

Humor Annotation Guidelines

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Summary of Project

This project involves the classification of humorous statements into different categories. In particular, we are attempting to classify the meta concepts that cause a given joke to be funny, as opposed to the specific parts of the joke that express those concepts.

How to Think About Classifying a Joke

Imagine someone tells a joke. You laugh, but your friend doesn't understand why the joke is funny. At first, you might try to point to a specific part of the joke that makes it amusing. For example, saying that it's funny because one of the words has two meanings, or because a pattern was set, then broken in a surprising way. For this annotation project, imagine that your friend is still confused. They understand that there is a second meaning, or that a pattern was broken, but why is that particular set of meanings or specific pattern break funny, as opposed to simply unexpected? The annotation category you choose for the joke should be based on how you would handle answering that question.

Categories

Wordplay

If you need to start explaining the definitions of words and the connection between each disambiguated meaning and another word in the sentence, the joke likely depends on wordplay. Wordplay jokes will have punchlines that focus on ambiguity, where both possible interpretations of the punchline are relevant due to the set up of the joke. Often the ambiguous punchline will provide a connection between parts of the setup that previously seemed incongruous.

If you need to do more than just explain how both meanings are relevant (for example, explaining how you knew what the intended meaning was and why the person in the joke did not), consider the reference or character categories.

Focus

If you need to explain how the set up of the joke led you to expect something specific, but the conclusion of the joke broke this expectation in a surprising way, the joke likely depends on focus. Focus jokes can also involve one character in a situation being aware of some detail (that you also know), but another character not knowing this and misinterpreting a question or statement.

Note that the surprise should not be violent, crude, or shocking. For jokes that break the expectation in those specific ways, consider the shock category. If your expectation

comes from knowing about a specific format of joke or situation, consider the reference category.

Character

If you need to explain a specific stereotype about a person or type of person, the joke likely depends on character. Often, it will involve talking about how an average person would know to act or not act in a specific way, but the person in the joke responded in a way that fit their stereotypical traits. In particular, the joke will usually hinge on the reader believing the character acted incorrectly or in a way that they would not want to act, given the option.

For jokes that depend on a character acting in a way an average person might wish they could, consider the reference category, since it is referencing a common desire. Jokes that depend on an average person knowing to act or not act in a specific way, but do not depend on a stereotype to explain why the person in the joke responded in the specific way they did, also might better fit the reference category.

Reference

If you need to explain a common situation and what the average person knows or expects in that situation, the joke likely depends on reference. Sometimes the joke may depend on how an average person wishes they could respond in the situation, such as the person in the joke finding a way to get revenge when a reader would want revenge in a similar situation or finding a clever way to get around a restriction that has been imposed on them, or on something an average person would know is a bad response to the situation. The joke should depend on your knowledge of the correct or expected response in the situation, and how the individual differed from that. Jokes that rely on previous understanding of the format of a particular type of joke or story might be reference, if the punchline involves the joke or story getting the ending you expected.

For jokes that involve the joke or story getting an ending that broke your expectation, consider focus. For jokes that involve an individual from a specific group acting in a way that matches a stereotype of that group, consider the character category.

Shock

If you need to explain how the set up of the joke led you to expect something specific, but that the conclusion of the joke broke this expectation in a way that referenced violence, swearing, or in some way crude material, the joke likely depends on shock. Note that just involving shocking material is not enough to classify a joke as a shock joke. The punchline of the joke should involve material that is unexpectedly shocking with regards to the setup of the joke, so that the humor comes from the sudden change in tone or level of crudity/violence. Jokes that are risqué or involve violence, sex, or crudity throughout may not count as shock jokes without escalation in the punchline.

If the joke comes from a surprise or unexpected punchline that does not depend on an escalation in violence, crudity, or shock value from the setup, consider the focus category.

Example Classifications and Reasoning

A good tactic for classifying data is to first consider what piece of the joke you would point to as the punchline and why it is funny, then consider what makes that humor work. This strategy is used for the example reasonings and classifications below.

Wordplay Example:

Why did the musician go to the chiropractor? Because he had Bach problems.

In the above joke, the punchline is “Bach problems”, which is funny because it is ambiguous when spoken aloud between “issues with music composed by Bach” and “physical issues related to the back”. The humor works because both meanings of “Bach problems” are relevant, as a composer would work with Bach but a chiropractor would work with backs. To explain this joke, we would need to talk about the connection between Bach and a musician, and backs and a chiropractor, so this joke should be classified as **wordplay**. It is not reference or character because the humor only requires an explanation of the ambiguous word and two other words in the setup which connect to each of the possible meanings.

Focus Example:

Yesterday I accidentally hit a kid with my car. It's okay, nobody saw me.

