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The Types and Functions of Humor in the Work of a United States Senator: A Case Study of Senator Edward Kennedy

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Abstract

This study investigates the role interactional competence plays in the performance of political roles by examining the use of humor in events such as speeches, election campaign rallies, press briefings and televised news interviews. In this case study of a prominent United States Senator (the late Senator Edward Kennedy), twenty publically available video recordings from the C-SPAN online archives are analyzed using a conversation analytic approach. Two main types of humor were found in these data, self-deprecatory humor and humor that criticizes others. Three main functions of humor were identified (subtle self-promotion, managing challenging political and interactional situations, and creating solidarity with an audience). The results of this study contribute to our understanding of how humor can play a role in doing the work of a Senator.

1. Introduction

Previous research on Senate leadership and the work done by Senators focuses on such topics as

Senate procedures (e.g., Ainsworth and Flathman 1995; Carson et al. 2016; Chaturvedi 2018;

Overby and Bell 2004) or the role of candidates for Senate office (e.g., Hatcher 2011; Hayes

2010). While some studies of the work Senators or other legislators do examine aspects of

language and communication (e.g., Inya's (2021) study of Senator's ideological arguments in

Nigerian Senate debates, Hayden et al.'s (2017) study of Senator Kerr's speeches on efforts to

promote space exploration, Chan and Yap (2015) study of metaphors in political campaign

debates in Hong Kong, Kadkhodaee and Tari's (2019) study of arguments made in U.S. Senate

hearings, and Meisel's (2009) historical study of humor in British parliamentary speech), these

studies do not directly examine linguistic behaviors in the context of the face-to-face interactions

they occur within.

The very few studies that do directly analyze the talk of senators and other legislators in

interactional context, such as Raymond et al. (2019) on turn taking practices in Senate committee

hearings and Verkuyten and Nooitgedagt (2019) on debates in the Dutch parliament, enable us to

examine linguistic behaviors as they are integrated with the pragmatics of interaction. These

studies use methods (conversation analysis and discursive psychology, respectively) which

enable the study of interaction in its sequential and institutional context.

The current paper extends previous research on the speech of Senators in interactional

context by investigating how humor is used in a range of public events through which the work

of Senators is done. A collection of the public interactions of the late Senator Edward Kennedy

are used as data for this case study. The analysis will show how the Senator used humor in a

wide range of genres of public events, including giving prepared speeches at Senate hearings,

political rallies, news conferences, and invited talks in a variety of venues. It also examines

occasions where spontaneous talk is required, such as in press conferences, televised news interviews and in the introductions to speeches given at various events.

The analysis will result in a profile of the role of humor in the Senator's communicative style, showing the techniques used to successfully manage the different tasks, roles and relationships involved in the job of Senator through an investigation of humor in the naturally occurring interactional and sequential contexts in which they occur. Two main types of humor were found in these data, self-deprecatory humor and humor that criticizes others. Three main functions of humor were identified (subtle self-promotion, managing challenging political and interactional situations, and creating solidarity with an audience). The results of this study contribute to our understanding of how humor can play a role in doing the work of a Senator. In this paper I first review previous literature on humor and politics, describe the data and methods, and then present the analysis of the use of humor in the collection of data.

2. Literature review: Humor and politics

Previous research on humor in politics has addressed a number of issues. Dmitriev (2008) reviews the uses of political humor by different historical figures around the world. Rossing (2017) studied political humor and examined how comedic responses to the speech of political figures such as President Trump can include silence, or a 'non-response.' Mann's (2016) article examined how humor was used in political ads during Israeli political campaigns. Waisanen (2015) examined humor in U. S. Presidential speeches. Stewart (2010) studied the humorous use of facial expression of emotions by presidential candidates. Feldman and Bull (2012) analyzed the different ways that political speakers interact with audiences. They note that humor and joking can be a way of creating audience affiliation in response to political speeches in Japan.

Two main types of humor addressed by previous research on humor and politics are self-deprecating humor and humor that is critical of others.

2.1 Self deprecating humor

Previous research on self-deprecating humor in political contexts focuses on the effect that different types of humor have on the audience rather than on the techniques used to construct the humor itself. For example, Baumgartner, Morris and Coleman (2018) found that self-deprecating humor by political candidates had a protective effect over the response of listeners. The research subjects in his study were more likely to express approval of a politician who used self-deprecating humor as opposed to one who was the target of disparaging humor directed at them by another. Becker (2012) showed that a comedian's disparaging humor had a negative effect on subjects' responses to the politician being disparaged (the former Senator John McCain), while the politician's self-deprecating humor did not significantly increase positive reactions to him. However, Chefneux (2015, 387) notes that self-deprecating humor enables the speakers to "admit that they are less than perfect and when self-deprecation becomes shared ridicule (the audience laughing at their own foibles) it becomes a form of power (Schwarz 2010, 305)." This suggests that while demonstrating the speaker's imperfections and sense of humor about themselves, the speaker may also be doing work to position themselves in a stronger position.

2.2 Humor as criticism

Chefneux (2015) notes that humor (especially sarcastic humor) can be used to criticize others.
Waisanen (2015, 236) found that "[j]okes can serve many purposes in political communication.
Politicians have used humor as a "velvet weapon" to chastise opponents, legitimate actions, or
engage in diplomacy." Innocenti and Miller's (2016, p. 369) analysis of political humor defines
ridicule of others as a way of "impugning others' conduct and making them the butt of the joke."
Meisel's (2009) study of British parliamentary speech found disparaging humor in frequent use.
Waisanen (2015) studied U. S. presidents' speeches at the White House Correspondents' Dinner,
an event at which presidents are expected to give humorous speeches. Among his findings were
that humor could be used strategically at these events. They were also a method of addressing
issues and positions in which the actual critique could be left unstated, yet understood. As noted
above, politicians who were the targets of disparaging humor were evaluated more negatively by
the audience than those who used self-deprecating humor themselves (Baumgartner et al. 2018;
Becker 2012). What remains to be addressed is the examination of the use of humor by Senators
in the interactional contexts through which they do the work of being senator.

