The Language of Humour

INCONGRUITY

You could say that much humour occurs because of an INCONGRUITY, which is when things are inconsistent, not fitting well together or unsuitable.

This is usually a negative thing, because an important rule of language use is that we should try to communicate as clearly as possible. Humour breaks this rule, which creates surprise when we are confronted with the unexpected. This surprise can make us laugh. So humour is created out of the conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs.

DOUBLE MEANING

One way of "communicating badly" in this way is to exploit the possible DOUBLE MEANING we find in the English language (and all other languages, of course). When there is room for more than one meaning, you can construct a PUN or PLAY ON WORDS. This is where you make use of a DOUBLE MEANING in the language to deliberately mislead the listeners and then deliver an unexpected punch line.

The reason why you might not find such a PLAY ON WORDS funny might be that you don't perceive the DOUBLE MEANING. Or it might be because the DOUBLE MEANING is laboured and corny, so that you acknowledge that it's a joke, but not a funny one.

Some DOUBLE MEANINGS work both on writing and when spoken because the two words share the same spelling (homonyms):

'What makes a tree noisy? Its bark.'

Others work only when spoken, but not in writing, because they are spelled differently (homophones):

'What's black and white and red/read all over?'
'A newspaper.'

The English language is particularly suited for the creation of PLAYS ON WORDS because of the way that English vowel sounds are pronounced in connected speech.

In English, unstressed syllables tend to reduce the sound of the vowel to a *schwa* (the symbol of which is an upside-down e). This is one of the reasons that spelling in English is not always that easy – ALL vowels can be spoken as a *schwa*.

The *schwa* sound occurs often in the unstressed words when the words are spoken as part of an utterance:

'Are you going to the shops?' could easily be pronounced with five *schwa* sounds:

'ə jə gəʊɪŋ tə ðə ʃɒps'

But you could also exploit the possibilities for DOUBLE MEANINGS that lie in the different possibilities we sometimes have when understanding the meaning of a sentence, e.g. we often have the possibility of "misinterpreting" the structure of the sentence. This works 100 per cent in writing:

'How do you make a cat drink?'
'Easy. Put it in the blender!'

Here, the joke is created by the surprising interpretation of 'cat drink' as a COMPOUND WORD meaning a 'drink made from a cat' instead of the more usual interpretation that they are separate words. But this doesn't really work when the joke is spoken, because the spoken language makes use of STRESS and INTONATION to distinguish these different interpretations from each other.

'...make a cat 'drink.' = get a cat to start drinking.
'...make a 'cat drink.' = a drink made from a cat.

For the joke to work as well when spoken, the surprising interpretation has to STRESS the same syllable, which most often means that both interpretations have to be either a COMPOUND WORD or not:

'Have you heard the one about the man who bought a paper shop? It blew away'

Here, the humour arises from the surprising interpretation of the COMPOUND WORD 'paper shop' meaning a 'shop made of paper' rather than a 'shop that sells papers'. But because both interpretations view 'paper shop' as a COMPOUND WORD, there is no difference in pronunciation.

In spoken language individual words are run together. Only the context tells the listener how the stream of sounds should be divided:

'Some others I've seen...'
'Some mothers I've seen...'

This is used in some popular "genres" of jokes:

'Knock, knock.'
'Who's there?'
'Noah.'
'Noah who?'
'Noah good place to eat?'

Keep Fit by Jim Nastics

Victorian Transport by Orson Cart

IDIOMS

An IDIOM is a group of words that should be regarded as a single unit, as their meaning cannot be worked out from the constituent parts:

‘To go bananas’

But sometimes there is room for interpreting the words as NOT being an IDIOM, with a humorous result:

(=miserable) (=resulted)
‘When *down in mouth*, remember Jonah. He *came out* all right.’
(=in the mouth of a whale) (=came out of the mouth of the whale)

There is also much fun to be had with IDIOMS because they often become such a fixed part of language that they are used in all sorts of situations without thinking about their meaning.

‘Pheebs, you wanna help?’
‘Oh, I wish I could, but I really don’t want to.’

Friends

And simply altering a small part of a well-known saying can yield some fun results.

‘Save a little money each month, and at the end of the year you’ll be surprised how *little* you have.’

Ernest Haskins

PREPOSITIONS

A group of words that are often a part of IDIOMS is PREPOSITIONS. In all languages, PREPOSITIONS have multiple meanings, because their meanings need to be defined by the context in which they occur.

In *Friends*, before they become a couple, Ross comments on a message Rachel has left on his answer phone in a literal way:

‘You said you were *over* me. When were you ever *under* me?!’

