Gender and joking:
On the complexities of women's image politics
in humorous narratives

Helga Kotthoff

Department of Linguistics University of Konstanz, P.O. Box 5560,
78434 Konstanz, Germany

Received 8 October; revised version 8 January 1999

Abstract

The present article contributes to contextualization research, genre analysis, and gender studies. It deals with anecdotes in which a female narrator humorously presents her own personal misadventures or inadequacies. In my corpus of informal dinner conversations among good friends from the German academic milieu, I have found many instances where women presented comic perspectives on themselves; only one man did this.\(^1\) In contrast to psychological gender research, which frequently shows a tendency for women to depreciate themselves in their humor (women regard jokes at their own expense as funnier than do men), I prefer to view the phenomenon in the context of complex conversational image politics. I use Erving Goffman's concept of face to describe personal faces or identities. In detailed data analyses, it can be shown how female narrators organize their presentations so that other people do not laugh at their expense, but rather at the expense of the norms which they mock collectively by laughing at them. Drawing on a theory of interactional perspective, we can tell from listeners' reactions that they share the narrator's perspective. The comparison of my data with Jefferson's 'troubles talks' (1979) shows the relevance of an early keying of the humorous modality. In self-mockery, tellers try from the very start not to give the impression of

---

\(^1\) I was not primarily interested in gender but in humorous genres and activity types in general, such as teasing, banter, witty remarks, funny anecdotes, standardized jokes, fabrications (make-believe-activities), humorous theorizing, activities of upgrading the trivial. I was surprised to discover many activities for which we have no name in our everyday language, e.g., the upgrading of the trivial. German intellectuals often make a game of playfully taking trivial media news extremely seriously, e.g., during dinners among friends they might ask the group whether they think Prince Charles and Lady Di were ever suitable for each other. They can then jointly develop comical, half-serious theories about Charles and Diana. This kind of acting in a theater frame is found amusing by all participants. There are also other gender differences in my corpus that I do not deal with here: men tell more standardized jokes and practice sexual teasing. Women generally laugh more than men.
having a problem. In making jokes about their own experiences, the women in my corpus communicate specific sides of their personal identity. Instead of ascribing fixed, essentialist humor styles to men and women, I favor analyzing humorous episodes in natural contexts. Finally, I see a need to explain why men seldom employ complex forms of self-mockery, as compared to what many women do. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Contextualization; Gender; Narration; Face work; Conversational humor; Perspective

1. Introduction

In humorous presentations, experiences are conversationally structured in such a way that people can laugh about them together. They contribute to entertainment and relaxation; but precisely because they want to amuse people, they can covertly introduce serious matters so that the group is able to assure itself of similar experiences, values, and perspectives without having to explicitly thematize this (Mulkay, 1988). Negative experiences can be narratively presented in such a way that real relations are reversed in the humorous anecdote. For example, the powerful are exposed as fools, losers as the true victors, etc. Topics which are partly taboo, such as envy or certain physical problems, can be dealt with through allusion. By dealing with them playfully, people can agree on delicate subjects without having to address all aspects explicitly. Unusual interests, preferences, or behavioral patterns lose their stigma when they are humorously performed for entertainment purposes, and the group is able to unite in laughter. Quite interesting in regard to face work in conversation are the jokes people tell at their own expense. Sometimes, people portray themselves in their humorous activities as dumb, foolish, inept, forgetful, or otherwise deficient (on the surface). They offer themselves as objects of laughter. Jokes at the expense of others can also intersect in complex ways with those at one's own expense.

Empirical and experimental research has shown in various ways that women's humor at their own expense is more strongly developed than men's (Cantor, 1976; Bruner and Kelso, 1980; Jenkins, 1985, 1996 [1988]; Kotthoff, 1996 [1988]; Stocking and Zillmann, 1996 [1988]; Pizzini, 1991; Ervin-Tripp and Lampert, 1992; Groth, 1992). This is related in several ways to patriarchal gender norms, which favored powerless, instead of powerful behavior for women. Since almost no female role is positively evaluated in society, women presumably develop greater role distance than men; this could affect their style of humor. However, women and men do not behave as 'cultural dopes' (Garfinkel, 1967), but make choices when they speak and joke; they can subvert gender norms. For me, the question was whether my own data were consistent with the phenomena described above.

---

2 Bateson has developed procedures to differentiate playfulness and seriousness. Even primates can recognize whether a bite is meant to be playful or serious and whether a serious fight results or only a playful one. Play is an end in itself and is oriented to nothing beyond itself: to performance but not to reality. The humorous often occurs in a playful modality and creates it; see on this, e.g., Bange (1986), Schütte (1991), and Norrick (1993).
Of the 27 women who took part in the informal conversations on which I base my analyses, ten produced humorous self-mockery, while of the twenty-one men in this corpus, only one did. At first glance, this seems to support the postulated trend toward female self-deprecation; at second glance it does not.

I combine several different questions and approaches. My chief purpose is to present a conversational data analysis of a few examples of self-mockery in order to show how the episodes are structured linguistically and prosodically, and what kind of social micro-politics is negotiated. I discuss them in connection with Goffman's concept of face, whose focus I will thereby shift from general to personal dimensions. First, I will present a few research results on gender differences in conversational humor, which I will then relate to my data analyses.

2. Gender differences in conversational humor

In sociology, linguistics, psychology, and psychoanalysis there are various, in part mutually supportive, humor models which encompass phenomena like double framing, breach of perspective, experience of contradictions and ambivalence, tension and relaxation, dominance and subordination, aggression and surprise. Above all, social and socio-psychological phenomena are responsible for the fact that conversational humor is not only experienced differently by men and women in our society, but is also differently practiced and passed on (Mulkay, 1988; Crawford, 1995). In sociological and sociolinguistic works, it is frequently emphasized that comedians and humorists are often socially very influential (Apte, 1985; Coser, 1960; Douglas, 1975; Nietzsche, 1980; Tannen, 1990; Pizzini, 1991). They define situations, and those who laugh along with them share these definitions. In the professional world, women were rarely allowed to define situations. It is no wonder that they less often created humor in this context.

In my study of the pragmatics of conversational humor (Kotthoff, 1998a), I also discussed humorous activities in other social groups (e.g., sport groups). I am considering here only what I have called the 'group of academics'. In conversational humor, differences in the social milieu are relatively prominent. In the sport groups of my corpus, for example, self-mockery plays no role at all. I am employing here Schulze's (1993) concept of a social milieu and assume that today the traditional sociological concept of class no longer suffices for analyzing the self-presentation of social groups. I do not imply that a group's level of education is the chief determining factor for the types of humorous communication it engages in. It plays a role, however.

