The Language of Humor: Navajo

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1. Introduction

We all laugh at jokes, exchange humorous stories for entertainment and information, tease one another, and trade clever insults for amusement on a daily basis. Scientists have told us that laughing is good for our health. But what makes something funny? Prior definitions of humor, like this one by Victor Raskin (1985), have categorized humor as a universal human trait:

> "responding to humor is part of human behavior, ability or competence, other parts of which comprise such important social and psychological manifestations of *homo sapiens* as language, morality, logic, faith, etc. Just as all of those, humor may be described as partly natural and partly acquired" (Raskin 1985: 2).

The purpose and end result of humor, much like that of language, is the externalization of human thought and conceptualization. This externalization carries multiple meanings, partly as an outlet to express certain emotions, partly as a social device, and partly as an exercise of the intellect. The active engagement of this human ability allows some to earn their livelihood from a career in making jokes. Thus, there is the possibility in a culture to broadcast one's own personal opinion and world view in a series of jokes. Chafe explains that this is an intrinsic attribute of *Homo sapiens*; it is "The essence of human understanding: the ability to interpret particular experiences as manifestations of lager encompassing systems" (1994: 9). Humor acts to level the field, allowing people who identify with each other to create social groups. As Raskin points out, "It seems to be generally recognized that the scope and degree of mutual understanding in humor varies directly with the degree to which the participants share their social backgrounds" (1985: 16). This understanding, as part of the collective, is what creates the shared common ground and knowledge base that are the foundation for culture. Thus humor becomes a voice of the people, spoken in many instances under many contexts. It is a means for us to transmit experience and claim values to one another while also highlighting solidarity and shared identity.

The intersection between humor and language is rife with complex cognitive, cultural, and social variables that all work together to create a very specific sort of understanding between people. Prior theories of humor have been unable to establish clear criteria for what is or can be funny. However, the realms of cognition, culture and society are deeply intertwined in this phenomenon.

Humor is, for example, steeped in and shaped by culture. The experiences that we share as members of a culture are the basis for jokes, humorous observations, puns,

ironies, satires, and punchlines that strike us as amusing. In researching the humor of languages across widely differing cultures, language families, and typologies, we can better understand the linguistic, cognitive, and cultural influences on humor, and see these same influences as reflections of the culture through humor. From language emanates the very essence of the world view encoded in a joke or story, and in its realm the abstract is given form and transmitted to others.

In what follows, we examine joking and humor in Navajo. We will demonstrate that the way a joke is structured, the rhetorical devices that are manipulated, and the relationship between a language's word formation strategies and humor all fall within the sphere of linguistic analysis. Jokes yield insight into the structure of the language being spoken, and by very close relation, to the people that are speaking that language. We begin with an overview of Navajo grammar.

2. The Navajo Language

Navajo is a Southern Athabaskan language spoken in New Mexico and Arizona. A polysynthetic language, Navajo is related to other Apachean languages in the Southwest and other Athabaskan languages in the north. Navajo sentences employ Subject Object Verb order. The majority of meaning is concentrated in the verb in this language. Some of the prefixes that attach to the verb stem include number, subject and object pronoun markers, negative, valence, and mode. There is a set of classificatory verb stems which specify what type of object is being talked about, whether round, flat and flexible, long and thin, etc. Leonard M. Faltz provides a diagram of the verb structure of Navajo in the following diagram (1998: 10):

outer prefixes + plural + object prefix + inner prefixes + subject prefix + cl + stem

When looking at humor in Navajo it is important to understand the phonology and morphology of the language. Following is a general sketch of the most important aspects of Navajo in these regards.

In Navajo, vowels have phonemic tone (high vs. low), nasality, and length. Examples (1) - (3) show that high tone is marked in Navajo.
Examples:
(1)   Yootó
        'Santa Fe'

(2)   jóhonaa'éí'
        'sun'

(3)   tł'éhonaa'éí
        'moon'

The minimal pair below is an example of nasality as a contrastive feature.
Compare the final vowel in words (4) and (5).

(4)   dii
        'this'

(5)   díį́
        'four'

Vowel length is illustrated in examples (6) - (9). Notice that nasal vowels can be long or short as well, as in the second syllable in example (7).

