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## Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication

*The compelling power of humor makes it a recurrent topic for research in many fields, including communication. Three theories of humor creation emerge in humor research: the relief theory, which focuses on physiological release of tension; the incongruity theory, singling out violations of a rationally learned pattern; and the superiority theory, involving a sense of victory or triumph. Each theory helps to explain the creation of different aspects of humor, but each runs into problems explaining rhetorical applications of humor. Because each theory of humor origin tries to explain all instances of humor, the diverging communication effects of humor remain unexplained. Humor's enactment leads to 4 basic functions of humor in communication. Two tend to unite communicators: the identification and the clarification functions. The other 2 tend to divide 1 set of communicators from others: the enforcement and differentiation functions. Exploration of these effects-based functions of humor will clarify understanding of its use in messages. Humor use unites communicators through mutual identification and clarification of positions and values, while dividing them through enforcement of norms and differentiation of acceptable versus unacceptable behaviors or people. This paradox in the functions of humor in communication as, alternately, a unifier and divider, allows humor use to delineate social boundaries.*

Humor in communication is a subject that seems difficult to analyze. After all, if one has to explain a joke, it is probably no longer funny. Yet, the compelling, mysterious power of humor leads scholars of all stripes to return to it again and again as a focus for study, because humor is so pervasive—while being most enjoyable and pleasant. Not only is humor pleasant; its recurring presence in rhetoric suggests that communicators believe it is also persuasive. What is it about humor that makes it so rewarding and so influential? Humor is generally viewed as a social phenomenon. For instance, people laugh less when watching a funny televi-

sion show alone than during the same show with a group all laughing hilariously. Persons who are perceived to appreciate humor readily are generally more popular with others (Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1996). Such social properties make humor a natural focus for communication study. Central to all communication is the audience—those to whom a message may be directed. The audience gives attempts at humor their success or failure. This receiver-centered nature of humor, focusing on the intended effect of a message on the hearers, suggests that a rhetorical perspective on humor will lead to insights into how humor influences audiences.

Much research has sought to determine the causes of humor, why it exists, and why humor is funny. This essay focuses on how rhetors use humor when constructing messages. Such uses of humor are found to break down into two basic functions: unification and division. These functions result in four “theories of use,” or key functions of humor in messages, rather than theories of humor origin. Politicians especially find humor a useful tool for uniting their audience behind them and dividing them from the opposition; thus, communicators use humor for various rhetorical purposes. However, the audience or receiver of the message determines how it is interpreted and what actual function the humor use serves. This essay refers to such communication effects as functions of humor, while maintaining that communicators try to include humor for intended purposes, seeking to effect a desired humor function. Before discussing functions, however, it is useful to review briefly the major theories of humor origin to understand how humor’s four key communication functions (identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation) emerge from them.

Several major theories claim to comprehensively explain how humor originates in the minds of those experiencing it. Humor is viewed as a cognitive experience involving an internal redefining of sociocultural reality and resulting in a “mirthful” state of mind, of which laughter is a possible external display (Apte, 1985). Laughter is a primary indicator of the experience of humor, but it is not the only one. Smiles, grins, or even sudden exhalations can indicate such experience. The perception- or audience-centered nature of humor is highlighted by the fact that, other than through such nonlinguistic indicators, the only evidence of humor experience comes from statements by the person experiencing it. Communication is a key factor in nearly all theories of humor because of its resulting from a message or interaction perceived by someone. At times, simple observations or thoughts can provoke humor, but theorists acknowledge the cognitive and symbolic nature of humor (McGhee, 1979). Some symbols must be processed in one’s mind to perceive humor in a given situation, whether one is communicating or merely ob-

serving. Humor has been claimed to emerge in three basic ways in human thought: through perceptions of relief, incongruity, and superiority (Berger, 1993; Raskin, 1985).

## Theories of Humor Origin

### Relief

From the perspective of the relief theory, people experience humor and laugh because they sense stress has been reduced in a certain way (Berlyne, 1972; Morreall, 1983; Shurcliff, 1968). The physiological manifestations or “symptoms” of humor are most important to this view, which holds that humor stems from the relief experienced when tensions are engendered and removed from an individual. Humor then results from a release of nervous energy. This tension reduction may engender humor by reducing the state of arousal (the “jag” theory) or increasing the arousal (the “boost” theory), depending on the perspective (Berlyne, 1972). Some elaborations of the relief theory hold that humor may result from releases of energy that subconsciously overcome sociocultural inhibitions (Freud, 1960; Schaeffer, 1981). This release or arousal does not depend so much on symbols, allowing for the existence of humor indicated by happy laughter for no discernible reason, or children’s laughter (Eckardt, 1992). Yet tellers of jokes or humorous stories may purposefully build tension, even using an incongruity, for the express purpose of releasing tension by resolving the incongruity (Maase, Fink, & Kaplowitz, 1984).

Communicators take advantage of this source of humor by telling a joke, often at the beginning of their remarks, to defuse a potentially tense situation. Often tension results from dissonance people experience after making a decision or sensing the approach of incompatible and undesirable thoughts or actions. Because people desire and find it pleasing to reduce dissonance (Festinger, 1957), speakers who do so can create humor. People feeling threatened by budget cuts in their organization, for instance, laugh with relief at a joke told at the start of a luncheon meeting on the budget to the effect that, “Well, it turns out we still can afford to have lunch—but I don’t think the cook is accepting complaints.” Remarks like this make the situation seem more elastic, or more manageable, by showing that difficulties are not so overwhelming as to be out of control after all (Burke, 1984). Using jokes to reduce tension in situations points to a common application of the relief theory of humor by communicators. Simple and even awkward laughter during conversations has been found to relieve tension and facilitate further interaction between the parties (O’Donnell-Trujillo & Adams, 1983).

