Also by Susan J. Douglas

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# *Listening In*

## Radio and the American Imagination

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CHAPTER 5

# Radio Comedy and Linguistic Slapstick

When Ronald Reagan used the statement "Go ahead; make my day" in 1983 as a warning to Congress that he would veto, with glee, any tax increase it might pass, he was extending a tradition begun fifty years earlier in radio. A former radio announcer, he had an instinct for this. He borrowed a scrap of pop culture dialogue heard by millions (in this case, in a Clint Eastwood film) and used it in a completely different sphere of American life, national politics, to instantly bond himself to his audience. He knew intuitively that this macho comeback allowed him to inhabit, however temporarily, the skin of a tough, larger-than-life fictional cop with whom many of his listeners had identified. Being a creature of Hollywood, he grasped that such media catchphrases help produce a sense of solidarity, a sense of us-versus-them, of who's in the know and who isn't, of who gets the joke and who doesn't. Reagan, Eastwood's character, and Americans who envied this defiant retort were bonded through language, standing tall against a bunch of cowed spendthrifts. They were all real men. All this through five words.

There are many tacks one could take in writing about one of American popular culture's most beloved genres, radio comedy in the 1930s. The central role of advertising agencies in the making of popular entertainment was a key departure: networks didn't produce radio shows, ad agencies did, with particular products, like Jell-O, sponsoring particular comedians, like Jack Benny. One could focus on a few shows or stars, or on how radio created comedy factories manned by teams of writers who developed huge files reportedly containing up to 200,000 jokes they could feed into the ever needy maw of broadcasting.



I'd like to explore what radio comedy did with and to the American language. Usually we take language use for granted, rarely thinking about how transparent a window it is onto the values, hopes, and anxieties of society. But language and social order are braided together so tightly that, unless we untangle them, we can overlook what language tells us about history. And since radio pushed the use of language to the center stage of American life, we should explore what these words enacted. For when we think about the impact of radio on American life, we are thinking primarily about the impact of language on people's thoughts and cultural perceptions. Story listening evolved through radio comedy in important ways, and comedians like George Burns and Gracie Allen, Fred Allen, and Jack Benny added a visual, dimensional element to the standard joke repartee of vaudeville. It wasn't enough to laugh at some one-liners; now listeners were asked to see Gracie sliding down a banister, to go down to Jack's infamous vault, to stroll along Fred Allen's alley. These performers asked listeners to enter a common, imagined space, and they had to develop audio signposts to help the listeners along.

With millions of Americans from the late 1920s onward hearing the same often humorous phrases simultaneously, comments like "I'se regusted" and "Holy mackerel" from *Amos 'n' Andy* became embedded in the everyday language of ordinary people. Radio reshaped the spoken word in America, but not only by giving people new catchphrases to use. Just as silent films had relied on physical slapstick to make up for the absence of the verbal, radio made up for the absence of the visual by showcasing and inflating linguistic slapstick. In the 1930s, with the rise of comedy as the most popular genre on the air, radio enacted a war between a more homogenized language on the one hand and the defiant, unassimilated linguistic holdouts on the other. Wordplay reached new heights, but it was circumscribed by a new, official corps of language police, who determined and enforced what kind of English it was proper to speak on the air before a national audience. Decorum and insubordination took turns, and they worked hand in hand.

What radio did was provide an arena in which very different kinds of verbal agility could duke it out. The radio language wars were on, seemingly inconsequential and played for laughs. But language wars are never inconsequential. When we look at these battles, we are witnessing struggles over power, pecking order, and masculine authority. All societies are ruled by language, and nearly every society grants high status to those with deft verbal skills.[1] There are always rivalries between language users in a culture; when a mass medium caters to the ears alone, such rivalries assume central symbolic importance. Who says what to whom and how speaks volumes about who has power, who doesn't, and how that power is both challenged and maintained.

And questions about who should and should not have power were at the forefront of thought and politics in Depression America.

Radio in the 1920s brought the disembodied voices of politicians, educators, celebrities, and announcers directly into people's homes for the first time. By 1923 millions of listeners had heard Warren Harding, Woodrow Wilson, and Calvin Coolidge address the nation over radio. "It is incomparably more interesting to hear the message delivered than to read it in the next morning's paper," observed *Radio Broadcast,* because the voice conveys emotion, emphasis, sincerity (or lack thereof), and personality. It quickly became clear that listeners, with the voice as their only clue, used a combination of their imaginations and social knowledge to ascribe all sorts of traits to an unseen speaker. Herta Herzog, a pioneer in audience research, found that listeners pictured the speaker's age, social status, appearance, and personality all from his or her voice. In addition, listeners made all sorts of assumptions about a speaker's intelligence, honesty, compassion, generosity, and competence simply based on accent, as well as on tone of voice and delivery. Thus were those on the radio, the famous and the unknown, now "judged by vocal standards alone."[2]

Radio, like other mass entertainments, was a site of class tensions and of the pull between cultural homogeneity and diversity. So language use over the air became controversial by the late 1920s. The pronunciations of entertainers and announcers on radio were "as varied as their origins," with listeners wondering whether one pronounced *tomato* "tomayto"-or "tomahto" and *vase* "vays," "vayz," or "vahz." Radio, observed one writer, had made Americans "pronunciation conscious," prompting them to turn a book like *Thirty Thousand Words Mispronounced* into a best-seller and to flock to correspondence courses on how to speak. Were radio stations really going to permit people to go on the air who pronounced *birds* "boids," *avenues* "avenoos," and *God* "Gawd"? asked *The Commonweal.* Radio had to provide a model of good diction, the magazine insisted. *The Saturday Review* asserted that the strict audio limitations of the device itself would compel the professional broadcaster "to become a careful speaker. The Southerner in America begins to pull his vowels together for the radio, and the Londoner sometimes makes *a, e, i, o, u* sound like those letters; while the slovenly New Yorker and the careless Chicagoan begin to articulate as the English do, because they have to, if they are to be heard."[3] Those with nasal voices were extremely unpopular, and critics asserted that women's higher voices didn't sound as good as men's over the ether.

In 1929 the BBC imposed a single standard of pronunciation for all its announcers, who had to be phonetically trained and conform precisely to BBC usage. While *The Saturday Review* feared that "those in control of broadcasting will try to make us all talk alike," many critics urged the adoption of an official standard of radio pronunciation in the United States. As one argued, the "universal leveling of dialects . . . will go far to promote sectional and national and international understanding."[4] But the subtext of these recommendations acknowledged the powerful role that language plays in defining and reinforcing class, ethnic, racial, and gender differences, and insisted that language continue to perform this function. Malapropisms, wrong pronunciations, overly thick regional accents, and dialects marked the speaker, rightly or wrongly, as ignorant, stupid, and low-class.



