

# Oral genres of humor

## On the dialectic of genre knowledge and creative authoring

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### Abstract

The article discusses humorous conversational activities (e.g. jokes, teasing, joint fantasizing) in the context of genre theory. The high degree of creativity, emergent construction and artistry typical of humor call for a flexible concept of genre which makes sense of modifications and transgressions in communicative processes. Some forms of conversational humor are generic, for example, standardized jokes, joint fantasizing or teasing. Other forms exploit our knowledge of serious genres and activity types (thereby relying on it): e.g. humorous stories about problems, humorous gossiping or counseling. Here the keying is done from the start in such a way that a serious mode of understanding is undermined. Generic boundaries are often transgressed and disregarded in joking; new sub-types arise, such as absurd meta-jokes which violate the well-known expectation of a punch-line or other features of the genre. Nevertheless, the realizations of these genres are related only by a sort of family resemblance. The concept of intertextuality plays another important role in analyzing oral genres of humor. Genre knowledge is also employed when the speakers violate expected patterns in such a way that further information is located precisely in the violation. The article shows humorous co-construction as an emergent phenomenon, which nevertheless (or precisely for this reason) relies on genre knowledge.

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## 0. Introduction

Humor poses a challenge to genre theories whose concept of genre imposes an excessively high standard of rigor and is too narrowly based on an interest in classifying ideals of pre-patterned discourse. The high degree of creativity, emergent construction and artistry typical of humor call for a concept of genre which makes sense of modifications and transgressions in communicative processes, as shown by Luckmann (1986, 2002), Günthner/Knoblauch (1995) and Muntigl/Gruber (2005). Some forms of conversational humor are generic, for example, standardized jokes. Other forms exploit our knowledge of serious genres and activity types (thereby relying on it). Despite, or better because of this, generic boundaries are often transgressed and disregarded in joking; new sub-types arise, such as absurd meta-jokes which violate the well-known expectation of a punch line or other features of the genre. There are genres such as teasing which much more than jokes reflect their emergent construction. We can define prototypes of teasing (and other humor genres), but the genre is nevertheless realized in a great variety of ways. Linguists have also identified some basic generic features of stories, but there are as well many sub-types of humorous stories demanding a certain style of performance, a special framing and significant deviation from their serious counterparts. There are also genres for which we lack a folk taxonomy but which are nevertheless quite generic in their dialogical structure and emergent performance (i.e. joint fantasizing). I will take a close look at the above-mentioned genres and discuss how genre, contextualization and keying relate to each other. Conversational humor often works with contextualization procedures such as code switching, social stylistics, features of oral art, repetition, marked wording, prosody, interjections, laughter, mimicry, etc. that create a humorous keying. These cues index the continually changing contextual presuppositions necessary for situated interpretations in oral discourse. Much of spontaneous humorous discourse involves conversational inferencing in the sense of Gumperz (1982).

Finally, I will discuss what it means for a genre such as gossip to be performed as a play with gossip. Is "playing gossip" still gossip? Intertextuality is another important concept that I draw upon.

## 1. Genre in the sociology of knowledge

Communicative processes following more or less fixed patterns are called "genres." Luckmann (2002: 163) describes typification and routinization processes as going on naturally in human action. It comes as no surprise that in the course of history interlocutors consolidate certain structural expectations about how an activity might begin, develop and come to an end, what role relations it allows, where it typically takes place, what its reputation is, and what functions it is able to realize.

Like poetics, theology and literary criticism, classical rhetoric works with a genre concept. Because of the excessive demands for rigor and clarity expected in scientific definitions of genre, "thus far in the illustrious history of the discipline, not so much as one genre has been completely defined" (Dundes, cited following Swales 1990, 34). Genre theorists have mainly been preoccupied with written texts, whereas the work of Bakhtin (1986/1994) and Voloshinov (1929/1975) prompted a 'communicative turn' in genre theory, as discussed by Günthner/Knoblauch (1995).

The two authors opposed a static concept of genre such as the ones common in folklore studies and literary criticism. In linguistic anthropology (Hanks 1995, Foley 1997), and likewise in the ethnography of communication, there is a tendency to no longer consider genres as static, monological products, but rather to adopt a performance-centered approach and to study genres in the process of their interactive production within a conversational and socio-cultural context. This includes showing how and why speakers violate conventions and index originality. Conversation Analysis has also had an important influence on genre research. Sacks (1974, 1978), for example, analyzed joke-telling in natural settings. He showed how joke-telling suspends the normal turn-taking procedure. For the length of the joke, the teller reserves the right to speak. This is why jokes are usually introduced before they are told. The announced intention to tell a joke must first be ratified by the prospective listeners.

Joke-telling is temporally and sequentially organized. The story unfolds in a simple series of events located in time (Sacks 1974, 1978). The sequential structure of the joke relies on a series of implausibilities. In order for a joke to be received as such, it is necessary from the very beginning to secure an appropriate reception by the listeners. The conflation of temporal and sequential order allows the sequence of events to appear coherent.

Earlier studies have suggested that disbelief is suspended for the length of the joke. Sacks, however, emphasizes that the implausibilities of jokes must be handled systematically. Jokes are not invalidated by implausibility, but rather implausibilities help to secure the appropriate reception through the canonical order of time (1978). He writes that in receiving a story, listeners should believe the events being told; if necessary, they are expected to suspend 'disbelief'. In telling a joke, the teller concentrates on constructing the punch line so that listeners can figure it out (get it) as easily and quickly as possible. Recipients should understand a joke directly, without receiving hints or additional information, and laughter is the preferred and desired reaction. But Sacks also showed that joke-telling can be used for context-specific purposes. Speakers can, as is the case in Sacks' (1978) example, use jokes to show their knowledge of sexual behavior. An interlocking of functions and goals arises. Of course, one function of jokes is to amuse people. Individual and context-specific functions can also be added. Genres may be reframed strategically in various ways. As Günthner / Knoblauch (1995: 7) explain, reframing can only succeed if there are pre-fixed communicative patterns.

Günthner / Knoblauch hold that pre-patterning is located on three different structural levels: the level of internal structure, the situative level and the level of external structure. Many features of the internal structure of jokes can be identified. At the situative level, it remains clear that joke-telling is typical of informal settings. It may be used to deformalize a context. The external structure is quite loose because we seldom find situations that make joking obligatory. One such occasion is the German "Büttenrede," a speech delivered during the Carnival season. And there are situations when joking is forbidden, for example at funerals. There is an ideology underlying standardized joking as there is for every genre. In Germany, and perhaps throughout Western Europe, men were in the past more likely to tell jokes than women. There was a critical meta-discourse about jokes. Many jokes were, for example, regarded by the women's movement as carrying sexist messages. Most jokes took place in a male world; women were often the butt of jokes (Legman 1970, Kotthoff 2006a). Then the women's movement began to produce numerous jokes aimed at men. In this way, the genre gained a new status in society's communicative household. Briggs/Bauman (1992: 147), applying Bakhtin's concept of intertextuality, describe an "intertextual relationship" as a linkage of texts that are "ordered, unified, and bounded, on the one hand, and fragmented, heterogeneous, and open-ended,

on the other." Günthner / Knoblauch (1995: 21) sum up approaches that underline the interrelationship between generic speech practices and social structures, values and ideologies. With Luckmann they see genres as part of a cultural system, as an important link between language and culture. Speakers are always open to modifying typified forms of communicative behavior. I see this flexibility as the advantage of discussing genres within the context of the sociology of knowledge. Knowledge of typified genre realization frees speakers to inscribe new social meanings into a genre. Identical realignments hold true for everyday communication, as has been discussed in connection with the evolution of the creative arts:

How a competent reader approaches a work of literature, his attitude and expectations, depend importantly upon the genre he sees it as exemplifying. A work that rebels against genre-conventions equally relies on the reader's recognition of the conventions being rejected. Aesthetically relevant features of a work may stand out only if its reader has a background awareness of the historical development of the genre, or of the style, that the work is transforming in its distinctive way and perhaps without direct allusions within the text itself. The work demands to be seen against the foil of the whole tradition from which it stems, and which it modifies by its very existence. (Hepburn, 1983: 496, cited following Swales 1990: 37).

