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Journal of Pragmatics 38 (2006) 51–72

Journal of
PRAGMATICS

www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Risky laughter: Teasing and self-directed joking among male and female friends

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Received 1 December 2002; received in revised form 1 April 2004; accepted 1 June 2005

Abstract

Personal humorous remarks may be avoided in certain conversations out of fear of introducing and reinforcing undesirable assumptions. Teases directed at others and self-targeted humor are perhaps the most vulnerable in this regard. Unless participants know each other well, a tease intended as kidding could be heard as an insult, and a self-directed remark could be read as a confession. When humor is not expected, speakers may have to rely more heavily on presentational cues, such as prior humorous context or exaggeration to mark humorous intent, or pretense.

We examined variation in conversational humor in 59 transcripts of naturally occurring conversations of mixed- and same-sex groups of friends. We looked specifically at whether speakers were less likely to show high-cost forms of humor, such as self-targeting and teasing, in contexts where a listener's recognition of pretense would be relatively low—i.e., teasing of men by women and women by men in mixed-sex interactions. In mixed- compared to same-sex groups, European American men teased less and made self-directed wisecracks more, and European American women teased more but told fewer humorous stories about themselves. Exaggeration as a mode of flagging humor occurred in self-directed wisecracks of both men and women, and in teasing by women in mixed groups and by men in all-male groups. Risky humor in mixed groups was also more likely to occur as a continuation of an earlier humorous key. We explain our results in terms of gender role expectations involving aggression, power, and self-disclosure as they relate to the interpretation of humor in conversation.

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Keywords: Teasing; Kidding; Wisecracking; Self-targeted humor; Exaggeration; High-cost forms of humor; Humorous keying; Gender; Self-disclosure

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1. Introduction

Women know from personal observation in their own homes and offices that it is perfectly OK for one man to look at another man's new shirt and ask the guy if he fell through an awning. He can comment on the guy's haircut by wondering if he lost a bet. Or he can crack that the guy is so ugly his therapist probably makes him lie face down on the couch. Indeed, such comments solidify the friendship.

Joan Ryan, Columnist, San Francisco Chronicle July 27, 2001

Research over the last 25 years has reported a striking contrast between the humor of men and women. Men are said to be more likely to tell jokes, especially jokes with sexual and aggressive themes. Women are described as more likely to laugh at humor, especially nonsensical, non-aggressive humor. If women create humor at all, they are believed to offer stories of a personal, often self-effacing nature. Investigators have attributed these gender differences to societal norms that allow men and boys greater leeway in public humor. In a recent review of the literature, we have argued (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp, 1998), as others have (Crawford, 1989, 1992; Marlowe, 1984–1985), that this portrayal is inaccurate, largely because earlier humor research relied on laboratory studies of joke appreciation and on analyses of joking in performance contexts. Personal conversations collected in more naturalistic and intimate settings (e.g., Hay, 2000) suggest that the humor of men and women is more variable than earlier reports have claimed.

We have observed that conversational humor occurs frequently in the talk of both male and female friends, and in particular among women in mixed-sex groups, who averaged one humorous remark in every 10 turns at talk (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp, 1989). But group composition has strong effects on humorous remarks and narratives in sociable contexts. Among European-American speakers, both men and women were more likely to make wisecracks and to tell humorous stories about celebrities and absent acquaintances in mixed- rather than in same-sex groups. Further, while women did tell many funny personal stories, it was largely in the company of other women. Men often made wisecracks about their own past or current behavior, but mainly with women, and rarely in groups of men.

Participants deploy their humor to develop and maintain rapport with others, according to the make-up of the group. We know that interactional behavior and the salience of gender identity changes with group composition (Ervin-Tripp, 2001; Greenwood, 1996; Meyerhoff, 1996). How does humor work to promote friendly relations among peers, and why would a factor such as the gender composition of the group matter so in the expression of humor across the range of interpersonal relationships? An answer to this question requires a consideration of the nature of humor and its role within conversation.

Humor is often viewed as rooted in ambiguity. Humor-producing incongruities have been characterized as stemming from the brief intersection of tangential related planes of thought (Koestler, 1964), layering of communicative acts (Clark, 1996), the juxtaposition of opposing psychological scripts (Raskin, 1985), and the switching of cognitive frames (Apter, 1982; Wyer and Collins, 1992). In non-humorous contexts, the default response to a novel or incongruous stimulus is not the kind of mental play with ideas that characterizes humor, but rather problem-solving, a search for explanation or resolution. Conversational

behavior is guided by a motivation to understand, which typically involves the assimilation of new information to existing common knowledge of conversational partners (Clark, 1996).

When faced with discrepant information that does not perfectly “fit” with an activated sphere of knowledge, a participant has three alternatives: (1) to completely ignore or disregard this new information, for instance by mishearing or forgetting, (2) to readjust his/her knowledge base to accommodate it, or (3) to create temporarily an imaginary psychological context in which it does fit. In terms of these outcomes, individuals differ, even in the same situation, in their temperamental preference for novelty, hence for wit.

Because conversation is jointly constructed, the ongoing talk reveals which path is taken. The last option allows for an exploration of intersecting ideas, characterized by the kinds of fantasy layering described by others (Clark, 1996) as forming the basis for pretense and mental play—i.e., humor. Conversational analysis of European and American data shows that in sociable talk, participants join in or challenge assessments, or make remarks that are generally informative and relevant to the ongoing talk, in terms of both topical and action level uptake (Clark, 1996; Goodwin and Goodwin, 1987; Pomerantz, 1984). Listeners, when not cued otherwise, also appear to assume cooperative informativeness in line with Grice’s maxims of conversation (see Grice, 1975, 1978, 1982). Violations of the maxims can lead to on-the-spot implicatures regarding the meaning of local talk, or to reframing of the talk in terms of a new key, or goal, or layer of pretense.

A playful key can lead to the suspension of the presupposition of truthfulness and to shifts in manner and quantity from the norms of serious talk. Personal humor has been shown to be a means of displaying common perspective, developing a deeper interpersonal link, and building rapport (Keltner et al., 2001). In fact, we would assert that the experience of *jointly* playing with ideas allows interactants to show that they have similar attitudes and beliefs towards the objects of the play, and as a result, to reinforce the personal bonds between them. The risk is that someone may miss the playful key, resulting in a miscommunication.

