

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction: Jokes, humor, and taste**

The importance of a shared sense of humor is made obvious by its absence. It is almost impossible to build a relationship with someone who never makes you laugh, who never laughs at jokes you make or even worse: who tries really hard to be funny but insists on telling the wrong jokes. Very few things are more painful than an attempt at humor that is not appreciated by those listening.

To tell the right joke at the right time requires considerable cultural knowledge. Someone who doesn't laugh when others do or who laughs when the rest are silent, exposes himself as an outsider: he reveals his lack of awareness of codes, habits, and rules. He doesn't belong. In social relationships, humor has the role of measuring mutual understanding and signaling good intentions. When a joke fails, listeners usually feel like rejecting the joke teller, and often do.

What counts as "good" humor differs from group to group, from person to person, and from moment to moment. The extent to which people differ in their opinions of what is funny is sharply illustrated in a form of humor prominent in day-to-day interactions: in joke telling. The joke is a humorous genre about which opinions are extremely mixed. There are true joke lovers – proverbial uncles at parties producing enough jokes, one after the other, to last the whole evening – but also self-declared adversaries. Certain groups welcome jokes with great enthusiasm while others reject the telling of a joke with demonstrative silence; the latter group sees joke telling as tasteless and vulgar.

Judging jokes goes further than expressing personal style or taste. Sense of humor is connected to social milieu and background. Not only are there individual differences in how humor is appreciated but there are also differences between men and women, between people with different educational advantages, between old and young, and of course differences between people from different cultures and countries. What people think is funny – or not funny – is strongly determined by how they were brought up and the company they keep.

This book has to do with the relationship between sense of humor and social background. As the starting point for understanding and plotting these social differences in sense of humor, I will be looking at how people

think about one specific humorous genre: the joke. More precisely: I will be looking at the standardized or “canned” joke: a short humorous story, ending in a punch line, which the teller usually does not claim to have invented himself. Dutch, the language in which most of this research was originally carried out, has a specific word for this genre: *mop*. In English, “joke” can refer both to this specific genre and more generally to something said or done to amuse people. However, even though there is no separate word in English for the specific genre, the joke was clearly recognized as being separate by the Americans I interviewed.

It may perhaps surprise the reader that I chose this, of all genres. The subject “humor” is capable of suggesting something profound and of prompting people to contemplate human nature, the importance of creativity, or the connection between suffering, humor, and detachment, but the joke evokes many fewer grandiloquent associations. Jokes are amusement more than anything else, without many pretensions or profound purposes: they are meant to make people laugh and no more.

The joke is perhaps not a particularly chic genre but it does evoke emphatic reactions. As I did my research, I interviewed people who considered telling jokes to be “the acme of humor”, “just part of any good night’s fun”, and even: “the essence of togetherness and pleasure, a reason to laugh till you cry”. But I also talked to people who denigrated jokes as “a form of spiritual poverty”, “tiresome things, enormously disrupting to conversation”. One of my informants stated very decidedly: “Jokes that’s not humor”. In saying these things, people are also stating implicitly what humor means to them: what they consider funny, hilarious, corny, far-fetched, vulgar, or banal. They are verbalizing a decision about good and bad humor. But just behind the scenes, ideas are lurking about what a good conversation entails, what an enjoyable evening looks like, what being sociable means, and more generally: how people are supposed to interact with each other. Judgments about humor are directly connected with ideas about what constitutes pleasant and unpleasant communication.

### **Researching jokes**

This variance of opinion itself makes the genre of the joke a suitable starting point for research into differences in how humor is appreciated. Research into preference for and aversion to jokes leads to more general questions about humor: why do some people love certain forms of humor while others can’t stand them? Which subjects are preferred joke material and

which are not? Why do people consider something funny, amusing, hilarious or, rather, corny, feeble, or vulgar? What do people mean by “sense of humor”? How do people differ in their opinions on this? And what are the consequences of such differences in humor style?

In order to answer these questions I conducted interviews, I did a survey of humor styles, and I collected a large number of jokes. The research on which this book is based was carried out mostly in the Netherlands. However, the final chapter presents the results of a similar, though smaller, study in the United States. In the Netherlands, I spoke extensively to seventy Dutch people about jokes and humor. First, I talked to thirty-four joke lovers, people who knew and told a lot of jokes. These were acquired through newspaper advertisements and through the grapevine, but primarily gleaned from people participating in the selection for the Dutch television program *Moppentoppers*, a program aired by RTL4, a large commercial TV channel. *Moppentoppers* (the name is a contamination of *toppers*, which means approximately the same in English, and *moppentapper*, a rather jocular word for joke teller) was a highly popular joke-telling contest for amateur joke tellers.

I also interviewed four editors of joke books. After that, I interviewed thirty-two “ordinary people” about their sense of humor: men and women, young and old, of different educational and professional backgrounds, joke lovers and joke haters. All these interviewees, under fictitious names, will be cited frequently in this book. The group of thirty-two was a sample taken from a group of 340 Dutch people who had filled in a questionnaire about jokes and humor in 1997/1998. In addition to this, I collected many thousands of jokes: I found them on the Internet, in joke books and magazines, in archives, and they were told to me by friends, acquaintances, and people whom I interviewed.

