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# Annotated Bibliography of Matlon Guide Sources on the Use of Humor in Public Speech

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*Eastern Illinois University*

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Annotated Bibliography of Matlon Guide

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Sources on the Use of Humor in Public Speech

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(TITLE)

BY

James Joseph Callahan

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1996

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Sources on the Use of Humor in Public Speech  
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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

For years, researchers have investigated the functions of humor in public address. Various arguments exist as to the specific functions and effects of using humor in public speech. Specifically, these arguments focus on the impression of humor on persuasion, credibility, retention, and interest enhancement. These conflicting points of view need to be resolved to establish a base for future research involving humor and public address. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to reduce the ambiguity by analyzing and synthesizing a representative array of journal articles obtained through the Matlon Index to Journals in Communication Studies.

Method of Investigation

The format for this thesis involves obtaining relevant information, categorizing the information for analysis, consulting various publications on humor for



aid in synthesis, making an in depth analysis, and drawing conclusions from trends in the various studies.

First, studies relevant to the thesis were obtained from journal articles through the Matlon Index. After an exhaustive search, only the pertinent studies to this thesis were selected for analysis. Then, information and results from the studies were categorized into various subject areas (persuasion, retention, credibility, etc.) to make the analysis a more focused task. Before and during the synthesis of this information, various publications on humor were consulted for additional help. After the information was categorized and the gaps filled in by consulting publications for assistance, the final step was to analyze the evidence to note trends and draw conclusions. With the conclusions drawn, the foundation for the thesis was complete.

#### Elements to be Examined

The inclusion of humor in a public presentation (persuasive or informative) can lead to various consequences. These effects, or elements, can be

beneficial or handicap the speaker's intentions depending on the astuteness of use. The elements that this thesis will examine specifically are the persuasive supports of humor, the influence on retention, the enhancement of topic interest, effect on speaker credibility, and facilitation of goodwill in the group. These elements will be presented in the literature review, analyzed, synthesized and discussed in detail to make clear the various affects that humor has in public speech.

#### Definitions and Terminology

To make the information presented in this thesis completely clear, some definitions and terminology of humor need to be introduced. The terms to be addressed are humor, mirth, joking, satire, wit, pun, anecdote, disparaging humor, and sick jokes.

Humor can be defined as that quality in a happening, an action, a situation, or an expression of ideal which appeal to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous. This quality is comic and generates an amusing affect. Humor, then, encompasses

any or all types of the comic - puns, anecdotes, wit, etc. which, when uttered by a speaker, amuse a listener or group of listeners (Lull, 1940). Effective humor also is poetic in these aspects: (1) It has content without a serious purpose, (2) It deals with fantasy, (3) It is allusional and imaginative in method, (4) it is intended for all people in the audience at all times, and (5) centers around 'timeless themes' which have no limit (Porkorny & Gruner, 1969). Humor itself is generated and reinforced when we laugh at certain relationships. By utilizing a combination of establishing incongruous relationships (creating meaning), presenting them with suddenness at the right moment (timing), the audience will laugh - thus producing humor (Berger, 1976).

Mirth is an experience of social merriment that is produced by the inclusion of humor. In other words, it is an experience for the audience that involves pleasurable feelings and buoyancy of spirits manifested in their jesting and laughter (Grimes, 1955). It is the actual feeling of cheerfulness, fixed and permanent, that is generated when the comic creates and

builds a humorous atmosphere. This mirth experience evokes positive responses from the audience indicating that the accommodation of humor was successful (Munn & Gruner, 1981).

Joking is the actual preparation or spontaneous generation of statements that produce humor from the audience for the speaker. Joking involves punning, making statements about existing 'conditions,' telling stories with 'punch lines,' and/or bantering that uses a person, object, or theme as the target (Ullian, 1976).

Satire is a type of humor that involves sarcasm, irony, or keenness of wit in ridiculing vices, abuses, or evil. The speaker using satire employs humorous exaggeration in a critical way to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind (Gruner, 1965). Here is an example of satire from Oliver Goldsmith's *Retaliation* (on Thomas Barnard the Dean):

Here lies the good dean re-united to earth,  
Who mixt reason with pleasure, and wisdom with  
mirth,  
If he had any faults, he has left us in doubt,

At least, in six weeks, I could not find 'em out,  
Yet some have declar'd, and it can't be denied  
'em,

That sly-boots was cursedly cunning to hide 'em.

(Bloom & Bloom, 1979)

Here is another poetic illustration of satire  
criticizing a man named Caier from the Restoration:

Half-witty, and half-mad, and scarce half-brave,  
Half-honest (which is very much a *knave*.)  
Made up of all these halves, thou can'st not pass,  
For any thing intirely, but an asse.

(Griffin, 1994)

Satire is not restricted to poetry and lampoons, but  
can expand into oration. Here is an amusing, yet  
critical example of satire from the scholar H. L.  
Mencken (1880-1956) in a brief comment on politicians  
and registers:

"There is something about a national  
convention that makes it as fascinating as a  
revival or a hanging. It is vulgar, it is stupid,  
it is tedious, it is hard upon both the higher  
cerebral centers and the gluteus maximus, and yet

it is somehow charming. One sits through long sessions wishing heartily that all the delegates and alternates were dead and in hell-and then suddenly there comes a show so gaudy and hilarious, so melodramatic and obscene, so unimaginably exhilarating and preposterous that one lives a gorgeous year in an hour"

(Mintz, 1988)

In short, the purpose of satire is to cure folly and expose evil; To excite anger at human misdeeds and cruelty (Gruner & Lampton, 1972). It is a cynical outlook on some detail or quality of existence - the goal being that the listener will emerge from the satiric experience better equipped to fulfill his or her potential for social understanding and self-knowledge (Bloom & Bloom, 1979).