## Incongruity

From the perspective of the incongruity theory, people laugh at what surprises them, is unexpected, or is odd in a nonthreatening way (Berger, 1976; Deckers & Divine, 1981; McGhee, 1979). An accepted pattern is violated, or a difference is noted—close enough to the norm to be non-threatening, but different enough from the norm to be remarkable. It is this difference, neither too shocking nor too mundane, that provokes humor in the mind of the receiver, according to the incongruity theory.

Rather than focusing on the physiological or emotional effects of humor, the incongruity theory emphasizes cognition. Individuals must have rationally come to understand normal patterns of reality before they can notice differences. The mental capacity to note, understand, and categorize incongruous changes is necessary for the perceiver to experience humor, as it is viewed from the incongruity perspective. Only with this ability can humor arise from any sort of perceived incongruous relation, including an unexpected event or object, a physical or moral defect, an odd or disproportionate object, or any observable deviation from an implied standard (Grimes, 1955b). Comprehending these situations and their implications is required before humor, or a cognitive state of mirth, can be experienced.

Surprise, of course, is a key ingredient in humor from the incongruity perspective (Shurcliff, 1968). People laughed, for instance, at a comedian responding to criticism with a loud “Excuuuuse me!” because that is not normally how one is expected to respond to criticism; such a response is surprising, whereas an attempt to defend oneself or deny responsibility might not be. This use of surprise in humor is evident when one becomes irritated when telling a joke to someone who already knows the punch line. The joke is less funny because it is familiar; the element of surprise is lost, as the joke’s pattern is now known and recognized by the receiver. Yet, people will often experience humor when hearing a joke told again, watching a funny routine again, or seeing a comedy multiple times. Incongruity theorists hold in such cases that people obtain humor from the “surprise” of a new perspective being enjoyed multiple times even when they know the basics of an impending humorous message. Veatch (1992) makes incongruity through “affective absurdity” the centerpiece of his humor theory, which holds that a humorous situation must involve a perceiver simultaneously having in mind one view of a situation that seems normal, and one view where there is a violation of the moral or natural order. When it seems that the situation is normal, yet something is wrong, humor occurs (Veatch, 1992). If one or the other of these perceptions is absent, the perceiver will not find humor. This perspective stresses the need for a rational development of a set of expectations that must be violated before humor can be per-

ceived, explaining why mental sophistication is required for humor's appreciation and humor's consequent rarity in the animal kingdom (Apte, 1985). Such a crucial role for incongruity also suggests why humor is a social phenomenon, because much humor stems from violations of what is socially or culturally agreed to be normal.

Examples of incongruity humor are numerous (Chapman & Foot, 1977; Meyer, 1990; Schutz, 1977). Politicians use humor from incongruity to portray opponents' actions as irrational. In 1992, President George Bush tried to portray opposing vice presidential candidate Al Gore as "Mr. Ozone," alluding to his advocacy of strict environmental regulations. Ten years earlier, President Ronald Reagan pointed to incongruities in governmental attempts to control crime: "We have the technological genius to send astronauts to the moon and bring them safely home. But we're having trouble making it safe for a citizen to take a walk in the evening through a park" (Reagan, 1982). Another Reagan commonplace that used incongruity for humor recurred frequently during his campaigns: "A federal program, once started, is the nearest thing to eternal life you'll ever see on this earth" (Reagan, 1976). He placed "eternal life," something usually associated with religion, in the context of government programs, an unusual association and hence an incongruity. Popular television shows like *America's Funniest Home Videos* or *Seinfeld* long have taken advantage of the humor found when people enact highly unusual or inappropriate behaviors.

### **Superiority**

The superiority theory notes that people laugh outwardly or inwardly at others because they feel some sort of triumph over them or feel superior in some way to them (Feinberg, 1978; Grotjahn, 1957; Gruner, 1997, 1978; Morrell, 1983; Rapp, 1951; Ziv, 1984). Laughing at "ignorant" actions on the part of others, as adults often laugh at the sayings or doings of children, illustrates this perspective. Such events engender a state of mirth within individuals, which may result in outward laughter. Hostile laughter also is thought to be explainable by the superiority theory (Bergson, 1911; Singer, 1968). Mirth is first felt due to superiority, and then it may be expressed through laughter—sending an explicit message of superiority. The disagreeable feelings of threat to our identity from being laughed at stem from such humorous messages of superiority. Often superiority is not a pleasant type of humor for those subjected to it.

This theory also allows for open displays of humor to be used as social correctives (Bergson, 1911). Duncan (1962, p. 187) noted that such "disciplining by laughter" was one of the functions of the royal fool throughout the ages. Foolish antics were laughed at to show that such behaviors or beliefs were unacceptable in serious society (Apte, 1985). From a superiority theory perspective, humor results, not just

from something irrational or unexpected, but from seeing oneself as superior, right, or triumphant in contrast to one who is inferior, wrong, or defeated. Fine (1976) has described how sexual humor sets and enforces the relevant social norms in a culture by ridiculing “lower” forms of behavior or language from the perspective of society’s mainstream.

