MALE CHEERLEADERS AND WANTON WOMEN:

HUMOUR AMONG NEW ZEALAND FRIENDS[1]

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Abstract

This paper investigates the types of humour used by men and women in single-sex and mixed conversations. The analysis is based on examples drawn from 16 spontaneous conversations occurring among young New Zealand friends. Both speaker-sex and group composition are found to significantly affect the types of humour used.

1. Introduction

Different types of humour can serve varying functions in discourse, and contribute to the interaction in different ways. While many have hypothesised that men and women prefer different humour strategies, no systematic study has been conducted of the spontaneous use of humour by men and women in conversation. This paper explores the types of humour used by young New Zealanders in spontaneous conversation, and analyses the distribution of such types in mixed and single-sex conversations. It reports on humour strategies that have received little attention in the literature, and on patterns of humour usage which are influenced by gender and group composition.

2. Background

One of the qualities Lakoff (1975) identifies as comprising 'women's language' is lack of sense of humour.

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

Both popular and academic discourse has tended to reinforce this stereotype (see Crawford 1995 for discussion). Holmes, Marra and Burns (2001) demonstrate empirically, however, that, in the business meetings they studied, women used at least as much humour as men — and often more.

Kramarae (1987) points out that men and women have different perceptions of the world and so consequently probably have different joking interests. Society is such that women have to work within the social symbols of the dominant group, so it is more likely that women will recognise the joking interests of males than vice-versa. Kramarae believes this is the basis of the common assertion that women have no sense of humour. In short, women have to understand male humour, men do not have to understand women's. Jenkins (1985) also notes this asymmetry:

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

Kotthoff (1986) proposes three hypotheses based on transcripts taken from various discourse analysis literature:

- Men more often than women joke at the cost of others.

- Women joke about themselves and their experiences. For them joking is a means of establishing common ground and intimacy.

- Women actively encourage the success of the speaker by providing support through laughter. Men do this less frequently, especially when the speaker is a woman.

She states that for women and other oppressed groups, the safest joking method is to make oneself the butt of the joke. This allows the audience amusement at the speaker's expense and also, the laughter provides an acceptable outlet for aggression. She stresses that women's ability to laugh at themselves should be considered positive.

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

Jenkins (1985) also notes that male humour tends to be more performance-based than women's humour. Jenkins observes that men's humour is charact-erised as self-aggrandising one-upmanship. They more often use formulaic jokes which are markedly separate from the surrounding discourse and which involve a performance. This establishes them as credible performers and gives them an audience. Women tend to rely more on the context in the creation of their humour, and use it in a way that is supportive and healing.

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

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

Much of the literature in this area is anecdotal, and none systematically explores the way people joke when they are relaxing with friends. Possible interactions between gender and group composition have not been considered.

This paper empirically investigates the types of humour used in mixed and single-sex friendship groups. The next section briefly outlines the methodology adopted for collecting data for this purpose.

3. Methodology

The corpus for this study consists of a balanced set of 18 conversations: six conversations between four female friends, six between four male friends, and six mixed groups consisting of two males and two females. All groups are natural friendship groups, all are Pakeha[2] aged between 18 and 35, with some higher education. The conversations were taped in settings familiar to the speakers, usually in one of the participants' homes. Four recordings came from the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English, one from the Victoria University of Wellington Linguistics Library, and three were collected by Anita Easton for the research reported in Easton (1994).[3] The remaining ten recordings were collected for this project, and consist of conversations between my friends and their friends.

From each tape, all instances of humour occurring in a twenty minute extract were analysed. I regarded humour as being anything the speaker intended to be funny. As Tannen (1993: 166) points out, the true intention of any utterance can not be established from the examination of linguistic form alone. This criterion is clearly a subjective one. In identifying and coding the examples numerous clues were used to help identify whether the speaker had humorous intent. These included context, knowledge of the speakers and groups, and audience response. The audience formed part of the group as a whole and so probably shared with the speaker a similar sense of what is funny, so if something appeared to be meant humorously, then an amused audience would provide evidence in support of this. Sudden changes in pace or pitch, a laughing or smiling voice and other verbal clues were taken into consideration (see Crystal 1969).

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

A taxonomy was then constructed to divide these examples according to the type of humour used.[4] The taxonomy is outlined in the following section.

4. Taxonomy

In almost every paper on types or forms of humour a new taxonomy is employed. Comparison of results is therefore made complicated by different and overlapping sets of categories. Many of the taxonomies are specifically designed for certain contexts for example, the classroom (Neuliep 1991), the workplace (Vinton 1989), or to form parts of questionnaires (Graham, Papa and Brookes 1992). Many taxonomies are intended only for categorising canned or formulaic jokes.

Feigelson (1989) constructs a fairly comprehensive taxonomy of humour occurring among employees in a factory:

1. Puns

2. Goofing off (slapstick)

3. Jokes/anecdotes
   o Humorous self-ridicule
   o Bawdy jokes (sexual or racial basis)
   o Industry jokes

4. Teasing
   o Teasing to get things done
   o Bantering — the great leveller

Categories such as industry jokes, are context specific, and so not relevant to this study. Puns are a relevant category, and would fall into a broader category of wordplay, as described in Norrick (1993). Wordplay can include not only puns, but also types of humour such as spoonerisms, allusion, hyperbole and metaphor.

Feigelson groups jokes and anecdotes together as one category, although many researchers choose to keep these distinct. Jokes and anecdotes are different in form, and usually different in function. Mitchell (1985) makes a further distinction between narrative jokes and question and answer jokes.

Most researchers include teasing in taxonomies of humour types, though there is some confusion as to whether it is a type of humour, or a strategy, or function. It is rather different than other "types" identified in that a tease can not be formally identified by any criterion. Humour which serves to tease someone present could take the form of an insults, wordplay, anecdotes or role play, and so is clearly on a different level from a purely formal taxonomy.

