Children's response to humor in translated poetry

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CHAPTER 5

Humor

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the theoretical framework for understanding what individuals in general, and children in particular, find funny. It begins with a discussion of why humor is hard to define, something humor and children's literature have in common. Three theories that explain why people laugh at certain things are then explored. These are the incongruity theory, the relief theory and the superiority theory. These explanatory theories are particularly critical in the analysis of the responses of children to humorous texts. The chapter then takes a closer look at the influence of culture on humor which signals the importance of looking at the collected data through a cultural lens. This is followed by an examination of children's humor from a developmental perspective, particularly among primary school-aged children and children's humor preferences in literary texts, including fiction but especially poetry. This chapter also offers some new concepts that arose from the limitations of existing concepts and theories in explaining humor. For example, it introduces the concept of joyful laughter, a type of laughter that comes from the pleasure derived from generating creative ideas. It also proposes two approaches to explaining humor: humor creation and resolution as a power-balancing act and humor as a form of negotiation in which the recipient can either be a collaborator or an unwilling or hesitant party. Although the design of the present study did not make it possible to investigate these ideas in detail, other researchers may find these concepts useful in their studies of humor.

5.2 Defining humor

Humor is such an essential part of several domains of human life that a world without it is simply unimaginable. Humor, in its many forms, is a universal human trait that is present across cultures. People always find and create something to laugh about and for a multitude of reasons: a funny anecdote in a political speech, children's rhymes that poke fun at adults, shop names made hilarious thanks to puns (there is a bakery in Cebu City, Philippines named Bread Pitt and another in Amsterdam, the Netherlands called Life of Pie). Nevertheless, while laughter is a universal form of human expression, people from different cultures and different backgrounds have different opinions on what is witty, amusing or comical. The funniness of a joke or a gesture also changes over time; we have seen how what is considered taboo has evolved and how what was once considered funny can now cause raised eyebrows instead of bursts of laughter, and vice versa. For example, in India, more female comedians are using curse words and sexual content in their acts which used to be reserved for male comedians. There is still gender bias in what females cannot do or say and even women listeners themselves get offended when such boundaries are crossed. However, the situation appears to be improving for female comedians. Sumukhi Suresh shares in an interview (Sinha 2020) that when she started, there would be 70% men and 30% women in the audience but when she toured in 2019, her audience was 80% women. As Sinha (2020) finds, "female comedians are aggressively pushing the boundaries, challenging biases, breaking the stereotypes and successfully fighting refrains that 'women aren't funny.'" So humor, much like human society, is a complex phenomenon. Everybody laughs but there is no single account of what makes people laugh, or why they even do so. Many philosophers and scholars from a range of disciplines have endeavored to explain the intricacies of humor and its production, perception and types, the main takeaway being that there is no single formula when it comes to humor. Indeed, the study of humor is no laughing matter.

5.2.1 Problems with defining humor

The ability to appreciate humor may be universal (Raskin 1985: 2) and present in all human groups yet it possesses no generic definition. This is a characteristic that humor shares with children's literature. It is easily recognizable (Berlyne 1972 in Ford et al. 2016: 1) and can be identified intuitively yet remains difficult to define (McGhee 1979 in Ford et al. 2016: 1, Davis 2013: 2). In the preceding paragraph, what is humorous, particularly that which elicits laughter, was held to be synonymous with being witty, amusing or comical. Still, there are scholars who have made distinctions between these expressions, viewing wit and humor as just two of eight comic styles (Ruch et al.: 2018) or examining humor and wit separately (Long and Graesser 1988). The question why it is challenging to produce a comprehensive definition that covers all aspects also brings up the issue of how researchers from different fields delineate

the scope of humor investigation. For example, the folklorist or the literary critic looks at "genres" such as the joke, the humorous anecdote and the tall tale while psychologists subcategorize humor based on subject matter such as scatological, aggressive and sexual (Attardo 1994: 4-5). In addition, researchers look at different aspects: comprehension, appreciation, and production (Ruch and Heintz 2019: 2). As such, similar to children's literature, a single definition of humor that is acceptable to all humor scholars has become impossible to reach (Ruch 1998 in Ford et al. 2016: 1).

5.2.1.1 Defining humor according to a physical response

One of the difficulties underlying this task of defining humor has to do with biology. Often, humor is taken as anything that evokes laughter, smiling (Thompson 2014: 683), giggling or mirth. But smiling and spontaneous laughter do not always signal humor appreciation (Szameitat et al. 2009, Chiaro 2012: 17). People laugh for different reasons. They can use laughter as a coping mechanism – to release tension or nervous energy in unpleasant situations. People smile to taunt or hide shame. Smiling and laughter can also accompany a state of surprise, fear or aggression. A study made by Provine (2000) sheds light on what triggers laughter. His findings indicate that, contrary to popular belief, the presence of another person and not the joke serves as the stimulus for laughter, "a social vocalization that binds people together." This is evident with laughter that commonly proceeds statements, rather than jokes, that are hardly funny (e.g., "Where have you been?" or "It was nice meeting you, too"). Joint to the prevalence of non-humorous laughter in human activity is the fact that humor does not always make us laugh. This occurs in cases where someone is the target of the joke, particularly an offensive one, or where a joke or event does amuse – it prompts the reader or hearer to say "That is funny" – but fails to provoke laughter. Likewise, laughter is an unreliable measure of amusement. People may laugh after a joke without grasping the humor to conform to social expectations, maintain interpersonal relationships or avoid embarrassment. For this reason, some theorists have acknowledged that humor may not be followed by smiling or laughter (Pien and Rothbart 1980: 2).

