

Just Kidding, Folks!: An Expressivist Analysis of Offensive Humor

Thomas Brommage, Sam Houston State University

Two Dogmas of Representationalism: Jokes as Speech-Acts

The philosophy of language has historically taken the declarative sentence as the most basic form of linguistic expression, and tried to “shoehorn” all other forms of linguistic expression in terms of the fact-stating function of language. The “declarative fallacy” as it has been called,¹ is present throughout much of early 20th Century philosophy of language. Particularly (but not exclusively) with Frege, the Tractarian Wittgenstein, the early Carnap and others: the primary function of language is to express truths about the world. When viewed in this way, it is not surprising that Wittgenstein’s later investigations into language must begin by denying this methodological bias. Consider the “builder” example in the opening stanzas of the *Philosophical Investigations*, which describes a language that is entirely constituted by the cries “Block!” “Slab!” “Pillar!” and “Beam!” Wittgenstein explicitly tells us that “Builderese” (as we might call it) is “a complete primitive language.”² One of the conclusions Wittgenstein wishes for us to draw from this thought-experiment is that in this language, the expression “Beam!” is not clearly interpretable either as elliptical shorthand for the declarative “This is a beam,” or for the order “Give me a beam!”³ Many take this to be a direct comment on his earlier approach to language, exemplified by the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in which he held that the only genuinely meaningful propositions are those that express facts about the world.⁴ While there are many types of words and functions of speech acts, we do a disservice to language by theoretically “shoehorning” them into a single analysis—“a one-sided diet.”⁵ Since the 1950s, philosophers of language have expanded their focus to include analysis of such expressions as counterfactuals, optatives, etc.

Additionally, the pragmatic turn in the philosophy of language—particularly through the work of Sellars,⁶ Rorty,⁷ Brandom,⁸ and other—has been the most fruitful approach to understanding non-declarative sentences. There exists a strong urge toward representationalism in language, which demands that we think of a meaningful expression as somehow given by the connection between language and world—that is a byproduct, I would argue, of the “declarative fallacy.” This is troublesome not only because jokes aren’t primarily fact-stating (although, in cases, they can be taken to imply facts—as I shall explain below). Moreover, jokes often involve contrived set-ups that are not taken to be real—whether it be imagining members of clergy meeting up at a bar, or the fictional counterpart to the actor we all know as Chuck Norris. Therefore, the problem of the connection between language and the world in jokes is analogous with the problem of the

truth of declarative sentences about fictional works.⁹

An expressivist account of language involves avoiding taking syntactic and semantic facets of the expression as primary, but rather consider questions of truth or reference “must answer to pragmatics.”¹⁰ We must understand *what the expression is intended to do* before any question of its further analysis can begin. I am sympathetic to this analysis. And while others have focused on certain standard types of utterances (questions, orders, optatives, counterfactuals, etc.), few have tried to provide such an analysis of jokes. The sketch I am providing here is a first step of account of this neglected type of expression.

A Few Quick Assumptions

I will begin by briefly lay out a few assumptions on which my analysis will depend. First: I will not be assuming any specific theory of humor for my analysis here. I think that “theories” of humor are failures from conception, not merely from execution. The role of a theory is to systematize, and humorous stimuli are too diverse to allow systemization. But that does not mean we cannot come up with an accurate *description* of the role certain types of humor (for example: literary satire, slip and fall humor, or—as I will attempt here—jokes). In this regard, I intend to keep in mind Wittgenstein’s invocation: “And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. All explanation must disappear, and description alone must take its place.”¹¹ This is, of course, does not imply that those who might adopt a version of an inconsistency or therapeutic theoretical basis cannot accept my analysis here. Quite the contrary. Since my analysis has a fairly defined scope (jokes, not all things humorous) and also since it focuses on the level of the propositionally articulated moves made in the game of telling jokes, I think this analysis is consistent with whatever theoretical overlay one may wish to employ.

Secondly, although trivially, jokes are essentially linguistic entities. There are, of course, many non-linguistic forms of humor. Pratfalls, for example, require no linguistic component. But jokes are a particularly linguistic form of humor. So it is entirely appropriate (indeed, I offer: necessary) that an analysis of jokes be understood in consideration of how language operates. And—as I hope to show—jokes are “linguistic moves” which are fundamentally different from how certain other locutions operate.

