



## Discourse of Humour in the Culture of Mobile Jokes

Namratha Mogaral  
Department of English  
Kuvempu University  
Shankaraghatta-577451  
mogaral103\_1@dataone.in

**Wife: The trouble with you Brian is that you have no sense of humour**

**Man: (After thinking about it for moment) Well, I don't think that's funny.**

Is it true that some people don't have a sense of humour? What is humour? From where does it arise? If we look at the origin of the idea of the comic we would know how subversive the wife is being. Two odd millennium years ago the ancient Greeks discovered a very funny anatomical difference between the sexes. Women did not have the hyoid bone found in the region of the throat. They related this to the strength and size of the laugh of the two sexes and found women falling far behind the men. But of course all this changes subsequently when they discovered that the body has fluids that caused changes in the temperaments of individuals. This in today's parlance comes close to the idea of psychological character, comic being one of them.

But to the Greeks the comic was only a means to balance temperament as for example when Aristotle proposed comic catharsis as the end of comedy. The comic was not so much one of the psychological traits as much as means to the golden mean. Sigmund Freud the Austrian originator of the discipline of psychology in the modern times proposed another effective theory that looked to jokes as the release of everyday pathology. Joke for him was the symptom of an aberration albeit released in a socially harmless way. Mikhail Bakhtin the Russian sociolinguist extends this in social and collective terms as carnival subversion of power and norms. For Bakhtin the comic was always in possession of the powerless. Figures of authority could not afford the joke because if was potentially disruptive of social order. Carl Jung's collective unconscious too drew upon humour as having a communal basis as being a shared experience while Bakhtin's carnival insists on its performative aspect.

Perhaps the ancient Indian aestheticians were the first to give a synthetic analysis of the actual dynamics of humour. They placed hasya as the second most important asa next to only sringara in any performance. According to a contemporary



Sanskrit scholar Sunthar Viswalingam the ancient s distinguished between laughter and humour. Humour is the state of mind or bhava that expresses itself as laughter. Rasa or essence of humour is mirth or the comic. Here again we find a distinction being made between humour and the comic.

Laughter is the psychological response or effective discharge to any comic artistic object. Such a comic is the formal equivalent – correlative –vehicle for a humorous state of the mind. For the response to occur there must be a suitable logical pattern verbal, pictorial or body depending on the chosen medium or all the three media together that presents the comic.

The notion of the logical pattern is a formal –structural one. Even though the various comic genres may correspond to this notion of a formal equivalent, it may not be reduced to the generic formulas. A joke written outside the comic genres still has a logical pattern which enables the discharge of the comic.

In his research on Abhinavagupta the sixteenth century literary Sanskrit philosopher, Viswalingam explains that the ancient theorists of humour identified dual association as the primary mechanism of anything comical. Technically speaking it is not possible to actually identify in any specific or concrete terms the form of the dual association or bi-association. But still there are certain norms by which an effective comic artistic object may be identified with, such as economy and implicitness.

In the following pages I analyze how the comic is produced in mobile jokes. By mobile jokes I mean those humorous text messages that are circulated among mobile network users. Mobile jokes are the product of the contemporary fascination with mobile phones and communication technology. They are generated either purposely or accidentally for the consumption of the mobile phone users as part of their communication networking. This article attempts a study of the humorous mechanism of mobile jokes. In my view mobile jokes inhabit different worlds at the same time, which are situated at the overlapping sites of the techno-cultural, multilingual and postcolonial.

## **Jokes and how they work**

The joke is a genre of humour that is most flexible in definition and covers almost all types of verbal humour. Jokes make up the repertoire of popular wisdom. They are means of carnival subversion. They make the seriousness of life bearable. Jokes can subvert rituals of everyday life. Jokes make the sacred seem profane and vice versa. They present a topsy-turvy world. Take for instance the following mobile joke.



