

# **Humor in Some Linguistic Perspectives**

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## **Abstract**

Humor is something that invites laugh and it has become the heart of research in some various disciplines due to the fact that the ability to perceive and produce humor belongs to human trait. This ability develops through time and culture. To be able to perceive and produce humor, understanding context and schemata is inevitably needed. Psychology utilizes humor to reveal stress, linguistics investigates humor base on the linguistic units in producing and analyzing humor, and semiotics uses humor to reveal the message carried by signs in humorous texts. This article discusses the basic theories of humor and the application of some linguistic approaches towards humor.

Keywords: humor, linguistics, language, culture, and context

## **Abstrak**

Humor adalah segala sesuatu yang mengundang tawa dan itu telah menjadi objek penelitian di beberapa bidang kajian karena kemampuan untuk menerima dan memproduksi humor menjadi salah satu karakteristik/kemampuan manusia. Kemampuan ini akan terus berkembang seiring perkembangan waktu dan kebudayaan. Untuk dapat menikmati dan memproduksi humor, pemahaman terhadap konteks dan skemata menjadi hal yang mutlak. Psikologi memanfaatkan humor untuk melepaskan stress, linguistik memberikan piranti kebahasaan untuk menganalisis humor, dan semiotik menggunakan humor untuk menunjukkan pesan yang dikandung oleh berbagai tanda di dalam teks-teks humor. Artikel ini membahas teori-teori dasar humor dan penerapan beberapa pendekatan linguistik terhadap humor.

Kata kunci: humor, linguistik, bahasa, kebudayaan, konteks

## **Introduction**

Humor has been the subject of research in various disciplines in recent days from psychological field (Freud, 1960), semiotics (Dorfles, 1968), and linguistics (Raskin, 1985; Atardo & Raskin, 1991). Freud says that humor can be utilized to reduce psychological tension caused by depression. Psychological researchers are naturally more interested in the role of humor in the life of human beings not on the language and technicality of humor production. Dorfles assumes that humor will be considered a particular kind of message (...) that operates when in a determined communicative circumstance a (...) change a relationship between the sign and its referent is given (1986:102). He further explains that the fact that the sign no longer refer to its 'natural' referent but to another 'paradoxical'...referent, gives a 'negative', 'paradoxical' values to the sign, and so its humorous effect. Raskin highlights that the ability to appreciate and

enjoy humor is a universal human trait, whereas the individual's response to humor are the result of their exercising of this ability in varying degrees (1985)

It can be seen that humor is very natural to human being as it can function to reveal stress and entertain human psychological condition; humor can also be found in many signs in people's surrounding and language is the biggest sign-system in human culture, therefore, humor is unique to each culture due to the fact that the speaker and the hearer must have certain level of schemata to understand humor. Humor is context-bound and culture provides the most immense context; particular culture will create particular context

### **Definition of Humor**

Defining humor and answering the question 'why do we laugh?' is arduous if not improbable due to the subjective characteristics of humor. People laugh at different things and they may have different background so that sometimes humor may be perceived differently. What is considered to be funny may be interpreted ironically in different context. Cultural background can be the most influential context in determining humor. In a simple way, humor is defined as anything that makes people laugh or is amusing, or the capacity to recognize what is funny about a situation or person. Anything that invites laugh can be considered as humor. A different generation may find different thing about funniness. Humor is a wide, often subjectively treated study. Despite many theories of humor across disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, anthropology, and medicine, it is still nearly impossible to determine how humor works. (Gardner 2008:9)

### **Types of Humor**

Some scholars retain a distinction between high and low comedy. High comedy provides a critique, often quite stinging of human weakness and customs, social structure, and power. It realized into the following but not limited to satire and irony; and dark comedy. Dark comedy is usually defined as humor relating to subject normally treated very serious or somber. Low comedy does not imply any social critique and is based on a wide range of topics, such as: romantic comedy (battle of the sexes, sexual innuendo), sitcom (stupidity/naive), slapstick (physical humor, delight in misfortune of others and physical incongruity).

### **Theories of Humor**

Basically there are three fundamental theories on humor, the relief theory, the superiority theory and the incongruity theory. From linguistic point of view, incongruity theory becomes the most popular chosen theory to analyze humor. However the other two theories need to be discussed in brief.

#### **1. Relief/Release Theory**

It is undeniable that the most passionate interest for humor research was firstly initiated by psychologists, thus, the earliest efforts to formulate theories of humor were made in psychology field. Release humor can be seen as 'a way to remain sane'. Relief in terms of humor theory is most commonly associated with Freud's work in *Jokes and Their Relation to the*

*Unconscious* (1960). The main premise behind humor encouraging relief is that the physical act of laughing provides a way of venting nervous energy from emotions that are not accepted by the society.