3. Methods and data

The topic of humor in political talk requires an integrative approach to the qualitative analysis of
verbal data including using concepts and categories from other studies of political rhetoric such
as those reviewed above. This study also relies on the conversation analytic perspective which
enables the direct observation and analysis of the talk that occurs in the work of a Senator. The
conversation analytic approach is a qualitative method of studying naturally occurring face-to-
face interaction that grew out of the ethnomethodological perspective on sociology developed by
Harold Garfinkel (1967). Ethnomethodological studies of talk in interaction analyze the

procedures and techniques used to accomplish the talk, including the pragmatics of interaction. Conversation analysis enables the study of naturally occurring data and examines talk in the interactional context it occurs within (e.g., Arminen 2017; Garcia 2013; Heritage and Clayman 2010; Schegloff 2007; Sidnell 2010; ten Have 2007). The study of talk in its sequential context enables the discovery of the common-sense understandings and procedures people use to shape their conduct in particular interactional settings. Social roles such as that of a Senator do not just affect behavior by providing a set of rights, obligations, and expectations; people instantiate their roles by their actions (Halkowski 1990).

In this paper I use a case study approach to analyze the interactional techniques used by the late Senator Edward Kennedy. This Senator was selected for analysis due to his long successful career in which he both reached a high level of prominence and played leading roles on many occasions. The late Senator Edward Kennedy was the brother of former President John F. Kennedy, and served as a Democratic U. S. Senator from 1962 to 2009. He also ran for the democratic nomination for President in 1979, losing to incumbent President Carter (Clymer 1999; Stanley 2010; Ward 2019).

Senators interact with a wide range of people in a variety of public settings as they do their work. The purpose of this analysis is to discover the types of interactional techniques, competencies and strategies used to communicate successfully through humor while doing the work of a Senator. In this paper I analyze the use of humor in a collection of 20 public events involving the Senator. Video recordings of these events are publically available online from the C-SPAN video archives. This collection of data (see Sidnell 2010 for a discussion of how conversation analytic collections of data differ from samples) was collected for a larger study of interactional competence in Senate communications. The goal for this collection was to examine

a wide range of types of public interactions that Senators engage in as they do their work. The types of interactions included in this collection are Senate speeches and debates, committee hearings, election campaign events, press briefings and conferences, and television news interviews. The collection thus includes both formal and informal interactions in large public settings as well as those involving smaller numbers of people, in person and on broadcast media. A list of the 20 public events which form the data for this study are in Appendix A.

While basic transcripts of many of these interactions are often available on the C-SPAN website, those transcripts are not adequate for using a conversation-analytic approach. In order to facilitate the analysis I made detailed transcripts of the data using the conventions of conversation analysis (Jefferson 2004). These conventions include timing pauses and indicating stress or emphasis, intonation, and changes in volume along with indications of simultaneous talk. In addition, since face-to-face interaction is inherently multi-modal, key nonverbal behaviors such as facial expressions or gestures are notated as needed for the analysis of the data (see for example, Mondada 2016; Soulaimani 2018). The most common transcript symbols are shown in Appendix B; in this paper the transcripts have been simplified for ease of reading. For some of the longest speeches only the first 20 minutes or so were transcribed.

4. General observations about the use of humor in the data set

Humor is not a common occurrence in Senator Kennedy's speeches and the other public interactions in this data set. There were a total of 34 jokes or other humorous statements in the collection of 20 transcripts. The February 5 2007 Washington Press Club dinner was an event whose purpose was to share humorous speeches. This speech, presumably written by a speech writer (but surely approved by Senator Kennedy), had 20 jokes or other instances of humor. The

other 19 events in the data set had far fewer instances of humor (between zero and three

instances per event). The seven events that had from 1 to 3 instances of humor were three

election campaign events, a college commencement speech, a news conference which was

structured informally like a rally, a keynote address at a conference on education, and the

unveiling of the Senator Byrd portrait.

There were no instances of humor or joking in 13 of the 20 events. For these events, the

topic of discussion (e.g., the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks) and/or the seriousness of the

event (e.g., the Supreme Court nomination hearing for Judge Bork at which Senator Kennedy

argued against Bork's appointment) were clearly unsuited to humor.

5. Humor, social role and interactional competence

In these data I found that most of the instances of humor fit into the two categories discussed

above: self-deprecating humor and humorous criticisms of others. Many of these jokes may

have been written for the Senator by various speech writers during the years, but presumably he

had choice in which types of jokes he was willing to make, so they can provide a window into

how he worked to perform the role of Senator and present an image of himself to the public. In

addition, part of the humor is created by its delivery and how it is fit into the ongoing stream of

interaction (including such behaviors as timing, facial expressions, and laughter). In this section

I will first discuss the types of self-deprecating humor that occurred and then analyze the use of

humor in critiques of others. Three main functions of humor were identified (subtle self-

promotion, managing challenging political and interactional situations, and creating solidarity

with an audience).

5.1 Self-deprecatory humor

There are four main ways of doing self-deprecating humor in these data: self-deprecatory humor

with an underlying self-aggrandizement, self-deprecatory humor based on a surprise contrast (a

mid-utterance switch in speech act), self-deprecatory stories which are obviously fictional, and

self-deprecating humor through 'pretend ignorance.' Three main functions of humor were

identified (subtle self-promotion, managing challenging political and interactional situations, and

creating solidarity with an audience).

5.1.1 Self-deprecatory and self-aggrandizing humor

While self-deprecating jokes or other humorous utterances are at least on the surface

modest or self-effacing, in some sense, most self-deprecating jokes are actually often self-

aggrandizing in some way. For example, in Excerpt 1 below, Kennedy is self-deprecating in

terms of making fun of his advanced age, but there is also a subtle self-compliment here, because

the joke highlights how long a career he has had in the Senate--a sign of his success.

Excerpt 1: January 8 2007 Keynote Address at the Center for American Progress

Conference on Expanding Student Learning (00:5:40)

((Senator Kennedy is reading his speech from paper documents))

1   SKen: Thank you very much:, uh John, for your kind and eh <u>gen</u>erous uh

2   <u>com</u>ments. John (0.4) uh <u>did</u> uh mention that I started in uh in thuh

3   United States some years ago. uh I When I <u>first</u> sta:rted (0.2) and

4   <u>ran</u> for thee United States Senate u:h when I was thirty years old, I

5   said what thuh Senate needed was uh .h <u>young</u> person with new

6   ideas, (0.2) and when I ran this la:st: year, I said there's nothing

7   ((Kennedy looks up to audience and gives a small smile during the

8   next four words:; his smile gets slightly broader after that and

9   through the audience laughter below)) like age and experience.

