

Emotion in Humour,
Humour in Emotion



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“The ability to appreciate humour is universal and shared by all people...”

--Victor Raskin

0. Abstract

This paper will touch on how and why we communicate humour while concentrating on the emotions provoked and expressed by its use.

A look back through the history of humour studies allow us to realise that until recently this field had been somewhat neglected and if taken into consideration at all, seen as negative and non-important in the scheme of things. It will also permit an overview of the changing status of humour in society as a whole.

Nowadays humour is seen to have both positive and negative aspects on receivers, which I endeavour to explain and categorise, while outlining their effects.

Key words: humour, feelings, emotion, history of humour, positive, negative

1. Introduction

If humour as a cognitive capacity is not well understood, the emotional nature of humour is even less so. Although humour has been studied holistically through the ages, it has not been until recently that investigation has undertaken the formidable task of discovering how it affects our feelings and life in general.

Travelling back in time would surely prove an interesting litmus test of the different acceptations of the matter in hand through the years. Whereas nowadays a “good sense of humour” has a ready acronym (GSOH) in personal ads, not too long ago laughing out loud was seen as base and a sign of the “lower class”.

To understand the shifts that humour, laughter and the emotions that provoke them have undergone, we should start at the beginning. We must take into consideration the context in which it was viewed, who the leading “authorities” were, their opinions and the social settings of the time.

The research and therefore the methodology used to prepare this paper is interdisciplinary, combining sources from the fields of medicine to sociology, from psychology to discourse analysis, from humour theory and pragmatics. The revision and investigation of texts related to humour in online scientific journals and related bibliographies will serve to cross reference data found to support my hypothesis; that humour cannot be evaluated holistically. It depends on chronology, culture and most importantly, humour must be considered from the point of view of the receiver to be accepted as truly positive or negative.

After visualising humour through different theories and points of view, I aim to re-categorise it using the way humour is perceived as a basis for my paper. Instead of focusing on the reasons why we find humour in different situations, I will concentrate on how receivers perceive positive or negative feelings.

2. History of Humour

Humour, or more specifically comedy, had its own Muse in ancient times: Thalia (Thaleia). Her name means “blooming” or “flourishing”. In Ancient Greece she was one of the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne and presided over song and dance. Later in Classical times, she was assigned the art of comedy and pastoral or idyllic poetry. Ancient Greek dramatists would invoke her to provide inspiration in their writings. She was usually portrayed wearing a wreath of ivy on her head with a mask in her hand and other times, with a bugle, a trumpet or a shepherd’s staff.

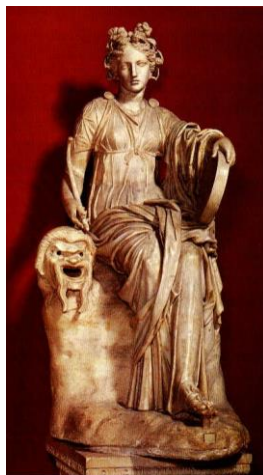


Figure 1: Seated muse, Thalia (Roman, 2nd century AD - Hadrianic period) ¹

One of the first known comic playwrights was Aristophanes, born in Athens in 450 BC. His writings were satirical and often crude and obscene. His mockery struck fear in the hearts of many, including Socrates whom he ridiculed on many occasions, including in his famous play *The Clouds*. Today Aristophanes is considered the paradigm of Old Comedy, and was later imitated by European writers such as Voltaire or Swift; disguising political attacks as jocularities. So our first taste of humour from this era is one of protest; to amuse but with a purpose.

Plato and Aristotle saw humour as negative and aggressive. Social conditions in their times were, of course, completely distinct from those of today. A rigid sense of class, where free and non-free were clearly distinguished, dictated the way

¹ Taken from: <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/vaticano/C-Clementino.html> (Consulted April, 2015)

emotions were expressed. Free men kept their laughter under control, lest they be seen as being coarse. Frivolity and buffoonery were low class pastimes. The upper class guarded the State's good name, permitting not a single breath of mirth to cloud its countenance. Humour was focused on the obscene and the profane. Plato labelled humour as "ugly" and Aristotle agreed, though he did recognise the practical use of humour; that of argumentation and rhetoric.

A cursory reading of the Bible will leave little doubt as to the place that humour occupied at this time. According to Morreall (2008) laughter in the Bible was associated with hostility, foolishness and joy, in that order. People were generally laughed "at" with scorn, contempt or hostility. This quote from the Book of Ecclesiastes is indicative of the soberness required by the Lord's followers:

Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools (Ecclesiastes 7: 3–6)

While not all philosophers or thinkers of Ancient Times saw humour as negative, and at times it was used as a rhetorical strategy in protest or as a form of social corrective, jocularly was reserved for the "low" class. Soberness was considered best. It is important to acknowledge that historical context is an influential component in showing the role (or lack thereof) of humour in history as we shall continue to appreciate throughout this paper.

In ancient civilisations there were constant wars, invasions and conquests and a man's worth was linked to his abilities in war or providing for his family, not in making people laugh. Physically deformed and unhealthy babies were on occasions sacrificed at birth². Children suffered severe discipline. People worked from dusk to dawn to be able to survive, cultivating their food and looking after their livestock. Many were property of others, as slaves. Life expectancy did not surpass forty. Humour had little to no place in the lives of ancient peoples. The

² From Ancient Greece to the Middle Ages children were often sacrificed either to Gods or because of the parents' inability to keep them (poverty, birth defects or even for population control) See further <http://www.deathreference.com/Ho-Ka/Infanticide.html>

humour that did exist, was used as a weapon: its function was social. On many occasions it was a mechanism to curb improper behaviour by ridiculing it.

The beginning of the Middle Ages saw famine, wars, strife, peasant revolts, divisions between Church and State and the Bubonic Plague, just to name a few. These were not happy and stable times for the people that lived in them. Delight was taken in the suffering of others. The physically afflicted were mocked and shunned. Public executions and torture were considered valid means of entertainment, even festive events. Insults and mockery were the base of humour. People laughing at such occurrences today of course would shock and deeply bother our civilised and sensitised world. This could lead us to the conclusion that humour in former times was crude; it certainly was different.

