

# The Language of Humor

## *An Introduction*

Much of today's communication is carried out through various kinds of humor, and we therefore need to be able to understand its many aspects. Here, two of the world's leading pioneers in humor studies, Alleen and Don Nilsen, explore how humor can be explained across the numerous sub-disciplines of linguistics. Drawing on examples from language play and jokes in a range of real-life contexts, such as art, business, marketing, comedy, creative writing, science, journalism, and politics, the authors use their own theory of 'Features, Functions, and Subjects of Humor' to analyze humor across all disciplines. Each highly accessible chapter uses a rich array of examples to stimulate discussion and interaction even in large classes. Supplemental PowerPoints to accompany each of the twenty-five chapters are available online, taking many of the insights from the chapters for further interactional discussions with students.

ALLEEN PACE NILSEN and DON L. F. NILSEN are in the Humanities Division of Arizona State University's Emeritus College. Together, they have authored an abundance of books including *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (2013), *Pronunciation Contrasts in English* (2010), and *Encyclopedia of 20th Century American Humor* (2000). They are the leading pioneers in humor studies, having both received lifetime achievement awards from the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor and the International Society for Humor Studies.

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Don L. F. Nilsen , Alleen Pace Nilsen  
Frontmatter  
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## Preface and Acknowledgments

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In 1976, Antony Chapman and Hugh Foot hosted an International Humor Conference in Cardiff, Wales, which was the first such conference to be attended by a significant number of European and American humor scholars. In 1979, Harvey Mindess and Joy Turek of Antioch University in California hosted a second International Humor Conference, and in 1982, Rufus Browning of the Modern Language Association's American Humor Studies Association, along with Larry Mintz from the University of Maryland, and Herb Cummings from the Workshop Library on World Humor, hosted a third International Humor Conference. In 1984, Avner Ziv of Tel Aviv University hosted the fourth International Humor Conference, and in 1985, Desmond McHale of University College in Cork, Ireland hosted a fifth International Humor Conference. Except for the first Conference, we attended all of these, and benefitted both from the formal presentations that we heard and from the discussions about humor that went on in the hallways and on the buses and in the dining rooms, pubs, and dorm rooms.

In the meantime, both of us finished our Ph.D. degrees (Don in Linguistics from the University of Michigan, and Alleen in English Education from the University of Iowa), and we settled into our own academic careers at Arizona State University. Our university happens to be located in a geographical area which has a mild climate that every spring attracts visitors from around the world. In the late 1970s, we began thinking of hosting our own humor conferences as a way of celebrating April Fools' Day, when people were looking for a chance to get away from icy, cold winters and to spend a few pleasant days in the sunshine.

In the spring of 1981, we happened to notice a news story saying that Art Buchwald, a highly respected writer whose humorous political columns were published in over 500 newspapers, was going to be in nearby Scottsdale to speak to a convention. We wrote him a note asking if he could perhaps meet with a group of professors from Arizona State University and give us advice on how we could manage to put on an April Fools' Day humor conference that would attract a national audience.

He agreed to come to a luncheon meeting of several ASU professors who were interested in humor studies and were eager to hear what he thought about our idea. The most important thing he told us was that people would be disappointed, as they would come to a humor conference expecting to laugh for three whole days. He explained that no one can laugh that long and still enjoy it. We set about planning our conference and advertising it as being both for humor scholars and for members of the general public who just wanted to have fun. One of the positive things we did was to devise different kinds of events so that people would have choices. For example, we had a Friday night joke-telling contest, and on Sunday afternoon we offered a session for parents and their children to come and listen to the authors of humorous children's books.

Among the participants who helped us appeal to both scholars and to the general public were Joyce Saltman, Mel Helitzer, and Larry Wilde. We were happily surprised at how many people came, and even happier at the kinds of publicity we got because newspapers and television stations were searching for ways to acknowledge April Fools' Day. Even the nationally televised *Today Show* sent out a crew. Our first ASU Humor Conference was held in the spring of 1982 under the "sponsorship" of WHIM (Western Humor and Irony Membership) and the Arizona Humanities Council. But after a couple of years, when we saw that many humor scholars were coming from around the world, we decided that the *W* in WHIM could stand for "World" instead of for "Western."

