'If it rhymes, it's funny': Theories of Humour in Children's Poetry

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One day while walking to school, my daughter and I were discussing a headline we had recently seen that she found funny even though it had no humorous content. 'It just rhymed,' she said, 'and I think if it rhymes, it's funny.' She's right, according to Alastair Clarke's study on the pattern recognition theory of humour. Clarke sets his theory apart from theories proposed and debated in philosophical and literary discourse by asserting a neuroscientific basis for humour that disregards content altogether: for Clarke, 'The humorous response is evoked by the surprise recognition of a pattern' (2008:27). Content is important for Clarke only insofar as it forms the individual entities that are first apprehended and then recognised as repeating in adapted circumstances. Pattern recognition is obviously a crucial facet in a child's developing cognitive arsenal; it enables a child to access and find order in a world that would otherwise present itself as a kind of terrible randomness of individual events or entities. As sequences of entities develop into patterns, children can act on expectations of pattern repetition, and this produces a kind of reward or sense of mastery. Humour, on the other hand, produces a different kind of reward, because it is based not on the expectations of the repetition of a familiar pattern, but on the surprise of discerning a pattern despite altered circumstances or in an unexpected place, and thus rewards our ability to parse innovation.

In the case of the headline, for instance, my daughter expected the linguistic pattern to be resolved in a non-rhyming way in keeping with most serious or ordinary language, and was therefore surprised and rewarded to recognise
another linguistic pattern, that of rhyme, in an unexpected place. Children's poetry, on the other hand, is a place where we often expect to find rhyme, repetition, rhythm, and other established and easily discernable patterns. Indeed, Kieran Egan (1988) points out that this particular type of word play facilitates and augments a child's cognitive abilities by helping her recognise patterns and generate pattern completion or continuation. For a poem to be humorous, though, there must be some sort of innovation on an expected pattern that evokes surprise, such as when ordinary syntax or a recognised poetic form is violated, or when words are used in an unfamiliar or punning way, or when subtler cultural patterns dependent on content unexpectedly appear.

In the following limerick of unknown origin, we find such a surprise based on violating the expected rhythm of a familiar form:

There was a young man from Japan
Whose limericks never would scan.
When asked why this was,
He replied, 'It's because
I always try to fit as many syllables into the last line as ever I possibly can.'

Likewise, this anonymous limerick, which includes a play on two meanings of the word 'meter', enabling a semantic as well as a formal level of pattern recognition that contributes to its humour:

A decrepit old gas man named Peter,
While hunting around for the meter,
Touched a leak with his light.
He arose out of sight,
And, as anyone can see by reading this, he also destroyed the meter.

These playful deviations of the limerick form are so ubiquitous as to have become an established subgenre of their own – the anti-limerick. As with any parody, however, some level of familiarity with the original is necessary for readers to get the joke or, in Clarke's terminology, to recognise the pattern that is beinginnovated. In this parody of Lear from W.S. Gilbert, the deviance from the pattern is so significant that for children, who either are not familiar enough with the limerick form to find the pattern or who don't recognise the original, the effect is likely to be confusion rather than humour:

There was an old man of St. Bees,
Who was stung in the arm by a wasp,
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When they asked, ‘Does it hurt?’
He replied, ‘No, it doesn’t,
But I thought all the while ‘twas a Hornet.’ (Wells, 1903:xix)

Deviations and surprise recognitions of new patterns are not just limited to form. Ogden Nash, for instance, often created nonsense words in his limericks, such as ‘wearance’ and ‘tearance’, to continue the pattern of the rhyme he had established with ‘Clarence’ and ‘parents’. There’s no reason why the words shouldn’t exist – they are pronounceable and their form doesn’t violate any conventions of spelling or root-suffix adhesion – but they just don’t, and therefore their use is surprising, incongruent, and humorous. Another example of more complex pattern recognition can be found in Douglas Florian’s ‘The Monarch Butterfly’. In this poem, Florian establishes a subservient formal pattern of rhyme and repetition, but also a dominant semantic one of stately formality in his description of the butterfly. He positions his monarch as the leader of ‘great migrations’ and uses inverted syntax such as ‘Past nations he wings’ to evoke high seriousness and dignity of purpose and carriage. The final word, ‘puke’, then evokes surprise because, while it continues the subservient patterns of rhyme and rhythm, its position as slang and its reference to an abject bodily response violates the dominant pattern of lofty description that the poem has established. With the surprise comes the recognition of dissonance or pattern cessation that then evokes a humorous response.

