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Laughing with educational programmes

Humour is often integrated in educational programmes for children as a part of the narration or as a characteristic of the presenter. But do children laugh during educational programmes? This study of 300 German children who watched six different shows found that they laugh, but not simultaneously with others and that laughing depends on the presenter and the role he or she has been given.

Humour is frequently an integral part of educational broadcasts. Yet, to date, research on the subject “children – television and humour in educational programmes” has only been done selectively in the 1980s. Then, researchers found that humour in educational programmes attracts and holds the attention of young viewers, raises their attentiveness to the visual and facilitates the acquisition of educational information by selective exposure (Zillmann et al., 1980 and summarised in Zillmann and Bryant, 1988; Bryant, Zillmann and Brown, 1983, p. 221 ff.).

On the basis of their research, Zillmann and Bryant recommended that humour be integrated in short, lively and attractively cut small packages that do not disrupt the information flow. However, for producers of children’s TV, quite a number of concrete questions remain unanswered: Is the kind of humour identified in the programmes by adults also funny for children? Do children laugh at the

punch lines offered? What makes a presenter funny in their eyes?

In order to obtain some insight into these questions, the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) included issues of laughter during the reception study it conducted: “Knowledge and Documentary Programmes for Children”. Six contemporary German educational TV programmes for children were integrated in this study:

Wissen macht Ah! [*Knowledge makes you go Ah!*](WDR*), *Willi wills wissen* [*Willi wants to know it all*] (BR*), *Null-Acht-13* [*Zero-Eight-13*](WDR*/SFB*/MDR*), *Felix und die wilden Tiere* [*Felix and the wild animals*] (BR*), *Anja und Anton* [*Anja and Anton*] (ZDF*) and *Was ist Was TV* [*What is what TV*] (Super RTL).

Method

In the study, 300 children (153 girls, 147 boys) aged 6 to 12 were interviewed in their natural environment – Munich day-care centres.¹ A group of between 7 to 10 children watched one sequence from each of the formats mentioned above.² The children were recorded by two video cameras during the viewing of the programmes. Subsequently they drew

pictures on what they had liked best about the programme and were interviewed face to face. The extent of the sample permits limited quantification, but makes no claims to be representative or transferable to a non-experimental situation.

First, we analysed the video recordings of the reception situation. To operationalise the analysis, we used an instrument specifically developed for this purpose, the “Blick-O-Mat,”³ that enabled us to code the visible laughing of individual children. This operation reveals at which points the children are laughing. Thus, it was possible to create “laughter profiles” of the viewers for the respective programmes (cf. Fig. 1).

Aligning these profiles with the video recordings of 51 children who viewed, for example, *Willi wills wissen* made it possible to compile an initial descriptive analysis:

The kids are all sitting there full of anticipation, waiting for the programme to begin. The signature tune of *Willi wills wissen* starts up and some groups “rock” in perfect timing to the beat.

When a bucket of wallpaper paste falls on Willi’s head in the opening credits,

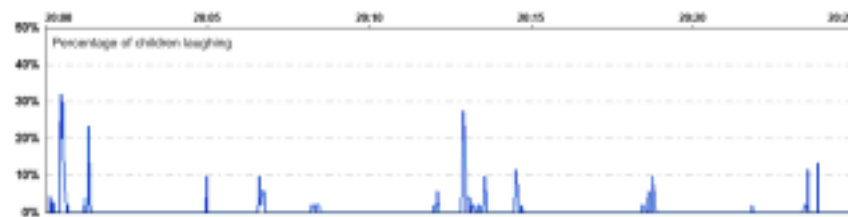


Fig 1: Laughter peaks in *Willi wills wissen*

31% of the kids burst out laughing⁴ – particularly the groups that had joined in the “rocking” during the playing of the signature music.

