

Humor, Psyche, and Society

A Socio-Semiotic Analysis

Arthur Asa Berger
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Series in Anthropology



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Preface

by

Arie Sover

Humor has a language of its own. Verbal humor is attached to the normative language, reflecting our rational ordinary thinking. At some point, humor decides to turn on a path of its own, abandons the expected pattern of thought created at the beginning of the story (or joke), and turns to new directions. Common routine language is not the way of humor.

Humor tends to play with exceptional patterns of thinking, which cause us pleasure and satisfaction when we manage to understand the extraordinary cognitive path, and actually the language of humor. The brain acts as a nerve network that organizes itself; a system that classifies the new information it receives into patterns it recognizes. If this system cannot embed information into an existing pattern, it creates a new pattern. In this self-organizing information system, an idea can seem completely logical after application, but it is difficult to be predicted in advance. In this way, humor is created (de Bono, 1994, 28-29).

The language of humor is based on the normative language, but it is much richer. The language of humor, using a cognitive process, knows how to connect words and phrases that do not relate in the normative language. By doing so, humor creates a whole new language of its own. The uniqueness of the language of humor is its ability to regenerate itself over and over again. As opposed to the normative language, which usually has constant basic patterns, the language of humor has a surprising ability to modify itself within a moment. Comparing normative language with humor language, we see two conflicting cognitive behaviors of the brain. In normative language, the brain operates within rational, well-organized patterns, rejecting everything that is not compatible with these patterns. In humor language, the brain operates in contrast with normative activity, allowing itself to break the rules of the game and chooses ways in which impossible cognitive and intellectual connections become possible, within the moment in which humor is created.

Humor language is based on three levels: verbal, psychological and cultural. On the **verbal level**, there is the ability of the joke's creator or receiver to interpret its complexity and reach the desired solution. It is similar to the intellectual effort of solving a crossword puzzle or understanding a caricature. On the **psychological level**, we refer to the personality traits of the one who receives and responds to a joke. The response to a joke or a humor situation

depends on other factors, such as the mental or physical condition during absorption, and the attitude, positive or negative, to the content of the joke. People perceive humor positively when the source of humor is something that they identify with. The more humor is perceived as positive for them, the more positive is the appreciation of this humor (Zillmann & Cantor, 1972). Responds to humor can sometimes result in big laughter or in a little smile. Therefore, in order to analyze humorous situations, we have to distinguish and separate between laughter, which is the response to humor, and humor itself, which activates laughter (Attardo, 2003). Jokes and humor situations are **culturally based**. The content of the joke refers to the cultural world of the joke's target audience. The assumption is that there are shared cultural similarities and common ground between the joke's creator and the target audience. Thanks to this common ground, the response will be laughter (Gervais, M., & Wilson, D. 2005, Raskin 1985). Indicating laughter as a response, we also classify smiling in the same category, since smile is also in the hierarchy of responses for comic, humorous, verbal, visual or other situations.

Arthur Asa Berger goes deeper into these three aspects of humor: the structure of humor, humor and the psyche, and humor and society. He refers to laughter as a tool of criticism that is based on true expression of opinion or as he calls it "A free weapon in people's hands." Arthur is a prolific academic researcher on various areas of knowledge, one of which is humor research. He has written many articles and a number of books on humor such as *Li'l Abner: A Study in American Satire* (1970), *The Comic-Stripped American* (1974), *Anatomy of the Joke* (1976), *An Anatomy of Humor* (1993), *Blind Men and Elephants: Perspectives on Humor* (1995), *The Art of Comedy Writing* (1997), *Jewish Jesters* (2001), and *The Genius of the Jewish Joke* (2005).

This new book is a collection of important studies written by the author and in addition, it includes new chapters that all together enrich the reader's knowledge on the study of humor and laughter. One of his humor research focuses is analyzing the techniques of jokes, from which he conceived his own structural and semiotic theory or typology. This typology helps us analyze verbal and physical humor and is found in many of his chapters, his **"45 techniques of humor."**

Addressing the semiotics of verbal humor, the author does not forget to mention the inventor of semiotics F. de Saussure which - even if not intended to - is also the 'forefather' of verbal humor studies. Many new humor researchers don't mention Saussure as such and are satisfied to refer in their studies to new semioticians. Other chapters in the book deal with important aspects of humor research such as humor and health, Jewish humor and Ethnic humor.

