

## Functions of humor in the conversations of men and women<sup>☆</sup>

Jennifer Hay

*Department of Linguistics, Northwestern University,  
2016 Sheridan Rd, Evanston, IL 60208-4090, USA*

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### Abstract

Humor can serve numerous functions in discourse. This paper provides a tool for categorizing functions of humor, and uses this tool to highlight statistically some interesting patterns in the humor of New Zealand men and women.

The humor occurring in 18 New Zealand friendship groups was analyzed according to function and these functions were organized into a taxonomy. Functions of humor occurring in such groups can be classified under the three broad labels of solidarity-based, power-based and psychological functions. Further distinctions within these labels are also made.

The distribution of these functions within the friendship groups was analyzed. The sample consisted of both mixed groups and male and female single-sex groups. Log-linear modelling revealed the women much more likely to share funny personal stories to create solidarity, whereas the men used other strategies to achieve the same goal. They were more likely to reminisce about shared experiences or highlight similarities to create solidarity within the group. While teasing was used in single-sex groups both to create power and solidarity, this behavior reduced markedly in mixed groups. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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### 1. Introduction

The following is an extract from a conversation between four young women (for transcription conventions see Appendix A):

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<sup>☆</sup> This paper is based on chapter 5 of my Master's Thesis (Hay, 1995a). It has benefitted from the comments of Janet Holmes, Gary Johnson, Rae Moses, Bernadette Vine, and two anonymous reviewers.

- (1) 1 JF&NF: [laugh]  
 2 SF: what's this going on  
 3 JF: [laughs]: nothing + just good humor:

Here, JF and NF are sharing a private joke. When questioned about it by SF, they claim that nothing is going on, just 'good humor'. Humor, though, can have numerous functions, and usually serves a conversational function beyond simply making people laugh. When JF and NF share a private joke without including other participants of the conversation, this both reflects and affects group dynamics. It reinforces solidarity between the two jokers, while marking a social boundary between them and the other participants.

Increasing attention has been paid to humor over the last few decades. However the discipline is still young and, as Graham et al. point out:

"We are lacking a substantial body of research that focuses on the use of humor in conversational settings. Such research is necessary for the development of a single, unified functional model of humor." (Graham et al., 1992: 177)

Many areas of humor research have progressed steadily, but little research has been done on spontaneous spoken humor. Collecting appropriate data and identifying and analysing spoken humor is not without its challenges. As one begins to work with naturally occurring conversation, the appeal of the written joke as a subject becomes all the more apparent.

This paper explores the functions of humor in friendship groups, and how the sex composition of such groups affects humor usage. The discussion is based on a detailed study of humor occurring among 18 groups of friends. Tapes of mixed and single-sex groups were used to construct a taxonomy of functions of humor. This taxonomy was then used to explore the way humor tends to be used by men and women in mixed and single-sex groups.

Section 2 briefly discusses language and gender research and outlines recent research on gender and humor. The corpus is briefly described in section 3, and in sections 4 and 5 a taxonomy of functions of humor is developed, and the categories defined. The remainder of the paper discusses the results of using this framework to investigate humor in mixed and single-sex conversations.

## **2. Language and gender research**

The literature on gender and language has grown considerably over the last twenty-five years, and now covers many different aspects of language use. Many researchers conclude that there are significant sex differences in conversational style. Probably the most consistent interpretation is that women tend to be supportive in their conversational style, and men competitive (see Aries, 1976; Edelsky, 1981; Fishman, 1983; Maltz and Borker, 1983; Coates, 1986; Preisler, 1986, among others).

Much of the work on which observation is based is quantitative, an approach of which researchers are increasingly critical. Deborah Cameron comments:

“Merely to say that ‘men do x and women do y’ is inherently problematic: it fits comfortably into a tradition of prescriptive and sexist comment about what ‘normal’ masculinity and femininity entail.” (Cameron, 1992: 21)

Instead, there has been a move towards a view of gender as situated and dynamic. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) advocate the study of ‘communities of practice’, which can reveal much about identity formation, and help refine the conceptualisation of gender. They note that correlations between linguistic forms and sex are useful, but only in that they indicate areas where future investigation may potentially reveal the practices entering into gender dynamics within a community.

In many areas this ground work has now been laid, and researchers are equipped to move on to detailed investigation of various aspects of gender dynamics. Humor research is an area where there are few ground studies. The literature indicates some trends, but much of it relies upon introspection or artificially elicited data.

### *2.1. Gender and Humor*

In her influential but much disputed paper Lakoff (1975) lists the forms comprising ‘women’s language’. One of her observations is that ‘[w]omen don’t tell jokes’ (Lakoff, 1975: 56).

“It is axiomatic in middle-class American society that, first, women can’t tell jokes – they are bound to ruin the punchline, they mix up the order of things and so on. Moreover, they don’t ‘get’ jokes. In short, women have no sense of humor.” (Lakoff, 1975: 56)

Some researchers have attempted to explain the ‘fact’ that women do not use humor. Freud (1905) claimed women do not need a sense of humor because they have fewer strong feelings to repress. Grotjahn (1957) suggested that women do not tell jokes because joke-telling is an aggressive act.

Goodman, in a paper primarily about stand-up comedy, points out:

“There is a lingering perception that women are not best suited to telling jokes but rather to being the punchlines.” (Goodman, 1992: 286)

This perception has applied, not only to joke-telling, but to humor in general. The attitude is slowly changing, as researchers begin the process of collecting and documenting humor used by both men and women in a variety of contexts.

Kramarae (1981) points out that men and women have different perceptions of the world and consequently probably have different joking interests. Society is such that women have to work within the social symbols of the dominant group, so it is more likely that women will recognize the joking interests of males than vice-versa. Kramarae believes this is the basis of the common assertion that women have no sense of humor. In short, women have to understand male humor, men do not have to

understand women's. This is reinforced by Jenkins (1985) who notes this asymmetry:

"I wondered why it was that when a man tells a joke and women don't laugh, we are told we have no sense of humor, but when a woman tells a joke and men don't laugh, we are told we are not funny." (Jenkins, 1985: 135)

Many researchers have pointed out that humor is an inherently powerful act. In order to gain acceptance as a 'true' woman, it is therefore unacceptable for women to display humor in mixed company. Marlowe (1989) observes:

"When women produce and present humor they reverse conventional social situations by putting themselves in the foreground, threatening the most basic social gender arrangements." (Marlowe, 1989: 150)

Women are said to have a sense of humor, not if they produce humor, but if they respond to and appreciate it (Coser, 1960; McGhee, 1979; Barreca, 1991).

Some researchers have found that women use humor when by themselves, and tend to avoid it in mixed groups (Coser, 1960; Goodman, 1992).

Crawford (1989) points out that many studies of gender and humor have involved bias. Many concentrate on humor occurring in the public sphere. This is clearly easier to collect than private, spontaneous joking, but, as the public sphere is generally the domain of males, observed women's humor is unlikely to be typical. There has also been a lot of research concentrating on responses to set piece jokes. Canned jokes have been shown to be a more typically male form of humor (Jenkins, 1985; Goodwin, 1982), and so predictably, many results show men more appreciative of the jokes than the women. This often leads to the conclusion that women have less of a sense of humor.

Unfortunately poor methodology has even recently lead some researchers to mistakenly conclude that impressions of humorless women are substantiated by fact. Cox et al. (1990) looked at gender differences in communicating job-related humor. The study is triggered by the concern that:

"Abundant literature indicates the importance of humor in the workplace. Yet it is also proposed by some authors that women lack (or do not make use of) humor when communicating in professional activities." (Cox et al., 1990: 287)

Their questionnaire contained 15 hypothetical situations in which the respondent's colleague is placed in a potentially embarrassing situation in a job-related circumstance. Each situation was followed by three reactions, one related to ignoring, one to humor and one to helpfulness. For each one, the informant had to rate how likely it was that they would react in that way. The one example given was a colleague who accidentally dropped a lot of papers, and the humor response was: 'I would tease him about being a master paper shuffler' (Cox et al., 1990: 291). Students were asked to rate such statements from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree).

What this actually tests is whether respondents have the same sense of humor as whoever wrote the questions. If a respondent rated the humor question low, then this

was taken to mean they would not use humor in that particular situation. All it really means is that they would not use the statement provided. If it is the case that men and women have different joking styles, then this methodology will be heavily biased towards the gender of the author of the questions.

