

Humor

Humor is a performative pragmatic accomplishment involving a wide range of communication skills including, but not exclusively involving, language, gesture, the presentation of visual imagery, and situation management. Humor aims at creating a concrete feeling of enjoyment for an audience, most commonly manifested in a physical display consisting of displays of pleasure, including smiles and laughter.

The basis for most humor is the setting up of a surprise or series of surprises for an audience. The most common kind of surprise has since the eighteenth century been described under the general rubric of "incongruity." Basic incongruity theory as an explanation of humor can be described in linguistic terms as follows: A communicative actor presents a message or other content material and contextualizes it within a cognitive "frame." The actor constructs the frame through narration, visual representation, or enactment. He or she then suddenly pulls this frame aside, revealing one or more additional cognitive frames which audience members are shown as possible contextualizations or reframings of the original content material. The tension between the original framing and the sudden reframing results in an emotional release recognizable as the enjoyment response we see as smiles, amusement, and laughter. This tension is the driving force that underlies humor, and the release of that tension—as Freud pointed out—is a fundamental human behavioral reflex.

Humor, of all forms of communicative acts, is one of the most heavily dependent on equal cooperative participation of actor and audience. The audience, in order to enjoy humor, must "get" the joke. This means they must be capable of analyzing the cognitive frames presented by the actor and following the process of the creation of the humor.

Typically, humor involves four stages, the *setup*, the *paradox*, the *dénouement*, and the *release*. The setup involves the presentation of the original content material and the first interpretive frame. The paradox involves the creation of the additional frame or frames. The *dénouement* is the point at

which the initial and subsequent frames are shown to coexist, creating tension. The release is the enjoyment registered by the audience in the process of realization and the release resulting therefrom.

The communicative actor has a great deal to consider in creating humor. He or she must assess the audience carefully, particularly regarding their pre-existing knowledge. A large portion of the comic effect of humor involves the audience's taking a set interpretive frame for granted and then being surprised when the actor shows their assumptions to be unwarranted at the point of *dénouement*. Thus the actor creating humor must be aware of and use the audience's taken-for-granted knowledge effectively. Some of the simplest examples of such effective use involve playing on assumptions about the conventional meanings of words or conversational routines. Comedian Henny Youngman's classic one-liner "Take my wife . . . please!" is an excellent example. In just four words and a pause, Youngman double-frames the word *take*, showing two of its discourse usages: as an introduction to an example, and as a direct command/request. The double framing is completed by the word *please*. The pause is crucial. It allows the audience to set up an expectation that Youngman will be providing them with an example, which is then frustrated with his *dénouement*. In this way the work of comedians and the work of professional magicians is similar.

Humans structure the presentation of humor through numerous forms of culture-specific communicative events. All cultures have some form of the *joke*, a humorous narrative with the *dénouement* embodied in a *punchline*. Some of the best joke-tellers make their jokes seem to be instances of normal conversational narrative. Only after the punchline does the audience realize that the narrator has co-opted them into hearing a joke. In other instances, the joke is identified as such prior to its narration through a conversational introduction, and the audience expects and waits for the punchline. The joke is a kind of master form of humorous communication. Most other forms of humor can be seen as a variation of this form, even non-verbal humor.

Sigmund Freud theorized that jokes have only two purposes: aggression and exposure. The first purpose (which includes satire and defense) is fulfilled through the hostile joke, the second through the dirty joke. Humor theorists have debated Freud's claims extensively. The mechanisms used to create humor can be considered separately from the purposes of humor, but, as will be seen below, the purposes are important to the success of humorous communication.

Just as speech acts must be *felicitous*, in the Austinian sense, in order to function, jokes must fulfill a number of performative criteria in order to achieve a humorous effect and bring the audience to a release. These performative criteria center on the successful execution of the stages of humor creation.

The setup must be adequate. The actor must either be skilled in presenting the content of the humor or be astute in judging what the audience will assume from their own cultural knowledge, or from the setting in which the humor is created. The successful creation of the paradox requires that the alternative interpretive frame or frames be presented adequately and be

plausible and comprehensible to the audience. The dénouement must successfully present the juxtaposition of interpretive frames. If the actor does not present the frames in a manner that allows them to be seen together, the humor fails.

If the above three communicational acts are carried out successfully, tension release in laughter should proceed. The release may be genuine or feigned. Jokes are such well-known communicational structures in most societies that audience members will smile, laugh, or express appreciation as a communicational reflex even when they have not found the joke to be humorous. The realization that people laugh when presentations with humorous intent are not seen as humorous leads to further question of why humor fails even if its formal properties are well structured.

One reason that humor may fail when all of its formal performative properties are adequately executed is—*homage* Freud—that the purpose of the humor may be overreach its bounds. It may be so overly aggressive toward someone present in the audience or to individuals or groups they revere; or so excessively ribald that it is seen by the audience as offensive. Humor and offensiveness are not mutually exclusive, however. An audience may be affected by the paradox as revealed in the dénouement of the humor despite their ethical or moral objections and laugh in spite of themselves (perhaps with some feelings of shame). Likewise, what one audience finds offensive, another audience may find humorous.

Another reason humor may fail is that the paradox is not sufficiently surprising or unexpected to generate the tension necessary for release in laughter. Children's humor frequently has this property for adults. Similarly, the paradox may be so obscure or difficult to perceive that the audience may be confused. They know that humor was intended in the communication because they understand the structure of humorous discourse, but they cannot understand what it is in the discourse that is humorous. This is a frequent difficulty in humor presented cross-culturally, or between groups with specialized occupations or information who do not share the same basic knowledge.

In the end, those who wish to create humor can never be quite certain in advance that their efforts will be successful. For this reason professional comedians must try out their jokes on numerous audiences and practice their delivery and timing. Comedic actors, public speakers, and amateur raconteurs must do the same. The delay of the smallest fraction in time, or the slightest premature telegraphing in delivering the dénouement of a humorous presentation, can cause it to fail. Lack of clarity in the setup and in constructing the paradox can likewise kill humor. This essay has not dealt with written humor, but many of the same considerations of structure and pacing apply to humor in print as to humor communicated face-to-face.

(See also *control, genres, gesture, improvisation, metaphor, performativity, poetry, theater, truth*)

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