

# 1

## The Joke

This same folly creates societies and maintains empires.  
(Erasmus)

Do we know one another? what need of ceremony between friends.  
We all have a touch of *that same* – you understand me – a touch of  
the motley.  
(Charles Lamb)

### 1. How to analyse a joke

So many philosophers have thought it best to begin with Logic: it is much better to begin with the Joke. This is from the opening of Leigh Hunt's essay 'Wit Made Easy or a Hint to Word-Catchers':

A: ... Well, B., my dear boy, I hope I see you well.  
B: I hope you do, My dear A., otherwise you have lost your eyesight.  
A: Good. Well, how do you do?  
B: How? Why, as other people do. You would not have me eccentric, would you?  
A: Nonsense. I mean, how do you find yourself?  
B: Find myself? Where's the necessity of finding myself? I have not been lost.  
A: Incurrible dog! come now; be serious.  
B: [*comes closer to A., and looks very serious*].  
A: Well, what now?  
B: I am come, to be serious.  
(Leigh Hunt, 1929: 317–18)

So we are come to be serious, and about 'doing as other people do', and about 'finding oneself' when one has been 'lost'. Plutarch tells us that Homer died because he could not think of an answer to a riddle. If we are to try to avoid it, for it is not an uncommon mode of dying, we could start

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with a riddle – our aim being to find out what a riddle is. Philosophy always comes round to riddles in the end. It is not just in titles like *The New Riddle of Induction* – the topic of riddles is always coming up, but, riddlingly enough, that is not how the actual speakers see it. One, talking of Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument, called it 'a notorious logical conundrum'; yet another, C. I. Lewis, referring to the problems of metaphysics, called them 'cosmic riddles' (Lewis, 1929 [1916]: 4). There are examples all over the academic literature. But none of the thinkers takes a step back and asks what a conundrum or a riddle is.

You would think it might be some help to find out what is common to all these dilemmas. The serious mind when faced with a logical puzzle assumes that it is a puzzle to be worked out *within* logic, but the word 'logical' can be shifted in meaning. Aristotle noticed long ago that the word 'healthy' can slide from meaning *safeguarding health*, as in 'healthy diet', to *indicating health*, as in 'healthy complexion' (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book Γ, ch. 2). In the same way 'logical' can shift. Take 'logical puzzle' when it is being used of philosophical problems (like the relation of the 'particular' to the 'universal' or 'appearance' to 'reality'), not as meaning a puzzle to be worked out *within* logic, but as a puzzle 'arising out of the nature of logic', being something to do with what logic is.

So what is the structure of a joke or a riddle or a conundrum? We shall start with a very simple one from a child's joke book:

A: Knock knock!  
B: Who's there?  
A: Cook.  
B: Cook who?  
A: That's the first one I've heard this year.  
(Ahlberg and Ahlberg, 1982: 8)

The first point to notice is that a joke, riddle or conundrum always works with something the meaning of which is multiple, ambiguous, equivocal. So the first thing to look for is that ambiguous element, wherever it may be. Here, as you quickly discerned, it is 'Cook who?'

There is one strange thing to notice about it. The joke is typically *told*, not written or printed as here, so the ambiguous element is really the sequence of *sound* that 'Cook who?' indicates.

There is a passage in Gilbert Adair's *Alice through the Needle's Eye*, that *tromp l'oeil* pastiche of Lewis Carroll, which brings this home (a character called the Grampus is speaking to Alice):

'... the best meanings ca'n't ever be written down, that's how precious they are.'

'I think I should hear an example,' Alice cautiously replied.

'And so you shall!' it exclaimed, and it suddenly began to recite the following:

*In spring the farmer sows his field:  
What crops in autumn will it yield?  
In spring the farmer's wife sews too:  
A baby's mittens – pink or blue?  
From early morn, with cock a-crowing,  
They both set busily to –*

The Grampus left off to address Alice. 'And what do you think the next word ought to be?'

'I'm pretty certain it's "sewing",' replied Alice.

