

Children's Laughter and Language of Humour

RICHA*

Abstract

This paper will try to elaborate on the theoretical aspect of language of humour and its implication in children's learning. An attempt is made to discuss the aesthetic dimension of human experience where a certain kind of emotional sensation, evokes laughter and mirth. In a flash, humour connects children to the multifaceted shades of life. It is seen that modern day education emphasises on learner-centred classroom, with the message that the teaching-learning process should be centred on each child's needs, wants, and initiatives. The possible suggestive precondition is assumed to be the child's laughter and happiness as per the 'Learning without Burden' (1993) report and National Curriculum Framework (2005), which stress on the use of humour in classroom learning. However, whether humour is healthy or not, is still a debateable question. The paper presents the philosophical, psychological and language orientation on humour.

INTRODUCTION

"...man is distinguished from all other creatures by the faculty of laughter."

— Joseph Addison (p. 87, 1712)

The recognition of humour and taking delight in the ludicrous incongruity are particularly human activity. Someone narrates a funny

story or tells a joke, or makes a witty remark, and we are suddenly struck by its wittiness. Depending upon how amusing we perceive the humour to be, it can make us smile or burst into laughter. The laughter seems to arise from a subtle creative twist in the language expression underlining

* Research Scholar, Central Institute of Education (C.I.E.), University of Delhi, Delhi-110007

something incongruous. The ability to comprehend and appreciate humour is a critical aspect of social functioning. Modern day school learning focuses on the pedagogic trend towards the promotion of joyful learning, with an attention that children are much more likely to be motivated to learn, and to retain knowledge if they are happy, rather than anxious in the classrooms. The Yash Pal Committee report *Learning without Burden* (1993), has extensively reported on the flaws of the contemporary education system, pointing out that the contemporary education system has become highly centralised, examination driven and joyless. It highlights that the child has lost “the sense of joy in being involved in an educational process” (p.5). Moreover, it argues that the textbooks are impersonal, and somewhat irrelevant to the child’s world. “Words, expressions and nuances commonly used by children and others in their milieu are all absent from textbooks. So is humour... The language used in textbooks, thus, deepens the sense of ‘burden’ attached to all school-related knowledge” (p.10).

It envisages, “...joy must be respected in a text written from a child-centred point of view” (p.9). For the first time, National Curriculum Framework (2005) recognised this, in its chapter ‘Systemic Reforms’ and recommended that “the curriculum will be designed so as to provide opportunities to directly observe learners at play and work; assignments

to help teachers understand learners’ questions and observations about natural and social phenomena; insights into children’s thinking and learning; and opportunities to listen to children with attention, humour and empathy” (p. 108-109). The use of humorous content in the classroom allows a platform for interpreting the ambiguity of humour, and integrating teaching-learning practice with the children’s wishes. This paper will try to present the philosophical orientation to understand the expression of humour, in what way, the ironic humorous or joking speeches of daily life use a figurative meaning opposite to the literal meaning of the utterance.

LANGUAGE OF HUMOUR

To facilitate the discussion of meaning and kind of ambiguity humour possesses, we need to look at the language of humour and its nature. This area is always looked upon by the society as a non-serious or joking subject. Emerson (1969) writes: “for the very reason that the humour officially does not ‘count’, persons are induced to express messages that might be unacceptable if stated seriously” (p.169-170). He emphasises that it is a process of negotiation and a covert communication, which “may be regarded as bargaining to make unofficial arrangements about taboo topics” (p.170). Underpinning this form of communication allows a mode of disguise that implies that only joke was intended, and nothing serious. The review of literature points out

that humour are incongruous and is regarded as a form of social play, a twist in the language expression with sheer creativity and spontaneity, which evokes laughter. The form of humour proposes that the appreciation of humorous material involves understanding and resolution of incongruity. Use of ambiguity or metaphor is an important feature of persuasive discourse in humorous expression because it mediates between the cognition and emotion. McGhee (1979) defines humour as "the mental experience of discovering or appreciating ludicrous or absurdly incongruous ideas, events, or situations" (p.6). The cognitive process of humour involves a social context, an intellectual appraisal comprising the perception of a playful incongruity with an emotional response of mirth or laughter. The simplest expression of that is the pun or joke, in which two different meanings of a word or phrase are brought together simultaneously.

In explaining the role of incongruity in humour, Kant (1911) writes: "in everything that is to excite a lively laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction)... laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (p. 54). Freud (1905) writes: "pleasure could arise from the alternation between 'thinking it senseless' and 'recognising it as sensible'" (p.160). Koestler (1964) developed the concept

of 'bisociation' to explain the mental processes involved in humour, as an incongruity. According to him, bisociation occurs when a situation, event, or idea is simultaneously perceived from the perspective of two self-consistent but normally incompatible or disparate frames of reference. Thus, a single event "is made to vibrate simultaneously on two different wavelengths, as it were" (p.35).

