

CATEGORY PLAY IN A SCHOOL STAFF-ROOM¹

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Introduction

In this paper we analyse some instances of category play in talk. In the first section we offer some remarks on the work of Sacks on membership categorisation, focussing in particular on 'intentional mis-address' and its interactional uses. We argue that this phenomenon rests upon a distinction between actual and virtual category incumbency and that this distinction provides for the possibility of category play that can be deployed for humorous purposes. In the second, and longer, part of the paper, we examine some instances of intentional mis-address and category play that occur in a corpus of conversational materials gathered in a school staff room. In these data varieties of category play, including mimicry and parody, are used to generate humour, especially 'black' humour. Category play is thereby sequentially paired with 'laughter among colleagues' (Coser 1960)ⁱⁱⁱ, often about 'serious' organisational matters. In the ways they develop the humorous possibilities of such matters teachers display an orientation to the locally situated character of organisational knowledge. We conclude the paper with some methodological remarks about the complexity of talk's organisation and the 'layering' of different organisational dimensions of conversational interaction. The materials to hand offer a perspicuous case in that they allow us to examine both sequential and categorical dimensions of interaction, and to show how in the case of humour these dimensions are crucially combined. We begin with a discussion of Sacks' work on 'mis-address.'

Sacks on Categorical Mis-address

One component of Sacks' work on membership categorisation consists of an analysis of the phenomenon of 'intentional mis-address.' In his lectures on this phenomenon (1992a: 157-162) he considers aspects of the interactional 'work' which may be done in and through such 'deliberate misidentifications' of persons. In particular, he examines the use of intentional mis-address in relation to insults, both in their giving (in sequential 'first' position) and in their return (in 'second' position). These 'insult sequences' are shown to involve the deployment of membership categorisation devices, in which the (mis)-categorisations in second position are hearably consistent with those employed (or implied) in first position. The data extract which anchored much of Sacks' discussion of this matter was taken from the Group Therapy Session Corpus and was as follows:

(1) Roger: Face it Ken, you're
a poor little rich
kid.

Ken: Yes, mommy,
thank you.

Sacks notes that the intentional mis-address in Ken's response can be heard as a return-insult in which the categorical reference is consistent with that contained in Roger's turn. That is, 'kid' and 'mommy' are hearably consistent membership categories in terms of the membership categorisation device, 'family.' Furthermore, however, the category 'little kid' can

also be heard in its 'stage of life' sense as referring to a child. The stage of life membership categorisation device, as Sacks points out elsewhere (Sacks, 1974) has the property of being a 'positioned order' device and since its component categories are sequentially ordered in terms of an individual's occupancy of them in a 'natural lifetime' (Atkinson, 1980), it is available to members on any occasion of their use to look to see whether a category is being employed 'literally' or 'metaphorically'. The sequentially 'positioned' property of the stage of life device provides for its use in talk for the doing of various interpersonal actions, especially assessments, including praise, put downs and so forth, via 'mis-positioning' usage. For example, small children can be praised by being 'mis-categorised' as 'big boy' or 'big girl' or older children may be denigrated as behaving like 'little babies' or 'infants.' In the extract above, Roger's use of the categorisation 'little kid' to refer to Ken can be heard as a 'put down' by virtue of the fact that Ken is a 'young man' of some 18 or 19 years of age. It is this insulting 'mis-positioning' to which Ken hearably responds with the use of the intentional mis-address 'mommy.' Again, Sacks (1974) has noted the link between the 'stage of life' and 'family' categorisation devices. That link is here invoked by Ken to mark the mis-positioning reference and return the insult. Ken's reply trades upon members' knowledge that 'talking down' to little children is something that 'mommys' do.

With reference to these materials, then, Sacks emphasises the use of the 'consistency rule' for categorisation.

In this case, consistency involves categories drawn from the device 'family,' from which two 'inapplicable' categories have been co-selected in order to accomplish the insult-return-insult pair. Handling the initial insult involves 'staying with the device'. By means of its sequential placement immediately following the first misaddress, 'mommy' is not heard as a mistake, but as a return-insult. The second, 'insulting' misaddress is hearably done to match the first, 'insulting' misaddress.

