



THE FUNCTIONAL LOAD OF HUMOR: A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The pervasive and universal nature of humor makes of it a fertile field of analysis which can have interesting implications for the understanding of human communication in particular and human behavior in general. We believe that any analysis of humor as a socio-cultural phenomenon presupposes an understanding of the variety of functions it plays in human society and communication. The present paper aims at exploring the functional load of humor with a focus on the review of two main functions, the cohesive function and the control function.

Key Words: Humor, pervasive and universal, functional load, cohesive function, control function, human communication, human behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Humor is a complex universal socio-cultural phenomenon. It pervades all aspects of human life and existence and seems to have no borderlines as it manifests itself in all human spheres and patterns: social, cultural, ethnic, racial ... , and human variables: social class, gender, age, education, occupation ... etc. This pervasive and universal nature of humor explains the reasonable belief that its accurate understanding represents undoubtedly a large step forward towards the understanding of the complex nature of human behavior in general.

The analysis of the functional load of humor has a double aim related to both human communication and human behavior. By exploring the variety of functions that humor assumes in our life, we are first shedding light on some of the aspects of human behavior whether from a social, cultural, ethnic, educational or occupational perspective. Second, any analysis of the functional load of humor has direct implications for a general theory of communication. It would be unrealistic to dismiss the humorous side of communication if we know for sure that we – humans beings – tend to be more non-serious than serious in our daily life. Moreover, the two

modes of discourse, serious and humorous, are interactive and coexisting and tend to interplay in our daily life and communication.

Thus, understanding the multitude of functions of humor and its diverse manifestations helps in a better understanding of human communication, which in its turn, provides useful insights into the understanding and development of a general theory of human behavior. The functional analysis of humor has also the aim of “shaking a little bit” the widely held skeptical view that humor is a futile field of research not worthy of academic scrutiny.

The present paper aims at exploring the variety of functions that humor plays in human life with a focus on the socio-cultural dimension. The paper does not intend or pretend to be exhaustive in the review of the huge bulk of research dealing with the functional load of humor, but rather selective enough to reflect the major socio-cultural functions of humor with a focus on two main functions, the cohesive function and the control function.

The cohesive function of humor

The cohesive function of humor lies in its use as a defensive mechanism against any external element that can threaten the unification of a group. In multicultural societies, for example, members of different ethnic origins have to communicate in order to survive. However, this coexistence and “necessary” cooperation will not result in a cultural melting pot since people will tend to preserve the unification of their ethnic group. Humor has often been exploited as a tool to consolidate intra-group ethnic features. A minority group which has to face the hostilities, aggressions and negative attitudes of the majority group may develop a sense of humor as a response to these challenging forces that threaten not only the rhythm of their daily life existence, but also the state of their ethnic or racial identity (Martineau 1972, Husband 1988, Mintz 1999, Oshima 2000). In the United States for example, the blacks - being a segregated minority group - have developed what is referred to neutrally as “black humor” and pejoratively as “Negro humor” in order to fight back the aggressive remarks and the value-laden judgements which white people tend to hold against them in real life. The superiority of one group over the other in terms of socio-economic status, race, power, and prestige, often leads to disparaging humor, a humor that “disparages, belittles, debases, demeans, humiliates, or otherwise victimizes” the subordinate group (Zillman 1983: 85). By disparaging the minority group, the majority group facilitates and maintains its superiority (Kuipers 2000).

More than this, as Gravley (1983: 53) suggests:

“The consistent directing of such humor toward a group could well initiate or strengthen a set of attitudes of beliefs that defy objective evidence and become accepted descriptions of that population segment “ (Gravely 1983: 53).

Under the pressure of the dominant group, blacks have developed a humor, often of a counter-disparaging kind, the social function of which is somehow paradoxically double: “To express dissatisfaction with those who are dominant (the white community) and simultaneously, perhaps paradoxically, to control their own otherwise overtly aggressive impulses“(Fine 1983: 175).

Thus, humor serves different functions. First, it symbolically unifies the blacks as a minority group, hence its cohesive function. Second, it is well suited as a conflict device because of its adaptability to varying subject matters and its great potential for subtly conveying malice. Humor can, then, function as a line of separation from the antagonistic group and, therefore, can be used as a medium through which the whites’ hostility and aggression can be counter-balanced, hence the underlying conflict function. Third, the circulation of this humor among blacks allows them to accept the prevailing norms and conventions as they are in reality since they are in a weak position, hence the control function.

