Language and Humour in the Media

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CP   cooperative principle
ESL   English as a second language (English language studies)
GTVH general theory of verbal humor
ISHS   International Society of Humor Studies
KR   knowledge resources
LA   language
LM   logical mechanism
LTC   live text commentary
MBM   minute-by-minute (commentary)
NS   narrative strategy
NVC   nonverbal communication
OST   ontological semantic technology
OSTH ontological semantic theory of humor
PP   politeness principle
RP   received pronunciation (Standard British English)
RT   relevance theory
SI   situation
SO   script opposition
SSTH   script-based semantic theory of humor
ST   source text
TA   target
TMR   text-meaning representation
TT   target text

HUMOUR, LANGUAGE AND THE MEDIA

Isabel Ermida and Jan Chovanec

Humour and the media are such intertwined phenomena that it may be hard to tackle one without resorting to the other. From cartoons and comic strips, through Internet gags and humorous adverts, to sitcoms and funny remarks in editorials and opinion articles, the media do thrive in linguistic manifestations of humour. Whether or not it serves as a playful distraction, a marketing strategy, or an instrument to make a point, attack indirectly or voice the unspeakable, humour in the media deserves attention both as a discoursal device and a sociolinguistic phenomenon. At the same time, it also requires a consideration of the forms it assumes and the linguistic structures it deploys, be it with regard to wordplay or to the stylistic and rhetorical devices of which it makes use. Actually, the humour in the media stands out as a particularly challenging topic that not only congregates a number of research questions central to the history of humour studies but also addresses the two paradigms around which the linguistics of humour has spun: on the one hand, structurally-oriented approaches; on the other, interactional and pragmatic ones.

Originally studied within the area of rhetoric, the language of humour was regarded as a useful tool for nimble orators, provided that its use was prudent and balanced. Actually, moral issues were not detached from the teachings of such masters as Cicero (55 BC) and Quintilian (AD 95), who advised against comic excess and bad taste when propounding the unexpected as a triggering device of the laughable (geloion). Aristotle himself, in Rhetoric, established four centuries earlier that the comic effect only supervenes if language contains novelties of expression and deceptive alterations in words in face of which "the hearer anticipates one thing and hears another" (3.11). The Renaissance revived the classical tradition and authors such as Robortellus (1548), Madius (1550) and Trissino (1562) defended a clear, unaffected, and natural style for comic orators, as well as the introduction of an element of surprise (see Herrick 1950). In the 18th century, James Beattie (1764: 629-630) established that the principles guiding "ludicrous composition" involved "mean or common thoughts

delivered in pompous language" or "a solemn expression unexpectedly introduced in the midst of something frivolous."

However, besides its study within the art of public speaking, the language of humour was meagrely examined before the 20th century. In fact, for a long time it was literary studies that absorbed much of the scholarly input into linguistic forms of humour. The characteristic heterogeneity of literary inquiry makes the vast bibliography on comedy focus on a variety of types and authors spanning over a long diachronic line, from classical theatre comedy, including Greek Aristophanes and Menander and Roman Plautus and Terence, through the comedy of manners of Molière, the satirical plays of Ben Jonson and the landmark Shakespearean phenomenon, to Restoration authors, such as Behn, Vanbrugh and Dryden, and the 20th-century theatre of the absurd (with Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco). But the comic also assumes other forms besides playwriting, as is the case of poetry and prose fiction, and the wide array of genres, including parody, farce, satire and burlesque, amounts to a great diversity of literary approaches to the study of humour.

The research into comic incongruity, mainly by way of such philosophers as Kant (1793), Schopenhauer (1818) and Bergson (1900), was finally put to linguistic use, especially in terms of the semantic structures necessary for humour to occur in a given text. At long last, after a few scattered linguistic studies, such as those by Brown (1953), Fry (1963), Kelly (1971) and Hockett (1977), which were rather superficial and exploratory, more systematic linguistic treatments of the humorous phenomenon saw the light of day in the fourth quarter of the 20th century. Important contributions include, besides Raskin's 1985 groundbreaking semantic script theory of humour, Attardo and Raskin's 1991 "general theory of verbal humour" and Giora's 1992 model of marked informativeness in jokes involving lexical puns, all of which take semantic opposition, or contrastive meanings, as a defining feature of comic language. Alexander (1997) and Ritchie (2004) offer, instead of a model of verbal humour, a descriptive account of its workings: the former focuses on lexicogrammatical aspects of jokes and allusive punning, whereas the latter provides a general revision of the language devices used in jokes. In a similar vein, other approaches – such as Nash's 1985 analysis of stylistic techniques in humorous texts, Giora's 1992 account of verbal jokes, Crystal's 1998 inquiry into verbal play, and Ross's 1998 overview of linguistic resources of humour – give a structural, micro-textual, view of the mechanisms of humour in verbal texts, though they do not necessarily ignore the contextual setting of the humorous speech act. Likewise, Chlopicki's 1987 script-informed study of Polish comic stories,

