

8 Conclusion

8.1 Summary of findings

Among lay people, humor is generally considered merely frivolous and fun, and this conception is easy to maintain when all goes well. However, as with a great deal of linguistic behavior, it is when expectations are *not* met that social norms are revealed. The research discussed here confirms that under some conditions humor is not at all frivolous. Certainly, if this were the case, its failure would be of little consequence and we would not witness strangers changing seats on a train following the poor reception of their joke. To the contrary, it is apparent that often there is much at stake in terms of face, identity, and social status for both participants in a humorous exchange. In this closing chapter I discuss the implications of the findings presented in this text for humor studies more broadly, as well as suggestions for future research. Before this, however, a brief review of the major findings of this study is in order. Below, the questions presented in Chapter 1 are reproduced here, with summaries of their findings:

What are the different ways that humor can fail? For example, is failure due to a lack of understanding, a lack of appreciation, or an offensive message?

Unsuccessful humor is most commonly thought to occur when the audience is not amused, and secondly when the audience fails to understand a joke, probably because these are crucial stages in the processing of humor. In this book, however, I opted to analyze failed humor in the broadest sense, which included examining a number of triggers of failure that are identical for both serious and non-serious communication. This comprehensive approach to unsuccessful humor allowed for comparisons to be made, as discussed below, between failure in serious and playful discourse. Ultimately, however, it is those triggers of failure that are fundamental to humor that tell us the most not only about humor, but about miscommunication in general and about societal norms and values regarding humor.

In what ways is the failure of humor similar to or different from the failure of other speech acts or events?

In many ways, the failure of humor parallels other types of communicative failure, as it is triggered by problems common to all communication, such as the use of language that is unfamiliar to the hearer. Although common to all communication, the focus here on unsuccessful humor foregrounded the issue of serious/non-serious keying as an interpretive challenge. The analysis suggested

that this should also be taken seriously as an important discursive resource and as an important factor in miscommunication, including, but not limited to failed humor. The other triggers that were common to both serious and playful communication seemed to be treated similarly, although a tendency to abandon repair in humorous talk was noted. Not understanding humor was demonstrated to be quite different from not understanding serious talk, as were the social consequences, as noted below. Similarly, the failure to appreciate humor is often seen as a clear (usually negative) statement about the hearer's character, unlike the failure to appreciate other aesthetic forms of talk, such as poetry. As a mode of communication, unsuccessful humor fails in some ways that are exclusive to this mode, and are, accordingly, treated in ways specific to it.

How do speakers manage failure of their attempts at humor and how do hearers react to unsuccessful attempts at humor? Are their reactions similar across different types of failures?

The strategies used by both speakers and hearers tell us about the special status of humor itself, as well as the social value we place on humor and having a “good” sense of humor. As a face threat to both speaker and hearer, the failure of humor is negotiated in different ways by each party, and the specific strategies used, as well as the extent to which the response is mitigated or aggravated vary widely. Furthermore, the specific type of failure changes the type and degree of face threat that each party is exposed to, further complicating the picture of management. The different types of failure also help us recognize that there are different degrees of failure – as well as success. Finally, the perception of humor as merely fun, versus humor that also functions as an attempt to instigate social or discursive change by communicating a serious message affects the way that its failure is managed. The social consequences of failed humor can range from a minimal disruption in communication to the severing of a relationship.

How do social variables affect the negotiation of failed humor in interaction?

The same types of social variables that affect serious conversation also affect the ways that failed humor is received and negotiated in interaction. Typically, sociolinguists name race, class, gender, and social status as four important qualities that influence how interlocutors speak and are spoken to. Furthermore, the relationship that obtains among interlocutors is also important. Finally, any number of factors that constitute what we refer to as “context” are also influential in constructing how we speak. Some of these include the physical space, time of day, and conversational goals. It is virtually certain that the same array of factors influence both serious and non-serious discourse; however, the emphasis seems to be different for each type. The variables that were identified through this

analysis as being particularly significant were topic, speaker status, and most importantly, the interlocutors' social relationship. This last is in keeping with the role of humor as a way of managing social relationships. The degree of closeness between interactants strongly influences how they react to the failure of humor. In particular, humor that fails among intimates may well receive the strongest rebuke.