Differences in the appreciation of jokes touch upon three of the most important social distinctions in the Netherlands: gender, age, and particularly class. In the Netherlands, like in other Western countries, it is often said that class no longer plays a role of any importance. Classical distinctions between high and low culture are said to be fading; people can freely choose from a great diversity of “lifestyles”. That educational level and social milieu played such a huge role in appreciating humor surprised me too. My questions about jokes, humorists, and humorous television programs seemed to lead automatically to the subjects of vulgarity and good taste, high and low culture, common and elitist humor. The discourse about humor in the Netherlands turned out to be imbued with references to class.

Five years after I did these interviews in the Netherlands, I carried out a similar, though much smaller, study in the United States: I interviewed twenty-eight people and 143 people filled in a questionnaire similar to the one used in the Netherlands. Not only did this enable me to compare Dutch patterns of humor styles and social background with American humor styles, it also gave me an opportunity to include national differences in the comparison. Moreover, the American study functioned as a cross-cultural validation of the approach to humor and social background I had developed in the Dutch study: it turned out that, in a different cultural context, the approach and the concepts still worked, even though actual social distinctions in the US were markedly different.

### **Jokes and humor**

Jokes are – as all humor is – meant to amuse, to make people laugh. Ever since antiquity, many superior and inferior thinkers have reflected on humor, and there is but one thing upon which they all agree: humor is a pleasant experience, often (but by no means always) accompanied by laughter. Humor is not solely amusement; it can bring people closer to each other, embarrass, ridicule, cause to reflect, relieve tension, or put into perspective serious affairs. However, if people do not like the joke, humor cannot fulfill these other functions competently. Humor can fulfill a great number of functions, but the first goal of the joke is to provoke mirth, amusement, and preferable laughter.

The joke is but one form of humor. In addition to jokes, many other humorous genres and styles exist, varying from slapstick to doggerel to cabaret critical of society. To investigate social differences in sense of humor, it seemed most sensible to me to focus on one genre. It is simply not possible to allow all styles and genres sufficient space in a single book. It is also questionable whether one can make meaningful generalizations about such divergent genres as jokes, cabaret, revue, stand-up comedy, clowns, TV satire, sitcoms, humorous talk shows, let alone cartoons, regular columns, trick cigars, fake turds, clowns' noses, or the humor in advertisements, on signboards, or carved into toilet doors. And then these represent only standardized humor: spontaneous jokes like those made every day fall outside these categories. Therefore, I sought to limit my scope.

After serious consideration, I chose the joke, one of the most widely distributed and most recognizable humorous genres in the Netherlands and throughout the world. It is basically a short humorous text with at its end an

unexpected turn or *dénouement*, the punch line. Usually jokes have the form of a story, but riddles are also considered to be jokes. These have, as jokes do, a clear punch line and are based frequently on the same themes. What happens in a joke generally follows a standard pattern: things often take place three times. There are standard formulas for the telling too: “A man walks into a bar...”; “A Dutchman, a German and a Belgian...” or their American counterparts, “A Polack, an Irishman and a ...” Themes, settings, and personages are largely standard as well: a dumb blonde, a woman at the doctor’s, a man in a bar, a fly in the soup, three persons on the Eiffel Tower, in an airplane, or on a desert island – all personages and situations the good listener immediately associates with jokes. Some of these characters have a more national flavor: in the Netherlands the dumb character is usually Belgian, the little boy outwitting adults is called Jantje (Johnnie), and Jewish stock characters Sam and Moos (short for Samuel and Moses) will be out walking in the Kalverstraat, Amsterdam’s main shopping street. However, the same jokes, featuring different characters, can be found in other countries around the world, from America to India or Chile.

The strong standardizing of jokes has to do with the fact that jokes are orally transmitted. Jokes are written down, for instance in joke books, but the majority of the jokes contained in these derives from the oral culture of storytelling. Such oral genres often have standard formulas and themes: this makes them easy to remember and repeat to others. In addition, new punch lines can be built into an existing pattern. Everyone who tells a joke is dipping into an enormous, pre-existing, repertoire of jokes. A joke teller will then never – at least almost never, and then very seldom rightfully – claim that he thought up the joke himself. Not only the joke itself is at issue in joke telling, but also the art of telling it: whether or not someone knows how to “present” it.

This verbal transmission means that jokes grant researchers a view of the role, so difficult of access, that humor plays in normal, day-to-day interactions. Jokes are not the domain of professional humor producers, but are mainly told in everyday situations by “ordinary people”. Jokes differ in this from other standardized humor usually taking place on paper or on a podium. Comedy often is a rather one-sided form of communication: the role of the audience is limited to laughing or not, laughing right out loud or less enthusiastically – where in humor on paper, radio, or television the humorist does not even get to hear whether this happens. However, the teller makes direct contact with his audience in telling jokes. Also, the division of roles is not standardized: different people gathered together can tell

jokes in turn. Jokes thus provide the opportunity to look at humor as a mode of communication.

