

4 Triggers of Failed Humor

4.1 Introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, many of the factors that can cause humor to fail will also be likely to cause miscommunications to occur in serious discourse. These potential triggers represent the first six levels of the model presented in Chapter 3, and examples of each will be discussed here with the goal of determining the ways in which communicative failures at each level can differ when they take place in serious or non-serious discourse. In other words, when the mechanism that triggers miscommunication is the same, are failures of humor different in some way from parallel failures in serious talk? If so, in what way? The triggers to be examined here involve problems related to: locution, linguistic rules, ambiguity, pragmatic force, message form, and framing.

4.2 Locutionary problems

At the most basic level are problems with the channel of communication. Communicative problems at the locutionary level arise from either issues of performance or from factors outside of the control of the interlocutors. Recall that locutionary problems involve anything that impedes interlocutors' abilities to articulate or decode utterances. Thus, the physical environment may interfere, as when people attempt to communicate over noise, or the problem may stem from personal impairment or injury. In the first example, a number of these factors are likely in play. At a party, a male in his 20s finds some ricotta cheese in the host's refrigerator. As a joke, he puts a dollop of ricotta on each palm, goes into the living room, raises his hands and shouts:

Example 4.1

01 M: ricotta stigmata!

02 Party-goers: (turn and look in silence, return to partying)

Because this is a reported example, it is impossible to determine the exact problem; however, given the situation, the root of the problem is almost certainly locutionary, and possibly due to several factors. First, by his own admission, the joke-teller was inebriated, which may well have interfered with his ability to articulate clearly. Although he reports having cried, "Ricotta stigmata!" his actual delivery may have been slurred and incomprehensible to the hearers, creating a

performance issue. Similarly, many of the hearers were likely in a similar state of intoxication, and therefore may not have been able to process his attempt at humor. Finally, this particular social situation is typically marked by music, which is often loud, and perhaps raucous (drinking) games. These in turn usually force interlocutors to raise their voices, and all of these factors lead to a loud environment. This noise may have prevented even those party-goers who were near-by and sober when the joke was made to be unable to discern what was said. The speaker also reported that no one attempted to find out what he had said, essentially ignoring his outburst. It seems likely that non-essential, but serious information conveyed in this same context and not heard would also be ignored.

Another reported example illustrates the failure of an attempt at humor because the speaker was too soft-spoken:

Example 4.2

- 01 Harumi: he tends to murmur, so I usually cannot hear what he says. and at
 02 the time as always I missed some part of his talk but it seems like I
 03 failed to hear his joke? and his face was like the face that somebody
 04 shows just after he has finished a joke.
 05 Nancy: o:h
 06 Harumi: when I saw his face uh it's like he just said something funny.
 07 Nancy: like he's waiting?
 08 Harumi: yeah HHH my reaction I was like, "my god" I didn't / / to him. then
 09 I noticed I was supposed to laugh. but I guess it was kind of too late.
 10 and I thought that it was not nice that I didn't smile so I just like like
 11 made / / smile HHH. / / or something.
 (Bell and Attardo 2010: 430)

Because she was unable to clearly hear it, Harumi identifies her interlocutor's prior utterance as having been intended as humor, albeit belatedly, from his expression. However, given that she could not hear what was said, she was unable to process it through her humor competence. Despite the failure of the joke at this point, Harumi opted to smile, feigning appreciation of the humor she had not heard, rather than initiate repair. Interestingly, the problem of not hearing portions of this speaker's utterances was apparently routine, as Harumi introduced

the problem by noting that “as always” (line 2) she had missed something. This type of failure with respect to a joke, however, is presented as an exceptional situation, as it is introduced with “but,” when she notes in line 02 that this time it was a joke that she did not hear. Although we do not know how Harumi responded when similar problems arose in serious discourse, we can see here that she feels an obligation to respond and to do so in a particular way (“I was supposed to laugh,” line 09). Politeness comes in to play here, since while missing portions of a serious utterance may not matter, “it was not nice” (line 10) for Harumi to not smile and thus to fail to acknowledge the attempt at humor. The expectation of a normative response of laughter or smiling is very strong. As soon as Harumi recognized it was a joke, she apparently felt a sense of shock (“my god” line 08) and obligation to respond that she may not have felt had the utterance been serious. Thus, while the locutionary failure in this case is easily found in both serious and non-serious interaction, the types of reactions engendered by each do not appear to be the same.

Finally, one locutionary problem does occur that is largely specific to humorous talk: This is when the speaker is laughing too hard to articulate clearly, thus making it impossible for the audience to process the joke.⁸ The extract below is taken from a video posted on YouTube, and the poster describes the content as “My girlfriend tries saying a joke but fails completely.” The video is two minutes and 59 seconds long and opens with the teller, who I call Ana, laughing, apparently from having already attempted the joke, but failed because she could not help breaking down in laughter. She continues laughing almost incessantly throughout the recording while she makes several more attempts to tell the joke. Three other interlocutors are present: her boyfriend, who is making the recording and who I call Bob, and a male and female. The male does not speak in this extract. The female, who I call Carol, is the one who the joke is primarily addressed to, because the response is gendered and requires a female addressee. In the first part of the video all three try various tactics to help Ana complete her joke. They encourage her, ask questions and make comments about the nature of the joke, and try to change to a more serious subjects so that Ana can begin to control her laughter. However, they also express mild, teasing frustration at her inability to tell the joke, with Carol at one point chanting, “This joke sucks! This joke sucks!” In the interest of space, the transcription, greatly simplified in terms of aspiration to maintain readability, begins at 2:22, when Ana initiates what will ultimately be a complete telling of the joke:

⁸ This may also be a problem that occurs in hysterical or maniacal episodes.

