# What's in a laugh?

## Humour, jokes and laughter in the conversational corpus of the BNC

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# Acknowledgements

# 1   Introduction

The questions of what makes people laugh and what constitutes 'humour' have been under discussion for a long time - certainly since Plato (*Philebos*) and probably before. This work adopts the techniques of corpus linguistics and Conversation Analysis (henceforth CA) to carry out a broad-based empirical study that attempts to illuminate the extensive theoretical discussions of the last few millennia.

Linguistic analyses of humour have generally been based on prepared material (texts, canned jokes) and introspection. It is only in the last thirty years, as the attention of the conversation analysts turned to explaining the frequent occurrence of laughter in their material, that we have seen attempts to investigate humour and laughter in a conversational context. This pioneering work does however suffer from a couple of limitations. Firstly, it is often based on eclectic collections of anecdotal data or small purpose-built corpora focused on narrow selections of conversational context. Secondly, a certain lack of transparency in these studies as to the source and amount of data analysed makes it impossible to evaluate whether the conclusions are representative.

When considering work done with collections and small corpora, it must be understood that the analysis is greatly simplified when a lot of detail is available on contextual information (speakers, setting, etc.) and the construction and examination of narrow data sets is (economically) more feasible than broad-based studies. However, in order to begin to understand how humour and laughter function in the general population we have to go beyond these limitations. It is clear that the progress of theory has greatly outstripped that of empirical verification.

The conversational part of the British National Corpus (henceforth BNC) offers a way out of the problem of gathering representative samples. Although not primarily designed for discourse-analytic purposes, it presents a large corpus of spontaneous conversations, with speakers of various different social backgrounds and ages, that the analyst can draw upon.

One way of putting the BNC to work is as a test bed for assessing the wider validity of existing experimental results and theoretical speculation. Another great advantage of working with this 4.2 million word conversational corpus (henceforth CC) of unscripted material is the increased likelihood of encountering rare phenomena. An example of this is the telling of canned jokes – a genre extensively studied within a structuralist framework and 'exploited' as an epistemological basis for arguments about the nature of humour but only scarcely or ephemerally discussed from the perspective of actual use and performance.

Working with a large corpus of conversational material allows us to generate new – as well as to test old - hypotheses. The relatively wide coverage of the British population in the BNC makes it feasible to pose questions of a more global nature such as 'What kinds of humour are used in face-to-face interaction?' or 'What general functions are served by laughter and how does this connect to humour?'. Another possibility would be to compare the humorous behaviour of particular social or ethnic groups if that information is made available and tagged in the corpus.

There are limitations to what one can do with the BNC and these affect the approach one can take. As is the case with any new 'toy', there are problems - most of which originate from the lack of familiarity with the depth of the material and its quality. It goes without saying that lower data quality than that of a small, custom-built data set could reasonably be anticipated. Difficulties also arise from the extent to which background or contextual information is available (or at least can be gleaned from extensive logical deduction) and this has a considerable influence on the discourse-analytic approach taken. The most cursory survey of conversations analysed in the literature exposes participants with whom the analyst was clearly familiar; this analytic convenience is clearly impossible when working with the BNC.

New technical and methodological challenges arise when working with a source like the BNC. The anonymous nature of the Conversational Corpus calls for a structural approach to the analysis of (humorous) discourse and this work adopts Conversation Analysis (or 'Ethnomethodology') as a technique that fulfils this requirement and has proven to be a powerful analytical tool (for example in the study of institutional discourse or second language acquisition). It is also necessary to study a sufficient amount of material to establish a quantitative basis for the analysis, although this is a purely logistic problem. The main challenge the present work attempts to address is combining the 'internal'/qualitative and the 'external'/quantitative perspectives in order to overcome the limitations inherent in each approach - somewhat in the manner of two one-legged men walking down the street. This scheme of integrating the two perspectives, which has been independently anticipated by John Heritage in his 1999 prediction that "CA will become more quantitative during the next period of development" (70), is pursued throughout the work.

## 1.1   Aims and scope of the study

The overall aim of this work is to describe laughter, jokes and humour in a conversational context. Specifically, we attempt to answer the following questions:

- What kinds of humorous manoeuvres are used in actual talk?

- What discourse functions are served by laughter?

- How does laughter relate to humour?

- How are jokes performed and what joke formats are preferred in spontaneous speech?

- To what extent do social categories determine humorous/laughter behaviour?

- Does the conversational corpus data support previous research on 'gender and humour'?

- What are the tools required – both technical and methodological – that enable us to tackle these questions based on the conversational material provided by the BNC?

- How can the precepts and disciplinary commitments of Conversation Analysis be integrated with quantitative procedures?

It should come as no surprise to the reader that this work is primarily exploratory in nature. Further, considering the data and their appropriate 'processing', we clearly venture into unknown territory. The scope of the work was therefore defined as the project progressed; it was impossible to ascertain *a priori* what hypotheses would be testable or what methodological and technical tools would need to be built to analyse the corpus.

Chapter 2 presents the conceptual and methodological tools employed in this study. It explains why the conversation analytic approach was given precedence to other potentially available discourse-analytic disciplines. Further, an argument is presented for a two-fold rather than three-fold model of exchange structure, both in general and also with a view to the study of conversational humour. Section 2.3 addresses the methodological problems that arise when combining CA with quantitative procedures, suggesting areas of quantitative enquiry which hopefully enhance rather than distort our picture of interactional and institutional realities.

The aim of incorporating extralinguistic categories within an ethnomethodological framework makes it necessary to find a suitable statistical technique to test hypotheses where the role of each variable as dependent or independent – cause or effect - cannot be determined. This functional ambivalence arises from the insight – fundamental to CA - that conversational practices may reflect social norms and expectations or, conversely, induce particular outcomes. In acknowledging this, the *symmetrical* mode of log-linear analysis is selected as one of the statistical tools employed in this study (see section 2.3.2 and Appendix A).

Chapter 3 studies canned joke performances in the CC. Here, a twofold strategy is adopted. Firstly, the complete CC is scanned for canned joke occurrences and analysed according to a number of relevant extralinguistic criteria (e.g. who tells jokes) and according to features internal to the joke (in particular, the puzzle format and its tripartite subset dominate this analysis). This part of the work takes a primarily macroscopic point of view towards the data. The second approach is characterised by a greater concern with the details of interactional practices as they unfold in actual talk. This microscopic perspective, what Conversation Analysts sometimes label the "emic" (Heritage 1995:406) vantage point, is adopted for the study of an adolescent joke session.[1] This is, however, not to say that the analysis is confined to structural description. Rather, we attempt to establish connections between the identified sequential patterns and possible social and pragmatic orientations of the participants.

Chapter 4 is a description of laughter and humour in natural spontaneous speech. One aim of this study is to illuminate the relationship between laughter and humour from an empirical viewpoint and it was therefore necessary to create taxonomies of laughter and humour. These in turn act as reference points for a sociolinguistic investigation that attempts to account for the significant variations in behaviour that were found in the CC.

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[1] This was made possible by the assistance of Anna-Brita Stenström, who kindly granted access to the revised and much improved COLT (Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language) transcripts (a component of the CC), which were not publicly available at the time of writing.

It is not realistic for any linguistic study of humour to remain within the confines of its own conceptual and analytical framework. One must acknowledge the broader context of 'Humour Studies' within which it is embedded. This thesis therefore begins by recapitulating the major strands of humour theories and by summarising the accumulated knowledge from various disciplines (linguistics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy) on humour functions. It ends with a critical assessment of some of these propositions in the light of the evidence of 'humour-in-action' as exercised by speakers in their daily encounters.


## 1.2   The corpora


### 1.2.1   The 'Conversational Corpus' of the BNC

The present work is based on the demographically-sampled spoken component of the BNC, version number 1. Following Rayson/Leech/Hodges (1997), it is referred to as the 'Conversational Corpus', abbreviated to CC.

The spoken part of the BNC was intended as a representative sample of spoken British English (see Aston/Burnard's (1998) *BNC Handbook*, Crowdy 1995). In order to achieve this a number of measures were taken:

- the adoption of a demographic sampling technique for the CC,

- the extension of the CC by the addition of a so-called 'context-governed' part covering more formal spoken interaction,

- the target of producing a large corpus.

There is no doubt that this unprecedented effort by the BNC project partners has produced an impressively large (4.2 million words) and variegated (conversational) corpus. But, still, as is clear from the following comment, representativeness is not achieved at all levels:

> Although the BNC distinguishes several different geographical, sociological, and generic varieties, it does not necessarily provide a reliable sample for any particular set of such criteria. (Aston/Burnard 1998:28)

While this remark serves as a reminder that no corpus is ever large enough to quench the linguist's thirst[2], it should also be noted when interpreting raw frequencies pertaining to the aforementioned extralinguistic categories. That is, base figures for such categories may vary considerably, to the extent that some groups, for instance speakers of a particular dialect, are hardly represented at all. Statistical techniques are therefore required that take into account the unequal distribution of the various extralinguistic categories.

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[2] Given the funding of the project, the BNC compilation and transcription was primarily guided by lexicographic concerns (see Haslerud/Stenström 1995:235).

In accessing the BNC data, the windows client - the search tool distributed with the BNC – proved sufficient for most purposes although, as noted in *The BNC Handbook* (Draft Version 1.0), "drinking large amounts of coffee while waiting for the results" (120) was not an unusual event and some queries ran for days. The client's facilities for accessing larger chunks of texts - a prerequisite for much discourse analytic work - are, however, rather primitive. It was therefore found necessary to convert the original SGML-marked-up text files into a more readable format outside of the client-server environment provided by the BNC. Furthermore, not all information that is theoretically available can be obtained using the default procedures provided. An example of this are the frequencies with which certain group types (e.g. mixed-gender/single-gender) are present in the CC. Here, some programming knowledge can prove invaluable.

### 1.2.2 *The Bergen corpus of London teenage language (COLT)*

Some of the conversational material included in the CC originates from a separate project conducted by the University of Bergen and collected in 1993 in London. This corpus, known as COLT, contains 500,000 words of spontaneous conversations between 13 to 17 year-old teenagers "with varying social backgrounds, ranging from lower working class to upper class" (Haslerud/Stenström 1995:235).[3] While the original COLT recordings were first transcribed by the Longman Group (alongside the material collected within the BNC project) using a broad orthographic transcription (see Appendix B), the team in Bergen later revised the transcriptions so that "a great many instances of <unclear> have disappeared, most of the speakers have been identified, and mistakes in the original transcription have been straightened out" (COLT 6/16/1998). Thanks to the generosity of the project members these transcripts were used in the present study before the first version of COLT on CD-ROM was released in the autumn of 1998.

It should be noted that the COLT-project has recently released a new version[4] which uses a more delicate transcription notation (prosodic, tone-unit oriented) and includes sound files. This will no doubt open up new possibilities for conversation analytic research.

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[3] For more details, see also the COLT webpages at http://www.hd.uib.no/colt/.
[4] At the time of writing, this version was however not available yet.

## *1.3  Theories of humour*

The major strands of humour research present a complex topic. This complexity arises mainly for three reasons. Firstly – and most fundamentally – there is no general agreement on how to define *humour*.[5] *S*econd, humour research has a long tradition. And, third, humour has attracted considerable interest from a number of disciplines; philosophy, psychology, linguistics, sociology and anthropology have each applied a particular set of objectives and methodologies. Needless to say, these three aspects intersect with each other so that, for example, psychologists typically regard humour as a cognitive and/or emotional phenomenon, linguists are primarily concerned with the 'joke text' and sociologists relate humour to social and cultural circumstances. In addition, the term *humour* has undergone semantic change. The OED lists two principal meanings, the "physical senses" (I) and the "senses denoting mental quality or condition" (II). Close inspection of the entries reveals that the term has undergone a process of semantic shifting and narrowing. In terms of semantic change *humour* progresses from an initial physical sense denoting fluid or moisture (corresponding to the Latin forms *humorem/umorem*) towards describing a mental disposition (originally deriving from the medieval conception of four chief fluids of the body). An example of this is its use in the sense of 'mood' or 'putting someone in a good/better mood' as is apparent in the following BNC citations:

FRP n=2019

> Joe's relief at Nina's presence overcame his bad humour and she could see that he was glad that she'd come.

HHA n=3338

> The sight of the bolted galley door reminded her that Fen would not have breakfasted. That wouldn't improve his humour.

H97 n=2875

> "Maybe one day, you too will have your own helicopter. When you finally become a world-famous designer." "How generous of you to say so." She knew he did not mean it. He was simply laughing at her in that condescending way he had. "But, really," she assured him, "you don't have to humour me." "Humour you? Why should I humour you?"

A further, crucial, development is that *humour* became increasingly associated with pleasure and enjoyment, which finally led to the main modern sense[6] depicted in entry 7a –

> That quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun and 7b. The faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject.

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[5] For an extended discussion, see Attardo 1994:1-13; Keith-Spiegel 1972; Raskin 1985.

[6] Apart from dictionaries, this conclusion is based on the examination of 200 occurrences of the word *humour* in the BNC.

With regard to semantic narrowing we find that some of the older uses, especially physical denotations, are extinct today[7] while the complete spectrum of meanings appears to have been available to the 17th century language user. In 1670 – according to a reference entry in the OED - *humour* is used in the sense of 'moisture' or 'fluid': *At Christmas last we could hardly find humour enough in the ground to plant.* Around about the same time, in 1695, the medieval notion of the four humours was obviously still in circulation as evidenced by the following quote *If your Husband should be really sullen … let the Black Humour begin to spend itself, before you come in.* Rather surprisingly, there is also evidence of the most prominent modern usage [7.] at the time; in 1682 we find: *The Cup was so closed, that 'twas a difficult matter for us to open it, and therefore the General gave it us on purpose, to divert himself with the humour of it.* In conclusion, the broad application of the term *humour* in historical material requires careful analysis of individual occurrences as well as consideration of pertinent conceptions of the term. Furthermore, any treatment of humour has to be viewed in its historical context as well as its scientific framework.[8]

Despite the diversity of the field, three categories of humour theories have been identified. They are commonly known as release theories, superiority theories and incongruity theories.[9] It is important to note that these theories do not contradict each other. In fact, as more recent studies on humour show, they are best regarded as complementary. The following sections outline the major tenets and some implications of the three theories.

### 1.3.1 Release Theories

Release theories explain humour on the basis of psychological mechanisms. They contend that humour functions as a 'release trigger' for suppressed inhibitions and tensions caused by conventions and laws.

Freud deserves special mention as the major and most influential proponent of release theories and will be discussed in some detail below. More recent studies promoting release theories are Fry (1963), Fry and Allen (1976), Mindess (1971) and Latta (1998).

Freud's work *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten,* first published in 1905, is generally used in the literature as the major reference for Freud's conception of humour, although, as the title suggests, it is primarily concerned with jokes. Freud – in an essay titled "Der Humor" ([1927] [5]1999) – retrospectively classified his previous work as a treatment of humour:

> In meiner Schrift über den "Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten" (1905) habe ich *den Humor* eigentlich nur vom ökonomischen Gesichtspunkt behandelt. Es lag mir daran, die *Quelle der Lust am Humor* zu finden, […]. (253; emphasis added)

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[7] With the exception of the terminology for the eye fluids (aqueous humour and vitreous humour).

[8] For a more detailed review of the term *humour* and the concept *sense of humour* see Ruch (1998:5-11).

[9] Attardo (1994) proposes a slightly different terminology and discriminates between cognitive, social and psychoanalytical theories (47).

This statement may be contrasted with a quote from *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* ([1905] [5]1999):

> Aus welchen Quellen die eigentümliche Lust fließt, welche uns *der Witz* bereitet, das stellen wir nun als gesicherte Erkenntnis voran. (131, emphasis added)

At first glance one may be tempted to presume that Freud used the terms *Witz* and *Humor* interchangeably. However, Freud draws a distinction between humour and jokes/comic: whereas both can be described in terms of a release mechanism (due to 'saved' emotional expenditures) only humour possesses an element of superiority:

> Der Humor hat nicht nur etwas Befreiendes wie der Witz und die Komik, sondern auch etwas Großartiges und Erhebendes, […]. Das Großartige liegt offenbar im Triumph des Narzißmus, in der siegreich behaupteten Unverletzlichkeit des Ichs. ([1927] [5]1999:254)

That Freud incorporated the aspect of superiority as an essential part in his 'theory' of humour is often overlooked[10] not least because most scholars seem to have focused on Freud's earlier work where no such claim can be found.[11]

Freud distinguishes two forms of humour: humour directed against other people and humour directed against oneself. The latter form is assumed to represent the more original and significant (256). The combination of the two forms and the concept of superiority are subsequently discussed and will not be reproduced in detail here. It should however be noted that the notion of superiority and self-directed humour are somewhat contradictory: how can one feel superior to oneself? Freud addresses this question by applying his model of the ego and the super-ego. He argues that the super-ego takes the role of the superior and, from this position, mediates the humour to the ego. The result is a pleasurable experience. Thus, according to Freud, self-deprecating humour - in other words amusement at one's own expense - is possible. This claim is rather controversial. For example, La Fave et al. (1976) refute it on the basis of simple logic: one cannot be amused (feel happier) and at the same time experience unhappiness due to the construct 'own expense' (79).

A recent example of release theories is presented by Latta's (1998) description of the psychodynamics of the humour process. According to this theory (conveniently labelled 'Theory L' by its originator) the subject passes through three stages:

1.  an unrelaxed state that may be caused by "any of a virtually unlimited number of forms and can occur in any of a virtually unlimited number of combinations" (44),

2.  a cognitive shift produced by some "stimulus event or factor or a complex of them" (*ibid.*) that renders the former stage of unrelaxation pointless,

3.  relaxation through laughter.

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[10] Kline (1977) alludes to this aspect in his discussion on the Freudian distinction between jokes, the comic, humour and wit. He comments: "[…] in Freudian theory humour is considered to be one of the highest defences" (10).

[11] But it has been noted that Freud's earlier work (1905) integrates incongruity theories (see Aubouin 1948: 213-223).

It is important to note in this response-sided theory that laughter serves as the prime criterion for identifying humorous situations and, ultimately, for defining humour. This accounts for the theory's ability to cover a broad and diverse range of laughter-provoking/humorous situations.

While acknowledging Latta's methodological approach, it has to be said that the theory's apparent wide applicability originates – at least to some extent - in lack of precision, especially regarding the stimulus side. One may reasonably call for the theory to supply a more detailed specification of the relation between what causes the initial-stage 'unrelaxation' and what causes the 'cognitive shift'. This aspect is dealt with by incongruity theories, which, despite their flaws, inconsistencies and limitations, at least address this issue.[12]

From a linguistic point of view the principal merit of release theories is that they explain tendentious as well as aggressive language in humour. In a more general sense, they account for the suspense (acquittance) of rules regarding language (i.e. puns, wordplay) and infractions of the principle of co-operation (see Attardo 1994:50).

Raskin incorporates release theories into his general framework of semantic script theory (SSTH) thus:

> The release-based theories concentrate on the switch from *bona-fide* communication to the joke-telling mode [...] The suppression/repression element which is often associated with this theory is easily interpreted in script terms as a preference for those oppositeness relations in which one of the scripts pertains to a tabooed area, e.g., sex, violence, evacuation, etc. (1985:131-132)

SSTH has often been interpreted as an incongruity-based theory of humour. This appears warranted given Raskin's argument in the quote above.


### 1.3.2   Incongruity Theories


Whereas the central question in release theories is what (psychologically) motivates the production of humour, incongruity theories focus on the humour *per se* or, in other words, what makes humour what it is: a funny experience. At the core of incongruity theories lies the contention that all humour involves two (or more) incongruous elements that are somehow brought together and synthesised.

Incongruity theories are generally traced back to Kant, who in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* made some passing comments on humour:

> Es muß in allem, was ein lebhaftes, erschütterndes Lachen erregen soll, etwas Widersinniges sein [...]. Das Lachen ist ein Affekt aus der plötzlichen Verwandlung einer gespannten Erwartung in nichts. ([3]1799:225)

Of course, for someone who wants to draw a distinction between laughter and humour, Kant says nothing about humour, otherwise the sentence should read '*Humour* arises from sudden transformation of ...' Similarly, Schopenhauer put

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[12] As a matter of fact, Latta (1998) devotes more than half of the work to presenting arguments against incongruity theories.

forward a definition of *laughter* that is generally quoted as evidence for incongruity-based theories of *humour*[13]:

> Meiner […] Erklärung zufolge ist der Ursprung des Lächerlichen allemal die paradoxe und daher unerwartete Subsumtion eines Gegenstandes unter einem ihm übrigens heterogenen Begriff, und bezeichnet demgemäß das Phänomen des Lachens allemal als die plötzliche Wahrnehmung einer Inkongruenz zwischen einem solchen Begriff und dem durch denselben gedachten realen Gegenstand, also zwischen dem Abstrakten und dem Anschaulichen. ([2]1858:122)

As Morreall (1987) suggests, the terms *humour, laughter and amusement* have often been used imprecisely or differently to the modern sense. Kant and Schopenhauer's theories, Morreall argues, are presented as theories of laughter, but "at most they could hope to serve as theories of humor" (5).

Incongruity theories figure prominently in treatments of humour as is evidenced by philosophical discussion[14], psychological research, anthropological and sociological studies and, last but not least, linguistic work. The wide acceptance of incongruity theories is mainly due to its focus on formal characteristics of humour but also to the fact that the concept of 'incongruity' can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Apte, for example, uses the word *ambivalence*:

> A major theme recurring in anthropological theories is that expressions of humor are the result of attempting to resolve ambivalence in social situations, roles, statuses, cultural values, and ideologies. For example, ambivalence occurs because of conflict between social obligations and self-interest, between fear and amusement, between disapproval and envy of deviant behavior, between infantile urges and restrictions of sociocultural norms, and so on. (1983:207)

In the field of psychology, the incongruity model was examined in the light of cognitive processes, leading to the formulation of the 'incongruity – resolution model'[15] which states that humour results from the resolution of an incongruity. In other words, for humour to occur the incongruity has to be resolved by the recipient "either by retrieval of information in the joke or cartoon or from his/her own storehouse of information" (Suls 1983:42). The 'incongruity – resolution model' has been further elaborated incorporating *timing* and a *play cue* as additional critical features of humour (*ibid.*:54).

The notion of *play* evokes yet another type of incongruity involved in humour. As Fry and Allen[16] contend:

> Each humorous experience is found to be contained within the context of play. In other words, a play frame must be established around each episode for its humorous potential to be realized. (1976:249)

The incongruity then arises from the mismatch of 'reality' and 'play': within a context of play a normally offensive action such as an insult or a slap, for example, is interpreted as funny.[17]

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[13] See Raskin (1985:31), Attardo (1994:48).
[14] See Morreall (1987) for a review.
[15] See Suls (1972), Rothbart (1976).
[16] See also Fry (1963, 1976), Berlyne (1969) and Bateson (1969).

The distinction between 'reality' and 'play' has also had some impact on linguistic treatments of humour and jokes. Within his general framework of *Semantic Script Theory of Humor* (SSTH), Raskin (1985) discriminates between *bona-fide* (BF) communication, i.e. the normal, information-conveying mode governed by the Cooperative Principle (CP) (Grice 1967) and non-*bona-fide* (NBF) communication. The purpose of the non-*bona-fide* mode of communication, it is argued, "is not to convey any information contained in the text (he is uttering) but rather to create a special effect with the help of the text, namely to make the hearer laugh" (Raskin 1985:101). It is important to note that NBF communication, although violating the maxims of BF communication, is also regarded as co-operative (in contrast to lying, which is non-cooperative) though following a different set of maxims.[18]

As noted earlier, Raskin's work on pragmatic aspects of humorous texts is embedded in SSTH. Its main hypothesis reads:

> (107) A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the conditions in (108) are satisfied.
>
> (108)
>
> (i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts
>
> (ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite […] (*ibid.*:99)

The two scripts with which some text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part on this text.

It is beyond the scope of this survey to discuss Raskin's theory or any of the other semiotic or structural accounts of humour, which have dominated the linguistic debate.[19] I would only like to make the point – as illustrated by the above quote – that the prime object of investigation within linguistics has been the joke text. This holds true for SSTH as well as other models, e.g. the Isotopy-Disjunction Model (first proposed by Greimas 1966) or Koestler's Bisociation Theory (Koestler 1964). It may be added that these theories all identify 'incongruity' as an essential characteristic of jokes or puns: SSTH mentions two opposing scripts, the Isotopy-Disjunction Model describes two opposing isotopies (or semantic interpretations)[20] and Bisociation Theories refer to "the perceiving of a situation or idea […] in *two* self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" (Koestler 1964:35, emphasis added).

To summarise: it appears that the fundamental mechanisms of jokes (and – to some extent – humour in general) have been sufficiently examined and formalised by linguistic scholarship. No doubt this work was necessary both for historical and epistemological reasons.[21] However, it would seem appropriate now for linguists to go beyond the joke and investigate other types of humour. A tentative but promising

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[17] In commenting on the relationship between fiction and play Lixfeld suggests that "this wavering between fiction and play could be representative of a modern state of human consciousness" (1986:235).

[18] See Raskin (1992, 1998) and Attardo (1994) for a detailed discussion.

[19] A more detailed discussion of the structuralist approach is presented in section 3.3 on the topic of tripartite jokes.

[20] For definitions of the term 'isotopy' see Attardo (1994).

[21] See Attardo and Chabanne (1992).

step in this direction was made by Attardo (1994), who studied register-based humour and non-joke humorous texts on the basis of SSTH and its improved and extended version GTVH (General Theory of Verbal Humour). Worthy of note in this context is also Alexander's (1997) rather comprehensive empirical treatment of verbal humour and Wenzel's (1989) narratological analysis of short stories based on joke structure.

### 1.3.3  Superiority Theories

Superiority theories are concerned with the role humour plays in interpersonal relationships, or, more generally, in social networks. Because of this general sociological orientation they are of greater interest to the present investigation than the release and incongruity theories.

One of the first modern proponents of the view that humour is potentially aggressive and employed to demean others was Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651).[22] In *Le rire* Bergson maintained that humour functions as a social corrective:

> […] le rire ne peut pas être absolment juste. Répétons qu'il ne doit pas non plus être bon. Il a pour fonction d'intimider en humuliant. Il n'y réusirait pas si la nature n'avait laissé à cet effet, dans les meilleurs d'entre les hommes, un petit fonds de méchanceté, ou tout au moins malice.

> […] Ici, comme ailleurs, la nature a utilisé le mal en vue du bien. C'est le bien surtout qui nous a préoccupé dans toute cette étude. Il nous a paru que la société, à mesure qu'elle se perfectionnait, obtenait de ses membres une souplesse d'adaptation de plus en plus grande. (1899:52)

This approach stimulated a number of studies in the fields of social psychology and sociology. For example, La Fave/Haddad/Maesen (1976) tested the hypotheses that jokes with victims who are disliked by the listener are rated as funnier than jokes with neutral or liked victims. For the purposes of the study the authors implemented the concept of identification classes (or reference groups) which can be loosely described as a group of persons that one recognises (either as member or non-member) and holds a certain attitude towards (positive, negative or neutral). The results mainly confirmed the hypotheses: the subjects generally preferred jokes that disparaged negative non-membership identification classes.[23]

The concept of identification classes makes apparent that humour is embedded in a social and cultural context. Some groups may exist in one culture but not in another. Equally, one group may be held in high esteem in one society but disdained in another. Mintz comments:

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[22] Similar ideas about humour were expressed much earlier. Aristotle, for instance, describes the comedy as a "Nachahmung von schlechteren Menschen, aber nicht im Hinblick auf jede Art von Schlechtigkeit, sondern nur soweit, als das Lächerliche am Häßlichen teilhat. Das Lächerliche ist nämlich ein mit Häßlichkeit verbundener Fehler, der indes keinen Schmerz und kein Verderben verursacht, wie ja auch die lächerliche Maske häßlich und verzerrt ist, jedoch ohne den Ausdruck von Schmerz." (Poetik, 5); see also Plato (*Philebos*, 48c, 49e, 50a, b) and Cicero (*De Oratore*, II 236).

[23] Some findings were considered as inconsistent with 'general' superiority theory (as, for example, suggested by Hobbes), in particular that amusement is possible when the preferred reference non-membership group is victorious over the membership group.

> However deep-seated and universal the psychology of humour may be, clearly most of its manifestations are culture-bound – connected to realities of time and place. (1977:17)

Norrick (1993) addresses this point more explicitly in his description of the complex interrelation between humour and context. Any account of humour, he argues, must take into account the cultural context as well as situational aspects such as setting (private or official) and participants (number, social attributes, interrelation). Shared knowledge about cultural values is considered to be a crucial prerequisite for humour to occur.

Powell (1977) makes a similar point emphasising that cultural values always imply the recognition of deviant versus normal ideas or behaviours. In his view, humour serves to sanction deviant behaviour and is routinely exploited by the ruling group/Establishment to invalidate the 'unconventional' (55).

Following these arguments it should not come as a surprise that feminists, especially those who subscribe to the 'dominance approach', are attracted to superiority theories. As gender issues are discussed at various points in this work the following quote from Marlowe should suffice to illustrate the feminist stance:

> Male sexual humour and demeaning characterizations of women maintain boundaries between women and men: men may laugh at women; women must laugh at themselves. Such boundaries sustain the social fabric by controlling action and affect toward culturally defined elements and events of the social environment. (1989:148)

To summarise, superiority theories address sociocultural aspects of humour. The linguistic correlates for such an approach are not difficult to find. Functionalist theories of language such as those proposed by Halliday, Jakobson, or more recently Brown and Yule, Stubbs, and Fairclough[24], to name just a few, all emphasise the role of context in the production and apprehension of language.

## 1.4 Functions of humour

### 1.4.1 Psychological and physiological functions

Probably everyone of us has come across the proverb 'Laughter is the best medicine'. Now, this may not be entirely true for someone who suffers an asthma attack, but the bulk of psychological literature on the relation between humour and health offer convincing evidence that humour, laughter and mirth have beneficial effects on health and well-being. For example, a number of studies have shown positive effects of humour on blood circulation, muscle relaxation, digestion, immunity and convalescence (Borins 1995, Cousins 1979, Fry 1992, Hulse 1994, Dillon et al. 1985, Martin/Dobbin 1988, McCaffery 1990, Ziegler 1995[25]). As a result, humour is increasingly employed in therapy.

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[24] See Halliday (1978, 1985), Jakobson (1960), Brown/Yule (1983), Stubbs (1983), Fairclough (1989, 1995).
[25] Cited in Lefcourt/Thomas (1998).

Other empirical research on psychological humour functions focuses on the role humour plays as stress moderator. There is no space here to discuss the different and, to some extent, contradictory results in this area,[26] however there seems to be sufficient evidence to suggest that humour reduces the effects of stressful experiences that would otherwise result in dysphoric emotions.

Interestingly, there is some empirical evidence for humour serving as a coping strategy – reminiscent of Freud's (1927) proposition of humour as the highest of the defence mechanisms.[27] Similar to Freud, Vaillant (1993) describes humour among other defence mechanisms (i.e. neurotic or psychotic defences) as a mature defence, similar to altruism, sublimation, and suppression. This 'mature defence mechanism' is typically realised by self-directed humour, which ultimately (and in contrast to humour directed at other people or tendentious humour) results in relief. As Lefcourt/Thomas (1998) point out, some discrepancies in the experimental results on humour as a stress moderator may be attributed to gender differences in the use of self-deprecatory humour. Confronted with a demanding and stressful task, females generally engaged in 'humorous exchanges'. Lefcourt/Thomas comment:

> […] they may have accepted their failures, inabilities and frustrations more easily given their readiness to engage in self-deprecating humor. Conceivably, they may have begun to think of the experiment as something to share and laugh at with their friends, anticipating social support in the process. (31)

Contrary to female behaviour, males were obviously (as shown in rather high levels of systolic blood pressure) considerably distressed by the stressful environment despite their high self-assessment as measured in the CHS (Coping Humour Scale[28]). In the light of these findings, Lefcourt/Thomas tentatively conclude that for evolutionary adaptive reasons males are more prone to react in an emotionally aroused way when irritated whereas females, in order to increase their own safety, use humour as a coping device (32).

The fundamental mechanism involved in 'coping humour' (self-directed humour or humorous responses in stressful conditions) has been described by a number of authors in terms of a cognitive ability to distance oneself from negative experiences and to take on a broader perspective (May 1953, Frankl 1969, O'Connell 1976, Moody 1978, Christie 1994[29]). In this context, Kuiper/Martin/Olinger (1993) observe that persons who use humour as a coping mechanism in stressful situations are more likely to focus on the problem and exhibit minimal emotional responses. Moody asserts that 'coping humour' allows a person to remain in contact with reality and express emotional involvement (*ibid.*:4).

In sum, humour seems to have salutary effects on physiological and psychological health. However, as the literature suggests, its role is rarely simple or transparent. For example, there seems to be a linkage between type of humour (i.e. self-directed as opposed to aggressive or sexual humour) and mood states. Also, according to

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[26] For a survey, see Lefcourt/Thomas (1998).
[27] See also Allport (1961).
[28] The CHS, a questionnaire, was designed to assess subjects' disposition to use humour as a strategy for coping with stress.
[29] All cited in Martin (1998:42).

Lefcourt/Thomas, gender emerges as a main factor in the prediction of humorous responses to stressful situations.

### 1.4.2  Social functions

This section focuses on the role humour plays in society and group culture. A recurrent theme expressed in the writings of sociologists and anthropologists is the role humour plays in maintaining and enforcing social values and boundaries (Bergson 1899, Apte 1985, Powell 1977, Marlowe 1989, Linstead 1985). As such humour may be regarded as a tool of social control. Evidently, as Powell (1977) points out, this function is routinely employed (although generally in an unsystematic and non-conspiratorial manner) by those members or groups of society who have an interest in maintaining the *status quo*.[30]

Humour may also serve the underprivileged as, for instance, black people or feminists. In a study of black humour in the civil rights movement Arnez/Anthony (1968) identify social satire directed at the dominant group (white community) as a primary function. On the issue of women's humour, Marlowe (1989:163) contends that female self-deprecatory humour may be regarded as "an act of satirising the dominant group's view and affirming one's own, subversive view of reality".[31] In examining aggressive aspects of jokes, Lixfeld (1986) proposes that jokes ultimately serve to attack cultural norms with the aim of bringing about changes. In a similar vein, Douglas (1968) interprets jokes as "a juxtaposition of a control against that which is controlled, this juxtaposition being such that the latter triumphs" (365), which finally transforms the balance of power. This function is commonly referred to as conflict function (Martineau 1972, Stephenson 1951). In differentiating between in-group and out-group humour, Martineau asserts that humour may also be used to introduce and foster conflicts within groups. However, as concerns the dynamics of intra-group behaviour, the prevalent function of humour is generally identified as 'reducing social distance' (i.e. the *consensus* category proposed by Martineau or the *conform* function created by Collinson 1988), 'creating solidarity' (Hay 1995, Crawford 1989, Kaplan/Boyd 1965[32]), enforcing group cohesion (Linstead 1985, Morreall 1983, Pogrebin/Poole 1988) and reduction of hostility (Radcliffe-Brown 1940).

Finally, humour may function as a form of social control in the sense that it enables people to address threatening or taboo topics (Emerson 1969, Ransohoff 1975, Ziv 1984, 1988). As Graham et al. (1992:177) observe, sharing information on these unmentionable subjects requires interlocutors to negotiate rule suspension in order to tell a particular joke. This observation reflects interpersonal aspects discussed in the next section.

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[30] See also Foot (1986).

[31] See also Douglas (1975), who maintains that humour necessarily threatens hierarchy and order.

[32] Cited in Graham at al. (1992).

## 1.4.3  Interpersonal functions

Whereas the previous section takes a rather broad perspective on humour functions in communities, it is useful to examine the role humour plays in concrete situations of human interaction. It would appear that humour in communication is extremely versatile, serving a variety of different goals depending on situational context, relationship between speakers, etc. To navigate through this complex terrain, it is convenient to structure the presentation around a more general concept of interpersonal communication. The one adapted here is by McAdams (1988) and describes two principal, antagonistic tendencies governing human conduct in life and relationships: a tendency towards agency or to assert one's own individuality, and a tendency for communion. According to this view, persons are constantly engaged in balancing the two tendencies, i.e. expressing personal convictions, attaining status, exercising control, and - conversely - adhering to social conventions, meeting others' expectations, establishing intimacy.[33]

Interestingly, humour has been found to operate in both directions. Cheatwood (1983), for example, suggests that humour may be used to create or reduce social distance. Chapman (1983) raises a similar point, arguing that humour helps to maintain an equilibrium of intimacy:

> Attention-gaining and attention-maintaining aspects to humor and laughter (i.e. the cooperate production of laughter and humor stimuli; my comment) are particularly exercised when situations are experienced as low in intimacy [...]. Conversely an attention-breaking function may be brought into force when a situation is too high in intimacy. Both these functions are restorative, deployed to regain a more pleasant level of intimacy. (145-6)

In an empirical study on the relation between humour and intimacy, Hampes (1992:127) observes that intimate relationships benefit from the use of humour because it allows partners to deal with the stress within those relationships. But humour is also encountered in official settings, often characterised by a low level of intimacy. Here, it may serve the function of 'breaking the ice' (i.e. reducing social distance) and facilitating communication. However, as these contexts often involve hierarchies, humour is typically initiated by the superior. For example, Coser's (1960) analysis of humour in a psychiatric staff meeting reveals that doctors joke considerably more at the expense of nurses or patients than the reverse. Interestingly, this pattern of humour flowing down hierarchies (Marlowe 1989) appears to be somewhat related to gender. In her study of communicative strategies in job interviews, Bogaers reports:

> The expectation that higher status people more often define the laughing events was only supported by the male interviewers. (1993:75)

Given the "small-scale nature of this research" (79), however, further work would be necessary to verify this result.

Hardly anyone would argue with the contention that a sense of humour is in general considered to be a positive personality trait. We delight in being thought of as having

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[33] Brown/Levinson's (1987) notion of positive and negative face (underlying politeness phenomena) promotes a similar view of interpersonal communication.

a 'good sense of humour' or feel criticised when we are told to show a sense of humour. While scholars of various backgrounds are still occupied in clarifying what 'sense of humour' actually means (Ruch 1998),[34] various studies have demonstrated that humour helps to increase interpersonal attraction (Graham/Rubin 1987, Kane/Suls/Tedeschi 1977, Derks/Berkowitz 1989[35]) and enhance self-image (e.g. Hay 1995). In analysing teenage conversations (particularly joke sessions) Sanford/Eder (1984) conclude that humour serves the purpose of demonstrating performative abilities and sophisticated knowledge of shared interests. At the same time humour may also fulfil a testing function, assessing the recipients' knowledge and understanding of the presented jokes.

In an exploratory study based on questionnaires and self-reports, Crawford/Gressley (1991) identify *creativity* and *caring* as the most important aspects of humour in subjects' descriptions of a person they know "who has an excellent sense of humour" (220). *Creativity* reflects the ability to "make spontaneous or 'off the cuff' witty remarks" (223) and *caring* the use of humour "to ease social tension, to 'cheer up' other people, and to reduce others' stress or anxiety"[36] (224). Within McAdams' framework both these dimensions may be interpreted as realising the tendency towards agency and may primarily be employed to promote self-image.

*Creativity* also implies an aesthetic aspect often noted in the context of humour production and appreciation. Morreall, for example, in a chapter titled 'Humor as Aesthetic experience' contends:

> Our enjoyment of humor is a kind of aesthetic experience, in short, when only the necessary conditions for humor are met, that is, when incongruity is enjoyed for its own sake. (1983:93)

This quote captures another important and often neglected aspect of humour, namely that it allows persons to simply have fun together by exchanging humorous quips, funny stories, mock insults, etc. This function has been referred to as 'defunctionalization' (Guiraud 1976, Attardo 1994) since language is not used to transmit information (its referential function) but for ludic purposes (Attardo 1994:328).[37] In his discussion of humour on the shop floor, Collinson (1988) labelled this function 'to resist boredom'. As the growing body of analyses of authentic everyday conversations suggests, this function plays an important role in interpersonal communication and may even prevail over talk (Hartung 1998, Hay 1995, Mulkay 1988).

### 1.4.4  Summary

Humour serves a variety of functions. On a personal level it helps to reduce stress and anxiety and cope with difficult or embarrassing situations. It may also be used to

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[34] As a matter of fact, La Fave et al. (1976) deny that the concept of a 'sense of humour' – at least in psychological reality - exists.

[35] All cited in Graham et al.

[36] This function is reminiscent of one of the verbal senses of *humour* described as 'putting someone in a good/better mood' mentioned earlier (see section 1.3).

[37] Similarly, Apter (1989) discriminates between paratelic activities (humour) and telic (purposeful) activities.

promote self-image since 'a sense of humour' is generally regarded a positive character trait. In the context of society and group mechanisms humour may serve both reactionary and progressive forces depending on social position and status. Solidarity and group cohesion are reported to improve when group members routinely employ humour. Another important aspect of humour emerging from the study of 'real-life' conversations is that it may simply be used for the sake of pleasure and entertainment. As such it resembles the self-containment of play.

To conclude, it would seem to be appropriate to relate the principal humour functions to Jakobson's general model of communication:

<br>

**referential**
criticism

**emotive**                          **poetic**                          **conative**
stress relief, defence,        enjoyment, aesthetic function        entertainment, control
promotion of self-image

**phatic**
mutual entertainment,
solidarity, conflict

**metalingual**
drawing attention to ambiguity
of words and expressions

<br>
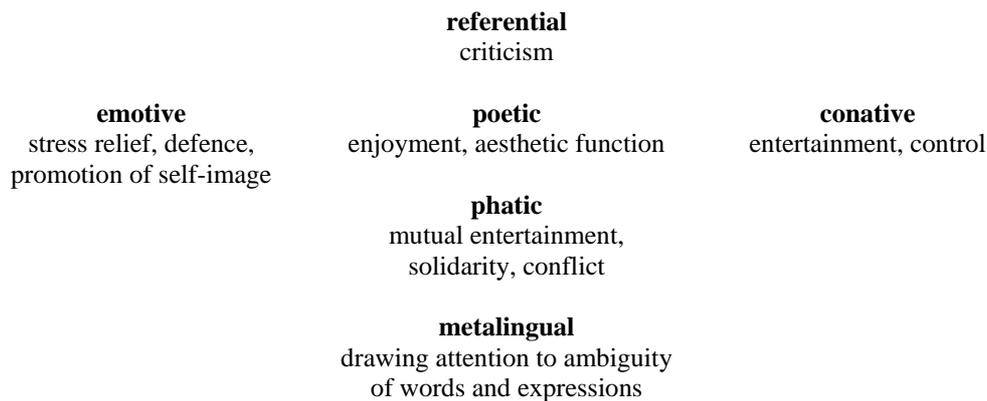
For illustration, consider a performance of the following joke:

> What is the difference between a catfish and a lawyer?

> One is a scum-sucking bottom dweller, and the other is a fish.

Here, the referential function is realised by the criticism against the legal profession. The phrase 'scum-sucking bottom dweller' can be regarded as serving a metalingual function (in terms of drawing attention to metaphorical readings) and a poetic function (cf. alliteration/sound similarity in /skʌm/ and /sʌkɪŋ/).

The remaining three functions are best illustrated by considering possible real-life scenarios. For example, if the joke is interspersed into a conversation by someone who has recently experienced problems with a lawyer it may fulfil a coping function (and therefore relief stress) and promote a positive self (by displaying a 'sense of humour') (emotive function); further, it may serve to entertain the listener(s) or provoke members of this profession if present in the interaction (conative function). Alternatively, the joke may occur within a joke telling circle and be told for the sake of mutual entertainment, sustaining the joke telling round and creating a good atmosphere (phatic function).

In addition to contextual variability, humour functions shift according to the type of humour employed. Canned joke performances are certainly at the lower end of the creativity spectrum of conversational humour. Off-the-cuff puns, the telling of funny anecdotes, spontaneous witticisms, for instance, all require more inventiveness and

verbal artistry - thus stressing the emotive and poetic aspects. Furthermore, humour allows people to present a unique self by showing off their preferences in humorous 'types', humour appreciation, and their readiness to overstep borders such as moral norms, conversational maxims (e.g. 'maxim of quality' vs. 'irony'; 'maxim of quantity' vs. 'repetition/hyperbole/exaggeration') and conversational routines (e.g. joke-first practice, see Norrick 1993).

## 2   Humour in communication: theoretical and methodological issues

This chapter focuses on the social and interactive nature of humour. These dimensions are partly, and to varying degrees, addressed by the humour theories discussed in the previous chapter but require further explication given the proposal in this work of analysing humour in everyday talk. Before this can be done it is however necessary to outline the general linguistic framework and model of communication adopted for this investigation.

### 2.1   Linguistic framework / model of communication

Any approach to discourse makes implicit assumptions on the nature of communication. Generally (and traditionally), communication theories identify at least three components as pertinent to the communication process: a communicator, a signal and a recipient (Smith 1977:14,[38] Bühler 1933:19-20). Jakobson ([1960] 1990:69-79) defines six factors and six corresponding functions as constitutive of the speech event:

<div align="center">

CONTEXT
(referential)

ADDRESSER    MESSAGE    ADDRESSEE
(emotive)    (poetic)    (conative)

CONTACT
(phatic)

CODE
(metalingual)

</div>

Jakobson's extension of the tripartite model (sender, message, recipient) is an important contribution since it incorporates other observable language functions evident in verbal communication.[39] For example, some discourse may not be primarily concerned with transmitting information (the cognitive, referential function) but serves predominantly to establish or maintain communication between interlocutors (phatic function). In this context, Stubbs (1983:146) notes that in casual conversation between social equals the phatic or social function typically overrides

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[38] Cited in Schiffrin 1994:387.

[39] Jakobson's model has been the subject of some heated debate. In particular, his conceptualisation of 'message' and 'poetic function' has been criticised as being trivial (Werth 1976), superficial and too narrow (Koch 1981). Koch (*ibid.*) offers a revised model that elaborates the dimensions of 'contact' and 'message' as well as introduces extralinguistic levels to the communicative process.

the referential function. Similarly, the poetic function focusing on the "message for its own sake" (76) and thus reflecting an aesthetic dimension may predominate talk. In his analysis of irony in conversation, Hartung, for instance, observes:

> Der kreative und phantasievolle Umgang mit Sprache und mit Welt läßt sich zwar grundsätzlich in jeder Kommunikation beobachten, ich möchte in dieser Arbeit aber zeigen, daß er unter Umständen zur leitenden Gesprächsmaxime werden kann, der die Produktion der einzelnen Beiträge und ihre interaktive Verknüpfung maßgeblich bestimmt […] In dem von mir untersuchten Aktivitätstyp ist die ästhetische Sprachfunktion dominant gesetzt, vergleichbar mit Produktion und Rezeption etablierter Kunstformen. (1996:109)

It should be noted that the poetic function became recognised as a prevalent feature of a certain *activity type* labelled 'private Scherzkommunikation' (110). This points to another important aspect of communication, namely the contextual embedding of the speech event – an aspect somewhat neglected in Jakobson's model. Evidently, we have to supplement Jakobson's otherwise straightforward and, for our purposes, well-suited framework with the notion that language is situated in the 'here and now' of the speech event (in other words, the co-text and context) as well as in a social and cultural context.

Several approaches to discourse such as Interactional Sociolinguistics and Conversation Analysis emphasise (although to varying degrees) the role of context. Gumperz (1982a), for example, attempted to formulate a "general theory of verbal communication which integrates what we know about grammar, culture and interactive procedures" (4). Halliday's theory, known as systemic linguistics (Halliday 1978, 1985), acknowledges the social setting or sociosemiotic system as crucial to the choices language users make when they draw from the meaning potential of their language to express themselves. Also Goffman's notion of frames (Goffman 1974) and Fairclough's approach called *critical language study* (CLS) advocating a dialectical view of language and society ("Language is a part of society; linguistic phenomena are social phenomena of a special sort, and social phenomena are (in part) linguistic phenomena" (Fairclough 1989:23)) may be mentioned here.[40]

It follows from the preceding discussion that the current study assumes a rather broad conception of *communication*: when people engage in talk they interpret each other's utterances not only on the basis of signals emitted in a code but also draw on contextual information. This includes physical reactions (such as blushing) and – more importantly for this investigation - paralinguistic phenomena (such as laughter). Communication is thus viewed as behaviour (either intentional or unintentional, or in Goffman's words 'information given' and 'information given-off') and the underlying model of communication adopted for this investigation may be referred to as an interactional model (Schiffrin 1994:391ff). Central to this model is the notion of contextualisation cues – a term coined by the anthropologist Gumperz. The definition reads:

> […] a contextualization cue is any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signalling of contextual presuppositions. Such cues may have a number of such linguistic realizations depending on the historically given linguistic repertoire of the participants. The code, dialect and style switching processes, some of the prosodic phenomena we have discussed as well as

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[40] See also Brown/Yule (1983) and Grimshaw (1981).

> choice among lexical and syntactic options, formulaic expressions, conversational openings, closings and sequencing strategies can all have similar contextualizing functions. (1982a:131)

Underlying this concept is the assumption that utterances can be interpreted in various ways by conversationalists. Contextualisation cues then help to disambiguate utterances so that correct inferences are drawn as to the meaning of utterances, ultimately resulting in 'smooth' communication. Put differently, miscommunication occurs when conversationalists fail to recognize or misinterpret each other's signals. The following fragment from COLT (B133203)[41] illustrates how the notion of contextualisation cues is implemented in the present investigation of humour and laughter in conversation.

| 89 | Angela: | When did, erm David phone ^ up? ^ |
|----|---------|-----------------------------------|
| 90 | Charlotte: | ^ Shut ^ the door please. |
| 91 | Orgady: | [laughing] Yeah I spoke to him, I can't remember [] I spoke to him on Wednesday, I phoned him. |
| 92 | Angela: | You ^ phoned him? ^ |
| 93 | Orgady: | ^ Phoned him. ^ Yes, cos he phoned ^ me ^ |
| 94 | Angela: | Oh! [laugh] |
| 95 | Orgady: | [shouting] Stop it [] You're doing that on purpose. |
| 96 | Angela: | Aah! |
| 97 | Orgady: | Stop. Don't say aah you make me [laughing] feel sick. [] [laugh] |
| 98 | Angela: | [laugh] |
| 99 | Orgady: | All right, |
| 100 | Angela: | Urgh! |
| 101 | Orgady: | urgh, |
| 102 | Angela: | Urgh, you phoned him, urgh. |
| 103 | Orgady: | [laugh] |

Evidently, laughter, laughing intonation and prosody – as in this fragment of a conversation between Angela and Orgady (aged 18) – help to convey the expressive meaning and illocutionary force of the utterances. Note, for example, how the imperative in line 97 is mitigated if not neutralised by the interspersed laughter particles. Or consider line 94: here, the prosodically marked exclamation "Oh!" followed by laughter does not primarily endorse the felicitous outcome of the interaction as typical for first follow-up moves (see Tsui 1994:41) but carries the message 'there's something going between you and David' and thus represents a tease. The laughing intonation in line 91 is more difficult to interpret. Here, it seems very likely that it serves a hedge function. It certainly indicates embarrassment since the speaker is hesitant to disclose the news that it was her who phoned David rather than the other way round.

As this brief discussion of laughter in conversation reveals, the concept of contextualisation cues is – despite its theoretical importance – not straightforward when applied to 'real' data. First, we find that one contextualisation cue, here laughter, can fulfil various functions. Jefferson's work on the sequential organisation of laughter[42] (reviewed in section 4.1) amply illustrates this. A second problem is the all-inclusiveness of the term. As is apparent in the quote from Gumperz cited above, a rather broad range of features may qualify as contextualisation cues. This puts high

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[41] This extract - as part of the file KPW - can also be found in the BNC.
[42] See also Glenn (1989).

demands on the depth of the data. As a consequence a growing body of research is based on 'home-brewed' material (cf., e.g. Tannen, Hartung, Hay, Kotthoff) - transcribed recordings of friends' conversations with or without the participation of the researcher. For example, Tannen (1984) – in her guideline "Steps in Analyzing Conversation" proposes:

> 1. Tape record (with consent) interactions whenever possible. Choose one to study – one that is *very familiar* or very intriguing, but one preferably with identifiable boundaries and including *participants you can later interview.*" (emphasis added).[43]

In Hartung's (1998) study on irony in everyday talk it is argued that – due to the opacity of the term – the phenomenon can only fruitfully be examined with the observer actively participating in the conversations (59). This study demonstrates that identification and interpretation of certain phenomena require familiarity with the data and the involvement of the observer (membership knowledge). Stubbs (1983) argues on similar lines when he writes about underlying acts not clearly inferable from linguistic form: "The interpretation of such acts will often depend on idiosyncratic or social knowledge […]" (175).[44] But he also stresses that discourse analytic procedures, i.e. accounting for the coherence of a discourse segment, can uncover links between surface forms and underlying acts. In other words, it is (in many cases) possible to discern the illocutionary force of utterances via systematic linguistic analysis.[45] This view reflects a more structuralist approach to discourse analysis also advocated by Schiffrin (1994). In her view, discourse analysis should be concerned with "the way the communicative content of an utterance contributes to our understanding of relationships across utterances, or, alternatively the way relationships across utterances help us understand the form, function, or meaning of a single utterance" (39). This emphasis on co-text rather than context is also central to the present study.

In short, familiarity with the data (knowledge of participants or membership knowledge) is certainly helpful and is in some cases, depending on the research interest, essential. It is, however, as Stubbs and Schiffrin make clear, not always a strict prerequisite. This is important as it would otherwise be impossible to undertake comparative studies, i.e. comparing the linguistic behaviour of different age groups, social classes or – as prevalent in the present study – males and females. Here it is virtually impossible to know all the participants personally not least because a relatively large amount of data has to be processed to allow comparison.

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[43] That interviews can be counterproductive or, at best, be irrelevant is expressed by McLaughlin (1986): "My own experience suggests that most people are not particularly adept at reconstructing a sequence of actions they have undertaken in conversation, even though to the observer those actions appear to evidence a considerable degree of structure and premeditation" (191).

[44] See also Fine (1977), who stresses the importance of taking into account the tradition and history of a group in the analysis of humour incidences.

[45] The folklorist Nusbaum expresses a similar viewpoint in his ethnographic case study on "Jocular Joking and Conversational Joke Telling": "While features of the setting can cue the creation of a certain type of subject matter, *features of the setting do not determine the structure of verbal communication. No matter what the situation*, through the interactive contextual process, a second speaker attaches a response to an utterance of another speaker, so that participants comprehend the second in terms of the syntax of the first, and usually in terms of its content" (Nusbaum 1994:27; emphasis added).

An additional undesirable effect of data collected from the researcher's friends is that it very likely originates from a self-selecting group, thus representing a linguistically-biased sample. This is not a serious problem for the researcher who is interested in fundamental mechanisms of discourse (such as the sequencing and co-ordination of turns) but potentially problematic when one intends to generalize the conclusions to a wider population.

The preceding discussion exhibited the limits of an excessively integrative approach towards discourse. Although this analysis assumes a functional model supplemented by the notion of 'context' some concessions have to be made as to what contextual information is taken into account. In addition, this study maintains that the functional description of interactions should be grounded in structural analysis. For this purpose *Conversation Analysis* - among other approaches to discourse such as *Interactional Sociolinguistics* and the *Ethnography of Communication* - seems particularly suitable. The reasons are that both *Interactional Sociolinguistics* and the *Ethnography of Communication* are primarily concerned with relating meanings and functions of utterances to the specific details of the contextual situation. At the same time contextual information is used as a prime resource in interpreting discourse. The main question here is how interactional (interpersonal and instrumental) goals (largely inferable from context or what ethnographers label 'communicative structure') are realised in actual language use. Hence structural analysis is ultimately based on a functional model of the speech situation under examination.

For the reasons pointed out above, the present study takes the opposite route: rather than deriving structure from function, function is inferred from structure. This is predominantly why CA – a more structural approach to discourse – is selected as the mode of analysis. It must however be added that the distinction between *structural* and *functional* methodologies is more a matter of degree and not as clear-cut as the above discussion may suggest. In their analysis of a video-taped and transcribed dissertation defence, for example, the co-founders and promoters of *Interactional Sociolinguistics*, Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz argue for a co-text - rather than context - oriented strategy in order to explore conversational inference. They say:

> What we want to suggest is that it may neither be possible nor even necessary for analysts to know every detail of individual participants' interactional history. (1994:377)

It is further maintained that via analysis of turn-sequences, response moves and contextualisation cues it is possible to discern listeners' meaning assessments and, ultimately, what interpretations are shared.

In the light of these comments the difference between *Interactional Sociolinguistics* and *CA* seems merely terminological. Consider the following quote by the 'Conversation Analyst' Heritage:

> It is thus only *after* the structural features of, for example, turn-taking and interruption have been determined that it is meaningful to search for the ways in which sociological factors such as gender, class ethnicity, etc. or psychological dispositions such as extroversion or a disposition to "passive-aggressive" conduct may be manifested – whether causally or expressively – in interactional conduct. [emphasis in the original] (1995:396)

As is evident from this quote, conversation analytic studies may very well consider contextual variation. There is in fact a fair amount of work designed to explore the

effects of asymmetric power relations, for example, among men and women (e.g. Zimmerman/West 1975, West 1979) or in institutional settings between professionals and clients.[46] However, some conversation analysts are sceptical of such approaches to conversational material. This issue, among others, will have to be addressed in closer detail in the following section, which outlines the 'type' of CA adopted for the present investigation of conversational humour.

## 2.2 Conversation Analysis

### 2.2.1 Turn-taking structure

CA distinguishes between two principles of interactional organisation, a horizontal (1) and a vertical axis (2): -

1. Interaction is sequentially organised, i.e. each utterance is shaped by a prior context and provides a context for the next utterance.

2. Interaction is structured in a hierarchy of part-whole relationships, i.e. spoken discourse can be broken down into units such that acts combine to form moves, moves combine to form exchanges, exchanges combine to form transactions,47 etc.

As a consequence, the analyst needs to reconcile two perspectives: first, a process-oriented view which, for example, addresses questions such as 'How are utterances linked to each other?', 'What functions do particular moves serve?', 'What is the role of individual speakers in creating the talk in progress?', etc., and, second, a more structural vantage point which focuses on the constructional elements of the conversational fragment examined.

In adopting this approach to the study of joke performances in natural settings, this work proceeds from the analysis of individual turns towards larger units. This procedure allows to establish where and what type of turn transitions take place and, ultimately, what conversational routines are employed and oriented to by the speakers in a joke session.

Following the standard model of exchanges proposed by CA, the current investigation assumes a two-fold structure comprising an initiation and a response. In consequence, anything else that may occur within one exchange unit (e.g. side-sequences, pre-sequences, follow-up moves, etc.) is regarded as *marked*.

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[46] For doctor and patient interaction see e.g. Fisher 1983, Todd 1983, Maynard 1991; courtroom interaction: Maynard/Wilson 1980, O'Barr 1982; teacher and pupil/student: Mehan 1979, Stubbs 1976.
[47] The terminology of the units varies considerably: for example, *acts* are labelled *points* by Scheflen (1973) and *moves* by Goffman (1967), *moves* are *turns* in Schegloff's and Sacks' nomenclature and *exchanges* may be called *interchanges* (Goffman 1967).

This view has been challenged by a number of scholars. Tsui, for example, advocates a three part structure of the exchange consisting of an initiation, response move and follow-up move:

> Conversation is an interactive process, during which the meaning and illocutionary force of utterances are negotiated between the speaker and the addressee […]. Hence, the initiating utterance that the speaker produces is subjected to the interpretation of the addressee who displays his or her interpretation in the response. *However, the interaction does not stop there.* The addressee may need to know whether the speaker has understood his or her response, whether the response is acceptable, and whether the addressee has correctly interpreted the speaker's utterance. (1994:32; emphasis added)

Without detracting from Tsui's point that the addressee *may* be waiting for some follow-up comment one might hesitate to accept her proposal to view third moves as default elements in exchanges. The reason is that CA analyses of follow-up moves almost invariably point towards some idiosyncratic contextual aspect(s) that account for their presence. Tsui herself gives an example of this, namely follow-up moves of the type 'concession' prospected by dispreferred negative responses. Another instance would be third moves as part of a politeness routine in requesting exchanges where the first speaker may wish to express his/her gratitude for the recipient's co-operation (see Goffman). As shown by Stenström (1984), follow-up moves are however far less common in conversations between a married couple than in other environments, implying that such moves are indicative of the level of intimacy between speakers. Yet other examples can be found in their regular occurrence in classroom/courtroom/quiz show interchanges (see Sinclair/Coulthard 1975), where they realise an evaluative function. Their presence can thus be explained on the basis of contextual aspects, i.e. the communicative framework and which of the participants is the "primary knower" (Berry 1981:123). [48]

In the light of these studies[49] it seems safe to say that such careful attention to third moves would hardly have been paid if the three-part exchange structure had been assumed as the default model. As a result, the present study adopts the two-fold adjacency pair as the basic discourse unit. The next section attempts to show the analytic power of this model in exploring humorous interaction.

## 2.2.2   Turn-taking structure and conversational humour

It is worthwhile examining humour in the light of sequential organisation because humour typically projects a reaction. In fact, this feature has sometimes been used to define 'humour'. Ziv comments:

> Laughter and smiling are not exclusively responses to humor. However, they are the main reaction to it and thus can be used in a definition of humor. Humor is therefore defined as a

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[48] Burton (1981) criticises Sinclair/Coulthard's (1975) three-part IRF (initiation-response-feedback) model on the basis that it is tailored to classroom exchange and does not apply to informal talk. She suggests that in casual conversations the third move may be used to convey sarcasm. Berry (1981) differentiates between optional and obligatory follow-up moves depending on which of the interactants is the 'primary knower'.

[49] Other investigations focusing on third moves are Heritage's (1994b) analysis of the "*oh* –receipt token" in eliciting exchanges and studies exploring its varying relevance in different settings (ten Have 1991, Drew 1992a, Drew/Heritage 1992).

social message intended to produce laughter or smiling. As with any social message, it fulfills
certain functions, uses certain techniques, has a content, and is used in certain situations.
(1988:ix)

The prospective nature of humorous utterances can – at least in part – be explained by
the fact that humour is often communicated indirectly. As a result, shared
interpretations cannot be taken for granted unless the recipient demonstrates his/her
understanding of the utterance's implied meaning.

One important vehicle for humour production is the generation of conversational
implicature originating in some form of flouting or violation of maxims (Grice
1967);[50] in humorous talk speakers constantly code and decode messages and publicly
display their knowledge of what is going on. This complex interactional work (or, as
Grice calls it, "conversational game" (*ibid.*: 35) is also visible on the level of
exchange structure. Some examples of punning and "joke-firsts" (Schegloff) in
response moves may illustrate this phenomenon.

Puns play upon lexical ambiguity. In natural conversations they typically occur in
responding moves for comic effect. The following is an example (quoted by Norrick)
based on (polysemic[51]) punning:

    A:   I'm leaving now. Are you coming?

