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FROM *WODEHOUSE* TO THE *WHITE HOUSE*:  
A CORPUS-ASSISTED STUDY OF PLAY, FANTASY  
AND DRAMATIC INCONGRUITY  
IN COMIC WRITING AND LAUGHTER-TALK

**Abstract**

In this paper I consider two discourse types, one written and literary, the other spoken and semi-conversational, in an attempt to discover if there are any similarities in the ways in which humour is generated in such apparently diverse forms of communication. The first part of the paper is concerned with the explicitly comic prose of P.G.Wodehouse, whilst in the second part of the paper, we investigate the laughter-talk, defined as the talk preceding and provoking, intentionally or otherwise, an episode of laughter, occurring during press briefings held at the White House during the Clinton era and the subsequent Bush administration. Both studies, by employing corpus analysis techniques together with detailed discourse reading, integrate quantitative and qualitative approaches to the respective data sets.

**Keywords**

Humour, stylistics, Wodehouse, press briefings, Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies.

**1. The comic techniques in the prose of P.G. Wodehouse**

Despite being widely recognised as perhaps the greatest humorous novelist in the English language, and frequently also simply as a great creative genius (Hilaire Belloc called Wodehouse “the best living writer of English”), as Golab notes, “little evidence has been shown to justify this claim,” there is almost no literature “attempting to specify the reasons for Wodehouse’s success as a humorous writer”

(2004: 35). There have been precious few linguistic-stylistic studies of Wodehouse's works and certainly none which incorporate corpus-assisted analysis.

### 1.1. The corpora

The first step, then, in studying the particularities of Wodehouse's language play was to construct a corpus of his work by downloading the available texts from the Gutenberg site. Due to copyright these are confined to the early works from the 1910s and 1920s. The resulting corpus contains circa 1.2 million words of text. For purposes of comparison, two other corpora were also compiled from Gutenberg, one of ordinary fiction written during the same period of circa 1.5 million words, and another of comic writing, mostly from the same time but, given the relative paucity of material, also from a slightly earlier period, comprising circa one million words. These corpora were named *Plum*, *Novels* and *Humour*, respectively. Their precise contents are listed in the Appendix to this paper.

Both single-word and word-cluster (that is from two- to seven-word clusters) frequency lists were then compiled by means of the *WordSmith* (version 4.0) *WordList* tool, for all three corpora, as well as another for *Novels* and *Humour* combined. These lists were then automatically compared by *WordSmith Keywords* program, which produces a list of items which are relatively more frequent in the target corpus (*Plum*) compared to the comparison or background corpus (*Novels* plus *Humour*). It was thus possible to have a roughly objective picture of some of the specialities of Wodehouse's vocabulary and phraseology. Corpus-assisted studies of discourse types—just as all discourse analysis should be—are properly comparative: it is only possible to both uncover and evaluate the particular features of a discourse type by comparing it with others.

However, frequency statistics can, of course, only begin to give an indication of a writer's style and strategies, and so the list analyses were followed up by a close discourse analysis of the novel *The Code of the Woosters* (1938, henceforth *CW*), of fourteen excerpts from the novel *Much Obligated, Jeeves* (1971, *MOJ*), reported in Golab (2004), and the short story *The Reverent Wooing of Archibald* (1929, *RWA*). I also include a number of episodes included in the *Oxford Book of Modern Quotations* (*OMQ*).

### 1.2. Formality - informality

First of all, the frequency lists were found to contain a good number of words and expressions relating to reporting, perceiving and mental processes. The reporting items include "say," "said," "uttered," "speak," "speech," "words,"

“remarks,” “mention,” “confide,” “what I mean,” “I’m bound to say,” “I mean to say.” The perceiving items include “perceived,” “eyed,” “gaze,” “become conscious/aware of,” “the spectacle of,” “became aware that,” “get or under the impression that.” The mental processes items include “suppose,” “idea,” “thinking,” “meditations,” “brooded,” “occurred to” (as in “it occurred to him that”), “to ascertain,” “the recollection of,” “to my mind,” “it seemed to me/him,” etc.

All these are ample evidence of how much of Wodehouse’s prose is composed of dialogue, and even when the narration does consist of reported speech, it is framed as talk. The Wooster stories are narrated in first person as a kind of internal dialogue, with the occasional reference to a potential “public” (“but one must be honest with one’s public,” “if I were to take it for granted that my public knows all about Gussie Fink-Nottle...”), whereas the Mulliner tales are explicitly framed as stories being told by Mr Mulliner to the fellow members of the *Angler’s Rest*.

The single most striking aspect of the frequency list then is the number of informalisms they contain, in imitation of informal speech. These are, of course, of many kinds, comic public schoolisms like “blighter,” “chump,” “by jove,” conversational items, including “you know,” “awfully sorry,” “it’s all right” and colloquial items, such as “gulped,” “bloke,” “baffled.”

However, the lists also contain a considerable number of strikingly formal items of various kinds. These include simple words like “injudicious,” “ascertain,” “enabled,” but also more complex constructions such as, among others, “endeavouring to,” “proceeded to,” “the latter,” “as regards,” “at this juncture,” “the recollection of,” “had been compelled to,” “to the exclusion of all else/other things,” etc., “the work of a moment,” “would be paltering with the truth.” The WordSmith program enables the analyst to examine the contexts of use of these items by concordancing them. A concordance, or better, a KWIC (KeyWord In Context) concordance, is a list of segments of text which have been summoned by the concordance program from the corpus. In short, the program can search through very large quantities of discourse and draw out all examples of use in context of the words or phrases the analyst wishes to examine.

