WE now turn to the uses of the black English vernacular and
to document the claim made in earlier chapters that members
of the vernacular culture are in command of great verbal skills. ¹ We
could consider a wide range of speech events in which these skills
are displayed: *shucking, rifting, toasting, sweet-talking* (CRR 3288,
Kochman 1970, Abrahams 1970). But instead this chapter will analyze
in detail one particular speech event: the system of ritual insults
known variously as *sounding, signifying, woofing, cuttin*, etc. In this
pursuit there will be ample opportunity to demonstrate the verbal
resources of peer-group members, their command of complex syntax,
and their creative powers. In the following chapter we will take up
narratives of personal experience and examine the syntactic devices
used to transform that experience so that others can understand it.
Here too we will have ample evidence of the great development of
verbal resources within the black English vernacular. To explore
these uses of language, we will necessarily be engaged in the study
of discourse, going beyond the sentence grammar of chapters 1-4.

Linguists have not made very much progress in the study of dis-
course; by and large, they are still confined to the boundaries of
the sentence. If discourse analysis is not a virgin field, it is at least
technically so in that no serious penetration of the fundamental areas
has yet been made. There is of course a well-known publication of
Harris entitled *Discourse Analysis Reprints* (1963), but it is concerned
with rearrangements of sentence structure which are not related to

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the general questions to be raised here. Although many linguists who are beginning to make contributions to the study of discourse—it is somewhat startling for linguists to discover that the major steps have been taken by sociologists. Sacks (1972) and Schegloff (1972) have isolated a number of fundamental problems and made some progress toward solution: the selection of speakers, the identification of persons and places, and the isolation of that social competence which allows members of a society to engage in talk. The influence of their work on this chapter will be apparent in the focus on sequencing in ritual insults and the social knowledge required for their interpretation. Linguists should be able to contribute their skill and practice in formalization to this study. It would not be too much to say that the concepts of invariance and rule-governed behavior are more fully developed in linguistics than in any other field of social study. Yet there may be such a thing as premature formalization, which Garfinkel, Goffman, Sacks, and Schegloff are anxious to avoid: the categorical model of linguistic behavior may indeed lead linguists to set up paradigms of discrete features, mutually defined by their opposites, in fields where only open sets are to be found in reality. But formalization is a fruitful procedure even when it is wrong: it sharpens our questions and promotes the search for answers.

Some General Principles of Discourse Analysis

The first and most important step in the formalization of discourse analysis is to distinguish what is said from what is done. From a grammatical viewpoint, there are only a small number of sentence types: principally statements, questions, and imperatives, and these must be related by discourse rules to the much larger set of actions
done with words. It is commonplace to use these terms interchangeably with the names of certain actions: assertions, requests for information, and commands respectively. But there is no such simple one-to-one relationship: it is easy to demonstrate, for example, that requests for information can be made with statements, questions, or imperatives:

I would like to know your name.
What is your name?
Tell me your name!

Furthermore, there are a great many other actions which are done with words and which must be related by rule to the utterance: refusals, challenges, retreats, insults, promises, threats, etc. The rules which connect what is said to the actions being performed with words are complex; the major task of discourse analysis is to analyze them and thus to show that one sentence follows another in a coherent way. If we hear the dialogue:

A: Are you going to work tomorrow?
B: I'm on jury duty.

we know intuitively that we are listening to coherent discourse. Yet there is no formal basis in sentence-grammar to explicate our reaction to this well-formed sequence. A statement follows a question; the question is a request for information, but in what way does the statement form an answer to that request? Some fear that linguists will never be able to answer such questions, because one would have to enter into our grammars every known relation between persons and objects: in this case, that people on jury duty are not able to work. However, the form of discourse rules is independent of such detail. In answering A's request for information Q-S1, with a superficially unrelated statement S2, B is in fact asserting that there is a proposition known to both A and B that connects this with S1. When

2. The definition of discourse analysis with which Harris begins his "Discourse Analysis Manual" shows no direct relation to the problems to be raised in this paper. For Harris, "discourse analysis is a method of seeking in any connected discrete linear material... some global structure characteristic of the whole discourse..." This global structure is "a pattern of occurrence... of segments of the discourse relative to each other." Harris points out that this is the only type of structure that can be investigated "without bringing into account other types of data, such as relations of meanings throughout the discourse." This pursuit therefore forms part of Harris's previous interest in analyzing the phonology and grammar of a language without reference to meaning.

3. It was an unpublished draft by Bever and Ross on "Underlying Structures in Discourse" (1963) which put the issue most directly. In order to show coherence in a discourse such as Everyone should read the Bible. Deuteronomy is one of the great books of the world, Bever and Ross thought that it would be necessary to include in the grammar that Deuteronomy is one of the books of the Bible and that discourse analysis therefore lay outside of linguistics. The rules of discourse developed here are not subject to this problem; they would typically show that some such relation is being asserted by the sequence itself, as listeners unfamiliar with the Bible would infer without difficulty.
A hears B say "I'm on jury duty," he searches for the proposition which B is asserting; in this case, he locates "If someone is on jury duty, he cannot go to work." B's answer is then heard as "I'm not going to go to work tomorrow.

The rule of discourse which we can then formulate will read as follows:

If A makes a request for information Q-S₁, and B makes a statement S₂ in response which cannot be expanded by rules of ellipsis to the form X S₁ Y, then S₂ is heard as an assertion that there exists a proposition P known to both A and B:

If S₂, then (E) S₁

where (E) is an existential operator, and from this proposition there is inferred an answer to A's request: (E) S₁.

This is a rule of interpretation which relates what is said (S₂) to what is done (the assertion of P) and to the answer to Q-S₁. Note that there is no direct connection between the two utterances Q-S₁ and S₂, and it would be fruitless to search for one.

The overall relation of discourse rules to utterances shows several levels of abstraction. Consider a conversation of the following superficial form:

A: Are you going to work tomorrow? (U₁)
B: I'm on jury duty. (U₂)
A: Couldn't you get out of it? (U₃)
B: We tried everything. (U₄)

To understand the connections between these four utterances, they must be expanded to a scheme such as the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Speaker A:} & \quad \left\{ \begin{array}{c}
D₁ \\
D₂ \\
D₃ \\
D₄
\end{array} \right. \\
\text{Utterance:} & \quad \left\{ \begin{array}{c}
U₁ \\
U₂ \\
U₃ \\
U₄
\end{array} \right.
\end{align*}
\]

Speaker B:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Utterance:} & \quad \left\{ \begin{array}{c}
U₂ \\
U₄
\end{array} \right. \\
\text{Utterance:} & \quad \left\{ \begin{array}{c}
D₂ \\
D₃ \\
D₄
\end{array} \right.
\end{align*}
\]

Any statement $S₂$ will not do in these sequences. If B had replied, "De Gaulle just lost the election," A could reasonably complain "What has that to do with your going to work tomorrow?" The rule tells A to search for a proposition $P$ which will make the connection: if he fails to find it, he will reject B's response. But the operation
of the rule is invariant. A must inspect S₂ as a possible element in a proposition if S₂ then (E)S₁ before he can react. Failure to locate such a proposition may reflect a real incompetence; younger members of a social group may not be able to find the proposition being asserted. Thus Linus knocks at Violet's front door and says:

Linus: Do you want to play with me, Violet?
Violet: You're younger than me. (Shuts the door)
Linus: (puzzled) She didn't answer my question.

The unstated proposition being asserted here by Violet is presumed to be part of the communal shared knowledge, but it has not in fact reached Linus yet. This concept of "shared knowledge" is an essential element in discourse analysis; to illustrate its importance further, we may consider examples in which statements are heard as requests for confirmation. The following exchanges are taken from a therapeutic interview.

Therapist: Oh, so she told you.
Patient: Yes.
Therapist: She didn't say for you . . .
Patient: No.
Therapist: And it never occurred to her to prepare dinner.
Patient: No.
Therapist: But she does go to the store.
Patient: Yes.

These four instances are typical of a great many examples, where the first utterance is a statement and the second is yes or no. It seems that a statement is functioning as equivalent to a yes-no question—that is, a request for information. These statements have the same compelling force as requests made in question form: we frequently see that the patient is not allowed to continue until a yes or no answer is given.

A great many speakers habitually use statements to ask for confirmation. How is it that we regularly and reliably recognize these

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as requests and not as assertions? There is a simple and invariant rule of discourse involved here: it depends upon the concept of shared knowledge, which I will introduce into the rules by classifying all reported events as A-events, B-events, or AB-events. Given any two-party conversation, there exists an understanding that there are events which A knows about, but B does not; and events which B knows about but A does not; and AB-events which are known to both. We can then state simply the rules of interpretation:

If A makes a statement about a B-event, it is heard as a request for confirmation.

If A makes a statement about an A-event ("I'm sleepy"), it is not heard as such a request. But if he utters a statement about a B-event, ("You were up late last night") it is heard as requesting a confirmation, "Is it true that . . . ?" 6

In addition to these concepts of shared and unshared knowledge, there are other elements of discourse which are based on sociological concepts: notions of role, rights, duties, and obligations associated with social rules. Now consider the following exchange from a narrative of the patient, Rhoda, in the therapeutic sessions cited above.

Rhoda: Well, when are you planning to come home?
Rhoda's mother: Oh, why y?

In the face of such a sequence, it is common to say that "a question is answered with a question." But questions do not answer questions, any more than statements do. Answers are given to requests; they may occasionally take the form of questions. Closer examination of this sequence shows that Rhoda's question is a request for action, not information, and her mother's question is a refusal of that request. But what are the rules which allow us to make this interpretation?

A parallel case can be observed in the following extract from one of our group sessions with the Jets. 7 The speakers involved here are Stanley, the president of the Jets, and Reu, a Puerto Rican member

4. Charles M. Schulz, Peanuts à Vendre (J. Dupuis, Marcinelle-Charleroi-Belgique, 1969), p. 64. I happen to have seen this in a French translation, but I am sure that the English original reflects many parallel cases in real life.

5. From current studies of therapeutic interviews being carried out by David Fanshel of the Columbia School of Social Work and myself.

6. There are cases where A makes a statement about an AB-event which requires an answer, but these seem to be equivalent to rhetorical questions which are not requests for information and should probably be covered by a different rule.

7. This particular session was the subject of considerable study; it was recorded on video-tape as well as on multiple audio tracks.
who is also one of the officers (prime minister). At one point Rel called for quiet:

Rel: Shut up please!
Stanley: ey, you tellin' me?
Rel: Yes. Your mother's a duck.

Rel's first remark—an imperative—is clearly a command or request for action, Stanley's response is formally a question, but it is certainly not a request for information; again, we intuitively recognize that Stanley is refusing but by what regular rule of interpretation do we recognize this? The general form of the answer may be outlined as follows. The underlying rules for requests for action appear to have the form: A requests B to do X for the purpose Y under conditions Z. For this to be heard as a valid command, it is necessary for the following additional preconditions to hold. B must believe that A believes that:

1. X needs to be done.
2. B has the ability to do X.
3. B has the obligation to do X.
4. A has the right to tell B to do X.

There are many ways to perform this request and many ways of aggravating or mitigating the force of the command. One device involves making statements or asking questions which refer to any of the four preconditions. The same mechanism can be used to refuse the request. In both of the examples just given, B refuses by asking a question concerning the relation of A, B, and X which is heard as a question about (a challenge to) precondition 4.

