



**Teachers Education University
Faculty of Literature and Humanities
Department of Foreign Languages**

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language
(TEFL)**

**On the Comprehension and Appreciation of English Verbal Humor by
Iranian EFL Learners**

Supervisor: E. Babaii (Ph. D)

By: Maryam Khalili

January, 2010

In the Name of God



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We certify that the thesis entitled “**On the Comprehension and Appreciation of English Verbal Humor by Iranian EFL Learners**” by Maryam Khalili is accepted as partial fulfillment of MA degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

Supervisor:

Advisor:

Head of English department:

Proudly dedicated to:
My Dearest Hadi
and to
My Mother
with Love and Respect

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ABSTRACT

Comprehension of L2 verbal humor, as a way to improve and gain communicative competence is an area in SLL in which little research has been conducted. Triggered by this dearth of research, the present study attempted to contribute to this knowledge base.

Therefore, it was tried to investigate the comprehension and appreciation of verbal humor by Iranian advanced learners of English. For this purpose, a test of Humor Comprehension and Appreciation was devised and administered to the subjects. The results of the study showed that Iranian EFL learners had much difficulty in understanding English verbal humor; subsequently they did not appreciate English humor as much as they value their mother tongue's jokes. The results also showed that pragmatic jokes and lexical jokes respectively were the easiest and the most difficult types of English verbal humor for the participants of the study to comprehend and appreciate.

Due to the facilitating role of humor in learning it is suggested that different kinds of English humor be implemented to Iranian EFL classrooms and textbooks.

Key terms: humor, verbal humor, joke, linguistic joke, punch line, humor comprehension, humor appreciation.

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1.1. Overview

The role of social interaction in second language learning (SLL) has been recently the limelight and point of interest of scholars and practitioners in the field. In recent years this phenomenon has entailed not only the study of how learners use and develop knowledge of syntax and vocabulary in interaction, but also how they negotiate L2 sociolinguistic norms in and outside the classroom (Shea, 1994; Tyler, 1995; Iino, 1996; Siegel, 1996). What is clear nowadays is that effective communication requires something beyond the knowledge of linguistic forms. Contextual factors, such as time, place and interlocutors, as well as variations in culturally depended background knowledge all influence the way people speak and understand each other, and these are all constantly in the process of being negotiated and constructed in and through social interaction.

1.2. Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

Verbal humor is an example of a challenging sociolinguistic phenomenon. Use of humorous language and gestures is a part and parcel of any friendly interaction. It can turn a formal conversation between two completely stranger interlocutors into an informal and enjoyable talk. Majority of people are able to be amused, to laugh or smile at something funny, and thus they are considered to have 'sense of humor' and as stated by Alford and Alford (1981, p.162) "no society was reported to be without humor". Humor is present throughout social conventions and cultural artifacts, and the use of humor is highly valued in interactions between people.

Although the occurrence of humor is universal, what is considered funny as well as when, where, with whom, and under what conditions a person may joke, differ from one culture to the other, and even between individuals of a shared culture (Raskin, 1985, p.2, cf. Hymes 1972).

It is interesting that in American society like many other cultures humor is a highly valued and highly productive means of communication. In surveys asking about important qualities in a friend or spouse, Americans consistently place a good sense of humor (GSOH) as the first or second most desirable quality and this is consistent across age groups (Maritz Ameripoll, 1999).

However, the comprehension and appreciation of verbal humor in an L2 constitutes a great challenge to the learner, as it often requires sophisticated linguistic, social and cultural competence. For a learner of a foreign language to understand and appreciate humor of that language in addition to the necessary level of sense of humor, an exceptional knowledge of language and an in-depth perception of the culture are required.

Most of the time when ESL learners face English jokes in their books or in the media they just shrug their shoulders showing lack of understanding or they may think they got the joke but it was not funny. It is because each culture has its own style of humor and both the forms and functions of humor differ from those of L2 learners' native language. Humor often involves word play and very colloquial expressions. In addition, rules as to the conditions under which humor may be used may be quite unexpected. For example, it

is an American custom to begin a formal speech with one or two light-hearted comments (Scollon & Scollon, 1994).

Considering this complex part of social interaction, even native speakers' humor occasionally falls flat and they fail to amuse, or even worse, they unintentionally succeed in causing offense, so it would not be strange if using, understanding and appreciating foreign language humor create a huge problem for non native speakers. The important role that humor plays in societies and interactions was a trigger for the researcher to conduct a study on the comprehension and appreciation of verbal humor.