By the 1930s the fully established networks and the advertisers who controlled much of radio programming *did* impose a standard of radio pronunciation. Diction contests on the air set norms for announcers and listeners, and one fan wrote that "not only the youth of today but many older people have received much help and inspiration toward correct speech from radio announcers." Announcers had to learn the proper pronunciation of words rarely used in everyday speech, easily mispronounced names and words like Chopin, Goebbels, Wagner, *chorale,* and *mazurka.*[5]

But the contest between linguistic homogeneity and diversity found a fascinating territorial compromise, one that quickly became highly ritualized. Announcers for shows and those who read the commercials were indeed the custodians of "official" English in America, as were newscasters and dramatic actors and actresses. Some complained that these announcers promoted "a stereotyped style of toneless expression, accurate, monotonous and stiff"; they "seem to wish to teach us all to talk like mechanical dolls or robots." This style of announcing bracketed everything, music, talks, and plays. It was "the norm to which the waves must always return . . . as inevitable as the hour-end chimes and more insistent."[6] But Americans were not going to abide such obvious, top-down, anti-individualistic verbal encasements. For in comedy shows—and *Amos 'n' Andy* was the harbinger here—linguistic rebellion, even anarchy, reigned supreme. Radio comedians, in contrast to their linguistically staid, even pompous announcers, ran wild with the American language. Yes, radio would have standards and impose them. But "nonstandard" English on the radio was where the laughs—and the profits—were.

Radio critics at the time bemoaned language use on the radio, particularly the way many advertisers and programmers seemed to "talk down" to the audience, reinforcing what many of these critics saw as a connection between the spread of mass culture and the dumbing down of America. Gilbert Seldes, in *The New Republic,* chastised Alexander Woollcott's broadcasts as "the Early Bookworm," because they "had none of the virtues of his written work." Needling Woollcott for saying that certain written treasures "caught these old

eyes," Seldes remarked that "most of the rest of Mr. Woollcott's anatomy grew old as he spoke" and added that he sounded like "an English squire who detests intelligence."[7] By the mid-1930s many intellectuals felt that radio, with its overexplanation of scenes, its low comedy, and its wordplay, was infantalizing the audience.

*Amos 'n' Andy* was radio's first great national program, the one that got people into the habit of listening to a specific program at a fixed time every night.[8] It was the broadcast that demonstrated most forcefully the way radio was starting to determine how people divided up their time at home and matched their schedules to the schedules of the broadcast day. It showed vaudevillians—whose success was being undercut by movies and radios—that comedy over the air worked and was profitable.

The two thousand vaudeville theaters that had thrived at the turn of the century had been reduced to fewer than one hundred by 1930. By the early and mid-1930s, with advertisers and networks searching for similar shows with national appeal, a host of vaudevillians—Joe Penner, Will Rogers, Ed Wynn, Burns and Allen, and Jack Benny—signed up to do their own radio shows. And what they did was comedy that elevated the wisecrack, the witty comeback, the put-down to an art. "Because of radio," noted *Literary Digest,* America was becoming "a nation of wisecrackers."[9] Now, commentators noted, the air was filled with puns, malapropisms, insults, quips, and non sequiturs. Obviously, in this nonvisual medium, words, tone of voice, and sound effects carried all the freight.

Some have opined that radio comedy's main function was to cheer people up during hard times. Surely we can do better than this. For the nature of the linguistic acrobatics that went on over the airwaves in the 1930s, the centrality of verbal dueling, suggests that radio comedy was enacting much larger dramas about competition, authority, fairness, and hope during the greatest crisis of American capitalism, the Great Depression. Certainly Freud insisted that we regard comedy as something much more complicated and revealing than it appears on the surface. It often expresses barely articulated beliefs and fears, basic passions, and an ongoing contest between the infantile and the rational, in which the rational wins out—we "get" the joke—but up until then nonsense has a field day.

Jokes often express violence and aggression, frequently against the constraints we feel are imposed on us by institutions, indeed, by adulthood itself. It is in part our "infantile greed for disorder" that is manifested in people's love of wordplay, in our delight in breaking free and razzing the rules. Sociolinguists emphasize, in fact, that "ritual" insulting—insults as part of a game, done for laughs—occurs most frequently during times of cultural stress.[10]



Most important, I think, is that this dueling also reflected the crisis in masculinity and traditional male authority that the Depression precipitated. Let's remember that from 1929 to 1933 gross national product dropped by 29 percent, construction by 78 percent, and investment by 98 percent. Unemployment rose from 3.2 percent to a staggering 24.9 percent. Just one look at the enormously popular Shirley Temple films of the period, with their lost daddies, dead daddies, or blind daddies, drives home the enormous anxiety about the threatened collapse of patriarchy. Individual reaction to this catastrophe ranged from acquiescence, self-recrimination, and a sense of personal failure to outrage and a determination to find scapegoats and restructure society. In 1934 alone—the same year that radio comedy, with all its insults and linguistic battles, established its primacy over the airwaves—nearly 1.5 million workers participated in 1,800 strikes. As the historian Robert McElvaine succinctly puts it, "Class conflict reached the point of open warfare."[11] Workers were fighting back, often in the streets, sometimes with weapons and violence, against privilege, exclusion, inequity.

The enormous popularity of all kinds of verbal deviance suggests how anger, defiance, and rebellion were given voice, while also defused, over the airwaves. It is not enough to note that people wanted a good laugh during the Depression. When a particular culture at a particular moment invests enormous amounts of time, energy, and money into verbal dueling, we need to ask why.[12] What were these bloodless, cathartic battles stand-ins for?

The unspoken but understood rules of speech—of who says what to whom and how—both reflect and reaffirm any culture's established social order. When one man addresses another by his first name, while the other man uses "Mr." and a last name, we know right away who's boss. The most striking features of one's social environment—class, region, educational level, gender, and race—are all marked, in how one speaks.[13] Proper grammar, correct forms of address; polite, inoffensive commentary; a modulated tone of voice, neither too high nor too low; a neutral accent, not overly marked by geography or ethnicity—all of these govern middle-class speech, how someone who wants to be accepted and doesn't want to stand out is meant to talk.

Violating any of these rules, especially more than one, signals that the speaker isn't going to play by the rules, either because he or she doesn't know better or because he or she refuses. Not knowing better makes you pathetic and even contemptible. Refusing, however, sets you apart from the herd, and can make you scary. It can also make you funny. Most endearing of all, as radio comics learned, was violating staid linguistic conventions while appearing oblivious to the fact that you were doing so. This way the audience could laugh at you and feel superior to you while also wanting, on a psychological level, to

take you under its wing, protect you, and thank you for the momentary relief from linguistic lockstep.