There has been, however, a controversial disagreement on the functional value of disparagement humor. While Martineau’s hypothesis (1972) stipulates that disparagement humor fosters prejudice against the disparaged out-group, Ford *et al* (2015), Davies (1991) and Schutz (1989) emphasize the cohesive function of humor. For instance, Ford *et al* (2015) have, contrarily to Martineau’s claim, shown that disparagement humor functions as “ a releaser of existing prejudice” , rather than acting as “ an initiator of prejudice” .

At the Cross-cultural level, though humor is usually expected to represent a challenge leading frequently to miscommunications, misjudgements and negative perceptions, Bell (2007: 27) found that humor among native and non-native speakers of English “didn’t seem to be a cause of conflict because of adjustments speakers made to their speech and their situated interpretations of meaning”.

This Cross-cultural humorous interaction between native and non-native speakers of English was successful and humor played a positive cohesive role thanks to the participants’ avoidance of taboo topics and their tendency to make speech adjustments and mutual accommodation while keeping a lenient attitude.

Similarly, but at the ethnic level, in response to the widely held view that ethnic jokes are socially divisive and demeaning, Schutz (1989) argues that:

“Ethnic humor remains a peaceful mode of lessening tension, by relieving hostility, and of social bonding, not only for the dominant social group but for ethnic subcultures “ (Schutz 1989: 166).

Davies (1991) follows the same direction when he criticizes the consideration of ethnic jokes as vehicles of social aggressiveness and an expression of hostility and ethnic enmity.

Following the same streamline, the positive socio-cultural function of humor has been highlighted by Oshima (2000) in his study of Hawai'i, a multi-ethnic society by excellence. According to him, ethnic humor takes a more cohesive function as it contributes to the reduction of conflicts between different ethnic groups. This adaptive function is achieved because the humorous communication among the various ethnic groups is based on a set of rules which are shared implicitly by all members of the society, namely

1. Be able to tell jokes concerning one's own ethnicity (self-duplicating).
2. Be able to laugh at jokes concerning one's own ethnicity.
3. Know the realm of stereotypes authorized by the ethnic groups presented and stay within those boundaries.
4. Jokes must identify ethnic traits with respect and understanding.

This rule-governed humorous behavior ensures coexistence and communicative fluidity among diverse ethnicities.

In his analysis of American humor, Mintz (1999) examines what he calls “ a unique and invaluable” virtue of humor in America in so far as it serves as a coping mechanism with the essential facets of life such as sex, politics, race and ethnicity, religion and family relations. All this can be achieved by humor through a channel which “*Frames our problems as bearable and even as a source of strength and pleasure - a paradox which exemplifies the unity and diversity of the American humor*” (Mintz, 1999: 237).

Within the same respect, Derks and Nezelek (2001) directed their research focus to a more socio-psychologically oriented coping function of humor. The authors have shown how humor use among the 286 participants had a positive influence in coping with depression, loneliness and social anxiety, and how humor functions as a moderator of the participants' positive psychological adjustment and easier social interaction.

Still dealing with the cohesive function of humor, Thomae & Pina (2015) have analyzed sexist humor in relation with gender social identity. They focused on the various ways in which sexist humor functions as an enhancer of male in-group cohesion and serves as a form of sexual harassment. By getting involved in sexist humor, males try to assert their sex identity as opposed to the female one and exploit this type of humor to sexually harass females who are blamed as victims, hence the reinforcement and establishment of males' feeling of power and superiority.

Humor research went beyond the analysis of humor styles which characterize cultures, societies and communities to concentrate on the functional value of humor in the family environment. According to Ziv (1988: 224), if there is one institution which can benefit from all the virtues of humor, such as cohesiveness, tension reduction, long-term relationships (Hall and Sereno 2010, Graham 1995), and creativity, it is the marriage institution. Therefore a lot of research focused on the role of humor in the couples' feeling of cohesiveness and marital

satisfaction and well-being. (Goldstein & Rust 1989, Brooks, et al (1999), Priest & Thein 2003, Everts 2003, Hall & Sereno 2010, Koning & Weiss 2010 and Hall 2013).

While the majority of research has focused on problems, conflicts and attitudes influencing the partners' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with married life, Ziv (1988) directed his investigation to the contribution of humor to the life of married couples. He found that among the five functions of humor, namely aggressive, sexual, social, defensive and intellectual, the social one is the most frequently used and "contributes to the couple's feeling of cohesiveness, tension reduction, and communication improvement between the couple members.