    B:   No, just breathing hard.

    (1993:22)

It may be added that the response move in this example projects a follow-up move.
The first speaker may either respond by showing appreciation of the joke (e.g.
laughter) whereupon the joker generally provides the desired response (Schegloff
1987). Or, alternatively, the speaker may treat the response "as a legitimate
misinterpretation and thus refusing to accept the response as a joke at all"
(Norrick:22).

As Norrick further points out the effects of such "joke-firsts" on sequential patterning
are enormous:

The essentially everpresent potential for such joke-firsts has broad consequences for
sequentiality in conversation. The first part – second part structure of adjacency pairs looms
large in the organization of conversation; add to it the possibility that any second part can be a

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[50] The question of how the Cooperative Principle (CP) ties in with 'humour' is controversial. Some
scholars have proposed that the CP is practically inoperative in humour production (see Raskin 1985,
who compiled a specific set of maxims functioning for the 'humorous mode of communication' (non-
bona-fide; NBF), Alexander 1997:69, Attardo 1994). Other linguists, most noticeably those who
analyse humour on the basis of natural talk (e.g. Kotthoff 1998a, Mulkay 1988) emphasise the co-
operative nature of humorous talk. Kotthoff comments: "Die Verletzung einer oder mehrerer Maximen
wird bei ihm [Grice] keineswegs gleichgesetzt mit der Aufgabe der Kooperation oder mit Non-Bona-
Fide-Kommunikation" (*ibid.*:57).
[51] Puns are generally distinguished according to whether they involve lexical ambiguity based on
homonymy or polysemy (cf. Leech 1969:209, Alexander 1997). In his analysis of data sampled from
British print media, Alexander points to the limits of this classification and accordingly broadens the
concept of puns to include instances realising 'semantic allusion to idioms and metaphors' (*ibid.*:97-
100).

joking response, and the effects on this basic level of conversational organization can be far-reaching. (*ibid.*:22)

The conversational data presented by Norrick (1993) and Sherzer (1978) provide evidence for this view.[52] Punning and/or "joke-firsts" typically disrupt topical turn-by-turn talk and frequently change the direction of the conversation. Hence they may realise interactional aggression.

The following two examples from the Conversational Corpus support Norrick's and Sherzer's (*ibid.*) observations:

(1) KB8 n=06895

| | |
|---|---|
| PS14B: | Except, he could have for the minibus of course. [pause dur=6] Where's my knitting gone? |
| PS14C: | I think he had a pet shop. |
| PS14B: | Well he wouldn't need a P S V licence for a pet shop. |
| PS14C: | But, I don't know that ^ he does now. ^ |
| PS14B: | ^ Unless you were a ^ Pet Shop Boy [pause] and were a roadie. |
| PS14C: | Mm mm. |
| PS14B: | I can't remember what line I was doing. |

In the immediately preceding passage James (PS14C) and Ann (PS14B) were discussing the possible reasons why one of James' professional acquaintances carries a PSV licence. After a short silence Ann changes the topic ("Where's my knitting gone?"). James, however, continues with topical talk, suggesting that the acquaintance once required a PSV licence for his pet shop. Ann dismisses this proposition and interrupts James' subsequent turn with a punning continuation of her previous utterance. Although James does not laugh, he does respond to her punning with a minimal response (which, in Tsui's framework, represents a concession to a negative response) and grants the floor to her. Ann subsequently reintroduces the 'knitting topic' that she attempted earlier.

(2) KDM n=12785

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0PN: | Ooh, I tell you what you want though. |
| PS0PP: | For the iron? |
| PS0S0: | ^ Got a ^ |
| PS0RR: | ^ Yeah. ^ |
| PS0PN: | couple of things for you. [pause] You want water from, where was it I said to you? |
| PS0PP: | [laugh] |
| PS0PN: | From er |
| PS0PP: | [laugh] Lourdes! |
| PS0PN: | No, no! From nor= , somewhere in Snowdonia [pause] they send this water all over the country [pause] and it's so full of iron [pause] Germany, they buy it [pause] [unclear]. [pause] But er, it's a good [pause] I don't know about cure, but whatever! |
| PS0PP: | Dunno, something ^ you read ^ |
| PS0PN: | ^ The rheuma ^ |
| PS0PP: | in the paper yesterday. |
| PS0PN: | I told you on Su= on Sunday! |
| PS0PP: | Mm, I've forgotten now. |

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[52] See also Stubbs (1983:243ff), who presents an interesting incidence of punning from his field notes in order to show the complexity of interpretative processes involved in this type of exchange.

> PS0PN:      Er, rheumatism, what else was it?
> PS0PP:      I dunno, ^ I didn't read it! ^

As is apparent from the passage following the joking incident, Raymond has good reasons to believe that Margaret knows the answer to his question ("I told you on Su= on Sunday!"). Hence he would expect her to provide the relevant response in a turn subsequent to her 'joke-first'.[53] This 'relevance of response' cannot be ignored by Margaret (unless, of course, she decides to turn down co-operation); she has to react to this situation. As we can see in the fragment, she does so by declaring her ignorance of the matter. This is certainly not a satisfying answer to Raymond (as, in fact, we can witness from the subsequent talk). It is, however, important as it signals that help is not being refused but rather that it cannot be provided. Viewed from the angle of the CP, Margaret's 'serious', second response therefore resolves the interactional problem that arose from her infringement of the maxims of relation and quality by her initial joking response to Raymond's question.

The flouting of maxims is common in conversational humour. This may result in a momentary state of non-cooperation. Conversationalists however are quick in remedying this situation if it causes too much irritation. The joker may either clarify the issue (i.e. "I'm only joking.") or provide the desired response (see above); the humour recipient may simply ignore the humour or s/he may decide to collaborate in the humorous key. To round off this survey, let us look at a few more humorous exchanges in the Conversational Corpus:

KBM n=0033

> PS6P7:      Mm?
> PS1BL:      Say that again dad?
> PS6P7:      What was the weather like round here today?
> PS1BL:      Oh it was gorgeous!
> PS6P7:      Mm.
> PS1BL:      [laugh] [pause] It was erm [pause] a bit cold. [pause] [laugh]
> PS1BM:      Freezing! Real cold.
> PS1BL:      Mum, the spaghetti's horrible. It's all ^ short and ^

15-year-old Chris' (PS1BL) response to his father's (PS6P7) enquiry about the weather is interpretable in two ways: it is either a form of "expressive lying" (Bauman 1986), which in terms of the CP constitutes a violation of the maxim of quality; or, it is ironic and thus flouts the maxim of quality.[54] The ensuing follow-up move produced by the father containing a mere acknowledgement token is equally ambiguous: has he taken Chris' response at face-value or has he grasped the conversational implicature? This situation obviously calls for clarification; otherwise Chris subsequent turn initiated by laughter and followed by a slightly-more-to-the-truth version[55] would not have been necessary. The mother (PS1BM) terminates the exchange by spelling out what the weather was *really* like. The main point to note

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[53] The many pauses in Raymond's utterance are perhaps indicative of his anticipation of the appropriate answer.

[54] In order to decide this question prosodic information would be most useful.

[55] It may be noted that Chris' reformulation is more clearly marked for irony than the first utterance (see also Hartung, who observes that speakers, rather than explicating the implied meaning, tend to paraphrase their ironic statements more markedly when the irony has not been grasped immediately (1996:131); understatements as present here in the expression 'a bit cold' are typical for irony (Alexander 1997:68, Leech 1983).

here is that Chris' humorous remark sets off a chain of action and expands what would have normally been a two-part exchange (with an optional follow-up) to an exchange containing five moves.

The following two fragments illustrate how initiating acts can be (somewhat mischievously) misinterpreted to create humour. The phenomenon is rather similar to punning (as discussed above) in that both actions make fun of the (first) speaker.

(1) KCY n=1613

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0H9: | Oh it didn't look like it was making a hundred miles an hour anyway |
| PS0HB: | No [pause] |
| PS0H9: | What happens if that engine blows up? |
| PS0HB: | Yeah, well it goes downstream then don't it? |
| PS0H9: | [laugh] |
| PS0HB: | Goes back to the fisherman and they just er done the dirty on [pause] |

Keith (PS0H9) and Russel (PS0HB) are watching fishing boats. In the first line, Keith comments on the astonishing speed of one of the boats. His next utterance is, of course, not to be taken as a genuine question, but rather as a way of saying 'Just imagine, if that engine blows up'. Russel, however, deliberately ignores the illocutionary force of Keith's utterance and responds by stating the obvious. This comment is obviously appreciated as Keith responds with laughter.

(2) KPU n= 2062[56]

| | |
|---|---|
| PS585: | Oh! Wedding bells. |
| PS583: | They're holding hands. |
| PS585: | [laugh] [pause] Blind Date. |
| → PS583: | I think you were the only one that [laughing] recognised that. |
| PS582: | [laughing] Yeah . |
| PS584: | You were ^ actually.^ |
| PS583: | ^ [laugh] ^ |
| PS585: | ^ Yes. ^ Yeah. Yes erm |
| PS582: | [laughing] Yes, cos he's been on the gin and Martini. |
| PS585: | Been on the Coke. |
| PS583: | ^ [laugh] ^ |
| PS582: | ^ She's on a ve ^, she's in a very [pause] kind of pretty dress, I couldn't imagine him liking that. |

The four participants Gearoid (PS585, aged 40), Michael (PS584, aged 36), Ann-Marie (PS583, aged 29), and Rachel (PS582, aged 27) have just been watching (and discussing) the TV programme 'Blind Date' when Gearoid makes the comment (introduced by laughter and followed by a pause) 'Blind Date'. Given that everyone present knows the programme, this is rather superfluous. In other words, Gearoid's utterance does not represent an informative act in the sense that it serves to provide information and prospects an acknowledgement (Sinclair/Coulthard 1975, Tsui 1994).[57] This is, however, exactly how Ann-Marie 'wishes' to interpret Gearoid's utterance when directly referring to one major presupposition underlying informatives, namely that "it is not obvious that the addressee knows about the event(s) or state(s) of affairs" (Tsui:181). At the same time, Ann-Marie flouts the

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[56] This fragment is also used to illustrate the humorous manoeuvre 'generating implicature' in section 4.4.

[57] It is rather some kind of closing statement to the exchange starting in the first line.

maxim of quality, which results in irony. Laughing intonation marks the non-seriousness of the utterance. Both Rachel and Michael signal their understanding of Ann-Marie's humour by joining in the humorous key and jokingly affirm the truth-value of Ann-Marie's statement. Gearoid, who has now become the teasing object, attempts to say something (he may be busy thinking of some funny retort) but is interrupted by Rachel. She continues her sister's humour by also violating the maxim of quality: as a matter of fact, Gearoid is the only person present who is *not* consuming alcoholic beverages. Gearoid reacts with a witty repartee that adopts the syntagmatic ordering of Rachel's utterance and replaces the final constituent (*gin and Martini*) by a pun.[58] This is received with laughter. In the last line shown above Rachel returns to topical talk.

While humour has the effect of expanding exchanges and/or producing time-outs from topical talk, it may further be noted that individual turns within such humorous sequences are often rather difficult to pin down. This is an issue that will be discussed in detail at some later point (see sections 4.6 and 4.10.1). For the purpose of overview, however, it seems appropriate at this point to briefly introduce this aspect.

Examining Rachel's utterance in the fragment above (produced with laughing intonation) "Yes, cos he's been on the gin and Martini" we are caught on the horns of a dilemma: It is clearly not initial as it can be expanded (following Stubbs' expansion tests proposed to determine whether a turn is initial or not) to something like 'He was the only person who recognised the programme because he has been on the gin and Martini'. On the other hand, however, Rachel's move is initial in that it projects a next move, as can be shown by expanding Gearoid's subsequent utterance to 'I have not been on the gin and Martini but on the coke'.

One could describe these events where conversational moves are concurrently predicted and predicting as Janiform turns.[59] This phenomenon, resulting in blurred exchange boundaries, seems rather typical of conversational humour. It is generated by a high level of collaboration where speakers constantly monitor each other's contributions and seek for opportunities to say something funny. As Fillmore puts it: "[…] the humorist-conversationalist is one who operates in a *speaking mode* and in an *attending mode*" (1994:308; emphasis in the original). As shown by the previous discussion of individual humorous interchanges this complex interactional work manifests itself on the level of exchange structure and beyond exchange boundaries.

To date, descriptions of exchange structure and taxonomies of conversational moves have largely ignored humorous talk. Further, 'laughter' has seldom been systematically studied in terms of its functions within interchanges. As a result, the concepts developed so far fail to account for many of the phenomena encountered in the 'humour data' extracted from the BNC. The present work attempts to fill this gap by analysing representative samples of humorous exchanges and laughter occurrences from the BNC. It is hoped that the taxonomy of moves and the system of exchange structure developed on this basis and outlined in section 4.6 will prove useful in future analyses of moves within exchanges in natural spontaneous conversations. Given the

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[58] The spelling of 'coke' (with initial capital letter) suggests that the transcriber settled on a non-humorous reading.

[59] As a matter of fact, Stubbs (1983:132) considers the possibility of "Janus-faced" utterances.

frequent occurrence of "jocular chit-chat" (BNC, BN3 n=784) in spontaneous conversation, a reconsideration of current exchange models seems to be overdue.

## 2.3    Statistics and CA: two incompatible disciplines?

### 2.3.1    The micro-macro issue

In adopting a conversation analytical approach to the study of interaction one is inevitably drawn into what is commonly referred to in sociology as the 'micro-macro debate'. The question of how micro phenomena can be linked to macro structures such as 'society', 'institutions', 'ethnicity', etc. is one that pervades the often controversial discussions of the status and value of CA work. Here the issue is sketched out, largely ignoring its long tradition in philosophical and sociological theory, alongside the major propositions advocated by the purists of CA, the criticism raised (both within CA and from related fields) against this 'radical' stance and some possible compromise between the different positions. Without ignoring the theoretical importance of the issue, the purpose of this chapter is to establish a methodology suitable for the examination of conversational humour which seeks to adopt both an *emic* approach, i.e. explain conversational practices "from within" (Heritage 1995:406), as well as incorporate contextual variables into the analyses.

### CA 'proper'

Judging from the volume of publications that explicitly deal with the micro-macro issue the most vigorous defender of 'classical' CA is Emanuel Schegloff. His contributions to the field both in the initial stage of theory construction and as a devoted empirical analyst do not permit us to take his objections to some current trends in CA lightly. In addition, it is worthwhile recalling that right from the outset of CA as an emerging discipline the CA 'resolution' of the micro-macro problem paved the way for the methodological approach so distinct from other sociological research methods of the period. In order to understand Schegloff's adherence to 'classical' CA, it is necessary to appreciate both its basis and the considerations that brought it into being.

From a historical perspective, the development of a new discipline (now generally referred to as 'Conversation Analysis' although Harold Garfinkel, one of its most prominent founders, used to call it 'ethnomethodology') was certainly a reaction against the established macro-theories of social action at the time (as developed by, e.g., Durkheim and Parsons). It opposed Durkheim's insistence on the independence of macroscopic phenomena ("social facts") from individual action and their exercising control over individuals. Parsons was criticised for his account of social order as resulting from the internalisation of normative patterns ("need dispositions"), which were viewed as causal determinants of individual action. Some major strands of reasoning against these viewpoints are the following: -

(a) Actors are not "judgemental dopes" (Garfinkel 1967:68ff) who unconsciously obey the whip of institutionalised cultural directives. Rather, they are capable of choosing among suitable strategic alternatives, reflecting on particular normative patterns (and, possibly, undermining them), and co-ordinating their actions on the basis of shared knowledge of procedures and possible courses of action.

(b) Abstract theorising on what may constitute 'rational' behaviour and 'objective reality' is misguided. It is impossible to *a priori* and exhaustively define sets of rules which would account for any possible real-life situation.[60] The application of rules is always adjusted to the specifics of the concrete situation. *A priori* formulations of external variables tend to "'absorb' and 'naturalize' various details of talk" (Schegloff 1991:58) – combined with a deterministic view of individual action this is counterproductive to gaining new insights and advancing social science (Heritage 1984a:104-6, 112; Schegloff 1987).

(c) The prevailing theories do no explain how "social actors come to know, and know in common, what they are doing and the circumstances in which they are doing it" (Heritage 1984a:76).

Owing to these fundamental objections, CA developed a radically different theoretical position on the nature of social order and social organisation and devised its own methodological approach. The major propositions can be outlined as: -

1. Normative rules are constitutive of socially organised events. Social order is implemented from the bottom up rather than vice versa.

2. Conversational structure *is* social structure. Since "institutional contexts are created as visible states of affairs *on a turn-by-turn basis* [and] it is ultimately through such means that 'institutions' exist as accountable organizations of social actions" (Heritage 1984a:290, emphasis added) the analysis of some piece of conversational interaction is 'complete' once the specifics of the sequential and structural organisation have been worked out. In discussing the relation between 'talk-in-interaction' and social structure, Schegloff comments:

> Whatever substantive gains there are to be had from focusing on the relationship between talk and social structure in the traditional sense, this focus is not needed in order to supply conversation analysis with its sociological credentials. The work which is focused on the organization of talk-in-interaction in its own right – work on the organization of turn-taking, or on the organization of sequences, work addressed to the actions being done in turns and the formats through which they are done, work on the organization of repair, and work directed to the many discrete practices of talking and acting through talk which do not converge into domains of organization – this work is itself dealing with social organization and social structures […] (1991:46)

3. If any claims are made concerning the relevance of some external variable (e.g. gender, ethnicity, official setting, etc.) to a particular conversation, empirical evidence (derived from structural/sequential analysis) has to be shown which demonstrates that such external variables were oriented to by the participants at the time of their talk.

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[60] Heritage (1984a:106-10) convincingly demonstrates this point by his discussion of greetings.

4. Recurrent formal patterns underlying the conduct of interaction such as the organisation of repair (Schegloff 1987) or the allocation of turns (Sacks/Schegloff/Jefferson 1978) are presumed to operate independently of contextual properties.

## Criticism

A number of objections have been raised against CA's insistence on bracketing contextual factors and its exclusive focus on structural/sequential phenomena. The following notes present some of the published criticism and a few additional comments.

In order to get a full grasp of what is going on in social interaction it is not sufficient to analyse its structural organisation. Speakers are also guided by semantic and pragmatic considerations, which makes it necessary for the analyst to juxtapose his/her findings on the temporal/sequential structure of some event with contextual knowledge (Mehan 1991).

Contextual aspects (such as social setting, speaker attributes, etc.) cannot always be inferred from studying the details of talk; they may hide in the background. As Kotthoff remarks: "Es fehlt eine Unterscheidung von Anzeigeverfahren im Vordergrund und mitlaufendem Hintergrund" (1998a:115).

Claims of invariance concerning turn-taking phenomena or the structural sequencing of particular conversational actions have been challenged by studies that have taken external variables into account (see Mehan 1991 for a survey of such investigations; Kotthoff 1998a:117, Schegloff 1993).

Although CA studies often claim the existence (and recurrence) of a particular conversational practice, they generally fail to inform the reader about the size and type of material used for analysis. This appears scientifically unsound: one cannot postulate rules and excuse the "resistance to numbers in CA" by referring to the "analytic goal of accounting for every case, rather than just a percentage of cases" (Hopper/Koch/Mandelbaum 1986:182). The criticism often levelled at CA of practising 'radical situationalism' and "microanalytic myopia" (Mehan 1991) can only be countered by disclosing how much and what kind of data were investigated.

The rigorous stance towards participants' orientation to external variables (see item (3) in the previous section) renders it impossible to explore some meaningful sociological questions – questions of the kind: 'How or to what extent do the genders differ in their use of particular conversational practices?' Certainly, the difference is - if there is any at all - like one of degree rather than kind, but the question itself is reasonable and valid - not least because 'gender' has demonstrably been shown to constitute an 'institutional reality', something that gets 'done' during interaction (cf., e.g., Garfinkel's (1967) study on the transsexual individual 'Agnes').

Now, if it is true that 'gender' presents a salient institutional category, why is it that CA only allows the investigation to consider conversational data that explicitly mention 'gender', hence displaying members' orientation towards this particular

aspect of identity? Is it not possible that 'gender' is in fact salient in an interaction but is neither marked as such or (metalinguistically) pondered over by the interlocutors?

Clearly, if our answer to this last question is positive, it is also then reasonable and desirable to track 'gender' not only in data where it is (conveniently) overtly specified, but also in data that does not explicitly display gender orientation – despite the reservations against this stance towards spoken data held by some Conversation Analysts. Admittedly, following up such questions of gender is not done on the safe ground provided for by Conversation Analysis but more realistic and it is thus worth taking the risk of introducing potential analyst bias into the data.

As Kotthoff (1998) points out, one effective way of dealing with the problem of prejudicing the analysis by one's own preconceptions is "the systematic comparison of individual conversations" (116, my translation). This entails both careful scrutiny of conversational practices as well as keeping count of them. In other words, statistical techniques are required to complement the qualitative analysis of individual conversations.

Notwithstanding Schegloff's scepticism of the value of statistical procedures, this work takes the approach that this 'institutional reality' *gender* can only be studied by systematic comparison, entailing both qualitative and quantitative evaluation. How this can be done without falling into the trap of prejudicing the results of the analysis and precluding new discoveries is the topic of the next section.


### 2.3.2   Integrating CA and quantitative procedures

Before discussing the utility of statistical procedures in CA research, it is worthwhile summarising some of the principal insights and guidelines on this topic within the wider context of corpus linguistics. We first note that the presentation of statistical data as a goal in itself - without couching such data within the framework of linguistic enquiry - is clearly misguided. As Mair comments:

> The object of corpus linguistics is not the explanation of what is present in the corpus, but the understanding of language. (1992:99)

Statistics, then, should be seen as a tool that may be used for detecting and/or evaluating interesting linguistic phenomena.

An important issue in this context concerns the relationship between statistically significant findings on the one hand, and their relevance (i.e. their meaningfulness) for linguistic description on the other.

Generally speaking, any result produced by a test statistic should be taken with a pinch of salt. Statistically significant findings may, for instance, reflect a sampling bias or clustering effects (e.g. due to individual behaviour).[61] Since the test statistics

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[61] Empirical linguists (cf. Woods/Fletcher/Hughes 1986, Hundt 1998) point out that the standards of 'random sampling' and 'independence of observations' cannot always be fully satisfied in practice. Before jumping to startling conclusions on the basis of the statistical results it is advisable to look more closely at the sample/corpus itself.

become more 'sensitive' with increasing sample size, a very minor effect may be detected by using a large sample (see Woods/Fletcher/Hughes 1986:127-9, Kennedy 1992:250).

The reverse situation may also be encountered where some statistically insignificant residue offers valuable information on the emergence of new grammatical structures or provides an explanation of why other forms are preferred (see Mair 1992, Hundt 1998).

Needless to say, the comments above are also applicable for interpreting quantitative findings within CA research - albeit with the complication that beside the issue of *linguistic* relevance we must also consider the relation between statistical significance and relevance in terms of the *displayed orientation* of speakers towards the particular conversational practice under scrutiny. The reason is – and it is in this point where the dividing line between (interactive) sociolinguistics and CA is most firmly evident – that CA is highly suspicious about statistically significant results that cannot be shown to be operative in actual discourse (see previous section). Overcoming this insistence on the provision of sufficient evidence from the interactants' conduct often proves to be a great hurdle for comparative work. Failure to meet this stringent criterion should, however, not be equated with an absence of relation: stylistic variation, for instance, may not be manifested on the surface level of structural organisation; as a matter of fact, after having established the 'environment of relevant possible occurrence' of some well-defined item, its actual occurrence or omission (i.e. its relative frequency) in that context may not be explicable without recourse to stylistic differences or other contextual variables (setting, group composition, etc.).

Traditionally, statistical procedures have primarily been employed to explore the extent to which specific external, mutually exclusive, conditioning factors are at work in determining surface variants of underlying forms, meanings, functions, etc. The obvious virtue of this approach is that it respects the principle of accountability. However, their applicability to the study of semantic and pragmatic phenomena is often limited due to the lack of a detectable underlying form or because the structural or functional variability of the phenomenon in question renders it impossible to determine which are the dependent, and independent variables, which factors play a role, which do not, which associations are present among variables, etc. (see Dubois/Sankoff 1997). This situation may give the impression that it is impossible to see the wood for the trees or, put more drastically -

> In contrast to much of the subject matter of the social sciences […] conduct in talk-in-interaction *could* then appear to be demonstrably orderly *at the level of the singular occurrence only* and, in effect, *not* orderly in any distinctive, relevant, or precisely determinable way in the aggregate. (Schegloff 1992:117)

- to lead one to speculate that there is no wood to be seen at all.

While lack of order in the aggregate cannot be completely ruled out, scientific enquiry should at least strive to detect some order in this alleged chaos of orderly-produced singular events. Here, statistical procedures may be of assistance in systematically working out associations holding between relevant categories and variables inferred from detailed qualitative analyses.

To summarise, the approach taken in the present work follows a constructivist line of investigation: conversational practices are studied in their local context in terms of their structural, referential and functional properties and they are examined in the light of how they accomplish and generate social structure. Quantitative procedures may enter at various points during this process:

- when isolating the *relevant* organisational features: here, numerical evidence for frequency judgements (such as 'typically', 'generally') on some corpus of known size could be used to safeguard against possibly wrong intuitive evaluations,

- when exploring the role of contextual properties in determining linguistic structure and conversational practice: here, it could be worthwhile going out on fishing expeditions as long as one is aware of the danger of merely presenting some bare statistics and not seeking to relate quantitative results to the exigencies of talk-in-interaction,

- when working out associations among the various levels of description derived from the previous steps of qualitative and quantitative investigation (here, log-linear modelling proves to be a useful statistical technique in assessing interactions and associations among three or more variables).

Apart from this exploratory role assigned to quantitative evaluation statistical methods are employed here in the more conventional sense of testing hypotheses derived from previous studies. The aim of this is not to seek to invalidate the previous work carried out on the subject[62] but rather - if it so happens that some hypothesis could not be confirmed - to attempt to account for the divergences. This throws light on the methodologies and research paradigms used in each study, their potentials in view of the phenomena under scrutiny and, ultimately, the relative quality of the findings.

## 2.3.3  Summary of statistical methods

Following the first (purely descriptive) steps of counting and tabulating, statistical techniques are, when appropriate, applied to evaluate the data.

The statistical procedures employed in this study are:

- the chi-square test for two-dimensional relationships and

- log-linear modelling for three-dimensional relationships.[63]

As a measure of the strength of association, odds ratios are calculated for significant interactions that emerged in the context of large sample sizes.[64] Most statistics were

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[62] The volume of data gathered is probably insufficient to do this with a high degree of confidence.

[63] Relationships of higher dimensionality were not considered.

[64] Since this measure is independent of sample size, it is extremely useful in assessing the strength of association when large sample sizes are involved.

computed by the statistics package SAS (Statistical Analysis System).[65] A brief introduction to log-linear modelling is presented in Appendix A.[66]

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[65] While (owing to the time-consuming process of iterative fitting for the computation of maximum-likelihood estimators) all log-linear results were generated by SAS, the chi-square tests were sometimes calculated by hand. This, I hope, will make the results no less reliable.

[66] For extensive treatments of log-linear analysis see Kennedy (1992) and Gilbert (1993). A crisp and clear survey of log-linear modelling is presented in Oakes (1998). Leech (1992:115-116) also comments on the usability of this method in corpus-linguistic research.

# 3    Canned jokes in the BNC

As pointed out in chapter 1, canned jokes have received considerable attention in linguistic scholarship, mainly in order to isolate fundamental mechanisms and principal structural components. Little work has however been done so far on standardised jokes as they occur in everyday conversation. This is at least in part due to the fact that this form of humour occurs rather infrequently in ordinary talk, as we will see in the following analysis.[67] However, within the domain of CA and, to some extent, sociologically oriented studies some attempts have been made to identify important characteristics of canned jokes in conversations. These observations will serve as a starting point for the following study of canned jokes in the BNC.

Compared to other forms of humour, canned jokes are relatively easy to retrieve from the BNC using the retrieval software 'SARA'. Because joke texts are usually introduced or responded to in a more or less standardised fashion, i.e. 'Have you heard the one about …', 'I gotta joke', 'That was a good joke', etc., SARA can be used to search for words and expressions commonly used in the context of joke performances. Convenient as this strategy may be, it has its drawbacks: the results of the word query for 'joke', for example, do not refer invariably to a joke performance. Thus, the elimination of irrelevant instances – a rather tedious process[68] - was a major part of the work.

Further problems arise from the way that standardised jokes may occur in conversations without explicit announcement or evaluation. Zajdman (1991), analysing the contextualisation of canned jokes, differentiates between four types of jokes depending on the level of contextual embedding. One of the types, labelled 'merger' in the original text, represents instances of canned jokes that are (slightly) altered so that they become part of the 'real-life situation'. In other words, the basic format of the joke is retained, but it is applied in such a way that is has become inseparable from the immediate context. Evidently, such incidences are impossible to retrieve with the applied method. The resulting 'corpus' of canned jokes obtained from the BNC is thus by no means comprehensive; it features a specific, albeit common, kind of contextualisation corresponding to Zajdman's type A ("supplier") and type B ("sub-contractor") classes (28-31).

For the purpose of overview the query results are presented in tabular format. The table includes information about contextual parameters such as sex and age of joke teller and group composition as well as joke-specific aspects, i.e. joke topic (neutral, ethnic, sexual, obscene), structure (narrative, riddle), humour (verbal, referential). After a discussion of these findings, section 3.3 draws attention to tripartite jokes – a format frequently encountered in the material. The emphasis here is not so much on aspects of performance but on joke-internal features and mechanisms, while surveying a major part of the relevant literature on the topic, particularly the linguistic work inspired by structuralism. Several tripartite jokes are examined in the light of 'established' theory and an attempt is made to isolate those components that

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[67] Hay (1995) also commented on the low frequency of canned jokes in her corpus of conversations.

[68] This is mainly due to the BNC client's options for context. 'Maximum' context was often not sufficiently large to decide whether instances were relevant or not.

ultimately motivate a three-fold format. Studies of oral communication as offered by Jakobson, Kotthoff, Johnstone and Bauman provide the background for interpreting the findings.

Finally, section 3.4 takes a closer look at canned joke performances in conversations of adolescents. The motive for focusing on adolescent conversations was twofold: first, the relatively high frequency of occurrence of canned jokes in teenage talk justifies separate analysis. Second, and more importantly, it was possible to obtain a fair amount of the recently revised transcripts from the COLT project. In its original version this material was partly included in the BNC. Owing to the much improved quality of the transcripts, it was possible to analyse a joke session recorded by 'Josie' (BNC text: KPG; COLT: recruit 36) more accurately and reliably. This joke session will thus be presented in greater detail, focusing on the following issues:

- aspects of the joke performance: participant interaction during the telling of a joke, negotiation of speaking rights, evaluation sequences of jokes, narrative styles, performance quality and reception,

- joke topics,

- favourite joke structures.

During the process of analysis, observed phenomena are cross-checked with other data from teenage conversations and canned joke performances so as to allow, if possible, generalization and formulation of rules and patterns. The findings are further examined in the light of the functions that canned jokes may serve in adolescent conversations.