Each year, we would collect copies of the papers that were delivered, and would publish excerpts (which we called *concretes* rather than *abstracts*), in a booklet that we distributed at the next conference. We used the title *WHIMSY (World Humor and Irony Membership Serial Yearbook)*. We had six WHIM conferences, and six *WHIMSY* yearbooks, with each conference becoming larger and more international than the previous one.

Our conferences became truly international and included delegations of humor scholars from several different countries. One of the most active supporters of our humor conferences was James Boren from Oklahoma. His brother, David Boren, who had been both the President of the University of Oklahoma and the Governor of Oklahoma, and was at the time a US Senator from Oklahoma, was instrumental in arranging funding for a delegation of humor scholars to come from Russia to attend our 1987 conference.

There were many humorous – or maybe not-so-humorous – events connected to this endeavor. About a month before the conference, FBI agents even came to our house to interview us about our intentions and to inform us that the editor of the Russian humor magazine, *Krokodil*, could not attend because our university was within twenty miles of Williams Field, which at that time was a major military airport. They explained that Russia also had a twenty-mile limit on keeping America's high government officials away from military airports. Of course, we were sad to have to report this to our Russian visitors, but the

editor happily turned over his designated spot to his son, so at least *Krokodil* was represented.

The excitement connected to our having a Russian delegation spread throughout the world of “humor scholars,” so that several other humor scholars from various countries paid their own way and came to our conference. ASU faculty and staff members hosted these international visitors in their homes so that they would not have to pay hotel bills in addition to their airfare. We still meet people on campus – ranging from Department secretaries to high-level administrators – who remind us of how they helped us out at our grand conference finale.

One of the attendees was Stefan Furtounov, the Director of the “House of Humour and Satire” in Gabrovo, Bulgaria. We were alarmed on the second day of the conference when we couldn’t find him, but then we learned that he had snuck off just for one day so he could see Disneyland in California. He was back in plenty of time for the last day of the conference. A couple of years after we had retired from our annual WHIMSY conferences, we traveled to Bulgaria so that we could see Furtounov’s truly outstanding Museum of Humor. We still remember being surprised to see a crocheted cannon with a drooping gun barrel and an artistic sculpture of our Statue of Liberty sinking into the ocean. The delightful interpreter who had been assigned to us walked hurriedly past this display without saying anything about it, so we tried not to be too obvious in the way we stared.

After hosting six WHIMSY conferences, we put out the word that we had used up every favor that anyone at our University owed us and so we asked for a volunteer to take over the 1988 conference. Victor Raskin and Shaun Hughes from Purdue University offered to host the 1988 conference, where plans would be drawn up for the future of the organization. As usual, it was scheduled for the April Fools’ Day weekend, but at the business meeting the first item on the agenda was to make a new rule stating that whatever university hosted the conference could choose the date that would make the most sense for the host university, as well as for potential attendees. It was a unanimous decision because in 1988, April Fools’ Day in Indiana had been cold, windy, and snowy. Besides it conflicted with Passover celebrations for the many Jewish comedians and scholars who were active in ISHS.

Happily, the volunteer hosts for the 1989 conference turned out to be Margaret Baker and Jesse Crisler from Brigham Young University in Hawaii. At this conference in Hawaii, real business was conducted and plans were made for the publication of a refereed journal to replace the *Whimsy* conference proceedings. It would be named *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, and would be published on a quarterly basis. Victor Raskin, who with Shaun Hughes had co-chaired the 1988 Humor Conference at Purdue University, happily distributed their book of “concretes,” which they had entitled *At Last, The Last WHIMSY VII*.