It is also the case that humor is produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by codification. The fact that communicative activities violate the norms of their genres does not mean that those genres necessarily disappear.

I will look at jokes, teasing activities, humorous stories, joint fantasizing, humorous gossip and humorous counseling in order to discover the creative potentials that depend on genre knowledge.

## 2. Beyond the Standards of Standardized Jokes

The genre of the "joke" is familiar to everyone in our culture, and this can be relied on. I have already summarized Sacks' joke analysis. He writes that the joke, constructed as a test of comprehension, always makes special interpretative demands on reception. The demands for plausibility and coherence are different from those in serious discourse. Freud referred to the high 'density' of jokes already in

1905. Sacks (1978) stresses that there are no divergences from the central focus. 'Embellishment' is typical of stories, but not of jokes. Everything that does not direct attention to the punch line should be eliminated in jokes.

But there are indeed aesthetic strategies that improve a joke.

The next joke was told in the US state of Minnesota during a dinner shared by several friends. David, Wendy and Vivian are Americans, Roland is German.

Datum 1<sup>1</sup>

(David (D), Vivian (V), Wendy (W), Roland (R))

1 D: ...which remInds me of a JOke i wanna tell you.  
2 W: oh yeah. hehe  
3 D: uhm  
4 V: dAve it's time to GO.  
5 W: oh NO:::: hehe  
6 V: hehehe  
7 D: uh this uh THIS guy came over from EUrope  
8 in about the MIddle of eighteensIxty you know,  
9 around that PERiod, mIddle eighteenthundreds  
10 Anyway, SOMEwhere in there, (-)  
11 and the REASON he came Over of course is to make  
12 his fOrtune in this new LAND.  
13 he heard, the further wEst you WENT, the bEtter  
14 chance you had at making a FORTune.  
15 remEmber there was a GUY [that said,  
16 W: [go WEST young mAn.  
17 go WEST young mAn. go WEST.  
18 W: yeah.  
19 D: (? ?) i think his nAme was.  
20 Anyway he comes over and he he lANDs in new YORK.  
21 well All the money that he had OBviously was spent for passage. sEE'  
22 W: yeah. ((glass is tipped over))  
23 D: so, Anyway he uh he goes and he hears that there=s a WAggon train  
24 that's being set Up (-) in new YORK,  
25 and he wants to gEt on this WAggon train.  
26 but (-) he has no MOnEy. so he goes to the WAggon master  
27 and he says, uh sOMething about,  
28 (-) uh i would like to go as far WEST as you people are gOing.  
29 and he said, wEll, we're going ALL the way over to the Oregon  
territory.  
30 wEll he says, i'd like to go WITH,  
31 but i don't have any MOnEy. he says,  
32 but i'd be glAd to do ANY kind of wOrk  
33 that yOU would like me to DO'  
34 wEll, he said uh, how are you with a RIfle.  
35 (-) and he says i'm uh really vERy GOOD with a with a gun. see.  
36 so they said wEll, we're gonna set you on the last  
37 WAggon of the waggon train.  
38 you're gonna sit on the BACK and watch out for Indians.  
39 okay? so they take Off from new YORK.

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<sup>1</sup> The data stem from various circles of friends who were at the time of the recordings between 30 and 40 years old; most have an academic training background. The data are characterized in Kotthoff 1998.

40 well they go through you know ohIo,  
41 (-) and pennsylvAnia, and Illinois, and the whole wOrks,  
42 and they go to minnesOta and they get into  
43 the dakOtas before they ever see an INdian.  
44 W: hehehehe  
45 D: so and they're in the dakOtas and they are trAveling,  
46 (-) you know, this guy has got his rIfle,he hollers to the drIver,  
47 and he says, HEY DRIVER, he says, (-)  
48 I SEE AN INDIAN. (-) and the drIver says,  
49 HOW BIG IS HE: he says, well, HE'S ABOUT THAT BIG.  
((indicates a very small distance with his fingers))  
50 well, he says, he's TOO far away to shOOt. he says.  
51 jUst WATCH=m. so they go for mIles and that  
52 and he says uh DRIVER,  
53 THAT INDIAN'S STILL FOLLOWING US:  
54 HOW BIG IS HE NOW. OH HE'S THAT BIG.  
((indicates a greater distance))  
55 he says, - TOO small to shOOt. they're TOO far awAy.  
56 so: Anyway they GO and that and he says uh  
57 HEY that Indian's still - following us  
58 and he's getting a little CLOser.  
59 how big's he NOW? wEll about THAT big.  
((indicates a greater distance))  
60 ah, he says, he's still TOO far awAy.  
61 W: hehe  
62 D: so they keep on gOing and that and fInally, he says  
63 HEY that Indian's getting closer.  
64 and the driver says, HOW CLOSE IS HE NOW?  
65 WELl, he says, HE'S ABOUT THAT BIG. ((indicates a greater distance))  
66 he says, SHOO::T=m.  
67 (-) he sis, i CAN't shOOt=m. so why nOt.  
68 he sis he's a frIEnd of mine.  
69 (- -) hehe, he says, a frIEnd of yours?  
70 how the heck do you fIGure he's a frIEnd of yours.  
71 he sis, hey, I've known him since he was THAT big.  
((indicates a small distance))  
72 a: hahahahahahahahahahahahaha  
73 W: thAt's good. hehehehehehehehehehe  
74 V: hehehehehe okay  
75 D: HARD to find a good, clean jOke.  
76 m: hehehehehehe  
((Baby cries))

Generic features go beyond those described by Sacks. The joke prefers implicit person characterization for which direct quotations are very important. An essential question for joke performance always remains whether the typification process is staged in such a way that it could be shared by listeners.

## 2.1. Comical Effects of Social Typifications and Stylizations

With Tannen (1989), Couper-Kuhlen (1999) and Günthner (1999), I regard reported dialogue as a play with double voicing in the sense of Michail Bakhtin. The persons whose speech is delivered are stylized and evoked (Günthner 1999, Kotthoff 1998). These implicit typifications of the dramatis personae are easily identifiable by the

listeners because they are based on shared knowledge about typical speech styles, which is confirmed in this manner.

In a well presented joke, scenic narration occurs. Onomatopoetic callings-out, expressive evaluations, gesticulations, mimicry, interjections, typical oral and structural discourse markers and so on are employed as stylistic procedures, just as with funny stories.

```
63 HEY that Indian's getting closer.  
64 and the driver says, HOW CLOSE IS HE NOW?  
65 WELL, he says, HE'S ABOUT THAT BIG. ((indicates a greater distance))  
66 he says, SHOO::T=m.
```

Direct quotes are imperative. Elements of spoken discourse, interjections such as "hey" and "well," call prosody and shortenings (SHOO::T=m) can be reproduced most effectively in a quote. There are good and bad realizations of a genre. In a bad realization (which would not contain the mentioned strategies) the genre remains valid.

A good joke performer not only stylizes direct quotes, but also integrates other special effects, for example, s/he manipulates the tempo of the joke, such as here the iconization of great distance with long lists of the territories traversed.

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40 well they go through you know ohIo,  
41 (-) and pennsylvAnia, and Illinois, and the whole wOrks,  
42 and they go to minnesOta and they get into  
43 the dakOtas before they ever see an INdian.
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Even the reproduction of a standardized joke is much more than simple reproduction. The specific speaker-listener constellation influences the performance of the joke. Beyond the goal to amuse the public, jokes can have more specific goals, such as to introduce American folklore to a German guest as is the case in the example.

## 2. 2. Meta-jokes

For a theory of genre, it is important that interlocutors play with the features of the genre. There are question-and-answer jokes, such as elephant jokes:

- How do you fit four elephants into a VW?
- Two in the front, two in the back.

The punch line is based on a demonstration of normality. Most cars seat two persons in the front and two in the back. That elephants are too large to fit into a VW is suppressed, and thus the question is not really answered but it does not present an odd solution either.

What Attardo (1994, 285) discusses as an example of a joke, which fails to deliver the expected punch line and becomes funny precisely because of the failure to do so, is in fact a meta-joke based on the failure to fulfill the normal genre expectation:

“Have you heard the latest?”