Friends

IMAGERY

A popular way of using double meaning is to take a widely used piece of IMAGERY and deliberately understanding it literally.

A SIMILE is a comparison using the words *as* or *like*.

‘Oh, my Luve’s like a red red rose’.

Robert Burns

SIMILIS often turn into FIGURES OF SPEECH (IDIOMS), which can then be taken advantage of:

‘Football is a cruel mistress, she’s more than a mistress, she’s a wife, she’s a mother, she’s a daughter, she’s an errand child.’

Peter Cook in his persona of Alan Latchley

A METAPHOR is the use of words to indicate something other than the literal meaning of the words. This can of course also be taken advantage of:

‘He is a pig’.

‘He has a heart of stone.’

‘He has his father’s eyes. He keeps them in a little box.’

‘No, you can’t lick the system; but you can give it a damn good fondling.’

Fry and Laurie

‘My father wouldn’t have a television in the house, so we used to gather around every night and watch it on the lawn.’

Fry and Laurie

A cause of jokes or unintentional humour is the use of MIXED METAPHORS, which is usually the use of two CLICHÉD expressions joined together without awareness of the strange image created.

‘A lot of people think the hard noses of Fleet Street don’t have a soft centre, but they do, you know.’

Gerald Williams

MULTI-WORD VERBS

Some verbs in English are not single words, but have to be understood together with a PREPOSITION that follows it:

‘I ˈ*ran* up a hill.’
‘I *ran* ˈ*up* a bill.’

The position of the STRESS then makes the surprising interpretation audible:

‘When is a car not a car?
When it *turns* ˈ*into* a garage.’

Not: ‘When it ˈ*turns* into a garage.’

SYNTAX

To explain the DOUBLE MEANING in some jokes, we have to analyse the sentence using terms such as:

subject,	verb,	object,	indirect object,	complement,	adverbial.
S	V	O	IO	C to S/ C to O	A
X	O	Δ	□	⊗ Ⓐ	_____.
grundled,	udsagnsled,	genstandsled,	hensynsled,	omsagnsled,	adverbialled

Each new element can expand or even change the meaning of the sentence:

Time flies. S V X O	Imagery describing how time moves rapidly forward.
Time flies <u>like an arrow</u>. S V A X O _____.	Expansion of the imagery by an added adverbial. The adverbial is a single word or a group of words that add information about *how*, *when* or *where* the action happened.

Together, the words form an idiom. Groucho Marx then put it together with another sentence that changed the syntax of the sentence, utilising the DOUBLE MEANING of the word *flies* which can both mean the plural form of the noun *a fly* and the 3rd person singular form of the verb *to fly*.

<u>Fruit flies</u> like <u>a banana</u>. <u>Time flies</u> like <u>an arrow</u>.
S V O S V O
X O Δ X O Δ

The *arrow* then describes *what* the flies like, rather than *how* they fly.

Here is another example that illustrates how different uses of common verbs can be used to create DOUBLE MEANINGS.

He found her a rose
S V IO O
X O □ Δ

Here, "found" means the literal action of spotting something, and what "he" spots is a particular object, namely "a rose". The indirect object is then the person he has performed the action of "finding a rose" for, i.e. "her".

But we only have to change the object – and switch the roles around – to understand "found" as a different action, i.e. that of how a person perceives something or someone:

She found him a pig
S V O C to O
X O Δ Ⓐ

She thought that he was a pig

Label this headline to show the two different interpretations of its structure:

Police found drunk in shop window.

Police found drunk in shop window.

Explain the DOUBLE MEANING in grammatical terms. And then these:

'We don't serve coloured people.'
'That's fine by me. I just want some roast chicken.'

'Do you serve frogs' legs?'
'We serve anyone who's able to pay.'

Another ways of creating DOUBLE MEANING is to wilfully misunderstand PRONOUNS:

‘The Mississippi is the longest river in the USA. Can you spell it?’
‘I T spells “it.”’

Clearly, the teller is asking the tellee to spell the thing that the PRONOUN “it” refers to, i.e. “Mississippi”, but the tellee misunderstands.

Or you could misunderstand which word in the sentence an adverb is referring to (“modifying”):

We will sell gasoline to anyone in a glass container.
S v V O A A
X o----O Δ _____. _____.

There is nothing funny here if “in a glass container” modifies “gasoline”, but if it instead modifies “anyone”, we get the meaning that “We will sell gasoline to anyone who is in a glass container.”

Analyse the following to show the two possible interpretations of the SYNTAX.

1. I have read your book and much like it. I have read your book and much like it.

2. The students are revolting. The students are revolting.

3. Dr Livingstone I Presume – the full name of Doctor Presume.

Dr Livingstone I Presume.

