

**Neal R. NORRICK, *Conversational Joking: Humor in Everyday Talk*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993, Pp. xi+175, ISBN 0-253-34111-60)**

**Michelle Long**

Volume 17, Number 1, 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087481ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087481ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

**ISSN**

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Long, M. (1995). Review of [Neal R. NORRICK, *Conversational Joking: Humor in Everyday Talk*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993, Pp. xi+175, ISBN 0-253-34111-60)]. *Ethnologies*, 17(1), 220–223. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087481ar>

Neal R. NORRICK, *Conversational Joking: Humor in Everyday Talk*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993, Pp. xi+175, ISBN 0-253-34111-60

In *Conversational Joking*, Neal Norrick examines the multitude of situations in which speakers employ humour in their everyday discourse. He explains that a joking manner can be used in exchanging information about participants, a third person, an event, or an abstract notion, for greeting or leave-taking, introducing new topics or participants, presenting social information about oneself and eliciting it from others, relieving tension, covering embarrassment, and of course, filling in awkward moments or lulls. Humour finds a natural home in conversation.

Norrick organizes the book according to some of humour's functions in conversation. He cites concepts set out by Roman Jakobson on the basic components of the communicative event, and to a lesser degree, those of M.A.K. Halliday and Dell Hymes. Specifically, he looks at organizational functions, interpersonal dimensions, and the metalingual function of joking. He organizes his study by function rather than by form, because he says that the former determines the latter.

At the outset, Norrick explains because humour is a fundamental part of discourse, it must be examined in context. Rather than presenting an anthology of narrative jokes, he looks to natural, everyday conversation in which to showcase the spontaneous and varied uses of humour as it most often occurs.

His introductory chapter explains his transcription system. While transcribed conversation may sometimes be difficult to follow, with its interruptions, simultaneous speech, and laughter, Norrick's consistency and careful attention to detail makes it easy to follow. Since timing and context are so crucial in joking, most of the passages Norrick presents have been transcribed from taped conversation, thus allowing him to present the most accurate representation possible. He also uses only examples which were received with amusement when uttered, and gives sufficient background information to put the joke in context. His analysis focuses on North American English (nearly all participants were native-born white Anglo-Americans living just west of Chicago). However Norrick expects that the situations are ones which his readers will recognize from their own personal experiences.

In Chapter 2, he focuses on the role of joking in conversational organization, which aligns roughly with Jakobson's phatic and Halliday's textual functions. He begins with humour's role in the simplest type of exchange: a two-part adjacency pair. This structure consists of two successive turns, such as a question and response. The response segment is often used to inject humour, usually

prompted by ambiguous or vague words or phrases in the question. A participant may choose to deliberately “misunderstand” the initial statement or question, and respond in a way that does not mesh with the real context. Usually, once the pretended misunderstanding is received by the first speaker, the second will give the appropriate reply, this time in the correct context. Humour can also organize larger chunks of conversation, over several turns, when participants are opening or closing conversations, leaving, changing topics, introducing new participants, or re-aligning the present ones.

Turn-taking is important for the analysis of humour and conversation. To tell a narrative joke or personal anecdote, the speaker takes command of the floor, while the audience awaits the monologue, in the hope that they can participate in the payoff: laughter. Jokes are generally introduced into the conversation when topically relevant, or once a play-frame has been established, one joke often leading to another. Or the joke may cause a change in key; the conversation's topic may take a serious note, based upon some facet of the joke just told.

Laughter itself can be used to organize a conversation. Not only the appropriate response at the end of a joke, it can defuse seriousness or occur out of embarrassment or nervousness. It may also signal closure to a topic of conversation. In this way, Norrick says (citing work by Deborah Schiffren), laughter is a discourse marker.

In his third chapter, Norrick discusses joking's “interpersonal” dimension. This is a term he borrows from Halliday, covering Jacobson's emotive and conative functions concerning the speaker and listener respectively. The author is interested in the exchange of personal information between the speaker and listener in a joking situation. Much of his work on this dimension of joking grows out of research on social interaction done by Goffman, as well as work on politeness, solidarity, and rapport by Lakoff, Brown and Levinson, and Tannen. Norrick looks at a wide range of humorous exchanges, and the roles of all participants.

In particular, he examines three types of exchanges: personal anecdotes, wordplay, and sarcasm and mockery. All allow speakers to manipulate topics or introduce a play frame, as well as to search for social information about fellow participants, i.e. their knowledge, attitudes, and tolerances.

