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“Is that funny anywhere else?”

An international comparison of humour in children’s programmes

IZI’s 2005 comparative intercultural study aimed at similarities and differences in the reception of humorous children’s television programmes. In co-operation with international partners, 476 children in five countries were asked to judge six programmes: What children find funny can depend on gender and cultural proximity.

People laugh all over the world, but do they also find the same things to be funny? Comparative intercultural studies of adults have found higher degrees of commonality than differences about the forms and humorous nature of jokes. Culture-specific tendencies suggest that Germans, French and Danes generally laugh more at jokes, while Canadians, New Zealanders and Americans much less so (The BA, 2002). Germans laugh more at incongruence, Italians and the French find sexual humour funnier, while the Italians find nonsense jokes not really amusing (Ruch and Forabosco, 1996; Ruch et al., 1991). To date, few comparative studies have been undertaken about how children perceive humour and, in particular, humour conveyed by television. Given the increasingly global nature of the children’s television market and

tension between global and local, it is particularly important that research be directed to understanding what children throughout the world find to be humorous.

The International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) at the Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation therefore initiated a comparative, collaborative study conducted with researchers from Israel, the USA, Northern Ireland/the Republic of Ireland, and South Africa. The initial step taken in the research was that the team leader from each of these countries selected an amusing, locally produced children’s 5-minute segment that was, as far as possible, not based on linguistic humour (so that the humour content would be equally understandable by children in all five countries):

Pink Panther (USA), a sequence in which the well-known pink protagonist helps a husband triumph over his bossy wife. The latter tries to get rid of the troublesome panther using all kinds of tricks;

Open a Door in South Africa (South Africa), a film from the *Open a Door* series produced internationally in which the everyday life of a child is related to in a short story in a specific region;

Tabaluga tivi – Das total verrückte Haus (Germany), a series about chaotic life in a flat shared by Tabaluga the dragon, Arktus the snowman, James the penguin, Happy the bunny and Tom the human being;

Candid Camera (Israel), a classic home-video format in which “normal” people are involved in accidents and oafish misadventures;

Wallace & Gromit – A Close Shave (United Kingdom), the plasticine animation story of the adventures of hobby inventor Wallace and his faithful dog Gromit who has human abilities; *Angela Anaconda* (USA), an animated cartoon consisting of photo collages in which the protagonist, Angela, seeks to prevail against her big brothers and the golden-haired class swot, Nanette, by repeatedly escaping into a fantasy world.



III. 1: South African children watching and judging the fun programmes (left) and then discussing the segments (right)



Ill. 2: Fun-O-Meter evaluation in action

Method and sample

494 children, 8 to 10 years of age, took part in the study. Country-specific samples differed according to sex and separately determined stratified socio-cultural sub-groupings. Accordingly, Arab and Jewish children were interviewed in Israel; Protestants, Catholics and children of no denomination in Northern Ireland (UK) and the Republic of Ireland; coloured, white and black children in South Africa; and children from the east and west of Germany.¹ The children watched the excerpts from the aforementioned programmes and judged each by means of a “Fun-O-Meter” (cf. Götz, and Gollner in this issue). Afterwards the children discussed what had happened and named the parts they liked or did not like, whether and why they were funny etc. The complete analysis included statistical analyses of the “Fun-O-Meter” data, interpretations of the children’s statements in the group discussion, and a media-analysis. The following is a short summary of the results.

Children in different regions of the world consider the same things funny

The study centred on the question: Do children in different countries judge humour in the TV segments differently? From a purely statistical point of view, there is a “no” and a “yes” as an answer to this question. Analysis of the data from the Fun-O-Meter revealed that for the most part chil-

dren consider the same places to be funny. The overall level of the judgement did vary considerably in the particular countries. Thus the German and South African children rated the funny points to be much funnier than did the American and Irish/UK children.² While most of the time the curves correlate on different levels (cf. Chart 1) at some points they differ. Altogether, however, the commonalities among children are far greater than the differences. The basic tendency is that children in very different regions of the world find the programmes funny at the same points. This became even clearer in the analysis of the group discussions. In all samples the same scenes and comedy elements were mentioned as particularly funny. Programmes from participants’ own countries potentially belong to the comparatively higher rated programmes. The clearest example was Ireland/UK, whose children proportionately rated *Wallace & Gromit* significantly higher than the other programmes. In detail, appreciation of the humour depends on the kind of comic content of the programmes.

