

# Teaching Linguistic Humour Research Theories: Egyptian Higher Education EFL Literature Classes

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**Abstract**—“Humour studies” is an interdisciplinary research area that is relatively recent. It interests researchers from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, medicine, nursing, in the work place, gender studies, among others, and certainly teaching, language learning, linguistics, and literature. Linguistic theories of humour research are numerous; some of which are of interest to the present study. In spite of the fact that humour courses are now taught in universities around the world in the Egyptian context it is not included. The purpose of the present study is two-fold: to review the state of arts and to show how linguistic theories of humour can be possibly used as an art and craft of teaching and of learning in EFL literature classes. In the present study linguistic theories of humour were applied to selected literary texts to interpret humour as an intrinsic artistic communicative competence challenge. Humour in the area of linguistics was seen as a fifth component of communicative competence of the second language learner. In literature it was studied as satire, irony, wit, or comedy. Linguistic theories of humour now describe its linguistic structure, mechanism, function, and linguistic deviance. Semantic Script Theory of Verbal Humor (SSTH), General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), Audience Based Theory of Humor (ABTH), and their extensions and subcategories as well as the pragmatic perspective were employed in the analyses. This research analysed the linguistic semantic structure of humour, its mechanism, and how the audience reader (teacher or learner) becomes an interactive interpreter of the humour. This promotes humour competence together with the linguistic, social, cultural, and discourse communicative competence. Studying humour as part of the literary texts and the perception of its function in the work also brings its positive association in class for educational purposes. Humour is by default a provoking/laughter-generated device. Incongruity recognition, perception and resolving it, is a cognitive mastery. This cognitive process involves a humour experience that lightens up the classroom and the mind. It establishes connections necessary for the learning process. In this context the study examined selected narratives to exemplify the application of the theories. It is, therefore, recommended that the theories would be taught and applied to literary texts for a better understanding of the language. Students will then develop their language competence. Teachers in EFL/ESL classes will teach the theories, assist students apply them and interpret text and in the process will also use humour. This is thus easing students' acquisition of the second language, making the classroom an enjoyable, cheerful, self-assuring, and self-illuminating experience for both themselves and their students. It is further recommended that courses of humour research studies should become an integral part of higher education curricula in Egypt.

**Keywords**—ABTH, deviance, disjuncture, episodic, GTVH, humour competence, humour comprehension, humour in the classroom, humour in the literary texts, humour research linguistic theories, incongruity- resolution, isotopy-disjunction, jab line, longer

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text joke, narrative story line (macro-micro), punch line, six knowledge resource, SSTH, stacks, strands, teaching linguistics, teaching literature, TEFL, TESL.

## I. INTRODUCTION: LITERATURE REVIEW - STATE OF ART

“**H**UMOUR research studies” is an interdisciplinary research area that is relatively recent. It is reviewed by several scholars in the different disciplines. The International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS) is an official organization for humour studies that encourages researchers from different disciplines to work together in collaboration [1]. This research will refer to its scholars and research done, but not exclusively. Humour researchers are from various disciplines other than linguistics, which is the core focus of this paper. Although the separate disciplines have different focuses, they work across disciplines. Researchers and educators from the different disciplines not only studied humour effect on the learner and instructor, but actually recommended its employment in class, published books and created courses: in class, online, and in blended forms. *Humour and health* for example researched extensively how laughter is related to the process of healing (see [2]-[5]). They also now have exam preparation books in medicine [6] and in teaching [7]. The therapeutic effect of humour is also an area of interest to the *discipline of psychology* [8], [9]. The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (AATH) is another important association [10] together with its related educating body [11] that nurses, doctors and psychiatrists and others of interest can use. They include rich online resources (see also [12] one of the earliest proponents in medicine and nursing). Researchers and practitioners showed how humor helped dealing with stress, relieved tension, and assisted retention of information in the classroom [13]. Furthermore, in the area of humour and psychology a prominent scholarly pioneer work is a classic professional reference [14] reviewing and promoting measures and research done in the area and applying them [15]-[17]. Thus, humour appreciation, and the sense of humour are also interrelated to *cultural and social* aspects of humour comprehension. It is a skill/competence that is natural, necessary and could be improved, as researchers suggested, if one was humor impaired [18]. For further references see also [19]. Since indeed humour is related to the cultural and social aspects, studies in these areas were numerous [20]-[24]. Moreover, educators in context of the classroom teaching and learning strategies and interests, researched and manipulated both areas. In psychology they examined how humor can reduce stress [25] and boost retention of information [26]. Studies also showed how intercultural aspects of humor comprehension affected interaction in EFL/ESL classroom