Teasing is a humour strategy which can take any number of forms. It is therefore not included in the formal taxonomy discussed in this paper. For a discussion of teasing humour in this corpus see Hay (1995b).

There are two further categories identified in the literature which do not seem to fit into Feigelson's framework. One is sarcasm as discussed by Norrick (1993:73). And finally, Morreall (1983) provides a comprehensive taxonomy of humour, based on the concept of incongruity. Most of his categories could be slotted into one of those discussed above, with the exception of mimicry.

It is unfortunate to add yet another taxonomy to the literature, but this too can be seen as suited to a particular context. It is designed for classifying instances of humour occurring in small, natural friendship groups. I drew on the body of literature and unified the discussions and classifications into a small number of types. This taxonomy was then modified after an initial examination of the data. Some categories were unnecessary, some were collapsed, and some categories were expanded.

Three categories were included that do not seem to be mentioned in past discussions of types of humour; the categories *fantasy humour*, *observational humour* and *quotes*. These will be discussed in detail below.

That this data required its own taxonomy reflects a number of factors. First, the speakers are young New Zealanders. Different nationalities have their own particular sense and brand of humour (Ziv 1988) and so the fact that the speakers in this corpus were New Zealanders may be part of the reason existing taxonomies (all constructed elsewhere) were not appropriate. Also, to my knowledge, this was the first taxonomy which has been constructed in parallel with close scrutinisation of recordings of natural, spoken conversations between friends, rather than through artificially elicited data, participant observation, or introspection.

The taxonomy contains the following categories:

1. ANECDOTES

2. FANTASY

3. INSULT

4. IRONY

5. JOKES

6. OBSERVATIONAL

7. QUOTE

8. ROLEPLAY

9. SELF-DEPRECATION

10. VULGARITY

11. WORDPLAY

12. OTHER

5. Analysis

All 815 examples were coded according to the above taxonomy. The categories listed in the taxonomy are not mutually exclusive, and some examples were identified as belonging to more than one of these categories. In order to simplify the statistics, examples coded in two categories were treated as two examples. There were not many such examples and so this did not significantly affect the results.

After coding the examples, log-linear modelling was used to investigate speaker gender and group composition as possible predictors of the type of humour used. Both gender and group composition significantly affected the type of humour used. For details of the statistics, the reader is referred to Hay (1995a). In this paper, I simply report the results as overall percentages, and highlight the main trends in the data. In interpreting the results it is important to recall that the results are based on 16 conversations, and 72 different speakers. Minor differences across groups may be expected to occur simply because different individuals have different conversational styles, and different groups are discussing different topics. Small differences in frequency should therefore be regarded with appropriate caution. The scale on the Y axis has been kept constant, to maximise comparability between graphs.

For each type of humour included in the taxonomy, I now define and exemplify the category, and present results showing the use of this type of humour by the men and women, in mixed and single-sex groups. The categories are presented in decreasing order of frequency in the corpus.

5.1 Anecdote

An anecdote is a story which the speaker perceives to be amusing. It is not necessarily long, but must impart information. This will most often be about the experiences or actions of either the speaker or someone they are acquainted with. (1) is an example of a short anecdote.

> (1)
>
> PM: but you know those you know my old three gir[h]ls barbara
>   lisa and the other one + um i supposed to be going out with
>   them on Wednesday[hay]
>
> DM: [ha ha ha ha]
>
> PM: don't tell //mark\
>
> DM: /[huh]\\

Brief descriptions of humorous episodes experienced by all present are also classed as anecdotes. In such examples the speaker is triggering the memory of a previous humorous incident, so the group can laugh at it and enjoy the humour again. Anecdotes can sometimes be long, and may contribute more to the overall humour than other types of humour.

A narrative may typically consist of several funny points, or several sub-plots within the one story. Each separate funny incident a speaker described was counted as an anecdote in its own right. In general, the more funny components a story has, the longer it takes to tell, so this goes part way to solving the problem of apportioning sufficient weight to anecdotes. A story about a person who was distracted about something and walked into a lamp-post on the way to the shop would be one anecdote. A story about a person who walked into a lamp-post, then went to the shop and knocked over a big pile of cans, and finally went to pay and discovered they had no money, would be three anecdotes. The narrative consists of three related stories, each of which is considered funny in its own right. This is one area in which it is particularly important to observe speaker intentions. There is always a temptation to code everything that the audience laughs at as an instance of humour. It is much more difficult to establish the distinct parts of the anecdote that the speaker intends to be funny. Example (2) is a narrative sequence which, for the purposes of this study, includes two anecdotes.

(2)

CM: [h] oh i came off a couple of times and it was actually
      the last time that i rode it i was driving around looking
      at cars that //were in=

All: /[laugh]\\

CM: =the paper\ and i you know went and saw one and i came
      off and it was a hot day and i hit some diesel or something
      on the road and i was going around a corner (   )

++

CM: so i i determined

MM: [ha ha ha]

CM: well i did i determined i'm going to buy a car TODAY

EM: [ha ha]

CM: and i DID i bought the next one [h] i went //to\

EM: /[coughs]\\ [ha ha]

CM: it was probably a STUPID decision [h]

MM: [ha ha]

CM: but i've since sold it to my sister [h]
      [evil laugh]

The first anecdote is a story about why CM gave up motor-biking. He was out looking at cars and fell off his bike, so decided that he would definitely buy a car that day. The second anecdote tells what he has done with the bike since. They are related, but the humour in each of them is drawn from completely separate sources — the first, an incident on the bike, and the second, CM successfully duping his sister. If one did not distinguish between parts of a narrative sequence in this way, then an entire conversation could conceivably be interpreted as consisting of a single humorous instance — an anecdote, when in fact one speaker had spent twenty minutes describing funny things that had happened to them on an overseas trip.

