

Time Limitation Theory (TLT) as the Basis for Humor Creation

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Abstract

In this article, I suggest a new theoretical approach according to which the basis for the creation of humor lies in our life expectancy. Over the span of their lives, most human beings endeavor to achieve goals of one kind or another, both big and small, long and short term. Yet, because our life expectancy is limited, we have to divide our time into various activities that we want or need or are required to do. Sometimes consciously, but often not, we form a sense of the portion of our time that is appropriate for each of our daily activities, whether eating, dressing, going to work or watching a movie. Many of these activities are common across societies, though there are obviously cultural differences, and they may differ not only in the content of the activity but also in the time allocated to each. These are then situated at some level of the mind in socially and individually determined time frameworks which constitute the basic temporal **model** according to which we feel we are supposed to act. The performance of an activity in a time period in accordance with this model is perceived as the **norm**; a significant deviation is considered a breach of the norm, an unusual situation. It is incongruous, then, and could be seen as a particular, temporal, manifestation of the incongruity that has long been identified at the core of humor. I will argue here, however, that incongruity itself, because it intrudes upon our experience of time, may be perceived as either time-consuming or a “stitch in time”, time-saving; in other words, incongruity itself is a phenomenon that may be explicated in terms of our temporal framework. In this article, then, I will suggest that what I call **Time Limitation Theory (TLT)** does not contradict the dominant theories within the study of humor, but constitutes a possible new infrastructure for these theories that reflects the growing awareness that human existence and consciousness are essentially temporal.

Keywords: Life expectancy, Time, Humor theory, Comedy, Laughter

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The Human Experience of Time

Augustine wrote, "What is Time? If no one asks me about it, I know; if I want to explain it to the one who asks, I don't know". Augustine suggested that we all possess an internal sense of time, that it is very much personal, and consequently can't be delivered or explained readily to another person. (Augustine, 2008: 2). Innumerable studies have dealt with time across domains such as philosophy, psychology, biology, physics and history. So time is an interdisciplinary issue and has a long history, from Plato and Aristotle, through Einstein and Bergson. It was the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander (600 BCE) who apparently was the first among the ancient Greeks to refer to the idea of time, in his treatise *On Nature*. Only a fragment of that is left, being quoted by the doxographer Simplicius in the sixth century. Anaximander speaks of a **common nature** of all things, from which they come into being and into which they disappear again. This process of birth and destruction is measured by **necessity** or by **the assessment of Time** (Kirk & Raven, 1971; 119).

There are, of course, different ways of perceiving and articulating time, such as relative time, personal time or objective time. Personal time concerns not only the development of processes of technical and scientific time-keeping, but also various kinds of personal, human temporal processes: genetic time, biological time, perceptual time, psychological time, and sociocultural time. (Bruneau, 2012) Many studies relate time to space.

Einstein's special theory of relativity changed the notion of space, energy and time, so that time is perceived as relative and time and space should be considered together and in relation to each other. (See, Durie, 1999: xvii). The connection between time and space has been studied extensively in areas such as philosophy, psychology and linguistics. Yet many questions remain about the nature of this connection: "one can argue that they are autonomous conceptual domains that derive from a generalized representational template. But the conceptual domain of time achieves much of its meaning and coherence from our basic perceptual, motor, and kinesthetic experiences in the physical world" (Matlock et al., 2011).

Time has assumed a central place in modern philosophy, especially since Nietzsche (1999) noted the complexity of time and suggested that every human being born symbolizes the future but incorporates in him the past, being an extension of his ancestors that gave birth to him. Bergson draws a distinction between the duration in which we act, and the duration in which we see ourselves acting, a duration whose elements are dissociated and juxtaposed. The former is the energy and the latter is the matter, and what unifies duration is our sense of temporality. Our past remains part of the present as desire, will and action, although only what is useful enters consciousness in any one perception. (Olkowski 2010, see also Patomäki, 2011,). Husserl states that only human beings make time by sifting the fragmentary dynamics of experience through the reflexive unity of consciousness. The awareness of temporality requires the reduction of **objective time**. From this point of view, there is no objective standard of measuring time. All of the means of determination belonging to natural science like clocks, calendars are excluded (Husserl, 1964; 60, 1991; 350). Heidegger builds upon Nietzsche, Bergson and Husserl, claiming that to be human is to be self-conscious, where lies the primordial feeling of duration, and that human beings have an essentially temporal character (Heidegger, 1962; 2). In the phenomenological tradition, Merleau-Ponty claims that "we have been forced to recognize that spatial perception is a structural phenomenon and is comprehensible only within a perceptual field in which we are anchored through our commitments past, present and future" (Olkowski 2010, See also Du Nouy 1937; 126).

