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Let's have a joke!

Children's joking and humour – some age and intercultural differences

Children love playing practical jokes, twisting words, giggling and fooling around. They come up with a whole variety of jokes and comedy with adults sometimes failing to grasp why and what the children are having such a good laugh about.

1. Cognition and interaction: simple incongruity and resolved incongruity

Similar to Bruner (1987), I have observed that even 1-year-olds find a successful trick or feint highly amusing. A child who has developed a certain cognitive level of expectation concerning a specific scene (i. e. a script), the script for a feeding episode, for example, is capable of eliciting the expectation script in his or her communication with a vis-à-vis. The child can suddenly deceive the latter, leading him or her off in a totally different direction. This means the 1-year-old has already acquired a communicative intention, which he or she can effect in different stages. Bates (1975), among others, demonstrates that children from the age of ten months comprehend a goal-means relationship.

One example: The family is sitting at the dining-room table, drinking coffee and eating some cake and fruit. Little Mary seems intent on putting a piece of banana into Auntie Elsie's mouth. Auntie Elsie naturally opens her mouth, expecting to be fed and bends towards the piece of banana in Mary's hand. That's just when Mary withdraws the piece of banana, pops it into her own mouth and has a good laugh.

Auntie Elsie deftly pretends to be shocked. Little Mary receives the acclaim of those at the table. Besides her pleasure at the success of her manoeuvre, she achieves what is clearly a conversational success. She becomes the centre of attention for all those sitting at the table. These two levels of experience should not be underestimated. Children notice not only how jokes succeed but also that jokes have a positive connotation. Jokes and humour attract the spotlight of attention and give others pleasure. Adults deploy exactly the same game to tease children. Eibl-Eibesfeld (1984, p. 266) reports that adults often organise comical surprises for children. Imitating may later contribute to the 1-year-old's success in this constellation of the complex contextualisation of anticipation, the co-ordination of positions in a dialogue and the exactly timed interruption of the anticipation generated. The 1-year-old generates far more than the pleasure found in the simple incongruity which according to psychological research into humour constitutes the prime cause of fun in children up to the age of five. Psychologist Paul McGhee, who has conducted several investigations into children's humour, believes young children enjoy simple incongruity. It is not until after the age of five that the latter is joined by the pleasure in resolved incongruity producing an unexpected meaning (McGhee, 1980). In the above example, however, we are confronted with resolved incongruity.

What is orange and likes wandering? A wanderin

Fun derived from simple incongruity seems to set in from the age of approximately ten months, i. e. at the time when playing with symbols also commences (Piaget, 1962). Research has shown that children enjoy the opportunity to solve a problem even before this age. They then smile or laugh. But since this problem-solving lacks imaginative and playful aspects, McGhee (1977, 1980) does not define them yet as humour. What problem-solving has in common with humour is merely the existence of a tension production and tension reduction phase. The example of the trick or feint cited above does have the structure of a systematic deviation of meaning characteristic of jokes, for example. Although young children are sometimes capable of such bisociations, it would be inaccurate to presume that they already have a secure command of this ability.

Psychological research into humour differentiates between the phases referred to in the development of the pleasure in humour, between the simple enjoyment of incongruity and the resolution of incongruity. The first stage extends up to the age of six whereas the following stage also applies to adults (McGhee, 1977). What we see here is a clear overlap of the two phases. It is evident that

children have a lot of fun with simple incongruity until they start school. At the same time they also resolve incongruities in a new framing; they create sense in nonsense and redefine situations in such a manner that an unexpected sense is produced, finding delight in the amazement of those present.
An example of pleasure in the simple form of incongruity is when infants burst out laughing at Mum or Dad crawling around on the floor. At an early age they form scripts for upright-walking people such as parents and for the four-legged form of locomotion practised by animals – frequently over-generalised as a "bow-wow". Crossing bow-wow with Mum or Dad is presumably funny, but the scripts still remain stable for the young child. The child enjoys the sight of Mum and Dad crawling about on the floor; she/he can derive pleasure from the violation of his/her concepts of normality without having to forfeit all the security of his/her perception. The child perceives the violation playfully and not as a threat.
Comic effects, humour and irony innocuously flout norms and typifications, be they typified scenes or object expectations, evaluations or language norms. Unofficially the typifications are confirmed, however. Playing with normality is absolutely permissible, as the world will still survive. The playful violation of what is normal recreates normality, without which enculturation would be impossible. Children use their jokes to test the security of normality.
In language acquisition research, it has been observed that children play systematically with what they have learnt (Helmers, 1971). They twist syllables, use the same vowels everywhere (e. g. German children's nursery rhyme: "Three Cheeneese weeth thee Deeble Beess", chanted with i's, u's, o's and so on), etc. From the age of five they play with linguistic ambiguities, e. g. double meanings. Later – before they start school at the age of six in Germany – pronunciation games, initially expressing pleasure in the sound produced, also become meaningful. Joke questions of the following type enjoy growing popularity: "What is orange and likes wandering? A wanderin." Children are amused by the fact that the unusual juxtaposition of wandering and mandarine results in a context-effective meaning. The successful image of a wandering mandarin should not be underestimated, either. Conjuring up images is an important part of developing the ability to narrate. Children also derive a lot of fun from morpheme mix-ups ("Dear Leddles and Gentymen"), presuming the child in question recognises morphemes.
McGhee (1977, 1980) demonstrated that children who had learnt the laws of stable sets and class inclusion found the following joke visibly far funnier than children who had not yet grasped these contexts or children who had already internalised them for several years:

