The Sources of Deaf Humor

An Exploration of the Reasons Deaf Humor Differs from That of Hearing People

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title Page</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Language-Related Jokes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Sign Language Puns</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bilingual Puns</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Modality Jokes</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Deaf Experience Jokes</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Zap Stories (Jokes About Hearing People)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Deaf Culture</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Visual Humor</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Jokes Circulated Within the Community</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Conclusion</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

As a student of linguistics, I have been exposed to information about the particulars of many different languages, extant and historical. Many times the purpose of these details was to provide for comparison samples of common characteristics of language and language change. Real world examples demonstrated the prevalence of one type of sentence structure over another, or the tendency of natural languages to select for ease of articulation and perceptual distinctiveness. Phoneme inventories were compared against each other, along with the rates of sound change in dissimilar geographic areas. There were also plenty of examples of rare or unique occurrences among the world’s languages, such as languages that could not be proven to be related to any other language, and occupy their very own language family. So of course, comprehensive linguistic instruction cannot fail to also include comparisons of language modalities. Though the vast majority of all languages use the auditory-phonetic channel, there are full, natural languages that use the visual-manual channel instead. These languages, usually called sign languages, are used primarily by the deaf population, who do not have the option of learning spoken language due to their inability to access auditory input.

After taking several courses that concentrated primarily on Deaf culture and sign languages – ASL (American Sign Language) in particular – it became increasingly clear that despite occupying the same geographic areas, the cultures of Deaf people and the hearing people surrounding them had huge disparities all across the world. One of the major differences that was emphasized in these courses was the unexpected revelation that something as basic to human nature as a sense of humor varied greatly between the Deaf and hearing people in a single community. Moreover, it wasn’t just the language barrier that existed between the two groups that caused an arbitrary divergence of humor styles. Instead, Deaf communities across the world
tended to have comparable joke characteristics to each other, and also tended to differ from their ambient hearing communities in similar ways.

I was led to wonder, what precisely were the recurrent patterns that appeared in Deaf humor? What jokes were regularly well-received and which ones always fell flat? Furthermore, what were the causes of those patterns? Though these sorts of cultural dissimilarities are to be expected to a certain point, this consistent degree of unity in the Deaf community suggested to me that there was something inherent in the modality of sign languages or the lifestyles of deaf people that lead to this effect. Further research supports both of these variables as sources of the phenomenon. Deaf humor can be divided into two main categories of jokes that require either knowledge of a sign language or knowledge of what it is like to be deaf in order to be fully enjoyed. These categories are: language-related jokes and Deaf experience jokes. The categories can be subdivided, but the majority of Deaf humor will fit into one or both of these classifications.

LANGUAGE-RELATED JOKES

1. Sign Language Puns

One of the most common types of language-based humor is the pun. There are various types of puns, and people can’t always agree on what qualifies, but the basic idea of a pun is a play on words that uses homophones or metaphors to suggest a humorous double meaning. This type of joke is very reliant on the language being used to deliver it. A set of homophones in one language is very likely not going to be replicated in any other language. Consequently, any translation of a joke that depends on two unrelated words sounding similar for its punchline will
fall flat in the new language. This effect is particularly noticeable, frequently causing people to lament about what important or entertaining information has been lost in translation. Similarly, languages tend to have their own unique collections of common idioms for people to use for their metaphorical imagery. These phrases often have meanings so specific and nuanced that they are difficult or impossible to describe to someone who did not grow up knowing what they meant or how to use them.

Here is an example of a common English pun:

_Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana._

This joke uses both homophonic and metaphorical material. The first sentences makes reference to the idiom “time flies,” meaning that time moves quickly. Time, of course, is not an object and cannot literally fly, but this phrase is used so commonly in English that the meaning would not be a mystery to anyone who heard it. However, other languages might not necessarily use the metaphor of flight to describe the speed at which time seems to pass, so the setup of this joke might already be perplexing. After hearing the first part, the listener is prepared to interpret the second part of the joke as a description of how a fruit moves, since the first sentence described how time moved. This however, is a misdirection. The word “flies” when it appears for the second time is not a verb, but a noun. The meaning of the word “like” has similarly changed. It is not a preposition, but a verb. The delight of this pun results from the audience realizing that it is not about airborne fruit, and is instead about the taste that the insects known as fruit flies have for bananas. If either one or both of these homophones were missing from the target language, the multiple meanings would be lost, and the listener would be left with a
bizarre impression of two unrelated sentences, one of which might be about the aerodynamics of a long, yellow fruit.

