

“A chimpanzee walked into a bar ...”

### WHAT JOKES TELL US ABOUT LANGUAGE, CREATIVITY AND TIME

**CHRISTOPHER MOORE**

*“Time is an illusion. Lunchtime doubly so.”* (Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.)

Could a chimpanzee learn to tell a good joke? It seems not. When I was studying linguistics in Edinburgh a few years back, we spent a lot of time talking about primate language acquisition, something of an obsession for linguists from the 1930s onwards. “Could chimpanzees be taught language?” linguists asked themselves. If so, what would this tell us about our own language acquisition?

There were a number of chimps that schooled very well, one of the most remarkable being Kanzi, a bonobo pygmy chimp born in 1980, later in the care of Susan Savage-Rumbaugh at the Great Ape Trust in Des Moines, Iowa. Kanzi learned to respond to thousands of symbols and even primitive sentence structures. So where lay the difference between his achievement and the language development of a human child? Goldin-Meadow (1996), reviewing an account of Kanzi’s career, suggests that:

“... while chimps appear to require a great deal of linguistic input to develop language, human children, *even if lacking a model for language altogether*, will actually invent a language to communicate with those around them.” [my italics](Goldin-Meadow)

I have just observed this myself during a weekend with my granddaughter aged fourteen months. When adults are chatting around her, she is so keen to join in that, without having words to use, she embarks on an extended sequence of ‘babble’ which is, for her, the nearest equivalent to what she is hearing and observing, using her speech organs, mouth and tongue to articulate varied patterns of sound and changes of volume. We may relate this pre-language activity to what Henri Bortoft, following Schelling, describes as “language language-ing.” In other words, quoting Humboldt, “We must look upon language, not as a dead *product*, but far more as a *producing*”. (Humboldt, p.48,49) Language in this sense is not merely representational, it is an actualisation of the world around us, an entering into connection and relation with it.

Even as adults, we experience this same creativity and inventiveness in language, conspicuously in the joke and in forms of nonsense. Both the appeal of nonsense and the talent for it seem to be universal, rather than cultural. To take one simple example, Lewis Carroll’s ‘Jabberwocky’ nonsense rhyme from *Alice Through the Looking Glass* has been translated into over fifty languages, from Latin to Gaelic. One might ask, how is it possible for nonsense to be translated? The answer is that it gets translated into even more nonsense. But what is it that drives such an urge in the first place? Here we have to examine the role that humour plays in creation.

Incidentally, one outcome of all this primate research must be the conclusion that Kanzi, although known to have a sense of humour -- for instance, just like a child, offering a stick then taking it away at the last moment - never learned to tell a decent joke. Jokes tell us something about our specifically human relationship with language, creativity and time. How does this work? We can find out more by looking at the inspired output of Eddie Braben (who sadly died in May 2013), master joke-writer who scripted the sketches and stand-up turns which made such a success of Morecambe and Wise. Here are some examples of his gift:

*He opened the door with a smile. It’s a neat trick, not many people can do it.*

*Must go, I’m taking the dog out – it’s been in the oven for two hours.*

*Have you got the dispatches? No, I always walk like this.*

Of course, it’s how you tell them, as the saying goes! But what these comic verbal treasures have in common is the little time mechanism where you hear a statement and then, in the follow-up, have to return and reinterpret what you have just heard. Without this open-ended dimension of time, there is no joke. The word “joke”, by the way, has its derivation in the Latin *iocus*, meaning “play”, a sense preserved in the Italian noun/verb *gioco/giocare*. And coincidentally it is to the verbal humour of the seventeenth century *commedia dell’arte* in Italy that we must go to find the origins of our performance comedy, such as music-hall and pantomime, while stage humour in general can be traced right back to Greek and Roman theatre.

We return to Lewis Carroll and his *Alice in Wonderland*, for a nice example of combining the verbal with the visual, in the episode of the Mouse's Tale. "Mine is a long and sad tale," says the Mouse to Alice, who wonders to herself as she observes the mouse's tail, "Long certainly, but why sad?" And, the story goes on, "she kept on puzzling about it while the Mouse was speaking, so that her idea of the tale was something like this:— ..."

Meanwhile because of her fixing on "tail" rather than "tale", the text morphs into a tail-shape meandering down the page. Again, there is an open-endedness about this sudden and unexpected transformation of the very medium itself from formal to informal.