## 2. Superiority Theory

Superiority theory concludes that laughter occurs as a reaction of to a feeling of ‘sudden glory’. This feeling of glory is as a reaction to inferior object/person/group of people, or an inferior version of our-selves in the past. These inferior objects or characters are located in humor as the ‘butt of the joke” Superiority theory indicates the use of humor by the society to correct deviant behavior (Attardo, 1994: 52)

## 3. Incongruity Theory

Incongruity becomes the most popular theories of humor due to the fact that humor arises from a certain discrepancy in a situation, an unexpected ‘glitch’. Raskin quotes Mindess and explains that in jokes ‘we are led along one line of thought and then booted out of it’. Incongruity theory proposes that in a joke (or humorous situation) there are two incongruous elements which are also linked in a way. In other words, the elements should not be entirely incongruous or the humor will not be perceived (Raskin, 1985: 31-32). In incongruity theory, the audience member is led to expect a certain behavior, statement, chain of events and then is surprised and humor is produced by the misperception or unrecognized meaning.

## **SSTH and GTVH**

The Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) proposes by Rasikin (1985) utilizes the idea of scripts to describe the process of producing two or more interpretation from a humorous text. Each joke need two opposing script to display an opposition that is incongruous, and therefore humorous. "Script" is broadly defined as a structured chunk of information about lexemes and/or parts of the world. The SSTH can be summarized as two necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to be funny:

- a. Each joke must contain two overlapping scripts (that is, the joke must be interpretable fully or in part, according to two different scripts);
- b. The two scripts must be opposed (that is, they must be the negation of each other, if only for the purpose of a given text), according to a list of basic oppositions, such as real/unreal, normal/abnormal, possible/impossible, etc.

In a simple way, it can be said that the basic notion of SSTH is that two interpretations are achieved from a joke, both are scripts. Those interpretations are often as a result of a particular word or phrase, one of which is favored by the reader/hearer. This favored interpretation is placed or set in a part of the text which is affected by the reveal of a joke (It is usually placed in the last sentence/clause). The differences in the meaning of those two interpretations of a text/utterance result in incongruity, through its specific opposition (script-switch trigger).

Take a look at those two examples.

- (1) Customer : “Why is this chop very tough?”

Waiter : "It's a karate chop"

(2) *Suami* : "Aduh, kepalaku pusing banget"

*Istri* : "Sebentar, aku ambilin kampak"

The general Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) is Attardo and Raskin's (1991) elaboration of the SSTH to a more sophisticated linguistic theory of humor (incongruity-resolution based). It means that it uses many linguistic area including (but not limited to) narrative theory, pragmatics, and stylistics (1994: 222). GTVH is meant at explaining the semantic efforts behind humor are brought into the theory by the roles of six Knowledge Resource (KR) parameters that provide the certain attributes of jokes that can be compared between instances of humor for joke similarity, something which Attardo (1994) claims the theory dedicates a lot of effort to. The KRs are the script opposition (SO), the logical mechanism (LM), the target (TA), the narrative strategy (NS), the language (LA), and the situation (SI) (Attardo, 1994: 223).

#### Script Opposition (SO)

SO deals with the script opposition/overlap requirement presented in the SSTH. It should be noted that the SO is the most abstract (perhaps sharing this degree of abstractness with the LM) of all the KRs, which accounts for the fact that the SSTH could collapse all six KRs onto this one (basically ignoring the other five, with some exceptions, such as TA and LA).

#### Logical mechanism (LM)

The logical mechanism accounts for the way in which the two senses (scripts) in the joke are brought together. LMs can range from straightforward juxtapositions, false analogies, garden path phenomena.

#### Target (TA)

The target selects the butt of the joke. Jokes that are not aggressive (that is, that do not ridicule someone or something) have an empty value for the TA.

#### Narrative strategy (NS)

The NS accounts for the fact that any joke has to be cast in some form of narrative organization, that is either as a simple (framed) narrative, as a dialogue (question and answer), as a pseudo-riddle, as an aside in a conversation, etc.

#### Situation (SI)

Any joke must introduce some event or situation such as changing a light bulb, crossing the road, playing golf, etc. The situation of a joke can be thought of as the "props" of the joke: the objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc

#### Language (LA)

The LA is the actual verbalization of the joke, resulting in its text. It includes all the linguistic components of the text at all levels.

Take a look at below example taken from Rosenbloom (1981: 91)

Ned : “What kind of dog do you have there-a pointer?”

