

The pragmatics of humor support

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Abstract

Many researchers claim joking and laughter to be an adjacency pair. There are, however, a range of strategies used for supporting humor in conversation, of which laughter is just one. This paper uses natural conversational data to illustrate a variety of humor support strategies. Common support strategies include contributing more humor, playing along with the gag, using echo or overlap, offering sympathy and contradicting self-deprecating humor.

There are four implicatures associated with full support of humor: recognition of a humorous frame, understanding the humor, appreciating the humor, and agreeing with any message associated with it. Recognition, understanding and appreciation are in an entailment relationship, and this relationship can be exploited to display recognition and understanding while denying appreciation. The implicature of agreement is particularly salient when teasing or self-deprecating humor is being supported.

Introduction

We often groan at the punchlines of jokes we find particularly bad or corny. From the joker's point of view, a groan is far preferable to total silence. It acknowledges the attempt at humor, and displays understanding, if not overwhelming appreciation. Telling jokes is just one form of the wide range of humor we employ in our day-to-day interactions. A reaction from our audience that implies appreciation of the humor is one way of supporting the humorist's face. While much attention has been paid to the wide range of humor strategies available to a speaker, the

range of support strategies available to their audience has been largely ignored. In order to fully account for the dynamics of conversational humor, however, it is imperative to reach a good understanding of the role of all participants. And the audience plays a vital role in the construction of humorous discourse. This paper surveys a range of strategies that can potentially serve as humor support, and examines the pragmatics involved in responding to humor.

I begin with some definitions, and then move on to review literature in this area, demonstrating that assuming laughter to be the sole humor support strategy can be misleading. I then describe and exemplify some alternative humor support strategies, which are commonly used in conversation. Finally I move on to discuss the pragmatics of humor support, demonstrating that there are a number conversational implicatures involved in humor support, and that these sometimes require delicate navigation.

Some definitions

The problem of defining humor is a notoriously thorny one. Definitions tend to focus on either speaker intention (Winick 1976, Pizzini 1991) or audience interpretation (Berger 1976). Some researchers play it safe, and when selecting examples, require both apparent intent and audience response to be present (Holmes and Hay 1997). Regardless of the approach, the process of establishing what should be counted as humor is seldom entirely objective.

As this paper focuses on humor support, a definition of humor based solely on audience support would clearly be inappropriate. Most examples in this paper are drawn from a corpus of spontaneous humor in natural friendship groups — a corpus collected for the research reported in Hay (1995). The criterion for inclusion in that corpus was anything the speaker intended to be funny — clearly not an objective approach. Background knowledge, tone of voice, audience reaction, and verbal clues were all used to infer speaker intention. As this paper does not concentrate on the humor itself, but rather the audience's response to the humor, it will not go to great lengths to justify each of the examples as valid examples of humor. Rather the discussion will focus on the strategies used to support the humor. For specific discussion on how instances of humor were identified, the reader is referred to Hay (1995).

This paper identifies a number of different strategies that can be used in the support of humor. This word is used in its discourse analytic sense, as developed by Harvey Sacks and his collaborators (see, e.g., Sacks et al. 1974). Just as a variety of discourse strategies can be employed, for example, to bring a conversation to a close, so too can different strategies be used in the support of humor. Conversational strategies may range from highly conscious to highly conventionalized.

Laughter as humor support

Research in humor has been prolific for some time now, spanning a wide range of disciplines. There are varying approaches to the subject. Some researchers concentrate on developing theories explicating what makes humor funny (Freud 1905; Keith-Spiegel 1972; Suls 1972; Raskin 1985), and many researchers have investigated written humor or canned jokes (Berger 1976; Davies 1982; Zhao 1988; Attardo 1993). A canned joke is context-free and reusable, as opposed to spontaneous humor (Douglas 1968). Several of those researchers that have concerned themselves with spontaneous humor have done so using questionnaires, surveys or elicitation techniques (Fink and Walker 1977; Crawford and Gressley 1991; Neuliep 1991; Hampes 1992 and others). Many have attempted to taxonomize humor into different types, such as puns, jokes, black humor, etc. (Monro 1953; Zijderveld 1983; Feigelson 1989 and others). Others have taxonomized humor according to the functions it can serve, such as consensus building or control (see, e.g., Martineau 1972; Linstead 1985; Collinson 1988).

Only recently have researchers turned to spontaneous spoken humor as it occurs in the context of natural conversation. Studying the dynamics of conversational humor offers new challenges in data collection and analysis.