2.1. Superiority Theory

All of these factors led to what many consider the beginnings of Superiority Theory, although it was not called such until the seventeenth century when the English Philosopher Thomas Hobbes wrote *Human Nature* as part of his political manuscript *Elements of Law, Nature and Politics*. Basically stated, this theory maintains that when we see someone who is deformed, less fortunate, the butt of a joke, or to sum up, weaker than us, we immediately feel superior to them and our laughter stems from this momentary feeling of pleasure. Hobbes (1840) claims all humans are in competition with one another and that we laugh at others to expose their weaknesses and set off our abilities and strong points. Ridicule is a weapon we wield to make ourselves more powerful while undermining others, resulting in a sudden triumph or what he later coined “a sudden glory”. It would appear that Hobbes ascribed to the survival of the fittest ideal, though Darwin did not write his famous *On the Origin of Species* until several centuries later.

Hobbes places this ridicule at the very heart of humour, exposing it as something negative and placing all types of humour under suspicion. He sees laughter as the result of an inner emotional state that has no real meaning. We do not even admit to ourselves that we feel superior when we laugh in most cases.

He envisions a world full of laughter as a miserable existence where each member of society tries to outdo all the others, in a competition that no one can possibly win. These base and selfish motives for laughing, this vulgar passion

and self-interest, according to Hobbes, should be controlled and condemned by society since human beings lack the capacity to control themselves.

Again, it is important to keep context in mind. The English Revolution (1640s-1660s) marked an important class and religious war in England. The cruel and fearful times of James II caused much tension among the population and ended in the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

But even in the early 20th century, Henri Bergson (1998) also saw humour as a social corrective, a way to redress improper or deviant behaviour, where those in power belittled those who did not conform to their standards. His book *Laughter*, is a hybrid look at humour. He claims laughter is a social gesture (Morreall, 2008: 229) which is used to mock those who act without thinking. Humiliation humour has a social function in that it attempts to draw attention to or to rectify undesirable behaviour. Humour is one-sided, there are those who laugh, and those who are being laughed at. You are either part of the “in” group (producing the mockery) or the “out” group which is suffering the brunt of the action.

However, he also states that laughter is “something mechanical encrusted on the living” which would imply elements of incongruence as well. It would seem that Bergson was combining The Superiority Theory with The Incongruity Theory, which will be the next theory explored.

2.2. Rise of the Incongruity Theory

The later part of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance Period (15th to 18th century) lead to new ways of focusing on humour. In Europe especially, witty people were interesting. Those who could ridicule, outwit and humiliate, were desired dinner guests, providing amusement. The socially acceptable form of aggression known as *raillery*, came into fashion at the end of the 17th century. The unknown author of *The Art of Complaisance*, made it quite clear that genteel raillery was “an essential part of fashionable conversation” of the time. Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury remarked:

Twas the saying of an ancient sage that humour was the only test of gravity, and gravity of humour. For a subject which would not bear raillery was suspicious; and a jest which would not bear a serious examination was certainly false wit.³ (Lund, 2012)

Authority was being questioned. The established and the taboo were used to make people laugh. Moveable print in the 15th century had made reading available to a more general public and theatres entertained the masses that could not read, but that could afford the price of admittance. Poets and playwrights caught the wave of the new vogue in laughter. In the 16th century apart from his tragedies, Shakespeare wrote light-hearted comedies with happy endings to amuse Jacobean England. His use of puns, banter and earthy humour made him immediately popular. Likewise Ben Jonson with his *Every Man in His Humour* and *Volpone, the Fox*, to mention a few, allowed audiences to laugh out loud at everyday situations laced with clever dialogue. Humour was on the move, because making people laugh was becoming lucrative and the stigma attached to it was being lifted.

Although Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans with their objections to idleness and pleasure halted this movement towards humour for over a decade, after the Restoration in 1660, English Drama under Charles II (the Merry Monarch) came back with a flourish.

As a result of these changes and the easing of religious and social restraints after the Reformation, ways of thinking were changing. Locke’s belief in the goodness

³ From *Characteristics, Letter Concerning Enthusiasm*, Part I. Sect. V. Referring to Leontinus.

and rationality of human beings in the late 1600s started to destabilise the previous view of humans as dangerous and selfish, unable to control their desires and passions. Kindness and civility now marked a more humanitarian society.

Satire flourished in the 18th century. This Age of Reason gave rise to Voltaire, Jonathan Swift and William Hogarth, whose satire used sarcasm, wit and irony to attack the political situation they were experiencing. Scatology and the grotesque were enjoyed by most. Many reacted against Hobbes' affirmations of superiority with a more benevolent look at humour. Although the class system persisted and wit was still considered to be a more "pure" form of humour, incongruity theorists focused more on the circumstances that provoke laughter than on *why* it was manifested.

Humour began to be regarded in a different light; not as the result of negative feelings, but rather the response to the "unexpected". When something occurs that challenges our expectations, rendering something incongruous, we find it humorous. When we encounter something "out of place", that defies logic or forces us to re-evaluate the situation, we detect humour.

E.g.: *Two fish in a tank. One turns to the other and says: "Do you know how to drive this?"*⁴

Naturally the word "tank" in the first line, linked to the idea of fish, automatically advances the idea of a fish tank. Whereas in the punch line, the surprise comes with the word "drive" which forces us to reinterpret the meaning of "tank" and reassign this idea to a military vehicle. The Incongruity Theory claims that it is this very surprise that causes humour, and consequently in many cases, laughter.

Schopenhauer (1969) also mentioned "incongruity", capturing the idea that when two mismatched ideas are combined, the result is unexpected and therefore humorous. He claimed the stronger the incongruence, the more violent the laughter would be.

⁴ Joke taken from: <http://www.richardwiseman.com/LaughLab/incon.htm> (Consulted January, 2015)

The incongruity theorists (later included in the cognitive theories of the psychological field) claim that it is the unexpected and the incongruent that produces humour, not the need to belittle or insult.

Most modern influential theories of humour, such as the Semantic Script based Theory of Humour (SSTH) proposed by Victor Raskin in 1985 and the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) which Raskin extended with Salvatore Attardo in 1991, are closely related to this incongruity resolution theory. They go much further by developing the idea of scripts and how incongruity is achieved when these conflicting scripts overlap, giving rise to the unexpected and the incongruent.

2.3. The Release/Relief Theory

Parallel to the Incongruity Theory, we find supporters of the Relief or Release Theory. This theory concentrates on the feeling of relief or release that we experience when we “let go of” prohibited thoughts. It is the release of pent up nervous energy.

Lord Shaftesbury in his essay “The Freedom of Wit and Humour” (1711) postulated:

The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint, and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged on their constrainers. (Quoted in Morreall, 2008, p. 221)

We must keep in mind the beliefs of the times; that nerves were tiny tubes that carried fluids that made our bodies move. He insinuated that this venting was done in such a way as to revenge the constrainers, by mocking them.

