Clarke clarifies pattern recognition theory of humour

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Recent commentary has suggested that the extent to which anomaly theories have become ingrained in the minds of academics and popular commentators alike has led to certain common assumptions and misconceptions about Clarke's pattern recognition theory of humour.

"There are two major misconceptions that have arisen," says Clarke. "First there is the assumption that this theory suggests that the deviation from a pattern is rewarded in humour; second there is the idea that the eight patterns identified correspond to categories of jokes or types of comedy in some way, as if there were eight types of humour. Both are entirely untrue.

"In all circumstances," states Clarke, "it is the recognition of simple repetition that is being rewarded in humour, not any form of anomaly, aberration or deviation. It is the recognition of this repetition in increasingly difficult or unlikely circumstances, despite any altered context or associated problems of perception, which is valuable to the individual.

"This is a major departure from prior theories and turns the whole received wisdom about both the mechanism and function of humour on its head. When we talk of pattern recognition, this does not include the recognition of deviation from a pattern, which is not a cognitive process rewarded by the faculty of humour. While this may seem counter-intuitive it is fundamental to an understanding of humour that such aberrations and deviations are discounted from the range of humorous

causality."

The apparent simplicity of the theory and the information-processing system it suggests has also fooled many into believing Clarke's analysis has grouped different stimuli into certain categories of humour. "The eight patterns don't correspond to eight types of humour," clarifies the author. "Rather, they are cognitive processes by which the brain identifies and analyses information unconsciously. Since this necessarily involves perceptual subjectivity, the same stimulus may lead to the recognition of completely different patterns by different individuals.

"What we haven't done is to produce a literary survey of eight types of joke. This couldn't be further from the nature of our research and I feel it requires clarification. What we're looking at is the importance of pattern recognition to the brain and the processes by which that recognition is effected. The eight patterns, far from being categories of joke formation, are therefore flexible processes of apprehension. When those processes occur in surprising circumstances, the brain rewards the individual for their achievement. What this also means is that we aren't just concerned here with comedic entertainment, but also situations such as when you turn up to work wearing the same tie as a colleague and find yourself laughing. Humour is therefore a faculty for the apprehension of any information, not just a social diversion.

"On an evolutionary level the recognition of patterns provides a remarkable survival advantage. The power of patterns includes the recognition of environmental and climatic trends, behavioural patterns in predators, prey and competing species or conspecifics, providing an insight into information that would produce significant survival advantages.

"Further, pattern recognition doesn't just mean that the brain can easily recognize an entity in the same or a different context, it also means that

the same quality, the same valuable property, can be recognized in a different entity. This provides the brain with a built-in capacity for adaptation to changing environments. Some researchers suggest that a contributory factor in the extinction of the Neanderthals was their inability to vary their diet. Humans, on the other hand, could recognize the same properties of 'good to eat' or 'nutritious' (or any number of other properties regarding texture, form or smell) in different foodstuffs (such as fish) not yet part of their staple diets.

"It is fundamentally the recognition of similarity that facilitates adaptability, not, as is often presumed, dissimilarity or deviation, which could lead to the adoption of entirely inappropriate new qualities or entities."

Clarke is keen to clarify the scope and nature of the theory further. "Humour is effectively an information-processing system, and is consequently applicable to any data, whether externally perceived or internally stored. Having recognized this, and having identified the details of what it is the brain wishes to process, we finally have a system that is truly universal."

Clarke is also keen to point out that the theory explains why other theories exist by describing the cognitive basis of the types of humour they identify, unifying all previous interpretations as it does so by the concept of pattern recognition. "Previous attempts at unification have failed since they have relied on combining smaller theories into a larger whole, quoting multiple mechanisms and functions as the basis of humour, rather than analysing their common elements and synthesizing a new interpretation with global relevance. Cutting and pasting doesn't make a universal theory," says Clarke. "It just makes a scrap book of other theories."

"All major interpretations of the last hundred years are explained by the

activity of pattern recognition. For example, anomaly theories have generally identified humour based on qualitative or applicative recontextualization, while mock-aggression theories have recognized opposition and interpretative recontextualization. Bergsonian roboticism was founded on the identification of positive repetition and applicative recontextualization, and broader incongruity theories on the recognition of patterns of scale or locational recontextualization, often alongside those identified in anomaly. Superiority and anti-dominance theories have tended to recognize positive repetition and patterns of scale, and even the popular theory that 'It's funny because it's true' (recently given scientific credibility by Robert Lynch of Rutgers University) exists because of the recognition of positive repetition.

"By examining humour through patterns it becomes clear why theorists and researchers have identified certain traits as humorous, although each has been restricted by attempting to identify a constituent element of that single type as the source of all humour. This has been impossible since thematic and perceptual issues relating to different media or formats of humour get in the way until humour is looked at as a whole. By removing content and culture from our analyses we have been able to achieve a distance from the material that has made this possible at last. As a consequence humour can finally be studied as a single faculty rather than a phenomenon caused by an ever-changing range of stimuli."

Details of the patterns recognized in humour and how they relate to more than a hundred sources of laughter are published in The Eight Patterns Of Humour, which is available as a free eBook from the publisher's website at www.pyrrhichouse.co.uk/eightpatterns until April 20th.

"Patterns are simple things constructed from any information, which has confused analysts for hundreds of years," says Clarke. "Unfortunately that confusion shows no signs of abating."