Humor Theory

- Joke Contexts

  - Jokes often uttered within particular social contexts -- party atmosphere, stand up routine, etc.

  - Jokes make use of familiar introductions that cue the following as a joke.
    - *Did you hear the one about...*
    - *A priest, a rabbi and a Minister...*
    - *Yo' mama's so...*

  - Jokes may have highly codified/formulaic structures

Humor Theory

- Examples of formulaic jokes:
  - Little Willie jokes:
    - sparked by *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes* - Graham 1899 (Gruner)

    (1)   *Willie poisoned his father's tea;*
            Father died in agony.
            Mother came, and looked quite vexed:
            'Really, Will,' she said, 'what next?

    (2)   *Willie fell down the elevator--*
            Wasn't found till six days later.
            Then the neighbors sniffed, 'Gee whizz!
            What a spoiled child Willie is.'

Humor Theory

− Little Audrey jokes - emerged 1930′s

Basic format: Little Audrey is involved in some terrible catastrophe but always finds some humor in every situation.

Little Audrey got lost on a desert island. Along came a bunch of cannibals and kidnapped her. They tied her to a tree and started their pot to boiling. Little Audrey knew they were going to make stew of her; so she looked around at those lean, hungry cannibals and counted them. There were nineteen. *Little Audrey just laughed and laughed*, 'cause she knew she was not big enough to make enough stew to go around.

Humor Theory

- Other Familiar formats
  - "knock knock" jokes

  - *How many X does it take to screw in a light bulb?*

  - *You might be a redneck if...*

    - *Anyone in your family died right after saying "hey, watch this"*
    - *You've been remarried 3 times and still have the same in laws*
    - *You walk to school with your 10 year old son because you're both in the same grade.*
    - *You go to your family reunion to meet women.*

Humor Theory

- Classes of people represent particular qualities within jokedom

    - Various ethnicities
        Alcoholic, cheap, stupid, complaining, lazy, dirty

    - Professions
        Unethical - lawyers, politicians
        Money grubbing - lawyers, doctors
        Too ethical - clergy

    - Other
        Blonds - stupid, promiscuous
        Mothers-in-law - complaining, difficult
        Children - naivete, but also sexual precociousness

Humor Theory

- Elements of humor
  - Incongruity
  - Resolution
  - Challenge (Resolution is effortful)
  - Derision
  - Tension & release
  - Familiar joke themes (sex, alcohol, bodily functions,etc.)
  - Familiar joke targets (politicians, lawyers, blonds, etc.)
  - Familiar joke cues & scripts ("knock knock", "did you hear...", etc.)

Scalar Humor

- Scalar Humor (Bergen & Binsted)

    – I was such an ugly kid that when I was born the doctor slapped my *face*
    – Your sister's so ugly she makes onions cry
    – Yo' mama's so old her birth certificate says 'expired' on it.

Scalar Humor

- Playing the Dozens

  - A battle of verbal insults
  - Exchange of 'snaps'

    - Insults often making use of form:
      - X is so Y that Z is the case
      - Typically insulting family members, especially mother

Scalar Humor

- *X is so Y that Z* construction

- *X is such a Y thing that Z*

  - X is person or object

  - Y is scalar quality

  - Z is proposition which provides evidence of X being very Y

  - X is causally linked to Z

Scalar Humor

– Non-joke and joke forms have same basic structure

1. It was so cold where I live, we found dogs huddling for warmth

2. It was so cold in New York that flashers in Central Park were just describing themselves.

Scalar Humor

- Scalar comprehension

  - Scalar qualities are those viewed as having a range of possible values
    - Tall, short, big, small, thick, thin, hot, cold

  - As opposed to binary qualities which are viewed as being either present or absent
    - Dead, alive, male, female

Scalar Humor

- Scalar qualities are judged within particular contexts
  - It's cold in Hawaii (but not Alaska) when it's 40 degrees F.

- *X is so Y that Z* construction is sensitive to context
  - *It was cold in the arctic circle that we found frost on the lettuce.

Scalar Humor

– Comprehension of *X is so Y that Z* construction involves two scales.

- X is ranked high on a scale of Y
- Z is ranked in terms of exceptionality as applied to X (or X's kind)