'Quite right. And how would you write it down, may I ask?'

Alice didn't even bother to reflect before answering. 'Why, that's easy: s-e-w-i-n – I mean –' she broke off thoughtfully, 'no, it ca'n't be that for it would only apply to one sort of sewing. So it should be: s-o-w-i –' she broke off again. 'Except that now it only applies to the *other* kind! I know – it should be spelt: s- . . .' More confused than ever, Alice fell silent for a moment. 'Now I understand,' she said, brightening up: 'the word ca'n't be spelt at all, because –'

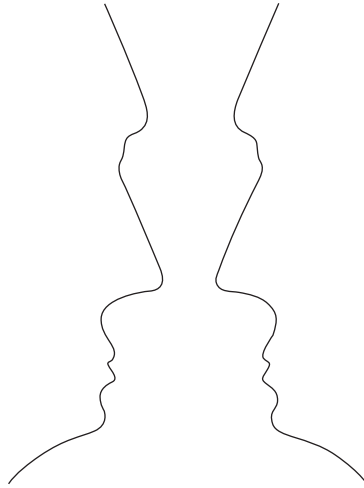
'That's what I call a meaning!' the Grampus interrupted her in triumph. 'And I trust you'll remember this lesson in years to come . . .'

(Adair, 1984: 80–1)

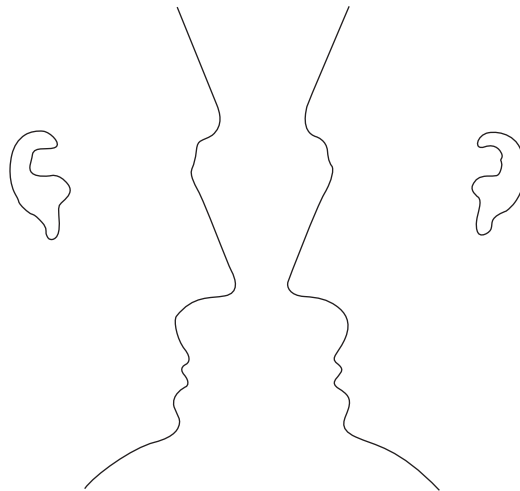
So (sew? sow?) the core of a joke cannot really be spelt at all: the Grampus is right (Adair has made him as much of a philosopher as Carroll's Humpty Dumpty). We could not even get away with it by printing the core of the joke we started out with in the International Phonetic Alphabet, thus / **kuk hu:** or **kuku:**/, for that would be to suggest that we already knew that this particular sequence of sound was human speech made up of what the linguists call individual 'phonemes' like /**k**/, /**h**/ and /**u:**/, and a glance at the joke – for you have got the point that one of the meanings involved *is not human speech at all* – even though we have a way of spelling it! There's glory for you, in the form of a first philosophical crumb: in a joke, and in much else, we are dealing with something that lies outside words.

What is going on can be most easily demonstrated by using a visual illustration of the structure, one provided by the professor of aesthetics, Sir Ernst Gombrich. The diagram that he uses was produced to show the effect of existing memory expectations upon features of the distribution of a visual field. He took the familiar Rubin Vase (Figure 1), which we can subject to a switch of gestalts between two profiles or a vase. He added clues which strengthened our expectations, first a pair of ears, which encouraged the

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*Figure 1*



*Figure 2*

Profile interpretation (Figure 2), or a few flowers at the top, which strengthened the Vase interpretation (Figure 3). His significant move was to include both sets of contextual clues, as in Figure 4. He points out that if you mask either set of clues 'the reading becomes assured' (Gombrich, 1973: 239). The interesting aspect of this demonstration is that the rival gestalt-figures play over what is a contestable visual ground which cannot be described in the