### 3.1   Previous research


It is instructive to review the literature on canned jokes in the context of conversation analysis. The earliest reference known to the author is Sacks' 1978 analysis of a 'dirty joke'. Since frequent reference is made to this groundbreaking work throughout the present discussion of canned jokes, it seems appropriate at this point to quote the conversational fragment on which Sacks' analysis was based.[69] For the sake of consistency (and for lack of a better transcription scheme) the original notation is retained.[70] Symbol explanations are presented in the appendix.


```
KEN:        You wanna hear- My sister told me a story last night
ROGER:      I don't wanna hear it. But if you must
                  (0.7)
AL:         What's purple and an island. Grape, Britain.
            That's what his sister told him.
KEN:        No. To stun me she says uh,
                  (0.8)
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[69] From Sacks (1978:250-252).

[70] As Schenkein (1978:xi) informs us, the transcript notation was largely designed by Gail Jefferson.

KEN:        There was these three girls and they just got married?
ROGER:      hhhh-hhh
AL:         heh heh heh
            [[
KEN:        And uh,
KEN:        (They were)
            [[
ROGER:      Hey waita second. Drag that by again heh
KEN:        There was these three girls. And they were all sisters. And they'd just got
            married to three *bro*thers.
ROGER:      You better have a long talk with your sister.
AL:         Waita second heh!
ROGER:      *Oh.* Three *bro*thers.
KEN:        And uh, so,
AL:         The brothers of these sisters.
KEN:        No they're *dif*ferent you know *dif*ferent families.
ROGER:      That's closer than be*fore* (I think).
KEN:        So-
            [[
AL:         hhhh*hah*
                    (0.7)
KEN:        *Qui*et.
AL:         º(          )
KEN:        So, *first* of all, that night they're on their honeymoon the mother in law
            says well why don't you all spend the night here and then you can go on
            your honeymoon in the morning. The *fi*rst night, the mother walks up to
            the first door and she hears the "*uu*ooo-ooo-ooo," second door is
            "***HHHOHHhhh***," third door there's *No*thin. She stands there for about
            twenty five minutes waitin for somethin to happen. *No*thin.
                    (1.0)
KEN:        Next morning she talks to the first daughter and she says "How come you-
            how come you went *YAAAaaa* last night" and the daughter says "Well it
            *tic*kled, Mommy." Second girl, "How come you *scre*amed." "*Oh, Mo*mmy it
            *hur*ts." Third girl, walks up to her. "Why didn't you *say* anything last night."
            "Well *you* told me it was always impolite to talk with my mouth full."
                    (1.3)
KEN:        hhhhyok hyok. Hyok.
                    (2.5)
AL:         *HA-A-A-A!*
KEN:        heh-heh-huh-huh
ROGER:      Delayed reaction.
AL:         I had to think about it awhile you know?
ROGER:      Sure.
                    (1.0)
ROGER:      hih heh You mean the *deep* hidden *m*eaning there doesn't *hi*t you right
            away heh
AL:         hhih
            [[
(DAN):      (It's pretty interesting.)
AL:         What he *m*eant to say is that- that um,
ROGER:      Kinda got psychological overtones.
KEN:        Little sister's getting older.
AL:         eh-hih-hih
KEN:        yihh hih-hih That's what I *m*ean to say.
DAN:        *Sounds* like it.
KEN:        For twelve years old tellin me- *I* didn't even know-
ROGER:      How do you know she's just repeating what she heard and doesn't know
            what it means.
AL:         Did she have to explain it to you Ken?
KEN:        Yeah she had to explain it in detail to me,

AL:         Okay Ken, glad you got a sister that knows somethin.
KEN:        She told me she was eatin a hot dog,
                    (3.0)
ROGER:      What does *th*at mean.
AL:         Yeah come on. Explain it to us. Explain-
KEN:        *I DON'T KNOW* I just said that.
                    [[
AL:         Explain everything you know, Ken.
AL:         Explain everything.

## Discussion

### 3.1.1  The sequential arrangement of joke performances

Sacks introduced the notion of a three-part structure of the joke performance that has been widely adopted by other workers in the field (Attardo 1994). The structure provides an analysis framework of three successive phases that together comprise the performance of a canned joke. In the introductory phase, the "preface", the participants negotiate the joke performance; someone communicates his/her wish to tell a joke, attempting to secure the floor and the co-operation of the other participants.

The second, "telling", phase is, according to Sacks and Attardo, a monologic presentation of the joke text:

> The 'telling' is the most significant phenomenon in joke telling from the point of view of CA because it consists of only one speaker turn […] any speaking done during the telling will be interruptive. (Attardo 1994:303)

This proposition is somewhat controversial; Norrick's (1993) analysis of canned joke performances suggests that members of the audience actively participate in the presentation of narrative jokes. Similarly, Mulkay emphasises interactional aspects of the joke telling:

> […] the teller and her recipients work together to establish and sustain the operation of the humorous mode and to accomplish the proper performance and acknowledgement of the joke. (1988:61)

The transition from this "telling" phase to the third "response" (or "reaction") phase is marked by the delivery of the punch line, after which the teller typically relinquishes the floor. Based on the results of an empirical investigation on the position of the punch line ('disjunctor') Attardo (1994) argues that "the teller 'is done' when the punch line has been uttered and thus has no need to prolong the story" (310). However, it should be noted that the corpus of canned jokes analysed and referred to in that context was taken from "commercially available printed sources" (101) and not, as would have been more appropriate, from conversational material.

A number of reactions are possible in the response phase: spontaneous laughter, delayed laughter, silence and protest (sometimes expressed by a groan). While spontaneous laughter instantly expresses understanding and appreciation of the joke, delayed laughter either indicates a prolonged processing time of the punch line or a

reluctance to openly display amusement due to 'social' considerations. Silence implies that the joke is considered distasteful, its performance was rated as poor, resulting in loss of face for the joke teller (*ibid.*:310) or that the listener failed to realise it was a joke. Repugnance may also be signalled by mock laughter or 'groaning'. This reaction is certainly less ambivalent than silence as it unmistakably conveys to the teller that the joke is understood but not appreciated. [71]

### 3.1.2 Internal joke structures

Sacks' paper is also particularly concerned with the sequential organisation of the joke text. As a major feature of the joke under analysis he identifies a puzzle comprising three components: the first two items establish a pattern, which is then challenged by the third item. The resulting puzzle is solvable from the punch line. Sacks considers this as an "ideal construction; a perfect economical use of a number of components to get a puzzle" (254). This point is taken up by Mulkay (1988), suggesting that the principle of economy is a prevalent feature of the joke *per se* (13-14) and also noting that three-part sequences are rather frequently employed in standard jokes (12). As will be seen in the subsequent analysis both the puzzle format and the tripartite structure are frequently used in oral joke performances and are therefore discussed in somewhat greater detail in a separate section (3.3).

### 3.1.3 Verbal and referential humour

The division of types of humour into verbal and referential is an ancient one. In the Greek manuscript referred to as 'Tractatus Coisilinianus'[72] from the tenth century AD – which some scholars believe to represent a summary of Aristotle's second and lost book of the *Poetics* – this distinction is rendered as "Laughter arises from the words and from the facts".[73] This broad classification has often been further refined. In his work *De Oratore* Cicero (106-43 BC) categorises anecdotes and caricature as instantiations of referential humour; ambiguity, proverbs, allegory and metaphors are listed as examples of verbal humour.[74] The present study adheres to Attardo's definition of the concept:

> There are two kinds of jokes […] On one side, we have "referential" jokes, and on the other, we have "verbal" jokes. The former are based exclusively on the meaning of the text and do not make any reference to the phonological realization of the lexical items (or of other units in the text), while the latter, in addition to being based on the meaning of the elements of the text, make reference to the phonological realization of the text. (1994:95)

Interestingly, Attardo postulates that referential humour is more common in jokes than verbal humour. This hypothesis has also been confirmed in his two studies based on written joke material from America and Italy.[75] Given the prevailing image of the

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[71] Some of the options listed are not mentioned by Attardo (1994).
[72] To avoid confusion, the manuscript is Greek – despite of its Latin title.
[73] Janko (1984) shows some pages of the original manuscript.
[74] For a discussion of Cicero's thoughts on humour, see Attardo (1994:26-9).
[75] For an overview of these studies, see Attardo (1994:101-7).

English showing a particular tendency towards punning, this issue is considered in the analysis of orally-performed jokes sampled from the Conversational Corpus.

### 3.1.4  Functions

A rather controversial point in Sacks' (1978) analysis of "a dirty joke" is his account of implausible events frequently encountered in joke texts.[76] He rejects Aristotle's notion of 'the willing suspension of disbelief' as the rationale behind recipients' acquiescence to unrealistic incidents. Instead, it is argued that participants become so much involved in understanding the "complex of the joke's components" in order to 'get' the joke that the suspension of disbelief is rather unnecessary. In this context, Sacks stresses the testing function of jokes – an aspect frequently encountered in the literature (e.g. Sherzer 1985, Graesser et al. 1989):

> In the course of the joke, one is not ever in a position to assess the complex of its components, but is fully occupied in understanding it, piece by piece, so that, arriving at its end, one can solve the punch line as fast as possible. This is a critical task posed for a joke's recipient […]. It is not only a task provided by the array of events, but, since failing to "get" the joke can be treated as, e.g., a sign of one's lack of sophistication, then the social circumstances, as well, urge a recipient to be working to find what the punch line means. (258-9)

This view is challenged by Norrick (1993), who maintains that jokes in conversations primarily serve an entertaining function and are used to display a sense of humour. He concedes, however, that "teenagers may tell jokes, especially dirty jokes, to test others and to show off their own superior knowledge" (133).

Another function that has emerged in the context of adolescent joking behaviour is that of information exchange, primarily of sexual content. Sacks (*ibid.*) remarks on the "transmissability of dirty jokes with a 'discretion' marker on them" (266), which is used as a resource for adolescents to communicate common concerns and fantasies. Mulkay (1988) (even) notes a tendency for adolescents to explain the punch line, which is rather remarkable considering that jokes typically lose their humour when the punch line is explained (Attardo 1994:289). In their study of peer group talk,[77] Sanford and Eder (1984) observe that joking plays a major part in adolescent interaction, with sexual topics also figuring prominently among the subjects addressed.[78] Interestingly, the memorised (tendentious) jokes encountered are often performed in (same-sex or mixed-sex) newly formed groups with members typically engaging in a joke contest. This is taken to imply that the telling of dirty jokes does not merely serve the function of information exchange but is also part of a more general behaviour pattern referred to as "acting 'grown up'" (237) and thus may be utilised to enhance one's status in the group.

Zhao (1988) offers a more 'theoretical' approach to the information-conveying aspect of jokes employing Lyons' taxonomy of language functions and Raskin's script

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[76] See Attardo (1994:305-307) for a discussion of this issue.

[77] The majority of the peer groups observed were all-female, but there were also some mixed-group interactions.

[78] Further studies testifying to the popularity of sexual issues in adolescent girl's humour are Prerost (1980), who observed a curvilinear trend from 13 to 19 year-olds and Ransohoff's (1975) qualitative investigation of 12 to 14 year-old girls from the Bronx, New York.

model. She discriminates between sexual, situation-related and ethnic, and political jokes. Sexual jokes are viewed as primarily serving an expressive function, revealing personal attitudes and intentions of the joker. For this reason they are socially restricted in that they cannot be told "freely and thoughtlessly in the company of the opposite sex, or of people with whom one is not very close" (284). Still, as is often asserted (see e.g. Palmer 1988:109, Mulkay 1988:120, Freud 1905), sexual and tendentious jokes enjoy great popularity. This is generally accounted for by referring to the 'humorous mode' enabling people to address tabooed areas without risk of losing face. It may be added, however, that – as shown by Walle's (1976) study of humour in an American all-night diner - sexually allusive jokes may be strategically employed in increasing the level of intimacy between, as in this particular case, male guests and waitresses. Generalising this observation we may conclude that sexual and tendentious humour may play an important role in 'mating' activities.

### 3.1.5 Extralinguistic parameters: gender, age, group composition and ethnicity

Interestingly, Walle's (1976) study gives the impression that it is generally males who perform sexually allusive jokes in order to attract females rather than the reverse. This ties in with a more general trend noted in the literature that males prefer 'portable' humour, i.e. humour that can be carried around and inserted in various situations while women's humour is more context-bound. Crawford/Gressley (1991) reach this conclusion after an empirical analysis designed to identify important dimensions of humour both in creation and appreciation. They also examined gender similarities and differences in the context of the dimensions they encountered. Following factor analysis of a 68-item questionnaire they arrived at 10 dimensions, four of which revealed significant gender differences: hostility, joking, slapstick and anecdotal humour. Males clearly preferred hostile humour, canned jokes and slapstick, whereas females scored higher on anecdotal humour.[79] In her corpus-based study of conversational humour, Hay (1995) reaches a similar conclusion: independent of group composition (single-sex or mixed-sex) men were more likely to use external source humour[80] than women.

Furthermore, as shown by a series of observational laboratory studies by Howard Levanthal and Gerald Cupchik (Cupchik/Levanthal 1974, Levanthal/Cupchik 1975, 1976), women (compared to men) are more affected by the contextualisation of jokes: in the experiments they were demonstrably more (than men) impressed by additional played-in canned laughter when exposed to cartoons accompanied by audio-taped readings of the cartoon captions. This is taken to imply that men focus more on the quality of the joke itself whereas women are more influenced by their current emotional states.

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[79] See also Jenkins (1985), who – in analysing conversations in all-women groups - notes that humorous incidences are often "jointly created out of the on-going talk" (138) and less often performance-based as is typical for male humour.
[80] External source humour is defined by Hay as "humour that is derived from elsewhere, perhaps a humorous historical event, or something funny that happened in a movie" (1995:91).

Experimental work and observational studies focusing on children's joking behaviour indicate the same trend (Groch 1974, McGhee 1976, Chapman 1983). As Chapman (1983) - in his review of the relevant literature – remarks, girls' humour is more sensitive to the prevailing social situation, whereas boys focus more on the humour *per se*. It is further suggested that "children as young as 7 years regard joke-telling as something of a male prerogative" (146).

Scanning the literature on the influence of group composition on the joking behaviour of the two genders, it is generally agreed that females are reluctant to tell (sexual and tendentious) jokes in mixed-sex company while males do not exhibit this sensitivity to context (Mulkay 1988:126, Mitchell 1977, 1978; Castell/Goldstein 1977). The only exception to this 'rule' would appear to be adolescent girls, who - as Sanford and Eder report - "in mixed groups [girls will] sometimes choose sexual topics about which they have more information, such as menstruation" (1984:237).[81]

Finally it is worth noting that – beside gender, age and group composition – other effects may be operative in determining one's joking behaviour. In their study Lampert/Ervin-Tripp (1989) explore cultural factors, specifically the issue of whether the humour of men and women has become more similar in the wake of the women's movement since the late 1960s. They find that women of European/American descent were the most likely to make a humorous contribution in mixed settings, followed by European/American and Asian/Latino men and, at final position, Asian/Latino women. Two conclusions can be drawn from this result: First, European/American women seem less restricted in employing humour than earlier descriptions would have us believe.[82] This could indicate that the women's movement has had an impact on this group. Second, the reluctance shown by Asian/Latino women to producing humour in mixed groups suggests that this group adheres more strongly to the traditional gender role, perhaps as a result of greater social pressures.

In sum, when evaluating the findings published on gender biases in the expression of humour, a number of caveats are in order. A first and fundamental problem for all gender research is that gender is merely one personality variable in an array of other personal attributes such as age, ethnicity, social class and other (difficult-to-control) idiosyncratic personality traits and belief systems. Since gender cannot be studied in isolation, an experimental study design seeks to control extraneous variables (as far as possible) so to be able to tap the effect of differences between the sexes. The way in which extraneous variables are controlled, however, may vary from one study to the other, depending largely on the researcher's interests and resources. As a result, a considerable number of studies[83] produce wildly differing results, reflecting the pre-selected participant attributes along with (possibly) gender effects.

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[81] This, apparently, is in stark contrast to Mitchell (1977, 1978), who notes that in mixed settings female students and faculty staff members are particularly reserved about telling tendentious jokes that deal with their own experiences such as menstruation, rape, or frustrations with the opposite sex. This finding is explainable on the basis that aggressive and/or sexual jokes, which overtly target women, are likely to be misinterpreted by members of the opposite sex.

[82] See also Apte (1985), who cites numerous anthropological and cross-cultural studies which almost invariably show women to be culturally constrained in expressing humour (with the only exception of older women and women in all-female groups).

[83] For a neat overview (in tabular form) of previous research, see Lampert/Ervin-Tripp (1998).

A further point at issue is the research paradigm depicted for the study of gender differences in humour. Earlier studies grounded on subject ratings of prefabricated jokes and/or cartoons have been criticised on the basis that the material presented was often sexist and thus produced low scores from predominantly female respondents. The conclusion drawn from these studies, namely that women tend to dislike tendentious humour, is therefore open to question. Yet another problem with an experimental design based on 'humour judgements' is that it is not exactly conducive to prompting spontaneous, off-the-cuff and authentic responses. Rather, partly because of the artificialness of the laboratory setting, partly because of an 'in-built' censorship, test subjects often respond according to what they consider appropriate in the given circumstances.

An obvious way out of the difficulties inherent in the response-sided, experimental design is to either observe people in natural surroundings as has been done by a number of researchers (e.g. Sanford/Eder 1984, Eder 1993, Hartung 1998, Groch 1974, McGhee 1976, 1980) or analyse transcripts of naturally-occurring spoken interaction (e.g. Hay 1995, Kotthoff (1996a, 1998a, b), Lampert/Ervin-Tripp 1989, Ervin-Tripp/Lampert 1992, Jenkins 1985, Tannen 1984, Mulkay 1988, Norrick 1993). Such approaches are also more liable to tackle the crux of the matter: what is really interesting about the topic of 'gender and humour' is not so much how men and women may differ in their *appreciation* of humorous instances; rather what we want to know is *if and how they differ in their humour use.* Although this question is certainly more to the point, it has to be conceded that it is difficult and time-consuming to obtain a volume of data large enough to allow quantitative interpretation. As will be seen when examining canned jokes in spontaneous talk even the Conversational Corpus of the BNC (which appears quite enormous at first sight) frequently fails to produce enough data to statistically test extant hypotheses.

Another problem in assessing gender research on humour is that a large number of studies are quite dated. As suggested by the quantitative findings by Lampert/Ervin-Tripp (1989) (see above) the changing status of women in society sparked off by the women's movement, equalitarian politics, etc. has probably affected women in their humour use in mixed-gender interactions. Hence, if we are to draw conclusions from any of the studies we must always bear in mind that what is tested is not 'sex' (the biological attribute) but 'gender' (which also entails social expectations and norms in a given culture for each sex category[84]).

### 3.1.6  Contextualisation of canned jokes

To complete this survey of the literature on canned jokes let us briefly examine how canned jokes are embedded in spoken discourse. Evidently, standardised jokes are

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[84] On the notion of 'gender' see West/Zimmerman (1987), Cameron (1992), Eckert/McConnell-Ginet (1992), Hay (1995). These works particularly stress the fact that 'gender' is not a static construct (describable in terms of a set of traits resulting from socialization) but rather that gender is something that we *do*. As Hay puts it: "So there is not a male gender identity and a female gender identity, but rather a myriad of possible ways of identifying as male or female, and we reflect and construct these identities in interaction constantly. Subtle shifts will occur in our gender identity as we shift from interaction to interaction, from interlocutor to interlocutor. At certain times our gender identity will be much more salient than at others" (1995:22).

self-contained units - often in a narrative format. The question is what makes them relevant in concrete situations. Describing the relationship between canned and conversational jokes, Fry offers the following definitions:

> Canned jokes are defined as those which are *presented* with little obvious relationship to the ongoing human interaction. Situation jokes are indicated as those which are *spontaneous* and have, to a major extent, their origin in the ongoing interpersonal (or intrapersonal) process. (1963:43; italics in the original)

Long and Graesser (1988) and Alexander (1997) provide a similar description. In distinguishing between 'joke' and 'wit' they argue that the 'joke' is context-free, whereas 'wit' is context-bound.

As pointed out by Attardo (1994), the distinction between conversational (or situational) jokes and canned jokes is not as clear-cut as these descriptions would lead us to believe. Firstly, they cannot be differentiated on structural grounds and secondly – as Zajdman's (1991) study illustrates (see above) – canned jokes may be integrated into the context "so as to become virtually indistinguishable from situational jokes" (Attardo 1994:299).

Similarly, Mulkay notes that canned jokes may arise out of serious talk and thus create topical links to the surrounding discourse:

> […] standardized jokes, although they are transferable from one situation to another, need not be entirely divorced from the ongoing discourse. They employ interpretative resources taken from the serious realm, and may be built upon and used to contribute indirectly to the serious talk in which they are often embedded. (1988:61)

It is not necessarily the case that conversationalists always return to serious talk after a joke has been performed. Norrick (1993) observes that the telling of a joke may lead to other joke performances, which usually exhibit some topical or structural relation to the previous joke. The resulting joke sessions are marked by a certain degree of competitiveness with joke tellers attempting to surpass previous performances. Another point at issue here is that participants in joke-telling rounds are more or less required to tell *new* jokes to their audience. According to the literature at least, one of the main prerequisites for a joke to succeed is that recipients have not heard the joke before (see Attardo 1994:302). This implies that a necessary condition for a joke session to take place is that participants do not share the same joke repertoire – a situation hardly to be encountered with close friends or relatives. Therefore, as previously noted, group composition emerges as a crucial factor in the analysis of joking behaviour.

### 3.1.7  Summary

Previous research on canned jokes in conversation has examined a large number of aspects of the material:

Investigations of the *functions* of canned joke performances by a number of authors have identified several potential purposes behind the event, most often testing or probing, exchange of information and entertainment. Zhao (1988), implementing a

somewhat different framework of functions adopted from Lyons (1977[85]), analysed jokes while differentiating between expressive, descriptive and social functions.

*Structural* facets of joke performances were first explored following Sacks' (1978) observation that joke performances are sequentially arranged in opening, telling and closing phases. This organisation has been widely accepted by subsequent researchers.

Although a number of *internal joke structures* have been proposed in the literature,[86] the only investigation of this in the context of conversation analysis appears to be Sacks' (1978) identification of a three-component puzzle format of narrative jokes, examined further in Mulkay (1988).

Examination of the *sociological* aspects of canned jokes in conversation is clearly hampered by the volume of data required to make valid generalizations over the entire population. Despite this, research on gender differences in the use of humour seems to indicate a preference for males to use canned jokes; females are more likely to use anecdotal and context-bound humour. A somewhat different picture emerges when taking into account the age of joke teller and audience. Mulkay (1988) observed that female adolescents exchange canned jokes in single-sex encounters. In mixed groups, however, females appear to be more reserved with respect to the production of jokes. Several authors have also detected a certain predilection of adolescents for sexual and obscene jokes.

*Contextualisation* aspects of canned jokes have been addressed by a number of authors. Mulkay (1988) observed that canned jokes often arise out of topical talk; Attardo (1994) proposes that canned jokes develop secondary links to the surrounding discourse. The most detailed study of this aspect is by Zajdman (1991), who differentiated between four types of contextualisation.

Notably, the majority of the reported findings were obtained from qualitative analyses of naturally occurring conversations. Without question, these studies offer valuable insights into the particularities of canned jokes in conversation. However, as a result of the attention to detail implicit in the qualitative approach of conversation analysis, it is not feasible to process statistically significant samples. In addition, researchers generally lack the resources to obtain a sufficient quantity of material for reliable quantitative evaluation.[87] The present work aspires to be a small contribution to the statistical study of these phenomena within the broad sampling possibilities offered by the BNC. In the next section the extant claims will be tested against the material from the BNC.

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[85] Cited in Zhao (1988).

[86] An overview of the literature concerning internal joke structures is presented in section 3.3.

[87] A notable exception to this rule is the work by Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (e.g. Lampert/Ervin-Tripp 1989; Ervin-Tripp/Lampert 1992).

## 3.2   Sociolinguistic aspects of joke performances


### 3.2.1   Overview


The table below presents a summary of joke occurrences in the demographically-sampled part of the BNC featuring contextual aspects (joke teller, group composition) as well as joke-specific aspects (joke topic, joke structure, joke humour). The following four categories of joke topic are distinguished:

- ethnic/social jokes, which centre upon (popular) stereotypes,

- sexual jokes, which centre upon sexual intercourse,

- obscene jokes, which centre upon bodily functions, e.g. defecation,

- neutral jokes, which have no specific topic other than wordplay.

It may be remarked that this list is by no means comprehensive. However, it appears to cover the jokes found in the spoken part of the BNC. Röhrich (1977), for example, suggests a subdivision according to content (and object of aggression) into absurd, macabre, intimate-sexual, infirmities, social groups, ethnic, political and religious. Similarly, Raskin (1985) – following a discussion of sexual, ethnic and political humour – acknowledges the presence of other "large and powerful groupings as dark humor, sick humor, toilet humor, school and college humor, sports humor, etc." and "more faddish and usually short-lived groupings as the elephant jokes, dead-cat jokes, Little-Audrey jokes, Watergate jokes, Congresspage jokes, etc." (247).

As Lixfeld (1986:237) notes, these subgroups are not mutually exclusive and often overlap, which is why some jokes in the present study are assigned two labels (ethnic/sexual) because they both feature stereotypical views and allude to sexual themes.

The first column of table 3.1 shows the BNC text identification code followed by the number of joke occurrence within this text file.

The column 'group composition' displays information on the parties present during the joke performance. Here, the reader will note a certain lack of consistency as regards participant attributes resulting from the lack of complete speaker information in the BNC. In order to compensate for this deficiency some effort was made to extract (more) information about these speakers by reading large 'chunks', if not the whole, of the text file. However, in some cases (KBE, KD8), all efforts failed due to additional transcription errors, 'unclear' tags, etc.

Question marks following an entry indicate that there is some uncertainty as to the validity of the entry; single question marks indicate that no information could be obtained.

The text file KPG (originating from the COLT material) contains a series of 22 jokes told in a round by a group of teenagers. It is obvious that within a total of 59 jokes retrieved from the BNC, 22 jokes from one small group of youngsters are likely to

distort a quantitative analysis. This is part of the reason why this joke session is discussed separately in section 3.4.[88] However, data from KPG will be considered in this analysis when it is relevant (as, for example, in the discussion of the age and gender distributions).

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[88] For a survey of the jokes performed in KPG, see section 3.4.1.

*Table 3.1    Canned jokes in the CC*

| no | text id (joke instance) | joke teller (sex, age) | group composition | joke topic | joke structure | joke humour |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | KB1 | m, 53 | Albert (teller)<br>June, 47, Albert's wife<br>Ada, 70, June's mother | sexual | narrative | verbal: wordplay |
| 2 | KB8 (1) | f, 9 | Chris (teller)<br>Ann, 53, Chris' aunt<br>Pat, 39, Chris' mother | neutral | question - answer | verbal: onomatopoeia |
| 3 | KB8 (2) | f, 9 | see above | neutral | question - answer | verbal: onomatopoeia |
| 4 | KB8 (3) | f, 9 | see above | neutral | question - answer | verbal: onomatopoeia |
| 5 | (KBE) | incomprehensible text ('unclear' tags, anonymous speakers) | | | | |
| 6 | KCE (1) | f, 16 | Helena (teller)<br>Andy, 18<br>Joanne, 13<br>Emma, 16<br>Mark/Shrimpy, 18<br>all mutual friends | sexual | narrative | referential |
| 7 | KCE (2) | f, 16 | see above | obscene | question - answer | verbal: wordplay |
| 8 | KCH (1) | m, 6 | David, 6<br>Jane, 40, David's mother<br>Phillip, 46, David's father<br>Christopher, 9, David's brother | neutral | question - answer | verbal: wordplay |
| 9 | KCH (2) | m, 6 | see above | neutral | question - answer | verbal: wordplay |
| 10 | KCH (3) | cooperative telling father and sons | see above | neutral | funny version of children song (riddle) | verbal: wordplay |

| no | text id (joke instance) | joke teller (sex, age) | group composition | joke topic | joke structure | joke humour |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11 | KCH (4) | cooperative telling: father, Chris | see above | neutral | 'rude' version of children's song (riddle) | verbal: wordplay |
| 12 | KCH (5) | m, 9 | see above | neutral | funny version of children song (riddle) | verbal: wordplay |
| 13 | KCH (6) | m, 6 | see above | neutral | question - answer | verbal: wordplay |
| 14 | KCH (7) | m, 46 | see above | neutral | question - answer | verbal: wordplay |
| 15 | KCH (8) | mother/David | see above | neutral | 2 'Knock, knock' jokes | verbal: structure break-down |
| 16 | KCH (9) | m, 6 | see above | neutral | question - answer | verbal: wordplay |
| 17 | KCH (10) | David/father/mother | see above | neutral | 3 'Knock, knock' jokes | referential |
| 18 | KCH (11) | m, 6 | see above | neutral | question - answer | verbal: wordplay |
| 19 | KCH (12) | m, 6 | see above | neutral | question - answer | verbal: wordplay |
| 20 | KD0 (1) | f, 40 | Ruth (teller) Kevin, 41, Ruth's husband | neutral | narrative | referential |
| 21 | KD0 (2) | f, 40 | see above | neutral | question - answer | verbal: wordplay |
| 22 | KD0 (3) | f, 40 | see above | neutral | narrative | verbal: wordplay |
| 23 | KD5 (1) | f, 27 | Sue, 27 Sue's father-in-law, 60 Mark, 27, Sue's husband | neutral | question - answer | verbal: wordplay |
| 24 | KD5 (2) | m, 60 | see above | ? | question - answer | ?; no punch line |
| 25 | KD5 (3) | m, 27 | see above | neutral | question - answer | referential; canned joke (spontaneously) altered |
| 26 | KD5 (4) | m, 27 | see above | neutral | question - answer | verbal: wordplay |
| 27 | KD5 (5) | m, 60 | see above | ethnic national stereotypes (The Irish, English, Scots) | narrative | ?; incomplete |

| no | text id (joke instance) | joke teller (sex, age) | group composition | joke topic | joke structure | joke humour |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 28 | KD8 | f, 25 | ? (unidentified speakers; transcription errors) | sexual | narrative | referential |
| 29 | KE0 (1) | f, 15? | 6 participants, possibly all female; class/schoolmates | sexual | narrative | verbal: wordplay incomplete |
| 30 | KE0 (2) same joke as KE0 (1) | f, 15 | 3 participants; all present at previous joke performance | see above | see above | verbal: wordplay |
| 31 | KP1 | m, 44 | Arthur (teller) Paula, 43, Arthur's wife Paul, 14, son Anthony, 16, son grandmother, 70 | ethnic/sexual | question – answer | ?; incomplete |
| 32 | KP6 | f, 16 | Catriona (teller) her mother and father | obscene | question – answer | verbal: wordplay |
| 33 – 54 | KPG (1-22) | m, f, 12, 14, 16 | 6 participants, all mutual friends | SEPARATE TABLE; see section 3.4.1 | | |
| 55 | KSV (1) | m, 16 | Richard (teller) Andy, friend (no personal details) | ethnic (Scouse) | question – answer | referential |
| 56 | KSV (2) | m, 16 | see above | ethnic (Scouse) | question - answer | referential |
| 57 | KSV (3) | m, 16 | see above | ethnic/sexual (Essex girls) | question - answer | referential |
| 58 | KSV (4) | m, 16 | see above | ethnic/sexual (Essex girls) | question - answer | referential |
| 59 | KSV (5) | m, 16? | see above | ethnic/sexual (homosexuals) | question - answer | referential |

*3.2.2  Analysis*

The statistical evaluation of the data obtained from the BNC is clearly hampered by the fact that the data itself is rather heterogeneous. For example, if we are to evaluate the frequency with which question-and-answer jokes occur in natural conversation we have to face the problem that a considerable proportion of this type of joke in our data originates from one single speaker, namely the six-year-old David (KCH). Similarly, it is difficult to assess the joking behaviour of adolescents since a large number of jokes produced by this group occurs in a joke session (KPG). The interpretation of observed frequencies is, therefore, not as straightforward as is possible in, say, the context of a controlled experimental design. However, provided that the data is approached with some circumspection and prudence, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions.

In order to evaluate the findings presented in table 3.1 it is necessary to formulate hypotheses arising from previous research and test them statistically by performing a significance test. In particular, the discussion centres around the following hypotheses: -

1.  Females do not tend to perform canned jokes.

2.  Females do not tend to perform canned jokes in mixed-sex groups.

3.  Adolescents prefer sexual jokes.

4.  Referential humour is more common[89] than verbal humour in canned jokes.

5.  Narrative jokes frequently employ a three-part riddle format.

The statistical test used in this analysis is the chi-square test with a confidence interval of 95%, i.e. if $p < 0.05$ the null hypothesis (representing the normal distribution) is rejected. Since the chi-square test only produces reliable results when the *expected* cell frequencies are greater than 5 it will sometimes be necessary to collapse variables. If this is not possible, no significance tests will be performed.

**Who tells jokes?**

Table 3.2 presents gender and age information for the BNC speakers performing canned jokes. The age variable – although not part of the original test design – emerged during the course of analysis, as the CC appeared to exhibit a particular preference for younger people to perform jokes (see table 3.4 below).

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[89] Attardo (1994) claims (on the basis of a collection of Italian and American jokes) that it is "common wisdom" that speakers prefer non-punning humour (102-3); see section 3.1.3 above.

*Table 3.2*        *Gender and age of BNC joke teller*

| speaker | text id | gender | age |
|---------|---------|--------|-----|
| 1 | KB1 | m | 57 |
| 2 | KB8 | f | 9 |
| 3 | KCE | f | 16 |
| 4 | KCH | m | 6 |
| 5 | KCH | m | 46 |
| 6 | KCH | f | 40 |
| 7 | KCH | m | 9 |
| 8 | KD0 | f | 40 |
| 9 | KD5 | f | 27 |
| 10 | KD5 | m | 60 |
| 11 | KD5 | m | 27 |
| 12 | KD8 | f | 25 |
| 13 | KE0 | f | 15? |
| 14 | KE0 | f | 15 |
| 15 | KP1 | m | 44 |
| 16 | KPG | m | 12 |
| 17 | KPG | m | 12 |
| 18 | KPG | m | 16 |
| 19 | KPG | f | 14 |
| 20 | KPG | f | 12 |
| 21 | KSV | m | 16 |
| 22 | KSV | m | 16? |
| 23 | KP6 | f | 16 |

### *Gender variation*

The number of males and females who perform jokes is almost equal (m = 12, f = 11). This result needs to be compared with the entire population of male and female speakers in the CC. Unfortunately, the figures obtained providing this information show some variance:

The query using SARA defined as <catRef target=sdeSex1 target=sdeSex2>#<person sex=m> (for female speakers the last term is changed to <person sex=f>) finds 490 male and 552 female speakers.

Counting the numbers of male and female speaker assignments using Sebastian Hoffmann's 'SpeakerInfo' file[90] we arrive at 498 male speakers and 561 female speakers in the CC.

According to an article by Rayson/Leech/Hodges (1997) the distribution of male and female speakers is almost equal with 561 female and 536 male speakers. These figures were obtained by applying a software package designed by UCREL at

[90] Sebastian Hoffmann has generously given public access to two files: one of which summarises header information for each BNC document, and the other summarises speaker information as provided in the header of each BNC file from the spoken component. Extracting this information must have been a rather time-consuming and tedious process, and I wish to thank the author for providing this information. The files may be downloaded from the following address: ftp://escorp.unizh.ch/pub/bncstuff/databases.

Lancaster University to the CC which retrieves header information on speakers such as age, sex, social group, etc.

It is, of course, highly irritating that each of these (re)sources generate different results. However, in the present case, this is not a problem as each pair of figures produces the same value in the chi-square test: one would expect females to score 12 and males 11 times (i.e. the reverse constellation to that observed in the data). This difference is not significant (df = 1; $\chi^2$ = 0.174; p = 0.68).

Hence, the BNC data - contrary to the claims found in the literature – does not suggest a preference for males to use canned jokes in conversations.[91]

In addition, the material does not lend support to the prevalent view that females are reluctant to tell jokes in mixed-sex groups or, as Alexander (1997) put it, are "expected to be an audience and to laugh at the men's jokes" (128). In fact, females are found to initiate joke cycles (KPG, KD5) and dominate them (KPG; see section 3.4), or they are the only individual performing as evidenced by KCE and KD0 in mixed-sex settings. While it is also true that males act as sole performers (KB1, KP1) in such groups the data certainly does not reveal any tendency in this direction.

What shows up in the BNC material, however, is that females exhibit a certain sensibility to contextual aspects. In the excerpt below a middle-aged woman[92] explains why she did not take the opportunity to tell her favourite golfing joke in a joke telling round. As shown by her husband's reaction (see arrowed utterance), he does not quite share her point of view.

KP6 n=2140

| | |
|---|---|
| PS52L (woman): | ^ It was very unfortunate last night ^ they were telling jokes round the table Julian |
| PS52K (husband): | Yes. |
| PS52L (woman): | and there was this very charming medical student [pause] so I couldn't tell the golfing joke ^ because I ^ |
| → PS52K (husband): | ^ Why not? ^ |
| PS52L (woman): | well I wasn't ^ quite sure how it would ^ |
| PS52K (husband): | ^ Of course you [unclear] ^ |
| PS52L (woman): | it would have been taken, ^ it was rather a pity. ^ |
| PS52K (husband): | ^ don't be [unclear] ^ don't be ^ [unclear] ^ |
| PS52L (woman): | ^ No I didn't ^ like to but I just, don't, don't know him well enough. |

The joke was obviously considered too obnoxious to be communicated in the presence of a new acquaintance, a medical student. This reveals that the aggressive impact of the joke is taken as a potential face threat to one of the recipients. As a result, social considerations in this particular context gain the upper hand – despite of the joke's quality and the expected praise from the rest of the audience. Hence, the woman, rather than taking the chance of presenting a positive self and possibly gaining in-group status by successfully performing a joke, turns down this opportunity

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[91] An alternative reference point for calculating the chi-square is the number of *utterances* produced by male and female speakers (rather than number of speakers). This also yields a non-significant result (df = 1; $\chi^2$ = 0.196; p = 0.27).

[92] The BNC does not provide any further details on personal attributes of this participant other than that she is the mother of the 16-year-old respondent Catriona and, professionally, an artist.

out of concern for one particular member in the audience. As her husband's reaction shows (arrowed utterance), this behaviour is by no means self-evident.

Further evidence for the concern that women show about the social acceptability of their jokes is shown in the following fragment of a family conversation. Here, Paul's mother and grandmother (as well as, to some extent, Paul's uncle) interfere with Paul's and his father's attempt to reproduce a joke. As becomes clear from the preceding text, Paul's main concern is to get the joke 'on tape'; the recording facilities are obviously taken as a prompt to perform.

Six interlocutors are present during the recording:

> PS50X: Paul, 14, student, son of PS50V (Paula) and PS50T (Arthur)
> PS50T: Arthur, 44, teacher, C1, father of Paul and Anthony
> PS50U: 70, housewife, DE, grandmother of Anthony and Paul
> PS50Y: Philip, 35, brother of Paula
> PS50V: Paula, 43, teacher, DE,[93] mother of Paul and Anthony
> PS50W: Anthony, 16, student, brother of Paul

> KP1 n=3332

> | PS50X (Paul): | You can tell him that joke can't ya? |
> |---|---|
> | PS50Y (Philip): | What joke? |
> | PS50T (Arthur): | Which joke's that one? |
> | … | |
> | PS50X (Paul): | Keep it clean |
> | PS50X (Paul): | no |
> | PS50T (Arthur): | What's the Irish contraceptive? You know what it was? |
> | PS50Y (Philip): | We've heard it don't |
> | PS50U (grandmother): | Don't |
> | PS50V (Paula): | Oh no we've heard it |
> | PS50T (Arthur): | Right then |
> | PS50U (grandmother): | no we don't |
> | PS50T (Arthur): | no, no, no |
> | PS50X (Paul): | Just say it quietly so that the people can get the joke |
> | PS50U (grandmother): | It's not very nice |
> | PS50T (Arthur): | [laugh] |
> | PS50X (Paul): | It's funny |
> | PS50U (grandmother): | it's not very nice |
> | PS50X (Paul): | it's funny though |
> | PS50T (Arthur): | No it's not you're right [laugh] |
> | PS50X (Paul): | It's about as good as your erm |

In the first line Paul suggests to his father that he/they perform (and record) a particular joke on their next visit to grandfather in hospital. Even before his father identified the joke Paul was referring to the mother expresses a warning ("Keep it clean"), indicating that she does not want impolite language to be recorded.[94] In addressing the other participants by way of a question ("You know what it was?"), the father raises the issue of whether everyone is familiar with the joke and thus redirects the focus. The unison response from the (rapidly forming) opposition ("We've heard

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[93] The social class attributed to Paula is probably wrong, first, because it is inconsistent with her husband's social class (the BNC adopted the policy of assigning married women and housewives their husband's social class) and, second, because she is also – like her husband – a teacher.

[94] Her reference to language use becomes even more apparent if we consider the expression 'keep a clean tongue'.

it") - commonly a strong argument against a performance - however does not yield the desired effect. Paul rejects it on the basis that - at least to him - the main point of performing the joke is to communicate it to the people who finally receive the tapes ("Just say it quietly so that the people can get the joke"). His reaction further reveals that he is quite unaware of the message the opposing party was trying to get across (i.e. the utterances' illocutionary force) which may be paraphrased as "We think this joke is quite distasteful; we don't want to hear it again". Further action from the opposition is therefore necessary, and, this time, more to the point ("It's not very nice"). Even then Paul does not give in and produces another counter-argument ("It's funny (though)"). The argument is finally settled by the father, who laughingly concedes defeat.

To summarise the different viewpoints concerning the joke and its (public) performance expressed in this small fragment, we can say that the women (with some assistance from Paul's uncle) display a particular concern about what Jakobson labels 'Context' (the referential function) and 'Code' (the metalingual function); their rejection is motivated on the grounds that the joke is 'dirty' both in terms of content and in language. Paul's and – to some extent – his father's emphasis, in contrast, is on 'Contact' (the phatic function); they want to *convey* a joke to an audience - despite its tastelessness. As is expressed by Paul, the crucial criterion is not primarily content but 'funniness', hence, the quality of the joke *as such*. It must be conceded, however, that the joke's sexual topic may have appealed particularly to the 14-year-old adolescent Paul. Before we go on discussing this issue in greater detail a few concluding remarks are appropriate.

The previous discussion presents a rather enigmatic situation. On the one hand, the BNC data implies that females contribute as many jokes as males do and, further, group composition does not seem to have an observable effect either. On the other, qualitative analyses of conversational material indicate that women display a particular sensitivity to context, which – as shown in the first fragment – may constrain their participation. While it may be argued that the two pieces of data provided could hardly be viewed as representative for all women, one should also note that no similar occurrence was evidenced in male speech.

How can we make sense out of these apparently contradictory findings? Clearly, the latter result lends support to previous research which finds women to be more conscientious about situational aspects while men tend to focus more on the humour *per se* (Cupchik/Levanthal 1974, Levanthal/Cupchik 1975, 1976, Jenkins 1985, Chapman 1983). The quantitative results, however, seem to deny the validity of claims that females are reluctant to perform jokes, particularly in mixed-sex settings (Chapman 1983, Crawford/Gressley 1991, Castell/Goldstein 1977, Mulkay 1988, Mitchell 1977, 1978).

One possible explanation is the age factor. Taking a glance at the age distribution of joke tellers (see table 3.4 below) it becomes apparent that it is mainly younger people who perform jokes. It may well be the case that during childhood and adolescence gender roles have not been taken on to the extent that they interfere with the impulse to exchange jokes. In other words, the "gender-based socialization of language" (Marlowe 1989:147), which - according to this author - inhibits females both in

showing mirth and producing humour, is not visible in the joking behaviour of children and teenagers.[95] In this context one may note that the women in the two fragments presented above who display the kind of behaviour typically associated with women are middle-aged adults.

Another factor at play, one might hope, is that - in our time and place - traditional gender roles are on the decline with the result that women's talk has become more assertive and 'extrovert' – two qualities that are highly conducive to the production of humour and jokes.

## *Variation by age group*

The BNC classifies speakers into six age groups:

    0: speakers aged 0-14
    1: speakers aged 15-24
    2: speakers aged 25-34
    3: speakers aged 35-44
    4: speakers aged 45-59
    5: speakers aged 60 and above

The following table shows the distribution of speakers in the CC according to age group. Since the figures retrieved from SARA are again at variance with the numbers calculated from the 'SpeakerInfo' file mentioned previously both sets of results are shown in the table below. The last column shows the number of speakers performing jokes in each age group.

*Table 3.3          Age group distribution of speakers and joke tellers in the CC*

| age group | SARA | 'SpeakerInfo' file | number of joke tellers |
|---|---|---|---|
| **0 (0-14)** | 231 | 235 | 7 |
| **1 (15-24)** | 163 | 169 | 7 |
| **2 (25-34)** | 163 | 164 | 3 |
| **3 (35-44)** | 143 | 146 | 3 |
| **4 (45-59)** | 148 | 151 | 2 |
| **5 (60+)** | 140 | 178 | 1 |
| **total** | 988 | 1043 | 23 |

Fortunately, results calculated form the figures obtained from SARA and those from the 'SpeakerInfo' file do not differ significantly.[96]

As pointed out above, the chi-square test is only reliable when the expected cell frequencies exceed 5.[97] Considering the distribution of joke tellers above it seems reasonable to assume that people below 25 are more likely to perform jokes than people above this age. In order to test this hypothesis we collapse age groups 0 and 1

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[95] Compare also Sanford/Eder (1984), whose study of teenage talk produced the rather unique result that teenage girls also frequently tell (sexual) jokes in the company of boys.

[96] For fear of boring the reader not all statistical calculations are presented in all their detail.

[97] There are other limitations of applicability such as when dealing with high frequency phenomena or comparing a small corpus to a much larger one (see Dunning 1993, cited in Rayson et al. 1997).

(for the under 25 year-olds) and 2, 3, 4 and 5 (for all speakers aged 25 and above); the numbers from the 'SpeakerInfo' file serve as the reference point for the respective entire populations:

*Table 3.4*          *Age group distribution of joke tellers*

| age group | total number of speakers | number of joke tellers |
|-----------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| **0-24**  | 404                      | 14                     |
| **≥ 25**  | 639                      | 9                      |
| **total** | 1043                     | 23                     |

The chi-square test shows the age difference in joking behaviour as significant (df = 1; $\chi^2$ = 4.75; p = 0.03). That is, on the 5% confidence level, the null hypothesis (normal distribution) has to be rejected: younger people (aged 0-24) tell more canned jokes in casual conversation than older people (aged ≥ 25).

It should be added that it is not people in their early twenties who contribute most to this effect. As table 3.2 shows, it is mainly teenagers (aged 12-16) who tell jokes most frequently. More important, however, is the fact that five of these teenage joke performers are found in the file KPG. All of these subjects happened to participate in a joke session 'staged' by the respondent Josie. This finding, although rather meaningful in itself, suggests that the result obtained from the chi-square test may well be misleading. Hence, the outcome of the analysis – that age is significant - is not as unequivocal as it appears to be.

### *Variation by age group and joke topic*

In order to test the third hypothesis ('Adolescents prefer sexual jokes.') the designated attributes for the category 'joke topic' (sexual, obscene, neutral, ethnic/social) of each joke occurrence have to be linked to the age of the joke teller. To establish a category for adolescents we deviate from the age group classification adopted by the BNC (see above) and create four age groups (see below). As a consequence of this rearrangement the resulting age bands are not equal in size. Furthermore, due to the rigidly defined age groups offered by the BNC, the entire populations of each newly defined age group cannot easily be determined. For that reason, chi-square testing on the data is not performed.

*Table 3.5*          *Variation of joke topic according to age group*

| age group | joke topic | | | | total | total no of jokes |
|-----------|--------|---------|---------|------------------|-------|-------------------|
|           | sexual | obscene | neutral | ethnic/ social   |       |                   |
| **(1) < 12**   | 0  | 0 | 10 | 0  | 10 | 10 |
| **(2) 12 - 20** | 13 | 3 | 10 | 8  | 34 | 32 |
| **(3) 21 - 40** | 1  | 0 | 6  | 0  | 7  | 7  |
| **(4) > 40**   | 2  | 0 | 1  | 2  | 5  | 5  |
| **total**      | 16 | 3 | 27 | 10 | 56 | 54 |

In table 3.5, jokes that are labelled twice for joke topic (i.e. sexual and ethnic) are counted twice. The co-operative joke performances of David and his parents

occurring in KCH were ignored; so were the three jokes for which the joke topic could not be identified. The final column was added to illustrate the resulting discrepancy between total number of joke topics and total number of jokes performed by each age group.[98]

Looking at the total amounts of jokes produced in each age group, the bias already observed for younger people to perform jokes is more marked – even more so when we take into account that the age bands (3) and (4) are much wider – and, more importantly, contain more speakers than (1) and (2). This is partly due to the fact that younger people tend to be multiple performers, i.e. they tell more than one joke. Hence, as noted in the preceding section, the absolute figures presented for age groups (1) and (2) may be quite deceptive since a considerable number of instances originate in one document file only (cf. KB8, KCH, KPG). However, the extent to which youngsters show an interest in both telling jokes and hearing new ones seems rather remarkable. Consider the following clippings from a family dinner conversation between six-year-old David and his parents:

KCH n=3681

| | |
|---|---|
| PS1BV (David): | … Dad ask me a joke.[99] |
| PS1BT (father): | First joke, can you please blow your nose? Come on. |
| … | |
| PS1BV (David): | No! |
| PS1BS (mother): | Mm. |
| PS1BV (David): | Not those sort of jokes. Any sort of jokes. But but they have to be jokes. Right dad |
| PS1BT (father): | Yes. |
| PS1BV (David): | first joke. |
| … | |
| PS1BV (David): | Do you know any more? |
| … | |
| PS1BV (David): | Do you know any more dad? |
| … | |
| PS1BV (David): | Be nice to have a joke from you. |

What is evident from this excerpt is that if little David had been less persistent in nagging his father (from whom he obviously expected more co-operation on this issue than from his brother and mother) we would certainly have had much fewer counts of jokes in age group 1. Incidentally, we encounter a similar situation in KPG where the respondent Josie encourages a joke telling round. While these instances are certainly extreme and - as noted before - pose a problem in quantitatively assessing the issue, they may very well be representative for the joking behaviour of these particular age groups – especially given the fact that no such extreme occurrences are found in the higher age bands. Hence, it would appear that the exchange of jokes as a matter of 'talk' is of greater interest to younger people than to older people.

Comparison of age group joke preferences reveals that sexual topics figure most prominently in adolescent joke performances. This bias is even more pronounced if we take into account that the ten 'neutral' joke topics listed for this age group (12-20)

---

[98] Again, the co-operative joke tellings in KCE and unknown joke topics are ignored.

[99] David's choice of *ask* in this context reveals that what he probably has in mind are question-and-answer jokes.

all occur in one document (KPG; Josie's joke session). Hence, our findings lend further support to the claim found in the literature that teenagers tend to tell jokes with a sexual content (hypothesis 3). Again, however, caution is advised. Seven of the thirteen jokes featuring sexual topics originate from KPG (Josie's joke session). Moreover, the observed bias for teenagers to perform sexual jokes (compared to other age bands) does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that adults prefer different joke topics. The low frequency of jokes occurring in adult talk does not allow any serious quantitative interpretation. What can be said, however, is that the data reflects an adolescents' concern about dealing with (and thus talking about) the issue of sexuality and that this compulsion obviously seems to weaken with age.[100]

## Referential and verbal humour

From a cultural perspective it is worthwhile to quantitatively explore the role of verbal humour (as against referential humour) in English-speaking communities. Considering the quantity of publications on verbal humour in English and various comments on the phenomenon - sometimes in contrastive terms (Suranyi 1982, Fernando/Flavell 1981), sometimes from a linguistic viewpoint claiming a predisposition of English speakers towards wordplay (Alexander 1997) - it would appear that the English have an exceptional liking for verbal humour.[101]

This particular cultural trait, however, does not show up in the type of humour employed in canned jokes. This is, at least, the result of two empirical studies by Attardo (1987; cited in Attardo 1994) and Attardo et al. (1994), which, among other aspects, tested the validity of the hypothesis that referential jokes outnumber verbal jokes. Attardo (and colleagues) examined this issue on the basis of reasonably large samples of written joke material from America and (for cross-cultural comparison) Italy[102] and found a rather marked bias towards referential jokes in every one of his joke corpora. To what extent this observed preference is, however, attributable to selection criteria defined by the authors/publishers of commercial joke collections is an open question.[103]

Transferring these findings to our discussion of joke preferences in spontaneous talk we may thus postulate the existence of two conflicting forces governing the type of humour contained in canned jokes: on the one hand English speakers may prefer verbal humour to referential humour and, on the other, canned jokes are typically based on referential rather than verbal humour. Given this state of affairs it is, of course, rather difficult to predict frequencies or, for that matter, formulate hypotheses.

---

[100] One may wonder what a Freudian would make out of this finding. If we take Freud's concept of 'economy in expenditure upon inhibition' (as the underlying motivator of telling tendentious jokes) to a logical conclusion the data suggests that either adolescents suffer more inhibitions than adults do, and/or that adults are less 'economical'.

[101] The British interest in word play is mirrored in the popularity of crossword puzzles and the many forms of word games circulated in the print media and television programmes.

[102] The first study (published in 1987) examines two equally large corpora of jokes containing 300 jokes from America and Italy; the second study involves a corpus of 2000 American jokes obtained from four different joke collections.

[103] Attardo (1994:103) notes that the "widespread perception of verbal jokes as 'bad quality' humor" may "lead authors of commercial collections to leave verbal humor out." The assumption that verbal humour has such a bad reputation in *British* communities is, however, questionable.

What can be said, however, is that one would expect at least some verbal jokes to occur in the corpus.

Given the lack of a testable hypothesis a statistical approach to the distribution of referential and verbal jokes would be unsuitable. The discussion of this aspect of the data is thus confined to tracing some possible connections to previous findings and extracting information which may serve future studies as working hypotheses.

Since the total numbers of referential and verbal jokes encountered in the material could be misleading, the figures obtained are listed according to age group. This also has the obvious advantage that age group preferences may be inferred directly from the table. Furthermore, as this format has previously been used for other humour variables, we can draw parallels to previous observations.

The numbers in brackets (Josie's joke session) for the categories 'referential' and 'verbal' humour in the 12-20 year old age group are shown in order to give some indication as to what extent one single text file (KPG) impacts on the 'numerical' results. This is not to say that this piece of data is without meaning or unimportant; but these idiosyncrasies have to be borne in mind when trying to quantitatively assess the issue at hand.

The total numbers obtained for this variable are slightly at variance with the figures presented above due to some of the jokes in the material being - for whatever reason - incomplete. With the punch line missing it is, of course, rather difficult to decide which form of humour is employed. As in the previous sections, jokes with multiple performers are ignored.

*Table 3.6        Type of humour in jokes according to age groups*

| age group | joke humour (contribution of KPG) | | total (total from KPG) |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | referential | verbal |  |
| **(1) < 12** | 0 | 10 | 10 |
| **(2) 12 - 20** | 21 (15) | 7 (3) | 28 (10) |
| **(3) 21 - 40** | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| **(4) > 40** | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| **total** | 24 | 23 | 47 |

The table shows an almost equal distribution of verbal and referential jokes in the material. While this result reflects to a considerable extent the idiosyncrasies present in the data, the effects deriving from 'extreme cases' (KPG, KCH; see above) partly compensate for each other. That is, the rather pronounced bias towards verbal jokes encountered in KCH is to some degree counterbalanced by the prevalence of referential jokes in Josie's joke session (KPG).

If we are to draw any conclusion at all from the observed frequencies then all we can state is that verbal jokes are at least not uncommon in English conversations (and so are, for that matter, referential jokes). In order to consider this question further one would need to examine similarly compiled corpora from other speech communities. Such resources, however desirable, are not available at present, and, considering the time and cost involved in a project aimed at creating parallel spoken corpora, not very likely to be available in the near future.

A few remarks on humour preferences of children seem appropriate. With age group (1) producing exclusively verbal jokes, our data confirms previous observations noting a bias towards wordplay in small schoolchildren (Opie/Opie 1959, Apte 1985). This phenomenon is understandable given that young children often lack the contextual knowledge presupposed in jokes. Try to tell some of your favourite jokes to children and you become acutely aware of how much real-world knowledge, cultural and social values, etc. are alluded to. The following fragment serves to illustrate this point.

KCH n=3797

| | |
|---|---|
| PS1BV (David): | … Knock, knock. |
| PS1BS (mother): | Who's there? |
| PS1BV (David): | The Avon lady, your bell's broken! |
| PS1BT (father): | The Avo Avon lady? |
| PS1BV (David): | Mm mm. |
| PS1BT (father): | What does she do? |
| … | |
| PS1BV (David): | Dad, I don't know what an Avon lady does. |

What is remarkable about this instance is that David performs a joke he does not (at least, fully) understand. He seems, however, quite capable of appreciating the joke, indicating that he is aware of the commercial slogan 'Ding-dong, Avon calling!' If we were to summarise the background information required to completely grasp this little joke we would have to list at least three items: first, familiarity with the knock-knock format; second, knowledge of the advertising slogan; third, some idea of what Avon ladies do (customer visits).

After having stressed the significance of contextual knowledge, it must be added that verbal jokes are not necessarily undemanding. As is shown in the fragment below, a child's (or learner's) linguistic competence may not be quite up to the standard set by the joke.

KCH n=3739

| | |
|---|---|
| PS1BT (father): | Why can't a locomotive sit down? |
| PS1BV (David): | Don't know. |
| PS1BT (father): | Because it's got a tender behind. |
| PS1BV (David): | Why? |
| PS1BT (father): | Chrissy'll understand that one. |
| PS1BS (mother): | Mm. |
| PS1BU (Christopher): | Like a sore bottom. |
| PS1BT (father): | Mm mm. |
| PS1BS (mother): | It's alright. David'll learn when he's older. |

The joke is based on the homonymy of 'tender' and the ambiguous syntactic status of 'behind', which David obviously fails to recognise – even after his brother explaining the sense alluded to. The mother's comment "David'll learn when he's older" draws attention to the fact that children are learners, i.e. they are to a great extent preoccupied with mastering their mother tongue. It is thus not surprising that what surfaces in their joking behaviour are items directly related to linguistic form and use. In other words, the metalinguistic function plays an important role in children's discourse and, for that matter, humour.

Adult humour frequently draws on the sometimes hilarious mistakes children make when trying to express themselves. This is apparent from some of the jokes produced by adults as well as other humorous instances in the corpus. Consider the following joke told by 40-year-old Ruth:

> KD0 n=3340
>
> PS0HP (Ruth):        Fred it's rude to keep reaching over the table for the mince pies, haven't you got a tongue in your head? [pause] Yes, but my arm's longer.

While competent speakers can avail themselves of the rich humour resources provided by discourse 'routines' (e.g. indirectness), children are often quite ignorant of an utterance's illocutionary force; they rather take the words at their face value, which, though not intended, produces a humorous effect.

In the following episode a 9-year-old girl (Chris) tells a funny anecdote to her mother and aunt. The humour of the story revolves on the homonymy of 'bogey' ('bogy'/'bogie') and Chris' misinterpretation of the word.

> KB8 n=7593
>
> PS168 (Chris):       I said erm me gran
> PS167 (mother):      Give us more wool a bit and me needles
> PS168 (Chris):       grandma er said when she went to China and that she saw these bogeys on the back of bikes that they were carrying
> PS14B (aunt):        Mm, mm
> PS168 (Chris):       and I said grandma how many, how many hankies did they have for you?
> PS14B (aunt):        Oh [laugh]
> PS167 (mother):      What? How many what?
> PS14B (aunt):        She's making jokes
> PS167 (mother):      Hankies, me mam was on about the bogeys that they pull on the, back behind their bikes
> PS168 (Chris):       And I said
> PS14B (aunt):        Aha
> PS168 (Chris)        how many tissues do they have to use?
> PS167 (mother):      and she said how many the hankies do they use
> PS14B (aunt):        [laugh]
> PS167 (mother):      to cover all them bogeys
> PS14B (aunt):        [laugh]
> PS167 (mother):      [laugh]
> PS168 (Chris):       Ha, ha
> PS167 (mother):      Clever aren't you?
> PS14B (aunt):        I don't know
> PS168 (Chris):       No, I'm not

It is not entirely clear whether Chris deliberately misconstrued the sense so as to tease her grandmother or whether it was simply a mistake. Chris' reaction to the joint laughter of her aunt and mother ("Ha, ha") and her disclaimer ("No, I'm not") suggest that the word play was unintentional. However, the aunt's early remark "She's making jokes" and the mother's comment "Clever aren't you?" indicate the opposite.

With this issue remaining unresolved, it is nevertheless noteworthy that wordplay, whether deliberate or not, is not confined to jokes but is also addressed by children in ordinary turn-by-turn talk.

**Joke format**

The analysis of joke formats occurring in the CC yields a rather unexpected result: the high frequency with which question-and-answer jokes are used in face-to-face interaction. This was not anticipated since the prototypical association of 'joke' is that it has a narrative schema. The bulk of the literature on the topic focus on narrative jokes; question-and-answer jokes are at best cited to illustrate a certain point (Raskin 1985:248-9) or are merely mentioned in passing. Perhaps the only more detailed account of the phenomenon is Marfurt's (1977:111-116) description of what he labels "Dialogwitze" within the framework of tagmemics.

*Table 3.7          Variation of joke format according to age group*

| age group | joke format | | total |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **narrative** | **question – answer** | |
| **(1) < 12** | 0 | 9 | 9 |
| **(2) 12 - 20** | 17 | 12 | 29 |
| **(3) 21 - 40** | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| **(4) > 40** | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| **total** | 22 | 28 | 50 |

Table 3.7 shows the distribution of joke formats according to age group. The knock-knock jokes and "funny versions of children songs" (listed in table 3.1) are excluded.

Again, it would be inappropriate to perform a significance test on this data since the total number of speakers for each age band is unknown. There are, however, a few observations we can make:

Looking at the total numbers in the last row, we find that question-and-answer jokes outnumber jokes with a narrative format. Although this bias is - to a considerable extent - produced by children below 12 years, it is nevertheless noteworthy that on the whole question-and-answer jokes seem to enjoy great popularity. Let us speculate on why this might be the case.

One plausible reason for age group (1) performing question-and-answer jokes is that such children may still lack the performative skills required for the production of narrative jokes. That both children and adolescents experience problems in aptly and efficiently accomplishing the task of telling a joke is amply demonstrated in the data. The following two joke telling episodes – one from six-year-old David (KCH), the other from 15-year-old Simmone (KE0) – serve as illustration. For reasons of space those passages considered immaterial for the present discussion (i.e. comments by other participants during the performance) are elided.

   (1) KCH n=3896

| | |
|---|---|
| PS1BV (David): | Dad. |
| PS1BT (father): | Mm mm? |
| PS1BV (David): | What do you call a bear, a a teddy with no hair? |
| PS1BT (father): | Bald. |
| PS1BV (David): | I meant, I meant fur. |
| PS1BU (Christopher): | Fur? |
| PS1BT (father): | Furless teddy. |

…
PS1BV (David):             You know dad. He, I, it's a bare.

(2) KE0 n=4687

PS0SW (Simmone):           There was this panda ^ [laughing] and he was just la= [] ^
PS0T0 (anonymous):         ^ [laugh] ^
…
PS0SW (Simmone):           And he was at London Zoo
…
PS0SW (Simmone):           ^ and he was very ^ frustrated! Sexually frustrated. And so he
                           was erm [pause] he ^ decided to break out ^
…
PS0SW (Simmone):           and go and [pause] find a lover. So, he broke out ^ and went
                           into this ^
…
PS0SW (Simmone):           brothel
…
PS0SW (Simmone):           and he managed to pick up this prostitute, who only took cos
                           business was slow. And they went upstairs
…
PS0SW (Simmone):           And anyway, the panda went upstairs with this prostitute and
                           erm [pause] well he was a bit peckish so they had something
                           to eat. [pause dur=6] [pause] And erm, after that they got down
                           to the serious business! And, when they were, the was panda
                           was about to leave, you know, he's all ready and the prostitute
                           thought well [pause] well he can't realise [pause] so she
                           [pause] got th, her dictionary out and looked up pand= , looked
                           for prostitute [pause] one who avails herself for money. And
                           not to out done, the panda got out his own dictionary and
                           looked up panda, one that eats, shoots then leaves!
PS0T1 (anonymous):         Ah! ^ Ah! ^
PS0SW (Simmone):           ^ And ^ leaves. I like that joke, it's ^ funny! ^

In (1), David not only fails to deliver the punch line correctly he has also difficulty in formulating the question, which prompts his father's mock (but rather educational) response. Simmone in (2) also messes up the punch line, but corrects herself afterwards. Furthermore, her performance shows features that clearly indicate her difficulties in presenting the narrative, such as false starts, re-formulations, pauses and fillers. In the light of these findings it becomes evident that both grasping the humour of a particular joke and adequately presenting it are challenging tasks for younger people. It is thus not surprising that children prefer relatively simple joke formats.

Viewed from a different perspective, question-and-answer jokes seem particularly suitable for spoken dialogue in that they are – like the knock-knock jokes also encountered in the material – interactive. One could even go so far as to say that they simulate the fundamental conversational routine of the adjacency pair. In commenting on this issue, Marfurt emphasises the pseudo character of the dialogue sparked off by the joke question:

> Strukturell findet sich immer dasselbe Schema: Problemfrage – Antwort des Hörers – Lösung. Der Dialog, der hier zwischen Erzähler und Hörer geführt wird, erweist sich aber regelmässig als blosses Scheingespräch. Die Antworten des Hörers sind stereotyp: Er hat keine Möglichkeiten einzugreifen und darf, wenn er nicht als Spielverderber gelten will, weder mit *ja* antworten, noch selbst einen Lösungsvorschlag anbringen. (1977:112)

While this portrayal of question-and-answer jokes is certainly intuitively appealing, it nevertheless somewhat underestimates the creativity of the recipient(s). In fact, what is evidenced by the present data is that participants frequently attempt to produce a witty response/punch line to the joke question. The fragment (1) quoted above exemplifies this, as do the following excerpts from KD5 and KCE:

KD5 n=807

| PS0JY (Sue): | What kind of house weighs next to nothing? |
| PS0JX (Mark): | I don't know, what kind of house weighs. |
| PS0JY (Sue): | [unclear] |
| PS0K0 (Sue's father): | Strip house. |
| PS0JY (Sue): | Lighthouse. |
| PS0K0: | Ha, ha, ha. |

KCE n=5196

| PS0EB (Helena): | ^ Oh [unclear] what, what erm [pause] what's toilet rolls and er [pause] Starship Enterprise got in common? ^ |
| PS0EF (Joanne): | A load of crap. |
| PS0EB (Helena): | ^ They both go round and try and get rid of cling-ons. ^[104] |

Both instances show that recipients are actively engaged in working out a funny solution to the 'problem' and also that they are quite capable of accomplishing this. What is rather remarkable about the first fragment (KD5) is that after the 'stereotypical' resigned response of the first recipient ("I don't know …"), the second recipient has the opportunity to slip in a punch line.

It would also seem that recipients are not as co-operative as Marfurt suggests. In talk among social equals, as shown in the excerpt below, the situation is somewhat to the contrary: here, it appears that the recipient (Andy) rejoices in producing the punch line and thus spoiling the performance for the teller (Richard). This is clearly indicated by Richard's remarks "Oh you heard it?", "You sod!" and his repeated attempts to present a novel joke. He may have managed in the end (cf. his last joke contribution in the fragment) but it is equally possible that he 'rushed on' with the punch line so as not to give his opposite the chance to complete the joke for him.

KSV n=2204

| PS1BY (Richard): | I've got a joke for you. What do you call a Scouse [pause] in a five-bedroomed house? |
| PS1K5 (Andy): | Burglar. |
| PS1BY (Richard): | What do you call a Liverpudlian in a suit? |
| PS1K5 (Andy): | Defendant. |
| PS1BY (Richard): | Yes! Oh you heard it? |
| PS1K5 (Andy): | I was waiting for [unclear]. |
| PS1BY (Richard): | You sod! Erm [pause] why do Essex girls [pause] wear knickers? |
| PS1K5 (Andy): | Keep their nipples warm. [laughing] Why don't [unclear], oh it was brilliant! |
| PS1BY (Richard): | Why do erm [pause] what's the difference between a Skoda and an Essex girl? You can drive an Essex girl more than a hundred yards! |

---

[104] The speech overlap is insubstantial to the joke performance since it merely marks the transition to an unrelated conversation taking place at the same time as the recording.

To summarise, our evidence from the spoken material in the CC suggests that 'stereotypical' answers such as, perhaps, *I don't know* or *Go ahead*, are not the norm. Rather, the puzzle presented in the joke question seems to activate a creative process in the recipient, which works at finding a humorous solution. In other words, this particular joke format - by inviting a response - involves the participants in the process of humour creation. Hence, it would be more appropriate to view question-and-answer jokes as 'interactive' rather than 'one-person-shows'. Furthermore, given the popularity of this format in spoken interaction, it would seem that the use of canned jokes is adjusted to the general goal of co-operation and mutual exchange characteristic for most everyday oral communication.

The puzzle format encountered is incidentally by no means restricted to question-and-answer jokes. Closer examination reveals that it is also rather common in narrative jokes. This issue is discussed in great detail in section 3.3. Consider the following joke - performed by the 25-year-old respondent Martine - illustrating the phenomenon:[105]

KD8 n=7605

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0LK (Martine): | A guy comes home from work |
| … | |
| PS0LK (Martine): | Yeah, this guy comes home from work and his wife's got the chair and she's picking it up and taking it around like this |
| … | |
| PS0LK (Martine): | and he said what are you doing? She says I'm trying to increase me bust, he says put it down he says all you need is a couple of pieces of toilet tissue and rub it between the gap |
| … | |
| PS0LK (Martine): | and there you go, she says well how do you work that out? He says well it's worked on your arse hasn't it? |

The puzzle format contained in this joke is perhaps most evident when we convert this narrative into a question-and-answer joke. For the sake of the argument I adopt the frame of the Essex girls, which occurred in KSV. Other target groups, as long as they are female, are, of course equally possible.[106]

Why do Essex girls – in order to increase their bust - rub toilet paper in between the gap?

What is apparent from this example is that its mechanism is describable in terms of a puzzle. Other theories which view the principal joke mechanism in terms of an opposition of scripts (Raskin 1985) or a juxtaposition of isotopies (Greimas 1966, Attardo 1994) seem – in the light of the present example – less revealing. As mentioned earlier, this issue will be dealt with in section 3.3.

Concerning the prevalence of question-and-answer jokes in the conversational material, one final point should be added. Contrary to narrative jokes, this format does not require the speaker to hold the floor for an extended period of time and it does not disrupt topical turn-by-turn talk to the extent that narrative jokes do. It follows that

---

[105] Again, for reasons of space, only the joke is reproduced here; audience reactions are cut out.
[106] A lot of jokes are rather flexible in the choice of the protagonists (Kotthoff 1998a:225-7). Target groups figuring as the butt of the joke can thus be adjusted to the actual social situation or 'taste' of the particular group.

question-and-answer jokes are certainly one of the least aggressive choices (Norrick 1993) speakers can make when they want to tell a joke.

All in all, then, it emerges that conversationalists tend to reduce the aggressive impact inherent in jokes. They not only frequently opt for 'short' jokes, they also seem to prefer jokes that involve the recipient in the humorous process.


## Summary

The discussion of factors concerning canned jokes shows the limitations of a purely statistical approach. Statistical testing could only be performed for the gender- and age variables. Apropos 'gender', our data does not suggest – contrary to previous claims in the literature – a male bias towards producing canned jokes. Further, we observed that females rather frequently perform jokes in mixed-gender settings. Analysis of the age variable revealed that it is mainly younger people - in fact, to a great extent, teenagers – who tell jokes in spontaneous talk. If we take those two significant results on the gender- and age distribution together, it emerges that our findings concerning the gender issue possibly only apply to younger people.

For the remaining variables (joke topics, joke formats, type of humour involved) significance testing would have been inappropriate – partly because the frequencies found in  individual categories have become too low as a result of the classification process or, in the case of 'type of humour involved' (i.e. 'referential' or 'verbal'), for lack of a *tertium comparationis.* Here, observed 'numerical' tendencies were supplemented by qualitative analyses of conversational fragments. These were also illuminating insofar as it was possible to uncover phenomena which would have been left unnoticed if we had adopted a purely statistical approach. So, for example, on the subject of gender variation, the additional material extracted from dialogue brought to light that the women's joking behaviour may well be governed by situational aspects of the conversation – a finding that could not be anticipated by the earlier observations on the relation of 'group composition' and 'gender of joke teller'.

In the discussion of joke formats we observed a preference for question-and-answer jokes, especially for lower age groups. Here, clippings of talk not only provided an explanation for this phenomenon, they also challenged Marfurt's (1977) claims on the interactional qualities of this joke format.

The puzzle format implemented by question-and-answer jokes may also be accomplished by 'larger' narrative jokes as evidenced by a considerable number of jokes in the material. This finding deserves separate analysis and will be pursued in the next section.


### 3.3   Tripartite jokes

It is worth commenting that a large proportion of jokes encountered in the CC display a puzzle format. From a total of 50 jokes, 28 are of the question-and-answer type. The remaining 22 are narrative jokes of which 12 contain a puzzle, 6 are based on "script

opposition"[107] and four are incompletely rendered (and are thus not analysable). Thus, in sum, 30 out of 50 or 60 per cent of all oral joke performances are constructed around a puzzle. This is quite remarkable when viewed in the light of the prevailing theories of 'how jokes work' (for a discussion of these ideas, see section 3.3.1 below). Even more extraordinary is the considerable number of narrative jokes (8) that develop the puzzle by employing a tripartite textual structure. In the literature on this type of joke construction, references to and discussions of actual (tripartite) jokes are found almost exclusively in analyses of spoken material (see Sacks 1978, Sherzer 1985, Mulkay 1988, Carnes 1990, Kotthoff 1995, 1998a). Existing theoretical models, however, appear to have ignored this aspect of puzzle construction and tripartite structure. These models,[108] perhaps because they have been largely based on written material, do not appear to cover this largely oral phenomenon. The following analysis attempts to fill this gap.

### 3.3.1 Previous research

Sacks (1978) describes the structural sequencing of the three parts in terms of creating a puzzle with the first two parts establishing a certain pattern and the third part introducing a contrasting item obliging the recipients to account for this peculiarity. The resulting puzzle is then resolved by the punch line. He argues that the puzzle requires at least three parts so that a contrast between the first two (repetitive) items and the final item can evolve:

> Three is the minimal but sufficient number for making the *minority event* [final item] peculiar and therefore focusable-on as a puzzle. (254; italics added)

This analysis is interpreted as representing an economical principle generally characteristic of jokes.

Within the framework of semiotics and text theory, Wenzel (1989) proposes a model of joke structure which – as demonstrated in this study - is also applicable to larger texts such as short stories or shaggy dog stories. He further stresses that the study of jokes requires the analyst to focus on – what he calls – the 'syntagmatic-dynamic' aspect inherent in jokes:

> […] so kann man zwischen einer paradigmatisch-statischen und einer syntagmatisch-dynamischen Komponente des Witzes unterscheiden: Die paradigmatische Komponente besteht in einer Inkongruenz, wie sie auch für weniger komplexe Formen von Komik typisch ist; zum Witz, d.h. zu einer pointierten Form der Komik, kommt es dagegen erst dann, wenn zwei inkongruente Elemente in einer […] syntagmatischen Abfolge stehen, die ihre Inkongruenz plötzlich aufdeckt. (21)

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[107] Section 3.3.2 below investigates the utility of this concept by applying it to a concrete example.
[108] For (structuralist) analyses of the joke text focusing on its syntagmatic organisation cf., e.g. Morin (1966), Marfurt (1977), Attardo et al. (1994). Other models (e.g. Raskin's script-based model) are presented in the text.

This emphasis reflects the narratological approach adopted in this study, which sets it apart from other treatments of jokes.[109]

In contrast to the threefold structure proposed by some scholars (e.g. Morin 1966, Marfurt 1977) Wenzel subdivides the joke text into two constituent phases: the exposition and the punch line.[110] The obvious advantage of this division is that it is more general and applicable to a wider range of jokes and text types. In addition, it seems to capture more clearly the dual and opposite nature implied in the notion of 'incongruity'.

Drawing on the precepts of Gestalt psychology, Wenzel attributes the humorous effect of the punch line to a change of reference frames. Reference frames are loosely described as 'contexts' (33) and seem intuitively similar to Raskin's notion of scripts.[111] Of major interest for the present investigation are Wenzel's further comments on what we may call principal and complementary subtypes of 'frame change': the breaking of a reference frame and the establishment of a reference frame. The former achieves its humorous effect by creating a coherent frame of reference, which is subsequently (and suddenly) broken, resulting in the establishment of a new reference frame. The latter presents a rather incoherent set of events which becomes unexpectedly meaningful at the punch line. As Wenzel notes, this type generally appeals to the intellect and requires the recipient to participate actively in the resolution of the punch line as the presentation of the joke leaves some relevant information implicit:

> Eine Pointe, die auf der Herstellung des Bezugsrahmens beruht, bedarf also offenbar immer einer gewissen Aussparung, die als Antrieb für die Vorstellungstätigkeit des Lesers wirksam werden kann. (43)

Comparing Wenzel's subtype 'establishment of a reference frame' with Sacks' description of the joke (inferred from the analysis of a single joke) we find striking similarities. Consider the following comment:

> And it is characteristic for jokes, and present in this one, that while the puzzle is solvable from the punch line, the solution isn't asserted in the punch line but will have to be interpreted out of it. (Sacks 1978:258)

Like Wenzel, Sacks identifies two correlative elements in the joke: a puzzle (which roughly corresponds to Wenzel's "incoherent set of events") and a solution to this puzzle inferable from the punch line. Furthermore, Sacks – similar to Wenzel – relates this structure to the issue of cognitive processing involved for the recipient,

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[109] Attardo (1994) comments that the difference between Raskin's script model (or structuralist models) and Wenzel's 'dynamic' model is "probably entirely terminological" (191). I do not share this opinion. As will be argued in section 3.3.2, Wenzel's consideration of the syntagmatic axis of the joke text appears to generate a more comprehensive model than that proposed by Raskin.

[110] Cf. also Johnson (1978), who proposes a similar model referred to as 'two-clause structure'.