Wit is the quick perception and happy expression of unexpected or amusing analogies. The ideas in wit are apparently incongruous or unrelated and the comic readily draws up a relationship between them. Here is an illustration that employs wit:

A condemned spy was being led out at dawn to

the wall against which he was to be shot at sunrise. It was raining with ferocious intensity. On either side of him was a line of soldiers and to one of them the condemned spy said bitterly, "What beasts you all are to march me out to be shot in a rain like this."

And the soldier replied with equal bitterness, "What are you complaining about? We've got to march back."

(Asimov, 1971)

Wit thrives when tension is built immediately in the speech preceding it (Grimes, 1955). Wit is like rhetoric in these ways: (1) it has a serious purpose, (2) it deals with real events, (3) it contains logic, (4) It is intended for a specific audience or occasion, and (5) the subject matter has a limited theme or scope (Porkorny & Gruner, 1969). Here is another example of wit in the form of a joke:

"It is a horrible fact," commented the teacher, "that every day around this world, people are being tortured."

"And here in school," whispered one class

member, " it's called homework!"

(Mamchak & Mamchak, 1994)

Irony is an important component to wit; The comic relies on this quick shift from tension to relief to produce humor. Here is a comic representation of wit that employs irony to create the humorous effect:

"I have brought a frog," said Professor Krumpelmayer, beaming at his class in elementary zoology, "fresh from the pond, in order that we might study its outer appearance and later dissect it."

He carefully unwrapped the package he carried and inside was a neatly prepared ham sandwich.

The good professor looked at it with astonishment. "Odd," he said, "I distinctly remember having eaten my lunch."

(Asimov, 1971)

The pun is actually a play on words of the same sound but of different meanings. It is the witty use of a word in two senses; Usually antithetic and more or less incongruous. For example, let's say a man named Bob was hanged in the public square for crimes



that he committed. Someone who knows Bob that just arrives in town asks: "Where has Bob been lately? I haven't seen or heard from him." A humorous response would be: "Oh, he's still hanging around!" Here is another example of pun:

"If you succeed with Cynthia, you'll go back to your missus with a tidy sum."

"With What?"

"A tidy sum."

"Oh, I thought you said a tiny son."

(Gilliatt, 1990)

The success of a pun relies upon these components: (1) providing tension, (2) employing shock from the play on words, and (3) humorous relief (Grimes, 1955). Note the amusing play on words in the following joke:

Smith came into the house, dripping wet and looking incredibly bedraggled. Outside the window, the pelting rain was all too visible. His sympathetic wife said, "Oh dear, it's raining cats and dogs outside."

"You're telling me," said Smith. "I just stepped in a poodle."  
(Asimov, 1971)

An anecdote is a short narrative of an interesting, amusing, or curious incident. It is often biographical and generally characterized by human interest. This usually involves items of unpublished or secret history; Short passages that people haven't known of or really thought of. For example Zsa Zsa Gabor once replied to a fan's letter:

Dear Miss Gabor:

I have been keeping company with a very charming, handsome man who owns over 100 oil wells in Oklahoma and a gold mine in Colorado. He is very generous, but lately he seems to have lost interest in me. What should I do?"

Zsa Zsa's answer:

You seem to have a very serious problem: You said he has 100 oil wells and a gold mine? I must handle this man personally- Send me his name and address.

(Adams, 1968)

The following is an early historical anecdote that originated in China from around 1000 B.C.:

A Chinese Emperor...would allow nothing but

ten-cash pieces to be minted. No one dared explain the disadvantages of this to him until two of his clowns thought of a comic turn to perform 'for his amusement'. One took the part of a soft-drinks seller, the other the part of the customer. The customer asked for a one-cash drink, and handed over the smallest coin he had—a ten-cash piece. The vendor could not give him any change, for he had no smaller coins either, so with a great deal of puffing and blowing, the customer drank ten big drinks. Then he sighed, and burst out with, "There! But if the Government made us use those big hundred-cash pieces I'd have popped!"

The Emperor laughed long and loud—but the next day he ordered one-cash pieces to be put back into circulation.

(Durant & Miller, 1988)

The complete success of an anecdote relies on building suspense and then combining shock and surprise to the narrative (Grimes, 1955). Here is a humorous anecdote of an actual occurrence at Windsor in England as told

by Christopher Pulling:

Queen Victoria, listening to a military band at Windsor, was captivated by a certain tune and sent a messenger to ascertain the title of it. He returned in some embarrassment and said it was called 'Come Where the Booze is Cheaper'.

(Hastings, 1985)

Disparaging humor degrades either the self or another in estimation by using detractive language or by dishonoring treatment. Simply put, disparaging humor makes fun of someone, but with a good sense of humor (Chang, 1981). Take this joke for example: "Your mother is so ugly...she went into a haunted house and came out with an application." When using this type of humor, the comic will use either put down someone else as the brunt of the joke, or use him or herself as the target of the disparagement (Hackman, 1988). Another example of disparaging humor occurred in the Lincoln-Douglas debates:

Mr. Douglas taunted Lincoln with the fact that the 1st time he met Lincoln he was in a store where Lincoln was selling whiskey.

Honest Abe replied by saying: "What Mr. Douglas said is true. I did keep a grocery, and I did sell cotton, cigars, and, sometimes, whiskey. But I remember in those days, that Mr. Douglas was one of my best customers. Many a time I have stood on one side of the counter and sold whiskey to Mr. Douglas on the other side, but the difference between us now is this: I have left my side of the counter - but Mr. Douglas still sticks to his as tenaciously as ever."

(Adams, 1968)

Disparaging humor can exaggerate and/or be fictitious, yet still employ an existing person well-known for a trait that they possess:

If you are on an airplane for instance, and the person next to you is pouring down double scotches, you could get live damage breathing this person's intoxicating exhales. The solution to this problem is not to allow Ted Kennedy on commercial flights.