Though they use a different modality, sign languages also take advantage of double meanings for the purpose of creating humor. However, since sound has no significance in a manual language, the concept of a homophone works a bit differently. Words in spoken languages are made up of strings of phonemes, discrete units of sound characterized by parameters such as their place and manner of articulation. A homophone arises when two words have the same sequence of phonemes. Puns can even take the word play a step further and suggest double meanings from phrases, words, or even portions of words that sound similar but not identical, perhaps due to a single differing phoneme or an alternate phoneme order. Though sign languages do not make use of phonemes as they exist in spoken languages, there are parameters analogous to place and manner of articulation that can characterize any sign. The five parameters are: handshape, location, orientation, movement, and facial expression (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 27). A sign language equivalent of a homophone might be a sign where all or most of these parameters are identical.

For example, the sign in ASL for “I understand” involves placing your fist up by your temple, with the palm oriented toward the back, and flicking the index finger up. However, this sign can be altered in one parameter, handshape, so that the pinky flicks up instead of the index finger. This is a joke meant to imply that since the finger that is being used, the pinky, is little, the person making the sign only understands a little (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 55-56). This joke takes advantage not only of two similar-looking signs to create a second meaning, but of the metaphorical idea in ASL, and probably many other languages as well, that understanding is a
substance with a size that can be measured and compared to other degrees and instances of understanding.

Another pun, in the style of a riddle, makes use of two signs with identical handshapes, but creatively alters their movements in order to achieve a comedic effect.

*Question: Why do Deaf people love flying? (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 70)*

The answer uses a handshape called the I-L-Y handshape, named for its most recognizable function: communicating the phrase, “I love you.” This in itself is a clever bilingual reference to the fact that the first letters in those three English words, “I,” “love,” and “you,” are all represented in this handshape. The letter I in the ASL manual alphabet is formed by extending only the pinky finger from a closed fist shape. The letter L is formed by extending the thumb and index finger from that same fist shape. The letter Y is formed by extending the pinky and the thumb. So the I-L-Y handshape combines all of these, creating a shape that no longer looks much like a fist, with the thumb, index, and pinky fingers all extended, and the middle and ring fingers folded down over the palm.

When using this handshape to convey love, the signer would use the parameter of movement to complete the sign. Starting with the palm facing away from the signer, and holding the hand in front of the chest, the signer would move the hand toward the object receiving the declaration of love. This could be done toward a dog, sitting on the floor, meaning “I love that dog.” Or it could be directed toward the person the signer is conversing with, meaning “I love you.” It could even be intended for multiple targets, combined with a sweeping motion toward an entire audience, meaning “I love you all.” The handshape is the simplest part of this sign, with a great deal of
linguistic information being contained in the movement itself. This makes the pun that plays with this particular parameter especially expressive and clever, and it also doubles the source of enjoyment.

Half of the joke comes from the fact that the I-L-Y handshape is also the handshape for the sign for airplane, the method by which all humans, including Deaf people, fly. So from the very start, asking why a Deaf person loves to fly brings these two signs, which share a handshape, to mind. The second layer of the jokes relies on the movements used in the riddle’s answer. When using the sign for airplane, the I-L-Y handshape is oriented with the palm toward the floor, and the movement is just what you might expect from a plane. It moves up and across the signing space, like a plane taking off. In order to describe the path the plane took, the signer can take liberties with the movement, looping it around to indicate a wandering trajectory, or speeding it up to signify a particularly fast plane. So when answering this riddle, the signer will loop the hand around in this way, using the movement to show the act of flight itself, as well as to indicate, as the movement for sign for love is meant to do, the object of the signer’s love. Usually this movement would be directed toward a loved object, but in this case it is directed toward a loved concept, a concept which is itself being represented with movement.

This joke takes mere seconds to perform, yet all its layers of reference and complexity make it an especially successful pun. The bilingual reference to an English phrase, the “homophonic style nature between the signs for “love” and “plane,” and the self-referential, meta characteristics of the movement could each create a pun on its own, but all together they are exceptionally punny.
2. Bilingual Puns

Though many puns depend entirely on the language being used to convey them, some puns require an understanding of more than one language, and make use of homophones in one or both of the languages to achieve a humorous effect. A very common ASL/English bilingual pun is the story of the Deaf person at the railroad crossing.