Humour of plot, narrative, and genre

As noted, the material chosen did not rely heavily on language for its humour. Two clips (*Pink Panther*, *Candid Camera*) had no dialogue whatsoever; another (*Wallace & Gromit*) had very little. The humour thus depended on the construction of the plot through visual “gags.” With wordless comedy, the narrative must be clear and visual “gags” constructed in such a way that the outcome will be either inevitable or will show “reversal” – resisting the inevitable. For example, in the *Pink Panther* the wife set a trap for the Panther leading to a potentially good visual joke if he fell in, but instead she, the wife, fell in. This scene was summarised by one German girl who quoted a proverb: “There is a phrase, ‘the biter will be bitten.’” In *Wallace & Gromit*, the dog Gromit was rescued from prison by a group of sheep and was then involved in a chase scene on a motorbike which at a crucial stage (as the sidecar was going over a cliff) turned into an aeroplane and started firing porridge at the pursuing lorry. This scene involved another comic narrative technique – parody, in this case of genres such as

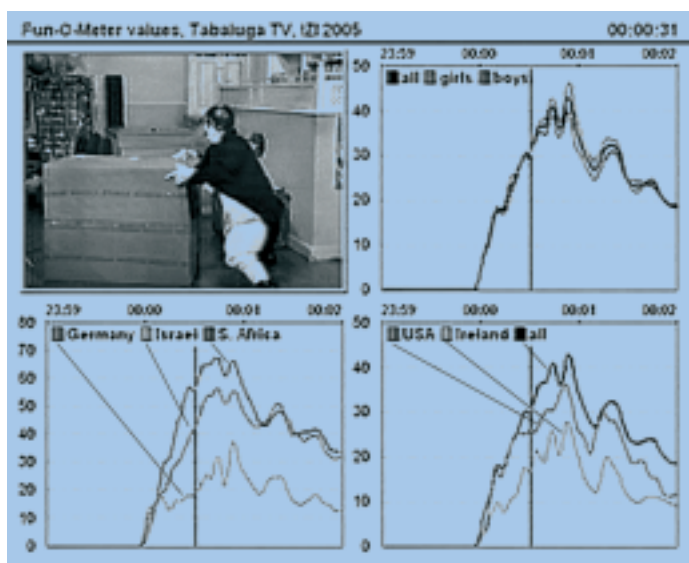


Chart 1: Fun-O-Meter data of *Tabaluga tivi*: Children are judging this slapstick scene (still) on different levels, but with a similar curve progression (vertical bars in the graphs indicate this scene)

crime movies and war films; this was noted by some children but was baffling to others, like the South African children who took it very literally. The two scenes voted funniest were central to the narrative; the sheep pyramid rescuing Gromit and the car/plane transformation with Gromit shooting porridge at the pursuing truck. A German girl “found it funny because he had stayed in prison for a long time and now suddenly he knows how to fly a plane.” With the porridge-shooting as with the sheep rescuers, much humour derived from incongruity. One US-American boy said: “Sheep don’t do that every day.” An Israeli boy said: “The porridge made me laugh because porridge is funny.” Children often noticed technique with wordless humour – “how it was done.” An Israeli girl said: “With clay you can do anything you want to do.” When children particularly enjoyed one of the clips, there was playfulness sometimes in the way they talked about it. One boy in Northern Ireland said: “You never see a sheep in a woolly jumper ... yeah, like he was just wearing himself! He was just wearing another sheep! (Laughter).”

Insightful for producers is the finding that silent, or semi-silent action comedy is appealing for children, but the visual jokes need to be set up clearly and the characters and their relationships need to be properly differentiated for the joke to be understood. Cultural knowledge is required to understand parodies, such as the war-film music in *Wallace & Gromit*, but children will cope with unfamiliar references as long as the humorous narrative key elements such as incongruity (heroic sheep; lethal porridge) and the reversal joke (falling in the hole you’ve dug yourself) can keep them engaged. In long-running series (such as e. g. *The Simpsons*), the young audience can laugh at the slapstick and at the naughty kids, and will catch up with the cultural in-jokes as they get older.