The results showed that men used the humor response significantly more, and women were significantly more likely to react helpfully. Cox et al., therefore conclude:

“This study seems to verify what most of the non-empirical literature has hypothesized about women’s use of humor, namely, that humor is less a part of the female’s communications pattern.” (Cox et al., 1990: 293)

Even if the methodology did not lead us to question the validity of the results, this study could in no way lead us to such a dramatic conclusion. Firstly, this questionnaire is concerned with one type of humor – humor at the expense of others. This is a small sub-class of the many types of humor, and so we cannot conclude on the basis of this study that “humor is less a part of the female’s communication pattern”. Most aspects of humor have not been discussed, let alone examined in Cox et al.’s paper. Secondly, the study set out to look at job-related humor, but this conclusion seems to be making claims about communication in general.

Crawford and Gressley (1991) also used a questionnaire to elicit their data. Their findings are both less spectacular and more credible than those of Cox et al. They administered a questionnaire asking subjects to describe someone they knew who had an outstanding sense of humor, and to rate how much they themselves participate in various humor-related activities (e.g. enjoying ethnic humor). In describing someone they knew, men used the creativity dimension significantly more than women. Of 92 females, 62 wrote about males, and of 49 males, 41 wrote about males. When writing about males, respondents were significantly more likely to use the creativity dimension. Males reported they enjoyed both slapstick and hostile humor (e.g. racist or sexist humor) more often than females, and they reported more use of formulaic joking, whereas females reported more anecdotal humor.

Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992) investigated humor in naturally occurring situations and found men more likely to initiate a humorous key. Women maintained a humorous key across participants so there was a larger amount of humor elicitation by women. Women were more collaborative in their humor. They often used duets in wordplay, and their self-directed humor in single-sex interaction was more likely than men’s to be built on someone else’s remark. Ervin Tripp and Lampert call this ‘stacked humor’. When men used self-directed humor, it was more novel and less collaborative. It also tended to be more exaggerated or clearly false, giving a performance quality to men’s humor.

Jenkins (1985) also notes that male humor tends to be more performance-based than women’s humor. Jenkins observes that men’s humor is characterized as self-aggrandizing one-upmanship. They more often use formulaic jokes which are markedly separate from the surrounding discourse and which involve a performance. This establishes them as credible performers and gives them an audience. Women

tend to rely on the context more in the creation of their humor, and use humor in a way that is supportive and healing.

Goodman (1992) points out that joke telling is less typical for female comedians than males. Female comedians tend to prefer narrative comedy, in which humor is diffused over the situation rather than contained in a single phrase. She quotes Lederer describing gender differences she perceives in the use of humor by professional comedians.

“When a man tells a formalized joke I tend to switch off because it’s quite authoritarian: you have to listen in order to get the payoff, the punchline, and then you have to laugh. It’s quite strict and inflexible. It’s far more interesting for me to ramble on, hopefully hitting the right targets, certainly with a through-line, and certainly with an end, but not in the same formalized way. I would rather just sit and hope that it’s funny.” (Helen Lederer as quoted in Goodman, 1992: 295)

Kaufman (1991) attempts to characterize feminist humor. She also notes a preference for spontaneity rather than for formulaic humor.

“[Feminists’] preferences are toward spontaneous wit, amusing real-life anecdotes and other forms of humor that are participatory. Jokes involve tellers and listeners, the teller is the active one at the centre of attention, and the listeners are relatively passive ... spontaneous human interaction is largely absent.” (Kaufman, 1991: 248)

She points out that witty remarks contribute to the dialogue, whereas jokes tend to disrupt and distract from it.

Crawford (1989) administered questionnaires designed to elicit the types of humor used by women, their perceptions about gender differences in the use of humor, and the types of humor they valued in others. She found that the types of humor the women differentially attributed to themselves were the same as the types they valued in others. Namely, anecdotes about one’s own, and one’s friends’ personal experiences. Crawford says of women’s humor:

“[I]t involves not only creative spontaneity but connectedness and compassion; it invites self-disclosure and reciprocal sharing of perspectives; it is dependent on the immediate social context.” (Crawford, 1989: 160)

A number of scholars, then, have had interesting things to say about gender and humor. However, few of these have employed analytic or classificatory tools in their analyses, and even fewer have investigated natural spoken data. In this study, I investigate differences between men and women statistically. I do not intend to produce any startling or categorical conclusions about how men and women use humor, but rather provide the ground work which has been lacking in this area. I point to some interesting trends, and identify areas of humor and gender research which could benefit from closer examination.

### 3. Methodology

The corpus for this study consists of 18 conversations. Six of these are conversations between four female friends, six between four male friends, and six are mixed groups consisting of two males and two females. All of the groups are natural friendship groups, all are Pakeha (New Zealanders of European descent) aged between 18 and 35, with some higher education. The conversations were taped in settings familiar to the speakers, usually in one of the participants' homes. Four of the recordings were taken from the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English, one from the Victoria University of Wellington Linguistics Library, and three were collected by Anita Easton for the research reported in Easton (1994).<sup>1</sup> The remaining ten tapes were collected by me and consist of conversations between my friends and their friends. None of the speakers were aware at the time of recording that I was specifically interested in humor.

From each tape, I took a twenty minute excerpt and transcribed all instances of humor. Unanalyzed portions of the tape were also monitored, in order to extract maximum background information and understanding of the group dynamics, which would help to inform the analysis. For the purposes of this paper, I regard humor as being anything the speaker intends to be funny. Tannen (1993: 166) points out that the true intention of any utterance cannot be established from the examination of linguistic form alone. This is clearly a problem. I was interested in intentional humor, including humor that remained unsupported by the audience. This precluded a definition based on audience response. While criteria based on speaker intention are clearly fraught with problems of indeterminacy and subjectivity, I decided to work within these limitations, and attempt to use as much objective evidence as was available in each case. As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, this technique effectively amounted to situating myself as part of the audience, and assessing the utterance's function by its effect on me.

In identifying and coding the humor, numerous clues were used to determine the speaker's intention. I drew on my knowledge of the speakers and the groups as a whole, and also on knowledge of the groups gleaned from the remaining non-analyzed tape. I relied heavily on context to determine the speaker's intention, and also took into account the audience's response. The audience formed part of the group as a whole and so probably shared a similar sense of what is funny with the speaker, so if something appeared to be meant humorously, then an amused audience would provide evidence in support of this. The speaker's tone of voice was also important. Sudden changes in pace or pitch, a laughing or smiling voice and other verbal clues were taken into consideration (see Crystal, 1969).

This process resulted in a corpus of 815 examples. Of these, 333 examples were from single-sex male groups, 216 from single-sex female groups, 163 from males in mixed groups, and 103 from females in mixed groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to WCSNZE and to Anita Easton for allowing me access to their data.

I was interested in investigating variation in how humor functioned within groups. An initial step then was to construct a suitable taxonomy to classify examples of humor according to function. This taxonomy is outlined in section 4.

#### 4. The framework

This framework was developed specifically for analyzing spontaneous humor occurring amongst friendship groups in New Zealand. No existing description of the functions of humor proved suitable for this analysis. Taxonomies of humor developed to describe different settings (for example the workplace – Collinson, 1988) or for different purposes (questionnaire design – Graham et al., 1992) were clearly unsuitable.

Several authors identify three or four broad functions that humor can serve (Martineau, 1972; Ziv, 1984; Pogrebin and Poole, 1988; Collinson, 1988; Ervin-Tripp and Lampert, 1992, among others). Each identifies at least one solidarity-oriented function. Other functions discussed include controlling others (Martineau, 1972; Collinson, 1988), conflict (Martineau, 1972), exploration and coping (Pogrebin and Poole, 1988). Several authors have discussed the fact that humor can perform a boundary function (Davies, 1982; Linstead, 1985). For this study, I drew together the functions identified in the literature, and then worked with the data to construct a framework which seemed to best capture the ways in which humor was being used.

The framework assumes that every attempt at humor is an attempt to both express solidarity with the audience and construct a position of respect and status within the group. Tannen (1993: 167) points out that, although solidarity and power may on first consideration appear to be opposites, each entails the other. This is particularly true in the case of humor. Whenever you attempt humor and it succeeds, your status within the group is positively affected. You have amused the audience and so illustrated that you share with them a common idea of what is funny. This serves to create or maintain solidarity. Some instances of humor will have this general function and no other, beyond the creation of a positive self-identity.

