6 Managing Failed Humor in Interaction

6.1 Introduction

Having described in the previous two chapters the various triggers that can cause humor to fail, we are now prepared to examine the negotiation of failure in conversation. Although, as I have emphasized, meaning is jointly constructed in interaction, for analytic purposes this chapter focuses first on strategies speakers use to prevent or manage failure. Then, the ways that hearers respond to humor that has failed for different reasons will be examined. Specifically, humor that fails because the hearer was not amused, because the hearer did not understand the joke, or because the hearer was offended all require different treatment. In closing, some remarks will be made concerning the negotiation of unsuccessful humor in general.

6.2 Speaker management of failure

As described in Chapter 3, in serious interaction, interlocutors exhibit a marked preference for self-initiation of repair and self-correction in resolving conversational trouble. These practices hold for humorous talk when the speaker realizes that he or she has been unclear or has misspoken and wishes to clarify his or her utterance. Consider, for example, the following interaction that occurred when one spouse suggested that the other, who was going to the store, pick up some butter:

Example 6.1

01 Husband: do we really need it?

02 Wife: yeah. we're in butter desperation. (.) *bu*tter desperation, get it?

03 Husband: yeah not funny at all![10]

In line 02, the wife jokes about the dire butter situation by describing it as "butter desperation," a play on the familiar collocation "utter desperation." She delivers her initial attempt at humor in a deadpan fashion. After a brief pause during which the husband has provided no indication of having noticed or appreciated

10 For the record, this joke is objectively quite clever. The husband is clearly at fault here, as anyone can see.

the quip, she initiates repair, repeating the line with emphasis. In addition, she asks the question "get it?" which is typically used to check for understanding specifically of jokes. These two moves serve to ensure that her attempt at humor is recognized. As the husband's next turn indicates, however, his lack of response had not been due to his not noticing or understanding her joke, but to a lack of appreciation.

This type of checking is, again, similar to repair of serious utterances. However, the extent to which self-repair occurs in non-serious interaction is unclear. The types of miscommunication addressed in Chapter 4, where triggers of conversational failure common to both serious and non-serious interaction were discussed, will tend to follow the repair sequences already studied for serious interaction, with some exceptions. The types of failure specific to humorous talk, however, discussed in Chapter 5 are more likely to merit special practices. The preference for self-initiation and self-correction will be less frequent, as humor relies on surprise. As the familiar adage suggests, explaining humor kills it, thus the speaker wants the hearer to figure it out herself. "Self repair," in these instances might instead consist of a reformulation of a punch line or a hint that will help the hearer identify the humorous incongruity. In the following sections, strategies used by speakers to prevent and manage failure are discussed.

6.2.1 Preventing failure

Speakers use a variety of techniques in serious interaction to prevent miscommunication and many of these apply to humorous communication, as well. For instance, in both serious and non-serious talk speakers will attempt to ensure that they speak clearly, that they have the hearer's attention, and that the hearer has the necessary background information to understand the utterance. In this section I discuss two strategies for preventing communicative failure that, although certainly not specific to humorous interaction, do appear frequently with respect to that type of talk. I refer to these strategies as avoidance and inoculation.

Humor is almost never a conversational requirement, therefore, if a speaker is unsure of the appropriateness of making a joke, she or he can simply opt to maintain a serious frame and thus prevent the possible failure of the humor. In addition to avoiding an attempt at humor for fear of its failure, speakers may also avoid certain topics, language, or types of humor. In a study of humor in intercultural interaction (Bell 2007a), I noted each of these types of avoidance. There was, for instance, a marked absence of joking about taboo topics by both native and non-native interlocutors. Both groups also tended to avoid teasing, a form of

humor that often carries the potential to be misconstrued as aggressive, and thus carries more risk. Native speakers also reported being aware of their language use when constructing humor with a non-native hearer and attempting to use simple language. Similarly, Adelswärd and Öberg's (1998) study of humor in international business negotiations suggests that, at least in intercultural communication, speakers consider their hearers' background knowledge in constructing humor. They reported that most humor between the groups was work-related, and suggested that the speakers avoided non-work-related jokes that might contain information and references unfamiliar (and therefore unfunny) to their hearers.

Research indicates that poor recipient design of utterances is an important cause of miscommunication, as speakers often do not take hearer needs into account when crafting their utterances (Mustajoki 2012). As I suggested in Bell (2007a), however, humor may be somewhat of an exception. Communicative failures involving other types of serious speech, such as greetings or requests, are not only likely to be less humiliating than those involving humor, but also less memorable. Everyone has witnessed or engaged in an unsuccessful attempt at humor and this is often recalled as an embarrassing event. This awareness may facilitate the use of avoidance as a strategy for preventing the failure of humor. Although this assertion was formed based on research into the experiences of native and non-native language users' interaction, I believe that it applies to the population at large. In fact, two of the studies of responses to failed humor that are reported on in section 6.3 used elicitation as a technique to gather data. This option was employed after naturalistic observation was found to yield very few instances of failed humor. Moreover, data collection procedures had to be altered to require the data collectors to tell the jokes to a set number of strangers. Without this stipulation, nearly everyone avoided this potentially embarrassing situation and told the jokes only to people with whom they already had an ongoing relationship and to whom they could easily explain their anomalous joke-telling behavior. We seem to be fairly good judges of appropriateness with regard to humor, avoiding humor itself, as well as certain types, topics, or language in order to ensure that conversation proceeds smoothly.

The second strategy for preventing failure is inoculation. Speakers who anticipate that their attempt to joke might be seen as unamusing, inappropriate, or even offensive can safeguard themselves against any negative reaction by acknowledging the potential trouble with their humor and preparing the hearers for it. By criticizing themselves first, speakers essentially inoculate themselves against further censure, as the hearers have been warned and could have, for example, left the room if they did not want to hear a the joke. Example 4.14, in Chapter 4, where George Zimmerman's attorney began his opening statement with a joke was an extreme illustration of this. A less dramatic example of inoculation

that occurred during a news show is provided here. The host, Tucker Carlson, had been discussing new statistics reporting a drop in sex crimes with human rights activist Bianca Jagger:

Example 6.2

01 Jagger: I think that we are on the right track. It is important we have legisla-
02 tion. I think we have to even make legislations that are tougher on
03 them to be able to really inform parents and families when there is
04 a sex offender nearby them. It is important to have therapy, as
05 apparently it's part of the situation has improved, but we should
06 not cry victory and think that this is the end of the battle against
07 sex offenders.
08 Carlson: Well, that is a very smart point, which may be surprising, in light
09 of this next story. I'm actually just kidding, and I want our viewers
10 to know not to shoot the messenger. We are merely reporting the
11 news. And you decide what to make of it. But a paper to be pub-
12 lished soon in a "British Journal of Psychology" suggests that men,
13 by an average of five I.Q. points, smarter than women.
(August 26, 2005, MSNBC, "The Situation with Tucker Carlson")

Carlson assesses Jagger's views on sex crimes as "smart," and then proceeds to joke that viewers may find it surprising that his guest's remarks were intelligent when they hear the next story (line 08). Before explaining this joke, which would not be apparent to viewers who had not already heard what the next story was about, he immediately inoculates himself by referring to his prior utterance as "just kidding" and appealing to viewers to not be angry with him, as the person who is merely reporting the story. As it turns out, the joke is that it is surprising that his guest's contribution was smart because she is female, since a recent study had found men's average I.Q.s to be a few points higher than women's. The humor obviously contains the potential to offend and, given that Carlson's show ran nationwide in the U.S., it was almost certain to upset some viewers. Thus, protecting himself in this way was a wise move.

