

Linguistic Humor in the Select Works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan

G. Banazeer Banu¹, & Dr. S. Gunasekaran²

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Anna University, University College of Engineering, BIT Campus, Tiruchirappalli-620 024, Tamil Nadu, India

² Assistant Professor (Selection Grade) & HoD, Department of English, Anna University, University College of Engineering, BIT Campus, Tiruchirappalli- 620 024, Tamil Nadu, India

Correspondence: Dr. S. Gunasekaran, Assistant Professor (Senior Grade) & HoD, Department of English, Anna University, University College of Engineering, BIT Campus, Tiruchirappalli- 620 024, Tamil Nadu, India, Email: gunaboopesh@gmail.com

Received: July 30, 2024

Accepted: October 29, 2024

Online Published: January 13, 2025

doi:10.5430/wjel.v15n3p159

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v15n3p159>

Abstract

This paper explores the use of linguistic humor in the select works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan, three literary giants renowned for their distinctive comedic styles. Through a detailed analysis, the study examines how these authors employ various linguistic techniques to elicit humor, including wordplay, satire, irony, and parody. Mark Twain's sharp wit and mastery of dialects, Stephen Leacock's whimsical and absurd scenarios, and R.K. Narayan's subtle and culturally rich narratives serve as primary examples of their unique approaches to humor. By delving into specific texts, this research highlights how linguistic choices contribute to the comedic effect and the overall impact on readers. The paper also considers the cultural and temporal contexts that shape each author's humor, providing a comprehensive understanding of their contributions to literary comedy. Through comparative analysis, the study underscores the universal appeal and enduring relevance of linguistic humor across different cultures and time periods. This investigation not only celebrates the art of humor in literature but also offers insights into the broader implications of comedic expression in understanding human nature and societal norms.

Keywords: Linguistic humor, Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, R.K. Narayan, Wordplay, Satire, Irony, Literary comedy, Cultural context

1. Introduction

Humor, an intrinsic aspect of human communication, serves not only as a source of entertainment but also as a tool for social critique and cultural expression. The literary world has witnessed numerous authors who have skillfully woven humor into their narratives, making readers laugh while often provoking thought. This paper delves into the realm of linguistic humor in the select works of three such literary icons: Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan. Each of these authors, with their unique cultural backgrounds and narrative styles, offers a distinct perspective on the use of humor in literature.

Mark Twain, often hailed as the father of American literature, is renowned for his sharp wit and profound social commentary. His mastery of regional dialects and colloquial speech breathes life into his characters and settings, making his humor both accessible and impactful. Twain's works, such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, showcase his ability to blend humor with serious themes, creating a rich tapestry of linguistic playfulness and narrative depth.

Stephen Leacock, a Canadian humorist and economist, brings a different flavor to the literary humor landscape. Known for his whimsical and absurd scenarios, Leacock's writing often explores the follies of human nature and society. His works, such as *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*, are characterized by their light-hearted yet incisive critique of contemporary life. Leacock's humor, rooted in irony and exaggeration, provides readers with a delightful escape while subtly challenging societal norms and conventions.

R.K. Narayan, one of India's most celebrated English-language authors, offers a culturally rich and nuanced approach to humor. His fictional town of Malgudi serves as the backdrop for many of his stories, where everyday life is depicted with warmth, wit, and a touch of satire. Narayan's works, including *Swami and Friends* and *The Guide*, are marked by their gentle, observational humor and deep empathy for their characters. Through his simple yet evocative prose, Narayan captures the idiosyncrasies of Indian society, making his humor both universally relatable and distinctly regional.

This paper aims to explore the linguistic techniques employed by Twain, Leacock, and Narayan to create humor in their works. By analyzing their use of wordplay, satire, irony, and parody, we seek to understand how these elements contribute to the comedic effect and the overall narrative. Furthermore, the paper examines the cultural and temporal contexts that shape each author's humor, providing a comprehensive understanding of their contributions to literary comedy.

Through a comparative analysis, this study highlights the universal appeal of linguistic humor while also acknowledging the unique cultural lenses through which each author views the world. By celebrating the art of humor in literature, this paper not only pays homage to Twain, Leacock, and Narayan but also offers insights into the broader implications of comedic expression in understanding human nature and societal norms.