Fig. 1 shows the structure of the taxonomy of humor. The *general* function, as described above, is at the head of the tree. All humor serves this function (at least within friendship groups). The next level of the taxonomy shows specific functions which examples could fulfill. Humor normally serves primarily *solidarity*-based, *power*-based or *psychological* needs. Those examples which can not be classified as serving primarily solidarity-based, power-based or psychological functions are simply categorized as serving the general function. Categories which are potential final-level labels are shaded in grey.

The psychological category contains the functions 'to defend' and 'to cope'. Coping humor is further categorized into two more specific functions. I do not identify specific strategies through which the psychological functions could be fulfilled. Strategies such as putting oneself down before someone else does, or making light of a serious situation fulfill psychological functions. As the psychological categories are already quite specific at the function level, strategy level categories would be

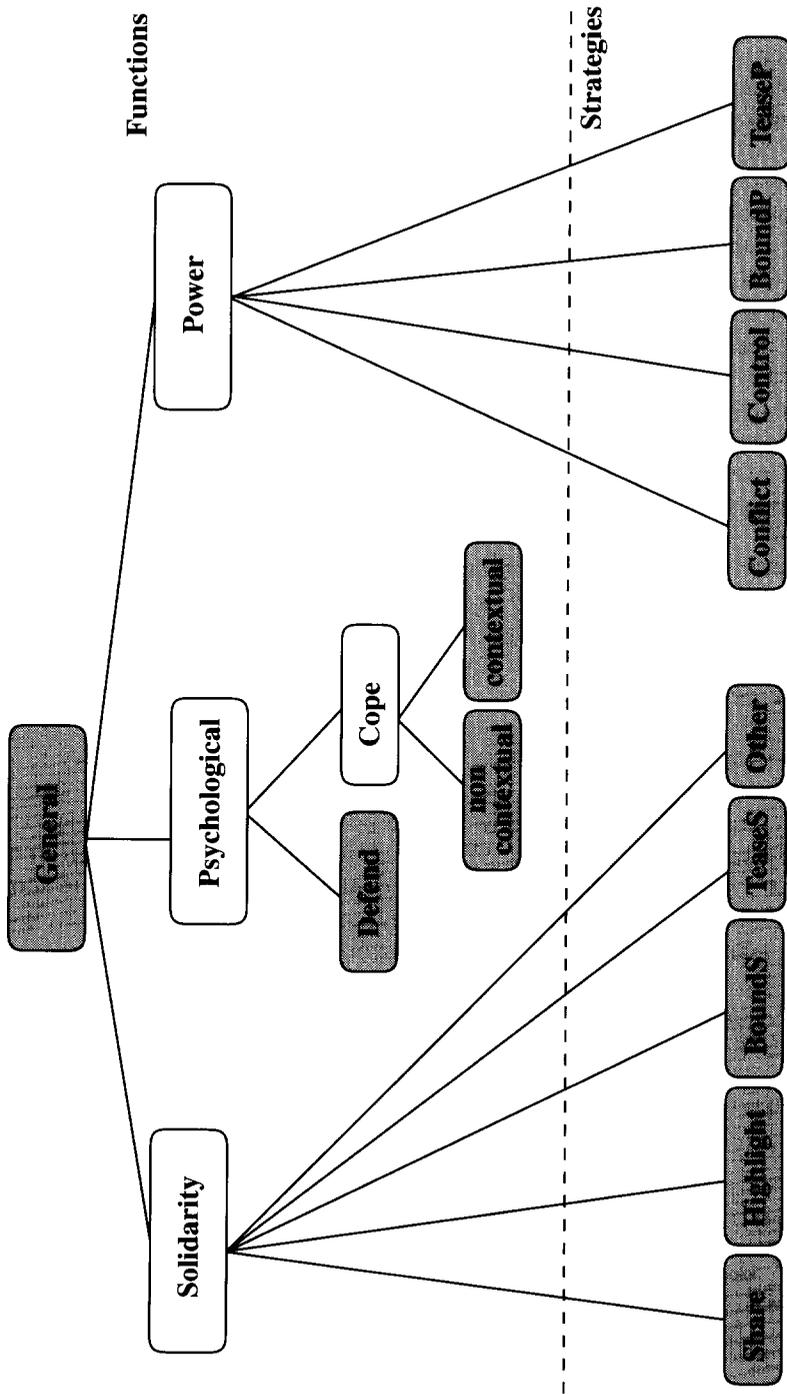


Fig. 1. The functions of humor.

particularly detailed and contain very few examples. I therefore felt it sufficient to code such examples only by the specific function they served. The function of forming or maintaining solidarity, however, is much broader. There are several recurrent strategies that speakers use in order to fulfill this function. The same is true of humor which functions specifically to exert power.

The diagram makes the interrelation of the different levels, strategies and functions appear relatively straightforward. This is an attempt at representing the taxonomy graphically. In fact, however, the division between strategy and function is less distinct than was implied in the preceding paragraph. Strategies can be seen as more precise descriptions of functions. One could go considerably further postulating various levels of such a tree, and the application of labels to each of the levels, while convenient, is somewhat artificial. The use of the tree to represent the taxonomy also implies that each example can be identified as fitting into one and only one of the categories. In fact, however it is possible for an instance of humor to simultaneously fulfill several of the identified functions. For example it is quite possible for a single example to serve both psychological and solidarity functions.

In the following sections I define and exemplify each of the categories in the taxonomy.

## 5. Defining the categories

### 5.1. Solidarity

Many instances of humor serve to create solidarity within the group or between particular members of the group. This section of the taxonomy identifies a number of primary strategies used to create solidarity and consensus. There are some examples in the corpus which do not fit into the main categories identified. Such examples are labelled as 'other' within this category.

#### 5.1.1. To share

In (2) RF shares a memory from her childhood.

- (2) 1 RF: i LIKED my poncho + except it had little holes  
 2 about the size of my fingers so i'd go to reach  
 3 for something [voc: xunk [h]] right through  
 4 poncho and and be stopped you know +  
 5 SF: [ha h ha]  
 6 LM: oh dea[h]r  
 7 RF: but other than that [ha] it was warm and you  
 8 could wear it over anything

Sharing covers humor which reveals something about the speaker, and lets the audience know them better. Many anecdotes fit into this category. The speaker allows

the audience to know them better, and so positively affects solidarity. Sharing sensitive information also indicates a speaker's trust of the audience, and so can enhance solidarity.

### 5.1.2. To highlight similarities or capitalize on shared experiences

Ziv (1984) defines one of the functions of humor as 'sharing similarities between self and others'. This category is for humor which identifies or celebrates shared ideas, shared interests and other similarities between speakers. Also in this category I include references to and reminiscences about shared experiences. Example (3) includes humor which refers to shared experiences and humor which highlights similarities. The group is reminiscing about a course they took which was particularly tough, and during which they regularly stayed up all night in the university computer labs. MM recalls that he drank an incredible amount of CocaCola on one particular night before they all had an assignment due, which has put him off the drink ever since. He is capitalizing on shared experiences.

- (3) 1 CM: yeah that's it's a it's it's an  
 2 //experience\  
 3 MM: /something\ you'd want to do once  
 4 CM: just cause it's quite //quite\  
 5 TM: /ruin\ your body by  
 6 ingesting all that coke  
 7 MM: mm i still can't drink coke like i used  
 8 after that //episode\ i think=  
 9 TM: /[h ha]\  
 10 MM: =i drank about eight cans of coke and four  
 11 cookie time biscuits all on one night and i  
 12 didn't feel quite r[h]ight ever since  
 13 CM: god that's NOTHING when I did three oh nine  
 14 All: [laugh]

CM's comment at line 13 is a reference to a Monty Python skit. The group has been sitting round exchanging horror stories about the course, and CM's quip implies that they sound like the men in this skit, who try to outdo each other with hard luck stories. They all recognize the reference, indicating they share an appreciation of this particular skit, and highlighting another similarity between the members of the group.

### 5.1.3. To clarify and maintain boundaries (boundS)

Linstead (1985) notes that humor can be used to reinforce norms and values and make explicit the boundaries of acceptability. It can also clarify who belongs in different groups. Making fun of outsiders serves a boundary function. If the humor reinforces readily accepted and agreed upon standards, then it will increase solidarity. Note that there is a similar function within the power set of functions. Boundary humor can also be used to impose boundaries, or to clarify boundaries by ridiculing

a member of the group who has unwittingly overstepped the boundaries of acceptability. For convenience, I have used the label *boundS* for boundary humor which maintains solidarity, and *boundP* for boundary humor which increases or reinforces the speaker's power. An example of boundP humor is given in section 5.2.3. BoundS humor is humor which attempts to clarify boundaries, or supports boundaries which are already clearly established.