5.2.1.2 Defining humor according to intent

How intent is perceived to factor in the production of humor also divides scholars. There are theorists such as Attardo (1994) and Attardo and his colleagues (2013) whose standard definition of humor calls for a clear intention to elicit amusement, laughter or exhilaration. Such humorous intent can either be successful (there is a humorous effect) or unsuccessful (there is no humorous effect; also called unachieved humor by Vandaele 2002). The intent can be signaled at the beginning, for example, by a change in tone or facial expression in the case of verbal humor. Most of the time, however, it involves a suspension of judgment on the part of the listener, reader or viewer, meaning the intent is

recognizable only after the message has been sent or the action done. But to say that there can be no humor without intent suggests three things. First, this overlooks situations where the intent is missing but has a humorous effect. For other scholars such as Vandaele (2002), this is still a humorous situation even with the absence of intent. Episodes in which humor occurs unexpectedly, that is, when humor is accidental on the part of the producer and only constructed by the recipient (Brock 2016) are in fact quite prevalent; consider, as an illustration, hearing a mispronounced word. Second, in the presence of a clear intent, humor becomes a negotiation. Humor happens when there is an identification of the intent of the producer, which is up to the recipient to accept or reject, and an understanding of the message, which may or may not be interpreted correctly and appreciated depending on individual taste, state of mind, communication skills, level of comprehension along with what is socially and culturally acceptable. The negotiation has a temporal aspect to it and what people find humorous at a particular time can change at another time. When the intent is accepted, the recipient can be considered a collaborator – he or she helped fulfill the intent. When the humorous intent has been evaluated but not accepted, the recipient can either be an unwilling or a hesitant party: the former can be said of someone fully against the intent as in the case of racist jokes while the latter could be someone delaying judgment due to lack of proficiency in the language in which the humorous intent was expressed or to humor that is not safe, the response of other people to which is not yet known. Third, in the case where there is no intention to amuse but a response of amusement is still provoked, humor can be classified as a departure where there is no negotiation between the producer and receiver, and the outcome is determined solely by the receiver as an independent agent.

5.2.1.3 Defining humor according to cognitive processes

Similar to intention, theorists understand mental processes at work in detecting and appreciating humor differently (Pien and Rothbart 1980: 2). Humor comprehension is a high-level cognitive activity (Tian et al. 2017, Kipman et al. 2012) that activates the same areas of the brain used in gaining new insight. It is a problem-solving task (Suls 1972 in Tian et al. 2017) whose primary goal is to reconcile an apparent deviation or unforeseen cause of an irregularity (Kipman et al. 2012). A great deal of work in this area focuses on how the cognitive processing necessary for a humorous experience to happen involves an awareness of incongruities, which results in pleasure similar to what one experiences upon working out a problem or decoding a puzzle (Zigler et al. 1966).

This approach to humor posits that humor results from unmet expectations and mental patterns – a joke is only funny if the predicted outcome does not happen. There is a sudden shift in frame as the recipient not only moves from a serious form of activity to a playful one but also changes mental models to analyze and grasp the humor, particularly the incongruity. Scholars have written about incongruity in humor as early as the 18th century, albeit with seemingly

contradictory stances. For literary critic William Hazlitt, only incongruity is needed to produce humor but for others such as philosopher James Beattie and author Arthur Koestler, the relationship is far more complex (Suls 1983: 40).

For most advocates of the incongruity theory, humor hinges on two conflicting and unexpected ideas that are juxtaposed; however, for Koestler with his theory of bisociation, these ideas must be combined and not merely juxtaposed to create a new product (Suls 1983: 40). Whichever the case, looking at humor perception as a high-intensity mental activity makes the producer of humor an agent of power. This should not be confused with superiority in humor or instances of "put-down" or aggressive humor where the producer sees himself or herself better than others and intends to denigrate the target (a point that will be expounded in the next section). This does not refer either to hierarchical relationships, as in the case of a manager (high position) and an intern (low position). Instead, this refers to a space where by "testing" the cognitive abilities of the viewer, hearer or reader in resolving humor, the producer creates power relations. Failure to comprehend the humor maintains this power status while understanding what is funny equalizes the power status between producer and recipient. Thus, the whole process of humor creation and resolution is a power balancing act.

5.2.2 Defining humor for the study

Considering these varying views and approaches, humor in this research will be defined as a variety of comical phenomena, with or without the intention to amuse, that elicit amusement and that may or may not be followed by smiling or laughter. When it intends to amuse, humor becomes a negotiation between the producer of humor and the receiver; the latter may or may not cooperate to fulfill the intention. In the case of accidental humor, it is an instance of departure where only the receiver, an independent agent, determines the outcome.

5.3 Theories of humor

There are many different explanations about why people laugh at certain things. Humor arises when there are incompatible ideas placed side by side, when negative energy is released or when people feel superior to others. These accounts for the major theories of humor and are referred to in different parts of this chapter. Various scholars relate these concepts to children's humor. McGhee (1979) explains how mental development prepares children for humorous incongruities; Landsberg (1992) points out that in humor, children are able to release their anxieties; and Kappas (1967) and Shannon (1999) identify ridicule and perceived advantages over adults and other children as features of humorous children's literature.

Theories of humor are traditionally classified into three groups: the incon-

gruity theory, the relief or release theory and the superiority theory. Lintott (2016: 347) notes that the incongruity theory focuses on cognitive aspects, the relief theory on physical aspects of comic amusement and the superiority theory on the emotive. Thus, it can be said that they are not direct competitors of each other in explaining humor since they look at different aspects and dimensions.