On the other hand, the language discourse on humour highlights the idea of ambiguity in expression of language or incongruity as a basis of origin of humour. Looking at our roots to understand the humorous incongruity and aesthetics, the enjoyment of incongruities forms the basis of aesthetic pleasure. In ancient Sanskrit literature, Humour is defined as Hāsya (हास्य). Humour or Hasya is seen as a *rasa* of joy, a prominent integral part of the '*Natyashastra*' for evoking mirth. Attardo (2001) suggests that humour in its simplest structure includes a set-up with an incongruity and a resolution. Considering joke, he writes that this structure has a disjuncture or punch line, a textual element that introduces the incongruity and forces a switch from one schema to another. Also, there has to be a connector which functions as a bridge between these schemas to achieve a 'resolution'. The two schemas have to be incongruous with each other. Attardo (2001) writes: "by forcing the hearer/reader to backtrack and reinterpret

the text, or by forcing her/him to produce a new and incompatible... interpretation of the text, the punch line cannot be integrated into the narrative it disrupts (which is the one that has set up the first script)” (cited in Goatly, 2012, p.22).

In India, the most common form of humour among children is a riddle or question-answer structure (पहेली) in which, humour resolves the process in an unexpected way, inconsistent with the previous assumptions. The element of surprise is an evident component in the design of the humorous content. Another important aspect of humour is the punchline concept, which achieves its effect implicitly rather than overtly. It employs a twist in language expression through different vocabulary is applied in an unusual and new way that opens a new vista of thought process. Alexander (1997) writes: “jokes appear to flout/violate the maxim of manner: they often depend upon deliberate creation of ambiguity, which is eventually resolved in punchline” (cited in Goatly, 2012, p. 232). Traditionally, literal language has been distinguished from figure of speech, including metaphor, metonymy, simile, understatement, hyperbole or irony. All these figures of speech are utterances whose meanings fail to match the state of affairs, and thus involve a hidden or metaphorical meaning. Goatly (2012) says that metonymy or metaphor based text holds ambiguity, which jokes or puns may exploit. Its

comprehension mainly depends upon contiguity in experience on some perceived similarity or analogy. From a cognitive aspect, a metaphorical use in language expression can be briefly defined as thinking of one thing or idea as though it refers to another thing or idea.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF HUMOUR

From a psychological perspective humour is seen as a social process, recognising that a humour or jokes may say more about social life of a particular society of a particular time. Freud (1928) sees laughter as a social phenomenon and writes that there are two ways in which a joke works, “either one person may himself adopt a humorous attitude, while a second person acts as a spectator, and derives enjoyment from the attitude of the first, or there may be two people concerned, one of whom does not himself take any active share in producing the humorous effect, but is regarded by other in a humorous light” (p. 215). Further, he writes: “similar pleasure is experienced by observers who take no actual part in it” (p. 216).

Freud (1905) called it a ‘harmless wit’, a play on words whose meaning is hidden. He viewed it as a piece of sophisticated dialogue, operating by condensed meaning and substituting signs. He writes: “words are a plastic material with which one can do all kinds of things. There are words which, when used in certain connections, have lost their original

full meaning, but which regain it in other connections" (p. 34). A significant characteristic of the joke is 'double meaning' or 'hidden meaning' through word play (p. 36). Humour, thus, in a way finding 'sense in nonsense' (p. 12). The psychogenesis of jokes highlights that the pleasure in a joke is derived from play with words or from the liberation of nonsense and that the meaning of the joke is merely intended to protect that pleasure from being done away with by criticism. Thus, it helps in deriving the pleasurable effect of humour from the conflict between feeling which arise from the 'simultaneous sense' and 'nonsense of jokes' and it achieves a general relief through discharge of suppressed emotions in real life.

Wolfenstein (1954) writes: "joke is a gallant attempt to ward off the oppressive difficulties of life, a bit of humble heroism, which for a moment that it succeeds provides elation, but only for a moment" (p.11). Richter (1804) writes: "joking is merely playing with ideas" where "freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom" (Freud 1905, p. 11). Joking is viewed as the ability to find similarity between dissimilar things, "that is hidden similarities" (Freud 1905, p. 11). Likewise, it maintained that the wit "is founded on the detection of unexpected likeness and distinction in things" (Hazlitt, 1903; as cited in Raskin, 1985 p. 32). Attardo (1994) argues: "humour like poetry presents a 'non-casual speech', an exceptional

kind of language though a part of causal talks" (cited in Goatly, 2012, p. 110).

