

“Let Me Show You a Trick!”: A Toddler’s Use of Humor To Explore, Interpret, and Negotiate Her Familial Environment During a *Day in the Life*

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Abstract. Children employ different types of humor as they explore, interpret, and negotiate their environments. Whereas an appreciation of verbal incongruity has been a hallmark of older preschooler humor (e.g., McGhee, 1989), more recently, other violations of expectations and clowning also have been identified as ubiquitous during the first two years of life (e.g., Loizou, 2005; Reddy, 2001). We examined the pragmatics of one 30-month-old girl’s humor, and determined how it interactively harnessed the cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional resources available to her negotiations within her familial context. Using the methodology of a *Day in the Life* of a toddler in early childhood (Gillen et al., 2006), the child’s entire waking day was videotaped, and all interactions were transcribed and analyzed. We identified many instances of humor, and categorized them into four major types: clowning, teasing, jokes and playful language, and physical actions. Humor served both socio-emotional and cognitive-linguistic functions, and we confirmed Reddy’s (2001) finding that early humor is interpersonally co-constructed: When humor operates within the child’s inter-mental development zone (Mercer, 2000), it serves to inform her or his intra-mental growth; the inter-mental precedes and enables the intra-mental.

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Until recently, very young children’s humor had been underestimated. For example, reports from Shultz and Robillard (1980) and McGhee (1979) suggested that the perception of humorous events begins at about 18 months (but see Pien & Rothbart, 1980). More recent studies, however, have demonstrated humor in younger toddlers (Johnson & Mervis, 1997; Loizou, 2005, 2007) and even in infants (Reddy, 2001), and Bergen (e.g., Bergen, 2001) has emphasized the importance of humor in young children’s play.

In addition to underestimating when the perception of humor begins, the capacity for the use of humor also has been underestimated. McGhee (1979) initially focused attention largely on *verbal incongruity* in

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child humor; but others have highlighted a range of child humor types such as *clowning* (e.g., Bergen, 2001; Reddy, 2001), *teasing*, *joy in mastery play*, *sound play*, *verbal reproductions*, and *elaborations of language patterns* (Bergen, 2001), and other forms of incongruity such as *violating social norms* (e.g., Loizou, 2005, 2007). Furthermore, Horgan (1981) rightly noted that much more research is needed on what makes children funny, in addition to what they find funny.

Humor, in the context of human development, has been defined as “the mental experience of discovering or appreciating ludicrous or absurdly incongruous ideas, events or situations” (McGhee, 1979, p. 6). This definition focuses on the cognitive component of humor that arises from *incongruity*, which is “the notion that something unexpected happens in a joke which serves to arouse, surprise, or mystify the listeners” (Schultz & Robillard, 1980, p. 60). Appreciating incongruity relies on at least a certain level of cognitive sophistication. For example, in the context of language, it relies on metalinguistic knowledge to appreciate and resolve verbal incongruity (Shultz & Robillard, 1980), although even this skill has been demonstrated as early as during the toddler years (Johnson & Mervis, 1997). In light of Zigler, Levine, and Gould’s 1967 claim that the greatest humor response appears to occur when the complexity of a humor stimulus matches the complexity of the child’s cognitive structures, the cognitive maturity of that child must be taken into account in order to identify most inclusively instances of early humor.

Other definitions of humor highlight the socio-emotional aspects of humor, such as “any communication that leads to an emotional experience of amusement, pleasure, and/or mirth” (Southam, 2003, p. 28). Berlyne (1972) sought to define humor by taking into account the relationship between so-called arousal jags and boost-jags and their hedonic values, timing, and clues precluding seriousness. Chafe (2001) similarly indicated that some stimuli that produce laughter might be humorous, at least to

the extent that they generate a “feeling of nonseriousness” (p. 39). Although many researchers have acknowledged the social aspects of humor, less research has focused on its socio-emotional functions. Loizou (2005) has recently combined cognitive and socio-emotional factors in her definition of humor, explicitly situating incongruity in the social realm by suggesting that toddlers find violating existing social norms to be humorous—her “theory of the absurd.” She further proposed that young children feel more efficacious by violating expectations—her “theory of empowerment.”

Building upon Vygotskian claims (1987) that social interactions importantly facilitate cognitive development, Mercer (2000) has provided strong evidence that peer discussions enhance children’s problem-solving and claimed that inter-mental (social) intellectual operations facilitate intra-mental (individual) progress. Humorous exchanges under such a lens can be seen to provide opportunities for children to observe and manipulate collaboratively everyday incongruities. The opportunity for playful interactions with respect to such commonplace incongruities as are the foci of much humor provides scope for early environmental and social mastery (Rogoff, Mistry, Goncu, & Mosier, 1993).