Finally and perhaps most controversially: language is a normative endeavor. The meaning of a sentence issues from its use; and the use of the word—or just as “grasping” a concept expressed by the word—inherently contains its own “right” and “wrong” applications. Additionally, this normativity is also resident in the backdrop against which joke-telling is made possible. For example when someone says “Knock, knock,” the listener feels the interpellating force of this setup, and will regularly responds according to the usual social norms with the query “Who’s there?” These are the

social conditions outlined in the game of joke-telling, which requires certain capacities and actions antecedent to understanding the locution as a joke. Likewise, jokes have normative force in that they can *obligate* a person to respond to them. This will be particularly important for understanding the case of offensive humor.

A Pragmatic Topography of Jokes

I will attempt here to examine jokes in terms of their pragmatics: how they work in terms of the basic epistemic and practical background necessary for a joke to be successfully told, and the corresponding consequences that follow in the reaction to the joke. I will be largely ignoring the joke's syntactic structure—both since syntactical analysis is likely to be misleading, and since there is not a single syntactical structure associated with all jokes. Nor, for that matter, do I feel that approaching jokes in terms of their content is a lucrative endeavor. Dividing jokes into their various semantic features (blond jokes, ethnic jokes, dirty jokes, etc.) is certainly possible—but not relevant to understanding of what they do and why they are meaningful. It is only a properly pragmatic account of jokes can shed light on their function.

I offer an expressionist (or, if you prefer, inferentialist)¹² analysis of jokes. Such an analysis takes a linguistic expression to be understood in terms of the pragmatic roles and abilities required for telling and understanding the joke. Thus we can understand how jokes function if we look at their conditions of what is required of the speaker and listener in making a joke—the conditions of their “input” and “output.”¹³ As should be obvious, jokes do not have exactly the same pragmatic function as declarative expressions do. Typically, the declarative has a dual pragmatic function: relative either to the speaker issuing the assertion, or the hearer receiving it.¹⁴ Declarative sentences *entitle* the hearer to elicit reasons from the speaker, and secondly *commit* the speaker not to further declare anything materially incompatible with the expression. When I say for example, “Today is Saturday,” you are entitled to question my reasons—which might be immediately inferential ones, such as looking at the calendar, or more mediated ones such as “Yesterday was Friday”; this is what Brandom calls “the game of giving and asking for reasons.”¹⁵ But furthermore the assertion of a declarative also commits me to certain claims, and prohibits me from asserting such incompatible expressions, like “Today is Tuesday”—at least, for at least a specific period of time.

But this is different than how jokes work. In telling a joke, one does not seem to be committed to the inferential consequences of the joke. Sometimes, in a moment of perhaps too candid disclosures with a friend, I might “take back” an assertion with the qualifier “I was joking,” thereby nullifying the commitment expressed by the assertion itself. In this sense, joking is generally understood in a context as *lacking* commitments for the expressed content of the utterance. For this reason, I can tell two jokes whose punchlines are materially incompatible with one another. Also

rarely, if ever, would it be appropriate to ask the speaker for reasons to justify the joke.¹⁶

Jokes, unlike other speech acts, do not *generally* seem to require conditions of entitlement. Consider the contrast here with orders, which are locutions that have an agent-specific role. A speaker's authority gives the normative force of the order; for instance, I might issue the order to one of my students: "Don't text during class!" Acknowledging the bindingness of that order is contingent upon the authority I hold relative to my role as an instructor at the University. A fellow classmate could not give the same order to the student and expect it to be followed. By contrast, jokes are not agent-specific. One can easily repeat jokes that one had previously heard; thus there is something fundamentally different about how jokes work from how imperatives do. In most cases, there does not seem to be any essential entitlement conditions for the successful telling of a joke. On this line, the joke would be more closely related to declarative factual utterances that one does not need any specific authority assert.¹⁷

However, the notion of "success" with a joke is very different from the successfully issuing an order or a prescription. A successful command has the effect of obligating the person to whom it was targeted to react in some way to the content of the utterance. In my earlier cited example ("Don't text in class"), the expected function of the order is to "bind" the hearer normatively to cease texting while I am lecturing. Jokes primarily aim at producing mirth. This might be in the form of laughter, or stress-relief in a tense moment, or perhaps even to make the teller look clever in the eyes of the audience. Granted the hearer may not be amused by the joke—just as my student could conceivably ignore that order I have issued and continue to send text messages, while hiding the phone under her desk. But that does not affect the primary goal of the joke, which is to bring about this state of amusement.

