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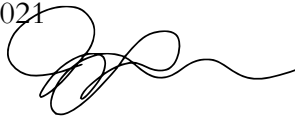




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To my muse(r).

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## ***1 Introduction***

The starting point of this work is the question what it means to understand a joke. I limit this notion of joke to the narrative joke, a brief amusing fictional story with a punchline, in order to concentrate on a specific form of joking. I also exclusively discuss situations in which these jokes are told live, that is, in which a performance of these jokes takes place. I consider this the classical or standard form of joking.

It is interesting to think about how jokes can be successfully communicated, and that one can assume in principle that they are understood or at least can be understood correctly to some extent. What I mean is that there seems to be some objective claim about the funniness of a joke, a correct understanding of what is intended. This is remarkable considering that narrative jokes (a genre that is mostly orally transmitted, which gives rise to divergent versions) are fictional stories that could leave a margin for interpretation. But jokes are not told like other stories, fairy tales for example. I want to explore what it specifically takes to tell jokes and, more importantly, to understand jokes. This understanding, of course, has a lot to do with language and communication, but it goes beyond that. An intuitive answer might be that it is the funny part of a joke that needs to be grasped in order to understand the joke. However, the phenomenon of the funny seems to be similarly elusive as, for example, that of the beautiful.

The question of what is funny and why something is funny is philosophically appealing. One can examine these questions from different perspectives, for example from a linguistic, an aesthetic, a cognitive, a social, or psychological perspective. The philosophy of humour has gained importance in recent years. The authors who engage with the subject strive to develop satisfactory definitions of humour and often emphasize the parallels between philosophical practice and joking practice. Four theories are distinguished in the standard analysis, which recognize different phenomena as the main characteristic of humour; these are the theory of

incongruity, of relief, of superiority, and of play.<sup>1</sup> I do not subscribe to any of these theories but sympathise with the theory of incongruity, which starts from the joke content and claims that joke content contains an incongruity that diverges from the expected. The recipient stumbles upon the incongruous – it surprises her and ideally makes her laugh. Laughter, naturally, plays an essential role in humour theories. It is considered an expression of amusement and a person's laughter may suggest that the person is confronted with something funny. Of course, laughter can also be an expression of something else, for example, of nervousness or of a physical stimulus such as tickling. Laughter is more tangible than the funny itself, as it is manifest, which makes it an easier subject to start from. I consider it justified to include laughter in theories of humour, especially when examining joking, because here it seems not only to be an expression of amusement, but of a kind of code that one has understood. Laughter is an essential element of a joke performance. Joke performances demand engagement, comprehension and response, ideally laughter-response. If a joke is told and there is no laughter, then something has gone wrong.

That brings me to my research question of what makes a joke performance successful. In my investigation below, I will analyse the situation in which a joke is performed (told and received) and all the elements involved therein in order to establish a theory of successful joking. These elements are the joke content/text, its performance, the joke teller, the recipients, the interaction between the participants in the joke performance, the reaction and response of the recipients, and the manifestation/expression of this response. My hypothesis is that successful joking involves a simultaneous response of understanding and laughter. This response could denote what one means when one talks about *getting a joke*.

I will structure the thesis as follows: in chapter 2 I analyse the form and performance of jokes. I examine how they are successfully communicated, discussing the pragmatic approaches of Grice, Attardo and Raskin. I further engage with Wittgenstein's conception of jokes and investigate whether jokes could be regarded as language games. In chapter 3 I discuss the social aspects of joking. I analyse the roles of the participants engaged in a joke performance. Furthermore, I examine the interaction within a joke community. I discuss Cohen's concept of intimacy and present my own concept of complicity. The common response to jokes requires a theory of the shared perception of joke performances. I come back to Cohen's concept of intimacy here and

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive introduction and further references one may consult Morreall (e.g. 1987, 2009). Dennett et al. provide a theory of humour in philosophy of mind (2011); Noël and Levinson (1998) present aesthetic considerations about humour.

relate it to Kant's Third Critique. I develop a thesis that builds on Kant's concept of *sensus communis* to explain the objective claim within the subjective judgement on a joke. In chapter 4 I investigate the correlation between laughter and understanding in joke reception. I discuss the positions of Hurley, Dennett and Adams and Raatzsch and develop my own position by arguing that, in successful cases, laughter and understanding are an interwoven simultaneous response to joking.



## *2 Form and Performance*

In this chapter I define the type of jokes I am talking about. I do so by describing their form and their performance. The latter includes my description of the situation in which jokes are told and received. The performative aspect is of crucial importance for the purpose of my inquiry into the conditions of successful joking, which ideally results in understanding and laughter on behalf of the recipient.

Within this context I investigate whether Grice's idealized maxims for cooperative linguistic communication (1975) apply to joking, or whether joke practice involves violation of one or more of these maxims. The latter is claimed by Attardo (1990), whose account I discuss.

I still want to defend that joking asks for a certain form of cooperation, which is just different from other communicative situations. What needs to be clarified is the question of how humorous communication can succeed, in the sense that there is understanding between the participants in a joke performance, which are the teller and the recipients. This understanding is fundamental for the ideal situation that leads to laughter about the joke. Raskin (1985) provides an alternative mode of communicating humorous texts, which I find plausible and convincing. Both Raskin and Attardo also argue in favour of the possibility of cooperative attitude in joking. An aspect that I criticize in Raskin and Attardo is their take on the involvement and behaviour of the recipient in a joke performance.

In a separate section I want to discuss the issue of joking as a language game. I discuss Wittgenstein's idea of "grammatical jokes", try to provide examples for it and link it to the issue of cooperation.

## **2.1 Form**

The type of joke I will consider in the following is the narrative joke. This is because narrative jokes interest me most and I consider them the “classical” form of jokes. That having said, I am well aware that there are other types or forms of joking. The narrative joke is a fictional micro-story, following a certain scheme which, in most cases, contains information about the main characters, their actions and often their location (who/what/where). Although there are written collections of narrative jokes, traditionally they are transmitted orally:<sup>2</sup> they are told, and retold, similar to fairy tales.

From this oral tradition, it also follows that jokes have the particularity of openness to diverging versions and slight adaptations. Jokes, like other fictional stories or representations do not necessarily deliver truth. It is rather the case that in a joke everything is allowed; and when we hear a joke, we are ready for anything. Yes, talking animals, but also wives who lay eggs. Of course, jokes can be realistic, and their storylines are often embedded in, or start from, everyday situations, however they are indifferent to how things really are and can therefore be neither true nor false. In the same sense, jokes also do not necessarily deliver morality – see above: everything is allowed.

Being a short form, the number of a joke’s active characters is limited. Most cases, however, feature two of them in order to allow for dialogue. These characters may have names but are often merely presented as prototypes by their profession, nationality, religion, or similar. The joke teller reports the storyline from a neutral narrative perspective and typically supplements it with the characters’ direct speeches. The story told serves to build certain expectations (set up) and leads towards a sudden but still anticipated end – the climax, the punch(line). These two elements need to be connected and coherent, but just not in the expected way.

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<sup>2</sup> Heller claims that jokes may be the last genre of oral cultures to have survived the Gutenberg galaxies. (see 2005, 126)

## ***2.2 Performance***

Let me explain why I assume that the telling and receiving of a joke constitutes a performative practice. I understand a performance to consist of the following elements: time and space, the performer's body which expresses the performative content, and a relationship between audience and performer. Joking takes place in an appropriate setting, and may sometimes be introduced with a sentence, like: "I've got a good one, listen to this." Deciding on the appropriate time and place for a joke performance is a risk the joke teller has to take. The ideal setting might be a table of friends after a good meal. However, a joke performance may also be welcome or even beneficial in less comfortable settings – think of lectures and talks, or when a joke serves to break the ice at a formal gathering. In fact, there seem to be very few situations where it is not considered appropriate to tell a joke, examples of which could be funerals or exit interviews.

The participants need to be present and involved throughout the performance in order to follow the story and respond directly to it, as the joke teller's performance depends on the presence and feedback of the audience. Let me stress that the participants' involvement regards the performance, not necessarily the story and its content. This is an important distinction, especially when we consider cases in which joke stories display content that we do not approve of (morally, socially, politically or for any other reason); we are however still engaged in the performance of it, and we may still be amused. The teller herself should ideally be easily perceivable for the recipients, but, in ordinary cases, she does not have to take up an exposed position, such as a stage, or use amplifying aids, such as a microphone.

Once initiated, the joke performance works according to certain rules that need to be followed, as in a game. These rules must be learned. As joking is an everyday social practice, most people easily come to be familiar with it, more easily than theatre performances for example. In principle, anyone can tell and listen to jokes. In many cases, one becomes a recipient of jokes at an early age. Among these might be many jokes one does not understand, however one still tries to (re)tell or perform them oneself. It would certainly be interesting to study how children learn how to deal with jokes. I think I am not alone in the observation that children tend to like jokes and enjoy trying to tell them themselves. It may be due to the performative nature of joking. Potentially, one gets attention and applause (in the form of laughter) for it. They may also enjoy the aspect of being allowed to say, for example, obscene or provocative things in this setting.

The rules of joke performance are rather complex, however. They consist in more than catching a ball and throwing it back. The joke teller is supposed to tell the story right. Ideally, the joke is also recited with emphasizing expression. You may have heard the very same joke, recited by different people, evoking different reactions: one time you found it highly entertaining, another time all it provoked was a faint smile.<sup>3</sup> The recipient is supposed to listen attentively, to make it to the end, and, ideally, express her comprehension and amusement through applauding laughter.

Usually, it is the recipient who can react more or less directly to the content of the joke, whereas the joke teller is of course already familiar with it. She quite likely might have previously been in the position of the recipient, reacting to the very joke she is telling, which is where she has heard and learned the joke. In a simplified thesis, one could assume that jokes are always performed with the intention to entertain,<sup>4</sup> which would be fulfilled by the recipient's laughter. The motivations or reasons for telling a joke can still be quite different. As mentioned above, to break the ice, but also to provoke, to create a state of intimacy or connection.