Norrick (1993: 2) claims that in order to understand how joking can simultaneously express aggression and build rapport, researchers need to view joke-telling, punning and teasing in relation to power, solidarity and distance and in light of the principles of politeness and cooperation. A full understanding of the dynamics of conversational humor requires understanding not only of isolated humorous utterances, but also of their place and effect within a wider conversational frame. Zajdman (1991) has demonstrated a variety of ways in which a humorous frame

can be introduced into discourse. Another crucial element of a humorous frame is the support, or lack thereof, provided by the other conversational participants.

Most literature on humor, and on strategies for supporting it, assumes that laughter is the normal and most appropriate support for an attempt at humor. Coser (1960) observes that to joke and not hear anyone laugh in response is similar to initiating a handshake; only to have one's outstretched hand ignored. Norrick (1993: 23) claims joking and laughter are an adjacency pair, and includes this assumption in the criteria he uses to identify instances of humor for his research. If a laugh or "aw" or snide comment follow a recognizable joking structure, he claims "it seems reasonable to say the speaker was joking, teasing, playing with words, being sarcastic, or something similar" (1993: 8). Norrick insists on these explicit signs that something is funny for an extract to be included in his corpus of humor. He admits that laughter can be used for purposes other than to support humor, but does not consider that other support strategies may be available, or even more appropriate for certain types of humor.

One main area in which investigation of humor support has taken place is in the study of language and gender. Much research has found that women are generally more conversationally supportive than men (see Aries 1976; Edelsky 1981; Fishman 1983; Maltz and Borker 1983; Coates 1986; Preisler 1986; among others), and so this would lead us to predict that women would be more supportive of humor than men, even when they do not find the humor funny. Several researchers have found that women respond to humor with laughter more than men do (Dreher 1982 (as cited in Kotthoff 1986); Bogaers 1993; Easton 1994; Makri-Tsilipakou 1994). The conclusion, therefore, has been that women are more supportive of humor than men.

Example (1) is an excerpt from a mixed gender conversation 2 which conforms to the observations of the researchers discussed above. The men joke, the women laugh. The group has been discussing the words the parents used for their private parts when they were young. The group is laughing because BM's parents called this part of his body Colin, and this had led to some embarrassment when he later started scouts. A sequence hypothesizing worse names follows. It is initiated by GM who suggests that "car" would have been an even worse name, and then the two males; GM and BM joke for some time about various words and the confusion that could ensue. The two women are laughing almost

constantly, whereas the men laugh relatively little. Given the subject matter one may be tempted to interpret the women's laughter as embarrassment rather than humor support. It is clear from the tape, however, that the women are not embarrassed by the subject. The group speaks openly and freely about a range of sensitive issues during the taping, and in this excerpt the women show no sign of embarrassment. They are merely enjoying the humor. In this and subsequent transcripts, male speakers have pseudonyms ending in M, and female pseudonyms end in F.

(1)

- JF: /= [ha ha ha ha ha] that's
brilliant // [ha ha] \ your [h] parents were =
- AF: /[ha ha ha] \
- JF: = very cruel
- GM: well i mean you could have called it they could have been really
cruel and called it something like a car
- AF: //[ha ha ha ha] \
- JF: /[ha ha ha ha] \ \ you wouldn't have been-
- BM: or a television
- AF: [ha ha ha]
- GM: hey have you heard how HUGE // they () =
- AF + JF: /[laugh] \ \
- GM: = // i mean you really SCREW s-\
- BM: /twenty four inch color television \ \
- All: [laugh]
- BM: remote CONTROL twenty four inch color television
- AF + JF: [laugh loudly]
- GM: with with um s- stereo sp[h]eakers or one of those silly things
that tilts in different directions
- AF + JF: [still laughing - right through GM's speech]
- BM: what are you going to do with black and white portables
- AF: [ha ha ha ha ha]
- GM: with cars they have hoods AND ()
- BM: yeah
- AF: [h h huh]
- GM: and as for television watchers
- BM: mm + television critics

It is clear that, at least in this example, the women are supporting the humor with laughter, and the males are laughing less frequently.

But can we conclude from this that the men are not supporting each other in their attempts at humor? Surely by picking up on GM's wit, and pursuing it further BM is supporting GM in his attempt at humor. He must think the quip is funny, or he would not develop the line of humor himself. Together they spar, both competing, and jointly developing the theme, and in doing so expressing a commonality in their sense of humor, solidarity and support.

To assume, then, that laughter is the sole means of supporting humor, is to obscure a great deal. There are a number of available support strategies, some more explicit than others, and in some circumstances, laughter may not be the most appropriate. The general finding that women laugh more than men tells us only that women laugh more. We cannot generalize from this to claim that women are more supportive of humor than men, without exploring alternative functions of laughter, examining alternative support strategies, and exploring the possibility that some of these may be used more often by men than by women. This paper is an initial step towards exploring the range of humor support strategies. It highlights some of the strategies used to support humor in a corpus of New Zealand English. The pragmatics involved in supporting humor is also discussed. The analysis stems from recorded conversations, and so includes only those support strategies evident from recordings. It is clearly possible to support humor non-verbally through smiles, facial statements and other body language.