Concordancing revealed a number of interesting comic techniques. First of all, Wodehouse frequently mixes formalisms and informalisms very closely in the same segment of text, as was evident in the case of “as regards”:

- (1) As regards the fusing of her soul and mine, therefore, nothing doing.
- (2) As regards his getting blotto ...
- (3) ... as regards the foodstuffs and what not ...

and, especially, of “endeavouring to”:

- (4) He darted rapidly away, and the cabman, endeavouring to detain him, snatched at his overcoat.
- (5) ... and had sat in a corner behind a potted palm perspiring shyly and endeavouring to make conversation to a formidable nymph in pink.
- (6) ... where Bill, the fox-terrier, had encountered an acquaintance, and, to the accompaniment of a loud, gargling noise, was endeavouring to bite his head off.

The concordance of “the work of a moment” reveals how Wodehouse also combines the mixing of formal and informal language with deliberately over-intricate grammatical complexity, to comic effect:

- (7) The makings were neatly laid out on a side-table, and to pour into a glass an inch or so of the raw spirit and shoosh some soda-water on top of it was with me the work of a moment.
- (8) In short, he was one of Nature's rubbernecks, and to dash to the rail and shove a fat man in a tweed cap to one side was with him the work of a moment.
- (9) It was nicely perched up on the grass, and to have plunked it on to the green with an iron should have been for any reasonable golfer the work of a moment.

A third aspect of Wodehouse's comic style was evident in the concordance of both “as regards” and “endeavouring to,” namely the recounting of banal, mundane events in high-flown language. This is most apparent when the character Jeeves is speaking:

- (10) Mr. Fink-Nottle appears to have realized at this point that his position as regards the cabman had become equivocal. The figures on the clock had already reached a substantial sum, and he was not in a position to meet his obligations.

He could have explained.

You cannot explain to cabmen, sir. On endeavouring to do so, he found the fellow sceptical of his bona fides.

A more qualitative analysis, that is, a close reading, of the excerpts contained in Golab, highlights how Jeeves's linguistic role in the Wooster stories consists largely in formulating an account of events and, especially, in reformulating other characters' accounts, in a formal register (all *MOJ*, my emphasis in bold):

- (11) I'd hate to be a fox, **wouldn't you, Jeeves?**

Certainly I can imagine more agreeable existences, **sir.**

- (12) **Was this you, Jeeves?**

**Sir?**

Did you put Ginger up to doing it?

**It is conceivable that Mr Winship may have been influenced by something I said, sir.**

The following contains three reformulations hard upon each other's heels:

- (13) Then I succeeded in diverting his attention for a moment, and while his scrutiny was elsewhere **I was able to insert a chemical substance in his beverage which had the effect of rendering him temporarily insensible.**  
[...]

**You mean you slipped him a Mickey Finn?**

I believe that is what they are termed in the argot, madam.

**Do you always carry them about with you?**

**I am seldom without a small supply, madam.**

**Never know when they won't come in handy, eh?**

Precisely, madam. **Opportunities for their use are constantly arising.**

And Jeeves's frequent literary quotations also tend to be hyper-elegant reformulations of another speaker's previous sentiment:

- (14) **How quiet everything seems now.**

Yes, sir. **Silence like a poultice comes to heal the blows of sound.**

One of the principal underlying and recurrent comic techniques employed by Wodehouse, then, is *humour of register*. Hasan and Halliday (1989) define a register as "a cluster of associated [linguistic] features having a greater than random [...] tendency to co-occur" in a given situation. More informally we might

define it as a way of speaking or writing regularly associated by a set of participants with a certain set of contextual circumstances. Register is thus a linguistic but also a social and a psychological entity. It is linguistic in being characterised by a particular vocabulary and phraseology, a particular syntax, a particular discourse organisation and, if spoken, very possibly by special intonation patterns and voice quality. It is social in that there is a consensus in a given discourse community about which features normally belong to or are appropriate in a given context, that is, whether the register matches the situation. And it is psychological in that any individual member of the community can recognise whether a piece of discourse which has been produced is appropriate in the current situation.

Attardo defines register humour as “humor caused by an incongruity originating in the clash between two registers” (1994: 230). This definition would certainly relate to the reformulation examples reported above, as well simpler juxtapositions such as (both *MOJ*):

- (15) I had given him the Spinoza at Christmas and he was constantly immersed in it [...] he tells me it is **good ripe stuff, well worth perusal**.
- (16) **I could appreciate** that this **put him in quite a spot, the feudal spirit** making him wish to **do the square thing** by the young master, while a **natural disinclination** to **get bunged out of** a well-loved club **urged him** to let the young master **boil his head**.

These are both instances of Wooster’s narration of which, in fact, the constant movement between the elevated and the mundane is characteristic.