Anecdotes are a very frequently used type of humour. In this corpus, they
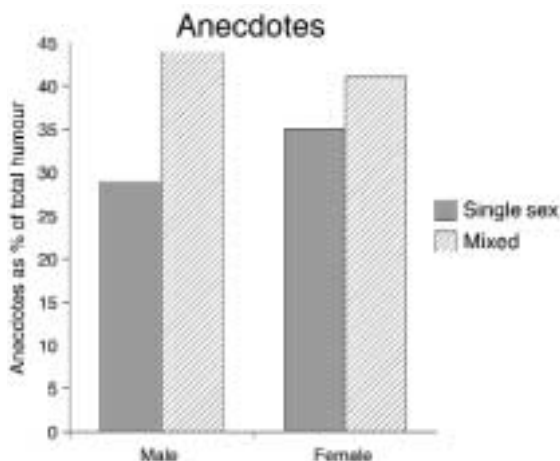
Figure 1: Anecdotes as a percentage of humour produced
by men and women in mixed and single-sex groups.

constituted 35% of all examples. Figure 1 shows the percentage use by men
and women, in single and mixed-sex groups. Use of anecdotes by all groups
is relatively high. In single-sex groups the women in the sample used a higher
percentage of anecdotes than the men. Both groups increased their usage of
anecdotes in mixed groups — this increase was particularly dramatic for male
speakers.

5.2 Fantasy
Fantasy is the construction of humorous, imaginary scenarios or events. This
is usually a collaborative activity, in which the participants jointly construct a
possible (or impossible) series of events. This is best clarified by exemplifi-
cation. In (3), TM suggests a reason why people have not frequented a
restaurant, despite rave reviews.

(3)
DM: it's just along um + down that that way you know can't
       remember what it used to be called but yeah no i read
       a couple of reviews on it over a various time span and
       they've both been sort of saying why haven't more people
       discovered this wonderful place [inhales]

+

TM: cause the cook greased them up that day

The important point is that all examples of fantasy will involve the construction of imaginary circumstances or happenings. Example (4) is another example in this category. The speakers were scorning the tradition of cheerleading in sport, and then CF suggests that perhaps male cheerleaders would be a good idea.

(4)
SF: well men could have their own cheerleaders

CF: //they could\ have male cheerleaders

SF: /[softly]: yeah right:\\

CF: /[laughter]\\

CF: [laughs]: i don't think they should wear short skirts either:

Fantasy humour typically involves a lot of collaborative humour.

Between them, anecdotes and fantasy humour constituted over 60% of the total examples in the corpus — these two types of humour were much more frequent than any other type. 27% of all examples were fantasy humour. Given that this form of humour has not typically been included in previous taxonomies, it is perhaps surprising to discover that is the second most frequent form of humour occurring in this corpus.

Figure 2 shows the use of this humour by the speakers in different groups.

Both the men and women used fantasy humour more in mixed groups than in single-sex conversations. This difference is particularly marked for male speakers.

The higher rate of usage of fantasy humour by men in mixed groups may relate to the responsive audience provided for them. Fantasy humour is often a joint display, where speakers bounce off each other and jointly build up a hypothetical scenario. Hay (2001) discusses support mechanisms for humour. It has been claimed that women are more 'supportive' of humour, although this claim refers almost exclusively to humour support via laughter. Men often support each other in other ways, one of which is to continue on the humour sequence, and to spar with each other. It is sometimes the case, then, that men will begin a fantasy routine in a mixed group. The women will usually support
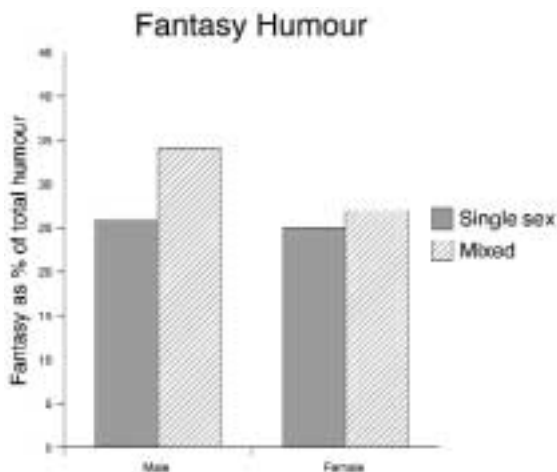
Figure 2: Use of fantasy as a percentage of humour produced by men and women in mixed and single-sex groups.

this with laughter, leaving the men free to carry on the routine, sparring with each other and delighting in the laughter their audience is providing. This is a performance of sorts. In a single-sex group, males appear less likely to be given ongoing support via laughter, but instead all four speakers will contribute to the sequence. This leads to short lived chaos and amusement, but the fantasy is less of a performance, more of a confusion, and hence shorter fantasy routines result. This seems a likely reason why men may capitalise on the laughter offered in mixed sex groups, bounce quips off each other and enjoy lengthy fantasy sequences, and support from their female audience.

5.3 Observational

Humour in this category consists of quips or comments about the environment, the events occurring at the time, or about the previous person's words. In this sense it is 'observational' — the speaker is making an observation about something funny, or making a witty observation. In (5) LM makes an observation about RF's comment, which he finds funny.

(5)
RF: JUST been reading the lord of the rings myself frodo
             and sam are PRETTY CHUMmy too

All: [laugh] 2sec

LM: [ha ha ha] oh my god //it's sort of a\ looking=

SF: /[ha ha ha ha]\\

LM: =for sexual deviance and //degradation of the=

SF+RF: /[laugh]\\

LM: =lord of the rings\

In (6) DM observes that the group has run out of chips. While I am not present, the group is at my house, and they know that I am going to be listening to the tape. DM rustles and crunches the new packet right beside the tape-recorder, and MM makes the observation that they are now left with a bag of crunched up chips.

