

# Types of Humour

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**Types of Humour**

Završni rad

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## 1. Introduction

The subject of humour has been discussed throughout history and has been an engaging topic firstly to philosophers, then to linguists, sociologists and psychologists. A general idea and definition of humour has been established, which is that it is *a funny and amusing quality*. There are several other adjectives which also describe humour such as: comic, hilarious, ridiculous, silly and even absurd. It is hard to think of humour in its essence, as it is considered by most to be something which simply happens or does not – something is or is not funny - which makes it hard to grasp the idea, define and describe it. It is an impalpable mechanism, rooted inside our minds ( God only knows why ), which finds everyday use, and the way it functions is incredible i.e. one cannot outline a joke and plan its punch line like one does with designing a house for instance, but one simply devises a set of circumstances which he/she realizes is amusing and comic and hopes that the receiving audience will share their opinion. Virtually everybody accepts certain situations , stories or thoughts by laughing at them, subconsciously recognizing their funniness, which tells that the sense of humour is a simple and universal human trait. However, the moment the idea of humour collides with philosophy, linguistics and psychology, where my main focus, obviously, will be the linguistic approach to humour, it all becomes vague and ambiguous, as by now nobody has found concurrence trying to explain this phenomenon which is at the same time both simple and complex. In my research I will try my best to explain and exemplify this incredible mechanism and its types, starting firstly by going through the problematics of defining, explaining and classifying humour by following certain linguistic theories. To end this introduction in satisfactory manner, I feel compelled to round it off with a joke, but I am having a hard time finding or thinking out an adequate one which – to be frank – is demotivating at the very least as I am dealing with this subject.

## 2. Problematics of Humour

### 2.1. Defining Humour

„ However commonplace it is in everyday life, humour seems to be rather elusive and unpindownable as a theoretical concept. However, this has not prevented scholars of various disciplines [...] from probing into the topic of humour, which has, more often than not, resulted in "epistemological hairsplitting" (Attardo 1994:1). The problems involved in defining humour are such that several scholars have doubted that an all-embracing definition of humour could be formulated ( Attardo 1994:3).

One of the difficulties in defining humour derives from the fact that the terminology used to describe it is not explicit. Some scholars, such as Schmidt-Hidding (1963, Attardo 1994:6-7), have attempted to clarify the issue by proposing semantic maps of humour but undoubtedly various others, significantly different, could be formulated.

The definition of what humour is ultimately depends on the purpose for which it is used. As Attardo (1994:4) points out, in the field of literary criticism, for example, there is a need for a fine-grained categorisation, whereas linguists have often been happy with broader definitions, arguing that whatever evokes laughter or is felt to be funny is humour, i.e. that humour can be deduced from its effect. However, laughter as such is not necessarily a condition for humour. Bearing this in mind, Attardo (1994:13) considers Kerbrat-Orecchioni's (1981) pragmatic definition of humour as a text whose perlocutionary, i.e. intended, effect is laughter, to be a more fruitful approach. In other words, humour is whatever is intended to be funny, even if it might not always be perceived or interpreted as such. This definition does have its problems, since measuring intention is hardly easy; yet it is useful because it accounts for humour as a fundamentally social phenomenon as well as one whose manifestations can vary greatly in different cultures. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I have chosen to use "humour" as a generic term to cover any phenomena with humour-inducing potential. „ (<http://ethesis.helsinki.fi/julkaisut/hum/engla/pg/jaskanen/ch4.html>)

### **3. Linguistic Theories of Humour**

Due to humour being such a controversial and polemical field which yields numerous theories, we will focus on three central theories ( theories of incongruity, superiority, and release ), as proposed by Raskin in his book *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour* . The problem, however, surfaces again as these theories are only capable of dealing with certain types of humour. “ We will attempt here a feature analysis of central theories and groups of theories [...] with a strong emphasis on the similarities exhibited by different approaches. It has been established in the literature, both polemically and objectively, that most of the available theories account for a certain type of humour and leave out all others [...] In other words, we are dealing basically with partial theories at best. Each of these theories usually puts forward a highly prominent feature or two. “ Raskin (1985:30)

#### **3.1. Theory of Incongruity**

“ Commenting on his classification of humor quoted in Section 5, Monro picks out his type (d), “ Importing into one situation what belongs to another” and comments, “ It is usual to call this incongruity (1951:45). “

In more simple words this would mean, as Mindess (1951:46) put it “ in jokes... we are lead along one line of thought and then booted out of it. “

Several philosophers have entertained a similar idea claiming that an ending of a thought or event which does not meet our expectations, or even more so it turns out surprising meet the requirements of the theory of incongruity e.g. Schopenhauer wrote “ The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through in some relation, and the laught itself is just the expression of this incongruity”

Another way of putting it by Beattie “(1776, 602), “laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts of circumstances, considered as united in complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them.”