Example 4.3

- 01 Ana: ok. are you Africahhhhhh (breaks down laughing)
- 02 Bob: oh god that one?
- 03 Ana: ((are you African)) (1)
- 04 Carol: no:?
- 05 Ana: ☹ 'cause you're a frickin' biHHH[°tch° ☹ (continues laughing)
- 06 Bob: [ha ha HA:::
- 07 Carol: /what what/ what?
- 08 Bob: she couldn't finish it!
- 09 Ana: ((are you African))
- 10 Carol: no
- 11 Ana: 'cause you're a frickin' biHHitchHHHH (continues laughing)
- 12 Bob: ☹ noHO::! finish it! ☹
- 13 Ana: ☹ are you- it's / / ☹
- 14 Carol: a fuckin' bitch?
- 15 Bob: [yea:h
- 16 Ana: [no ☹ are you African. ☹
- 17 Carol: no:
- 18 Ana: 'cause you're a frickin' bitch HUH
- 19 Bob: huh ☹ 'cause you're a frickin' bitch ☹
- 20 Ana: ☹ 'cause *African*, a *frickin'* ☹
- 21 Carol: oh::::: (in recognition)
- 22 Ana: ☹ you don't get it it's funny::: ☹
- 23 Bob: ah hahhh
- 24 Carol: you think that's funny?! [o::h no (disappointed)
- 25 Bob: [rea:ction (turns the camera from Ana toward

- 26 Carol, who is shaking her head and waving her hand dismissively as
 27 she turns away from the camera)
 (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ut02u8TMgVk, retrieved 9/13/2013)

Ana's first attempt at the punch line (in this extract) occurs in line 05, but her laughter renders it incomprehensible to Carol. Bob, who knows the joke, laughs and informs Carol that Ana was not able to complete the punch line. Her second attempt, in line 11, is still deemed unfinished by Bob, although it is clearer and Carol is able to guess "fucking bitch" as part of the punch line. Bob confirms this, probably since although "fucking" is not the word used, "frickin'" is a common euphemism for it, which suggests that Carol has successfully decoded the surface features of the joke. Ana, on the other hand, simultaneously disconfirms Carol's interpretation and launches into a third telling, which finally results in a clear rendering of the punch line (line 18), which she follows with an exposition of the pun in line 20. The final portion of this example will be discussed below. At this point, it is important to recognize that the initial two attempts at telling this joke failed simply because Ana's laughter prevented her from fully articulating the final words.

Experience attests to the many times that an attempt at humor may initially fail due to locutionary problems, but then succeed when repair is initiated in the same way as it is when such troubles occur in serious discourse. That is, the speaker self-corrects, or the hearer signals the trouble with, for instance, "What?" or "Sorry?" As these examples suggest, however, additional types of responses might be more common in humorous failures of this sort. Humor may be more prone to simply being ignored. If the hearer has recognized the utterance as an attempt to amuse, he or she might not seek clarification, since humor does not normally communicate necessary information. Furthermore, there is a perception that humor that is not immediately grasped is not worth pursuing, perhaps due to the concern for ruining a joke through repetition or explanation, even though the problem was purely locutionary. Humor that was not fully perceived may also be prone to receiving a response that is polite, seeking only to save face for both speaker and hearers rather than rectify the miscommunication, again due to its non-essential nature. And, as the final example illustrates, although laughter might seem to be something that would lend itself to a more playful telling, excessive laughter seems to try the patience of the audience and may ultimately lead to the failure of the joke.

4.3 Linguistic rules

When humor fails due to linguistic factors (limited here to phonology, morphosyntax, and semantics), the issue may be one of either competence or performance on the part of either interlocutor. Both speakers and hearers may lack the knowledge of the structure of the language being used that is necessary to either construct or interpret the humor. Performance problems relating to linguistic rules may be due to memory lapses or slips of the tongue or ear, for example. Although performance-related problems can occur with any speaker, competence-related problems will be more often found in speakers whose knowledge is not yet fully developed, such as second language learners and children.

4.3.1 Phonology

The failure of humor due to phonological problems appears to be very rare. Example 4.3, above, seems to be a case in which phonology, at least to some extent, interferes with joke comprehension. First, it is important to recall that Ana's uncontrollable laughter resulted in the joke's telling being extended over several minutes. The laughter may have contributed to unreasonably high expectations for amusement on the part of the hearers and the multiple attempts may have reduced the element of surprise and spontaneity. Still, phonology appears to have also contributed to the lack of success. Following Ana's second delivery of the punch line (line 11), Carol is apparently able to interpret its meaning, as she performs a comprehension check, asking "a fuckin' bitch?" in line 14. Although this reveals her understanding of the meaning of the phrase, the humor is lost, because it is only the euphemism "frickin'" that creates a pun with "African." Ana articulates this clearly in line 20, when she isolates these elements and repeats them, emphasizing their different stress for clarification ("African, a *frickin'*"). This display seems to finally help Carol understand the incongruity in joke, although she does not appreciate it. In this instance performance is largely the issue for both participants. Ana's delivery is imperfect as, it seems, is Carol's reception.