While I find Clarke’s work useful for analysing linguistic forms of humour such as those illustrated above, I find myself wanting to put both cultural and psychological meat on its very bare bones. After all, his condition for humour does not, by his own admission, account for why not everyone laughs at the same things, and thus I think an interdisciplinary approach that takes into account social interaction, cultural norms and psychoanalytic theories of development is a necessary supplement for a truly comprehensive understanding of why some poems are funnier than others. For instance, in Clarke’s discussion of the evolutionary functions and benefits of humour, he asserts that humour gives us a physical reward for cognitive perception in difficult circumstances that is, the release of endorphins, hormones and neurotransmitters; and alterations in levels of stress hormones (2008:51-56). In other words, humour makes us feel as though we have won something. This accords with professor of speech communication Charles Gruner’s (1997) comprehensive claim that all humour, no matter what form it takes or content it contains, can be explained through the superiority theory first articulated by philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes observes:
Men laugh at mischances and indecencies, wherein there lies not wit or jest at all ... Also, men laugh at the infirmities of others ... I may therefore conclude that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminence in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonor. ... (as cited in Gruner, 1997:13)

In all humorous utterances and situations, there is an element of competition, adds Gruner, which sets the stage for there to be a winner and a loser. Take away the possibility of winning and losing, and you take away the humour. He stresses, interestingly, that unlike gambling, where the possibility of winning is what keeps the gambler going, the possibility of losing is what keeps us in the game of humour. If you had a magic formula, for instance, that ensured that you would always bowl a perfect game, bowling would soon lose interest for you; the excitement and incentive of any game is the hope that you will triumph against the possibility that you won't. In life, likewise, as the country song goes, sometimes you're the windshield, and sometimes you're the bug, and this uncertainty is one of the conditions that make humour possible.

Even theories and explanations of humour play into the superiority theory. Gruner claims that his is the only theory of humour we need; Clarke does likewise. Likewise, we assert our superiority whenever we offer an explanation for an individual instance of humour. If I can explain it, I prove that I have understood it- in other words, my perspicacity has won out over the ambiguity of language or the incongruity of the concept. If I have to explain it, say, to someone else who didn't understand it, not only have I won out over the joke, I've also won out over the person who didn't get it - getting something that someone else didn't is de facto a form of winning, unless, of course, what you get is the flu or something equally unpleasant. At any rate, it's a common cliche that if you have to explain a joke, it isn't funny. Well, maybe yes and maybe no. You might not think it's funny because you weren't able to discern the pattern upon which it innovates - which means you didn't win, either over the meaning of the joke itself or over the butt of the joke. She who laughs last, after all, might just think slowest.

If we avoid fiddly pedantic competitions among theorists and accept the idea that the thrill of victory is either one of the necessary conditions or one of the rewards for humour, then the question becomes what would count as a win when it comes to linguistic humour, such as that which we find in much chil-
dren's poetry. I would argue that through language, and specifically through the patterned language play of poetry, we win out, to some degree, over the randomness and terror evoked by the two inevitabilities of life identified by Bataille and closely linked to embodied experience: 1) I am insufficient, and 2) I will die (1988:xxxii).

Lacanian psychoanalysis teaches that the child's separation from the mother inaugurates a sense of lack, of insufficiency, first on the part of the child herself, but soon on the part of the mother as well. Language, especially a patterned language full of metaphors and rich imagery, substitutes in some way for that lack by enabling both social connection and an imaginative connection between the world of words and the world of things. Poetic language, with its formal structures and its ability to metonymise entities and pattern experience, enables children to erect structures of predictability over which they have an illusion of control, allowing them to exercise a form of linguistic mastery over a physical world they can't always comprehend and certainly cannot control. Hence it separates them from their embodied experience at one level, while its rhythms and sonorous music reconnect them to that body in pleasurable ways.

Examples of how this works come in the many short humorous treatments that I might call paeans to the skin. For instance, Max Patchen, in his quatrain 'Rullo, Inside,' and Colin West, in his quatrain 'Insides' both express gratitude to their skin for enclosing their innards and holding their parts together (Prelutsky, 1991). Tedd Arnold (1997), on the other hand, expresses anxious sentiments about the same phenomenon. In his picturebook, Parts, a boy discovers that bits of him – hair, skin, boogies, belly-button lint, teeth – are falling off. His concern is that 'The glue that holds our parts together isn't holding me!!' (n.p.). His anxiety is both expressed and expelled by his use of a tightly controlled meter and through the deployment of humour. What he demonstrates without realising it is that, to a large degree, words are what hold his body image together; his parents eventually explain the processes of exfoliation and tooth loss, thus partially alleviating his anxiety, which has already been contained through the use of rhyme, just as Dr. Seuss created controlled anarchy through the tight containment of chaotic action within a fixed, regular metre. The humour comes through the reader's winning out over the things that trouble the protagonist – the reader recognises in this boy's fears ones that she herself has put aside, but she also enjoys the process of bouncing along in a pattern that surprises her with its linguistic innovations.
Children come hardwired with a range of diffuse emotions that need to be organised and developed according to cultural and social norms and ideologies. Children’s literature plays a huge role in helping in that project, as it provides images and language that carry the values and possibilities for identity construction in a given culture. Along with adult and peer interaction, children’s literature and culture shape children’s identities by giving them the discourses and images to identify with. Children’s poetry plays a crucial role in this project by helping children regulate embodied experience; they must transition from and combine the rhythms of their own bodies into the rhythms their cultures and languages value. They have a basic emotion of fear or anxiety; their stories teach them what to be afraid of; their poems help them contain those fears by manipulating their emotional states and containing them in metre. When they realise their essential separateness from other people and things in the world, they develop longing and desire; their stories teach them both what is missing and what is desirable; their poems ameliorate those longings by transforming them into aesthetic pleasures. Stories and poems organise diffuse emotions into narrative and formal contexts that allow us to manage reality; this is an historical constant. But the values people live by change over time and across cultures. I would argue that contemporary western culture requires certain dispositions for people to flourish: among these are mental flexibility, a high tolerance for ambiguity, a capacity for moral decision making in the face of complex and competing ideologies, and divergent thinking. These are all, according to philosopher John Morreall (1999), a result of a comic, as opposed to a tragic, way of viewing the world. In Clarke’s terms, they result from the evolved ability to discern patterns across varied circumstances. Children’s poetry, especially the nonsense tradition inaugurated by Carroll and Lear, demands that sort of mental flexibility and facilitates its development through the manipulation of patterns of rhythm and rhyme set against absurd rearrangements of the physical as well as the linguistic world.