[27], [28]. Researches further confirm how the psychological, social and cultural aspects affect the humor comprehension and sometimes cause humor failure [29]-[31]. On the other hand, it is also believed and proven true by many researchers that the importance of using humor in college classes as a communication tactic [32]-[34] is essential for learning and communication to take place. Since language is communication and the classroom or lecture hall are the place to communicate and learn so it must be a cheerful healing place where both student and teacher are building rapport. To have a successful teaching and learning environment, humour must be part of the experience since it is considered the fifth component of the communicative competence components [35]. For an EFL /ESL learner to achieve real communicative competence he/she needs to have the tools and the skills to acquire humour competence [36]. These tools, techniques, material and strategies were researched and exploited in several researches, papers, and books [37]-[44]. For a fuller review see also [45]. On teaching humour [46]-[50] review and analyse the status quo, while [51] reviews humor research in general. In college higher education [52], [44] discussed strategies while [53]-[58] discussed the pros and cons of using humour in higher education and in EFL/ESL classes. A classic resource [59] is an essential: to read and to use book. A full review of four decades in the educational setting was also done [60]. Techniques and methods for teaching specific language skills in L2 classroom was researched and tried. They used humour in the teaching of reading and writing skills [61], the oral skill e.g. speaking [62], grammar and structure [63], translation [64] as well as context in language [65]. More extensively the use of literature in the class both as content humour was also explored and reviewed [1]. The literature in this area too is quite extensive: researchers went as far as to suggest a rewrite of the classics to be able to support humour comprehension in the classics [66]. Others shared how they used literary texts [67], [68]. Most extensive work that was done was by Attardo applying his linguistic theories of longer humorous texts [69]. From the previous review we can conclude that in the educational setting and EFL/ESL, higher education numerous and extensive research was done excluding the Egyptian context except for very few research [70]. Furthermore, humour research courses, modules, workshops in all the areas of humour research in academia were statistically internationally reviewed by [71]. This shows that none of the humour research modules are taught in Egypt, neither in undergraduate studies nor in higher education. The essential necessity in the teaching of linguistic theories of humour is certainly a must. In the following parts of the paper, a simplified amalgamated theory kit/model will be provided as a means of teaching the theories and applying them to literary genres in the literature or stylistic modules that are already part of the curricula at the University level in the Faculties of Arts and Humanities. It is hoped that the next step for Universities in Egypt would be to design new post graduate modules teaching humour studies. To teach modules of Humour Research not only in literature but in the areas of psychology, for example, would be a promotion hopefully

employing theory and application.

## II. AMALGAMATED LINGUISTIC HUMOUR THEORIES SIMPLIFIED

Linguistic theories of humour research are numerous but the following are suggested here as a model kit:

- A. Incongruity Resolution (IR) and Isotopy –Disjunction model (IDM).
- B. SSTH and B. GTVH
- C. Extended Humorous Longer Texts
- D. Humour as Deviance
- E. ABTH
- F. Humour Competence

### A. Incongruity Resolution (IR) and Isotopy –Disjunction Model (IDM)

The incongruity theory is the basis for most of the linguistics theories of humour. In the incongruity theory of humour, amusement is the enjoyment of something which clashes with our mental patterns and expectations. The enjoyment of the incongruity is the humorous amusement [72]. Humorous texts, like jokes, work in a mechanism [73], [74] of first taking you mentally to a path of thought (isotopy/script/meaning/reading) S1, then shifts you to another S2. When you are first lead to a meaning that is surprising or incongruous you reach a punchline; you reach an illogical ending or a “disjunction” (a process involving choice between two words/disjoining). This is usually triggered/ caused by a “connector” (a linguistic entity that realizes the connection between the two scripts (S1-S2) or a “switch trigger”. Isotopy (one of two or more forms of an element differing from each other) disjunction (disjoining) model is an explanation of the mechanism after which the process of backtracking or act of going back to the second meaning or S2 and a resolution of the incongruity takes place. Now the receiver of the joke is amused. Humour comprehension happens and enjoyment takes place. The following (Fig. 1) is a diagram explaining the process using the following joke:

- Q: Do you believe in clubs for young men?  
 A: Only when kindness fails.