*A Deaf man is driving along and stops at train tracks because barriers at the level-crossing of a railway are down. The train passes. He waits a long time, but the barriers don’t go up. So he gets out of his car and checks the control booth. Ah, the official there is asleep. The Deaf man writes a note, wakes the man, and hands him the note. The note says, “Please BUT.” The official just stares at the Deaf man.* (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 89)

In order to understand this joke, the listener must know that the sign for “but” in ASL starts with two crossed index fingers, which then simultaneously swing up and away from each other, much as the levers at a railway crossing would when the gates were being raised. The humor in this situation lies in the faulty translation of the Deaf person. The signs for “but” and the raising of the gate look very similar, taking the roles of the homophones in this joke by generating the double meaning. The Deaf man translated the less relevant variant, confusing the controller and surprising the listener. This joke works particularly well when spoken or written down, but could be told in either modality as long as the audience understands the implications of the written word “but” in English. The signer might even fingerspell it so that the audience can reach their
own conclusions about the connection between “but” and a request to open the gate, instead of seeing right away the similarity between the two signs.

The next joke, unlike the previous one, loses a great deal when spoken or written, and is best when signed due to the visual source of much of its humor. A talented storyteller or comedian could take the movements of this story, in particular the gestural rather than linguistic parts, and exaggerate them for comedic effect.

>A foreign man arrives at a hotel in London. He struggles to push open the door until a helpful porter shows him the word “Pull” written on the door. The man is grateful and understands that whenever he sees “Pull” on a door, he must do so. Once inside the hotel he struggles to pull open another door. The helpful porter comes to his aid again, this time showing him the word “Push” written on the door. The man is grateful and understands that whenever he sees “Push” on a door, he must do so to open it. Later the porter sees a great commotion in the lobby and pushes through the crowd to see the man straining and struggling, apparently trying to lift an entire wall. Written on the wall is the word “Lift.”
(Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 87-88)

The punchline of this joke relies on the absurd situation of this foreign man rather than the ability to translate a particular word from English to ASL, but it still counts as a bilingual joke, because knowledge of both English and a signed language is necessary to experience it. The occurrence described here is naturally impossible. The man is foreign, and it is implied that he knows no English, or else he would not have had trouble opening the first two doors, which were
labeled with the relatively basic words “push” and “pull.” Yet when he encounters the sign that says “lift” he somehow knew the meaning of the English word without the porter’s help. Specifically, he knew that the word referred to the action of lifting something, but not that it has another meaning in British English, and that it is another word for elevator. The wall in the lobby that he was trying to lift was presumably the wall where the elevators were located, and they were presumably the barrier he was attempting overcome, though he did not endeavor to lift the elevator doors and instead attacked the wall itself. These incongruities all contribute to the absurdity of the situation, but they are not its true source. The most ridiculous premise of all is the idea that a full grown man, who has traveled all the way to another country, utilizing various forms of transportation and passing through congested hubs such as train stations and airports, had not already realized that there were some doors that required pushing and that others required pulling. Silliest of all, he seemed to be unfamiliar with the very concept of walls, which are inherently immovable and must therefore have doors inserted into them so that you may pass through them.

Most likely, the only audience capable of really appreciating this joke are British signers. As was addressed earlier, along with the foreign man’s many inconsistencies, the punchline of the joke requires enough knowledge of British English to realize that the “lift” sign the foreign man is seeing refers to an elevator. In other countries, where “lift” means only the action of picking something up, the elaborate setup may be wasted on an audience that doesn’t understand why any door would be labeled with the word “lift” in the first place. This joke could theoretically be told in an entertaining way in any sign language, since the comedic style relies only on the modality of sign and not specifically BSL (British Sign Language). However, the signers who
are familiar with British English are most likely restricted to Britain, meaning that the target audience is rather limited.

3. Modality Jokes:

Puns are not the only type of joke that can take advantage of the modality of sign languages in order to generate humor. In some very witty, self-aware jokes, modality is not only a factor, it is a punchline all on its own. A BSL story signed by Richard Carter uses this element, among several others, to tell an amusing tale about a little girl and her snow globe.