Radio comedy's reliance on linguistic slapstick was an auditory exaggeration of what had gone on in vaudeville for years. Vaudeville had popularized a new kind of humor, a humor like gunfire, more brash, defiant, and aggressive, more reliant on jokes and punch lines than on tall tales or monologues. It threw verbal pies in the face of Victorian gentility: it showcased hostility, not politeness; misunderstandings, not conversations; and it acknowledged that disorder, not order, governed everyday life. Its argot was slang, dialect, malapropisms. The wisecracks often took deadly aim at the gap between the sunny myth of success and the more overcast, unyielding realities of urban and industrial life. This was the humor of resentment and retaliation and, with the enormous influence of Jewish comics and minstrelsy, was the humor of the underdog trapped by verbal misunderstandings and barricades, tripped up by verbal codes he could never completely crack. Some of its roots could be traced to minstrelsy, in which actors in blackface mangled "proper" English, and to burlesque in the late 1860s and 1870s, in which women, often dressed as men, used puns to lampoon much that bourgeois culture found sacred.[14]

Although there was plenty of slapstick for the eyes—bizarre costumes, exaggerated facial expressions, and pratfalls—it was wordplay that was central to vaudeville humor. Indeed, wordplay was central to the country's sometimes raucous theatrical history. And while vaudeville managers did much to attract females to their shows in the 1890s and after, in cities like New York nearly two-thirds of the audience was still male in the 1910s.[15] This humor spoke especially to working-class men, to their frustrated ambitions and wounded pride, their respect and need for quick-wittedness, and their need to get even, if only verbally, with a system that rewarded some men at the expense of others. Radio didn't just continue this tradition of linguistic slapstick. The properties of the machine itself ensured that wordplay would be enshrined as a central cultural feature of American life at midcentury. And the conditions of everyday life ensured that wordplay would become heavily laden with other, much less frivolous freight.

The pioneering show here was *Amos 'n' Andy,* whose main characters were played by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll. As Gilbert Seldes noted at the time, the show fused two successful pop culture genres, blackface minstrelsy and the "story comic strip."[16] Most of the humor came from the pair's mangling of conventional English, from the incessant malapropisms, inadvertent puns, and total misunderstanding of regular terms and phrases.

Thus it is important to move beyond the "was it racist or not" questions surrounding the show. Of course it was racist. Of course it took the most de-



meaning aspects of minstrelsy and enshrined them on the air. And it was hardly an exception. As the media historian Michele Hilmes reminds us, radio revived minstrelsy in shows like *Two Black Crows, The Dutch Masters Minstrels,* and *Watermelon and Cantaloupe.* But *Amos 'n' Andy* was one of the few situation comedies that didn't cast blacks solely as servants. And as Melvin Patrick Ely argues in his definitive study of the show, millions of white listeners were not glued to it every night at 7:00 simply so they could laugh at the stupidity and naiveté of black folks. Rather, through the dialogue the show "jumped back and forth across the color line in a manner both cavalier and surreal," in a way that ultimately caused that line "to blur altogether."[17] White listeners weren't simply laughing at black folks; they were also laughing at an only slightly exaggerated version of themselves. All too many white listeners, although most would never actually admit it, identified with *Amos 'n' Andy.*

*Amos 'n' Andy* became a network show in August 1929, just a few months before the stock market crash. It quickly grew to be the most popular program on the air, reaching an estimated 40 million listeners, or approximately one-third of the population. It was a national addiction: hotel lobbies, movie theaters, and shops piped the show in from 7:00 to 7:15 so as not to lose customers. Telephones remained still, toilets weren't used, taxis sat unhailed while the show was on.[18]

Certainly the show played on stereotypes about the incompetence, duplicity, and shiftlessness of black men. But its power came from the way it dramatized the collapse of paternal authority in the home, in the government, in the marketplace. White culture has often projected onto "stage Negroes" its worst fears about itself. And this was certainly true of *Amos 'n' Andy,* in which black men (portrayed by white men) struggled to earn a living, conquer bureaucracy, and retain some shred of masculine dignity in the face of breadlines, an indifferent government, and uppity women. Using what the writer and editor Mel Watkins has called "racial ventriloquism," white men put into the mouths of blacks their sense of helplessness in a world where all too many men suddenly felt superfluous, stymied, throttled.[19]

Amos (played by Gosden) was the more earnest, gullible, and hardworking partner of the Fresh Air Taxi Company, Incorpulated, while Andy (played by Correll) was the more cocky, lazy, and self-important of the two. The Kingfish (also played by Gosden) was the unscrupulous bunco artist who inducted the two into the fraternal organization the Mystic Knights of the Sea and constantly conned Amos and Andy out of what little money they had. As Melvin Patrick Ely has noted, the show, despite its reinforcement of a host of racial stereotypes, also evoked a rich and complex portrait of an urban black community during the Depression.

One of the pleasures of the show for whites came from its racial voyeurism, the eavesdropping the show pretended it allowed onto another speech community with ridiculous and fascinating attributes. There was, in the 1920s, with the popularity of jazz, the Harlem Renaissance, and the ongoing black migration in America, a renewed fascination with Black English, a distinctive language with rules all its own, indigenous to America yet nonstandard. *Amos 'n' Andy* was a hybrid, a bastardization of Black English by white men. But the use of *d* for *th* (as in "dese" and "dat"), the dropping of final *g*'s ("huntin' ") and final *r*'s ("heah" for *here),* and the use of *done* as a substitute for the verb "to be" ("I done go now") marked the speech as authentically black. Here was a more lively, seemingly genuine dialect not roped in and confined by schoolmarms, intellectuals, or bourgeois codes of decorum. The fact that so many catchphrases from *Amos 'n' Andy* were used by millions of white listeners is testimony to people's affection for the show's version of Black English: people borrow linguistically from those they admire, not those they scorn, however forbidden it is to admit that admiration.[20]

The linguistic mutilations of the show allowed listeners to feel superior to these illiterate, verbally stumbling men, whose language deficiencies were meant to reflect cognitive deficiencies. But the malapropisms also ridiculed mainstream, white America, especially the arbitrariness and high-handedness of government bureaucracy and big business. Letters Andy "de-tated" to Amos were addressed to the "secketary of de interior o' labor," and nationally known figures were renamed J. Ping-Pong Morgan and Charles Limburger. Executives discussed "propolitions," the economic crisis was "de bizness repression," and garbled explanations of the causes of the Depression were not all that far from the incomprehensible and reckless machinations of Wall Street manipulators. This use of blacks—or faux blacks—to attack the pretensions, snobbery, and frequent inhumanity of the upper classes had begun in minstrel shows, in which the Dandy Jim caricature lampooned not just the urban black dandy but also the prissy and pompous upper-class *white* dandy.[21]

Andy—greedy, selfish, and always on the make—straddled those deeply contradictory feelings about businessmen after the crash. On the one hand, they were despicable and had ruined the country; on the other hand, without more entrepreneurs hustling to make it, the country would never recover. The suspicion that all too many businessmen were not just greedy but incompetent to boot was given full play in the show, as was the sense that most people were being buffeted about by economic forces way beyond their control.

And it was the wordplay that conveyed this. The Kingfish explained what had happened to small investors in Wall Street: "Ev'ybody knows de inside on de stocks, yo' see—dat's what dey tell yo', so den you buy it an' it just look like dey waitin' fo' you to buy it, 'cause de minute you buy it, it goes down . . . de fust thing you know it gits cheaper, den you lose." Andy asks what makes stocks go up. "Well, some o' dese big mens down on Wall Street git in a pool, an' when dey git behind de stocks, dey say dat's whut make it go up."[22] They weren't just stereotyping black incomprehension of complexities like the economy. They gave voice to *white* incomprehension—admittedly safely projected onto blacks—and to the deep resentment white working folks had toward those white elites who may have precipitated, yet remain unscathed by, the current disaster.