For the purpose of this investigation, I will introduce the prototype of the "successful joke performance", which involves both laughter and understanding on behalf of the recipient. This does not imply that the successful joke performance ends with laughter. It may very well be the case that the recipients think or talk about the joke's meaning or reflect on their reactions to it right after they have heard it; and even if they do not, the joke has created an atmosphere in the social space that lasts for a while. Finally, there seems to be some kind of code of honour that the joke teller should not explain her joke, as it is for the audience to react to the joke. And if it does not resonate, then maybe it has just been told wrong.

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<sup>3</sup> This of course may result from various conditions, your current state of mind etc. However, it seems plausible that the success of a joke deeply depends on the quality of the performative expression.

<sup>4</sup> Freud claims that the aim of getting pleasure should be acknowledged as a sufficient motive for the joke-work. (see 1940 [1905], 156) By "joke-work" ("Witzarbeit") Freud denotes the processes involved in the construction of a joke and distinguishes them from the processes involved in the comprehension of a joke, the "work of understanding" ("Verständnisarbeit"). (see 1940 [1905], 56)

### ***2.3 Communication***

A verbally performed narrative joke functions via communication. Two levels of communication need to be distinguished in the performance of narrative jokes: the communication between the participants of the joke performance (outside the joke story) and the fictional communication (within the joke story). In the discussion below, we should keep this distinction in mind. It is the communication between the participants of the joke performance, the joke teller and the recipients, that is most relevant to my research question about the successful performance and understanding of jokes.

We may assume that joking is a specific form of communication. We may also assume that certain rules apply to joking that must be adhered to if the communication should succeed. Grice, generally assuming an idealized form of linguistic communication, offers such a set of rules; a “cooperative principle” (1975, 45f.) for successful communication. His principle contains the Kantian categories of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner, each comprising corresponding maxims. These can be broken down to: (Quantity) providing the required amount of information, (Quality) committing to the truth, (Relation) communicating relevantly, (Manner) communicating perspicuously. What needs to be examined is whether Grice’s rules apply to joking. The related question is whether joking can be regarded as cooperative communication.

In reference to Grice’s first category, I consent that the content told in a joke performance serves the purpose of providing the necessary and sufficient information for the joke to work. Sure, you can embellish the plot of the joke story a little; however, as a recipient, one is not prepared for the telling of a joke to involve narrative detail which is not aimed at the impact of the punchline. Grice formulates two maxims that fall under the first category as follows:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (1975, 45)

I suggest imagining the following two situations: (i) You are told a joke and the set up contains some information that has no evident connection to the punchline. (ii) You are told a joke and the set up lacks some of the required information connected to the punchline. In (i) you might be misled. Grice formulates this risk as “thinking that there is some particular *point* in the

provision of the excess of information”. (1975, 46) But we have to be careful here: joking does involve misleading. However, misleading which is deliberate and strategic, the only purpose of which is to make the punchline work. In situations such as (i) it may be difficult for you to understand, and ideally, laugh at the joke because you are busy trying to figure out what a certain added detail has to do with the story and its punchline.

You may object that the form and structure of certain jokes consist in repetitions. That is, for example, the introduction of two additional preliminary pieces of information, before the third, relevant one is told. There certainly are jokes with such a structure. The hunter has to go into the woods and fail at shooting the bear two times, before the third time, where the punchline surprises us. I claim that the respective content in such cases is not superfluous but is used deliberately and strategically. The repetitions are necessary parts of the set up and aim at the punchline. Perhaps it should be specified that these repetitions need to be applied in a rule-based manner and cannot be exhausted indefinitely. The effect, then, is basically nothing other than suspense. Still grappling with (i) we should recall that an essential stylistic feature of the joke is, after all, its poignancy and brevity<sup>5</sup> which is violated by excessive information. (ii), by contrast, makes it impossible for you to be (mis)led to the punchline. You do not miss it because you took the wrong (wrong) track<sup>6</sup> as perhaps in (i), much rather you won't reach it at all because there is no way for you to get there. This typically happens when a joke teller forgets an essential detail and then, when no one laughs, adds in despair: “Oh, and the rabbit has a lisp!”

Attardo has written a paper in which he discusses whether Grice's maxims apply to joking (1990) and argues that all forms of verbal humour based on ambiguity automatically violate Grice's category of Manner, “and thus constitute examples of non-cooperative behaviour”. (1990, 355) Attardo presents the following counterexamples to illustrate how each of Grice's maxims may be violated in jokes.

Quantity: ‘Excuse me do you know what time it is?’ ‘Yes.’

Quality: ‘Why did the Vice President fly to Panama?’ ‘Because the fighting is over.’

Relation: ‘How many surrealists does it take to screw in a light bulb?’ ‘Fish!’

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<sup>5</sup> I doubt that I need to justify this assertion; in any case, this idea can be found for example in, Jean Paul's *Preschool of Aesthetics*, II, §42, or Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act 2, Scene 2).

<sup>6</sup> By that I allude to the deliberate misleading of the set up to the wrong track, whereby situations like (i) bear the risk that the recipient does not recognize this misleading but is led on a “wrong (wrong) track” by superfluous information that is not related to the punchline.

Manner: 'Do you believe in clubs for young men?' 'Only when kindness fails.' (1990, 355)

Attardo does not appear to be aware of the difference between the two levels of communication in the performance of narrative jokes: his counterexamples are fictional dialogues within the joke stories. Therefore, the violations of Grice's maxims occur within the joke stories, not necessarily in the communication between the teller of the joke and the recipients. Attardo might want to argue that the teller of the joke exclusively communicates the information of the joke story in the communicative situation of joking, yet the difference between the joke teller's intention and the intention of the fictional characters within a joke must be made clear. Nevertheless, Attardo arrives at an interesting conclusion. He contends that jokes can be communicated successfully, they can be understood, they can be recognized as jokes, and they have meaning. He further claims that it must be possible to communicate humorous content cooperatively, although a different mode of communication is required.

## ***2.4 Cooperation***

Such an alternative mode of humorous communication (a "non-bona-fide" mode), governed by a different set of maxims is provided by Raskin (1985). Raskin's rules apply to the level of communication between joke teller and recipient. In contrast to Grice's maxims they are not a guideline for successful communication in general, but specifically for successful humorous communication.

Quantity: Give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke

Quality: Say only what is compatible with the world of the joke

Relation: Say only what is relevant to the joke

Manner: Tell the joke efficiently (Raskin 1985, 103)

Raskin's maxims apply to the joke teller and suggest how a joke should be told in order to be successful, that is, to be understood, and ideally to be laughed about. I find his maxims plausible and convincing. The recipient in Raskin's model, who realizes that she is confronted with a joke, which involves misleading, will activate the "non-bona-fide" mode of humorous communication and interpret the performed text she is confronted with in an according way (by

accepting strange and unrealistic events, by activating certain stereotypes, and the like) that allows the reaction of amusement, instead of irritation. Such a behaviour of those involved in a joke performance allows cooperative communication and thus allows the performance to be successful.

What puzzles me in both Raskin's and Attardo's account is that they hold that the recipient is always first reacting to and interpreting the joke in a serious ("bona-fide") way, eventually stumbling over certain violations. Only when she becomes aware that the joke is a joke will she *reinterpret* it and react to it accordingly. I do accept that joke stories often involve deliberate subversion of common communication. However, I assume that it is possible for the recipient to immediately realize that they are involved in the performance of a joke, thus activating an according communicative behaviour. It is still the recipient's task to recognize the funny element of the joke, and I do not think that switching on the mode of humorous communication automatically gets us there. Although joke stories may display situations of uncooperative communication, I defend that the performance of jokes asks for cooperative communication on behalf of all participants involved.

## ***2.5 Joking as Language Game***

Based on our considerations so far joking could be understood as a form of game. It is only possible if all participants know its rules and behave and engage accordingly – ideally with a certain ambition that leads to success in the game. We may need to count joking among cooperative games, or games of groups, as a ball game for example, to emphasize the cooperative necessity of joking. Wittgenstein puts the point like this:

What is it like for people not to have the same sense of humour? They do not react properly to each other. It's as though there were a custom amongst certain people for one person to throw another a ball which he is supposed to catch and throw back; but some people, instead of throwing it back, put it in their pocket. (1980, 83)

In response to the quote, I should point out that there is an obvious difference between a specific instance of joking and a generally shared sense of humour. Nevertheless, I believe that Wittgenstein is describing an image here that illustrates very well what happens when the

communication of a joke fails. It could also be that by “sense of humour” the author is indeed referring to a particular humorous practice, such as joking. Wittgenstein famously propounded the idea that a serious philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes. (Malcolm 2001, 29) In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein raises the issue of “depth”. He ascribes depth to problems that arise through a misinterpretation of our forms of language.

They [those problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language] are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and their significance is as great as the importance of our language. – Let us ask ourselves: Why do we feel a grammatical joke to be deep? (And that is what the depth of philosophy is.) (1977 [1958], 111./p. 79; my translation)

“Grammar”, here, expresses the norms of meaningful language. Meaningful language and successful communication are only possible when the use of words is justifiable in a way everybody understands. Investigating grammar is therefore an activity that clarifies our language. Deep joking seems to display this activity of clarification in a humorous mode, by bringing unspoken assumptions to light that are presupposed in the way we think and talk. (cf. Yablo 2019, 3)

Thus, a “deep (grammatical) joke” could be a senseless sentence that arises out of a misunderstanding of the rules of grammar for the expressions they contain. Wittgenstein himself does not provide any examples for such jokes. Alberto Voltolini (in an online discussion, December 2020) however has detected an example for a grammatical joke in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* 246.:

It can’t be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I am in pain. What is it supposed to mean – except perhaps that I *am* in pain?”. (1977 [1958], 246./p. 141; my translation)

If one reflects on Wittgenstein’s point, one may concede that in fact it is a funny thing to claim that you possess knowledge of your pain. Knowledge must be open to doubt, and this is not feasible in the case of one’s own pain. One can only have pain, be in pain; knowledge is irrelevant and wrongly referred to. The joke thus arises out of the misunderstanding of the grammar of “know” and of “pain” (or of expressions of sensations more generally). A similar grammatical error that could provide deep joke material is displayed in the sentence: “I know what I am thinking”. A joke attributed to Lewis Carroll serves as another example:

King: “Who do you see on the road?” Alice: “I see nobody.” King: “What eyes you have, to see nobody; at this distance, it’s all I can do to see somebody.”

