"It's Not Very Funny": Heightened Performance through Prefaces of Formulaic Jokes in Interaction

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Introduction

Jokes are a longstanding topic of interest in the fields of anthropology, linguistics, psychology, sociology, and related disciplines. Indeed, entire theories of humor have been developed using formulaic jokes as canonical examples of humor. Many of these approaches share a focus on formulaic jokes as texts, which has the disadvantage of decontextualizing an inherently contextual phenomenon. While formulaic jokes have a stable identity as a reproducible text with a regularized structure and content, the performance of an individual joke is highly variable and inextricably linked to the situational context in which it is told. I argue that as a social phenomenon, jokes should be analyzed from an interactional perspective.

Much attention has been given to the structure of jokes, as well as to the reactions to jokes within interaction, but other elements of interaction in joke telling have been under-examined. This paper examines what happens between participants when jokes are told in interaction, specifically the important functions that joke prefaces serve, and what the use of these prefaces tells us about the risks involved in joke telling. In the analysis, jokes are not treated as static texts, but rather as contextualized performances with important interactional implications. Arguably, creating the interactional effect of making people laugh may be seen as a prime objective of telling a formulaic joke. However, as my analysis shows, bringing about humor with a punch line is not the only interactional consequence of joke telling in interaction. As with any interaction, there may be unexpected elements which are part of both the interaction and the performance. And in a joke-telling setting, where participants are often prepared and willing to laugh, these unexpected elements may not only enhance the humor of the joke, but bring about humor in their own right.

One goal of the current study is to provide further insights into the interactional aspects of formulaic jokes, using only data recorded from interaction. While jokes ordinarily occur in everyday interaction, it is difficult to successfully capture them as they take place, leading some analysts to rely on interactions reconstructed from memory or other means such as surveys. With the much larger collection in this study—303 formulaic

jokes told in interactional settings—it is possible to explore issues which have been addressed by previous researchers but deserve further examination. In particular, an interactional approach sheds light on jokes as performances, and risky ones at that, as well as on the role of prefaces as interactional tools for mitigating such risk and enhancing performance.

Formulaic Jokes in Interaction

One of the earliest and most influential study of formulaic jokes in interaction is Harvey Sacks's (1974) analysis of a dirty joke. In his analysis of a teenage boy's telling of a dirty joke, he suggests that by mentioning the source of the joke (in this case, the teller's sister) in the preface, the joke teller has built in a mechanism for disaffiliation from the joke should it fail, which it does. Sacks also asserts that jokes, especially dirty jokes, pose a risk for recipients, functioning as "understanding tests" (1974:346). That is, the recipients must display understanding of the taboo subject matter, and recipients who fail to understand are compelled to conceal this through appropriately timed laughter, or else they risk being seen as unsophisticated or, worse, being held accountable for feigning comprehension. Jokes are not, however, only risky for recipients. Sherzer (1985:219) expands on Sacks's findings by discussing the role of jokes as displays of knowledge and thus "intelligence tests" for both the teller and the audience. Tellers must demonstrate through their performance that they understand the joke, just as recipients must show their understanding through an appropriate and well-timed response. However, I argue that beyond simply understanding the joke, tellers must also contend with risk related to the joke's content as well as its performance; there are many ways in which tellers demonstrate orientation to this risk and develop strategies for lessening it, such as through joke prefaces and meta-discursive joke framing such as talk about the joke at hand or about a speaker's joke telling ability.

In her discussion of prefaces to jokes, Chiaro (1992) addresses the face-saving function of prefaces. She argues that openings to jokes, such as announcements, requests for permission to tell the joke, and verification that the participants do not already know the joke, occur because joke tellers require encouragement before telling a joke for fear of losing face. Likewise, Edwards (1984) and Cashion et al. (1986) see prefaces as both a means of dissociating oneself from the content of the joke and as a way to begin the joke in a socially acceptable way. Edwards argues that prefaces are a way for the narrator to "den[y] responsibility for the text in order to accept responsibility for the performance" (1984:214). Through her focus on potentially offensive jokes she shows that speakers use disclaimers to distance themselves from the content and make acceptable their "breakthrough into performance" (Hymes, 1975).