The kids follow attentively as during Willi's introduction of the programme's topic – newspapers – he makes a boat from a sheet of newspaper and a paper plane. Finally, he rolls up the paper and waves it like a truncheon at the camera. A quarter of the children laugh at this scene. In the course of the programme Willi visits a newspaper publisher and accompanies the reporter to tortoise breeders, who proudly point two fine specimens at the press photographer's camera. In the process the smaller one urinates on the large one (Willi calls it “peeing”). 8% of the children laugh. Willi accompanies the reporter back to the editorial office and watches her write the article. Here a special trick is used: When Willi reads out the article, the speed of the image and sound are accelerated as in the leader: 27% of the kids laugh. When the speed is throttled, with Willi reading the line that he has added – “It's peeing,” two children (4%) laugh again. A few moments later Willi tells an East Frisian joke: “Why do East Frisians wear crash helmets when they read the paper? So they aren't hit by a headline!” This joke is received with loud laughter; though more from the boys than the girls. Finally, 10% of the older children laugh about Willi's slip of the tongue, when he refers to the print storeroom as a toilet paper store. During the final credits, an exact replay of the opening credits, 14% of the kids in this sub-sample laugh repeatedly.

Individually experienced emotion

In this manner, the initial analysis of all the programmes revealed that the children laugh, but never all at once! The highest value of collective laughter reached in the analysis of all six programmes was 41 % for *Anja und Anton*. Thus, it would appear that laughing is the individual expression of an individually experienced emotion. Children laugh at different television situations in varying degrees.



Ill. 1: Boys giggling in the background about “kack, kack”

Three types of laughing in front of the screen

The analysis reveals three types of laughter exhibited by the children as they viewed these programmes. The most frequently observed was loud, spontaneous laughter (“laughter peaks”), in a variety of timbres, applicable to most of the laughs aroused in *Willi wills wissen* (cf. Fig. 1). In the collective laughter profile, the peaks tower above the rest. Many of these laughs are the direct consequence of funny moments during the programme (e. g. funny actions, images and noises). Such “spontaneous laughter” is directly related to the dynamic of the viewing group. Frequently, children look to one side before or after they laugh, presumably to check their neighbour's reaction or to communicate with him or her. Another variant revealed that some children initially do not laugh but wait until other kids, usually their neighbours, start laughing. In this type, the main trigger of humour communication is what appears on television, boosted – but also possibly restrained – by the dynamics in the group viewing the programme together.

A second type is recurring laughter or giggling, appropriately termed “waves of infectious laughter” in accordance with their appearance on the “Blick-O-Mat” recordings (cf. Fig. 2). The prototype is found in the reception of the series *Anja und Anton*.

In this sequence the main characters want to re-enact the fairy tale – “The Frog King.” Klaus-Peter is supposed to play the role of the frog, but cannot make the right croaking noises; he can only produce a “kack, kack.” Some children are observed to laugh spontaneously. Others, for example a group of boys, seem to be laughing about the similarity of the sound to the word “crap” in its excremental connotation. The boys continue giggling several minutes after receiving the prompt from the television. They keep on repeating these sounds, giggling and nudging each other (cf. Ill. 1).

Humour communication is promoted by the humour features in the series, but the nature of this communication is influenced by the meaning attributed by the individual in the subsequent dynamics of the group context. A third type of laughter features what can clearly be observed to be continuous laughter as well as “brief smiles.” In this variant there is no concrete attempt at integration into the group dynamic. Presumably the way in which the individual child attributes meaning explains why he or she laughs here. Even this relatively simple form of evaluation reveals that children laugh for different reasons and at different intervals when watching TV.