This deep joke, which consists of a short dialogue between the two fictional characters King and Alice, reveals the misuse of “nothing” and its cognate expressions as referential terms. (see Yablo 2019)

There is another example,<sup>7</sup> well known and highly revealing which ties directly into and carries forward the idea of Wittgenstein’s deep grammatical joke. There are actually two versions of this joke, aiming for opposing but equally original punchlines:

A group of salespeople had been travelling the country for many years, always sharing the same carriage in the train and always telling one another jokes.<sup>8</sup> Over the years, they had become so familiar with the jokes that they just used numbers to indicate them. One of them would say “142” and they’d all laugh. Or “89!” A young person joined them and after a few journeys decided she’d take part. So, when there was a lull, she exclaimed “107”. Nobody laughed. The young person wondered what she could have done wrong. Had she chosen the wrong number? She got the answer from one of the group “One must also know *how to tell* a joke.”

The alternative, positive punchline, instead, goes as follows

There was a lot of laughter and one of the group turned to her and said: “That’s a good one! – We hadn’t heard it before.”

This joke accomplishes several things. Firstly, it makes a joke out of the performance of joking. Secondly, it radically puts into question the relevance of the actual content of a joke story. And thirdly, of course, it is also a joke about the unwritten mechanisms of communication. The group is in possession of a code, it shares a way of life in which the new person cannot yet participate. She tries her hand at it and fails in one case, mysteriously succeeds in the other. Both cases illustrate how arbitrary the code must be. The second punchline in particular triggers a feeling of disquiet. There is a happy ending, the joke (the telling of the number) succeeds, no one is offended, everything is harmless, and yet this punchline provokes a deep uncertainty about our use of language. It raises questions, such as: What is actually happening in communication? Do we communicate content and do we respond to content that is not comprehensible to us?

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<sup>7</sup>I thank my colleague Kira David who first introduced me to this joke.

<sup>8</sup> The action could equally take place in a prison cell with its inmates and a new arrival.

Are our linguistic conventions nothing other than codes? Does the content we communicate need to have meaning? Is there such a thing as successful communication without understanding? I assume that this joke corresponds to Wittgenstein's idea of a "deep grammatical joke", as it meets the weight of the consequential effects (those "deep disquietudes") that such jokes entail.

Heller discusses the joke as the "third kind of narrative (comic) prose", next to the comic novel and the comic short story or novella, in her book on the "Immortal Comedy" (2005). She adds an aspect to the issue that creates a link to the question of cooperation that I have addressed earlier in this chapter. The secret of jokes to her, lies in the fact that jokes "upset the language game and do not aim at cooperative communication (...), because they unmask (among other things) the phony character of cooperative communication in pragmatic modes of life". (2005, 139) As argued above I disagree that joke performances ask for uncooperative communication, however I do agree that the content of jokes/ the stories they display seem to mock our ordinary use and patterns of language and what we take for granted in "eingespielter" communication – which means something like well-established, well-practiced communication, but is actually a much more interesting and fitting term, comprising the verb "spielen"/"to play", knowing how the game works and playing it accordingly. Joke stories often contain an element of misunderstanding, especially when they involve dialogue. Communication must succeed and be cooperative between the joke teller and the listener. The joke teller wants to be understood (even though she may be the transmitter of a story which displays uncooperative communication) and the willing listener wants to understand.



### ***3 Joker and Recipient***

In this chapter I discuss the conditions and implications that apply to the individual participants and the community of a joke performance. These conditions are entangled with cooperative communication and humorous behaviour, as discussed in the previous chapter, and facilitate the success of the joke performance. The analysis of these conditions involves, on the one hand, looking more closely at the role of the joker/ joke teller, the prerequisites she has to provide and her motivations for telling a joke. On the other hand, it concerns the role of the recipient, the conditions she must fulfil in order to be able to understand a joke and the new meanings that emerge from the recipient's understanding of a joke. Common conditions also apply to all participants. A special bond is created within the community of those who understand a joke and, in the best cases, laugh about it together. Cohen speaks here of "intimacy", whereas I argue for the term "complicity". Cohen's descriptions refer to the phenomenon of an aesthetic experience, whereby similar tastes imply closeness and understanding of one another. On this point, I will refer to Kant's Third Critique and the corresponding reflection on "sensus communis". I assume that an objective/ shared understanding in the *sensus communis* is possible when it comes to jokes.

This chapter also aims at explaining why I concentrate on narrative jokes. Narrative jokes tell a story, even if short, over which the participants may bond. The performance of narrative jokes occupies a space that allows for an engaging aesthetic experience. Narrative jokes also require a certain level of commitment, similar to attending an exhibition or a theatre production. One-liners, joke questions, or joke riddles most times do not feature a story and characters to identify with or to distance oneself from. This has an impact on the performance of these types of jokes and their reception. They are less involving.

### 3.1 *The Participants*

Joking is a shared and interactive practice. Nobody tells jokes to themselves, there is no motivation or reason to do so. Certainly, you can find many ways to laugh on your own, you can observe funny moments in everyday life that amuse you, you can laugh at yourself, at a text or pictures, but you do not recite a narrative joke without an audience. In principle, anyone can become a joker/ a joke teller, there are only a few specific prerequisites that are required for it. Among these can be counted: (i) proficiency in a linguistic expression that the recipients also understand, (ii) familiarity with the performance of jokes that is also familiar to the recipients in this form, (iii) ability or at least willingness to entertain (ideally emphasized by expressiveness in reciting), and, of course, (iv) knowledge of the joke that one intends to tell. Thus, performative conditions and conditions of prior knowledge or belief apply. The implementation is not dependent on any other tools or preps, such as instruments or a stage. The joke teller recites the joke freely from memory and does not take a special position in the room. However, it is not an easy task and not everyone enters the position of a joke teller lightly. It is comparable to an artistic performance where the audience's admiration is not for the success alone, but also for the risk of failure that the artist takes on. I have mentioned before that the joke teller takes some risk in initiating a joke performance. The context or content may turn out to be inappropriate. Also, she risks telling the joke wrong by messing up the set up and/or punchline, resulting, in the worst case, in disappointed silence. Naturally, risky acts can be powerful acts too. In case of success, the joke teller earns applauding laughter and in the best cases thankfulness and appreciation. Not only does she amuse her audience (in case of success) she may also create a communal experience and a shared feeling.

But why do people take on the role of joke teller in the first place? There seem to be different motivations and reasons for it. One being the wish to simply entertain as in lightening the mood. Another incentive could be, for example, to attract attention. Telling a joke can be quite an effective method of quieting down others and inviting them to listen. Yet another motivation for a joke performance is to tell a joke that the teller herself has laughed at and now seeks to see who shares her taste. Finally, I see a significant reason for telling jokes as being to test its recipients. Freud describes similar motives for telling jokes. He argues that jokes need to be communicated, they *must* be told to someone else, in contrast to the comical which one can enjoy by oneself. (see 1940 [1905], 160) Jokes require another person, the recipient, to test

whether they have attained their aim to amuse. In this process, the joke teller also transfers the task of forming a judgement about the joke to the recipient. (cf. Freud 1940 [1905], 161) I assume that the joke teller's testing is aimed at addressing several questions: Do the recipients get the joke? / Do they understand it? And if so, do they also, in case the joke contains such content, recognize the surprising, unsettling, problematic, or provocative aspects which they are confronted with and give the joke teller the appropriate feedback?

For now, let me say more about the audience or the recipients. They are usually confronted with and involved in the performance of a joke more or less unprepared. You do not buy a ticket for a joke performance, you do not take a seat in front of a stage, you do not intentionally and beforehand put yourself in a mood that is receptive to "funny" – as would be the case with (stand-up) comedy or similar. However, I take it that you can get into that mode quickly, as soon as you realize that you are involved in a joke performance. In this thesis I distance myself from Attardo and Raskin (compare chapter 2). The two authors assume that a recipient apprehends the joke performed by the joke teller twice. Once in a "serious" mode of communication. And only when she realizes that she is confronted with humorous content, then she may respond to it in a humorous ("non-serious") mode. I, on the other hand, assume that it is relatively easy to recognize when someone is telling a joke. Usually there is a difference to be noted in the joke teller's communication mode between their "normal speaking" and their joke telling. This can show in speech, gesture and mimic; and the joke content itself often contains certain patterns that are recognizable for a recipient who is familiar with jokes.

It must be emphasized that joke telling is a relatively spontaneous affair after all, as the teller confronts her listeners with the joke and its content more or less unasked. This involves the risk that the joke teller encounters an audience which is not willing or in the mood for joking. Or it simply does not relate to the joke and its content.

As already indicated, there must be at least one recipient to allow a joke performance, the upper limit, on the other hand, is variable and depends entirely on the situation in which the joke is told. It can be a small, informal gathering of friends, but just as well a lecture with an audience of two hundred people. That not all listeners will react to the joke with laughter can always be the case, both in a small group and in front of a large audience. The requirements for the recipients are relatively low. But if one assumes the ideal situation, which includes understanding and laughter, then some conditions do apply to their role. The recipient of the ideal situation

also fulfils corresponding conditions of prior knowledge or belief and performative conditions. The former include relevant linguistic knowledge, familiarity with the narrator's form of joke performance, as well as recognition of the punchline and the "funny" element of the joke. The latter involve attentive listening, willingness to be entertained, and feedback expression towards the joke teller.

