

## **The Communication of Humor: a Socio-Linguistic Approach**

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There is very little that can compare with humor for joy, comfort, relaxation, and an escape from the seriousness and routine of many everyday activities. Language, with all its component parts (phonology, morphology, and syntax) must be contextualized. In other words, it must be placed in a general situational setting or in a particular cultural setting to elicit the desired meanings and responses. To start with, let me state my definition of humor: “Linguistically, humor is communicated through the unusual distribution of some language element or elements relative to some social/cultural situation or situations.”

The types of humor can be classified under four categories. These four categories are explained below, and humorous examples are given on each.

### ***1. The Line***

This type of humor is relatively easy to respond to. The basic element that triggers the humor here is an unusual juxtaposition of a language form with other language forms or with a special real-life setting or cultural situation. Examples:

a. In a Mother’s Letter to Her Son:

- i. “Dear son, I am writing this letter slowly because I know you cannot read fast.”
- ii. “When you come home on your next vacation, you won’t recognize the house. We have moved.”

b. In Riddles:

- i. How do you fit five elephants in a mini-car? Simple: two in the front and three in the back.
- ii. What is very broad at the bottom, very narrow at the top, and has ears? A mountain, of course. What about the ears? Have you never heard of mountaineers?
- iii. What is black and white and red (read) all over? A newspaper.

c. Through (mis)Pronunciation:

- i. When this deawfwiend of ouwsopened hew wefwigewatow, she found awabbit inside. She said, “Mw. Wabbit, what awe you doing in ouwwefwigewatow?” The wabbitweplied, “This is a Westinghouse, isn’t it? I’mwesting.”
- ii. (In French and Italian, there is no distinction between /i/ as in “sit” and /i:/as in “seat”. When an American tourist in a French store wanted to try a new dress, the French saleslady said, “You can have your feet (fit) in thenext room.”
- iii. (In Portuguese, final /r/ is pronounced /w/. A Brazilian in the USA was heard to say, “Last month we bought a new diesel cow (car).”
- iv. (In Japanese, final /r/ is pronounced /l/. A Japanese announcer remarked, “All of us went through a very tough wall (war) in the forties.”

### ***2. The Fork***

This is a very common type of humor where there might be a play on words and meanings or an expectation going in one direction when the punch line points to a very different direction. Examples:

a. Play on Words:

- i. Why did the moron take a ladder with him to school? He went to a high school.
- ii. Why did the moron stand at the corner of a street with bread and butter in his hand? He was waiting for the traffic jam.
- iii. Why did the tomato in the refrigerator blush? It saw the salad dressing.

- iv. What was the cross-eyed teacher's biggest problem? His pupils.
- v. In a conversation between some friends, reference was made to a fellow who was a trouble maker. One member of the group said, "Let us not worry about him. Each dog has his day." Another member of the group, wanting to joke, said, "Yes, each dog has his day with the exception of one dog. That dog had his tail cut off, and he didn't have a day; he had a weekend."

b. Play on Sounds and Words

- i. A foreigner whose English language proficiency was rather poor, applied for a store job that involved dealing with customers. In his pronunciation he substituted a /d/ for the *th* sound in *there*. "I speak de English very good," he said to the manager. "I'm not so sure," replied the manager. "Let me see if you can use these three words in one sentence: defense, defeat, detail."

"Dat is easy," he replied. "De fox jumped over de fense, first de feet, den detail."

c. Play on Grammatical Factors

- i. An engaged couple met with their pastor for a wedding rehearsal. After the rehearsal, the bride-to-be said, "Pastor, I'm a little confused about the sequence of events, and I'm afraid to make a mistake." The pastor said, "Don't worry; it's very simple. First you walk down the aisle and stand by the altar. Then, after we sing a hymn, I will lead you through the rest of the ceremony. So all you have to remember is the aisle, the altar, the hymn."

"Thank you," she said after feeling somewhat comforted. That night she was overheard repeating, "I'll (aisle), alter (altar), him (hymn)."