One of the most common story lines in the show featured the con man and the mark, in which an ambitious and/or well-intentioned and naïve type is duped by a more calculating, sophisticated shyster. Here a string of shimmering verbal mirages serves as the lure for the more credulous. *Amos 'n' Andy* insisted that language was fun, but it also acknowledged that it was dangerous, especially for plain, trusting folk. There was an identification that transcended race when Amos and Andy lost their money in the Kingfish's schemes, were hounded by unsympathetic creditors, or got in trouble with the IRS or other bureaucracies because they had failed to fill out forms too complicated for them to understand. And while Amos embodied the work ethic and insisted it remained *the* foundation to success in America, Andy repudiated the merits of hard work, personifying the sense that a lot of people *had* worked hard, and look where they were now.

This ambivalence about the merits and future of capitalism was intimately connected with dramas about the nature of masculinity and the ongoing battles of the sexes. Andy, of course, was totally cynical about women and love. When Amos describes marriage as requiring "give an' take," Andy agrees, saying that the husband must "give de money an' take de back-talk."[23] Andy specialized in macho braggadocio about the importance of keeping women in their place, and his exaggerated bombast about his mastery over women was deflated by Amos, female characters, and the plot lines. Amos was on the other end of the spectrum, respectful of and deferential to his girlfriend, Ruby, and not above crying when he got too emotional about his love life. Using stage Negroes, the show stripped away certain pretensions about masculinity—its self-importance, its seriousness, its coherence, its strength.

Here, language was also revealing. Ruby, the woman Amos loved, and Sapphire, the Kingfish's acid-tongued wife, both spoke standard English. It was the women who had mastered proper English. The men, by contrast, were constant victims of the way white people spoke and wrote. In one episode Amos and Andy struggle to sound out the word *acknowledge* and come up with *acna-o-wheel-dij.* In countless other episodes, they attempt the simplest mathemat-

ical calculations by "mulsifyin'," "revidin'," "timesin'," and "stackin' 'em up" (adding).[24] The humor here, the crisis in masculinity, came from the fact that the boys didn't get the better of the language, the language got the better of them. In the early 1930s the dynamic between male radio characters and the language became more complex. But this did not necessarily mean a rescuing of American manhood. With linguistic slapstick there was redemption, but there was also the enactment of utter failure.

While *Amos 'n' Andy* came out of a seventy-year tradition of minstrel shows in America, subsequent radio comedy drew from vaudeville. And vaudeville specialized in ethnic humor, in comedy teams of "the straight man" and the stooge, and in insults, puns, wordplay, and punch lines. But vaudeville was also a visual medium, and comics often relied on clownish costumes, mugging, and physical slapstick to get laughs. With radio this was impossible.

A radio comic had to do what other successful entertainers did—develop an identifiable and pleasing "personality." The show, of course, could refer to the clothes the comic wore, his face and body movements. In fact, radio had to overdescribe everything in a way you never would in real life—"Oh, look, here's Jack coming into the room now"—which made its discourse uniquely quaint. But for the most part the comic had to rely on his voice and his words to set himself apart from the others. So most radio comics early on developed "vocal trade-marks" by which they were known, including "Vas you der, Scharlie?" "Don't ever do that," and "Some joke, eh boss?" What helped the audience at home was the institutionalization of the studio audience, who helped comics time the delivery of their jokes and let those at home visualize themselves as part of a larger, public audience in which it was perfectly fine—even expected—to laugh out loud, in front of a box in your living room.[25]

It was in the 1932–33 season that Ed Wynn, Fred Allen, Jack Benny, and George Burns and Gracie Allen all made their debuts on radio. Eddie Cantor had gone on the air the year before, Joe Penner would debut the year after. Separately and together, they made linguistic slapstick a central feature of American life in the 1930s. The comedy formats they designed—using the deep-voiced, well-spoken announcer or orchestra leader as the "straight man," playing ethnic types for laughs, making themselves the butts of jokes and insults—became so ritualized and durable that they persist in varying forms to this day. It was the contrast between types of voices, with different timbres, accents, and affectations, that was key to radio's humor—the jokes lay as much between the sounds and pronunciations of different voices as they did within the voice of one character. And central to these jokes, insults, and linguistic rituals was a debate about the sanctity of male authority in an economic system that certain male authority figures had nearly ruined because of their greed and carelessness.



Successful male comics set themselves up as self-inflated egoists in desperate need of deflation, often by women and ethnic minorities but also by their white, male straight men. Other men squealed and whinnied, their vocal cross-dressing central to their jokes and their on-air personalities. Still others had wives who refused to speak the official (male) language properly and used the double-jointedness of the English language to slip out of official linguistic handcuffs and to render their husbands helpless. Gracie Allen may have played the airheaded ditz, but it was George who, week in and week out, was the benighted chump.

Because his popularity was short-lived, Joe Penner is probably the least remembered of the famous radio comics. But in 1933 he was an overnight sensation when he hosted the half-hour variety show *The Baker's Broadcast.* In June of 1934, Penner was voted the best comedian on radio. His trademark was his exaggerated, squeaky, seemingly preadolescent voice—a precursor to Jerry Lewis—and his inane, "yuk yuk" horse laugh. Penner's careening, skidding voice shot up octaves into falsetto giggles and squeals. He elongated individual words as in "woooe is me," pulling the middle *o* up and down as if he were playing it on a clarinet. Through catchphrases repeated every week—"you nah-hsty man," "Don't ever doooo that," and "Wanna buy a duck"—Penner masqueraded as a woman, a gay man, a child, an idiot, and, not insignificantly, a eunuch.

The humor of these expressions eludes us today, because such humor is so tied to its historical moment. But Penner and comics like him seemed to appreciate, however unconsciously, that catchphrases help cultivate an us-versus-them, insider-outsider mentality. Phrases like "you nasty man" were, as *Literary Digest* put it, "done to death by every street urchin."[26] The use of such broadcasting argot served as a password into a club, a code only the initiated could decipher.

Penner and his contemporaries also reveled in puns and other forms of wordplay. Proficiency with language was admired in 1930s America, as it was in most societies, but a deftness that came from wealth and class privilege was suspect, especially in the aftermath of the stock market crash. By playing such proficiency for laughs, and linking it to buffoonery and self-deprecating humor, radio comics could be above the less facile hoi polloi but one of the people at the same time. Most important, radio comics, most of whom had had limited formal education, used their oral displays instead of diplomas to make it in America. They showed that other kinds of verbal agility, not just that

which came from a college degree, could move one up a few rungs on the social ladder.

