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Forms, Types, and Major Theories of Humour and Their Development in Linguistics

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Abstract: Humour has long been a subject of interdisciplinary study involving linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and sociology. Linguistic humour research explores how language structures, pragmatic strategies, and discourse patterns generate comic effects. This article reviews the forms and types of humour in linguistic communication and examines the major theoretical approaches explaining humour. Using an analytical literature-review method, the study traces the historical development of humour theories—from classical philosophical interpretations to modern linguistic and pragmatic frameworks. The findings show that humour in language manifests through multiple forms such as irony, sarcasm, satire, and wordplay, while three classical theories—superiority, relief, and incongruity—remain the foundation for contemporary linguistic models. Modern approaches integrate cognitive and pragmatic perspectives, explaining humour as a complex interaction between linguistic structure, social context, and cognitive processing. The article highlights the evolution of humour studies in linguistics and suggests directions for future research.

Keywords: Humour, Linguistic Humour, Humour Theories, Incongruity Theory, Satire, Pragmatics

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1. Introduction

Humour is a universal communicative phenomenon that plays a crucial role in social interaction, discourse, and cultural expression [1]. Linguists study humour to understand how language structures and contextual interpretation create comic effects. Humour may appear in various linguistic forms such as jokes, irony, sarcasm, parody, or satire, each relying on particular linguistic mechanisms [2].

Research on humour has historically been shaped by philosophical and psychological traditions before becoming an independent field within linguistics. Early explanations focused on why people laugh, whereas modern linguistic studies emphasize how humour is produced and interpreted in language. The development of humour theories has been especially influenced by three classical theoretical frameworks: **superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory** [3].

With the rise of discourse analysis, pragmatics, and cognitive linguistics, humour studies now examine the interaction between language structure, context, and human cognition. This article aims to analyze the forms and types of humour in language and review the major theoretical approaches explaining humour in linguistics [4].

2. Methodology

This research employs a **qualitative literature review** method based on scholarly sources from linguistics, psychology, and humour studies. Academic articles, theoretical works, and linguistic research on humour were analyzed to identify key concepts, classifications, and theoretical frameworks [5].

The study followed three stages:

1. **Collection of sources** related to humour theories and linguistic humour.
2. **Comparative analysis** of classifications of humour forms and types.
3. **Synthesis of theoretical perspectives** explaining humour in linguistic communication.

The analytical approach focuses on how linguistic structures and pragmatic strategies contribute to humour production and interpretation.

3. Result

Humour can be realized through numerous linguistic forms and stylistic devices. Researchers distinguish several major types commonly found in discourse and literature [6].

Irony.

Irony occurs when the intended meaning differs from the literal meaning of an utterance. It relies on contextual interpretation and pragmatic inference.

Sarcasm.

Sarcasm is a more aggressive form of irony used to ridicule or criticize someone through apparently positive statements with negative intent [7].

Satire.

Satire employs humour, irony, or exaggeration to criticize social, political, or moral issues. It often exposes human vices and social problems through ridicule [8].

Parody.

Parody imitates a particular style, text, or genre in an exaggerated way to create comic effect.

Wordplay (Puns).

Wordplay uses linguistic ambiguity, homophones, or multiple meanings of words to produce humour.

Slapstick and exaggeration.

Some forms rely on exaggerated situations or physical humour, although these may also appear in linguistic descriptions and narratives.

Modern research also identifies humour styles such as affiliative humour, aggressive humour, self-enhancing humour, and self-defeating humour in interpersonal communication [9].

These forms demonstrate that humour is not a single phenomenon but a complex set of communicative strategies embedded in language and discourse.

Major Theories of Humour

Humour research traditionally distinguishes three fundamental theoretical approaches.

Superiority Theory

Superiority theory is one of the earliest explanations of humour, associated with philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Hobbes. According to this theory, laughter arises from feelings of superiority over others or from observing their misfortune or foolishness.

In linguistic contexts, this theory explains humour that involves ridicule, mockery, or social comparison [10].

Relief Theory

Relief theory, associated with Sigmund Freud, views humour as a psychological mechanism for releasing emotional tension or suppressed energy. Laughter functions as a form of psychological relief that reduces stress or anxiety [11].

In discourse, humour can therefore serve social functions such as easing tension in conversations or mitigating conflict [12].

Incongruity Theory

Incongruity theory suggests that humour arises when there is a mismatch between expectations and reality. A humorous effect occurs when a surprising or contradictory element disrupts logical patterns and is later resolved cognitively.

This theory is particularly important for linguistic humour, since many jokes rely on ambiguity, semantic contrast, or unexpected punchlines [13].

Modern Linguistic Approaches to Humour

Contemporary linguistic research has expanded classical humour theories by incorporating pragmatic and cognitive frameworks.

Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH)

Proposed by Raskin and later expanded by Attardo, this theory argues that humour arises when a text activates two opposing “scripts” or semantic frames.

General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH)

This model identifies several parameters—such as script opposition, logical mechanisms, narrative strategy, and language—that structure verbal humour.

Pragmatic and cognitive approaches

Recent research applies pragmatic principles such as Grice’s cooperative principle and relevance theory to explain how humour emerges from violations of conversational expectations [14].

Modern cognitive theories also explore how humour involves mental processes such as surprise, reinterpretation, and problem-solving.

4. Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that humour in linguistics is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by linguistic structures, social context, and cognitive mechanisms. Classical humour theories remain foundational because they explain basic motivations for laughter: social comparison, emotional release, and cognitive surprise.

However, these theories alone cannot fully explain all forms of humour. Contemporary linguistic models, therefore, integrate multiple perspectives. For example, incongruity theory explains the cognitive mechanism behind jokes, while pragmatic theories account for contextual interpretation in conversation.

The development of humour studies also reflects broader trends in linguistics. Earlier studies focused on philosophical explanations of laughter, whereas modern research emphasizes discourse analysis, pragmatics, and cognitive linguistics [15].

5. Conclusion

Humour is a complex linguistic phenomenon expressed through diverse forms such as irony, sarcasm, satire, parody, and wordplay. The theoretical foundation of humour studies is based on three classical frameworks: superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory. These approaches explain humour in terms of social hierarchy, emotional release, and cognitive contradiction.

In modern linguistics, humour is increasingly analyzed through pragmatic and cognitive perspectives that emphasize contextual interpretation and mental processing. The development of humour theories illustrates the interdisciplinary nature of humour studies and highlights the importance of language in producing comic effects.

Future research may focus on cross-cultural humour, digital communication, and computational approaches to humour detection and generation.

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