Victor Raskin deserves a huge thank-you for being the founding editor of the new journal. He was followed by Giseline Kuipers, Salvatore Attardo, and Thomas Ford. This highly respected *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research* is now in its thirty-first year of publication. The success of the journal and the rotation of the annual conferences between inside and outside of North America fully established humor as a respected field of study and research.

Between 1989 and 2011, we attended all of the International Society of Humor Conferences except for the ones in Spain and in Hong Kong. The conference chairs were as follows:

- 1989: Margaret Baker and Jesse Crisler of BYU–Hawaii
- 1990: Mark Glazer of the University of Sheffield, UK
- 1991: Ann-Marie Guilmette of Brock University, Canada
- 1992: Judith Stora-Sandor and Nelly Feuerhahn of the Sorbonne, France
- 1993: Larry Sherman of Miami University (the conference was in Luxembourg)
- 1994: Mary Ann Rishel of Ithaca College, New York
- 1995: George Paton of Aston University, UK
- 1996: Jessica Milner Davis and John McCallum of the University of New South Wales, Australia
- 1997: Amy Carrell of the University of Central Oklahoma
- 1998: Sven Svebak of Norwegian University of Science and Technology
- 1999: Martin Lampert of Holy Names College, Oakland, California
- 2000: Hiroshi Inoue of Kansai University, and Goh Abe of Tokushima Bunri University, Japan
- 2001: Larry Mintz of the University of Maryland, College Park
- 2002: Delia Chiaro of the University of Bologna, Italy
- 2003: Judith Kaplan-Weinger and Richard Hallett of Northeastern Illinois University
- 2004: Lorene Birden of the University of Bourgogne, France
- 2005: Salvatore Attardo of Youngstown State University, Ohio
- 2006: Martin Führ of Danish University of Education, Copenhagen, Denmark
- 2007: Margaret Mathias of Salve Regina University, Rhode Island
- 2008: Juan Garcia Cerrada, Carmen Valero-Carces and Begona Carbelo Baquero of the University of Alcalá, Spain
- 2009: Amy Bippus of California State University, Long Beach, California
- 2010: Xiaodong Yue of City University of Hong Kong
- 2011: Patrice Oppliger of Boston University, Massachusetts.

Although we felt too old to travel to the subsequent ISHS conferences between 2012 and 2018, we are nevertheless indebted to these conference chairs and have appreciated interacting with them and reading many of their papers in the *Humor* journal. These recent conference chairs include:

- 2012: Wladyslaw Chlopicki of Jagiellonian University, Poland  
 2013: Larry Ventis of the College of William and Mary, Virginia  
 2014: Sibe Doosje of the University of Utrecht, Netherlands  
 2015: Martin Lampert of Holy Names University, California  
 2016: Eric Weitz of Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland  
 2017: Jean-Marie Lafortune of the University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada  
 2018: Liisi Laineste of Estonian Literary Museum in Tallinn, Estonia.

In addition to these conference chairs, members of the International Society for Humor Studies who have had a profound effect on our humor insights include Larry Barron, Samy Basu, Ursula Beerman, Janet Bing, Hugo Carretero Dios, Wallace Chafe, Christie Davies, Peter Derks, Jeffrey Goldstein, Paul and Robin Grawe, Gil Greengross, Christian Hempelmann, Helga Kotthoff, Nick Kuiper, Paul Lewis, Robert Mankoff, Moira Marsh, Rod Martin, John Morreall, Neal Norrick, Elliott Oring, John Parkin, Diana Popa, Rene Proyer, Graeme Ritchie, Willibald Ruch, Elaine Safer, Andrea Samson, Limor Shifman, Moira Smith, Julia Taylor, and Villy Tsakona. Please forgive us if we have accidentally left out other names.