The list of studies concerning time in its different aspects and across scholarly fields is very large. But very few studies have connected time to humor theoretically. When they do so, it is usually done with a focus on laughter rather than on the explication of the nature of humor. Hobbes claimed that "Sudden glory is the passion which makes those grimaces called Laughter" (Hobbes,1997; 125). Kant suggested that "Laughter results from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing." Both of them emphasize the suddenness of the process (Kant, 1942; 149-151, Sover, 2009, 30-32, see also Spencer, 1868; 195-203). Weeks (2002; 2010) suggests that laughter has a

transcendental aspect, “the sound of a hole being torn in the fabric of subjective time,” and calls it a “time out.”

Connecting Time and Humor

In this article, I relate time not simply to the laughter response but to humor creation. I want to suggest a new theoretical approach according to which the basis for the creation of humor lies in our life expectancy.

From the moment we are born our internal biological clock starts to work. It is a linear clock that runs forward and takes us to a future that is limited in time (see Flaherty, 1999: 12-15). Everyone has their own biological clock, based on genetic and environmental influences, which is the key factor determining their life expectancy. Over the span of their lives, most human beings endeavor to achieve goals of one kind or another, both big and small, long and short term. Yet, because our life expectancy is limited, we have to divide our time into various activities that we want or need or are required to do. Sometimes consciously, but often not, we form a sense of the portion of our time that is appropriate for each of our daily activities, whether eating, dressing, going to work or watching a movie. Many of these activities are common across societies, though there are obviously cultural differences, and they may differ not only in the content of the activity but also in the time allocated to each. These are then situated at some level of the mind in socially and individually determined time frameworks which constitute the basic temporal **model** according to which we feel we are supposed to act. The performance of an activity in a time period which is in accordance with this model is perceived as the **norm**; a significant deviation is considered a breach of the norm, an unusual situation.

We live in several territories simultaneously, such as the physical, social, cultural and technological. But from the point of view of the individual, I wish to argue, the framework through which each of these is experienced is the **life expectancy territory**; it is in a sense the infrastructure of all the others. The life expectancy territory shapes the content and significance of all the various activities in each territory for the person, as well as the time division model in each.

As our life expectancy territory is limited, we are generally interested in the optimal utilization of our time—hence the saying "time is money", meaning that since we do not have unlimited time it is a finite resource that needs to be husbanded (see Mooij 2012). Therefore, all of our activities are time-based. Any activity such as eating, drinking, or shopping at the supermarket, is expected to be of certain duration. An activity taking more time or less time is regarded as inappropriate. Thus, we might suppose that there is a reasonable time range for each activity we perform, the basis of what I term the **"time range model"**. The duration of any activity under or above the time range model will be perceived as a deviation and therefore unusual. As we are well aware, the **unusual**, the incongruous, is the basic condition for the creation of a humorous situation (although not every unusual situation is necessarily perceived as humorous). The **time model** applies, in fact, not only to actions or activities but to every aspect of our life. People often use spatial metaphors to describe time, especially metaphors related to motion. They refer to time in terms of moving quickly or slowly, as in *"Spring break raced by"* or *"The weekend is taking forever to arrive."* They ascribe time the characteristic of moving in a forward or backward direction, as in *"Let's move the meeting forward to September"* or *"The party was pushed back two hours"* (Matlock et al., 2011). What this reveals is that somewhat like the universe as the theory of relativity conceives it, and perhaps in accordance with that "reality", our temporal and spatial conceptions of the world do not function wholly independently; they inform each other. We tend to spatialize time (as Bergson most famously noted) and we temporalize space. It is the former that has us think of the flow of time, sometimes, in terms of bigger or smaller "blocks" of time—that is, as bricks in the larger structure that is our life—and then assess whether the time spent on a certain task or in a certain condition represents an appropriate proportion (proportion being an essentially spatial term) or an inappropriate or unusual proportion.

Time and Humor Creation

Imagine that you are invited to a concert one evening, and the concert concludes five minutes after it began. This would seem unusual and might be perceived as comic.

