

TOGETHER OR APART: TARGETING, OFFENCE AND GROUP DYNAMICS IN HUMOUR

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Abstract:

Choosing what (not) to laugh about, when, where and with whom to do so are crucial questions to the pragmatics of humorous interaction. The topic of a joke, the target it is aimed at and the situation in which it is told may jeopardise comic success by causing offence or just by being deemed inappropriate. Issues of permissibility bear on such notions as respect, courtesy and political correctness. Yet, it is humour's very prerogative to break rules and be incorrect, while one of the best laughing triggers is the release from social and moral tensions.

In this paper, I intend to discuss the ways in which politically incorrect jokes freely make use of tabooed topics and target frequently discriminated groups, all the while prompting responses of either approval or rejection that depend on each hearer's ideological and/or personal standpoints. Thus, I will hopefully make clear the dually unifying and divisive role of humour, causing in-group cohesion and out-group ostracism. By analysing cases ranging from sexism through racism to ageism, I expect to assess how far humour is, after all, allowed to go, and at what price.

Keywords: Humour; Disparagement; Offence; Targeting; Politically incorrect jokes.