### ***3.2 The Community***

In the introductory paragraphs I have tried to delineate the basic characterization of the joke teller's and the recipient's roles. I now want to take a step further and talk about the interconnected elements of the participants in the joke performance. There are not only conditions that have to be fulfilled by the individual participants, but also communal conditions that determine the success of the performance. What I presume is that there has to be some kind of common ground that applies to the joke teller and the recipient which allows the performance to take place, which facilitates the understanding and ultimately the success of the joke. It is obvious that understanding a joke cannot solely be an internalist cognitive-logical process. It is also about intersubjective, social and cultural understanding. Critchley suggests that joke teller and recipient(s) enter into a "tacit social contract", (2002b, 1) a consensus about the social world as background of the joke. Two aspects play into that idea: (i) a shared understanding of what counts as a joke/ as joking, and (ii) a shared social world the joke is referring to and playing with. Critchley notes that the incongruity of a punchline only works when there is congruence between joke structure and social structure. (see *ibid.*) In other words, what Critchley tries to show is that (successful) joking is possible iff the participants already have an agreement about what counts as joking, have knowledge of its practice, and have shared knowledge about the social world they are living in, to which their jokes refer. By doing so, they confirm that they are willing to participate in this practice and to fulfil the relevant conditions of their respective roles.

I do support Critchley's thesis regarding the relevance of a social community for joking practice. Even more so, as it emphasizes the importance of acquiring joke telling and joke receiving competency; let us remember children learning jokes in kindergarten and enthusiastically trying

them out on their parents. This way, they not only practice performance but become participants of a social world, a “form of life” with corresponding use of language, habitual activities and responses, as, for example, in the language game of making/telling a joke, (cf. Wittgenstein 1977 [1958], 23./p. 28f.) which reveal how we think and live. It seems conclusive that children tell jokes not only because they wish to entertain, but because they want to learn this practice, like doing the shopping. The focus is not on linguistic expression alone, but on all the performative and intersubjective elements of the practice.

What remains open here is the question of a shared sense of humour, which could manifest in a shared appreciation or disapproval for specific jokes and not others. Yes, in the cases of successful joking we can assume that such a sense exists between the laughing recipients and the joke teller. The tacit social contract alone, however, does not comprise this condition. Just because we live in a shared social world and are familiar with the same form of joke practice does not mean that we have the same sense of humour and enjoy the same jokes. The exclusive community of those with a shared response to a certain joke is an aspect that Cohen brings into focus in his work on jokes. He goes beyond Critchley’s tacit social contract, by claiming that jokes provide a state of “intimacy”. (1999, 28) Instances of successful joking establish a community of those involved and the participants become aware of that fact. It is not only a moment of shared laughter, but the manifestation of an alliance that relies on two constituents: (i) a shared outlook on the world (a shared set of beliefs, dispositions, prejudices, preferences), and (ii) a shared feeling/ a shared response. (see *ibid.*) Cohen points out that both constituents may be cultivated and realized without jokes; however, *with* jokes (ii) is amplified by (i). This, for him, is a very special feature. It means we laugh at the same thing, *because* we have a shared understanding. I assume that it implies more than that. Consider the following: We may laugh at one joke together but not at the next, which means that our intimacy is rather fragile. We may share an understanding of sexuality, but not of religion, or politics. So, it seems that the durability or strength of intimacy grows exponentially with our shared set of beliefs, taste, etc. – compare (i). One could interpret Cohen’s thesis to also imply that the intimacy level may be strengthened intentionally by a continuing joke practice within a community.

What I like about Cohen’s account is that, compared to Critchley’s contract, it is more fine-grained. Exclusive communities emerge in individual instances of joking. The large cultural community of a shared social world and a shared form of joke practice constitutes an essential basis for the possibility of (successful) joking but says nothing about further social effects and

meanings that are contained in or can arise from a joke practice. The concept of intimacy, on the other hand, emphasizes what happens when an exclusive joke community is built and what shared laughter about a specific joke can signify. In the following paragraph I will discuss Cohen's approach and present my proposal for a position that emphasizes complicity in joking over intimacy.

### ***3.3 Complicity***

Cohen relates his theory of intimacy primarily to the relationship between the joke teller and the recipients. I would consider it more convincing to speak of intimacy when individual recipients respond alike to a joke performance. They are in the same position and for this reason a relationship of closeness may result from their spontaneous and similar reaction. When I think of my experience in the practice of joking, both receiving and telling, I rather suggest the term "complicity", instead of intimacy, because that is just what I feel when I am, let us say, in a group of people and it is only the joke teller and me, or me and one of the recipients, who laugh heartily at a saucy joke. Cohen himself uses the term "active complicity" in his essay, (1983, 132) introducing it as a topic associated with the complexity of conditional jokes, (see *ibid.*) but lacking the definition that sets it apart from his concept of "intimacy".

There is indisputable negative connotation that lies on the term "complicity", such as complicity in committing a crime together and covering each other's backs. Or commonality that expresses itself in cooperation and mutual favouritism. Complicity in joking would accordingly underline the negative potential of the joke as something forbidden, criminal, bad, or damaging to the community and benefiting one's own advantage. But that is not what I want to get at. What the term complicity could underline is that joke practice does not imply the confiding of a moving private story and the sharing of the corresponding feeling in an intimate moment, but the intentional performance of a story for the purpose of entertainment and, possibly, as outlined above, also for the purpose of putting its recipients to the test. Complicity then defines the exclusive community of those who fulfil all conditions – the respective performative and background knowledge/belief conditions as well as the communal conditions – and recognize that they do so. What the concept of complicity also underlines is the process of a shared

realization of understanding. One knows that one understands, and the other knowers become witnesses to this. Thus, complicity denotes the collective experience of understanding the same thing. The joke teller initiates the performance and bears the basic responsibility for its success. As soon as laughter occurs, if it does, those laughing enter into an active and exclusive connection with the joke teller and share her responsibility. They enter her boat.

One could say that joke teller's testing also amounts to testing the tastes and boundaries of her audience. If you want to be on the safe side, you consider your audience in the choice of the joke you perform. By this I mean that as the joke teller you can try to assess which joke will meet the approval of which listeners and thus try to eliminate the risk of telling the wrong joke. You can also, obviously, tell a joke to intentionally provoke. Or you may simply tell a joke that you yourself like, that you yourself have heard elsewhere recently and now test, for example in a group of friends, who understands the joke, who gets it and shares your taste and who does not, and in doing so form a community with those who understand it and set yourselves apart from the others (who don't). A question I want to raise here is one that Cohen's description also seems directed at, which is: what about the outsiders? Is our sense of complicity/ intimacy enhanced by their incomprehension? What if we explained the joke and what we find funny about it and then they approved, so there were just some gaps to fill? Do we allow them to join us now? Laughter seems to be an expression that, bearing spontaneity at the core of its phenomenon, does not allow any catching up. And the mere utterance: "Now I've got it, that's good!" is no valid substitution. The joke teller has already positioned herself and seeks immediate recognition. The joke itself is message and medium. It evolves into a space for the display of mutual knowledge or belief. If I have to explain to you what I find funny about the joke, then this space vanishes; you did not get it, and you do not enter.

I want to attempt a comparison that comes to mind if one understands joking as performance that evokes comprehensive response. When you go to the theatre your main purpose is not to understand the individual actress, but to understand the play. Of course, the success of the performance is highly dependent on the acting, the direction, and everyone involved in the production. The difference is that the actress does not come on stage as a private person to portray something that she personally enjoys and wants to share. With a person telling a joke, on the other hand, often that is just the case. Although, as in theatre, joke performances mostly refer to scripts. The joke story exists independently, it is handed down and may be performed by many different people, in very different settings, just like a dramatic text.

The comparison is intended to make several points. Firstly, the importance of the joke as a medium that a person chooses to perform. Whereby, secondly, the specific joke at the same time reveals a great deal about the person telling it, because after all, they choose it, share it, and seek to reach others with it. This implies that the recipient responds to the joke, but also very much to the person telling it. The joke teller presents a work that, in most cases, is not of her own making, as something she personally enjoys. And she contributes her part to sharing that enjoyment with others.

I think this consideration underlines the importance of complicity in a joke performance. The participants involved are not professional performers and not paying audience. They act and react as private people and position themselves as such vis-à-vis the joke and each other. The applause at the end is not recognition for a production, where afterwards everyone returns to their private life. It is rather a personal and performative confession.

### ***3.4 Sensus Communis***

Cohen cares more about the experience of likeness and sharing than the experience of mutual understanding and responsibility. The main motivation for joke telling, according to his account, is the desire to reach others, to verify that others are like oneself, understand us, and, in the best case, to enter into a shared feeling with others. I have two points of doubt about this account. Firstly, there can be no equality in this sense between the joke teller and the recipients. They do not react to the joke at the same moment and are therefore not in a position to share the same feeling. The joke teller knows the joke she is telling – she might have *had* a spontaneous reaction or feeling to it, when she was in the role of the recipient. Now that she shares it with others, she may revive/remember her initial response via the other's responses. That way she can facilitate and prepare a community of those who appreciate the same joke, those who share a taste in a specific instance. Secondly, within the description of his concept of intimacy, Cohen shifts the focus entirely away from the joke to the participants in a joke performance and their desires; their desires for recognition, for a communal experience, for the affirmation that they are understood by others and understand others. The joke here seems to be only a means to an

end. I am certain that this is not Cohen's conscious intention, as his appreciation for the phenomenon of the joke clearly emerges from his work. It is true that an aesthetic experience – as this is what Cohen describes – is about the feelings and judgements of those involved. However, these feelings and judgements are always directed towards and arise from the confrontation with the aesthetic content, which to a certain extent also acts independently of the mediator, of the mediating or representing instance. With regard to these questions, I consider it useful to refer to Kant's elaborations in the Third Critique, where the complexity of communal aesthetic experience is described in its nuances. An insight into Kant's aesthetic theory will help to discuss and clarify Cohen's position on relevant points.

The interesting thing about a joke is that, unlike another aesthetic content or object we commonly perceive as a work of art, it can be “understood correctly” to a certain extent. This entire investigation bases on that fact. One may not “understand” an aesthetic content “correctly”, but one may perceive it as “beautiful”, and this judgement, if it is also to have a certain objective validity, means a challenge that Kant, most notably, faces in his Third Critique. One can understand a joke, recognize the “funny” in it and laugh about it. Laughter is, of course, a voluntary act; just because someone understands the joke this does not mean they have to laugh – it is not a necessary consequence, as with an argument that we understand, recognize as valid and therefore accept. However, one can additionally exchange ideas with the joke teller, for example, about her opinion regarding the intention of the joke, and whether she understands it the way oneself understands it. A joke is not beautiful if you laugh at it, but trying to describe or define the “funny” in a joke is a very similar challenge to describing the “beautiful” in an aesthetic content. Both phenomena are very difficult to pin down and contain the “je ne sais quoi”.