Conversely, you've probably had an opportunity to observe a street performance in which a mime holds a fixed position for a long time without moving, as if s/he were a statue. At a certain point the audience starts to laugh. There is a moment at which the mime's lack of movement exceeds the observer's time range model. In the film *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp*, the comedian Harry Langdon acts out such a comic scene. He gazes straight into the camera, continues gazing, casts his eyes to the left and to the right, then again gazes forward, and so on, thereby expressing his inability to decide his next step. At a certain point the theater audience will burst out in laughter.

Creators of comedy for cinema, television, and theater understand well how to use the concept of time limitation as a basis for creating comic situations. For example, in his film *The Great Dictator*, Charlie Chaplin plays Hitler. He hastily enters a room in which a painter and sculptor are waiting for him. One is painting his portrait, the other is sculpting a statue of him. Charlie stands still for a split second, says "enough", and exits. During that period of time the painter and sculptor were supposed to make discernable progress. From the audience's perspective, Charlie had entered the room for a fraction of moment for the purpose of an activity that we know requires much more time. The miniscule amount of time that Charlie devotes to the activity creates a particularly large, and comic, gap between our expectation and the outcome in practice, and this of course is very funny.

In his film *The Cameraman*, Buster Keaton creates a gag on a similar basis. He is speaking by phone with a young woman and they agree to meet. Keaton is so thrilled that even before the conversation concludes he abandons the phone and rushes to the woman's home with lightning speed. She continues speaking to him on the phone and by the time she notices that there is no answer on the other end of the line, he is already standing behind her. Another clear example is the virtuoso meal scene in the play *Servant of Two Masters* by Goldoni. The number of activities that Arlecchino carries out in a short amount of time in order to satisfy the culinary needs of his two masters is unusual and comic. Likewise, in Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, the wait for Godot is apparently infinite. Each of these sites of potential humor involves judgments

concerning a departure from a preconceived appropriate time range. I say these are *potentially* funny because humor does not exist independently of its context, nor of the person who experiences the humorous event or situation, so allow me to briefly deal with that issue of contextual variation.

Humor is a shadow that accompanies human activity, just as the human shadow does not exist without the human being. Humor is a virtual state, a perception of the world, although it can also become a way of living, a philosophically comic disposition. Humor also depends very much on the personality and culture of the individual who perceives it. What one person perceives as a humorous situation will not necessarily be perceived as such by someone else. What is perceived as humor in one cultural setting will not necessarily be perceived as humorous in a different one. In order to attribute social characteristics to humor it should be assessed at three cultural levels: the **global level**, the **local or community level**, and the **personal level**. At the global level there exist shared codes of humor that touch upon all aspects of life. Global humor indicates the existence of a shared cultural foundation on the one hand, while serving as a means to critique that culture on the other. At the local or community level, humor depends on local cultural characteristics: the nation, ethnic group, or community. At the personal level, an individual interprets humor in accordance with the shared values of the local and global culture as well as his own personality. Ultimately an individual designs his own codes of humor, characteristic to him. The territories in which we live – such as technological, social, physical, and climatic, and I would suggest foremost among them the **life expectancy territory** – create a variety of norms among people and, therefore, create various time range models as well. The number of activities undertaken by a member of a western society with abundant technology differs from the number of activities undertaken by a member of an agricultural society without technology (see Robinson & Godbey, 1997: 11-42, 287-302). The number of activities that a Bedouin in the Sinai Desert undertakes throughout his life, differs from the number of activities undertaken by an Israeli living in Tel Aviv, a Pole in Krakow, or an American in New York. The number of activities that an Eskimo in the North Pole undertakes during his life

differs from the number of activities undertaken by someone living in Paris or London. This influences not only the number of activities but also additional characteristics, such as the quality and duration of the activity. Our life's clock is a function of these territories, and their influence is felt, among other ways, in the number of activities that a person undertakes during his life and in the ideal duration associated, generally unconsciously, with each and every activity. As a result there are differences among human beings with respect to perceptions of humor.

The potential for humor attaches to every characteristic of an activity. If there is a deviation from one of the characteristics, then it becomes unusual and potentially humorous. This deviation is in relation to the norms of the person laughing or the society that finds it funny. The same norm is derived from the limitation of life expectancy and the division of limited time. It follows that what amuses someone living according to a particular time division might not amuse someone else who lives according to a different division of time. For an Indian to practice yoga for a month might seem perfectly natural to Indians. An Israeli observing this practice would "go crazy" after five minutes. An Italian observer would be certain that the yogi has been dead for a month.

