

Teaching English to Rural and Semi Urban Students through Jokes



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to teach English language to rural and semi-urban college students through jokes. The paper has been divided into three parts. The first part presents various theories of humour and it attempts to show four interpretations of comedy: violation of expectation, punches coming as a surprise, resolution of incongruity through interpretation and the violation of Grecian maxims. In the second part of the paper, an actual classroom experiment is discussed where the B.A first year students of a semi-urban college were introduced to the jokes and then on the basis of those jokes they were instructed to write jokes in their own English. To the satisfaction of both the students and the teacher they were able to construct very interesting and instructive English language jokes. The third part of the paper presents conclusions.

Keywords: *jokes as ridicule, various theories of humour, construction of coherent English discourse)*

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Introduction

Plato, Aristotle and many early philosophers were against laughter and jokes because the implied scorn, ridicule, hostility and railing. In Benedict's "Ladder of Humility", step ten is a restraint against laughter and step eleven a warning against joking (Gilhus 1997:65).

There are various theories about humour. Chief among these are superiority theory

and relief theory. The Relief Theory of Shaftesbury (1709) is based on hydraulic explanations. That is laughter provides relief to the nervous system just like a pressure relief valve in a steam boiler. Spencer (1911) states that laughter relieves pent up nervous energy. Sigmund Freud in his 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious' (1974: 1905) analyses those situations that lead to *der witz* (jokes), the comic and humour. According to him, in all the three forms, laughter releases nervous energy that was used for a psychological task but then became superfluous as that task was

abandoned. But these theories have become outdated now.

This theory was replaced by Incongruity Theory in the 18th century. This theory was propounded by James Beathie, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer and Soren Kiekegaard. This theory is based on the perception of something incongruous-something that violates our mental patterns and expectations. Cicero in 'On the Orator' (chapter 63) says that 'the most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said here, here our own disappointed explanations make us laugh.' This approach to joking is similar to the techniques of stand-up comedies today. Greg Dean in his internet article 'How to write Jokes': Structure" in several parts. Below we discuss his main ideas that are based on Incongruity Themes.

Stand – Up Comedy

This comedy has two constituents: the set up and the punch (line). The set-up is the first part of the joke which creates the expectation. The punch line is the last part that violates that expectation. The ending of a joke is congruous with the beginning of the joke.

In other words, the set up creates first story and the punch-line creates a second story that comes as a surprise in other words creates a reframe.

The second thing about a joke is timing. This means what you want to do is to catch your audience completely by surprise – so good timing means saying things when they

least expect it and to say in ways that that hadn't imagined."

Examples:

1) Set up: I saw my grandmother the other day, probably for the last time.

Punch: Oh, she's not sick or anything, she just bores the hell out of me.

2) Set-up: Why are the grand parents and grand children so friendly?

Punch: Because their enemies are common.

In the first example, the expectation is that the grandmother is seriously ill but this expectation is violated in the punch-line when the speaker says that the reason why he does not want to see the grandmother in future because she is boring.

In the second joke, the set-up creates the expectation that the grand-parents and grand children have some common characteristic. They never imagined that it would be parents. So here the punch-line comes as a surprise.

There is a third view about jokes. It states that comedy or humour does not lie in incongruity but in resolution of incongruity through reinterpretation. Thus the target assumption and the punch line shatters it by reinterpretation. The set-up in every human remark has stated or underlying assumptions based on physical laws, societal biases, cultural and national presuppositions, accepted definitions, stereotypes and familiar environments.

Further, the set-up state states the target assumption and the punch line shatters it by reinterpretation of the punch.

Example 3: My grandfather died a peaceful death. He died in his sleep. Of course, the kids on the bus were screaming.

Here the key assumption is that he fell asleep and died in his bed. But to understand the joke we have to reinterpret the location of death. In this case, he fell asleep and died while driving a bus full of kids.

Example 4: "Marriage is a great institution. But I am not ready for an institution."

Here the word institution has two meanings: (a) a system (b) an organization. The humour lies in the shift of meaning of the word institution.

The fourth way of looking at humour is in terms of the violation of Gricean maxims (1975):

- a. Do not say what you believe is false
- b. Do not say for which there is no evidence
- c. Avoid obscurity of expression
- d. Avoid ambiguity
- e. Be brief

We break Rule (a) when we exaggerate or say the opposite of what we think; we break rule (b) if we present funny things as facts; we break rule (c) when we reply to an embarrassing question in a vague or confusing answer; we break rule (d) when we reply ambiguously as above in example (4).

Having discussed the theory of humour/ comedy, we shall now discuss the experiment and how jokes helped the students to communicate in English.

The Experiment

Telling and listening to jokes is always enjoyable in all cultures and in all countries. There are different kinds of jokes; jokes about castes, class, colour; jokes about professions, animals and historical figures. Telling a joke is an art. A good teller holds the audience spell bound. Electronic media has made comedy very popular. A new crop of stand-up comedians such as Kapil Sharma, Raju Shrivastava etc. have become very popular.

It was decided to use this genre in the I BA Class of rural and semi-urban students of Vinayaka Arts and Commerce College, Alwar. They were asked to tell jokes in Hindi or their mother tongue or in English. They very enthusiastically participated in the joke-telling session. They found the class very interesting and at the end of the class, they were able to narrate jokes in English.

Student Profile

The I BA class consisted of a mixed group of 30 students. Some of them received education in English medium schools but most of them studied in Hindi medium schools. They were 16 to 18 years old and most of them belonged to the middle and lower middle class. It was a co-educational class. The girls were also in the same category socially and economically. The knowledge of English of these students was

poor. They had a limited vocabulary and grammar. They could not construct even a simple composition without the guidance of the teacher or a bright class-mate. It was decided to improve their English and to enable them to communicate in English through jokes.