Inoculation can also take place even between individuals who are familiar with each other's interactional and humor styles. The next example comes from a Facebook posting and thus is also public, although intended for a smaller circle. The poster, who I refer to as Randy, announced upcoming travel plans and Kevin, the first friend to comment, made a potentially upsetting joke:

Example 6.3

Randy: I'm gearing up for six weeks in El Salvador and Panama. On the bright side: both countries use dollars as the official currency, and the murder rate in El Salvador, though the second highest in the world, is still only slightly higher than Detroit's. And then there's the opportunity finally to learn the difference between empanadas, pupusas, and arepas!

Like · Comment · Share · 4 hours ago near Washington, DC · 10 people like this.

Kevin: And to make a really tasteless joke, you'll be far away from the Navy Yard. Have a good time, Randy!

Randy's post was made near Washington, D.C. on September 17, 2013 – the day after 12 people were killed in a shooting at the Washington Navy Yard. Kevin's comment playfully suggests that another benefit of Randy's upcoming trip is that it will keep him far away from the danger (even though the situation had been resolved by then). Joking about a tragic incident, especially so soon after it occurred, is always risky, and Kevin acknowledges this by introducing his remark as "a really tasteless joke." Kevin may have been able to anticipate that Randy would appreciate (or at least not be offended by) this joke, but he could not be certain how others who would see it would react. The inoculation strategy apparently worked well in this instance (although it is, of course, impossible to know what the reaction would have been had Kevin not inoculated himself in this way). The recipient "liked" this comment and neither of two additional comments subsequently added to this post even mentioned Kevin's comment.

Because humor is not necessary in interaction, avoidance makes sense as a way of preventing its failure. Inoculation as a strategy against failure, however, is curious. If a joke seems too obscure to be understood or has the potential to offend the audience, it would be safer to simply not attempt to make the joke. The use of this strategy points yet again to the importance of humor in managing social relationships. It suggests that the payoff for using humor is perceived as greater than the risk of failure.

6.2.2 Managing failure

Of course, despite the best efforts of speakers to avoid failure, as we have already seen, humor does fail. One outcome of failed humor discussed in Chapter 2 is the post-failed joke hitch (Schegloff (1996). This is when, following a lack of hearer uptake of an attempt at humor, the speaker's next turn begins with some disfluencies, such as stuttering and false starts. This suggests that the failure to achieve shared laughter, or at least some acknowledgement of a joke is awkward for the speaker, which further leads us to expect that the speaker may have certain strategies for managing failed humor. In this section examples of five strategies that arose from the data set are described. They are: topic change, apology, coaxing, naming the joke, and turning the joke on oneself.

Given that the failure of humor can create an uncomfortable situation for the speaker, it is unsurprising to find that speakers whose humor has been unsuccessful frequently turn the conversation to a new topic in their next turn. (Hearers also utilize this option. See Table 6.2, below). The example in which this occurs came from a televised news show with discussants Pat Buchanan, a conservative commentator, Mike Kinsley, a liberal commentator who does not speak in this extract, and Dewey Stokes, president of the Fraternal Order of Police. The topic of the evening was gun control, as the U.S. senate had just voted in favor of an assault weapons ban. Stokes has brought a number of the newly banned weapons to demonstrate how they work:

Example 6.4

01	Buchanan:	Why is it- why is it threaded on the end?
02	Stokes:	Well, this is threaded on the end because then you can adapt
03		the silencer
04	Buchanan:	Right.
05	Stokes:	to this weapon
06	Buchanan:	Well, is this the one for shooting squirrels?
07	Stokes:	This is for- well, this is for anything. I guess in some of the mag-
08		azines you'll see that this silencer is interchangeable with both
09		these weapons

10 Buchanan: All right. Yeah, I was just kidding about squirrels. But this is
11 not an assault rifle.
12 This is what? A machine pistol?
(May 23, 1990, CNN's Crossfire)

Buchanan chooses one of the weapons and jokes about its function in line 06. Although these are arms originally designed for the military, thus making their use in squirrel-hunting absurd, Stokes responds seriously to Buchanan's utterance, suggesting that the gun can be used for "anything." In his next turn, Buchanan acknowledges the information Stokes has added ("all right") and refers back to his squirrel comment as "just kidding." In the same turn, he then immediately turns Stokes' attention to another gun. By asking a question about the weapon, he increases the likelihood that his topic change will be successful, as Stokes will be more likely to orient to the question rather than back to the earlier comment.

The next example features not only a change of topic, but also a change of addressee. The extract of talk presented here occurred in an episode of the Geraldo show, a daytime talk show with a sensationalistic, tabloid style of interaction. Geraldo's guests are members of the racist organization, the Ku Klux Klan and one, Ellen, sews the white costumes worn by the KKK:

Example 6.5

01 Rivera: Now, Ellen, are you really the seamstress for the Klan? You knit
02 those nifty hats and all?
03 Ellen: I don't knit them. And I am one of many seamstresses. And as a
04 matter of fact, J.D. over here is negotiating right now to buy a small
05 factory so that we can...
06 Rivera: Is that right?
07 Ellen: Yes.
08 Rivera: Well, will we find it like in the catalog of Sears or...
09 Ellen: No, you will not.
10 Rivera: I'm just kidding. Forgive me. All right. Now I want to come back to
11 you, Ellen, because I think it is intriguing because there is a big
12 demand for this. I want to go to Melissa, one of the moms, and ask

13 her how exactly are you teaching your beautiful daughters, you

14 know, your creed – your credo?
(November 22, 1993, Geraldo)

Where the previous example demonstrated a change of topic following a lack of acknowledgement of an attempt at humor, in this instance the humor appears to fail because it has offended the hearer. Rivera seems to be approaching his guests with a somewhat playful, or even flippant attitude, referring to the Klan headgear as "nifty hats" (line 02) and interrupting his guest (line 06). Despite her serious orientation to his questions, Rivera continues in the same vein in line 08. Again, his guest replies seriously and shortly. Rivera apparently orients to this curt response as her having taken offense, because his first reaction is to name the prior utterance as "just kidding" and to apologize (line 10). He then turns his attention to another guest to ask her about raising her children within the KKK belief system, thus changing not only the topic, but the addressee. It may well be the case that a more serious failure calls for more dramatic forms of redress.

