

CLOSURE AS A JOKE-PRINCIPLE

Hellmuth Metz-Göckel

Many theories attempt to describe or explain the content and structure of jokes and how they might produce funniness and amusement. Freud's theory (Freud 1905, 1958) is based on motivational processes, but it concedes that besides tendentious (i.e. mainly hostile and obscene) nontentious factors as stimulus conditions are also effective. Other theories (La Fave 1972) postulate that the experience of superiority, derision or disparagement is important. Cognitively oriented theories (Suls 1972, Wilson 1979) maintain that cognitive conflict and its resolution are central.

Principles derived from Gestalt Theory are also able and usable to identify the structural aspects of the joke stimulus that might stimulate laughter and funniness (Metz-Göckel 1989). The central assumption is that the joke effect is preceded by complex perception and comprehension processes. The joke-perceiver or hearer gets information which he or she elaborates. In most cases

he or she has to structure this material,
has to understand it, and sometimes
has to re-enact in his or her mind what persons in the joke do, wish or
think.

First, I will give some examples for which gestalt theoretical assumptions or knowledge are able to explain the joke effect, mostly in terms of structuring or restructuring.

Diverse forms of reversals play an important role, e.g. something like figure-ground-reversals:

- *"What's the matter, little boy?" said the kindhearted man, "are you lost?" "No," was the manful answer, "I ain't lost. I'm here. But I'd like to know where father and mother have wandered to."*

Alternatively reversals of the relation between the whole and its parts, normally the whole is superordinate, the part is subordinate:

- *My mechanic gave me a great report. He told me that my battery needs a new car.*

Or the reversal of reference-judgements. For example, we normally would say that 'the son is similar to his father' and not 'the father is similar to the son'. Another example:

- *In Hollywood (in the seventies or eighties) long-established stars found themselves hopelessly miscast in terrible films, while others disappeared for ever. – One fan said to Gloria Swanson: "You used to be in pictures. You used to be big." To which the star replied: "I am big. The films have gotten small."*

Although we may find clear examples of structuring or re-structuring:

- *Early one morning, a mother went in to wake up her son. "Wake up, son. It's time to go to school!" - "But why, Mom? I don't want to go." - "Give me two reasons why you don't want to go." - "Well, the kids hate me for one, and the teachers hate me, too!" - "Oh, that's no reason not to go to school. Come on now and get ready." - "Give me two reasons why I should go to school." - "Well, for one, you're 52 years old. And for another, you're the headmaster!"*

Most readers of this joke may experience a form of restructuring.

We may find contradiction.

- *The girl with a future avoids the man with a past.*

We will explain later what contradiction or contrast may mean under a structural perspective.

One other joke-principle is based on reference to wholes, in the sense, that a verbal phrase or a concept derives its meaning from a special context. A word or a concept may have two meanings, depending on the whole to which it belongs. In jokes there is first perceived one meaning, which does fit in one context but not in another, which is afterwards or simultaneously presented. This may surprise at first and may create the experience of incongruence, but afterwards the joke-perceiver realises that the other meaning is also possible and fits in another context too, which results in resolution and relief. This principle is recognized and broadly discussed in the literature (e.g. Suls 1972). The key factor is an ambiguity which may be semantic or sometimes also syntactic.

- *"We would like very much to have you for dinner", as the cannibal said to the captured missionary.*

Or:

- *"Mr. Fields, do you believe in clubs for young people?" - "Only when kindness fails."*

In the next example we have a syntactical ambiguity:

- *The stranger asks: "Can you tell me how long cows should be milked?" - And the farmer answers: "They should be milked the same as short ones, of course."*

I propose that there is another joke-structure which is very well explained in gestalt theoretical terms, but it is not mentioned in the literature¹, and I propose it is independent of joke content or joke tendency. First I give some examples:

- *Dracula at the dentist. - "Please, only do some sharpening!"*

¹ But it is treated in Metz-Goeckel (1989) using German joke examples.

- *He (awkward dancer): "It was nice of you to give me that dance." She (sweetly): "Not at all – this is a charity ball."*
- *"I saw the doctor today about my loss of memory." "What did he do?" - "Made me pay him in advance."*
- *A man believes that he's a cannibal, so his wife convinces him to go to a psychiatrist. He returns home later, and his wife asks: "How was the psychiatrist?" The man answers: "Delicious."*
- *"What is your son, the ventriloquist, doing now?" – "He is selling parrots in a pet-shop."*

What have these joke examples got in common? I postulate that some idea is introduced and later – mostly in the punchline – occurs information, which has or creates a connection to it; and – I think in all examples - it fits rather well, we may experience conciseness (or Prägnanz). I claim that we may experience one form of closure.

