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Wriggly, Squiffy, Lummox, and Boobs: What Makes Some Words Funny?

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Abstract

Theories of humor suffer from insufficient operationalization. We build on the Engelthaler & Hills (2017) humor rating norms, by analyzing the semantic and word form factors that play a role in the judgments. Our model can predict the original humor rating norms and ratings for previously unrated words with greater reliability than the split half reliability in the original norms. The model is consistent with several theories of humor, while suggesting that those theories are too narrow. In particular, it is consistent with incongruity theory, which suggests that experienced humor is proportional to the degree to which expectations are violated. Words are judged funnier if they are less common and have an improbable orthographic or phonological structure. We also describe and quantify the semantic attributes of funny words that are judged funny and show that they are partly compatible with the superiority theory of humor, which focuses on humor as scorn.