The early expression and experience of humor can be somewhat unpredictable and ephemeral. Further, studies seeking to explore early humor are methodologically challenging, given that it is neither easy nor particularly advised to ascertain from a very young child judgments or evaluations of experimentally generated stimuli. Thus, more naturalistic approaches lend themselves best to the investigation of humor in young children. Observations of children in preschool settings, as reported by Bergen (2001), Loizou (2005), and Reddy (2001), were fruitful, and a novel ecological methodology for studying young children within their family contexts during a *Day in the Life* (Gillen et al., 2006) suggested itself as a unique opportunity to capture *in situ* all the humorous experiences and expressions

of a child over the course of an entire waking day. The types of humor displayed, as well as the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, could be documented, and the functions of humor could be analyzed from a grounded theoretical perspective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)

The present case study using this novel methodology explored in some detail how one young child employed humor as she negotiated many aspects of her daily routine. Because the literature on the development of humor has been relatively silent on the presence of humor in very young children's early interactions and communications, this study was designed to explore the range of humorous expressions types used by this child, as well as the functions that humor served.

Methods

The ecological approach employed, described in detail elsewhere by Gillen et al. (2006), can be briefly summarized as follows:

Data Collection

Phase 1 involved locating and recruiting appropriate research participants. Families from seven different countries (Peru, Italy, Canada, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Turkey, and the United States) participated in this study. These families were all working- to middle-class socio-economically, and reported confidence about the healthy development of their children and engagement in the project. Institutional ethics review boards, following accepted local practices, approved the procedures, and the families gave informed consent for participation.

Only the data from the child in the United States are described in this article. This family consisted of two working parents (both college professors¹), one older (6-year-old) brother, and the focus child, who lived in a small midwestern U.S. community.

Phase 2 involved a parental interview and a brief practice videotaping session. Two researchers visited the family home to conduct the interview, inquiring about basic family demographic, health, and lifestyle informa-

tion. They also filmed the focus child for one hour in order to familiarize her and her family with the procedure to be used.

Phase 3 was the filming of the "day." This started when the child woke up (7:58 a.m.), stopping only for toilet activities and her nap (1:33-3:55 p.m.), and ended at bedtime at 7:43 p.m. Parents were aware that they could request taping to be stopped at any time, but such a request was never made. Detailed field notes were taken by a second researcher, who noted the time, changes in activity, location, people present, details of verbal exchanges, and other explanatory details to assist later interpretation of data by the international team. This researcher also drew floor plans of the home.

Phases 4 and 5 involved reviewing the videotapes and selecting representative segments of the "day" by two distal (in this case, UK) investigators. These researchers selected six 5-minute sequences during the day that were considered to have captured the variety of activities and interactions observed during the "day" and revealed the healthy development of the child. Video clips of these segments were made and one half-hour compilation videotape was created from them.

Phase 6 was a follow-up interview and discussion with the family in the context of viewing the compilation tape. The goal was to allow the family to comment on what they saw of the child's "day" and to reflect on how their child was developing into a "strong child" (Cameron, Tapanya, & Gillen, 2006). A copy of this compilation tape was given to the family as a "remembrance" of the child's day and as compensation for their participation in the study.

Data Analysis: Humor

First, the videotapes were transcribed; then, the authors independently scrutinized the raw video data in association with the field notes and transcriptions, identifying all instances of humorous exchanges—that is, all exchanges that appeared to be intended to elicit a smile or laughter from a communicative partner. These data, as well as

the time and people present, were recorded on a spreadsheet. Humorous exchanges were independently examined line-by-line by the authors. Each instance was then classified by humor type as each emerged, independent of previous taxonomies in the literature, with similarities and overlaps between types noted. This analysis led to a subsequent identification of the functions that each instance appeared to play within the exchange between communicative partners.

Results

Types and Functions of Humor

We identified the use of four major *types of humor* within the corpus (see Figure 1). **1) Clowning** involves “acts repeated deliberately in order to re-elicite laughter from others” (Reddy, 2001), and may or may not be motoric. It could also be repetitive speech. **2) Teasing** is playful mocking directed at, appealing to, or attempting to provoke a response from a communicative partner. **3) Jokes** include many forms of word play and playful language. **4) Physical play** is the use of the body and other physical objects for amusement. Note that all of these types of humor are encompassed by the concept of incongruity, which is the

out-of-the-ordinary use of objects, sounds, or labels. As McGhee (1979) earlier claimed, incongruity is a hallmark of humor.