10   And [uh]

11 Aud: [((laug]hter))

12 SKen: whichever works.

13 Aud: ((laughter))

14 SKen: uhm I think uh all of us <u>feel</u> ((Kennedy's smile stops here)) thuh

15   <u>warm</u>thness in this room uh uh for for John.

Senator Kennedy begins his remarks by thanking the person who introduced him (John Podesta) (lines 1-2). He mentions John again as he segues from John's introduction to his own long tenure in the Senate (lines 2-3). Throughout this part of his opening his face is serious and he looks down at the document he is reading while occasionally glancing briefly up at the audience. He starts to change his facial expression as he begins producing the punchline to his joke "like age and experience." (line 9). He then smiles more broadly and continues smiling through the audience's laughter (see Jefferson 1979 on 'invitations to laugh'). He has thus used his embodied actions to facilitate the telling of the joke. This joke has the format of a serious beginning followed by a surprise (humorous) ending. By refraining from smiling until he starts the punch line, he accentuates the experience of surprise in the ending. The slight smile he gives during the punch line serves as an invitation to laugh (Jefferson 1979; see also Glenn 2003), in which he indicates his utterance is a 'candidate laughable.' He then joins in with the audience's

response to the joke by broadening his smile during their laughter, thus participating in a shared

orientation to his remark as a joke, and creating and maintaining solidarity with his audience

through this shared orientation. He then signals the transition out of the joke and the return (at

least momentarily) to 'serious' talk by ceasing to smile as he moves into the next part of his

remarks (lines 14-15). The joke is thus competently delivered. The nature of the joke as (at least

on the surface), a self-deprecating joke making fun of his advanced age, is successful in

portraying a modest and humble presentation of self, in amusing the audience, and at the same

time displaying a positive sense of self (the implicit allusion to his long successful career on

which the joke rests).

The next two excerpts are from a speech Senator Kennedy gave at the Washington Press

Club Dinner in 2007. The purpose of this event was to tell jokes about oneself and other

politicians. These two jokes are also examples of self-deprecating jokes which at the same time

highlight a positive aspect of the Senator. They are modest without being self-abasing or self-

critical. Both of these jokes are based on self-mocking references to his fame not being as great

as he thought it was.

In Excerpt 2 Senator Kennedy tells a joke about an instance in which he was not

recognized.

Excerpt 2: February 5, 2007 Washington Press Club Speech (1:01:40)

1   SKen: wuh- when I was- sworn in to thuh Senate thuh first time?, (0.2)

2   President Kennedy- told me, Teddy?, if you want to get ahead in

3   thuh Senate?, (0.6) introduce yourself: (0.5) to Richard Russell!

4   (0.6) thuh women's press club dinner (0.2) is thuh perfect place!

5   (0.4) <u>don't</u> be afraid. (0.2) just walk up (0.2) and say hello. (0.4)

6   .h so a-h-t thuh dinner I got up my nerve. (0.3) I went over to his

7   ta- uh table and I said, to Senator Russell?, (0.2) <u>my</u> <u>name</u> <u>is</u> <u>Ted</u>.

8   (0.2) ((Kennedy adopts a slow paced "southern" accent as he

9   mimics Senator Russell)) he smi:led broa::dly and said, why, hello

10   Ted. (0.2) Senator Stennis: will have another bourbon and branch,

11   Aud: ((laughter begins here))

12   SKen: and <u>I'll</u> take ((Audience laughter ends here)) thuh peach co-h-bbler.

13   heh ((Audience laughter begins here)) hunh hunh

14   Aud: ((laughter continues))

In this excerpt Senator Kennedy recounts approaching a well known Senator at a dinner

event, while assuming that the Senator knew who he was and would recognize him. However,

not only did the Senator apparently not recognize him, he thought he was the waiter, and

proceeded to give an order for drinks and dessert. Recall that this story is told by Senator

Kennedy in 2007, and is recounting something that (supposedly) happened years ago when he

was first sworn into the Senate (he first became a Senator in 1962). As a younger Senator he

may not have been as well known as he is in 2007, however, as a member of the Kennedy family

and the brother of then President John F. Kennedy and U. S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy,

he would certainly have been known, at least by name, by the other Senators at that time. So the

story may be apocryphal, but it is funny because it purports to show how relatively insignificant

he was, compared to his expectations. The joke is thus self-deprecating, since it shows him as

being not as famous as he thought he was. It also is self-deprecating in that it shows him being immodest, since he expected that Senator Russell would know who he was.

However, there is also an element of self-aggrandizement in the joke. Since he is telling this joke in 2007 as a very successful and well known Senator, the joke also serves as a reminder of how famous he is. The joke would probably not be funny if told by someone who was not, in fact, famous. This type of joke therefore works as a way to communicate positive information about one self while maintaining a posture of humbleness or modesty. Selling oneself--communicating one's strengths and positive attributes, could be considered part of the job of a politician, since their success to a great extent depends on it (at least in terms of convincing an electorate to vote for him).

Again, note the interactional competence displayed in both the Senator's delivery of the joke and in his receipt of the audience's response. Senator Kennedy keeps a straight face during the set up of the joke (lines 1-7). With the exception of a slight aspiration in "a-h-t" (line 6), which reads as a laughter implicative breath within a word (Jefferson 1979), the first hint of the humorous nature of the story begins in line 9 as he switches to a marked imitation of Senator Russell's voice. Note that he keeps any hint of laughter out of this impersonation and delivers it flawlessly. It is not until the audience laughs (starting in line 11) that he displays his analysis of the line as a 'candidate laughable' (note the laughter-implicative aspiration in "co-h-bbler."; line 12). This begins an invitation to laugh which he continues with a laughter particle "heh" placed right after the end of the joke (line 13). At this point the audience joins in and resumes their laughter response to the joke, so that Senator Kennedy and the audience are laughing together as he produces the continuation of his laugh in line 13.

The joke in Excerpt 3 is also an instance of a self-deprecating joke which at the same

time serves to emphasize how famous Senator Kennedy is.