Holcomb's 1992 analysis of "nodal humour" in Twain and Wodehouse, and Attardo et al's 1994 "linear" approach to joke-texts, all share a sequential perspective of the structure of textual humour.

It was only in recent years that a pragmatically oriented approach to the language of humour gained prominence. Dolitsky (1983), Hunter (1983), and Dascal (1985) took a few preliminary steps back in the eighties, by respectively looking at the unsaid in humour, the construction of comic witticisms from a Gricean perspective, and the sociopragmatics of language use in jokes. Then, in 1993, Norrick offered a book on conversational joking which examined how the communicative situation and the "surrounding conversation" influence joking behaviour and, a year later, Palmer (1994ab) investigated the pragmatic, situational, and cultural elements involved in the production and reception of humour. In this century, several contributions revolve around the role pragmatics plays in the understanding of humorous language. Attardo (2001) puts forth a pragmatic, as well as semantic, analysis of comic texts, followed by an edited special issue entitled *The Pragmatics of Humour* (2003); Simpson (2003) writes on the discourse of satire by investigating its dually "prime" and "dialectical" nature and how the two discursive subjects (the satirist and the "satiree") negotiate their positions; and Partington (2006) analyses the strategic use of so-called "laughter-talk" to achieve specific pragmatic and rhetoric ends, such as making an argumentative point or threatening someone's face. More recently, Ermida's 2008 linguistic model of comic narratives assumes a substantial pragmatic alignment, and Dynel's 2009 pragmatic-cognitive study of humorous garden-paths, as well as her edited collection of papers (2011) on the pragmatics of humour across different discursive domains, constitute important contributions to the establishment of a pragmatic trend in humour studies. Last but not least, Norrick and Chiaro's (2009) *Humour in Interaction*, which includes material from the media, focuses mostly on authentic conversational exchanges, whereas Chiaro (2010) explores translation and humour issues in the realm of the media, with a view to setting a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comprehension of humorous communication.

The present volume follows up on this rich tradition and takes an admittedly broad stance, considering the various roles humour plays in print and audiovisual media, as well as the forms it takes, the purposes it serves, the butts it targets, the implications it carries and the differences it may assume across cultures. Structure and effect are therefore regarded as compatible angles in this interdisciplinary endeavour. Early versions of some of the papers in this book were presented in a thematic workshop convened by the editors at the 10th conference of the European Society for

the Study of English in Torino in August 2010. The research perspectives adopted include discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, intercultural studies, pragmatics, communication studies, and rhetoric. The phenomena described range from conversational humour and word play to humour in translation and news satire.

As such, the volume brings together two areas that have not been previously subject to extensive attention by researchers: the interface between humour studies and media discourse analysis. Humour analysts have previously tended to concentrate on the understanding of the mechanics and the functioning of various types of humorous texts (e.g., canned jokes, conversational humour, comic narratives, etc.) rather than on the application of humour in particular domains. Media discourse analysts have, on the one hand, been aware and critical of the role of amusement in the media for a long time (e.g., the humorous and light-hearted presentation of serious content, the trends towards "infotainment", etc.), but, on the other, there has been little systematic research into the uses of humour in the modern media.

This book sets out to start mapping out the points of contact between these two areas. The individual chapters explore some of the diverse forms that humour takes (e.g. word play; canned jokes; conversational humour; satirical humour; humour in translation; etc.) across equally diverse forms of the modern media (traditional print and broadcast media, such as magazines, sitcoms, films and spoof news; as well as electronic and internet-based media, such as emails, listserv messages, and online news). The contributors to this book do not limit themselves to a single analytic perspective: although the individual chapters will mostly appeal to linguists, they will also be of interest to scholars from other disciplines that deal with humour, most notably media studies, psychology, and cross-cultural communication.

