

PAPER

GLOBAL CONCEPTS IN THE STUDY OF THE LAUGHTER PHENOMENON AND THEIR APPLICATION IN AMERICAN AND UZBEK FOLKLORE

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Abstract

Laughter and the joke are among the oldest expressions of human culture. They reflect the social, psychological, and aesthetic layers of human thought. This article analyzes the main scholarly approaches and theories used in the study of jokes within American folklore. It highlights the differences between the literary-genre interpretation of the joke in Uzbek folklore studies and the social-functional approach developed in American folklore. In contemporary folkloristics, three major theories are widely applied to the study of jokes: Relief Theory, Incongruity Theory, and Superiority Theory. These theories were formed on an international scale and later developed extensively within American folklore studies. Although these theories are not fully established as formal terminology in Uzbek folkloristics, they are used in terms of their conceptual content.

Key words: joke, American folklore, humor, social function, Relief Theory, Incongruity Theory, Superiority Theory, folkloristics.

A joke is one of the oldest and at the same time the most vibrant genres of folk oral creativity. It embodies the life philosophy of the people, their social relations, their worldview expressed through laughter, and their aesthetic values. In jokes, the people’s life experience, wit, and thoughts rich in irony and satire are reflected in a distinct artistic form.

In Uzbek folkloristics, the joke is studied as an independent genre, with research focusing on its

compositional structure, system of characters, and the logical punchline that forms its culmination (Karimov, 2016, p. 42). In American folklore studies, however, the joke (“joke,” “humorous anecdote”) is not viewed as an independent genre, but rather as an expressive form within verbal folklore (Dundes, 1980, p. 23). Researchers examine jokes within cultural, social, and psychological contexts, emphasizing the cause and function of laughter. Therefore, American folkloristics

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interprets the joke as a functional phenomenon, placing emphasis not on the question “What do people laugh at?” but rather “Why do they laugh?” It is important to note that the scientific study of laughter and jokes developed within several distinct intellectual traditions. While Uzbek folkloristics primarily focuses on the genre structure, narrative composition, and artistic nature of the joke, Western—especially American—scholarship tends to analyze humor through philosophical, psychological, and functional frameworks. As a result, the interpretation of jokes in American folklore is closely tied to broader theoretical discussions about how and why laughter emerges. Over the course of the 18th–20th centuries, scholars in philosophy, psychology, and anthropology proposed various explanations for the mechanisms of humor, eventually giving rise to three fundamental theories that shaped modern humor studies: Relief Theory, Incongruity Theory, and Superiority Theory. These theories, though originating in European intellectual history, later became central analytic models in American folkloristics, where jokes are viewed not merely as verbal narratives but as cultural and social acts that reveal human cognition, emotion, and social relations.

1. Relief Theory Relief Theory first emerged within nineteenth-century European psychology. It is based on the views of psychoanalytic scholars such as Sigmund Freud and Herbert Spencer. The English philosopher Herbert Spencer, in his 1860 article *On the Physiology of Laughter*, interpreted laughter as “the release of surplus nervous energy” (Spencer, 1860). Later, Sigmund Freud further developed this idea and, in his well-known work *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), explained laughter as a mechanism for releasing psychological pressure. According to Freud, “laughter allows the discharge of psychic energy constrained by social prohibitions” (Freud, 1905, pp. 229–245). Freud (1905) also describes laughter as “a mode of releasing repressed emotions within the human mind” (Freud, 1960, p. 65).

According to this view, a joke alleviates accumulated psychological tension. This is especially evident in humorous stories dealing with political or sexual topics. For example, in American political jokes, people express internal

dissatisfaction by laughing at the government or political elite (Davies, 1990, p. 112). This process provides psychological relief and helps restore social balance.

In American folklore studies, this theory was applied practically by Alan Dundes. He interpreted jokes as “a communicative mechanism that relieves social stress through humor” (*Cracking Jokes*, Dundes, 1987, pp. 14–27). In his view, political, sexual, or occupational jokes serve as means of expressing social pressure within a community. As Dundes emphasizes, “jokes serve as pressure valves in society, releasing tensions that cannot be expressed openly” (Dundes, 1980, p. 47).

In Uzbek folklore, this theory is rarely used as a formal term; however, its essence appears in the popular belief that “laughter eases pain.” For example, in Soviet-era humorous cycles such as *Ravshan* and *Jamshid* or *Nasriddin Afandi*, laughter functioned as a humorous response to social constraints and pressures.