By far the most common sort of humour register clash is bathos, that is, the sudden bathetic shift from something elevated to something low and mundane, often both of language and of topic.<sup>1</sup> There is no shortage of examples in Wodehouse’s prose, as in the following (both *RWA*):

- (17) Algy moved on, and Archibald, **his soul bubbling within him like a Welsh rarebit at the height of its fever**, sank into a chair **and stared sightlessly at**

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<sup>1</sup> It is very common in canned jokes: “A mountain climber slips over a precipice and clings to a rope over a thousand-foot drop. In fear and despair, he looks to the heaven and cries: *Is there anyone up there who can help me?* A voice from above booms: *You will be saved if you show your faith by letting go of the rope.* The man looks down, then up, and shouts, *Is there anyone else up there who can help me?*” and that the humorous writings of Woody Allen is almost entirely bathetic: “Authentic Being, reasoned Needleman, could only be achieved at weekends and even then it required the borrowing of a car.” (1997: 301)

**the ceiling. Then, rising, he went off to the Burlington Arcade to buy socks.**

But Wodehouse's work also includes innumerable instances of a less common form of humour, that is, the reverse, a shift from the low, colloquial and mundane to the elevated in language and topic; in the following two examples, elevation to the philosophical and the poetic respectively (both *RWA*):

- (18) The process of buying socks eased for awhile the turmoil that ran riot in Archibald's veins. **But even socks with lavender clocks can only alleviate: they do not cure.**
- (19) "Suppose that aunt of yours wants to come and visit us ... what, dearest, would be your reaction to the scheme of **socking her on the base of the skull with a stuffed eelskin?**"

"**I should like it,**" said Aurelia warmly, "**above all things.**"

Partington uses the term *upgrading* to describe this less-studied form of register humour (2006: 75-6, 78-80).

Partington also notes that register humour does not necessarily involve an explicit clash, that it can also occur when "a mismatch is perceived between speech events which have actually been produced and those that might be expected in the current situation" (2006: 74). In practice, this kind of register humour occurs when the speech events produced are normally felt to belong rightfully to, to be characteristic of, a different situation from the one actually pertaining, in other words, that a speaker/writer has fallen into a different register. This definition relates to instances such as Jeeves' account of an altercation with a cabman (example 10) and the many instances in Wodehouse where mundane entities or events are recounted with high-flown (pseudo-)elegance:

- (20) "These eggs, Jeeves," I said. "Very good. Very tasty."

"Yes, sir?"

**"Laid, no doubt, by contented hens. And the coffee, perfect. Nor must I omit to give a word of praise to the bacon."** (*MOJ*)

These can, of course, also be counted as instances of upgrading.

### 1.3. Hyperbole and litotes

In the previous section we looked at one type of register shift or interchange, that between formal and informal language. The frequency lists, however, bear traces of another kind of register play. They contain a considerable number of intensifying items, that is, expressions of hyperbole. Some of these are in a comic 1920s upper-class English public-school register, such as “deuced,” “topping,” “infernal,” “frightful/frightfully,” but many more are items which could be found across a wide range of discourse items, such as “thoroughly,” “extremely,” “perfectly,” “extraordinarily,” “undoubtedly,” “absolutely.”

However, at the same time, the lists contain a number of expressions of litotes (understatement), such as “a bit of,” “sort of,” and vague language such as “and all that,” “what not,” “all that sort of thing/rot,” “in a [adjective] sort of way.”

Turning to a closer reading, we find, in fact that both hyperbole and understatement are, indeed, very important stylistic strategies. The first, exaggeration, is an almost constant feature of Wodehouse’s prose:

- (21) “I can remember the days,” said the Gin-and-Ginger-Ale, “when **every other girl you met stood about six feet two in her dancing-shoes, and had as many curves as a Scenic Railway**. Now **they are all five foot nothing and you can’t see them sideways**. Why is this?”

The Draught Stout shook his head.

“Nobody can say. It’s the same with dogs. One moment the world is **full of pugs as far as the eye can reach**; the next, **not a pug in sight**, only Pekes and Alsatians. Odd!”

A common and characteristic technique is to pepper the account of a mundane or comic event with hyperbolic expressions. In the following, the hero of the tale is engaged in a performance of his acclaimed hen-laying-an-egg impression for the benefit of his beloved Aurelia:

- (22) Every artist knows when **the authentic divine fire** is within him, and an inner voice told Archibald Mulliner that he was **at the top of his form** and **giving the performance of a lifetime**. Love thrilled through every ‘Brt-t-t-t’ that he uttered ... Indeed, **so deeply did Love drive its spur** that ... instead of the customary once, he **actually** made the circle of the room three times before coming down to rest on the top of the chest of drawers. (*RWA*)

Turning to understatement, we find, for instance:

- (23) Shakespeare said **some rather good things**.

I understand that he **has given uniform satisfaction**, sir. (*MOJ*)



A particularly effective and characteristic technique is the recounting of sudden or hurried or violent activity in sedate language:

- (24) How simple it would have been, had he not been a Mulliner and a gentleman, to remove the weapon [a battle-axe] from its hook, spit on his hands, and haul off and dot this doddering old ruin one just above the imitation pearl necklace. (*RWA*)

And the sudden shift from the hyperbolic to the trivial may be seen as another form of bathos:

- (25) The great thing in life, Jeeves, if we wish to be happy and prosperous, is to miss as many political debates as possible. (*MOJ*)

#### 1.4. Colourful imagery

Golab expresses the common opinion that “the hallmark of Wodehouse’s fiction is his imagery” (2004: 40). His similes and metaphors are striking and colourful (I hope an idea of precisely what the description “colourful” entails will emerge from the course of this study) due to:

... the wide range from which he draws his comparisons, using them in every instance to emphasise resemblances which at first glance seem highly incongruous (and hence provoke the reader’s laughter), but which at the same time are highly appropriate to the particular person or situation described. (Hall 1974: 106-107)

However, since incongruity is not necessarily in itself humorous (Ritchie 2004: 63; Partington 2006: 43-49), this begs the question of what kinds of incongruity Wodehouse employs, and what makes some kinds of incongruity humorous.