However, there seems to be an objective principle for the correct understanding of a joke performance. Cohen addresses this with his position that jokes are conditional, and certain background conditions must be met, such as language knowledge, prior knowledge, predispositions, in order to allow the understanding of a joke. Of course, there are other criteria, performative, intersubjective, subjective preferences, and the like. From my investigation so far, it is fair to assume that a joke performance involves both cognitive and aesthetic reception, that is, judgements of cognition and judgements of taste. Cohen's idea of intimacy responds to this; where joke response is not just about understanding, but also about sharing a feeling. However, the question arises as to where exactly these paths diverge. Because not all those participants in

a joke performance who fulfil the requirements for understanding automatically form an exclusive group with a shared response. First, of course, there is a coarse difference between those who fulfil the conditions and those who do not. But there is also a more subtle difference between those who fulfil all the conditions and those who judge alike, in the sense that they find the same joke “funny” and laugh about it. Cohen suggests that agreement within a group can arise in two ways: through a shared belief, but also through a shared feeling. The subtler difference then is exactly that shared feeling, which seems to provide the possibility of objectivity in an aesthetic judgement.

(...) I also need you to like it [the joke], because in your liking I receive a confirmation of my own liking. I put this by saying that the joke is *funny*, as if this were an objective matter, (...) but what I mean is that *I* laugh at it, and if everyone laughed at it, then it would really *be* funny (or as good as funny), and I do so want you to laugh at it. (1999, 31f.)

Cohen stresses the fact that he personally finds it much more unsettling when someone does not understand his jokes, and thus does not share his feeling and disagrees with his judgement of “funny” in a particular case, than when someone perceives green differently than he does.

The more pressing question, however, is: what is this feeling? Is it the laughter? If so, what is it expressive of (where does it come from)? Cohen describes it that way, that the recipient, by understanding the joke and recognizing it as funny, understands the joke teller and vice versa, the joke teller, by telling the joke right, verifies that she can reach others and that others understand her taste. The shared laughter is manifest to that. This description of a “shared feeling”, however, is rather evasive, and I am asking: doesn’t this feeling also imply aesthetic pleasure which derives from the joke? And if that were the case, how is it possible that we share such a response to this content with others, that we can assume that others have a similar experience, that there is some form of objectivity to it? I am totally aware of the fact that the definition of a feeling is indeed a very difficult task to take on and I myself do not provide a better solution but propose that something more satisfying can be found in Kant’s idea of “*Gemeinsinn*”, which I will outline in the following.

Paragraph 20 of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* starts precisely at the point that there is a difference between judgements of taste and judgements of cognition. The former do not have a specific objective principle like cognitive judgements, however they do have a subjective principle,

“which determines what pleases or displeases only by feeling and not by concepts, but nevertheless in a generally valid way”. (2009 [1790], § 20/p. 95) Such a principle is the *sensus communis*, “Gemeinsinn”, through which we apprehend the impact from the free play of our faculties. Kant claims that a judgement of taste can only be made under the premise of such a principle, and that a judgement of taste must be universally communicable, otherwise it has no correspondence with the object to which it refers. (see 2009 [1790], § 21/p. 96) Thus we need a principle with an idealist norm as “subjective-general”. (2009 [1790], § 22/p. 98) If I perceive an object with pleasure and make an aesthetic judgement about it by calling it “beautiful”, then this judgement already contains that in principle everyone else should agree with this judgement. Cavell makes a point of this idea, by stating that “it is essential to making an aesthetic judgement that at some point we be prepared to say in its support: don’t you see, don’t you hear, don’t you dig?”. (2002 [1969], 93) And in reference to the joke, one could add: “don’t you get?”

If we want to apply these considerations to the phenomenon of the joke, several clarifications are needed. First, one could immediately exclude jokes from the realm of the Kantian beautiful by arguing that they do not allow or stimulate the free play of our faculties, since there is indeed something like a “correct understanding” of a joke. Kant himself counts jokes among the agreeable, not the beautiful; for him, they primarily imply a physical stimulus.

Another point concerns the universal communicability. If Cohen assumes that we tell jokes primarily to find out whether others share our taste and resemble us in it, he advocates verifying the basic principle of *sensus communis* in individual cases. For him, then, it is not an underlying ideal principle, but manifests itself in the individual’s desire to be confirmed in their judgements of taste by others. Yet, one could also attempt to argue that joke performances, by appealing to all our faculties are very close to Kant’s idea of universal aesthetic experiences. In the ideal case, laughing at a joke implies, on the one hand, cognitive understanding, but also appreciation for the crafting or composition of the joke itself, the language, the structure, the content, as well as pleasure or enjoyment in the performance of the joke. Laughter, then, *is* both an aesthetic and cognitive judgement and expresses a subjective necessity. I am convinced by these considerations of Kant. On the one hand, they help me to better understand Cohen’s “shared feeling” and, on the other, they give me food for thought about whether and how “objective” aesthetic judgements about jokes are possible. It is true that we rarely judge jokes as “beautiful”, and

therefore Kant's claim for universal communicability does not apply, but perhaps they do go beyond the purely agreeable and require a possibility for universal judgements.

Kant himself argues that music and laughing-material are two different ways of playing with aesthetic representations or representations of the mind, through which in the end nothing is thought. However, they can be lively amusing, if only physical. (see 2009 [1790], § 54/p. 227f.) He specifies that laughing-material (jokes) must contain something absurd, in which the intellect, therefore, can find no satisfaction.

*Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of strained expectation into nothing.* (2009 [1790], § 54/p. 229; this entire sentence is emphasized)

Kant explains that the objective representation (that comes with the strained expectation) is not the object of pleasure, however the playing of representations contributes to the balance of the faculties. This is an effect that Kant also ascribes to the contemplation of fine art; however, the physical aspect seems crucial to his remarks on the joke. I am not sure, whether Kant denies the joke the potential to stimulate the intellect, or rather he wants to find an argument that it actually does, but only indirectly; because the intellect cannot take satisfaction from evaporation. I question why this should not be possible, if it turns out that the expectation was wrong in the first place. Yablo reads Kant's remarks a bit differently. He assumes that Kant is trying to say: "We laugh because we make fools of ourselves trying to make sense of something absurd. Our understanding is exercised, but then thwarted." (2019, 2) I state that the essential point lies in the following. One naturally aims to understand a joke; that is at least a useful prerequisite for a recipient. And a cognitive as well as aesthetic understanding of a joke/ a joke performance is principally possible, as discussed in the preceding sections. However, the content of the joke is not structured like a mathematical or logical exercise, or a riddle, which can be cognitively solved, but refers to something absurd, to incoherence, to false conclusions or misinterpretations. These can be recognized as such and those who do may laugh about them, but one has not thereby corrected an error or solved a problem. I believe that Yablo's and my interpretation of Kant's expositions are very close. The intellectual reaction to the joke is justified, but not sufficient to understand it. We become aware that feelings and aesthetic perception also play a role, and our self-reflective laughter can be an expression of our recognition and pleasure in this challenge.

Critchley provides a thesis regarding the issue of the “correct understanding” of a joke. He argues that jokes may show us what we already know. I assume that this knowledge could of course be individual, subjective knowledge, as the specific background condition for one of Cohen’s “strongly conditional hermetic jokes”. However, and this is where Critchley seems to be wanting to get at, since jokes are orally transmitted and retold, it is also fair to assume that much joke material is based on communal knowledge. Even “strongly conditional hermetic jokes”, though not accessible to everyone, have to be shared by a group in order to function as a joke at all. Critchley claims that it is a generally shared stock of knowledge of a social world which is displayed in a new light through jokes and in this way remembered, updated, validated and in the best case reflected upon or reconsidered. Critchley argues that this account moves away from Kant and describes jokes, in reference to Wittgenstein’s remarks on forms of life as “clarificatory remarks, that make situations perspicuous, that provide us with some sort of synopsis or overview of a particular state of affairs”. (Critchley 2002, 86) I concede that this argument contains an essential point. Critchley distances himself from Kant in his elaboration, but I think that his thesis could be embedded in Kant’s theory of *sensus communis* if one accepts that jokes belong to the realm of the beautiful and the generally communicable. I do support that jokes generally display what is shared by a community. And I also support that jokes bear the potential of providing some sort of abstraction, which enables the understanding recipient, although involved in the performance, to reflect on the content displayed by the joke. I consider Critchley’s thesis to be very compatible with the idea of *sensus communis*, if we accept that objective/shared judgements are possible when it comes to jokes (which Kant does not do).

The previous chapter (2) was an exploration of the form and performance of jokes. The elaboration already revealed that the social interaction of the participants (in their communication and in their performative participation) is of high relevance for the success of the joke performance. This chapter (3) has now gone deeper into the social aspects of joking and explored further issues. I have explored what it takes to tell a joke and what it takes to receive a joke. I also put up for discussion why jokes are told, what makes the practice of joking appealing and what its social impact might be. I have argued that joking (the performance of jokes) is a communal practice and experience. The understanding that conditions successful joke performances is in this sense also a communal understanding. I explained this by expounding the concepts of complicity, which is distinct from Cohen’s intimacy, and an aesthetic *sensus communis* that is more generous than Kant’s. It is essential for the following chapter to have

examined the phenomenon of joke understanding. Now I can turn to the connection between this understanding and the expression of laughter as a response to a joke performance.



## ***4 Laughter and Understanding***

In this chapter I analyse the relation between understanding a joke and laughing about it. To be more explicit, I seek to investigate whether one of them comes first, and if so, which, or whether they come jointly. I elaborate my position by defending the claim that performed jokes, in successful cases, elicit a response in which laughter and understanding occur simultaneously. By putting laughter and understanding on an equal footing in my model, I support the idea that the pleasure we experience in joke reception is based both on insight and entertainment. I claim that laughter is not sufficient, but necessary for a successful joke performance. By “understanding” I mean a direct recognition that depends on preconditions at the moment of the punchline.