“No? Well, neither have I.”

There are typical summons which open up a joke telling sequence, such as “have you heard the latest?” or “Do you know the one about X?” one can play with.

### 3. Stability and variability in teasing

Teasing is a genre with even greater variation in situative performance. We start from the common denominator that teasing is a personally addressed jocular remark with a bite, often performed in front of a public. The humorous quality is marked, for example, by the inadequate wording of attributions.

In the next episode, a playful framing is initiated in the first line by the inappropriate combination of *opulent* and *social life*. This steers the reception towards irony since the utterance is stylistically marked.

#### Datum 2<sup>2</sup>

(David (D), Ernst (E), Inge (I), Johannes (J), Katharina (K), Maria (M), Rudolph (R), several persons at once (m))

1 M: du hasch grad son opulEntes [soziALleben.  
2 R: [ (? ?)  
3 D: totAL. totAL was los grad, weil ich nämlich initiativ  
4 geworden bin[jetzt.  
5 M: [hahahahahaha  
6 K: [hab ich scho(h)n erZÄ(h)HLT. haha[hahaha  
7 S: [haha=  
8 s: hahahahahaha [hahahahaha  
9 E: [WAS sagt er, er freut sich schon  
10 auf wEIhnachten und silvEster.  
11a: hahahahahahahaha[hahahahahaha  
12E: [mUnkelt man. mUnkelt man.  
13D: ich hab angeregt entWEder. Oder. hab ich angeregt.

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<sup>2</sup> The irony in this scene is also discussed in Kotthoff 2002.

14s: hehehehehehehehehe  
 15K: wenn nichts los sei, weihnachten und silvEster, dann  
 16 würde er (-) verREisen. hat er gesagt.[dann FLIEGT er  
 17D: [mhm dann FLIEG ich.  
 18E: in die karIbik. karIbik. hehehehe[hehehe  
 19s: [ha[hahahahahaha  
 20M: [hehehehehehehe

**Translation:**

1 M: you are leading such an opulent [social life of late.  
 2 R: [(? ?)  
 3 D: a lot. a lot has been going on lately, because i  
 4 have taken the initiative [now.  
 5 M: [hahahahahaha  
 6 K: [i have just told about that.  
 haha[haha  
 7 [haha=  
 8 s: hahahahahaha [hahahaha  
 9 E: [what's he saying, he is already looking  
 10 forward to christmas and new years.  
 11 a: hahahahahaha[hahahahaha  
 12 E: [it is rumored. it is rumored.  
 13 D: i have suggested either. or. i have suggested.  
 14 s: heheheheheheheheh  
 15 K: if nothing were happening, christmas and new year's eve,  
 16 then he would (-) take a trip. he said. [then he  
 would fly  
 17 D: [uhm then  
 i fly.  
 18 E: to the caribbean. caribbean. hehehehe[hehehe  
 19 s: [ha[hahahahaha  
 20M: [hehehehehe

The dinner takes place at Katharina and David's home. Maria focuses on David's *social life*. She employs an elevated and inappropriate formulation (*opulent social life*), thereby creating a playful-ironic modality. Everybody knows that David prefers a quiet lifestyle. Recently, however, he has taken part in two social events: dinners at their home at Christmas and on New Year's Eve.

David likewise responds ironically to Maria's remark. Above all the formulation *taken the initiative* is quoted from Maria and his wife Katharina, who immediately reacts affirmatively to this and laughs. Many people present know that the view that David normally *does not take the initiative* is not his own. David's self-irony thus draws its potential from Maria and Katharina, who sometimes use such psychological jargon. The others also understand the conflict-laden point of David's reclusive social life and how it is discussed. In lines 6, 7, and 8 several persons laugh.

David not only processes Maria's irony, but he immediately counters it. We must assume that shared knowledge of personal habits and speaking styles and a high degree of familiarity make it possible to respond very quickly and creatively to irony. In lines 9 and 10, Ernst alludes to next Christmas and New Year's Eve, which further amplifies the topic and the teasing of David. The background is that Katharina had invited numerous guests this year not only for Christmas, but also for New Year's Eve, among others those present, and that this was definitely too much for David. He has resigned himself good-naturedly to his fate. Everyone laughs at the teasing jest that he is looking forward to the next Christmas and New Year's Eve, which also implies that there will again be numerous invitations to social events.

Ernst expands on the irony by himself starting to tease David. A contrasting perspectivation is still at stake. He speaks about David in the third person, which is typical of teasing (Straehle 1993, Günthner 1996). Maria's ironic implication that David considers his present social life to be "opulent" is now teasingly intensified. David is portrayed as wanting nothing more than to have more parties. In line 12 Ernst refers to a *rumor* he pretends to have heard, thereby suggesting the fictitious quality of his remarks.

In line 13 David seriously reports what his stated preference is (he would like to have a party on either Christmas or New Year's Eve in the coming year). Everyone laughs again. Drew (1987) has shown that teased persons initially react seriously to a teasing attack. David seriously explains how he made it clear to his wife Katharina that in the future he would prefer not to hold big parties at their home on Christmas and New Year's Eve. This reveals his real mood.

But the teasing continues. Starting at line 13, Katharina links David's distaste for an *opulent social life* with his disinclination to travel. David really does not enjoy trips abroad and seldom takes them, and the threat to take one would be the last thing we would expect from him. Everyone present shares this knowledge. David starts to take part in the teasing himself (15). He confirms the views attributed to him. This again is a reaction to the literal meaning. Ernst augments this once more by referring to *the Caribbean*. David himself had recently teased him because of his flight to the Caribbean. For environmental reasons, David was critical of traveling long distances on vacation trips. Again, the participants laugh. David's "leg is pulled", but he shows the ability to laugh at himself. Teasing can work with irony, as is the case here, and it

always works additionally with exaggeration. "Tangential address" (Günthner 1996) is typical; it underlines the performance character of the teasing.

Ironic activities are being carried out here teasingly, which everyone present seemingly finds amusing. People communicate knowledge of one another in this way and thereby affirm their identity as part of the in-group. Friendly irony allows the in-group to deal playfully with social differences, which thereby receive acceptance. The participants leave the domain of official face politics and playfully create a high level of intimacy (Kotthoff 1996). Teasing in this case indirectly communicates a social difference to David. His friends playfully convey to him a construction of how he might see himself in regard to the topic – and also make it clear that they know his real perspective. Friendly irony combines social dissonance und consonance (in the sense of Radcliffe-Brown 1940/1965), individuation and solidarity. David's self-irony shows that he does not feel insulted by the teasing. In datum 2 the social function of the teasing episode can be described as negotiating social norms and accepting differences in regard to them.

There are other forms of teasing, and the knowledge of teasing can be exploited. The listener can define a simple critique as teasing and thereby invite the emergent construction of a teasing episode.

Datum 3 (from Drew 1987)

(Gerald has a new Mustang Sport wagon)

Gerald: Hi, how are you.

Martha: Well, you're late as usual.

Gerald: eheh eheh eheh eheh

Lee: What's the matter, couldn't you get your car started?

Gerald: hehe That's right. I had to get it pushed, eheh eheh

Gerald's laughter in line 3 defines the criticism as teasing. We get an impression here of the recipient's power to negotiate the meaning of a speech activity. Lee ratifies Gerald's definition of the situation through teasing. Drew does not discuss that this is emergent teasing invited by the activities of the recipient.

I see datum 3 as an example of a recipient's reframing of a critique. Martha's remark is quite serious. But Gerald refuses to offer a serious reception of her complaint (late as usual). The occasion of the teasing is a critical incident here. As Drew claims, there is an evident contrast here between the new car and Lee's comment that he

could not get it started. The critical component of datum 3 is more evident than in datum 2.

Some teasing episodes are totally fictional. Schmitt (1992) describes a group that meets everyday at a newsstand to chat and have a drink. This group likes to tease an older customer (Müller) for coming just to see Iris, a 22-year old student. This teasing is a provocation without any underlying real event or critical attitude. The group likes to see Müller's reactions. In a playful way, the group invents special situative identities for the steady customers. The owner of the newsstand, Gerhard, for example, pretends to unmask Müller as a secret admirer of Iris. Müller is spoken about in the third person, which is typical of teasing activities. Müller often gets into the act, and Iris likewise reacts with laughter (1992: 92ff.).

