

THEORIES AND TYPES OF HUMOUR IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Education and humour may seem two issues that definitely exclude each other, the first involving seriousness while the second mere enjoyment. However, at a deeper level, their close relationship in the complexity of a typical classroom environment will result into a genuine success. From the various theories on humour, incongruity, superiority, and evolutionary theories appear to be of great importance. When the taxonomy of humour comes into the spotlight, the views seem to be generally shared, as humour may be used in many different ways, but undoubtedly it is always situational. Humour is a fundamentally undefined emotional response and an accurate analysis of it seems almost impossible to achieve. As a matter of fact, defining humour has been compared with the attempt to express the essence of music in words. The same as in the case of music, humour is subjective; what one finds funny about a joke or situation another may not.

Key words: analysis, English as a foreign language, humour, taxonomy

1. Introduction

Very few researchers take care to define what they mean by humour, or specify the basis on which they selected their examples. Aspects and repercussions of humour and the functions it can play are readily ascribed and discussed, and entire theories are sometimes constructed, without a definition in sight. Those researchers that do define their terms or make explicit the criteria by which they select examples adopt varying approaches and emphases. Comparison of definitions highlights contradictions and inconsistencies in this area. The issue is further complicated by terminological overlap and confusion.

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In the case of humour, a special place must be devoted to grammatical irregularities, polysemy of words, structural homonymy of sentences, etc., that alter the meaning of a sentence or utterance, making it ambiguous and thus creating a humorous effect. We, as teachers, are fully aware of the fact that to deal with humour is not a simple business and sometimes it could be misleading. We all have such different ideas of what is meant by funny. What is funny to an Englishman is often not funny to a Romanian. What is funny to one Englishman may not be funny to another. And nothing is more exasperating to a reader than 'humour' which he/she cannot understand. It strikes him/her as either impertinence or insult to his/her intelligence.

Nevertheless, teachers should try at least to step on this path because jokes are not merely for the sake of fun or entertainment but for a serious linguistic investigation with the purpose of showing their usefulness within the complex teaching-learning process. Our role in the classroom is to make it possible for the students to approach humour from a linguistic point of view and thus help them to acquire the skills of comprehending the most complex intellectual feat accessible to all humans, and that is the use of English language. Humour has some fundamental principles which consist of specific linguistic phenomena, the most important being the absence of one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning. That is the main source of ambiguity, the most general language phenomenon underlying the majority of linguistically-based jokes. The ambiguity of a sentence allows one to interpret it in a sense different from that which was originally meant and thus creating a humorous effect.

Humour is a quite generous term that could be used in a wide and a narrow sense as well. The first application can be met in literature and in any speech or form of writing where the purpose is to amuse or to bring about laughter to the reader or hearer. The second sense distinguishes humour from satire, farce and wit and it refers more to the character and situation than to the plays upon words or ideas.

The question that inevitably comes into our minds refers to the manner in which a certain situation is made laughable. All we know for a fact is that there do exist various things which make people laugh but it seems really difficult to identify what they have in common. And here come the theories of humour which attempt to clarify this matter. There are three dominant theories of humour: *incongruity*, *superiority*, and *evolutionary*. The peculiarity lies in the fact that none of these theories has one researcher who could be recognized as its creator. However, we must not forget that instances of the incongruity theory have been attributed to Freud, Piaget, Schopenhauer, and Kant; instances of the superiority theory to Aristotle, Plato, Hobbes, Bain, and Bergson; and finally, instances of the evolutionary theory to Darwin, Alexander, and Weisfeld.

2. The Incongruity and Superiority Theories

In the next lines, there will be briefly presented some scientific opinions on each of these three theories, opinions which were stated by various remarkable linguists. L. Deckers & P. Kizer in their *Humour and the Incongruity Theory* (Journal of Psychology, 1975) refer to **incongruity** as “the divergence between an expected and actual state of affairs and has long been recognized as a condition for humour”, the result of this divergence being humour. D.J. Hill (*Humour in the Classroom: A Handbook for Teachers and Other Entertainers*, 1988) comes with a further assertion: that when something is taken for incongruous, then it is viewed as a combination with an unusual or unexpected something else. Going deeper, Ronald A. Berk (*Humour as an Instructional Defibrillator: Evidence –Based Techniques in Teaching and Assessment*, 2002) considers that there are two types of incongruity theory, and they are expected content and unexpected twist or punch line. Another point of view is the one belonging to Peter M. Jonas, who asserts in the *Secrets of Connecting Leadership and Learning with Humour* (2004) that the incongruity theories “explain humour as unexpected or surprising experiences, words or activities that happen. Strange, absurd, inappropriate consequences or endings are examples of incongruity theories”. On the other side, Richard A. Shade’s opinion regarding the appearance of incongruity is that it comes up when people are expecting one thing to happen, but they get a different response, if not the opposite of their expectations (*License to Laugh: Humour in the Classroom*, 1996). And this is the very source of humour arising either from verbal or visual incongruities. The last but definitely not the least view that I am bringing in front refers to Mary K. Rothbart’s attempt to define the incongruity theory presented above by stating that “...although perception of an incongruous or unexpected event may lead to laughter, perception of an unexpected event may also lead to fear, curiosity, problem-solving, or concept learning”(Incongruity, Problem-Solving and Laughter, 1976). And it is obvious that from this point of view, the rightful place of humour is no longer outside the classroom but definitely inside it.

