status updates or blog posts.

2. Self-reports: Some instances of failed humor have been shared with me when people learn about my research. In addition, the 33 examples that formed the basis for Bell and Attardo (2010) are used here. These were reported by nonnative English speaking graduate students, who kept diaries of their experiences with humor in the U.S. Like all self-report data, these must be understood as having been selected by the reporter and filtered through her or his own lens. In addition, these examples lack the linguistic detail of directly observed or audio/video recorded interaction.

3. Previously published data: These examples come from scholarly articles, and in most cases the failed humor was not the focus of the analysis, but the

failure was noted. At other times the failure was not remarked upon, but was apparent in the transcript. Many of these examples are detailed transcripts of recorded interaction, although some are narrative accounts from the author's fieldnotes.

4. Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): By using various search terms such as "just/only kidding" and "just/only joking" and limiting the search to spoken English, I identified 53 examples of failed humor in COCA. Most of these examples are the rough transcripts of television or radio broadcasts, but the original recordings for a substantial number of these were available online and were used to construct more detailed transcripts (e.g., marking pauses, false starts, intonation, overlap, etc.). The public nature of this type of talk, as well as the interlocutors' awareness of large multiple and unseen audiences, gives it particular qualities not necessarily found in private discourse. Kotthoff (2003), for instance, found that friends tend to respond playfully to the surface meaning of an ironic utterance, whereas those in the public arena tended to address the implicature. Much of the talk taken from COCA resembles casual conversation between friends on the surface, but is actually being done before an audience for the purposes of informing and/or entertaining them, thus making the communication quite different from private, casual conversation. At issue here, then, is not the linguistic details, but the explicit performance that is occurring, rendering this interaction qualitatively different from private, casual conversations, no matter how much it may resemble that type of interaction on the surface.

5. Television/movies: Rose (2001) and Martínez-Flor (2007) have demonstrated that in many respects the scripted interactions found in films that depict "regular" life (i.e. dramas or [pseudo] reality shows set in the present day, as opposed to fantasy films set in an imagined future world) closely resemble in form naturally-occurring examples of the same type of interaction or speech act. On this basis, a small number of examples were obtained from these sources.

6. Elicitation: This technique was used in order to gather data specifically on responses to failed humor. Responses to two different types of failure, lack of appreciation and lack of understanding, were collected. The first set consists of 540 reactions elicited in response to a joke that was not funny. The second set consists of 248 responses that were recorded following the telling of a joke that was very difficult to understand. This data is mainly presented in Chapter 6. Elicitation has the advantage of allowing a large amount of data to be collected quickly, but lacks the element of genuine spontaneity.

Given the challenges in identifying failed humor described in the previous section, the data collected here surely will not have captured all failures, and it is possible that the data set may include as failures some instances of humor that were actually successful (although the former seems more likely). It is also crucial to recall that failure is not an all-or-nothing proposition: Appreciation can range from robust to weak; understanding can be partial. (This idea will be revisited in the next chapter.) Still, using a variety of techniques, I ensured that each token in the data set met requirements for use as examples of unsuccessful humor. In some instances identifying failed humor was easy as I was a participant, whereas in others I relied on the reports of others, under the assumption that they were competent interlocutors with the ability to judge failures. This is in keeping with our understanding of linguistic intuition – while interlocutors are not often able to accurately report what they would say in a particular situation, they are good judges of things like appropriateness or implicature (Wolfson 1986). In other instances I relied on cues that were present in the interaction. These included the reaction of the hearer (e.g. "that's not funny") or the speaker's assessment of his or her own utterance (e.g. "that was supposed to be a joke"), as well as other linguistic or paralinguistic cues made the failure apparent, as discussed above. It is also worth noting that, given the broad range of language users represented here, it is unlikely that I managed to create a data set consisting largely of socially awkward individuals who have an "inept" humor style and are thus prone to failing at humor (Craik, Lampert, and Nelson 1996). The findings I present with regard to types of failure and ways of negotiating failed humor in interaction are likely to apply broadly, although it will certainly be the case that individuals will exhibit variety in their interactional preferences and that different patterns may be found to apply to specific populations with certain personality characteristics or psychological profiles (e.g., neurotics, gelotophiles/gelotophobes, introverts/extroverts).

As I was attempting to capture the widest range of failed humor, few attempts were made to restrict the data. Age was one criterion by which participants could be excluded. Because children's sense of humor is still developing (for reviews see Bariaud 1989, Bergen 2006, Martin 2007: 229–241, Semrud-Clikeman and Glass 2010), I did not want to complicate the picture unnecessarily by including humor that failed for them – either in production or reception. In addition, I excluded instances of humor that succeeded in the moment, but failed later, although these are occasionally referred to. Many of these are well-known celebrity blunders that later had to be apologized for. One example is a self-denigrating comment that Barack Obama made on the Jay Leno show when he compared his own bowling skills to that of Special Olympics bowlers:

Example 2.7

01	Obama:	I have been practicing bowling
02	Leno:	really. really.
03	Obama:	I uh I bowled a 129
04	Audience:	(applause, cheers)
05	Obama:	which (.) yes (.) I have- (laughs)
06	Leno:	(sarcastically) oh no that's very good. yeah. no, that's very
07		[good, Mr. President.
08	Obama:	[☺ I'm sure it was
09		like- it was like Special Olympics or something ☺ eh heh heh
10	Audience:	(laughter)
11	Leno:	no, that no that- that's very good

It is tempting to classify this as failed humor, because less than 24 hours later, Obama publicly apologized for this remark, which many people saw as offensive to the Special Olympics participants, who, although mentally challenged are often highly accomplished athletes. However, this quip was apparently successful at the time. Rather than being greeted with boos, the president's remark received laughter. In this age of rapid, global communications, any public remarks can eventually be met with a range of responses (see, e.g. the discussion of the genesis and aftermath of the Danish Muhammad cartoons in Lewis 2008). Humor that succeeds in the moment may be deemed as failed at a later date, by a different audience. These examples are excluded in favor of an examination of humor that has failed in its immediate context.

2.5 Summary

In this chapter, the major theories of humor were reviewed in order to determine how the failure of humor might be conceptualized from each perspective and to what extent each theory might be able to account for failure. The review suggested that only incongruity theories are equipped to cope with failure. Furthermore, through the work of Raskin (1985, [1998] 2007), some advances toward the incorporation of unsuccessful humor into incongruity theories have been made.

Building on the notions of linguistic competence and performance introduced in Chapter 1, the idea of humor competence and performance were presented. The small body of research that has touched on humor competence and performance and their relationship to failed humor was reviewed, and this work provides a foundation from which to examine the phenomenon further. Finally, two methodological issues were discussed. First, challenges involved in the identification of failed humor were described. Many of these overlap with the task faced by analysts in locating humor; however, additional problems were identified. Finally, the chapter closed with a description of data set that was used to perform the analyses presented in this book, including the advantages and disadvantages of each type of data. In the following chapter, failed humor is discussed as a specific form of miscommunication.

3 Failed Humor as Miscommunication

3.1 Introduction

Up to this point the term "failed humor" has been used to describe any utterance that is intended to amuse, but that is not perceived, understood, and/or appreciated, or perhaps that does not achieve additional desired interactional goals. As such, failed humor fits into a broader category of miscommunication, therefore, it will be useful to review previous work on this topic before focusing on communicative problems involving humor, specifically. There is a rich body of work on miscommunication (e.g. Bazzanella and Damiano 1999; Bremer et al. 1996; Coupland, Giles, and Wiemann 1991; Dascal 2003; Grimshaw 1980; Hinnenkamp 2001, 2003; House, Kasper, and Ross 2003; Kaur 2011; Linell 1995; Mustajoki 2012; Schegloff 1987; Schlesinger and Hurvitz 2008; Tzanne 2000; Verdonik 2010; Weigand 1999; Yus 1999; Zamborlin 2007). Hinnenkamp (2001) noted that these works generally take one of two approaches, describing either the potential sources of miscommunication or the interactional structure of miscommunication sequences. His observation holds true today, although some work does address both aspects. In this chapter, following a brief review of some fundamental concepts of unsuccessful communication, I pursue both of these approaches to miscommunication. I focus first on the sources of miscommunication and use prior research to lay out a framework that can be used to identify these sources with respect to humorous interaction. Second, I examine research on the interactional structure of unsuccessful communication and how repair is negotiated. These two strands of work then form the basis for the analyses in the ensuing chapters, which provide examples of each type of miscommunication with interactional analyses of each.

3.2 Defining miscommunication

Research on less-than-perfect communication employs a wide variety of terms to discuss problematic talk. Terms such as misunderstanding, non-understanding, non-success, mishearing and communicative failure are all used, but not always with consistency among researchers (see Kaur 2011 for examples and disambiguation). These ways of describing interaction that does not proceed smoothly are not all equivalent, in that they are not all neutral with regard to the source of the problem. For instance, "misunderstanding," perhaps the most commonly-used term, clearly suggests an assessment of the hearer's mental state. In this text I

use terms such as "failure" and "miscommunication" to describe any attempt at humor whose outcome is less-than-ideal. I am also partial to Zamborlin's (2007) use of "dissonance" as a less dramatic option than "failure," and as another term that does not attribute responsibility to either party. I reserve terms like "mishearing" or "misspeaking" for describing interaction in which either the audience or the speaker has clearly erred.

Studies of miscommunication emphasize the partial nature of both understanding and misunderstanding (Dascal 2003, Grimshaw 1980, Linell 1995, Verdonik 2010). From this perspective, miscommunication can been understood as an inherent part of communication (Coupland et al. 1991). In this vein, Weigand (1999: 769) prefers to conceptualize the object of study as "coming to an understanding" in interaction, in contrast to the binaries of "understanding" or "misunderstanding." This also helps to highlight not only the incomplete nature of understanding, as well as the process, but also the negotiated nature of all communication – whatever its degree of success. Weigand emphasizes that such a view helps us go beyond merely describing linguistic performance to explain the functional use of language. I would add, as well, that conceptualizing miscommunication as dynamic and jointly constructed is in keeping with the view of interaction outlined in Chapter 1.

3.3 Sources of miscommunication

What causes unsuccessful communication? Dascal's (2003) folk taxonomy, derived from an examination of the family of "mis-" words involving interaction (e.g. mishear, misinterpret) derives the same broad categories found in the research literature. He finds that this class of words allows us to distinguish:
1. whether the problem is one of production or reception;
2. the level of language at which the problem occurred;
3. the type of social norms upon which the communicative problem is evaluated; and
4. whether the error was voluntary or involuntary (p. 293–294).

Let us examine each of these in turn.

With respect to whether the problem can be pinpointed as involving production or reception, Mustajoki (2012) draws on a growing body of research that demonstrates the egocentrism of the speaker (Keysar 2007, Kecskes and Zhang 2009) to suggest that most unsuccessful interaction can be attributed to the speaker's inability (or unwillingness) to take the hearer's needs into account. Mustajoki notes that poor recipient design of utterances can result from a lack of moni-

toring due to a desire to avoid cognitive effort, from an (incorrect) assumption of convergence between speaker and hearer's mental worlds, from physical or emotional impediments, or in cases where clarity comes second to other communicative goals (an obvious one here would be the desire to amuse). However, it is important to recognize that, despite these findings, as well as an inclination in the research literature to focus on the speaker as the source of conversational trouble, the hearer can also play an important role (Grimshaw 1980). Further, given that interaction is co-constructed, its success or failure can always be seen as a mutual endeavor (Bremer et al. 1996; Hinnenkamp 2001, 2003; Kaur 2011; Linell 1995; Schlesinger and Hurvitz 2008). With respect to this first broad dimension, failures in non-serious interaction will likely face essentially the same obstacles as does serious discourse.

Identifying interactional failures by the level of language that was the source of the problem is a fairly common approach (Tzanne 2000, Weigand 1999), although some authors merely name language in general as a factor. Despite some potential for overlap, classifying whether an instance of miscommunication arose from phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, or pragmatic aspects of language is generally straightforward. Empirical work in this vein finds lexical and syntactic ambiguity to be the most common source of misunderstandings (Bazzanella and Damiano 1999). This seems to be the case both inter-and intra-culturally (Kaur 2011). Although confusion arising from unintentional ambiguity may commonly contribute to miscommunications that occur in serious conversations, humor often relies on ambiguity, thus we should expect that the failure of humor will largely be due to other factors.

Discussions in which interlocutors' social values lead to particular assessments of misunderstanding tend to be found most frequently in literature on intercultural and interethnic communication, or in research on interaction between native and non-native speakers (e.g. Gunthner & Luckmann 2001, Varonis and Gass 1985, Wierzbicka 2010, Zamborlin 2007). Jenny Thomas' (1983) seminal work on the pragmatic failures of second language users highlighted the difference between miscommunications that are largely due to linguistic errors and those that are due to pragmatic factors by distinguishing between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure. The former occurs when a learner maps onto an utterance a pragmatic force that is not normally attributed to it by native speakers. This is primarily a linguistic problem. For example, in some languages (e.g., Russian) a question such as, "Can you close the door?" does not have the force of a request, but instead refers only to ability. Sociopragmatic failure occurs when a second language user assesses a social situation differently than is usually done by native speakers and ends up making a statement that is, for example, too formal for the context. An example of this might be the differing emphasis on age as a

component of status between Koreans and North Americans, which might cause a native speaker of Korean to speak much more formally to a classmate or co-worker who is just a few years older than would a native speaker of English.

Grammatical differences are usually easily identified either as slips of the tongue, for native speakers, or as not belonging to English in the case of non-native language users. Pragmatic differences, on the other hand, may go unrecognized by the hearer, as they will often simply fail to achieve the desired effect. However, pragmatic failure potentially has additional consequences for the speaker's identity. Whereas errors in grammar or pronunciation are easily attributed to fatigue or to a speaker's status as language learner, grammatical, but socially odd speech seems more likely to be construed as a characteristic of a speaker's personality or ethnic group (Thomas 1983). In serious communication, this may manifest itself as an impression of an individual or group as being, for example, rude. Pragmatic failure in humorous communication, however, may be perceived differently. Some research suggests that such failures on the part of native interlocutors will be perceived harshly (Bell 2009a), but that humorous failures in intercultural communication are ignored or treated with leniency (Bell 2007a).

Finally, the accidental nature of some slips that lead to miscommunication, versus deliberate attempts to mislead are the concern of (4). Unsuccessful communication is often thought of as something undesirable to be avoided in conversation, and thus is often assumed to be due to involuntary factors, such as slips of the tongue. This view, however, ignores the many occasions on which interlocutors feign misunderstanding (Dascal 2003; Grimshaw 1980; Schlesinger and Hurvitz 2008) or construct utterances that are deliberate attempts to create misunderstanding (Zamborlin 2007). This facet is of particular interest here, as these are often these are often strategies used in an attempt to be humorous. Schegloff (1987), for instance, has documented what he calls the "joke first" phenomenon, in which a speaker provides a facetious response before providing the serious answer. Often these joking rejoinders exploit an ambiguity in the prior speaker's utterance that allows a joke to be created through deliberate misunderstanding. This is illustrated in the following example that took place during a group therapy session. Ken, one of the teenagers in the group has received an unsatisfactory report card from school and is asked about it by Dan, the therapist:

Example 3.1

01 Dan: well, whaddya y'gonna do about it. (0.2)

02 Ken: give it to my parents and have em sign it,

03 Dan: no, I mean about hh

04 Ken: heh

05 Dan: not this, [I'm not talking about this.

06 Ken: [heh heh (0.4)

07 Dan: what *are* you gonna do about it.
(adapted from Schegloff 1987: 213)

The referent of "it" in Dan's utterance (line 1) is intended to refer to the problem of having done unsatisfactory work, but can also be interpreted as referring to the report card itself. Ken deliberately misunderstands Dan by opting for this second interpretation, which allows him to provide the facetious answer that he will have his parents sign the report card, as required by the school. It is worth nothing that although Dan does not immediately recognize the playful nature of Ken's feigned misunderstanding, we would not classify this as an instance of failed humor, as part of the amusement lies in tricking the hearer.

Weigand (1999) provides one of the most detailed analyses of misunderstanding, and as such will be used to illustrate one way in which the four broad categories presented above have been conceptualized as a general model of miscommunication. She makes an initial division between "misunderstanding the means" of communication and "misunderstanding the purposes." She further sub-categorizes means into linguistic, perceptual, and cognitive. Problems involving linguistic means are purely illocutionary. Perceptual means include problems in appropriately interpreting contextualization cues, such as facial expressions or gestures. Finally, problems related to cognitive means involve incorrect inferences. Weigand also recognizes that these categories are not mutually exclusive, thus misunderstandings can be attributed to a combination of these. Misunderstandings involving purpose are functional and can be of three types. What she calls the action function essentially refers to the identification or encoding of a particular speech act. Within the referential function she includes problems related to the use of vague deictics, for example. Finally, the predicative function focuses on problems understanding particular lexical items, perhaps due to an interlocutor's lack of linguistic competence, or to the ambiguity of a word.

Weigand's (1999) goal was to lay out the "standard case" of misunderstanding. Schlesinger and Hurvitz (2008) build upon her findings using what they call a "neutral" analyst's perspective to mediate between the apparent understandings and intentions of the interlocutors and to describe additional types of misunderstanding. They begin with a similar list of potential sources of miscommunication, but depart by adding a set of factors that may create more subtle types of misunderstandings, and thus be less apparent, both in communication and analysis. Two of their additions are of particular interest to miscommunication involving humor. First, they note that the form of the message can be important to comprehension of the overall message. Thus, if a hearer is not familiar with the register used or does not recognize that the speaker is quoting someone, the message may not be fully appreciated or understood. In humor, of course, the form can be the major contributor to the joke, as in word or register play. The second important addition is referred to as "resonating to the message" (p. 582). If a hearer resonates to the speaker's message, then an emotional or attitudinal response is elicited. If the response is not what the speaker intended or expected, a misunderstanding has occurred. In the case of humor, the expected resonance would be a feeling of mirth.

Finally, it is worth noting that a large body of literature has been devoted to intercultural, cross-linguistic, and inter-ethnic communication under the assumption that interaction among individuals who are different from each other in some way will be more likely to create challenges to the achievement of understanding. Given that I have opted here to treat the communicative failures of both native and non-native interlocutors in the same manner (see Chapter 2), it seems important to address the assumption that difference automatically contributes to communicative troubles. First, work such as that of Erickson and Schultz (1983) has demonstrated that even in the face of numerous differences – power, race, class – communication is by no means guaranteed to be disrupted. In closely examining the interaction that took place in inter-ethnic school counseling sessions, Erickson and Shultz noted the powerful role that the establishment of co-membership between interlocutors can play in their ability to achieve understanding. Co-membership is created when conversational partners reveal or discover a shared identity, which might involve, for instance, having a love of the same sport or hobby, having visited the same place, or having similar problems. Similarly, research has shown how interculturality (Mori 2003) and non-native speaker status (Firth 2009) are not necessarily oriented to by speakers. It is therefore incorrect to assume that intercultural conversations are somehow different than those that take place between native interlocutors of similar backgrounds. Rather, evidence for the relevance of non-native speaker status or interculturality for the participants should be found in the interaction. Although factors

such as language proficiency, lack of shared background knowledge, and cultural differences can clearly contribute to conversational trouble at times, these explanations are one step removed from the analysis of the interaction itself. The framework presented here focuses on those elements that can be found in the interaction, and then looks to these and other factors to help further explain each particular instance of miscommunication.

3.4 Failed humor as misunderstanding

How is the failure of humor similar to or different from other communicative failures? Is there something about communication within a play frame that creates different types of miscommunication? Clearly, some of the sources of conversational trouble will remain the same. For instance, garbled speech or a noisy environment will interfere with humor in precisely the same way as with other types of talk. Similarly, lack of familiarity with the linguistic means used in recounting a narrative may prevent the hearer from understanding the story, whether or not it is intended as amusing. Other aspects of the general models of miscommunication will have humor-specific instantiations and effects. For example, when it comes to being able to recognize the particular frame or key that should be used to interpret an utterance, we can narrow the choices essentially to a point along the continuum of "serious" to "non-serious." Still, within any stretch of conversation that takes place within a play frame, the hearer must be able to recognize specific voicings or registers in order to fully appreciate the humor. Finally, the nature of humor itself, as described in Chapter 2, creates special conditions in which failure is possible. Perhaps most important is the ability to create and understand humorous incongruities. The reactions to humor, including both the cognitive effect of appreciation and the interactional effect of constructing an appropriate response are also particular to communication within a play frame. In the next section I introduce an initial framework for the analysis of failed humor, and expand it based on the models of misunderstanding discussed above.

3.4.1 A framework for understanding failed humor

Bell and Attardo (2010) used self-reports of non-native speakers of English describing their experiences with humor in English in order to develop a typology of failed humor. Although the data came from second language speakers, we posited that the difference between native and non-native language users would be only quantitative rather than qualitative. In other words, we assume that native

speakers can experience all the same types of communicative problems as non-native speakers, but will merely encounter them less frequently. For example, an attempt at humor that relies on the understanding of a specific lexical item may fail for a native speaker who is not familiar with that word, but this is probably something that many non-native users, who are likely to have a more restricted vocabulary in their second language, will be more likely to experience. On the topic of misunderstandings in general, Kaur (2011) reports the same finding: The sources of misunderstanding are the same for first and second language users. It is thus an assumption built into this framework that it applies broadly to all types of contexts and all adult interlocutors with a fully developed humor competence.

Bell and Attardo (2010) proposed seven potentially overlapping levels at which failure can occur (see Table 1). These potential trouble sources coincide to a large extent with the findings of previous research on miscommunication, including, for instance, trouble with the communicative channel itself (level 1), linguistic problems (levels 2 and 3), and issues involving the framing or keying of an utterance (level 4). However, because this framework was derived in a bottom-up fashion, by looking at the data, and because the data relied on self-reports, some triggers of miscommunication that are reported in prior research on misunderstanding were not included, as they did not appear in the data, perhaps because they were not noticed by the participants. Level 2 stands out as a clear example. While other frameworks recognize errors at all levels of language as potential triggers, we identified only semantics as a problem.

Table 1: Levels of failure in Bell and Attardo (2010: 430)

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(1) failure to process language at the locutionary level
(2) failure to understand the meaning of words (including connotations)
(3) failure to understand pragmatic force of utterances (including irony)
(4) failure to recognize the humorous frame
    (a) false negative: miss a joke
    (b) false positive: see a joke where none was intended
(5) failure to understand the incongruity of the joke
(6) failure to appreciate the joke
(7) failure to join in the joking (humor support/mode adoption)

The revised framework reflects two major changes based on the findings of prior research on miscommunication. One shortcoming of the original typology is that, derived from the self-report data, it was biased toward hearer-related problems, despite our recognition that both successful and unsuccessful interaction are jointly constructed. Thus, the original typology described a failure to *process* language at the locutionary level, focusing on the audience and ignoring the fact

that the speaker might fail to clearly articulate. Thus, the descriptions of the levels have been revised to remove the bias toward the hearer and leave open the possibility that miscommunication might be triggered by either interlocutor (or both, with the exception of levels 7, 8 and 10). Second, the framework has been broadened, drawing mainly on the models of Weigand (1999), Bazzanella and Damiano (1999), and Schlesinger and Hurvitz (2008) to account for further ways that humor can fail in interaction. These changes are provided in bolded italics in Table 2. Attention to ambiguity, found to be a major contributor to misunderstandings, as noted above, has been added. This seems particularly appropriate for an examination of failed humor. Because humor often relies on ambiguity we will want to ask what role ambiguity plays in triggering failed humor. Level 5 is also a potential trigger to unsuccessful communication in general, but also particularly important for humorous communication, which often involves play with linguistic forms. Finally, level 9 failures, a new addition to the framework, were acknowledged in Bell and Attardo (2010: 426), but were not addressed in detail or added to the framework, as the participants themselves did not report failures of this sort.

Table 2: Revised framework for understanding failed humor

(1)   locutionary factors
(2)   ***linguistic rules***
    (a)   ***phonology***
    (b)   ***morphosyntax***
    (c)   semantics (word meanings, connotations)
(3)   ***ambiguity***
    (a)   ***lexical***
    (b)   ***syntactic***
(4)   pragmatic force of utterances
(5)   ***message form (e.g. register, code-switching, rhyming)***
(6)   humorous frame (key)
    (a)   false negative: miss a joke
    (b)   false positive: see a joke where none was intended
(7)   joke incongruity
(8)   joke appreciation
(9)   ***joke (meta)messages***
    (a)   ***social functions (e.g. attempts to get others to change their behavior or attitudes)***
    (b)   ***discourse functions (e.g. attempts to change the topic, keep talking, etc.)***
(10) appropriate humor support

The following chapters will provide examples of each of these, with accompanying analysis to allow for a focus on the actual co-construction of unsuccessful humor. Here, however, I provide a brief explanation of each level. Table 3 also

further explicates each level by outlining possible problems that a speaker or hearer might have.

3.4.1.1 Locutionary factors

Problems at the locutionary level involve physical conditions necessary for an utterance to be constructed and perceived. Injury to the vocal tract or hearing impairment, for example, might lead to a joke not being encoded or decoded. Similarly, intoxication might create a disruption in the communicative channel. These are solely errors of performance. Factors external to the interlocutors should also be considered, such as a noisy environment.

3.4.1.2 Linguistic rules

At this level, errors may occur due to shortcomings in either performance or competence. A speaker may be unaware of appropriate or correct language forms (competence) or may undergo a slip of the tongue. Hearers, similarly, may lack linguistic knowledge or mishear utterances. With respect to phonology, this might involve mispronunciation or lack of familiarity with the pronunciation of a word, as well as slips of the tongue such as spoonerisms that involve the inversion of sounds (e.g. "ray the pent" instead of "pay the rent"). Problems involving morphology or syntax could include incorrect affixes, such as the use of "eated" rather than the correct form "ate," or improper sentence structure. From the hearer's perspective, a lack of familiarity with a certain structure might impede comprehension. Miscommunications that derive from semantics stem from lack of knowledge of word meanings, which may involve both denotation and connotation.

3.4.1.3 Ambiguity

As noted above, given the role that ambiguity can play in the construction of humor, as well as the extent to which it has been found to contribute to communicative troubles, it has been given its own level in this model, despite being essentially a linguistic problem. Ambiguity may be lexical or syntactic. Lexical ambiguity derives from the use of words with multiple meanings, such as "bat" used for baseball and the animal "bat." Syntactic ambiguity is introduced when the structure of an utterance is such that it is open to more than one interpretation. For example, a request for "more cuddly kittens" could be referring to a greater number of cuddly kittens, or to a desire for kittens that are better for cuddling.

Ambiguity may be introduced into conversation intentionally, often as a way of being humorous. In such cases, the humor will fail if the hearer does not recognize the dual meanings. Unintentional ambiguity in an utterance can provide an opportunity for the hearer to construct humor, for instance by telling a speaker who has requested a bat during a baseball game that she cannot have it because it has rabies (see also example 3.1, above).

3.4.1.4 Pragmatic force of utterances

Failures to clearly communicate or to detect the illocutionary or perlocutionary force of an utterance are addressed at this level. The result of failure at this level will likely be an inappropriate action, as the hearer will understand the literal, but not the implicit sense of the utterance. Thus, an ironic compliment or joking suggestion will be responded to seriously.

3.4.1.5 Message form (e.g. register, code-switching, rhyming)

Speakers have many choices in how they communicate their messages, thus the form of the utterance is often significant. A switch from Spanish to English or from a more to less formal way of speaking, for example, can signal a particular attitude. This level might also refer to the channel of communication, where writing versus speaking is meaningful. With respect to humor, specifically, interlocutors must be able to construct and decode particular forms, such as a knock-knock joke or the question-answer format of riddles. Finally, I include in this category deliveries of jokes that are particularly poor, as humor can often be ruined by a telling that is too fast or slow, very circuitous and overly-detailed, or full of self-interruptions, to name just a few problems that might occur.