The joke is a preeminently social phenomenon. Jokes belong to everyone: they are not thought up by any one person, but are told again and again and continuously redesigned in the interaction. A joke is a joke only if it is repeated: only at the moment of repetition does a joke become a joke, a “social event” instead of an individual creation. This too is one of the reasons why I chose the joke: research into cabaret or other humor whose author can be clearly indicated would quickly have become a history of important names and conflicting artistic movements. In research of this nature, I would also have run the risk of placing the emphasis on creation instead of communication. Jokes are what Emile Durkheim ([1895]1964) has referred to as *social facts*: phenomena that cannot be reduced to the level of individual decisions and motivations.

The consideration that finally determined my choice for the joke is how people think *about* jokes. As I have already mentioned: the joke has very definite advocates and opponents. In general, however, the joke’s status is low. This means that the joke forms a good basis for this research: it is precisely the “low” and controversial genres that evoke explicit reactions and thus make visible social distinctions. Explicit judgments about the joke have a lot to do with the fact that joke appreciation is often couched in terms of good and bad taste. “Taste” does not usually point to matters of life and death but rather to mundane things like preferences for interior decoration, clothing, or television series. And yet, in judgments having to do with taste, preference or aversion is often highly present and deeply felt. Social boundaries are sharply delineated by what seem to be trivial matters, in which “tastes differ”.

Given that this is mostly research into my own society, throughout the research I was very much aware of these opinions on good and bad taste. I have never been particularly tempted to tell jokes (in spite of my prolonged contact with them, I have never become a virtuoso joke teller) and in my social milieu I seldom hear them. This “anthropological impulse” also spurred me on to choose the joke as my research subject: researching something you don’t know well often produces more insight, even into what is very familiar and trusted, than researching something with which you are intimately involved. In choosing jokes, I was not choosing an unknown subject but a “strange” one, nevertheless, to those in my own circles.

## **Humor as a social phenomenon**

Thinking about humor has always been predominantly the domain of philosophers and psychologists, and more recently of linguists. While humor is preeminently a social phenomenon, social scientists have only dealt with humor research sporadically. The scientific background of the majority of humor researchers has influenced the questions they have asked about humor. Philosophers see humor to a large extent as something intrinsically present in a text or an event. The question then quickly is focused on what “the substance” or “the essence” of humor is: what are the distinguishing characteristics of “humor”, “the laugh”, or “the comic”? (Morreall 1983, 1987). Within psychological research, the emphasis is strongly placed on humor as an individual matter: the confrontation between an individual, with specific moods, distinguishing personal characteristics, aspects of character and interests, and a joke (e.g. Martin 1998; Ruch 1998). Linguists, finally, have tended to focus on the formal characteristics of the humorous text: what distinguishes jokes and other funny texts from serious ones? (Raskin 1985; Attardo 1994, 2001)

In this book, I want to look at humor primarily as a *social* phenomenon: a form of communication that is embedded in social relationships. For this reason I have also chosen a working definition of humor in which the social aspect is prominent: I see humor as “the successful exchange of joking and laughter”. Humor in this definition is viewed as an exchange involving a number of people. This communication can be more or less successful; there is only question of humor if the joke “succeeds”. An unsuccessful exchange does still contain an aspiring joke – an attempt to make people laugh – but this is not successful humor: no one laughs, smiles, or otherwise acknowledges the joke.

While humor also can be unintentional, I will be looking primarily at conscious attempts to make people laugh: jokes, performances of comedians, television comedy – all of these socially stylized invitations to laughter. The ideal reaction to such a joke is always a laugh. Everyone who tells a joke hopes that it will be laughed at. The joke tellers I spoke to said without exception that the attractiveness of telling jokes lies in the fact that people laugh at them, “that people fall off their chairs laughing”. “That the canteen resounds with laughter. The more people laugh, the more fun you have telling them.” “What’s fun about telling jokes? If I go to a bar, the moment I come in, everybody starts laughing. That’s the nice thing about telling jokes.”

The explicit mention of laughter in this definition may be something of a provocation in current humor research, where humor and laughter are generally considered separate and partly unconnected phenomena. Not everyone who appreciates a joke expresses that by laughing, and there are many forms of laughter that are not responses to humor (Douglas 1975; Provine 2000). Still, everyone who makes a joke hopes for laughter as the result; and everyone who hears a laugh assumes that something funny has happened (and will also want to know “what’s so funny?”).