The next strategy used by speakers to manage failed humor was already seen in the example just discussed: apology. In this extract, conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh chats with guests at the beginning of his show:

Example 6.6

01 Limbaugh: Sir, I want – I want you to shout it out. Where you from, sir?

02 Man: Toms River, New Jersey.

03 Limbaugh: Tom – it figures, New Jersey. In New Jersey, Janet Reno is a prom

04 date.

05 Audience: (boos, laughter)

06 Limbaugh: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so... (Spring sound) Just

07 kidding, sir. Just kidding. Let's get to the end of crime. We have

08 reason – what better week should we celebrate the end of crime

09 than Thanksgiving week?
(Rush Limbaugh Show, November 22, 1993)

In bantering with his guests about their home towns, Limbaugh attempts a joke that seems to insult both his hearer and the state he is from. When the audience member gives his home state as New Jersey (line 02), Limbaugh replies that "it

figures," a phrase that implies that there is something undesirable about this man that can now be explained by his coming from that state. Limbaugh then criticizes the state as a whole, saying that then U.S. attorney general Janet Reno would be considered a prom date there (lines 03–04). This is apparently a barb directed at heterosexual New Jersey males' tastes in female sexual partners, as Janet Reno is clearly too old and unglamorous to be considered a normatively attractive date for a young man. In addition, the fact that she is a Democrat would also be seen as negative for this conservative audience. Although some audience members laugh, there are also boos, and Limbaugh orients to these, apologizing three times and naming his utterance as "just kidding" twice (lines 06–07). This type of management may be particularly prevalent in public venues such as this, where viewer support translates into financial support for the show. It is also worth noting that, as in the previous two examples, we see the speaker of the failed humor changing the subject. In this case, however, this may have occurred due to time constraints (the new topic is introduced as something that Limbaugh needs to "get to"), unlike in the other instances.

Speakers need not always grovel or be embarrassed when their humor fails. Some interlocutors, perhaps those with more confidence or who are speaking in a comfortable, intimate situation, can resist failure and instead try to coax or even exhort their audience into appreciating their humor. This is seen in the following example where a group of friends in an informal gathering are sharing jokes:

Example 6.7

01 Ginger: did I tell you my lumber joke?

02 Grant: no

03 Ginger: did I tell it?

04 Robert: lumber joke?

05 Ginger: yeah, the lumber joke.

06 Grant: tell them

07 Ginger: a man goes into a lumber yard and he says "I need some four by

08 twos"

09 Others: (laughter)

10 Ginger: and the man who works there say- looks at him kind of strange

11 and says "are you sure you don't mean two by fours?" and he says

12 "I don't know let me check." he goes out of the store across the
13 parking lot to his car where his buddies are parking the car they roll
14 down the window he converses with them for a moment goes back
15 to the store and says "you were right I need some two by fours." and
16 the man who works there says "well, how long do you need them?"
17 he says "just wait a moment I'll check." he goes out to the car con
18 verses again comes back and he goes "a long time we're building a
19 house."
20 Others: (a little laughter)
21 Ginger: come on that's so cool.
22 Robert: sorry
23 Ginger: I read it in a book it was the only book where I've ever read a joke it
24 was in Ann Diller- in Andy Diller's autobiography she tells it.
25 Grant: yeah.
26 Robert: but eh how long do you need eh-
27 Grant: [yeah that's]
28 Robert: [for me]
(Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English, Part 3)

This seems to be a non-competitive, supportive environment for joke-telling. Ginger asks twice whether she has already shared the lumber joke (lines 01 and 03) and is encouraged by Grant to tell it (line 06). Following the punch line, however, there is little laughter from the group. Rather than accepting this lukewarm reaction and abandoning her joke, Ginger attempts to coax her hearers into expressing greater appreciation ("come on"). She also described the joke as "so cool." Interestingly, although she does not achieve buy-in, Robert does respond with an apology (line 22). Doing so implies that Ginger's joke may indeed be cool, and that he takes at least partial blame for not being able to appreciate it. Ginger then explains where she learned the joke, and it is worth noting here that comments and questions about the joke and its origins seem to be a strategy used by both speakers and hearers when managing unsuccessful humor, as will be seen again later in this chapter.

A move that is similar to Ginger's in that it involves not backing down from one's attempt at humor, is explicitly pointing out the joke when there is no uptake from the audience. The following example of this strategy occurred during a professor's lecture:

Example 6.8[11]

01	Professor:	so the key to success when (0.2) when you're writing a play (0.2)
02		is that the characters (0.2) have to seem like real people (0.2) in
03		real life (5.3) so er this is described as verisimilitude (0.7) verisi
04		militude (0.8) er or vraisemblance (0.5) er (0.2) in the French
05		classical theatre (3.2) it would help if my pen worked (1.5)
06		vraisemblance (2.0) that w-, that you could y-, (0.6) that was a
07		joke actually so you were supposed to laugh then (1.1)
08	Students:	(laughter)
09	Professor:	okay (0.2) not a good actor I'm afraid (0.3) er (0.2) okay (0.2) so er
10		vraisemblance er (0.2) er the sort of verisimilitude (1.2) however
11		(0.3) er not er (0.3) okay I mean (0.2) so thi-, this is the kind of
12		classical view of character

(Adapted from the BASE Corpus, ahlct017, Keywords in modern drama)

The humor in this case appears to center on the word "vraisemblance" in line 06, but the exact joke must have relied on some non-verbal element, as it is not clear from the transcript. In any case, after a two second pause and two false starts, the professor identifies this earlier utterance as a joke and playfully instructs his audience on what the proper response should have been ("you were supposed to laugh then" line 07). Although the joke was not acknowledged, this admission/exhortation is followed by laughter. Examples 4.16 and 5.9 illustrate additional examples of this strategy and follow the same pattern: pause + joke identifica-

11 This transcription comes from the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus, which was developed at the Universities of Warwick and Reading under the directorship of Hilary Nesi (Warwick) and Paul Thompson (Reading). Corpus development was assisted by funding from the Universities of Warwick and Reading, BALEAP, EURALEX, the British Academy and the Arts and Humanities Research Board.

tion + (instruction to laugh). Subsequent audience laughter is also seen in both of these examples. This strategy is interesting in that it can be seen as either – or simultaneously – self-effacing to the speaker or reproachful to the audience. It is unclear whether the speaker is admitting to having delivered the joke poorly and is identifying it as a sort of apology, or whether he is chiding the audience for not having recognized or been amused by it. In either case, this strategy seems to garner a greater mirthful response than the joke itself and thus may serve to save face for the speaker.