The teasing episodes take place in front of a public. Often they thematize aspects of social relations. Customer Müller counters the newsstand's owner's teasing by pointing out that Gerhard's shoes could use polishing. Although the teasing is carried out in a playful mode, relevant cultural values are at stake, such as age differences in love affairs or standards of cleanliness.

Already, we have seen three moments of variation in teasing:

- Playful provocation based on behavioral differences within a social group
- Teasing as a redefinition of criticism
- Fictional teasing

Some anthropological linguists have analyzed the teasing of children, which shows further variants of that genre.

Eisenberg (1986) discusses how two Mexican families in California manipulate their children by teasing them. It is important that the children learn not to believe what is being said. Very often an adult says something that is highly threatening to the child, like: "We are going to throw Marissa into the garbage can!" This is said with a lot of laughter and a marked sing song intonation. Smiling also contextualizes a humorous keying. Very often emotive threats form the kernel of the provocation. For example, a mother might say that everyone is going to visit grandfather, but Nancy will have to stay home. After Nancy gets excited, it is made clear that Nancy will of course accompany the others. In teasing, children are first threatened, but then the threat is taken back completely, and the adults thus create a possibility to communicate closeness, security and love. The teasing in this setting is used as the first part of a

ritual with two parts. The second is the celebration of love, togetherness, and solidarity within the family.

Again, it becomes evident that the genre is used in various contexts for various purposes. Sexual and romantic teasing among youngsters would reveal additional aspects (Eder 1993, Lampert/Ervin-Tripp 2006). Among themselves, adults do not close a teasing sequence by demonstrating their principal social conjunction. They often develop a new teasing topic from a previous one (as we saw in datum 3). A teasing topic can be transformed into a running gag as is the case with Müller and Iris at the newsstand.

#### 4. Humorous stories about problems

The dialectic of genre knowledge and creative authoring can also be seen in narratives, for example, when comparing talk about problems with humorous talk about problems. Humorous stories about problems deviate significantly in production and reception from serious stories about problems.

Jefferson (1984) has dealt with trouble telling in conversations and shown that in this context laughter produced by the speaker does not necessarily demand that listeners also laugh. She discusses episodes in which speakers laugh while talking about difficult problems, e.g.:

Datum 4 (from Jefferson 1984)

(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.

G: Why were you crying?

Person S laughs after saying that she has stopped crying. Person G (Geri) does not join in. While laughter on the side of recipients is the normal response to the speaker's initial laughter and the normal case in daily discourse, the listeners here display "trouble-receptiveness" (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 lightly. But the hearer may not necessarily share this attitude. The hearer indicates

“trouble sensitivity” if s/he tends to react to the problem content by posing questions about it or making serious comments on it. In connection with problem presentations, there is a need for especially strong contextualizations of humor intended to evoke laughter from the hearers.

Jefferson's examples suggest that the trouble teller herself laughs relatively late in the problem presentation; in her data the first laughter particles usually occur in the closing phase of the topic. The positioning of laugh particles thus contributes significantly to the social meaning of the utterances. It makes a difference in what phase of presenting a problem the tellers laugh. If the problematic aspects are already introduced with laughter, the humorous potential of the topic takes the upper hand. Recipients expect something funny to follow.

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

In the next datum, Anni jokes about losing her student status at the university. From the very start, the contextualization of humor prevents a possible “trouble sensitive” reception.

#### Datum 5

(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  
2 NEUNunddrei(h)ßigsten semester exmatrikulieren.  
3 da hamse Extra ne STUdienberatung eingerichtet.  
4 M: nEI::(heheh)n  
5 U: es war FOLgende mEldung in der presse, in berLIN  
6 hättense jetzt mAssenhaft ihre [lang=  
7 A: [genAU. ja  
8 U: [eh die bummela(h)Anten  
9 A: [genAU. aber nur die KUNSTgeschichte.  
10 und ich meine, die anderen-  
11 U: da hamse einen mit NEUNundfuffzig semEstern entdeckt.  
12 A: a:h, NEUNundfuffzig. der hat [mEhr als ich.  
13 U: [hehehehehe  
14 A: auf V(h)IERzig [wollt ich(h)s brIngen. hehe  
15 U: [hehehehehehehe  
16 K: ja und dAnn?  
17 A: mEInes wissens kam das aus der KUNSTgeschichte.  
18 der professor SAUer hat diese Unglückliche aktion  
entrollt.  
19 schEInheilig wollte er sich erkUndigen,  
20 was mit diesen gestalten Is, ja?

#### Translation:

1 A: but imagine, I had to drop out of the university now in  
2 my thi(h)rty-ninth semester.



enrolled for so long as a personal inadequacy, but rather as a sort of game: the longer the better. Katharina's question is not understood as a question of how the overly long enrollment could have happened, but rather of how the termination could have happened. In her presentation, Anni turns the tables on the usual societal evaluations. The professor is a negative sort of person: he has spoilt her fun. She is in one sense a loser – but in a game whose norms she rejects 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 at least she has had her fun.

In order to accept the casualness of Anni's representation of her withdrawal (Exmatrikulation), however, 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 supplement her knowledge of Chinese art history. If she were actually unable to cope with her studies, the presentation and reception would probably have been different.

The listeners' reception here again shows that they share Anni's distanced and amused perspective on losing one's student status. Ulf names a negative attribution (*Bummelanten/slowpokes*) as a quotation, which Anni emphatically confirms (9). If Anni had presented her termination as awkward, it would have been tasteless 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 amused perspective on what has happened. Narratives at the teller's own expense can encourage a sharing of perspectives.

It is important to bear in mind that some stories might be told from different perspectives, tailoring them as much as necessary to fit the current context (Norrick 2000). In a different setting, Anni might very well describe the same event as really creating a problem for her.

## 5. Joint fantasizing

Characteristic of this genre is the emergent production of a shared fantasy, often with several conversational participants making short contributions which create coherent scenes through the incremental structuring and augmentation of unreality. The genre shows how interlocutors put each other on inferential tracks and how these tracks can be processed, drawing on the relevant contextual knowledge, so that the humor can be immediately “topped” (to use an ethnographical term). It shows how several



16 m: [hahahahahahaha  
 17 L: [kommst a jAhr lang aus.  
 18 H: na, na. im PLAYgirl. nO viel besser.  
 19 P: a jOa.  
 20 m: hahahaha  
 21 L: als EIne ausgabe fÜnfundzwanzig [meter hoch. hehehehehe  
 22 P: [dER fällt EH net  
 23 unters jugendverbot,=  
 24 L: hehe  
 25 P: =weil genitAlien sichst bei dem EH kane  
 26 durch den bauch, also  
 27 C: na DER kann nackt ruhig sEIn, [des des  
 28 H: [DER kann ruhig  
 29 nackt sEIn.  
 30 C: mAlen nach zahlen. [HERmes phettberg zum sElber malen.  
 31 P: [das PHETTberg puzzle.  
 32 L: hahaha pfui TEUFL.  
 33 C: da hast a LEBensaufgabe.

### Translation:

1 C: how many kilos he really weighs, nobody knows that,  
 2 how many kilos he really weighs.  
 3 R: hundred forty-sev[en?  
 4 P: [over two hundred surely.  
 5 H: [(? ?)  
 6 C: [i am not a bravo-reader with a collection of fan  
 [c(h)ards  
 7 L: [hehehehehehehe  
 8 m: [hehe  
 9 P: what?  
 10 H: how do you know that [anyway.  
 11 P: [no, but two hundred could  
 12 be possible, yeah  
 13 C: once i read that.  
 14 P: ↑that would be something. ↑hermes phettberg life-sized.  
 15 ↑celebrity cutouts in bravo, [huh?  
 16 m: [hahahahahahaha  
 17 L: [lasts for a whole year.  
 18 H: [no, no in playgirl, much  
 better.  
 19 P: a whole year.  
 20 m: hahahaha  
 21 L: as a single picture twenty-five [meters high.  
 hehehehehe  
 22 P: [he does not come under  
 23 the youth age limits.  
 24 L: hehe  
 25 P: =because with him you don't see genitals anyway  
 26 because of his belly, well  
 27 C: no for him to be nude is all right[the the  
 28 H: [for him it's all  
 29 right to be nude.  
 30 C: painting by numbers. [hermes phettberg to paint

yourself.  
31 P: [the phettberg puzzle.  
32 L: hahaha yucky.  
33 C: that's a lifetime task.