Laughing at faulty behavior can also reinforce unity among group members, as a feeling of superiority over those being ridiculed can coexist with a feeling of belonging (Duncan, 1982). Two important effects of superiority humor follow: Human society is kept in order as those who disobey are censured by laughter, and people are made to feel part of a group by laughing at some ridiculed others. As examples of mild forms of superiority humor, television shows like *Candid Camera*, as well as many situation comedies, allow audiences to laugh at people caught in unenviable or idiotic situations.

### **The Functions of Humor in Messages**

Applying the three major theories of humor origin to actual messages suggests that each can illuminate only partially the functions of humor. Just as one humorous line may serve more than one rhetorical function, so it may fall under more than one humor theory. However, proponents of each theory hold that it can explain all instances of humor (Gruner, 1997; Morreall, 1983). The impact of such theoretical disputes is that any example of humor can be readily explained by the perspective of one’s choice, based on the “theoretical sunglasses” through which one chooses to peer. For instance, one printed announcement in a church bulletin noted that “Weight Watchers will meet at 7:00 p.m. Please use the large double door at the side entrance.” If one experiences humor from this written remark, relief theory proponents could argue that the humor stems from the tension released when receivers realize that the juxtaposition of the meeting announcement and reference to the large door was not directed at the receiver personally. Incongruity proponents could claim that the humor results from the surprise at seeing such a recommendation for entry following a serious announcement for a group of people concerned about their weight. The reference to the large doors violates social norms of politeness and respect, among others; thus the incongruity can result in humor. Superiority theory proponents, in turn, could argue that the humor originates simply from the implied put-down of overweight people by reference to their particular problems (i.e., needing larger doors). Thus, any of the three theories of humor origin can ideally explain any instance of humor, and the debate continues. Acknowledgment of a variety of characteristics inhering in a single instance of humor suggests that the inclusion of humor in messages has the po-

tential to fulfill a variety of rhetorical goals. These rhetorical functions can be clarified by developing an effects-based taxonomy of humor, moving beyond the theories of humor origin. It is important to recognize that, however humor originates, its effects in a message can vary, based upon other variables that mediate the humor.

Most important, much humor is situationally dependent. Given a set of audiences or contexts, what would be perceived as quite humorous in one instance may seem irrelevant or only mildly interesting in another (Carrell, 1992; Duncan, 1982; Winick, 1976). Humor may also be viewed in separate situations as more or less acceptable in communication (Hackman & Barthel-Hackman, 1993). As Raskin (1992) noted, communication participants may vary in familiarity with social scripts, modes of communication, and experiences, as well as in their humor appreciation volition. If audience members are familiar with expected scripts or patterns of interaction, they will be able to understand a humorous deviation from them. In addition, though, they must choose to appreciate the humor, and not to be angered, irritated, or afraid, or to feel another strong emotion. Raskin (1992) holds that both understanding and volition are required to experience humor. Given all these potential variables, it is no surprise that the presence or effect of humor differs from audience to audience and from situation to situation.

Secondly, because surprise, or an unexpected symbolic event, is important for humor to be perceived, the concepts that create the humor must be only mildly familiar to an audience. If the concepts that create the humor are so familiar as to be already known, or not familiar at all, the audience cannot “get” a joke because the sudden perception of a new perspective is lost, and humor does not occur. Although some surprise may lead to humor, often it is also essential that a receiver fill an enthymematic gap (Rybacki, 1992) in order to understand what is normal and what is being violated in a given situation. Clearly, the attempts at humor that meet with success depend directly on the specific audience and the situation in question.

In spite of such situational variability, however, some general understandings of humor function can be gained. Each theory of humor origin does seem especially fitted to specific situations: relief humor for relaxing tensions during communication in disconcerting situations or relating to a controversial issue, incongruity humor for presenting new perspectives and viewpoints, and superiority humor for criticizing opposition or unifying a group. Their dilemma when explaining rhetorical uses of humor arises when each seeks to explain all instances of humor. Although theories of humor origin are necessary and fascinating, theories of humor's effects or rhetorical functions are also needed. It long has been noted that humor can simultaneously unite and divide those expe-

| Humor theory | Humor function                                   |
|--------------|--|
| Relief       | Identification                                   |
| Incongruity  | Clarification<br>Differentiation                 |
| Superiority  | Identification<br>Enforcement<br>Differentiation |

**Table 1.**  
**Origin**  
**Theories of**  
**Humor With**  
**Correspond-**  
**ing**  
**Rhetorical**  
**Functions**

riencing it; laughter “produces simultaneously a strong fellow-feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders” (Lorenz, 1963, p. 253). This helps make humor use a potent but risky rhetorical tool, as the results may backfire due to humor’s paradox—“laughter forms a bond and simultaneously draws a line” (Lorenz, 1963, p. 253). Though humor has been found to give people unity and hope in the face of obstacles, it also may conceal malice or allow the expression of aggression without the consequences possible from direct confrontation. Humor is both a “lubricant” and an “abrasive” in social situations (Martineau, 1972, p. 103). It can smooth the way and integrate a rhetor into a greater level of credibility within a group, but it can also ruffle feathers and cause social friction and conflict. Martineau (1972) systematically outlined some social functions of humor. He created a sociological model showing how humor within and between groups can solidify a group, cause conflicts within and social disintegration of a group, or cause conflict or redefine a relationship between groups. In doing so, he foreshadowed the basic rhetorical functions of humor. Humor can have both uniting and divisive effects within and between communicating parties. Martineau’s model, however, does not explore how humor can have such effects through messages. It merely outlines the possible social results of humor use. The taxonomy of humor’s rhetorical functions developed here will illuminate more clearly these humor effects in messages.