There was with Penner and Ed Wynn, another giggling, falsetto type known as the Fire Chief, a sheer love of playing with language. One survey in 1933 reported that Wynn's show was the most popular on radio, with 74 percent of listeners on Tuesday night at 9:30 tuned in to him. Like most comics Wynn relied on the gag, usually a quick, two-line joke that did not depend on the context of the show to produce laughs, and he reportedly delivered sixty such gags every broadcast. Penner also played with the language itself rather than creating particular comedic situations. In an exchange between Penner and his girlfriend, she chastises him for failing to call her at 8:00 as he had promised. "I wanted to call you up to call you down for not calling me up," she chides, "but I couldn't do it because the phone company just installed a French phone and I don't know how to speak French."[27]

Ed Wynn loved puns and announced on the air, "You notice tonight I'm almost pun struck." As radio researchers noted at the time, "Puns are the *pièce de résistance* of radio humor." Most of these puns were real groaners. "The darnedest thing happened," reported Wynn. "I was just carrying a jar of jelly wrapped in newspaper when it fell on the floor and broke. You should see the jam Dick Tracy is in today." Puns also served as punch lines in exchanges between Wynn and his straight man–announcer, Graham McNamee, who also became one of radio's first important sportscasters. Repetition, which is key to oral cultures, helped with the cadence and timing of the jokes and made sure the audience was ready for the wordplay to follow.[28] McNamee, setting an example for Ed McMahon and other sidekicks thirty years later, was in a perpetual state of merriment, giggling constantly during his exchanges with Wynn, to cue the audience that a big laugh was coming. "How's your aunt?" McNamee would ask, and then giggle. "A mess, Graham, just a mess." "A mess," repeated McNamee, giggling. "Yes, a mess," responded Wynn. And then the jokes would proceed, and McNamee would let loose and laugh at the punch line.

Such grooved rhythms helped pull people into the flow of the show and set up the verbal surprises to come. Wynn would say to McNamee, "Graham, I had a friend of mine down to my farm the other day, and I served him some beer. I served him some beer, Graham, and do you know what he said?" "No, Chief, what did he say?" "He said, 'I don't want that! Bring me a whole stein. Bring me a whole stein!' So you know what I brought him?" "What did you bring him, Chief?" asked McNamee, again giggling, of course. "A cow!" giggled Wynn. In another exchange, Wynn said that his aunt went into a dry goods store and said, "I want some material. I want to make pillowcases. I don't know what kind of material I want for pillowcases." Then Wynn giggled. "The clerk said,



'You need muslin.' My aunt said, 'If I do, it'll take a bigger man than you to do it.' " Although puns are usually regarded as a low form of humor, they expose the loopholes in the language, the ways in which it is possible to disobey or deliberately ignore certain rules, and they celebrate the language's elasticity. They also show how language can move us—trap us—in a place we don't want to be. And puns, of course, work best when they are heard, not when they are read.[29]

Like Penner, Wynn played the vocal eunuch—he sometimes sounded like Tiny Tim—frequently interrupting his straight man with falsetto giggles and high-pitched interjections of effeminate comments like "fancy that" or "my goodness." Sometimes he affected a lisp. Like Penner, Wynn got laughs because he was an emasculated clown.

Eddie Cantor's *Chase and Sanborn Hour* premiered in September 1931, and within a year one of the fledgling ratings services estimated that over 50 percent of Sunday night's listeners tuned in to hear him. In 1933 and 1934 Cantor's show was the highest rated program on the airwaves. The variety show featured singers and a violinist, but the main focus was on the humor, which consisted of sketches and stand-up routines. Cantor's ethnic jokesters included the Mad Russian (played by Bert Gordon) and the Greek character Parkyakarkus (Harry Einstein). These players with exaggerated accents did double duty: their inability to master proper English marked them as men still outside the fold, yet their ability to zing Cantor verbally showed that recent immigrants could hold their own. The banter between Cantor and his straight man, as well as between him and the show's ethnic stooges, was combative and insulting, as the men ridiculed one another's appearance, competence, and especially their manhood. These insults were typical of banter not between grown men but between male adolescents. This same form of humor was used when famous guests appeared on the show. In an exchange with John Barrymore, Cantor says, "When I'm with my kids, I'm always acting funny." Barrymore retorts, "What a pity a microphone could stop all that." When Barrymore's wife appears, Cantor kisses her and announces, "Your wife kisses beautifully. My wife doesn't kiss like that." Barrymore's wife, Elaine, shoots back, "No wonder, look what she's got to practice on." In another show featuring Tallulah Bankhead, Cantor proposes doing a passionate love scene with her. "Stop kidding yourself, Eddie," she answers, "you haven't got enough fuel to give me a hot foot."[30]

The rapidity of the repartee, and the speed of the cutting comeback, was key to this humor. You had to be quick on the uptake. Insults establish a pecking order, and the one insulted must respond quickly and effectively or lose status instantly. Such oral dueling was inherently competitive; it reaffirmed that the competitive spirit was still thriving in America and that its pleasures—the

laughs—were greater than its costs—the injured pride. Radio comics had to simulate spontaneity—hence their file boxes full of jokes. And offstage, joking insults are allowed only between people pretty familiar with each other, like brother and sister or husband and wife. So the very reliance on insults simulated a feeling of familiarity between those on the air, and between them and their audience.[31] Cantor treated his audience as if the show was a collaboration between speaker and listener, and as if they were all part of the same dysfunctional family.

While many of the jokes ridiculed masculine self-delusions, the pace, delivery, and tone of the humor reaffirmed verbal agility and quickness as a distinctly male trait. On Cantor's show masculinity was exposed as a masquerade that a lot of men, like Cantor, couldn't carry off. Men's conceits about their attractiveness and sexual prowess, about their intelligence and general mastery over life, were pricked into flaccid, deflated balloons. But at the same time masculinity was recuperated, its resilience, toughness, and instant ability to respond to a challenge celebrated week in and week out.

On Cantor's show and other comedy-variety shows like it, the listener was moved sometimes rapidly between modes of listening. There might be a series of jokes, then a vocal performance, then a skit, then a commercial, then an instrumental by the band. Each segment called for varying, nuanced levels of attention and for different emotional registers. Some invited imagining a particular scene and people, others didn't. Often at the same time you'd be rooting for Cantor yet eagerly anticipating his put-down. One song would bore you, the next would trigger all sorts of memories. Just as linguistic slapstick moved you between being the underdog and being the victor, between being a humbled man and a cocky one, these variety shows encouraged listeners to be many persons, with various stances, all at the same time.

The comedy teams that pushed wordplay to new and often subversive extremes were George Burns and Gracie Allen, and Jane and Goodman Ace. The Aces are not as well remembered today as Burns and Allen because they didn't make the transition to television (the TV version of their show lasted only six weeks). But they became enormously popular after their show premiered in 1930.

In both *The Burns and Allen Show* and *Easy Aces,* the wives were scatterbrained, upper-middle-class women who, on the surface, played into stereotypes about women being dumb, irrational, obsessed with the trivial, and unable to comprehend even the most basic rules of logic. But the humor and the roles were much more complex. For despite the fact that George Burns and Goodman Ace personified male logic and reason, their radio wives consistently got the better of them, maneuvering them into linguistic and cognitive



labyrinths they couldn't begin to find their ways out of. Thirty years later, in the 1960s, TV wives who were really witches or genies had magical powers that turned the male world of business, technology, and logic upside down.[32] But in the 1930s, on radio, language was what these women used to demonstrate that male authority—especially the authority that came from *their* language, *their* logic—was totally arbitrary and extremely fragile. When these women spoke the seemingly crystalline nature of male reasoning was shattered into a million unretrievable pieces.

