

A Theory of Humor

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In this study, which is anchored on Descriptive Psychology, a theoretical formulation of Humor is proposed. The Joke is presented as a paradigm case of humor; transformations of the paradigm case reveal the family resemblances among diverse forms of humor and phenomena related to humor. The Joke is formulated as:

- A. Present some subject as one to be taken seriously (View/serious);
- B. Present that subject as one to be taken nonseriously (V/ns).

The relationship between the two viewpoints and the variety of ways of presenting the views in that relationship are elaborated. The formulation of Humor includes "second order" transformations which specify (1) that the viewpoints could be presented in any order or simultaneously, and (2) that the terms "serious" and "nonserious" could be replaced by any functionally equivalent terms. The individual who appraises the subject as funny/humorous will have achieved a new viewpoint (new appraisal) which was described as "seeing the serious-as-nonserious," i.e., the serious view provides the background-given for the (foreground) appraisal of the subject as nonserious. Both the serious and nonserious viewpoints are maintained in the special relationship elaborated in this study. Implications for our understanding of the role of incongruity in humor, and the distinction of "funny-peculiar" versus "funny-ha ha" are discussed.

A person's appraisal of some situation or matter as "humorous" provides intrinsic motivation for that person to be amused and to express his amusement (for example, by laughing, smiling, etc.). As in the case of emotional behavior, the person who appraises something as humorous has the tendency to act on his appraisal without deliberation. Moreover, his behavior will be an expression of the appraised relationship unless:

- (a) He is acting on another relationship which takes precedence; or
- (b) He takes the relationship to be a different one than humor; or
- (c) He is unable to act at that time in accordance with the relationship; or
- (d) He mistakenly believes that what he did was an expression of amusement.

Since there is no guarantee that something which is presented as humor will be appraised as humorous (funny), the further matter of what contributes to successful versus unsuccessful humor is discussed. Three parameters influencing the success or failure of humor are considered: Material, Presentation, and Personal Characteristics (Individual Differences) of the Audience.

The place of humor in human behavior is also discussed in the light of the status dynamic formulation of Humor proposed. Connections to surprise, superiority and degradation, relief, liberation, and joy are considered. An empirical test of two hypotheses derived from the status dynamic formulation of humor is presented.

To achieve a second, nonserious perspective about a serious subject, without discarding the serious viewpoint, is to acquire a new relationship to the subject matter (situation). Thus, when one appreciates the Humor of X, the new perspective is both liberating and status enhancing. It was hypothesized that the

more seriously a person takes a matter, the more he would enjoy humor about that matter, unless he were "overinvolved"; overinvolvement would interfere with his enjoyment of the humor.

Thirty printed jokes were presented to a group of individuals, and their self-reported ratings of enjoyment of the jokes and seriousness toward the matters were obtained. Corrections were calculated for intrinsic (normative) funniness of each joke and individual differences of each individual. Subjects' doubly corrected Enjoyment scores were plotted as a function of subjects' degree of Involvement. Twenty-four of the thirty-five subjects behaved as predicted; for eleven subjects, as seriousness increased, enjoyment decreased. Individual attitudes concerning propriety were suggested as one significant factor affecting one's appreciation and enjoyment of humor, and distinguishing individuals' senses of humor. [179 pp.]