For Lucy with love

On Humour

Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society

Michael Mulkay

Cambridge: Polity Press 1988

Michael Mulkay. On Humour. Its Nature and its Place in Modern Society. Cambridge; Polity Press, 1988.

Contents

Michael Mulkay. On Humour, Its nature and its Place in Modern Society. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988.

Acknowledgements

I offer thanks to Brian Berriman, Anna Cornhill, Madeleine Walker and Jo Riding and her daughters for helping me to collect examples of humour as it occurs in natural settings; to Jonathan Potter and Steve Yearley for reading and commenting helpfully on the first draft of chapters 1 to 6 of this book; and to all (well, almost all) of the students at the University of York who have taken my course 'Analysing Humour' for their enthusiasm, their bright ideas and their stimulating project work. Most of all I thank my wife, Lucy, not only for typing the manuscript, and then retyping it without complaint, but also for her continued companionship and support.

I am grateful to Nick Garland for allowing me to reproduce his cartoon 'Whoops' (p. 200), which appeared in the *Independent* of Thursday 15 January 1987; to Christine Roche for permission to reproduce two untitled cartoons (pp. 140, 151) from her collection *I'm not a Feminist but . . .*, published by Virago Press, 1985; to Gerald Scarfe for permission to reproduce his cartoon 'Reagun, 1980' (p. 199) from his collection *Gerald Scarfe* published by Thames & Hudson, 1982; to Emanuel Schegloff for permission to quote at length from, and to use the transcription of the joke from, the late Harvey Sacks's 'Some technical considerations of a dirty joke', published in J. Schenkein (ed.), *Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction*, Academic Press, 1978; and to Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay for permission to quote at length from *The Complete Yes Minister*, BBC Publications, 1984.

Introduction

In this book, I offer a sociological view of humour. Although there is a diverse secondary literature on humour, produced in particular by philosophers, psychologists and anthropologists, the subject has received little systematic attention from sociologists. The founding fathers of the discipline, for example, ignore it entirely. This widespread lack of concern on the part of sociologists is surprising. For humour is one of the few basic social phenomena which occur in all groups throughout the course of human history. One possible reason for this neglect is that sociologists have confused the 'non-serious' with the 'trivial'. They may have assumed that humour, because it is by definition outside the domain of the serious, is not worthy of serious investigation. The central theme of my analysis, in contrast, is that the exact opposite is the case. I will show that it is precisely the symbolic separation of humour from the realm of serious action that enables social actors to use humour for serious purposes, and that makes humour an essential area for sociological inquiry. Humour is of interest, not only in its own right, but also because its study helps us better to understand our serious social world.

For several centuries, at least since the time of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), Western scholars have tried hard to make sense of the phenomenon of humour. In our own century, the writings of Sigmund Freud (1905) and Henri Bergson (1911) have been regarded as particularly noteworthy. Even today, their venerable accounts of the mechanisms of jokes and laughter are regularly used as the starting point for further study. This is not to say, however, that their ideas have been generally accepted – far from it. In fact, there is remarkably little acknowledged agreement about the nature of humour. Consequently, it has come to be almost customary for each new contributor to the literature to review the major theories of bygone days before presenting his own.

I have not adopted that approach in this book. (For an excellent review of this kind, see Paulos, 1980.) I have tried to avoid discussion of

disembodied 'theories of humour' and to concentrate instead on careful examination, in depth, of people's actual humorous conduct. I do not mean to imply by this that my analysis is free of theoretical preconception or that the empirical material I shall consider can in any way speak for itself. I take for granted that the analytical meaning of the data employed in the following chapters is being actively created in the present text and recreated in your reading of it (Mulkay, 1985). Thus, I do not claim that my approach to the study of humour is necessarily better than other approaches that might be, or that have been, adopted. The justification for my strategy is simply that I prefer to formulate my sociology of humour whilst immersing my reader and myself as deeply as possible in the recorded traces of humorous interaction.

My aim has been to present a systematic analysis of the part played by humour in the social life of advanced industrial societies. In so doing, I have looked in some detail at spoken jokes, written jokes, 'dirty jokes', innocent jokes, adolescent humour, feminist cartoons, political cartoons, dinner table wit, joking relationships, bar room humour, ceremonial humour, graffiti, situation comedies, teasing and laughter. Despite my best efforts, however, it has proved impossible, in one comparatively short volume, to cover this broad subject in full. Consequently, certain important topics have been excluded or have been considered only in passing. For example, I have not examined ethnic humour at all (see Davies, 1988); nor have I dealt with practical jokes (see Fry, 1963), nor, apart from situation comedy, with the various forms of comic drama. Although I have included and discussed cartoons in two chapters, the main emphasis of the text is upon verbal, rather than visual, humour. Furthermore, I have based my discussion almost exclusively on humour occurring in the United States and Britain within the last two decades or so. The data used in subsequent chapters have been chosen to represent these two countries more or less equally. I have assumed that the social organization of humour is likely to be fundamentally the same in the other industrial nations as it is in these two societies. (For an excellent cross-cultural review of the anthropological literature on humour in preliterate societies, see Apte, 1985.)

I do not imagine that what I have to say here will be the last sociological word on humour. Indeed, I will be disappointed if this book does not help to stimulate a more active interest in humour among sociologists and others. For I have tried to provide a coherent and wide-ranging analysis that will furnish an organized frame of reference for further research into, and further informed speculation about, the social dynamics of humour and the interplay of humorous and serious conduct in every field of social

activity. There have, of course, been occasional attempts in the past to develop a broad sociological overview of humour (see Fry, 1963; Hertzler, 1970). But these texts have not given rise to a cumulative tradition of sociological research. As a result, the various empirical studies of humour that have been carried out by sociologists have remained fragmentary and uncoordinated. In the chapters which follow, I examine a number of the most successful of these studies and try to reveal their analytical significance more fully by weaving their authors' observations into my own overall design. In so doing, I do not hesitate, wherever necessary, to reject or modify the original researchers' conclusions. But revisions of this kind are always based upon a careful re-examination of the evidence and are often linked to consideration of additional material of my own.

This book, then, offers a general, empirically based sociology of humour. But such a description of its content is deceptively simple. For, as most readers will know, there are many available sociologies; and some readers may be inclined to ask: 'What *kind* of sociology are we to expect?' The only answer I can give to this question is that it is not any kind of sociology that I can name. To put this more positively, my policy is to draw freely upon, and to incorporate into my argument, any study that seems to convey something interesting about the social character of humour, whether it employs the framework of functional analysis, the assumptions of symbolic interactionism, the methods of conversation analysis, or the resources of any other sociological perspective. Humour, it seems to me, is too rich, too varied and too complex to be confined within the narrow limits of any single sociological school. Indeed, no single discipline can cope adequately with humour. Consequently, I also try to integrate parts of the non-sociological literature into my analysis. In other words, I assume that we have more to gain than to lose by approaching this largely uncharted territory in a spirit of tolerant, yet rigorous, eclecticism.

The first half of the book provides a close examination of the dynamics of humorous interchange in small-scale social settings and an account of the basic features of humorous conduct. The second half deals with the part played by humour in society at large. Chapter 1 presents a detailed analysis of humorous exchange among a group of American adolescent males. This analysis enables me to convey directly how humour is organized in fine detail and to establish that humorous and serious conduct differ in certain fundamental respects. In the second chapter, the organizing principles of the serious mode and the humorous mode are discussed more fully. I argue that in the serious realm we normally employ a unitary mode of discourse which takes for granted the existence of one real world, and within which ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction and

interpretative diversity are potential problems. In contrast, humour depends on the active creation and display of interpretative multiplicity. When people engage in humour, they are obliged to collaborate in the production of a kind of 'controlled nonsense'. They temporarily inhabit, not a single, coherent world, but a world in which whatever is said and done necessarily has more than one meaning.

In chapters 2 to 5, various implications of this distinction between the serious and the humorous modes are explored, and some of the complexities of humorous interchange in face-to-face settings are examined in depth. In the latter part of the second chapter, psychologists' accounts of the 'mental processing' of humour are discussed and amended in order to allow for the interpretative duality built into humorous discourse. Chapter 3 deals with the semantics of humour and with the ways in which the linguistic resources of the serious domain can be redeployed to create a world of multiple meanings. It also describes how participants signal their adoption of the humorous mode, explains why they may respond seriously in situations where others have signalled their humorous intent, and shows how unintended humour can occur.

In chapter 4 I consider how standardized jokes and informal humour are connected to the surrounding serious discourse, and how informal exchange may generate the kind of transferable humorous packages that we call 'jokes'. Detailed attention is also given to the varied ways in which people employ humour in informal settings. It is shown that participants themselves distinguish between what we may call 'pure humour' and the 'applied humour' that occurs when social actors are taken to be making use of the humorous mode for serious purposes. In chapter 5 several kinds of applied humour are described, and the use of the humorous mode as a resource for accomplishing certain types of difficult interaction is documented in detail. The first half of the book concludes with a discussion of how far laughter should be regarded as part of the sign-language of the humorous mode.

In chapters 7 to 11 I examine how humour is moulded by the larger structures of modern society, and I assess the contribution made by humour both to changing and to maintaining those structures. Chapters 7 and 8 focus upon sexual humour and provide an explanation for the prominence of sexual themes and obscenity within humorous discourse. Chapter 7 deals with the particular interest in sexual humour shown by adolescents of both sexes, and describes how dirty jokes furnish them with an appropriate vehicle for the transmission of useful sexual information. In chapter 8 I turn to adult sexual humour. I argue here that the underlying assumptions of men's sexual humour, and the representation embedded in that humour of the relationships between women and men,

give expression to men's domination of women in our society and operate to support and strengthen that domination. I show that, at the structural level, as at the level of direct interaction, the persistent use of particular forms of humour is likely to have serious consequences.

In chapter 9, the relationship between humour and social structure is examined in completely general terms. A major conclusion of this chapter is that humour which occurs within relatively formalized structures is closely linked to contradictions built into those structures, but that in such settings humour is employed in accordance with the requirements of those who occupy the positions of formal control. It appears that humour can be used to challenge existing social patterns, but only in so far as it is given serious meaning by means of criticism and confrontation that is already operative within the serious domain.

This conclusion is confirmed in chapters 10 and 11, which combine an examination of the mass production of humour with an assessment of the contribution made by humour to the sphere of politics. In chapter 10 it is shown that the formal properties of situation comedy require a static rather than a dynamic representation of the political system, that the political sitcom depends on, and nourishes, established political stereotypes, and that, even when sitcom is used to convey a critical political message, this message will be weakened, if not swamped, by the repeated signals of humorous intent that are essential to television comedy. Unlike the political sitcom, political cartoons are clearly sited within the sphere of real political action and their critical connotations are fairly obvious. It may be, therefore, that they do sometimes have a genuine political impact. But political cartoons operate within a wider realm of political language that is organized around the conflict between antagonistic social groupings. Political cartoons are a subordinate part of the oppositional language of politics. They appear overwhelmingly to reflect the existing forms of political life and to reinforce existing divisions within the political community. Thus one broad, overall conclusion of the second half of the book is that, although humour may often appear on the surface to challenge, condemn and disrupt existing social patterns, at a more fundamental level it works to maintain the social structures which give it birth.

The main body of the book, then, consists of a systematic, detailed and empirically documented account of the social character of humour and of its place in society. In the final chapter, however, some of the constraints of empirically based analysis are put aside and I allow myself greater freedom to speculate about certain fundamental aspects of humour and the human condition. I will not summarize these speculations here, except to say that they are as much concerned with serious conduct and serious discourse as with humour. Given the dominant position in our culture of

that mode of discourse which we use to create the serious world, it is inevitable that the final significance of humour lies in what it tells us about the serious mode and about the recurrent failure of that unitary form of discourse to cope with the multiple realities which are generated by the basic processes of social life.

1

The Humorous Mode

Humour is an ordinary, everyday activity. There are a few people who claim to have no sense of humour. But the great majority of us have taken an active part in creating humour on countless occasions. We are intimately familiar with its processes and, to varying degrees, we have acquired the craft skills that this form of social intercourse demands. This does not mean, however, that it is easy to provide or to obtain an accurate account of the nature of humour. For example, when comedians or skilled raconteurs are asked how they make people laugh, they tend to reply, not with a serious analysis, but with another joke. The essential problem, I suggest, in talking or writing seriously about humour is that humorous and serious discourse operate according to fundamentally different principles. The attempt to make serious sense of humour is analogous to that of using words to describe pictures. It is without doubt possible, and the enterprise can have important benefits. But there are inherent difficulties and there is a constant danger of misrepresentation.

In the following passage, we can see how the incompatibility of the humorous and the serious modes can create practical problems for the serious analyst.

> As part of research activity, I set myself the assignment of discovering the number of smiles and laughs that came to me during the course of an eight-hour period. The experiment lasted only six of the proposed eight hours . . . I found that I became too self-conscious. I would become aware of an impending smile and prepare to record it. But in my anticipating it, it would fail to appear. I had entered a different mood. The intention of recording the smile contributed to the moment in such a manner as to alter its nature and puncture the humor.
>
> During the six hours of the experiment, I made several attempts to manipulate this self-awareness so that it would no longer present such an operational difficulty. These attempts were, by and large, unsuccessful. (Fry, 1963, pp. 4–5)

In the last two chapters I have concentrated on serious uses of humour in informal interaction. This does not mean, of course, that all interpersonal humour has some underlying serious intent or that humour among friends, colleagues and acquaintances is never enjoyed for its own sake. In the previous chapter, we saw that humour can be offered and received purely as an agreeable diversion and as a source of that special form of enjoyment which finds expression in collective laughter. After paying so much attention to the serious side of humour, it seems appropriate to enjoy a brief diversion together and to turn our attention now to laughter. Let us devote the next chapter to considering how far laughter can be regarded as a social phenomenon.

Author references:

Koestler, Morreall } Psychiatric

♂ Chapman, ♀ Jefferson, Schenkein } Social

6

Laughter as Social Action

I have to begin this chapter with an admission: namely, that very little research on laughter has been carried out by sociologists. Furthermore, there appear to be good reasons why this is so. For, at first sight, laughter seems neither to require, nor to be open to, sociological investigation. Laughter, as we all 'know', is essentially a physiological/psychological process which occurs when people are amused. The *sources* of amusement are certainly, as we have seen, social in character. They arise out of people's organized use of cultural material in the course of interaction. But laughter itself is usually taken to be no more than a physical by-product of participants' social experiences. The possibility that laughter enters into social interaction in a methodical manner or that participants systematically employ laughter as an interactional device is seldom considered.

The widespread adoption of this view of laughter has meant that psychologists, rather than sociologists, have born the brunt of research into laughter. I will devote much of this chapter, therefore, to an examination of two psychological theories of laughter. I will draw attention to various limitations, as well as some advantages, of such theories, and I will try to show that certain aspects of laughter can only adequately be approached from a more sociologically informed perspective. The latter part of the chapter will review the rather small body of research on social aspects of laughter that has been carried out by social psychologists and conversation analysts.

Laughter as a physical reflex

It seems appropriate to begin with Koestler's account of the mechanism of laughter. For Koestler seeks to provide an analysis of laughter which is consistent with the idea that humour depends on the bisociation of interpretative frameworks. Given that the concept of 'bisociation' has been built into my own exposition in previous chapters, Koestler's attempt to

link laughter to bisociation is to be welcomed. However, I will argue that Koestler's explanation of laughter is seriously defective and that it draws attention away from certain aspects of laughter which are essential to its understanding.

Koestler begins with the unqualified claim that laughter is a reflex action; that is, it is an involuntary, automatic response to external stimuli of an amusing kind (1964, p. 28). His basic idea is that when something amusing happens out there in the world it triggers a very special kind of physical response within us over which we have very little control. To use Goffman's phrase – when we are amused, laughter seems to come 'flooding out' (1961, p. 55). Koestler recognizes that responses to humour do vary considerably, from an almost imperceptible smile, through innumerable shades of amplitude, to a loud guffaw. But these variations he regards as merely differences of degree. The human reaction to humour, he maintains, is essentially uniform; it varies only in intensity in accordance with the extent to which the stimulus is found to be amusing. Thus human beings' response to humour closely 'resembles the action of a mechanical slot-machine' (1964, p. 29). Whenever humour is experienced, laughter is emitted. Consequently, laughter can be used to identify the occurrence of humour in the same way that 'the tell-tale clicking of the Geiger counter' can be used to indicate 'the presence of radioactivity' (1964, p. 31). Operating within this stimulus/response view of humour, Koestler takes his task to be that of explaining why and how the stimulus of humour produces such a peculiar response. What is it about the comic, he asks, which gives rise to the distinctive physical contortions of laughter?

Before attempting to answer this question, Koestler briefly mentions certain apparently minor qualifications with regard to his basic assumption concerning the reflex, uniform character of laughter. He notes, in the first place, that 'civilized laughter is rarely quite spontaneous' (1964, p. 30), and he goes on, without clarifying what he means by 'civilized laughter', to state that amusement can be 'feigned or suppressed' and generally controlled and 'interfered with' to a greater or lesser extent (1964, p. 30). In addition, he acknowledges that laughter can be used to convey rather different moods and that it is possible, therefore, to distinguish between 'gay laughter, melancholy smile and lascivious grin' (1964, p. 30). Finally, he admits that 'contrived laughter and smiling can be used as a conventional signal-language to convey pleasure or embarrassment, friendliness or derision' (1964, p. 30).

These comments by Koestler himself could be taken to suggest that his basic assumptions about laughter, assumptions typical of stimulus/response analyses in general, are markedly inappropriate or are relevant to only one type of laughter. For example, his acceptance that laughter and smiling can vary from being gay, to melancholy, to lascivious, seems to imply that laughter/smiling is not after all a unitary phenomenon varying only in intensity. Koestler seems to believe that laughter can vary in kind. Secondly, the fact that laughter can be a response to embarrassment or a signal of derision seems to undermine his claim that there is a simple, direct correspondence between laughter and amusement. As others have shown, and as Koestler himself appears to accept at this point in his argument, laughter can occur without humour and humour without laughter (Chapman, 1983). Thus laughter is no 'Geiger counter of the comic' (Douglas, 1968; Morreall, 1983), and any general explanation of laughter would have to deal with its non-humorous forms.

A third, and fundamental, implication of Koestler's qualifying remarks is that, to some unknown degree, laughter is not a reflex action. For Koestler accepts that, at least in 'civilized' contexts, laughter can be controlled. As we can see from his references to laughter being 'contrived' and 'interfered with', he treats such controlled laughter as an unnatural departure from the normal, reflex pattern. But neither Koestler nor more recent researchers can offer us a way of distinguishing spontaneous from contrived laughter.

> Whatever the physiological causes of laughter, it is at times an involuntary reflex action and at times occurs intentionally . . . Yet no criteria have been established for distinguishing between spontaneously occurring natural laughter and laughter that is deliberate, artificial, and acquired as part of the socialization process. (Apte, 1985, pp. 240–1)

If this is so, we have no reliable way of judging whether spontaneous, reflex laughter occurs very frequently or whether it is an occasional, rather unusual event. If it is the latter, then any stimulus/response theory such as Koestler's, even if it were correct, would give a radically incomplete account of the production of laughter.

Finally, in noting that laughter is employed as part of a 'conventional signal-language', Koestler seems briefly to recognize that laughter is generated in the course of social interaction and that it can be used by participants to communicate about and to construct the meaning of such interaction. If one were to explore this aspect of laughter, one would be led to investigate how laughter varies with the social process under way and how it is fitted systematically into the ongoing interaction. But Koestler decides to ignore such analytical possibilities and curtly dismisses from consideration all his own reservations: 'We are concerned, however, only with spontaneous laughter as a specific response to the comic; regarding which we can conclude with Dr Johnson that "men have been wise in very different modes; but they have always laughed in the same way"' (1964, p.

30). Thus Koestler, having drawn attention to certain variable facets of laughter which are inconsistent with his own basic assumptions about its simple, reflex character, chooses to disregard the implications of his own argument. It is not that he has *shown* that participants' ability to control their laughter, to produce different kinds of laughter, to laugh in non-humorous situations, to vary their laughter in accordance with the changing social context, and so on, are analytically trivial phenomena. His procedure is rather to insist on treating the basically reflex character of laughter as self-evident and to refuse to bother seriously with any arguments or observations which do not fit the simple slot-machine model.

Koestler's definition of laughter as a reflex action generates what he calls 'the paradox of laughter'. This paradox or, more correctly, this puzzle is given several different formulations. One version is that, unlike all other reflexes, the 'laughter reflex' serves no apparent biological purpose (1964, p. 31). Laughter seems to contribute in no discernible way to the survival of the human species. But, argues Koestler, if laughter is a true reflex it must make some useful contribution. For if it did not, it would not have been retained by the evolving human organism. Accordingly, a critical goal for any theory of laughter, in Koestler's view, must be to explain how the automatic reaction of the human body to comic situations contributes to its effective functioning and, thereby, to the biological efficiency of the species.

A second formulation of the 'paradox' focuses on the stimulus that produces laughter. Other reflex reactions are physiological responses to very specific changes in the physical environment. For example, a sharp light shone into the eye makes the pupil contract automatically. This contraction occurs because, in the simplest possible terms, the pupil is made up of light-sensitive material. In such cases, stimulus and response appear to operate at approximately the same physical level. But in the case of humour, the stimulus is a complex cultural product which requires complicated mental processing, yet which gives rise to marked reactions in the muscles of the face and violent disruption of the breathing apparatus: 'Humour is the only domain of creative activity where a stimulus on a high level of complexity produces a massive and sharply defined response on the level of physiological reflexes' (Koestler, 1964, p. 31). Koestler is not deterred by this puzzle, nor is he led to reconsider his initial assumption that laughter operates much like other reflexes. Rather, he takes as his central task to explain how the complex stimulus of humour is directly responsible for the unusual physiological processes of laughter.

Koestler establishes a theoretical connection between humour and the physical process of laughter by asserting that all humour contains an element of aggression or fear. This claim has by no means been confined to

Koestler (for useful reviews, see Paulos, 1980; Morreall, 1983). But Koestler develops it in a particularly interesting way. Humour, he argues, necessarily evokes 'an impulse, however faint, of aggression or apprehension. It may be manifested in the guise of malice, derision, the veiled cruelty of condescension, or merely as an absence of sympathy with the victim of the joke' (1964, p. 53). The recipient cannot avoid responding emotionally and physiologically to the 'self- assertive' implications of the humour: 'Emotions of the self- asserting type involve a wide range of bodily changes, such as increased secretion of the adrenal glands, increase of blood sugar, acceleration of the heart, speedier clotting of the blood, altered breathing . . . muscle tension and tremor' (Koestler, 1964, pp. 57–8).

These bodily reactions are primitive and involuntary and derive from mankind's earliest experiences in a hostile world, where they were essential for survival. As a response to humour, however, they are grossly inappropriate. For not only is the aggression and threat contained in humorous discourse merely symbolic; but as the humour unfolds the apparent targets for participants' aggression or self-defence are suddenly and unexpectedly removed as a result of the bisociative structure of humorous discourse: 'The sudden bisociation of a mental event with two habitually incompatible matrices results in an abrupt transfer of the train of thought from one associative context to another. The emotional charge which the narrative carried cannot be so transferred owing to its greater inertia and persistence; discarded by reason, the tension finds its outlet in laughter' (Koestler, 1964, p. 60).

