Gender and Humor

Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives

Edited by
Delia Chiaro and Raffaella Baccolini

Gender and Humor

"An interdisciplinary, international volume exploring the complex relationship between gender and humor and its attendant power dynamics is long overdue. This collection will be an invaluable resource to scholars and students in a variety of disciplines."

—*Joanna Gilbert, Alma College, USA*

In the mid-seventies, both gender studies and humor studies emerged as new disciplines, with scholars from various fields undertaking research in these areas. The first publications that emerged in the field of gender studies came out of disciplines such as philosophy, history, and literature, while early works in the area of humor studies initially concentrated on language, linguistics, and psychology. Since then, both fields have flourished, but largely independently. This book draws together and focuses the work of scholars from diverse disciplines on intersections of gender and humor, giving voice to approaches in disciplines such as film, television, literature, linguistics, translation studies, and popular culture.

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For Clarissa and Giacomo

"Men are from Earth, women are from Earth. Deal with it."
—*George Carlin*

"When your children are teenagers, it's important to have a dog so that someone in the house is happy to see you."
—*Nora Ephron*

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1 Humor
A Many Gendered Thing

Delia Chiaro and Raffaella Baccolini

It is commonly accepted today that, consciously or subconsciously, our gender affects a myriad of actions we carry out as part of our daily routines. It conditions the way we present ourselves, the way we interact with others, and the way we speak. Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of "situated knowledges"—the notion that whenever we receive or produce culture we do so from a particular, partial position—has long become a tenet of gender studies. Together with Adrienne Rich's (1985) "politics of location"—the recognition of the position we inhabit and from which we speak—they represent some of feminism's strong points. Initially considered as a proof of feminism's lack of objectivity, they have become the backbone of women's and gender studies. Women scholars have had the merit to take what, from the outside, looked like a weakness and transform it into a strength. But gender, like the notion of "woman," cannot be monolithic: the idea that gender alone in itself represents a homogeneous category has long been dismantled. The binary opposition between male and female genders has been deconstructed, for one, by the introduction of GLBT and queer studies. Likewise, Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performance has contributed to questioning the sex/gender binary. Nowadays sex, like gender, is also considered as a cultural construct and gender is performed regardless of the sex attributed to individuals. Gender conditions the most minute details of our lives, possibly more than our age, our social background, and our ethnicity, and, thus, it stands to reason that the way we "do" humor, the way we receive humor, and perhaps even our sense of humor may also, in some way, be accordingly gendered.

Yet humor is an extremely complex, slippery, and multifaceted concept. First and foremost humor is an emotion that can be summed up in that kind of positive feeling of glee, usually—but by no means exclusively—manifested through smiling or laughter in response to a stimulus we have found to be amusing. Furthermore, it is generally acknowledged that humorous stimuli, things that make us smile or laugh, whether visual, verbal, or situational, contain some kind of positive incongruity that will trigger a mirthful response (Chafe 2009). And laughter, inextricably linked to humor, may well be considered an evident factor of gender difference; the vocal folds of

females are, on average, shorter than those of males, and thus the sound of laughter—in particular the pitch—will tend to differ accordingly. However, the concept of averageness is clearly hypothetical, and allegedly average males and females will certainly be surrounded by numerous outliers whose modes of laughter will not concur with a theoretical baseline. In terms of averageness and regularity, the relationship between humor and gender and how they are reciprocally anchored remains fluid and somewhat taxing to pigeonhole into watertight categories.

In whatever form it may occur, however, humor does not arise in a vacuum; thus a central aspect of humor is its social function. In fact, humor can act as an ice breaker, as a bonding device, as a pacifier, as a distraction in moments of pain and anxiety. Equally humor can be used to attack others and therefore may also irritate, anger, hurt, and offend. Yet it can also act as a sensor. By expressing in jest what we might consider to be a controversial view to our interlocutors, we can test their opinion on the subject and withdraw, if necessary, without losing face with an "I was only joking" when we discover that they have different ideas from our own. Likewise, a glance at personal ads of the "lonely hearts" variety in online dating sites suggest that we tend to seek partners who have a "good" sense of humor, presumably rendering sense of humor a much sought after personality trait (see Kulick, ch. 6, and Martin, ch. 8, this volume). Thus, many questions arise from these first considerations: Do we all interact humorously in the same way, regardless of gender? Are male and female humor styles the same? Do we react with mirth to the same comic stimuli? And even if a physiological reaction such as laughter is not gender specific, do women laugh in the same way as men, for example, as loudly and as raucously, in all social contexts? By the same token, is it admissible for grown men to giggle, or would it undermine their masculinity? Again, is it acceptable for women to guffaw? From comedy on stage and screen to stand-up, what, if any, are the differences in the way women and men perform humor? And here we find one of the main leitmotivs present in this volume: the concept of performance—how natural is the way we laugh and the way we do humor, and how far has it become part of our gendered performance?

On the other hand, could it be that difference simply boils down to individuality? So far we have only scratched the surface by simply considering the perceptions of male and female, knowing full well that the notion of gender, as we mentioned previously, is anything but polarized, yet more likely to consist of a continuum in which boundaries blend and fuzziness reigns.

