

The functions of “just kidding” in American English

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Abstract

This study is a corpus-assisted investigation concerning the functions of the formulaic sequence *just kidding* and its variants (e.g., *only kidding*, *just joking*, *JK*) in spoken and written American English. We identified 1200 instances of this phrase from multiple corpora representing a range of modalities (Contemporary Corpus of American English, Global Web-Based English corpus, The Santa Barbara Corpus, CallFriend, and MICASE) and utilized a recursive qualitative coding process that identified four different functions of the phrase (inoculation, repair of failed humor, return to serious, and set-up-new-joke). After the initial identification, we analyzed the four functions of *just kidding* through the lens of rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2005), which assumes the ongoing maintenance of relationships between interlocutors, arguing that *just kidding* and its variants can serve as an important element of rapport management amongst interlocutors. Our results suggest that *just kidding* is pragmatically dynamic and not solely a marker of failed humor, as initially expected. © 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

In June of 2014, the following exchange took place between an air traffic controller working at Hartsfield-Jackson airport in Atlanta, Georgia, USA and the pilot of a passenger jet:

Tower: Delta 630 heavy, Atlanta Tower, wind 230 at 14, runway 27 left, cleared to land

Pilot: Cleared to land, 27 left. Uh, we do not have a gate yet so you might want to figure out some place for us to park while we sort it out

Tower: Delta 630 go around [2 second pause] **I'm kidding**. Delta 630, after your landing I've got no one behind you. Expect to exit right the second high-speed we'll, we'll hide you out somewhere down by Papa [4 second pause] Delta 630 heavy you copy?

Pilot: Sorry say again?

Tower: Expect to exit the second high speed November Two... Delta 630 you're cleared to land runway 27 left

Pilot: You sent us around. Delta 630's on the go

(Story: [Fehely, 2014](#); Audio: [Mead, 2014](#))

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The air traffic controller's initial instruction to abort landing and "go around" was apparently intended to be interpreted humorously, as evidenced by the quick recontextualization of the utterance as "kidding." Unfortunately, this clarification came too late. The pilot had already pulled away and aborted the attempted landing. Given the communicative context of air traffic control discourse, in which precise, utilitarian information must be conveyed swiftly, it is unsurprising that the initial instruction was interpreted as serious and acted upon immediately. Even the quick deployment of a formulaic sequence to clarify humorous intent ("I'm kidding") was not enough to save the air traffic controller's joke from failing, with negative consequences for all involved, as Flight 630 was not able to land until about an hour later.

In this study we focus on the phrase *just kidding* and its variants (e.g., *totally kidding*, *only joking*, and its acronym *JK*) in existing spoken and written corpora in an attempt to gain a better understanding of how interlocutors interpret and use this formulaic sequence in the presence of humor (failed or otherwise). By treating this phrase and its variants as formulaic, we attend to the conventionalized nature of this expression as serving specific pragmatic goals in conversation between interlocutors (Bardovi-Harlig, 2012) and focus not only on form and meaning but function as well (Schmitt and Carter, 2004). Past scholarship has suggested that formulaic language can be used to realize a variety of social purposes, including the co-construction of communication, the maintenance of social solidarity, and the organization of discourse (Schmitt and Carter, 2004; Wray, 2002). While our initial assumption was that *just kidding* and its variants would serve the social purpose of clarifying humorous intent, we were mindful that further research is needed in order to fully realize the particular functions of certain formulaic language and its conditions of use (Schmitt and Carter, 2004). Therefore, our study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What function(s) of the formulaic sequence *just kidding* and its variants are found in North American discourse?
- What rapport managing functions (if any) does the use of *just kidding* serve?

2. Just kidding

When someone says *just kidding*, that person is making an overt linguistic signal that a prior utterance (or action) should be reconsidered. On its face, the form and meaning of the phrase functions to indicate that a previous utterance was intended as non-serious or funny. The optional co-deployment of *just* functions to further minimize the pragmatic force of the prior utterance (Grant, 2011; Lindemann and Mauranen, 2001). However, it may be that the prefabricated nature of this sequence, which allows for its quick retrieval from memory (Wray, 2002), enables the sequence to serve both discourse level (i.e., signaling non-serious intent) and social functions (e.g., managing relationships).

Intuitively, it seems likely that *just kidding* and its variants would be used to signal recognition or repair of failed humor. Bell and Attardo (2010) have commented on the difficulty of identifying failed humor in discourse, primarily when the presence or absence of laughter is used as a key indicator of humor. *Just kidding* has provided a useful marker for identifying at least some instances of failed humor in transcripts of corpora and other large data sets (see Bell, 2015). If a closer examination of the phrase *just kidding* and its variants demonstrates that these phrases always coincide with an instance of failed humor, this would suggest that the primary function of *just kidding* is to mitigate or repair failed humor. Given that the failure of humor – whether at the level of perception, comprehension, or appreciation – often poses a serious face threat to both speaker and hearer (Bell, 2015) it would not be surprising to find a formulaic sequence that could be quickly deployed to mitigate that threat and ease any tension that might arise from a less-than-smooth social interaction.