(Grizzard, 1994)

Self-disparaging humor has been successful to various

comedians. Many comedians open their act with self-disparagement to get the crowd's curiosity and attention. Rodney Dangerfield's use of humor thrives on a sentence that has brought him to fame: "I can't get no respect!"

A sick joke is a statement that employs a mix of nonchalance with monsterism, mutilation, gore, vampirism, atrocity, or catastrophe (Munn & Gruner, 1981). For example:

What's grosser than gross? When you throw your underwear against the wall and it sticks...

What's grosser than that? When it slowly slides down...

What's grosser than that? When it climbs back up!

This method of joking can be either offensive or appropriate depending on the conditions and/or audience. Here is an example of a sick joke that is rich in gore and atrocity:

This is a Gun. Is the Gun loaded? I do not know. Let us find out. Put the Gun on the table and you, Susie, blow down one barrel, while you

Charlie, blow down the other. Bang! Yes, it was loaded. Run quick Jennie, and pick up Susie's head and Charlie's lower jaw before the Nasty Blood gets over the new carpet.

(Clark & Turner, 1984)

### Review of the Literature

#### **Persuasive Support**

In order to assist in the understanding of what humor can or can't do for the public speaker, the mirth process will first be examined. The public speaker can attain mirth arousal when he or she addresses certain external stimulating factors. The factors include the following: A physical or moral defect, deception, mistake, disappointed expectation, surprise, or incongruity (Grimes, 1955). In addition to including one of the external stimulating factors, the speaker must also develop tension early in the movement of the event. From here, the speaker must sharpen and build the tension. This is followed by a change in direction to cause a shock. Finally, the emotion is changed by yielding insight or creating immediate surprise. This

will result in the relief of tension and mirth will be attained (Grimes, 1955). Take this joke for example:

Question: What is 1000 lawyers chained together at the bottom of the ocean (tension sustained)?

Answer: Justice (relief and mirth).

To increase the chances of success, the speaker should also have friendly feelings, an uncritical attitude, and put the audience in superiority to the elements of the joke (Grimes, 1955).

In regards to persuasion and humor, P. E. Lull (1940) examined the effectiveness of humor in persuasive speech where the speaker's purpose was essentially serious. Lull made no attempt at isolating and measuring the effectiveness of specific types of humor: Rather a variety of types were included (for such is the common practice of public speakers who use humor). Lull included two similar versions of a persuasive speech, a humorous and a non-humorous, on the same topic for the experiment. Results indicated that both speeches changed attitudes significantly, but there was no significant difference between the



humorous and non-humorous speeches in the degree of effectiveness. Conclusions suggest the addition of humor did not meaningfully increase the effectiveness of the persuasive impact (Lull, 1940). This result may also be influenced by the power of the jokes and how well they were told.

In investigating humor and persuasive speech, Charles R. Gruner (1965) performed an experimental study of satire as persuasion. Gruner had concluded from previous research that satire is actually an indirect form of criticism that may lose some of its potential for changing attitudes. In Gruner's review he indicates that "non-directive" messages tend to be less persuasive than those whose purpose is relatively obvious. Therefore Gruner generated the following hypotheses: (1) A satiric speech supporting a thesis indirectly will not significantly change the attitude of an audience towards the thesis, and (2) A satiric speech supporting a thesis indirectly will not change the attitude of auditors toward the thesis significantly regardless of the members' original attitude, sex, or combination of both. Results of the

study confirmed both hypotheses: satiric speech supporting a thesis indirectly will not change the attitude of the audience towards the thesis and this also holds true regardless of original attitude, sex, or combination of both. This indicates that the value of satire presumably lies in its humorousness; for enjoyment of satire and obviousness are related inversely. Thus, if the speaker succeeds as a satirist, he is likely to be too indirect for the audience to grasp his thesis; but if he is direct enough for his thesis to be plain, he is no longer humorous (Gruner, 1965).

To secure validity for his experiment in 1965, Gruner (1966) executed a similar study entitled "A Further Experimental Study of Satire as Persuasion." In this study, Gruner wanted to retest the subjects of the first experiment to see if they actually perceived the serious thesis of the satire rather than just reacting to humor. Gruner hypothesized: "Does the effect of satire perceived as such depend on the original attitudes of the auditors?" By partial replication of the first experiment followed by the

subjects rating the experimental message on 'perceived funniness' and the speaker on 'perceived intelligence,' Gruner increased the credibility of his previous experiment. Results indicated that the subject perceived the message as satire. The results of the earlier and the 1966 study, taken together, make it appear that satire does not produce attitude change generally (Gruner, 1966).

Wilma H. Grimes (1955) proposes that humorous implants (jokes inserted into the speech) are not objective and thus hinder the persuasive impact. This provides a dilemma to the speaker: How can the speaker expect the audience to take the theme objectively and seriously? Why is satire sometimes persuasive and sometimes not? Gruner (1985), supplied one tentative answer indicating that satire is effective as persuasion only when the serious thesis intended by the satire is perceived by the audience.

In a related experiment 16 years prior, Gary F. Pokorny and Charles R. Gruner (1969) examined the effect of satire used as support in a persuasive speech. The purpose of the study was to measure the

effectiveness of the satire in respect to changing or reinforcing attitudes. Results of the experiment dictate that the inclusion of satiric material as extra support did not materially affect persuasive impact. The speech without the satire produced greater attitude shift than the experimental-satiric speech did, but the difference was not statistically significant (Pokorny & Gruner, 1969).