However, there would seem to be another interactional dimension to this and other instances of intentional misaddress which Sacks cites in his discussion, namely the dimension of mimicry. Sacks does not discuss this dimension of his materials. However, we suggest that the phenomenon of mimicry may be centrally involved in the organisation and production of intentional misaddress and mis-categorisation. We have referred to 'staying with the device'. Our suggestion is that responses to insults are often mimetic insofar as they (a) exhibit a disjunction between actual and imputed category membership, and (b) involve a speaker exploiting this disjunction by hearably mimicking the response that might be made were he/she to *actually* occupy the category to which he/she has been (mis)assigned. Mimicry or mimetic membership thus provides a method for accomplishing insult-response. The mimetic return exhibits the recipient's analysis of the first position insult. For example,

(2) A. Pass me that book

B. Yes, boss, anything you say.

In this case, B displays her analysis of the demeaning character of the 'instruction' as embodying a 'master-servant' (or equivalent asymmetrical relational pair) by virtue of her mimetic response. That is, in mimicking the kind of response that a servant or slave or other 'inferior' would make she marks the mis-categorisation that she finds in the instruction. Furthermore, the response is hearably 'sarcastic' by virtue of its mimetic character. We note that such mimetic responses frequently involve a combination of verbal and non-verbal gestures. For example, in the instance just cited, the verbal component may be combined with gestures predicated of inferiority and humility such as 'doffing one's cap,' 'bowing and scraping' or 'tugging one's forelock.'

Mimetic self-identification and mimetic talk (for example, in gender or stage of life mimicry, or other categorial form) has as a key feature the relations between 'actual' and 'displayed' category membership. Mimicry trades upon observable and available category disjunctions (cf. Goffman, 1968 on actual and virtual identities). In order to recognise an utterance as mimetic, persons have to be able to see that the category incumbency in terms of which a speaker is talking and acting is not their actual category membership. Furthermore, mimicry can be done not just for its own sake but also as an *enabling* activity in the sense that some other *meta-activity* may be accomplished through it. For mimicry to work in this way, co-participants have to be able to see what this meta-activity is that the

Mimicry is designed to accomplish. Thus, mimicry can be employed to accomplish activities concerned with interpersonal conflict, such as insults or sarcasm. Conversely, the intended meta-activity can be humour. Thus, an issue for co-participants is not simply that mimicry is being done, but to what interactional purpose.

Category Play and Humour

We suggest that different interactional uses and different types of MCD structures lend themselves to various kinds of mimetic work.^{iv1} One of these, as we have already mentioned, is humour, more specifically the making of jokes. As such mimicry is one kind of category play. In the rest of this paper, we will examine four separate instances of category play, including mimicry, in a school staff room. The first involves a deliberate case of misaddress. The second involves some parody in relation to in-service courses offered to teachers. The third involves teachers mimicking children's accents. The fourth concerns teachers' playful responses to fire regulations. The humour in these extracts is observably 'black.' That is, it treats serious professional educational matters as topics with humorous possibilities. The order in which we consider these four stretches of talk relates to the 'blackness' of the humour which they display, and to the grounds of this blackness in relation to the occupational identity of the participants (i.e. that they are teachers) and the local context of the talk (i.e. that it is occurring in a school staff room). In the first extract the black humour pertains to the participants' concerns for their

own jobs and livelihood. As such, there is a sense in which this talk could have been produced ‘anywhere’ (i.e. in any organisation), it makes no particular reference to the categorial identities and the staff room setting in which the episode takes place. However, in three of the extracts that follow, the staff room and school context is, we suggest, progressively relevant to the talk and to the blackness of the humour. That is, in treating professional/educational matters for their the humorous potential the participants can be understood as trading upon their mutual category incumbency as teachers and invoking the various entitlements, obligations, activities etc. which are predicated of these categories. Thus, in the second example, the predicates concern ‘professional knowledge’, in the third they concern matters of linguistic competence, skill and propriety, while the fourth concerns organisational responsibility (that is, the teachers should be concerned with the children’s safety).

Misaddress, Puns and Category Play

Our first stretch of talk exhibits the theme of misaddress and mimetic talk. The mimicry also involves the use of a pun. The data is as follows:

(3) W: 4/2/72

1. N. When are you going to do something about this employment situation anyway, Mr Carr? (2.0) It’s getting a bit much you know, it’s getting out of hand.
2. C. I’ll stop it when it gets to two million.

3. N: Heh-heh-heh, you’ll have to stop it when it gets to my job.
4. N&C: (laughter)
5. P: Or mine heh-heh
6. B: ((s.v.)) Here you are
7. P: (.....)