Deploying our interdisciplinary model, we might say that the appreciation of nonsense verse or humorous poetry represents the fruition of a victory won in stages. In psychoanalytic terms, the use of language is a triumphant response to the trauma of expulsion from the maternal body because it aligns the child with the paternal Law as it is represented in the written word. Indeed, Kristeva asserts that the child’s ‘entry into syntax constitutes a first victory over the mother’ (1980:289) and just as he rejects his indebtedness to the body of the mother, he also uses language to recast embodiment *per se*. Poetic language has a somatic dimension that enables the child to re-find a
bit of the *jouissance* he has lost in his replacement of immediate embodied experience with imaginary and symbolic representations of experiences. It involves the body emotionally with its rhythms and its patterns of sound, and gives the material world back to the child in images. However, the achievement of language is an incomplete victory for the child, as it simply asserts a new, paternal master who could potentially swallow the child up in its own straitened and lockstep rhythms that affirm the hegemony of a patriarchal symbolic order. A disruption or unexpected alteration cracks the pattern up, allowing for movement and innovation. In other words, if the acquisition of syntax is a victory over the mother, then the acquisition of a sense of humour is the child’s first victory over the father.

From victory unto victory the child progresses through the stages Freud outlined in the development of a sense of humour, which correspond handily to Erikson's stages of development as well; each win enables a child to enjoy yet another level of humorous poetry. Freud's stage of play, for instance, challenges the congruity of objects with their names or uses and concepts with their meaning. Humour at this stage consists in calling people and things by names that aren't theirs, or using objects in innovative ways—calling mommy daddy, say, or using a pan as a hat. This kind of play aligns with Erikson's stage of trust vs. mistrust in that children have to acquire a sense of consistency in regard to the things and people in their world. Once they are assured of that consistency, they can test it through playful manipulation that produces humour rather than anxiety—just because I call mommy daddy doesn't mean she changes. Poems that challenge identity and imagine alternative uses for everyday things, often playing out absurd consequences, participate in that sort of humour.

Scatological or scandalously gross poems that challenge adult rules of propriety find favour with children who are in Freud’s jesting stage. Freud emphasises that the key factor in this stage is an audience who will in fact be scandalised. Erikson’s more nuanced account of this stage indicates that children will experience conflicts between autonomy versus shame and doubt, and initiative versus guilt. Poems such as those found in Adam Rex’s *Frankenstein* books (2006, 2008), that explore the abject, disgusting, and monstrous or that blatantly violate parentally approved conventions, correspond to the issues of the child asserting himself against the strictures of his culture, the rejection of which might induce shame or guilt. On the other hand, if you take the initiative and make a sandwich from the garbage your neighbors throw at you, or find a husband after you’re dead, or craft a hat from carrots to stave off
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carnivorous zombies, you can meet the challenges with humour rather than shame, doubt, or guilt.

In Freud's final stage, children (and adults) use jokes to expound upon problematic themes, without expressing hostile and sexual feelings. Playground poetry, which is often competitive, sexual, and aggressive, evolves at this stage in which, according to Erikson, competence is at stake against a sense of inferiority. Aspiring wits invent and recite poems that display their linguistic finesse while containing anxiety over their bodily prowess. Dirty limericks, suggestive jump rope rhymes and wicked parodies of old favorites dominate the poetry slams of the playground set, sublimating emergent sexual and hostile feelings that may not even be understood through a medium young poets have successfully mastered.

Obviously, theoretical models such as those I have discussed and put forth are attempts at mastering the complexities of lived experience, destined to remain inadequate to that experience. Indeed, the most important thing to remember when discussing any sort of stage theory is that the stages are persistent and recursive; anxieties that seemed long overcome may resurface at any time, and victories must be renegotiated. And while competence in all aspects of life is what we aspire to, the certainties of life – our insufficiency and our mortality – have stacked the decks against us. With children's humorous poetry, however, we can find and play with the cracks in the ideological systems, the linguistic codes and patterns, and the pretentiousness of the pretence. We can crack wise, and we can crack ourselves up, thus finding the truth in the song by Leonard Cohen: 'There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in' (1992).
 Works Cited:
Wells, C (1903) A nonsense anthology. New York: Scribner