This is the sole miscommunication based on phonology in the present data set; however, it is easy to imagine that a not-fully-proficient interlocutor might have trouble with other aspects of phonology. Websites for English language teachers are replete with jokes that can be used to expose learners to specific facets of the language, including drawing their attention to patterns of phonology. Consider, for instance, this joke:

Example 4.4

A man went to see his psychiatrist. “When I wake up, I keep on finding that I have black lines all down my body.” “I know the problem,” said the psychiatrist. “You’re a psychopath.”

(<http://videoweb.nie.edu.sg/phonetic/phonetics/jokes.htm>.)

Assuming that the hearer is familiar with both lexical items, the humor lies in being able to identify the phonetic similarities between “psychopath” and “cycle path.” More specifically, a speaker must know that the sound /l/ varies in English. The word “leap,” for instance, contains a “bright” /l/ sound, pronounced clearly and in the front of the mouth. “Cycle” contains a “dark” /l/, which is pronounced in the back of the mouth and is much closer to the vowel sound in the middle syllable of “psychopath.” Individuals whose pronunciation is different from this (whose linguistic competence does not include this variation) will likely have a very difficult time processing the joke.

Linking, or liaison, between words is the phonological process that constructs the humor in the next joke:

Example 4.5

Two boll-weevils grew up together in the cotton fields of Alabama. One of them went on to become a high-flying lawyer in New York. The other stayed behind in Alabama. The second was the lesser of two weevils.

(<http://videoweb.nie.edu.sg/phonetic/phonetics/jokes.htm>.)

The rounded vowel sound /u/ that comes at the end of the word “two” encourages the insertion of the glide /w/ before the vowel sound /i/ in “evils.” This is similar to the use of “an” before a word that begins with a vowel sound, such as “an icicle,” but is not encoded in the written system. This sound insertion renders the phrase “two evils” virtually identical-sounding to “two weevils,” hence the humor. A speaker, such as a second language learner of English, who is unfamiliar with this linking process (unconscious to most native speakers) and who tends to carefully articulate each word may be unable to perform or to decipher this joke.

4.3.2 Morphosyntax

As with failures of humor due to problems constructing or interpreting phonology, failures involving morphosyntax were difficult to find in every day interac-

tion. However, for a project seeking to examine the ways that people respond to humor that they did not understand, I used a joke that relied on morphosyntax for its humor, and thus collected numerous examples of failure in this realm (the results of that project are summarized in Chapter 6 and are also available in Bell 2013). Here is the joke, which was also presented in Chapter 1:

Example 4.6

Every time the mail carrier comes to this one house a huge dog comes bounding out and jumps on him. He puts his paws on the mail carrier's shoulders and licks his face and sometimes he almost knocks him over. One day, the mail carrier comes to the house and walks into the yard, but there's no dog. Next day, same thing. The third day the owner's in the yard and the mail carrier, a little anxious about whether the dog's ok or not asks, "How's (house) the dog?" The owner replies, "I did."

This joke was ideal for collecting examples of humor that failed due to hearers' inability to understand it, as most people were only able to retrieve the more common parsing of the sound sequence [hauz], which gave them "I did" as a response to a question about the dog's welfare: How's the dog? In order to understand the joke, the hearer must be able to instead construct a truncated question that asks whether the owner put the dog in the house. The question uses "house" in its less common verb form and drops the initial do-construction that often introduces such a question: (Did you) house the dog?

One spontaneous example of failure deriving from imperfect knowledge of morphosyntax is taken from a classroom of college students enrolled in second year Spanish. As language learners, their competence in Spanish syntax is still developing and thus gaps remain. As the excerpt begins, the teacher is listing examples of adverbial phrases that trigger the use of the subjunctive. All of these structures use the form "que"⁹ (a word that rhymes with the English "hay"), but when he makes a joke based on this structure, the students' lack of knowledge of the possible forms prevents them from immediately understanding it:

Example 4.7

01 T *si, a menos que, a fin de que*

02 S okay

9 *a menos que* = unless, *a fin de que* = in order to/that, *antes de que* = before, *para que* = so that

- 03 T um *antes de que*, *para que*
 04 S okay
 05 T *o que?* no, no, no
 06 S no?
 07 T it was a bad joke
 08 Ss (laughter)
 09 T she was like *antes de que*, *para que*, and she's like ok, and I'm like no "ok"
 10 (o que) no
 11 Ss (laughter)
 (Adapted from Sterling and Loewen 2013)

As the teacher lists the structures using “que,” one student backchannels with “okay” (lines 02 and 04). The teacher seizes upon the second turn using “okay” to make a joke based on the phonological similarity between that word and the structures he has been presenting. In line 05 he playfully takes up the student’s contribution as an addition to the list, reimagining “okay” as “o que,” a possibility that he immediately rejects. Although his misunderstanding is deliberate, his rejection is accurate, because although “o” is a legitimate lexical item in Spanish (meaning “or”), “o que” could not be included in this list. Although the student’s turn in line 06 draws attention to conversational trouble, it does not make clear the source of her confusion. Is she uncertain as to whether or not “o que” is a possible Spanish phrase or has she heard “okay” and is confused as to why the teacher would reject that backchannel? In any case, the humor is not taken up by any members of the class, and the instructor begins to conduct repair in line 07, by explaining his utterance as “a bad joke.” Once the intent has been retroactively named, the joke succeeds, with members laughing in line 08, and again after an explanation is issued in line 11.