[111] Dolitsky (1986), in my view, rightly criticises Raskin's choice of the term 'script'. Prior works, most notably Schank and Abelson (1977), employ the term in a much narrower sense, reserving it for a temporal sequence of events. Lakoff (1987) refers to scripts as 'scenarios', which also reflects the tendency to discriminate between *temporal* and *non-temporal* (i.e. image-schematic) mental concepts. Raskin clearly deviates from this definition as evidenced by numerous "script" examples in his work (for instance, DUMBNESS, CUNNINGNESS and ARROGANCE are quoted as ethnic scripts). Hence, it appears that Raskin's use of 'script' is rather similar to terms such as '(reference) frame', 'schema' or 'daemon' employed by other scholars.

suggesting that the joke submits the recipient to an understanding test (see Sacks 1978:258-9). In sum, it appears that both authors – within their own conceptual and terminological frameworks – describe the same phenomenon. The analyses, however, differ in two significant ways. First, Sacks considers his analysis to be applicable to all joke texts, whereas Wenzel views the structure as representing one of two types of the (postulated) fundamental mechanism of 'frame change'. It appears that Sacks, on this point, has fallen victim to the over-eager application of induction – a general risk within CA. Second, Sacks insists that the puzzle consists of three parts (see above), whereas Wenzel's analysis requires only two parts. This is most evident in the example used to illustrate the subtype 'establishment of a reference frame':

> Ein kleines Sportflugzeug hat sich in dichtem Nebel über dem Mittelmeer verirrt. „Halt mal die Hand aus dem Fenster, um zu fühlen, wo wir sind," beauftragt der Pilot den Copiloten. „Wir müssen über der Wüste sein, ich spüre Sand zwischen den Fingern!" lautet die Antwort. Nach einer weiteren Flugstunde wiederholt sich der Vorgang: „Wo sind wir jetzt?" fragt der Pilot. – „Über Italien!" – „Wieso denn das?" – „Meine Armbanduhr ist verschwunden!" (41)

This joke is structurally similar to Sacks' 'dirty joke': it contains a puzzle verbalised by the pilot's questioning 'how come we are over Italy?' and an (implicit) solution inferable from the punch line. It is also similar in the way that the joke is composed of parallel events (in the joke above the repetition lies in the hand reaching out of the window for better orientation; in Sacks' joke it is the knocking on the door followed by specific sounds). However, unlike Sacks' joke, the joke above consists of only two parts; it lacks the interjacent, repetitional second sequence present in Sacks' joke (and, notably, the jokes encountered in Josie's joke session, see below).[112] This suggests that, from an essentialist point of view, Sacks is mistaken in postulating three as the minimal number of recurring events to get a puzzle. Hence the use of three rather than two sequences cannot be regarded as economical. However, a few additional comments towards the issue of 'economy' are appropriate at this point.

First, it would be insufficient to describe the joke text and its effectiveness in terms of humour creation solely on the basis of 'economy'. The principle of economy is merely one factor in the play of humour stimulants. In an article in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* titled "Humour and Wit: Styles and Techniques of Humour" three factors are distinguished:

> The criteria that determine whether a humorous offering will be judged good, bad, or indifferent are partly a matter of period taste and personal preference and partly dependent on the style and technique of the humorist. It would seem that these criteria can be summed up under three main headings: **originality, emphasis, and economy**.

> The merits of originality are self-evident; it provides the essential element of surprise, which cuts across our expectations. But true originality is not very often met either in humour or in other forms of art. One common substitute for it is to increase the tension of the audience by various techniques of suggestive emphasis. The clown's domain is the rich, coarse type of humour: he piles it on; he appeals to sadistic, sexual, scatological impulses. One of his favourite tricks is repetition of the same situation, the same key phrase. This diminishes the effect of surprise, but it has a tension-accumulating effect: emotion is easily drawn into the familiar channel - more and more liquid is being pumped into the punctured pipeline. [emphasis added]

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[112] It may be noted that Wenzel's joke could be improved by being a three-parter.

Hence, according to this description, a joke text (or humorous offering) is ruled by two counteractive forces: 'economy', on the one hand, and 'emphasis', on the other. Which one of them finally gains the upper hand seems to depend on a number of factors. First, it would appear that the joke text itself plays an important role. If we return to the 'dirty joke' examined by Sacks, for example, it has to be admitted that *in this case*, the second repetitional sequence - although not indispensable – serves a key function in the creation of the puzzle. That is, we can actually follow Sacks' argumentation that – *in this joke* – the puzzle is far more plausible by containing three parts with the last sequence breaking the established pattern created by the first two events (and thereby focusing the listener on the anomaly (silence)). In Wenzel's joke above, however, a second interjacent sequence does not seem to be as crucial for puzzle construction as in Sacks' joke. This may be due to the fact that, in Sacks' joke, three different characters (the three sisters) perform parallel actions responded to by their mother, while Wenzel's joke merely involves one co-pilot conversing with the pilot. Second, the situational context in which a joke occurs influences its presentation. As Wenzel comments, his joke is recalled from memory. It is communicated for the purpose of illustrating his proposed theoretical model. One can reasonably assume that this 'scholarly' context favours a rather brief and concise joke version, giving preference to the principle of economy rather than emphasis. Sacks' joke, in contrast, presents an authentic example of an actual joke performance in a conversation of adolescents. The universe of discourse is thus entirely different to that encountered by Wenzel: Wenzel's joke is embedded in argumentative discourse; its function is primarily referential, adding to the informational content and supporting the main proposition. In Sacks' joke, however, other language functions are at play and supersede the referential function, e.g., the phatic and poetic function. The situational context thus produces a shift of discourse functions. Put more simply, situational context determines to what extent particular discourse functions are activated, which, in turn, determines what is said and how it is said.

Returning to the original point – the 'battle' between the principle of economy and emphasis – it may be said that the situational context plays a decisive role in determining which side eventually outweighs the other.

From a more structuralist viewpoint the processing of a joke text is described in terms of a disambiguation process. Attardo presents a neat summary:

> A theory of the processing of the text of jokes must distinguish two moments in the disambiguation of a joke text […]: in the first part of the process a first isotopy/sense ($S_1$) is established, until the recipient encounters an element that causes the passage form the first sense to a second sense ($S_2$) antagonistic to the first one. The passage from $S_1$ to $S_2$ must be "unexpected," on the one hand, and "immediate" […] one the other. (1994:95)

The two main sources underlying this description are Greimas' (1966) semantic concept of 'isotopy'[113] and Raskin's (1985) script-based model first proposed in 1985. The element causing the transition from $S_1$ to $S_2$ is commonly referred to as 'disjunctor' or in Raskin's (1985) terminology 'script switch trigger'. In verbal jokes we also find a so-called 'connector', a lexicalised item which - in conjunction with the

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[113] The notion of 'isotopy', first introduced by Greimas in 1966, has been subject of extensive scholarly debate, which led to the revision of the original definition and, more generally, to a semantic broadening of the term (see Attardo (1994) for a detailed discussion).

disjunctor - brings about the shift of meaning. The following conversational fragment from the CC serves as illustration:

KB1 n=3251

| PS01A (Albert): | June. The joke here [pause] little girl on a beach says, mum, if I eat enough silicone chips will it increase [laughing] my bust size? [] |
| PS01B (June): | [laugh] |
| PS01A (Albert): | [laugh] |

This verbal joke relies on the polysemous word 'chips', which serves as the connector; 'silicone'[114]/'increase bust size' act as disjunctors; 'increase bust size' is also the punch line.

Within the framework of prototype theory, Giora (1991) presents an interesting description of the joke text in terms of cognitive processes. Although her study is limited to verbal jokes involving semantic ambiguity, it appears that her proposed concept is also applicable to other domains such as referential humour.[115] According to Giora, the surprise effect of the punch line results from the replacement of a first and immediate unmarked interpretation towards a marked interpretation of the text, where 'unmarked' refers to prototypical members of a given conceptual category and 'marked' refers to marginal and least accessible members of a set. Thus, the joke text starts off by activating prototypical associations and terminates by activating less probable interpretations or marginal constituents of a given set. If this claim holds true as a general feature of jokes (and not just verbal jokes with semantic ambiguity) one may ask why tripartite jokes require two sequences to induce a certain prototypical interpretation. It would appear that joke recipients grasp unmarked category members or information content automatically and immediately.

*Summary*

Essentialist claims made by, e.g., Raskin (1985), Attardo (1994) and Sacks (1978) are all based on limited bodies of data. As a result, the structural and CA analyses performed exhibit considerable over-induction. In addition, it appears that the study of written joke material yields somewhat different results than analyses based on spoken data (e.g. Sacks 1978, Kotthoff 1995, 1998a) or analyses including spoken material (Wenzel 1989). The frequency with which tripartite jokes occur in studies of oral material (contrary to, say, jokes recorded in joke books) points towards a preference for this particular format in spoken discourse. The text genre *joke* is therefore context-sensitive. This further implies that it would be misguided to form any conclusive statement on the subject while excluding spoken material. The next section seeks to compensate for the apparent neglect of orally performed jokes in the literature, offering a more in-depth treatment of the tripartite format. This will entail the

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[114] We can only presume that the transcriber decided on this spelling ('silicon**e**' rather than 'silicon') because of the way the word was pronounced in the recording. A perhaps more effective/funnier presentation technique for this joke would be to pronounce the words as 'silicon' – unless, of course, one would want to make a joke of the frequent mistake in confusing 'silicone' (a term quite familiar in the general public as a widely-advertised ingredient of furniture polish) with 'silicon' (a semiconductor).

[115] In fact, Giora (1991) illustrates some of her points by quoting referential jokes (cf. pp. 472, 474).

elaboration of some of the issues raised in this preliminary survey, most notably the question of 'economy versus emphasis' and the functional relevance of repetitive sequences in oral joke performances.

### 3.3.2 Structural patterns of tripartite jokes

The first three jokes below originate from a joke session instigated by the respondent Josie (BNC file 'KPG'), the fourth is taken from a written source[116] and serves to highlight fundamental differences in (tripartite) joke constructions- and mechanisms. The subsequent discussion considers aspects of performance and examines them in terms of (text) cohesion and the notion of economy. Further, an underlying pattern for each joke is abstracted, focusing on the individual sequences' functional relevance in the construction of the joke. One major issue addressed is the question of whether the second sequence is redundant in terms of humour and/or joke creation.

## The jokes

*(1) Vampire joke*

COLT B132617 id=91

| | |
|---|---|
| Josie: | Right, three vam, a vampire walks into a pub and goes erm |
| Sean: | Oh yeah. I know. |
| Josie: | excuse me, [mimicking Romanian accent] I want a pint of blood []. |
| Sean: | Yeah. |
| Josie: | And the man goes sorry mate we don't do blood. And he goes, I want a pint of blood! So the man goes [pause] ah, chops the dog's head off. |
| Sean: | [laugh] |
| Josie: | Sticks it in the cup, goes and gives it to him, he goes, [mimicking Romanian accent] thank you []. And goes and sits in the corner. Second vampire comes in, [mimicking Romanian accent] I want a pint of blood []. |
| many: | [laugh] |
| Josie: | He goes alright. Gives it to him. He goes, [mimicking Romanian accent] thank you [], and go and sit down. Third vampire comes in, right, the other one goes and sits down, the third one comes in, he goes [pause] yo! What's going down man? I want a pint of water. He goes, pardon? He goes, I want a pint of water. |
| Sean: | [laugh] |
| Josie: | So he gives him a pint of water, he goes and sits with the other ones. And the other ones look at him, and they sort of look in their cups and going [pause] er, how comes we got blood [pause] and you got water? [laugh] [pause] He goes, nah mate! Ain't you lot ever heard of tea bags? And he puts a Tampax in the water. |

*(2) Three-women-in-heaven joke*

COLT B132701 id=1

| | |
|---|---|
| Carrie: | There were three women and they died at the same time so God goes cos you don't [unclear] all three of you don't [unclear] so, erm, the first one |

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[116] This joke (among many others) arrived by e-mail from a passionate joke collector.

goes: I wanna go back to Earth [pause] thousand times are better so she goes back as a President, right?

Josie:       Is that ^ all she could do? ^

Carrie:     ^ A Prime Minister, a Prime Minister ^ [unclear] second one goes I wanna go back [pause] thousand, thousand times better [pause] so erm, God goes sends him back as a queen. The third one goes I wanna go back million times better, a million times better! [pause] And he sends him back as a man.[117]

(3) Three-spastics joke


COLT B132701 id=25

Ali:         ^ There's ^ three spastics, there's three [unclear]

Josie:       I can't hear!

Ali:         three spastics and they went to the ice-cream van. One went [mimicking mentally handicapped] can I have an ice-cream please? [] and the man shot him [unclear] died. But erm, the next one went [mimicking mentally handicapped] can I have an ice-cream please? [] and the the man hit him over the with the head with a baseball bat and he died. The other one goes [mimicking mentally handicapped] can I have an ice-cream please? [] and like stabbed him and he died. Policeman come over and said why did you kill all these three [unclear], these three spastics. And he goes [mimicking mentally handicapped] I thought they were taking the mickey out of me [] [laugh]

(4) Skoda joke

A boy is walking down the road one day when a car pulls over. "If you get in the car", the driver says, "I'll give you a 10 pound note and a packet of sweets". The boy refuses and keeps on walking.

A little  further up the road the man pulls over again. "Okay", he says. "How about a 20 pound note and two packets of sweets?" The boy tells the man to piss off and carries on walking.

Still further up the road the man again pulls over, "Right," he says. "This is my final offer, I'll give you fifty pounds and all the sweets you can eat." The little boy stops walking, goes toward the car and leans in. "Look," he hisses. "You bought the fucking Skoda, Dad, and you have to live with it."


## Prospection and Retrospection


### *Prospection*


Examining the oral presentations of tripartite jokes (jokes (1) - (3)) it can be seen that the three-fold joke structure is announced at the onset of the narration. In terms of text cohesion (and its principal instruments of 'retrospection' and 'prospection') this move is interpretable as a prospective act, serving to 'set the scene' (see Sinclair 1992) for the utterances/story yet to come. Consider, for example, jokes (2) and (3): in both jokes the three joke characters are introduced in the first sentence. Interestingly, Josie in joke (1) begins her performance with a false start ("Right, three vam="), suggesting that it is rather conventional to initiate a tripartite joke narration this way. The

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[117] The pronominal reference 'him' occurring twice in this performance is erroneous. Considering the joke's punch line the mistake can be interpreted as a slip of the tongue.

threefold structure is further accomplished by employing ordinal numerals (*first, second, third*) or – as in (3) - general ordinals (*next, the other one*) for the introduction of the joke characters. This certainly contributes to the transparency of the joke events: during the narration of the joke the recipients have clear reference points as to 'where' they are in the story; for example, they know that after the first vampire has moved to the side of the stage, another two are to follow; they also anticipate the end of the joke (and thus the approximate position of the punch line) because they know that there are no more than three vampires. Hence, the presentation technique of tripartite jokes encountered in the material provides essential clues for understanding the joke. And even if some member of the audience does not get the point of the joke s/he knows (more or less) at which point to laugh and, hence, saves her/himself embarrassment. Viewed in this light, tripartite jokes seem especially suitable in conversational settings where social factors play an important role (see section 3.4). The finding is also consistent with earlier observations (Mulkay 1988, Norrick 1993) that jokes rarely serve a testing function in informal conversations.[118]

As evidenced by joke (4), the technique of introducing three characters at the earliest opportunity is not relevant for all tripartite jokes. Here, it is one person's repetitive attempts to achieve a certain aim that produces a three-fold structure. In this case the events are sequentially organised by the spatio-temporal markers *A little further up the road* and *Still further up the road.* The man's outcry *This is my final offer* in the third sequence indicates that the joke has reached a culmination point and that the end (punch line) is close.

### Retrospection

Repetitive elements (actions, events) are generally presented in a brief and concise manner using pronominal reference, ellipsis, and, sometimes, epitomic expressions (cf. joke (1): *and go and sit down*). The effects of such anaphoric devices are twofold: first, in that they act as cohesive ties, they contribute to the coherence of the joke and, second, they bring forward and, thus, rivet the attention to contrasting items in the joke. Interestingly, as Bauman's (1986) analyses of oral story performances show, anaphoric ties are also frequently used in the construction of the final punch line in humorous anecdotes. He notes, for example, that the density and multiplicity of anaphoric ties "sets the concluding lines [punch lines] of the stories off to a degree from the rest of the text and gives them the quality of a kind of closing couplet" (70). Thus, the frequent employment of anaphora prepares the punch line and serves to promote the humour of the story/joke.

This phenomenon may also be interpreted in terms of 'economy' – a term often quoted in reference to joke construction. Anaphoric reference clearly serves to reduce redundancy and its use may thus be viewed as 'economical'.

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[118] See also section 3.4.3, where it is argued that the testing function is tied to the peer group status of conversationalists.

## Structural patterns

### (1) Vampire joke

The structure of the vampire joke may be summarised as follows: the first sequence presents an event (first vampire walks into the pub, orders a pint of blood, bartender finally complies, vampire sits down), which is then repeated in the second sequence with the slight variation that – this time - the bartender is not puzzled and serves the vampire immediately. The third sequence deviates from the established pattern in that the third vampire requests a pint of *water*. This digression produces a puzzle, which may be paraphrased as *Why does the third vampire order water instead of blood?* The final sequence provides the humorous solution to the puzzle, the punch line.

In brief, we may outline the sequential organisation as:

- event,

- repetition,

- deviation → puzzle,

- solution/punch line.

Thus the threefold textual surface structure can be analysed into four functional units.

### (2) Three-women-in-heaven joke

In contrast to the vampire joke that almost immediately 'plunges into the action', this joke has a more elaborate expositional sequence serving to set the scene, introduce the characters and, ultimately, motivate the ensuing events and actions. This may be necessary because of the fantasy world depicted in this joke.[119] What follows is a threefold series of structurally equivalent events organised around an adjacency pair (request for action – positive response[120]) in an ascending order: the first woman becomes a president/prime minister, the second woman becomes a queen, and, finally, the third woman returns to earth as a man. In brief, the three sequences following the exposition are organised around a climactic concatenation of structurally analogue episodes.

The climactic organisation of the joke (which ultimately triggers the punch line) is based on our (internal) knowledge of the concept of hierarchy and power, alluding to a number of integral aspects, e.g. relativity of status, human striving for wealth and well-being, and religious beliefs.

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[119] The vampire joke – in contrast to this one – may not require such an elaborate exposition because the narrated event (*going to the pub and ordering a drink*) presents a familiar, real-life activity.

[120] For a taxonomy of (conversational) moves, see Tsui 1994.

The main effect resulting from this climactic organisation is that it creates a puzzle. Following the 'logic' of the joke, it is to be assumed that the women – one after the other – return to earth with increased status: the first becomes a president/prime minister; the second becomes a queen. But what is going to happen to the third woman? This is the puzzle. We cannot conceive of a status superior to the queen. And again, as in the vampire joke, the solution to the puzzle is provided in the punch line.

This joke can be broken down into five functional sequences:

- exposition,

- event,

- repetition ('better'),

- repetition ('even better'/climax) → puzzle,

- punch line (solution).

In comparing this organisation to the previous one for the vampire joke we note a number of differences. First, the present joke contains an expositional sequence. This could be accounted for by the need to explain a joke situation that is rather remote from reality. Second, the puzzle in this joke is more implicit than in the vampire joke, where it is expressed rather perspicuously by the joke characters (cf. the questioning repeat of the bartender *He goes, pardon?*; the first two vampires' question *how comes we got blood [pause] and you got water?*). Third, it appears that the repetition sequence (3) - by representing an integral part of the climax – plays a different and more important role in the creation of the joke's humour than the repetition sequence (2) does in the vampire joke. The role of the repetition sequence will be dealt with in greater detail below.

## (3) Three-spastics joke

Like the three-women-in-heaven joke the performance begins with a short expositional sequence introducing the three characters and the situation.

The narration commences – in dramatic dialogue – with presenting the rather inexplicable incident of a spastic who ends up getting shot by an ice-cream salesman after requesting some ice cream. This is the genuine puzzle of the joke. But before we get its solution the same event is reiterated twice with slight variations: the second spastic dies by being hit over the head with a baseball bat, the third spastic is stabbed. These are minor deviations to the principal puzzle established right at the beginning of the joke. Here, we find a major difference to the previous joke constructions. In the vampire joke the puzzle results from the deviation of the constructed pattern 'vampires (exclusively) drink blood', in the three-women-in-heaven joke we get the puzzle from the perceived impossibility of stepping up any further in the gradation of social ranks. Hence, the difference between the previous jokes and this joke is that - in the former - the puzzle is *developed* whereas, here, it is simply *stated* and reiterated. From an 'essentialist' point of view the presence of two repetitive sequences in the three-spastics joke may thus be viewed redundant and uneconomical.

The final sequence presenting the punch line shows striking similarities to the one encountered in the vampire joke. Both jokes employ the adjacency pair of question and answer where, in the first part, the puzzle is explicitly articulated and, in the second part, the puzzle is resolved.

The sequential organisation of this joke can be summarised as follows:

- exposition,

- event → puzzle,

- repetition,

- repetition,

- solution/punch line.


### (4) The Skoda joke and the question of joke mechanisms

As already mentioned, this joke differs from the others in that the joke characters (a man and a boy) do not change in the course of the events. This is not the only diverging aspect as close analysis reveals.

In order to elucidate the major structural difference, it is useful to recall Wenzel's model of frame change (Wenzel 1989; see section 3.3.1 above). The major proposition in Wenzel's model is the discrimination between two mechanisms of joke construction: the breaking of a reference frame, and the establishment of a reference frame. Both mechanisms are subsumed under the general heading of 'frame change'. As will be argued below, the Skoda joke represents an instance of the first subtype, whereas the other jokes discussed so far are instances of the second type.

It must be added that Wenzel's framework is deliberately chosen for it seems to encompass a larger variety of joke structures than covered by structuralist models (based on Greimas' notion of 'isotopy') or Raskin's semantic theory of script opposition. These theories appear to reflect Wenzel's first subtype, the establishment of a first "script",[121] which is then suddenly 'broken' and reinterpreted in terms of another script. The second subtype, however, seems to be ignored although it may well deserve separate analysis. The following discussion attempts to justify this position by examining the structural organisation of the Skoda joke and comparing it to the jokes analysed previously.

The Skoda joke can be broken down into four parts. The first three sequences lead up to the turning point of the joke where *the little boy stops walking, goes toward the car and leans in* and evoke a certain "reference frame" - to adopt Wenzel's terminology. This reference frame may be referred to as 'paedophilia'. The last sequence contains the punch line where the humour is based on the sudden breaking of the reference frame 'paedophilia': the boy's utterance can only be understood by abandoning the

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[121] On the notion of 'script', see section 3.3.1.

established frame and substituting a different frame of reference. The structural pattern of the joke may thus be summarised as:

- exposition,

- event,

- repetition (climactic),

- repetition and turning point (climax),

- punch line.

As noted above, the joke contains a climax. It results from parallel constructions (i.e. the man's repetitive attempts to bribe the boy to get into his car) and the successive upgrading of the bait. However, unlike the 'three-women-in-heaven' joke (2) this concatenation of events does not lead up to a puzzle. The boy's seeming acceptance of the man's "final offer" is fully compatible with our reference frame: we assume that the little boy is too weak to withstand the tempting offerings and falls victim to the paedophilic interests of the man. Hence, the boy's final reaction confirms our interpretation of the presented events. The transition from this first reference frame to the second or, as Attardo puts it, "the passage from $S_1$ [first isotopy/sense] to $S_2$" (1994:95) is accomplished via the disjunctors 'Skoda' and 'Dad',[122] which force the recipient to dismiss the prior interpretation and replace it by a different reference frame. We may label this second reference frame as 'father collects son from school (by car)'.

Raskin's (1985) "Main Hypothesis" of the SSTH qualifies the relation holding between the two "scripts" as *opposite*. This label may be correct from an experiential viewpoint, i.e. in the sense that the recipient encounters *incompatible* "scripts". It would, however, be wrong to assume a *semantic* opposite relation between the two "scripts" and - as is suggested by Raskin - to infer from it a productive rule as part of a "construction algorithm" (147) for a computerised joke generator. Hence the two "scripts" in the following joke

> "Is the doctor at home?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. "No," the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply. "Come right in." (Raskin 1985:32)

referred to as "doctor vs. lover" (107) are, of course, not opposites in lexicosemantic terms, and it would be impossible to predict from either of the "scripts" the respective opposite counterpart. In addition, Raskin's own classification scheme of potential opposite relations, which categorises this instance as an "actual vs. non-actual" opposition,[123] is, if anything, only of descriptive value. It certainly does not present a productive rule that could be implemented in a joke generator. However, the SSTH has been improved and revised by Raskin and Attardo. It would be interesting to see

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[122] It would also be possible to interpret the complete sentence (*You bought the fucking Skoda, Dad, and you have to live with it*) as the disjunctor (see Attardo 1994:96).
[123] According to Raskin, the principal opposition realised in all joke texts is the dichotomy of real vs. unreal situations. He further distinguishes three different subtypes: actual vs. non-actual situations, normal/expected state of affairs vs. abnormal/unexpected state of affairs, and possible/plausible situations vs. fully or partially impossible or much less plausible situations (111).

whether this new version known as the "General Theory of Verbal Humor"[124] (GTVH) produces more satisfactory results.[125]

It seems difficult to believe in a computerised joke generator, especially when it comes to the category of referential humour, and indeed Attardo asserts that "the passage from one sense to another in referential humor is always possible because the text is *relatively free to introduce new topics*" (1994:96, emphasis added). It is exactly this freedom which is the ultimate resource for any humorist striving to create surprising and unexpected punch lines. If there were such constraints as postulated by Raskin ("scripts" have to be opposite in the sense that they contrast real and unreal situations), humorists would be well advised to find themselves new jobs

While Raskin's script-based model seems to work for joke (4), its application to the jokes (1) to (3) appears less straightforward, if not beside the point for the following reasons:

Firstly, Raskin's postulate of an "unreal-real script opposition" cannot easily be sustained since all jokes (although to somewhat different degrees) play in an unreal, imaginary world. No matter how hard we look, there is simply no *real* "script" in these jokes. Secondly, it is difficult to detect two opposing "scripts". Take, for example, the vampire joke: here, the humour of the joke does not rely on the reinterpretation of an established "script", but, rather the contrary, on sustaining the evoked "script" VAMPIRES (and their predilection for blood). The three-women-in-heaven joke presents a similar case: here, the STATUS "script" is never abandoned; on the contrary, it needs to be maintained in order to infer the point of the joke. Hence, Raskin's postulate of the juxtaposition of two opposing scripts is an inadequate account of the joke mechanisms at work here. In addition, the jokes' humour does not arise from a sudden breaking of a first-evoked script; rather – as Wenzel (1989) indicates – the punch line provides the clue for resolving an incongruity arising *within* a frame of reference, which – in turn - ultimately establishes coherence.

In sum, the jokes (1) to (3) are based on two components: first, the evocation of a certain reference frame, which is sustained until the end of the joke; and second, the creation of some incongruity as part of the reference frame, which poses the puzzle. Needless to say, the resolution in the punch line may result in a shift of reference frames. This is certainly the case with the vampire joke where the (disgusting) picture of a used tampax enters the scene. However, all these jokes rely heavily on having established well-defined reference frames: joke (1) – 'vampires drink blood'; joke (2) – 'status'; joke (3) – 'man kills salesperson'. Their significance is also mirrored in how elaborately they are created, involving two or more parallel sequences. The next section deals with this issue in greater detail.

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[124] Beside "script", Raskin also deviates from established terminology in his use of the category 'verbal humour' with the consequence that his theory of script opposition is likely to be (mis)interpreted as excluding referential humour (cf. Kotthoff 1998a:48).

[125] Also Kotthoff (1998a) challenges Raskin's postulate of two "scripts" as essential of joke texts. In her analysis of an orally performed joke (referred to as "Der frierende Eisbär") she reaches the conclusion that this joke only contains one "script" and that the humour derives from an unexpected shift of logic (201). It must be added though that Kotthoff adheres to the artificial intelligence definition of 'script' (see Schank and Abelson 1977) and not to Raskin's broad usage of the term.

## The role of the repetitive sequence

By their very nature, essentialist treatments of jokes typically ignore the role of the repetitive sequence in joke construction. At best, repetitions are given some cursory treatment as is the case in Raskin's (1985:145-7) discussion of a number of 'joke-presenting techniques' which – given that they do not interfere with the proposed 'algorithm' of joke construction – may improve or decrease the quality of the joke. He writes:

> The more effort is required for script evocation, the more time the hearer should be given to work on it. For this reason, many jokes are told as serials, with the same situation recurring a couple of times before the punch line is delivered […]. This helps establish the first script very firmly before it is "disestablished". (145)

This account is surely too simplistic since the role of repetitions cannot be entirely reduced to the difficulty of "scripts". Furthermore, it neglects another important cognitive function, namely that of 'focusing'. Consider, for example, the vampire joke. Although one may argue that the second sequence is redundant with regard to the joke's humour, it serves to direct recipient attention to the main 'story line' of the joke. That is, from all the potential topics triggered in the first sequence (e.g. bartender, dog, cruelty, vampires, blood) we are directed to focus on the last two items. From a cognitive viewpoint, this 'focusing' function seems more plausible than Raskin's idea of difficult-to-get "scripts". What, we may ask, is so cognitively challenging in grasping the situation of a vampire ordering blood in a pub. Admittedly, it is fantasy. But this is rather common in the world of jokes. Admittedly, it requires some cultural knowledge, but we can presuppose this knowledge in the given cultural context. Further, if the listener did not know about vampires and blood, s/he would be unlikely to learn it from two short repetitions.

While repetitions bring to focus relevant elements in the joke, they also serve to develop a climactic structure. In fact, as shown in the individual analyses of particular joke instances above, the climax plays an important role in the construction of those jokes. For some jokes even, as evidenced by the three-women-in-heaven joke, it is part of the structural make-up.

However, the role of the repetitive sequence in tripartite jokes can only be fully appreciated by taking into account that jokes are deeply anchored in folklore and as such are primarily a genre of oral communication (Röhrich 1977:29ff, Kotthoff 1998a:204). As a result, jokes exhibit features that reflect the idiosyncrasies of spoken discourse such as the contextual environment, the physical presence of addresser and addressee, the co-operative co-ordination of turns, etc. In short, if we are to account for linguistic phenomena present in jokes, we need to bear in mind that jokes are usually performed in face-to-face interaction. Viewed from this perspective, repetitive sequences do make a lot of sense even though, theoretically, the joke could be condensed to a two-parter. Consider, for example, the cognitive function already discussed and - at least to some extent - acknowledged by semantically-oriented works. It is reasonable to assume that this function - corresponding to Jakobson's *referential* function[126] - gains significant weight in face-to-face interaction where

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[126] For Jakobson ([1960] 1990) the term *referential* is synonymous with *cognitive* or *denotative* as is apparent in the following comment: "But even though a set (*Einstellung*) toward the referent, an

success or failure of a joke performance is directly felt and can pose a serious face threat to the performer. Put differently, a joke performer – contrary to, say, an author compiling jokes for an anonymous audience – gravitates towards a version of the joke that is easy to grasp, transparent and adapted to the listener. Repetitions serve this purpose.

Furthermore, repetitions are the prime example of the *poetic* function, particularly with view to Jakobson's often-quoted formulation:

> The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection onto the axis of combination. ([1960] 1990:78)

In other words, the poetic function is realised when the paradigmatic axis (which is based on the principle of equivalence or similarity) governs sequential (syntagmatic) structuring. While some authors describe the phenomenon as "orally based" (Ong 1982) or – somewhat pejoratively – characteristic for unplanned discourse (Ochs 1979), other studies associate repetitive/parallelistic discourse with an aesthetic dimension (Bauman 1978, Kotthoff 1998a, Hymes 1981, Tannen 1989, Besch 1989). Hence, according to this view, repetitions of a certain frame not only bring to the foreground and intensify those parts repeated (or those which are different), they also add to the aesthetic pleasure experienced by both the performer and the recipient(s). The following fragment may serve to illustrate this particular facet:

COLT B132701 n=152

Josie:        … The next man goes up, [mimicking a stupid man's voice] hello. [] She goes [mimicking a woman's voice] hello, cutey, wooty coochy coochy coochy bing! What does your daddy do? [] [mimicking a man's voice] My dad's a mechanic. [] [imitates sound of something being unscrewed and popped off]

This second sequence (of a tripartite joke) is only interpretable when one knows what has come before. In other words, it presupposes understanding of the main story line; its value in terms of informational content is negligible. What moves to surface in this excerpt is not the referential but the poetic function. It is striking to observe the extent to which the performer plays with language and exploits the possibilities available in spoken discourse: she uses direct speech, modulates her voice to animate the characters (she even manages to render the man's voice "stupid" to the transcriber's ear) and imitates sounds to iconically represent a certain activity (inferable from the first joke sequence). This playful use of language not only produces an 'economical', condensed version of the main story event, it is also extremely comical. Furthermore, in that narrative events are communicated indirectly - which is most apparent in the realisation of the third item of the presented three-move exchange (question – answer – follow-up) - recipients are induced to work out an interpretation. Bearing in mind that implicitness is a major stimulus for humour, Josie's style of presentation certainly enhances the pleasure experienced in hearing the joke and working out the punch line.

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orientation toward the CONTEXT – briefly, the so-called REFERENTIAL, "denotative," "cognitive" function – is the leading task for numerous messages, the accessory participation of the other functions in such messages must be taken into account by the observant linguist." (73)

As is apparent from the previous discussion, the *poetic* function is closely connected to the *conative* or - adopting Johnstone's (1996:186) broad interpretation of the term - *rhetorical* function.[127] This function is particularly important when dealing with spoken discourse since rhetoric originates in the analysis and codification of authentic speech in face-to-face interaction. Vickers' (1994) article "Repetition and Emphasis in Rhetoric" provides an in-depth treatment of the various forms and functions repetitions may serve in discourse. The principal function is delineated as follows:

> In the rhetorical theory of the figures the main associations of repetition are with emphasis, emotional intensity. (97)

If we rephrase this description in the jargon of Interactional Sociolinguistics we may say that repetitions serve to create involvement.

Furthermore, Vickers identifies the sequencing of repetitive and slightly varied elements ("repetition-plus-addition" (107)) as a means of creating climax or – sometimes (as shown in Beckett's work *L'innommable)* – as anti-climax. These different effects are attributed to the general polysemous nature of rhetorical devices.

Another interesting contribution to the rhetoric of repetition is Johnstone's (1991) examination of Arabic argumentative discourse. To cite this work may seem far-fetched at first sight but her conclusions derived from a different 'universe' of discourse show such striking similarities to Sacks' observations on the "dirty joke" that they seem worth considering.

Johnstone distinguishes between two kinds of argumentation referred to as *presentation* on the one hand, and *proof* on the other. Their difference is defined in terms of their treatment of 'truth'. If the truth is evident, "clear, universally accepted (in the particular universe of discourse), and close to the surface" (115) then all that is needed is to express the 'given' truth. This mode of argumentation is labelled *presentation*. *Proof*, on the other hand, argues the validity of a certain proposition since agreement cannot be presupposed.

The *presentation* mode is characterised by paradigmatic structuring involving, e.g., parallelism and repetition. According to Johnstone, it is the mode typically encountered in (political) Arabic argumentative discourse. Beside the cultural implications (which cannot be discussed here), this observation bears some striking resemblance to what Sacks noted with respect to the implausibilities of the joke's events. He comments:

> There can be no room in the story to engage in assessing its plausibility when it emerges **sequentially, piece by piece**; one is hearing it as it's being told, going through it and understanding it, and seeing that it's [sic] characters are understanding it as one is understanding it. (1978:259; emphasis added)

Hence, following Sacks, it is the sequential and temporal organisation of the joke that induces the recipient to accept whatever implausibility occurs. Bearing in mind Johnstone's observations, we may therefore conclude that the recipients' acceptance

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[127] Johnstone's relabelling of the term *conative* seems justified on the grounds that rhetoric, as the art of persuasion, is essentially concerned with the effects of certain figures and/or tropes on the recipient(s).

of absurd or incongruous elements is accomplished by means of activating the presentation mode.[128]

In this context it is also worthwhile commenting on the fact that tripartite structures have been identified as being a regular phenomenon in natural conversation. In her paper "List-Construction as a Task and Resource", Jefferson (1990) presents numerous examples of three-part lists, arguing that speakers and recipients orient themselves towards their three-part nature, i.e. in list construction speakers tend to produce three items and recipients generally await the completion of the list before they start talking. As such, list completion and, more specifically, the "projectability of third-as-final component" (77) may constitute a transition relevance place (TRP).

According to Jefferson, the list format typically 'implicates' "sameness" of list members, i.e. the list members are 'heard as similar'; they are perceived as instantiations of one particular phenomenon. The following example from Jefferson's paper serves as illustration:

> Maybelle: I think if you exercise it an' <u>work</u> at it'n studied it chu <u>do</u> become clairvoyant. (64)

As noted by Jefferson, the expected "sameness" relationship holding between list members may however be exploited for specific purposes. She writes:

> Third list members may also be the locus of special work; e.g., the expectable sameness provided by the adequate representivity feature exploited to design for "surprise," "punchline," etc. (79)

Interestingly then, three-part lists are not only routinely employed in natural conversations, they may also be used for humorous effect. Following these observations we may view the three-part joke format encountered in our material as an elaboration of this conventionalised speech pattern. In other words, the occurrence of tripartite jokes in natural talk can be explained on the basis that 'three-partedness' is a recurrent and familiar conversational feature.

## Summary and conclusion

The analysis uncovered several dimensions underlying the construction of tripartite jokes. They can be subsumed under the headings 'puzzle creation' and 'climactic organisation':

### *Puzzle creation*

The tripartite joke performances occurring in the conversational data analysed invariably exhibit the pattern of puzzle creation followed by its humorous resolution in the punch line. This mechanism corresponds to Wenzel's subtype 'establishment of a reference frame'. Tripartite jokes based on 'script opposition' (Raskin 1985) or 'the

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[128] For discussions of how recipients are induced to accept the fantasy world of jokes see also Mulkay 1988:10-21, Attardo 1994:303-307 and Raskin's concept of the NBF (non-bona-fide) mode of communication.

breaking of a reference frame' (Wenzel 1989) have not (yet) been found in the Conversational Corpus of the BNC; the Skoda joke (representing this type) and included in the discussion originates from a written source. It is interesting to note that other works on joke performances in spoken discourse indicate a similar trend: Sacks' (1978) "dirty joke" is both tripartite and structured around a puzzle; Kotthoff (1995, 1998a) discusses several joke performances which show a threefold format and involve a puzzle. Adding these observations to our own findings it emerges that conversationalists prefer a puzzle format in jokes. This tendency seems to be further supported by the rather frequent occurrence of question-and-answer jokes in the corpus since they also – though in truncated form – present a puzzle to the audience.[129]

It is possible to pinpoint several reasons for the observed phenomenon. One explanation for the fact that in conversation speakers tend to tell joke containing a puzzle is to view the phenomenon in terms of involvement. Puzzles (like questions or riddles) invite a response; they challenge the recipient to find a solution and thus stimulate a creative process in the recipient. Hence the recipient not merely *listens to* the joke but is rather actively engaged in humour production. Furthermore, as is suggested by Sacks (1978), a puzzle, while directing recipient attention towards resolving the problem, distracts the audience from absurdities and implausibilities present in the joke text.

## Climactic organisation

The setting up of a climax is an important structuring device of jokes. It ultimately motivates the extension of a 'theoretically possible' twofold format. Furthermore, some tripartite jokes employ comparative/climactic sequencing as a means of humour production.

Repetition and variation are prime resources for accomplishing climactic structure.[130] As part of the climax, repetitive sequences (e.g. parallel structures, lexical repetition) have an intensifying and tension-increasing effect. Besides suspense, repetitions fulfil other important functions which seem particularly relevant for spoken discourse: they facilitate understanding and render the performance more amusing by adding on an aesthetic dimension. Due to their relatively low informational 'load', repetitive sequences allow the performer to focus on poetic and rhetorical techniques which are primarily aimed at entertaining the audience.

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[129] Incidentally, Carnes' (1990) discussion of recorded jokes occurring in natural conversations presents several jokes which are all in the format of 'question-and-answer' or tripartite.
[130] Another literary genre which effectively implements repetition and variation is the folk ballad.

### 3.4   Teenage joke performances: Josie's joke session and other jokes

Josie was one of the recruits participating in the COLT project. According to the header descriptions of the files which contain the joke session (reference numbers: B 132617; B 132701) the recordings were made in London/Hackney outside home. Although the joke session is separated into two documents it seems very likely that the event was interrupted for only a short period of time. The header descriptions of the two files are almost identical – with the one exception that an additional participant is listed for the second recording. In order to clarify this point, information on recording dates and times would have been useful. These details were, however, not available – and, in this instance, possibly even unknown to the corpus compilers.[131] In any case, the present study assumes that *one* joke session took place and that it was suspended for a short interval.

Five speakers participated in the first recording:

> Josie, female, 14,
> Carrie, male, 16,
> Jessica, female, 12,
> Sean, male, 12,
> Ali, male, 12.

The sixth participant listed for the second recording is:

> Petro, male, 12.

Their relationship to each other is described as "friends".

For reasons of electronic processing each speaker is assigned an identification code which substitutes for the name in the transcribed conversations. Since these codes complicate matters unnecessarily they have been dropped and replaced by the corresponding name. For ease of reference the line numbers (following the SGML tag *id*) are retained.

The joke session contains 22 jokes. Their examination focuses on the following aspects:

- favourite joke topics,

- joke tellers and their alternation during the joke session,

- favourite internal joke structures,

- aspects of joke performance: introduction, performance, evaluation,

- novelty of the joke,

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[131] The header entry for the creation date in the corresponding BNC file (KPG) shows a question mark.

- presentation of jokes as a function of their temporal placement in the joke session,

- embedding of the joke session (jokes) in the surrounding discourse.

Although the present investigation draws particular attention to a joke session between adolescents, potential generalizations of observed phenomena are cross-checked with other joke instances from the BNC. This inevitably raises the question of quantification and its limitations arising from idiosyncratic aspects of the joke session under discussion. Evidently, phenomena that are present in joke sessions may not be observed in 'single' joke performances. For example, one would expect some variation in the opening sequences of individual performances: whereas within a joke session the telling of a joke is conditionally relevant, a single, interspersed joke presumably requires a somewhat greater negotiating effort between the interactants. Comparability, therefore, cannot be assumed as a fact but has to be assessed on the basis of the phenomenon under investigation. Despite this problem – certainly pervasive in all CA research – hypotheses generated from this sample of jokes are tested against other data in order to identify more general patterns and principles.

### 3.4.1  Joke profiles

The table below outlines major aspects of the jokes told during the joking session. For the purpose of reference each joke is given a name, which is presented in the second column. The jokes are ordered according to their temporal sequence.

*Table 3.8          Canned jokes in Josie's joke session*

|    | joke | joke teller | joke topic | joke structure |
|----|------|-------------|------------|----------------|
| 1  | bubble-gum joke | Sean | sexual | narrative |
| 2  | three-vamps joke | Josie | sexual/ethnic | narrative; tripartite riddle format |
| 3  | divorce-and-murder joke | Jessica | ? | narrative |
| 4  | prostitute joke | Josie | sexual | question-answer |
| 5  | daughter-mother joke | Ali/Sean | sexual | narrative |
| 6  | three-women-in-heaven joke | Carrie | neutral | narrative; tripartite riddle format |
| 7  | three-prisoners joke | Josie | neutral | narrative; tripartite riddle format |
| 8  | Arsenal joke | Ali | neutral | question-answer |
| 9  | Aids joke | Josie | obscene | narrative |
| 10 | three-spastics joke | Ali | 'ethnic' | narrative; tripartite riddle format |
| 11 | three-men-in-the-desert joke | Josie | sexual | narrative; tripartite riddle format |
| 12 | riddle | Josie | neutral | question-answer |
| 13 | knock-knock joke | Sean/Ali | neutral | knock-knock joke format |
| 14 | alphabet joke | Jessica | neutral/topical | narrative; tripartite riddle format |
| 15 | bear joke | Josie | sexual | narrative; two-part riddle format |
| 16 | knock-knock joke | Ali/Josie | neutral | knock-knock joke format |
| 17 | prostitute joke | Josie | 'ethnic' | narrative; tripartite riddle format |
| 18 | gestural jokes | Josie | neutral | question-answer |
| 19 | Oxfam joke | Petro | neutral | question-answer |
| 20 | three-men-in-attic joke | Josie | sexual | narrative; tripartite riddle format |
| 21 | bear joke | Josie | ? | narrative |
| 22 | fortune-teller joke | Josie | neutral | narrative, 'shaggy dog story' |

### 3.4.2  Why Josie's joke session?

The reader may be puzzled by this headline and wonder why the joke session is presented as so closely connected to Josie. After all, joke sessions seem to be a co-operative achievement of all participants. So why this special emphasis on Josie? It is worthwhile discussing this issue in greater detail because it brings to light prominent features and functions of canned jokes in conversations of adolescents. For this purpose we will first review some data as presented in the above table and then proceed with a closer inspection of conversational material.

The table shows Josie to be the main contributor of jokes: she tells 13 out of 22 jokes. It can also be observed that Josie tells most of the sexual/obscene jokes (6 out of 8). During the course of the joke session there are fewer alternations of joke tellers, suggesting that Josie possesses the largest repertoire of jokes. These facts demonstrate that Josie assumes a dominant position within this joke session.

It appears that Josie – in her position as respondent and hence responsible for the recordings – was planning the joke session in advance. This would not be surprising given the general tendency of teenagers to 'show off' their performing skills on tape.[132] Close inspection of the talk preceding the joke session supplies evidence for the assumption of a pre-arranged event: rather abruptly Carrie shifts topical talk towards the issue of a particular joke which Sean or Ali promised to tell but have not yet done so:

B 132617 n=50

| 50 | Josie: | Alright. Prepare to go to sleep. |
|---|---|---|
| 51 | Jessica: | [laugh] |
| 52 | Sean: | ^ Well I haven't got one of those ^. |
| 53 | Jessica: | [laughing] Yes. [] |
| 54 | Carrie: | Go [pause] What's the joke? |
| 55 | Josie: | Come on. |
| 56 | Ali: | You tell it. |
| 57 | Sean: | No you tell it. |
| 58 | Ali: | No, ^ you tell it ^. |
| 59 | Sean: | ^ I've got a ^ wicked ^ joke ^. |
| 60 | Josie: | [shouting] ^ Just ^, fucking tell me! [] |
| 61 | Sean: | Alright! Alright! |
| 62 | Jessica: | [laugh] |

This passage illustrates that all participants (perhaps with the exception of Jessica) are prepared to participate in the performance of a specific joke – either as teller(s) or listeners. Ali and Sean - who obviously both know the joke – appear to be reluctant to go ahead with the performance and are encouraged by Josie (l. 55 and l. 60). Interestingly, Josie uses the singular pronoun *me* in l. 60 instead of *us* although it is apparent that Carrie wants to hear the joke as well. This may be regarded as an indication for Josie's conspicuous role as respondent and recorder.

After having established the fact that the joke session was probably planned by Josie it is instructive to consider her possible motive since she – in her active role as recorder – certainly attempts to channel conversations into activities she deems

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[132] There are, for example, a fair amount of song performances in the recordings of adolescents.

appropriate for the recording. The joke session shows ample evidence for the fact that Josie is interested in sustaining the event as long as possible: not only does she motivate joke telling initiatives by other speakers as illustrated in the fragment above, she also supports bad performances (especially by Jessica) and tells others to 'shut up' when another joke is getting under way:

B 132701 n=46

| | |
|---|---|
| Carrie: | Gotta a joke [unclear] |
| Sean: | Yeah I do. |
| Josie: | Come on then, let's hear it. |
| Ali: | Right. |
| many: | [unclear] [pause=6] |
| Josie: | Can you shut up and keep still! I can't hear him. [pause] Shut up! |
| Ali: | Don't fucking hit me! |

In conclusion, Josie's active involvement in the joke session is reminiscent of a person hosting a show.

One reason for recording jokes may have been their entertaining qualities with regard to the potential listeners of the tapes. Almost certainly, Josie and her friends regarded 'ordinary conversation' as something boring and hence not suitable for recording; they wanted to record something special. Thus it should not come as a surprise that jokes are performed which are familiar to all speakers participating in the interaction. Such an instance is present in the joke session:

B 132701 n=160

| | |
|---|---|
| Josie: | All right, one more. A man goes into the pub, you've all heard this but I'll tell you it again. A man goes in the pub, there's a bear sitting in the corner. |

Another occurrence of this phenomenon is the second performance of the panda joke (KE0). In this case it is even more obvious that the panda joke was recorded once more - due to a recording error during the first performance - for the benefit of the final recipient. The following fragment illustrates this:

KE0 n=4753

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0SW (Simmone): | Well there you go! That is the panda joke revisited! Aren't you glad you got Simmone to record all this for you! |
| PS000 (anonymous): | [laugh] |

As may be expected, there is no prompt laughter after completion of the punch line in both instances. The panda joke performance, however, contains a rather long evaluation sequence where the participants express their opinion on the quality of the joke. It appears that this sequence mainly serves the purpose of justifying the second recording. The fragment below represents only part of this sequence and immediately precedes Simmone's utterance quoted above.

KE0 n=4741

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0T0 (anonymous): | What do you think of it? |
| PS0SW (Simmone): | It's sick! |
| PS0T0 (anonymous): | What do you think? |
| PS0T1 (anonymous): | It's a ^ [unclear] ^ |
| PS0SW (Simmone): | ^ It's totally ^, ^ absolutely ^ |

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0T0 (anonymous): | ^ [laugh] ^ |
| PS0SW (Simmone): | wonderful! |
| PS0T1 (anonymous): | Yes Simmone. Unbelievable! |
| PS0T0 (anonymous): | Ha Ah! |
| PS0T1 (anonymous): | Unbelievable! |
| PS0T0 (anonymous): | You're going to ^ have a ^ |
| PS0T1 (anonymous): | ^ Hilarious! ^ |

These observations lead to the conclusion that the recording situation had an impact on the conversational activities of theses adolescents. Hence this contextual parameter must always be taken into account when analysing teenage talk.

To return to the main issue of Josie's motives of 'staging' a joke session, examination of her joke contributions – both quantitative and qualitative – is rather revealing. It seems that Josie pursues rather personal interests, ultimately aimed at establishing a superior position in the group. As previously noted, it is evident that Josie dominates the event. Not only does she produce most of the jokes she is also – compared to her peers – an excellent performer. In this context one should also note that her co-participants – apart from Carrie – are younger. The age difference of two years between Josie (14) and her male friends Sean and Ali (both 12) is, in fact, rather significant given the widely accepted understanding that girls are generally ahead of boys in terms of maturity.[133] This situation is certainly conducive to Josie taking a leading role in this conversation – especially when it comes to the display of sexual knowledge.

Another important issue is the role of sexual jokes in this conversation. Table 3.8 shows that a considerable proportion of the jokes performed have sexual content (8) and most of these are told by Josie (6). Interestingly, four of the sexual jokes are performed (almost) in a row by alternating speakers at the beginning of the joke session. Presumably – as one can never be sure as to how long the joke session is going to last – participants decided to tell their best jokes at the first possible opportunity. These observations support previous findings (e.g. Mulkay 1988; Sanford/Eder 1984), which report that sexual topics figure prominently in adolescent humour as a result of a fundamental concern about acquiring and displaying knowledge on these matters. The following fragment exemplifies the role of sexual humour in adolescent interaction and its connection to in-group status.

B 132701 n=58

| | |
|---|---|
| Josie: | All right, look! What's the, what's the, erm what can you put in your left hand but not in your right? |
| Sean: | A cock. |
| Josie: | Your right elbow. I mean, come on, it's a bit obvious. Well, what can you put in your left hand but not in your right? You can put, you can put, you can put, but you can't put your left hand in your right elbow. See Sean? I think you should stick to the knock, knock jokes. |
| many: | [laugh] |
| Sean: | Knock, knock ^ [unclear] ^ |

---

[133] Faust comments on this issue as follows: "Girls are ahead of boys in physical maturity from the time of birth, and they reach more advanced stages of maturity at earlier ages throughout childhood and adolescence; at every chronological age, girls are closer to their mature adult status, physically speaking, than are boys" (1979:38).

In the first line Josie presents the audience with a genuine riddle – obviously rather unexpectedly to Sean, who attempts to produce a funny response to a presumed question – answer joke. Unfortunately, for Sean, his explicit reference to male genitalia is both inadequate and illogical, which subsequently prompts ridicule from Josie and the other participants. In fact, Sean falls victim to a sudden shift from a humorous (Mulkay 1988) or non-bona-fide (NBF) (Raskin 1985) mode of communication (the joke session was already in 'full swing' and, hence, a joke performance was to be expected) to a 'serious' or bona-fide (BF) mode. The non-transparency of this situation ultimately results in Sean losing his face.

The way in which sexual knowledge serves to establish a superior position is further demonstrated by the following opening sequence of a sexual joke:

B 132701 n=137

Josie:          Jo's gotta joke, right. All right, there's this erm [pause] there's erm, you won't get this one but I'll tell you it anyway because it's quite disgusting.

It is clear from the outset of this performance that Josie submits the recipients to an understanding test, which may be viewed as an aggressive act against the audience (see Sherzer 1985, Sacks 1978). This is yet another indication for the asymmetric relationship between Josie and the other interactants. It also appears that Ali, Sean and Jessica accept their subordinate role as they do not make any attempts to challenge Josie. When, in fact, the listeners do not get the joke after completion of the punch line, Josie capitalises on this situation and further plays off her superiority:

B132701 n=154

Josie:          ^ Put it on ^ the side, the man's dead. [raspberry] The third man comes up, he's laughing, he's not even having an erection he's just laughing. He's looking at her. She goes what does your daddy do? He goes sh= work this one out, he's an ice cream salesman. [pause] I knew you wouldn't get it. Work it out.
Carrie:         ^ [unclear] ^
Josie:          ^ How, how ^ she, how's she gonna cut it off if he's an ice cream salesman?
Jessica:       [unclear] licking it innit?
Josie:          She'll have to suck it off!
Ali:            Oh yeah.

Interestingly, it does not occur to Josie that the silence following the punch line may signify lack of appreciation rather than understanding. The subsequent explanation of the joke may be regarded as yet another sign of Josie's superiority; she obviously has a rather low opinion on her co-participants' abilities to work out the joke for themselves.

In sum, the joke session seems to have served two main purposes: first, the entertainment of the final recipients (e.g. the corpus compilers) and second, Josie's aim at establishing high in-group status. More specifically, Josie's behaviour can be described in terms of two (sometimes conflicting) tendencies: first, activities directed at getting others to perform jokes and second, demonstrating her own sexual sophistication and performative skills. In addition, we see a preference for jokes of sexual or obscene content. This finding is also verifiable on the basis of the complete data set of jokes retrieved from the BNC: the vast majority of jokes performed by

teenagers are about sexual or obscene subjects (cf. KCE, KE0, KSV, KP6). It is also rather remarkable that it is mainly girls who perform these jokes[134] – a finding that somewhat defies the prevailing conception of canned jokes as a primarily male form of humour. However, it must be admitted that the number of teenage joke occurrences is too small to allow generalization.

### 3.4.3  Joke performance

Joke performances vary with respect to who tells them and to their temporal position in the joke session. The following discussion highlights some regular features observed and, when possible, compares the findings with other joke occurrences in the BNC.

For the analysis of the joke session it is instructive to recapitulate what has previously been said about the communicative process and what, in fact, represents the core of CA research: the concept that all conversational activity arises out of past behaviour and, at the same time, constitutes the basis for future behaviour. Needless to say, this view of communicative action - as illustrated by Dance's (1967) helix metaphor - also applies to the joke session under analysis. Hence, it would be inappropriate to discuss each joke in the joke session as a separate unit without taking into account their sequential placement. In fact, we can infer the cause of a large degree of variation in the performance of jokes by taking into consideration their position in the on-going discourse.

Variation due to a joke's temporal positioning was found for a considerable number of performative aspects, i.e. the threefold sequential structure (opening, telling, evaluation), participant interaction and alternation of joke tellers. In other words, it is possible to discern some regular tendencies concerning the presentation of jokes as the joke session progresses. These may be summarised as follows:

1. During the first part of the joke session opening sequences become mainly concerned with seizing the conversational floor.

2. In the course of the joke session evaluation sequences become shorter or are (even) absent.

3. The joke performance shifts towards a monologic format with fewer speakers actively involved in its accomplishment.

4. There are fewer alternations of joke tellers.

The subsequent discussion illustrates these observations.

---

[134] The number of adolescent male and female speakers (aged 10 – 16) in the CC is as good as equal: there are 94 male speakers and 98 female speakers in this age group.

## Opening sequences

Opening sequences generally serve the purpose of negotiating the telling of a joke. Depending on the context this may sometimes involve a switch from the "BF mode" to the "NBF mode of communication" (Raskin 1985) so that the participants tune into the idiosyncrasies of joke telling. In the present case the joke session arose out of non-serious talk marked by mutual playful mocking and sexual allusions, thus rendering a transition from BF to NBF unnecessary. The first opening sequence is presented in the previous section – at this point mainly to support the claim that the joke session was planned in advance. This opening sequence is, in fact, rather unusual in that the joke performance is initiated by a potential listener and not, as typically the case, by the potential teller. In general, the opening sequence may be described in terms of the pattern: announcement ("I've got a joke.") – acceptance ("Go on.") or refusal ("Shut up."). The following fragments illustrate this sequential organisation:

(1) B 132617 n=104

Carrie:      How comes ^ your jokes are sick? ^
Jessica:     ^ I got a joke. ^
Josie:       Come on then, let's hear your joke.

(2) B 132701 n=91

Ali:         [unclear] I've got one alright. Knock, knock
Carrie:      ^ [unclear] ^
Ali:         ^ [unclear] ^ [unclear]
Josie:       Ali, shut up! Knock, knock. This is the crap joke you were trying to say. No, it's will you all remember me in two years?

The first fragment shows the transition from the second joke performance, i.e. the final part of the evaluation sequence, to the third performance. It is particularly noteworthy that there is speech overlap, suggesting some degree of competition for speaking rights. Competition for the next space of joke performance does in fact play an important role as demonstrated by the following opening sequences:

(1) B 132617 n=132

Ali:         [laugh] I've got one alright. There's this girl
Josie:       [laugh]
Sean:        [unclear] ^ my joke right? ^
Ali:         ^ There's, no let ^ me tell her. There's this girl and she comes home and she goes, mum [pause] I wanna be like you. So she went out and buy everything that you've got. And she goes out into the street and she pulls her skirt up. No you can tell it.

(2) B 132701 n=15

Ali:         A tea bag can stay longer in the cup. ^ [laugh] ^
Josie:       ^ Alright, listen to this ^ there's this, there's this, there's this. There's this AIDS

As in the previous excerpt both fragments show speech overlap. Ali's laughter in (1) (first line) refers to the previous joke and constitutes the evaluation sequence (possibly together with Josie's laughter in the next line). In the instances above the speakers seize the conversational floor in order to tell their jokes without, so to speak, asking for permission. It can also be observed that this strategy is most frequently

employed by Josie, which may be regarded as yet another indication of her superior standing in this setting (see above).

An interesting side effect of the competition over joke telling space is that evaluation sequences become shorter or, in some instances, are completely missing. This situation is most apparent during the first part of the joke session. This can be explained on the basis that – at the beginning – every one of the participants was capable of contributing at least one good joke. As mentioned in the previous section, in the latter part of the joke session Josie dominates the event, and this is, alongside other factors, certainly attributable to her larger repertoire of jokes. Hence we find longer evaluation sequences at the end of the joke session.

Returning to the first-mentioned general pattern of the opening sequence, a rather regular feature can be observed concerning the speaker who takes the second (response) move of the adjacency pair: it is usually the previous joke teller who encourages a subsequent joke telling initiative by some other participant. Consider the following fragments:

(1) B 132617 n=89

| Josie: | Alright, alright! Listen, listen! Vam=, have I told you one about a, I've told you one about a vampires innit? |
| Sean: | No, no, no. Tell me then. Go on. |

(2) B 132617 n=105

| Jessica: | ^ I got a joke. ^ |
| Josie: | Come on then, let's hear your joke. |

In both cases the previous joke teller supports the joke initiative. His use of the pronoun 'me' in (1) suggests that Sean – who happened to perform the previous joke - considers himself as the primary addressee of the next performance. Other incidences of jokes in the BNC exhibit a similar structure. For example, in KD8 after completion of her joke Martine encourages her co-participant to tell a joke:

KD8 n=7617

| PS0LK (Martine): | Rob you never remember those jokes off your brother |
| PS000 (Rob): | There's some that I can't tell though |
| PS0LK (Martine): | Rob, course you can |

Similarly, during the small round of jokes in KD5 Mark (after having told a few jokes) attempts to get Sue (his wife) to contribute more jokes:

KD5 n=589

| PS0JX (Mark): | What's on telecom, don't you watch the jokes [unclear]. |
| PS0JY (Sue): | I told you my joke about the lighthouse. |
| PS0JX (Mark): | Oh. What kind of house weighs next to nothing? |
| PS0JY (Sue): | The jokes I know [unclear] absolutely vulgar. |

How can we account for this phenomenon? Two explanations seem plausible. First, one could argue that the telling of a joke – in comparison to turns in the 'ordinary' dialogic conversational format – grants the speaker a rather large amount of contiguous conversational time. As Norrick (1993) suggests in his discussion about

aggression in joking, consumption of a large proportion of conversational time can be viewed as an offensive act against other conversationalists. On this basis we can interpret the above finding as being motivated by an attempt to compensate for the transgression of ordinary turn space. Put simply, joke tellers appreciate other joke telling initiatives because they do not want to dominate the conversation. In this sense the identified behaviour may be regarded as a strategy to mitigate aggression.

The phenomenon may also be explained on the following grounds: since the teller of a joke takes a rather active role in the conversation it seems more plausible to assume that s/he retains this active role even beyond completion of the joke rather than suddenly shifting towards passive participation. Further evidence for this tendency is that even rather 'quiet' participants such as Jessica in the joke session exhibit the same behaviour.

Another issue commonly addressed in opening sequences is whether members of the audience have heard the joke before. The joke teller may either ask a question towards that matter, as exemplified in fragment (1) above, or some other participant comments on the issue:

> B 132701 n=85
>
> Josie:        Right, listen to this one. There's, there's this Mummy bear, Daddy bear
>               and Baby bear [pause]
> Jessica:      Oh yeah I know this one.
> Josie:        and erm Mummy bear has to go away Bye! …

Josie in the fragment above ignores Jessica's remark and continues with the joke. In the foregoing section it was argued that members' knowledge of the joke plays a secondary role because of the taping situation. While this certainly holds true as a general observation, it also appears that the participants enjoy jokes which are familiar to them. This is most evident in the second performance when Josie tells the vampire joke. Here, Sean explicitly states that he knows the joke but can be seen to laugh at various points during the performance. His appreciative remark 'Very good' after completion of the joke almost certainly refers to the performance rather than the joke *per se* since he had heard the joke before. In fact, it appears that a skilled performance may well compensate for an apparent lack of novelty of the joke. Consider the following passage:

> B 132701 n=160
>
> Josie:        All right, one more. A man goes into the pub, you've all heard this but I'll
>               tell you it again. A man goes in the pub, there's a bear sitting in the corner.
> many:         [unclear]
> Jessica:      Oh yeah, yeah!
> many:         [unclear]
> Josie:        He goes up to the, he goes up to the bartender, he says excuse me, why
>               is there a bear sitting over there? And he goes, this joke changes a little
>               bit every time I tell you, I thought I'd warn you though. …

Josie has told the joke on a previous occasion but this obviously does not preclude a repeat performance. After all - as Josie observes in this excerpt ("this joke changes a little bit every time I tell you") – one joke can be told in many (slightly) different ways without distorting major structural and thematic features. Thus, the quality of performance plays a crucial role: although the audience knows the joke they are

curious about how it is presented this time. This finding suggests that the exchange of jokes serves a poetic function (Jakobson). In addition, one may also infer the realisation of the phatic and emotive function since the conversationalists appear to enjoy the event 'for its own sake' - as a vehicle of mutual entertainment.

## Summary

The analysis of opening sequences in the joke session identified a basic pattern of how conversationalists negotiate the telling of a joke. It was described in terms of an adjacency pair consisting of the first move, joke announcement, and the second move, acceptance or refusal. Variation of this pattern was found during the first part of the joke session where the second slot of the adjacency pair is empty, suggesting a rather high degree of competition over speaking rights. It was also observed that participants commonly address the question of whether they are familiar with the joke. Interestingly - as the analysis showed - the retelling of (old) jokes is quite common and acceptable. This finding leads to the conclusion that the exchange of jokes serves poetic and phatic functions.

## Variation of joke telling episodes in the joke session

This section focuses on the variation in the presentation of jokes as a function of temporal placement within the joke session. For this purpose it is instructive to contrast two joke telling sequences, one near the beginning of the joke session, the other taking place at some later point. For reasons of comparability the two jokes presented below are told by the same person, Josie.

(1) B 132617 n=91

| | |
|---|---|
| Josie: | Right, three vam=, a vampire walks into a pub and goes erm |
| Sean: | Oh yeah. I know. |
| Josie: | excuse me, [mimicking Romanian accent] I want a pint of blood []. |
| Sean: | Yeah. |
| Josie: | And the man goes sorry mate we don't do blood. And he goes, I want a pint of blood! So the man goes [pause] ah, chops the dog's head off. |
| Sean: | [laugh] |
| Josie: | Sticks it in the cup, goes and gives it to him, he goes, [mimicking Romanian accent] thank you []. And goes and sits in the corner. Second vampire comes in, [mimicking Romanian accent] I want a pint of blood []. |
| many: | [laugh] |
| Josie: | He goes alright. Gives it to him. He goes, [mimicking Romanian accent] thank you [], and go and sit down. Third vampire comes in, right, the other one goes and sits down, the third one comes in, he goes [pause] yo! What's going down man? I want a pint of water. He goes, pardon? He goes, I want a pint of water. |
| Sean: | [laugh] |
| Josie: | So he gives him a pint of water, he goes and sits with the other ones. And the other ones look at him, and they sort of look in their cups and going [pause] er, how comes we got blood [pause] and you got water? [laugh] [pause] He goes, nah mate! Ain't you lot ever heard of tea bags? And he puts a Tampax in the water. |
| many: | [laugh] |

(2) B 132701 n=18

Josie :        There's AIDS, there's AIDS, right. Listen, listen, listen. There's AIDS and
               he's chasing the bum and the bum's running [mimicking running sound]
               and the AIDS is going come on you little bastard and he's going
               [mimicking squawking sound] leave me alone [unclear] and so he runs up
               a tree and there's a bird there and he's got all bones on him, he's a s=
               witch doctor [pause] and the bird goes, and the bird goes, what's a
               matter? He goes [panting] help me! The AIDS gonna come and get me,
               I'm gonna die! So he goes, all right, don't worry about it, he goes [makes
               incantation sounds] pouff! He's a bird. So AIDS comes running up. Come
               on, where's that little bastard! I know he's in here somewhere. Come out!
               He goes you whistle. He goes [whistling] He goes you whistle. He goes
               [raspberry]
Ali:           [laugh]

The fragments above exemplify the general trend encountered in the narration of
jokes during the joke session from a more dialogic towards a more monologic format.
Whereas in the first fragment members of the audience, especially Sean, participate in
the performance by way of expressing support, the second performance is
uninterrupted. How can we account for this phenomenon? Two explanations seem
plausible. First, one may argue that at the beginning of the joke session participants
tend to retain the 'ordinary' conversational format characterised by frequent turn-
taking, i.e. alternation of speakers. In other words, conversationalists are slow to tune
into the idiosyncrasies of joke telling, which commonly involves the setting up of a
speaker – listener dichotomy and granting one speaker (the joke teller) the rights to
hold the floor for an extended amount of time. In this respect, it is also worth noting
that a rather large number of jokes in the CC are organised in question – answer form.
This structure, in a way, simulates the ordinary dialogic exchange format generally
found in conversations.

The second explanation – somewhat interrelated to the previous argument – is more
psychologically oriented: at the beginning of the joke session joke tellers seem to
require explicit support for their performance even during the telling sequence. That
is, the opening part of the performance – although theoretically serving to secure the
floor to the joke teller – is not considered as the ultimate guarantor of the joke's
accomplishment. As a result, members of the audience may voluntarily encourage the
performance or - as shown in the fragment below - joke tellers address the audience in
order to seek confirmation.

B 132617 n=63

Sean:          There's this la=, there's this girl right?
Josie:         Yeah.
Sean:          And she says yes every time she got her bubble gum in, she says no
               when she ain't got the bubble gum in her mouth.
Josie:         Right.
Sean:          Right? This man knocks on the door
Josie:         Right.
Sean:          and he goes, can I come in? She goes yes, [unclear], ^ she goes ^
Josie:         ^ Right. ^
Sean:          yes. And sh=, lay one, he goes [pause] can we go in your bedroom? And
               he goes yes, she goes yes.
Josie:         He goes yes. ^ Alright ^
Ali :          ^ No ^
Josie:         yeah.

Ali: she goes yes, ^ right. ^
Josie: ^ Right ^, I'm listening. Come on.

This fragment illustrates the significance of feedback during the telling episode. In the first line, Sean interrupts his narration at a very early point (after the rather trivial assertion "There's this girl.") in order to ensure audience attention. Then Josie provides the feedback at relevant points during the presentation, which culminates in her affirmation: "Right, I'm listening. Come on".

The fragment above provides another interesting point of discussion. There is certain evidence in the joke performance suggesting that the teller and his friend Ali are predominantly concerned that the audience should get the joke. In the above fragment Ali interferes with the telling and corrects an apparent misunderstanding. Later, Ali offers an explanation for a joke-internal event – presumably in order to facilitate its processing:

B 132617 n=79

Sean: and he goes, is this hard enough? And she goes no.
Ali: [laughing] Because she ain't got no bubble gum in her mouth []!

In addition, Sean - upon completion of the punch line – attempts to explain the joke:

B 132617 n=83

Sean : She goes, is this hard enough, she goes yes. Cos he's su=
Carrie: Oh! ^ Urgh! Urgh! ^

These observations are rather contradictory to the view that jokes fulfil a testing function. In this joke telling episode we find that speakers assist recipients in processing the joke more easily. Quite contrary to this finding is Josie's style of presentation, which has been discussed in some detail in the previous section. There we noted that Josie does submit the audience to an understanding test, leading us to conclude that Josie enjoys a superior position in the group's hierarchy. Similarly, one could argue that Sean's (and to some extent Ali's) joke telling is indicative of their relatively low intra-group standing. Put differently, Josie's competitive style signals her relatively high peer group status and Sean's (Ali's) co-operative style exhibits relatively low peer status. These findings suggest a close connection of in-group status and the testing function often attributed to joke performances: in situations where the testing function prevails, jokes serve to establish or maintain a superior standing.

While in the course of the joke session recipients more and more adopt a passive role and Josie gradually establishes herself as the main contributor of jokes, we can also observe that Josie attempts to counteract the increasingly monologic character of the conversation. She interrupts her narration and addresses the audience:

B 132701 n=32

(1)
Josie: You ain't heard it? They're walking through the desert and like, you know, they're gonna die, it's obvious and they see this house. Oh my god! A house! So the first man goes the house and he goes and opens the door and you hear the door. It goes [makes creaking door noise] and, and this

|         | woman answers [unclear] this woman's ugly and you've never seen anything [pause] What's the ugliest person you've ever seen? |
|---------|---|
| Carrie: | ^ Sean ^ |
| Ali:    | ^ You! ^ |
| Josie:  | No, what, no come on, [unclear] who's the ugliest person you've ever ^ seen? ^ |
| Carrie: | ^ Sean's ^ mum! [laughing] Only joking. [] |
| Ali:    | [laughing] Yeah, yeah, yeah. [] |
| Josie:  | All right, take your mum and double it and triple her age and all warts and hairs and everything and she goes [mimicking witch voice] hello [] |
| Carrie: | [unclear] |
| Josie:  | Yeah. Shut up! … |

Later during the joke session we encounter a similar occurrence:

B 132701 n=137

(2)

| Josie:    | Jo's gotta joke, right. All right, there's this erm [pause] there's erm, you won't get this one but I'll tell you it anyway because it's quite disgusting. There's this man, there's these three men and they go to an hotel. And erm they walk into the, the hotel and they say can we stay here and he goes yeah, you can stay here on one condition. As long as you don't go down into the attic, I'm sure I've told you this, he goes as long as you don't go down into the attic. So he goes, all right. Well anyway, it reaches night and the three of them go down into the attic. And they go down, there's this beautiful woman sitting there, right. Who's the most beautiful woman in the world? |
|-----------|---|
| Ali:      | Julia Roberts! |
| Josie:    | Ah look, Cindy Crawford. Take Cindy Crawford and double it, right. And she's sitting there with just a swimming costume on ^ and they think ^ |
| Jessica:  | ^ No, no, ^ no, not Cindy Crawford. |
| Josie:    | Who? |

This strategy of involving the audience in the joke's telling serves two purposes. First, it compensates for the lack of feedback from the audience, and, second, it ensures the attention of the listeners. Clearly, in situations where one person attempts to reserve expanded speaking rights (as Josie does), this person may actually have to take some action to prevent the listeners drifting away and being attracted by something else. Josie's strategy may thus be described in terms of control or as a 'hold in check' manoeuvre. Consistent with this interpretation is also that she delimits the conversational space for the developing (humorous) argument concerning her questions. In (1) she attempts to regain the floor in order to continue the joke by way of presenting a summary of the previous contributions ("All right, take your mum and double it …") and when this obviously fails, she becomes more explicit about her intentions ("Yeah. Shut up!").[135] In summary, Josie's initialising moves in (1) and (2) respectively ("What's the ugliest person you've ever seen?" and "Who's the most beautiful woman in the world?") serve a metacommunicative function in the sense that they check on audience attention and motivate the listeners to follow the presentation.

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[135] Incidentally, the exchange pattern encountered in this fragment is typical for teacher – pupil interaction, namely question – answer – feedback.

Metacommunicative acts of this kind are not, of course, confined to joke performances but also occur in other situations. Consider the following fragment extracted from the CC:

KDJ n=494

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0N4 (Bob): | Now a bad habit that I got into, right, a customer will be talking to me and I don't know if you've noticed it, I won't let them finish what they're saying, I'll jump in because I'll know what they're asking me [pause] |
| PS0N3 (Pauline): | Yeah, I've noticed it a wee bit |
| PS0N4 (Bob): | With me? ^ Right ^ |
| PS0N3 (Pauline): | ^ A wee bit ^ I mean |
| PS0N4 (Bob): | Aye, but I mean I notice it, it's just that I've been doing that job that longly you see, you follow me? ^ Now you see, I'm anticipat ^ |
| PS0N3 (Pauline): | ^ Yeah, anticipate ^ |
| PS0N4 (Bob): | Are you with me? [pause] |
| PS0N3 (Pauline): | Yeah |
| PS0N4 (Bob): | Cos when you, when you get to the stage that you're at now basically, that [pause] it's not that difficult be what sort of extra money to find |
| PS0N3 (Pauline): | No |
| PS0N4 (Bob): | are you with me? |

This excerpt represents a small fraction from a conversation between Bob, a 53-year-old sales assistant, and his friend Pauline (aged 26, unemployed). In this dialogue Bob lets Pauline into the secrets of successful selling strategies. Pauline takes the role of the listener. What we encounter here is, in essence, the same constellation as in the previous joke telling episode: one participant dominates the interaction. And again, it can be observed that the main speaker constantly monitors the recipient and checks on her attention (and understanding). It should be noted, however, that instances like this are difficult to find. In general, it appears that in everyday talk a speaker – listener dichotomy of this kind does not arise because, for example, listeners to stories or anecdotes frequently volunteer in providing feedback or participate in the development of the presentation.