<u>Excerpt 3: February 5, 2007 Washington Press Club Speech (55:40)</u>

1   SKen: good to see you. thank you, well done. (0.6) thank you. ((applause

2   ends)) (1.4) thank you, uh Bob Schieffer, for (0.2) that uh <u>gen</u>erous

3   introduction and for (0.2) <u>a:ll</u> your wisdom over thuh years as one

4   of thuh bright, lo:ng shining stars of uh television news. (0.2) uh

5   <u>this</u> is a:lways one my uh <u>fa</u>vorite evenings, as I was (0.2) <u>wal</u>king

6   in here uh this evening, someone came up and said to me (0.2) .h

7   has <u>any</u> one ever told you you look like Ted Kennedy.

8   (0.4) ((some audience laughter))

9   SKen: and uh I said well yes, they have. (0.2) they said it must make you

10   as mad as <u>hell</u>, doesn't it? henh!

11   Aud: ((mild laughter from audience))

This joke is self-deprecating in that it shows the Senator being taken down a notch when

he presumably assumed his fame would make him recognizable to everyone. This is an example

of a joke with a double punchline. The first candidate laughable is at the end of line 7, since

Senator Kennedy is so well known that it would be surprising if someone (particularly an

attendee at the Washington Press Club dinner, where he is an invited speaker) did not recognize

him. There is some audience laughter at this point. Senator Kennedy continues his delivery of

the joke, and reaches the second punch line of the joke in lines 9-10. There is no immediate

laughter, and Senator Kennedy produces a laughter particle ("henh!") at the end of the turn, thus treating his utterance as a candidate laughable. Mild laughter from the audience is then forthcoming (line 11).

5.1.2 Self-deprecatory humor based on a surprise contrast

This next excerpt is an example of a different type of self-deprecating humor. Rather than an actual joke or humorous story, this type of humor depends on the contrast between a turn opening which is formulated and positioned as the beginning of a serious statement, which is then completed by a playful, non-serious speech act. As Glenn (2003, 19) explains it, "laughing results from experiencing the unexpected, from a perceived inconsistency between what one believes will happen or should happen and what actually happens." In Excerpt 4, Senator Kennedy is giving a speech at the 1980 Democratic Convention, just after loosing his campaign for the Democratic nomination for president to incumbent President Jimmy Carter. He begins an utterance which, in that political moment, could well have been a continuation of his fight for the presidential nomination or a complaint about what had just happened. The utterance ends, however, with a comical expression of appreciation for New York City, where the convention was held.

Excerpt 4: 1980 Democratic Convention Speech

((Music playing during this opening segment))

1 Aud: ((applause and clapping as Senator Kennedy takes the stage))

2 Aud: ((clapping and singing here and throughout the Senator's turn until

3   line 9))

((Kennedy paces his speech slowly and gradually gets louder; when the audience

realizes he's speaking they finally stop clapping and singing))

4   SenK: <u>thank</u> you very much. (2.5) thank you very much!, (0.4) Barbara

5   Mikulski, (0.8) for your very eloquent, your eloquent introduction.

6   distinguished legislator, uh great spokes: <u>wo</u>man for economic

7   democracy and social justice in this country, (0.3) <u>I</u> thank you for

8   your eloquent introduction.

9   Aud: ((Applause and music stop here))

10   SKen: WE::LL, (0.4) things worked out uh little different (0.2) from thuh

11   way I thought, (0.2) but let me tell you, <u>I:</u> <u>sti</u>:ll <u>lo</u>:ve <u>ne</u>:w <u>yo</u>:rk.

12   [henh henh henh henh ((Kennedy smiles while laughing))]

13   Aud: [((laughter   ] and

14   cheers))

As the Senator takes the floor, he thanks Representative Barbara Mikulski for her

introduction (lines 4-8). When the audience response stops in line 9, he begins his remarks. This

utterance begins with a loud and extended "WE::LL," (line 10). "Well" is a typical way to begin

a dispreferred response, often one that disagrees with a prior utterance or action (Pomerantz

1984). It can also be used to signal that a complex response will be forthcoming (Schegloff and

Lerner 2009). This opening may suggest to the audience that a serious, critical or problematic

turn is in progress. The continuation of his turn is also produced in a serious matter, but gives

the first hint that Senator Kennedy's response will not be overwhelmingly negative. His "things

worked out uh little different (0.2) from thuh way I thought," is an indirect reference to the fact

that he has just lost the battle for the nomination for the presidency (Ward 2019). Note the use of

"uh little" in line 10, which minimizes the importance of "things"; note also the use of the

indexical term "things" instead of baldly mentioning the fact that he has lost the nomination. He

says "things worked out uh little different (0.2) from thuh way I thought, (0.2) but let me tell

you," (lines 10-11). The "but" in line 11 suggests a contrast to come, and when it comes it is

playful and lighthearted ("I: sti:ll lo:ve ne:w yo:rk."; line 11). When he continues with "but let

me tell you," the audience could be expecting to hear a complaining or challenging completion to

this turn. However, he provides a 'surprise' ending to this utterance, by switching to a

compliment which is performed in a humorous frame. His playful reference to "I: sti:ll lo:ve

ne:w yo:rk." is an abrupt topic shift from the serious issues of the nomination fight to a playful

reference to the city the convention is being held in. By saying this, Kennedy communicates that

he has no hard feelings and is not going to complain about or discuss his loss of the nomination.

The audience starts laughing as soon as he completes this turn, and he begins laughing as well.

They are thus laughing together. This joke is self-deprecating in that it makes light of his loss,

but it uses a playful topic shift to produce the humor rather than a reference to a personal

characteristic. This utterance begins seriously, but then ends playfully; it is the contrast between

the seriousness and the playfulness that is the source of the humor. Senator Kennedy is in

essence making fun of himself and showing that he is not taking himself seriously, while at the

same time indirectly acknowledging that he has lost the nomination fight--conceding defeat. So

this utterance demonstrates his defeat in a humorous way.

        5.1.3 Self-deprecating humor through fictional story telling

Another type of self-deprecating humor in these data is 'fictional story telling.' These are stories that are obviously not true, but are told for humorous effect. In Excerpt 5 Senator Kennedy integrates humor into his opening encounter with the audience at a political rally held in support of presidential candidate Barack Obama in 2008. This humorous opening fits well with the playful way he begins speaking to the rally audience, as he 'warms up' the audience prior to the speech in which he introduces Barack Obama.

Excerpt 5: April 3 2008 Pennsylvania Obama Rally (2:19)

1   SKen: HE:LLO::::! Montgomery County. Hello! ((Kennedy starts

2   smiling))

3   Aud: ((Applause))

4   SKen: ((Smile ends--'pretend' stern face)) how are you? are you

5   ((Audience applause ends)) gla:d to see me?