One final strategy speakers may use following an unsuccessful attempt at humor is to turn the joke around on themselves. One example of this is reported in an academic study of joking in the workplace:

Example 6.9

Gene is using a large cable stripper at his bench to prepare some lead wire by stripping the rubber insulation off of it. As he looks up, he bangs extra loudly and gets the attention of Wally a commercial repairman, and John, the Reconditioning Foreman, and says loudly: "This here is my do-it-yourself circumciser. Care to try it?" There is no response. Gene then maneuvers the cable stripper in front of his own person and dances around making a clank. At this point Wally and John and a few others nearby grin. Here Gene "saves" a situation which initially seems to affront his publics by turning the joke on himself.

(Lundberg 1969: 26)

Gene is initially ignored by all when he aims his joke at two (higher ranking) co-workers. However, by turning the same joke around on himself, he is able to, as Lundberg describes it "save" the situation, as his original targets, as well as some other co-workers smile. This strategy may be particularly useful when aggressive humor, which Gene's playful threat of circumcision can be seen as, is not well-received. The success of this tactic hinges on not merely choosing a new target, but in targeting oneself in order to defuse any tension from the failed joke. By targeting himself, the aggressor becomes the butt of the joke.

6.3 Audience management of failure

The interactional challenges and discomfort that arise for the speaker whose humor has been unsuccessful seem clear. Less apparent, or perhaps simply less remarked upon, are the problems faced by the audience. Not understanding or appreciating a joke places a hearer at risk of being seen as slow-witted or lacking

a good sense of humor. In this section I explore how hearers respond to three different types of failed humor: humor that they have not understood; humor that they have understood, but not found amusing; and humor that they have understood, but have found offensive. Each of these types of failure makes different demands on hearers' face needs and thus requires a different response.

6.3.1 Responses to failure due to lack of understanding

The research I summarize in this section was originally reported in Bell (2013), where additional details about the study and examples can be found. That research used elicitation to collect data to examine the ways that people responded to a joke that they did not understand. Here, I summarize those findings and augment them through comparison to naturally-occurring examples of humor that was not comprehended. Prior to the completion of the research presented here, humor scholars generally assumed that joke hearers would be motivated to conceal their lack of understanding. This perspective was largely based on Sacks' (1974) analysis of the telling of a sexual joke in a group of young adolescent males. Sacks viewed jokes as "understanding tests" (p. 336), and asserted that not understanding a joke opens a hearer to certain types of judgments that are not cast when a serious story is not comprehended. Specifically, the hearer risks being seen as naïve or unsophisticated. Furthermore, Sacks suggested that feigning appreciation would be a preferred response because of the availability of a normative way of responding to humor: laughter. A second option noted by Sacks is for the hearer to critique the joke or some aspect of its telling, thereby shifting the blame for the failure from hearer to speaker.

In order to test Sacks' (1974) assertions against a broader set of data, 278 responses to the following joke were collected:

> 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."

Most hearers were unable to decipher the joke on their own, as they were only able to retrieve the form "How is the dog?" which left them unable to interpret the owner's response. Rather than being a question about the dog's welfare, the question is instead one about the location of the dog, specifically asking if he has been put in the house: "(Did you) house the dog?"

A broad range of responses were collected and these are presented in Table 6.1, below. Contrary to what we would predict based on Sacks' (1974) analysis, although many of the responses included laughter (28.4%), very few of the respondents in this study feigned understanding of the joke. Half of the respondents did not clearly indicate that they had not understood the joke, but

Table 6.1: Response Types

	N	%
Nonverbal response (n=71, 25.5%)	102	36.7
Smile (n=31, 11.1%)		
"I don't get it" (n = 78, 28.1%)	100	36.0
Other expression of non-understanding (n = 22, 7.9%)		
Laughter	79	28.4
Silence	69	24.8
Repetition of punch line	61	21.9
Interjection	57	20.5
Joke assessment	43	15.5
"(Wait) what?!"	38	13.7
Request for explanation	33	11.9
Question about joke	22	7.9
Teller assessment	15	5.4
Request for repetition	7	2.5
Self assessment	6	2.2
Excuse for lack of understanding	6	2.2
Other	6	2.2
Request for time to think	5	1.8
Apology for lack of understanding	4	1.4
Mode adoption	3	1.1
"I get it"	3	1.1
Provide own joke interpretation	3	1.1

(Note: Total is greater than the number of tokens, as multiple strategies were sometimes used.)
(Bell 2013: 179)

merely provided reactions that allowed their interlocutor a great deal of latitude in interpreting whether they had not understood or had not appreciated the joke, or whether they were simply disinterested. Just 30 respondents feigned a lack of appreciation, most commonly by issuing a negative evaluation of the joke or the teller, using the second strategy suggested by Sacks, in an attempt to shift the fault for the failure to the speaker, as well as to conceal their lack of comprehension. A mere five hearers feigned both understanding and appreciation, and in doing so they

> seemed to orient to the joke as a social lubricant, laughing because, as one respondent said "it sounded like a joke." Another reported that he laughed because he thought he was "supposed to." For them, maintaining rapport was more important than reacting in a way that genuinely reflected their reaction to the attempt at humor (Bell 2013: 183–184).

These responses suggest that although some hearers (such as the spouse in Chapter 1 who cried upon not being able to understand this joke) may see humor as a kind of knowledge test, they are apparently in the minority.

Instead, most reactions (74.8%) clearly indicated the hearer's lack of comprehension and, as Table 1 shows, over 1/3 of the responses were utterances that explicitly expressed this, with "I don't get it" being the most commonly employed phrase. Most responses employed multiple strategies, and the most typical response pattern was for the hearer to repeat all or part of the punch line, followed by a statement indicating he or she had not understood the joke. The following examples illustrate a range of typical responses:

Example 6.10

Response: (2) Ummm. That's all? (laughter) I don't get it.

Example 6.11

Response: How's the dog? (thinking) I don't get it. You know, it's been a long day!

Example 6.12

Response: (3) I think it went over my head. How's the dog? (2) Just wait, I wanna get it. How's the dog? Yeah, I don't get it.

Each of these sample responses contains an explicit statement of non-understanding ("I don't get it"). In addition, 6.10 and 6.12 have documented silence (which likely also occurred in 6.11 where "thinking" is recorded). Both 6.11 and

6.12 repeat part of the punch line, apparently having pinpointed the source of their comprehension trouble. Laughter, another common reaction is apparent in 6.10. Example 6.11 also displays the strategy of providing an excuse for not understanding.

The predominance of the strategy of openly admitting lack of comprehension suggests that failing to understand a joke is not a serious face threat. In Bell (2013), I suggest that where the consequence of not appreciating a joke is that the hearer is seen as someone with no (or a poor) sense of humor, not understanding a joke does not entail the same assessment and is thus a less serious type of failure. This is because a sense of humor is a quality that is positively valued, while an ability to merely understand humor is not normally subject to overt evaluations. There is also a question, however, of the type of humor that has not been understood. It may be more face-threatening for hearers to not understand a joke that relies on knowledge important to them, for instance, a joke that hinges on knowledge of some professional jargon. Similarly, canned jokes, such as the one used in this study, tend not to be used often in interaction among the groups who did the data collection, and therefore may have been seen as childish. As such, the respondents here may not have felt that being able to understand the joke was important and, not sensing a face threat, were open about their failure.