Example (4) is an example of boundary humor. JF makes fun of Tessa Davies – an outsider. All agree that this person is not a member of their group, and that she has some undesirable characteristics, and so the humor reinforces solidarity.

- (4) 1 NF: i saw tessa davies in the on the train like  
 2 JF: UGH  
 3 SF: [ha ha ha]  
 4 JF: what a grotter

#### 5.1.4. To tease (S)

Teasing is another strategy which can function in two ways. Teasing is not always antagonistic, but rather can function to express solidarity and rapport (see e.g. Strahle, 1993; Hay, 1994). Some teasing primarily reinforces solidarity and expresses rapport, whereas other teases serve primarily to maintain the power of the teaser. As with boundary humor, I therefore distinguish between *teaseS* and *teaseP*. An example and discussion of teasing which expresses power is given in section 5.2.4.

Teasing can reinforce solidarity if it occurs within what Radcliffe-Brown (1952 [1940]) terms a 'joking relationship'. Within such a relationship, individuals routinely tease and insult each other. This serves a number of functions, and is primarily a strategy for expressing solidarity (see Hay, 1994).

CF and DF have such a relationship, and (5) shows an excerpt from a discussion in which they are participants. CF has just mentioned that she tends to sleep with her electric blanket on. When it gets too hot, she rolls over her partner (with whom she lives) and sleeps on the cold side of the bed. DF calls CF a *wanton woman* for living with a man before she is married. DF, herself, however, also lives with her partner, and CF knows that she has no objections to such behavior. While teasing CF, then, DF indirectly implicates herself in the 'wantonness', and so the comment is clearly meant in jest.

- (5) 1 CF: i don't i roll over alex onto the cold side  
 2 and shove him on to it  
 3 AF: [oh ha]  
 4 DF: well chris that //just shows that\ you're a=  
 5 BF: /good on you\<\  
 6 DF: =wanton //woman\<\  
 7 BF: /initiative\<\  
 8 DF: living with someone before you're married  
 9 CF: [sniffs] [ha] yeah well you can talk

Teasing is not always verbal. In (6), a simple, meaningful look is sufficient for JF to realize she is being teased. NF is the only member of the group that knows that Evan has a crush on JF. And she has frequently teased JF about this fact. While I was not present at the time of this recording, I am familiar with the dynamic between JF and NF, and the background story involving Evan. Several times during the preceding weeks I had been present with the two speakers when Evan's name arose in conversation, and NF had either verbally teased JF, or directed a pointed look at NF, with associated eyebrow wiggling. Taking this into account, the most likely analysis of (6) is as a tease.

- (6) 1 SF:        evan really changed eh  
 2 TF:        shit yeah mega  
 3 SF:        he went really arty  
 4 TF:        he and yeah he went to dunedin and then he  
 5             came back and now oh i don't know where he is  
 6             now  
 7 JF&NF: [laugh]  
 8 SF:        what's this going on  
 9 JF:        [laughs]: nothing + just good humor:

The fact that Evan's crush is secret, unites JF and NF, and so the tease clearly serves to maintain solidarity between them. A tease can also reinforce solidarity if it is about something that is clearly false or trivial.

This example serves as an illustration of the extent to which the analyses presented here draw heavily on contextual knowledge. As noted by Strahle (1993: 227), teasing and the emerging alignments between participants "can be understood only with regard to the participants' specific relationships". The advantage of exploiting such information is socially relevant and contextually informed categorization. The disadvantage, however, is that for some categories, the classification of examples would not necessarily be replicated by analysts less familiar with the speakers and context.

## 5.2. Power

Far fewer examples fall into the category of power. As my data stems from natural friendship groups, it is not surprising that a large percentage of the instances of humor served to create and maintain solidarity. There are at least four strategies which can be used to maintain or create power: fostering conflict, controlling, teasing and creating boundaries. It is important to note that I am not claiming that the examples in this section involve the explicit and conscious exertion of power. What these examples share is their effect: the creation or maintenance of an emotively loaded division within the group. Such divisions are inherently power-based.

### 5.2.1. To foster conflict

Humor which introduces or fosters conflict within a group is one of three broad functions Martineau (1972) describes in his model of the social functions of humor.

Such humor may purposefully demean another participant, or transmit an aggressive message. In the one example labelled ‘to foster conflict’ in this corpus, the speaker uses humor to voice clear disagreement with a member of the group. While this example is perhaps not a completely transparent example of ‘fostering conflict’, it is a clear example of adversarial behavior, and of the transmission of an aggressive message. Given that it is the only example of its type in the corpus, the particular label applied is not crucial. This specific label was chosen in order to remain as true as possible to categories already introduced in the literature.

The example is shown in (7). BM and DF both know BM’s relation to the cousin who is the focus of the discussion. BM tells how the cousin had surgery, and DF disagrees with BM’s assessment that the surgery was mainly cosmetic. DF’s comment is framed in such a way as to be adversarial, and she adopts a very confrontational tone of voice.

- (7) 1 BM: my cousin’s wife um ++ has just spent  
 2 thousands and thousands i don’t know how  
 3 much but it’s something in the order of ten  
 4 thousand dollars  
 5 AF: mm  
 6 BM: on having her + teeth straightened up  
 .....  
 7 BM: but //it\ was a co- it was basically a=  
 8 DF: /yeah\  
 9 BM: =cosmetic thing though //+ ì mean there=  
 10 AF: /yeah\  
 11 BM: =wasn’t any-  
 12 DF: //[challenging tone]: well=  
 13 AF: /(was it quite)\  
 14 DF: =it was\ partly ’cause she couldn’t eat:  
 15 AF: //but that’s what but that’s what=  
 16 DF: /[laughs] i think she’s ( )\  
 17 CM: /[laughs]\  
 18 BM: /[laughs]\  
 19 AF: =orthodontics is\ i mean you know

DF takes the floor from BM (line 12) in order to voice disagreement with his analysis of the situation. Her voice has a challenging tone, and persists through AF’s attempted contributions (lines 13, 15). The humor in DF’s challenge comes from the word *partly* (line 14). If one cannot eat, then this is something that desperately needs fixing, and not just a minor contributing factor in making a larger decision. The use of humor serves to couch a serious and adversarial message.

### 5.2.2. To control

The controlling function is identified by a number of researchers, including Martineau (1972), Collinson (1988) and Graham et al. (1992). Any humor intended to

influence the behavior of the audience is classified as controlling humor; this comprises any humor which serves a regulatory mechanism. The import of the controlling function could range from drawing people to the dinner table, through reminding someone to set their alarm, to chastisement for inappropriate behavior or trying to compel someone to perform an undesirable act. Obviously, the level of power invoked varies across each of these cases. In this sense, ‘control’ might be seen as a stronger term than is required to describe the more innocuous examples of this form. Indeed, if faced with many examples in which humor was used to influence behavior, it would seem appropriate to expand this category to subcategories which more accurately reflected the range of degrees of control. In this corpus, however, there was only one relevant example, and so I have followed the trend in the literature and adopted the general cover term ‘control’.

Note that most examples of boundP humor would be examples of the speaker trying to control or restrict the audience’s behavior in some way, but I have not included those examples in this category.

The corpus included only one example of non-boundary humor whose apparent intention was to influence the behavior of the audience. This, again, is likely to be a reflection of the type of data involved. One would expect to find much more controlling humor in the workplace or some other hierarchical environment. The one example, (8), is from one of the tapes collected by the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English. One person present was in charge of collecting the tape, for which she had instructions to try and collect a conversation which was as natural as possible. Therefore, when the tape is mentioned, she uses humor to remind her friends that the taperecorder should be ignored, and to steer conversation away from its presence.