3.4.1.6 Humorous frame (key)

In some respects, given the present project's focus on failed humor, the issue of framing or keying of an utterance would seem to be a fairly simple task: An utterance is either framed as playful or serious. If done successfully, the speaker will have selected appropriate contextualization cues to signal the frame and the hearer will have been able to recognize the cues as the speaker intended. If this is the case, when failure occurs it will result either in a false negative, in which the joke is not recognized, or a false positive, in which an utterance that was intended as serious is interpreted as humorous. In reality, however, the situation is more complex. As noted in Chapter 1, Goffman (1981) demonstrates how frames are often "laminated" so that layers of frames can be enacted simultaneously. This

dynamic shifting of multiple frames can create uncertainty among participants as to the conversational key. Sacks' (1972) analysis of calls to a suicide center poignantly illustrates the slippery, blended and therefore often difficult to interpret nature of playful vs. serious framing of talk and the ensuing interactional consequences of either interpretation. Schegloff (1987) built upon Sacks' initial work and, importantly for the study of failed humor, identified interactants' uncertainty with regard to serious/non-serious keying as a major factor in miscommunications. Thus, not only are play frames not constructed in an all-or-nothing manner, but their interpretation can be quite challenging for hearers.

3.4.1.7 Joke incongruity

As noted by Bell and Attardo (2010: 436), the identification of failed humor at this level can pose a challenge, in that often linguistic or pragmatic problems create parallel miscommunications. The main difference is that problems of, for example, lexical item selection or comprehension, result in an inability to process the text as a whole. Thus, a hearer might understand all the words of the utterance, but fail to identify the incongruity. The folk description of failing to identify joke incongruity is often that the hearer "didn't get it." Troubles relating to the construction or interpretation of incongruity are a potential trigger for miscommunication that is specific to humor.

3.4.1.8 Joke appreciation

This level is also specific to humorous interaction, as it addresses the trouble that occurs when an attempt at humor is recognized and understood, but not appreciated. It is a broad category, as there are many reasons why an interlocutor may not share an intent to be humorous. Hearers may be offended by a joke, may lack requisite background knowledge, may not share cultural references, or simply may not share the same sense of humor as the speaker. The problem may also lie largely with the speaker, who may have delivered the joke in a highly inept manner, thus detracting from the amusement. It is also important to recall that the expression of a lack of appreciation may be the result of an unconscious reaction or a conscious decision on the part of the hearer (Raskin 2000/1998). In the latter case, the hearer may be amused, but wishes to conceal his or her amusement, for instance in the case of an offensive joke. In some situations, a hearer may want to distance her or himself from the speaker, and therefore she or he withholds laughter or other expressions of appreciation.

Table 3:

Trigger	Speaker	Hearer
locutionary problem	Utterance poorly encoded (slurred speech, etc.)	Unable to process utterance (noisy, drunk)
linguistic rules	Error/slip with regard to rules of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics (e.g., spoonerism, "misunderestimate," use of nonplussed to mean underwhelmed)	Slip of the ear or lack of familiarity with linguistic rules
Ambiguity	Introduces unintended ambiguity or intentional but not marked	Is unable to identify/decode ambiguity
Problem with pragmatic force of utterances	Ill-/perlocutionary force not clearly communicated (e.g. too vague, indirect)	Unable to identify illocutionary force
the form of the message (e.g. register, code-switching, rhyming)	Failure to perform formal elements appropriately (e.g., unable to voice a hillbilly in a recognizable way)	failure to appreciate the form of the message (doesn't know how a hillbilly talks)
humorous framing/keying	Does not use clear/appropriate cues to signal play frame	Unable to properly interpret cues
Joke incongruity	Failure to construct an appropriate and well-formed incongruity	failure to understand the incongruity of the joke
Joke appreciation	n/a	Failure to appreciate the joke
Joke (meta)messages	Does not clearly communicate additional messages; communicates inappropriate meta-messages	failure to recognize any (meta)messages contained in the joke
humor support	n/a	failure to join in the joking or provide appropriate feedback

3.4.1.9 Joke (meta)messages

Here the assumption is that the pragmatic force of the utterance has been appropriately communicated and understood, thus clearing level 4. However, some humorous utterances are designed to do more than amuse their audience. Humor is, for example, often used to soften criticism or hedge a face-threatening act because, when couched as humor, the meta-message is deniable: I was only kidding. Meta-messages may involve social or discourse functions. Social functions are attempts to alter another's behavior or attitudes, and thus include, for instance, the aforementioned criticisms presented jokingly. Discourse functions

involve attempts to alter the interaction, for instance by seizing or holding the floor, or changing the topic.

3.4.1.10 Appropriate humor support

The failure to provide appropriate humor support that expresses understanding and appreciation is well-known to anyone who has thought of a witty reply hours after it was needed. In our work with non-native users of English (Bell and Attardo 2010), we identified this type of conversational trouble specifically as this type of problem: A failure to join in the joking. An inability to contribute a clever rejoinder is not likely to disrupt conversation if the hearer contributes non-verbal signals of appreciation. However, it may result in miscommunication as when, for example, a tepid reaction is interpreted as lack of understanding or lack of appreciation. Here, however, I take up the issue of support more broadly, examining such aspects as unusual responses and the ongoing interaction surrounding failed humor. This is the topic of the following section.

3.5 Structure of miscommunication and repair

Despite interlocutors' best efforts and intentions to achieve and maintain inter-subjectivity, problems do occur in regularly in discourse. Thus, fundamental to the study of miscommunication is the practice of conversational repair. The notion of repair is broader than that of correction, as it refers to the set of practices that interlocutors engage in when trouble of any sort has been detected in interaction. In examining cases of repair we might ask, for instance, how do interlocutors identify misunderstandings? What do they do upon realizing that a misinterpretation has occurred? What types of social practices are employed to resolve misunderstandings? Who claims responsibility for communicative trouble? In this chapter I present a brief examination of previous work on conversational repair in order to provide a basic illustration of the most typical repair practices that occur in serious communication. This picture, which will be elaborated in Chapter 6 with respect to humorous interaction, will be helpful in understanding such negotiations in playful talk, where repair has not yet been extensively studied.

Conversation analysts pioneered extensive research on the organization of repair, initially focusing on questions of who initiates the repair, how it is initiated, and where within the conversational sequence the initiation occurs. This work demonstrated a strong preference for self-initiation (rather than other-initiation) of repair, as well as self-correction (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977). In other words, it is much more common for the speaker of the utterance that created

the trouble to both initiate repair and correction than for a hearer to do so. What occurs most commonly is termed third-position repair.[7] As briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, an important concern of conversation analysis is the sequential organization of interaction. Because speakers normally address their utterances to prior (and usually immediately prior) talk, they reveal their understandings of the interaction at hand and of that previous utterance. Thus the first position in the excerpts that follow is the turn that is the source of the trouble, the second (sometimes) reveals the misunderstanding, and thus, the repair then is initiated and often also occurs in the third. Third position repairs are illustrated in the following examples:

Example 3.2

01 Hannah: and he's going to make his own paintings.

02 Bea: mm hm,

03 Hannah: and- or I mean his own frames

04 Bea: yeah,
(Adapted from Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977: 366)

Example 3.3

01 Annie: which one::s are closed, and which ones are open.

02 Zebrach: most of'em. this, this, [this, this (pointing)

03 Annie: [I don't mean on the shelters, I mean on

04   the roads.

05 Zebrach: oh!
(Adapted from Schegloff 1992: 1303)

In example 3.1, Bea exhibits no sign of finding trouble with Hannah's initial utterance, but Hannah herself detects a problem and both initiates and completes repair in her next turn (line 03). In the next example, Zebrach's response to Annie (line 02) reveals a misunderstanding, which prompts Annie to initiate repair in line 03. Schegloff (1992) documents four components of a third position repair, not all of which must necessarily be present. These repairs often begin with "No"

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7 Conversation analysts make a distinction between third position and third turn repairs that, for the sake of simplicity, I am ignoring here. However, see Schegloff (1992) for a discussion.

and may be followed by a statement of agreement or acceptance of the prior speaker's utterance (e.g., "I know" or "you're right"), although this is the most likely component to be missing, as it is incorporated almost exclusively when the prior utterance was heard as a complaint. The third component is a statement that rejects the hearer's understanding of the speaker's utterance, and it often takes the forms "I didn't mean that" or "I'm not criticizing/joking/complaining, etc." Finally, and most likely to be present, is the repair proper. A variety of strategies, such as reformulation, explanation, or provision of example responses might be used for the repair. Of these components, the first example above contains only the repair, while the second also includes a rejection.

The less frequently used other-initiated repair usually happens in the turn following the trouble-source turn, although sometimes factors may intervene to displace it (see Schegloff 2000 for examples). In these cases, the hearer, having identified some problem with the preceding utterance, signals the problem, often with a particle such as "huh?" or, as seen here, with a question word (who?):

Example 3.4

01   B: oh Sibbie's sister had a ba:by bo:y.

02   A: who?

03   B: Sibbie's sister.

04   A: oh really?
(adapted from Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977: 367)

This example also illustrates the already-noted preference for the speaker of the trouble to resolve it, even when the repair is initiated by the hearer. Thus B, who uttered the phrase that was not understood, repeats the information that identifies the new mother. Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977) note that the preference for self-repair occurs largely as a result of the structural constraints and affordances of conversation. Given the sequential organization of talk, opportunities for initiation of repair are always available first to the speaker of the trouble. Other-initiation of repair provides the speaker with a new opportunity for correction, which is overwhelmingly taken up. In the case of self-initiated self-repairs, this works well. However, Robinson (2006) notes that the very organizational factors favoring self-repair can create a delicate interactional situation for hearers who initiate repair, as they are often heard as blaming the speaker for the trouble. Thus, we sometimes see hearers enacting repair-initiation with an apology ("Sorry?") and claiming responsibility for the trouble, even when it is clearly not theirs. Thus, the handling of repair can be delicate and is important for the management of

relationships. Given that a great deal of humorous interaction is implicated in the construction and maintenance of relationships, the examination of negotiation of repair sequences in playful talk takes on greater importance.

A functional model of the basic negotiation cycle that takes place following the detection of a misunderstanding is provided by Bazzanella and Damiano (1999). Upon detection of a misunderstanding, the interlocutor who identified the trouble can either initiate repair, or forego it, in which case a communication breakdown is likely to occur. Indeed, as Drummond and Hopper (1991) demonstrated, the longer the space between detection and initiation of repair, the more likely we are to call the sequence a "miscommunication." If, however, repair is initiated, it may be (partially) refused or (partially) accepted. Both incomplete refusals and acceptances will trigger an additional repair turn, and this cycle may continue until the interlocutor either fully accepts or rejects the repair attempt. If the refusal is complete, the interlocutors experience communication failure. Upon full acceptance, the talk can continue under what Bazzanella and Damiano refer to as a "fresh start" (p. 824).

In this brief review I have provided information about the canonical shape of repair in interaction. Since these studies, extensive research has further documented additional repair practices, the conditions under which they occur, and their interactional import (e.g. Bolden 2010, 2012; Egbert 2004, Koshik 2005; Laakso and Sorjonen 2010; Robinson 2006; Robinson and Bolden 2010; Schegloff 1997, 2000). This body of work allows for comparisons to be made between repair that occurs in predominately serious discourse and repair of joking utterances. It seems likely that miscommunication that takes place within humorous discourse might be done somewhat differently since, as the research demonstrates, different types of repair are required for different types of trouble. In creating humor, the speaker can employ some strategies to prevent misunderstanding, but to some extent is also working to challenge the hearer with ambiguity and surprise, and thus may often operate under a greater risk of miscommunication than in serious interaction. Furthermore, we can expect dissonance in humorous communication to follow a different trajectory and set of practices due to its special nature. Humorous talk is not necessarily information-conveying, and thus not necessarily crucial to the conversation. Because of this, when trouble occurs the line of talk can be abandoned. Although the structural affordances and constraints will remain the same, the social factors involved in humor will require different practices for negotiating failure.

3.6 Summary

Conversational trouble, or miscommunication, has been the focus of the present chapter. Following a review of the concepts involved in miscommunication and the general models that have been put forth, a framework for the study of failed humor was proposed, based on Bell and Attardo's (2010) previous work, as well as the work of those who have studied miscommunication more generally. In addition to a discussion of the types of conversational trouble that can occur, the typical processes of repair were presented. While we should expect a great deal of overlap between serious and humorous miscommunication, the play frame also carries with it different expectations than does the serious frame, thus differences will also be seen. With the understanding of language and interaction presented in Chapter 1, the understanding of humor and its failure presented in Chapter 2, and now an understanding of conversational problems and repair, we can proceed to an examination and analysis of actual examples of failed humor in the following chapters.

4 Triggers of Failed Humor

4.1 Introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, many of the factors that can cause humor to fail will also be likely to cause miscommunications to occur in serious discourse. These potential triggers represent the first six levels of the model presented in Chapter 3, and examples of each will be discussed here with the goal of determining the ways in which communicative failures at each level can differ when they take place in serious or non-serious discourse. In other words, when the mechanism that triggers miscommunication is the same, are failures of humor different in some way from parallel failures in serious talk? If so, in what way? The triggers to be examined here involve problems related to: locution, linguistic rules, ambiguity, pragmatic force, message form, and framing.

4.2 Locutionary problems

At the most basic level are problems with the channel of communication. Communicative problems at the locutionary level arise from either issues of performance or from factors outside of the control of the interlocutors. Recall that locutionary problems involve anything that impedes interlocutors' abilities to articulate or decode utterances. Thus, the physical environment may interfere, as when people attempt to communicate over noise, or the problem may stem from personal impairment or injury. In the first example, a number of these factors are likely in play. At a party, a male in his 20s finds some ricotta cheese in the host's refrigerator. As a joke, he puts a dollop of ricotta on each palm, goes into the living room, raises his hands and shouts:

Example 4.1

01 M: ricotta stigmata!

02 Party-goers: (turn and look in silence, return to partying)

Because this is a reported example, it is impossible to determine the exact problem; however, given the situation, the root of the problem is almost certainly locutionary, and possibly due to several factors. First, by his own admission, the joke-teller was inebriated, which may well have interfered with his ability to articulate clearly. Although he reports having cried, "Ricotta stigmata!" his actual delivery may have been slurred and incomprehensible to the hearers, creating a

performance issue. Similarly, many of the hearers were likely in a similar state of intoxication, and therefore may not have been able to process his attempt at humor. Finally, this particular social situation is typically marked by music, which is often loud, and perhaps raucous (drinking) games. These in turn usually force interlocutors to raise their voices, and all of these factors lead to a loud environment. This noise may have prevented even those party-goers who were near-by and sober when the joke was made to be unable to discern what was said. The speaker also reported that no one attempted to find out what he had said, essentially ignoring his outburst. It seems likely that non-essential, but serious information conveyed in this same context and not heard would also be ignored.

Another reported example illustrates the failure of an attempt at humor because the speaker was too soft-spoken:

Example 4.2

01 Harumi: he tends to murmur, so I usually cannot hear what he says. and at

02   the time as always I missed some part of his talk but it seems like I

03   failed to hear his joke? and his face was like the face that somebody

04   shows just after he has finished a joke.

05 Nancy: o:h

06 Harumi: when I saw his face uh it's like he just said something funny.

07 Nancy: like he's waiting?

08 Harumi: yeah HHH my reaction I was like, "my god" I didn't /   / to him. then

09   I noticed I was supposed to laugh. but I guess it was kind of too late.

10   and I thought that it was not nice that I didn't smile so I just like like

11   made /   / smile HHH. /   / or something.
(Bell and Attardo 2010: 430)

Because she was unable to clearly hear it, Harumi identifies her interlocutor's prior utterance as having been intended as humor, albeit belatedly, from his expression. However, given that she could not hear what was said, she was unable to process it through her humor competence. Despite the failure of the joke at this point, Harumi opted to smile, feigning appreciation of the humor she had not heard, rather than initiate repair. Interestingly, the problem of not hearing portions of this speaker's utterances was apparently routine, as Harumi introduced

the problem by noting that "as always" (line 2) she had missed something. This type of failure with respect to a joke, however, is presented as an exceptional situation, as it is introduced with "but," when she notes in line 02 that this time it was a joke that she did not hear. Although we do not know how Harumi responded when similar problems arose in serious discourse, we can see here that she feels an obligation to respond and to do so in a particular way ("I was supposed to laugh," line 09). Politeness comes in to play here, since while missing portions of a serious utterance may not matter, "it was not nice" (line 10) for Harumi to not smile and thus to fail to acknowledge the attempt at humor. The expectation of a normative response of laughter or smiling is very strong. As soon as Harumi recognized it was a joke, she apparently felt a sense of shock ("my god" line 08) and obligation to respond that she may not have felt had the utterance been serious. Thus, while the locutionary failure in this case is easily found in both serious and non-serious interaction, the types of reactions engendered by each do not appear to be the same.

Finally, one locutionary problem does occur that is largely specific to humorous talk: This is when the speaker is laughing too hard to articulate clearly, thus making it impossible for the audience to process the joke.[8] The extract below is taken from a video posted on YouTube, and the poster describes the content as "My girlfriend tries saying a joke but fails completely." The video is two minutes and 59 seconds long and opens with the teller, who I call Ana, laughing, apparently from having already attempted the joke, but failed because she could not help breaking down in laughter. She continues laughing almost incessantly throughout the recording while she makes several more attempts to tell the joke. Three other interlocutors are present: her boyfriend, who is making the recording and who I call Bob, and a male and female. The male does not speak in this extract. The female, who I call Carol, is the one who the joke is primarily addressed to, because the response is gendered and requires a female addressee. In the first part of the video all three try various tactics to help Ana complete her joke. They encourage her, ask questions and make comments about the nature of the joke, and try to change to a more serious subjects so that Ana can begin to control her laughter. However, they also express mild, teasing frustration at her inability to tell the joke, with Carol at one point chanting, "This joke sucks! This joke sucks!" In the interest of space, the transcription, greatly simplified in terms of aspiration to maintain readability, begins at 2:22, when Ana initiates what will ultimately be a complete telling of the joke:

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8 This may also be a problem that occurs in hysterical or maniacal episodes.

Example 4.3

01 Ana: ok. are you Africahhhhhh (breaks down laughing)

02 Bob: oh god that one?

03 Ana: ((are you African)) (1)

04 Carol: no:?

05 Ana: ☺ 'cause you're a frickin' biHHH[°tch° ☺ (continues laughing)

06 Bob: [ha ha HA::::

07 Carol: /what what/ what?

08 Bob: she couldn't finish it!

09 Ana: ((are you African))

10 Carol: no

11 Ana: 'cause you're a frickin' biHHitchHHHH (continues laughing)

12 Bob: ☺ noHO::! finish it! ☺

13 Ana: ☺ are you- it's /   / ☺

14 Carol: a fuckin' bitch?

15 Bob: [yea:h

16 Ana: [no ☺ are you African. ☺

17 Carol: no:

18 Ana: 'cause you're a frickin' bitch HUH

19 Bob: huh ☺ 'cause you're a frickin' bitch ☺

20 Ana: ☺ 'cause *Af*rican, a *frick*in' ☺

21 Carol: oh::::: (in recognition)

22 Ana: ☺ you don't get it it's funny:::: ☺

23 Bob: ah hahhh

24 Carol: you think that's funny?! [o::h no (disappointed)

25 Bob: [rea:ction (turns the camera from Ana toward

26   Carol, who is shaking her head and waving her hand dismissively as

27   she turns away from the camera)
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ut02u8TMgVk, retrieved 9/13/2013)

Ana's first attempt at the punch line (in this extract) occurs in line 05, but her laughter renders it incomprehensible to Carol. Bob, who knows the joke, laughs and informs Carol that Ana was not able to complete the punch line. Her second attempt, in line 11, is still deemed unfinished by Bob, although it is clearer and Carol is able to guess "fucking bitch" as part of the punch line. Bob confirms this, probably since although "fucking" is not the word used, "frickin'" is a common euphemism for it, which suggests that Carol has successfully decoded the surface features of the joke. Ana, on the other hand, simultaneously disconfirms Carol's interpretation and launches into a third telling, which finally results in a clear rendering of the punch line (line 18), which she follows with an exposition of the pun in line 20. The final portion of this example will be discussed below. At this point, it is important to recognize that the initial two attempts at telling this joke failed simply because Ana's laughter prevented her from fully articulating the final words.

Experience attests to the many times that an attempt at humor may initially fail due to locutionary problems, but then succeed when repair is initiated in the same way as it is when such troubles occur in serious discourse. That is, the speaker self-corrects, or the hearer signals the trouble with, for instance, "What?" or "Sorry?" As these examples suggest, however, additional types of responses might be more common in humorous failures of this sort. Humor may be more prone to simply being ignored. If the hearer has recognized the utterance as an attempt to amuse, he or she might not seek clarification, since humor is does not normally communicate necessary information. Furthermore, there is a perception that humor that is not immediately grasped is not worth pursuing, perhaps due to the concern for ruining a joke through repetition or explanation, even though the problem was purely locutionary. Humor that was not fully perceived may also be prone to receiving a response that is polite, seeking only to save face for both speaker and hearers rather than rectify the miscommunication, again due to its non-essential nature. And, as the final example illustrates, although laughter might seem to be something that would lend itself to a more playful telling, excessive laughter seems to try the patience of the audience and may ultimately lead to the failure of the joke.

4.3 Linguistic rules

When humor fails due to linguistic factors (limited here to phonology, morphosyntax, and semantics), the issue may be one of either competence or performance on the part of either interlocutor. Both speakers and hearers may lack the knowledge of the structure of the language being used that is necessary to either construct or interpret the humor. Performance problems relating to linguistic rules may be due to memory lapses or slips of the tongue or ear, for example. Although performance-related problems can occur with any speaker, competence-related problems will be more often found in speakers whose knowledge is not yet fully developed, such as second language learners and children.

4.3.1 Phonology

The failure of humor due to phonological problems appears to be very rare. Example 4.3, above, seems to be a case in which phonology, at least to some extent, interferes with joke comprehension. First, it is important to recall that Ana's uncontrollable laughter resulted in the joke's telling being extended over several minutes. The laughter may have contributed to unreasonably high expectations for amusement on the part of the hearers and the multiple attempts may have reduced the element of surprise and spontaneity. Still, phonology appears to have also contributed to the lack of success. Following Ana's second delivery of the punch line (line 11), Carol is apparently able to interpret its meaning, as she performs a comprehension check, asking "a fuckin' bitch?" in line 14. Although this reveals her understanding of the meaning of the phrase, the humor is lost, because it is only the euphemism "frickin'" that creates a pun with "African." Ana articulates this clearly in line 20, when she isolates these elements and repeats them, emphasizing their different stress for clarification ("*Af*rican, a *frick*in'"). This display seems to finally help Carol understand the incongruity in joke, although she does not appreciate it. In this instance performance is largely the issue for both participants. Ana's delivery is imperfect as, it seems, is Carol's reception.

    This is the sole miscommunication based on phonology in the present data set; however, it is easy to imagine that a not-fully-proficient interlocutor might have trouble with other aspects of phonology. Websites for English language teachers are replete with jokes that can be used to expose learners to specific facets of the language, including drawing their attention to patterns of phonology. Consider, for instance, this joke:

Example 4.4

A man went to see his psychiatrist. "When I wake up, I keep on finding that I have black lines all down my body." "I know the problem," said the psychiatrist. "You're a psychopath."
(http://videoweb.nie.edu.sg/phonetic/phonetics/jokes.htm:)

Assuming that the hearer is familiar with both lexical items, the humor lies in being able to identify the phonetic similarities between "psychopath" and "cycle path." More specifically, a speaker must know that the sound /l/ varies in English. The word "leap," for instance, contains a "bright" /l/ sound, pronounced clearly and in the front of the mouth. "Cycle" contains a "dark" /l/, which is pronounced in the back of the mouth and is much closer to the vowel sound in the middle syllable of "psychopath." Individuals whose pronunciation is different from this (whose linguistic competence does not include this variation) will likely have a very difficult time processing the joke.

Linking, or liaison, between words is the phonological process that constructs the humor in the next joke:

Example 4.5

Two boll-weevils grew up together in the cotton fields of Alabama. One of them went on to become a high-flying lawyer in New York. The other stayed behind in Alabama. The second was the lesser of two weevils.
(http://videoweb.nie.edu.sg/phonetic/phonetics/jokes.htm:)

The rounded vowel sound /u/ that comes at the end of the word "two" encourages the insertion of the glide /w/ before the vowel sound /i/ in "evils." This is similar to the use of "an" before a word that begins with a vowel sound, such as "an icicle," but is not encoded in the written system. This sound insertion renders the phrase "two evils" virtually identical-sounding to "two weevils," hence the humor. A speaker, such as an second language learner of English, who is unfamiliar with this linking process (unconscious to most native speakers) and who tends to carefully articulate each word may be unable to perform or to decipher this joke.

4.3.2 Morphosyntax

As with failures of humor due to problems constructing or interpreting phonology, failures involving morphosyntax were difficult to find in every day interac-

tion. However, for a project seeking to examine the ways that people respond to humor that they did not understand, I used a joke that relied on morphosyntax for its humor, and thus collected numerous examples of failure in this realm (the results of that project are summarized in Chapter 6 and are also available in Bell 2013). Here is the joke, which was also presented in Chapter 1:

Example 4.6

Every time the mail carrier comes to this one house a huge dog comes bounding out and jumps on him. He puts his paws on the mail carrier's shoulders and licks his face and sometimes he almost knocks him over. One day, the mail carrier comes to the house and walks into the yard, but there's no dog. Next day, same thing. The third day the owner's in the yard and the mail carrier, a little anxious about whether the dog's ok or not asks, "How's (house) the dog?" The owner replies, "I did."

This joke was ideal for collecting examples of humor that failed due to hearers' inability to understand it, as most people were only able to retrieve the more common parsing of the sound sequence [hauz], which gave them "I did" as a response to a question about the dog's welfare: How's the dog? In order to understand the joke, the hearer must be able to instead construct a truncated question that asks whether the owner put the dog in the house. The question uses "house" in its less common verb form and drops the initial do-construction that often introduces such a question: (Did you) house the dog?

One spontaneous example of failure deriving from imperfect knowledge of morphosyntax is taken from a classroom of college students enrolled in second year Spanish. As language learners, their competence in Spanish syntax is still developing and thus gaps remain. As the excerpt begins, the teacher is listing examples of adverbial phrases that trigger the use of the subjunctive. All of these structures use the form "que"[9] (a word that rhymes with the English "hay"), but when he makes a joke based on this structure, the students' lack of knowledge of the possible forms prevents them from immediately understanding it:

Example 4.7

01   T   *si, a menos que, a fin de que*

02   S   okay

---

9 *a menos que* = unless, *a fin de que* = in order to/that, *antes de que* = before, *para que* = so that

03 T um *antes de que, para que*

04 S okay

05 T *o que?* no, no, no

06 S no?

07 T it was a bad joke

08 Ss (laughter)

09 T she was like *antes de que, para que*, and she's like ok, and I'm like no "ok"

10   (o que) no

11 Ss (laughter)
(Adapted from Sterling and Loewen 2013)

As the teacher lists the structures using "que," one student backchannels with "okay" (lines 02 and 04). The teacher seizes upon the second turn using "okay" to make a joke based on the phonological similarity between that word and the structures he has been presenting. In line 05 he playfully takes up the student's contribution as an addition to the list, reimagining "okay" as "o que," a possibility that he immediately rejects. Although his misunderstanding is deliberate, his rejection is accurate, because although "o" is a legitimate lexical item in Spanish (meaning "or"), "o que" could not be included in this list. Although the student's turn in line 06 draws attention to conversational trouble, it does not make clear the source of her confusion. Is she uncertain as to whether or not "o que" is a possible Spanish phrase or has she heard "okay" and is confused as to why the teacher would reject that backchannel? In any case, the humor is not taken up by any members of the class, and the instructor begins to conduct repair in line 07, by explaining his utterance as "a bad joke." Once the intent has been retroactively named, the joke succeeds, with members laughing in line 08, and again after an explanation is issued in line 11.

4.3.3 Semantics

While a native speaker's knowledge of the rules of phonology and morphosyntax are learned and largely set fairly early, the lexicon continues to develop throughout the lifespan. We add to our vocabularies as we encounter jargon specific to new activities we engage in, learning words related to our profession, or to new sports and hobbies we try. In addition, meanings shift and new connotations build

up around words as we gain more and varied experiences. Thus, whereas the last two areas of language are those in which failures were more likely to be found among second language users and children, the semantic realm finds similar problems across all language users. The source of the communicative trouble at this level may only be hearer-based, but can also derive from the speaker not judging the audience's background knowledge well.