It’s Christmas Eve. A little girl picks up a snow globe. She shakes it and suddenly gets sucked inside—into the snow globe world. She walks through this new, snowy world and finds a house. She wipes off the window pane so she can peer inside. Father Christmas is sitting there, reading the newspaper. Time is passing—it’s nearly midnight on December 24. Outside, his long-suffering reindeer is waiting, pawing the ground. The little girl hides and watches. Finally, the reindeer taps on the window, and, once he has gotten Father Christmas’s attention, he signs, YOU LOOK-AT-THE-TIME! LATE COME-ON! READY WORK GET-UP. READY CHISTMAS. WILL LATE COME-ON! Father Christmas jumps to it and puts on his hearing aid, pockets his mobile communicator, and jumps into his sleigh. He picks up the reins and is ready to go. The exasperated reindeer reminds him to use his magic powder. Father Christmas sprinkles some over the reindeer, whose nose starts to glow. Off goes the sleigh, flying through the sky on its way to deliver presents. (Sutton Spence & Napoli 2011: 237-238)
Though a written representation of this story makes clear the cultural references, like the relationship between reindeer, Father Christmas, and Christmas Day, or the suggestion that Father Christmas might be a deaf old man who signs, there are modality-specific jokes that are not apparent. This story calls for a suspension of disbelief from the very beginning, when a little girl gets sucked into a snow globe, so normally the audience would not question the fact that a reindeer can sign, even though he does not have hands. However, the signer has addressed this question in a clever way. In both ASL and BSL, the sign for reindeer is two open, flat hands with the fingers separate and extended placed on either side of the head, thumbs touching the temples. It is as close of an approximation to antlers that a human being could use hands to make. So, initially, when the signer puts his hands to his head in this manner, the viewer will interpret his hands as antlers. However, the reindeer needs to sign somehow, so the storyteller uses his head as the location for all the signs the reindeer uses. It will become clear very quickly that the reindeer is using his antlers (which look a lot like hands after all) to sign.

The audience has already suspended their disbelief at the start of this story, so this explanation of the reindeer’s signing ability is not necessary. It is included, however, because it is an entertaining idea about sign language modality, similar to the ones we might find in a similar spoken story with an anthropomorphized animal as an interactive, communicative character (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2011: 239). Many children’s stories and jokes contain speaking animals, but this is so common that it is never questioned (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 43). The habitual blind eye we turn to this feature of stories allows it to be reintroduced into jokes as an unexpected element. For instance, consider the following joke:
Three racehorses were in their paddock reminiscing over their greatest racing victories. “Of my last five races, I have won three,” boasted the first horse.

“That’s nothing,” said the second horse, “Out of my last ten races I have won seven.” “Well,” said the third horse, “let me tell you that out of my last twenty races I have won fifteen.” Just then, a greyhound who had been dozing in the sunshine nearby raised his head and said, “Out of my last 100 races, I have won them all.” The horses looked at each other in astonishment. “Well, I never!” exclaimed one, finally. “A talking dog!” (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 10-11)

The listener is initially led to believe that the punch line of the joke will be in the content of the racehorses’ conversation, related to the number of races each of them has won. Their ability to speak is not questioned, yet the punch line turns out to be how ridiculous it is for the dog to be able to speak, since we all know that animals do not speak in real life. Another level of humor is added by the fact that the horses do not realize the irony of their reaction.

While the aforementioned reindeer’s ability to speak is not supposed to surprise the audience, attention is continuously brought to the reality of animals’ general lack of articulators, so they must make do with what they have. An equivalent example in spoken language would be a story where a snake character speaks especially sibilantly. Snakes clearly do not have all the necessary apparatuses to produce human-like sounds with their mouths, but if they could, their speech would probably sound a great deal like the noises they are already able to make. Just like a reindeer clearly does not have hands to sign with, but if he could sign, it would be with the most hand-like structures he had available to him.
Jokes like these, which are based in anthropomorphization, have a more frivolous feel to them, since it is most commonly a feature in children’s stories. However, an awareness of the modality they use to communicate can be a very important realization for Deaf people because it is the main feature that distinguishes them from the majority population that surrounds them. Adults who have come to terms with this fact make jokes about it by comparing hearing to sight and making equivalencies between the behaviors of hearing and Deaf people. For example:

A Deaf couple have an argument. The woman gets heated and begins moving her hands in a larger path than normal. The husband then signs, “NOT NEED YELL. I DEAF NOT BLIND.” (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2011: 245)