Verbal humor or Verbally Expressed Humor (VEH) has also been referred to as *verbalized humor*, i.e. 'jokes which are expressed by means of a linguistic system (Attardo, 1994, p. 96). There are some disagreements in using the terms verbal humor and Verbally Expressed Humor to refer to the same phenomenon and some prefer the phrase *verbal humor*, so that they emphasize that the humor need not be basically concerned with verbal matters. But some experts in the field of humor, such as Raskin, (1985), use verbal humor and verbally expressed humor to mean the same thing. In this study, for the sake of simplicity in reference, the researcher decided to follow Raskin and use verbal humor because this study is just concerned with humor conveyed through language.

Verbal humor in addition to jokes includes puns (e.g. (1)), humorous riddles (e.g. (2)), amusing epigrams (e.g. (3)), etc., and even the retelling of amusing incidents or cartoons in cases where the retelling itself functions humorously (Ritchie, 2004).

(1) *Don't worry about the world coming to an end today. It's already tomorrow in Australia.*

(2) A: *What's black and dangerous and sits in a tree?*
- B: *A crow with a machine gun.*

(3) *Fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months.*

(Oscar Wild cited by Metcalf, 1994, p. 79)

While research on humor in NS-NS interaction has attracted a great deal of attention, studies on non native speakers' understanding of humor have remained virtually unexamined until recently. Understanding humor is more difficult to observe and to document and this reason has provided enough pretext for researchers to pay less attention to it in non native settings and focus their energy on production of humor mostly among L1 speakers. Difficulty in understanding FL humor has also influenced the EFL instructors and materials developers and has led them to evade the issue and include as least as, or even exclude, humor in language classrooms and EFL materials. This dearth of attention to this significant social phenomenon has led to lack of understanding and appreciating FL jokes by EFL learners. To the author's knowledge there is dearth of research on the comprehension of verbal humor by NNSs of English in the setting of Iran, the only one found was done by Afghari and Allami (2007). This shortcoming was a trigger to conduct the present study hoping to contribute to this knowledge base and pave the way for further research and future researchers in this field.

In this study it was aimed to gain a valid and reliable measure of the appreciation and comprehension ability of Iranians advanced EFL learners in terms of English verbal humor.

1.3. Significance of the Study

In the past few years researchers have shown an interest in humor and language play as it facilitates second language learning. Cook (2000), for example, points to the pervasiveness of language play in human social interaction, and calls for the integration of an element of humor within language teaching. Other researchers (Broner & Tarone 2001; Sullivan, 2000) have examined the use of humor in L2 classrooms from a socio-cultural perspective. Their findings indicate that humor is of potential aid to acquisition. They also claim that language play creates opportunities for the exploitation of L2 resources and also provides contexts in which access to L2 resources may be facilitated. Language play may contribute to the development of sociolinguistic competence in particular, allowing learners to experiment with different varieties of language. Because studies of L2 language play have focused largely on children and adolescents in L2 classrooms, Tarone (2000) calls for further research focusing on how adult L2 speakers interacting outside of the classroom play with language, in order to further the understanding of the contribution of language play to SLL. However, in the current scientific research paradigm there are a few studies on humor with a focus on cross-cultural differences. Most research has been conducted on L1 speakers and especially on

the production of humor. On the other hand, understanding of humor, perhaps, because of being more difficult to document, has received less attention. Verbal humor in the L2 classroom often has been a great challenge to the teachers, as it is felt to require great social and cultural competence. This feeling has led the instructors and material developers to include as little verbal humor as possible in EFL classrooms and textbooks.

Considering the present gap in this field of research, using a descriptive methodology to document the appreciation and comprehension of English verbal humor by adults advanced learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), the present study attempts to contribute to this knowledge base.

Since humor and humorous language covers a large and complex body of data, including slapstick-style humor, sitcoms, stand-up comedies, funny gestures or pies in the face, etc. it would not be practical to examine comprehension of all aspects of humorous language in one single study. Therefore the current study focuses on only a subclass, albeit a large and interesting subclass of humor i.e. “jokes”; where the humorous point lies in one of the following features: phonology, lexicon, structure and pragmatics (Raskin, 1985).

1.4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The present study aimed to investigate the answer to the following questions:

RQ1. Is there any difference between sub-categories of verbal humor (phonological,

lexical, structural and pragmatic) in terms of their comprehension?

RQ2. Is there any difference between sub-categories of verbal humor (phonological, lexical, structural and pragmatic) in terms of their appreciation?

RQ3. Is there any relationship between humor comprehension and humor appreciation?

Hypotheses:

Considering the above mentioned research questions, the following hypotheses were proposed:

NH1. There is no difference between sub-categories of verbal humor (phonological, lexical, structural and pragmatic) in terms of their comprehension.

NH2. There is no difference between sub-categories of verbal humor (phonological, lexical, structural and pragmatic) in terms of their appreciation.

NH3. There is no relationship between verbal humor comprehension and verbal humor appreciation.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

Humor: *Humour* or *humor* is the tendency of particular cognitive experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement. Humor is something that makes a person laugh