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Humour in ESP - Demonstration lecture

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01- Introduction

Good morning. My name is Ivan Lowe. My surname in German means “lion”. So welcome to the feast of the lion. I have no intention to eat you my audience of course. Rather, I invite you to discover a lion’s feast of fun as we seriously explore the world of humour in ESP.

I will begin with ESP. When people ask me in Britain what I teach, I usually say ‘linguistics’. Some of them ask what I have specialised in. At this point I hesitate. I say, ESP, and they recoil in surprise. Why would I be teaching Extra Sensory Perception?

In this demonstration I would like to show you how humour is almost everywhere in linguistics, and especially in ESP. Right away I must apologise for not including jokes from the world of business. The largest types of ESP are English for Scientists and English for Business.

I must also mention the problem of audience. Most of you are very good in English, but struggle with science. In most English classes to scientists, the students know the science, but will be struggling with English. So, forgive me if I have to explain some of the jokes.

02. Phonetics

1. Let us begin with phonetics. A few years ago students were required to rewrite words in the phonemic script. One word was ‘linguistics’. The student wrote ‘lingustics’. So there you have it, I teach disgusting linguistics.
2. An Asian student once went to a tutor, asking for information about "condom free sex". A puzzled teacher asked which course it was. The course was on philosophy, not health education. It turned out the student was trying to say "quantum physics".
3. Did you know that this word GHOTI, according to Bernard Shaw, is pronounced ‘Fish’?
gh from rough = f
o from women = i
ti from position = sh

(Attributed to Bernard Shaw. Referred to in NSc 11 May 96) (NSc = New Scientist)

Or how do you read the following word? Ghoughgheighghough

gh from hiccough = p

ough frm though = o

gh from eighth = t

eigh from eight = a

gh from eighth = t

ough frm though = o (NSc 24.8.96)

4. A student was convinced that the square root of minus one was equal to "e". Try as he might, the teacher could not understand where this notion had come from. Eventually the student reached for his calculator, which, refusing the problem, had displayed "e" for "error". (NSc 8 Jun 96)

There is a twist. Of course, the student must have been French, and forgotten to quote the right letter. the answer is "i" said /aɪ/ ... in English, and /i:/ in French.

5. There are several long/short pronunciation poems. A short one, read well, would probably illustrate the genre.

Why English is so hard

We'll begin with a BOX and the plural is

But the plural of OX should be not

Then one fowl is GOOSE but two are called

Yet the plural of MOOSE should never be meece.

You may find a lone MOUSE or a whole lot of

But the plural of HOUSE is not hice.

If the plural of MAN is always called

Why shouldn't the plural of PAN be called pen?

If COW in the plural may be or KINE

But the plural of VOW is not vine.

And I speak of a FOOT and you show me two

But I give you a BOOT - would a pair be called beet?

If one is a TOOTH and a whole set are

Why shouldn't the plural of BOOTH be called beeth?

If the singular is THIS and the plural is

Should the plural of KISS be nicknamed kese?

Then one may be THAT and three may be
Yet the plural of HAT would never be hose.
We speak of a BROTHER and also of BRETHREN
But though we say MOTHER we never say methren.

The masculine pronouns are HE HIS and HIM.
But imagine the feminine, she shis and shim.
So our English language, I think you agree
Is the trickiest language you ever did see.

Hints on pronunciation for foreigners

I take it you already know, of tough and bough, cough and dough?
Others may stumble but not you, on hiccough, thorough, laugh and through.
Well done! And now perhaps you wish to learn of these familiar traps.

Beware of heard, a dreadful word, that looks like beard, and sounds like bird.
And dead: it's said like bed not bead. For goodness sake don't call it deed!
Watch out for meat and great and threat,
They rhyme with suite and straight and debt.

A moth is not a moth in mother, nor both in bother, broth in brother.
And here is not a match for there, not dear and fear for bear and pear.

And then there's does and rose and lose -- Just look them up!
And cork and front and word and ward, and font and front and word and sword,
And do and go and thwart and cart. Come come! I've hardly made a start.
A dreadful language? Man alive! I'd mastered it when I was five!