Fred : “No-a disppointer’

Knowledge Resorce	Explanation
SO	Actual/non-actual → dog breed/adjective
LM	Using homonym (pointer) in the form of a breed dog and an adjective
TA	Particular dog being called a disappointment by his owner
NS	Conversation between two or three people
SI	Dog walking or entering a bar
LA	Actual linguistic units used in the particular order used by the participants to convey all of the above parameters. Participants use informal style.

*Konteks* Tiga orang dosen tengah bersiap-siap mengikuti upacara bendera 17 Agustus.. Mereka memperbincangkan tugas laporan penelitian yang sudah mendekati masa monitoring.

*Dosen 1* : “Waduh...aku beum ngetik laporan penelitian sama sekali’

*Dosen 2* : “Weh...aku dong semalam ngetik”

*Dosen 3* :”Ah keren sekali”

*Dosen 2* : “Ngetik di wa grup lah”

SO	Typing research report and typing in Whatsapp chatting (ngetik)
LM	Using verb ‘ngetik’ and mislead the context
TA	Group of lecturer approaching research monitoring period
NS	Conversation
SI	Preparing for Independence Day Ceremony
LA	Informal language use

## **Humor and Linguistics**

Most humor utilizes linguistic unit to realize their message even though some humor may be presented in picture/photos such as meme. As an important part in humor language may provide some functions and inevitably language is the center of linguistics studies. Linguistics perceives humor as a human being product of communication. In daily bases conversation, people try to communicate something and most of them are realized into language. Linguistics gives a platform for researcher to conduct researches on humor. There are some of linguistics subfield that can be considered in humor research.

## **Humor and Pragmatics**

Pragmatics is a sub-discipline in linguistics that concerns about the meaning in context. It deals with many aspects of language use in various kinds of context. The two major issues in pragmatics is cooperative principle and politeness principle. Both of them are used to govern conversation so that it can run smoothly and properly.

### **Humor Resulted From the Floating of Cooperative Principle**

Cooperative principle becomes the heart of pragmatics since it governs the participants in communication to speak as much as needed for to communication to run properly. Grice (1975) mentions four maxims to support cooperative principle as follows.

- (1) Maxim of quantity
  - a. make your contribution as informative as required;
  - b. do not make your contribution more informative than required.
- (2) Maxim of quality
  - a. do not say what you believe to be false;
  - b. do not say which you lack adequate evidence.
- (3) Maxim of relation  
Make you contribution relevant.
- (4) Maxim of manner
  - a. avoid obscurity
  - b. avoid ambiguity
  - c. be brief
  - d. be orderly

Rule-governed conversation will result the effective communication, however, people do not only need to communicate referentially but they also need to communicate affectively. Humor can be a strategy to express affective intention in communication and it can be produced by neglecting the cooperative principle.

The forms of maxim's neglect at least take one out of the four following ways.

- (1) Opting out: making clear that one is aware of the maxim, but is prevented for some reasons from observing it.
- (2) Violating the maxim: often with the intention to mislead, this is often a quiet act, also known as lying.
- (3) A clash: arises when one cannot be fully co-operative.
- (4) Flouting: it happens when a speaker openly disregard the maxim.

The neglect of cooperative principle is systematically proposed into NBF Communication Mode by Raskin. Raskin (1985) edited the Coopertative Principle mainly for jokes and presented them as the Non-Bona-Fide (NBF) Communication Mode of joke telling. He assumed that jokes were not produced simply by floating Grice's maxim in general conversation but it had their on arrangement. To be able to make a successful humor, one or more of the 'principles' must be adhered to as all jokes belong to the Non-Bona-Fide Communication Mode;

- (1) maxim of quantity : give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke;

- (2) maxim of quality: say only what is compatible with the words of the joke;
- (3) maxim of relation: say only what is relevant to the joke;
- (4) maxim of manner: tell the joke efficiently

(Raskin, 1985: 103)

Here are some examples taken from Attardo (1994: 272) that can be used to elaborate the NBF Communication Mode of joke Telling above.

- (1) maxim of quantity
  - “Excuse me, do you know what time it is?”
  - ‘Yes’
- (2) maxim of quality
  - “Why did the Vice President fly to Panama?”
  - “Because the fighting is over”
- (3) maxim of relation
  - “How many surrealists does it take to screw in a light bulb?”
  - “Fish”
- (4) maxim of manner
  - “Do you believe in club for young people?”
  - “Only when kindness fails”

### **Humor Resulted From the Floating of Politeness Principle**

Aside from cooperative principle, a politeness principle is also introduced to maintain social relationship among speaker. Those principles are meant to avoid stiffness in communication. Some scholars have proposed several theories of politeness. Here I take Leech’s Politeness model. The central concept in Leech model is that of a cost-benefit scale of politeness related to both the speaker and the hearer. Leech (1983) argues that politeness involves minimizing the cost and maximizing the benefit to speaker/hearer. His politeness principles are arranged in several maxims as follows.