Before the transcript begins, someone had commented that Hermes Phettberg would not reach the age of seventy, since he was much too fat. Conrad agrees in line 1/2 and notes twice that no one knows how much Phettberg weighs. Renate offers a concrete guess with a slight question intonation. Peter in line 4 offers an even higher estimate. So far the talk is serious. In line 6 Conrad makes a statement about himself, which demands extra processing effort to fit it into the topical context. The last word contains a laughter particle. Lilo and some others respond with laughter (lines 7, 8), which suggests that they understood Conrad's statement to be funny. Coherence seems to be formed. Conrad refers to a youth magazine, *Bravo*, which publishes so-called *Steckbriefe* (celebrity trading cards) containing all sorts of information about film, pop and rock stars. Here we have an unusual combination of elements from the life world.<sup>3</sup> Phettberg does not at all fit into the trendy youth magazine *Bravo*, which does not cover intellectual and unconventional personalities. Peter has not understood something (maybe he could not see the comical dimension). Hugo's question in line 10 is directed at Peter, who in line 4 made a claim about Phettberg's weight. Peter in the following softens his assertion a bit. In line 13, Conrad agrees with him.

In the lexeme *Steckbriefsammlung* (celebrity trading cards), we find the first laugh particles of this episode, which elicit responsive laughter; thereby ratifying a humorous perspective on the conversational topic *Phettberg* in connection with *Bravo*. The utterance in line 6 does not immediately make sense and violates the maxims of quality and quantity, because nothing is ever written about Phettberg in *Bravo*. According to Sperber and Wilson (1985), the listeners have to seek a context for the information which requires as little processing effort as possible, thus preferably the one already opened, to which the new information can relate. The widely differing topics of Phettberg and *Bravo* can relevantly be connected if one takes *Bravo* as a context in which celebrity trading cards about Hermes Phettberg could be created. This presupposes that Phettberg could be presented as a teenage idol. In reality, this is so far from the truth that it is amusing. It works as an invitation

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<sup>3</sup> Literature theorists such as Iser 1992 see that as a typical procedure to create art. They discuss only written texts such as novels or poetry. Humor shows all features which Iser calls artistic staging.

to enter the realm of fiction. The normative world of stars and starlets is connected with the anti-normative world of Hermes Phettberg. Line 6 bi-sociates two contrastive frames, as Arthur Koestler described in his book on "acts of creation" (1964).

The inferencing does not explode maximally in many directions, but in a coordinated manner elaborates the context that was opened up by Conrad.

In line 14, Peter continues to fantasize about the topical area of *Bravo*. The phrase *that would be something* introduces something that is marked as unusual. The line is syntactically and prosodically subdivided into three phrase units, which all have the same rhythm and intonation. The accent is on the first syllable in each phrase; the intonation falls at the end of each. Rhythm and intonation can contextualize comicality, if semantics support this. In this way a humorous keying is reinforced. The youth magazine is known for its celebrity cutouts; one can gradually fit together small pieces to create life-sized celebrity portraits. The pieces can be clipped out of *Bravo* one after the other like puzzle pieces. This sort of world knowledge has to be activated. Drawn out laughter in line 16 indicates that something funny is being processed.

*Bravo* is introduced in headline style. Formulation (lines 14 ff.) certainly is among the procedures which key humor. Metonymically, elements of *Bravo* (a journal has headlines) are used in order to not only denote this magazine, but simultaneously to stylistically evoke it. The syntactic and prosodic forms recreate the semantic content iconically. This "likeness on several levels" (Jakobson 1960: 369) characterizes aestheticized speech. Conversational humor here enters into the realm of verbal art (Knoblauch/Kotthoff 2002).

Furthermore, the continuation of a very elliptical speech style is striking. Ellipses usually contain the *rheme*, the new information. In line 18, for example, the proposal to present Phettberg in *Playgirl*, as well as the evaluation *no viel besser/much better* are like small spotlights on an already set stage; lines 19 and 21 also cohere in form and content to lines 14f.

The presented fictionalization is absurd, since Phettberg absolutely does not come into question as a teenage idol, suitable to be presented in *Bravo*. In line 16 the women present laugh. Lilo comments on the fantasy that in the case of Phettberg it would take an especially long time to collect all the pieces (a Jahr/one year); she thereby alludes to his enormous girth. Allusions further aestheticize the discourse. In conversational humor the recipients often actively top the ongoing humor (Norrick

1993). The humorous fantasy is displayed as an ongoing achievement. Hugo in line 18 intensifies the fiction about Phettberg in *Bravo*; he suggests *Playgirl*, a magazine known for erotic photos of nude or scantily clad males. Previously created images are then detailed. Peter would like to see him presented a year long in this magazine as well. Several persons laugh (20). In line 21 Lilo stretches the life-sized figure to one twenty-five meters high and likewise laughs.

Starting in line 22, Peter takes up another aspect of Phettberg's girth and erotic self-display. His belly hangs down, serving as though it were a sort of fig leaf. Conrad and Hugo affirm this impression. Phettberg and youth age limit form a new combination, which is also developed by other interlocutors. Conrad in line 30 alludes to a game for children. The game is called *Malen nach Zahlen/painting by numbers*. Peter then continues with a further fictionalization from children's games (*the Phettberg Puzzle*). Lines 30 and 31 again use a headline style. The games are presented like an ad. Lilo laughs and inserts an interjection of dismay. Conrad, by pointing out that one thereby has a *Lebensaufgabe/lifetime task*, again alludes to Phettberg's enormous girth.

All the fictionalizations draw on cultural knowledge of entertainment media and thereby make coherence easy. The topic development goes from Phettberg in *Bravo*, Phettberg in *Playgirl*, to Phettberg in children's puzzle games. The coordinated imaginings have a meta-message: Hermes Phettberg, who markets himself as nonconformist, is mercilessly marketed in the fantasies of the young Viennese in a conforming way. They take his body as a starting point for various humorous quips. The interlocutors do something that Phettberg himself very often does but they do it so-to-speak in a diametrically opposite manner. In numerous interviews, Phettberg himself has referred repeatedly to his unusual body, body feeling and sexuality. He acquired his popularity to a considerable degree due to the fact that he staged himself as an appealing anti-type. He contradicts several norms of the boulevard press. He notoriously presented himself in interviews as fat, unkempt, homosexual and masochistic – thereby trying to shock and simultaneously win over the public, which amused at least part of the intellectual public in Austria. Consequently, it is amusing to see him being integrated into the yellow press world as though he were a quite typical TV celebrity. Thereby the young Viennese also implicitly communicate that they find Phettberg's self-presentation contradictory. Thus, distance can be simultaneously displayed toward both Phettberg and the yellow press. The participants show their knowledge of media contents, and as well their critical attitude

to them, without explicitly evaluating them. The evaluation is not made explicit, but is jointly performed. In their imaginings, the norms of the magazine world are violated, and at the same time the social norms of self-presentation are negotiated, using Phettberg as an example.

With a high level of personal participation, thirteen different turns come about which sketch out a fiction and amplify the absurdity of its elements (lines 6, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 30, 31, 33). In this genre the most important thing appears to consist in somehow continuing to spin out the topic within theater frame. This means that a performative special frame was created. A different example of this type is discussed in Kotthoff (2005).

In joint fantasizing, condensed information is quickly added on to produce the most absurd fictive scene; the short turns iconize the tempo of building up the structure. The particular artistry of participation in the formation of such fantasies consists in doing this rapidly (Ehmer 2004). The taking over of constructions is functional in the sense of “on-line” syntactic phenomena (Auer 2005).