(6)   hágoóne'
        'good bye'

(7)   ashǫǫdé
        'please'

(8)   yiiyiiyą
        'she ate it'

(9)   naané'
        'play'

(10)   łéíchąą'í
        'dog'

Navajo also has some consonants which are less common in languages of the world as well, such as the voiceless lateral fricative /ɬ/, transcribed as [ɬ]. This sound is found in the transcriptions of the words (10), (11), and (12). When the [ɬ] is word initial, it tends to become velarized, as in (10) and (11). This is possibly a result of coarticulation. When preceded by a possessive prefix, the voiceless lateral fricative becomes a voiced lateral approximant or [l], as shown in example (13).

(11)   łeezh
        'dirt'

(12)   ałwosh
        'sleep'

(13)   shileichąą
        'my dog'

Glottal stops and ejectives occur relatively often in various positions. A glottal stop is both a phoneme, /'/, as in (10), and a characteristic of other phonemes, such as the /t'/ in example (15). Example (14) shows instances of both representations of glottal stops. It can also be seen in word final position such as (9). In Navajo, the phoneme /t/ is

often highly affricated, which is the sound $[t^x]$ in (16), and it is also found palatalized before front vowels, which is the sound $[t^y]$ in example (17). Both are represented by the grapheme <t>.

    (14)   yá'át'ééh
             'hello'

    (15)   at'ééd
             'girl'

    (16)   tó
             'water'

    (17)   tin
             'íce'

The phoneme transcribed as /d/, word finally in example (15), is actually an unaspirated voiceless alveolar.

Morphologically, Navajo employs a number of bound and free morphemes to convey information within the language. Some of the free morphemes in this language include nouns, adjectives, and deictics. Verb stems are not free morphemes, and cannot stand alone to convey meaning. Adjectives are expressed as verbs. The order of elements in the sentence is SOV, as in examples and come after subjects in examples (18), (19), and (20) below, though it should be noted that in example (20), the adjective 'old' no longer has the meaning of aged, but is closer to the idea of a maternal relationship. Examples:

(18)	éí	łéíchąą'í'	yoinildiil
	that	dog	huge
	'that dog is big'		

(19)	dii	sits'a	nidaz
	this	box	heavy
	'this box is heavy'		

(20)	shimasaani	a'tsi	yiist'e'
	my-mother-old	meat	cooked
	'my grandmother cooked the meat'		

The majority of meaning is concentrated on the verb in this language. Examples (21), (22), and (23) include analyses of the verb and all its prefixes:

(21)	adisk'ǫ́ǫ́s		
	adi-	-s-	-k'ǫ́ǫ́s
	reflexive	1p sg. subj.	verb stem 'stretch'

'I am stretching.'

(22)   na'isht'ó'
         na'-   -i-   -sh-   -t'ó'
         repeatedly   asp.   1p sg. subj.   verb stem 'suck'
         'I am smoking.'

(23)   aa'dilzhéé
         aa'di-   -l-   -zhéé
         reflexive   cl./val.   verb stem 'shave'
         'He is shaving himself.'

   Because of the rich morphological structure of verbs in Navajo, words that vary only slightly in sound can have very different meanings, and this fact is exploited in producing humor. These strategies will be described in the next section, along with their consequences for humor in jokes. The ability to use language with a metacommunicative purpose, such as making a joke, is based on the idea that the speaker and hearer share enough social and cultural context, i.e. common background and information, so that the utterance is understood as humorous.

3. Linguistic Strategies in Joking

   In order to speak about humor, certain terminology must be defined. For the purposes of this paper, we distinguish between formal humor and informal humor. These definitions parallel Raskin's idea of intentional and unintentional humor. However, based on the functionalist idea that discourse is never unintentional, we have instead highlighted the differences between structuralized occurrences of humor, and those that arise spontaneously in interaction, and describe these two categories of humor in the following section. Next, in order to approach the question of why and how something is funny, we provide some discussion of common types of verbal humor, including puns, sarcasm, etc. Finally, we present the semantic methodology by which we analyze why certain ideas, coded in words and phrases, strike the hearer as funny or amusing.
   Because of the complex relationship between what we say and what we imagine, it is necessary to analyze humor semantically and we propose, in section 3.3, a theoretical framework for explanation that incorporates frame semantics (Fillmore 1975) and a theory of mental spaces (Fauconnier 1994) in social interaction. Fauconnier distinguishes between the base space, the mutually known world of the interlocutors, or the reality space, and other proposed fictional spaces, that is, between the real world (as speakers and hearers see it) and the discourse world. As Croft and Cruse put it, "just as words and constructions evoke semantic frames/domains, words and constructions also build spaces" (2004: 34). Our framework also includes Lakoff's approach to categorization (1987), which we use to create a Linguistic Map of the categorization of humor in the Navajo language. This allows us to identify the most common type of humor in Navajo and explain its linguistic attributes. By looking at the phonology, morphology, semantics

and syntax of Navajo, we will present those characteristics of Navajo which are used and manipulated the most in humorous exchanges. Doing so not only allows us to study the linguistic characteristics of the language, but also allows us to examine closely the salient social and cultural ties within the community.