03. Sexist language

Did you know that the politically correct, anti-sexism in language people, have finally started to work on that final bastion of international language: the names of the elements.
From now on, helium will be called he/shelium, or theylium.
manganese is now called personganise
mendelevium is called peopledelevium.

Please inform your students, because they may not be aware of these most recent changes to the language of science.

04. Morphology

1. Hyphens can sometimes appear where they should not be. The following examples are taken from the New Scientist "Feedback" pages.

Coo-perative	(loving insistence)
Fun-ding	(quite a party)
Hors-e	(any letter except e)
hyp-hens	(chickens in advertising)
men-swear, women-swear, boy-swear, girl-swear.	(bad language)
not-ice	(water)
t-rouble	(Russian tea money)
the-sis	(sis is short for 'sister', so this can mean 'the nurse')
vol-canoes	(French flying boats)
(NSc 10 Dec 94)	

mans-laughter
real-locations
calfs-kin
royal-ties
deter-gents
imp-roved
read-just
forest-all
thin-king
roman-tic
gene-rations
cart-ridges
end-anger
cows-lip
jar-ring
prick-led
corn-ices
bar-rage
wee-knights
tramp-led
casual-ties
(NSc 18 Feb 95).

2. One of the ways Shakespeare added to the English language was that he changed the word classes of words. When I first taught this, I was asked for an example. I could not think of one from Shakespeare so I gave a modern example. Ten years ago, only the noun 'google' existed. Now we have the verb, 'to google'.

In the examinations students were asked to explain how Shakespeare added to the English language. Half of them used 'google' as a verb form introduced by Shakespeare.

3. But Shakespeare is not alone.

The following is taken from Newsweek, Feb 23 1981. Apparently General Haig had a habit of forming new words, and this extract is a parody of his language.

General Haig has contexted the Polish Watchpot somewhat nuancely. How though if the situation decontrols can he stoppage it mountingly conflagrating? Haig in Congressional hearings before his confirmatory paradoxed his auditioners by abnormalling his responds so that verbs were nouned and adjectives were adverbised. He techniqued a new way to vocabulary his thoughts so as to informationally uncertain anyone listening about what he actually implicationed. At first it seemed that the General was impenetrabbling what at basis was clear. This it was suppositioned was the new linguistic harbingered by NATO during the time he belwethered it. But close observors have alternated the idea. What Haig is doing, they concept, is to decouple the Russians from everything they are moded to. An example was to obstacle Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin from personalising the private elevator at work. Now he has to communal like everybody else. Experts in the Kremlin thought they could recognition the wordforms of American Diplomacy. Now they have to afresh language themselves up before they know what the Americans are subtling. They are like chess grandmasters suddenly told to knight their bishops and rook their pawns. If that is how General Haig wants to nervous breakdown the Russian leadership he may be shrewding his way to the biggest diplomatic invent since Causewitz. Unless, that is, he schizophrenes his allies first!

05. Nominative determinism/apronyms

In these types of words, the name of the author or the name of someone in a profession is very appropriate or apt.

1. The head of planning for British Airways. ROD MUDDLE
2. The director of the Howard League for Penal Reform. FRANCES CROOK
3. The soundrecorder for Attenborough's Birds of Paradise film. DICKIE BIRD
4. The researcher for The secret life of flowers. MARK FLOWERS
5. Contributor to Ecology magazine. J. ROUGHGARDEN
6. Marketing manager for the Meat and Livestock Commission. CHRIS LAMB
(NSc 22 Jun 96)
7. The dentist MR PHANG
8. Psychiatrist specialising in depression. DR MISRI, Brice Pitt.
9. Marine biologist: John FISH
10. Astronomers: Alan Heavens, Richard Starr, Stella Law.
11. Michael Bolton is an expert in reinforcement engineering.
12. Ian Begg, a specialist in British economic policy.
13. The Archbishop of Manila is called CARDINAL SIN.
14. The head of life insurance at the Norwich Union is, or was, Mr De-Ath.