Douglas Adams is a modern writer who has picked up the mantle of absurd humour in the narrative form, and has even contributed his own nonsense verse to the canon:

*"Oh freddled gruntbuggly thy micturations are to me  
As plurdled gabbleblotchits on a lurgid bee."* (Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide*)

And that's only the opening lines. And what are we to make of his phrase "The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul", other than to confirm the author's lasting interest in meal-times? (See also above.) And what has the soul got to do with it? Could it be that what we celebrate in the joke is no more or less than our involvement in some greater cosmic game? Could it be that all this silliness is evidence of some transcendent quality of human language? The biologist Brian Goodwin has written of the dimension of ambiguity in language which he explored with his colleague Philip Franses at Schumacher College:

*"The creativity of human discourse lies in the ambiguity of words and texts. If every word had a fixed meaning by being rigidly connected to some object or some experience then language would function very differently than it does in human cultures."* (Goodwin 2006)

This general statement relates closely, as well, to how we experience verbal humour. Once we recognise that we are in a context of 'play', we suspend formality and allow ourselves degrees of absurdity and ambiguity that would in normal discourse be outrageous. In their circumscribed but otherwise unconstrained form, such humorous activities represent moments of relaxation, a rest from normal strictures and cultural discipline.

But returning to Douglas Adams' soul, there may be an even more serious purpose to the activity of play. We must turn to Nietzsche for enlightenment here, specifically to his *Three Metamorphoses of the Soul*:

*"Three metamorphoses of the spirit will I show to you: how the spirit becomes a camel, the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child."*

In this allegory the soul enters the world to become a beast of burden, laden with received ideas, imitated habits and thoughts and ideas which are placed upon it. The soul must then decide to reject the burden which afflicts and bows it down:

*"To create itself freedom, and give a holy No! even to duty: for that, my brethren, there is need of the lion. ... to create itself freedom for new creating - that is what the might of the lion can do."*

But, Zarathustra goes on, there is still a need for one further vital change:

*"To create new values - that, even the lion cannot accomplish: ... Why does the preying lion still have to become a child? ... What can the child can do, which even the lion cannot do?"*

Then we are given the brilliant reply which tells us all we need to know:

*The child is innocence, and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a game, a self-turning wheel, a first movement, a holy Yes.*

Here indeed the wheel turns full circle and we arrive again at the earliest intimations of my year-old granddaughter, as yet unburdened; and equally to *gioco/giocare*, now seen as the game of creating of new values for which Nietzsche says we need "a holy Yes to life".

Keiron Le Grice puts Nietzsche's allegory into modern context in his excellent study, *The Rebirth of the Hero*: "Through the human being, nature, or the spirit in nature, is striving to overcome itself, to transform itself. The individual human being is a protagonist in this epic cosmic drama. There is much more at stake, I believe, than only one's own psychological transformation. For what happens to each and every one of us can have a decisive effect on the evolutionary transformation of the whole. *If we can overcome our own unconscious habitual tendencies, which pull the human spirit back, we can add consciousness and freedom to the world.*" (Le Grice 2013, p.155)[my italics]

Lee Smolin, physicist, puts the same message into the context of physics by challenging the 'block universe' concept of time as a fixed continuum locked into its past and future like an already mapped highway. In his *Time Reborn* (2013) he argues for a dynamic and open-ended value of time as a creative process in which "the future is open, and the universe can discover novel structures, novel ideas". This, he suggests, "creates a very different idea of our possibilities." (Smolin)

The joke tells us that this is indeed the case, for it is the proof of our ability to surprise ourselves. More profoundly, we can see the joke as revelatory of emergence, a dynamic and creative process in time, in which we humans participate. Seen from this perspective, as Brian Goodwin concludes:

*"... a new mimesis is now emerging as the roots of a renaissance that can take us from the Industrial Age to an Age of Gaia in which the main role of humans is the continuous celebration of earth's creative adventure."*(Goodwin)

And quite clearly, without the creative and open dynamic of time there *is* nothing to celebrate, and above all, there would be no decent jokes.

#### **References**

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**Christopher Moore** is an editor of Floris Books and author of numerous books himself. His latest is *King Abba*, a philosophical fantasy, and its sequel *Behind the Mountain* which is to appear shortly. This article is based on a talk given at Schumacher College, October 2013.

<http://kingabba.com>