The book is organized into three thematic parts. The first section discusses the phenomenon of humour from an interdisciplinary perspective, probing different responses to humour in different groups and at different times. The second section deals with the workings of humour in various kinds of the mass media, with a focus on a linguistic analysis of data. The final part offers a critical commentary on the forms and functions of humorous discourse in social and political contexts, e.g., humour as a form of social critique.

Part One, entitled "Responses to Mass Media Humour across the Disciplines", consists of three papers. Patricia Andrew concentrates on the understanding of ageist humour from a sociolinguistic perspective. Drawing

on a sample of pass-along email messages, she identifies some of the main stereotypes and cultural discourses that underlie such practices. She notes that old people often joke about themselves and that such self-disparagement in ageist humour serves a positive function for them, helping them to cope with the negatives of old age. Melody Geddert reports the findings of an empirical pedagogical study into the perception and understanding of humour. The inability to identify humour is particularly acute among second-language speakers who may, as a result, find themselves excluded in native-speaker interactions or, more prosaically, be unable to perform academic tasks. Victor Raskin offers a strong argument in favour of theory in humour analysis, claiming the need for an explicit and systematic account of the tenets, body and specific constituents of a theory in any scholarly discussion of humour. In a rich methodological article, he lays out the formal mechanisms of Ontological Semantic Technology as applied to the most widespread type of humour, that from the Internet mailing lists, setting the bases for a computable treatment of humorous texts.

Under the title of "The Mechanisms of Humour in the Mass Media", Part Two brings together five papers that share a preoccupation with how humour is constructed in media contexts for the benefit of mass audiences. Christos Arampatzis deals with the role of dialects in American sitcoms in general and the interlinguistic transfer of this phenomenon through Spanish translations in particular. The analysis reveals a trend towards the levelling of user-related variation, paralinguistic compensation of use-related variation, as well as generalization and explicitation. Marta Dynel notes how creative witty metaphors are constructed in film discourse and how they contribute to the recipient's amusement. The entertaining potential of metaphors is shown to consist, among other factors, in how they are skilfully interwoven into the interlocutors' verbal exchanges. Such metaphor-based humour is complex since it is oriented at both the characters within the film and the actual audiences. Milena Kozić considers how communication in US sitcoms is framed as "play" on the basis of both verbal and non-verbal signals. She notes how the two channels are co-patterned, i.e., how they complement, contradict and substitute each other, and how play is realized on the levels of form, meaning, use, and through metalinguistic comments. Jan Chovanec explores humour in online journalism. Using data from the genre of live text commentary of sports events, he notes how humour is built cumulatively over extensive stretches of text in both the journalist's comments and the readers' emails. In such pseudo-dialogical exchanges, the participants jointly construct conversational humour and fantasy that

serve for bonding as well as mutual entertainment in dull moments of games. Last but not least, Moeko Okada considers the function of wordplay in advertising. Based on data of international products marketed in Japan, she notes how wordplay is used intentionally by advertisers with reference to the Japanese cultural traditions of using metaphor and sign-reading.

Part Three—"Mass Media Humour as Political and Social Critique"—contains contributions whose authors link humour and politics: they either focus on material from political contexts or discuss how humour can achieve political and social critique. Isabel Ermida deals with parodic news satire in spoof articles. Using data from a Portuguese newspaper, she focuses on what linguistic devices are involved in the construction of such satire. She postulates a model of analysis comprising the intertextual, critical and comic components and incorporating several subcomponents (structural, stylistic, lexical, pragmatic and rhetorical). María Jesús Pinar Sanz concentrates on ethnic humour in western societies. Drawing on the pragmatic relevance theory and the incongruity-resolution theory of humour, she analyses visual and multimodal metaphors in political advertising (election posters). She notes that the interpretation of the humorous components is relative, depending on the recipients' ideology. The collection closes with Jamil Dakhlia, who offers an interpretation of humorous devices in French celebrity magazines, arguing that there is a tension between the two trends of presenting celebrity content: laughing at the stars and laughing with the stars. Nevertheless, humour serves as a release of the readers' anxieties, pointing out the essential equality between human beings.