However, the current body of research into humor studies suggests that a deeper and more purposed investigation into the phrase *just kidding* may be in order. Despite the risk inherent in using humor, it remains a crucial interactional resource. Conversational humor plays an important role in terms of relationship management and identity construction (e.g., Bell, 2011; Martin, 2007), in part due to its ambiguous nature, which creates both the risk and the interactional payoff. Because of its deniability, potentially through the use of phrases like *just kidding*, humor allows us to express criticism or praise indirectly (Dews and Winner, 1995), to express heartfelt emotions in a way that is not seen as maudlin (Oring, 2003), or to save face when complaining (Jorgensen, 1996). Extensive research into humorous talk in the workplace led by Janet Holmes (e.g. Holmes, 2000, 2006; Holmes and Marra, 2002a,b,c; Holmes and Schnurr, 2005) has amply demonstrated the ways that humor can be used to negotiate delicate situations involving power, hierarchy, and the construction and enactment of leadership across a variety of workplace contexts. This body of work shows that speakers use a variety of types of humor for both affiliative and disaffiliative, or contestive, ends (see also Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Haugh, 2010; Sinkeviciute, 2014). In any of these situations, a phrase such as *just joking* allows a speaker to retract statements that are not well received. Thus, a joking expression of love can be used to test the emotional waters and, depending on the reaction it receives, can be recalibrated as more or less serious in a subsequent turn. A complaint directed playfully at a supervisor can be ignored or retracted, with few negative repercussions. Given the multifunctional nature of humorous discourse, we may expect that, when used in conjunction with an attempt at humor, *just kidding* will

serve parallel functions depending on factors such as whether the joke was perceived, understood, or successful, as well as the relationship between interlocutors.

Furthermore, because speakers do not always wait for hearers to respond before stating *just kidding*, as was the case in our opening example, or because hearers may not have a chance to respond, the *anticipation* of failed humor may also exist. This anticipatory usage of *just kidding* likely demonstrates concern on the part of the speaker to preserve or maintain face for the hearer. With that in mind, we situate our current analysis within the framework of rapport management in order to account for the potential relationship management function that *just kidding* and its variants serve. Because the use of conversational humor has been shown to play a role in relationship management (Martin, 2007), we believe that rapport management can serve as a useful framework to study occurrences and functions of *just kidding*, with the assumption that *just kidding* and its variants will co-occur with attempts at humor or play.

3. Rapport management

While conversing, interlocutors not only exchange information, but they also build and maintain relationships, and differences in these relationships can influence the discourse that is produced. Major differences, such as variations in style have been argued to be primarily dependent on consideration of a speaker's audience (Bell, 1984, 2001). Politeness theory provided an early account of the ways that interlocutors' construction of their relationships is intertwined with their language use (Brown and Levinson, 1987). More recent accounts of politeness theory argue against inherent (im)politeness existing in words or language itself, but instead view (im)politeness as an interactional and dynamic phenomenon. *Rapport management* (Spencer-Oatey, 2002, 2005) is one example of such an account. From this view, interlocutors dynamically mediate relationships during conversation; how they choose to do so depends on personal and social expectations (Spencer-Oatey, 2002), which are broadly defined as behavioral expectations, considerations of face, and interactional wants (Spencer-Oatey, 2005). Rather than language functioning as the starting place for the emergence of (im)politeness, the management of relations amongst interlocutors leads to specific language choices, with the pragmatic force behind any utterances dependent upon the broader face and rights management of the interlocutors (Spencer-Oatey, 2002).

Rapport is defined as the "relative harmony and smoothness of relations" between interlocutors and *rapport management* as the management of such harmony (p. 96). Management of this harmony can be achieved through four rapport orientations: rapport enhancement, maintenance, neglect, or challenge. While interacting with one another, interlocutors make subjective judgments regarding the rapport orientations that exist amongst them; these judgments are derived from interlocutors' expectations of behavior, desire to save face, and interactional wants. Behavioral expectations depend upon context, individual beliefs, and relationships. Spencer-Oatey expands Brown and Levinson's (1987) original conceptualization of *face* to include *respectability face* ("the prestige, honor, or 'good name' that a person or social group holds and claims within a [broader] community," p. 102) and *identity face*, the "situation-specific face sensitivity [that is] highly vulnerable" (p. 103). Face sensitivity is based on individual's "positive social values that they associate with their various self aspects" (p. 104), which are individual and dependent upon elements such as bodily features, possessions, social behavior, and verbal behavior. Therefore, identity face is what is threatened during local interactions amongst interlocutors. Finally, interactional wants are the specific interactional goals of a conversation. Spencer-Oatey (2005) maintains that these three factors (behavioral expectations, face sensitivity, and wants) can all play dependent or independent roles as interlocutors dynamically mediate relationships in rapport management.

4. Method

4.1. Corpus-assisted analysis

This study seeks to examine discourse and pragmatic functions of the formulaic sequence *just kidding* and its variants. In order to locate a wide range of examples of these formulaic sequences in spontaneous use, we employed corpus-assisted methods of analysis. While researchers have long employed large corpora in order to gain a better understanding of lexical and grammatical patterns in language (e.g., Biber et al., 1999; Carter and McCarthy, 1997), the role of corpora in studies investigating pragmatic functions of language has been less clear, due to the inherent difficulty of analyzing pragmatic function in large, decontextualized corpora (Jucker et al., 2009; Romero-Trillo, 2008). Despite these difficulties, researchers in corpus pragmatics have successfully demonstrated the capability of corpora to provide a fruitful means of gaining a better understanding into pragmatic language use (e.g., Aijmer, 2002).

4.2. Corpora

We examined five corpora representing a range of modalities and interaction types and searched each corpus for instances of *just kidding* and similar forms using the search terms *joking*, *kidding*, or *JK* (see Table 1). Because we were

Table 1
Frequency of *kidding* and *joking*.

	COCA	GLoWbE	SBCSAE	CallFriend	MICASE	Total
<i>kidding</i>	341	708	5	8	18	1080 (90%)
<i>joking</i>	42	72	3	–	3	120 (10%)
<i>Total</i>	383	780	8	8	21	1200

interested in how *just kidding* and its variants function in interaction and in conjunction with humor, we examined each occurrence in its original context and manually removed examples in which the sequence occurred in reported speech, quotes from scripted television shows or movies, retellings, and other instances where *just kidding* and its variants were not performing an immediate conversational function. We also counted immediate repetitions of any phrase as a single instance. The remainder of this section provides a brief description of the corpora used in this study as well as how data was extracted.