5.3.1 Incongruity theory

The incongruity theory is the most cited explanation of humor. For McGhee (1979) and Schultz (1976), incongruity-based humor is one of the earliest forms of humor in young children (in Pien and Rothbart 1980: 2). It posits that humor occurs with the unexpected and the incongruous, that people are amused by conflicting and illogical ideas that are put together or when they experience something that goes against how they would typically understand and explain actions or situations. In other words, a situation is humorous because it counters previous experiences and usual cognitive frameworks and earlier expectations (Perks 2012). Immanuel Kant supports this "frustrated expectation" argument and says that laughter comes from the "sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (1951: 54). Consider jokes as an example. The setup establishes an expectation and the punchline serves to surprise, creating humor. In some cases, incongruity has been deemed a deviation from the normal. Ancheta (2017: xxiii), in studying Filipino humor, emphasizes that the Filipino humor known to many is mainly incongruity-based, "functioning as an apprehension of abnormality, in the subjects as well as in the milieu in which we find them, as departure from normalcy, and as valorization of flaw. . . "

The incongruity theory then implies a well-ordered world, that the world works according to specific schemes and patterns, and violating this order results in humor. But how one views order is unique to every person, influenced by many factors such as social status and culture, to name a few. Furthermore, because our concept of order is subjective, so too is what we perceive as incongruous. Thus, what may be incongruous for one person may not be for another, as when one finds a joke predictable and therefore not funny.

Additionally, this implies that incongruity is pleasurable, although the theory does not explain why it is so. This is perhaps one limitation of the incongruity theory. It makes sense why the resolution or understanding of two contradictory concepts should elicit pleasure – it provides new insight or makes us feel clever. But why something that we did not anticipate or goes against our mental patterns can be humorous is unclear. It does not answer why thwarted expectations in the case of humor do not cause disappointment or sadness when this is the usual response to unmet expectations.

Other philosophers and theorists argue that an incongruity by itself does not lead to pleasure. Barber's (2015: 48-49) account is simple: aside from thwarted intentionality, the "upset intentionality" must be found "enjoyable, amusing or evoking laughter" and not sad or unpleasant. Nevertheless, this is not a persuasive argument. What Barber is saying is that humor is produced when the

upset intentionality is humorous and thus begs the question of what constitutes humor. One of the most common arguments against the theory (Marra 2019: 39) is that if what is funny is the unexpected, then why do people still laugh at a joke they heard the second time? The incongruity theory reasons that the punchline of the joke still violates expectations and norms, no matter how many times it has been heard. This is why for Morreall (2009), it is not enough to take incongruity as something unexpected; it must also contradict systems of thought that guide us in evaluating expectations about the consequences of our actions. Still, the theory remains open to criticism and questions. Slapstick humor, in which outcomes are expected (such as someone slipping on a banana peel) is still funny but the incongruity theory fails to address why it is so.

5.3.2 Relief theory

The second theory that explains humor is the relief theory. It takes the view that people experience humor and laugh when positive emotions release pent-up emotions. Laughter relieves mental, nervous or psychic energy, producing homeostasis after tension or strain (Raskin 1985: 38 in Perks 2012: 120). In other words, humor results from the reduction of stress and anxiety.

In *The Physiology of Laughter*, Herbert Spencer, one of the two most prominent relief theorists, claims that this nervous energy "must... discharge itself in some other direction" (1860: 400) and laughter serves to release excessive energy. For Sigmund Freud, another influential relief theorist, such nervous energy is released when tension in events that cause sexual or aggressive energy is suddenly and surprisingly thwarted; what follows is relief in the form of humor (in Hurley et al. 2011). When the person anticipates a situation to be unpleasant but it turns out to be benign, the negative feelings are released (Morreall 2009). Freud claims that there are mental censors that repress certain thoughts and emotions but jokes deceive these censors and allow repressed energy to be released (in Hurley et al. 2011).

In more contemporary work, Morreall (2009: 15-18 in Barber 2015: 47) argues that repressed feelings of hostility flow through laughter when a joke expressing hostility toward another group "overrides" these inner censors. Shurcliff (1968) supports the relief theory using the results of his experiment. He hypothesized that if humor results from reduced strong affect or arousal, then humor should increase with higher arousal prior to relief. He found that not only is judged humor greater with greater subject's anxiety but that humor increases in proportion to surprisingness. This supports Freud's claim on the importance of surprise in thwarting a tension-causing situation to relieve excessive nervous arousal. However, there are some questions that the theory cannot address. Hurley et al. (2011) note how the theory is applicable to humor about "emotionally charged topics" but not to other kinds of humor such as logical humor. How is nervous energy released in the case of puns which do not involve aggressive or sexual tension? In essence, the relief theory suggests that all humor begins with tension. But this cannot be true. Similar to Hurley's example

of puns, how would the theory explain the funniness of someone falling off a chair? This does not involve negative emotions such as anxiety or stress, and this type of humor presents itself to us on numerous occasions.

Second, the theory suggests that all laughter result from the release of negative energy. But there is also a kind of laughter that arises from positive emotions derived, for instance, from a creative act. Pleasure derived from writing a poem or completing a painting or a musical piece can also result in an excitable state or a sense of accomplishment that can be expressed in open laughter. This type of laughter can be called joyful laughter to distinguish it from humorous laughter. It comes from pleasure given by generating creative ideas where such pleasure gradually builds up in the process until it reaches its peak and is released through laughter. This suggests that pleasure in a creative thinking task, where the goal is to produce original ideas, can be cumulative. Although one may face obstacles in the creative process, causing displeasure, these do not cancel out or override the pleasure that had been experienced, with such pleasure increasing as one nears the end of the task.

5.3.3 Superiority theory

Superiority theory, the third commonly used theory to explain humor, puts mockery, ridicule and laughter at the ridiculous actions of others at the center of humor experience (Keith-Spiegel 1972: 6 in Perks 2012: 120). What people find funny is a situation where they can look down on others and regard themselves as superior. Aristotle and Hobbes espoused the superiority theory to explain humorous laughter.

Plato calls this malice – laughing at the self-ignorance of other people – and says that seeing their misfortune causes pleasure and pain (in the soul). Hobbes, like Plato, believes that we laugh at situations where there is an absence of wit. Hobbes (1839) views laughter as caused by "sudden glory" at a pleasing act or by "apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves" (in Lintott 2016: 355). But as a supporter of incongruity theory, he believes that perceived superiority is not enough and novelty is needed to summon laughter – "it must be new and expected."