The marginalization of women's humor, comedy, and performing arts in literary criticism is shown in Walker (1988) and Kotthoff (1996 [1988]). In comedy and caricature, the disregard of women is even more striking than in other artistic genres. Thus, e.g., at the major 1992 exhibition 'Caricature and satire. Five hundred years of epochal critique' organized by the Munich Foundation 'Hypo-Kulturstiftung', not one of the well-known European female caricaturists, such as Claire Bretécher or Marie Marcks, was presented. Of the 117 artists represented only two were women, one of them the German artist Käthe Kollwitz, who was out of place in this context.

Most studies which showed this trend are quite old. In recent years, the picture has surely become more mixed. However, downgrading forms of joking are even today found uttered more often by men.
In the development of children's humorous activities, those of boys begin to diverge from those of girls at an early age. Researchers nowadays generally assume that girls and boys actively adopt the gender role images of their surroundings, and that humorous interactions play a role in this process of female and male self-construction (McGhee, 1979). In a participant observer study of a kindergarten published in 1974, Alice Groch was one of the first to show clear differences between boys and girls in regard to not only the initiation of humorous activities, but also in their reaction to them. She demonstrated that girls overwhelmingly initiated forms of humor based on incongruity and surprise. Aggression and malice played scarcely any role in the scenes they initiated. Among the boys, forms of put-down humor dominated (see also Fine, 1990). They attacked others in a humorous manner, aped each other and joked and laughed more at other people's deficiencies. Girls laughed more in mixed groups than in all-girl groups. They started to support the boys' jokes at an early age. Recently, Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992) and Lampert (1996) found gender differences in humorous narratives in fifth-grade conversations among friends of the same sex. The girls were more likely than the boys to talk with bemused reflection about their past behavior and personal experiences. They used self-directed humor to facilitate discussions of personal experiences, whereas fifth-grade boys, like college-age men, were more likely to use it to minimize the importance of a self-revelation or to divert attention away from an uncomfortable topic.

Various psychological laboratory studies also provide evidence of gender differences in the enjoyment of humor. I am generally not of the opinion that humor should be studied in artificial settings and I favor research methods which analyze everyday activities in natural contexts, as the work presented here will show. Experimental studies of humor fail to grasp its interactional potential. They declare humor to be a constant feature of the individual; individuals, however, show rather different forms of humor in different settings. I do, however, regard the results obtained in laboratory studies of the humorous dispositions of the sexes as suggestive and will consequently briefly report on them.

Cantor (1976) confronted men and women with various written jokes in which the constellation of persons varied, as in the following:

An actor whose autobiography had just been published was asked by an actress at a party: 'I have just read your new book ... Who wrote it for you?' 'I am glad you liked it', he replied. 'Who read it to you?'

This reading text was also presented in the reverse gender constellation, in which the actress trumped the actor. Men were significantly more amused by the joke if the actor had the last word in the joke. This can generally be explained with disposition theory (Zillmann, 1983): If I am positively disposed to the person put down in a joke, I cannot enjoy the joke. Men always take the man's side in these experiments, if the malicious humor takes place between the sexes. "Women", Stocking and Zillmann write (1996 [1988]: 234, my translation), "enjoyed the same material, as

---

E.g., Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1996) show in an interactional analysis of a dissertation defense how the male examiners' juxtaposition of jokes suggests a critical stance toward the female examinee. Joking plays a role in downgrading her academic involvement.
though they accepted the subordinated role, and agreed to the burden of societal behavioral rules and standards”. They enjoyed jokes where a man got the better of a woman more than vice versa. They behaved as though they would have taken the side of the men. The version of the joke in which the actress made a verbal coup against the actor was not considered at all funny by the women subjects. They didn’t take any pleasure in it.

Many researchers have subsequently found very similar results. McGhee and Duffey (1983a,b) discovered that as early as the ages of between three and seven, boys found it more amusing when the opposite sex had a mishap than when the same thing happened to a boy. Girls did not take the side of girls in enjoying jokes, but rather shared the feelings of the boys. McGhee and Duffey were able to show that these self-deprecating tendencies were even more marked among girls from lower income levels. There are good reasons for the argument that girls, in contrast to boys, develop no dispositions in favor of their own sex/gender. In our culture, the socialization process appears to further favorable dispositions towards males among both men and women.

This seems to confirm the old Durkheimian thesis that societal value hierarchies find expression in almost all individuals in a similar way (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1996: 29ff.). The homogeneous incorporation of the patriarchal order of values explains their historical stability. It does not mean, however, that such dispositions cannot be changed.

More recent studies by Barrecca (1991), Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992), Crawford (1995), and Lampert (1996) show that women and men who claim to be sympathetic to the women’s movement do not share a consistent empathy with males in jokes; above all, feminists exhibit solidarity with their own gender in enjoying jokes, and deconstruct patriarchal ideologies of gender orders in their humor. They have changed their emotional dispositions and try to influence others. Above all, the context-sensitivity of humor is more strongly emphasized in discourse studies than in laboratory studies. Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992) were able to show, in their study of spontaneous humor in natural settings, that women produce significantly more self-mockery among themselves than do men in all-male-groups.7 In mixed groups on US campuses, only Hispanic and Asiatic women and men displayed the traditional gender differences. Euro-Americans altered their style of humor in mixed society. Ervin-Tripp and Lampert found a general increase in the number of jokes; Euro-American men more often displayed forms of humor at their own expense and Euro-American women displayed this form less often; thus an assimilation of conversational styles took place. However, a closer observation of self-mockery showed that that of males often related to exaggerated presentations or phantasy constructions and not necessarily to their own inadequacies. Because of the large cultural heterogeneity in California, the study divided speakers into European-Americans and others (mostly Asian- and Latino-Americans). In the first group, women

---

7 This particularity can probably be best explained by the socialization in boys’ groups, where it is risky to display personal weaknesses, even if only in humor. In boys’ groups, stronger norms of competition prevail than in girls’ groups (Maltz and Borker, 1982).
made more humorous remarks; in the second, men. Clearly, this is an issue of cultural difference (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp, 1998).

In their studies of humor among women, Jenkins (1985, 1996 [1988]) and Painter (1996 [1988]) observed that women often use their humor as a means of coming to terms with negative experiences. In the private groups, these researchers found many examples of self-mockery which, however, did not result in laughter at the expense of the storyteller. If a woman jokingly told a story about a mishap or a negative experience, others would respond with similar anecdotes, so that they were able to share their experiences and jointly create distance through humor. To this extent, one can ascribe therapeutic functions to forms of humor.