3.1 Formal vs. Informal humor

Jokes are a formal expression of humor. Formal humor is a premeditated effort to create amusement and is dependent on a correct delivery. As pointed out by Katharina Barbe in *Irony in Context*, jokes are not copyrighted and "as they are based on comparable human experiences, [they] recycle. Similar to metaphors and idioms, jokes are told, heard, told again, forgotten, reworked or even reinvented" (1995: 95). As such, jokes are formulaic, shared across languages and across time and easily recognized by their structure and content. Knock-knock jokes, as well as the nearly infinite answers to the "Why did the chicken cross the road?" question are all easily understood to be jokes by members of a common culture. What are today blonde jokes used to be Pollack jokes, just like a myriad of other jokes where the punchlines remain the same while the names, races, and gender of the characters change as needed. In terms of formal humor, the joke acts as the prototype, the prescribed form in which to create humor.

Situational humor is an informal expression of humor that is dependent on context. Jokes can and do exist within informal humor, but the funniness of an informal situation is based on a greater understanding and shared common knowledge. The punchline to a joke, then, can be part of a funny informal situation, but is not the only or necessarily funniest part of the whole. Situational humor is of a spontaneous nature; it can be created inadvertently or on purpose with a well-placed witty remark. Situational humor is marked by its reliance on quick thinking, and creative and inventive use of language. Sarcasm, puns, double entendres and irony are often the devices used in situational humor. Another characteristic of informal humor is that it cannot be replicated easily or successfully, since the context, just like the words, is transitory and always changing. This characterizes the "you had to be there" nature of situationally funny stories, many of which are not amusing in the least to those who were not present.

3.2 Categories of Verbal Humor

The way humor is transmitted is through a specific use of a linguistic structure. Following are terms that will connect familiar notions within humor to a linguistic explanation. Doing so allows a deeper analysis of how words and sounds are used in the creation of a funny utterance.

Linguistically speaking, puns present a dichotomy between two words that are very similar. This can be due to homonymy, which is broken down into homophony, words that sound the same, and homography, words that are written the same. Additionally, paronymy presents two words that are phonetically or semantically very similar, though not exact duplicates as in homophony. According to Attardo (1994: 114), puns can also include polysemy and antonymy. Puns are also present in non-spoken

languages such as ASL, where similarity can occur in any of the four phonemic parameters (location, hand shape, movement, and orientation). Puns emerge as a very important element in Navajo humor, where, later in our paper, we will demonstrate that word play and misunderstanding between two phonetically similar words are common in Navajo jokes.

Irony has everything to do with speaker intentions; there is a surface meaning and an underlying meaning, which sometimes intersect. Depending on situational context, the addressee may or may not be aware of this. Sometimes a speaker's tone can mark an ironic statement. Two examples, taken from Barbe (1995: 24 & 41) are: "I love people who signal" and "I love people who don't signal." In the first example, the underlying and surface meanings are the same, and both statements function as an indirect way of telling a driver what you think he should do. Irony can be used as an indirect insult, but between friends with no insult intended, the results can be humorous.

Sarcasm often occurs along with irony. In a sarcastic statement, similar to irony, the surface meaning of a speaker's statement does not match the underlying meaning, and this can be marked by tone of voice. This can lead to confusion if the addressee does not realize that the statement was not made in all seriousness.

Incongruity is a form of surprise. Not all surprises are funny; physical pain, for instance, is sometimes funny but not always in good taste (Weiner 1996: 141). In our linguistic analysis of humor, incongruity can arise from something unexpected or nonsensical entering one of our normal frames of reference. "How would you fit four elephants in a VW bug? Two in the front seat, two in the back" (1996: 143). This joke violates an expected property of our common frame of elephants, namely their size. "This riddle is funny because it leads the hearer to try to solve a problem of incompatible sizes. The punchline causes a salient feature of elephants to be ignored after which the resolution of the problem becomes trivial" (Ibid).