## 6. Playing with genre norms

### 6. 1. Humorous nutritional counseling

Below, I present another transcript from a dinner shared by friends (30 to 45 years old) in a German academic milieu. Vegetables are being passed around. Anni responds to them in an unusual way; she claims that she needs to eat a few carrots just for the sake of vitamins, and this time with butter. Then she advises the others with exaggerated emphasis that raw fruits and vegetables ought to be eaten with butter. Her explanations become still more amusing when she reveals the source of her nutritional expertise: from the *Bäckerblume* ('Baker's Flower', a free magazine available in many German bakeries, offering among other things nutritional advice). An amusing episode follows. I will explain the sequence conversation analytically and pragmatically.

#### Datum 6

(Everyone (a), Anni (A), Bernada (B), David (D), Johannes (J), Katharina (K), Maria (M), several (m), Ulf (U))

- 1 B: noch jemand ↑rÜebli::? ((bietet diese an))
- 2 A: ICH muss noch welche Essen.
- 3 ich hab zu wenig vitamin A: und bE:.

4 weil, du musst se ja mit BUTter essen.  
 5 sonst is das vitamin A hehe ni(h)cht w(h)Irksa(h)m.  
 6 B: ja also  
 7 ((Zwischensequenz, A nimmt sich Butter))  
 8 A: jetzt tu maln bisschen BUTter drAU(h)f. hehe  
 9 U: des heißt, man muss eigentlich e:h [die dann auch  
 10 A: [na ja , ohne BUTTER  
 11 D: UNbedingt. rohkost wIrkt nich ohne. (? ?)  
 12 B: wUsst ich gar nich.  
 13 A: ja:::hehe  
 14 M: ich AUch net. Ich hab [rOhkost IMmer SO gegessen.  
 15 A: [genau des NÜTZT nIx.  
 16 brauchst ↑BUTter mit dabEI.  
 17 ↑BUTTER.  
 18 D: [hehehe  
 18 [deshalb war das schOn ernährungs[poli(h)tisch WIChtig.  
 19 hehe was wi(h)r vorhIn gesagt ham.  
 20 D: [hehehehehehe [hehehehe  
 21 a: [hehehehehehe  
 22 hehehehehehehe  
 23 M: °wohEr WEISCHT du des?°  
 24 A: sowas WEIß ich. weil Ich die ↑BÄCKERblume lese.  
 25 m: hahahahahahahahahahaha[hahahahaha  
 26 K: [ICH wEIß es auch daher.  
 27 B: aber bei Unserm bäcker ↑GIBTS jetzt  
 <  
 28 [keine bäckerblume me:::hr.  
 ((kindlich)) >  
 29 A: [ja genAU. des wird jetzt Alles EINGespart.  
 30 das musst Ich jetzt AUCh schon mal feststellen.  
 31 B: sonst würd ich sie mir AUCh noch hOlen. [(? ?)  
 32 K: [ich hab  
 33 [die früher AUCh immer gelesen.  
 34 A: [die BÄCKERblume und die METZgerzeitung.  
 35 ich war ganz verzWEI(h)felt als  
 36 [ich merkte, hehe die BÄCKERblume kOmmt nich mehr.  
 37 B: [kann sein dass es die bei Uns schon LANGE  
 38 nich mehr gab.  
 39 U: da hab ich ja noch gAr keinen kontAKT aufgenommen.  
 40 [in meiner journalistischen LAufbahn.  
 41 ?: [hehehehehehehehe  
 42 U: wo ich eigentlich [versUch JEDES blatt irgendwie EINzubeziehen  
 43 M: [zur bÄckerblume?

### Translation:

1 B: anyone else rüebli:::? (Swiss German for carrot)  
 2 A: I must eat some more.  
 3 I have too little vitamin A: and bE:.  
 4 because,you must eat them with butter.  
 5 otherwise the vitamin A will no(h)t be(h) effe(h)ct(h)ive.  
 6 B: well  
 7 ((incomprehensible side sequence, A helps herself to the butter))  
 8 A: now put a little bÜtter on t(h)em. hehe  
 9 U: that means, one should practically e.h [then also  
 10 A: [well, without BUTTER  
 11 D: Absolutely. raw fruits and vegetables have no effect without.  
 12 B: I really didn't know that.  
 13 A: we:::ll hehe

14 M: I didn't either. I have always eaten [raw fruits and vegetables  
plAIn.

15 A: [that's exactly what doesn't  
hElp.

16 you need ↑bUtter with them.

17 BUTTER. therefore it was already

18 D: hehe

19 nutritional[poli(h)tically important. hehe what w(h)e said before.

20 D: [hehehehehehehehehehehehe [hehehehehehehehehe

21 a: [hehehehehehehehehehe

22 hehehehehehehehehehehe

23 M: °where did you find that out?°

24 A: I knOw that sort of thing. because I read the ↑BAker's Flower.

25 m: hahahahahahahahaha[hahahahahaha

26 K: [I also found out about it there.

27 B: but at our bakery there ↑ is now  
> ((childish))

28 [no more Baker's Flower.  
((childish)) <

29 A: [yes *exactly*. everything is being sAved on now.

30 I Also could not help but notice that.

31 B: otherwise I would still pick it up. [(? ?)]

32 K: [I

33 [also always used to read it.

34 A: [the ↑BAker's Flower and the BUtcher's Journal.

35 I was really desp(he)erate when

36 [I noticed that BAker's Flower doesn't come anymore.

37 B: [could be that it hasn't been available here anymore for a lOnG  
38 time already.

39 U: I haven't contacted them at all.

40 [in my journalistic career.

41 m: [hehehehehehehehehehehe

42 U: whereas I normally try [to include every publication somehow

43 M: [even Baker's Flower?

What is going on here? Bernada, who is from Berlin, asks the group whether anyone else would like *Rüebli* (*carrots*). This term, spoken in Swiss German dialect (Standard German would be 'Karotten' or 'Möhren') in a diminutive form, represents a code switch and thereby draws attention to the expression as such. The group is meeting in a Swiss town on the German border. Talking like the Swiss (German dialects are a popular source of German humor) affects the creation of a play layer of action in Clark's sense (1996: 357 f.): The Berliner even prolongs the *i* of the Swiss diminutive *li* exaggeratedly, thereby reinforcing the playful effect.<sup>4</sup> Marked registers and "borrowed" varieties are effective performative strategies (Coupland 2001). Marked formulations draw attention to themselves and highlight performance.

Anni pretends in line 2 ff. that for the sake of vitamins she still *has to eat some more*. Laughter particles in line 5 indicate that these reasons are not to be taken overly

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<sup>4</sup> This diminutive is well-known in the German speaking world and is identified by most speakers as typical for Swiss German. See for German dialects Barbour and Stevensen 1999.

seriously. The scene switches back and forth between joking and seriousness. But no punch line humor moves the text from the realm of bona-fide into that of non-bona-fide (as it is sometimes discussed in humor theory, see Attardo 1994). Anni actually does eat some carrots (*Rüebli*) with butter and offers a nutritional theory that the others respond to seriously (9, 12, 14, 23). Her acceptance of the carrots is not the usual way of accepting offered food, but is easy to understand. Transcripts from conversations often show that utterances contain laughter particles in places where nothing really funny is being said. Above all Jefferson (1984, 1985) corrected the dominant view in humor research that laughter follows from a humorous stimulus. Laughter itself often functions as a stimulus, as a contextualization cue, as an extra element that lends an utterance additional meaning in the sense of: “Take it easy,” or “What I am saying is a bit funny.” In line 5 the laughter contextualizes comicality (see also Glenn 2003).

In line 8 Anni tells the others laughingly that they should also put butter on their carrots. What inferences could be made from her laughing speech and nutritional counseling? Maybe she can thereby avoid the danger of being considered a glutton. Anni stylizes herself in a transparent way as someone who always acts sensibly. This perspective remains totally implicit and vague. As we all know, this is not unusual in everyday talk. We often invite listeners to make a little extra effort to construct additional meaning. All contextualization cues create, as Gumperz (1982) and Auer (1986) have pointed out, information on how to interpret what is said. Since these cues are analogous, they make sense only in combination with what is said.

