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Pigeonholing comic elements in children's TV

TV producers employ certain strategies in a conscious effort to evoke laughter from their target audience. While watching, it is up to the recipients to respond to what is on offer, to get involved with the comedy or to reject parts of the programme or the whole of it. In this article, we want to present a systematic account of elementary "ingredients" of humour communication strategies, in short: humour techniques in children's comedy.[1]

Comic elements are the focal points for humorous communication. They are constructed on different levels of the media text, and may build on each other (Mikos, 2003, p. 141). Since a perception of (subjective) humour is evoked by a discrepancy between the perceived content and the expectations derived from one's own experience, our criteria for determining comic elements is "potential funniness" of an element in terms of incongruity (cf. McGhee, 1977, and Kotthoff, and Lyon for an account on how humour relates to incongruity, in this issue). We approached the issue of humour in media texts not only from a reception perspective (cf. Götz, and Götz et al. in this issue) but also from the text itself which provides offers for humour communication.[2] The research question was: How is humour written into the text? In philological, psychological and media research, some typologies of strategy for invoking humour have

been established. Many humour typologies are based on (adult) jokes or funny conversations, e. g. Berger (1993), Röhrich (1977), and Kotthoff (2003), and even typologies of humour techniques in psychotherapeutical interventions exist (Schreiner, 2003, p. 260-262). An account of schoolchildren's conversational humour and joking is presented by Bönsch-Kauke (2003), who extracts 14 categories from content analysis of humorous interactions, e. g. children's behaviour (grotesque-clownesque/parodic/satirical), quality of humour (irony, jest, teasing or mockery); function of humour, e. g. participants and location of the humour communication, and so on.

The only typology of humour in audiovisual media to date is that by Buijzen, and Valkenburg (2004) who refer to Berger's categories and expand these by categories drawn from the analysis of humorous TV commercials directed at children and adults. They elaborate seven main categories of humour in TV: slapstick, clownish humour, surprise, misunderstanding, irony, satire, and parody comprising in total 41 humour techniques.

Our classification of comic elements originates from a sequential content analysis of children's animation and live action programmes.[3] This typology has so far proved to be effective for analysing children's humorous programmes from different cultural contexts. We now move on to describe the different levels and categories of comic elements and elaborate on this list by giving characteristic examples

from (internationally known) comic programmes for children.

The elements can be grouped on different levels of complexity of the funny text while they do not occur mutually exclusively. The most basic level of incongruity is the aesthetic level which can be perceived straightforwardly via the actual image or sound, followed by the level of funny action in a short scene. In a next step, there is the level of language, wordplays or jokes in one sentence or a little chat. The level of narration typically comprises several connected scenes where characters are shown in relationship with each other. Two more levels deal, respectively, with character and intertextual correlations.

Level 1: Aesthetics

On the most basic level, the properties of objects are a major source of humour: images or sounds that display a clear deviation from the (expected) norm. What differs from an expected standard can be a still or a single sound

or a single noise. The recipient constructs the meaning as funny on the basis of the seen/heard object. Comic elements on an aesthetic level are:

- Technical effects (like fish-eye camera, slow motion),
- Sound and/or background music (comic voices, comic score, canned laughter),
- Comical sounds or noise (e. g. the sounding of a gong to a hit on a character's head),
- Exaggerated movements,
- Temporary body deformation (e. g. a woman turning into a hurricane in *Pink Panther*),
- A funny still/visual humour (e. g. *Pucca*: little hearts symbolise being in love) and
- A spectacular picture (like an explosion or a stunt).

Level 2: Action

Funniness on the level of action is created by deviation from the standard at the smallest unit of action. Usually, this is a short scene of a few seconds duration. The humour here is based on the relation between several objects. Relevant comic elements are:

- Absurdity: The action runs counter to our everyday experience (although it is not a lie), e. g. *Looney toon* characters who run over the edge of an abyss without immediately falling down.
- Exaggeration: the displayed action is clearly over- or understated (e. g. Angela Anaconda who dreams of catching a great fish with a fishing rod suddenly hooks a whale-sized fish).
- Kidding/jabberwocky: The action is (amusing) nonsense (e. g. the dog Gromit from *Wallace & Gromit* is shooting porridge instead of bullets from a gun).
- Little mishaps in the sense of slapstick (e. g. TV shows featuring se-

lected home-videos of minor accidents).
- Juicy issues are (for children) love, kissing, sex in the sense of intimacy (e. g. Pucca who is constantly chasing her crush and trying to kiss him).
- Toilet humour/scatological humour: displaying genital body parts, belching, farting, throwing up, etc. (e. g. SpongeBob ripping his underpants or blowing soap bubbles which produce fart noises when they burst).