Language as a central factor of humour

Quite a lot of the humour in children’s television is based on language. For this study, international considerations led us to select most of the segments that did not use language as the central humour element. A purposefully chosen exception was *Angela Anaconda*, which was shown in three different versions in the various countries: In Ireland, the USA and South Africa in the English original, in Germany in the dubbed version and in Israel with Hebrew or Arabic subtitles. As expected, some differences emerged that can be associated with different forms of language access. This was especially the case when language was spoken quickly; then the children watching the programme with subtitles did not raise the Fun-O-Meter. For example: in response to the comment by Angela, “When I break all the world’s fishing records for fishing,” the humour assessment curve went up in Germany, the USA and Ireland, while in Israel and South Africa it went down. For the Israeli children it is part of their everyday experience to watch television programmes with subtitles. In translating jokes from English to Hebrew subtitles some verbal puns got lost and it wasn’t funny any more. In addition to that, the children were probably not in a position to read a language joke at such a speed.

Another phenomenon was the occasional rise of the German children’s curve while the other countries showed no significant movement. The reason for this might be the fact that the German dubbed version sometimes included funnier plays on words than did the English original. Instead of the English phrase “This lake is growing” the German version goes something like: “This lake is growing up.” So, dubbing – if well done – can even be a chance to integrate more humour in a programme.

Is humour different for boys and girls?

As a general rule, gender differences were not very pronounced in this cross-cultural comparison. However, a more careful review reveals several interesting insights, particularly when listening to what children said in the focus group discussions.

As expected, boys had a higher preference for the action-adventure type of humour such as *Wallace & Gromit* and *Pink Panther*. For example, boys talked more about the action scenes, shooting porridge, and the like; while girls talked more about the sheep. On the other hand, girls had a higher preference in some countries for *Open the Door*, which seemed to elicit more discussion among them in comparison to the boys. The characters in this programme were related to as “cute” and enjoyable, with pleasant voices. The attractiveness of this programme could perhaps be associated with its non-aggressive humour, the fact that it was female-centred, and takes place in a private sphere setting. Also, when looking at specific moments in the programmes, children’s reactions were sometimes related to their gender. For example, when positioned in the centre of the scene a girl (in *Angela Anaconda*) attracted more of the girls’ interest. In *Pink Panther*, the girls more readily identified with the wife and were more critical of the way she was treated by the man. The boys identified more readily with the man, made fun of the woman and how she deserved her punishment. For example, in Germany a boy called the woman and the mother-in-law “two bitches,” while a girl identifying with the woman wished she would have fought back: “It would have been better if she’d hit him ’cause, I would hit somebody before I would even attempt to clean.” An interesting gender-related issue comes from children’s discussions of the sometimes-painful, real-life acci-

dents shown in *Candid Camera*. Due to the fact that the empathy measure found, as expected from previous studies, that older girls are more empathic to others' suffering than older boys, we expected that girls would rate the programme lower than boys. However, we found that in many cases girls liked the humour of *Candid Camera* better. A possible explanation comes from the discussion: Girls argued that they enjoyed this humour because they knew that it would not have been on the air if someone was really hurt. Also, they laughed at it and at the same time felt guilty about it, as was stated by an Israeli girl: "It's funny because people fell, but on the other hand it is not so funny because it must hurt very much ... (laughter)". It seems that some children were "acting their gender" in a manner appropriate to cultural expectations. Yet, despite these differences, girls and boys reacted similarly to the video overall. Thus, quality humour needs to offer opportunities for boys and girls to experiment with diverse forms of humour and not confine them to what is considered to be appropriate to one or the other gender by making stereotypical gendered jokes.

Reality vs. fantasy

Many of the same considerations arise in producing programmes that are either realistic (e. g., *Candid Camera*, *Open a Door*) or fantasy (e. g., *Pink Panther*, *Wallace & Gromit*). Both require appealing characters, stories, and so on. Yet, our data show that different considerations come into play.

Realistic programmes

Different kinds of humour may be associated with different genres; the documentary-style *Open a Door* employed a warm, gentle humour that would be less typical in a traditional cartoon. Also, realistic formats raise



Ill. 3: Slapstick in animation (*Pink Panther*, above) and live action (*Candid Camera*, below)

issues that might not occur in fantasy formats. For example, although children found *Candid Camera* very funny, they disagreed about whether laughing at people's accidents was appropriate. In all five countries, some considered it unacceptable:

Girl (Israel): "I don't laugh about real things, because if it really happened ... and someone really falls, then it really hurts. But if they make it up, let's say they draw somebody falling and it doesn't really hurt, then it is funny."