> A man goes into a pizzeria and orders a pizza. The waiter asks him: "Should I cut it into eight or six pieces?" The man says: "Oh, six pieces, please. I'll never manage eight."

According to McGhee, children enjoy the jokes and cartoons most that correspond to their level of cognitive development.

1.1 Jokes

In the fifties, Wolfenstein, rooted in the tradition of psychoanalysis, examined white children between 4 and 17 at two New York private schools. She demonstrated the development stages children pass through in terms of form, style and understanding of joke communication. She recorded the first telling of standard jokes (1954, p. 16) at around the age of six. At first, the children confront each other with riddles:

> "With striking punctuality children seem to acquire a store of joking riddles at the age of six. As one six-year-old girl remarked: 'We didn't know any of these jokes last year.' At six or seven about three times as many joking riddles are told as jokes in any other form. In the following three years the percentage of riddles is a little over half. At eleven and twelve it is reduced to a third; riddles are being discarded in favor of anecdotes." (Wolfenstein, 1954, p. 94)

A riddle joke consists of simple question-and-answer patterns which are often absurd: "What is red with stripes? A tomato wearing braces (US: suspenders)."
Then narrative forms develop, becoming more and more complex (Wagner and Putz, 1995; Rasoloson, 1995). My recordings of children between the ages of 5 and 7 show that they learn at about school starting age how to handle the lead-up to the punch line, the special design of speech reproduction, complex tense management and other narrative strategies of jokes.
The pleasure they find in narrative jokes is accompanied by the ability to cope with indirectness and innuendo. 6- to 7-year-olds love to be allowed to say the dirty words used by the main characters in the joke. But, of course, many children in the first year of school are far from being perfect joke-tellers – as are quite a few adults, too.
The child is always more involved in telling the joke than in pulling off the punch line. He or she has to learn, for example, how to see through a long narrative unit and to ward off all the assaults on his/her right to speak.

2. Communication: framing and performance

Even before the child has completed the first year of his/her life, he/she can accomplish something that Bateson (1972) has observed in highly organised animals. The child can differentiate between framings, for example between a real fight and a

feigned fight in play. As *homo ludens* the child performs activities within a certain frame at an early age, learning to recognise framings in the process. The child frames his/her game as a game, frequently attributing an explicit framing designation such as: "Now I'll pretend to be Mum and you Dad." A small microcosm is thus created, a theatrical framework in which the contents stand for something else. Symbolisation takes place (Wygotski, 1973). Speaking is also set in a framework. In the example above little Mary comprehends very well that Auntie Elsie's indignation about the piece of banana she is denied is feigned. Auntie Elsie laughs for example. Laughing is a significant framing technique to indicate a non-serious nature (Kotthoff, 1998). The child with his or her knowledge of framing acquires a further decisive skill for humour development. Let's illustrate this further with the example of teasing and making fun.

2.1 Teasing and making fun in Mexico

In many cultures children are teased by adults. Referring to the example of two Mexican families living in California, Eisenberg (1986) illustrates how the children there are provoked in the form of teasing as well as the purpose of the latter in the families' routines.

A key feature of this provocative activity is to demonstrate at the same time to the children that they must not believe what has been said in jest. At first, adults express in a playful tone of voice something threatening such as: "Let's throw Marisa into the dustbin." They start laughing, the child is lifted up: chanting in exaggerated fashion, they indicate non-verbally with their smiling and laughing that only a playful threatening setting is being staged.