David seriously confirms Anni’s theory in line 11. He must have stayed in the realm of what Attardo (1994) calls the bona-fide. We see that it is not problematic to react bona-fide to a non-bona-fide utterance. This does not mean that the discourse is shifted back to the bona-fide. It shows instead that two levels are activated simultaneously.

Bernada admits that she does not know how one ought to eat raw fruits and vegetables. This sequence is also spoken seriously. Anni then reacts with a drawn-out *ja* (well), in which laughter particles are integrated (line 13): This *well*, spoken with a gradually falling contour, has a playful sense. We could translate it as, ‘There, now you see how much / know’. Anni presents herself as an expert on nutrition and simultaneously comicalizes this role with the laugh particle and other strategies. Maria reacts seriously to the information (14). Though they switch back and forth

between both keys, this does not seem to present a problem. The playful keying does not necessarily suspend any of serious meanings that are created. What Anni tells her friends is true, and her suggestions are meant in this sense. But there is an additional layer of meaning. She could of course have pointed out seriously that vitamins in raw fruits and vegetables are more easily digested if they are eaten with some sort of fat, but serious nutritional counseling is not very entertaining. Anni communicates her advice in a double framing: she shows her knowledge and at the same time invites comical perspectives.

In lines 16 and 17, Anni again gives advice in a very exaggerated manner. Above all the word *Butter*, repeated twice with a high onset and spoken loudly, has a comic effect. David responds with laughter.

But only with the term “nutritional politically” (*ernährungspolitisch*) do most of the hearers begin to laugh. This academic-sounding term is too elevated for her modest suggestions. Anni alludes to something they *have said before* (*vorhin gesagt ham*). Prior to the episode recounted in the transcript, there was another in which the participants developed the absurd theory that if something tastes good then it must also be good in a nutritional sense. The extended laughter in lines 19 and 20 also has to do with remembering this absurd theory. The participants are also invited to infer that Anni is supporting her current culinary tastes with theories whose value depends arbitrarily on whether they fit her current tastes or not. This would be one possible way to construct relevance for her talk. But why do people present arbitrary theories and simultaneously pull the rug out from under them? Sudden shifts into a quasi-scientific register, which are contextually inappropriate, come up repeatedly with these intellectuals. They play with academic terminology, theatricalize it as though quoting scientific texts, and thereby frame it as something unusual.

Our everyday conversations are full of citation-like speech that is not introduced as such (Kotthoff 1998, 2002). We can use this mode of speech in order to blend in other persons' ways of speaking. Chiefly shared knowledge is what guarantees that such utterances are not understood on a direct level, but rather as playing with typical utterances in typical genres in a sort of theater frame – be it academic or parental or whatever – that people can laugh about. Phenomena like prosody, gestures and mimicry, seen by Bateson (1953, 1954) as meta-messages indicating, “this is play,” perform a basic function in the creation of humor. Goffman (1981) calls these “footing,” and Clark (1996, 2004) calls them “pretense” and “layering.” The speaker

downplays her responsibility for the utterance. This is not to be confused with non-bona-fide speech. Anni really motivates the group to take more butter, but does this in an entertaining manner, contextualized by integrated laugh particles, the manipulation of volume and an exaggerated authoritative intonation, whereby the utterance is made recognizable as a citation. We seem to have no problems with vague communication, as many pragmaticists since Grice have recognized. Nevertheless, Anni's humorous way of speaking can only vaguely be assigned an intention. Humorous intentions can seldom be pinned down exactly. Apparently, such vagueness can be handled without problems in communication.

Now, up to line 18 Anni is the only one who laughs. Bernada, David, Maria and Ulf react seriously, which is not a problem. There is no punch line that must be ratified by laughter. One can very well respond to the serious level of the advice. Anni's comments require no specific sort of response.

Maria asks quietly how Anni "knows that" (23). Anni constructs her answer in a suspense-creating way. The first part of the answer can be understood as in itself bragging (24); it is syntactically independent. A long, immediate laugh follows the information contained in the second statement, *Baker's Flower* (spoken with high onset). But what is funny about *Baker's Flower*?

*Baker's Flower* (*Bäckerblume* – no pun between 'flower' and 'flour' is intended, since the corresponding German words are 'Mehl' and 'Blume') is a free customer magazine available in many German bakeries. Anni focuses on this magazine as though it were something special. Cultural knowledge of the mundane, everyday kind comes into play here, since *Baker's Flower* is well known to be a very modest publication, both topically and intellectually. Anni's almost proud reference to *Baker's Flower* as the chief source of her nutritional expertise is humorous to the extent that the magazine clearly does not meet our expectations about what a university graduate normally reads. This is one of the tacit assumptions that Anni rejects when she violates such milieu-specific cultural expectations of normal behavior. Cultural knowledge has to be shared if we are to grasp this sort of humor.

Katharina announces that she has also acquired similar knowledge from *Baker's Flower* (26). Bernada's comment that her baker no longer carries this magazine is given a complaining and childishly whining undertone through the extended *o* in *more* (German: *e in mehr*). She thereby joins in the humorous play of exaggerating the prestige of this lowbrow magazine. Anni confirms the negative trend (28) in bakeries.

Bernada also confesses to reading *Baker's Flower* (32), and Anni extends the report of her reading interests to the *Butcher's Journal* (34). A confessional discourse arises, keyed as humorous, and several participants join in. They perform their extreme disappointment at the disappearance of this valued source of information. The staging of humor focused on *Baker's Flower* is jointly produced. In the emergent discourse, the scope of the humor gradually broadens.

The introduction in line 35 of the sense of feeling 'desperate' as a reaction to the disappearance of the magazine points again to exaggeration as a keying procedure. *Baker's Flower* is humorously transformed into an intellectually significant journal. One can take part in this humor by pretending to be quite serious on the explicit level, as Ulf does in the following (39). Ulf is a journalist with high standards and now pretends that he might want to publish in *Baker's Flower* and that that this would help to make up for a personal journalistic deficiency. Several of the friends laugh. Through his participation in exaggerating the status of a trivial popular magazine, Ulf also shows that he is ratifying the humor of the preceding discourse. His remark is integrated into the already constituted humorous discourse and expands on it. Ulf speaks in a serious tone, although the group knows that he normally publishes in much more prestigious journals.

In the emergent discourse, the humor is developed step by step. A level of bona-fide is nevertheless preserved. Again and again we find exaggeration used as a humor strategy.

The humorous counseling as well as the humorous play with the upgrading of modest journals allow the group, consisting of academics, to distance themselves from the norms of the academic world. Speakers index informality by maximizing an intertextual gap from serious counterparts of genres such as counseling or talk about journals.

## 6. 2. Humorous gossip

Bergmann (1987/1993) analyzed gossip as a reconstructive, collaborative genre of moral communication. In gossip, "discreet indiscretion" is managed. Although gossip has a bad reputation, it is widely indulged in and even fulfills important functions for group formation. The producer of the gossip and the addressees talk about an absent object. The information is delivered as delicate.

In the next datum, the interlocutors play with the genre of gossip.

Datum 7 (Conversation 14 Episode 10)

(David (D), Ernst (E), Inge (I), Johannes (J), Katharina (K), Maria (M), Rudolph (R))

1 K: Irgendwie hast du=s AUCH nicht mEhr so mit frau donner.  
ne?  
2 R: [ m:::::::::::  
3 K: [früher war das mal, da gab=s doch mal mEhr kontakt.  
4 R: sie hat en FREUND jetzt wieder,  
5 D: m:::: wie lang goht des schon?  
6 R: he?  
7 D: wie lang goht des schon.  
8 R: ja seit SECHS wOchen ungefähr.  
9 und sEither ist sie wieder UMGänglicher.  
10 M: ach so?  
11 I: was ISCH des für EIner?  
12 R: oh jE. jetzt eh eh RED ich natürlich wieder ausm  
13 nÄhkästchen.  
14 E: dEs erfahr ich sowieso.  
15 R: he?  
16 D: [(? ?)  
17 K: [bei UNS ist das gUt [aufgehoben.  
18 M: [hehe[hehehehehe  
19 I: [hehehehehe  
20 R: es ist der vAter ihres sOhnes.  
21 a: NA::::I:::N  
22 I: po:::  
22 K: erzÄ::h::l.  
23 D: WER das is wolln wa ja gar nicht wissen, rudolph.  
24 das dArf doch KEIner wissen.  
25 M: [(? ?)  
26 R: [also wenn ihr jetzt nächstens ins TREppenhaus geht,  
27 und die lilo kommt, sagst du, wir wissen NICHT,  
28 dass dun verhÄltnis mit dem vAter [deines SOHnes hast.  
29 I: [hehehehe  
hehehehehehehehehehe  
30 D: wir wissens auch NICHT von rUdolph.  
31 a: hahahahahahahahahahaha  
32 R: wir hams nämlich letzten mOntag GAR nicht erfahren.  
33 a: hahahahahahahahaha[haha  
34 K: [rudolph, magst du den sEkt....