Given varying degrees of audience position on and familiarity with a topic inherent in the humor situation, four potential effects of humor in rhetoric can be extrapolated. Table 1 suggests which theory of humor origin tended to suggest most strongly opportunities for each more refined humor function to arise. In the first case, an audience highly sympathetic to and quite familiar with a topic of humor may experience identification with the user of humor. Humor in this case serves to strengthen the commonality and shared meaning perceived between communicators. In the second case, an audience with lower degrees of agreement and familiarity with a humor topic may receive clarification of an issue through humor use. Thirdly, an audience with some disagreement



Table 2.  
Degrees of  
Agreement  
on Position  
and  
Familiarity  
With Topic  
of Humor by  
Key Humor  
Function

| Humor function  | Target person's position on issue |  | Target's familiarity with issue |  |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|--|
|                 |                                   |  |                                 |  |
| Identification  | ++                                |  | ++                              |  |
| Clarification   | +                                 |  | +                               |  |
| Enforcement     | —                                 |  | +                               |  |
| Differentiation | —                                 |  | ++                              |  |

or unfamiliarity with an issue communicated through humor may experience enforcement of a social norm. Finally, an audience in strong disagreement with a subject of humor, even with great familiarity with the issue, will experience differentiation through humor use. Because some familiarity with an issue is required to appreciate humor (Raskin, 1985), it ranges from high to low and back to high again through the four humor functions. The level of agreement with the issue presumed or engendered by humor use gives the most power to humor's functions. Table 2 summarizes the situational combination in terms of issue agreement and familiarity for each function of humor. The functions can be viewed as falling along a continuum, starting with identification, then clarification, enforcement, and, at the other extreme, differentiation. This continuum illustrates the division of humor's basic communication functions into strategies that unify and those that divide. I will now explore these four basic rhetorical functions of humor in communication, drawing examples of each from a variety of rhetorical settings.

**Identification.** One valuable function humor serves is to build support by identifying communicators with their audiences, enhancing speaker credibility (Chang & Gruner, 1987; Gruner, 1967, 1985; Malone, 1980) and building group cohesiveness (Graham, Papa, & Brooks, 1992). Feelings may safely be communicated using humor that normally might be blocked by lack of a socially acceptable outlet (Winick, 1976). The appreciation of a sense of humor is an important part of growing and deepening relationships with people, as mutual uncertainty is reduced (Graham, 1995). These goals are sought when communicators try to release tension through humor and make their audiences feel superior in the sense that they are brought up to a more equal relationship with the speaker. This often involves speakers using self-deprecating humor to ally themselves with their audiences (Chapel, 1978). One example occurred when, during the first presidential debate in October 1992, Ross Perot responded to the other candidates' plans by saying that "if there are some good plans out there, I'm all ears." Of course, his ears were a prominent part of his anatomy, as many political cartoons had made clear. This let the audience know that he was human, too, and had the

ability to laugh at himself. (It communicated such a message, it should be noted, even though he later claimed he did not realize that the remark was funny.) Such humor invokes an issue very familiar to the audience, as well as placing the target of the humor in a position of sharing meaning or perspective on that issue. Humor that reduces tensions or makes a speaker seem a part of the group serves to identify the audience with the communicator, as they may laugh together at some relief of tension.

**Clarification.** Communicators also employ humor to encapsulate their views into memorable phrases or short anecdotes, resulting in the clarification of issues or positions. This strategy not only promotes greater recall of the event by audiences (Goldstein, 1976; Gruner, 1967, 1985), but, in today's era of short television sound bites, also provides a focus for media coverage. A short, humorous line, as modern politicians have learned, gets more play on radio and television newscasts than does a thorough presentation of policy positions. Humorous lines often serve to express one's views creatively and memorably because they are presented incongruously or unexpectedly. For the same reason, such lines are more likely to be picked up by the media. The line most remembered from Reagan's debates with Walter Mondale in 1984, for example, was Reagan's expression that he had no desire to make age an issue in the campaign because of the "youth and inexperience" of his opponent. This unexpected deflection of the age issue from himself to his opponent caused the audience present and even Mondale himself to laugh and caught widespread media attention in the days following. Clearly, incongruities can be extremely useful for politicians to humorously summarize their opinions and criticisms. The same can be true of any communicator attempting to persuade.