Joke telling as Performance

The context within which a joke is told is widely variable, yet one factor remains constant: a joke is a text which has been decontextualized and recontextualized within a particular setting and which is always told as a performance. However with very few exceptions (e.g., Edwards, 1984) joke telling has not been analyzed using a performance framework. The concept of performance (Bauman, 1975) is therefore essential to this study. As a performance, a joke always "involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content" (Bauman, 1975:293). Joke tellers are keenly aware of their accountability to the recipients of the joke, based not only on the

joke's content (which may play a large role) but also on the quality of the performance itself.

Given that a formulaic joke is almost always a recital of a previously heard joke, the teller must entextualize the joke in order to retell it. Entextualization is the process of "making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit—a *text*—that can be lifted out of its interactional setting" (Bauman & Briggs, 1990:73, original emphasis). Jokes as a genre are highly susceptible to this process, both by joke tellers and by humor researchers who analyze jokes. Once the joke has been removed from its original social context (i.e., where it was first heard or read), it is recontextualized in a new setting (i.e., when it is told again). So while jokes may be seen as a type of text, and certainly are seen as such by participants, they are by no means static entities. As Bauman and Briggs point out, when this recontextualized text is recentered in a new context, it necessarily brings with it elements from its earlier context, while at the same time having "emergent form, function, and meaning" in the new discursive setting (1990:75).

This emergent form can be seen in formulaic jokes told in interaction, particularly in the many unexpected, non-formulaic elements which arise in such tellings. For example, Norrick (2001) shows that aspects of delivery that might generally be thought of as detracting from effective telling, such as hesitation, backtracking, and repetition, are in fact tools used to heighten performance, highlighting how little we know about how jokes work in interaction and demonstrating that intuitions and recollections may not be borne out in recorded data. Furthermore, Kotthoff (2007) shows that elements that might considered deviations from the joke such as interjections, which could be expected to have a harmful effect on the joke's success may actually be clever and creative devices for improving the performance.

The current study likewise aims to more fully address the range of interactional and performance phenomena involved in joke telling more fully on the basis of recorded interactional data. I discuss the various ways that risk is evident in joke telling in interaction and the tools speakers use to mitigate that risk. I focus on prefaces, in particular those which both orient to and function to reduce the risk of negative evaluations based on the content and/or performance of the joke. I refer to these as *evaluative risk prefaces*. In addition, there are many other preface types in the data which indicate other kinds of risks involved in joke telling in interaction, such as topic transitions and announcements. I refer to these prefaces as *interactional risk prefaces*, as they serve the interactional function of beginning a joke in a socially acceptable manner. In an interactional risk preface, the risk is not as foregrounded as with evaluative risk prefaces; the tellers are essentially observing normative routines of interaction.

I use the term *risk* for both interactional and evaluative prefaces in order to highlight that there is always some risk involved in interactions and that the salience of such risk is often heightened in joke telling. Thus, the fact hat nearly three-quarters of the jokes in my data set contain an interactional preface suggests that smoothly transitioning to the next joke is important for tellers. However, in the case of evaluative risk prefaces, the risk is so appreciable that tellers explicitly talk about it, taking out "insurance policies" against negative evaluation through meta discourse about the joke or their performance of it. While the functions of interactional risk prefaces are interesting in their own right, due to space limitations and the special risks involved in performance, I focus on evaluative risk prefaces in the current study. Specifically, I examine how such prefaces show tellers' orientation to the risk of negative evaluation in joke telling, and how they function to mitigate this risk. Furthermore, I argue that evaluative risk prefaces do much more than

allow tellers to "breakthrough into performance" (cf. Edwards, 1984); rather, they are in fact a crucial part of the performance in many jokes, enhancing performance in addition to reducing risk.

Methodology

The data used for this study are formulaic jokes of both the narrative and riddle types (cf. Attardo & Chabanne, 1992) taken from interactional data. I recorded tellings of 303 jokes, often occurring in rounds, during interactions involving three or more speakers. I have transcribed all jokes presented in this analysis following the transcription conventions of Du Bois (2006). The analysis of each joke starts from the beginning of its telling, including the preface if there is one, and continues until the completion of the joke, that is, the punch line and recipients' reactions. Inclusion of the interactional entirety of the joke's telling sheds light on the creative and non-routine aspects of this genre.