3.3 Theoretical framework

In this section, we discuss the theoretical framework we propose for analyzing humor in Navajo, beginning with an overview of frame semantics, and then concluding with an summary of work by Lakoff and others on cognitive categorization.

A **frame** can be defined as a "coherent region of conceptual space" (Croft and Cruse 2004: 14). Fillmore defines it as "any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any one of them, you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits" (cited in Croft and Cruse 2004: 15). A basic definition of frame semantics is provided by Fillmore (1975: 123):

> "[P]eople associate certain <u>scenes</u> with certain linguistic <u>frames</u>. I use the word <u>scene</u> in a maximally general sense, including not only visual scenes but also familiar kinds of interpersonal transactions, standard scenarios defined by the culture, institutional structures, enactive experiences, body image, and, in general, any kind

> of coherent segment of human beliefs, actions, experiences
> or imaginings. I use the word <u>frame</u> for any system of
> linguistic choices—the easiest cases being collections of
> words, but also including choices of grammatical rules or
> linguistic categories—that can get associated with
> prototypical instances of scenes."

As Fillmore explains, frames are the sets of ideas, linguistic and non-linguistic, that is, words and mental imagery, which are triggered when we hear a word, phrase, or set of utterances. According to Croft and Cruse, our understandings are complex: in a frame semantic analysis, for example, "*man, boy, woman,* and *girl* evoke frames that include not just the biological sexual distinction but also differences in attitudes and behavior toward the sexes . . ." (2004: 9)

These frames are formed out of our experience in the culture and society around us. They are shaped from the time we are born and redefined throughout our day-to-day interactions with our environment. The hearer's expectation, once a frame is activated, is that it will match sufficiently with what the speaker is saying to create a common understanding. Likewise, a speaker's choice of words reflects her own expectation of the hearer activation of overlapping frames in the hearer's mind. This is in keeping with the speaker/hearer expectations that Grice has outlined in his maxims, those of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner. It is often just these expectations that are actively and purposefully violated in humor.

Categorization and Prototypes:

Lakoff expands on Rosch's well-known prototype theory in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (1987). According to prototype theory, some examples of words may be more central and/or more basic than others. The most basic, central example is termed the prototype of the category. In order to fit into the category, another example need not match all the characteristics of a check-list, it only has to be a reasonable match to the prototype. Rosch's (1975) experiments explored what people had in mind when they used words which refer to specific categories of items. Respondents rated items as better or worse examples of particular categories (e.g., the most "doggy" dog or the most "birdy" bird). In order tasks, she checked response time for respondents to verify category membership. Results on all tests were very consistent, and agreement was very high. When people categorize objects they seem to have in mind some idea of the characteristics of an ideal exemplar, a prototype. This notion of prototype is important in frame theory as well. According to Fillmore (1975), frames impose structure on areas of human experience, and in some cases, those areas of experience are prototypes.

In addition to the conceptualization of prototypes such as birds, cars and other "nouny" nouns, Lakoff (1987) states that we can conceptualize other linguistic categories in the same way. As he explains, linguistic categories also have asymmetries within themselves and gradations away from the "best example." One asymmetry in linguistic category is markedness, which is the smallest level of a prototype effect. In morphology, markedness relates to whether a word is the basic instance of the meaning. For example,

in English, plurals are considered to be marked, (Lakoff 1987: 59) since the majority of our nouns are used in the singular form, and plural is used to specifically denote more than one. Markedness is also found in phonology. For example, voiced consonants (unless it is between two vowels) and voiceless vowels are both considered to be less common. This result is also found when looking at other larger asymmetric categories, e.g., if one member of the category is more basic than the other(s), the basic member is considered to be unmarked (1987: 60-61). As will be seen in the conclusion, markedness is responsible for the humor in the utterances we produce. We have labeled this use of markedness Frame Shift (see linguistic map at the end of the paper).

In humor, the discussion of markedness ties into frame theory in that the unmarked situation is the one typified within a frame. A joke that draws the marked situation into focus will break the frame and create humor. An example of a marked/unmarked distinction is the following joke, taken from Raskin (1985: 157):

> "At a costumed party, the first prize for the most elegant
> outfit went to the Six of Spades, a pretty brunette wearing a
> pair of high-heeled black shoes, (Soviet, 1950s)."

