

interface

**THE
LANGUAGE
OF JOKES
ANALYSING
VERBAL PLAY**

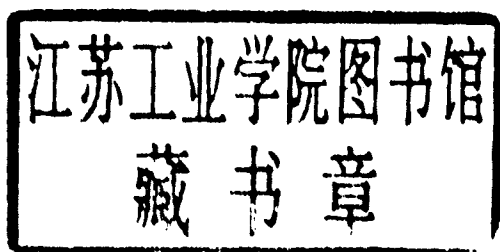
DELIA CHIARO



The Language of Jokes

Analysing verbal play

Delia Chiaro



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Series editor's introduction to the Interface series

There have been many books published this century which have been devoted to the interface of language and literary studies. This is the first series of books devoted to this area commissioned by a major international publisher; it is the first time a group of writers have addressed themselves to issues at the interface of language and literature; and it is the first time an international professional association has worked closely with a publisher to establish such a venture. It is the purpose of this general introduction to the series to outline some of the main guiding principles underlying the books in the series.

The first principle adopted is one of not foreclosing on the many possibilities for the integration of language and literature studies. There are many ways in which the study of language and literature can be combined and many different theoretical, practical and curricular objects to be realized. Obviously, a close relationship with the aims and methods of descriptive linguistics will play a prominent part, so readers will encounter some detailed analysis of language in places. In keeping with a goal of much work in this field, writers will try to make their analysis sufficiently replicable for other analysts to see how they have arrived at the interpretative decisions they have reached and to allow others to reproduce their methods on the same or on other texts. But linguistic science does not have a monopoly in methodology and description any more than linguists can have sole possession of insights into language and its workings. Some contributors to the series adopt quite rigorous linguistic procedures; others proceed less rigorously but no less revealingly. All are, however, united by a belief that detailed scrutiny of the role of language in literary texts can be mutually enriching to language and literary studies.

Series of books are usually written to an overall formula or design. In the case of the Interface series this was considered to be not

entirely appropriate. This is for the reasons given above, but also because, as the first series of its kind, it would be wrong to suggest that there are formulaic modes by which integration can be achieved. The fact that all the books address themselves to the integration of language and literature in any case imparts a natural and organic unity to the series. Thus, some of the books in this series will provide descriptive overviews, others will offer detailed case studies of a particular topic, others will involve single author studies, and some will be more pedagogically oriented.

This range of design and procedure means that a wide variety of audiences is envisaged for the series as a whole, though, of course, individual books are necessarily quite specifically targeted. The general level of exposition presumes quite advanced students of language and literature. Approximately, this level covers students of English language and literature (though not exclusively English) at senior high-school/upper sixth-form level to university students in their first or second year of study. Many of the books in the series are designed to be used by students. Some may serve as course books – these will normally contain exercises and suggestions for further work as well as glossaries and graded bibliographies which point the student towards further reading. Some books are also designed to be used by teachers for their own reading and updating, and to supplement courses; in some cases, specific questions of pedagogic theory, teaching procedure and methodology at the interface of language and literature are addressed.

From a pedagogic point of view it is the case in many parts of the world that students focus on literary texts, especially in the mother tongue, before undertaking any formal study of the language. With this fact in mind, contributors to the series have attempted to gloss all new technical terms and to assume on the part of their readers little or no previous knowledge of linguistics or formal language studies. They see no merit in not being detailed and explicit about what they describe in the linguistic properties of texts; but they recognize that formal language study can seem forbidding if it is not properly introduced.

A further characteristic of the series is that the authors engage in a direct relationship with their readers. The overall style of writing is informal and there is above all an attempt to lighten the usual style of academic discourse. In some cases this extends to the way in which notes and guidance for further work are presented. In all cases, the style adopted by authors is judged to be that most appropriate to the mediation of their chosen subject matter.

We now come to two major points of principle which underlie the conceptual scheme for the series. One is that the term 'literature' cannot be defined in isolation from an expression of ideology. In fact, no academic study, and certainly no description of the language of texts, can be neutral and objective, for the sociocultural positioning of the analyst will mean that the description is unavoidably political. Contributors to the series recognize and, in so far as this accords with the aims of each book, attempt to explore the role of ideology at the interface of language and literature. Second, most writers also prefer the term 'literatures' to a singular notion of literature. Some replace 'literature' altogether with the neutral term 'text'. It is for this reason that readers will not find exclusive discussions of the literary language of canonical literary texts; instead the linguistic heterogeneity of literature and the permeation of many discourses with what is conventionally thought of as poetic or literary language will be a focus. This means that in places as much space can be devoted to examples of word play in jokes, newspaper editorials, advertisements, historical writing, or a popular thriller as to a sonnet by Shakespeare or a passage from Jane Austen. It is also important to stress how the term 'literature' itself is historically variable and how different social and cultural assumptions can condition what is regarded as literature. In this respect the role of linguistic and literary theory is vital. It is an aim of the series to be constantly alert to new developments in the description and theory of texts.

