3 Failed Humor as Miscommunication

3.1 Introduction

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

3.2 Defining miscommunication

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

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

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

3.3 Sources of miscommunication

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

Let us examine each of these in turn.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Example 3.1

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

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

03 Dan: no, I mean about hh

04 Ken: heh

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

06 Ken: [heh heh (0.4)

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.4 Failed humor as misunderstanding

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

3.4.1 A framework for understanding failed humor

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 2: Revised framework for understanding failed humor

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

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

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

3.4.1.1 Locutionary factors

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

3.4.1.2 Linguistic rules

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

3.4.1.3 Ambiguity

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

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

3.4.1.4 Pragmatic force of utterances

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

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

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

3.4.1.6 Humorous frame (key)

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

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

3.4.1.7 Joke incongruity

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

3.4.1.8 Joke appreciation

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

Table 3:

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

3.4.1.9 Joke (meta)messages

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

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

3.4.1.10 Appropriate humor support

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

3.5 Structure of miscommunication and repair

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

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

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

Example 3.2

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

02 Bea: mm hm,

03 Hannah: and- or I mean his own frames

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

Example 3.3

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

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

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

04   the roads.

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

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

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

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

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

Example 3.4

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

02 A: who?

03 B: Sibbie's sister.

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

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

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

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

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

3.6 Summary

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