These brief illustrations from current work on discourse analysis show that the form of discourse rules is independent of the particular propositions being asserted, challenged, or denied. These rules have to do with invariant relations between the linguistic units and actions intended or interpreted. Discourse rules also contain references to unstated assumptions about social relations, which we are only beginning to work out. These involve the concepts of shared or social

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knowledge, the roles of speaker, addressee and audiences, their rights and obligations, and other constraints which have not appeared before in the array of linguistic primitives. Some linguists who are currently analyzing the deep structure of sentences have come to realize that one must posit elaborate presuppositions to explain syntactic data, but they have not yet attempted to incorporate such presuppositions into their formal rules.

The questions we have posed so far have been based upon examples relatively transparent to our intuitive sense of what was being done (especially when larger sections of the text are taken into account). But the last example is not at all clear in this sense. Why did Rel tell Stanley that his mother was a duck? Does this have any cognitive meaning, and if so, what rules of interpretation are operating? Rel's remark performed some kind of work, because Stanley then retired from his threatening posture and he apparently considered the incident closed. Stanley regularly insists on his status as president of the jets; he never backs down from a challenge or backs away from a fight. There are a number of times in this group session when sequences such as these led to fights—semisemiserous, but none the less real. If Rel had just said "Yes," there would certainly have been some punches traded. But his last remark was accepted as appropriate, coherent discourse, which established some kind of closure to the incident. To those outside this subculture, Rel's utterance (and the action intended) are as opaque as the previous examples were transparent. Those who have some knowledge of urban ghetto culture will recognize Rel's remark Your mother's a duck as a ritual insult, and they will connect it with the institution of the dozens, sounding, or signifying. Sounding is a well-organized speech event which occurs with great frequency in the verbal interaction of black adolescents we have studied and occupies long stretches of their time. This speech event is worth describing as part of the general program of "the ethnography of speaking" outlined by Hymes 1962. Here we have an opportunity to go further, and hope to establish the fundamental rules which govern sounding and use this investigation to achieve some deeper understanding of discourse analysis. If the rules for sounding are appropriate and well constructed, it should be possible to throw light on the particular problem cited here: why does Stanley retire when Rel says to him "Your mother's a duck"?

The following pages will present a large body of information about

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8. At a higher level of analysis, this is a challenge to Rel (see CRR 3288: sec. 4.2.4). However the rules presented here are aimed at the lowest level of abstraction, closest to the linguistic material.
this speech event. There should be very little difficulty in understanding the literal meaning of the sounds as English sentences: the grammar used (BEV) presents no particular difficulty to most Americans; the vocabulary is not especially hip or esoteric; the trade names and personalities mentioned are a part of the general American scene. But the activity itself is not well known: the point of the whole proceeding will escape many readers. The ways in which sounds are delivered and the evaluation of them by the group follow a well-established ritual pattern which reflects many assumptions and much social knowledge not shared by members of other subcultures. To understand the significance of sounds and the function of this activity for members of the vernacular culture, it will be necessary to write explicit rules of discourse for producing, interpreting, and answering sounds. In our original investigation of sounding, we were much concerned with the syntactic structures involved: much of this material is preserved here, since it adds considerable depth to our understanding of the abstract operations involved.

Terms for the Speech Event

A great variety of terms describe this activity: the dozens, sounding, and signifying are three of the most common. The activity itself is remarkably similar throughout the various black communities, both in the form and content of the insults themselves and in the rules of verbal interaction which operate. In this section we will refer to the institution by the most common term in Harlem—sounding.

Sounding, or playing the dozens, has been described briefly in a number of other sources, particularly Dollard 1939 and Abrahams 1962. Kochman (1968) has dealt with sounding in Chicago in his general treatment of speech events in the black community. The oldest term for the game of exchanging ritualized insults is the dozens. Various possibilities for the origin of this term are given in Abrahams (1962: fn. 1), but none are very persuasive. One speaks of the dozens, playing the dozens, or putting someone in the dozens. The term sounding is by far the most common in New York and is

9. I am particularly indebted to Benji Wald for suggestions incorporated in the present version of the analysis of sounding. Much of the following material on sounding is adapted from CRR 3286 Vol. 2: section 4.2.3.

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reported as the favored term in Philadelphia by Abrahams. Woofing is common in Philadelphia and elsewhere, joning in Washington, signifying in Chicago, screaming in Harrisburg, and on the West Coast, such general terms as cutting, capping, or chopping. The great number of terms available suggests that there will be inevitably some specialization and shift of meaning in a particular area. Kochman suggests that sounding is used in Chicago for the initial exchanges, signifying for personal insults, and the dozens for insults on relatives. In New York, the dozens seems to be even more specialized, referring to rhymed couplets of the form

I don’t play the dozens, the dozens ain’t my game
But the way I fucked your mama is a god damn shame.

But playing the dozens also refers to any ritualized insult directed against a relative. Sounding is also used to include such insults and includes personal insults of a simpler form. Somebody can “sound on” somebody else by referring to a ritualized attribute of that person.

It seems to be the case everywhere that the superordinate terms which describe a verbal activity are quite variable and take on a wide range of meanings, while the verbal behavior itself does not change very much from place to place. People talk much more than they talk about talk, and as a result there is more agreement in the activity than in the ways of describing it. A member of the BEV subculture may have idiosyncratic notions about the general terms for sounding and the dozens without realizing it. He can be an expert on sounds and be quite untrustworthy on ‘sounding’.

The Shape of Sounds

As noted above, some of the most elaborate and traditional sounds are dozens in the form of rhymed couplets. A typical opening dozen is cited above. Another favorite opening is:

I hate to talk about your mother, she’s a good old soul
She got a ten-ton pussy and a rubber asshole.

Both of these initiating dozens have “disclaiming” or retiring first lines, with second lines which contradict them. They are in this sense typical of the usage of young adults, who often back away from the dozens, saying “I don’t play that game,” or quoting the proverb, “1
laugh, joke and smoke, but I don’t play” (Abrahams 1962:210). There is a general impression that sounding is gradually moving down in the age range—it is now primarily an adolescent and preadolescent activity and not practiced as much by young men 20 to 30 years old; but we have no exact information to support this notion. The rhymed dozens were used by adolescents in New York City 20 years ago. In any case, most young adolescents do not know many of the older rhymed dozens and are very much impressed by them. To show the general style, we can cite a few others which have impressed the Jets and Cobras (and were not included in the 20 examples given by Abrahams):

I fucked your mother on top of the piano
When she came out she was singin’ the Star Spangled Banner.

Fucked your mother in the ear,
And when I came out she said, “Buy me a beer.”

The couplet which had the greatest effect was probably
Iron is iron, and steel don’t rust,
But your mamma got a pussy like a Greyhound Bus.

The winner in a contest of this sort is the man with the largest store of couplets on hand, the best memory, and perhaps the best delivery. But there is no question of improvisation, or creativity when playing, or judgment in fitting one dozens into another. These couplets can follow each other in any succession; one is as appropriate as the other. The originators certainly show great skill, and C. Robins remembers long hours spent by his group in the 1940’s trying to invent new rhymes, but no one is expected to manufacture them in the heat of the contest. The Jets know a few rhymed dozens, such as “Fucked his mother on a red-hot heater/I missed her cunt ‘n’ burned my Peter,” but most of the traditional rhymes are no longer well known. One must be quite careful in using the rhymed dozens with younger boys: if they cannot top them, they feel beaten from the start, and the verbal flow is choked off. To initiate sounding in a single interview, or a group session, we used instead such primitive sequences as “What would you say if someone said to you, ‘Your mamma drink pee?’” The answer is well known to most peer-group members: “Your father eat shit.” This standard reply allows the exchange to begin along conventional lines, with room for elaboration and invention.

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For our present purposes, the basic formulas can be described in terms of the types of syntactic structures, especially with an eye to the mode of sentence embedding. I will draw most of the examples from two extended sounding sessions in which sounds were used rather than simply quoted. One was on a return trip from an outing with the Jets: 13 members were crowded in a microbus; 190 sounds were deciphered from the recording made in a 35-minute ride. The other was a group session with five Thunderbirds in which Boot, Money, David, and Roger sounded against each other at great length. For those 60 sounds the record is complete and exact identification is possible.

There are of course other sessions where sounds are cited or used; included in the examples given below are some from a trip with the Cobras where 35 sounds were deciphered from one short section of a recording. Where the quotations are actual sequences, speakers are indicated by names or initials.

a. **Your mother is (like)** — Perhaps the simplest of all sounds is the comparison or identification of the mother with something old, ugly, or bizarre: a simple equative prediction. The Jets use great numbers of such simple sounds:

Your mother look like Flipper ... like Hoppity Hooper ...
Your mother's a Milk Dud ... A Holloway Black Cow ... a rubber dick ...
They say your mother was a Gravy Train ... Your mother's a bookworm ... a ass, period. Your mother James Bond, K.C. ... Your mother Pussy Galore.

The Cobras use a number of sounds of this type:

Your mama's a weight-lifter ... a butcher ... a peanut man ... a iceman ... a Boston Indian. Your mother look like Crooked-Mile Hank! ... like that piece called King Kong! ... Quahab's mother look like who did it and don't want to do it no more!

Note that the mass media and commercial culture provide a rich body of images. Such sounds were particularly appropriate on the Jet outing because every odd or old person that passed on the way would be a stimulus for another sound.
Your mother look like that taxi driver... Your mother a applejack-eater... a flea-bag... the Abominable Snowman... Your mother is a Phil D. Basket (calypso accent)... Your mother's a diesel... a taxicab driver.

Another passer-by sets off a train of simple identifications at the very end of the Jet outing:

J1: There go Willie mother right there.
J2: Your mother is a lizard.
J3: Your mother smell like a roach.
J4: Your mother name is Benedict Arnold.

One passing lady is the focus of a whole series of sounds. One can sound on someone simply by saying, "There go your mother."

J1: Hey-ey (whistle)... That's your mother over there!
J2: I know that lady.
J1: That's your mother.
J3: Hell, look the way that lady walk.
J4: ... she sick in the head.
J3: Walk like she got a lizard-neck.

b. Your mother got... Equally simple, from a syntactic point of view, is the series of sounds with the form Your mother got so and so. The Thunderbirds use long sequences of this type.

Boot: Your mother got a putty chest.
Boot: Your mother got hair growin'out her dunkie hole.
Roger: Your mother got a .45 in her left titty.
Money: Your mother got a 45-degree titty.
Boot: Your mother got titties behind her neck.

The Jets use simple sounds of this sort as well. (The first statement here is not a sound; it simply provides the base on which the sound is built, in this case the verb got.)

J1: You got the nerve to talk.
J2: Your mother got funky drawers.
J3: Your mother got braces between her legs.

Again,

Your mother got boobies that shake... hangdown lips
Tell mother got a old beat-up boot...
Her mother got a face like a rubber ass...
Junior got a face like a clown...

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From an adolescent Chicago group:

Your momma got three titties: chocolate milk, white milk, and one half-and-half.

The Cobras show the same style; note that wear does as well as got where clothes are concerned:

Your mother got on sneakers!
Your mother wear high-heeled sneakers to church!
Your mother wear a jock-strap.
Your mother got polka-dot drawers!
Your mother wear the seat of her drawers on the top of her head!