Humor support strategies

Contributing more humor

In the example discussed in the previous section, the men supported each other by developing a theme and contributing more humor. The humorous frame is maintained. To contribute to a humorous frame is to acknowledge that one exists, and so acknowledge the previous speaker's humor. Example (2) is an extract from a discussion between four males. They are reminiscing about an evening, during which they had prepared and eaten dinner with other friends. The female host had sent TM out to look for ingredients, and CM hypothesizes that this was because the host did not want a male in her kitchen. CM, however, had been present in the kitchen for some of the evening, and so is teased that this

was allowed because he doesn't count as male. This sparks a chain of playful insults directed at CM.

There is very little laughter, and yet a humorous frame is maintained throughout. Most of the humor consists of insults, and there is a wordplay towards the end of the sequence. The speakers are clearly enjoying themselves, and there is no indication in any of their voices or reactions that they feel their humor is being rejected or ignored. By maintaining a humorous frame and sparring and bouncing humor around, the men support each other's humor. It is not likely that the men would feel unsatisfied after such routine, or feel that their humor had gone unsupported or unappreciated.

(2)

CM: / = cause she didn't want you there
that's all i mean come on a MALE in a kitchen (that can right
rid of you)

TM: if/(they had girls they would've had)\

NM: /clarence didn't count [ha]\ = /

MM: / = no of course not

TM: he's not male he's barely human = /

MM: / = yeah

TM: i don't know how they get that much body odour in a female but
i guess it's possib[h]le

MM: he's not even human at ALL thank you very much

CM: oh that's okay thank you //very much ()\

MM: /a bloody insult //saying (that he) is
human\ \

NM: /got klingon aspirations remember\ \

TM: probably got klingon genes in him but we won't go into that

CM: not wearing my jeans

TM: enough of that = /

NM: / = yes

Sometimes maintaining the humorous frame, or playing along with a "gag" initiated by the first speaker can in itself provide very solid support.

Irony is a type of humor, which often invites the audience to join in, and support the speaker by maintaining the ironic tone. Irony, for the purposes of this paper, is any instance in which the speaker says the opposite of what they mean, or something different from what they mean

(Haverkate 1990: 77) for humorous effect. In example (3) PM expresses mock disgust at having to spend time at Waipuna Lodge, all expenses paid, for his work. AM and BM support the irony with more irony, offering PM mock sympathy for his upcoming “ordeal”. No laughter occurs, yet the humor is adequately supported.

(3)

PM: yeah but i i [tut] absolutely disGUSTed i've got to spend two days
in waipuna lodge

AM: //[[tut] oh mate\

BM: /[drawls]: aw:\ how sad

Fantasy humor is often supported by more fantasy. Fantasy is the construction of humorous, imaginary scenarios or events. This is usually a collaborative activity, in which the participants jointly construct a possible (or impossible) series of events. Speakers will jointly construct long and involved scenarios. The funniest contributions will be explicitly supported with laughter, but most are supported only by more fantasy. Speakers usually incorporate or build on humor offered by the other participants, and so the humor has by no means failed. In (4) the speakers speculate about what could have happened if PM had responded to the advance made by a model the previous evening. Had he gone out with her, perhaps he could have moved into the lifestyle of the rich and famous. They jointly construct the scenario.

(4)

PM: um but yeah that could have been the one could've been rich lived
a life of sin

DM: //she could have set me with the ()\

GM: /she could have she could have been\ in the women's weekly man
oh i could have seen like you know pat and maybe
[1 sec of everyone speaking at once]

PM: unnamed friend yeah [ha ha] yeah i was that unnamed friend

GM: next larry forensky or whatever tough man REAL man sort of thing

DM: () make their song and everything [ha] in the
charts //[[ha ha]\

GM: /[yeah]\ un- =/

DM: /=write a book =/

EM: /= [oh ho ha ha]

Echo

Humor can be effectively supported by echoing the words of the speaker. A member of the audience will repeat the words in appreciation, often as if savoring the humor. In (5) AM repeats CM's words in a tone that indicates he appreciates them and finds them funny.

(5)

CM: / = too many brain cells in his beer vat now

AM: yeah //in his beer vat yeah\

CM: /[laughs]\

Example (6) is similar. RM is describing a vegetarian restaurant crawl. One of the restaurants had unexpectedly changed their menu and begun to serve meats, and so he had eaten fish as part of the crawl.