Taken together, the contributions to this volume bear witness not only to the multiplicity of humour manifestations in the media but also to the wealth of theoretical and conceptual angles from which to analyse the phenomenon of humorous language. Hopefully, they will also inspire future reflections on the comic as mediated by such heterogeneous channels as the press, television and the Web.

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PART ONE

RESPONSES TO MASS MEDIA HUMOUR ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

"Laughter is the Best Medicine": The Construction of Old Age in Ageist Humor

Patricia Andrew

While humor is a universal phenomenon, it is also culturally dependent for its specific content on a particular time and place. Proscriptions against sexist and racist jokes have increased in recent years, yet ageist humor remains largely acceptable in contemporary Western culture. The following discussion centers on humor as one manifestation of the discourses that form the basis of the social construction of age in the US. It aims to identify recurrent categories or cultural discourses used in the ageist humor appearing in pass-along email messages and to highlight some of the social functions that are served. The focus is principally on the decline discourses that prevail not only in American culture but in most parts of the Western world as well. Lastly, the discussion turns to a consideration of both the upside and the downside of ageist humor.

1. Introduction

Humor is a universal phenomenon, touching upon key themes shared by societies everywhere, such as politics, religion, ethnicity, sex, gender and age (Shifman 2007). However, in order to be fully appreciated humor depends on the culture-specific discourses, stereotypes and symbols that surround these topics in a given local and historical context. Ageist humor is a case in point. While the disparagement of old age is a feature of most Western industrialized societies today, the particular topics and categories associated with age and aging in contemporary American culture may differ to some extent from those found in other Western cultures (Andrew 2007).

The following discussion centers on humor as one manifestation of the discourses that form the basis of the social construction of age in the US (Cruikshank 2003; Andrew 2007; Gullette 2011). In this context, it is framed as a discursive strategy for social interaction (Mulkay 1988; Crawford 2003). This position consonant with a sociolinguistic theory or

perspective on humor in that it emphasizes the situatedness of humor and its dependence on shared cultural implicits for interpretation. The aim of this article is to identify recurrent categories or cultural discourses used in the ageist humor that appears in pass-along email messages and to highlight some of the social functions they serve.

2. Pass-along email humor

Although some research has been done on ageist humor in television portrayals of the elderly and in greeting cards (Dillon and Jones 1981; Kelly et al. 1987; Harwood and Giles 1992), there is not much to be found on email humor. Increasingly, the Internet has assumed a major role in the production and distribution of humor, and pass-along email messages account for a large part of the volume. According to Shifman (2007), pass-along emails are a spin-off of photocopylore and faxlore, a phenomenon which originated in the 1970s and which featured lists, advice, letters, cartoons, quizzes and the like, that were circulated in the workplace using photocopiers and fax machines. An examination of pass-along emails can provide a valuable way of tapping into contemporary American attitudes toward age and aging.

Pass-along email humor lies somewhere between the impersonal television or comedy routines and the more personal greeting cards and face-to-face jokes. The senders of pass-along messages generally mail them to multiple recipients, and the choice of recipients depends on who the sender thinks will enjoy the content. That means there must be shared cultural understandings, both of what is explicitly expressed and of what is implicit, if the humor is to be successful (Bowd 2003). Because it is asynchronous, few signals are available to indicate either the intent of the sender or the degree to which the recipient appreciates the humor (Hancock 2004).

In the material analyzed for the purposes of this study, the senders of humorous pass-along messages about age are predominantly older adults rather than middle-aged or young adults. A large volume of ageist email humor is likely to be passed along among the elderly by their peers. However, no data is readily accessible to confirm this observation as little research has been done on the subject. The humorous effects in these messages can best be explained by the incongruity theory of humor, which attributes the source of amusement to the juxtaposition of two paradoxical, ambiguous or unexpected ways of looking at a situation (Mulkay 1988; Crawford 2003; Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004). According to Mulkay:

> Whereas ambiguity, inconsistency, contradiction and interpretive diversity are often treated as problems during serious discourse … they are necessarily features of the humorous mode. (1988: 26)

In the case of this type of self-deprecating humor, older people target themselves and their own foibles or defects, as part of a defense or tension-relieving mechanism that is not intended to be hostile or aggressive. This type of jesting is also consistent with the psychoanalytically-oriented relief theory of humor (Mulkay 1988; Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004).