For humor to work as a rapport-building device, speakers must be able to gauge when their remarks are less likely to be interpreted as having serious implications and more likely to be taken as a switch to a more playful, paratelic mode of information-processing (Apter, 1982), or non-bona-fide mode of communication (Raskin, 1985, 1992) with its own cooperation principle and set of maxims (Attardo, 1990, 1994). The dozens (Abrahams, 1962; Labov, 1972) provide a good example of a playful genre, which prevents dangerous miscommunication by using a highly ritualized form, fantasy or exaggeration, and by prohibiting plausible real-world assertions.

An extension of Sperber and Wilson’s (1986/1995) Relevance Theory suggests one possibility for how the switch to a playful key may happen. In their model, a proposition conveyed in conversation has relevance for a listener if (1) it produces large contextual effects (i.e., generates new knowledge, reinforces assumptions, etc.), and (2) the effort required to process the proposition is small. Individuals may weigh the relevance of a proposition for the immediate psychological context (set of facts and beliefs made manifest by the proposition) or search for relevancy through a set of hierarchically arranged and related sets of ideas or informational contexts.

A listener can manufacture relevance where alternative paths do not come quickly to mind. The imperative to find relevance may be so strong that it may lead to *imaginary*

relevance in a pretense layer. For example, consider the following conversational fragment one of us witnessed, in which Vivian is drinking a Diet Pepsi containing the artificial sweetener aspartame while talking to her friend Joe.

(1) *Friends talk about Diet Pepsi.*

Vi: There is a problem with aspartame, but I can't remember what it is.

Joe: It affects your memory.

Vi: Hah! That's a good one.

Joe's response does supply Vivian with needed information, so why did she take Joe's reply as a joke? For Vivian, Joe's remark achieves *imaginary* relevance, and it is this act of imagination that leads Vi to treat Joe's comment as humorous regardless of Joe's initial intent. She took her mention of memory loss as cuing his leap to proposing it only in jest as a symptom of the effect of aspartame. She might not have made this leap had he been her doctor rather than a friend that she considered witty.

Speakers who intend their remarks to be heard as humor must ensure that their comments will be heard within an immediate context to have only weak or no relevance to the primary real-world layer of talk, and that for their audience, the effort to allow for relevance on an imaginary plane will be less than the effort required to detect the real-world relevance. Two factors that affect the ease of transition to the layer of fantasy relevance are prior occurrence, or conversational key, and familiarity with a speaker's humorous practices. For example, a visiting professor once started a seminar by saying with a deadpan expression, "I have a cassette lecture for next week." Her friends knew this to be a joking metaphor, but the students asked for the cassette. She had provided no contextual cue of a joke, and the real-world relevance was strong.

At the same time, some assumptions underlying a remark could spark the construction of imaginary relevance, while others could suggest real-world relevance within a broader scope. It is this layering that allows speakers to weave humor into their conversations and yet maintain a sense of coherency with the ongoing discourse. For example, consider the following excerpt from a conversation between two sisters:

(2) *Sisters, Ellen and Leah, talk about clothes-buying.*

Ellen: But the thing is also is that I think I don't buy like mommy, 'cause I wear what I buy. Occasionally I b- I'll buy things, and then end up not wearing it. 'Cause I'll make a stupid decision, like {[accelerates]} I wanted a pair of pants that look (like this?) an' I'll buy it even though they're too big or they're too small because when I looked in the mirror I think like oh I can breathe in [giggle] these}.¹

Leah: Right. Right.

UCB-Disclab, GCON1

¹ Overlaps in texts are indicated within equal signs =, and utterances with special vocal qualities are indicated within curly brackets { }.

Ellen's accelerated narrative suggests a key shift to pretense, namely that her main criterion for buying a type of pants she had looked for is whether she can breathe in them. Leah can share in the pretense and enjoy this remark as humor to the extent that she likewise imagines that an impulse can make one buy badly fitting clothes as long as one can breathe. But Ellen's lead-in to the narrative connects it to a larger topic in the conversation, a comparison with her mother in her buying habits, so both layers are relevant in the interaction.

Although serious relevance within the larger context of talk may allow for coherency, it can also overshadow the playful nature of a pretense. This is especially likely if the pretense suggests and/or strengthens a potential assumption that addressees want to avoid. Consider, for example, the following exchange among friends at the dinner table:

(3) *Friends talk at dinner. Victor is Amanda's brother.*

- 138 Greg: If you cook like this every night, Amanda,
I'll come down and eat with you.
- 139 Victor: That's why she doesn't.
- 140 Greg: What? [laughs]
- 141 Victor: I said that's why she doesn't.
- 142 Greg: [laughs]
- 143 Angie: [exaggerated tone] Ooooh!
- 144 Amanda: Ooooh, Victor.
- 145 Victor: I'm just kiddin'. He knows I'm just kidding. Don't cry.
- 146 Angie: No you're not .. ooooooooh!

UCB-Disclab, CCON5

This exchange begins with a mock offer by Greg, in the form of flattery. Victor takes the implication, and reverses it. He teases Greg by suggesting that Amanda avoids excellent daily cooking in order to avoid Greg. For Greg, Angie and Amanda to take Victor's remark on line 139 as playful, they must treat it as having little or no serious validity (i.e., not really intended to suggest that Amanda dislikes Greg) and must be willing to entertain a pretense that allows for imaginary relevance (i.e., that Amanda knows clever ways to avoid Greg's company). This is what is usually called prosocial teasing among friends. Amanda and Angie appear to recognize Victor's comment as a tease, but are unwilling to entertain the pretense, and give a response that is a mocking rebuke of the insult. Going along with the pretense could risk strengthening a serious assumption, that Amanda does not like Greg. Since Victor is Amanda's brother, he could be privy to her motives. We see that Victor assumed his suggestion was so outlandish it would be taken as play, but Angie and Amanda's assessment leads him to mitigate by lexicalizing the humor explicitly.

