

Actus I -- What's so Funny?

If we are to be able to formulate rules to describe and prescribe the production of linguistic humor, we must understand what produces humor in general, and to start by looking at definitions and philosophical and psychological models of it. Traditionally, humor was regarded as simply a matter of **incongruity**. Schopenhauer used this definition, as did James Beattie, and they both noted the importance of establishing some sort of relation "from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them." (Raskin, p32, quoting Beattie, "Essay on laughter and ludicrous composition," 1776) If puns are humorous, it is because they link disparate ideas through something as simple and arbitrary as similarity of sound. **Therefore the distance between the ideas linked, and the closeness of the similarity that links them, are the crucial factors in the humor value of the pun.** (This will become especially important in the analysis of puns and etymologies.) By **ideas**, I mean the specific meanings of the ambiguous words, which is a linguistic matter, as distinct from the larger implications of the links of the words, a social, cultural, and otherwise world-knowledge related matter. More modern incongruity theories also stress the degree to which disparate things are brought back together (the degree of resolution) the making plausible of the seemingly wildly unlikely situation. In pun terms, this corresponds to the degree to which the pun is, in the end, appropriate; that is, whether it actually makes some true statement about its subject.

Other theories shift the stress slightly to the **unexpected** rather than the incongruous. The link is that we usually do not expect the incongruous; yet this is not always true. There are jokes which can be funny even after multiple tellings, and scenes in films which still provoke laughter, even after many viewings. Proponents of suddenness could respond that we forget the exact pattern of the humorous situation between experiences of it, and thus that it remains fresh, and in the interim our experiences are so constantly ordinary that we lose any expectation of the unexpected. "Unexpected" can also be used in the sense of "sudden," which is how Kant used it, defining laughter as *"arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing."* (Raskin 31, Kant **Critique of Judgment**, 1790) I will use "**incongruous**" to refer to situations in containing elements which are beyond normal experience, and "**unexpected**" to refer to situations in which an apparently normal flow is resolved in an odd way. A subgroup of the incongruous is the odd, or that which can take place only in an "alternate universe," this is the basis of most of the humor of such comic strips as **The Far Side** and **Mr. Boffo**, with their themes of "what if."

More modern work on the subject includes that done by Henri Bergson, and of course, Sigmund Freud. Bergson, in his book **Le Rire**, published around the turn of the century, rejects surprise and contrast as applying to too many other cases besides humor to be sufficient conditions for it in themselves for it. (p41) Instead, he defined the humorous as the perception of the mechanical encrusted on the living, "Du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant." (p39) He used these terms fairly loosely; by "living," Bergson meant that which is capable of adaptation, which is supple, which does not persist in a blindly automated way of action when faced with new conditions to which it may not be appropriate. According to him, an ugly, distorted face can be comic because it seems as if the person is persisting in a bizarre grimace that anyone can assume but no one keeps. The viewer is like the character in Edmond Rostand's **Cyrano de Bergerac**, who sees the hero's huge appendage and thinks "Surely he will take it off." (Act I) A man slipping on a banana peel is funny because he is attempting to maintain the mechanical precision of his walk under new circumstances that make it impossible. (Douglas (1968), seems to interpret Bergson differently; in his view, the man slipping is comic because we realize the mechanical, unnatural nature of the steady walk in comparison to the sudden wild and unpredictable sprawl of his fall.) Whenever people are made to look or act like machines, (or they give the impression of being things rather than people (p59)) when they adhere rigidly to rules or processes that no longer apply in the situation, it becomes comic. Bergson cites as further examples the Baron Munchausen, transformed into a cannonball, or the overzealous customs officers who, as they picked up the survivors of a cross-Channel ferry that sank, asked them if they had anything to declare, in accordance with regular procedures. The humor closest to a literal interpretation of Bergson is that of films such as Charlie Chaplin's **Modern Times**, Woody Allen's **Sleeper**, or Terry Gilliam's **Brazil**, in which people are forced by a mechanized society to act like machines, but it applies equally well to any comedy of manners, and broadly to jokes in general. The key is to persist in the bizarre grimace of rule governed behavior when it is no longer appropriate.