In the first utterance of this extract, the teacher (N) asks his colleague (“Mr. Carr”) a question (turn 1), “when are you going to do something about this employment situation anyway, Mr. Carr”. On the face of it, this might seem to be a strange question to ask of a schoolteacher. However, it just so happens that the colleague he is addressing has the same surname as the Minister for Employment at the time, Mr Robert Carr. So, the materials available to N are firstly ‘Mr.-Carr-as-teacher’ and secondly ‘Mr.-Carr-as-government-minister.’ By virtue of this coincidence, N is able to mimic a political journalist or interviewer (since this is an activity predicated of such a category) and to thereby playfully treat Mr Carr, the teacher, as if he is the Employment Minister being interviewed. In accomplishing this piece of mimicry, several design features of his question can be noted. Firstly, he adopts what can be heard as a serious and challenging (though respectful) *tone*. That is he deploys what can be heard as an intonation typical of a political journalist or political interviewer. Second, with regard to the content of his question, it is a question which is accountable, that is, understandable as just the sort of question predicated of political

journalists. Thus, asking a Minister for Employment what he or she proposes to 'do about' an economic (employment) problem is, for a political journalist, a perfectly reasonable question to ask in the context of a political interview. Thirdly, by appending the punning mis-address (Mr.-Carr-as-government-minister) to his question, he makes clear the humorous character of his talk.

N's question, then, can be heard as one that not only mimics the action of a political journalist but also mis-categorises his colleague, Mr. Carr. Furthermore, by mimicking a political journalist 'doing an interview' with a Minister, N can be heard to invite his colleague to share and participate in the joke. The mimic offers the materials through which 'Mr Carr' can then provide such co-participation. These materials consist of a proffered relational pair of membership categories, 'interviewer-interviewee' or, more specifically, political interviewer or journalist-government minister. If he mimics a 'ministerial response', then Mr Carr, the teacher, will show that he has taken up and used these materials, that the joke will have been 'gotten' and the proffered humour of this mutual identity play taken up and sustained. C's response (turn 2), "I'll stop it when it gets to two million" does precisely this. That is, the response can be understood not only as an answer to the question; it is also recognisable as the kind of answer a Minister of Employment would provide.

N's response (turn 3) to C's answer is interesting in so far as it exhibits a category shift from 'political interviewer' to 'member of the public'. That is, in asserting that Mr Carr will

"have to stop it when it gets to my job", N can be heard to shift a 'professional' to a 'personal' stance in relation to the issue of unemployment. It is possible that this shift embodies another piece of mimicry rather than a reversion to her category membership as teacher. Thus, N can be heard as mimicking the 'self-centred' concerns of members of the public whose interest in employment extends only as far as whether they have a job or not. The response can be heard to allude to and even mock this self-preoccupation and the political position which it implies. It is notable that N's utterance is then 'echoed' by that of another teacher (P) – "Or mine" (turn 5).

Parody, Mockery and Critique

The category play in our second data extract involves parody rather than mimicry. In this extract a teacher is perusing a handbook of 'in service courses' available to teachers, in the course of which he reads aloud the titles of some courses. The extract is as follows:

(4) W: 4/2/72

1. C:nativity plays.... (5.0)
2. N: That should be an interesting course, ed 'the educational implications of research in bees and bee keeping' (1.0) or 'quantum phenomena in the sixth form and beyond' hehhh
- 3: B: (What's that about)
4. N: I don't know, I can hardly even say it.

5. B: You did
6. N: I didn't I was cheating, I made it up
7. C: Did you
8. B: That's cleverer still

Our interest here is in teacher N's parodic category play in his announcement of the titles, "the educational implications of research in bees and bee keeping" and "quantum phenomena in the sixth form and beyond" (turn 2). Both titles can be heard as parodies of academic life, with particular reference to those academics involved in designing courses for teachers. The parody, we feel, is especially trenchant in the second title. Thus, in contrast to the first, it is hearably obscure. Indeed, we take it that B's question (turn 3) analyses this course title as obscure and that N's response (turn 4) confirms this assessment - N does not know what the title means nor can he hardly say it. When B challenges this assertion (turn 5) N replies by admitting that he did not read the title from the handbook but invented it. N can thus be heard to make available to co-participants that they may hear the course title as a parody of the academic designers of courses for teachers. In ridiculing the title can be understood to mark the gap between the 'real worldly' concerns of teachers and the academic obscurities and irrelevances frequently displayed in such courses.⁴

Mimicry, Parody and Racism

The category play in our third extract involves mimicry and parody in relation to ethnic identities, specifically

Through the use of particular accents predicated of such identities. The use of mimicry and parody here is put to the service of humour that is hereably racist in character. The ethnic categories in question are 'Irish' and 'West Indian'.