The Cobra sounds on clothes gradually drift away from the basic sounding pattern to a more complex structure that plays on the names of New York City Department stores:

Your momma got shit on...
Bel's mother bought her clothes from Ohrbach's. All front and no back.
You got your suit from Woolworth! All wool but it ain't worth shit!
You get your shoes from Buster Brown—brown on the top and all busted on the bottom!

Note that one of the Jets or Cobras can appear as the subject of a sound, though the majority are directed against someone's mother. In some ways, sounds of the X got... type are more complex when directed against a member, possibly because the comparisons are not as ritualized. Some of these are original and/or complex similes:

He got a head like a water-hydrant, and shit...
He got a head like a water-pump... a mailbox...
... like the front of a bus.
You got a nose like a car fender!

The Thunderbirds say:

Boot: Money got a head like a tornado mixed with a horse.
Money: You got a head of a motor.

c. Your mother so—she—. More complex comparisons are done with a quantifier, an adjective, and an embedded sentence of the type b or other predication.
David: Your mother so old she got spider webs under her arms.

Boot: Your mother so old she can stretch her head and lick out her ass.

Such sounds can be made freely against a member of the group.

Roger: Hey Davy, you so fat you could slide down the razor blade without gettin' cut.

. . . an' he so thin that he can dodge rain drops.

These are traditional "fat" and "thin" similes; they take on a particular value here because David is fat (a ritualized attribute for him).

Boot continues with ritual sounds along these lines:

Boot: Eh, eh, your mother so skinny she could split through a needle's eye.

Boot: Your mother's so skinny, about that skinny, she can get in a Cheerioat and say, "Hula hoop! hula hoop!"

This last variant is one step more complex; it has two subordinate clauses and two commerical products conjoined into one rhetorical figure. The same simile appears with a different breakfast cereal in a jet sound:

Stanley: Your mother so skinny, she do the hula hoop in a Applejack.

Other Jet similes show a wide range of attributes sounded on:

Bell grandmother so-so-so ugly, her rag is showin'.

Bell mother was so small, she bust her lip on the curve (curb).

Your mother so white she hafta use Mighty White.

Your mother so skinny, she ice-skate on a razor blade.

. . . so skinny she can reach under the doorknob . . .

. . . so low she c'play Chinese handball on the curve.

. . . so low, got to look down to look up.

. . . so black, she sweat chocolate.

. . . so black that she hafta steal to get her clothes.

. . . so black that she has to suck my dick to get home.

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The syntax of these similes can become very complex and involve a second subordination: "your mother is so _____ that when she _____, she can _____." It is not easy to get all of this into one proposition in the heat of the moment.

Your mother's so small, you play hide-and-go-seek, y'all c'slip under a penny.

In this version, the conjunction when is omitted (not uncommon in the speech of children), but in addition the you all seems out of place; the syntax of this sound is just beyond the range of performance available to the speaker. Boot of the Thunderbirds can handle constructions of this complexity, but he is the only one who can. The following sound of Boot is even more complex, since the when clause conjoins two other clauses:

Boot: His mother was so dirty, when she get the rag take a bath, the water went back down the drain.

Here the only flaw in the surface structure is perhaps the absence of and before take a bath. The underlying structure of this sentence might be shown as in the diagram below.

\[
S \quad \text{His mother was} \quad \text{dirty} \quad \text{and} \quad \text{she} \quad \text{get the rag,} \\
\quad \text{the water went back down the drain} \\
\quad \text{S} \quad \text{S} \quad \text{S} \quad \text{S} \quad \text{S} \\
\quad \text{she take a bath} \\
\quad \text{when}
\]

The structure of the sound makes it necessary to foreground the when-clauses, so that, rather than end with a condition, the action which makes the insult is last. This means that two clauses interpose between the quantifier and the predications went down—a type of left-hand embedding in the surface which is indeed rare in colloquial speech. Boot uses a similar construction without the initial
so clause in the following sound, which again is well beyond the syntactic competence of most members.

**Boot:** Your mother, when she go to work and she had—those, you know—open-toe shoes, well, her stockings reach her—be sweeping the ground.

Notice that the following sound is much simpler, since the main point is made by a subordinated clause which can therefore appear in final position.

**Boot:** His mother go to work without any drawers on, so that she c'd get a good breeze.

Some of the Jets use constructions of a complexity equal to those of Boot just given. The most complex syntax occurs in sounds of the type Your X has Y with attributive quantifiers dominating several sentences.

**J1:** Who father wear raggedy drawers?
**J2:** Yeh, the ones with so many holes in them when-a-you walk, they whistle?

This sound is received with immediate enthusiasm.

**J3:** Oh, shi-it! When you walk they whistle! Oh shit!
**J4:** Tha's all he got lef'... He never buys but one pair o'drawers.

And shortly afterwards, this sound models another of the same form:

**J1:** Ronald got so many holes in his socks, when he walks them shoes hum!
**J2:** Them shoes say MMMM!

The abstract structure which underlies sounds of this complexity is diagrammed on the next page.

The comparative node so many is contained in a relative clause, and in turn it dominates a sentence which dominates a time clause. It cannot be accidental that all of these complex structures are positively evaluated by the group: we can argue that only an idea of exceptional merit would justify for the originator the effort of using such syntax and that the evaluation refers to the idea: or we can argue that the complexity of the structure itself is impressive for the listener.

d. **Your mother eat ——.** We now return to a different type of sound which does not involve similes or metaphors, but portrays direct action with simple verbs. The power of these sounds seems to reside in the incongruity or absurdity of the elements juxtaposed—which may be only another way of saying that we do not really understand them.

**Boot:** I heard your mother eat rice crispies without any milk.
**Roger:** Eat 'em raw!
**Boot:** Money eat shit without puttin' any cornflakes on.

The Jets use such constructions freely as well.

His mother eat Dog Yummies.
They say your mother eat Gainesburgers.
**Your mother eat coke-a-rouches.**
**Your mother eat rat heads.**
**Your mother eat Bosco.**
**Your mother a applejack-eater.**
One obvious recipe for constructing sounds of this type is to mention something disgusting to eat. Yet most of the items mentioned here are not in that class, and as we will see below, less than half of the examples we have could actually be considered obscene. Dog Yummies are not disgusting (they are edible but not palatable) but it is plainly “low” to eat dog food. Elegance in sounds of this type can also involve syntactic complexity. Your mother a applejack eater seems to be a more effective sound than Your mother eat applejack. (Applejack, a new breakfast cereal at the time, may be favored because it suggests applejack whiskey). If so, it is a further piece of evidence that syntactic complexity is a positive feature of sounds.

e. Your mother raised you on ______. This is a specific pattern with fairly simple syntax, particularly effective in striking at both the opponent and his mother. In one Thunderbirds’ session, we triggered a series of these sounds:

- **WL:** Your mother raised you on ugly milk.
- **Boot:** Your mother raised you on raw corn.
- **David:** Your mother raised you with big lips.
- **Boot:** Your mother gave you milk out of a cave.
- **Boot:** Your mother gave you milk out of her ass.
  ... when you just born, she say “Take a shot.”

f. I went to your house ______. A numerous and important series are sounds directed against the household and the state of poverty that exists there. Some of these are complex rhymes, quite parallel to the rhymed dozens:

- **Boot:** I went to your house to ask for a piece of cheese.
  The rat jumped up and say “Heggies, please.”

(*Heggies* is the claiming word parallel to *dibbs, holfies, allies, checks, etc.* which was standard in New York City some twenty years ago. Today *heggeries* is a minor variant, though it is still recognized, having given way to *thumbs up.*

Most sounds of this type are in prose and are disguised as anecdotes. Cockroaches are a favorite theme:

- **Boot:** Hey! I went up Money house and I walked in Money house, I say, I wanted to sit down, and then, you know a roach jumped up and said, “Sorry, this seat is taken.”
- **Roger:** I went to David house, I saw the roaches walkin’ round in combat boots.

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Rules for Ritual Insults

Several sounds from a session with the Aces may be quoted here in which the members noted where they had learned various sounds.

- **Tony:** A boy named Richard learned me this one: When I came across your house, a rat gave me a jeep-walkin’ ticket.
- **Bennett:** When I came to your house, seven roaches jumped me and one search me.
- **Ted:** And I made this one up: I was come in your house; I got hit on the back of my head with a Yoo-hoo bottle.

Ted’s original sound seems weak; it leans upon the humor of the Yoo-hoo bottle but it departs from the rats-and-roaches theme without connecting up with any of the major topics of sounding. One such topic is the bathroom, or the lack of one:

- **Boot:** I went to your house and ask your mother, could I go to the bathroom. She said, “The submarine jus’ lef.”
- **Roger:** I went to his house—I wanted to go to the bathroom, and her mother—his mother gave me a pitchfork and a flashlight.
- **Roger:** I ringed his bell and the toilet stood flushed.

Remarks about somebody’s house are apt to become quite personal as we see below. The jets did not produce many of these sounds, but the following occurred in quick succession:

- **J1:** I went in Junior house ‘n sat in a chair that caved in.
- **J2:** You’s a damn liar, ‘n you was eatin’ in my house, right?
- **J3:** I went to Bell’s house ‘n a Chinese roach said, “Come and git it.”
- **J1:** I brought my uncle—I brought my uncle up Junior house—I didn’t trust them guys.

The tendency to take “house” sounds personally shows up in the second line of this series. As we will see below, the charge that “You was eatin’ in my house” returns the accusation of hunger against the originator, and this can have a solid basis in real life.

g. Other anecdotal forms. There are many other anecdotal sounds which do not fall into a single mold. Some are quite long and include the kind of extra detail which can give the illusion, at the outset, that an actual story is being told. From the jets’ session we find:
I ran over Park Avenue—you know, I was ridin' on my bike—and—uh—I seen somebody fightin'; I said lemme get on this now. I ran up there and Bell and his mother, fallin' all over: I was there first x x x gettin' it—gettin' that Welfare food x x

The incoherent sections are filled with slurping noises which are an important part of such food sounds—indicating that those involved were so desperately hungry and so uncivilized that they behaved like animals.

One can also deliver an anecdote with the same theme as the rhymed doozens quoted above:

\textit{Boot}: I'm not gonna say who it was, boy. But I fucked somebody's mother on this bridge one night, Whooh! That shit was so good, she jumped overboard in the river.

There are any number of miscellaneous sounds that can be disguised as pseudoanecdotes.

\textit{Roger}: One day, Money's mother's ass was stuck up and she called Roto-Rooter.