And if we are looking for a rule governed human behavior, language is an ideal example. However, the rules that govern language are not mechanical but psychological and genuinely human. It was not always believed so; in the days when Behaviorism, when Skinner and Bloomfield, reigned supreme, language was seen as completely mechanical. It was a set of responses to phonological input in the form of phonological output; there was no room for the mind, the human being. An endless debate raged over whether certain homophones, such as **pod** and **pa'd**, could really be distinguished, for this would require mental representations of things other than sounds. Since that time, the

tendency has been to require that linguistic rules be justified in terms of psychological reality rather than just descriptive adequacy. Theoretically, we operate on underlying mental representations rather than surface ones since we are human beings and not Skinnerian machines. But in practice, we often act like them, (which is why Behaviorism has some relevance and was long accepted) since the surface representations are close enough to the underlying ones that we can glide through conversation, on automatic pilot as it were. But when ambiguity will not let us do so, when we confuse two utterances because of the similarity of their surface forms rather than their true meanings, it is the mechanical encrusted on the living. When Groucho remarks that it is easier to get elephants out of one's pyjamas in Alabama because the Tuscaloosa, (**Animal Crackers**) we cannot adapt our march through language quickly enough to the new meaning of the place-name, and slip just as on a banana peel. We realize that we have been acting mechanically, and laugh at it. We are clinging to behavior (a certain, usual interpretation of a certain string) in a new situation (context) in which it is no longer appropriate. More generally, we are behaving according to mechanical rules in a supple, human situation. This same thing can happen in production as well as comprehension; Bergson gives as a rule "*On obtiendra toujours un mot comique en insérant une idée absurde dans un moule de phrase consacré.*" ("One will always obtain a comic expression in inserting an absurd idea into a fixed formula." p114) and as an example, "ce sabre est le plus beau jour de ma vie," of Prudhomme, ("this saber is the most beautiful day of my life", and if this does not seem very funny, he notes "translate it into English or German, and it becomes simply absurd, from the comic which it was in French.") "It is enough," he says, "to make it comic, to bring to light the automatism of the person who pronounces it." The speaker is so used to his formula that he does not notice that the word he has substituted in are inappropriate, but we do, and find it humorous and pleasurable. (Or sometimes we don't. To see ourselves or other human beings acting like machines can also be grim and terrifying, as the movies mentioned above show. This would explain why puns often raise a feeling of resentment; they show us to be something we would rather not acknowledge.) Or, to look at language in general from this angle, we expect language to be precise, that each string will have a unique and clear interpretation. When we see how imprecise it can be, how ambiguous, it becomes human again. When we realize it to be imprecise, spontaneous, with associations based on chance similarity of sounds rather than precise grammatical links, it becomes funny.

Freud's basic explanation of the "mechanism of pleasure in jokes" (what makes them funny) is "the savings in psychical expenditure," which is what is produced by the

reaction or maintenance of a psychical inhibition. (118).¹ We have inhibitions and repressions produced by the social structures and strictures; we are not allowed to do certain things in company, such as talk openly about sex or express aggressive feelings. But there is perhaps no set of social rules more restrictive and binding than those of language, or at least of grammatical speech. Thus, when we can circumvent them, we receive pleasure. "In focusing our psychical attitude on the sound of a word instead of on its meaning -- in making the (acoustic) word-presentation itself take the place of its significance as given by its relations to thing-presentations...it may really be suspected that...we are bringing about a great relief in psychical work and that when we make serious use of words we are obliged to hold ourselves back with a certain effort from this comfortable procedure." (p119) This implies that we would all rather act directly on the acoustic input, rather than having to process and parse it so many levels. Furthermore, similarity of sound allows us to make connections that we might not normally allow ourselves to make, to blame them on the words, in effect. Years ago, when former Dukakis Campaign Aide Michael Zubrensky asked me my concentration, and I told him, he asked if I were a "cunning linguist." His remark was apparently innocent, but we both recognized its smutty significance. However, this relates more to the content of jokes than their mechanism.

Another source of savings of psychical energy is the **recognition of what is familiar**, (p120) a release from the "psychical damming" of inhibitions that prevents us from seeing that things are the same or at least connected. It seems difficult, however, to attribute this wholly to overcoming inhibitions. A totally innocent example occurred to me once (and occurs to me now): I have a checking account at one bank and a savings account at another, and to transfer money to it, I usually make a check out to myself and deposit it. As I was going through the cancelled checks included with my bank statement one month, checking to how I had given away my money and to whom, I found a check made out to "Michael Stoler," and realized, *but only after a moment's delay*, that I knew him. It seems to me that the pleasure of recognition comes from the unexpectedness of finding the comfortably familiar in a new place, and the oddness, even the stupidity, (the Bergsonian mental *raideur*, though not *of the Lost Ark*) of not having recognized it in the first place, of having delayed slightly. On the other hand, to state in abstract terms of psychical energy, perhaps the mind likes to deal with as few symbols as possible, and dreads having to learn new things; this requires work. If, after the threat, the appearance, of the necessity of learning something new, it is revealed that it is only the familiar in a

¹ This same mechanism produces other forms of pleasure than jokes (130)

new form, the mind is relieved at not having to exert itself. However, is it really any easier for the mind to deal with the multiple meanings per symbol required by a small number of symbols, than to learn new ones? Is this perhaps only a trait of closed-minded adults and not of eager-to-learn children, especially when it comes to language? I will not attempt to answer these questions, but I think it should be accepted that not only the **recognition of the familiar** but the **delayed recognition of the obvious** is a source of pleasure and humor.