Translation:

1 K: somehow things are not going so well for you and frau.  
donner. isn't that so?  
2 R: [m:::::::::::  
3 K: [previously there was, there was really more contact.  
4 R: now she has a boyfriend again,  
5 D: how long has that been going on already?  
6 R: huh?  
7 D: how long has that been going on already?  
8 R: well for about six weeks.  
9 and since then she is more approachable again.  
10 M: oh really?

11 I: what sort of person is he?  
 12 R: oh well.  
 13 now uh uh i am naturally giving away secrets.  
 14 E: i will find that out anyway.  
 15 R: he?  
 16 D: [(? ?)  
 17 K: [it is safe with us.  
 18 M: [hehe[hehehehehe  
 19 I: [hehehehehehe  
 20 R: it is her son's father.  
 21 a: NO:::::::::::  
 22 I: po:::  
 22 K: te:::ll us  
 23 D: who that is we definitely do not want to know, rudolph  
 24 no one is supposed to know.  
 25 M: [(? ?)  
 26 R: [so if you step into the stairwell sometime soon,  
 27 and lilo comes, you will say, we do not know,  
 28 that you are having a relationship with  
 the father [of your son.  
 29 I: [hehehehehehehehehehehehehehehe  
 30 D: nor do we know it from rudolph.  
 31 a: hahahahahahahahahahaha  
 32 R: we definitely did not learn about it last monday.  
 33 a: hahahahahahahahaha[haha  
 34 K: [rudolph, do you like the sparkling  
 wine...

Katharina asks Rudolph about his current relationship with *Frau Donner*, who works as a psychologist in the neighborhood and is usually addressed informally by everyone as Lilo. The formal reference to *Frau Donner* instead of *Lilo* indexes distance from the lady in question. This is the first step to establishing a possible object of gossip. Rudolph's drawn-out interjection in line 2 is hard to interpret, but somehow signals the delicacy of the subject. He answers in line 4 that *Frau Donner* apparently has a boyfriend again. A wonderful topic of gossip is thus established. David reacts with the same drawn out interjection *m:::* (thereby underlining the delicacy) and with a question in Alemannic (a south-German dialect), which he otherwise never speaks (*wie lang goht des schon?* How long has that been going on already?), and which thereby becomes an indicator of comicalization, a stage separator in Haiman's sense (1990). Now a gossipy conversation is imitated. In line 7 David repeats the question in Alemannic in response to Rudolph's questioning signal. The stylization of the question in Alemannic dialect gives his words a quotation-like character.<sup>5</sup> Rudolph replies normally and comments on *Frau Donner's* relationship. Maria and Inge would like to know more (10, 11). Rudolph verbalizes the difficulties

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<sup>5</sup> I discuss the potentials of shifting and crossing dialects as a humor strategy in Kotthoff 2006b.

he is having in his role as a gossip informant (*jetzt eh eh red ich natürlich wieder ausm Nähkästchen*. oh well. now uh uh I am naturally giving away secrets.) The group seems to be fully aware that gossip has a bad reputation. Ernst allays his misgivings. He also has other sources. Katharina pretends to be acting therapeutically (17), as though the informant would be relieved if she could share the secret. There is a humorous incongruity in this, because the opposite is obviously the case. Maria and Inge laugh. Rudolph presents the key piece of information in formal syntax (*es ist... it is...*). In line 21 a sort of exclamation goes through the round which is so exaggerated that it reinforces the theater frame of the gossip. Inge inserts an interjection which playfully underlines the outrageousness of the news (*po:::*). Katharina insists that Rudolph tell them about it. Everyone knows about Frau Donner's child and has already on various occasions wondered about the father's identity. Now David turns the tables: He evinces explicit disinterest in exactly what everyone is so anxious to know (23, 24). Starting at line 26, Rudolph stages scenes of meetings with *Lilo Donner*. They imagine saying to her that they don't know any of the things they have just been talking about. Inge laughs (29). David expands on Rudolph's fantasy of the dialogue (30). Everyone laughs. Rudolph speaks even more concretely in line 32. Everyone laughs again. The imagined dialogue with *Frau Donner* is absurd. The joking episode reaches a climax and ends, among other things, with the drinks being refreshed.

In playing with gossip, some gossiping really is going on. In a humorous frame, people can distance themselves from a speech genre with a bad reputation (Bergmann 1987/1994) and simultaneously still carry on the activity. The main piece of information, that *Frau Donner* is having a relationship with the father of her child, whose identity they have kept secret, is in any case passed on.

The emergent play is so successful because everybody knows not only the genre, but also the ideology underlying it. Key information about Frau Donner is being transmitted in a play frame.

## 7. Final remarks: transcending genre by relying on genre knowledge

In this paper I have considered humorous genres (jokes, teasing, joint fantasizing) and determined that we can find a basic pattern for them. Nevertheless, the realizations of these genres are related only by a sort of family resemblance in

Wittgenstein's sense. Genre knowledge is, however, employed precisely when the speaker goes outside the genre and when the pattern is violated in such a way that further information is located precisely in the violation.

Then I considered humorous realizations of genres that modify a serious genre (humorous stories about problems, humorous counseling, humorous gossiping). Here the framing is done from the start in such a way that a serious mode of understanding is undermined. The humorous realization is co-constructed. The co-construction is of course emergent, but nevertheless (or precisely for this reason) it relies on genre knowledge.

Along with Clark (1996), we can say that in humorous realizations of genres a second meta-communicative layer is made relevant. A level of commentary on the said arises by means of which speakers distance themselves from their messages. In playing with gossip, the gossip is kept as an intertext. The participants also communicate knowledge of the bad reputation of the genre. They take the offensive toward the ambivalence attached to the genre in everyday life (on the one side a bad reputation – on the other pleasure in the exchange of discrete indiscretions). Other intertexts are also included in the game, e.g. therapeutic discourse. People act as though it is more in the interest of the teller to tell something, than in the interest of satisfying their own curiosity.

We viewed genres from a performance perspective and witnessed how an actual co-construction of ongoing discourse indexes social relationships, moral stances and a certain context. With Briggs and Bauman (1992) we can see datum 5, 6 and 7 as maximizing an intertextual gap. Creative improvisation blurs any sharp distinctions among genres. Although the intertextual gap is smaller in realizing jokes, teasings or joint fantasies also these genres of humor demand high performance standards – rather monological in the case of jokes and rather dialogical in the case of teasing and joint fantasies.

Transcription conventions (based on GAT, Selting et al. 1998)

- (-) 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 a trailing off

..[.... .	indicates overlap or interruption
=	latching of an utterance of one person; no interruption
hahaha	laughter
hehehe	slight laughter
goo(h)d	integrated laughter
(h)	audible exhalation
('h)	audible inhalation
,	slightly rising intonation
?	rising intonation
.	falling intonation
,	ongoing intonation
:	indicates elongated sound
◦ blabla°	lower amplitude and pitch
COME ON	emphatic stress (pitch and volume shift)
cOme ON	primary and secondary accent syllable within a sentence (only in the original language of the transcript)
↑	high onset of pitch
↓	pitch goes down
<↓blabla>	low pitch register within the brackets
<(smiling)>	comments
((sits down))	nonverbal actions or comments

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