8.2 Implications for the study of language and humor

Perhaps more than anything, this study of failed humor confirms the crucial role of humor in social interaction and points to the need to integrate the study of humor into the study of conversation more broadly. As a mode of communication, humor can perform all the same functions as serious discourse (Priego-Valverde 2003). Thus, not only is humor useful for showing people that we like them, but it is just as useful for showing that we do not like them. The examination of unsuccessful humor foregrounds this point even more so than does the study of successful humor, because it reveals the wide variety of reactions to humor that fails, many of which are highly emotionally-charged. These visceral responses suggest that discourse analysts should carefully take note of any humorous moments in interaction – successful or unsuccessful – as these are likely to be moments when the work of attending to face needs and wants is occurring. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the need for attention to all types of non-cooperative speech and communicative failures in conversational discourse. Just as this analysis of unsuccessful humor has shed light on the social and interactional norms of successful humor, the study of other types of linguistic failures can tell us a great deal about the more commonly seen and researched successes.

Not only has the complex, multifunctional nature of humor been highlighted in this text, but so has laughter and the link between (failed) humor and laughter. Although the tenuous link between humor and laughter is increasingly acknowledged by humor scholars and discourse analysts, the work of conversation analysts that provides detailed accounts of the complex functions of laughter has not yet been fully integrated into the study of humor and interaction more broadly. Because of this, the presence of so much laughter surrounding failed humor may have come as a surprise to some readers. Yet this makes sense once we understand that “laughter registers and communicates the recognition of change and the unusual and, especially, that some behavior has been perceived as improper” (Partington 2006: 234, see also, e.g. Glenn and Holt 2013). Thus, the laughter associated with failure in humor can be understood as likely involving attempts on the part of the speaker to acknowledge and minimize a gaffe. It may also rep-

resent attempts on the part of the hearer to communicate disaffiliation and/or resistance to a humorous (meta)message: Laughter *at* rather than laughter *with* the speaker.

The present research also underscores the challenges scholars face when identifying (failed) humor. The inherent difficulty in doing this further points to the need to integrate the conversation analytic work on laughter into studies of humor, and of interaction more broadly. Conversation analysts have not only shown *that* laughter is strongly associated with the management of interactional trouble, disaffiliation, and resistance, but also *how* this occurs in sequential interaction. Familiarity with this body of literature will help discourse analysts to avoid identifying failed humor as successful simply because of the presence of laughter. Unlike strict conversation analysis procedures, I also believe that an understanding of the social context and participant relationships can greatly enrich our analyses, particularly with respect to (failed) humor. The impossibility of recognizing an attempt at humor that went unacknowledged by all participants, for instance, points to the need for insider information in the identification of failed humor. Similarly, power relations may make failure difficult to identify, as when a subordinate expresses seemingly genuine laughter and support following a superior's joke. The close analysis of both linguistic and social context are important to the study of (failed) humor, in my view.

Finally, humor is often discussed as relying on creativity, and indeed it does, but this work has demonstrated that there are limits to that creativity. Although cognitive limits, such as memory capacity, exist, this study of failed humor most clearly brings forth their social nature. Our judgments about what counts as "good" humor are shaped by our peers and others we identify with, and the boundaries of what is seen as acceptable humor are expressed in the reactions of the audience. Although most people would not consider their expression of distaste for someone's attempt at humor an act of stifling that speaker's creative expression, negative reactions may indeed serve to rein in individual creativity and delineate the boundaries of what is seen as amusing. Yet, if we exclude those occasions where humor fails precisely because it is not creative enough (e.g. overused, old jokes), it is likely that unsuccessful attempts at humor, particularly those that are not understood, represent speech that surpasses the normative degree of creativity. This is an issue that is underexplored, yet this line of inquiry has the potential to speak broadly to studies of language use, change, and development.

8.3 Future research

Because failed humor has received so little attention from scholars in any field, my inquiry was designed to be expansive, addressing broad questions about the types of failed humor that exist and the ways that such failures are locally managed. A study such as this provides a foundation on which further research can be built. Moreover, most of the work I presented here is qualitative. Qualitative research is useful for providing rich descriptions of interaction which can be used to develop additional, more focused research questions. Qualitative descriptions benefit, in particular, from complementary studies involving quantification. Innumerable questions remain to be explored. We can ask, for instance:

- What are actually the most common (i.e. preferred) strategies that speakers and hearers use in responding to failed humor?
- How and under what conditions do different factors (context, interlocutors) influence the use of different strategies? Unpacking this question provides us with a range of specific studies related to age, gender, race and social status, as well as different public or private groups.
- What types of strategies are preferred to manage the failure of different types of humor (e.g., canned jokes, spontaneous quips, humorous narratives)?
- How does the negotiation of failed humor differ across cultures? How do cultures where humor is not highly valued respond to unsuccessful jokes?

These questions represent just a few of the possibilities for future research, and I am sure that alert readers noticed many more places where my assertions were tentative and in need of confirmation, as well as additional gaps. This is far from a definitive work on failed humor, and I can only hope that it inspires others to embrace failure, as I have.