One of the challenges of studying jokes in interaction is the collection of recorded interactional data. As previously mentioned, despite the fact that jokes are not an unusual phenomenon in interaction, they are logistically quite difficult to record spontaneously. In the course of this study, I have often been part of unrecorded and unprompted joke-telling sessions, even when other parties were not aware of my subject of study. Furthermore, many times, to my great frustration, a friend recounted their experience of the perfect data for me—if only I had been there! So while jokes are regularly told in interaction, recorded examples were not readily available. For example, an extensive search of the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken English (249,000 words) yielded no examples.

In order to assemble a larger sample, the rest of the data were collected in pre-arranged joke-telling sessions: interactions wherein the participants were aware of my desire to collect jokes and were sometimes explicitly asked by me or other participants if they had any jokes to tell; for example, in one instance I asked, "So you got any jokes for me, Jerry?" at the beginning of an extended round. The recorded data do not consist entirely of joke telling; many of the joke-telling sessions contain non-joke conversational interaction as well. The participants were not told of the study's focus on interaction, performance, and risk, analytic themes that emerged after data collection was complete, but simply knew that jokes were being collected for research purposes (see Edwards, 1984 for a similar methodology). Although this method does not allow for an analysis of how jokes arise in interaction, the focus of this study is the interaction that takes place during the joke telling itself. And crucially, this approach made it possible to collect a much larger database of jokes than could be obtained by other means. Furthermore, a comparison of jokes told in conversational settings and those told in organized joke-telling settings shows that all preface types I discuss in this study occur in each setting.

I collected the jokes analyzed in this study from 11 separate recordings of gatherings of friends, family, and colleagues between Fall 2005 and Fall 2007. I am present in all of the recordings except the two recordings provided by colleagues. Because the participants are often my friends and colleagues, more than half of them are linguists and 11 of them linguistics graduate students, although none specialize in the study of humor. There are a total of 21 female participants and 16 male participants, but not all of the 37 participants tell jokes during the interactions; there are a total of 15 female and 12 male joke tellers. The age range is from about 18 to 80; however, most participants are 25 to 35 years old. The majority of participants are European American and from middle-class backgrounds. All participants other than myself are referred to by pseudonyms.

Preface Types
After all of the data were collected, a categorization of preface types was established based on classifications that emerged from the content of the prefaces, which were divided into two broad categories: interactional risk prefaces and evaluative risk prefaces.

Interactional Risk Prefaces
Interactional risk prefaces are those which function to transition smoothly into a joke in an interactionally acceptable manner. I classify interactional risk prefaces into 7 distinct types on the basis of content and function: 1) discourse markers, 2) descriptions and details of the joke, 3) announcements, 4) prompting by another participant, 5) topic transitions, 6) source references, and 7) positive evaluations of the joke. In the data set 218 (72%) of the jokes are preceded by at least one interactional risk preface. Despite the interesting role of interactional risk prefaces in joke telling in interaction, it is the clearly heightened awareness of and orientation to the risk of negative evaluation evidenced in evaluative risk prefaces that will be addressed in this analysis. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the use of such prefaces both as a strategy for mitigating this risk and as a crucial part of the joke's performance.

Evaluative Risk Prefaces
Evaluative risk prefaces are those that clearly orient to the riskiness of being negatively evaluated during the process of joke telling. These are further broken down into content prefaces and performance prefaces. In a content preface, the risk is based on the participants' evaluations of the content of the joke. Tellers can use a content preface to verify that the joke is not already known by the recipients, or simply to warn the recipients that they may have heard it before. The teller also orients to participants' possible objections to the content of the joke and may caution that the joke may be evaluated as unfunny or offensive.

While content prefaces orient to possible negative evaluations based on the joke's content, performance prefaces indicate a concern with evaluations of the teller's performance of the joke. Tellers may warn that they are "bad" at telling jokes in general or admit to a possible "bad" telling of the specific joke at hand, or they may warn that they are unable to remember the joke in its entirety. The practice and function of performance prefaces are noteworthy, as they are strongly indicative of tellers' orientation to the importance of performance in joke telling. Speakers' usage of both content prefaces and performance prefaces shows a similar orientation to the importance of risk and performance; however, I have chosen to exclude performance prefaces from this analysis as they have a distinctive function not shared by content prefaces[1]. Table 1 lists and illustrates the types of content-based evaluative risk prefaces with examples the data set. Undoubtedly, there are other possible preface types for jokes that do not occur in the present data set.