Examples of responses to spontaneous, rather than pre-scripted, conversational quips that were not understood do indeed suggest that failure to understand might be face-threatening under some conditions. Hay (2001) provides the following example taken from an internet chat with friends about the paper she was writing:

Example 6.13

01 Rick: what's the topic of your paper?

02 Jen: humor support

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

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

05 Rick: always wondered why clowns wear braces

06 John: huh?

07 Jen: grins

08 Rick: support=braces

09 John: oh doh

10 John: I get it

11 John: I got it beFORE the hint
(adapted from Hay 2001: 69)

In line 05, Rick jokes about the topic of Jen's paper, equating clowns' wearing of braces (suspenders) with support of humor. John is the first to respond, and he expresses confusion. Jen's response of a grin, however, suggests that she has both understood and appreciated Rick's joke. Rick's explanation (line 08) and John's exclamation of "oh doh," which suggests delayed comprehension, are reported by Hay to have appeared on the screen "almost simultaneously" (p. 69). This leaves it unclear whether John's insight was his own, or came from Rick's explanation. That he feels a need to clarify first that he had deciphered the joke, and then to add that he had done it on his own, suggests that not understanding and requiring clarification of humor is a considerable face threat.

Social context, too, will certainly affect how non-understanding of humor is managed by hearers. In the following example, David and Gavin are helping Emma, a new employee, search a database for potential clients:

Example 6.14

01 David: okay we need to find the (2) factory number

02 Emma: factory number

03 David: yes in the (2) two nine zero (3) Fei Cai

04 Gavin: Fei Cai hah

05 David: Cai hah

06 Gavin: Fei Cai (in a strange tone)

07 David: hah address

08 Gavin: J (.) JJ one zero (3) alight

09 David: hah

10 Emma: hah

11 Gavin: Fei Cai (.) all in KFS? (company name)?

12 Emma: (company name)
(Adapted from Mak, Liu, and Deneen 2012: 169)

As reported by the authors, the humor for David and Gavin in this extract derives from the English transliteration of the company name "Fei Cai," which is pronounced similarly to the words "fatty" and "hooligan" in Cantonese (Mak, Liu, and Deneen 2012: 170). The two repeat the name several times, including once in a "strange tone" (line 06), and laugh briefly. In line 08 they appear to be returning to a serious key, but David adds one more laugh particle in the next line. Following this, Emma also briefly laughs, joining in for the first time. Emma was a native of the Philippines and conducted most her business in English, since her command of Cantonese was not strong. In an interview, she explained that she did not understand the words, but tried to guess at what was happening "by looking at their facial expressions" (p. 170). Having discerned that it was a joke, rather than ask for an explanation she joined in with minimal laughter. This is a somewhat higher stakes situation than the other examples in this section, as Emma is seeking to fit in to her new workplace. We may see more attempts to hide non-understanding of humor in such contexts, particularly where relationships are not solidified.

6.3.2 Responses to failure due to lack of appreciation

A joke that is not appreciated by the audience calls for a different type of response. Humor that fails in this way represents a face threat to both speaker and hearer, as both risk being labelled as having a poor sense of humor. The research discussed here was originally reported in Bell (2009a, 2009b). Following the publication of those papers, the data set that describes responses to an unfunny joke was augmented with 353 new responses, raising the total number of tokens from 186 to 540. The patterns of responses remained essentially the same in this larger data set, but I provide the slightly revised results here. As with the study on responses to incomprehensible humor, reactions to an unfunny joke were elicited. This time the template was in riddle form:

> What did the big chimney say to the little chimney?
>
> Nothing. Chimneys can't talk.

This joke had the advantage of not only being unamusing to most hearers, but also easily tailored to different situations. The speaker could simply change the noun to use whatever inanimate object was on hand (e.g., "What did the big fork say to the little fork?"), making the joke seem to arise naturally in conversation.

Table 6.2 shows the range of response strategies used by hearers in reacting to the joke. Most respondents used multiple strategies to signal that they although they had recognized and understood the joke, they did not find it funny. Fake or lexicalized laughter (i.e., laughter in which the syllables "ha ha" are uttered mirthlessly, see also Haakana 2012) and groaning, both often thought to be the most typical reactions to a bad joke, were among the least frequent responses. On the other hand, genuine laughter (which included laughter that was perceived as merely "polite") was the most common element to be included. Typical responses are illustrated in the following examples:

Example 6.15

Response: ha ha wow.

Example 6.16

Response: (winced, laughed, shook head)

Example 6.17

Response: Yeah that's not a very good one. (laughs)

All three of these responses contain laughter. 6.15 also provides an example of a common interjection, "wow." Example 6.16 includes a description of non-verbal behavior that is typical in that the movements and expressions are clearly evaluating the joke negatively, despite the hearer's laughter. Finally, Example 6.17 contains a negative evaluation, seen in many responses.

Although all the responses submitted were perceived by the data collectors as reactions that indicated failure of their joke, they did not all convey this with the same affective sense. The distribution of the data according to the affective sense of the responses is shown in Table 6.3. Unsurprisingly, most were negative, in that they included, for instance, evaluations of the joke as "stupid" or "not funny." Almost an equal amount, however, were neutral. Many of these utilized minimal responses in the form of interjections; but questions about the joke, evaluations, and topic changes often also were couched in neutral terms. The very small numbers of positive responses seemed aimed at helping the joke-teller save face.

Table 6.2: Response Types

	N	%
Laughter	167	30.9
Metalinguistic	112	20.7
Nonverbal response	112	20.7
Interjection	106	19.6
Evaluation	89	16.5
Rhetorical question	45	8.3
Joke question/comment	29	5.4
Sarcasm	29	5.4
Mode adoption	22	4.1
Topic change	20	3.7
Fake laughter	18	3.3
Directive	16	3.0
Groaning	2	0.4

(Note: Total is greater than the number of tokens, as multiple strategies were sometimes used.)

Table 6.3: Affective sense of responses

	N	%
Negative responses	253	46.9
Neutral/other responses	241	44.6
Positive responses	46	8.5
Totals	540	100

Because the majority of the reactions included some type of assessment, these responses were examined separately. The subset of 213 responses discussed below includes the evaluative and metalinguistic comments, as well as the majority of the sarcastic comments, which were also evaluative in nature. As Table 6.4 shows, most speakers aimed their evaluations at the joke, with fewer targeting the joke teller or both the joke and the teller. Table 6.5 provides information about the quality of these evaluations. Together, these tables demonstrate that although respondents by far opted to provide negative evaluations, their criticisms were

tempered somewhat by their choice of target. To describe the joke as stupid only implicitly remarks on the teller's sense of humor. Describing the teller as stupid, or saying that the teller is an idiot and the joke is stupid, are both more aggressive and explicitly denigrate the joke-teller. The more aggressive responses were found much more frequently between intimates, such as family or close friends. Humor is a strong marker of group and individual identities, and this helps to explain these overt displays of distaste for the joke. With a clear, negative response the hearer communicates behavioral expectations: This is not my sense of humor, and that joke is not in keeping with our group norms of humor. This message might discourage future attempts to use similar jokes.