We identified the use of two main clusters of *humorous functioning*, and several categories within these clusters (see Figure 2): **1) socio-emotional functioning**, as can be seen in the way the child engages in pleasurable social communications that allow her to solidify her social position in her familial context; and **2) cognitive and linguistic functioning**, in which the child interacts in a playful fashion to explore her cognitive and linguistic “environment/world” and attempt to understand it.

Humor was ubiquitous to the child’s day. For example, in a particularly rich lunchtime segment lasting approximately 30 minutes, we documented 22 instances of humor. These instances were independently categorized by two of the authors, and those classifications that were scored identically by the two raters are reported in Table 1.

All instances were scored as falling into at least one of the categories listed above (clowning, teasing, joking and language play, and physical play); on average, instances were identified as being illustrative of two categories and, thus, the 22 instances

Figure 1
*Schematic Representation of Relationships
Among Types of Humor*

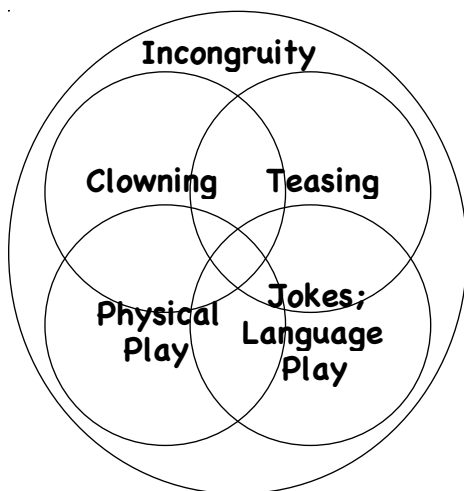
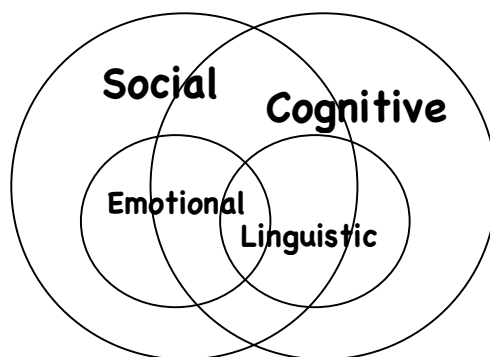


Figure 2
*Schematic Representation of Relationships
Among Functions of Humor*



yielded a total of 45 humor types (totaling more than 100% because of the multiple categorizations, as seen in Figure 3). The majority of instances were classified as jokes, and the least as teasing.

We now turn to three samples of humor to instantiate the variety of types and functions of humor used by this toddler, as defined above. The following illustrative episodes demonstrate the range of this toddler's humor and how we interpret its function for enhancing her daily experiences. Interestingly, each of these instances of humor that emerged during the lunchtime passage discussed above was repeated several times throughout the day.

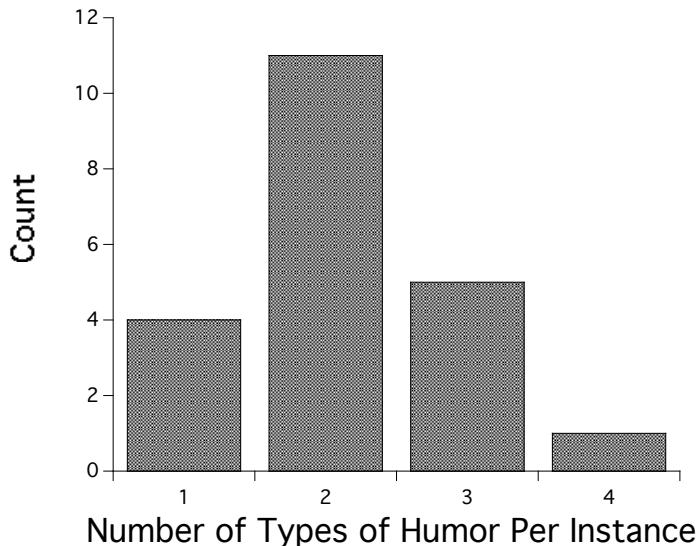
Episode #1: Pledge of Allegiance

At the time of data collection, Katy lived with her American father, Canadian mother, and older brother, James. Both Katy and James were taught the *Pledge of Allegiance* to the flag of the United States of America in child care/school. Their mother objected to this on sociopolitical grounds. She had told her children that she did not think that training in such displays of patriotism was appropriate with children at such an early age. So, the children had learned that they could tease their mother by reciting the *Pledge of Allegiance*. The family game involved the children saying, "I pledge allegiance . . ." and their mother saying "Don't

*Table 1
Percentages and Frequencies of the Types of Humor Identified
in 22 Instances During Lunchtime*

Humor Type:	Clowning	Teasing	Jokes	Physical Play	Total
Frequency	12	6	19	8	45
Percentage of Instances	55%	27%	86%	36%	204%

*Figure 3
Frequencies of Types of Humor Observed*



you say that to me!” in a mocking, “How dare you?” tone. There was excitement in the game as the children blatantly disobey their mother, but the consequence was laughter and not scolding.