Finally, as series editor, I have to underline the partnership and co-operation of the whole enterprise of the Interface series and acknowledge the advice and assistance received at many stages from the PALA Committee and from Routledge. In turn, we are all fortunate to have the benefit of three associate editors with considerable collective depth of experience in this field in different parts of the world: Professor Roger Fowler, Professor Mary Louise Pratt, Professor Michael Halliday. In spite of their own individual orientations, I am sure that all concerned with the series would want to endorse the statement by Roman Jakobson made over twenty-five years ago but which is no less relevant today:

A linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unconvertant with linguistic methods, are equally flagrant anachronisms.

The Language of Jokes may not appear an obvious candidate for inclusion in a series of books concerned with the interface between language and literary studies. Jokes are certainly not part of a canonical tradition of literature with a capital L, nor are they normally considered to be contexts of language use which may have 'literary' applications.

In this book Delia Chiaro reveals much that is of interest to students of both language and literature and convinces us that jokes have been neglected as rich sources of patterned creativity in language use. Dr Chiaro demonstrates her case through a detailed and systematic attention to language functions which have parallels in more traditional contexts of literary study. The diverse range of material treated includes: the narrative organization of jokes; degrees of conformity to and deviation from established conventions; the 'tellability' of jokes and the role of the reader/listener in interpreting them; discourse strategies in making jokes; the creative uses of puns, word play and ambiguities. The emphasis in Dr Chiaro's argument falls increasingly on sociocultural contexts for the production and reception of jokes, and she explores the extent to which jokes are both universal in their appeal and specific cultural artefacts, embedded within and representing different cultural assumptions.

To this highly readable study, Delia Chiaro brings a seriousness of mind and playfulness of style which befits a subject which is now likely to be studied further as a result of her work.

Ronald Carter

Contents

	<i>Series editor's introduction to the Interface series</i>	vii
	Introduction	1
1	About word play	4
2	Inside word play	17
3	Framing word play	48
4	Translating word play	77
5	Word play in action	100
	Conclusion	122
	<i>Bibliography</i>	124
	<i>Index</i>	128

Introduction

Studies on humour and what makes people laugh are countless. Over the centuries, writers of diverse interests have attempted to define it, supply reasons for it, analyse it. From Plato and Aristotle to Cicero, through Hume and Kant to the more recent Bergson and Freud, the resulting bibliography provides us with as many theories as there are theorists. Nevertheless, most works on humour tend to be concerned with themes such as its physiological, psychological and sociological aspects and few scholars in comparison have worked on the linguistic aspects of the comic mode.

Naturally, most major works on language do include something on verbal humour, but the norm tends to be the inclusion of a page or two which play mere lipservice to phenomena such as metathesis, polysemy, homophony and so on. On the other hand, linguists such as Charles Hockett, Harvey Sacks and Joel Sherzer have taken a deeper interest in word play, producing what must be the only truly seminal works on the language of jokes, while it has only been of late that entire books dedicated to the language of humour have appeared (e.g. Walter Nash, Walter Redfern). Perhaps the lack of abundance of major works in the field could be due to the fact that there is a widespread feeling that academic respectability is directly correlated to unenjoyable subject matter, thus the study of humour, by its very nature, cannot be taken seriously. On the other hand, in an era in which scholarly books on phenomena connected to mass media such as soap opera, quiz shows and football matches have given rise to the discipline of media studies, it may be the case that we are ready to accept books on verbal humour which do not need to be justified by psychological or philosophical whys and wherefores and examples taken from traditional literature.

From John o'Groats to Land's End word play appears to be one of the nation's favourite pastimes. The term word play includes every

2 *The Language of Jokes*

conceivable way in which language is used with the intent to amuse. Word play stretches way beyond the joke which, in itself, is indeed a handy container in which such play may occur, but this blanket term also covers the sort of *double entendre* which is so common in conversation, public speeches, headlines and graffiti, not to mention the works of famous punsters such as Shakespeare and Joyce.

