Poking fun

Why people laugh

The true story of how your wife’s stalker rang her to discuss killing you isn’t supposed to provoke mirth. But when John Morreall, of the College of William and Mary in Virginia, related the events last week to a group of scholars in Tübingen in Germany, they were in stitches as he divulged the details of how his wife tried to dissuade the confused young man by pleading that her mortgage was too large to pay without her husband’s help.

So why did they laugh? Dr Morreall’s thesis is that laughter, incapacitating as it can be, is a convincing signal that the danger has passed. The reaction of the psychologists, linguists, philosophers and clowns attending the Fifth International Summer School on Humor and Laughter illustrates his point. Dr Morreall survived to tell the tale and so had an easy time making it sound funny.

One description of how laughter is provoked is the incongruity theory developed by Victor Raskin of Purdue University and Salvatore Attardo of Youngstown State University, both in America. This theory says that all written jokes and many other humorous situations are based on incongruity—something that is not quite right. In many jokes, the teller sets up the story with this incongruity present and the punch line then resolves it, in a way people do not expect. Alternatively, the very last words of the story may introduce the absurdity and leave the listeners with the task of reconciling it. For instance, many people find it funny that a conference on humour could take place in Germany.

Why do people laugh at all? What is the point of it? Laughter is very contagious and this suggests that it may have become a part of human behaviour because it promotes social bonding. When a group of people laughs, the message seems to be “relax, you are among friends”.

Indeed, humour is one way of dealing with the fact that humans are “excrement-producing poets and imperfect lovers”, says Appletree Rodden of the University of Tübingen. He sees religion and humour as different, and perhaps competing, ways for people to accept death and the general unsatisfactoriness of the world. Perhaps that is why, as Dr Morreall calculates in a forthcoming article in the journal *Humor*, 95% of the writings that he sampled from important Christian scholars through the centuries disapproved of humour, linking it to insincerity and idleness.

Fear of idiocy is why many managers discourage laughter during office hours, Dr Morreall notes. This is foolish, he claims. Laughter or its absence may be the best clue a manager has about the work environment and the mood of employees.

Indeed, another theory of why people laugh—the superiority theory—says that people laugh to assert that they are on a level equal to or higher than those around them. Research has shown that bosses tend to crack more jokes than do their employees. Women laugh much more in the presence of men, and men generally tell more jokes in the presence of women. Men have even been shown to laugh much more quietly around women, while laughing louder when in a group of men.

But laughter does not work all the time. There are those who have a pathological fear that others will laugh at them. Sufferers avoid situations where there will be laughter, which means most places where people meet. Willibald Ruch of Zurich University surveyed 1,000 Germans and asked them whether they thought they were the butts of jokes and found that almost 10% felt this way. These people also tended to classify taped laughter as jeering. Future research will focus on the hypothesis that there is something seriously wrong with their sense of humour.

To be, or not to be

Astronomy

A chance to cut the number of planets in the solar system to eight

“My very educated mother just served us nine pizzas.” Many American schoolchildren are taught this mnemonic to help them remember the order of the planets of the solar system. Soon though, this may change because, on July 29th, a team of astronomers announced the discovery of a very distant celestial body larger than Pluto. The researchers claim that the new body—which they are informally calling Xena—should be classified as a planet.

The new body—temporarily named 2003 UB313—orbits the Sun once every 560 years. It is currently over 14 billion kilometres away, about three times farther out than Pluto, making it the most distant object ever discovered in the solar system. The researchers think it is part of the Kuiper belt, a ring of rocky objects that extends beyond Neptune.

Mike Brown of the California Institute of Technology, Chad Trujillo of the Gemini Observatory and David Rabinowitz of Yale University discovered the object in data recorded at the Palomar Observatory in San Diego in October 2003, but its motion did not become apparent until they reanalysed the data in January 2005.

The question of whether or not the new body should be considered a planet has rekindled the debate over what exactly counts as a planet. A handful of objects of similar size to, but smaller than, Pluto have been discovered in the Kuiper belt over the past few years. These have not been considered planets, mainly because they were smaller than Pluto. But 2003 UB313 is larger than Pluto. Is Pluto a planet, shouldn’t it be as well?

The case is not so cut clear. Many astronomers argue that Pluto should not be considered a planet. It is not unlike a large asteroid, they hold. Meanwhile, Dr Brown asserts that as Pluto has historically been considered a planet, anything larger should also be considered one.

Ultimately, the International Astronomical Union, a group of professional astronomers, will end this existential angst. Dr Brown expects the process to take months, and the team is not allowed to reveal its suggested name until then. Since most Greek and Roman names have already been used, he and his colleagues have previously drawn upon Native American and Inuit mythology for names. He will only hint that the new name comes from a different tradition altogether.

Time will tell whether mother will be serving “nine polished xylophones”, “nine pizzas” or just “noodles.”