The joke session ends with Josie presenting a shaggy dog story. Considering its length this joke will not be reproduced here. It is, however, rather telling that the joke session finishes with a shaggy dog story. In a sense, shaggy dog stories play a practical joke on the audience. According to Mulkay (1988) they break with the convention of economy usually encountered in jokes. In addition, shaggy dog stories invariably exhibit an irrelevant or banal punch line (21). In violating principal patterns of joke structure shaggy dog stories make fun of the listeners: not only have they endured a lengthy and ornamental build-up of a story line, they also get disappointed by the 'punch line'. Josie's performance of a shaggy dog story may thus be viewed as constituting a subtly instigated act of aggression against the audience. At the same time her relentless striving to outclass her peers appears to have reached a climax. Furthermore – in line with Douglas (1968)[136] contention that "the shaggy dog story is only told in a society which has been satiated with jokes" – it seems that the conversationalists themselves reached a point of satiation with jokes. As a result the joke session ends and the participants return to 'ordinary' conversation. Interestingly,

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[136] Cited in Mulkay (1988:21).

the recording breaks off shortly afterwards indicating that Josie was predominantly concerned with taping jokes (see previous section).

## Summary

Based on the observation that the joke telling episodes encountered during the joke session progress from a dialogic towards a monologic format, the analysis has attempted to account for this phenomenon employing some fundamental concepts of CA, considering turn-taking mechanisms as well as psychological considerations. It was argued – also in the light of quantitative results obtained from BNC joke instances – that conversationalists tend to adhere to the normal conversational mode of frequent turn-taking. Furthermore, 'initial' joke tellers appear to require some motivation and active support from the audience.

With the emergence of a speaker – listener dichotomy during the joke session we observed some action countering this situation instigated by the performer:        Josie encourages the audience to participate more actively in the performance of the joke. This finding is consistent with the general perception of natural conversation as a *mutual* exchange of ideas, thoughts, etc. and may explain the fact that canned jokes, especially narrative jokes, are relatively rare in spontaneous speech.

In contrasting the joke performances of two speakers (Sean and Josie) the analysis addressed the issue of probing often referred to in the context of joke telling. In the light of the data it is clear that the testing function is not intrinsic to joke performances but linked to sociological variables such as in-group status and age. In other words, the probing function is typically exercised by speakers who enjoy a superior standing in the group.

## Direct discourse

As shown in a large number of joke telling episodes, joke tellers typically employ direct discourse or, to use a different term, constructed dialogue. According to Marfurt (1977), this is a formal characteristic of what he labels the 'Dramatisierung' sequence in jokes:[137]

> Formales Merkmal des Strukturelements *Dramatisierung* ist die Tatsache, dass es sich fast ausschliesslich in Form eines Dialogs manifestiert: Ein Grund dafür liegt vermutlich in der Oekonomie der Darstellung (ihrerseits natürlich bedingt durch die *Funktion* der Dramatisierung): Dialogische Aeusserungen der Witzfiguren kennzeichnen nämlich nicht nur den Sachverhalt, auf den sie sich beziehen – und erweitern so dem Witzhörer das Bild der Situation -, sondern sie charakterisieren auch gleich die Einstellung der Witzfigur zu dieser Situation und damit die Figur selbst. (97, italics in the original)

Hence, from an 'economical' point of view, direct quotations kill two birds with one stone: first, events or actions are communicated via the (joke) characters' dialogue and, second, each character (*dramatis personae)* (and/or attitude towards the ongoing

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[137] Marfurt describes the joke text as consisting of three parts, the 'Einleitung' [introduction], 'Dramatisierung' [climax] and 'Pointe' [punch line].

event) is characterised by their manner of speech (e.g. sociolect, dialect, voice pitch, intonation, pauses, etc.). The latter is especially important for a large category of jokes, namely those that deal with stereotypes. Consider, for example, the vampire joke quoted at the beginning of the preceding section. The dialogues between the first (second, third) vampire and the bartender not only signify the event 'ordering and receiving blood (water)', they also reveal the nationality of the vampires[138] - in this instance one of the dimensions of the joke's humour. In addition, the dialogic format may serve to highlight important aspects of the joke. The questioning repeat of the bartender "He goes, pardon?" following the third vampire's order of water, for instance, brings to the fore one fundamental aspect of the joke: the creation of a puzzle and its humorous solution inferable from the punch line.

Research has shown that the rendering of someone else's words is a rather common activity in spoken language. It is therefore not surprising that this feature is frequently employed by novelists in simulating spoken dialogue. In his essay "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin comments:

> The transmission and assessment of the speech of others, the discourse of another, is one of the most widespread and fundamental topics of human speech. In all areas of life and ideological activity, our speech is filled to overflowing with other people's words, which are transmitted with highly varied degrees of accuracy and impartiality. ([1934-5] 1988:337)

Of course, the transmission of other people's words can be accomplished by various means. On the level of grammar, speech may be reproduced using indirect speech, direct speech, free direct speech and free indirect speech[139] – all with different effects. According to Vološinov (1929), indirect speech focalises the referential message, whereas direct speech – by depicting "manner of speech" - centres upon the (typological or individual) character of the speaker. Brünner (1991) interprets the difference between direct and indirect speech in terms of involvement: unlike indirect speech, direct speech has the effect of turning the recipients into eyewitnesses and thus producing a high degree of involvement. For that reason, it is claimed, indirect speech is inappropriate for joke performances. As research on oral narratives suggests (Chafe 1982, Coulmas 1986, Tannen 1986, 1989, Schiffrin 1981, Bauman 1986, Quasthoff 1995), this also holds true for the construction of stories and anecdotes. Hence, following Tannen (1989) and Brünner (1991), the use of direct quotation presents an involvement strategy.

It is also worth noting that this high level of involvement directs the recipients towards an uncritical assessment of the joke, thus ignoring the inherent implausibilities of the joke. Sacks notes:

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[138] The careful reader may have noted that the animation of the joke's characters lacks some consistency. For example, at one point Josie (the performer) forgets to imitate the Romanian accent in the repeat "I want a pint of blood."

[139] As pointed out by various literary scholars (e.g. Vološinov [1929] 1975, Kristeva [1967] 1980, Tannen 1989), these categories are not clearly distinguished in actual discourse. Furthermore, their contextual embedding plays a crucial role as well. Bakhtin ([1934/5] 1988:340) notes: "The following must be kept in mind: that the speech of another, once enclosed in a context, is – no matter how accurately transmitted – always subject to certain semantic changes. The context embracing another's word is responsible for its dialogizing background, whose influence can be very great. Given the appropriate methods for framing, one may bring about fundamental changes even in another's utterance accurately quoted."

> Furthermore, there are characters in the thing [the joke] who seem to be doing a parallel task, and in that they seem to understand what's going on, and the recipient can find that he can understand it in the way that the parties seem to, then the parties' understandings can serve as further confirmation that the recipient is doing the right sort of work on it. (1978:258)

In her working paper "Erzählstile in mündlichen Witzen", Kotthoff (1995) classifies direct speech as an obligatory element in the telling of jokes, arguing that the successful delivery of jokes presupposes a clear image of the (usually stereotypical) joke characters. She writes:

> Der Witz bevorzugt interne Personalcharakterisierungen, welche außer durch implizite Charakterisierung auch durch die spezifische Wiedergabe der Äußerung selbst erreicht werden. Eine wesentliche Frage für die Performanz des Witzes besteht immer auch darin, ob der Typisierungsprozess so inszeniert wurde, dass er von den Hörer/innen rezipiert werden kann. (16)

This point may be best illustrated by transforming a joke into a version which has all instances of direct speech substituted by indirect discourse. Let us take the vampire joke:

> A vampire walks into a pub and – speaking with a Romanian accent – orders a pint of blood. The bartender - rather baffled by this request - replies that his pub does not serve blood. The vampire insistently repeats his order. The bartender, after having realised that he has no choice but to comply, walks up to the dog, chops its head off, sticks it in the cup and gives it to the vampire. The vampire thanks him and sits down in the corner. A second vampire enters the pub and also orders – in a Romanian accent – a pint of blood. The bartender pours him a pint of blood, the vampire thanks him and also disappears in the corner. A third vampire walks into the pub, approaches the bartender and (in an English accent) orders a pint of water. The bartender – thinking that he misheard the order – asks the vampire to repeat his order. The vampire replies that he wants a pint of water. So the vampire receives a pint of water, walks away and joins the other two vampires in the corner. The first two vampires look in astonishment at the glass of water and ask the third vampire why he ordered water instead of blood. Then the vampire asks if they have never heard of tea bags and puts a Tampax in the water.

This corrupted version of the vampire joke, I believe, speaks for itself: it is difficult to imagine the joke being presented without using direct speech. That is, even when preserving both the structural organisation and the point of the joke, this version would be unlikely to occur in reality. Hence, direct speech must be recognised as an essential feature of joke presentation.

It may be added that the animation of voices in the construction of dialogue often gives rise to comic effects, which heighten the amusement and thus promote the positive reception of the joke. Furthermore, as indicated in Kotthoff's statement above, animated speech helps the recipients to quickly identify stereotypes frequently encountered in jokes.

Direct discourse thus accomplishes many things simultaneously: Firstly, it exposes relevant features of the joke characters and exhibits their frame of mind at various points during the story. Secondly, by turning the audience into eyewitnesses, direct discourse produces involvement. Finally, by encoding information and making it implicit, direct discourse and animated speech enhances the pleasure found in resolving the punch line. The vampire joke is a good example of the latter point. Consider the altered version containing indirect discourse. Here, the different nationalities of the vampires have to be explicitly mentioned (*speaking with a*

*Romanian/English accent*). This sounds odd for the reason that this information appears to be a triviality. The only plausible explanation for the recipient to account for this oddity is to interpret this characterisation as crucial for the joke's humour. In contrast, in the original joke we have no reason to assume that nationality plays a role in the punch line – at least up to the point where the third vampire (speaking with an English accent) enters the scene. Initially, the Romanian accent is most probably interpreted as an attempt to imitate the archetypal vampire.[140] When the third vampire appears using an English accent we note a deviation from the former pattern and begin to revise our former interpretation. Nationality suddenly becomes and issue, but we still do not know whether this fact is incidental or crucial for the humour of the joke. It is not until the punch line that we come to realise the significance of this 'minor' detail, progressively and implicitly developed in the course of the narration. In other words, one humorous aspect of the joke gradually unfolds and is *discovered* after termination of the punch line. In the version containing indirect speech, however, this detail – by having been made explicit – merely requires to be *integrated*. Viewed from the cognitive perspective of joke processing, this operation of 'integration' requires less effort resulting in a weaker humorous effect than that achieved by using direct quotation.

One final point: given the above considerations, it would seem that the vampire joke was originally designed for oral presentation. Any written version of this joke would have great difficulties in coding the nationality item as tacitly and implicitly as is possible in oral performance. Incidentally, the same holds true for the three-spastics joke (see section 3.3.2). Here, the joke's humour relies on the recognition of the (stereotypical) speech animation of a spastic. That is, only after *hearing* the punch line which imitates the speech of a spastic are we in a position to make the appropriate inferences. These findings suggest that jokes are best considered as belonging to the domain of vocal art.

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[140] The entertaining effect of such animated speech performances (see above) is also confirmed in the fragment by recipient laughter.

# 4 Laughter in the BNC

While research into *humour* has been prolific for a long time, it is only in recent years that the study of *laughter* has aroused some interest – most notably, perhaps, within the field of psychology, but also within Conversation Analysis.

Relatively little quantitative work has been done to date on laughter in conversation. Such research is clearly hampered by the complexity of the phenomenon (as shown by some of the qualitative analyses undertaken by conversation analysts) but is perhaps now more feasible in view of the CA 'field work' already performed. This chapter attempts to fill this gap, using prior research on the subject and elaborating the concepts so far developed.

Section 4.1 reviews some of the relevant literature in laughter research and presents the major taxonomies developed for categorising laughter as proposed by linguists, philosophers and psychologists. The main ideas emerging from this survey are then summarised using a slightly modified version of Jakobson's functional communication model.

Section 4.2 presents the results of an initial quantitative investigation of laughter in the CC, primarily from SARA. Laughter frequencies are related to the variables *gender* and *age* and other relevant 'basic' figures such as the number of utterances produced by (fe)males in the CC or information on group structures necessary for the evaluation of the quantitative results. It should be pointed out that the outcome of this initial exploration eventually launched the project of analysing laughter and humour in greater detail.

Sections 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10 analyse a sample drawn from the CC according to the taxonomies developed for humorous manoeuvres (outlined in section 4.4), laughter function (outlined in section 4.5), laughter position (outlined in section 4.6) and a number of extralinguistic variables (outlined in section 4.7). Quantitative results and functional aspects are discussed – especially in connection to the findings concerning humorous manoeuvres.

The chapter concludes with a survey of meta-communicative comments on laughter produced by BNC speakers. These are used to assess the validity of the methodological approach and taxonomies developed.

## 4.1 Previous research

According to recent publications, laughter is about 7 million years old and served as a communicative signal before humans developed speech (Niemitz 1990, Ruch and Ekman, in press). This long evolutionary history may explain the fact that laughter is extremely difficult to pin down to one single formula that would account for all possible occurrences. As Chapman puts it:

> […] it may be impossible to delineate sets of conditions under which laughter is never to be observed […] As far as we know laughter can erupt in association with any of the emotions […] (1983:151)

Ordinary language collocations provide testimony of this fact. In English we can laugh with glee, with scorn, with joy, with contempt – to name just a few. A glance at a thesaurus reveals that the semantic word field of 'laughter' abounds with related and neighbouring lexemes (e.g. chuckle, giggle, guffaw, crack up, hoot, snigger) or metaphorical expressions (e.g. laugh in one's sleeve, be in stitches, roll/split/burst/rock/shriek/hoot/roar/choke/die with laughter). Apte (1985) reports that Western Indian languages are particularly rich in words designating different values to 'laughter types', enumerating eight adverbs used to accompany the verb *has* (meaning 'to laugh or to smile')[141] from Marathi, an Indian language spoken by around 40 million people. Given the complexity of the phenomenon it has proved to be a challenging task to classify laughter instances according to useful and meaningful criteria. The following discussion surveys some of the prevalent taxonomies, presenting material from psychological, philosophical, sociological and linguistic treatments of the topic.

One rather common but not unproblematic classification is to order laughter instances according to whether they are triggered by a humorous or non-humorous stimulus (Monro 1951, Apte 1985, Morreall 1983). The problem here is that the distinction presupposes a definition of humour that may not be explicitly stated. For example, Monro (1951), in his search to find "the common element in laughable situations" (19), obviously adheres to the 'incongruity' theory when he lists "any breach of the usual order of events", "importing into one situation what belong to another", word play and nonsense as instantiations of humorous laughter incidences while "laughing it off" and triumphant laughter are categorised as non-humorous.

Morreall (1983) identifies three core elements common to all laughter situations: (a) the laugher undergoes a psychological change, (b) the change is sudden and unexpected, (c) the change is pleasant. Accordingly, the shift may be sensory (as in the case of tickling) or emotional (e.g. laughter after solving a puzzle or winning a contest; running into an old friend), which gives rise to non-humorous laughter, or the shift may be cognitive, which produces humorous laughter. Cognitive shifts (that may well be accompanied by positive emotional shifts) are defined as "usually from what the person would expect a given thing or situation to be like, to an awareness that the thing or situation is not like that, that it has incongruous features […] The surprise here is based on having part of one's conceptual system violated" (43). Again, as with Monro, the incongruity aspect of humour is used as the central criterion in distinguishing laughter occurrences.

Beside the dichotomy 'humorous vs. non-humorous', Morreall uses a further important dimension to cataloguing laughter incidences: the distinction between laughter as a "natural expression of pleasure" and voluntary laughter used to feign amusement or as a coping strategy.[142] In Morreall's 'Theory of Laughter' this

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[141] The meaning of those adverbs range from "soft, pleasant laughter of an infant" to "horselike laughter" and "superficial polite laughter" (*ibid.*:255).

[142] See also Ruch and Ekman (in press), who distinguish between spontaneous/emotional laughter and voluntary/contrived/faked laughter or Apte (1985), who draws up the dichotomy 'laughter as an

distinction is necessary to account for such phenomena as embarrassed laughter or hysterical laughter, in other words, laughter occurring in rather unpleasant situations (where the three-part formula given above does not fit). The problem is resolved by viewing laughter and its underlying feelings as being connected by a two-way causality link so that laughter may not only be the response to some pleasant stimulus but also capable of inducing happy feelings.

The philosophical groundwork for the distinction between 'natural' or 'genuine' laughter, on the one hand, and intentional, faked or strategic laughter, on the other, was laid by Plessner. For him, laughter and crying are symptoms of the dual nature of the physical human condition; we both 'have' a body and at the same time 'are' a body:

> Die Möglichkeit, für die physische Existenz derart verschiedene verbale Wendungen zu gebrauchen, wurzelt in dem doppeldeutigen Charakter dieser Existenz selbst. Er hat sie, und er ist sie. Er steht ihr gegenüber wie einem Etwas, das er beherrscht oder von sich abtut, das er als Mittel, als Instrument gebraucht, er steht in ihr, und er fällt (bis zu irgendeinem Grade) mit ihr zusammen. ([1941] $^2$1950:45)

It is argued that in laughter (as well as in crying) this twofold existence becomes visible; here the 'body-one-is' takes over from the 'body-we-have'; we lose control and 'let go'. Hence, laughter and crying need to be contrasted with gestures such as hand shaking, nodding, eyebrow raising that are instrumentally employed for expressive purposes. According to Plessner, laughter is unreplaceable (in the sense that words or sign language could be used as alternatives), direct and automatic (73). Clearly, what Plessner had in mind when dealing with this issue was that kind of laughter referred to above as 'genuine' or 'natural'. He was, however, also aware of the possibility of 'acting out' laughter, if one wanted to. In this (certainly, for Plessner, exceptional) case the human being remains under control and uses his command of expression.

The fact that laughter is not merely a response mechanism but may be used to initiate humorous interaction or cue some situation, event or joke as funny or ludicrous is particularly stressed by Zijderveld (1983). For him "laughter is language", it is symbolic and needs to be viewed as "something autonomous, as a constitutive element of a (usually playful) social interaction" (31). Research on the ontogenetic development of laughter underpins Zijderveld's viewpoint. Here, the distinction is drawn between laughter that acts as an appeasement signal (similar to the ultrasonic squeaking sounds produced by rats or the 'ah, ah' noise produced by chimpanzees in play situations) and laughter triggered by the resolution of some cognitive dissonance. Both types, the 'social' and the 'cognitive', are thought of as tapping into the same expressive machinery in our brains, with the difference that cognitive laughter involves more brain activity and is the result of more general thought processes (as reported by McCrone 2000).

Owing to their characteristic suspicion of theorising and *a priori* assumptions, conversation analysts have taken a fresh look at laughter. Rather than debating the relation between laughter and humour or enumerating kinds of laughter stimuli, CA

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"involuntary reflex action" (240)' vs. 'intentional laughter that is "deliberate, artificial laughter and acquired as part of the socialization process" (241).

has focused on laughter as a non-speech phenomenon occurring in ordinary conversation. To summarise the core results of these studies, laughter was found to be routinely and systematically employed in conversation and attributed the status of a conversational activity. In stressing that laughter is frequently put in rather than flooding out, CA puts an end to the myth of laughter as the expression of mirth and amusement hitherto prevailing in many writings on the subject. The following presents a summary of the major findings.

Among the first workers to point out that laughter deserves our attention as linguists and conversation analysts – despite the fact that it has no referent and therefore contrasts with other 'utterables' that are more readily definable - is Schenkein (1972). In line with the central CA paradigm of demonstrating "how order, and meaning, are generated and generatable by Members in their naturally occurring situated conversations" (348), Schenkein sets out to account for a particular laughter incidence in a conversation among adolescent boys. This includes detailed discussion of various preceding segments of the conversation, which - for reasons of space - cannot be reproduced here.[143] It is sufficient for our purposes to say that Schenkein identifies a number of laughter functions:

- to signal non-seriousness; here, laughter is typically tagged on to the end of an utterance and simultaneously indicates utterance completion,

- to signal understanding and appreciation of some prior attempt at humour,

- to ridicule some prior speaker - typically the result of an inappropriately placed laughter, which may then "be attended to, called into question, formulated, made into a topic of inquiry, noted as a possible violation of some sort, or invoked as grounds for a request for clarification" (365); Schenkein further notes that a similar effect is achieved when laughter is withheld although it would have been appropriate.

In Schenkein's analysis therefore, laughter can be both retrospective in that it moderates a just completed utterance or acts as a positive or negative response to some prior turn, or it can be prospective in that it induces speaker transition.

The prospective nature of laughter particles is further documented by laughter invitations, a phenomenon uncovered and extensively studied by Jefferson (1979, 1984) and Glenn (1989). Jefferson (1979), which primarily deals with dyadic conversations, observes that laughter invitations may either be accomplished by appending laughter at the end of an utterance (post-utterance completion laugh particle) or by inserting laughter particles at recognition points during talk in progress. These laughter invitations produce a "relevance of laughter"[144] (*ibid.*:79), i.e. the hearer is obliged to either laugh or (actively) terminate its relevance by responding to

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[143] For someone unfamiliar with CA procedures and argumentation, reading this study is however recommended.

[144] As Glenn (1989) reports, citing a paper presented by Jefferson in 1974, laughter invitations may also be realised without accompanying laughter. The term coined for such instances, "laughables", is however analytically problematic as "virtually any utterance or action could provoke laughter in someone, under certain circumstances" and because it is, of course, difficult to pin down "what does or does not count as laughable" (*ibid.*:147).

the topical import (rather than the 'laughable' import) of the prior utterance. Recipient silence, it is further argued, does not terminate the relevance of laughter. In cases where laughter invitations are declined the following scenarios are possible: either the prior speaker collaborates and goes along with the pursuit of topical talk or, alternatively, s/he competes and pursues laughter. The latter is probably more likely to happen in multi-party settings where there is a greater chance of one party taking up the laughter.[145]

The question of how and to what extent laughter invitations are affected by the number of speakers participating in an interaction is dealt with by Glenn (1989). His comparison of two-party and multi-party talk reveals that shared laughter is typically initiated by the current speaker in dyadic settings, whereas in multi-party settings it is usually one of the recipients who produces the first laugh. The analysis of individual occurrences from multi-party situations suggests the following explanations:

(a) The current speaker does not laugh because s/he claims ownership of the laughable (and wants to take the credit for its success); laughing first would thus constitute a form of self-praise.

(b) Some other member who possesses prior knowledge of a 'funny' story currently narrated collaborates with the speaker and cues the other participants to the relevance of laughter, e.g. by initiating shared laughter or by producing evaluative comments ("it was so funny") (*ibid.*:139).

(c) Two or more recipients want to display alignment in response to some unintentional laughable (e.g. slip of the tongue) or in response to teasing to which they are the target.

In conclusion, Glenn compares multi-party laughter situations to public events: both are characterised by a role division between performer and audience; laughter primarily, if not exclusively, serves an applause function. This is also viewed as the prototypical laughter function as is apparent in the following quote:

> Both participants to a two-party interaction must join in shared laughter. This forces one participant both to create the laughable and to laugh, playing dual roles of performer and audience. Perhaps laughter is best viewed as originally a group and public, as opposed to interpersonal, phenomenon. (146)

The context sensitivity of laughter is further documented in Jefferson's (1984) paper "On the organization of laughter in talk about troubles". Here, it is noted that the presence of "post-utterance completion laughs" or within-speech laugh particles do not always make it appropriate to laugh in response as asserted in Jefferson's previous (1979) treatment of the phenomenon. Rather, in environments of trouble talk, it is more common that when the "troubles-teller" laughs the "troubles-recipient" does not laugh but instead produces a serious response related to the trouble. Jefferson refers to the respective patterns of behaviour as "troubles-resistance" and "troubles-receptiveness". Troubles-receptiveness (or the declination to laugh) can be overcome, however, by the troubles-teller initiating a "buffer topic", a "time-out for pleasantries"

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[145] In fact, the data shown by Jefferson illustrating this phenomenon are from multi-party conversations.

(351) and comic relief. On these occasions both[146] parties may laugh together but, as shown in Jefferson's data, some time may pass before the recipient joins in the laughter. An obvious function of introducing a buffer topic is to divert the attention away from the trouble which "might reoccasion tears" (353). It is further observed that troubles-recipients may in fact laugh at troubles talk but, again, this does not happen randomly but follows a certain 'logic': it typically occurs in relation to troubles that the troubles-teller (rather than a third party) is or was personally involved in and in response to "those components of a troubles-telling that can be characterised as, say, manipulated, as constituting, for example, excuses, bids for sympathy, sentimentalizing, and dramatizing" (366) (rather than straight facts). The patterns identified by Jefferson can be summarised as:

- troubles-teller laughs; troubles-recipient does not laugh (common/frequent),

- joint laughter of both troubles-teller and recipient (occasional),

- troubles-teller does not laugh; troubles-recipient laughs (rare).

Another environment where laughter occurs regularly is "improper talk", i.e. talk about tabooed areas containing obscenities or otherwise rude language (Jefferson 1985, Jefferson/Sacks/Schegloff 1987). In her paper advocating a meticulous transcription of laughter particles (showing onset, quality and termination of laughter), Jefferson (1985) shows that distorted speech caused by laughter, rather than being an instance of 'flooding out', may be methodically produced in order to obscure some tender or obscene remark. In addition, as argued by Jefferson/Sacks/Schegloff (1987), speakers may exploit the fact that "improper talk" typically occurs in conversations among close friends and thus by 'mentioning the unmentionable' may attempt to create intimacy. Recipients of such talk (often accompanied by laughter particles) may react in different ways: they may "disaffiliate" (give no response and change topic), they may "disattend" (impropriety is not taken up), appreciate the impropriety (typically culminating in joint laughter), affiliate (explicitly take up the impropriety), or escalate the situation. The authors note that segments of this (hypothetical) continuum regularly occur in conversation such as disattention followed by appreciation followed by affiliation (163). Escalation, i.e. further breaches and mention of improprieties, rarely occurs owing to the fact, as argued by the authors, that the parties are content with the interactional achievement so far (higher level of intimacy) and do not want to risk continuation (escalation) since this may result in "non-affiliative response-types" (170).

Hay (1995) offers a rather straightforward statistical approach to the study of laughter. Her study looks into the distribution of humour support (laughter) according to group composition and gender of the humour producer. Although no statistically significant results are obtained, the figures clearly indicate a trend for both variables – group composition and speaker gender – to be operative. Further investigation reveals that "men in mixed groups are almost ten percent more likely to have their humour supported than men or women in single sex groups, and women in mixed sex groups" (159). This result confirms earlier observations: Dreher (1983, cited in Kotthoff 1986) studies four conversations and finds that both women and men laugh more in support

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[146] Jefferson's analysis is entirely based on dyadic conversations.

of male speakers than female speakers; Makri-Tsilipakou (1994), using Schenkein's (1972) functional taxonomy that distinguishes between 'affiliative' and 'disaffiliative' laughter responses, finds that women laugh more in cross-sex interaction than men, suggesting that men's humour is more likely supported by affiliative laughter. It is further observed that men frequently turn down laughter invitations, whereas women rarely do so, thus lending support to Kotthoff's earlier hypothesis:

> Frauen werden aktiv für die Gesprächserfolge ihres Gegenübers. Mit ihrem Lachen leisten sie Beziehungsarbeit. Männer tun dies (vor allem für Frauen) weniger. (1986:23)

It would, however, be naïve to infer from this finding that men are generally reluctant to support women's humour. Makri-Tsilipakou (*ibid.*) points out that men tend to convey their affiliation by using speech, e.g. humorous quips, rather than by laughing. Hay (1995) identifies four humour support strategies, among them "contributing more humour" and "echo", which may be used in place of laughter. She further notes that for some forms of humour such as 'irony' explicit support is not expected.

The perhaps most systematic empirical laughter study using CA techniques and quantitative procedures is Adelswärd/Öberg (1998). Departing from the usual statistical practice of hypothesis testing, the study design is explorative, aiming at discerning laughter functions on the basis of "where, how, and at what the participants laugh[ed]" (414). In line with this general proposal, laughter instances are tagged according to their position in the conversation,[147] according to whether they are "unilateral" or "joint" plus the respective status of the laugher(s) and according to eight topical areas. The data originates from three different business transactions and may thus be characterised as 'business talk'. The following summarises the main results:

1. Laughter serves as a structuring device: it frequently occurs at topic boundaries to either indicate a "'time-out' from the 'real' activity" (421) or to "round off an old topic and to introduce a new one" (420);[148] pre-phases (greetings) and post-phases (leave-takings) are also often accompanied by laughter.

2. Laughter typically occurs in response to some unexpected event.

3. Laughter is strategically employed in the context of conflict: speakers 'laughingly' introduce sensitive issues "as if to mitigate possible face threats" (423).[149]

4. Participants who perceive themselves as superior are more likely to initiate joint laughter events than the other way round.[150]

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[147] Prior to this process it was, of course, necessary to identify "phase and topic boundaries" (417).

[148] In his study of humour in an American dissertation defence, Fillmore (1994) notes that despite its formal, ritualistic character "joking interruptions and interludes of good-natured talk are extremely frequent" (275). He suggests that one is not likely to encounter such frivolous talk within an equivalent European setting.

[149] As noted by the authors (see p. 424), Mulkay et al. (1993) make a similar observation: in serious situations laughter often accompanies interactional problems; hence laughter is not always a sign of rapport.

[150] This finding confirms earlier observations (e.g. Coser 1960), which noted a tendency for status structure to be sustained by downward humour.

5. Unilateral laughter incidences often indicate low status or disadvantageous position.

By way of summary, the authors sought to map their findings onto the three well-known humour theories. They suggested that release theories cover the aspect of laughter occurring in connection with the raising of sensitive issues (finding (3) above) and that the fact that a large proportion of laughter incidences are introduced by speakers in a superior position (finding (4)) is addressed by the superiority theories. The incongruity theories are considered to be "touched upon" (427) by laughter serving a discourse-structural function. The incongruity is described as "establishing [of] what is coherent and relevant and what is inconsistent and incongruous" (*ibid.*) – in other words, the authors use a rather broad interpretation of 'incongruity'. The term would perhaps be better reserved for 'humorous experience', i.e. incongruities found and resolved in encountering humour.

### *Summary*

This literature survey shows that laughter is a multi-faceted phenomenon. It is context-sensitive in that it responds to external factors such as social setting, speaker sex and status and number of the participants. It may be used for different, sometimes even opposite, ends, e.g. affiliation or disaffiliation, contextualisation, laughter invitation.

A number of dichotomies have been proposed to classify laughter instances. The psychological literature typically adheres to the pairs *genuine/natural* vs. *faked/strategic* and *emotional* vs. *cognitive*. The latter overlaps with the somewhat broader classes *humorous* vs. *non-humorous* often used in philosophical treatments. The CA approach has introduced, although not explicitly, the distinction between *prospective* and *retrospective* laughter occurrences and has drawn attention to production features, e.g. whether laughter events are *jointly produced* or *unilateral.*

Consideration of the referential level, i.e. *what* the parties are talking about, reveals that laughter often accompanies talk about taboo topics and sensitive issues; troubles-telling is yet another environment where laughter occurs regularly.

On the discourse-structural level, i.e. *where* laughter occurs most frequently, both initial and end phases attract laughter as well as interludes, or 'time-outs' during the conversation.

Among the functions attributed to laughter are: rapport, ridicule, fostering status relationships, displaying a sense of humour, cueing something as funny, hedging, and obscuring speech that contains "improper talk".

Figure 4.1.
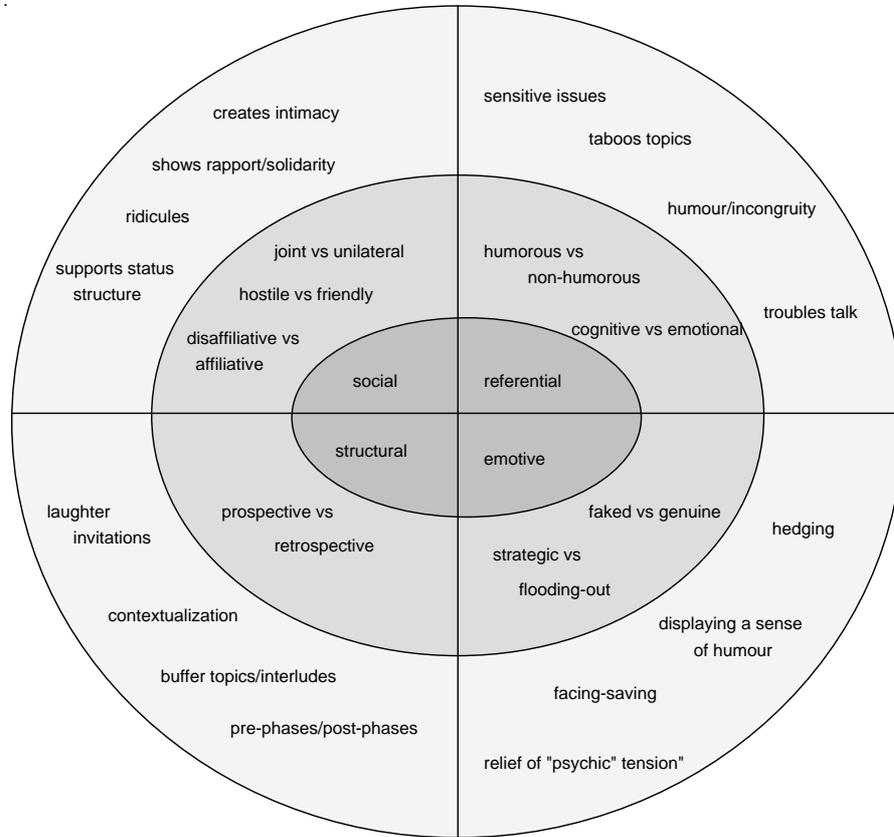


Figure 4.1 illustrates the major aspects, using a modified version of Jakobson's communication model: the entity 'Message' presenting the poetic function is replaced by the discourse-structural level and, for the sake of transparency, the conative function is omitted.[151] Further, the 'phatic' function is replaced by the broader 'social' function. The inner layer shows the four general functions, the next layer presents the major dichotomies associated with the respective functions and the outer layer displays some relevant key words.

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[151] Some items presented in the diagram are, of course, classifiable as serving this function, for example, laughter invitations or contextualisation. They may, however, be equally subsumed under the heading 'discourse-structural'.

## 4.2 Overall frequencies: laughter, gender, age group and group structure in the CC

> I cannot do't without compters.
>
> William Shakespeare,
> *The Winter's Tale*, Act IV, Scene ii

A useful first step towards examining laughter occurrences in terms of socio-demographic variables is to look at the relevant frequencies in the CC. One would expect that this would not present a great problem given that the speakers in the CC are generally coded for their gender and age and SARA (or the Corpus Query Language) allows the user to search for this information. There are, however, a number of obstacles to collecting such data: some are technical and can be overcome with the assistance of a computer expert; others are more severe as they concern the reliability of the data obtained by the SARA client - the software developed by and distributed with the BNC. For the benefit of the reader who is tempted to use SARA for similar research, some of the technical problems are reported before discussing the quality of the results and the policy towards data handling adopted in the present work.

The SARA server and client offer a wide range of search options and unquestionably open up a vast field of possibilities for linguists. Unfortunately, it must also be said that some options only exist in theory – at least for the average user who accesses the BNC over a network. With increasing query complexity or high frequency counts of items queried the processing time may become extremely long[152] and one is very likely to encounter network problems (e.g. automatic time-outs, which cut off the connection to the remote server). An additional problem is the rather flaky Windows application (the SARA client) that often stops responding and appears to have 'given up the ghost' while the query is in fact still running. In my experience, there are only two ways out of this: one either possesses an extremely powerful machine that can produce a result in a reasonable time-scale or have a private server. Even then, many complex queries do not work.

A more serious problem encountered during this study was that some of the query results obtained from the server were clearly wrong (see below). Not surprisingly, this generated an air of doubt around any of the figures reported by SARA. As a result, query results were double-checked whenever possible with corresponding data that has already been published on the subject (Rayson/Leech/Hodges 1997, Sebastian Hoffmann's (manually created) 'SpeakerInfo' file).

The tedious process of cross-checking individual frequencies obtained by SARA with (if available) other sources brought to light the uncomfortable truth that discrepancies are not, as one would hope, exceptional but rather the rule. This is, of course, highly irritating, especially as it remains essentially unclear what causes these divergences. It

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[152] Depending on the query and machine used one may have to wait for days to get a result.

can be said, however, that the differences are, in general, not enormous and unlikely to affect the results of the statistical analyses.[153]

Having resolved the problem of 'data discrepancy', the question remains as to which data source to use for statistical analysis. For reasons of consistency, one would wish to avoid a potpourri of different data sets and settle on one source only. Unfortunately, this objective is unachievable for two reasons: firstly, some data could only be obtained by using SARA,[154] and, secondly, some data generated by SARA (for example, the figures shown for male/female speakers in each age group) are clearly wrong (as is evident from scrolling through individual occurrences). Here, we would prefer to consult a more reliable data source. This gap was filled by Hoffmann's 'SpeakerInfo' file, which was used for all data concerning speaker characteristics (gender and age group).

Software defects aside, there are also problems with data quality. The observant reader may find it confusing that figures sometimes do not add up. For example, Hoffmann's 'SpeakerInfo' file lists 1252 persons participating in the CC, 498 of whom are male and 561 of whom are female. The reason why 498 + 561 (= 1059) does not add up to 1252 is that 'only' 1059 persons are coded for gender; for the remaining 193 this information is not available. Naturally, the same principle applies to age group classification, class classification etc.

The following section presents the major findings on the variables 'gender' and 'age group' and their relation to laughter incidences[155] in the Conversational Corpus.

### 4.2.1 Gender and age group

The tables below summarise the data on the age and gender structure of speakers in the CC, combining the results on utterance frequencies obtained from SARA and speaker information extracted from Hoffmann's 'SpeakerInfo' file.

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[153] This point has already been made in section 3.2 on the subject of canned joke occurrences in the CC.

[154] For example, frequency figures on the number of utterances according to age groups are not listed in Rayson/Leech/Hodges (1997).

[155] For comparison, the frequencies were also computed for the complete spoken part of the BNC. By and large, the figures correspond well apart from some minor discrepancies in the age group distribution.

*Table 4.1          Utterances by males in the CC*

| age group | <u> by males | total group <u> | <u> by males/ total <u> by males | <u> by males/ total <u> | male speak-ers | <u>/ male speaker | total number of speakers | <u>/ speaker |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **0 0-14** | 35076 | 65049 | 0.184 | 0.075 | 127 | 276.19 | 235 | 276.80 |
| **1 15-24** | 18808 | 49068 | 0.099 | 0.040 | 76 | 247.47 | 169 | 290.34 |
| **2 25-34** | 30122 | 84755 | 0.158 | 0.065 | 76 | 396.34 | 164 | 516.80 |
| **3 35-44** | 33846 | 84018 | 0.178 | 0.073 | 59 | 573.66 | 146 | 575.47 |
| **4 45-59** | 37985 | 95732 | 0.199 | 0.082 | 72 | 527.57 | 151 | 633.99 |
| **5 60+** | 34763 | 86717 | 0.182 | 0.075 | 63 | 551.79 | 140 | 619.41 |
| total | 190600 | 465339 | 1. | 0.410 | 473 | 402.96 | 1005 | 463.02 |

*Table 4.2          Utterances by females in the CC*

| age group | <u> by fem. | total group <u> | <u> by fem./ total <u> by fem. | <u> by fem./ total <u> | female speak-ers | <u>/ fem. speaker | total number of speakers | <u>/ speaker |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **0 0-14** | 29973 | 65049 | 0.109 | 0.064 | 107 | 280.12 | 235[156] | 276.80 |
| **1 15-24** | 30260 | 49068 | 0.110 | 0.065 | 93 | 325.38 | 169 | 290.34 |
| **2 25-34** | 54633 | 84755 | 0.199 | 0.117 | 88 | 620.83 | 164 | 516.80 |
| **3 35-44** | 50172 | 84018 | 0.183 | 0.108 | 87 | 576.69 | 146 | 575.47 |
| **4 45-59** | 57747 | 95732 | 0.210 | 0.124 | 79 | 730.98 | 151 | 633.99 |
| **5 60+** | 51954 | 86717 | 0.189 | 0.112 | 77 | 674.73 | 140 | 619.41 |
| total | 274739 | 465339 | 1. | 0.590 | 531 | 517.40 | 1005 | 463.02 |

## Discussion

### *Gender in the CC*

Roughly speaking - as shown by the column totals of male and female utterances - females talk 1.44 (0.59/0.41) times more in the CC than males do. If we take into account that females are (slightly) over-represented (there are 531 female speakers

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[156] The observant reader may have noticed that the figures for male and female speakers in this group do not add up to 235 but to 234. The 'missing' person is PS55D from KPG for whom the BNC (and, accordingly, Hoffmann's 'SpeakerInfo' file) does not offer a gender specification.

compared to 473 males[157]) we find this ratio to be somewhat smaller (1.28). This slight correction, however, does not result in a significant correction to the finding that, in general, females produce more utterances than males in the CC.

As shown by the chi-square test for equal proportions the difference between male and female utterances is highly significant ($\chi^2 = 7068.6662$; df = 1; p < 0.0001).

### *Age group in the CC*

Age groups are not equally distributed in the CC. This applies to speaker numbers presenting the six age groups ($\chi^2 = 36.1881$; df = 5; p < 0.0001) as well as the distribution of utterances ($\chi^2 = 19029.5479$; df = 5; p < 0.0001).

Age group 0 contains the highest number of speakers and shows the lowest ratio of utterances per speaker. In other words, children under the age of 15 produce on average considerably fewer utterances than older speakers.[158] In fact, when examining both speaker representation and utterance totals in each age group (together with the ratios of <u> per speaker), one could get the impression that older speakers try to make up for their relatively low representation by producing more turns.

*Figure 4.2        Age and gender*



| | male age0 | fem age0 | male age1 | fem age1 | male age2 | fem age2 | male age3 | fem age3 | male age4 | fem age4 | male age5 | fem age5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| □Series1 | 35076 | 29973 | 18808 | 30260 | 30122 | 54663 | 33846 | 50172 | 37985 | 57747 | 34763 | 51954 |

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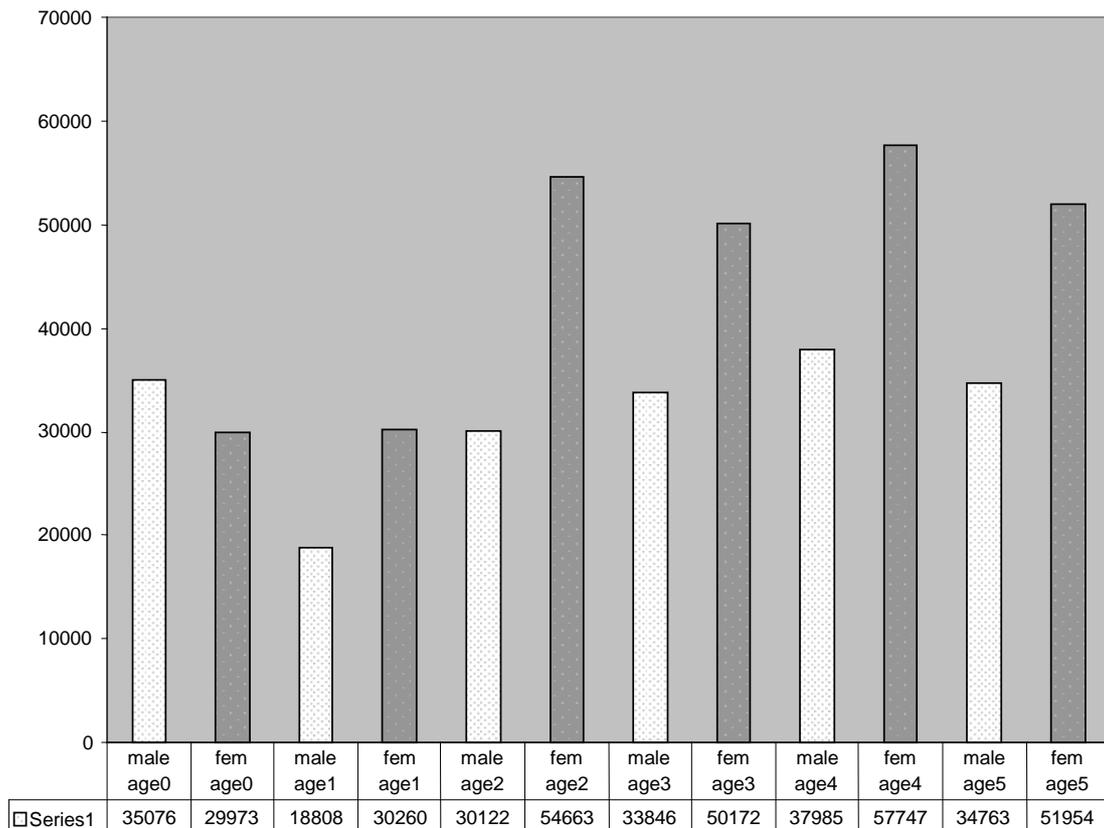
[157] The figures shown for male and female speakers represent the sum of speakers in each category that have an age group identification. If one 'merely' searches for number of speakers according to gender the figures are slightly higher: according to Hoffmann's 'SpeakerInfo' file there are 561 female speakers and 498 male speakers.

**Gender and age group in the CC**

(a) Speakers

With the exception of age group 0, female speakers outnumber male speakers in every age group. The greatest discrepancy between female and male speakers is in age group 3 where the ratio is 1.48, the smallest difference is in age group 4 (ratio: 1.10).

(b) Utterances

Figure 4.2 illustrates utterance frequencies according to gender and age group in the CC.

Computation of the chi-square statistic ($\chi^2$ =5802.9529; df = 5; p < 0.0001) shows significant interaction between age group and gender. The greatest discrepancies between observed and expected frequencies are in age group 0 and age group 2.

Examining the distribution of utterances within each gender population (tables 4.1/4.2, column 3) we find that the lowest percentage of utterances produced by males is in age group 1 (9.9%). In the female population it is age group 0 and age group 1 which have the lowest representation.

(c) Utterances per speakers

The largest figures for utterances and utterances per speaker are found in age group 4. Given that the ratio of utterances per speaker for this age group is extremely high in the female population (730.98) it seems likely that this effect is mainly produced by females.

Gender comparison of the ratios of utterance per speaker (tables 4.1/4.2, column 6) reveals similarities in age groups 0 and 3, i.e. the average number of utterances produced by one speaker is approximately the same for both genders in these age groups. The largest discrepancies between the genders are found in age group 2 where females 'talk about 1.57 times more' than males, followed by age group 4 (1.39) and age group 1 (1.32).

### 4.2.2   Group structure

Since 'group structure' plays a role in the ensuing, more focused analysis of laughter and humorous episodes, the relevant information for the complete CC had to be extracted from the header information of sub-files within the BNC documents. This was not possible via the SARA engine and required some Perl programming – a job that Sebastian Hoffmann kindly offered to do. It may be added that this procedure uses the BNC internal system of identifying individual conversations, where separate conversations are assigned unique division numbers linked to information concerning the specific setting (e.g. place of recording, participants) in the header. For someone

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[158] Probably with the exception of age group 1 (15-24) that also shows a relatively low ratio of utterances per speaker.

familiar with the difficulties inherent in dividing up stretches of talk into separate units it will come as no surprise that the BNC follows a segmentation policy that is primarily oriented to the local setting (and recording time). As a result, changes of the speech situation caused by, say, some new speaker entering the scene and thus transforming a dyadic exchange into a multi-party one, are typically ignored. Detrimental as this fact may be to the present analysis, it could have only been avoided by manually segmenting the complete CC – a task clearly beyond the scope of the present work.

The first section below presents the total numbers of dyadic and multi-party conversations according to whether they are all-male, all-female or mixed-sex (SS stands for single-sex, MS for mixed-sex). The second section focuses on the age distribution, showing the frequencies with which each single speaker from the CC (marked for his/her age group) participated in the specified setting[159] - independent of the age of the other co-conversationalists.[160]

It is important to note that in evaluating the data we have to bear in mind that the number of female speakers in the CC is not equal to the number of male speakers; the respective numbers are 531 (female speakers) and 473 (male speakers). The numbers of speakers in each age band (section 2. below) are shown in table 4.4.

## Gender and group composition

*Table 4.3*          *Gender and group composition*

|  | **SS male** | **SS female** | **MS** | **overall[161]** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **dyadic** | 329 | 398 | 810 | 1550 |
| **multi-party** | 14 | 93 | 1242 | 1840 |

A striking feature of this distribution is the low number of multi-party single-sex male conversations. This finding matches an observation by Hay, who comments on a problem of finding and collecting conversations between four males:

> One male I approached commented that he could not remember the last time he sat around with three other men and chatted for half an hour. "Men tend to come in twos and threes" he said. (1995:41)

While the difference between multi-party single-sex male conversations and multi-party single-sex female conversations is highly significant (p < 0.001), this is not the case for dyadic single-sex interaction, which yields a $\chi^2$- value of 1.006 and p = 0.3158. Thus, females and males are equally represented in single-sex dyadic groups.

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[159] Speakers for whom no age information is provided are excluded from consideration.

[160] It may be noted that the tables shown in the sub-section present different kinds of data and are thus hardly comparable: The gender distribution presents absolute figures, i.e. the respective numbers of which the specified interaction type occurs in the data. For reasons of combinatorial complexity, the age distribution had to be based on single speakers with the result that one particular interaction, say between two same-sex speakers aged 14 and 16, was counted twice.

[161] The 'overall' figures in the tables are not equivalent to their mathematically correct counterpart (summation over the counts of SS male, SS female and MS interaction) due to missing information/coding in the CC.

Mixed-sex conversations occur more often than single-sex conversations. For dyadic interaction the ratio (averaging the numbers for SS male and SS female) is slightly more than 2:1. In multi-party interaction the bias is much more pronounced, which of course could readily be explained by some basic probability theory (i.e. the Binomial Law). In addition, it appears that 'family talk' – often between the mother and/or father and a number of children - might play a role in generating such high frequencies for multi-party interaction.

There is also some indication that females prefer single-sex groups as can be shown by comparing the respective frequencies of all-male single-sex interaction and all-female single-sex interaction ($\chi^2 = 12.03$; p = 0.0005).

Dyadic conversations are slightly more frequent than multi-party talk; the odds for retrieving dyadic talk from the CC are 1.140:1.

## Age and group composition

*Table 4.4          Age and group composition*

| age group | dyadic SS | dyadic MS | multi SS | multi MS | total | number of speakers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **0 0-14** | 209 | 143 | 136 | 1040 | 1528 | 235 |
| **1 15-24** | 189 | 46 | 64 | 370 | 669 | 169 |
| **2 25-34** | 216 | 290 | 10 | 696 | 1212 | 164 |
| **3 35-44** | 195 | 232 | 78 | 828 | 1333 | 146 |
| **4 45-59** | 224 | 529 | 21 | 716 | 1490 | 151 |
| **5 60+** | 128 | 369 | 28 | 567 | 1092 | 140 |

Evaluating the data using log-linear analysis we found no reduced model that would fit the data satisfactorily. Therefore we have to accept the saturated model, i.e. the model that incorporates every possible combination (including the three-variable interaction age * group size * group sex). This means that in comparing speakers across age bands we find a rather diverse picture of what group settings are preferred.

For our purposes it will suffice to note a few trends that can be observed in the table:

- Multi-party mixed-sex settings are the most common interaction types in all age groups. This tendency is most pronounced in age group 0 – almost certainly the result of children conversing predominantly with other family members.

- Dyadic mixed-sex settings are considerably more frequent for speakers above the age of 24 and most conventional for speakers aged 45 and above. Unquestionably, the rising amount of talk between (married) couples plays a role here.

- Speakers from age group 1 (14-24) yield the highest percentage for participating in dyadic single-sex groups. One reason for this is, of course, that they are less likely to be married than people above this age but – given the

rather low percentage of this interaction type for children below 14 (age group 0) – we may also infer that speakers of this age generally seek to talk to members of the same sex, probably close friends.

## 4.2.3  Laughter in the CC according to gender

The following table presents the number of laughter incidences reported by SARA for each gender, some previously discussed figures relevant to this analysis and some ratios computed in order to reveal variable interaction.

*Table 4.5          Laughter according to gender*

| gender group | total number of <u> | speakers | laughter | ratio: laughter/ total laughter | ratio: laughter/ <u> | ratio: laughter/ speaker |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| females | 274739 | 531 | 11814 | 0.623 | 0.0430 | 22.25 |
| males | 190600 | 473 | 7144 | 0.377 | 0.0375 | 15.10 |
| total | 465339 | 1004 | 18958 | 1 | 0.0407 | 18.88 |

As shown by the absolute figures (column 3) as well as the ratios, females laugh more often than men do. Chi-square testing of laughter incidences relative to total number of utterances further reveals that the difference is significant ($\chi^2 = 80.9238$; df = 1; p < 0.0001). Hence, females not only produce more utterances, they also laugh more often per utterance than men do. The figures presented in the last column on laughter occurrences per speaker further demonstrate this association of laughter and gender: on average female speakers laugh 22.25 times, whereas male speakers only do so 15.10 times.

## 4.2.4  Laughter in the CC according to age group

The table below summarises the data on laughter and speaker/utterance representation for each age group.

As with the previous analysis of laughter and gender, the chi-square value testing independence between age groups is significant ($\chi^2 = 1064.0854$; df = 5; p < 0.0001). The largest term contributing to this effect originates from age group 1, where one would expect a much lower rate of laughter occurrences than actually observed in the data. Examination of the last column reveals that the number of laughter incidences *per speaker* is highest in age group 2 (25-34) where it is almost twice as high as the figure shown for speakers in age group 0 (0-14). It is also worth noting that speakers over 60 show a relatively high rate of laughter incidences per speaker.

*Table 4.6*          *Laughter according to age group*

| age group | total number of <u> | speakers | laughter | ratio: laughter/ total laughter | ratio: laughter/ <u> | ratio: laughter/ speaker |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **0 0-14** | 65090 | 235 | 2997 | 0.162 | 0.046 | 12.75 |
| **1 15-24** | 49210 | 169 | 3320 | 0.179 | 0.068 | 19.65 |
| **2 25-34** | 83198 | 164 | 3628 | 0.196 | 0.044 | 22.12 |
| **3 35-44** | 81484 | 146 | 2750 | 0.148 | 0.038 | 18.84 |
| **4 45-59** | 84003 | 151 | 2785 | 0.150 | 0.032 | 18.44 |
| **5 60+** | 81365 | 140 | 3051 | 0.165 | 0.038 | 21.79 |
| **total** | 444350 | 1005 | 18531 | 1 | 0.042 | 18.44 |

## 4.2.5  Laughter position in the CC

One particularly useful facility offered by SARA is that the position of a queried item within an utterance can be specified. In the present study this function was used in order to look into the distribution of laughter incidences depending on whether they occurred in utterance-initial position ('inilaugh'), utterance-final ('finlaugh'), or 'solo' (i.e. without any accompanying speech).[162] Also of interest were potential gender differences with respect to laughter position.

The table below shows the relevant frequencies:

*Table 4.7*          *Number of laughter occurrences according to gender and position within utterance*

| gender | total number of laughter | 'inilaugh' | 'finlaugh' | 'solo'-laughter |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **female** | 11814 | 4012 | 5776 | 170 |
| **male** | 7144 | 2495 | 3399 | 130 |
| **total** | 18958 | 6507 | 9175 | 300 |

Before the appropriate test statistics are calculated two comments are appropriate.

First, the frequencies presented for laughter in initial and final position both include 'single' laughter occurrences, i.e. 'solo'-laughter. The reason for this is that it is not possible to specify the query in a way that would exclude such items. From experience (sorting through the data and discarding instances of single laughter occurrences) it would seem that around about 50 per cent of the figures shown above represent 'solo'-laughter occurrences. That means that the figures shown for

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[162] Laughter during talk in progress, another possible context, could not be searched with the syntax options available in SARA.

'inilaugh' and 'finlaugh' should be divided by two to approximate the real number of laughter in initial/final position.

Second, the figures computed for 'solo'-laughter are clearly wrong: they are contrary to what common sense predicts and they run counter to our previous observation that approximately 50 per cent of laughter incidences are not accompanied by speech. Since this error has obviously not been eradicated for the second release of the BNC the correct frequencies had to be retrieved in a different way (using an AWK script,[163] which identified the relevant occurrences in the CC, and subsequent manual editing of discordant patterns). Unfortunately, with the tools available it was not feasible to do a gender-specific search for such 'solo'-laughter occurrences but it was at least possible to extract their total number in the CC, which is 9990.

Calculation of the chi-square statistics yields the following results

(a) Laughter according to position (utterance-initial or utterance-final)[164]

$\chi^2 = 453.1724$; df = 1; p < 0.0001

The difference between 'inilaugh' and 'finlaugh' is significant: laughter in utterance-final position occurs more frequently than in utterance-initial position. This is certainly a rather surprising result given the widespread conceptualisation of laughter as a response mechanism

(b) Laughter in utterance-initial position according to gender

$\chi^2 = 0.8971$; df = 1; p = 0.3436

(c) Laughter in utterance-final position according to gender

$\chi^2 = 1.0706$; df = 1; p = 0.3008

The last two calculations imply that there is no association between gender and laughter position. In other words, neither males nor females show a particular tendency towards laughing at the beginning or at the end of their utterance.

### 4.2.6  Summary

It emerges from the preceding discussion that the demographically-sampled spoken component of the BNC is by no means demographically-balanced. While this is not to be understood as a deficiency but rather as a welcome artefact of the respondents' 'natural' choices of co-conversationalists, it must be borne in mind when evaluating sociolinguistic data obtained from the CC. Statistical procedures that compensate for the skewed demographics are therefore inevitable in the present analysis.

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[163] AWK is a UNIX programming language used for scanning patterns in text.
[164] The calculation uses the figures presented in the table – not, as would have also been possible, their approximated 'real' frequencies (these would also yield a significant result).

Summarising the results on gender variation we can say that female speakers produce a larger proportion of the language collected than males and that they also laugh more often than males do. Analysis of the age group distribution revealed that age groups are not equally represented – neither in terms of speakers nor number of utterances. Further, the gender ratio within each age group differs rather considerably, the utterance representation according to age group and gender can be sketched as a cline starting with the lowest percentage:

> male, age group 1 < female, age group 0 < male, age group 2/female, age group 1 < male, age group 3 < male, age group 0/male, age group 5 < male, age group 4 < female, age group 3 < female, age group 5 < female, age group 2 < female, age group 4

The examination of gender variation structured according to the group variable 'gender composition' and 'group size' brought to light an astoundingly low frequency of all-male, multi-party interaction in the CC, suggesting that this grouping is rather 'unnatural' for males. It was further noted that females are more likely to be encountered in all-female groups than men in all-male groups. With increasing age mixed-sex dyads become more frequent, which could be taken to reflect the cultural tradition of marriage. Single-sex dyads are most often encountered in age group 1 (15-24). If we were to draw a random laughter incidence from the CC the chance would be highest for it to originate from a female and from a speaker aged 15-34.

Finally, the analysis of laughter position within a turn indicates that utterance-final laughter occurs more often than utterance-initial laughter. Gender variation on this aspect could not be detected.

In conclusion, the quantitative exploration of the CC uncovered some interesting CC-internal demographic phenomena (that may nevertheless represent the general population) and the fact that the tendency to laugh is somehow connected to the gender and age of a speaker. The remainder of this chapter tries to get a clearer picture of this rather undifferentiated finding.

## 4.3  Study design

The quantitative results presented in the previous section are 'vacuous' and we may reasonably ask 'So what?' when confronted with the fact that women laugh significantly more than men. There are, of course, numerous 'explanations' for this result depending on the framework one prefers. One could follow Freud's hypothesis that women suffer more inhibitions that call for a release of psychic energy. This may seem far-fetched but given the association of laughter with "improper talk" observed by CA researchers (see section 4.1) not at all implausible. Alternatively, if one perceives laughter primarily as a response to humour, one may conclude that women are more likely to support humour with laughter (see Dreher 1983 as cited in Kotthoff 1986, Makri-Tsilipakou 1994, Hay 1995). Yet another possibility would be to refer to social factors, such as gender differences in socio-economic position, role distribution, etc. as suggested by, e.g., Marlowe (1989). It is clear that the bird's-eye view taken so far has to be abandoned and replaced by a more thorough analysis of laughter incidences. For this purpose a number of factors are examined as possible explanations of the statistically significant differences in laughter behaviour:

- group composition

Previous research (Beattie 1981, Glenn 1989, Ervin-Tripp/Lampert 1992, Hay 1995) indicates that the size and gender composition of groups can influence (humorous) behaviour. Each laughter instance is therefore marked for

  (a) the gender of the interactants, resulting in two categories labelled 'single-sex' (SS) and 'mixed-sex' (MS); SS groups can, of course, be further classified as SS male or SS female          and

  (b) the size of the group; here, the distinction is made between dyadic and multi-party interaction.

- laughter function

One could hypothesise, following research on humour support (see section 4.1), that females are more likely than men to affiliate with their co-conversationalists and, therefore, generate a higher output of 'affiliative' laughter. As a result, a laughter taxonomy was developed and used to classify laughter incidences according to which function they serve in the actual context.

- humour preferences

The numerical discrepancies could perhaps also be explained by different humour preferences. Hay (1995) notes that "there are some types of humour which do not always need explicit support" (170), quoting 'irony' as an example. Laughter incidences, if applicable, were therefore also coded according to the type of 'humorous manoeuvre' performed by the speakers. The taxonomy developed for 'humour' is outlined in section 4.4.

Laughter incidences were further marked for their position within the turn-taking system (see section 4.6) and for the (humorous) target(s) which may have been victimised (see section 4.7). These dimensions are interesting with regard to the description of (humorous) exchange structure and with regard to providing an estimate for the degree of aggressiveness involved in conversational humour.

The "mode of enquiry" (Kennedy 1992:9) adopted in the present study is *symmetrical*, i.e. unlike as in the *asymmetrical* mode all variables are treated as response variables and none is given the status of an explanatory variable. This mode is selected on the grounds that it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine which of the variables are the dependent and which the independent ones. Thus, the principal aim of this research is to identify potential associations between variables.[165]

Owing to the large number of laughter incidences in the CC the drawing of a sample is inevitable. As simple random sampling procedures are most suitable for the *symmetrical* mode of enquiry (Kennedy:8) one single sample (rather than stratified random samples) of laughter occurrences was (randomly) drawn from the CC and incidences were classified for the parameters and variables presented above.

The target population of laughter is restricted to utterance-initial and utterance-final laughter incidences. Hence, turns that consist solely of laughter (i.e. 'solo'-laughter) as well as laughter occurring during speech are not considered in the present study. In the case of 'solo'-laughter this limitation was necessary because it is often impossible to discern which function a particular instance of 'solo'-laughter serves or which humorous manoeuvre it relates to. In the other case, it turns out that laughter in mid-talk is often accompanied by distorted speech (i.e. 'unclear' tags) and is thus difficult to comprehend. Admittedly, the exclusion of such occurrences skews the results to some degree but the benefits of restricting the analysis to utterance-initial and utterance-final laughter seem to outweigh any possible drawbacks.

The sample size was set to comprise a total of 200 instances divided equally in utterance-initial and utterance-final occurrences. As it turned out, this was a reasonable compromise between the competing interests of feasibility and viability of quantitative procedures. Whenever appropriate, resulting frequencies were examined using the chi-square test or log-linear analysis (outlined in Appendix A).

The quality of the transcripts created some problems, the trouble being not so much to find a replacement for difficult-to-render examples but rather evolving from the concern of achieving randomness. To be precise, it is quite possible that problematic passages do have something in common and by editing them out interesting phenomena will get lost in the course of the analysis.[166] In addition, this situation cannot, unfortunately, be resolved by some straightforward policy that would accept transcripts up to, say, three 'unclear' tags and dismiss anything above this level. This study resorts to a policy of keeping track of excluded examples and ensuring accountability for rejecting those instances. The following fragments serve to illustrate the point:

---

[165] For a detailed discussion of 'symmetrical' versus 'asymmetrical' modes of enquiry see Kennedy 1992:7ff.

[166] We have already encountered an example of this, namely the phenomenon of distorted speech accompanying improper language.

KPH n=505

| | |
|---|---|
| PS000: | and he goes [pause] that's that fucking arsehole that called you a slut isn't it? |
| PS000: | [laugh] |
| PS000: | And I was like ^ [unclear] ^ |
| PS000: | ^ [unclear] ^ |
| → PS000: | [laugh] [laughing] can you say it any louder dad [] [laugh] |
| PS000: | [unclear] as well like er [laughing] he sounds so funny []. |
| PS55T: | Yeah he speaks and he goes you alright Kath and I went [pause] |
| PS000: | What! |
| PS000: | yeah hi |
| PS000: | My dad said hello to you? |
| PS55T: | Yeah! |
| PS000: | How the hell did he know who you are? |
| PS55T: | I don't know. [pause] |
| PS000: | [scream] [laughing] Oh blimey []. |

This example (of utterance-final laughter; see arrowed utterance) was excluded on the grounds that too many of the speakers remain anonymous (the speaker identification code PS000/PS001 is generally used for unidentifiable participants) and the fact that the speech could not be rendered completely as is apparent in the frequent use of 'unclear' tags.

In contrast, the following fragment (from the sub-sample of utterance-initial laughter incidences) was included in the sample because it was sufficiently comprehensible - despite 'unclear' tags and the fact that one of the speakers is anonymous:

KPK n=1556

| | |
|---|---|
| PS563: | Yeah. Absolutely. [unclear] |
| PS563: | Who's that girl? |
| PS001: | Yeah, that's Sarah [unclear]. |
| PS563: | She's not as sexy as me is she? |
| PS001: | [laughing] It's what you call |
| PS563: | [laugh] |
| PS001: | in fact I'm not even sure it was female then []. |
| → PS563: | [laugh] [pause] Not that I'm insecure or anything. |
| PS001: | [laugh] [pause] It's alright, you can try and [unclear]. |
| PS563: | [laugh] [pause] Oh dear. How's Nat? |
| PS001: | Fine. |
| PS563: | Oh oh! |
| PS001: | Gone to the cinema tonight or summat. |
| PS563: | Eh? |

The following sections will outline the classification systems developed for laughter and humour as well as the extralinguistic variables considered in the present study.


## *4.4   Humorous manoeuvres*

As previous CA analyses of laughter appear to have completely omitted the 'humour aspect', it seems necessary to relate laughter to its (possibly) humorous trigger. This has proven to be rather difficult for at least three reasons: (a) the lack of a humour

taxonomy, (b) the complexity of conversational humour and (c) the difficulties inherent in determining why people are laughing.

(a) Humour taxonomies

'Traditional' humour taxonomies (as offered, for example, by Monro 1951, Morreall 1983, Zijderveld 1983) proved to be of little use because they had primarily been established on the basis of written material. Taxonomies based on conversational humour are scarce; they are, in addition, often tailored to a relatively small and restricted data set (Fillmore 1994) or are not intended to be comprehensive. This is not meant as criticism – taxonomies clearly need to emerge from detailed qualitative analysis, and this has been the primary focus of work so far – but it did present an obstacle to the present study. As a result, it was necessary to infer categories from individual occurrences of conversational humour. During this explorative process other taxonomies and qualitative descriptions were consulted for clarification.

(b) Conversational humour can be very complex, combining a number of features.

The problem can be stated thus: how can we create categories that would cover this complexity *and* that are general enough to explain other similar occurrences? Clearly, from a statistician's viewpoint it is useful to keep the numbers of categories down (so as to get higher frequency counts), resulting in a bias towards generalization and simplification of the model. From a linguist's perspective, one is tempted to 'code' each detail and/or produce multiple classes in order to do justice to each individual instance. It is easier said than done to consolidate these two perspectives and this has proven to be very time-consuming.

(c) The problem of determining why people are laughing has been observed by a number of researchers (e.g. Coser 1960, Davies 1984). Fillmore comments:

> […] the realization that as an outsider I did not *know* when to laugh at what the members laughed at brought home to me very clearly how snugly the spontaneous humor of natural conversation is embedded in the lives and experiences of the people among whom it is exchanged. (1994:271)

For the purposes of this study contextual knowledge is crucial when attempting to uncover what may have triggered the laugh. It was therefore necessary to examine considerably more text material – including so-called "header information" such as participant descriptions, mutual relationships, etc. - than the presented clips would suggest. An additional obstacle were the many transcription errors, 'unclear' tags, incorrect speaker assignments, etc.

Instead of using static labels for 'types of humour' (e.g. wordplay, anecdote) the present investigation favours Fillmore's dynamic terms referred to as 'manoeuvres'. Consequently, the taxonomy presented here stresses strategic/action-type aspects rather than aspects of form. It contains the following 13 categories based on natural, spontaneous conversations:

1. playing with words

2. joking about the use of language (metalingual humour)

3. telling a funny story

4. using vulgar language

5. putting others down: insult, criticism, teasing

6. inventing funny scenarios (fantasy humour)

7. against good manners: violating social conventions

8. generating implicature

9. quipping at what's going on at the moment

10. exaggerating

11. performing

12. noticing an incongruity (referential)

13. other

Instances that did not involve any humour and for which the parameter 'manoeuvres' did not apply were marked as (14). This is admittedly slightly artificial but the insertion of a missing value would have unnecessarily complicated the statistical calculation.

Apart from minor terminological differences, some categories are identical to those in Hay's taxonomy (1995:ch. 6) such as 'inventing funny scenarios' (labelled 'fantasy' by Hay). Other categories are collapsed so that joke tellings or other forms of using external sources of humour primarily aimed at entertaining are classified as 'performing'.

The present analysis of spoken material lends support to Monro's (1951) classes *(a) Any Breach of the Usual Order of Events* and, more importantly, *(b) Any Forbidden Breach of the Usual Order of Events*, which seemed to have been created largely through observation and introspection. In the 'manoeuvres' taxonomy this style of humour appears as 'against good manners: violating social conventions'. It is a rather multi-faceted category and contains several subsets . This also applies to the class 'generating implicature', which covers such classic types of humour as irony and sarcasm. In order to illustrate the range of instances included under a particular heading, examples from the corpus are presented for each category.

Borderlines between categories are not as clear-cut as one might hope; this is a common problem in semantics and pragmatics. The categories 'using vulgar language', 'putting others down' and 'against good manners' are particularly close to each other. The division is, however, warranted given the different emphasis and number of examples in each category.

There were a small number of cases where more than one category seemed applicable. Rather than putting them into the 'other' class (which would have obscured a lot of

qualitative detail) they were coded separately for each relevant category. The effects on the statistical results are negligible since there were only a few such examples.

The classification of conversational humour is intriguing. It would be foolish to assume that it is done without subjective bias although much effort has been put into the present study in cross-checking individual instances in order to achieve an acceptable level of consistency.

## Category 1: playing with words

Verbal humour is a broad field (see, e.g. Alexander 1997). The analysis of conversational humour presented here identifies four sub-classes:

  (a) puns,

  (b) pretended misunderstanding,

  (c) sound similarity,

  (d) fixed expression in new context.

The following fragments illustrate each category.

(a) puns

    KCU n=9031

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0GG: | What's this one? |
| PS0GF: | [reading] What does the book, The Joy Of Sex, ^ describe an orgasm as []? ^ |
| PS0GK: | ^ I'll give it C ^, I give C |
| PS0GF: | No B, the most religious moment in a person's life |
| → PS0GJ: | [laugh] Oh yeah I suppose you shout oh god I'm coming [laugh], every time that bloody thing goes off [laugh] |
| PS0GF: | I've gotta go and blow my nose myself before a piece comes out of it |
| PS0GJ: | [laugh] |

In this instance the double meaning of come (in the continuous form) is exploited for humorous effect. It should be noted that while the use of vulgar language certainly contributed to the overall humour in this case, it has been categorised as 'playing with words' rather than 'using vulgar language' (see below). The latter category is reserved for instances which humour primarily arises from its own crassness.[167]

(b) pretended misunderstanding

    KDB n=2032

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0L6: | ^ [unclear] on there ^ and then you'll be able to [pause] sorry Emma I didn't hear what you said. |
| PS0L2: | How am I gonna paint under that black |
| → PS0L6: | Very carefully ^ [laugh] ^ |

---

[167] Hay (1995) uses the same identification criterion for classifying vulgar humour (see p.78).

PS0L2:      ^ without ^ getting the red red and the red
PS0L6:      Well if you hold a piece of paper there.
PS0L2:      Yeah?
PS0L6:      Get a small piece of paper ^ and hold there as you do it. ^
PS0KY:      ^ Thing is every spike's gonna be changed ^ a different colour anyway so.

Here, PS0L6 (Tabitha, a 17-year-old female student) deliberately misinterprets her friend's (Emma's) request for information. Her post-utterance laughter indicates that the response is not to be taken seriously. In fact, she supplies the desired response straight afterwards. Similar occurrences of conversational humour have previously been termed 'joke-first practice' by Norrick (1993).

(c) sound similarity

KBW n=17767

PS089:      [laugh] I said peas. [pause] Not please, I didn't say please.
PS087:      Oh. Well say thank you when you get it.
PS089:      Thank you. ^ I said ^
PS087:      ^ That's it. ^
PS089:      peas [pause] instead of please. I said peas
PS087:      Timothy, how did you manage to get on your knees again?
PS088:      What?
→ PS08A:    [laugh] ^ Easy. Easy-peasy. ^
PS087:      ^ He must have got a spring. Automatic spring ^ in there.
PS088:      What?
PS089:      What?
PS08A:      You're supposed to sit down to eat Tim. Remember?

In this family conversation PS089 (5-year-old Christopher) cheekily played a joke on his mother using the sound similarity of *peas* and *please*. In the arrowed line his father adopts the humorous key by elaborating Chris' wordplay and, simultaneously, responding to his wife's admonition of the boy's behaviour.

The following is another example of this type:

KBL n=1840

PS06J:      her name was Jessica, it was abbreviated to Jec! And it's a bit of problem
            when you're shouting Jec! The dog turns round!
PS06B:      ^ [laugh] ^
PS06J:      ^ [laugh] ^
PS06F:      The dog's name.
PS06B:      Jec! Oh he did then! Oh prat! [laugh]
PS06J:      [laugh]
PS06B:      Prat!
PS06F:      Don't call him a prat!
PS06B:      Jack! Prat! Prat! Prat! He responds!
PS06J:      Jack the prat! [laugh]
PS06B:      Jack the prat is a brat! He was very much black.
PS06F:      It's not very nice!
PS06J:      ^ [laugh] ^
PS06B:      ^ [laugh] ^ [pause] And that was that!
PS06J:      Cos he was black.

In this fragment, the homophony of Jec, PS06B's (13-year-old Jessica's) old nickname, and Jack, the family's dog, leads to further creative humorous wordplay

based on sound similarity: Jessica invents rhymes and near-rhymes (*Jec*, *Jack*, *prat*, *brat*, *black* and the phrase *And that was that*).

(d) fixed expression in a 'new' context

    KDM n=12792

| PS0RR: | Mm. |
|---|---|
| PS0PN: | Ooh, I tell you what you want though. |
| PS0PP: | For the iron? |
| PS0S0: | ^ Got a ^ |
| PS0RR: | ^ Yeah. ^ |
| PS0PN: | couple of things for you. [pause] You want water from, where was it I said to you? |
| PS0PP: | [laugh] |
| PS0PN: | From er |
| → PS0PP: | [laugh] Lourdes! |
| PS0PN: | No, no! From nor -, somewhere in Snowdonia [pause] they send this water all over the country [pause] and it's so full of iron [pause] Germany, they buy it [pause] [unclear]. [pause] But er, it's a good [pause] I don't know about cure, but whatever! |
| PS0PP: | Dunno, something ^ you read ^ |

Similar to instances of the type described in (b) above, PS0PP (Margaret, 55) decides to 'joke first' before producing a sincere response. In contrast to (b), however, the humour originates in the well-known collocation *water from Lourdes*, which is (ab-) used probably in order to needle Margaret's overly health-conscious husband Raymond (PS0PN).

## Category 2: joking about the use of language (metalingual humour)

In metalingual humour speakers focus on their common code. This frequently happens after slips of the tongue and erroneous speech produced by learners (children, foreigners). In the following fragment PS05B (Carol, 36, housewife) corrects her French au-pair (PS05C):

    KBH n=5754

| PS05C: | I go and make the beans. |
|---|---|
| PS05B: | They're already made you just have to prepare them. [laugh] |

The next excerpt shows a man, 41-year-old David, echoing his mother's phrasing 'light at night', thus drawing attention to its (decontextualized) paradoxical sense:

    KC2 n=3131

| PS09V: | I love summer, summer time you know it's special about summer time |
|---|---|
| PS09U: | I like it when it gets dar=, dark |
| PS09V: | Ah? |
| PS09U: | I mean I like it when it's still light at night |
| → PS09V: | [laugh] light at night, yeah so do I, mm [pause] well, oh [unclear] |

Finally, speakers may comment on the quality of their interlocution as in the fragment below where a young woman (PS0BK: Gill, 21) refers to her conversation with her friend Nancy (PS0BS) as "gossiping":

KC7 n=143

PS0BK:     ^ So then he'd ^ be a stepbrother.
PS0BS:     Oh. [unclear] mixed up.
→ PS0BK:   [laugh] Maybe we don't know. Maybe we're just gossiping. [laugh]
PS0BS:     Maybe we're just damn fucking nosy.
PS0BK:     [laugh]
PS0BS:     [laugh]


## Category 3: telling a funny story

Generally speaking, funny stories are anecdotes concerning some amusing event in the past. In actual talk their realisation depends to a large degree on whether the story is known only to one person (the prospective storyteller) or to more than one person present. Naturally, the former allows for only limited audience participation in the development of the narrative, whereas a humorous anecdote shared by a number of speakers may lead to collaborative or competitive storytelling. It may also occur that some members have only partial knowledge of a particular event and are interested in getting the whole story. The fragments below are ordered according to this 'cline of knowledge' starting with an anecdote told by a 'single' teller, then proceeding to an example where the storyteller is the primary knower and terminating with a jointly produced narrative.

(1) KB8 n=10871


Maggie (PS17G) recollects an incidence that is unknown to her friend Ann (PS14B).

PS17G:     Unless you can create your ^ own atmosphere. ^
PS14B:     ^ Well, ^ that's it. I mean you should have all your friends and neighbours in ^ and have a party! ^
PS17G:     ^ Well the last ^ the last time when Sunderland got to the Final in seventy-three [pause] er there were five of us in the, in my house and I'd made red and white rosettes [laugh]
PS14B:     ^ [laugh] ^
PS17G:     we had our red and white rosettes and when our, I was sitting watching the match and when they scored the goal my slippers went ^ up in the air. ^
PS14B:     [laugh]

(2) KB8 n=2842


In this conversation, Ann (PS14B, aged 53) seeks more information about some events surrounding a flooding from Sally (PS15B, aged 10).

PS14B:     ^ But ^ who, ^ who started ^
PS15B:     ^ under there. ^
PS14B:     the rumour that Skillery Bridge had been washed away?
PS14M:     [unclear]
PS15B:     It was Stephen.
PS14B:     Yeah but then dad said when he came in that, he'd heard that the middle of it had gone.[television on]
PS15B:     What? Stephen [last or full name] came in our class and he said that [pause] er [pause] Skillery Bridge had

PS14B:      And who said the flood wall had gone? When you were all sent home
            early.
PS15B:      Er er [pause] I think he said that as well. [laugh]
PS14B:      Ha! [laughing] One way of getting out of school, ^ I don't know []! ^
PS15B:      ^ [laugh] ^ [pause] He did. He di= he did.

(3) KB1 n=4152


June (PS01B, aged 47) initiates a storytelling about some traffic incidence
reported in the newspaper. Her husband Albert (PS01A, aged 53) soon joins in
the narration, first by adding more detail ("Hundred and eight!") and later by
encouraging story continuation ("[laugh] [pause] He had a new Fiat er [pause]
what were it?"). Their daughter Corrinne (PS01D, aged 18) acts as audience.

PS01B:      See that ^ bit in ^
PS01A:      ^ That doesn't ^
PS01B:      paper about that Robin Reliant and he's done it all up and it does hundred
            mile an hour!
→ PS01A:    Hundred and eight!
PS01B:      I wouldn't fancy going down no bloody motorway, hundred eight ^ in one
            of them! ^
PS01A:      ^ I tell you some ^ of ^ them Robi ^
PS01D:      ^ I bet ^ [unclear], I bet it's ^ [unclear] ^
PS01B:      ^ I know! ^
PS01D:      [unclear]
PS01A:      he had a [pause] Honda Civic engine in it! [laughing] Oh, oh dear! []
PS01B:      shouldn't think anybody'd insure it!
PS01A:      I'm surprised!
PS01B:      Then that bloody prat towing down motorway at hundred mile an hour!
PS01D:      Towing?
PS01B:      Yeah! Towing a
PS01A:      Car!
PS01B:      towing somebody down motorway. And they're going hundred mile an
            hour!
→ PS01A:    [laugh] [pause] He had a new Fiat er [pause] what were it?
PS01B:      Don't know. I just ^ know that it ^
PS01A:      ^ The next one up ^ from ours.
PS01B:      Oh! The one that er [pause] ^ oh! ^
PS01D:      ^ Oh! ^ The Corona?
PS01A:      Corona.
PS01B:      Coroma?
PS01A:      Coroma? He had a new Coroma [pause] two litre [pause] [laughing] and
            he's towing this bloke on motorway at hundred mile an hour! []


## Category 4: using vulgar language


Tender or obscene remarks can be used for humorous effect; they are frequently
accompanied by laughter particles from the producer and recipient(s). Judging from
the frequent use of the 'unclear' tag in passages exhibiting vulgar language, it seems
likely that speakers 'committing' such improprieties tend to obscure their speech. This
is in line with Jefferson (1985), who also observes the presence of distorted speech
surrounding improper talk. The following is an example of toilet humour:

KDV n=2645

PS0SB:      Come on Kyle! Play the game properly.