3. My corpus

The data which I present here are based on a corpus of fifteen dinner conversations among friends and acquaintances, with three to eight persons participating each time. About one-and-a-half hours of each dinner was recorded, forty-five minutes from the start and forty-five minutes later in the evening.

All conversations took place in a social group whose members were at the time of the recordings between thirty and forty years old. Most of them had completed a university degree and most worked in varied academic professions (psychologist, economist, cultural program director, book seller, linguist, teacher, journalist, designer, physician, etc.). I call this group the ‘academic group’, which does not mean, however, that I attribute their type of humorous communication exclusively to a high level of education. I have equally good reasons to maintain that their views, values, and egalitarian social structure influenced their style of humor. The group consisted of forty-eight persons who met in various combinations with varying frequencies in their free time; some were also colleagues. I had reached an understanding with the members of the group that I could make recordings during a few gatherings. Consequently, the recording situation did not hold the center of attention of those present. Humor is more likely to occur when a relaxed atmosphere prevails.8

The women in this milieu are economically independent and have professions equal in social prestige to those of the men. All sympathize in some way with the aims of the women’s movement; the women and men think of themselves as professing new behavioral standards.

Generally, the gender-related differences in conversational humor are not especially marked in this milieu. I did notice three differences, however: The women laugh much more than the men and they practice narrative self-mockery more often. Men tell more standardized jokes.9

8 See on the characterization of the overall corpus Kotthoff (1998a). The naming of the group was necessary because other groups were also integrated in the study. The conversational humor of this group was compared with that of other groups for several humorous activities.

9 In the non-intellectual milieu I also found sexual teasing practiced only by men.
4. On conversational image politics

Humor is a form of self-presentation. I think we can best explain women’s joking at their own expense by drawing on concepts coined by Erving Goffman. The categories which Goffman introduced in *Interaction Ritual* (1967), and later developed further, serve as the foundation for sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic discussions on questions of image politics in conversation.

The self which a person communicates becomes ritualized in interaction. Goffman also calls this ritualization ‘communicating a line’:

> “Every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants. In each of the contacts, he tends to act out what is sometimes called a ‘line’ – that is, a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself ... The term face can be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share ...” (Goffman: 1967: 5)

Face is an image of the self, formed from recognized social attributes which people claim to possess and which others confirm them as having. ‘A line’ refers to the coherence which is thereby expected. Every person is always involved in affirming other persons’ faces. These are constructions of the same order. Persons’ faces must display consistency and are institutionalized in contacts so that in the future, they may be expected from others.

One’s own face must be asserted in communication. Anyone who does not do so is regarded as odd. Goffman writes that a person’s power and prestige influence the extent of this face work (1967: 10). The mutual acceptance of faces is a fundamental structural attribute of every interaction. This is entirely compatible with fighting, disputes, and differences of opinion, as long as rules of ‘fair play’ are still recognizable. Face work introduces a conservative moment into interactions, because it creates expectations for the future. Face saving is a condition of interaction, not its object. It is habitualized and standardized as social practice in all cultures, subcultures, or groups. A knowledge of face work is expected of all group members, not only of its defensive aspects (how to save your own face), but also of the protective ones (how to save the faces of others). One can threaten not only one’s own face, but also that of others, and do so either voluntarily or involuntarily.

Goffman assumes, in agreement with findings from ethology, that certain behavioral modes are formalized: They are simplified, exaggerated, stereotyped, and taken out of the original context of eliciting stimuli – all for the purpose of a more forceful signal effect. Instead of having to perform an action, one offers an easily read expression of one’s situation in the form of a ritualization. Representation and self-presentation establish the modalities of encounters between people. Presentations do not speak a clear symbolic language, but rather, index identities and situation definitions. Humor belongs to the rituals of self-representation.

Various actions or action components can contain ritual dimensions in the interpersonal domain, e.g., lexical choices in speaking, speaking styles, gestures,
prosody, turn-taking, spatial behavior, and body politics, all of which express the speakers’ attitude to the topic of conversation and the other person. Politeness is an important ritual dimension. Humorous communication acquires ritual dimensions because it is a component of self-representation.

Goffman, and following him Brown and Levinson (1987), were concerned with universal and general face work, but communication also reveals the specific personal identities that people wish to create for themselves. What I am more interested in, is the particularity of face work in the conversational display of subjectivity and individuality.

5. An example of making fun of oneself

It is questionable whether the humorous presentation of one’s ineptitudes and weaknesses always weakens one’s face, or whether some variants of this kind of humor could not rather be an indication of some very complex face politics. Possibly, there are sub-genres of self-mockery in which people laugh more with humorists who tell stories at their own expense than at them, as the examples below will show. My data show that irrelevant aspects of one’s own face are sacrificed in self-mockery in order to reaffirm other aspects which humorists consider more important for themselves. Humor at one’s own expense suggests the complexity of one’s personal image, in that certain forms of humorous violation of aspects of one’s face may even reveal self-confidence. We need micro-analyses of self-mockery in order to discover the different possible variants of the genre.

Data 1

(Conversation 3, Episode 6)
Anton (A), Helena (H), Margaritta (M), Rudolf (R), some of them (s)
1  M: aber wir ham uns grad (-) ma damit beschäftigt
   but we were just (-) dealing with that
2  aber wir kriegens eben bis jetzt (-) gereHegelt
   but we haven’t got it (-) sortHed out yet
3  son Kompostding aufzustellen, (- - - ) weil wir eben auch
   erecting such a compost thing, (- - - ) because we just also
4  nicht wu3ten oder immer dachten, in dem kleinen Garten,
   did not know or always thought, in the little garden,
5  wenn er dann sti:nkt, AHAHA.
   if it sme:lls then, AHAHA,
6  H: mHEHEHEHE
   7  M: ja des is auch nich so schöHÖn.
      well that is not so niHIce either.

---

10 Normally, prosodic symbols are not included in the translation of a transcript. In this case, however, I have decided to include some, orienting them as closely as possible to the original German text. Most importantly, the reader should recognize the inclusion of laughter traces in words. Another problem is the translation of spoken language with all its ellipses, repetitions, break-offs. I have tried to translate the colloquial German into colloquial English.
Margaritta talks here about her and her husband's difficulties in creating a compost pile in their garden. As early as line 2, the word *geregelt/sorted out* contains traces of laughter. From the start of the presentation, it is thus contextualized that what follows is not the story of a problem. It is no accident that the laughter traces occur in the very sentence *(but we haven't got it sortHEd out yet)* in which an inadequacy is reported. In lines 5 and 7, Margaritta expresses an obvious understatement: it is not so niHlce when the compost smells. The problems of composting are contextualized as funny; Helena laughs (6). The laughter scattered through the story functions as an invitation to the hearers not to take Margaritta's problem too seriously and to share her light-hearted perspective.