Katy recited passages of the *Pledge of Allegiance* numerous times throughout the day. The final one occurred near bedtime (see Figure 4):

Katy’s father has finished reading stories to Katy and he tells her that he hears her mother coming up the stairs. Katy gets excited and upon her mother’s entering the room, asks to be picked up, and starts reciting the Pledge of Allegiance even before she is picked up. Katy’s father laughs loudly and leaves the room. Her mother asks Katy if she is teasing her as she tickles Katy. This recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance continues for about one minute.

This episode can be characterized into at least three types of humor. First, it is obviously *teasing*, and is primarily directed toward her mother, from whom she counts on getting a reaction. Second, given that it is repeated in the episode and throughout the day, with the goal of making others laugh, we consider it to be *clowning*. Further, it is *language play*; playful language uttered paradoxically both to taunt and to affiliate with her mother.

Figure 4

Still shot of Katy teasing her mother with the Pledge of Allegiance recitation



Episode #2: Mini Pooper

The mother and children were in their car at the start of a 25-minute drive home from swimming (see Figure 5). Travel by car is a common daily activity for this family, who spend an average of about 45 minutes/day in the car together. Thus, the car provides a comfortable, familiar *location* for the family, and one that fosters conversation, where a variety of salient objects and events can be the focus of mutual attention. At the time of data collection, the family particularly enjoyed pointing out certain types of cars. Mini Coopers were a favorite, as they were relatively rare in that location and there was a maternal family history with an original Mini Minor. It is also worth noting that James found “potty humor” particularly amusing at that stage in his development and entrained younger sibling Katy into this fascination.

Katy’s mother, James, and Katy are driving home in the car when the mother points out a Mini Cooper on the road. After a pause, Katy asks, “Where’s the Mini Pooper?” Mother and James laugh and the mother attempts to show Katy again where the Mini Cooper is. James repeats “Mini Pooper” and both he and his mother laugh. Katy sits quietly contemplating this exchange. She then turns with a grin and says, “Where’s the Mini Pooper?” Katy, realizing that the

Figure 5

Still shot of Katy in car asking, “Where’s the Mini Pooper?”



laughter is about the name, repeats “Mini Pooper” several times. At lunch, her mother reminds Katy of this incident—Katy repeats “Mini Pooper” again and everyone laughs.

The “joke” in this episode involves verbal incongruity through word play. An interesting aspect of this exchange is that during the “day,” Katy never appeared fully to understand why her expression *Mini Pooper* amused other members of her family, a point we discuss below. She did, however, use the phrase repeatedly to elicit laughter, instantiating Reddy’s (2001) category of *clowning*, although, in this instance, with words.

Episode #3: Trick

Throughout the “day,” Katy used the term “trick” in reference to a variety of her own behaviors, such as playing with a ball, climbing into her doll’s crib, playing with a spoon, spilling water on herself, and spitting out food. In this latter example, Katy violated family table manner norms by spitting pineapple out of her mouth. She covered this behavior—attempting to gloss it over by turning the violation into what she apparently hoped would be perceived as a clever act—with the following expression: *I popped it in my mouth and do a trick!* (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Still shot of Katy during the lunchtime Trick episode, saying, “That was a trick! Let me show you a trick! I popped it in my mouth and do a trick!”



The family is eating a lunch of French toast and pineapple. Katy is eating her pineapple cubes with a toothpick and one cube falls out of her mouth (or perhaps she spits it out because it is sour). She puts it back in her mouth and then deliberately spits it onto the table. She puts it in again, pulls it out and smiles and laughs. She says, “I popped it in my mouth and do a trick!” Mom questions what Katy is doing and Katy does it again and laughs. A few minutes later Katy does it again and says, “That was a trick!” Her father says that he didn’t like that trick.