(6)
DM: [silly voice]: we need more chips:

All: [laugh]

CM: they have actually supplied us with some

DM: thank you

[rustles right by tape recorder]

EM: [ha ha ha ha ha ha]

MM: we now have these [laughs]: crinkly:

Observational humour of this type accounts for 8% of the data. The distribution of relevant examples is shown in figure 3.

This form of humour is used more by the female speakers in this corpus than the male speakers, and appears more prevalently in mixed groups than single-sex groups. Jenkins (1985) has noted that women's humour tends to be more context bound, whereas men's is more performance-based and often transferable from one context to another.

Observational humour is highly-context bound and non-transferrable, and so the result that the women in the corpus were more likely to use this form of humour lends some weight to Jenkins' generalisation.

Observational Humour

**Figure 3: Observational humour as a percentage of total humour
produced by men and women in mixed and single-sex groups.**

5.4 Irony

This category includes examples of both irony and sarcasm. If the speaker
does not mean their words to be taken literally, and in saying them, is implying
the opposite, or something with a markedly different meaning, then it is
classed as irony. Knowledge of the speakers and the context are important in
identifying irony. When listening to unfamiliar speakers, it is necessary to rely
on the surrounding context, paralinguistic clues, and the reaction of the
audience. Some examples of insults will also be irony, but they will not be
placed in this category. This category is intended solely for verbal irony, and
will not include ironic situations. A description of an ironic situation would be
classed as an anecdote. If the humour stems from some form of situational
irony which is co-occurrent with the extract, the humour will be an example
of observational humour. (7) is an example of irony.

> (7)
> CM: well yeah when i c- when i came out of the interview
>   and saw YOU the next person to go in i thought oh NO
>   dan's going for THIS job jees i can't have this one
>
> MM: [ha ha ha //ha ha ha ha]\

DM: /well i'm glad\ you think so //highly of me\\

All: /[laugh]\\

CM: no that's not true at all there's the next day
   .....

DM's comment in this extract is not meant literally. There are a number of clues to this. The first is, quite simply, that if the comment were meant literally, then it would not make sense in this context. The second clue is a very sarcastic tone of voice, which clearly does not come across in a transcript. DM uses a rise-fall intonation — a tone frequently used to reinforce irony or sarcasm (Cruttenden 1986). Finally there is CM's reaction "no not at all." CM is not denying the literal sense of DM's words, but rather the implied meaning, and he goes on to explain the real reason he did not take the job. (8) is another example of irony, involving the same speakers.

(8)
CM: yes well i mean it was i guess fairly shortly after that that
        i gave up on motor-biking

MM: [ha ha ha ha ha]
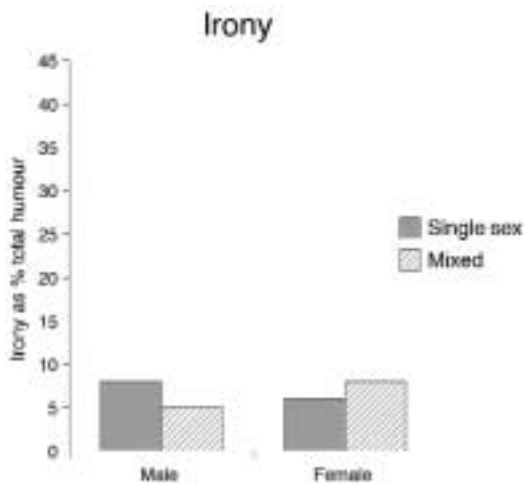
**Figure 4: Use of irony as a percentage of total humour used
by men and women in mixed and single-sex conversations.**

DM: well i wonder why

CM: [ha ha] well it wasn't so much that but...

This is similar to example (7). DM's words 'well I wonder why' are not meant literally, but instead imply that the reason is obvious. Again, CM understands the irony, and denies the intended meaning of the words. He goes on to explain that it was not 'that', i.e. it was not for the reason that DM had implied, but for another reason altogether.

Seven percent of the examples in this corpus were categorised as irony. As can be seen in figure 4, there is an interaction between gender and group composition. The men were more likely to use irony in single-sex groups than mixed groups, but the women increased their use of irony in mixed interactions.

5.5 Role play

Role play is the adoption of another voice or personality for humorous effect. The speaker steps into someone else's shoes. Role play could be quite specific mimicry of a particular person, or just the general adoption of a stereotypical voice or attitude. This is very much performance-based humour; the speaker is acting for their audience. This type of humour, like fantasy humour, has received very little attention in the literature, although both are relatively common in spoken discourse. Morreall (1983) identifies mimicry as a type of humour, although this is restricted to the mimicry of a specific person. Example (9) is an example of the mimicry of a specific person's actions on a particular occasion. By imitating the person, the speakers ridicule him.

(9)
GM: dave and him were having a good old time weren't they

EM: fuck and they were really getting into it they thought it was
     excellent

GM: [ha ha ha ha ha] what about those women that
     were //(   )\

EM: /what like\\ [imitates dave]:
     oh YEAH mate YEAH oh yeah:

GM: [imitates dave]: fuck i'm going to waste you today:

All: [imitate dave for 1 sec]

EM: [imitates dave]: YEAH you know where i'm coming from:

GM: yeah he was so full of BULLshit talk

In (10) the speakers are discussing an incident in which a customer at a restaurant was accidentally served dish-washing liquid. VF places herself in the shoes of the person who did this.

(10)
VF: oh chevy's managed to do one of the more major impressive
       fuck ups though

SF: yeah yeah [ha ha] dishwash[h]ing li[hi]quid[h]
       //oh gross\

VF: /[loud]: OH\\ i wonder if this is REALLY
       dish//washing liquid\ let me taste //it\=

SF: /[ha ha ha ha]\\   /[ha ha=

VF: =EVERYBODY have a try //[ha ha]\ excuse me=

SF: =ha]\\   /[ha ha]\\

VF: =madam //[voc] would you[ho] care[he] f[h]or a=

All: /[laugh]\\

VF: =b[h]it\....