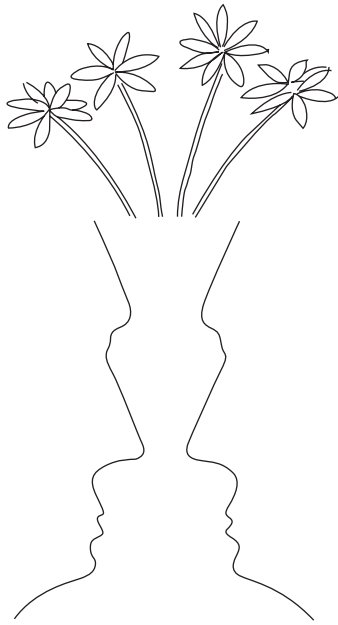


Figure 3

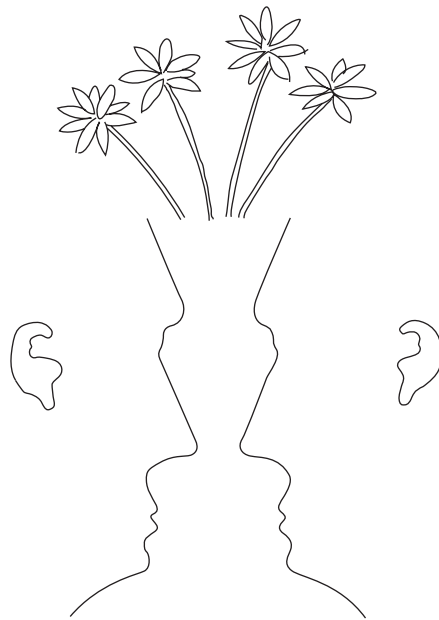
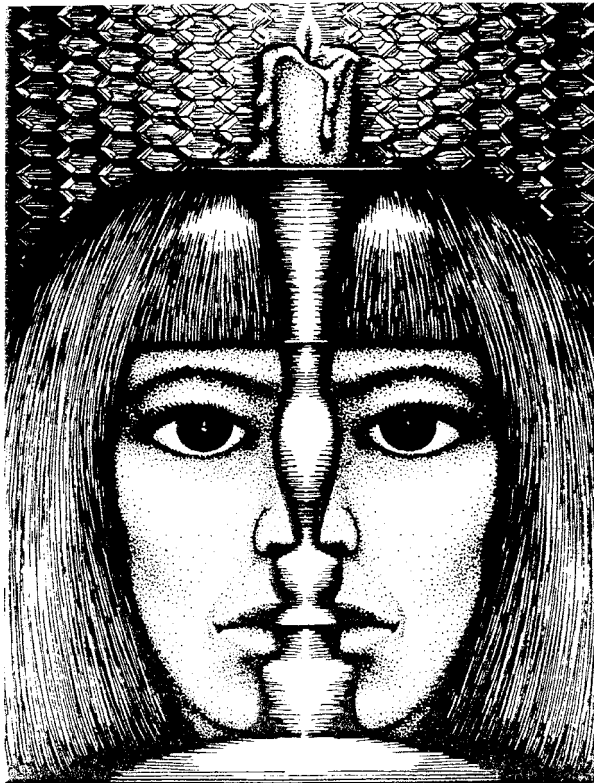


Figure 4

terms that are used of the gestalts *per se*. It is not the case that the distribution of lines has only two ways of being described: there is a neutral ground from which the two percepts, vase and faces, are being *selected*. It is noteworthy also that the two gestalts *do not share the same portion of that ground, only a boundary*. It is not the case that one entity (the vase) changed wholly into another two entities (the faces). Compare the version of the Rubin Vase in Figure 5, in which one 'vase' can change into two faces or one face (the actual drawing of the faces provides one set of clues, the candle works for the 'Vase' interpretation).

Let us produce a diagram of this structure that can apply to a joke and such drawings as these indifferently. It can be begun by placing the Ambiguous Element in the middle of a page (Figure 6). We shall have to compromise here and put either one of the spellings or the phonetic spelling to pass for the actual sound. Strictly speaking, we should have a cassette player in the middle producing the sound sequence itself.