Table 6.4: Target of the response

	N	%
Joke	140	65.7
Joke teller	53	24.9
Both joke and teller	20	9.4
Totals	213	100

Table 6.5: Evaluative comments

		N	%
Evaluation of joke	negative	117	54.9
	positive	17	8.0
	both	6	2.8
Evaluation of teller	negative	49	23.0
	positive	3	1.4
	both	1	0.5
Negative evaluation of teller & joke		20	9.4
Totals		213	100

The responses collected in this study contain the same limitations as that of the study of incomprehensible humor reported above: They are respondent reactions to a canned joke, rather than to spontaneous instances of conversational humor. In the previous section, natural data suggested that responses to spontaneous,

but incomprehensible humor are likely to differ from reactions to pre-scripted jokes. However, in the case of reactions that demonstrate a lack of appreciation, the elicited responses seem to be a fairly good fit with natural responses to spontaneous, but unfunny humor. First, reactions to naturally-occurring humor seem to contain the same types of negative evaluations. This was seen in example 6.1, for instance, where the husband assesses the wife's joke as "not funny at all." If anything, the responses are a bit more creative, while still conveying a clear lack of appreciation, as in the following examples. In the first case, while putting away groceries, the wife discovers that the husband has bought a different kind of vegetarian burger from the one he normally gets. She points this out to him, then says:

Example 6.18

01 Wife: But if you can't eat the one you love, love the one you eat! (laughs)

02 Husband: Oh my god. You're a dork. In the supreme. (sings last bit)

Her joke is a play on the lyrics of the Crosby, Stills and Nash song, "Love the One You're With." The husband's response includes an interjection ("oh my god") and a mildly negative assessment of the speaker, calling her a "dork." He ends by boosting this assessment with the phrase "in the supreme," which is sung. While the form is typical, the final part of his utterance is unusual and lends a playful air to his critique. A similar style of reaction is seen in the next example, which involves a retelling of the joke seen in Example 5.1. Here the daughter retells to her partner the joke she heard from her mother:

Example 6.19

01 A: The guy who invented the bowling shirt died today. I wonder what Polish

02 people wore to weddings before that.

03 B: I think that's the first joke I've heard where the set-up was funnier than

04 the punch line.

In this case partner B does not critique the joke teller, but the joke itself. Although her response clearly communicates a lack of appreciation, it is again formulated creatively, avoiding single adjective descriptions, such as "dumb," as was often seen in the elicited data.

It is also worth noting that in the second phase of data collection with the chimney joke, the joke-tellers explained that they were gathering data for a study on failed humor and asked their hearers to explain their responses. This question

helped to illuminate what I had already suspected about much of the laughter that was found. Hearers expressed surprise and confusion at having been told the joke and indicated that their laughter had been aimed at the teller. That is, they were expressing amusement, but at the teller's expense. In one naturally-occurring instance of failed humor, previously presented as Example 5.5 in the last chapter, this was made explicit. Here, two friends were driving together and began talking about hybrid cars. As they try to remember what the different models are called, one friend comes up with a silly name:

Example 6.20

01 A: Not the Toyota. Honda makes one. The Honda Schmaccord.

02 B: (laughs) That was bad. I'm actually laughing at that. I'm laughing that

03 you actually said that.

As noted previously, A's playful name is not highly creative, simply taking the name of the common Honda Accord and adding "sch-" to the beginning. B's initial reaction of laughter might suggest appreciation, but she immediately cancels this with a negative evaluation. Although she first expresses surprise ("actually") that she is laughing, she then clarifies that she is in fact laughing at the speaker. Her surprise is now directed at the fact that the speaker could have ("actually") spoken these words, implying that the joke was very poor.

Almost all of the data collected using the chimney joke was, for ease of recording responses by hand, between two interlocutors. Evidence from natural interaction suggests that jokes that are not appreciated in group interaction may receive different responses. Most commonly, it seems that they are simply ignored:

Example 6.21:

01 MM: I knew I should have brought my tape recorder which has sounds to

02 play back at them

03 CM: tell you what Alan's fridge is a lot better stocked than our one is ha=

04 EM: =ha ha

05 DM: was=

06 CM: =(laughs) was:=

07 MM: =ha ha ha

08 EM: I can do some (whistles) feedback ha ha (inhales, clears throat)

09 CM: (looking at tape-recorder) miles to go

10 DM: (yawns)
(Adapted from Hay 2001: 71)

The joke here is made by EM in line 08, and he refers back to MM's comment in line 01. MM had previously suggested that he bring a recording of sound effects to play while the recording for the data collection was occurring. Between that comment and EM's attempt at humor, the group has changed the topic and is now joking about Alan's refrigerator and everything they have taken out of it. Although EM's joke is clearly contextualized as such and thus almost certainly recognized by the rest of the group, as Hay (2001) notes, the others ignore it. Hay further suggests that EM seems aware of the failure of his humor and that clearing the throat, as he does, may be a common strategy speakers use when their humor has been unsuccessful. Group conversations where no individual has been targeted as the recipient of an utterance ease the burden of responding. When no participant is required to respond, the interactional preference when humor fails may be to allow the silence to convey the message. Similar reactions can be seen in Example 4.14, where George Zimmerman's attorney begins the trial with a knock knock joke and in Example 5.6, where Graeme Garden's joke about sports cars for the blind failed.

If anything, the naturally-occurring responses to bad jokes seem less aggressive than those collected via the telling of the chimney joke. This may be because the spontaneous attempts at humor are deemed better than the pre-scripted joke. In fact, expectations for scripted jokes may be higher than for those that we (non-professionals) create ourselves, and so interlocutors are more forgiving of their failure.

6.3.3 Taking offense to humor

Of the three types of failed humor discussed in this section, responding to offensive humor seems to place the hearer in the most tenuous interactional position. Not only is the hearer not amused, and thus experiencing an absence of the emotion that the speaker (probably) hoped to elicit, but she or he is also actively expressing dislike of the message of the humor. Humor often relies on language and topics that skirt the edges of social acceptability, and a person who is easily offended may also be branded as a person with no sense of humor. The consequences of this can

be serious, as Plester and Sayers' (2007) description of Brenda, who took offense at her colleagues casual – and often pointed – banter and teasing demonstrates:

Example 6.22

Brenda joined the team and immediately took offense at the style of communication used among peers and with some customers. She was particularly shocked by the humorous interchanges. Staff interacted in a very flippant way to each other and with some of their better-known customers and she perceived the every-day banter was abusive, insulting and profane. Brenda overheard a colleague (Cathy) telling her customer that he was just being a "wanker" today and then laughed uproariously (as apparently did the customer). Brenda took extreme exception to this incident and chided her colleague about her unsuitable behaviour with the customer. Cathy, who had been working in the team for over three years, was extremely angry and offended by Brenda's admonishment. (Brenda also took exception to other banter exchanges not explicitly described by participants). Five different participants (including Cathy) described this organizational issue in interviews and articulated outrage at the criticism of their daily banter (p. 166).