Weisfeld *et al* (2011) explored the role of humor in marriage cross-culturally in five countries: The United States of America, the United Kingdom, China, Turkey and Russia. While in the American, British, Chinese and Turkish cultures husbands were perceived to make wives laugh more than the reverse, in the Russian culture, the wives were funnier. However, in all cultures, spousal humorousness was associated with marital satisfaction, especially the wife's satisfaction and is a connotation of spousal intelligence, kindness, dependability and understanding.

Still dealing with family humor, Everts (2003) applied a sociolinguistic discourse analysis to naturally occurring family interaction and came to show how a Kansas family makes an evident use of aggressive humor to « the ends of solidarity, intimacy and ongoing socialization of family members" (Everts, 2003: 370).

Moving to a more interpersonal level, Graham (1995) sought to investigate the impact of having a sense of humor on the development of social relationships. He found that "a high, rather than a low, sense of humor facilitated the reduction of uncertainty and also served to reduce social distance between interactants" (Graham 1995: 164). Humor, then, lubricates the development of interpersonal relations as well as social ones.

The case of Northern Norway investigated by Johnsen (1999) displays another far-reaching functional value of humor in the life of communities and their development. The researcher shows how the influence of the processes of internalization in economy and cross-cultural cooperation and understanding has made of humor an important constituent of the global mass culture. Johnsen (1999) presents the interesting case of traditional humorous communication in Northern Norway which "is *actively and consciously used in constructing regional identity*". (Johnsen, 1999: 316).

There is a remarkable direction of research where we can conceive humor being exploited as an essential component in the creation and the development of the attractiveness of a city or a region. Nowadays, cities and regions evolve and change constantly and rapidly and are increasingly competing against each other, each trying to find ways and tools of differentiating itself from the others in order to be more attractive economically and culturally and subsequently

gain advantage over its competitors. For this, city managers work hard to boost the image of their city in its different facets and care a lot about covering it with a label identity.

In Morocco, for instance, the magic city of Marrakech, whose name and fame have always been associated with the humor and joy of its citizens, represents an interesting example worthy of analysis to reveal the extent to which the surrounding humor culture, for which the city is historically known, plays an undoubtedly prominent role in the attractiveness of the city and the building up of its identity not only nationally but also internationally.

The control function of humor

Unlike conflict humor, control humor *“does not divide or separate groups, but attempts to make group members accept group norms and disavow deviance of ten through ridicule”* (Fine 1983: 173)

In Zinacantan society, for example, anthropological research suggests that one of the basic functions of humor is that of social control. Being basically a male activity, humorous exchanges serve as a means of entertainment, of testing one’s virility and reinforcing existing relationships. Consequently, humor goes beyond its non-serious common function of amusement to foster the consolidation of people’s social relationships. That is why, it is no surprise that in such a society where humor reaches a high degree of institutionalization, going astray of the rules and conventions of how to perform these humorous exchanges results not only in purely communicative problems, but also in shaking the social rhythm dictated by the kind of social relationships holding between people. It seems to be the case that in those societies where humor behavior is closely linked to the essence of the prevailing social and kinship ties, humor takes a more “organized” form. Humorous exchanges are not random since they take the form of “joking relationships” which are defined by Aple (1983: 185) as those relationships that

“Involve playful behavior between two individuals who recognize special kinship or other types of social bonds between them. Such behavior displays reciprocal and non-reciprocal verbal or action-based humor, including joking, teasing, banter, ridicule, insult, horseplay and other similar manifestations, usually, but not always, in the presence of an audience “

Humorous exchanges, then, take the form of joking relationships which are explicitly defined and recognized among members of the community. These joking relationships regulate humorous communication in such a way as they specify who is to joke with whom, where, when and how. If a participant breaks these conventions, he will be badly perceived not only because he is causing a communicative breakdown, but also because he is threatening the stability of

well-established social relationships that people agree on as a basis for intra-group communication. In Zinacantan society, the mere fact of refusing to participate in joking interaction is interpreted as a sign of cowardice and unmanliness (Bricker 1978: 413). In a joking interaction where roles are well defined, a Zinacantecos will initiate playful behavior by teasing or making fun of or even insulting his partner. The partner, however, is supposed to take no offense. In cases where joking relationships are not well defined and do not conform to the Zinacantan joking requirements, participants who are strangers are expected to adopt “a fictitious role relationship” such as the one of a kinsman or a friend. Bricker (1978: 415) explains that

“Depending on what fictitious relationships they have decided upon, they will know what rules of conduct are appropriate”

It is clear, then, that any involvement of a stranger in a joking interaction without a pre-existing knowledge of the rules of the game will result in communicative breakdown and subsequent negative judgements. Humorous communication in Zinacantan (and many other societies like the Bachama community of Northeastern Nigeria (Stevens 1978) where joking is institutionalized) seems to be a rule-governed activity where joking behavior follows an institutionalized pattern and serves to control the social bonds between people.