From line 9 on, Margaritta explains the rules of composting. Rudolf also contributes information on the topic (16, 21). Helena asks *what can you use then* (19) and receives answers from Anton and Rudolf. Her question has, with its falling intonation, more an indignant than a questioning character and thereby suggests

---

11 She actually talks about problems she and her husband have ('we').

12 I use the concept of perspective in the sense of Graumann (1989), who sees it as the 'representation' or 'presentation' of something for someone from a given position. In perspectivation, we deal with the creation of relevance for what is being perspectivized under a specific aspect. See Kallmeyer and Keim (1996) and Sandig (1996) for a discussion of the literature on perspectives.
that she shares Margaritta’s perspective on composting as being well-nigh impossible. Helena shows co-indignation. Margaritta uses her answer in line 22 to top the two men. She gives the impression that composting is simply impossible. People laugh. They are not necessarily laughing at her, but rather at the discrepancy between the theory and practice of composting. Margaritta had already laughingly admitted (in line 2) that she had had no success. Composting is a matter of following the rules; but even if they are all observed, the desired results do not necessarily occur. Margaritta shows a side of herself that can be viewed as a weakness. She invites the interpretation that she did not correctly apply the theory. In familiar circles, women constitute intimacy by admitting such weaknesses. A comical incongruity consists between the opposition of the complex rules of composting and the absence, despite the rules, of guaranteed personal success. Margaritta demonstratively takes the failure of her composting efforts lightly: she thereby communicates a face compatible with failed efforts. In her milieu, it is positively received that she is making an effort at environmentally sound waste disposal. Because environmental consciousness serves as a normative template here, she can communicate a nonconformist identity by pluckily admitting her failure.

Very soon, it becomes obvious that Helena is ready to share Margaritta’s perspective. The two men first try to present suggestions for a better composting in a serious manner, and only join in the laughter after Margaritta rejects their suggestions in line 22 with a humorous remark.

6. On contextualizing the humorous modality

Not only in interpretive sociolinguistics, but also in interaction analysis it is assumed today that the interactants themselves actively locate their utterances in a concrete context, i.e., that they interactively produce the frame in which utterances are to be understood through verbal and nonverbal indications, so-called ‘contextualization cues’ (Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1976; Auer and di Luzio, 1992). The humorous mode must be contextualized. Contextualization focuses on the performance aspect of humor. Conversation analysts have made valuable contributions to the analysis of humorous speech activities. They address such questions as when precisely it is that people laugh in conversation, how this changes discourse, and to what extent laughter represents an orderly, conversational activity (Jefferson, 1979, 1985). They help to question the everyday theory according to which we laugh if something is funny. We also laugh initially to mark the humorous potential of an utterance. Laughter is the contextualization cue for humor par excellence.


14 Laughter can very well also be a sign of embarrassment. In that case, it is normally accompanied by other signs of embarrassment.
Conversation analysis deals with humor and joke forms in natural surroundings; forms of lexical, mimic, and prosodic marking of the humor modality have been studied (Schütte, 1991; Müller, 1992). Above all, studies in the tradition of interactive sociolinguistics have revealed the relation between conversational humor and group culture (e.g., Tannen, 1984; Norrick, 1993; Schwitalla, 1994; Kallmeyer, 1994; Kotthoff, 1996a, 1998a).

Of central significance for the analysis of conversational humor is the concept of interaction modality (Kallmeyer, 1978). It corresponds to the ‘keying’ which is employed in the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1974; Straehle, 1993). Pathos, exaggeration, or humor can be regarded as examples of ‘keying’. Interaction modalities play a role in the creation of a specific text understanding (Kallmeyer, 1978). They represent a subgroup of contextualization procedures which regulate the particular reality status and coherence of utterances. In humor, the relationship to reality is loosened and special inferences are expected which are to create ‘sense in nonsense’, to use Freud’s expression (1985 [1905]).

Through special contextualization (or framing) procedures, utterances are marked as humorous. The initiating laughter thus plays a special role. Performance and cognition are combined to form the special quality of humor.

Our topic of joking about problematic contents at personal cost requires a differentiation between problem narratives and humorous problem narratives. In contextualization research, we assume that the narrators of problems will themselves be active in creating a specific reception. Do they want their hearers to recognize their problem and perhaps show understanding for it? Or do they want their narrative topic to be understood from the start as not really a problem, but rather as funny?

Jefferson (1984) has dealt with the presentation of problems in conversations; she has shown that in this context, laughing on the speaker’s side does not necessarily demand that the hearers also laugh. She discusses episodes in which speakers laugh while they talk about difficult problems (or after having told about them), e.g.:

(1) [Frankel: TC: 1:4:SO]
G: You don’t want to go through all the hassle?
S: 'hhh I don’t know Geri,
(.)
S: I’ve stopped crying uhheh-heh-heh-heh-heh.
G: Why were you crying?

Person S laughs after saying that she has stopped crying. Person G (Geri) does not laugh. While laughter on the recipients’ side is the normal response to the speaker’s initial laughter, and the normal case in daily discourse, the listeners here display ‘trouble-receptiveness’ (Jefferson, 1984: 348). Precisely by not laughing they indicate that they take the problem seriously.

Jefferson writes that initial laughter in the context of problem presentations shows that the narrator displays resistance to the problem; she wants to take the problem

---

15 See on humorous interaction modalities also the articles in Kotthoff (1996a).
lightly. But the hearer may not necessarily share this attitude. The hearer indicates
trouble sensitivity if she tends to react to the problem content by posing questions or
making serious comments. In connection with problem presentations, contextualiza-
tions of humor intended to evoke laughter from the hearers need to be especially
strong.

Jefferson’s examples suggest that the trouble narrator herself laughs relatively late
in the problem presentation; in her data, the first traces of laughter usually occur in
the closing phase of the topic. The positioning of laughter thus contributes signifi-
cantly to the social meaning of the utterances. It makes a difference in what phase of
presenting the problems tellers laugh. If the problematic aspects are already intro-
duced with laughter, the humorous potential of the topic takes the upper hand.
Recipients expect something funny.

In the following, we focus on strategies of contextualizing harmlessness and
humor in regard to the presented problem.

