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## COMICAL CONTRASTS – THE EASIEST ROUTE TO HUMOR CREATION

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I sometimes think about one of my teachers, a brilliant mathematician, who lived only partially in the ordinary world. One day one of his colleagues died, and a funeral was scheduled for the next morning. All the teachers showed up at the funeral dressed in their formal mourning attire and so did the mathematician. But he had forgotten to put on the appropriate shoes and was wearing his sandals instead.

This teacher is a classic example of involuntary humor! He did what many patients are afraid to do in their everyday lives: to look ridiculous because they have involuntarily integrated into their global appearance some elements that may be incompatible with the normative expectations of social conduct. The stuttering reverend, the blushing teacher, the TV announcer who is short of breath, the cop with a blinking tic, are other examples of this type of behavior. All these individuals stand in contrast to the role expectations of adulthood. Because this contrast is involuntary, those who display it tend to suffer from it. Viktor Frankl was the first to recommend that such individuals should voluntarily create exactly those contrasts that are the source of their suffering. In other words: individuals who can consciously intend not to be perfect performers of all of the role constraints associated with adulthood become humorists by default! They enter the imperfect world of humor, which is constituted of comical contrasts that can be seen as quite amusing – once such contrasts are accepted and approved of!

Some years ago I gave a lecture on the topic of comical contrasts. After I completed my presentation, a young man approached me. He introduced himself as an assistant physician working in a big hospital. He shared that he had to present an address to all the hospital's staff the very next day: "It's

always the same with me. I start speaking in a relatively inconspicuous way. Then the tension begins to overwhelm me. My heart rate increases, my respiration gets shorter and my rational thinking goes off course. I suffer from severe stress! Now how can humor help me to overcome this terrible inhibition?”, he asked me. “I give you this advice”, I replied. “The easiest solution is to create a humoristic contrast. When you feel the tension coming over you, simply stick your tongue out of your mouth. Then you should tell your audience that you will be continuing your lecture with alternative means.”

The young man was pretty astonished, but he nodded his head. He called me two days later and reported that he had done exactly what I had suggested: “When I felt the tension building up, I stuck my tongue between my teeth and declared that I now would continue my speech in a less formal way. The audience burst out laughing! Then the miracle happened: my tension disappeared almost immediately!”

## **Comical Contrasts**

The basic principle of humor creation is the comical contrast. All clowns are proving this! Grock, the “King of Clowns”, appeared in 1911 for the first time with an incredibly huge suitcase on the stage. All that this suitcase contained was a tiny violin. This comical contrast since then has been copied by generations of other clowns. Thus, the confessing humorist is treading in the rationally structured world of adulthood as well as in the intellectually disorganized world of a child. In psychoanalytic terms, this person is concurrently taking into account secondary and primary processes. Humor emerges when a person is flexible enough to be a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde at the cognitive level, to be both, a Nobel prize winner and an idiot! This type of “switching” allows for contradictory elements to come together within the creative mix. Furthermore, when people express themselves verbally as highly educated individuals while behaving in unconstrained or even naughty ways at the level of body language, this also constitutes a comical contrast.

Comical contrasts are at work when:

- an employee describes his manager’s professional qualities with admiring words while simultaneously rolling his eyes;
- an individual speaks unctuously about the benefits of celibacy while gesticulating in an obscene manner;
- someone confesses to being very anxious while imitating the posture of King Kong and speaking in a loud voice;

- a person states that he is the most powerful figure in his corporation while whispering and hiding his face in his hands.

These types of comical contrasts were extensively practiced by comedians in ancient Greece and in Shakespearean times.

Of course it is also possible to produce comical contrasts at a purely verbal level as illustrated in the following examples:

- “Here is a piece of scholastic wisdom: A soft fart wets the pants!”
- “Out of the greatest respect for you I dare to ask: May I kick you in the pants?”
- “Eternal nothingness is okay if you are dressed appropriately” (W. Allen).
- “Existential being could be a big illusion. If so, I definitely paid too much for my carpet” (W. Allen).
- “It is statistically proofed that one-third of mankind is incredibly stupid. Okay, that might be true. But what about the other third?”
- “It might be true that God does not exist, but try to find a plumber on a weekend!” (W. Allen)

As the forecited examples show, comical contrasts are created when the one-sidedness of regulated adult behavior is supplemented with the idiosyncrasies of one’s inner child. Here are more examples:

- The boss looks reproachfully at his wristwatch because. By doing this he intends to indicate that an employee showed up to late for a conference. This employee naively asks: “Is this watch suitable for diving?”
- The new employee greets one of his colleagues in the cafeteria in a very friendly way, but the colleague does not respond. However, the employee won’t be put off! He repeats his greeting in a higher voice pitch while stretching his words and exhibiting a beaming face: “Gooood Mooorniiiiing, Sir!” Now the colleague responds with a faint smile face and begins an obliging conversation!
- A secretary is clattering with the coffee things. Her boss barks: “Not so loud, this noise is driving me crazy!” The secretary reacts with a beatific smiling: “I love it when powerful men are tough with me!”