On the other hand, there are anecdotes which take the form of rhymes:

\textit{Boot}: I went down south to buy a piece of butter
\textit{I saw yo' mother layin' in the gutter,}
\textit{I took a piece of glass and stuck it up her ass}
\textit{I never saw a motherfucker run so fas'.}

Such narratives typically use the simplest type of syntax, with minimal subjects and preterit verb heads. The anecdotal type of sound appears to be most effective when it is delivered with hesitations and false starts, rather than with the smooth delivery of the other type of sounds. The technique is therefore closely associated with certain types of narrative styles in which the point is delayed to the final clause, where the evaluation is fused with result and coda, as in a joke (see chapter 9). It is generally true that all sounds have this structure: the evaluative point must be at the very end.

h. Portraits: just as narrative calls for simple syntax, sounds which present elaborate portraits demand syntactic complexity. The most common are those which place someone's mother on the street as a whore.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{J1}: Willie mother stink; she be over here on 128 St. between Seventh 'n' Eighth, waving her white handkerchief. [Falsetto] "C'mon, baby, only a nickel."
\item \textit{J2}: Hey Willie mother be up there, standin' the corner, be pullin' up her her dress, be runnin' her ass over 'n' see those skinny, little legs.
\end{itemize}

i. Absurd and bizarre forms. The formal typology of sounds presented so far actually covers the great majority of sounds used. But there are a number of striking examples which are not part of any obvious pattern, sounds which locate some profoundly absurd or memorable point by a mechanism not easy to analyze. There is the darkly poetic sound used by Eddie of the Cobras:

Your mother play dice with the midnight mice.

Rhyme also plays an essential part in this uncommon sound:

Ricky got shot with his own fart.

We might also cite the following exchange; which develops its own deep complication:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{J1}: Your mother take a swim in the gutter.
\item \textit{J2}: Your mother live in a garbage can.
\item \textit{J1}: Least I don't live on 1222 Boogie Woogie Avenue, two garbage cans to the right.
\end{itemize}

The attraction of trade names like \textit{Rite Guard} or \textit{Applejacks} may be their bizarre and whimsical character. In charging somebody's mother with unfeminine behavior we can also observe comical effects:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{J1}: Willie mother make a living' playin' basketball.
\item \textit{J2}: I saw Tommy mother wearin' high-heel sneakers to church.
\end{itemize}

j. Response forms: puns and metaphors. Sounds are usually answered by other sounds, and the ways in which they follow each other will be discussed below. But there is one formal feature of a sound which is essentially made for responses: "At least my mother ain't . . ." Although these forms cannot be used to initiate sourcin.
several can succeed each other, as in these sequences from the Aces session:

A1: At least I don't wear bubblegum drawers.
A2: At least his drawers ain't bubblegum, it's not sticky like yours.
A1: At least my mother don't work in the sewer.
A2: At least my mother don't live in the water-crack, like yours.

There are a series of traditional responses of this form which incorporate complex puns. Abrahams cites a dozen from South Philadelphia, including five common in Harlem. Perhaps the best known is:

At least my mother ain't no railroad track, laid all over the country.

Such forms frequently occur as simple similes, such as:

Your mother's like a police station—dicks going in and out all the time.

Although puns such as these seem to have been part of the original dozens tradition, they are no longer common among adolescents in Harlem. They seem to have been adopted by white groups in the city, where they are quite well known. When our white interviewers used some of these in sounding sessions, they were admired, but they did not initiate a series of other sounds as in the case of "Your momma drink pee" or "Your mother raised you on ugly milk."

This presentation of the "shape" of sounds has also given the reader some idea of the range of topics which are sounded on. Our own exploratory interviews in other parts of the country show that this scheme applies quite well to other cities and other black communities. Kochman and his students (1968) have provided descriptions of the Chicago patterns which are very similar to those of Harlem. O. C. Worham in San Francisco has collected a large body of preadolescent sounds, many of which might have been quoted directly from the Thunderbirds, Jets, or Cobras. "Your momma got a cast on her right titty"; "Your mama wears a jocky strap"; "Your mother wears holy drawers"; "Ricky's mama eat shit"; "Your mother named Mike"; "Your mother wears tennis shoes to work"; "He say his mama plays Batman"; "Hey, it's so cold in your house the roaches walk around with fur coats on"; "Man I done busted you so low, you can walk up under that piece of paper with a top hat on".

**Ritual Insults Among White Peer Groups**

While some elements of the dozens and other black ritual insults have appeared among white peer groups in the urban centers, the typical forms used among whites are quite different from those of blacks. The personal experience of several of our own investigators (Paul Cohen and Benji Wald) drawn from different areas of New York City, shows firm agreement on ritual insults. Whereas the BEV practice of sounding ranges over a wide variety of forms and topics which are combined with great flexibility, the white forms are essentially a limited set of routines. Two of the most common begin with "Eat shit":

A: Eat shit.
B: What should I do with the bones?
A: Build a cage for your mother.
B: At least I got one.
A: She is the least.
A: Eat shit.
B: Hop on the spoon.
A: Move over.
B: I can't, your mother's already there.

These are indeed ritual and impersonal insults, directed in part against the opponent's mother. But the sequencing occurs in a fixed form, and there is little room for individual choice. These are essentially "snappy answers" which show how knowledgeable rather than how competent the speaker is. It is the aptness of the rejoinder which is looked for:

A: Kiss my ass.
B: Move your nose.
A: Fuck you.
B: Yeh, that would be the best one you ever had.
A: You motherfucker.
B: Your mother told.
A: Got a match?
B: My ass against your face.

These are trick responses. The first speaker may say something aggressive (but not particularly clever) or he may be tricked into a routine such as:
A: How tall are you?
B: Five foot seven.
A: I didn’t think shit piled that high.

The white groups also use a certain number of comparisons of the “You are so X that Y” type: “You’re so full of shit your eyes are brown.” Furthermore, there are similes directed against one's mother that overlap those cited under X: “Your mother so low she could play handball on the curb ... walk under a pregnant cockroach without stooping.”

The white material is limited in content as well as form and quantity. Shit is the most common topic, and in general the insults are based on the taboo words rather than taboo activities. We do not find the proliferation of odd and bizarre elements and the wide range of choice characteristic of the BEV forms. Furthermore, this activity does not occupy any considerable time for the white groups—in a word, it is not a speech event for white groups in the sense that sounding is a speech event for the black groups. There is some evidence that southern whites (e.g. Mississippi Delta area) show the same range of ritual insults as northern whites and that the rich development of sounding described here is indeed a characteristic of the black speech community.

Attributes and Persons Sounded On

A review of the content of the sounds given above under a–j will show that a wide but fairly well-defined range of attributes is sounded on. A mother (grandmother, etc.) may be cited for her age, weight (fat or skinny), ugliness, blackness, smell, the food she eats, the clothes she wears, her poverty, and of course her sexual activity. As far as persons are concerned, sounding is always thought of as talking about someone’s mother. But other relatives are also mentioned—as part of the speech for variety in switching, or for their particular attributes. In order of importance, one can list the opponent’s relatives as: mother, father, uncle, grandmother, aunt. As far as number of sounds is concerned, the opponent himself might be included as second most important to his mother, but proverbially sounds are thought of as primarily against relatives.

One of the long epic poems of the BEV community called “Signifying Monkey” gives us some insight into the ordering of relatives. Signifying Monkey stirs up trouble (“signifies”) by telling the lion that the elephant had sounded on him:

“Mr. Lion, Mr. Lion, there’s a big burly motherfucker comin’ your way.
Talks shit about you from day to day.”

The monkey successively reports that the elephant had talked about the lion’s sister, brother, father and mother, wife, and grandmother.

The monkey said, “Wait a minute, Mr. Lion”, said, “That ain’t all, he said your grandmother, said she was a lady playin’ in the old backyard.
Said ever’ time he seen her, made his dick get on the hard.”

Even more relatives are brought in, which brings the monkey to the inevitable conclusion:

He said, “Yeah he talked about your aunt, your uncle, and your cousins.
Right then and there I knew the bad motherfucker was playin’ the dozens.”

What is said about someone’s mother’s age, weight, or clothes can be a general or traditional insult, or it can be local and particular. The presence of commercial trade names in the sounds is very striking: Bosco, Applejacks, Wonder Bread, Dog Yummies, Gainesburgers, Gravy Train, as well as the names of the popular figures in the mass media: James Bond, Pussy Galore, Flipper. The street culture is highly local, and local humor is a very large part of sounds. As noted before, one of the best ways to start a loud discussion is to associate someone with a local character who is an “ultra-rich” source of humor. Trade names have this local character—and part of the effect is the superimposing of this overspecific label on the general, impersonal figure of “your mother” as in “Your mother look like Flipper.” Local humor is omnipresent and overpowering in every
peer group—it is difficult to explain in any case, but its importance cannot be ignored. The odd or whimsical use of particular names can be illustrated by a sequence that occurred when John Lewis left the microbus at an early stop. As a parting shot, he leaned back in the window and shouted genially “Faggots! Motherfuckers!” This set up a chain of responses including a simple “Your mother!” from Rel, “You razorblade bastard!” from someone else, and finally an anonymous “Winnie the Pooh!”

Obscenity does not play as large a part as one would expect from the character of the original dozens. Many sounds are obscene in the full sense of the word. The speaker uses as many “bad” words and images as possible—that is, subject to taboo and moral reprimand in adult middle-class society. The originator will search for images that would be considered as disgusting as possible: “Your mother eat fried dick-heads.” With long familiarity the vividness of this image disappears, and one might say that it is not disgusting or obscene to the sounders. But the meaning of the sound and the activity would be entirely lost without reference to these middle-class norms. Many sounds are “good” because they are “bad”—because the speakers know that they would arouse disgust and revulsion among those committed to the “good” standards of middle-class society. Like the toast, sounds derive their meaning from the opposition between two major sets of values; their way of being “good” and our way of being “bad”.

The rhymed dozens are all uniformly sexual in character; they aim at the sexual degradation of the object sounded on. But the body of sounds cited above depart widely from this model; less than half of them could be considered obscene, in any sense. At one point in the Jet session, there is a sequence of three sounds concerning fried dick-heads; this is immediately followed by

1: Your mother eat rat heads.
2: Your mother eat Bosco.
3: Your mother look that taxi driver.
4: Your mother stinks.
5: Hey Willie got a talkin’ hat.
6: Your mother a applejack-eater.
7: Willie got on a talkin’ hat.
8: So, Bell, your mother stink like a bear.
9: Willie mother . . . she walk like a penguin.

Rules for Ritual Insults

This sequence of nine remarks contains no sexual references; the strongest word is stink. Many sounds depend upon the whimsical juxtaposition of a variety of images, upon original and unpredictable humor which is for the moment quite beyond our analysis. But it can be noted that the content has departed very far from the original model of uniform sexual insult.

Only someone very unfamiliar with the BEV subculture could think that the current generation is “nicer” and less concerned with sex than previous generations. The cry of “Winnie the Pooh!” does not mean that the jets are absorbing refined, middle-class wit and culture. Its significance can only be understood by a deeper study of the nature of this ritual activity.

Evaluation of Sounds

One of the most important differences between sounding and other speech events is that most sounds are evaluated overtly and immediately by the audience. In well-structured situations, like the Thunderbird sounding session, this is true of every sound. In wilder sessions with a great many participants, like the Jet session in the microbus, a certain number of sounds will follow each other rapidly without each one being evaluated. The primary mark of positive evaluation is laughter. We can rate the effectiveness of a sound in a group session by the number of members of the audience who laugh. In the Thunderbird session, there were five members; if one sounded against the other successfully, the other three would laugh; a less successful sound would show only one or two laughs. (The value of having a separate recording track for each speaker is very great.)

A really successful sound will be evaluated by overt comments; in the Jet session the most common forms are “Oh!”, “Oh shit!” “God damn!”, or “Oh lord!” By far the most common is “Oh shit!” The intonation is important; when approval is to be signalled the vowel of each word is quite long, with a high sustained initial pitch, and a slow-falling pitch contour. The same words can be used to express negative reaction, or disgust, but then the pitch is low and sustained. The implication of the positive exclamations is “That is too much” or “That leaves me helpless.”