Jane Ace was especially known for her malapropisms and misquotes, known as Janeacisms. Like Gracie Allen, Jane appeared to be a scatterbrain, but language was putty in her hands as she reshaped existing clichés into double entendres and pointed jokes. "We're insufferable friends" and "Time wounds all heels" made fun of the tensions in interpersonal relationships, while a comment like "I was down on the Lower East Side today and saw those old testament houses" had a more biting undercurrent. So did "we're all cremated equal." Others, like "up at the crank of dawn," "working my head to the bone," and "you've got to take the bitter with the badder," breathed new life and meaning into outworn bromides.[33]

Gracie Allen, with her slightly nasal, high-pitched voice, was also a master at exposing the way male rules of language weren't as ironclad as they might seem, especially if you just looked at things a little bit differently, took things too literally, or not literally enough. Burns and Allen knew exactly what they were doing, and they referred to Gracie's worldview as "illogical logic." Because of the way she misread words and their meanings, Gracie made preposterous statements she believed to be true, and she convinced the audience to see things her way, if only for a second. In one of their earliest routines, she reports to George that on the way to work, a man said, "Hiya, cutie, how about a bite tonight after the show?" She answered, " 'I'll be busy after the show but I'm not doing anything now,' so I bit him." In another exchange, George asks, "Did you ever hear silence is golden?" to which she responds, "No, what station are they on?" "It's an adage," insists George, "you know what an adage is." "Oh sure," answers Gracie, "that's where you keep your old trunks." In another show she asks the straight man Bill Goodwin what she should get George for Christmas. Goodwin recommends silk pajamas with George's initials on the front and a dragon on the back. "A drag in the back," she muses, "that's just the way his pajamas fit him right now."[34]

Herman, Gracie's pet duck, was a stock feature of the show, and on one Christmas show Gracie taught him all about American history. In this version, Santa Claus came to America in 1492 with five reindeer, Dancer, Prancer, Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria. Santa put on a red coat and rode around telling every-

one Paul Revere was here. After that Santa freed all the slaves while he was flying a kite in a thunderstorm, and that's why he's called the father of our country.[35]

Gracie was also capable of the comic put-down. "You ought to live in the home for the feebleminded," advises George, to which Gracie shoots back, "Oh, I'd love to be your houseguest sometime." In one of his many expressions of exasperation at Gracie's logic, he says, "Gracie, all I have to do is hear you talk and the blood rushes to my head." "That's because it's empty," she replies.[36]

But most of all it was Gracie's unruliness—her absolute refusal to obey orders, her defiance of instructions, her willful misunderstanding of the language—that was legendary. In one routine George asks her, as part of a new bit, simply to ask him the exact question he has just asked her. "If I should say to you, 'Why are apples green?' all you have to do is just repeat the same thing. You say, 'I don't know, why are apples green?' " After Gracie assures him that she's got it down, George asks, "What fellow in the army wears the biggest hat?" Gracie responds, "I don't know. Why are apples green?" "Now don't be silly, when I say, What fellow in the army wears the biggest hat? you must say, 'I don't know. What fellow in the army wears the biggest hat?' " After Gracie assures him she really does have it this time, George asks, "All right now, what fellow in the army wears the biggest hat?" and Gracie answers, "The fellow with the biggest head." By misunderstanding—and flouting—George's instructions, Gracie is also the one to get the laughs. Gracie subverted male authority, as embodied and given power through the word, over and over.

The mix in the early 1930s of girlish, giggling, falsetto men like Ed Wynn and Joe Penner; of insults and verbal sparring that put radio stars in their place; and of the deflation of men by women all fused in the radio persona of Jack Benny, probably the most popular radio comedian of all time. Benny went on the air in 1932 and by 1933 had established the format of his show, a precursor to the situation comedy. Instead of relying on a series of vaudeville jokes and stand-up routines, Benny's show featured a regular cast—Don Wilson, the announcer; Mary Livingstone (Benny's wife); Phil Harris, the orchestra leader; Kenny Baker, the tenor; and Eddie "Rochester" Anderson. The show constructed an on-air personality for Benny, and it was this personality that drove the humor and skits. By 1934, when Jell-O took over sponsorship of the show, listening to Jack Benny on Sunday night was a national ritual.

The Benny persona targeted masculinity and upper-class pretensions: Benny assumed a series of traits, and "the gang" ridiculed these week in and week out. It is interesting that, except for his notorious stinginess, most of these traits were feminine. He was vain, especially about his age and appearance; he was coy; he loved playing the violin; he specialized in catty remarks;



he lacked an aggressive sexual desire for women; he was prissy; he had a high-pitched giggle; and one of his most famous retorts was the effeminate and ineffectual "Now cut that out." "The minute I come on," observed Benny, "even the most henpecked guy in the audience feels good." His trademark swishy walk, which viewers of his TV show could see, was turned into a joke even on the radio. "Who was that lady I saw you with?" Joe Louis asks Mary Livingstone on a 1945 broadcast. "That was no lady," says Mary, "that was Jack—he always walks that way."[37] Here was a projection of man's feminine side, extracted, exorcised, and sent into exile. And this dreaded femaleness was carried off on the back of its opposite, male acquisitiveness run amok. That Jack Benny linked people's hatred of Scrooge with the fear one might be too much like a girl to succeed was, frankly, nothing short of brilliant in the 1930s. He spoke to men who blamed themselves and blamed the system, and to women who blamed their unemployed husbands yet couldn't blame them at all.

Jack's role was to be the butt of everyone's jokes and insults, and what drove every show was the determination to displace this man—conceited, miserly, self-deluded—as the center of attention, power, and authority.[38] It was a dethroning the cast members pursued with glee and the audience relished. Here was a pseudoaristocratic skinflint who refused to own up to—or even recognize—any of his rather obvious flaws. For while Jack always believed he was an irresistible Don Juan type, calling himself the "Clark Gable of the air," and was repeatedly and sarcastically introduced by Don Wilson as a "suave, sophisticated, lover type," in reality his manhood was always provisional.