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[1] See Bird (In Preparation) for a discussion of the role of ideologies of gender and joking in these preface types.

Table 1: Types of evaluative risk content prefaces

Known Content	"Did anyone tell the blond one about the dog?"
Unfunny Content	"Okay this may be one of the dumbest jokes ever but..."
Offensive Content	"So this guy, this is getting naughty but I'll tell it anyway."

Analysis of Evaluative Risk Prefaces

Beyond simply distancing themselves from the content of the joke, tellers utilize evaluative risk prefaces in much more complex ways in interaction, showing that the performance of the joke begins with the preface, and the success of the joke may in fact be crucially linked to the success of the preface.

Known-Content Prefaces
There are two basic types of known-content prefaces: those that seek to verify that participants do not know the joke, and those that simply warn the participants that some of them have likely heard the joke before it is nonetheless told. In Example 2, Ben references a specific joke in line 1, and then asks the other participants if they know it before continuing.

(1) 1   BEN;   The three whiskeys with the fly?,
     2   Do you know that one?.
     3   GRANT;   Mm-m. <i.e., No>
     4   BEN;   Alright,

In line 2, it is unclear if Ben is asking only Grant if he knows the joke, or all four of the participants in the room. Regardless, he takes Grant's negative response in line 3 as encouragement to continue. In Example 3, however, Grant begins a joke, then stops to warn the participants that they most likely know it in lines 2-3 (there may have been head shakes, etc.), but continues in line 4 without verbally verifying whether they do or not.

(2) 1   GRANT;   What's sweeter?,
     2   I- you guys have probably heard this,
     3   this is an old one,
     4   but what's sweeter than roses on a piano.

Both of these examples demonstrate that tellers are aware that they might be negatively evaluated by the participants if any or all of them are already familiar with the joke. This is not surprising as the success of the joke depends in part on the "disjunctor" (Attardo, 1994) being a surprise; if there is no surprise when the punch line is uttered, then the joke will most likely not be evaluated as funny. Tellers use known-content prefaces, of either type specified above, to mitigate this risk by either avoiding telling a known joke as in Example 1, or telling the joke but admitting the possibility of failure because it is already known, as in Example 2. Tellers thus reduce the degree to which they can be negatively evaluated for this failure, as participants were forewarned, or they may at least reduce the degree to which they seem invested in the success of the joke.

While a known-content preface may be used as a way to mitigate the risk of telling a joke that will be unsuccessful because participants already know it, this type of preface can also result in increased risk for the teller. In giving enough information about the joke to verify that participants do not know it, tellers also risk giving away too much information and spoiling the joke. In Example 3, Todd uses such a preface in lines 1-5 in attempting to ensure that the participants have not already heard the joke.

(3)	1	TODD;	Did anybody tell the blo:nde one,
	2		about [the uh,]
	3	ELMO;	[Oh %y--]
	4		(Hx)
	5	TODD;	about the do:g?,
	6	CHRISTY;	Un-uh.
	7	ELMO;	[No (Hx:]:) [₂@@]
	8	TODD;	[Oh okay okay,]
	9		[₂Okay.]

In this joke, part of the "blonde" genre of jokes, about a blond woman who tries to guess how many sheep a farmer has, the punch line relies on the surprise ending that the woman has mistaken a dog for a sheep. Thus, in line 5 Todd gives away the punch line. This is a prime example of the multiple factors for which the teller is at risk when telling a joke, and of how attempts to mitigate one type of risk (content) may in fact thwart success in another risky area (performance).

Content prefaces warning recipients that the joke is unfunny or offensive play another very important interactional role in the joke's telling. It has been argued that prefaces serve to distance or disaffiliate the speaker from the joke and therefore any negative evaluation in the case of failure (e.g., Chiaro, 1992; Sacks, 1974). The most artistic prefaces, however, prime the recipients to receive the joke positively despite its content flaws "by anticipating audience response, and by trying to manipulate that response" (Edwards, 2003:216). A well-delivered preface, together with skillful performance elements, can enhance what might not be considered a particularly funny or appropriate joke (at least according to some members of the audience).