d. Social/Cultural Factors

- i. At one time in London one could see some Indian conductors and bus drivers wearing their white turbans on their heads. One old lady who had probably never seen a white turban before was attempting to get on the bus with her heavy shopping bags. The turbaned conductor got off the bus and said, "I will help you, Madam," carrying one of her bags. "Let me know when you want to get off the bus." Five bus stops later he helped her down. Now, wanting to acknowledge the assistance he had given her, while mistaking the turban for a big bandage, she said, "Thank you, young man, and I hope your head gets better."
- ii. A married man, who was having a very rough and unhappy relationship with his mother-in-law, was delighted when a friend of his suggested a new definition of mixed feelings to him: "Mixed feelings is what you have when you see your mother-in-law driving your brand new car down a cliff."
- iii. An old man, who thought that his wife was somewhat hard of hearing, went to an ear doctor friend of his and said, "I think Betty is having a problem with her ears. What do you think we should do?" His doctor friend said, "Why don't you conduct an easy experiment at home first? Go to the farthest point in your home while she is in the kitchen, and, at your normal voice volume ask her what is for dinner. Then proceed closer and closer, asking the same question to see at what point she is able to hear you. Let me know the result before you bring Betty in to see me"

From their bedroom the husband said, "Honey, what's for dinner? There was no reply. From the den he asked the same question. No reply. From the living room he repeated the question and then from the entrance with no reply. Finally at the kitchen door he said, "Honey, what's for dinner?"

"For heaven's sake," she said in a loud voice. "For the fifth time: CHICKEN."

### 3. The Hook

This type of humor involves a surprise. One might expect a story to go in some (any) direction, and the punch line provides a very unexpected twist. Examples:

a. In Not-Very-Ordinary Settings

- i. Two friends planned to spend a weekend in a bed-and-breakfast inn named The Green Orchard, which they had never been to before. When the driver reached a fork in the road, he didn't know which way to take. He got out of the car, trying to find someone to help. Suddenly he came across a sign that read:

Take your RIGHT to the GREEN ORCHARD

P.S. If you don't know how to read, ask the nearby farmer.

He thought this was very funny, and he pointed it out to his friend to enjoy the joke. His passenger friend read it and said, "What's so funny about it?"

Obviously, if you can't read, what else can you do but ask the farmer?"

"Well, if you don't get it, you don't get it," replied the driver. After dinner they went to their rooms for the night. The car passenger couldn't sleep, trying to figure out the meaning of the sign. Shortly after midnight he thought he got it, and he didn't want his friend to think that he was too slow to understand the point. So he knocked on his friend's door, woke him up, and said, "I just want you to know that I got the joke: What if the farmer is not there? HO, ho, ho."

ii. An old man, whose driving license had been revoked because of his poor eyesight, told his wife that he wanted to drive to his club for a luncheon meeting. "You're not allowed to drive," she said. "I know," he replied, "but it's only a few exits away on the highway." "Well, be very careful," she pleaded. After he left, she turned on the radio, as she had always done, to get the morning news. Suddenly she heard an urgent alert to drivers on that highway: Be very careful; there is a car going the wrong way on the highway. She immediately called her husband on his cell phone and said,

"They've just announced that there is a car going the wrong way on your Highway. Be very careful, dear." "Not one," he said, "hundreds."

iii. A policeman spotted a lady driving her car while she was knitting. He drove his patrol car alongside hers, rolled down his window, and said, "Pull over." She turned to him and said, "No, scarf."

#### **4. The Fork and Hook**

This type of humor is triggered when a story seems to lead to a possible understandable fork, and the punch line goes in an entirely surprise direction. Examples:

a. With Some Odd People

i. A kind and generous man, who lived in a hot climate, used to hang his wash on the roof to dry in the sun. He was popular with his friends and neighbors because he often invited them to his home for delicious meals. One day he hung his wash on the roof and, upon his return from work, he noticed one of his shirts being blown away by a strong gust. That evening he called some of his friends and invited them to dinner to celebrate the loss of his shirt. At the dinner table one of his friends said, "People usually celebrate happy occasions. Thank you very much for this scrumptious meal, but why are you celebrating the loss of a shirt?" "Oh," he said, "I am celebrating my safety as well. Can you imagine what would have happened to me if I was wearing that shirt?"

ii. A long time ago one fellow wanted to buy something to eat for a light supper. He had only fifteen cents in his pocket. In the grocery store next to his house he found nothing to buy for the money he had. On his way out of the store he noticed some apples priced at a nickel each. Well, he thought to himself, three apples will be good enough for a light supper.

When he got home, he turned on the lights, washed the apples, and sat at the table to enjoy his meal. He cut into the first apple and found a worm in it. That disgusted him, and he threw it away, lamenting the fact that he had lost one third of his supper. He cut into the second apple and found another worm in it too. Throwing it away, he was now terribly disappointed that he had lost two thirds of his supper. Then he thought and he thought and he thought, and he turned off the lights and ate the third apple.

Some people believe that this is the real story behind the internationally known saying: Ignorance is bliss.