(5) W/5/2/72

1. B: It's terribly confusing when they say dis and de. De. for the (1.0) You don't know whether
2. P: That's probably from me sayin' 'look at dat man smoking out dere again' (Irish accent) huh huh
3. B: (....)
4. ?: ((coughs))
5. B: Oh:::hh
6. N: Even the West Indian lads in the class say that (2.0)
7. N: 'Sir' ((strong Irish accent))
8. ((laughter))
9. N: 'me mudder sez yer teachin' me to speak fonny' (strong Irish accent) heh-heh-heh
- 10: ((laughter))
11. N: And I say 'woddy mean man' ((deep voice, West Indian accent))
12. ((laughter))

This extract begins (turn 1) with teacher B reporting that she finds it

confusing when some of the children say 'dis' instead of 'this' and 'der' instead of 'the'. A second teacher, P, then offers (turn 2) responsibility for this pronunciation 'problem' and then parodies himself (as an 'Irishman') since he owns up to having an Irish accent. The parody takes the form of an exaggeration of his Irishness. This is achieved by 'putting on' an excessively broad Irish accent in relation to the words "look at dat man smoking out dere again". It is notable that an invitation to laugh is appended to this parody and that, in this case, the invitation is accepted. Thus, the response to the parody is much hilarity.

The topic of ethnic identities and accents is jokingly developed by another teacher, N, who reports (turn 6) that 'even' the West Indian lads speak with an Irish accent. Having reported that this is the case, the teacher then mimics the West Indian children talking in an Irish accent. There are two parts to this. First, the teacher says (turn 7) "Sir" in a strong Irish accent, mimicking a child seeking the teacher's attention. This is greeted with much laughter by other teachers in the room. The second part (turn 9) mimics a child reporting a complaint from his or her mother, that the teacher is "teaching him to speak funny". Once again this is done in a strong Irish accent and is greeted with more laughter.

The remarkability of N's observation (turn 6) that "even the West Indian lads in the class say that" presumably has to do with these pupils having strong West Indian accents in the first place. That is, N can be heard to imply that whilst it might be understandable that English children would adopt Irish inflections into their speech with daily exposure to an Irish teacher, for West Indian children

to do so is particularly noticeable. This implication points up the heavy influence that teacher P's Irish accent may be having on the children. Its force apparently derives from the presumption that West Indian children 'have a strong ethnic accent' in comparison to others.

We note that the participants are possibly oriented to another layer of racist humour here, namely the irony that it is a West Indian 'mother' who is making the imagined complaint. The racist humour here involves the implication that West Indian mothers speak with 'funny' accents so who are they to complain about their children being taught to speak 'funny.' Furthermore, N's invented response to the imagined complaint emphasises this humorous implication by mimicking a strong West Indian accent.

Category Play and Organizational Responsibility

We now turn to the fourth extract from our data. Like the previous extracts, the talk occurs during a break-time, and there are six or seven teachers sitting around the staff room. The topic of 'fire practice' is introduced and generates a series of joking remarks on the subject of the teachers' preparedness and possible responses in the event of fire.

(6) W/5/2/72

((a child, T, knocks and enters the staffroom))

1. ? () gone yet
2. T: (Yes miss)

3. B: We never have a fire practice in this school, do we?
4. N: Steady Tom.
5. T: I couldn't help it.
6. N: I know you couldn't. He's stronger than you think.

((T exits))
8. B: I wonder what would happen if we had a fire here.
9. ((quiet laughter))
10. K: Lock the door=
11. J: =Well I'd go around shoutin' HOORA:::Y
12. ((loud laughter))
13. B: You'd be the one=
14. N: =(He sen-) he'd send you out for a can of petrol
15. ((laughter))
16. B: Yea
17. J: Put in all the fire hoses

(3.0)
18. N: We've never had a fire practice since I've=
19. B: =No
20. A: We've had er (-) various plans for a fire practice

