



## Self-deprecatory humor on TV cooking shows



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### ABSTRACT

Humor and joking are instruments through which social control is exerted and through which self-identity is displayed. A form of self-disclosure, humorous self-deprecation is self-directed critique done in a humorous way to minimize possible value judgments the self-revealing information might provoke. While much of humor has been examined in the context of natural conversation or between participants in the media, little attention has been given to humor performed individually in a pseudo-interactive context. A pragmatics approach shows how humorous self-deprecations of celebrity chefs in single-hosted how-to-cook cooking shows serve to entertain, build solidarity, and construct authenticity. We further argue that self-deprecation protects the speaker from criticism and also promotes hegemonic values of what is appropriate and inappropriate gendered behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent research on humor has been carried out in the field of pragmatics and interactional sociolinguistics. This research has focused on the multiple uses of humor in conversation: its realization in the form of joking and teasing (Haugh, 2016; Norrick, 1993, 2010; Dynel, 2009, 2014); its effectiveness in eliciting laughter (Glenn, 2003; Haakana, 2012); and how it functions in relationships in various situations such as the workplace (Holmes, 2000; Holmes and Marra, 2002); and finally, how it functions in relationship development among friends (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997) and between men and women (Jefferson, 2004; Lakoff, 1975; Hay, 2002). However, there has been little attempt to analyze the role of humor in one-way, “pseudo” interaction with others. In this article, we examine how humor is employed in the realization of self-disclosure by solo speakers to an absent other. Specifically, we analyze how humorous self-disclosure is carried out by solo television cooking show hosts who address virtual listeners, or their viewers.

Fewer research in sociolinguistics on humor has been conducted in the field of gender studies (Cortés-Conde and Boxer, 2010; Hay, 2000, 2002; Holmes and Schnurr, 2006). This research has repeatedly shown that women continue to struggle with socially imposed gender roles, and through which uses of humorous self-disclosure allow for resistance and forging identities of their own. In this study, we address a type of self-disclosure: self-deprecation or the critiquing of oneself, especially in humor. We focus on humorous self-deprecation as a means for analyzing the way identity is displayed and how relationships are affirmed and reaffirmed through such display.

We assert that an even more important part of humorous self-deprecation can be not only the display but also the development of “synthetic personalization,” the construction of a personal connection although done en masse (Fairclough,

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2001). This relationship creates an illusion of intimacy that leads to a sense of membership and loyalty in a group. In so doing, we take into account various approaches to identity display and development, aligning the study with social constructionist and performative views of gender (e.g. Butler, 1990; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003; West and Zimmerman, 1987). We will show that humorous self-deprecation, when conducted solo on a media platform such as television cooking shows, involves distribution of power, questioning hegemonic views of women as passive and victims, and performance of “being ordinary” (Tolson, 2001), or being real with flaws to appeal to the viewers.

What is distinct in the cooking show humor is that the humor is pseudo-interactional. On screen, the host is both the teller and the recipient of the joke, responding in a sense for the audience or at-home viewers. Laughter tests the hearer’s understanding of the joke (Sacks et al., 1974), but as Norrick (1993) points out, humor is as much about the teller and the hearer. At-home viewers learn just as much about the cooking show host as the host does about them. Humor offers the host a safe way to present a certain identity and to gauge the audience’s response. If the host can model for the audience in how to respond (i.e. with laughter and approval), then the performance is that much more likely to be ratified and accepted.

We discuss excerpts from the *Food Network* cooking show *The Pioneer Woman* with host Ree Drummond to shed some light on humor practices and their contribution to the developing a person’s relational identity. For example, by joking at her own expense in a particular context, in this case the introduction of her cooking shows, Ree creates an identity for herself as a “writer, blogger, mother, and I’m an accidental country girl.” Revealing personal information and describing herself as imperfect, or an “accident,” places her in a vulnerable position and open to judgment, while making the audience feel good about themselves.

This self-directed humor, as our analysis will show, supports findings on gendered speech on humor (e.g. Hay, 2000; Schnurr, 2009). Women have been found to use more self-denigrating humor, while men tended to use more challenging types of humor. We will see that the self-disclosures of ‘pseudo’ interaction help to explore “identities in interaction,” and more specifically, how people negotiate and form specific gender identities in humor. Humorous self-deprecation offers a strategic discourse performance in enhancing one’s likability, thus increasing one’s popularity, status, and influence in food media, in this context.

The aim of this paper is thus to build on these prior analyses in further exploring the role of humor on cooking shows, especially humorous self-deprecations. Drawing on a close analysis of instances of self disclosure in single-hosted, how-to cooking shows, it is argued that humorous self-deprecations create a pseudo-relationship between the celebrity chef and the audience. The revealing of flaws by celebrities makes them appear more normal and thus more likeable. Further, the humorous frame in which self-deprecations are realized allows for engagement with and questioning of morally-laden behavior; the female celebrity chef questions hegemonic views of gendered eating practices, particularly in regards to self-control and portion size.

## 2. Data and method

An initial textual analysis was conducted of the American television cable and satellite channel *Food Network*, specifically shows that were aired during the Daytime (Mon–Fri, 9:30am–3pm) and Fringe (Mon–Fri, 2–6pm) and weekend mornings September–December 2016. These two programming blocks primarily consist of a traditional cooking show format that is kitchen-based, how-to-cook, and with a single host. Each episode averages 20–22 min (30 min of television, 22–22 min streamed online without commercials). Many episodes are available on the *Food Network* website, which allows for replaying, transcribing, and selective viewing. Total viewing resulted in approximately 50 h. While there are numerous cooking shows shown during this period, the data focused on Ree Drummond of *The Pioneer Woman*. Her style, which extends to her popular blog, four bestselling cookbooks, novel, and children’s books, has been described as “funny, enthusiastic and self-deprecating” (Moskin, 2010). Further, her role as a woman and her primarily female audience will be situated in previous research on gendered humor.

We isolated incidents of self-deprecatory humor cued by laughter, giggles, or smiles, indices that the joke is to be interpreted as humorous (Sacks et al., 1974). Similarly, Norrick (1993) claims joking and laughter are an adjacency pair and uses this assumption to identify humorous exchanges. Further, we compare the meaning of self-deprecation to jocular mockery, “a form of teasing where speakers figuratively cut down or diminish the target in some way, but do so within a non-serious or playful frame” (Haugh, 2016, p. 123). Here, the target of the speaker’s teasing is the self.

Incidents of self-deprecation were then analyzed within an interactional pragmatics framework (Arundale, 2010; Haugh, 2015), that is, an approach that analyzes language in interaction, viewing language as dynamic and emergent. The transcribing here focuses on not only the self-deprecation tokens but also the context, including the overall story of each episode. In this regard, we follow the working definition of self-disclosure asserted by Cortés-Conde and Boxer (2010): “Self-disclosure as a process is how one reveals personal information about oneself in the instances in which the revelation takes place. It goes beyond the utterances that introduces the self-revealing information to include the context and the manner in which the information is revealed” (p. 74). Personal information reveals what is in one’s mind or information about one’s private life, including relationships. For our analysis, we consider divulging of personal information that potentially renders the discloser vulnerable. The use of humor reveals one’s vulnerability and mitigates possible judgment from others. Understanding the humor within a larger narrative makes the disclosure recognizable, appropriate, and acceptable.

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