```
PS0SH:      It's your go.
PS0SJ:      [yawn]
→ PS0SB:    I want a little toilet roll to fit in that [unclear].
→ PS0SJ:    [laugh] [pause] [laughing] To see she's wiped her arse []! ^ [laugh] ^
PS0SB:      ^ [laugh] ^
PS0SH:      [laugh]
PS0SB:      Look at Kyle! Look at him he's ^ gone up ^
PS0SH:      ^ Kyle! ^
```

The obscenity is interspersed into the on-going activity of playing a game. All participants, except the 9-year-old Kyle, join the laughter.

## Category 5: putting others down: insult, criticism, teasing

Numerous qualitative studies have been published on this kind of conversational humour. The core result is that teasing typically occurs in relatively close and stable relationships and is used to create and maintain a high level of intimacy (Günthner 1996, Schütte 1987, Eder 1993). Hence teasing serves to foster in-group solidarity but, while doing so, it may also generate out-groups (Dupréel 1928, Kotthoff 1998a).

Schütte describes several conventionalized techniques that are used to minimise the potential face-threat in teasing and help establishing the relevant interpretative frame (joking). Among these are exaggeration, repetition, ironic evaluation and laughing (250ff.). As Kotthoff observes, there is, however, always the risk of 'going too far', which may eventually result in serious interpersonal crises (298).

It is reasonable to distinguish between put-down humour where the victim is present and put-down humour where the target does not participate in the on-going interaction. The latter, as noted by Hay (1995), tends to be "genuine", whereas the former is jocular and "not intended to offend" (70).

The fragment below is an example of an absent person being put-down. The target is a woman who appears in the TV program 'Blind Date' which the interactants are currently viewing.

KPU n=1920