Katy demonstrated at least three types of humor in this example. First, her “trick” is *joking*. It is a *physical* expression, incongruously (or at least, inappropriately) spitting food out of her mouth at the dinner table, an atypical food management act! It is also *clowning* in its repetition (“Let me do it again”) of its *physical* manifestation and also *verbal* in its hopeful labeling of the activity as a “trick.”

Psycholinguistic Analysis

Although, as we have demonstrated above, humor includes physical acts that do not necessarily involve language, language is clearly a significant cornerstone of much of this child’s humor. We wanted to explore this aspect of humor more deeply by a close examination of a representative sample of her language.

Language acquisition during the early years is accompanied by a wealth of value-added semiotic resources (semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic) that young children can bring to bear in their familial interchanges, to get their way with playful words and cleverly deployed banter. Monitoring that development can enhance understanding of one of many channels opening up between the children and their families. All linguistic utterances of the child and all those directed toward her during lunchtime were therefore re-transcribed using the conventions of the Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT; Miller & Chapman, 1984). This provided

an opportunity to document the linguistic performance of the child and her mother during one half hour when instances of all three illustrative interchanges described above were demonstrated. Of specific interest were lengths of utterances, number of different words uttered, questions, and Brown's developmental stage, as they are not simply indices of vocabulary or syntactic accomplishments, but represent the intersections of both semantic and syntactic psycholinguistic processes with pragmatics (Brown, 1963).

The passage analyzed here includes a total of 120 utterances from Katy and 98 from her mother (see Table 2). In this passage, Katy's mean length of utterance (MLU) in words was 3.4 and in morphemes it was 3.7, putting her in Brown's (1963) late IV/early V stage (31-50 months), which is quite advanced for a 30-month-old. Her language was primarily directed toward negotiating food play at the family meal time table, a goal that was not likely to succeed; yet she was remarkably successful in joking her way into many repeats of her comedy routines by playing with words, analogies, and concepts that either temporarily entertained or at least diverted her parents from

insisting she stop messing with her food. As she listened to the dinner table conversations around her, she interpolated what she intended as humorous interventions previously deployed successfully during her day: the patriotic *Pledge of Allegiance* and the *faux pas* of the *Mini Pooper*, both guaranteed to get a rise from her mother, and the focal verbal activity involved in "*the [pineapple] trick.*"

Katy's utterance lengths fairly closely matched her mother's or, perhaps, her mother's mirrored hers. The inter-mental zone of development in operation appears to be a rich verbal environment for Katy to ply her wares of joking, teasing, and clowning in aid of turning her lunchtime into a personally satisfying playing field (Hancock & Gillen, 2007). Likewise, Katy's type-token ratio (TTR) was an impressive 0.3, reflecting an extensive repertoire of unique words in the passage analyzed (of 387 words, 114 were unique). Again, her mother's TTR was in relative synchrony with hers at 0.4.

While half of her mother's utterances were questions and one sixth of Katy's were, one sixth of her mother's utterances were responses to questions and one third of Katy's utterances were responses to questions

Table 2
Psycholinguistic Analysis of the Speech of Katy and Mother

SALT Analysis	Katy	Mother
Total Utterances	120	98
Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) in Words	3.4	4.4
MLU in Morphemes	3.7	4.7
Type-Token Ratio	0.3	0.4
Different Words/ Total Words	114/387	168/428
Questions Asked	1/6	1/2
Responses to Questions	1/3	1/6
Brown's Stage	Late IV/Early V (31-50 mos.)	Late V (41 mos.)

asked of her. Exchange reciprocity seems to typify their dinner table communications. While the distributions of utterance lengths showed a bimodal pattern for Katy, with many instances of one-word utterances, there were also a large number of four-word utterances. Likewise, her mother issued several very long utterances, but her modal utterance lengths were approximately 4 words long as well (see Figure 7). Again, there seems to be an impressive amount of mirroring occurring between child and mother, both linguistically and conceptually, even if the child's attempts at interactional synchrony through humor sometimes misfired. Katy used her developing language skills to negotiate the verbal thicket of her domestic world. She used it to make her presence felt in interactions with family members, and she used it to confirm her preferences, get needs met, and to establish connections with her closest relatives.