Secondly, metaphor is common to many prose styles, some would say to all language. The proper question is, what is singular, if anything, about Wodehouse metaphors such as:

- (26) Ice formed on the butler’s upper slopes.
- (27) It is no use telling me that there are bad aunts and good aunts. At the core they are all alike. Sooner or later, out pops the cloven hoof.

Finally, what is especially particular about Wodehouse’s imagery is his very frequent employment of *simile*.

The precise and fraught question of the relationship between metaphor and simile is beyond the scope of the current paper. Miller sees them as relating very closely indeed to metaphor and containing all the same mysteries:

similes can pose all the apperceptive problems that metaphors can [...] when Eliot writes, for example, “the evening is spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table,” it challenges us to search for the similarity in our experience of evenings and etherized patients – and may well affect the way we see an evening sky thereafter.<sup>2</sup> (Miller 1993: 375)

Here, we will follow Miller in considering simile a category of metaphor, but a category perhaps used in special ways.

Similes, of course, by definition, contain an overt lexical sign linking the two items to be compared. Miller lists a number of these simile signals: “like,” “is like,” “acts like,” “looks like,” “as,” “is as Adj as,” “resembles,” “reminds me of,” “is the same as,” “is similar to” and “the same way” (1993: 371). All of these items can, of course, be concordanced.

The first particularity to be noted about Wodehouse’s similes, is the remarkable array of linguistic means of introducing the comparison statement, which goes far, far beyond Miller’s list. We find such items as “like,” “as,” “as if,” and so on, but also many far more exotic and striking linking expressions, as in the following, all from CW:

- (28) Her attitude to a recalcitrant nephew **would closely resemble that of** ...
- (29) ... the odd **suggestion he conveyed of** having bought the place
- (30) it’s **not unlike** the Scottish express going through a tunnel ...
- (31) his expression was **almost identical with** that of ... the face of a fish I once ...
- (32) ... something [in Gussie’s *timbre*] ... **reminding the hearer** partly of an escape of gas ...
- (33) I couldn’t have made a better shot, **if I had been** one of those detectives who see a chap walking along the street and deduce that he is a retired manufacturer of poppet valves named Robinson, with rheumatism in one arm, living at Clapham.

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<sup>2</sup> *Apperception* is a term borrowed from Herbart (1898) and indicates the mental processes required when new things are learned by being related to things already known.

alongside the following from *RWA*:

- (34) ...which gave him **something of the look of** an earnest sheep
- (35) ...and all I can do is **stand there feeling like** a piece of Gorgonzola that has been condemned by the local sanitary inspector

A special place is reserved for “a sort of/the sort of” as in:

- (36) Big chap ... with **the sort of** eye that can open an oyster at sixty paces? (*CW*)
- (37) ... **a sort of** macédoine of arms and legs and wheels (*CW*)
- (38) ...and giving me **the sort of** weak smile Roman gladiators used to give the Emperor before entering the arena (*Plum*)

As for the special effects Wodehouse creates with his metaphor and simile, we might consider:

- (39) We are the parfait gentle knights, and we feel that it ill beseems us to make a beeline for a girl like a man charging into a railway restaurant for a bowl of soup. (*Thank You, Jeeves* as quoted in Hall 1974: 107)

Such constructions clearly display the kind of bathos described in 1.2, that is, their effect depends upon a sudden dramatic fall from high to low register and, possibly also, topic. Wodehouse compounds a number of highly literary items in the first part—“parfait gentle knights (the allusion is to Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale*), we feel, ill beseems us”—to be followed by a comic fantasy script of the hungry and hurried railway traveller, complete with colloquial language “charging, make a beeline.” We have already encountered a similar instance in example (17) (“his soul bubbling within him like a Welsh rarebit”).

In other episodes, for instance:

- (40) ... whose demeanour was now rather like that of one who, picking daisies on the railway, has just caught the down express in the small of the back. (*The Inimitable Jeeves* in *ODQ*)

the effect is similar to that described in 1.3, that is, the sudden intrusion of an extremely hyperbolic fantasy narrative—being struck by an express train—into an otherwise tranquil scenario, the picking of flowers.

Finally in the following type:

- (41) As a rule ... I’m not lugged into Family Rows. On the occasions when Aunt is

calling to Aunt like mastodons bellowing across primeval swamps ... the clan has a tendency to ignore me. (*The Inimitable Jeeves* in *ODQ*)

we find language hyperbole (“mastodons,” “bellowing”) combined with a highly fanciful fantasy narrative script revolving around prehistoric dinosaurs.

And the sheer imagination indeed far-fetchedness, verging on the absurd, of the juxtaposed fantasy narrative scrip—together with, as Hall implied, its perfect aptness—is another characteristic of Wodehouse’s imagery:

- (42) But the change in him, I soon perceived, was purely superficial. The manner in which he now tripped over a rug and cannoned into an occasional table, upsetting it with all the old thoroughness, showed me that at heart he still remained the same galumphing man with two left feet, who had always been constitutionally incapable of walking through the great Gobi desert without knocking something over. (*CW*)

and see example (21) (“every other girl ... had as many curves as a Scenic Railway”).

In the next part, we look at the laughter-talk in briefings to examine whether there are any parallels between spoken language phenomena which provoked participants’ laughter and Wodehouse’s written comic language effects.

## 2. Laughter-talk in White House Briefings

Briefings are press conferences held on a regular basis—in the case of the White House, practically daily. They are a particularly fascinating genre of *institutional talk* (Drew and Heritage 1992) in that they combine features of informal talk, given that the participants meet so often and know each other well, and confrontational or *strategic* talk, since the main participants, the spokesperson (or *podium*) and the press, have very different, often conflicting, aims. It is thanks to both these properties—familiarity and antagonism—that laughter occurs fairly regularly in these briefings.

