

**“I’m almost afraid to tell this”:
Risk and Performance in Prefacing of Formulaic Jokes in Interaction**

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I. Introduction

Prefaces of Formulaic Jokes

- Prefaces of formulaic jokes told in interaction do more than allow teller to disaffiliate from failed joke
- Prefaces play a crucial role in not only mitigating risk but in the performance of the joke; the preface is *part* of the performance
- Performance strategies involved in prefaces bring about interactional effects which enhance the overall performance of the joke

Formulaic Jokes

- Focus on structure (Attardo & Chabanne 1992, Chiaro 1992) has attempted to show regularities and patterns of jokes
- Some models allow for treatment of jokes as decontextualized texts rather than interactional achievements
- Limited use of recorded interactional data due to difficulty of capturing jokes as they occur

Risk and Prefaces

- Formulaic jokes described as “intelligence tests” (Sherzer 1985:219) - risky for both teller and recipients, and as “understanding tests” (Sacks 1974) risky for participants
- Prefaces serve a face-saving function to disaffiliate from the joke in cases it fails (Sacks 1974, Chiaro 1992, Cashion et al. 1986)
- Prefaces are also a means of beginning the joke in a socially acceptable manner, signaling a “breakthrough into performance” (Edwards 1984)

Performance

- “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)

- As performances with “emergent form, function, and meaning” (Bauman & Briggs 1990:75) non-formulaic performance strategies enhance timing and overall performance (e.g., Norrick 2001, Kotthoff 2007)

II. The Data

- 303 recorded jokes told in interactional settings; a total of 11 separate spontaneous and pre-arranged sessions recorded between Fall 2005 and Fall 2007 and transcribed following the conventions of Du Bois (2006)
- A total of 37 participants
 - 21 female, 16 male
 - Age range from 18-80, most participants 25-35
 - Majority are European-American from middle-class backgrounds
 - Not all participants tell jokes during the interactions

III. Analysis

Preface Types

- Interactional Risk Prefaces
 - Transitional function to begin the joke in interactionally acceptable manner, primarily functioning to gain the floor
 - discourse markers
 - descriptions and details of the joke
 - announcements
 - prompting by another participant
 - transitional markers
 - source references
 - positive evaluations of the joke
- Evaluative Risk Prefaces
 - Orient to and seek to mitigate risk based on possible negative evaluation of joke content and/or performance
 - known content
 - unfunny content
 - offensive content
 - long content/performance
 - bad performance
 - forgetful performance

- Preface not only marks a transition into performance, but *is* the beginning of the performance and is often crucial to success of joke
- Gender plays a crucial role in performance prefaces, which often transform possible blunders into humorous occurrences in and of themselves (Bird in progress)
- Focus of this analysis is on evaluative risk prefaces based on joke content

Known Content Prefaces

- Seek to verify that participants do not know joke

(1) 1 BEN; The three whiskey's with the fly?,
2 Do you know that one?.
3 GRANT; Mm-m.
4 BEN; Alright,

- Warn the participants that they may know the joke, but proceed regardless

(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.

- More complex negotiations with participants to ensure at least one participant does not know the joke – the joke will then be directed to that participant

Interactional Effect

- Mitigates risk by
 - a) avoiding telling a known joke
 - b) telling the joke but admitting the possibility of failure
- Reduces the degree to which they can be negatively evaluated for failure, as participants were forewarned
- Reduces the degree to which the teller seems invested in the success of the joke.
- May result in increased risk for teller and possible failure as in Example 3

(3) 1 TODD; Did anybody tell the blo:nd 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.]

- Multiple factors for which teller is at risk
 - Attempt to mitigate one type (content) may thwart success in another risky area (performance)

Unfunny Content Prefaces

- May precede unsuccessful joke (Example 4 followed by 7.2 seconds of groaning, one disapproving *Oh my God*, and no laughter)

(4) 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.

- However, many jokes prefaced as unfunny are very successful (Example 5 followed by 21.9 seconds of laughter and commentary such as *That's pretty cute* and *Oh that is so good*).

(5) 1 SALLY; @[@@@ (H)]
2 MOLLY; [I have a really corny one.]
3 JENNA; [₂Okay.]
4 CHRISTY; [₂Ya:y.]