To better understand the effects of including humor in persuasive speech a distinction must be made. Charles R. Gruner (1965) proposes that a discernable difference exists between 'wit' and 'humor,' a difference much like that between rhetoric and poetic. Five factors were explored: (1) purpose, (2) medium, (3) method, (4) audience and occasion, and (5) subject matter. First, Purpose is comprised of two elements, function and motive. Rhetoric and wit have practical functions, while poetic and humor have aesthetic functions. In addressing motive, Humor can be content "to be without a significant purpose," whereas wit (irony, satire, ridicule, etc.) springs from a more serious motive (Gruner, 1965). The second factor,

medium, also contains a distinction. Rhetoric and wit deal with real events while humor and poetic are more apt to deal with fancy. In method, poetic and humor are more emotional and imaginative while the method of rhetoric and wit is more reasonable, appealing more often and more directly to the intellect. The fourth factor, audience and occasion, also differ in respect to wit and humor. The audience and occasion of poetic and humor is more universal and less confining than that of rhetoric and wit, whose themes are centered around what is going on here and now. Finally, rhetoric and wit differ from poetic and humor in subject matter. Humor's subject is universal and timeless while wit often contains a time-bound quality. Concluding his observations, Gruner (1965) states that because humor is unrelated to persuasive purpose, it can hardly be expected to produce persuasion. Furthermore, if wit gains its response by artistic condensation of what is already perceived as truth, perhaps further experimentation should focus upon wit's tendency to reinforce and strengthen already existent attitudes rather than its ability to change those

attitudes.

In exploring the effects of being witty on position in the social structure of a small group, J. Goodchilds (1959) reached various conclusions on wit and influence. 'Sarcastic' witticisms of the speaker were rated by the subjects as more influential than 'clownish' wits. On the other hand, 'clownish' wit was perceived as more popular and amusing to the audience than 'sarcastic' wit. In respect to character, if the wit was perceived as inappropriate, the speaker's ratings would suffer, thus reducing the chances of persuasion (Goodchilds, 1959).

In a related study, Christi McGuffee Smith and Larry Powell (1988) explored the use of disparaging humor by group leaders. An important question was raised for the research: What are the possible interrelationships between the use of specific types of humor in the small group and in perceptions of leadership effectiveness? In respect to persuasion, the results of the experiment indicated that disparaging humor was not perceived to significantly increase the persuasiveness of the influential messages

or increase the interest on specific task-oriented functions. Another conclusion is interesting to note: Disparaging humor meets with the greatest appreciation when directed at someone people resent (Smith & Powell, 1988).

#### **Retention Enhancement**

In investigating information retention and humor, Charles R. Gruner (1967) examined the effect of humor on speaker ethos and audience information gain in informative speeches. Prior to conducting the experiment, Gruner noted that previous studies have indicated conflicting reports on humor's effect on information gain and retention. Some researchers claimed that the inclusion of humor has no significant effects on retention, while others state that there are statistically significantly greater gains in knowledge. To resolve these conflicting results, Gruner prepared an experiment. Results of the study clearly indicated that humor failed to produce greater or less information retention for the audience in respect to immediate, or short-term, retention (Gruner, 1967). To

complement this, it has been found that long-term retention (six weeks or more) can be enhanced by including humorous illustrations, but there is no significant effect on the immediate recall. Thus, points illustrated by humor are better recalled over the long run (Munn & Gruner, 1981; Gruner, 1985) as with Lloyd Bentson's sharply cynical reply to Dan Quayle: "I knew John Kennedy [and I know you]. You are no John Kennedy."

Additionally, Robert M. Kaplan and Gregory C. Pascoe (1977) completed a study involving the effects of humorous lectures upon comprehension and retention. The purpose was to explore the effects of two types of humor (humor related to the concepts presented, and humor unrelated to the concepts presented) upon learning in a lecture situation. Results of the study indicated that the recall was improved in only one way; There was greater retention of the humorous examples but not of the material of the lecture. There was no significant improvement of general comprehension and retention of a classroom message (Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977).



In analyzing information retention and humor, Charles R. Gruner (1970) investigated the effects of humor in dull and interesting informative speeches. Before this experiment, Gruner states that several speech textbooks recommend the use of humor in speeches as an interest or attention factor. But, he claimed there was a lack of strong empirical evidence to support that this claim was necessarily true. Results of this experiment concluded that the addition of humor enhanced only the interestingness of the dull speech, and this interest enhancement due to humor cannot be said to have produced greater information retention (Gruner, 1970).

In a similar study, Joan Gorham and Diane M. Christophel (1990) explored the relationship of teachers' use of humor in the classroom to immediacy and student learning. In respect to retention and learning, the purpose of the study was to find if there was a relationship between the amount and/or type of humor used by teachers and student learning. Results of the study indicated that recall and learning can be enhanced significantly if attention is paid to the

composite of the humor used rather than the volume of humor inserted into a lecture. If the humor is related in context to the material of the lecture and the teacher has a moderate [or more] amount of immediacy towards the students, this can generate more desirable learning outcomes (Gorham & Christophel, 1990).

#### **Interest Enhancement**

In exploring humor's effect on audience interest, Charles R. Gruner (1970) completed a study on the effects of humor in dull and interesting informative speeches. This experiment was based on previous assumptions that adding humor to a speech would enhance its interestingness. Results indicated that the addition of humor enhanced the interestingness of only the 'dull' speech significantly and had no meaningful effect on the already 'interesting' speech. But, this increase in interestingness due to the humor cannot be said to have produced greater information retention (Gruner, 1970).

Another experiment (Gruner & Lampton, 1972) explored basically the same concept as the

aforementioned, but instead the effects of including humorous material in a 'persuasive' sermon were examined. Results demonstrated that the sermon was significantly perceived as more 'humorous,' but this perceived difference did not add an extremely heightened interest level for the audience. The notion that an auditor's appraisal of the humorousness of a speech will not bear a direct relation to his estimate of its interestingness is also supported in previous research (Lull, 1940). The same holds true for interest in the teacher: Students may find the teacher extremely humorous and enjoy listening to him or her but at the same time put little stock in what is being taught to them (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). This is especially true if the teacher goes overboard on the humor and makes laughter, not learning, the chief goal.

