

Patricia Arriaga

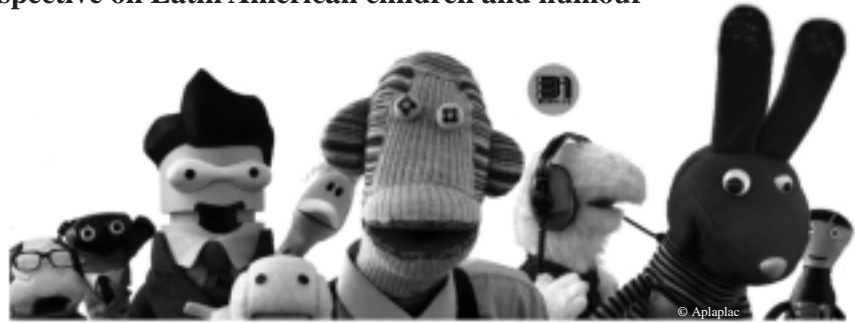
Pepito, El Chavo, and Bob Esponja

A producer's perspective on Latin American children and humour

Latin American children learn to appreciate and practise humour in their family circle, and especially boys excel in humorous action. On television, children in Latin America enjoy US-American and Japanese animation programmes, and local and Latin American TV comedy shows for kids.

Children love to laugh. Laughter in children is not difficult to elicit through play or through the enjoyment of physical activity such as running, swimming, going on swings, etc. It is more difficult for children to enjoy humour since a child has to understand its message. Humour changes in children according to their developmental level (cf. Kotthoff, and Lyon in this issue), and I think I can safely assume that developmental changes are not exclusive of Latin American children. Preschool children find humour in things showing incongruence in appearances, such as a pig brushing his teeth and washing himself in a bubble bath. At this age children seem to enjoy their own inventions of humour and the humour tends to be spontaneous, original and relatively crude. Practically anything that goes against what children consider normal and predictable can become humorous to them.

There seems to be a change in humour starting with their entrance into elementary school. At about the age 6, children begin to show an interest in ready-made jokes. 7-year-



Reporter muppets of the Chilean news parody programme *31 minutos*

olds find cartoons, clowns and riddles enjoyable. In the imaginary world of cartoons everything is possible: a cat rolled over by a car becomes flat and can roll with the tire without being harmed. There is incongruity and nobody gets harmed: two *sine qua non* elements of humour.

What I have briefly discussed is possibly true of children all over the world. What might be typical of Latin American children is probably related to our very conservative Catholic societies where there is limited open discussion of sex and where family ties are very strong. Children know that certain words are unacceptable to adults, and they like to use them deliberately in order to shock them or to make their peers laugh. They also use humour as an escape from social or family limitations.

Political correctness is not a part of Latin American societies. Accordingly, mocking, name-calling or making fun of someone who is considered to be different or who has different abilities is a source of humour for children. This is distinct from US-American sources of humour for children, especially on TV: while Latin American countries are a bit cautious so as not to be offensive, they are a far cry from applying political correctness.

I don't know whether this is true of all countries, but in Latin America, as children grow older, humour becomes more a boys' thing than a girls' thing. Ready-made jokes, nicknames and toilet humour are three areas where this tendency can be seen.

Jokes

At about seven years of age, children delight in trying to outwit their peers as well as adults with jokes and riddles. In Mexico, children have Pepito, a child protagonist for their jokes. Pepito is smart, irreverent and lazy, and children love him precisely for his qualities and defects. For young children, "Pepito jokes" are at a very basic level. This is a typical Pepito joke for a 6-year-old:

Pepito's mother scolds him because he has called his sister "ugly," and he has hurt her by saying this. "You should go and tell her you're sorry," says his mum. Pepito goes to his sister: "I'm sorry you're so ugly."

Around 11 years of age as children change, Pepito becomes more of a "boy" and his humour is more related to a boy's world. His jokes become charged with sexual content. Here's an example:

Pepito's father summons him. "Pepito, I have to talk to you." "Sure, Dad," says Pepito, "What about?" – "Sex," replies his father. Pepito answers, "What would you like to know?"