The specter of introducing and reinforcing undesirable assumptions is why speakers may be cautious about making personal humorous remarks. Teases directed at others and self-directed comments are perhaps the most risky. Unless interactants know each other well, a tease intended as pretense could be heard as a genuine insult, as illustrated in example 3. The importance of familiarity is similarly evident in playful teases involving sign-reversible or reclaimed² epithets, such as *bitch*, *bastard*, *faggot*, and *nigger*, which

² Thanks to Geoffrey Nunberg (Stanford) for supplying "reclaimed."

non-friends hear as insults but friends take as signs of closeness. As Keltner et al. (2001) suggest, teasing involves both aggressive and playful behavior directed toward another that is (1) ambiguous as to whether it is aggressive or playful, (2) designed to mildly distress its recipient, and (3) marked with culturally appropriate cues, signifying that teasing is taking place. Acts that are overtly aggressive (e.g., bullying), highly distressing (e.g., public exposure of a sensitive issue), or unmarked are more likely to be experienced by a target as hostile. In these cases, a target may be more likely to hear a tease as a taunt or a rib as ridicule. Teases are more likely to be heard as friendly if they relate inconsequential or deniable characteristics of a target, occur in a playful context (i.e., pretense), and involve playful markers that identify the tease as non-serious, such as special prosodic cues (e.g., vowel elongation, rise in pitch, sarcastic intonation, etc.), linguistic devices (e.g., formulaic expressions, repetition, exaggeration), and nonverbal displays (e.g., grimaces). The less likely the target of a tease is to hear the tease as playful, the more heavily a speaker will have to rely on overt marking with cues.

The familiarity of interactants, informality of the setting, and general disposition of speakers are all factors that can lead individuals to experience conversational teases as friendly gestures. In our samples, men's conversational humor, for example, leans more toward wisecracking and competitive joking, whereas women's humor among women leans more toward the construction of humorous narratives (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp, 1998). Men's wisecracking style may be more conducive to the emergence of teasing behavior and the interpretation of teasing as friendly. Further, men seem more inclined than women to view being teased as a positive experience that reinforces a sense of affiliation and liking (Keltner et al., 2001). Consequently, men may be more receptive than women to being teased.

Gender norms about aggressive behavior can also have an impact. As an aggressive act, teasing may be viewed as more appropriate for men than for women. In general, males are reported as slightly more verbally and physically aggressive than females (Harris, 1992; Hyde, 1984; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974), and aggression is more often viewed as a masculine trait (Eysenck, 1971). Female aggression is more often of the indirect, relational kind, involving gossip and ostracism. Moreover, because of cultural norms that allow aggressive behavior by men toward men but not toward women (Crick et al., 1999), men may be less willing to engage in teasing with a female than with a male friend. In fact, Harris and Knight-Bohnhoff (1996) found that both men and women perceive seemingly aggressive acts more negatively when perpetrated by a man toward a woman. One can speculate that men who are sensitive to power issues may also avoid teasing women in a conversation so as not to establish an asymmetrical relationship. If power relations are relatively stable, as may be the case among brothers and sisters within families, teasing may occur more freely between the sexes.

We expected men in the community that we studied to be more willing to engage in teasing in all-male peer groups, where their teases are more likely to be accepted and understood as play-aggression. We expected men to be less willing to tease women peers, for fear that their teases may be heard as suggesting an undesirable superordinate–subordinate relationship with their female friends and partners. On those occasions when men and women do tease each other, we would expect that, to ensure the interpretation of a tease as play and not as an insult or believable commentary, they would be more likely (1)

to use special markers (i.e., prosodic cues and exaggeration) and (2) to tease mainly in the context of already ongoing humorous talk.

As with teases, self-directed remarks, meant only in jest, could be read by others as confessional self-abasement. In particular, self-disclosing narratives, like example 2, run the risk of suggesting experiences, behaviors, and attitudes, which may reflect badly upon a speaker, unless the speaker can assume that listeners will adopt the point of view that the narrative does not reflect the speaker's true self or is trivial. Even while telling about real troubles, women's narratives are "interrupted by jocular expressions, irony, and humorous metaphors" (Günthner, 1997:188). In an earlier paper about self-directed humor, we proposed that men and women would make more self-directed humorous remarks to women largely because of a general belief that women are more likely to be receptive and sympathetic to self-disclosure. In fact, evidence suggests that self-disclosure, especially for European American populations, serves as a basis of female friendship (Rubin, 1983), and that women and girls are more likely to self-disclose in general and are more likely to self-disclose to female than male friends (Buhrmester and Prager, 1995; Dindia and Allen, 1992). Research on whether men are more likely to self-disclose to women, though, has been mixed (Hill and Stull, 1987). Our own analysis showed that while women seemed to build rapport with each other via humorous commentaries in self-disclosing narratives (see also Johnstone, 1993), men did not. Instead, men's self-directed remarks recast their social gaffes into nonsensical exaggerations (Ervin-Tripp and Lampert, 1992; Lampert, 1996; Lampert and Ervin-Tripp, 1992).

We now suggest a different explanation for this contrast in self-directed humor. Women may be more inclined to make humorous commentaries about themselves to other women not only because they perceive the latter as more sympathetic to self-disclosure, but also because they may believe a close female friend or family member is less likely to make negative assumptions about them or about women in general. One piece of evidence for this speculation is that we have noticed that women censor what they reveal about themselves even to other women across generations and status, based on presumed attitudes. Again, friendship, solidarity, and a shared viewpoint are the factors that most strongly affect self-disclosing humor.

In the company of men, a female speaker may be reluctant to include a comment such as, "I'll buy a pair of pants even though they're too big or they're too small because when I looked in the mirror I think like oh I can breathe in these," because she expects a male would not be likely to recognize exaggeration on this topic. When addressees cannot easily recognize such exaggeration, they often must guess as to the truth of the speaker's statement. Similarly, a young man may avoid humorous self-directed narratives for fear that they may be read as confessions with negative implications, counter to his self-image as a man. Older men may have more self-confidence. When circumstances require a rapport-damaging admission, though, men may maintain a positive self-image by covering the admission with a pretense marked with exaggeration both in the content and the delivery of the remarks.

In sum, we propose that men and women will tend to vary their humorous remarks largely because role expectations of men and women in interaction shape their sense of whether their joking remarks will be understood primarily as humor. In this analysis of young adults' sociable talk with friends, we look specifically at the high-cost forms of

humor, teasing, and self-direction across mixed and same-sex groups. We contrast quick humor, or wisecracks, with longer narratives, and contrast moves initiating new humor with humor that occurs in response, as a retort or as part of a round when the key is already established. In this analysis, we expected that men and women would be less likely to display teasing and self-direction in contexts where a listener's expectations of pretense and imaginary relevance would be relatively low. In particular, we anticipated that teasing would be lower for men and self-direction would be lower for women in mixed-sex groups. We further anticipated that in those contexts with a low potential for listener pretense, teasing and self-direction would be marked by heightened exaggeration and/or by continuity with a prior humorous key.