In accordance with the changed perception of human time, the perception of humor has also changed. Humor, the virtual shadow of the human being, attaches to the central component of the human endeavor, which is **the optimal utilization of time**. Deviation from the optimal utilization of time – the model time – is perceived as unusual and as a basis for creating humor. What is funny about a person slipping on a banana peel in the street and falling on his behind? People who observe him walking will laugh the moment he slips and falls. Why do they laugh? They laugh because that person disrupted their model of a walking person. In this case, there was a person who was expected to carry out a simple activity as per expectations, but the activity was disrupted. In our assessment of time, there was an event that disrupted the optimal utilization of time for walking. This activity wasted some of our precious and limited life expectancy.

The same principle applies to verbal humor. Verbal humor that is based on the disruption of a spoken or a written word or sentence represents a deviation from the norm of the optimal utilization of time. Jokes that are based on a double meaning or, as Koestler (1964: 44-45, 55-67) terms it **bisociation**, save time within our timeframe. Rather than grasping one consistent and expected meaning within a specific unit of time, we simultaneously grasp two meanings. Thus we have acquired more meaningful information within a shorter amount of time. Here too, our time model has been disrupted.

Let's take another example that tackles the time mechanism from a different point of view. Walking on the street, we see identical twins and it makes us laugh. The reason that we laugh now is that the perceived reality of twins looks unusual to us. Because of the rarity of such a phenomenon, we did not have a readily accessible, compatible model in our mind. At that moment we need to build or at least locate a temporal model so that we can adapt ourselves to the new reality.² To achieve this goal we need to invest energy and it takes time. This time the "unusual" forces us to invest more time and energy. The unusual causes us a time-based tension that is released by laughter. Our laughter indicates that we are in the middle of a process of adapting to the unusual. The same process happens when we perceive any situation that is rare and doesn't fit any of our models, for example one hundred pregnant women walking on the street, ten dogs with the same shape and color, or seven men with the same haircut.

What I am suggesting is that humor is a cognitive effect in which we are warned about an unusual activity that disrupts our ideal timeframe. In fact, when an unusual situation is created by another human, at that moment, the person who grasps the humor and laughs is functioning on two different levels: on the first one, he examines the perceived unusual situation and assesses it in terms of his cognitive timeframe, resulting in laughter; on the other level, the same laughter signals to the person who created the

² We use to creat temporal model as a normal process in order to adapt ourselves to unusual situations and new information that we are exposed to, sometimes on a daily basis.

unusual that his activity was wrong or at least at odds with the timeframe of the one who laughs.

The Way Humor Works

In any comic situation we will find one or more of the following elements of optimal time utilization: **direction, objective, and invested effort**. Humor will attach to one or more of these elements and make the unusual situation comic. A person walking down the street who, due to lack of attention, bumps into an electricity pole has involuntarily deviated from his objective, and some of the effort that he invested towards this objective is wasted.

In his film *It's a Gift*, the comedian W.C. Fields and his family set out on a long trip. They get into their overloaded car. They say goodbye to all the neighbors standing by their car. Fields starts the car, and there are more waves of goodbye to the neighbors. The car begins to move, then stops after two meters. The car breaks down and the movie theater audience typically bursts out laughing. In this case the direction of travel was correct, and the objective was clear—a vacation trip. Yet the result achieved—a two-meter drive—is, in relation to the invested effort, unusual and comic. In his film *take the Money and Run*, Woody Allen portrays an unsuccessful cellist who says, “They asked me who Mozart is. I thought about it for an hour but didn’t know who he is.” The period of time – the “hour” that he needed to think about who Mozart is – is the unusual factor in our model, which holds that a cellist should immediately be able to answer who Mozart is. In his film *Seven Chances*, Buster Keaton must get married by 7 p.m. in order to receive a large inheritance. He immediately goes out to the street and proposes to every woman he meets. Here we have a drastic reduction in time relative to our model of how much time should pass in a relationship before one proposes marriage.

Let me provide an example derived not from comic cultural texts. Lions sleep or doze for 18 or more hours during a 24-hour period. Anyone hearing this number for the first time probably marvels over the fact, perceiving it as unusual. Even if we have never previously wondered about the number of hours a lion sleeps, we have models related to human sleep and to sleep generally, and we assess the number we hear accordingly.

A comparison of the lion's hours of sleep to our sleep model makes the former unusual. Will someone that reads this article smile upon reading of this fact? That depends on his models and the nature of his personality. I refer to the gap between our time model and the real time of an activity as a "**comic gap**." The greater the comic gap is, the stronger the laughter is likely to be.