Unsurprisingly, a larger signing space is the sign language equivalent of yelling. It can be seen from a greater distance in the same way that louder voices can be heard from farther away, and it corresponds with the lack of control angry people often have over their utterances, which are usually exaggerated and unnecessarily intense. So the husband in this example has not made an inaccurate comparison. It is the conclusion he draws from this comparison that is comical. His wife’s behavior might be the equivalent of yelling, but he acts as though she is actually yelling out loud, which would be pointless, since he is deaf and would not be able to hear her. Therefore, though she is really signing, his conclusion is that her berating him is pointless, because he is deaf, not blind. According to him, a blind person would be the one more affected by yelling. He is, of course, wrong in this case, since the yelling is in fact visual, so a blind person would be affected least of all.
One of the most important things about modality is not simply the body parts which are used as articulators, but how using those articulators might interfere with or be interfered with by the other uses humans might have for them. People are generally very aware that speaking and eating at the same time are rather difficult because the two functions interfere with each other. This has been dealt with in most cases by a cultural taboo on speaking with a full mouth, or by warnings from parents that doing this is dangerous and may cause choking. Chewing does not put the same limitations on signing, but there are other drawbacks that signers have to contend with that speakers do not. Signing may become impossible when carrying too many things, when performing dirty tasks that leave residues on the hands, or even just when it gets dark. These are realities of the modality that may be troublesome, but can also be the source of lighthearted mockery in the same way that spit-takes are in American culture and cinema. There is one particularly famous joke where difficulties with the modality is the punch line. There are many different versions of this joke in several sign languages, but they all end the same way.

_A huge giant is stalking through a small village of wee people, who are scattering throughout the streets, trying to escape the ugly creature. The giant notices one particularly beautiful blonde-haired girl scampering down the cobblestone street. He stretches out his clumsy arm and sweeps up the girl, then stares in wonder at the slight shivering figure in his palm. “You are so beautiful!” he exclaims. The young woman looks up in fear. “I would never hurt you,” he signs. “I love you. I think we should get MARRIED.”_ (Bienvenu 1994: 20)
The sign for marriage in ASL, unfortunately for the beautiful girl, involves the dominant hand dropping down on the upturned non-dominant hand and the two hands clasping together. The giant signs without considering the limitations of the modality and ends up crushing the girl between his hands. This same joke exists in BSL, but the sign for marriage instead involves turning the non-dominant hand over so that the dominant hand can pinch the top of the ring finger, as if adorning it with a wedding ring (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 84). In this version, the girl takes a very long fall from the giant’s hand instead of getting crushed, but both outcomes are undesirable for her.

Ultimately, the difficulties and benefits of sign language are analogous to those of spoken language. Neither modality is useful in every situation; a signer cannot communicate if both hands are occupied, and a speaker cannot communicate with a full mouth. However, both modalities are capable of being used creatively to generate humor, and can in fact be the fodder for language and culture-specific jokes.

DEAF EXPERIENCE JOKES

4. Zap Stories (Jokes About Hearing People)

Sign language is the avenue by which most Deaf people encounter most of their humor. It is difficult to develop or understand humor in a non-native language, and humor is a social experience, so it is really only by gathering together in groups that the Deaf community can experiment with comedy and storytelling (Bienvenu 1994: 16). In fact, it is crucial for deaf children to be exposed to Deaf adults, as they will not start to properly develop a sense of humor or engage with word play until they begin to learn it from the people around them (Bouchauveau
1994: 24). Jokes stemming from Deaf culture, however, do not need to be delivered in sign language in order for Deaf people to find them funny. These concepts can be portrayed in any language, signed or spoken, and will appeal to any Deaf person who understands that language simply because the jokes describe situations that Deaf people can identify with.

Many of these jokes have to do with interactions with hearing people and the common types of ignorance, microaggressions, and outright discrimination they encounter. As an oppressed minority, a relatively large amount of their humor deals with ridiculing the behavior of hearing people and finding a release for their frustrations and challenges through comedy. This is often done by telling stories, often called zap stories, where a Deaf person manages to one-up a hearing person who has mistreated them, or where a hearing person simply acts so foolishly that the Deaf person does not need to intervene in order to see the hearing person humiliated (Bienvenu 1994: 20).

For instance, it is quite the taboo for an interpreter to seek attention or praise for their use of sign language. Any attempt to profit monetarily or socially from the language or culture of another group is blatant cultural appropriation and the Deaf community understandably does not take well to it. One typical zap story has to do with an incident where an interpreter was drawing attention to himself and away from his clients, so some of the event’s Deaf participants tricked him into interpreting a joke for the entire assembly. The man telling the joke gradually made the joke dirtier and dirtier until it was blatantly filthy and graphic, forcing the interpreter to find words for increasingly embarrassing things as he tried to remain professional (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 12).

Other jokes of this type require no trickery from Deaf people. In one story, a foolish hearing man walks up to a Deaf man at a bus stop and begins talking to him. The Deaf man signs that he
is deaf, which is done in ASL by touching the index finger first to the corner of the mouth and then to the ear. So the hearing man walks around to the Deaf man’s other side and tries to speak into the ear that wasn’t used to sign DEAF (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 22). This story is especially silly because it assumes that the hearing man knows the sign for DEAF, but doesn’t realize that it means the other man is deaf in both ears. Though these stories are embarrassing, they are fairly lighthearted. Zap stories frequently have to do with Deaf people dealing with much more serious situations of discrimination by hearing people.