2. Method

2.1. Texts

We selected 59 transcripts of conversation between 18- to-35-year-old peers from the Disclab natural conversation database, housed at the Institute for Cognitive and Brain Sciences at the University of California, Berkeley. All conversations were collected by students in sociolinguistics courses taught at the University of California between 1987 and 1991 and involved talk among friends and/or siblings in informal settings (dormitory rooms, cafés, cars, fraternity/sorority houses, etc.). The number of speakers per interaction ranged from two to five, with 90% of the interactions involving two to four individuals.

We divided the transcripts according to their gender composition (i.e., same- or mixed-sex groups). Recognizing that cultural variation in gender role expectations could affect conversational humor, we further subdivided speakers according to ethnicity as well as sex. We compared European-American with Latino and Asian-American speakers in light of prior research suggesting that the latter two groups were more likely to experience familial and/or cultural pressures to maintain traditional gender roles and, in some instances, to score more traditionally on indices of gender identity (Chow, 1987; True, 1990; Vazquez-Nuttall et al., 1987). Table 1 provides the breakdown of speakers according to speaker sex and ethnicity, and group composition.

We did not have enough data from ethnically homogeneous groups to look at ethnicity as well as sex by group homogeneity. Seventy-six percent of our European American speakers were in groups composed of individuals from European American backgrounds only. However, only 46% of our Asian-American speakers were in interactions with just Asian-Americans, if we pooled those with Filipino, Chinese, and Korean heritage. There was only one all-Latino interaction. For this reason, we focused on the ethnicity of the speaker, not of group for our data analysis.

2.2. Coding

For each text, a remark was identified as humor if it was either (1) accompanied by a speaker's or listener's laughter, (2) possessed a prosodic contour associated with humor, such as a sarcastic intonation, (3) was identified explicitly by a speaker as a joke, or (4)

Table 1

Number of European-American, Latino, and Asian-American men and women in same- and mixed-sex interactions

Speaker ethnicity	Sex of speaker	Sex of group	Sample size	Number of texts
European-American	Male	Same	41	15
		Mixed	32	19
	Female	Same	22	9
		Mixed	30	16
Latino and Asian-American	Male	Same	21	9
		Mixed	10	10
	Female	Same	19	7
		Mixed	13	11
		Overall		188

continued an ongoing sequence of humorous banter with prior turns already marked by laughter or prosodic contour. Laughter with no apparent referent was not coded. By using laughter and contextual features as indices of humor we tried to minimize the influence of our own subjective interpretations of what was or was not intended as humor. Overall, we identified 2187 humorous moves across the 59 texts.

For each text, one primary researcher and two student assistants coded independently all humor moves for four formal characteristics (Initiation, Vehicle, Theme, and Degree of Exaggeration) and four functional features (Target, Social Dynamic, Speaker's Purpose, and Social Effect). We retained all coding decisions on which two or all three coders agreed, and catalogued the cases on which all three disagreed. Intercoder agreement tended to be the highest for Theme (94% agreement; $\kappa = .82$) followed by Purpose (78%; $\kappa = .60$), Target (77%; $\kappa = .72$), Social Dynamic (77%; $\kappa = .65$), Social Effect (77%; $\kappa = .45$), Exaggeration (76%; $\kappa = .56$), Initiation (73%; $\kappa = .58$), and Vehicle (71%; $\kappa = .56$).³ Disagreements were resolved through discussions among coders of the individual items, and after discussion, the group's final consensus for each item was recorded.

For the present study, we limited our analysis to six of the eight coding topics: Initiation, Vehicle, Exaggeration, Target, Social Dynamic, and Purpose. 'Initiation' captured whether a remark was an initial attempt at humor or built upon an earlier try, either by the speaker or another person in the interaction. Of the 2187 coded attempts at humor, 43% were identified as initial tries and 56% were responsive, either building immediately upon another speaker's humor or contributing to longer humorous exchange on a common theme. The remaining 1% were designated unclassifiable. We expected risky humor more often in cases of responsive maintenance of humorous key.

'Vehicle' denoted the humor type, which was categorized as a wisecrack, narrative, or standard joke, among other possibilities. We defined wisecracks as brief remarks characterized by pretense and reactive to another person's behavior or previous comments.

³ Kappa (κ) is a measure of reliability, representing the degree of agreement between raters or coders beyond that which would be expected by chance. According to Landis and Koch (1977), values between .41 and .60 may be considered moderate; between .61 and .80, substantial, and between .81 and 1.00, almost perfect.

We defined narratives as descriptions of personal experiences or attitudes that focused on the telling of a humorous episode or practice, whether real or imaginary. Victor's *That's why she doesn't* in example 3 is illustrative of a wisecrack, and Ellen's description of clothes buying from example 2 illustrates a narrative. Jokes, which we found in earlier analyses to be infrequent in our natural conversations, covered all attempts that followed a prescribed or familiar humor formula (e.g., puns, riddles, shaggy dog stories, etc.). Of the 2187 humor-related attempts, 61% were identified as wisecracks, 29% as narratives, and only 1% as jokes. The remaining 9% were categorized as mimicry, wordplay, or comedic gestures.

'Degree of Exaggeration' focused on whether a humorous comment or narrative could be taken to be factual or fanciful. Some remarks could be defined as 'Reality-based', centered largely around what we judged to be genuine events, characterized as crazy, funny, or comical, or stated as factual with no overt hint of distortion (Victor's comments in example 3 illustrate the latter). Others' remarks could be identified as 'Simple Distortions and Exaggerations', characterized by either understatement or hyperbole, and still others could be classified as 'Flights of Fantasy', based on an unbelievable or unlikely state of affairs. In the final data set, 49% of all humorous remarks were coded as 'Reality-Based', 31% were coded as 'Exaggerations', and 20% were coded as 'Fantasy'. This variable was one of the disambiguating markers we expected would change with risky humor.