The studies in this volume address many of these issues from a wide variety of disciplines so that the concepts of humor and gender crosscut notions of the way they are constructed in writing, on stage, on screen, and in art forms, as well as in the conversations of everyday life. Divided into three parts, the book opens with six comprehensive and all-encompassing overviews of humor and gender from different perspectives

ranging from linguistics (Bing and Scheibman, ch. 2) to anthropology (Kulick, ch. 6) and stretching across both Eastern (Bouchetoux, ch. 7) and Western cultures (Gray, ch. 5; Davis, ch 3; Wagner-Lawlor, ch. 4). In contrast, the second part opens with an extensive overview of psychological research on gender differences in sense of humor (Martin, ch. 8), followed by three studies focused on humor and gender in conversation, firmly anchored within the tradition of conversational analysis (Coates, ch. 9; Holmes and Schnurr, ch. 10; Hui, ch 11). The third and final part of the collection is introduced by a discussion of visual humor produced by female designers for objects in the home (Klein, ch. 12), followed by a series of studies that explore the fluidity of both gender and ethnic identities and how these tend to clash and merge in the creation of humor (Lockyer, ch. 13; Finney, ch. 14; Gardaphé, ch. 15; Senzani, ch. 16; Maher, ch. 17; Emig, ch. 18; Del Negro, ch. 19). Nonetheless, there is much overflow among the contributions contained in these three parts as certain features arise repeatedly, albeit from diverse stances. Among the recurring themes that link the chapters are, first and foremost, those of gender and performance—often and especially in terms of body politics—and second, the concept of uncertainty, that of knowing and not knowing and issues regarding shared and unshared knowledge with respect to humorous discourse. A further aspect that emerges concerns the frequent inability to separate genders, or rather that, whereas on the one hand the notion of humor and gender can, at first sight, be completely polarized, on the other it can also become extremely blurred. Humor, it would appear, is a many gendered thing.

Janet Bing and **Joanne Scheibman** open this volume from a feminist perspective that challenges binary linguistic theories on humor while simultaneously engaging with the notion of the uncertainty of partial knowledge. Introducing conceptual blending theory, Bing and Scheibman argue that the indistinctness of humorous messages can contest the status quo. Challenging the canonical notion of verbal humor being made up of two separate scripts (see Raskin's [1985] Semantic Script Theory) that overlap and oppose each other beneath the disguise of a single script, they argue in favor of a model of blended spaces that are capable of subverting and creating utopias and dystopias. Furthermore, the amalgamation and sense of cognitive inclusion of conceptual blending is in sharp contrast with the dualistic opposition and overlap inherent to Semantic Script Theory and later to the General Theory of Verbal Humor (Attardo and Raskin 1991). Bing and Scheibman's concept of blended spaces is in line with the findings of **Jennifer Coates** and those of **Janet Holmes** and **Stephanie Schnurr** regarding how females tend to prefer collaborative humor. Thus, the sensitive blending of female support and collaboration through humor fits well with the idea of conceptual blending rather than the seemingly harsher idea of script oppositions.

Inescapably, humor is very much based on knowing and not knowing, or more bluntly, "getting" or "not getting" a joke, a pun, or more generally, the instance of humor in question. Regina Barreca (1991) famously reflects

on the ambiguity and double standards that exist in mixed-gender joke-telling situations. Are sexual jokes told by men in female company to be considered in terms of linguistic harassment? Should women laugh at sexually explicit humor articulated by men, or should they coyly refrain? Damned if they laugh (that is, overtly acknowledging their familiarity with explicit sexual know-how and running the risk of being labeled as being sexually available—a nonstarter for females) and equally damned if they don't (that is, having no sense of humor and therefore being straitlaced), Barreca argues that women are in a no-win situation as far as humor is concerned. Yet **Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor** seems to overturn this argument by demonstrating how this very indistinctness of humorous discourse can be used to women's advantage. Picking up on this double-faceted aspect of humor and the perception of what Susan Sontag labeled the "partial knowledge" connected to it, Wagner-Lawlor explores the way in which three novels expose the scandal of women's subjectivity through the uncertainty of the seriousness of the writers. Undoubtedly, the ambiguity inherent to irony present in the imaginary societies described in *Herland*, *The Female Man*, and *The Gate to Women's Country* gives extra force to the underlying purpose of the novels, namely, to provide harsh criticisms of traditional social hierarchies. Suffice it to think of the effect of Jonathan Swift's famous essay, *A Modest Proposal.*

This same notion of knowing and not knowing is also exploited in the movie *Little Miss Sunshine*, as discussed by **Gail Finney**—a film in which black comedy hides a number of gender-linked family traumas. As Finney points out, the portrayal of the excesses and exaggerations of a dysfunctional family allows the public to come to grips with a series of family disturbances in a more successful way than would have been possible had the director adopted a more dramatic form. Behind the partial knowledge that provokes laughter lies a bleaker reality that the film is challenging through humor.

From the seriously anchored fictional humor reported by Wagner-Lawlor and Finney, **Rod A. Martin** takes us back to the reality of everyday life with his extensive overview of psychological research on gender differences in sense of humor in which he underscores the complexity of researching this many-sided concept coupled with the characteristically wide variability that exists among individuals within each gender. Reporting numerous studies that have investigated various aspects of gender and sense of humor through different methodologies or experimental designs, Martin takes care to point out that there are possibly more similarities between the sexes than differences, a conclusion also reached by Helga Kotthoff (2006b: 2) in a review of gender variances in Western culture. Moreover, based on scientific evidence, Martin suggests that we should tread lightly when drawing conclusions, because different patterns could well be found in people from different cultural and ethnic groups, ages, sexual preferences, and social classes. And yet the prevailing view that women's sense of humor is generally inferior to

that of men's (see Wickberg 1998) can certainly be refuted. This argument is further backed up by **Jessica Milner Davis,** who highlights the fact that over the centuries theatrical farce has been enjoyed by both sexes and that there is no evidence that women have ever been excluded from participating as part of the audience. And on the subject of reception, **Giovanna Del Negro** explores the whys and wherefores of the huge gay following of female comic and icon Judy Tenuta.

However, appreciating or not appreciating humor is only part of the story. People also "do" humor, and more recent research on humor and gender has moved away from an emphasis on enjoyment or non-enjoyment of humorous stimuli, such as jokes and cartoons, to studies of the way men and women use humor in everyday life.