The central argument, then, is that the aggressive element essential to humour generates within those involved a build-up of nervous and physical energy which is suddenly made inappropriate by the unexpected change of interpretative framework required by humour, and which then bursts forth along the line of least resistance – that is, in energetic release of breath and of muscle tension. It is an elegant argument and it undoubtedly provides an answer to Koestler's 'paradox of laughter'. If he is right, it appears that, although laughter has no direct biological purpose, it does have the physiological function of giving relief from the bodily tension sometimes created by man's advanced symbolic capacities. In addition, Koestler combines the idea that humour is aggressive with that of bisociation to provide a plausible explanation of how complex cultural products can elicit a primitive, reflex response. To his credit, Koestler furnishes one of the very few general analyses of humour which include a systematic account of why humorous discourse provokes such a peculiar bodily reaction. Unfortunately, the defects of his theory more than outweigh these advantages.

The first problem with Koestler's scheme follows from his proposal that

discourse or action 'will produce a comic effect only if an aggressive-defensive tendency, however sublimated, is present in it' (1964, p. 55). This claim is convincing only if we can show that all instances of humour are recognizably aggressive-apprehensive. There are doubtless many cases where this is a 'reasonable' description. For example, Suls's joke could be said to express aggression against Irishmen (p. 35), and Sacks's joke (pp. 9–10) might be described as expressing aggression against mothers. Similarly, some informal humour, such as Peter's remarks at the dinner party addressed to Deborah and David (p. 69), could be said to express underlying aggression. The most convincing example of all is the laughter of the men in the helicopter over Vietnam, which seemed to be closely associated with release of tension after a fearful experience (p. 53). However, there are many other humorous passages above which do not appear in any way related to aggression or apprehension: for instance, the playful exchange between Boo and Mike (pp. 47–8), the elephant in the fridge joke (p. 85) and the swimming trunks joke (p. 17). It is very difficult to interpret this latter joke as a vehicle for aggression, for example, unless one is willing to believe that every teller of the joke must have had fears about, or aggressive inclinations towards, fish and/or elephants. If we dismiss this possibility, as I think we must, we can defend Koestler's theory only by insisting, as does Koestler himself at one point, that we always laugh at someone else's expense (1964, p. 55). Thus, in the case of the swimming trunks joke, and indeed any other standardized joke, we could be regarded as laughing, not at the humour of its content, but at the recipient's failure to foresee the joke's unexpected outcome. In this sense, even innocent jokes would be told at the recipient's expense.

It is possible, then, to retain the notion that humour is inherently self-assertive, even though its content sometimes seems innocuous, by maintaining that the interactive form of humour is aggressive by its very nature. If this were so, however, we would expect recipients to respond to humour, not with laughter (*displaced* aggression), but with some kind of aggressive retaliation or symbolic retreat. For it would seem that recipients will have been subject in the course of humour to an aggressive act. I suggest that we can account for their reacting with laughter rather than with counter-aggression only if we credit them with the ability to perceive that they are not dealing with *real* aggression. An important defect in theories of humorous aggression, like that of Koestler, is that they pay no attention to the obvious difference between serious and humorous or playful aggression. Participants, on the other hand, evidently do make such a distinction; for they react to them quite differently.

If these observations are accurate, two important consequences follow. The first is that, if recipients are able to register and decode the various signals establishing the operation of the humorous mode, they are not merely responding to humour in an automatic fashion at the reflex, physiological level. Secondly, if recipients can distinguish between humorous and serious intent, we would not expect them to respond to humour with the physiological build-up appropriate to a situation of real physical threat. Consequently, it seems to follow that, where humorous intent is signalled and understood, there is unlikely to be the overwhelming need for the release of tension that is assumed in Koestler's account of the cause of laughter. We can accept that certain *kinds* of laughter do seem to fit Koestler's analysis: for instance, where participants react to unsignalled 'natural humour', as in the helicopter over Vietnam. However, the closer we approach to normal humorous interchange, with its subtle use of meaningful symbols and of signals of intent, the less appropriate does Koestler's reliance on primitive response mechanisms become. Of course, Koestler may well have had such subtleties in mind when he referred in passing to the awkward complications of 'civilized' discourse. But, I suggest, it seems more likely that it is the reflex laughter of the men in battle which is exceptional and that 'civilized', negotiated, orderly humorous discourse is closer to the ordinary state of affairs.

Koestler's use of the word 'civilized' in this context is in one respect rather misleading. For it seems to imply that the ability to regulate laughter and to use it in an organized way as a means of communication are relatively recent human accomplishments. Koestler seems to equate these capacities with the emergence of advanced societies and the creation of a false and contrived culture which tends to conceal man's natural urges beneath a thin veneer of apparent social order. However, this view that controlled, meaningful laughter is a by-product of 'civilized' life has come to appear rather unconvincing in the light of conclusions about parallel behaviour among apes.

> It appears, then, that in the evolutionary process leading from nonprimate mammals to primates, and finally to *Homo sapiens*, the meaning of the teeth-baring display broadened. While it was originally a part of the mainly defensive or protective behaviour mechanism, it became a signal of submission and nonhostility. In some species, the nonhostility signal probably became predominant, so that finally a signal indicating friendliness could evolve. Among primates, the bared-teeth display overlapped with the lip-smacking display, while human smiling appears to have resulted from the combination of both, very nearly replacing the latter. (Apte, 1985, p. 245)

The relationship between primate behaviour and that of humans is bound to remain uncertain. Nevertheless, it now seems clear that, in primate society, actions very similar to laughing and smiling are actively employed

as signals of friendliness by participants. As Bateson (1955) and Fry (1963) noted in the course of their earlier studies of 'the play frame', primates are also able to use such signals to indicate that their actions are not what they might appear to be. In particular, facial grimaces are employed as a signal of mock-aggression. It is clear that apes, as well as humans, can distinguish playful hostility from the real thing and can respond appropriately. Thus, even in primate society, actions closely akin to smiling and laughter are part of a conventional sign language that is used to regulate interaction and to play with the distinction between reality and unreality. It seems probable, therefore, that Koestler was mistaken in dismissing these symbolic and interactional aspects of laughter as peculiar to 'civilized' societies and, therefore, as of no more than peripheral interest.

Koestler's analysis of laughter does have some merits. It recognizes the bisociative character of humorous discourse. It suggests a possible link between the semantic structure of humour and the physiology of laughter. It accounts for laughter's lack of biological function. And the basic notion of the build-up and release of tension does seem to apply to certain kinds of laughter. But as a general theory of laughter it is unsatisfactory. Firstly, it ignores the fact that laughter occurs regularly in certain kinds of non-humorous and non-aggressive situations. Secondly, the content of much humour seems quite unrelated to aggression/apprehension. Thirdly, it is difficult to maintain that humorous interaction itself is necessarily aggressive, because it is normally signalled and accepted as being different from genuine aggression. Fourthly, to a considerable extent laughter appears not to be a crude reflex reaction, but a regulated and orderly part of the process of communication and social interaction. Furthermore, it is unlikely that this is a recent or marginal aspect of the production of laughter.

Fifthly, Koestler's argument that 'men have always laughed in the same way' transforms humour itself from a complex and variable cultural process to a simple, utterly primitive phenomenon common to all men. For according to Koestler, when we react to humour, we are not appreciating the subtleties of language or of social action; we are merely giving vent to an accumulation of redundant energy which we have been fooled into producing. I suggest that Koestler has not succeeded in reconciling a high-level cultural stimulus with the production of a reflex response. Rather, he has reduced humour to the level of that supposedly primitive response by eliminating the diversity and complexity of humour from theoretical consideration. Such a slot-machine view of the production of laughter cannot cope even with the actions characteristic of apes.

Finally, there is the fact that Koestler never once offers observational data on laughter. His whole argument is a priori and it takes for granted

that we all know exactly what laughter is like, precisely when it occurs, and so on. When Koestler reaffirms Dr Johnson's claim that 'men have always laughed in the same way', he seems to be implying that laughter conforms to one basic pattern. Yet he does not even try to describe what that pattern might be, nor to check whether it occurs in practice. John Morreall (1983) has tried to infer what the pattern would be if laughter was produced, as Koestler and others suggest, through the sudden release of tension. For such theorists, Morreall writes, laughing is analogous to the opening of a safety valve in a steam pipe.

> Just as the opening of the valve releases excess steam pressure built up within the pipe, laughter is supposed to release excess nervous energy built up within the laugher's nervous system. But if this is the case, then we should expect the greatest amount of nervous energy to be released at the very beginning of the overflow, when the excess is at its peak. As the release continues, the amount of energy released, and so the intensity of the laughter, should gradually diminish; just as the steam from a safety valve is at its greatest pressure at the moment the valve is opened, but after that initial outburst gradually diminishes. Now sometimes laughter is like this – there is a powerful outburst that trails off to mild chuckling and then no laughter at all. But often laughter starts out very weak and increases in strength; or there is an initial outburst followed by a period of no laughter, and then more laughter. (1983, pp. 26–7)

Morreall does not provide detailed documentation of these possible patterns of 'laughter emission'. He offers us no more than common-sense reflection on 'what we all know' about laughter. But even with this minimal recourse to empirical evidence, he improves on the efforts of Koestler and the great majority of writers on this topic. In his brief remarks about the variety of humorous patterns, Morreall implies that perhaps laughter is no more uniform than humour. He enables us to imagine that there may be as many kinds of laughter and patterns of laughter-production as there are types of humorous interaction. His remarks also imply that laughter might be carefully observed, its variations and complexities documented and explored, and an analysis developed which was linked to systematic evidence about its production. In the next section, therefore, we will examine Morreall's own theory of laughter.

Laughter and the pleasure shift

Morreall claims to offer a completely general explanation of laughter. His

analysis is remarkably simple but quite powerful. It is also a distinct improvement, in several respects, on that of Koestler. Nevertheless Morreall, like Koestler, fails to recognize the limitations of his basic model of laughter-production; and he fails, therefore, to move beyond a narrowly psychological approach to laughter.

Morreall's theory of laughter is built around three basic propositions. The first is that laughter is always associated with some change in the psychological state of the individual concerned. The second is that laughter occurs when this change in state is too sudden for the person to be able to adjust smoothly. Thirdly, the psychological shift leading to laughter must be pleasant. These statements, Morreall proposes, convey the essential characteristics of laughter. Laughter is the physical activity that is caused by, and which gives expression to, the feelings produced by a sudden psychological shift in a pleasurable direction (1983, p. 39).

This theory is an improvement on prior attempts to explain laughter, claims Morreall, in two important respects. In the first place, it applies to all laughter and not just to that associated with humour. Thus it can account, not only for the response to an amusing story, but for laughter produced by tickling, by embarrassment, by running into an old friend in the street, and even that caused by hysteria. Secondly, previous theories of humorous laughter have focused on one kind of humorous situation and have insisted that all humorous laughter is of this type. For instance, Koestler and others have maintained that all humorous laughter involves a release of aggressive tension. Morreall is willing to accept that *some* humorous laughter may arise in this way, but he contends that in many other amusing situations aggression and pent-up emotion are completely lacking. Thus it cannot be the sudden release of tension as such which causes laughter. Rather, he argues, laughter is due to the sudden and pleasurable change of state which accompanies the release of tension, but which can also be created in many other ways. Morreall maintains that his alternative hypothesis includes within its scope all the accurate observations about laughter made by previous analysts, without making the mistake of overgeneralizing on the basis of one limited type of laughter. He claims to have reformulated their findings at a level which is genuinely applicable to all cases of laughter.

Morreall succeeds in making his theory so wide-ranging, despite its basic simplicity, by identifying four analytically distinct aspects of individuals' psychological states: namely, the sensory, the affective, the perceptual and the cognitive. Laughter is so varied, he suggests, because it can be caused by sudden changes of state occurring in each of these psychological dimensions and in every possible combination. For example, the laughter which is emitted by very young babies when they are tickled is said to be produced by sudden, yet pleasant, changes in purely

sensory stimulation. In the case of older children and adults, tickling becomes more complex psychologically, but it still operates mainly at the sensory level.

> Older children and adults, of course, can also be tickled; and though more is involved here because a child or adult perceives the tickler, and can often thereby anticipate or even stop the touches, here, too, successful tickling is based on a shift in sensory stimulation. The most important thing in tickling children and adults is that the touch be unexpected in some way – either in its commencement, duration, location, direction, or amount of pressure. For if we can fully anticipate the touch, we can prepare ourselves for it and so eliminate its suddenness, its power to shock us; and in that case there will not be a psychological shift, but an expected bit of stimulation. (Morreall, 1983, p. 40)

In the case of adults, behaviour is always much more complex than in young children and will always involve some combination of sensory input, emotion and cognition. The general applicability of Morreall's theory, however, is assured because it includes any and every conceivable psychological state. The only requirement for laughter to occur is that there must be some sudden and pleasant psychological alteration.

> In the situation where I run into an old friend on the street, for instance, I may be experiencing no emotion before I see him. But then as I recognize his face and rush to meet him, I feel a boost of excitement; my step quickens and even my heartbeat is speeded up. The shift from feeling no emotions to feeling very strong emotions here will be pleasant, and my hearty laughter will be the expression of my pleasure. In much the same way I might laugh on finding out that I have won a lottery, especially if this discovery is accidental and so sudden. Even the shift from a neutral emotional state to simply *thinking* about something that arouses positive emotions can be enough to trigger laughter, as when we laugh in anticipating some enjoyable activity or in recalling some particularly fond memory. (Morreall, 1983, p. 46)

In this passage, Morreall is discussing non-humorous laughter. In relation to humorous laughter, the main advantage of his perspective is that its basic psychological mechanism is so general that it can be said to appear in an indefinite variety of humorous forms. Consequently, not only does the theory cover non-humorous laughter, but it allows for wide diversity within the humorous realm. The psychological shift responsible for laughter may, in some cases, be mainly emotional; and it may sometimes involve aggression/apprehension. But there are many other kinds of

emotion and, in principle, every one can give rise to the sudden pleasurable change required for laughter to occur. Morreall emphasizes, in addition, that we should not place undue importance on the emotional shift present in some cases of humour.

> For our enjoyment of an emotional shift is neither necessary nor sufficient for humor, whereas our enjoyment of a conceptual shift is both necessary and sufficient for humor. Though a release of hostile, sexual, or other feelings may be involved in some cases of humor, the essence of humor lies in the enjoyment of incongruity. (1983, p. 47)

One obvious limitation of Morreall's theory, compared to that of Koestler, is that Morreall provides no account of the physical mechanism of laughter. He makes no attempt to explain why sudden, pleasant changes of psychological state should generate the peculiar convulsive movements of laughter. Whereas Koestler sought to devise a theory which brought together the cultural, psychological and physiological levels within one coherent scheme, Morreall concentrates more narrowly on the psychological processes of laughter. In compensation for this exclusively psychological focus, he offers us a theory which should apply equally well to all forms of laughter, yet which avoids oversimplification. Morreall's analysis of the psychology of laughter and humour accepts the complexity and diversity of these phenomena, and recognizes that humorous interplay can be 'pure' and playful as well as emotionally charged. It also gives an account of the psychological process of laughter which could be taken to parallel what we know about the semantic structure of humorous discourse. In other words, we could reformulate Morreall's hypothesis as a proposal that laughter will occur when the discourse fosters a psychological state which is then unexpectedly, but pleasantly, disrupted by the evolution of that same discourse.

Unfortunately, there is a major weakness in Morreall's theory. This weakness becomes evident when we ask what is meant by the phrase 'pleasantly disrupted'. As we have noted in previous chapters, not all disruptions or incongruities are found to be funny. Morreall is inclined to take for granted that if incongruity or a change of psychological state gives rise to laughter, the experience must have been pleasant. Consequently, his claim that only pleasurable changes of state lead to laughter is somewhat empty. For he offers no independent evidence that an increase in pleasure is involved in such cases. In most of his examples, the likely occurrence of laughter is itself taken as sufficient indication that the experience was pleasant. As a result, the analysis comes close to a tautology.

The wider significance of this aspect of Morreall's analysis will become clearer if we reconsider his example of non-humorous laughter occasioned

by meeting an old friend in the street. The emotions depicted in Morreall's description of this meeting are explicitly described as 'pleasant', and the 'hearty laughter' is said to be 'the expression of this pleasure' (see p. 103). I can equally well, however, imagine a quite different psychological state leading to laughter in a similar situation. For instance, I may be very far from pleased at meeting that old fool again, and my heart may sink, but I greet him nonetheless with hearty laughter out of recognition of past ties of friendship. Would this example of a negative change of psychological state producing laughter count as a refutation of Morreall's theory? It appears that it would not. This instance would not be taken to contradict his analysis because, although the change in psychological state did not involve an increase in pleasure, the ensuing laughter would be deemed not to have been natural laughter but merely 'forced laughter' or 'feigned laughter'. As Morreall makes clear, he regards laughter which is not a natural expression of pleasure as a distortion of the primary psychological process. Any situation where people seem to laugh without an increase in pleasure is treated as irrelevant to his basic hypothesis.

> Our formula that laughter is an expression of pleasure at a psychological shift, then, can be seen to cover even the problem cases on our list. Because laughing is not only a natural expression of pleasure, but is also under our voluntary control, and even under the control of unconscious coping mechanisms, it can occur in the absence of pleasure. I can force a laugh to please my boss or to make myself feel less tense. But such cases, as we saw, are parasitic on laughter as the natural expression of pleasure, for they all work by using laughter to feign pleasure, or by breaking into the causal loop between pleasure and laughter to induce pleasure by performing laughter. Because laughter is partially voluntary, too, it can not only be forced when the person is not amused, but can also be suppressed when he is amused . . . There is no one-to-one correspondence, in short, between instances of amusement and instances of laughter. Nonetheless, our formula that laughter is the natural expression of amusement provides the key to understanding all cases of laughter. (Morreall, 1983, pp. 58–9)

In this passage, Morreall's argument closely resembles that of Koestler. For Morreall, like Koestler, insists on regarding the involuntary emission of laughter in response to a pleasant stimulus as the key to understanding all cases of laughter. He does accept that laughter can occur in the absence of such a stimulus and that laughter can be actively employed in the course of social interaction. But this does not lead him either to revise his theoretical hypothesis that 'laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift' (1983, p. 39) or to qualify his claim to be offering a comprehensive

theory of laughter. Rather, again like Koestler, he responds by dismissing those kinds of laughter which do not fit his theory as unnatural and parasitic on the so-called natural process.

The central defect of Morreall's analysis, in my view, is that despite its genuine attempt to allow for the diversity of humour and laughter, the theory is confined within a restricted conception of isolated organisms responding automatically to the pleasure derived from external stimuli: 'Laughter, as we have set out to account for it, is a human behavior that is a reaction of the person to his perceptions of the world around him – a motor response, to put it crudely, to sensory input' (1983, p. 57). As we have seen, this simplistic view requires Morreall to disregard a potentially enormous range of situations where laughter seems to be to some degree under participants' control. It also leads him to treat human actors as essentially passive recipients of external stimuli that are intrinsically either pleasure-giving or not. Where he suspects that people are not simply responding to whatever inputs their environment provides, but are acting upon that environment and thereby creating its meaning, he dismisses their actions as feigned, forced, and as being not a source of true laughter. I suggest, in contrast, and in line with the discussion in previous chapters, that participants are continually engaged in giving meaning to the world around them and in making it laughable or not. For example, it seems to me unlikely that the psychological change brought about by hearing, say, the swimming trunks joke, is in itself laughter-inducing. As we will see in the next section, humorous discourse is not inherently laughable. Laughter occurs in a social environment in which participants act to make things humorous. The swimming trunks joke (and much other humour) will give rise to laughter, as we saw in the two previous chapters, only in so far as it has been actively signalled as humour and in so far as participants collaborate to make it laughable. Thus laughter is not merely a motor response by isolated individual organisms to some laughable input. It is necessarily part of an active social process and can be understood only in relation to that process.

Morreall's underlying stimulus-response model leads him, then, to underestimate the extent to which people actively work together to construct the humour and laughability of their 'sensory inputs'. It is also probably responsible in part for his failure to develop his own observations on the possible 'shaping' of laughter in the course of interaction. As we saw in the previous section, Morreall correctly draws attention to other analysts' inability to account for the varying patterns of laughter on different occasions and in different circumstances. This could have led to careful observation of how laughter is actually produced; for instance, one might have predicted that so-called 'forced' laughter was recognizably different in shape from laughter which was a 'natural expression of

this empirical direction. The reason for this, perhaps, is that his basic model implies that contrived laughter is relatively unimportant and that variations in the production of natural laughter must correspond, by definition, to fluctuations in participants' experiences of pleasure. Given these assumptions, empirical research into laughter is quite redundant. As with Koestler, the answers are assumed to be known in advance.

This discussion of Koestler's and Morreall's theories makes it clear that, although laughter may sometimes be a reflex response to changes originating in the external environment, this is not the only, nor even the primary, mechanism of laughter-production. It appears that, even in primate groups, laughter and smiling are actively used as resources in the course of social interaction. We might expect that, in human societies, such controlled and socially accomplished production of laughter would be widespread, if not paramount. In previous chapters we have observed in passing, when we have examined transcriptions of natural interaction, how laughter and smiling are built into social life by participants in an intricate manner and are exchanged as part of a collaborative process. Yet Koestler and Morreall dismiss all such laughter as a marginal phenomenon. In their view, it is obvious that such laughter is no more than a theoretically irrelevant deviation from the 'natural', and 'normal', situation in which a human organism responds automatically to the appropriate external stimulus. But this assumption about what kind of laughter is 'normal' is not based on observation of real, laughing human beings. Neither Koestler nor Morreall takes the trouble to provide empirical support for their assertions about the nature of 'normal' or 'natural' laughter. When, however, we do try to base our explanations of laughter on what can be observed in experimental and natural settings, we are forced to abandon these preconceptions and to accept that laughter is overwhelmingly a product of social processes and can be understood only in relation to such processes. Laughter undoubtedly has, by definition, an important psychological/physiological dimension which requires analysis at that level. But this does not mean that laughter can only be analysed by means of a slot-machine model of human action (Zijderveld, 1983). Laughter is almost always socially mediated. It almost always occurs in a social context and varies, sometimes dramatically and sometimes subtly, in accordance with the interpersonal dynamics of that context. Let us examine some studies of the social production of laughter in which these claims are substantiated and illustrated in detail.

Laughter and the social context

It has long been clear that laughter occurs overwhelmingly in social

humorous laughter is that humorous discourse necessarily requires a teller and at least one recipient (Fine, 1983). Standardized jokes, for example, involve concerted action by a participant who already knows and can deliver the comic resolution of the joke, and by one for whom the comic outcome is unexpected, amusing and, therefore, laughable. Moreover, even isolated laughter is likely to be a by-product of the laugher's social experiences, or to arise out of some indirect social relationship.