Role play accounts for 7% of the corpus. As can be seen in figure 5 — it occurred more often in the single-sex male groups than in the other groups.

Role play has a strong performance component, and its success relies very heavily on group knowledge. Members agree on who is an appropriate target for imitation or ridicule, and successful role play relies on an audience's recognition of the performance. The single-sex groups in the corpus tend to have more group history — many are old school friends, and so they perhaps have more material and inclination for role play. Also, as role play is very performance-based and on-record, the loss of face involved if it fails will be much larger than for other types of humour. This could be a contributing reason why speakers are more likely to use role play humour in single-sex groups. These may provide safer environments.
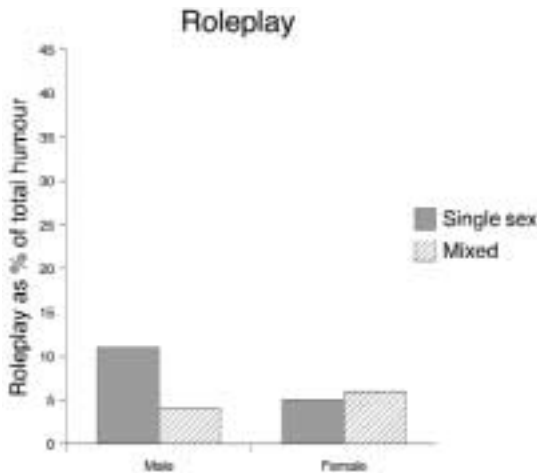
**Figure 5: use of Roleplay as a percentage of total humour produced
by men and women in mixed and single-sex conversations.**

5.6 Insult

An insult is a remark that puts someone down, or ascribes a negative characteristic to them. There are two distinct types of humour which come under this heading. One is jocular abuse, in which the speaker jokingly insults a member of the audience. The other is when someone absent is insulted. The insult here is likely to be genuine, and the humour stems from the unexpectedness of the statement, which in most circumstances would be unacceptable.

(11) is an example of an absent person being insulted.

> (11)
> DM: she's older than your mother
>
> GM: she just she's just like a couple of beacons sh[h]ort of lik[h]e
>   say[h]ing take me //[ha ha]\
>
> DM: /[huh h]\\

(12) is an example of jocular abuse. Someone present is insulted for humorous effect. The insult is jocular, in that it is not intended to offend. On the contrary, it highlights similarities and serves to maintain solidarity. DF is also living

with her partner and so when she criticises CF for doing the same, although the humour takes the form of an insult, CF knows it is not meant literally.

(12)
DF: i usually just um turn off the electric blanket

BF: yeah well i did

CF: i don't i roll over alex onto the cold side
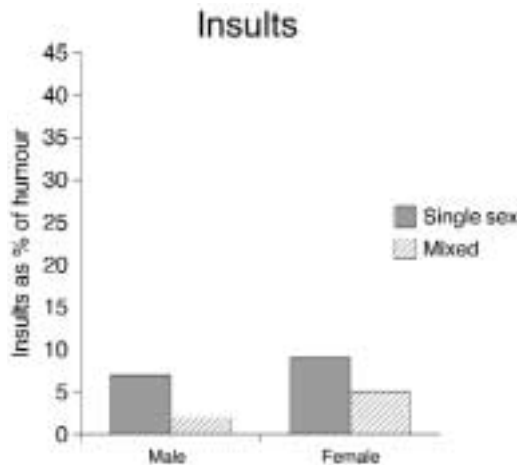   (//so[ho]\   )

AF: /[oh ha]\\

DF: well chris that //just shows that\ you're a=

BF: /good on you\\

DF: =wanton woman

Six percent of the total examples in the corpus took the forms of insults. The distribution is shown in figure 6.

   Men and women behaved similarly with respect to insults. What is striking about these results is the dramatic decrease in frequency of insulting humour

Figure 6: Use of insults as a percentage of total humour produced by men and women in mixed and single-sex groups.

in the presence of the opposite sex. While both men and women dedicated a reasonable proportion of their humour to insults in single-sex conversations, this dramatically decreased for both groups in mixed sex conversations. Note that this corpus does not show Kotthoff's hypothesised pattern that 'Men more often than women joke at the cost of others' (Kotthoff 1986). In fact, in this corpus, the female speakers were slightly more likely to use insult humour than the males.

5.7 Wordplay

Wordplay is any humorous statement in which the humour derives from the meanings, sounds or ambiguities of words. The most typical instance would be a pun. This may involve a speaker deliberately punning, or a hearer identifying an ambiguity in the speaker's speech and exploiting it for humorous effect (13). is an example of wordplay.

> (13)
> MM: associative databases
>
> NM: deductive
>
> MM: deDUCtive databases //that's the ones yeah\
>
> NM: /yeah yeah\\ well //there's\
>
> TM: /well i de-\\ d- i
>   deduced that
>
> MM: [groans]

In (14) DF identifies an ambiguity in CF's comment, and pretends to mistake CF's intended meaning of pulse = heart beat for pulse = legume. CF plays along with DF's deliberate misinterpretation, and together they fool BF.
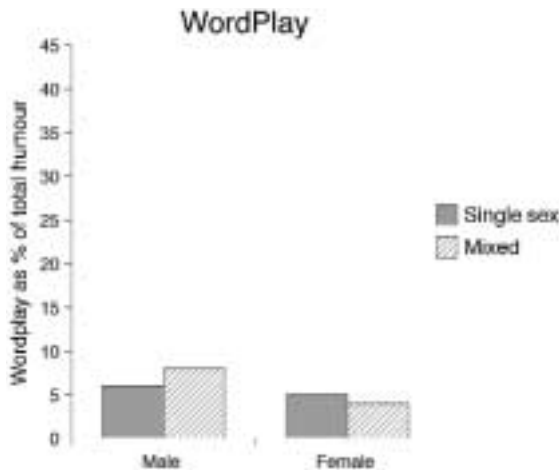
> (14)
> CF: i mean i've got bad feeling in my hands anyway
>
> BF: have you
>
> CF: like i can never feel pulses or stuff like like you know
>
> DF: pulses what like beans? like beans? you mean
>
> BF: NO

Figure 7: Use of Wordplay as a percentage of humour produced by men and women in mixed and single sex conversations.