Three contributions in this book explore women doing humor in everyday situations. **Jennifer Coates** looks at humorous talk occurring in all-female and all-male friendship groups. Working from the framework of linguistics, and especially within the tradition of conversational analysis, her findings, based on naturally occurring conversations, support evidence previously found in psychology research that men seem to prefer more formulaic joking (Crawford and Gressley 1991), whereas women prefer to share funny stories and anecdotes to create solidarity (see also Martin, ch. 8, this volume). Evidence of women crafting harmony through the use of humor also emerges from the study of linguists **Janet Holmes** and **Stephanie Schnurr.** Their examination of humor in the workplace, based on quantitative data collected from workplace meetings, demonstrates the diverse ways in which humor is used as a resource by women, among other things, to mitigate and soften conflict. Here, too, the myth that women do not have a sense of humor is repudiated as they are seen able to use different kinds of humor strategies as a form of empowerment. **Jon Hui**'s research on how humor works within the asymmetrical power relationships existing in a Chinese family is also based on traditional conversation analysis methodology. Needless to say, gender is a significant factor in the Chinese family's power hierarchy, thus affecting who uses humor, with whom, and how.

As well as doing humor on an everyday basis, we also receive it. If we consider the joke form, for example, as a "genre" on the interface of conversational humor and performance, we clearly see that underdog jokes, those in which we laugh *at* a victim, not only involve dimwits and the avaricious, but alongside a long series of peripheral figures, such as Blacks, Latinos, and the diversely abled (for a full discussion, see Davies 1998), we find jokes replete with women and homosexuals acting as butts. Fat women, ugly women, old women, promiscuous women, sexually naïve women, cuckolded women, mothers-in-law, feminists, and blonds—they all seem to work well as the protagonists of underdog jokes (see Chiaro 2005a). Furthermore, it is also worth considering that whereas straight males inhabiting jokes are often connoted by their professions (e.g., medics and politicians) or by their ethnicity, females are marked by their physicality or sexuality,

as in US blonde jokes, transformed into Essex girls in the UK (although, to be fair, the professions of teachers and nurses do occur). As for homosexual males, in jokes they appear as sex-starved individuals to be avoided by full-blooded males, whereas lesbians, like feminists (and women in general?), have no sense of humor. On this subject, **Don Kulick** provides a fascinating argument comparing "humorless lesbians" with other groups depicted and perceived as being humorless, ranging from the Germans in general to present-day Muslims as depicted in the media. How intriguing that, according to the common imaginary, the male "queen" is seen as the embodiment of gaiety and wit, and the lesbian as dour and humorless. In a similar vein, **Rainer Emig** explores contemporary queer comedy on stage, film, and TV, classifying the homosexual as a male-deviant figure of fun and calling for more truly subversive comedy that tackles common perceptions of masculine, feminine, gay, and straight. According to Emig, there is a need to refute the many clichéd stereotypes attached to gendered humor. More destabilizing than the limp-wristed stereotype of the humorous queen is a stand-up comedian such as Eddie Izzard, who, although a cross-dresser, performs as a straight male, thereby surprising the public and making a gendered statement. And once again we find ourselves in the knowing/not knowing territory that is essential to humor. The performances of Judy Tenuta, discussed by **Giovanna P. Del Negro**, also challenge gender stereotypes, not only through the comic's excessive stage costumes and offbeat personae, but also through her ability to use her vocal chords to the full by exploiting their deeper masculine possibilities as well as the shriller options, resulting in a style of disturbing transgression that recalls the voice of singer Annie Lennox. This larger-than-life character totally dismantles gender norms in her show—a mix of vaudeville, burlesque, slapstick, and screwball—and brings forth the suppressed anger of women stuck in alien roles. Tenuta contradicts other gendered expectations, too. First, she is a minute, slightly built woman and not the typically larger-than-life overweight comedienne, and second, she makes no use of the self-effacing humor that is so typical in female stand-up. And, as pointed out by Del Negro, Judy Tenuta overrides her male targets, often pulverizing them into wimps. Tenuta is never the object of humor; she is, instead, all subject.

Jessica Milner Davis's discussion of farce sees men and women very much on an equal footing. Although stereotypes such as the mother-in-law and the under/over-sexed wife are indeed stock characters in farce, Davis shows that these women are often strong characters who are not necessarily to be laughed at. Davis's overview of female stock characters in farce is very much in agreement with **François Bouchetoux**'s outline of Japanese humor, especially in his discussion of *kyōgen*—the wild words of Japanese theater—in which it is not at all unusual for the female character to overpower the male.

The strength of routine female characters is also highlighted by **Frances Gray** in her discussion of low-budget comedies produced in the UK in the wake of World War II. Gray convincingly argues that the female characters,

such as the "busty blonde" in the low-budget *Carry On* series, played by Barbara Windsor, was not simply there to satisfy the male gaze. Windsor successfully ironized a number of female roles, as did the stereotypically large woman played by Hattie Jacques, who, according to Gray, was never to be laughed at as she was very much in charge of her own sexuality, rendering her feeble and skinny counterpart (and useless lover) Kenneth Williams as the butt of the joke. British humor cannot escape from marking itself in terms of class. Whereas Gray explores the comedic film characters of postwar Britain, a moment in time when the world was an oyster for working-class women (free education for all, the pill, sexual equality, etc.), **Sharon Lockyer** provides us with a glimpse of today's women as depicted in televised comedic sketches. In Catherine Tate's sketches, in which she enacts "chav" Lauren Cooper and older woman "Nan" Taylor, the sad reality of an impoverished Britain is inescapable to the viewer. Once more, Sontag's hide-and-seek notion of knowing and not knowing emerges; behind the comic mask of a young girl who chooses pregnancy as a career option and a cantankerous, old, unruly woman relegated to the care of strangers lies the bleak reality of underprivileged women in Britain today.