The prime example supporting this theory would be the following joke:

“Is the doctor at home?” the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. “No,” the doctor’s young wife whispered in reply. “Come right in.” (American, 20<sup>th</sup> century)

In this joke the patient is obviously looking for the doctor. The invitation by the doctor’s young wife when the doctor is absent is the incongruous part, but the different situation, the situation of adultery, is congruous. The fact that the patient is whispering is explained by his illness, the young doctor’s wife being pretty is a matter of course and why she whispers is not explained, but also does not matter. The incongruity of the invitation creates a whole new, different situation, a situation that imposes on the hearer an idea of adultery. The situations overlap at the very end, as in the patient would have come in if the doctor had been at home, otherwise we were not expecting an invitation.

In the theory of incongruity, the element of surprise which is delivered by a punch line, is of great importance. The punch line provides the ability to shift from one abstract expectation to another. “ The punch line of a joke is a highly specialized article. It frequently presents a seemingly irrelevant idea, or it may seem to open up an entirely new trend of thought. Or the punch line may be an unexpectedly rational statement.” Raskin 1985:33)”

### **3.2. Theory of Superiority**

The second central theory of humour is the theory of superiority, or as Raskin also calls it “humor based on hostility, superiority, malice, aggression, derision, or disparagement.” Even some ancient Greek philosophers e.g. Plato claimed that malice or envy is at the root of comic enjoyment, that we laugh at the troubles and misfortunes of others for joy of not sharing them.

Aristotle talks of humour as being “an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others.”

Unfortunately, this kind of approach to humour gave the phenomenon a bad name. However, recognizing hostility as the basis of humour, should not necessarily mean being driven to negative conclusions about it. “Thus, Rapp, who proposed a whole theory of

evolution based on hostility (see Section 4), grants not only “that we laugh at the mishap of others; but they must be minor mishaps” (Rapp 1951, 35) but also that there are still whole cultures where non-minor mishaps become admissible objects of laughter (ibid, 36ff). He postulates that “the joke is a complex form. Of the three “elements” of laughter which we have isolated it nearly always uses two, sometimes three. These three elements are (1) ridicule (2) sudden success in a contest of wit; which in the joke usually means catching the point. And (3) sudden victory over restraint or suppression” (ibid, 134).

In one way or another, all three elements introduced contain hostility, but it does not mean that humour is a hostile phenomenon, as each culture has its own influential ways of civilizing and restraining comical hostility.

A prime example of a joke from the theory of superiority would be: A woman goes into a cafe with a duck. She puts the duck on a stool and sits next to it. The waiter comes over and says: “Hey! That's the ugliest pig that I have ever seen.” The woman says: “It’s a duck, not a pig.” And the Waiter says: “I was talking to the duck.”

In this joke the ridicule is the woman who went into a cafe with a duck. The waiter is hostile towards the woman by calling her a pig ( not directly ).

### **3.3. Theory of Release**

The third, and last theory would be the theory of release. This theory advocates that laughter originates from a state of mind which is relieved from certain restraints. One of these restraints for instance are simple social requirements in which we find ourselves, since humour often calls for social conventions i.e. people usually need company to be humorous.

“The relief may be only temporary: a smoking room story, for example, is not usually a serious challenge to conventional morality; but it does enable us to air the sexual impulses which society makes us repress. Moreover, people who have been undergoing a strain will sometimes burst into laughter if the strain is suddenly removed. It may be, then, that the central element in humour is neither a feeling of superiority nor the awareness (**page 354 begins here**) of incongruity, but the feeling of relief that comes from the removal of restraint.

”



Or as Raskin would put it „ The basic principle of all such theories is that laughter provides a relief for mental, nervous and/or psychic energy and thus ensures homeostasis after a struggle, tension, strain, etc. „

A human being functions under constraints such as: to be logical, to be rational, to think clearly, to talk sense. It is understandable that a person searches for a way to vent and relax.