(6)

TM: fish? they don't serve f- fish do they =/

RM: / = oh yeah

they serve all meats =/

TM: / = oh have they sort of //um\

DM: /[ha ha]\ =/

LM: / = [ha ha] [imitates RM's intonation]: all meats:

RM's humor is supported through laughter, but LM also supports the humor by echoing RM's words.

Offer sympathy or contradict self-deprecating humor

For some humor, laughter could actually be an inappropriate response. Jefferson (1984) notes that if humor is used in troubles-talk, then laughing could indicate that you find the speaker's unfortunate situation funny. The speaker can laugh at their own problems, but in general, the appropriate response to such humor seems to be an offer of sympathy. In example (7) TF tells of a woman she met just before she had her baby, and laughs at the fact that the woman was paranoid about little things that were not going to be ready when her baby was born, which seemed

ridiculous in comparison with TF's half finished house. Rather than laugh at TF's situation, the others offer sympathy.

(7)

TF: this woman um was saying to me just before he was born now
[high voice]: oh we haven't got the nursery ready: [h]and yeah we
[h]haven't done this and //we haven't done\ that i said =

WF: /[drawls]: oh god:\

TF: =FUCK we've only got half a bloody house =/

BF:

/=yeah =/

WF: / =yeah =/

Similarly in (8) CF is not confident about an upcoming judo tournament in which she is on a team with a friend of hers who is very good. She jokes that they will be a mixed ability pair. Rather than laugh, which would indicate that she agreed the skill difference was that large, JF assures CF that she will do fine.

(8)

CF: /mixed ability pair\ [laughs]

JF: you will it'll be fine

In (9) BM tells an anecdote about his ears, and AF and DF assure him that his ears look okay.

(9)

BM: /a hard\ time //right\ Mum used =

DF: /yeah\

BM: =to tell me when i was a child that if i was born a generation ago
they would've put a big band around my head [laughing]: (you
know to keep them there): =/

AF: / =but your ears aren't that bad

BM: no no

DF: you've got quite a big head //so it sort of balances it\

If they had laughed at his anecdote, it may have indicated that they agreed that his ears seemed big. From this transcription DF's comment could be interpreted as an underhand insult, but there is no indication in her voice that it is intended as such.

Overlap and heightened involvement in the conversation

A speaker can show enthusiasm and appreciation for another's humor by indicating excitement, by using overlap or other means of signaling general involvement in the conversation. In example (10) the group is speculating about reasons why a friend acts strangely when with a particular woman. VF supports RF's hypothesis by completing her sentence.

(10)

- RF: /cause\\ SHE'S gone+i bet you've never been laid in your
life or- or maybe she's INterested in him and so he's trying to look
VF: world//ly\
RF: /ex\\perienced

When explicit support is not needed

There are some types of humor, which do not always need explicit support. The speaker does not necessarily expect the audience to respond in any way, and so when there is no laughter or other form of support, the humor has not failed.

The humor is a support strategy itself

Some follow-up humor supports humor initiated by another person. When humor is a support strategy itself, then it does not need further explicit support from the audience. Example (11) shows the end of an anecdote in which BM describes his experiences of nitrous oxide from when he was at secondary school. DF's humor directly supports BM's anecdote, and so does not need support itself.

(11)

- BM: cause it does i mean light- light- lightning fixes nitrogen +not
necessarily nitrous ox[h]ide but i mean i didn't know the difference
DF: [ha ha ha ha] you didn't really CARE did you [ha]
CM: remember you used to get those little capsules
DF: //yeah\
BM: /oh right\\

Irony

There are a number of examples of irony, which are not explicitly supported in any way, and for which the speaker does not seem to expect support. Norrick (1993: 72) suggests irony may be an unmarked form of talk for some speakers. It is true that some speakers use irony extensively, and irony can be different from other forms of humor in that it can sometimes be a flippant way of expressing quite a serious meaning. When speakers use irony, they do not always expect explicit support from the audience. Example (12) occurs after an explanation about something, which the speaker had originally expected the audience to know. TM had asked for clarification, and once a relatively obscure explanation was received said:

(12)
TM: / = yes oh silly for not knowing

The other speaker then continued with his story. Support was not offered, nor apparently expected. TM was merely using irony to make a point.

Humor support and implicature

Example (13) is an example of humor in which no laughter occurs. The humor is supported by playing along with the gag.