Skillful Unfunny Preface

- Unfunny content preface paired with a funny content preface
 - The teller finds the joke funny, but it has not been perceived as such in the past
 - Explicit cueing of desired response – more so than simple funny content preface which serve a much more transitional function and do not guarantee positive evaluation
- Jokes prefaced with this pairing are always successful in this data (5 separate examples)

(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@afta [t@ell m][2e?,]
14 JADE; [@ @][2 @][3 @ @ @ @][4 @]
15 ELMO; [2 @ @ @][3 Oka @ @ @ y.]
16 JENNA; [3if you think it's fu][4nny or not.]
17 ELMO; [4(H:) He-] alright.

Performance Strategies

- Use of pre-laughter
 - Slightly different from a laugh invitation (e.g., Jefferson 1979, Glenn 1989)
 - Encourages laughter in the next sequential slot, but also primes laughter at the end of the joke – laughter at the punch line may be more likely if participants are laughing during the joke's telling
- Explicit statement of preferred response *tell me if you think it's funny*
- Use of performance enhancements (i.e., hand gestures, voice quality)
- Prolonging laughter after joke (see Tannen 1989 on “savoring”) through repetition of punchline and comments reminiscent of preface

Interactional Effect

- Risk mitigating preface may work in conjunction with other elements of the joke's telling to encourage the successful reception of the joke
- Preface marks the beginning of the performance and plays a crucial role in the success of the joke's performance – the joke (originally from Sesame Street) would likely not have been as successful without the elaborate preface

Offensive Content Prefaces

- Warn recipients of possible inappropriateness
- Offer a chance for disapproval from recipients (which never happens in the data)
- Assert that the teller does not actually share the attitude endorsed by the joke
- Prepare recipients to evaluate joke as funny rather than offensive, or as funny precisely because it is offensive

- Like known content prefaces, offensive content prefaces may
 - Verify that the joke is sanctioned by the group or
 - Simply warn of possibility of offensiveness before proceeding

Skillful Offensive Preface

- (7) 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; [₂What^h.]
 16 VIOLET; [₄Plus Helen] Keller—
 17 (0.2)
 18 VIOLET; Oh I [could do a deaf—]
 19 MEREDITH; [O:::h] [₂@ @ @ @ @]
 20 ELMO; [Oh @ @ @ @][₂@ @ @ @ ah @ @ @][₃@ @]

Performance Strategies and Interactional Effects

- Asserts that she is justified in telling a joke in this genre (reminding them that it does in fact belong to a genre and is not *her* joke)
- Informs participants of topic and uses absurd humor/shock to bring about laughter

- (8) 34 VIOLET; I love Helen K[eller jokes.]
 35 MEREDITH; [@ (H):) [₂@ @][₃@ @ @ @][₄@ @]
 36 CHRISTY; [₂O @ @ oh][₃@ @ @ @ @ @][₄@ @][₅@ @][₆(H)]
 37 VIOLET; [₃they're so bad.]
 38 ELMO; [₄Wh @ at's][₅#the @ —]
 39 [₅But] [₆my 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][₂ing you,]
 45 [₃is,]
 46 (0.4)
 47 VIOLET; Why did Helen Keller's dog commit suicide.
 48 (2.4)

Performance Strategies and Interactional Effects

- Juxtaposes negative and positive evaluations (like Jenna in Example 6)
 - Prepares participants for the joke's questionable content
 - *they're so bad, and this IS bad*
 - Simultaneously gives them permission and encouragement to find it funny
 - *I love Helen Keller jokes, but my most favorite Helen Keller joke*
 - Primes them to laugh at the joke as the absurd yet skillful preface itself brings about considerable laughter
- Very successful joke - followed by 40 seconds of laughter

IV. Conclusion: The Punch Line

- Prefaces play an important and complex role in formulaic joke telling in interaction
- Performance Strategies
 - Communicate preferred response
 - Ward off or discount possible objections
 - Invite laughter
- Interactional Effects
 - Allow tellers to dissociate from the content of the joke
 - Help tellers to negotiate the risks of performance inherent in joke telling
 - Heighten performance
- Preface is part of the performance
 - Preface performance enhances the joke performance
- Performance and humor in interaction should not be seen as idealized schemata but rather remarkable and complex interactional achievements.

Thank you!

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