

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.

Keywords: Humor; Rapport management; Corpus-assisted analysis; Formulaic language

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

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