(8) [pour wine]

- 1 BM: the sound of wine pouring always sounds good on
- 2        tape
- 3 DF: what tape [ha]
- 4 BM: [nh ha]

Here, DF uses humor to monitor the conversation topic. One reviewer disagrees with the classification of this example as controlling humor, arguing that DF is ‘acting as though’ no one is aware the tape-recorder is running, and that this is what gives rise to humor. While it is clear that the humor arises from the pretense that the participants are unaware of the presence of the tape-recorder, this in itself does not preclude the possibility that the humor is intended to have a specific effect. This is one example where the role of the speaker in the group can have a strong effect on the impact of various types of humor. If any other participant had made this quip, the analysis offered by the reviewer, in which the humor is a mere ‘acting as though’, would be accurate and complete. However, the fact that DF is the organizer of the evening and is clearly in charge of the taping event, cannot be overlooked in the analysis of this example. The example further illustrates the importance of taking knowledge of a group’s structure and dynamics into account when analyzing an example’s apparent function within the wider conversational frame.

### 5.2.3. To challenge and set boundaries (boundP)

Humor can challenge existing boundaries, attempt to set new ones, or create or maintain boundaries by making an example of someone present. This category has already been discussed to some extent in section 5.1.3.

Example (9) is an extract from a conversation between geology students. SF's comment in (9) clearly draws a boundary between acceptable and unacceptable applications of geology. This is not a readily established boundary within the group, and BF has already expressed an interest in the type of geology SF condemns.

- (9) 1 BF: i like petroleum geology i think it's cool  
 2 AF: DO you  
 3 BF: mm that's what i'd like to do if i do  
 4 anything in geology  
 5 SF: far out  
 6 AF: it's where the money is  
 7 BF: i'm just a (sucker for it)  
 8 AF: really  
 9 CF: yeah  
 10 SF: mhm i'm not interested in money i more  
 11 interested in the research side i could never  
 12 do //coal and that\  
 13 BF: /oh i want to\\ make big bikkies  
 14 AF: [ha ha]  
 15 CF: //like me i just want to marry\\ [ha]  
 16 SF: /raping and pillaging the land [ha ha]\\

When SF jokes that petroleum geology is 'raping and pillaging the land' (line 16), she is explicitly criticizing the type of work BF aspires to. The exaggerated nature of this statement contributes to the humorous effect, and softens its impact, but the statement nonetheless remains a commentary on the negative social impact of BF's chosen career. Such commentary invokes a delicate group-internal division.

### 5.2.4. To tease (P)

Teases which attack personal details, or seem to make genuine criticisms, serve to increase or maintain the speaker's power. This will often overlap with the boundary category. In (10), the group has been discussing favorite episodes of the Muppet Show. LM mentions a specific episode he would particularly like to see (line 1). This comment is a tease, specifically aimed at DM (LM's roommate), who had agreed to set the video when this episode was scheduled to play, but forgot to actually do so. DM responds to the tease defensively.

- (10) 1 LM: i'd love to see the john cleese one as well  
 2 DM: yeah yeah //yes i set the video wrong give me=  
 3 LM: /nh nh nh nh ha\  
 4 DM: =a break\  
 5 LM: /i'm sorry i forgot to set the video for you\\

### 5.3. Psychological functions

Defending and coping humor serve psychological functions. These categories are discussed in the following sections.

#### 5.3.1. To defend

'To defend' is a category used by Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992) for Ziv's (1984) function: "protecting the self by identifying a weakness before anyone else does" (1984: 62). The label is used here to apply to any humor which is used to protect oneself. In (11), WF is insecure about the trifle she has made, and makes excuses to protect herself from any criticism that may be forthcoming.<sup>2</sup>

- (11) 1 PM: it was a nice trifle  
 2 WF: normally //yeah well it was nice\  
 3 TF: /what's this\\ WAS shit  
 4 WF: [laughs] but it sort of the problem is i just  
 5 kept adding more and more and i only had  
 6 certain size bowls so i couldn't balance it all  
 7 up and i didn't have enough ingredients to just  
 8 keep adding [ha huh]

WF exaggerates the pitfalls of her cooking style for humorous effect. Another instance of 'defending' is using humor to avoid revealing personal information about oneself.

#### 5.3.2. To cope with a contextual problem

The coping function is identified by a number of researchers, including Pogrebin and Poole (1988), Fink and Walker (1977) and Ziv (1984). I have divided humor which is used as a coping device into two further categories – coping with a contextual problem and coping with a non-contextual problem. The first, coping with a contextual problem, includes any humor which is used to cope with a problem arising in the course of the conversation. The problem could range from a social gaffe of some sort to a pot boiling over; the main point is that it arises, and must be coped with during the conversation. (12) is a typical example of this type of humor, in which the speakers use humor to cope with the presence of the tape-recorder.

- (12) 1 CM: i thought she was going to rescue us at four  
 2 YOU'RE LATE  
 3 All: [laugh]  
 4 CM: [yells]: come on:  
 5 MM: we should start with the credits now yeah  
 6 NM: this conversation HAS featured  
 7 TM: [ha ha ha]

<sup>2</sup> Trifle: A type of dessert.

Here the men parody a radio broadcast in order to cope with awkwardness associated with being recorded.

### 5.3.3. To cope with a non-contextual problem

This category covers humor used to cope with more general problems such as sickness or death. Joking about something gory, scary or depressing is often an example of coping humor. One way of capturing the essential difference between contextual and non-contextual coping, is that the first copes with problems we need to get through to survive the conversation, and the second copes with problems we need to get through to survive in life, or a period of our life. In (13), humor is used to cope with a problem TF has. She has employed tradespeople who made an initial appearance, but have recently disappeared into thin air.<sup>3</sup>

- (13) 1 TF: they obviously thought that that i looked like  
 2 the type that wouldn't make them //ring\ up i=  
 3 WF: /oh\<\  
 4 TF: =# r # d i iMAGine  
 5 LF: should ring the i # r # d up if they don't come  
 6 back  
 7 TF: [h]if they d[h]on't come back [h]we just  
 8 wo[h]n't PAY them anything

TF uses humor to cope with her stress regarding the missing tradespeople.

## 6. Statistical analysis

The taxonomy was used to code all of the examples in the corpus, and this data was analyzed with log-linear modelling. In log-linear modelling, the researcher draws on theoretical knowledge to hypothesize possible models for explaining the observed data.<sup>4</sup>

My hypothesized explanatory variables were speaker sex and group composition. Log-linear modelling is ideal for independent data. Unfortunately, the data I am analysing is far from independent. There are three types of clustering involved.

<sup>3</sup> IRD: Inland Revenue Department. Government Department responsible for collecting income tax.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert (1981) describes model building as the creation of an alternative world, which is theoretically identical in all respects to the real world, and shows the relationships specified in the model. In effect, this world is the world that would exist if the model were true. The imaginary world is then compared to the 'real world' as reflected in the observed data. If there is no significant difference between them, then this is evidence that the model is correct. The figures and probabilities reported, then, would be based on the frequencies as predicted by the model, rather than the observed frequencies. The use of log-linear models is a form of exploratory data analysis. Unlike more traditional approaches, it does not require that analysts have carefully formulated hypotheses to be tested, but, given some notion of the form of suitable models, allows the in-depth exploration of possible patterns in the data. As noted by Gilbert, a hypothesis generally deals with just one relationship, whereas a model may involve a complex set of relationships.

### 6.1. *Clustering due to individual behavior*

Individuals may have tendencies to use humor in certain ways. The more instances of humor collected from any one speaker, the greater the chance that the data will be distorted due to clustering effects.

### 6.2. *Clustering due to conversational flow*

Clustering of humor may occur within conversations. Sparring matches and banter, for example, encourage similar types of humor to occur in clusters within conversations.

### 6.3. *Clustering due to complex examples*

Some examples were coded for more than one function. These were very few, and so I decided to treat them as two examples for the purposes of log-linear modelling. The numbers were so small as to have no significant effect on the models, except in one case. This is described in section 7.2.2.

### 6.4. *A statistical check on clustering*

One way of accounting for possible clustering effects is described by Manly (1992: 253).<sup>5</sup> This adjustment was performed on the model described in this paper, which showed no indication of possible distortion due to clustering.

### 6.5. *The suitability of statistics for analysing conversational data*

Conversations are real and dynamic. The performance of statistical analysis on such data can be regarded as at best indicative. Such statistics should be regarded simply as tools for indicating areas of research which may reward in-depth, qualitative analysis. Conversational data is best suited to qualitative investigation. In my analysis, I followed the data in the creation of the taxonomy, rather than constricting and limiting the categories and trying to force my data into them. Statistical results are interesting indications, but the most fruitful and interesting research will be that which goes beyond numbers, and on to detailed examination of the data itself. Log-linear modelling is a useful tool for highlighting areas where future research may prove fruitful.