6   Aud: ((cheers))

7   SKen: are you glad to see me?

8   Aud: ((shouts of "yes"))

9   SKen: well you ought to be.

10   Aud: ((laughter))

11   SKen: ((Kennedy starts smiling again)) and I wanna to tell you why.

12   ((Kennedy smile ends)) now your committee, your committee,

13   that dynamite committee that is turning this county to uh

14   democratic county, (0.2) ((audience cheering starts here)) what uh

15   dynamite committee you've got. ((Audience applause)) YOUR

16		committee was getting together (0.6) and <u>thi:n</u>king (0.2) about
17		what they were going to CHA::RGE tonight (0.2) and WHO: they
18		were going to inVITE. (0.6) do you understand?
19	Aud:	((yeah))
20	SKen:	and some said (0.2) <u>look</u>!, (0.2) <u>we</u> can invite A:L GO:RE and
21		charge <u>five</u> <u>hun</u>dred <u>doll</u>ars and someone said why not ask
22		Kennedy and it could only cost us uh hundred bucks.
23	Aud:	((laughter, applause))
24	SKen:	so you <u>ought</u> to be ((Kennedy smiles)) glad to see me.
25	Aud:	((applause))

Senator Kennedy's playful opening exchange with the audience in which he encourages and receives laughter from the audience sets them up for the story he begins to tell in line 11 ("and I wanna to tell you why.") as a humorous story. The punch line "why not ask Kennedy and it could only cost us uh hundred bucks." (lines 21-22) is self-deprecating because it presents Al Gore as a much more famous and desirable speaker than himself. By making fun of himself in this way he presents a modest persona.

Excerpt 6 below shows a self-deprecatory fictional story being used in a different way. This fictional story works to create solidarity with the audience at the same time it presents the Senator's own actions as comical, thereby achieving the self-deprecatory humor. This excerpt is part of Senator Kennedy's introduction of presidential candidate Barack Obama at his campaign rally. This humorous story contributes to the introduction of Senator Obama as someone who is

not only familiar with Boston and its World Trade Center, but who is also very enthusiastic

about coming to speak there.

Excerpt 6: February 4, 2008 Obama Campaign event (23:06)

1   SKen: now, I was uh talking yesterday to (0.2) uh Deval Patrick- and to

2   uh Barack Obama, and (0.2) he said, uh Ted?, (0.2) uh where are

3   you going? where are you going tomorrow? (0.2) and I said, well,

4   I'll tell you what, uh (1.5) Barack, this is what I'm going to do. I'm

5   going to get on uh pla:ne?, (0.2) and I'm gonna fly north for about

6   an hour and fifteen minutes. (0.2) A:nd uh then I'm going to take

7   thee Ted Williams tunnel for uh few minutes. (0.2) ((from this

8   point on Senator Kennedy gradually increases the volume until

9   he's actually shouting at the last line)) and from thuh tunnel I'm

10   going to get on to B Street. and after uh minute or two I'm going to

11   turn right on to Sea port Bouleva-h-rd!, go about another two

12   hundred yards (0.2) he said, you're going to thuh World Trade

13   Center in Boston, and I'M GOING TO BE THERE WITH YOU!

14   Aud: ((applause and [cheers))   ]

15   SKen: [I- eh- you're going to be glad to see] him!

In line 3 Senator Kennedy quotes Barack Obama as asking "where are you going

tomorrow?" Instead of answering the question, Senator Kennedy begins a long list of the

directions he is going to travel, the modes of transportation he is going to use, and the roads he is

going to take (lines 3-12). The punch line of the story is that Senator Obama recognizes from this description where Senator Kennedy is going ("he said, you're going to thuh World Trade Center in Boston,"; lines 12-13), thereby displaying his independent knowledge of the area, which he follows up with an enthusiastic statement "and I'M GOING TO BE THERE WITH YOU!"; line 13).

The story presents both Senators Kennedy and Obama as having local knowledge of the place the speech is held at--the World Trade Center in Boston. Emphasizing their knowledge of the location (and how to get there) is a way of connecting both of them to the audience. The purpose of this speech is to introduce Senator Obama to the crowd at the rally. This humorous story therefore also serves to show that Senator Obama is enthusiastic about speaking at that event, which helps create solidarity with the Boston audience. At the same time, it is an obviously fictional dialogue. When people are asked where they are going tomorrow, they typically state the destination, not the path their journey will take (see Sacks (1984) on telling stories in 'ordinary' ways). This story is clearly designed to be funny, and works to show enthusiasm for the audience, the event, and the local context. This is also an example of self-deprecatory humor, since by answering the question in such an unexpected way Senator Kennedy 'pretends' to be not as smart as he actually is. In this story he portrays himself as not having a high degree of interactional competence.

5.1.4 Self-deprecating humor through 'pretend ignorance'

Another type of self-deprecating humor in these data involves pretending ignorance. In this type of humor the Senator says something which displays him as unbelievably (but humorously) ignorant of some facts which everyone in the audience knows.

Sacks (1972) uses the term membership categorization to describe how people refer to themselves and others in ways which convey different identities or roles along with the actions or characteristics associated with those roles. Membership categories are used to describe persons and groups of people (Fitzgerald and Housley 2015; Hester and Eglin 1997; Sacks 1972), and can be used strategically to accomplish specific goals in the interaction by claiming group membership, characteristics or qualities associated with a category (e.g., Winiecki 2008).

The two self-deprecating jokes below relied on membership categories as the source of the pretended ignorance which underlies the humor. In Excerpt 7 the relevant membership category is ethnicity.

Excerpt 7: February 5, 2007 Washington Press Club Speech (1:04:12)

1   SKen: Bob's right about experience, (0.5) Barack Obama in thuh Senate,

2   just two yea:rs?, is already uh top candidate. (0.5) I liked Barack

3   right from thuh start. how could I not? (0.2) O'Neal?, (0.2)

4   O'Connor?, (0.2) O'Reilly?, (0.2) Onassis?, (0.2) Obama. (0.2)

5   [he <u>has</u> to be <u>I</u>rish! ((Kennedy smiles after "<u>I</u>rish!"]