Several contributors focus on the notion of the body and humor. As we have seen, Frances Gray discusses the busty blondes of the *Carry On* series of films, and emphasizes the role of the large woman compared to the skinny male, a trope from well-known British "saucy" seaside postcard tradition, while Kulick discusses the funny/unfunny overweight lesbian at length. Again Wagner-Lawlor picks up on the ambiguity of the women inhabiting the utopias of the novels she examines. If men are the baseline from which women extend and perform difference, in absence of female performance a series of unknowns will arise regarding women's bodies. Emig's discussion of the misperceptions surrounding comic Eddie Izzard also brings elements of the unknown into question. Is he gay? Is he straight? If he dresses like a woman, why doesn't he talk and act like one? Why is Izzard's humor not female? Most importantly, do these questions actually matter? Unlike so many female stand-ups, cross-dressed Izzard unexpectedly does not act the disruptive part of the screaming queen—he simply performs as a male. **Sheri Klein**'s overview of visual puns inherent to humorous household objects created by female designers and her discussion of a need for us to be surrounded by objects and things that amuse and titillate us also tags on to the concept of ambiguity. Is this a corkscrew or a doll? Is this a salt cellar or a toy rabbit (see the Alessi corkscrew)?

Although several chapters focus on unruly women, especially old unruly women (see Davies, Lockyer, and Maher), **Alessandra Senzani,** in her essay on the hyphenated cinema of Monica Pellizzari, compares different generations of working-class Italian Australian women and their relationships with their bodies. Through the use of grotesque humor, Pellizzari overturns traditional definitions of feminine identity, but above all, she challenges typically "male-gaze"-oriented cinematic language while playing with a more

distorted female gaze. Similar grotesque humor is also exploited by contemporary Italian writers to comment critically on relationships between the sexes, as described by **Brigid Maher**. Rosa Cappiello's *Paese fortunato*, for example, and its bi-cultural protagonist's relationship with her body are reminiscent of Pellizzari's cinema. Maher explores how this and two other Italian pulp novels fare in their English translations. Bakhtinian-style comedies of excess, preoccupied with the body and that continually underscore bodily functions, run the risk of being censored in translation and thereby losing their subversiveness.

No volume on gender and humor would be complete without a discussion of masculinity and humor. **Fred Gardaphé** explores the construction of Italian masculinity and how, through the process of emigration, it clashed and later co-existed alongside US values of manliness. With regard to hyphenated cinema, Gardaphé explores so-called ball-busting humor and the way this Italian American male verbal banter sets out to test virility with examples from Martin Scorsese's film *Goodfellas*. Significantly, laughter and masculinity are central to *Goodfellas*, not only in the challenging of masculinity through humorous offense, but also through the presence of hysterical laughter in combination with ferociously violent acts.

Finally, although all humorous behavior is inherently subversive, and both women and men are destabilizing when performing in the comic mode, it has to be said that in the male, such behavior is unmarked and that unruliness is marked in the female alone. In fact, it would appear that compared to men, women as perpetrators of humor appear to be more subversive and unruly—in fact, from Mae West to Joan Rivers, in order to be funny, women tend to perform in a way that goes against the status quo of female behavior (see Barreca 1991; Gray 1994; Finney 1994; Walker 1998; Chiaro 2005a). Furthermore, whereas the male comic portrays something of the innocent child in his facial features and demeanor—consider the childish expressions of Stan Laurel, Charlie Chaplin, and Mr. Bean (for further discussion see Sontag [n.d.]), the female comic is rarely childlike, let alone pretty or beautiful (Chiaro 2005a) because in order to be funny she needs to let go of a number of gendered restraints. Performing humor involves the donning of the comic mask, which Aristotle defined as being an ugly mask. Unattractiveness not only goes against the expected notion of femininity, but also challenges an unwritten law of female demeanor that includes the goals of beauty and perfection. Thus, many women learn early on that being funny and being attractive are mutually exclusive; consequently it is not unusual to find that female stand-up comedians engage in self-deprecating humor. Comedians such as Phyllis Diller and Jo Brand typically draw attention to their physical shortcomings in order to get a laugh. Interestingly, many male comics also dispense with their attractiveness—Jim Carrey and Rowan Atkinson, for example, typically adopt a distorted gait and unlikely facial expressions when performing in comic mode—yet like their female counterparts, none of these comedians are intrinsically unattractive. Thus, males,

too, have to don the ugly comic mask when wanting to amuse, but the essential difference between men and women lies, of course, in the dispensation of canons of beauty. Suffice it to think of the many sassy, wisecracking "best friends" on screen playing supporting characters who, by embracing a comic style, do not seem quite as pretty and attractive as the leading lady. These women are typically loquacious and witty, yet it is the (seemingly) prettier, verbally more restrained lead who inevitably comes up trumps by getting her man.

According to Barreca, in the common imaginary, "Good Girls" once smiled rather than laughed, and sense of humor was a trait supposedly reserved for men, alongside intelligence, ambition, and economic acumen. It was the "Bad Girls" who engaged in behavior normally reserved for men, such as laughing loudly as well as telling and getting racy jokes. As the contributions in this volume have shown, nowadays boundaries have become fuzzier and gendered behaviors are no longer so clear cut and as classifiable as they once may have been. Traditionally men have joked about women and women have joked about men—so far, so good. But hopefully, in time, more women will move away from their predilection for the use of self-deprecating humor and be able to laugh out loud and generally behave in a boisterous humorous manner without this seeming marked. Nonetheless, for the time being, we can at least begin to say with conviction that humor is indeed a many gendered thing.

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Part I

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2   Blended Spaces as Subversive Feminist Humor

Janet Bing and Joanne Scheibman

1.   INTRODUCTION

> The children of Israel wandered around the desert for forty years.
> Even in Biblical times men wouldn't ask for directions.