British humour attracts and mystifies non-natives of the British Isles. The notoriety of the British sense of humour is as widespread as tea at five o'clock and stiff upper lips, although possibly not as mythical. A glance at the shelves of any bookshop will reveal a marked preference for the comic genre: written spin-offs of situation comedies, books by well-known comedians, collections of jokes and compendiums of rhymes and riddles for children. Such literature undoubtedly interests a large sector of the nation's reading public while more 'serious' humour can be found amongst the classics. If Britain's more high-flown literature envies others their Balzacs and Dostoevskys, as far as the comic mode is concerned, it remains quite unrivalled. There are, in fact, hardly any writers in English literature who have not attempted at least once to be funny with or through the medium of words.

This book will not be dealing with the eminent punsters of the literary world, but with the nation's unknown jokers. The anonymous authors of countless millions of quips, asides, graffiti and rhymes are rarely considered worthy of serious study; in fact, people would probably consider such instances of language as insignificant. However, the sprawling mass which is word, or verbal, play can be ordered and classified in such a way as to show that the linguistic options available to the joker are no different from those available to the poet. Of course, taxonomies of word play already exist (e.g. Hockett, 1977; Alexander, 1981; Nash, 1985) as do analyses of the narrative structure of jokes. On the other hand, we know very little of the interactive processes involved in word play. Although we know that it is particularly pervasive in British culture, we hardly know why it nonplusses foreigners both at a formal level and at an interactive level. Furthermore, few studies have been carried out which consider word play in contrast across languages.

We shall thus try to go one small step further than the existing literature on word play by considering what occurs outside the humorous text, how people react and interact in the face of verbal play and where, if anywhere, lies the cut-off point between serious and humorous discourse.

The examples in the book have either been taken from collections

of jokes or else retrieved from my memory; others still have been recorded at dinner parties while speakers were unaware that they were being recorded. However, most frequently, especially with regard to the chapter on interaction, I have had to work from memory. Predicting when someone is going to be funny is not always possible and this has, of course, caused a few inevitable inaccuracies; these should not, however, detract from the gist of the analyses.

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Last but not least, my thanks go to Malcolm Coulthard who, so long ago, helped me clarify my somewhat confused thoughts on puns and word play as well as encouraging me to continue in my research; and to Ron Carter for his invaluable comments and criticisms during the various stages of the preparation of the manuscript.

1 About word play

The term word play conjures up an array of conceits ranging from puns and spoonerisms to wisecracks and funny stories. Word play is, in fact, inseparably linked to humour which in turn is linked to laughter; so in a book which sets out to explore such a subject, it is hard to resist not to begin by pointing out the obvious analogy which exists between language and laughter, the fact that both are human universals.

In all its many-splendoured varieties, humour can be simply defined as a type of stimulation that tends to elicit the laughter reflex. Spontaneous laughter is a motor reflex produced by the coordinated contraction of 15 facial muscles in a stereotyped pattern and accompanied by altered breathing. Electrical stimulation of the main lifting muscle of the upper lip, the zygomatic major, with currents of varying intensity produces facial expressions ranging from the faint smile through the broad grin to the contortions typical of explosive laughter.

(Koestler, 1974)

The physiological processes involved in the production of laughter described above are identical in men and women the world over. Equally complex physiological processes underlie the formation of speech sounds. In fact, from Birmingham to Bombay the formation of speech sounds is simply variations of identical physical procedures involving the various speech organs; in other words, as far as laughing and speaking are concerned, we all do it in the same way. However, the comparison between laughter and language cannot be developed any further, for, if it were, then, just as different languages are simply manifestations triggered off by the universal blueprint of a single grammatical matrix, it should follow that all laughter has a single stimulus. Where laughter is concerned, however, the process is

reversed; while the physical manifestation of laughter is the same the world over, its stimulus differs from culture to culture.

It is a well-known fact that the same things are not funny to everybody. We have all at some time made what we consider to be a witty remark at the wrong time and in the wrong company and have consequently had to suffer acute embarrassment to find the joke falls flat. Tacit rules underlie where, when and with whom it is permissible to joke. What is more, what may appear to be funny at a certain moment in time may cease to be so a few months later. If we then begin to consider the exportability of funniness, we will soon find that a traditional vehicle of humour such as the joke does not generally travel well. The concept of what people find funny appears to be surrounded by linguistic, geographical, diachronic, sociocultural and personal boundaries.

The notion of humour and what makes people laugh has intrigued scholars of various disciplines for centuries. Philosophers, psychologists and sociologists have attempted to define the whys and wherefores of humour and, above all, its essence. Such studies have resulted in numerous theories on the subject, some of which are more convincing than others; yet in their quest for a reason why, students of humour have tended to lose sight of the ways in which humorous effects are achieved. In fact, while considerable interest has been aroused by the subconscious processes concealed behind a burst of laughter or a smile, the stimulus itself has been largely ignored, rather as though unworthy of serious consideration.

