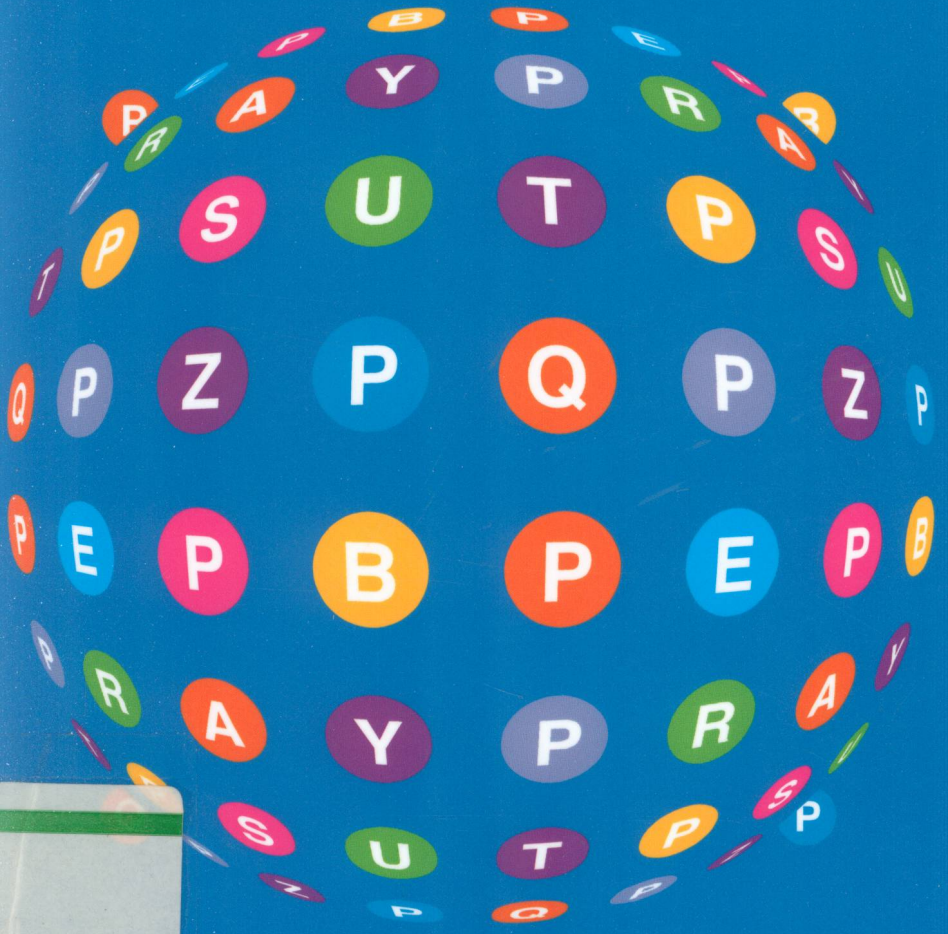
Playing with Words

Humour in the English Language

Barry Blake



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Introduction

Language is mostly used for serious business like telling your bookmaker that you really meant to back No. 3 in the fifth, not No. 5 in the third, or asking Sister Immaculata if she wants to see *Lust in the Dust*. But language is also a source of amusement. We can use it to be funny, to be witty. We can laugh at ourselves and others making a slip of the tongue or coming out with the wrong word. We can write amusing verses.

Very few people confine themselves to the formal, staid language of the type you might use in speaking to a stranger from another culture. Most people use a lot of colloquialisms for a start, and these are often smart and witty. There is a certain cleverness in words like *butterfingers* or phrases such as *not since Adam was a boy,* though such expressions lose their effectiveness once they are in common use. A majority of people relay jokes. Many use pleasantries and other light-hearted remarks as part of getting along with others. Some make clever jibes with a view to eliciting a clever retort.

Language play is part of normal language use. There are only a few situations where it is excluded. We do not use any form of language play in drafting laws or rules of conduct, for instance, and we don't try to be smart in business letters, at least not in those that the recipient might not want to receive. But these situations are few. Humour can sometimes be found in sermons, for

instance, and even at funerals there are often humorous anecdotes and light-hearted remarks in the eulogy.

Humour and other types of word play form a bigger part of our normal experience of language than most people probably recognize. Consider a typical young couple, Debbie and Mark. They start the day listening to a breakfast session on the radio. The presenters interlard their talk about traffic and weather with the odd witticism, and some of the songs they play have clever lyrics.