Nicknames

Nicknames are a great source of humour for Latin American children around the sixth grade. Girls very rarely give one another nicknames, and when they do so it hardly ever involves a humorous or a mocking intention. In contrast, almost every boy has a nickname, and those not liked by their peers are targeted through use of nasty nicknames that make fun of them because of their height, weight, looks, skin colour, abilities, or personality. Since Latin American societies are still very "macho"-oriented, it is not unusual for boys to give their peers girls' nicknames, mostly in order to laugh at them but not meaning any harm.

Toilet humour

Kindergarten children find almost everything related to body functions or body waste funny. Just mentioning the word "pi-pi" makes children laugh, especially boys. Girls are more likely to be annoyed by it. Boys over 7 years old see rude behaviour and grossness as humorous.

Boys' humour vs. girls' humour

In general we could say that in Latin America boys are more humorous than girls in the sense that they are better at noticing incongruence and finding the context to create a joke. Girls are a wonderful audience for boys, they laugh easily but are not as quick as boys in generating jokes and humour. This is probably due to social circumstances rather than to gender. It is culturally acceptable for boys to ex-

press themselves with humour, not only verbal humour, but also physical humour to the point of slapstick. In Latin America, it is very rare to see a girl become the clown of a group. This is a role usually reserved for boys.

Humour on television

Latin American societies are very family-oriented. Long Sunday dinners with the extended family are fairly common as is the habit of telling jokes around the table and making up new ones as the evening wears on. Children grow up with this tradition and, in their eagerness to participate and be part of their families, they learn from a young age that humour is a great way to entertain and spend time with friends. Overall, humour is highly valued in Latin American societies and being funny is a desirable quality to succeed in life.

Despite this fact, to date TV has not generated good comedy for children or adults to a great extent. TV humour for adults is limited to use of slapstick and double entendres, usually with sexual connotations in live shows. Men dressed as women who make fun of women is also another running gag in comedy shows. Children watch this on TV and learn what is humorous to family members. Local comedy programmes have very good ratings throughout Latin America and they are usually in-house productions. But these comedy programmes do not circulate across the borders. Although all Latin American countries except for Brazil are Spanish-speaking, the use of Spanish is different and the sources of humour and the words used do not have a common denominator throughout our countries.

Children's TV in Latin America predominantly broadcasts US-American (85%) and Japanese animation programmes (15%). Children enjoy the comedy in US-American cartoons, and they love programmes such as *Bob Esponja* (*SpongeBob Squarepants*).

There are very few TV comedy shows for children created in Latin America: *31 minutos* in Chile¹, and *Cuentos de pelos*² and *El chavo del ocho*³ in Mexico are examples of good comedy for children, all of them are live shows. Unlike comedy shows for adults humorous shows for children seem to be able to spread across our countries: *El chavo del ocho* is loved throughout Latin America, and *31 minutos* is now shown on Nickelodeon. Latin American countries do not produce their own animation programmes, although an animated series of *El chavo del ocho* is now in production in Mexico. Maybe things are beginning to change, and a common ground for children's TV comedy in Latin America is a possibility in the near future. ■

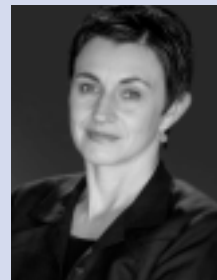
NOTES

1 *31 minutos* (transl.: 31 minutes) is an entertaining news parody show with puppet reporters aired by *Televisión Nacional de Chile*. The show was selected to a finalist at *Prix Jeunesse 2004*.

2 *Cuentos de pelos* (transl.: Great tales with hair) is a children's series about a hairdresser's shop, broadcast on *Once TV*, Mexico's public television. It is a new production by *Bravo Films*, the creative team that has produced *Once TV's* children's shows since 1995.

3 *El chavo del ocho* (transl.: The boy from house no. 8) by *Televisa*, Mexico's most important private broadcaster, was originally produced in 1975 and is still running after several seasons.

THE AUTHOR



Patricia Arriaga, Mexican producer and film-maker, has created several TV series for children on *Once TV*, Mexico's public television, and was Head of Children's Programmes for *Once TV* for 8 years. She studied at the *Universidad Iberoamericana* in Mexico City, Mexico, and at the *New School for Social Research* and the *Parsons School of Design* in New York, USA.