We may look at one example: *"What is your son, the ventriloquist, doing now?"* – If the answer would be *"he is working at the mayors office"* then it would not be a joke. It fits rather better to re-enact in one's mind that the son uses his ability to help selling parrots, naturally by deceiving people who want to buy a parrot. – I think we enjoy experiencing closure to the attributes of a ventriloquist – they fit rather well.

Another example:

- *"What's that piece of cord tied around your finger for?" - "My wife put it there to remind me to post a letter." - "And did you post it?" - "No; she forgot to give it to me."*

The punch-line fits very well to the introduced story.

The next example is more complex:

- *A Rabbi was walking slowly, out of a shul in New York, when a gust of wind blew his hat off and down the street. He was an old man, who walked with the aid of a cane, and he couldn't run after the hat. Across the street, a young gentile returned it to the Rabbi. - "I don't think I could have retrieved my hat by myself," said the Rabbi. "Thank you very much!" He then placed his hand on the man's shoulder and said, "May God bless you." - The young man thought to himself, "I've been blessed by the Rabbi, this must be my lucky day!" He decided then to go to the racetrack. In the first race he noticed a horse name 'Stetson' at 20 to 1. He bet \$50 and, sure enough, the horse came in first. In the second race, a horse named 'Fedora' was at 30 to 1, so he bet all his money on that Horse. Fedora came in first, as well. - At the end of the day the man returned home to his wife. She asked him where he'd been. He explained about catching the Rabbi's hat, and being blessed by him, and how he then went to the track and did so well betting on horses named after hats. - "So where is the money?" she said. - "I lost it all in the ninth race. I bet on a horse named 'Chateau' and it lost." - "You fool," exclaimed his wife, 'Chateau' is a house, 'chapeau' is a hat!" - "It doesn't matter," he said, "the winner was some Japanese horse named 'Yarmulka'."*

Here we find two recurrences: The lost hat and horses with the name of hats ('fedora' is a felt hat). 'Yarmulka', the kippa of the Jews, is a connection to the beginning of the joke.

Another example:

- *During one of his many trips to London, George Burns became friends with a very wealthy, yet very modest, Jewish chap named Hyman Goldfarb. On one visit, Hy told George that because of his large donation to charities through the years, the queen wanted to knight him, but he was going to turn it down. - "That's a great honor," George said. "Why would you turn it down?" "Because during the ceremony you have to say something in Latin," he said. "And I don't wish to bother studying Latin just for that." - "So say something in Hebrew. The queen wouldn't know the difference." - "Brilliant," Hy complimented me, "But what should I say?" - "Remember that question the son asks the father on the first night of Passover? ... 'Why is this night different from all other nights?' Can you say that in Hebrew?" - "Of course," he said. "Ma nishtana ha Leila Haze. Thank you, old sport, I shall become a knight." - At the ceremony Hy waited his turn while several of the other honorees went before the queen. Finally they called his name. He knelt before Her Majesty, she placed her sword on one shoulder and then on the other, and motioned for Hy to speak. - Out came "Ma nishtana ha Leila Haze." - The queen turned to her husband and said, "Why is this knight different from all other knights?"*

In this example we experience closure through phonological equality.

Other examples:

- *Two blondes were driving along a road by a wheat field when they saw a blonde in the middle of the field rowing a row boat. The driver blonde turned to her friend and said "You know - it's blondes like that that gives us a bad name!" - To this, the other blonde replies "I know it, and if I knew how to swim, I'd go out there and drown her."*

In this case there is a form a repetition or a recurring or a confirmation of an idea. This joke is the first of our examples, which is clearly disparaging a group of persons, the blondes.

