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JOINT JOKING
IMPROVISATIONAL HUMOROUS EPISODES IN CONVERSATION
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Linguistic analyses of humor have dealt with the topic from many different angles, including: grammatical ambiguity at the sentence level (Nilsen 1970), linguistic reversals in connection with a general semiotic theory of humor (Milner 1972), transformational operations in the production and comprehension of a joke (Bradshaw 1978), semantic schema theory (Raskin 1979), the violation of constitutive and regulative speech act rules (Hancher 1980), the violation of pragmatic conventions as the most common humor strategy (Dolitsky 1983); but with the exception of work by Watson (1975), Philips (1975), and Tannen (1979), there has been no treatment of joking as an interactive communicative process, consideration of differences in joking styles, or application of a multi-dimensional linguistic analysis to joking in context among speakers of American English. Ethnomethodologists (Sacks 1973, 1974; Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff 1976), symbolic interactionists (Emerson 1969), and anthropologists especially within the traditions of the ethnography of speaking and folklore as performance (Basso 1979, Gossen 1976, Brukman 1975, Roper 1981, R.D. Johnson 1973) have come closer to an investigation of joking as communication, but many of the analyses deal with speech events in other cultures, and those which do deal with joking among American English speakers do not bring the resources of linguistics to bear on the data.

My approach uses a multi-dimensional close linguistic analysis of joking which is aimed at a particular interpersonal rapport goal, in order to identify different joking styles among speakers of American English (cf. Davies 1983 for an extended discussion of the theoretical background). I began my investigation by gathering linguistic data which constituted speakers' attempts at positive politeness through joking (Brown and Levinson 1978). The data were drawn from tapes of natural conversation, television and radio talk shows, and scripted television shows; participant observation; interviews with jokers and others; and literary sources. I determined the basically friendly intent of the joking from testimony of the participants and/or the judgment of members of the same speech background, or from the demands of the situation (e.g., that a talk show host create at least the illusion of cordiality). Discovering that there were different styles of friendly joking,

I selected examples of joking which were jointly constructed within a joking "footing" (Goffman 1981), the joint construction simultaneously demonstrating the existence of a shared style and displaying the features of the style in the interactive process.

In this paper I will illustrate three joking styles by presenting in-depth analyses of particular joking footings which represent prototypical examples. My analysis considers multiple levels of linguistic organization and the interplay of different aspects of context in order to demonstrate coherence and to reveal basic principles and improvisational dimensions of the styles. I will then relate the styles back to the theoretical work on rapport, differentiating them in terms of conveyed meaning; discuss how misinterpretation is predictable between two of the styles; and consider the analyses I have done in relation to current theories of humor.

Example #1

- 1 Ed: I'll pay for it.
- 2 Joyce: No, I already got it.
- 3 Ed: You shouldn't pay for my coffee.
- 4 Joyce: Oh, that's OK . . . you're worth every penny.
- 5 Ed: (laughs) I see your opinion of me has gone up.
- 6 Joyce: Not really. I'm coming back later to take fifteen cents out again.
- 7 Both: (laugh)

This joking incident involves two faculty members who are meeting in the department lounge. Ed had previously paid for a couple of cups of coffee. They disagree about who should pay for the coffee, and then the shift into the joking footing is initiated by Joyce in line 4, where after a pause she says, "you're worth every penny." Ed laughs and responds. Joyce responds to Ed, and both laugh, ending the joking footing as they get back to their discussion. This piece of data was reconstructed afterward by one of the participants and then checked with the other for general accuracy.

With this joking style the pragmatic guidelines dictate that one may attack only at mutually recognized strengths, thereby conveying that whatever constitutes the insult is believed by the speaker not to be the case. Thus in the example Joyce has a good opinion of Ed, and she believes that Ed knows that she has a good opinion of him.

In this joking style a smile is possible, but so is a straight face. The deadpan is the extreme form of removal of facial cues, and it may be used as well.

However, this joking style requires careful monitoring of reactions and if the joker is in doubt, non-verbal channels are intensified for a very clear signal of intention to joke. Typical paralinguistic and prosodic characteristics are: a nasal tone, exaggerated stress, and a slower tempo relative to previous utterances outside of the joking footing. Laugh particles, as explored by Jefferson (1979), may or may not be used.