„In its early stages,“ agrees Mindess, „our sense of humour frees us from from the chains of our perceptual, conventional, logical, linguistic, and moral systems“.

Mindess regards humour as liberation and elaborates on what it is we are trying to escape from.

„We all feel a need to bank on something or someone,“ writes Mindess, „be it reason, morality, science, the church, democracy, family, friends, our own attractiveness, intelligence, strength, or charm... Every aspect of our existence, from the most trivial to the most profound, is molded by group expectations. It should come as no surprise, then, that the sight of a comic ignoring conventions excites us... because it provides us, vicariously, a moment of freedom from the prisons of our adjustments“ (ibid, 38).

Basically, the subjects people joke about are things that make them feel uncomfortable or uncertain and this provides a way of releasing feelings of tensions. Even if they say certain things which do not go over well with a certain party, they can just say that they were kidding.

## **4. Types of Humour according to Raskin V.**

### **4.1. Ridicule**

The first type of humour would be ridicule, which is usually short, simple and cannot be verbalized in most cases.. It is assumed that it has existed since primeval cavemen, but what is sure is that it has been retained to this day. Ridicules are centred around a mishap which happens to another human being and causes laughter to the observer.

“He quotes Chandler’s experiment (1902, 959-60) with eight-year-old boys and girls who were asked to describe the best joke they heard during vacation and who, “without exception, described an action, and one in which they had personally participated, either as joker or as observer. The jokes recorded were always on somebody else. They all embodied an idea of discomfort to somebody or something. A companion was tripped, or knocked into a water trough, or frightened by a snake, or burned with a hot spoon, or shot with firecrackers, or pinched, or beaten, or scared with a Jack-o’Lantern” (ibid, 34)

### **4.2. Deliberate ridicule**

Deliberate ridicule is a substitution of physical assault which has the purpose of making fun of somebody or something. With such a versatile purpose, every possible subject can be ridiculed. Here are a few examples:

- 1) An anti-pretence ridicule: „An aristocratic Bostonian lady hired a new chauffeur. As they started out on their first drive, she inquired:  
„What is your name?“  
„Thomas, ma'am,“ he answered.  
„What is your last name?“ she said. „I never call chauffeurs by their first names.“  
„Darling, ma'am,“ he replied.  
„Drive on – Thomas,“ she said. (Rapp, 1951, 49-50)
  
- 2) An anti-politics ridicule: „„Who was the gentleman I saw you with last night?“  
„That was no gentleman. That was a senator.“ (Esar, 1952, 177)“

- 3) An anti-clerical ridicule: „The Archdeacon has got back from London, and confides to his friend the doctor, „Like Saint Peter, I toiled all night. Let us hope that like Saint Peter I caught nothing.“ (Legman, 1975, 308)“
- 4) An affectionate ridicule: „Back in 1942, I said, „Mama, I'm going into the Army.“ And she told me, „All right, but don't come home late.“ (Spalding, 1976, 24) „
- 5) A self-disparaging ridicule: „Nurse: That's a pretty bad cold you have, sir. What are you taking for it?

Patient: Make me an offer! (Spalding, 1976, 225)“

The list can go on and on, ranging from the most complex and intellectual topics to everyday life.

### **4.3. Riddle**

The riddle is next on our list of types of humour. However, this is not about the usual riddle. This type of riddle does manifest itself like the usual riddle ( question, statement or phrase having a double or veiled meaning ), but there is a twist to it, namely, the answer, even though it makes sense, is also a punch line designed for a humour effect.

Example:

- 1) „What building has the most stories? A library“  
(<http://goodriddlesnow.com/funny-riddles>)

### **4.4. Conundrum or punning riddle**

Same as the abovementioned riddle, but its answer (punch line) is a play on words.

Example:

- 1) „ How are penitentiary inmates and astronauts alike? They are both interested in „outer space.“ „  
(<http://www.theislandenglishtutor.com/riddles-that-use-pun.html>)

#### **4.5. Pure pun**

A pun is a form of word play which suggests two or more meanings to create a humorous effect.