- *An American met an Englishman in one of those fancy London clubs. The American suggested that they have a drink together. The Englishman said, "No, thanks. I tried it once, but I didn't like it." - A servingman passed by with a tray of delicious-looking hors d'oeuvres. Taking one, the American murmured with pleasure. The Englishman motioned that he'd pass. He explained, "I tried it once, but I didn't like it." - Some minutes passed, and a handsome young man came into the club. He started to walk toward the pair. Noticing that he looked very much like the Englishman, the American said, "Your son?" - The Englishman said, "Yes." - "Your only son, I presume?"*

With similar structure this joke is based on the repetition of an idea. As in other examples we complete or supplement it with our own thoughts.

The listed jokes evidently have in common that first there is introduced an idea, a meaning, a context which in later ideas, meanings or contexts are confirmed or recur, and it always meets the requirement of fitting.

This principle occurs in some examples with an important modification, as contradiction or opposition.

- *Two men met by chance for the first time in many years. The first man asked, "How's life been treating you?" - "Not so well," replied his friend. "My wife left me, my son was arrested for breaking and entering, my daughter is in hospital with a broken arm, I'm going bald, all my teeth are being taken out tomorrow and my dog died yesterday." - "Oh, that is terrible, I'm sorry to hear all that. You still have a job, though. What line of business are you in? - "I sell lucky charms." (Glücksbringer)*

The troubles the man has sustained are contradicted by the last sentence. The joke is based on that contradiction.

- *A Texas Aggie and two friends are marooned on a desert island without food or water. Suddenly, the sky opens and a voice says, "Each of you may have one wish." - One friend says, "I wish I were in the arms of my loved one." Immediately, he is gone. - The second friend says, "I wish I were in the bosom of my family." Immediately, he is gone. - The Texas Aggie thinks for a moment and says, "Gee, I wish my friends were with me now."*

In this joke we re-enact a contradiction because the wishes of the friends are cancelled out. Another example – now in German:

- *„Jeder, der hier ins Gefängnis eingeliefert wird, muss einen Beruf lernen“, sagt der Gefängnisdirektor zum Gefangenen, „was möchten Sie denn werden?“ – Sagt der Insasse: „Reisender!“*

This is a new idea: Contradiction or the Opposite– or in perception ‘contrast’ – is not only a slight form of variation or difference, but it is the largest difference there can be, and one may see it as a special case of good fitting or Prägnanz.

Summary

The treated joke-principle or technique (as Freud would have said) is not yet identified in the literature. In the punch-line there is information given which connects with the former introduced subject matter. This connection, recurrence or conformation fits very well – in told or published jokes. These are important conditions for amusement and funniness because we enjoy the closure. Interestingly the impression of fit is ostensibly also possible with contradiction or the opposite or contrast.

Keywords: Jokes, closure, re-structuring, prägnanz, cognitive elaboration, contrariety in jokes.

Zusammenfassung

Es wird eine Witzstruktur – oder Witztechnik im Sinne von Freud – vorgestellt, die in der Literatur noch nicht erwähnt wurde. In der Pointe des Witzes wird etwas aufgegriffen, das zur vorher gegebenen Information in Beziehung steht. In den verbreiteten Witzen passt die Pointe genau zu den vorher eingeführten Inhalten. Dies scheint eine Voraussetzung für Amüsement und Witzigkeit zu sein, wobei wir eine Schließung („closure“) erleben, über die wir uns freuen. Interessanterweise kann der Eindruck des Passens auch durch Gegenteiligkeit oder Widerspruch entstehen. Gegenteil oder auch Kontrast sind nicht einfache Abweichungen, sondern drücken in besonders prägnanter Weise Unterschiedlichkeit aus.

References

- Freud, S. (1905, 1958): *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*. Frankfurt: Fischer.
- La Fave, L. (1972): Humor judgment as a function of reference group and identification classes, in Goldstein, J.H. & McGhee, P. (Eds.): *The psychology of humor*. 195-210. New York: Academic Press.
- Metz-Goeckel, H. (1989): *Witzstrukturen*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Suls, J.M. (1972): A two-stage model for the appreciation of jokes and cartoons: An information-processing analyses, in: Goldstein, J.H. & McGhee, P. (Eds.): *The psychology of humor*. 81-100. New York: Academic Press.
- Wilson, C.P. (1979): *Jokes. Form, content, use, and function*. London: Academic Press.

Address of the Author:

Hellmuth Metz-Göckel
Institut für Psychologie
Universität Dortmund
Emil-Figge-Straße 50
44227 Dortmund
Deutschland
Email: metz-goeckel@fk14.tu-dortmund.de