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THE NOTION OF HUMOUR AND ITS FUNCTIONS IN COMMUNICATION: INSIGHTS FROM ENGLISH AND UZBEK LITERARY TEXTS

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Abstract: Humour is a familiar yet elusive feature of human communication. It draws on mental agility, cultural knowledge, emotional attunement, and the capacity to interpret what is left untold. This research examines humour as a communicative resource through a comparative aspect, using literary texts from English and Uzbek traditions. Works by Jerome K. Jerome, Oscar Wilde, Abdulla Qahhor, and G'afur G'ulom are analysed to demonstrate how humour builds rapport, defuses tension, preserves face, and voices social critique indirectly. While the cognitive mechanisms underpinning humour appear broadly similar across cultures, its stylistic realisation is shaped by distinct literary conventions and social norms. The findings contribute to pragmatics, literary stylistics, and cross-cultural communication studies.

Keywords: Humour, Communicative Functions, Pragmatics, Stylistics, Literary Humour, English Literature, Uzbek Literature, Irony, Wordplay, Face-Work, Cultural Context.

Introduction

Humour resists easy definition. Though it surfaces in nearly every domain of human interaction—casual talk, public discourse, fiction—its operation depends on an intricate interplay of linguistic form, inferential reasoning, emotional resonance, and shared cultural reference. Within linguistics, humour is no longer treated as ornamental; it is increasingly understood as a purposeful communicative strategy. Speakers and writers deploy humour to imply what cannot be stated directly, to secure attention, and to register judgment without assuming full responsibility for it.

Despite a substantial body of research on humour in individual literary traditions, comparative studies examining humour across English and Uzbek cultures remain scarce. English literary humour has long been associated with irony, verbal agility, and comic exaggeration. Uzbek literary humour, by contrast, tends toward understatement, situational comedy, and ethically shaded observation. Yet few studies ask how similar communicative ends are achieved through differing stylistic means, or how cultural context shapes what humour is permitted to do.

This study addresses that gap. It asks three interlinked questions:

1. How is humour theorised in linguistic and literary scholarship?
2. What communicative functions does humour perform in selected English and Uzbek literary texts?

3. How do cultural and literary conventions shape the production and interpretation of humour?

1. Materials and Methods

A qualitative comparative design was adopted, combining stylistic analysis with pragmatic interpretation. Text selection was guided by each author's established reputation for skillful humour.

- **English corpus:** Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat* (1889); Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Both texts are canonical instances of verbal wit, ironic dialogue, and comic situation.
- **Uzbek corpus:** Short fiction by Abdulla Qahhor and G'afur G'ulom, selected for their sustained use of situational irony, narrative understatement, and morally inflected comedy.

Three analytical passes were made. First, a linguistic-pragmatic reading identified lexical, syntactic, and semantic features that cue humour and examined how these cues invite inferential completion by the reader. Second, a stylistic-literary analysis attended to narrative voice, characterisation, and rhetorical devices such as irony and hyperbole. Third, a cross-cultural comparison traced how humour functions differently across the two traditions.

Humorous episodes were classified according to four communicative functions derived from pragmatic research: social bonding, tension reduction, face protection, and social critique. The aim was not to quantify but to interpret—to understand what humour *does* in each textual environment.

2. Results

In *Three Men in a Boat*, the characters' mock-serious exchanges and shared exasperation create a texture of camaraderie that extends to the reader. The humour is inclusive; laughing with the characters means being admitted to their circle. Qahhor achieves a similar effect through gentler means. His comic situations—misunderstandings, small domestic absurdities—invite recognition rather than judgment. The reader smiles not at the characters but alongside them.

Wilde's dialogue repeatedly skirts social danger—scandal, insult, exposure—only to pivot into wit. The epigram disarms; what might have been conflict becomes comedy. In G'ulom's narratives, humour often accompanies moments of hardship or moral gravity. It does not trivialise but tempers, allowing serious themes to breathe without becoming ponderous.

Wilde's epigrams are, among other things, instruments of politeness. They permit the speaker to criticise—hypocrisy, vanity, convention—while maintaining an aura of civility. The critique is registered but not pressed. Qahhor and G'ulom rely on a quieter irony. Their narrators rarely condemn; they observe, and the observation itself carries the judgment. The reader is trusted to complete the thought.

Both traditions use humour to expose social absurdity. In the English texts, this exposure is often verbal and performance-oriented: the joke announces itself. In the Uzbek texts, critique is more frequently embedded in situation and narrative pacing. The humour does not call attention to its own cleverness; it accumulates, emerging from the accumulated weight of detail. What is exposed is not always named.

Across all texts, successful humour depended on shared knowledge—of genre, of social code, of unspoken norms. English humour tended to foreground linguistic play; Uzbek humour favoured situational resonance and ethical implication.

3. Discussion

The findings support the view that humour operates at the intersection of linguistic form, cognitive inference, and cultural competence. The mechanisms commonly cited in humour theory—incongruity, violated expectation, ironic distance—were present in both corpora. What differed was their stylistic embedding.

In the English texts, humour was closely bound to verbal performance. The pleasure lay partly in the deftness of the phrasing itself. In the Uzbek texts, humour was more often narratively distributed; it emerged from pacing, from the juxtaposition of scenes, from the patient unfolding of character. These are not opposed categories but tendencies rooted in different literary histories and communicative priorities.

The pragmatics of humour also diverged. English humour, in the examples considered, positioned the reader as an active decoder of implication. The joke was a puzzle to be solved. Uzbek humour, by contrast, often presupposed a shared ethical horizon. The reader was not so much solving as recognising. This difference has consequences for cross-cultural interpretation. A reader unfamiliar with Uzbek narrative conventions might miss the humour entirely, mistaking restraint for flatness.

4. Conclusion

What bears emphasising is that these divergent strategies serve convergent ends. In both traditions, humour mediates social relationships. It permits criticism without confrontation. It sustains reader engagement. It transforms potentially alienating material—moral instruction, social satire, existential unease—into something shareable. The joke, in other words, is not the point. What humour *does* is the point.

This study has clear limitations. The corpus is small and canonical; it excludes contemporary writing, oral traditions, and digital genres. The method is qualitative and interpretive; no claims of empirical generalisation are made. Future research might examine how humour travels—across languages, across media, across time—and what is gained or lost in transit. Reader-response studies would usefully complement the textual focus adopted here. So too would translation analysis, which could illuminate how humour fares when dislodged from its original cultural and linguistic habitat.

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