As the sociologist Rose Coser wrote: “To laugh, or to occasion laughter through humor and wit, is to invite those present to come close.” (Coser 1959:172) Laughter signals the acceptance of this invitation. As so often happens with invitations, acceptance of the invitation is often interpreted as an acceptance of the inviter at the same time. Thus, humor and its counterpart and reward, laughter, are among the strongest signals of social solidarity and togetherness.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore the laugh is a fundamental part of the way people *perceive* humorous communication. It is the expected, intended, and coveted reaction of any joke teller. Laughter is the idealtypical expression of the emotion of amusement. As such, it cannot be ignored as a social phenomenon and a form of communication in any study of humor. But there are of course other possible reactions: these range from smiling and grinning to complicated (but culturally coded) reactions such as half-exhausted sighing at a corny joke, or verbal expressions of appreciation. When I was living in the United States, I was rather puzzled at the prevalence of verbal acknowledgements of jokes: “That’s so funny” in addition to, or even instead of, laughing.

The description employed bypasses the crucial question about humor: what is it that makes people laugh? If people try to get other people to laugh by using a joke, how do they do that? Ever since Plato and Aristotle, people have asked themselves these questions but it is very difficult, if not impossible, to answer them conclusively and definitively. From the perspective chosen here, this is not necessary either. Here we are concerned not with the essence of humor, but with its social functions and meanings. Thus, even though the question how humor works, and what mechanisms are central to it, will emerge several times in the course of this book, most extensively in Chapters 7 and 8, this book is not an attempt to construct a theory of the workings and mechanisms of humor.

Humor has peculiar contradictory meanings: a joke can be an invitation, as Coser states, but it can also put people off and exclude them (Bergson [1900]1999; Billig 2004). Humor brings people together but it can also

emphasize and augment differences in status. Humor can shock, insult, hurt, and consecutively be used as an excuse (“it was just a joke”) but nevertheless a sense of humor counts as a positive feature. This multiplicity of contradictory functions has a lot to do with the fact that humor is “not serious”. Something that is said in the guise of a joke should not be taken literally (Bateson 1972; Mulkay 1988). Because of this, the same joke can have different functions and meanings at one and the same time. Signals like laughter and smiling, as well as verbal cues of humorous intent (“Have you heard the one about...”) separate humor from ordinary, serious communication. This so-called *framing* separates playing behavior from serious behavior; it separates what actors do on stage from what is done in the “real world”; and it separates humor from seriousness.

The different functions of humor often intersect and can hardly be separated in concrete situations (Palmer 1994; Ziv 1984). A regularly occurring event such as telling an ethnic joke – for instance about the Turkish minority in the Netherlands – can be an attempt simply to amuse, as well as an expression of a shared negative attitude regarding a specific ethnic group. Perhaps a joke of this type is also an attempt to acquire status or to bring up in conversation the sensitive subject of migrants. If there are Turks present, it may be an attempt to shock, insult, or exclude them. Among Turks and Dutch people who know each other well it can, instead, be a way of showing that they are above such sentiments. One and the same phenomenon can therefore have a diversity of functions for different persons or in different situations; for separate persons it can, moreover, have another function than for the group or society as a whole.

The polysemy of a joke makes it impossible to say with certainty which function it fulfills or what the joke teller meant: humor is by definition an ambivalent form of communication. “The” function of the joke or humorous genre can thus not be firmly established. What’s more: even “the” function of a single joke about Turks in one, specific, social setting generally cannot be established firmly. Quite probably even the person telling a joke does not know for sure why he’s doing it, let alone why he chose that joke. The only thing he will probably know for sure is that he wants to make people laugh.

If humor is seen as a social phenomenon, in addition to that communicative aspect two other aspects are of special importance. Firstly: differences in appreciation of humor are for a large part socially and culturally determined. What people think is funny varies from culture to culture and from group to group: even within one culture there are differences in taste. Even

though many scholars have commented on the cultural variability of humor, comparative research on humor is almost absent.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, humor often touches upon social and moral boundaries. Jokes often deal with taboos or “painful subjects”; this means that social and moral boundaries are often transgressed to some extent (Douglas 1966, 1975). Humor, however, also marks social boundaries: it is a powerful means of pulling people together and, in doing this, automatically shutting other people out. Sometimes this takes place directly, by laughing at people, but it can also be indirect: taking place through shared standards of what is funny and what is not, or because the joke includes a reference that not everyone understands. The laugh makes group boundaries clearly visible and palpable: he who laughs belongs, he who does not laugh is excluded.

Humor is a form of communication, a question of taste, a marking of social boundaries. These three aspects determine the social functions and meanings of humor, and these aspects will serve here as guidelines for an exploration of the sociology of the joke. These subjects lie at the cutting-edge of humor research and sociology: within social theory, taste, communication, and social boundaries are important themes. Two of these, the connection between humor and social boundaries, and the role of humor as a form of communication, are important themes in the existing research in the social sciences into humor. The third – the connection between humor and taste – has hardly been investigated; thus in this book I have tried to establish a connection between humor research and theories about taste and taste difference in the social sciences.

