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A Joking Matter: Sociolinguistics at Work Within Southwest Airlines

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the pilot speaking. I hope y'all are having a nice day. We have a full flight, several tons of baggage, and all your drinks and peanuts. So we'll see if we can't get this plane in the air..."

"Please review the safety instructions located in the pocket of the seat in front of you. In the event of loss of cabin pressure, oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling. Your directions are to stop screaming, and believe me, you will be screaming, and place the oxygen masks over your nose and mouth...."

Upon landing in New Orleans, the flight attendant says enthusiastically, "Welcome to New York!" A passenger on a Southwest Airlines flight would probably hear something similar to these examples. In contrast to their competitors, jokes and quips are the norm on Southwest's routes which are also characterized by first-come first-serve seating, absence of a first-class section, and minimal "no-frills" service.

In the early days of air travel, commercial airline carriers provided formal business service echoing military influences. Southwest Airlines, however, sought to create a different, informal type of environment since its inception in 1971. Until recently, travelers dressed in their best (or at least better) clothes for the occasion of a plane ride. The interruption of formality is created by the airline's flight attendants, pilots, and other employees (in descending order of frequency) with whom the client comes into contact. Witty remarks and jokes are predominantly told on board during the attendants' recitations and during flight, but some quipping also occurs at the gate. Such brand of behavior manipulates the social interaction with its clients through linguistic means by breaking the seal of business-like formality through strategic implementation of humor. As Braveman notes, "all this silliness [does not] get in the way of the bottom line... Southwest is the only airline that has turned a profit every year since it began" (1993, p.9). The purpose of this project is to determine how the clients of Southwest Airlines react to its use of language, how it functions to create an atmosphere of community or friendliness with the airline, and explore the implications of the ritual state engendered.

For the purposes of this paper, a joke may be defined as by Random House (1993, p.1033) as "something said or done to provoke laughter or cause amusement, as a witticism, a short and amusing anecdote, or a prankish act" with the qualification that additional humor is implied through the irreverence atypical for the environment in which it occurs. The incongruity between the humor and the setting is important, because it is at this juncture that they meet where Southwest Airlines succeeds in generating a different operating environment. To my knowledge, this is the first study on this subject to date.

The Formal Environment

In most businesses, one would expect personal interactions of a professional demeanor. The function of humor in this environment operates on a constrained continuum where polite jokes and witty anecdotes are normative. The possibility for the growth of humor lies in the frequency of repeated personal interactions and familiarity between the people involved. In a business with a high volume of mobile customers, personal distance is maintained and a heightened level of humor is difficult if not impossible to reach.

The formal environment of the main commercial carriers (United Airlines, Continental Airlines, Delta Airlines, etc.) has intimate ties to military influences. For example, many of the commercial airline pilots are Air Force trained, and therefore conceivably contribute to the preservation of a military formality. Secondly, the titles "Captain" and "Navigator" strongly echo their corresponding Air Force progenitors, especially when taken into consideration that "pilot" could easily substitute for "captain". *Also*, uniforms worn by flight attendants and cabin crew members are reminiscent of post-World War II military uniforms, with epaulets, stripes on the cuffs, distinctive hats, and flight wings worn on the breast of the navy blue jacket.

Methods

Data for the project was collected on the topic from client surveys conducted in the Southwest terminal at the San Antonio Airport on a Sunday afternoon and the following Monday afternoon. Since explicit permission to survey proved to be elusive, questions regarding the joking behavior were asked orally from a survey sheet to avoid official notice. Interviews with employees of Southwest Airlines were requested, but due to the volume of similar requests the company policy prohibits such meetings, therefore only clients were surveyed. Of the twenty surveyed who had traveled via Southwest before, there were nine females and eleven males. An effort was made to keep the sex ratios generally close, but during the course of data collection, it became apparent that males tended to be more familiar with the airline and its unusual tactics. Therefore despite the nearly equal sex distribution of passengers waiting at the gates, more men were surveyed than women.

By way of procuring informants, I introduced myself as a student of the University of Texas at San Antonio working on a sociolinguistics project, and gave a general introduction to the basis of the project which included a contrast of the formal military-like nature of airline travel with the informal joking behavior observable from Southwest Airlines. Questions asked of the participants were as follows:

- Does the client travel via Southwest Airlines often?
Has the client noticed this type of informal speech used by employees of the airline?
- Does the behavior seem out of place to the client?
- Is this behavior amusing, laugh-out-loud, or is it just there?

- Does it ever cross a line and become offensive?
- Does this behavior make the client more comfortable about flying?
- Does the client feel like Southwest Airlines creates a different atmosphere than all the other airline carriers by using humor?

Responses of the participants yielded six pages of shorthand. This method of documentation was implemented because exact transcriptions were not necessary and because it attracted less attention than a tape recorder would have.

Results

Out of the nine females surveyed, four (44.4 percent) (Table 1.) did *not* notice the informal joking mentioned, though two of the four did notice a "more friendly" environment. Only one male out of the eleven surveyed (9.09 percent) (Table 1.) had *not* experienced the informal behavior. Ten out of the eleven males (90.9 percent) and four out of the nine females (44.4 percent, or 75.0 percent total) affirmed that there was a different, friendlier atmosphere in their dealings with Southwest that is lacking or diminished in interactions with other carriers, and they virtually all agreed (95.0 percent) that this atmosphere can be attributed to the joking behavior.

Table 1. Individuals surveyed.