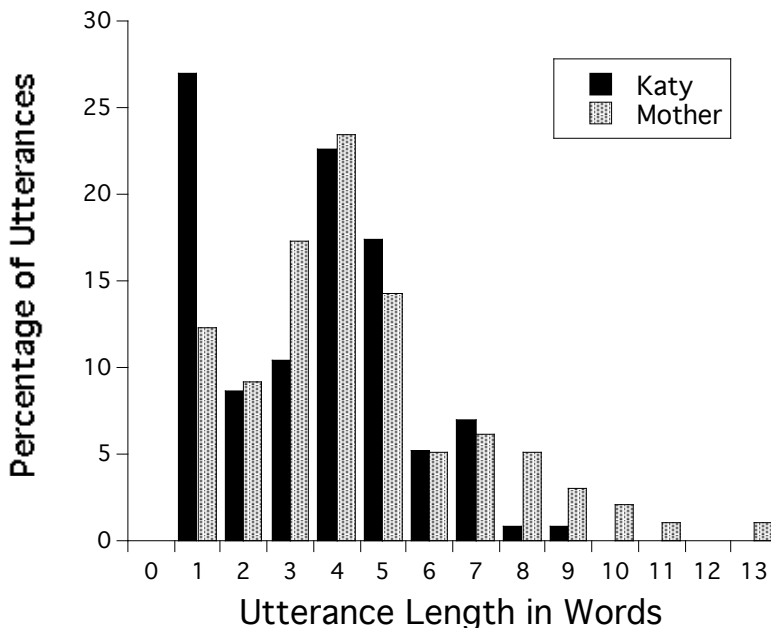
Functions of Humor

Each of the above samples served multiple functions for Katy. We have carefully ana-

lyzed each of these episodes, considering the socio-emotional and cognitive and linguistic functions they served. The cognitive and playful language motives are frequently deeply intertwined with socio-emotional intentions. There is a rich socio-emotional web created by humor, and the cognitive and linguistic advances made by the child appear enhanced by this contextually affective scaffolding.

First, in each of these episodes there was clear enjoyment and pleasure for the child, serving a positive emotional function. For example, in the case of the *Pledge of Allegiance* episode, Katy laughed and rolled around on the bed as her mother tickled her. In the *Mini Pooper* example, Katy smiled and her eyes twinkled as she repeated the phrase "Where's the Mini Pooper?" Second, there is satisfaction in shared-meaning in the impacts of these humorous episodes. Katy understood and played on the idea that her mother would react in a charged manner to her recitation of the *Pledge of Allegiance*. In the case of the *Mini Pooper*, the joke served as an empowering mother-

Figure 7
Mean Utterance Lengths in Words for Katy and Mother



son-daughter shared experience, which was later shared with the father, and created a familial “in-joke.” Third, in the *Pledge of Allegiance* and *Trick* episodes, Katy was deliberately violating social norms in varying degrees of playfulness, which provides some supportive evidence for Loizou’s (2005) *theory of the absurd*. In the *Pledge of Allegiance*, Katy jokingly disobeyed her mother, and in the *Trick*, she was “testing the waters,” exploring the extent of her powers of persuasion, and seeking a positive consensus on her playful actions. Interestingly, the *Trick* contained an added dimension, in that her antics did not immediately gain her the acceptance she was apparently trying to elicit from her parents. Hence, it was repeated (in the name of a “trick”) to try to persuade them of its hilarity. This appears in the first instance to be akin to the phrase “*Can’t you take a joke?*” used by adults to cover for missteps, a point to which we also return below. Finally, each of these episodes demonstrates that Katy attracts the attention of her family members with her various humorous actions, leading to further interaction with them (e.g., tickling from her mother during the *Pledge of Allegiance*, and sharing laughter together). Humor seems largely to serve a familial attachment function between Katy and her relatives, and especially with her mother.

In addition to these socio-emotional functions of humor use, there are also cognitive and linguistic functions. Katy’s playful use of language to exchange ideas and experiences dovetails with her intellectual and expressive maturation, and many cognitive advances reflect accompanying linguistic ones. First, there was a significant amount of repetition of each of the three sample “jokes” described above. There is a wealth of developmental evidence from the psychological literature demonstrating that repetition reinforces learning. Katy’s jokes were clearly clowning, efforts to elicit laughter (Reddy, 2001). Indeed, each of the samples described above appeared repeatedly during in the “*day*.” Moreover, the *joke* in each

was repeated numerous times within the episodes highlighted here. An additional benefit of clowning (besides connecting with others and making them laugh) is that it offers the child the opportunity to reinforce and extend concepts and their associated language. Each repetition of *Mini Pooper* was an opportunity for Katy to reflect on the phrase and to attempt to understand what made it funny, exploiting the developmental opportunity that humor provides. “Getting a joke” requires cognitive sophistication that matches, reaches, or exceeds the complexity of the joke. Given the benefits of congruence between humorous stimuli and a child’s cognitive structures (Zigler, Levine, & Gould, 1967), repetition can enhance understanding, and increased sophistication can enrich the experience of humorous stimuli. Thus, humor can reinforce mastered concepts and introduce new ones for the child to explore. In this way, humor and cognition are complementary.

