Barbara A. Plester and Janet Sayers, "'Taking the piss': Functions of banter in the IT industry", *Humor* **20–2 (2007), 157–187**

Summarized by Dr. Kareen Seidler

Plester and Sayers found that the most common form of humour in IT companies is banter. Teasing and even (jokingly) insulting others is an important part of the company culture.

This study analyzed the kinds of humour used in three New Zealand IT companies. In the IT industry, companies are usually small and have a very flat hierarchy. This encourages banter and joking. The authors define banter as "a colloquial term meaning to use jocular abuse to deflate someone else's ego to bring them to the same level as others" (157). The companies were proud of their "fun" culture and cultivated banter, joking and witty repartee. This "was perceived as healthy and positive" (183). Humour was viewed as necessary to cope with high levels of stress and large workload common in the business. The banter usually had a team-building effect, which could, however, hurt outsiders or non-initiated people.

The authors identified six main functions of banter:

1. Making a point
Criticism can be voiced in humorous form. This always allows the speaker to claim that "it was just a joke" if his counterpart is offended. Nevertheless, the message comes across quite clearly.
The participants in the study did not approve of this. They preferred criticism to be uttered directly.

2. Boredom busting
Boredom busting was part of the social component of humour and also helped to "re-establish connections … when staff members had been out of the office for a while" (170).

3. Socialization
Only employees who knew each other well and had been part of the team for some time insulted each other. Once a newcomer was insulted like everyone else, they had been fully accepted into the group. Sharing laughter was very important – more important than the actual reason for laughing. One new employee had trouble adjusting to this culture of banter. She was not the object of insults and found it difficult to participate in the joking. At the same time she felt excluded. She soon left the company.

4. Celebrating differences
People were often teased about their physical characteristics (e.g. size or age). They also made jokes about themselves. Repartees were expected. These jibes sometimes went beyond the limits of political correctness and made use of taboo-topics. "Cheerful laughter, chuckles, friendly backslapping and smiles accompanied the cheeky jibes" (174), the authors of the study observed. Seemingly, no one felt offended, perhaps also because of the obvious exaggeration of the jokes.

5. Displaying the culture
IT companies are free and "self-directed" (176), they have a "lack of official censorship" (177). Their motto is "work hard – play hard" (177).

6. Highlighting and defining status
Banter and joking was mainly practiced by employees on the lower levels of the hierarchy. Senior managers only responded to the jests, they "were not expected to create banter" (181). In fact, high-

level staff had to be careful with their use of humour so as to appear serious and in order to avoid insulting anyone.

Examples
Here are some examples, recorded by the study's authors in interviews or during their observation of the team members:

"Staff are reporting on their sales forecasts and actual achievements for the past week. Zac did not have a good sales week and spends some time giving the reasons for this. The CEO looks stern and concerned. He reiterates the sales number that Zac had forecast and the much lower number that was reached. Zac quips 'Oh well, I'm revising next week's forecast to zero sales!' Everyone laughs and the meeting moves on to the next topic." (167)

"After remarking that the men always ran the audio-visual equipment and then taking control of the equipment in one meeting, Kara was called 'evil, remote-control woman' by a male colleague. Kara received this comment with some glee, revelling in the recognition others gave her by this comment on her appropriation of the technology." (167)

"An employee turned up to work in a more colorful shirt than usual (his taste was colorful normally but this shirt was very bright). He was greeted with the comment, 'I see it's gay shirt day'." (165)

"The workplace 'joker' described how he 'terrorized' a new male employee by inviting him to a game of 'all-boy nudie leapfrog' being held at lunchtime." (165)

"A new organizational member described a comment that was made (deliberately) in her hearing about her. One long-time staff member asked another: 'How soon can we start hassling the new girl?'" (166)

"Brenda joined the team and immediately took offense at the style of communication used among peers and with some customers. She was particularly shocked by the humorous interchanges. Staff interacted in a very flippant way to each other and with some of their better-known customers and she perceived the every-day banter was abusive, insulting and profane. Brenda overheard a colleague (Cathy) telling her customer that he was just being a 'wanker' today and then laughed uproariously (as apparently did the customer). Brenda took extreme exception to this incident and chided her colleague about her unsuitable behaviour with the customer. Cathy, who had been working in the team for over three years, was extremely angry and offended by Brenda's admonishment. (Brenda also took exception to other banter exchanges not explicitly described by participants). Five different participants (including Cathy) described this organizational issue in interviews and articulated outrage at the criticism of their daily banter." (166)

"Alf entered a group with the (apparent) joke 'you're a bitch!' to his female colleague. When Alf left this group he left with the parting shot, 'Karl came through for me (with tickets) but you're still a bitch!'". (166)