In modern industrialized western societies, however, joking behavior tends not to be based on highly categorized joking relationships of the type we have discussed above. Fine (1983: 165) describes how joking behavior takes place in western societies versus non-western societies:

“Industrial societies, unlike many non-western societies... do not have formalized role relationships in which participants are required to joke with each other in lieu of serious communication. Our cultures are sufficiently structured and stratified to permit such a formalized relationship” (Fine 1983: 165).

Instead, joking behavior in modern industrialized societies is less formalized or structured and is not based on kinship or familial ties:

“Joking (for teasing or kidding) relationships have been found among groups of friends and also among groups of co-workers. We do not find joking relationships in the family or among relatives” (Fine 1983:165).

It seems, then, that humorous communication is not regulated by the same principles in western and non-western societies. The situational rules for joking differ from one culture to

another and any transfer of these situational rules or standards for appropriate joking from one culture to another may result in miscommunications which can lead in turn to subsequent mutual negative perceptions and bad evaluations. While in the Zinacantan society, formal role relations are based on explicitly defined kinship ties in a humorous interaction, in western societies humorous behavior tends to be regulated by formal role relationships based on parameters such as status, hierarchy and sex-role relationships (Fine 1983). Any humorous encounter involving people from these two different cultures may result in a communicative breakdown. The Zinacantecos will expect the westerners to adopt “fictitious role relationships” - as one of a kinsman for instance - in order to participate in the joking encounter. The westerners, in contrast, will have other assumptions in mind as to who can joke with whom, where, when and how. Moreover, the value attached to joking behavior and its content may not be the same for people of the two cultures. For westerners, the joking encounter in its unmarked sense may, for instance, be considered as a mere moment of amusement and a way of establishing rapport with members of the other culture. Successful performance will mean accordingly a maximization of the entertainment and amusement of the others including the choice of the topics that may serve these purposes. The westerner may tend to avoid, for example, what is considered taboo in his culture and what he thinks may be taboo in other cultures. For the Zinacantecos, however, successful performance in joking encounters is valued as a mark of virility (Bricker 1978: 413). For Them “*to perform well means to parry the opponent’s insulting remarks with telling counter insults of one’s own*” (Bricker 1978: 413). As for the content of the joking encounter, since joking interactions are essentially exchanges of insults, a Zinacantecos may initiate a joking encounter with an insult, an initiative which may be shocking and embarrassing for a westerner who may take the insult to be seriously offending. Moreover, if the westerners refuse to participate in the joking encounter, they may be perceived by Zinacantecos as “Cowardly and unmanly” (Bricker 1978: 413).

The control function of humor has also been depicted by Bardaneh (2011) in his study of contemporary Arab political humor. According to him, political jokes in this type of Arab humor

“Reflect a textual representation of the life cycle of the oppressive ruler, which begins with comic “crowning” and glorification and ends in “decrowning” and comic death” (Bardaneh 2011: 306).

The telling of these jokes, however, is not meant to take side with or against the regime. They serve only as a way of building an alternative world where people can depress their oppression without shaking the status-quo, hence the control function of humor. Humor is used in such context as a way of self-control which underlies the repressive situation of people and their inability to overtly express themselves. Humor, then, functions as a hidden discourse channel where the implicit expression reflects the explicit oppression.

The control function of humor has also been discussed by Kuipers (2000), but this time in connection to ethnic relations. He reports the case of the Dutch society which used to be both ethnically and culturally a very homogenous country in the early nineteen sixties. With the coming new waves of immigration, what he calls “foreigner jokes” or “attitude jokes” appeared in the Dutch society because the ethnic minorities, especially the Turks and the Surinamese, were perceived negatively as “problematic” people. Consequently, a lot of “attitude jokes” emerged among the Dutch about these two minority ethnic groups, associating them with the humorous script of “dirtiness”. According to Kuipers (2000), this association does not only emanate from “the *Turks disadvantageous socio-economic situation and their cultural distinctiveness*”, but also possibly from “*the Dutch’s obsession with cleanliness*” (kuipers 2000: 142). These newly emerging ethnic jokes reflected the perceived position of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands at that period of time as a group situated at the bottom rank of the socio-economic ladder in the Dutch society. The ethnic attitude jokes also reflect the way these minorities are perceived in the Dutch culture, namely as second class citizens who need to be controlled and dominated by the superiority and power of the local ethnic majority. It should be noted however that no matter how degrading and downgrading these “attitude jokes”, they are not expressed overtly in public since they are considered as “highly offensive” in the Dutch society.