The fact that this joke may amuse some listeners and not others is uncontroversial. However, whether or not jokes convey any sort of bona fide message is still being discussed and debated (see Attardo 1994: ch. 9). In this chapter, we assume, based on arguments from Zhao (1988), Oring (2003), and Barcelona (2003), as well as the analyses offered here, that jokes such as the one above do convey *joke thoughts*. A number of humor scholars, including Douglas (1975), Green (1977), Hay (2000), and Crawford (2003), have also claimed that jokes and other forms of humor have the potential to communicate messages indirectly in cases where a more direct communication would have been difficult, particularly in situations when there is a power differential. Messages sent humorously always have deniability ("It was just a joke!"). As Kuipers (2006a: 9) notes, "The polysemy of a joke makes it impossible to say with certainty which function it fulfills or what the joke teller meant: humor is by definition an ambivalent form of communication."

Some humorous messages can challenge the status quo, and thus are potentially subversive in the sense that they reframe an existing situation or stereotype to suggest an alternative. In this chapter we discuss a type of potentially subversive humor that results from *conceptual blending*, also referred to as *blends* or *blended spaces*. Conceptual blending is a theoretical framework that models how language users integrate information from different domains of knowledge to form novel concepts as they produce and interpret discourse (Coulson and Oakley 2000: 176). With respect to the humor discussed here, the novel or "unreal" (Raskin 1985: 111) concepts produced in the blends provide feminist alternatives to more traditional cultural interpretations.

We begin by discussing some of Oring's ideas about joke thoughts and then discuss mental spaces, conceptual blending, and the type of humor that results

from blended mental spaces. We compare blending to script opposition and suggest that some jokes that seem to be simple script opposition or script overlap (Raskin 1985: 104–17) involve not only generic spaces (representations of overlap), but also the creation of new blended spaces. We then show how humor that results from blending can be subversive because of the creation of new possible worlds—situations that suggest alternatives to the status quo.

2.   JOKE THOUGHTS

In his book *Engaging Humor*, Elliott Oring (2003) suggests that Freud's book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* contains a number of useful hypotheses for the analysis of humor. Oring (2003: 28) notes, "If one hypothesis among them [Freud's ideas] is basic, it is that underlying every joke is a thought." Oring's (2003: 29) first approximation of a joke thought is, "a joke thought might be characterized as a proposition: a statement with a subject and predicate contained within the joke that is basically sensible and commensurate with our conceptions and experiences of the world." He later modifies this definition by adding that, in many jokes, the thought must be inferred, and inferred from the entire joke and not just parts of it. Oring (2003: 37) discusses how different types of jokes communicate different thoughts to different people.

In response to Raskin's (1985) claim that jokes and other types of humor violate Grice's (1989) maxims of cooperation and thus are a non-bona fide mode of communication, Oring (2003: 95) comments, "The implication of this view is that jokes should lack communicative import, since no communicative effect should follow from a violation of the cooperative principle." Like Zhao (1988), Oring rejects a characterization of jokes as non-bona fide communication, and provides ample evidence that what he calls joke glosses communicate messages.[1] In other discussions Raskin (1985, 1992) and Attardo (1993, 1994) also suggest that bona fide (BF) communication can be a combination of BF and non-bona fide communication. Attardo (1994: ch. 9–10) provides an explanation of how jokes can violate Grice's maxims and still convey joke thoughts.

Messages conveyed by humor often have social significance. Both Wolf (2002: 39) and Ziv (1984: 34–38) describe how humor can help reinforce group norms; Ziv notes that humor can also act as a social corrective, and Attardo (1994: 322–29) summarizes other social functions of humor. Oring (2003: 92) notes, "The joke glosses I have recorded have been used to advocate a course of action; disengage from answering a delicate question; question authority; support a friend; ridicule a behavior; criticize a point of view on policy decision; and illustrate any number of scientific and sociological principles." Our focus in this chapter is on one particular function: how humor created through conceptual blending challenges and subverts existing norms that marginalize some groups.

3.   CONCEPTUAL BLENDING

Conceptual blending is one aspect of mental space theory (Fauconnier 1994), a theoretical framework that models how speakers construct meaning in discourse. Mental spaces themselves are partial representations of the entities and relations of a particular scenario referred to in discourse, and these conceptual constructs guide interpretation by indexing both linguistic material and background, often cultural information, or scripts.[2] Relative to humor studies, Attardo (1994: 198) defines "script" as "an organized chunk of information about something (in the broadest sense). It is a cognitive structure internalized by the speaker which provides the speaker with information on how things are done, organized, etc." Although both mental spaces and conceptual blends necessarily rely on script (or frame) information, blend analysis and script analysis are not the same, as will be discussed later.

Most humor theorists are familiar with the role of script opposition in humor, as discussed extensively in Raskin (1985) and Attardo (1994). Script opposition is one aspect of the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) proposed in Attardo and Raskin (1991). Many standard jokes begin by evoking one script—that is, one structure of expectations (Tannen 1993)— and then at some point (usually the end) switching to another.

For example, the following joke from Attardo and Raskin (1991: 305–6) is a case of simple script opposition:

> George Bush has a short one. Gorbachev has a longer one. The Pope has it but does not use it, Madonna does not have it. What is it? A last name.

In this joke there is the original script, which might be called the "penis script," and this is switched to the "name script" in the punch line. What is funny here is that one set of potentially bawdy expectations is replaced by a second more mundane domain of cultural knowledge (e.g., the shared understanding that popes are not referred to by their last names and that Madonna does not go by hers), but the only possible overlap is that names and penises are attributes of males. No new concepts result from the script switch.

Conceptual blending, on the other hand, describes how people combine information from different semantic domains to form new concepts. Conceptual blending is similar to, but not identical to, the idea of "bisociation" proposed by Koestler (1964: 35), which he defined as "the perceiving of a situation or idea, L, in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference." However, unlike either script opposition, which substitutes one set of interpretive expectations with another, or bisociation, which results in a simultaneous perception of two scripts, in blended spaces elements from different areas of social and cultural knowledge are integrated into one emergent cognitive structure, which then has the potential

to contribute to subsequent reasoning and interpretation.[3] Although there may be script overlap in script opposition (Attardo 1993: 203), overlap is similar to the generic spaces in conceptual blending rather than to the emergent spaces, or blends themselves (as will be illustrated later). In conceptual integration (blending) networks, generic spaces represent "some common, usually more abstract, structure and organization shared by the inputs and defines the cross-space mapping between them" (Fauconnier 1997: 149).