Much humor that results from plays on words serves to clarify social norms without a sense of correction or censure of anyone involved. There is some familiarity with the issue on the part of the audience, and some agreement on the issue involved, but the humor serves to teach or clarify the socially expected behaviors relating to the issue. Social norms are illuminated while the stress is on the expected norm rather than the seriousness of the violation. The humor stems from a relatively benign difference or a unique presentation of a message. Good examples of this have been collected from church bulletins and announcements, and from time to time one runs across a compilation of such church bulletin bloopers. The intent of such messages was clearly (and seriously) to convey useful information, but an error created humor because of its divergence from the norm. Such messages are then recirculated as humorous, serving to reinforce social norms of how messages should treat such subjects. One such announcement said, "The Low Self-Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 7:00. Please use the back door," thus sug-

gesting that those presumably already having low self-esteem should use a more discreet entrance than “normal.” Many similar examples exist, including an announcement that “the Rev. Merriwether spoke briefly, much to the delight of the audience,” and another account that revealed that “during the absence of our Pastor, we enjoyed the rare privilege of hearing a good sermon when J. F. Stubbs preached last Sunday.” The social norm in such messages is to praise the minister or show appreciation for a message, and such announcements engender humor as they show that they (presumably) inadvertently violated the social norm they supposedly were following. Finally, a bulletin requested eight new choir robes “due to the addition of several new members and to the deterioration of some older ones.” The applicable norm in this case would be to point out the deterioration of choir robes, not of the members, and this norm is emphasized by its violation through humor. These examples show humor in messages that serves to clarify social norms or perceptions, yet may also reduce tension and promote good feelings among communicators. No specific party is corrected or differentiated in such humor, as it seeks to unify receivers of such messages in mutual enjoyment of a mild violation of normal messages or norms.

**Enforcement.** Humor allows a communicator to enforce norms delicately by leveling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification with an audience (Graham et al., 1992). Reagan used humor to speak against what he believed was an oppressive federal government without casting himself as a “negative” politician. Incongruity was useful for Reagan to accomplish this; he could get his audiences to laugh at incongruities rather than harshly criticizing them, thus avoiding the role of the bitter, angry critic (Meyer, 1990). Humor can also teach and enforce social norms. These norms are developed cognitively as expectations for behavior. Any deviations from such expectations may be seen as humorous and can be held up for ridicule, invoking laughter to discipline those who are not seen as properly following the rules of a social group (Bergson, 1911; Duncan, 1962).

Humor involving children often serves an enforcement function, as the violations of norms that produce a mirthful experience illuminate something that a child has yet to learn. Thus, the audience is familiar with the issue involved, but there is disagreement about perspective, which gives rise to the humor. The perspectives of children often create humor from their divergent, unusual perspective on social norms and activities. Yet, such messages with humor generally point to a need for correction or enforcement of social knowledge and norms. One teacher had children write letters to God with questions they would like to ask. One girl wrote, “Are you really invisible or is that just a trick?” A boy wanted to know, “why is Sunday school on Sunday? I thought it was supposed to

be our day of rest.” Humor in such instances is elicited by the lack of knowledge—or of the “correct” sociocultural perspective—on the part of the children. Sometimes this type of humor may actually involve the children “correcting” some adult perspectives on the world, such as when one boy wrote: “I went to this wedding and they kissed right in church. Is that okay?” One girl pointedly asked, “Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don’t You just keep the ones You have now?” These questions are humorous because they point to some inconsistency in the child’s knowledge or in adult perspectives that need correction through teaching or through gaining an understanding of the socially desired perspective.

In a similar vein, other teachers have asked young children to finish old proverbs on their own to see what the children would come up with. Although their responses were not inaccurate, they clearly needed education on the original proverbs. One first grader noted that it is “better to be safe than . . . punch a 5th grader.” Another pointed out that “It’s always darkest before . . . daylight savings time.” Of course, there was the child’s suggestion that “children should be seen and not . . . spanked or grounded.” These statements are humorous because they are clear violations of common expectations or knowledge in that they do not match the well-known sayings, and they also evoke the expectation that these will be corrected as the children grow up and learn the common sayings as part of the cultural knowledge of their society. Though the examples above were humorous in a benignly corrective way, the following were less so, as they were found on answers to tests given to schoolchildren in their music classes. One child wrote that: “Refrain means don’t do it. A refrain in music is the part you better not try to sing,” and another solemnly noted that “Beethoven died in the latter part of his life.” It was clear to one student that “an opera is a song of bigly size,” and another wrote that “most authorities agree that music of antiquity was written long ago.” The “wrongheadedness” of these answers is more striking and the need for correction clear. The responses show more clearly the need for correction and learning on the part of the sender, even as the receivers of these messages often find them humorous. The enforcement function of humor allows for stress on the violation of norms, which, although engendering mirth, requires correction indicated by laughing *at* the person responsible for the humorous violation.

**Differentiation.** As a final function, communicators use differentiation quite often, contrasting themselves with their opponents, their views with an opponent’s views, their own social group with others, and so on. Humor is invoked to make both alliances and distinctions. Politicians may use humor to differentiate themselves from other candidates;

leaders may use humor to distinguish their own group from others. Goldstein (1976) noted that such use of humor can help speakers transcend the immediate situation and objectify it, promoting the use of reason and thereby making these differences clearer and less colored by previous experience and emotion. One can criticize with humor by ridiculing the opposition through laughter rather than through indignation, anger, or violence (Volpe, 1977). Comic ridicule can also maintain identification and political unity among members of one group while stressing contradictions and differences they have with others (Schutz, 1977). Though the presidential campaign of 1996 was not known for its humor, Republican candidate Robert Dole invoked differentiation humor in a reference to his opponent:

For the government cannot direct the people, the people must direct the government. This is not the outlook of my opponent, and he is my opponent, not my enemy. Though he has tried to be a good Republican, there are certain distinctions between the two great parties that will be debated, and must be debated in the next 82 days. (Dole, 1996, p. 679)

By pointing out in a humorous way that his opponent was trying to act like a Republican, but was not really one, Dole (1996) differentiated his opponent (and supporters) from his own supporters. Of course, such differentiation can also serve as identification for one in agreement with Dole on the issue, causing the rhetorical identification through differentiation noted by Kenneth Burke (1984).