Personal anecdotes allow participants to present a facet of themselves to the audience, thus enhancing rapport through mutual revelation. They allow much interaction between speaker and audience, sometimes to the extent that the audience becomes a co-teller. Wordplay allows the speaker to display wit, and a view of himself or herself as a person willing to suspend the conversation at hand for some amusement. Wordplay grows out of the immediate context, and provides a way for speaking “off record.” Sometimes making puns and such forms of humour may take on a competitive edge. Some people develop a customary joking relationship, in which they participate in a friendly competition of wits.

Sarcasm and mockery are some of the more aggressive kinds of joking. They can be used to control other participants' actions within a speech group, and firmly establish what is acceptable behaviour. They often enforce solidarity and although aggressive, they are not always negative. In a relationship which is secure enough to flout the overt trappings of politeness, a sarcastic remark can carry a "metamessage" that it is intended as play. Norrick writes that this occurs especially in customarily joking relationships.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the metalingual function of joking, which, Norrick writes, has been largely overlooked in past work on humour. It allows speakers to use the linguistic form of a language as a possible inventory for amusement, as well as a means of social control. Puns and other forms of word play, for example, focus on the linguistic form as a source of humour, using phonologically identical or similar words or phrases, and ambiguity of word meanings. But joking or mocking comments on pronunciations or word choices also allow participants to set parameters for their conversation; that is, they can define the appropriate grammar and meanings for the speech situation. Mocking the language systems of other speech groups or situations lets participants define their own community, and build group solidarity.

Chapter 5 discusses the performance aspect of joke telling, and the role of the audience. Norrick explains how other studies have focused on the aggression and test elements in jokes. He acknowledges Sacks, Sherzer, and Legman, who say that the teller challenges the listener to understand the joke—to pass a test—and aggression is directed at either the listener or some other party as the butt of the joke. However, the author takes a softer position, claiming that participants learn something about each other through the exchange, and that the test is less a form of aggression than a means of finding common ground. He views joke telling as a way to share knowledge and beliefs, and form group cohesion.

In Chapter 6, Norrick stresses the major thrust of this volume: the importance of joking in conversation and the many roles it plays. He suggests further research on the interrelations of joking and aggression, and admits his work has downplayed the test function. Because most of Norrick's examples recorded leisure-time interactions between family and friends in one geographical area, he suggests comparative studies be done based on different interactional groups. He also posits a need to consider the acquisition of joking strategies from childhood to adulthood.

A bibliographical essay follows the main text, giving a clear, well-annotated summary of research to date on conversation and humour. Norrick discusses sociolinguistic, psychological, and anthropological approaches. However, he claims that none has presented a complete picture of conversational humour, because each treats joking as its own category, and fails to look at it as it occurs in everyday discourse.

Overall, Norrick has a clear writing style, and provides a wealth of examples to illustrate his points. He examines a wide variety of functions of humour, and explains them well. *Conversational Joking* should be interesting and informative to anyone interested in language and communication. The one comparatively weak component of the work, as Norrick readily admits, is the one-sidedness of his interactional situations, restricted to good-natured leisure time of midwestern American family and friends. A less confined study group could have altered Norrick's findings—particularly in regard to humour and aggression.

Michelle LONG  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, MB

---

Tim BORLASE (ed. and comp.), *Songs of Labrador*, (Fredericton, Goose Lane Editions, 1993, pp. 214, ISBN 0-86492-156-X)

Co-published with the Labrador East Integrated School Board, this is a revised and expanded version of a volume published by the Board in 1982. It includes all but four of the first volume's 117 songs and narratives, and adds 23 new pieces, for a total of 136. The title does not convey fully the contents, for there are 13 narratives—essentially oral history texts—taken mainly from *Them Days*, the award-winning Labrador-based quarterly that has been publishing such material since the mid-70s. Also included are brief signed essays on aspects of traditional life such as sayings, games, medicine, and “old custom” trapping laws. One, “Folk Songs of the Trapper” by Alicia Eaton (117), offers insights into the traditional contexts and uses of some of the older songs in the volume.

In terms of the songs that comprise most of its contents the volume is quite eclectic, reflecting the region's cultural and geographical diversity. Its metal spiral binding signals the intention of the editor that it be used as a school songbook, and its texts are printed so that, with the exception of two songs for which lengthy choral scores are provided, each song fills no more than two facing pages. Music is provided for all songs and tunes. In his “Foreword” (9-11), Borlase, who is the coordinator of art, music, drama, and social studies for the School Board, sketches geography, climate, settlement history, and “The Labrador Way of Living.” It closes with a discussion of the collection itself, a collaborative labour which, editor Borlase stresses, speaks “to a common Labrador experience and the sharing of cultural values that have made this place so