Another relevant feature: the hearer must be in an epistemic condition to ascertain the relevance of the joke. Understanding a joke relies upon a certain shared background, or what Wittgenstein might call a "form of life."¹⁸ Consider the following joke:

An experimental physicist performs an experiment involving two cats, and an inclined tin roof. The two cats are very nearly identical; same sex, age, weight, breed, eye and hair color.

The physicist places both cats on the roof at the same height and lets them both go at the same time. One of the cats fall off the roof first so obviously there is some difference between the two cats.

What is the difference?

[wait for it . . .]

One cat has a greater mew.

It's a dreadful joke, but illustrates an important point. While this joke may be humorous to a someone reasonably well-versed with physics, who would know that the Greek letter "mu" is the symbol for the coefficient of friction—one who does not have this background would not see why it is humorous (and even if those conditions were met, one still might not find a cheap pun to be funny). The point is that a joke only is a joke when it is understood, and the understanding of it relies upon a common set of shared conventions and background assumptions. Or consider the list of "philosophers proof that p "¹⁹—which are funny if and only if the hearer has a strong enough grasp on the arguments of that specific philosopher who is the subject of the joke. I might find the list funny, but my colleague in another discipline might find the list perplexing. So-called "inside jokes" are a similar phenomenon: for those outside of the relevant group, the joke is not a joke at all. In each case, a relevant epistemic background is necessary for "getting" the joke, which will have specific relevance in the case of offensive jokes in particular.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, jokes seem to have certain consequences that follow from them. They obligate a reaction from the hearer. That reaction might take the form of many non-propositional moves: one can laugh, smile, groan, etc. The form of the acknowledgement varies, but a joke does obligate some acknowledgment, and some reaction, either way.²⁰ If one were to respond with a blank stare, in many cases it's because the listener did not take the locution to be a joke. But a joke also has the consequence of entitling the hearer to re-evaluate the normative status of the joke-teller. A well, placed and well-timed joke (e.g., used to de-fuse an awkward situation) might make the hearer esteem the teller more. But the inverse is also true: an inopportune joke can make one look like a buffoon. These changes in normative status may not occur for most jokes—but they do occur, and are particularly important in the case of offensive humor, to which I shall now turn.

The Case of Offensive Humor

So far, I have laid out some of the essential features of jokes as they act, by showing their contrast with other speech acts. An offensive joke resembles in some respect the merely bad joke (for example, the "groaner" pun) in that the joke does not meet its proper end: amusement. But while a bad joke is just generally not funny, there are conditions under which the offensive joke might be told successfully (for example, if one were in a community whose shared beliefs confirm the premise of the joke). So initially an analysis that might rely on the reaction of the listener—whether the intended audience does or does not find it funny—does not help us discern the difference between offensive jokes and merely bad jokes. As we shall see, offensive humor—whether "blue" material, Friars' Club roasts, or racial and ethnic humor—seem to be significantly different from jokes of a "cleaner" variety, and require a unique analysis.

Consider the case from a few years ago of the comedian Daniel Tosh. At a performance in Los Angeles in July 2012, Tosh allegedly tried to silence a female heckler who was vocally criticizing the comedian during his set, telling the performer that she did not think rape was a subject about which one should not make light. Tosh responded saying “Wouldn’t it be funny if you were raped by five guys right here right now. Like, right now?”²¹ The female audience member later posted the exchange on the web, which was soon picked up by the national media. Tosh apologized, but was roundly criticized for the “joke.”

Now clearly, this elicited a quite different reaction than a similar joke that may be delivered by a female comedienne. Sarah Silverman, for example, uses the following in her act: “I was raped by a doctor...which is so bittersweet for a Jewish girl.”²² This joke is an edgy but successful one, and there has been no corresponding outrage at the idea that she would use it. The difference between the two does not therefore seem to be based on the intrinsic properties of the joke, nor that the subject matter itself is inappropriate for jest as such.