21. B: Ha ha
22. A: Never actually got around to having one

Our initial interest is in turn 3: "We never have a fire practice in this school, do we?" We note, firstly, that this utterance is a topic-initiation. Secondly, although B produces his utterance in the form of a question, it is apparent that he is not requesting information that he does not already possess. Rather, he can be heard to be 'doing noticing', or perhaps, more accurately, doing 'remarking on something noticeable'. Noticeables are not 'subjective' phenomena. Rather, to notice something as an action in talk is to make a *claim* about its 'public' status (i.e. its significance as a collective and interpersonally relevant matter), since one is 'bringing it to the attention' of others. Furthermore, such a noticeable may mark a topic or issue as one for which some *account* relevantly may be sought. By stating the noticeable character of something, a speaker may be heard as requesting or inviting an account of that thing.^v We take it that B's question can be heard in precisely this way. However, given the multi-party nature of the occasion, the production of this account-invitation leaves its reciprocity an open matter. Given that it is addressed to nobody in particular, we take it that the utterance can be heard as addressed to the 'company' (i.e. all the teachers in the room).^{vi} Furthermore, as such an open account invitation, intended for 'general consumption,' the utterance would seem to trade upon the omninoticeable and omnirelevant status of the matter it raises. Fire practices in

schools are events of a collective organisational kind; all teachers are obliged to participate in them. The “we” to whom B refers this can be understood as referencing all those teachers who work in the school. Consequently, anyone present is entitled to provide an account, since each is in a position to know that the fact that there has not been a fire practice in the school *is an accountable matter*. The use of the tag question, “do we?” can be heard as not so much designed to elicit confirmation or rejection of the statement as to further establish or mark the collective relevance and local omninoticeability of the topic. In this sense, then, we suggest that B’s question is not done *merely* for the purpose of noticing something that anyone present could have noticed. Rather, the remark can be heard as designed to initiate a discussion predicated upon the accountability of the absence of fire practices in the school. We take it that this accountability turns upon matters of organisational procedure and professional responsibility, matters which all those present can be assumed to be aware.

The teacher’s use of “we never” can be heard to evoke common knowledge of the school’s organisational workings. Fire practices are precautions; they are ways of pre-organising what should happen in the event of a fire, ensuring that adequate knowledge of the actions to be taken in the event of a fire is possessed by the school’s personnel. As such, fire practices are organisational events that should happen on a scheduled basis, according to some definition of adequate frequency and regularity. We take it that it is this scheduled character of fire practices to which B is alluding in asserting that the

school ‘never’ holds them. Taken ‘literally,’ the assertion of ‘never’ might be seen to be unsustainable, since this teacher presumably can only speak with authority about a given period of time, that time during which she has been member of staff at this school. However, this description is not meant to be taken literally, it is an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1978). As such, the use of ‘never’ draws attention to the fact that, insofar as no fire practice has taken place during her time at the school, this period exceeds that in which it would be proper and normal for a fire practice to have been held.

If B’s question is a topic-initiation and a possible account-invitation, it is nevertheless unsuccessful. The topic is not taken up in co-participants’ subsequent utterances. Instead they address another matter entirely. Subsequently, four turns later, B reinitiates the topic with a suppositional utterance, namely she ‘wonders’ what would happen in the event of a fire. This ‘wondering’ can be heard to reformulate the problem of the absent fire practices. This time her topic initiation is successful because it is followed by responses from her colleagues. Furthermore, the topic, ‘what would happen if we had a fire here,’ establishes the relevance of a particular class of items, namely those items comprising possible responses to or consequences of a fire. Following the identification of a first response, subsequent turns contain various other responses that are hearably consistent with it (Sacks 1992a, April 17, 1968). However, given the nature of our interests in this paper, there are two features of the items produced in light of the topic initiation that are particu-

larly observable. The first is their humorous character - none of the responses treats the topic *seriously*; instead, the series of responses that follows B's reformulation comprises a 'joking sequence' in which speakers humorously and successively build upon each previous response to a fire at the school. The second is the 'deviant' character of the responses. The humour is generated out of the transparent inappropriateness of the responses proposed.