4.2.1. COCA

COCA, The Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008–2014), is comprised of over 450 million words and contains examples of spoken and written English from 1990 to the present, covering a variety of genres and mediums. To collect examples from COCA, we selected spoken data and the keyword-in-context (KWIC) view. Initial searches used exact search strings (i.e., *just kidding*, *just joking*) and were expanded to include adverb slots inside the phrase (i.e., *just adverb kidding*). Each example was manually extracted with the expanded context intact. In all, a total of 383 instances of *just kidding* or its variants were extracted from the spoken portion of COCA for analysis.

The data from COCA served as an initial dataset and was first analyzed to generate an initial taxonomy of functions. We examined each example, along with its expanded context, looking at how *just kidding* or its variants occurred with respect to turn order, attempts at humor, types of humor (e.g., tease, offensive jokes). This qualitative process resulted in an initial list of functions and also confirmed that although *just kidding* was the most common sequence, each of the variants functioned similarly (e.g., *only kidding/joking*). Much of the spoken data in COCA, however, comes from a very specific conversational context: television and radio reports and interviews. Although much of the talk that is found between variety show hosts or in interviews with guests resembles casual conversation among acquaintances and friends, we can also assume that the speakers are aware of and designing their utterances for a broader audience of strangers. Thus, in order to confirm and expand upon our initial findings, data were collected from four more corpora. These are described in further detail below.

4.2.2. GloWbE

GloWbE, the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (Davies, 2013), is a more recent corpus built from texts on the Internet. GloWbE contains almost two billion words from almost two billion web pages in English, including personal blogs, discussion forums, comment sections, etc. Data collection from GloWbE was similar to COCA. We again chose the KWIC view and limited our search to the United States. We searched for *just kidding* and its variants using the same search strings we used for COCA. Due to the nature of web-based written registers, GloWbE also contained instances of *just kidding* in the conventional web form *JK* or *jk*. Each example was manually extracted with the expanded context intact. Along with the abbreviated version and all other variants, a total of 780 instances were collected from GloWbE.

4.2.3. Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English

SBCSAE, the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (Du Bois et al., 2000–2005), is a collection of naturally occurring spoken interactions (approximately 249,000 words) obtained from across the United States. Transcribed recordings contain both face-to-face conversations, as well as other natural settings for spoken interaction, such as telephone conversations, lectures, tour guides, etc. The SBCSAE recordings also represent a range of regional and socioeconomic backgrounds. We identified a total of eight occurrences of *just kidding* or its variants in the SBCSAE by searching for the words *kidding* or *joking*.

4.2.4. CallFriend

CallFriend is a part of the much larger TalkBank Corpus (MacWhinney, 2007). Collected in 1997 by the Linguistic Data Consortium to analyze different dialects of spoken English, CallFriend consists of 60 transcribed telephone conversations between native speakers of English. Collected at a time prior to inexpensive long distance calling, volunteers were allowed to make a toll free telephone call to anyone they knew and were aware that they were being recorded, but also

given no prompts or guidance on what to talk about. All of the calls took place within Canada, the United States, Puerto Rico, or the Dominican Republic and were between family members or close friends. The length of the calls ranges from 5 to 30 min each (Linguistic Data Consortium, 1992–2015). By manually searching for the words *joking* or *kidding*, we identified a total of eight instances of *just kidding* or its variants from the English portion of the CallFriend corpus.

4.2.5. MICASE

MICASE, the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, (Simpson et al., 2002), is a collection of spoken English gathered by the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. The purpose of MICASE was to record academic spoken English in a variety of academic settings amongst different interlocutors. The corpus contains over 190 h of recorded speech totaling 1.8 million words and includes information about the speakers (e.g., academic status, native speaker status) and the conversational contexts (e.g., speech event genre, academic discipline, level of interaction). By manually searching for the words *joking* or *kidding*, we identified a total of 21 instances of *just kidding* or its variants.

4.3. Analysis

Taken together, the corpora in our study represent a range of interaction types. COCA, SBCSAE, CallFriend, and MICASE are all spoken, but involve different types of interaction, including differing degrees of formality (especially so in MICASE), public vs. private environments, and levels of intimacy between interlocutors. GloWbE provides a written corpus of asynchronous Internet discussion, which brings a wealth of different conversational topics and discourse communities into our data set. Including this wide range of interaction types in our data set allows us to better capture the different functions of *just kidding* and its variants.

The initial coding scheme derived from analyzing COCA was applied to these four additional data sets. Coding was again conducted using judgments based on how *just kidding* and its variants were functioning in the context of interaction. In other words, the phrases were not examined in isolation but alongside other speaker turns and reactions. Additionally, information available about the speakers was taken into account, and the original audio or video recordings (or online posts, in the case of GloWbE) were consulted to clarify any discrepancies. All authors independently coded this second half of the data and then discussed their results and adjudicated any disagreements.

5. Results

In all, we identified a total of 1200 instances of *just kidding* or its variants across the five corpora. As can be seen in Table 1, we located many more instances of *kidding* than *joking* in the data. Aside from the difference in frequency, we found no major differences in function between *kidding* and *joking*, and found only slight differences in co-occurring word forms. In terms of specific forms, the most common form for *kidding* was *just kidding* (81%), including the acronym *JK*, followed by no preceding adverb (12%; e.g., *I was kidding*), and then followed by other preceding adverbs (7%), such as *only* and *totally*. Slightly different results were seen for *joking*, with the most common form being no preceding adverb (52%), followed by *just joking* (32%), followed by other preceding adverbs (16%).

After analyzing each instance, we came to the conclusion that *just kidding* or its variants were used in this data for four different purposes: to inoculate the speaker against the failure of a prior utterance (likely an attempt to be humorous), to repair humor that had already failed, to return to a serious frame, and to set up a new joke. Tables 2 and 3 provide a summary of our findings. Table 2 displays the total number of times we coded an occurrence with a single function,

Table 2
Frequency of “*just kidding*” and corresponding functions across five corpora.