7. Problems, ineptitude, and misadventures – humorously presented

In the next set of data, Anni jokes about losing her student status at the university.
From the very start, the contextualization of humor prevents a possible problematiz-
ing reception.

Data 2 (Conversation 6, Episode 7)
Anni (A), Bernada (B), David (D), Johannes (J), Maria (M), Katharina (K), Ulf (U)
1 A: aber stellt Euch vor, ich mußte mich jetzt im
   but imagine, I had to exmatriculate now in my
neununddreißigsten Semester exmatrikulieren.
thirty-ninth semester.
3 da hamse extra ne Studienberatung eingerichtet.
there they set up a study counseling office extra.
4 M: NEI::HEHE HE
NO::HEHE HE
5 U: es war folgende Meldung in der Presse, in Berlin
   there was the following report in the press, in Berlin
6 hätten jetzt massenhaft ihre [Lang=
   they now have massively their [long=
7 A: [genau. ja
   [exactly. yes
8 U: [eh die BummelaHanten
   [uh the eteHERnal students
9 A: [genau. aber nur die Kunstgeschichte.
   [exactly. but only art history.
10 und ich meine, die anderen
   and I mean, the others
11 U: da hamse einen mit neunundfuffzig Semestern entdeckt.
   they found one with fifty-nine semesters.
The group discusses the topic of who studied what when, and Anni says that she had to withdraw from the university in her thirty-ninth semester. Anni presents this information as spectacular (*imagine*). A possible effect of embarrassment is thereby eliminated from the start. Maria’s reception in line 4 shows simultaneous astonishment and amusement. Ulf has also read that in Berlin, measures are being taken against students whose progress is too slow (*Bummelanten/eternal students*), a category in which Anni is now indirectly classified. Ulf does not show any problem sensitivity, like the hearers in Jefferson’s analyses, but rather intensifies the problem through negative attributions. The laughter traces (*Bummelanten/eternal students*) function in his comment like quotation marks. Anni does not resist the attribution of overly slow student status, but rather confirms Ulf’s claims. The drop-outs, Anni further states, are limited to art history. Ulf can also report that one student was discovered to be in his fifty-ninth semester. Anni immediately competes with him: *he has more* (line 12). Ulf laughs. In line 14, she laughingly announces her own grand study goals. Ulf laughs with her. Katharina asks a serious question, to which Anni explains that a professor tried hypocritically to determine what was wrong with *these guys*. Anni adopts pro forma the professor’s perspective. But since he was already presented as hypocritical, it is made clear that the professor was not interested in finding out about ‘those guys’, but rather in the university’s getting rid of overly slow students. Anni ironically plays with thought patterns which are indirectly attributed to the professor.\(^{16}\)

Her announcement that she has been exmatriculated in her thirty-ninth semester seems anything but contrite. Nor does she present it as a personal inadequacy to have studied so long, but rather as a sort of game: the more semesters one has, the better. Katharina’s question is not understood as a question about the overly long enroll-

\(^{16}\) Stempel (1976), Giora (1995) and many other researchers have shown that irony exploits a contrast between the said and the implied – mostly in regard to evaluation. Ironic speakers attribute other persons’ thought patterns to their addressee and simultaneously distance themselves from the said. In irony, we find a polyphonic contrastive perspectivation (Kotthoff, 1998b).
ment, but rather about how the exmatriculation could have happened. In her presenta-
tion, Anni turns the tables on the usual societal evaluations. The professor is a neg-
vative figure: he spoils her fun. She is in one sense the loser – but in a game, with
whose rules she doesn’t agree anyway. She invites her hearers to laugh with her over
the incongruity of the norms. Here, a representative of the institution has indeed
won, but the fun at least remains on her side.

In order to accept the casualness of Anni’s representation of her exmatriculation,
however, some background knowledge is helpful. Anni has been professionally
active as a sinologist for some time and was enrolled as a student only secondarily,
in order to acquire more knowledge of the history of Chinese art. If she actually had
been unable to cope with her studies, her presentation and its reception would prob-
ably have been different.

The listeners’ reception here again shows that they share Anni’s distanced and
amused perspective concerning the exmatriculation. Ulf quotes a negative attribution
(Bummelanten/eternal students), which Anni emphatically confirms (line 9). If Anni
had presented her removal as awkward, it would have been impertinent to stress the
awkwardness by negative attribution. But Ulf can feel sure that Anni will recognize
the quotation character, and thus he indicates that he shares her amusing perspective
on what happened. Narratives at the teller’s expense encourage a sharing of perspec-
tives. Kallmeyer and Keim (1996) define perspective setting and taking as follows:

“Very generally, all human beings’ perceiving and acting is done from a specific viewpoint which,
together with the scope and other structural characteristics of perspective, determines the space of perception and activity. All objects are perceived and interpreted in those aspects that correspond to the given viewpoint and perspective. In verbal interaction, the taking into account of the other’s perspective, at least up to a certain extent, is a constitutive precondition in order to establish an interactive exchange. As a consequence, verbal interaction is – on a certain level – structured as a process of perspective setting and perspective taking (Graumann, 1989). Perspective setting means that in order to make one’s actions comprehensible and to enable others to deal with one’s perspective, a speaker has to reveal his/her perspective, at least up to a certain extent. Perspective taking means that recipients have to show how they interpret the manifested perspective, how they relate their own perspective to it, and to what extent they adopt the speaker’s perspective, or incorporate it at least partly in their own. Perspective setting implies a claim of social relevance for the manifested perspective, and perspective taking deals with this claim.” (Kallmeyer and Keim, 1996: 286)

It is important to bear in mind that the same stories may be told from different per-
spectives, tailoring them as much as necessary to fit the current context (Norrick,
1998: 95). In a different setting, Anni might very well describe the same event as
really creating a problem for her.

In the next episode, Anni relates how while leading a trip in an Asiatic country
she got lice and did not recognize it at first.