4.3.3 Semantics

While a native speaker’s knowledge of the rules of phonology and morphosyntax are learned and largely set fairly early, the lexicon continues to develop throughout the lifespan. We add to our vocabularies as we encounter jargon specific to new activities we engage in, learning words related to our profession, or to new sports and hobbies we try. In addition, meanings shift and new connotations build

up around words as we gain more and varied experiences. Thus, whereas the last two areas of language are those in which failures were more likely to be found among second language users and children, the semantic realm finds similar problems across all language users. The source of the communicative trouble at this level may only be hearer-based, but can also derive from the speaker not judging the audience's background knowledge well.

The first example of the failure of humor due to semantics involves a joke told in a college calculus class designed especially for students who showed promise in scientific research. Here, just as the professor approaches this group of students to observe their work, James attempts to tell a math joke. (Each @ symbol here represents a single pulse of laughter, following the notation that was used in the original transcript.):

Example 4.8

- 01 James: what do you call an eigensheep?
 02 Zoe: [@
 03 James: [a la:mbda. (Zoe, Morrisse, Harry, and the professor smile)
 (...)
 28 Harry: [@@@
 29 Zoe: [@@@
 30 Harry: oh Zo[e.
 31 Zoe: [and I don't get it at a@@@ll.
 32 Harry: you don't get it?
 33 Zoe: no@.
 34 Harry: what don't you get? It's not la:mb, du:h, it's la:mbda:.
 35 Zoe: @ I@ do@n't kno@w what- I don't know what ei@genvalue i@s.
 36 Harry: [o@@@h, m@e@ neither.
 37 Zoe: [h! @@
 38 Harry: [it's still funny though.
 39 Zoe: [@h!
 (Adapted from Bucholtz et al. 2011: 182–184)

Bucholtz et al. (2011) explain the joke thus:

The humor derives from the fact that the Greek character λ (lambda) is used to represent the eigenvalues of a matrix. The joke relies on a pun between the phonological similarity of *lamb* and the first syllable of *lambda*; in most entextualizations, the riddle is *What do you call a young (or baby) eigensheep?*, a phrasing that provides a clearer motivation for the punchline (p. 183).

James presented the answer to the joke as the Greek character. In part of the transcript that is not shown here, the teaching assistant returns and suggests that a better delivery of the punch line would be “A lamb, duh.” When Zoe professes to have not gotten the joke (line 31), Harry contrasts the two possibilities for her (line 34) for clarification. This, however, is not Zoe’s concern, as in line 35 she asserts that she does not know “what eigenvalue is,” which prompts Harry to confess that he does not either. Interestingly, both students fail to fully understand the joke, but arrive at opposite conclusions about what this means for their appreciation. Harry seems to feel that he understands enough to appreciate the humor, whereas Zoe, despite having extrapolated the term “eigenvalue” from the joke’s “eigensheep,” does not claim understanding.

As noted above, a lack of shared connotation may also affect how humor is received. Below Frank, a native of Japan, describes how his classmate playfully referred to him as a “guru”:

Example 4.9

Frank: Karen asked me if she can call me guru, huh, huh, guru, I don’t know why. she just want to call me guru, huh, huh, guru. so but I got upset. [...] because guru, the word guru in Japan it has a special meaning, if you are related to a cult guru, which is a very bad thing.

(Bell and Attardo 2010: 432)

Frank reported this incident as an attempt at humor, but one that he could not appreciate. In this context, it seems that his friend was using the term to teasingly describe Frank as very knowledgeable. Although Frank was aware of the complimentary denotation of the term “guru,” he associated it with the leader of the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo, which was responsible for using sarin gas in an attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995. Thus, he found the application of the term disturbing, as only the negative Japanese connotations resonated strongly with him, preventing him from being able to appreciate the humor.

Humor whose failure is triggered by linguistic problems seems likely to be treated similarly to serious failures of the same sort if the trouble is in the per-

formance. In these cases, as in Ana's delivery of her "Are you African?" joke, the trouble is apparent in Carol's question "a fucking bitch?" which prompts repair by Ana, in the form of a clearer delivery. Problems that spring from competence, on the other hand, may be treated differently from those found in similar, serious interaction. When interlocutor competencies differs significantly, as in talk with children or second language users, the attempt to joke may be abandoned without clarification sought by either party. In Frank's case, his interlocutor was not even aware of his dismay at having been referred to as a guru. Recognizing that she was attempting to joke, he did not see it as important to engage her on the topic. The specific interactional conditions, of course, can affect this. Teachers, such as the one who attempted to joke in Example 4.7, are responsible for communicating clearly and, in this case, taking care to point out particular language structures so that their students can learn. Thus, it was important for this teacher to explain his joke.