They read the paper. Debbie concentrates on the serious stuff on the first few pages, but Mark starts half-way through and finds lots of smart captions with alliteration, puns, and allusions. There's a report about a trial entitled *Prisoner free. Jury hung*, and an article by Germaine Greer in which she claims James Dean was gay. It is called *Mad about the Boy*, using the title of an old Noel Coward song. Some of the ads are witty too. One for lingerie catches Mark's eye, in which a scantily clad model says *Lola's Lingerie. I wear nothing else.*

They drive to work. A car in front of them has a bumper sticker that says *If you can read this, you're too close,* and Mark gets a black look from Debbie after being caught 'perving' on a blonde in a red sports car with the number plate *TOSEXI* (real example!).

On reaching the office Mark exchanges pleasantries with Declan, the security guard on the front desk, and Debbie engages in some banter with her aide, Cheryl. Mark opens his e-mail and among the Viagra ads he finds that someone has sent him a joke about yesterday's news. Debbie finds that someone has sent her a page of humorous headlines including *Sex more common than thought*. Today she has to give an address to the branch managers who are in town for a refresher. She already has a few jokes to put into the first part of her talk, but she spots something else in the 'headlines' and adds that. A few minutes later she receives a text message on her mobile. Like all text messages, it makes clever use of abbreviations: *I C U WANT 2 B 1 2* 'I see you want to be one too'.

During a coffee break Mark's colleague, Paul, drops by to discuss sales figures, but not before telling Mark a smutty joke about

Michael Jackson. At lunch Mark and Debbie meet a few workmates and recount humorous experiences and the like. Before going back to work Mark has to pick out a birthday card for his father. There are quite a few funny ones to pick from. On the way back he witnesses a demonstration. The tertiary teachers are marching to protest against reductions in funding for universities and some of them are carrying placards with catchy slogans such as *No more cuts. We slave our butts*.

It is Friday, the end of the working week, so when the office closes, Mark and Debbie go off to a nearby pub with workmates for a drink. A lot of the conversation involves puns and smart remarks about their boss, who is said to be so thick-witted *that he would be out of his depth in a puddle*. At some point someone tells a joke, and that leads others to join in and tell more.

When Debbie and Mark get home and have dinner, they turn on the television and watch a couple of sitcoms, a comedy movie, and finally a stand-up comedian. Over the course of the evening they indulge in a bit of light-hearted banter. Mark boasts about his prowess in the bedroom and Debbie puts him down.

Language lends itself to humour. It evolves. It is not designed by committee. This means that it is full of all kinds of ambiguities. Some words sound the same as others, which allows for puns: *I'm a baker because I knead the dough*. Some sequences admit of more than one interpretation as with *Killer sentenced to die twice* or *I saw a man eating a pizza and a dog* (perhaps it was a hot dog!).

Exploiting the humorous possibilities in language obviously provides entertainment, but people also use verbal humour for other ends: to establish harmony or rapport, to ingratiate themselves, to lighten the mood when contentious issues are raised, and to soften the force of criticism. There is a growing body of evidence that humour makes for better health and helps relieve stress, and some companies employ humour consultants in the hope of improved communication and productivity, and employee motivation.

While humour can build rapport in the short term, it can unite groups of people in the long term because it exploits local culture

and local language, whether it be a matter of dialect or just local colloquialisms. The creating of an in-group sounds positive, but the creation of an in-group implies the creation of an out-group, and there's no doubt that humour has played a part in exclusion. There is thus a negative side to humour. It can be used to deride, to mock, to belittle, to stereotype. Too often in the past mainstream males have been the originators of humour, while women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities have been the butt. But where people feel oppressed, they bond by sharing jokes at the expense of their oppressors, whether that be the enemy in war, slavers, prison guards, police, employers, the government, the ruling classes or, in the case of children, their teachers.

Joking is not entirely a light-hearted activity. If you stand back and look at the subject matter, you find that a lot of jokes deal with bodily functions or unpleasant human experiences such as death, disease, dismemberment and disfiguration, with the things we fear. Joking about these things seems to be a way of coping with unpleasant facts about our mortality. A lot of humour deals with war and poverty, indeed it has been said that humour is born of adversity. We are regularly counselled to talk about what troubles us. Joking seems to be a way of talking about our fears.

Comedy can also laugh us out of our follies. Comedians are social commentators. They are good at disturbing complacency, deflating egos, and exposing hypocrisy. They usually present an antidote to government propaganda. When the generals take over, comedians are suppressed. They must be doing something right.