Humor is often a crucial coping technique for those in the Deaf community who have had to deal with real struggles against oppression. Many children who were deaf growing up were denied access to language itself by the destructive push for oralism. Oralism was the main method of educating deaf children for over a hundred years, and was based in the idea that banning sign language from the classroom would remove the temptation to rely on easier forms of communication, thereby encouraging students to try harder and become more proficient in speech and lipreading. In reality, the effects were to confuse the students, who had no way of clarifying the information they were given and were not even able to engage in linguistic play, a crucial step in the development of language skills of any kind. Humor, often used behind the instructors’ backs in these oralist schools, was a way to relieve stress and survive the oralist experience (Ladd 2003: 310). Simply letting out their frustrations, through mockery, about the hearing teachers who tormented them was a cathartic experience. Many adults who went through oralist schooling still enjoy the irony of jokes where oralism is portrayed favorably, because the idea is so absurd to them, who know it to really be a form of oppression (Bienvenu 1994: 20).

Considering the sorts of things most deaf people have been put through by the unrealistic and selfish expectations of hearing society, it is no wonder that zap stories are such a popular
5. Deaf Culture

Though learning to deal with hearing people is a big part of life as a Deaf person, there are many other shared experiences that can be used in comedy to bring Deaf people together and strengthen the sense of community. They can all identify with each other’s struggles, and they can be brought together by humor outlining those struggles. Perhaps they never realized that other deaf people had to deal with similar silly issues in their daily lives, so communicating even small details about those moments can relieve feelings of isolation and embarrassment and let them know that they had even more in common with each other than they may have previously realized (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 9). A quote from Deaf comedian Hal Draper about one of his performances perfectly explains that feeling of relief.

_The big thing about the all-Deaf audiences was the way they identified with the experiences and so they laughed. They could sit and watch and laugh and think, “Yes, I remember the same thing happening to me before.” Also, for some Deaf people who were new to the Deaf community, it brought out lots of things from deep inside about themselves. They watched things being performed that they felt embarrassed about and realized, “I am not the only one who’s had this problem—all Deaf people have this problem.” So in some ways the show was about humor and laughter but in other ways it was a little bit of therapy for some Deaf people who found their identity._ (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 9)
The Deaf experience is so universal that even when Deaf people from around the world gather together, they are able to find ways to communicate across their language barriers and begin making friends through humor, even when international groups of hearing people with a shared language are still awkwardly making polite conversation (Bouchauveau 1994: 25). They can understand each other’s jokes about the disadvantages and benefits of being unable to hear.

There is one classic joke with numerous variations, which is so popular that it was even made into a Superbowl commercial by Pepsi. One of the more traditional versions involved a Deaf couple going on their honeymoon.

_A Deaf couple has just arrived at the motel for their honeymoon. They start unpacking for the night, and then the nervous husband goes out to get a drink._

_When he returns to the motel, he realizes that he as forgotten his room number._

_Because it is dark outside and all the rooms look alike, he walks out to his car and continues to honk the horn until the rooms start lighting up with angry hearing boarders who were awakened by the noise—all but one room, where his Deaf wife is waiting for him!_ (Bienvenu 1994: 19)

This is the type of joke that the Deaf community prefers. They have heard enough from hearing people about what a terrible disability they have and how they’re at such a disadvantage. In this story, the tables are turned and it is a benefit to be deaf (Bienvenu 1994: 19). All the hearing people are grumpy at being awakened by a sound that a deaf person could sleep soundly through, and the Deaf husband is able to use his deafness as a tool in order to gain information.
Of course there are also stories about mistakes and miscommunications caused by being deaf or hard of hearing, but even in those stories, it is hard to feel bad for the characters who have been affected.

A Deaf man visited his doctor for a check-up. A week later the doctor saw the Deaf man walking down the street with a beautiful woman on his arm and a huge grin on his face. The doctor said to the Deaf man, “I see you’re feeling well.” The Deaf man replied, “Yes, I followed your advice. I got a hot mamma and I am cheerful.” The doctor shook his head. “No, no. I said, ‘You have a heart murmur. Be careful.’” (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 15)

On the one hand, this sort of miscommunication could, and most likely often does, generate a great deal of trouble and create dangerous conditions for patients who cannot properly converse with their physicians. On the other hand, in this story at least, the Deaf man seems quite happy. The actions he has taken will not necessarily aggravate his heart condition. In fact, a cheerful, stress-free life might do him some good. But this sort of situation is all too common for deaf people, not only in the very specific realm of lipreading mistakes, but also as a result of poor accommodations or cultural misunderstandings. This sort of lighthearted joke may be a comfort to Deaf people who have experienced this sort of incident many times over, and may not have seen such a harmless outcome result from it.