```
→ PS583:    I hate that dress she's got on. [pause] She's straight down to his ^
            trousers ^
PS582:      ^ Mm mm! ^
PS583:      then. [laugh] [pause] She's really eyeing him up and down.
PS582:      What did she say?
PS585:      Look what he's got. ^ [laugh] ^
PS582:      ^ [laugh] ^
PS583:      [laugh] [pause] Oh she not impre=, oh no.
→ PS582:    She's got quite big thighs hasn't she?
PS583:      She's got big thighs?
PS582:      Mm. [pause] Mm.
PS585:      [laugh]
→ PS582:    [laugh] [pause] I mean that jacket doesn't look right does it?
```

The following example shows a woman being collaboratively teased by her (female) friend and the daughter of her friend, 'Josie'.

B132801 n=184 (KPG n=4614[168])

| | |
|---|---|
| Jane: | Good! I don't like the teachers up there anyway. I only send you there cos it's cheap. [laugh] Don't have to buy uniform or nothing. [pause] Better just explain to that tape recorder that weren't your mother speaking. |
| → Josie: | That was my Mum's best friend it weren't my Mum. Some stupid woman from upstairs. She just comes in, she's like Dorien out of Birds of a Feather, she just invites herself in, you know. |
| → Patsy: | Yeah, but she hasn't got as many men in her life. ^ [laugh] ^ |
| → Josie: | ^ Yeah, in fact, she's only got Steve! ^ Loo= loo= look! Well, you know, you know I just, ^ you know [laugh] ^ |
| Patsy: | ^ Oh, let's be friends! ^ |
| Josie: | It's a bit [pause] |
| Jane: | [unclear] to old curry-face. |
| Patsy: | Getting all ^ excited! ^ |
| Josie: | ^ Who'd you ^ mean? Edwina Curry? |
| Patsy: | Now look, [unclear] is a real bargain. … |

## Category 6: inventing funny scenarios (fantasy humour)

People sometimes engage in constructing imaginary scenarios or events for humorous effect. This typically happens collaboratively with more than one speaker contributing to the developing story. In the fragment below a young woman flirts with a friend and tries to persuade him to go out dancing with her.

KPK n=0511

| | |
|---|---|
| PS001: | I've got two left feet. |
| PS563: | that's worth twenty quid. That's alright, if you tread on my feet I'll just pick you up and carry you then. |
| PS001: | Yeah, that's true. |
| PS563: | ^ [laughing] And put you - over my ^ |
| PS001: | ^ [laugh] ^ |
| PS563: | put you over my shoulder []. |
| PS001: | You probably could. |
| PS563: | [laugh] |
| PS001: | A fireman's lift then. |
| PS563: | [laugh] [pause] Oh dear. |
| PS001: | And we can [pause] disappear outside and everyone'll be talking. |
| PS563: | Oh yeah! Absolutely. |
| PS001: | [laugh] |
| PS563: | You'll have to deal with Martin though. Can you run faster than him? |
| PS001: | Erm |
| PS563: | [laugh] |

In adolescent talk the made-up stories often involve sexual fantasies and contain elements of teasing or insult. The following is an example where two teenage girls jokingly compete to date their friend Warren (PS6R3). In suggesting "Why don't you both come round" the object of the teasing, Warren, joins in the fantasy world.

KPG n=271

| | |
|---|---|
| PS556: | Warren I love you. |

---

[168] The speaker code assignments in the BNC file are at variance with the COLT material. The transcript shown adopts the version from COLT.

PS6R3:      Ah?
PS556:      You can come over tonight, and don't forget the condoms. ^ [laugh] ^
PS555:      ^ Are you coming ^ over on Saturday?
PS556:      No, he's coming round my house tonight ^ with his condoms. ^
PS555:      ^ Can I come ^ over on Saturday?
PS6R3:      Why don't you both come round ^ [unclear] ^
PS555:      ^ [laugh] ^ [laugh] [pause] [sighing] Oh [].

## Category 7: against good manners: violating social conventions

This category was born of the need to find a home for all those humorous manoeuvres that did not fit the narrower categories such as 'using vulgar language' or 'putting others down', which, of course, also defy decent social practice. As the name suggests it is a relatively broad class, holding a large range of examples that required further specification as to the violation of convention that had been committed. This process generated three sub-groups:

  (a)  self-praise,

  (b)  cheekiness and

  (c)  candidness,

each of which is illustrated by an example from the corpus below.

(a)  self-praise

Boasting of one's qualities in public is socially unacceptable (cf. 'maxim of modesty', Leech 1983; Pomerantz 1978, Tsui 1994).[169] This rule may, however, be violated for humorous effect. For example:

   KPK n=1556

   → PS563:    She's not as sexy as me is she?
   PS001:      [laughing] It's what you call
   PS563:      [laugh]
   PS001:      in fact I'm not even sure it was female then [].
   → PS563:    [laugh] [pause] Not that I'm insecure or anything.
   PS001:      [laugh] [pause] It's alright, you can try and [unclear].
   PS563:      [laugh] [pause] Oh dear. How's Nat?

(b)  cheekiness

Cheekiness is a mild form of defiant behaviour. Like category (5) discussed above, it is usually not intended to offend but rather to provoke a laugh or prompt further humorous comments. The following fragment shows that even three-year-olds are capable of it; after having been invited to lunch at his grandmother's little Tim (PS088) suggests to his mother (PS087) that grandmother (PS0XR) should also do the washing-up.

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[169] This rule is of course context-dependent: e.g. politicians, especially when campaigning break it often enough.

KBW n=19127

| | |
|---|---|
| PS087: | What about [pause] washing up? [pause] |
| PS088: | Think grandma [unclear]. |
| PS087: | Oh no she doesn't. |
| PS088: | [laugh] Yeah. |
| PS087: | Poor grandma. |
| PS088: | Yeah. |
| PS087: | She gives us our lunch and we have to wash up for her then. |
| PS088: | No. ^ [laugh] ^ |
| PS087: | ^ Oh yes we do. ^ |
| PS0XR: | There seems to be a mess on this table, look |

(c) candidness

While tact, politeness or other social considerations often prevent us from (directly) expressing our true thoughts and personal convictions it also occasionally happens that - either deliberately or unintentionally - we disclose our 'private' opinion or say things that are potentially offensive. This can be quite embarrassing and for that reason such humorous manoeuvres are more likely to occur in more intimate relationships. In the following excerpt, Pauline (PS0JC) admits to her friend Larna (PS0JA) that she likes the idea of hen parties and would not mind attending one.

KD1 n=3836

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0JA: | Have you ever seen any of them or not? |
| PS0JC: | No I'd like to [laugh] |
| PS0JA: | [laugh] |
| PS0JC: | Well why not men go to the bleeding, er well it's like I've never been to a proper hen night, Gary's been to a, a stag night, with female strippers, I'd like to go to a stag, er a hen night |
| PS0JA: | Mm [pause] oh dear [sneeze] oh dear me |

## Category 8: generating implicature

In contrast to the previous category, this manoeuvre derives its humour from indirect expression.

This class is reminiscent of the definition of humour advocated by incongruity theories involving, as it does, the encoding and disambiguation of two (or more) senses (see section 1.3.2). The phenomenon is therefore well-known – at least from a structural and operational viewpoint – although qualitative descriptions of their realisation in spontaneous speech are still scarce.

It seems safe to say that humorous manoeuvres of this sort are generally held in higher esteem than other kinds.[170] This can be explained (and, perhaps, justified) by the complexity of the process: the speaker has to cue their utterance in a way that forbids a plain reading and, simultaneously, indicate which other meaning(s) are intended whereupon the recipient needs to infer the 'correct' sense(s) and think of an adequate response. The phenomenon is also referred to in the literature as polyphonic

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[170] Cf. Crawford (1989) and Crawford/Gressley (1991), who identify 'creativity' as the most valued trait associated with a good sense of humour.

voicing (see Bakhtin), staged intertextuality (Kotthoff) or (echoic) mention (Sperber and Wilson).

A much-discussed variety of this humorous kind is irony. It is beyond the scope of this work to present a detailed account of this phenomenon. However, a few remarks are appropriate to highlight some key issues relevant to this analysis.

1. Definition

Approaches to 'irony' may differ widely but scholars who have dealt with the phenomenon in some detail generally agree on one point: one cannot put it in a nutshell. The traditional viewpoint offered by a number of linguists (e.g. Brown/Levinson 1978, Eggs 1979), and captured by the OED's first entry

> a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt

is sometimes considered too specific as it permits only *opposite* relationships, which, in the light of some instances of irony, is unsustainable (Wilson/Sperber 1992, Giora 1995). However, the broader definition proposed by others (e.g. Barbe 1995, Myers Roy 1978 as cited in Haverkate 1990), namely that irony transports a *different* meaning than that said is certainly too global since it blurs the contrast with other related phenomena (e.g. metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole). This dilemma can perhaps be usefully resolved by applying prototype theory, which was to some extent attempted by Kotthoff (1998b) for whom the opposition of meaning was certainly a central feature. The present analysis adopts Giora's (1995) definition, which - beside opposition - includes a *more than* and *less than* interpretation of the literal meaning.[171]

2. Pragmatic considerations

More recent treatments of irony often describe it in terms of an evaluative act where an attitude not shared by the issuer of the ironic remark is "echoed" (in "what is said"/the dictum) and implicitly negated[172] (Kotthoff 1998b, Wilson/Sperber 1992, Giora 1995). Several authors believe that the dictum typically depicts the (alleged) opinion of some present interlocutor, resulting in playful criticism or sarcasm. This may well be the prototype although other ironic varieties surely exist such as ironic compliments ("blaming in order to praise", Muecke 1969) or instances where the dictum refers to some "undefinable generalized human being" (Kotthoff 1998b:4) or ironic utterances which do not reflect an opinion at all (for examples see Martin 1992, Kaufer 1981).[173] The present study includes those (perhaps peripheral) uses. It does not, however, embrace ironic situations (sometimes referred to as *irony of fate*), which - in contrast to verbal irony - are non-intentional. Such instances are either classified as 'telling a funny story' or 'quipping at what's going on at the moment' depending on when the ironic situation occurred.

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[171] Elsewhere in Giora's paper it is argued that ironic utterances are, however, less vague than their potential alternative, direct negation.

[172] For reason of simplicity, two other interpretations (*more than*, *less than*) quoted above have been omitted.

[173] For an overview of ironic 'patterns' as identified in spontaneous speech, see Hartung (1998).

3. Neighboring categories

Verbal irony has been contrasted with (other) rhetorical figures such as metaphor (Giora 1995) and litotes (Haverkate 1990) or forms of quotation (Kotthoff 1998b) in order to illuminate its characteristic features. It is perhaps worthwhile delineating its domain with respect to two other *humorous* categories, namely parody and animated speech, which are also double-voiced. The difference is two-fold: first, they lack the clashing of evaluative perspectives that is typical of irony; second, they differ in terms of which of the two voices outweighs the other (i.e. the *author* or the *principal*, in Goffman's (1981) framework). For these reasons, instances of parody or animation are classed under a different heading labelled 'performing' and discussed below.

Ironical criticism and, to some extent, ironical compliments may serve to tease, criticise or, at worst, insult someone. There is thus a proximity to class 5 'putting others down: insult, criticism, teasing', which is, however, reserved for non-ironical banter only.

4. Methodological considerations

It must be stressed that the focus of the present study is laughter so the corpus was not exhaustively searched for irony or some other type of humour. Laughter incidences were analysed and attempts were made to relate them to a particular humorous manoeuvre. As a result, only those ironic instances that are somehow accompanied with laughter (as contextualisation cues or in response to some ironical remark) enter the analysis. Given the widespread viewpoint that irony is often signalled on the level of prosody, kinetics (both of which are, of course, hardly identifiable in the transcripts) or contextually (Barbe 1995, Hartung 1998, Kotthoff 1998b), the figures computed are certainly not representative of the overall presence of irony in conversation. This observation, of course, also holds true for the other humorous manoeuvres identified in this study.

5. Examples

The following excerpt originates from a dinner party between four participants: Rachel, aged 27 (PS582), her sister Anne-Marie, aged 29 (PS583), and their two friends Michael, aged 36 (PS584) and Gearoid, aged 40 (PS585).

    KPU n= 2062

| | |
|---|---|
| PS585: | Oh! Wedding bells. |
| PS583: | They're holding hands. |
| PS585: | [laugh] [pause] Blind Date. |
| → PS583: | I think you were the only one that [laughing] recognised that []. |
| PS582: | [laughing] Yeah []. |
| PS584: | You were ^ actually.^ |
| PS583: | ^ [laugh] ^ |
| PS585: | ^ Yes. ^ Yeah. Yes erm |
| → PS582: | [laughing] Yes, cos he's been on the gin and Martini []. |
| PS585: | Been on the Coke. |
| PS583: | ^ [laugh] ^ |

Gearoid makes an all two obvious statement ("[laugh] [pause] Blind Date") whereupon Anne-Marie produces the ironic remark contextualised with laughing

intonation (see first arrow). The other interlocutors join in by mockingly asserting the truth of the literal meaning. Rachel continues the teasing with another ironic utterance (see second arrow) discernible from contextual knowledge: unlike the others, Gearoid has not been consuming the alcoholic drinks mentioned. Both ironic instances imply the opposite of what was said literally.

The next passage shows an example of ironic understatement (equivalent to the *more than* interpretation, see above):

KCS n=1596

PS1F2:     Is your daughter keeping alright?
→ PS1F3:    Yeah she's, just at the moment she hadn't a complaint
PS1F2:     Oh that's good
PS1F3:     [laugh] Ah, ha, I said
PS1F2:     Touch wood as they say
PS1F3:     ^ I say what's your trouble today then? ^
PS1F1:     ^ Here, here, here, here ^
PS1F3:     ^ We haven't got one ^
PS1F2:     ^ [cough] ^
PS1F3:     That's marvellous [laugh]

Ken's (PS1F3, aged 63) wording in response to his neighbour Joan's (PS1F2, aged 65) polite request is polyphonous in that it suggests a number of evaluative statements: (1) last time he saw his daughter she *seemed* alright; (2) this might have changed; (3) his daughter usually complains (without reason). After Joan's appreciative remark ("Touch wood as they say") animated dialogue elaborates the irony.

Beside irony, the class 'generating implicature' also contains instances of allusive (humorous) comments such as the following:

KD7 n=1418

PS0KP:    I'm not looking for a Jag! I'm not looking for a Jag=! I'm not interested in a Jag= Christopher!
PS0KV:    It's nineteen seventy, a good body work, [unclear], spoilers,[unclear] alloys, triple kerbs
PS0KP:    [laugh]
PS0KV:    Two hundred ^ and six ^
PS0KP:    ^ Yeah ^ okay.
PS0KV:    two hundred and sixty five brake horse.
→ PS0KP:  Attached B P petrol station! ^ [laugh] ^
PS0KV:    ^ [laugh] ^

Matt (PS0KP, 35) is looking for a car and discusses various models with his friend Christopher (PS0KV). When Christopher is trying to sell him the idea of buying a Jaguar by enumerating its qualities ("It's nineteen seventy, a good body work, …") Matt jokingly completes the list with an "attached BP petrol station", implying, of course, that the Jaguar consumes too much petrol.

## Category 9: quipping at what's going on at the moment

This category is adopted from Hay (1995),[174] who noticed that a lot of humorous examples refer to "the environment, the events occurring at the time, or [about] the previous person's words" (74). This category is also present in conversations between British English speakers. Two examples are given below.

> KCX n=1792

| PS1FG: | I bet you get as fat as a pig! |
|--------|--------------------------------|
| PS1FH: | I am! So what? |
| → PS1FC: | He's not bothered! [laugh] |
| PS1FG: | Well he says, said to me [pause] I don't know why you're going to keep, er th to slimming thing cos you, because [pause] I can't tell no difference with you. |
| PS1FH: | Can you tell? |
| PS1FG: | You what? I can tell, yeah. |
| PS1FH: | That's all that counts. |

In the above passage Kathleen (PS1FC, 37) comments upon Steve's (PS1FH, 39) response to his wife's (PS1FG, 40+) insulting criticism that he eats too much.

The following excerpt is taken from a conversation between Wendy (PS52U, 33) and her mother Hazel (PS52Y, 72). The humour derives from the fact that Hazel – judging from the noise level – gets the impression that the boys are playing in the background, not, as is actually the case, outside the front of the house. For additional humorous effect, Hazel's mistaken perception underscores Wendy's previous comment on the boys being "boisterous as ever".

> KP8 n=3373

| PS52Y: | ^ How ^ are the boys? |
|--------|------------------------|
| PS52U: | Yeah. Oh! Erm, fine, fine, they're boisterous as ever. |
| PS52Y: | I can hear them screeching around in the background. |
| → PS52U: | Oh they're, believe it or not they're outside, you can hear them from outside! |
| PS52Y: | Oh! |
| PS52U: | [laugh] [pause] They were here initially, but they've gone outside, they're out the front. [unclear] |

## Category 10: exaggerating

This category refers to humorous instances where some idea or concept is deliberately inflated for comic effect. Beside exaggeration this may also be achieved by understatement. In contrast to 'irony' discussed above, this humorous manoeuvre does not, however, involve a change in sense.[175]

The following is an example:

---

[174] In Hay (1995) this type is labelled 'observational humour'.

[175] Hyperbole, the corresponding figure of speech, does not qualify as a trope either.

KDV n=2581

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0SJ: | [laughing] I get the hint |
| PS0SC: | Ah! Ah! |
| PS0SJ: | that somebody telling me I stink! |
| PS0SH: | [laughing] I got loads of [pause] toiletries and things this year []! You should worry, they obviously think I stink more than you! ^ [laugh] ^ |
| PS0SB: | ^ [laugh] ^ |
| PS0SJ: | Oh! Christmas. |
| PS0SC: | You do! |
| PS0SB: | Got loads and loads! And you had a load more for you ^ birthday ^ |
| PS0SH: | ^ Okay. ^ |
| PS0SB: | didn't you? |
| PS0SC: | Any time. |
| PS0SH: | Yep! [laugh] [pause] And loads of chocolates. I'm taking a lot back with me. |

The quantity of toiletries received as presents is exaggerated so as to render the comparison with the notion of personal hygiene more dramatic.

## Category 11: performing

When the humour originates from an external source and is staged for the purpose of entertaining we have a prototypical instance of performing. Various subgroups fall under this heading, e.g. animated quotation, (parodying) song performances and joke tellings. The first example shows an instance of animation, the second a joint exercise in satiric verse.

KBL n=1524

| | |
|---|---|
| PS06J: | [laughing] Mel []! |
| PS06B: | Oh there's, Mel! |
| PS06J: | I did that the first excuse [pause] and Lee, yeah, yeah office! |
| PS06B: | [laugh] |
| → PS06J: | [laugh] [pause] He's been told to go to the office so many times it like [pause] yeah, yeah, alright! I'm going! I'm going! [laugh] |

KPG n=247

| | |
|---|---|
| PS555: | ^ my name is Nick, my mum's a junkie. ^ |
| PS556: | ^ my name is Nick, my mum's a junkie. ^ |
| PS000: | No don't say that cos I |
| PS555: | ^ My name is Nick, my gran is randy. ^ |
| PS556: | ^ My name is [laughing] Nick [], my gran is randy. ^ |
| PS555: | [laugh] [pause] ^ My name is Nick. ^ |
| PS556: | ^ My name is Nick. ^ Ready, steady, [singing] your gran is ^ randy []. ^ [loud bleeping] |
| PS555: | ^ [laugh] ^ |

## Category 12: noticing an incongruity (referential)

Sometimes people (suddenly) become aware of some discrepancy, absurdity or incongruous state of affairs that does not conform to what they perceive as normal. In commenting on these inconsistencies they draw attention to their implicit humour.

The first passage below draws its humour from the fact that one of the speakers estimated the value of a picture on the basis of the frame rather than on the picture itself. In the second example, it is the "duck in the washing" which is inconsistent with normal expectation.

KBB n=5455

PS03T:      you should ^ of [sic] asked him if you ^
PS03S:      ^ I was too busy looking ^ at the picture ^ and the frame ^
PS03T:      ^ yeah I know you were ^
PS03S:      I were weighing up the value of the frame
→ PS03T:    [laugh] not the picture
PS03S:      I like the frame though very much
PS03T:      oh I do ^ its like the mountains ^

KBW n=5867

PS087:      just off [pause] hanging over the welly boots [pause] when somebody puts their feet in the welly boots they get a bit of shock! The spider goes in. [pause] I can see a fly as well [pause] can you see the fly?
PS089:      It's over there.
PS087:      That's right, there it is [pause] and there's the other one. [pause] Shall we turn over this [unclear] and see what we can find. [pause] Oh this [pause] this page makes me laugh! [pause] What have we got?
→ PS088:    A duck in the washing.
PS089:      [laugh]
PS087:      [laugh] [pause] A duck in the washing, that's it. [pause] And what else? [pause] And somebody with a pan on their head!

## Category 13: other

This category was born of the fact that not every humorous instance could be pigeonholed into one of the twelve classes given above and/or its rare occurrence as a particular type did not justify the generation of yet another category. Interestingly, self-deprecating humour and humour associated with troubles talk (both of which have attracted significant attention in the humour literature) do not figure highly in the present study (and are, accordingly, classified under this heading). This is certainly partly due to the study design, which registers only those humorous manoeuvres that are somehow accompanied by laughter. Hence, it is possible that the aforementioned types are less frequently contextualized or responded to by laughter.

## Category 14: non-humorous examples

For some laughter occurrences it was impossible to discern a clear connection to humour. The following two examples serve as illustration:

(1) KCF n=192

PS1EM:      They can get them because they are British.
PS1EP:      Pakistan's British?
PS1EM:      Well it was, it was in the empire. It's in the commonwealth isn't it? And Indians and all this. And this is why we're trying to stop them coming in. [pause] There's ten thousand a week coming in. [pause]
PS1EP:      Every week?

→ PS1EM:     [laugh] [pause] They're coming in from everywhere. And this is what the, the [unclear] what's name now [pause] that when it's opened in nineteen ninety two [pause] the communist block will be able to come through Germany this way in. Straight into this country.

(2) KBW n=9747

PS088:       Then I'm going to ^ [unclear] ^
PS087:       ^ Oh look at that. ^ Horrid. ^ I don't want that. ^
PS089:       ^ No I don't want ^ [pause]
PS087:       Have you won?
→ PS089:     Yes. ^ [laugh] ^
PS087:       ^ Oh look at that. ^ He's got a jelly. [pause] Well done. Right it's just me and you now Tim.
→ PS089:     [laugh] [pause]


## 4.5   Types of laughter

This section presents a proposed taxonomy for investigating types of laughter, focusing on their discourse function in everyday talk. Some of the functional labels are adopted from the literature (affiliative laughter, disaffiliative laughter), some are inferred from qualitative descriptions (contextualising laughter) and some emerged during the analysis (reflexive laughter, heterogeneous laughter).

The terms in brackets at the end of each headline are the labels used in the tables (see section 4.10).


### 4.5.1   Affiliative laughter (aff)

When laughter is interpretable as supporting some prior intentionally humorous utterance it is labelled affiliative laughter (*aff*). Following Schenkein's (1972) description, affiliative laughter signals "coincidence of thought, attitude, sense of humour and the like" (371). This type of laughter normally occurs directly after the termination of the intentionally non-serious utterance. The following is a prototypical example:[176]

KD3 n=1451

PS0JJ:       Yeah. [pause] No I mean he didn't want his [pause] erm [pause] milk at tea time.
PS0JL:       Oh yeah. He nearly weed [sic] all over me.
PS0JJ:       → [laugh] Did he? He nearly got me this afternoon. [laugh] [pause] You have to watch him.

Sometimes affiliative laughter occurs delayed as shown in the fragment below:

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[176] "Single" laughter occurrences could also be mentioned here as prototypical representatives; they are, however, not included in the present investigation (see section 4.3).

KCX n=5589

| | |
|---|---|
| PS1FC: | and then he's just gone mad, I think they've gone to his head. Did I tell you they call him Juan now? |
| PS1FE: | Yeah that's a new one innit? |
| PS1FC: | Yeah. |
| PS1FE: | Be alright if one of the birds turn up here and you say oh hello Florence, oh no I'm not Florence I'm Zebedee. |
| PS1FC: | Yeah. |
| PS1FE: | You know? |
| PS1FC: | → [laugh] Yeah that's true. [pause] I'm wondering what that thing is on Maureen's wall, have you seen it? [pause] |
| PS1FE: | No, ain't been ^ looking. ^ |

Maggie's (PS1FE) animated comment "… and you say oh hello Florence, oh no I'm not Florence I'm Zebedee" does not immediately trigger the projected recipient laughter. It is only after Maggie's enquiring "You know?" that Kathleen (PS1FC) demonstrates[177] her understanding.

Affiliative laughter may be prompted by laughter particles (often utterance-final) or laughing intonation produced by the humorist. These are instances of *invited laughter*, symbolized as *aff+* in the tables. Laughter marked as 'simultaneous' in the transcripts is also categorised in this group. The following are two examples:

KBG n=550

| | |
|---|---|
| PS052: | We've got big cobwebs up there and all! |
| PS051: | Don't tell [laughing] everybody our secrets []! |
| PS052: | → [laugh] [pause] Sorry! Oh dear! It's quite a surprise! Mm. |
| PS051: | [whistling] Yeah. |

KBR n=502

| | |
|---|---|
| PS10D: | We'd most probably end up in Wales or something |
| PS069: | I'd go and ring Barry up then → ^ [laugh] ^ |
| PS10D: | → ^ [laugh] ^ [pause] So what you gonna do for eats tomorrow then? Well you won't have much time now to eat |

Occasionally, affiliative laughter is found at the end of the humour recipient's utterance. In those cases, the words preceding the laughter may express "coincidence of thought" (first example below) or echo some prior humorous contribution (second example):

KD2 n=1212

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0J1: | Put Jaws and Jane together. |
| PS0J7: | They'd not know the difference. |
| PS0J1: | I mean Jabber Jaws. |
| PS0J7: | Mm! That's what I mean! → [laugh] |

KBL n=1840

| | |
|---|---|
| PS06B: | Jec! Oh he did then! Oh prat! [laugh] |
| PS06J: | [laugh] |
| PS06B: | Prat! |
| PS06F: | Don't call him a prat! |

---

[177] Maggie's joke refers to a very popular children's programme broadcast in the 60s and 70s on BBC1.

| PS06B: | Jack! Prat! Prat! Prat! He responds! |
| PS06J: | Jack the prat! → [laugh] |

## 4.5.2  Contextualising laughter (con)

When laughter is used to cue an utterance as non-serious, emphasise its laughability or mitigate some implicit criticism then it is classified as contextualising (*con*). Typically, contextualising laughter is tagged on to the end of an utterance.[178] At this place, it also marks utterance completion and induces speaker transition (see Schenkein 1972:365, Jefferson 1979, Jefferson/Sacks/Schegloff 1987, Glenn 1989). In the following fragment contextualising utterance-final laughter occurs during story telling:

KBU n=1056

| PS18E: | Tony said I need to do some exercise late at night. Cos I annoy him. Because as soon as I go upstairs [pause] I'm wide awake. → [laugh] |
| PS18L: | Mm mm. |
| PS18E: | He says you should go, go jogging or something late at night. I said well if you got us a dog I'd have to take it for a late night walk wouldn't I? → [laugh] |
| PS18L: | Come jogging with me. Do you fancy coming jogging? |

Occasionally, laughter serves to downplay a potentially face-threatening act as in this example where Carol (PS05B) corrects her French au-pair's (Joelle, PS05C) English:

KBH n=5753

| PS05C: | I go and make the beans. |
| PS05B: | They're already made you just have to prepare them. → [laugh] |

According to previous CA research (Jefferson 1979, Glenn 1989, Jefferson/Sacks/Schegloff 1987) post-utterance laughter particles produce a relevance of laughter, i.e. they invite laughter from the recipient(s). This invitation is *normally* accepted; in other words, *as a rule*, "recipient thereupon laughs" as Jefferson (1979:80) points out. (Such instances are coded as *con+* in the present work.) Exceptions to this kind of contextual relevance have been noted in "troubles talk" (Jefferson 1984) and, to some extent, in connection with "improper talk" (Jefferson/Sacks/Schegloff 1987).

Somewhat contrary to these observations, at least from a purely numerical perspective, is the fact that in the present study post-utterance laughter particles do not – as a rule – trigger recipient laughter; only every fifth instance does so. It is beyond the scope of this investigation to look more closely into this but this finding suggests – among other things - that there exist alternative strategies in response to laughter invitations.[179] One option that could perhaps be seen as being as supportive as

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[178] As shown by some of the examples presented below, contextualising laughter may, of course, also occur within speech.

[179] It is only in relatively recent publications that researchers have noted the presence of humour support strategies other than laughter. Hay (1995) offers a reasonably detailed overview of alternative humour support strategies.

laughter is the continuation or elaboration of the initiated humour. Consider the following fragment where two adolescent boys fantasise about their friend's appearance at their upcoming party:

KSV n=5539

| | |
|---|---|
| PS1K5: | So what do you think Donna will wear? |
| PS1BY: | Nothing if I had my way [laugh] |
| → PS1K5: | What, you want something to sort of take off don't you? |
| PS1BY: | A negligee [laugh] |
| → PS1K5: | Me and Ron here don't like negligence |
| PS1BY: | [laugh] |
| PS1K5: | no we don't like fe - any form of underwear |
| PS1BY: | [laugh] |

Clearly, what happens here is hardly a case of turning down laughter invitations but rather an expansion of the stripping fantasy initiated by Richard (PS1BY).

Contextualising laughter may also occur in utterance-initial position. The following is an example:

KDM n=12792

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0PN: | Ooh, I tell you what you want though. |
| PS0PP: | For the iron? |
| PS0S0: | ^ Got a ^ |
| PS0RR: | ^ Yeah. ^ |
| PS0PN: | couple of things for you. [pause] You want water from, where was it I said to you? |
| PS0PP: | → [laugh] |
| PS0PN: | From er |
| PS0PP: | → [laugh] Lourdes! |
| PS0PN: | No, no! From nor -, somewhere in Snowdonia [pause] they send this water all over the country [pause] and it's so full of iron [pause] Germany, they buy it [pause] [unclear]. [pause] But er, it's a good [pause] I don't know about cure, but whatever! |
| PS0PP: | Dunno, something ^ you read ^ |

This passage is discussed in great detail elsewhere (see sections 2.2.2 and 4.4, where it is cited as an instance of the humorous manoeuvre 'playing with words').

### 4.5.3  Disaffiliative laughter (disaff)

Disaffiliative laughter is laughter "placed in a slot in which it is not specifically appropriate" (Makri-Tsilipakou 1994:35) and expresses disapproval or criticism of some first speaker's utterance.[180] Schenkein (1972) lists a number of functions associated with diaffiliation: "put down, ridicule, turn the tables on, make uneasy, cause trouble" (371).

By far the majority of disaffiliative laughter occurrences identified in the corpus are in utterance-initial position. In the following example disaffiliative laughter introduces a challenging move:

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[180] Disaffiliative laughter can thus be regarded as a misplacement marker (see Schegloff/Sacks 1973).

KD4 n=801

| | |
|---|---|
| PS13C: | Or buy two brand new Fiestas. |
| PS0JW: | [laugh] |
| PS13C: | What I'd really like for us to have, and this is some time in the future, is one nice sort of saloon type car for best |
| PS0JW: | → [laugh] [laughing] For best []? |
| PS13C: | for best, yeah |
| PS0JW: | [laugh] Yes. |

Adrian (PS13C) tells his wife Margaret (PS0JW) what solutions he considers best to solve their transport problems. His suggestion to buy a "nice sort of saloon type car for best" is received with laughter. In echoing the relevant phrase (*for best*) Margaret spells out what exactly she found ludicrous in Adrian's proposal. It remains, however, unclear whether her criticism is metalingual (the phrase *for best* is typically used for the sort of outfit one wears on relatively formal occasions – not for cars) or whether she disapproves of the proposal. Less ambiguous in this respect is the following instance where David (PS09V) draws attention to the absurdity of the phrase "light at night" (see also section 4.4, Category 2):

KC2 n=3131

| | |
|---|---|
| PS09V: | I love summer, summer time you know it's special about summer time |
| PS09U: | I like it when it gets dar=, dark |
| PS09V: | Ah? |
| PS09U: | I mean I like it when it's still light at night |
| PS09V: | → [laugh] light at night, yeah so do I, mm [pause] well, oh [unclear] |

As shown in the fragment below, the phenomenon may be much more subtle in that the concomitant utterance does not make any backward reference at all:

KPU n=1691

| | |
|---|---|
| PS583: | [reading] You can though perform a successful damage limitation exercise if you try. You may even be able to coax a victory out of the situation []. |
| PS584: | That's Gearoid for you. |
| PS583: | But if you attend church |
| PS585: | → [laugh] [pause] I love this ad. |
| PS000: | [laugh] [unclear] |
| PS583: | Tea! Coffee! |

Anne-Marie (PS583) is reading out Gearoid's (PS585) horoscope. When she attempts to continue ("But if you attend church"), Gearoid interrupts her by laughing. A short silence ensues whereupon Gearoid takes the next move and changes the topic.[181] Ann-Marie has obviously got the message as she ceases reciting from the horoscope.

### 4.5.4  Reflexive laughter (reflex)

This category roughly corresponds to the type of laughter described by Glenn (1989) in connection with multi-party interactions. In analysing his transcripts, Glenn noted the following pattern: "[…] current speaker produces a laughable and some other speaker initiates responsive laughter. Current speaker may or may not join the

---

[181] Gearoid may be commenting on some advertisement shown on television.

laughter subsequently" (135). I refer to such sequence-final laughter occurrences as reflexive laugher (*reflex+*) as they applaud one's own humorous contribution and are preceded by some other speaker's laugh. In contrast to Glenn's description, the *reflex-* category also includes laughter instances that are not preceded by another interlocutor's first laugh. In those cases the *reflex*[182] laughter underscores the 'laughability' of some prior humorous comment[183] or event.

The following two examples serve as illustration:

KCH n=2239

| PS1BS: | Joan? No, that was last Saturday. Oh that reminds me, did you say you rang David this morning? |
|--------|-----|
| PS1BU: | Mm. |
| PS1BS: | And? |
| PS1BU: | He was [pause] in ^ [unclear] ^ |
| PS1BS: | ^ Don't ^ tell me, he's going to help? |
| PS1BU: | Yeah. |
| PS1BS: | → [laugh] [pause] Look. |
| PS1BU: | Look. |

KPU n=192

| PS582: | She's got quite big thighs hasn't she? |
|--------|-----|
| PS583: | She's got big thighs? |
| PS582: | Mm. [pause] Mm. |
| PS585: | [laugh] |
| PS582: | → [laugh] [pause] I mean that jacket doesn't look right does it? |
| PS000: | [laugh] |

### 4.5.5  Heterogeneous laughter (hetero)

So far, we have been looking at laughter that was well defined on two dimensions: (1) the role division between humour *producer* and *recipient* and (2) the direction of laughter as either *prospective* or *retrospective*. There are, however, a fair number of laughter incidences that appear functionally ambivalent in terms of these aspects and therefore cannot be conveniently pigeonholed.[184] Consider the following fragment:

KBN n=1702

| PS060: | Do you mind, I'm trying to do a programme here, and how the hell can I do it, with your gob slapping? Thank you [pause] |
|--------|-----|
| PS05Y: | → [laugh] Oh you dickhead |
| PS060: | Oy, right then today, we have got Melanie of Neighbours here with us [unclear] |

Melissa's (PS060) rather offensive call for silence is returned with an insult preceded by laughter from Clare (PS05Y). Clare's laughter can be interpreted in at least three ways: as a retrospective act, either affiliating or disaffiliating (herself) with the prior

---

[182] Note that there is no extra '+' – sign that would symbolise some adjacent laughter.
[183] Sometimes this is comparable to the pursuit of laughter by current speaker when his/her laughter invitation has been declined (see Jefferson 1979).
[184] This is, of course, hardly surprising given that moves within turn-sequences can also be simultaneously predicted and predicting (see section 2.2.2).

utterance **or** as a prospective act, contextualising her own insulting comment towards Melissa **or** as a synthesis of the two aforementioned functions. Now it may very well be the case that the information which would resolve this ambiguity is not visible in the transcript but was communicated via prosody and paralinguistic channels in the actual event. But it is, of course, also possible that this instance is intentionally ambiguous.

Evidence for the fact that laughter can be Janus-faced can be found in its use in interrupting other turns. So far, 'laughter interruptions' have been accounted for by their briefness and power of accomplishing "rather intricate pieces of interactional work" (Schenkein 1972:367) or, as Kotthoff (1998a) puts it, by "der Ideologie der unbeherrschbaren Spontaneität" (107). These explanations tell only part of the story. Consider the following fragment:

KPU n=1663

PS583:      [reading] It doesn't make sense to buy the cheapest brand of baked beans to save a few pence. []
PS585:      ^ It's true. ^
PS583:      [reading] ^ So then ^ fill your car tank at the most expensive petrol station [laughing] in town. [] []
PS584:      [laugh]
PS583:      [reading] → [laughing] If you're going to make economies [], make efficient ones. Similarly, if you are going to be extravagant, be so in an a area, [laughing] where you're actually going to see the benefit []
PS585:      So you ^ see ^
PS583:      ^ Ha= ^
PS585:      I told you you should have those two pairs of shoes.
PS583:      [reading] → [laughing] happiness will come to all Virgos [] who aim the right arrows at the right targets this weekend []. Gearoid, what are you?
PS585:      It depends. It is the nineteenth of February, which one does it fall on theirs? Pisces or [pause] Aquarius?
PS582:      Pisces.
PS583:      Aquaria=, Aquarius.
PS585:      Mhm.
PS583:      [reading] Expect a hectic weekend [].
PS585:      Hmm mm.
PS583:      [reading] You will have to spend a lot of time preventing tricky scenarios from getting any worse or keeping antagonistic individuals apart [].
PS585:      [laugh]
PS584:      [laughing] Who was that [].
PS583:      [reading] → [laughing] Simultaneously, you may be fending off [] criticism from a friend or relative ^ who feels ^ []
PS585:      ^ Ah oh! ^ …

This excerpt originates from a dinner party between four participants: the sisters Anne-Marie (PS583, aged 29) and Rachel (PS582, aged 27) and their friends Michael (PS584, aged 36) and Gearoid (PS585, aged 40). Anne-Marie entertains the others by reading out their horoscopes. This does not however mean that she has been granted the floor: speech overlap (especially at the beginning of the fragment) indicates that there is quite some competition over speaking rights. As a strategy to regain the floor Ann-Marie can be seen to laugh or produce laughter intonation at the onset of her utterance. Again, as in the previous example, laughter can be interpreted as referring back to the previous turn but in this particular case the prospective and contextualising character of the laughter would seem more obvious and prominent.

The following is an example where a laughter interruption fails to take the floor:

> KBB n=2533
>
> PS03U:    were quite pale and I thought here we go [laughing] it's me next []. ^ And
>           er ^
> PS03S:    ^ What about ^ Bush then? ^ [unclear] ^
> PS03U:    ^ He, he passed out ^ didn't he? ^ Collapsed ^
> PS03T:    ^ Yeah. ^
> PS03U:    that was ^ terrible. ^
> PS03T:    → ^ [laugh] ^ ^ But I just remember [unclear] ^
> PS03S:    ^ But mind you he's a bit ^ he's a bit silly, looking back [pause] at myself er
>           er three year, or was it two year back, or one? You know I, I've got a big
>           laurel and it was coming right over what we call the roundabout so I
>           decided to have a go at it.

Conversational humour is seldom the result of one person staging a show or offering humorous lines for the other's entertainment but is rather a joint achievement. When humour is produced collaboratively and accompanied by laughter it is often impossible to discern which function (affiliative or contextualising) a particular laughter incidence serves. Consider the following excerpt:

> KSV n=4485
>
> PS1BY:    ^ Such ^ a thing to do! So, if I have a word with, like I say, with Donna and
>           see what she thinks, if it's a good idea. [yawning] I will basically do that [].
>           So, that's what I'll do. Great! It's gonna be a great laugh! I think if we get
>           everybody by ooh, ten thirty we can have sort of [pause] a game of strip
>           Trivial Pursuit. [laugh]
> PS1K5:    And the only person we strip is Donna! → ^ [laugh] ^
> PS1BY:    ^ [laughing] That's right []! ^ [laughing] And Sarah [last or full name] []!
>           Cor! Yeah! [unclear]

Andy's (PS1K5) post-utterance laughter can be interpreted as an instance of affiliative laughter since it supports Richard's prior humorous fantasy. But it also marks Andy's own humorous contribution and as such fulfils a contextualising function. Simultaneously, Andy's laughter represents a laughter invitation (Jefferson 1979) and projects some appropriate next action. As a result, this laughter incidence can be construed as being both retrospective and prospective.

Richard's laughing response, classifiable as a sequence-terminating follow-up move, endorses the felicitous outcome of the humorous exchange. Such moves are frequently found in jointly produced conversational humour. In the present taxonomy they can be regarded as a combination of affiliative and reflexive laughter and are thus grouped under this heading.

In conclusion, laughter instances were marked as heterogeneous (*hetero*) when the transcripts did not permit an unequivocal interpretation and functional ambivalence could therefore not be ruled out.

## 4.5.6  Other (other)

There are three instances that could not be placed into one of the categories above. Two of them are rather similar in that laughter occurs in follow-up move position

after a negative responding act.[185] Their function may be described as 'making light of the situation'. The following excerpt serves as illustration:

KD1 n=3874

| PS0JA: | you coming in or you staying out? |
| PS0JF: | [crying] |
| PS0JA: | Dog knocked him over didn't he, then you hit your head on your bike |
| PS0JE: | Oh dear |
| PS0JA: | Have you had a good day? |
| PS0JE: | Not really |
| PS0JA: | → [laugh] Oh dear why's that? |
| PS0JE: | Washing dishes not much fun [unclear] |

The third *other*-instance occurs in connection to winning a game. The person who laughs is a five-year-old boy and it seems likely that his laughter, rather than serving a strategic function, is solely motivated on psychological grounds:[186]

KBW n=9747

| PS087: | Have you won? |
| PS089: | Yes. → ^ [laugh] ^ |
| PS087: | ^ Oh look at that. ^ He's got a jelly. [pause] Well done. Right it's just me and you now Tim. |
| PS089: | [laugh] [pause] |

---

[185] It is not entirely obvious in the present example why one should qualify the preceding move as a negative responding act. It can however be justified on the grounds that initiating moves of the type "Have you had a good day?" or "How are you?" are conventionally responded to positively (e.g. "Fine", "Not too bad", etc.). By saying "Not really", PS0JE does not fulfil the illocutionary intent of PS0JA's request.

[186] Note that this example has already been presented as an instance of the 'non-humorous' category in the humour taxonomy.

## 4.6 Laughter position within turn sequence

In addition to the functional taxonomy presented above, laughter incidences were classified according to where they occur within an exchange. The main objective of this was to gain insights in the exchange structure of humorous discourse and to seek some quantitative evidence for the observations on this issue (presented in section 2.2.2), which were based on a number of miscellaneous conversational fragments.

Following established CA theory, three major classes of turns are distinguished in the analysis:

  (a) initiations (*I*),

  (b) responses (*R*)      and

  (c) follow-ups (*F*).

In the light of the conversational material examined this taxonomy proved to be too narrow and required the addition of the categories:

  (d) dyadic turns       and

  *(e) Rj* turns,

which are defined in detail below.

A useful starting point in assigning labels to turns is Stubbs' (1983) model of exchange structure. He distinguishes between three basic configurations:

  • [Inf][187]

  • [I R]

  • [I R/I R],

all of which may be followed by follow-up moves or re-initiation (*Ir*) – response pairs. It may be noted that this model also views follow-up moves as optional elements (see section 2.2.1). Stubbs' notion of R/I moves is, however, of only limited use in this study as it is tailored to classroom exchanges or quizzes and puzzle-solving sessions (see also Coulthard/Brazil 1981 and Berry 1981, 1987).[188] Instead a distinction is here proposed between response moves that terminate an *I – R* sequence (*Rt*) and response moves that project and are in fact followed by a follow-up move (*Rj*). This has the advantage that we can examine – at least from a quantitative

---

[187] *Inf* stands for *inform* and represents the type of turn produced by a lecturer talking to an audience. As this kind of exchange structure is irrelevant for the present analysis, it is henceforth excluded from further consideration.

[188] There are some few recordings of quiz game sessions in the corpus for which this exchange structure applies, e.g.:

KCU n= 9031

PS0GF: [reading] What does the book, The Joy Of Sex, ^ describe an orgasm as []? ^      *I*
PS0GK: ^ I'll give it C ^, I give C                                                       *R/I*
PS0GF: No B, the most religious moment in a person's life                                 *Rt*

perspective – to what extent (humorous) exchanges are twofold (i.e. consisting of an adjacency pair) or threefold (including an additional follow-up move).

Elements of exchange structure are defined in terms of two dimensions. First, one distinguishes between ± predicting and ± predicted moves and, second, one checks whether the move is ± terminal or ± initial. In analogy to Stubbs' matrix (*ibid.*:138) and with the modifications suggested above, this leads to the following classification:

|  | **Predicting** | **Terminal** | **Predicted** | **Initial** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *I* | + | – | – | + |
| *Rt* | – | ± | + | – |
| *Rj* | + | – | + | – |
| *F* | – | ± | + | – |
| *Ir* | + | – | – | – |

According to this taxonomy, *I* moves only qualify as such when they predict a response move and are exchange-initial. *Rt* utterances terminate the exchange depending on whether an *Ir* move follows or not; they are predicted by an initiating move. *Rj* moves are Janus-faced in that they are both predicted and predicting. Since they predict a follow-up move they are not exchange-terminal. *F* moves are predicted by *Rj* utterances; they are not necessarily exchange-terminal since another follow-up turn may trail behind (serving the function of turn-passing; see Tsui 1994:60). *Ir* utterances are initiating moves within an exchange unit. The following is a prototypical example:

KPL n=78

| | |
|---|---|
| PS000: | Are you recording? |
| PS56D: | yes, I'm recording right now. |
| → PS000: | Are you? |
| PS56D: | I have been recording for ages. |

As Stubbs (*ibid.*) points out, initiating moves of the kind shown above are "intuitively non-initial" (138). An analysis of this four-part sequence into two exchanges ([I R] [I R]) would further "fail to account for the coherence of the interchange" (*ibid.*). In the present analysis the notion of *Ir* moves is further expanded to cover a wider range of contexts (see below).

In order to account for the data in a more satisfactory manner it was necessary to introduce an even more subtle distinction between initiating moves. As shown by the fragments below, initiating moves may sometimes occur adjacent to a prior initiation. Such moves are labelled *Ia*:

(1) KC3 n=3555

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0A8: | I feel as though I'm on a plateau at the moment although sh= sh= when I said that she said well [pause] i= it is getting better ^ so the ^ |
| → PS0AE: | ^ There's a ^ physio. [shouting] Trish [] [pause] I've got a patient for you Trish if you've got five minutes to spare please. [laugh] |
| PS0AF: | Oh dear. |

(2) KCU n=5020

PS0GK:      ^ Well ^
PS0GF:      buy something.
PS0GK:      now I'm up here all on my own in the higher class!
→ PS0GF:    One, two, three, four, ^ five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten ^
PS0GK:      ^ [unclear] look down on you in the middle class! ^
→ PS0GF:    eleven. Fucking hell! [laugh]
PS0GK:      And you look up ^ to me! ^
PS0GJ:      ^ You can ^ guarantee I'll divorced straight away ^ again now! ^
PS0GF:      ^ I'll have ^ one of them Shel?
PS0GJ:      To five hundred.
PS0GK:      I'll count my winnings so
PS0GJ:      [laugh] [pause] He'll probably win now he's got ^ those cards ^

In (1), PS0A8 interrupts a patient (PS0A8) by reacting to some external event ("physio is approaching"). Although her contribution is of some relevance to the patient it does not relate to his prior initiating move. It therefore does not constitute a response move.

The participants of the second excerpt are participating in a card game. While one speaker (PS0GF) takes her turn another speaker (PS0GK) addresses some teasing remarks to the other players, showing off his superior position. Both moves occur 'side by side' and both are certainly initiating.

Tsui (1994) mentions another environment: initiating moves of the type 'elicit: repeat' and 'elicit: clarify'. The example below is taken from her work:

(3)

H: Oh and bring the Moser book, I'd like to see that.
X: Oh I ah with the what?
H: With the book by Moser.    (172)

It must be stressed that the type of initiating move described by Tsui has a meta-communicative function. As such it differs from *Rj* moves, which comment on the referential part of the preceding initiation. As an illustration, consider the following fragment presenting a *Rj* move:

KCF n=192

PS1EP:      Pakistan's British?
PS1EM:      Well it was, it was in the empire. It's in the commonwealth isn't it? And Indians and all this. And this is why we're trying to stop them coming in. [pause] There's ten thousand a week coming in. [pause]
→ PS1EP:    Every week?
PS1EM:      [laugh] [pause] They're coming in from everywhere. And this is what the, the [unclear] what's name now [pause] that when it's opened in nineteen ninety two [pause] the communist block will be able to come through Germany this way in. Straight into this country.

The arrowed utterance constitutes a challenging move in the sense that it challenges the validity of the prior statement. In the present taxonomy such moves are qualified as *Rj*. Further realisations of this kind of move are shown in the next sub-sections where the entire taxonomy is described in greater detail and additional examples from the corpus are presented.

In summary, the classification of turns proposed above generates the following basic exchange patterns:

$$(1) \quad I \quad \rightarrow \quad Rt \quad (\rightarrow \quad Ir \quad \rightarrow \quad \ldots)$$

$$(2) \quad I \quad \rightarrow \quad Rj \quad \rightarrow \quad F_1 \quad (\rightarrow \quad F_2)$$

$$(3) \quad I \quad \rightarrow \quad Ia \quad \rightarrow \quad Rt/ Rj \; (\rightarrow \quad \ldots)$$

$$(4) \quad I \quad \rightarrow \quad R/I \quad \rightarrow \quad R$$

$$(5) \quad Inf \quad (\rightarrow \quad R)$$

With the exception of a handful of instances, all conversational data could be pressed into one of the first three moulds. (4) and (5) are presented solely for the sake of completeness as they depict special discourse types (classroom interchanges, lecture situation; see above).

### 4.6.1  Response moves (Rt)

The defining features of response moves (exchange-terminating unless a re-initiation follows; predicted) have already been mentioned. A prototypical example from the corpus is the following (move assignments are indicated at the right-hand side of the fragment):

KE3 n=3878

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0V4: | I didn't want to say that because I didn't, I don't think it is a cosy little job |
| PS0V5: | Mm. |
| PS0V4: | especially with the management's support you get. |
| PS0V5: | Well we don't get any. |
| PS0V4: | That's ^ what I meant ^. |
| PS0V5: | ^ From the management ^ we get positive hinderance not support ***Ir*** |
| → PS0V4: | [laugh], yeah, that's what I meant. ***Rt*** |
| PS0V5: | I mean, my immediate management, [unclear], now in, in a crisis she's ***Ir*** brilliant, you see, I, I don't know whether this with this the other day, whether she didn't [pause] go to see Paul to see what I'd say |
| PS0V4: | Mm. |

In multi-party conversations more than one speaker may offer a response. The excerpt below shows a family conversation where the mother (PS087) admonishes her 3-year-old son Timothy (PS088). Timothy reacts with an *I* move of the type 'elicit: repeat/clarify' (see above), which seems to be more or less ignored. His father (PS08A) produces a humorous response that continues the preceding wordplay of his other son Christopher (PS089).

KBW n=17767

| | |
|---|---|
| PS089: | [laugh] I said peas. [pause] Not please, I didn't say please. |
| PS087: | Oh. Well say thank you when you get it.] |
| PS089: | Thank you. ^I said ^ |
| PS087: | ^ That's it. ^ |
| PS089: | peas [pause] instead of please. I said peas |
| PS087: | Timothy, how did you manage to get on your knees again? ***I*** |

| PS088: | What? | *la* |
|---|---|---|
| → PS08A: | [laugh] ^ Easy. Easy-peasy. ^ | *Rt* |
| PS087: | ^ He must have got a spring. Automatic spring ^ in there. | *Ir* |
| PS088: | What? | |
| PS089: | What? | |
| PS08A: | You're supposed to sit down to eat Tim. Remember? | |

A crucial criterion for identifying *Rj* moves is the fact that they are *not* succeeded by a follow-up move. As a result, response turns that appear functionally equivalent may be assigned different labels. For illustration, consider the two fragments below:

KDB n=2032

| PS0L2: | How am I gonna paint under that black | *I* |
|---|---|---|
| → PS0L6: | Very carefully ^ [laugh] ^ | *Rt* |
| PS0L2: | ^ without ^ getting the red red and the red | *Ir* |
| PS0L6: | Well if you hold a piece of paper there. | |
| PS0L2: | Yeah? | |
| PS0L6: | Get a small piece of paper ^ and hold there as you do it. ^ | |

KDM n=12792

| PS0PN: | Ooh, I tell you what you want though. | |
|---|---|---|
| PS0PP: | For the iron? | |
| PS0S0: | ^ Got a ^ | |
| PS0RR: | ^ Yeah. ^ | |
| PS0PN: | couple of things for you. [pause] You want water from, where was it I said to you? | *I* |
| PS0PP: | [laugh] | *Rt* |
| PS0PN: | From er | *Ir* |
| → PS0PP: | [laugh] Lourdes! | *Rj* |
| PS0PN: | No, no! From nor -, somewhere in Snowdonia [pause] they send this water all over the country [pause] and it's so full of iron [pause] Germany, they buy it [pause] [unclear]. [pause] But er, it's a good [pause] I don't know about cure, but whatever! | *F-I* |

Both (arrowed) responses are interpretable as "joke-firsts" (Norrick 1993) or challenging moves as they challenge the pragmatic presuppositions of the preceding initiation (Tsui 1994): in the first fragment, PS0L2[189] makes a request for practical advice, which is at first deliberately ignored; in the second fragment, Margaret (PS0PP) jokes instead of providing the desired piece of information. The responses differ, however, in terms of their sequential embedding as one is followed by a follow-up move realised at the beginning of the next turn ("No, no!") and the other one is not.

### 4.6.2  Rj moves

The preceding discussion has already identified *challenging moves* as representatives of *Rj* turns. They are often realised in the form of partial repetitions of the prior utterance, e.g.:

---

[189] - described as "unknown" in the BNC header description -

(1) KD4 n=801

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS13C: | What I'd really like for us to have, and this is some time in the future, is one nice sort of saloon type car for best | *I* |
| → PS0JW: | [laugh] [laughing] For best []? | *Rj* |
| PS13C: | for best, yeah | *F1* |
| PS0JW: | [laugh] Yes. | *F2* |

(2) KCF n=192

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS1EM: | Well it was, it was in the empire. It's in the commonwealth isn't it? And Indians and all this. And this is why we're trying to stop them coming in. [pause] There's ten thousand a week coming in. [pause] | *I* |
| → PS1EP: | Every week? | *Rj* |
| PS1EM: | [laugh] [pause] They're coming in from everywhere. And this is what the, the [unclear] what's name now [pause] that when it's opened in nineteen ninety two [pause] the communist block will be able to come through Germany this way in. Straight into this country. | *F-I* |

(3) KCE n=3777

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS0EB: | I've got a dead itchy back, oh! | |
| PS0EF: | [laugh] [unclear] Ah! Hurt me boob. | *I* |
| → PS0EB: | [laughing] Hurt your boob []? | *Rj* |
| PS0EF: | [laugh] Bashed it. [pause] I'm dreading tonight now. I've decided I don't think I can go to [unclear] | *F-I* |

While in the above examples speakers distance themselves from some proposition, *Rj* moves may also indicate understanding and consent. As such they represent positive responding acts in the sense that they "fulfil the illocutionary intent" of the initiating move (Tsui 1994:162). The fragments shown below also illustrate that *Rj* moves of this kind signal involvement. In the first example, Steve (PS09G) interrupts Frank's (PS09E) anecdote in order to show his appreciation of his friend's cleverness in negotiating an insurance policy. In the second example, Tony (PS0V4) emphasises with Jackie's (PS0V5) emotional state during an event described in her story.

(1) KC1 n=360

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS09E: | the guy's er filling out the form for the er mortgage and he's er [pause] said non-smoker? Yeah, yeah and Lynette yeah non-smoker, you know. When we got outside I said I couldn't very well offer him one I only had two left in the packet ^ [laugh] ^ | *I* |
| → PS09G: | ^ [laugh] ^ That makes quite a difference on your policy, the ^ premium ^ | *Rj* |
| PS09E: | ^ Yeah ^ | *F1* |
| PS09G: | if you're non-smokers. | *Rj* |

(2) KE3 n=3344

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS0V5: | So I took my card and went in I thought well I'll pay for this by, by cheque | |
| PS0V4: | Yeah. | |
| PS0V5: | Erm, but I wanted some cash, so what I did in the end was walked round Asda remembered it, or thought I remembered it, came back out put the erm card back in and the terminal came up erm [pause] it's ok. | *Ir* |
| → PS0V4: | [laugh] nervous now, you're gonna be checking that quite a bit. | *Rj* |
| PS0V5: | Yeah the terminal came up erm, due to an error were unable to complete your transaction, so I thought oh great, so I can't have my money in any place | *F-I* |

It should not come as a surprise that humorous responses often fall into this category as they almost inevitably project a reaction. The following is an example of co-operative joking from Richard (PS1BY) and Andy (PS1K5):

KSV n=4485

| PS1BY: | ^ Such ^ a thing to do! So, if I have a word with, like I say, with Donna and see what she thinks, if it's a good idea. [yawning] I will basically do that []. So, that's what I'll do. Great! It's gonna be a great laugh! I think if we get everybody by ooh, ten thirty we can have sort of [pause] a game of strip Trivial Pursuit. [laugh] | *I* |
|---|---|---|
| → PS1K5: | And the only person we strip is Donna! ^ [laugh] ^ | *R* |
| PS1BY: | ^ [laughing] That's right []! ^ [laughing] And Sarah [last or full name] []! Cor! Yeah! | *F* |

In the fragment below, Matt (PS0KP) interferes with his friend Christopher's (PS0KV) enthusiastic report by humorously commenting on the enormous fuel consumption of the vehicle:[190]

KD7 n=1418

| PS0KP: | I'm not looking for a Jag=! I'm not interested in a Jag= Christopher! | |
|---|---|---|
| PS0KV: | It's nineteen seventy, a good body work, [unclear], spoilers, [unclear] alloys, triple kerbs | *I* |
| PS0KP: | [laugh] | *Rt* |
| PS0KV: | Two hundred ^ and six ^ | *Ir* |
| PS0KP: | ^ Yeah ^ okay. | *Rt* |
| PS0KV: | two hundred and sixty five brake horse. | *Ir* |
| → PS0KP: | Attached B P petrol station! ^ [laugh] ^ | *Rj* |
| PS0KV: | ^ [laugh] ^ | *F* |

The interpretation of conversational data in terms of moves is not always as straightforward as the above presentation may suggest. Often multi-party settings complicate things, which comes as a reminder that the CA taxonomies in circulation all seem to be developed on the basis of dyadic interchanges. Problems could sometimes be sorted out by gathering more contextual knowledge. The following excerpt taken from a conversation between three women is a case in point and I will, for once, go through it at some length – not because the problem itself is one of great significance but in order to illustrate how intriguing it can be to classify moves within exchanges:

KBW n=10178

| PS0XK: | And she said why don't you come swimming with us Rick? We go swimming Sunday mornings. Well I go to church. I'm going to church. |
|---|---|
| PS087: | I'm impressed. ^ This is Rick? ^ |
| PS0XJ: | ^ Yes I [unclear] ^ |
| PS0XK: | ^ Oh yeah, I ^ was really impressed, I was. Yeah. |
| PS087: | You'll have to remind him next time he decides not to bother coming ^ [laughing] that he's supposed to come in case [] ^ |
| PS0XK: | ^ [laugh] ^ In case you end up someone come and saying come on we're going swimming. |
| → PS0XJ: | We're going swimming. |
| PS0XK: | Yeah. |
| PS0XJ: | Your sister might come. [pause] You'll have to come. |

---

[190] As an amusing aside, it may be mentioned that Matt is professionally a financial adviser.