In his bisociation theory, Koestler (1964: 52) also embraces a form of superiority theory but asserts that this is a "detached malice" that he calls aggressive-defensive or self-asserting tendency, a requirement for humor. He stresses that this "impulse of aggression or apprehension" is "indispensable" and manifested "in the guise of malice, derision, the veiled cruelty of condescension, or merely as an absence of sympathy with the victim of the joke."

In other words, the superiority theory believes that it is only by comparing ourselves to others that we find humor. Critics of the superiority theory would of course argue that such a comparison does not always underpin humor – there are many counterexamples. This theory likewise suggests another contradiction in humor much like Plato's assertion of humor as causing both pleasure and pain: that while humor facilitates social connectedness when people collec-

tively agree on what is ridiculous, humor in fact capitalizes on breaking down social cohesion, used to assert differences and how one individual or group is distinguished from another.

5.4 The influence of culture on humor

In the previous sections, it was already mentioned that people from different cultures hold different views toward humor. First, culture determines the norms and expectations that influence what is considered to be incongruous (incongruity theory). Second, it defines power relationships, hierarchies and views on equality that affect how humor targets specific individuals or groups (superiority theory). Cultural differences thus have a direct bearing on humor production and reception. To illustrate, Americans are likely to use self-denigrating humor while the Spanish prefer teasing and ironic upgrades (Mir and Cots 2019: 393). The latter part of this chapter will touch on how the appreciation of a humorous verse for children can be culture-specific since exposure to nursery rhymes varies across cultures.

5.4.1 Culture and appropriate humor

According to Kant and Norman (2019), humor differs from culture to culture because culture determines the "absolute level" of what can be considered benign and malign by a particular group. They contend that this is not only evident on an intercountry level but also within the country where subcultures and different groups vary in how they perceive and use humor. Such variations also include differences in norms for expressing amusement, that is, there are distinctions in what are held to be appropriate responses to humor. Wang et al. (2019) mention that culture impinges on humor tolerance or how one allows taboo and controversial topics to be the object of humor. Referring to Maggie and Smith's (2013) elaborations, Kant and Norman (2019) add that cultural values influence power differences which in turn affect views on humor between the joke-teller and the joke-listener. Culture influences people's perspective of appropriate behavior for high-power individuals and the extent to which power differences are disregarded. This acts on how "socially distant" or "socially close" the joke-teller and joke-listener are to each other. Because this research involves two cultures – Western and Eastern – a few examples of studies illustrating humor differences between the two will be discussed.

5.4.2 Western versus Eastern views on humor

Jiang et al. (2019 in Kant and Norman 2019) argue that Easterners do not hold as much positive attitude toward humor unlike Westerners. Thus, Easterners are less likely to use humor as a coping strategy than Westerners (Jiang et al. 2019: 123). It has been found that the four styles of humor proposed by Martin

et al. 2003 – self-enhancing, affiliative, self-defeating, and aggressive humor – are used by people in different countries but how they are employed in the country or region varies (Jiang et al. 2019: 3). Findings show that Easterners are inclined to use more adaptive humor in contrast to Westerners who are prone to using more maladaptive humor.

Other studies highlight differences between Westerners' and Easterners' use of humor. For example, in the US, people use humor widely even in the classroom. But Tsukawaki et al. (2019) mention how Japan is still "cautious" about introducing humor within the school. Citing Yajima (2013), they reason that this has to do with the perception of parents and teachers that humor, including playful humor as well as puns and wordplay, encourages "boisterousness and frivolity."

It seems, however, that such observations of Easterners cannot be generalized for all cultures in a particular geographical region. In the Philippines, Ancheta (2017) finds the use of self-disparaging or maladaptive humor evident in comic personas in popular cultural forms. This way of using humor is similar to how Westerners (mainly Americans) employ self-denigrating humor, as Mir and Cots (2019: 393) observed. For instance, Erap (from the Filipino slang "pare" which means "dude" and spelled in reverse) jokes make fun of former Philippine President Joseph "Erap" Estrada's low IQ (Ancheta 2017: 191) or his "woeful inadequacy in the English language which proved to the upper class how much of a buffoon he was" (Reyes 2005: 267 in Ancheta 2017: 191). Erap himself encouraged the publication of a joke book *Eraptions* (Maceda 2008: 99 in Ancheta 2017: 191) to boost his popularity with the masses during the campaign period in 1998. Ancheta (2017) points out that Erap jokes capitalize on linguistic incongruities to create humor. Self-deprecating humor could have been handed down by the Americans when they colonized the Philippines for 50 years or it could have been transplanted to Filipino culture with the Filipinos' substantial exposure to American culture through films, TV shows, books and comics.

Thus, although incongruity characterizes much Filipino humor, Ancheta (2017) notes the "prevalence of the humor of superiority, or tendentious humor" in Philippine popular cultural forms. Ancheta (2017), for example, looks at how self-deprecating humor in Philippine creative nonfiction has its roots in the observational humor found in American stand-up comedy and thus largely Western in orientation (Ancheta 2017: 233). However, what makes these texts of observational humor now Filipino "despite their narrative and historical provenance" is that "the everyday lives spoken of, and personas that speak about these, are Filipino." As to the question "Why does the Filipino laugh?", Ancheta (2017: xxv-xxvi) asserts that laughter is a form of survival in the Philippines that shows "the strengths of the Filipino character" using laughter to "palliate many of the conflicts in which Filipinos continually find themselves embroiled." Leon Ma. Guerrero (1990: 315-16 in Ancheta 2017: xxvi) describes Filipinos as saved by "a lively sense of the ridiculous [that] has helped to keep alive our sense of proportion", being "the only nationalists in Asia who do not take ourselves

too seriously, which explains why we strike white men as being friendly and good-natured. . . " Ancheta (2017: xxvii) argues against this "oversimplification of this 'friendliness' or 'good-naturedness'" by saying that "while Filipinos use laughter to cope with perennial national misfortunes and invite others to share this apparent self-deprecation, the appreciation of the ridiculous also keeps on redounding to tactics of resurrection and comeuppance to the maintenance of scripts of national virtue, and defenses of community and communal power" (xxvii). In other words, humor is an essential part of how Filipinos live and thrive.