### 2.1. The corpora

The corpora were compiled by downloading the transcripts one by one, shortly after each occurred, from the White House library website. The first, *Dems*, comprises 48 briefings or circa 250,000 words, whilst the second, *Reps*, contains around 750,000 words. The transcripts include indications of where laughter occurs—the word *laughter* in round or square brackets. By using the *WordSmith*

concordance program with a wide context setting (800 characters) it was possible to collect all episodes where laughter occurred and transfer them into separate files. These were called the *laughter files* and contained altogether 543 bouts.

The raw data is plainly far from ideal from a linguist's point of view. The transcriber places laughter at the nearest convenient point in the text and there is no indication of length or type of laugh. However, it was possible to recover a degree of audio-visual information regarding both the kinesics of speakers and the contexts in which episodes occur, since the briefings are broadcast over the Web by C-Span television. The laughter files were annotated with such information.

In general, and certainly in briefings, by no means all laughter is occasioned by humour. Similarly, not all humour is necessarily marked by laughter. Nevertheless sites of laughter where some kind of language play was found to have taken place were taken intuitively as indicating events which the audience potentially found humorous.

## 2.2. Colourful metaphor

As in Wodehouse's prose, the occurrence of striking, unusual, dramatic and extravagant metaphor plays a significant role in laughter-talk.

Clayman, in an analysis of episodes of audience laughter which occurred during the 1988 presidential debates in the United States, notes that in one of the sites of what he calls "affiliative laughter" one of the speakers has indulged in some sort of far-fetched, metaphorical description (Clayman 1992). In White House briefings, Partington (2006) also discovered how "colourful language" often seems to be enough to occasion laughter:

(43) MR. FLEISCHER: No. With all due respect, I think you're fishing off a dock that doesn't exist. (Laughter)

There is considerable evidence that participants find colourful language striking and memorable. In one of his early briefings, Mr Fleischer asserts that, thanks to his President's ability to work with the Democrats, "you can hear the sound of *gridlock breaking*" (my emphasis), a metaphor meaning "to get things moving again." Several moves go by until someone decides to ask: "Ari, what *is* the sound of gridlock breaking?" which affords general mirth and prolonged laughter. At first the laughter is slightly delayed (one person in fact laughs much later than the others) but the audience quickly recall the expression, which was used only once and a good two minutes earlier.

On several other occasions a striking metaphor is picked out and reemployed by another speaker:

(44) Q: You said the NSC meeting today was to discuss a variety of military matters that are pending, a phrase that would seem to be eight months pregnant with meaning. (Laughter) [...]

MR. FLEISCHER: I'm trying to do the math. When does eight months go back to? (Laughter) And are you suggesting there will be a baby born in one month? (Laughter)

(45) MR. FLEISCHER: [...] let me put it to you this way; the President is going the last mile for diplomacy. We shall see if the other nations on the Security Council are willing to entertain that last mile. We shall see.

Q: Is the last mile 10 days long?

MR. FLEISCHER: Not going -- (Laughter)

As the second example shows, colourful language can be dangerous: it can be picked up and used against the other speaker sarcastically, often through a *reductio ad absurdum*.

The significance of the audience laughter in simple cases like (43) and the first bout in (44) would seem to be simple recognition of out-of-the-ordinary language and that non-serious, non-*bona fide* mode (Raskin 1985) has been employed. In the second bout of (44) and in (45), however, we find this recognition value accompanied by teasing. In Clayman's terms we would have to talk of a combination of or rapid interchange between affiliative (recognition) and non-affiliative (teasing) laughter in such episodes.

Other examples of wordplay using striking and unusual (for briefings discourse) terms involve various sorts of punning, for instance:

(46) Q: What about the Ebola outbreak?

MR. MCCURRY: The President got an update on the two monkeys that are in quarantine in Texas from Leon Panetta, who spoke to Dr. Shalala. Do you want me to monkey around with this further? (Laughter)

(47) Q: Mike, I know you don't want to talk about the train wreck coming, but just one last thing. (Laughter) Could you tell --

MR. MCCURRY: There's a train wreck -- (laughter) --

Q: I know and it's something to look forward to. (Laughter)

(48) Q: Is the General in the doghouse here?

MR. LOCKHART: Here? There is no doghouse here; if there was, I'd live there. (Laughter)

The first is a rather silly syntagmatic joke, which receives a patter of polite laughter, partly because humans find the topic of monkeys somehow funny and partly because ‘monkey around’ falls into the category of colourful language. The other two are instances of a more common type of wordplay in these briefings, namely *reformulation* puns, in which the second speaker picks out a part of the preceding speaker’s move to create a pun (Partington 2006: 131). In the first the metaphorical *train wreck* (a disaster, more precisely here, the potential collision of the government and Congress) is playfully reinterpreted by the podium as a real one, whilst in the second Mr Lockhart relexicalises and de-metaphorises the set expression *BE in the doghouse* conjuring up a comic fantasy narrative of his own putative life in a kennel. The function of the pun in these three episodes appears to be the same; simply to amuse, create rapport and reinforce the podium’s *persona* as congenial regular guy.

However, puns can, of course, be less innocent, as in the following (the topic of talk has been how Mr Clinton’s personality might be overshadowing that of Mr Gore in the run-up to the Presidential election):

- (49) Q: Joe, you’re saying that he doesn’t have to do anything, that naturally attention shifts to the presidential election. And certainly that’s true in some respects, but the President is a larger-than-life figure and he’s somebody who gets attention every time he opens his mouth.