To develop this theory, I determine the conditions that must be met in order to allow for a joke performance to be successful. This ideal situation of “successful joking” is given *iff the recipient both understands the joke and laughs about it*. The conditions for it are based on issues I have elaborated in the previous chapters and which I will recall and elaborate further in the following. These are, on the one hand, background conditions the participants have to provide, such as prior knowledge. On the other hand, these are performative conditions, such as familiarity with joke performances, expressiveness on behalf of the joke teller and attentiveness on behalf of the recipients, as well as engagement and the establishment of an alliance of complicity and *sensus communis* between the participants that I have advanced in the previous chapter.

By establishing my model of simultaneity, L/U, I challenge two other positions. The first one suggests that laughter, as a triumphant expression of successful “data integrity checking” in the reception of a joke, is based on and follows understanding, U-L. The other position regards laughter as the primary phenomenon of the joke and insights only as potential side-effects, L-(U). I point out that there are discrepancies in the use of the term “understanding” and identify two distinct notions: (a) a direct comprehension that depends on preconditions at the moment of the punchline, and (b) a further “after effect” reflection initiated by the joking process. U-L and my own position of L/U are more concerned with (a). L-(U), instead, which considers

laughter to be the immediate response to joking, assumes a notion of understanding that is closer to (b). Thus, L-(U) and (a) are not compatible, which means that I can reject this model for my purpose, since we are talking about different things. U-L on the other hand leaves out the aspect of spontaneity and presents the reception of a joke as a mechanical sequence. I claim that something essential is lost in this view. In joke practice our main interest is not to discover a mistake and find a solution, but to recognize the “funny” element and be entertained. Laughter in that sense is not just the manifestation of relief that follows the undertaken task of understanding but a spontaneous expression of engagement, recognition and amusement.

I deliberately refrain from trying to define “the funny”, since I am convinced that such a definition can never be completely satisfying and valid; I have briefly tried to explain this when I addressed the subject of the aesthetic experience and showed its similarity to the phenomena of the “beautiful”. What I would like to address in the beginning of this chapter, however, is the theory of incongruity. This theory takes the position that amusement arises from the perception of incongruity, which determines the structure of funny content.

### ***4.1 Incongruity***

If there is a dominant modern theory in philosophy of humour, it is the theory of incongruity (among its proponents are, for example, Clark 1970, Morreall 1987). Its key claim is that the humorous emerges from the “perception of something incongruous – something that violates our mental patterns and expectations”. (Morreall 2020, 8) For some proponents of this theory, it involves, on the one hand, the perception and, on the other, the resolution of something incongruous. That is how incongruity causes amusement. Kant’s thoughts on joking are close to the idea of incongruity, although he is not using the term “incongruous”, and he does not emphasize the aspect of resolution, rather the contrary. Remember his argument that laughing-material (jokes) contains something absurd (“etwas Widersinniges”, something contra the sense, which differs from “Unsinniges”, nonsensical), in which the intellect itself is activated but can find no satisfaction. (see 2009 [1790], § 54/p. 228f.) In chapter 3 I have shared my interpretation of Kant’s thought as: the intellect cannot solve the riddle or problem of the absurd, it can only recognize it. Laughter may then be a possible expression of the self-reflective disappointment or

irritation that stems from the strained expectation. In Kant the absurd arises from a discrepancy between expectation and experience.

A general possible definition of the term “incongruity” that works for various theoretical applications is offered by Morreall in “that some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our standard mental patterns and normal expectations”. (2020, 12) A strong version of an early theory of incongruity could thus be something like:

*S* is amused by *O* if *S* perceives an incongruity because of *O*.

In jokes, incongruity may be located between the set up and the punchline, where the information in the set up is supposed to prepare and mislead, while the content of punchline is supposed to surprise or irritate. The narrative of the two elements needs to be connected somehow, they need to be coherent in a certain sense, but not in the expected sense. If there is no connection between the two, then the narrative is not going to create something “Widersinniges”, “funny” or humorous, but just something nonsensical. Let me give you a quick example out of Yablo’s (2019) collection to demonstrate the incongruity structure:

Bernstein walks into work one day at 9. He is very late. The boss is furious. “You should have been here at 8.30!”, she shouts. To which Bernstein replies “Why?”, “What happened at 8.30?”

An excuse or explanation on behalf of the character Bernstein would be the expected or obvious reaction. Instead, he misinterprets the explicit accusation regarding his tardiness, and naively asks what it is that he had missed.

If we consider that those involved in joke performances are already familiar with their pattern, then the punchline is to be expected, it is anticipated. This, however, does not necessarily create a problem for the theory of incongruity. It could indeed be argued that the anticipation of the punchline adds to the excitement about its actual content. We know it will come and ideally, if successful, kick in, but we do not know, when and how. I am sure as a recipient involved in a joke performance it has happened to you that you had been thinking about potential punches, while still listening to the set up. If that does not distract you all too much from listening to the joke story, then you can still appreciate and be amused by the actual punchline. Even if it were similar to the one you had imagined.

What appears to be an obvious problem about the theory of incongruity is that perception of incongruity does not suffice for amusement or even laughter. Amusement is only one possible reaction to incongruity. One could also be irritated, frightened or disappointed about it. There have been several attempts to refine the theory of incongruity in this regard. Roberts provides an account which accepts that incongruity is necessary but not sufficient for amusement. He proposes a refinement of the theory of incongruity via bisociation and resolution, to define the “cognitive component of amusement (CCoA)” (see Roberts 2019, 77) as follows:

Bisociation: If subject *S* is amused by object *O*, then *S* activates two inconsistent interpretations because of *O*.

Resolution: If subject *S* is amused by object *O*, then *S* perceives an incongruity via unsound reasoning because of *O*.

CCoA: If subject *S* is amused by object *O*, then *S* activates two inconsistent interpretations via unsound reasoning because of *O*. (ibid.)

This account is still insufficient to provide a comprehensive theory of humour, as it is reduced to cognitive perception; Roberts also addresses affective components of amusement in later sections of his book. However, as far as the conception of the phenomenon of incongruity is concerned, I consider this proposal a substantial improvement. It attempts a clear description of how *S* cognitively responds to incongruity and eliminates the sufficiency of incongruity perception for amusement.

The other problem I see with the theory of incongruity is that there is a lack of explanation regarding the aspects of understanding and laughing. They are not discussed but they are implied. Perceiving the incongruity implies understanding it and being amused by something that displays incongruity implies laughing about it. Both aspects, however, are not guaranteed. It is possible to perceive two elements as misfitting, without fully understanding what the misfitting exactly is. And, very obviously, it is possible to be amused by something without feeling the need to express this amusement via laughter.

As argued in the previous chapter, I sympathise with a position that apprehends the funny or humorous element in joke performances via a combination of cognitive perception and aesthetic perception, which ideally allows a judgement with an objective claim. Voltolini offers a

definition for the property of “being humorous” that is objective, though relational, namely response-dependent. (see unpublished MS 2021, 13) His account is embedded within a theory of incongruity, “for it consists in the perception, or better the realization, of a paradoxical or absurd incongruity between different representations as occurring in a fictional representational model”. (ibid.)

I acknowledge that incongruity plays a role in amusement that emerges of the perception of something “Widersinning”, presented in a fictional model, as Voltolini suggests, which in my case is a recited joke story. As argued in chapter 3 I contend that amusement is highly dependent on the circumstances. The participants of a joke performance actively enter the mode of joking, where the joke story is performed and perceived as fictional content, to which the participants react differently than to content of their everyday reality, which facilitates the recognition of the “funny” and corresponding amusement. In accordance with my account that concentrates on jokes exclusively I therefore claim that the incongruous element inherent in a joke story may be recognized as “funny” and lead to amusement within the framework of a joke performance. I claim that this recognition does not extend to the resolution of the incongruity perceived, as for example Kulka defends. His account suggests that “it is not the incongruous itself which is the proper object of the aesthetic or humorous enjoyment, but its resolution”. (Kulka 2007, 333) I assume that if we actually indicated the incongruous elements in individual jokes we laughed at and tried to explain how we resolved them, it would quickly become apparent that this task is neither easy nor necessary for amusement. This view is also held by Morreall, who argues that “it is possible to be faced with some incongruity and simply enjoy it, without feeling compelled to figure it out”. (Morreall 1987, 196)

Incongruity is not in the centre of my account of successful joking. However, if I tried to embed the theory within my account then my take on it would be the following:

The recipient involved in a joke performance may recognize the incongruous element inherent in the joke story performed as “funny” and laugh about it, if all conditions for successful joking are fulfilled.

Let me outline these conditions for successful joking in the following sections.

## 4.2 Background Conditions

In addition to the information provided by the story, the successful joke performance also builds upon prior knowledge or belief. Cohen claims that jokes are always conditional, in the sense that “the audience must supply something in order either to get the joke or to be amused by it. That something is the *condition* on which the success of the joke depends”. (1999, 12) Here we have exactly the two elements I am concerned with; and it might seem a very obvious claim. Still, in an earlier essay (“Jokes” 1983) Cohen divides jokes into pure and conditional ones. However, in the book I am quoting here (1999) he comes to the conclusion that a pure (universal) joke, which presupposes nothing in the recipient, is only an ideal and does not exist. (see Cohen 1999, 12) And I do agree with that. The “something”-condition is whichever background condition the joke presupposes. Cohen classifies jokes that presuppose knowledge or belief as “hermetic”, whereas jokes that require certain prejudices or dispositions are considered “affective”. Proficiency in the language the joke is told in may be the minimum requirement. Moreover, jokes that presuppose knowledge of the topics or the jargon of a certain profession, for example, are then “strongly conditional hermetic jokes”.