Another, even more forceful mode of approving sounds is to repeat the striking part of the sound oneself.
John: Who father wear raggedy drawers?
Willie: Yeh the ones with so many holes in them when-
a-you walk they whistle?
Others: Oh . . . shi-it! When you walk they whistle! Oh
shit!

Negative reactions to sounds are common and equally overt. The
most frequent is "That's phony!" or "Phony shit!", but sounds are
also disapproved as corny, weak, or lame. Stanley elaborates his
negative comments quite freely:

Junior: Aww, Nigger Bell, you smell like B.O. Plenty.
Bell: Aww, nigger, you look like—you look like Jimmy
Durante's grandfather.
Stan: Aw, tha's phony [bullshit] . . . Eh, you woke me up
with that phony one, man . . .
Bell: Junior look like Howdy Doody.
Stan: That's phony too, Bell. Daag, boy! . . . Tonight ain't
your night, Bell.

At another point, Stanley denounces a sound with a more compli-
cated technique: "Don't tell 'im those phony jokes, they're so phony,
you got to laugh."

The difference between these negative terms is not clear. For our
present purposes, we may consider them equivalent, although they
are probably used in slightly different ways by different speakers.
The Cobras do not use the same negative terms as the Jets. They
will say "You fake!" "Take that shit outa here!" or most often, "That
ain't where it's at."

These evaluative remarks are ways of responding to the overall
effect of a sound. There is also considerable explicit discussion of
sounds themselves. In the case of a traditional sound, like a rhymed
dozen, one can object to an imperfect rendition. For example, Stevie
answers one of our versions with "That's wrong! You said it wrong!
Mistake!" Members are also very clear on who the best sounders
are. Among the Thunderbirds, it is generally recognized that "Boot
one of the best sounders . . . he's one of the best sounders of all."
This very reputation will interfere with the chances of getting other
members to initiate sounding—they know in advance that they will
be outdone. In general, sounding is an activity very much in the
forefront of social consciousness: members talk a great deal about
it, try to make up new sounds themselves, and talk about each other's
success. Sounding practices are open to intuitive inspection. It is
possible to ask a good sounder, "What would you say if somebody
said to you . . ." and he will be glad to construct an answer. Members
will also make metacomment on the course of a sounding session:
"Now he's sounding on you, Money!" or announce their intentions,
as Roger does: "Aw, that's all right. Now I'm gonna sound on you
pitiful."

Furthermore, members take very sharp notice of the end result
of a sounding contest, as noted below. In a sounding session, every-
ting is public—nothing significant happens without drawing com-
ment. The rules and patterning of this particular speech event are
therefore open for our inspection.

The Activity of Sounding

We can distinguish two very different uses of sounds: (1) ritual
sounding and (2) applied sounding. The quotations given above are
taken from sounding sessions which are examples of the first: rituals
in which the sounding is done for its own sake. Applied sounding
involves the use of sounds for particular purposes in the midst of
other verbal encounters and follows a very different set of rules. We
will consider ritual sounding first, beginning with the general rules
which apply, and then the operation of these rules in the two sessions
which have been cited.

There are three participants in this speech event: antagonist A,
protagonist B, and the audience. A sounds against B; the audience
evaluates; B sounds against A; his sound is evaluated. The general
structure is then more complex than most ABABAB exchanges: it is

A-1 e B-1 e A-2 e B-2 e . . .

A-1 almost always contains a reference to B's mother. B-1 should
be based on A-1; to the extent that it is an original or well-delivered
transformation of A-1, B may be said to have won. A-2 may be an
entirely new sound. But if A-2 is a further transformation of B-1, it
is usually evaluated even more highly. Whereas we may say that
A-2 "tops" B-1 if it is intrinsically better, A may be said to "get"
B most often if A-2 is a variant or clearly related to B-1. This is what
is meant by "topping" B—the exchange is held open. A skillful
sounder can hold an exchange of variants open beyond the point where it would normally be considered ended by conventional estimates. The series may be terminated by one antagonist clearly winning over the other. Thus in that part of the Thunderbirds' session following Ricky's collapse, Boot clearly beats Money. The exchange starts with Boot's long story of how Money was tricked into thinking that a jar of urine was ice tea, and he drank it. Money objects, rather incoherently: "I know you love thud—ice tea . . . I know you love to pee—i—ice cream tea." Boot then begins sounding.

A-1 Boot: His mother go to work without any draws on so that she c'd get a good breeze.
B-1 Money: Your mother go, your mother go work without anything on, just go naked.

d David: That's a lie.

In the first exchange, Money clearly fails, as evidenced by his hesitation: he simply exaggerates Boot's well-constructed and witty sound without the corresponding wit. David's comment is negative—particularly in that it takes Money's sound to be a factual claim.

A-2 Boot: Your mother, when she go to work and she had—those, you know—open-toe shoes, well her stockings reach her be—sweeping the ground.

cf [Ricky: (laughs)]
cf [Roger: Ho lawd! (laughs)]

Boot's A-2 is stretching the limits of the syntax available to him, and he has considerable difficulty in getting it out. It is clearly an extension of A-1 and B-1, of the form "Your mother go to work with . . ." But instead of the conventional wit of A-1, or the reduced variant of B-1, A-2 enters the field of the unconventional and absurd. Boot scores two strong responses from Ricky and Roger.

Money cannot build further on the syntactic model, but he does attempt to respond to the theme of holes in shoes. There is no audience response.

B-2 Money: Your mother have holes—potatoes in her shoes.

Since Boot has won this exchange, he now begins a new sequence:

A-3 Boot: Your mother got a putty chest (laugh).
B-3 Money: Argh! Aww—you wish you had a putty chest, right?

Rules for Ritual Insults

Money responds, but he does not sound. Boot continues with another sound of the "got" type; now, however, the pattern is complicated as Roger joins in, sounding specifically against Money. This is a second stage which occurs when one antagonist is clearly losing ground: he becomes the object of group sounding:

A-4 Boot: Your mother got hair growin' out her dunkie hole.
C-4 Roger: Money you mother got a .45 in her left titty.
    Money: Awwww!
    e David: (laughter)

Money now responds to Roger's sound with a variant which strikes us as a very able one.

B-4 Money: Your mother got a .45-degree titty.

Now it is Roger who answers Money and gets a strong response. Boot then adds a sound which is delivered incoherently and gets no response.

C-5 Roger: Your mother got baptism in a whiskey bottle.
    e Money: (laughs)
    e [Ricky: (laughs)]
    e [David: (laughs)]
A-5 Boot: Your mothersailthesevensesasinasardine can.
    [laughs]

The situation has become unclear. Sounding is defined for members as one person sounding upon another, but three are involved. Money's laughter indicates that he thinks Roger's sound is not against him, but against Boot. David now explicitly says that the antagonists are Boot and Roger, but Roger denies this. He is still sounding against Money. Boot adds a further dig which recognizes that Roger's him means Money, not Boot:

David: Now you and Roger sounding. (laughs)
Roger: I'm sounding on him.
Boot: That half of a motor. (laughs)

Given the sanction of a group attack against Money, David now begins his own. But Money turns to us suddenly and says, "Could we sing now?" (the formal recording of singing was one of the purposes of the session). Money's question is interpreted as a transparent attempt to escape, and a storm of abuse descends on his head.
from the leaders of the group. He is forced to acknowledge his defeat explicitly.

D-6

David: Everytime Money looks at the moon, everytime
Money: Could we sing now?
Boot: (laughs)
Roger: (laughs)
David: Money look at moon, he say "Ooo, look at the moonshine."
Roger: He changing the subject!
Ricky: Awww! Tryin' to change thuh—uh—subject
Roger: What's the matter, you feeling all right, or you want some more sounding?
Money: Uh-uh.

The sounding session goes on, with Money saying nothing. When he speaks up later on, Ricky says "Hey Money, you better keep quiet, if you don't want 'em soundin' bad on you." It should be quite clear that there are winners and losers in sounding sessions.

The speech event we call sounding is not isolated from other forms of verbal interaction: it can merge with them or become transformed into a series of personal insults. When ritual insult changes into personal insult, the difference between the two becomes quite clear. We take as an instance the beginning of the sounding session with the Thunderbirds. To save space, evaluative reactions to each sound will be put in parentheses after it.

In this session, we can observe the difficulty that members have in distinguishing between hypothetical and actual sounding. The question "What would you say if ..." is quickly transformed into actual sounding. The series was initiated by an effort of C. Robins to get Money to sound.

CII: (to Money) What would you say if Boot said "Your father look like Funjie!"? (Roger: "Oh Lord, oh Money ... oh ... ho ... Funjie ... oo!" Roger, Boot, Ricky, David: laugh)
Money: Huh?
CII: That's like Funjie's your father. (Roger: Ohh! Boot, Ricky: Laugh)
Boot: He's sounding on you, Money!
CII: No, no if Boot said it ...
C-3  David: So your...so then I say, "Your father got buck teeth."

B-3  Boot: Aw your father got teeth growing out of his behind! (Money, Ricky, Roger laugh).

Boo's response is a winning effort. He takes David's hypothetical A-3 and adds it elements of absurdity and obscenity; B-3 gets positive evaluation from all three members of the audience. Note that Boo's sound is no longer hypothetical: it is the first "real sound" of the series. David now attempts to top this by staying with the behind theme, but he fails to get a coherent thought out. He is not fluent in this area, at least not in the face of Boo's ability:

C-3  David: Yeah, your father, y--got, your father grow, uh, uh, grow hair from, from between his, y'know. (Money laughs)

B-4  Boot: Your father got calluses growin' up through his ass, and comin' through his mouth. (Boot, Money, and Ricky laugh)

With B-4 Boo builds further on the original model and crushes David with a display of virtuosity that leaves him with nothing to say. Boo is not willing to leave it there: like many a good sounder, he can seize his advantage by piling one sound on another. He switches abruptly to B-5:

B-5  Boot: Your father look like a grown pig. (Boot, Money, and Ricky laugh).

David now reaches out for a sound which breaks the rules. It is not a ritual insult at all, but a personal remark that hits on a real failing of Boo's step-father.

C-5  David: Least my—at least my father don’t be up there talkin' uh-uh-uh-uh-uh-uh!

The fact that this is a personal insult and not a ritual insult is shown by the fact that Boo now answers it. Since ritual insults are not intended as factual statements, they are not to be denied. But Boo does respond to David and Roger acknowledges that Boot has been hit. (A denial of an insult A-x will be marked B-x).

B-5'  Boot: Uh—so my father talks stutter talk what it mean? (Roger: He talk the same way a little bit.)

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Next Boo responds to David's insult with an insult related to A-5 in exactly the way that one sound is related to another. Boo's father stutters: David's father is old and has gray hair.

B-6  Boot: At least my father ain't got a gray head! His father got a big bald spot with a gray head right down there, and one long string...

David is hurt, and he denies the personal insult as best he can. But Boo doesn't stop: he picks up the point of "one long string" and grinds it in to the amusement of Roger and Money.

C-6  David: Because he'd old he's old, that's why! He's old, that's why!...

B-7  Boot: ...and one long string, that covers his whole head, one, one long string, about that high, covers his whole head. (Roger: Ho Lord, one string! Money, Boo laugh).