*Figure 5*

**Ambiguous Element**

/kuku:/

Figure 6

Next we shall look for the first meaning that comes to mind as one progresses through the joke. Again you will have no difficulty in deciding that it is 'Cook who?', where 'Cook' is taken as an unusual forename and B, in saying 'Cook who?' is asking for the surname, which is the ritual performance in all these 'Knock knock' jokes. Again there is a significant but at the moment small problem – if it is a 'meaning' it is clearly something being *thought*, so the printed words 'Cook who?' are only a proxy for what is really happening. However, we shall make do with them. We shall place them below the Ambiguous Element in the lower right-hand corner of our diagram, and label them 'Meaning I', using the Roman numeral (Figure 7).

Next we look for what it is that is making us interpret the Ambiguous Element as someone asking for someone's surname in this way. Well, it is the ritual of the 'Knock knock' joke that we are expected to ask this, but, if we are going to be pedantic and thorough, we must say in addition that, if one hears a knock at the door and one has asked 'Who's there?' and one hears a forename, then it is extremely likely that, if one is still puzzled who it is, then, if they have said 'Sigmund', one asks 'Sigmund who?' With all that run-up, the memory is not given a very difficult task in interpreting the sounds that follow. All these, therefore, constitute a set of memory-clues by which we can guide our interpretation. We do it so spontaneously that you could say it was second-nature to respond with this meaning. We now know what preparations for action, *what set of intentions*, we need to bring to the sound we are hearing. These we shall label 'Clue(s) to Intentional Perspective I' and place them in the top left-hand part of our diagram, drawing an arrow through to Meaning I to show that it was the clues that encouraged the interpretation (Figure 8). (We have written 'Clue(s)' because in some jokes there is only one such clue, but in others there are more.)

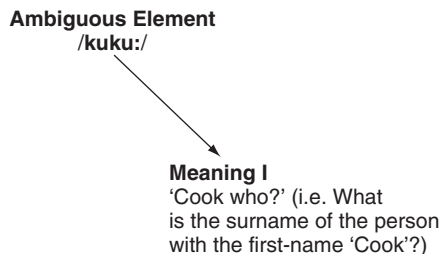
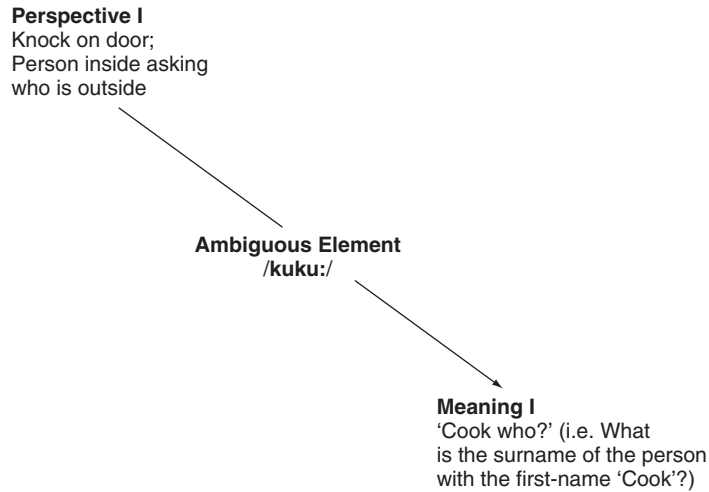
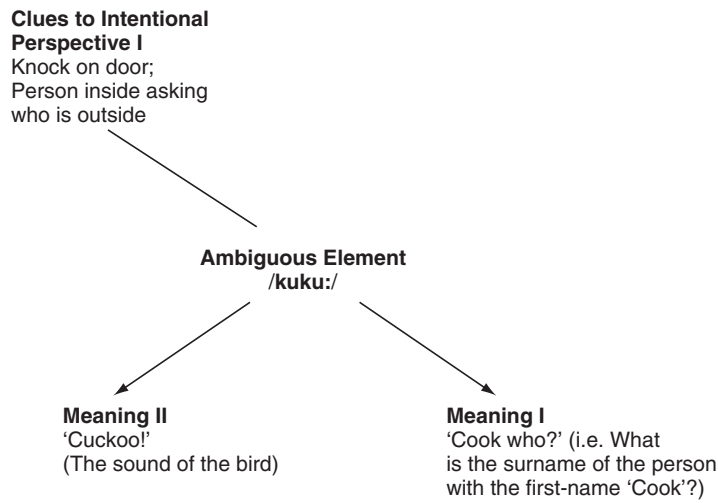