Papers and books

15. "Optical materials". paper. AM GLASS.
16. "Tree Fruit growing". Raymond Bush.
17. The case against death by Richard Lazarus.
18. The complete book of dogs by AJ Barker.
19. The Atom Bomb, by David Killingray.
20. Sewage disposal from isolated buildings, by GM Flood.

06. Bacronyms

A backronym is an acronym turned back into words of your choice.

1. BNFL. British Nuclear Fuels Limited.	Buy No Fish Locally.
2. BSE. Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (Mad Cow Disease).	Bunglers Swapped Entrails
3. CD-ROM. Compact Disk Read-Only Memory.	Compatible? Doesn't Run On Mine
4. USAF. United States Air Force.	Usually Shooting At Friends
5. ASCII. American Standard Code for Information Interchange.	Another System Crash Is Imminent
6. CAD. Computer Aided Design.	Can't Anybody Draw?
7. CERN. Organisation (was: Conseil) Européene pour la Recherche	Could Eventually Reveal Nothing Nucléaire
8. LASER. Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation.	Looking At Source Erases Retina (NSc 17 Sept 94)

07. Bizarre ideas

Now for some bizarre ideas, beginning with my old favourite.

1. "When a cat is dropped, it always lands on its feet, and when toast is dropped, it always lands the buttered side facing down. I propose to strap buttered toast to the back of a cat; the two will hover, spinning inches above the ground." NSc Feedback 19. 10. 96.

But, the probability of toast landing buttered side down is proportional to the cost of the carpet. So to keep the device floating would require a very expensive carpet. Also, to maintain the value of the carpet, it would have to be cleaned frequently from the cat hairs. This input of energy needed would defeat the claim to perpetual motion. (NSc 16 Nov 96).

2. "Why yawning is contagious: You yawn to equalise the pressure on your eardrums. This pressure change outside your eardrums unbalances other people's hear pressures, so they must yawn to even it out". NSC Feedback 19 10 96.
3. "The earth may spin faster on its axis due to deforestation. Just as a figure skater's rate of spin increases when the arms are brought in close to the body, the cutting of tall trees may cause our planet to spin dangerously fast". NSc Feedback 19 10 96.

08. Pragmatics and intonation

If you think that pragmatics is left out, think again.

Letter 1

Here is a lesson in ambiguity from a professor who was asked to give an opinion about a research student. [I usually like to read it twice: once expressing disgust, the second time expressing admiration].

You write to ask me for my opinion of X, who has applied for a position in your department. I cannot recommend him too highly nor say enough good things about him. There is no student of mine with whom I can adequately compare him. His thesis is the sort of work you don't expect to find nowadays and in it he has clearly demonstrated his complete capabilities. The amount of material he knows will surprise you. You will indeed be fortunate if you can get him to work for you. (Paulos 1995:43).

Letter 2. Here is the student version of a letter

Dear Professor X,

Thankyou for your letter of March 16. After careful consideration, I regret to inform you that I am unable to accept your refusal to offer me an assistant professorship in your department.

This year I have been particularly fortunate in receiving an unusually large number of rejection letters. With such a varied and promising field of candidates, it is impossible to accept all the refusals.

Despite [your university's] outstanding qualifications and previous experience in rejecting applicants, I find that your rejection does not meet my needs at this time. Therefore I will assume the position of assistant professor in your department this August.

I look forward to seeing you then. Best of luck in rejecting future applicants.

Sincerely

Chris L. Jensen.

(NSc 11 May 1996)

2. **Question: Will you marry me?** This question is linguistic, with behaviour involved in communicating the meaning of the reply.

English: silence = hesitation

Japanese: silence = acceptance

Igbo: if the woman stands there = denial

if the woman runs away = acceptance. Catch me if you can!!

3. Foreign accent syndrome

Sometimes, due to an accident, people appear to wake up speaking totally differently.

"They do not actually develop a whole new accent, it is the listener who attaches a particular label to what they are hearing. In the UK people are most likely to say someone with Foreign Accent Syndrome sounds French or German, while in the US people are mostly likely to be told they sound British."