4. Yoko Ono will talk about her husband John Lennon who was killed

   in an interview with Barbara Walters.

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5. I once shot an elephant in my pyjamas. How he got into my pyjamas I'll never know.

5. I once shot an elephant in my pyjamas.

6. In passing sentence the judge said he was a thoroughly evil man.

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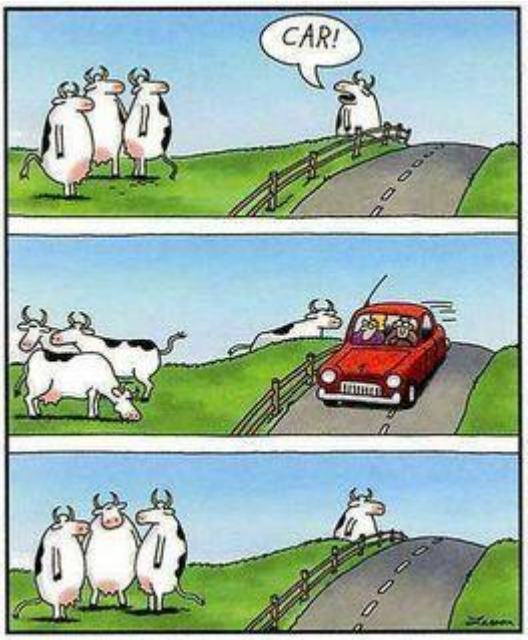
And just explain this last one:

7. 'My parents are stuck at Waterloo Station. There's a bomb scare'
   'Are they safe?'
   'No, bombs are really dangerous.'

CONVENTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

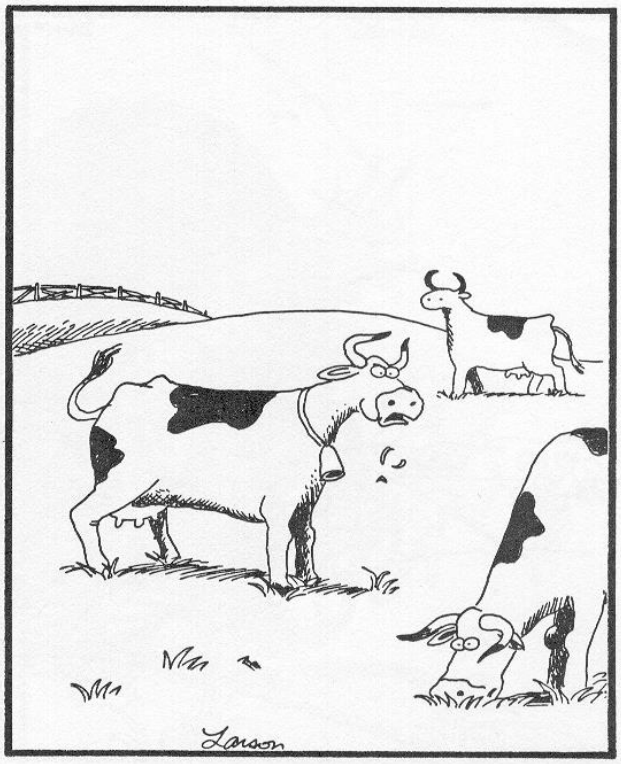


As we have seen, the surprise that is essential for humour can often arise from some DOUBLE MEANING or other. But that does not mean that we can't have humour without it.

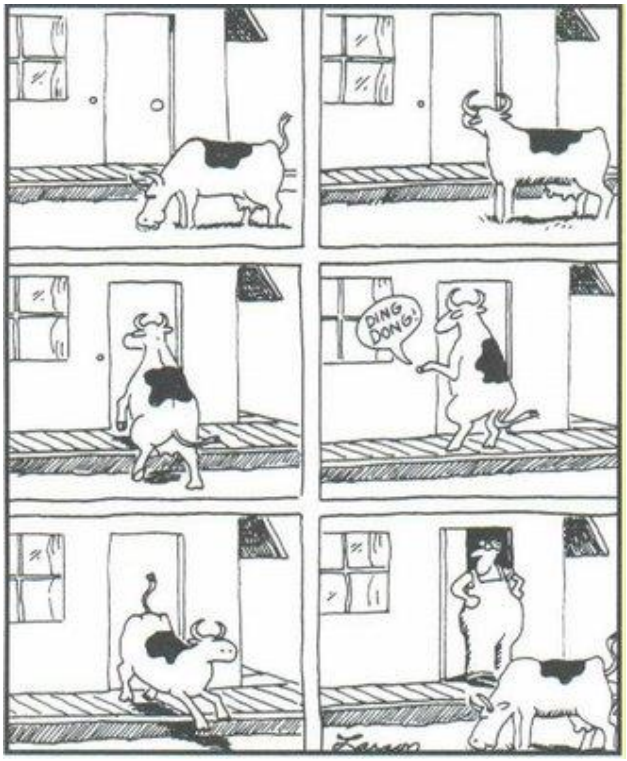
Look at the example from the Goon Show, written by Spike Milligan and Peter Sellers. Instead of relying on some DOUBLE MEANING of language to create the surprise, it instead plays with, and disturbs, our notions of what 'time' is.