4.4 Ambiguity

Commonly exploited for humor, lexical and syntactic ambiguity can also trigger the failure of humor when the ambiguity is not recognized or is misinterpreted. It can be more difficult than usual, in the case of ambiguity, to name one participant as the primary source of the trouble. The speaker may be unaware of having constructed an ambiguous utterance or, if the ambiguity is intended and has been employed for humorous purposes, it is possible that the speaker did not adequately contextualize the ambiguity. The latter is the case in the following example, which illustrates a failed attempt at humor using lexical ambiguity. In this situation a husband and wife are walking in the woods and the husband has constructed an imaginary scenario in which he plans to take up hunting in order to extract revenge on all the deer that are staring at him from behind the trees:

Example 4.10

- 01 Wife: those eyes!
- 02 Husband: their doey eyes
- 03 Wife: I could make you a cookie
- 04 Husband: of a deer?
- 05 Wife: those doughy eyes

- 06 Husband: (does not acknowledge that he has perceived a joke and contin-
 07 ues to talk about what he will do to the deer)

The initial joke made by the wife in line 03 is a rather oblique attempt to exploit the ambiguity of “doey/doughy eyes.” The ambiguity is not recognized by the husband, whose request for clarification indicates some interactional trouble, but does not demonstrate that he has recognized her utterance as an attempt at humor. The wife’s simple repetition (line 05) of the phrase previously used by the husband is not sufficient to draw his attention to the ambiguity, and he continues to elaborate on his fantasy, while she abandons the joke.

In the doey/doughy eyes example, it is possible to argue that the lexical ambiguity was not identified by the hearer because the humor was overly implicit. In other words, the lack of contextualization cues may have contributed as much to the failure of the joke as did the husband’s inability to recognize the ambiguity. In a more high-profile instance of failure due to lexical ambiguity, the fact that an attempt at humor was being enacted was made very clear. This 2011 interview of the Dalai Lama by Australian Today show host Karl Stefanovic had been quite light-hearted throughout. For instance, Stefanovic had asked the Dalai Lama what makes him laugh and the Dalai Lama had, several times, initiated humor. This excerpt, in which Stefanovic attempts to tell a formulaic joke to the Dalai Lama (DL, below; there is also a translator present) comes at the end of the interview, and thus after the two had already shared a great deal of laughter:

Example 4.11

- 01 Stef: so the Dalai Lama walks into a pizza shop
 02 DL: (looks to translator and speaks Nepalese, apparently asking for translation)
 03 Trans: (provides translation – the word “pizza” can be heard)
 04 Stef: pizza?
 05 DL: pizza [shop (nodding) yes
 06 Stef: [yeah pizza pizza shop. and says, can you make me *one* with
 07 everything
 08 DL: (1) mm (.) (puzzled look, shakes head, looks to interpreter, smiling)
 09 what’s that?

- 10 Trans: (speaking Nepalese)
- 11 DL: (looks back at interviewer) ah yes
- 12 Stef: do you know what I mean? (laughing) can you make me one (puts
13 palms together in front of his face, as in prayer)
- 14 DL: ho
- 15 Stef: with everything. (gestures with both hands to make one circle) (laughs)
- 16 DL: ah theoretically possible
- 17 Stef: oh I knew that wouldn't work (puts hand over eyes)
- 18 DL: (hearty laughter)
(<http://today.ninemsn.com.au/videoindex.aspx>)

The first disruption occurs when the Dalai Lama requires a translation for part of the question; however, this is minor and appears to be quickly resolved. In line 06, Stefanovic delivers the punch line, articulating quite clearly, perhaps in response to the initial need for translation, and emphasizing the word “one,” upon which the joke hinges. Here “one” can be interpreted as a pronoun, indicating a pizza, or as an adjective indicating a unified, harmonious, single entity. Understood in the context of a pizzeria, the phrase “make me one with everything” would be a request for a pizza with all the available toppings, while a spiritual interpretation would involve a request for personal peace and enlightenment. The Dalai Lama again turns to the translator and receives an answer; however, when he turns back to the interviewer (line 11) his response of “ah yes” does not show that he has oriented to the humorous nature of the punch line, and the token instead seems to be given as a backchannel response, as if he is expecting Stefanovic to continue. Stefanovic checks the Dalai Lama’s understanding and repeats the punch line slowly, and this time accompanying each interpretation with clarifying gestures. The Dalai Lama’s response in line 16 does not indicate recognition of ambiguity, as it only addresses the spiritual interpretation of the punch line, and Stefanovic subsequently admits defeat. Interestingly, the host’s resignation receives strong laughter from the Dalai Lama, suggesting that he did not forget or misunderstand that Stefanovic’s narrative was intended to be humorous, even though he was not able to understand the humor.