DF: pulses you mean //kidney beans\ and the like

CF: /yeah\\

CF: and lentils

BF: oh DOES she [h]

CF: i find it really hard to feel lentils

Wordplay is not confined to puns. It may involve exploiting similarities or differences between words in a variety of ways.

Wordplay accounts for 6% of the total humour analysed. Its distribution across the different groups is shown in figure 7.

In general, wordplay was used more frequently in the single-sex groups, and more by the men than by the women.

5.8 Quote
A quote is a line taken from a television show or a movie, usually a comedy. It depends very much on the group as to whether this type of humour is used. Some groups quote extensively, and have memorised whole routines into which they will launch given the slightest prompt. The speaker establishes

solidarity with members who can recognise and laugh at the quote. They also gain a certain amount of prestige for being able to memorise the quote and deliver it satisfactorily. Appreciation of the humour requires a certain amount of in-group knowledge. Example (15) follows discussion about which episodes of the Muppets people had seen. LM mentions that he has seen the Muppets episode in which Steve Martin is guest star. DM then quotes some lines from the Steve Martin episode, pauses slightly, then says 'five five five', a quote from *LA Story*, a Steve Martin movie. This humour is entirely for LM's benefit, as he has recently seen the Muppets episode, and he and DM saw *LA Story* together.

(15)

LM: i got i got to see steve martin

TM: you need one of those g codes that [ha huh]

DM: [exhales] [quotes]: he's a rambling guy:

LM: [nh nh] yeah

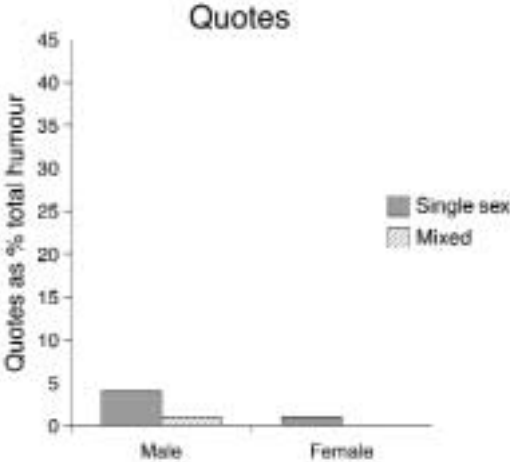DM: [quotes]: you loved rambling guy [ha ha] you'll LOVE juggling guy:

+

Figure 8: Use of quotes as percentage of use of humour by men and women in mixed and single-sex conversations.

DM: [tut] [quotes]: five five five: [h]

LM: [nh h huh]

Quotes constitute 2% of the corpus. The majority of examples occur in the single-sex male conversations. Both men and women were more likely to use quotes in single-sex contexts. These results are shown in figure 8.

5.9 Vulgarity
It is clear that it is possible for examples in all of the categories to be crass. Jokes, wordplay, insults etc. can all have an aspect of vulgarity. There are some examples however, in which the sole source of the humour is its crassness, and these are the ones which belong in this category. Toilet humour and sexual humour are typical instances of vulgarity. The humour in both cases derives from the fact that the speakers are breaking some sort of taboo. (16) is an example of vulgarity.

(16)
GM: yeah oh i had a fantastic crap in there this morning

DM+EM: [ha ha ha]

Such examples constitute just 1% of the corpus — 9 examples total. Seven of these examples were in single-sex male groups (2% of examples from this group), and two were in single-sex female groups (1%). Like insults, this appears to be a type of humour which is strongly dispreferred in mixed groups.

5.10 Self Deprecation
Self deprecation is an insult directed at oneself. In (17) DF has farted. She herself comments that the fart smells bad. This is a defence strategy. If she points this out herself, then any insults directed at her because of the fart will hold much less force.

(17)
BF: DAYna

DF: sh[h]it this is b[h]ad man

All: [laugh] 5 secs

Just five examples fall into this category — two in single-sex male groups, and

three in single-sex female groups. Thus, there appears to be a tendency for self-deprecating humour to be avoided in mixed groups, but much more striking is the extremely low frequency of this type of humour in the corpus as a whole.

5.11 Jokes

I use the term jokes to refer specifically to canned jokes. These are chunks of humour whose basic form has been memorised. Canned jokes will have a punch line, or some point at which an incongruity is resolved (Raskin 1985). They often have a standardised form. Example (18) is an example of a joke taken from the corpus.

> (18)
> BM: well it's a bit bit like that er joke about what's the difference
>   between a hedgehog and a range-rover
>
> PM: yeah [h] range-rover's got pricks on the //inside\
>
> AM: /inside\\
>
> BM: [ha ha]

This example, in fact, is the only example of a joke in the corpus. It occurred in a single-sex male friendship group. Jokes therefore account for much less than 1% of the data.

5.12 Other

There is also an "other" category, for humour which does not slot into any of the ten main categories of humour. A taxonomy of types of humour which claimed to encompass every possible example would be either incredibly huge or contain particularly general categories. Two percent of examples were coded as "other".

6. Discussion

6.1 The effect of group composition

There are many respects in which the behaviour of men and women in this corpus is remarkably similar. In single-sex groups, their humour shares much in common. They also share in common a dramatic shifting of use of certain types of humour in mixed sex groups.