Figure 7



*Figure 8*



*Figure 9*

Now we look for the second meaning, which you have no problem in identifying as 'Cuckoo!' and we shall place this in the lower left-hand corner, marking it as 'Meaning II' (Figure 9). Again the caveat must be borne in mind that this spelling only stands for what happens in the minds of the teller of the joke and his or her hearer.

Finally we look for the contextual clue or clues that excite this second meaning, and it is obvious that the last line performs this task in the joke. In a way one hardly needs this last line, for the laughter of the joker would be sufficient clue. One doesn't need to be acquainted with Delius's 'On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring' or be a regular reader of *The Times* to associate the call of the cuckoo with something being heard for the first time in spring. So we can place this clue from the joke in the top right-hand corner of the diagram and label it 'Clue(s) to Intentional Perspective II' and drawing the arrow through to Meaning II to show what reminder to settle our expectations is working to create the meaning out of the sound (Figure 10).

This now completes the initial analysis of the joke. What triggered the laugh in this case was the provision of the Second Clue, although, as has just been noted, the Second Clue could arise out of memory by itself, aided no doubt by the clue of the laughter of the joker. Many jokes, however, do need a clear Second Clue; otherwise Meaning I remains unchallenged and then there is nothing funny to laugh at.

This, for example, is a joke with its Second Clue removed: 'What do babies wear in the rain?' – 'Gumboots.' With the Second Clue missing the core of the would-be joke, here 'gum' retains only one meaning, that is, *rubber*. Insert the Second Clue and the joke is activated: 'What do jelly