Corpus	Single functions					Total ^a
	Inoculation	Repair	Return to serious	New joke		
COCA	215 (56%)	95 (25%)	66 (17%)	–	–	383
GloWbE	596 (76%)	31 (4%)	24 (3%)	71 (9%)	–	780
SBCSAE	1 (12%)	5 (64%)	1 (12%)	–	–	8
CallFriend	4 (50%)	3 (38%)	1 (12%)	–	–	8
MICASE	15 (72%)	3 (14%)	3 (14%)	–	–	21
Total	831 (69%)	138 (11.5%)	95 (8%)	71 (6%)	–	1200

^a Note: total includes dual function counts from Table 3.

Table 3
Frequency of dual functions across five corpora.

Corpus	Dual functions				Total
	Inoculation & return to serious		Inoculation & new joke		
COCA	7	(2%)	–	–	7
GloWbE	48	(6%)	10	(1%)	58
SBCSAE	–	–	–	1	(12%)
Total	55	(5%)	10	(<1%)	66

whereas Table 3 displays the total number of times we coded an occurrence with more than one function. In this data, we never identified more than two functions for a single occurrence of *just kidding* or its variants.

As can be seen, *inoculation* was the most frequent function across all corpora combined, and the most frequent function within each individual corpus except for SBCSAE. Repair of failed humor was the second highest function across all corpora, and the second highest within each corpus, with the exceptions of GloWbE and SBCSAE. Return to serious was the third most frequent function across and within the corpora, again, except for GloWbE. The new joke set-up function was the least frequent function, and more importantly, only occurred within GloWbE.

We now turn to a more detailed discussion of each function in turn. To be consistent and to more easily discuss each example, we have formatted the extracts below to include line numbers. Because the different corpora all utilized different transcription conventions, we removed any original transcription conventions that were not relevant to the scope of the current study, focusing our analysis primarily on contextualization cues and language indicative of humor or attempts at humor. When necessary, we explain the meaning of any remaining transcription notations. We have also added emphasis (bold type) to places where speakers use *just kidding* or its variants. Examples are otherwise unchanged from the original source.

5.1. Function 1: Inoculation

In our data, the most common use of *just kidding* was to inoculate the speaker against any negative reaction that they anticipate following humor that might be seen as unfunny, inappropriate, or offensive (Bell, 2015), accounting for 69% (831 of 1200) of the instances. We coded instances with this function when an interlocutor stated *just kidding* (or one of its variants) immediately after a potentially humorous or playful statement and also before subsequent utterances were provided by any accompanying interlocutors. This function was seen in all five corpora. In COCA and GloWbE, it typically followed statements that were potentially offensive, risqué, or otherwise rife with the potential for misinterpretation. In our first example, Rush Limbaugh, a popular conservative radio and television talk show host, risks offense by making fun of his guest's tie:

Example 1 (COCA: Ind_Limbaugh 19960523)

- 1 LIMBAUGH: Follow me over here. Sir, your tie is less than fashionable. I saw
- 2 this tie, I felt embarrassed for him, ladies and gentlemen. Which of
- 3 these would go better with that drab suit you're wearing? **I'm only**
- 4 **kidding**. Come on. Which one do you want?
- 5 MAN: Both of them.
- 6 LIMBAUGH: No, no. You want this one. Obviously, you want this one. I want to
- 7 give this one to one of our men in uniform. There you go.

Rush Limbaugh poked fun at his guest's appearance in a very direct manner. He first describes the man's tie as "less than fashionable" and says that he "felt embarrassed" for the man because of the tie (lines 1–2). He further escalates the attack by calling the man's suit "drab," but immediately follows his statement with "I'm only kidding" (lines 3–4). The placement of this phrase, which directly follows an aggressive tease and leaves no time for a response from the target of the tease or from the audience, suggests that "I'm only kidding" is an explicit signal to the audience to interpret Limbaugh's utterance not as insulting, but as teasing, and thus is an attempt to inoculate him against the failure of such a potentially offensive tease. Although Limbaugh is known for using a style of humor that tends to be aggressive and often politically incorrect, the relationship between host and guest is not an intimate one. The behavioral expectations of this context

certainly include aggressive humor from Limbaugh targeting public figures or groups of people and may even permit a level of playful teasing directed at individuals, as seen here. However, as a popular conservative radio host, Limbaugh would be aware of the American political right's vocal respect for the military and those who are members of it. Teasing a person in the military (i.e., "one of our men in uniform") may have been particularly risky from the perspective of Limbaugh given his conservative audience. In terms of rapport management, Limbaugh's decision to inoculate this potentially insulting joke reveals his concern for his identity face, particularly in front of a live audience. Thus, this excerpt serves as an example of inoculation functioning to consider face even when the behavioral expectations of the situation might have otherwise permitted playful teasing. Our next example demonstrates the same function in an online setting:

Example 2 (GloWbe: <http://atbash.net/blog/archives/000046.html>)

- 1 "hi, there is pro european british? let's open a museum for them. I 'm kidding,
- 2 welcome in europe"

This excerpt comes from a blog discussion in 2004 surrounding the discovery that a small travel bag and laptop case manufacturer had secretly placed a political message (written in French) on the manufacturer's label for some of its products (see Bryant, 2004). Many found the label to be a direct attack on the then current U.S. president, George W. Bush. Being an election year in the U.S., the comment stream on the blog became highly politicized and shifted to a discussion regarding how fairly the U.S. government was seen in the eyes of Europeans, which then led to a discussion about perceptions of different governing bodies inside of Europe itself. During this discussion, one commenter posed a rhetorical question related to another commenter's claim that there are some British people in favor of the European Union. The author jokes that pro-EU British citizens are rare enough to merit inclusion in a museum (line 1). Immediately after the joke, however, and within the same turn, the author made it clear that he or she is "kidding" and then continued with a friendly welcome. Much like the Limbaugh example above, the potentially offensive joke here, about stereotypical British views, is clarified for general readers of the blog site and also those who may in fact be "pro european."