Frequently in this style a basic thematic principle is contradiction. At the most obvious level it occurs in overtly marked form between utterances, as from 5 to 6. There is also contradiction within utterances, arising in 4 out of the use of the conventionally complimentary set phrase, "you're worth every penny", in an inappropriate context. In line 5, "I see your opinion of me has gone up," Ed matches Joyce's utterance: his utterance is also overtly positive in terms of evaluation, but given the established situation, that what is at stake is twenty cents together with the presupposition that Joyce's opinion was previously even lower, the covert meaning is negative. The principle of contradiction is displayed in the contrast between overt and conveyed meaning. Contradiction as a thematic principle is consistent with the competitive feeling of this style of joking, and is reflected in the interactional moves (which actually begin at 2). Thus Joyce insults Ed at 4; Ed simultaneously acknowledges the insult and rejects it by redefining Joyce's move at 4 as complimentary; to continue the game Joyce has to reject the redefinition at 6 and escalate (in a downward direction, so to speak). Further, the situation itself represents a contradiction of traditional gender role expectations concerning who buys the coffee and who initiates joking. Finally, an ideological contradiction is expressed in the theme of materialistic evaluation of persons.

Turning to a consideration of syntax, what is typical in this style is a series of relatively short statements. These utterances tend to be self-contained, in that the syntactic units are not developed across turn boundaries. The only instance of ellipsis in this example is at the beginning of line 6. Although it is not exemplified here, questions are a common form for insults, used to exploit presuppositional possibilities. Also in this style overt negation is frequent, as is parallelism across turns.

The participants in this example were able to create a joint improvisation within the joking footing, grasping and following the principles of the frame: the pragmatic principle that one should attack only at mutually recognized strengths; the kinesic, paralinguistic and prosodic principles concerning clear signalling of

the intention to joke; the thematic principle that one should express contradiction in any and all possible ways; and the syntactic principle that one should keep one's syntax to oneself. These principles seem to constitute the basic pattern of the joking style, against which the jokers improvise such things as the nature of the insult and the devices for expressing contradiction, guided by situational resources, cultural schemas, and knowledge of each other.

Example #2

- 1 Randy: What's the E.T.E. on your cake, Mary?
(laughter)
- 2 Mary: Estimated Time . . . ?
- 3 Randy & Others: of Eating. (laughter)
- 4 Mary: 35 minutes in the oven, 20 minutes to cool
- 5 Frank: and 10 minutes to get eaten. (laughter)
- 6 Sid: Is that one minute per person? (laughter)
- 7 Alice: So all return in . . . an hour and a half.
- 8 Sid: Or you can return in 35 minutes and steal
it out of the oven and ice it yourself.
- 9 Bruce: Quickly . . . quietly . . .
- 10 Donna: (laughter) uhuh . . .
- 11 Earl: Probably reduce the cooling time by throw-
ing ice cubes in it.
- 12 Sid: What, in the batter? (laughter)
- 13 Frank: Yes, start out with ice cubes in the batter.
- 14 Bruce: But put asbestos around them so that they
don't get melted in the oven. (laughter;
Alice speaks inaudibly)
- 15 Earl: Just pick out the asbestos . . . (laughter)

This example is from Hall (1974) and was transcribed from audiotape. The participants are student housemates who have just walked into the kitchen where one of their number is baking a cake. The joking footing begins probably at "E.T.E." in the first question, and continues through to the end of the transcription here, shifting frame halfway through, at 11. Randy initiates the joking, but then others take over. There are a few apparently "non-joking" utterances within the footing (at 4 and 7) but they are added on to in a joking way in each case, incorporating them into the joking footing. The joking turns are taken collaboratively by six different people. Laughter occurs frequently.

For this joking style the pragmatic principles seem to be: build on what others have done; demonstrate ability and willingness to participate in the joint effort; keep it impersonal.

The danger potentially involved in misinterpretation is not as great as with style #1, so the distinctive paralinguistic, prosodic and kinesic cues are not as evident. In this style there is typically more use of laugh particles than in style #1. There may be more latching between utterances as participants build on each other's contributions.

A basic thematic principle is elaboration. Lines 2 through 9 are an elaboration of the basic question in 1: first, just in the full forms of the words "Estimated, Time, Eating;" then, in that 4 through 15 can be seen as an elaboration of the answer to the initial question, which is apparently given in 7. At the level of cultural schema what is elaborated is the introduction of a mock technological efficiency into the domestic world of cake-baking at home: E.T.E. evoking E.T.A. (Estimated Time of Arrival) of the world of air travel; the jargon of the efficiency expert; the absurd calculation of eating time of the cake by the number of eaters; the ridiculous suggestion of cooling the cake faster by starting before it has been baked, thereby creating much more trouble than it would be worth given that cakes cool quickly. There is the further dimension that a substance known to be hazardous to human health is being proposed for use in the interest of efficiency. The mock efficiency is elaborated and escalated in its self-defeating absurdity. A further schematic overlay is that 13 through 15 is presented in the format of a recipe, again referring to the domestic context. A reflection in the situation is that a woman is baking the cake, and the joking is all constructed by the men: the participants enact gender stereotypes as they play on them.