Affective threats often constitute the core of the provocation. The mother says, for example, that they are all going to Granddad's and that Nancy will have to stay at home by herself. After Nancy has got upset, it is expressively made clear to her that, of course, Nancy is coming along with them and that the family would never leave her on her own. With this teasing the children are at first threatened, but then the threat is eliminated and replaced by the opportunity to extend to each other mutual warmth, love and security.

At times playful acts of provocation are presented so convincingly that the child initially believes them and is actually deceived. It is regarded as particularly successful when the child at first "falls for it" and then realises that he/she has been taken in. In many cultures, teasing is in principle not deemed to be problematic; in fact, it serves to strengthen the family's sense of closeness and fundamental togetherness.

2.2 Teasing and making fun among the Kaluli

The sociolinguist Schieffelin (1986) presented in detail various framing techniques that allow Kaluli children in Papua New Guinea to distinguish between teasing and seriously meant verbal activities. Kaluli mothers, according to her research, often ask rhetorical questions which sound excessively threatening to the children ("Where are you climbing?" with the intention of stopping the child from climbing); the intonation of such questions is stressed and the pitch is high in order to gain the child's attention. Teasing is deployed in this case as a subtle form of manipulating the child. The teasing can assume such exaggerated dimensions that the children are upset and start crying. Despite there being no rules to establish when one "has gone too far," the message is clear. Similar to the Kaluli children, the Mexican children are slightly embarrassed by funny gibes when they misbehave, for example when failing to say hello. In this way they learn the cultural value of greeting.

In the course of time, children learn to recognise teasing and leg-pulling and to quickly react. Their initial reaction may then be a plain 'no' in order to stand up for themselves. The next step consists of reversing the classifications received. If someone says "Marisa is crazy," two-and-half-year-old Marisa shouts back: "No, you are!" A few months later the children themselves start to exchange highly routinised verbal and non-verbal forms of teasing. The singsong intonation is the first technique they learn to frame the activity.

3. Socialising: dealing with norms and values

Various studies on recent anthropological-sociolinguistic research have elaborated on the socialising function of teasing and leg-pulling. Teasing is attributed to the category transmission of the social value code.

Schieffelin (1986, p. 165) reports on the Kaluli society in Papua New Guinea that adults there prefer verbal manipulation by way of teasing and shaming to direct physical intervention. By means of systematic teasing children are implicitly inducted into the moral code of their society.

The fact that teasing is permitted in a relationship makes the relationship a familiar one, according to the old (German) saying: "Those who tease each other love each other."

> "Teasing can also establish collusion by creating alignments; inviting a child to help tease creates a special and valued closeness between that child and the adult who invites her into the relationship." (Eisenberg, 1986, p. 193)

Cognitive processes are crucial features in the production and reception of humour but do not guarantee the success of the joke; here emotional, communicative and social processes enter the scene. It is by no means the case that the child who can quickly produce or dissolve incongruences is

destined to become a great humorist. Many other factors, a number of which we have already examined, contribute towards the formation or consolidation of such a social role.
Sociolinguistics and social psychology have shed light on several factors related to the child's cultural and social environment which are relevant for his or her communication development.

3.1 Girls' and boys' humour

In the course of large-scale studies on children's humour development, McGhee discovered that boys and girls reveal considerable differences at the end of pre-school age (McGhee, 1977, 1979, 1980; Kotthoff, 1994). In his studies he stepped up his focus on the issue of when and in which form differences can be ascertained in the development of boys and girls and investigated possible explanations. During school age, boys were more frequently to be found in the role of the fun initiators in mixed groups and girls more in the role of so-called fun recipients. In sum, at school age boys made more jokes, did more fooling and clowning around and the girls laughed more often. In narrative sessions conducted at kindergarten in my research, the boys were more active in making funny interjections. More recent works no longer reveal these gender-specific differences (Kauke, 1996; Bönsch-Kauke, 2003). However, juveniles do in fact manifest gender-specific differences in their humour behaviour (Branner, 2003). Girls usually tell funny stories they have experienced whereas boys try to beat each other in levels of wittiness and obscene humour (Bönsch-Kauke, 2003). One reason for the gender-specific differences, for the degree of intensity they adopt in context is related to the societal approval of showing aggression. Boys use humour to show off as little bosses in the close circle of their friends. They attack other boys' stories, challenge them and distort the punch lines.
Boys and girls are frequently confronted with different humour contents by adults. Sociolinguists demonstrate how cultural values are transmitted via teasing. In the above-mentioned studies by Eisenberg and Schieffelin, girls were often teased by male relatives who described them as being ugly. The teasing episode ended up with the males stating that the girls were in fact pretty. Being pretty as the central value in women's development was thus implicitly indicated to the girls.