This joke serves to potentially belittle or insult members of the conversation who may be both British and in favor of the European Union system of government. At the same time, it also does little to advance the larger conversation. Furthermore, this comment signals this author's entrance into the conversation (indicated by the greeting "hi" in line 1) and, as a newcomer, the other participants in the discussion may interpret the author's remarks as indicative of a participant that does not take the ongoing conversation seriously. As an example of rapport management, this commenter uses *just kidding* in a way that explicitly signals the playful manner of the comment before others have a chance to respond. Furthermore, the author's "welcome" to those "pro european british" in line 2 indicates that the author does not in fact hold the view that "pro european british" are oddities that should be placed on display in a museum, but rather sees them as equally deserving of participating in the ongoing online conversation. In this manner, the author's inoculation of his or her humor ensures that the interactional wants of all parties are met, and that the more serious conversation can continue.

5.2. Function 2: Repair of failed humor

The second most common function of *just kidding* and its variants in our data was as an attempt to repair failed humor or clarify humorous intent. Although we originally assumed this function would best represent how the phrase is used in conversation, it accounted for just 11.5% of the corpus (138 of 1200). The defining criterion for this category is that repair occurs *after* an intervening turn in discourse, during which the hearer has responded in a manner that suggests that the speaker's attempt at humor or play was not recognized, was not understood, or was not appreciated.

The participants in the next example are discussing O.J. Simpson, who was accused of murder in 1994 and ultimately acquitted. Later, in 2007, Simpson was accused and eventually found guilty of armed robbery in Las Vegas, where he broke into a hotel room and took sports memorabilia that the victims were planning to sell. It is this robbery that Maggie Rodriguez, the news anchor, has been discussing with the network's legal analyst, Mickey Sherman, when he makes a joke about Simpson:

Example 3 (COCA: CBS_Sat Early 20070915)

- 1 RODRIGUEZ: Bottom line, Mickey, do you think this'll end with us seeing O.J.
- 2 Simpson in handcuffs again?
- 3 SHERMAN: We can only hope so.
- 4 RODRIGUEZ: Oh, my.
- 5 SHERMAN: **I'm just kidding. Just kidding.** Don't know. It's an even toss.

This excerpt begins with Rodriguez asking Sherman for his overall opinion on the case in lines 1 and 2. Sherman's response in line 3 is out of character for the role of a legal analyst, who is expected to weigh the strength of the legal

arguments in the case fairly and dispassionately. Instead, Sherman's response evokes memories of O.J. Simpson's 1994 acquittal. By "hoping" that Simpson be placed in handcuffs again, Sherman strays from his role of legal analyst and instead expresses his personal opinion that Simpson's arrest would be a good thing (line 3). Rodriguez' response in line 4, is evidence that Sherman's utterance was interpreted as a violation of behavioral expectations, given both the context of the conversation (i.e., the news) and the role of the speaker as a presumably impartial expert. In response to Rodriguez' surprise, Sherman produces two instances of *just kidding* before immediately offering his actual legal opinion. Sherman's use of *just kidding* in line 5 repaired or clarified his utterance in line 3, recontextualizing it as humorous or playful and thus mitigating the challenge it presented to rapport. Sherman's subsequent return to his conversational role of legal analyst by giving a serious and less subjective response to the anchor's question further suggests an attempt to manage rapport by repairing a failed joke.

In the semi-scripted, face-to-face synchronous discourse of television news, interlocutors are able to receive immediate feedback from each other and more fluidly maintain rapport during a conversation. Their conversational roles are also more defined compared to casual or spontaneous conversation, and, by extension, so are the behavioral expectations. In a less defined, more spontaneous conversation, such as the one below between two friends chatting on the phone about the ending of a book, the negotiation of repair becomes less clear: (Transcription note: ☺ = smiling voice; [text] = overlapping text; (.) = small pause, hhh = laugh particle.)

Example 4 (CallFriend: engn4984)

- 1 ROBERTA: oh well I'm very curious to read it... I'll see if I can get that at the
- 2 library
- 3 LIZ: I like the end (.) everybody dies in the end!
- 4 ROBERTA: hhh hhh [☺ thanks for telling me ☺]
- 5 LIZ: [don't be sca-hhh]
- 6 ROBERTA: [laughter]
- 7 LIZ: [laughter] **just** (.) **kidding!**
- 8 ROBERTA: no I'm **[kidding!** (laughter)]
- 9 LIZ: [(laughter)]
- 10 ROBERTA: [(laughter)]
- 11 LIZ: [(laughter)] that 's what (Kizzy) would do!
- 12 oh and everybody [dies in the end anyway]!
- 13 ROBERTA: [oh God] she and my mother

This example contains two concurrent instances of *just kidding*. Liz has read the book and is trying to convince Roberta to read it as well. While attempting to convince Roberta, Liz pretends to spoil the book by providing a cliché ending in line 3 ("everyone dies in the end"). In line 4, Roberta facetiously thanks Liz for telling her the ending, framed in smiling voice, suggesting that Liz aligns herself with Roberta's non-serious intent in line 3. In line 5 Liz tells Roberta "don't be sca-," but her utterance is cut off in laughter and both of them join in laughter together. In line 7, Liz then punctuates her laughter with "just (.) kidding!" Roberta immediately follows by declaring that *she* was kidding as well.

Liz's use of *just kidding* can be seen to serve two functions here: to clarify her statement as non-serious and to also move the conversation back to serious (see function three, below). First, even though both participants are laughing, Roberta's statement in line 4, if taken seriously, signals sarcastic disappointment at having the ending of the book ruined. Thus, it may be important for two friends to ensure that they are, in fact, just kidding, in order to maintain their relationship, especially when the behavioral expectations of talking about books or movies dictate that a person *not* spoil endings for another person who has yet to enjoy those books or movies.