The first item in this sequence is teacher K's utterance (turn 10), "Lock the door." This establishes a class of irresponsible and deviant actions on the part of teachers, given the predicates of the category 'teacher' in this context. "Lock the door" can be heard to say that K would not care about the consequences of the fire. The theme is then taken up by teacher J (turn 11) who caps K's response with "I'd go around shoutin' HOORA::::Y." In other words, J indicates that unlike K he would care about the fire but in a totally inappropriate fashion. Thus, rather than being concerned to extinguish the fire, J would celebrate it. J's deviant response is followed by loud laughter. B's utterance (turn 13), "You'd be the one", is cut off and is therefore difficult to analyse. However, one plausible possibility - consistent with the 'inappropriate actions' theme - is that B intended to say that J would have been the one to have started the fire in the first place. As such, B's utterance might have escalated further the theme of irresponsibility that runs through this succession of deviant responses. In any

case, the utterance whose production cuts B off accomplishes just such an escalation. Teacher N says (turn 14) "he'd send you out for a can of petrol." As a next item in the collection, this recognisably builds upon the previous item with respect to the theme of irresponsibility and degree of deviance.^{vii} Not surprisingly, this utterance is also followed by collective laughter. Finally, J (turn 17) takes the theme of irresponsibility to a surreal level with the utterance, "Put it in all the fire hoses." That is, not only would he go so far as to start the fire he would then ensure that the very actions designed to extinguish the fire would make it worse.

A further feature of this collection of deviant responses is their exhibition of category play. This occurs in two ways. Firstly, the responses are categorially playful in so far they refer to activities that contrast with, are the very opposite of, the predicates of the category 'teacher' in relation to a fire at school. Those predicates, as we have suggested, have to do with a collective responsibility to manage the problem of a fire and to organise the children in their care in such a way as to prevent them from coming to any harm. So this response plays off the predicates of the well-drilled schoolteacher in relation to the issue of fires. There is an issue of massive category bound obligation and responsibility here. The format for humour here, then, involves an inversion of the predicated response. Secondly, the activities referred to can be understood to play with the membership category, pupil. Thus,

given the contextually relevant identity of the speakers as teachers, a readily available, recurrently relevant and relationally paired category is that of pupil or school child. The paired character of 'teacher-pupil' as a membership device makes available a way of doing 'recognisable deviance' on the part of persons identified as teachers; that is, they can act deviantly by producing, or proposing, actions that are predicated of 'pupils.' However, the deviant character of the actions proposed here suggests not just *any* pupil. Rather, it implies a category for whom burning down the school could be an understandable activity - a predicate in other words - namely the anti-social, anti-school child. Each inflated response, then, can be heard to 'play' with this membership category.⁸ Thus, each of the deviant actions: locking the door, cheering, acquiring petrol for the fire and filling the fire extinguishers with it, can be heard as predicated of the deviant pupil. K's action, locking the door, invokes an anti-school, anti-teacher attitude. J's action - shouting hooray - is mimetic with respect to the stereotypical anti-school child, one who would be pleased if the school burnt down. N's action, acquiring petrol replicates this category membership, whilst J's final action, filling the fire extinguishers with petrol, inflates and extends the deviance associated with it.

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to explore some issues in the generation of humour in a school staff room. Such generation, we have suggested, involves various forms of category

play. Thus, as we have shown, humour was accomplished through mimicry, parody and the inversion of situated predicates or category contrasts. In these ways, our materials not only exhibit the interactionally methodical and accomplished character of humour but also show how such humour can involve artful play with situationally available membership categories and their predicates.

In examining our materials we have also been mindful of recent discussions concerning the relationship between different analytic strategies informed by ethno-methodology.^{viii} Central to these discussions has been the relationship between (sequential) conversation analysis and membership categorisation analysis. The key issue has been the extent to which it is possible or desirable to treat the sequential and categorial organisational features of talk as analytically separable phenomena. We will not enter into this debate here except to say that in our view these organisational dimensions of talk in interaction are in practice overwhelmingly intertwined. In this respect, we would agree with Sacks to the effect that whilst it may be possible to separate out these various dimensions it is far more productive to consider the ways in which they intersect for participants. As he puts it (1992b: 561), talk in interaction is organisationally *layered* and not just *serially* organised:

I've mentioned varieties of types of Organisation and proposed that Adjacency pairs were used in various types of organisation.

One of the sorts of interests raised by talk like that can be developed in the following way. Imagine a surface of some sort, and we are now proceeding to characterise that surface in terms of conversational sequential types of things. Since the things we're talking about are serial it's imaginable that for lots of them they are in some ways *serially linked* on the surface - this follows this, this goes after this position, etc., etc. - rather than focussing on another aspect of things, which is the way that different types of organisations may be *layered* onto each other I want, then, to inhibit a consideration of actual objects in terms of single types of organisation, i.e., saying of something that it's a 'question,' and then saying that it's adjacency-pair orderly in a variety of ways, and that's that, as though one is finished with it. The question of what sorts of things, even for the sequential organisation of conversation, can be pulled out of a piece of talk needs to be open, and having found it orderly in one way doesn't mean that you've done all there is to make it operate in the ways that we can, perhaps, make it operate.