6   Aud: [(((laughter   ] followed by

7   applause))

Excerpt 7 shows a self-deprecating joke in which Senator Kennedy portrays himself as ignorant of the source and meaning of Senator Barack Obama's last name. It also shows him implicitly self-identifying himself as Irish (which would be already a well-known fact to his audience). This is 'pretend modesty,' since of course he is not ignorant enough to think that

"Obama" is an Irish name. This is also an implicit joke about race. Part of what makes this joke funny is the assumption that people are either black or white (a false dichotomy which is still an underlying perspective in American culture). So another way in which Senator Kennedy is being self-deprecating here is pretending that he is so oblivious that he has not noticed that Barack Obama is Black. Note that Senator Kennedy also included "Onassis" in the list of names that precedes "Obama." This is the Greek surname of his sister in-law Jacqueline Onassis, and is also not an Irish name. So another level of self-deprecation here is portraying himself as someone who does not understand that his sister in law's name is Greek, and that not all names that begin with 'O' are Irish names.

Excerpt 8 is also an instance of a joke which is based on a pretense at ignorance or deficiency. It also works by contrasting a surprise ending with a mundane beginning (in this case, the contrast is achieved by initially projecting one type of speech act (e.g., an apology), and continuing with a humorous self-deprecatory put down instead of the projected apology. In this excerpt, also from Senator Kennedy's humorous Washington Press Club dinner speech, he is 'roasting' Representative John Boehner. As in Excerpt 7 above, this joke plays on membership in a category--in this case, the category of age. The joke plays on stereotypes of older people as likely to become confused or loose mental capacity:

Excerpt 8: February 5, 2007 Washington Press Club Speech (58:00)

1   SKen: speaking of uh numbers, I- I turn seventy five uh this month!, (0.4)

2   and I hope to be here ((audience applause begins)) to applaud you

3   (0.2) when yo-h-u're seventy five.

4   Aud: ((applause continues))

5   SKen: but ((applause ends)) I digress, at (0.2) seventy five, of <u>course</u>, I

6   digress.

7   (0.2)

8   Aud: ((one person laughs first, followed by others))

This is another joke that is based on a serious beginning (lines 1-3), followed by a

surprising completion. He first sets up the joke by discussing turning seventy five (lines 1-3).

While the audience is applauding his impending birthday, he continues in line 5 "but ((applause

ends)) I digress," which sounds like an apology for talking about his birthday rather than

continuing with his speech. He then continues "at (0.2) seventy five, of <u>course</u>, I digress." thus

providing a contrasting and humorous ending which is self-deprecating because it pokes fun at

himself for being old. This joke plays on his membership in the category of older people, which

has specific characteristics attached to it. The joke thus turns what may at first appear to be a

self-centered appeal for congratulations on his impending birthday into a comical put down of

himself. However, note that in some ways this self-deprecatory joke is also a self-compliment.

This joke works precisely because it is unbelievable--Senator Kennedy is clearly 'old,' but

obviously not confused or addled, so this is a pretend association with the supposed weaknesses

of people in the membership category of the aged, the pretense being necessary to achieve the

humor. This could therefore be considered yet another example of self deprecating and self-

aggrandizing humor.

5.2 Humorous criticism of others

The humor in these data that was not self-deprecatory was typically humorous criticism of

another. The instances of critical humor found here varied in terms of being direct or indirect,

genuine or pretend critiques.

5.2.1 Humor through direct criticism

In his 1980 speech at the Democratic Convention, Senator Kennedy criticizes some of the

claims the Republicans made in their convention. In Excerpt 9 below, he disparages the

Republican attempts to pick up the mantel of Franklin Roosevelt. His critique is conveyed

through a metaphor--a comparison of the Republican party with a performing circus elephant

(the elephant is the symbol of the Republican Party):

Excerpt 9: 1980 Democratic Convention Speech (9:46)

1   SKen: you kno:w?, he continued, <u>ve</u>ry <u>few</u> of us are <u>that</u> gullible. (0.2)

2   and four years later when thuh Republicans TRI:ed that trick again,

3   Franklin Roosevelt asked, <u>can</u> thee old guard pass itself off as thuh

4   new deal? I think not. (0.2) we have A::ll seen (0.2) many

5   <u>ma:r</u>velous stunts in thuh °circus.° (0.4) but NO:: performing

6   elephant (0.2) could tu:rn uh handspring without falling <u>FLAT</u>

7   on its <u>BACK.</u>

8   Aud: ((long applause; whistles))

In this use of a humorous image the effect is critical and disparaging of the targets of the

remark. The Republican convention is compared with a circus, and the attempts of the

Republicans to lay claim to some of the ideas of Franklin Roosevelt are compared to an elephant

doing "stunts." He not only trivializes the Republicans by this comparison, he further belittles

them by the claim that they are not even capable of performing circus stunts successfully ("but

NO:: performing elephant (0.2) could tu:rn uh handspring without falling <u>FLAT</u> on its <u>BACK.</u>";

lines 5-7). Senator Kennedy thus rejects the attempt of the Republicans to claim any aspects of

Franklin Roosevelt's legacy. Pointed attacks on others, whether humorous or not, are rare in this

data set. There are not many instances of humor used to attack, and few as pointed as this

critique. Note that the tone is sarcastic and belittling rather than joking, and the audience

responds with applause and whistles rather than with laughter.

Another approach to critical humor is the use of a sarcastic statement. Here Senator

Kennedy criticizes the beliefs of the Republican candidate for the presidency, Ronald Reagan, by

quoting a statement he made about the environment. Senator Kennedy prefaces this quote by

characterizing it as "thee preposterous! statement," (Excerpt 10, line 3).

<u>Excerpt 10: 1980 Democratic Convention Speech (12:33)</u>

1   SKen: thuh SA:me Republicans who are talking about prese::r!ving thee

2   environment (0.4) have nominated uh man who LA:st ye:ar made

3   thee preposterous! statement, and I quote, (0.6) EIghty percent of

4   our air pollution comes from <plants and trees.>

5   (0.2)

6   Aud: ((laughter))

7   SKen: and THAT NOminee is no friend of thee environment.

8   (0.2)

9   Aud: ((applause and cheers))

The "preposterous! statement," is "and I quote, (0.6) EIghty percent of our air pollution comes from <plants and trees.>." (lines 3-4). This quote is responded to with laughter by the audience rather than the applause which followed his previous critique in Excerpt 9 above.