The first example of the failure of humor due to semantics involves a joke told in a college calculus class designed especially for students who showed promise in scientific research. Here, just as the professor approaches this group of students to observe their work, James attempts to tell a math joke. (Each @ symbol here represents a single pulse of laughter, following the notation that was used in the original transcript.):

Example 4.8

01 James: what do you call an eigensheep?

02 Zoe: [@

03 James: [a la:mbda. (Zoe, Morrisse, Harry, and the professor smile)

(...)

28 Harry: [@@

29 Zoe: [@@

30 Harry: oh Zo[e.

31 Zoe: [and I don't get it at a@@@ll.

32 Harry: you don't get it?

33 Zoe: no@.

34 Harry: what don't you get? It's not la:mb, du:h, it's la:mbda:.

35 Zoe: @ I@ do@n't kno@w what- I don't know what ei@genvalue i@s.

36 Harry: [o@@h, m@e@ neither.

37 Zoe: [.h! @@

38 Harry: [it's still funny though.

39 Zoe: [@.h!
(Adapted from Bucholtz et al. 2011: 182–184)

Bucholtz et al. (2011) explain the joke thus:

> The humor derives from the fact that the Greek character λ (lambda) is used to represent the eigenvalues of a matrix. The joke relies on a pun between the phonological similarity of *lamb* and the first syllable of *lambda*; in most entextualizations, the riddle is *What do you call a young* (or *baby*) *eigensheep?*, a phrasing that provides a clearer motivation for the punchline (p. 183).

James presented the answer to the joke as the Greek character. In part of the transcript that is not shown here, the teaching assistant returns and suggests that a better delivery of the punch line would be "A lamb, duh." When Zoe professes to have not gotten the joke (line 31), Harry contrasts the two possibilities for her (line 34) for clarification. This, however, is not Zoe's concern, as in line 35 she asserts that she does not know "what eigenvalue is," which prompts Harry to confess that he does not either. Interestingly, both students fail to fully understand the joke, but arrive at opposite conclusions about what this means for their appreciation. Harry seems to feel that he understands enough to appreciate the humor, whereas Zoe, despite having extrapolated the term "eigenvalue" from the joke's "eigensheep," does not claim understanding.

As noted above, a lack of shared connotation may also affect how humor is received. Below Frank, a native of Japan, describes how his classmate playfully referred to him as a "guru":

Example 4.9

Frank: Karen asked me if she can call me guru, huh, huh, guru, I don't know why. she just want to call me guru, huh, huh, guru. so but I got upset. [...] because guru, the word guru in Japan it has a special meaning, if you are related to a cult guru, which is a very bad thing.
(Bell and Attardo 2010: 432)

Frank reported this incident as an attempt at humor, but one that he could not appreciate. In this context, it seems that his friend was using the term to teasingly describe Frank as very knowledgeable. Although Frank was aware of the complimentary denotation of the term "guru," he associated it with the leader of the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo, which was responsible for using sarin gas in an attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995. Thus, he found the application of the term disturbing, as only the negative Japanese connotations resonated strongly with him, preventing him from being able to appreciate the humor.

Humor whose failure is triggered by linguistic problems seems likely to be treated similarly to serious failures of the same sort if the trouble is in the per-

formance. In these cases, as in Ana's delivery of her "Are you African?" joke, the trouble is apparent in Carol's question "a fucking bitch?" which prompts repair by Ana, in the form of a clearer delivery. Problems that spring from competence, on the other hand, may be treated differently from those found in similar, serious interaction. When interlocutor competencies differs significantly, as in talk with children or second language users, the attempt to joke may be abandoned without clarification sought by either party. In Frank's case, his interlocutor was not even aware of his dismay at having been referred to as a guru. Recognizing that she was attempting to joke, he did not see it as important to engage her on the topic. The specific interactional conditions, of course, can affect this. Teachers, such as the one who attempted to joke in Example 4.7, are responsible for communicating clearly and, in this case, taking care to point out particular language structures so that their students can learn. Thus, it was important for this teacher to explain his joke.

4.4 Ambiguity

Commonly exploited for humor, lexical and syntactic ambiguity can also trigger the failure of humor when the ambiguity is not recognized or is misinterpreted. It can be more difficult than usual, in the case of ambiguity, to name one participant as the primary source of the trouble. The speaker may be unaware of having constructed an ambiguous utterance or, if the ambiguity is intended and has been employed for humorous purposes, it is possible that the speaker did not adequately contextualize the ambiguity. The latter is the case in the following example, which illustrates a failed attempt at humor using lexical ambiguity. In this situation a husband and wife are walking in the woods and the husband has constructed an imaginary scenario in which he plans to take up hunting in order to extract revenge on all the deer that are staring at him from behind the trees:

Example 4.10

01	Wife:	those eyes!
02	Husband:	their doey eyes
03	Wife:	I could make you a cookie
04	Husband:	of a deer?
05	Wife:	those doughy eyes

06 Husband: (does not acknowledge that he has perceived a joke and contin-

07   ues to talk about what he will do to the deer)

The initial joke made by the wife in line 03 is a rather oblique attempt to exploit the ambiguity of "doey/doughy eyes." The ambiguity is not recognized by the husband, whose request for clarification indicates some interactional trouble, but does not demonstrate that he has recognized her utterance as an attempt at humor. The wife's simple repetition (line 05) of the phrase previously used by the husband is not sufficient to draw his attention to the ambiguity, and he continues to elaborate on his fantasy, while she abandons the joke.

In the doey/doughy eyes example, it is possible to argue that the lexical ambiguity was not identified by the hearer because the humor was overly implicit. In other words, the lack of contextualization cues may have contributed as much to the failure of the joke as did the husband's inability to recognize the ambiguity. In a more high-profile instance of failure due to lexical ambiguity, the fact that an attempt at humor was being enacted was made very clear. This 2011 interview of the Dalai Lama by Australian Today show host Karl Stefanovic had been quite light-hearted throughout. For instance, Stefanovic had asked the Dalai Lama what makes him laugh and the Dalai Lama had, several times, initiated humor. This excerpt, in which Stefanovic attempts to tell a formulaic joke to the Dalai Lama (DL, below; there is also a translator present) comes at the end of the interview, and thus after the two had already shared a great deal of laughter:

Example 4.11

01 Stef: so the Dalai Lama walks into a pizza shop

02 DL: (looks to translator and speaks Nepalese, apparently asking for trans-
              lation)

03 Trans: (provides translation – the word "pizza" can be heard)

04 Stef: pizza?

05 DL: pizza [shop (nodding) yes

06 Stef: [yeah pizza pizza shop. and says, can you make me *one* with

07   everything

08 DL: (1) mm (.) (puzzled look, shakes head, looks to interpreter, smiling)

09   what's that?

10 Trans: (speaking Nepalese)

11 DL: (looks back at interviewer) ah yes

12 Stef: do you know what I mean? (laughing) can you make me one (puts

13   palms together in front of his face, as in prayer)

14 DL: ho

15 Stef: with everything. (gestures with both hands to make one circle) (laughs)

16 DL: ah theoretically possible

17 Stef: oh I knew that wouldn't work (puts hand over eyes)

18 DL: (hearty laughter)
(http://today.ninemsn.com.au/videoindex.aspx)

The first disruption occurs when the Dalai Lama requires a translation for part of the question; however, this is minor and appears to be quickly resolved. In line 06, Stefanovic delivers the punch line, articulating quite clearly, perhaps in response to the initial need for translation, and emphasizing the word "one," upon which the joke hinges. Here "one" can be interpreted as a pronoun, indicating a pizza, or as an adjective indicating a unified, harmonious, single entity. Understood in the context of a pizzeria, the phrase "make me one with everything" would be a request for a pizza with all the available toppings, while a spiritual interpretation would involve a request for personal peace and enlightenment. The Dalai Lama again turns to the translator and receives an answer; however, when he turns back to the interviewer (line 11) his response of "ah yes" does not show that he has oriented to the humorous nature of the punch line, and the token instead seems to be given as a backchannel response, as if he is expecting Stefanovic to continue. Stefanovic checks the Dalai Lama's understanding and repeats the punch line slowly, and this time accompanying each interpretation with clarifying gestures. The Dalai Lama's response in line 16 does not indicate recognition of ambiguity, as it only addresses the spiritual interpretation of the punch line, and Stefanovic subsequently admits defeat. Interestingly, the host's resignation receives strong laughter from the Dalai Lama, suggesting that he did not forget or misunderstand that Stefanovic's narrative was intended to be humorous, even though he was not able to understand the humor.

Where the previous two examples demonstrated the failure of humor that relied on lexical ambiguity, we return to mundane talk for an example of an unsuccessful joke using syntactic ambiguity. In what follows, two students have been discussing a writing assignment for one of their courses, and the transcript

opens with student S initiating a topic change to inform student K about a change in the class meeting time:

Example 4.12

01 S: ºyeah.º anyway you know the (1.3) the time maybe change (0.7) on Monday

02   we- we start class at nine (0.9)

03 K: [yes

04 S: [you know?

05 K: I know.

06 S: yes and maybe we- we wake up early hahhahhahhahhahhah[hah

07 K: [okay so you

08   have er:::: (0.9) y- (1.4) you worry about it? ºhuhhhuhhuhº=

09 S: =yeah I worry about the long paper of the:

10 K: no no no you worry about the:: (1.0) waking up so early? huhhh[huhhuhhuh

11 S: [no I just

12   joking hahhahhah
(Adapted from Kaur 2011: 106)

The attempt at humor occurs in line 08, where K asks whether S is worried about "it." The intended referent for "it" was "waking up early," but S intentionally misinterprets "it" to refer to the assignment (line 09). K, not recognizing this as an attempt at humor initiates repair in line 10, naming the intended referent. S, then, also executes repair, naming the intended interpretation of the utterance in line 09 as a joke. S seems to have recognized that play with the ambiguity of "it" might be challenging for the listener. Clearly, the most obvious interpretation was "waking up early," as the nearest prior referent. Had S wanted to express concern about the early class meeting time an elliptical response would have sufficed (e.g., "Yeah, I do."). Thus, S's utterance is framed as humor at least partly through the use of the full noun phrase referring to the earlier referent "the long paper." In this case the hearer seized on unintended ambiguity in the prior speaker's utterance to create humor that then went unrecognized.

These examples suggest that, like non-playful conversational dissonance that is triggered by problems of lexical or syntactic ambiguity, similar such playful miscommunications will be treated in a variety of ways, depending on

the context and interlocutor goals. In the first example, the ambiguity was not recognized and the joke was not deemed worth clarifying, and was therefore abandoned, a tactic which may, again, be more common to humorous talk. In the next two extracts, however, the misunderstanding based on the ambiguity took a central place in the conversation and thus required acknowledgement and repair. The close relationship between ambiguity and humor (both intentional and unintentional) further suggests that the treatment of misunderstandings based on it might be very similar. Ambiguity often triggers humor, either unintentionally because it created a misunderstanding (as in Example 4.12 above, or because it was unintentionally introduced and deliberately misunderstood (as in Example 3.1 in Chapter 3). Although ambiguity certainly creates non-playful miscommunications and repairs, it may also be a trigger of humor and play much more frequently than are the other types of conversational troubles discussed here, and the types of negotiations that result may tend toward the playful more often than in the other cases.

4.5 Pragmatic force

When humor fails due to miscommunication involving pragmatic force, the utterance is interpreted literally. Thus what is meant implicitly as a joke is instead understood only in its explicit sense as, for instance, a suggestion, warning, or compliment. Irony may be particularly susceptible to such misinterpretations, as in the following example. Here two strangers sitting together on a train begin chatting and A, who is reading a newspaper, remarks about one of the articles:

Example 4.13

01   A: listen, it says here that sixty per cent of women are still unemployed in

02   this country!

03   B: yeah! keep them in the kitchen where they belong!

04   A: do you think all women should be housewives?

05   B: of course not! I was only joking, for god's sake!
(Adapted from Yus 1998: 405)

In response to A's factual comment, B offers an enthusiastic, but ironical assessment, which constructs him at sexist. Although A reacts to the literal content, by asking a question, A also leaves open the possibility that B's utterance may

have been offered non-seriously. Furthermore, this move allows B to claim non-serious status of the utterance even if that was not the original intention, as a way of maintaining cordial interaction between these two strangers. B's vehement denial and explicit recontextualization of the utterance work to repair the miscommunication (line 05).

One potential difference between miscommunications of this sort in serious vs. playful discourse and their subsequent negotiation is that humor often draws on scandalous or shocking topics. This makes the risk of misinterpretation of humorous intent resulting in an escalation of the repair into a more aggressive key a real possibility. The existence of formulaic sequences (e.g. I was just/only kidding/joking/being facetious) for quickly repairing these types of miscommunications suggests not only that these are common enough problems for linguistic formulas to have developed in response, but also further supports the notion that these misunderstandings can threaten social harmony. Notice that the sequence normally employs the minimizers "only" or "just" (the latter being frequent enough to have been incorporated into the internet acronym for the verbal formula: JK for "just kidding"), again indicating that this phrase is used in response to a prior utterance that has been perceived as inflammatory. Of course, not all attempts at humor that fail in this way will provoke the hearer and require a mitigating response.

4.6 Message form

This broad category captures humor that is unsuccessful because of its form. This may include the language(s) or register(s) used, the channel of communication (spoken, electronic, sky-writing, etc.), or the particular linguistic forms selected for a certain effect, such as a rhyme. An example of particularly poor joke delivery occurred in 2013 at the opening of the trial of George Zimmerman in Florida. The months leading up to the case were emotionally charged for many Americans, who saw Zimmerman's killing of Trayvon Martin, an African-American teenager, as a sad comment on the state of race relations, as well as gun laws, in the U.S. In this atmosphere, Zimmerman's defense attorney, Don West, opted to open the trial with formulaic joke:

Example 4.14

01　West:　sometimes (.) you have to laugh (.) to keep from crying. (1) so let me

02　　　　　(.) uh eh- at considerable risk let me (.) let me say, I'd like to tell you a

03   little joke. I know how that (.) may sound a bit *weird* (.) in this context

04   under these circumstances. (.) but I think you're the perfect audience

05   for it (.) as long as you uh don't- if you don't like it or you don't think

06   it's funny or inappropriate that you don't (.) hold it against

07   Mr. *Zim*merman you can hold it against me if you want, but not Mr.

08   Zimmerman. I have your as*sur*ance you won't, here's how it goes.

09   knock knock (.) who's there. George Zimmerman. George Zimmerman

10   who (.) all right good (.) you're on the jury. (3) nothin'?!

11 Aud: (laughter)

12 West: that's funny. (.) after what you folks have been through the last two or

13   three weeks

(http://thinkprogress.org/politics/2013/06/24/2202081/george-zimmermans-law-yer-opens-trial-with-a-knock-knock-joe/?mobile=nc)

As acknowledged by West, the telling of this joke, at this moment, and to this group of people is fraught with potential pitfalls, and as such it is impossible to identify what aspects of the joke caused each member of the courtroom to withhold laughter. It does appear, however, that the actual delivery of the joke is likely to have been involved. First, West's tone is far from animated and he pauses noticeably after almost every phrase. The effect is not a deadpan delivery, which might have been more successful, but one that seems to be an awkward attempt to incorporate the communicative demands of the courtroom for seriousness and clarity into the telling of a joke. Next, the introduction to the joke (which lasts much longer than the joke itself) prepares the jury for something that is not only unusual ("weird" in line 03) and thus potentially risky (line 02), but also, most surprisingly for the telling of a joke, not funny. West asserts that they may not be amused by the joke or may find it inappropriate (line 06) and even suggests that they might want to "hold it against" either him or his defendant (lines 06–07). In all, this is not an auspicious beginning for the joke itself. Once the joke has been told, three full seconds of silence follow (line 10), and it is only West's exclamation over their lack of response that receives laughter.

    The next example of humor that does not succeed due to a problem with the message form comes from reader comments in an article about English as a lingua franca posted on the Times Higher Education website (Reisz 2012). The piece reported on a talk by applied linguist Jennifer Jenkins, who appealed to

those in higher education to recognize how the widespread use of English has changed its norms, particularly among international users. She explains that many non-native users of English no longer look to native speakers for their linguistic models and that their versions of English should be accepted on an equal basis. The first reader to comment offered a critique of Jenkins' view, couched as a joke:

Example 4.15

01	Michael:	I want that Jennifer Jenkins stops to say these things. My French
02		students tell to me that they like very much correct English.
03	ali:	Hi Michael, I think your sentence will disappoint your students
04		because even your sentence is NOT "very much correct English".
05		'Tell' as a verb does not require 'to' following it. You should have
06		better written 'my students say to me.' to make them much happier.
07		For me, it does not matter as I am focused more on the
08		communicative side of what you wrote rather than linguistic forms
09		used. (...)
10	Michael:	@ali
11		Thanks for reading my comment, but unfortunately – and surpris-
12		ingly, if you are a native English speaker – you didn't see the joke.
13	ali:	@Michael
14		I am a non-native speaker and user of English. Sorry but I could not
15		see any joke or failed to see it but that does not change my stand
16		point here. (...)
17	Michael:	@ali
18		I was too brusque in my reply to you above, for which I apologise.
19		I guessed from your writing that you were not a native speaker of

20   English and I should have explained the joke and not left you in the

21   dark.
(http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/a-word-of-advices-let-speakers-
of-englishes-do-it-their-way-uk-told/419935.article)

Michael's joke relies on the ability to recognize both the errors that he included in his message, as well as the fact that they were put there deliberately. This detail could be discerned from his mention of "my students," which suggests that he is an English teacher, which would in turn lead the reader to expect that he would be able to eliminate those forms from his English if he so desired. In his reply, Ali notes at least one error, however, he does not recognize that it was a deliberate part of the message and earnestly suggests a correction. He goes on to disagree with Michael's critique (parts of the dialog have not been included here). Michael then initiates repair (line 12), but only by identifying his post as a joke. In the ensuing negotiation, ali confirms his failure to identify the post as an attempt at humor, and Michael apologizes and explains the errors he inserted (not shown here). Michael's choice of form for his humor – deliberate errors – was particularly challenging given the medium of a website's comments forum. In face to face communication his status as a native speaker of English would have been made clear, and a hearer would have recognized, perhaps through the staging of a very hesitant delivery or a clearly feigned French accent, that this was play. The electronic forum, however, does not easily accommodate such markers, making interaction among strangers even more open to misinterpretation. Thus, in this instance the form of the humor contributed in (at least) two ways to its failure.

4.7 Framing/keying

The indeterminate and often layered framing of talk as serious, non-serious, or something in between the two is an important resource in human interaction. It allows us to calibrate messages to our context and audience, creating nuanced meanings. It also provides a way to save face for both speaker and hearer, smoothing over potentially uncomfortable social situations. Of course, indeterminate framing can also lead to trouble if the key of an utterance is not clear. With regard to humor, failure can occur when an attempt to amuse is not recognized or when a serious utterance is interpreted as non-serious.

A false negative identification of humor can occur due to inadequate construction or interpretation of a play frame. In the extract below, a BBC reporter

interviews the president of Jefferson County Commission, in Alabama. Corruption among city officials had left the county with $3.2 million of debt that the current president was attempting to resolve:

Example 4.16

01 Reporter: why did you take this job on

02 Interviewee: stupidity. (1) that was my humor. I thought you would

03   [(.) laugh HUH! um I've *been*] in

04 Reporter: [(exhale)   °huh huh huh°]

05 Interviewee: public service for the last (.) six years and I guess I should back-

06   track for a moment
(BBC Business Weekly, 3/4/2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p00f17ll/
Business_Weekly_Sewage_Bankruptcy_and_Strikes/)

The interviewee delivers his response to the reporter regarding why he had agreed to undertake this job in a completely deadpan manner, apparently relying on the content to contextualize his utterance as humorous. He allows ample time – one full second – for her to react before initiating self-repair by explicitly naming his response as humor. His explanation is issued in a serious tone (note the falling intonation in line 02) and the reporter withholds laughter while he speaks. It is not until he issues a single laugh particle (line 03) that she finally joins in with quiet laughter as he returns to her question, providing a serious response. Given the very challenging situation that the interviewee and his county are in, it is not surprising that the hearer's laughter would be absent or minimal. Although different from friends commiserating, this clearly falls under "troubles talk," where we can expect to see speakers making light of their difficulties, while their interlocutors withhold laughter (Jefferson 1984). Furthermore, given that these two are strangers and thus unfamiliar with each other's humor styles – as well as speaking by telephone – makes it even more likely that a joke might not be recognized.

False positives can also occur, where a joke is perceived when none was intended, as demonstrated in the next example, which also comes from a radio interview. Here the host, Jennifer Ludden is interviewing a professor of legal ethics, Steven Lubet, on the topic of judicial bias. A moment of confusion follows his answer about how judges recuse themselves from cases:

Example 4.17

01 Ludden: and then who uh who decides I mean is it always the j:udge who

02   recuses him or herself is there someone who decides fo:r them?

03   w- whether this is a legitimate uh concern and the- they should not

04   hear that case?

05 Lubet: tha- that's a pretty sensitive issue actually and it differs from state

06   to state. uh almost everywhere uh motions to disqualify a judge go

07   initially to the judge herself (.) or himself. um then in in many

08   places many states the motion would be referred to another judge

09   which seems to make a lot of sHEHense doesn't it.

10 Ludden: eh [heh uh y- well eh- uh are you being facetious [or no

11 Lubet: [u:m   [no!

12 Ludden: no.=

13 Lubet: =I think it [makes a lot of sense

14 Ludden: [yes it ☺does make sense☺

15 Lubet: it makes a lot of sense t- to to send a motion like that to somebody

16   else

(Talk of the Nation, July 19, 2012, http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.htm
l?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=157052848&m=157052841)

The reporter is clearly uncertain as to how to react to the professor's answer to her
question, as evidenced by the disfluency at the beginning of her response and the
explicit request for him to name his intentions. The conversational trouble seems
to have two sources. First, the professor inserts a laugh particle at the end of his
response (line 09), a technique often used for inviting shared laughter (Jefferson
1979). Laughter is of course used in many ways in interaction, however, and here
it seems to be signaling that he is stating an obvious truth. The content of his
utterance seems to complicate the interpretation. He employs a formulaic phrase
that is often used ironically: "That makes a lot of sense." When combined with
the laugh particle, the sarcastic interpretation of this phrase may have become
more salient than the serious use. When Ludden initiates repair, he emphatically
denies having intended to be facetious (line 11) and repeats his assertion that it

"makes a lot of sense." Having established that this was not intended as humor, conversational harmony is restored as the two repeat the phrase in an overlapping chorus, rather than by sharing joint laughter, which we would expect if Ludden's intent had been to joke. It is worth noting that here again we have interaction between strangers. To some extent, this is likely a bias of the data set, which is somewhat weighted toward public interaction. However, it seems considerably more likely that these problems of framing would occur between strangers or acquaintances than with intimates who are familiar with each other's humor styles. In addition, both interviews addressed serious topics, where humor might be less expected, again contributing to the confusion.

As was noted in Chapter 3 (section 3.3.1.6), constructing and interpreting serious and non-serious frames is a considerable challenge to interlocutors (Sacks 1972, Schegloff 1987). While lexical and syntactic ambiguity have been identified as major contributors to miscommunication in serious discourse, it is likely that problems with keying are the most common reasons that humor fails in conversation. It is the very indeterminacy of serious/playful keying, however, that makes humorous talk both a very risky and a very socially useful mode of communication. The cues that are used to fold a serious and potentially face-threatening message into a humorous package allow the hearer to choose which aspect of the utterance to respond to, as well as allowing the speaker to deny one of the two messages. Thus, although this indeterminate framing clearly contributes to miscommunications, it should be viewed as a resource, rather than a problem.

4.8 Summary

The potential triggers of communicative failure that were discussed in this chapter could all be found in both serious and non-serious discourse. As such, the negotiation and repair of these failed attempts at humor were similar or even identical to those of miscommunications of the same type that occur during serious talk. At the same time, however, the status of humorous discourse does seem to create some differences in the way that failure is managed. First, it seems to be more likely that interlocutors will forego repair, perhaps because, in comparison to transactional utterances, humor is perceived as unimportant. Most of the triggers discussed here do not preclude the hearer from recognizing an utterance as an attempt to amuse. If this intent is identified, the hearer may simply opt to move the conversation forward, rather than initiate repair. From the speaker's perspective, if it is apparent that humorous intent has been recognized, but there has been no uptake from the hearer, repair may not be initiated due to the general social sanction against belaboring a humorous point. At the same time, however,

humor is often not at all frivolous and in fact serves a vital social function, communicating sensitive information indirectly. Humor is thus extremely important for the management of relationships and although the imprecise framing of utterances as serious/non-serious/semi-serious may contribute to miscommunications, it also functions as an important communicative resource. An utterance that was initially construed as serious can be renegotiated as humorous and vice versa, if the reaction of the hearer is not what the speaker desired. Thus, this chapter has demonstrated that although many of the triggers of failed humor are the same as those that trigger failure in serious talk, their negotiation is not always the same. In the next chapter we turn to failures that are specific to humor.

5 Triggers of Failure Specific to Humor

5.1 Introduction

As a particular mode of communication, the processing of humor involves a number of steps that are not found in most serious discourse. In this chapter, those communicative failures that are specific to humor are examined. These are the final four triggers in the model presented in Chapter 3: joke incongruity, joke appreciation, joke (meta)messages, and humor support.

5.2 Joke incongruity

As described in Chapter 3, a failure at the level of joke incongruity arises when a hearer is able to identify an utterance as something intended as humorous and can understand the language of the text, yet is still unable to process the text as humor. In other words, the hearer simply does not get the joke. This may be caused by a variety of problems. For instance, the speaker may not have adequately considered the hearer's background knowledge. In the first example, a woman, well known for inventing corny quips, told her daughter the following joke:

Example 5.1

01   Mother: The guy who invented the bowling shirt died today. I wonder

02   what Polish people wore to weddings before that.

03   Daughter: What? I have absolutely NO contextual reference for that joke.

The daughter's response places the responsibility for the failure of the joke squarely on her mother's shoulders, suggesting that the daughter's own life experiences have not prepared her to appreciate this as humor. Thus, the necessary information to find this amusing is not part of her humor competence. At the same time, the mother has made a poor selection of audience.

The speaker might also fail to properly set up a joke, providing a sufficient amount of information for the hearer to be able to grasp the punch line. To some extent, this is the case in the next example. Here, however, it also seems that the hearer was not paying close attention:

Example 5.2

01	Peter:	oh no recording again. how stupid
02	Ralph:	oh yes, we're going to have a singing telegram: "*Fred* and the *kids*
03		are *dead*." (singing and clapping on stressed words)
04	Peter:	(laughs)
05	Ralph:	you ever hear that joke?
06	Mary:	no. (laughing)
07	Ralph:	well, it was just one woman wanted a telegram? she always wanted
08		a singing telegram? guy says, "ma'am I don't think you want this as
09		a singing telegram." "yeah, go ahead." "*Fred* and the *kids* are
10		*dead*." (singing and clapping on stressed words)
11	Mary:	(laughs briefly) I didn't get it.
12	Peter:	I'm not talking while we're being recorded.
13	Ralph:	you don't *get* it. you don't sing a telegram about *death*. or anything
14		bad news.
15	Mary:	well, I lost the bad news part. I never knew there *was* bad news=
16	Ralph:	=Fred and the kids are dead. opens up the telegram, sings, "*Fred*
17		and the *kids* are *dead*" (singing)
18	Pat:	that's an old *old* joke.
19	Mary:	oh. (laughs)

(Adapted from Norrick 2001: 269)

By making an allusion to the joke in referring to "a singing telegram" and provid-
ing only its punch line, Ralph assumes that his interlocutors are familiar enough
with the joke to be able to retrieve the rest. Indeed, Peter's laughter (line 04) sug-
gests that this has been the case for him. Mary, on the other hand, has not heard
the joke before, so Ralph proceeds to share it. Although Mary laughs, she also
confesses that she did not understand the joke (line 11). Following Ralph's expla-
nation, we learn that she did not apprehend that there was bad news involved.
A third delivery of the punch line (lines 16–17) elicits laughter from her. In this

situation, the structure of the joke telling was unusual, first because Ralph began with the punch line. His full delivery, however, also seems truncated. A quick web search shows that most variations of this joke begin by creating a scenario in which the doorbell rings and the resident answers the door to find a (non-singing) telegram delivery person there. The resident then persuades the messenger to deliver the telegram in song. Ralph, however, does not even mention a messenger, instead simply referring to the delivery person as a "guy" (line 08). The bad news, as well, is implied in the statement, "I don't think you want this as a singing telegram," but Mary does not notice this, or is unable to make this additional inference. Although the necessary information to retrieve the joke's incongruity is present, Ralph's abbreviated telling, in which a telegram, messenger, and bad news must all be inferred, creates a heavy cognitive load for someone unfamiliar with the joke. The performance of both joke-teller and audience thus contributed to the failure of this joke.