Word play, the use of language with intent to amuse, is, of course, only one of numerous ways of provoking laughter. Although at first sight it may appear to be convenient to detach it from non-verbal stimuli, this soon proves to be an impossible task due to the fact that word play is inextricably linked to circumstances which belong to the world which exists beyond words. While it is perfectly possible to stimulate laughter without words, once words become part of the stimulus, whatever the type of verbal conceit, it is bound to be the verbalization of a state, an event or a situation. Over and above this, although the manipulation of the language itself may well be involved in the creation of a stimulus, instances of word play in which the language is used as an end in itself with the aim of amusing would be a contradiction in terms.

BEYOND WORDS

Everyone is capable of producing laughter, yet different people are amused by different things, so let us try to identify what, if anything,

may be considered funny universally. There are situations which may be seen as funny in all western societies. Practical jokes such as pulling a chair away when someone is about to sit down are a pretty universal source of amusement to schoolchildren, while other stock examples include seeing someone slip on a banana skin or receive a custard pie in the face.

Henri Bergson, in his famous essay *Le Rire*, in an attempt at explaining why we laugh, concluded that we always laugh at 'something human', at 'inelasticity', at 'rigidity' and 'when something mechanical is encrusted on something that is living'. In this light we can perhaps explain the laughter triggered off by the clumsiness of a clown or the mishaps of a comic like Buster Keaton. Yet on the other hand, it may be equally feasible to suggest that laughter is triggered off by something which is not at all funny in itself, but which symbolizes a well-established comic pattern. After all, is there any real reason why Groucho Marx's cigar and raised eyebrows should make us laugh? Yet they do and they do so universally. Are we really simply laughing at his mechanistic movements? If we try to trace such a stimulus back to its source or primeval association in order to find an explanation we soon find ourselves involved in a complicated and possibly hopeless task.

Like Groucho Marx, Charlie Chaplin with his ill-fitting suit and rickety walk, the antics of Laurel and Hardy, and more recently the lecherous Benny Hill chasing lightly clad ladies around fields have all succeeded in amusing audiences despite geographical boundaries; yet where slapstick (and lewdness in the case of Benny Hill) stimulates laughter universally, other situations are only amusing well within the borders of their country of origin.

In Italy, for example, where most television situation comedies are imported from either Britain or the United States, a series is only successful if the situation depicted is not too culture-specific. For example, in the early 1980s the series *George and Mildred* and *Different Strokes* became extremely successful in Italy. Both programmes are basically farcical in structure with dramatic irony used as an indispensable feature in each episode. The main character is usually responsible for a misdeed which is worsened when he tries to remedy it. This results in situations which are not too different from the 'fine messes' in which Stan Laurel constantly involved Oliver Hardy. On the other hand, the problems of a priest trying to outdo his Anglican counterpart in a parish somewhere in England (*Bless me, Father*) are far too culture-specific to hope to amuse Roman Catholic Italy. In fact, the latter series was quickly relegated to off-

peak viewing time on one of the country's minor commercial channels.

Situation comedy frequently plays on stereotypes. John Cleese's bowler-hatted business man (*Monty Python*) and hotelier (*Fawlty Towers*), members of the French resistance ('*Allo, 'Allo*) and typical British civil servants (*Yes, Prime Minister*) are all figures belonging to British culture which are instantly recognized in their inflated parodied forms by home audiences. Outside the British Isles, the stereotypes do not necessarily correspond as being comic in intent.

Situation comedies involve someone getting into some kind of mess. From the intricate farces of Plautus, through to the court jester and then the clown, from boss-eyed Ben Turpin to John Cleese's 'Silly Walks', from the ill-treated guests at *Fawlty Towers* to the painfully embarrassing situations created by *Candid Camera*, it would appear that people's misfortunes have always been a laughing matter. As far back as *Philebus* we find Plato claiming that:

when we laugh at the ridiculous qualities of our friends, we mix pleasure with pain

(1925: 338-9)

while Aristotle declares that:

Comedy . . . is a representation of inferior people, not indeed in the full sense of the word bad, but the laughable is a species of the base or ugly. It consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster, an obvious example being the comic mask which is ugly and distorted but not painful.