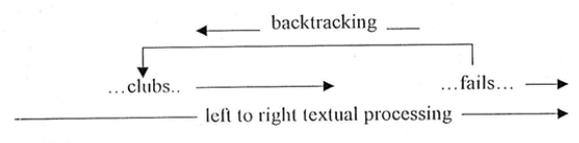


Fig.1 The processing of the joke text: Isotopy disjunction incongruity resolution [73]

In this example, the first mention of “clubs” S1: “social group” is not yet the connector until the reader/listener reaches the disjunctive “fails” and that causes the disjunction, backtracking to the incongruity of clubs which is now the connector, disambiguation takes place by referring to S2 “sticks”, resolve the two meaning of “clubs”. [73]

### B. SSTH and GTVH

The SSTH [74] can be summarized as two necessary criteria

or conditions for a text to be funny: a) each joke must contain two overlapping scripts (or interpretations); b) the two scripts must be opposed (or one is a negation of the other) for example: real/unreal; possible/ impossible. GTVH revision [75] is actually adding to the script opposition five more conditions or descriptive criteria upon which the joke or the funny text can be created or described. To simplify and summarize them see Table I. Table I. For the detailed applications of the theory, see [73]-[75].

**C. Extended Humorous Longer Text**

According to Attardo [69], Fig. 2 describes the idea of how a humorous long text like a novel, drama or even the narrative poetry of the classics would have clusters of humorous instances that accumulate and become real funny and sometimes hilariously funny. The application of this

models/theory extension shows that clusters in the story line, the situations and the actual conversations. See the application in [69].

TABLE I  
 SIX KNOWLEDGE RESOURCES OF GTVH

| Knowledge Resource | (KR) | the resource you need to generate a joke                                                   |
|--------------------|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Script Opposition  | (SO) | Two opposite meanings/interpretations                                                      |
| Logical Mechanism  | (LM) | The way in which the two senses/scripts) in the joke are brought together                  |
| Situation          | (SI) | Or joke event, context, or situation: objects, participants, instruments, activities, etc. |
| Target             | (TA) | The person or the action that is being ridiculed                                           |
| Narrative Strategy | (NS) | The form in which the joke is framed: story, dialogue, riddle, etc.                        |
| Language           | (L)  | The actual verbalization: spoken, written, other linguistic components                     |

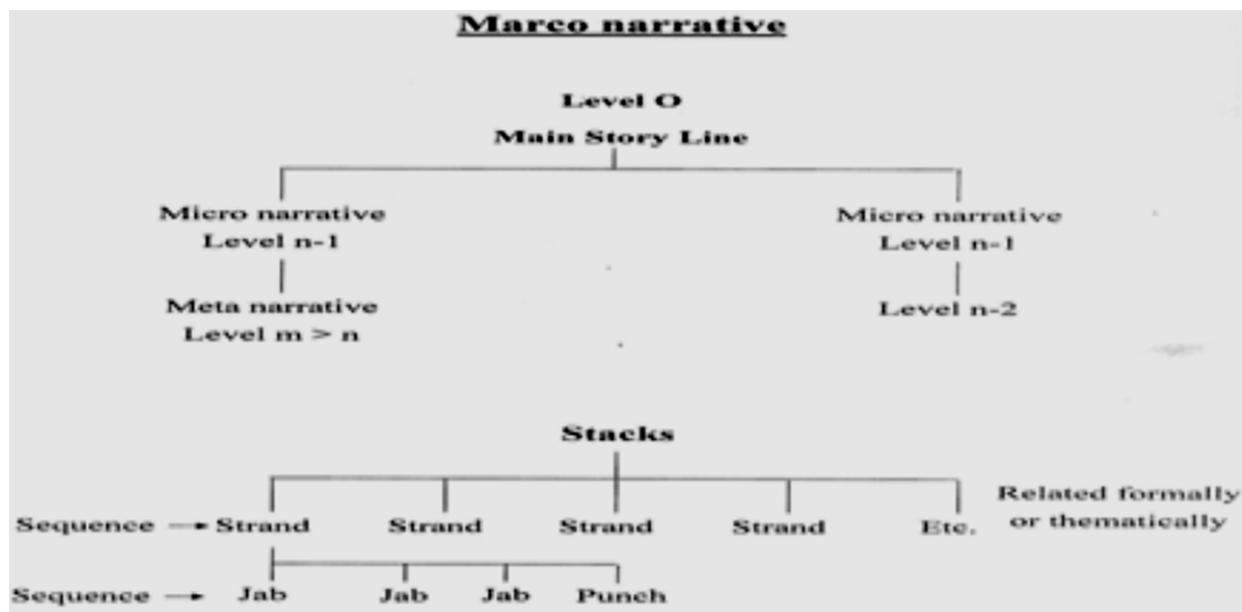


Fig. 2 Explanation of the model used for longer texts (Adapted from [69])

The difference between a punch line (occurring at the final position and a jab line (a humorous trigger occurring in the middle of the body of a text) is that the punch line was prepared for by the clusters or a sequence of jab or punch lines called strands. Strands can be established textually or intertextually. Stacks are a group of strands: thematically or formally related. Joke cycles are a group of jokes that are related thematically. Macro narrative is the larger story line that includes smaller side micro stories. A good example is the Canterbury Tales from which the Nun’s Story was typically using all the previous features.