Humor styles and preferences are diverse, and sometimes what is funny to one person is incomprehensible to another. This seems to be the case in the following example, in which comedian and talk show host Joy Behar interviews comedian Roseanne Barr. Prior to this extract Behar was asking Barr questions submitted from the public via Twitter. One question was "Why did your dad say that Santa is an anti-Semite?" Barr explained that her father was a very funny man and, as a Jewish family, this was his way of explaining why Santa Claus did not come to their house. She then explained that, as a child, she loved Santa and began to tell about a time she visited him:

Example 5.3

01	Barr:	and I finally *got* to Santa, because I thought he was like go:d, and so
02		I'm like "*Sa:*nta I want this Judy the walking doll thing," and he's
03		like "ok (.) ne::xt" or whatever. ☺ he wasn't a very *sen*sitive Santa ☺
04		and then I didn't [*get* it!
04	Behar:	[(coughs) o:::h.
05	Barr:	see, that's why I feel sorry for kids with this [Santa thing.
06	Behar:	[but that was when the
07		devil was in you.

08 Barr: (1) no. it's because my parents didn't buy [me a Judy the walking

09   doll.

10 Behar: [or was that when you

11   were married to Tom

12   Arnold. [/ ? / (laughs)

13 Barr: [no it's when I was a *kid*!=

14 Behar: =°ok° (.) just kidding.

15 Barr: *what* did you say

16 Behar: I said that was when the devil was in you, or was that when Tom

17   Arnold was married to

18   you [(laughs)

19 Barr: [well, you know, getting famous is definitely a deal with the

20   devil.

21 Behar: yes.
(CNN, Joy Behar, 4-15-2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&
v=1hDiajhZbmM&NR=1)

Barr completes her story about not having received the toy she asked for from
Santa, and Behar makes an appropriately sympathetic sound (line 04). In the next
line, Barr provides a coda for her narrative, explaining that her experience caused
her to feel sorry for children, apparently because their interactions with Santa
do not always yield what they hoped for. Behar's next utterance overlaps with
Barr's and suggests that at that time "the devil was in" Barr. This topic appears
to be unmotivated by anything in the prior talk, and Barr pauses for a full second
before she initiates repair, which seems to pinpoint the problem children have as
one in which they tell Santa one thing and their parents do something different
(or perhaps nothing at all, if gift-giving is not part of their tradition). Behar again
overlaps her speech with the end of Barr's utterance, providing an alternative
("or...") proposition, that Barr was married to actor Tom Arnold at that time. This
utterance is clearly framed as an attempt at humor, as Behar laughs heartily as
she finishes. Barr, however, strongly denies this possibility, does not take up the
humor, and again attempts repair by emphasizing that she was a child when the
story took place, implying that of course she could not have been married. Behar

immediately concedes and initiates her own repair, minimizing the importance of her utterance as "just kidding" (line 14) When Barr asks her, to repeat it, perhaps thinking she had missed the joke and would be able to understand it, Behar does, again laughing as she finishes speaking. Barr does not join her laughter, but links her next utterance to Behar's joke, shifting the topic to describe fame as "a deal with the devil" (lines 19–20). The incongruity is left unexplained, but given the public forum and the need to entertain viewers, the two professionals continue on the new topic rather than continue to negotiate repair.

Prior joke schema may also interfere with a hearer's ability to detect humorous incongruity. The following transcript is extracted from a video lasting three minutes and 53 seconds. The first minute has been provided, as well as the final 27 seconds. The entire recording consists of A attempting to get B to understand the joke through repetition and finally explanation, most of which is not seen here:

Example 5.4

01 A: why did the chicken cross the road

02 B: why::

03 A: to go to your house knock knock

04 B: who's thHEHre?

05 A: the chicke:n

06 B: HHHthe chicken who?

07 A: (2) (laughs) *NO::::*! ok why did the chicken cross the road.

08 B: I don't know why:

09 A: to go to your house. knock knock

10 B: knock knock who's there

11 A: the *chi*ckeHEHEHEn

12 B: the chicken who

13 A: NOHOHOHOHOHO!

14 B: (laughing) I don't get it!

15 A: oh my god. 'kay. why did the chicken cross the road.

16 B: to get to my house

17   A: knock knock

18   B: (1) yes?

19   A: (laughing) NO! knock *knock*.

20   B: WHO'S THERE

21   A: the *chi*:cken

22   B: the chicken who

23   A: OhHOHOHOHOHO

24   B: (laughing) isn't that what I'm supposed to say?

25   A: no not the chicken who::: (.) knock knock!

26   B: WHO'S THERE!

27   A: the *CHI*CKE:N

28   B: oka::y?

29   A: (laughing) do you not *get* it?

30   B: (laughing) °no°

(...)

74   A: ...and the chicken's at your house because it crossed the road to get to

75   your house.

76   B: (2) °that's the dumbest joke [I've ever heard in my life.°

77   A: [(laughing) it's a little bit funny (4) it's a little

78   bit funny.

79   B: I don't get it. (.) I mean I GET IT I just don't get why it's a *joke*. it's just con

80   *fu*sing.

81   A: exaHActly

82   B: and *you're* laughing at the other person because they don't understand it
(Retrieved 9-23-2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKKw-qx92_o)

The joke blends two common formulaic joke formats, the riddle using the question "Why did the chicken cross the road?" and the knock knock joke. The joke begins

as a traditional chicken joke, with the response being, "To get to your house." This is immediately followed with "knock knock," prompting the hearer to take up the appropriate role within that joke and ask, "Who's there?" The response of "the chicken" is meant to be the punch line, as the chicken has crossed the road and is now at the hearer's door. B, however, does not recognize this and instead continues with the next step in the knock knock joke formula, asking "the chicken who?" In the portion of the recording that is not transcribed here out of consideration for reader boredom, the two speakers go through several more iterations of this pattern, with slight variations until A finally explains the joke. B, however, has become so confused that a second explanation is required. At the end of the recording (line 79), B's understanding of the incongruity that creates the humor remains tenuous: Is she unable find it amusing because she still does not fully understand it, or does she simply not appreciate this type of humor? In either case, given the number of repetitions of "the chicken who?" on her part, it is clear that the knock knock joke schema prevented her from identifying the incongruity in the actual joke.

5.3 Joke appreciation

Humor that is understood, but is ultimately unsuccessful because the hearer refuses or is simply unable to express appreciation for it is perhaps the most familiar – and often distressing – type of failure. Often, the attempt at humor was weak or simply does not evoke a feeling of mirth in the hearer, as is the case in the first example presented. Two female friends are talking about hybrid cars and are trying to remember what the names are:

Example 5.5

01   A: not the Toyota. Honda makes one. the Honda Schmaccord.

02   B: (laughs) that was bad. I'm actually laughing at that. I'm laughing that you

03   actually *said* that.

The proposal of "Honda Schmaccord" as the name of Honda's hybrid vehicle alludes to the well-known Honda model, the Accord. Placing the "schm-" before it is not particularly creative, as this sound sequence is often called upon to express a dismissive attitude toward something. Furthermore, because of this function of "schm-," it is not even appropriate here, either for humorous or serious purposes, as the two are not disparaging the cars. Despite B's laughter, she makes it clear

that she did not find the joke amusing and is instead laughing at the teller for having offered that name as a possible joke.

Although the face loss was minimal in the previous example, failing to amuse can at times be quite humiliating. Humor scholar Christie Davies recalls in detail an episode of failed humor that he witnessed during the 1963–1964 academic year. At that time, Graeme Garden, now a well-known British professional comedian, was a student at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. He was not a regular attender at the college debating society, but one evening he turned up at a debate and told a joke. He was by then already very prominent in the Cambridge Footlights, the leading group of comedy actors doing review work in the university. The joke he told went as follows:

Example 5.6

I'm setting up a new society called sports cars for the blind. All cars will have white hub caps.

As Davies recounts:

> *No* one laughed. Total silence. No one said anything. He was unable to continue. It was the custom of the society that the secretary took notes on all the speeches made in long hand in a large book, which then constituted the society's records. Garden was so embarrassed he asked to have his joke expunged from the records. (The secretary refused.)
> (personal communication, July 8, 2011)

Clearly, the public nature of this joke, coupled with its telling before an audience of comedians, created a situation in which failure to amuse was exceptionally humiliating, as demonstrated by the teller's desire to have his remark obliterated from the record. Although this is not a typical situation for most speakers, it does serve to illustrate the serious emotional consequences that can follow when hearers have plainly not appreciated a joke.

In some contexts humor might not be appreciated when it is seen as rude, hurtful or overly aggressive. Louis Walsh, a judge on the U.K. music competition show X-Factor, illustrates this in a comment he aimed at his fellow judges, Dannii Minogue, Simon Cowell, and Cheryl Cole. The excerpt begins just as Minogue was completing her assessment of the performer:

Example 5.7

01 Minogue: and you know people say diva like it's a bad thing

02 Walsh: it's a good thing

03 Minogue: it's a *good* thing!

04 Walsh: I agree

05 Minogue: yes

06 Walsh: I'm working with three (looks at his fellow judges, all seated to

07   his left, smiles)

08 Minogue: ☺ huh ☺ (nodding, Simon Cowell and Cheryl Cole are stony-faced)

09 Audience: (weak smattering of laughter) (3)

10 Host: all right guys

11 Audience: (laughter)
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVty1JT5M7M)

Minogue, in encouraging a contestant, implies that to behave like a "diva" is not insulting, despite the typical negative connotations the word often carries. Walsh supports Minogue in this assertion, and in line 06 jokingly (it seems) applies the term to his fellow judges. Although Walsh has just agreed to a revised sense of "diva," the more commonly-used negative sense still predominates, with the effect of making his attempt at humor seem more insult than compliment. The reactions of Cowell and Cole, as well as the very minimal laughter from the audience, suggest that most hearers did not find this funny. The host seems to orient to the aggression in Walsh's utterance and the negative reaction of the other judges, as he utters "all right guys" (line 09) in a tone that might be used by a referee or a parent trying to alleviate tension and move the conversation forward. This example also serves to remind us that failure is rarely complete. At least some members of the audience laughed, and although that may have been in response to the other judges' reactions, it is likely that at least some simply found Walsh's remark amusing.

Aggressive humor towards groups of people also carries a high potential to fail, depending on the audience, because it may cause offense. Conservative political talk show host Rush Limbaugh regularly engages in humor aimed at particular groups and, even given his audience, which we can assume is largely populated with similarly conservative thinkers, he often ends up mitigating humor that has received a negative reaction. Here, Limbaugh has been asking audience members to relate their first encounters with him on the radio or on television:

Example 5.8

01	Man:	My wife s- my moderate wife said (laughter) "there's this guy on
02		the radio I think you might like." I said, "nah, those liberals on
03		the radio I don't like." But she was right.
04	Limbaugh:	Yes, she was. One of the rare times a wife knew what she was
05		talking about.
06	Audience:	(laughter; boos)
07	Limbaugh:	Just kid- I'm just kidding. I'm s- I'm just ki- please, I 'm just
08		kidding. I love stereotypical humor. I- just a joke. You see, in
09		our society today, women are going to, "See, he just is vicious
10		to women."
11	Audience:	(laughter)
12	Limbaugh:	Yes, one more. Yes, madam, where were you? What were you
13		doing when you first heard or saw me?

(Rush Limbaugh show, 11-22-1993)

One audience member explains how his wife suggested that he listen to Limbaugh and, although he was skeptical, he found that he agreed with her recommendation. Limbaugh used this information to make a joke that implies that women – or at least married women – are rarely well-informed (line 04–05). The joke encompasses all wives, as he refers to "a wife" as a generality. Some audience members were apparently amused by his utterance, but he was also met with enough negative response, in the form of booing, to undertake repair in the next turn. The disfluency he exhibits as he begins repair is common following failed humor, and was deemed the post-failed joke hitch by Schegloff (1996). Limbaugh repeats the intention of his utterance, referring to it as "kidding" and "just a joke," and also makes a mitigating move by adding more humor at the expense of those who were not amused by the initial attempt. It is, of course, important to again recognize that some individuals may have been amused, but withheld laughter or even contributed to the booing, in order to send the message that this humor was not appropriate. In other words, the message could have overridden the humor potential for them.

In other situations the reasons for which signs of appreciation are withheld can be less clear. In 2011, President Obama made some remarks to the press on his nomination of Richard Cordray to be director of the newly-created Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. In those remarks, he joked about Cordray's past as a successful game show contestant:

Example 5.9

01	Obama:	he's also served as Ohio's treasurer and has successfully worked
02		with people across the ideological spectrum: Democrats and
03		Republicans, banks and consumer advocates. now last but not
04		least uh back in the eighties Richard was also a five-time
05		Jeopardy champion.
06	Audience:	(smattering of quiet laughter)
07	Obama:	and a ☺semifinaliHHHHst☺ in the tournament of champions.
08		not too shabby (2) uh that's why a::ll his confirmation uh <all his
09		answers at his confirmation> (.) hearings will be in the form of a
10		question. (3)
11	Audience:	(very little weak laughter)
12	Obama:	(lower pitch) that's a joke.
13	Audience:	(laughter)

(July 18, 2011, retrieved 9-26-13, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XD6ek8R5Bf s&feature=related)

Obama completes his list of Cordray's accomplishments with one that is less distinguished and almost certainly irrelevant to the position for which he has been nominated: five-time Jeopardy champion (lines 04–05). Completing a list with an absurd element is a time-honored comedic technique, and the audience responds in kind with quiet laughter in line 06. Obama, however, had merely been setting up a humorous scenario in which Cordray would respond to all questions at his confirmation hearing with a question. This joke requires that the hearers be familiar with the game Jeopardy, in which the answer is given and the contestant must come up with the question. For instance, in response to the answer "the African country where Mafa and Mandara are spoken" the contestant would need

to say, "What is Cameroon?" Although it is likely that most members of this audience were familiar with this long-running and popular game show, first silence and then a bit of weak laughter ensued. Much more laughter followed Obama's meta-commentary in line 12.

On the one hand, the lack of laughter in response to the initial attempt at humor is curious. Not only did Obama seem to clearly frame his utterance as non-serious, but Elizabeth Warren (then responsible for setting up the agency to which Cordray was being nominated to run), who was standing near the president, laughed in a way that seemed to signal genuine appreciation. Cordray, as well, responded to the joke with laughter. Thus, this does not seem to be a situation in which the joke or the incongruity were not recognized (although the latter would certainly be the case for anyone unfamiliar with the show). Instead, I suggest that the context itself may have been responsible for preventing or suppressing expressions of appreciation. First, when the president makes a public statement it is rarely with the primary goal of amusing his listeners. Rather, presidential press conferences tend to be occasions for the delivery of serious information. Thus, audience members may have oriented to this norm and withheld laughter out of respect and perhaps uncertainty as to whether it would be appropriate to express mirth in this context. Second, the audience would have been mainly reporters present to obtain a story. Their role then, as professionals would be fore-grounded, and thus their stance would likely tend toward seriousness, as they listened carefully in order to later create a news story. This simply may not have been an audience primed for playful commentary.

Finally, one more brief example is provided to illustrate how lack of appreciation can cause a joke to fail when the humor is seen as stale or obvious. This conversation took place during Christmas gift-opening. One brother, who does not speak here, has just received a travel guide to micronations, which are entities that claim sovereignty over a geographically very small area. The oldest brother makes a joke about presiding over such a nation:

Example 5.10

01 Brother: so you know how people say they want to be king of their castle,

02   you can actually say you are!

03 Sister: oh yeah. Nobody thought of that. That's the best you can do?

04   (sarcastically)

Given that some of these micronations are only a few acres, or even less, it makes sense to seize on the normally only metaphorical phrase "king of one's castle" to

joke about them. Unfortunately for the speaker, his sister deems this an obvious joke and issues a scathing put-down. It is worth comparing this response to the much kinder, but still clearly unappreciative response to the "Honda Schmaccord" joke in example 5.5, above. As Chapter 6 will demonstrate, responses to failure can vary widely, depending on the context and reason for the lack of success.

5.4 Joke (meta)messages

Joke (meta)messages can be difficult to identify, as the analyst needs to be privy to or be able to find evidence of the speaker's intentions. In addition, knowing what the hearer did – or did not do – following the humor can also be crucial. In the first example, the analyst was a participant in the interaction and thus was able to both identify and add insight into the failure of the attempted humor. The conversation involves four friends. The two males are dental students, one female is studying pharmacy, and the other female participant (F1, below) is studying linguistics. The discussion has centered around possible collaborations that might help result in a successful dentistry practice:

Example 5.11

01 M1: it's complicated (.) we have to see uh:::

02 F1: (interrupting) and you're not interested in having a linguist in it?

03 M1: (very seriously) no:: no no

04 All: (roar of laughter)

05 M2: a private university uh:::

06 F1: (laughter)

07 M1: /on the other hand/ a doctor
(adapted from Priego-Valverde 2009: 178)

At first glance, F1's attempt at humor seems to be successful, and indeed is in some senses. She asks a question that is clearly irrelevant to the discussion (line 02), and thus equally clearly intended to be interpreted playfully. When M1 rejects her suggestion seriously, the group erupts in laughter (line 04). However, by line 07, M1 has brought the conversation back to the original topic and the discussion continues in a serious tone. However, as Priego-Valverde (2009: 179–180)

reports, F1 did not merely hope to amuse her interlocutors. Instead, her playful interruption was meant to also contain a meta-message with a discourse function: Please change the topic. Although M2 briefly collaborates with F1 to extend the play frame, M1's next contribution rejects this frame and subsequent turns by other interlocutors, including F1 (not shown here) serve to maintain that conversational key. Thus, although F1's joke succeeds in the sense that it results in an episode of humor for the group, its use as an attempt to change the course of the conversation fails.

As noted in Chapter 3, meta-messages in humor can also serve social functions, communicating something about a hearer's stance or attempting to change the attitude or behavior of another. Teasing is one type of humor that often receives a response that, similar to the previous example, indicates amusement, but also disagreement with the message, since teases often playfully point out faults. Drew (1987) provides numerous example of serious, or po-faced, responses to teases. Here Del has called Paul on the telephone:

Example 5.12

01   Del: what are you doing at ho:me. (1.7)

02   Paul: sitting down watching the tu:[be

03   Del: [khnhhh:: ih-huh .hhh wa:tching n-hghn

04   .h you-nghn (0.4)

05   watching dayti:me stories uh? (.)

06   Paul: no I was just watching this: uh:m: (0.7) .h.khh you know one of them

07   ga:me shows,
(adapted from Drew 1987: 226)

This phone call has apparently taken place in the afternoon, because when Paul reveals that he has been watching television, Del teases him about watching soap operas ("daytime stories," line 05). Paul's response in line 06 entails a denial of Del's assertion ("no") and a correction, in which he provides the name of the type of show he was actually watching. Sometimes the recipients of teases will include some laughter or other signal that they have recognized that they have been teased, even while rejecting the content of the tease. Paul, however, gives no such sign to mitigate his rejection. Drew notes, however, that this does not mean that he has not recognized it. Tease recipients may recognize teases without displaying signs of recognition and choose to attend only to the message of the tease.

Even if the message of the joke itself is innocuous, hearers may choose to withhold signs of appreciation due to some aspect of the telling. To illustrate this, an example from a scripted television show is provided. Bubel and Spitz (2006) analyze two jokes told during an episode of Ally McBeal, a comedy/drama series about a lawyer. The jokes themselves were structurally similar and told in a similarly expert fashion, yet one failed and the other did not, therefore the researchers sought to determine why. In the show, the day prior, Ally McBeal's friend (Renee) had told a dirty joke on stage at their favorite bar. The next day, Ally is called to the stage to tell a joke (rather than going voluntarily like her friend), and she goes with great reluctance:

Example 5.13

01 A: okay (laughs) thank you. I was here last night, when Renee Radick=

02 All: [yeah]

03 A: =[-told] that .. JOKE=

04 All: =yeah=

05 A: =and I see that a lot of you were here too, and and wasn't she great?

06 Au: yeah [(applause)]

07 A: [Renee stand up take a bow.] (Renee is hiding under the table) okay

08   well .. she's just being shy, but she she really is there and but you know

09   what, she DARED me, to come up here, and tell a dirty joke. >she didn't

10   think I had it in me. she didn't think I could do it, and and and what do

11   you think, d'you think I can do it?<

12 All: no:::::

13 A: o::::h ha ha (forced) GOOD. good I'm glad you think that, because you

14   know what? one of the last VEStiges of gender bias [is the dirty joke=]

15 All: [u:::::h]

16 A: =MEN can handle it, [women can't we're we're uh]

17 All: [(murmuring)]

18 A: we're not tough enough. we're we're too we're too (2.0) fragile.

19 All: (murmuring)

20 A: well let's see. here we go. okay oh and by the way, my joke .. true story.

21   two little fleas,

22 All: [(laughter)]

23 A: [(laughs)] they meet at a ba:r in Florida. uh oh they they vacation ..

24   together, all the time [and uhm ..]

25 All: [(laughter)]

26 A: ONE year, the second little flea, he arrives, and he's < freezing freezing

27   cold. > and he says "o:h o:h (higher pitch; acts out freezing flea) > I was

28   just zooming down from Jersey, in the mustache of some guy on a

29   motorcycle, < and I: am FROzen." and the first flea says "well THAT is

30   no way to come to Florida, Here's what you do. you go into an airport

31   bar, you have a few dri::nks. you .. find a BEAUtiful stewardess, you

32   climb up her leg, you nestle RIGHT in her wa:rm so:ft .hh you know

33   what I mean.

34 All: (laughter)

35 A: a:nd you get a good night's sleep, a:nd you wake up in FLOrida. now

36   THAT is the way to TRAvel." year goes by. vacation comes, IN comes

37   the second flea agAIN. freezing cold agAIN. and the first flea goes, "well

38   okay, why are you cold? didn't you do what I said?" > and the second

39   flea says, "I did exACTly what you said. < I went into a bar, I had a couple

40   of dri:nks, I climbed right up the leg of a BEAUtiful stewardess, I

41   NEstled i:n, .h and I PASSed out all snuggled up, and the next thing

42   you know, > I am ZOOming down the freeway in the MUstache of SOME

43   guy on a motorcycle (giggling)." <

45 All: (1.5) (murmuring)

46 Ri: (forced laughter)

47 G: (forced laughter)

48 All: (murmuring) boo

49 A: oh oh COME ON

50 All: [(murmuring)]

51 A: [okay .. uhm well uh .fhhh uh] let's let's hear for VONDA (forced laugh)

52 All: (applause)

(Adapted from Bubel and Spitz 2006: 86–89)

Ally's joke received a positive response from the audience during its telling; however, prior to and immediately following the joke she does not receive their support. Her initial warm-up of the audience proceeds smoothly until, in lines 08–11, she frames the joke-telling as a competition and subsequently does not receive audience support when she asks whether they think she can tell a dirty joke on stage. Her next three turns put her further at odds with the audience, as she brings in the issue of gender bias, making her telling of the joke not only a competition with her friend, but a political statement. Because the topic of sexism is raised in response to the audience's expression of their lack of faith in Ally's ability to tell the dirty joke, it is potentially aggressive toward them, suggesting that their lack of faith stems from their own sexism. This places the audience on a defensive footing. Ally's joke-telling is now not just a matter of entertainment, but a statement about gender inequity and an effort to overturn it. The audience clearly does not approve of her framing the joke in this way, given their disapproving murmurs. Laughing at the end would suggest not only that they enjoyed the joke, but that they agreed with her meta-message and saw her telling as a positive statement for women. Instead, of course, as the final lines show, there is silence (line 45), more murmuring, and even some boos. The only laughter comes from Ally's friends and it is described as "forced." Thus, the performance, rather than the content, of this joke contained a meta-message with a social function that failed with this audience.

Finally, it is worth noting that multiple meta-messages may be present in humor and that these may serve both discourse and social functions. An example from a television news broadcast serves to illustrate this. O.J. Simpson, who was accused of murder in 1994 and acquitted, was in 2007 accused and eventually found guilty of armed robbery in Las Vegas, where he broke into a hotel room and

took some memorabilia that the victims were planning to sell. It is this robbery that Maggie Rodriguez, the news anchor has been discussing with the network's legal analyst, Mickey Sherman:

Example 5.14

01   Rodriguez: Bottom line, Mickey, do you think this'll end with us seeing O.J.

02   Simpson in handcuffs again?

03   Sherman: We can only hope so.

04   Rodriguez: Oh, my.

05   Sherman: I'm just kidding. Just kidding. Don't know. It's an even toss.
(CBS Saturday Early Show, 9-15-2007)

Although Sherman is a news analyst, rather than a reporter, his joking wish to see O.J. Simpson arrested once again is rather inappropriate in this professional, public forum. Although analysts are allowed to express opinions, it is expected that they will do so as journalists, presenting opinions based on careful and reasoned thought, assessment of the facts, and consideration of, for instance, prior cases. Sherman's quip instead seems to be the unreasoned, emotional opinion of an everyday observer and thus removes him from his professional footing. The comment puts him – and the network who invited him to contribute – in the position of appearing biased and untrustworthy. Rodriguez' non-committal response of "oh my" allows her to suggest that his utterance was inappropriate, while still maintaining a professional distance by not agreeing or disagreeing with him, as laughter or any clear expression of offense would have implied. Her remark can be seen as having both a social and a discourse function. The social function seems to be to express surprise, as well as a cue that his comment was inappropriate. With respect to discourse, she provides Sherman with a space to mitigate his utterance and regain a professional stance, which he takes advantage of.

5.5 (Appropriate) humor support

One failure that is specific to hearers is that of responding appropriately to humor. Sometimes even if a joke has been perceived, understood and appreciated, a response eludes us. Although the appropriate reaction varies according to context, quite often a response that adds more humor, and thus supports the speaker's playful utterance is called for. In fact, as the example below demon-

strates, a hearer who is unable to join in the humor creates a somewhat awkward interaction. This television interview took place on a morning news and variety show. The host, Julie Chen, has been interviewing Robert Franek, author of the Princeton Review college guidebook, about the text's recommendations for different types of universities:

Example 5.15

01 Chen: okay. everyone wants to know the biggest party sch[ools

02 Franek: [ah, yes! eh heh

03 Chen: because we wanna study!=

04 Franek: =huh huh

05 Chen: we wanna make sure we don't want to go to these party schools

06   right?

07 Franek: uh well w- [eh ha ha ha

08 Chen: [I:'m just kidding. lot of- you know have a good time

09 Franek: I totally agree. I totally agree.

10 Chen: top three, number one, Penn State University, followed by Univer-

11   sity of Florida, University of Mississippi. all right. how do you know

12   Penn State is the biggest party school?

12 Franek: it's a- it's a good question and we go directly to whom we consider

13   college experts, students at college classrooms and we asked them

14   their experiences

(July 29, 2009, CBS Early show, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vww_uQ3lzuk)

Chen's question about party schools turns the conversation to a more playful frame, as the earlier talk had centered on such factors as which colleges were economically sound choices. Franek orients to this with enthusiastic agreement and a small laugh. In line 03, Chen begins to construct a scenario in which the people (and potential students) listening to the show are serious scholars who want to hear the party schools named so that they can avoid them. When Chen completes the scenario, Franek has difficulties constructing a rejoinder even though he had contributed apparently supportive laugh particles as she spoke. His response in

line 07 begins with a great deal of disfluency and ends in laughter, overlapping with Chen's explicit rekeying of her prior speech. With a return to serious information-sharing, his next turns are much more fluent. The public forum in which this discussion took place may well have made responding to such a joke more of a challenge.

This is possibly also the case in the next example, which also occurred during a public interview. Here British writer Ian Leslie is being interviewed by Jian Ghomeshi, host of the Canadian arts and culture radio show, *Q*. The topic has been an article Leslie wrote titled "Is the internet killing gossip?"