3.2 The use of wit as a means of self-defence

In many cultures, it is considered desirable for the children to learn verbal self-defence. Miller (1986) begins her article on teasing in an American white working-class community with the story told by a woman worker teased at school for receiving free school dinners (a sign of poverty). She told the researcher that one day she went up to the group of teasers and loudly proclaimed she very well knew that she got something free and the others did not. With this little performance she succeeded in upsetting the score and gaining the more favourable position. No longer was she the ridiculed poor girl; she openly acknowledged the fact that she was the one who received something for nothing. The result of her courageous reaction to the others' teasing was that she managed to transform a potentially distressing situation into an amusing one. This example illustrates how harmless humorous provocations can be and how smooth the borders between friendly and hostile humour activities are. In the working-class culture of South Baltimore humorous self-defence is regarded to be a significant educational goal.
Miller emphasises that the teasing themes in the children's socialisation process also reveal what is deemed to be important in the culture. In South Baltimore (and not only there) emotions, liking someone and love of babies represent key teasing themes in respect of girls. There creative language use is a desirable asset transmitted to all children.

3.3 First flirting endeavours

Teasing plays a significant role in encounters between older girls and boys, as this allows them to communicate interest in each other without showing any feelings (Eder, 1993). This is accompanied by close observation of who is standing next to whom and who looks over at whom. The situation is then exploited with joking fantasies ("Oh, Klaus's wearing a blue pullover. Just like Christa. Partner look! Don't you wanna hold hands?")
In teasing the borders between the sexes are clearly demarcated; frequent contact with the opposite sex is in itself the subject of teasing ("Franz is cleaning the blackboard with Lara again!"). The children make fun of each other by remarking that the other has a boyfriend or girlfriend. Particularly girls tend to joke about who has a crush on whom (Branner, 2003).

4. Handling taboos

Children undergo personal cleanliness education and learn the scatological and sexual norms of their society. They learn that faeces and sexuality are not topics of overt communication. Wolfenstein believes that this indirectness enhances the children's interest, providing them with a further impulse to integrate wordplays, double word meanings and rhyme structures into their jokes. Puns and other word association forms permit the child only to allude to taboo elements. Even if Wolfenstein's psychoanalytical approach is not always wholeheartedly shared, the fact remains that all children enter the phase of "wee-wee, botty and poo-poo" jokes:

"Let us sum up the phases in the development of the joke facade which we have observed. For a four-year-old, throwing water on someone is a joke. The only indirectness is the substitution of water for urine. A five-year-old tells a 'dirty joke' in which a little boy makes a peepee all over the floor. A seven-year-old tells the story of a little bear, in which the urgency to make water is justified by the unreasonable restrictions of the adults. The conflict with, and rebellion against authority enters into the joke content. An earlier element is retained in the actual wetting, which, however, is performed in a surprising way towards a victim who has been beguiled into foolish unwariness by the story." (Wolfenstein, 1954, p. 167)

When making jokes, we do not assume full responsibility for what we have said (1954, p. 168). Young children play with sounds as an end itself, an activity later joined by double associations. Their development proceeds from games with sounds, morphemes and words to playing with meanings and larger structures. Sex jokes are highly popular during prepuberty, for example. They permit children to reveal everything they know about sexuality without their having to explicitly refer to the subject. Humour forms are also used to come to terms with violence. Children's use of oral poetic remarks such as little rhymes, counting-out rhymes, hand-clapping rhymes, plays-on-words, jokes, songs, teasing or I'll-catch-you rhymes are still today part and parcel of children's folklore and fulfil several functions – ranging from mood-boosting to rage management –, particularly in groups. And yet they constitute only one part of children's poetics. Children of different age levels constantly create new forms and orally experiment with language in a variety of ways (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1976).

5. Conclusion

Humour and joking play a significant role in the children's world. In a variety of ways, they have lots of fun playing with forms and norms. In the process they test relationships, provoke and stand up for each other, turn boring discussions into interesting ones, allow their imagination full rein and share its fruits with others. They mock and jeer, refer to taboo subjects, they are cheeky, they experiment with faecal language, imitate each other and adults, play the clown, mess about and create absurdities. It is clearly revealed that the themes relevant for children differ from adults' and that quite a few joke forms elude their immediate comprehension. The adults' approach towards children's humour often lacks acknowledgement. We are quick to dismiss what they do as annoying childishness, which on closer observation absolutely makes sense amid any nonsense. ■

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