In this style, in contrast to style #1, there is a great deal of lexical repetition and other forms of semantic linking between utterances: from 4 to 5: "minutes," to 6: "minute," to 7: "an hour and a half," to 8: "minutes"; from 7 to 8: "return"; from 8 to 11: "ice" to "ice cubes," to 13: "ice cubes," to 14: "they," and "them"; from 12 to 13: "batter" (with retroactive definition of "it" in 11 as "batter"); from 14 to 15: "asbestos".

This style is characterized by phonetic play: alliteration, rhyme, puns. In this example there is an instance of a play on two meanings of a word which serves as the pivot on which the frame shifts within the joking footing. In 8 the word "ice" is a verb meaning "to coat with frosting" within a cake-baking schema. Sid shifts the meaning to the less specialized "frozen water," which interestingly enough does have relevance

here within a cake-baking schema in that cakes do need to cool. But Earl initiates an absurd application of the alternate meaning which is picked up on by Sid, who redefines "it" which up to line 8 had stood for "cake."

Syntactically, elaboration and collaboration occur in: the completion of a phrase at lines 2 and 3; the addition of a third parallel clause to a previous utterance at lines 4 and 5; the use of conjunctions to begin utterances at lines 5 (and), 7 (so), 8 (or), and 14 (but). The adverbs in line 9 are added presumably to the end of utterance 8. There is an interesting use of questions in this joking style which is exemplified at lines 1, 6 and 12: the exploitation of adjacency pair force toward a response, so to speak, to keep the elaboration going.

My impression is that this style is less constrained in terms of basic principles than is style #1. Because it is more likely to be a group activity, drawing on the resources of more than two people, it is also probably better able to tolerate shifts in the frame within the joking footing. In fact, one of the basic principles of this joking style may be that jokers must continue to shift the frame within the joking footing (Farrer 1981).

Example #3

- 1 Ann: I've been busy doing twenty-five other things but now, finally, I'll turn my attention to these courses.
- 2 Kay: Do you ever feel fragmented?
- 3 Ann: Who me? Fragmented? (with simultaneous contortion of arms, face)
(laughter: Kay and Sue, joined by Ann)
- 4 Kay: What do I do next?
- 5 All: (laughter)

This joking footing was written down shortly after the interaction by the participant who laughed but did not joke. The jokers here are fellow teachers who have just gotten together to work on a common project. The shift into the joking footing is initiated by Kay at 2. The intonation here is falling rather than rising. Ann responds, both verbally and non-verbally. Everyone laughs. Kay makes another contribution, there is more laughter, and the shift occurs out of the joking footing.

The pragmatic principles for this style seem to be: display understanding of what the other person is feeling or thinking, using allusions to shared symbols; give the other person a chance to express further; use incongruity; if possible, shift perspectives in such a way that the other person will be released from a rigid

psychological position.

A small smile (as opposed to a broad smile) is used more frequently in this joking style. Laugh particles are used frequently.

The thematic principle is paraphrase. In line 2 "Do you ever feel fragmented?" paraphrases what was expressed in the first part of utterance 1 and offers a supportive response to the semi-apology that that utterance represents, in effect conveying that Kay understands what Ann has been feeling and going through. A direct lexical repetition in 3 might seem to be inconsistent with my claim that the thematic principle is paraphrase, but only superficially, because in 3 Ann is literally embodying an additional paraphrase. Her questioning of the label as she contorts her body represents the idea of fragmentation: if one were fragmented one would display it while remaining unaware of it. In 4, Kay offers a paraphrase of a different sort: the internalized speech of a fragmented person.

An interesting feature of this particular joking footing is the use of the word "fragmented." It has been pointed out to me that this is a fashionable word right now; such a paraphrase has favorable connotations, suggesting that one is in tune with Twentieth Century Intellectual Developments. Consider the contrast with a choice of word like "scatterbrained," or an expression like "going to pieces." But the word "fragmented" also has a mechanical connotation to it which creates an incongruous juxtaposition of the mechanical and the human--which Ann then acts out through the distortion of her body.

The theme of fragmentation is also reflected in the use of rhetorical questions in 2, 3 and 4, all of which have, in effect, the function (that of statement) split off from the form (that of question). In another sense the rhetorical question is appropriate to this style in that it is tentative: suggesting a definition without imposing it (as a statement might) or questioning directly.

One of the most striking characteristics of this joking style is that the joking initiator may actually assume, linguistically, the point of view of the person empathized with. In this case, I am referring to Kay's use of the pronoun "I" in utterance 4: that "I" represents Ann.

In terms of the situation, each of the teachers is very busy and they have a difficult time getting together to work. Each feels to some degree that she treats herself like a machine, expecting superhuman accomplishments. In the last analysis, existentially

speaking, we are all "fragmented," in the sense that we are not aware of everything about ourselves, and in that what we do know consciously we cannot hold in awareness simultaneously.