As it could be noticed in the aforementioned definitions of the incongruity theory – which had a more or less agreement with one another – this theory accounts for the cognitive side of humour. Nevertheless, it does not always results into academic achievement even if it has a great potential but still its role in education is a reality that could not be denied or minimised. Consequently, I will stick to those studies in which humour has brought about an increase of knowledge acquisition and two good examples would be C.A. Crump’s *Teacher Immediacy: What Students Consider to Be Effective Teacher’s Behaviour*, 1996) in which he investigated the impact of

immediacy behaviours in the classroom. In this study, teacher's immediacy has been found to have a positive impact on students' cognitive, affective and behavioural learning. The next example refers to R.L. Garner's association of humour with a host of positive physiological and psychological effects in *Humour in Pedagogy. How ha-ha Can Lead to Aha*, 2006. He has identified that educators who use humour in their instruction are better rated by their peers and their students as well and it has been suggested that humour may enhance learning just like in the case of the previous research.

When it comes to the **superiority theory**, it must not omit to mention that this concept continues the cognitive aspect of the previous theory, leading to the affective side of fostering the learning process. However, as it demands the same recognition of incongruent stimuli, the superiority theory is still very much cognitive. The following paragraphs point out some scientific researches so as to illustrate the above stated ideas related to this theory. The first one belongs to L. LaFave, J. Haddad and W.A. Maesen who, in their *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications* (1976). They various classes while being exposed to different types of jokes and noticed that in some situations their class was the 'butt' of the anecdote, and in others the 'victor'. The conclusion they came up with was that "An attitude holds both an emotive and a cognitive component".

The linguist C.E. Cornett became convinced that the superiority theory of humour is constructed around on the basis that "humans derive pleasure from seeing themselves as better off than others" (*Learning Through Laughter...Again*, 2001). As a consequence, we may amuse ourselves of the people who make certain errors we never would or more than that we could laugh at our past mistakes because when we do this we feel superior to what or who we were back at the time. The general point here is that everything inferior to us is often found humorous: clowns, caricatures, puppets, and impersonators. Nevertheless, there is a very important specification to to be mentioned: defects in others are humorous as long as they are not harmful to the victims.

There is no doubt then that at the basis of any source of laughter there lie the superior feelings, as the two Geek philosophers of Antiquity Plato and Aristotle rightly believed. "We laugh maliciously when we possess superior knowledge over the people we ridicule." "We laugh at people who have an inferior moral character or at people who are more ugly or distorted than ourselves" considers D. J. Hill in his *Humour in the Classroom: A Handbook for Teachers and Other Entertainers* (1988). In other words, the reason why we sometimes laugh at people or situations is out of fear, ignorance, or lack of power and control.

3. The Evolutionary Theory

As far as the **evolutionary theory** of humour is concerned, mention must be made as to its origin and we can say that it utilizes biology as its basis, more explicitly it involves the ability to produce and appreciate humour evolved via sexual selection. This mental capacity of creating humour clearly demonstrates the existence of intelligence and creativity. The result of humorous situations is submitted to the process of sexual selection and this phenomenon will endow children with desirable genetic humorous qualities inherited from their parents (E.R. Bressler, R.A. Martin and S. Balshine, *Production and Appreciation of Humour as Sexually Selected Traits*, 2006). The researchers' conclusions demonstrated that there is an obvious difference between men's and women's sense of humour. Whereas women consider the sense of humour in their partners as their ability to create humour, men look at this characteristic as women's receptiveness to their humour. This particular study showed that men do not care if their female partners are funny as long as women believe that men possess this quality. So as to conclude the evolutionary theory, it is worth mentioning a quote in this research: "Thus, sexual selection may have more strongly favoured women who reacted positively to humour producers and men who attended preferentially to women who appreciated their humour"(p. 122).

