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# Gendered Jokes: Humor as a Subversive Activity

Janet M. Bing

Old Dominion University, [jbing@odu.edu](mailto:jbing@odu.edu)

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The following abstracts are of papers presented at the 44<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the International Linguistics Association, New York University, April 16-18, 1999:

**Punctors in Japanese: A Study of Discourse Particles Across Languages.** Makiko Akiyama, New York University

Recently, researchers have begun to systematically explore the functions of an expanded set of forms usually referred to as discourse markers (hereafter, DMs). They consider as punctors words that share some structural and functional characteristics such as nervous tics, fillers, sign of hesitancy, etc., that give directions to the hearer, about how interpret the discourse, related to either the structure of the discourse, or to actions of discourse. Punctors are similar to DMs but appear only in spoken language and have lost all or most of their original meaning. Vincent and Sankoff (1992) identified punctor occurrences in the four prosodic contexts of regulation, demarcation, segmentation, and discourse. They claim that speakers use punctors in much the same way even if the overall rate of use and use and backgrounds of the speakers are significantly different although they do not discuss any variation in punctor usage.

I hypothesized that systematic variation may be present in speech and compared my Japanese data with Vincent and Sankoff's Quebec French. In both sets of data as the number of punctor occurrences increased for any

given speaker, the number of different forms used also increased.

Three principal tendencies were observed in the Japanese data.

1. No significant systematic variation in punctor usage reflected age or educational level differences.
2. In Japanese females tended to use punctors more frequently than males.
3. A dialect difference is also present.

In Japanese male non-Tokyo dialect speakers tend to use more punctors than do male Tokyo dialect speakers. However, two female speakers showed just the opposite result, even though the difference is minimal. In addition, even though the general hierarchical punctor occurrence order is the same for all speakers (regulation, segmentation, demarcation, and discourse respectively), dialect differences show the punctor occurrence varies in the segmentation context. E-mail: ma17@is4.nyu.edu

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**Sexism and Derogation in Brazilian Soap Operas.** Martha Reis Almeida, University of Georgia

In a previous investigation I followed Robin Lakoff's guidelines (1990) to recognize and disclose derogation and sexism in language usage in Brazil. The results showed that not only lexical items but also forms of address and epithets were asymmetric in terms of gender. For example, *Um touro*, a bull, describes a strong person but the feminine, *a vaca*, cow, when applied to a woman, means a whore. Using a framework based on these findings I analyzed a 1993 Brazilian soap opera, *Fera Ferida*, Wounded Beast. The investigation confirmed my previous findings in language usage. Female characters had names

that described their physical attributes of beauty, while names of male characters either described their social status, or they were Greek and Latin names symbolizing wisdom and power. Many other forms of derogation were detected.

This paper looks at a 1998 soap opera *Hilda Furacao*, Hilda Hurricane, that takes place at the present time. It examines whether the social gains of the last decades in the status of women have had any impact in reducing derogation and sexism in language usage. E-mail: marta@arches.uga.edu

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**Gendered Jokes: Humor as a Subversive Activity.** Janet Bing, Old Dominion University

Humor, as one type of self-reflective activity, can reveal unexpected perspectives and new alternatives. Many jokes, however, are based on negative stereotypes and may reinforce existing assumptions and beliefs. In this paper I argue that different kinds of humor have different social consequences. Although certain types of "feminist jokes" can be liberating, other jokes which claim to be feminist can actually work against the best interests of women.

Different types of humor have different targets and different consequences. Subversive humor targets ideology and reveals the absurdity of certain social practices, including those that unfairly exclude people from power. The primary targets of subversive jokes are repressive actions, social structures, systems, and attitudes; humor can undermine these by revealing absurdities (such as the difficulties businesswomen have in getting their suggestions heard). Subversive humor ridicules unjust

social causes rather than than the people who maintain and benefit from such systems.

Divisive humor, on the other hand, divides groups into "us" and "them," based on stereotypes and questionable social myths. Divisive humor has long been used against women and other out-of-power groups. Many women do not object to divisive humor as long as it attacks "the outsiders" and as long as the "in-group" is female.

Although divisive humor may make women feel better and may reinforce group solidarity, it also reinforces strict categorization (the belief that members of a category share certain inherent characteristics), and gender

polarization (as defined by Bem, 1993). Most importantly, divisive humor alienates potential allies because it strengthens the prevailing (and usually incorrect) assumption that social inequities result from mean-spirited individuals consciously discriminating against women and other marginalized groups. By attacking "oppressors" rather than revealing the nature of oppressive systems and behaviors, divisive humor can actually strengthen reactionary power structures. Strategically, subversive humor, which allows everyone to laugh, can be far more effective. E-mail: Jbing@odu.edu

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**Longa et Brevis: Speaking Turns and Pauses in a Pair of All-Male and All-Female Academic Department Meetings.** Susan Kay Donaldson, Tacoma Community College

Examination of audiotaped 30-minute opening segments of an all-male physics department meeting and an all-female English as a Second Language department meeting revealed striking differences in styles of speakers: long individual turns and many long pauses in the all-male physics meeting and short turns (with much overlapping) and few--and only relatively short--pauses in the all-female

ESL meeting. In addition, when suggestions for action or decisions arose, the males were generally silent, the females generally effusively talkative and supportive. In contrast to what might have been expected, the men did not compete for the floor, whereas in the female group, one struggle over topic ensued, but with a cooperative outcome. E-mail: sdonalds@tcc.tacoma.ctc.edu

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**Humor appreciation: using semantic scripts to explain gender differences.** Karen A. Duchaj, Northwestern University

The effect of gender on humor appreciation has been investigated in many ways. Results vary from finding no appreciable differences in humor appreciation between genders to discovering various types of differences and proposing explanations. This paper, applying script-based semantics to the findings, provides a new perspective on individual appreciation of jokes. A script is a piece of semantic information that accompanies a lexical item. According to Raskin, the opposition in scripts creates humor in a joke text.

I examined three variables of responses by sex: perceived funniness, cleverness, and offensiveness. Discriminant analysis revealed no statistically significant difference was found between males and females regarding perceived funniness and cleverness of the jokes, but a significant difference for offensiveness. For females,

regression analysis found a statistically significant inverse relationship between perceived funniness and offensiveness for the jokes tested. A slight inverse relationship for the male subjects was not statistically significant.

I propose that the dichotomy in the males' and females' appreciation of jokes can be explained by a difference in the semantic scripts associated with particular lexical items. For example, in the jokes studied, the word child seemed to activate different scripts for women than for men. This finding suggests that script analysis of jokes in conjunction with appreciation study may reveal differences in the mental lexicon, shedding some light on communication issues between the sexes. E-mail: beatles@casbah.acns.nwu.edu

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**Basque pronouns: En-'gendering' Basque ethnic 'authenticity'.** Begona Echeverria, University of California at San Diego

Since Brown & Gilman's classic study, pronouns have been considered key markers of identity and stance (i.e. power and solidarity), yet my research is the first study of the pragmatics of Basque pronoun use. Basque nouns have no gender, except for the familiar second person pronoun, *hi*. The formal second-person pronoun, *zu*, can be used by

either gender to address either gender. But the use of *hi* requires a gender marker on its accompanying verb forms: *toka* forms encode a male addressee with a 'k', while *noka* forms encode a female addressee with an 'n.' The addressee is encoded in the verb forms even when the addressee is not an argument in the sentence. Like other T-

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