Others thought laughing was all right:

Boy 1 (Germany): "But that hurts!"

Boy 2 (Germany): "Who cares?"

Still others saw both sides of the issue, or said laughing was okay because they assumed the people weren't seriously hurt. If they were hurt (the children reasoned), the videos wouldn't be on television:

Girl (Ireland): "I just thought it was very funny, but I just thought it's kind of mean to laugh at people when they get hurt."

Girl (USA): "You know they're going to be okay."

In realistic programmes, then, some children may find slapstick funny,

while others may feel too much sympathy. Moreover, children trust producers to ensure that no one has been hurt – implicitly challenging producers to live up to this trust.

Fantasy programmes

In fantasy programmes, humour can exceed the physical limits of real life. Indeed, US-American and Israeli children found an exaggerated bit in *Pink Panther* (a woman slips, sending groceries flying in all directions) funnier than a parallel, realistic bit in *Open a Door* (a woman drops her groceries in a more realistic way). However, as in realistic programmes, the slapstick must fit both the segment and the audience. Children often find bizarre slapstick funny; for example, many enjoyed watching sheep form an acrobatic pyramid in *Wallace & Gromit*. Yet, if slapstick is pushed too far (as in the costumes and broad slapstick of *Tabaluga tivi*), then school-age children may see the segment as "babyish" or "trying too hard" to be funny.

Cultural proximity

Depending on the cultural proximity of the text to the viewer, the result could be strong empathy and identification with the text, as when Arab children felt "closer" to *Open the Door*; or an alienating effect, such as in *Angela Anaconda* when the South African children felt that they did not understand the text because the icons used, such as language, style and composition, were unfamiliar. Thus, we found that children interpret each programme depending on their cultural proximity/familiarity with the genre, language, character, plot or context.

In *Open the Door*, for example, the South African children enjoyed the programme; there was strong empathy with the subject, familiarity with the environment, the language, and genre (cf. Chart 2).

Child (South Africa): "I like the Yolanda story ..."

Child (South Africa): "I think it comes from South Africa because of the traditional things, huts, language ... I feel sorry for them."

Child (South Africa): "I don't really like it because some people live in shacks and stuff like that."

The programme had many cultural references with which the Arab children from the Arab-Israeli study also identified; they were familiar with the rural setting, the homesteads, and may have empathised with the black children whom they recognised as not having very good living conditions, almost close to their own situation. So, both rated the segment high on the Fun-O-Meter.

Based on culture proximity we also found different understandings of the text. While for most of the children, the woman in *Pink Panther* clearly was the wife, some South African called her "maid," a professional guild which is relatively common in South Africa. Another example was the interpretation of the scene when penguin James falls into a box. A South African child thought he was frightened because of the smoke coming out of the kitchen – James thought he should be cooked. None of the children in other countries imagined cooking penguins, while in South Africa this was not unusual.

Aside from the issue of feeling close to the setting, understanding the details and a cultural-based reading, a special humour feeling became apparent when interpreting the South African interviews. For example, when penguin James in *Tabaluga tivi* throws a vase into the glass table, all children judged it high except for the South African ones. When a box is thrown down the stairs, which actually means it could break, a South African child argues: "Ma'am, I don't find it funny because who would ever throw a box down the stairs?" And even more clearly was this argument in the discussion about *Wallace & Gromit*

shooting with porridge. A South African child: "I didn't find it funny because how could they shoot porridge in the windows? If it was water or something it would be fine." It seems that in living conditions where food is not in abundance and breaking a table causes more of a problem than going to the store next day, comedy involving wasting food and destroying valuable things is not considered to be humorous.

Summing up: cross-cultural similarities and the role of familiarity

In drawing conclusions from this study, it is important to be mindful of the parameters within which it was conducted. First, this was a study of humour, not of appeal. The data reflect only what children found funny; naturally, television programmes can also be highly appealing without being humorous. Second, the children in this study were drawn from five countries and the samples were not representative of the entire population of these countries. Thus, while we were able to compare children's reactions across several different cultures, this is not to say that the data necessarily reflect the reactions of *all*

children in these countries or that identical results would be found throughout the rest of the world.

