

# Current Comments

## Did You Hear the One About...?

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As an information scientist it's natural that I appreciate conciseness. Scientific communication is too often cluttered by verbiage. There are, for example, too few journals with titles like *Nature*, *Cell*, or *Gut*, and too many like *Ergebnisse der Physiologie Biologischen Chemie und Experimentellen Pharmakologie*, or *Zhurnal Vsesoyuznogo Khimicheskogo Obshchestva Imeni D I Mendeleeva*.<sup>1</sup> Just as I appreciate brevity in scientific communication, I enjoy it in humor. Among my favorite jokes are many "one-liners." The *Random House Dictionary* laconically defines one-liner as "a brief, witty or humorous remark."<sup>2</sup>

Many comedians have used one-liners, but probably no other American comic is so closely identified with the one-liner as Henny Youngman. Some examples of his humor appear in Figure 1. Youngman refined the one-liner into a compact art form. According to a *New Yorker* profile, Youngman knows over 1,500 jokes.<sup>3</sup> He can tell six or seven of them per minute. Aside from playing a few bars of "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" on the violin, his act consists entirely of one-liners.

My love for one-liners prompted me to wonder where they originated. We asked Robert D. Orben, who has written them for Red Skelton, Jack Paar, and Dick Gregory. He publishes the newsletters *Orben's Current Comedy* and *Orben's Comedy Fillers*, which are full of topical one-liners. He doesn't know who coined the term one-liner,

but tells us it came into use in the 1930s or 40s. He defines the one-liner as "a joke, not necessarily of one sentence, but set up and paid off in a minimum amount of words."<sup>4</sup>

The one-liner "probably goes as far back as recorded literature," according to Orben. But early forms of one-liners, such as biblical aphorisms, are not necessarily funny.

Orben singles out Benjamin Franklin's aphorisms as ancestors of the one-liner. These are meant to be clever, and instructive as well. Orben says Mark Twain and Oscar Wilde are literary progenitors of the one-liner. Their intentions were often satirical, and many of the points they made are still relevant. Consider Twain's classic, "It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctively American criminal class except Congress."

Temple University psychologist Jeffrey Goldstein says there have been few scientific studies of one-liners.<sup>5</sup> Scientists and scholars, however, have not overlooked the study of humor. They have been probing the question of laughter for centuries.

The 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes observed that all humor occurs at somebody else's expense.<sup>6</sup> The 19th-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer proposed that humor is rooted in incongruity. Sigmund Freud believed that jokes allow us to express aggressive urges, including sexual ones.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 1:** Some examples of Henny Youngman's one-liners. From: **Youngman H.** *101 of My Funniest Jokes*. New York: Henny Youngman, 1976. Brochure.

You can imagine how much money I have. My banker knocked on my door and asked for his calendar back.

I got a brother-in-law—I don't say he's a thief—he finds things before people lose them.

One day I played a horse so slow, the jockey kept a diary of the trip.

I'll never forget my first words in the theater. "Peanuts! Popcorn!"

Psychiatrist to patient says, "What do you do for a living?" The guy says, "I'm an auto mechanic." Psychiatrist says, "Get under the couch."

I've got a great doctor. He gave a guy six months to live. The guy couldn't pay his bill so he gave him another six months.

I was so ugly when I was born, the doctor slapped my mother.

My doctor says I must give up those little intimate dinners for two unless I have someone eating with me.

A doctor advises his patient to stop smoking. He says, "As long as you're quitting, I'll give you \$5 for your gold lighter."

Cancer stops smoking.

Doctor leaving his crowded office to go out to move his car, said to his patients, "Don't anybody get better, I'll be right back."

I solved the parking problem. I bought a parked car.

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That may explain a *Psychology Today* poll from last year. The readers were asked to rate 30 jokes. Those about sex got the highest ratings.<sup>8,9</sup> Ethnic jokes also proved popular. This was so despite the fact that many ethnic groups are offended by such jokes. A possible explanation might be that ethnics don't mind some ethnic jokes about themselves. Though ethnic jokes can be insulting, some of them are fairly harmless. In *The Complete Book of Ethnic Humor*,<sup>10</sup> for example, Larry Wilde offers this Jewish anecdote that's almost short enough to be a one-liner:

The young son of a garment maker was in school one day. The teacher asked him to name the four seasons.

"I only know two," said the boy.