Unfunny-Content Prefaces

Prefaces that warn that the joke may be perceived as unfunny by the recipients often precede very successful jokes—those jokes which are followed by laughter or positive evaluations. The teller expresses the possibility of negative evaluation, which seems to serve to remind participants that this is not the preferred response. The majority of unfunny-content prefaces in the data (80%) indicate that the tellers themselves do not consider the jokes to be particularly funny (e.g., *So that made me think of a stupid joke…*). The simplest type of unfunny-content preface cautions that the joke may not be very funny. Many of these jokes are in fact successful; however, more than half in the data set are not. The joke that follows the preface in Example 4, characterized as *corny* (not very witty or sophisticated) is followed by 21.9 seconds of laughter and commentary such as *That's pretty cute,* and *Oh that is so good*, as well as a repetition of the punch line by a participant (discussed further below).

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(4)  1   SALLY;        @[@@@(H)]
     2   MOLLY;           [I have a really corny one.]
     3   JENNA;        [₂Okay.]
     4   CHRISTY;      [₂Ya:y.]
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On the other hand, other jokes with unfunny-content prefaces may fail in spite of the teller's warning. Example 5 precedes a joke which, despite an audience member's encouragement to tell the joke in line 6, is followed by 7.2 seconds of groaning by two participants, and *Oh my God* by the participant who encouraged the teller in the first place, but no laughter.

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(5)  1   ISAAC;        (TSK) And then the [₆worst one,]
     2   #CHRISTY;                        [₆(H)]
     3   ISAAC;        (TSK) of a:ll was,
     4                 which probably won't be funny to anybody here,
     5                 (0.6)
     6   ELMO;         Try.
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A speaker may also pair an unfunny-content preface with a funny-content preface by asserting that previous audiences have considered the joke to be unfunny, but that she herself finds it to be very funny (e.g., *It's not very funny. Nobody ever laughs. I love it dearly*). Such prefaces occur in 5 of the 23 unfunny-content prefaces in the data, and all 5 of the jokes prefaced in this manner are very successful, that is, followed by lengthy laughter and appreciative comments. A preface that includes the information that the speaker finds the joke funny but that it has not been perceived as such in the past explicitly conveys the desired response to the recipients. Thus, in these five cases, a funny-content preface does in fact serve as (part of) an evaluative content preface.

An illustration of an unfunny-content preface that includes such explicit cuing of the desired response is seen in the following examples. In Example 6, Jenna announces her joke with an unfunny-content preface and then gives an unusually long account of how funny she thinks the joke is. The entire preface lasts 31 seconds, whereas the joke itself is only 23 seconds long. The first part of her preface is the warning about the joke's unfunny content and includes a request for the recipients to evaluate it for themselves.

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(6) 1   JENNA;      Well I have a joke,
    2   CHRISTY;    Okay.
    3   JENNA;      that deals with ha:nds.
    4               [You have to] [₂ha- you have to see the] hands.
    5   CHRISTY;    [Okay.]
    6   ELMO;                          [₂O:kay(hx).]
    7   CHRISTY;    Okay.
    8   JENNA;      (H:) But,
    9               the funny thing i:s that,
    10              (0.4)
    11  JENNA;      nobody but my sister and I:,
    12              have ever thought this joke was funn%y.
    13              So you're gonna h@ave to [t@ell m][₂e?,]
    14  JAYLA;                          [@@][₂@][₃@@@@][₄@]
    15  ELMO;                          [₂@@@][₃Oka@@@y.]
    16  JENNA;                                 [₃if you think it's fu]
                    [₄nny or not.]
    17  ELMO;       [₄(H:) He-] alright.
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Before Jenna admits in line 12 that no one ever thinks her joke is funny except herself and her sister, she introduces this fact in line 9 as being funny in and of itself. That is, she explicitly tells the participants that there is something amusing about this joke (presumably besides the joke itself), priming the recipients to notice "the funny thing." [2]