It was so cold outside that dogs were huddling together for warmth.
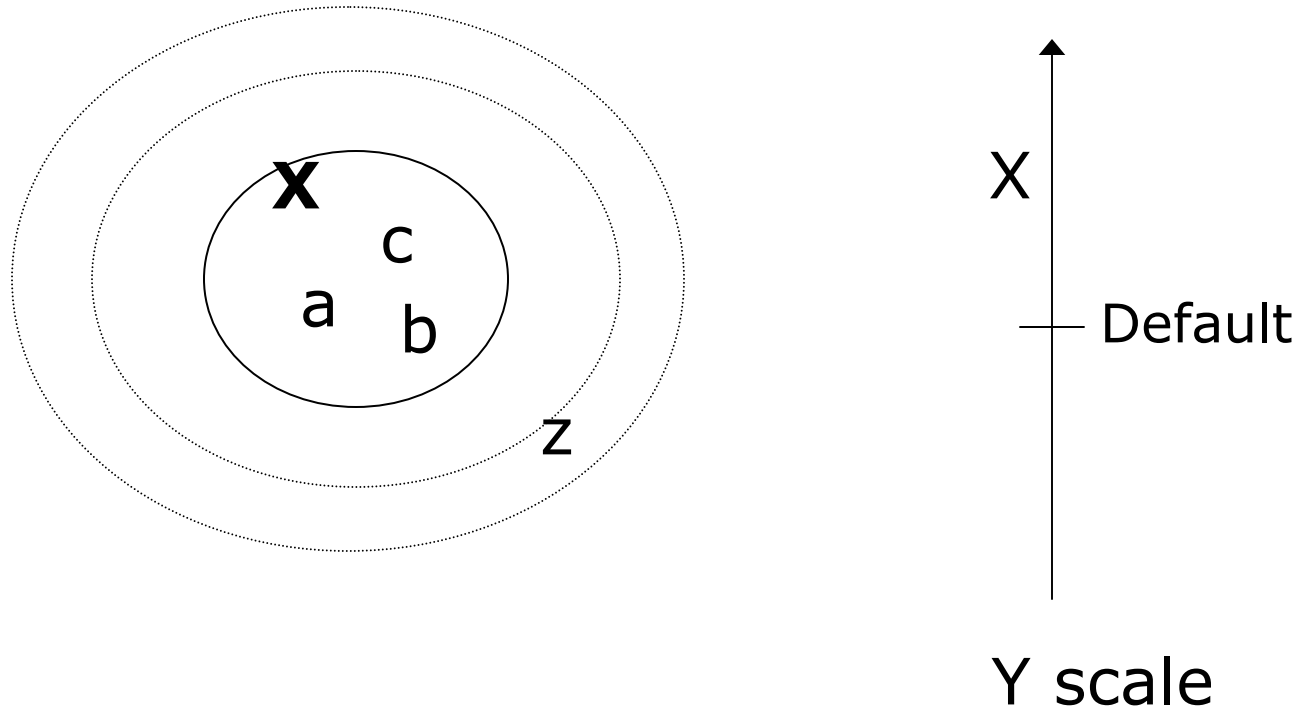
X = it = outside (local)

Y = cold

Z = dogs huddling together for warmth

Scalar Humor

– *It was so cold that dogs were huddled together for warmth*
– *He's so tall that he always has to duck going through doorways*

Scalar Humor

- Joke form of *X is so Y that Z* offers incongruity and resolution

    – Expectation for non-funny sentence is that Y will be an extreme, but possible situation in which X is depicted as being very Y
        - It was so cold that dogs were huddled together for warmth

    – Joke form presents a case of Y that is incongruous by its departure from expectation.

Scalar Humor

- Incongruity often the result of one of the following:

    - Hyperbole
    - Understatement
    - Indirect Relations
        - Polysemy
        - Idiom reanalysis
        - Metaphor
        - Puns
        - Imagery

Scalar Humor

- Hyperbole

  - Incongruity is a result of viewing Z as an impossible (fantastic) or extremely unlikely situation for X
  - Resolution occurs as X can still be viewed as causally related to Z

  - *Yo' Mama's so fat, she gets runs in her jeans.*
  - *Yo' Mama's so fat, she has smaller fat women orbiting around her*
  - *Yo' Mama's so fat, a picture of her fell off the wall.*

Scalar Humor

- Understatement

  - Incongruity occurs because Z is seen as very un-extreme in general -- contrary to regular pattern
  - Resolution occurs because Z can be viewed as extreme within a narrower context

  - *It was so cold last week in Hawaii that I had to put on socks*

Scalar Humor

- Indirect Relation - Polysemy

    - Incongruity is a result of Z having a default interpretation that does not fit the expected pattern
    - Resolution occurs as another interpretation is discovered that does fit

    - *Yo' mama's so dumb, they had to burn down the school to <u>get her out</u> of the second grade*

Scalar Humor

- Indirect Relation - Idiom Reanalysis

    - *Yo' mama's so fat, she can't even jump to a conclusion*

    - *Yo' mama's so fat, when she hauls ass, she has to make two trips.*

Scalar Humor

- Indirect Relation - Idiom Reanalysis

  - *Yo' mama's so fat, she can't even jump to a conclusion*
  - *Yo' mama's so fat, when she hauls ass, she has to make two trips.*

  - Incongruity - default idiom interpretation does not present Z as extreme example of Y
  - Resolution - Literal interpretation of idiom required to make sense of Z within construction

Scalar Humor

- Indirect Relation - Metaphor

    - *It was so cold, I saw a bunch of Eskimos using Hillary Clinton for heat*
    - *Yo' Mama's so fat, she has smaller fat women orbiting around her*

Scalar Humor

- Indirect Relation - Metaphor

    - *It was so cold, I saw a bunch of Eskimos using Hillary Clinton for heat*
    - *Yo' Mama's so fat, she has smaller fat women orbiting around her*

    - Incongruity - Z's literal interpretation does not make sense
    - Resolution - Z interpreted metaphorically does.

Scalar Humor

- Indirect Relation - Puns

  - Yo mama's so fat, she went on a light diet…As soon as it's light she starts eating.
  - Yo mama's so fat, she ain't on a diet, she's on a triet…She be like "What ya'll eating?   I'll try it!"

  - Sentence starts out looking like standard *X is so Y that Z* constructions (no incongruity)
  - Humor comes when pun is explained and Z is understood in a new way that also fits but uses hyperbole

Scalar Humor

- Indirect Relation - Imagery

  - Shared imagery between Z and Y

    - It was cold last night! I was so cold I was rubbing my hands faster than Dick Cheney on an Enron payday.

Scalar Humor

- Imagery in Z can create new incongruities (absurdities) that may enhance the appreciation of humor in the joke.

Incongruity in image created

– *Yo' mama is so fat that she has other fat people orbiting around her.*

No incongruity in imagery created

– *It was so cold yesterday that I saw a lawyer with his hands in his own pockets.*