



Inter **text**

# The Language of Humour



ROUTLEDGE  


Alison Ross

*Inter* text

# The Language of Humour

• Alison Ross

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## The Language of Humour

This accessible satellite textbook in the Routledge INTERTEXT series is unique in offering students hands-on, practical experience of textual analysis focused on the language of humour. Written in a clear, user-friendly style by a practising teacher, it combines practical activities with texts, followed by commentaries to show how messages are constructed from language and suggestions for further activities. It can be used individually or in conjunction with the series core textbook, *Working with Texts: A core book for language analysis*.

Aimed at A-Level and beginning undergraduate students, *The Language of Humour*:

- ⊙ examines the ways that humour is created in both spoken and written language;
- ⊙ explores the relationship between humour and social attitudes; the status of the targets of humour, the joke tellers and the audience;
- ⊙ focuses on the social aspects of humour, and asks what it contributes to current debates on 'political correctness' and censorship;
- ⊙ analyses a rich variety of humorous text examples, from the classics of Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde to the contemporary sketches of French and Saunders, Eddie Izzard, Victoria Wood, Reeves and Mortimer, the cartoons of Gary Larson, and the sitcom *Friends*.

**Alison Ross** is a visiting lecturer at Leeds University and Sheffield Hallam University. She is a senior examiner and moderator for the NEAB English Language A Level.

## The Intertext series

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- ◎ What might a piece of literary writing have in common with an advert or a note from the milkman?
- ◎ What aspects of language are important to understand when analysing texts?

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The series consists of a foundation text, *Working with Texts: A core book for language analysis*, which looks at language aspects essential for the analysis of texts, and a range of satellite texts. These apply aspects of language to a particular topic area in more detail. They complement the core text and can also be used alone, providing the user has the foundation skills furnished by the core text.

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**Ronald Carter** is Professor of Modern English Language in the Department of English Studies at the University of Nottingham and is the editor of the Routledge INTERFACE series in Language and Literary Studies. He is also co-author of *The Routledge History of Literature in English*. From 1989 to 1992 he was seconded as National Director for the Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) project, directing a £21.4 million in-service teacher education programme.

**Angela Goddard** is Senior Lecturer in Language at the Centre for Human Communication, Manchester Metropolitan University, and was Chief Moderator for the project element of English Language A Level for the Northern Examination and Assessment Board (NEAB) from 1983 to 1995. Her publications include *The Language Awareness Project: Language and Gender*, vols I and II, 1988, and *Researching Language*, 1993 (Framework Press).

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# introduction

Humour has a high profile in our society. A glance through the television guides will show this: sitcoms and comedy shows are on prime-time television every evening. In January 1997 the final episode of the sitcom, *Only Fools and Horses* was watched by a record number of 24.5 million viewers. Humorous books are usually in the bestseller lists: in January 1997 the best-selling paperback was *Notes from a Small Island* by Bill Bryson, and another five humorous books were in the top twenty. Comedians like Eddie Izzard, Victoria Wood, Jo Brand, Lennie Henry can fill venues as well as top bands. These are all examples of mass media, but humour has a fashionable status even at a personal level: most advertisements in the lonely hearts columns refer to a GSOH (they don't even have to spell out a Good Sense Of Humour). Few people today would own up to a lack of humour.

Humour is influential - from political satire to joking as a way of establishing friendships and excluding others. The examples included in this book all made someone laugh at some time, but the context for humour is a crucial element. This means that a book *about* humour is unlikely to be funny. What it offers is an examination of the ways that humour is created in language. While this may spoil the immediate gut reaction of laughter, it is important to understand how the response of laughter is triggered.