When the nervous system became better understood in the mid-19th century, Herbert Spencer explained in his essay “On the Physiology of Laughter” (1860) that emotions are the physical forms of nervous energy, which when deemed inappropriate, cause muscular motion and eventually discharge this built up energy in the form of laughter. Spencer rooted his laughter theory in physiological

ideas and claimed that the powers of the body could not be separated from those of the mind.

Freud was one of the strongest supporters of this way of thinking. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) he postulated that laughter released nervous energy that was no longer needed.

Freud depicted a conflict between individual desire and social order. As humans, we inherit the instincts of sexuality and aggression that promise to afford us the most intense of pleasures. However, these instincts are dangerous, for they are fundamentally anti-social. (...) Not only must the instinctual desires be thwarted, but they must also be pushed from conscious awareness, so that we are not continually conscious of desire and temptation. Repression, thus, is necessary for collective life.

This means that repression is a disciplinary force, exerting control over undisciplined instinctual forces and turning the unsocialised infant into a civilised being. However, the instinctual urges do not simply disappear once they are repressed. The problem of repression is never completely solved.

Society may attempt to divert, or sublimate, instinctual energy into socially useful ends, but this process is always unfinished. There still remains instinctual energy left over. And this residual energy seeks to tempt the individual into pursuing the paths of pleasure. (Billig, 2008: 144)

He also added that these repressed emotions, many time related to sexual desire and hostility, bypass our internal censor and are vented through laughter.

2.4. Changing times

These last two theories began to revolutionise how humour was seen. It no longer had to be repressed or hidden. Humour could be enjoyed more freely, laughing out loud was no longer “second class” behaviour.

Little by little humour became more and more accepted and socially desirable, and in the 20th century these distinctions gradually disappeared. The umbrella term “humour” came to represent everything that causes us to laugh. This simple change in terminology made all theorists reconsider their standpoints. Suddenly all humour was seen as positive, and even many superiority followers began to see its benevolent aspects.

In the XXI century humour can be found everywhere, from the workplace to the bookshelves, from newspapers to films, from the stage to the television. In modern times, having a sense of humour is seen as an important social skill. The entertainment industry employs millions of dollars and hours of work, to make us laugh. Advertising companies often use humour as part of their marketing strategies to capture our attention.

We live in a time where one is tolerant and democratic, able to use humour to negotiate difficult situations, defuse tension or simply be the star of the party. Being adept at humour may help you to climb the career ladder, to be popular or to find a date. Those who lack the skills to produce or appreciate humour are often deemed dull or boring, lacking “a vital human quality” (Billig, 2005:11). Humour is “a necessary quality for being fully human” (2005: 13)

In conclusion, the way humour is regarded by society has changed drastically over time and the theories that have dealt with it have reflected these changes. From the “creation” of comedy, with the Romans and the Greeks, to the austerity of the Middle Ages and the rise of wit in the midst of the literary revolution in the 1700s and 1800s, the path was laid for the acceptance of humour nowadays as an integral part of our society. As Billig says of humour in the 21st century: *“It is central to social life. Without the possibility of laughter, serious social life could not be sustained”*. (2005: 5)

3. Different types of humour

Certainly the problem of looking at humour holistically for so long, and trying to make all types of humour conform to one theory, has limited the way we perceive it. Are all types of humour the same? Do they make us feel the same? Most definitely not.

Even back in the 18th century, two different types of humour were recognised. Wit referred to aggressive and intellectual humour, associated with the upper class and the elite. It was seen as something affected, an art that could be learnt if one were sophisticated enough. Humour was emotional and more natural, something associated by many with the middle class. It was benevolent and referred to “laughing with” rather than “laughing at”. Sigmund Freud distinguished humour as psychologically healthy and deemed wit as aggressive.

3.1. Why do we smile or laugh?

Humour can take many forms and here I will mention some of the most common:

- canned jokes
- satire
- irony (situational or verbal)
- puns
- conversational humour

Laughter is exclusive to human beings. This idea has survived since Aristotle claimed “no animal laughs save Man” and Voltaire called men the “risible animal”, the only animal who laughs and weeps. Although laughter is present in Chimps, there is still much debate as to whether apes’ laughter is spontaneous or simply imitation⁵. Humans have evolved through the ages to enjoy humour and to use it socially, to the point where biological functions have been superseded by cultural

⁵ *Aping Expressions? Chimpanzees Produce Distinct Laugh Types When Responding to Laughter of Others*. For further information: <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/emo-11-5-1013.pdf> (Consulted February, 2015)

aspects. We have learned from a young age how to use laughter in rhetoric, imposing or disrupting order, depending on our needs.

Humour is an umbrella term for a wide array of ways of making us smile, laugh or providing amusement. It is a response to a certain type of stimulus. Laughter also has different degrees, there are different types of smiles that can then graduate into laughter, which in turn can become “hearty” laughter or “belly” laughing. Here I only propose a brief summary of some of the most common types of humour, because in reality there are infinite ways to elicit humour.

Before I begin, I think it is relevant to introduce the term *frame*. The notion of play frame or humorous frame were originally introduced in studies unrelated to humour itself, but have since been incorporated for use in various theories (Dyrel, 2011). Frames help us to recognise and organise chunks of experience in meaningful ways. They are guidelines that assist in establishing the “rules” of the type of exchange we are involved in.

These frames, later divided by Bateson (1953) into interactive frames and knowledge frames, enable researchers to organise the way humour is presented. Knowledge frames refer to knowledge stored in the mind that guides participants in their conversations. Interactive frames are seen as an interactive events orientated towards a certain goal. Both help people recognise when humour is intended and allows them to work out the implicatures of the speaker.

At this point it is also essential to introduce Attardo’s (2001) concept of “mode adoption”, which is the way the hearer reacts to humour with humour and irony with irony, etc. The frequency of whether or not the participant in the discourse chooses to respond to this “mode adoption” is usually context dependent.

Canned jokes are those that are context or situation free in the sense that they are introduced directly as jokes and need not be directly related to the discourse at hand. These types usually begin with “Have you heard the one about.....?” or “A man walks into a bar....”. When we hear these introduction utterances, we all know a joke will be offered and sit back to prepare to be entertained. These utterances set the stage for the joke at the same time they invite the hearer to enter into the play frame. The frame is set quite clearly from the beginning, hence

it would be very difficult for the hearer to not understand that a humorous exchange is forthcoming.

This type of joke is very often repeated from one person to another as they are usually short and easy to memorise.