### **Humor and taste**

Anthropological research into humor also shows a clear connection between humor and culture: the documented humor from cultures far distant from our own in time and place often seems coarse, strange, absurd, or simply unintelligible to us (Apte 1985). The impossibility of understanding someone else’s humor has much to do with cultural knowledge: people do not understand each other’s jokes because they fail to understand crucial references. Additionally, cultural background affects cultural boundaries, and that also affects sense of humor: something that is funny in one culture can be shocking, embarrassing, or even repugnant in another.

But mostly, cultural differences in sense of humor are also connected with culturally determined differences in style. For instance, the difference

between British and American humor has been summarized as the contrast between understatement and overstatement. This difference lies not in the themes or subjects of the joke but rather in the general tone or attitude: it is possible to conceive two completely different jokes about similar subjects, and with similar techniques, but with a completely different presentation, tone, and purport. Such differences, which reflect more general notions of what good and bad humor are, are matters of *style*. Style differences of this sort are difficult to verbalize; they are more subtle but more crucial than the more obvious differences in subject choice or language use.

Not only among cultures but also within any given culture, huge differences exist in what people find funny. Within the Netherlands there is, for instance, a cultural difference between city and countryside, between the college and non-college educated and between young and old. These cultural differences are reflected in humor: the highly provocative stand-up comic Hans Teeuwen is thus for the young while the late Toon Hermans, who often seemed more a clown than a comic, and whose humor ranged from the absurd to the sentimental, is preferred by those who are older. André van Duin, a comic from the music-hall tradition, known for his impersonations of rather bizarre characters, is the popular humorist while Freek de Jonge, a critical comedian from the slightly moralist Dutch *cabaret* tradition, with his dense, poetic style, and fast and chaotic presentation, appeals more to intellectuals. (Short descriptions of Dutch humorists and television programs mentioned in this book are provided in Appendix 2.)

The differences in humor between different groups within Dutch society, just as the differences between cultures, can to some extent be clarified by differences in cultural knowledge and sensitivity to certain boundaries. Most cultural differences within the Netherlands are, however, also a question of style. This is, for instance, the case for André van Duin, the most prominent popular comedian in the Netherlands. Probably very few people in the Netherlands have difficulty understanding him, he does not antagonize people by transgressing boundaries, and no one doubts his professional skill. And yet there are many people who don't like him. Differences in the appreciation of van Duin are questions of style, of taste: his humor is a close or less close match with what people expect of good humor.

"Style" and "taste" are connected concepts: both have to do with esthetic preference for and aversion to something. Each concept can be used both in the evaluative and the descriptive sense: someone who "has style", has good style; someone "with taste", has good taste. There are, however, differences: taste primarily has to do with judgment and appreciation while style implies a more active role: it can be linked to both appreciation and

creation. Someone with a certain taste *likes* a certain style. Taste has to do with “what people see in something” while style has to do with “how people do it”.

The social formation and determination of taste is one of the classical themes in sociology (e.g. Bourdieu [1979] 1984; Gans [1974] 1999; Veblen [1899] 2001). Sociologists tend to speak of “taste” rather than “style” when describing how social background relates to esthetic appreciation. This reflects and reproduces a distinction between consumption and production of esthetic preferences, which does not make much sense when discussing joke telling and humor, where appreciation and creation are intimately connected. In this book, I will therefore often speak of “humor style” rather than “humor taste”. However, the main theoretical inspiration of this book comes from sociologists studying taste, most notably Pierre Bourdieu.

The central proposition of sociological studies of taste is that they can be used to demarcate social boundaries (Lamont and Fournier 1992; Lamont 1992, 2000; Lamont and Molnar 2002)). It is preferences for mundane things such as furniture, books, paintings, clothing, television programs, and hobbies that come to have exceptionally strong symbolic meaning. Choices of this nature can and do evoke vehement and emphatic reactions. Taste, just as humor, is felt to be something extremely personal and spontaneous, but it also serves as a way of establishing whether or not people are on the same “wavelength”. In this way, these taste differences function as a direct social delimitation, not just between cultures, but also between groups within one culture.

Cultural differences within one society are not completely independent of one another. Although different groups within Dutch society have to some extent their own values, norms, ideas, and symbols, differing from those of other Dutch subcultures, taste and style are defined and formed in relationship, and even in contrast, to tastes and styles of other groups (see Kuipers 2006a). Youth culture, for instance, often includes a more or less conscious rejection of the adult culture (Hebdige 1979; Willis et al. 1990). Class culture as well is often partially based on rejecting the taste, behavior and lifestyle of other classes. The higher middle class has always tried to distinguish itself from the culture of the lower classes. “Taste” is one of the weapons used by the higher classes in doing this: the power to define the preferences of other people as less valuable than one’s own.

That taste is a way of distinguishing oneself – a means of distinction – is the central proposition of *La Distinction* (1984). In this book, Pierre Bourdieu shows that esthetical preference, therefore taste, is strongly connected to class. Not only the art form people appreciate, but also what they prefer

to eat, how they furnish their houses, what they prefer to photograph, is connected with their class position. Taste is not just a way to distinguish oneself from others, it also reveals one's status. The preferences of the college educated are socially more valued than those of the non-college educated. Their taste has more status because *they* have more status, and vice versa: they have more status because of their taste. Taste of the higher circles very quickly becomes the legitimate taste. Taste is then, in Bourdieu's words, a form of symbolic capital: the status of certain groups is automatically equated with the status of their esthetical preferences.