Benny's radio character was a personification of paternalism gone bad, of manhood undercut by narcissism, pride, and overweening avarice. The Jack Benny penny-pincher jokes, especially his use of the infamous vault to hide his money, and the contrast between his self-inflated masculine pride and the cutting remarks by Livingstone and other women remain funny even today. But this brilliant displacement of political criticism about the hypocrisy and collapse of paternal capitalism, this lampooning of failed manhood, had to have had special resonance during the Depression. When everyday people were writing letters to national leaders complaining about the "overly rich, selfish, dumb ignorant money hogs" whose parasitic behavior had ruined the country and millions of Americans, Jack Benny's rabid materialism lanced a rather large boil. The scene in which a mugger demanded "Your money or your life" and after a long pause, Benny replied, "I'm thinking, I'm *thinking*," produced one of the biggest laughs he ever got. In a job market where men over forty knew they couldn't compete for work with men in their twenties—as one man put it, "A man over forty might as well go out and shoot himself"—Benny's

refusal to declare any age over thirty-nine let people laugh at the desperate realities of ageism for men.[39]

There was, and remains, considerable debate over Rochester, played by Eddie Anderson, who was the first black to land a regular part on a radio program. He became one of the most popular characters on the show. At first, with constant jokes about Rochester's drinking and carousing, devotion to "African badminton"—craps—and addiction to watermelon, African Americans criticized the show's perpetuation of the negative stereotype the character reinforced. Gradually, Benny and his writers abandoned these stereotypes, and despite the fact that Rochester was in a servile position, he almost always got the better of his boss, just like everyone else, hurling impudent rejoinders to Benny that were both good-natured and sardonic.[40]

In one episode Jack reports that he ran into some poor fellow who asked for a dime and announces, "I gave him fifty cents." The next sound we hear is of a tray of dishes crashing to the floor, and the audience cracks up. Jack asks, "Rochester, why did you drop those dishes? All I said was I gave a man fifty cents." Then there is another crash and more laughter. "Rochester, you didn't have to push that second stack off the drain board." Answers Rochester, "I didn't touch 'em. They jumped off by themselves." Here, an irreverent, even cocky black man talked back to and made fun of his white boss, and the fact that he too deflated Jack's ego made the impaling of white male pretensions even more thorough. In a time when "black *males* who challenged white authority were simply not seen in mainstream media," notes Mel Watkins, this was "a revolutionary advance."[41]

One of Jack Benny's most successful publicity stunts was his long-running "feud" with Fred Allen, which started in 1936, when Allen, on his show *Town Hall Tonight,* ad-libbed a joke about Benny's pathetic violin playing. Benny responded on his next show, and the feud was on. Allen, like Benny, preferred more sophisticated humor than Penner's or Wynn's and skewered upper-class pretensions. Allen was a virtuoso at wordplay, coining new, irreverent nicknames (the American eagle was "patriotic poultry"), exposing the pomposity of overblown words, and inventing maxims. "There's an old saying," offered Allen, "if all of the politicians in the world were laid end to end they would still be lying."[42] Some of the more famous characters on his show included Portland (Allen's wife), yet another squeaky-pitched, daffy type who played with language herself, Allen's characterization of the famous Chinese detective One Long Pan, and other stock types portrayed by the Mighty Allen Art Players. Later, Senator Bloat and Senator Claghorn, moronic yet bombastic southern politicians; Mrs. Nussbaum, a Jewish housewife who called Mississippi "Matzos-Zippi" and the famous Swedish actress "Ingrown Bergman"; Ajax Cassidy, the heavy-drinking Irishman; and Titus Moody, the New England hayseed, became radio icons in *Allen's Alley,* Fred Allen's show from 1942 to 1949.



The "feud" between Benny and Allen was irresistible to listeners. It pulled them into an inner circle of celebrity friendship, insider jokes, and deft but harmless jousting that combined intimacy with competition, affection with irritation. This way everyone was in on the joke, and the insults could be savored without discomfort or concern. It was essential that listeners know the feud was fake, that in "real life" Allen and Benny were good friends. But the feud also mirrored the twin needs for men, particularly working-class men, in the 1930s: their emotional need for each other's friendship and support, and their economic need to cooperate and organize, juxtaposed with their need to compete with each other and to regard each other as rivals.

The feud was quickly labeled the Battle of the Century in the typically modest terms the media choose for such events. After months of sniping the two met face-to-face on a broadcast from the Hotel Pierre in March 1937, and the show had one of the largest listening audiences in radio history. The insults on this and subsequent shows focused on the men's age and appearance, their sincerity, their cowardice and bullying of those weaker than they (especially children), their pretensions about their talents, their capacity for lying and for self-defeat, and their general integrity. Building on a previous insult, turning what was, for an instant, a barb that hit the target exactly where it hurt back on the man who had hurled it, was essential to the game. When Allen appeared on Benny's show after months of berating his violin playing, Benny warned, "Now look here, Allen. I don't care what you say about my violin playing on your program, but when you come up here, be careful. After all, I've got listeners." "Keep your family out of it," answered Allen.[43] This was key: using the man's own words to disarm him. For not only had you gained something but you had taken something away from him, made him less of a man than he was before.

By the time Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy went on the air in the spring of 1937—at the height of the Benny-Allen feud—the speed of radio repartee had increased, and the insults were even more personal and cutting. That a ventriloquist act became such a smash hit on radio, where listeners couldn't even *see* whether Bergen was convincing at throwing his voice, remains almost laughable today. And the fact that Charlie was a wooden dummy, and a child, gave him even more license to express antisocial, adolescent sentiments in a comparatively uncensored form. Whether people took him to be the not-so-successfully repressed alter ego of the soft-spoken, conventional, and fatherly Edgar Bergen we can never know. But the dummy, not the dad, gave voice to male impudence, insolence, and rebellion.

It was Charlie who refused to study, to work hard, to respect his elders, to

behave properly around women. It was Charlie who could make suggestive remarks to Rita Hayworth or Mae West in a way flesh-and-blood men couldn't on the radio, and in a way that was, frankly, creepy, given that he was supposed to be a boy. W. C. Fields, another caricature of a man, the bulbous-nosed drunk who loathed children and dogs, was Charlie's most formidable verbal opponent. "Tell me, Charles, is it true that your father was a gateleg table?" asked Fields. "If he was, your father was under it," snapped back Charlie. Fields constantly threatened to carve Charlie up into shoe trees, to sic a beaver on him, to saw him in two. Charlie, in turn, threatened Fields that he would "stick a wick in your mouth and use you for an alcohol lamp."[44] Here was the Oedipal drama writ large but, for safety's sake, acted out by a puppet and a clown, by a parody of a father and a son.

At first on radio there was a clear demarcation between the linguistic antics of comics and the more staid, self-important announcements from advertisers. Comedians could be goofy, make fun of themselves, and turn the language upside down, but commercials would not. This was where the sanctity of corporate America, male authority, and correct English interlocked into one impregnable edifice of overseriousness. But the success and contagiousness of linguistic slapstick eventually colonized advertising as well. After an intense debate in the mid-1920s about how radio should be financed—with advertising being one of the least popular and most vilified options—something called indirect advertising took hold by the late 1920s. Direct sales pitches and prices were verboten; instead, performers took on the name of the sponsor, as with the Cliquot Club Eskimos and the Happiness Candy Boys.

But such restraint didn't last long, and sonorous accounts of the merits of Lux soap and Chevrolets soon bracketed most broadcasts. The contrast between the looseness and freedom of radio comedy and the zipped-up tightness of the ads was irresistible to comics like Ed Wynn. He began spoofing Texaco gas commercials and interrupting Graham McNamee with asides like "fancy that" and "is that so" as McNamee delivered the latest ad.[45] At first sponsors had no sense of humor about this, but as they saw sales increase, they lightened up. By the mid-1930s advertisers—who also produced these shows—came to recognize that being the butt of jokes, and being willing to take a joke, endeared whoever was on the radio to the audience. The jokes also helped the audience recall who the sponsor was. Not only did ad-libbed jokes about the sponsor become tolerated, but scripted repartee about the product was worked into most shows.