On the other hand, ageist jokes in which younger people target older ones are a manifestation of the superiority theory of humor and can be offensive in varying degrees (Mulkay 1988; Berger 1993). Although their own aging process may be looming on the horizon, young people may view it with incredulity and try to distance themselves from any of the negative manifestations of aging (Berk 2001). Such humor may also provide them with a modicum of relief, for they see the situations in age-based jokes as something happening to others (Solomon 1996; Bonneson and Burgess 2004).

3. Social functions of humor

The principal social functions that humor serves in a general sense are readily applicable to age-related humor. Certainly, enjoyment in the form of amusement comes immediately to mind as a very obvious one (Beeman 1999). Another function is the display of cleverness or ingenuity, for our appreciation and evaluation of a humorous joke or story depends fundamentally on this quality (Berger 1993; Weisfeld 2006). Humor, especially in-group humor, can have the function of promoting solidarity among its members by stressing shared traits (Solomon 1996). Recipients may find a joke amusing because it is a way to laugh about something they themselves are experiencing (Bonneson and Burgess 2004).

This type of defense tactic is characteristic of the self-directed humor of socially marginalized sexual, racial, class, or age groups (Jönson and Siverskog 2011). By pointing out alleged "weaknesses" before others do and making themselves the butt of a joke, they may elicit sympathy from their audience (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006; Matsumoto 2009). Such humor can also highlight the absurdity of such prejudicial attitudes (Cohen 2001). Finally, humor often works as a coping mechanism. It can help reduce anxiety or stress stemming from something feared or unpleasant (Hanlon, Farnsworth and Murray 1997; Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004). This is a singularly important function in the case of age-based humor in contemporary society, where decline discourses surround the topic of age.

Humor is a way of exercising some control over our anxieties about aging and death, both for the young and the old (Hanlon, Farnsworth and Murray 1997; Matsumoto 2009).

4. Age discourses and categories

From the social constructionist standpoint, language does not reflect or mirror reality; rather it actively produces, constructs and shapes the world around us through discursive interaction. As Burr explains:

> Social constructionism holds that our experience and knowledge of the world is constantly being produced or constructed by people in everyday interaction with each other, and it places a special emphasis upon the role of language in this interaction. Through our linguistic exchanges with each other in our routine daily lives we construct and re-construct the concepts, categories and objects with which we are familiar. They form a kind of common currency with which we can meaningfully deal with other people who share the same culture. (Burr 1997: 4)

From this perspective, age is socially constructed on the basis of the dominant discourses, beliefs and attitudes in a given culture. In the case of ageism, stereotypes attribute selected, and generally unfavorable, characteristics to individuals on the sole basis of their belonging to a particular age cohort. In American culture, and indeed in most of the industrialized West, the majority of the stereotypes associated with old age are negative in consequence of the fact that the prevalent discourse of aging is one of inevitable and irreversible decline (Gullette 2004). According to Coupland et al., "the diachronic perspective and the associated expectation of decremental change are built in to the mythology of ageing" (1991: 4).

Ageist humor is based on discourses and stereotypes that are commonly accepted or, at the least, understood by both the sender and the recipient (Bowd 2003). Typologies of ageist stereotypes and attitudes have been assembled by Palmore (1971) in the 70s, and by Bowd (2003) and others more recently. There is a great deal of overlap. Based on a set of materials obtained from personal pass-along messages, I have compiled a list of 11 categories, using qualitative content analysis (Bryman 2004), that form the basis of the ageist humor that I found. The following list is not intended, of course, to be all-encompassing, but rather to give a representative idea of the thematic content that is prevalent in the ageist humor appearing in pass-along email messages.

- *Loss of physical abilities*

By far the most frequent subject of ageist humor that emerged is the loss of physical abilities. Decrepitude is a constant in this type of humor (1).

(1)   That Snap, Crackle Pop in the morning…ain't my freaking Rice Krispies.

Often the text is accompanied by images. For example, iconography associated with disability, such as dentures, eyeglasses, hearing aids, canes, wheelchairs, diapers, and walkers, is a key feature in ageist humor, connecting the visual image and the verbal language. In (2), a picture of a woman using a walker appears next to the written text.