This is the harshest function of humor in rhetoric, as often no quarter is given to the opposing group. The audience is very familiar with the subject, but is in complete disagreement with the humor's target. Indeed, harsh comments about disliked groups are often perceived in themselves as humorous. One type of differentiation humor that is pervasive in our society attacks attorneys. Several collections of lawyer jokes make the rounds, including comments such as this: Q: Why don't snakes bite attorneys? A: Professional courtesy. Even more cruel is the one that asks: How can you tell that an attorney is about to lie? A: His lips begin to move. Both of the above are as insulting and venomous as they are humorous—a superiority theorist's touchstone. Another dart at the legal system noted that "a jury is a collection of people banded together to decide who hired the better lawyer." Here was a shot at those who were swayed by "good lawyers" instead of by the socially desired norms of truth and justice. Finally, one asked: What do lawyers use for birth control? A: Their personalities. All of these attack and differentiate an opposing or disliked group, and it is the creative attacks on that group that spark the humor. This function of humor is clearly effective at dividing one group (those who communicate and appreciate the humor) from

another (those who would be expected to disagree with the perspective creating the humor). However, there are many cases of group members telling jokes about their own group. Such humor seems to unite the group's members against the issue or behavior by which they are being mocked, serving as a form of identification through mutually acknowledged differentiation humor. Group members clearly disagree on a rational level with the violations that spark the humor and would be expected to object if an "outsider" told the same deprecatory jokes about their group. The differentiation function of humor serves rhetors by making clear divisions and oppositions among opinions, people, and groups.

### **The Paradox of Dual Humor Functions**

When applied to rhetoric, argumentation, or even to personal communication, the functions discussed above suggest a continuum of humor use, running from identification and unification to differentiation and social exile. Because identification and clarification through humor engender agreement with the norm or issue involved, they tend to unify communicators. On the other hand, the enforcement and differentiation functions rely on someone's disagreement with the norm or issue involved, and thus tend to be divisive. Even more complicated is the fact that such divisive humor may serve to unite one group against another. Study of humor in conversation has revealed factors related to both positive and negative affect, with a third more neutral factor of expressiveness (Graham et al., 1992). These factors may be viewed as falling along the very continuum of humor function proposed here. When applying humor to communication events involving persuasive appeals, two overall effects do emerge: division and unification. However, their dualism is evident in that divisive humor simultaneously can unify a group participating in it.

All uses of humor to attack others, whether on the basis of perceived irrationality or behavior perceived as wrong, would be categorized under the enforcement or differentiation functions of humor and would stress the violation of the norm more strongly than the continuing effective norm. However, they can still serve to unify hearers against the violators, as is usually done by implying that "the others" are somehow irrational or inferior. One example came when, during the 1980 presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan tried to divide himself and his supporters from President Jimmy Carter's:

I publicly declared that this is a depression and the President before the day was out went to the press to say, "That shows how little he knows. This is a recession." If the

President wants a definition, I'll give him one. Recession is when your neighbor loses his job, depression is when you lose yours, and [here he paused as the laughs began] recovery will be when Jimmy Carter loses his. (Boller, 1981, p. 354)

This kind of humor is used primarily to attack or blame and thus to divide one group from another, yet supporters within one group can be united behind an effective humorous attack.

Many forms of ingratiation, including relieving tension through an entertaining story or remark, promoting good feelings in an audience, and seeking to equalize the communicator-audience relationship, would fall under the identification or clarification functions of humor in communication. This is the primary purpose, for instance, of a politician using a funny story to clarify a position, entertain an audience, or defuse tension in a situation. One example comes from Jimmy Carter's presidency:

Just before President Carter's helicopter landed in Justin, Texas, about forty miles northeast of the drought-stricken Dallas-Fort Worth area in July 1980, there was a sudden rainfall lasting for about ten minutes. Carter stepped onto slippery clay soil that only an hour earlier had been hard and rough. "Well," he smiled at the farmers who had gathered to greet him, "you asked for either money or rain. I couldn't get the money so I brought the rain." (Boller, 1981, p. 346)

Humor can be used in such ways to bring a speaker symbolically closer to an audience, which is the most crucial need for the unifying effect of humor, especially through identification.