Example 5.16

01 Ghomeshi: would you like to use this opportunity to *share* any gossip?

02 Leslie: we:ll, Jian, I *would* like to share with your listeners exactly how

03   you got your job. but (.) u:m (.) I fear perhaps you wouldn't have

04   me back on the show

05 Ghomeshi: hhhhhh°hahahhh° what a strange (.) j- joHOke [(.) but I appreci-

06   ate it=

07 Leslie: [hahaha

08 Ghomeshi: =uh Ian uh thank you very much for this and congrats on a very-

09   a most interesting piece that had us captivated
(October 4, 2013 http://www.cbc.ca/q/blog/2013/10/04/is-gossiping-good-for-us/)

Because Leslie has been extolling the virtues of gossip, Ghomeshi closes the interview by asking whether he might want to share some gossip of his own. Leslie's response is a tease that implies that there is something untoward in the way that Ghomeshi secured his current position. His deadpan delivery may not clearly indicate humorous intent, particularly over the radio. Ghomeshi, however, orients to Leslie's utterance as humorous, but in a rather curious way. Initially he emits a long nasal exhale followed by some quiet laughter. Then he explicitly names the speech act that he interprets Leslie's utterance to be (a joke) and evaluates it as "strange" (line 05). Ghomeshi seems to see "strange" as a potentially negative evaluation, because he prefaces his expression of appreciation with "but" to indicate contrast. Notice, however, that despite Ghomeshi's laughter, the expression "I appreciate it" is a lukewarm manifestation of mirth compared to, for instance, "that's hilarious!" or any other number of ways he could have

chosen to express appreciation. This example demonstrates well how interlocutors can express nuanced degrees of appreciation. However, more to the point of joining in on humor that has been recognized and appreciated, it shows even more clearly than the above extract how hearers may be deterred from engaging in full humor support. To deny the content of Leslie's tease in order to ensure that his radio audience does not think that there is any truth to it places Ghomeshi in the position of a humorless interviewer. Yet, to play along with the joke puts him at risk of seeming to agree with the proposition and potentially creating questions about his credibility as an interviewer with listeners who did not perceive the humor. Thus, his unusual response seems calculated to avoid both of these problems, while also displaying his sense of humor.

Hearers may also have a difficult time responding to humor in new contexts or with unfamiliar participants. This point is made clearly in the next example, where a new employee, Emma, contributes only a minimal acknowledgement of her colleague Gavin's playful criticism of another colleague who she had not yet met (Leonard). Her response is not necessarily inappropriate, but illustrates another situation in which providing full support of humor may be risky:

Example 5.17

01	Gavin:	so (.) Elaine and you (.) will be the person to handle Oliver Flower
02		with Lucy and (.) please remember (.) Leonard will forget (.) all the
03		things (.) after the meeting
04	Emma:	after the meeting
05	Gavin:	yeah he will forgot everything hah and make sure hah make sure
06		every (.) decision he made (.) please cap and email to him because
07		(.) he will forget everything once got the problem (.) he will say oh
08		(.) you did it you did it hah you did it (.) not me hah
09	Emma:	hah okay
10	Gavin:	okay be careful of (.) Leonard
11		(Emma rapidly raises another business topic.)

(Adapted from Mak, Liu, and Deneen 2012: 171)

In reminding Emma about her duties as a note-taker during the meeting, Gavin playfully warns Emma about Leonard's absent-mindedness. As a new member of the organization, Emma has not only not met Leonard, the person who is being made fun of here, but she is also in a low position vis-à-vis the others. Although Gavin sprinkles his warning with laugh particles, Emma may be reluctant to express full support for humor that criticizes a colleague with authority over her, as she follows his utterance with only minimal laughter and acknowledgement of the message and quickly steers the conversation in another direction. Joining in the humor, for example by sharing a story about a past colleague whose behavior was similar, might be an option for Emma and would align her with Gavin and allow her to build on his humor; however, it is still likely to be more risky than the minimal contribution she makes.

5.6 Summary

The four triggers of failure discussed in this chapter involve cognitive and inter-actional demands that differ from those of most serious discourse, and little is known about the structure of these failures and the ways that such failures are negotiated in interaction. The first point worth noting is that, in contrast to the reactions to some of the failures presented in the previous chapter, the unsuccessful attempts at humor that involved a hearer not understanding or not appreciating the joke were not simply ignored. It seems that some acknowledgement of these types of failures is preferred. Furthermore, as the following chapter will demonstrate more clearly, responses to humor that fails for these two reasons often differ significantly in emotionality from the serious repair sequences examined in Chapter 3. The construction and reception of any meta-messages contained in a joke, on the other hand, may pass unacknowledged and even unnoticed by the interactants. This is related to the indeterminacy of playful/non-playful framing and, as noted in the previous chapter, serves an important social function. Meta-messages contained in humor may be delicate, which also helps to explain why they might be glossed over in conversation. Finally, humor requires different types of support than other, serious speech acts. Humor that has been successful requires acknowledgement of this success, even minimally. For full support, however, the preference is for the hearer to add more humor. This is not unlike other speech acts where, for instance, a compliment is returned with another compliment or a greeting with a greeting. In these acts, however, the forms are often limited and even formulaic, making such responses cognitively easy. Because humor, in contrast demands creativity and spontaneity, the hearer who wishes to support humor with humor must think quickly, making the task

more challenging than responding to many other types of speech acts. The next chapter will address in greater detail the strategies used by both speakers and hearers to manage the failure of humor.

6 Managing Failed Humor in Interaction

6.1 Introduction

Having described in the previous two chapters the various triggers that can cause humor to fail, we are now prepared to examine the negotiation of failure in conversation. Although, as I have emphasized, meaning is jointly constructed in interaction, for analytic purposes this chapter focuses first on strategies speakers use to prevent or manage failure. Then, the ways that hearers respond to humor that has failed for different reasons will be examined. Specifically, humor that fails because the hearer was not amused, because the hearer did not understand the joke, or because the hearer was offended all require different treatment. In closing, some remarks will be made concerning the negotiation of unsuccessful humor in general.

6.2 Speaker management of failure

As described in Chapter 3, in serious interaction, interlocutors exhibit a marked preference for self-initiation of repair and self-correction in resolving conversational trouble. These practices hold for humorous talk when the speaker realizes that he or she has been unclear or has misspoken and wishes to clarify his or her utterance. Consider, for example, the following interaction that occurred when one spouse suggested that the other, who was going to the store, pick up some butter:

Example 6.1

01   Husband: do we really need it?

02   Wife: yeah. we're in butter desperation. (.) *but*ter desperation, get it?

03   Husband: yeah not funny at all![10]

In line 02, the wife jokes about the dire butter situation by describing it as "butter desperation," a play on the familiar collocation "utter desperation." She delivers her initial attempt at humor in a deadpan fashion. After a brief pause during which the husband has provided no indication of having noticed or appreciated

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10 For the record, this joke is objectively quite clever. The husband is clearly at fault here, as anyone can see.

the quip, she initiates repair, repeating the line with emphasis. In addition, she asks the question "get it?" which is typically used to check for understanding specifically of jokes. These two moves serve to ensure that her attempt at humor is recognized. As the husband's next turn indicates, however, his lack of response had not been due to his not noticing or understanding her joke, but to a lack of appreciation.

This type of checking is, again, similar to repair of serious utterances. However, the extent to which self-repair occurs in non-serious interaction is unclear. The types of miscommunication addressed in Chapter 4, where triggers of conversational failure common to both serious and non-serious interaction were discussed, will tend to follow the repair sequences already studied for serious interaction, with some exceptions. The types of failure specific to humorous talk, however, discussed in Chapter 5 are more likely to merit special practices. The preference for self-initiation and self-correction will be less frequent, as humor relies on surprise. As the familiar adage suggests, explaining humor kills it, thus the speaker wants the hearer to figure it out herself. "Self repair," in these instances might instead consist of a reformulation of a punch line or a hint that will help the hearer identify the humorous incongruity. In the following sections, strategies used by speakers to prevent and manage failure are discussed.

6.2.1 Preventing failure

Speakers use a variety of techniques in serious interaction to prevent miscommunication and many of these apply to humorous communication, as well. For instance, in both serious and non-serious talk speakers will attempt to ensure that they speak clearly, that they have the hearer's attention, and that the hearer has the necessary background information to understand the utterance. In this section I discuss two strategies for preventing communicative failure that, although certainly not specific to humorous interaction, do appear frequently with respect to that type of talk. I refer to these strategies as avoidance and inoculation.

Humor is almost never a conversational requirement, therefore, if a speaker is unsure of the appropriateness of making a joke, she or he can simply opt to maintain a serious frame and thus prevent the possible failure of the humor. In addition to avoiding an attempt at humor for fear of its failure, speakers may also avoid certain topics, language, or types of humor. In a study of humor in intercultural interaction (Bell 2007a), I noted each of these types of avoidance. There was, for instance, a marked absence of joking about taboo topics by both native and non-native interlocutors. Both groups also tended to avoid teasing, a form of

humor that often carries the potential to be misconstrued as aggressive, and thus carries more risk. Native speakers also reported being aware of their language use when constructing humor with a non-native hearer and attempting to use simple language. Similarly, Adelswärd and Öberg's (1998) study of humor in international business negotiations suggests that, at least in intercultural communication, speakers consider their hearers' background knowledge in constructing humor. They reported that most humor between the groups was work-related, and suggested that the speakers avoided non-work-related jokes that might contain information and references unfamiliar (and therefore unfunny) to their hearers.

Research indicates that poor recipient design of utterances is an important cause of miscommunication, as speakers often do not take hearer needs into account when crafting their utterances (Mustajoki 2012). As I suggested in Bell (2007a), however, humor may be somewhat of an exception. Communicative failures involving other types of serious speech, such as greetings or requests, are not only likely to be less humiliating than those involving humor, but also less memorable. Everyone has witnessed or engaged in an unsuccessful attempt at humor and this is often recalled as an embarrassing event. This awareness may facilitate the use of avoidance as a strategy for preventing the failure of humor. Although this assertion was formed based on research into the experiences of native and non-native language users' interaction, I believe that it applies to the population at large. In fact, two of the studies of responses to failed humor that are reported on in section 6.3 used elicitation as a technique to gather data. This option was employed after naturalistic observation was found to yield very few instances of failed humor. Moreover, data collection procedures had to be altered to require the data collectors to tell the jokes to a set number of strangers. Without this stipulation, nearly everyone avoided this potentially embarrassing situation and told the jokes only to people with whom they already had an ongoing relationship and to whom they could easily explain their anomalous joke-telling behavior. We seem to be fairly good judges of appropriateness with regard to humor, avoiding humor itself, as well as certain types, topics, or language in order to ensure that conversation proceeds smoothly.

The second strategy for preventing failure is inoculation. Speakers who anticipate that their attempt to joke might be seen as unamusing, inappropriate, or even offensive can safeguard themselves against any negative reaction by acknowledging the potential trouble with their humor and preparing the hearers for it. By criticizing themselves first, speakers essentially inoculate themselves against further censure, as the hearers have been warned and could have, for example, left the room if they did not want to hear a the joke. Example 4.14, in Chapter 4, where George Zimmerman's attorney began his opening statement with a joke was an extreme illustration of this. A less dramatic example of inoculation

that occurred during a news show is provided here. The host, Tucker Carlson, had been discussing new statistics reporting a drop in sex crimes with human rights activist Bianca Jagger:

Example 6.2

01 Jagger: I think that we are on the right track. It is important we have legisla-

02   tion. I think we have to even make legislations that are tougher on

03   them to be able to really inform parents and families when there is

04   a sex offender nearby them. It is important to have therapy, as

05   apparently it's part of the situation has improved, but we should

06   not cry victory and think that this is the end of the battle against

07   sex offenders.

08 Carlson: Well, that is a very smart point, which may be surprising, in light

09   of this next story. I'm actually just kidding, and I want our viewers

10   to know not to shoot the messenger. We are merely reporting the

11   news. And you decide what to make of it. But a paper to be pub-

12   lished soon in a "British Journal of Psychology" suggests that men,

13   by an average of five I.Q. points, smarter than women.
(August 26, 2005, MSNBC, "The Situation with Tucker Carlson")

Carlson assesses Jagger's views on sex crimes as "smart," and then proceeds to joke that viewers may find it surprising that his guest's remarks were intelligent when they hear the next story (line 08). Before explaining this joke, which would not be apparent to viewers who had not already heard what the next story was about, he immediately inoculates himself by referring to his prior utterance as "just kidding" and appealing to viewers to not be angry with him, as the person who is merely reporting the story. As it turns out, the joke is that it is surprising that his guest's contribution was smart because she is female, since a recent study had found men's average I.Q.s to be a few points higher than women's. The humor obviously contains the potential to offend and, given that Carlson's show ran nationwide in the U.S., it was almost certain to upset some viewers. Thus, protecting himself in this way was a wise move.

Inoculation can also take place even between individuals who are familiar with each other's interactional and humor styles. The next example comes from a Facebook posting and thus is also public, although intended for a smaller circle. The poster, who I refer to as Randy, announced upcoming travel plans and Kevin, the first friend to comment, made a potentially upsetting joke:

Example 6.3

Randy: I'm gearing up for six weeks in El Salvador and Panama. On the bright side: both countries use dollars as the official currency, and the murder rate in El Salvador, though the second highest in the world, is still only slightly higher than Detroit's. And then there's the opportunity finally to learn the difference between empanadas, pupusas, and arepas!

Like · Comment · Share · 4 hours ago near Washington, DC · 10 people like this.

Kevin: And to make a really tasteless joke, you'll be far away from the Navy Yard. Have a good time, Randy!

Randy's post was made near Washington, D.C. on September 17, 2013 – the day after 12 people were killed in a shooting at the Washington Navy Yard. Kevin's comment playfully suggests that another benefit of Randy's upcoming trip is that it will keep him far away from the danger (even though the situation had been resolved by then). Joking about a tragic incident, especially so soon after it occurred, is always risky, and Kevin acknowledges this by introducing his remark as "a really tasteless joke." Kevin may have been able to anticipate that Randy would appreciate (or at least not be offended by) this joke, but he could not be certain how others who would see it would react. The inoculation strategy apparently worked well in this instance (although it is, of course, impossible to know what the reaction would have been had Kevin not inoculated himself in this way). The recipient "liked" this comment and neither of two additional comments subsequently added to this post even mentioned Kevin's comment.

Because humor is not necessary in interaction, avoidance makes sense as a way of preventing its failure. Inoculation as a strategy against failure, however, is curious. If a joke seems too obscure to be understood or has the potential to offend the audience, it would be safer to simply not attempt to make the joke. The use of this strategy points yet again to the importance of humor in managing social relationships. It suggests that the payoff for using humor is perceived as greater than the risk of failure.

6.2.2 Managing failure

Of course, despite the best efforts of speakers to avoid failure, as we have already seen, humor does fail. One outcome of failed humor discussed in Chapter 2 is the post-failed joke hitch (Schegloff (1996). This is when, following a lack of hearer uptake of an attempt at humor, the speaker's next turn begins with some disfluencies, such as stuttering and false starts. This suggests that the failure to achieve shared laughter, or at least some acknowledgement of a joke is awkward for the speaker, which further leads us to expect that the speaker may have certain strategies for managing failed humor. In this section examples of five strategies that arose from the data set are described. They are: topic change, apology, coaxing, naming the joke, and turning the joke on oneself.

Given that the failure of humor can create an uncomfortable situation for the speaker, it is unsurprising to find that speakers whose humor has been unsuccessful frequently turn the conversation to a new topic in their next turn. (Hearers also utilize this option. See Table 6.2, below). The example in which this occurs came from a televised news show with discussants Pat Buchanan, a conservative commentator, Mike Kinsley, a liberal commentator who does not speak in this extract, and Dewey Stokes, president of the Fraternal Order of Police. The topic of the evening was gun control, as the U.S. senate had just voted in favor of an assault weapons ban. Stokes has brought a number of the newly banned weapons to demonstrate how they work:

Example 6.4

01	Buchanan:	Why is it- why is it threaded on the end?
02	Stokes:	Well, this is threaded on the end because then you can adapt
03		the silencer
04	Buchanan:	Right.
05	Stokes:	to this weapon
06	Buchanan:	Well, is this the one for shooting squirrels?
07	Stokes:	This is for- well, this is for anything. I guess in some of the mag-
08		azines you'll see that this silencer is interchangeable with both
09		these weapons

10	Buchanan:	All right. Yeah, I was just kidding about squirrels. But this is
11		not an assault rifle.
12		This is what? A machine pistol?

(May 23, 1990, CNN's Crossfire)

Buchanan chooses one of the weapons and jokes about its function in line 06. Although these are arms originally designed for the military, thus making their use in squirrel-hunting absurd, Stokes responds seriously to Buchanan's utterance, suggesting that the gun can be used for "anything." In his next turn, Buchanan acknowledges the information Stokes has added ("all right") and refers back to his squirrel comment as "just kidding." In the same turn, he then immediately turns Stokes' attention to another gun. By asking a question about the weapon, he increases the likelihood that his topic change will be successful, as Stokes will be more likely to orient to the question rather than back to the earlier comment.

The next example features not only a change of topic, but also a change of addressee. The extract of talk presented here occurred in an episode of the Geraldo show, a daytime talk show with a sensationalistic, tabloid style of interaction. Geraldo's guests are members of the racist organization, the Ku Klux Klan and one, Ellen, sews the white costumes worn by the KKK:

Example 6.5

01	Rivera:	Now, Ellen, are you really the seamstress for the Klan? You knit
02		those nifty hats and all?
03	Ellen:	I don't knit them. And I am one of many seamstresses. And as a
04		matter of fact, J.D. over here is negotiating right now to buy a small
05		factory so that we can...
06	Rivera:	Is that right?
07	Ellen:	Yes.
08	Rivera:	Well, will we find it like in the catalog of Sears or...
09	Ellen:	No, you will not.
10	Rivera:	I'm just kidding. Forgive me. All right. Now I want to come back to
11		you, Ellen, because I think it is intriguing because there is a big
12		demand for this. I want to go to Melissa, one of the moms, and ask

13   her how exactly are you teaching your beautiful daughters, you

14   know, your creed – your credo?
(November 22, 1993, Geraldo)

Where the previous example demonstrated a change of topic following a lack of acknowledgement of an attempt at humor, in this instance the humor appears to fail because it has offended the hearer. Rivera seems to be approaching his guests with a somewhat playful, or even flippant attitude, referring to the Klan headgear as "nifty hats" (line 02) and interrupting his guest (line 06). Despite her serious orientation to his questions, Rivera continues in the same vein in line 08. Again, his guest replies seriously and shortly. Rivera apparently orients to this curt response as her having taken offense, because his first reaction is to name the prior utterance as "just kidding" and to apologize (line 10). He then turns his attention to another guest to ask her about raising her children within the KKK belief system, thus changing not only the topic, but the addressee. It may well be the case that a more serious failure calls for more dramatic forms of redress.

The next strategy used by speakers to manage failed humor was already seen in the example just discussed: apology. In this extract, conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh chats with guests at the beginning of his show:

Example 6.6

01 Limbaugh: Sir, I want – I want you to shout it out. Where you from, sir?

02 Man: Toms River, New Jersey.

03 Limbaugh: Tom – it figures, New Jersey. In New Jersey, Janet Reno is a prom

04   date.

05 Audience: (boos, laughter)

06 Limbaugh: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so... (Spring sound) Just

07   kidding, sir. Just kidding. Let's get to the end of crime. We have

08   reason – what better week should we celebrate the end of crime

09   than Thanksgiving week?
(Rush Limbaugh Show, November 22, 1993)

In bantering with his guests about their home towns, Limbaugh attempts a joke that seems to insult both his hearer and the state he is from. When the audience member gives his home state as New Jersey (line 02), Limbaugh replies that "it

figures," a phrase that implies that there is something undesirable about this man that can now be explained by his coming from that state. Limbaugh then criticizes the state as a whole, saying that then U.S. attorney general Janet Reno would be considered a prom date there (lines 03–04). This is apparently a barb directed at heterosexual New Jersey males' tastes in female sexual partners, as Janet Reno is clearly too old and unglamorous to be considered a normatively attractive date for a young man. In addition, the fact that she is a Democrat would also be seen as negative for this conservative audience. Although some audience members laugh, there are also boos, and Limbaugh orients to these, apologizing three times and naming his utterance as "just kidding" twice (lines 06–07). This type of management may be particularly prevalent in public venues such as this, where viewer support translates into financial support for the show. It is also worth noting that, as in the previous two examples, we see the speaker of the failed humor changing the subject. In this case, however, this may have occurred due to time constraints (the new topic is introduced as something that Limbaugh needs to "get to"), unlike in the other instances.

Speakers need not always grovel or be embarrassed when their humor fails. Some interlocutors, perhaps those with more confidence or who are speaking in a comfortable, intimate situation, can resist failure and instead try to coax or even exhort their audience into appreciating their humor. This is seen in the following example where a group of friends in an informal gathering are sharing jokes:

Example 6.7

01	Ginger:	did I tell you my lumber joke?

01 Ginger: did I tell you my lumber joke?

02 Grant: no

03 Ginger: did I tell it?

04 Robert: lumber joke?

05 Ginger: yeah, the lumber joke.

06 Grant: tell them

07 Ginger: a man goes into a lumber yard and he says "I need some four by

08   twos"

09 Others: (laughter)

10 Ginger: and the man who works there say- looks at him kind of strange

11   and says "are you sure you don't mean two by fours?" and he says

12		"I don't know let me check." he goes out of the store across the
13		parking lot to his car where his buddies are parking the car they roll
14		down the window he converses with them for a moment goes back
15		to the store and says "you were right I need some two by fours." and
16		the man who works there says "well, how long do you need them?"
17		he says "just wait a moment I'll check." he goes out to the car con
18		verses again comes back and he goes "a long time we're building a
19		house."
20	Others:	(a little laughter)
21	Ginger:	come on that's so cool.
22	Robert:	sorry
23	Ginger:	I read it in a book it was the only book where I've ever read a joke it
24		was in Ann Diller- in Andy Diller's autobiography she tells it.
25	Grant:	yeah.
26	Robert:	but eh how long do you need eh-
27	Grant:	[yeah that's]
28	Robert:	[for me]

(Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English, Part 3)

This seems to be a non-competitive, supportive environment for joke-telling. Ginger asks twice whether she has already shared the lumber joke (lines 01 and 03) and is encouraged by Grant to tell it (line 06). Following the punch line, however, there is little laughter from the group. Rather than accepting this luke-warm reaction and abandoning her joke, Ginger attempts to coax her hearers into expressing greater appreciation ("come on"). She also described the joke as "so cool." Interestingly, although she does not achieve buy-in, Robert does respond with an apology (line 22). Doing so implies that Ginger's joke may indeed be cool, and that he takes at least partial blame for not being able to appreciate it. Ginger then explains where she learned the joke, and it is worth noting here that comments and questions about the joke and its origins seem to be a strategy used by both speakers and hearers when managing unsuccessful humor, as will be seen again later in this chapter.

A move that is similar to Ginger's in that it involves not backing down from one's attempt at humor, is explicitly pointing out the joke when there is no uptake from the audience. The following example of this strategy occurred during a professor's lecture:

Example 6.8[11]

01	Professor:	so the key to success when (0.2) when you're writing a play (0.2)
02		is that the characters (0.2) have to seem like real people (0.2) in
03		real life (5.3) so er this is described as verisimilitude (0.7) verisi
04		militude (0.8) er or vraisemblance (0.5) er (0.2) in the French
05		classical theatre (3.2) it would help if my pen worked (1.5)
06		vraisemblance (2.0) that w-, that you could y-, (0.6) that was a
07		joke actually so you were supposed to laugh then (1.1)
08	Students:	(laughter)
09	Professor:	okay (0.2) not a good actor I'm afraid (0.3) er (0.2) okay (0.2) so er
10		vraisemblance er (0.2) er the sort of verisimilitude (1.2) however
11		(0.3) er not er (0.3) okay I mean (0.2) so thi-, this is the kind of
12		classical view of character

(Adapted from the BASE Corpus, ahlct017, Keywords in modern drama)

The humor in this case appears to center on the word "vraisemblance" in line 06, but the exact joke must have relied on some non-verbal element, as it is not clear from the transcript. In any case, after a two second pause and two false starts, the professor identifies this earlier utterance as a joke and playfully instructs his audience on what the proper response should have been ("you were supposed to laugh then" line 07). Although the joke was not acknowledged, this admission/exhortation is followed by laughter. Examples 4.16 and 5.9 illustrate additional examples of this strategy and follow the same pattern: pause + joke identifica-

tion + (instruction to laugh). Subsequent audience laughter is also seen in both of these examples. This strategy is interesting in that it can be seen as either – or simultaneously – self-effacing to the speaker or reproachful to the audience. It is unclear whether the speaker is admitting to having delivered the joke poorly and is identifying it as a sort of apology, or whether he is chiding the audience for not having recognized or been amused by it. In either case, this strategy seems to garner a greater mirthful response than the joke itself and thus may serve to save face for the speaker.

One final strategy speakers may use following an unsuccessful attempt at humor is to turn the joke around on themselves. One example of this is reported in an academic study of joking in the workplace:

Example 6.9

Gene is using a large cable stripper at his bench to prepare some lead wire by stripping the rubber insulation off of it. As he looks up, he bangs extra loudly and gets the attention of Wally a commercial repairman, and John, the Reconditioning Foreman, and says loudly: "This here is my do-it-yourself circumciser. Care to try it?" There is no response. Gene then maneuvers the cable stripper in front of his own person and dances around making a clank. At this point Wally and John and a few others nearby grin. Here Gene "saves" a situation which initially seems to affront his publics by turning the joke on himself.

(Lundberg 1969: 26)

Gene is initially ignored by all when he aims his joke at two (higher ranking) co-workers. However, by turning the same joke around on himself, he is able to, as Lundberg describes it "save" the situation, as his original targets, as well as some other co-workers smile. This strategy may be particularly useful when aggressive humor, which Gene's playful threat of circumcision can be seen as, is not well-received. The success of this tactic hinges on not merely choosing a new target, but in targeting oneself in order to defuse any tension from the failed joke. By targeting himself, the aggressor becomes the butt of the joke.

6.3 Audience management of failure

The interactional challenges and discomfort that arise for the speaker whose humor has been unsuccessful seem clear. Less apparent, or perhaps simply less remarked upon, are the problems faced by the audience. Not understanding or appreciating a joke places a hearer at risk of being seen as slow-witted or lacking

a good sense of humor. In this section I explore how hearers respond to three different types of failed humor: humor that they have not understood; humor that they have understood, but not found amusing; and humor that they have understood, but have found offensive. Each of these types of failure makes different demands on hearers' face needs and thus requires a different response.

6.3.1 Responses to failure due to lack of understanding

The research I summarize in this section was originally reported in Bell (2013), where additional details about the study and examples can be found. That research used elicitation to collect data to examine the ways that people responded to a joke that they did not understand. Here, I summarize those findings and augment them through comparison to naturally-occurring examples of humor that was not comprehended. Prior to the completion of the research presented here, humor scholars generally assumed that joke hearers would be motivated to conceal their lack of understanding. This perspective was largely based on Sacks' (1974) analysis of the telling of a sexual joke in a group of young adolescent males. Sacks viewed jokes as "understanding tests" (p. 336), and asserted that not understanding a joke opens a hearer to certain types of judgments that are not cast when a serious story is not comprehended. Specifically, the hearer risks being seen as naïve or unsophisticated. Furthermore, Sacks suggested that feigning appreciation would be a preferred response because of the availability of a normative way of responding to humor: laughter. A second option noted by Sacks is for the hearer to critique the joke or some aspect of its telling, thereby shifting the blame for the failure from hearer to speaker.

In order to test Sacks' (1974) assertions against a broader set of data, 278 responses to the following joke were collected:

> Every time the mail carrier comes to this one house a huge dog comes bounding out and jumps on him. He puts his paws on the mail carrier's shoulders and licks his face and sometimes he almost knocks him over. One day, the mail carrier comes to the house and walks into the yard, but there's no dog. Next day, same thing. The third day the owner's in the yard and the mail carrier, a little anxious about whether the dog's ok or not asks, "How's (house) the dog?" The owner replies, "I did."

Most hearers were unable to decipher the joke on their own, as they were only able to retrieve the form "How is the dog?" which left them unable to interpret the owner's response. Rather than being a question about the dog's welfare, the question is instead one about the location of the dog, specifically asking if he has been put in the house: "(Did you) house the dog?"