Where the previous two examples demonstrated the failure of humor that relied on lexical ambiguity, we return to mundane talk for an example of an unsuccessful joke using syntactic ambiguity. In what follows, two students have been discussing a writing assignment for one of their courses, and the transcript

opens with student S initiating a topic change to inform student K about a change in the class meeting time:

Example 4.12

- 01 S: °yeah.° anyway you know the (1.3) the time maybe change (0.7) on Monday
 02 we- we start class at nine (0.9)
 03 K: [yes
 04 S: [you know?
 05 K: I know.
 06 S: yes and maybe we- we wake up early hahhahhahhahhahh[hah
 07 K: [okay so you
 08 have er:::: (0.9) y- (1.4) you worry about it? °huhhhuhhuh°=
 09 S: =yeah I worry about the long paper of the:
 10 K: no no no you worry about the:: (1.0) waking up so early? huhhh[huhhuhhuh
 11 S: [no I just
 12 joking hahhahhah
 (Adapted from Kaur 2011: 106)

The attempt at humor occurs in line 08, where K asks whether S is worried about “it.” The intended referent for “it” was “waking up early,” but S intentionally misinterprets “it” to refer to the assignment (line 09). K, not recognizing this as an attempt at humor initiates repair in line 10, naming the intended referent. S, then, also executes repair, naming the intended interpretation of the utterance in line 09 as a joke. S seems to have recognized that play with the ambiguity of “it” might be challenging for the listener. Clearly, the most obvious interpretation was “waking up early,” as the nearest prior referent. Had S wanted to express concern about the early class meeting time an elliptical response would have sufficed (e.g., “Yeah, I do.”). Thus, S’s utterance is framed as humor at least partly through the use of the full noun phrase referring to the earlier referent “the long paper.” In this case the hearer seized on unintended ambiguity in the prior speaker’s utterance to create humor that then went unrecognized.

These examples suggest that, like non-playful conversational dissonance that is triggered by problems of lexical or syntactic ambiguity, similar such playful miscommunications will be treated in a variety of ways, depending on

the context and interlocutor goals. In the first example, the ambiguity was not recognized and the joke was not deemed worth clarifying, and was therefore abandoned, a tactic which may, again, be more common to humorous talk. In the next two extracts, however, the misunderstanding based on the ambiguity took a central place in the conversation and thus required acknowledgement and repair. The close relationship between ambiguity and humor (both intentional and unintentional) further suggests that the treatment of misunderstandings based on it might be very similar. Ambiguity often triggers humor, either unintentionally because it created a misunderstanding (as in Example 4.12 above, or because it was unintentionally introduced and deliberately misunderstood (as in Example 3.1 in Chapter 3). Although ambiguity certainly creates non-playful miscommunications and repairs, it may also be a trigger of humor and play much more frequently than are the other types of conversational troubles discussed here, and the types of negotiations that result may tend toward the playful more often than in the other cases.

4.5 Pragmatic force

When humor fails due to miscommunication involving pragmatic force, the utterance is interpreted literally. Thus what is meant implicitly as a joke is instead understood only in its explicit sense as, for instance, a suggestion, warning, or compliment. Irony may be particularly susceptible to such misinterpretations, as in the following example. Here two strangers sitting together on a train begin chatting and A, who is reading a newspaper, remarks about one of the articles:

Example 4.13

- 01 A: listen, it says here that sixty per cent of women are still unemployed in
 02 this country!
 03 B: yeah! keep them in the kitchen where they belong!
 04 A: do you think all women should be housewives?
 05 B: of course not! I was only joking, for god's sake!
 (Adapted from Yus 1998: 405)

In response to A's factual comment, B offers an enthusiastic, but ironical assessment, which constructs him as sexist. Although A reacts to the literal content, by asking a question, A also leaves open the possibility that B's utterance may

have been offered non-seriously. Furthermore, this move allows B to claim non-serious status of the utterance even if that was not the original intention, as a way of maintaining cordial interaction between these two strangers. B's vehement denial and explicit recontextualization of the utterance work to repair the miscommunication (line 05).

One potential difference between miscommunications of this sort in serious vs. playful discourse and their subsequent negotiation is that humor often draws on scandalous or shocking topics. This makes the risk of misinterpretation of humorous intent resulting in an escalation of the repair into a more aggressive key a real possibility. The existence of formulaic sequences (e.g. I was just/only kidding/joking/being facetious) for quickly repairing these types of miscommunications suggests not only that these are common enough problems for linguistic formulas to have developed in response, but also further supports the notion that these misunderstandings can threaten social harmony. Notice that the sequence normally employs the minimizers "only" or "just" (the latter being frequent enough to have been incorporated into the internet acronym for the verbal formula: JK for "just kidding"), again indicating that this phrase is used in response to a prior utterance that has been perceived as inflammatory. Of course, not all attempts at humor that fail in this way will provoke the hearer and require a mitigating response.