These four rhetorical humor functions, placed along a uniting/dividing continuum, logically separate the different types of humor found in messages. The dual potential of humor to unite or divide (and sometimes do both at once) is clearly delineated, thereby making the application of humor function to analysis of rhetoric clearer. Although humor always can serve several purposes, the merit of humor function definitions rests on their clarity in explaining phenomena as well as their simplicity. The identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation functions of humor in rhetoric meet these criteria readily. Though there still may be found some overlap between them, they are clearer for studying rhetorical humor than the standard triad of incongruity, superiority, and relief theories. Though the four rhetorical functions are the most parsimonious to date in delineating humor functions, the dual nature of humor function in rhetoric long has been noted. Charles Gruner (1965) split the function of humor into two basic kinds: persuasive, rational humor, on the one hand, and clowning, emotional humor, on the other. The former he called "wit," which was practical and concerned with

reality or truth; the latter, “humor,” which was artistic, creative, and often concerned with fantasy. Years earlier, Dahlberg (1945) had characterized a wit as one who laughed at you, whereas a humorist laughed with you. Gruner’s distinction seems to be a case of using more broad terms for the humor duality explored above: Wit referred to the differentiation or enforcement functions, whereas humor for him referred to the relaxing identification or clarification functions of humor in communication. Humor’s creative, poetic impulse is useful for relaxing and identifying with audiences, whereas ironic, educational humor is used to make arguments vivid by differentiating or enforcing norms through “perspective by incongruity” (Burke, 1984).

The question remains, then, what makes divisive humor distinct from unifying humor? What is key to distinguishing one from the other? The theory put forward by Veatch (1992) can assist in determining that. He notes that for a situation to be perceived as humorous by a perceiver, one must simultaneously have in mind two views of the situation: one in which there is a violation of some moral or natural order, and one in which all appears normal. For divisive humor, the different situation, or the violation, is the focus of the communication. With unifying humor, the normal situation is emphasized or dominant in the message. So, although all communication functions of humor require the simultaneous entertainment of two perceptions, each function relies on a communicative emphasis upon one perception or the other. Differentiation and enforcement humor show the violation, though laughable, to be an unacceptable violation that needs to be focused on, corrected, or avoided in the future. Identification and clarification humor, on the other hand, show the violation as a humorous exception to the normal, reassuring, relaxing state that is expected and that, it is implied, will soon return undisturbed. Thus, the rhetorical goal influences which key function of humor is applied. Such goals and humor use in service of them can be adapted to the structure of the argument and necessarily must be adapted to the perspective of the audience.

The identification and clarification functions stress the overall normality of the situation, providing reassurance while noting some humorous divergence from that normality. Showing that one can laugh at such situations makes a speaker seem relaxed and more in control, potentially boosting audience confidence in the speaker. However, there is an element of divisiveness in such humor appeals as well—a sense the communicator gives that group members share in seeing humor in a particular comment or joke, while other outsiders do not. This leads to feelings of unity as “in-group-ness,” through the sharing of a particular joke or story (Bormann, 1972, 1982). Political candidate Robert Dole used unifying humor through clarification in 1996 when, after falling off a plat-



form into the audience, he let it be known that he had simply decided to try break dancing. This reassured his audience that, although it was unusual for a candidate to fall off the platform, things were really all right and he was still in control. The norm (doing crazy things in the course of campaigning) was stressed in the humor over and above the violation (being so clumsy or unsteady that he fell off a platform).

Humor also can divide through the enforcement and differentiation functions with derision and put-downs of others pointing to incongruities in what they do or say. Communicators imply that others' actions not only are unexpected, but unacceptable, and hence worthy of opposition in the form of discipline by laughter (Duncan, 1962). Here, it is the violation that is stressed over the normality (though both perceptions must be present for appreciation of humor). Acceptance of put-downs implies that audience members, as well as the speaker, are superior to those being laughed at. Yet, it is the incongruity of others' actions compared to what is expected or desired of them that provokes laughter and serves as a corrector or divider. Regardless of the theory of humor origin selected, however, differentiation and enforcement humor focus on the violation, rather than the norm. After all, if certain behaviors are laughable, should others seriously support them in fellow group members or in a political candidate? Persuaders and politicians using humor to attack hope most audience members think not. During the 1996 presidential debates, Bob Dole's most memorable (of very few) humorous lines were said when he noted, in response to a question on whether people were better off than they were four years earlier, that "Well he's [President Clinton's] better off than he was four years ago . . . Saddam Hussein is probably better off than he was four years ago." *Time* referred to this response as Dole's best line in the entire debate (Levasseur & Dean, 1996). Opponents of former Vice President Dan Quayle have taken to simply passing around quotes from his various speeches. Their clear intent is to show, in a humorous way, his lack of intelligence. In a speech to the United Negro College Fund, Quayle noted that, "What a terrible thing to have lost one's mind. Or not to have a mind at all. How true that is." He noted in a speech to the Phoenix Republican Forum in 1990 that "I believe we are on an irreversible trend toward more freedom and democracy, but that could change." When discussing the environment, he noted that "it isn't pollution that's harming the environment. It's the impurities in the air and water that are doing it." Later he announced that "I stand by all the misstatements that I've made." Quayle may be unique in supplying so much divisive humor about himself, but his opponents clearly relish using such quotes to point to his apparent stupidity in contrast to themselves. They stress Quayle's violations of debate or intelligence norms as the most relevant factor in the humor,

though the element of a “normal” politician is in mind, as well, to spark humor appreciation.