Scholarly descriptions of jokes and humorous discourse as blends are not new. Seana Coulson's blend analyses of a variety of humorous texts (1996, 2005a) such as jokes, cartoons, and radio discourse are key contributions to this work. Coulson (2005b) has also shown that blending processes are important for humor production and comprehension. In noting the value of conceptual blending for humor research, Attardo (2006: 342–43) writes, "one of the observations of blending theory is that some blends exhibit 'emerging' features, i.e., features that belong to neither of the input (mental) spaces. This strikes me as a potentially very useful tool to handle complex examples, such as those analyzed by Laineste (2002), who correctly—it seems to me—suggests the use of emergent features in a blended space to explain two jokes." In a discussion of topical jokes, Laineste (2002) observes that blending lends itself to a creative type of humor in which alternative possibilities to the status quo are offered.

Fauconnier and Turner (2002: xvii) suggest that conceptual blending is a "basic mental operation" that plays a pivotal role in human understanding and operates in many contexts, including "the way we learn, the way we think, and the way we live." Linguists and cognitive scientists are interested in blending because the process sheds light on how people select from their existing knowledge structures to create new meanings. Furthermore, Fauconnier (1997: 166) suggests that blends are not simply "conceptual constructs. They are genuine domains of mental exploration." Feminists interested in creating humor can construct these blended spaces to create possible worlds that suggest alternatives to the "normal" world where males predominate. Our exploration of blending theory to explore jokes, cartoons, and stories allows us to consider how novel concepts found in these blends can potentially subvert heteronormative expectations.

Although blends can be found in almost any type of humorous discourse, they lend themselves particularly well to visual humor, especially comics and cartoons (e.g., Marín-Arrese 2008). Because in blended spaces information from distinct areas of knowledge combines to form novel scenarios, blends often produce some type of possible and even improbable world. Readers familiar with Gary Larson's *The Far Side* will recognize blends in many of his cartoons. For example, one cartoon portrays "Hell's video store," where the only video for rent is *Ishtar* (Larson 1992: 28). This cartoon blends one mental space, a traditional conception of Hell, with another mental space, a modern video store. The emergent space, then, would be Hell for some people: a video store that rents out only one really bad movie. Another

Larson cartoon labeled "Punk worms" pictures two worms whose piercings are fish hooks, thus blending the idea of body piercing (human self adornment) with that of an equally human practice of skewering worms to use as fish bait (Larson 1992: 48). In the blend, however, it is the worms that are decorating themselves with objects that in the "real world" would kill them.

For some readers, the anthropomorphic figures in Larson's cartoons convey messages with social import. For example in one Larson cartoon, a butterfly is being interviewed by another butterfly that seems to be a TV news reporter. In the background yet another butterfly cameraman is shooting a video of a dead butterfly victim that has been collected and pinned into a collector's glass case. The butterfly being interviewed says, "Oh, the whole flower bed is still in shock. He was such a quiet butterfly—kept to himself mostly" (Larson 1993: 140). This blend of a murder scene TV news interview with that of the display case of a bug collector not only satirizes these familiar broadcast interviews with neighbors of crime victims, it also suggests a new perspective about killing and collecting butterflies. Although, as Oring (2003) notes, interpretation of a joke thought can vary from person to person, Larson's blends construct scenarios that place expectations related to social conventions onto beings that are not infrequently the victims of such conventions. Perhaps, too, for some readers Larson's animal-human blends have the effect of mocking or trivializing the human activities he depicts.

Of course, not all blends are visual. The satirical online publication *The Onion* frequently uses blended spaces for drawing humor out of current political issues in the US. For example, an article titled "Lethal injection ban leads to rise in back-alley lethal injections" clearly refers to the abortion debate, although abortion is never explicitly discussed (*The Onion* 2007). This clever blend is subversive because it undermines many of the arguments of the anti-choice movement by using a capital punishment framework in which state governors suffer great guilt because they are forced to execute prisoners with "back-alley lethal injections." Because the language of the "right-to-life" position is familiar to people in the US, the blend successfully makes fun of those who oppose abortion but at the same time support capital punishment.

4.   SUBVERSIVE BLENDED SPACES

Our interest in humorous blends is twofold. We hope to show that humor produced by blending is different from the overlap of scripts. We briefly discuss the blended spaces produced in some jokes previously thought to be the result of script opposition. In terms of the GTVH, our claim is that emergent spaces are not simply a notational variant of script opposition (as claimed by Attardo 2006), but are a different process that produces a new knowledge source. In addition, we explore the subversive potential of humor produced by blended mental spaces.

For example, the following joke by performer and activist Robin Tyler is an example of a humorous conceptual blend, one that is also potentially subversive:

> If homosexuality is a disease, let's all call in queer to work. "Hello, can't work today. Still queer."[4]

The counterfactual utterance evokes information from two domains of cultural knowledge (represented by the two top circles in Figure 2.1), and information in these two domains is combined to form a blended space (represented by the bottom circle). The representations of knowledge contained in the circles are called *inputs* or *input spaces* in blending theory. Input spaces represent the different types, or domains, of information whose elements combine to produce the blend.