A third cognitive function of humor involves, in Loizou’s (2005) terminology, empowerment. Loizou’s theory of empowerment highlights the “headiness” of violating or challenging social norms. We identified numerous instances when Katy seems to have felt she might have been pulling the wool over an interlocutor’s eyes. Humor in general, particularly when shared with others, is reinforcing. Smiles and laughter also demonstrate empowerment, accompanying behavior in which mastery has been achieved. Like Bergen (2001) reported, we noted several instances of Katy’s smiling when she had accomplished a challenging task during the day, although we did not classify simple pleasure in mastery as a type of humor, as Bergen did.

Finally, as demonstrated by the SALT analysis, Katy’s linguistic achievements at 30 months were advanced. It seems that humor and *cognition* serve symbiotic ends, and that humor and *language* are also mutually interdependent. For example, one of her longest utterances was a 10-word playful one (in reference to pineapple in the *Trick* episode): “I popped it in my mouth and do

a trick!" Katy also uses playful language to buy time and authority to play with her food via her incongruous labeling of food items. At the lunch table, in addition to her "trick" joking, the following utterances were analyzed:

K: Look! The fork, it's got a pancake on it!
M: French toast.

To which, Katy amends:
K: French toast pancake.

And about 10 minutes later:

K: I'm eating pancakes.
M: It's French toast!
K: I'm just kidding.
M: You're funny.

Her joking is persistent and intentional as she repeats her "jokes," saying they are "tricks" or that she is "kidding." With her speech acts, Katy made her own lunch table talk into a verbal playground (Hancock & Gillen, 2007) and established discursive power in the family with her clever manipulation of language. Interestingly, the linguistic and emotional synchrony observed between Katy and her mother, combined with their mutual enjoyment of humor, may provide a "secure base" from which Katy can confidently explore, engage, and seek to understand her environment (Cameron, Tapanya, & Gillen, 2006).

Discussion

We were struck by the ubiquitous use of humor evident in our analysis of this child's daily activities. While counting and classifying in a case study is a risky proposition, we have identified numerous instances of humor, conservatively estimating about one every 10 minutes or so, some of which were fleeting. We see the overlapping four basic types as being well represented in Figure 1. A most notable feature of all three examples of humor described above is that each encompasses several *types* of humor. This is important, as much research has focused on

verbal incongruity to the exclusion of other types of humor employed by children, and especially very young children. Moreover, this child used humor to achieve many often overlapping or interacting ends—cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and social, as depicted in the representation of functions served in Figure 3.

As Horgan (1981) and others have noted, children are influenced by the passions of their parents. For example, the child of a psycholinguist may well demonstrate pleasure in playing with language in a sophisticated way. Likewise, in the context of this household, humor is held in high regard. The parents reported themselves to be fun-loving people and declared that they wanted their children to make them laugh. Katy seemed to be aware of this and used it to her advantage whenever possible.

Inter-mental Zone Informs Intra-mental Processes

Piaget described cognitive development as progressing genetically from inside outward, and believed that thought preceded language, with early speech functioning egocentrically; that is, he saw language as only a rough internal guide to developing thought (Piaget, 1970). Vygotsky, by contrast, argued that speech served first and foremost a social function, with interactions with others the stimulus for cognitive advancement. It was in the activity of joint problem-solving with a more cognitively advanced partner that the child's true intellectual potential could be identified. Contemporary applied cognitive developmental psychologists have emphasized the importance of investigating operations within the social interstices of joint problem-solving, what Vygotsky identified as a Zone of Proximal Development, and none have done so more persuasively than Mercer (2000). Mercer has contrasted intra-mental with inter-mental cognitive functioning; like Vygotsky, he has demonstrated the importance of inter-mental processing to intra-mental growth. An educational psychologist, Mercer examined students' classroom problem-solving and suggested the great importance of providing ample

opportunity in school settings for cognitive processing in what he calls Inter-mental Development Zones (IDZs). In the present work, we see a good deal of evidence of the observed child operating in a socially rich IDZ wherein she safely explored ways and means to expand her understanding of her familial place, her physical surroundings, and her comprehension of the social power of her own and others' words to "get things done." Just as adult humor is largely social by nature, our toddler's humorous interactions expose entwined affective and intellectual processes and reveal the place of playful communications in the development of a "strong child."