(2)   It ain't the age. It's the darn mileage.

Incontinence (3) is another source of amusement.

(3)   I asked my wife if old men wear boxers or briefs. She said Depends.

Here we find a play on the word "Depends", a well-known brand of adult diapers. The use of recognized commercial products appears frequently in this type of humor.
     Sometimes the focus is on a specific physical impairment, such as failing eyesight (4).

(4)   Coming soon! Large type alphabet soup.

This first category, then, characterizes the older person as infirm and decrepit.

- *Loss of mental abilities*

The second recurrent theme in ageist humor is the loss of mental abilities. The expression "Alzheimer's disease" is commonly used—rather inaccurately—as a global term for memory loss or forgetfulness in older persons. Consider (5):

(5)   One good thing about Alzheimer's…you get to meet new people every day.

A similar example alludes to the cyber world (6).

(6)   Insufficient memory at this time.

The category of loss of mental abilities also includes references to lack of mental acuity, obliviousness to surroundings, danger to self, reasoning and problem solving limitations, and odd or unusual behavior.

(7)   Flight attendant to elderly passenger: "When we asked you to turn off all electronic devices, we didn't mean your husband's pacemaker…"

In (7) the source of amusement is the nonsensical or incongruous situation that points up the mental slowness of the female passenger.

- *Loss of attractiveness*

A third theme in ageist humor is the loss of attractiveness. The humor targets both men and women. In (8), the subject is the unattractive female. The punch line provides an unexpected comment or response, exemplifying the mechanism of incongruity in humor.

(8)   I was at the beauty shop for nearly two hours. That was only for the estimate.

Joke (9) focuses on baldness as a symbol of the loss of attractiveness in men.

(9)   Man to woman: "I lied when I told you I shaved my head."

Exaggeration or absurdity is often used to make a parody of the absence of fashion sense, going gray, wrinkles, unattractive body shape, and other stereotypes of the loss of attractiveness in older people.

- *Loss of sexual ability or interest*

The loss of sexual ability or interest is another category prevalent in ageist humor.

(10)   When did my wild oats turn to prunes and bran?

The play on words in (10) juxtaposes the allusion to "sowing one's wild oats", an expression referring to the reckless and sexually promiscuous behavior characteristic of young people, with fiber-rich foods conventionally advised for the aging digestive system.

(11)   At my age… 'Gettin' any?' means sleep!

The double entendre in (11) pokes fun at the sexlessness of older persons. This category also takes into account the impotent male, the disinterested female and the sexually or romantically inactive condition of older people in general.

- *Old age as a second childhood*

A fifth category arises from the vision of old age as a second childhood. This is a particularly popular stereotype in which the supposed "declining" competence, increased dependency, lack of productivity, social marginality and physical smallness of the elderly are likened to similar characteristics in young children, in what is aptly described as the "inverted-U" model of the life course (Coupland, Coupland and Giles 1991; Coupland 2001). In (12) the expression "Happy Hour", referring to a time of day when bars try to attract customers by offering drinks at a reduced price or by other special promotions, lends itself to word play.

(12)   You know you're getting old when Happy Hour is a nap.

(13)   You know you're getting old when you throw a wild party and the
          neighbors don't even realize it.

In (13) a suitably absurd illustration of an older woman wearing a child's birthday hat highlights the important connection between the visual image and the verbal text.

- *Loss of independence*

A frequent stereotype of aging is that it brings about a loss of independence. There is the notion that older people are invariably in need of care (14).

(14)   Be nice to your children. They will choose your nursing home.

Loss of independence is also associated with being in precarious financial shape or having to live in poverty (15).

(15)   Retirement: twice as much husband, half as much money.

- *Ineptitude*

The seventh category is ineptitude, and covers a number of stereotypical notions. One is general incompetence (16).

(16)   Experience is a wonderful thing. It enables you to recognize a mistake when you make it again.

Another belief is that older people are rambling and verbose (17).

(17)   My wife always gives me sound advice. 99% sound…1% advice.

Here the pun made on the word "sound" provides the source of humor. In this case the reference is to women, but verbosity can be applicable to both genders. This category also includes inappropriate or eccentric behavior.

- *Preoccupation with health and mortality*

An eighth theme is the preoccupation with health and mortality, as seen in (18) and (19).

