

## CONTINGENCY OF HUMOR ON LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE

Prateeti Mukherjee  
B.Tech, Second Year,  
Department of CSE  
Institute of Engineering & Management, Kolkata

### Abstract:

Humor is pervasive. People of all ages, cultures, religions, and every stratum of society experience humor on a daily basis. When torn down and extracted to its most fundamental level, we find that the rudimentary of humor is contingent on linguistics and language. Rather, humor is contingent on the non-literal, figurative aspects of language. Studies that attempt to discover how humor functions have covered a wide range of fields and topics in the past decades, with significant number of researches focused on humor in international activities of human beings, such as in the workplace, between genders, across cultures, and on the responses of humor. Though humor is dyadic in nature, it presents itself in both conversational and non-conversational manners. This paper explores the undeniable relationship between humor and linguistics through the analysis of several theories in humorology, studying current trends, and recognising the importance of humor studies in the media, corporate world and academia.

**Keywords:** *Humorology, Cognitive Linguistics, Corpus Linguistics, Language, Theories.*

### Introduction:

Interest in the linguistics of humor is widespread and goes back to the times of Plato and Aristotle. Several scholarly societies have been set up for the study of humor, and numerous journals and book series are dedicated entirely to humor research. The most widely adopted one, the semantic-script theory of humor, was presented by Victor Raskin[1], in 1985, which provided the foundation for the General Theory of Verbal Humor. However, other approaches are emerging in the fields of cognitive and corpus linguistics. The predominant approach in applied linguistics is the analysis of conversation and discourse, with a focus on the disparate functions of humor in conversation. Humor may be co-constructed and used among friends or used pro-socially by speakers to build in-group solidarity, or anti-socially, to exclude and denigrate the targets of humor. Increasingly, corpus-supported research is beginning to reshape the field by introducing quantitative concerns, as well as multimodal data and analyses. Thus, the linguistics of humor is a dynamic and rapidly changing field.

### Definition Of Humor:

Attempting to define humor is comical, since it includes an apparent paradox. Humor simply cannot be defined. It is often confused with laughter and amusement; however, they are mere effects of a humorous situation as opposed to being a definitive factor. On the contrary, many

believe that for a situation or a comment to be deemed humorous, it must evoke laughter. Although it could be considered as a measure of success for stand-up comedians or class clowns, that is not a universally acceptable theory. Humor is a complex phenomenon with no general theory or agreed definition. According to Dr. Chaya Ostrower[2], humor is comprised of the components: wit, mirth, and laughter. Each component describes a specific experience-wit is the cognitive experience, mirth-the emotional and laughter, the physiological experience. Humor is a quality of perception; what one finds humorous may be considered offensive by another. The effect of humor is also varied as laughter is not the only possible physiological outcome. Hence, humor could be equated to beauty-like beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, humor is in the funny bone of the receiver of the experience.

### **Linguistic Expression Of Humor:**

Humor may be broadly classified as “de re” and “de dicto”, also described as “referential” and “verbal” humor. The former is purely semantic/pragmatic and does not depend on the linguistic form (the signifier), whereas the latter crucially does. Referential humor is based only on the semantic/pragmatic incongruity, whereas verbal humor, in its various forms, exploits characteristics of the signifier to bring together incongruous semantic or pragmatic meanings.

Language-based jokes often find their humorous power through ambiguities apparent in the English language. Some rely on similarities of sounds (puns), some rely on the ambiguous word meaning (trunk of a car vs. trunk of an elephant), some are based on repetition of parts of the signifier (as in alliteration), while others rely on similar syntactic representations (rose the flower vs. rose past tense of rise).

Linguistic humor research initially focused on puns. Most of the research was taxonomic, building elaborate classifications of phenomena, primarily based on the linguistic factors at play. There were other classifications focused on distinctions such as homonymy (homophones and homographs), paronymy (partial homonymy), among others.

