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 get her out 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.*