Early in his book, in his section on the mechanisms of humor, Freud describes various techniques that produce this economy of psychical expenditure. Many of his examples are of verbal humor. One technique is **condensation**, frequently used for puns, which involves combining words or phrases with common or similar elements to say two things at once. Freud gives as an example the description of the Christmas season as the "**alcoholidays**," in which "alcohol" and "holidays" are connected by their common element. Other examples are the horticultural store in Brookline called "**Plantasia**" (Plant + fantasia) and the butcher shop across the street from it which promises "**Our prime meats with your approval**." The idea behind condensation is that the two elements have a necessary and logical connection based on similarity of sound; it is conjunctive, saying "the ideas suggested by both words are true at the same time." Freud introduces a related concept of "substitute formation," which is simply the condensation with slight modification of the words involved. Although Freud does not say so, this technique usually serves a disjunctive function, which I shall call **differentiation**, or contrasting. Here, the joker makes a change in a phrase that usually conveys a certain impression so that the meaning and the impression conveyed are changed. Freud cites "I drove with that stupid ass tête-à-bête," meaning "I drove with him tête-à-tête and he is an animal." The change in sounds, (or in some cases which are often hard to recognize except in print, the change in semantics of part of the phrase) stand for the change in meaning of the entire phrase. Another good example of differentiation comes from Gary Larsen's **The Far Side**: in a picture captioned "Canine comedians," a dog is shown standing on a stage saying to an audience, "Take my wife's...fleas." The entire difference between dogs and men is thus reduced to the change of adding a sound and changing a feature. Freud quotes Jean Paul, that "brevity is the soul of wit," that using the same material in two ways saves psychical expenditure. He distinguishes also "multiple use of the same material" in two different senses, with modification or without. His funniest example concerns a fairly well-off couple, of whom it is said, "**The husband has made a bit of money and so has been able to lay back a bit, while the wife has lain back a bit and has thus been able to make a bit of money**." The English is stilted, the phrases not the ordinary ones; but in

German "sich etwas zurückgelegt" stands for both "lay back"'s without sounding odd. The humor of this is due to a large degree to its larger implications, however, as well as its technique." Here pleasure stems from the rediscovery of the familiar in a slightly -- or widely---different form. A third sub-category is "double meaning," that is, the use of a word in two senses without repetition, which is distinguished from condensation mainly in that the word changes meaning instead of retaining two meanings. Freud also dismisses puns, "kalauer" as he calls them, as inferior, prizing, as many have, the play on words (3rd order and above, see Actus III) over the play on sounds. This seems inconsistent; for most examples of condensation and multiple use that he gives involve modification of sound.

His second large category of jokes are those involving logical errors, such as "Never to be born is the best thing for mortal man, but this happens scarcely to one person in a hundred thousand." (p57) Another involves the beggar who asks his patron for money to travel to Ostend for his health, and when the patron remarks on the expense of Ostend and suggests a cheaper place, replies that "I consider that nothing is too expensive for my health." Some simply shift the emphasis, respond for the wrong reason, such as the character in Gilbert and Sullivan's **Ruddigore**² who brags of the crime disinheriting his unborn son, and when told he cannot do so, replies "Then whose unborn son can I disinherit?" Closely related are jokes in which plain stupidity is expressed, such as "Isn't it amazing that cats have two holes in their skin right where their eyes are?" My favorite example is of the person who listens to a lecture on astronomy, and understands and believes most of it, such as how we can calculate the masses and distances of the stars, their temperatures, ages, compositions. What he can't understand is how scientists have figured out what their names are. Freud again suggests that we yearn to return to the days of childhood when we could speak nonsense without criticism, a right denied to adults. (p125) When Aristotle, in the *Sophistici Elenchi*, is discussing the kinds of tricks the Sophist arguers play, he discusses purely logical ruses, but also linguistic ambiguities. The two are obviously related; a pun is the ultimate logical error, to think that just because two things sound the same, or worse, they only sound similar, they must be related logically. On the other hand, this logical fallacy, that similarity of sound implies similarity of meaning, is the basis for a great deal of human linguistic activity, poetry, and popular etymologizing as well as punning. (It will be further discussed below.) We can always laugh at the making of a pun because the subject is acting stupidly, that is, confusing two words which we, in our superior knowledge, distinguish easily, or