Under 'Target', we captured the focus of the humor, which could be either the self, another person within the interacting group, people absent from the interaction, an object, or well-known social institutions, and under 'Social Dynamic', we classified the positive or negative impact of a remark on its target. Positive remarks, which tended to enhance the image of a target, were coded as 'Flattery'. Negative remarks could be coded as either 'Ribs and Teases', which involved the playful baiting of another person, often by the mention of unflattering characteristics, or 'Put-Downs', which involved depreciatory remarks, most notably insults and self-abasement. Remarks that were neither positive nor negative were coded as 'Neutral'. Of the coded attempts, 81% were directed toward specific individuals or groups: 22% were self-directed; 32% were directed at individuals within the interacting group, and 27% were directed at people outside of the interaction. The remaining remarks generally involved comments about animals, objects, or the ongoing social interaction in general. Of the self-directed remarks, 10% were coded as 'Flattery' and 30% were coded as 'Put-Downs' or a kind of 'Self-Rib'. Among the remarks directed at others present or to their in-group, less than 1% were coded as 'Flattery'; however, 76% and 10% were coded as 'Ribs' and 'Put-Downs', respectively. Of the outsider-directed remarks, 4% were viewed as 'Flattery', and 49% were coded as 'Put-Downs'.

Finally, under 'Purpose', we captured the intention of a humorous remark or gesture, according to function categories similar to ones previously described by other researchers (Long and Graesser, 1988; Ziv, 1984). We labeled our categories broadly as 'Self-Enhancement', 'Nurturance', 'Protection', 'Provocation', and 'Just for Fun'. Self-enhancing comments typically involved social comparisons in which speakers presented themselves as superior in some fashion to others in the interaction. Nurturing remarks covered all instances intended to minimize the significance of an anxiety-provoking or traumatic experience, by talking or joking about it, and in some cases, by soliciting listeners to empathize with a speaker's point of view. Provocative humor included all

instances intended to goad or scandalize a listener (which could include teasing or taboo language), and Just for Fun covered all attempts that did not fall into the other four categories. The majority of humorous comments were coded as Just for Fun (63%), followed by Provocation (14%), Nurturance (12%), Protection (9%), and Self-Enhancement (1%).

3. Results

We focused our analysis on the two types of humor that we proposed earlier as presenting the greatest interpersonal risk: teasing and self-directed joking. For teasing, we included all remarks coded as participant-directed ribs or put-downs, and for self-directed joking, all instances coded with the speaker as the target of the put-down. Teases and self-directed remarks were tallied for each speaker and weighted by the speaker's turns at talk to control for differences in the lengths of conversations across texts. Final counts were recorded as the number of instances of humor per 100 turns.

Because of anticipated cultural variation, we looked at our European- and Latino/Asian-American speakers separately. We also decided to analyze narratives and wisecracks separately because of their different functional properties. For each sample and vehicle type, we conducted comparisons for speaker sex (male vs. female), group composition (same- vs. mixed-sex), point of initiation (initial vs. responsive try), and degree of exaggeration. With respect to initiation, we were specifically interested in whether speakers initiated risky forms of humor outside of play (an initial or isolated try), or only engaged in teasing and self-direction after a playful or humorous exchange was safely in progress (as a jocular response to someone else's humor). We examined also whether exaggeration or fantasy occurred more often, presumably to identify teases and self-directed humor as funny rather than realistic.

3.1. *Teasing and self-direction*

For teasing and self-directed joking in general, we found two main effects for sex and no main effects for group composition. European American women ($M = 1.30$ contributions per 100 turns) were significantly more likely than European American men ($M = 0.70$) to tell self-directed humorous narratives, $F(1, 121) = 4.75$, $p < .05$, and Latino/Asian-American women ($M = 0.54$) were significantly more likely than the Latino/Asian-American men ($M = 0.03$) to tell teasing narratives, $F(1, 59) = 9.80$, $p < .01$. The means are for contributions summed across all groups.

Among the European American speakers, we found statistically significant interactions for speaker sex and group composition for teasing wisecracks, $F(1, 121) = 4.01$, $p < .05$, as well as for self-directed narratives, $F(1, 121) = 4.27$, $p < .05$, and self-directed wisecracks, $F(1, 121) = 5.40$, $p < .05$. Using wisecracks, European American men teased more in all-men's ($M = 2.98$) than in mixed-sex groups ($M = 1.85$) whereas European American women teased more in mixed-sex ($M = 2.83$) than all-women's groups ($M = 1.63$). As we found in earlier research, the reverse pattern was again observed for self-direction. European American women engaged in more self-directed narrative wit and wisecracks in all-women's ($M = 1.73$ and 1.72 , respectively) than in mixed-sex groups ($M = 0.98$ and

Table 2

European-American sample: mean number of humorous remarks per 100 turns by type in same- and mixed-sex interactions

Humor form	Sex of speaker	Sex of group	All humor	Ribs and teases	Self-directed humor
Narratives	Male	Same	2.57	0.35	0.45
		Mixed	3.42	0.34	1.01
	Female	Same	4.96	0.58	1.73
		Mixed	3.49	0.36	0.98
Wisecracks	Male	Same	6.45	2.98	1.38
		Mixed	7.82	1.85	2.73
	Female	Same	7.84	1.63	1.72
		Mixed	7.31	2.83	1.07

1.07, respectively), whereas European American men engaged in more self-directed narrative humor and wisecracks in mixed-sex ($M = 1.01$ and 2.73 , respectively) than in all-men's groups ($M = 0.45$ and 1.38 , respectively). No significant interactions were found for the Latino/Asian-American speakers. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the results for the two ethnic groups.

The emergent pattern in our sample suggests that at least for young European-American adults, women increase their teasing in mixed-sex groups whereas men decrease their teasing and increase their self-directed stories and wisecracks. One way to explain this trend is as a kind of stylistic accommodation. In an earlier study of preschool children's humor, for example, we found boys and girls were very different in single-sex dyads, but when each child was re-paired in a mixed dyad, the children modified their humorous behavior as an accommodation to the mixed-sex interaction (see Lampert, 1996).