To further investigate humor and interest enhancement, Mei-Jung Chang and Charles R. Gruner (1981) explored audience reaction to self-disparaging humor. An interesting speech, with engaging and impressive information, and a dull speech, with basic facts, (both including humorous passages) were used to

test the subjects' reactions. Results indicated that the addition of wit/humor (disparaging) to an already interesting speech does not necessarily raise its 'interestingness' level (Chang & Gruner, 1981). Gruner (1967) found similar results: Addition of humor to an already interesting speech did not necessarily make it more interesting.

In a comparable study, Michael Z. Hackman (1988) examined the reactions to the use of self-disparaging humor by informative public speakers. Results indicated that speakers who used self-disparaging humor, whether related or not directly related to the speech topic, were found significantly less interesting than those speakers who used no self-disparaging humor. Additionally, the speakers who used self-disparaging humor not related to the speech topic were found significantly more interesting than those who used self-disparaging humor related to the topic (Hackman, 1988).

In an experiment on the inclusion of sick jokes in informative speech (Munn & Gruner, 1981), similar results were found concerning interest enhancement.

Inclusion of the sick jokes, there appeared to be no effect on the rating of the speech's 'interestingness' or 'usefulness of information.' The speech, however, was found to be significantly funnier than the no-joke speech used in the experiment.

Jennings Bryant, Jon S. Crane, Paul W. Comisky, and Dolf Zillmann (1980) examined the relationship between college teachers' use of humor in the classroom and evaluations from their students. It is interesting to note: The authors state that previous research indicates that humor can be highly effective in improving the function of our mental faculties due to stimulated interest in or attention to the accompanying educational messages. Results previously discussed in this literature review dictate otherwise: It cannot be said that the addition of humor will enhance the interestingness of a speech (Munn & Gruner, 1981; Hackman, 1988; Chang & Gruner, 1981; Lull, 1940; Gruner & Lampton, 1972).

#### **Effect on Speaker's Credibility**

In exploring speaker credibility, Charles R.

Gruner (1967) studied the effect of humor on speaker ethos and audience information gain. Gruner had the subjects listen to two pre-recorded speeches from the same speaker (one of the speeches contained the humorous additions) and then had the subjects evaluate the speaker on 'authoritativeness' and 'character' for each speech. The subjects also rated the 'seriousness' of various speech-related concepts on both speeches. Results indicated that if a speaker used humor perceived as 'clownish' he could damage his perceived authoritativeness. Additionally, a speaker who uses apt humor in informative discourse is more likely to be perceived by his audience as high in attributes of 'character' than he would be if he does not (Gruner, 1967).

Gruner found similar results in surveying the effect of humor in dull and interesting informative speeches (1970). Humor was found to enhance the character ratings of the speaker in informative speeches. However, the addition of humor to an already interesting speech did not enhance the speaker's authoritativeness rating. Only when humor was applied

to the dull speech was there a significantly higher increase in ratings of authoritativeness. Gruner also concludes that the ratings of speaker authoritativeness were greatly enhanced by "interestingness" of the presentation rather than by the addition of humor (Gruner, 1970).

In a similar study, Pat M. Taylor (1974) devised an experimental study of humor and ethos. The purpose of Taylor's study was to determine what effects, if any, the inclusion of listener-defined supportive humor in informative speeches has on an audience's evaluation of a speaker's ethos. Results suggest that the subjects hearing humorous versions of some speeches rated the speakers as having lower ethos than those who rated the same speeches without humor (Taylor, 1974).

In a related, but different, experiment Manoochehr Javidi, Valerie C. Downs, and Jon F. Nussbaum (1988) analyzed teachers' use of humor and dramatic styles in the classroom. Their investigation sought to explore the use of humor, self disclosure, and narrative by award winning teachers (recipients of Faculty awards and/or the Burlington Northern Faculty Achievement

Award) and non-award winning teachers in the secondary and college school levels. Results of the investigation indicated that the award winning teachers frequently utilized the verbal behaviors of humor, self-disclosure and narratives and were perceived by students as the most effective. Results obtained from comparing the award winning teachers with the non-award winning teachers indicates that non-award winning teachers are less active than award-winning teachers in using the three verbal behaviors. The authors suggest that this provides further evidence that the use of these behaviors covary with teaching effectiveness (Javidi, Downs, & Nussbaum, 1988).

In an interesting investigation, Elizabeth E. Graham, Michael J. Papa, and Gordon P. Brooks (1992) sought to analyze the various functions of humor in conversation. The authors found significant positive relationships between positive affect humor (humor that offers inclusion and/or identity among group members) and each dimension of interpersonal competence: (1) altercentrism (including others more than just the self), (2) vocal expressiveness, (3) interaction



management, and (4) overall conversational performance. The authors note that negative-affect humor (humor that controls and/or demeans), and expressive humor (Humor that offers self disclosure and/or affection) were not significantly positively correlated with any of the four dimensions of interpersonal competence (Graham, Papa, & Brooks, 1992).

In exploring the use of negative humor, William C. Munn and Charles R. Gruner (1981) explored the effects of including sick jokes in public speech. Previous research has indicated that the inclusion of humor in speech usually generates positive responses from the audience and also influences the audience to rate the speaker higher on the 'character' factor of ethos. Also, speech containing "non-germane" humor was rated significantly lower on "worthwhileness" than was the same speech containing "germane" humor. From this it was hypothesized: If the humor, meant to be at least "content-relevant" to the speech material were perceived as appropriate, then reaction to the speaker, especially on the 'character' dimension, would be favorable. On the other hand, if the humor were

perceived as inappropriate, the audience should react negatively regarding the speaker's character. Results of the experiment indicated that the addition of sick jokes significantly decreased the ratings on speaker's sense of humor, character, and authoritativeness (Munn & Gruner, 1981).