(18)   Florida: God's waiting room.

(19)   Visitors surrounding a patient in a hospital bed: "It's a very senior moment—he's dead."

The punch line in (19) exemplifies the violation of expectations that is at the heart of the incongruity theory of humor (Mulkay 1988).

- *Lack of life satisfaction*

A widespread idea is that older people are bored and unhappy (20). Here the incongruity stems from the contradiction between being "retired" and "having a day off from work".

(20)   The only problem with retirement…you never get a damn day off.

People, as they age, are also characterized as cantankerous and angry (21).

(21)   Sometimes I wake up grumpy…and sometimes I let him sleep.

The pun in (21) is made on the word "grumpy", which can be both an adjective and a proper noun.

- *Obstinacy*

An important category of ageist humor is obstinacy (22).

(22)   Husband to wife at breakfast: "Where's the butter?"
         Wife: "I think you really should be watching your cholesterol."
         Husband: "I'm 92 years old. I've done everything that I care to do in this
         life, except one…to eat this muffin. Where's the butter?"

Older people are often viewed as closed-minded, inflexible and unable to adapt to change (23).

(23)   Doctor to the wife of a dying patient: "It could be hours, or it could be
         weeks. He's determined to hang on until he finally understands the punch
         line to a joke everybody else got at a cocktail party in 1947!"

Again, the nonsensical situation in (23) provides the humor in this story.

- *Age marking*

The final category shows another source of humor, age marking, that is, how age identity is marked or highlighted in talk. It is a way of characterizing someone as old either directly, for example, by the explicit mention—or concealment, as in (24)—of one's exact age.

(24)   I'm not old. I'm chronologically gifted.

The term "gifted" (24) is part of the politically correct speech used in euphemisms for disabilities.
    Denial of one's age is another constant in ageist humor (25).

(25)   The secret of staying young is to live honestly…eat slowly, and lie about
         your age.

Coupland et al. (1993) include "temporal framing processes" as an indirect kind of age marking. Consider (26):

(26)   Support Bingo. Keep Grandma off the streets.

In this case, the references to "Grandma" position the person as old by mentioning a characteristically "elderly" category or role. The other chronological marker is the reference to "Bingo", a stereotypically elderly activity.

The mention of a present state that implicitly or explicitly categorizes the person as old (27), and references to the past or clues from which age is obvious (28), are other examples of chronological markers.

(27)   I must be getting older…all the names in my phone book end with M.D.

(28)   Don't laugh. My Studebaker may be worth more than what you drive.

Ageist humor can also be based on positive stereotypes, which feature an older person as atypical of the generality of elderly people. Depicting older people as exceedingly robust, mentally quick, sexually active, or demonstrating any other kind of counter-stereotypical behavior, produces a comic effect because of its "supposed" unlikelihood (29).

(29)   Advertisement: "Tattoos for the elderly: 'Arthritis Sucks', 'Really Old School', 'Born to Ride'."

The illustration of the last tattoo features a motorized wheel chair, rather than the expected motorcycle. In the end, by making such uncharacteristic portrayals of the elderly laughable, the original negative stereotypes about older people are actually reinforced.

As previously mentioned, the meanings with which people imbue age and aging come to them initially through the prevailing discourses or narratives in their culture. The way a specific culture envisions age and the passing of time permeates every aspect of life, including attitudes, beliefs, feelings, values, social practices, ways of talking, as well as social institutions, and these discourses are taken up by the members of a given society from an early age (Andrew 2007). This certainly extends to humor, where the foregoing examples underscore the decremental view of aging characteristic of contemporary American society.

Most of the instances that have been included here use incongruous or even absurd situations, puns and other types of wordplay, and other violations of the expected to create a humorous effect. They are based on commonly shared stereotypes about aging. Yet, all these stereotypes have been debunked by evidence from research, despite the fact that elements of truth may be found in some of them. However, attempting to determine the extent to which they do or do not present an accurate portrayal of older people misses the point, which is that people age in far different ways. Stereotypes, both positive and negative, overlook this important fact. As a result, ageist discourses and narratives engender prejudicial beliefs and practices that "endorse the subordinate or marginal positions and qualities of the old" (Coupland 2001). Perhaps the most serious consequence is the