In *La Distinction*, Bourdieu distinguishes two different sorts of capital: cultural and economic. Class, and thus taste, is connected with possessions and wealth: economic capital. Beside this, there is the influence of cultural capital: the education one has had and, connected to this, one's knowledge of "high culture". These two forms of capital do not completely coincide. There are people with a great deal of cultural but very little economic capital – penniless but very cultivated intellectuals and artistic persons – and the *nouveau riches* with a great deal of money but the "wrong" cars, clothes, hairdos, and holiday destinations. The esthetical preferences of these two groups do not completely coincide: people with more economic capital are often somewhat more conservative; people with more cultural capital are often somewhat avant-garde. These are all "legitimate" tastes: they are not shared, however, in all high circles.

This relationship between taste and status is also the motor behind the trickle-down effect (Fallers 1954; Elias [1939] 1978): the mechanism by which many tastes, styles, and preferences diffuse through a society. People attempt to distinguish themselves from others in a positive sense by acquiring tastes and styles with higher status. The effect of this is that this taste or style diffuses further and further downward in the society, after which those in the upper layer seek something else to distinguish themselves. The drive to distinguish oneself is thus an important source of cultural change.

Since Bourdieu's theory of cultural and economic capital was developed, in the France of the 1960s, class systems have eroded considerably in most Western countries. Social hierarchies have become less strict, social mobility has increased, and other social distinctions, such as age or ethnicity, have become more influential. As a result of this, relationships between taste cultures are less clear-cut than Bourdieu's theory might suggest (cf. Holt 1997, Peterson 1997). Rather than "trickle down", processes of emulation and distinction may lead to elements of working-class and youth culture "moving up" (e.g. blue jeans, pop music), or to taste groups combining

high and popular tastes (Peterson and Kern 1996). Additionally, processes of distinction and emulation may not be limited to one society, leading to incorporation of foreign, cultural elements into taste cultures.

That taste is a means of distinction, does not however, mean that people necessarily allow themselves to be led by the need to be different or better than others in their preferences for humor, art, or television programs. Neither is it so that assuming the taste of people with higher status, the legitimate taste, solely arises from the drive to imitate. Taste is more than an imposed attempt to belong somewhere; taste happens automatically. “Each taste is experienced as natural – and it is practically that, as *habitus* – which amounts to rejecting others as unnatural and consequently bad.” (Bourdieu 1984: 56) Variations in taste and style, according to Bourdieu, are the *embodiment* of social distinctions, they are “symbolic re-creations of actual differences”. Esthetic judgments are inevitably intertwined with social distinctions.

Taste is an integral part of what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*: embodied culture, culture that has become part of people’s most automatic reactions and preferences. *Habitus* is culture worn in, as it were, to the body. This includes not only esthetical preference or aversion, but also how someone speaks, how someone moves, how someone sees himself and others. All these things are formed by culture and social position. What someone finds humorous is also part of *habitus*: the reaction to humor is almost a reflex – you either laugh or you don’t. But at the same time the reactions – as will become apparent from this book – are strongly connected to social position: different people laugh at different things.

And yet “sense of humor” is not only linked to status arising from cultural and economic capital. Bourdieu and other sociologists of taste described primarily how taste differences mark class boundaries. Next to these, there are other, different, important social distinctions such as age, gender, religion, regional or ethnic background – all these distinctions are generally connected with taste and lifestyles, and thus: humor style.

Making the appropriate jokes and knowing which jokes to laugh at are always skills held in high esteem. A good sense of humor also is a way to distinguish oneself *within* one’s own social group. The ability to tell jokes well is also a form of capital; the only thing is that it does not have the same value in every situation. Having “a sense of humor” always goes together with social status, but not by definition with economic or cultural capital.

A good sense of humor, the ability to make, share, and appreciate the right jokes is always symbolic capital. But still, the humor of the groups

with the highest status is not everyone's idea of the funniest humor. I will try in this book to classify not the lifestyles but the humor styles: the differences in "humorous habitus".

### **The context of Dutch humor**

A study of a country's humor inevitably becomes something of an ethnography of that country. This book, although primarily a book about humor, will probably reveal much about the Netherlands. The final chapter, while intended mainly as a cross-cultural validation of the approach developed in the first nine chapters, will also shed light on American culture.

To approach a country through its humor is to produce a rather unusual image of that country. This study highlights the backstage areas of private interactions with family and friends, the minutiae of everyday communication, and the subtle distinctions and judgments that people make about others. It is also so that the jokes I collected and discussed with my informants give a view of the Netherlands that may differ from the official "front-stage" image of the Netherlands. Like jokes around the world, Dutch jokes are mostly concerned with the sensitive areas in Dutch culture and society.