T.L.T. as the Infrastructure of the Major Humor Theories

In the same way that time is an essential part of the infrastructure of human experience, the time limitation theory provides a possible infrastructure for theories that seek to define humor. Time limitation theory, I believe, provides a foundation for the most resilient theoretical concept within humor research, that is, the theory of **incongruity** (Spencer, 1868: 194, 260, Koestler, 1964: 35, Samson & Hempelmann, 2011, Oring, 2011). Incongruity is based on the gap between our model and something perceived as unusual. Every gap or incoherent situation is perceived as a subversion of our time model. There are those who claim that **surprise** is a necessary foundation for the creation of humor. It turns out that the theory of surprise is partially correct and does not apply to all humorous situations. When it does apply, however, it also accords with the time limitation theory. Let us take magic tricks as an example. The magician removes his hat from his head and takes a dove out of it. He taps his magic wand and it turns into a flower. Both cases entail a surprise. This surprise is based on shortening the time model. The transition from hat to dove and from magic wand to flower shortcuts many cognitive processes that we would expect to take place in order to achieve the same results. Each of these processes, if they really took place, would take time. This time was shortened. The shortening of time accords with **time limitation theory**.

Bergson's social theory of humor and laughter, which includes a number of key arguments, also accords with time limitation theory. For example, the **mechanical inelasticity theory**, (*raideur de mecanique*), **double meaning**, and **repetition**, all have at their foundation the non-optimal utilization of time. Likewise, at the core of Freud's **psychoanalytic theory of humor** is the emotional energy expenditure that is conserved,

and the concepts of conservation and waste derive directly from the optimal utilization of time. Freud claimed that tendentious, aggressive, or sexual jokes entail breaking through inhibitions and circumventing censorship. This circumvention is based on the shortening of time or the multiplicity of information within a unit of time, and that is what makes the joke comic. Let us take the following joke as an example:

The Jewish dignitary Moshe Montefiore was invited to a dinner party in London with ministers, dukes, and the city's dignitaries. An anti-Semitic duke who was sitting next to Montefiore said to him: "Listen, Montefiore, I have just returned from Japan. Such a nice country. I did not see a single pig or Jew there." Montefiore replied: "You know what? We should go there immediately. Then there will be one of each."

If the joke contained only aggression it would not be comic. What makes it comic is that it entails a multiplicity of information. Montefiore's reply to the duke includes sentences that he did not voice, namely, "Let us now travel to Japan in order to correct the current situation, and then you will be the pig there, and I will be the Jew there." In effect, two sentences are thus compacted into one, an efficiency, which is to say, a saving in time.

Here is another example from Laurel and Hardy's film *Twice Two* that illustrates the existence of verbal efficiency. The following title appears:

"Mr. Hardy was married — Mr. Laurel was also unhappy."

Observe how many hidden sentences are contained in the following statement:

"If only Adam had died with all his ribs in his body."

If we had to voice all the missing sentences in these examples, it would take much more time. Thus we have here an abundance of information and we save time, which Freud, since his theoretical modelling was largely lacking in temporal aspects, would define in terms of conservation of emotional energy.

All the examples given and all those situations that make us laugh can function as humorous because the models through which we interact with our world are naturally important to us and we take them seriously. Such models are the skeleton of our personality, our way of living and understanding the world that surrounds us. That's why we are so sensitive to every minor change that we perceive which doesn't fit our

models. I agree with Kauppinen (2012), who argues that spending time without meaning is a loss of time. From this perspective, while humor flirts with nonsense, it always has to do with meaning. The more you laugh at humorous situations, the more we understand that the humorous subject, from a temporal standpoint, means very much to you.³

Conclusion

Theoretically, we could speculate based on my **time limitation theory** that if we were to live forever humor might not exist, since in that case there would be no need for time-based models and therefore the unusual could not exist. I hope that, in the limited time available to me, I have succeeded conveying the notion that time is fundamental to the creation of humor, as it is to all human experience, and that our life expectancy, from which the **time limitation theory (TLT)** is derived, may be a crucial foundation. Of course, what I have outlined here is just a tentative beginning, a prototype if you like for a new theoretical approach. Establishing more thoroughly the generalizability and practical applicability of this approach will be elaborated through future research and publications.

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³ I am less receptive to another claim by Kauppinen, that "life is ideally meaningful when challenging efforts lead to lasting successes". But this is a topic for discussion elsewhere on what is meaningful and what success means in different cultures.

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