Boo brings tears to David's eyes. Boo's side-kick Money does not mind, but Ricky objects.

C-7  David: You lyin' Boo! ...You know 'cause he old, tha's why!

Ricky: Aw man, cut it out.

Boo has won the day, but he has no sense of restraint. What follows now is no longer the controlled counterpart of sounding, of the form A e B a, but rather an excited argument, in which both parties are in strident overlap most of the time. It is mostly David against Boo now; Boo's insults do not draw much response from the others, and one can sense the group support ebbing from him.

B-8  Boo: Your father look like this—with his butt comin' out, and he go (shurp) he look like...

C-8  David: You a liar!

B-9  Boo: You know one time I came over his house, I saw some slop in the garbage, you know, and then, and I left it there, and David say (shurp, chomp, chomp, chomp) (Money laughs).

David is now ready to take up any weapon at hand. He seizes on the poverty theme, and he makes a personal charge that hits home. It takes some time for David to be heard, but finally Boo does hear
him, and he stops his chomping to issue a vigorous (but ineffective) denial.

C-9 David: Sol and you always come over my house and say, yeah, Boot always come over my house and say, Boot always coming over my house to eat. He ask for food, and Ohhh lawww . . .

B-9' Boot: I don't come over your house—I don't come nuttin'! I only come over your house on school days and from now on I do.

David senses his advantage and pursues it.

C-10 David: . . . and when we go swimmin', we go, you ask for food, and ever ti—and you come over my house—

Boot can no longer deny the factual truth of David's charge, but he tries to mitigate the facts: foolishly perhaps, because David is now ready with a crushing response.

B-10' Boot: Yeah, I only be playin', I only be playin'!

C-11 David: Yeah, but you sure be eatin'!

Not every story ends with the underdog showing as well as David. David's momentary success is all the more striking because Boot is without a doubt in verbal control of the group. Boot continued his triumphant progress in sounding against others, in no way daunted by this reversal. In these extracts, we have the full weight of evidence for the important point that Boot is the verbal leader of the Thunderbirds—that he excels at all the verbal skills of the BEV subculture. It is not only that Boot has a larger store of sounds at his disposal and can draw upon them more readily. His syntax is also more complex, and he can deliver sounds that no one else can; all of the more complex examples from the Thunderbirds cited above are his.

The Rules for Ritual Sounding

In the presentation of sounding so far, we have seen that this speech event has a well-articulated structure. These rules can be broken: it is possible to hurl personal insults and it is possible to join in a mass attack on one person. But there is always a cost in stepping out of the expected pattern; in the kind of uncontrolled and angry response which occurs or in the confusion as to who is doing what to who.

As we examine these examples of sounding, the fundamental opposition between ritual insults and personal insults emerges. The appropriate responses are quite different: a personal insult is answered by a denial, excuse, or mitigation, whereas a sound or ritual insult is answered by longer sequences, since a sound and its response are essentially the same kind of thing, and a response calls for a further response. The complexity of sounding follows from this comparatively simple structure, so that our diagram of sounding might be reduced to:

S-1 e S-2 s S-3 . . .

On the other hand, personal insults produce dyads of interaction: insult (I) and denial or excuse (D). We observe a chain in this last exchange between Boot and David:

I-1 D-1 I-2 D-2 I-3 D-3 . . .

but there is no inherent, structural reason for chaining as in the case of sounds. A denial can end the series. But the denials that are normal and automatic for a personal insult are unthinkable with sounds. We have the exchanges A: You come over to my house and ask for something to eat B: I do not! and A: Your father got grey hair and one long string . . . B: That's cause he's old, that's why! But we do not have such exchanges as A: Your mamma drink pec. B: *That's a lie! Instead the right response is B: Your father eat shit. This is an invariant rule: sounds are not denied. If it were merely a semicategorical rule we would expect joking responses with denials, deliberate misinterpretations of the sounds, parallel to those we sometimes hear with requests: Would you mind opening the window? No. Can you give me the time? Yes. Since responses to sounds are so automatic and deep-seated, we must presuppose a well-formed competence on the part of members to distinguish ritual insults from personal insults. On the face of it, it does not seem easy to make this distinction. It is a question, among other things, of how serious the antagonist is: does he want to start a fight? Does he mean it? Are people going to believe this is true? What is the internal competence which allows Boot to recognize immediately David's personal insult and to respond with a denial? How can the Jets sound on each other for hours without anyone being insulted?
To answer these questions, it is necessary to specify more precisely the structure of sounds. The superficial taxonomy given above under a–j merely charts the differences in the syntactic forms of sounds as they are uttered. If sounds are heard as one kind of utterance, there must be a uniform mode of interpretation which shows all of these forms as derived from a single underlying structure. We propose that this structure is

\[ T(B) \text{ is so } X \text{ that } P \]

where \( T \) is the target of the sound, \( X \) is the attribute of \( T \) which is focused on, and \( P \) is a proposition that is coupled with the attribute by the quantifier so . . . that to express the degree to which \( T \) has \( X \). The target \( T(B) \) is normally \( B \)’s mother or other relative. (It may seem as if there are more complex targets such as “Your mother’s clothes” or “Your mother’s face” but these may best be seen as derived from constructions such as “Your mother is so ugly that her face . . .”.) The attribute \( X \) is drawn from the range of features or topics outlined above: age, weight, clothes, etc. It is limited to a specifically pejorative value: age is specifically old, weight is skinny or fat, clothing is ragged or dirty, appearance is ugly or dirty, sexual behavior is loose or immoral; smell is stink, wealth is poor, food is poor or disgusting. The proposition \( P \) may have a wide variety of forms, although there are lower-level sequencing rules and standards of excellence that govern its form. Thus we have a typical sound, Your mother \( T(B) \) so old \( X \), she fart dust \( P \).

It will be observed that there are a great many sounds with simpler forms than this, and some that are more complex. We might consider that the simpler forms such as Your mother the Abominable Snowman are derived from a full form \( T(B) \) is so \( X \) that \( P \) by rules of deletion parallel to syntactic rules for ellipsis. However, it seems more plausible to write discourse rules for making sounds indirectly, parallel to the rules for making commands or requests. One can make preconditions for such commands. Thus someone can request a glass of water by stating that he is thirsty. A sound may be made by simply stating the proposition \( P \). The deletion of \( T(A) \) is so \( X \) that . . . is recoverable in the interpretation of the listener, who has the competence to know what attribute is being sounded on. For example, Your mother look like Flipper must be understood as “Your mother is so ugly that she looks like Flipper,” whereas Your mother name the Black Boy will be interpreted as “Your mother is so black that she is named “Black Boy”.” Your father got teeth growing out his ass is one of many sounds that must refer to an attribute odd, crazy, or perhaps most literally, fucked-up.

Of the simpler forms listed under a–d above, the only types which offer serious difficulty in this interpretation are the equative forms. Type a, Your mother the Abominable Snowman can be understood as either “Your mother is so ugly that she looks like the Abominable Snowman” or “. . . that she is named the Abominable Snowman.” If one takes a more mystical approach—that the speaker is asserting “Your mother is in fact the Abominable Snowman”—this is equivalent to saying that the insult is directed against the opponent himself, rather than his (ritual) mother. If we hold the notion that the sound is intended to insult or degrade the opponent’s mother, rather than to claim he has an altogether different mother, then the interpretations of “like” and “is named” are called for.

Sounds of type d Your mother eat . . . are usually interpreted as referring to the attribute “poor” (or “hungry” which may be subsumed under “poor”). Thus Your mother eat corn flakes without any milk may be understood as “Your mother is so hungry that she eats corn flakes without any milk!” or as “Your mother is so poor that she has to eat corn flakes without any milk.”

On the other hand, the following sequence of sounds must be given a different interpretation:

\[ J1: \text{ His mother eat Dog Yummies . . . } \\
\text{J2: Somebody said your mother’s breath smell funny.} \\
\text{J3: They say your mother eat Gainesburgers. } \\
\text{J4: They say your mother was a Gravy Train.} \]

These are plainly based on the traditional mode of insulting someone’s mother by calling her a dog. The direct insults Your mother’s a bitch . . . a dog . . . You’re a son of a bitch do not have any weight in sounding today. But the existence of this model makes it plain that the underlying interpretation is not “Your mother is like a dog” or “Your mother is named dog” but rather “Your mother is a dog.”

On the other hand, Boot’s sound Your father looks like a grown pig is not equivalent to saying Your father is a pig . . . a swine but rather must be taken to mean “Your father is so fat that he looks like a grown pig.”

Type e, Your mother raised you on ugly milk is unique in this series, because it must be interpreted as a sound directly against the
opponent: 'You are so ugly that your mother [must have] raised you on ugly milk.' But we might add that the mother is also being insulted here, so that the sound adds in effect 'and it's your mother's fault!'

The more complex sounds such as the anecdotal f. I went to B's house... must be taken as directed against the whole family: B's family is so poor that... On the other hand, complex comparisons as Your father draws have so many holes in them that when he walk they whistle can be interpreted as 'Your father is so ragged that his drawers have so many holes in them that when he walks they whistle.'

There are, of course, a certain number of miscellaneous sounds which are difficult to interpret in any scheme: Your mother play dice with the midnight mice is many ways ambiguous.

It is clear that the formal definition given does not include the rhymed dozens, which have the underlying structure I fucked your mother so much that... A number of other sounds, such as I took your mother are based upon the model in which the sounder asserts that he sexually insulted or degraded the opponent's mother. This model must be added as an alternative mode of sounding to the one outlined above. But the great majority of sounds used by the Jets, Cobras, and Thunderbirds fit the T(B) is so X that P model. We must presuppose that members have the competence to make such interpretations if we are to explain their behavior.

The capacity to interpret sounds frequently depends on the ability to locate the underlying negative adjective X when only the proposition P remains. What does it mean to say Your mother eat Bosco? It requires native competence to decide if this is a sound against your mother's blackness (Bosco is a chocolate product; as in Your mother so black she sweat chocolate); or her poverty (as in Your mother eat corn flakes without any milk); or her decency (as in Your mother eat scumbag).

We can now write rules for sounding that will account for the interpretation of a sound and selection of an appropriate response to it. The following rule begins with the listener B's position, as he hears what is said and interprets it to decide what has been done: it is a rule of interpretation UD in the scheme on page 300.

1 If A makes an utterance S in the presence of B and an audience C, which includes reference to a target related to B, T(B), in a proposition P, and

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a. B believes that A believes that P is not true and
b. B believes that A believes that B knows that P is not true...

then S is a sound, heard as T(B) is so X that P where X is a pejorative attribute, and A is said to have sounded on B.

This rule can (and must) be abbreviated by identifying conditions a and b as conditions for shared or social knowledge. These are only the first of an infinite series of recursive conditions which represent the fact that there is shared knowledge between A and B that P is not true. In the terminology of discourse analysis now being developed, an A-event is one known to be known only to A (in A's biography) and a B-event is one known to be known only to B, whereas an AB-event is one known to be known to both. We may summarize conditions a and b as it is an AB-event that P is not true.

The audience C is an essential ingredient here. It is true that one person can sound against another without a third person being present, but the presupposition that this is public behavior can easily be heard in the verbal style. Sounds are not uttered in a direct, face-to-face conversational mode. The voice is raised and projected, as if to reach an audience. In a two-person sounding situation, the antagonists treat each other as representing the audience.