- Once 3 eggs fell to d ground bt only 2eggs broke....!  
Why....!  
Sometimes happens  
You don't take tension  
Just relax:-

Study the above you will find that it is on the one side, directed to the world. It draws upon the laws of existence the fact of gravity, anything that falls must break. The question elicits our knowledge of this law but this expectation is punctuated in the punch line by asking us to suspend this law. A person who appreciates this joke should be aware of this simple fact of existence but the person must also be able to suspend one's belief. *Jokes are worldly*. They derive from our knowledge of the world. But they usually subvert these laws. Jokes make silly things look big and big things silly. That is why jokes always help to see the world in a different way from normative.

On the other side this joke elicits us to play a circular game. We accept the evasion of answer in the above joke because it announces its verbosity. *Jokes are language games*. They require us to be logocentric and draw our attention away from the world to the verbal construction itself. Thus jokes are in addition to being directed to the world are directed away at the language in which they are couched. The logic of jokes is not the logic of things but of language. That's why jokes can be our duex ex machine from a tight spot, the magical escape from the tensions of life. Just relax.

There is yet another dimension to jokes that is their formal aspect. Most *jokes are rituals, a performance that follows a certain formal rules of execution*. They must have a punch line and an organization. The cleverest joke always manages to elicit this ritual and they subvert it like the above joke does with the cool evasion of a substantial answer. Notice most jokes are 'cracked' or 'burst' like Diwali fireworks at a certain point in the ritual of telling. This point is known as the 'punch line'. The exact location of the laugh, usually it comes at the end of the telling. But what precedes it is equally important for the joke to work successful. This is only one feature of the form(s) of jokes.

## **World on the Move: Hybridity of mobile Jokes**

Jokes that super impose the norms of two different world create a lot of fun. Take for instance the Jataka tales. These animal stories delightfully appeal to persons of any age because they overlap the norms of the animal world and the human. The



most distinctive quality of mobile humour is the overlapping of two world systems and two communicative-semiotic codes.

Mobile humour is predominantly directed at reconstructing the laws of the world of mobile networking in terms of the real physical. This makes mobile jokes reflexive ruefully joking at themselves and their implications for the real life world.

- Doctor: You must exercise daily  
Sardar: I play football, tennis, cricket daily sir.  
Dctr: Good....! Where do you play?  
Sardarji: On the mobile sir!

Or this rather naughty one:

- If a mobile company owner is suffering from loose motion how will he explain this to the doctor?  
Dctr from morning unlimited free outgoing. Then I am hearing new new ring tones, there is no balance in my stomach. Whenever I am recharging within a minute it gets discharged. Can u pls disconnect this offer?

Now a person who can appreciate this joke should be familiar with not merely the physical world of contemporary existence—its middle class consumerism and various fetishes. Knowledge of the technological virtual world of mobile networking is even more important. One should also be fluent in the specialized vocabulary of mobile dialogic. The mobile register, the SMS short forms and orthography, and the entire communication discourse. Only then one will be in a position to imbibe the ironies of the dual world in which we have started to live in. *The discourse of mobile humour populates a hybrid world.*

Read the above joke aloud and notice the mocking repetition of the –ing form. Even though a texted joke it has a strongly oral quality. Jokes can be presented in either the textual mode or in oral. There can be a lot of difference in the two modes. The textual can be more literary, individualistic and comprehensive in form. The oral on the other can be ritualistic, formulaic and drawing from a specific genre of jokes. *Mobile jokes are hybrid in modality* even while being textual, i.e. using SMS text format still they exhibit many oral qualities. They are topical in content eliciting current knowledge. They are short and simple in presentation. They also draw upon already circulating genres such as Sardarji and Gunda jokes that are already readily available in Indian culture. These predictable



formats undercut the difficulty posed by the technologically savvy SMS formatting.

Then the oral joke is demotic in all its dimensions content, form and manner of presentation. The SMS formatting thumbs a nose at propriety of language grammar and spelling. It can challenge pedantry and the erudition of books. See the following student friendly joke. The simple wisdom of the folk is pitted against logical scientific method. Intuition even though considered illogical can take one a long way even to God.