However, it is also clear that both participants are laughing and cooperating in a playful moment, suggesting that Liz's use of *just kidding* in line 7 may have been a bid to return to serious (function three, below). However, Roberta also clarifies that she was "kidding." What is notable in Roberta's use of the phrase is that it is preceded by *no*, suggesting that she is responding directly to Liz's use of *just kidding*. When Liz says *just kidding*, she is explicitly marking that she was being non-serious, and Roberta's immediate response works to explicitly mark that she had recognized Liz's non-seriousness and had indeed been participating in the playful frame.

Ultimately, this example demonstrates the complicated nature of repairing perceived misunderstanding between intimates in order to maintain rapport. While it may be difficult to argue that the participants completely misunderstood each other's humor, we see both interlocutors using the same phrase to make clear the communicative intent of their utterances, with intervening turns influencing the final coding of the utterance. While Liz works to clarify that she was not spoiling the book (and thus not a rude person), Roberta works to clarify that she did not "fall" for the joke (and is not therefore naïve or gullible). At the same time, Roberta's use of *just kidding* demonstrates a consideration of face, in that the utterance serves to lessen any embarrassment Liz may have felt about her own failed humor. These parallel displays

of non-serious stance reinforce the playful frame, as well as reaffirming the two friends' shared norms regarding how books are discussed. This complicated interplay of the functions of *just kidding* and its variants demonstrates their flexibility and usefulness for rapport management.

5.3. Function 3: Return to serious

The *return to serious* function accounted for approximately 8% of the instances in our data (95 of 1200). Similar to Schegloff's (2001) finding on the use of "no" following a joke, we found that *just kidding* and its variants function as an attempt to steer discourse back into a serious or non-playful frame. Schegloff (2001) argued that interlocutors use the word *no* to mark a shift from playful or humorous back into serious discourse, providing the formula of "joke →serious 'no'" (p. 1954). According to Schegloff, using a *serious no* may serve as a method of "defeating" (p. 1954) discourse or making clear that what comes after is different than what comes before (i.e., my last statement was a joke, but my next statement is not). In this function, we argue that an interlocutor uses *just kidding* and its variants as a bid for participants to return back to a serious frame in the discourse.

The next example, from the CBS Early Show, occurred during the 2011 royal wedding between Prince William and Kate Middleton. American media were fascinated by the hats worn by the women at that event, and here the hosts and guests bantered about a particularly unusual hat worn by one of the guests (Erica):

Example 5 (COCA: CBS_Early 110427)

- 1 CHRIS: ...Just a quick note, what happened with your security? You look as
 2 though you were being attacked by some type of shrub when you
 3 went in for high tea, what was that on your head?
 4 JEFF: Jesus.
 5 ERICA: That is called an exploding peacock and it was loaned to me by Victoria
 6 Mather who you'll meet in just a moment.
 7 CHRIS: **I'm kidding.**
 8 ERICA: I said it was loaned, so I can't bring it back for you babe, I'm sorry.
 9 CHRIS: It did look great. It looked great. **Just kidding**, you got so much going on
 10 out there and everything looks great. Those wedding dresses that was a
 11 wonderful sight. And we'll get back to you in just a couple of minutes.

In lines 1–3, Chris exaggerates the appearance of the hat, implying that it was so extravagant that the wearer appeared to be battling a plant rather than wearing a hat. While Jeff, in line 4, offers a mild curse that may signal either disapproval of the tease or surprise at the hat, Erica picks up the playful manner of the comment in line 5 and goes along with the joke. She reinforces Chris' exaggerated portrayal by providing the name of the hat, an exploding peacock, a name that further highlights the extravagant nature of the hat. In line 7, when Chris utters "I'm kidding," it is possible that he is offering redress for what he may now see as too harsh of an assessment of the hat; however, we also see this as a bid to return to serious, something that becomes more apparent in his next turn. Following his comment, Erica continues with the humor in line 8 by offering a mock apology about her inability to bring that hat home for Chris. Note that a bid to return to serious does not necessarily guarantee that it will be successful – it is, after all, a *bid*.

In response, Chris provides a positive assessment of the hat, and again offers that he was "just kidding"; however, this time he maintains the floor and briefly comments, now in a serious frame, on the wedding in general before the show breaks for a commercial. This indicates even stronger evidence for interpreting his *just kidding* as a bid to return to a serious key, rather than as inoculation against any offense that may have been taken by audience members for his description of the hat. As previously noted, the hats were generally discussed as novelties in the U.S. media, and furthermore, a hat, particularly one worn in play and not closely associated with the tastes of the wearer, is not normally a sensitive target for most people. Finally, the imminent need to take a commercial break provides retrospective evidence for Chris' use of *just kidding* as a bid to return to serious, suggesting that the primary function of *just kidding* in this example aligned with the speaker's presumed interactional wants.

In online discussion, such as that found on a blog commenting section, returns to serious were also found contained within a single interlocutor's utterance. For example, this excerpt is from an online comment responding to a blog post about the potential increase in domestic oil production in the United States.

Excerpt 6 (GloWbe: <http://www.pluginCars.com/increasing-domestic-oil-production-would-have-little-effect-gas-prices-107081.html>)

The following exchange took place in the comment sections of an article published on a blog dedicated to electric vehicles (plugincars.com). The article (McDonald, 2011) put forth an argument that increasing domestic production of oil would do little to decrease the domestic price of gasoline in the United States. As commenters debated the issues and facts brought up by the blog post, one commenter named “abasile” chimed in with the following reply addressed to another poster, Peder.

abasile

- 1 @Peder: As a self-identified conservative, I also don't understand why so many of
- 2 my fellow conservatives, with whom I do agree on many issues, seem to have no
- 3 problem depending on hostile nations to fuel their gas guzzlers [continues].

