

## 5.3 Text 2: The Naked Jape: Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes

This is an extract from *The Naked Jape: Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes*, written by comedian Jimmy Carr and writer Lucy Greeves and published in 2006, in which they explore the purpose of jokes and how they work.

Jokes, by definition, are not to be taken seriously. We brush off their effects by saying, “It’s just a joke,” or “I’m only joking.” We dismiss individuals we don’t respect in the same way: “He’s a total joke.” When telling jokes, we agree that they are best delivered lightly, off-the-cuff<sup>1</sup> – however much effort may go into the appearance of levity<sup>2</sup>. And that’s the

5 extraordinary thing about jokes, really: trivial as we insist they are, still we treasure them. We commit them carefully to memory and share them with people we love or people we want to love us. We support a massive and increasingly global joke-manufacturing industry of stand-up comedians and all sorts of backroom gag-smiths: sitcom writers, radio DJs, journalists. A sense of humour is one of our most valued social assets; have you met a

10 single person who will cheerfully admit that they don’t have one?

Children, with their natural anarchy<sup>3</sup> and love of nonsense, are practically born joking. As we grow older, our joking becomes more restricted. We absorb with varying degrees of success the complex unwritten rules that govern where, when and to whom a particular joke can be told. Almost all of us learn to “take a joke”, whether or not we’re any good at

15 telling them. And not getting a joke, or not getting a laugh when you tell one, are excruciating<sup>4</sup> experiences. It seems that being able to prove you have a sense of humour is a matter of peculiar social importance – particularly in Britain, where we take the art of joking very seriously indeed, although we try not to let it show. Jokes oil the wheels of our social encounters in so many useful ways: breaking the ice at the office party; establishing

20 that the sister’s new boyfriend is a good bloke; lightening the mood at Uncle Ted’s wake<sup>5</sup>. This sort of use may go some way to explaining why jokes and joking loom so large in British culture – a nation so profoundly ill at ease with itself socially is bound to be particularly in need of the crutch<sup>6</sup> that a joke provides. Sociologists<sup>7</sup> have measured the silences in conversations between English speakers and concluded that we cannot bear a

25 pause of longer than four seconds – we would rather fill the gap with anything. Having exhausted the weather as a topic, we often move straight on to trying to make each other laugh.

**Glossary**

<sup>1</sup>off-the-cuff: without preparation

<sup>2</sup>levity: light-heartedness

<sup>3</sup>anarchy: lawlessness; lack of respect for rules

<sup>4</sup>excruciating: painful

<sup>5</sup>wake: gathering of mourners after a funeral at which food and drink are sometimes served

<sup>6</sup>crutch: something used for support or reassurance

<sup>7</sup>Sociologists: people who study the structure and development of human society