4.6 Message form

This broad category captures humor that is unsuccessful because of its form. This may include the language(s) or register(s) used, the channel of communication (spoken, electronic, sky-writing, etc.), or the particular linguistic forms selected for a certain effect, such as a rhyme. An example of particularly poor joke delivery occurred in 2013 at the opening of the trial of George Zimmerman in Florida. The months leading up to the case were emotionally charged for many Americans, who saw Zimmerman's killing of Trayvon Martin, an African-American teenager, as a sad comment on the state of race relations, as well as gun laws, in the U.S. In this atmosphere, Zimmerman's defense attorney, Don West, opted to open the trial with formulaic joke:

Example 4.14

- 01 West: sometimes (.) you have to laugh (.) to keep from crying. (1) so let me
02 (.) uh eh- at considerable risk let me (.) let me say, I'd like to tell you a

- 03 little joke. I know how that (.) may sound a bit *weird* (.) in this context
 04 under these circumstances. (.) but I think you're the perfect audience
 05 for it (.) as long as you uh don't- if you don't like it or you don't think
 06 it's funny or inappropriate that you don't (.) hold it against
 07 Mr. *Zimmerman* you can hold it against me if you want, but not Mr.
 08 *Zimmerman*. I have your assurance you won't, here's how it goes.
 09 knock knock (.) who's there. George *Zimmerman*. George *Zimmerman*
 10 who (.) all right good (.) you're on the jury. (3) nothin'?!
 11 Aud: (laughter)
 12 West: that's funny. (.) after what you folks have been through the last two or
 13 three weeks
 (<http://thinkprogress.org/politics/2013/06/24/2202081/george-zimmermans-lawyer-opens-trial-with-a-knock-knock-joe/?mobile=nc>)

As acknowledged by West, the telling of this joke, at this moment, and to this group of people is fraught with potential pitfalls, and as such it is impossible to identify what aspects of the joke caused each member of the courtroom to withhold laughter. It does appear, however, that the actual delivery of the joke is likely to have been involved. First, West's tone is far from animated and he pauses noticeably after almost every phrase. The effect is not a deadpan delivery, which might have been more successful, but one that seems to be an awkward attempt to incorporate the communicative demands of the courtroom for seriousness and clarity into the telling of a joke. Next, the introduction to the joke (which lasts much longer than the joke itself) prepares the jury for something that is not only unusual ("weird" in line 03) and thus potentially risky (line 02), but also, most surprisingly for the telling of a joke, not funny. West asserts that they may not be amused by the joke or may find it inappropriate (line 06) and even suggests that they might want to "hold it against" either him or his defendant (lines 06–07). In all, this is not an auspicious beginning for the joke itself. Once the joke has been told, three full seconds of silence follow (line 10), and it is only West's exclamation over their lack of response that receives laughter.

The next example of humor that does not succeed due to a problem with the message form comes from reader comments in an article about English as a lingua franca posted on the Times Higher Education website (Reisz 2012). The piece reported on a talk by applied linguist Jennifer Jenkins, who appealed to

those in higher education to recognize how the widespread use of English has changed its norms, particularly among international users. She explains that many non-native users of English no longer look to native speakers for their linguistic models and that their versions of English should be accepted on an equal basis. The first reader to comment offered a critique of Jenkins' view, couched as a joke:

Example 4.15

- 01 Michael: I want that Jennifer Jenkins stops to say these things. My French
 02 students tell to me that they like very much correct English.
- 03 ali: Hi Michael, I think your sentence will disappoint your students
 04 because even your sentence is NOT "very much correct English".
 05 'Tell' as a verb does not require 'to' following it. You should have
 06 better written 'my students say to me.' to make them much happier.
 07 For me, it does not matter as I am focused more on the
 08 communicative side of what you wrote rather than linguistic forms
 09 used. (...)
- 10 Michael: @ali
- 11 Thanks for reading my comment, but unfortunately – and surpris-
 12 ingly, if you are a native English speaker – you didn't see the joke.
- 13 ali: @Michael
- 14 I am a non-native speaker and user of English. Sorry but I could not
 15 see any joke or failed to see it but that does not change my stand
 16 point here. (...)
- 17 Michael: @ali
- 18 I was too brusque in my reply to you above, for which I apologise.
 19 I guessed from your writing that you were not a native speaker of

20 English and I should have explained the joke and not left you in the
 21 dark.
 (<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/a-word-of-advice-let-speakers-of-englishes-do-it-their-way-uk-told/419935.article>)

Michael's joke relies on the ability to recognize both the errors that he included in his message, as well as the fact that they were put there deliberately. This detail could be discerned from his mention of "my students," which suggests that he is an English teacher, which would in turn lead the reader to expect that he would be able to eliminate those forms from his English if he so desired. In his reply, Ali notes at least one error, however, he does not recognize that it was a deliberate part of the message and earnestly suggests a correction. He goes on to disagree with Michael's critique (parts of the dialog have not been included here). Michael then initiates repair (line 12), but only by identifying his post as a joke. In the ensuing negotiation, Ali confirms his failure to identify the post as an attempt at humor, and Michael apologizes and explains the errors he inserted (not shown here). Michael's choice of form for his humor – deliberate errors – was particularly challenging given the medium of a website's comments forum. In face to face communication his status as a native speaker of English would have been made clear, and a hearer would have recognized, perhaps through the staging of a very hesitant delivery or a clearly feigned French accent, that this was play. The electronic forum, however, does not easily accommodate such markers, making interaction among strangers even more open to misinterpretation. Thus, in this instance the form of the humor contributed in (at least) two ways to its failure.