5.2.2 Humor through indirect criticism

Senator Kennedy also uses humorous or comical comparisons or analogies to indirectly convey criticism of an another person or of an opponent or opposing party. For example, in Excerpt 11 from a commencement address Senator Kennedy gave at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts ('MCLA'), he prefaces his speech with thanks to the President of MCLA (Mary Grant) for her introduction of him. As he does so, he makes a humorous contrast between President Mary Grant and then President of the United States George W. Bush.

Excerpt 11: May 13, 2006 MCLA Commencement Speech (3:30)

1   SKen: .h well thank you, Mary, for that extre:mely uh kind and generous

2   introduction. it's nice to be with uh president that I can agree with

3   as much as I do [with you.]

4   Aud: [((laughter,] applause and cheers))

In lines 2-3 Senator Kennedy seamlessly integrates a criticism of President Bush with his thanks and compliments to the president of the college he is giving the commencement address for ("it's nice to be with uh president that I can agree with as much as I do [with you."). This is

an indirect criticism of then President Bush. The criticism is muted, not only because President

Bush is never referred to directly or named in any way, but also through the valence of the

criticism. Senator Kennedy says it is good to be with someone he agrees with, rather than saying

he does not like being with the President with whom he disagrees. The criticism or attack of

President Bush is therefore implied rather than stated.

Another example of an indirect criticism of others is also framed as a humorous remark

by Senator Kennedy. In Excerpt 12 he begins a turn that projects one type of completion and

then finishes it with an unexpected completion. The contrast between these two parts provides

the humorous take on an indirect criticism of the incumbent President George Bush.

Excerpt 12: April 3 2008 Pennsylvania Obama Rally (3:22)

1	SKen:	I've got thuh best news of thuh evening my friends thuh best news
2		of thee evening. and that is (0.2) <u>nine mon</u>ths from today <u>George</u>
3		<u>Bush</u> will not be President ((Audience applause and cheering starts
4		here)) of thee United States. ((Senator Kennedy smiles broadly as
5		soon as he completes this turn))
6	Aud:	((applause and cheering))
7	SKen:	((Senator Kennedy smiling broadly during his laughter; audience
8		applause continues during his laughter)) henh henh henh henh
9		henh henh henh
10	Aud:	((Audience applause continues for about 5 seconds, Senator
11		Kennedy then lowers his gaze to the speech on the podium,
12		Audience applause stops))

13   SKen: mo:re! in just uh minute.

As Senator Kennedy sets up this turn, he frames the first part as if there will be some

good news revealed ("I've got thuh best news of thuh evening my friends thuh best news of thee

evening."; lines 1-2). When he continues speaking, he points out the obvious fact that President

Bush will no longer be president ("and that is (0.2) nine months from today George Bush will not

be President of thee United States."; lines 2-4). While this is a fact that many of those in the

audience may be happy about, it is not really news. The incumbent President Bush has served

two terms and is not eligible to run again. So this is primarily an indirect way of criticizing

President Bush's performance of the role of President, without making a direct or specific attack

against him. The main challenge of the Obama presidential primacy campaign at that point

(Senator Kennedy was supporting then candidate Obama with this speech at a rally for

Democratic candidates) is not to defeat President Bush, but to defeat the candidate selected by

the Republicans to run for President (this ended up being Senator John McCain). Note that the

audience responds to this statement enthusiastically, but with applause and cheering rather than

with laughter. Senator Kennedy appends post-turn laughter particles simultaneously with the

audience response (lines 8-9), thus producing an invitation to laugh which marks this utterance

as a laughable (Glenn 2003; Jefferson 1979).

5.2.3 Pretend criticism: Humor from obviously fake attacks

As in the fictional stories described above, Excerpt 13 shows an obviously fake criticism

as Senator Kennedy makes a speech in honor of Senator Robert Byrd. He teases Senator Byrd

about his voting record by falsely claiming that he has been casting votes for centuries before he

joined the Senate. While a criticism, this is an obviously fake attack produced for humorous

purposes.

Excerpt 13: September 25, 2007 Senator Byrd Portrait Unveiling (35:06)

1   SKen: I just cast my fifteen thousandth! vote last month. (0.2) .h but as of

2   this afternoon Bob has cast eighteen thousand one hundred and

3   fifteen votes! (0.6) .h as I've said, every time Bob casts uh vote he

4   sets uh new record. (0.4) it is not fair though, (0.2) he cast uh vote,

5   he counts thuh votes, he casts in thuh Roman Senate too.

6   (0.2)

7   Aud: ((Laughs)) ((Senator Kennedy turns to Senator Byrd and smiles at

8   him, then turns back to his notes))

9   SKen: but ((Audience laughter ends here)) we love him very much

10   anyway.

Making fun not only of Senator Byrd's long tenure in the Senate, but also of his advanced

age, Senator Kennedy makes the obviously fake claim that Senator Byrd cheated to achieve his

record of the most votes cast. He claims that Senator Byrd illegitimately counted his votes in the

Roman Senate--he is not nearly old enough to have done this! This excerpt is another example

of a criticism conveyed through humor, but in this instance it is obviously a fake attack rather

than a serious critique. The humor comes from the absurdity of the claim.

6. Discussion and conclusions

In sum, the analysis of these data has revealed several aspects of the late Senator Edward Kennedy's use of humor while doing the work of Senator. The first observation is that the use of humor in the interactions analyzed was relatively rare (in most of the 20 events in the collection there were no instances of humor). There was a relationship between the type of event and the incidence of humor (with more humor at informal and campaign events, and fewer incidents of humor at formal Senate proceedings). However, the subject matter of the interaction seemed to be an even more powerful aspect of the context in terms of whether humor was used or not. Events about serious subjects (such as the September 11 attacks or a report on the war in Iraq) did not have any instances of humor, while events such as Senator Byrd's portrait unveiling celebration and campaign rallies had instances of humor.

In this analysis of the use of humor in Senator Kennedy's talk in public events, a number of different types of humor were found, and a number of different functions were performed by this humor. The two main categories of uses of humor in these data were self-deprecatory humor and humor as indirect criticism. There are four main ways of doing self-deprecating humor in these data: self-deprecatory humor with an underlying self-aggrandizement, self-deprecatory humor based on a surprise contrast (a mid-utterance switch in speech act), self-deprecatory stories which are obviously fictional, and self-deprecating humor through pretended ignorance.