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<sup>5</sup> A heterogeneity factor is calculated by dividing the chi-square value for the fitted model by its degrees of freedom (DF). For each predicted frequency in the model, we divide the estimated standard error by the standard error multiplied by the square root of the heterogeneity figure. That is, we calculate SE Estimate/SE\* where SE\* = square root of chi-square/DF. If the resulting figure is less than two, then this indicates that clustering may have affected the model.

## 7. Results

I fitted log-linear models, firstly to investigate the distribution of the four main functions of humor, and then to investigate behavior more closely with regard to all of the strategies and the specific psychological functions. I outline the overall distribution of the different functions in section 7.1 and then move on to describe the model which fits each of the strategies separately.

### 7.1. Overall results

The fitted model for the distribution of general, solidarity, power and psychological functions showed main effects for both the sex of the speaker and group composition. The degrees of freedom, chi-square and probability figures for the various options are shown in Table 1.

Table 1  
Results of possible models for overall function

Model no.	Model	DF	Chi-sq	Prob.
A	12 13 23	3	7.93	0.0475
B	12 23	6	34.77	0.0000
C	12 13	6	48.45	0.0000
D	12	9	75.27	0.0000

Group composition and speaker sex are explanatory variables and so the 1–2 interaction is kept in the model at all times. Model A shows main effects for both speaker sex and group composition. Model B says that sex affects the function but the function is independent of group composition given sex. Model C is the same as the second, with group composition and sex reversed, and model D is saying that function is independent both of speaker sex and group composition. Model A is clearly the best model – it has the lowest chi-square and the highest probability of the four. We can clarify that it is significantly better than the other options by comparing it with the closest model – model B. We can subtract 7.93 from 34.77 and check the significance level for this to three degrees of freedom (we reach three by subtracting the DF for model A from the DF for model B). This calculation shows that model A is significantly better than the other models – to the .001 level.

The probabilities predicted by this model are shown in Table 2. Here, FM stands for females in mixed-sex groups, MM for males in mixed-sex groups, FS for females in single-sex groups and MS for males in single-sex groups.

These probabilities are calculated as conditional probabilities. So, for example, the figure for the general function is conditional on the sex of the speaker and the group composition. This is done to allow for differences in the cell sizes for each of the groups. The probabilities for each of the four groups should therefore add to 1, although there is some slight variation due to rounding.

Table 2  
Probability figures for overall function

	FM	MM	FS	MS
General	0.25	0.44	0.13	0.26
Solidarity	0.59	0.36	0.65	0.45
Power	0.10	0.13	0.12	0.17
Psychological	0.06	0.07	0.11	0.13

We can spot some general trends from investigating the probabilities, but calculation of the ratio of conditional odds reveals the exact nature of these trends.<sup>6</sup>

For each function, I have calculated four odds ratios. These show the relation between the behavior of females and males in both single-sex and mixed-sex conversations, and the difference between single-sex and mixed-sex conversations for both females and males. The two groups being compared are joined by a hyphen, with the group more likely to use that particular type of humor first. So I only ever fill in one of FM-MM and MM-FM, unless the odds ratio is one. The odds ratios for the four overall functions are shown in Table 3.

Table 3  
Odds ratios for overall function

	FM-MM	MM-FM	FM-FS	FS-FM	MM-MS	MS-MM	FS-MS	MS-FS
General	–	2.36	2.23	–	2.24	–	–	2.35
Solidarity	2.56	–	–	1.29	–	1.45	2.27	–
Power	–	1.34	–	1.23	–	1.37	–	1.50
Psychological	–	1.18	–	1.94	–	1.99	–	1.21

The MM-FM and MS-FS ratios are virtually equal for the general function, as are the ratios for FM-FS and MM-MS. We can therefore collapse the table and say the odds of men using only the general function are approximately 2.35 times higher than for women, and that the odds of only the general function being used are roughly 2.23 times higher in mixed conversations than in single-sex ones.

The odds of females using humor for a solidarity function are 2.56 times higher than males when in a mixed group, and 2.27 times higher in single-sex groups. Solidarity maintaining humor is also slightly more likely to be used in single-sex than in mixed-sex groups.

<sup>6</sup> The odds are calculated by  $p/1-p$ . A comparison of the respective conditional odds gives a measure of the strength of the association. As pointed out by Kennedy (1983), the odds ratio has both advantages and weaknesses. The main advantage is that the resulting figure is completely independent of sample size. This allows for considerable comparability with other studies using a similar method. It is also unaffected by unequal marginal distributions. It is important to keep in mind that the odds ratio is not symmetric. As the association becomes more intense, the odds ratio approaches either 0 or infinity.

The odds ratios for the power function do not provide such conclusive evidence. The ratios show a number of slight trends. Males tend to use power based strategies more often than females, and these strategies occur slightly more in single-sex than in mixed-sex groups.

Males seem more likely to use humor for psychological functions, though we should not put too much weight on this, as the difference is only slight. More conclusive is the fact that humor is more likely to be used for this function in single sex conversations than mixed conversations.

## 7.2. Results of individual strategies

I adopted the same model for looking at the distribution of the individual strategies as I did for the overall functions. When applied to the individual strategies, the model of main effects for speaker sex and group composition is significantly better than any other variations on the model, although the model is marginally off reaching significance itself. This is primarily because the expanded contingency table is much sparser than the table in which all the functions are collapsed into four overall categories. As the collapsed tables still hold the same data, it is safe to assume that the correct model for the individual strategies is the same as for the grouped categories. In the following sections, I outline the results for each of the individual strategies.

### 7.2.1. Results of solidarity based strategies

Table 4 shows the probability figures for each of the strategies used to create or maintain solidarity. Clarifying and maintaining boundaries is the strategy most frequently used to fulfill this function.

Table 4  
Probabilities for solidarity-based strategies

	FM	MM	FS	MS
Share	0.09	0.01	0.15	0.02
Highlight	0.08	0.12	0.09	0.16
BoundS	0.31	0.19	0.23	0.15
TeaseS	0.06	0.05	0.11	0.12
Other	0.06	0.01	0.07	0.01

In Table 5, I present the odds ratios for solidarity based strategies.

The results for sharing humor are conclusive. There is no doubt that the women are much more likely to use humor in this way than the men. The model predicts the odds of females using sharing humor to be 9.79 times higher than the odds of males using sharing humor in mixed conversations, and in single-sex conversations the odds ratio for females to males is 8.65:1. The figures also show both sexes more likely to use sharing humor in single-sex than in mixed-sex interaction.

Table 5  
Odds ratios for solidarity-based strategies

	FM-MM	MM-FM	FM-FS	FS-FM	MM-MS	MS-MM	FS-MS	MS-FS
Share	9.79	–	–	1.78	–	2.02	8.65	–
Highlight	–	1.57	–	1.14	–	1.40	–	1.93
BoundS	1.92	–	1.50	–	1.33	–	1.69	–
TeaseS	1.21	–	–	1.94	–	2.59	–	1.10
Other	6.32	–	–	1.18	1.00	1.00	7.45	–

Highlighting similarities and capitalizing on shared experiences are strategies more likely to be used by men than women. There is also a very slight indication that these strategies are more likely to be used in single-sex rather than mixed-sex conversations.

None of the odds ratios for boundS reach 2, and so the patterns shown can only be regarded as possible trends. The figures show that maintenance and clarification of boundaries is more likely to be used by women than men, and in mixed conversations rather than single-sex conversations.

Teasing in a manner that enforces solidarity is more likely to occur in single-sex conversations than mixed-sex conversations. This is particularly true in the case of male speakers.

The odds ratios show women 6–7 times more likely to use an alternative solidarity building strategy than men. As the particular nature of these strategies is varied, this category is not so interesting by itself, but plays an important part in contributing to the overall consideration of the solidarity function as discussed in section 7.1.

### 7.2.2. Results of power-based strategies

Table 6 shows the strategies that serve to maintain or create power, and the probabilities that a speaker in each of the groups use these strategies.