(13)
CF: i mean i've got bad feeling in my hands anyway
BF: have you
CF: like i can never feel pulses or stuff like like you know
DF: pulses what like beans? like beans? you mean
BF: NO
DF: pulses you mean //kidney beans\ and the like
CF: /yeah\<\
CF: and lentils =/
BF: / = oh does she [h] =/
CF: / = i find it really hard to feel lentils
BF: [ha ho]

DF identifies an ambiguity in CF's comment, and pretends to mistake CF's intended meaning of pulse=heart beat for pulse=legume. CF plays along with DF's deliberate misinterpretation, and together they fool BF. CF, by playing along with the gag, is supporting DF's humor. She wouldn't pick it up and play with it if she didn't find it funny. By doing this, as in all unqualified humor support, CF implicates a number of things:

1. She recognizes an attempt at humor
2. She understands the humor
3. She finds the humor funny

Unqualified laughter and other humor support strategies contain these three implicatures, which I will refer to as recognition, understanding and appreciation. It is important to notice that there is a scalar relationship here. The three implicatures lie on a scale, in the order shown in (14). Understanding entails recognition, and appreciation entails both recognition and understanding.

(14) recognition - understanding - appreciation

The fact that these lie on a scale can be exploited linguistically in cases in which the hearer does not want to supply full support.

Numbers are a clear case of a scale: 4 entails 3, 3 entails 2 and so on. Therefore, truth-conditionally (15a) would hold true even if the speaker had four children, because four entails three. A hearer of this sentence assumes, however, that the speaker is being maximally informative, and so infers that all points higher than three on the scale do not hold true. In (15a) the speaker implicates that they have only three children. This is a scalar implicature (Horn 1972, Hirschberg 1985). This implicature can easily be cancelled, as shown in (15b).

(15)

- (a) I have three children.
- (b) I have three children, in fact I have four.

That the same type of relationship holds between recognition, understanding and appreciation can be exploited by audiences who wish to withhold full support, yet still demonstrate understanding of the joke. An explicit statement of understanding will implicate lack of appreciation.

Carrell (1997) distinguishes between joke competence — the recognition of a joke text, and humor competence — the ability to judge whether that text is humorous. For the audience to fully maintain face, then, they need to demonstrate that they possess both of these competences.

The importance of recognition and understanding

In cases where the hearer does not wish to provide full support, it is crucial that they still be seen to have “got the joke”. Sacks (1974) notes that a joke poses an understanding test to the audience — a test that it is important to pass in order to maintain face. The same can be said of spontaneous humor — for both recognition and understanding.

Zajdman (1995: 332) points out that any joking activity presents a potential face threatening act for both the speaker (because it could fall flat) and the hearer (in that they might not “get the joke”).

Example (16) illustrates the extreme loss of face that can be involved in failing to recognize humor. Previously TM has been hassled by the group for his obsession with OS/2 — a computer operating system. CM revives this hassling in this excerpt, and TM plays along with the gag. MM, however, doesn’t recognize the humor, and questions the suggestion that OS/2 be used in an incompatible environment. MM is chastised for failing the recognition test.

(16)

CM: and tom pipes in but it can also run o s 2 =/

NM: /=[h]=/

TM: / =oh yes o s 2 is the way i’ll just put that in =/

CM: / =yeah fine

MM: what for the alpha? there is o //s 2 for it?\

CM: /it was a\\ JOKE you d-

All: [laugh]

CM: i can’t say this on radio oh good it’s on tape you + doorknob

The group then takes great delight in hassling MM further. When humor occurs, then, demonstrating recognition of the humorous frame is clearly important for the hearer’s face.

Example (17) demonstrates the importance of passing the understanding test. This is a transcript from an online “talk” session, in which

several friends are having a discussion across the Internet. The subject matter is this paper!

(17)

Rick: what's the topic of your paper?

Jen: humor support

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

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

Rick always wondered why clowns wear braces

John: huh?

Jen grins

Rick: support = braces

John: oh doh

John: I get it

John: I got it beFORE the hint

Talking about yourself in the third person is a standard way of indicating gestures, statements or making indirect statements in this medium. John doesn't immediately catch on to Rick's wordplay and indicates confusion. There is a pause, and as Rick types in his explanation, John catches on. The "oh doh" and "I get it" were typed almost simultaneously with Rick's explanation, and appear immediately after it. "I get it" is a direct assertion of understanding. John doesn't get it at first, and so stands to lose significant face. So when he does click, it becomes important to repair any damage already done, and to prevent further face loss. The assertion of understanding is the most effective way to perform this repair. Note also that the sequencing on the screen leaves open the possibility that John got the joke as a result of Rick's explanation. He feels the need to deny this explicitly. The fact that John goes to such trouble to make clear that he "got the joke" indicates the extent of face loss involved in failing the understanding test.