Data 3 (Conversation 6, Episode 8)
Anni (A), Bernada (B), David (D), Johannes (J), Katharina (K), Maria (M), some of them (s),
Ulf (U)
1 A: ich sag, des is mir so ↑wurscht,
  I say it’s all the ↑same to me,
ich laß mir jetzt hier ne Glatze schneiden,
I will have my head shaved here and now,

wenn ich Läuse hab. und dann hab ich der ↑Gruppe das gsagt
if I have lice. and then I told the ↑group about that

und ich sag, ich vermute, ich hab Läuse, (′HH)
and I say, I suspect I have lice, (′HH)

hat jemand Erfahrungen mit Läusen; und dann ↑meldeten sich einige.
has anyone had experiences with lice; and then a few ↑responded

und sagten, nee, Sie haben keine Läuse.

so wie Ihre Haare ausschaun, das sin keine Läuse. (-)

the way your hair looks, those aren’t lice. (-)

D: mhm

A: damit war ich auf Krätze. oder auf e:h (H) Allergie

with that I thought I had scabies. or an e:h (H) allergy

dacht ich. daß ich gegen irgendwas allergisch bin,

I thought, that I am allergic to something,

und (1.0) und hab nur dann verdammt schwarz

and (1.0) and then I have just always had these damn

†Fingernägel immer ghabt,

black †fingernails,

D: HEHE

A: wenn ich kratzt hab HEHEHE und da hab ich x LäuHse

when I scratched HEHEHE and then I have muHERdereHEd who knows how many lice

glaub ich (′ ??? (not under transcription conventions) HH) auf die AHArt und WeiHEse schon ermoHOrdeHEt.

I believe (′ HH) in that wHAay already

K: [HAHAHAHAHAHA]

s: [HEHEHE HEHEHE

K: [das is in schöner Kombination mit

[that makes a beautiful combination with

dem ganzen Essen.

the whole dinner.

A: HE[HEHEHEHEHEHEHE

K: [HEHEHEHEHEHEHE

s: [HEHEHEHEHEHE

M: [wir ham (-) gleich Eis.

[we are having (-) ice cream next.

s: [HEHEHEHEHEHEHE

Everyone knows that Anni had recently had head lice. This had already been the topic of various jokes. Immediately before the above data, the group had just rere-
turned to the topic of bugs, and in connection with it, also to that of head lice. In the first three lines of data set 3, Anni reports what she told the members of her travel group when she first suspected she had head lice. She portrays herself as emphati-
cally indifferent (des is mir ↑Twurschtit’s all the ↑same to me). She also reports to her travel group very objectively about the incident and asks them to relate their own
experiences. Then she reports what some in the group said. From line 9 on she
describes her new diagnoses (scabies or allergy), which are similarly face-threaten-
ing. Then she gives a very unappealing detail (damn black fingernails). Part of the
humorous presentation of this inglorious happening appears to include offering
details which one doesn’t really have to tell. They index that Anni does not want to
hide anything. She approaches the subject so much from the humorous side that even
unpleasant or face threatening details can be presented. Then she explicitly calls
attention to the absurd-positive sides of this detail. She has already killed any num-
ber of lice (14−16) by her manner of reacting (scratching): again, a humorous incon-
gruity with regard to norms. (Usually, people would be shocked by lice under fin-
gernails.) In the subjective world of the narrator, this experience is restyled as
combat success. Everybody who laughs shares this conception of incongruity with
Anni. Katharina does not treat Anni gently, when she offers a friendly albeit ironic
remark (lines 18−19); but the intonation in lines 18−19 does not reveal a critical
undertone. Katharina creates a further humorous incongruity. Using irony, she shows
that she shares Anni’s perspective of seeking absurd-positive aspects of the lice
topic. On the level of the said, she supports Anni’s dinner conversation topics. It is
implicated that people normally refrain from discussing such unpleasant topics. But
this group laughs about it together, thereby indexing that they do not obey normal
criteria of etiquette: as Sandig (1996: 46) has suggested, in irony, several perspec-
tives come into play. Maria’s remark is also framed as friendly irony (line 23). 17 By
ironically reproaching Anni by commenting on how wonderfully the topic fits with
the meal (black lice contrasted with white vanilla ice cream), Anni’s absurd per-
spective on the problem is shared. Perspective adoption can be implicitly shown in
dialogic irony, thereby co-constructing irony as a joint enterprise. If the irony were
meant critically, people would probably not laugh together. Anni’s nonconformist
topic choice is apparently shared.

In the following set of data, the narrator laughingly recounts an embarrassing inci-
dent in a restaurant.

**Data 4 (Conversation 6, Episode 11)**
Anni (A), Bernada (B), David (D), Johannes (J), Katharina (K), Maria (M), Ulf (U)
1 B: diese SOJASOUCÉ. DU: HAST DIE SOJASOUCÉ
   **this soy sauce, you: knocked over the soy sauce**
   RUNTERGE [schmissen.
3 A: [ICH? nee ich nich.
   [I? nah not I.
4 B: [das war Johanna. Du hast recht.
   [that was Johanna. you are right.

17 Such forms of shared irony in friendly contexts are seldom discussed in the literature, but are often
found in everyday interaction (Barbe, 1995, Kotthoff, 1998a,b). Here, the playfulness of the ironic
remark depends on mimics and gestures. It also seems to be important that vanilla ice cream had already
been placed on the table. I asked Anni, Katharina and Maria about their understanding of this episode.
They indicated that no one present understood the irony as critical. It is important here that Anni is the
first to display an ironic perspective. Katharina and Maria support it.
The conversation focuses on a well-known actress, Frau Hüttinger. In data set 4, we learn how the group around Anni and Bernada attracted negative attention (line 18). For an outsider, the episode is not funny; this is an instance of 'you had to be there'. Starting at line 7, Anni relates how the incident took place. Time, place, and the famous lady herself are identified. The statement in which the mishap is described is uttered with intermittent laughter (lines 9–10). Bernada echoes Anni’s words in line 11. Anni also repeats parts and then laughingly tells what followed (lines 12–13). Bernada laughs. The memory is by no means embarrassing (the situation probably was). Katharina asks for details. Bernada enlightens her in line 16. Katharina now also laughs and utters an interjection. Anni finally summarizes the meaning of the episode in line 18. The modal particle (halt/simply) indicates that things just happened like that and cannot be changed. The embarrassment which the incident perhaps caused is transformed into humor at the time of retelling in friendly company. The thrice formulated laughingly told mishap (off the table) iconizes something interesting. Inept behavior appears here not really to harm the teller’s face. An anti-authoritarian moment could even be read into the mishap. It is normal to admire famous persons; it is not normal to knock things off their table. Strong behavior norms are at a disadvantage here.
Let's now have a look now at a male’s self-disparaging humorous story. Ulf is the only male in this group who humorously presents mishaps in which he was involved. In the next set of data, Ulf tells how the absent Heinrich, who once shared an apartment with Ulf and two others present, wore Ulf’s new shoes without permission when Ulf had a broken leg, and thus was unable to stop Heinrich. On the one hand, Ulf presents himself as Heinrich’s victim, on the other hand, he subverts this role through his way of presentation. The topic of the conversation was that Heinrich often borrowed the clothes of other persons living in the house without asking them.