We forget today the extent to which Jack Benny, Burns and Allen, Fred Allen, and others hawked their sponsors' products repeatedly. They had to be shills, and they knew it: if sales didn't go up they would lose their shows. And



they made this more palatable to themselves and no doubt to the audience by embedding the ads in the same kinds of wordplay rituals they used during the rest of their shows. In the same show in which Gracie Allen is wondering what to buy George for Christmas, their straight man, Bill Goodwin, says he's trying to come up with a Christmas card to send out. This discussion is woven right into the skits and the main dialogue. Bill says he's thinking of something like, "Season's greetings from Bill Goodwin and Swan, the new white floating soap that's eight ways better than old-style floating soaps—something simple like that," he notes self-mockingly. Gracie suggests he send out a song and does her own version of "Jingle Bells." "Season's greetings to you and yours/and all of my best wishes/and don't forget, for goodness sakes/use Swan to wash your dishes." Bill then picks up the song: "Swan gives loads of suds/Swan is white as snow/You'll find that Swan suds twice as fast . . . ," and then Gracie blurts out the last line, "even in the hottest water." When Bill points out that *water* doesn't rhyme with *snow*, Gracie quips "$H_2O$."[46]

On Ed Wynn's show too the ads became embedded in the discourse and pace of the show, as Wynn and McNamee bantered about the merits of Texaco gas. McNamee might start by saying, "Hey, Chief, this is going to be a great year for touring," and then bring up the merits of Texaco. After some back-and-forth, Wynn would say, "I know it's powerful, Graham. Why, last week a man filled his car with Fire Chief gas" so he could tour American cities. "It went so fast he had to get a stenographer to take down the names of the towns in shorthand." Finally, McNamee would add the tag line—"Buy a tankful tomorrow"—which would signal that they were moving back to the show.[47]

Jack Benny began his broadcasts, "Jell-O, everyone," and it was a running gag that Don Wilson tried to slip in references to the product throughout the show. Shameless self-promotion, done in this highly self-conscious way, was funny, even endearing. The audience came to expect it, anticipate it, and laugh at—and with—it when it appeared. During their feud Allen referred to Benny as "an itinerant vendor of desserts" and "a gelatin hawker." His obvious refusal to say the brand's name only added to the sense that knowing about Jell-O, knowing it was Benny's sponsor, was what truly made someone in the know.

This linguistic embrace of the sponsor was essential to the increased commercialism of everyday life that radio accelerated and reinforced. Once you can be made fun of, once people play with your name in teasing ways and sing or chat about you in silly rhymes, then you're really part of the gang. Certainly plenty of Americans bemoaned what was, by the mid-1930s, the shameless, blaring commercialization of radio. But bringing commercials linguistically into the fold legitimized not just their existence but their purpose as well.

Commercialization became associated, however subtly, with spontaneity, happiness, freedom itself.

Probably the best-known piece of linguistic slapstick from the old radio days is Bud Abbott and Lou Costello's routine "Who's on First?" Abbott was the brittle, even-voiced, mustachioed city slicker, the straight man (in so many senses of the term). Costello was perennially prepubescent, short and still larded with baby fat, his voice wailing up and down octaves like a tantrum-throwing child's when he was frustrated or confused. The notion that any grown woman would find him attractive was preposterous, yet he slobbered over women like Goofy. Bud knew about women, not Lou. Each was a caricature of masculinity, the one so crass and unfeeling you couldn't imagine him as a father or husband, the other so vulnerable, so prone to hysteria, so gullible he was, well, like a girl. And "Who's on First?"—a routine so popular it was, for a while, performed nearly weekly on the radio—displayed how mastery over language separated the men from the boys, and, by implication, from the girls as well.

The exchange is about baseball, a male pursuit, and builds on the unusual nicknames many ballplayers had. Bud is introducing a team and says these members have silly nicknames too, and he wants to let Lou know who's who. Lou awaits the roster. But the players' names are all pronouns, like *who* or *what*, or conjunctions like *because* or *why*. Bud tells Lou that "Who is on first." Yes, Lou asks, "Who is on first?" "That's right," insists Bud, with increasing testiness, "Who *is* on first." And so it goes around the bases.

Lou struggles in vain to enter the linguistic domain that Bud so effortlessly masters. He takes everything too literally; he just doesn't understand. He wails and pouts with frustration and exasperation; at times he becomes hysterical. Bud, by contrast, gets impatient (as men often do in the face of overwrought emotions) but is always calm. The voices, their tones, their registers, are a study in contrasts: it is a parody of a fight between a man and a woman, a father and a child.

The routine is delicious; it is hard to tire of it; at times it seems addictive. It makes fun of and speaks to us about so many things: the connections between the ability to name things and the access to power; the ability to follow accepted, male logic, however convoluted; the anxiety about being part of the gang, the team; and, of course, the delight we take in hearing skilled people show how the linguistic rules we live and die by can be toyed with, stretched, broken. For the audience, the pleasure comes, in part, from seeing the logic of both men's positions, of understanding Bud's nomenclature and Lou's complete confusion in the face of it. We are inside and outside the power of language. We respect and balk at its tyranny, we laugh at the utter arbitrariness of



words. We see the pleasures and stupidities of the coded argot of sports. Knowing how language includes and excludes us every day, in all kinds of realms—from business and politics to friendships, clubs, and families—we recognize how words alone give us power and take it away.

Radio comedy was revolutionary and conservative, insubordinate and obedient, attacking conventional authority yet buttressing it at the same time. Its befuddled, hapless men invited listeners' sympathies *and* their ridicule, bolstering the self-esteem of those in the audience, who recognized all too well what it was like to be confused and intimidated in the face of power yet were assured they would do much better than Lou Costello. At the same time these shows and their displays of male verbal agility also insisted that the resistance and persistence, aggression and energy of American manhood had yet to be doused, despite the ongoing economic catastrophe.

Linguistic slapstick acknowledged that America was a nation of subgroups, many of them antagonistic to one another, some of them deserving of ridicule. But it also suggested that, despite those differences—and maybe even because of them—America was on the rebound. Linguistic slapstick asserted that America was as vibrant, pliable, inventive, absorptive, defiant, and full of surprises as its language. And it claimed that that vibrancy came from the bottom up, not from the top down. Sure, radio cheered people up during the Depression. But it did so because it gave men an imagined preserve where they could project their own sense of failure onto others, hear acknowledgments that successful masculinity was a hard mantle to keep on, yet also hear that even benighted men, through their wits alone, were still going to land on top, if only for a few minutes.

Newman, "On the Air with Jack L. Cooper," *Chicago History,* Summer 1983, p. 52; Jack L. Cooper Collection, Chicago Historical Society, "Biographical Sketch of Jack L. Cooper" and "Jack L. Cooper, First DJ, Is Dead," *Daily Defender,* January 14, 1970.

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32. Eberly, *Music in the Air,* p. 44.
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