### **Types Of Humor Theories:**

Theories of humor are traditionally divided into the following three branches:

#### **(1) Theories of incongruity, or contradiction:**

According to Kant, incongruity is “Humor where the punchline or resolution is inconsistent or incongruous with the set-up” (McCreadie & Wiggins[3]). Incongruity theories are essentially cognitive, i.e. they are based on some objective characteristics of a humorous text, picture, situation, etc. People understand humorous communication if they are cognitively able to resolve the incongruity (Banas[4]). Surprise is a key element (Meyer[5]), with absurdity and nonsense as typical themes (Buijzen & Valkenburg[6]).

It is assumed that every act involves two different planes of content or isotopies that are mutually incompatible but also include a certain common part which makes the shift from one to the other possible. The recipient processes the information into its most accessible script, and proceeds until the interpretation bounces over a semantic obstacle and fails. Then some instantaneous cognitive work will be done to overcome the contradiction and another interpretation that has so far remained hidden can be found. The renewal of understanding is

attended by the emotion of surprise and satisfaction, causing the reaction of laughter. Thus, incongruity theory emphasizes cognition, requiring the mental capacity to note, understand, and categorize incongruous changes and thus to comprehend a situation and its implications before humor (the cognitive state of mirth) can be experienced.

**(2) Theories of superiority, or disparagement:**

The superiority or disparagement approach characterizes aggressive humor against some person or group, on political, ethnic or gender grounds. This form of humor may also be used against the self, for example, self-deprecating/-defeating/-disparaging humor. A typical theme of this form of humor is ridicule directed towards a subordinate or someone deviating from social norms. The superiority theory emphasizes the ways in which negative or hostile attitudes are expressed through humor. However, being laughed at often threatens one's identity and is thus unpleasant for the targets of such superiority humor.

**(3) Theories of release, or relief, or relaxation:**

Sigmund Freud is the most outstanding representative of this form of psychoanalytic humor. According to Freud (1856–1938), relief or release theory implies “Humor released by ‘excess’ nervous energy which actually masks other motives and/or desires”. This class is recipient-centric, that is, it is focused on the psychological effects of humor on the recipient. The relief theory focuses on the release of tension through laughter. The theory combines cognitive appraisal with emotion.

**1. Metatheory Of Humor:**

Considering the types of humor theories, the question arises, where do Linguistic theories fit? To answer this, we consider a broader classification of humor theories:

**(.1) Essentialist theories:**

The essentialist theories provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for a phenomenon to occur, and these conditions are taken to define the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon.

**(.2) Teleological theories:**

These theories define the purposes of the phenomenon and how its mechanisms are shaped and defined by said purposes.

**(.3) Substantialist theories:**

The Substantialist theories find the unifying factor for the explanation of the phenomenon in the concrete contents of the phenomena.

A good distinction between the three theories is made by Salvatore Attardo[7] in the book, ‘Linguistic Theories of Humor’--“Faced with the problem of describing a bicycle, an essentialist theory would describe it, in part, as a lever and a mechanism to redistribute animal force. A teleological theory would describe it as a means of transportation, and a substantialist theory would describe it as an arrangement of wheels, pedals, a frame, etc.” Linguistic theories of humor are either essentialist or teleological, thus differentiating the linguistic approach from sociological, literary and psychological approaches that are more concerned with the modalities and development of humor rather than the essence of humorous phenomena.

The three types of theories differ in terms of emphasis in the data and may depend on the observer's attitude. The linguistic approach to humor, favours the essentialist theories and will

necessarily foreground essentialist problems.

Linguistic, philosophical and psychological analysis of humor have been the most outspoken in their essentialist approach with the most explicit example being the theories proposed by Attardo and Raskin(1991). Their claim is that the general theory of humor requires consideration of six different and unrelated knowledge resources, each contributing to the creation of humor. The separate disciplines may be concerned with a single knowledge resource; however, the general theory must be concerned with all six resources at the same time, and its goal is assumed essentialist.