Table 6  
Probabilities for power-based strategies

	FM	MM	FS	MS
BoundP	0.07	0.06	0.09	0.06
TeaseP	0.07	0.06	0.12	0.11
Other	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.00

When calculating the log-linear models, examples which employed more than one strategy were coded for both. I then checked the models, using a calculation discussed in section 6.4, which adjusts for resulting clustering effects. In most cases, this did not affect things significantly, as only a very small percentage of examples were coded for more than one strategy. A notable exception to this, however, was the co-occurrence of power-based boundary marking and teasing. These two are somewhat

related, and sufficient examples were coded as both to affect the model. To bypass this problem, I created a separate category for those examples coded as both tease-P and boundary-P. To illustrate the trends in the data clearly, I have re-separated these categories for the following discussion. The probability figures predicted by the model for examples which both powerfully tease and create boundaries have been added to the boundary-P category and also to the tease-P category, so that we can independently consider the probability of each of these occurring. This means that the probability figures presented for all of the strategies add to a little over 1 in each group. This is because part of the probability figures for boundP and teaseP overlap.

The odds ratios for each of the strategies that are used to create or maintain power are given in Table 7. No odds ratios are given for the categories of ‘foster conflict’ or ‘control’. There was only one example in each of these categories and so nothing meaningful can be said about the distribution. The most interesting result here is the fact that so few examples fell into these categories.

Table 7  
Odds ratios for power-based strategies

	FM-MM	MM-FM	FM-FS	FS-FM	MM-MS	MS-MM	FS-MS	MS-FS
BoundP	1.18	–	–	1.31	1.00	1.00	1.55	–
TeaseP	1.18	–	–	1.81	–	1.94	1.10	–

The ratios for creating or challenging boundaries are not particularly striking. The women seem to use humor in this way slightly more than the men, both in single sex and mixed interaction. Women use it slightly more in single-sex groups than mixed groups, but group composition does not affect the extent to which men use humor to create or challenge boundaries.

The ratios show that there is a tendency for powerful teases to occur in single sex conversations more often than mixed sex conversations. The model shows women slightly more likely to use humor in this way than men, though this figure is far from conclusive.

### 7.2.3. Results of psychological functions

The probabilities that a speaker will use humor to cope or defend are shown in Table 8. In Table 9, I present the odds ratios for these functions.

The figures show no notable difference in the use of defending humor between men and women or mixed and single-sex conversations. The one trend indicated by the figures is a slight tendency for defending humor to occur more in single than in mixed-sex conversations.

The probabilities given for humor which copes with a non-contextual problem are fairly small, and so the resulting odds ratios may be disproportionately high. They do indicate some clear trends, however. This type of humor is more likely to occur in single-sex conversations than in mixed-sex conversations, and females are more likely than males to use humor in this way.

Table 8  
Probabilities for psychological functions

	FM	MM	FS	MS
Defend	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.03
Cope-noncontext	0.02	0.01	0.04	0.03
Cope-context	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.07

Table 9  
Odds ratios for psychological functions

	FM-MM	MM-FM	FM-FS	FS-FM	MM-MS	MS-MM	FS-MS	MS-FS
Defend	1.00	1.00	–	1.52	–	1.52	1.00	1.00
Cope-noncontext	2.02	–	–	2.04	–	3.06	1.35	–
Cope-context	–	2.04	–	1.52	–	1.81	–	2.43

The strongest trend involving contextual coping is that the odds of males using contextual coping humor are more than twice as high as for women, across both group compositions. There also seems to be a slight trend for contextual coping humor to occur more in single-sex than in mixed-sex groups.

## 8. Discussion

That I chose to investigate natural friendship groups has no doubt influenced the types of functions for which humor is used in my data. There are very few examples of the particularly negative categories – to control, and to create conflict. These functions have been identified as common functions for humor in the literature (Martineau, 1972; Collinson, 1988), but it seems very plausible that the informal friendly context is the reason there are few instances in my sample.

### 8.1. The general function

Achieving the general function described in section 4 was more often the only purpose of the humor produced by men. Women were more likely to also use the humor for some further function, such as to create solidarity through sharing. That the general function was used significantly more by men than by women is probably related to the fact that appearing witty seems more central to a male personal identity than to a female identity (see Hay, 1995a: 148). A short quip or one-liner, then, performs positive work on a male personal identity. In general, this ability seems much less important for women, and so when they use humor, it tends to be performing a further identifiable function beyond the general function of increasing solidarity and power and positively affecting personal identity.

It could be argued that, because I am a female, I was unable to interpret much of the male humor, and so more male humor than female humor ended up in this general category, which could be seen in some ways as an ‘other’ category. This is a possibility, but I tried to safeguard against this by checking my intuitions with several male ‘interpreters’.

The claim that males more often use humor for the sole purpose of impressing, appearing funny, or creating a positive personal identity is in part supported by past findings.

Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992) observed that men’s humor consists largely of flip wisecracks and that this tendency further increased in mixed-sex groups. Most short wisecracks in my sample fell into this general function. They are typical of a type of humor designed to elevate status and solidarity within the group and to work on personal identity, without performing any further function. In my data, too, this type of humor increased in mixed sex groups.

## 8.2. *Solidarity*

The solidarity ratio shows exactly what one would expect, given the literature. The odds of women using humor to create or maintain solidarity are more than twice as high as men.

The results for sharing humor show conclusively that women use this strategy much more than men do. This supports Ervin-Tripp and Lampert’s (1992) claim that women use humor to share. Johnson and Aries (1983) is one of several studies which found women much more likely to self-disclose than men. Cozby (1973) provides a comprehensive review of early work in this area. Some of the studies outlined in this review show that women self-disclose more than men, while some found no difference. Some of these differences may be attributable to differently placed thresholds for what counts as self-disclosure. No studies, however, found men more likely to self-disclose than women.

Komarovsky (1962) found the men in her study unlikely to share or disclose personal information.

“The phrase ‘incapacity to share’ aims to convey a certain view about the men’s articulateness. The ideal of masculinity into which they were socialized inhibits expressiveness both directly, with its emphasis on reserve, and indirectly, by identifying personal interchange with the feminine role.” (Komarovsky, 1962: 151)

My results show males more likely than females to use humor to highlight similarities or capitalize on shared experiences.

Many of these examples consist of joint reminiscences about previously shared activities, or of reminding each other of jokes from movies, or quoting lines from favorite books. In this way, speakers express similar tastes, and capitalize on time they have shared together. So while a group of women may share new, personal information about themselves in order to maintain solidarity with their friendship group, men seem to be more likely to relive old times to achieve the same end. John-

son and Aries (1983) found that men reminisced more than women and talked about hobbies and shared activities.

This could relate to the interaction-based/task-based distinction noted by Parsons and Bales (1955). Interaction seems crucial to female friendship groups, whereas activities are more important in all male groups (Goodwin, 1982). Douvan and Adelson (1966) point to the fact that females are socialized to place value on interpersonal relationships, whereas males are taught to value activities and achievement. It therefore makes sense that while women create solidarity by sharing intimate information, men remind each other of shared activities.

Females are slightly more likely than males to use humor to maintain or clarify boundaries, particularly in mixed groups. This strategy serves to increase group solidarity, often by identifying an outgroup.

Solidarity-based teases are used more often in single-sex than in mixed-sex groups. This is particularly true of men. The odds of a male using a solidarity-based tease are 2.59 times greater in single-sex than in mixed-sex interaction.

Most literature on teasing is restricted to teasing amongst males (see Radcliffe-Brown, 1952 [1940]; Loudon, 1970; Kuiper, 1991). Some studies show teasing in mixed groups, but this is of a particularly sexual nature (Spradley and Mann, 1975; Whitehead, 1976; Parkin, 1979). Only recently have researchers found that teasing also occurs in all female groups (Eder, 1990, 1993).

Limbrick (1991) found a similar pattern in the use of expletives by New Zealand men and women. Both groups used roughly the same number of expletives when in single-sex groups. In mixed groups, however, the males decreased their use of expletives by a substantial amount. Limbrick interpreted this as a desire not to offend, and as an accommodation to the stereotype of females' lesser expletive usage.

Folb (1980) found that the Black American girls she studied used the vernacular and swear words only when out of earshot of males and of adults.

“When I was privy to all female conversation, I found that the quantity of talk, joking, boasting, argument, cursing and even shooting the dozens rivalled male expressive behavior.” (Folb, 1980: 195)

Much of the teasing humor in my corpus takes the form of jocular insults. Folb points out that such behavior is not ‘lady-like’ and so regarded as inappropriate behavior to display to boys, or to adults. Similarly, the boys in her study toned down their vernacular usage among young women, as to do otherwise would be disrespectful.