5.4.3 National humor

There is also the so-called "national humor." In defining American humor, Walter Blair does not generalize it to mean all humor produced in America or to a kind that cannot be found in another country. Rather, he defines national humor as humor with "an emphatic 'native quality'" (Blair 1988: 91-92 in Ancheta 2017: xx). Blair quotes from *The London and Westminster Review*:

> Humour [sic] is national when it is impregnated with the convictions, customs, and associations of a nation ... National ... humour must be all this transferred into shapes which produce laughter. The humour of a people is their institutions, laws, customs, manners, habits, characters, convictions–their scenery whether of the sea, the city, or the hills–expressed in the language of the ludicrous. . . " (in Blair 1988: 9 in Ancheta 2017: xxi)

Ancheta (2017: xxii) comments that identifying national humor entails a "specific reading of values, experiences, beliefs and traditions that intersect and are woven within a particular cultural matrix." To define Filipino culture then, she articulates, is to claim that humor can powerfully present "Filipino-ness" and how Filipinos negotiate frames of experiences at the local and national scale (2017: xxii). Alba-Juez (2016 in Mir and Cots 2019: 393-394) states that experiences exert influence on humor, thereby revealing cultural and social identity not only of individuals but also of groups. Touching on Filipino humor as well, Abad (2017: vii) expresses that while Filipino humor is often regarded as entertainment or the laughter of the "masses" or common people, it also displays the "national psyche" including institutions, laws, customs and habits. Thus, it forms part of the Filipino identity.

One of the interesting areas for investigation with respect to this is comparing differences in societal values and views of humor over time. As Jiang et al. (2019) point out, culture is not a fixed construct, citing how globalization has caused tremendous shifts in people's psychology and culture. Changes in what is acceptable or not – as well as what is normal or not – influence humor usage and perception. This is an understudied domain in humor research which this thesis hopes to address.

5.5 Children's humor

5.5.1 Development of children's humor

McGhee first introduced in 1979 the idea that humor understanding and appreciation are directly related to cognitive development. According to him, children go through four stages of humor development that correspond to the stages of cognitive development proposed by Piaget. The stages put forward by McGhee are: incongruous actions towards objects, incongruous labeling of objects and events, conceptual incongruity, and multiple meanings or the first step toward adult humor. Cognitive shifts affect the way children create and perceive humor. With new cognitive skills come new ways of interpreting humor. As cognitive skills become more complex, so do humor production and comprehension.

5.5.1.1 Humor in young children

In the first stage, children at 18 to 20 months old find humor in objects that do not belong to a schema (Zimmerman 2014). In other words, children laugh at objects that deviate from their normal uses (Southam 2009). In the second stage, by around two years old, children are able to use language playfully, finding enjoyment in renaming objects to create humor. For example, calling an apple a banana (McGhee 2015) and creating silly rhymes such as "drink bilk" for "drink milk" where only the sound and not the meaning matters are funny for them. Children acquire more cognitive skills by the third stage which starts at about three years. They learn to recognize the characteristics of objects and their associated words together with similarities between objects and events and thus find humor when these similarities are violated (Southam 2009). McGhee (2015) gives as examples a cow on roller skates and a bicycle with square wheels. Children at this stage can appreciate jokes especially when they rhyme: "What do you call a rabbit that tells jokes? A funny bunny" (Southam 2009).

5.5.1.2 Humor in primary school children

Because this research involved children from 8 to 9 years old, it is essential to look more closely at how this group views humor.

In the final stage, children shift from non-linguistic to linguistic humor (Zimmermann 2014: 126). At around 7 years old, children can appreciate puns since they can already detect linguistic ambiguity. A child can understand when a word with double meaning creates an incongruity, resulting in a humorous event (McGhee 1979: 76). McGhee (2015) cites an example: "What's gray, has four legs and a trunk? A mouse on vacation." The child can also understand other forms of abstract humor (McGhee 1979: 77). During this period, humor is generated more from abstract qualities of behavior and thought rather than by perception (141). This is because by this stage, children have acquired cogni-

tive abilities which Piaget calls concrete operational thinking. Such skills allow them to see relationships between events rather than just outcomes of events (78). For example, a dog that meows is hilarious for them. Concrete operational thinking also affects the way children respond to a situation and how funny a joke is perceived. As McGhee illustrates, the difference between a Stage 3 child and a Stage 4 child is that for the Stage 4 child, an event that involves damage to property or personal harm is amusing only if it is perceived to be accidental or unintentional; however, to a Stage 3 child, it does not matter what the intent is (78). Even though by 6 to 9 years of age, children can already understand linguistic incongruities in ambiguous words or structures, it will only be by 9 to 12 years that children can fully comprehend more sophisticated humorous manifestations such as irony and sarcasm (Zimmermann 2014: 123-124). Children from 6 to 9 years of age can understand riddles but cannot say why a riddle is funny (Zimmermann 2014). By 9 or 10, children can pinpoint why a riddle is funny based on context. They also find humor in ambiguous meanings, as in McGhee's example: "Order! Order in the court! Ham and cheese on rye, your Honor" (McGhee 1979: 76). Moreover, during the early school years, children can understand social models of their culture, logical incongruities and violations of social norms enough to joke about the world and peers and adults to "obtain control and advantages" over them (Zimmerman 2014: 126). At 9 to 10 years of age, children start to enjoy teasing and ridiculing others (126), delight in the misfortunes of others (Kappas 1967: 72) and use humor for their own ends (74). McGhee (1986: 30) points out that, as evidenced by their experiments, humor involving adults as targets rather than humor with children as victims appeals more to children because people are inclined to be more favorable toward their own age group than other age groups. (The next section, however, mentions that children find amusement when they feel superior over other children as well.) That children enjoy having an advantage over authority figures supports the superiority theory. McGhee's findings of humor in childhood development further demonstrate two things. First, no one theory fully explains humor. Second, the appreciation of humorous elements as explained by both the incongruity theory and superiority theory emerges in childhood. Similarly, because humor development is progressive, children are still drawn to what they find humorous at an earlier age but the appreciation becomes more sophisticated with the addition of new skills. Children at age 8, for example, will still laugh at the image of a hotdog wearing a pair of shorts and a hat (visual humor that will make younger children chuckle) but will now be amused if the hotdog says it is "playing ketchup with summer."