In Tyler's joke, a new meaning emerges when elements from these two domains of knowledge are combined. The domain on the left contains information related to classification by institutions and individuals of homosexuality as a disease, and includes characteristics of diseases (e.g., that they are debilitating and distressing, that they often impede regular performance). The second domain of knowledge includes information about everyday situations in which employees notify their supervisors or coworkers that they will not be at work because of health problems. The partial overlap between the two inputs to the blend, called the generic space (not illustrated in the figure), is the concept of disease or illness that occurs in both the "homosexuality as a disease" and the "calling in sick" spaces.
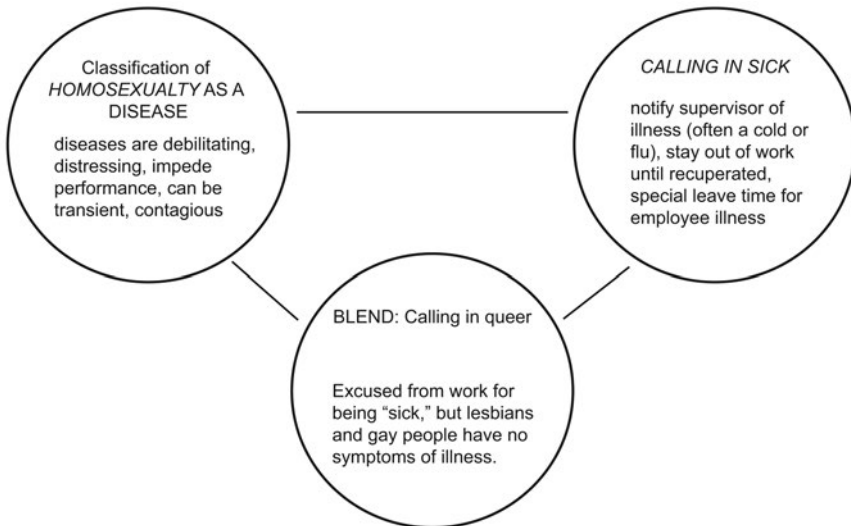

Figure 2.1   Calling in queer to work

In the blend, classification of homosexuality as a disease is subverted when combined with the everyday situation in which an employee calls in sick to work. The joke is funny because in the blended space, "we" (from "Let's all" of the counterfactual utterance) are in good health, but we end up being excused from work. Furthermore, when information in the classification of "homosexuality as a disease" input combines with interpreters' understanding of activities related to "calling in sick," the resulting conceptualization (what happens when you call in queer) demonstrates that "homosexuality" is inconsistent with cultural construals of the notion of "disease." In this way, then, the blend undermines the authority of homophobic expectations.[5] Not only is a new meaning created in the blend, the meaning is performative due to its activist message.

Those assuming a script opposition analysis might treat Tyler's joke as a switch from an "illness" script to a "queer" script, and conclude that the source of the humor is the incongruity and surprise triggered by the opposition of the two scripts. However, something else is happening in this joke. In addition to invoking and juxtaposing two incongruous but overlapping scripts, the joke suggests a new possible world, one in which gays and lesbians could claim sick leave simply by virtue of their homosexuality. Indeed, in this world, being gay would be an employment benefit.

As noted earlier, mental spaces and blends incorporate script (frame) information, represented as knowledge, in the input and blended spaces. However, because blends produce novel possibilities, the incongruous hypothetical situation not only can make us laugh, but also contains an indirect joke message in the sense of Oring and Zhao.

At first glance, the joke at the beginning of this chapter, repeated here, seems to simply be a straightforward script opposition:

> The children of Israel wandered around the desert for forty years. Even in Biblical times men wouldn't ask for directions.

The joke begins by evoking a frame set several hundred years BCE, a script that could be called a "biblical" script. It switches to a "modern" script. The overlap between the scripts is the shared scenario of people being lost on journeys. However, the joke does more than trigger humor based on incongruity of the contrasting scripts. Like blends discussed by Fauconnier and Turner and others, the punch line of this joke creates a blended mental space that combines elements from two input mental spaces, in this case, from two different eras and cultures, as shown in Figure 2.2. Although there are two contrasting input spaces in this joke, a blended space is created that combines these mental spaces. In some jokes (and elsewhere) modern males driving cars are stereotyped as being unwilling to ask for directions when they are lost. In Biblical times, Moses and the children of Israel would have had few opportunities in the desert to ask for directions to the Promised Land, which is why the joke is funny. The blend created by the joke depicts a hypothetical universe never mentioned in the Bible.
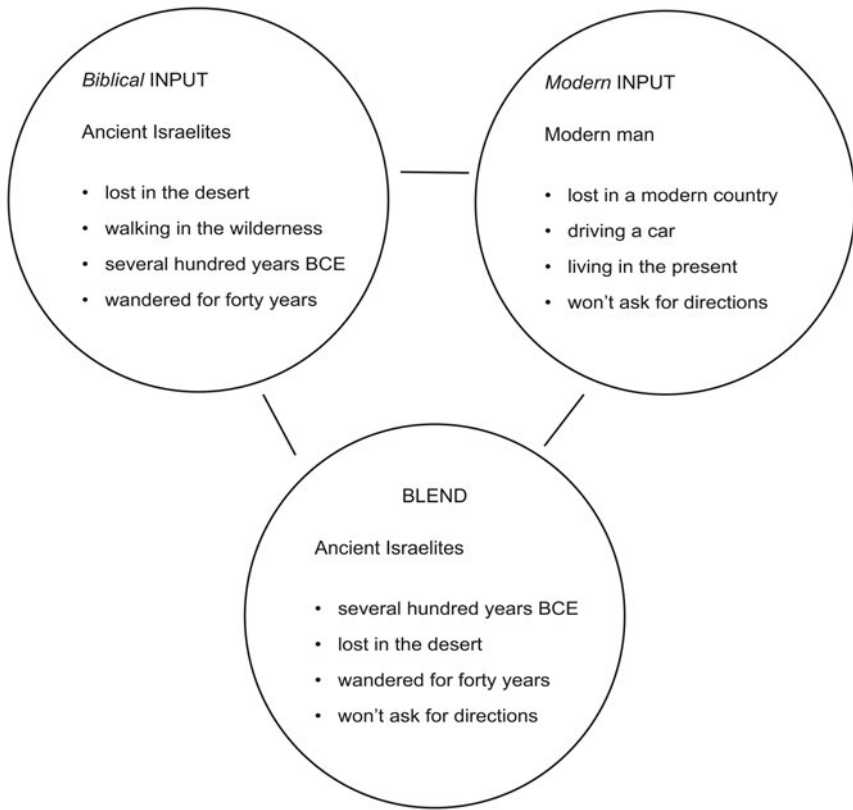
Figure 2.2   Even in biblical times men wouldn't ask for directions

Like scripts in humor research, mental spaces select from existing knowledge sources, but, in addition, information combines to create new scenarios. The blend in this joke uses the time from the "biblical" script, but the stereotypical male unwillingness to ask directions from the "modern" one.