Raskin points out that in sexual humor, being clothed is the unmarked, expected response. Nudity is the marked, abnormal, or unexpected option. Since the winner was unclothed, and her nudity was pointed out by only mentioning her shoes, our frame of what would constitute a winning costume at such a party is completely shattered.

For the purpose of this paper, the term "prototype" will be used in two distinct manners. Firstly, we seek to define the most prototypical types of humor in language, in this case Navajo. This will be based on our analysis of the typologies of the languages and will be reflected in the linguistic map at the conclusion of this paper.

Semantically, the term prototype will be used in conjunction with our presentation of frame theory and the idea of stereotypes. Humor steps beyond the boundaries of prototypes and frequently uses the stereotype as part of its repertoire. The difference between a prototype and stereotype is tenuous. As Lakoff states, "[s]ocial stereotypes are cases of metonymy—where a subcategory has a socially recognized status as standing for the category as a whole, usually for the purpose of making quick judgments about people." (1987: 79) Stereotypes are a frequent source of humorous material, and they are particularly salient in the United States, where racial, social, and economic distinctions play large roles in the creation of stereotypes as well as jokes.

4. Data & Analysis

Navajo's phonological complexity is a large part of the focus of the humor. *Laughter, The Navajo Way*, written by Alan Wilson and Gene Dennison (1970) is an in-depth look at humor found in Navajo. This book is one of the only publications focusing on this subject. Many jokes analyzed in *Laughter* comment on the intricacies of the phonology. One example is as follows:

(A) Wilson and Dennison (1970: 6)

Text

Ashkii yázhí léi' bimásání ííłní jiní:
"Shimásání éii, hahgoósh neeshch'íí' tahgóó nádínídzá?"
"Yú-úh, shiyáázh ch'įįditahgóó doo shini' da," ní jiní.

Translation of Text

      There was a little boy who said to his grandmother: "Grandma, when are you going back to gather pinions?" "Oh, I don't want to go to hell," she replied.

Explanation of Text

      A play on the two words *neeshch'íí'tah* (among the pinions) and *ch'įįdiitah* (among the evil spirits, hell) is intended. The explanation as Wilson and Dennison present it has many cultural and linguistic implications. The character of the grandmother represents several salient characteristics of Navajo culture. She is elderly and hard of hearing, as they explain, and creates a comical situation where the Navajo value of respect for the elders is juxtaposed with a situation where it is acceptable to laugh at the folly of one such elder, and it fulfills a hearer expectation of the elderly. The introduction of 'hell' as a frame creates humor because it is so distant from such a harmless activity as picking pinion nuts. The role of the child is to further the separation between the two notions, since children are hardly expected to ask their grandmothers if they wish to go to hell.

      Our next example of a Navajo joke comes from natural discourse between two native Navajo speakers at the University of New Mexico. The joke was told spontaneously and we used Wilson and Dennison's format to analyze the joke. Here we present the transcribed speech, as well as an English translation and an explanation of the punchline.

(B) Joke told and transcribed by Jalon Begay and Melvatha Chee.

Text

Spkr One: Shąą ale'í shąą Nl'éí Ndaadí asdzaan shįį askii 'aahiłni-jin Nléí' hooghan nimaz'oo dílyeed 'ashjąąshįį doo' hastói' díkwii Ndaahaaztą́ą́' shįį bi'doo'nééd, ('éísh sídintsáá'?-

Spkr Two: digha'

Spkr One: Ashikii yazhi shįį 'akǫ́ǫ́'/hǫ́ǫ́' nashwod-'aoo' naalwaod Nt'ę́ę́' 'ajiní jin "shímasání neeznaa lá'"

Both: (laughter)

Spkr Two: neeznaa lá'

Spkr One: neezna lá'…just neeznago. Da' masání 'aní jin (sound of surprise) shítsóí' haa'at'éélá 'oolyé' (laughter)
Spkr Two: da' neezna'

Spkr One: da neezna' 'íís…

Spkr Two: da' dikwii nahaajezt'ą́ą́

Spkr One: neeznaa shį́į́ naahaajezt'ą́ą́'oo…

Translation of Text
 At a ceremony, the grandma told the little boy, go run to the Hogan and see how many men are sitting over there.
So the little boy went over there and he checked and he came back and he goes, and in Navajo this sounds funny, "grandmother, there's ten of them over there."
And the grandma's like, "whoo!, what do you mean, they're dead?" (UNM, 11/22/05)