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/8022653.stm accessed 2 May 2009

09. Poetry in ESP

Here the demands upon your knowledge of science are high.

1. Our mutual flame is like the affinity
That doth exist between two simple bodies;
O, would that I, my Mary, were an acid
A living acid; thou an alkali;
We might both coalesce into one salt.
I'd be content to be Sulphuric Acid,
So that thou might be Soda; in that case
We should be Glauber's salt.
Sweet, thy name is Briggs
And mine Johnson. Wherefore should not we
Agree to form a Johnsonate of Briggs?
We will. The day, the happy day is nigh.
(Rev OH Tiffany, Philadelphia 1883. Reprinted in NSc 11 May 96)

2. A student of colours went crashing
Through red lights all day -- fenders bashing
"Those 'red' lights," he said
"Are all colours but red,
"So why should I stop for their flashing?" (Pamela S. Ward, NSc 12 Nov 1981)

3. Personally I find the following poem one of the funniest ever written. To understand it you will need to know a little about Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. This basically states that at the sub-atomic level, the quantum world, you can measure either the speed of an electron or the position of an electron, but you cannot measure both at the same time.

An electron in search of a mate
Found Heisenberg worthy of hate
Whenever I whirl,
In search of a girl
I miss either the place or the date!!

10. Famous names

Ideal Christmas presents

1. Electric razors and aftershave lotion for William of Occam.
2. Swarfega for Lady Macbeth.
3. Semtex for Guy Fawkes.
4. Bungee jump vouchers for Robert Hooke.
5. Trojans: an airport luggage scanner.
6. Jules Verne: a surplus to requirements, Trident submarine
7. Watson and Crick: a re-union dinner starting with escargots (*Helix helix*).
8. A pair of Levi's for Charles Darwin, so that he could learn about jeans.
(etc see NSc 18 Dec 93)

Invitations to the scientist's ball

1. Wilbur Wright is coming provided he can get a flight.
2. Galvani is looking forwards to shaking a leg with us.
3. Wheatstone is unable to come because it clashes with his bridge night.
4. Van Der Graaff is looking forwards to letting his hair down.
5. Watt reckons it will be a good way to let off steam.
6. Millikan said "Oil drop in".
7. Edison thinks it will be an illuminating experience.
8. Einstein now says he will not be coming, because he finds over-c travel impossible.
9. Rutherford has declined as he has a splitting headache.
10. All those at CERN LEPd at the opportunity to come.

11. Definitions and synonyms

1. "**Chaos theory**. A scientist flaps his mouth somewhere, causing a storm in a teacup." Simon Harper, NSc 3 Aug 96).
2. Playing with a computerised thesaurus, the aim is to find a path to the opposite of the starting word. I joined in this game and proved that the social constructivists are right! The world of Science is synonymous with myth and legend.
 - a) good-competent-appropriate-seize-get-influence-bias-prejudice-mischief-evil (NSc 25 Mar 95)
 - b) black-ebony-midnight-night-dark-dun-sallow-white
 - c) laugh-roar-cry
 - d) intellectual-abstract-obscure-dim
 - e) green-raw-harsh-barren
 - f) sink-immense-dip-swim
 - g) slim-lean-muscular-burly-stout
 - h) science-knowledge-information-lore-myth/legend (Lowe 1995) (NSc 29 April 1995)

12. Social Constructivism

So science is the same as legend. That is official The evidence was first published on 29 April 1995 by the New Scientist. Social constructivists have won. All my ravings elsewhere are to no avail. With great shame, but full honesty, I publish the skeleton in my cupboard. I have the dubious honour of being the first to provide and publish this conclusive piece of evidence. Elsewhere I have argued vigorously against Social Constructivism, yet it was I who first published the fact which shows that science is a synonym for legend! In other words, Science is a synonym for fiction: science is socially constructed afterall!

In the spirit of high ethical research standards, unpleasant evidence must be declared and not ignored. And here I present the evidence that I do not like to admit.