Although it is fine to make jokes about the disadvantages of not being able to hear, the Deaf community is understandably unhappy when jokes are made at their expense. For example, a book called Hazards of Deafness by Roy Holcomb chooses to portray Deaf people who feel
tormented by their deafness. Instead of coming out on top, like the Deaf couple did in the honeymoon story, these Deaf people find that they joke is always on them, even if the inconvenience being described is not one that Deaf people would even ever have to deal with. A scene from his book illustrates:

"A Deaf person is having a difficult time vacuuming the carpet. He goes over the same spot of dirt repeatedly, to no avail. In a fit of frustration, he turns around and notices that the machine is unplugged." (Bienvenu 1994: 19)

Clearly, this is not a situation that would ever occur in real life. The strong vibrations of a vacuum cleaner are impossible to miss, and no amount of deafness can create the illusion that a completely motionless vacuum cleaner is operating. The Deaf community as a whole generally disapproves of this kind of humor, which sounds more like the ignorant ideas of a hearing person outside the community than that of a deaf person (Bienvenu 1994: 19).

Perhaps due to their visual interaction with the world and being forced to confront some difficult and ugly truths, Deaf communication tends to be very candid. Descriptions of people are graphic and accurate, in a way that might offend a hearing person. A fat friend is not “overweight,” “heavy,” or “plus-sized.” A signed depiction of this person would involve an outline of their shape, exactly as it is, so that people who rely on their vision are getting an accurate visual description that they can use to identify the person they’re looking for. Even clearly unpleasant traits are often used to tease friends and family (Ladd 2003: 365). Sometimes descriptions of individuals are best portrayed by imitations that are superficially reminiscent of mockery, and which may in some situations be put to that very use. Deaf children learn very
quickly how to visually imitate others. This is used not only in teasing, but in creating realistic characters during storytelling (Bienvenu 1994: 18) and in mocking individuals such as hearing people who are part of an outgroup (Bienvenu 1994: 17). The Deaf community takes pride in their frankness as well as in their storytelling abilities and the cultural and historical significance storytelling has within the community.

6. Visual Humor

There are real differences between experiencing the world with sound and experiencing the world in silence. Most of the implications are linguistic, since deafness causes barriers in communication with the majority hearing population, but even the less important consequences can have a huge impact on humor. Silence can cause normally serious situations to seem hilarious, while auditory jokes that cause hearing people to laugh hysterically may cause no emotional reaction in a deaf person, even if they understand them (Bienvenu 1994: 17-18). For instance, a deaf person would not have access to humor stemming from the production of silly sounds, such as the eternally immature and yet always popular fart joke. Any person who could not hear a small sound like that would not be able to tell why everyone in the vicinity suddenly started laughing. A deaf person could go to see a movie, and even with subtitles and descriptions of the relevant sounds, the comedic effect of an adolescent voice crack or throat being cleared in an otherwise quiet room would be lost them. In other situations, such as a dramatic moment being augmented by soaring, orchestral music or an emotional scene made all the more heart-wrenching by the cries of a distraught character, the loss of these sounds generates a humorous effect. Deaf people often laugh at inappropriate moments during a movie due to the outrageous
facial expressions the characters make in response to stimuli or emotional cues that the deaf viewer does not have access to (Bienvenu 1994: 18).

These variations in emotional response are not due to a different cultural sense of humor, or an inability to understand a joke, but are rather due to the inherently different comedic experience of responding to a world without sound. When a group of hearing people were asked to watch King Kong with the mute on, they laughed in all the same places a group of deaf people would. When people in the movie were screaming and fleeing for their lives in the shadow of an enormous ape, the audience laughed instead of feeling tense. When asked why they were laughing, they responded that the terrified faces people made seemed ridiculously overdone when not paired with the sounds of screams and dramatic music (Bienvenu 1994: 18). In this way, hearing people can come to understand some of the visual nature of Deaf humor simply by consuming certain types of media without the sound normally associated with it.