E.g. *How does a spoiled rich girl change a lightbulb? She says, "Daddy, I want a new apartment."*

E.g. *Why did the rubber chicken cross the road? She wanted to stretch her legs.*

E.g. A panda walks into a bar and orders a beer and a hamburger. After he eats he stands up stretches and pulls out a gun shooting everyone in the room but the bartender. The panda puts \$20 on the bar and turns to leave. As he walks out the door the bartender asks why the panda shot everyone. The panda tells him to look in the encyclopaedia. The bartender looks up panda and he reads "Panda: Large black and white mammal native to China. Eats shoots and leaves."!

Satire: is used quite often in literature to expose and ridicule characters' vices, follies or ridiculous manners. More often than not, the butt of this ridicule are political figures or other topics related to social aspects. This type of humour requires analysis on the part of the reader, as it may not be apparent on the surface because it can usually be read or understood on two different planes. It surprises us with the unexpected. *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift is a perfect example of this type of humour. On the surface it can be read as the incredible travels of the young surgeon turned captain and his adventures in different lands. But underneath the surface lies a bitter criticism of the politics of the day.

Irony: The term irony comes from the Ancient Greek word *eirōneía*⁶, meaning dissimulation, understatement or feigned ignorance. There are two basic types of irony, verbal and situational.

In verbal irony there is a gap between the communication itself and what is really being implied. The larger this gap, the more irony is found. The literal sense of what is said is discarded or at least put aside and the implication of the second meaning must be worked out by the recipient. Verbal irony is spoken, where the speaker intentionally uses words to mean something different from what they say

⁶ From: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/irony> (Consulted January, 2015)

it “is one of the linguistic mechanisms used for the expression of values” (Alba-Juez & Attardo, 2014: 97). The hearer has to work out the implicature or inference to come to the underlying “true” meaning that the speaker wishes to convey. When we express irony in this way we are evaluating or judging. Most verbal irony (including sarcasm) is negative in the sense that the speaker uses a positive comment to convey a negative judgement. It is used many times in off record strategies to avoid responsibility for doing a Face Threatening Act, leaving the hearer to decide the interpretation of the utterance (Alba-Juez, 1995).

Situational irony involves a discrepancy between what is expected to happen and what actually happens. There must be something that induces you to think that a situation or event is likely to happen. When it does not, we have situational irony.

When in the course of a torrential rain storm someone says “Nice day to go to the beach” it is more than evident that they really do not believe that it is an appropriate moment to go to the beach. The hearer may respond in kind (mode adoption) by saying “Yeah, good idea! Let me get my bathing suit” or they may decide not to enter into the humour frame and say “Stop being silly.”



Figure 27: Situational irony in cartoons

Puns are a form of word play where the double meaning of a word which sometimes, but not always, gives rise to humour. They can rely on ambiguity of word sounds, word meaning or syntactic interpretations in context to produce the humorous effect. Puns can be seen as a show of wit or intelligence as they often

⁷ Taken from: <http://becuo.com/verbal-irony-cartoons> (Consulted April, 2015)

depend a great deal on cultural knowledge or can sometimes be unintentional. An example of a phonological substitution would be “I keep reading “The Lord of the Rings” over and over, I guess it’s a force of hobbit.”⁸ Here “hobbit” replaces the expected word in the collocation “force of habit”.



Figure 3⁹: Pun

Conversational humour is without doubt the most common and usually combines all of the above at some point. This is humour that spontaneously arises during interaction with others. It is totally dependent on the context and may even build upon previous jokes or humorous comments.

In the course of a normal day we interact with others on a constant basis and during this discourse, we many laugh many times or not at all, depending on the context, situation or purpose of this interaction.

Humour has serious uses; as a rhetorical tool used to diffuse tension, to try to call attention to oneself, as a defence mechanism, to make ourselves seem more (or less) important, or to attract the opposite sex among others. At times it can distance the speaker through *decommitment* (Kane et al. 1997) allowing them to later retract or disclaim what was said by postulating they were “only joking”.

Humour is also mitigating and can soften criticism, reprimands or directives by going off-record and trying to save the hearer’s positive face (Attardo 1994). However this depends on whether both the speaker and the hearer take part in the humorous frame and if the hearer uses mode adoption. If one of them does

⁸ Taken from: www.punoftheday.com (Consulted March, 2015)

⁹ Taken from: www.funnyjunk.com (Consulted April, 2015)

not enter into their humour role, misunderstandings and misfires most assuredly will take place and humour (at least for one of the participants) will not be found.

4. Categorising Positive and Negative Humour

Up until now we have taken a brief journey through the history of humour, seen the major theories that have studied it and some of the ways that humour is produced. My intention now is to categorise humour under the terms negative and positive.

For the purpose of this paper, positive humour will be that which makes us feel good, having a positive influence over our state of mind. On the other hand, negative humour will be that which does not make us laugh or smile, that which causes us to feel unhappy, bothered or uncomfortable.

The definition of positive or negative humour depends on the receiver and can never be context free. Something that causes one person to laugh out loud might be offensive to another. This context can include our age, gender, race, religious beliefs, political affiliation or geographical location, among others.

Individual traits also influence our reactions to humour at any given time. Individuals with a high sense of humour are more likely to smile and to join in laughter and jocularly than those who are more serious or with a lower sense of humour (Ruch, 2008). As well, states or moods can change quickly. Good news or bad news and other conditions which fluctuate in intensity can affect our willingness to be drawn into humour plays. Playfulness and seriousness can affect how incongruities are received at a given point in time. So what may seem funny today, thanks to being in a good mood, may not seem so funny tomorrow after learning that we have, for example, just lost our job.

The butt of the joke may feel put down or belittled (negative feelings) by the teller of the joke, who probably either feels superior to the offended party or whose only objective is only to make others laugh, though intending no malice. This experience is positive for him and his “audience” of listeners or readers, but I will be going back to the idea of “superior” further along in the paper.

A very simple example could be a religious joke. Touching on modern events, the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists and the readers of this magazine found humour in the artists' satirical drawings and political cartoons about many irreverent topics, including the Prophet Mohammed. This humour was positive for the artists themselves and their public, but obviously taken very badly by the Extremist Islamic groups who found this very disturbing (negative). This is obviously a very extreme case which has caused free speech to be questioned and has raised very important questions in modern society about the limits of how humour can be used to criticise. Francis Bacon (1625) claimed in "Of Discourse": certain matters should be exempt from jest "*namely religion, matters of state, great persons, any man's present business of importance, any case that deserveth pity*". This debate indeed would take up many pages to investigate.