> For most of us laughter bubbles to the fore only rarely when there is no one else around. These are occasions when we relive amusing accidents or when in day-dreams we conjure up thoughts of others. Sometimes an author can levitate us so that we lose ourselves in the story and imagine ourselves as first- hand witnesses to funny events. When we laugh it is as though we were actually present. Therein lies an explanation as to why laughter, an essentially social response, can find expression when we are on our own: we may be alone physically, but we are not alone psychologically. (Chapman, 1983, p. 148)

Laughter, then, is social in the sense that it normally arises out of real or imagined dialogue between people. There are, however, other more specific connections between laughter and the social setting. Some of these have been revealed in a series of detailed studies carried out since the early 1970s by Chapman and his colleagues (for reviews of this work see Chapman, 1976; 1983). For example, Chapman found that children's humorous laughter is dramatically increased simply by the presence of a companion. When children were presented with humorous material, they laughed and smiled far more in the presence of another child than when they were alone. This was so, even when the companion neither laughed nor smiled and even though there was no observable interaction between the children (Chapman, 1976). In the case of adults, the results were slightly more complex. For it was found that adults' laughter was significantly affected by the companion's behaviour. Subjects who were paired with a partner who was completely unresponsive produced very little reaction to the humorous material. Subjects on their own tended to laugh rather more. But subjects with a responsive companion laughed much more frequently and more enthusiastically than either of the other two categories (Osborne and Chapman, 1977).

It appears from this study of adults that laughter and smiling operate as cues which encourage laughter and smiling on the part of others. It is tempting to infer that participants' laughter and the frequent exchange of humorous cues in the 'high response' situation must have made these subjects' experiences more amusing. But Osborne and Chapman report: 'An analysis of the subjective ratings solicited at the end of the sessions showed no significant differences between the three groups in terms of the perceived funniness of the tape-recordings' (1977, p. 43). Of course, it may be that experimental subjects who laughed relatively little were responding retrospectively to the 'demand characteristics' of the experiment and exaggerating their feelings of amusement. But we cannot know whether or not this was the case. We can only conclude that there is no direct evidence that participants' *amusement* was significantly affected in this study by variations in social context. The extent to which participants laughed and smiled, however, was very considerably altered by the presence of other laughing persons. It seems that, even in situations like this where social interaction is minimal and where humour is not jointly accomplished, participants' laughter can be highly responsive to changes in others' behaviour.

Most of Chapman's studies of laughter have dealt with children, and we cannot be certain that his findings apply equally to adults. But it appears that children's laughter and smiling vary systematically in accordance with a range of interactional and interpersonal factors: for instance, how much a companion laughs, how much the partner looks at the subject, how close they sit together, whether the subject and companions are friends, whether there are several companions and, if so, how much they look at one another, and so on (Chapman, 1983). The general conclusions arising from these studies are that the level of social 'intimacy' among participants is a crucial factor influencing the production of humorous laughter and that the more 'shared' is the situation, the more children laugh (Chapman, 1976). 'Intimacy' and 'sharing' are measured in this research by means of behavioural indicators such as eye contact and physical proximity.

These studies are an advance on the views considered earlier in this chapter in so far as they provide careful empirical documentation for their claims. They certainly furnish ample confirmation of the need to study the production of laughter as a social process. Yet the design of these studies tends to reproduce one of the basic mistakes of writers such as Koestler and Morreall. For Chapman's experimental subjects are always passive recipients, rather than active initiators, of humour. Laughter is persistently treated in these studies as if it can occur only as a behavioural response to external stimuli. The design of the experiments is such that humorous material is always presented to the subjects by the experimenters, and the frequency and duration of their laughter is then measured under controlled conditions. Consequently, we can learn nothing from such studies about participants' active use of laughter and humour in the course of ordinary interaction. Whereas Koestler and Morreall argue theoretically for the irrelevance of laughter which is not an involuntary reaction to humorous stimuli, Chapman and other social psychologists (Chapman, 1983, p. 137) tend to exclude actors' controlled use of laughter from consideration by adopting a particular experimental design.

In addition, although aggregate measurements of the number of laughs

or the duration of laughter can be informative, they will never reveal the social 'shaping' of laughter. The work of Chapman and his colleagues clearly confirms that people laugh in response to others' laughter. But aggregate measurements cannot show how the social exchange of laughter works in detail in varying circumstances, nor how laughter may be used in different ways to contribute in a meaningful fashion to the interaction of which it forms a part. If laughter *is* more than a mere reflex response to environmental cues, if it *does* contribute systematically to the sign language of the humorous mode and is employed in subtle ways to communicate about the meaning of the ongoing interaction, techniques must be found to investigate the fine detail of laughter in natural settings. We must find a research perspective which not only allows for the possibility that social actors methodically employ laughter as an interactional resource, but also treats such laughter as a topic for careful investigation. In the pursuit of such a perspective, we will now examine several studies of laughter carried out by conversation analysts.

Making laughter flood out

We have seen that Koestler and Morreall treat occasions where laughter 'floods out' as paradigm cases. Such situations are thought to provide the key to an understanding of laughter. Similarly, Chapman is reassured about the relevance of his data to natural settings by the fact that 'explosive laughter' was very common during his experimental sessions (1976). It should be noted, however, that there are other human reactions which often appear to burst forth spontaneously: for example, clapping and applause. Laughter is by no means as distinctive in this respect as Koestler and others have assumed. Furthermore, clapping and applause have been shown to be collectively managed and to be produced in a socially organized manner (Atkinson, 1984; Grady and Potter, 1985; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986). Let us turn, therefore, to a paper by Gail Jefferson (1985) in which the 'flooding out' of laughter is viewed as, in some circumstances, a controlled interactional device.

Jefferson starts with the observation that neither participants nor analysts normally describe laughter in the same detail as other aspects of conversation. For example, a participant can normally convey what happened on a specific occasion in summary terms ('He insulted me') or by repeating a version of what was said ('He said, "You clumsy idiot"'). But in the case of laughter, the summary description has to suffice ('He laughed' or 'He laughed heartily'). We do not say, 'He went "*ahh* ha ha *heh* heh heh".' Laughter is very seldom, if ever, reproduced in this kind of detail by participants.

A similar approach to laughter has been adopted by the great majority of analysts. If we look back at transcriptions of informal conversation in previous chapters, we find that the occurrence of laughter is normally indicated by insertion of the word 'laughter' (see pp. 62 and 75). But no attempt is made to reproduce precise details of the sounds of laughter or of its relation to the surrounding discourse. Jefferson acknowledges that this procedure is perfectly adequate for many analytical purposes. However, she suggests that it may obscure interesting features of interaction which can be revealed by means of a more detailed transcription. Her advanced method of transcription is not always easy to read. I will employ it below only for the most critical passages. Jefferson uses a row of 'h's preceded by a dot, ·hhh, to indicate an inbreath. An 'h' in parenthesis, (h), indicates a particle of within-speech laughter.

To illustrate her claim about the analytical value of detailed transcription, Jefferson compares one of her own early transcriptions with a later transcription of the same passage.

First transcription

Ken: And he came home and decided he was gonna play with his orchids from then on in.
Roger: With his *what*?
Louise: heh heh heh heh
Ken: With his orchids. [He has an orchid –
Roger: [Oh heh hehheh
Louise: *(through bubbling laughter)* Playing with his organ yeah I thought the same thing!
Ken: No he's got a great big [glass house
Roger: [I can see him playing with his organ
hehh hhh

(1985, p. 28)

In the later transcription of the middle section, the utterance by Louise which had been initially described as being spoken 'through bubbling laughter' is depicted as follows:

Later transcription

Ken: Ee[z got an *orch*[id
Roger: [Oh: [*h*ehh[h a h ·he: h ·*h*eh
Louise: [*h*eh huh ·*hh* PLAYN(h)W(h)IZ
O(h)R'N ya:h *I* thought the same.

The earlier transcription conveys a clear impression of laughter bursting forth against the speaker's will. Jefferson provides several examples of similar passages, and she illustrates how participants, as well as analysts,

can interpret such laughter as an uncontrollable response to the humour of the discourse. For example, in a mildly dirty joke involving a punch line about a 'dick being transplanted', the female teller laughs so much in delivering the punch line that recipients have difficulty hearing what is being said. One of the participants appears to employ a 'reflex' theory of laughter to explain what is causing the problem when she says: 'It's difficult when she gets to the punch line, she can't help laugh.'

Jefferson suggests, however, that this kind of interpretation of Louise's remark in the passage above becomes rather less convincing when we look carefully at the later transcription. For, whereas the first version implied that laughter was uncontrolled and persisted throughout the utterance, we can now see that the laughter is restricted to one part of the utterance and that the remainder is completely free of laughter. At this point in her exposition, Jefferson begins to consider whether the laughter is perhaps not flooding out, but has been deliberately inserted; for it is rather odd that the laughter which seems so difficult to control in 'PLAYN(h)W(h)IZ *O*(h)R'N' should cease so suddenly and be followed immediately by speech without the least trace of humorous upheaval. Furthermore, given that laughter *can* be inserted and controlled for its interactional effect, it is possible that the impression of laughter exploding out of the speaker's control may itself be intentionally conveyed by actors in certain circumstances.

Jefferson finds support for this interpretation in the way that Louise and other speakers place their laughter. She points out that Louise's laughter in this uttereance begins and ends in exact conjunction with the potentially improper phrase 'playing with his organ'; and she cites other instances where the laughter coincides with what she calls the 'tender' component of the utterance. She gives as another example: 'they'd say catch a n(hh)i(hh)gg(h)er by the toe. ·hh if he hollers let im go.' On numerous occasions, it appears, speakers are able to talk without laughter and with considerable clarity before or after some obscene or otherwise difficult phrase; yet when delivering that phrase they seem to lose control and their speech becomes briefly suffused with apparently uncontainable laughter. In Jefferson's view, the precise placing of the laughter makes it difficult to accept that this seeming loss of control over the impulse to laugh is not itself under the speaker's control.

If participants do sometimes place 'outbursts' of laughter to accompany awkward speech, this is presumably because such placement has interactional consequences. Jefferson's proposal is that the insertion of laughter distorts and hides what is being said. Moreover, the impression that this laughter is out of control makes it 'evident' to other participants that the speaker can do nothing about her inability to speak clearly: 'the presence of laughter can account for the presence of the distortion, not, for

example, as a matter of the speaker's reluctance to say the words he is saying and thus in fact not-quite-saying . . . but as a constituent feature of flooding out; of uncontainable laughter invading and incidentally distorting the speech' (Jefferson, 1985, p. 31). Thus tender words, such as 'dick', 'organ' and 'nigger', can be communicated, yet not quite 'said', without the speaker being culpable for her failure to deliver the words clearly. In addition, her 'involuntary reaction' shows that she is not the sort of person who would *choose* to engage in dirty talk. As we saw above, speakers are somehow able, by the nature of their laughter, to make it clear that they 'can't help laugh'. When they are 'flooded by laughter', they can claim the right not to speak properly and not to be held fully responsible for any indelicacy of conduct.

Laughter can be used, as in Louise's remark, to add another level to the allusiveness which is characteristic of humorous discourse. Thus the written phrase 'playing with his organ' does no more than allude indirectly to a possible sexual referent. When it is uttered by Louise as something like 'PLAYN(h)W(h)IZ *O*(h)R'N' it is even further removed from open, explicit discourse. Interactionally, the insertion of laughter focuses attention on the locus of the humour (Nash, 1985) whilst placing the responsibility for extracting its improper meaning even more firmly with the recipient. As so often, the humorous mode is being employed to enable speakers to say and do things without appearing to do so. The careful placing of laughter, revealed by Jefferson's method of transcription, shows that laughter can be used, not merely to signal that the humorous mode is in operation, but also to promote the allusiveness of humorous discourse and to engage in impropriety apparently against one's will.

Jefferson's study of participants' controlled use of 'flooding out' is, of course, no more than a first step towards a sociological analysis of laughter. It seems likely, however, that the 'supposed spontaneity' of laughter may be put to work in many other subtle ways. Schenkein has shown, for example, that brief fragments of laughter can be inserted successfully into conversation in a meaningful way at points where the person responsible would normally be open to the charge of having improperly interrupted the discourse. In Schenkein's words: 'One possible accomplishment of the use of *heheh* then is that a speaker may be immune to some charge of interrupting the ongoing sequencing, of usurping a slot properly available to someone else, while nevertheless accomplishing rather intricate pieces of interactional work' (1972, p. 367). One reason for this immunity may well be that laughter, unlike other conversational inputs, is taken to be, or can be presented as, being beyond one's control. Thus, in the same way that speakers can always deny the serious import of their humorously signalled remarks by claiming that they were 'only joking', laughers can always deny responsibility for their

laughter on the grounds that it was a natural, uncontrollable response to the humour of the situation. One general lesson to be learned, therefore, from studies such as those of Jefferson and Schenkein is that we must be careful not to assume too readily that laughter which seems spontaneous really is so; for participants themselves may be artfully engaged in sustaining and making use of this assumption for their own ends.

Inviting laughter and declining to laugh

Neither Koestler nor Morreall offers precise predictions about the location of laughter within social interaction. One might infer from their theories, however, that 'normal', unregulated laughter would be produced mainly by recipients of the humorous stimulus rather than those who deliver the humour. Tellers of standardized jokes, for instance, would already know the punch line and would not, therefore, experience either a sudden displacement of aggression or an unexpected psychological shift when telling the joke. Consequently, the theoretically predicted pattern for standardized jokes would be along these lines:

First speaker: Humorous remark.
Second speaker: Immediate laughter.

In fact, this pattern occurs very seldom in natural conversation, even in the simplest situation where there are only two participants. Furthermore, the recipient's immediate production of laughter, when it occurs, does not necessarily imply that the laughter in such cases is an unregulated, reflex response. For it is clear that participants are expected to laugh after a humorous utterance and that they are aware of this expectation. The two following passages from another study by Jefferson illustrate this nicely.

Example 1

Roger: Well it struck *me* funny
(1.0 second pause)
Al: HA, HA HA HA
Ken: hh
Roger: Thankyou.

Example 2

Bill: That wz a jo:ke people
(short pause)
Bill: That wz
Yeh

(short pause)
Bill: That-En yer spoze tuh smi:le.

(1979, p. 93)

As Fine puts it, 'humor typically requires an immediate audience response' (1984, p. 85), conventionally in the form of laughter or what Fry calls the 'terminal smile' (1963, p. 145). However, actors' production of laughter is no more *determined* by this convention than it is by an involuntary psychological/physiological mechanism. Rather, close observation of natural conversation shows that participants often use laughter itself to invite or solicit laughter from others, and that such invitations can be declined. An important characteristic of participants' 'invitations to laugh' is that they normally remain implicit. Explicit reminders, like the two quotations immediately above, about the obligation to laugh occur very seldom. This is because, by its very nature, laughter must seem to be spontaneous. Recipients are required to laugh; yet they must laugh only if they are genuinely amused. Thus attempts to solicit laughter are overwhelmingly indirect. Nevertheless, in inviting laughter and in declining to laugh, participants continually attend to and make use of other parties' knowledge of the conventional response to humour and to signals of humorous intent.

One regular way in which speakers indicate the need for another party to respond with laughter is to insert within-speech laughter into their own utterance. Jefferson (1979) examines a number of passages in which the use of within-speech laughter elicits laughter from a second party in the middle of talk which has been serious until that point. This is one of her examples:

B: Dju watch by any chance Miss International Showcase las' night?
E: N:no I didn' I waz reading my–
B: You missed a really great
pro(H)
E: O(hh)h i(h)t wa(hh)s?
ehh heh heh heh!

(Jefferson, 1979, p. 83)

In this extract, the discourse seems to have been entirely serious until B begins to laugh whilst uttering the word 'program'. Furthermore, the statement 'You missed a really great program' does not appear to accomplish the kind of semantic reversal required by humour. In other words, nothing indicative of humour has occurred during the first three utterances, apart from B's brief interjection of within-speech laughter. Nevertheless, this alone seems to be sufficient to provoke a marked

display of amusement on the part of the recipient. It is clear that B's use of within-speech laughter at this stage is not itself a response to humour, but a controlled signal of humorous intent. It is a preparation for humour yet to come. It seems unlikely that E is greatly amused by this signal. However, he immediately signals his own willingness to be amused in due course by emitting laughter of his own. In this way participants use laughter, *in advance of any humorous semantic exchange*, to enter the humorous mode together. In this and other similar cases, laughter is employed in a methodical and collaborative manner to guide interaction in a humorous direction. Both B and E make use of the expectation that recipients of humour will respond with laughter to accomplish their joint entry into the humorous mode.

Conversational replies and laughing responses are normally linked closely to the prior speaker's turn. The second speaker's utterance typically either follows the preceding turn immediately or, as in the last example, overlaps and partially disrupts that turn. Thus when a recipient fails to laugh where a first speaker thinks that laughter is appropriate, first speaker will quickly become aware of the problem (Schenkein, 1972) and will be able to take remedial action. In such circumstances, first speaker's 'humorous' remark is often followed by a pause and then by an 'invitation' to laugh, after which recipient responds in the proper manner. Here is one illustrative example:

Dan: I thought that wz pretty outta sight didju
hear me say'r you a junkie
(0.5 second pause)
Dan: hheh heh
Dolly: hh*heh*-heh-heh.

(Jefferson, 1979, p. 80)

In this typical extract, the first speaker pauses at the end of a verbal utterance, presumably expecting the appropriate response from his partner. When it becomes clear that this response is not forthcoming, first speaker indicates that laughter is required by laughing himself, thereby drawing attention to the humorous character of his remark and to the convention that humorous remarks should be acknowledged as such by means of laughter. Only at this point, when there can no longer be any doubt that the first speaker has entered the humorous mode and that laughter is conventionally required, does the recipient begin to laugh. In this case, as in similar cases examined by Jefferson, it is clear that neither party is simply laughing in response to humour. Rather, speakers are using laughter to signal the occurrence of humour, to solicit laughter from

a partner, to acknowledge a partner's humorous intent, to conform to a conventional pattern of conduct, and generally to manage the ongoing sequence of interaction.

Invitations to laugh, whether by means of within-speech or post-utterance laughter, are not, of course, always accepted. For various reasons, recipients can decline to laugh. Even here, however, both speakers attend indirectly to the obligation to laugh with which recipients have chosen not to comply. The basic pattern in such circumstances, documented by Jefferson (1979), is that first speaker begins to try to elicit laughter from recipient by laughing himself, but is quickly interrupted by second speaker with an emphatically serious pursuit of topics available from first speaker's prior remarks. Given the expectation that humour should receive immediate ratification by recipients' laughter, they cannot simply decline to laugh. As Schenkein (1972) has demonstrated, the withholding of laughter when it is appropriate and expected is likely to be taken as a 'put down', as an expression of ridicule, or as offensive in one way or another. On some occasions, it may be that recipients withhold their laughter in order to cause offence. But if such a negative outcome is to be avoided, recipients of humorous invitations who decline to laugh must act quickly to establish some acceptable, non-humorous alternative. In Jefferson's words: 'In order to terminate the relevance of laughter, recipient must actively decline to laugh. One technique for declining a postcompletion invitation to laugh is the placement of speech, by recipient, just after onset of speaker's laughter, that speech providing serious pursuit of topic as a counter to the pursuit of laughter' (1979, p. 93).

We have seen, in this section, that laughter often occurs before humorous discourse rather than in response to it. Laughter often seems to be used by those initiating humour to signal their humorous intent and to discover whether or not their partners are willing to enter the humorous mode. Even when laughter occurs after a 'humorous' utterance, it is frequently begun by the teller and seems to be used by him to invite laughter from the recipient and to confirm thereby the amusing nature of his preceding remark. In these circumstances, recipient's laughter appears to be, not an involuntary emission, but a voluntary sign of acquiescence. In the course of such negotiations, both teller and recipient use laughter to establish and display the meaning of their interaction. In so doing, they attend to the expectation that humour should be immediately ratified by recipient's laughter (or smiles). But this expectation is in no way binding on recipients. For they may choose to withhold laughter in order to cause offence, or they may decline to laugh in a more active, yet less offensive, manner by quickly exploiting any serious topics contained in their partner's prior discourse.

Controlled spontaneity

As this chapter has progressed, it has become increasingly clear that the production of laughter needs to be seen in relation to its social context. It is undeniable that laughter involves certain fairly distinctive physiological, and presumably psychological, changes in the individuals concerned; and it is possible that these changes sometimes occur as a result of involuntary responses to external stimuli. Even in these cases, however, the nature and extent of the laughter are significantly affected by variations in the social situation. Furthermore, when we carefully examine the details of laughter in the course of ordinary conversation, it is clear that explosive, uncontrolled laughter occurs much less frequently than other forms of laughter, which are fitted in a systematic and intricate fashion into the surrounding interaction. If we are to understand the full range of human laughter we must accept that most laughter is, to a considerable extent, part of the sign language of the humorous mode.

Sociological analysis will never be able to explain the physical contortions of laughter or to convey what happens psychologically when we feel amused. What it may be able to do, however, is to show how laughter is used to help construct the boundary between humorous and serious discourse, and to establish the meaning of participants' conduct in relation to that boundary. Until recently, as I said earlier, very little sociological research on laughter has been completed. But the few studies by conversation analysts have already begun to reveal how participants may regulate the production of laughter and yet artfully contrive to convey the impression that it is an involuntary, uncontrollable reaction. Indeed, although there are strong conventions involved in the production and exchange of laughter, it must always *appear to be* natural and spontaneous (Schenkein, 1972). Participants within the humorous mode are required not to seem to be controlling their own, or other people's, responses to humour. Humour is deemed to be successful only if it evokes what is taken to be a genuine, spontaneous reaction.

The 'primitive' physical contortions of laughter are usually regarded as the clearest indication that a recipient's response is natural and uncontrived. It is in this sense that, in Morreall's words, the natural expression of amusement provides the key to understanding laughter (1983, p. 59). But most empirical researchers as well as most theorists of laughter have taken this appearance of spontaneity at face value. They have assumed that 'real' laughter does flood out in response to humour and, as a result, they have never looked closely at laughter's details. Consequently, they have failed to observe the constant interactional work that lies behind the surface impression that laughter is 'normally' uncontrolled. What seems to be

spontaneous is often, on closer inspection, solicited, signalled in advance and produced on cue. Even 'explosive' laughter may be furnished in preparation for humour yet to come, or may be devised to cope with other subtleties of social interaction. It is, perhaps, another paradox of the humorous realm that its inhabitants must appear to laugh spontaneously, whilst exercising a very strict control.

7

The Social Significance of Sexual Jokes

Sexual matters and the relationship between men and women are perennial topics within the humorous mode. Any representative collection of standardized jokes from our own culture will include a substantial number of 'dirty stories', and all professional comedians, whether male or female, regularly use material of this kind. Some forms of humorous discourse deal with little else. For example, I have in front of me a collection of 'saucy postcards' which is peopled almost entirely by women in a state of undress, women with protuberant busts, honeymoon couples, men lowering their trousers, and so on (*Bamforth's Saucy Postcard Annual*, 1977). I also have a tape-recording of a typical performance by a male stand-up comedian at a pub in Northern England, lasting one and a half hours, in the course of which there is continual obscenity and a wide range of suggestive humour. Similarly Winick (1963) reports, in his content analysis of orally transmitted humour in New York, that 17 per cent of the jokes identified in his study were concerned with sexual matters and that this percentage was significantly greater than that of any other category. It appears, then, that one of the features that distinguishes humour from ordinary, serious discourse is its marked concern with sexual relationships and its frequently obscene treatment of sexual topics.