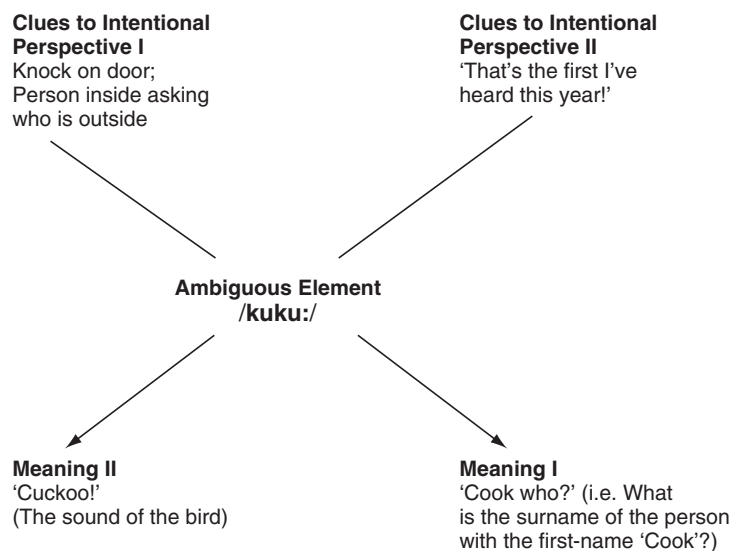


Figure 10

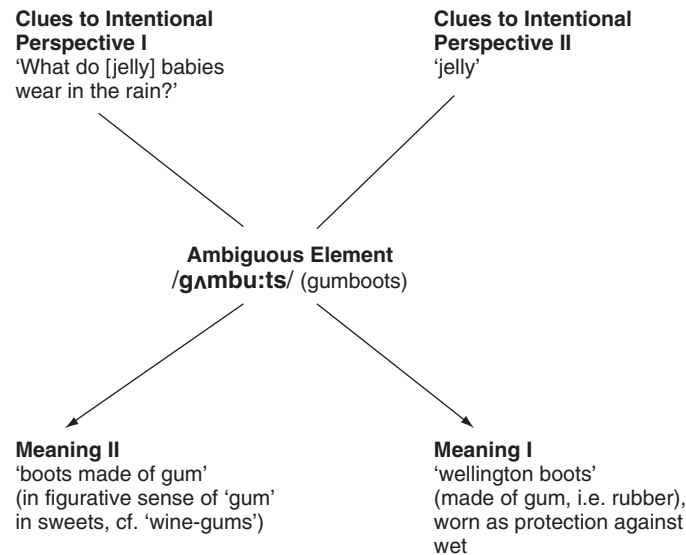


Figure 11

babies wear in the rain? – Gumboots' (Ahlberg and Ahlberg, 1982: 88). The five-part analysis can now be performed as in Figure 11.

Jerry Suls, a psychologist interested in jokes, insists that there has to be the 'resolution' of an 'incongruity' in order for the joke to function. He gives as proof the effect of certain substitutions in the following joke:

DISTRAUGHT PARENT: 'Doctor, come at once! Our baby has swallowed /(a) a fountain-pen (b) a rubber-band/.  
DOCTOR: I'll come right over. What are you doing in the meantime?  
DISTRAUGHT PARENT: /(c) Using a pencil (d) We don't know what to do/.  
(Suls, 1983: 45)

(a) and (c) together produce the joke because they contain both the incongruity and the resolution; (b) and (c) produce an incongruity but no resolution; (b) and (d) have no incongruity to be resolved. By the analysis here, only (a) and (c) produce the joke because the Ambiguous Element ('What are you doing in the meantime?') is only given two intentionally contrasting interpretations by the First Clue 'swallowing a fountain-pen' (which gives the serious and troubling interpretation 'What medical measures have you begun?', and the Second Clue 'Using a pencil' which gives the absurd black-comedy

interpretation 'How are you managing now that you have lost your writing implement?', which carries the horrifying implication that the writing task was more important than the state of the baby. What the Suls example brings out is that the joke will have greater power the more incongruous the intentions are in the joke, and that draws in the emotions associated with the two meanings.

A further point about the Joke's structure. Sometimes it is the Second Clue that comes last and triggers the Joke, as in the Cuckoo joke, and sometimes it is the Ambiguous Element itself which is the trigger, as in the Gumboots joke.

In this passage from Dickens's *Great Expectations* Orlick uses a series of Second Clues against Pip in exactly the same way as Leigh Hunt's interlocutor. Can you pick out the two Second Clues and what Orlick renders ambiguous thereby? Pip asks the first question.

'How did you get here?'

'I come here,' he retorted, 'on my legs. I had my box brought alongside me in a barrow.'

'Are you here for good?'

'I ain't here for harm, young master, I suppose.'

(Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*: Ch. 29)

## 2. More than one joke in the joke

Jokes, as Freud well knew, contain far more than appears on the surface. The joke about the Cuckoo, for example, had more than one ambiguous element drawn into it. The Joker made the Hearer say 'Cuckoo!' without his realizing it, making the Hearer into a fool, since the sound 'Cuckoo!', because of the history of its metaphorical association with cuckolding (the strange fledgling left in the 'nest'), has always been a source of mocking fun. To quote Shakespeare: 'Oh word of fear, / Unpleasing to a married ear!' So the Hearer of the joke is made into an Ambiguous Element in the context: on the one hand an innocent listener to a joke whose fun he was invited to share (Meaning I); on the other the very butt of the joke itself (Meaning II). So one clue was the apparent welcoming well-known set-up of the 'Knock knock' joke (First Clue), the other arose out of this familiarity for it induced him to utter the key phrase 'Cuckoo!' (Second Clue) (Figure 12). And isn't this second interpretation of the joke actually where the real fun of it lies?

There are therefore two diagrams to draw for this joke, and two for the Jelly Babies one, which encourages us to visualize the ambiguous image of jelly babies stomping along in gumboots, which is open to an indefinite