Fig. 2: Waves of infectious laughter in *Anja und Anton*

What kids appreciate as being humorous in presenters

In the next step we analysed the interviews with the children. At one point we asked them to give the presenters a mark like at school and to justify it. The presenter the children found to be funny most frequently (in the sense of pure comedy) was Mike from *Null-Acht-13*.⁵ “Cos he’s funny and always in a good mood” (Emanuele, a boy aged 8). Being in a good mood was important, but so were gags and activities:

Pascal (10): “I’d give a straight 1 as a mark. (giggling) (...) Yeah. Mmm. Just right for us kids. (...) Cos I think he’s, well, he likes kids, he (...) doesn’t just keep on talking, but he also cocks things up, asks something funny, chucks in a joke or something like that. I just find him funny.” (He starts laughing)

For Pascal being a good children’s TV presenter means cracking jokes, using gags and “making the right cock-up” now and again. The programme *Willi wills wissen* (cf. Fig. 3) also has these elements. The kids explain Willi’s mark (an average of 1.3 on the scale of 1 to 6 – 1 being “very good”) by referring to his humorous activities:

Thea (9): “Mmm! I more or less liked all of it, but I liked that most. Especially when he went and took a lettuce leaf and ate it like a tortoise. [...] Mmm. That was worth a 1+!”

Thea talks about a scene in which Willi copies a tortoise slowly eating a lettuce leaf. His eyes half closed and his mouth wide open, he chews at this lettuce leaf. Kids love such gags, even though adults may discard this as being silly. To recapitulate, the kids in this interview thought that being in a good mood, doing funny activities and using puns are the presenter’s outstanding humour characteristics. In contrast, overexcited behaviour or

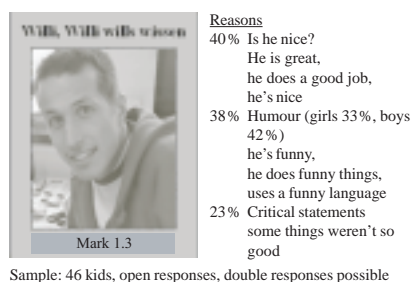


Fig. 3: *Willi wills wissen*

having a childish demeanour which has an artificial effect are clearly rejected. The children have to be convinced that the presenter “really” is like that and that he is enjoying what he does.

Gender differences

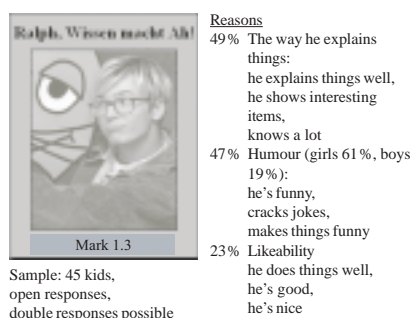
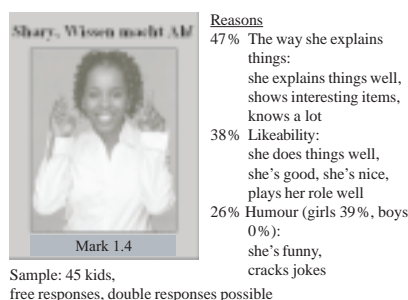
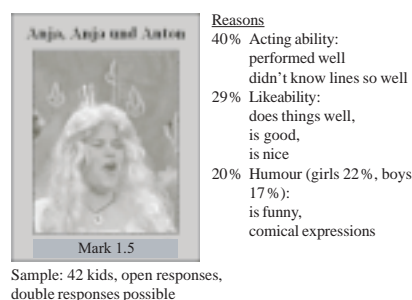
The kids’ appraisal of the presenters’ ability to be humorous does reveal certain gender differences. In the case of Mike (*Null-Acht-13*) and Willi (*Willi wills wissen*) a slightly higher percentage of boys than girls give humour as the reason for the mark assigned. The sample was small, therefore this result can only be considered to be a trend. The gender difference assumes clearer contours in the case of the presenter Ralph Caspers of *Wissen macht Ah!* (cf. Fig. 4). From the kids’ point of view Ralph is “good at explaining things,” but he is frequently described as being “funny” or “a good laugh” or “as doing it really funny.” Just under half the children state humour as being the reason for his average mark of 1.3; this comprises 60 % of the girls, but only just fewer than 20 % of the boys. So in this case it is the girls who in particular consider his humour to be the outstanding feature. The presenter Ralph Caspers is characterised by an intelligent, sophisticated type of humour featuring ambiguous remarks and flashes of irony. These characteristics, as various studies revealed in the 70’s and 80’s, signal humour that is more readily appreciated by girls. Boys, on the other hand, tend to appreciate an aggressive and hostile quality of humour (cf. sum-

mary in Stockinger and Zillmann 1996, p. 232 ff.; Alphen, 1996). In this respect, Ralph Caspers’ jokes seem to be a better match for the girls’ humour.