So far, I agree with Cohen’s account. That said, one thing I find questionable is that Cohen divides successful joking into two separate possibilities of *either* getting the joke *or* being amused by it, probably to emphasize that they do not necessarily happen together. However, being amused by a joke seems to imply that you got it – that it got to you; what else could be the reason for your amusement? Therefore, I suggest a slight rephrasing of the sentence quoted above: “(...) in order either to get the joke or to get the joke *and* be amused by it.” I assume that understanding does not guarantee laughter (and also amusement does not necessarily manifest in laughter); and that there are situations in which laughter occurs although one has not understood. However, in these cases I want to rule out that the person concerned is amused *by the joke*. Remember that I am only concerned with the situation of successful joking which requires the genuine expression of laughter elicited by the joke, and understanding.

Instances of unsuccessful joking are then such cases in which we either simply do not understand a joke, simply do not laugh about it, or we understand it (understand what is supposed to be funny about it) but are not amused by or laugh about it. There are always reasons for this: either it just does not meet our sense or taste of humour; or we simply feel little sympathy for the joke

teller and do not wish to give her the acknowledgement she seeks. One could also feel inhibited to laugh about a joke that displays or plays with images that violate one's values or beliefs. However, I assume that our values and what amuses us in the framework of a joke do not necessarily coincide or necessarily create a problem when they conflict. As mentioned before, jokes are fictional representations that do not display truth, reality or how the world should be. In fact, let me elaborate a thought in the following, that recognizes a positive potential in this regard.

When joke stories refer to what appears to be shared, or common knowledge or belief, then this may be expressed in content that is reactionary or prejudiced. This does not necessarily mean that such jokes have reactionary or prejudiced implications. What could also be the case is that jokes which display what appears to be shared knowledge stimulate reflection. Then they do not reinforce us in our clichés but provide a kind of exercise in reflecting on them. The very form of the joke creates a certain distancing from the content, we recognize the funny or absurd in it better than in everyday life, because we already respond to jokes with a corresponding attitude. One could even go a step further and consider whether reactionary and prejudiced jokes demand a reflective attitude that allows to recognize the content *as such*. I would go as far as to say that, for example, a sexist joke that displays discriminations or stigmatisations of the sexes, is not necessarily told by a sexist person and that sexist people do not necessarily laugh at it – because why would they laugh if they do not see anything wrong or absurd in it? I would consider that something like the theory of incongruity embeds potential for recognizing not only logical incongruity or logically mistaken beliefs but all forms of mistaken beliefs, as in moral beliefs, social beliefs, political beliefs. In that sense, joking could serve as some sort of “mind-hygiene”, a common practice to challenge our concepts.

An analogous hypothesis could be made with the theory of relief, which is most prominently expounded by Freud.<sup>9</sup> This theory propounds the thesis that the pleasure we experience in joking which leads to laughter is a feeling of relief. Among other things, jokes offer us a way to circumvent our censorships and, for example, talk and laugh about taboos. The relief bases on the fact that in joking everything is allowed, liberating us from internal or external (this can be political, social, religious...) authority. In telling joke stories we are allowed to depict taboos, to violate social forms or moral values, etc. I propose that this relief does not necessarily stem from

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<sup>9</sup> 1905, this work opens the debate on relief theory of humour.

the fact that we can *finally* find pleasure in giving vent to our repressed thoughts, but rather that in jokes these very topics are dealt with in a structured way, thus providing a “safe” possibility to deal with them and reflect on them. That way joke performances can function as a lifting of social and/or psychological orders of censorship, opening up a space that questions established reasoning, almost like a brief bull-session. In her reading of Freud’s contribution to joke-theory, Heller emphasizes, how, by initiating such a space, the joke teller may experience a relief “before” – (see 2005, 133) prior to the sudden event of the punchline. As opposed to the recipient, whose expectations build up while she listens to the story and who may experience the classic form of the sudden relief “after” that Freud had in mind, manifesting in laughter when the punchline kicks in.

Freud offers another interesting approach to jokes, comparing them to dreams. He builds on the theory that dream content often manifests in absurd, objectionable sceneries (see 1940 [1905], 200) which is attributed to a shift of our internal authority, allowing subconscious content to come to the surface, passing our own censorship.<sup>10</sup> The juxtaposition of joking and dreaming brings me to the observation that they seem to share the extraordinary feature of being common everyday/-night activities, in which we give up control (over our inner authorities and our body) to some extent; and when we “come back to our senses” right afterwards, we perceive our situation – our environment, ourselves, ourselves in relation to our environment – more distinctively.

Challenging my definition of a successful joke performance, one may refer to cases of joking which are only loosely connected to my elaboration above. Unimaginative, clichéd puns are sometimes understood and laughed at. However, not due to comprehension of the particular joke’s content, but due to the recognition of the joke’s derivative and cliché features.<sup>11</sup> I rule out these cases as ones of successful joking, since the recipient here is neither engaging with the particular performance and laughing *about* the particular joke story, nor recognizing the particular joke’s display of a “funny” fictional representation. She is only laughing at a type of joke content. The aspect of direct understanding and spontaneous reaction is lost in these cases, since the recipient derives her amusement only via activating the idea of a type and not directly from the reaction to the token.

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<sup>10</sup> This thought is famously elaborated in Freud’s work on dreams (*Traumdeutung* 1900).

<sup>11</sup> I thank Philip Letts for bringing this possible objection to my attention.

### ***4.3 Performative Conditions***

In chapter 1 I have pointed out that traditionally jokes are transmitted orally, and that joking is a shared and performative practice. I have referred to the classical situation where a joke is recited to an audience, to describe the performance of a joke. These aspects also indicate the performative conditions for successful joking. Let me recall the main points. Joke practice requires certain skills and familiarity with it. Its performance takes place in an appropriate setting and works according to rules that must be followed, as in a game. There are conditions that apply to the individual role of the participants. The joke teller is supposed to tell the story right. The recipient is supposed to listen attentively, to make it to the end, and, in the case of success, give the according feedback.

In addition to the individual conditions, interactive performative conditions must be met, since my account of successful joking, very obviously, is not an internalist theory. The participants need to actively enter into the mode of joking. I have elaborated my account of complicity in chapter 2. All participants in a joke performance carry responsibility for its success. It is not the joke teller alone who takes a risk by exposing herself with the performance, but all committed participants do so if they understand and laugh. The shared experience of this alliance also implies a shared aesthetic experience, a shared response, a shared taste, a shared judgement in the theme of *sensus communis* as a subjective principle, “which determines what pleases or displeases only by feeling and not by concepts, but nevertheless in a generally valid way”. (Kant 2009 [1790], § 20/p. 95)

If both the background conditions that I have discussed in 4.2, and the performative conditions are fulfilled by the participants, then there is a possibility for joking to be successful, manifesting in the recipients’ understanding and laughter.

#### ***4.4 Laughter***

The laughter I am concerned with is a spontaneous expression of amusement and recognition (of what is “funny”). I want to add that while laughter may function as a form of applause at the end of a joke performance, it does not necessarily imply a judgement that expresses aesthetic appreciation. One may very well understand a joke, be amused by it in whichever way, and express this through laughter. Still, one may not necessarily be of the opinion that the joke is a particularly well-crafted, sophisticated or beautiful joke. What could be the case is that we have a deeper appreciation for a joke that we also find well-crafted, and that stimulates us far beyond laughter. This is where one might start if one wants to engage with the “deep joke” or revelatory joke that Wittgenstein or Stephen Yablo speak of. I find this idea very interesting and intriguing, but I cannot address it here.

Naturally there are theories that explore the link between comic amusement and laughter, including Levinson’s (1998) dispositional theory. According to this theory, the emotion of amusement is identified in terms of people’s disposition towards a laughter response. It has also been pointed out by various authors (amongst others by Hurley, Dennett and Adams, 2011) that laughter is not necessary for humour, as humour can involve behaviours other than laughter. I instead am not analysing humour as a broad phenomenon, but the situation of successful joke performances. It requires both the recipient’s understanding of the joke (and their understanding of the joke teller), and laughter about the joke and its performance, in order to regard the performance as successful. When a joke is performed and there is no laughter involved, then something has clearly gone wrong. Laughter is a necessary feedback for the joke teller; it confirms the engagement and commitment of those involved in the performance and completes it. Cases where laughter does not occur instead force the joke teller to ask questions, such as “Didn’t you get it?”, or “Don’t you like it?”, having to end the performance with either an explanation of the joke (which, to some, implies ruining it), or a discussion about why it is or is not a good joke, or whether it has been told wrong. My definition for laughter is not restrictive, it also contains expressions like a chuckle; as long as they can be understood as spontaneous expressions of amusement. I claim that laughter is not sufficient, but necessary for a successful joke performance.

#### ***4.5 Two Models of Understanding/Laughter Correlation U-L, L-(U)***

The pressing question now regards the correlation between understanding and laughter. How do they relate, are they interdependent, and is there a sequence to their occurrence? I address these questions by referring to two different accounts. The first is a cognitive approach<sup>12</sup> proposed by Hurley, Dennett and Adams that investigates how our mind responds to humour. What the authors show is in line with incongruity and surprise theories on jokes. They understand incongruity as a “way to lead one into either making or discovering a mistaken commitment”. (2011, 288) Surprise, on the other hand, is the response to a broken expectation. What we are surprised about is the discovery of a commitment to a false belief – and if it is not ourselves, who have this commitment, then it is our former selves or even the protagonists in the joke story, with whom we may be empathetic or momentarily identify.

The authors argue that humour points out failures and mistakes in a mental model. It is part of a mechanism to encourage the process “that keeps data integrity in our knowledge representation”. (2011, 289) It is not incongruity itself that makes us laugh, but “incongruity in a stimulus often plays a part in the discovery of a faulty mental space and its deconstruction”. (2011, 293) In this sense the pleasure we experience via a joke that makes us laugh may be understood as a reward for success in the task of “data-integrity checking”. (2011, 292) This is how the authors also explain why we do not simply detect jokes but get joy from debugging the mistakes that jokes create, similar to the joy we get from candy.