Certain forms of popular media already exist that do not rely on sound for most of their effect. When Saturday morning cartoons were still primarily slapstick style, deaf children watching television could easily understand what was going on and enjoy the visual nature of the humor in those shows. Some of the older cartoons had no dialogue in them at all, so apart from a missing bang, whack, or splash here and there, the experience of the deaf child watching that program was probably not too different from the one of the hearing child. Similar to the example of hearing people watching a muted movie, this is another instance demonstrating that purely visual humor can have the same effect on deaf and hearing people in the absence of sound. It’s possible that this style of humor is more inherent in humans than the primarily learned styles that make up the majority of Deaf humor.
7. Jokes Circulated Within the Community

A final type of joke that can be seen moving around in a community is simply one that has been told so many times that everyone knows it. This kind of joke does not necessarily need to rely on aspects of the Deaf experience, whether it be language, culture, or sound-related, in order to make its impact. Certainly most of the jokes that arise within a Deaf community will draw on the details of life for its members, but the punch line is not always required to be based on those particular features. For example:

*A man gets home late from work and quickly grabs a cup of tea, walks the dog, throws a load of washing into the washing machine before rushing out to the pub to meet his friends. On his way there he realizes he has lost his cochlear implant hearing aid but decides not to look for it because he will be with his signing friends. He is signing happily with his friends when suddenly his head spins round and round. Then it stops as suddenly as it began and he carries on chatting. Twice more that evening, his head spins uncontrollably and he goes home worried that he may be unwell. He takes his washing out of the machine and in one of the shirts finds the magnet of his cochlear implant.* (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 16-17)

This joke, while having a Deaf main character and using props from his everyday life in that role, does not require an intricate knowledge of Deaf life in order to understand it. Instead, the punch line relies on the ridiculous idea that a magnet in a washing machine can affect the feeling in the head of a person with the corresponding magnet in a pub far away. It is simply a funny
story with a main character that is relatable to the audience and a punch line similar to one any other silly joke might have.

Another similar joke relies on a Deaf character, and differentiates his behavior from that of the other characters, but does not make any claims or statements about Deaf culture or the Deaf experience. He acts the same way any character might act in the punchline of a funny story from any culture.

A blind man goes to a barber for a haircut. The barber cuts his hair and then refuses payment, saying he’s doing community service for the handicapped this week. The next morning the barber finds a thank you card and a dozen roses at his shop.

Later a man in wheelchair comes in for a haircut. The barber cuts his hair and then refuses payment, saying he’s doing community service for the handicapped this week. The next morning the barber finds a thank you card and a box of a dozen muffins waiting at his shop.

Later a Deaf man comes for a haircut. The barber cuts his hair and then refuses payment, saying he’s doing community service for the handicapped this week. The next morning he finds a dozen Deaf people waiting at his door. (Sutton-Spence & Napoli 2009: 18)

This joke references issues that the Deaf community regularly addresses with their humor, but those sorts of stances aren’t taken here. Deaf people don’t think of themselves as handicapped, so normally in a joke like this, the hearing barber would have found himself being
humiliated, certainly in a more dramatic way than having to give out a dozen free haircuts. And though the Deaf people in this joke are taking advantage of the barber, the behavior they’re exhibiting does not seem particularly unique to the Deaf community. The setup of the joke is classic. Two individuals follow a pattern, and the last one breaks it in some absurd way for comedic effect. The blind man gives a dozen roses, the man in the wheelchair gives a dozen muffins, and the Deaf man gives a dozen referrals. This example takes elements from Deaf life to fill out a timeless joke template that will cycle around groups of Deaf people and entertain them, but which is not so different from the hearing humor we are used to.

CONCLUSION

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that human beings are not born with an innate sense of humor that will not grow or change over time. Children must be exposed to adults and experience comical interactions with them, as well as learn at least one language natively and understand its intricacies in order to engage in linguistic play. Even as basic as language and humor are to the human condition, they are still learned behaviors. Living as they do in a silent world, deaf children and adults will inevitably find humor in situations where auditory input is not a necessity. They will also interact with each other on the basis of their life experiences, which as deaf individuals, means they will have that much more in common to commiserate and joke about. The patterns that emerge in the humor styles of deaf communities around the world are remarkably uniform. They undoubtedly differ by location due to geographic area and major cultural input from the ambient hearing community, but for the most part, the things they have in common unite them on a more basic level than race or nationality. Through their shared
languages and life experiences, Deaf people bond with each other to create an incredibly tight-knit community where they can find refuge and fulfillment in a world that tends to view them as incomplete.
Bibliography