MR. LOCKHART: Well, we’re going to put him on a diet. (Laughter) He’s going to be smaller, thinner, less noticeable.

Norrick (2003) talks of the conversational disruptiveness of punning, of how it interrupts the flow. The above episode constitutes a good example of this. The podium is using the reformulation pun, taking the metaphorical expression “larger than life” and relexicalising it in a literal fashion in order to distract the audience’s attention and in effect to evade the question, to which he has no real answer.

### 2.3. Fantasy role-play and parsonae

We saw in 1.4 how the construction of fantasy narratives was an extremely important feature of Wodehouse’s colourful imagery. Fantasy also plays a significant role in briefings laughter-talk.

Cook (2000) notes how many play activities involve creative imagining, including fiction, mime-mimicry, acting, disguise, make-belief and fantasising. He even speculates that play gave rise to language itself and that, working together, they make complex thought and social organisation possible:

It might be that both ontogenetically and phylogenetically, the first function of language is the creation of imaginative worlds: whether lies, games, fictions or fantasies. From this use could have emerged the capacity for intricate social organization and complex knowledge. (Cook 2000: 47)

Play, then, is characterised by dissimulation, invention, fantasy. The participants in White House briefings occasionally indulge in a form of language play which involves a fantasy narrative of sorts, sometimes quite outlandish and involving relevant fictional roles (or *personae*), along with appropriate language (Kotthoff 1999). In the following we find an “espionage” fantasy:

(50) Q: Ari, there’s a tape running now -- it may want to -- it may affect what you just said.

MR. FLEISCHER: Now, as we speak?

Q: As we speak, yes.

MR. FLEISCHER: How do you know? You’re sitting here. (Laughter) You don’t have one of those little –

Q: Because I’ve got the same communication devices you do.

Q: He’s emplaced. (Laughter)

Q: It’s in his teeth. (Laughter)

A number of what we might call *hyper-narratives* are evoked repeatedly and have become humorous in-scripts for the group, whilst the particular roles associated with them have become in-group *personae*. One of the simplest and most common is the “briefings as a game show” narrative, in which the podium becomes the contestant, usually facing difficult or trick questions:

(51) Q: Joe, on China --

MR. LOCKHART: Sure. An easy one, China. (Laughter)

(52) Q: I’ve got a question about the President’s choice to head the St. Lawrence Seaway. There appears to be a gentleman from California with no --

MR. MCCURRY: This is stump Mike time. (Laughter)

Closely linked is the podium in a “tough job” narrative:

(53) Q: Joe, this was the honeymoon weekend for the Clintons. When was Mrs



Clinton's trip -

MR. LOCKHART: I thought this was my honeymoon week? No?

Q: It was. (Laughter)

MR. LOCKHART: This was my honeymoon?

Q: You're having it. (Laughter)

In each of the last three cases, the podium's response has the nature of an *aside* whose function is a metadiscursive comment on the business of briefings itself. Explicit reference to in-group activity is noted by Brown and Levinson (1987) as one of the strategies of positive politeness; it functions, of course, by implying the affiliation of the speaker to the group in question. The laughter that greets in-group reference, in all probability, signals recognition of the allusion, a sort of back-channel gesture.

Returning to narrative-outline shift, the "tough job" narrative often develops into an "ordinary guy caught up in tough job" persona (in the following, a question has been put about who pays for Mrs Clinton's foreign trips and the podium has indicated the State Department):

(54) Q: Joe, is there a difference between the State Department and the taxpayers?

MR. LOCKHART: No. (Laughter) It just sounded a lot better if I said State Department. (Laughter)

The podium playfully acknowledges having been caught out, whilst, at the same time, implying he is an average guy underneath but has to say things this way because it is his job. The "regular guy" persona can even slip into the self-deprecating "rather dumber-than-average" guy:

(55) Q: Joe, is The New York Times one of the papers that you read carefully?

MR. LOCKHART: Some days, but they use a lot of big words, so it's sometimes hard to understand. (Laughter)

On other occasions, though, we come across the "podium as tough guy" role/narrative:

(56) MR. FLEISCHER: I treat you like I treat everybody else. [...]

Q: That's not saying much. (Laughter)

From which it is a small step to the narrative of “podium and press as adversaries”:

(57) MR. FLEISCHER: [...] You know, there is an enemy who wants to know, so I’m not going to give any indications about -

Q: That’s not us, right? (Laughter)

The journalist reinterprets the expression “an enemy who wants to know.” It is apparently self-deprecatory but in reality the corpus data indicates that the press often enjoy casting themselves or being cast by the podium in a role of rigorous and antagonistic task-masters. It would not do in US press circles to be seen to be too accommodating to a representative of the administration.

Different podiums display a distinct preference for different play roles. Humour plays a huge part in the construction of identity in this discourse type (as in others). Of the Democrats, Mr (Mike) McCurry enjoyed being the “tough-but-regular guy,” whilst Mr (Joe) Lockhart was far more likely to slip into a self-deprecatory persona. The Republican, Mr (Ari) Fleischer, in contrast, preferred “figure of authority” roles, variations on parent, judge, master of ceremonies and schoolmaster:

(58) Q: That was my question, but I have another.

MR. FLEISCHER: The three of you must have passed notes. (Laughter)

(59) MR. FLEISCHER: Les, that’s three questions, not two. You need to pick one.