We have also appreciated working with The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (AATH). Members who have been especially helpful in sharing information and ideas with us include Maia Aziz, Don Baird, Karyn Buxman, Kay Caskey, Lenny Dave, Ed Dunkelblau, Brenda Elsagher, Barbara Grapstein, Guy Giard, Heidi Hanna, Sporty King, Allen Klein, Jill Knox, Chip Lutz, Paul Moore, Mary Kay Morrison, Melissa Mork, Nila Nielsen, Jae Pierce-Baba, Katherine Puckett, Steven Sultanoff, Shirley Trout, Steve Wilson, and Laurie Young.

We also want to thank the American Name Society, whose members have interacted with us on various aspects of humorous onomastics. People who come immediately to mind include Ernest Abel, Herbert Barry, Bruce Brown, Catherine Davies, Christine De Vinne, Cleveland Evans, Ed Lawson, Carol Lombard, Michael McGoff, Michel Nguessan, Frank Nuessel, Andre LaPierre, Willy Van Langendonck, Lynn Westney, Kemp Williams, and Sandra Wright.

We also want to express our appreciation to our friends at Arizona State University who, after we had officially retired in 2011, made it possible for us to teach three courses entitled “Humor across the Disciplines” in the ASU English Department, and two similar courses in the ASU Honors College. The names of ASU linguists that come immediately to mind include Karen Adams, Jean Arnold, Dawn Bates, Betsy Brandt, Lee Croft, Aryeh Faltz, Sandra Griffiths-Nagy, Mark James, Robert LaBarge, Neal Lester, Ruby Macksoud, Roy Major, Alberto Rios, Maureen Schmid, Lupco Spasovski, Suzanne Steadman, Gene and Kristin Valentine, Elly Van Gelderen, and Timothy Wong.

We would also like to thank NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English), and ALAN (Adolescent Literature Assembly at NCTE) for their support in providing us with information about humorous young adult novels and the effect they have on students in both elementary and high schools. Our special thanks go to Lisa Arter, Joan Bauer, Jean Boreen, April Brannon, Patty Campbell, Orson Scott Card, Pam Cole, Beverly Chin, Darren Crovitz, Chris Crowe, Anjanette Darrington, Jessica Early, Don Gallo, Jack Gantos, David Gill, Bryan Gillis, Wendy Glenn, Corrine Gordon, Jeffrey Kaplan, Joan Kaywell, Teri Lesesne, Aaron Levy, Katie Mason, David Pegram, Christina Saily, Tim San Pedro, Carol Smith, Diane Tuccillo, Arturo Valdespino, Elle Wolterbeek, Mary Wong, Connie Zitlow, and especially Jim Blasingame. In the *English Journal's* "Honor List of the Best Books" for young readers, many of the books (both fiction and non-fiction) are filled with elements of humor, irony, satire, parody, paradox, innuendo, and language play. We also need to express our appreciation to the ASU Emeritus College, and ASURA for their support of our humor investigations, especially Per Aannestad, Jay Braun, Elmer Gooding, Dick Jacob, Jo Madonna, Larry Mankin, Barry McNeill, Jeri Meeks, Tara Fuchs Roessler, David Schwalm, Mary Stevens, Linda Van Scoy, and Bill Verdini.

Since our retirement from ASU's English Department in 2011, we have been giving presentations related to humor across the disciplines at various retirement communities throughout the state of Arizona. We thank the Arizona Humanities Council for arranging our presentations in Arizona cities that range from the old frontier mining town of Bisbee to some of the newest senior citizen communities in places like Scottsdale and Sun City. We also want to thank various senior educational groups including *New Adventures* (Jan Bobbett, Eileen Holmes, Ed Schauble, and Wayne Wright), *New Frontiers* (Ann Bloxam, Con Downey, Bob Dukelow, Gary Kleeman, Shiela and Archie Millhollon, Jennifer Wong), *Sagewood* (Warner and Ruth Davidson and Norman and Rose Levine), *Osher* (Karla Burkhart, Brandy Daley, and Richard Knopf), and *Stonegate* (Jane Picoult), for allowing us to make and share PowerPoint presentations about various aspects of humor studies as we interact with senior citizens about the powers and limitations of humor.