One obvious difference in the two cases is the “target” of each joke: Daniel Tosh made a joke targeted at another person, and Silverman made a joke about herself as a victim. This feature cannot to be ignored. A self-effacing joke often can make the teller come across as humble and (perhaps) even charming; the same joke directed at someone else would likely be considered rude or offensive.

However, it would be impossible to ignore that, contrary to the general features of jokes outlined above, there does seem to be sometimes a degree of authority relevant to the “success” of the offensive joke. A speaker’s set of entitlement conditions might allow one to tell an offensive joke, and often it will also determine how it will be received. That is why, for example, certain ethnic jokes can be told—and be found to be funny—when the joke-teller is of that specific heritage. In this case, one might recognize the incompatibility between one’s own commitments (implied, as they may be, by ethnic status) and the beliefs inferred to be behind the joke. In the case of Tosh, he did not have the same entitlement conditions as Silverman, since she is statistically more likely to be the target of sexual violence than he would be. Thus, there is an incompatibility that exists between Silverman being female and holding misogynist beliefs—so the inconsistency is quickly resolved in the mind of the listener that the misogyny was not genuine. It must have therefore been humor. Note that one need not be the target of the joke to have this entitlement to tell such a joke; self-effacing humor is merely a superlative case of this entitlement, since we are taken to be epistemically privileged with regard to our own lives and abilities. In either case, it is more probable that a joke can be successfully told when others find one’s authority more plausible.

Authority and Entitlement

In my initial sketch of the pragmatic features of jokes, I noted that jokes in general seem not to have specific entitlement conditions. I can re-tell a joke told to me, without it losing its force.²³ This is certainly the case with the majority of jokes. However, in the case of offensive jokes it seems entitlement plays an important role in its successful uptake. Therefore, we must accept either that all jokes really do have entitlement conditions for their telling; or try to claim that only offensive jokes have entitlement conditions, and are thus a special “type” of joke. I will argue the former alternative is the case.

One reason for thinking that offensive humor is not different from ordinary jokes is that offensive jokes are not always offensive at all points throughout history. There were a time that Irish and Italian jokes were likely considered more acceptable through the 19th and early 20th century. Likewise, it would be more acceptable to “play” on certain stereotypes when people are more convinced that those stereotypes are true. This is due primarily to the material compatibility with one’s epistemic commitments that shift over time. In times of social change, making fun of certain groups gains a social stigma, due to a change in attitudes regarding that group. This change of beliefs often creates an incompatibility with epistemic conditions of those who reject the commitments of past generations. So, in this sense, jokes can stop being merely jokes and can be considered offensive after a period of time. That is why, for example, we might excuse Grandma for making a racist joke; but we might not excuse a colleague for doing the same.

The fact that a successful joke can become offensive over time demonstrates, I think, that offensive jokes are not a “special type” of the larger category of jokes. It is not due to the joke itself—there is nothing *intrinsically* offensive about it. Rather, it is due to the changing commitments of the hearer or the collective commitments of the linguistic community that decide whether a joke is appropriate or not.

So why does it seem that ordinarily jokes do not have conditions of authority, as is the case with offensive ones? We mentioned above that the ability to re-tell a joke makes the joke similar to the declarative fact-stating utterance, in the sense that it does not take any special authority to issue a truth-claim. I suggest that all jokes have conditions of entitlement required antecedent to telling a joke, although in most cases those are fairly minimal. It might be considered bad taste, for example, to tell a joke at a funeral. At a different time, the same joke might be considered funny. These are contextual entitlement conditions for telling jokes. It just so happens that jokes are often told in the appropriate conditions to mark the material as humor and not as fact-stating. In a comedy club, for example, one “brackets” the content of the joke *as* a joke. It is not in principle different from the phenomenon of “suspension of disbelief” in interpreting literary fiction. The knowledge that dragons do not exist, for example, does not create an obstacle from one’s enjoyment in reading

George R. R. Martin; but it might, for example, if a discussion of dragons were present in the context of a documentary. Within an explicitly comedic context, the inferential consequences of a joke are minimal when it is appropriately delineated as such.