Data 5 (Conversation 7, Episode 8)
Anni (A), Bernada (B), David (D), Erika (E), Jürgen (J), Katharina (K), some of them (s), Ulf (U)

1 U: aber letztens hab ich mir neue Schuhe gekauft.
   but recently I bought new shoes.
2 A: mhm
3 U: und eh, (-) des war eigentlich bisher noch Neuland,
   and uh, (-) that was actually breaking new ground,
4 weil Schuhe da [dacht ich immer so, jeder hat so seine.
   because shoes there [I always thought, everyone has his own.
5 J: [nei::n, er hat immer meine alten
   [no, he always wore my old ones
6 aufgetragen, aber das fand ich ja okay.
   but I felt it was okay.
7 A: HEHEHE
8 J: wenn ich meine, damit kann man nicht mehr gehen, dann,
   if I mean, I cannot walk in them any more, then
9 (0.5)
10 U: [nee aber so da hat,
   [nah, but in this case there has,
11 J: [(?)
12 U: da hat, die ham ihm auch gut gefa[llen.
   in this case, he also liked them very much,
13 A: [HEHE
14 B: die Neuen.
   the new ones.
15 U: die Neuen. und dann warn die halt ma ne Woche weg.
   the new ones. and then they were just gone for a week.
16 (und dann,
17 s: [HAHAHAHA
18 A: ha ausgegHaHn[gen, HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA
   went ouHt, HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA
19 s: HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA
20 D: nee::
   na:h.
21 B: [hat er
   [dld he
22 sie gut eingelaufen?
   break them in well?
In line 1, Ulf introduces his new shoes thematically. He thought that Heinrich would not take his shoes, but Jürgen reminds him that Heinrich put on Jürgen's shoes (lines 5–6) with his permission. Anni laughs (line 7). As background information, one must presumably also know at this point that Heinrich had a good income and by no means wore other people's clothes and shoes because of poverty. Problem consciousness and sympathy for a person in need are not contextualized here. Ulf tells in line 12 that Heinrich liked his new shoes. Heinrich, for whom outward appearances were normally not so important turned out to be a person of taste. Ulf's new shoes had just been gone then for a week (line 15). This central information is presented very laconically. The modal particle halt/just points here to the immutability of the events. People laugh (line 17). Anni produces a humorous remark (line 18). The shoes ‘went out’. It sounds as though the shoes themselves had decided to take a stroll. People laugh at length. Bernada poses a question which ascribes a positive effect to the shoes' absence (lines 21–22). Ulf then describes how Jürgen argued for him with Heinrich, because he himself was too angry to do so. Ulf begins to employ laughter, as he tells about his plaster cast (line 27). Jürgen continues that at the time of the plaster cast Heinrich ignored all arguments (line 29) (but why was there any
need for argumentation at this point? We don’t know). Ulf animates Heinrich’s words in line 32. The adverb *nimmer* (‘never again’) is willfully exaggerated, since its semantics suggest that Ulf will never be able to walk again. In reality, however, it was clear that he would only have to wear the plaster cast temporarily. Laughing, Maria reveals additional dimensions of Heinrich’s infelicitous behavior (lines 34–35). The aim is clearly not to condemn Heinrich, but rather to portray the group sharing the house and their unconventional customs comically. People laugh. Ulf’s shoes were stretched out of shape, but the matter-of-fact manner in which the story is told conveys the impression that the episode was really more amusing than annoying, at least in retrospect. The narrative process could itself be cathartic, because it helps the speaker to take the incident lightly. It is important to know that Heinrich is still Ulf’s friend. He basically tolerates Heinrich’s strange habits.

In humorous stories at one’s own expense, speakers present themselves as people who understand humor and are able to see the funny side of embarrassing situations. Anni evaluates the entire story as *herrlich* (‘marvelous’).

Let us examine one last example. In the following episode, an incident is reported in which Vivian, an American philosophy professor, wanted to explain to German students a term used in an English-language philosophy text, viz. ‘Leitmotiv’. The students point out to the teacher that this is a German word and already more familiar to them than to the ambitious teacher.

Data 6 (Conversation 11 (bilingual), Episode 4)

*Don (D), Roland (R), Vivian (V), Wendy (W)*

1 V: einmal habe ich meine Studenten gefragt,
   *once I asked my students,*
2 ob sie dieses Wort Leitmotiv verstanden haben,
   *whether they understood this word, Leitmotiv,*
3 und sie haben gesagt, ja Vivian,
   *and they said, yes, Vivian,*
4 das IST aber ein deutsches Wort.
   *but that is a German word.*
5 W: DAS IST JA TOLL. [HEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHE]
6 V: [ja HEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHE]
7 R: das wird halt nicht übersetzt.
   *that is just not translated.*

Vivian talks about herself as not being observant. Philosophical concepts are often not translated. She had simply overlooked the fact that what she wanted to clarify was a German concept and therefore not problematic for German students. She presents her story as funny, and Wendy receives it as such (line 5). Roland adds a clarification. Vivian’s competence as an instructor is not affected by such mistakes.

The message of all the above stories, which center on personal blunders in a humorous way, is the following: The blunders do not negatively affect a person’s
face, but rather tend to reinforce it. Only very superficially do the narrators offer themselves as targets of laughter. In reality, people laugh with them over normative incongruities, and sympathize with them. The narrators are not laughed at and do not invite others to do so. They seem to be saying, 'I had such an awful experience', or 'I was so dumb', but it is all done with a narrative strategy which prevents regret, pity or even laughter at their expense. The introduction to the stories is presented without decoration, and the humorous point is quickly reached. The narrator can even announce something spectacular, as in data sets 2 and 5. The key information is always offered laughingly and opens the speaking space for further humorous exaggerations (she wanted to reach forty semesters, the shoes went out, lice go well with ice cream, flowers also smell): The exaggerations often provide a sort of punchline. They can be presented by the narrators themselves or by the hearers. If they are uttered by the latter, they indicate that the hearers share the narrator's perspective on the topic.