Examples:

- 1) „I'm reading a book about anti-gravity. It's impossible to put down. „
- 2) „ I used to be a banker but then I lost interest.“

(<http://www.punoftheday.com/cgi-bin/disppuns.pl?ord=F>)

#### **4.6. Wisecrack**

„ A wisecrack is a „clever remark... which deals with a particular person or thing“ (ibid, 13)“

Example: „He's a man of letters; he works in the Post Office. (Esar, 1952, 13)“

#### **4.7. Epigram**

„An epigram is very much like a wisecrack, except that it „refers to a general group of person or things“ (ibid, 16)“

Example: „By the time the wise man is old enough to marry, the fool has enough children to support him. (Esar, 1952, 18)“

#### **4.8. Gag**

Gags are limited to a definite form of comic dialogue and usually are conversation rather than a dialogue.

Example: „„He used such nautical terms,“ „Yes, sailors always talk dirty.“ Esar (1952, 25)“

#### 4.9. Joke and anecdote

Jokes and anecdotes are very similar as in they are both short funny stories. However, jokes involve a comedy of situation, whereas anecdotes depict a moral point or a celebrity's character.

Example of a joke: "Doctor, when my hand gets better, will I be able to play the piano?" "Of course" said the doctor. "That's great. I could never play the piano before!" (<http://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-humor.html>)

Example of an anecdote : „One of the first steps to accomplishing great things in your life is to cease dwelling on the negative things in your past. Carefully assess your present strengths, successes, and achievements. Dwell on those positive events in your life, and quit limiting your potential by constantly thinking about what you have done poorly. Alice and the Mad Hatter in Wonderland had a conversation that illustrates this concept:

Alice: Where I come from, people study what they are not good at in order to be able to do what they are good at.

Mad Hatter: We only go around in circles in Wonderland, but we always end up where we started. Would you mind explaining yourself?

Alice: Well, grown-ups tell us to find out what we did wrong, and never do it again

Mad Hatter: That's odd! It seems to me that in order to find out about something, you have to study it. And when you study it, you should become better at it. Why should you want to become better at something and then never do it again? But please continue.

Alice: Nobody ever tells us to study the right things we do. We're only supposed to learn from the wrong things. But we are permitted to study the right things other people do. And sometimes we're even told to copy them.

Mad Hatter: That's cheating!

Alice: You're quite right, Mr. Hatter. I do live in a topsy-turvy world. It seems like I have to do something wrong first, in order to learn from what not to do. And then, by not doing what I'm not supposed to do, perhaps I'll be right. But I'd rather be right the first time, wouldn't you? „ (<http://daxko.com/blog/2012/04/lessons-from-alice-in-wonderland/>)

#### **4.10. Supression / repression humour**

In this type of humour, the goal is to outwit the „censor“ and our internal inhibitions which prevent us from giving rein to many of our natural impulses.

Example of supression/repression humour on the topic of sex:

„ And elderly client in a whore-house insists on having a special girl, who happens to be occupied. „But what's she got that all my other girls haven't got?“ asks the madam. „Patience,“ says the old man. (Legman, 1975, 200)“

One more example on politics:

„ A contest for the best political joke was announced in Moscow. First prize, 25 years of hard labor. Second prize, 15 years of solitary confinement. Third prize, ten years of imprisonment and confiscation of all belongings. (Soviet, 1950's – cf. Draitser, 1978, 29) „

## **5. Conclusion**

Each of the theories in Section 3 are able to explain some types of humour, but are not able to explain every type of humour. Superiority theories fit well to our laughter at small misfortunes, but are irrelevant when related to word play, nonsense and incongruity. With incongruity theories it is the other way around; they feel most adequate where superiority theories do not. Relief theories can focus mainly on laughter at malice and indecency. However, each of these theories highlight some aspect of humour, which proposes an idea of a synthesis of those features making it easier to approximate what humour is rather than any partial theory taken separately.

When it comes to the classification of humour, it is clear that there can be numerous types. I believe, however, that the abovementioned list serves as an ideal foundation of the basic types of humours which can then branch out accordingly to the specifics we are concerned with, creating a dense tree of classification. What matters the most in classification is the beginning taxonomy where key features can be distinguished and so humour can be split into basic categories. When we would compare this list to the humour tendencies of a human being, funnily enough, the human being would use at least most of the types of humour from the list without even knowing it, which shows the naturalness and logic of the list.

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