Divisive humor is applied to rhetorically push away the “other” and to show that they or their opinions are beyond the pale of common values being invoked. President Bill Clinton has certainly been the subject of varied uses of differentiation humor. In one story, three high-school-aged boys are walking down a street in Washington when suddenly they see Clinton go jogging by. He is about to be hit by a car, so they pull him out of the way and save his life. Clinton tells them, “Thank you for saving my life. I’ll grant each of you one wish.” The first boy says, “I want to go to Georgetown.” Clinton pulls some strings and gets the boy admitted. The second boy says, “I want to get into West Point, but it normally requires a congressional appointment.” So, Clinton calls up his Democratic friends in Congress and gets the boy his appointment. The third boy says, “I want to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery.” Clinton says, “That’s an odd request for a 17-year-old!” The boy says, “Yeah, but when my father finds out I saved your life he’s gonna kill me!” No clearer political differentiation can be made through humor than that, as the violation of norms by the father’s exaggerated anger at Clinton dominates such humor. Others have put forward humorous “dictionaries” of what Bill Clinton is really saying: “My fellow citizens” really means “suckers,” “broad-based contributions” are “taxes,” “investing in our infrastructure” is “pork-barrel spending,” “opportunity” and “compassion” are really “federal handouts,” and “health care reform” is really “increasing broad-based contributions”! These so-called definitions stress violations through contrasts, presented as humor, and illustrate the differences between opponents and supporters of Bill Clinton in a sharp, memorable way.

Humor can also be used to attack misbehavior and enforce conformity to social norms. In a year of political scandal, humorous jabs at the president and his sexual activity were everywhere. Many reported learning the latest news from the jokes that Jay Leno and David Letterman told about President Clinton on their nightly television talk shows. Just two fictitious questions to Clinton can serve as examples of this:

Question: Mr. President, have you ever considered contributing to a sperm bank?  
Clinton’s answer: No, I already gave at the office.

Question: Mr. President, when you fall in love, should it be forever?  
Clinton’s answer: Thirty good seconds should do the trick. (Bishop & Brand, 1998)

These jokes, which make verbal jabs at their target, separate audiences who laugh at the violations of social norms illustrated in them from the

person or group described in them. Politicians who invoke such humor in their rhetoric want that divisiveness to extend to audience support for themselves and disfavor for their opponents.

In noting that humor is used to unify as well as to divide, other striking instances of it potentially doing both at once are found in teases. A tease is viewed as humorous and aggressive at the same time, as it “makes a potentially negative statement about the recipient, but is framed as humor or play” (Alberts, Kellar-Guenther, & Corman, 1996, p. 337). Thus, the receiver is left to decide, based primarily on the prior relationship to the teaser (Alberts et al., 1996), whether the message is primarily a tension-relieving mood lightener or a lightly disguised critique. The context of the relationship allows the receiver to place the stress of teasing humor on the norm (friendly making light of faults) or the violation (a “muffled” criticism or put-down). The duality of humor also can be a strength for communicators as they use it to relax tensions by showing that a speaker is aware of contradictions in messages or values causing tension and is dealing with them, encouraging others involved to get beyond their own tension by doing the same (Meyer, 1997).

Humor’s potential power as an influential communication tool is illustrated by the acknowledgment that the two most popular and admired U.S. presidents of the past 40 years, John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, have been men with the most agreeable senses of humor (Gardner, 1986; Troxler, 1983). Use of humor clearly enhances one’s leadership and persuasive influence because of the nearly universal admiration of this skill (in moderation—overuse of humor can lower credibility [Gruner, 1985]). Many consider a sense of humor a crucial indicator of good character. Yet, this sense of humor can cut both ways. It can be a kind, humane, friendly, pleasant means of communication through promoting identification and clarification of issues, or it can be wry, cynical, cutting, and even mean. Some people may feel less safe communicating with a person enacting a divisive sense of humor through enforcement or differentiation, but they also may be entertained, enlightened, or even motivated (at times, perhaps, even angered) by such communicators. The necessity of holding multiple perspectives in mind allows both users and receivers of humor to choose on which perspective to focus: the norm briefly and benignly violated humorously or the violation, which draws condemnation by humor. Thus does the duality paradox of humor function allow rhetorical unification or division—or both at the same time.

The flexible contradictions inherent in humor allow rhetors to enlist it for a variety of purposes, making it a most powerful communication tool. Understanding its rhetorical functions of differentiation, enforcement, clarification, and identification allows more refined and detailed

assessment of humor's communication effects than the theories of humor origin do. Humor's flexibility as a rhetorical tool allows communicators to transcend recurring arguments or patterns because messages with humor can get people to laugh at contradictions as a way to accept their existence (Boland & Hoffman, 1983) instead of frantically, futilely, or tragically seeking to correct or eliminate them. How many work and world conflicts could be defused if both parties could see humor in their differences? Through the identification and clarification functions, or the relaxing elements of humor, parties can lower defenses and be more open to seeing the new perspectives required to appreciate humor. Viewing new perspectives and laughing together at them can enhance communicators' identification with each other and move communication to a "comic frame" away from a rigid "tragic frame" (Burke, 1984). Contradictions or differences may also be separated from the allegiance of communicators through humor in the form of burlesque (Moore, 1992). By imitating and mocking differences, they can be recognized and censured in a flexible and perceptive way. Humor's fourfold functional manipulation of concepts can increase potential future directions for communication research, enhancing rhetorical study and illuminating communicators' ability to deal with contradictions rather than feeling oppressed or trapped by contradictions and prone to other alternatives, such as violence. In sum, the paradox of duality in humor functions between unification and division serves to make humor a "double-edged sword" by which communicators can unite or divide their audiences. Humor use is thus a fruitful area of research for communication scholars, as future research can increase understanding of the symbols through which the duality of humor and the four rhetorical functions of humor manifest themselves in a variety of messages.

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