A broad range of responses were collected and these are presented in Table 6.1, below. Contrary to what we would predict based on Sacks' (1974) analysis, although many of the responses included laughter (28.4%), very few of the respondents in this study feigned understanding of the joke. Half of the respondents did not clearly indicate that they had not understood the joke, but

Table 6.1: Response Types

	N	%
Nonverbal response (n=71, 25.5%)	102	36.7
Smile (n=31, 11.1%)		
"I don't get it" (n = 78, 28.1%)	100	36.0
Other expression of non-understanding (n = 22, 7.9%)		
Laughter	79	28.4
Silence	69	24.8
Repetition of punch line	61	21.9
Interjection	57	20.5
Joke assessment	43	15.5
"(Wait) what?!"	38	13.7
Request for explanation	33	11.9
Question about joke	22	7.9
Teller assessment	15	5.4
Request for repetition	7	2.5
Self assessment	6	2.2
Excuse for lack of understanding	6	2.2
Other	6	2.2
Request for time to think	5	1.8
Apology for lack of understanding	4	1.4
Mode adoption	3	1.1
"I get it"	3	1.1
Provide own joke interpretation	3	1.1

(Note: Total is greater than the number of tokens, as multiple strategies were sometimes used.)
(Bell 2013: 179)

merely provided reactions that allowed their interlocutor a great deal of latitude in interpreting whether they had not understood or had not appreciated the joke, or whether they were simply disinterested. Just 30 respondents feigned a lack of appreciation, most commonly by issuing a negative evaluation of the joke or the teller, using the second strategy suggested by Sacks, in an attempt to shift the fault for the failure to the speaker, as well as to conceal their lack of comprehension. A mere five hearers feigned both understanding and appreciation, and in doing so they

> seemed to orient to the joke as a social lubricant, laughing because, as one respondent said "it sounded like a joke." Another reported that he laughed because he thought he was "supposed to." For them, maintaining rapport was more important than reacting in a way that genuinely reflected their reaction to the attempt at humor (Bell 2013: 183–184).

These responses suggest that although some hearers (such as the spouse in Chapter 1 who cried upon not being able to understand this joke) may see humor as a kind of knowledge test, they are apparently in the minority.

Instead, most reactions (74.8%) clearly indicated the hearer's lack of comprehension and, as Table 1 shows, over 1/3 of the responses were utterances that explicitly expressed this, with "I don't get it" being the most commonly employed phrase. Most responses employed multiple strategies, and the most typical response pattern was for the hearer to repeat all or part of the punch line, followed by a statement indicating he or she had not understood the joke. The following examples illustrate a range of typical responses:

Example 6.10

Response: (2) Ummm. That's all? (laughter) I don't get it.

Example 6.11

Response: How's the dog? (thinking) I don't get it. You know, it's been a long day!

Example 6.12

Response: (3) I think it went over my head. How's the dog? (2) Just wait, I wanna get it. How's the dog? Yeah, I don't get it.

Each of these sample responses contains an explicit statement of non-understanding ("I don't get it"). In addition, 6.10 and 6.12 have documented silence (which likely also occurred in 6.11 where "thinking" is recorded). Both 6.11 and

6.12 repeat part of the punch line, apparently having pinpointed the source of their comprehension trouble. Laughter, another common reaction is apparent in 6.10. Example 6.11 also displays the strategy of providing an excuse for not understanding.

The predominance of the strategy of openly admitting lack of comprehension suggests that failing to understand a joke is not a serious face threat. In Bell (2013), I suggest that where the consequence of not appreciating a joke is that the hearer is seen as someone with no (or a poor) sense of humor, not understanding a joke does not entail the same assessment and is thus a less serious type of failure. This is because a sense of humor is a quality that is positively valued, while an ability to merely understand humor is not normally subject to overt evaluations. There is also a question, however, of the type of humor that has not been understood. It may be more face-threatening for hearers to not understand a joke that relies on knowledge important to them, for instance, a joke that hinges on knowledge of some professional jargon. Similarly, canned jokes, such as the one used in this study, tend not to be used often in interaction among the groups who did the data collection, and therefore may have been seen as childish. As such, the respondents here may not have felt that being able to understand the joke was important and, not sensing a face threat, were open about their failure.

Examples of responses to spontaneous, rather than pre-scripted, conversational quips that were not understood do indeed suggest that failure to understand might be face-threatening under some conditions. Hay (2001) provides the following example taken from an internet chat with friends about the paper she was writing:

Example 6.13

01   Rick: what's the topic of your paper?

02   Jen: humor support

03   John: is that like clapping at a comedian or something?

04   Jen: kind of, except in normal conversation, like laughing or something

05   Rick: always wondered why clowns wear braces

06   John: huh?

07   Jen: grins

08   Rick: support=braces

09   John: oh doh

10   John: I get it

11   John: I got it beFORE the hint
(adapted from Hay 2001: 69)

In line 05, Rick jokes about the topic of Jen's paper, equating clowns' wearing of braces (suspenders) with support of humor. John is the first to respond, and he expresses confusion. Jen's response of a grin, however, suggests that she has both understood and appreciated Rick's joke. Rick's explanation (line 08) and John's exclamation of "oh doh," which suggests delayed comprehension, are reported by Hay to have appeared on the screen "almost simultaneously" (p. 69). This leaves it unclear whether John's insight was his own, or came from Rick's explanation. That he feels a need to clarify first that he had deciphered the joke, and then to add that he had done it on his own, suggests that not understanding and requiring clarification of humor is a considerable face threat.

Social context, too, will certainly affect how non-understanding of humor is managed by hearers. In the following example, David and Gavin are helping Emma, a new employee, search a database for potential clients:

Example 6.14

01   David: okay we need to find the (2) factory number

02   Emma: factory number

03   David: yes in the (2) two nine zero (3) Fei Cai

04   Gavin: Fei Cai hah

05   David: Cai hah

06   Gavin: Fei Cai (in a strange tone)

07   David: hah address

08   Gavin: J (.) JJ one zero (3) alight

09   David: hah

10   Emma: hah

11   Gavin: Fei Cai (.) all in KFS? (company name)?

12   Emma: (company name)
(Adapted from Mak, Liu, and Deneen 2012: 169)

As reported by the authors, the humor for David and Gavin in this extract derives from the English transliteration of the company name "Fei Cai," which is pronounced similarly to the words "fatty" and "hooligan" in Cantonese (Mak, Liu, and Deneen 2012: 170). The two repeat the name several times, including once in a "strange tone" (line 06), and laugh briefly. In line 08 they appear to be returning to a serious key, but David adds one more laugh particle in the next line. Following this, Emma also briefly laughs, joining in for the first time. Emma was a native of the Philippines and conducted most her business in English, since her command of Cantonese was not strong. In an interview, she explained that she did not understand the words, but tried to guess at what was happening "by looking at their facial expressions" (p. 170). Having discerned that it was a joke, rather than ask for an explanation she joined in with minimal laughter. This is a somewhat higher stakes situation than the other examples in this section, as Emma is seeking to fit in to her new workplace. We may see more attempts to hide non-understanding of humor in such contexts, particularly where relationships are not solidified.

6.3.2 Responses to failure due to lack of appreciation

A joke that is not appreciated by the audience calls for a different type of response. Humor that fails in this way represents a face threat to both speaker and hearer, as both risk being labelled as having a poor sense of humor. The research discussed here was originally reported in Bell (2009a, 2009b). Following the publication of those papers, the data set that describes responses to an unfunny joke was augmented with 353 new responses, raising the total number of tokens from 186 to 540. The patterns of responses remained essentially the same in this larger data set, but I provide the slightly revised results here. As with the study on responses to incomprehensible humor, reactions to an unfunny joke were elicited. This time the template was in riddle form:

> What did the big chimney say to the little chimney?

> Nothing. Chimneys can't talk.

This joke had the advantage of not only being unamusing to most hearers, but also easily tailored to different situations. The speaker could simply change the noun to use whatever inanimate object was on hand (e.g., "What did the big fork say to the little fork?"), making the joke seem to arise naturally in conversation.

Table 6.2 shows the range of response strategies used by hearers in reacting to the joke. Most respondents used multiple strategies to signal that they although they had recognized and understood the joke, they did not find it funny. Fake or lexicalized laughter (i.e., laughter in which the syllables "ha ha" are uttered mirthlessly, see also Haakana 2012) and groaning, both often thought to be the most typical reactions to a bad joke, were among the least frequent responses. On the other hand, genuine laughter (which included laughter that was perceived as merely "polite") was the most common element to be included. Typical responses are illustrated in the following examples:

Example 6.15

Response: ha ha wow.

Example 6.16

Response: (winced, laughed, shook head)

Example 6.17

Response: Yeah that's not a very good one. (laughs)

All three of these responses contain laughter. 6.15 also provides an example of a common interjection, "wow." Example 6.16 includes a description of non-verbal behavior that is typical in that the movements and expressions are clearly evaluating the joke negatively, despite the hearer's laughter. Finally, Example 6.17 contains a negative evaluation, seen in many responses.

Although all the responses submitted were perceived by the data collectors as reactions that indicated failure of their joke, they did not all convey this with the same affective sense. The distribution of the data according to the affective sense of the responses is shown in Table 6.3. Unsurprisingly, most were negative, in that they included, for instance, evaluations of the joke as "stupid" or "not funny." Almost an equal amount, however, were neutral. Many of these utilized minimal responses in the form of interjections; but questions about the joke, evaluations, and topic changes often also were couched in neutral terms. The very small numbers of positive responses seemed aimed at helping the joke-teller save face.

Table 6.2: Response Types

	N	%
Laughter	167	30.9
Metalinguistic	112	20.7
Nonverbal response	112	20.7
Interjection	106	19.6
Evaluation	89	16.5
Rhetorical question	45	8.3
Joke question/comment	29	5.4
Sarcasm	29	5.4
Mode adoption	22	4.1
Topic change	20	3.7
Fake laughter	18	3.3
Directive	16	3.0
Groaning	2	0.4

(Note: Total is greater than the number of tokens, as multiple strategies were sometimes used.)

Table 6.3: Affective sense of responses

	N	%
Negative responses	253	46.9
Neutral/other responses	241	44.6
Positive responses	46	8.5
Totals	540	100

Because the majority of the reactions included some type of assessment, these responses were examined separately. The subset of 213 responses discussed below includes the evaluative and metalinguistic comments, as well as the majority of the sarcastic comments, which were also evaluative in nature. As Table 6.4 shows, most speakers aimed their evaluations at the joke, with fewer targeting the joke teller or both the joke and the teller. Table 6.5 provides information about the quality of these evaluations. Together, these tables demonstrate that although respondents by far opted to provide negative evaluations, their criticisms were

tempered somewhat by their choice of target. To describe the joke as stupid only implicitly remarks on the teller's sense of humor. Describing the teller as stupid, or saying that the teller is an idiot and the joke is stupid, are both more aggressive and explicitly denigrate the joke-teller. The more aggressive responses were found much more frequently between intimates, such as family or close friends. Humor is a strong marker of group and individual identities, and this helps to explain these overt displays of distaste for the joke. With a clear, negative response the hearer communicates behavioral expectations: This is not my sense of humor, and that joke is not in keeping with our group norms of humor. This message might discourage future attempts to use similar jokes.

Table 6.4: Target of the response

	N	%
Joke	140	65.7
Joke teller	53	24.9
Both joke and teller	20	9.4
Totals	213	100

Table 6.5: Evaluative comments

		N	%
Evaluation of joke	negative	117	54.9
	positive	17	8.0
	both	6	2.8
Evaluation of teller	negative	49	23.0
	positive	3	1.4
	both	1	0.5
Negative evaluation of teller & joke		20	9.4
Totals		213	100

The responses collected in this study contain the same limitations as that of the study of incomprehensible humor reported above: They are respondent reactions to a canned joke, rather than to spontaneous instances of conversational humor. In the previous section, natural data suggested that responses to spontaneous,

but incomprehensible humor are likely to differ from reactions to pre-scripted jokes. However, in the case of reactions that demonstrate a lack of appreciation, the elicited responses seem to be a fairly good fit with natural responses to spontaneous, but unfunny humor. First, reactions to naturally-occurring humor seem to contain the same types of negative evaluations. This was seen in example 6.1, for instance, where the husband assesses the wife's joke as "not funny at all." If anything, the responses are a bit more creative, while still conveying a clear lack of appreciation, as in the following examples. In the first case, while putting away groceries, the wife discovers that the husband has bought a different kind of vegetarian burger from the one he normally gets. She points this out to him, then says:

Example 6.18

01   Wife: But if you can't eat the one you love, love the one you eat! (laughs)

02   Husband: Oh my god. You're a dork. In the supreme. (sings last bit)

Her joke is a play on the lyrics of the Crosby, Stills and Nash song, "Love the One You're With." The husband's response includes an interjection ("oh my god") and a mildly negative assessment of the speaker, calling her a "dork." He ends by boosting this assessment with the phrase "in the supreme," which is sung. While the form is typical, the final part of his utterance is unusual and lends a playful air to his critique. A similar style of reaction is seen in the next example, which involves a retelling of the joke seen in Example 5.1. Here the daughter retells to her partner the joke she heard from her mother:

Example 6.19

01   A: The guy who invented the bowling shirt died today. I wonder what Polish

02   people wore to weddings before that.

03   B: I think that's the first joke I've heard where the set-up was funnier than

04   the punch line.

In this case partner B does not critique the joke teller, but the joke itself. Although her response clearly communicates a lack of appreciation, it is again formulated creatively, avoiding single adjective descriptions, such as "dumb," as was often seen in the elicited data.

It is also worth noting that in the second phase of data collection with the chimney joke, the joke-tellers explained that they were gathering data for a study on failed humor and asked their hearers to explain their responses. This question

helped to illuminate what I had already suspected about much of the laughter that was found. Hearers expressed surprise and confusion at having been told the joke and indicated that their laughter had been aimed at the teller. That is, they were expressing amusement, but at the teller's expense. In one naturally-occurring instance of failed humor, previously presented as Example 5.5 in the last chapter, this was made explicit. Here, two friends were driving together and began talking about hybrid cars. As they try to remember what the different models are called, one friend comes up with a silly name:

Example 6.20

01   A: Not the Toyota. Honda makes one. The Honda Schmaccord.

02   B: (laughs) That was bad. I'm actually laughing at that. I'm laughing that

03   you actually said that.

As noted previously, A's playful name is not highly creative, simply taking the name of the common Honda Accord and adding "sch-" to the beginning. B's initial reaction of laughter might suggest appreciation, but she immediately cancels this with a negative evaluation. Although she first expresses surprise ("actually") that she is laughing, she then clarifies that she is in fact laughing at the speaker. Her surprise is now directed at the fact that the speaker could have ("actually") spoken these words, implying that the joke was very poor.

Almost all of the data collected using the chimney joke was, for ease of recording responses by hand, between two interlocutors. Evidence from natural interaction suggests that jokes that are not appreciated in group interaction may receive different responses. Most commonly, it seems that they are simply ignored:

Example 6.21:

01   MM: I knew I should have brought my tape recorder which has sounds to

02   play back at them

03   CM: tell you what Alan's fridge is a lot better stocked than our one is ha=

04   EM: =ha ha

05   DM: was=

06   CM: =(laughs) was:=

07   MM: =ha ha ha

08 EM: I can do some (whistles) feedback ha ha (inhales, clears throat)

09 CM: (looking at tape-recorder) miles to go

10 DM: (yawns)
(Adapted from Hay 2001: 71)

The joke here is made by EM in line 08, and he refers back to MM's comment in line 01. MM had previously suggested that he bring a recording of sound effects to play while the recording for the data collection was occurring. Between that comment and EM's attempt at humor, the group has changed the topic and is now joking about Alan's refrigerator and everything they have taken out of it. Although EM's joke is clearly contextualized as such and thus almost certainly recognized by the rest of the group, as Hay (2001) notes, the others ignore it. Hay further suggests that EM seems aware of the failure of his humor and that clearing the throat, as he does, may be a common strategy speakers use when their humor has been unsuccessful. Group conversations where no individual has been targeted as the recipient of an utterance ease the burden of responding. When no participant is required to respond, the interactional preference when humor fails may be to allow the silence to convey the message. Similar reactions can be seen in Example 4.14, where George Zimmerman's attorney begins the trial with a knock knock joke and in Example 5.6, where Graeme Garden's joke about sports cars for the blind failed.

If anything, the naturally-occurring responses to bad jokes seem less aggressive than those collected via the telling of the chimney joke. This may be because the spontaneous attempts at humor are deemed better than the pre-scripted joke. In fact, expectations for scripted jokes may be higher than for those that we (nonprofessionals) create ourselves, and so interlocutors are more forgiving of their failure.

6.3.3 Taking offense to humor

Of the three types of failed humor discussed in this section, responding to offensive humor seems to place the hearer in the most tenuous interactional position. Not only is the hearer not amused, and thus experiencing an absence of the emotion that the speaker (probably) hoped to elicit, but she or he is also actively expressing dislike of the message of the humor. Humor often relies on language and topics that skirt the edges of social acceptability, and a person who is easily offended may also be branded as a person with no sense of humor. The consequences of this can

be serious, as Plester and Sayers' (2007) description of Brenda, who took offense at her colleagues casual – and often pointed – banter and teasing demonstrates:

Example 6.22

Brenda joined the team and immediately took offense at the style of communication used among peers and with some customers. She was particularly shocked by the humorous interchanges. Staff interacted in a very flippant way to each other and with some of their better-known customers and she perceived the every-day banter was abusive, insulting and profane. Brenda overheard a colleague (Cathy) telling her customer that he was just being a "wanker" today and then laughed uproariously (as apparently did the customer). Brenda took extreme exception to this incident and chided her colleague about her unsuitable behaviour with the customer. Cathy, who had been working in the team for over three years, was extremely angry and offended by Brenda's admonishment. (Brenda also took exception to other banter exchanges not explicitly described by participants). Five different participants (including Cathy) described this organizational issue in interviews and articulated outrage at the criticism of their daily banter (p. 166).

Even though Brenda found the humor of her colleagues only inappropriate for the workplace (not, therefore, totally inappropriate), communicating this to them had a chilling effect on her professional relationships. Following this incident, she was excluded from these types of playful interactions and, in addition, her colleagues became "very wary" (p. 172) of her. As a newcomer to this environment her assessment was almost certainly less appreciated than if it had come from an insider; however, it also ensured that she remain, in some respects, an outsider. (See, also, Collinson 1988 for a similar example).

    The above observation indicates that interlocutors who are offended by an attempt at humor may want to consider a more measured response if they are concerned about maintaining and developing cordial relationships. (Indeed, see the discussion of example 6.23, below). Lockyer and Pickering's (2001) research suggests that offended recipients often use a number of strategies to ensure that while they are taking umbrage to the humor, they also work to construct themselves as individuals with a healthy sense of humor. Their data is a set of letters of complaint to the satirical magazine Private Eye, in which the writers wish to express their indignation about some (humorous) image or story from the publication. In these letters, the researchers found that complaints were rarely issued directly. Rather, the writers usually began by sharing their appreciation for the magazine, as in the following examples: "Usually I find the cover of Private Eye highly entertaining..." or "I am not much of a one for 'writing letters,' nor do

I consider myself easily shocked or offended..." (p. 637). Following Hewitt and Stokes (1975), Lockyer and Pickering refer to this as "a credentialling disclaimer where readers attempt to avoid anticipated undesirable typifications that may follow the complaint" (p. 638). These disclaimers first serve to protect the writer, by presenting her or him as someone who is aware that the complaint sounds as if it is coming from a humorless individual, yet this is someone who normally enjoys the magazine. Second, the disclaimers place the blame on the publication: It is not the individual's sense of humor that is the problem, but the editors' selection of materials that has created this unusual breach.

What is particularly interesting about the stance taken by these complainants is the fact that writers have no relationship with the magazine editors or readers and are not even confronting them face-to-face. Yet, in anticipation of being denounced as humorless in making their complaints, they employ multiple strategies to inoculate themselves against such censure. That they have taken such pains to present themselves as having a good sense of humor to people they have not met, and in all likelihood never will meet, points all the more to the crucial social functions humor plays in our society and to the cultural norm that discourages individuals from not joining in on jokes.

Kramer's (2011) work on arguments over rape jokes found on the internet identifies further strategies that are used to justify offense at certain types of humor. Two main types of arguments are made. First, offense is found to be justifiable because rape is a special case, in which the horror of the act "renders it inescapably realistic" (p. 143), thus preventing there from being any distinction between a fictional, narrated rape and a real one. This argument is made in response to those who suggest that although rape itself is not amusing, jokes about rape can be, either because they are not actual rape (even if they refer to a real case of rape) or because they are fictional accounts. Second, audience qualities can justify offense. In this case, those who had been sexually assaulted brought this up as a reason to be offended. Personal experience can be called upon as support and exempts the non-laugher from accusations of mirthlessness. Also, in this case, being female was named as a factor in lack of appreciation or a feeling of offense at rape jokes, given that women make up a much higher proportion of rape victims and live with this fear more than men.

The character trait of "sense of humor" and the extent to which an individual is easily offended also fall into the category of personal qualities of hearers. From her examination of the various positions presented in the forums, Kramer (2011) finds two different folk models of offense and humor. In the first, individuals have different levels of tolerance for offense; some are easily offended, where others find very little to be offensive. The second perspective divides the world into empathetic individuals who do not laugh at the pain of others, and those "morally

depraved" (p. 152) individuals who do find humor in this. Of course, from the view of those who are labelled as "morally depraved," these divisions are named differently, with the first group being overly sensitive and the second exhibiting a normal ability to laugh at black humor. Kramer's analysis is particularly interesting in the way that it demonstrates how our beliefs about humor – what it is and how it functions – are reflected in the ways that we respond to its failure.

6.4 Final remarks on negotiation of failed humor

The variety of strategies used by speakers and hearers to manage failed humor suggests that conversational joking is far from simply an entertaining add-on to interaction. Instead, it is a complex, social accomplishment, with multiple functions and meanings. As one example of this complexity, we can point to the different types and degrees of face threats that arise given different types of unsuccessful humor. Furthermore, the threats faced by speakers are not the same as those faced by hearers. Of course, the examples used thus far were selected to illustrate most clearly the strategies used. In fact, many examples are less clear, with more extensive negotiations and multiple strategy use. These may represent what happens in the majority of instances of failed humor, particularly those that occur in private communication, rather than on television or radio. Below I provide two extracts to demonstrate the more intricate negotiation that can take place when humor goes awry.

The first example represents a case where something has gone wrong in the delivery or reception of the humor, but it is not entirely clear what has happened. That is, is this a case where the joke was not understood, or perhaps only partially understood? Or are the interlocutors identifying different incongruities in the joke? In addition, it is useful to note how both parties seem to be invested in avoiding failure. The context is a radio interview between host Barbara Bogaev and Irish author Eoin Colfer:

Example 6.23

01 Bogaev: now is music still a part of your your experience then (.) writing?

02 Colfer: oh, yes, I always play (.) um music when I'm writing, and (.) uh very

03   um::: (.) varied tastes: uh:: (.) I love everything from AC/DC to eh to

04   Metallica! hhhh [(laughs)

05 Bogaev: [(laughs) well, that=

06 Colfer: =no=

07 Bogaev: =that covers a lot of!

08 Colfer: no I'm just kidding I'm just kidding. No, I like everything and I

09   mean some of the modern stuff is great. I love Sheryl Crow; I think

10   she's brilliant. And Coldplay are an excellent band, and Semisonic

11   and all these wonderful bands. I do admit that I'm leaning towards

12   guitar bands, but as I get older, I'm mellowing slightly. I haven't

13   gone to see a heavy metal concert since Whitesnake back in, I don't

14   know,
(NPR Fresh Air, 05-15-2003)

In response to Bogaev's question about the role of music in his writing, Colfer jokes that he has "varied tastes" and enjoys "everything from AC/DC to Metallica." This is clearly contextualized as humor and, indeed, the interlocutors engage in joint laughter, but the intonation of Bogaev's verbal response ("well that" in line 05) indicates uncertainty. Colfer orients to this and quickly provides "no," which is often used to mark a return to a serious mode (Schegloff 2001) and also retroactively designates his utterance as "just kidding" (line 08). I suggest that the confusion comes from a clash between the form and content of his humor. The formulaic sequence "from A to Z" is often used to denote a wide range. Here, it seems that Colfer may be doing this with "from AC/DC to Metallica," since the first item begins with A and the second with M, which occurs much later in the alphabet. At second glance, however, both bands are of the same genre and era, which then creates a humorous incongruity with his claim of having varied tastes. Colfer acknowledges this in his next turn, in which he provides a serious answer, naming a variety of artists and also explicitly identifying the prior bands as heavy metal and something that he used to listen to. It may be that Bogaev oriented first to the form of his utterance and only later to the content, and this is what created her somewhat disfluent response. Two things are clearly worth noting, however. First, despite the joint laughter, this attempt at humor was marked by dissonance. It was not accomplished smoothly. Second, both participants seem to be working to make the joke succeed, or at least to reduce the dissonance. Despite apparently not fully grasping the humor, Bogaev joins in with laughter. Her rather vague comment is also supportive and seems designed for face-saving, as it provides an opening for Colfer to elaborate. For his part, Colfer is quick to

clarify his joking intent, as well as to take Bogaev's opening as an opportunity to expand his answer.

In the next example failure of a joke due to a word that is perceived as offensive is clear, but both teller and the offended hearer engage in extensive negotiation about the nature of the joke. This interaction took place among a group of intimates, who had already been telling jokes:

Example 6.24

01	Sherry:	did he tell you his Harvard joke?
02	Brandon:	oh yeah that's a good joke
03	Ned:	you can't tell that HERE.
04	Brandon:	no this one's-
04	Ned:	oh DIFferent Harvard joke
05	Brandon:	this one's fine.
06	Ned:	(laughs) I only know two and they're both dirty.
07	Sherry:	this isn't
08	Brandon:	this is a pretty good one. uh Oregon- Oregon boy goes to HARvard
09		and he's just a young kid y'know? ready to start his freshman
10		year and he's kind of intimidated he goes out into Harvard YARD
11		for the first time and his instructions are that he's supposed to
12		meet at the library at such and such time and he's looking around
13		the yard and there's ALL the ivy-covered buildings and they
14		all look the same to him and he sees a guy walking the other
15		direction and he's a slightly older guy with a BIG Harvard letter
16		sweater on obviously a Harvard student. so he goes up to the
17		fellow and says "can you tell me where the library's at?" and the
18		fellow looks at him and says (4) "I am a HARvard student we're
19		standing here in the HARvard Yard I assume at some point in
20		your life you're going to be a Harvard student too and the first

21		thing you should KNOW is that no HARvard student ends his
22		sentences with a preposition. so NO I do NOT know where the
23		library's AT.
24	Lydia:	(laughs) [isn't that cute?]
25	Frank:	[(laughs)]
26	Brandon:	and the fellow thinks for a second and he says (1) "okay uh can
27		you tell me where the library's at ASShole." (sniffs)
28	Frank:	oh. (laughs)
29	Ned:	see [I view that as dirty]
30	Brandon:	[(laughs)]
31	Ned:	and I know that I'm a prude about these things but still I think it's
32		something about the last WORD
33	Brandon:	sorry
34	Ned:	it IS the joke I know. it's okay. it's a pretty good JOKE.
35	Lydia:	it's a FUNNY joke
36	Frank:	it doesn't end in a preposition
37	Ned:	no.
38	Sherry:	(laughs)
39	Frank:	he accomplished his goal.
40	Lydia:	it's very funny
41	Ned:	oh it all WORKS I was just kind of surprised that it ended up
42		being the same joke I knew.
43	Brandon:	then there's the other one where-
44	Ned:	which I viewed as dirty whereas yours of course ISn't
45	Brandon:	no see when I-
46	Ned:	nothing dirty about assholes

47	Brandon:	think of dirty I think of scatological not just the fact that there
48		happens to-
49	Ned:	nothing scatological about assholes, no.
50	Brandon:	to be a four-letter word in it.
51	Frank:	(laughs)
52	Ned:	(laughs) what could be scatological about an asshole?
53	Brandon:	well I think of that word

(Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English, Part 3)

Upon completion of the joke, Frank laughs (line 28), but Ned, who has already expressed apprehension that this joke might be "dirty" (line 06), withholds laughter. Instead, Ned states that his fear had been confirmed. Note, however, that he does not categorically claim that the joke is dirty, but rather that this is his opinion ("I view that as dirty," line 29), thus hedging his assertion. Brandon laughs through Ned's turn, and it seems that Ned orients to this as laughter aimed at the view he has just expressed, as he continues to concede that he is prudish about foul language (line 31). In acknowledging this as a shortcoming and openly claiming it as part of his identity, he potentially inoculates himself against ridicule (or *further* ridicule, if that is how Brandon's laughter has been interpreted), while at the same time defending his view. This elicits an apology from Brandon, presumably for having used this word that has offended Ned. After this, the interaction becomes particularly interesting, as Ned assesses the joke first as "okay" and immediately after as "pretty good" (line 34). This would seem to be a reversal of his earlier position, assuming that dirty means not funny; however, there is not anything that precludes a joke that offends one's sensibilities from also being at least somewhat amusing. Lydia, who was instrumental in getting Brandon to tell the joke, upgrades Ned's evaluation, insisting that it is "a *funny* joke" (line 35). Frank expresses implicit approval for the joke by pointing out how the Oregon boy had cleverly gotten the best of the Harvard student. Ned seems to orient to this as an explanation aimed at him, and he acknowledges the internal logistics of the joke ("it all works"). Ned then seems to retroactively justify his lack of expression of appreciation as surprise that the joke was the same as one he already knew. This prompts Brandon to begin to tell that other joke and it is here that Ned changes his view of Brandon's first joke, saying that the other one is dirty, whereas the one Brandon has just told is not (despite this having been his first reaction). What follows is some playful negotiation of what counts as a "dirty" word. Tables are turned – Brandon is explaining and Ned is teasing.