Even though Brenda found the humor of her colleagues only inappropriate for the workplace (not, therefore, totally inappropriate), communicating this to them had a chilling effect on her professional relationships. Following this incident, she was excluded from these types of playful interactions and, in addition, her colleagues became "very wary" (p. 172) of her. As a newcomer to this environment her assessment was almost certainly less appreciated than if it had come from an insider; however, it also ensured that she remain, in some respects, an outsider. (See, also, Collinson 1988 for a similar example).

The above observation indicates that interlocutors who are offended by an attempt at humor may want to consider a more measured response if they are concerned about maintaining and developing cordial relationships. (Indeed, see the discussion of example 6.23, below). Lockyer and Pickering's (2001) research suggests that offended recipients often use a number of strategies to ensure that while they are taking umbrage to the humor, they also work to construct themselves as individuals with a healthy sense of humor. Their data is a set of letters of complaint to the satirical magazine Private Eye, in which the writers wish to express their indignation about some (humorous) image or story from the publication. In these letters, the researchers found that complaints were rarely issued directly. Rather, the writers usually began by sharing their appreciation for the magazine, as in the following examples: "Usually I find the cover of Private Eye highly entertaining…" or "I am not much of a one for 'writing letters,' nor do

I consider myself easily shocked or offended…" (p. 637). Following Hewitt and Stokes (1975), Lockyer and Pickering refer to this as "a credentialling disclaimer where readers attempt to avoid anticipated undesirable typifications that may follow the complaint" (p. 638). These disclaimers first serve to protect the writer, by presenting her or him as someone who is aware that the complaint sounds as if it is coming from a humorless individual, yet this is someone who normally enjoys the magazine. Second, the disclaimers place the blame on the publication: It is not the individual's sense of humor that is the problem, but the editors' selection of materials that has created this unusual breach.

What is particularly interesting about the stance taken by these complainants is the fact that writers have no relationship with the magazine editors or readers and are not even confronting them face-to-face. Yet, in anticipation of being denounced as humorless in making their complaints, they employ multiple strategies to inoculate themselves against such censure. That they have taken such pains to present themselves as having a good sense of humor to people they have not met, and in all likelihood never will meet, points all the more to the crucial social functions humor plays in our society and to the cultural norm that discourages individuals from not joining in on jokes.

Kramer's (2011) work on arguments over rape jokes found on the internet identifies further strategies that are used to justify offense at certain types of humor. Two main types of arguments are made. First, offense is found to be justifiable because rape is a special case, in which the horror of the act "renders it inescapably realistic" (p. 143), thus preventing there from being any distinction between a fictional, narrated rape and a real one. This argument is made in response to those who suggest that although rape itself is not amusing, jokes about rape can be, either because they are not actual rape (even if they refer to a real case of rape) or because they are fictional accounts. Second, audience qualities can justify offense. In this case, those who had been sexually assaulted brought this up as a reason to be offended. Personal experience can be called upon as support and exempts the non-laugher from accusations of mirthlessness. Also, in this case, being female was named as a factor in lack of appreciation or a feeling of offense at rape jokes, given that women make up a much higher proportion of rape victims and live with this fear more than men.

The character trait of "sense of humor" and the extent to which an individual is easily offended also fall into the category of personal qualities of hearers. From her examination of the various positions presented in the forums, Kramer (2011) finds two different folk models of offense and humor. In the first, individuals have different levels of tolerance for offense; some are easily offended, where others find very little to be offensive. The second perspective divides the world into empathetic individuals who do not laugh at the pain of others, and those "morally

depraved" (p. 152) individuals who do find humor in this. Of course, from the view of those who are labelled as "morally depraved," these divisions are named differently, with the first group being overly sensitive and the second exhibiting a normal ability to laugh at black humor. Kramer's analysis is particularly interesting in the way that it demonstrates how our beliefs about humor – what it is and how it functions – are reflected in the ways that we respond to its failure.

6.4 Final remarks on negotiation of failed humor

The variety of strategies used by speakers and hearers to manage failed humor suggests that conversational joking is far from simply an entertaining add-on to interaction. Instead, it is a complex, social accomplishment, with multiple functions and meanings. As one example of this complexity, we can point to the different types and degrees of face threats that arise given different types of unsuccessful humor. Furthermore, the threats faced by speakers are not the same as those faced by hearers. Of course, the examples used thus far were selected to illustrate most clearly the strategies used. In fact, many examples are less clear, with more extensive negotiations and multiple strategy use. These may represent what happens in the majority of instances of failed humor, particularly those that occur in private communication, rather than on television or radio. Below I provide two extracts to demonstrate the more intricate negotiation that can take place when humor goes awry.

The first example represents a case where something has gone wrong in the delivery or reception of the humor, but it is not entirely clear what has happened. That is, is this a case where the joke was not understood, or perhaps only partially understood? Or are the interlocutors identifying different incongruities in the joke? In addition, it is useful to note how both parties seem to be invested in avoiding failure. The context is a radio interview between host Barbara Bogaev and Irish author Eoin Colfer:

Example 6.23

01	Bogaev:	now is music still a part of your your experience then (.) writing?
02	Colfer:	oh, yes, I always play (.) um music when I'm writing, and (.) uh very
03		um::: (.) varied tastes: uh:: (.) I love everything from AC/DC to eh to
04		Metallica! hhhh [(laughs)
05	Bogaev:	[(laughs) well, that=

06 Colfer: =no=
07 Bogaev: =that covers a lot of!
08 Colfer: no I'm just kidding I'm just kidding. No, I like everything and I
09 mean some of the modern stuff is great. I love Sheryl Crow; I think
10 she's brilliant. And Coldplay are an excellent band, and Semisonic
11 and all these wonderful bands. I do admit that I'm leaning towards
12 guitar bands, but as I get older, I'm mellowing slightly. I haven't
13 gone to see a heavy metal concert since Whitesnake back in, I don't
14 know,
(NPR Fresh Air, 05-15-2003)