As the text "The Philosophy of Humour" said, the INCONGRUITY theory states that humour arises from the surprise we get when we are presented with something that is different from our realistic, down-to-earth view of how the world to be. The moment we realise that there is a gap between these, the surprise forces us to laugh.

Gary Larson is fond of surprising us with a different version of cows than what we normally expect.



"Hey, wait a minute! This is grass! We've been eating grass!"



NON-SENSE AND NONSENSE

Sometimes we are caused to laugh by combinations of words and meanings that seem odd (or incongruous) in some way. Why is it that some combinations of words make sense together and others do not? Compare:

1. My uncle always sleeps in the day.
2. My uncle always sleeps awake.
3. My uncle always sleeps standing on one toe.
4. My uncle Tuesday is a sleep-walk away from being a toe.

The first one (1) is entirely possible, but the next two (2&3) don't really make sense. But when we compare them to the last one (4) we can see that they are not gibberish, but actually recognisable English. So because we have two kinds of sentences that don't make any sense, it is useful to think of two kinds of not making sense. The sentences that are recognisable English (2&3) is referred to as NON-SENSE, whereas the other one (4) is clearly NONSENSE.

It is most likely the sentences that are NON-SENSE that has a chance of making you laugh, because the first one (1) doesn't break away from our expectations, and the NONSENSE sentence (4) breaks the CONVENTIONS of language to the degree that we just go "WHAT?!".

But the NON-SENSE is close enough to our CONVENTIONS of how language works that we immediately understands it, and so the NON-SENSE of the sentence can hit us all at once and the break away from what we expected can take us by surprise and make us laugh.

Sentence 2 CONTRADICTS what we know about language and meaning (you can't be *asleep* and *awake* at the same time), and sentence 3 CONTRADICTS what we know about the world (it is physically impossible to sleep on one toe).

The British comedian Eddie Izzard often points out a more complex type of NON-SENSE:

> Prince Philip shoots things. He's the President of the World Wild Life Fund and he shoots things. "Oh look, there's a panda. I'll protect them and then shoot them."
>
> Eddie Izzard

There is an apparent contradiction in the meanings of *protect* and *shoot*, and an actual contradiction in having a president of such an organisation who kills wildlife.

The strange thing is that, rather than rejecting such odd examples of language, the human mind often reacts by trying to make sense of them.

Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.

Chomsky

In creative use of language, such as poetry, the new combinations are exciting precisely because they *extend* the range of possible meanings and cause a sudden shift in perception. The apparent contradiction *bitter-sweet* invites a fresh look at the concepts of sweetness and bitterness; the meaning of the words is widened to include METAPHORICAL senses.

Some humour also forces the mind into such a COGNITIVE SHIFT. Alexander Pope defined wit as 'what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed', which has often been attributed to poetry as well.

SITUATION and REGISTER

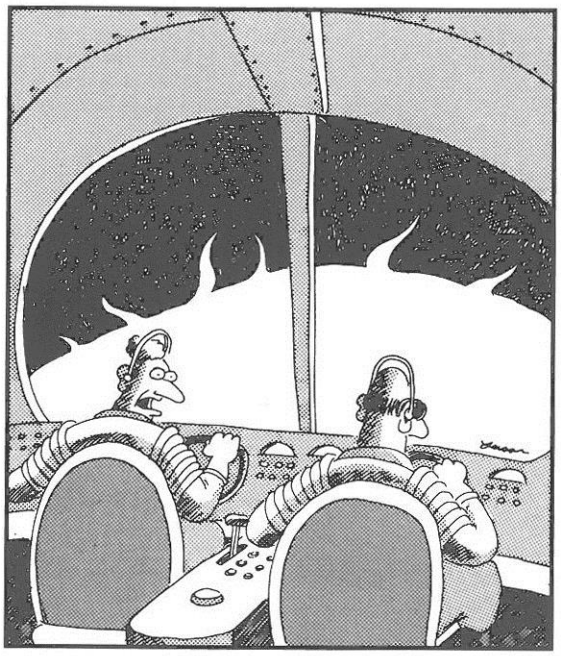
When communicating, you can do so in different kinds of REGISTER, ranging from formal language to more casual language. This REGISTER we choose usually has to do with the SITUATION we find ourselves in, i.e. if you are speaking or writing, what your purpose is, whom you are addressing, etc. People make fine adjustments during the day: talking to a friend, talking to a stranger, talking on the telephone, writing a message on the blackboard.