² This is not Freud's example, but is similar to one that Bergson uses in discussing the same matter.

believing the fallacy described above. In Bergson's view, we would laugh at stupidity the same way we laugh at ugliness, in the assumption that the subject is persisting in stupid behavior when he could be smart. Bergson also describes logical errors, such as that made by the young man who wanted to play the stock market, and when told it can go up one day, and down the next, said that he would only play every other day. (p119) Of course, some of these "logical" errors border on the linguistic; one could just as well say that the market sometimes goes up and sometimes goes down, in which case the same logical error could not still be made. (Although one could respond, "I'll only play it when it is going up," but then the faulty reasoning shows a different kind of ignorance about how the market works than the expectation of regularity expressed by the original example.) Jokes that change emphasis usually require a change of the actual word phrasal stress.

Freud's last large category are jokes that are simply allusive, that are funny for what they do not say directly. Since we are forbidden to say certain things, related mainly to sex and violence, directly, there is pleasure in circumventing the inhibitions through allusion. There is something to be decoded, figured out, with multiple translations into other codes. Many of these jokes involve analogies, in which the connection may (p81) be difficult to grasp at first, but in the end, very satisfying. This at first might seem to require a greater expenditure of psychological energy in exploring the various meanings, and if the payoff of pleasure from recognition of the familiar is not great enough, these jokes will fail due to their obscurity.

Freud further analyzes smutty and aggressive jokes. He believes we have hostile and sexually aggressive tensions which society does not permit us to express. Smut (that is, frank, direct sexual statements) is not tolerated in most social situations, nor are open expressions of violent intentions; they must be disguised through the allusions found in jokes.³ "They make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle [the social rules] that stands in the way. They circumvent this obstacle and in this way draw pleasure from a source which the obstacle had rendered inaccessible." (101) The obstacle is caused by the repression of sexual and violent feelings, which is a product of civilization and its rules, but jokes "provide a means of undoing the renunciation and recovering what was lost." They allow the venting of repressed sexual and hostile desires and the degradation of those whom one finds sexually attractive, or threatening. Freud believes this is a trait only of tendentious jokes,

³ One wonders, however, what Freud would have made of modern comedians such as Lenny Bruce and Eddie Murphy. He probably would have classed their material as smut rather than jokes.

of their content, not their form, but puns may be an exception. When one locates and plays upon the ambiguity in what other people say, it can be a subtle way of degrading them, of expressing superiority in the face of a perceived threat. (Raskin calls these "disparagement theories.") Puns replace punches, but the aggressive intent is the same. Of course, many puns are sexual in nature, but this is, again, not part of their technique, as is their use in ethnic jokes.

Not vastly different from this is the modern psychological theory of **arousal - safety**. (Raskin, p40) According to this theory, humor is a reaction to danger followed by rescue from it, as variation on the disappointed expectation theme. However, many jokes end with a character in dire circumstances -- how is this explained? There is certainly some pleasure in hearing of a terrible situation, if it happens to someone else, and we can be glad we are not in it. Puns can both express this in themselves and in what they say. The two meanings expressed by a pun can diametrically opposite, one positive, one negative. Also, being misunderstood is itself a misfortune, with potentially dire consequences. "We make jokes on what we fear: sex and death," my father used to say. If we are not comfortable with our command of language, if we fear being misunderstood, jokes can help defuse this tension.

For from the funny to the grim is but a step. Some humor is particularly dark (so-called gallows humor, jokes about death, maiming, torture, anything from Monty Python) and will not be found funny one whose experience of the subject is too fresh. (The producers of "Alive with AIDS," a recent musical revue celebrating those living with the disease, seemed to be surprised that a show featuring a woman telling her dead friend "Nice coffin" was not much of a success.) The targets of disparaging humor will not find it funny if they can feel its hostile intent. To have a pun made on one's own speech can be a (to use Prof. Alice Jardine's favorite semiotics term) castrating experience, as one's linguistic capabilities are brought into question. Even the most avid punster may be disturbed at another's making a pun on his own speech, if another finds ambiguity in speech the first speaker thought precise. Although there may be no hostile intent (and psychologists, and realists for that matter, would probably say there always is) being the victim of a pun can be unnerving; it is much easier to laugh at a pun on someone else's speech than on one's own. (Freud discusses the role of the third person in hostile jokes on 100ff.) On the other hand, if we tend to laugh at things which scare us, or try to, we might still laugh even at castrating puns.