Freud's (1905) joke-work is based on nearly two hundred Jewish jokes, puns, anecdotes, witticisms and riddles where he discovered the way in which pleasure arises from humour answering to the question, 'Why do we laugh'. Freud argues that jokes, like dreams, satisfy our unconscious desires. Like dreams, jokes facilitate a way of getting around restrictions on what is impressive. Thus, the content of a joke is often sexual, aggressive, or self-accusatory. In his view, jokes provide immense pleasure by releasing us from our inhibitions, and allowing us to express our repressed desires that would otherwise remain hidden. Consequently, jokes provides a space for making light of a disappointment, and transform painful feelings, and gain under the guise of foolishness or some gratification for forbidden wishes through play on the ambiguity of words.

CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS

To understand how humour acts as a critical tool, one needs to look at the structure of humour. The jokes, cartoon, riddle, proverb and irony or sarcasm is the humorous figure of speech that is used to communicate indirectly a message that is opposite of the literal meaning of the sentence. Because of the inherent ambiguity, humour can be employed for a variety of cognitive

purposes where the child may be given appropriate space for thinking on the ambiguities in language and art expressions. A primary focus of modern day education is to provide ample space for meaningful learning through signs and symbols. Vygotsky described psychological tools as a device for mastering mental processes. He viewed them as artificial and social origin rather than organic or individual. He gave the examples of psychological tools as “language, various systems for counting, *mnemonic (memory)* techniques, algebraic symbol systems, works of art, writing, schemes, diagrams, maps and mechanical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs” (Vygotsky, 1960/1981, p. 136-7) with an attempt to provide an account of learning and development as a mediated process. In addition, proficiency in language expression is essential to understand the play of words or language discourse. Similarly, Aristotle has discussed pun in the context of a metaphor in language expression as a form of humorous verbal play.

Here, we turned then to consider Piaget’s contribution to the study of children’s language. His study is made on the assumption that children have developed abstract logic inherent in puns, proverbs, metaphors, and analogies. Their increased mental facility permits them to understand the ways in which language can be used to convey multiple messages, such as satire,

metaphor, and sarcasm. Piaget’s (1926) study of metaphor in children has exerted an overwhelming influence in understanding the cognitive process. In his study, he asked the children to match proverbs with one of the several statements to locate the appropriate meaning. He concluded that the cognitive capability does not reveal until about 11 years of age, when children are able to understand the metaphorical expressions. He says that the actual quality of creative thought or process changes beyond adolescence. Language, for Piaget, is a vehicle through which aspects of child’s thinking are revealed and, together with the child’s actions, provides the means through which child’s thinking can be studied. He considers this as a last stage (usually 11-14 years) where children are able to interpret the abstract or metaphorical expressions; Piaget calls this as formal operations stage. He writes that this permits adolescents to think about their thoughts, to construct ideals, and to reason realistically about their surrounding. The ability to come up with new problems and to decide which are most susceptible to solution defies Piaget. Likewise, Elkind (1974) writes that formal operations to enable “young people to reason about contrary-to-fact proposition” and understand the metaphor, “it is for this reason that political and other satirical cartoons are not understood until adolescence” (p. 24-25). Emphasising further, he writes that the child’s inability to comprehend a metaphor, somehow

indirectly helps them to enjoy books like 'Alice in Wonderland' and 'Gulliver Travels' more in the childhood stage than in adolescence and adulthood, when the text's social significance is realised.

The psychological account of identity formation must be attributed to Erikson (1956), who located the genesis of one's 'ego identity' in his adolescent (fifth) stage of psychosocial development. He writes that in achieving an ego identity the individual makes "choices and decisions which will...lead to a more final self-definition, to irreversible role patterns", and thus to commitments "for life" (p.74). Like Piaget, Erikson (1956) argues that it is not surprising that children's performance in dealing with an artistic task improves with age. This is the reason why children's understanding of metaphorical language improves with age. In the light of Piaget, it is believed that deductive logic becomes important during the formal operational stage where the beginning of appreciation of pure incongruity begins. The deductive logic requires the ability to use a general principle to determine a specific outcome. The appreciation of metaphor lays a field open for critical thinking and developing social perspectives. Acknowledging this aspect, National Curriculum Framework 2005 emphasises on 'critical pedagogy' as an outline for helping children to see social issues from different perspectives, and understanding how issues are

connected to their lives. Critical pedagogy helps in recognising the value of humour and satire which provides the capacity of children to think critically, and make judgements over cognitive congruency.

The way incongruity is advanced in humorous expression reveals the conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in humour or cartoon forms. The different genres of humour do suggest its analytical constants. In recognising the pedagogic value of cartoon forms, an attempt is made to understand the role of art. Vygotsky (1971) says that art "introduces the effects of passion, violates inner equilibrium, changes with the new sense, and stirs feeling, emotions, passions, vices without which society would remain in an inert and emotionless state" (p.249). In explaining the dialectical relationship between the individual and society, Vygotsky (2004) writes, "every inventor, even the genius is the product of the time and his environment. His creations arise from needs that were created before him and rest on capacities that also exist outside of him" (p. 30).