- Sardar in biopractical exam.  
Examnr- See d bird's leg & tell its name.  
Srdr-don't know  
Examr- U've failed d exam. What's ur name?  
Srdr- Now see my leg & tell my name.

Question and answer mode in its different versions as in the jokes discussed above is a popular oral form The anecdote and the tall tale are also two favorite oral modes of joking. Both have some fixed features: a narrative form and highly ritualized routine of elaborated presentation. These features have themselves made the prodigal gagster with unashamed irresistible urge to spin to be labeled as a bore. Mobile jokes attempt to overcome the tedium of joke routine and ritual with meaningful use of dots, dashes, exclamation marks and other orthographic conventions.

- Sardar was buying movie tickets  
...again...  
and  
...again...!

Angrily the man at the ticket counter asked him:

Y R U selling BLACK!

Srdr in anguish: Some fool standing near d door is TEARING

my  
TICKETS

Normally the joke would have been presented as follows:

- Do you know this one on our Sardar?  
Once Sardar went to the movies. The man at the door asked him for his



ticket. Sardar was not annoyed. He patiently went to the counter bought a ticket and gave it to the man. With dismay he watched the man tear it.

Thinking that he would have to buy another one now he went back to the counter and bought another. At the door he was again way laid and the man tore the ticket once more. This already put Sardar off track but never mind he would buy one more. Third time the man at the issuing counter asked Sardar angrily: Are you selling tickets in black?

Sardar innocent as he was answered him straight:

But the man at the door is tearing my ticket!

The curtailment of this long drawn out ritual of narration and the short fall it might create is compensated with orthographic conventions that may be used defectively in SMS text format. The mobile joke communicates visually as well as verbally.

Here is a subversive joke on the power politics among nations in a postcolonial world riddled with competition and rivalry. It actually is in the form of a tall tale. But the presentation relies not on ritual routine narration but rather the interplay of words projected like metaphors in a poem or a literary piece.

- American: We will go to the moon.  
Sardar: WE will go to the sun.  
American: Impossible you will be burnt.  
Sardar: Even I know that. But we are going during the Night!

Going to the moon and sun here are not merely elements of the tall tale but expressions of the overreaching spatial ambitions of the two leading nations of the world. The formulation is drawing upon the existing hierarchy between the two heavenly bodies made so popular by the deconstructionists and feminists. From point of narrative routine this joke draws upon postcolonial forms like the Afro-American dozens and the Indian Qawali, these both proceed in the form of challenge –counter challenge. This triumph of oriental form over the western tall tale should have already signaled victory but not so ; it is undercut by the boasting tone. The democracy of the joke is that both the nations are leveled in status and the hierarchy is defied in the next two lines. The American is as foolish in his warning as the Indian in his ignorance because any one sees that it is a truism that the sun is not habitable by humans. Considering that his joke originated in these times of the American debt crisis it raises an eye brow at the credibility of advancement of science and suggests that man is not God after all. After all it is the stereotype of



the west that it is the forerunner of technology and science while India is the intuitive terrain.

## Irony as the vehicle of brevity

- Yamaraja: Why Chitrugupta, now a day you don't bring in any accident cases?  
Chi'guptha: What can I do Yamaraja. Even before I get there "108" will have reached the place.

Jokes are ironic. They cast oblique glance at the world, Indirection is the foremost quality of humour. Mobile jokes are not any different in this. Their world-directed gaze pounces upon the loop holes in the seamlessly constructed consumption and technology dominated life world of today. Examine the above joke the laugh is not that ambulance, doctors and medicine cures all the accident cases. But rather all death cases may be ultimately traced to modern medical practices. This may be called as indirection or obliquity.

- Sardar was looking at his marriage certificate  
Wife asked him. Dear, Why do you look at our marriage certificate?  
Sardar: I was looking for the expiry date!