Summarizing the paper so far: detailed analyses have been presented of three joking footings which represent prototypical examples of three joking styles. In each case, improvisational dimensions have been discussed and basic principles of the style have been identified. The manifestations of these basic principles serve as contextualization cues (Gumperz 1982) which shift in their constellation according to such things as the setting, the mood or degree of intoxication of the participants, and the topic.

The three styles represent sociolinguistic skills, and my impression is that competence is differentially distributed in a complex interrelationship of regional, gender, social class, and ethnic differences. Status differences in a particular situation may also be related to the choice of style. An individual's repertoire may include from none to all of these styles, and an individual will have different degrees of proficiency. The styles may also be learned and displayed at different stages in a person's life cycle. The styles may also be used at different stages in a relationship.

Referring now to the chart in the appendix, I would like to suggest that the different styles of friendly joking that I have identified can be organized theoretically along a continuum in terms of conveyed meaning. Style #1 is a reflection in everyday conversation of the well-studied phenomenon of ritual insults (see, for example, Labov 1972). Within Brown and Levinson's framework this style represents an exploitation of the relation between on-record strategies and intimacy. In other words, I can say things to you that I wouldn't dare to say if we weren't close; an exchange of insults becomes a display of the strength of our friendship bond (often in front of an audience). In addition, we display a common expertise at this particular linguistic game. But whereas with, for example, "the dozens," the insults about certain approved topics must be obviously untrue and preferably as fantastic as possible, in style #1 one should attack only at strengths.

Style #2, which I have considered calling "cognitive frame," is less personal than either of the other types. The style stresses group identification and displays sociocultural knowledge along with expertise in the creation of an intersubjective fantasy world. This style evokes for me the image of a Steinberg cartoon in

which the speech of a group of people would be intertwining in the air to create a fantastic edifice in the middle of the group.

Style #3 is the most intimate positive politeness style, one which to my knowledge has not been studied. It is used to display understanding of another person's internal state, i.e., empathy, so that that person knows that she is not alone in what she is experiencing. It can also serve to shift perspective for the other person so that distress may be rendered manageable. As might be predicted, this joking style is often initiated in response to a personal statement which constitutes a request for support (as in the example).

To understand how misinterpretation of communicative intent is predictable between people who are primarily or habitually style 1 or style 3 jokers, we need to think in terms of levels of interpretation. Usually the shift into the joking footing is interpreted as part of a coherent style at various levels of linguistic organization. For a habitual style 3 joker, non-verbal cues signalling a shift into a joking footing together with manifestations of the other principles of style 1 joking are not interpretable as a display of a friendship bond. The style 1 joker intends the joking frame to mean: "Let's play!"; the style 3 joker interprets it as: "I hereby deny responsibility for what I'm saying." The style 1 joker intends the insult to mean: "Here's something we both know is a strength of yours;" the style 3 joker interprets it as: "Here's some criticism I can tease you with and deny responsibility for at the same time." On the other hand, the habitual style 1 joker may experience style 3 friendly joking as getting too close, as a communication that feels like exposure in the guise of friendliness.

The strong affective dimension involved in joking can make it difficult to accept cross-stylistic joking as it is intended; even when we have an intellectual understanding of what is happening the gut level emotional experience related to the habitual perception of criticism or exposure may get in the way. There is also the reality to consider that in practice people often do exploit the potential ambiguity between style 1 joking and veiled criticism.

Finally, looking at the joking discussed above in terms of some current theoretical work on humor (Johnson 1976) which asserts that the dominant theories of humor have in common the recognition that the joke form is the product of some kind of bisociation between two frames of reference or realms of meaning, it is clear that in each of the examples bisociation occurs: in example #1

it is set off by the use of a set phrase, "you're worth every penny," in an anomalous context; in example #2 the basic bisociation is of two cultural schemas, the domestic and the high tech; in example #3 it is set off by the introduction of the term "fragmented," which introduces several other realms of meaning. Johnson suggests that a joke may involve not one but many layers of bisociation; I have demonstrated how the bisociation reverberates within the complex interplay of levels of linguistic organization and other aspects of context.

The study of joking and the identification of different joking styles has important theoretical and practical implications. In terms of theory, it represents an opportunity to explore a complex and ambiguous mode of communication, forcing us to consider the full range of levels of linguistic organization, the situatedness of communication, and multiple levels of interpretation. It also raises some problems for the identification of units in discourse. Further, humor is an important dimension of a grammar of style as discussed by Lakoff (1979). In terms of application, the study of joking is a subtle way of differentiating people who share sociocultural knowledge. To the extent to which friendly joking is a salient element in sociable conversation among native speakers of American English, ESL teaching and cross-cultural training should include ways of developing awareness of this phenomenon.

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