In addition to this priming, Jenna laughs in her request for evaluation in line 13, after which two of the five participants laugh. This tactic of laughing during part of the joke's telling, and specifically during a preface, is found in many examples in the data set and seems to be a device for inviting laughter from the recipients (cf. Atkinson, 1984; Glenn, 1989; Jefferson, 1979). I refer to this type of laughter by the teller as *pre-laughter*. Pre-laughter is slightly different from what is commonly referred to as a *laugh invitation* (e.g., Jefferson, 1979; Glenn, 1989), as it may not only encourage laughter in the next sequential slot, but also prime the recipients to laugh at the end of the joke—if they are laughing during the joke's telling, they may be more likely to laugh at the punch line (cf. Schegloff, 1980; Beach & Dunning, 1982 on conversational pre-sequences or 'pres'). Furthermore, by requesting that the participants tell her if they think the joke is funny, Jenna makes very clear that her preferred response is a positive evaluation. While it may seem obvious that the preferred response to a joke is laughter (or at least some form of positive evaluation), some unfunny-content prefaces suggest that a negative evaluation would not be unexpected. Here, Jenna takes a very explicit approach and almost overtly asks the recipients to like her joke, perhaps to support the fact that both she and her sister do.

In her telling, Jenna shows quite a lot of skill at increasing the likelihood of the positive evaluation of her joke. She uses prefacing as a way to prime laughter, followed by techniques such as performance enhancements (e.g., hand gestures, voice quality), humorous framing of the joke's success after the punch line, and repetition of the dialogue

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[2] It is possible that by saying *the funny thing is,* Jenna means 'peculiar' rather than 'amusing,' or a combination of the two, although her laughter suggests the second interpretation. Bird (2007) provides a discussion of the fuzzy boundaries of the meaning of *funny*.

from the joke in order to prolong laughter (cf. Tannen, 1989 on "savoring"). Therefore, the risk-mitigating preface may work in conjunction with other elements of the joke's telling to encourage successful reception. The preface plays a crucial role in the joke's performance, serving as it does as the beginning of that performance. Therefore, in the most skillful cases, unfunny-content prefaces prime the recipients to expect what is coming and to interpret the joke, and indeed the entire performance, as humorous rather than unfunny.

Offensive-Content Prefaces

Offensive-content prefaces warn of a more serious offense than merely telling an unfunny joke; they warn recipients of possible inappropriateness by the teller, asserting in many cases that the teller does not actually share the attitude endorsed by the joke. As with known-content prefaces (Examples 1 and 2), the teller may either verify that the joke is sanctioned by the group or may simply warn of a possible cause for negative evaluation before proceeding to tell the joke anyway.

The following example of an offensive-content preface to be considered here precedes a particularly skillfully told joke. Part of that skill is the effective and humorous use of a preface which primes the participants to laugh at the punch line by making them laugh uproariously before the joke is even begun. Violet begins her preface in Example 7a.

(7a) 10 VIOLET;   Okay I figure I can tell these jokes 'cause my parents are deaf,
     11 VIOLET;   right.
     12   (0.4)
     13 ELMO;   [@@@@][$_2$@@@][$_3$@@@@@@@@@]
     14 MEREDITH;   [@@@@][$_2$@@][$_3$@@@@@@@@][$_4$@@]
     15 CHRISTY;   [$_2$What^h.]
     16 VIOLET;   [$_4$Plus Helen] Keller—
     17   (0.2)
     18 VIOLET;   Oh I [could do a deaf—]
     19 MEREDITH;   [O::::h] [$_2$@@@@@@]
     20 ELMO;   [Oh@@@@][$_2$@@@@ah@@@][$_3$@@]

Violet's remark in line 10 is a clear and humorous attempt to justify her telling of the joke. By referring to *these jokes* she points to the fact that she is about to tell a joke of a particular type, namely, one that may be considered offensive because it mocks deaf people. By saying "I figure I can tell these jokes 'cause my parents are deaf," Violet argues that based on her parentage she is justified in this joke's telling, or at least somewhat immune to negative judgment; given that the characteristic of her parents that she mentions is their deafness, the recipients must assume at this point that the joke has something to do with deaf people. In line 16 they learn exactly what kind of joke it is that she is about to tell. After the mention of *Helen Keller*, Elmo and Meredith break into laughter. Both recipients' laughter begins with *oh* in lines 19 and 20, signaling their sudden understanding of the type of joke Violet has in mind (Heritage, 1984). Elmo's laughter lasts for 4 seconds, while Meredith continues to laugh for nearly 10 seconds. The quality of this laughter is very distinctive in its pitch and intensity; it is clear the revelation of the kind of joke has shocked (and amused) these two participants, who anticipate that the joke will indeed be in poor taste. As soon as the laughter dies down Violet reorients to the joke she is about to tell and again achieves a humorous effect (Example 7b).