As women increase their teasing in mixed groups, they direct their ribbing toward men rather than other women. The men, rather than responding in kind, are more likely to make light of the behavior for which they were playfully criticized. Consistent with this interpretation, we found that European-American women in mixed groups were significantly more likely via wisecracking to tease men ($M = 1.98$) than they were to tease

Table 3

Latino/Asian-American sample: mean number of humorous remarks per 100 turns by type in same- and mixed-sex interactions

Humor vehicle	Sex of speaker	Sex of group	All humor	Ribs and teases	Self-directed humor
Narratives	Male	Same	1.73	0.05	0.37
		Mixed	1.30	0.00	0.37
	Female	Same	3.39	0.70	0.73
		Mixed	1.72	0.30	0.59
Wisecracks	Male	Same	6.97	3.21	1.48
		Mixed	3.95	2.58	0.88
	Female	Same	5.60	2.28	1.05
		Mixed	5.47	2.72	1.08

other women ($M = 0.84$), $t(29) = 2.025$, $p < .05$ by a one-tail test. The reverse was not the case for the men in mixed groups who were no more likely to tease another man ($M = 0.95$) than a woman ($M = 0.90$). This particular finding is all the more remarkable, considering that our mixed-sex groups were roughly balanced in terms of the number of men and women in three, four and five speaker conversations (i.e., four texts had one man with two women and another four texts involved one woman with two men). Further, we found that speakers' self-directed wisecracks, in particular men's, tended to be more self-protective in mixed- than in same-sex groups (21% vs. 10% classified as self-protective, $F(1, 121) = 5.202$, $p < .05$) supporting the characterization of women teasing men and men responding by making light of themselves in mixed-sex encounters. Example 4 illustrates this knitting together of female teases and male self-protective exaggeration.

- (4) *After dinner, Barb is chatting with her guests, Anna and younger brother Carl. Anna and Carl laugh while talking about surfer-chicks.*
- Barb: Your shoes are neat.
 Carl: Hm.
 Barb: Your shoes are perfect for you. A philosopher's foot.
 Carl: Well, I have such tiny feet, and need such tiny little shoes.
 Barb: Yeah. [Laughs]
 Carl: Do you like them?
 Barb: They're sort of- they're sort of this marvelous combination of whatever I'd imagine an Oxford philosopher would wear and a hobbit.⁴
- Carl: [Laughs]
 Barb: A hobbit.
 Anna: Really they are hobbit shoes.
 Barb: Aren't they hobbitty?
 Anna: Really hobbit shoes.
 Carl: I had them made by a man with a green moustache.

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Barb's comments about her brother Carl's shoes follow a humorous exchange and maintain the key. Carl could have responded to Barb's and Anna's teases about his shoes by ribbing them about their own shoes. Instead, he maintains the mood and positive rapport by accepting and building on Barb's and Anna's hobbit comments with self-directed wisecracks, which, in this context, may have been perceived as more friendly and playful than a reciprocating tease.

3.2. Key and continuity

We next turned our attention to the issue of mitigating risky humor, and the factors which we proposed should increase the likelihood of a tease or self-directed remark being heard as playful: (1) the placement of a remark within an ongoing humorous exchange, and

⁴ A hobbit is an elfin creature invented by novelist J.R. Tolkien.

(2) the use of exaggeration and fantasy. Ongoing exchanges can be based on rounds in which topic, key, or target remains throughout several turns. These are common episodes in fast-paced conversation of friends. We found that European Americans were in fact more likely to tease and make self-directed wisecracks in mixed-sex groups in the flow of wit after other humorous comments. Within the European American sample, speakers in mixed-sex groups were more likely to tease on a responsive turn ($M = 1.20$) than as an initial humorous try ($M = 0.79$), $F(1, 121) = 4.06$, $p < .05$. In same-sex groups, the pattern was just the reverse; speakers were willing to risk initiating teasing. Teasing remarks in same-sex groups were less likely to occur in response to someone else's humor ($M = 0.57$) than in isolation or as an initial try that changes the key ($M = 0.93$). Speakers in mixed-sex groups were also more likely to make self-directed wisecracks in response to someone else's humor ($M = 1.53$) than as initial tries ($M = 0.79$), $F(1, 121) = 7.44$, $p < .01$. Example 4 shows this kind of continuing banter in which self-directed humor and teasing alternate. In same-sex groups, self-directed wisecracks occurred as initial and responsive tries with similar frequency ($M = 1.25$ and 1.26 , respectively).

European American women were significantly more likely than European American men to produce self-directed narratives as a responsive than initial try, $F(1, 121) = 4.27$, $p < .05$. We found no other main effects or interactions for Initiation within the European American sample. Latinos and Asian-Americans were more likely to make a teasing wisecrack as a responsive ($M = 1.89$) than as an initial move ($M = 0.84$), $F(1, 59) = 9.97$, $p < .01$, but this preference was not related to sex or group composition, and no other significant effects were found for these variables among these speakers.

The findings for Initiation are in line with the expectation that speakers would be more inclined to engage in riskier forms of humor only after the initiation of a more playful mode of talk and especially in settings where gender role expectations might have the greatest impact on misinterpretation (i.e., mixed-sex groups). An alternative explanation is that speakers simply engage in longer humorous exchanges in mixed-sex groups, resulting in more teasing and self-directed responses. We investigated this possibility. We eliminated the effect of length of humor bouts by dividing speakers according to whether they made at least one humor initiation, or one humorous response, or both. Of the European Americans in mixed-sex groups, 40% made teasing wisecracks on at least one initial try, whereas 52% did so on at least one responsive turn. Of the European Americans in same-sex groups, 49% teased on initial and 52% did so on responsive turns. A similar pattern was observed for self-direction. Of those in mixed groups, 44% and 53% made self-directed wisecracks on initial and responsive turns, respectively. The reverse was observed for the same-sex groups, where 43% and 35% made self-directed wisecracks on initial and responsive turns, respectively. Although these percentages did not produce statistically significant differences, they were in the direction of speakers in mixed-sex groups having a greater propensity to tease and engage in self-direction once a humorous exchange had been launched.