"Busy and Slack!" (p. 145)

Some of Wilde's ethnic one-liners actually compliment their targets. This one can be taken as a tribute to Japan's engineering expertise:

What's the official animal of Japan?

The shutter bug. (p. 139)

Practically any subject under the sun is fair game for people who manufacture one-liners. Orben combined our perennial interest in money and sex when he

penned this gem: "I've kissed so much of it goodbye, I'm beginning to think of money as the opposite sex."<sup>11</sup>

Even the higher realms of philosophy have been the subjects of one-liners. Woody Allen is especially effective at this: "If it turns out that there is a God, I don't think that he's evil. But the worst you can say about him is that basically he's an underachiever."<sup>12</sup>

Harvey Mindess, a clinical psychiatrist at Antioch University, Los Angeles, says that science has generally neglected the study of humor and laughter. He says many psychology courses "don't even mention humor, as if it weren't important." Studying humor was considered frivolous. But he believes that humor is as "prevalent as any emotion," and thus fair game for scientists.<sup>13</sup>

In the 1970s, there were indications of an increased scholarly interest in humor. The first International Conference on Humor & Laughter was held in Cardiff, Wales, in 1976. It was organized by the Welsh branch of the British Psychological Society.<sup>14</sup> Some of the papers presented examined the theories of laughter, such as the psychoanalytic and incongruity theo-

ries. Others discussed children's humor, ethnic humor, the use of humor in the classroom, the recorded laughter used in television comedy shows, and people's reactions to computer-drawn animated-movie smiles.

The second international humor conference was held last year and was sponsored by Antioch University. Topics discussed included Freud's humor theory and a cross-cultural study of humor.<sup>6</sup>

*Saturday Review* editor Norman Cousins spoke on humor as a healing agent. He referred to his *New England Journal of Medicine*<sup>15</sup> account of his remarkable recovery from a crippling disease of the connective tissue, from which his doctors told him he had one chance in 500 of recovering. Laughter was an important part of his "mind-over-matter" therapy. Not surprisingly, Cousins believes the potential value of humor in medicine is largely untapped.

The third international humor conference will be held in Washington, DC, in August 1982. For information, contact Rufus Browning, 2213 Parker Avenue, Silver Springs, Maryland 20902. One sponsor of the congress is the Workshop Library on World Humor (WLWH), a nonprofit group based in Washington, DC. WLWH, founded in 1975, seeks to assist scientists, artists, lawyers, teachers, and others to explore the constructive uses of humor. It also plans to compile a bibliography on humor, maintain a collection of humorous written works, and "establish multi-cultural centers for the study, testing, and application of constructive uses of humor." WLWH, P.O. Box 23334, Washington, DC 20024, also publishes an occasional newsletter, *Humor Events*. It includes news of humor colloquies, lists of books and records on humor, and other news.

Humor researchers are prepared for criticisms that their work will take the fun out of humor. Mindess was quoted as saying, "Of course, we're sitting

ducks for people who want to poke fun at us. At the moment of analysis, you may not be laughing; you may be thinking. But afterwards you have an even subtler appreciation of humor, just as you enjoy music more if you understand it.'"<sup>7</sup>

One humor researcher, Howard Pollio, University of Tennessee, suggests that since humor is part of our universe, it can and should be subject to the same scrutiny as practically everything else. But he also believes that the study of humor should be approached with a sense of humor.<sup>16</sup>

While these scientific studies into humor are worthwhile, they do not explain the interest of an information retriever in one-liners. But the reason should be obvious. I've spent my life creating indexes full of one-liners. Most of my scientific colleagues don't think the titles of their brain children are so funny. As a matter of fact, many of them would be improved if they could be a little less serious. You don't have to become paranoid about science like Senator Proxmire to realize that science can be a little stuffy at times. As the title of Sidney Harris's cartoon collection asks, *What's So Funny About Science?*<sup>17</sup> The answer, of course, is "Plenty!"

I wondered why comedians rarely discuss the contribution of cartoonists to one-liners. But Harris told us cartoons and one-liners have little in common, except maybe economy. He said that usually, "Cartoons don't sound as well as they read, and one-liners don't read as well as they sound."<sup>18</sup> In any case, Harris combines the best of science and humor in *Chicken Soup and Other Medical Matters*.<sup>19</sup> Some of the cartoons in the book have appeared in *Current Contents*<sup>®</sup>. We publish them to give our readers something to laugh at, before they plunge into scanning contents pages full of not-too-funny one-liners.

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