Sex	Witnessed Behavior	Different Atmosphere
Male	10/11 (90.9 %)	10/11 (90.9 %)
Female	5/9 (55.6 %)	4/9 (44.4%)
Total	15:20 (75.0 %)	14:20 (70.0%)

In actual words, sixty-four percent of the males (seven out of nine) and forty-four percent of the females (four out of nine) used the terms 'comfortable', 'comforting', 'relaxed', or 'casual' to describe the joking language usage. Eleven percent (1:9) of the females and twenty-seven percent (3:11) of the males used the term 'different.' Twelve of the fifteen participants who noticed the language use (80.0 percent) (Table 2.) found the jokes amusing, and two participants were unmoved by the joking. All participants reported that the joking never "went too far" or offended them. Only one participant described the behavior as "out of place."

Table 2. Behavioral results.

Sex	Amusing	Indifferent
Male	8/10 (80.0 %)	2/10 (20.0 %)
Female	5/5 (100.0 %)	0/0 (00.0 %)

*Excludes those participants who observed none of the behavior

One male participant said that the joking behavior is *why* he prefers to fly Southwest Airlines. Another remarked that he appreciates the accessibility of the flight attendants and that their interaction makes one feel more important than when on another carrier's flight. Others expressed that they relished the break in the monotony of airline travel. All of the participants reacted favorably to the low fares. Most of the males were traveling for business purposes, and they all traveled frequently. The mean age of the males surveyed is 35.6 years. One female participant was traveling for business out of the nine surveyed, and none described themselves as frequent travelers. The mean age of the female participants is 43.2 years.

Discussion

Though the data reflects that the participants recognized the unique use of language to create an informal environment, the breakdown to sex ratios belies the actual extent. The percentages above imply that the half of the female observers had not noticed the joking behavior, but this is clearly not the case. None of the females described themselves as frequent travelers, yet five were familiar with the airline, and four recognized the friendlier atmosphere which they attributed to the joking. The disparity between the males' and females' assessments can be credited to the personal agendas of these passengers. The overwhelming majority of males surveyed were traveling for the purpose of business and do so habitually, and, therefore, are quite familiar with the style of operations of Southwest Airlines. The female participants were the converse: the majority of females were traveling on personal non-commercial business and seeking the lowest fare.

Interestingly, the female participants sampled averaged eight years older than their male counterparts. It might be said that business travelers tend not only to be male but also to be relatively young. Younger non-traveling "nine-to-five" people would be less inclined to travel during a weekday and would decrease in ratio to older retired and mobile people. It is therefore no surprise that those traveling for personal reasons would on the average be older than the business traveler, but the surprise lies in the sex of the older passengers.

From a more-or-less equal representation of sexes in the Southwest terminal, most of the females surveyed were traveling for personal business, and five were not familiar enough with the airline to have witnessed the joking, while all but one male had witnessed it. This might support that Southwest Airlines draws on a pool of frequent male customers and a larger pool

of individually infrequent female customers. Constraints on this assessment include the small number of days the survey was conducted and the relatively small survey base, however the explanation helps to account for the disparity in the observations and suggests that the observations of frequent female customers of the airline would conform to the observations of the male customers.

Provided this or not, the results indicate that the overwhelming majority of Southwest Airlines customers surveyed credit the informal character and more comfortable environment of interaction to the use of humor by the employees. The airline's advertisement campaigns have kept no secrets regarding the eccentric CEO Herb Kelleher and often depict him in different -- sometimes gender-crossing -- costumes or in amusing situations. A call to the People Department's Automated System informs that a sense of humor is not a prerequisite but helps one's chances for employment in the company (Southwest Airlines [B] 1997). As confirmed by the passengers, not every flight attendant is particularly skilled at the art of joke-cracking, but overall the company has succeeded in incorporating the manipulation of humor in language to set itself apart in a favorable way from its competitors.

Another socially symbolic point of interest here is the introduction of the anthropological sense of mundane ritual, the actions and repetition of actions whose meanings include and transcend the pragmatic. In a very real sense, the telling of jokes within the airline is a gimmick to attract customers and a way to create a solidarity among its employees (Sunoo 1995) that they hope is taken up by the customers as well. But in another sense, the social distance normally between the provider of a service and the buyer is breached by the interruption of formality through the use of humor, and a new ritual space of the mundane sense is created, and this is the environment that Southwest's passengers recognize. The company generates a small shock with the breach of the confines of social distance, breaking the monotony of air travel and simultaneously creating a new space of social interaction.

Conclusion

The aim of this project has been to frame the formal and informal sectors functioning within the airline industry and elucidate the social space with remarkable symbolic potential which separates them. Illustrative of the in-between, Southwest Airlines supplements its competitive business strategies with the careful manipulation of language. Personal interview and survey of passengers to collect data regarding the reactions the joking behavior receives were conducted, and contrasts between the nonnative formal environment were set against the informal behavior typical of Southwest. By maintaining a consistent minor shock breaching the social barriers of business protocol, Southwest fosters an informal space within the perimeter of formal social interactions. The contrast draws the attention of would-be clients, and now serves as a model marketing strategy for its competitors and other national airlines. One informer recalled hearing on a USAir flight to LaGuardia, "Welcome to Phoenix" (penzien 1997). The linguistic strategy enacted at Southwest Airlines predates the company's interactions with its clients on a micro-level, and influences the strategies of the markets' airlines on a macro-level, and there-in lies its importance.

"Please pass all the plastic cups to the center aisle so we can wash them out and use them for the next group of passengers." (Sunoo 1995. p.62)

"Welcome to New Orleans. Please remain seated until the plane has come to a complete stop, and the pilot has turned off the seatbelt sign. I have a joke for you. What do you call a boomerang that doesn't come back? (pauses) A stick. Thank you for flying Southwest Airlines and enjoy your stay in New Orleans or wherever your final destination may be."

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