While McGhee does not elaborate on exactly why children find ridiculing others humorous (i.e., if the motivations are the same as those with adults based on the superiority theory), he provides support for the incongruity theory. This is not surprising since he views humor mainly as a cognitive act. Humor is a mental play which requires the right amount of difficulty: how a child finds humor in incongruous representations of objects and events depends on how easy or difficult it is to make sense of the incongruity (McGhee 1979: 38).

Jokes that are too simple and obvious are not funny as are those that are too intellectually demanding. As McGhee (1979: 39) contends, "humor appreciation is greatest ... when we do not immediately see the point, and yet are not required to think laboriously about it."

5.5.2 Humor in children's literature

Humor plays a huge part in determining content for children's books. Apart from suspense and adventure, humor motivates children to read books actively (Orekoya et al. 2014: 62). A study by Zbaracki (2003: iii) describes how children were highly engaged in reading when the material was a humorous one. Humorous stories easily become favorites among children (Shannon 1999: 119). Humor is also a constant in children's verbal lore (Factor 1989: 162) such as rhymes. For example, the Filipino nursery rhyme Pen Pen De Sarapen makes use of silly words that do not make sense but which makes it fun for children to sing. Even children's books labeled as fantasy or science fiction would always have an element of humor in the form of witty dialogues and silly circumstances. Humor can likewise be found in children's books that deal with serious subjects such as death as in the middle grade book *Ms. Bixby's Last Day* (2016). What sets children apart from adults in their humor style is the former's fascination for bathroom humor; the book *Doctor Proctor's Fart Powder* (2007) is one such example. This has been found by researchers such as Styles (1998: 108) who says that children possess "a great appetite for vulgarity." She adds that much of what children find funny is "really sadistic and even ghoulish" and that what is pure nonsense to adults amuses children. But humor in children's literature comes in various forms and section 5.5.2.1 will present what these are.

In Vandaele's (2002: 168) belief, the schemes of normality to be transgressed in humor vary according to genre. Children's literature as a genre has its own conventions. For one, children are primarily the protagonists in this genre, taking over what would generally be adult spaces to solve a mystery and save a community from a disaster, among others. For example, in the *Lockwood & Co.* series (2013-2017), only children have the ability to fight the supernatural and they lose this skill as soon as they enter adulthood while in *The Vanderbeekers* series (2017-2022), young siblings join forces to help adults solve their problems. Such centrality of children characters defines the type of humor in many children's books: superiority (Shannon 1999), ridicule and defiance (Kappas 1967) and poking fun at authority (Mallan 1993; Zbaracki 2003). Similarly, literature intended for young children is "often, by its nature, a conservative genre that reinforces the status quo to assure children that their worlds are safe" (Trites 2006). Transgressing this to create humor would mean introducing elements such as violence (Kappas 1967), comedy of chaos (Mallan 1993) or other physical events (Shannon 1999) usually directed at villains or adults such as parents, teachers or other figures of authority.

5.5.2.1 Categories of humor in children's fiction

In an earlier study, Kappas (1967: 68) identifies 10 categories of humor in juvenile literature. These are: (1) exaggeration, (2) incongruity, (3) surprise, (4) slapstick, (5) the absurd, (6) human predicaments, (7) ridicule, (8) defiance, (9) violence, and (10) verbal humor. Relating this to humor development in childhood, she mentions how humorous behavior shifts from being group-oriented to individual-centered as children grow older – there is less homogeneity in what children find humorous as they enter adolescence. She concludes that cognitive abilities influence humor appreciation alongside factors such as sex, intelligence, cultural background and personality. Knowledge of the development framework of humor, she says, can be used to critically evaluate children's literature to determine whether the behavior of the humorous characters suits the interests and experiences of a child at a certain age.

Unlike Kappas, Mallan (1993: 15-18) believes that children's humor in literature can be categorized into only three types, although these also include some form of ridicule, defiance, verbal humor and incongruity which have been identified by Kappas. The first consists of humorous characters created by exaggerating "human traits and foibles." This type includes poking fun at authority figures as well as having innocent characters (children, animals, toys and even adults) who are funny but on whom people can take pity. The second comprises humorous situations or incongruities that result from injecting absurdity into everyday events such as an ant carrying a wheel of cheese. Nonsense, transformation (such as having the power to turn people into animals) and comedy of chaos (where things get out of control) create funny situations. The third type is humorous discourse. According to Mallan, this can be appreciated by older children since incongruities in discourse require refinement and literary experience; as children grow older, they search for linguistic challenges. Spoonerisms or metathesis (e.g., the title of Shel Silverstein's book *Runny Babbit: A Billy Sook*, 2005), name-calling, puns, slang and parody contribute to humorous discourse. Mallan concludes that humorous literature makes readers more linguistically sophisticated because it invites readers to play with language. They are also exposed to incongruities – what is expected is different from what is real – and departures from normal social behavior. Thus, for Mallan, humorous literature demands "critical readers who do not passively accept what they read."