Withholding appreciation

The safest way to withhold appreciation, then, is one, which explicitly demonstrates understanding. A prompt and disinterested statement of understanding (e.g., "I get it") implicates, through scalar implicature, a lack of appreciation. Understanding is also entailed by an explicit statement of lack of appreciation ("That's not very funny").

A common strategy is a bored “ha ha ha”, which acknowledges the humorous frame, and the required response, while making clear that the humor is not found very funny. An ironic statement of appreciation also serves to demonstrate recognition and understanding, while withholding full support (e.g., “very funny”, or “such wit”.) This is the strategy used in example (18), overheard at a recent dinner party, and transcribed from memory.

(18)

AM: maybe that’s why the football team was so good that year

BF: i thought it was because you were dating the football teams top six scorers

CM: OFF the field

BF: [flat intonation]: ha ha such wit:

An ironic display of support displays recognition and understanding of the joke, while withholding any explicit indication of appreciation.

In such cases, the audience displays full joke and humor competence, and so the responsibility for the failure of the humor is placed with the humor instigator.

Lack of reaction to humor

Support can also be withheld by a complete lack of reaction to the humor. This is a much more risky strategy, as it leaves open the possibility that the understanding/recognition tests were failed. Except in the case of very obvious humor, silence will implicate you didn’t recognize the humor or understand it. However, if the humor is sufficiently obvious that it is very unlikely to be misunderstood, then silence will work in the opposite way. The joker, unable to infer from the lack of response that the hearer did not understand the humor, is left to the inference that the hearer didn’t appreciate it.

In example (19) EM is a few seconds late with his humor, the conversation has already moved on, and so the humor fails. MM says he has a tape with sound effects on, which would have been funny to play onto the tape they were making. The conversation moves on to the fridge, from which CM has just fetched a beer. EM then contributes some humor on the theme of sound effects. He is too late with this, so it is not supported.

(19)

MM: / = i knew i should have brought my tape recorder
which has sounds to play back at them

CM: tell you what alan's fridge is a lot better stocked than our one
is [ha] = /

EM: / = [ha ha]

DM: was = /

CM: / = [laughs]: was: = /

MM: / = [ha ha ha]

EM: i can do some [whistles] feedback [ha ha] [inhales] [clears throat]

CM: [looking at tape-recorder] miles to go

DM: [yawns]

EM's humor is not particularly subtle, and so there is no risk that he will conclude from the silence that the others did not recognize or understand it. He also adds some laugh particles at the end of his quip, as an invitation to laugh (c.f. Jefferson 1979). EM is clearly conscious that his humor has failed. He inhales and clears his throat to cover the silence and his embarrassment. Clearing the throat seems to be a relatively common strategy for coping with failed humor.

Being too late is one quality that leaves humor prone to failure. Hay (1995) details and exemplifies a number of situations in which support is likely to be withheld. The vast majority of unsupported examples in this corpus of humor in friendship groups fell into one of the following categories.

- (1) Insufficient contextualization
- (2) Being too late, or reviving "dead" humor
- (3) Assuming too much background knowledge
- (4) Misjudging relation between speaker and audience
- (5) Negatively teasing someone present
- (6) Trying to gain membership of an exclusive sub-group
- (7) Disrupting serious conversation
- (8) Portraying oneself inappropriately for one's status or gender

These are all scenarios in which the speaker leaves themselves vulnerable to a withholding of support. Carrell (1997) details some reasons why a joke may not pass through one's joke or humor competence. She concentrates largely on cases where the relevant script is unavailable

to the audience. In the friendship groups studied here, the level of shared knowledge is high, and so when humor fails, it is often not because it was not recognized or understood, but rather that it was deemed inappropriate.

Carrell (1997) notes that religious beliefs, politics, sexual orientation etc. can often impinge on the availability of certain scripts for humorous purposes. This is certainly true, but it is also possible for someone to be simultaneously offended and amused by humor. In such cases the audience can indicate amusement (through laughter, say), and yet explicitly state that the joke is offensive. Here, they are implicating recognition, understanding and appreciation, but then canceling out a fourth implicature: that of *agreement*.

A fourth implicature: Agreement

In addition to the three implicatures discussed, full support of humor (such as unqualified laughter) contains a fourth implicature: agreement.

Alberts (1992) points out that teasing comprises two speech events — joking and conveying a serious message. This is true of many instances of humor. Boundary humor, such as ethnic humor, self-deprecation, anecdotal humor and many other forms usually have a serious component to them. Unqualified support of humor implicates agreement with the message, including any attitudes, presuppositions or implicatures contained in the humor.

In (20) two friends discuss an episode of the Oprah Winfrey Show.