Note that rule 1 does not require the attribute A to be explicitly mentioned. On the other hand, the proposition P must be present. We rarely hear sounds of the form T(B) is (Q) X where Q is a simple quantifier, and it is doubtless if they are to be classified as sounds. Your mother is very fat; your father is real black are not heard as sounds. Indeed, we can explain the nondeletability of P as we return to the question of the conditions for recognizing sounds as opposed to personal insults. Rule 1 is designed to answer the original question: how does B recognize a ritual insult? First, he recognizes an appropriate target. Secondly, he recognizes the sounding situation: a remark is made by A in a loud voice designed to be heard by the audience C. Thirdly, he judges the proposition P to be appropriate to a ritual insult in that everyone present plainly knows that it is not true. The Jets' mothers do not look like Flippa or Howdy Doody; they are not the Abominable Snowman; they do not eat Dog Yummies or fried dick-heads. Furthermore, it is a matter of human competence to know that everyone knows that these propositions are not true.
On the other hand, the attributes X may justly be attributed to one's mother; she may very well be fat, or skinny, or ugly, or black, or poor, or old. If the proposition P were deleted, the ritual insult would become a personal insult. Your family is poor is not a ritual insult, but a personal one. We have noted that Boot's stepfather does stutter; David's father is old and has gray hair—and all the Thunderbirds know this.

Outsiders would of course be able to recognize ritual propositions P, but without the shared knowledge of members as to whose family was poor, which family was poorest, and which mother was blackest, the outsider could not as readily recognize a personal insult. He would have to suspend judgment. The group does not share all knowledge equally, and sounding is not confined within a single peer group or hang-out group. Therefore sounds must be recognized as ritual insults in themselves, without presupposing any specific knowledge of the sounder's family. For this reason, the propositions P tend to become more and more bizarre and unlikely. Your mother so low she c'play Chinese handball on a curve (curb) is a safe sound. Nobody is that low. On the other hand, there is something dangerously personal in Your mother look like his father, boy; A' you know how he look, boy.

There are other cases, some noted below, where weak sounds can be interpreted as personal insults; they are then denied, and conflict follows. But if one reviews the sounds quoted above, it will be immediately obvious in almost every case that the propositions P are known to be untrue.

The same argument applies to the rhymed dozens. Among young adults, to say I fucked your mother is not to say something obviously untrue. But it is obviously untrue that "I fucked your mother from tree to tree." Your father said, "Now fuck me!" The situation can become difficult in some neighborhoods. In the Puerto Rican barrio of East 111th Street, it is common sound to say "Your mother's on Fifth Avenue" meaning that she is a prostitute. To the question, "What about the kids whose mothers are on Fifth Avenue?", members reply, "They don't say much."

First it is worth noting that P can be deleted if X is also missing; we then have Your mother! This is a very common sound; as cited above.

John Lewis: Faggots!! Motherfuckers!!
Bob: Your mother!

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Here of course there is unrecoverable deletion—that is, there is no X or P that can be reconstructed. We can interpret Your mother as signaling either a generalized insult or as referring to the intention to sound on someone. It may also be used in public places as an elliptical form where behavior is not as free as normally. Observe the following sequence used by two ten-year-olds entering a delicatessen:

A: Your mother!
B: Your father!
A: Your uncle!

The danger of sounds being misinterpreted as personal remarks cannot be overstated. One real incident is worth citing. A group of musicians were returning to New York City on a bus, and they started sounding on the wife of one member of the band who lived in Detroit; she jumps into the bay with the ice man, and so on. When they got to the hotel, they noticed he was missing. Later they found out that he had gone back to Detroit and that he did find his wife in bed with someone. A short while after he committed suicide.

There is no need to compile a great many such incidents to demonstrate the danger of a ritual sounding which is not obviously untrue. In dealing with strangers, it is considerably harder to say what is a safe sound, and there are any number of taboos which can be broken with serious results. Generally speaking, extended ritual sounding is an in-group process, and when sounding occurs across group lines, it is often intended to provoke a fight. One such case has been documented by Swett (1966). A young musician named Young Beartracks killed another young man known as Chicago Eddie outside a poolroom in East Palo Alto. In the court testimony, it was said that there had been an argument between the two preceding the shooting. Swett, who knew the situation quite well, points out that they were engaged in the dozens, and that there was considerable tension already present between the two; Eddie was a member of an urban gang, and Young Beartracks a recent member of a rural gang. The role of the dozens in this situation was plainly relevant to the shooting that followed—actually a case of verbal aggression.

10. While this incident is necessarily anonymous, it was reported to me through close associates who are related to some of those involved.
by Eddie against Young Beartracks—but the judge and jury did not understand this point.\footnote{11}

The first witness for the prosecution, the poolroom attendant and a member of the urban gang, did state in cross-examination that "Eddie put him (Young Beartracks) in the dozens," but the effort of the defense counsel to procure a clarification of the term dozens was objected to by the prosecution on the grounds that the witness had not been qualified as an expert in semantics. (Swett, 1966)

We can now give rule 2 for responding to a sound.

2 If A has sounded on B, B sounds on A by asserting a new proposition \( P' \) which includes reference to a target related to A, T(A), and such that it is an AB-event that \( P' \) is untrue. \( P' \) may be embedded in a sentence as a quantification of a pejorative attribute \( X' \) of T(A).

This is a production rule in the scheme outlined on page 300. It also contains reference, in the first clause, to the DD sequencing rule which may be stated independently as

the response to a sound is a sound.

We have thus filled out the original paradigm for discourse analysis which may be shown as

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sound}_1 \\
\text{Speaker A} \\
T(B) \text{ is so } X \text{ that } P \\
\text{Speaker B} \\
\begin{cases}
(1) & T(A) \text{ is so } X' \text{ that } P' \\
(2) & \text{Sound}_1 \\
(3) & \text{Sound}_2
\end{cases}
\end{align*}
\]

There is an interesting condition here on \( P' \) which is that if \( X' \neq X \), then \( P' \neq P \). In other words, if A says, Your mother so old she fact dust, B cannot say Your mother so skinny she fact dust, or Your mother so black she fact dust. But if \( X' = X \), then it is possible for \( P' = P \), if the target T is shifted, although this is the weakest kind of response. Among young children who do not sound well, one will hear such sequences as:

Your mother got funky drawers. 
Your father got funky drawers.

But one does not hear as an answer, "Your mother got funky drawers," for this would be equivalent to a denial of the sound. We can now see why denial of ritual sounds is impossible; for to deny a sound is to admit that it is not a matter of general knowledge that it is obviously untrue, just as to excuse or mitigate the sound is to admit it as factually true.

The description of P as being obviously untrue—that its untruth is an AB-event—is equivalent to deciding that the sounder is not "serious." This decision must be made in any conversational exchange; whether it is a matter of commands, requests, assertions, or sounds, it is the first act of interpretation which the listener must make. As Harvey Sacks has pointed out (1966) there are important consequences of this decision: if the speaker is judged serious, a suitable response must be constructed to fit the situation. If the speaker is joking, then all that is usually required is a laugh—no matter what was said by the first speaker. In the case of sounding, the judgment is made that the speaker is not serious—the insult is a ritual one—but the answer will be governed to a certain extent by the nature of the proposition P. Excellence in sounding, and the winning of the contest, will depend upon the relation of \( P' \) to P.

The following more general formulation of the interactional structure of sounding is based upon the suggestions of Erving Goffman, in response to an earlier presentation of this analysis. Goffman's framework isolates four basic properties of ritual sounding, as opposed to other types of insult behavior:

1. A sound opens a field, which is meant to be sustained. A sound is presented with the expectation that another sound will be offered in response, and that this second sound may be built
formally upon it. The player who presents an initial sound is thus
offering others the opportunity to display their ingenuity at his
expense.
2. Besides the initial two players, a third-person role is necessary.
3. Any third person can become a player, especially if there is a
failure by one of the two players then engaged.
4. Considerable symbolic distance is maintained and serves to insu-
late the event from other kinds of verbal interaction.

These properties, illustrated in the previous sections, are the means
by which the process of insult becomes socialized and adapted for
play. They may eventually be formalized in higher level rules of
verbal interaction. In the following discussion, we will see in greater
detail how the first principle operates in ritual sounding.

Sequencing in the Content of Sounds

The rules given in the subsection above are all that are needed
to generate a series of sounds between two antagonists. There are
further complications involved when a third person enters the ex-
change and when a number of members join in sounding on one
antagonist who is falling behind. But sequencing is much more than
the fact that speakers take turns and succeed each other: sequencing
involves the substance of sounds which succeed each other—how
one sound is built on another and how a series of sounds are brought
to a conclusion. Above all, we are concerned with the standards of
excellence in sounding—what makes one person a better sounder
than another and how the group evaluates the performance of an
individual. This topic will provide us with the best insight into the
factors which control the use of language in the street culture. In
settings far removed from the classroom, under standards of per-
formance that are alien to those of the school, peer-group members
develop a high level of competence in syntax, semantics, and rhei-
toric. One part of this competence was seen in the toasts developed
by adults; in this discussion of sounding, we will observe the creative
use of language by adolescents. We will consider first simple se-
quences of the type A B, where B builds on A’s sound to achieve
a greater level of complexity and may be judged in some sense to
have surpassed it.

The extensive selections from the Thunderbirds’ session show a
number of such A B sequences. We cited:

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David: Your father got buck teeth.
Boot: Your father got teeth growin’ out his behind.

Note that both sounds feature the same attribute: odd or misshapen
appearance, and the same target (relative to the speaker). Boot also
preserves the same surface form: that is, in neither sound does the
T is so X that . . . sentence appear. We do not in fact find sequences
of the form:

A: Your father got buck teeth.
*B: Your father got such long teeth that they growin’ out
his behind.

We also note that the most superficial syntax of the proposition P
is preserved: Your father got . . . Finally, Boot builds his sound on
the same specific notion of misshapen teeth that David introduced.
But Boot does not limit himself to mere exaggeration, such as Your
father got teeth a mile long. Instead, he adds a new theme which
combines an interest with absurdity. We will not attempt to explore
here the question of how “original” Boot’s effort is. Most sounds are
repetitions or recombinations of elements that have been used be-
fore. But it should be clear that sheer memory will not do the trick
here, as it will with rhymed dozens. The reply must be appropriate,
well-formed, it must build upon the specific model offered. It was
observed before that Boot clearly won this round, judging by the
responses of the audience.

Turning to the Jet session, we find that the targets usually shift
more rapidly, since more than two members are involved and there
is more overt play to the audience. The sequence A B is illustrated
by many examples such as:

A: Eh man, Tommy mother so little, look like she got hit
by lightning.
B: Your mother so small, you play hide-and-go-seek,
y’all c’slip under a penny.

Here the target and attribute are preserved by B, who adds another
clause going far beyond A in syntactic complexity (and apparently
to the limits of his syntactic competence). The same pattern prevails
when two different sounders are sounding on the same third man.
A: Bell grandmother so-so-so ugly, her rag is showin'.
B: Bell grandmother got so many wrinkles in her face, when they walk down the street, her mother would say, "Wrinkles and ruffles."