In general, humor at one's own expense shows how robust interactional faces are in a sympathetic audience. In addition, it shows that the women and the male speaker present themselves as breaching some general norms. They violate various sorts of conventions (such as that it is out of the question to let a house mate wear one's clothes), partly those of their own milieu (i.e., ecologically sound waste disposal), partly also those of the rest of society (i.e., to want to finish one's studies as soon as possible, or to recognize foreign philosophical vocabulary). Kotthoff (1996b) shows that despite frequent assertions to the contrary, face can definitely bear impoliteness, if it is humorously presented. It can also bear the presentation of weaknesses. Anyone who reacts to such stories at the teller's expense with a shake of the head, or even offers advice, shows himself/herself unworthy of such signs of trust and as a spoil-sport. Of course there are occasional questions, but chiefly people laugh or even add a humorous remark. The presented forms of humor at one's own cost confirm the intimacy of the discourse in that what is at stake is not positional identities, but rather personal ones.19

Thus, two dimensions of face are to be distinguished: a general and a personal one. Goffman (1967) and Brown and Levinson (1987) regard face as a general category which fits various people equally. Along with a general need for distance and affirmation, people seem also to pursue a personal identity politics. The indicative function of humor is clearly apparent here. Humor at one's own expense does not always indicate a weak sense of self-respect, as maintained by psychologists, but sometimes a very specific sense of self-respect. Humor at one's own expense occurs at the expense of general dimensions of face and builds up its personal dimensions. It does not necessarily threaten a person's overall face, but rather, dimensions which are unimportant for the person. In the episodes presented, the interactants confirm themselves in their individual identity.

19 See Irvine (1978) for differentiating positional and personal identities.
8. Conclusion

In groups consisting solely of women, self-mockings are widespread (Kalčik, 1975; Jenkins, 1996 [1988]; Painter, 1996 [1988]), while in male groups, they generally are not. Male humor is described by many researchers as more impersonal and formalized than women's (Bryant et al., 1979; Tannen, 1990).

Freud (1985 [1905]) portrayed humor at one's own expense as mature humor, because it displays the ability for self-distancing. Women seem to possess this ability, even if it has so far never been attributed to them in the relevant literature. Traditionally, it was thought that women had no sense of humor. Researchers, who discovered in humortests that women were less competent in joking than men, were working with impersonal and monological humor models (e.g., Chapman and Foot, 1976), considered to be generally inadequate, especially for women. When we study conversational humor in a natural context, we get a more differentiated picture of male and female humorous activities than through laboratory studies, which tend to overlook interactive negotiations.

In this study I have tried by detailed interaction analysis to rescue women's self-mockings from the kind of interpretation as self-devaluation that has been presented by many psychologists. Instead, I have shown that in the episodes there is no invitation to laugh about the teller, but rather with her.

In the history of humor research, the question of the relationship between humor and gender is relatively new. A gender difference noticed early on, even by traditional anthropologists, like Gershon Legman (1968), was that in most cultures the majority of standardized jokes dealt with sexuality, and moreover, that the majority of these were at the expense of women. Recall that Freud (1985 [1905]) categorically denied women the ability to enjoy sexual humor; he was committed to a program of essentializing socio-cultural displays of femininity. Female reticence in regard to aggressive and sexual forms of humor is now recognized as historically conditioned – best seen in the context of ideals of femininity oriented to passivity, subordination, and politeness – and thus as changeable in a praxis of resistance against norms of patriarchal gender order.

The humor characterizing an individual is always connected to her/his psychosocial habitus, her/his image politics, values, norms, and environmental dispositions. Gender is one factor within that structure, but by no means the only one. Gender interacts, for example, with social milieu and age. Some cultural anthropological studies have shown that in many cultures, older women allow themselves to indulge in sexual joking in public, not just among themselves (Apte, 1985). Here, too, social stratum or milieu plays a role. For women from the working class, it seems more

20 Günther (1997) found in her data that women also tell more stories of indignation than do men, and among women there is especially more co-indignation acted out. Similarly, in indignation stories women narrators present themselves as persons who have had negative experiences. They show themselves in situations which they could not control; something similar occurs in humorous stories at one's own expense. However, here the experiences are demonstratively taken lightly. In indignation stories, the opposite is the case.
normal to tell each other sexual jokes than for women from the middle class (Streeck, 1996 [1988]), where vulgar and sexual humor is just not lady-like. These forms of humor, however, can be used to display traditional masculinity. Again however, there is not 'one', but multiple masculinities (Connell, 1995). The German men in my data refrain from self-mockings; the Anglo-American men in Lambert's and Ervin-Tripp's do not. Further studies must show in which contexts women's and men's joking converge, and in which contexts they diverge.

Interestingly, there are often male protagonists in professional humor (e.g., Charley Chaplin and Woody Allen) whose humor in part consists in that everything seems to go wrong for them. They completely contradict the masculine gender role cliches and make this the topic of their humor. Professional humor thus presents models of behavior that would enrich the lives of both sexes if life were given more of an opportunity to imitate art.

Appendix:

Transcription conventions

(-) one hyphen indicates a short pause
(- -) two hyphens indicate a longer pause (less than half a second)
(0.5) pause of half a second; long pauses are counted in half-seconds
(? what ?) indicates uncertain transcription
(?? ??) indicates an incomprehensible utterance
.[..] indicates overlap or interruption
= latching of an utterance; no interruption
HAHAHA laughter
HEHEHE slight laughter
gooHd integrated laughter
('H) audible exhalation
('H) audible inhalation
??? slightly rising intonation
? rising intonation
. falling intonation
, ongoing intonation
: indicates protracted sound
° blabla° lower amplitude and pitch
COME ON emphatic stress (pitch and volume shift)
come on higher volume (volume shift)
↑ high onset of pitch
((sits down)) nonverbal actions or comments

References


Barreca, Regine, 1991. They used to call me Snow White ... but I drifted; Women’s strategic use of humor. New York: Penguin.


Irvine, Judith, 1978. Formality and informality in speech events. Sociolinguistic Working Papers 52, Columbus, OH.


Kalcik, Susan J, 1975. ‘... like Ann’s gynecologist or the time I was almost raped’. Personal narratives in women’s rap groups. Journal of American Folklore 88: 3–11.


**Helga Kotthoff** received her doctoral degree in General Linguistics in 1988 from the University of Konstanz, Germany. Her doctoral research focused on learner languages and German–American intercultural irritations in argumentative discourse (published as *Pro und Contra in der Fremdsprache*, Frankfurt: Lang, 1989). She conducted research in discourse-analytic gender studies, and edited and co-edited four books on that subject (two together with Susanne Günthner, one together with Ruth Wodak). She spent three years working at a university in Tbilisi, Georgia; she carried out ethnographic research on Georgian oral poetic genres such as lamentations, drinking toasts, and verbal dueling. Conversational joking forms another focus of Kotthoff’s research interests. She edited *Scherzkommunikation* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996), and her book *Spaß Verstehen: Zur Pragmatik von konversationellem Humor*, was published by Niemeyer (Tübingen) in 1998. Currently, she holds a temporary professorship in German linguistics at University of Konstanz (Vertretungsprofessur).