One of the author's privileges is that one of his chapters focuses on his contribution to humor not only as a scholar but also as an artist who produces humorous text. For those who are acquainted with his humor research, it is nice and refreshing to meet another and quite surprising aspect of the author dealing with humor. The same goes with his last chapter *I Laughed Last, and I Lasted, (But I Took Some Blows Along the Way)*, *My Scholarly Work on Humor*. The chapter begins that way "I see myself as essentially a humorist who did his gigs in universities, not comedy clubs. This has caused problems for me with some academicians who take themselves seriously and with many of my students, who didn't know how to take me" and another quote "Being Jewish I am (it almost comes naturally) like many Jews, a Jewish humorist". Is this book a conclusion of the work of Arthur Asa Berger as a humor scholar who has contributed so much to humor research? I hope not. I strongly recommend this book as an important contribution to those who seek knowledge about humor and laughter as one of the most important human phenomena.

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Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that has developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of power. It unveils the material bodily principle in its true meaning. Laughter opened men's eyes on that which is new, on the future. This is why it not only permitted the expression of an antifeudal, popular truth; it helped uncover this truth and give it an internal form. And this form was achieved and defended during thousands of years in its very depths and in its popular-festive images. Laughter showed the world anew in its gayest and most sober aspects. Its external privileges are intimately linked with interior forces; they are a recognition of the rights of these forces. This is why laughter could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the people. It always remained a free weapon in their hands.

As opposed to laughter, medieval seriousness was infused with elements of fear, weakness, humility, submission, falsehood, hypocrisy, or on the other hand, with violence, intimidation, threats, prohibitions. As a spokesman of power, seriousness terrorized, demanded and forbade... Distrust of the serious tone and confidence in the truth of laughter had a spontaneous, elemental character. It was understood that fear never lurks behind laughter...and that hypocrisy and lies never laugh but wear a serious mask. Laughter created no dogmas and could not become authoritarian; it did not convey fear but a feeling of strength. It was linked with the procreating act, with birth, renewal, fertility, abundance. Laughter was also related to food and drink and the people's earthy immortality, and finally, it was related to the future of things to come and was to clear the way for them.

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*: 1984:94-95

Introduction

This book reprints a number of my articles and chapters from books (some edited by other scholars) on various aspects of humor that I've written over the years. They appeared in some books and journals in the United States and other countries, and on Internet sites. A number of these articles involve Jewish humor, the subject of two of my books: *The Genius of the Jewish Joke* and *Jewish Jesters*. The chapters in *Humor, Psyche and Society* cover, broadly speaking, semiotic/structural, socio-political and psychoanalytic approaches to humor and reflect my approach to this fascinating and enigmatic subject. It also has some recent writings on humor.

The charts showing the 45 techniques of humor that I discuss in my article, "Anatomy of the Joke," appeared in the summer, 1976 issue of the *Journal of Communication*. It is very short and is the second chapter in this book. I used these techniques in my book, *An Anatomy of Humor* and many other articles and books I have written on humor and they are used in the chapters in this book where they play an important role in the analyses. I've also made some editorial changes to avoid repeating material discussed in several of the articles, but there is, you might expect, a certain amount of redundancy in the book. But not enough, I hope, to be bothersome.

The most commonly used justification for publishing a collection of previously published work is that doing so enables people interested in one's work to find this material available in one book. That is, collections of articles and chapters from books such as this save people interested in my work on humor a great deal of time and labor hunting down the material in books and journals. That is, books like this one are very convenient. They also serve to introduce my work to people interested in humor.

An important question to ask now is how is this book on humor different from other books on humor? My answer is that this book brings together my work that focuses upon three aspects of humor: the semiotics of humor, humor and the psyche, and humor and society. That's why the book is called *Humor, Psyche, and Society*. Informing the book is my focus on the structural/semiotic components of humor, as elaborated in my discovery of the 45 techniques of humor, elicited from a long content-analysis I made of humor many years ago. The techniques are shown below:

Table 0.1. Techniques of Humor by Category

LANGUAGE	LOGIC	IDENTITY	ACTION
Allusion	Absurdity	Before/After	Chase
Bombast	Accident	Burlesque	Slapstick
Definition	Analogy	Caricature	Speed
Exaggeration	Catalogue	Eccentricity	
Facetiousness	Coincidence	Embarrassment	
Insults	Comparison	Exposure	
Infantilism	Disappointment	Grotesque	
Irony	Ignorance	Imitation	
Literalness	Mistakes	Impersonation	
Misunderstanding	Repetition	Mimicry	
Puns/Wordplay	Reversal	Parody	
Repartee	Rigidity	Scale	
Ridicule	Theme/Variation	Stereotype	
Sarcasm	Unmasking		
Satire			

Techniques of Humor According to Category

When I found these techniques, I didn't realize that they could be fit into categories but eventually decided there were four categories of humor: humor involving language, humor involving logic, humor involving identity and humor involving action. These techniques can be put into alphabetical form and numbered, as shown in the chart that follows. This enumerated list enables us to deconstruct humorous texts with a degree of specificity which, I suggest, other approaches to humor do not allow.