This having been said, the data do suggest significant conclusions about 8- to 11-year-old children's reactions to humour, that have concrete implications for the production of humorous television programmes for this age group. These stem from both the similarities and the differences observed across countries, demographic groups, and individual children.

Overall, one of the study's most striking findings was the degree to which we found that many children in different countries and different demographic groups do share much in common. Certain elements of humour made many children laugh, regardless of whether they were boys or girls, and regardless of where they lived. Some of these elements included: slapstick, incongruity, surprise and violating expectations, and a reversal of fortune (which was sometimes related to a sense of justice and characters' getting their just desserts).

At the same time, differences were found, too. Many of these differences seemed to grow out of cultural factors – particularly when an aspect of the segment was familiar to the children in a given country. In this context, "familiarity" can mean that the chil-

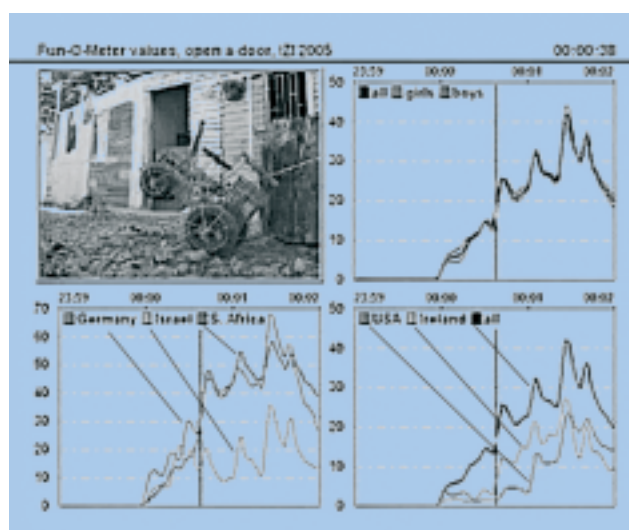


Chart 2: Fun-O-Meter data of *Open a Door*: South African children found the scene with the self-made tractor (still) very funny – along with Germans (see curve peak at the vertical bars)

dren have seen the specific segment before (as in the case of children who recognised the *Wallace & Gromit* segment as it began), but it can refer to other sorts of familiarity as well, such as familiarity with:

- *The series and characters*, even if they have not seen the specific episode before.
- *Cultural content and context*, as reflected in the settings and activities shown in the programme.
- *Language* of the segment.
- *Media diet* of the viewers – that is, the degree to which children's media are available in the geographic area where children live, and the types of programmes that they typically watch.
- *Genre and perceived target audience* of the segment – that is, children's perception of the type of programme it is and whom it is for.

Familiarity (of any type) has the potential to make a segment easier for a viewer to understand, hence facilitating the humour. It also makes it more likely that children will have the background knowledge necessary to get the jokes in the segments. Similarly, on a broader level, familiarity helps children set expectations about what will happen next in a segment, so that they find it funny when those expectations are violated. Finally, the recognition of a familiar element can be enjoyable for children in and of itself. For all of these reasons, it is not surprising that, in this study, greater familiarity was often associated with higher ratings on the Fun-O-Meter. Further support for the influence of familiarity comes from the finding that when Fun-O-Meter differences did appear among children from different countries, these differences most often appeared within the first minute of a given segment. This is precisely the point at which familiarity would be expected to have its greatest impact – as children presumably were orienting themselves to

the segment, figuring out what was going on, and so on. Thus, familiarity appeared to help children orient themselves more quickly and facilitate appeal, whether it was familiarity with a specific programme, a television genre, or simply the activities shown in the scene.

This is not to say, of course, that children will (or should) only watch programmes that are familiar to them. It is important to bear in mind that, despite the cross-cultural differences that did appear in our data, great consistency was found across all of the countries in this study.

Television presents a means by which we can broaden children's knowledge and experience beyond their neighbourhoods, and expose them to people and activities from around the world. By incorporating elements that are familiar to the audience into new and unfamiliar material, we can encourage children to watch these programmes and make the material more accessible and enjoyable. ■

NOTES

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1 Unfortunately the sub-samples planned in the USA of white and African American children were not realised due to the small number of African American children who were present on the days of data collection.

2 This does resemble to a certain extent the findings of a comparative inter-cultural study of adults that found that persons in Anglo-American countries also tended to find jokes to be less humorous (*The BA*, 2002).

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