Nonetheless, the comedian has the conditions of authority in the context of the comedy club. The stage, the spotlight, the fact that a single voice is amplified—all exemplify the distinction between the role of the joke-teller and the audience member. Which is why, for example, heckling in a comedy club is an unpardonable sin. It is, in effect, reversing the authority relationship inherent in the social practice of stand-up comedy.

However, one might still object that background entitlement conditions for successful uptake of the joke (e.g., circumstances of one's telling) need not imply some such authority or another must exist for all jokes. This is true. In this case, I suggest that authority is an entitlement condition—not the converse. Thus, not all jokes require special status to tell, but they do require appropriate background conditions entitling the comedic context. It just so happens that, in the case of offensive humor, one's identification with the targeted group is itself an entitlement condition (as we saw in the case of Silverman). One might imagine telling an off-color joke trading in stereotypes about a specific group with which one identifies, although conditions of entitlement are not clearly known. This might be particularly true for non-visible minorities: LGBT individuals, those with non-physical disabilities, etc. If an offhand hearer did not ascertain one's identification with the targeted group or know the speaker's corollary commitments, then the joke would more likely be considered to be indicative of one's commitments (we would consider someone telling a racist joke to have racist sympathies, or a sexist joke to have misogynistic commitments, etc.). In these cases, the joke would likely be taken to be offensive, since the incompatibility with one's commitments cannot be ascertained; whereas if these other commitments were explicitly known to the hearer, the incompatibility would be clear and the same joke in the same context would not likely be taken to be offensive.

As mentioned above, the normative force intrinsic to the joke also licenses the hearer to change the normative status of the joke-teller herself. A well, placed and well-timed joke might raise the hearer's esteem for the joke-teller. However, the inverse is also true: an inopportune joke can make one look crass, specifically jokes which target certain groups or tread on social taboos. In the former case, it may raise normative status; in the latter case, it clearly lowers it. In this case, the audience has license to change the normative status of the joke-teller when the content of the joke conflicts with the audience's beliefs. In the case of racist joke, we think less of a person who might deliver it. In addition, we might challenge the joke-teller to re-evaluate the commitments implied by the joke. If a joke plays on racial stereotypes, for example, we might challenge the content of the claim on factual grounds, or by moral disapprobation.

Likewise, if one's other commitments were not known by the hearer, the joke might not be

taken as a joke at all. This might be why, for example, conservatives tend to think of the Stephen Colbert character from *The Colbert Report* is actually is a conservative, whereas most liberals take his performance to be a satire.²⁴ The function of humor is relative to the authority (or lack therein) which the hearer attributes to the speaker in the act of telling the joke. A different set of entitlement conditions and commitments on the part of the speaker might allow a joke to serve a different role than in others.

The Consequences of Offensive Humor

Offensive humor can also have a positive function. Just as humor provides relief and catharsis following traumatic incidents, finding humor in certain social situations can be cathartic—and indeed, liberating. Satire has long been used to expose and criticize existing power structures. In this sense, offensive humor also plays an important social role in exposing biases and stereotypes, and can be used to address taboo topics. This has particularly evident in the case of racial humor.

One important aspect of racial humor is relative to the entitlement conditions and authority of the speaker. The same Dave Chappelle joke coming from a speaker with a different set of commitments (for example, a white supremacist), could also reinforce certain attitudes when they are compatible with the commitments of the hearers. There is an obvious objection to this, wherein certain privileged groups can seem the target of those with different entitlement conditions when and if the hearer feels the group has a superior place in society. A Christian joke seems more widely acceptable in the United States (and more generally, in the West) than an Islamic joke; a joke trading in stereotypes of upper-class white individuals would be more likely to be taken as funny than someone from a different racial or socio-economic background. Often no special authority is required to tell jokes in these circumstances; one does not need to have the above mentioned identification with the targeted group—quite the contrary, it often has greater impact if one identifies differently than the group derided. The notion of a lower class “taking others down a peg” issues from the more general understanding of the commitments on the part of the hearer. Ordinarily a joke about certain stereotypes will be likely met by an audience of inferring that the joke teller holds specific stereotypical beliefs. Clearly they might not be taken as offensive if they confirm the beliefs of the audience. However there most likely will be (in a diverse enough audience) people who fit the demographic target of the joke and might still find the joke to be funny; that is not entirely because they think that the stereotypes are true. Rather, I think the answer is better found in the incompatibility with other commitments, namely to social justice. A joke about a class with disproportionate privilege highlights the fact that they indeed do have this status within society. This is commonly the case with satire: it has a double function of highlighting the facts of our society, and showing how it is incompatible with our larger ethical commitments. On this model, a joke