Notice that one cannot predict the resulting blended space simply from knowing the character of the input spaces, because blends only select a small number of elements from the inputs. Consider Figure 2.3, which is a much-circulated picture of a billboard advertisement for Fiat taken by photographer Jill Posener in 1979.

There are two counterfactual sentences on the billboard: (1) the published ad: "If it were a lady, it would get its bottom pinched"; and (2) the graffiti: "If this lady was a car she'd run you down." These utterances trigger two different, but related conceptual blends, and both of them emerge from the same cultural information: shared understanding of "small cars" and what it means to be positioned as a "lady" in this culture. However, the

Figure 2.3   "Fiat/Ad Graffiti." Copyright © by Jill Posener. Courtesy of Jill Posener.

authors of the two utterances highlight different aspects of shared cultural information, which results in their indexing different ideological stances in the resulting blends.

In the published ad ("If it were a lady, it would get its bottom pinched"), there are two input spaces.

The first input space in Figure 2.4 contains information related to what it means to be a lady in this culture, so it includes characteristics such as the fact that *lady* refers to a human female and stereotypical attributes of lady (at least at the time this picture was taken) as a type of woman who is culturally construed as ornamental, typically compliant and passive, and often a sexual object open to public viewing. The second input to this blend includes cultural knowledge of small cars: for example, that they are attractive, that they are fast, and that they are possessions that must be controlled (driven) to run. The overlap between the two inputs of this blend, or the generic space, includes the abstract understanding of entities moving in space (true for both ladies and cars) and interacting with other entities (e.g., men).

As in the previous cases, information in the two input spaces comes together and forms a new conceptual structure. In the blend, the interpretation of the entity in the counterfactual is an objectified human female referred to with the nonpersonal pronoun "it" who, like the "small car," is
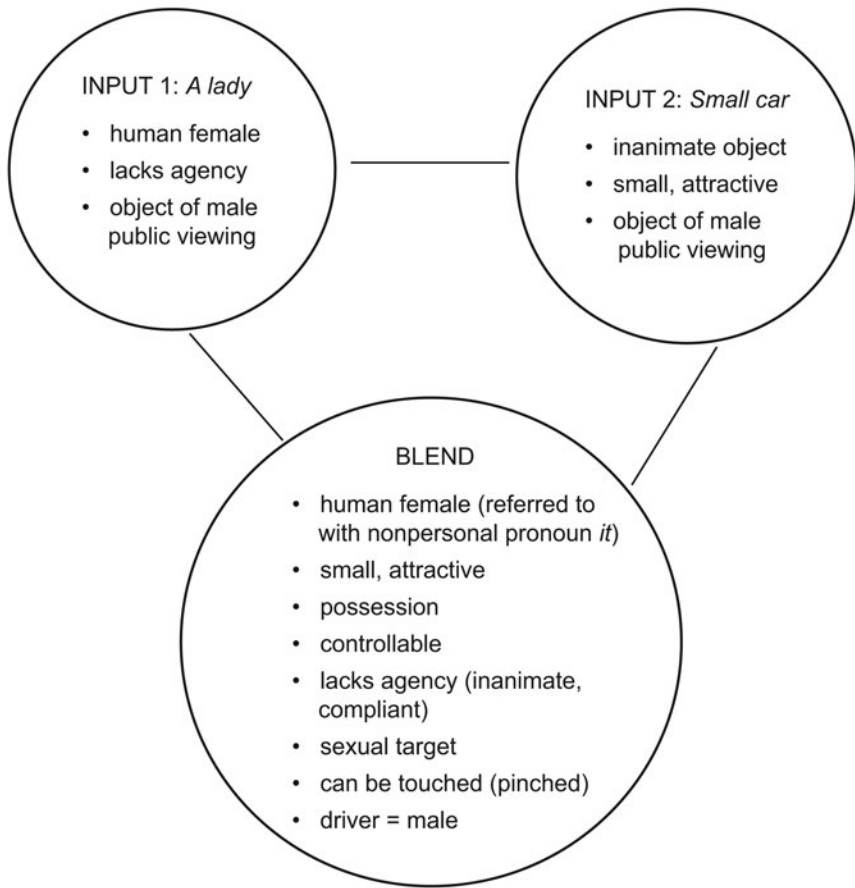
Figure 2.4   If it were a lady, it would get its bottom pinched

a possession that lacks agency. Supporting this interpretation is the fact that the second clause ("it would get its bottom pinched") is what is called a *get-*passive—a construction that typically marks the subject of the sentence as having little agency or responsibility (as in other expressions, such as "got fired," "got drunk," "got lost"). This advertisement normalizes what feminists have labeled "street harassment" or "street terrorism" (Gardner 1980; Kissling 1991). That is, in the billboard ad, the "Fiat as a lady" evokes a situation in which a woman can be addressed or even pinched in public by any male.

Now consider the graffiti, "If this lady was a car she'd run you down," which results in a different blended space than the original billboard, as shown in Figure 2.5. Although the input spaces for this blend are the same as that of the previous blend, the elements from these two spaces that contribute to this blend are different. In this case, Input 1 does not project information about "lady" as a stereotypical class; instead the selected information