Studying children's reception of humor in children's fiction, Shannon (1999) gives four categories of children's humor. These are similar to the ones identified by Kappas and Mallan in that they take into account instances of superiority and verbal humor but introduces two new categories: toilet humor and physical descriptions. Thus, for Shannon, the four categories of humor in children's fiction are: (1) superiority or sense of accomplishment, (2) physical events and appearances, (3) the scatological and gross, and (4) language and wordplay. Shannon found that appreciation of humor is connected to (1) comprehension of certain aspects of the texts and (2) sensitivity to style and tone (140). That

the reading of the books was done in a social setting greatly affected humor reception. Children were able to share humorous books with one another and talk about humorous incidents in the books. They could detect more subtle forms of humor when the books were read aloud by a skilled reader. What this suggests is that in investigating humor reception among children, there would likely be differences when the humorous material is read by or to children in a group setting than when it is read alone.

Shannon's findings also reinforce the view that laughter, though it can be experienced by a solitary individual as posited in joyful laughter, is mainly a social phenomenon. Children smile and laugh more when in the presence of others and conversely, smile and laugh less when reading alone (Chapman and Chapman 1974). Children are also more responsive to humor when their companions laugh. This also suggests that interaction, such as when a book is read aloud by a teacher, aids in a better understanding of a humorous material. Changes in pace or tone, body movements and facial expressions all serve as funniness cues. Individual differences also affect understanding and appreciation of humor, according to Shannon. First is the extent or degree of background knowledge. In her study, some children could not get the references to certain characters or aphorisms which lessened the funniness of the texts. Second is the child's reading ability. Titles that were easier to read were said to be more humorous. Furthermore, children who could read better understood the humor in the more difficult-to-read books. That children are influenced by the presence of other people when reading and responding to a humorous text is explored in the poetry reading sessions. Self-reported comprehensibility, as a measure of the actual ease with which a text can be read, is also investigated in this study against the funniness of the text.

Zbaracki (2003: 21) synthesizes the findings in available research and identifies five common factors that inject humor into a literary text: (1) humorous characters, (2) poking fun at authority, (3) physical humor, (4) nonsense, and (5) humorous discourse or language play. Humorous characters are created when there are incongruities within the character or between characters. Poking fun at authority is depicted when children traditionally outsmart adults; children delight in overcoming difficult situations and the authority that controls them. Physical humor includes exaggerated physical features and comical acts and gross humor. Nonsense pertains to fabricated words as well as characters with unusual names and outrageous behavior such as those that appear in the Dr. Seuss books (Shaeffer and Hopkins 1988 in Zbaracki 2003: 27). Finally, humorous discourse covers puns and wordplay found in the titles and character names that children find funny and challenging simultaneously. In the *Winterhouse* series (2018-2019), for example, the main characters, both children, often exchange palindromes and anagrams with humorous results.

5.5.2.2 Application of humor theories and developmental theories to humor in children's literature

The findings about what children find funny in literature reveal three things. First, they further indicate that the conventional theories of humor, although broadly examined in the context of adult humor and in spite of adverse criticism, also provide answers to what children find amusing in literature. The relief theory, which asserts that humor relieves tension including fear, nervous energy and inhibition, can also be used to explain children's fascination with humor found in literature. Landsberg (1992 in Munde 1997: 221) argues that "children, like all the powerless, find their best release and choicest weapon in humor." She adds: "When you stop to analyze why a funny book provokes laughter from many children of very different tastes, you almost always find that there's an unstated theme in the book that is common to the deepest experience of childhood . . . anxiety." She contends that anxiety features in much, if not all, of children's humor (Munde 1997: 230). Interestingly, the findings point to the equal prominence of feelings of superiority and incongruity production in creating humor for children.

Second, that verbal humor or the twisting of language to create funny names, puns and wordplay is a central ingredient in literature for schoolchildren substantiates McGhee's account that there is a shift from non-linguistic to linguistic humor in the final stage of children's humor development. Third, while these studies look at humor in children's fiction, studies on humorous children's poetry for children 8 to 9 years remain lacking. Kyte (1947) shows that poems that were sources of significant appeal to children include humor. However, he does not say why this is so and what kind of humor is attractive to them. The current research addresses this gap for a particular subgenre of children's literature – humorous poetry – for a particular age group (8 to 9 years old). The following section will provide some background of the subgenre as well as examples.

5.5.2.3 Humor in children's poetry

Language-specific humor that is contingent on violations of phonological rules is typical in children's humor. Children deliberately mispronounce words with humorous consequences when talking to each other or adults. These violations include distorted articulations, immature articulation (e.g., Tweety Bird's "I tought I taw a putty tat") and tongue twisters (Shultz and Robillard in McGhee and Chapman 1980: 69-70). But humorous children's verses do not rely on phonological rule violation; on the contrary, like serious poetry, it makes phonology explicit (Shultz and Robillard in McGhee and Chapman 1980). A great majority of children's poems, including those with a humorous narrative, rely on rhyme and repeated sounds. These devices not only produce rhythm which adds to children's enjoyment but also help make the poems easier to remember. In preference studies, children liked narrative rhymes better (Huck,

Hepler and Hickman 1987 in Mallan 1993).

Studies have demonstrated that with poetry, children prefer humorous poems over descriptive, sentimental and didactic ones (Nelson 1966, Pittman 1966 and Bradshaw 1937 in Robinson and Weintraub 1973, and Huck, Hepler and Hickman 1987 in Mallan 1993). One characteristic of humorous children's poems is their use of incongruity. Shultz and Robillard (in McGhee and Chapman 1980: 72) give the following example of a verse which hinges on incongruity to create humor:

> Roses are red,
> Violets are blue,
> I copied your paper
> And I flunked too.