Explanation of Text
 This joke employs homophony like many other Navajo jokes. It falls under the category of word play like many of the jokes found in Wilson and Denninson. It also plays upon the misunderstanding of words by the elderly and hard of hearing. Unlike those jokes, this one does not present the opposition of the two words that sound very similar, *neeznaa* 'ten' and *neeznah* 'dead'. The two speakers laughed as soon as *neeznaa la* was spoken; it is possible that even though Speaker Two had not heard the joke previously, he already guessed the punchline that grandma would misunderstand this statement as *neeznah*, 'they are dead'. This is due to the shared information between the two speakers and the cultural understanding that many Navajo jokes take the form of word play and misunderstanding from homophony.
 Another source of humor in Navajo comes from the well-known *yi-/bi-* inversion. When a third person singular subject is an animal or inanimate rather than a human being and that subject is acting on a human third person singular direct object, this situation is marked. It is the reversal of the usual, or prototypical, situation, in which a human being does the acting. This marked situation is indicated by the third person direct object prefix *bi-* rather than the unmarked *yi-*.
 The following examples are from Gary Witherspoon's article "Language in Culture and Culture in Language" (1980):

(i) at'ééd tó yoodlą́ą́'
 (girl) (water) (it-it-drank)

(ii) tó at'ééd boodlą́ą́'

| (water) | (girl) | (it-it-drank) |

The first sentence says "The girl drank the water". This is a grammatically and culturally acceptable sentence, an unmarked grammatical construction. However, the second example is an attempt to say "The water was drunk by the girl" (still an unmarked construction in English). As Witherspoon goes on to say, "it is much more absurd to say that *the water was drunk by the girl*. Navajos laugh profusely when they hear a sentence like [this]…A better translation of the sentence would be *the water decided to let the girl drink it*. The syntax of this sentence attributes intelligence and intent to the water, a proposition which the Navajos find to be humorous and absurd" (1980: 10). Another example of the inversion necessary to prevent an absurd or incongruous frame from being created is evident in the next two sentences, taken from Witherspoon as well (Ibid: 5). The first is acceptable, the second is not:

| (iii) | hastiin | łįį' | bitzał |
| | (man) | (horse) | (it-it-kicked) |

| (iv) | łįį' | hastiin | yiztał |
| | (horse) | (man) | (it-it-kicked) |

The first sentence is translated as "The man was kicked by the horse". The second, theoretically, should be also. However, it is instead viewed as absurd in Navajo because:

> "[i]n the Navajo view of the world horses cannot take it upon themselves to kick men, for men are more intelligent than horses. Navajos would explain this by saying that it is not within the intellectual capabilities of the horse to conjure up a plan by which he decides that he does not like some man and decides that when that man comes near him the next time, he will give he man a swift kick. Navajos say the behavior of horses is more spontaneous than that and that they are not capable of long-range planning.
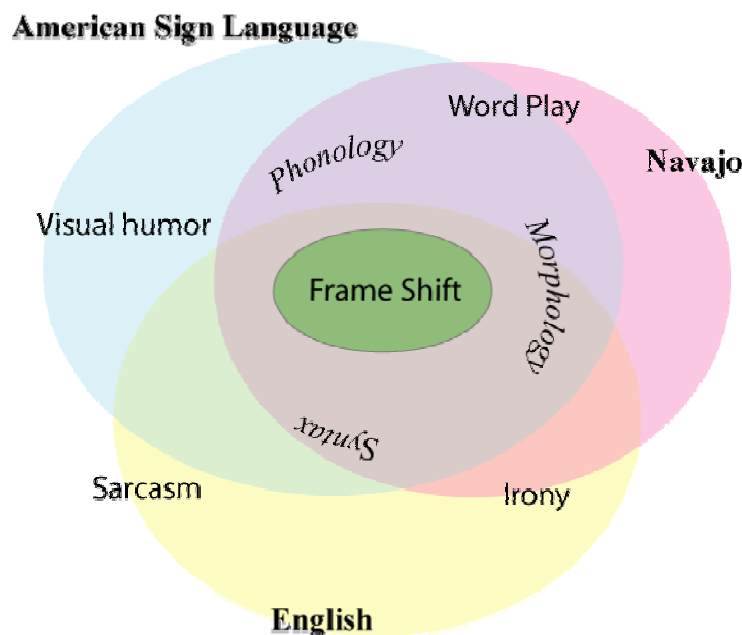>
> The conclusion that we can draw from this is that if a man gets kicked by a horse, it is his own damn fault for not using the intelligence with which he was born." (1980: 9)

The intersection between language and culture, therefore, shows us what is marked and therefore funny, since it is unexpected and incongruous that water would decide to be drunk or the man would let himself get kicked by a horse. The frames conjured by such constructions are inconsistent with the real spaces of Fauconnier's, that which the hearer expects to find in the real world. Thus, the humor is created in a shift of expectation where the prototype in the original frame and the newly presented situation do not resemble each other.