2. Incongruity Theory The Incongruity Theory originated in European philosophy. This theory has philosophical roots and was initially developed by Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer. According to their views, laughter emerges from unexpected incongruity—that is, from the mismatch between the flow of events and the resulting outcome (Oring, 1992, p. 15). Specifically, Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), writes that “laughter is an emotional conflict arising from an unexpected transformation” (§54). Likewise, Arthur Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation* (1819), states that “laughter results from the incongruity between an abstract concept and the real situation” (Schopenhauer, 1819, Vol. II, pp. 112–116).

Elliott Oring expands this theory within the context of modern folklore studies, emphasizing that the source of humor lies in “the violation of the audience’s cognitive expectations” (Oring, 1992, p. 27). The punch line of a joke reverses the expected logic, creating incongruity. This generates a state of “cognitive surprise,” which triggers laughter.

For instance, classic “light bulb jokes” or simple “knock-knock jokes” rely on unexpected, illogical answers that evoke a sense of incongruity in the audience. For this reason, Oring describes the joke as “incongruity made verbal” (Oring, 1992, p.

33). This phenomenon is also observed in Uzbek folklore. Jokes often contain an unexpected ending, a semantic twist, or a reversed situation—for example, the logical paradoxes found in Afandi tales. This indicates that Uzbek humor culture, too, is fundamentally grounded in the mechanism of incongruity.

3. Superiority Theory The Superiority Theory is one of the earliest conceptions of humor, with roots tracing back to ancient Greek philosophy. This theory has a classical philosophical foundation: Plato and Aristotle interpreted laughter as a feeling of superiority over someone else. Thomas Hobbes later described laughter as a form of “sudden glory,” meaning “a sudden feeling of triumph or superiority” (Davies, 1990, p. 76).

This approach is widely applied in American folklore studies, particularly in the analysis of ethnic and political jokes. For example, Christie Davies, in his work *Ethnic Humor Around the World* (1990), analyzes ethnic jokes across various cultures and demonstrates that they all rely on the listener’s sense of being “superior to the other” (Davies, 1990, pp. 19–31).

Jokes such as “blonde jokes,” “redneck jokes,” or other ethnic jokes allow the audience to feel superior to the target of the humor. This plays an important role in shaping social identity and reinforcing “us versus them” dynamics (Dundes, 1980, p. 52). A similar mechanism exists in Uzbek folklore. For example, in jokes that begin with phrases like “A Kazakh, a Tajik, and an Uzbek met...,” humor not only expresses national identity but also creates a sense of social superiority. Essentially, such jokes represent a humorous form of evaluating one’s own group in comparison with others.

Conclusion

In American folklore studies, the analysis of jokes focuses primarily not on their artistic structure or compositional form, but on their social, cultural, and psychological functions within society. This approach allows the joke to be viewed not only as an aesthetic text, but also as an expression of various social tensions, roles, stereotypes, and subconscious processes.

The three major theories analyzed — Relief Theory, Incongruity Theory, and Superiority Theory — are among the most widely used scholarly

paradigms for explaining the phenomenon of humor in international folkloristics. Relief Theory demonstrates how humor functions as a mechanism for releasing repressed psychological energy, interpreting jokes as tools for alleviating inner tension. Incongruity Theory explains humor through the cognitive dissonance between the audience’s expectations and the actual outcome. Superiority Theory interprets humor as an expression of social dominance, a way of placing oneself “above others,” or a mechanism that reinforces social hierarchies.

Although these theories originally emerged within European philosophy, psychology, and aesthetics, American folkloristics expanded them by integrating insights from cultural anthropology, sociology, and communication studies. As a result, the study of jokes shifted from the question “How does society laugh?” to “Why does society laugh?” While these theories are not commonly used as explicit terminology in Uzbek folkloristics, their underlying mechanisms are clearly observable in the culture of humor. Afandi anecdotes, Soviet-era satirical jokes, and contemporary popular humor rely on unexpected twists, the release of social pressure, or superiority dynamics based on the “we–they” model. This illustrates that Uzbek humor is deeply rooted in the national psyche, social environment, and historical experience.

From this perspective, the key difference between the Uzbek and American scholarly traditions is that:

Uzbek folkloristics tends to view the joke as a literary genre and compositional unit,

whereas American folkloristics interprets it as a socio-psychological phenomenon.

Both approaches contribute to a fuller understanding of the multifaceted nature of humor — aesthetic, psychological, social, and cultural. Ultimately, humor is a universal human need that plays an essential role in restoring internal balance, reevaluating stereotypes, strengthening social self-awareness, and expressing cultural experience (Dundes, 1987).

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