Method:

Readers were asked to play around with a computer thesaurus and to find a series of synonyms leading to opposites. I discovered the following chain:

Results

science-knowledge-information-lore-myth/legend
(Lowe 1995) (New Scientist Feedback 29 April 1995)

Conclusions

Despite all efforts to the contrary, Social Constructivism has clearly won. From now on everything belonging to science belongs to the world of myth and legend.

Of course, there is a logical flaw in this argument. If science is fiction, then the experiment that conclusively demonstrated this fact is in itself fiction. The experiment itself must be constructed, therefore how can it be relied upon?

13. Reasoning

1. Meaningless correlations

The two countries that head the world's longevity tables are Iceland and Japan. In Japan, women live an average of 82.4 years and in Iceland they live 81.5 years. What do these countries have in common? They are the only two developed countries that do not put their clocks back in winter. (NSc 15 Sept 1990)

2. There were three statisticians who decided to take up duck hunting. "The first fired and his shot sailed six inches over the duck. Then the second fired and his shot flew six inches below the duck. At this, the third statistician excitedly exclaimed, "We got it!" (p4).

Ref: Paulos JA 1995. A mathematician reads the newspaper. Basic books, USA.

14. TEFL

1. In a Hotel: The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable.
2. In a tailor's shop. Order your summer suit. Because is big rush we will execute customers in strict rotation.
3. Swiss restaurant menu. Our wines leave you with nothing to hope for.
4. Hotel: In case of fire, do your utmost to alarm the hotel porter.
5. Ladies are requested not to have children in the bar.
(Nsc 24 Jun 95)
6. Warning on a fire exit: "This door is alarmed". (Seen by Lowe).

15. Administratium

This is a version of a well known joke.

The heaviest element known to science was recently discovered.

The element, tentatively named Administratium, has no protons or electrons and thus has an atomic number of zero. However, it does have 1 neutron, 125 assistant neutrons, 75 vice neutrons, and 111 assistant neutrons, giving it an atomic mass of 312. These 312 particles are held together in the nucleus by a force that involves the continuous exchange of meson-like particles called morons.

Since it has no electrons, Administratium is inert. However, it can be detected chemically as it impedes every reaction with which it comes in contact. According to the discoverers, a tiny amount of Administratium caused one reaction to take over 4 days to complete when it would normally occur in less than 1 second.

Administratium has a normal half-life of approximately 3 years. At this time it doesn't actually decay but instead undergoes reorganization in which assistant neutrons, vice neutrons, and assistant vice neutrons exchange places. Some studies have shown that the atomic mass actually increases after each reorganization.

Researchers in other laboratories indicated that Administratium occurs naturally in the atmosphere. It tends to concentrate at certain points such as universities, government agencies, large corporations, and school systems and hospitals!

Scientists point out that Administratium is known to be toxic at any level of concentration and can destroy any productive reactions where it is allowed to accumulate. Attempts are being made to determine how Administratium can be controlled to prevent irreversible damage, but results are not promising.

16. An old medical joke

This joke has several different versions. Here is how I remember it.

It was our first anatomy lecture. We had all brought a small sample of urine to the lesson, as previously instructed. Prof began the lecture:

---All good doctors must learn to use all their senses - sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. A good doctor can tell the difference between good urine and diseased urine. In order to know the difference, a doctor needs to know what the normal urine tastes like. Now of course, all medical students are fit and healthy. Therefore, today, you will start by tasting your own urine. And don't worry about it, you will be doing far worse things than this in a few weeks time. Next term you will have to practice taking blood from each other, and you will learn to swallow stomach tubes without anaesthetic. But today you will learn the taste of normal urine.

---First, carefully open your specimen jar. Then do as I do, dip your finger into the urine and lick your finger.

Prof then dramatically opened his own specimen jar of urine, put in his finger, and licked it. Reluctantly, rather self-consciously, we dutifully did the same.

—Now, what does normal urine taste like? Sweet? Tasteless?

Then Prof delivered the thunderbolt.

---This was not a lesson in analysing urine. This was a lesson in observation. I dipped my second finger into the urine and licked the first finger. I did not taste my urine.