Q: Well ... let’s see -

MR. FLEISCHER: You’re taking too long [...] (Laughter)

(60) MR. FLEISCHER: By the way, whose seat do you - who is not showing up for their briefings anymore? (Laughter)

Q: The Washington Post.

which tends to cast the press audience in the role/persona of recalcitrant children.

Yet another recurrent in-script is that of “money-making.” This particular narrative outline is interesting for its ethical undertones. Both sides in these briefings tend to claim the moral high ground, the podium on behalf of his well-intentioned President, the press as upstanding representatives of the American public. But occasionally there is sneaking recognition that both sides are rather well paid for their ethical concerns. In the following episodes, Mr McCurry is answering questions on his retirement:

(61) Q: Have you learned anything in five and a half years from this press and from this White House?

MR. MCCURRY: Yes, quite a bit about it. But I'm going to go out and make people pay to hear it from now on. (Laughter)

(62) MR. MCCURRY: [...] we come and go, but we didn't get elected to be anything. And I will certainly enjoy whatever notoriety I have, and I will certainly use it to the good fortune of my family in the future. (Laughter)

Note the rather complex self-teasing present in these two episodes. Other podiums also sometimes embrace this in-script, which always seems to provoke laughter from the urbane press audience:

(63) MR. LOCKHART: Well, I mean - pursuing your craft, and being compensated fairly for it is something that everyone in this room understands (laughter).

The podium in these three examples, which all contain the transition from moral rectitude to money-making, is performing a bathetic shift.

These sudden transitions of narrative, with their accompanying switches of role and language are very frequently performed with a rhetorical purpose (where, by *rhetoric*, we intend 'the art of persuasion', Cockcroft and Cockcroft 1992). Participants adopt fantasy narratives and roles which favour their side of an argument, which help to project their professed view of the world and which reflect well on themselves and their clients. Different participants adopt different strategies. Of the podiums, one will project himself as a schoolmaster and his audience as a class of unruly schoolchildren, another will portray himself as a tough trouble-shooter and yet another as living in the doghouse (example 48). All will choose narratives which project their President as a long-suffering fellow citizen and, of course, as that most valued of figures in US society, a regular guy. Of the journalists, some will tend to humour the podium's narratives, others will contest them, some to the point of arrogating to themselves the role of professional cynic.

## **2.4. Bathos and upgrading**

Bathos, the sudden transition from high to low register, is widely recognised as a traditional comic technique, as we saw with regards to Wodehouse's comic prose. It is, of course, not always a fall in register alone which is involved:

sometimes it is a change in topic, sometimes it is simply, as Bergson reminds us, “a great cause which resolves itself in a small effect,” a comic deflation:

(64) Q: The Vice President will be here?

MR. LOCKHART: He is very knowledgeable on the environment. He could speak to you in a way that you could use tomorrow instead of today, but he won't be here. (Laughter)

The laughter files contain an example of its use combined with irony, bathetic praise on the occasion of a political nomination, where being in possession of an excellent degree from Harvard is depicted as something to be ashamed of:

(65) Q: How does he expect to get it through?

MR. MCCURRY: By hard work. By the persuasive arguments [...] on behalf of Governor Weld; and by the overall superior record and qualifications of the nominee -- save his summa cum laude degree from Harvard. (Laughter)

The speaker thus manages to praise his client without hubris.

In these two examples (64, 65) the bathetic shift is found in a single speaker's move, but it is also frequently used to great effect by a second speaker to shift the emphasis of a previous speaker's move. On occasion the podium employs a kind of bathetic response to praise, a self-deprecation along with regular guy role-play that goes down well with his audience:

(66) Q: Some of your fellow White House officials have remarked in recent weeks that your status has increased to a kind of superstar level --

MR. MCCURRY: Those are just the envious ones.

Or alternatively, self-deprecation allied to the “tough guy,” “hard task-master” fantasy persona:

(67) Q: You've had one of the most civil staffs we've ever dealt with.

MR. MCCURRY: That's good. They're ordered to be that way. (Laughter)

The converse technique, upgrading from low to high, is much less recognised in the literature on humour, probably because it is generally subsumed into the general category of parody. There are a number of examples in this corpus as in the following:

- (68) ... And do you really think many people believe he is really happy about this, Joe?

MR. LOCKHART: I have no reason to dispute the joy he expressed so openly in front of you. (Laughter) Next.

The middle register of the question is met with a much higher register in the response, all of which is a comic way of simply saying “yes.”

In general terms, in this particular, upgrading is probably the most common type of deliberate register mismatch:

- (69) And I will certainly enjoy whatever notoriety I have, and I will certainly use it to the good fortune of my family in the future. (Laughter)

The speaker—Mr McCurry again on his retirement—relates a “low” narrative outline—the money-making in-script—but with high language, as well as adopting a high, noble, modest fantasy persona. It is not too dissimilar from the kind of language attributed to Jeeves which we saw in the previous sections. The parody here is not only of a language style but also of those politicians who talk of their family but whose real interest is money.

In this final example we find bisociative switches of bathos and upgrading in quick succession (on the Clinton-Lewinsky case):

- (70) [...] isn't the sole alternative what Reuters News Agency quoted Angie Dickinson saying in Hollywood: Clinton has a very horny appetite, and I find that quite reasonable.

MR. MCCURRY: Is that a medical diagnosis, or was that a -- (Laughter).