5. Conclusion

Humor exists across all languages and cultures as an essential human characteristic. The need to express amusement and lightheartedness in life makes humor central to human interaction. Humor can be used as a marker of solidarity and bonding in specific social contexts. The endeavor of this project is to highlight the most outstanding characteristics of humor in the Navajo language. In doing so, we have outlined the most prototypical joke structures as well as the most salient linguistic characteristics of Navajo that are used and exploited in humor.

As a result of our analysis, we have created a linguistic map, based on the idea of the semantic map as used by many scholars (e.g., Haspelmath 2003). Since our analysis incorporates different levels of linguistic analysis, we have attempted to show through this diagram the overlapping qualities that humor shares across cultures. It should be noted that the original scope of this paper included American Sign Language (ASL), which is why it's part of the following linguistic map:

The idea of Frame Shift plays a central role in how hearers interpret an utterance. In analyzing both the form and the meaning of a construction, the hearer uses expectations as landmarks in a conversation. An important part of successful humor involves a certain amount of surprise. This is what hearers feel when the mental landmarks are not what he or she expected. A statement can unexpectedly shatter our frame, jolting our consciousness away from the norm and what is comfortable or deemed appropriate. The activation of this new frame creates a humorous juxtaposition between the newly created marked incongruity and the previously expected, unmarked outcome.

The Navajo *yi-/bi-* inversion provides an example of how hearers form an expectation based on fundamental grammatical and cultural conventions. When these conventions are manipulated, in this case by switching the 3rd person pronominals asymmetrically (and mismatching the agent and patient agreement roles), the mental landmark is moved, the frame contradicted, and the prototype challenged.

Our data suggests that styles of humor are largely dependent on the typologies of languages. ASL and Navajo are morphologically complex in comparison with English, leading to wordplay and puns being a more prototypical style of humor. In English, it is more common that the whole sentence becomes humorously marked than the individual morphemes or phonemes. The linguistic map should not be construed as complete or exclusive. For example, irony and sarcasm are more likely to be found in informal or situational humor, as is the case in Navajo, so Navajo should not be viewed as being devoid of these humor mechanisms. From our data, we conclude that word play is more humorous in Navajo and ASL than it is in English, where puns are more often the source of groans and moans. In ASL, visual humor is very prevalent because of the visual nature of the language and the use of iconic signs and classifiers. Visual humor exists in Navajo and English as well, but is not the primary channel for communicating the lighter side of life.

Culturally, we have seen several recurring themes in the jokes. Navajo culture holds close the ideal of respecting one's elders. Conversely, the jokes told create a humorous interpretation of one's elders and their shortcomings. Homophony and near homophony are mechanisms that work within the joke due to the poor hearing of the elderly protagonist. The comparison between what was actually said against what the elder heard creates the humorous incongruity, since they are often completely unrelated concepts. The concepts of death and hell as the ultimate crisis situation becomes the punchline when contrasted against daily life exercises such as gathering piñons and running errands for grandma. Other interesting characteristics of the jokes include the intergenerational commentary, which the grandmother or grandfather interacting with a child. This type of prototypical situation sheds light into the modes of transmission used in teaching children about their culture and language.

This paper represents only a brief linguistic analysis of humor in Navajo. There is much work to be done in the area of informal humor situations, since it requires the documentation of spontaneous conversation among native speakers. Future developments in this inquiry would use as much natural discourse as possible to continue to define, categorize and document humor as it occurs in our daily lives. Furthermore, investigations of humor can be used in ethnographic studies as a reference to salient cultural traits. In terms of an accurate theoretical framework for humor as a human phenomenon, there is still much to be agreed upon. Like many human faculties, it is a diffuse and flexible category that is inherently dependent on the context of the culture and society in which it occurs. However, there are generalities that can still be ascertained, which we hope to continue to explore through analyses such as these.

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