Humans indicate what they find funny by laughing, which serves other purposes in the evolutionary perspective as well. According to an article published in "The Economist", laughing demonstrates we are superior: "Indeed, another theory of why people laugh—the superiority theory—says that people laugh to assert that they are on a level equal to or higher than those around them. Research has shown that bosses tend to crack more jokes than do their employees. Women laugh much more in the presence of men, and men generally tell more jokes in the presence of women. Men have even been shown to laugh much more quietly around women, while laughing louder when in a group of men" (Economist, 2005).

The general remark is that each of these theories is capable to explain some types of humour but it may be doubted if any of them can satisfactorily explain every type of humour. Nevertheless their great role is that each type of theory does illuminate some aspect of humour. Superiority theory accounts very well for our laughter at small misfortunes and for the appeal of satire, but are less efficient in dealing with word play, incongruity, nonsense, and indecency. Incongruity theory, on the other hand, is strong where superiority theory is weakest, and the vice versa. While the evolutionary theory accounts for the gender difference in perceiving a certain humorous instance.

There are many ways of classifying humour, but there would be worthless trying to list them all but identifying some key categories. The sociolinguist David H. Monro (*Argument of Laughter*, 4th Edition, 2001) provides an outline of what he regards to be the traditional classes of humour: any breach of the usual order of events; any forbidden breach of the usual order of events; indecency; importing into one situation what belongs in another; anything masquerading as something it's not; wordplay; nonsense; small misfortunes; want of knowledge or skill; veiled insults.

Another view concerning humour belongs to A.C. Zijderfeld who describes humour as 'the exploitation of institutionalized meanings', and breaks down the types of humour into exploitation of either language (e.g. puns, spoonerisms), logic (wit, elephant jokes), emotions (black humour) or the activities of everyday life (parody, understatement) (*The Sociology of Humour and Laughter*, 1983).

S. Feigelson's *Mixing Mirth and Management* (1989) distinguishes the following taxonomy of humour instances among the employees in a factory:

- Puns
- Goofing off (slapstick)
- Jokes/anecdotes
 - Humorous self-ridicule
 - Bawdy jokes (sexual or racial basis)
 - Industry jokes
- Teasing
 - Teasing to get things done
 - Bantering - the great leveller

When dealing with any types of jokes we are aware that they are context specific. Puns, on the other hand, represent a relevant category which would fall into a broader context, that of wordplay, as described in N. Norrick (*Conversational Joking: Humour in Everyday Talk*, 1993). C. Mitchell (*Some Differences in Male and Female Joke Telling*, 1985) makes a further distinction between *narrative jokes* and *question and answer jokes*. As far as *teasing* is concerned, there may exist some confusion as to whether it is a type of humour, or a strategy, or function. It is rather different than other "types" identified so far due to the fact a tease cannot be formally identified by any criterion. We regard tease as a strategy which can take any number of forms, and which can be used to create either solidarity or power. Another really interesting research about the types of humour would be the one belonging to J. Bryant, P.W. Comisky, and

D. Zillman (*Teachers' Humour in the College Classroom*, 1979), which examine and code six units of humour commonly used in the classroom. The units are as follows: *jokes, riddles, puns, funny stories, humorous comments*, and *other* (containing all remaining humorous items). Along with the units, the researchers divide the units into types of humour used in the classroom, such as nonsexual hostile, sexual nonhostile, sexual hostile, and nonsense.

In order to sum up the ideas discussed in this chapter, I can assert that humour may be used in many different contexts, but it is always situational (C.M. Edwards & E.R. Gibboney, *The Power of Humour in the College Classroom*, 1992). According to D. Cohen (*Humour, Irony and Self-Detachment*, 1977), the three laughing situations are:

- to be laughed at (usually an unpleasant or fearful experience);
- to make others laugh (a fun, personally rewarding situation); and
- to be able to laugh at oneself (considered by many to be an admirable quality).

The conclusion coming out from this classification is that humour can be a negative or positive influence, depending on which of the three laughing situations occurs in the classroom.

Conclusion

To sum up the ideas shared in this article, we must bear in mind that humour is a fundamentally undefined emotional response and an accurate analysis of it seems almost impossible to achieve. As a matter of fact, defining humour has been compared with the attempt to express the essence of music in words (G.G. Pocheptsov, *Language and Humour*). The same as in the case of music, humour is subjective; what one finds funny about a joke or situation another may not. Humour in general and more specifically linguistic humour requires a highly developed intellect and it is encountered mainly in specific sociolinguistic conditions, two of them being the love for the mother tongue and the aesthetic pleasure that derives from it (Pocheptsov). The ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle was convinced that laughter has the ability to animate the human soul, thus separating us from animals (Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History*, 1995).

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