- (1) The Tact Maxim
  - a. Minimize cost to other.
  - b. Maximize benefit to other
- (2) The Generosity Maxim
  - a. Minimize benefit to self
  - b. Maximize cost to self
- (3) The Approbation Maxim
  - a. Minimize despair of other
  - b. Maximize praise to other
- (4) The Modesty Maxim
  - a. Minimize praise of self
  - b. Maximize praise of other
- (5) The Agreement Maxim
  - a. Minimize disagreement between self and other

- b. Maximize agreement between self and other
- (6) The Sympathy Maxim
  - a. Minimize antipathy between self and other
  - b. Maximize sympathy between self and other

### **Humor as a Politeness Strategy**

Brown and Levinson (1987: 124) claim that humor, joke precisely, can be used as a politeness strategy since it is based on mutual shared background knowledge and values. Jokes may be used to stress that shared background or those shared values. Joking is a basic positive-politeness technique for putting H (hearer) ‘at ease’-for example in response to a *faux pas* (social blunder) of H’s. Joking is a positive-politeness strategy. Brown and Levinson use the concept of ‘face’ in building their politeness strategy. Face is public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself; which consists of two related aspects:

- (1) negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, right to non-distraction-i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition.
- (2) Positive face: the positive consistent self-image or ‘personality’ (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61).

As it has been noted before, joke can be used as a politeness strategy in social blunder situation. Take a look at below situation.

Context : A new couple comes to a restaurant. While waiting for the menu, they are happily and enthusiastically talking when suddenly the woman farts

Woman : Sorry (smile clumsily)

Man : It’s OK. Everybody does (laugh)

Farting in front of a new date creates inconvenient situation. In response to the woman’s apology, the man utters a comforting reply and laughs. He uses jokes to save her date’s face by saying “It’s OK. Everybody does”. He uses joke to make generality and that of farting is not a bad thing since everybody does it. His response clearly shows positive attitude in politeness.

### **Humor in Translation**

Translating a text is not an easy thing to do especially when the text is culturally bounded. A humorous text is an example of culturally bounded text hence a translator needs to consider the cultural value so that the translation product is accepted. When it comes to translating humor, the operation proves to be as desperate as that of translating poetry” (Diot 1989: 84). The relative or absolute untranslatability is generally related to cultural and linguistic aspects. On a broader discursive level, a comical source text may contain (clashes between) registers, dialects, sociolects and idiolects which have no straightforward equivalent in the target language. When translation is difficult, descriptive translation studies will be interested in solutions that tell something about the contact between these cultures, groups and agents. They will note, for instance, that humor may have various textual and ideological functions which all



deserve to be taken into account. A descriptive comparison between a source and target text will not see humor as a homogeneous category (“that what caused laughter”) but will study its specific cognitive, emotional, social and interpersonal aspects (Vandaele 2002). Basically in translating humor, a translator must be able to convey the message/idea without changing the genre.

### **Humor in Education**

A short humor story can be used as an ice-breaking before teacher starts the class. Due to students’ various background knowledge, a simple joke may invite various responses. It will be better if the joke is not too long. Murphy (2008) suggests the criteria for simple joke-genre are as follows:

- (1) A good set up must establish a situation and an expectation; be short enough to keep keen attention; be easy to understand; not contain anything funnier than the punch line; provide contrast for the punch line’s impact
- (2) A good punch line must work off the set up; provide a contrast/incongruence, surprise and/or exaggeration

There is always a ‘funny word’ in the joke. A ‘funny word’ is a word that has been strategically placed in the joke to trigger a laugh or amusement. This ‘funny word’ is often (but not always) placed at the very end of the punch line. It may or may not be a ‘funny sounding’ word.

Here is a simple example taken from Murphy (2008)

Before starting a speaking class, a teacher may give joke to the students relate to the topic of discussion. For example to start a speaking class on vegetarian, a teacher may express the joke below.

It’s tough being a vegetarian! —→ Tension, curiosity and sympathy

But actually, I really do enjoy vegetarian food —→Tension release and raise in curiosity

Especially with a little pork —→ This is the punch line

### **Conclusion**

The ability to perceive and produce humor belongs to human trait which develops through time and culture. It has become the interest for several disciplines since it serves many functions in human life. Several theories have been introduced to analyzed humor and people keep on exploring to develop it. The advancement of technology provides more and more devices for human being to create humor and humor can be realized into various signs. Humor will be humor as long as it can amuse people .One thing needs to be highlighted that humor is like a frog, once it is dissected, it dies.

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