In exploring self-disparaging humor and informative speech, Michael Z. Hackman (1988) investigated humor and ethos. Hackman found that speakers who used self-disparaging humor in their presentations, whether related or not directly related to their presentation, received significantly higher ratings on the sense of humor scale. In contrast, even though the speakers were perceived as more humorous, results demonstrated that they run the risk of reducing their perceived competence, having the audience identify with them less, and producing speeches that are rated as less interesting (Hackman, 1988). Gruner's conclusions (1985) are similar to Hackman's results: The addition of self-disparaging humor can increase ratings on perceived 'wittiness' and 'sense of humor,' but at the same time reduce ratings on

'authoritativeness.'

In regards to the use of disparaging humor and speech, Dolf Zillmann and S. Holly Stocking (1976) investigated putdown humor and its effect on speaker credibility. The experiment was designed to compare self-disparagement with the disparagement of friends and enemies. Analyses of the various ratings of the disparager's personality (Subjects rated the speakers on the personality dimensions of self-confidence, wittiness, and intelligence) revealed that both males and females judged the self-disparager as significantly less confident, significantly less witty, and significantly less intelligent than the person who disparaged a friend or an enemy (Zillmann & Stocking, 1976).

The results of the experiment by Zillmann and Stocking (1976) are different than the results of Chang and Gruner's (1981) experiment on self-disparaging humor and speaker credibility. Chang and Gruner conclude that a speaker with relatively high initial speaker credibility (for instance, a college professor) can enhance perceived 'sense of humor' and 'wittiness'

without damaging perceived 'character' by using self-disparaging humor in the presentation (Chang & Gruner, 1981). In support of this, Smith & Powell (1988) found that the leader who used self-disparaging humor was perceived as more effective at relieving tension, more effective at encouraging member participation, and more willing to share opinions than the leaders who disparaged superiors or subordinates. Moreover, the leader should be careful in using humor directed at other targets, since such messages could limit the perceived effectiveness of the task and maintenance functions of the leadership position (Smith & Powell, 1988).

#### **Facilitation of Goodwill in the Group**

In examining group effects and humor, G.S. Hall and A. Allin (1897) analyzed the psychology behind tickling, laughing and the comic. According to the authors, people believe that laughter has the ability to cause relief in the group and supposedly has the power to banish hostility. On the other hand, the authors conclude: If genuine hostility prevails in the

audience, there will be no laughter (Hall & Allin, 1897).

In studying group effects, Nick O'Donnell-Trujillo and Katherine Adams (1983) examined the use of humor in conversation. The purpose of the essay was to examine what coordinating activities occur in conversation and how laughter works in accomplishing these activities. In respect to group effects, the authors conclude that laughter acts as a display of hearership. If members of the audience laugh, this lets the speaker know that he or she is actually being listened to. Also, laughter serves as a resource in affiliation. It coordinates turn taking cues, instructs a listener how an utterance is to be heard, evidences how an utterance is heard, and invites elaboration in the group (O'Donnell-Trujillo & Adams, 1983).

Self-disparaging humor has specific group effects that can assist the speaker. Results from an experiment by Smith and Powell (1988) indicated that use of self-disparaging humor by a group leader made that leader perceivably more effective at relieving tension and encouraging audience participation.

Additionally, the leader was perceived as more effective at initiating group responses and more willing to share opinions.

In a related article, Joseph Alan Ullian (1976) researched joking in communication at the workplace. Ullian indicated that joking is employed in the workplace to (1) release tension among employees, (2) to effect role-sending in the organization, (3) to reduce boredom among workers, and (4) to help workers discover possible sexual partners. The main purpose of this experiment was to test whether there are patterns of conditions associated with joking which might be useful in supporting interpretations of the functions of joking. Results indicated that joking is not a random behavior but occurs in definite patterns. Whenever there was new information introduced in the workplace, joking would accompany the message. Ullian concludes: Joking may be significant in explaining how employees deal with novel situations and how social organizations remain stable in the face of change (Ullian, 1976).

These group effects are supported by the research

of Graham, Papa, and Brooks (1992): Humor can serve as a social lubricant to avoid potentially hostile situations, reduce anxiety among employees, alleviate boredom, facilitate friendship patterns, define and redefine a group, clarify status relationships among employees, and ease the tension brought by new or novel stimuli such as information.

Along the lines of humor and effect on the group, Gorham and Christophel (1990) claim that humor can increase the learning outcomes for students. Previous research has shown that humor can reduce social distance and conflict. Furthermore, it can increase group cohesiveness, increase the potential for better human relations, and reduce tension among members of the group. Results of this experiment demonstrated that an increase in humor, supplemented by an increase in teacher immediacy, will increase the participative and learning outcomes of the students. But this only holds true if a low to moderate amount of humor and immediacy is used; If high amounts are used, the speaker will experience "overkill" and produce a negative effect on student learning (Gorham &

Christophel, 1990).

Results from Downs, Javidi, and Nussbaum (1988) tend to support this effect. Their results indicated that a dramatic teacher (one who frequently uses humor, self-disclosure, and narratives) provided the students with an emphasis on course content which helped the students organize their ideas, focus their thoughts, and sort the trivial information from that which is relevant to course content (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988).

### **Research Questions**

In respect to the literature examined, five research questions are proposed:

- RQ1:** Will the inclusion of humor in a presentation enhance the persuasiveness of the speaker?
- RQ2:** Will the inclusion of humor in a presentation have an influence on the audience's retention of the messages in the speech?
- RQ3:** Will the inclusion of humor in a presentation enhance the interest of the audience?
- RQ4:** Will the inclusion of humor in a presentation have an effect on the credibility of the speaker?



**RQ5:** Will the inclusion of humor in a presentation facilitate goodwill between the speaker and the audience?

### Synthesis and Analysis

#### **Intro to Areas of Conclusion**

The purpose of this section is to take the previously discussed results and combine them for a logical analysis. In addition to this, my own deductions and arguments based on the results will be proposed. By including this section in the paper I hope to take the information found and assimilate it to produce a clear and logical understanding of humor's effects in public speech.