Research on adult humor emphasizes the social nature of the use of humor and explores its rhetorical value, highlighting the important use of humor to "delineate social boundaries" (Meyer, 2000, p. 310). Meyer described three major theories of adult humor functioning: the relief theory (largely attributable to Berlyne [1972] and Freud [1905/2003]), incongruity theory (emphasized by McGhee [1989]), and "superiority" theory (also attributable to Freud [1905/2003]). While tension reduction and patterns violating congruity appear to capture some of the functions of the humor we have observed in one 30-month-old child, the superiority aspect of Freud's theory was not expected to account for very young children's humor, as researchers like Bergen (1998) have only offered data in support of the theory with considerably older children. Freud identified superiority humor behavior as that which is meant to divide people and empower an individual at the expense of another. Further, Meyer (2000) described the "double-edged sword" of humor, indicating that it can serve both to unite and divide interlocutors. We saw no instances of humor use that appeared to have the function of dividing, although teasing, "viewed as humorous and aggressive at the same time" (p. 328), might be a first step in this direction. Analysis of our data suggests that this very small child did not employ this sort of divisive humor; rather, her socio-emotional

development was primarily focused on relational affiliation at this early age.

Using Humor To Make Affective Connections

One very salient feature of Katy's humor is the extent to which it appeared to be used to establish warm connections to members of her family. Katy's clowning demonstrated her efforts to affect others by her actions. Moreover, her teasing initiated intense interactions with her mother and a connection that brought them closer physically and that elicited a warm emotional response from her mother. Her use of the *Pledge of Allegiance* reaffirmed her rightful membership in the family, as a person to be counted upon for generating a certified family joke on the outside world, including her child-care setting, her brother's school, and her larger social environment, where other children might not be encouraged to tease about something so "serious."

Using Humor To Negotiate Social Situations

Mercer (2000) made the point that joke telling requires the audience to know that they are mutually involved in a joke. The inter-mental aspect of joking is a critical dimension for Mercer. If interlocutors do not achieve this mutuality, the speaker may need to say something like "*That was a joke!*" Katy appeared to have adopted "*trick*" to stand in for this concept; it served not only as a hedge against disapproval, but also a signifier that what had been done was clever and thus worthy of approval. This reflects a sophisticated understanding of social "rules." She is, furthermore, negotiating her position as a certified family actor.

It seems that, during the "*day*," when Katy was moved to act in ways she felt were a little risqué, such as spitting out food at the dinner table, she would insert a comment to the effect that it was a "*trick*" to see how the gambit might fare. She seemed more confident of announcing an action as a "*trick*" than simply carrying it out and waiting for a response. She scaffolded her activities with accompanying "scare" ex-

planations, apparently hoping that those activities would become at least somewhat acceptable to her parents. This negotiation of food play during mealtime bought her a considerable amount of exploratory space under the radar of her parents' potential disapproval. She extended the stage for approval to include other speech acts that she thought would buy her floor time as family comedian by pulling out her *Pledge of Allegiance* script and repeating the *Mini Pooper* joke of the day.

While this young child's language was developing apace with her other cognitive functioning, her use of playful language served both to allow her to test in a range of ways her place in familial context, as well as to purchase space for learning the meanings of concepts and words. It may be that not all children would use humor in these ways. Further analyses of the other participants in our study of young children around the globe (such as in Cameron, Accorti Gamannossi, Gillen, & Cameron, 2007) will inform a broader appreciation of the development of variations in the uses of playful speech acts and other means of humorous interactions that facilitate the growth of internal representations, as well as advances in interactional synchrony (Cameron & Tapanya, 2006). Language and thought can mutually spur each other as they enhance at one and the same time socio-emotional development, just as emotions and social relationships can precipitate cognition and psycholinguistic enrichment. Clearly, humor can serve as a mechanism by which children learn "rules" of social discourse and engage in their local community, supporting Vygotsky's notion that language functions as both cultural and psychological tools.

Child caregivers can grasp the opportunities that humorous exchanges afford for enhancing early socio-emotional and psycho-linguistic development (e.g., Bergen, 2001; Klein, 2003; Loizou, 2007; Southam, 2005). By being sensitive to the developmental levels at which a child is operating, parents and teachers can synchronize with

the child's humorous perceptions of her or his world, thus scaffolding the broadening vistas of "possible worlds" (Bruner, 1986) made available to the child by her or his growing appreciation of life's all-pervading incongruities.

Note:

¹ The mother is also the first author of this paper. She became a collaborator on this project after the completion of data collection. She was unaware of any focus on humor development during the data collection phase.

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