4.1. Humour categorised in relation to the receiver

Humour in itself is universal in the sense that no humour free society has ever been discovered (Apte, 1985). Surely this does not imply that everyone finds humour in the same situations or jokes. Historical and cultural differences mark the difference in how attempts at humour are received by varied groups or individuals. Humour in general may be categorised as *attempts* to elicit laughter or amusement in its recipients but here I will be focusing on how these attempts are *received* and the responses of the receivers.

Since none of the humour theories to date seem to be able to deal with aspects of humour from a holistic standpoint, I aim to break them down into positive and negative as umbrella terms and categorise humour based on its reception.

4.2. When humour causes positive feelings

First, for the purpose of this paper, positive humour can be defined as benevolent and good-natured as opposed to humour which is hostile or cruel. It causes the receiver to feel good about themselves and their situation, not bad. Ruch (2008) and his associates have suggested that cheerfulness consists of having the

tendency to of be in a good mood, to smile and laugh easily, to be calm in the face of adversity, and to interact with others in a happy way.

I postulate that for the receiver to perceive humour in a positive way, certain conditions must be met.

1. We laugh and/or smile
2. We feel happy
3. We are amused

It should be pointed out that although not all of these conditions must be met, the first and second ones must be accompanied by the third for us to perceive humour in a positive way, although the third may stand alone. The reasons for these limitations will become clear upon reading the following points.

4.2.1. We laugh and/or smile

Smiles, smirks, simpers, grins, snickers, titters, giggles, chortles, chuckles, cackles, guffaws and belly laughs can all be seen as different types or degrees of laughter or smiling. Humour is such an integral part of our lives that social networks have created lists of acronyms that users can employ to denote their degree of amusement. A few examples would be:

- LOL - Laughing Out Loud
- LMAO - Laughing My Ass Off
- ROFL - Rolling On Floor Laughing

Smiley faces are also popular ways of showing amusement in computer messages, telephones and WhatsApps:



So it is apparent that smiling and laughing are central to many of our everyday conversations, however we should pause for a moment to reflect on how and why we use these external expressions. What moves us to use these expressions or smiley faces?

Smiling or laughing after a joke or comic situation can indicate various things. It may mean we are in agreement with the punchline, resolution of the joke or humorous comment. It may indicate our approval, that the occasion was indeed one for laughing and that we have enjoyed or been amused by the event or comment.

On the other hand we can laugh or smile at a joke simply because it is unexpected or sudden, not because it is funny or makes us feel “good”. The Incongruity Theory mentioned earlier bases its idea of humour on this very fact. Typically we experience an incongruity between objects, between elements of an object, or between an event and an expectation. Perceiving such stimuli may cause us to engage in the playful processing of incongruity and we feel the “lightness” involved in amusement (Lyman and Waters, 1986). The more unexpected the punchline or ending is, the funnier it is.

Naturally, it is possible to laugh without actually finding humour in its cause. Nervous laughter may be brought about by embarrassment or, according to Hobbes (1840), a feeling of superiority. Laughter can be hollow, only filling a social role or it may be a physical response to tickling. Without doubt, there are many times a day we witness incongruities that do not bring about laughter. Spencer presents the following example in “On the Physiology of Laughter”:

“If we are at a banquet and suddenly discover a corpse, that is incongruous but hardly funny. “Laughter naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small – only when there is what we may call a descending incongruity”.
(1860:1)

So neither do incongruities in themselves cause laughter, nor does all laughter arise from incongruities.

Returning to Hobbes and his Superiority Theory, we can see how he postulated that humour created many negative feelings. Ridicule and belittling were shown to be the basis for humour as life and social standing were shown as survival of the fittest, where the intelligent and skilful would see themselves as superior to those who found themselves the butt of jokes or in disagreeable situations.

So the physical response of a smile or a laugh is not enough to show positive “feel-good” humour. They cannot stand alone because humour depends on

another factor that is not just that of “surprise”. Therefore incongruity must be accompanied by one of the other two elements, amusement or happiness, which are the “lightness” mentioned before for it to be considered positive.

4.2.2. We are happy

According to Freud, social life curtails our possibilities for happiness by making demands on our freedom (Billig, 2005). So when do we feel happiness? According to Mintz (2008), happiness is found in stability, continuity, and contentment with the status quo, whereas sadness does not share these positive connotations

Happiness, in many cases, causes or is caused by laughter. This laughter has a social function that unites human beings, promoting social cohesion by unifying people and making them feel good about each other. When we walk into a room where everyone is laughing, sometimes, without even knowing why, we end up joining in. Laughter and good feelings are often contagious. This provides us with a sense of contentment.

Laughing along with others makes us feel better than if we laugh alone. If we pause to think about how often we laugh out loud when we are alone, we will probably be surprised to realise that it is very seldom. TV programmes “tell” us when to laugh by making the live audience laugh or by using voice-over laughing and, more times than not, we join in.

Happiness here is included as a contradiction to sadness; indicating good feelings over bad ones. If the situation or event makes us feel sad or uncomfortable, evidently it is not positive for us. But again, feeling happy does not necessarily mean we have found humour. We can be happy for many reasons; good news, a new job, we find out a friend is getting married, etc. So contentedness cannot be the only way to measure humour, it must also work in conjunction with amusement.

4.2.3. We are amused

What exactly is amusement? This question has no stock answer. If a comment or a joke appeals to our sense of humour, we are amused. "Amusement is an automatic bodily response to a funny perception" (Jauregui, 1998). We find what is familiar and acceptable to us (in the sense that we understand it) funny, so senses of humour are quite personal and what might provoke a humorous reaction in one receiver may have the opposite effect on another. Humour appreciation is variable.

While laughter and smiling are external manifestations, amusement is internal and therefore, it is extremely difficult to scientifically measure because it cannot be directly observed. The emotion of amusement is stimulated by funniness. Not only do varying degrees of smiling and laughing exist, as discussed previously, but there are also various degrees of amusement, as intensity of this emotion changes according to the humorous stimuli that we perceive. An important difference between laughter and amusement is the degree to which they can be controlled. Though the former can be consciously controlled, amusement is involuntary, unlearned and innate. It is the reaction to a cognitive stimulus which is a mental event. (Jauregui, 1998).

In conclusion, as mentioned previously, it is not enough for these elements to appear on their own, except for in the case of amusement. Assuming that something has tickled our sense of humour, amusement means that whatever the situation may be, we have perceived it as humorous. This amusement for us is positive. This amusement is positive for us even though we do not have to be happy about it (although this would usually be the case), nor are we obliged to smile or laugh to externalise our inner feelings of merriment. In fact, we often chose not to express our amusement externally, perhaps to avoid offending others or because we fear social repercussions.