This shifting is particularly apparent in the use of insults and vulgarity —
two types of humour which have been more stereotypically associated with
men than women. The fact that men and women behave similarly in these
respects in single-sex groups, suggest that the shift in mixed groups reflects
the role of perceived gender patterns — men should not be seen to be
disrespectful, or insult any women present. This attitude can be observed in
groups in which men are scolded for using vulgarity when there are "ladies in
the room." Conversely it can be considered "unladylike" to use vulgarity, and
so the women avoid this in the presence of men. Both men and women avoid
the use of vulgarity humour in mixed interaction, although both use it in
single-sex groups. The same pattern was observed by Folb (1980), and
parallels findings by Limbrick (1991). Limbrick looked at use of expletives by
New Zealand men and women. Both groups used roughly the same number of
expletives when in single-sex groups. In mixed groups, however, the males
decreased their use of expletives by a substantial amount. Limbrick interpreted
this as a desire not to offend and accommodation to the stereotype of females'
lesser expletive usage. Similarly, Folb (1980) found that the Black American
girls she studied used the vernacular and swear words only when out of
earshot of males and of adults.

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

Folb points out that behaviour such as the use of jocular insults is not 'lady-
like' and so regarded as inappropriate behaviour to display to boys, or to
adults. Similarly, the boys in her study toned down their vernacular usage
among young women as to do otherwise would be disrespectful.

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

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

So both men and women engage in jocular abuse and teasing activities,

though they do this much more often in single-sex groups than mixed groups. It seems likely that the reasons this behaviour is restricted in mixed conversation differ for both men and women, but both reflect the gender stereotyping and expectation of "appropriate" gender-specific behaviour.

It is interesting to note that women seem slightly more likely than men to use insults as a form of humour. Coates (1986: 153) claims that insults, along with shouting, name-calling and threats, are part of male aggressiveness, whereas women try to avoid such displays, finding them unpleasant and often interpret them as being meant personally. It may be true that women avoid genuine insults, but joking insults, such as those identified in this study, seem to be just as much a part of females' repertoire and banter as males', if not more so. It was only recently that researchers identified such behaviour in female groups (see Eder 1990), after a long-lived assumption that it was a male only activity. This study indicates that, while conversing in single sex groups, females are just as likely as males to use jocular abuse. A qualitative study into the nature of such abuse in male and female conversations would no doubt prove fascinating and fruitful.

Self deprecation is not very common in this corpus. But like the types of humour discussed above, it is restricted to single sex groups. Note that this is a purely formal category. The category includes only insults directed at oneself. It is possible to put oneself down indirectly through other types of humour, telling an anecdote for example.

Much has been made of the 'fact' that women use a lot of self deprecating humour. In fact, there is very little evidence to support this, and most claims can be traced back to Levine (1976 — as cited in Neitz (1980)). Levine studied female comics and found them more likely to disparage themselves. Several other studies have led to the claim that women use self-disparaging humour more than men. These are largely based on response to humour and humour preferences, rather than actual production (Zillman and Stocking 1976, Zillman and Cantor 1976). There is, in fact, very little evidence to suggest that this pattern is also present in spontaneous humour occurring in friendship groups. Jenkins (1985) suggests that this myth may have been helped by misinterpretation of women's humour. Women tell a lot of anecdotes about embarrassing things they have done, or other anecdotes which could be seen as portraying them negatively, and some analysts may classify such humour as self deprecating. Jenkins points out that this is mistaken.

That women tell jokes or laugh at themselves is negative only in the

competitive atmosphere of men where the intent is to show yourself off to the best advantage. (Jenkins 1985: 138)

Such humour, then, is not self deprecating, but self healing. If a bad experience is turned into a funny story that can be shared, everyone feels better. Whether or not a researcher classes an instance of humour as self deprecating may depend largely on their value system, on their knowledge of the value system of the speaker, and on the range of functions they attribute to self deprecating humour. In some cases they may be misled. Humour which researchers may claim is self deprecating may actually be serving to portray an open and sharing identity, or to heal and cope with problems. The categorisation of self deprecation as a function of humour is inherently problematic. It is more accurately regarded as a type of humour, which can serve any number of functions. And this type of humour is used as much by men as by women.

Because there are several types of humour which appear to be strongly dispreferred in mixed groups, one consequence of this is that the *range* of humour types used in mixed groups is substantially narrower than the range of humour types which have been recorded in mixed groups.

6.2 Humour as story-telling and observation
Perhaps the most common generalisation arising from past literature on this topic, is the observation that women are more likely to use more personal humour. Kotthoff (1986) summarises: 'Women joke about themselves and their experiences'. Crawford and Gressley (1991) elicited subjects' impressions on the types of humour they thought they used. Their results led them to conclude that males use more formulaic joking, whereas females use more anecdotal humour. Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992) also note that women in their corpus of spoken humour volunteered real stories about themselves, whereas men were much less likely to do so.

Personal anecdotes have been claimed to be less aggressive than forms of humour such as canned jokes or wordplay, because they do not impose an understanding test on the listener (Norrick 1994). The anecdote provides an amusing story which invites listeners to laugh and participate by adding comments of their own.

That females tend use more anecdotal humour than males is in part supported by the results of this study. Women use slightly more anecdotes than men. Men increase their use of anecdotes in mixed interaction, possibly accommodating to the women's use of this type of humour. It is interesting to

note that the women as well as the men in this study increased their use of anecdotes when in mixed sex interaction.

These shifts may well reflect that fact that the anecdote appears to be a primary vehicle for humour for all groups. That the percentage of anecdotes for both men and women increases in mixed sex interaction maybe the flip side of the fact that there are certain types of humour which seem to be preferentially used in single-sex company rather than mixed — as discussed above. The avoidance of these in mixed interaction may account for the increased percentage of the humour which is communicated via anecdotes.