(20)

AF: did you watch Oprah today

BF: yes and it was boring

AF: it was pretty boring /about the (end of the-)\

BF: //it's a FEMINIST show\ [laughs] //[[laughs]\

AF: //[[laughs]\

BF's joking about Oprah as being a feminist show indicates she believes feminism is boring, laughable, or generally unattractive. By laughing, without qualifying her laughter in any way, AF implicates agreement.

Agreement and teasing

In a humorous tease the message is a negative judgment or statement about the recipient of the tease. Unqualified laughter is therefore a rare response to a tease, because it implicates agreement with the message — a negative message about the recipient. In example (21) (from Hay 1994), MF whoops indignation at BM's tease about her ability to add.

(21)

BM: you got two as well Meena

MF: yeah I know that's why I put us up to one TE:N+ +I've
had three glasses of wine in half an hour, you can't expect me
to add two numbers together

BM: I didn't expect you to WITHOUT the wine

MF: WHOO OOH

In such examples, the recipient has to decide whether to (a) provide full support, thereby endorsing the message conveyed, (b) support the humor while explicitly commenting on the message, or (c) correct or deny the message and not support the humor at all. The decision will be based on the recipient's assessment of the seriousness and weight of the message conveyed. If the message is clearly meant entirely in jest then unqualified support may be given. If the message is interpreted as offensive and serious, then this will probably be commented on, and no support at all provided.

Drew (1987) observes that responses to teases are often "po-faced" — containing a serious response, which refutes the content of the tease. Recipients will sometimes laughingly agree, but more often will combine (in various orders) a laughing response or recognition they are being teased with a serious rejection about whatever is being proposed about them or their behavior. He points out that recipients respond seriously to teases because they are explicitly responding to the negative characterizations the tease contains.

Alberts (1992: 158) notes: "it's useful to conceptualize teasing as an activity comprised of two orthogonal dimensions: playfulness and seriousness". Given that a tease can function both as a joke and some form of negative evaluation, the teaser must structure their tease in such a way that it meets their goals as one or the other or both. The interpretation of the teaser's position on these continuums will influence the type of response invoked.

Within a teasing frame, Zajdman (1995) notes, a bald on-record face-threatening act which clearly conveys a derogatory sense actually minimizes face threat, because it can be easily dismissed along the lines of “he/she couldn’t really mean that.”

Teasing is one realm in which the tension between the various implicatures of humor support is particularly salient.

Agreement and self-deprecation

A second realm in which this tension is present is that of self-deprecating humor. Humor is often used in troubles-talk as a means of coping with a difficult situation, or to deprecate oneself to protect from anticipated deprecation by others.

Zajdman (1995: 337) discusses self-deprecating humor briefly, noting that: “It is assumed that nobody in his/her right mind is hostile towards him/herself. Therefore when a self denigrating FTA is performed, this is interpreted as humorous and cognitive consistence remains preserved.” He notes also that self-directed humor contains a circular message: “I am weak, I admit it. To admit means to be strong. So, I am strong” (Zajdman 1995: 338). In such cases, Zajdman claims, the hearer’s laughter conveys cognitive bewilderment — is the speaker strong or weak?

Unqualified humor support in response to self-denigrating humor will not only express appreciation of the humor, but also agreement with the message. In such cases, the message is a negative characterization of the speaker, and to agree with it would be to damage the speaker’s face. Here again, then, we see the delicate tension between the need to support the humor, and the need to deny the message. In a sense, the speaker has conflicting face needs, which must be navigated by the hearer. The degree to which the hearer decides to favor either of the needs will, again, depend upon the evaluated seriousness and sensitivity of the message conveyed. When the message is deemed to be sufficiently serious, the most appropriate response to such humor is the explicit negation of the message the humor contains. Examples of such responses were given earlier in the paper, under the heading “offer sympathy, or contradict self-deprecating humor.” This was offered as one mechanism for supporting humor, but, given the analysis outlined here, it is perhaps more accurately seen as a mechanism for supporting the speaker at the cost of leaving the humor itself unsupported.

Degrees of appreciation

Until now I have basically represented the statement of appreciation of humor as categorical. Either you thought it was funny or you didn't. Of course this is a gradient phenomenon, and largely dependent on the instance of humor involved. In many instances overwhelming support is unnecessary and uncalled for. Flip remarks and various attempts at humor which the speaker themselves intend to be silly/corny only require an acknowledgement as such to maintain the face of all involved.