**D. Humour as Deviance**

Linguistic theories of humour now describe humor’s linguistic structure, mechanism, function, and linguistic deviance. The deviation theory is clarifying the phenomenon of humour [76]. It is relating deviance to other traditional theories: the relief theory, the superiority theory, and, the incongruity theory. It is explaining how deviance in the use of

the language creates humour. Therefore, it shows how humour is created and how humour works. The producer and receiver of humour need to have an awareness about how the language of humour and its mechanism are deviant from straightforward language. In humour, one is relieved from a tension of some sort, he is released from any negative energy or situation. Amusing humour deviates from the normal use of language thus making witty connections with things and words that do not usually collocate. Explication of deviation in humour is necessary.

**E. ABTH**

Considering the student as an audience of the joke event or extended text the audience based theory is another very important theory that is quite illuminating for them. For humour/ joke/ text to be humorous it must have a receiver who comprehends and receives it as funny. It is crucial for the humour event to have an audience who identified/recognized/ appreciated it as funny. The theory and application were

promoted in [77]. See Fig. 3.



Fig. 3 Audience based theory where humor identification, comprehension and appreciation take place in the humor event [77]

#### F. Communicative Competence and Humour Competence in EFL

In context of the EFL higher education classes teaching and learning situation, it is important that the educators and students are aware of the importance of humour as an important component of communicative competence [35]. Part of being competent is that the student would also be humour competent. Humour competence is believed to be the fifth component of language communicative competence. A review on humour competence shows an interest an impotence of humour competence [36]. See Fig. 4.

*Humour competence :  
 a fifth component*



Fig. 4 Description of the humour competence added as a fifth component in communicative competence [35].

#### III. SUGGESTIONS FOR USING HUMOUROUS TEXTS AND TECHNIQUES IN THE EGYPTIAN CLASSROOM

Using the previously mentioned theories, the literary texts known as comic or witty [78], [79] were analysed partially to make sure the theories assist the humour comprehension. The theories as tools were found to be very illuminating and eye

opening to the humourous events- culminating, clustering and artistically either making one laugh, smile, or maybe just amused with the incongruity resolution.

It is also advised that not only the content would amuse but the discussion and negotiation about the humour and wit would be a good class tool. Humour builds rapport, relieves tension and support retention of artistic experience of working with a literary text.

It is further hoped that the learners themselves would have autonomy when they do analyses themselves and become humour competent. They should also have opportunities of creating their own humour in the class or in producing literary works with humour or humourous.

From a reader perspective, it is important that the humour in literary texts is understood, accepted, and appreciated as being funny and entertaining. Literary texts in higher education are a higher rhetorical production of the language. It might also be more challenging because of the displacement of the culture and place. The challenge is high but worth it. If students recognize it as a fifth component and so do instructors then it is clearly a necessary challenge. It can be eased off by the use of humour in the challenge.

In the area of teaching humour in the Egyptian higher education context, no serious contributions are made yet. It is believed that it should have its own humour research modules in its classrooms and curricula.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In the present paper, the researcher tried to argue that teaching linguistic theories of humour both as modules and for the teaching of literature in higher education is a necessary and important step for academia in Egypt.

It is also believed that the amalgamated simplifies model suggested here is a contribution: teachers can use it with ease and simplicity. It enlightens students' perspective, improves their humour competence and in turn, their communicative competence. Teaching linguistic theories of humour for the appreciation and comprehension of literary works is an art and craft. The act of comprehension and appreciation must further take place in a cheerful classroom context: also a craft of teaching. Laughing with students and about the characters as well as the literary situation will create an amiable classroom. It is believed, by the scholars and educators, that promoting humour and humour research is a challenging engaging perspective that should become part of our curricula whether as modules or as a technique of teaching and learning.

Educators need to recognize the importance of that area of research. Delivering it students and instructors become a humour community [80] where they all have ownership of the teaching and learning space and time. It is not a matter of just raising students' and instructors' awareness but they will own the craft.

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