3.3. Exaggeration

We expected that speakers in mixed-sex groups would be more likely to mark their teases and self-directed remarks as humorous with exaggeration or fantasy because of the

higher risk. We looked at the average percentages of remarks containing either elements of exaggeration or fantasy. To avoid underestimating these percentages, we included in our calculations only those speakers that actually teased or made self-directed comments. After making this correction, we found no significant main or interaction effects for exaggeration for our Latino/Asian-American speakers in either teasing or self-direction. As expected, the teasing wisecracks of European American women were more likely to contain exaggeration in mixed-sex ($n = 19$, $M = 64\%$ of teases exaggerated) than in all women's groups ($n = 12$, $M = 30\%$); in contrast, the teases of European American men were more likely to contain exaggeration in all-men's ($n = 31$, $M = 66\%$) than in mixed-sex groups ($n = 17$, $M = 50\%$), as revealed by a significant interaction between Speaker Sex and Group Composition, $F(1, 75) = 8.864$, $p < .01$. In the mixed-sex groups, men were slightly more likely than women to use exaggeration when teasing a male target ($M = 61\%$ and 57% , respectively), and women were more likely than men to use exaggeration when teasing a female friend ($M = 68\%$ and 49% , respectively). However, neither of these latter differences was statistically significant.

European-American speakers revealed a significant main effect for Speaker Sex for exaggeration in self-directed narratives, $F(1, 46) = 4.73$, $p < .05$, and for Group Composition for exaggeration in self-directed wisecracks, $F(1, 70) = 4.11$, $p < .05$. European-American men's self-directed narratives ($n = 23$, $M = 43\%$) were more likely than women's ($n = 27$, $M = 18\%$) to contain exaggeration, and European-American's self-directed wisecracks, in general, were more exaggerated in mixed-sex ($n = 37$, $M = 71\%$) than same-sex groups ($n = 37$, $M = 54\%$). Don's remark in example 5 illustrates humor with an exaggerated self-directed wisecrack.

(5) *May and Don, engaged couple, are eating at a Chinese Restaurant.
Don is pouring soy sauce on his food.*

May: Don't you think that has enough already?

Don: Uh: not quite enough. Besides I haven't been getting my minimum RDA⁵ in soy sauce lately.

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In sum, as we expected, both men and women were more inclined in mixed groups to incorporate exaggeration into their wisecracks. Women also appeared to exaggerate their teases more in mixed-sex groups, but the evidence suggests that they did not exaggerate more when teasing men compared to other women. However, our findings for teasing by men ran contrary to what we had anticipated, with men more likely to exaggerate their teases in same-sex groups. So we have not found the complete dynamic for exaggeration in teasing. The results for self-direction were more consistent with our earlier expectations. Men, who are less likely to self-disclose in general, were the more likely to use exaggeration and fantasy as a marker in their self-directed narratives.

⁵ Recommended Daily Allowance, a technical term used in U.S. labeling on all packaged food products with various RDAs for fat, sodium, etc.

4. Discussion

Overall, our results support a portrait of young men as more likely to engage in teasing banter in all-men's groups and less likely to do so when interacting with women. However, men do not curtail their humorous behavior in mixed-sex groups, but rather they change their humor to avoid teasing in favor of humorous self-directed commentary. Men may avoid teasing a female friend, even when teased, because of the social prohibitions on aggressive behavior by men toward women in friendship groups, sensitivity toward maintaining symmetrical power relationships within the group, and recognition that women view being teased more negatively than men. We proposed that these factors would contribute to men's teases in mixed-sex groups having a higher probability of being heard as aggressive rather than playful, and therefore less likely to occur. And in fact, we found this to be the case. Why men increase their use of self-direction is not as immediately evident. In our earlier work, we suggested that self-directed wisecracks were strategically used by men to deflect criticism, including teasing criticism, about their behavior by rendering the behavior absurd, as in example 5. However, in our current analysis, only a fraction of self-directed wisecracks were judged to be self-protective or defensive.

An alternative explanation is that although men in mixed groups refrain from teasing in kind when teased, they still wish to maintain positive rapport and facilitate the conversation. In all-men's groups, men may in fact build rapport by teasing one another as in example 6:

- (6) *Ron, Len and Neal talk about Eric's recording of them. Ron, Eric, and Neal are European American; Len is Latino. Len speaks after a pause.*
- Len: This is a really imbalanced sort of thing here. There's no female present.
- Ron: Well.
- Len: It's not racially =like balanced either.=
- Neal: =It's White dominated.=
- Len: Two White males.
- Neal: Do you feel .. do you feel real Len?
- Len: ==No, I feel spirited =as a matter of fact =
- Ron: =Do you feel .. do you feel= we're oppressing you?
- Len: I feel threatened. I feel threatened right now. I feel like if I say the wrong things, y'know, I'll look, I'll look dumb and stupid and perpetuate the stereotypes you both believe in. [laughs]
- Ron: It's good that you think that 'cause it's most likely true.
- Len: True. I know Ron's just sitting there waiting like
[pretends to be Ron] What's he gonna say next? What's he gonna say?
Oh that was stupid. [laughs]
- Ron: [playfully chastises Len]
- Len: [pretends to be Ron talking about Len] How very like him. [laughs]
- Ron: [quiet] That's so like Len.
- Len: God.

Ron and Len's mutual jibes serve not as genuine criticism but as a playful way to talk about stereotyping. In the process, they build greater rapport and sense of intimacy with one another, akin to the bonding previously observed by Lyman (1987) for joking in men's groups and found by Keltner et al. (1998) in a study of the effects of induced teasing. Our results suggest that similar banter is less likely between men and women friends, but that in mixed groups, men maintain a humorous exchange by replacing teasing with an acceptable and workable alternative—self-directed wisecracking—as in example 4.

Self-direction may serve men as a substitute for teasing in a humorous interchange with women. More difficult to explain is the increase in women's teasing when in conversation with men. One explanation is that whereas men may avoid teasing women so as not to sound hostile or to place a female friend in a more subordinate position within an interaction, women may use teasing as a means to maintain power symmetry, to counterbalance the more traditional power relations between men and women, and thereby develop greater solidarity with their male friends by adopting a male interactional style. Researchers have argued that teasing typically marks an asymmetrical relationship, with the person in the more powerful or superordinate position permitted to tease or rib individuals in less powerful or subordinate positions without being teased in return (Coser, 1959, 1960; Howell, 1973). Thus, bosses are more likely to tease their workers and, in traditional relationships, men should have more opportunities to tease women than vice versa. However, as Tannen (1993) argues, linguistic strategies such as indirectness, interruption, and verbal aggression can serve multiple purposes and these purposes are context sensitive—such strategies may mark or establish a hierarchical relationship in some situations but not necessarily all. For women interacting with their male friends, then, teasing may be a means for asserting their equal footing and solidarity within the group by showing that they feel free to tease the men in a form that deflects serious rebuke. As we have already noted, the men in our mixed-sex groups often responded to a woman's tease with a supportive self-directed remark, which the women could easily interpret as acceptance, a sign of bonding, and encouragement to tease even more. Example 7 illustrates this nicely.