- An employee comes into very close contact with the young secretary in the elevator. She screams with a twinkle in her eyes: “Mommy, Mommy, a bad man has touched me!”

## **The Schlemiel**

To practice comical contrasting, we need to get off the freeway of logical thinking and take the exit to stupidity as often as possible. However, we need to return as soon as possible! Otherwise, we would be idiots, not humorists. Arthur Koestler called this process “bisociation”, or playing with stupidity in an intelligent way. The Munich stand-up comedian Karl Valentin once said: “I am going to visit me. I do hope that I will be home!” On one occasion someone said to Valentin: “Do you know that Herr Meyer has died?” Valentin replied: “Oh, that’s the reason why he shows up so rarely!”

In Jewish humor, the “schlemiel” is the classic example for this intelligent stupidity. This is described in the following story:

- In the 16. Century the Pope had decided to drive all the members of the Jewish community out of Rome. Of course, this created tremendous desperation! The Jews delivered a petition to the Pope and asked him to be lenient with them. They reminded him of the fact that their ancestors first came to Rome in the time of Saint Paul and that successive generations of Jews had since called the Eternal City their home. The Pope now felt a little bad about his decision. So he offered to have a theological debate with one of the Jewish rabbis. Because he feared that he might be confronted with a Talmudic luminary, he decided that the debate would be nonverbal! However, the Jews could not find a single rabbi who would dare to debate the mighty Pontifex Maximus. Finally one of the synagogue servants agreed to do the job.

On the arranged day, the Pope appeared with all his cardinals, who sat on his right side of the Pope. The Jewish scribes sat on the Pope’s left side. Then the debate started. The Pope stepped forward, raised his right hand to the sky, and stretched out his forefinger. The schlemiel pointed his right forefinger down at the floor. The Pope then immediately raised his right hand again with his finger outstretched. The schlemiel stretched three fingers of his right hand.

After giving it some thought, the Pope then took an apple and held it up. Without hesitating, the schlemiel grabbed a Jewish flat bread out of his basket and held it up.

The Pope stood there quietly for a while, then turned to the Jews and said, “You may stay!”

The Pope returned to his office with his cardinals, all of whom were completely horrified. What had happened? Nobody could understand. The Pope declared: “This rabbi was theologically on the top. When I raised up my finger, this meant ‘there is only one God’. But the rabbi pointed with his finger down in the direction of hell. This indicated ‘there is a devil too’. What could I say? This is our good Catholic belief. So he won that round. Then I raised up my finger again to indicate that God is mightier than the devil. And what does the rabbi do? He raises three fingers, referring to the Holy Trinity. And this, again, is our Catholic dogma! Then I tried to test his faith by showing him an apple, the symbol of the heretic theory that the Earth is round. And what does he do? He shows me his flat bread, which indicates that the Earth is flat – again confirming our good Catholic belief. This man is really a master of theological debating. I had no chance!”

Meanwhile, the Jews gathered at the synagogue, and were also completely astonished. They asked the schlemiel about the meaning of the debate. The schlemiel answered, “The whole thing was a complete farce! First the Pope raised his finger to indicate ‘You be kicked out from Rome’ but I pointed my finger to the floor which indicated that we will stay. Then he raised his finger again, meaning that we would be thrown out anyway. I raised three fingers, meaning ‘You may tell me this three times, but we will stay’. Then he showed me his snack and I showed him my snack.”

- A schlemiel was feeling depressed and decided to commit suicide by hanging himself. While in the process, a friend came into his room and saw him standing there with a rope around his waist, so he asked him what he was trying to do. The schlemiel answered that he was in the midst of killing himself. But if you are killing yourself”, asked the friend, “why do you have the rope around your waist?”

“Well”, said the schlemiel, “when I put the rope around my neck, it started to choke me”.

- A schlemiel was lying on his deathbed so he called his wife and said, “Sara, put on your makeup, your most beautiful dress, and all of your jewelry.” Sara did what her husband requested, but asked him, “Why did you want me to dress me up like this?”

“Oh”, said the schlemiel, “you know the death angel will appear soon. Perhaps he will like you more than he likes me!”