There is another way of verbal irony, i.e. double vision or looking at the same thing from two different but juxtaposed angles. The thing about irony is that it saves explanation. It communicates by formal technique where elaboration fails. The wife of course would have been expecting a declaration of love and faith when she asked the question. But this is deflated by the contrary answer. The double vision is the expectation and its contrary. The locus of the joke in the punch line 'expiry date' uses a snide homonymic pun. Expiry dates are found on labels of goods sold in the market. But here it refers to the end of marriage, divorce or even death of one of the spouses in the Indian context. Puns are good way of indirection too.

- Sardar held a B'day party for his six month baby  
Some 1 asked: How come b'day for a 6 month old?  
Sardar: V follow semester system here.



The irony of the above joke is that it is a brave play upon a risky matter, something like dancing gracefully on thin ice. It juxtaposes the world of the joke with the real world where the semester system associated with English education is a point of anxiety among parents of growing children. There is so much onus on proper schooling and education in the making of individuals now a days that every Indian parent is eager to induct the child from the beginning like fish in water as it were into the academic routine of our modern English education system. The perfect achiever is one who will grow up smart enough to beat the system at its own game and become its master. The irony of this joke may not be self-evident. You could still enjoy it without cracking the riddle of its ironic tensions. But the full flavor of the joke is realized only when the irony is released.

- Sardar got a job as bus conductor

One day the bus became full there was really no space left. Not knowing what to do Sardar alighted from the bus, smartly blew on the whistle, “Right, right. I’ll come on the next trip.”

Sardar is a character that derived from a genus of Punjabi jokes based on a foolish but valiant Sikh gentleman. To be sure Sardar here is not a bit comical or foolish but as valiant as a foot soldier facing a cannon ball run. His tactic is no less than Gandhi’s Satyagraha or non-cooperation but herein turned ironically to combat the tyranny of the indifferent self-absorbed masses that crowd the public transport in India. But the irony is that this solution will not work. Such is the tragic-comic reality of the middle class of today.

### **Language Game and its Refusal: Playing logocentrism against itself.**

- 2 frogs chatting

Frog 1: tur

Frog 2: tur tur

Frog 1: tur tur tur

Frog 2: tur tur tur tur

Frog 1: tur tur tur

Frog 2: kur kur kur

Frog 1: don’t change the topic!

The humour in the above joke is not nonsense but the parody on communication itself. Parody is a frequent device of humour. In this joke the funny sounding



noises “tur” and “kur” in their polyphony parody normal linguistic dialogue. But the point here I want to make is not of parody as comic discourse which is in no doubt but that jokes are language oriented. Jokes manipulate the system of the language to bring laughter. There are numerous ways of doing it.

- Interviewer: Just imagine u r in d 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, it catches fire. How will u escape?

Sardar: It is very simple. I'll stop my IMAGINATION!

Surely it is not Sardar's fault for knowing that refusing to play the language game is the easiest escape route in the circumstance.

- In college...

Sardar: I love U

Girl: I'll tell the principal that.

Sardar: Are you crazy! He is already married.

Anybody can tell you that language performs primarily pragmatic function for the interlocutors. Linguistic utterances can have two kinds of pragmatics, contextual in which meaning relies on the utterances relation in the context that generated the speech. The other is effective pragmatics in which the thrust of the message lies in the intention of what impact is meant on the listener, A very important means of humour is the play on the pragmatic intentions of speakers and utterances.

### **Carnival: Language, authority and its comic subversion**

Ask any linguist they will confirm the pragmatics of linguistic utterances takes away the authority that its grammar structure bestows. Grammar and pragmatics function in two opposing directions making the meaning indeterminate. *The manipulation of pragmatic meaning is the best way of subverting authority of language.*

- Principal to students: It's good to make a rule to sleep at least 7 hours a day.  
Students: Impossible Sir! College is only for 6 hrs.

Obviously the student is eager to exploit fully the pragmatic ambivalence of the word “day” in the Principal's utterance. Considering the at principals and bossmen are images of authority, only the pragmatic ambivalence of—the doubtful authority in—language can provide safe avenue for the carnival subversion of the normative hierarchy of authority.