Level 3: Language/ wordplay/joke

Deviations from the norm are based on speech, usually occurring in form of a sentence or a small portion of speech. Normally, something would be expressed differently, and this deviation constitutes fun. Comic elements based on speech are:

- Repetition of the same words (e. g. Angela Anaconda is dreaming of breaking all fishing records in fishing)
- Alliterations (e. g. Angela Anaconda commenting: "Oh, my brainless brothers seem to be snared up in some seaweed.")
- Ambiguousness and double meanings (e. g. SpongeBob telling his friend on the beach: "Hey Sandy, I am sandy!").
- Taking something literally (e. g. the human animated character Wallace says to his dog partner Gromit after his successful jailbreak: "They are gonna hunt you down – *like a dog*!").
- Catachresis/illogical metaphor (e. g. SpongeBob: "What a great day! The sun is shining, the water is clear, and scallops twitter," instead of swallows).
- Jokes (a character/presenter tells a joke, e. g. a little narration with a punch line that usually plays with the expectations of the audience.

- Irony (a character says one thing, means the opposite, and to everyone it should be clear the contrary holds true, e. g. Squidward Tentacles frequently uses irony on SpongeBob and Patrick although they never understand it).

Level 4: Narration

On the narrative level, humour is generated in the course of consecutive scenes that bring objects or characters into a relationship or a context. Possible comic elements are:

- Practical jokes in form of deliberate teasing, a prototypical example is *Tom & Jerry*.
- Play with expectations: The viewer is anticipating a certain action. Inferring from preceding scenes, he/she is prepared for a special event. If the expected event happens, it is funny. But if the actual event does not correspond to the expectation of it, this happens to be even funnier. In the animation series *Pink Panther*, a woman digs a pit to catch the Pink Panther and he is expected to fall into it, but doesn't. Instead, the woman herself is shown falling into her own trap. This scene serves as a good example for another comic element, too:
- Restoration of justice: Harm set, harm get! An innocent character experiences an awkward situation, and suddenly there is a loophole and/or the bad character who had set the trap gets punished. Justice is restored because the "good" character wins out in the end.
- Play with hierarchies: a little hero challenges his/her seniors, authorities, or a stronger person. Examples are the main protagonist Andy of *What's with Andy?* who plays his tricks on adults and on stronger peers, and Roseanne's children who are constantly struggling against their mother's authority.

- Failure of a plan: A scheme is rendered unsuccessful from the point of view of the main character of the scene who has hatched the plan.

Character

A comic character displays incongruities which makes him/her look or sound especially funny (e. g. Sponge-Bob Squarepants, or Doug in *King of Queens*) or act funny (e. g. irreverent prankster Andy of *What's with Andy?* or the supernatural powers of the female teenager Raven which lead to amusing entanglements in *That's so Raven*). Character traits of comic characters are likely to be exaggerated or little quirks and/or tics over-emphasised to increase funniness (e. g. Pippi Longstocking who is virtually fearless and completely unaffected by adult authority). What is more, comic programmes frequently feature two main characters with opposed physical and/or character traits (e. g. Tom & Jerry, Stan and Ollie, Ernie and Bert of *Sesame Street*) and spark gags out of this encounter. Comic elements applying to a character have to be detailed individually in the categories "physical appearance," "behaviour," "character traits," and "dramaturgical conflict(s)."

Intertextuality

Elements of a particular programme are often related to elements of other programmes/media texts (e. g. parodies of genres). Intertextuality can be affiliated on either level of our typology, i. e.

- Aesthetics (e. g. a parody on the *Teletubbies*: the protagonists are dressed up like – tubbies but have beards),
- Action (e. g. cross-medial reference of Gromit in jail reading a copy of *Crime and Punishment* by Fido Dogstoyevsky),
- Language, character or narration (e. g. play with expectations: threatening a person with a rolling pin, which alludes to other films where people get hit with a rolling pin). In a parody, comic elements on different levels can add up to increase comedy. An example is the above-mentioned *Teletubbies* parody: not only do the protagonists look odd or amusing, they also behave contrary to the manner of the innocuous *Teletubby* characters in that they are trying to rob a bank.

Generally speaking, co-occurring comic elements (on different levels) in a sequence can reinforce one another and add to the overall humour. Furthermore, comic elements on different levels provide a humorous framing of a programme, assuring the audience in that it is safe to respond to the offer of humour communication and to laugh.[4]   ■

five minutes were analysed by splitting up the story line in sequences of different length which contained the smallest unit of action. These sequences were then evaluated in terms of elements of humour.

4 *An example for a transgression of the comic universe passing into horror is the animation programme* Happy Tree Friends *which is explicitly not directed at children. In the programme, comic framing (sound, animation style) is mixed with strong graphic violence.*

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NOTES

1 *Based on the results of several years of research work conducted by the IZI team: Head of research: Maya Götz, main contributors: Carolina Gollner, Ralf Schauer, Elke Schlote.*
A first compilation of elements of humour was extracted from analyses of interviews with children and producers for the IZI Humour Study in 2002 (cf. Götz, and Gollner in this issue). The list of comic elements has since been extended and systematised by media analyses of children's programmes used in the International Humour Study (cf. Götz et al. in this issue).
2 *Comic elements are offers, and thus appreciated differently by individuals.*
3 *Country-specific and international children's programmes were chosen as specimen for children's TV:* Angela Anaconda *(USA), a homevideo show (Israel),* Wallace and Gromit – A Close Shave *(Great Britain),* Pink Panther *(USA),* Open a Door in South Africa *(South Africa),* Tabaluga tivi *(Germany),* Der Schuh des Manitu *(Manitou's Shoe) (Germany). From each programme, approx.*

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