#### **Persuasion and Humor**

The majority of results conclude that humor does not significantly produce attitude change (Lull, 1940; Gruner, 1965; Gruner, 1966; Grimes, 1955; Pokorny, Gruner, 1969; & McGuffee-Smith, Powell, 1988). However, two exceptions were discovered: The first exception explored the use of wit in speech, and the second examined satiric support of a thesis.

In regards to wit and speech, Goodchilds (1959) found that subjects rated 'sarcastic' wit to be more influential in a public speech than 'clownish' wit. This finding is only significant when comparing the two types of wit; Neither one was found to significantly produce attitude change. One may seem more influential than the other, but realistically neither can persuade.

The other exception is explained by Gruner (1985): Satire is effective as persuasion only when the serious thesis intended by the satire is perceived by the audience. Most Previous studies by Gruner (1965; 1966; 1969) indicated that humor is not capable of producing a meaningful attitude change. After further investigation though, he concluded that persuasion may be enhanced if humor is used in the right way.

It appears that humor, in general, does not enhance the chances of persuasion in public speech. This may be due the nature of humor and satire: Enjoyment of satire and the obviousness of persuasion are related inversely, so how can they work together to change minds? How can a speaker, who is intent on a serious thesis, make jokes and expect this to help

persuade his or her audience? My conclusion: The only way this will work is if the speaker makes the serious thesis absolutely clear to the audience throughout the speech. Also, if humor is used continually it has to be relevant and creative satire or wit (sick jokes, clownish, or self-disparaging jokes will not work. They are not appropriate to maintain seriousness). Finally, the speaker must take care in not adding too much humor to the presentation or else the serious thesis may be obscured and the audience may become distracted.

### **Retention**

In regards to information retention and the effect humor has on it, there are different results that must be examined. Gruner (1967; 1970) found humor unable to produce greater or less information retention in respect to immediate recall. Later, Munn and Gruner (1981) found that long-term (6 weeks plus) retention was significantly enhanced by the use of humor. In contrast, Kaplan and Pascoe (1977) discovered that there was significantly greater retention of the

humorous examples in the speech, but not the material of the message. Finally, Gorham and Christophel (1990) claim that recall and learning can be enhanced by the addition of humor if attention is paid to the composite of humor (apt, relevant humor inserted strategically) rather than the volume (abundance of humorous passages).

It appears that humor generally does not produce immediate or short term recall of speech material but instead produces recall of the humorous illustration. However, in the long run, there is superior recall of lecture material. This is an example where humor is beneficial to the public speaker, especially the teacher. It is easy to remember something that makes you laugh, thus the enhanced recall of the humor. But, the purpose of the humor in public speech is not to make people laugh all the time (comedians do that), instead the speaker is trying to use humor to make his or her message more interesting and permanent in the minds of the audience.

To attain the benefits of using humor to enhance memory, It seems logical that the speaker must pick

humor that is apt and relevant. By tying the humorous illustrations directly to the points that are being proposed, there will be increased chances that the audience will remember both the joke and the topic. Imagine a serious speech with jokes that were completely out of theme: This speech would be confusing to the listener. The audience would be asking themselves: Is this speaker serious about something or is this speaker only here to entertain us? This illustrates the importance of relevant humor.

### **Interest Response**

It has been a myth that the addition of humor will undoubtedly increase the interestingness of a presentation. Experimental results have shown that the addition of humor to a speech only made subjects perceive that speech as more humorous, not necessarily more interesting (Gruner & Lampton, 1972; Lull, 1940; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Chang & Gruner, 1981). Also, the addition of humor to an already interesting speech had no effect on producing more interestingness in the audience (Gruner, 1967). Only in the case of a

dull speech was the interest significantly enhanced (Gruner, 1970), but this could almost be expected.

In respect to the teacher using humor in a lecture, Gorham and Christophel (1990) contend that a teacher may be found to be extremely humorous, but this does not mean that the audience will put stock in what is being taught to them. It was also found that self-disparaging humor did not raise the interestingness of a presentation (Chang & Gruner, 1981) and also made the speaker perceivably less interesting than a speaker not using humor (Hackman, 1988). On the other hand, Bryant, Crane, Comisky, and Zillmann (1980) assert that humor can stimulate interest or attention to accompanying educational messages.

In my opinion, this holds true to an extent: In order to break up the monotony of lecture, a teacher can introduce humorous illustrations to re-focus the audience's attention to him or her. This does not necessarily mean that the students will enjoy the material, but at least this can help the teacher keep the students awake and aware. In regards to public speakers, the humor can be used in the same way. For

instance—if there is a substantial amount of information to be presented, this means the presentation will most likely be lengthy. In order to keep the audience focused during this long period of time, the speaker may want to insert jokes as humorous intermissions or better still as illustrative narratives.

### **Credibility of the Speaker**

Humor in the presentation appears to have the greatest and most diverse effects on speaker credibility. The inclusion of positive humor significantly increases the ratings of sense of humor for a public speaker (Gruner, 1970; Gruner, 1985; Hackman, 1988). In a study by Javidi, Downs and Nussbaum (1988) it was found that various award winning teachers frequently used verbal behaviors of humor, self-disclosure and narratives more than non-award winning teachers. Graham, Papa, and Brooks (1992) discovered that interpersonal competence (altercentrism, vocal expressiveness, interaction management, and overall conversational performance) was

positively correlated with the use of positive affect humor (humor that offers inclusion and identity among the group). Public speakers using clownish humor had their character ratings enhanced, but at the same time their perceived authoritativeness was reduced (Gruner, 1967). Only in a dull speech was perceived character and authoritativeness magnified by the addition of humor for the speaker (Gruner, 1970). In contrast, Taylor (1974) proclaims that humorous speakers were rated lower on ethos than the speakers not using humor in a serious presentation.