The questioner, Mr Kinsolving again, pursues his original line in middle register, employing typical briefings question syntax and vocabulary, until reaching the expression “horny appetite,” which is decidedly colloquial. The podium responds to this fall in register as well as the sexual slant of the topic by shifting to a fairly colloquial register himself. The questioner, however, rather cleverly returns to middle-to-high register to parody and make fun of the podium's usual kind of language:

- (71) Q: I wonder, would you agree, disagree, or give that an icy “no comment”?

The podium winds up the exchange with a piece of rather suggestive upgrading of his own, using podium-speak but with an oblique risqué reference to Ms Dickinson's possible “inside information” on the President's sexual appetite, including a double-entendre of being “in a position” to judge it:

- (72) MR. MCCURRY: I'm not familiar enough with Angie Dickinson to know whether she's been in a position to render such an astute and explicit diagnosis, but I doubt that she has any informed ability to make that decision.

The humour, of course, lies in the mismatch of the formal register and the more everyday, prurient and slightly "locker room" topic of illicit sex.

### 3. Conclusions

The current paper has concentrated on the similarities between a written comic prose style and laughter-talk in a spoken discourse type. Nevertheless a number of differences are also apparent. The range of language play is, predictably, much wider and more sophisticated in Wodehouse, whilst the discussion of laughter-talk required much more attention to the various underlying speaker goals and motivation. Wodehouse is strong on plot and language play, whereas his characters' motivations tend to be fairly straightforward—love, friendship, greed, spite—and their actions are largely reactions to the vagaries of fate. Real life and politics, unfortunately, are more complicated.

Another difference is that, whereas there is a tendency in briefings to repeat many of the fantasy narratives or in-scripts, since in-group reference is a useful tactic for speakers, in comic prose, novelty of allusion and imagery is at a premium. Having said this, Wodehouse does in fact recycle literary allusions, favourite imagery, even the odd quirky grammatical construction, both within the same work and across his entire opus. Concordancing *Plum* is invaluable in picking these out and they include: literary references: "like the cat i'the adage" (Shakespeare), "God is in His heaven," "all's right with the world" (Browning); imagery: surprise is like being hit by a train, desire for the beloved is like someone rushing for a bowl of soup; grammar: the above-noted construction "with me ...to [VP] was the work of a moment." Wodehouse, thus, also acknowledged the importance of recognising the familiar and in creating a sense of collusion in his public as "Wodehouse readers."

The closest correspondences are probably those relating to register, in particular the frequent use of surprise bathos, the sudden shift from elevated to mundane tone and topic, and upgrading narration, the relating of mundane affairs in an elevated register. It should come as no surprise to find the former, since bathos is a stock-in-trade of comedy. However, Wodehouse achieves his particularly spectacular effects by combining the bathetic shift with dramatic, unusual, highly imaginative imagery.

The second, upgrading, has a special role to play in the briefings. It is a kind of mock formality and can be used by speakers to poke fun either at themselves or

other speakers, by pretending to imitate a certain supposedly typical speech style. It can thus serve as mild self-deprecation—often a useful tactic—or to score points off another participant.

The present study has employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies in an attempt to compare and contrast the humour generated in two apparently very different discourse types. As such it is a token of *CADS*, that is, *Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies* (Partington forthcoming 2008; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corpus-assisted\\_discourse\\_studies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corpus-assisted_discourse_studies)) Similar techniques can, of course, be employed in contrastive studies of any two or more discourse types, as long as a reasonable number of related texts are available, or can be made available, in electronic form.

### **Appendix: The contents of the three literary corpora**

#### *Plum:*

*The Adventures of Sally; The Clicking of Cuthbert; A Damsel in Distress; Death at the Excelsior; A Gentleman of Leisure; The Girl on a Boat; The Indiscretions of Archie; Jill the Reckless; The Little Nugget; The Man with Two Left Feet; A Man of Means; The Man Upstairs; My Man Jeeves; Piccadilly Jim; Right Ho, Jeeves; Something New; Uneasy Money; A Wodehouse Miscellany.*

#### Novels:

*The Valley of Fear*, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; *Women in Love*, by D.H. Lawrence; *Three Soldiers*, by John Dos Passos; *The Age of Innocence*, by Edith Wharton; *The Path of the King*, by John Buchan; *Short Stories, 1909 to 1922*, by Lucy Maud Montgomery; *The Land That Time Forgot*, by Edgar Rice Burroughs; *She and Allan*, by H. Rider Haggard; *Scaramouche*, by Rafael Sabatini; *The Beautiful and Damned*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald; *Tales of the Jazz Age*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald; *Main Street*, by Sinclair Lewis; *Twelve Men*, by Theodore Dreiser; *Crome Yellow*, by Aldous Huxley; *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, by Agatha Christie.

#### Humour:

*A Humorous Romance of Outdoor Life*, by Frederick Upham Adams; *Journeys to Bagdad*, by Charles S. Brooks; *The Innocence of Father Brown*, by G. K.

Chesterton; *The Wisdom of Father Brown*, by G. K. Chesterton; *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*, by Hugh Lofting; *The Diary of a Nobody*, by George Gossmith; *On Nothing & Kindred Subjects*, by Hilaire Belloc; *On Something*, by Hilaire Belloc; *Three Men in a Boat*, by Jerome K. Jerome; *Three Men on the Bummel*, by Jerome K. Jerome; *The Unbearable Bassington*, by Saki; *Beasts and Super-Beasts*, by Saki; *Humorous Masterpieces from American Literature*, by Various; *The Best American Humorous Short Stories*, by Various; *Little Masterpieces of American Wit and Humor*, by Various; *Little Masterpieces of American Wit and Humor 2*, by Various; *Nonsenseorship*, by G. G. Putnam.

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