How can we account for the prominence of sexual themes and obscenity within the world of humour? One clue is provided by the work of Emerson (1973) and Walle (1976) discussed in chapter 5. For their studies suggest that humour is often employed to deal with topics, such as sexuality, which are important, but which are also difficult to handle openly within the serious mode. Difficulties of this kind with the topic of sexuality, it is clear, are not confined to our own society.

> We must bear in mind that Trobriand manners do not ban sex as a subject for conversation, save in the presence of certain tabooed relatives, and Trobriand morals do not condemn extramarital intercourse, except in the form of adultery and incest. The attraction of the subject and its piquancy is not due, therefore, to the feeling that it is socially and artificially forbidden. And yet there is no doubt that the natives regard bawdiness as 'improper'; that there is a certain strain about it, barriers to be broken and a shyness to be overcome and a corresponding enjoyment of getting rid of the strain, breaking the barriers and overcoming the shyness . . . Sex, like excretory functions and nudity, is not felt or regarded as 'natural', but rather as naturally to be avoided in public and open conversation, and always to be concealed from others in behaviour. (Malinowski, 1929, p. 335)

Like the Trobrianders, we tend to cover sexually relevant parts of our body and to avoid explicit mention, in polite conversation, of sexual anatomy or the intimacies of sexual conduct; and it is precisely these hidden aspects of sexuality that reappear regularly in the discourse of the 'dirty joke'. The use of the terms 'dirty' or 'obscene' in this context reflects the fact that there is a range of topics and words which should not normally be used. Their very existence, however, implies that such topics are sometimes addressed and that such words are sometimes uttered. But they are accompanied by severe restrictions within the serious mode. Their much more frequent appearance within the domain of humour suggests that the sexual themes and obscene words which are unacceptable or restricted in proper, serious conversation are more legitimate and more freely available for use when signalled as humorous (Wilson, 1979). As we noted above, speakers are not taken to be entirely responsible for the content of their humorous remarks. Consequently, by adopting the humorous mode, they can communicate about forbidden aspects of sexuality whilst ostensibly being concerned only to provide amusement.

Of course, entry into the humorous mode does not completely remove the restrictions on sexual converse that apply in the serious realm. For example, dirty jokes are most likely to be told in single-sex groupings and among persons who are on a relaxed and intimate footing (Middleton and Moland, 1959). Nevertheless, within those settings where sexual humour is deemed to be appropriate, participants who address sexual topics or who employ obscene words in the course of humour can be taken to imply, and can always insist, that their discourse should not be taken seriously and that they have not transgressed the rules of proper discourse. Thus it seems likely that the strict limitations on sexual talk in the serious mode, combined with the importance of sexuality in our lives, are in some measure responsible for the prominence of sexual discourse within the domain of humour.

Dirty jokes and the transmission of sexual information

If this line of argument is broadly correct, it implies that sexual humour sometimes, perhaps frequently, operates as a means of communication about sexual topics. It implies, for example, that dirty jokes and other sexual jokes circulate, not simply as sources of amusement, but as carriers of sexual information, attitudes and emotions which have restricted passage within the serious mode. Furthermore, it seems likely that the sexual content deemed to be significant and informative by one social grouping may be of little interest to other groupings where participants' sexual experience is quite different. Consider the following joke:

'The deaf pharmacist'

Teller: There was this woman and she went into a shop and she said, 'Have you got any Tampax?' And the man said, 'Paaardon?' She said, 'Have you got any *Tam*pax?' And he said, um, 'Pardon?' And she goes, 'Have you got any *Tam*pax?' He said, 'Sorry, can you speak a bit louder, I can't hear you.' She said, 'Have you got any *bloody Tam*pax?' And he goes, 'Sorry, we don't sell second hands.'

Recipients: Ha ha ha ha

(Told by a twelve-year-old girl, 1985)

This joke was told by a young girl on the threshold of sexual maturity. Its content is highly relevant to her location in the cycle of sexual conduct. In its focus on tampons and their usage, it resembles numerous other jokes which were circulating freely among her group of friends. The example given above is the simplest and most basic of these jokes. Although the information about tampons contained in any one joke is limited and incomplete, as a set of related jokes they offer these young women a range of information about the control of menstruation. But the material that I have does not demonstrate unequivocally that these particular jokes convey helpful information on this topic to their young recipients. (For further anecdotal evidence see Wilson, 1979, pp. 188–9.) One possible reason for this is that they were recorded in a way which minimized the social interplay which normally occurs during a joke's telling. In addition, those involved were already very familiar with these tampon jokes. In order to glimpse the kind of interaction and information-exchange that sexual jokes can engender on a first hearing, let us look again at Madeleine's joke (told by a slightly older adolescent girl to two of her friends).

(1) A: Have you heard the one with the woman at the doctor's?
(2) B: Might have. I dunno till you tell us.
(3) C: Go on tell us anyway, it don't matter if we've heard it.
(4) A: Right, At the doctor's
(5) C: Don't tell me, there was this woman
(6) A: Oh shut up.
(7) C: All right, all right.
(8) A: At the doctor's this woman with a
(9) baby was shown into the surgery for a check-up.
(10) Doctor asks, 'Is he breast-fed or bottle-fed?'
(11) 'Breast-fed,' she says.
(12) 'Right,' he says, 'Strip to your waist.' When she'd
(13) took her clothes off, he started to touch
(14) her boobs
(15) B: *(giggles)*
C: *(giggles)*
(16) A: Then he started to suck 'em.
(17) 'No wonder this baby's ill. You've got no
(18) milk.' 'I'm not surprised,' she says, 'It's me sister's
(19) baby.' 'Oh dear you shouldn't have come then.'
(20) 'I didn't till you sucked the second one' hahaha.
(21) B: Eh?
(22) A: She didn't come until he sucked the second boob.
(23) B: Oh hhe hahah
(24) C: heheyheheh

(Told by an adolescent girl, 1985)

One particularly interesting feature of Madeleine's joke is that it has two punch lines, one of which is ignored by both teller and recipients. The first punch line occurs in line 18. At this point the joke could have terminated, for line 18 suddenly transforms the meaning of what has gone before by revealing that the doctor has been examining the breasts of 'the wrong woman'. But the teller does not pause here and the recipients make no response. These three young women take no notice of the sub-joke about mistaken identity. For the teller, the point of the joke is to do with the sexual significance of the female breast. It is conveyed in lines 19 and 20 with the revelation that the woman had not only been sexually aroused by the doctor's sucking her breasts, but had 'come', that is, had reached a sexual climax. For the recipients, however, although they display an interest in the joke's central theme at line 15, when they giggle at the reference to the doctor's touching the woman's 'boobs', the meaning contained in the main punch line does not seem to be immediately evident. C fails to respond at all at line 21 and B seems to indicate that the point of

the joke has escaped her. The teller then clarifies by extracting what had been implicit in the direct speech of the last two lines of the joke and by summarizing succinctly what had happened sexually to the woman in the joke. Once this has been done, the sequence concludes with both recipients registering that they have now understood.

This transcription clearly suggests that the telling of this joke on this occasion did involve the transmission of sexual information. In this respect it is typical of much of the material in my possession documenting the passage of such jokes among adolescent females. As in Madeleine's joke, recipients regularly reveal a pronounced concern with the sexual dimensions of the humour – for example, by responding audibly to words describing sexual parts. In addition, they sometimes fail to understand the punch line or some other part of the joke, which is then explained to them by fellow participants. During the telling of a joke, such explanations are undertaken in order to enable recipients to see the point of the joke: that is, to decipher the sexual meaning implicit in the punch line. But, clearly, any such explanatory gloss provided by other participants can also help recipients who are ignorant or doubtful about aspects of the sexual conduct depicted in a joke to understand that conduct more fully. For example, it seems that the recipients of Madeleine's joke were able to learn from that joke's telling that it is possible for women to achieve sexual climax when a man sucks their breasts.

Because the language of humour is allusive and the conventional response to humour so diffuse, we cannot know for certain what conclusions were drawn by the two young women on hearing Madeleine's joke. But it is precisely the allusiveness of humour which makes it such a suitable vehicle for the transmission of sexual information. For instance, in responding to sexual jokes, recipients can receive information without having to admit sexual ignorance. When the meaning of a joke is explained, it is not usually assumed that the recipient lacks the basic sexual knowledge to understand the joke, but rather that she has simply failed to solve the specific interpretative puzzle contained in the joke in question. Thus when recipients fail to see the point of a joke, they will typically be given an explanatory gloss in which the sexual knowledge on which the joke depends is made more accessible – although it is seldom made fully explicit – without either party engaging in open discussion of sexual topics.

The content of sexual jokes and the interactive work accomplished by participants as they are told make possible a transfer of sexual information in such a way that neither tellers nor recipients need acknowledge, or even recognize, that this sexual transmission is taking place. However, a major disadvantage of this method of communication is that it is left to recipients to disentangle fact from fantasy. As we have seen, this is far from easy

within the humorous mode. Thus Madeleine's joke alone will not reveal to the naive hearer whether sexual climax by oral stimulation of the breast actually occurs in the real world or whether it is a typical humorous misrepresentation. Moreover, no single joke will deal comprehensively with a young woman's doubts and uncertainties about menstruation or the sexual activities of adults. Her knowledge of these topics has to be gradually built up, revised and extended as she hears new jokes from her friends, as she tries to understand the sexual innuendoes that they contain and to solve the sexual puzzles that they pose, and as she compares the pictures of sexuality presented within the domain of humour with those available from various kinds of serious discourse. It seems likely that the active interpretation required in response to sexual humour forces and assists adolescents to become skilled in the interpretative subtleties of sexual discourse, and helps them to acquire that understanding of sexuality which they require as they approach adulthood, but which is not available within the restrictions of serious discourse. If this line of argument is correct, it provides an explanation, and perhaps some justification, for the particular enthusiasm shown among adolescents for sexual humour and dirty jokes.

The sexual nucleus and its semantic packaging

So far in this chapter, I have concentrated on the transmission of sexual humour among young women. I have done this in order to help to correct a mistaken view that is widespread among men and also in the secondary literature on humour: namely, that women very seldom tell jokes and that they have a less developed sense of humour than men (Kramarae, 1981). I have tried to illustrate in the previous section that sexual jokes particularly relevant to their concerns as females do regularly circulate among young women and that, within single-sex groupings, young women can act as competent raconteurs. The impression that women are not active producers of humour and that they contribute insignificantly to its dissemination is almost certainly due to the fact that women tend to contribute noticeably less to humorous discourse in the presence of men (Coser, 1960; Middleton and Moland, 1959).

There are several interrelated reasons why women are less humorously active than men in sexually mixed groups. Firstly, there is the fact that men tend to control interaction in such situations and to regulate the production of discourse in general, including humour. Secondly, it seems likely that women's view of the social world is systematically different from that of men, and that they are amused to some extent by different things (Kramarae, 1980). As a result, it may be that women refrain from

introducing distinctively female humour into social situations dominated by men, whilst often finding typically male humour to be unsuited to their taste (Kramarae, 1981). Thirdly, in relation to sexual humour, it is clear that the negative consequences of overstepping the boundary between polite conversation and 'dirty talk' are more serious for women than for men. In our culture, men tend to assume that women 'do not talk like that'. Consequently, women will be careful to avoid dispelling that illusion, and will normally refrain from telling sexual jokes in mixed company.

It may also be that sexual jokes are likely to be seen as invitations to, or explorations of the possibility of, more intimate sexual relationships (Legman, 1968, p. 218; Walle, 1976); and that women, on the whole, avoid becoming involved in discourse which may be seen as implying that they are taking the sexual initiative or that they are receptive to men's sexual overtures (see chapter 5). A further possibility is that women's signals of humorous intent are more often ignored than those of men and that their potentially humorous contributions receive less social recognition in mixed groups. Finally, it may well be that much of the humour produced by men gives expression to men's sexual domination of women and that women are, on the whole, less willing to participate actively in a discourse which often involves, for them, a form of extreme self-denigration.

In the next chapter, I will focus on the relationship between sexual humour and the domination of women by men. For the moment, however, I wish to explore the implications of the claim made above that male humour and female humour differ in certain significant ways. If this is so, it could be taken to imply that the sexual humour that circulates among adolescent males operates differently from that which passes among adolescent females, and perhaps, that the conclusions reached in the last section do not apply to young men. Unfortunately, to my knowledge, there have been no extended studies of adolescent humour in natural settings and no careful comparisons of the jokes told by young men and young women. My discussion of these issues, therefore, must be regarded as tentative. Nevertheless, my own observations combined with the fragments of data and analysis to be found in the published literature lead me to conclude that, although there are important differences between the sexual humour circulating among young women and that which circulates among young men, in both cases sexual jokes act as vehicles for sexual information which is not easily available within the serious mode.

We can begin to explore the operation of dirty jokes among adolescent males by returning to Sacks's joke discussed in the first chapter. This joke was said by its seventeen-year-old male teller to have been passed to him

by his twelve-year-old sister. When we examine the collective reaction to this joke, we find that the young men spend twenty conversational turns debating, not only what the joke meant, but also whether the younger sister could possibly have understood its sexual meaning. The nature of their response strongly suggests that they are extremely interested in what the joke reveals about sexual conduct. It also suggests that the idea of oral sex is fairly new to them, that they are uncertain about their knowledge on this topic, and that they are surprised by the younger sister's apparent ability to extract the joke's hidden sexual message. For instance, at one point Ken, the teller, says: 'For twelve years old tellin me – *I* didn't even know.' To which Roger replies: 'How do you know she's just not repeating what she heard and doesn't know what it means.'

In this exchange, both speakers seem to assume that twelve- year-old girls would not normally know about oral sex. For Ken, this assumption seems to be linked to his own relatively recent acquisition of this kind of sexual knowledge. His reasoning seems to be: How can this young female know about oral sex, when I have only just heard about it? Roger's contribution is to suggest that the young girl may simply not have understood what she was saying. This neatly, but implausibly, reconciles her telling the joke with his assumption that she cannot yet have attained his own level of sexual sophistication. After this exchange, Al and Roger proceed to make fun of Ken by implying that his younger sister seems to be more sexually knowledgeable than him and by challenging him to provide an explanation of the joke's meaning. Although Ken becomes increasingly disturbed by the allegations of sexual ignorance and by the suggestion that he does not understand the joke, he is unwilling or unable to say in a straightforward manner what the joke is about. It appears that, although the young men are intrigued by the topic of oral sex and, perhaps, eager to explore it further, they are unable to discuss it openly in the serious mode. As a result, the sequence comes to an end with the unanswered chant of 'Explain . . . explain . . . explain . . .'

It seems clear to me that the young men involved in Sacks's joke, like the young women participating in Madeleine's, focus collectively upon and pay special attention to the sexual information implicit in their sexual humour. Yet Sacks reaches a rather different conclusion in his examination of the joke presented in chapter 1. It is necessary, therefore, to consider Sacks's account of what dirty jokes communicate to their hearers.

Sacks argues that dirty jokes are 'rational institutions' designed to package and transmit information efficiently. He insists, however, that it would be wrong to infer:

> that the information in a dirty joke is its obscene information. That would be irrational, since their obscene character serves as a

> restriction on their passage. A vehicle which, by virtue of its obscenity, has a restriction on its passage, would be rationally exploited if it were used to pass information other than that which restricts that passage. Thus, if there are any sorts of information which it's relevant to pass, which it's also relevant to pass restrictedly, then such things could be put into dirty jokes, where the obscenity serves as a 'cover' for other information. (1978, p. 262)

In other words, the dirtiness of Sacks's own joke and of dirty jokes generally is taken to be a device for regulating the passage of other, 'non-sexual' information contained in the joke.

In view of this argument, it may seem surprising to find that Sacks does accept that the young men in his transcript interpret the joke 'by reference to its oral sex' (1978, pp. 268–9). But in so doing, he argues, they are *mis*understanding a joke which was not designed for circulation among males. The younger sister and her friends, Sacks proposes, would have understood the joke differently, and indeed properly. For they would have been much more aware of the non-sexual information specially relevant to twelve-year-old females that is contained in the joke, and they would have responded to this information rather than to the joke's superficial, sexual meaning.

This part of Sacks's technical considerations of a dirty joke seems to me unconvincing and seriously defective. In the first place, although Sacks claims that dirty jokes generally are vehicles for the restricted transmission of non-sexual information, the one example for which he provides documentation appears to be a counter-instance. For on Sacks's own admission, in the transcript under discussion, both recipients and teller focus on the topic of oral sex. Secondly, although Sacks maintains that twelve-year-old girls would see the joke in a different way, this is no more than supposition. Sacks offers no evidence to support this assertion. Moreover, we have examined data above which show that girls of this age are quite capable of displaying an active interest in the sexual meaning of dirty jokes. Thirdly, Sacks dismisses the boys 'sexual interpretation of the joke as a misunderstanding (1978, p. 263). This seems to imply, not only that there is only one correct understanding of a dirty joke, but also that the analyst can claim the right to define the procedures by which such jokes should be interpreted by participants. This latter implication seems to me to go beyond the proper scope of sociological analysis. In my view, if participants choose to understand a dirty joke in sexual terms, this must be accepted by the analyst as a proper and legitimate reading.

The major argument offered by Sacks to support his claim that the boys have misunderstood the joke is that quoted above in which he asserts that dirty jokes must be 'rational institutions'. But why must we accept that

dirty jokes have to be 'rational' according to Sacks's conception of rationality? Sacks insists that dirty jokes will be rational only if their obscenity is used to regulate the transmission of information which is not obscene. But would it not be equally plausible to argue that dirty jokes would be even more rational (that is, efficient and economical) if their obscene components both restricted their passage *and* contained the relevant information? Sacks's view of dirty jokes as semantic packages in which the obscene content regulates the transmission of non-sexual information seems to imply a rather high level of inefficiency (or irrationality). For there can be no guarantee that the boundary restricting the movement of obscene discourse will coincide with that required by the non-sexual information contained in the wide variety of dirty jokes. However, these a priori arguments about the rationality of dirty jokes are, in my view, largely irrelevant. I am persuaded by the details of Sacks's transcript and by empirical material of my own, such as Madeleine's joke, that young people of both sexes regularly attend to, and learn from, the *sexual* content of dirty jokes.

As we have seen, an important part of Sack's analysis is that the obscenity of dirty jokes restricts their circulation in such a way that their non-sexual information remains with the social grouping for whose members it is significant. In the case of his specific joke, he maintains that it is designed for circulation among twelve-year-old girls and that the critical information which is transmitted by the joke concerns the way in which parents, and particularly mothers, employ rules unpredictably to regulate their daughters' conduct. But, once again, the joke under examination appears to contradict Sacks's claim. For the obscenity of Sacks's joke does not prevent that joke from being passed outside the social network of twelve-year-old girls. Sacks insists that the boys do not understand or like the joke, and that once it has got into their hands it is going nowhere (1978, pp. 263, 269). He provides no evidence, however, to show that the joke's circulation stops here. Furthermore, the transmission of the joke from younger sister to older brother was not prevented by the joke's obscenity; and the brother found it sufficiently interesting to retell it within his own age and sex grouping. All the evidence we have seems to suggest, therefore, contrary to Sacks's analysis, that the joke's obscene content does not stop it from circulating. Clearly Sacks is right to insist that there are limitations on the movement of dirty jokes. In particular, as I suggested above, they tend to be told within single-sex groups. However, this is by no means always the case and, despite restrictions on their telling, dirty jokes are not rigidly confined by their obscene content within specific social groupings (Middleton and Moland, 1959; Winick, 1963).

When the boys respond to Sacks's joke, they pay no attention to the way in which the third daughter turns the tables on the mother and uses one of

the mother's own rules in an unexpected way to undermine her authority. In Sacks's view, however, this component contains the covert message of the joke which the boys fail to grasp: namely, that all mothers apply rules selectively in order to control their children. Sacks may well be right to identify this as an important part of the humorous package which has presumably been circulating among the younger sister's friends. But his argument goes much further. For his general account of dirty jokes as 'rational institutions' implies that this information about mothers' use of rules is transmitted in joke form because it cannot be passed around openly and because its circulation must be carefully controlled. However, not only have we seen that the joke's obscenity does not prevent its transmission, but in addition it is difficult to accept that twelve-year-old girls are unable to complain openly among themselves, and indeed to their brothers, about their mothers' use or misuse of rules. Thus Sacks's suggestion that twelve-year- old girls' critical appraisal of maternal authority has to travel under cover of a dirty joke seems unconvincing.

Finally, it is worth noting that, toward the end of his analysis, Sacks appears to revise his initial argument and to propose that it is not the sexual content alone, but both sexual and non-sexual components, which govern the circulation of a dirty joke: 'obscenity can provide an initial restriction [on a joke's transmission], but it is other aspects of it which discriminate among that initially located population and find a still narrower population, among which the joke circulates' (1978, p. 268). In relation to his specific joke, Sacks argues that what the seventeen-year-old boys do not like about this joke is not its sexual content, but the way in which the joke about oral sex is packaged. In particular, the joke deals exclusively with the relationships between women; and the men feature in the joke as no more than sexual ciphers. This latter observation is clearly correct. Sacks's joke is a sexual joke virtually without men. It seems likely, therefore, that this formulation of the joke has been produced by females and, as Sacks suggests, may well circulate effectively among females.

We have no further detailed evidence about the circulation of Sacks's joke. I can, however, provide an alternative version published quite recently in a wide-ranging collection of jokes (Knott, 1985).

Sacks's joke: alternative version

These three men went for a drive in the country and their car broke down, so they went to the nearest farmhouse to ask for shelter for the night. 'Sure, lads,' said the farmer, 'you can spend the night here, but you've each got to sleep with one of my daughters, because they don't get much company out here'. The men all agreed, and during the night the farmer got up to make sure they were going through with their part of the deal.

The next morning the men went on their way and the farmer called his daughters together.

'Linda, why were you laughing last night?'

'Because it tickled, Daddy'.

'Susie, why were you crying?'

'Because it hurt, Daddy'.

'Lizzie, why was your room silent?'

'Because you always told me not to talk with my mouth full'.

(Knott, 1985, p. 63)

It seems that the core of Sacks's joke is still on the move some twenty years after the telling recorded by him. In the light of Sacks's analysis and the discussion above, it is interesting to note how the joke about oral sex has remained constant, whilst the packaging has changed. In this alternative version, intended for widespread public distribution, men have come to occupy a much more prominent role. For instance, the male ciphers of the 'original' version have become more clearly defined and operate as the dominant figures during the first part of the joke. In addition, the mother has been replaced by a father. A more subtle change is that, although the father's authority is challenged in the punch line as was the mother's in the previous formulation, the father is depicted in the alternative version as exercising firm control over his daughters' sexual activities. The alternative version still contains the same implicit information about oral sex. But in the process of wider transmission, the packaging appropriate for young women has been replaced with a more male-centred representation of sexuality and of sexual relationships.