It has been argued (see e.g. Jenkins 1985) that humour produced by women tends to be more context-sensitive, whereas men's is more performance-based. Women's higher rate of use of observational humour lends some support to this generalisation. I now turn to discussion of more performance-driven types of humour.

6.3 Humour as performance and display

The men in this corpus did tend to display higher rates of more performance-oriented types of humour.

The men were slightly more likely to use fantasy humour, and particularly in mixed sex interaction. As was discussed earlier, this increase of fantasy in mixed-sex interaction could potentially relate to the presence of a responsive audience. Role play is also a very performance oriented type of humour, which was used more by the men than the women — and particularly in single-sex male groups.

Other performance oriented types of humour are also used more often by the men in the sample than the women. The use of quotes is one example of this. That quotes are more likely to occur in male conversations than female conversations could also be a reflection of the finding that men are more likely to talk about television shows, books or movies they have seen (Aries 1976). It appears that men tend to use external source humour more than women (Hay 1995a: 95).

Wordplay was more likely to be used by men than by women over both group compositions, though this is a slight trend. Contrary to Holmes' claim that 'there is no such thing as a female punster' (Holmes 1864 as cited in Redfern 1984) this type of humour was used by both men and women. Wordplay is a performance-based type of humour, and often has an element of competition. Norrick (1994) points out that punning disrupts ongoing inter-action. Puns can interrupt and redirect conversation, and oblige participants to

disrupt the flow of interaction in order to acknowledge the pun. In contrast with more narrative types of humour, wordplay directly challenges the hearer by testing them. There are certain circumstances in which wordplay may serve to create cohesion, particularly if banter occurs, through the demonstration of shared background knowledge and understanding and laughing together. Sherzer (1985) notes that puns can function both disjunctively and cohesively. Wordplay is also an excellent means of displaying wit, a quality often valued in male groups (see Hay 1995a: 148).

6.4 Where are the canned jokes?

That only one joke occurred is particularly striking considering the large amount of humour research concentrating on joke telling. The hypothesis put forward by several researchers, including Lakoff (1975), that men tell more jokes, and tell them better than women can unfortunately be neither confirmed nor denied on the basis of the data. The one joke that did occur was in an all-male conversation, but this hardly tells us much. Perhaps the main information to take from this is that jokes seldom occur in relaxed conversational English, and, in this corpus, form 0.1 percent of the total humour. It is time, perhaps, to give the other 99.9 percent its fair share of the attention!

7. Conclusion

This quantitative study has provided results characterising the types of humour that tend to occur in the casual conversations of young New Zealanders. Humorous anecdotes are the most frequent, whereas canned jokes are extremely infrequent, relative to other types of humour. In addition, both gender and group composition have been shown to have a strong effect on the likelihood of use of various types of humour. As with any quantitative work on discourse patterns, the numbers reported here should be regarded with appropriate caution.

The goal of such quantification, of course, is not to document categorical, inescapable gender differences in humour usage — we should be surprised to discover such patterns, and are certainly not looking for them. The (well-deserved) criticism of the 'men do x, and women do y' approach to the study of language and gender studies has seen a wholesale shift away from quantitative work, and an embracing of social constructionism. However, one should not be too quick to dismiss quantitative patterns such as the ones reported in

this paper. Holmes (1996: 316) points out that 'forms which express social meaning may acquire social significance on the basis of their distribution'. This point has also been made by Milroy (1992: 173), who argues that social significance derives from 'the (quantitatively analysable) tendency of particular social groups to use relatively high frequencies of particular options'.

The very best qualitative work, then, will be based on an informed knowledge of the degree to which the distribution of the variables under study tend to be gendered. The study reported here aims to provide this groundwork. It is to be hoped that the results will be used as a base for much future research, including in-depth, qualitative work.

Some of the results here support previous work suggesting men and women tend to use different types of humour. But in many respects, the male and female speakers in this study used humour in similar ways. Perhaps the most striking set of results are the dramatic changes in humour style across mixed and single-sex groups. Previous discussion of "men's" and "women's" humour has tended to be non-specific about context. Context, however, clearly plays a central role. The results presented here make apparent that gendered styles of humour appear most marked in mixed groups. The biggest differences in humour styles documented here are not between men and women, but rather between mixed and single-sex groups.

Future work on gender and humour promises to reveal much about how humour is used in the construction and performance of gender. Such work will likely reveal that both speaker and audience identity play central roles in such performance. After all, an important component of 'performing gender' is the audience one is performing it for.

Notes

1 This paper is based on chapter 6 of my masters thesis, Hay (1995a), and has benefited greatly from the comments of Janet Holmes, two anonymous reviewers, and audiences at Victoria University of Wellington, Northwestern University, and the International Humor Studies Conference in Oklahoma.
2 New Zealanders of European descent.
3 Many thanks to WCSNZ and to Anita Easton for allowing me access to their data, and to everyone who allowed themselves to be recorded for this project.
4 The examples were also analysed according to function. The results of that analysis are reported in Hay (2000).

Appendix: Transcription Conventions

The transcription conventions used are based largely on those developed at Victoria University for the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English (WCSNZ).

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

Transcription in doubt

( )   Speech indecipherable

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

Intonation

?   Rising or question intonation

—   Incomplete or cut-off utterance

YES   Capitals indicate emphatic stress

Paralinguistic and other non-verbal features

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

AM: [sneezes]

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

Pauses

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

Simultaneous Speech and Latching

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

AF: remember the time when //we were at school and\

BF: /what about when you wore that\\green hat

If someone's speech follows another's directly then latching is signalled as in the following example:

AF: i used to go to school and=/

BM: /=you wore that green hat

A "=" signals speech continues from an earlier line:

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

Laughter

[h]	laughing exhalation
[huh]	laughing inhalation
[ha]	voiced laugh particle
[nh]	nasalized laugh particle
hello[ho]	laughing repetition of syllable
[laughs]	2 secs used for prolonged laughter, or for a group of people laughing.

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