So both men and women engage in jocular abuse and teasing activities, though they do this much more often in single-sex groups than mixed groups. It seems likely that the reasons this behavior is restricted in mixed conversation differ for men and women, but both reflect the gender stereotyping and expectation of ‘appropriate’ sex-specific behavior.

There is also an indication that there are more limitations on who one can tease in mixed groups. Speakers were very unlikely to focus humor on the other participant of the same sex in mixed conversations. This pattern is discussed in Hay (1995b).

Hay (1994) analyzed jocular abuse patterns in a mixed friendship group consisting of eight members. The vast majority of examples involved jocular abuse between men and women – the speakers rarely teased others of their own sex. The examples showed a friendly animosity between the sexes and clearly served to maintain gender divisions.

The results of this research show that teasing is an activity indulged in equally by men and women. It tends to occur much more in single-sex interaction, perhaps also because these are the groups in which the most intimate friendships tend to be made. Teasing and sparring can develop a sense of ‘comradeship’ and joviality within groups. Because this tends to occur most in single-sex groups, many seem to believe that it is restricted to just one sex. My topic sparked much debate amongst my friends, and many gave me ‘insights’ into what they believed were the essentials about humor. A male friend explained to me that his best friends were those he insulted regularly and with great vigor. His wife did not understand this, and he most certainly could not insult her in the same manner! He wondered why it was that men could enjoy this type of humor and solidarity, whereas women did not seem to be able to. The answer seems to be that women do, in fact, use humor to tease to the same extent as men. But both men and women do this most in single-sex groups rather than mixed-sex groups.

It is important to note that this is a specific type of humor which is usually restricted to certain friendship groups. One either has a joking relationship established, or one does not. Joking relationships were first described by Radcliffe-Brown:

“What is meant by the term joking relationship is a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some cases required to tease or make fun of the other, who in return is required to take no offence” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952: 90)

If such a relationship exists, teasing humor will be prevalent; if it does not, there will most likely be no humor that serves this purpose. The examples of teasing in this corpus, then, are not equally distributed amongst all the conversations.

### 8.3. *Power*

Much of the language and gender literature presents power and solidarity as dichotomous. Men, in general, are said to place importance on power and competition within conversation, and females prioritize the expression and maintenance of solidarity (see Aries, 1976; Edelsky, 1981; Fishman, 1983; Maltz and Borker, 1983; Coates, 1986; Preisler, 1986, among others). Context is also important here, with ‘men’s’ style used more often in public settings, and ‘women’s’ in private interaction.

It is surprising, then, that the difference between men and women in the use of power-based functions is not great. Men do use humor for power-based functions slightly more than women, but the figures are far from conclusive. It is particularly interesting that the odds ratio for male-female single-sex groups is greater than for

male-female mixed groups. Given that men are said to exert their power more often – especially over women, we would have expected quite a large ratio here. Perhaps the distinction is so small because the groups are all natural friendship groups. Status and power differentials are minimal.

There are no striking differences between men and women or single and mixed conversations in the use of humor which creates or challenges boundaries. This, too, is contrary to expectations, and probably, reflect the fact that the conversations occur amongst friends.

Powerful teases occur more in single-sex conversations than mixed-sex conversations. This is interesting, as the literature indicates that these are more likely to be used by men than by women. Both groups tend to ‘behave’ more, or conform to social norms when in the presence of the opposite sex. In section 8.2, I discussed solidarity-based teases. The distribution of the two types of tease are very similar.

#### *8.4. Psychological functions*

Humor was more likely to be used for a psychological reason in single-sex conversations than mixed conversations. A contributing factor was the large amount of contextual coping used in single-sex conversations by males, who tended to find the taping situation more difficult. In Hay (1996), I discuss in detail the fact that sitting and chatting with friends and a tape-recorder was an activity the women in my study seemed more comfortable with than did the men.

Coping humor tends to occur in single-sex groups – females were more likely than males to use humor to deal with a non-contextual problem, whereas men were more likely to use it to cope with a contextual problem. In section 8.2 I referred to literature which claims women are more likely to self-disclose than men. If women are more likely to discuss a non-contextual problem facing them at any given time, it is not surprising that they more often employ humor to cope with such problems.

Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992) found women more likely to use humor as a coping strategy, although the definition I have used of coping has much wider scope than theirs, as they are interested specifically in self-directed humor.

Ervin-Tripp and Lampert also found men’s humor more likely to be used to defend than women’s. Again, I have expanded the definition for my purposes, which makes comparison difficult. Whereas Ervin-Tripp and Lampert include only humor which protects the self by identifying a weakness before anyone else does, whereas I include in this category any humor which serves to protect the speaker. My results show no significant differences in the use of defending humor.

## **9. Conclusion**

Humor is a complex discourse event, which can serve numerous functions. This paper has presented a taxonomy into which such functions can be organized. The taxonomy is specifically tailored for the classification of spoken humor occurring in young New Zealand Pakeha friendship groups.

Functions of humor occurring in such groups can be classified under the three broad labels of solidarity-based, power-based and psychological functions. Further distinctions within these labels are also made.

Humor, of course, is culturally grounded, as are gendered patterns of interaction. The last thing I want to do is make claims about universal patterns of men's and women's humor. Rather, I have provided a tool which can serve as a starting point for investigations into spontaneous humor. Holmes and Hay (1997) used the taxonomy presented here, and found quite different patterns in their analysis of humor among Maori.

The results of applying this taxonomy to a corpus of spontaneous humor among Pakeha New Zealanders revealed the women more likely to use humor for the specific function of forming or maintaining solidarity than are men. In particular, women used humor to share personal information about themselves. Revealing personal information allows the conversation participants to know the speaker better, and indicates a sense of trust.

When using solidarity-based humor, the men were more likely than women to capitalize on shared experiences or highlight similarities. Reminiscing about shared experiences is an effective strategy for creating solidarity, especially for the men in this study, who seem to place high value on shared activities.

Men were more likely to use humor solely for the general function of increasing solidarity and status and performing positive work on their personal identity. Power-based strategies such as controlling and fostering conflict are often identified as functions of humor, but the fact that my data came from natural friendship groups meant that these functions seldom occurred.

The speakers in my corpus used humor for psychological purposes. Men more often used humor to cope with a contextual problem, whereas women were more likely to use non-contextual coping strategies which helped cope with problems that were not specific to the immediate situation.

Despite literature to the contrary, this research has shown that women do, in fact, indulge in teasing humor. Both men and women tease both in a powerful manner, and to create solidarity, though this strategy is largely restricted to single sex groups.

This study leaves open many questions about the functions of humor as it is used by men and women. In particular, the applicability of this taxonomy to domains outside of young Pakeha friendship groups now needs to be investigated, and the gender patterns should be subject to carefully qualitative investigation.

## **Appendix A: Transcription conventions**

With the exception of the more detailed system for transcribing laughter, the conventions used in this thesis are based largely on those developed at Victoria University for the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English (WCSNZE).

Speakers are labelled using an initial and the letter F or M to indicate their sex.

*Transcription in doubt*

( ) Speech indecipherable  
 (hello) Transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance

*Intonation*

? Rising or question intonation  
 – Incomplete or cut-off utterance  
 YES Capitals indicate emphatic stress  
 # Juncture between letters (e.g. a#b#c)

*Paralinguistic and other non-verbal features*

Descriptions of paralinguistic and non-verbal features are contained in square brackets. If the feature is concurrent with speech, or describing speech, the relevant speech is placed between colons, e.g.:

AM: [sneezes]  
 BM: [silly voice]: you never can tell with bees:

*Pauses*

+ Pause of up to one second  
 ++ Pause of up to two seconds

*Simultaneous speech and latching*

Simultaneous speech is contained in slashes, as in the following example:

AF: remember the time when //we were at school and\  
 BF: /what about when you wore that\ green hat

A “=” signals speech continues from an earlier line:

AM: i would go to school almost //every day\ wearing this=  
 BF: /[ha ha ha]\  
 AM: =bright green hat

*Laughter*

[h] Laughing exhalation  
 [huh] Laughing inhalation  
 [ha] Voiced laugh particle  
 [nh] Nasalized laugh particle  
 hello[ho] Laughing repetition of syllable  
 [laughs] 2 secs Used for prolonged laughter,  
 or for a group of people laughing

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**Jennifer Hay** has a Masters in Linguistics from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Linguistics Department of Northwestern University, where she is working on issues of phonological and lexical representation.