4.7 Framing/keying

The indeterminate and often layered framing of talk as serious, non-serious, or something in between the two is an important resource in human interaction. It allows us to calibrate messages to our context and audience, creating nuanced meanings. It also provides a way to save face for both speaker and hearer, smoothing over potentially uncomfortable social situations. Of course, indeterminate framing can also lead to trouble if the key of an utterance is not clear. With regard to humor, failure can occur when an attempt to amuse is not recognized or when a serious utterance is interpreted as non-serious.

A false negative identification of humor can occur due to inadequate construction or interpretation of a play frame. In the extract below, a BBC reporter

interviews the president of Jefferson County Commission, in Alabama. Corruption among city officials had left the county with \$3.2 million of debt that the current president was attempting to resolve:

Example 4.16

- 01 Reporter: why did you take this job on
- 02 Interviewee: stupidity. (1) that was my humor. I thought you would
- 03 [(.) laugh HUH! um I've *been*] in
- 04 Reporter: [(exhale) °huh huh huh°]
- 05 Interviewee: public service for the last (.) six years and I guess I should back-
- 06 track for a moment
- (BBC Business Weekly, 3/4/2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p00f17ll/Business_Weekly_Sewage_Bankruptcy_and_Strikes/)

The interviewee delivers his response to the reporter regarding why he had agreed to undertake this job in a completely deadpan manner, apparently relying on the content to contextualize his utterance as humorous. He allows ample time – one full second – for her to react before initiating self-repair by explicitly naming his response as humor. His explanation is issued in a serious tone (note the falling intonation in line 02) and the reporter withholds laughter while he speaks. It is not until he issues a single laugh particle (line 03) that she finally joins in with quiet laughter as he returns to her question, providing a serious response. Given the very challenging situation that the interviewee and his county are in, it is not surprising that the hearer's laughter would be absent or minimal. Although different from friends commiserating, this clearly falls under “troubles talk,” where we can expect to see speakers making light of their difficulties, while their interlocutors withhold laughter (Jefferson 1984). Furthermore, given that these two are strangers and thus unfamiliar with each other's humor styles – as well as speaking by telephone – makes it even more likely that a joke might not be recognized.

False positives can also occur, where a joke is perceived when none was intended, as demonstrated in the next example, which also comes from a radio interview. Here the host, Jennifer Ludden is interviewing a professor of legal ethics, Steven Lubet, on the topic of judicial bias. A moment of confusion follows his answer about how judges recuse themselves from cases:

“makes a lot of sense.” Having established that this was not intended as humor, conversational harmony is restored as the two repeat the phrase in an overlapping chorus, rather than by sharing joint laughter, which we would expect if Ludden’s intent had been to joke. It is worth noting that here again we have interaction between strangers. To some extent, this is likely a bias of the data set, which is somewhat weighted toward public interaction. However, it seems considerably more likely that these problems of framing would occur between strangers or acquaintances than with intimates who are familiar with each other’s humor styles. In addition, both interviews addressed serious topics, where humor might be less expected, again contributing to the confusion.

As was noted in Chapter 3 (section 3.3.1.6), constructing and interpreting serious and non-serious frames is a considerable challenge to interlocutors (Sacks 1972, Schegloff 1987). While lexical and syntactic ambiguity have been identified as major contributors to miscommunication in serious discourse, it is likely that problems with keying are the most common reasons that humor fails in conversation. It is the very indeterminacy of serious/playful keying, however, that makes humorous talk both a very risky and a very socially useful mode of communication. The cues that are used to fold a serious and potentially face-threatening message into a humorous package allow the hearer to choose which aspect of the utterance to respond to, as well as allowing the speaker to deny one of the two messages. Thus, although this indeterminate framing clearly contributes to miscommunications, it should be viewed as a resource, rather than a problem.

4.8 Summary

The potential triggers of communicative failure that were discussed in this chapter could all be found in both serious and non-serious discourse. As such, the negotiation and repair of these failed attempts at humor were similar or even identical to those of miscommunications of the same type that occur during serious talk. At the same time, however, the status of humorous discourse does seem to create some differences in the way that failure is managed. First, it seems to be more likely that interlocutors will forego repair, perhaps because, in comparison to transactional utterances, humor is perceived as unimportant. Most of the triggers discussed here do not preclude the hearer from recognizing an utterance as an attempt to amuse. If this intent is identified, the hearer may simply opt to move the conversation forward, rather than initiate repair. From the speaker’s perspective, if it is apparent that humorous intent has been recognized, but there has been no uptake from the hearer, repair may not be initiated due to the general social sanction against belaboring a humorous point. At the same time, however,

humor is often not at all frivolous and in fact serves a vital social function, communicating sensitive information indirectly. Humor is thus extremely important for the management of relationships and although the imprecise framing of utterances as serious/non-serious/semi-serious may contribute to miscommunications, it also functions as an important communicative resource. An utterance that was initially construed as serious can be renegotiated as humorous and vice versa, if the reaction of the hearer is not what the speaker desired. Thus, this chapter has demonstrated that although many of the triggers of failed humor are the same as those that trigger failure in serious talk, their negotiation is not always the same. In the next chapter we turn to failures that are specific to humor.