```
PS0XK:      Mm.
PS001:      [laugh]
```

In this instance, the crucial question is what we make out of Jane's (PS0KJ) utterance "We're going swimming". Is it a re-initiation $(Ir)$[191] or an *F* move ratifying the positive outcome of the exchange? If we classify it as an *Ir* move then the preceding turn needs to be qualified as *Rt*, if we take the alternative choice then the preceding turn is a *Rj* move. Here, information on prosody would certainly be most helpful. It would also be a pretty clear case if the person who produces this utterance was PS087 (Dorothy); then we would be biased towards the *F* move option. In essence, there is an ambiguity which arises from two sources: first, it is a *third person's* utterance that succeeds the adjacency pair and, second, the utterance exhibits *close links* to the previous interchange.

The issue was eventually resolved after examining more of the surrounding context. It then became clear that Rick, the main character in Dawn's (PS0XK) anecdote tries to avoid spending time with his sister, who is – just to increase the humour of the story - completely unaware of this fact. As a result, Rick invents excuses such as the one quoted above (that he attends church on Sunday mornings) so that he does not have to come along to the swimming baths. It is, however, well known to the interactants that Rick is a rather irregular churchgoer and they now plot viciously to exploit their privileged knowledge and make Rick attend church more often by reminding him of the dreaded alternative.

With this contextual knowledge in the background, the ambiguity of the utterance in question can be resolved: it seems more likely that Jane - who has primarily been listening up until this point - wanted to express her appreciation of the story's humour as well as re-iterating its funny point. This becomes even more apparent when we take into account that she immediately elaborates the humour ("Your sister might come …"). Hence, the relevant turn is analysed as an *Ir* move; in consequence, the preceding turn becomes an *Rt* move.

### 4.6.3  F moves

In defining follow-up moves this taxonomy follows the principle of Tsui's classification which distinguishes between three types: endorsement (projected by a positive responding act), concession (projected by a negative responding act) and acknowledgement (projected by any of the three subclasses of responding acts). There is, however, a slight difference resulting from the fact that in the present taxonomy challenging moves are classified as *Rj*, which – due to their 'initiating momentum' – often call for clarification in the next turn. Hence, this conceptualisation of *F1* moves is somewhat broader than Tsui's. Also adopted is Tsui's notion of *F2* moves that may follow an *F1* move and serve the function of turn-passing.

The following shows two examples of *F moves*. The first represents an endorsement and is succeeded by a second follow-up, which rather obviously serves as a turn-passing signal: PS052 even indirectly comments on it by noting a "pregnant pause".

---

[191] For a detailed discussion of *Ir* moves see below.

The second fragment shows a negative response followed by an acknowledgement and an *F2* move. More examples of *F* moves (e.g. after challenging moves) can be inspected in the *Rj* section above.

(1) KBG n=550

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS052: | We've got big cobwebs up there and all! | *I* |
| PS051: | Don't tell [laughing] everybody our secrets []! | *Rj* |
| → PS052: | [laugh] [pause] Sorry! Oh dear! It's quite a surprise! Mm. | *F1* |
| PS051: | [whistling] Yeah. | *F2* |
| PS052: | This is what could be termed in [unclear] as a [pause] [laughing] a pregnant pause []! | *I* |

(2) KC9 n=3082

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS0CG: | He vacuums, he cooks her a meal | |
| PS0CR: | Oh ^ god ^ | |
| PS0CG: | ^ To try ^ and tempt her appetite ^ because she's throwing up ^ | |
| PS0CR: | ^ Did you say she had two sons? ^, is the ^ other one married? ^. | *I* |
| PS0CG: | ^ Two sons ^, the other one's dead. | *Rj* |
| → PS0CR: | Oh shame [laugh]. | *F1* |
| PS0CG: | Yep. | *F2* |

### 4.6.4  Dyadic turns (R-I; F-I)

Turns may sometimes be composed of two moves. A rather obvious example of this occurs when someone laughs in response to some prior (humorous) contribution and then proceeds with an initiating move. Consider the following fragments:

KBL n=5393

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS06A: | [laughing] Now just [pause] just relax Moira! You're getting too uptight about it []! | *I* |
| PS06C: | [laughing] I'm not []! | *Rj* |
| → PS06A: | [laugh] [pause] I shall play it back to Brian! [laugh] | *F1-I* |
| PS06C: | [laugh] | *Rt* |
| PS06A: | [laughing] He'll say [pause] dunno who that is []! | |

KBW n=9970

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS089: | That's the one you had with tadpoles in it. Mum, do you like tadpoles? | *I* |
| PS087: | Oh I like tadpoles but not in my drink. | *Rj* |
| → PS089: | [laugh] Did you have to have this one? | *F1-I* |
| PS087: | I did. | *Rt* |
| PS089: | Why did you have to have it? | |
| PS088: | I I ^ had this one. ^ | |

Both laughter occurrences in *F1* position endorse the positive outcome of the interchange. This can be regarded as further demonstration of the fact that laughter – unlike other non-speech sounds such as coughing - "has the status of an official conversational activity" (Jefferson/Sacks/Schegloff 1987:156). Speakers may, of course, compete over the post-laughter slot. The fragment below serves as illustration:

KDS n=1830

| | |
|---|---|
| PS0NW: | What about a Sunday paper, okay? Would you read a Sunday? |
| PS0NR: | Well that's that's the News of the World ^ [unclear] ^ |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS0NW: | ^ News of the World. ^ That's a very popular paper you know, the ^ News of the World. Aha. ^ | *(F1) - I* |
| PS0NR: | ^ Yeah but it's a lot of ^ lot of trash. | *Rj* |
| PS0NW: | Aha I know. [laugh] | *F1* |
| → PS0NR: | [laugh] ^ I I I I check me po - [pause] check me pools and that's all. [laugh] ^ | *F2- Ir* |
| PS0NW: | ^ I'm never sure what to [pause] [laugh] When in Rome do as the Romans do ^ okay for goodness sakes. What about any other? Would you read any other? | *Ir-(Rt) - I* |
| PS0NR: | No. | |
| PS0NW: | No, right. No. | |

This example may be taken as an argument for the case that *F2* moves typically serve a turn-passing function. The speech overlap can thus be explained on the basis that Anne (PS0NW) misinterprets Rosemary's (PS0NR) laughter as signalling the intention to leave the floor. While Anne's move clearly starts with a re-initiation ("I'm never sure …") and terminates with an initiation ("What about any other? …") the intervening part of the utterance ("When in Rome …") may represent a response to Rosemary's *Ir* but this is not clear from the transcript.

Most instances of dyadic turns in the present study follow the above pattern (utterance-initial laughter response + *I* move). There are, however, also a few examples where laughter occurs at the end of a dyadic turn. In the fragment below the first part of the (arrowed) turn constitutes a response and the second an initiation terminated by a laughter invitation:

KPH n=1393

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS55T: | I don't know. They just go oh who are the pretty ones and erm they get oh [pause] erm Sarah [last or full name] and Claire and Lizzie and then Marcus goes yeah but she's a bit pale, I went [pause] so? And then they were being really gross like going oh but you know we, we [pause] we fancy you, I was going ^ [unclear] ^ | |
| → PS55U: | ^ So oh that's nice ^ of them. That's just like [pause] oh but she's a bit pale [pause] [laughing] nice, thanks []. [pause] Say from me, next time you take prep, say well Lizzie's going to get a tan now. [laugh] | *R-I* |
| PS55T: | [laugh] | *Rt* |

A 'nice' example that combines response laughter and laughter invitation in one turn is the following:

KSV n=5563

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS1K5: | I'm sure, I, I, I, I've a fatal inkling that she might decline, but there's no harm in trying, but she might get the wrong idea about it, you know | *I* |
| PS1BY: | Oh no | *Rt* |
| PS1K5: | she might think that, you know, she's the only one who's gonna turn up and | *Ir* |
| PS1BY: | [laugh] Well anyway Sarah [last or full name] and that lot can sleep downstairs, we'll all come down during the night [laugh] | *R-I* |
| PS1K5: | Wake and we'll wake up find that we've got no respect | *Rj* |
| PS1BY: | [laugh] Never had anything else [laugh] love it | *F1* |
| PS1K5: | Eh, oh, ow | *F2* |

Here, two comments are appropriate: First, it may be noted that Richard (PS1BY) does not laugh in response to Andy's laughter invitation. His continuation of Andy's humorous line seems, however, equally supportive.[192] Second, Richard's laughter in utterance-initial position interrupts Andy (this time successfully); it is not only retrospective and affiliative but also projects a humorous contribution (see section 4.5.5).

### 4.6.5  Initiating moves (I)

It may seem odd to the reader to find *I* moves at the end of this survey. This does, however, make sense when we consider that initiations are generally defined via the responses they project and the fact that their "possibilities are open-ended" (Stubbs 1983:109). Hence, one crucial feature of initiations is that they expect an obligatory response, either *non-verbal* as in the case of an order or request of some action to be performed or *verbal* as in, for example, elicitations (Tsui 1994). As Tsui further suggests, it is also possible to classify initiations according to the two main speech act verbs 'ask' and 'tell', which may be used in referring to initiating acts. 'Ask' would then apply to initiating acts that request (an action to be performed) and elicit information, whereas 'tell' would be used to refer to directives (to perform a certain action) or informatives (e.g. reporting, story telling, etc.).

In practice, initiations are not too difficult to identify in conversational data. What can however be slightly problematic are re-initiations (*Ir*) – a concept proposed by Stubbs in order to account for the coherence of interchanges (see above). The following presents some relatively obvious examples of re-initiations and then proceeds towards some trickier cases.[193]

Re-initiations typically occur within story telling when the recipient(s) signal(s) understanding, agreement or appreciation of some humorous offering. Here are some examples:

KE3 n=1797

| PS0V5: | ^ I, I ^ said to him I, I don't want, I know I can't have a test soon, but I don't really want another one [pause] that soon. | |
|---|---|---|
| PS0V4: | No [pause] but now all that your doing is polishing your drive better off | ***R-I*** |
| PS0V5: | Mm. | ***Rt*** |
| → PS0V4: | unfortunately that can be a very painful business [laugh] | ***Ir*** |
| PS0V5: | Mm. | ***Rt*** |

KC0 n=3142

| PS096: | … [pause] He said yes but you now have your health centre and the district nurses work from there. [pause] So erm they all looked at him, you know, the district nurses [pause] so John said to this man what [pause] there are some of our patients [pause] who are housebound [pause] | ***I*** |
|---|---|---|
| PS08Y: | Yes. | ***Rt*** |
| → PS096: | and some of them [pause] as well as being housebound, maybe aren't | ***Ir*** |

---

[192] Makri-Tsilipakou (1994) and Hay (1995) make similar observations on alternative humour support strategies (see section 4.1).

[193] One ambiguous example has already been presented in the *Rj* move section above.

|         | very well and are bedbound [laugh] |       |
|---------|-----------------------------------|-------|
| PS090:  | [laughing] Mm []                  | **Rt** |

KBU n=1183

|         |                                                      |       |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| PS18E:  | [laughing] It's a little triangle of ^ the dog []! ^ |       |
| PS18K:  | ^ Oh no! ^                                           |       |
| PS18E:  | [laugh] [pause] ^ [laughing] I mean it was cruel ^   | **Ir** |
| PS18K:  | ^ Oh my God! ^                                       | **Rt** |
| PS18E:  | but it was funny cos he just [pause] aargh! Like this []. | **Ir** |
| PS18K:  | Ah ah ah!                                            | **Rt** |
| → PS18E: | The dog went off yelping. [laugh]                   | **Ir** |
| PS18K:  | Bless its little cotton socks.                       | **Rj** |
| PS18E:  | [laugh]                                              | **F** |

The following example looks rather similar to the previous one in that the speaker (PS05K; 5-year-old Toby) re-iterates the preceding 'joke'. There is, however, a difference: this does not trigger any reaction. Our definition of initiations above would therefore force us to reject this instance as it fails to meet the criterion of 'obligatory response'. As a result, we would have to classify the turn as a follow-up. But is this really an option? If we look closely at the sequencing of the surrounding context it would have to be an *F2* move. It seems, however, highly unlikely that Toby had the intention to pass the turn to someone else or change topic. What happened here is that the other two participants interfered with carrying on. As a result, this instance is labelled *Ir* although it failed to generate a response. Although this goes against the policy adopted of prioritising surface structure over underlying act there is, in this case, no other choice because it is not possible to account for the sequential organisation by reference to surface cohesion.[194]

KBH n=4188

|          |                                                                 |         |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| PS05D:   | You don't call me Uncle Adam and I won't call you Uncle Toby [laugh] |         |
| PS05K:   | [laugh]                                                          |         |
| PS05D:   | Cos you're not my uncle are you?                                 |         |
| PS05K:   | No. [laugh]                                                      |         |
| PS05B:   | [laugh]                                                          |         |
| PS05K:   | Ooh and and don't call me uncle five either. [laugh]            |         |
| PS05D:   | I won't call you uncle five [pause] no.                          |         |
| PS05K:   | [unclear] call you uncle six didn't I?                           |         |
| PS05D:   | I don't want to be called uncle six [pause] ^ why not? ^         | **Ir** |
| PS05K:   | ^ No. ^                                                          | **Rt** |
| PS05D:   | Because my name isn't six is it?                                 | **Ir** |
| PS05K:   | No. [laugh]                                                      | **Rt** |
| PS05D:   | No.                                                              | **F1** |
| PS05B:   | Could we erm                                                    |         |
| → PS05K: | ^ I don't want to be called ^                                    | **Ir? F2?** |
| PS05B:   | ^ discourage the feet on the ^                                   |         |
| → PS05K: | uncle five. [laugh]                                             | **Ir? F2?** |
| PS05D:   | Can you keep your feet off the [pause] chair [pause] thank you [pause] good you sit over there [pause] there we are. |         |

---

[194] Stubbs (1983) makes the same point when he asserts the necessity of motivating the analysis of conversational structure from the surface of discourse. When this fails, he argues, "then the analysis must rest on underlying acts which are performed by the utterances" (169).

An even more problematic case is the next example. Here both an *F1* move and *Ir* are sequentially possible. In addition, both interpretations can be pragmatically motivated:

KCX n=1595

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS1FH: | I'm after all of it. ^ Bloody marvellous! ^ | |
| PS1FC: | ^ You've got ^ all of it! It's same as your one. | |
| PS1FH: | It isn't. | |
| → PS1FC: | Yours don't have Sellotape all over it. That has. ^ [laugh] ^ | *Ir? F1?* |
| PS1FG: | ^ [laugh] ^ | |
| PS1FC: | It's got [pause] patches on it. I had taxi driver on it ^ this ^ | |
| PS1FG: | ^ [sniff] ^ | |
| PS1FC: | morning. | |

To cut a long argument short, the relevant turn is categorised as *Ir* on the grounds that it is purposefully funny and thus anticipates an adequate response (which in the above fragment is laughter). Hence, the analysis of the above passage gives precedence to the prospective character of the turn rather than its retrospective thrust towards the prior interchange comprising of an initiation and a negative response.

To complete this survey of initiating moves let us briefly turn towards *Ia* moves. The concept has already been presented in the introduction so it will suffice to document the phenomenon with another two examples. The first one is taken from a multi-party conversation where the participants are playing some sort of quiz game. PS0GG (Gary, aged 25) cannot get over the fact that "King David son of Solomon" (KCU n=9720) had had 700 wives and 300 concubines in his lifetime (which was the correct answer to the previous question). At the moment of talk he is competing with PS0GF (Julie, aged 24), who seeks to regain the floor in order to read out the next question ("right ready Phil …"). As a result, two initiations occur side by side (and with some speech overlap). Momentarily, Gary's initiation wins the upper hand as it is supported by PS0GK (Phil, aged 25) but eventually Julie succeeds in getting the floor.

KCU n=9771

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PS0GG: | dirty bastard | |
| PS0GK: | [laugh] | |
| PS0GG: | Fuck me they had no telly in those days, but that's fucking beyond a joke [unclear] | |
| PS0GF: | right ready Phil ^ I was gonna read that one out ^ | *Ia* |
| PS000: | ^ Jesus ^ | |
| PS0GF: | ^ but you'll already get that ^ | *Ia* |
| → PS0GG: | ^ He must of [sic] been totally fucked ^ | *Ia* |
| PS0GK: | ^ [laugh] ^ | *Rt* |
| PS0GG: | ^ [laugh] ^ two a night, fucking shit | *Ir* |
| PS0GK: | Fucking hell | *Rt* |
| PS0GG: | ^ very nice ^ | |
| PS0GF: | ^ [reading] Whose penis ^ was said to be as damn near as big as his guitar? | |
| PS000: | [laugh] [unclear] | |
| PS0GF: | A, er Eric Clapton, B, Keith Richard or C, Jimmy Hendricks [] | |
| PS0GK: | Oh I dunno | |

The following shows an initiation of the type 'elicit repeat'. It appears that its purpose was primarily to re-indulge in some former humour; it is hence a form of recycled (situational) humour.

KP4 n=4348

PS6P2:    This is Honey [last or full name], Dan [last or full name] 's
          fiancee, this man [laughing] [unclear] [] has the biggest [laughing]
          knob you will ever see in your life [] and it's all mine [laugh] [pause]
PS6U1:    [kiss] [pause] What were you saying? About, I thought you said          *R-I*
          something about tea?
→ PS6P2:  I said what's potato and leek soup like?                                *la*
PS6U1:    [laugh] Usually it tastes quite potatoey and presumably rather leeky    *Rt*
          as well I should imagine.

## *4.7  Extralinguistic variables*

In order to investigate the gender and age effects uncovered in the initial quantitative analysis (see section 4.2) it was, of course, necessary to keep note of these variables in the sample data. Each instance was therefore coded for age and gender of the laugher and (whenever applicable) additionally for the humour producer. Further – in order to be able to test prior hypotheses on humour support (Hay 1995, Dreher 1983 (cited in Kotthoff 1986, Makri-Tsilipakou 1994; see section 4.1) – the gender and age of the speaker whose humour was supported (by laughter) was noted.

The classification of the *age* variable followed the categorisation in the BNC, restated here for the convenience of the reader:

    0: 0-14
    1: 15-24
    2: 25-34
    3: 35-44
    4: 45-59
    5: 60+
    6: unknown

It may be remarked at this point that - partly as a result of the sampling policy outlined in section 4.3 - the desired information was not always fully available, thus creating a number of 'missing values'. In order to facilitate the statistical analysis they were put in a separate category as 'unknown'.

In addition to coding laughter and humorous instances for *age* and *gender* they were also marked for *group characteristics* (see section 4.3) and *humorous targets*. To deal with *humorous targets* it is necessary to briefly outline some of the relevant literature on the topic and the classification system employed in this study.

### *Targets*

The question of the butt of the joke figures prominently in the humour debate – be it within the framework of release theories or in the context of superiority theories. Despite its theoretical significance, however, only scant attention has been paid to investigating the phenomenon in the humour of everyday talk. The only studies focusing on this aspect using conversational data would appear to be Ervin-Tripp/Lampert (1992) and Hay (1995).

In their article Ervin-Tripp/Lampert (*ibid.*) report that in mixed-sex groups white speakers[195] (independent of their gender) tend to increase humour that targets an absent person and that men use more self-directed humour while women do so less often than in single-sex groups. Hay (1995) observes similar trends in her data, which, however, fail to reach any level of significance. An interesting result in Hay concerns humour targeted at someone present:

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[195] The study covers a broad ethnicity range. Subjects who identified as Hispanic, Asian (American), Black, etc. do not exhibit the described patterns.

> The odds of someone using humour focussed on a same sex group member are overwhelmingly higher in single-sex groups than mixed groups. Humour focussed on same sex group members drops right back in mixed conversation, and instead, when humour is focussed on a group member, they tend to be of the opposite sex to the speaker. (127)

In interpreting this finding Hay suggests that gender is a salient factor in marking group boundaries and that humour serves to recreate gender divisions.

In order to evaluate how and to what extent targets figure in the present sample of conversational humour, instances were coded according to whether the humour:

- has no target (*non*),

- is targeted against the *add*ressee (*add*),

- is targeted against a *t*hird *p*erson *p*resent in the interaction (*tpp*)[196],

- is targeted against an *a*bsent *t*hird *p*erson in the interaction (*tpa*),

- is targeted against one self (i.e. self-deprecating humour, *self*) or

- is targeted against a dog (*dog*).[197]

There are also some ambiguous cases (coded as *unclear*) such as the following example that could be classified as either victimising someone present or someone absent:

KCW n=872

| | |
|---|---|
| → PS0H8: | Now she's gonna go and die of embarrassment and not come anywhere near me [pause] ^ [laugh] ^ |
| PS12C: | ^ [laugh] ^ |
| → PS0H8: | for the rest of the week! Oh that's, that's a good idea actually! Get rid of that one! Who else can we get rid of? [laugh] |
| PS12C: | Amanda! [laugh] |
| PS0H8: | [laugh] |

Instances that did not involve any humour (coded as *14* in the humour taxonomy) were ignored.

---

[196] The distinction between *add* and *tpp* evolved from the need to contrast jointly-produced humorous attacks against someone present (in multi-party groups) with face-to-face ribbing (in dyads or multi-party groups). So the category *add* could be viewed as a subset of *tpp*.

[197] This category may come as a surprise to some readers. However, dogs did occasionally become the humorous butt in the data so a separate class appears warranted.

## 4.8   Gender, age and group composition

This section focuses on the relation between laughter and humour production, and the extralinguistic variables 'gender', 'age' and 'group composition'. More specifically, we will extract from the sample data the gender and age distribution of laughers and humour producers as well as the settings in which those humour/laughter episodes occur. Owing to the fact that our sample data does not exist in a vacuum but originates from the CC, we will then, in a second step, have to relate the findings based on the laughter/humour sample to the overall distributions found in the corpus as described in section 4.2.

### 4.8.1   Gender and age

*Table 4.8          Laughter incidences according to 'gender' and 'age'*

|         | age0 (0-14) | age1 (15-24) | age2 (25-34) | age3 (35-44) | age4 (45-59) | age5 (60+) | un-known | total |
|---------|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|----------|-------|
| **females** | 11        | 30           | 29           | 20           | 17           | 14         | 3        | 124   |
|         | 1.228       | 0.7686       | 0.9139       | 2.0382       | 0.1796       | 0.1158     | 0.012    |       |
| **males**   | 13        | 10           | 9            | 23           | 7            | 6          | 2        | 70    |
|         | 2.1753      | 1.3616       | 1.6189       | 3.6105       | 0.3181       | 0.2051     | 0.0213   |       |
| **total**   | 24        | 40           | 38           | 43           | 24           | 20         | 5        | 194   |

$\chi^2 = 14.5666$; df = 6; p = 0.0239

*Table 4.9          Humour incidences according to 'gender' and 'age'*

|         | age0 (0-14) | age1 (15-24) | age2 (25-34) | age3 (35-44) | age4 (45-59) | age5 (60+) | un-known | total |
|---------|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|----------|-------|
| **females** | 14        | 28           | 29           | 22           | 19           | 12         | 1        | 125   |
|         | 0.3912      | 0.0401       | 0.5985       | 0.0708       | 0.0208       | 0.0585     | 0.3822   |       |
| **males**   | 13        | 16           | 12           | 16           | 11           | 9          | 2        | 79    |
|         | 0.619       | 0.0634       | 0.9469       | 0.1121       | 0.0382       | 0.0926     | 0.6048   |       |
| **total**   | 27        | 44           | 41           | 38           | 30           | 21         | 3        | 204   |

$\chi^2 = 4.0337$; df = 6; p = 0.6721

The tables above present the frequencies of laughter (table 4.8) and humorous incidences (table 4.9) according to gender and age as well as each cell's contribution to the chi-square. For reasons of consistency, only instances for which all group information (group size and group sex) was available are considered. The humour distribution further takes into account jointly-produced humorous episodes, which are counted twice and therefore produce a total larger than the sum. The results from the chi-square calculations are shown below each table.

The significant result for the laughter distribution (table 4.8) is due primarily to the relatively high number of laughter incidences produced by males in the sample. Comparison with the overall laughter frequencies in the CC (see tables 4.1 and 4.2,

section 4.2.1) suggests that this may be caused by a sampling bias: age group 3 (35-44) is significantly (p = 0.0048) over-represented in the present sample compared to the CC. In contrast, age group 5 (60+) seems to be slightly under-represented in my sample (p = 0.0463). On the whole, however, it can be said that the laughter distribution of gender and age in the sample mirrors the one obtained from the complete CC.

Contrary to laughter, incidences of humour production are equally distributed over the sample population. Relating the individual age group totals from the sample to the total number of utterances in each age group we find that speakers from age group 1 not only produce the highest rate of laughter, they also contribute the most humour – at least the sort of humour that is somehow accompanied by laughter.

### 4.8.2  Gender and group composition

The table below summarises the data for the gender and group attributes. The first figure in each cell represents the number of laughter occurrences produced by (fe)males in the particular setting; the second (in brackets) refers to humorous incidences.

*Table 4.10*        *Gender and group setting*

|          | dyad, SS | dyad, MS | multi, SS | multi, MS | total     |
|----------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| **females** | 36 (36)  | 26 (25)  | 18 (18)   | 44 (46)   | 124 (125) |
| **males**   | 20 (25)  | 23 (24)  | 4 (3)     | 23 (27)   | 70 (79)   |
| **total**   | 56 (61)  | 49 (49)  | 22 (21)   | 67 (73)   | 194 (204) |

For both laughter and humour production, the most parsimonious models generated by log-linear analysis are the ones showing interaction only between group size and group sex (laughter: $\chi^2$ = 5.92; df = 3; p = 0.1156; humour: $\chi^2$ = 8.44; df = 3; p = 0.0377[198]). Calculation of the odds ratios reveals that the association between 'group size' and 'group sex' is quite strong:

*Table 4.11*        *Odds ratios for the laughter and humour data on gender and group setting*

|                                   | laughter | humour |
|-----------------------------------|----------|--------|
| **SS, dyad – SS, multi/MS dyad**  | 3.48     | 4.33   |

That is, the odds of finding a laughter/humour incidence in a SS dyadic group are 3.48/4.33 times greater than the odds of finding one in a SS multi-party or MS dyadic group.

We further note that the laughter/humour behaviour of females and males in the sample does not differ significantly with changing group size or gender composition.

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[198] It may be argued that the significance level for the humour model is too small (below 5 per cent; see Oakes 1998:43). Inter-model comparison, however, shows that the more complex models are not significantly better (on the 0.05 level). Further, chi-square testing of the interaction 'gender of humour producer' and 'group size' produces a non-significant result ($\chi^2$ = 3.4077; df = 1; p = 0.0649).

When comparing the frequencies above to the overall figures of 'gender' and 'group composition' in the CC (see section 4.2), we find no significant differences for dyadic settings. In other words, the sample frequencies of laughter/humorous manoeuvres produced by males or females in dyadic talk can be explained by the overall distribution. For multi-party settings, this is however not the case: here, we would expect a considerably smaller number of single-sex conversations in the sample, implying that laughter/humour occur more frequently in single-sex multi-party settings than in mixed-sex multi-party settings.

Further, it can be shown that this trend is largely produced by females, who laugh/produce humour significantly more often in multi-party, single-sex groups than in dyadic, single-sex groups.[199] With a view to our earlier observation that females in the CC participate significantly more often than males in multi-party single-sex groups (see section 4.2.2) this finding could be taken as accounting – at least to some degree – for the overall prevalence of female laughter in the CC.

While at first sight the laughter/humour sample mirrors the overall prevalence found in mixed-sex settings (116 (122) MS as opposed to 78 (82) SS settings[200]), it is important to note that single-sex settings occur significantly more often in the present sample than in the complete CC ($\chi^2 = 12.0733$; df = 1; p = 0.0005) – an effect largely produced by multi-party talk triggering more laughter and humour in single-sex than in mixed-sex settings (56 (61) SS opposed to 49 (49) MS).[201]

### 4.8.3  Age and group composition

Analogous to the previous table, the following table presents the frequencies for the group setting variables – this time according to the age bands.

*Table 4.12       Age and group setting*

|  | dyadic SS | dyadic MS | multi SS | multi MS | total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **age0 (0-14)** | 6 (8) | 0 (1) | 4 (4) | 14 (14) | 24 (27) |
| **age1 (15-24)** | 24 (25) | 1 (5) | 4 (3) | 11 (11) | 40 (44) |
| **age2 (25-34)** | 6 (6) | 13 (13) | 6 (7) | 13 (15) | 38 (41) |
| **age3 (35-44)** | 10 (9) | 14 (11) | 7 (7) | 12 (11) | 43 (38) |
| **age4 (45-59)** | 3 (5) | 10 (11) | 0 (0) | 11 (14) | 24 (30) |
| **age5 (60+)** | 6 (8) | 8 (7) | 1 (0) | 5 (6) | 20 (21) |

The model that best fits the laughter distribution is the one in which all two-way interactions are present ($\chi^2 = 2.10$; df = 2; p = 0.3505). For the humour distribution the model containing the pairwise associations 'age' * 'group size' and 'group size' * 'group sex' is best ($\chi^2 = 13.32$; df = 8; p = 0.1013), i.e. the potential association of 'age' and 'group sex' is negligible in this case.

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[199] The data for males exhibit the same pattern but the difference between observed and expected values are not significant.

[200] The numbers in brackets refer to instances of humour.

[201] As can be shown by statistical testing, the effect originating from dyadic talk (where SS settings outnumber MS settings in the sample) is negligible.

Putting the sample findings into the context of the overall distribution in the CC (see section 4.2) we can make a number of interesting observations:

- In general, multi-party mixed-sex settings yield less laughter and humour incidences than expected on the basis of the individual age group distributions according to group setting. The most extreme discrepancies are encountered in age range '15-44' (i.e. age groups 1, 2 and 3).

- With the exception of age group 4 (45-59) where expected and observed frequencies are almost identical, laughter/humour occurs more often in single-sex than in mixed-sex talk.

- From age group 2 onwards the number of laughter and humour incidences in dyadic mixed-sex settings exceeds that which we would expect.

- The most pronounced divergences from expected frequencies are found in age group 1 (15-24) where laughter and humour occur most often in dyadic single-sex settings.

### 4.8.4  Summary and discussion

Taking the results from the above sections together, the quantitative analyses indicate a trend for laughter and humour to occur most frequently in single-sex settings. We further observed a distinct bias for females to produce laughter/humour in multi-party single-sex encounters. This suggests that the significant gender differences observed for laughter in the CC are generated by group attributes.

Age factors seem to be operative in predicting the laughter and humorous behaviour of speakers depending on group composition: younger people aged 15-24 laugh /produce humour most often in dyadic single-sex conversations; with increasing age, laughter and humour occur more frequently in dyadic mixed-sex settings.[202]

Interestingly, multi-party, mixed-sex conversations trigger fewer laughter and humorous contributions than we would expect on the basis of their widespread presence in the CC. In attempting a plausible explanation for this we may recall that the present study focuses on utterance-initial and utterance-final laughter and completely ignores instances of 'single' laughter episodes, i.e. speaker turns that contain nothing but laughter. Following Glenn (1989) such turns, which primarily seem to serve an applause function, are considerably more characteristic of the multi-party situation with its much clearer role division of "(a) the speaker of the laughable,[203] and (b) co-celebrating (shared) laughers" (146). Would it be possible then, we may ask, that the relatively low number of laughter and humorous episodes for this interaction type is merely the result of the sampling strategy adopted in the present study? Unfortunately, there is no straightforward answer to this question. The reason is that if **multi-party** talk was the only operative criterion then we should be

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[202] Incidentally, this finding reflects the group preferences noted for the entire CC (see section 4.2).
[203] Glenn's study further shows that speakers in multi-party settings who produce a laughable rarely initiate shared laughter (e.g. by tagging a laughter particle at the end of their turn) in order to avoid the impression of self-praise.

observing a similar tendency in multi-party **single-sex** situations as well. This is, however, not the case. Of course, we could go on arguing that single-sex settings on the whole contain more laughter and humour and that this may be responsible for the higher number of multi-party single-sex laughter/humour instances, or we could say that - with a glance to the transcripts cited in Glenn's (1989) article – that Glenn's observations are based on multi-party **mixed-sex** conversations anyway. But, in any case, it becomes apparent that in following this path of reasoning we will not be able to reach a conclusive explanation. On this somewhat disconcerting note we should remind ourselves that not every statistically significant finding can readily be explained on linguistic or psychological grounds.

### 4.9  Humorous manoeuvres

This section presents and discusses the results of using the taxonomy developed for humorous manoeuvres to analyse the sample data. Section 4.9.1 looks at the distribution of the manoeuvres in the sample and evaluates the results against previous research. The subsequent sections examine possible connections between humour preferences and the variables *age* (section 4.9.3) and *gender* (section 4.9.4). The discussion of the findings on *gender* addresses the issue of psychological salience and statistical significance and critically reviews the results of prior works on 'gender and humour'. The section concludes with a brief summary of the main findings.

### 4.9.1  Overall distribution

The table below shows the frequencies of the various types of humorous manoeuvres in the sample. Owing to the fact that some humorous episodes were jointly produced and some had been assigned two labels the total number (208) exceeds the original sample size of 200. For ease of reference the tables use a shorthand version of the manoeuvre categories presented in section 4.4.

*Table 4.13        Humorous manoeuvres in the sample*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **wordplay** | 21 | **implicature** | 16 |
| **meta-lingual** | 6 | **observational** | 22 |
| **funny story** | 26 | **exaggerating** | 6 |
| **vulgar language** | 9 | **performing** | 10 |
| **insult/ teasing** | 20 | **incongruity** | 8 |
| **fantasy** | 21 | **other** | 9 |
| **violating good manners** | 26 | **no humour** | 8 |
| **total** | | 208 | |

The fact that the humorous manoeuvres are not equally distributed in the sample is, of course, in part due to the fact that some categories are broader (such as 'violating good manners') and others are more specific (e.g. metalingual). Still, it is somewhat startling that the manoeuvre 'wordplay' - which one might regard as a rather confined class - yields such a high score. Can this perhaps be explained by some sort of cultural bias?

Clearly, what is required in order to approach this question is a reference point against which the present findings can be compared. For this purpose, let us take a glance at

Hay's (1995) investigation of humour in conversations of New Zealanders - although we have to bear in mind that in Hay's study (unlike the present one) sociological and interaction-type variables were strictly controlled.[204]

*Table 4.14*        *Types of humour in Hay's (1995) study*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **anecdote** | 287 | **other** | 33 |
| **fantasy** | 224 | **quote** | 16 |
| **insult** | 52 | **roleplay** | 61 |
| **irony** | 55 | **self-deprecation** | 5 |
| **joke** | 1 | **vulgarity** | 9 |
| **observational** | 63 | **wordplay** | 47 |
| **total** | | 853 | |

'Anecdote' and 'fantasy' are by far the most frequently used forms of humour in Hay's corpus. In fact, they make up almost 60 per cent of all the humour episodes coded in that work. In comparison, the frequencies in the sample taken from the CC are much more evenly distributed.

Rather than trying to account for this overall difference (such a general analysis is unlikely to be rewarding) let us return to the category 'wordplay'. Juxtaposing the frequencies in both works we find a huge discrepancy (10.1% in the present work as against 0.06% in Hay (*ibid.*)). This finding could be construed as suggesting a cross-cultural difference between British and New Zealand society. But before we draw such a radical conclusion the divergent sampling methods utilised in the two studies need to be ruled out as a potential source of variation. This can be done on several grounds: -

- Hay's target group of young people between 18 and 35 also figures prominently in the use of 'wordplay' humour in the present work (cf. age groups 1 and 2, table 4.15 below).

- There is only a slight tendency towards using 'wordplay' in multi-party conversations (13 for multi-party against 8 for dyadic conversations).

- Social class attributes do not seem to have an impact on the use of 'wordplay'. It is, however, interesting to note that all 4 instances of wordplay involving sexual/vulgar innuendo are produced by DE (3 instances)- or C2 (1 instance)-members.[205]

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[204] Hay (1995) focused on conversations between four interlocutors, all of whom fell into the age range of 18 to 35, self-identified as Pakeha and had some form of tertiary education.
[205] The BNC classification system distinguishes between the four class groupings AB, C1, C2, DE.

Incidentally, this finding ties in with our previous results on the use of verbal humour in canned jokes (see section 3.2.2) where humour based on wordplay was found to be present to a non-trivial extent – despite the trend reported in the literature (see Attardo et al. (1994) on jokes in *American* and *Italian* joke books) for canned jokes to exhibit a preference for referential humour.

From a typological perspective, it would thus seem that this predilection for verbal humour cannot solely be explained in linguistic terms, i.e. in reference to the particularities of the English language system – an issue often referred to in discussions on the matter[206] - but rather that national and cultural aspects play an important role.

Another set of figures worthy of note are those summarising the use of vulgar language as a source of humour. Interestingly, they are identical in both studies (9) although my sample is considerably smaller than Hay's. In view of the fact that Hay sampled her speakers from the upper end of the educational spectrum (*ibid.*:37), I investigated whether the instances drawn from the CC sample originate from interlocutors at the lower end and found that this is clearly the case: all speakers who use this manoeuvre and for whom the BNC provides social class identification are either from DE or C2. Since a similar bias towards vulgar and sexual humour has already been noted in the discussion of 'wordplay', it would seem that there is a correlation between social class membership and humour preferences. In view of the low overall frequencies encountered, however, the validity of this connection would have to be tested by a more extensive corpus analysis or, perhaps, employing some more targeted methodology (e.g. questionnaires, humour response elicitation tests)[207] – endeavours that are beyond the scope of the present work.

Finally, it is necessary to comment on the fact that the category 'violating good manners' - which yields a rather respectable count in the present work - does not exist in Hay's taxonomy. After having ruled out the possibility of sampling effects as one source of this 'omission', it seems probable that such instances were classified as 'other' in Hay's work.

### 4.9.2  Age and gender

Before analysing the variables 'age' and 'gender' with respect to (possible) humour preferences it is necessary to examine whether there is any bias to be found in the distribution of gender of humour producers and age structure. The frequencies are shown in the table below:

The chi-square test statistic produces a non-significant result ($\chi^2$=4.8335; df=6; p=0.5653), implying that we do not need to consider any additional effects due to an interaction between these variables.

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[206] In her contrastive analyses of punning in Hungarian and English, Suranyi (1982) observes an almost total lack of Hungarian jokes based on homonymy, leading her to speculate that Hungarian jokes are less language-conscious than English jokes. See also Alexander (1992, 1997).

[207] In the case of 'vulgarity' especially, questionnaires or elicitation tests are however methodologically problematic.

*Table 4.15        Age and gender representation in the sample*

| gender | age0 0-14 | age1 15-24 | age2 25-34 | age3 35-44 | age4 45-59 | age5 60+ | unknown | total |
|--------|------|------|------|------|------|------|---------|-------|
| f | 16 | 30 | 28 | 22 | 20 | 14 | 2 | 132 |
| m | 14 | 15 | 10 | 17 | 9 | 9 | 2 | 76 |
| total | 30 | 45 | 38 | 39 | 29 | 23 | 4 | 208 |

## 4.9.3  Age and humorous manoeuvre

The table below displays the frequencies with which speakers of the various age groups employ humorous manoeuvres.

*Table 4.16        Humorous manoeuvres according to age group*

| humorous manoeuvre | age0 0-14 | age1 15-24 | age2 25-34 | age3 35-44 | age4 45-59 | age5 60+ | un-known | total |
|--------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| wordplay | 4 | 6 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 21 |
| metalingual | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 |
| funny story | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 26 |
| vulgar language | 3 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 9 |
| insult/teasing | 0 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 20 |
| fantasy | 2 (1) | 14 (6) | 0 | 3 (3) | 0 | 1 (1) | 1 | 21 |
| violating good manners | 5 | 3 | 6 | 6 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 26 |
| implicature | 0 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 0 | 16 |
| observational | 5 | 0 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 22 |
| exaggerating | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| performing | 4 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 10 |
| incongruity | 0 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 8 |
| other | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 9 |
| no humour | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| total | 30 | 45 | 39 | 39 | 28 | 23 | 4 | 208 |

Owing to the low expected frequencies of each cell[208] it is not appropriate to calculate the chi-square statistic. There are, however, a few interesting observations we can make:

1. The number of occurrences of 'fantasy' humour is remarkably high in age group 1 (15-24). Admittedly, this is partly due to clustering (6 instances originate from one single text file (KSV)) but counting out the figures on a text-by-text basis (cf. the figures given in brackets above) the observed tendency still persists. It is further worthy of note that 'fantasy humour', compared to other humorous manoeuvres, has the highest counts of *joint* production – a finding that is also supported by Hay:

    > Fantasy humour is often a joint display, where speakers bounce off each other and jointly build up a hypothetical scenario (1995:85).

    Incidentally, it is typically sexual fantasies that are projected into such scenarios by people of this age range.

2. There is no instance of the category 'insult/teasing' in age group 0 (0-14). Arguing on the lines of the superiority theories one may account for this by referring to the inferior status of children towards their adult co-conversationalists. Support for this interpretation is provided by the fact that during the examination of CC texts no recording was encountered where *only* (small) children were present; there was always at least one more adult talking and taping the conversation.[209]

3. The telling of funny stories (3) seems to be equally popular among all age groups.

4. For age group 5 (60+) no instances of the manoeuvres 'playing with words' and 'metalingual' are present. In view of the overall popularity of the 'wordplay' category this is a rather interesting finding. The question of whether this result can be generalized as some sort of 'humour attitude' of older people remains, however, an open question as it may simply be an artefact of the relatively low representation (23 instances) of humour/laughter incidences produced by this group in the sample. A follow-up study targeting the humour preferences of older people could throw more light on this matter.

5. There is a trend towards using the manoeuvre 'generating implicature' more often with increasing age. This result would seem to support the view ascribing a relatively high degree of cognitive complexity to this manoeuvre.

6. The highest frequency of 'performing' humour is found in age group 0 (0-14).

7. The 'observational' category (i.e. 'quipping at what's going on at the moment') is not represented in age group 1. This is a rather puzzling finding for which no

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[208] A rough estimate for the expected cell frequencies (neglecting proportional response) is given by dividing the total number of occurrences (208) by the number of cells (14·6=84), resulting in approximately 2.5.

[209] This could be interpreted as a sampling bias introduced by the BNC resulting from the obvious problem of not being able to equip (say) five-year-olds with tape recorders.

explanation can be offered. It serves, however, as a poignant reminder that any of the above comments have to be taken with a pinch of salt as they may merely reflect a sampling bias or random error.

### 4.9.4  Gender and humorous manoeuvre

The frequencies of humorous manoeuvres according to gender are presented in the following table:

*Table 4.17*        *Humorous manoeuvres according to gender*

| humorous manoeuvre | females | males | total |
|---|---|---|---|
| wordplay | 13 | 8 | 21 |
| metalingual | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| funny story | 15 | 12 | 27 |
| vulgar language | 5 | 4 | 9 |
| insult/teasing | 16 | 4 | 20 |
| fantasy | 8 | 13 | 21 |
| violating good manners | 22 | 3 | 25 |
| implicature | 4 | 12 | 16 |
| observational | 17 | 5 | 22 |
| exaggerating | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| performing | 8 | 2 | 10 |
| incongruity | 6 | 2 | 8 |
| other | 6 | 3 | 9 |
| no humour | 4 | 4 | 8 |
| total | 132 | 76 | 208 |

Again, chi-square testing on the complete data set above is inappropriate (one third of the cells have expected counts less than 5). It is, however, acceptable to perform a pointed (chi-square) comparison for those cells which have an expected value greater than 5.

Three manoeuvres produce significant results on the gender variable: two are significant on the 5% level and one is significant on the 1% level:

'fantasy': $\chi^2 = 5.9173$; $p = 0.015$

'violating good manners': $\chi^2 = 6.492$; $p = 0.011$

'implicature': $\chi^2 = 10.2073$; $p = 0.0014$

The quantitative data thus indicates a trend for males to use 'fantasy' and 'implicature' humour and a female bias towards the type 'violating good manners'. Despite the appeal of this finding, we should, however, recall what has been said on the issue of statistical significance and psychological salience. Thus, before we go on to discuss these results in the light of previous research we shall seek evidence in actual talk-in-interaction for our quantitative observations.

Examination of individual conversational fragments classified as 'violating good manners' shows a number of instances where females raise gender-related issues. One case in point has already been presented as an illustrative example for the subtype 'candidness' (see section 4.4) where two female friends address the social acceptability of hen parties (against the background of stag parties):

KD1 n=3836

PS0JA:  Have you ever seen any of them or not?
PS0JC:  No I'd like to [laugh]
PS0JA:  [laugh]
PS0JC:  Well why not men go to the bleeding, er well it's like I've never been to a proper hen night, Gary's been to a, a stag night, with female strippers, I'd like to go to a stag, er a hen night
PS0JA:  Mm [pause] oh dear [sneeze] oh dear me

Another example that demonstrates the sensitivity of females to gender roles and social expectations is the following excerpt of a conversation between two 16-year-olds in which Emma (PS0EC) pokes fun at her father's prudishness:

KCE n=1544

PS0EC:  This is disgusting! I did this top bottom up so that my dad wouldn't call me a tart as I walked out the house and I forgot to undo it again! [laugh]
PS0EB:  You're getting a bit prudish aren't you?
PS0EC:  [laughing] I know []! [pause] Ah dear!

While gender is psychologically salient in the production of humour that plays with social conventions, this cannot be shown for the categories 'generating implicature' and 'fantasy': here, no qualitative support could be found for the statistically significant findings in the conversational data. One could, of course, take this as grounds for dismissing the impact of the gender variable in this context altogether but it also seems possible that these humorous manoeuvres are less likely to be explicitly addressed in actual talk because they are rather abstract.

Reviewing the findings in the light of previous research we do, however, find support for the male preference of fantasy humour in Hay (1995), who notes the same trend. Her other observation, that fantasy humour occurs more often in mixed-sex interaction, cannot be confirmed by this sample: from a total of 17 occurrences (some of which are jointly produced) 9 occurred in mixed-sex settings (dyadic or multi-party) and 8 occurred in single-sex groups.

The gender bias noted in connection with the manoeuvre 'generating implicature' is not documented in previous research – mainly of course because it has never been isolated and operationalised as a discrete form of humour. Some correspondence can,

however, be detected with Crawford/Gressley (1991), who present experimental findings that document gender differences on the creativity dimension - one factor beside others distilled from a content analysis of subject descriptions of what constitutes an outstanding sense of humour. In their study, "creativity" – characterised by the authors as "witty, spontaneous, clever, quick" or as an ability to "use language creatively" (224) - is used significantly more by males than by females. It must however be conceded that 'creativity' in this context covers a much broader range of humorous episodes than is implied in the manoeuvre 'generating implicature'.

Viewed from a functionalist perspective, we could try and make sense of this finding by assuming that this manoeuvre poses an understanding test to the recipient and is thus potentially aggressive (Norrick 1993). Clearly, this interpretation would fit in with previously observed characteristics of male conversation and the male preference for hostile humour (Crawford 1989, Crawford/Gressley 1991, Jenkins 1985). One must however be aware of possible alternative interpretations of humour in this category. As shown in the following fragment, the humorous manoeuvre 'generating implicature' may be used to prevent or mitigate the undesired effect of the recipient taking offence:

> KD7 n=1418
>
> PS0KP:     I'm not looking for a Jag! I'm not looking for a Jag=! I'm not interested in a Jag= Christopher!
> PS0KV:     It's nineteen seventy, a good body work, [unclear], spoilers, [unclear] alloys, triple kerbs
> PS0KP:     [laugh]
> PS0KV:     Two hundred ^ and six ^
> PS0KP:     ^ Yeah ^ okay.
> PS0KV:     two hundred and sixty five brake horse.
> → PS0KP:   Attached B P petrol station! ^ [laugh] ^
> PS0KV:     ^ [laugh] ^

Despite Matt's (PS0KP) blatant lack of interest in Jaguars, Christopher (PS0KV) (probably jokingly) continues to try and sell him the idea of purchasing one. Rather than reacting seriously to such futile attempts, Matt obviously opts for a humorous strategy in order to make his position clear. His ironic statement is received with laughter and shortly afterwards the topic is closed.

To close this discussion of 'generating implicature' it should be pointed out that it would have been desirable to be able to tag instances according to a functional taxonomy of humour. The reason why this analysis refrained from doing so is not that a working taxonomy does not exist[210] but rather because of the difficulties that would be encountered in assigning the 'correct' labels without being able to draw on any (insider) knowledge of the speakers and judge their intentions. The previous discussion of the humorous type 'generating implicature' is a case in point. Another example is the functional ambivalence of teasing and insults: they may serve to maintain the power of the teaser but they may also be used to create and maintain solidarity in joking relationships (Radcliffe-Brown 1940, Norrick 1993). In conclusion, it would seem that such complex humorous activities are best investigated in a more focused, field-work type study such as offered by Hartung (1998).

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[210] Hay (1995) proposes a taxonomy on the basis of conversational humour which could perhaps have been used.

It seems appropriate to close this discussion with a brief evaluation of the present findings against the core results offered in the literature on gender and humour. These could be condensed (though somewhat simplistically) to the formula: male humour is more hostile, performance-oriented and formulaic; female humour is more sharing, anecdotal, and context-bound (see section 3.1.5). The present, admittedly small-scale, investigation can only partly underwrite these claims. For one thing, the counts for males using 'performing' humour, 'teasing/insult' and 'wordplay' are definitely too low to support this view; for another, no gender bias in the use of anecdotal humour could be observed.[211]

The most interesting result of this investigation is perhaps the female preference for breaching moral and social conventions as a source of humour. The following quote from Marlowe will serve to highlight a number of key areas within which this result can be interpreted:

> Women's roles generally require discretion in the use of vigorous response, monitoring one's own behavior to the point of self-consciousness so that one's actions do not provoke others. These norms limit women's production of humor. Inhibition is associated with humorlessness, and, by blocking spontaneity, self-consciousness is incompatible with humor behavior. (1989:147)

Marlowe's assertion of a female 'self-consciousness' vis-à-vis their environment and the resultant constraints on overstepping the borders of socially acceptable behaviour is particularly relevant. Unlike Marlowe's somewhat resigned commentary, however, this attitude - generally regarded as the outcome of gender-based socialization – does not necessarily lead to humour 'blockage' but may, to the contrary, serve as a driving force for humorous activity. Two functions spring to mind when considering this phenomenon: first, the coping function addressed by release theories and, second, the conflict function, which - in general terms - is described as a device employed by the unprivileged to subvert social differentiation and challenge dominant, oppressing societal norms (for discussion and references, see section 1.3.3). While the coping function, being a psychological one, is difficult to verify on the basis of actual talk, the conflict function was shown to be demonstrably at work in the two conversational fragments (KCE, KD1) above. Other examples are present in the sample.

An important issue mentioned in the quote is the alleged "humorlessness" of women (see also Crawford/Gressley 1991:217), which Marlowe apparently seeks to counter by her argument above. Everyone will agree that such statements – however demeaning and clichéd - presuppose an understanding of what humour is. As for Marlowe, this obviously includes 'spontaneity', but, one may ask, does it include the humorous manoeuvre 'violating social conventions' – a category that (beside other more 'respectable' ones such as 'generating implicature') has been granted a status of its own right in the present study? The answer is: almost certainly not. The reason is that this manoeuvre does not appear as a distinct class or aspect of humour in other works, neither in empirical research as an operationalised dimension, nor in linguistic treatments which have so far mainly focused on structural mechanisms of humour. With its emphasis on indirectness and hostile elements of humour prior research has thus perpetuated a conceptualisation of humour that only partly reflects the humorous

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[211] The tendency for females to use context-bound humour more often than males is however partly - though not in a statistically significant sense - reflected in the figures shown for observational humour.

activities of speakers in everyday talk. Studies that have drawn extensive conclusions about the 'humourless female' may well have missed the joke.

### 4.9.5  Summary

The analysis of humorous manoeuvres in conversations brought to light some interesting though sometimes not quite conclusive facts – hampered by the low frequencies obtained from the sample. This situation might have been avoided by drawing a larger sample or collapsing variable values. The former alternative was not feasible due to time constraints; the second option was considered inappropriate due to the loss of detail it would have entailed. However, those trends observed which were difficult to generalize may serve as working hypotheses for future research.

Summarising the main results, we found that - when contrasting the present data with a similar study investigating the humorous behaviour of New Zealanders - British speakers appear to have a particular penchant for verbal humour. We further detected a distinct bias for lower-class speakers to use vulgar language as a humorous resource. The analysis also noted a number of trends in age group preferences: Young speakers aged 0-14 show the highest frequency in 'performing' humour and no incidence of the 'insult/teasing' category; speakers aged 15-24 seem particularly fond of 'fantasy' humour; 'implicature' humour is more often used with increasing age. Owing to the larger frequencies obtained for the 'gender-humorous manoeuvres' - correlation, the quantitative evaluation produces more reliable results than on the 'age' dimension. Men were found to use significantly more 'implicature' and 'fantasy' humour and women used the type 'violating good manners' more often. The relevance of the latter finding could be demonstrated by quoting conversational material.

## 4.10  Laughter, humour support and targets

This section presents the results of an exploratory quantitative investigation of laughter-in-context as well as some more focused inquiries. That is, we

- go on a 'fishing expedition' seeking potential explanatory relationships,

- attempt to account for the significant difference in laughter incidences between females and males                                          and

- test hypotheses generated by prior gender research.

More specifically, the discussion will centre on the following questions:

1. Do females use a particular (perhaps more common) laughter function more often than males do? What are the most common laughter functions?

2. Is there any relationship between laughter function and age?

3. Are women more supportive of humour produced by males than the other way round?

4. Do male and female humour producers differ as to what targets they use? How aggressive is humour?

The low frequencies produced by the two-way comparisons mean that it is generally not possible to systematically investigate relationships between more than two variables. Effects originating from group size, group composition (i.e. single-sex (male/female) or mixed-sex) or other factors are pointed out in the course of the analysis.

The chapter concludes with a brief survey of metalinguistic comments produced by BNC speakers on 'laughing and laughter'. These provide a reference point for evaluating the relevance of the quantitative findings.

### 4.10.1 Laughter function and laughter position

Laughter position and laughter function are inextricably connected. The analysis of their interaction thus delivers fairly trivial results (such as that the contextualising function of laughter is typically realised in initiating moves and Janus-faced responses or that affiliative laughter is hardly ever found in initiating moves). It is therefore appropriate to restrict the discussion to the separate distributions of laughter functions (outlined in section 4.5) and laughter position within turn sequences.

## Laughter functions

*Table 4.18        Laughter functions*

| function | frequency | percent |
|----------|----------:|--------:|
| *con*    | 80        | 40.00   |
| *aff*    | 34        | 17.00   |
| *hetero* | 23        | 11.50   |
| *con+*   | 22        | 11.00   |
| *aff+*   | 11        | 5.50    |
| *reflex+*| 10        | 5.00    |
| *reflex* | 9         | 4.50    |
| *disaff* | 8         | 4.00    |
| *other*  | 3         | 1.50    |

Perhaps the most surprising result of this distribution is the frequency of contextualising laughter in the sample, which (taking *con* and *con+* together) adds up to 51 per cent of all instances. Needless to say, the majority of such occurrences are in utterance-final position but there is also a fair number (17) that are utterance-initial.

Affiliative laughter (*aff* and *aff+*) – the type which most of us would probably think of as the ordinary and prototypical form – ranks second in the above list. We should, however, bear in mind that this function is often realised by 'single' laughter incidences not included in the present analysis.

*Reflex+*- laughter, the functional equivalent to shared laughter initiated by "someone other than current speaker" (Glenn 1989:127), occurs slightly more often in multi-party talk than in dyadic talk (6 multi-party/4 dyadic). Considering the overall distribution of multi-party and dyadic settings in the sample, this finding falls somewhat short of our expectation of a more pronounced bias towards this sequential pattern occurring more frequently in multi-party groups.

*Heterogeneous* laughter is most often found in utterance-initial position. This observation is typical for utterance-initial laughter on the whole, as laughter in this position is functionally much more heterogeneous than utterance-terminating laughter.

The low number of *disaffiliative* laughter incidences supports prior research by Makri-Tsilipakou (1994), who notes that "the bulk of laughter is performed as solidary action embedded in affiliative sequences" (43). The frequency of the phenomenon in the present sample is however too small to evaluate possible effects of gender and group composition as was done by Makri-Tsilipakou.

**Laughter position**

*Table 4.19*        *Laughter position*

| position | frequency | percent |
|----------|----------:|--------:|
| *R* | 38 | 19.00 |
| *Ir* | 37 | 18.50 |
| *Rj* | 32 | 16.00 |
| *I* | 22 | 11.00 |
| *R – I* | 16 | 8.00 |
| *F1 – I* | 14 | 7.00 |
| *F1* | 12 | 6.00 |
| *F1 – Ir* | 12 | 6.00 |
| *R – Ir* | 6 | 3.00 |
| *F2 – Ir* | 5 | 2.50 |
| *Ia* | 3 | 1.50 |
| *F2 – I* | 2 | 1.00 |
| *F2* | 1 | 0.50 |

Similar to the above findings on contextualising and affiliative laughter, the quantitative data on laughter position shows a relatively high proportion of laughter in initiating moves or turns containing an initiating move compared to response moves. Although this is, of course, partly the result of the sampling (omitting 'single' laughter occurrences) it seems nevertheless worthy of note that utterances containing a laughter particle have what may be called a considerable 'initiating momentum'.

With respect to the issue of turn-taking structure and conversational humour discussed in section 2.2.2, the quantitative data above confirms the claims previously made on the basis of assorted humorous examples from the corpus: the basic unit of the adjacency pair is often extended to larger sequences (cf. *Rj* - moves, *F1* and *F2* moves in the table above), exchange boundaries are blurred (as is reflected in the substantial amount of *Ir*-moves in the sample) and moves within humorous exchanges are to a considerable extent Janus-faced (*Rj*).

*4.10.2 Laughter function and some extralinguistic variables*

**Laughter function and gender**

The previous section has shown that speakers often use laughter to signify the laughability of their own utterance (i.e. the *con* – function). In view of its prevalence – at least in the contexts drawn from the corpus – and with regard to the distinct gender bias in producing laughter, we may reasonably ask if this function occurs more frequently in women's laughter than in men's.

As is evident from the figures in the table below the answer to this question is definitely negative:

*Table 4.20        Laughter function according to gender*

| gender | laughter function | | | | | | | | | |
|--------|------|-----|--------|------|------|---------|--------|--------|-------|-------|
|        | con  | aff | hetero | con+ | aff+ | reflex+ | reflex | disaff | other | total |
| **f**     | 52   | 23  | 14     | 15   | 8    | 6       | 5      | 5      | 1     | 129   |
| **m**     | 28   | 11  | 9      | 7    | 3    | 4       | 4      | 3      | 2     | 71    |
| **total** | 80   | 34  | 23     | 22   | 11   | 10      | 9      | 8      | 3     | 200   |

Since 33% of the cells have expected counts less than 5, chi-square testing on the complete data set is not appropriate. If we, however, single out the first five columns that meet the frequency criterion of the chi-square test and analyse them separately, we find no differences between the genders. As a result, the fact that women laugh more than men in the CC cannot be explained on the basis of laughter function.

**Laughter function and age**

In an attempt to find an explanation for the age group differences in laughter frequencies (see section 4.2.4) the distribution of laughter functions according to age bands was examined:

The table shows that laughter functions are fairly evenly distributed across age bands. A pointed analysis of the most frequent functions (*con/con+* and *aff/aff+*) and subsequent chi-square testing reveals further no significant differences. Hence, as in the previous section, laughter function does not provide a clue as to why speakers of a particular age (gender) laugh more often than others.

*Table 4.21*        *Laughter function according to age group*

| age | laughter function | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | con | aff | hetero | con+ | aff+ | reflex+ | reflex | disaff | other | total |
| 0 | 13 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 26 |
| 1 | 16 | 10 | 8 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 42 |
| 2 | 14 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 38 |
| 3 | 15 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 44 |
| 4 | 11 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 24 |
| 5 | 10 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 21 |
| ? | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| total | 80 | 34 | 23 | 22 | 11 | 10 | 9 | 8 | 3 | 200 |

## Miscellaneous

*Table 4.22*        *Laughter function according to gender composition*

| age | laughter function | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | con | aff | hetero | con+ | aff+ | reflex+ | reflex | disaff | other | total |
| MS | 51 | 20 | 16 | 7 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 7 | 3 | 119 |
| SS | 28 | 13 | 7 | 15 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 79 |
| ? | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| total | 80 | 34 | 23 | 22 | 11 | 10 | 9 | 8 | 3 | 200 |

A number of other potentially interesting relationships were examined, e.g. 'laughter function' and 'manoeuvre', 'laughter function' and 'group size', 'laughter function' and 'group sex', which - by and large - delivered rather unspectacular results. One finding, however, deserves special note: recipient laughter prompted by a laughter invitation (symbolized as *con+*) occur significantly more often in single-sex settings than in mixed-sex settings, as shown in the table above:

Subsequent enquiry into possible gender effects further indicates that the observed bias is independent from gender:

*Table 4.23*

| group<br>sex | *con+* | total laughter |
|---|---|---|
| SS female | 11 | 55 |
| SS male | 4 | 24 |
| total | 15 | 79 |

The above findings suggest that speakers are more likely to accept a laughter invitation (and thereupon laugh) from same-sex members than they do from speakers of the other sex.[212] In view of the low frequency of the phenomenon in the present analysis, however, this result should be regarded as a working hypothesis for some future research. The following section will look more closely into the phenomenon of responsive laughter and, more specifically, in its function as humour support.

### 4.10.3 Humour support by laughter

The topic of humour support has attracted attention within the domain of gender studies. This section therefore largely focuses on examining the major results from these investigations in the light of the present material. The first issue concerns a point already mentioned above, namely that of laughter invitations. Following prior research (Dreher 1982 as cited in Kotthoff 1986, Hay 1995, Makri-Tsilipakou 1994), the following hypothesis will be examined:

1. *Men turn down laughter invitations more often than females and, to an even greater extent, when the laughter invitation originates from a female.*

The second hypothesis is more general and can be phrased as:

2. *Men are more likely to have their humour supported than women.*

Closely connected to this hypothesis is the final third one:

3. *Women are more supportive of their co-conversationalists' humour than men.*

In order to test the first hypothesis all instances of con+ - and aff+ - laughter functions are classified according to gender of the person who affiliates and gender of laugher, resulting in four combinations.[213] The respective frequencies are shown in the table below:

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[212] This also holds when we take into account the number of *aff+* - laughter incidences, which of course exhibit the same sequential pattern as *con+*.

[213] The abbreviations in the table are *f* for *female* and *m* for *male*, the first item in the pair denoting the gender of the speaker affiliating with laughter, the second the gender of the speaker who invites the laugh.

Both hypotheses (2) and (3) are evaluated by the data presented in the following table, which contains the figures for the gender of the laugher and gender of the person who initiates the laugh by saying something funny:[214]

*Table 4.24*          *Laughter support according to gender (laugher – invitation source)*

| f – f | f – m | m – m | m – f |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| 11 | 5 | 5 | 4 |
| **total:** 16 | | **total:** 9 | |

*Table 4.25*          *Humour support according to gender*

| gender of laugher | gender of humour producer | | |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| | f | m | total |
| f | 24 | 12 | 36 |
| m | 12 | 12 | 24 |
| total | 37 | 23 | 60 |

In the face of the scarcity of the phenomenon of invited laughter support in the present material (see table 4.24) the numerical evidence does not suggest the bias indicated in the literature. Granted, females produce laughter more often than men in response to laughter invitations but the difference is in keeping with the overall trend of females laughing more frequently than men (see also the figures of laughter support in table 4.25). Contrary to expectation, the data suggests that females are more responsive to laughter invitations by other females than by members of the opposite sex. In statistical terms, the difference is however not significant.

Calculation of the chi-square on the data in table 4.25 produces a non-significant result ($\chi^2 = 1.6667$; df = 1; p = 0.1967). Hence, the validity of hypotheses (2) and (3) cannot be confirmed. Despite this, the high frequency of female laughter/humour support towards females may lead us to suspect that the variable 'group sex' may have an effect on the distribution. The figures for humour support according to 'group sex' are therefore reproduced below in table 4.26.

This distribution displays an inverse trend in the gender categories: females support humour more often in SS groups, males in MS groups. Combining this data with table 4.25, it is tempting to construe this as implying a general pattern of females supporting other females' humour more than men support their same-sex members. This is, however, not the case: no significant differences are seen when comparing the overall figures of gender and group composition (see section 4.8.2) with the corresponding data shown in table 4.26. In short, although the track of following up

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[214] Unlike the preceding test, the crucial criterion here is humour production, not the production of a post-utterance laughter particle.
[215] Unlike the preceding test, the crucial criterion here is humour production, not the production of a post-utterance laughter particle.

the variable 'group sex' as an influencing factor seemed promising, it has to be dismissed.

*Table 4.26*

| gender of laugher | group sex | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | SS | MS | total |
| f | 22 | 14 | 36 |
| m | 9 | 15 | 24 |
| total | 31 | 29 | 60 |

In conclusion, the present data does not lend support to the claims made in the literature of a gender bias in humour support. Different interpretative frameworks may account for this divergence: The (statistical) calculations performed in the present work compensate for the lopsided gender data on laughter (in the CC and in the sample) with the result that some ostensible trends (such as the higher number of females supporting other speakers' humour) vanish in the light of the total frequencies. In contrast, it appears that other research on this topic interpret a similar tendency in their data in more absolute terms and take it as the *source* of variation for the greater frequency of laughter tokens in female speech.

## 4.10.4 Targets

The levels defined for the variable 'targets' (see section 4.7) are represented in the sample as follows:

*Table 4.27        Targets of humour*

| target | frequency | percent |
|---|---|---|
| non | 87 | 43.5 |
| tpa | 53 | 26.5 |
| add | 20 | 10 |
| tpp | 20 | 10 |
| self | 12 | 6 |
| unclear | 6 | 3 |
| dog | 2 | 1 |
| total | 200 | 100 |

As is apparent from the above table, a large proportion of humorous instances do not victimise anyone. Humour targeted against a person not present in the ongoing conversation yields the second highest figure, followed by humour focusing on

someone present (*add* and *tpp*) and self-deprecating humour. This 'cline' of humour targets generally conforms to Hay's (1995:127) although it would seem that her corpus contained a greater amount of self-directed humour.

All in all, the present distribution of the 'humorous butt' suggests that the role of humour as a release mechanism for aggressive sentiments or as a form of social control (see sections 1.3.1 and 1.3.3) has often been grossly overestimated in more 'theoretical' treatments of the topic. It adds support to previous studies on conversational humour, such as Norrick (1983), which assert that joking "usually serves to diffuse aggression and create solidarity" (34).

Prior research indicates that the use of humorous butts varies with respect to ethnicity, group composition and gender (Ervin-Tripp/Lampert 1992, Hay 1995). The following sections present the results obtained from the CC, focusing on the interaction between gender and group composition in relation to humour targeted at someone absent (*tpa*) and humour against someone present (in this case the figures for *tpp* and *add* targets are added together).[216]

## *tpa* – targets

Log-linear analysis produces the best fit for the independence model ($\chi^2 = 6.02$; df = 4; p = 0.1968), i.e. there is no paired interaction between any one of the variables 'gender', 'group size' and 'group sex'. This broadly coincides with the results on gender and group composition described in section 4.8.2 - albeit with the difference that in the present case the variables 'group size' and 'group sex' are not associated. In order to account for this divergence, it is necessary to weigh the frequencies of the current sub-sample (the first cell entry in the table below) against the ones representing the whole sample (the second cell entry, in brackets):

Table 4.28        *Frequencies of tpa-targets according to group characteristics*

| group size | group sex | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **MS** | **SS** | **total** |
| **dyad** | 14 (49) | 22 (61) | 36 (110) |
| **multi** | 10 (73) | 7 (21) | 17 (94) |
| **total** | 24 (122) | 29 (82) | 53 (204) |

As can be shown by a number of chi-square tests (omitted here), the major discrepancy between the two distributions is the relatively high number of tokens in dyadic, mixed-sex groups in the *tpa* data. This indicates a trend for humour targeting an absent person to occur more often in mixed-sex, dyadic settings.

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[216] The low frequency of self-directed humour in the present data does not unfortunately allow one to discriminate finer details such as group variables.

In the main, this finding conforms with prior research (Ervin-Tripp/Lampert 1992, Hay 1995) although we should bear in mind that Hay's observations are based on multi-party talk (between four participants) and we would therefore expect a larger figure for multi-party, mixed-sex interaction in our data as well. The slight gender bias (noted in Hay) towards females using *tpa*-targets more often than men cannot, however, be confirmed.

## *tpp/add* - targets

As in the previous analysis, the independence model proves to be the most parsimonious one ($\chi^2$ = 3.48; df = 4; p=0.4816). The discussion can therefore be restricted to the divergences in the respective 2*2 contingency tables of 'group size' and 'group sex'. The figures in the table below are arranged as before:

*Table 4.29*        *Frequencies of tpp/add-targets according to group characteristics*

| group size | group sex | | |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| | **MS** | **SS** | **total** |
| **dyad** | 6 (49) | 4 (61) | 10 (110) |
| **multi** | 24 (73) | 6 (21) | 30 (94) |
| **total** | 30 (122) | 10 (82) | 40 (204) |

The data reveal a clear trend towards *tpp/add* – targets occurring primarily in multi-party, mixed-sex groups. It can further be observed that speakers in dyads do not tend to focus their humour on their co-participant and that this seems to be independent of the other speaker's gender.

These findings run counter to Hay (*ibid.*), who notes a bias for humour focused on someone present to occur more frequently in single-sex groups. In addition, her observation that "speakers tend to use members of the opposite sex as the focus of their humour" (128) cannot be confirmed either, as is shown by the figures below:

*Table 4.30*

| gender of humour producer | gender of target | frequency[217] |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| m | m | 5 |
| m | f | 4 |
| f | f | 6 |
| f | m | 7 |

---

[217] The column total (22) falls short of the actual total (40) since the gender of the target could not always be identified (especially in multi-party conversations).

In the light of the low frequencies of the phenomenon in the present study, however, it would be misguided to draw any general conclusions or, for that matter, ascribe importance to the apparent mismatch of Hay's and the present findings.

The fact that speakers in **dyads** hardly end up at the receiving end of humorous banter, together with the observed tendencies towards putting-down absent people noted in the previous section, nonetheless deserve some attention as they are indicative of a solidarity-based communicative strategy that seeks to avoid affronts and highlight similarities. In **multi-party settings**, on the other hand, competitive, power-based strategies are more likely to occur, and this is reflected in the increased amount of humour targeted at someone present.

## 4.10.5 Summary and discussion

Summing up the main results of the quantitative evaluation, a surprisingly high incidence of contextualising laughter was found in the sample. Further, a trend was detected for utterances containing laughter to initiate further turns rather than terminate exchanges. As anticipated, the adjacency pair as the basic exchange unit is often extended to three or four moves in humorous talk and exchange boundaries are not always clear-cut - as is reflected by the considerable amount of Janus-faced and re-initiating moves.

On the 'sociolinguistic scale', none of the results show any effects caused by gender or age. This is both surprising – in that it contradicts prior research findings (especially on the topic of humour support) - as well as frustrating as it was hoped that the quantitative differences in the CC documented for the age groups and genders could at least in part be explained. Interestingly though, the study uncovers effects due to group characteristics:

(a) Speakers were found to laugh more often in response to laughter invitations produced by members of the same rather than the opposite sex.

(b) The presence of humorous butts was distinctly higher in mixed-sex groups, with *absent* targets being more likely to be victimised in dyads and *present* targets more likely to be addressed in multi-party settings.

All in all, however, humorous manoeuvres do not specifically target anyone.

Recapitulating the methodological approach adopted in the previous section, one could say that context-free interactional laughter mechanisms (isolated from actual talk-in-interaction) were related to contextual (extralinguistic) properties and - in a wider sense - societal institutions. In analogy to Zimmerman/Boden (1991), who contend that "institutions are "talked" into being" (9), one of the principal questions we addressed could thus be phrased as: how are institutions (such as gender) 'laughed' into being.

As argued elsewhere, the main problem with this approach is that the extralinguistic dimensions brought into play in the analysis may be immaterial, i.e. have no bearing on how interactants organise their turns and interpret each others' utterances. The

main purpose of the remainder of this chapter is to produce some evidence that run counter to this argument.

In doing so, we will exploit the fact that laughter is a conversational activity as becomes demonstrably obvious by the extent to which meta-communicative comments and even dialogues on the subject of laughter and laughing occur in the CC. Some of these remarks and recollections will be presented below. The discussion further attempts to show that an analysis of what speakers 'know about' the various accomplishments of laughter in their everyday encounters is not only rewarding in the sense that the relevance of the previous findings can be assessed but also that new areas of enquiry may be uncovered that have not been (or insufficiently) addressed in the present work. This, in turn, will throw some light on the methodological limitations and strengths of CA (as against other approaches) in the study of discourse.

The discussion is structured around the most prominent features and dimensions identified above as well as issues which emerged from the analysis of meta-communicative statements on laughter. The conversational fragments are not examined in any detail, as their main point is merely to illustrate the relevance of the item in question. Relevant passages are highlighted.

## Contextualizing laughter

Despite its significance in actual discourse, comments that make reference to this laughter function are rare. This would suggest that contextualising laughter is hardly recognised by speakers. The following two fragments do, however, demonstrate some awareness of the phenomenon:

> KE6 n=8130
>
> PS0X8:     right? And I said yeah, I was on one and Suzie was on seven, and I said yeah, even the cleaners complain, you know, in the evening that he don't shut the door when he goes to the loo [pause] and er I said, must have said, when she's working and Dee Dee turned round **and gl she laughed and said working**? I said well whatever you wanna call it. …

> KP4 n=2136
>
> PS51S:     And I, and you, you were going on about something to do with your job yeah? And I said I want a job and, and she said something like oh well it doesn't include you **so ha ha ha ha and thought it was really funny**. How would, how would she like it? That's like saying piss off I don't like you you stupid cow, why don't you go and kill yourself basically.

## Laughter responses

The fact that laughter is anticipated at specific moments during talk and is therefore produced according to some defined sequential pattern is apparent in this remark by 13-year-old William:

KPF n=69

PS54V:      [unclear] just weird isn't it. I mean sometimes you expect him to laugh and
            he doesn't laugh [pause dur=4] like he says something funny and I say
            something funny back to him but he doesn't laugh.

The binding force of this socially motivated, rule-governed behaviour is articulated in the following quote, again by a teenager (Catriona, aged 16) conversing with her friend Jess (aged 16):

KP6 n=774

PS52C:      but think about all the people that we are nice to, I mean look at James, a
            prime example, have I ever been a bitch to him, never, but I [laughing]
            stand up here, when I see him I'm [] like oh yeah ha ha, you know, laugh
            along with his jokes and
PS52F:      I'm a bitch to him, I tell him, I say you love yourself James.

The above comment further reveals awareness that laughter may be faked (for social considerations) and not be an expression of genuinely felt mirth and happiness. These aspects, though introduced in the literature survey at the beginning of this chapter, have not been operationalised and systematically studied in the present work.

A sense of the fact that laughter can be inappropriately positioned, or employed to distance oneself from some other speaker's utterance (disaffiliative laughter) is apparent in the two fragments below, both of which appear in the context of the telling of a personal anecdote. In the first fragment Kathleen (aged 37) recollects that her expression of criticism and her refusal to provide cigarettes was received with laughter. In the second, Catriona (aged 16) recalls a misplaced laughter incident.

KCX n=6974

PS1FC:      ^ [unclear] ^ we don't buy them for him. John looked at me I says [unclear]
            I says [pause] I've got enough bloody debt without keeping pair of you
            twats in cigs. John just laughed.

KP6 n=2456

PS52C:      … He made it sound like we've been out for a, you know, a romantic
            candle lit dinner and, you know, we'd just been down to his study for
            God's sake! And that was wrong, I shouldn't have laughed. [pause] ^
            Sorry. ^

## Targets

Under the heading of 'contextualising laughter' we have already seen an example of a speaker recollecting her own unpleasant feelings when having been used as the 'humorous butt'. In the following excerpt the issue, along with some other ones, is discussed at greater length:

KP6 n=2470

PS000:      ^ But they're like ^ you know, I suppose [pause] everyone goes through, I
            bet my dad was like that when he was younger a bit [pause] you know, all
            have a laugh and a joke and
PS52C:      At someone else's expense, yeah.

PS000:      and then they grow up later, you know, and then become really ^ responsible ^.

PS52C:      ^ Oh they ne ^ you never grow up Charlotte, haven't you seen that? Haven't you noticed? [pause]

PS000:      What?

PS52C:      [belch] Excuse me. You never [pause] never grow up.

PS000:      What, adults?

PS52C:      They're just ch they're just children inside big bodies, old bodies.

PS000:      What are you talking men or everyone?

PS52C:      Everybody. It's just dawning on me now that I'm not rea I mean you know having had a conversation with my dad this weekend [pause] ^ just me ^

PS000:      ^ Yeah. ^

…

n=2487

PS000:      ^ Yeah but what, what am I ^ then? Am I really really mature or something?

PS52C:      No.

PS000:      In my attitude, you know, I, I think [pause] you know I think they're all prats and stuff and I don't joke around like that.

PS52C:      No I just no ^ I can't ^

PS000:      ^ Why am I ^ different? What do you think?

PS52C:      Cos you're gullible. [pause] Cos you don't see through a joke. [pause] You don't seem to notice. ^ I don't ^

PS000:      ^ Why is that? ^ It's because I'm honest. I ^ never tell lies. ^

PS52C:      ^ I'm honest too ^ but I can still tell a joke.

PS000:      You're n yeah but you know how you make fun of me sometimes, ^ how you ^

PS52C:      ^ Me? ^

PS000:      draw a lesbian thing and all that

PS52C:      [laughing] Oh shut up [].

PS000:      no but you know that, you know you make, you lie and you play along ^ and stuff ^

PS52C:      ^ No I don't ^ lie, I fib!

PS000:      Well fib then, ^ whatever ^

PS52C:      ^Joke. ^ [laugh]

PS000:      you see I, that's where I'm different I could never ever do something like that to anyone. ^ I'd feel so [unclear] ^

PS52C:      ^ What am I doing? I'm not doing ^ anything bad to you, I'm just

PS000:      It's not bad no, no but I'm just saying it's not in me, and so wh when everyone else is like mucking around, making fun of me, you know, I don't do things like that so I don't think other people can but they do.

PS52C:      [laugh] [pause]

PS000:      I know. Yeah I think everyone's like me but they're not, yeah? [pause]

PS52C:      I dunno [laugh] …

The two teenage girls express their different viewpoints on a joking style which, at various points during the discussion, is characterised as "joke around", "mucking around", "have a joke and a laugh at someone else's expense". Catriona (PS52C) thinks that she is "not doing anything bad" when taking the mickey out of her friend; Charlotte (PS000) thinks that it is a mean thing to do ("I think they're all prats and stuff") and that she could never do such a thing ("it's not in me"). In short, "joking at someone else's expense in their presence" is viewed as a phenomenon of personal attitude and style. Further, it is interesting to note that this joking 'style' is also associated with age – at least Charlotte proposes that it is a matter of maturity whether one indulges in victimising others or not. This observation implies that *age* is indeed perceived as psychologically relevant in assessing humorous behaviour and that its

inclusion as one pertinent dimension in the present study is not unwarranted. As concerns the idiosyncratic nature of joking, we should note that this aspect is barely touched upon in the methodological approach adopted here with its emphasis on documenting behaviour in the aggregate rather than as a personality characteristic.[218] This does not, however, invalidate the logic of the present enquiry as it becomes vividly apparent in Charlotte's remark

"Yeah I think everyone's like me but they're not, yeah?"[219]

but illustrates the necessity for alternative more personality-oriented approaches to humour.

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[218] For research in this area see Ruch (1998).

[219] Modern psychologists would perhaps claim that this is an example of the 'False Consensus Effect' (see Ross et al. (1977)).

# 5 Conclusion

## 5.1 The role of social categories in determining humorous behaviour

One of the major aims of the present work was to identify possible connections between social attributes and humour/laughter behaviour. The social attributes considered were *gender*, *age*, *group composition* and – although not in a systematic fashion – *social class*. Working taxonomies of humour, jokes and laughter were created on the basis of prior works and adjusted to reflect the types actually encountered in everyday talk. The statistical techniques employed to uncover possible associations were the chi-square test and symmetrical mode log-linear modelling.

The analysis of canned jokes showed that this form of humour, although much analysed by theorists, is rarely used in conversations: the 4.2 million word demographic component of the BNC (i.e. the CC) 'merely' yielded a total of 59 joke performances. Contrary to the views expressed in previous works, *gender* was not found to predict the likelihood of a canned joke performance; males and females contributed equally to the collection of canned jokes extracted from the CC. The only operative extralinguistic dimension affecting canned joke performances in conversational settings detected was *age*: younger speakers (aged 24 or less) performed significantly more jokes than speakers above this age. Consistent with earlier descriptions, I found that adolescents preferred sexual joke topics. Younger children displayed a penchant for verbal humour.

Examination of conversational fragments indicated that (some) females evaluate canned jokes in terms of their aggressive potential and 'suitability' for performance. This finding was taken to suggest that the original one-dimensional statistical finding that *gender* had no effect may have to be complemented to include the age variable. Hence, it is quite possible that *gender* effects are in fact operative for older speakers. Owing to the low frequencies for the interaction *gender * age*, this hypothesis could not however be validated statistically.

The humour taxonomy used was constructed from a sample of laughter occurrences and comprised 13 categories. The *gender* variable yielded significant results for the humorous manoeuvres 'inventing funny scenarios (fantasy humour)', 'generating implicature' and 'against good manners: violating social conventions': the former two were more often used by males, and the latter more often by females. This finding accords with the prevalent view of females being more conscious of social norms than males and supports Hay's (1995) observation of a male bias towards 'fantasy' humour. In contrast to some of the categories created, e.g. 'performing' or 'violating social conventions', the manoeuvre 'generating implicature' certainly corresponds more closely with the prevailing theoretical understanding of what constitutes 'humour'. Since males were found to employ this type more often than females, one could reasonably ask whether "the greater penchant of men for humor" (Lampert/Ervin-Tripp 1998) often noted in the literature (e.g. Freud 1905, McGhee 1979, Ziv 1984) simply reflects a narrower conceptualisation of 'humour' that overlooks alternative manifestations and resources.

The age of speakers no doubt affects their humorous behaviour and 'choice' of humorous manoeuvres. Within the sampling framework it was however not possible to perform any statistical testing on this dimension so we must be content with indicating some trends. The category 'inventing funny scenarios' was most often used by speakers aged 15-24. Since this type often involved sexual fantasies this result was consistent with the finding on joke topics stated earlier. With increasing age the 'generating implicature' manoeuvre was used more frequently. This makes sense when taking into account that the encoding of utterance meaning for the purpose of creating humorous ambivalence requires some degree of sophistication and elocutionary skill, which may not be readily available to the 10- or even 20- year-old. The telling of funny stories, however, was found to be equally popular in all age groups. Interestingly, the category 'putting others down: insult, criticism, teasing' was not represented in the lowest age band (0-14). This could be interpreted as reflecting the subordinate status of children towards their adult co-conversationalists.

Social class attributes were found to be operative in the use of 'vulgar language' as a humorous resource: all instances drawn from the sample (for which the BNC provided social class identification) were from speakers of the lower end of the social stratum (DE and C2). In the light of the relative scarcity of the phenomenon, however, further studies are required to confirm this finding.

Comparison of the present findings with Hay's (1995) analysis of humour preferences in small friendship-based groups of New Zealanders indicated that the category 'playing with words' is considerably more popular with British speakers than with New Zealanders, suggesting a cultural bias that goes beyond the inherent humorous potentials of the language system.

Females were found to laugh significantly more often than males in the CC. In attempting an explanation for this bias a number of factors were examined. Contrary to the gender-specific conversational humour/laughter strategies described in earlier works, only *group composition* emerged as a possible source of variation: females were found to participate significantly more often than males in multi-party single-sex groups and this configuration appeared to be particularly prone to 'provoking' laughter.

Other statistically significant results were that laughter and humour occurred more frequently in single-sex settings and that laughter invitations were more likely to be accepted in single-sex groups. Both trends were independent of gender. There was further detected a (non-significant) tendency for females to laugh more often in response to a laughter invitation produced by a female than by a male. The claim found in the literature (Dreher 1982 as cited in Kotthoff 1986, Hay 1995, Makri-Tsilipakou 1994) that females are more supportive of other speakers' humour than males could not be confirmed – at least not after adjusting the figures to the overall unsymmetrical gender - laughter distribution.

The analysis of the connection between gender and the 'context-free' (and thus anonymous) interactional mechanisms associated with humour and laughter revealed surprisingly few differences between the sexes. As was anticipated (see section 2.3.2), both genders display the full repertoire of laughter functions and humorous manoeuvres that were identified in this study – only with the difference that, roughly speaking, *females do everything more often than males*.

## 5.2 *Statistical significance and psychological salience*

> Why have they been telling us women lately that we have no
> sense of humor – when we are always laughing? ... And when
> we're not laughing, we're smiling.
>
> <div align="right">Naomi Weisstein</div>

This work has attempted to walk the methodological tightrope integrating quantitative procedures with CA research. Among other issues, the question of the relevance of extralinguistic analytic categories remains a particularly intriguing one: how can we be sure that speakers actually orient to such categories in the course of an interaction? Although one could subscribe fully to the CA stance that analytic categories applied in a study must be shown to be relevant to the speakers themselves, one should also point out that for those conversational practices that are not *consciously employed*, statistical examination may indicate the existence of social markers. It is therefore appropriate to confront the possibility of uneven distributions in the use of particular well-defined conversational practices in different social groups. This necessarily requires the analyst to disaggregate the data set – which conversation analysts have so far been reluctant to do. However, Heritage's (1999) comments on future directions in CA research would indicate that this discipline has opened the door to raising such distributional questions.

The present study revealed that statistically significant differences need not coincide with what speakers perceive as real, typical or relevant. It is therefore minimally necessary to distinguish between the following three types of relationships:

(a) psychologically salient phenomena that demonstrably (i.e. 'significantly') exist in language use (e.g. children's interest in canned jokes, women laugh more than men),

(b) psychologically salient phenomena that cannot be shown to be operative in actual performance (e.g. women's reluctance to tell jokes in certain contexts),

(c) statistically significant correlations that are not somehow psychologically modelled (e.g. men produce more fantasy humour than women, laughter and humour occur more frequently in single-sex settings).

For historical reasons, CA remains sceptical about empirical findings of the last type; they may simply be a 'chance result' of the *researcher's* universe of analytic categories. As argued above and elsewhere (see section 2.3), the present work takes a more positive stance towards such results on the grounds that some differences in interactional conduct may only be detected by applying quantitative procedures. Having said that, it would nevertheless be desirable to verify the findings by producing either qualitative or quantitative evidence in some future project.

To ensure that the analysis did in fact deal with psychologically relevant classifications and concepts two paths were followed. First, the taxonomies were derived from actual talk-in-interaction and can thus be considered to reflect the speakers' orientation and exigencies of social intercourse. Second, the support of

conversational evidence (e.g. the meta-communicative statements on laughter and humour preferences, see section 4.10.5) was sought to demonstrate the (psychological) relevance of statistically significant results. Of course, an elicitation test targeting the phenomena in question could also have shed more light on the matter. Time constraints, however, precluded such an investigation.

Inasmuch as CA procedures explore the speakers' knowledge of their "everyday affairs" (Garfinkel 1967:41) or of 'what we already know', as it is sometimes plainly put, statistically significant findings that are startling and clash with our experience are suspect. An example of this encountered in the present work was the relatively low frequency with which laughter and humour occurred in multi-party *mixed-sex* settings against their 'abundant' presence in multi-party *single-sex* conversations. An interpretation of this in terms of psychological relevance would be difficult; more detail on the nature of the group composition would perhaps reveal an explanation but would require – of course – more data and more detail.

## 5.3  The 'Conversational Corpus' of the BNC as a resource for CA research

In order to address the implicit question posed in the headline the following three issues need to be considered:

- the 'nature' of the 'Conversational Corpus',

- the principal aims of the present study,

- the methodological perspectives pertinent to the CA approach.

Attempting a succinct description of the CC in terms of its potential for discourse analytic research, we have to mention its size, breadth of social categories and convenience in terms of being readily available. Any linguist who has experience in the collection of conversational material and the transcription and evaluation of the data (with some degree of confidence that his or her findings can be generalized over a larger population) will certainly agree that these are real advantages. However, as with everything in life, these apparent virtues have their price, the most fundamental of which being that the analyst has no control over the data.

The analyst is virtually defenceless against transcription or tagging errors. At one point during this research a fragment of a conversation between teenagers in the BNC document file KPG was analysed and it was later found - when looking at the same stretch of talk in the original (though revised) COLT material - that the speaker code assignments in the BNC were reversed!

Another problem is the anonymity of the speakers. This was seriously underestimated at the beginning of this project. One source of this error lies in the programmatic position of CA in seeking to derive function from organisational or structural features. As Psathas puts it:

> It should also be obvious […] that the types of interactional phenomena being described and
> analyzed are not being analyzed in terms of their connection to the particularities of persons.
> There is thus no effort or need to identify persons. (1990:4)

Considering, however, the common and recommended practice of "repeated listenings/viewings" (ibid:5) of recordings, there is no such thing as an anonymous speaker even in CA research. That is, although speaker characteristics recede in the background in the actual analysis, they are nevertheless permanently present and leave an imprint on how utterances are interpreted.[220] It therefore appears that the majority of CA works are based on data much more familiar to the analyst than is possible in research based on the BNC.

The relative anonymity of speakers in the BNC makes a functional interpretation of humorous acts rather difficult. Such interpretation does seem to require some background knowledge of the speakers, their past common (interactional) history, etc. It should be stressed that the word 'require' in this context is not necessarily to be understood in terms of *sine qua non* but rather in terms of practical feasibility. Consider, for example, the analysis of a joke session between adolescents presented in section 3.4. While this certainly illustrates the viability of deriving function from structure as advocated by CA, it also demonstrates the volume of research necessary to arrive at such conclusions when dealing with anonymous speakers. Given this state of affairs one could continue in this fashion - deriving function from structure - while focusing on a small number of humorous episodes and by that means contribute to the overall knowledge gained from in-depth studies. The alternative would be to sacrifice the functional analysis[221] for a wider coverage of humorous instances prioritizing structural features. Considering the broad spectrum of data provided by the CC, the general problem of having to work with virtually unknown speakers and the fact that the major part of existing works on conversational humour is based on (apparently small quantities of) home-brewed data, this study opts for the latter alternative – *pace* Harvey Sacks.

## 5.4   Humour theories revisited: the impact of conversational humour

> Overall, joking of all types serves many purposes in conversation.
> Far from simply providing pleasant icing on the cake, joking
> inheres in the very substance of talk in interaction and holds it
> together. And this reflects back on the nature of conversation
> itself.
>
> Norrick 1993:130

### 5.4.1   Symmetrical vs. complementary relationships and the notion of
### superiority

Like Norrick (1993) and other observers, I was flabbergasted by the amount and variety of conversational humour present in the CC in which canned jokes play a

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[220] For example, voice pitch does, to some degree, give away the gender and age of a speaker.
[221] This 'sacrifice' was not necessary in the analysis of laughter (section 4.5), where a functional taxonomy could be applied.

relatively minor role. While this is usually accounted for by referring to an array of communicative and social functions (cf., e.g. Norrick 1993:128-132, Kotthoff 1998:353-363) it is perhaps appropriate to offer a more general explanation, employing the framework of *symmetrical* versus *complementary* relationship types proposed by Bateson (1972:323ff). Before this is possible, however, it seems necessary to briefly define these concepts.

The terms *symmetrical* and *complementary* describe two (opposite) patterns of interaction that may govern human interaction. The s*ymmetrical* mode denotes a relationship of similarity where the behaviour of one actor evokes similar behaviour. Conversely, in the *complementary* mode, the behaviour stimulates not similar, but "fitting behavior" (323). An example illustrative of these principles is presented by a fight between, say, two dogs, where aggression is typically first countered with aggression (*symmetrical* mode) until the fight escalates to a point where one of the dogs stops fighting and signals surrender (*complementary* mode). The victorious dog, however, does not typically follow up by switching over so rapidly, resulting in his retaining the *symmetrical* mode and consequently stopping fighting as well.

In this context, it is worth noting that both modes governing (human) conduct may co-exist in a particular communicative situation not least to modulate each other in order to prevent escalation, or, "schismogenesis" (*ibid.*:324), as Bateson puts it.

In applying the above framework to the present concern of accounting for the high frequency of humour and laughter in the CC, it is perhaps productive to argue that in the context of leisure talk, which this study focused on, the symmetrical mode typically overrides the complementary mode. The joke performances studied in this work are a good example as they are generally perceived to be contextually structured in complementary form (performer – recipient). The present analysis, however, has identified a number of activities that speakers use to counteract this situation, among others, joke interruptions, joint performances, alternation of joke tellers, involvement of audience in actual joke telling, the fact that one joke performance makes another one relevant, etc. It is further noted that this form of humour is rarely used in conversations and that shorter formats such as question-and-answer jokes are often preferred to the more elaborate narrative kind. Incidentally, this general trend towards shorter forms of humour in conversational settings is also mirrored in the types of humorous manoeuvres isolated in the present work: apart from category 3 ('telling a funny story'), all types are generally realised as witty 'one-liners' that are somehow - typically 'humorously' - reacted to, commented on or elaborated by other speakers in subsequent turns.

The observations above suggest that speakers – in their everyday talk – tend to align themselves in a *symmetrical* rather than *complementary* fashion. What remains to be discussed is to what extent this view opens up analytic perspectives and how it reflects back on the superiority theories of humour.

Insofar as the symmetrical mode can be regarded as the guiding principle of interactional conduct, the complementary one naturally becomes the salient and accountable form of behaviour. Such instantiations have been identified by Jefferson (1979) in the context of laughter invitations, where the absence of recipient laughter was shown to be deviant. Other examples were discussed in section 2.2.2 where joke-firsts (that represent a sudden shift to complementary behaviour) did not, as perhaps

intended, generate more humour (i.e. re-activate the symmetrical mode). Or, one may recall in this context Josie's repetitive attempts to get her audience to perform jokes with her (section 3.4.3). The present work does not, however, provide a systematic study of this interesting phenomenon although it would likely warrant closer examination. In particular, a detailed study of how humorous episodes are introduced and terminated in the conversational flow, the participants who do so and to what extent this bears on the interaction itself may shed light on the intricate ways in which intra-group relationships and power asymmetries are created and maintained. While lacking qualitative work on that topic, the present study does, however, offer an estimate of the significance of superiority theories in the description of conversational humour. Here, it is necessary to distinguish two 'levels' of significance: first, the role of 'superiority' as a guiding principle for actual humorous behaviour and, second, the role of 'superiority' as a heuristic concept. In the light of what has been said on relationship types (or considering the context-sensitivity of humour), the role of the latter can hardly be denied. However, the general trend towards *symmetrical* alignment noted above and the low frequency with which target groups were shown to figure in conversational humour suggest that superiority theories of humour (at least, in the traditional sense of (re-)constituting social boundaries) are peripheral to the spontaneous humorous inventions of everyday talk.

### 5.4.2  Types of humorous manoeuvres and the notion of incongruity

While the previous section essentially advances socio-philosophical/anthropological arguments in order to explain the recurrent use of humour in everyday talk, the following discussion focuses on methodological and (psycho-)linguistic aspects.

To recapitulate briefly: the methodological approach adopted to identify humorous manoeuvres was substantially a descriptive one, with laughter serving as a signal that some humorous event may have taken place. The basic motive for doing so was that a deductive approach - finding examples to fit into a proposed humour taxonomy – runs the risk of overlooking instances of humour that lie outside of the framework. Thus the analysis attempted to minimise the effect of preconceived notions of what constitutes humour (and what not).

One result of this broadly-based analysis strategy is that some of the examples in the classification of humorous manoeuvres may not fit the reader's preconceived notion of humour. However, given the broad definition of humour offered by the OED – "7.a. That quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun." – the present response-oriented approach towards categorising humour seems appropriate. Moreover, it is hoped that the 'types' described – though perhaps at first sight incompatible with the reader's preconceived ideas – clarify things already familiar.

Although the vantage point used to analyse humorous episodes is response-sided, the taxonomy of manoeuvres is clearly stimulus-oriented. This brings into play incongruity theories: how and to what extent, we may ask, do 'incongruities' figure in the ways people use humour in their speech?

The terms 'incongruous' and 'incongruity' are used in their dictionary sense. The OED lists three main meanings:

1. Disagreeing in character or qualities; not corresponding; out of keeping; disaccordant, inconsistent, inharmonious, unsuited. Const. *with*, *to*.

2. Disagreeing or inconsistent with the circumstances or requirements of the case, or with what is reasonable or becoming; unbecoming, unsuitable, inappropriate, absurd, out of place.

3. Having parts or elements not agreeing with each other; involving inconsistency or disagreement; not self-consistent; incoherent.

In applying this concept to humorous examples, two items are used that are implicitly addressed in this definition: -

(a) 'Incongruity' refers to a relationship. It is therefore instructive to specify the terms of the relationship perceived as incongruous.

(b) 'Incongruity' implies an understanding of what is 'congruous', which in turn presupposes the existence of a set of rules, guiding principles, internalised norms etc. The relation may thus be described in terms of a breach of conventions.[222]

Within the taxonomy of humorous manoeuvres developed in this study we can delineate three broad areas of incongruous relations:

1. 'decent/acceptable social practice/behaviour' versus 'actual behaviour';

examples: 'against good manners: violating social conventions', 'putting others down: insult, criticism, teasing', 'using vulgar language', 'performing',

2. 'the 'Cooperative Principle'/maxims of cooperative talk (Grice)' versus 'actual behaviour';

examples: 'playing with words' (cf., e.g. joke-firsts: maxim of relation), 'joking about the use of language' (metalingual humour) (maxim of relation), 'generating implicature' (cf., e.g. 'irony': maxim of quality), 'quipping at what's going on at the moment' (maxim of relation), 'exaggerating' (maxim of quantity/manner), 'performing', 'putting others down: insult, criticism, teasing',

3. 'truth/reality/the laws of logic and likelihood' versus 'lies/fiction/paradox and fantasy';

examples: 'inventing funny scenarios (fantasy humour)', 'putting others down: insult, criticism, teasing'.

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[222] Following Latta (1998), it is also vital to ask "from what point of view" the terms are incongruous. While Latta only accepts incongruities that can be shown to figure in the subject's thinking as true incongruities, this notion would have little utility in the present study both because it is beyond the scope of this work to provide a psychological account of the humour process and because of the theoretical and practical problems surrounding 'looking inside the subject's head'.

To illustrate some of the less transparent classifications, consider the example of 'performing' humour. It is present in all the three groups, therefore realising three different kinds of incongruity because:

- it violates the norm of perfection typically associated with (public) performances,

- performing and imitating others (often famous celebrities) involves a play with reality (one cannot be oneself and at the same time somebody else),

- it infringes on the maxim of relation in that speakers were generally aware of the linguistic background of the recordings.[223]

Another interesting example is presented by the manoeuvre 'putting others down: insult, criticism, teasing', which is also found in all groups: -

- It represents an incongruity of the type (1) because our culture tends to sidetrack hostile expressions into the more implicit.

- It flouts the maxim of quality - type (2) - because these kinds of mock accusations are typically inaccurate or made-up on the spur of the moment.

- It is generally incongruous with logic in the sense that it is reminiscent of Epimenides' paradoxes - type (3) - presenting negative statements that contain an implicit negative metastatement. The phenomenon has been described in the context of symbolic action, e.g. (animal) play and ritual combat where "the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite" (Bateson 1972:180). Similarly, we may say that a teasing insult – said within a play frame – denotes an insult but does not denote what would be denoted by the insult.

In conclusion, the notion of incongruity is certainly an important factor in describing humour – not least because it encompasses a broad field of dimensions. Its significance for conversational humour can hardly be overstated. This is mainly to do with the communicative situation of face-to-face interaction. As Austin reminds us, utterances do not only have a referential meaning, they may also signify an act or transaction in conversational interaction. Humour exploiting this kind of ambiguity is fairly common. As an example, consider a joke based on the literal interpretation of the typical pub utterance 'Your round', exploiting the homophony of 'your' and 'you're' and ignoring its illocutionary force:

> Two fat blokes in a pub, one says to the other: "Your round."

> The other one says: "So are you, you fat bastard."

---

[223] It is clear that at the back of many speakers' minds they knew that they were not simply among themselves but that there was always a "third" anonymous interlocutor expecting relevant material for linguistic analysis. It seems safe to say that the (predominantly adolescent) originators of song performances found in the BNC considered such recordings to be irrelevant and counterproductive to the aims of a 'serious' linguistic project. Such performances were nevertheless produced for humorous purposes (i.e. to poke fun at members of the BNC/COLT research teams).

Other potential ambiguities may arise that deliberately bring into the foreground the 'latent' or more implicit message contents, which may lurk in the background of utterances.[224] A particularly nice example of this type is present in the following joke told by Aki Kaurismaki, the Finnish film director:[225]

> Two Finnish countrymen are sitting in a bar. After hours of silence one raises a glass and says "Cheers". His friend snaps back, "We didn't come here to talk."

In a nutshell, we may conclude that the multifarious ways in which utterances can be interpreted provide speakers with numerous incongruities that may be exploited for comic or humorous purposes. If we add to this the various forms of concocted incongruities born of the human penchant for playing with likelihood and logic, it comes as no surprise that conversations abound with humour – although not necessarily that predicted by many theoretical studies.

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[224] Bateson, among others, calls attention to levels of utterance-meaning often ignored in linguistic analysis such as statements about the "conventions of communication", "*Weltanschauung*" and "relationship" (1969:161).

[225] This joke is reprinted in an article on Finnish cinema entitled "Don't say a word" in *The Economist* (January 17th 1998), pp. 83-84.

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# Appendix A: Log-linear modelling

Historically, log-linear modelling was primarily devised for sociological research and aimed to describe relationships among categorical data as it appears in cross-tabulation frequency tables. In contrast to the chi-square test, it can handle designs where more than two variables are involved and consider possible effects of interaction between individual variables. Depending on the nature of the enquiry, two modes of enquiry are distinguished: the *symmetrical* and the *asymmetrical* mode. *Symmetrical* enquiry is generally exploratory in that it merely seeks to explore whether there are associations between members of a tentative set of parameters of equal status. *Asymmetrical* enquiry, on the other hand, draws a clear line between independent (or explanatory) variables and response variables. It is important to determine the mode of enquiry right at the outset of the investigation, as it is likely to affect the sampling strategy: for *asymmetrical* enquiries one would prefer to draw stratified random samples whereas *symmetrical* ones are best served by random samples (see Kennedy 1992:8-9).

As the name suggests, log-linear modelling tests models on the observed data. The aim is to find the most parsimonious model that successfully predicts the data. The most important models are:

  (a) the independence model where the parameters do not leave any imprint on the observed data whatsoever,
  (b) the saturated model where all parameters and all their possible combinations are required to explain the data      and

  (c) models of pairwise associations.

In practice, one would typically proceed from testing the most constrained model (the saturated model) towards simpler models, removing "on the way" factors or combinations of factors which do not seem to contribute significantly to the overall distribution.

The method used to estimate parameters and the corresponding overall likelihood of models is called maximum likelihood estimation (ML). As ML typically involves rather complex calculations in order to find the values of parameters that maximise the sample likelihood (known as Iterative Proportional Scaling (IPS)), one would generally use a computerised statistics program (such as SAS or SPSS) for these procedures.

ML estimates are also used to generate elementary cell frequencies that are *expected* under the hypotheses of the underlying log-linear model. These values are used to test the "fitness" of the model against the actual *observed* data, typically expressed as the Pearson's goodness-of-fit chi-square statistic or, alternatively, Fisher's likelihood-ratio chi-square (symbolized as $L^2$ or $G^2$).[226] The smaller the value of these test

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[226] Since $\chi^2$ and $L^2$ converge with increasing sample size the difference becomes negligible for large samples.

statistics the better the fit of the model; the higher the value the greater the likelihood that an important factor or factor combination has been omitted.

Practitioners of the method (Kennedy 1992, Oakes 1998) assert that it is often rather difficult to find the simplest meaningful model. Although statistical tests (employing appropriate significance levels adjusted to the sample size) are indispensable in evaluating models, it is generally necessary to view the results in the light of the subject matter at hand. As Kennedy puts it:

> When dealing with an actual problem and real data, however, the researcher will find him- or herself in a better position to ensure that the statistical tail is not permitted to wag the substantive dog. (97)

Once the most suitable model has been selected additional investigations examining the direction (in the case of symmetrical enquiry) and intensity of associations are generally appropriate. The measure of association used in the present work is the *odds ratio* and is perhaps best explained by the following example: Suppose you are studying gender differences in the appreciation of various jokes. For simplicity let us further assume that the rating options are simply 'appreciate' or 'not appreciate' and the log-linear analysis of one particular joke indicates an interaction between the two dichotomous variables gender and subject rating. We could then compute the conditional odds for each gender of appreciating the joke by dividing the 'number of positive responses' by the 'number of negative responses'. The ratio of these conditional odds for each population is the odds ratio and represents the measure of strength of the association.

The main advantages of the odds ratio as a measure of association are the relative ease of which it can be computed, its perspicuity and its independence of sample size. The main disadvantage is that it is not symmetrical (around 1 – the case where both variables are independent) and that results deviating from 1 (towards 0 or infinity) are sometimes difficult to interpret. For 2*2 contingency tables Yule's Q Statistic would provide a solution to this: by means of some simple algebra the odds ratio is transferred onto a scale symmetric around 0 and ranging between –1 and +1 (see Kennedy 1992:101-103). For the purposes of the present work, however, the odds ratio is deemed sufficient.

Summarising the major procedures and operations involved in log-linear analysis we can single out the following steps (see Kennedy: 70-72):

1. model specification,

2. generating expected frequencies using ML estimation,

3. comparing observed and expected frequencies using $\chi^2$ or $L^2$ ($G^2$),

4. selection of the best model,

5. model interpretation.

## Appendix B: Transcription notation

The transcription scheme used for the BNC and the first version of COLT is a broad orthographic one "with little prosodic information and no phonetic features marked" (Crowdy 1995:228). According to Burnard (1995) this degree of transcription accuracy corresponds to level 2 in French's (1992)[227] four-level hierarchy ranging from a very broad word-by-word representation to a very delicate phonetic transcription including prosodic information.

In aiming at identifying sentence-like units the punctuation follows written text conventions. That is, a falling intonation contour is depicted as a declarative and therefore marked with a full stop, a rising pitch pattern may be interpreted as an interrogative, "a slight terminal rise followed by a shorter pause" (Crowdy 1995:231) may be represented by a comma, etc.

For better readability and ease of reference the present work deviates slightly from the notation used in the BNC. The symbols and conventions employed in this study are as follows:

1. pauses

Silent pauses that take longer than five seconds (and for which conventional punctuation marks are inappropriate) are marked as [pause]. When the pause takes longer than five seconds an approximate duration (in seconds) is added, e.g. [pause=6]. Filled pauses such as 'erm', 'er', 'hm' are represented orthographically.

2. speaker codes

For better readability, the BNC speaker identification codes are generally replaced by the speakers first name or, if this is more relevant, designations of relation (such as 'mother', 'son'). For anonymous speakers the speaker is designated the label 'anonymous'. Sometimes, in order to facilitate reference to the BNC source texts, both first names and speaker codes are shown.

3. incomplete words

Truncated words are marked by an equals sign; e.g. diff= (for different) (see Crowdy 1995:231)

4. non-verbal sounds

Non-verbal sounds transcribed include laughter, coughing, sneezing, yawning, raspberry and whistling. They are represented in square brackets, e.g. [laugh], [cough], [raspberry].

5. paralinguistic features

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[227] Working paper, cited in Burnard 1995.

Some part of speech may be realised by a laughing intonation, shouting, whispering or mimicking. Such passages are transcribed using a start tag for the initiation point (e.g. [laughing]) and an end tag (two square brackets []) for the point when it finishes. Unfortunately, the end tag is sometimes missing in the original, resulting also in its omission in the present transcripts.

6. unclear passages

Stretches of talk that could not be transcribed (because of poor recording, background noise, etc.) are marked as [unclear]. Untranscribable passages lasting longer than five seconds are timed (e.g. [unclear] (15); see Crowdy *ibid*:233).

7. Overlapped speech

Passages of overlapped speech are bracketed by caret marks, thus in the following exchange:

| 89 | Angela: | When did, erm David phone ^ up? ^ |
| 90 | Charlotte: | ^ Shut ^ the door please. |

'up' and 'shut' were spoken simultaneously.

8. text identification

Transcripts are headed by the BNC source text or COLT file and a line number indicating the approximate place of the fragment in the original document.

9. truncated examples

Strictly speaking, every transcript presented is a conversational fragment taken out of a much larger context, and it has seldom been trivial to decide which parts to ex- or include in the actual transcript. Insofar every datum could be prefaced and terminated with a symbol denoting omitted speech, which in the present work are three spaced periods. However, the symbol was merely used to indicate that some passage(s) either within the shown transcript or at the end is/are omitted for brevity. Instances of this are the following:

a.)

| PS1BU (Christopher): | Fur? |
| PS1BT (father): | Furless teddy. |
| … | |
| PS1BV (David): | You know dad. He, I, it's a bare. |

Here, some intermittent speech between the father's utterance and David's is omitted.

b.)

| Jessica: | Oh yeah I know this one. |
| Josie: | and erm Mummy bear has to go away Bye! … |

In this case, the three periods indicate that Josie's utterance continues beyond the point depicted in the fragment.

In section 3.1 Sacks' transcription of the "dirty joke" is reproduced. The symbols used in this notation mean the following:

| | |
|---|---|
| - | single dash: short untimed pause or abrupt halting, |
| [[ | simultaneous utterances, |
| [ | overlapping speech, |
| (0.6) | pause timed in tenths of a second, |
| hhh | audible aspirations, |
| .hhh | audible inhalations, |
| *italics* | stressed segments of speech; an enlarged typeface (***italics,*** *ITALICS*) denotes emphasis intensity, |
| (speech) | in the case that the transcriber is  in doubt unclear passages are enclosed within parentheses, |
| (   ) | "empty" parentheses indicate that some speech could not be rendered. |