Self-disparaging humor was found to create higher ratings on perceived character, but at the same time decrease the ratings on authoritativeness (Gruner, 1985; Hackman, 1988). One interesting note: If a speaker already has high initial credibility and uses self-disparaging humor, he or she can enhance ratings on sense of humor and wittiness without damaging character (Chang & Gruner, 1981). In accordance with this, Smith and Powell (1988) proclaim that leaders using self-disparaging humor were perceived as more effective at relieving tension, encouraging audience



participation, and appeared more willing to share opinions. Contrary to these findings, Zillmann and Stocking (1976) claim that self-disparaging humor causes the audience to rate the speaker as less confident, less witty, and less intelligent than a speaker who used disparagement of another.

As for sick jokes and public speech, Munn and Gruner (1981) noted that the speaker's ratings on sense of humor, character, and authoritativeness were all reduced significantly. This suggests that sick jokes should remain only in social situations and clearly kept out of formal presentations.

This research suggests that humor in public discourse can have both positive and negative effects for the speaker. If a speaker uses humor that is witty and not too clownish, he or she probably has a good chance at appealing to the audience on a personal level without damaging perceived authoritativeness. The more clownish and/or inappropriate the humor becomes, the greater the chances that authoritativeness will fade. In a serious presentation, authoritativeness is mandatory to establish a foundation of credibility. No

one wants to follow or learn from a foolish, clownish individual. The goal here is to have an amiable appearance to the audience, but at the same time keep to the mission of getting a point across or imparting knowledge to others. The best way, it seems, is to include positive-affect humor (humor that offers inclusion) that is in good taste and also humor that is more relevant and less distracting. If the speaker desires to disparage the self, he or she should keep in mind that even though this makes one seem warm and human, more than a little may damage authoritativeness and detract from the mission.

### **Goodwill and the Facilitation of Group Unity**

Introducing humor into a presentation has various effects on the audience and group as a whole. O'Donnell-Trujillo and Adams (1983) proclaim that laughter serves as a resource in affiliation; It coordinates turn-taking, instructs a listener how an utterance is to be heard, evidences this, and invites elaboration in the group. Ullian (1976) states that joking in the workplace can (1) release tension, (2)

effect role-sending in the organization, (3) reduce boredom, and (4) help workers find possible sexual partners. Similarly, humor also has been found to act as a social lubricant to avoid potentially hostile situations, reduce anxiety among employees, alleviate boredom, facilitate friendship, define/redefine a group, clarify status relationships among employees, and ease tension brought on by new information (Graham, Papa, & Brooks, 1992). On the other hand, Hall and Allin (1897) noted that if genuine hostility prevails in the audience to begin with, there will be no laughter. This does not hold true for all circumstances though: Southern orator Henry W. Grady used humor in his speech "The New South," to overcome resistance and dispel hostility of a predominantly northern audience in 1886 (There was still conflict of opinion between the north and the south after the Civil war).

In respect to teachers and group leaders, Gorham and Christophel (1990) state that increases in humor and increases in immediacy will amplify the participative and learning outcomes in the students, as

long as the humor and immediacy don't take away from the learning session. Downs, Javidi, and Nussbaum (1988) examined dramatic teachers (teachers that used self-disclosure, humor, and narratives) and found that they were the most effective for aiding students in organizing their ideas, focusing their thoughts, and helping them sort the trivial information from that which is relevant to course content. Finally, Smith & Powell (1988) discovered the leader who used self-disparaging humor was perceived as the most effective in relieving tension, encouraging audience participation, and initiating group responses.

In analyzing these results, some group effects become clear. Humor seems to have the ability to reduce tension and make people 'lighten up.' This, I believe is one of the most powerful uses of humor in public discourse. If indeed the speaker intends the audience to actually listen to and consider what is proposed, he or she must first make a benevolent and amiable impression on the audience, and in effect, dispel hostility or indifference. Humor can assist the speaker in this way: It reveals to the audience a

person who is warm-hearted and willing to establish a connection of friendship. By offering this invitation to laugh, the group becomes more willing to participate and listen. I sense that a connection of common ground is mandatory for the public speaker and the audience. Humor is an excellent tool suited for this purpose.

### Conclusion

#### **Speaker's Goals**

The primary purpose of the public speaker using humor for the various benefits is simple: Try to make the thesis clear without losing the supposed value of being humorous and, at the same time, avoiding a loss in ethos by proper selection of apt, relevant humor. It may help the speaker to examine the common interests and knowledge of the audience as closely as possible. To attain the mirth experience in the audience one must project friendly feelings, demonstrate an attitude that is not critical in a malicious and negative sense, and maintain audience superiority to the elements of the joke. These basic guidelines will assist the speaker in finding success in humor and public speech.

Humor has been found to have negative and positive effects for the public speaker. These effects are important to know before one decides to use humor in a presentation. By knowing the various consequences of humor and speech beforehand, a speaker can strategically place humor in the areas of the presentation where it will yield the most beneficial results. This is why it is so important to analyze and test humor in speech: If it is used properly, it is an excellent supplement to the public speaker's arsenal.

#### **Recommendations for Future Research**

One problem I see in the area of research is subject selection. In the majority of these experiments, the subjects chosen for experimentation were college-level students between the ages of 18 and 25. The results of the experiments then pertain only to that demographic of the population. What of senior citizens and people that are out of college and into the working world? By using various subjects, a more rounded representation of the world we live in could be examined instead of merely a narrow age bracket.

Another problem with some of the research is the relatively small amount of subjects used. Some studies had only 30 to 50 students surveyed for the entire experiment. How can one get accurately generalizable results from such a small sample? What if the sample was, for instance, from the same class. Their own ratings may be biased from intersubject relations and friends from within the group. A more rounded, anonymous, and sizable sample selection is needed for the optimal test results. Method aside, I feel that more experiments on humor's effects need to be conducted, providing that they are valuable, accurate and insightful.

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