REGISTER can be roughly divided into five styles of writing and speaking, ranging from very casual language to the very formalised:

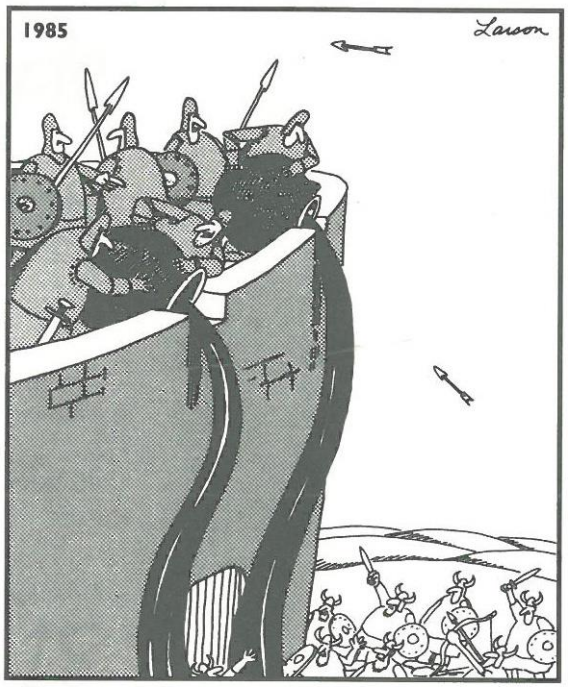
- Intimate – the use of 'private' code, rather than 'public' vocabulary, e.g. jargon.
- Casual – is between friends, so using shortened forms and slang.
- Consultative – coming to terms with strangers, and supplying background information.
- Formal – no participation from the listeners, so it can stand alone, detached, cohesion.

If you are socially competent, you know by instinct which REGISTER is suitable for which SITUATION, so naturally you will be surprised when someone chooses the wrong REGISTER for a SITUATION. Because instinct is something which works very fast, shorter pieces of humour often make use of the wrong REGISTER.

A man who was tried and acquitted for armed robbery said, 'Great. Does that mean I can keep the money?'



"It's no good, Dawson! We're being sucked in by the sun's gravitational field and there's nothing we can do! ... And let me add those are my sunglasses you're wearing!"

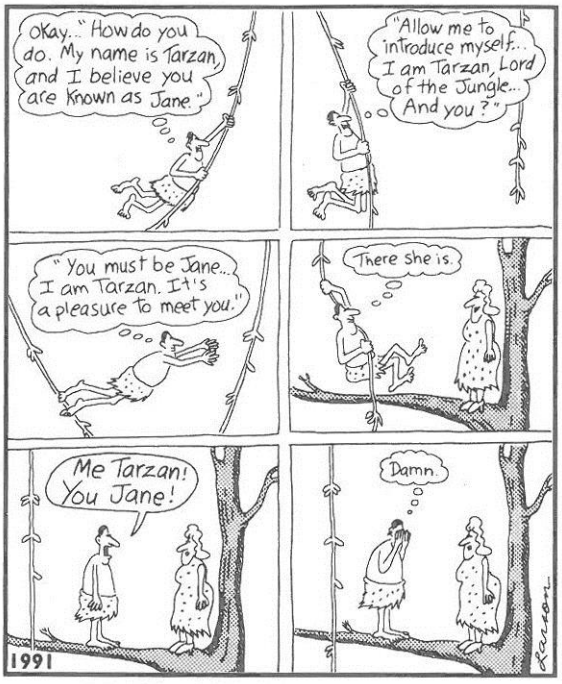


"You know, I have a confession to make, Bernie. Win or lose, I love doing this."

Because there normally isn't a change in your SITUATION while you are talking, you would rarely change REGISTER in the middle of saying something. Therefore, such a change in REGISTER is a very efficient way of creating the needed surprise to cause laughter, because the first part of what you say sets up the SITUATION, which the last part then takes a detour from.

She can make you laugh, she can make you cry, she can bring tears to me eyes, she can bring blood to my shoulders, she can bring the kettle to boil.

