2 Conceptualizing Failed Humor

2.1 Approaches to failed humor

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

2.1.1 Superiority/hostility theories

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

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

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

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

Example 2.1

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.1.2 Release theories

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

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

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

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

2.1.3 Incongruity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.2 Competence, performance, and failed humor

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

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

2.2.1 Failed humor and humor competence[6]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.2.2 Failed humor and humor performance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.3 Identification of failed humor

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

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

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

Example 2.2

01 Marsha: I- I, I told my ki:ds. who do this: down at the Drug Coalition I want the
02 to:p back. hhhhhh (1) (breath) SEND OUT the WO:RD. hhh hnh (0.2)
03 Tony: yeah
04 Marsha: hhh bu:t u-hu: ghh his friend Steve and Brian are driving up. right
05 after::
(Adapted from Schegloff 1996: 94)

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

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

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

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

Example 2.3

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

02 reviews=

03 Hera: [it's a political issue]

04 Tracey: =there's been

05 Ripeka: just like the Māoris

06 (people smile and look amused)

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

08 to do with logic

09 Tracey: no

(Adapted from Vine et al. 2009: 133)

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

Example 2.4

Why did God create the Paris Hilton sex video tape?

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

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

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

One.

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

Example 2.5

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

Wife: (eye roll)

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

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

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

Example 2.6

01	Jake:	☺ all we do is sit around and smo[ke and drink ☺
02	Louis:	[smoke and drink
03	Pum:	the best part uh [huh huh huh
04	Jake:	(gruff voice) [and we take out our guns
05	Louis:	yeah
06	Jake:	drive my pickup truck
07	Louis:	(gruff voice) I wish I was in the desert right now with a
08		gu[n and a knife
09	Jake:	[u:::h huh huh huh huh
10	Louis:	and that orange and white parachute
11	Jake:	uh huh huh huh
12	Louis:	and a book on what types of d[esert animals are out there.
13	Pum:	[uh huh huh huh huh huh

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

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

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

2.4 Data set

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

1. Observations: These include interactions that I participated in, or that I overheard. For several years, each time I encountered an instance of failed humor as I went about my daily life, I made detailed fieldnotes on the interaction as soon as possible. This data has the advantage of spontaneity, and is usually transcribed in some detail, despite not having been audio recorded. In addition, some examples from internet interaction are included here, such as videos posted on Youtube or comments on Facebook status updates or blog posts.
2. Self-reports: Some instances of failed humor have been shared with me when people learn about my research. In addition, the 33 examples that formed the basis for Bell and Attardo (2010) are used here. These were reported by non-native English speaking graduate students, who kept diaries of their experiences with humor in the U.S. Like all self-report data, these must be understood as having been selected by the reporter and filtered through her or his own lens. In addition, these examples lack the linguistic detail of directly observed or audio/video recorded interaction.
3. Previously published data: These examples come from scholarly articles, and in most cases the failed humor was not the focus of the analysis, but the

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

4. Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): By using various search terms such as "just/only kidding" and "just/only joking" and limiting the search to spoken English, I identified 53 examples of failed humor in COCA. Most of these examples are the rough transcripts of television or radio broadcasts, but the original recordings for a substantial number of these were available online and were used to construct more detailed transcripts (e.g., marking pauses, false starts, intonation, overlap, etc.). The public nature of this type of talk, as well as the interlocutors' awareness of large multiple and unseen audiences, gives it particular qualities not necessarily found in private discourse. Kotthoff (2003), for instance, found that friends tend to respond playfully to the surface meaning of an ironic utterance, whereas those in the public arena tended to address the implicature. Much of the talk taken from COCA resembles casual conversation between friends on the surface, but is actually being done before an audience for the purposes of informing and/or entertaining them, thus making the communication quite different from private, casual conversation. At issue here, then, is not the linguistic details, but the explicit performance that is occurring, rendering this interaction qualitatively different from private, casual conversations, no matter how much it may resemble that type of interaction on the surface.
5. Television/movies: Rose (2001) and Martínez-Flor (2007) have demonstrated that in many respects the scripted interactions found in films that depict "regular" life (i.e. dramas or [pseudo] reality shows set in the present day, as opposed to fantasy films set in an imagined future world) closely resemble in form naturally-occurring examples of the same type of interaction or speech act. On this basis, a small number of examples were obtained from these sources.
6. Elicitation: This technique was used in order to gather data specifically on responses to failed humor. Responses to two different types of failure, lack of appreciation and lack of understanding, were collected. The first set consists of 540 reactions elicited in response to a joke that was not funny. The second set consists of 248 responses that were recorded following the telling of a joke that was very difficult to understand. This data is mainly presented in Chapter 6. Elicitation has the advantage of allowing a large amount of data to be collected quickly, but lacks the element of genuine spontaneity.

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

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

Example 2.7

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

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

2.5 Summary

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

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