This suggests that the sexual component of a dirty joke constitutes a relatively stable nucleus which embodies and is capable of furnishing sexual information. Indeed, as Sacks himself demonstrates, the humorous structure of such a joke is created out of a precise arrangement and sequencing of sexually relevant scripts which leaves little room for alteration. Some of the non-sexual packaging, however, can sometimes be changed without destroying that structure and, as Sacks finally acknowledged, this non-sexual content may be critical for the circulation of the central, sexual component. It seems likely that the female focus of the 'original' version of Sacks's joke was particularly suitable for circulation among young women, and that the non-sexual packaging has been refashioned in accordance with the assumptions and requirements of a wider audience as the joke has come to circulate more widely. Thus non-sexual content is probably highly relevant to the dissemination of

specific versions of a dirty joke. But in cases where this element can be revised, it is unlikely to restrict the social transmission of the sexual nucleus of the joke to any great degree.

Let me bring this chapter to a close by offering a few conclusions. In the first place, it appears that jokes especially relevant to the sexual concerns of specific age and sex groupings circulate among young women and young men. For example, menstrual jokes of various kinds are popular among girls approaching puberty, but very seldom appear in published collections of humour or among the jokes told by adolescent boys. Although they have not been examined here, it seems likely that jokes about prostitution, masturbation and the size of male genitals are particularly common among young men (for examples, see Legman, 1968; Raskin, 1985a). Not only do dirty jokes deal with sexual topics of special interest to the members of the groups within which they circulate, but they also provide information or clues about sexual topics such as oral sex, adultery and homosexuality, which are difficult to broach within ordinary, serious conversation, whilst helping participants to develop interpretative skills related to sexual conduct. Although men and boys often assume that females are lacking in humour, and are especially surprised to find women, particularly young women, participating in obscene humour, women of all ages make active use of the humorous mode. However, females' humour does tend to differ to some extent from that of males in its sexual focus and in the representation of social relationships it conveys.

As dirty jokes pass from one group to another and across sexual lines, their semantic packaging tends to change. This humorous repackaging will reflect, in particular, certain differences between men and women with regard to sexuality. Women's humorous culture, however, appears to be much less visible than that of men. For example, such an authority on sexual humour as Gershon Legman can write as follows:

> One fact strikingly evident in any collection of modern sexual folklore, whether jokes, limericks, ballads, printed 'novelties', or whatnot, is that this material has all been created by men, and that there is no place in it for women except as the butt. It is not just that so preponderant an amount of the material is grossly anti-woman in tendency and intent, but also that the situations presented almost completely lack any protagonist position in which a woman can identify herself – *as a woman* – with any human gratification or pride. (1968, p. 217)

Legman is wrong, I suggest, if he is claiming that women do not create humour (see Johnson, 1973). Nevertheless, he is undoubtedly correct in maintaining that the great bulk of sexual humour that is publicly available – in published collections, for example – seems to have been produced by

men and to reflect a distinctly male view of sexuality. Some of the reasons for this are fairly obvious. Humour in television and publishing is largely produced and controlled by men. For example, until very recently, female comics were entirely absent from our TV screens. The main audience for humour, sexual or otherwise, is taken to be male ('Women have little sense of humour'); and male topics and the male perspective on sexual humour have become widely established, thereby furnishing the interpretative framework within which such humour is generated and distributed. However, Legman goes further than this. He asserts that the sexual humour which is culturally dominant in our society is not only male-centred, but also 'grossly anti-woman in tendency and intent'. In the next chapter I will examine how far this is true of adult sexual humour.

8

Sexual Humour and Gender Relationships

Adolescent sexual humour is likely to be rather different from that of adults. Adult humour will be less involved in the passage of basic sexual information because, on the whole, adults will have experienced a wider range of sexual activities and will have acquired a more adequate stock of sexual knowledge than adolescents. However, the sexual humour circulating among adults will still employ, give expression to and transmit the underlying sexual assumptions of those concerned. For we know from the preceding discussion that standardized sexual humour is embedded in semantic packages which are created out of the sexual and social conceptions of those among whom it passes. Thus Legman's (1968) wide-ranging and detailed examination of the dirty jokes produced by men, from which I quoted at the end of the previous chapter, may not only reveal the major features of male sexual humour, but also provide insight into the basic assumptions about the relations between men and women that enter into men's serious sexual discourse. Legman's study of male sexual humour is too extensive to be discussed here in full, so I will concentrate on just a few of his more important conclusions regarding the structure and content of dirty jokes.

The basic principles of men's sexual humour

One of Legman's main observations is that, within the discourse of the dirty joke, men approach women with the sole aim of achieving sexual congress. The men appearing in dirty jokes are overwhelmingly represented as being interested in women solely as a source of sexual pleasure. Legman refers to this semantic principle, in terms of which dirty jokes are constructed and understood, as the principle of 'the primacy of coitus' (1968, p. 236). A second principle identified by Legman is that of 'the general availability of women'. According to this principle, all women are available as partners for any man, even when they pretend not to be (1968,

pp. 221, 236). Legman provides copious documentation of the use of these two principles in men's humour. They are combined with great economy in the following joke:

Verbal rape: 1

Salesman: Listen, I'm only in town for a couple of hours, and I can't kid around. Do you screw or don't you?
Girl: *(shyly)* Well, I don't usually, but you talked me into it.
(Legman, 1968, p. 222)

The tone of this joke is captured perfectly by Legman's phrase 'verbal rape'. The joke seems to be a great favourite among men. The version reproduced by Legman was heard in New York in 1939. The basic joke, however, has continued to circulate since at least that date, and it reappears in several published collections. Here is a transcript of a comedian's presentation recorded in Yorkshire in 1985:

Verbal rape: 2

Chubby Brown: I go into this club the other night, a fucking *great* club, honest. I get fixed up with this tart. And I walked across dead casual, you know what I mean. I said, 'Hiiii, do you *fuck*?'
Chorus of male voices from the audience: *Haha*haha hurr*aah*, ha ha *(5 seconds)*
Chubby Brown: She said, 'I suppose I'll *have* to, you smooth-talking bastard.'
Audience: Ha haha ha *(4 seconds)*

Legman's two principles are clearly illustrated in both versions of the verbal rape joke. The man is depicted in both as choosing, on this occasion, not to engage in small talk about non-sexual matters, and as revealing without prevarication or pretence his exclusively sexual interest in the woman (in any woman). In the fantasy world of humour, the man has been able to step outside the restrictions of normal interaction between men and women and to express in the most direct fashion what he really wants from women – namely, sexual gratification. As we can see from the live recording of version 2, many men in the audience respond enthusiastically to the first half of the joke in which this symbolic transformation is accomplished. They appear to find this move from the normal script of sexual restriction to that of uninhibited sexual discourse to be highly amusing, even deserving of applause. Similarly, the largely

male audience actively expresses its collective enjoyment of the joke's punch line in which the woman, in accordance with Legman's second principle, reveals that her normal resistance to men's advances is a sham and that she also is really interested only in sexual pleasure.

A third, related principle evident in men's dirty jokes is that women can be represented adequately by reference to the sexual, domestic and other services which they provide for men. In the world of the dirty joke, women often become no more than objects designed to cater for the needs of men. This is made particularly clear in jokes which provide humorous definitions of womanhood or of specific female roles. Although Legman provides numerous examples of jokes in which this principle operates (see 1968, p. 239), he does not give it a name. We may call it the principle of 'woman as object'. The following example is taken from Legman:

> WIFE: a gadget you screw on the bed to get the housework done.
>
> (1968, p. 239)

It is clear that the 'you' in this joke is male. For only husbands can 'screw their wives on the bed'. This is a joke for men alone. It provides a definition of a basic female role that is intended to be passed from one man to another. Not only are women defined as objects designed to serve men's interests, but they are also excluded from active participation in the act of humorous definition.

This instance seems to date from the 1940s and Legman traces its origins back to 1919. Let me bring us up to date by providing another definitional joke which was circulating in written form in 1985 among working men in Yorkshire.

'The perfect woman'

What's the definition of a perfect woman?

A She's three feet tall, has a round hole for a mouth and her head is flat, so you can put a pint glass on it.

B The sports model has pull-back ears and her teeth fold in.

C The economy model fucks all evening and at midnight turns into a roast beef sandwich and a six-pack.

This joke was contained in a list of jokes entitled 'Jokes Guaranteed to Offend Anyone'. There is no doubt that many people will find this joke offensive, as I do. One reason why this, and many other, dirty jokes are experienced as offensive is that they convey ideas and sentiments that are normally regarded as unacceptable, as outside the bounds of proper discourse – which is what we mean by calling such jokes 'dirty'. We may

feel that this joke, like the previous one, is particularly unpleasant in the way that it seeks to amuse by removing all trace of humanity from womankind. However, although we, the analyst and his readers, may be offended by its humour, *participants'* characterization of the joke as 'guaranteed to offend anyone' cannot be taken literally. For, although some of them may have thought it distasteful, it has nevertheless been read and passed on so that it could eventually arrive on my desk. Moreover, Legman's researches show that jokes of this kind have been widely available in North America, and presumably in Britain, since the early years of this century. It seems clear that the principle of 'woman as object', like those of 'the primacy of coitus' and 'the availability of women', is an enduring part of men's humorous culture within our society.

The final principle that I will extract from Legman's analysis can be called the principle of 'the subordination of women's discourse'. As Legman makes clear, one pervasive formula for the construction of a dirty joke is to make the female character utter some remark which can then be reinterpreted in sexual terms, to the woman's presumed discomfiture, by a man. For example:

> Manicurist: Shall I skin back the cuticle for you, sir?
> Customer: No, just kiss me, honey, and it'll take care of itself.
>
> (Legman, 1968, p. 227)

Legman comments that the punch line in this kind of joke 'is supposed to floor and destroy the person spoken to. This point has been made before, but must not be lost sight of. The old standbys in the punning proposition field do not give this weapon to the woman. Sometimes she hardly speaks at all' (1968, pp. 225–6). In men's dirty jokes, it is not only women's bodies and services that are at men's disposal, but also women's language. Women's words, through which women's versions of the relationship between men and women might be expressed, very seldom triumph in the dirty joke. They are persistently subject to what Legman calls a 'purposeful perversion' which transforms their meaning and replaces it with that preferred by men. Thus dirty jokes depict the relationship between men and women in terms of a radical form of sexual, social and linguistic domination of women by men. The very words used to refer to women endorse and exemplify this domination. For instance, in male jokes, women are persistently referred to in terms which express men's superiority and contempt, such as 'tart', 'babe' and, most frequently, 'girl'. The domain of humour is a world where the male voice constantly triumphs over that of the female and where women are made to exist and act only as appendages to men's most basic sexual inclinations.

Così fan tutte

This account of the main characteristics of the representation of sexuality and sexual relationships in male humour is accurate, in my judgement, not only for the material supplied by Legman, but also for the great majority of instances of dirty jokes available in published collections as well as those which have come into my hands informally. Let us accept, then, that much of this humour is accurately described by the four principles of 'the primacy of coitus', 'the availability of women', 'woman as object' and 'the subordination of women's discourse'. What are we to conclude from this finding? In previous chapters, two basic points have been made that may have some bearing upon our conclusions. On the one hand, it has been stressed that humorous discourse is significantly different from serious discourse and that it is a mistake to try to understand humour in the same way that one understands serious discourse. This line of argument might seem to imply that men's dirty jokes should be regarded as mere fun and that their content is largely determined by the requirements of the humorous realm. On the other hand, however, I have also argued that the separation of humour from serious discourse is often put to serious use. I have maintained that one of the paradoxes of humour is that its removal from the serious domain actually makes it useful for certain serious purposes. This line of argument would seem to imply that men's dirty jokes may play an important role in their serious discourse and, perhaps, that they can be understood only in relation to that discourse. Let us consider these two possibilities in turn.

The first possibility is that the four semantic principles identified above are unavoidable if participants are to succeed in constructing dirty jokes. The principle of the primacy of coitus comes closest to meeting this requirement. For if we are to generate *sexual* humour, we must employ active agents in our humorous discourse whose motivation is unequivocally sexual. Furthermore, as we saw in chapter 1, standardized jokes have to depict actions in a highly simplified manner, with all interpretative irrelevances removed. Thus one might reasonably argue that the prevalence of the primacy of coitus in much of men's humour implies nothing about men's serious perspective on the relationship between men and women. For a crude representation of men's sexual motivation is required by the very form of the dirty joke.

This seems to be a powerful argument. If we reduce it to its simplest formulation, it becomes self-evident: namely, that sexual humour has to focus on sexuality. There is, however, the issue of *whose* sexuality is taken to be primary. In most dirty jokes, the humour centres unambiguously around the sexuality of the male. Men are taken to be the active agents of

sexuality and women the largely passive recipients. Even in Sacks's joke, for example, where women are more prominent than usual, they are nevertheless depicted as responding to the sexual actions of their men. Yet there seems to be no good reason why men's sexuality *has* to be primary in the dirty joke. The principle of availability, in fact, seems to imply that women have powerful sexual drives and this idea could be used, if men were not otherwise inclined, to construct a larger proportion of jokes in which the sexual initiative was taken by women.

Although the three remaining principles, concerning the sexual availability of women, the depiction of women as objects and the subordination of women's language, also operate to support the asymmetrical assumption of men's sexual dominance, it seems quite clear that alternative principles could be, and occasionally are, employed. For example, in a few jokes, the woman's voice wins out over the man's. In such jokes, women's discourse is dominant without, presumably, any great sacrifice of humorous effect (see, for example, Legman, 1968, p. 223). It appears, therefore, that the subordination of women's discourse is not essential to sexual humour and cannot be explained as being required by the form of the dirty joke. Similarly, there is no compelling reason why women, but not men, should be regularly portrayed as objects. For instance, it seems to me that my own reformulations below of the definitional joke quoted on p. 136 are just as effective as that furnished by Legman, even though they represent men as objects and express (my version of) possible female perspectives on sexuality:

> HUSBAND: a gadget you screw on the bed to obtain a fur coat/to feed the kids/to stop getting hit/to protect your friends.

However, although the principle of 'men as objects' can be used to construct sexual humour, I know of no previous instances where it has actually been employed.

Finally, we must consider 'the availability of women'. In order to do so, let me turn to genuine female humour. The sequence of cartoons below is taken from Christine Roche's *I'm Not a Feminist but . . .* (1985). I have provided the caption. This cartoon clearly addresses and makes use of the principle of the availability of women, as well as that of the primacy of sexual interest on the part of men. To that extent, it resembles male humour. However, my interpretation of this joke is that it challenges men's assumption that women are available and reveals, humorously of course, men's hypocritical denial, when thwarted, of sexual intent. Whereas the principle of availability is typically used in men's jokes to create situations in which women are shown to be interested in virtually any man solely for sexual purposes, no matter what they may say – in Roche's joke the humorous effect is achieved by first implying this

'The unavailability of women'

assumption and then switching from the man's to the woman's perspective in order to show that, for her, the principle does not operate at all. In this cartoon, 'the availability of women' has become subordinate to a contrary principle, 'the unavailability of women'. In Roche's humorous creation, the interaction culminates in the assertion of this latter principle and in the man's discomfiture. Once again, therefore, it is evident that neither the semantic principles customarily used by men to construct their sexual humour nor the male-centred application of those principles are required by the form of the dirty joke, as such, but by the peculiar tradition of sexual humour that has grown up as part of male discourse.

If the generative principles identified above are not essential to sexual

humour, if they are not required to create the dirty joke, it seems reasonable to suggest that their origin lies outside the realm of humour. In other words, we are led to conclude that the content of men's humour derives from their serious discourse and from their serious relationships with women. If this is so, we must ask: What do men's jokes tell us about these relationships? The answer, I think, is that men treat these relationships as fundamentally asymmetrical. My conclusion is that men, in constructing their sexual humour, take over from the serious realm the assumption that women are subordinate to men, that women exist for men, and that this is the natural relationship between men and women which women, on the whole, recognize and accept. The parallel between what I have shown to be the case for men's sexual humour and masculine discourse in general is supported by much recent research.

> The imperious 'he' is rooted in Western discourse to such an extent that even when an attempt is consciously made to avoid its use, we either have to invent a new language, or have to deconstruct our present usage. Language, written or spoken, is saturated with 'masculinity'. Not only do men make history, but they write and speak that history. It is only recently that feminist writers have begun to reclaim and reconstruct women's past. (Brittan and Maynard, 1984, p. 195)

Elsewhere, Brittan and Maynard emphasize the theme of domination of women by men which is built into our ordinary language, as it is into so much of our humour.

> Male control of language . . . conveys implicit sexist messages to the girls [in schools] concerning their lack of importance and status in comparison to their male peers. However, it is not simply sexism which is being transmitted here, nor just the benign signalling of the existence of two complementary gender roles. Rather, girls are learning that the relations between the sexes are power relations where men are dominant and in control, while women are subordinated and inferior. (1984, p. 165)

The discussion so far brings to our notice an aspect of our own culture the significance of which is in danger of being overlooked, perhaps because it is so utterly taken for granted: namely, that in the domain of humour man's control over and sexual domination of women is exceptionally stark and unrestricted. As I noted in chapter 3, the scripts for specific terms can be radically different in the humorous mode compared with the realm of serious discourse. We saw, for example, how the meaning of the term 'bishop' is altered within humorous discourse for comic effect. In the case

of terms denoting femininity, too, we note a change. But the difference between the two modes appears to involve not a radical reversal of the basic female script, but rather a humorous exaggeration of, and simplification of, elements that are already pronounced within serious discourse. In other words, in the world of humour the script for 'woman' differs from that operative in serious discourse in being even more narrowly confined to a few basic semantic elements – in particular, to those of female subordination to, and sexual use by, the male.

If this is so, it appears that, to some extent, Sacks was right to draw our attention to the 'non-sexual' message contained in the dirty joke. In the case of adult sexual humour, where the transmission of basic sexual information is relatively unimportant, the humorous mode seems to be used to give comparatively unrestrained voice to an exploitative conception of the relationship between men and women which cannot normally be expressed so forcefully within serious discourse.

The basic message of the dirty joke is 'non-sexual' in the sense that its implications extend well beyond the realm of sexual reproduction and related topics. However, we must be careful not to try to separate too strictly the 'sexual' from the 'non-sexual' here. For men's domination of women can never be entirely divorced from the ways in which women's bodies are used by men, nor from the ways in which this use is given meaning through men's, and women's, use of language. The use of, and attitudes towards, a human being's body by other persons can involve a fundamental form of domination. It is this kind of domination which is most clearly evident in the discourse of humour where, of course, it is not to be taken seriously. It is another paradox of humour that men's most basic, serious assumptions regarding women and sexuality are probably most clearly visible, if we care to look closely enough, in the world of humour.

If this discussion is broadly correct, we can understand more fully women's reluctance and/or inability to participate as prominently as men in the sphere of humour. For it seems that such participation will normally require women to collaborate in a discourse which employs extremely derogatory assumptions about the characteristics of females. This discourse will require them to accept, albeit for humorous purposes, that *così fan tutte*, or in plain English – 'women are like that.' We can reasonably infer, therefore, that women will often find men's humour to be alien (Kramarae, 1981). But we have not, so far, seen how humour is actually used by men and women in the course of interaction. In order to complete our examination of the nature of sexual humour we must now attempt to do this by adopting a more ethnographic approach and by turning to observational studies of the use of situational humour in specific social settings. In the next section, I will examine one such study in detail.

The cocktail waitress

The most detailed study available of the humorous interplay between men and women in a particular locale is contained in *The Cocktail Waitress* (1975) by James Spradley and Brenda Mann. This study provides careful observation of the relationships between bartenders, waitresses and their clientele in an American drinking establishment called Brady's Bar during the 1970s. Although there are few other comparable studies (see, however, Coser, 1960; Sykes, 1966; Leonard, 1980), there is no reason to think that Brady's Bar is in any relevant way unique. I will assume, therefore, that Spradley and Mann's conclusions apply in many similar locations in our society and, probably, in a wide variety of situations where men and women come into close contact. I will concentrate on what the analysts tell us about the joking relationship between bartenders and waitresses.

Spradley and Mann observed that the serious interaction between waitresses and bartenders in Brady's Bar was frequently, although irregularly, punctuated by humorous exchanges. They mention no instances where formal jokes were employed in the course of such exchanges, so their analysis appears to deal exclusively with what was termed earlier situational or spontaneous humour (see chapter 4). Although the humour was spontaneous in the sense that it was constructed out of the ongoing discourse and did not make use of pre-arranged humorous anecdotes, Spradley and Mann stress that it had several ritual aspects. Firstly, it was limited to specific categories: in particular, those of 'bartender' (male) and 'waitress' (female). Similarly, it was deemed to be appropriate only in certain specific settings. For example, it could take place at the bar when clients were present, but not in private in the kitchen. Thirdly, the form and content of the humour were rigidly restricted to the exchange of ridicule, sexual insults and lewd words. Spradley and Mann argue, following Radcliffe-Brown's (1940) analysis of ritual joking in preliterate societies, that this joking relationship has grown out of structurally created conflict between bartenders and waitresses in the bar, and that the exchange of humour serves, in part, to alleviate this conflict (1975, pp. 88–9, 97, 100).

The first step taken by Spradley and Mann in their attempt to explain the joking relationship in Brady's Bar is to identify certain problems faced by waitresses as a result of their position in the social structure of the bar. These problems arise, they argue, because waitresses have to deal with two conflicting pressures. On the one hand, they are required to cooperate with the bartenders, as a result of which they develop close personal ties with them, sometimes culminating in sexual liaison. On the other hand, the waitresses' low status in the bar means that they are subordinate to the bartenders and that all their actions in the bar must be designed to meet

the bartenders' needs. These socially generated but opposing patterns of conduct are difficult to reconcile. Fortunately, however, Spradley and Mann propose, humour is available to make their difficulties less oppressive.

> This structural conflict creates powerful but often ambivalent feelings in the girls. They all recognize the ambivalent nature of this relationship and would as quickly defend the bartenders as criticize them. When they talked together about their work, the most frequent discussions centered on this relationship and its significance to them personally. As we listened to these descriptions and observed the social encounters that took place, it became clear that the conflict was mediated, in part, by the joking aspect of this complex relationship. (1975, p. 89)

Spradley and Mann argue that humour helps to resolve waitresses' problems by furnishing a safety valve for the release of their frustrations. At the same time, however, although humour is of assistance to the waitresses, it also helps to sustain an authority structure in which the bartenders can continue to exercise control over their female subordinates. Humour, they conclude:

> serves to resolve the deep structural conflict in the social structure of the bar. Anger and frustration are dissipated and feelings of inequality felt by the waitresses are deflected away from the relationship. It creates a buffer between the waitress and bartender in potential conflict situations and provides a means for handling inadequate role performances that occur in full public view.
>
> But the joking relationship also maintains the status inequality of female waitresses and reinforces masculine values. By providing a kind of 'safety valve' for the frustrations created for women in this small society, joking behavior ensures that the role of female waitresses remains unchanged. (1975, p. 100)

Spradley and Mann's study is particularly valuable because it is based on careful observation of the use made by men and women of humour in the course of direct interaction. The detail of their observational work enables us to examine their data for ourselves and to draw our own conclusions. Mine do not not coincide entirely with theirs, and I will develop a somewhat different interpretation of their material.