On the other hand, we can laugh and smile without having been amused. In many social situations we smile or laugh to acknowledge our interest in something, to agree with the speaker, in surprise to an occurrence or simply because a social norm requires this reaction. But humour does not necessarily accompany the facial movements that form a smile or the vocal sounds that we emit when we

laugh. Actors can also duplicate smiling and laughter that would appear to be real manifestations of an external expression of internal amusement, while we as an audience know that they have not necessarily found real amusement in the events or situations that they have reacted to.

Primarily, the state of happiness has been used here to counterbalance negative emotions. This is especially important in conjunction with smiling or laughing. In many occasions when we smile or laugh, we are expressing our perception of funniness. So, the physical expression and the internal thought would appear to go hand in hand. Of course we know that this is not always true. We may laugh at a joke or a comment that we don't find appropriate for social reasons or to respect the speaker's positive face. This does not mean that we are happy. In fact, internally we may feel frustrated, sad or even offended. So for us to truly appreciate humour, smiling or laughing must be accompanied by happiness, in contrast to sadness, for it to be valued as positive.

4.2.4. Benefits of Positive humour

It has been suggested by many investigators that positive forms of humour are beneficial to mental health. Positive feelings and laughter in the 21st century are viewed almost as necessities in our lives. Online webpages like "Laughter Therapy"¹⁰ and Laughology¹¹ offer laughter as a solution to stress and as a way "to feel better". Laughter clubs, laughter workshops and laughter therapy give service to thousands worldwide. Even yoga experts are incorporating laughter exercises into their routines.

There is an unending list of self-help books that claim that laughter will help people of all ages and lifestyles to improve their quality of living (Billig, 2005: 16):

A Laughing Place: The Art and Psychology of Positive Humor in Love and Adversity (Hageseth, 1988); *Relax – You May Only Have a Few Minutes Left: Using the Power of Humour to Overcome Stress in Life and Work* (LaRoche, 1998); *The Healing Power: Techniques for Getting Through Loss, Setbacks, Upsets, Disappointments, Difficulties,*

¹⁰ <http://www.laughtertherapy.com/> (Consulted April, 2015)

¹¹ <http://www.laughology.co.uk/> (Idem)

Trials, Tribulations and All That Not-So-Funny Stuff (Klein, 1989); *The Courage to Laugh: Humour, Hope, and Healing in the Face of Death and Dying* (Klein, 1998); *Serious Laughter: Live a Happier, Healthier, More Productive Life* (Conte, 1998); *Becoming a Humour Being: The Power to Choose a Better Way* (Rizzo, 2000).

But this type of writing is not limited to popular psychology books. Professional psychologists also use humour in their therapy. In *the Handbook of Humour and Psychotherapy* (1987) the author William Fry, writes about how he has used humour to assist in treating patients. The social psychologist Herbert Leftcourt's *Humour: The Psychology of Living Buoyantly* (2001), the sociologist Peter Berger in *Redeeming Laughter* (1997) and the psychotherapist Salameh with his *Advances in Humour and Psychotherapy* also make important contributions as to how humour can be used successfully in therapy.

Dr. Steven Sultanoff, a practicing psychologist who writes for the website of The Association of Applied and Therapeutic Humor and the website www.humormatters.com talks about why humour is so important for an individual's mental health.

A sense of humour according to Davis is "the subtle but consistent ability to remain lighthearted in a wide range of circumstances, from the obvious occasions of happiness and joy to the more sacred and grave encounters with distress and tragedy" (2008). In general a humorous outlook on life and using this humour to deal with stress and everyday problems is seen as a positive trait. History has shown how concentration camp inmates, soldiers at war and subjects in other stressful situations¹² often use humour to help them to cope with difficult situations and provide a critical perspective.

All of the above mentioned refer to mental health. What about physical health? According to Cancer Treatment Centres of America¹³, in some studies laughter therapy may provide physical benefits, such as helping to:

¹² <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/1499500?uid=3737952&uid=2&uid=4&sid=21106507948363>
(Consulted April, 2015)

¹³ <http://www.cancercenter.com/treatments/laughter-therapy/> (Consulted March, 2015)

- Boost the immune system and circulatory system
- Enhance oxygen intake
- Stimulate the heart and lungs
- Relax muscles throughout the body
- Trigger the release of endorphins (the body's natural painkillers)
- Ease digestion/soothes stomach aches
- Relieve pain
- Balance blood pressure
- Improve mental functions (i.e., alertness, memory, creativity)

In *The Healing Power of Humour*, Klein (1989) asserts that medical and scientific research has proven that humour and a positive attitude help sufferers of physical disorders.

Athena du Pre in her studies of humour in medical settings added that humour helps patients to maintain dignity, to facilitate empathy and to voice complaints in non-threatening ways. In general humour facilitates quick and persuasive communication. Her *Humour and the Healing Arts* (1998) shows how patients can minimise their embarrassment and provide mutual identification with care givers.

However, it is also essential to include some of the dissenting voices, first, that of Martin (2001) who insists that “empirical evidence is generally weak and inconclusive” about the actual health benefits of humour and laughter. Also, Robert Provine (2000) raises the same doubts when he criticises three important studies about this subject that attributed curative powers to humour as flawed and incomplete.

As to social aspects, in Discourse Analysis humour can be seen to increase social management skills, such as building rapport, group cohesion and controlling conversations. It is important to note that this humour is co constructed (Attardo, 2008). In the workplace humour can lessen stress and anxiety, foment relationships and instil a feeling of comradeship (Plester, 2009). It can also

mitigate the authoritative voice of a supervisor and prevent loss of face by subordinates. Norrick (1993) points out how it can smooth over problems in the workplace in everyday situations, test for common ground and create rapport.

The effects of positive humour on our organisms, physically or mentally, in many cases are still under study. However in general, investigators seem to be proving that in fact, being positive and having a good sense of humour are beneficial to human beings in many ways.

4.3. When humour causes negative feelings

Obviously, humour does not always result in positive feelings. Just because the speaker or in other cases writer, means or intends to be humorous in a positive way, does not mean that this is enough. If we refer back to the idea of frames, we can see that it is paramount for the hearer and reader to enter into the humorous frame for it to be a positive experience for both of them. If they cannot or will not enter into this humour play, for them the results are negative.

Other times the speaker intends to hurt or to embarrass the receiver. Racial or ethnic humour, humour which targets minority groups such as women, gays and lesbians or even sexual harassment through joking are just some examples of how humour can be hostile and aggressive.