On semiotic mediation, Vygotsky writes, "The sense of the word...is the aggregate of all the psychological facts emerging in our consciousness because of this word" (1934a, p.305). Since, every humour has some context to be understood to enjoy the intended meaning to understand and appreciate any joke, irony and sarcasm form, a child must develop

the ability to make its linguistic and social inferences. In this process a child, first needs to recognise that the intended meaning of an ironic statement is not the surface meaning, and therefore she/he must learn to substitute the true meaning for the literal meaning. In addition, children need to recognise the pragmatic i.e., social and communicative functions of humour in speech. Second, as irony or sarcasm is used to convey humour, based on the incongruity between the literal and implied meaning, it will help in recognising whether it is meant to be funny or criticise some social phenomena, process or happening through some hidden motive. Therefore, the use of humorous content like jokes, proverbs, anecdotes, art expression, and cartoons acts as a mediated meaningful signs in textbooks and provides a wide range and possibility of valid tools with recognition of its context for child's learning.

Apart from that, humour does improve the classroom environment through making the learning a more enjoyable. It helps in making a cordial relation with their respective teacher where the role of the teacher is more like a friend and guide rather than an indoctrinating agent of syllabus.

Gentilhomme (1992) writes that the use of humour in the classroom should be seen as a means of increasing ease of learning for children and good pedagogical resource.

CONCLUSION

Much of what we understand of the language lies beyond the literal meaning of the words as it depends rather on the use of words in different cultural and social contexts. The expression of language helps in giving intended meaning of the literal meaning. The introduction of different forms of humorous content in the post-NCF 2005, NCERT textbooks allowed a space for critical reasoning and humour. Laughter, in one place, provides freedom and at the other, space for critical thinking. Use of ambiguity is an attribute of any humorous expression. Words with double meaning, metaphorical or symbolic expression, by contrast, are purely arbitrary depending on apparently unmotivated relationships between form and meaning. Meaning of which seems to be hidden by the arbitrariness of the language, only to be found later in the word play. This provides space for children's inquisitiveness and reasoning critically.

REFERENCES

- ADDISON, J. 1712. *The Spectator*. J. and R. Tonson and S. Draper. London (September 26).
 ELKIND, D. 1974. *Children and Adolescents*. Oxford University Press, New York.
 EMERSON, J. P. 1969. Negotiating the Serious Import of Humour. *Sociometry*. 32. pp. 169-81

- ERIKSON, E. H. 1956. The Problem of Ego Identity. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*. 4. pp. 56-121.
- FREUD, S. 1949. *The Ego and the Id*. The Hogarth Press Ltd., London.
- _____. 1905. Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- _____. 1928. Humour. *Collected Papers*. Vol.5. pp. 215-221. The Hogarth Press Ltd., London.
- _____. 1929. *Civilisation and Its Discontents*. Penguin, London.
- GOATLY, A. 2012. *Meaning and Humour*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- GENTILHOMME, Y. 1992. Humour: A Didactic Adjuvant. *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research*. 5:1-2. pp. 6-89.
- KANT, I. 1911. *Critique of Judgement*. (James Creed Meredith, Trans). Oxford University Press, London.
- KOESTLER, A. 1964. *The Act of Creation*. Penguin Books, New York.
- NCERT. 2006. *National Curriculum Framework*. NCERT, New Delhi.
- _____. 2007. *National Focus Group Paper on Teaching of English*. NCERT, New Delhi.
- _____. 2006. *Indian Constitution at Work: Textbook in Political Science for Grade XI*. NCERT, New Delhi.
- _____. 2012. *National Monitoring Committee for Reviewing the Textbooks of Social Sciences/Political Science for Classes IX-XII*. (June 27). NCERT, New Delhi.
- MCGHEE, P.E. 1979. *Humour: Its Origin and Development*. W.H Freeman and Co., San Francisco
- MHRD. 1993. *Learning without Burden: Report of Yash Pal Committee*. NCERT, New Delhi.
- PIAGET, J. 1926. *The Language and Thought of the Child*. Routledge, London.
- RASKIM VICTOR. 1985. Semantic Mechanisms of Humour. *Dordrecht*. D. Reidel, Netherlands.
- VIYGOTSKY, L.S. 1934. *Thought and Language*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- _____. 1971. *The Psychology of Art*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- _____. 2004. Imagination and Creativity in Childhood. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*. 42: 1. pp. 7-97.
- WERTSCH, J. V. 1994. *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of the Mind*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- _____. 1985. *Culture, Communication, and Cognition: Vygotskian Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press, NY.
- WOLFENSTEIN, M. 1954. *Children's Humour*. The Free Press, Illinois.