Table 0.2. Techniques of Humor in Alphabetical Order

1. Absurdity	16. Embarrassment	31. Parody
2. Accident	17. Exaggeration	32. Puns
3. Allusion	18. Exposure	33. Repartee
4. Analogy	19. Facetiousness	34. Repetition
5. Before/After	20. Grotesque	35. Reversal
6. Bombast	21. Ignorance	36. Ridicule
7. Burlesque	22. Imitation	37. Rigidity
8. Caricature	23. Impersonation	38. Sarcasm

9. Catalogue	24. Infantilism	39. Satire
10. Chase Scene	25. Insults	40. Scale, Size
11. Coincidence	26. Irony	41. Slapstick
12. Comparison	27. Literalness	42. Speed
13. Definition	28. Mimicry	43. Stereotypes
14. Disappointment	29. Mistakes	44. Theme and Variation.
15. Eccentricity	30. Misunderstanding	45. Unmasking

Techniques Numbered and in Alphabetical Order

In a review of my book *The Art of Comedy Writing*, which appeared in *Humor: The International Journal of Humor Research* (*Humor*, 12-1, 1999:96, 97), the distinguished humor scholar Don L.F. Nilsen, writes:

For the work that I am presently doing involving humor in British, American, and Irish literature, Arthur Asa Berger has provided a very insightful and useful methodology for analyzing and creating humorous discourse in his *The Art of Comedy Writing*. For me, his model is as powerful as such other discourse models as “Script Model Grammar,” by Raskin and others, “Conversational Implicatures,” by Grice and others, “Conversational Analysis,” by Tannen and others, “Genre and Archetype Theory,” by Frye, White, and others, “Signification Theory,” by Henry Lewis Gates and others, “Dialogique Theory,” by Bakhtin and others, various ethnographic and linguistic models by Schiffrin and others, or indeed any discourse model I have studied and/or used. Although Berger’s model is flawed in many ways, and although it is presented in a glib fashion, it is nevertheless a powerful and rigorous model. Its power comes from its detail (45 techniques of devices) and its rigor comes from how this detail is spelled out (15 “Language” devices, 14 “Logic” devices, 13 “Identity” devices, and 3 “Action” devices.

I am deeply grateful to professor Nilsen for his kind words, which suggest that my model is of some consequence in the scholarly study of linguistics and humor.

I believe that my eliciting these 45 techniques of humor is my most important contribution to the study of humor in all its forms, such as jokes, cartoons, comic strips, situation comedies, literary comedies, and radio comedy. My argument, as Professor Nilsen pointed out in his review, is that there are 45 techniques that are used in *all* humor—no more (that I’ve been able to find) or no less, though my use of the technique “burlesque” has been criticized as being too broad and encompassing other techniques. We can find these

techniques in ancient Greek and Roman comedies, in Shakespeare's comedies, and contemporary comedies, in many different media.

Nilsen suggests that my choice of sophisticated texts is important. As he explains (1992:97):

The advantage of Berger's model is that it is based on sophisticated texts, and results from a close reading by a person who has a sensitive ear and an outstanding sense of humor. The texts, which are treated in detail in the book include not only Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus*, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, and Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, to which individual chapters are devoted, but also Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Henry IV Parts I and II*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Jonson's *Volpone*, Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest*, Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, Stoppard's *Travesties*, and Griffith's *Comedians*, from which extensive supporting details are taken.

He adds a comment on my suggestion that my content analysis of a variety of different kinds of texts shows that there are only forty-five techniques, but they can be used in endless combinations. My argument is that humor, whenever it was created and wherever it is found, is built upon using the 45 techniques I elicited, often in various complex combinations and permutations. Thus, even a seemingly simple kind of text such as a joke might employ several different techniques at the same time to generate mirthful laughter. Let me offer two examples of jokes with many different techniques operating in them at the same time. I will call the first joke "The Tan."