In response to Bogaev's question about the role of music in his writing, Colfer jokes that he has "varied tastes" and enjoys "everything from AC/DC to Metallica." This is clearly contextualized as humor and, indeed, the interlocutors engage in joint laughter, but the intonation of Bogaev's verbal response ("well that" in line 05) indicates uncertainty. Colfer orients to this and quickly provides "no," which is often used to mark a return to a serious mode (Schegloff 2001) and also retroactively designates his utterance as "just kidding" (line 08). I suggest that the confusion comes from a clash between the form and content of his humor. The formulaic sequence "from A to Z" is often used to denote a wide range. Here, it seems that Colfer may be doing this with "from AC/DC to Metallica," since the first item begins with A and the second with M, which occurs much later in the alphabet. At second glance, however, both bands are of the same genre and era, which then creates a humorous incongruity with his claim of having varied tastes. Colfer acknowledges this in his next turn, in which he provides a serious answer, naming a variety of artists and also explicitly identifying the prior bands as heavy metal and something that he used to listen to. It may be that Bogaev oriented first to the form of his utterance and only later to the content, and this is what created her somewhat disfluent response. Two things are clearly worth noting, however. First, despite the joint laughter, this attempt at humor was marked by dissonance. It was not accomplished smoothly. Second, both participants seem to be working to make the joke succeed, or at least to reduce the dissonance. Despite apparently not fully grasping the humor, Bogaev joins in with laughter. Her rather vague comment is also supportive and seems designed for face-saving, as it provides an opening for Colfer to elaborate. For his part, Colfer is quick to

clarify his joking intent, as well as to take Bogaev's opening as an opportunity to expand his answer.

In the next example failure of a joke due to a word that is perceived as offensive is clear, but both teller and the offended hearer engage in extensive negotiation about the nature of the joke. This interaction took place among a group of intimates, who had already been telling jokes:

Example 6.24

01	Sherry:	did he tell you his Harvard joke?
02	Brandon:	oh yeah that's a good joke
03	Ned:	you can't tell that HERE.
04	Brandon:	no this one's-
04	Ned:	oh DIFferent Harvard joke
05	Brandon:	this one's fine.
06	Ned:	(laughs) I only know two and they're both dirty.
07	Sherry:	this isn't
08	Brandon:	this is a pretty good one. uh Oregon- Oregon boy goes to HARvard
09		and he's just a young kid y'know? ready to start his freshman
10		year and he's kind of intimidated he goes out into Harvard YARD
11		for the first time and his instructions are that he's supposed to
12		meet at the library at such and such time and he's looking around
13		the yard and there's ALL the ivy-covered buildings and they
14		all look the same to him and he sees a guy walking the other
15		direction and he's a slightly older guy with a BIG Harvard letter
16		sweater on obviously a Harvard student. so he goes up to the
17		fellow and says "can you tell me where the library's at?" and the
18		fellow looks at him and says (4) "I am a HARvard student we're
19		standing here in the HARvard Yard I assume at some point in
20		your life you're going to be a Harvard student too and the first

thing you should KNOW is that no HARvard student ends his sentences with a preposition. so NO I do NOT know where the library's AT.

Lydia: (laughs) [isn't that cute?]

Frank: [(laughs)]

Brandon: and the fellow thinks for a second and he says (1) "okay uh can you tell me where the library's at ASShole." (sniffs)

Frank: oh. (laughs)

Ned: see [I view that as dirty]

Brandon: [(laughs)]

Ned: and I know that I'm a prude about these things but still I think it's something about the last WORD

Brandon: sorry

Ned: it IS the joke I know. it's okay. it's a pretty good JOKE.

Lydia: it's a FUNNY joke

Frank: it doesn't end in a preposition

Ned: no.

Sherry: (laughs)

Frank: he accomplished his goal.

Lydia: it's very funny

Ned: oh it all WORKS I was just kind of surprised that it ended up being the same joke I knew.

Brandon: then there's the other one where-

Ned: which I viewed as dirty whereas yours of course ISn't

Brandon: no see when I-

Ned: nothing dirty about assholes

47 Brandon: think of dirty I think of scatological not just the fact that there
48 happens to-
49 Ned: nothing scatological about assholes, no.
50 Brandon: to be a four-letter word in it.
51 Frank: (laughs)
52 Ned: (laughs) what could be scatological about an asshole?
53 Brandon: well I think of that word
(Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English, Part 3)

Upon completion of the joke, Frank laughs (line 28), but Ned, who has already expressed apprehension that this joke might be "dirty" (line 06), withholds laughter. Instead, Ned states that his fear had been confirmed. Note, however, that he does not categorically claim that the joke is dirty, but rather that this is his opinion ("I view that as dirty," line 29), thus hedging his assertion. Brandon laughs through Ned's turn, and it seems that Ned orients to this as laughter aimed at the view he has just expressed, as he continues to concede that he is prudish about foul language (line 31). In acknowledging this as a shortcoming and openly claiming it as part of his identity, he potentially inoculates himself against ridicule (or *further* ridicule, if that is how Brandon's laughter has been interpreted), while at the same time defending his view. This elicits an apology from Brandon, presumably for having used this word that has offended Ned. After this, the interaction becomes particularly interesting, as Ned assesses the joke first as "okay" and immediately after as "pretty good" (line 34). This would seem to be a reversal of his earlier position, assuming that dirty means not funny; however, there is not anything that precludes a joke that offends one's sensibilities from also being at least somewhat amusing. Lydia, who was instrumental in getting Brandon to tell the joke, upgrades Ned's evaluation, insisting that it is "a *funny* joke" (line 35). Frank expresses implicit approval for the joke by pointing out how the Oregon boy had cleverly gotten the best of the Harvard student. Ned seems to orient to this as an explanation aimed at him, and he acknowledges the internal logistics of the joke ("it all works"). Ned then seems to retroactively justify his lack of expression of appreciation as surprise that the joke was the same as one he already knew. This prompts Brandon to begin to tell that other joke and it is here that Ned changes his view of Brandon's first joke, saying that the other one is dirty, whereas the one Brandon has just told is not (despite this having been his first reaction). What follows is some playful negotiation of what counts as a "dirty" word. Tables are turned – Brandon is explaining and Ned is teasing.

It seems that often people choose to recognize the good will behind attempts at humor (or at least those attempts that don't seem mean-spirited – see the discussion of deliberately failed humor in the following chapter) and carefully attend to their own and each other's face needs.

6.5 Summary

In this chapter the strategies used by both speakers and hearers to negotiate failed humor were reviewed. The failure of humor poses a face threat to both parties, and each has a variety of ways to manage that threat, ranging from those that attempt to mitigate the threat for both parties, to those that aggravate the threat to one party while protecting the other party's face. Speakers can first simply avoid attempting humor that they feel might fail, but once they have uttered an unsuccessful joke, their strategies tend to be aimed at minimizing the damage to their own face. Hearers, on the other hand, use strategies that function to protect their identity as individuals with a good sense of humor, while simultaneously communicating failure to the speaker. The degree of aggression with which the failure is communicated can vary widely. In this chapter, the type of failure was demonstrated to be an important indicator of the type of response. In other words, a joke that is not comprehended will receive a different reaction from one that has not been found amusing, or has been deemed offensive. The following chapter will discuss social factors that contribute to differences in the ways that failure is negotiated, with a specific focus on power relations.