(7b) 33   (0.7)
    34   VIOLET;   I love Helen K[eller jokes.]
    35   MEREDITH;   [@ (H):) [$_2$@@][$_3$@@@@][$_4$@@]
    36   CHRISTY;   [$_2$O@@oh][$_3$@@@@@]@
                               [$_4$@][$_5$@][$_6$(H)]
    37   VIOLET;   [$_3$they're so bad.]
    38   ELMO;   [$_4$Wh@at's][$_5$#the@—]
    39   VIOLET;   [$_5$But] [$_6$my most f]avorite,
    40   Helen Keller joke,
    41   and this is bad,
    42   MEREDITH;   (H[:) @][$_2$@]god [$_3$(H)]
    43   ELMO;   [H@u@ee@]
    44   VIOLET;   [I'm warn][$_2$ing you,]
    45   [$_3$is,]
    46   (0.4)
    47   VIOLET;   Why did Helen Keller's dog commit suicide.
    48   (2.4)

This segment is striking because while Violet twice warns the participants that the joke will be "bad" (i.e., offensive) (lines 37 and 41), she also implies twice that it is good (*I love Helen Keller jokes,* line 34; *my most favorite Helen Keller joke,* lines 39-40). By juxtaposing negative and positive evaluations, she simultaneously mitigates the risk due to the content of the joke and also primes the participants to appreciate it, much as we saw Jenna do with her combination of unfunny-content and funny-content prefaces in Examples 6 above. This is a rather clever tactic as it prepares the participants for the joke's questionable content and simultaneously gives them permission and encouragement to find it funny. It also primes them to laugh, as the preface itself brings about laughter. In lines 34 and 37, Violet refers generally to Helen Keller jokes, stating first that she loves them and then that they are "so bad". This in effect communicates to the participants that the offensive nature of the jokes is precisely the reason she loves them. This information is reiterated in the same order in lines 39-41 for this specific joke: Violet loves the joke although (or perhaps because) it is bad, and in fact even worse than most (*this* IS *bad*). Furthermore, this allows Violet to position herself as a person who would tell an offensive joke, while pointing out that the activity at hand involves a certain kind of (enjoyable) ethical danger.

At this point Violet has expertly prefaced the joke. The risk of the offensive content has been mitigated by justifying her right to tell the joke, disclosing its nature, communicating her own appreciation of it, thereby permitting or even encouraging positive reception, and finally priming the participants to laugh at the punch line by making them laugh for more than 20 seconds before the joke is even told. All of the work put into this preface seems to pay off, as after the (equally expert) delivery of the punch line, the participants laugh for 40 seconds, the longest and arguably most enthusiastic positive evaluation in my data. [3]

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[3] The punch line consists of a derogatory imitation of Helen Keller incomprehensibly trying to say her dog's name (in a stereotype of deaf speech), which supposedly drives the dog to commit suicide.

Much like Jenna, Violet uses a variety of techniques to enhance the telling of her joke. This begins with a very skillful preface which both reduces the risk of participants finding the joke offensive and increases the likelihood that they will positively evaluate it. She asserts that she has the authority to tell the joke and thus should not be negatively evaluated, and she gives the participants permission and encouragement to find the joke funny, as she herself does. The expert and extremely successful performance of this joke begins with the preface, not with the first line of the joke itself. Not only does the preface frame the entire interaction to encourage a positive evaluation from the recipients, it also starts laughter from all parties long before the joke begins, priming participants to laugh at the punch line as well. As with the joke told by Jenna, it is very clear that the performance begins with the preface, and the success of the preface plays a crucial role in the performance and evaluation of the entire joke.