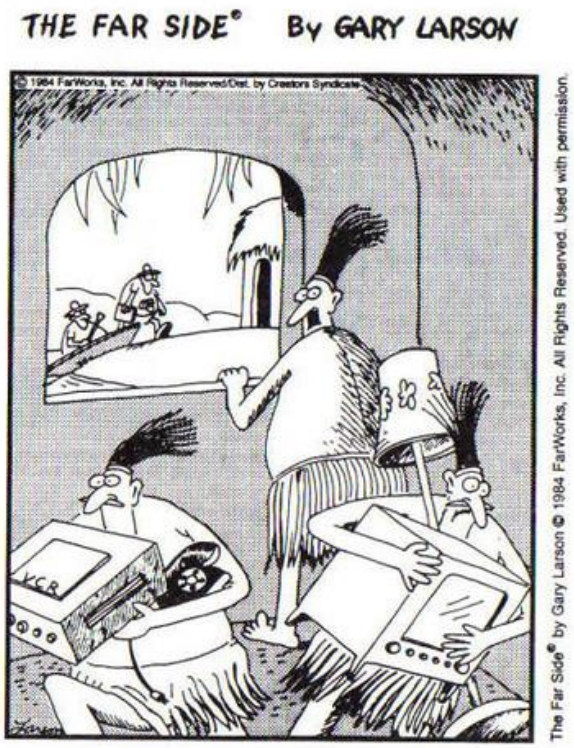
Peter Cook as Alan Latchley



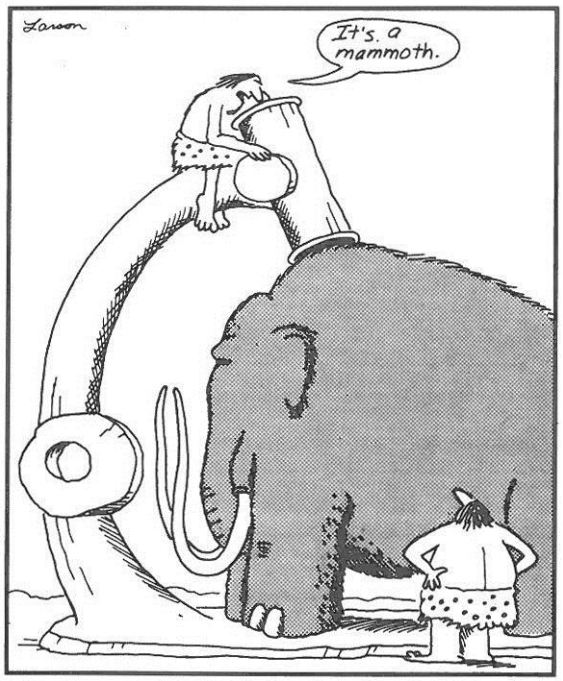
(Lawyer proposing to a woman): I love you, Sharon, and these documents will advise you of certain rights you have under federal and state law.

ABSURD SITUATIONS

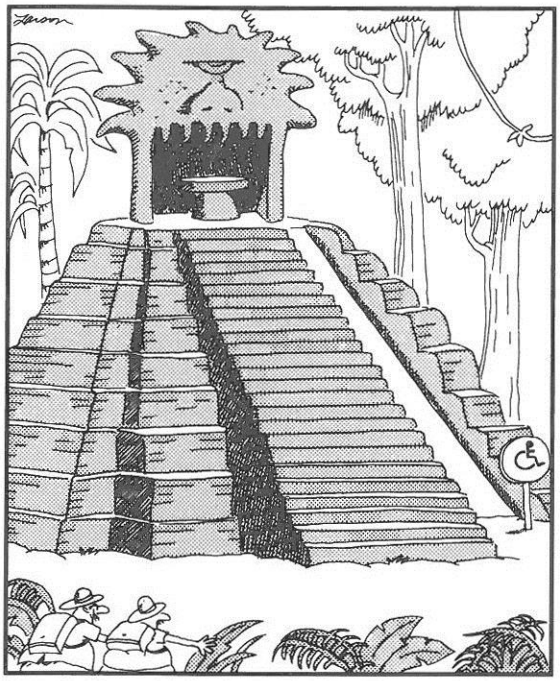
Many of the cartoons by Gary Larson take the language and behaviour of familiar modern humans onto a quite different group, such as animals, cavemen or other primitive people.