- A French aristocrat came to visit James Rothschild, the legendary tycoon and confessing schlemiel, in his bank. Rothschild offered him a chair and said: “Sit down please, I’ll be at your disposal in one moment.” The aristocrat became

very indignant: “Sir! Don’t you know, I am the Duke of M.!” – “Marvellous! In this case you may take two chairs.”

### **Contrasting biological functions with uncommon job titles**

Comical contrasts can be used as a means of defending oneself against rhetorical attacks. This can be done by matching specific bodily functions on the one hand with uncommon job titles on the other hand, as in the following scenario.

A very attractive secretary suffered from various suggestive sexist remarks made by her male colleagues. However, the remarks stopped completely after the woman made use of this counterattack tactic which she had practiced in one of our workshops

- “You look very hot today I really could eat you up!” – “Fantastic perspiration, Mr. Chorusmaster!”
- “May I invite you to my new jacuzzi tonight?” – “Perfect metabolism, Honorable Curator!”
- “Do you use silicon?” – “Enviably breathing capacity, dear Administrator!”

### **Inappropriate Proverbs**

A simple method for deflecting verbal attacks is to respond with an inappropriate proverb. This method was first described by Barbara Berckhan (2001), who made use of the old Zen tradition of giving idiotic replies to apparently intelligent questions. The following examples utilize Russian proverbs. The advantage of using these proverbs is that they are hardly known, which increases their absurd effect. Of course, it is also possible to use more familiar proverbs. Here are some matchings using Russian proverbs:

- “You always want to be the focus of attention!” – “Any fish is good if it is on the hook.”
- “Do you buy your clothes in the supermarket?” – “Beware of a quiet dog and still water!”
- “Have we surpassed the level of your intellectual capacity?” – “Onion treats seven ailments.”

- "When you don't have the faintest idea, you should keep quiet!" – "Do not carry rubbish out of your hut!"

## **"No na"**

There are sophisticated Yiddish jokes that do a take-off on the Talmudic tradition for proving things indirectly or *ex contrario*, i. e., by arguing the opposite. These jokes start with the term "no na", which refers to a realm of meaning spanning from "so what" or "yes but" to "come on!", "enough already!", or "not this way" - thus triggering a bunch of comical contrasts. Here are some examples:

- Itzik spent the night as a guest in Schmuel's house. The next morning, he complained, "I couldn't sleep last night. The fleas were dancing all over the bedroom!"  
Schmuel replied: "No na, did you think I will have the opera come to dance for you?"
- Schmuel went to the hospital and was given an enema. So he immediately started screaming.  
"Is it too hot?", the doctor asks.  
"No na, it's too sweet!"
- Itzik and Schmuel are walking down the street while engaged in a lively conversation. As they were walking, Schmuel suddenly fell down into an open drain pit. Itzik didn't notice this because he was fully absorbed by the conversation. When he noticed that his comrade was absent, he walked back until he reached the pit. "Did you fall in there?" he asked.  
"No na, maybe I'm living here!"
- Schmuel wanted to get off the train, but he stumbled and fell on his *toches* (butt).  
"Did you fall down?", asked a compassionate passerby.  
"No na, that's the way I always exit the train!"
- Schmuel was visiting Itzik when he screamed: "There's a bug on the wall!"  
Itzik replied: "No na, because of you're here I'll hang a Rembrandt on the wall!"
- Two travellers are sitting in the train compartment as the train starts moving.

First traveller: "It seems that the train is moving."  
"No na, it's just the scenery passing by!"

There is a good practice exercise I use in my humor workshops that helps in the creation of comical contrast. It involves sharing an interesting cartoon with the humor workshop trainees. The cartoon shows a woman sunbathing at the beach who is accosted by a would-be Latin lover. He says: "On vacation? Or what? Come on!" The participants are invited to make up "no na" replies for the vacationing woman in response to the advances of the so-called Latin Lover. Here are some of the "no na" responses produced by different trainees over time:

- "No na, I'm waiting for a UFO!"
- "No na, I missed the last train!"
- "No na, I am stalking Orangutans!"
- "No na, I'm representing the Bureau of Ethics and Standards!"
- "No na, I'm waiting for a for a blizzard!"
- "No na, I'm collecting the tobacco duty!"
- "No na, I'm waiting for Casper, the friendly ghost!"
- "No na, I am breeding tadpoles!"
- "No na, I'm expecting a choir of angels!"

The following "No na" response, which I thoroughly enjoyed, was created by a female participant at a humor summer school in Edmond, Oklahoma in 1998:

- "No na", I am transforming into jelly!"

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