Conclusion

Each time a joke is told in interaction, tellers knowingly accept responsibility to the audience for the content of the joke in addition to their performance. As Bauman (1975) points out, both speakers and audience orient in a specific way to a performance. In the case of jokes, the audience is aware that in addition to the pressure to understand the joke (Sacks, 1974; Sherzer, 1985), an important part of their role is to evaluate the skill and effectiveness of the performance together with the humor of the content. Additionally, tellers use a variety of interactional strategies and meta discourse about the joke both to signal their awareness of accountability for content and performance and to reduce the risk of negative evaluation. In many cases tellers also enhance the performance by employing a humorous preface as part of the performance. Prefaces of the type examined in this study may not be a fixed part of the formula of formulaic jokes, but while formulaic jokes often follow conventional patterns, deviations from these patterns reveal a great deal more about jokes as performances as well as interactional achievements, as suggested by Norrick (2001) and Kotthoff (2007).

While several researchers have discussed the role of prefaces as a means of dissociating from a joke's content should it fail (Sacks, 1974; Chiaro, 1992) and as a means of beginning a joke in a socially acceptable manner (Cashion et al., 1986; Edwards, 1984), none have addressed the importance of performance with the use of recorded interactional data. This study has built on the work of previous scholars, acknowledging the strengths of those analyses. However, rather than seeing prefaces as merely a means of divorcing oneself from a joke (e.g., Sacks, 1974) or as a way to "breakthrough into performance" (Edwards, 1984; cf. Hymes 1974), by identifying types of risk prefaces—specifically evaluative risk prefaces based on content—and analyzing their interactive functions, this study demonstrates that in interaction, prefaces to formulaic jokes are far more complex than previous research has suggested, both contributing to and enhancing the humor of the interaction. By viewing these prefaces as a crucial part of the performance of a formulaic joke and taking into consideration the effect of both successful and unsuccessful evaluative risk prefaces, this study offers a deeper understanding of the complexities of humor in interaction and the variability of a genre which has all too often been seen as static or predictable.

The preceding analysis has shown that formulaic joke prefaces fall into two categories: those whose function is to aid interactionally in smooth transitions between jokes, and those motivated by evaluative risk, which function to mitigate that risk, for a joke teller is evaluated not only based on the joke's content, but also on their performance of the joke's

telling. The prefaces orienting to content identified in this study—that the content will be negatively evaluated because it is known, unfunny, or offensive—serve to orient the recipients to the kind of joke they are about to hear, and usually imply the type of reception the teller hopes to achieve. They thus offer an opportunity for participants to express any objections they may have and often encourage participants to expressly give the teller permission to continue. Used as a tool to prime recipients for the joke and to boost the likelihood of a positive evaluation, these prefaces are clever and often very successful methods of reducing the risk involved in joke telling. Unfunny-content and offensive-content prefaces function in particular not only to warn recipients of the subject matter, but also to prime recipients to accept and appreciate this type of content, at least for the duration of the joke.

The analysis above has also shown that prefaces are not peripheral to but the beginning of the joke's performance; they indicate the importance tellers attach to their performance of the joke and their awareness that they will be evaluated for their skill. While the use of a risk-related preface may serve to mitigate risk and/or disaffiliate the teller from the joke, in many cases it in fact heightens the performance, acting as a locus of humor before the textual portion of the joke even begins. The teller may achieve this heightened performance in several ways during the preface: by explicitly communicating the preferred response of positive evaluation, by offering his or her own evaluation of the joke, by warding off or discounting possible objections, and by inviting laughter. As I have shown, prefaces are often accompanied by pre-laughter from the teller, which encourages recipients to laugh before the joke has even begun and perhaps increases the likelihood that they will laugh at the end of the joke as well. All of these elements together create a humorous interactional moment even before the telling of the joke itself; by framing and priming the humorous attitude that is need for what is to come, speakers are not merely mitigating against failure, but enhancing the overall performance and creating a livelier interactional experience for the audience.

Both the diversity of risk prefaces and the frequency with which they occur demonstrate that formulaic jokes are much more interactionally intricate than one might expect. As performances and not fixed texts, formulaic jokes are a risky undertaking. This is evidenced by the many creative techniques tellers and recipients employ to mitigate this risk and heighten performance. The interactional importance of risk prefaces demonstrates that they should not be seen as aberrations from the formulaic text, but rather as valid and important components of formulaic joke telling in interaction. By analyzing the form and function of these elements, we can better understand the complexities of joke telling in interaction and the ways in which participants manage the risks and goals of this activity. The role of risk and performance in formulaic joke telling in interaction highlights the need to study the diversity of jokes in interaction as remarkable and complex interactional achievements.

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