Let me outline how the process that the authors are implying could unfold. Someone is telling you a joke. You are listening to it; you follow the story step by step. There comes the incongruous punchline. You are hit by it, *because* you have also followed the mistaken belief, but you also become aware of that fact, you detect the mistake. Following and committing to the mistaken belief in a joke story is not a mistake itself, it is indeed an essential factor for the joke to even work for you. It has to mislead, and it can only mislead the recipient who is willing to be momentarily misled. However, you re-orient yourself and understand that you have been misled. That realization and the realization that you have overcome the commitment and restored order might make you laugh.

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<sup>12</sup> The theory of humour presented in their book “Inside Jokes” (2011) is also evolutionary and emotional.

If this is how it goes, then I would say this laughter is laughter of relief rather than amusement (and I am concerned with the latter). The process is actually very close to solving riddles and I am not saying that this is necessarily wrong; I do agree that joking and solving riddles are similar or related activities in some respects, but not all, for example not in their performance and their aim. Also Wittgenstein lists solving riddles and making/ telling a joke right next to each other in his example list of language games. (see 1977 [1958], 23./p. 28) How should we now conceptualize the sequence of these events? If there is a causal chain, what is its form? The model outlined above seems to advocate that understanding is followed by laughter. This model also implies that there is a slight delay between the individual steps: telling and receiving of the incongruous joke – integrity-checking – surprise about the mistaken commitment – detecting/debugging – re-establishment of coherence, and finally laughing. The process of responding to a joke is broken down into a somewhat mechanical sequence, with spontaneity not playing a very important role. Based on my own experience in the reception of jokes this does not seem right.

The spontaneous expression of laughter comes to the forefront in the second position I am referring to, which advocates the opposite order and argues that laughter comes before understanding. Raatzsch, a proponent of this position, claims that laughter is the primal phenomenon of the joke. (see 2000, 27./p. 49) Insights only follow, once we ask ourselves: “What were we laughing *about*? *What* was funny here?”. (ibid.; my translation) Raatzsch suggests that the joke itself is not actually aimed at realization; according to him it is only a possible “side effect”. (2000, 27./p. 50; my translation) But here we must ask ourselves, how this is supposed to work: Why am I laughing in the first place, if there is nothing yet that I have realized or discovered? In this case, it could only be a feeling: “I feel this is funny” – “funny” in the breadth of its meaning: comical, odd, peculiar, incongruous... – that evokes my intuitive reaction of laughter; and afterwards I might reflect on what I have heard and laughed about, in order to try and make sense of it all, try to understand what it means. Raatzsch’s model is not concerned with a direct, spontaneous understanding that depends on preconditions, but with a process of reflective understanding that goes beyond the duration of the joke performance.

It is slowly but surely becoming clear that we will have to make a distinction between different forms and degrees of understanding a joke. I propose the following: (a) a direct recognition that depends on preconditions at the moment of the punchline, and (b) a further “after effect” reflection initiated by the joking process, which extends to the recovery phase and may manifest

in something like: “How does this work? Why am I laughing about this? Why is this funny to me?”. Raatzsch, without specifying this himself, seems more interested in the extended effect of the joke practice, something like (b). My assumption is based on the fact that he goes on to argue the following thought: the mind can only find what it is looking for. However, as the joke is meant to surprise us, it only allows “innocent searching”. (2000, 28./p. 50; my translation) From the viewpoint of the mind, we discover – through the joke – that which is not sought. (see 2000, 28./p. 50) By that, Raatzsch ascribes to the joke a rather powerful (he calls it “philosophical”) potential<sup>13</sup> that enables its practitioners/ its recipients to discover something new (in its most empathetic sense) by stumbling over it. (ibid.) Understanding does play an important role for the author after all, but he still does not consider it the primary cause for laughter. I find Raatzsch’s elaborations interesting. However, as I am interested in the spontaneous response to a joke, his account is not relevant for my model.

#### ***4.6 Model of Simultaneity L/U***

This leads me to defending my own model of simultaneity: Firstly, both the background conditions as well as the performative conditions have to be fulfilled to make laughter *and* understanding feasible/ to allow a “successful joke performance”. I do not believe that the response to a joke is the same as the response to a riddle. Our main interest in joking is not to discover a mistake and find a solution, but to be entertained. Yes, if we understand, then we realize that there is something wrong, we recognize the funny/ nonsensical/ absurd within the joke story, but we do not have to solve the problem in order to feel “joyous about the successful task”. I find it plausible that we *recognize* rather than detect the funny aspect and laugh *about it* in a spontaneous simultaneous response.

There is neuroscientific research by Coulson and Kutas (2001) that analyses joke comprehension and arrives at results that are in line with my hypothesis. The authors challenge the two-stage thesis that joke comprehension is decomposed into two major components: “registration of surprise *followed* by re-establishment of coherence”. (2001, 71; the emphasis is mine) The latter

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<sup>13</sup> Raatzsch might be interested in the concept of the “deep philosophical joke” that Wittgenstein and Yablo are concerned with.

involves a process of “frame-shifting”, “in which the listener activates a new frame from long-term memory to reinterpret information already active in working memory”. (ibid.) The results of the research show that these components all occur within the same timeframe (see 2001, 74) – there is overlapping – and thus disprove the two-stage model with surprise and re-establishment of coherence engaged in sequence. Although laughter is not explicitly dealt with in this research, it seems reasonable that it could easily be incorporated into the result. I do not laugh because understanding leads me there, nor do I understand because laughter leads me there. Instead, in case of success, understanding and laughter are an interwoven spontaneous response to a joke within a joke performance.

#### **4.7 Getting It**

The elaboration of my model of simultaneity allows me to attempt a distinction between understanding a joke and getting a joke, as I presume that there is a difference between the two expressions. To get a joke is more than understanding it. It seems to imply resonance, like when you are receptive to the joke and the joke hits you – when it gets to you. There may very well be understanding without getting it. I propose to speak of “getting it” when the recipient of a joke performance comprehensively understands the joke and laughs about it (it is understanding+laughing, and everything it takes for that). Thus, the recipient who gets the joke is engaged with the performance and willing to be amused or entertained. The term “getting it” is compatible and unifies the essential aspects of my position in all chapters: cooperative communication, the commitment of complicity, *sensus communis* of a shared aesthetic understanding, cognitive understanding as being receptive to and recognizing the “funny” element of the joke and the expression of laughter as a simultaneous response. Therefore, I want to embed the term in my theory of successful joking based on my elaborations and adapt it as follows: A joke performance is successful if the recipient of the joke performance gets the joke.



## ***5 Conclusion***

I have defined what I mean by a joke and described its form and performance. I have argued that the successful communication of jokes requires cooperation. I have identified the roles of the participants in a joke performance and described the conditions they need to fulfil individually and communally. I have dealt extensively with the question of what it means to understand a joke and to what extent a valid claim can be made regarding the correct understanding of a joke. I have argued that a successful joke performance involves the recipients' response of both laughter and understanding.

This has provided the grounds for analysing the correlation between the two elements. In order to establish my own position of simultaneity L/U, I have critically discussed two accounts of understanding-laughter correlation: U-L, which suggests that laughter, as a triumphant expression of successful "data integrity checking" in the reception of a joke, is based on and follows understanding; and L-(U), which regards laughter as the primary phenomenon of the joke and understanding only as a potential side effect. I have pointed out that there are discrepancies in the use of the term "understanding" and identified two different notions: (a) a direct comprehension that depends on preconditions at the moment of the punchline, and (b) a further "after effect" reflection initiated by the joking process. I have shown that U-L and my own model are more concerned with (a). L-(U) and (a) proved to be incompatible, therefore I rejected this model for the given purpose. The discussion of U-L on the other hand has shown that this model leaves out the aspect of spontaneity and presents the reception of a joke as a mechanical sequence, where the main aim is to solve a problem. I have argued that something essential is lost in this view. I concluded that our main interest in joke practice is not to discover a mistake and find a solution, but to recognize the "funny" element and be entertained. Laughter in that sense is not just the manifestation of relief that follows the undertaken task of understanding, but a spontaneous expression of recognition and amusement elicited by the performance of a joke.

Building on these elaborations, I have introduced the term “getting it”, which refers precisely to this form of joke response. It is a comprehensive understanding with receptiveness to the funny element and willingness to be amused. A recipient who gets the joke fulfils all the necessary and sufficient conditions for a successful joke performance: she fulfils the background conditions and performative conditions; she communicates cooperatively; she engages with the performance and enters into an alliance of complicity; she has a shared aesthetic understanding of the joke performance and is receptive to and recognizes the “funny” element of the joke; she is willing to be amused and responds to the joke with laughter, an expression which is interwoven with her understanding.



## *Abstract*

This thesis investigates the question of how and in what way the performance of jokes, that is, the telling and receiving of short amusing fictional stories that mostly contain a set up and a punchline, can be successful. I address this question by identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for successful joking that must be met by those involved in the performance according to their role (teller and recipient). These conditions include background conditions of prior knowledge as well as performative conditions. I elaborate my own position by defending the claim that successful joke performances elicit a spontaneous response in which laughter and understanding occur simultaneously.

Key words: joke; laughter; understanding; getting it; joke performance; joke reception; background conditions; performative conditions

In dieser Arbeit wird untersucht, wie und auf welche Weise die Performanz von Witzen, also das Erzählen und Hören von kurzen amüsanten fiktionalen Geschichten, die meist ein Setup und eine Pointe enthalten, erfolgreich sein kann. Ich gehe dieser Frage nach, indem ich die notwendigen und hinreichenden Bedingungen für eine erfolgreiche Witz-Performanz identifiziere, die von den Beteiligten entsprechend ihrer Rolle (Erzählender oder Zuhörender) erfüllt werden müssen. Diese Bedingungen umfassen sowohl Hintergrundbedingungen des Vorwissens als auch performative Bedingungen. Ich entwickle meine eigene Position, indem ich argumentiere, dass erfolgreiche Witz-Performanzen eine spontane Reaktion hervorrufen, in der Lachen und Verstehen zugleich auftreten.

Key words: Witz; Lachen; Verstehen; getting it; Witz-Performanz; Witzrezeption; Hintergrundbedingungen; performative Bedingungen



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