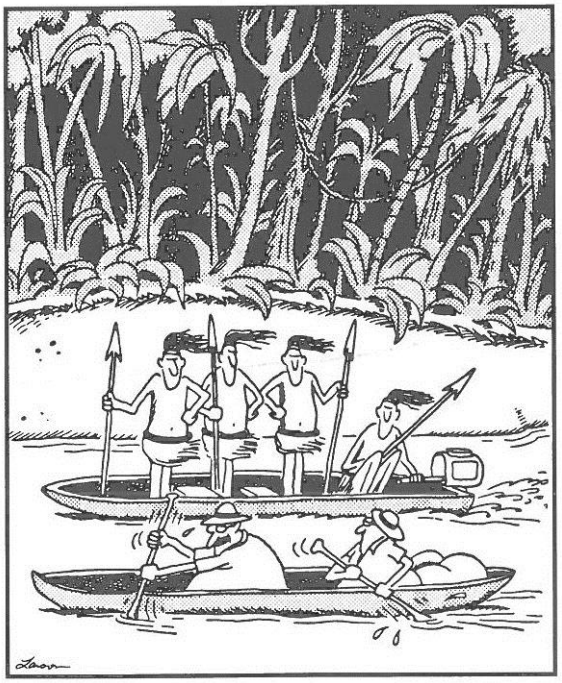
"Anthropologists! Anthropologists!"



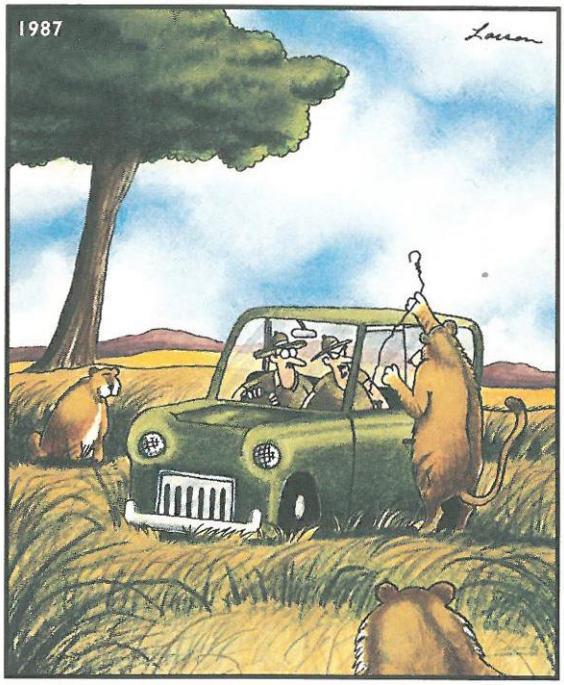
Early microscope



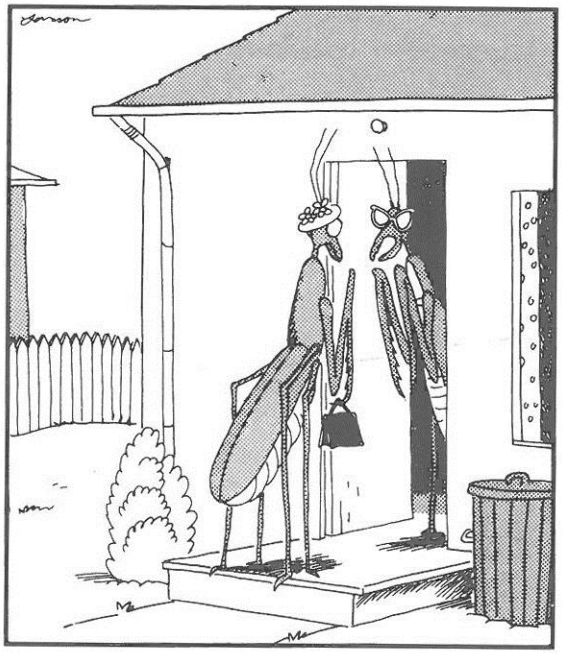
Aug. 11, 1959: In the heart of the Bolivian jungle, archaeologists discover an ancient and heretofore unknown sacrificial altar.



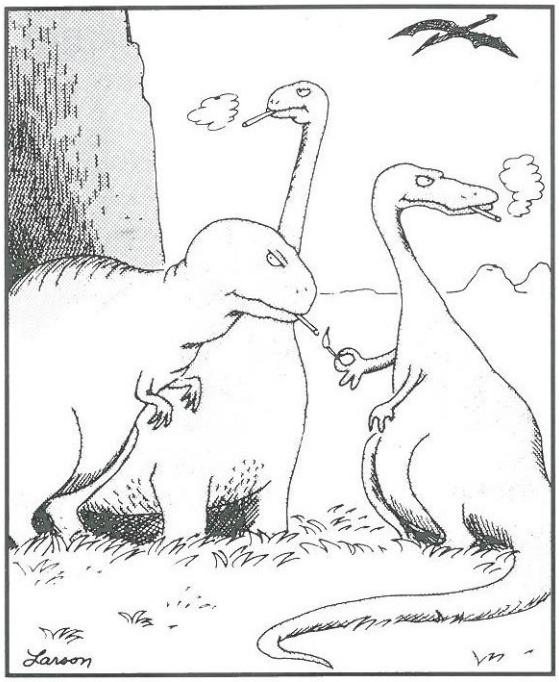
"Are they gaining, Huxley?"