Religious ethnic humor in its turn has also been exploited to activate the control function of humor. Draitser (1994) presents the interesting case of the Russian Jewish jokes of the exodus of Jews from the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. These jokes, which could not be formally documented for socio-political reasons, took the form of an oral humor spread among the Jews of the exodus. According to Draitser (1994) , this Jewish Jokelore was of great help for Jewish in-group control of its members’ behavior in order to “survive in a hostile environment”. The Jews’ use of these Russian Jewish jokes was a way to “increase morale and solidify the group” in order to face the hard ethno-political times and the heavy load of making important decisions concerning the presence and future of this minority oppressed group.

Having dealt with the macro socio-cultural and ethnic level, we move now to a more micro level of analysis of the control function of humor in relation to group life. In this respect, Fine and Soucey (2005) focused on the function of “joking cultures” in the social regulation in group life. They argue that interacting social groups tend to develop progressively a joking culture which is made up of a set of humorous references representing a background source that members will refer to for further interaction. In such interacting social groups who happen to share a common humorous cultural background, humor takes a control function in so far as it lubricates the group identity and ensures group members’ compliance and belonging. Humor becomes, then, an effective social regulator in group life.

The functional value of humor has also been analysed in relation to gender social identity, though the majority of research was directed towards male humor behavior at the detriment of females under the claim that joking performance is primarily a male activity (Bing 2007). However, some researchers focused solely on all-female groups. One interesting example is Reichenbach (2015) who explored the use of humor among Bahraini women as an instrument of

resistance or social control. When analyzing three genres of humorous conversation, namely self-mockery, mutual teasing, and joking about absent third parties, he found that women friends get involved in a “drastic, intimate and aggressive” humor through which they “questioned existing gender ideals and played with alternative identities”. Nevertheless, the control function of Bahraini women’s humor resides in giving them a chance to resist to the contradictions and ambiguities of an environment full of uncertainties and rapid social change.

Still within the socio-cultural function of humor, humor in its various forms and modes can be a useful means through which hierarchy, power and status structure can be preserved. In occupational settings, for example, where authority relations are well – defined in terms of dominant and dominated members, “humor will be employed routinely to support the authority structure in a way which maintains the dominant social pattern” (Mulkay 1988: 169). Fine (1983: 167) notes that where these formal relationships are governed by the law of authority, joking behavior will be directed from the more powerful to the less powerful. In Fine’s words:

“It is well established that humor is more often directed down the status hierarchy than up it, particularly in light of formal role relations” (Fine 1983: 167).

Another social function of humor in occupational settings is its facilitation of the socialization process of a newcomer to a group. The success and progress of a given company depends not only on the workers’ intensive efforts, but also on how much consensus and understanding characterize their relationship. Psychologically speaking, a newcomer who gets integrated into the group, will feel at ease in the company of his colleagues and will contribute to bring about satisfactory results for his company. Besides the socialization function, joking performs a number of other social functions, some of which are given by Holdaway (1988: 108) such as,

“The release of tension within and between groups, self-aggrandisement, easing the process of socialization for a newcomer to a group, the creation of consensus and the relief of boredom” (Holdaway 1988: 108).

Conclusion:

Joking behavior, then, is a culture-specific phenomenon, an out-product of the socio-cultural organization of the community in question. Therefore, humor is not only a means of causing laughter, but it may also be a useful and effective way to reach a “comprehensive understanding of group structure and group process” (Martineau 1972: 102). Through the observance of humor behavior and the multitude of socio-cultural functions it plays in groups and societies, we may reveal the structural characteristics of the community, namely how these people are related to each other in terms of power, solidarity, intimacy and how these relationships have created some social norms and conventions that regulate communication and behavior among members of this group.

Therefore, our analysis of the multitude of socio-cultural functions of humor provides some direct insights into a better understanding of human communication in particular and human behavior in general. This is legitimately justified and corroborated by the universal nature of humor and its capacity to pervade all aspects and sides of human life.

The presentation of this socio-cultural diversity of the functional load of humor also allows us to compare and contrast different societies, cultures, ethnic and even special groups as to how they perceive humor in their life and communication and the type of value they attach to its use and function in their community behavior.

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