The analysts focus in their study on what humour does for the waitresses. They decide, as we have seen, that humour operates as a safety valve which allows the waitresses to find relief from their frustrations. But consider whether this conclusion is consistent with their own reconstruction of a typical conversation among the women working in Brady's Bar concerning a bartender's humorous insults.

> 'Rob made some reference about my chest'.
> 'Same here. But I don't know what we can do to get him back'.
> 'Maybe we could all get together and try grabbing him'.
> 'That's silly. We aren't strong enough and they would just make a joke out of it'.
> 'We could all ignore him, but that wouldn't work because he would just pick at us until we responded. If we ignore him, we're admitting defeat'.
> 'There's no way we can get them back. We can't get on their level. The only way to get them back is to get on their level and you can't do that. You can't counter with some remark about the size of his penis or something without making yourself look really cheap'. (Spradley and Mann, 1975, p. 97)

Spradley and Mann comment immediately after presenting this passage, that 'although the joking helps to alleviate some of the conflicts between bartenders and waitresses, it is an asymmetrical relationship, one that continues to express the accepted cultural definitions of sexual identity in the bar' (1975, p. 97). To describe the relationship between waitresses and bartenders as asymmetrical seems entirely appropriate. In this respect, informal humour in the bar resembles the discourse of the dirty joke. But I find it difficult to see how the conversation above shows that joking, at least the joking performed by the *men*, helps to alleviate the waitresses' problems. It seems, rather, that the bartenders' humour creates yet another, somewhat intractable, difficulty arising out of the men's social and linguistic dominance. From the women's point of view, the humour of their male partners is an additional and particularly offensive consequence of their own structural subordination to the bartenders. If the passage above is typical, as Spradley and Mann claim, men's humour does not serve as a welcome release for the women, but as an added unpleasantness which is especially troublesome because it takes place within the humorous mode.

One way in which we might try to retain the authors' analysis, with only minor revisions, would be to propose that it is not the *bartenders'* humour which helps the waitresses, but their own humour. Unfortunately, we are not provided with any estimates of the frequency with which men and women initiated humour in the bar, nor of the frequency with which the humorously insulting exchanges ended to the advantage of either party. Nevertheless, we can try to compensate for this lack of information by examining the sixteen examples of humorous interchange actually

provided by the analysts in their chapter on joking relationships. When I did this, I found that twelve of the sixteen exchanges were started by men and that thirteen ended with the men as victor. In contrast, four were begun by women, in only three of which did the female emerge as dominant. It seems, therefore, that joking in Brady's Bar is overwhelmingly initiated by men and that it is mainly the men who benefit from it. If humour was primarily a mechanism enabling women to cope with their subordination and their ambivalent relationship with the bartenders, we would surely expect that women would play a much more active role in the production of humour and that joking exchanges would work in a way which enabled women to emerge, at least in play, as the dominant partners. But, if the observational material presented by Spradley and Mann is at all representative, the exact opposite seems to happen. Far from being a safety valve for women's frustrations, humour is used mainly by men in such a way that it further reinforces their control over the women with whom they are in direct contact.

We can understand how this happens, if we look in greater detail at one kind of situation in which humour is especially likely to occur. Spradley and Mann note that jokes very frequently arise out of the mistakes made by members of the bar staff. In such circumstances, they report, employees use humour to hide their error by humorously insulting the colleague who drew attention to it, or by jokingly attributing the error to that person or to some other member of the staff. In the two instances described by the analysts, the mistake is made by a bartender in his dealings with a waitress. On each occasion the bartender adopts the humorous mode as soon as the error is made evident by the waitress and, playfully of course, makes the waitress appear to be at fault. In one case, for example, in which the bartender has given the wrong change to the waitress, the sequence ends with the bartender admonishing the waitress with the words, 'Okay, chesty. Next time, get the amount right so I don't have to go to all this trouble.' In reply, the waitress helplessly sticks out her tongue, picks up the money which is now the correct amount, and retreats to her tables in defeat.

Given that bartenders are required constantly to respond to the orders placed by the waitresses, they will inevitably make mistakes which will be drawn to their attention by their female partners. (For a general discussion of such problems in restaurants, see Whyte, 1973.) We may speculate that, when these mistakes occur, the bartender's authority is momentarily in jeopardy.It is clearly difficult for him to re-establish that authority immediately within the mode of serious discourse. For within that mode, his only suitable response is to admit his own incompetence and the passing superiority of the waitress. Within the fantasy world of humour, however, where reality and illusion are interchangeable, that mistake can

be made to disappear by a mere change in the bartender's tone of voice; or if a fault is acknowledged, it can easily be attributed to the other member of staff involved in the incident – namely, the waitress. Because the bartender is 'only joking', it is, as we know, difficult for the waitress effectively to challenge his reallocation of blame. For any serious reply can be taken to be an inappropriate response to the bartender's humorous remark. Yet if the waitress also enters the domain of humour, she thereby accepts the unreality of the bartender's error. Thus his rapid switch from the serious to the humorous mode has a serious outcome for both parties. For the waitress, the result of the joking exchange is that the bartender's very incompetence has become an occasion for a further display of her subordination, whilst for the bartender, it has made possible a reassertion of his control over the female staff in a situation where that control was under threat.

Spradley and Mann's study leads me to the conclusion that the humour in Brady's Bar is produced or initiated primarily by the men, and that it is used by them to sustain their domination of the women. For the men, humour is a valuable interactional resource. In contrast, for the women, it is a source of continual frustration and one of the means by which their subordination is maintained. Spradley and Mann are probably correct in claiming that the sexually toned insults which occur persistently in Brady's Bar are used to deal with problems created by the regular patterns of interaction between waitresses and bartenders. I suggest, however, that they provide a solution, not to the difficulties of women, but to those experienced by men in maintaining their formal authority. As the analysts show with great clarity, the joking relationship between these men and women is fundamentally asymmetrical (Spradley and Mann, 1975, p. 97). They show, for example, that whereas women are not allowed to take offence at men's humorous or ribald remarks, men can and do object when a 'girl' 'goes too far'. 'Even when joking, girls must maintain a subordinate position, careful that their ritual insults do not denigrate a male bartender' (1975, p. 93). Similarly, the humorous language used by the women must be much more restrained than that employed by men. 'The waitresses must be careful not to say things that would appear course or crude. The males have much more latitude in what they do and say' (1975, p. 97; see also Sykes, 1966).

This asymmetry is also evident in the way that the customary repertoire of humorous terms focuses on the sexual attributes of women rather than those of men, particularly on the female breast. As Spradley and Mann report, 'public joking behavior in Brady's contains only vague and metaphorical comments about genitalia and almost never includes references to males in this regard' (1975, p. 96). One final aspect of this pervasive asymmetry within the discourse of the humorous mode is that

humorous talk regularly 'involves calling attention to the waitress as sexual object' (1975, p. 98). This even extends to the analogues and metaphors used by men to make fun of the women's bodies. For instance, in the two following fragments from bartenders' jocular repartee, waitresses are insulted by being likened to inanimate objects:

1 'It'd look better if you had some tits! Who wants to pull down a zipper just to see two fried eggs thrown against a wall?' (1975, p. 97)
2 'Who wants two ball bearings on a steel board, anyway?' (1975, p. 98)

The parallel with the discourse of the formal joke is obvious.

The asymmetrical joking relationship of Brady's Bar closely resembles the interpretative asymmetry noted above which is characteristic of male humour in our culture. Spradley and Mann comment that the humour of Brady's Bar reflects masculine values as defined by that culture (1975, p. 98). Yet they also try to argue that this male-centred humour largely benefits the female participants. I suggest, in contrast, that the joking relationship found in Brady's Bar, and presumably in many other places, is best seen as part of a wider pattern of male domination and female subordination that is widespread in society at large. I am quite sure, for example, that if Brady's Bar had employed a team of waiters instead of waitresses, the humorous asymmetry would have been much less pronounced and the language of sexual denigration would have been entirely absent. In other words, the insulting and lewd language used by the bartenders is not addressed to the waitresses simply as subordinate members of the bar staff, but as women, who are taken to be inferior by the bartenders in a much more comprehensive and basic manner. This, I think, is well illustrated by an exchange which occurred on one occasion when a waitress exceeded her authority and advised the bartender not to serve a customer who had been drinking heavily:

Bartender: What would you know? You're just a female and anything you say is nothing more than idle chatter.
Waitress: Okay, then. I won't tell you how handsome, charming, and intelligent you are.
Bartender: Don't be redundant. I already know.

(Spradley and Mann, 1975, p. 95)

It is clear that interactional problems do arise in the bar as a result of the structure of the relationships between waitresses and bartenders. But the solution which has evolved in response to these problems cannot be separated from the relationships between men and women in the bar, nor from the relationships between men and women in the wider society. It is

no accident that the position of formal authority in the bar, that of the bartender, is occupied exclusively by men, whilst the subordinate position is reserved for women. Thus the problems experienced by the bartenders in maintaining their control undoubtedly arise in part from the fact that their subordinates are women. It is not surprising, therefore, that their repertoire of humorous discourse is heavily sexual in content and extremely derogatory in tone. This is so because it is a discourse designed to assert and reassert the subordination of women.

If I am right in taking the asymmetrical, humorous interplay in Brady's Bar as arising out of participants' interaction as men and women, and not just as waitresses and bartenders, we can reasonably infer that the pattern observed there will occur widely throughout society; although clearly, the use of sexual humour will vary to some degree from one social grouping to another, from one person to another, and from one occasion to another. Thus this appraisal of Spradley and Mann's study provides strong support for the conclusions derived in previous sections from the examination of dirty jokes. Like the humour of the dirty joke, men's informal humour constantly denigrates women's bodies and stresses their inferiority as social beings. It seems likely that much of the humour which has become partially fossilized in the standardized dirty joke has its origin in the widespread asymmetry of direct interaction between men and women, as illustrated in the humorous interplay in Brady's Bar.

Humour and the critique of gender relationships

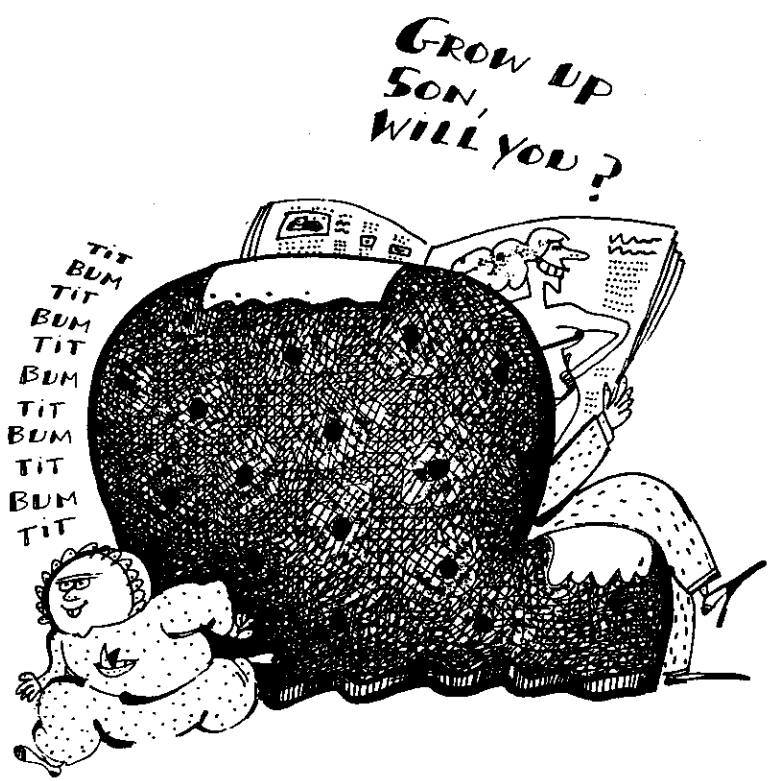
In the preceding chapter, I suggested that women's humour tends to differ from that of men. This is likely to be true, however, only to a limited extent. For women operate as cultural producers within the context of a dominant discourse and a pattern of social relationships which are premised on a male view of the world. Consequently, although the humour used by and circulated among women will tend to have certain distinctive features, it will also resemble men's humour in many ways and will draw upon similar interpretative resources. For instance, we saw in Madeleine's joke (p. 123) that the critical component of the humour was the handling, by a man, of a woman's breasts and that the young women found this amusing. Similarly the joke that I have called 'Sacks's joke', but which originated, as far as we are concerned, from an unknown twelve-year-old girl, depicts women as passive recipients of male sexuality: 'It *ti*ckled,' said the first daughter, 'It *hu*rts,' said the second. According to one commentator, it can be read as a joke 'in which women are presented as objects of pleasure whose capacity to satisfy male desire is enhanced by their incapacity to distinguish between a dinner table [where the mother's

rule about not speaking with one's mouth full would have been appropriate] and a bed' (Thompson, 1984, p. 117). Our attention is drawn by this reading of the joke to the fact that, although Sacks's version comes from a young girl and although women predominate in the joke's text, it still depends on a male- centred conception of sexuality and on the notion of female stupidity which features widely in men's jokes about women.

Because women's humour is created within a society where men's discourse and men's humour are dominant, the growing involvement of women in the production of mass humour will not, in itself, bring about a change in humorous style. For instance, Joan Rivers is a very popular TV comedienne in Britain and the USA, but her humour is firmly within the male-centred tradition, relying heavily on insulting sexual innuendo. This is clearly illustrated by her comic book (1985), the guiding theme of which is implied in the book's prefatory quotation: 'You show me a woman with a naturally beautiful body, and I'll show you a tramp!'

The clearest sign of a changing approach to humour, and particularly to humour dealing with the relationships between women and men, is to be found in humour which has been influenced by the women's movement. It would be misleading to suggest that those involved in the women's movement have emphasized the need for analysis or corrective action in relation to humour. They have concentrated, probably correctly, on serious analysis and serious areas of conduct. However, the discussion above indicates that it would be a tactical error on their part to ignore humour entirely. For, as we have seen, the male-centred view of sexuality and of women is formulated and transmitted in a most potent form within humorous discourse. Humour can allow the most unadulterated expression of sexist views because, when we speak humorously, we are not fully responsible for what we say. From the outside, from within the realm of serious discourse, the messages of humour are extremely difficult to oppose successfully. Yet the messages conveyed by humour may have very serious consequences. It seems, therefore, that the development of an 'alternative humour' is an important task to be faced by the women's movement.

Some female humorists have recognized the cultural importance of humour and, informed by ideas drawn from the women's movement, have sought to address and make fun of the basic assumptions of men's views of women, which are linked to the basic assumptions of men's sexual humour. In a previous section (p. 140), we saw Christine Roche's cartoon sequence in which the principle of the sexual availability of women was shown to be ludicrous. This chapter ends with another of her cartoons, in which Roche beautifully displays the infantile character of the male-centred conception of women which, with minor variations, is shared by many men as well as boys. In the cartoons that I have chosen, Roche is still



operating partly within the dominant tradition of male humour. However, her humour does not endorse the assumptions of that humorous discourse, but seeks to challenge them by giving expression to the potentially different perspective of women. As I argued above, there is nothing inevitable about the sexual humour of our culture. Quite different assumptions can be used to create humorous incongruity on this topic. Roche's work is a sign that a movement may already be under way towards the creation of new principles for producing humour about sexuality and about the relations between women and men.

9

Humour and Social Structure

We have just looked at the way in which certain aspects of sexual humour are linked in our society to the structured relationships between women and men. One broad conclusion of that chapter was that much sexual humour arises directly out of the social structure of gender relationships and that, on the whole, sexual humour works to reproduce this structure. I now intend to explore the connection between humour and social structure in more general terms. I will attempt to provide an analysis which can be used to elucidate the structural sources and consequences of humour in a wide range of social settings.

Jokes in the social structure

The most relevant and useful discussion in the existing literature with which to begin this chapter is that by Mary Douglas (1968; reprinted in Douglas, 1975). Her examination of the link between humour and social structure starts with a review of the writings of Freud (1905) and Bergson (1911) on the underlying structure of 'humorous thought'. She extracts from these authors what she calls a 'formula for identifying jokes'. This formula appears to be another version of the concept of 'bisociation'.

> A joke is a play upon form. It brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first . . . any recognisable joke falls into this joke pattern which needs two elements, the juxtaposition of a control against that which is controlled, this juxtaposition being such that the latter triumphs. (Douglas, 1975, p. 96)

This formulation captures the interpretative duality of humour on which I have placed great emphasis. It stresses that humour is produced, not merely by the incongruous combination of opposing patterns, but also by the revelation of an alternative, hidden meaning.

Douglas's analytical task is to demonstrate how humour, thus defined, is linked to social structure. She establishes this link by proposing, in the first place, that actors' perception and understanding in general are determined by the range of conceptual possibilities furnished by the social structure in which they act. Thus their ability to recognize and appreciate the interpretative oppositions and ambiguities required in the realm of humour is also structurally constrained. It follows, she argues, that a joke will be seen and allowed only 'when it offers a symbolic pattern of a social pattern occurring at the same time' (1975, p. 98). In Douglas's view, 'humorous' discourse cannot even be recognized as such, let alone found to be amusing, unless it expresses the social situation in which it occurs. Accordingly:

> The one social condition necessary for a joke to be enjoyed is that the social group in which it is received should develop the formal characteristics of a 'told' joke: that is, a dominant pattern of relations is challenged by another. If there is no joke in the social structure, no other joking can appear . . . I would go a step further and even suggest that the experience of a joke form in the social structure calls imperatively for an explicit joke to express it. (1975, pp. 98, 100)

The central idea, then, is that there is a direct correspondence between humour and social structure. Joking takes place because the organized patterns of social life themselves involve contradictions, oppositions and incongruities which find expression through the medium of humorous discourse. One might have expected, at this point in the analysis, that Douglas would have argued that joking, in giving symbolic expression to structural 'strains' and 'tensions', helps to lessen these strains and thereby to maintain the established structure of social relationships. There is, indeed, a well developed tradition of anthropological interpretation, stemming from the work of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1940; reprinted 1952), in which institutionalized joking is regarded as a device for resolving structural tensions in a manner that enables participants to engage in collaborative activities which are critical for the existing structure. Douglas, however, adopts a completely opposite position. She stresses that humorous utterances necessarily involve a confrontation with the dominant social pattern. Joking, she suggests, is an activity that is generated by the social structure, but which challenges and disrupts that structure by giving voice to its inconsistencies and irrationalities. In order to emphasize this aspect of humour, she compares jokes with standard rites. Rites express and impose order and harmony. They create a sense of unity. They assert hierarchy and convey the necessity of the established social patterns. In contrast, she maintains, humour disorganizes. It destroys hierarchy and order. Joking does not affirm dominant values, but denigrates and devalues them. In the course of humorous

discourse, the accepted patterns of social life are shown to have no necessity. 'Essentially a joke is an anti-rite' (1975, p. 102).

Let me illustrate how Douglas's analysis can give insight into specific social situations by briefly reconsidering the humorous interplay between waitresses and bartenders in Brady's Bar that was described in chapter 8. If Douglas is right in stressing that joking will occur only when there is a joke in the social structure, it should be possible to identify a joke in the social structure of Brady's Bar; that is, we should find that in the bar the dominant pattern of social relationships is challenged by an alternative pattern which is 'hidden in the first'. It seems to me that this is a reasonable way of describing what was, in fact, observed. For we saw that the joking among waitresses and bartenders was centrally concerned with the latter's attempts to maintain their position of formal authority in a situation where this was threatened by a degree of interactional subordination to the waitresses. Speaking figuratively, we can say that the social structure of Brady's Bar had played a joke on the bartenders; that is, it had vested in them authority over the activities of the other staff within the bar, but it had then placed them at the beck and call of their subordinates. We might even say that the social structure at large had played a joke on the bartenders. For it had given them the dominant status of men and had then forced them to behave like women; that is, it had required them constantly to cater for the needs of others, including waitresses as well as clients. The bartenders, it seems, responded to this joke in the social structure, of which they were the victims, by adopting the humorous mode of discourse themselves and by using it to reaffirm the domination that was 'properly' theirs.

If we accept that it is possible to identify a joke in the social structure of Brady's Bar and that much of the humour that took place there grew out of this structural joke, it follows that Douglas's analysis applies, at least in part, to this specific social setting. It may be, therefore, that it applies much more widely and may provide a useful framework for understanding the relationship between humour and social structure in general. Douglas's argument appears to suggest that the relationship between humour and social structure is fairly straightforward and that, in order to understand any particular instance of humorous interchange, we need do little more than locate the structural joke from which it arises and to which it corresponds. However, before we can reach this optimistic conclusion, we must examine several analytical difficulties that Douglas leaves unresolved.

In the first place, although Douglas suggests that the presence of a joke form in the social structure 'calls imperatively' for explicit humour to express it, she makes no attempt to describe the mechanism whereby this call is put into effect. Her phrasing seems to indicate that she expects explicit joking to be a direct 'expression of' structural incongruity; and, indeed, there are situations where this seems to be the case. In some preliterate

societies, institutionalized joking relationships exist which appear to take the form of playful displays of the interpretative ambiguities inherent in a tribe's complex kinship relationships and kinship terminology. Among the Gogo of Tanzania, for example, joking between male cross-cousins involves the reciprocal use of overlapping and potentially ambiguous kinship categories in a way which enables participants to pretend to be, not cousins, but father and son or nephew and mother's brother (Rigby, 1968). This, and similar examples (see Sharman, 1969), can reasonably be described as straightforward 'expressions' of jokes that are partially hidden in the social structure. (For a review of research on 'joking relationships', see Apte, 1985.) But Douglas gives no clue as to why such structural ambiguities are used as the basis for explicit humour, nor whether all such potential jokes are put into practice. Furthermore, it is clear from Brady's Bar that, in certain circumstances, a joke in the social structure may not be given voice at all, but may itself be confronted and suppressed as the more powerful participants respond within the humorous mode to its structural implications.

The evidence from Brady's Bar forces us to reconsider Douglas's claim that joking necessarily disrupts the dominant pattern and threatens hierarchy and order. It is true that what I have called 'the joke in the social structure of Brady's Bar' – namely, the control exerted by the waitresses over the bartenders' activities – challenges and threatens to disrupt the dominant structure. However, the pattern of joking initiated and sustained by the bartenders does the exact opposite. The bartenders' actual humour counters the joke in the social structure and works to reinstate the formal pattern of authority which had been put in jeopardy by the 'hidden pattern' implicit in the structured relationships taking place in the bar. If the processes operative in Brady's Bar are typical in this respect, it would follow, contrary to Douglas's proposal, that humorous discourse tends to support and maintain the dominant structure rather than to subvert it.

Douglas's analysis is presented as a completely general account of the relationship between humour and social structure. It must, therefore, encompass groups as different as the Gogo and the denizens of Brady's Bar. In both these settings, and in many others, there does appear to be a connection between the occurrence of humour and the existence of the kind of structural ambiguity or incongruity that Douglas calls a joke in the social structure. In addition, within groups like the Gogo, certain joking relationships do seem to involve fairly direct expressions of ambiguities in the kinship structure. Even here, however, participants' actual humour does not appear to challenge that structure or to reveal its arbitrary character. Gogo cross- cousins only *pretend* to be father and son within the protected confines of the humorous mode. Their humour does confront the dominant structure with its ambiguities. But it does this only in play. The structural challenge thus expressed is no more than a mock challenge. It has no serious

consequences. In this respect, institutionalized joking among the Gogo differs significantly from that occurring in Brady's Bar. For in the latter case, humorous interchange does seem to have a serious consequence: namely, that of supporting the formal pattern of authority within the bar.