## Cross-culturing English: The postcolonial pun

- Teacher: Which is ur favorite dish?  
Gunda: TATA SKY! (referring to a brand of H RTP dish antenna)

Puns are a stock of humour. Punning is one of the oldest trick in the joker's trade. Commonly recognized as word play or quibble the pun uses the polysemy of language. Subversively it is the recognition of the polyvalence of verbal utterances and the indeterminacy of meaning. Punning involves different kinds of code manipulation. The following is an extended pun in the form of acrostic.

- Teacher: What is the meaning of Maths?  
M-mental  
A-attack  
T-to  
H- healthy  
S-students

Here's another and pedantic pun: It plays on the homonym "sprint" meaning a fast un-interrupted run on a short straight back.

- Teacher: Give the definition for a line.  
Student: A line is a dot on a sprint.

Even a school kid will tell you, in Mathematics a line is defined as the shortest distance between two points. The (s)peculiarity of scientific definitions is that they link conceptual knowledge with proper linguistic formulations. Popular culture will never stop laughing at formal education and its high serious exacting dependence on language. To make matters worse definitions are always in English, the legacy of English education.

- Sardar started a college: The name of the college was Sardar Medical College of Engineering.

It may appear as proof of Sardar's failure to master English. But the media hype on genetic engineering and its uses makes us wonder if he is not a genius after all. It is



the fault of the language that cannot say what it means like the grammarian claims to. So Sardar does higher studying sitting on a hillock.

- A Sardar was sitting on top of a hillock and studying . A passerby asked:  
“Why are you studying on a mountain?”  
Sardar answered: “Oye ...you fool! Highest studies Vai....!”

Analysts of comic discourse will tell you the play on “higher” is homonymic. But the real question, is the higher in higher studies the same as in higher altitude? Do they have the same semantic value? If they do we wouldn't be laughing of this joke. In the joke cited below the pun is etymological, playing on the root meaning of the word “interest.”

- Bank manager: Our bank now gives loans without interest.  
Sardar: It's does not draw interest why do they bother?

After all bank “interest” does mean “interest.” Anybody who lends money is interested to make a profit. There is every reason to look yellow eyedly at any claims of to un-interestedness. Perhaps, for Indian pedestrian this joke resonates with extra meaning for it evokes loan meals a popular measure executed with ritualistic regularity by our netas in the name of alleviating poverty.

The culture of the postcolonial world is a language sensitive one. The niceties or the finer points of English language and grammar have made the subject of tomes both prose and poetry for many an ambitious person seeking to make a niche in the literary world. But popular culture has always been in the vanguard in this regard. The upper class wannabes in the modernist period used the knowledge of English as a signifier of social and intellectual superiority. In this postmodern times the undistinguishable commoner takes subversive pleasure in the ability to manipulate the code of English at will. After all the prerogative of Malapropism is not just of the English native why not the English-struck postcolonial global citizen? Here is one on

- “Teach-err's” English in PT class  
U rotate da ground three times  
U go understand the tree.  
Stand in a straight circle.



Teach-err is a kind of pun technically labeled as pseudo-morphing. The rest are malapropisms. The question is why should the word ‘rotate’

Be not used in this manner? Does it not mean to go round? If you can have verbs like understate and underline, why not understand (to mean to stand under)? We know a circle is a circle but isn’t a “straight circle” a true paradox?

- A man asked his friend—“When will u marry?  
The friend replied earnestly: “First I will marry my sister, then my mother will marry me.”

The ironies of English syntax are baffling. The phrase ‘marry off’ as in to marry off someone is quite correct. Moreover English does not insist on the use of particles strictly. In fact the use of particles reflects the class position of the speaker. For instance what is cool off for the upper class is merely cool for the lower. Hot up can be meant as effectively by simply hot. Cool down and cool up I believe mean the same thing as hang up and hang, and send off is the same as send away. The postcolonial speaker of English is I believe especially equipped to uncover the grammar of English in this manner.