## **2. Analysis Of Cicero's Taxonomy Of Humor:**

Cicero's taxonomy may be inspired by the Aristotelian thought, or by a Hellenistic systemization, but it is regarded as the first attempt at a taxonomy of humor from a linguistic standpoint. Cicero introduces the distinction between verbal and referential humor, a distinction tactically used by a vast majority of humor researchers. Besides the definition of each category mentioned in section 3, Cicero further stipulates that referential humor includes anecdotes and caricature, whereas verbal humor includes ambiguity, paranomasia, false etymologies, proverbs, allegory, metaphor, and antiphrasis or irony among others.

Another interesting point made by Cicero in his taxonomy involves linguistic barriers and its effects on humor. According to Cicero, translation permits a clear-cut determination of humorous text to one of the two categories. As inferred from the taxonomy, the criterion of resistance to translation is the only empirical technique able to ascertain whether humorous effect depends on the form of linguistic sign. If the text cannot remain humorous when modified, the humorous effect depends on the form of the text. If the humorous effect resists paraphrase (endolinguistic translation), translation (interlinguistic translation), or even intersemiotic translation (pictorial or other representation of the text), it solely depends on the semantic content of the text.

This criterion has been challenged by translators and linguists, as it is often possible to translate puns from one language to another, with minimum distortion. The rendering of puns in another language is a functional translation, wherein the original text is deformed to achieve the desired effect in the target language; or is a result of the sheer accidental congruencies between the two languages. However, the literal, non-functional translation of puns between unrelated languages is theoretically impossible. Puns associate two signifiers (sounds or characters that defines a word) that are similar to the signifieds(the literal meaning of the word), that are different. Since the relation between the signifiers and the signified is arbitrary, every language articulates is differently, thereby making literal translation of puns an impossible task. This issue could be a cause for concern in the entertainment industry, where foreign language speaking viewers would not experience the full effect of a humorous script through dubbed versions or by reading subtitles.

## **3. Current Trends In Humor Studies:**

### **(1) Theoretical Approaches:**

With the involvement of cognitive linguistics in the analysis of humor, studies on certain phenomena such as forced reinterpretation have provided interesting conclusions. With the central role of cognitive-linguistics being semantics, this approach tackles the intricacies of language in humor, such as the literalization of metaphors as mentioned by Brône[8] in his study.

With cognitive linguistics tackling questions such as the inconsistency of humorous effect in metaphors, corpus linguistics also bear potential of playing significant role in the field of linguistics and humor studies.

## **(2) Applied Linguistics- Conversational Approach:**

As the name implies, conversational approach focuses on recorded discursive data and requires close transcripts of conversations. Discourse analysis is different from the conventional competence-based approach of humor analysis and has paved the way for a new, independent field of research- the study of laughter.

Since conversational approach relies on interactions and transcripts, it heavily depends on the relation between humor and laughter. Scholars often research on widespread topics such as the acoustic description of laughter, its distribution within and around speech, and its complex relationship with humor. It is important to note that laughter may occur without humor and humor may occur without laughter, however their relationship is far from being that of an adjacency pair.

## **(.3) Variationist Approaches:**

Variationist sociolinguistics deal with the understanding of language through the analysis of variables and categorical processes. It assumes that the variation witnessed at all levels of language is not random but is characterized by “structural heterogeneity”. Humor, being pervasive, does not have a universal form and witnesses numerous variations. Gender difference (Crawford and Kotthoff[9]) has attracted significant research in this context. Other areas of variations include ethnicity, age, strata of society, national differences, among others. A recent contribution includes the work of Davies[10], who presents an exhaustive review of variationist research on humor in language.