For humour to be considered negative for the receiver I propose three conditions, but here only one must be met:

1. We do not understand the humour
2. We are unamused
3. We feel aversion (wrong, ashamed, humiliated, uncomfortable, belittled...)

4.3.1. Humour that is not understood. How do we feel when others laugh about something that we do not understand because we do not feel part of it? We feel excluded, disadvantaged and outcast.

This can be a Pragmatic misfire where the speaker assumes that the listener has the back round information (accommodation) that will allow them to work out the humorous inference. In this case the misfire is unintentional because it is a case of pragmatic norms not being met. It may simply mean that the listener cannot work out the humour intended or that the speaker has made reference to a situation, event or concept that the listener is not familiar with. This difficulty may arise from intercultural factors as well, where a play on words does not allow the humour to show through or where a reference to a particular person or place is not understood or known. Pragmatic humour is context-sensitive and culturally based, so it is logical that when a person from a certain culture or that speaks a given language finds a situation or utterance amusing, another may find no humour at all.

An example could be:

Elton John thinks 'sorry' seems to be the hardest word. He clearly hasn't been to Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogoch¹⁴

There is clearly back round knowledge here that the hearer or reader needs to know to understand the joke.

1. He must know that Elton John is a singer and that he performs a song called "Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word".

2. He must know that there is a town in Wales with this extremely long name.

If you are not from England or Wales and do not know who Elton John is, probably this joke will not be funny for you.

On the other hand, the speaker and writer may make a "private" joke or use slang or specific jargon that intentionally excludes members that do not belong to their group. Private jokes are also common among groups of friends or couples, who

¹⁴Joke taken from: <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/lifestyle/fun-stuff/15-welsh-jokes-make-you-6799233> (Consulted April, 2015)

have shared experiences and use these experiences as a basis for humour. Unfortunately those that have not lived these experiences cannot react in the same way because they lack the background information to appreciate it. Here humour is used in a specific way to include or exclude listeners or readers. Those included feel “good” because they are a part of the group which is able to work out the humorous inference, so for them it is positive, while those that can’t, may feel slighted or snubbed. So while I have stated above that humour is often a social, it can also be anti-social as in these cases that I have presented where we can observe both sides of group identification.

The last option would be that the hearer did not “notice” the humour, that she thought the speaker was being serious. This may happen when the speaker is being sarcastic and the hearer does not work out the implicit meaning that the speaker wishes to convey. Or it may simply mean that the speaker was using a humorous frame that the hearer interpreted as a serious way of speaking and therefore was not looking for humour in the content.

4.3.2. Not amused: Culture and time disparities

Having a sense of humour is a personality trait that people develop in different ways. This regulates the types of humour found “amusing” by different groups as I have mentioned above. When we hear or read something that does not provide mirth or amusement, for us it is devoid of humour. As we have already dealt with humour that was not understood, here I wish to deal with situations where the hearer finds no mirth and therefore does not respond in a positive way.

These reactions may include something as simple as “unlaughter”¹⁵, meaning that the hearer does not laugh because the situation has not appealed to their sense of humour or something much stronger like uncomfortable forced silence or showing outright disapproval through facial gestures or direct comments. This rejection would directly affect the teller’s face.

¹⁵ “Unlaughter” is a term referred to by Michael Billig in *Laughter and Ridicule* (2005) as the rhetorical opposite of laughter.

There are some types of humour, black humour, sick humour or grim humour, for example which for some is quite amusing, while for others they are lacking in mirth. This is usually a question of personal taste.

“Jokes do not travel” is an old adage which points out the obvious; the existence of different cultures suggests that not everyone finds the same things funny. Each country has their language, their rock stars and idols, their favorite television series, food, religions, beliefs, customs, weather, etc., and we laugh at what is familiar to us.

In some scenarios, intra-cultural mistranslations may also cause humour to be lost or in some cases mitigated. While most translators try to preserve the content and the context of the texts they are translating, this job is much harder than it would appear at first glance and many humorous references can get lost in translation.

Depending on the culture certain topics may be taboo. Sex and religion, for example, can be very delicate subjects in some places (E.g., The Charlie Hebdo reference is valid again here). Having a good sense of humour in one country, culture or area, may not be compatible with having a good sense of humour in another. For example the English culture tends to have a drier sense of humour, where straight faced comics surprise their audiences with absurd situations and comments, whereas Americans tend for more slapstick comedy, giggling along with the audience.

Time is another factor that may alter perceptions on humour. A sketch from the 20s or 30s will not find the same audience as it did almost a century before. I seriously doubt that Chatty Man¹⁶ or Jimmy Fallon¹⁷ would have been found amusing by my great grandparents back in the Roaring 20's as today many viewers would not find the same hilarious laughter in Charlie Chaplin films as my great grandparents would have. But again I should stress that not everyone loved

¹⁶ **Alan Carr: Chatty Man** (also simply known as **Chatty Man**) is a BAFTA award-winning British comedy chat show presented by comedian Alan Carr. The show features interviews with celebrity guests, sketches, topical chat and music.

¹⁷ **James Thomas "Jimmy" Fallon** is an American television host, comedian, actor, singer, writer, and producer. He currently hosts *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, a late-night talk show that airs on NBC

Chaplin movies at the time and not everyone find Chatty Man funny today; humour is much more individual than this. The fact that I have included footnotes on these humorists to make the comparatives relative to all, should in itself, prove this point.

In conclusion, there can be no universal jokes or situations that will provoke amusement in everyone as humour depends on the personal beliefs and tastes of each individual. Humour itself seems to have a “use by” date that restricts its reception in other points of time, due to changing contexts and social situations.

4.3.3. Humour that makes us feel bad

When someone threatens our *face*, this often makes us feel uncomfortable. This may be done with malice, with the intention to mock or insult or to show disrespect to an individual or to a group they belong to. Many groups based on religion, geography, race or gender are targets for mockery or aggression by others who often do not belong to the same group.

When humour makes us feel “bad” a number of different sensations can be perceived. When we feel shame or we are uncomfortable, it is the feeling that we have done, heard or witnessed something “wrong”; something that goes against our morals, beliefs or ethics. This would be the case for many people that hear racist jokes or comments. There are times when we *choose* not to laugh, indeed to frown or show other signs of disapproval when we find our ethics or morals under attack. “Ignoring the joke” (Alba-Juez, 2015:11) is another discourse strategy used to show rejection and that humour has been negatively received.

Moral sensitivities have changed considerably through the ages. With all the awareness and respect for differences nowadays, laughing at the poor or the deformed, which was considered socially acceptable in ancient times as mentioned in the introduction, would probably provoke more outrage than laughter in the majority of those that witnessed it.