Complete as it may seem, Freud's analysis leaves out another whole category of pleasure which can be produced by jokes. There can be a certain aesthetic pleasure in doing things by the rules or seeing things done that way; we enjoy the

symmetric perfection of a Greek temple, of a cast in fly fishing, or of a smooth, balanced cadence in bicycle racing. We also enjoy using our capacities, running fast, singing melodiously, or thinking clearly. There is an **intellectual pleasure** in using one's mind, in figuring things out, in following rules and expending psychical energy rather than saving it and breaking them. (Have I fallen into a bottomless chiasm?) We enjoy the recognition of the familiar after the intellectual labor required to see it, in part because of that labor, which forces us to think and reminds us that we are capable of doing so, as well as showing the joker that we are as intelligent as he or she is. There is also pleasurable feeling of pride, even superiority, in getting a joke requiring erudition or advanced knowledge, though this is a question of content rather than mechanism. The question is, is everyone capable of intellectual pleasure, or only intellectuals? Is it snobbish to think that most people would rather follow the intellectual path of least resistance, to avoid the strenuous life of the mind, just as they might avoid that of the body, to be intellectual couch potatoes as well as physical ones? (On the other hand, if this were not the case, then **Nova**, and not **Cheers**, would be the most popular show on television.) Is there a strong difference between popular jokes and intellectual ones? There is certainly one in content, but is there in mechanism also? It seems most probable that everyone is capable of enjoying "intellectual" humor to some degree, but that those who enjoy thinking more will receive more pleasure from jokes that require it. Of course, enjoyment of thinking can vary within the same individual; many who spend all day in intellectual pursuits enjoy only the broadest slapstick to relax in the evening.⁴ Jokes that force one to think too much when one does not feel like doing so, whether one ever feels like doing so or not, give little pleasure. Thus, some puns can be decidedly intellectual, reducing their appeal to only some of the people some of the time, while others will always be popular, depending on the amount of mental work required. Also, a joke, especially a verbal one, can be respected as almost a minor work of art; one can respect the labor, creativity, or insight of the joker as one contemplates the joke. Certain puns are real tours de force, showing great command of the language. Again, this tends to be more an intellectual process (I have a hard time thinking of puns that are breathtakingly beautiful at first experience, the way a sunset or a sculpture might be, or even a poem) requiring a certain delay, a certain conscious thought, and not producing the reflexive, uncontrollable belly laughs of a non-intellectual joke, working on the subconscious level. Aesthetic and

⁴ On the other hand, if their intellectual pursuits are constantly leavened with humor, so that they can sit in the stalls of Widener Library laughing while others are grimly poring, they may not tire of intellectualism so quickly, though my experience indicates they probably will in the end.

intellectual pleasure do not have the element of the unexpected, especially the unexpected rescue from danger, that ordinary comic pleasure has. They produce humor very differently; I am not sure if the reaction to aesthetic or intellectual pleasure can be called humor; it produces smiles but much less often laughter. I have tried to use examples of the popular, unconscious type, but when a pun's effect stems from the higher thought processes it requires, I will note the fact.

I should mention also some general conditions for humor which Freud lists and which help explain why puns succeed or fail. He cites a "generally cheerful mood" (219) as an advantage, and he is right; grumpy people don't like jokes, don't want to hear them, and so don't get them, while merry ones do. An "expectation of the comic," that is, for the hearer to know that the present context will probably contain humor, also helps. (See Section 4.1) Strong, deep mental or intellectual activity does not make the mind receptive to humor; people do not want to hear jokes when they are trying to be serious. If jokes are too closely examined, or if the material on which they are based is too close before the eyes, the joke disappears. Puns require a certain amount of distraction, of carelessness, a key fact that will be explained in the next chapter. Lastly, any accompanying pleasurable circumstance increases comic pleasure. (221) So have yourself a nice meal, turn on your favorite music, sit down in your favorite chair with an ice-cold beer, and put your feet up. Are you enjoying yourself? Good. Now go on to Actus II, and I am sure you will enjoy it a lot more. One other factor I have found important in the success of jokes and puns is the identity of the jokemaker and the hearer's feelings toward him or her. So you may want to forget, if your comfort has not already made you do so, who wrote this.