"Drive, George, drive! This one's got a coat hanger!"



"I don't know what you're insinuating, Jane, but I haven't seen your Harold all day—besides, surely you know I would only devour my *own* husband!"



The real reason dinosaurs became extinct

Dogs and alcohol: the tragic untold story

Jesus was also well-known for his miracles, and probably would have formed a band if Smokey Robinson hadn't done it.

Jo Brand

SITUATION and EXPECTED BEHAVIOR

In most SITUATIONS we expect people to behave in a certain way. So, naturally, it is a surprise when they don't.

If, for example, you go to an Information Booth, you are expected to have come there because you need some specific information.

'Can I help you?'
'I'd like some information, please.'
'Yes?'
'What kind of information have you got?'

Fry and Laurie

And there are some things you do not expect to hear at a funeral for one of you aunts:

'Auntie Muriel.'

'Jane, my dear. We're not going on to the crematorium 'till two o'clock. Have a sausage roll.'

'We're eating *before* the funeral? Isn't that a little unusual?'

'Well, I'm hungry *now*. Anyway, I never liked the bitch.'

Coupling

RELEVANCE

We normally expect the people we communicate with to keep what they say relevant for the topic that you are communicating about. So, when something irrelevant is brought into the communication – or if something very relevant is left out – it creates surprise.

'I saw Mr Jones having dinner with a woman yesterday.'
'Really? Does his wife know about it?'
'Of course she does. She was the woman he was having dinner with.'

'Does your dog bite?'
'No.'
'OW! I thought you said your dog didn't bite?!?'
'It's not my dog.'

Billy Conolly

EXPECTATIONS IN DISCOURSE

Efficient listening and reading involve prediction from clues and signals: the audience is usually one jump ahead. The openings of the texts often create certain expectations about what will follow. These expectations are then subverted in humour:

‘England’s not a bad country – it’s just a mean, cold, ugly, divided, tired clapped-out, post-imperial, post-industrial, slag-heap covered in polystyrene hamburger cartons.’

Margaret Drabble

This can also happen in a conversation:

‘Have a nice day!’
‘Thank you, but I have other plans.’

In the same way, we expect something that looks like a normal joke to behave like a normal joke.

A rabbit goes into a butcher’s shop and asks, ‘Have you got any lettuce?’ The butcher says, ‘We don’t sell lettuce here. You need the greengrocer’s across the road.’

The next day the rabbit comes into the shop and asks for some lettuce again. The butcher tells him, ‘Look, I told you yesterday, we don’t sell lettuce. You need the greengrocer.’

The rabbit comes in the next day and asks the butcher again, ‘Have you got any lettuce?’ The butcher goes mad. He says, ‘Look, I’m sick of this. How many times do I have to tell you I don’t sell lettuce. If you come in here again asking for lettuce, I’m going to nail your ears to the floor.’

The next day the rabbit comes in and asks the butcher, ‘Have you got any nails?’

‘Nails? No.’

‘Right,’ the rabbit says, ‘Have you got any lettuce?’

We expect the punch line to finally give us the answer to why the rabbit keeps looking for lettuce at a butcher’s, but instead it takes us somewhere else.

SURREAL

Some humour pushes the boundaries of language to create very strange, but conceivable, ideas, like in this example which is presented as a kind of children's TV kind of activity:

'And a boy from Eton will be ripping the guts out of a monkey and showing us how to make a saxophone.'

Which is then answered by:

'Yes, Bob, and I'm going to be making a cello out of Andre Agassi.'

Reeves & Mortimer

But we also find this surreal kind of humour in some children's jokes:

'When do elephants paint their toenails red?'
'When they want to hide upside-down in strawberry jam.'

'Why did the elephant sit on the marshmallow?'
'Because he didn't want to fall into the cup of hot chocolate.'

And in some stories for children:

After a time they saw some land at a distance; and when they came to it, they found it was an island made of water quite surrounded by earth. Besides that, it was bordered by evanescent isthmuses with a great Gulf-stream running about all over it, so that it was perfectly beautiful, and contained only a single tree, 503 feet high.

Edward Lear

Surrealist humour is used effectively in films and on TV shows where the suspension of disbelief can be stretched to absurd lengths by logically following the consequences of unlikely, reversed or exaggerated premises.