Shultz and Robillard remark that what makes the poem funny is that it is expressed in standard poetic format with the phonological devices of alliteration and rhyme. It is also written in trochaic (an unstressed syllable follows a strong stressed syllable) tetrameter (four strong stresses per line). Trochaic tetrameter is common to nursery rhymes and other humorous and non-humorous rhymes of children. According to them, the humor in a humorous verse comes from "an incongruous fusion of tendentious content and poetic form" which dignifies "a crude, silly, or naughty idea" (in McGhee and Chapman 1980: 72). They argue that if either the tendentious content or the poetic form is deleted, children would find less humor in the altered version than the original. It must be said as well, that the appreciation of the humor in this poem depends on the reader's background knowledge and understanding of another text: to be able to grasp the incongruity and resolve it, the reader must be able first to make the connection with the famous nursery rhyme that contains a different third and last line. In some sense then, this can be considered culture-specific humor as exposure to nursery rhymes varies from one culture to another.

Styles (1998) argues that children's poetry has always been connected with the desire to make children laugh. She adds that there is not much difference between a humorous verse for adults and that for children except that the latter does not contain elements that children would not understand such as sexual explicitness. She also observes that certain forms are less appropriate for children such as the satirical verse as it requires a certain level of "sophistication of reading and life" (1998: 108) which children do not have.

Similar to fiction, humor in children's poetry features playful language (puns, nonsense words), incongruities and surprises, comic people and situations, flouting conventions, confusions (upside-downness), exaggeration, oddity (the reversal of the expected), absurd premises combined with logical conclusions; burlesque and slapstick, and parody (Styles 1998: 109). It involves funny, eccentric characters with delightful-sounding names as well as ludicrous situations and funny stories (Huck 1979: 336-338) such as those found in animal poems. The level of humor in humorous poetry varies; some are funny throughout while others have only a bit of humor in them (Styles 1998: 108-109). Sloan

(2001: 53) argues that "most poetry is written for children, for they respond well to rhymes and obvious rhythms, free verse being an acquired taste for them." For instance, the good-natured absurdities in limericks and other nonsense verse delight children. Referring to the findings of Opie and Opie (1955), she comments that riddles, "both ridiculous and delicious, old", are also pleasurable (53).

A perfect example of punning in a poem is Tom Tigercat by J. Patrick Lewis.

> Tom Tigercat is noted
> for his manners and his wit.
> He wouldn't think of lion,
> No, he doesn't cheetah bit.
>
> Tom never pretended
> to be something that he's not.
> I guess that's why we like him
> and why he likes ocelot.

In Eletelephony, Laura Elizabeth Richards resorts to the use of nonsense words to generate humor.

> Once there was an elephant,
> Who tried to use the telephant—
> No! No! I mean an elephone
> Who tried to use the telephone—
> (Dear me! I am not certain quite
> That even now I've got it right.)
> Howe'er it was, he got his trunk
> Entangled in the telephunk;
> The more he tried to get it free,
> The louder buzzed the telephee—
> (I fear I'd better drop the song
> Of elephop and telephong!)

Finding the appropriate material for the target group is fundamental in a humor reception study. As intimated in earlier sections, children are attracted to a certain kind of humor as they enter a particular stage of intellectual development. That their humor styles vary depending on age is exhibited by the study of Kyte (1947) involving schoolchildren from Grades 4 through 8. A poem that made a distinct appeal to most children was described as "too silly" or "too childish" and "not interesting" by older pupils. Rhythm that contributed to the liking of a poem by many children was also unpleasant for upper-grade participants who particularly disliked the repetition of a phrase in a poem.

5.6 Conclusions

This chapter shows that no single comprehensive definition can be ascribed to humor, a feature it has in common with children's literature, and so in a humor reception study, the researcher must first resolve what definition to use. This chapter also introduces humor as either a negotiation or a departure, and as a power balancing act. There are three popular theories of humor that though commonly looked at in terms of adult humor are likewise applicable to children's humor and therefore relevant to this study. McGhee's model illustrates how humor as explained by the incongruity theory and superiority theory emerges in childhood while the relief theory finds evidence in children's literature based on Landsberg's argument. The fundamental ideas behind each theory are culture-sensitive and there are notable differences between Eastern and Western cultures in humor production and perception. However, readers must exercise caution in interpreting the findings of culture-based studies on humor. As shown, cultural differences are present not only in regional groupings ("Westerners" versus "Easterners") but also across individual countries, differences that may not necessarily be consistent with the conclusions made for geographic regions. While other studies have looked into cultural differences in humor of adults, the role of culture in influencing humor perception among children, particularly those in the primary school, is neglected in literature.

Humor in children develops in stages alongside cognitive skills and linguistic competence that are needed to comprehend incongruities. In a humor reception study such as the present study, knowledge of the stages of humor development is crucial to ensure that suitable materials are selected for a particular age group. As regards children's literature, children like different types of humor but verbal humor, incongruities, nonsense, exaggeration and humorous characters and situations appeal to them the most in both fiction and poetry. It was therefore of the utmost importance to determine the participating children's preferences on what they consider as funny to ensure that the right materials were selected for the participants of the current study.

A humor reception study involving children points to the influence of background knowledge and reading ability on the understanding and appreciation of humor particularly in fiction. Sex, intelligence, cultural background and personality are also significant factors. This study looked at sex and gender as determinants of humor preferences. Humor reception studies conducted among other age groups can also serve as valuable guides. For instance, El Refaie (2011) mentions the artificiality that came about in interviewing participants about the humor of newspaper cartoons which are normally encountered privately. Thus, though many of the young adult participants found them funny, their responses could have been influenced by social pressure to conform or to hide prejudices. Such "artificiality" was not examined in this study but the influence of having an authority figure in the form of the researcher-facilitator was considered in interpreting the results. Because there is a dearth of studies

on the reception of written humor, this study should contribute to a better understanding of the perception of humor especially in children's literature.