

“Aha!/Haha! – That’s a good one!”

On the Correlation of Laughter and Understanding in Joke Reception

Mira Magdalena Sickinger

University of Vienna

In this paper I investigate the correlation between two phenomena manifest in the reception of a (narrative) joke: understanding and laughter. I examine whether one of them comes first, and if so, which, or whether they come jointly. I defend the claim that jokes may initiate a process in which laughter and understanding happen simultaneously (U/L). In this context I provide definitions of “successful joking” which occurs iff the recipient both understands the joke and laughs about it; and for my notions of “joke” and “joke performance”.

By establishing my model of simultaneity, I challenge two other positions. One that suggests that laughter, as a triumphant expression of successful "integrity-checking" in the reception of a joke, is based on and follows understanding (U-L). The other model regards laughter as the primary phenomenon of the joke and insights only as potential side-effects [L-(U)]. I point out that there are discrepancies in the use of the term ‘understanding’ and identify two different notions: (a) direct comprehension that depends on preconditions [“Ah(a)! Haha! You got me there!”], and (b) further “after effect” reflection initiated by the joking process (“How does this work? Why am I laughing about this? Why is this funny to me?”). U-L and my own position of U/L are more concerned with (a). L-(U) and (a) are not compatible, which means that I can reject this model for my purposes, since we are talking about different things. U-L on the other hand leaves out the aspect of spontaneity and presents the reception of a joke as a mechanical sequence. I show that something essential is lost in this view, namely that laughter is a cognitive expression which is linked to surprise and comprehension but is also still a spontaneous expression of amusement. By putting laughter and understanding on an equal footing in my model, I also emphasize the idea that the pleasure we experience in joke reception is based both on insight and entertainment.