Unit 1 moves towards a definition of what counts as 'humour' and asks you to consider the factors which combine to make you laugh. Then three theories of humour are examined in turn. One theory states that we laugh at the unexpected or incongruous. Unit 2 looks at types of ambiguity, from individual words to the structure of English sentences. These types of double meanings are what many people think of as humour, but there are more subtle ways in which the humorist jolts us into laughter, by breaking the normal expectations of language in use. These language conventions are examined in Unit 3. The next two units move on to the *subject* of the humour. The superiority theory explains our tendency to laugh when someone we despise is the target. Seeing which groups are the targets of humour can give a snapshot of that society's attitudes. Unit 4 looks at the ways in which these attitudes are established or challenged by language use, and the ways in which the response is affected by the stance of the joke-teller or the audience. The

psychic release theory explains laughter as caused by the sense of a taboo being broken. The focus in Unit 5 is not on the reason *why* certain areas are taboos but on which areas are considered 'unspeakable' and *how* the humour is created - through either taboo words or innuendo. The remaining three units examine texts from the genres of literature, radio, television and stand-up comedy. Since much humour is a matter of personal taste, and contemporary humour may have a short 'shelf-life', the texts are there to represent a range of examples and indicate ways of investigating them. The aim of the book is to outline a framework of analysis that can be applied to any humour in speech or writing. It was a challenge to say anything revealing about the strangest, and funniest, examples from the 1990s: Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer on television, the cartoons of Gary Larson and the stand-up comedy of Eddie Izzard. By the year 2000 there will be new humour which is equally tricky to analyse. This is the essence of humour: surprise, innovation and rule-breaking.

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# Unit one

## 'Just for a laugh?'

### What is humour?

(One definition of humour is: 'something that makes a person laugh or smile'. Like all straightforward definitions, exceptions can be found. It's possible to claim that something is humorous, even though no one laughed at the time - and it can often happen that people laugh, but someone can claim, 'That's not funny'. Smiling and laughter can also be a sign of fear or embarrassment. Despite these objections, the *response* is an important factor in counting something as humour.) Examining the language can then help to explain *why* people laugh.

### When does laughter occur?

People laugh in company. Research has shown that when people are alone they rarely laugh, even though the same example of humour makes them do so in a room full of people. There is a strong social aspect to the way people respond to humour. If you watch your favourite comedy in the presence of people who remain straight-faced, it can stop you finding it so funny. Because it's important to sense other people responding to humour, 'canned laughter' is used for television or radio comedy. 'The same joke can work brilliantly in one context and die in another,' as stand-up comedians find, travelling from one venue to

another. Like other aspects of language, humour is a way in which people show their allegiance to a group. If someone signals their intention to say something humorous, the listeners are immediately ready to laugh. People often laugh when given this sort of cue, regardless of whether they even got the joke.

The opposite happens if the listeners want to distance themselves from the speaker. Once you feel that someone is old-fashioned, silly or racist, for example, you are unlikely to laugh. The social context is important for the creation and reception of humour. It is hard for humour to cross boundaries of time and social groups – humour becomes outdated as quickly as fashion, and is often dependent on particular cultures and attitudes. There are other ways in which the context is important. The phrase 'There's a time and a place for everything' is true of humour. It is not felt to be appropriate in certain situations, for example if it seems trivial or is a distraction from serious matters. It's also difficult to take humour 'cold'. Few people laugh first thing in the morning, so broadcast comedy programmes are scheduled for the relaxing parts of the day. Even when a comedy event happens in the evening, warm-up artists are often used to get audiences in the right mood.

## **'Just for a laugh?'**

Humour has various effects, whether these are intentional or not. It is simplistic to say that it's just for a laugh. It's possible to laugh and admit that, in a sense, it's not funny. There may be a target for the humour – a person, an institution or a set of beliefs – where the underlying purpose is deadly serious. Humour can occur in surprisingly serious contexts, as in sick jokes about death.

So, although laughter is not a necessary or sufficient condition of humour, from a commonsense point of view it's a useful starting point for a definition.

Humour may be thought of as a peripheral, leisure activity which lacks the more obvious significance of literature, advertising and the media. Having a good time with friends usually involves having a laugh. But what makes us laugh and why?

## **Activity with text**

How do you respond to the following jokes? Because they are listed in a book about humour, they are out of their usual context. Even so, group

them in order of preference. For those low down on your list, comment on the situation in which they *could* be funny – who might be telling the joke, where, when and to whom? Are there some you would consider *not* funny in any possible situation?