Methodology

The class was divided into 5 groups with 6 students in each group. A group leader for each group was appointed. The student who was very vocal at the time of telling jokes earlier in the class was chosen the group leader. The students were provided some cuttings of jokes from Sunday editions of Rajasthan Patrika and Dainik Bhaskar in Hindi for jokes. They were also encouraged to reproduce jokes from their repertoire. Further, they were also encouraged to translate jokes in English form cuttings of Hindi jokes. Before, the students started their work of collecting jokes or translating jokes, the teacher told 5 jokes to the class to motivate them. There were also supplied with structures and vocabulary where and when needed. The teacher went round the class guiding and motivating them.

Teacher's Jokes

1. Teacher: Five minutes minus five is equal to how much?

Student is quiet.

Teacher tries again.

Teacher: tumare pass 5 idli hain yadi ye 5 idli main le lu toh kya bachega?

Student: Sambhar aur Chatni

2. Some ladies used to sit in a park and gossip everyday. One man observed them daily as they were talking and laughing so loudly.

One day he observed that everybody was silent. He thought some serious thing might have happened. So he went to one lady and asked: 'How come everybody is silent today?'

The lady replied: 'All are present today.'

3. Teacher: Why are some people dark in complexion?

Student: Because they watch Sun TV, Surya TV and Uday TV without sun-screen lotion.

4. Mail from a rich student to his dad:

Dear Dad:

Sidney is a wonderful place. People are nice and I really like it here. But I am a bit ashamed to arrive at my college by pure gold Ferrari 599 GTV whereas all my teachers and fellow students travel by train.

Next day he gets the reply from his father:

My Dear Loving Son,

20 million US dollars has just been transferred to your account. Please stop embarrassing us. Go and get yourself a train too.

Your dad.

5. Some Definitions:

Bacteria: the back entrance to the

cafeteria

Dogma: the mother of puppies

Octopus: an eight sided cat

Here the teacher discussed the syllable structure and clipping formation of words through clipping such as brunch, motel etc.

Students' Jokes

The students after much group interaction, guidance from the teacher and group translation came out with the following jokes as narrated by the group leaders:

(1) The first group concentrated on definitions through clipping and came out with very funny definitions.

(a) Headmaster: A master with a head.

(b) Green-horn: musical horn of green colour

(c) Grey-market: a market where grey color things are bought and sold.

(d) Open-house: A house which is open for anybody to enter

(e) Comedy: come any day

(f) Nimbooz: a drink which makes your limbs unconsciousness

(2) Press Reporter: You have done encroachment around Galib's tomb.

People: Galib didn't do anything. So we have done it.

(Comedy created by reinterpretation of

set-up)

(3) Man: I took my dog to the vet today because it bit my wife.

Friend: Did you have it put to sleep?

Man: No, of course not- I had its teeth sharpened. (Comedy lies in violation of expectation)

(4) Did you hear about a doctor who tried to be a kidnapper? He failed because no one could read his ransom letters. (comedy-violation of expectation) (the students were given two words, kidnapper and ransom)

(5) Beach inspector: Why have you supplied for the job of coast guard. You're just wasting my time! You can't even swim!"

Job Applicant: 'I know. But seven feet two inches in height. I can wade out quite a long way!' (Comedy based on wrong interpretation of the assumption in the set-up)

(6) I student: Why are you saving all these old magazines?

2nd Student: Because I qualify as a doctor in five years' time and I'll need something suitable for my waiting room." (Resolution of incongruity)

(7) Very rich (but old) husband: I'm going to fire my pilot. He nearly killed me again today with his dreadful flying.

Very young (but bored) wife: but, darling, can't you give him one last chance? (The students were given the

- word dreadful by the teacher)
(Interpretation of the set up)
- (8) Where do you find mangoes?
Where woman goes. (Word play)
- (9) What do you call a camel with three humps?
Humphrey (word play)
- (10) Angry employer: You should have been here at nine o'clock.
Employee: 'Why, What happened?'
(Interpretation of set up)
- (11) Ram: Man Friday always comes before Thursday
Mother: 'I'm sorry, dear, but you are wrong.'
Ram: 'I'm not. Friday always comes before Thursday in the dictionary.'
(Reinterpretation of set up)
- (12) Mother: Today you have a choice for dinner. You either eat it.... Or you leave it." (word play)
- (13) Priest: Now tell me Ram, how many times a day do you say your prayers?
Four Year old Ram: Once, Sir. At night.
Priest: 'But don't you say any prayers at all during the day?'
Four year old Ram: 'No, Sir. I'm only frightened at night.'
(Lies by contradicting the assumption, the speakers' springs a surprise)

(14) Buyer: Your lemons are very small.

Salesman: You are standing on the terrace, so they will only look small.
(Reinterpretation of set-up)

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to present the various theories of humour. Finally we settled on four interpretations of comedy: violation of expectation, punch-lines coming as a surprise, resolution of incongruity through reinterpretation, and finally in the violation of Gricean four maxims. Having discussed the theory of comedy, we come to the actual class-room experiment where the students came out with as many as 14 jokes. These jokes were based on several principles: violation of expectation, springing of a surprise, reinterpretation of the set up, word-play and funny interpretation of the morphological division.

What was most satisfying both for the teacher and the students is that both enjoyed the class and the class was both interesting and instructive. The students were able to come out with some nice jokes which demonstrate that they can communicate in English and this goes to prove that jokes can be fruitfully used to teach and learn English.

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