(1927: 18-21)

COMMON DENOMINATORS IN VERBAL HUMOUR

If we now turn to the field of verbal humour, we will find that the intrusion of language will restrict the stimulus to a smaller audience. Nevertheless, the topics of jokes tend to be universal. Degradation, for example, is the subject of an entire category of jokes. Physical handicaps which are the topic of 'sick' jokes may well appeal to feelings of repressed sadism, while most western societies possess a dimwitted underdog who is the butt of a whole subcategory of derogatory jokes which possibly allow their recipients to give vent to equally repressed feelings of superiority. The Irishman in England is transformed into a Belgian in France, a Portuguese in Brazil and a

8 *The Language of Jokes*

Pole in the United States. All of them are victims of jokes in which they clearly become 'inferior people' in unlikely situations in which they display pure stupidity. The Polish captain in the following joke can be substituted by a captain of the 'inferior' group of one's choice in order to adapt it to a non-American audience:

J1

A Polish Airline passenger plane lands with difficulty on a modern runway just stopping short of disaster. The Polish captain wipes his brow after successfully braking the plane. 'Whew!' he says, 'that's the shortest runway I've ever seen.'

'Yes', says his copilot, looking wonderingly to his left and then to his right, 'but it sure is wide.'

Why it is that any minority ethnic group can find itself becoming the subject of a derogatory joke (and consequently laughed at by its recipients) may not, however, necessarily depend upon the inventor's hidden feelings of superiority. Over the years, practically every ethnic group in the United States has taken its turn at being the underdog. Recent literature on the subject (Bier, 1979 and 1988) suggests that it would be equally feasible to suggest that Blacks, Jews, Italians and Puerto Ricans may have presented both an economic and phallic threat to the white middle-class American, thus suggesting that such jokes conceal repressed feelings of fear and anxiety rather than superiority.

Minority groups do not however necessarily have to be of the ethnic variety in order to qualify as joke material. In Italy, the *carabinieri*, one of the country's three police forces, replace the ethnic stooge, while in Poland the role is played by the secret police. Other types of derogatory jokes involve cripples, the mentally sick, homosexuals, wives, mothers-in-law and women in general. Only recently, after the advent of feminism, have we begun to hear jokes in which men are the butt of derogatory humour:

J2

Q. *Why are women bad at parking?*

A. *Because they're used to men telling them that this much (joker indicates an inch with thumb and forefinger) is ten inches.*

This joke of course combines the put-down joke with another western joke universal: sex. Generally speaking, in 'civilized' societies dirty jokes are considered amusing especially if they concern newly-weds or sexual initiation. However, such jokes undergo variations from culture to culture. In many cultures, male prowess and penis size are a common feature of the 'dirty' joke, while in others, seduction, adultery and cuckolded husbands appear to amuse, and let

us not forget that many people find other bodily functions funny too, so that 'lavatorial' jokes are far from being unusual, both among children and adults.

Many people would agree with Charles Lamb when he claims that: 'Anything awful makes me laugh' (letter to Southey, 9 August 1815); and Freud's idea of the child born free but who is forced into a state of repression within months of birth certainly rings true if we consider that by playground age a child is ready to giggle guiltily at a scurrilous remark. Later on in life we see that an important aspect of male camaraderie lies deeply ingrained in traditions in which the dirty joke reigns supreme – the rugby song and the banter and repartee of the working man's club and the stag night are just two examples. J2 upsets a rather male-centric tradition of dirty jokes by poking fun at the male. He is now forced to laugh at himself and his over-preoccupation with penis size and sexual performance. As for laughing at the underdog, who in this example is the male, surely here we laugh the self-satisfied laugh of he or she who knows better?

Alongside the topics of sex and underdogs, another common denominator which is universally present in jokes is what we shall term the 'absurd' or 'out of this world' element. Jokes containing such elements can be easily compared to fairy tales as both may be inhabited by humanized objects and talking animals. Throughout the duration of these jokes, the recipient's disbelief must be suspended in the same way as it is suspended in order to watch an animated cartoon in which famous cats like Tom and Sylvester get flattened by steamrollers, hit over the head by gigantic hammers and pushed off mountains, yet, nevertheless, always manage to survive and return for another episode.

J3

Jeremy Cauliflower is involved in a very bad car accident; sprigs are scattered all over the road and he is immediately rushed to hospital where a team of surgeons quickly carry out a major operation. Meanwhile, his parents, Mr and Mrs Cauliflower sit outside the operating theatre anxiously waiting for the outcome of the operation. After five hours one of the surgeons comes out of the theatre and approaches Jeremy's parents.

'Well,' asks Mr Cauliflower, 'will Jeremy live?'

'It's been a long and difficult operation', replies the surgeon, 'and Jeremy's going to survive. However I'm afraid there's something you ought to know.'

'What?' ask the Cauliflowers.

'I'm sorry,' replies the surgeon, 'we've done our best but . . . but I'm afraid your son's going to remain a vegetable for the rest of his life.'