We need no further examples to conclude that Douglas has oversimplified the relationship between humour and social structure. In order to build upon her analysis, we must recognize, to begin with, that there are different kinds of humour. The playful exchanges of Gogo cross-cousins are markedly different from the insulting sexual banter of Brady's Bar – for participants as well as for analysts. The former is analogous to what I called 'pure humour' in chapter 4: that is, humour which is taken by participants to have no implications beyond the realm of humorous discourse. Joking in Brady's Bar, in contrast, seems to involve 'applied humour', in the sense that it makes a discernible contribution to serious interaction and is seen, at least by some participants on some occasions, as having serious consequences. Pure humour may be generated by the social structure, but it will, by definition, neither disrupt nor support that structure. Applied humour, however, may do either of these things. It may operate to maintain the dominant structure, as in Brady's Bar, or it may in different circumstances have the opposite effect.

We must accept that there are different types of humour, with varying effects on the social structure. But our amendment of Douglas's argument cannot stop here. Given that we, and Douglas, are seeking a universal formulation of the connection between humour and social structure, we must also respond to the fact that we are faced with a potentially enormous variety of different social structures. Clearly, we cannot hope to deal adequately with this structural diversity from the outset. We must be content for the time being with crude approximations. Nevertheless, it seems to me essential to recognize from the start that social structures do vary in significant ways. This means that different types of structure may create different sorts of structural joke, may provide different social contexts in which these jokes have to be handled and may, thereby, generate quite different reactions from participants.

It is clear that we must abandon Douglas's unduly simple idea that jokes in the social structure call imperatively for humour that challenges the structure which gives it birth. I suggest that we replace it with the following more complex and, I think, more realistic proposals: namely, that some, but not necessarily all, humour is directly generated by structural jokes; that humour so generated can be pure as well as applied; that applied humour can, in principle, have positive as well as negative consequences for the structure within which it occurs; and that the relationship between humour and social structure is different in different kinds of social setting. I will assume that these general points have been established in the course of the discussion so far. However, I also wish to make one more proposal: that the structural generation of humour is significantly affected by the degree of formality of the structural context in which it occurs and by the nature of the social hierarchy in which it is located. The two aspects of this claim will be substantiated and developed in the next three sections of this chapter.

Degrees of structural formality

If we are to understand how humour alters in accordance with variations in social structure, we must clarify what is meant by the statement that 'there is a joke in the social structure.' In the previous section, I suggested that it was reasonable to make this claim with respect to Brady's Bar as well as to the kinship structure of Gogo society. But I made no attempt to explain how a structural joke can be recognized. In order to do so, we have to combine what appear to be two rather different concepts. On the one hand, we have a joke, that is, a linguistic formulation displaying the characteristics identified in previous chapters. On the other hand, we have a social structure, that is, a pattern of recurrent meaningful interaction between the occupants of specific social positions. If we are to identify jokes in the social structure, we must be able to reconcile these two notions. We can do this, I suggest, by interpreting the phrase 'pattern of recurrent meaningful interaction' as equivalent to 'pattern of linguistic exchange'. As soon as we accept that both 'social structure' and 'joke' refer to organized patterns of discourse, we have no difficulty in allowing that social structures may reproduce the linguistic form of a joke.

Even if we insist that 'social structure' is something more than the mere exchange of words, it is undeniable that social scientists identify and describe social structures primarily by interpreting what people say, and in some societies write, to each other. (For a more extended discussion, see Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984, chapter 1.) For example, the claim that there is a formal authority structure in Brady's Bar in which bartenders exercise control over waitresses depends on the investigators' having observed that bartenders regularly give orders to waitresses, that waitresses almost never challenge those orders, that waitresses frequently complain to each other about the way in which bartenders treat them as inferiors but seldom complain directly to the bartenders themselves, that bartenders use various phrases which imply waitresses' subordination and express their own position of dominance, and so on. The phrase 'social structure of Brady's Bar' refers to such patterns of regular, organized discourse.

If a social structure is a pattern of organized discourse, it follows that it can be organized in the form of a joke; that is, in Douglas's words, it can be

arranged in such a way that one accepted or dominant pattern is challenged by the existence of another pattern which in some way is hidden in the first. In the case of Brady's Bar, the two conflicting patterns occur because the waitresses, although subject in many respects to the bartenders' control and obedient to their orders, are also required to pass on to the bartenders the 'orders' of the most powerful social category in the bar – namely, the customers. (It seems that jokes in the social structure can involve puns.) Because waitresses regularly speak to bartenders as the customers' representatives, and thereby exercise control over bartenders' actions, a secondary pattern of reciprocal discourse exists which implicitly contradicts the dominant pattern and sometimes gives rise, as we have seen, to genuine interactional difficulties (Whyte, 1973). It is the clash between these patterns of discourse that creates the joke in the social structure of Brady's Bar.

If this argument is correct, our analytical task has been simplified to some extent. It seems that, in exploring how variations in social structure give rise to humour, we must focus on the organized patterns of discourse which are characteristic of different social settings, and we must examine how contradictory patterns are generated and handled by participants within these different settings. However, the task may still appear to be dauntingly complex. For discourse varies along so many different dimensions, all of which may have some bearing on the generation of humour. I will try to create order out of this diversity by concentrating on the degree to which discourse is formalized in various social situations.

At one end of the spectrum of formality are ritual ceremonies. We saw earlier that Douglas regarded ritual discourse as being fundamentally different from humour. Unlike humour, ceremonial discourse is internally coherent, uniform and highly predictable. In the extreme case, as in marriage ceremonies in our own society, every word to be uttered is known in advance and, if the exact pattern of formal discourse is not reproduced, what takes place does not count as a proper ceremony (Austin, 1962). In such a setting, as long as participants make no mistakes, humour is impossible. It is excluded by the rigid formality of the discourse.

As we move away from such extremely formal settings, humorous discourse begins to occur. In Nobel ceremonies, for example, although the range of discourse and the basic forms of verbal exchange are pre-established (Mulkay, 1984), there is greater room for discursive variety than in the case of the marriage ceremony. It is this slight reduction in the level of formality that makes humour possible. However, the humour that takes place in Nobel ceremonies is, as we will see in the next section, closely linked to the standard forms of ceremonial discourse by the relative formality of the occasion. In this setting, participants are unable to move away from the central focus of the ceremony. As a result of this restriction on the variability of ceremonial discourse, Nobel humour never challenges or disrupts the

dominant pattern of the ceremony. It appears that, in this respect, it is typical of humour in highly formalized social structures. To put this in general terms, the more formalized the structure, the stronger is the connection between humour and the prevailing pattern of discourse. Moreover, in formal settings, where humour is most directly linked to the social structure, it is highly unlikely to be used to express opposition to that structure. In contrast, in situations where the pattern of interaction is less formal and the discourse less structured, the less will participants' humour be generated directly in response to structural contradictions.

Since, in informal settings, the relationship between humour and social structure is relatively weak and indirect, the humour that occurs can range more widely and, frequently, in a highly creative manner. Even in these circumstances, however, when participants' discourse is largely free from direct structural restraint, humour is rather seldom used to undermine the dominant patterns of social life. Although the humour that takes place in unstructured situations does occasionally touch upon issues of structural importance, we will see that the interpretative duality of the humorous mode, together with the separation of such humour from the major social structures, reduce its significance as a source of social disruption or challenge.

Ceremonial humour

There is, in fact, little humour during the annual ceremonies at which Nobel Prizes are awarded. During the period 1978–81, I was able to identify only twelve instances of humorous discourse in the published transcripts – that is, an average of three per ceremony (Mulkay, 1987). One reason for this low level of humorous content is that the ceremonies are by their very nature solemn ritual events devoted to the celebration of mankind's highest and most serious achievements in the realms of science, literature and human welfare. In addition, the ritual interaction is strictly pre-ordained and the discourse of individual participants varies from year to year only in relatively minor respects (Mulkay, 1984). Nevertheless, there are always a few isolated fragments of humour. Let us see how this humour is related to the relatively rigid structure of ceremonial discourse.

Nobel ceremonies are organized around three symbolic acts: that of describing and praising the achievements of each Nobel laureate named in a particular year; that of awarding the prize to each laureate; and that of responding after receipt of the prize. These acts are performed by means of a fairly simple linguistic exchange, of which the basic structure is as follows (Mulkay, 1984). First, various non-laureates speak on behalf of one or more social entities: for example, the Nobel Foundation, an academic discipline,

the younger generation, and so on. The speech of these non-laureates is addressed both to the ceremonial audience and to the laureates themselves. It consists overwhelmingly of admiring descriptions of laureates' accomplishments and enthusiastic endorsements of the significance of their contributions to knowledge, to world culture or to peace among nations. After this, the prizes are awarded and the laureates respond to the ritual praise of the non-laureates and to the ultimate compliment of the prize itself. The laureates' responses, like the speech of the non-laureates, are rigidly formalized. Their central features are the scrupulous avoidance of self-praise, the downgrading of their own achievements, the regular use of return compliments addressed to Alfred Nobel or to the Nobel Foundation and, most notably, the reassignment of praise by the laureates to their colleagues and families, and to wider social groupings of which they are members (Mulkay, 1984; 1987).

We do not need to understand why the Nobel ceremonies are organized in this way (see Mulkay, 1984). Our task is to consider whether there is a joke in the structure of Nobel discourse and whether the humour that occurs intermittently during the ceremonies is linked to that joke. It seems to me that the ceremonial discourse gives rise to a very obvious structural joke. For much of what the laureates say, when downgrading their own work and reassigning credit for their achievements, can be taken to contradict the fulsome praise bestowed on them by the non-laureates and, in many cases, to challenge the very idea of granting the prizes to particular individuals (Mulkay, 1985, chapter 8). We can, therefore, formulate the structural 'joke' or interpretative contradiction of Nobel discourse in a rather crude fashion by means of the following imaginary exchange:

> Non-laureate: I give you this prize for your marvellous achievement.
> Laureate: Thank you very much. I accept the prize and, in so doing, I accept your judgement of my cultural contribution. But actually my achievement is rather insignificant and, anyway, other people did most of the work.

Thus both laureates and non-laureates, in their different ways, endorse the dominant pattern of Nobel discourse and cooperate in bringing about the award and acceptance of the prizes. However, the laureates also challenge the validity of the dominant structure by implying, but never fully revealing, an alternative, hidden pattern.

If this account of the joke in the structure of the Nobel ceremony is correct and if, as I have suggested, the humour in highly formalized settings is closely linked to structural jokes, we should find that Nobel humour focuses on the attribution and denial of merit with respect to the Nobel laureates. As I have shown elsewhere, this is in fact the case (Mulkay, 1987). Let us examine two humorous passages taken from the ceremony held in 1979, one

from a laureate and one from a non-laureate, in order to understand in more detail how Nobel humour and the surrounding context of ceremonial discourse are related.

The following quotation is taken from the banquet speech of one of the two recipients of the prize for physiology and medicine. The prizewinners were being honoured for their contributions to the development of computerized tomography, a technique for constructing three-dimensional X-rays.

'The Nobel prescription'

> There is an irony in this award, since neither Hounsfield nor I is a physician. In fact it is not much of an exaggeration to say that what Hounsfield and I know about medicine and physiology could be written on a small prescription form!
>
> While there is an irony in the award, there is also hope that even in these days of increasing specialization there is a unity in the human experience, a unity clearly known to Alfred Nobel by the broad spectrum of his awards. I think that he would have been pleased to know that an engineer and a physicist, each in his own way, have contributed just a little to the advancement of medicine. (*Les Prix Nobel*, 1979, p. 41)

For several reasons, I take the first paragraph of this passage to be 'not entirely serious'. In the first place, the speaker mentions the irony of the award, thereby drawing attention to the possibility of attributing more than one meaning to his receipt of the prize for medicine. In addition, he engages in the kind of distortion characteristic of humour. He tells us that what he is about to say 'is not much of an exaggeration'. But this informs us that what is to come is *some* kind of exaggeration and is, therefore, not literally accurate. The 'non-serious intent' of the punch line is further confirmed by what I take to be a playful replacement of the standard humorous phrase 'what he knows about X could be written on a postage stamp' with 'what we know about medicine could be written on a small prescription form'.

These indications that 'the Nobel prescription' is not to be taken entirely seriously are incorporated in a passage that expresses an emphatic self-deprecation. Self-deprecation, as I have stressed, is part of the normal pattern of laureates' discourse; in this respect, the speaker is conforming to the established pattern. However, there is a problem facing any laureate who states openly and without qualification that he has done nothing to deserve the Nobel Prize. This problem must be resolved even when the statement is made in the relatively relaxed atmosphere of the ceremonial banquet. For such an outright denial of merit by a laureate clearly contradicts the lauda-

tory pronouncements made by non-laureates in the course of the prize-giving ceremonies, and is hardly consistent with his acceptance of the prize. For example, if this laureate had said in a straightforward, serious manner that he knew nothing about physiology or medicine and could not properly be given the prize under this heading, his very participation in the ceremony would have been put in question. The challenge to the ritual structure implicit in the pattern of Nobel discourse would have become 'no laughing matter'.

In the quoted passage, however, the laureate succeeds in employing irony and the humorous mode to deny his competence in the area for which the prize is being awarded, without producing these serious consequences. He uses the interpretative duality of humour to assert his incompetence without thereby challenging his right to receive the prize. The award of the prize is said to be 'ironic', but not actually 'wrong'. This passage is typical of laureates' Nobel humour in that humour is used, not to challenge and confront, but to avoid the potential difficulties built into the conflicting patterns of Nobel discourse.

Let us now turn to an example of humour produced by a non-laureate.

'Christopher Columbus'

> Scientific research has old traditions. Throughout the ages, man has striven to gain new knowledge, searched for new paths to follow. To many people, Christopher Columbus is an early and worthy exponent of this tradition. When he set off for America, he didn't know where he was going. When he reached that continent, he didn't know where he was. And safely back in Europe again, he didn't know where he had been. And as if this wasn't enough, he did not even travel at his own expense!
>
> This is very often the dilemma in which science finds itself. (*Les Prix Nobel*, 1979, p. 43)

This is the opening of the banquet speech delivered by the representative of the students of Stockholm. The first three sentences seem to be entirely serious, and no explicit indication is furnished at any stage that the passage is not intended to be taken literally. However, the account given of Columbus's explorations seems to me to be recognizably humorous. On a literal reading of this joke, Columbus appears to be subject to strong criticism. The underlying contrast structure of the joke seems to be that between ignorance and knowledge: Columbus was pursuing knowledge, but ended up in a state of ignorance. In the introduction to the joke, he is depicted as representing the tradition of scientific research, and in the following paragraph his dilemma is said to be the dilemma of science itself. Thus on a literal reading,

it appears that the student representative, in remarks addressed directly to the laureates, is proposing a general criticism of science or is at least drawing attention to certain limitations of the enterprise of scientific research. Needless to say, criticism of science or of the laureates is not typical of student representatives' discourse at the Nobel ceremonies. The normal pattern is that, along with all the other non-laureates, they pay profound homage to the laureates' achievements and to the attainments of science. On a literal reading, this passage contravenes normal expectations.

However, if I am right in suggesting that 'Christopher Columbus' is clearly humorous, a literal reading is prohibited. The joke is apparently critical of and disrespectful towards science, but we are instructed by its humorous form not to take these criticisms entirely seriously. I suggest that the joke is a temporary pretence of criticism that is reinterpreted subsequently and used as the basis for a conventional allocation of praise to science and scientists. The speech continues:

> Often, scientific progress has been the result of less specific basic reasearch. At the same time, it is difficult to combine free and independent research with the demands that may be placed upon this activity by providers of research funds . . . The freedom of the scientist is being curtailed in many parts of the world. If Columbus had been fitted out for a voyage to Cyprus by his patroness, probably not even he would have reached North America! . . . In a democratic society, free and independent research will always benefit all mankind. (*Les Prix Nobel*, 1979, p. 43)

In the course of this serious passage, the student representative proceeds to tell her audience how she interprets the Columbus joke. She draws an analogue between Columbus's wanderings and the unpredictable explorations of free and independent basic research. Columbus is depicted as having been successful in discovering America, despite his initial errors, because he was free from direct external control. It follows that science, similarly, should be left free to follow its own objectives, even though outsiders may be unable to understand scientists' conclusions. If scientists are not subject to outside constraint it can be guaranteed that, like Columbus, they will benefit all mankind.

In this passage, then, the apparent criticism of science implicit in the joke is transformed into a glowing compliment. The apparently misguided wanderings of Columbus and of scientific research are now seen to be an essential prerequisite for fundamental advances in understanding and in human welfare. Thus the student representative ensures that the meaning of the Columbus joke does not remain equivocal for long. Like the laureate in 'the Nobel prescription', who immediately transforms his playful self-denial into a serious return compliment to Alfred Nobel, she quickly makes it clear

that the joke was only a pretence of criticism. By formulating that criticism as a joke, she avoided any possibility of being seen as seriously infringing the normal patterns of Nobel discourse. Although her apparent criticism of the science laureates was at no stage 'to be taken seriously', her subsequent gloss re-presents the Columbus joke as having been an expression of praise 'all along'. Columbus, and by analogue scientists and the laureates, are shown to be Protean figures of knowledge and beneficence. Through this subsequent interpretative work, the student representative re-establishes her unambiguous conformity to the requirements of Nobel discourse.

At the banquet, the student representative briefly adopts the pattern of alternative discourse that is recurrent within the Nobel ceremony. Allusively, through the figure of Columbus, she represents scientists collectively as confused, ignorant and expensive. In so doing, she makes visible the secondary pattern hidden in the ceremonial social structure. But she is careful to express this potentially dangerous idea in humorous form. Her humour, like all humour at the Nobel ceremonies, necessarily focuses on the attribution of credit for cultural achievements. For this topic is the overriding concern of Nobel discourse, and the speech of all participants is required to deal exclusively with cultural accomplishment and the bestowal of appropriate reward. Because her remarks are humorous, they have to deviate in some way from the standard pattern of Nobel discourse, and they do so, like all Nobel humour, by endorsing the pattern already implicit in much of what laureates themselves say. Within the Nobel ceremony, as within any highly structured situation, humour is inevitably restricted in this way. Within formalized social contexts, any appreciable departure from recurrent forms and their central focus would not be treated as humour, but as a serious misdemeanor or breach of etiquette. Thus in the Nobel setting, neither laureates nor non-laureates can make any significant use of humour which is not linked to the joke in the social structure.

Although humour within the formal context of the Nobel ceremonies is closely linked to the structural joke, and although it relies on the contradictory possibilities implicit in the alternative pattern of discourse, Nobel humour never challenges the dominant pattern. It is always used, as in the two examples given above, in a way which sustains and reinforces that pattern. Thus Nobel humour is not imperatively called forth by structural incongruities that threaten to disrupt the existing structure. The very infrequency of humour, despite the existence of an evident joke in the structure, shows that participants can handle the difficulties of Nobel discourse, when they so wish, without recourse to humour (Mulkay, 1984). We must not reify the social structure and treat 'it' as an agent that calls particular responses into being. Rather, it seems that participants make use of the humorous possibilities of Nobel discourse when it suits their purposes. For example, it is surely no coincidence that Nobel humour is

especially likely to occur in the course of speeches at the ceremonial banquet. Participants presumably regard humour to be particularly appropriate at the banquet as a way of lightening the atmosphere and making the occasion more relaxed and enjoyable.

It seems that Nobel humour, despite its infrequency, is an organized and significant social phenomenon. Whether it appears during the more solemn parts of the ceremonial proceedings (Mulkay, 1987) or during the banquet, it is employed, as we have seen, as a protective device which enables speakers to deviate from the normal pattern of discourse without giving offence. Even during the banquet speeches, the humorous mode is employed to perform what is, in that setting, the 'serious' work of creating a little amusement and discursive variety out of the narrowly restricted interpretative resources that are available within a highly formalized social setting.

Hierarchy and humour

In this section we will move away from the extreme formality of ritual occasions, and examine the social sources and social consequences of humour in a setting which, although highly structured, is much less rigidly organized than are the Nobel ceremonies. The discussion will be based on Rose Laub Coser's study of the 'social functions of humor among the staff of a mental hospital' (1960, p. 81) in the USA. This study took place about ten years before Douglas's paper was published. Consequently, Coser makes no reference to Douglas's concept of a 'joke in the social structure'. Nevertheless, Coser's view of the social production of humour is very similar to that of Douglas; that is, they both argue that humour is generated by ambiguities in the social structure. However, Coser's conclusion about the social consequences of humour is closer to my own: namely, that in highly structured situations humour works to maintain the existing pattern.

> The meaning of humor, then, is to be detected primarily in the common concerns of the group, and can be understood only by examining its content and themes in the context of the network of role relationships among those who laugh together . . . attention will be given to humor as a means of mutual reassurance in an area of work that seems to be fraught with uncertainties, and to the group support it provides for facing ambiguities in role performance. (Coser, 1960, pp. 82, 83)

Coser does not speculate about the social production of humour in other kinds of social setting, and she does not herself distinguish between groups with different degrees of structural formality. Her concern is rather to provide a detailed empirical study of the place of humour in a series of

meetings among a specific group of psychiatric staff. The purpose of these meetings was to allow collective discussion of case material presented by junior staff members. The meetings were, Coser emphasizes, formally structured (1960, p. 82). Nevertheless, it is clear that neither the patterns of interaction, nor the form nor the content of the discourse, were pre-arranged to the same degree as in the Nobel ceremonies. The presentation and discussion of case material relating to individual mental patients were inevitably less predictable than the ceremonial circulation of praise. Thus social interaction during these staff meetings was more flexible, and probably more complex, than that at the Nobel ceremonies. There certainly appears to have been a greater variety of structural ambiguities. As we would expect, therefore, humour was more frequent and more varied than that generated within the more narrowly confined repertoire of Nobel discourse. Coser reports a total of 103 examples of humour that she noted in the course of twenty staff meetings. Although this rate of humorous production is not high, the average of five items per meeting clearly exceeds the three per ceremony observed during the much longer Nobel rituals.

Participants at the staff meetings occupied one of four social categories: namely, senior psychiatric staff, junior psychiatric staff, visiting psychiatrists and auxiliary staff. Coser maintains that the members of each of these categories faced structurally generated difficulties in their dealings with other participants, and that most of their humorous remarks were related to these difficulites. A major problem facing senior staff, for example, can be said to have arisen from their often being obliged to say two contradictory things at once to junior staff. This was necessary because the meetings were intended to help junior staff to learn from their mistakes and to become increasingly competent as psychiatrists yet, at the same time, to provide support so that they could continue to perform demanding tasks in the hospital for which they were not fully qualified.