This comment by abasile continued to discuss vehicle choices and fuel consumption. After this comment, three other comments were made, two of which were in reply to abasile's comment. These comments all addressed the topic of foreign dependence on oil in a serious manner. However, the fourth comment after abasile's (and the third direct reply to abasile) came from a commenter named Michael, and instead focused on abasile's professed political inclinations:

Michael

- 4 @abasile, “conservative”? You might as well use the phrase “Internal Combustion
- 5 Engine” on this site. You'll get the same response.
- 6 I'm **just kidding** of course. :-)
- 7 In all seriousness, though, I think the issue you bring up is starting to become
- 8 apparent to conservatives through a secondary problem of our growing national
- 9 debt [continues].

An American website devoted to the promotion of electric vehicles is bound to prompt leftward leaning political conversations, and liberal U.S. politicians and citizens have typically championed environmentally friendly lifestyles that shift away from non-renewable resources such as oil. Nonetheless, even though abasile self-identifies as a conservative (line 1), immediate replies to abasile's comment do not disparage or insult abasile, but instead continue the serious discussion about the conservative political stance toward gasoline consumption. Michael's reply is the first to recall abasile's conservative identity (line 4) and to equate the term with “internal combustion engine,” highlighting the negative connotation both terms take on in this context, a potentially insulting jab and also a break in the serious contributions to the conversation.

Michael then makes a stylistic choice to end his written utterance with a full stop and hard return, seemingly completing the utterance. However, in the next line Michael makes it clear that he is teasing or not being serious (line 6) before explicitly signaling a return to serious in line 7. Michael's subsequent comments continue to seriously discuss the United State's dependence on foreign oil imports.

Although Michael gently teases abasile for possessing the non-preferred political affiliation in the conversational context, he signals the serious intent of his reply with *just kidding* and works to enhance the obviousness of the tease with *of course* and a smiley face emoticon (line 6). Furthermore, while Michael's use of *just kidding* may also have served to inoculate him against any backlash from others who might misconstrue his non-serious intent, his use of *in all seriousness* (line 7) further strengthens the claim that *just kidding* was meant primarily as a bid to shift away from his non-serious utterance and continue the discussion. Thus, while it could be argued that Michael's return to serious serves to ensure that rapport has not been damaged, it also maintains rapport by aligning with the perceived interactional wants of other commenters.

5.4. Function 4: Setting up new joke

Using *just kidding* in order to set up a new joke was the final function we identified in our data, accounting for 6% of the total instances (71 of 1200). Although relatively rare and only occurring in GloWbE, these examples represent an interesting function of *just kidding* that serves to subvert interlocutors' expectations and extend the previous joke. The following examples demonstrate how this function works.

The following extract is a response to a website user's inquiry about career advice on the job search website www.indeed.com. That user's inquiry prompted a discussion about the relative costs of gaining more education as a person gets older. One active commenter in the thread with the name “Bob in Charleston” posted the following comment. (Note: “IMO” = In my opinion; “;)” = winking eye smiling face emoticon).

Example 7 (GloWbE: <http://www.indeed.com/forum/gen/Career-Advice/should-do-my-life/t176235/p2>)

- 1 But IMO after a certain age more schooling has diminished returns. It simply
- 2 won't do much for you. Sometimes one must stop training and go with what one
- 3 has. So mainly, if you are an older professional out of work, just hang it up and
- 4 get ready to die, you're pretty much useless. **I'm only kidding** ;). You're just
- 5 somewhat useless

In lines 3–4 of his comment, Bob equates being old with being useless in the workforce. However, he follows this comment with “I’m only kidding,” ostensibly to take the sting out of the rather harsh insult and thus ensure that rapport has not been damaged. At this point, his use of *I’m only kidding* is in line with the inoculation or return to serious function of the phrase; it would be difficult to take his comment seriously after seeing that Bob is indeed “only kidding.” However, Bob’s final line continues the previous tease by stating that unemployed elderly people are only *somewhat* (as opposed to *completely*) useless. Thus, Bob’s joke actually serves to support his initial claim: becoming old in the workforce is a detriment. As such, the kernel of truth is initially stated as a harsh insult, facetiously downgraded through the use of *only kidding*, but then immediately re-stated. As the previously described functions demonstrate, a hearer may anticipate *just kidding* to signal the retraction of or inoculation against an offensive or risky joke. Instead, this function provides just the opposite: it tricks the hearer into expecting a downgrade but works to enhance the original quality of the humor (in this case, a rather negative insult). From the perspective of rapport management, we can assume that Bob’s readers initially interpreted his use of *just kidding* as being motivated by face sensitivity toward the elderly. However, Bob manipulated this expectation to playfully enhance rapport by employing additional, albeit unexpected, humor.

Essentially, then, with this function, a speaker uses the new joke to set up an echoed or enhanced version of the original joke. The following excerpt comes from the *Weekend Update* segment from the American television show *Saturday Night Live*. The *Weekend Update* segment is a satirical take on the weekly news; the “anchor” for this version was American comedian Norm MacDonald. (Note: AUD = audience).

Example 8 (GloWbE: <http://score670.com/phpBB/viewtopic.php?f=100&t=92310>)

- 1 NORM: Who are safer drivers? Men, or women? Well, according to a new survey,
- 2 55% of adults feel that women are most responsible for minor fender-
- 3 benders, while 78% blame men for most fatal crashes. Please note that the
- 4 percentages in these pie graphs do not add up to 100% because the math
- 5 was done by a woman.
- 6 AUD: (*uneasy laughter, groans*)
- 7 NORM: For those of you hissing at that joke, it should be noted that that joke was
- 8 written by a woman. So, now you don't know what the hell to do, do you?
- 9 AUD: (*laughter increases*)
- 10 NORM: Nah, I'm **just kidding**. We don't hire women.
- 11 AUD: (*riotous laughter and applause*)

Norm MacDonald begins the extended joke with a bluntly sexist quip that relies on the American stereotype of women being worse than men at math. The audience’s reaction, as reported, suggests a variety of responses, but generally indicating disapproval. Norm’s response orients to the audience reaction and acknowledges that the joke was actually written by a woman (lines 7–8), potentially taking at least some of the sting out of the joke for those that may have found it to be distasteful. However, in the final stage of the joke, Norm indicates that he was “just kidding” about a woman writing the joke (line 10), because the show does not hire women. This is an echoing and enhancing of the sexist, misogynist stereotypes evoked in the initial portion of the joke.