It seems that often people choose to recognize the good will behind attempts at humor (or at least those attempts that don't seem mean-spirited – see the discussion of deliberately failed humor in the following chapter) and carefully attend to their own and each other's face needs.

6.5 Summary

In this chapter the strategies used by both speakers and hearers to negotiate failed humor were reviewed. The failure of humor poses a face threat to both parties, and each has a variety of ways to manage that threat, ranging from those that attempt to mitigate the threat for both parties, to those that aggravate the threat to one party while protecting the other party's face. Speakers can first simply avoid attempting humor that they feel might fail, but once they have uttered an unsuccessful joke, their strategies tend to be aimed at minimizing the damage to their own face. Hearers, on the other hand, use strategies that function to protect their identity as individuals with a good sense of humor, while simultaneously communicating failure to the speaker. The degree of aggression with which the failure is communicated can vary widely. In this chapter, the type of failure was demonstrated to be an important indicator of the type of response. In other words, a joke that is not comprehended will receive a different reaction from one that has not been found amusing, or has been deemed offensive. The following chapter will discuss social factors that contribute to differences in the ways that failure is negotiated, with a specific focus on power relations.

7 Failed Humor and Society

7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I noted that interlocutors are often prone to react with leniency in their interpretations of and support for humor, working jointly to avoid or smooth over failures. Yet, humor scholars have long recognized that the construction and reception of humor is also often less-than-benevolent. For instance, we have already stated that humor can be an important factor in building group cohesion. Often, however, group identities are built at the expense of others – creating an in-group automatically creates an out-group. In this chapter the relationship between humor and society is examined, with a particular focus on the ways that failed humor challenges or reinforces social norms and existing power relations. Before turning to the discussion of failed humor, the deeply social nature of humor in general is reviewed.

Although we often think of humor as an individual personality trait, research shows that whether or not we laugh and how amusing we find something is sensitive to all sorts of social factors. Humor and mirth occur much more frequently in the presence of others, and experiments have demonstrated that when our companions exhibit appreciative responses to humor, by laughing and smiling, our own laughter increases, as well (Chapman and Chapman 1974, Young and Frye 1966). Such a social orientation to funniness is also seen even when responses are not overtly social. This was demonstrated by Wimer and Beins (2008), who primed participants' expectations about the funniness of jokes by telling them that prior participants had rated them as funny or unfunny. The participants then privately rated the jokes and their ratings strongly correlated with the message they had been given. That is, those who were told that others had found the jokes funny, rated their own packet as much funnier than had a control group. Those who were told their jokes were not considered funny by others also rated them accordingly.

At the same time, knowing specifically who finds a joke amusing can also have a strong influence on an individual's perception of funniness. For instance, people have been found to laugh more with friends than with strangers (Chapman and Foot 1976, Foot, Chapman, and Smith 1977, Smoski and Bachorowski 2003). Platow, et al. (2005) further demonstrated the effect of in-group vs. out-group laughter on perceptions of funniness. They asked students to listen to a tape recording of a stand-up comedian. Some were told that the performance had been made before an audience of students from their university, while others were told that the audience was members of the One Nation Party, an Australian political

group that prior research had suggested was a group that university students did not identify with. Those who thought they were hearing the laughter of other in-group members (university students) in response to the comedian laughed and smiled more often and also laughed longer than those who believed the laughter came from an out-group (One Nation Party members).

That humor preferences are an important identifier of in and out-group status has been amply demonstrated by Kuipers (2006a, 2006b). Her work on joking in the Netherlands and in the U.S. illustrated the social construction of taste, revealing clear differences in preferred styles of humor across both cultural and class lines. Friedman and Kuipers (2013) confirmed Kuipers' earlier findings in a study comparing the comedy tastes of Dutch and British informants. Furthermore, they were struck by the very strong, emotionally charged aesthetic and moral judgments that their participants provided about comedic preferences. These judgments not only involved the performers themselves, but evaluations of their fans. One UK informant, for instance, described fans of two comedians in the following manner:

> People who love that kind of comedy, like Karen Dunbar and Michael McIntyre, I would probably think they were fucking idiots to be perfectly honest with you. It's about a lack of ambition to find anything for yourself (p. 185).

Friedman and Kuipers name these visceral reactions as their "most striking finding" (p. 193), particularly because these types of responses do not extend to other cultural realms. They suggest that "this heightened capacity is relatively unique, and bound up with comedy's inextricable relationship with personhood" (p. 193). Although humor is often considered trivial, these strong reactions index its important role in the construction and maintenance of individual and group identities.

Given that humor preferences seem to be used to make judgments about other aspects of an individual's character, success or failure of attempts at humor may predict the success or failure of a new relationship. Fraley and Aron (2004), for example, found that strangers who shared laughter reported feeling closer than those who did not in an experimental condition (see also Treger, Sprecher and Erber 2013). On the other hand, attempts to fit in socially through the use of awkward or inept uses of humor may prevent the formation of strong social connections (Kirsh and Kuiper 2003). The reactions of others to a joke can also affect individual judgments about the joke-teller. In a controlled experiment, Gruner (1989) found that listeners gave higher evaluations of a public speaker's general qualities (not just sense of humor) when that speaker's humor was greeted with laughter than when the speaker's jokes were met with silence. Moreover, any type

of laughter in response to humor may be more affiliative than no laughter at all. Derks, Kalland and Etgen (1995) found that both laughing at and laughing with a joke-teller following a quip resulted in higher affiliative ratings of the speaker than silence.

All of the studies discussed above point to the highly social and socially constructed nature of humor and reactions to it. Although most findings relate only indirectly to unsuccessful humor, they suggest that the failure of humor may have serious consequences for the speaker. Although as a mode of communication, humor can fulfill any function, two that are most common involve 1.) the construction and maintenance of social relationships through feelings of intimacy and solidarity, and 2.) attempts to alter or influence an interlocutor's beliefs or behavior. When humor intended to fulfill these functions is unsuccessful, does this also entail failure of the social action?

7.2 Failed humor and social action

Given the various ways that humor can be deemed unsuccessful, as presented in Chapters 4 and 5, it is clear that the specific way that the joke has failed will change this answer. For the sake of discussion, let us consider the two functions described above in light of a joke that has been recognized and understood, but not appreciated. With regard to the affiliative function of humor, the positive emotions and feelings of closeness that accrue when individuals enjoy humor together may not develop if the humor is not enjoyed by one party. This outcome, however, is highly dependent on the social context, including participant roles, relationships, and attitudes. Under some circumstances, a speaker may be commended for having good intentions to amuse, while under other conditions failure may result in the joke-teller's marginalization or exclusion from the group. When humor is used in hopes of influencing the behavior of others and communicating social messages, its failure to amuse in no way precludes the fulfillment of this function. Competent interlocutors are usually able to identify the message behind, say, a tease, even if it does not make them laugh. The question remains, however, as to whether action is likely to be taken based on a failed attempt at humor. Is failed humor less likely to induce changes in the hearer's behavior or attitudes than successful humor? In the following sections I consider humor that functions in each of these ways – for solidarity or for subversion – and examine what failure means for these functions.

7.2.1 Humor for solidarity

Humor is often portrayed as trivial and "just for fun," and if this is indeed the case, we might expect its use in developing relationships to be among its least important functions. Surely strong friendships can be formed without a shared sense of humor. Yet, as the research discussed above shows, shared humor preferences and laughing together result in demonstrably more positive emotions toward and personal evaluations of the speaker. Therefore, we can predict that unsuccessful humor will result in negative reactions to the speaker, and indeed, this prediction is borne out by an examination of naturally-occurring interaction. In analyzing examples of humor that is intended to increase solidarity, but that fails to amuse its audience, I begin with the most extreme reactions to failure: Those that result in marginalization or exclusion of a group member.

One instance of this was already discussed in the previous chapter (example 6.22), where Brenda, a new employee, found the joking culture of the company inappropriate and hurtful. When she chastised her colleagues for their humorous style, she was excluded from all but serious communication (Plester and Sayers 2007). Similarly, Collinson (1988) reported on the rather aggressive style of humor that was employed by workers on the shop-floor of a truck factory. Newcomers who did not share this sense of humor were either ostracized, or adapted and learned to partake in the culture (p. 189). Yet another example is found in Ducheneaut and Moore's (2005) discussion of socialization in an online gaming community. In this excerpt from an online conversation during a game, B is a new addition to the already-established group of three friends who play together:

Example 7.1

01   E tells the group: the plan is to power level

02   C tells the group: cool

03   B tells the group: i have a 17 mag that could pop your head like a zit

04   (long pause)

05   B tells the group: lol

06   (longer pause)

07   E tells the group: the question is where and what color should the mob be
(Adapted from Ducheneaut and Moore 2005: 97)

This group enjoyed joking together, but as is evident from their silence following B's attempt at joking in line 03, they did not appreciate B's style of humor. Ducheneaut and Moore report that "Eventually the group abandoned B, in part, because he simply was not funny" (p. 97). It is important to acknowledge that although this phenomenon was common enough to warrant inclusion in this article as one of the interactional practices of members of this community, the authors also note that it was *repeated* acts of joking that were not in keeping with group norms that would cause a player to be excluded. Their description of B's abandonment, above, shows that his final exclusion took time to occur ("eventually" he was abandoned) and that the group had additional reasons for dropping him (it was only "in part" because of his failed jokes). Thus, although this shunning of those who do not share norms of humorous interaction remains poignant, it seems that individuals are not necessarily quick to exclude another on this basis alone. A few awkward attempts at humor may be forgiven, but continued infractions, or, as in Brenda's case, open criticism of group norms, are likely to result in a member being ostracized.

When there is no specific community to reference, and little possibility of forming a community, exclusion might be more immediate. This is illustrated by the example that opened Chapter 1, where two strangers on the light rail did not connect humorously:

Example 7.2

01 Woman: the door is *trying* to close.

02 Girl: (removes headphones) huh?

03 Woman: (smiling) the door is *trying* to close.

04 Girl: (gives a short, half-hearted laugh) huh. yeah.

The woman's joke (line 01) playfully manipulated the repeated recorded warnings to move away from the doors so that they could close. The failure of her attempt at humor also resulted in a failure to develop affiliation with her seatmate, whose unequivocally unenthusiastic response conveyed a desire to not engage in conversation. This meta-message seems to have come through clearly to the would-be joker, as she quickly changed seats and found a passenger who would chat with her.

Not all unsuccessful attempts at humor for solidarity are greeted so harshly and not all result in the snubbing of the speaker. As noted above, repeated attempts at jokes that are seen by others as inappropriate are a sure path to social exclusion, but an adept interlocutor who recognizes failure and manages it in a

way that minimizes its disruption will likely have fewer problems. In the following example, Judith, a university student, is interviewing the student editor of the school's newspaper for a class project. Although these two are strangers, as were the interlocutors in the previous example, because they are both young, female students this situation could be expected to be one in which a casual style of conversation would be most appropriate. Indeed, Judith seems to have interpreted the situation in this manner and makes a small joke as the interview commences. When the joke is not well-received by the student editor, Judith adapts and continues her interview in a manner that accommodates the more serious style of her interactant:

Example 7.3

01 Judith: what do you like the most about the position and what do you like

02   least about th- your position?

03 Editor: the least is dealing with people

04 Judith: all right

05 Editor: dealing with the sta[ff because uh

06 Judith: [☺ are they tough? ☺

07 Editor: no it'[s it's very

08 Judith: [huh huh huh I'm just kidding

09 Editor: it's very difficult when you have to pull rank on a friend

10 Judith: oh right

11 Editor: like when you have to, for example you- your best friend is- for

12   example I'm the news editor
(adapted from Bell 2002: 182)

The student editor gives no sign of recognizing that Judith's utterance (line 06) is an attempt at joking, which is probably what prompts Judith to provide multiple cues as to the nature of her remark, in the form of laughter and an explicit statement that she's "just kidding" in line 08. These cues still do not elicit any sign of recognition of the quip from the editor, who continues on with the utterance she began to formulate in line 07. In a later interview about this interaction, Judith did not suggest that an attempt to establish affiliation with the editor was rebuffed, but mentioned that she thought that the editor seemed busy and wanted to rush

through the interview. Having assessed the situation in this manner, after this, Judith not only cut all joking behavior for the remainder of the interview, but also eliminated many of the questions she had planned to ask. The failure of her humor communicated something about the social situation to her, and she adapted accordingly, with the result being a successful completion of the interview.

Finally, attempts at joking for solidarity that fail among family and close friends also seem unlikely to result in social exclusion or decreased intimacy. This seems to be the case even when responses are extremely vehement, as in the sister's response to the "king of your castle" joke presented in Chapter 5 (Example 5.10). Feelings may be hurt, but the relationship will be maintained. Repeated sharing of bad jokes also seems to be acceptable among those with established close relationships, unlike among acquaintances. In the next example, the mother is a habitual teller of corny jokes, usually of her own design:

Example 7.5

01 Mother: Michael Jackson's building a theme park in Ireland. He wants to

02   be with all the little people.

03 Daughter: Uh huh. Yeah. Ok. Good one.

What is important to note here is that the daughter responds in a manner that communicates her lack of appreciation, but the relationship is ongoing, despite the mother's insistence on telling jokes of this caliber.

Humor that is offered as an attempt to create or reinforce feelings of solidarity, but that is not appreciated by its hearers, certainly puts the speaker at risk of social exclusion. It seems, however, that only those very serious offenders will experience this. In this way, reactions to humor may be similar to those for other behaviors deemed socially unacceptable. For instance, making a few rude comments or sharing a few boring stories will not necessarily result in a speaker being ostracized. However, repeated iterations of the offending act may cause others to withdraw. Perhaps the most important factor in determining reactions and consequences to unsuccessful humor is the social relationship that obtains between interlocutors. This will be further explored in section 7.2.3, below.

7.2.2 Humor, power, and subversion

The idea of humor as liberatory and subversive has been championed by lay people and humor scholars alike. In a critique of what he saw as the overly genteel nature of contemporary English humor writing, George Orwell (1945) encapsulated this notion when he described humor thus: "A thing is funny when – in some way that is not actually offensive or frightening – it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution." Orwell's words have since been re-interpreted more broadly as applying to revolutions at a broad, societal level; however, the notion that humor might spark widespread social change is highly questionable. Orwell, in fact, saw humor as powerful in this way at a smaller, interpersonal level, describing humor as "a temporary rebellion against virtue." Indeed, research shows that humor can sometimes effect at least local change by disrupting the status quo in a socially acceptable manner (Holmes and Marra, 2002). At the same time, however, humor is equally, if not more often used as a way of enforcing normative behaviors (e.g. Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997, Fine and de Soucey 2005, Franzén and Aronsson 2013, Holmes and Marra 2002a, 2002b, Keyton and Beck 2010, Lynch 2010, Wennerstrom 2000). Rather than being a tool through which the oppressed may find liberation, humor can be a tool of domination, enforcing conformity to norms. Its power is such that even just witnessing another person being subjected to ridicule can induce the observer to conform to group norms (Janes and Olsen 2000). Thus, at a local level, humor is used in the service of both maintaining and disrupting power relations, depending on the social circumstances. If humor itself intersects with power in these ways, what might we expect to see when humor fails?

If the success of subversive humor is at least temporarily liberating, then there is a distinct possibility that its failure ensures that prevailing social norms remain in place. Conversely, successful humor, such as teasing, that is designed to regulate social behavior tends to maintain the status quo, thus its failure can represent a challenge to the teaser, throwing into question this individual's power. Failure may in fact be more powerful in challenging and upholding normativity – at the very least with regard to what is seen as normative humor – than success. This is supported, for instance, by some of the responses to failed humor discussed in the previous chapter, and particularly those reactions to a joke that fails because it is not appreciated. The coldness or even vehemence of many of the responses and the very few responses that attempted to be supportive or at least polite while still rejecting the attempt at humor as amusing suggest a strong role for failure in the construction of normativity. Furthermore, that these responses were most emotionally charged when directed at intimates demonstrates the important role humor has in drawing in- and out-group boundaries.

Jokes have been thought of as ways for the marginalized or oppressed to effect change through tiny barbs, but in fact, humor is also wielded by the powerful, and joking tends to be targeted down a hierarchy (e.g. Adelswärd and Öberg 1998, Coser 1960, Fine 1983, Fine and de Soucey 2005, Goldberg 1997, Kotthoff 2006, Pizzini 1991, Yoels and Clair 1995). An extreme example of this is the abuse by American soldiers of detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2003 and 2004. Pictures showed soldiers laughing and the abuse was portrayed by the defense as a joke shared between the soldiers and their detainee in at least one instance (Abu Ghraib 2005). This seems highly implausible, given the extreme power differential between the two groups. Even if a detainee gave signs of going along with the "joke," the total control that the military members had over the prisoners would call into question the sincerity of any such signals. Providing positive support for a superior's jokes is an important way of maintaining good relations. The global outrage that greeted the news of the torture at Abu Ghraib suggests not only that the behavior of the soldiers was difficult to interpret as humorous, but also points to the delicate position of those in power with respect to the use of humor that targets those who are less powerful. When a joke targets groups or individuals down the hierarchy, failure of the joke will likely point to the upholding of broad social sanctions against mistreatment of the less fortunate.

The soldiers who participated in the abuse at Abu Ghraib apparently largely appreciated their actions as humor, with failure becoming apparent only in public reactions as the allegations appeared in the press. Such private moments that become gaffes only when made public are easily found. British member of Parliament Ann Winterton's joke about Chinese cockle-pickers, however, was reported as having failed in its original context. In 2004, 23 Chinese migrant workers were drowned by quickly-rising tides in Morecambe Bay while gathering clams. Not long after this tragedy, Winterton told the following joke at a dinner held to improve Anglo-Danish relations:

Example 7.6

Two sharks were in the Atlantic and one says "I'm sick of eating tuna." The other replies, "Fancy going to Morecambe for a Chinese?"

It was widely reported that the joke was greeted with silence and that those who heard it were "stunned" (Tories 2004). Had this joke not been made by a powerful public figure, there would have been little outcry. The public censure that Winterton received (we must acknowledge that private sentiments may have contradicted the public statements of some) upheld the broad social norm against racist

humor, as well as the topic of (recent) death, particularly that of those who are less fortunate, as unavailable for joking.

The faux pas need not be so severe, nor does the speaker need to be in such a high position, particularly if the topic of joking can be widely perceived (again, publicly) as inappropriate. In the following example, regular Today show host Hoda Kotb is joined by country music singer Trisha Yearwood as a guest co-host. The two have been discussing the discomforts of air travel:

Example 7.7

01	Yearwood:	As like if you're sitting in front of a child that's kicking the seat
02		the whole time.
03	Kotb:	Yes.
04	Yearwood:	I think that's...
05	Kotb:	Bad manners.
06	Yearwood:	Yeah. And I usually want to turn around and say to the parent,
07		are you good with this?
08	Kotb:	What's going...
09	Yearwood:	Because I'm about to deck your kid.
10	Kotb:	Have you ever sat next to somebody who's got...
11	Yearwood:	Just kidding.
12	Kotb:	Hello?
13	Yearwood:	And the wine has already kicked in, but that's fine.
14	Kotb:	Yeah. Have you ever sat next to someone who's looking at
15		movies and they're looking at porn next to you?

(Today, 8–26–10)

Yearwood seems to have intended her utterance in line 09 as a joke, given the creation of a fantasy sequence, as well as the use of marked vocabulary ("deck" for the more common "hit"). However, at the same time she orients to the possibility that it could be offensive, by providing the reassurance that she was "just kidding" in her subsequent turn. Kotb, in the intervening turn, ignores the remark, which may have been a signal that Yearwood's reference to hitting a child

was inappropriate, prompting the mitigation in line 11. Yearwood makes further amends in line 13, blaming her overly direct or aggressive statement on the wine that is apparently being drunk by the hosts. Kotb again changes the subject. It seems noteworthy that her choice of annoying airline behavior is still edgy, but targets an activity that is more likely to be widely condemned (public viewing of pornography in close quarters) and thus is more acceptable for humor. Joking about violence against vulnerable members of society is less socially acceptable than joking about sex, when it targets those who publicly violate social norms regarding it. (For similar examples involving sexist humor see Example 5.8, where Rush Limbaugh is booed and Willis' [2005: 140] analysis of a failed joke during an episode of the Bill Maher Show). Certainly there are examples of jokes made at the expense of the less fortunate – particularly those that take place in private moments among everyday citizens – that fail and are met with silence or perhaps feedback indicating their unacceptability to the hearer, even if it is a mixed response combining laughter with some rejection of the message. In these cases, too, the withholding of laughter sends a powerful message that the broader norm is upheld.

On an interpersonal level, joking by those with greater power can be used to shape the behavior of others. The failure of such attempts at humor may not have serious consequences, given the power differential. Those in power will likely maintain that power, despite their failed jokes. In the next example, members of two firms, UK buyers and Finnish sellers, are meeting in order to clarify the sellers' offer to the buyers. The buyers, who have the upper hand, target the business practices of the sellers – specifically their preferences about payment terms:

Example 7.8

01   Seller A: an' there's a lot of people that [we don't even

02   Buyer L: [/?/ (mumbles)

03   Seller A: do business with

04   Buyer L: well I can understand that if you're dealing in [in in in the third

05   world

06   Seller A: [no no not

07   Buyer S: (laughs)

08   Seller A: not (.) in this in this country's [/ ? /

09   Seller J: [it's Glasgow

10   Seller P: in those countries [we get one-hundred percent up front

11   Buyer M: [(laughs) Glasgow's the third world yeah ha ha
(Adapted from Vuorela 2005: 119)

The buyer's humor is successful among the buyers, but fails for the sellers, who do not want to take part in anything that might jeopardize the sale (i.e. things that seem to denigrate their product or way of doing business). The burden is on the sellers at this point, so the buyers have the power. Therefore, even though the sellers do not laugh, they also do not openly challenge the joke. They justify their payment practices by taking up the joke seriously, explaining the differences between the way they do business in "third world" countries as compared to with these U.K. buyers. Failure of the humor here changes little. The buyers have registered their critique playfully, and the sellers must still work to appease the buyers and try to make the sale. This may even be a case of deliberate failure, in which the appreciation of the sellers was purposely not sought (see more on this in section 7.3, below).

Joking that is directed up or across a hierarchy is often considered subversive and is thought to have the greatest power to effect change. Some social norms are so strong, however, that even when a barb using them is aimed at someone in power, they are not acceptable. Normally politicians are fair game for barbs, and we might imagine the joke below that occurred between two talk show hosts and was aimed at Barack Obama, to be acceptable. At this time, the presidential campaign was nearing its end, and he was leaving the campaign trail early to go to Hawaii to visit his gravely ill grandmother:

Example 7.9

01   Kotb: Let the election be over. (…) We're over it. We…

02   Gifford: Oh!

03   Kotb: … we keep saying it every day that we're over it, we're over it.

04   Gifford: And so is Obama. He's going to Hawaii for a vac- you know, not a

05   vacation, but…

06   Kotb: His grandmother's sick.

07   Gifford: I know. I'm only kidding.

08   Kotb: His grandmother…

09 Gifford: He's – I'm sure they'd like to have it over. I know it! I'm sure that

10   they'd rather it be over as well and be going on vacation.
(Oct. 21, 2008 NBC Today Show)

A politician's every action is usually up for criticism, and leaving the campaign trail early could easily open the door to speculative joking. In this case, however, the seriousness of Obama's grandmother's illness was known (in fact, she died not long after this, just two days before the election), and seemed to be the cause of the failure of Gifford's joke. The joke in line 04 is that Obama is going to Hawaii because, like them, he is weary of the campaign. Gifford begins to describe his retreat to Hawaii as a vacation, but cuts herself off and initiates self-correction. Even though Gifford is already in the process of performing self-repair, Kotb seems to reproach her, naming the fact that his grandmother is sick. Gifford acknowledges this and claims her prior utterance as "only kidding" (line 06). Kotb's repetition of "his grandmother" is hearable as an additional reproach, indicating that this is not an appropriate topic for humor. This example shows that joking up the hierarchy is not always acceptable. Power alone does not make someone a suitable target, particularly if the issue being joked about involves a situation that is common to the human condition, such as losing a close relative, as here.

Thus far we have examined cases where the target was not present, which makes the joke more abstract and removed, and the consequences perhaps less severe. When challenging humor is used – and fails – on an interpersonal level, however, the outcomes can be quite serious. One example of this comes from an ethnographic study of machine operators by Donald Roy, who was a participant observer in the joking sequence he reports below. Ike, George, and Roy are machine operators. George's daughter is marrying a professor's son. This is a source of status and admiration for him from his co-workers. Roy suggests that Ike tease him about this:

Example 7.10

"Why don't you tell him you saw the professor teaching in a barber college on Madison Street?" (...) After an interval of steady application to his clicking, (Ike) informed the unsuspecting George of his near West Side discovery; he had seen the professor busy at his instructing in a barber college in the lower reaches of Hobohemia. George reacted to this announcement with stony silence. (...) Ike had not elaborated his story very much before we realized that the show was not going over. George kept getting redder in the face, and more tight-lipped; he slammed into his clicking with increased vigor. I made one last weak attempt to keep the play on the road by remarking that barber colleges paid pretty well.

George turned to hiss at me, "You'll have to go to Kankakee with Ike!" I dropped the subject. Ike whispered to me, "George is sore!"
(Adapted from Roy 1959: 165)

George clearly took great umbrage at the notion that his daughter might be marrying the son of an instructor at a trade school, rather than an academic professor. Roy reports that, following this incident, George and Ike did not speak to each other for several days, and then spoke only about routine, serious work matters. It was not until 13 days later that they resumed their normal joking relationship and friendship. The joke could be seen as a message to George not to take this marriage so seriously and not to be proud about it. However, because the joking was abandoned when George refused to be amused by it, George won and the norm – class distinction – was upheld. Of course, this assertion only applies for the reported incident. In the future the values George holds regarding class and status might have been ignored or again put up for joking, or George himself might have taken up the topic humorously, signaling a shift in attitude. It is only through repeated acts of successfully upholding or challenging social norms (through humor or other means) that change is possible.