Since the implementation of these aims fell upon the senior staff, the speech addressed by senior to junior staff at these meetings had to convey reprimand and criticism – so that junior staff might learn – along with support and reassurance, so that they might not become unduly discouraged. Coser does not report on whether it was possible for senior staff to accomplish this subtle task of interpretative reconciliation within the serious mode of discourse. We do not know, in other words, whether this discursive duality could be achieved only by means of humour. She maintains, however, that humour was 'especially suited for this task because it combines criticism with support, rejection with acceptance' (1960, p. 91).

Coser gives several examples of the use of humour by senior staff. In the following instance, a junior psychiatrist has just reported to the meeting that he has adopted the therapeutic technique of accepting a patient's delusion of having killed someone. Upon hearing this, the senior member presiding at

the session asks him in a humorous tone: 'When was it that you reassured her that she was a murderess?' (1960, p. 90). This remark is greeted with laughter from the group. But Coser regards it as doing the serious work of drawing the recipient's attention to what the senior speaker regards as a therapeutic error. The comment is taken as conveying to the junior member that delusions of this kind should not be endorsed by the therapist. By adopting the humorous mode, and by eliciting laughter from the group, the speaker is able to display to the assembled participants that the younger psychiatrist's action is incongruous, without engaging in open criticism. Subsequently, the same senior member of staff employs the humorous mode again, in relation to the same case. On this occasion he uses humour in a manner which combines correction with reassurance and with collective amusement at the incongruity of others' actions in similar circumstances: 'Let me mention that there were precedents of your method. There once was a patient who went around barking like a dog [laughter starts here] and the therapist barked back . . . [the rest of the sentence is drowned in laughter]' (Coser, 1960, p. 91). The use of humour to generate group laughter also operates, Coser suggests, to add collective weight to the implied criticism and to make the offending party less likely to ignore the advice being offered by the senior person.

Coser reports that about 40 per cent of the humorous remarks of senior staff are directed at junior staff, and that this humour regularly conveys a critical or corrective message along the lines illustrated above. When humour is used in this fashion at the meetings, it appears to be a means of coping with the implicit joke built into the routine discourse of senior staff in this social context. In other words, much of the humour of senior staff seems to be designed to enable them to point out their juniors' mistakes, whilst simultaneously requiring recipients to respond with laughter rather than with resentment or with self- justification. If Coser is right, humour is used to a considerable extent by senior staff to accomplish correction without confrontation.

Coser's analysis of the humour of visiting psychiatrists and junior staff is similar to that of senior staff's humour. Visiting psychiatrists are usually present at the meetings when they have been unable to deal with the problems of one of their own patients and when the patient has had to be taken into hospital. Thus, when they attend staff meetings, visiting psychiatrists speak as supposedly qualified, competent psychiatrists whose competence is, on this occasion, a matter of possible doubt. Coser shows that much of their humour focuses upon and resolves this discursive uncertainty. It does this, she suggests, by humorously asserting the speaker's professional skill at the expense of patients and of others associated with patients. In other words, visiting psychiatrists' humour treats patients and those related to them as 'scapegoats'. Whatever has gone wrong is, jocularly,

attributed to them. In Coser's view, the implicit message of this humour is that the visiting psychiatrists, despite any appearances to the contrary, are not responsible for what has happened. In short, this joke in the structure of discourse, this potential challenge to the established pattern of professional dominance, is persistently resolved in a manner which dissipates that challenge and sustains the visitors' appearance of professional competence at the staff meetings.

The structural joke with which junior staff have to deal at the meetings is perhaps the most blatant. In Coser's words: 'Junior members . . . find themselves in a contradictory status position. In relation to patients they act as practising psychiatrists. Actually, however, they are still in training; in relation to senior members, they are advanced graduate students' (1960, p. 92). Thus at meetings, junior staff have to speak as students about things they have done and said elsewhere when they were acting as 'practising psychiatrists'. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that much of their humour is self-deprecatory, taking the form of joking denials of the legitimacy of their actions and discourse in the hospital wards: 'At the meetings, the junior members must show their seniors that they are good psychiatrists and good students, but these two roles are paradoxical – and the paradox may seek its solution in self-aggressive humor' (1960, p. 93). In making fun of themselves when reporting to their seniors, junior staff represent their professional discourse and actions as something that should not be taken entirely seriously. Thus it seems that the joke in the social structure to which junior members have to respond is normally resolved to their disadvantage in the sense that, at the meetings, their own humour operates to confirm their formal subordination.

In this respect, junior staff's humour converges with that of senior staff. Whereas senior staff are particularly likely to direct their humour at junior staff, the latter are strongly inclined to focus their humour on themselves. Although four out of every ten jokes by senior members deal with the actions of one or more juniors at the meeting, Coser reports that not once in twenty meetings 'was a senior staff member present a target of a junior member's humor' (1960, p. 85). Similarly the ancillary staff, who occupied the lowest formal status at the meetings and all of whom were women, virtually never joked. Their contribution to the operation of the humorous mode was to laugh enthusiastically in support of their seniors' witticisms (1960, p. 85).

In our examination of humour at the Nobel ceremonies, we saw that it was never employed to challenge the dominant social pattern. The same is clearly true of the departmental meetings studied by Coser. Indeed, she stresses that humour is no different from any other interpretative resource in this kind of hierarchically structured setting; that is, it is employed strictly in accordance with participants' location in the formal hierarchy. In so far as these meetings are typical of other hierarchical settings, it appears that

humour is overwhelmingly directed down the hierarchy. (For a review of supporting evidence, see Wilson, 1979, chapter 12.) For not only do senior members focus their joking upon juniors, who in contrast tend to make fun of themselves or of outsiders, but senior staff are much more likely than their subordinates to make use of humour. 'Thus it would seem that not only the frequency with which humor occurs, but the direction which it takes, tends to meet the requirements of the authority structure. Humor tends to be directed against those who have no authority over the initiator' (Coser, 1960, p. 85).

In highly formalized ceremonial situations, the formality of the discourse ensures that humour is seldom, if ever, allowed to be disruptive. In somewhat less formal settings, the disruptive potential of humour may appear to be greater. For the interaction characteristic of such settings is more open-ended and involves a more variable pattern of discursive exchange. However, in situations where there is a formal hierarchy and where proceedings are guided by participants occupying positions of authority, it seems likely that humour will be employed routinely to support the authority structure, in a way which maintains the dominant social pattern. Humour will be steered towards what those in control regard as the proper concerns of the group, and will, on the whole, take the form of fairly standardized solutions to the recurrent interpretative problems generated by the structured discourse of the group.

In such hierarchically regulated situations, much of the humour that occurs can be said to be already available in the social structure, in the sense that participants seldom draw upon discourse external to the setting in order to create humorous incongruity. Humour is produced primarily out of ambiguities, contradictions and interpretative difficulties that occur regularly in the particular context. What we may call 'non-structural' humour, that is, humour that is not directly linked to the group's normal discourse, does take place occasionally in such settings, as Coser illustrates (1960, p. 88). But such playful departures from the customary concerns of the group are infrequent, and are available almost exclusively to those in positions of authority (1960, p. 86). In short, their exploitation is subject to control by those participants who are dominant within the serious domain. As Coser concludes: 'humor helps . . . to overcome the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the complex social structure, and thereby to contribute to its maintenance' (1960, p. 95).

In the light of the discussion so far, we might infer that, in order to find humour which operates to challenge and confront the dominant patterns of social life, we need only turn to situations where social organization is much less formal and where participants are less subject to direct structural constraints. We might expect that, in such relatively unstructured settings, people are not only more humorously playful, but also more humorously

critical and disruptive. In practice, it seems, this expectation is only partly fulfilled.

Humour in unstructured situations

In order to compare the social production of humour in ceremonial and hierarchically structured situations with the processes operating in less structured settings, let us return to Tannen's dinner party, with which we are already familiar from the discussion in chapter 4. One very obvious difference is that the rate of humorous production is so much higher at the dinner party. During this meal, the six participants uttered a total of 202 remarks that were taken by Tannen to be humorous or ironic (1984, p. 131). Her figures show that about 7 per cent of the total recorded utterances were recognizably humorous. We cannot conclude, of course, that all informal interaction involves such a high output of humour. A dinner party is likely to be exceptional in this respect. Nevertheless, the contrast with our two previous examples is dramatic. Moreover, it seems clear from Tannen's account that this high level of humorous production was made possible by the relative informality of the occasion. In other words, it was possible because there was no pre-established agenda, no formal pattern of interaction, and no specific, serious objective to be attained. Accordingly, participants were able to enter the humorous mode at will, in pursuit of any potential interpretative reversal that became available.

We have seen earlier in this chapter that the humour occurring in structured contexts tends to be applied: that is, it merges with the dominant patterns of serious discourse and contributes significantly to participants' serious interaction. In informal settings, such as Tannen's dinner party, there tends to be much more pure humour, which seems to be generated for its own sake and makes no direct contribution to serious interactional work. The pursuit of pure humour is more prominent in informal settings because there are few direct structural constraints on participants' discourse.

At the dinner party, the only two identifiable roles in operation seem to have been those of 'host' and 'guest'. The formal requirements of these roles are relatively vague within the social milieu of middle-class American society inhabited by Tannen and her friends. There is, therefore, much more room for individual variation in conduct in such a setting than there is at the Nobel ceremonies or at the hierarchically organized staff meetings. Nevertheless, even an informal dinner party requires a certain minimum of structured interaction and discourse. Here this residual social structure consists mainly of interchange between the host and his or her guests. As we would expect, some of the humour observed by Tannen appears to have grown out of this

interchange and, in particular, out of interactional difficulties experienced by the host.

Tannen reports that the host, Steve, persistently adopted the humorous mode when he was speaking as host. For example, sometimes he 'ordered' his guests to do things in a 'clipped, tough guy manner' whilst at other times he assumed a mock Jewish accent and, in an obviously exaggerated fashion, displayed an abject concern to cater for their every need (Tannen, 1984, pp. 132–6). Tannen summarizes his behaviour: 'In addition to affecting exaggerated hosting style, Steve stylizes the bossiness that his host role entails' (1984, p. 133). It seems likely that this use of humour is linked to a basic contradiction in the pattern of discourse required of the host in such a setting. This contradiction resembles that experienced by the senior psychiatrists studied by Coser. For the host must maintain a minimal level of control over the conduct of his guests in accordance with his own conception of how the meal should proceed, whilst appearing not to dominate them but rather to be entirely responsive to *their* wishes. The contradiction facing the host is essentially that between dominance, or what Tannen calls 'bossiness', and subjection.

If we accept that this interactional problem is built into the structure of informal dinner parties, Steve's use of the humorous mode can be seen to provide a reasonably effective solution. For it enables him constantly to influence what his guests say and do during the dinner without seeming, seriously, to be interfering with their inclinations. By acting the role of 'host' in a humorous, and frequently self-mocking, fashion Steve can exercise a degree of control over his guests whilst appearing to be, or at least being able to claim to be, merely playing the fool and doing nothing serious at all. His complaints about the tape recorder and the bottle of salad dressing that were discussed in chapter 4 clearly illustrate this use of humour. On this occasion, at least one of the guests was not convinced by Steve's humorous 'performance' and maintained that Steve was really angry at the guests' refusal to comply with his wishes. Steve's use of the humorous mode, however, enabled him to insist that he was 'just picking up on a fleeting impression he got and exaggerating it for comic effect' (see pp. 69–71). Whatever Steve's motives, it is clear from Tannen's text that his regular use of humour during the dinner party made it possible for him to direct the proceedings more than any other participant, yet to do so in a way which fostered amusement and which was accepted, on the whole, as an expression of good fellowship (Tannen, 1984, pp. 132–6).

It is clear, then, that some of the humour occurring at Tannen's dinner party was structurally generated; that is, it arose out of attempts to deal with contradictions that are implicit in the patterns of discourse required on such occasions. Although the solutions devised by Steve were undoubtedly idiosyncratic in certain respects, they originated in an interpretative diffi-

culty that is structural in the sense that it is present in the basic forms of discourse routinely adopted by participants at informal dinner parties of this kind. However, it is important to note that the great majority of humorous utterances produced during the dinner party appear to have been unrelated to this structural feature or to any formal requirements of the specific situation. The guests, in particular, appear to have been relatively free of formal constraints and of structural contradictions. As a result, because neither the form nor the content of their discourse were prescribed in advance, they were able to create a great deal of diverse humour out of the vagaries of unstructured personal interaction.

This relative lack of formal constraints in unstructured situations means that participants can draw freely upon standardized comic resources. It also means that humour can become more inventive, fantastic, and – as we all know – on some occasions, 'plain silly'. We have already examined 'the Pope's nose', 'smoking after sex', and the spontaneous joke about the absence of misunderstandings, which illustrate how participants at the dinner party were able to engage in various forms of pure humour (see chapter 4). Humour of this kind appears to have no serious interactional consequences nor to grow out of patterns of discourse required by the occasion. To take another example provided by Tannen, at one point in the dinner party David spoke about a fictitious organization that he and his friends had invented, called NORCLOD (Northern California Lovers of the Deaf). This fantasy generated much amusement, and the humorous possibilities initiated by David were taken up and elaborated by other guests, as in the following fragment:

David: u:m . . . and . . . um the way we were gonna have the uh the officers of the organization the higher up you go . . . the more hearing people there would be and then the . . . the . . . the: chairperson of the organization was gonna be a hearing person.
Deborah: That didn't know sign language.
David: That didn't . . . Yeah. That didn't know sign language.
(laughter)

(Tannen, 1984, p. 137)

Most of the humour at the dinner party was of this kind; that is, it was unconnected with any specific patterns of discourse required of participants as host or guest. It makes no sense to treat such humorous make-believe as a response to contradictions in the social structure.

If Tannen's dinner party is representative of other relatively unstructured contexts, we can conclude that the less structured the social situation, the less frequently will humour be generated by jokes in the social structure. Formulated in this way, my conclusion may appear self-evident. For it seems obvious that, where social structure is at a minimum, there will be few

or no structural jokes present to set humour in motion. However, this idea that humour varies inversely with the degree of structural formality was not obvious to Douglas, nor to other social analysts of humour. It has, perhaps, only come to appear self-evident as a result of the detailed comparison of specific cases that has been presented in this chapter. Moreover, we have also observed that the level of humorous production may be much higher in unstructured settings. If this is generally the case, and if levels of humorous output are lower in formally structured contexts, it follows that Douglas's concentration on social structure as the source of humour was rather misleading. For it seems likely that much, perhaps most, non-professional humour will be generated in circumstances where structural constraints are weak and indirect. (Professional humour will be considered in the next chapter.)

Douglas maintained that the 'one social condition necessary for a joke to be enjoyed is that the social group in which it is received should develop the formal characteristics of a 'told' joke . . . If there is no joke in the social structure, no other joking can appear' (1975, p. 98). This claim does seem to apply to formally structured groupings. But in those relatively unstructured settings where humour occurs much more frequently and where the humorous mode is much more prominent, structural factors appear to be less relevant. In such settings, humour is not only too frequent, but also too variable, idiosyncratic, wide-ranging, and sometimes too fantastical, to be explained solely by reference to structural contradictions. Thus, it was only when we came to examine the informal setting of Tannen's dinner party that a wide range of humorous forms, varying from standardized jokes to witty remarks and extended humorous fictions, began to appear. Highly structured situations restrict and confine humour, both in scope and quantity. Humour blossoms, it seems, when the course of social interaction is neither prescribed by convention nor regulated from above. I suggest, therefore, that most informal humour has its origin, not in structurally pre-established contradictions, but in creative interpretative work that is possible in situations where participants are relatively free from structural constraint.

Humour and structural critique

One important implication of Douglas's original idea about humour and social structure was that humour would necessarily tend to challenge and disrupt the dominant patterns of social life. We have not found this to be so in the case of humour in structured situations. It seems that when humour is located within a context of formal interaction, participants' inclination and ability to employ it in a disruptive manner is severely limited. We might expect, therefore, that humour produced in unstructured contexts, in the

course of unregulated interaction, would tend to be more critical of the dominant patterns of social life. This may well be so under certain circumstances. There can be no doubt, for example, that when presidents run into trouble or when prime ministers become unpopular, there is often a surge of informal humour in which the offending parties are ridiculed mercilessly. But on the whole, I suggest, the humour that is produced in unstructured situations is predominantly mild and playful rather than critical and subversive. Let me substantiate this claim.

There is one particular form of humour that is produced in a situation where the direct impact of social relationships is at an absolute minimum – namely, that of humorous graffiti. Many, perhaps most, graffiti are produced by individuals acting in isolation or, at least, in very small groups. This is obviously so of those found in toilets (Bruner and Kelso, 1980), but is probably also the case with other kinds of graffiti. On this assumption, we can take graffiti to represent a form of humour that occurs in a context where producers, and indeed recipients, are not directly involved in a social structure.

Graffiti are, by their very nature, widely dispersed geographically and, for that reason, rather difficult to collect. On the other hand, they are written down in public or semi-public settings and are potentially available for collection. Fortunately, since 1979 Nigel Rees has amassed and published five collections of graffiti (so far) from around the world, but particularly from English-speaking countries (Rees, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1986). These volumes contain over six hundred pages of humorous material. I do not intend to offer a detailed analysis of this mass of data, but rather, to make one major point based on a careful examination of these items: namely, that there are remarkably few which seem to express any significant challenge to the dominant forms of social life. The vast majority seem to me to resemble closely the kind of playful creation of incongruity that pervaded Tannen's dinner party. The following examples are, in this respect, typical:

1 Give masochists a fair crack of the whip. (Rees, 1979)
2 Keep incest in the family. (Rees, 1980)
3 To do is to be – Rousseau.
To be is to do – Sartre.
Dobedobedo – Sinatra. (Rees, 1979)

These humorous quips differ from ordinary informal humour in being more epigrammatic and self-contained. But they resemble such humour in that they create a playfully humorous reversal of meanings out of commonly available cultural resources. I describe them as 'playful' because, in my view, it requires a wilfully perverse reading of these texts to interpret numbers 1 and 2 as genuinely endorsing masochism and incest respectively, or number 3 as proposing any kind of serious point. It is, in fact, remarkably

difficult to discover graffiti in Rees's wide collection that seem to express a powerful rejection of society or of any of its major institutions. The three following examples seem to me to be as socially relevant as one can find:

4 Don't vote. The government will get in. (Rees, 1979)
5 Military intelligence is a contradiction in terms. (Rees, 1979)
6 Keep Britain tidy – kill a tourist. (Rees, 1979)

These items could be taken to convey a more serious message than the previous examples and to contain a more effective challenge to government, the military and tourism. It might well be that number 6 in particular, because it is both clever and unexpected, could briefly shock an unsuspecting tourist or bring a grim smile of satisfaction to the lips of long-suffering natives of one of Britain's cathedral towns. But do such humorous formulations amount to a challenge to or a confrontation with the established patterns of social life? I suggest that they do not, and cannot, for the following reasons.

In the first place, any serious message implicit within a humorous graffito is bound to remain uncertain as a result of the interpretative duality of the humorous mode. Self-contained humorous statements are inherently ambiguous. They play with meanings, and with the boundary between reality and unreality. Isolated fragments of humour, such as graffiti, can be made clearly relevant to structural issues only if they can be placed within a serious social context. But, for the great majority of graffiti, this is made impossible by the very nature of their production – that is, by their removal from any discernible context of social interaction. The separation of humour from any specific social location removes the interpretative context without which humour cannot be given serious meaning and cannot be used to exert an effective challenge to dominant social patterns. Any serious intent or import that may lie behind an ordinary graffito is heavily obscured by the anonymity of the speaker, the fragmentary nature of the discourse and the lack of a context within which to give it meaning. Unless we know who is speaking and why, and unless we can locate an utterance in some wider framework of discourse, the humorous epigram is doomed to remain inert except as a source of fleeting amusement.

It follows from this line of argument that graffiti will acquire serious significance only in so far as they can be linked, despite their anonymity, to specific social categories and to social confrontations that are operative in the realm of serious action. It is for this reason, I suggest, that anti- German graffiti were washed from the walls by the occupying troops after the invasion of Czechoslovakia at the start of the Second World War (Obrdlik, 1942). Similarly, it is for this reason that feminist graffiti have become distinctly more influential in recent years than other items in this genre. Their challenge to the existing structure of social relations has become

recognized as such because they have been incorporated into a wider programme of critical discourse and organized action. There is, for example, the by now famous graffito added to an advertisement for a well known make of car:

7 If this car was a lady it would get its bottom pinched.
If this lady was a car she would run him down!

It is not that this clever semantic reversal has an obvious and inherent serious message. Viewed as an isolated fragment of discourse, as are most graffiti, it is potentially amusing, but it need not necessarily be taken as a genuine expression of resentment about the relationships between women and men in our society. However, the visual version of this item has been reproduced in large numbers as a postcard and widely distributed by those with feminist commitments. It has also been included in a book entitled *Off the Wall: A Collection of Feminist Graffiti* (Bartlett, 1982). In this latter context we know that this graffito, and the others in the collection, are to be given a feminist, that is, a serious, interpretation as well as a humorous one. No longer are we dealing with an isolated, anonymous, possibly merely playful, comment. We are back in the world of structured social relationships. We are being addressed by a representative of an identifiable social category. The provision of this context has made it clear that these graffiti are being used to display, from a variety of perspectives, one of the most fundamental 'jokes' in the social structure of our society:

8 Every mother is a working mother.
9 Mummy, mummy, what's an orgasm?
I dunno, ask your father.
10 Behind every great woman there's a man – who tried to stop her.
11 When God created man she was only experimenting.
12 To be successful at anything a woman has to be twice as good as a man . . . luckily this is not difficult. (Bartlett, 1982)

The cumulative impact of this discourse is unequivocal. Its underlying serious message offers a clear challenge to one of the dominant patterns of our social world. However, this challenge has been made effective, not by leaving these unconnected speakers to operate alone beyond the margin of organized social life, but by bringing them together to speak as a collective female voice and by linking that voice's humour to the serious struggle of the women's movement within the established social structure.

One conclusion to emerge from this chapter is that much humour is directly linked to the social structure; but that even more is not. The humour that occurs in formal structures is closely linked to their inherent contradictions. Overwhelmingly, however, this humour is employed in accordance with the

requirements of the existing system, and in a way which supports that system. The lack of formal restraint that is characteristic of unstructured situations allows participants to be humorous more frequently and to be more humorously imaginative and fanciful. But this interpretative freedom in informal settings does not enable participants to use their humour to confront and contradict the dominant structure more effectively. For the less structured the social situation in which humour occurs, the more ambiguous does its message become and the more uncertain its interpretation. In completely unstructured situations, the only unambiguous characteristic of humorous discourse is that it is not part of the serious domain. Thus humour can be used effectively to perform serious work only within reasonably well defined social contexts. However, within such contexts, humour normally comes to be used to conserve the dominant pattern of social relationships. Humour *can* be used to challenge the existing pattern, as we saw in the case of the women's movement – but only when it is given meaning in relation to criticism and confrontation that is already under way within the serious realm. It is yet another 'paradox of the humorous mode' that, although semantically humour involves confrontation with and subversion of a dominant pattern, it is used most effectively for serious purposes mainly in structured situations where it works to maintain that pattern.