- 1 'Do you believe in clubs for young people?' 'Only when kindness fails.' (W.C. Fields)
- 2 Why do women have small feet? So they can get closer to the sink.
- 3/ What's the difference between a bad marksman and a constipated owl? One shoots but can't hit.
- 4 If Noel Edmunds, Stalin and Hitler were in a room and you had only two bullets in your gun, who do you shoot? Noel Edmunds – twice.
- 5 What's orange and sounds like a parrot? A carrot.
- 6 Why does Edward Woodward have 4 D's in his name? Because if he didn't he'd be called E-war Woo-war-.
- 7 I have an existential map. It has 'You are here' written all over it.
- 8 God is not dead but alive and well and working on a much more ambitious project.
- 9 Winter is nature's way of saying 'Up yours.'
- 10 Weather forecast for tonight: dark.
- 11 There is no gravity. The earth sucks.
- 12 When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping
- 13 One hundred thousand lemmings can't be wrong.
- 14 Did you hear the one about the man who walked into a bar and said 'Ouch!'?
- 15 LOVE, n. A temporary insanity curable by marriage.
- 16 MAD, adj. Affected with a high degree of intellectual independence.
- 17 Fox hunting is the unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible. (Oscar Wilde)
- 18 Two cows in a field. One says, 'Moo.' Other says, 'You bastard, I was going to say that.'
- 19/ Two cows in a field. One says 'Are you worried about this BSE scare?' 'Of course not, I'm a helicopter.'
- 20 Man in a bar: 'I just got a bottle of gin for my mother-in-law.'  
Second man: 'Sounds like a good swap.'

## Commentary

Personal taste is a crucial aspect of humour, so it is unlikely that any two people will coincide in their ranking of the jokes. Your taste in humour will also change over time: certain styles seem outdated once you have heard that sort of joke too often. It also changes less predictably with mood, even the time of day. However you may be able to identify a type and style of humour that you tend to appreciate. If you enjoy wordplay and puns, numbers 1, 11 and 20 in the list have an element of ambiguity, though you may feel that the wordplay is corny or trivial. Some jokes have an element of shock, because taboo subjects or words are mentioned (3, 18) or because they attack a target (2, 4, 20). Your reaction will depend partly on your attitude to the subject – you might object to jokes about women or feel offended by cruelty or crudity in humour. Others make some neat witticism about human nature and society (15, 16, 17). You are more likely to respond to the clever use of language if you share the attitude of the joke-teller. Some allude to a familiar saying and twist it (8, 9, 12, 13). This type of cross-reference needs to be both understood and appreciated in its new use. Others refer to the actual conventions of humour and joking and subvert them (5, 6, 14). There is an element of irony and detachment in jokes about jokes. Enjoyment of the surreal leads to a bizarrely unexpected notion (7, 18, 19) rather than a surprising punchline. Many examples of humour do several of these things at the same time (1, 20). Others make us laugh although it is hard to explain why. Number 10 is stating the obvious, so it's odd as a forecast – but, then again, weather forecasts often do state the obvious, so perhaps it's a comment on that.

## Extension

Collect examples of humour that you enjoy. Also list those that you do not find funny at all. You may find examples from fields such as advertising or newspaper headlines, as well as texts clearly intended as comedy. Attempt a broad characterisation into types of humour, using some of the categories mentioned above: 'wordplay and ambiguity, taboo-breaking, attacking a target, **allusion** and **intertextuality**, nonsense or the absurd'. These features will be discussed in more detail in the next four units. Are there some examples which do not fall into these categories? If so, try to describe the source of humour.

Bear the following in mind when selecting texts for your own project work or investigation.

Visual humour – as in silent films, cartoons and clowning – is outside the scope of this book, though it is possible to comment on the way cartoon captions interact with visuals to create humour. Some spoken humour, particularly of impressionists like Rory Bremner, relies so much on features like the quality and tone of voice that it would need a sophisticated phonetic analysis – also outside the book's scope. Use the following as a guide to choosing texts that are suitable for language analysis:

- ✓⊙ The humour must be verbal – either written or spoken.
- ✓⊙ It will generally be intentional, though perhaps based on inadvertent slips of the tongue.
- ✓⊙ Your response must be to aspects of language.
- ✓⊙ Those aspects should be diverse enough to allow extended comment.