Mockery, degradation, sarcasm, bigotry, feeling belittled or humiliated when one is the butt of a joke or comic situation that leaves us in an inferior position can be uncomfortable or even traumatic. Here we can refer back to the Superiority Theory and observe how one person may try to make himself look better at the

expense of another. However it is important to keep in mind that the “sudden glory” of the speaker usually implies the “sudden defeat” of another.

Embarrassment would also fall under this category. Goffman (1967) claims that embarrassment is connected to unfulfilled expectations. Social life depends on learned expectations and as all societies follow social codes, the potential for embarrassment exists everywhere. When we go to university in the morning, we expect certain behaviour from the people we meet along the way. When acts breach these codes of behaviour, embarrassment may be one of the results. It is important to note that here we are not dealing with grave infractions of the law or mortal sins, more likely we are referring to breaches in social etiquette or to awkward situations. Embarrassment is not usually a sensation that we feel when we are alone. The blushing, sweating and racing pulse are the results of public social blunders in front of others. If we leave the public bathrooms with toilet paper stuck to the sole of our shoe, we cause mirth and amusement in anyone that observes this. As soon as we discover the cause of this laughter, we feel embarrassed. William Hazlitt remarked “We laugh at those misfortunes in which we are spectators, not sharers” (1987:70). Embarrassing situations are funny to those not directly involved, but usually very painful to the “victim”.

This point sums up quite neatly the rhetorical aspect of humour by showing that many times there are two “faces” to humour. It can be used to unite or divide, to ridicule or to save face, depending on the participants and the situation. One side might find the situation or joke highly amusing, while the other can only show its disdain, incomprehension or “not funny” reaction (Alba-Juez, 2015:11) which implies rejection of the joke or humorous situation.

4.3.4. Negative effects of humour

I will again turn to Ruch (2008) for definition of trait seriousness (relating to humorouslessness). He claims that people with a low sense of humour are melancholy and grumpy, which would lead us to the conclusion that it would be more difficult for them to enter in humour frames.

Aggressive humour includes a wide range of actions, from simple teasing to disparagement humour which consists of ridiculing and belittling others. This type of humour often hurts or alienates the receivers. Humour can be used to manipulate others by getting them to do what the speakers wants, in exchange for not ridiculing them. Bullying is a perfect example of this type of negative humour.

Norrick (1993) points out that mockery and sarcasm are geared more towards “animosity rather than rapport” and problematise interpersonal functions. This of course provokes conflicts. At school, in the workplace, at home or out in public, if there is someone who is constantly putting us down or trying to make us look bad through their sarcasm, teasing and derision, we will try to avoid this situation at all costs. If the situation cannot be avoided, the conflict will either end in a confrontation when the receiver reaches a limit, or the consequences (many times mental) will reach extremes where the receiver becomes depressed and tries to distance herself from the source of their problem, even at the expense of losing their job or changing schools. Peter Berger (1997: 57) considers the socionegative aspects of humour as those that divide (as opposed to bringing groups together). This humour is not co-constructed, it’s individual and one sided. There is even a term for this, *gelotophobia*; the fear of being laughed at.

So while there are many positive aspects to humour, as investigators we should not ignore or try to push aside the important negative aspects that humour may also transmit. Laughter is not always positive. Much laughter is directed at others, which may be harmful to that person’s personal well-being or state of mind.

5. Conclusion

Humour builds on shared understandings and experiences. It is co-constructed and negotiated. It is all around us and forms an important part of the everyday interactions we carry out with friends, co-workers and family. Humour is not frivolous or unimportant, it is central to many conversations and negotiations.

No single theory can explain a subject as diverse and as multifaceted as humour, nor is it probable that one will ever be reached if we take into consideration that numerous variables are involved in the field of Humour Studies. Time, personal tastes and beliefs, religion, and gender, all influence the way each of us as individuals perceive humour. Therefore humour can never be identified as a single entity, easily parcelled, explained and agreed upon by all. The fact that laughter is used in rhetoric should have opened our eyes to this from the very beginning. It has two facets and can be used to flatter or to insult, to be social or to be unsocial. In fact, humour and its interpretation can be quite controversial as one man's joke may be another man's insult. Therefore any holistic theory that sets out to categorise humour is bound to fail.

From the point of view of the speaker, it is almost impossible to distinguish between positive and negative aspects of humour, as the intentions of the speaker are only always clear to the speaker. The message that the hearer receives may not be the intended as the hearer may not share the same ethics, morals, culture and beliefs as those of the speaker. On the part of the hearer it is important to keep in mind that humour is multifunctional and indeterminate, interpreted differently by various speakers at various times (Holmes, 2000). There is no one-to-one relationship between a specific humour category and its social function in the interaction (Norrick, 2009) and these functions can be perceived by the hearer as positive or negative.

I have called attention to the fact that laughter is not always a sign that humour is present. Laughter can be spontaneous (nervous) or intentional to feign understanding, surprise, interest or cover a number of other emotions. Other times humour can be found and exteriorised as a smile or a nod of the head; not necessarily with laughter.

Modern day psychologists tend to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative (Billig, 2005) when referring to humour. Warm-hearted humour is praised, while the functions that are less accepted, such as mockery, ridicule and humiliation, are swept under a thick, warm rug. In a society where we desperately want to believe that humour and laughter can cure us from our ills and relieve us of our stress, the negative aspects of humour are downplayed, but by no means should they be ignored.

In conclusion, I think it is important to note that while amusement as an emotion lacks a single cause or purpose, it is a central and important part of our daily lives. Studies in many countries have proven that the VIA-IS humour scale is a good predictor of satisfaction with life (Ruch, 2008) which can lead to the conclusion that people with a good sense of humour that are easily amused are happier with their lives in general, and that humour is one (of many) human strengths that enables a good life. Also, Berger (1997) claims that sociopositive functions outweigh socionegative consequences. Therefore positive humour is considered an important factor in our lives, allowing us to interact with others, form social groups, ease tension and relieve stress. At the same time humour may improve certain aspects of our physical and mental health. It is interdisciplinary, touching on all aspects of human behaviour and thinking and manifests itself in many forms and modalities. Scientists and scholars from many fields working together are chipping away at the mystery of humour and the role it plays in our lives. Little by little studies and investigations are revealing more of the *hows* and the *whys* related to humour and the effect it has on our lives. The future of Humour Studies is wide open and as more and more importance is given to this field, the idea that humour is frivolous and unproductive, is slowly fading into the back-ground.

“A day without laughter is a day wasted”- Charlie Chaplin.

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