- Teacher taught English grammar and asked Sardar,  
Give me example for compound sentence.  
Sardar answered: “Beware of dogs”

The word “compound” is the legacy of colonial English. It refers to the enclosure around a house. It is commonly used I Indian English while talking of Indian homes with a courtyard. I doubt if the native English today can appreciate the pun on “compound sentence” The double entendre on the collocation is bilingual and needs knowledge of two languages, cultures and worlds.

We in India today live between two worlds the world of colonial English education and the world of authentic experiences. In the circumstances punning is put to special use in mobile humour. Cross cultural punning i.e. puns that arise due to code mixing and the use of Indian English make good comic on mobile networking. This one is a truly original cross cultural joke:

- Customer: I want paper dosa.  
Sardar: Plain or ruled?



Paper dosa is a delicacy to be had either with stuffing or plain. What if Sardar's linguistic creativity sees the stuffing as ruled? Idiomatic English has always posed a special challenge to the anglophile eager to learn English and master it.

- wife: This is the third time in the day I see you in my kitchen looking at the sugar jar.  
Husband: Didn't the doctor ask me to do a sugar check?

Actually this joke is funny because an idiom like "sugar check" has become part of even the vernacular languages such as Kannada where a lot of code mixing is the norm. There are many English expressions and idioms which are used as they are and for which we have not bothered to find vernacular equivalents. Even a person who does not know any other language but the regional uses the English expressions unthinkingly. So that's the joke. Of course, this is a sore point among Nativists who are anxious that the domination of English is retarding the process of our regional languages. But they would be calmed to think that English is a language that has more number of borrowed expressions than original, from Greek, Latin, Hebrew. French. Norwegian and Germanic. Here is another similar one just meant to show off the skill of the English savvy populace, no mean achievement.

- It seems Sardar was found applying shampoo to his shoulder along with his head.  
His wife asked him concerned: Dearest why are you applying shampoo to your shoulders?  
Sardar answered showing the bottle wrapper: Darlin' It's no ordinary shampoo. It says Head and Shoulders.

The exuberance of cultural translation has always made more than a few laughs, whether intended or unintended.

- I talk, he talk, y u middle middle talk?

This joke is an eye opener on the comparability of any two languages. Two grammatical equivalents still don't mean equivalent texts. Languages differ not merely in their grammar but their performativity. In regional Kannada the above expression may be effectively used to snub unwanted third party from interfering in a dialogue. But this is not done in English because the norms regarding linguistic performance in Kannada are not the same as those that govern English.



- Teacher: Gunda tell me the names of members in your family in English.  
Gunda: My mum's name is FULL RICE(Annapurna)  
Dad's name is BLACK BULL (Karibasappa)  
My big brother's name is ELEPHANT HUSBAND(Gajapathi).  
My small brother's name is ROUND RAO (Gundu Rao).  
My name is KISSING KING (Muthu Raja).

This joke of course will need explanation. What the teacher meant was that the pupil should formulate the answers in complete and grammatically correct English. Now this question is routine in school admission interviews. But the pupil somehow misunderstood it and translated the names into English with much unexpected fun of literal translation. But then why not if our famed A K Ramanujan got away with translating the refrain in Mahadevi's Kannada Vachanas as Lord of the Jasmine?

## Conclusions

Whatever the humourists and psychologists say a good joke is always one with clever play on language(s). A good humourist is one who can manipulate the language and is also a good linguist. It may be true that one needs to be worldly wise in order to appreciate a good joke, but it is even truer that one needs to be a natural linguist too. In our times the increasing language awareness of the multilingual multicultural existence has given a new fillip to the clever manipulation of language as in mobile humour.

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All the jokes referred to in this article were forwarded to me by my student Smitha G (2008 Batch ?) in two years she sent me around 200 jokes in SMS text format. They are obviously anonymous and can be had for a small subscription fee on mobile networks.