There is a vast literature on jokes and at least one book just on laughter, but these writings are mostly about the psychology or sociology of humour. This book is mainly about the way we manipulate sounds, syllables, affixes, words, phrases, and constructions. It is full of funny examples. It is meant to be both instructive and enjoyable. As the old music hall master of ceremonies would have said, 'For your enjoyment and edification'. Read! Enjoy!

Lots of people have contributed to this book, most of them unwittingly. Kate Burridge pointed my way towards some nice sources of examples and made several helpful suggestions for

improving the book, and Gavan Breen provided me with copious lists of howlers and the like. I only hope he does not find any more lurking in my text.

Barry Blake
Melbourne 2006

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The nature of humour

One dictionary I consulted defined *humour* as 'the quality of being funny' and when I looked up *funny* it defined it as 'humorous'. To be fair, it also gave 'causing laughter' as one of the meanings of *funny*. I didn't feel like looking up *laughter* since we all know what laughter is. If you don't know what laughter is, you won't be able to find out from a dictionary definition. This reminds me of the story of the woman who once asked Fats Waller, 'Mr Waller. What is rhythm?' He replied, 'Lady, if you has to ask, I can't tell you.'

Whatever the dictionary says, laughter cannot be used as a touchstone for humour or funniness. Indeed, humour and laughter do not match. Let us consider a few examples.

Sometimes people laugh without there being anything funny. Most of us smile to show that we are friendly, for instance, in greeting friends or in over-the-counter dealings, but some people give a little laugh here and there, which is quite a useful device to keep things friendly, especially when the person you are talking to is out of sight. Recently a woman rang up a talk-back radio programme to seek advice about her dog from a guest vet. The vet asked what kind of dog she had and she replied that it was a Bassenji–Red Heeler cross. The presenter said that that sounded exotic, and the woman laughed. This laugh served to show she was accepting the comment in a good-natured way and that she recognized that this particular cross-breed was unusual.

To take another example. I was driving through a country town recently with my wife when I noticed that the van in front of us carried a sign *Barry Blake Outback Tours*. I burst out laughing at the coincidence between the tour operator's name and my own, but I wouldn't want to claim that this was humorous. It was more funny-peculiar than funny-haha.

Another example. While staying in Oxford a few years ago, my wife and I were invited to Jesus (College) for dinner. We found the right street with the help of a map, but we were uncertain exactly where the entrance to the college was. While we were looking lost, a young woman asked if she could help. I replied, 'We are looking for Jesus.' As soon as I said it, I couldn't help grinning, and the woman smiled too. In any other context this sentence would have had quite a different meaning. This is an example of unplanned, spontaneous humour. The double meaning arose unexpectedly, and the element of surprise, the sudden revelation of an alternative interpretation, is characteristic of humour.

Now for an example that is meant to be humorous, meant to be funny, meant to elicit laughter.

What do you get if you cross a computer with an icy road?

A hard drive.

Of course, I can't be certain that this is funny. In fact, I can be certain that some people, somewhere, will not find it funny. But it is in a joke format. If someone comes up to you and asks, 'What do you get if you cross a computer with an icy road?' and this question is irrelevant to the situation, you know that you have been given the feed line of a joke.

Now here's another example in the same format, but here I would judge that the joke is so weak that it is more likely to elicit a groan, a moue of disapproval or a real screwed-up face, the sort a child comes up with after taking nasty medicine.

What is the capital of England?

E.

These examples show that you can have laughter without humour and humour without laughter. Humour isn't always funny, but it is meant to elicit laughter or at least a smile, a grin, or some relaxation of the muscles around the mouth.

Humour is universal, though what strikes some people as funny will not strike others in the same way. Humour can be in language or in action. If you want to get a laugh from people of virtually any culture, show someone all togged out in a fine white costume and then have them slip and fall in the mud. If you can establish that the person is an unsympathetic character, someone who is arrogant, for instance, all the better. In vaudeville and in silent movies and early talkies a common source of humour was throwing custard pies. It was thought to be very funny if someone threw a custard pie and hit someone else fair in the face. Better still if the victim ducked in anticipation and the pie hit an unsuspecting bystander. Laughing at someone's misfortune seems to be universal, and the bigger the accident the greater the potential for humour. Mel Brooks once said, 'Tragedy is if I cut my finger. Comedy is if I walk into an open sewer and die.'

Falling in the mud or into an open sewer is humour in action. In this book I will deal only with verbal humour, though a large proportion of jokes do deal with unfortunate accidents such as falling in the mud, or worse.