As was noted in Chapter 6, the failure of humor can be risky for the hearer, who is in jeopardy of being labelled as humorless. Yet, two final examples serve to demonstrate how, in some cases, withholding signs of appreciation (thus creating unsuccessful humor) can be more subversive and challenging than the humor itself. The next exchange took place between a reporter and Ari Fleischer, press secretary for then President George W. Bush, during a White House press conference. Although the joke meets with success generally, it fails with the journalist to whom it is addressed:

Example 7.11

01	Reporter:	Ari, the House has changed the menus to freedom fries on Air
02		Force One as freedom toast. There are now some Republicans on
03		Capitol Hill, about 60, who want to step that up a level and cancel
04		a Marine contract worth almost $1 billion dollars with the
05		Marines. (...)
06	Fleischer:	I have heard people, particularly some of those who wear these
07		type of shirts wonder whether you call it a freedom cuff shirt or
08		not (...) (laughter)

09 Reporter: But what about stepping it up – I understand you like to make

10   jokes, but what about people stepping it up to (...)
(Adapted from Partington 2006: 98)

These questions were addressed to Fleischer when, after France was reluctant to support the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the word "French" was replaced with "freedom" in certain phrases as a way for some to register their disdain for France's decision. While there is laughter here, the joke fails for the reporter who made the query, as it not only seems to be a challenge to that reporter, but also derails his question, which is a particular affront when reporters have so little opportunity for individual interaction with the press secretary. Although the assembled reporters laugh, by deliberately withholding laughter and accusing Fleischer of "making jokes" this reporter makes Fleischer seem trivial. By seeming to not take the issues seriously, as Partington points out, Fleischer risks damage to his "competence face" (p. 98). Thus, this case illustrates how the failure of a joke – for just one person among many – has the potential to challenge the status quo and draw attention to an issue of interest and importance to the questioner. Furthermore, this challenge may have altered Fleischer's behavior – if only toward that reporter – in the future.

In the previous interaction the hearer criticized the press secretary's joke, constructing it as unsuccessful and turning it into a potential challenge to Fleischer and possibly empowering the hearer. The next example shows how failure might, under some conditions, actually empower the speaker. This interview between news anchor Tony Harris and Johnny Dupree, then mayor of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, took place following Hurricane Katrina, an event for which federal emergency services were notoriously mismanaged:

Example 7.12

01 Harris: Is FEMA in your city?

02 Dupree: Who is FEMA?

03 Harris: Oh, boy. Federal Emergency Management Agency?

04 Dupree: Oh, I've heard of them, but you know, I don't really – I'm being

05   facetious, Tony. We have 50 water and ice trucks stationed in Camp

06   Shelby which is located in Hattiesburg, Mississippi and we're sup-

07   posed to get "x" amount of water and ice trucks every day and we

08		have 50 trucks sitting down there that will not be released by, who
09		do you call that agency, FEMA?
10	Harris:	FEMA
11	Dupree:	I'm being facetious again.
12	Harris:	I understand where you're taking us.
13	Dupree:	They're sitting down there right now because one person from
14		FEMA won't take the call to say release those trucks to people in
15		Hattiesburg, Mississippi and other cities so they can have ice and
16		water.

(CNN, September 4, 2005)

In line 02 Dupree pretends to be unfamiliar with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, widely known by its acronym, FEMA. Harris does not signal that he recognizes this as a joke, as he registers surprise ("oh, boy" line 03) before seriously providing the whole name of the agency. In Dupree's next turn he is explicit about the non-serious status of his initial question ("I'm being facetious" in line 04), and begins to explain about the nearby trucks containing resources that are available and marked for his town, but that have not been allowed by FEMA to make their deliveries. He again pretends ignorance of the agency and the host again seriously provides the name, this time using its acronym. Dupree again repeats his non-serious intent. By repeatedly pretending to be unfamiliar with the agency, Dupree emphasizes their absence from and lack of help in his community. Although this is never made explicit, it seems that Harris wants to acknowledge that he has made this connection, in line 12, particularly since he has twice responded seriously to Dupree's facetious remarks. Although Dupree's humor issues a challenge up the hierarchy, its target is an organization, rather than an individual. Furthermore, at this time FEMA was coming under sharp criticism for their inadequate response to the disaster, thus humor targeting them would likely be successful. Rather than the powerful rescuers one would hope for in an emergency, they were incompetent scapegoats. Here the failure of his joke actually seems to empower Dupree to make his point more strongly. As this section has demonstrated, the failure of humor at times may uphold the existing status quo, while at others it may actually challenge social norms. In the next section we further examine the factors that might account for these differences.

7.2.3 Failed humor and social norms

Whether the failure of humor upholds or challenges social norms clearly depends on a number of factors. Most of these are common to all communication, but they may be evaluated differently in humorous talk. In this section I address three factors that are particularly important to the evaluation of (failed) humor: the degree of transgression in the failed humor, speaker roles and responsibilities, and the degree of intimacy between the interlocutors.

First, the extent to which the content of the failed joke transgresses norms will affect the response and consequences. Transgression is, of course, relative. One group might tolerate all violent-themed humor, another might do so only if it is presented as a parody or if it does not use marginalized persons as its target, while a third social circle might eschew all such efforts to amuse. This is where humor is a particularly challenging social achievement. Humor that always stays within the bounds of normativity is likely to be deemed stale (one kind of unsuccessful humor), but to stray too far into new territory is to be ostracized for having a weird/mean/ugly or just plain inappropriate sense of humor. As has been noted, humor is one of the most important means social groups have of delineating in- and out-group boundaries. Successful humor that falls slightly outside of these lines may succeed in redrawing the lines; however, the failure of such an attempt at humor will likely ensure that the present norms remain in place.

Second, although it is impossible to deny the role of the audience in the joint construction and management of failed humor, I see the status, role, and responsibilities of the speaker, in particular, as crucial. For instance, some speakers, such as politicians, teachers, and religious leaders, may be held to a higher standard than other individuals. Barack Obama's derogatory description of his bowling abilities as worthy of the Special Olympics (see Example 2.1) resulted in a great deal of public discussion and in him having to apologize to the chair of that organization's board. A similar remark from someone whose profession does not make him or her responsible for the well-being of others might well have gone unnoticed. The failure of jokes by those who wield power, but who are not in the public eye in the way that celebrities and politicians, but also teachers and religious leaders are, may suffer less from the failure of their quips. In day-to-day workplace situations, for instance, a boss whose humor fails – provided that it does not transgress social norms – will likely be tolerated simply because of the power that person has in creating assignments, assessing work, and giving raises (see, for example, the characters Michael Scott/David Brent in the U.S. or U.K. versions of the television series The Office for an exaggerated imagining of this scenario).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the degree of intimacy between the speaker and other interlocutors is a crucial factor in predicting the social consequences – and sanctions, if any – of a failed attempt at humor. One tool to aid in understanding the role of social distance is Wolfson's (1988, 1989) bulge theory of social interaction. This theory posits a non-linear relationship between the level of intimacy among interlocutors and the amount of negotiation or elaboration that occurs in conversation. When social distance is either very high, as in the case of strangers, or very low, as in the case of intimates, such as family members, speakers tend to address each other directly. Little speech elaboration is necessary, as these relationships are fixed. Within "the bulge," however, lie relationships that tend to be less established and more dynamic, such as those between co-workers, classmates, or acquaintances. The theory predicts that interaction between these people will exhibit the greatest amount of negotiation as uncertain relationships are mediated.
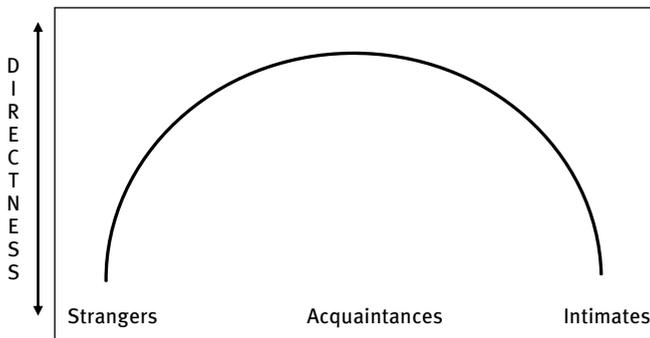
Figure 7.1: Wolfson's bulge theory of interaction

When social distance is high due to a well-established hierarchy, little joking activity occurs between status unequals. When social distance is low, humor has been shown to occur frequently (Carter 2004, Norrick 1993), which is unsurprising given the importance of humor in creating feelings of intimacy, as well as maintaining group identity. Interaction in "the bulge," among acquaintances and co-workers, has also been shown to be marked by a high degree of joking. This suggests that humor provides a means of dealing with the ambiguity of such relationships. Even though corpus studies show more play and humor among intimates (Carter 2004), it may be the humor that clearly "does something" in terms of relational work is found in the bulge, where relationships are less fixed and norms constantly need to be negotiated. Furthermore, jokes that present

a challenge to group or societal norms – whether intended or not – seem more likely to occur in the bulge, simply because the boundaries are less clear and more dynamic, changing as relationships change. This also raises the possibility that unsuccessful attempts at humor will occur more frequently among these interlocutors.

The management of failure within each of these social groups differs and does not necessarily adhere to the shape of the bulge, depending on the way that humor fails. Specifically, the two studies on responses to failed humor reported in the previous chapter suggest that there is a difference in the ways that interlocutors negotiate humor that failed due to lack of comprehension versus humor that failed due to lack of appreciation. The management of humor that fails because it is not understood closely follows the predictions of the bulge theory, with more direct responses given to strangers and intimates, while acquaintances receive more equivocal reactions (Bell 2013). Similarly, when an attempt at humor is not appreciated, Bell (2009b) found that, as predicted by the bulge, very direct responses were seen between intimates and more equivocal reactions are provided by acquaintances. Unlike the reactions to humor that was not understood, however, many intimates responded not just directly, but with vehemence toward the speaker (Bell 2009a). Between strangers, on the other hand, an unfunny joke did not receive direct responses, but instead tended to receive minimal, neutral responses (e.g., see the response of the girl on the light rail in Example 7.2, above). This skewing of the bulge toward intimates in humorous interaction is a finding also reported by Eisterhold, et al. (2006), and it suggests that engaging in playful communication is not only quite different between strangers and intimates, but also varies from other types of talk.

These differences are explicable when we consider, in particular, the identity and boundary formation functions of humor. First, the differential treatment of humor that is not understood versus humor that is not appreciated can be seen as indicating the importance and special status of humor appreciation:

> While not appreciating a joke can place someone into the category of "people with no sense of humor," not understanding a joke cannot entail the same assessment, as appreciation usually cannot occur prior to comprehension (although cf. Bell, 2007). Having not yet understood the joke, the hearer's sense of humor cannot be evaluated. Judgments can be made only on his or her ability to interpret the joke, a quality that is not often publicly lauded and therefore is less subject to face threats.
>
> (Bell 2013: 187)

The emotionally charged reactions of many of the intimates to the joke that they did not appreciate further supports this view of the status of appreciation – and the ability to appreciate as a positive quality that most individuals want to claim

as part of their identity – in the process of humor reception. The data from Bell (2009a) demonstrated that

> sometimes the audience members will see the joke as an indication that the problem lies with them, as well as with the teller, because it implies something about their own sense of humor: Why would you think I would enjoy that joke? Do you think my sense of humor is that bad? The joke, then, becomes a face-threatening act for individuals who want to claim "good sense of humor" as a part of their face (cf. Spencer-Oatey 2007).
>
> (Bell 2009a: 159–160)

Moreover, the relational aspect of identity and face claims explains the attacks on the teller of a bad joke. Humor that violates group norms is subject not only to censure, but, as the data showed, aggressive censure, again demonstrating the significance of humor in establishing and maintaining in- and out-group boundaries. Clearly sending the message that this type of joking is not appropriate for this group make it unlikely that the teller will repeat this type of humor in the future ensures that social lines are maintained.

7.3 Deliberately failed humor

Withholding signs of appreciation following an attempt at humor or even verbally attacking the teller of a bad joke, as in many of the examples from the previous section, are clearly ways of maintaining group boundaries. Another way to do this is through the deliberate construction of humor that will succeed for in-group members, but fail for outsiders. This kind of humor might be called aggressive or cruel teasing, ridicule, or even bullying. In fact, teasing and bullying are often treated simultaneously, in both academic and popular accounts (e.g. see Mills and Carwile 2009 and citations therein). Even the target of bullying may at times find the line between them to be blurry. In the introduction to his memoir on growing up with Asperger's, for instance, Jesse Saperstein (2010) describes the harassment that took place in his high school biology class: "On a good day, the bullying was tolerable and even humorous" (p. xii). However, it is clear that being laughed at can be a painful and psychologically damaging event (Klages and Wirth 2014).

Smith (2009), who directly addresses the phenomenon of humor designed to fail for its target, "argue[s] that these cases constitute both harassment and humor" (p. 162). Billig's (2005) notion of "unlaughter" forms the basis of Smith's observations. "Unlaughter" is a term coined by Billig that describes many of the situations in the previous section, where hearers provide "a display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded" (p. 192). Smith (2009) extends this notion beyond humor that is intended to amuse all

present, to humor that is intended to fail for some hearers. The following account of a practical joke is provided by Smith to illustrate this. The joke was reported by one of the women who worked in the office, a casting agency with a staff of eight. Brian had been tricked into calling a funeral home and asking for "Myra Mains" (my remains):

Example 7.13

Brian slams down the phone, angry and upset. He swings his chair around, to where Jennifer and Katie are standing and giggling, and says in a loud and bitter voice: "Very funny, guys!"

Jennifer responds by saying: "It was her idea!"

Katie laughs uncontrollably, and says, "Myra Mains! Myra Mains! Ha! Ha!" Jennifer and the two other casting agency workers present continue laughing uncontrollably. By the end of the day, everyone in the office has approached Brian and said "Myra Mains, Myra Mains, on line seven for you." Brian reacts predictably by pouting all day.
(Ladd 1995, cited in Smith 2009: 159)

At first, this might appear to be simply an instance in which the humor preferences of Brian differed from those of his co-workers. Note, however, that Brian is described as having reacted "predictably." In fact, he was not popular in the office, and the women who worked there found him to be particularly abrasive. As Smith reports,

> [t]hey thought he was egotistical, shunned teamwork, and inappropriately tried to dominate the women in the office, even though he was younger than they were and had only worked there for around three months. According to the collector, the humiliation wrought by the joke was meant to show him that he was not well liked by the others in the office.
>
> (2009: 160)

Thus, it is clear not only that the failure of the joke (for Brian) was intentional, but further that it was calculated to distress him. By responding angrily and not taking the joke well, Brian lived up to his co-workers' expectations of him, reinforced their solidarity, and almost certainly absolved the jokers (in their minds) of any responsibility for his feelings.

Reports of this type of socially divisive, calculated-to-fail humor seem to most often involve already-marginalized individuals, suggesting that this type of (failed) humor may be more commonly used once these individuals have become marginalized. Taylor (2011), for example, provides numerous examples in her

report of the teasing that adolescents use to target overweight peers. Here is just one anecdote:

Example 7.14

[O]ne overweight female informant explained that she has several large friends who get teased for being fat. In particular, one of her "really big" friends was teased frequently, mostly by boys who would say the following to her: "You're like the empire state building, just extra large," "You hippo!," and "Get away from the vending machine!"
(Taylor 2011: 186)

It seems possible that such patently exclusionary and cruel humor would be less likely to be directed toward an accepted group member, and that perhaps more covert techniques of exclusion are used initially. It is also true, however, that this phenomenon is under-researched and little is known about the process that occurs that allows some individuals to feel that this type of behavior is acceptable. In any case, it is clear that creating humor that will purposely fail for certain people is one technique by which the marginal status of outsiders, once established, is maintained.

And, as Brian's experience illustrated, adults are far from immune to this type of behavior. Watts (2007) explored the experiences of women in civil engineering jobs, focusing specifically on the uses of humor in that highly male-dominated profession. She found that the constant joking that was designed to exclude and denigrate the female workers was not only irritating to those workers, but also exhausting. For example, when one pregnant engineer went to a site, she encountered the following treatment:

Example 7.15

I remember going on site and saying I've got my MICE (Member of the Institution of Civil Engineers) and the foreman at the time said the only letters you should have after your name are MUM and I thought thank you! I mean that is the sort of comment you get and they make a joke of it and everybody laughs but he really meant it and a lot of the jibes that women take on site are more like couched in a joke but it is there all the time.
(Watts 2007: 64)

Because jokes are normally supposed to be all in good fun, it becomes difficult for the victim of a deliberately cruel and humiliating joke like this to object in a productive manner. The situation creates a challenge similar to that of the victims

of covert racism or sexism. The difference is that in these cases, the target may not be absolutely certain that his or her treatment was attributable to prejudice, which makes an appropriate and useful response difficult. In the case of deliberately failed humor, the victim status of the target is clear, but an objection only reinforces marginalization, and playing along is difficult to feign. Thus this type of (failed) joking creates a vicious cycle wherein the target responds negatively, amusing the jokers, which further increases the amount of teasing directed at that person. In a study of joking among electrical repair workers (Lundberg 1969), Hafler, a low-status employee found himself caught in such a cycle. Of the three examples given of deliberately unfunny jokes that targeted him, it is reported that in two instances he simply ignored the men's talk, while in the third, in which he had been tricked into wrestling with a piece of incorrectly-sized equipment for several minutes, he retired to the bathroom once the prank was revealed. Even though his responses were not highly emotional or dramatic, like Brian's in the first example, his obvious discomfort and lack of laughter were enough to encourage his colleagues to continue to taunt him in this way. Once this status is achieved, it may be very difficult to shake.

7.4 Summary

I began this chapter by reviewing literature that has demonstrated how, despite the common understanding of a sense of humor as a deeply personal, often idiosyncratic character trait, our humor preferences are socially constructed. The strong influence that others exert on our humor tastes helps to delineate and maintain group boundaries. The failure of humor, perhaps even more so, contributes to the drawing of these lines between what are considered in- and out-group members. This led us to a consideration of how the failure of humor might affect any social action it was also intended to accomplish. The social actions were broadly divided between humor for solidarity and humor that was intended to achieve some change in the hearer's behavior. The latter was considered from top-down and bottom-up humor. That is, humor that comes from those in power and that is often intended for restrictive social control purposes and that which comes from below, and which is often considered subversive. Analysis suggested that although a few failures of humor that is intended primarily to increase solidarity will not result in an individual's being ostracized from a group, continued use of humor that goes against group norms, even if it is meant in good fun, may been seen as meriting exclusion. When humor is intended to change behavior, the result of its failure was shown to be dependent on a number of factors, most important being the topic of the humor, the speaker's status, and the relation-

ship between the speaker and audience. In general, however, it was suggested that the power of humor to effect change is greater when the humor is top-down, rather than bottom-up. Finally, the use of humor that is shared with the express purpose of failing for some hearers, specifically as a means of (further) marginalizing them, was discussed. This type of humor yet again demonstrates the critical role of humor in social boundary-marking.

8 Conclusion

8.1 Summary of findings

Among lay people, humor is generally considered merely frivolous and fun, and this conception is easy to maintain when all goes well. However, as with a great deal of linguistic behavior, it is when expectations are *not* met that social norms are revealed. The research discussed here confirms that under some conditions humor is not at all frivolous. Certainly, if this were the case, its failure would be of little consequence and we would not witness strangers changing seats on a train following the poor reception of their joke. To the contrary, it is apparent that often there is much at stake in terms of face, identity, and social status for both participants in a humorous exchange. In this closing chapter I discuss the implications of the findings presented in this text for humor studies more broadly, as well as suggestions for future research. Before this, however, a brief review of the major findings of this study is in order. Below, the questions presented in Chapter 1 are reproduced here, with summaries of their findings:

What are the different ways that humor can fail? For example, is failure due to a lack of understanding, a lack of appreciation, or an offensive message?
Unsuccessful humor is most commonly thought to occur when the audience is not amused, and secondly when the audience fails to understand a joke, probably because these are crucial stages in the processing of humor. In this book, however, I opted to analyze failed humor in the broadest sense, which included examining a number of triggers of failure that are identical for both serious and non-serious communication. This comprehensive approach to unsuccessful humor allowed for comparisons to be made, as discussed below, between failure in serious and playful discourse. Ultimately, however, it is those triggers of failure that are fundamental to humor that tell us the most not only about humor, but about miscommunication in general and about societal norms and values regarding humor.

In what ways is the failure of humor similar to or different from the failure of other speech acts or events?
In many ways, the failure of humor parallels other types of communicative failure, as it is triggered by problems common to all communication, such as the use of language that is unfamiliar to the hearer. Although common to all communication, the focus here on unsuccessful humor foregrounded the issue of serious/non-serious keying as an interpretive challenge. The analysis suggested

that this should also be taken seriously as an important discursive resource and as an important factor in miscommunication, including, but not limited to failed humor. The other triggers that were common to both serious and playful communication seemed to be treated similarly, although a tendency to abandon repair in humorous talk was noted. Not understanding humor was demonstrated to be quite different from not understanding serious talk, as were the social consequences, as noted below. Similarly, the failure to appreciate humor is often seen as a clear (usually negative) statement about the hearer's character, unlike the failure to appreciate other aesthetic forms of talk, such as poetry. As a mode of communication, unsuccessful humor fails in some ways that are exclusive to this mode, and are, accordingly, treated in ways specific to it.

How do speakers manage failure of their attempts at humor and how do hearers react to unsuccessful attempts at humor? Are their reactions similar across different types of failures?

The strategies used by both speakers and hearers tell us about the special status of humor itself, as well as the social value we place on humor and having a "good" sense of humor. As a face threat to both speaker and hearer, the failure of humor is negotiated in different ways by each party, and the specific strategies used, as well as the extent to which the response is mitigated or aggravated vary widely. Furthermore, the specific type of failure changes the type and degree of face threat that each party is exposed to, further complicating the picture of management. The different types of failure also help us recognize that there are different degrees of failure – as well as success. Finally, the perception of humor as merely fun, versus humor that also functions as an attempt to instigate social or discursive change by communicating a serious message affects the way that its failure is managed. The social consequences of failed humor can range from a minimal disruption in communication to the severing of a relationship.

How do social variables affect the negotiation of failed humor in interaction?

The same types of social variables that affect serious conversation also affect the ways that failed humor is received and negotiated in interaction. Typically, sociolinguists name race, class, gender, and social status as four important qualities that influence how interlocutors speak and are spoken to. Furthermore, the relationship that obtains among interlocutors is also important. Finally, any number of factors that constitute what we refer to as "context" are also influential in constructing how we speak. Some of these include the physical space, time of day, and conversational goals. It is virtually certain that the same array of factors influence both serious and non-serious discourse; however, the emphasis seems to be different for each type. The variables that were identified through this

analysis as being particularly significant were topic, speaker status, and most importantly, the interlocutors' social relationship. This last is in keeping with the role of humor as a way of managing social relationships. The degree of closeness between interactants strongly influences how they react to the failure of humor. In particular, humor that fails among intimates may well receive the strongest rebuke.

8.2 Implications for the study of language and humor

Perhaps more than anything, this study of failed humor confirms the crucial role of humor in social interaction and points to the need to integrate the study of humor into the study of conversation more broadly. As a mode of communication, humor can perform all the same functions as serious discourse (Priego-Valverde 2003). Thus, not only is humor useful for showing people that we like them, but it is just as useful for showing that we do not like them. The examination of unsuccessful humor foregrounds this point even more so than does the study of successful humor, because it reveals the wide variety of reactions to humor that fails, many of which are highly emotionally-charged. These visceral responses suggest that discourse analysts should carefully take note of any humorous moments in interaction – successful or unsuccessful – as these are likely to be moments when the work of attending to face needs and wants is occurring. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the need for attention to all types of non-cooperative speech and communicative failures in conversational discourse. Just as this analysis of unsuccessful humor has shed light on the social and interactional norms of successful humor, the study of other types of linguistic failures can tell us a great deal about the more commonly seen and researched successes.

Not only has the complex, multifunctional nature of humor been highlighted in this text, but so has laughter and the link between (failed) humor and laughter. Although the tenuous link between humor and laughter is increasingly acknowledged by humor scholars and discourse analysts, the work of conversation analysts that provides detailed accounts of the complex functions of laughter has not yet been fully integrated into the study of humor and interaction more broadly. Because of this, the presence of so much laughter surrounding failed humor may have come as a surprise to some readers. Yet this makes sense once we understand that "laughter registers and communicates the recognition of change and the unusual and, especially, that some behavior has been perceived as improper" (Partington 2006: 234, see also, e.g. Glenn and Holt 2013). Thus, the laughter associated with failure in humor can be understood as likely involving attempts on the part of the speaker to acknowledge and minimize a gaffe. It may also rep-

resent attempts on the part of the hearer to communicate disaffiliation and/or resistance to a humorous (meta)message: Laughter *at* rather than laughter *with* the speaker.

The present research also underscores the challenges scholars face when identifying (failed) humor. The inherent difficulty in doing this further points to the need to integrate the conversation analytic work on laughter into studies of humor, and of interaction more broadly. Conversation analysts have not only shown *that* laughter is strongly associated with the management of interactional trouble, disaffiliation, and resistance, but also *how* this occurs in sequential interaction. Familiarity with this body of literature will help discourse analysts to avoid identifying failed humor as successful simply because of the presence of laughter. Unlike strict conversation analysis procedures, I also believe that an understanding of the social context and participant relationships can greatly enrich our analyses, particularly with respect to (failed) humor. The impossibility of recognizing an attempt at humor that went unacknowledged by all participants, for instance, points to the need for insider information in the identification of failed humor. Similarly, power relations may make failure difficult to identify, as when a subordinate expresses seemingly genuine laughter and support following a superior's joke. The close analysis of both linguistic and social context are important to the study of (failed) humor, in my view.

Finally, humor is often discussed as relying on creativity, and indeed it does, but this work has demonstrated that there are limits to that creativity. Although cognitive limits, such as memory capacity, exist, this study of failed humor most clearly brings forth their social nature. Our judgments about what counts as "good" humor are shaped by our peers and others we identify with, and the boundaries of what is seen as acceptable humor are expressed in the reactions of the audience. Although most people would not consider their expression of distaste for someone's attempt at humor an act of stifling that speaker's creative expression, negative reactions may indeed serve to rein in individual creativity and delineate the boundaries of what is seen as amusing. Yet, if we exclude those occasions where humor fails precisely because it is not creative enough (e.g. overused, old jokes), it is likely that unsuccessful attempts at humor, particularly those that are not understood, represent speech that surpasses the normative degree of creativity. This is an issue that is underexplored, yet this line of inquiry has the potential to speak broadly to studies of language use, change, and development.

8.3 Future research

Because failed humor has received so little attention from scholars in any field, my inquiry was designed to be expansive, addressing broad questions about the types of failed humor that exist and the ways that such failures are locally managed. A study such as this provides a foundation on which further research can be built. Moreover, most of the work I presented here is qualitative. Qualitative research is useful for providing rich descriptions of interaction which can be used to develop additional, more focused research questions. Qualitative descriptions benefit, in particular, from complementary studies involving quantification. Innumerable questions remain to be explored. We can ask, for instance:

–   What are actually the most common (i.e. preferred) strategies that speakers and hearers use in responding to failed humor?
–   How and under what conditions do different factors (context, interlocutors) influence the use of different strategies? Unpacking this question provides us with a range of specific studies related to age, gender, race and social status, as well as different public or private groups.
–   What types of strategies are preferred to manage the failure of different types of humor (e.g., canned jokes, spontaneous quips, humorous narratives)?
–   How does the negotiation of failed humor differ across cultures? How do cultures where humor is not highly valued respond to unsuccessful jokes?

These questions represent just a few of the possibilities for future research, and I am sure that alert readers noticed many more places where my assertions were tentative and in need of confirmation, as well as additional gaps. This is far from a definitive work on failed humor, and I can only hope that it inspires others to embrace failure, as I have.

Appendix A: Transcription Conventions

.	sentence final falling intonation
,	clause-final intonation ("more to come")
!	animated tone
?	rising intonation (not necessarily a question)
-	glottal stop: sound abruptly cut off; self-interruption
italics	emphatic stress
CAPS	spoken much louder than surrounding text
°words°	spoken more quietly than surrounding text
:	after a vowel indicates elongated vowel sound
::	more elongation
/words/	in slashes indicate uncertain transcription
wo[rds [words	beginning of overlapping speech, right brackets may be used to indicate the end of the overlap
=	latching
hhh	aspiration
.hhh	inhale
HHH	aspiration/laughter while speaking
(sarcastically)	description of voice quality or non-verbal action
(…)	part of a turn or some intervening turns at talk have been omitted
(.)	pause of less than one second
(7)	pause of this many seconds
"words"	speaker is quoting another person or adopting his/her voice
[fənɛDIk]	phonetic transcription
☺ great ☺	smiling voice quality

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