It seems to us that the possibilities pointed to by Sacks in the above quotation have barely begun to be addressed. There have been some notable exceptions to this, especially with respect to talk in educational settings (e.g. Payne, 1976 and Payne and Hustler 1980).

However, the instances analysed in this paper would seem to provide ample substantiation of Sacks' indications. Although we have not made it our central task to analyse such organisational and methodical layering with respect to each of our data extracts, orientations to the sequential ordering of utterances, to the categorial membership of the speakers and listeners, to topic and to consistency of description are, we suggest, in evidence throughout and intertwinedly so. We cannot, at this point, rework our analyses of each data extract in order to demonstrate that this is so. However, by way of conclusion and in order to illustrate the prospects for such an avenue of inquiry we will consider the last of our extracts (extract 6) in light of this issue.

It is thus demonstrably and firstly the case that extract 6 displays sequential organisational features. The parties to this occasion thus speak, for the most part, one at a time, with minimal gap and overlap. Turn transitions are orderly and display current speaker's analysis of the course and content of the prior speaker's turn. Laughter is 'properly' positioned after various candidate laughables, and not at dislocated distance from them. The participants, then, are oriented to two coalescing sequential organisational dimensions of the talk. They are also, as we have suggested, oriented to the categorial organisational features of the topic at hand. The 'joke' - deviant responses to a fire at school - is consistently (in terms of the consistency rule) and progressively built up through the succession of turns by the different speakers.

The topic that is initiated – what might happen in the event of a fire – establishes the relevance of class of items to which subsequent speakers orient their speech. Indeed, the first speaker to mention one of a possible collection of such items not only takes up this class but selects a sub-class of it, namely ‘inappropriate teachers’ responses’ to it which thereby provides the categorial parameters for further items of this sub-class. Then, again, the participants can be understood to be oriented to their own and their co-participants’ category membership in building this particular humorous segment. Thus, they play off their own category responsibilities with respect to a fire on school premises. They thereby invoke those responsibilities in the telling of their own particular deviant response. Those responses only make sense as humorous in terms of the category membership of the speakers. The parodic play with the category of the anti-school child is a further organisational layer of this piece of interaction. Finally, we suggest that the parties can be understood to be oriented to the context of their talk. It takes place, after all, at break time in a staff room, which we take it is a context which affords certain interactional possibilities unavailable in other settings within the school. At break time the staff room is a setting in which the parties have ‘time-out’ from some of the operational predicates of their category membership that pertain elsewhere at other times in the school. For one thing, they are afforded a space where they can not only play with their predicates but also they can make fun out of (at least some of) those with respect to whom those

Predicates are organisationally relevant, namely the children.

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Endnotes

¹ This article is based on a paper presented at a conference on the Social and Linguistic Construction of Identity' held at the University of Evora, Portugal in Summer 1996.

² In her classic study of humour among mental hospital staff, Coser emphasises the situated character of joking and witticism. She notes (p.81/2) that "humour relies on the collective perception of those to whom it is addressed and is therefore defined by the social situation in which it occurs....The meaning of humour, then, is to be detected primarily in the common concerns of the group, and can be understood only by examining its content and themes in the context of the network of role relationships of those who laugh together."

³ We note in passing that arguably it is nowadays more problematic and socially unacceptable to do gender mimicry by virtue of the fact that such mimicry can itself be subject to category analysis and found to be indicative of, for example, sexism and political incorrectness. One way in which historical and cultural change might be evidenced is through changes in what can and cannot acceptably be done in category terms).

⁴ Evidence that this parodic talk is intendedly humorous is available in terms of the laugh particle which A appends to the 'quantum phenomena...' title. This appended laugh particle can be understood as an 'invitation to laugh', a proposal that the preceding utterance is a candidate laughable (Jefferson, 1978). As the other participants' response makes clear, this invitation is not taken up.

⁵ This phenomenon has been described by Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) as 'Rose's gloss'.

⁶ Atkinson and Drew (1979) have analysed a similar phenomenon in relation to courtroom talk.

⁷ The sequential construction of a joke is classically analysed in Sacks (1978).

⁸ See for example Watson (1997), Hester and Francis (2000)