(22)

MM: associative databases =/

NM: / = deductive =/

MM: / = deDUCtive

databases //that's the ones yeah\

NM: /yeah yeah\ well //there's\

TM: /well i de-\ d- i deduced that

MM: [groans]

MM's groan implicates "yes I recognized and understood the humor, and it was corny". Corny humor has its merits, and as long as TM intended it as such, then all face needs are met. If, on the other hand, TM told a long story, introducing it by stating how funny he thought it was, then a groan would indicate that the hearer did not find it as funny as TM did, and TM's face would be damaged.

A similar example is given in (23), from the corpus described in Hay (1994) — a collection of recordings of a New Zealand friendship group. Recent conversation had revolved around a topic involving anal sex, with various bad jokes on the topic. MF requests a change in topic with a pun, which extracts groans from the whole group.

(23)

MF: can we get off the anal CRACKS please

All: [groan]

DM: now that was unneceSARILY punny

The groan and the explicit reference to puns by DM demonstrate understanding by the group. As MF was trying to achieve a change in topic with her pun, the lack of more explicit appreciation does not cause her a loss of face. In fact the desired effect of many puns seems to be precisely the elicitation of a groan.

The non-independence of agreement and appreciation

Appreciation and agreement will not always be independent. Sometimes a hearer may find the “humor” of humor funny, while disagreeing with the message. Then they can support the humor, but cancel the implicature of agreement (e.g., laughter followed by an explicit cancellation such as “that’s cruel”). But sometimes the “humor” may *depend* on sharing a certain attitude. Especially in examples such as ethnic or sexist humor, if the hearer doesn’t share a certain belief about the group in question, the joke may fall completely flat. This is precisely the type of situation described by Carrell (1997), when the hearer’s beliefs prevent the availability of a given script for humorous purposes.

Laughter is very tightly associated with appreciation. You can laugh, and then deny agreement, but you can’t laugh, and then deny appreciation. The behavior of “that’s not funny” is interesting in this context. If you have already laughed, “that’s not funny” doesn’t negate appreciation, but rather serves to cancel agreement. This indicates that, when associated with a laughing response, agreement is a conversational implicature in the sense of Grice (1975) (because it can be cancelled), and appreciation is a conventional implicature (because it can’t).

Conclusion

Most literature on humor assumes that laughter provides the most appropriate support. Those that have investigated gender differences in humor support have therefore concentrated on laughter. Such studies tend to show that women laugh more in conversations and in response to humor, and so conclude that women are more supportive of humor than men.

Counting instances of laughter is a misleading approach to investigating levels of support. There are numerous humor support strategies available, some of which provide stronger support than others. The context will, to some extent, dictate the most appropriate support strategy, and this will not always be laughter. Possible strategies for supporting humor including contributing more humor, echoing the humor, offering sympathy or contradicting self-deprecating humor, and using overlap or other strategies to show heightened involvement in the conversation.

There are even some instances of humor for which explicit support does not seem to be required at all. Irony is one type of humor for which support does not seem so crucial. Also, if the humor is itself supporting other humor, it does not require further explicit support.

Full support implicates recognition of the humor, understanding, appreciation, and agreement with any serious message conveyed. Recognition, understanding and appreciation are in an entailment relationship. There is a delicate tension between these and the implicature of agreement, which becomes particularly salient in teasing humor and self-deprecating humor. Humor support is an interesting and complicated discourse event in need of further analysis and study.

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Notes

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The work reported in this paper has benefited from discussions with Janet Holmes, Gregory Ward, and the comments of two anonymous reviewers. Portions of this paper also appear in Hay (1995) and Hay (1996).

Except where explicitly stated, the transcripts in this paper were drawn from a corpus of 815 examples of conversational humor, collected for the research described in Hay (1995). The speakers are all New Zealanders of European descent, aged between 18 and 35 with some tertiary education. I am particularly grateful to my friends, who agreed to record their conversations, and to the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English and Anita Easton, for allowing me access to their data.

One reviewer is concerned about the effect of the sexual content in some of the examples. While the specific content of any humor (be it sexual or otherwise) will likely influence the support strategies used, it is not a goal of this paper to explore such contextual influence. Rather it is merely to establish the range of different strategies available. The extent to which the type of humor affects the type of support strategy used is an interesting question, which I leave for future research.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

The transcription conventions used are based largely on those developed at Victoria University for the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English (WCSNZ).

Speakers are labeled using an initial and the letter F or M to indicate their sex.

A “=” signals speech continues from an earlier line:

AM: i would go to school almost //every day\ wearing this =

BF: / [ha ha ha] \

AM: =bright green hat

Laughter

[h] laughing exhalation

[huh] laughing inhalation

[ha] voiced laugh particle

[nh] nasalized laugh particle

hello[ho] laughing repetition of syllable

[laughs] 2 secs used for prolonged laughter, or for a group of people laughing.