In the above joke, the punchline is “It's okay, nobody saw me”, which is funny because it is not what you expect to follow a statement about someone being hit by a car. The humor works because the usual follow up would be something about the person who was hit, but instead it focuses on the person doing the driving, and instead of treating the injury of the person being hit as the largest issue it treats the potential punishment of the person doing the driving as the largest issue. To explain this joke, we need to talk about how we were expecting the next line to be about one type of thing, but were surprised because it was something else, so this joke should be classified as **focus**. It is not shock, because the initial setup of the joke sets the tone of it being a joke about violence, and the punchline does not depend on escalating the level of violence or providing a different type of shocking content.

Character Example:

One day a cop pulls over a blonde for speeding. The cop gets out of his car and asks the blonde for her license."You cops should get it together. One day you take away my license and the next day you ask me to show it.'

In the above joke, the punchline is “One day you take away my license and the next day you ask me to show it”, which is funny because of the expectation that everyone driving a car legally has a driver’s license and the realization that this driver’s license had been confiscated but they didn’t know it meant they should stop driving. The humor works because of the stereotype of a “dumb blonde”, in which a blonde character will misinterpret something or do something that an average person would know is incorrect or should not be done in that situation. To explain this joke, we need to talk about the stereotype of a “dumb blonde” and how the mistake made by the driver comes from her fitting the stereotype, so this joke should be classified as **character**. It is not reference, because the way that the driver differed from the expected response is specifically tied to her stereotyped role.

Reference Example:

A little girl was in church with her mother when she started feeling ill.
"Mommy," she said, "can we leave now?"
"No," her mother replied.
"Well, I think I'm gonna be sick, Momma!"
"Then go out the front door and around to the back of the church and then behind a bush."
After about 60 seconds the little girl returned to her seat.
"Were you sick?" her mom asked.
"Yes."
"How could you have gone all the way to the back of the church and returned so quickly?"
"I didn't have to go out of the church, Mommy. They have a box next to the front door that says, 'For the Sick.'"

In the above joke, the punchline of the joke is “For the Sick”, which is funny because it is ambiguous. The child interpreted it as meaning “for use by individuals who are not feeling well”, but we know it is meant to mean “for monetary donations that will be used to assist individuals who are not feeling well”. This humor works because we understand religious buildings and donation boxes and use this information to choose the correct interpretation of the ambiguous phrase, so to explain it we would need to explain these experiences. As such, this should be categorized as **reference**. It is not wordplay because we can tell there is a correct interpretation of “For the Sick” in this instance, and the joke relies on the child using the incorrect interpretation, not on our realization that the ambiguity ties together two parts of the setup.

Shock Example:

What’s red and bad for your teeth? A brick.

In the above joke, the punchline is “a brick”, which is funny because it interprets “bad for your teeth” in a more violent way that the reader initially expected. This humor relies on an

understanding of wordplay jokes that usually come in the format of asking what meets a set of criteria, then providing an answer that ties them together in an unexpected way, usually because of ambiguities. However, this pattern is broken in a violent way, with the answer being something that would not have the traits specified in the joke unless it is used violently, because otherwise bricks and teeth wouldn't really come into contact. As such, this should be categorized as **shock**. It is not focus, because without the additional connection of the brick being used to hit someone's teeth, the answer would just be confusing, since an average person would not attempt to eat a brick or use a brick for tooth care (the usual interpretations connected with something being "bad for your teeth").

Ambiguous Example:

A dyslexic man walks into a bra.

In the above joke, the punchline is "a bra", which is funny because it breaks the pattern of a common style of joke, in which a man walks into a bar. The humor relies on the connection between bra and bar, which the reader of the joke will realize are different combinations of the same three letters. To explain this joke, we would need to explain how bar is relevant for the connection to the man walking into the bar style of joke, and bra is relevant because it is a way a dyslexic individual might read the word bar. As such, this should be categorized as **wordplay**. It is not reference, because the humor does not come solely from the connection to the other style of joke, but the way in which "bra" connects that style of joke with another part of the setup, namely the man being dyslexic. It is not focus for two main reasons. First, while the joke did lead you to expect a specific format ("a man walks into a bar") which was then broken, it didn't finish the format. Normally, the actual humor part of a man walking into a bar jokes begin after he enters the bar. Secondly, and more importantly, the break in the format hinged on a word being interpreted in two ways, and the realization of this possible double meaning connected other parts of the setup, with the broken pattern of a man walking into the bar simply being one of the pieces being connected, and not the focal point of the humor.

Additional Guidelines

Jokes to tag will be provided in text files which contain 20 jokes each. Each joke will start with an item number, then the actual joke in quotes. You should tag the item number of the joke, not the quotes or the text of the joke.