Principles of humour

There are no rules to be followed that will enable us to be funny or witty, but looking at examples reveals a number of recurrent properties. The overriding principle of humour is that there should be a **set-up** and a **punch**. We usually talk about a 'punchline', but the bit that makes the impact is not always a line. Some jokes take the form of short anecdotes, often with three episodes. The first two episodes form the set-up and the last the punch or punchline. Other jokes have a feed line and a punchline. Consider the following:

My husband and I divorced because of religious differences.

He thought he was God and I didn't.

The first sentence is the feed line and the key phrase is 'religious differences'. This leads you to expect that one partner in the marriage was Protestant and the other Catholic, or that one was Jewish and the other Christian, and then this expectation is shattered in the punchline, where 'religious differences' is given an unexpected interpretation. As in boxing, a good punch should not be telegraphed. It should come as a surprise, a sudden flash, a sudden revelation that there was another possible interpretation.

In some instances the **set-up** and **punch** occur within a single statement. Consider the following 'headline'.

Injured upholstery worker fully recovered

You can easily read this and take it seriously, and if it were accompanied by an article detailing the convalescence of an injured worker, you might go on blissfully unaware that there was a humorous reading. If you are alert, and certainly if you find this example in a list of humorous headlines, you suddenly see that *upholstery* sets up the pun in *recovered*. The same situation is found in the next example,

Monogamy leaves a lot to be desired.

You first read the well-known idiom *leaves a lot to be desired* and give it the normal interpretation of 'being deficient'. Then you realize, in the context of *monogamy*, it is possible to take *desired* in one of the other senses that it has outside the idiom. There is a variant of this joke: *Celibacy leaves a lot to be desired*. The difference between monogamy and celibacy is small but significant.

This book is concerned with verbal humour, but some verbal humour revolves around incongruities of situation and the like, and does not depend on properties of language. Consider the following report from a local newspaper.

Two horse blankets were stolen from a stable near the racecourse last night. The horses noticed their blankets were missing around 11.30.

It is not certain whether this is serious reporting or an attempt at humour. There is certainly something funny about the notion of horses being the ones to notice their blankets were missing, but the humour does not arise from properties of language.

Fun with words

Each language contains thousands of words. They are stored in the brain in a kind of mental dictionary or lexicon. Since languages evolve and are not made up by a committee (Thank God!), it can happen that two or more words come to be pronounced alike, such as *peace* and *piece*. This is **homophony**. Moreover, many words have more than one meaning. Consider, for instance, some of the words for parts of the body that have extended meanings. We can talk of the *head of the school*, *the back of the bus*, *the mouth of the river* and *the foot of the hill*. This is **polysemy**. Homophony and polysemy allow us to make puns. Of the jokes and other witticisms that depend on language, probably a majority involve a pun.

When the actress saw her first grey hairs, she thought she'd dye.

How did the cat stop the VCR?
It pressed the paws button.

Dryden called the pun 'the lowest and most grovelling kind of wit'. But while it is true that puns are easy to make and can be so excruciatingly contrived as to elicit a groan rather than a laugh, they remain very popular. Puns not only appear in the punchline of a joke, as in the *die/dye* example above, they can also be slipped into conversation or into a piece of writing without disturbing the flow. They are also common in book titles, headlines and

captions in newspapers and magazines (other than those reporting disasters), in greeting cards, and in advertising.

Puns can be based on phrases as well as on single words. Here are some phrasal puns.

Why did the bank robber saw the legs off his bed?
Because he wanted to lie low for a while.

I'm very annoyed with my masseur.
He rubs me the wrong way.

There is also humour to be found in the mispronunciation, misidentification, and misuse of words. Most of this arises by accident, but the possibility can be exploited. Some mispronunciations are funny, particularly if they happen to result in a rude word. For instance, a recent TV news report was read as follows: 'British police are refusing to confirm media reports that a man was killed in last night's bum boss—bus bomb—in London.' Similarly, the wrong word in a particular context can be funny. Examples of this are not normally one-off slips, but the result of long-term ignorance, as when people say *mitigate against* for 'militate against'. I remember once catching an international beauty contest on TV (quite by accident, you understand) where the finalists were expected to say one sentence about their home country. The US entrant said that 'America was the land of *opportunism*.'

Another kind of error involves putting the wrong interpretation on what is heard. There is a well-known story of a young child who had a teddy bear whose eyes were askew, to which he gave the unusual name of *Gladly*. When he (the child, not the bear) was questioned about his choice of name, he said, 'It was from that song we sing in church, *Gladly the cross-eyed bear* ("Gladly the cross I bear").'