The Tan

A man goes to Miami for a vacation. After four days, he looks in the mirror and notices he has a tan all over his body, except for his penis. He decides to remedy the situation. So the next day he goes to a deserted area of the beach early in the morning, takes his clothes off and lies down. He sprinkles sand over himself until all that remains in the sun is his penis. Two little old ladies walk by on the boardwalk and one notices the penis. "When I was 20," she says, "I was scared to death of them. When I was 40, I couldn't get enough of them. When I was 60, I couldn't get one to come near me....and now they're growing wild on the beach."

In this joke, we have several techniques at work. We have 15, Eccentricity. The man feels he must have every bit of his body tanned, even his penis. We also

have 29, Mistakes. The old lady thinks that penises are growing wild on the beach. And we have 18, Exposure—in both the exhibitionism of the man and the suppressed sexual desire of the woman.

15 Eccentricity

29 Mistakes

18 Exposure

Let me offer the second joke, which is also one of my favorites. I will call this joke “The Minister and His Wife.”

The Minister and His Wife

A minister returns unexpectedly early to his apartment and finds the strong smell of cigar smoke and his wife lying naked in bed. He looks out the window and sees a priest smoking a big cigar walking out of the door of his apartment house. In a jealous rage, he picks up the refrigerator and throws it on the priest, killing him instantly. Then, smitten by remorse he jumps out the window and kills himself. The next instant, the minister, the priest and a rabbi appear before an angel at the Pearly Gates. "What happened?" the angel asks the priest. "I was walking out of this house after visiting with a parishioner who is ill and a refrigerator fell on me," said the priest. "And you?" asks the angel to the minister. "I threw the refrigerator on the priest and then felt so bad I killed myself." "And you?" asks the angel to the rabbi. "You've got me," says the rabbi. "I was minding my own business...smoking a cigar in a refrigerator...."

Here we start with 11, Coincidence. The minister returns early and finds a strong smell of cigar smoke in his apartment. Then we have 29, Mistakes. He looks out the window and assumes the priest he sees, who is smoking a cigar, is the source of the cigar smoke. Finally, we have 19, Facetiousness—in which the rabbi explains that he was minding his own business, smoking peacefully in a refrigerator.

11 Coincidence

29 Mistakes

19 Facetiousness

I've used these jokes and many other jokes and other humorous texts this book because I believe that a book on humor should offer many examples of humor to explicate various points that are being made. Humor is a “serious” business,

and a very complex matter, so it is imperative to offer examples of humor, when possible and relevant to the matter being discussed. Because I discuss humorous texts from several different media, in addition to jokes, I offer dialogue from situation comedies and other forms of humorous texts to enrich the discussions.

We can see from these two examples that jokes often contain several different techniques which interact with one another and, when successful, generate mirthful laughter. My argument, what Nilsen refers to as “strong claims,” is that these 45 techniques are found in ancient as well as modern humorous texts and texts in different countries, so the 45 techniques are both historically timeless and universal. We know, however, that different countries laugh at different things. What happens, I suggest, is that countries select from the list of 45 techniques the ones that are most congruent with their national character and historical experience.

I use the Yiddish term “goyim” about non-Jews reluctantly because it can have negative connotations. It comes from the Hebrew term “goy” for a nation. I try to avoid it as much as possible but in some places, especially in humorous texts, it is necessary to use it.

Let me now offer a brief description of the contents of this book. The first chapter in this book is a description of my experiences writing my dissertation, *Li'l Abner*. The second article “Anatomy of the Joke,” which appeared in the *Journal of Communication* in 1976, is the first article I published on humor that uses my 45 techniques. The third chapter, “How Jokes Work,” deals with how scholars from different disciplines analyze a joke. The fourth chapter, “Professor Ferdinand de Saussure Goes to a Bar,” on the pilot episode of the brilliant situation comedy *Cheers*, draws upon semiotic theory to show the numerous contrasts that exist in the episode among the characters.

My focus in this chapter is on how people find meaning in texts and draws upon Saussure's classic work, *Course in General Linguistics*. In this book, he explained that signs (which we can define as anything that can be used to stand for something else) are composed of *signifiers* (sounds, objects) and *signifieds* (concepts) whose relationship is arbitrary and based on convention. He also explained that the meaning of concepts is based on differences. As he wrote (1966:117) that “Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.”

There is a line in *Cheers* in which Diane Chambers tells Sam Malone that her fiancé Sumner Sloane is “everything you're not.” Since I am a semiotician, that line, of course, caught my attention. So it is the network of relationships that exist in this text, and their relation to cultural codes, that was the focus of my

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