## **4. The Importance Of Recognising Contingency Of Humor On Linguistics:**

### **(.1) Humor in media:**

In order to discuss humor in the media, the field has to be restricted to intentionally humorous output, and communication is aimed at multiple recipients. It often plays on several substances such as words, icons, sound effects, to bring about a local perlocutory effect of connivance based on the frequently off-beat characteristics of the enunciation and what is being enunciated. An act of humor, like any speech act, is the result of the interplay that becomes established between the partners in the communication situation and the protagonists in the enunciation situation. Therefore, in order to analyse an act involving humor, we need to “describe the ‘enunciation situation’ in which it occurs, the ‘theme’ that it addresses, the ‘language processes’ that bring it into effect and the ‘effects’ it can produce on the audience”.

Although it is not infinite or entirely open, the list of implicit ideas that could be associated with a humorous message is usually long and will vary with the attitudes, knowledge, involvement and motivations of the recipients. Further, the linguistic barriers, intra- and inter- cultural variations plead in favour of elaborate models to bring out the plurality of linguistic forms. Thus, collaboration is required in the field of communication between linguistic sciences and social sciences to enable the recipient to enjoy the humorous script or imagery presented in the show, advertisement, or by the comedian. This would allow a closer appraisal of the unresolved but crucial question of the variety of interpretations of humorous discourse and recognize the active and decisive part played by the recipient in the production of meanings through humor.

**(.2) Social functions of humor:**

Humor is integrated in socialization processes in two forms; one being the interactions and relationships within a group, and the second being that of the society as a whole, wherein humor aims to reform certain aspects of social life. Humor creates solidarity among the participants, with such exchanges being co-constructed, elaborated on, repeated and reinforced by the participants. Humor support is another phenomenon observed in workplaces, where discursive strategies acknowledge and support humorous turns.

Humor also provides a safety valve for the expression of socially unacceptable taboo thoughts, avoiding total suppression by society. It provides a venting space for frustration when it comes to social and political issues, without employing aggression. Satire is often employed to ridicule social and political institutions and individuals in the public eye. This enables release of tension without aggressive and violent outbreaks, while being supportive of the status quo. In theatrical dramas, the burden of social correction has traditionally been laid upon comedy, thus serving a crucial social function for centuries.

**(.3) Humor in teaching methods:**

Humor can be an effective way to engage students and activate learning. Multiple studies have been conducted focused on the effects of humor on learning. Mary Kay Morrison [11], in her study, concluded that brain scans showed high levels of activity in multiple areas of the brain when humor was used in conversation and instruction.

Thus, it is clear that use of humor in the classroom is expected to produce positive results in the learning of an individual.

In the 1990s, structured use of humor in the classroom was either dissuaded by administrators or considered elusive, however, today it seems to have emerged with more teachers and educators looking for methods that enable better communication and help students learn. When employed as a conversation starter between a teacher and a student, it behaves as a tension-breaker or therapeutic intervention and encourages communication. When targeted to the topic and placed in the context of the learning experience, humor proves to be an effective tool to stimulate concentration and interest in what is being taught.

Although use of humor in the classroom has multiple benefits, there are dangers to the student- educator roles if the humor is allowed to get out of hand or is misconstrued by the student. There is a fine line between competent use of humor in the classroom and humor inappropriate for the audience. Regulations and boundaries are therefore encouraged when employing humor in teaching methods.

**Conclusion:**

Humor is an ability that enables a person or a situation to evoke fun, joy, and laughter in others, while masking the seriousness or sensitivity of an issue and serving as a coping mechanism in many situations. It presents itself in many forms throughout the life of an individual, regardless of their social status, age or gender. Linguistics has had a privileged role in humorology, both because of its contributions, as mentioned in the paper, and because language is the most widely used medium of humor. Humor that is produced entirely outside of language, such as visual humor, also heavily depends on language for its analysis. The field of the linguistics of humor is in many ways still in its infancy. This paper emphasizes on the relationship between language and humor studies while stressing on the importance of

understanding the nature of this relationship. Although humor is heavily dependent on language, language bars the pervasive nature of humor, since its effects can easily be lost in translation. Hence, this paper encourages scholars, researchers and linguists all over the world to come together and make their contributions to this budding field of humor research.

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