The gender-specific difference becomes even more striking in the case of his colleague Shary Reeves, the co-presenter in the programme *Wissen macht Ah!* (cf. Fig. 5). Shary is also judged to be humorous and her average mark of 1.4 is explained through claims such as: “it was funny, a good laugh, she makes it real funny, she makes jokes.” In our sample only girls refer to humour as being the reason for their mark! This unequivocal result is certainly due to the small sample again. And yet the tendency is quite clear: Mostly girls regard Shary to be funny.

The generalised conclusion – women presenters are commonly not funny for boys – apparently rings true with the practices of many producers, since among the current programmes in Germany there are only two women figures, compared to seven male presenters. As a first check, let us consider the children’s statements and the rating of the other female character – Anja (*Anja und Anton*) (cf. Fig. 6). The kids based their mark for Anja mainly on her role in the plot: her acting in a role in a play. Her mark is also justified – albeit secondarily – with the factor of humour, admittedly by slightly more girls, but the percentages are similar. Any comparison of the two formats is limited due to their extremely different designs, but this very contrast clearly indicates that women figures are also described as humorous by boys.

Thus, gender difference seems to be linked to the format of the programme. So why do the boys consider Shary not to be as funny? A closer look at the children’s interviews suggests some possible explanations: Zoltan (8) for example, gives Shary a “2”, the mark “good”. Ralph, on the other hand, gets a “1” (very good). Here is his reasoning:

Fig. 4: *Wissen macht Ah!*Fig. 5: *Wissen macht Ah!*Fig. 6: *Anja und Anton*

Zoltan: Yeah. And the woman, she just, she was, she was just sitting around all the time, talking important and washing gold [...].

I'd give the lad the top mark, "1."

I: Mmm. Why a "1"?

Zoltan: Cos he did everythin' the whole time and so on. And he told us a lot, and for the woman a "2." She'd get a "2."

I: And why a "2"?

Zoltan: Cos she just sat around the whole time and just talked a bit. Then she went all quiet and was a bit lazy.

Zoltan sees Shary as being "lazy", which at first comes as a surprise on account of her lively manner. 9-year-old Myong also says he finds Shary boring. He gives her a "3" ("satisfactory"), "because she hardly gets anything fixed." Ralph, on the other hand, is assigned a "2", because "he gets everything going and says everything". In terms of media analysis, the kids' interpretation is quite comprehensible. In the programme, particularly in this episode, Shary unlike Ralph takes a back seat far more often than does Ralph. On several occasions she takes over the jobs that have to be done, while Ralph explains the relationships between the things shown. Shary's humour usually points out an irony or a take-off on her colleague Ralph. This means, at least in the episode used in the study, that Shary's role is mainly defined by Ralph. The programme has a clear hierarchy: The man (Ralph) is more important than the woman (Shary) and the boys seem to follow this, interpreting it as Shary's assumed "laziness". Actually this matter is

determined by the script that was written by the presenter Ralph.

In contrast, several girls appreciate Shary for being a self-confident, amicable female figure. One reason might be her humour, including sophisticated irony, but only one girl of all the children interviewed considered this at all:

Edna (10): "She, erm, went, she always went behind this man, behind that man and that the programme, I mean, that the photos were boring. I thought that was funny."

Edna is referring to the initial scene of the episode when Ralph introduces the topic of food (in German, "Essen") with photos of the German city Essen. Shary treats this ironically, showing a bored face and gestures. Here Edna follows Shary's perspective undermining Ralph's authority, but she was the only one mentioning this major part of Shary's acting.