(7) *Ellen has corrected her partner, Sean, for his use of the term “as well” and a humorous exchange, mostly between Sean and Jack, has continued for thirty turns.*

Sean: I think every girl I've ever dated has tried to break me of the habit of saying “as well.”

Jack: Really?

Sean: And then shortly they begin saying it. [laughs]

Jack: ==[laughs]=

Ellen: ==Ya.=

Jack: This is true. In fact this typifies every interaction we have with others.

Sean: [laughs followed by six seconds of silence]

Ellen: I think you're both full of shit.

Jack: You may assume that if you may.

Sean: [Laughs] Isn't she cool. I mean most people won't tell me I'm full of shit.

Jack: Mmm. I think many people would be prone to tell you that you are full of shit.

- Sean: But they never do.
 Jack: I think it is directly proportional to the amount of time you speak.
 Sean: Oh definitely. But I'm just saying that most people do not come out and say it.
 Jack: [sarcastic intonation] Ya, ya, ya, I think that's a good quality of Ellen that she can say that you are full of shit.
 Ellen: [Laughs]
 Jack: Mary says that I'm full of shit often as well.
 Sean: Ya, because you truly are.
 Jack: You might say.
 Ellen: And he did.

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In the context of Jack and Sean kidding around about the use of the phrase, “as well”, Ellen freely teases them about talking nonsense. However, what is remarkable is that Jack and Sean do not overtly tease her back in kind. Rather, Jack jestingly affirms her comment, and Sean goes as far as to suggest that it is a good thing for Ellen to say that he is “full of shit”, and in the process implies that this is one of his traits. Ellen is far from chastised for her tease, but in the context of the play is reinforced for it. Jack and Sean then launch into the kind of teasing banter characteristic of men's groups, and Ellen reenters the exchange by supporting Sean's teasing wisecrack directed at Jack with a tease of her own. As a result, Ellen asserts solidarity with her two male friends.

As teasing still remains a risky enterprise, it is not surprising that women's teasing in mixed-sex groups would be more likely to occur in the safer context of an ongoing humorous exchange, and that women, who would be the more likely to tease in mixed-sex groups, would tend to increase exaggeration in teases in this context. We have argued that a way to mark a self-disclosure or tease as humor is to situate it inside continuous banter or to exaggerate it to produce distance from reality. Example 7 illustrates both. We expected to find these properties more often in mixed groups, because of the normative pressures already described and because male and female friends often have less common ground than do same-sex friends. In women's teasing, we found this to be the case.

Whether one would find similar patterns for men's and women's humor in populations outside of those that we studied is unknown and requires additional research. In the current investigation, our findings are limited to a very specific population, European-American university students between the ages of 18 and 35. At this age, self-image is especially fragile, and flirtation is likely, especially in mixed-sex groups. Such factors can have an impact on playful talk. As Eder (1993) has observed for adolescent girls, teasing is one means for signaling romantic interest. The heightened teasing among the women in our mixed-groups could have resulted, in part, from this flirtatious use. Further, our European-American sample represents an educated group, likely to be aware of the feminist issues of the era, and sensitive to the power dynamics that we suggest may play a role in the appearance of teasing by women in mixed-sex groups. A similar sensitization may not exist for other populations.

As we have seen, our Latino/Asian-American sample did not show a similar pattern of behavior and, in fact, produced few significant group differences. Latino and Asian-American university students may interpret teasing and self-direction differently from their

European-American counterparts. We were unable to test this hypothesis adequately, though, as first, we had too few speakers to look at each ethnicity separately in this sample, and second, our Asian-American and Latino speakers were usually in ethnically heterogeneous friendship combinations. If speakers are likely to modify their use of risky humor in mixed-sex groups, they may be just as likely to do so in groups of mixed ethnicity. Further, the ethnic variability of the group may have had a greater impact on our Latino/Asian-American sample than on our European American one, which included more apparently ethnically homogeneous interactions.

Humor is cultural, certainly in content, possibly in its dynamics. For this reason, we expect to find different humor dynamics in different countries, languages, and groups. In a study of age changes in peer conversational humor of 3- to 10-year olds, self-revealing humor had not yet developed, but there was evident cultural variation in teasing (Ervin-Tripp et al., 2004). In addition, a speaker's humor can be influenced, not merely by the sex, age, and ethnic background of group members, but also by the speaker's sense of sameness and difference with others. As with gender, ethnic homogeneity in face-to-face group interactions could affect cultural practices, changing, for instance, language choice as well as humor. Each of our generalizations about gender demands testing in other cultural contexts and examining other dimensions that are likely to influence a sense of interpersonal intimacy and shared knowledge.

5. Conclusions

Humor is deployed in sociable groups of equals for the purposes of expressing emotions, common values, and perspectives, and for displaying and building rapport. Some of the dynamics of humor come from the tension between alternative interpretations as factual and as fictive. Humor targeting participants, as well as humor targeting the speaker, have an added risk of a factual interpretation as an insult or as a confessional disclosure. We found that in young European American adults, the dynamics both of gender differences and gender relationships in this culture affected the types of humor deployed in sociable conversations among friends. In all-men's groups, teasing could be done freely; in all-women's groups, self-disclosure was of higher frequency. However, in mixed-sex groups we found a change in dynamic, with men reducing teasing and increasing self-directed joking, and women reducing self-disclosure and increasing teasing of men. Because of the risks of misunderstanding in the mixed groups, mitigating tactics for these types of humor increased, namely exaggeration, fantasy, and the placement of risky humor in longer bouts of a humorous key.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to Janine Hansen for her help on the development of our coding system for conversational humor and to Daniel Bucher, Charleen Dean, Jennifer Hamblin, Courtney Hunter, Andra Knechel, Vi-Nhuan Le, Alexandra Leung, Fey Parrill, Florenz Quines, and Larry Yang for their work on coding.

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