Similar to the example provided by Bob, Norm MacDonald’s second joke enhanced the aggressiveness (and, therefore, the potential humor) of the joke. By setting up a potential retreat from the offensive qualities of the joke through the use of *just kidding*, the return to the sexist nature of the joke is amplified in ways that would not be possible had Norm merely continued making sexist jokes. Through setting up audience expectations of repair, inoculation, or a return to serious following an aggressive joke – all strategies found to maintain rapport in previous examples – the audience is unprepared for the enhancement of the joke that was just ostensibly retracted. Thus, this function subverts the more typical understanding of *just kidding* in ways that allow a speaker to purposefully flout conversational expectations.

5.5. Dual functions

We also coded 66 instances in which *just kidding* or its variants served more than one function (see Table 2). An example of this dual function was seen in the conversation between Roberta and Liz (Example 4, above), where

interlocutors may be simultaneously attempting to inoculate an utterance while also moving a conversation back into a serious frame. Sixty-five of the 66 dual codes included the inoculation function, further suggesting the dominance of the inoculation function while also demonstrating that the pragmatic force of this formulaic sequence can be multifunctional depending on the situation. This complicated interplay of the functions of *just kidding* and its variants demonstrates their flexibility and usefulness for rapport management.

5.6. Rapport management

The first two functions that were identified, inoculation and repair of failed humor, best align with rapport management of amicable relations among interlocutors. Both functions are oriented toward managing the hearer's reaction, but inoculation represents an earlier attempt on the part of an interlocutor to manage face, one of the parameters that influence the management of rapport (Spencer-Oatey, 2005). As such, inoculation is less risky because it preemptively minimizes the chance that a non-serious utterance will fail or be misinterpreted (see Example 1 and 2). When humor does fail, repair strategies such as the use of *just kidding* work to manage a reaction that comes after a failed attempt at humor (Bell, 2015). The reason for choosing one strategy over another may be related to the types of humor being used (e.g., more or less aggressive), the relationships between interlocutors (e.g., more or less intimate), or the synchronicity of the interaction (e.g., blog posts in which feedback from interlocutors may be relatively slow).

The bids to return to a serious frame functioned differently in that they were more focused on returning to the interactional wants or goals of interlocutors, another consideration of rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2005). This suggests that speakers interpreted their own jocular or humorous language as extraneous to the larger purpose or goals of a conversation, and thus a bid to return to a serious key through the use of *just kidding* aided in shifting the conversation back toward the desired goals (for example, the host of the CBS Early Show moving to a commercial break, Example 5).

Spencer-Oatey (2005) argues that rapport relations can be enhanced, maintained, neglected, or challenged. The use of *just kidding* and its variants to set up a new joke provided examples that could be initially interpreted as neglecting or challenging rapport relations. In other words, by violating the shared behavioral expectations of interlocutors, this function appears to flout the norms of use for this particular formulaic sequence (i.e., the more primary, and thus expected, functions of *just kidding*). However, if this violation of behavioral expectations ultimately results in enhanced humor shared between interlocutors, rapport may also be enhanced.

Viewed as a whole, the four different functions we identified in this study align along the continuum of rapport management relatively well. The inoculation and repair functions appear to serve mostly positive, affiliative ends, working to smooth and maintain relationships in a positive manner. The return to serious function fell in a more neutral position, depending on interactional wants that will in turn be highly dependent upon the situation in which they are found. While the set-up-of-new-joke function had the highest *potential* to build negative rapport, due to its subversion of interlocutor expectations and enhancement of potentially offensive humor, it may ultimately result in positive rapport management, as it invites hearers to re-visit the initial humor.

6. Conclusion

Our first research question asked what functions *just kidding* or its variants might serve in American discourse. As we discovered, *just kidding* does occur with failed humor, but it may also be a marker of anticipation of failed humor, a bid to return to serious discourse, or a set up for additional humor. Despite our initial assumption that *just kidding* and its variants would primarily serve to mark failed humor, the most common function we observed was in fact inoculation. It is important to note, however, that because the corpora were not balanced for frequency, and because statistical methods were not employed, we are not claiming that any one function is more or less common *overall*. Indeed, since 65% of our data comes from GloWbE and 32% from COCA, our data is currently over-represented by texts from the Internet, talk shows, and news reporting discourse. Furthermore, all instances of the new joke set-up function come from GloWbE. This is partially due to the nature of the other spoken corpora we included, which are relatively smaller than the larger reference corpora. Nonetheless, we feel it important to include their results, as the smaller corpora contained more naturalistic conversations, often between intimates and in more private contexts.

Our second research question asked what rapport managing functions may exist with *just kidding*. The interactions in the corpora that we have examined range on scales of intimacy, privacy, and modes of discourse. Clearly, the "dynamic judgments" that people make in terms of enhancing, maintaining, or damaging their rapport with each other must take into account these levels of knowledge (Spencer-Oatey, 2005). This dynamic process is reflected in the different functions of *just kidding* that we have identified in this study.

In conclusion, we offer this initial taxonomy so that future research into this phrase or similar markers of humor can consider the functions we propose and continue to revise or add to them. A promising direction for future research would

be to include more quantitative studies across larger, more balanced corpora in order to better generalize the tendencies of this phrase. Sociolinguistic studies that better take into account the level of intimacy, power relations, and other sociolinguistic differences among interlocutors can also help shed light on the rapport managing function of this phrase.

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