Irony: Children tend not to laugh

Experimental studies on television perception have revealed that kids tend not to perceive the ironic meaning of language used in educational programmes. For a long time research upheld the thesis that children are unable to grasp irony (e. g. Zillmann et al., 1984). A detailed analysis shows that the situation is in fact more complex. A large number of experimental studies from a variety of research perspectives have investigated this

matter, largely in the Anglo-American hemisphere (cf. Creuser, 1999 for a summary of the current research literature). The findings indicate that kids under the age of 5 are unable to understand irony; they simply comprehend ironical comments or statements literally. Even 6-year-olds fail to comprehend the intended meaning of sarcasm (Demorest et al., 1984). Indeed, of all the forms of irony, sarcasm is the most likely one to be understood by (older) children, with understatement being the most difficult for them.

When children misunderstand sarcasm and overstatement, they interpret these forms in the literal sense or as a lie committed by the speaker, while an understatement is understood in its literal sense (Winner et al., 1987). Differences between adults and children are also interesting: Children judge criticism presented in ironical tones to be less harmful than a straightforward statement, but adults adopt the exact opposite attitude (Winner and Leekam, 1991). On the other hand, far more children perceive the intention of ironical intonation and facial expression connected with a statement as being "mean" (Dews et al., 1996). The diverging appraisals of the humorous content of irony are particularly interesting in the context of this publication. For 5- to 6-year-olds, ironic criticism is even less funny than it is for 8- to 9-year-olds. A sarcastic undertone is considered by children to be much less funny than sincere emphasis. The authors presume that

children are not (yet) experienced enough to handle the possible simultaneity of "mean" and "funny" (Dews et al., 1996).

The general tendency revealed in these experimental studies is that children (up to the age of 10) tend not to laugh when confronted with irony; they rarely perceive irony as a form of intended humour; frequently they cannot pinpoint irony, but perceive such humour to be "mean" and find it to be less comical than do adults. The extent to which these findings based on experimental studies can be transferred to everyday communication is another issue. For children's TV editorial teams, however, they constitute an important indicator worthy of careful consideration prior to deploying irony.

Humour in educational broadcasts is certainly an advantage for the programme, but ambiguity that is not understood by children and that may be interpreted as making fun of them and of their perspective of this world is definitely not funny. ■

NOTES

* WDR = Westdeutscher Rundfunk (West German Broadcasting Corp.), Cologne

* BR = Bayerischer Rundfunk (Bavarian Broadcasting Corp.), Munich

* SFB = Sender Freies Berlin (Broadcasting Corp. Free Berlin), (in May 2003 fusion with ORB, now: RBB), Berlin

* RBB = Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (Broadcasting Corp. Berlin – Brandenburg), Berlin

* MDR = Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk (Central German Broadcasting Corp.), Leipzig

* ZDF = Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (Second German Television), Mainz

1 Only day-care centres equipped with a TV set and a viewing room were chosen. So the kids who participated in the study found nothing unusual about watching TV in the centre. The catchment area of the day-care centres included both the education-oriented middle class and the working class environment. Approx. 15 % of the children were from ethnic-minority families.

2 These are partial samples on every individual format, with a sample size of 45 to 61 children.

3 Developed by Ole Hofmann for IZI.

4 59 % in the case of the older children (aged between 10 and 14).

5 Null-Acht-13, with the presenter playing a variation on the theme of Who Wants to be a Millionaire? and the candidate having to choose from a set of absurd answers: "What does a volcano spew?" is followed by the answers: "Laba, Lama, Lala." The automatically wrong answer

causes the water to be let out of the bath where he is sitting. The kids laugh again and again about the whole sequence.

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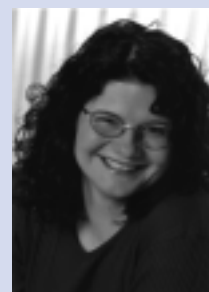
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