might not be considered offensive even coming from someone without the requisite authority to tell such a joke. This is due to the incompatibility between the recognition of the fact raised by the joke that they have such an elevated social status, and a further shared commitment on the part of the audience that it should not be that way. Those for whom this commitment is not shared, for instance those who identify with the targeted group but who feel their status is deserved, might find the same joke playing in stereotypes of privileged classes to be offensive.

However, the normative force of jokes, as mentioned above, also obligate the hearer to respond to the joke. This could be through laughter or snickering; but it could also obligate the hearer to re-evaluate his or her commitments when they are materially incompatible with the content of the joke. Consider the racial joke: in certain contexts, the joke might be taken as an opportunity to bring to light inequities that exist in people of color (often unacknowledged because of conditions of racial privilege), and the corresponding recognition in the audience that these inequities conflict without overriding commitments to an equitable social order. It is this function that Richard Pryor and Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle and others have used successfully to provide social criticism regarding racial politics. The joke can often bring to light existing structural or institutional asymmetries between people, and leads people to re-evaluate their commitments. It is under these conditions that the function of the joke as social commentary becomes most viable.

Conclusion

I have so far provided an account of the pragmatics of jokes, and shown how my account allows for an explanation of offensive jokes in particular. Specifically, when and how jokes are taken to be offensive, and how jokes can serve a liberating social function by shedding light on the inequities that exist. Schematically, my proposal might be understood as viewing the joke as an inference, and the interpretation of the joke as a modal instance of either *modus ponens* or *modus tollens*. A joke with shared entitlement conditions affirms the antecedent beliefs, and necessitates reaction to the content though laughter; a conflicting commitment to the content makes one deny the commitments that follow from a speech act, and can often create conflicts within one's epistemic commitments. If so, the contradiction will often be resolved by recognizing the truth in the humor, and often challenge existing beliefs. Here I have merely focused on offensive jokes, but I believe there are other fruitful ways of understanding other forms of linguistic humor—including irony, satire and puns—on the model I provide here.

Endnotes

¹ Belnap 1990, 1.

² Wittgenstein 1958, §2.

³ Wittgenstein 1958, §19.

⁴ Wittgenstein 1961, 6.53.

⁵ Wittgenstein 1958, §593.

⁶ Sellars 1963.

⁷ Rorty 1979.

⁸ Brandom 1994.

⁹ See Lewis 1978.

¹⁰ Brandom 1994, 83.

¹¹ Wittgenstein 1958, §109.

¹² While most trace inferentialism back to the work of Wilfrid Sellars, the “inferentialist” was made popular by Robert Brandom.

¹³ I am indebted to Kukla and Lance 2002 for this way of thinking about language.

¹⁴ Here I adopt the analysis here from Brandom 1994. See Chapter 3.

¹⁵ Brandom 1994, 89.

¹⁶ Except, of course, if the hearer does not get the joke. But then the justification plays a particular role—it queries *why* the joke is funny, not *that* it is funny.

¹⁷ Although, sometimes authority does makes a difference in whether the speaker might believe the claim without further justification.

¹⁸ Wittgenstein 1958, §23.

¹⁹ <http://consc.net/misc/proofs.html>.

²⁰ In this respect, the joke is similar to the “hail” (e.g., “Yo! Brian!!”). For more, see Kukla and Lance, *op. cit.*

²¹ According to reports, no video of the incident exists to my knowledge.

²² Which is included in her set for the “Jesus is Magic” video.

²³ Unless of course voicing is different in “delivery”.

²⁴ See LaMarre, Landreville and Beam 2009.

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