

Kill the joke

In her new column, Alice Haines explores how language can be used to create humour

In the last Kill the Joke column, I said that humour gives people a way of showing what they have in common with others, allowing them to bond. I also mentioned that this can be done at all levels of language. One way of thinking about the linguistic levels on which a joke works is to use what's known as the rank scale. This is a hierarchy of the grammatical units of language, from the morphemes making up words, to the groupings of words in phrases, to the groupings of phrases in clauses and sentences. We can also extend this scale at both ends. At the bottom we can look at the individual sound segments that make up words and how they are organised phonologically, and at the top we can look at the pragmatics of language use in discourse.

The phonological patterns of speech were put to excellent use in the well-known 'Four Candles' sketch that appeared in a 1976 episode of the BBC comedy programme The Two Ronnies, starring Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett. The sketch is set in a hardware store with Corbett playing the shopkeeper and Barker the customer, a slightly dishevelled and bored-looking workman. Barker consults his shopping list and reads off what is assumed by both shopkeeper and viewer to be 'Four candles'. Corbett places four candles on the counter but Barker replies 'No. Fork 'andles. 'Andles for forks'.

The joke relies on the assumption that Barker's first line is 'Four candles' rather than the phonetically-identical 'Fork 'andles'. If the shopkeeper and viewer first assume that Barker asks for 'Fork 'andles', the four candles will not be produced and the homophone may go unnoticed. Most people probably assume he says 'Four candles' because this is more plausible. Candles, to me, are a more everyday object and it would be odd to request multiple fork handles without specifying the number required. However, the joke also relies on the viewer accepting the possibility that Barker said 'Fork 'andles' in the first place or the exchange would not make sense.

This acceptance requires a degree of phonological sleight of hand in the delivery of the line. Spoken in isolation, the two phrases differ in their stress pattern. 'Four candles' tends to have the primary stress on the second syllable, 'Fork 'andles' on the first. However, Barker's delivery allows both interpretations as he stresses both the first and second syllables equally. This might sound unusual but for the fact, firstly, that he is reading, which could lead to a more monotone intonation with more equal stressing of each syllable, especially by someone reading in an unanimated fashion. Secondly, at a shop counter, it would not be unusual to stress the number of items required. The phonology of the spoken phrase is central to the joke but it also depends on viewers' expectations of the phonology of speech and Barker's ability to use this to misdirect their interpretation. Indeed, expectation and misdirection are common mechanisms underlying the linguistic structure of jokes. The rest of the sketch operates predominantly on a semantic level, but the same expectation and misdirection features are used to comedic effect. ¶

Alice Haines is a Lecturer in English Language at the University of Derby. She researches the cognition and linguistics of humour in literature.