This book not only looks at Dutch society through the lens of humor, it looks at *differences* in humor. This focus on social differences highlights cultural rifts and distinctions within Dutch society. It wasn't until I did a similar project in the US that I realized there was something particularly Dutch about Dutch respondents, despite their great differences.

This Dutchness, and commonality within Dutch society, may need a short introduction here. Given the book's focus on class differences, probably it is important to note that the Netherlands is a fairly egalitarian society, even by Western European standards. Traditionally, the Netherlands had hardly any nobility, and no upper class to speak of. Ever since the seventeenth century, Dutch society has been solidly middle class, with the elite consisting of merchants and bankers rather than counts and princes. The country did not become a monarchy until the nineteenth century, after the defeat of Napoleon. The Royal Family, though very prominent in jokes, has never had much real power and has always worked hard to cultivate a normal, accessible, and middle-class image. Social mobility is relatively high and traditional indicators of class inequality such as elite universities and a very uneven distribution of income are not present in the Netherlands (Dronkers and Ultee 1995). The class difference in sense of humor found in this study is by no means a reflection of the Dutch self-image. Like Ameri-

cans, Dutch tend to think of themselves as part of a classless society, making references to social class slightly taboo.

Currently, the Netherlands is one of the most secularized countries in the world. Until recently, religion significantly influenced all domains of life; witness the characteristic “pillarization”: Catholics and the various protestant denominations each had their own churches, political parties, and leisure activities (Lijphart 1968). A remnant of this system can still be found in public television: each of the old “pillars” has its own broadcasting corporation. In general, the various cultural revolutions of the past fifty years seem to have hit the Netherlands harder than other countries: the Netherlands has not only become one of the world’s most secularized, and one of the world’s most permissive countries (Kennedy 1995). This shows in Dutch humor, which has changed very quickly since the 1950s, becoming more transgressive and explicit than in other countries.

Another characteristic of the Netherlands that may be important to keep in mind is its ethnic composition. The Netherlands had a large Jewish minority until the Second World War, when a large percentage of Dutch Jews was deported. Apart from the Jewish community, the country was ethnically very homogeneous. It was only after 1970 that the country gradually became more mixed, with the arrival of migrants from the (former) colonies of Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles, and guest workers, mainly from Turkey and Morocco. However, at the time of this research, even though migrants had become the target of many jokes, for the most part they did not take part in Dutch joke culture (this is changing quickly, see Meder 2001). The former guest workers in particular did not speak Dutch well as a rule. Thus, the Dutch research addresses class, age, and gender differences, but not ethnic differences. The sample simply did not include enough members of ethnic minority groups to say much about ethnicity.

A final aspect of Dutch society that may need some introduction is its humorous tradition. Although the research dealt primarily with jokes, to create a larger perspective for the appreciation of jokes, informants also were asked about comedians, humorists, comic television shows, and other standardized forms of humor. This was done both in the interviews and in the surveys, both in the Netherlands and in the United States.

The Dutch humorous tradition aptly illustrates the Netherlands’ position in the world. All the main comic genres have foreign names: cabaret, revue, sketch, stand-up comedy, sitcom. However, each of these imported genres has acquired a highly Dutch flavor. The main humorous genre in the Netherlands is called *cabaret*, which has emerged from the French tradition of café entertainment (Ibo 1981). Nevertheless, Dutch cabaret generally con-

sists of long performances in a theater setting rather than in a smoky cellar or café; one person is involved, doing humorous monologues, which may be combined with songs, poetic monologues, social satire, and social critique. The best known representatives of cabaret are the late Wim Kan, Freek de Jonge, and Youp van 't Hek, celebrities who will be mentioned many times in this book.

Many comedians have a rather ambivalent view of the “cabaret” label because of its association with intellectualism and elitist social critique. The late Toon Hermans, whose humor lies somewhere between the clownish and the poetic, explicitly rejected cabaret. More absurdist comics like Brigitte Kaandorp or Herman Finkers are not completely comfortable being called “*cabaretiers*” either (Hanenberg and Verhallen 1996). Younger performers like Hans Teeuwen or Theo Maassen often move back and forth between the cabaret tradition and the faster and shorter “stand-up comedy”, imported from America and the UK in the 1990s. This Anglo-Saxon tradition is faster and more densely packed with jokes: the Dutch version of stand-up comedy does not leave much room for poetic musings or social satire.

Until the 1970s, there was a strong tradition of popular performance, variety shows called *revue*: a combination of sketch comedy with other traditional, vaudeville disciplines like dancing and singing. André van Duin, the favorite comedian of most joke lovers, comes from this *revue* tradition, which was superseded in large part in the 1970s by television comedy. Television is now one of the main sources of comedy. TV comedy shows clear American and British influences, with most comedies following the sitcom format. Other genres on Dutch television are transnational too and include candid-camera shows, talk shows presented by comedians, and sketch comedy.