The humorous criticism in these data could be direct or indirect, genuine or pretend. Direct criticism of an opponent was constructed through the humorous use of a metaphor or through a critical framing of the opponent's own words, articulated sarcastically. Indirect criticism was communicated through a humorous reference which only implies the critique and the person criticized rather than identifying them directly. A final type of critical humor is a fake attack, in which the criticism is obviously untrue.

In terms of the functions of humor in these data, the use of humor to manage a politically challenging and delicate moment (e.g., the 1980 nominating convention speech), to create solidarity with an audience (e.g., the humorous openings to campaign rally speeches), and to engage in a relatively subtle form of self-promotion (e.g., the subtle self-aggrandizement that often goes along with self-deprecating humor) were observed. Many instances of self-deprecatory humor had an element, usually subtle, of self-congratulation or self-aggrandizement, which enabled the simultaneous performance of modesty and the conveyance of a positive self-image.

The instances of critical humor were typically mild and amusing rather than directly critical of another individual. Criticisms of other persons or other political parties were done through metaphors or sarcasm rather than through direct attacks, insults, or derision. The work of this Senator, which as with all politicians does require at least some ability to 'self-promote' and to criticize others on occasion, was done in a predominantly modest, considerate and indirect way rather than through aggravated or assaultive verbal humor.

There were several ways in which Senator Kennedy's use of humor in these data displayed interactional competence. First, the fact that humor did not occur in all of the events is in itself a display of interactional competence. Humor would not have been appropriate during a television news interview about the Cuban missile crisis, or during a speech about the September 11, 2001 terror attacks that was given only one day after the attacks occurred. Having the emotional intelligence and interactional competence to act differently depending on type of event and circumstances, and with different categories of people, is in itself a competence.

Second, particularly in contrast with the current historical period in which polarization and bald criticism of others is participated in by some political figures, the general finding is that

Senator Kennedy's use of humor is typically benign and limited to modes of humor which do not directly denigrate others. He avoids insults, name-calling and other more aggressive types of humor. In contrast, consider Kayam's (2018) study of the rhetoric used by former President Trump who often used direct and highly critical attacks and references to others. While many of Senator Kennedy's speeches were undoubtedly written by or at least with the assistance of professional speech writers, Senator Kennedy would have been the one to approve the content of each speech. The nature of the humor in these speeches is therefore a reflection of how he chooses to construct his presentation of self as a person and as holder of the role of Senator.

Third, the delivery of jokes is critically important to their success--effective placement in the stream of interaction, timing, and appropriate use of emphasis, facial expressions, and so on are all essential parts of the effective delivery of jokes. While by no means a professional comedian, Senator Kennedy displays competence in the delivery of the jokes and humorous elements he includes in his public performances. This is illustrated in the examples above both in his choices of where to place jokes, such as in the opening phase of a campaign speech, as well as his timing while delivering the jokes and calibration of his demeanor during their delivery. For example, in Excerpt 1 above where he switches from a serious facial expression to a smile or laugh to signal that the utterance is indeed a candidate laughable (Jefferson 1979).

Particularly given the current historical period in which polarization, criticism and negativity are rampant in politics in the United States, research into those aspects of our political institutions that work well, and into those political figures (in this case, Senators) who are successful in their roles, may be useful both analytically and practically. This case study of the use of humor by one Senator shows how this aspect of his communicative competence can both

be a reflection of who he is and a technique through which he creates his public persona while

doing the work of being a Senator through talk in a variety of types of public interactions.

Further research should examine how other Senators use humor to do their jobs. In

addition, the role of each Senator's historical and social context (for example, the time period

they were active in, their social class and ethnic background, or their educational background)

should be explored for its impact on how Senators use humor in doing the work of a Senator.

Appendix A: List of data (C-SPAN online video archives) (number of instances of

    humor/jokes)

1. Kennedy Campaign Speech Democratic Convention 1980. August 11, 1980. (3)

2. Bork Nomination Day 1, Part 1, September 15, 1987. (0)

3. Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis. October 3, 1997. (0)

4. Senate Session re 911 attacks. September 12, 2001. (0)

5. Spoke to reporters re U.S. Report on Iraq. February 6, 2003. (0)

6. Foreign Policy Briefing Reaction. December 14, 2005. (0)

7. Sunday Talk Show Stakeout: re nomination of Judge Alito. January 8, 2006. (0)

8. Sunday Talk Show Stakeout: re immigration legislation. March 26, 2006. (0)

9. Press conference at White House re immigration reform legislation. April 25, 2006. (0)

10. Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts Commencement. May 13, 2006. (3)

11. Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on Foreign Guest Worker Programs. July 5, 2006. (0)

12. Press conference about Minimum Wage Increase. November 16, 2006. (1)

13. Keynote address at conference on Expanding Student Learning Time. January 8, 2007. (1)

14. National Press Club speech re future of Iraq. January 9, 2007. (0)

15. Washington Press Club 63rd Annual Congressional Dinner. February 5, 2007. (20)

16. Democratic Senators discuss immigration reform legislation failure, talk to reporters. June 28, 2007. (0)

17. Senator Byrd Portrait Unveiling. September 25, 2007. (1)

18. Obama Campaign Event. February 4, 2008. (2)

19. Pennsylvania Democratic Party Event. April 3, 2008. (3)

20. Senate Session re FAA Reauthorization Act. May 1, 2008. (0)

Appendix B: Transcribing Conventions (adapted from Jefferson 2004)

<u>Symbol</u>   <u>Definition</u>

.hh hh   Inhalations and exhalations, respectively

ta::lk   Colons indicate a syllable is drawn out

that-   Dash indicates a word was cut off abruptly

<u>lot</u>   Underlining indicates stress or emphasis

YOU   Capital letters indicate increased volume

°cost°   Degree signs indicate decreased volume

(1.4)   Numbers in parentheses indicate length of pauses (in seconds)

(talk)   Words in parentheses are tentative transcriptions.

(   )   Empty parentheses indicate nontranscribable talk

.,?!   Punctuation generally indicates intonation, not grammatical structure.

heh, hunh   Laughter particles are transcribed as pronounced.

A: [a copy of it]   Brackets indicate simultaneous speech.

B: [I have   ]

A: yeah=   Equal signs indicate one utterance or word is attached to another.

B: =in order

A: are yuh gonna?   Words spelled as pronounced

>said more quickly<   Carets and reversed carets indicate words spoken more quickly

<said more slowly>   or slowly than previous words

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