In the second sound, the attributes of age and ugliness overlap. The proposition is embedded in a more complex way in the T is so X clause; the embedded P combines three sentences as against the one sentence of the A model and again shows the left hand embedding which is so rare in colloquial speech. The underlying structure of this sentence, shown below, is certainly as complex as any we have seen.

Most of the sequences in the Jet session are not as complex as this, but throughout we see the general pattern that B builds on A. We do not find sequences which reverse this order—in which the same target and attribute are preserved, but in which the proposition P is simpler—as would be the case, for example, if B and A were reversed above.

In the Cobras' sounding, we get many long sequences of comparable structure until someone arrives with a more complex form which ends the series:

C1: Your momma's a truck driver!
C2: Your momma sell crackerjacks!
C3: Your mother look like a crackerjack!

The last sound in this series cannot be topped, and the sounding goes off in a completely different direction: "Your father named Theodore . . ." Here is another example of Cobras' building on each other:

C1: Your mother got on sneakers!
C2: Your mother wear high-heeled sneakers to church!
C3: Your mother wear high-heeled sneakers to come out and play on the basketball court!

The complication which B adds is often a semantic one—an additional pejorative attribute is inserted, as in the following:

A: Your mother name Black—Black Boy.
B: Your mother name the Black Bruiser.

The attribute attributed to the target is now not only blackness, but also masculinity or lack of femininity (as in Your mother James Bond).

When a sound becomes too ordinary—too possible—we can then observe a sudden switch in the pattern of response to that appropriate for a personal insult. This can happen by accident, when a sound is particularly weak. For example, in the Jet session:

A: I went in Junior house 'n' sat in a chair that caved in.
B: You's a damn liar; 'n' you was eatin' in my house, right?

This is the only instance in the Jet sounding session where a statement is denied, and it is plainly due to the fact that the proposition P is not appropriate for ritual insult. Its untruth is not at all a matter of general knowledge—it is quite possible that a chair in somebody's house would cave in, and that the chair in Junior's house did cave in. It is interesting that Junior takes the same line that David took in countering Boot's personal insult. First Junior denies the charge; second, he hits back with another proposition that is again a personal, not a ritual insult: 'You come over to my house to eat (since there was no food in your own), and so what right have you to complain?' Of course, the second part explicitly contradicts the first—if no chair caved in, how does Junior know what occasion is being talked about? Just as Boot was forced to concede the truth of
David’s point, so Junior here is plainly speaking of an actual event. There is no immediate response to contradict Junior’s last remark. Instead, the theme of sounding is continued, based on A as a first element in the series.

B: I went to Bell’s house 'n’ a Chinese roach said, “Come and git it.”
A: I brought my uncle—I brought my uncle up Junior house: I didn’t trust them guys.

Triads

There are many triads in the Jet session where B tops A, and a third person adds a sound against B. This third sound often has a different target, attribute and/or form of proposition: it is shorter and more pointed, and acts as a coda which terminates the series.

A: Your mother got funky drawers.
B: Your mother got braces between her legs.
C: Looks like your mother did it 'n ran.
A: Bell mother got a old beat-up boot.
B: Her mother got a face like a rubber ass.
C: Junior got a face like a clown.

In both of these cases, the final sound is contributed with authority by Bell, a senior member of the 100’s group. In the second triad, it is Bell who is sounded against by A, and again by B, and Bell who answers as C. A short, firmly-delivered sound of this sort, with heavy stress on the last monosyllable, seems to close off debate effectively. After the first two members of a series, the closing element provided by a third person will usually show formal simplification. Thus we have:

A: Your mother eat coke-a-roaches.
B: Your mother eat fried dick-heads.
A: Your mother suck fried dick-heads.
C: His mother eat cold dick-heads.

The theme here from the beginning is “so hungry that she eats ...”; the sounder is engaged in a search for something as disgusting to eat as he can find. B certainly tops A in this respect; note the complex noun phrase with an embedded participle. But A does not lose; he keeps the series open, capitalizing on the sexual element introduced by B. A’s reply does not depend upon syntactic complexity. In simply changing the verb, he introduces semantic complexity by introducing the implicit attribute of sexual immorality. Sex takes a higher place on the implicit agenda of relevant topics than hunger or poverty, so that we now have to read the sound as ‘Your mother is so hot that ...’ Thus A’s reply achieves semantic change with a minimum of formal change. The third man achieves closure by returning to the original verb and shortening the form with a much simpler noun phrase. The absurdity of C’s sound is based upon the assertion that the substitution of cold for hot food can be relevant at this stage in the search for disgusting attributes. This is a very low-ranking item on the agenda of relevance which governs discourse. It is a common source of humor to make such a sudden, incongruous claim to reverse the order of relevance.

We have seen that one way to achieve excellence in sounding is to develop comparisons with a high degree of left-hand embedding which suspends the final proposition. Another is to learn to close-off sequences with short sounds which abruptly change the prevailing form. The third, and perhaps the simplest method has been illustrated here—bringing about striking semantic shifts with minimal changes of form; a “minimax” solution. This is best illustrated by the following sequence from the very beginning of the Jet session:

John: I’ll take you to the last man.
Junior: I’ll take your mother.
Rel: I took your mother.

The initial remark of John Lewis is not a sound; he is simply “loaning,” or “granning.” Junior’s counter is a sound of the “dozens” model. The introduction of the target your mother also introduces the sexual meaning of take so that ambiguity is achieved with a minimum formal change. Rel’s final addition seems to us an even more adept example of semantic shift with a minimal effort. By changing from the challenge of the future form to the simply assertion of the past tense, Rel’s sound also fits the pattern of a short, decisive closure.

There are other forms of sounding which use the same targets and attributes, but very different formal structure. For example, questions are not common as sounds, but the following series begins with two:
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in demanding it, John Lewis turned around and replied without hesitation:

John L.: Next time you give me some pussy!

There was considerable uproar at this—it was evident to one and all that Junior had been put down decisively.

John Lewis's remark is one of a large class of ritual insults which impute homosexuality to the antagonist by indirection. Here it catches Junior in a double bind. If he wants to refute the ritual charge of homosexuality, then he has to interpret Lewis's reply as meaning 'Never!' But that is his decision—John Lewis has neatly left it up to him. If Lewis had said, "You're not going!" he would have been faced with a roar of injured innocence and fierce denunciation: "You cheap bastard!" etc. He has sidestepped the problem and put Junior down decisively: "Got you Junior—got you that time!"

Among the Jets, Rel is one of the most skilled at using sounds in this way. At one point in the Jets session, 13-year-old Stevie was trying to push his way into a fight developing between Larry and Rel by warning Larry, "He gon' getchyo with 'is legs ... he got legs—he got leg like—lik—"

Larry gave Stevie no more than a withering look, but Rel said

Aah, your mother got legs on 'er nose!

This sound crushed Stevie, and he made no effort to reenter the higher status group for some time. Rel's sound was as apt and crushing as Stevie's effort was bumbling and ineffective. Note however that Stevie is ordinarily a verbal leader of his own age group—an- other instance of the dominance of power relations over verbal skill.

We are now in a position to return to the original problem posed by Rel's sound, "Your mother's a duck." How is this a coherent response to Stanley's challenge? A closer examination of the context will help. First of all, we can note that when Rel first called for quiet, he was talking to the group as a whole, especially the younger, lower-status members at the other end of the table.

Rel: Shut up, please!

It was a deliberate, half-serious decision on Stanley's part to interpret Rel's request for action as being directed at him. As president, it was quite in order for him to challenge Rel's right to tell him to be quiet.

Stanley: ... 'ey, you tellin' me?

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A: Hey didn't I see ... shit on your mother bed?
B: A shot gun...
C: Did you see me under your mother bed when your father came in?
D: No I saw your uncle.
C: Oh my uncle was there too.

This whole series is positively evaluated by the group with great enthusiasm, but we will not explore the formal side of sounding further in this discussion.

Applied Sounding

So far, we have been considering the speech event called sounding as the principal focus of verbal activity. But sounding also occurs as an element in other kinds of interaction. Members with great verbal "presence of mind" are able to use sounds at critical moments to channel the direction of personal interaction in a direction that favors them. We may call such a use of ritual insults "applied sounding." It will be immediately apparent that applied sounds do not follow the rules set forth for ritual sounding—they are embedded in other rule sequences and other higher level structures of verbal interaction. But rule 1 for interpreting utterances as sounds will apply. Of the four more general properties of the ritual sounding situation, set forth on pages 343-4 above, only the fourth property is preserved—that symbolic distance is obligatory. But this property will prove essential to the analysis and ultimately to the solution of the initial problem posed in this chapter.

First it must be understood that verbal interaction among the Jets requires great verbal "presence of mind." Sounding is only one of the many ways of putting someone down. For example, the sounding session in the microbus cited above was initiated when Junior called out:

Junior: Hey what's your name! When are we goin' on the next one, K.C.?

This was out of line in two respects, first, in using What's your name with someone whose name was as well known as his own. By adding "K.C." (the usual term of address for John Lewis), the insult was only compounded. Secondly, this remark was out of line in that there had been no promise of a second outing, and Junior was far out of line

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Stanley put his elbow on the middle of the table and stretched out his long forearm towards Rel. His emphasis on me indicated that he was choosing to take this request personally. At this point, neither Rel nor Stanley could retreat.

Rel: Yes.
Stanley: Come a li'l closer.

Now Rel applied a simple sound against Stanley:

Rel: Your mother's a duck. Get outa here.
Stanley: Come a li'l closer an' say—
Rel: Your mother's a duck.

At this point, Stanley withdrew his arm, looked around, and became involved with someone else. Our understanding of why Stanley retreated is based on the definition of a sound as a ritual insult—one that is obviously not true. Though Stanley chooses to say, 'I take this personally,' Rel puts him down by redefining the situation as a ritual one. Informally, the message is 'What are you carrying on for? This is just a game we're playing, and you know it—unless your mother is a duck.' If Stanley insisted on taking the situation seriously, then he would be saying that it could be true—his mother could be a duck.

The logic of Rel's sound is the same as that of John Lewis's reply to Junior. The skill of the sounder leaves the ultimate decision up to the challenger: if he insists on taking the matter personally, the fight will go on, but he has already condemned himself and will find it very hard to regain his lost ground.

Thus the answer to the original problem we posed lies in the concept of a ritual event as one which is formulated without regard to the persons named. Sounds are directed at targets very close to the opponent (or at himself) but by social convention it is accepted that they do not denote attributes which persons actually possess: in Goffman's formulation, symbolic distance maintained serves to insulate this exchange from further consequences. The rules given above for sounding, and the development of sounds in bizarre and whimsical direction, all have the effect of preserving this ritual status. As we have seen, the ritual convention can break down with younger speakers or in strange situations—and the dangers of such a collapse of ritual safeguards are very great. Rituals are sanctuaries; in ritual we are freed from personal responsibility for the acts we are engaged in. Thus when someone makes a request for action in other subcultures, and he is challenged on the fourth precondition, "What right have you to tell me that?' his reply may follow the same strategy:

It's not my idea—I just have to get the work done.
I'm just doing my job.
I didn't pick on you—somebody has to do it.

Any of these moves to depersonalize the situation may succeed in removing the dangers of a face-to-face confrontation and defiance of authority. Ritual insults are used in the same way to manage challenges within the peer group, and an understanding of ritual behavior must therefore be an important element in constructing a general theory of discourse.