Different TV stations in the Netherlands target different audiences. RTL4, which aired *Moppentoppers*, is the largest commercial network, with popular shows and comedies aimed at large audiences. However, some of the public broadcasting corporations also aim for popular success. André van Duin had a variety show aired by TROS, one of the public broadcasting corporations, before joining RTL4, and the (formerly) socialist broadcasting corporation VARA has a long tradition of producing successful sitcoms. The most explicitly intellectual or highbrow broadcaster is called VPRO. Over the years, this corporation has produced many forms of slightly experimental and avant-garde humor, ranging from the political satire of van Kooten and de Bie to the absurdist sketch comedy of *Jiskefet*.

### **The design of this book**

This book consists of three parts: following upon the introduction, one part deals with differences in the appreciation of the genre and another with differences in the appreciation of separate jokes. These two parts are followed by a chapter describing the American research into social background and joke telling.

The first part is called *Style and social background*. This part deals with the question of where differences in appreciating the joke as genre arise. To begin with, Chapter 2 summarizes the coming into existence of the genre. I go into the history of the joke and try to connect this with the development of other humorous genres. There follow three chapters centered around the question of why people like the joke as a *genre*. In Chapter 3, I connect social differences in appreciation of jokes to differences in communication styles. Chapter 4 deals with the relationship between the appreciation of jokes and other forms of humor. In it, I contend that the appreciation of the genre of the joke is connected as well to differences in humor style: ideas about good and bad humor. Chapter 5 addresses humor styles in day-to-day life: here humor styles and communication styles are connected.

In the second part, entitled *Taste and quality*, the attention shifts to the content of separate jokes. Not everyone thinks every joke equally funny, or every subject equally suited to the making of a joke. But perhaps every joke is not equally funny, and differences in the appreciation of jokes are also a question of quality. I begin this part with a chapter about the repertoire: about the jokes being told at this moment in the Netherlands. Chapter 7 deals with the question of what a “good joke” is. In the last chapter of the Dutch study, I look at variations between groups in the appreciation of separate jokes. The content of the jokes is consciously placed after the chapters dealing with differences in the diffusion of the genre as a whole; if jokes are primarily told in certain social groups, this will also have an effect on their content.

The final part of this book is called *Comparing humor styles*. This consists of Chapter 9, which presents the results of the American study and compares these with Dutch humor styles. Some theoretical implications of this study are discussed in the concluding chapter.

While the book is not so much about jokes as about judgments *about* jokes, jokes are regularly quoted. Some of these will perhaps strike the reader as hurtful or shocking. This is intrinsic to jokes: humor always touches on social and moral boundaries. The fact that I quote a joke does

not mean that I appreciate it or even approve of it; it means only that it illustrates or supports my arguments appropriately.

In writing this book, I consciously chose to make my own voice heard occasionally. In writing about tastes it is almost impossible not to reveal something of your own judgment. No matter how hard I try, my descriptions of elite humor will always sound more sympathetic than my descriptions of a typical sexual joke. This has played a role not only in the descriptions but in the whole research process. I am deeply persuaded of the fact that because I did the research and all the interviews personally, this has influenced the book. The central concept of this book makes this almost matter-of-course: the interviews with persons who shared my taste and conversational style went more smoothly. I simply did not always succeed in laughing at the jokes my informants told me; I could not always tell them jokes they thought were funny either. In research into humor a first-person perspective is not only honest, or difficult to avoid in collecting material, but also useful. The judgment of humor cannot be disconnected from the person judging. Both in conversations with the interviewees and in exposing myself to the humor, my own role and judgment formed an important research resource.

The judgment of whether something is funny or not is spontaneous, automatic, almost a reflex; people laugh almost without reflecting. This goes for someone investigating humor too. Sense of humor thus lies very close to self-image. My informants often found it strange and not entirely pleasant that I was trying to connect something as personal and spontaneous as humor to social background: a scientific approach to humor seems to make its authenticity dubious. Resistance was particularly focused on my attempts to connect humor to class. While interviewees seemed quite ready to reflect on masculine and feminine humor, on the rough humor of the young and the respectable humor of the old, on the differing humor of believers and nonbelievers, and even enjoyed expanding on differences between people from different parts of Holland or the United States, the discussion of humor and class obviously made them ill at ease. Here a researcher encounters double resistance. Neither the Dutch, nor the Americans, like to talk about class differences. Both societies are believed to be meritocratic and individualistic; this does not sit well with the notion that your parents' professions influence who you are. Thus, people do not easily admit that their own behavior might have something to do with class, and they are more wary still of making any statement whatsoever about the class of others.

To indulge in a sociological analysis of humor is not to opt for unqualified pleasure. Not only is this opting to strip something we hold dear – our sense of humor – of its magic, the serious tone of science is also hard to combine with the frivolity of the subject. A scholar dealing with humor must quickly mount an adequate defense against the lethal accusation of not having a sense of humor. Analyzing humor is, after all, not always easy to combine with appreciating it – let alone creating it. This is not meant as a funny book. It is a book about jokes and not in itself any funnier than other books in the same genre: social-scientific monographs.