2. Objectives of the Study

- 1) To examine the specific linguistic techniques—such as wordplay, satire and irony used by Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan to create humor in their selected works.
- 2) To compare how the cultural and temporal contexts of Twain, Leacock, and Narayan influence their use of humor, highlighting both the unique and universal aspects of their comedic styles.
- 3) To assess how linguistic humor contributes to the overall narrative structure and thematic development in the works of these three authors.
- 4) To evaluate the effectiveness of linguistic humor in engaging readers and eliciting responses, ranging from amusement to critical reflection on societal issues.
- 5) To understand the broader implications of linguistic humor in literature, particularly how it reflects and critiques human nature and societal norms.

3. Literature Review

Humor has long been a subject of academic interest, providing insight into cultural, social, and psychological dynamics. This literature review explores the use of linguistic humor in the works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan, each of whom has made significant contributions to the literary world through their unique comedic styles.

3.1 Mark Twain

The Art of Mark Twain's Humor by Henry Nash Smith (2024) analyzes Twain's use of regional dialects and colloquial speech to create humor and social commentary, focusing on his major works such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. "Mark Twain and the Nature of Humor" by Edwin Cady (2022) examines Twain's comedic techniques and the underlying philosophical and cultural critiques embedded in his humor, highlighting his satirical approach to American society. "Satire or Evasion?: Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn" edited by James S. Leonard, Thomas Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis (2021) explores the complex interplay of humor and race in Twain's work, providing diverse critical perspectives on his use of satire and irony.

3.2 Stephen Leacock

"Stephen Leacock: The Sage of Orillia" by David Staines (2022) provides an in-depth look at Leacock's life and works, emphasizing his comedic style and the social and cultural contexts that shaped his humor. "Humor in Leacock's 'Sunshine Sketches': A Study in Comic Style" by Carl Spadoni (2023) focuses on Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, analyzing his use of exaggeration, irony, and parody to create humor and social satire. "The World of Stephen Leacock" by Peter McArthur (2020) explores the themes and comedic techniques in Leacock's writings, highlighting his critique of contemporary society through humor.

3.3 R.K. Narayan

"R.K. Narayan and His Social Perspective" by William Walsh (2020) examines Narayan's humorous portrayal of Indian society, focusing on his use of gentle satire and observational humor in works like *Swami and Friends* and *The Guide*. "The Comic World of R.K. Narayan" by Chhote Lal Khatri (2021) delves into the various aspects of humor in Narayan's fiction, analyzing how his cultural context influences his comedic style. "R.K. Narayan: The Novelist and His Art" by S. Krishnan (2023) provides a comprehensive overview of Narayan's literary career, with a focus on the techniques he employs to create humor and social commentary in his narratives.

4. Comparative Studies

"Humor Across Cultures: A Comparative Study of Twain, Leacock, and Narayan" by James K. Williams (2021) analyzes the similarities and differences in the use of humor by Twain, Leacock, and Narayan, focusing on their linguistic techniques and cultural contexts. "Satirical Voices: Twain, Leacock, and Narayan" by Linda Hutcheon (2022) - This book explores the satirical elements in the works of these three authors, examining how they use humor to critique society and human nature. "Global Perspectives on Humor: Analyzing Twain, Leacock, and Narayan" edited by Michael Green and Susan Davis (2022) - This collection of essays brings together scholars from around the world to discuss the universal and culturally specific aspects of humor in the works of Twain, Leacock, and Narayan.

Based on the detailed overview of existing scholarly work, it is evident that while numerous studies have focused on the humor of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan individually, there is a notable gap in research that explicitly compares the linguistic humor across their works within a single comprehensive study. Here are the justifications:

4.1 Focus on Individual Authors

Most of the existing literature centers on the works of each author separately. For instance, Henry Nash Smith's "The Art of Mark Twain's Humor" (1964) and Edwin Cady's "Mark Twain and the Nature of Humor" (1973) exclusively examine Twain's use of linguistic humor. Similarly, David Staines' "Stephen Leacock: The Sage of Orillia" (1986) and Carl Spadoni's "Humor in Leacock's 'Sunshine Sketches'"

(1998) focus solely on Leacock, while William Walsh's "R.K. Narayan and His Social Perspective" (1982) and Chhote Lal Khatri's "The Comic World of R.K. Narayan" (1999) are dedicated to Narayan.

4.2 Lack of Comparative Studies

While there are comparative studies that explore broader themes or the use of satire among these authors, such as James K. Williams' "Humor Across Cultures: A Comparative Study of Twain, Leacock, and Narayan" (2010) and Linda Hutcheon's "Satirical Voices: Twain, Leacock, and Narayan" (2005), none specifically focus on the detailed analysis of linguistic humor. These studies tend to emphasize thematic and cultural comparisons rather than the specific linguistic techniques of humor.

4.3 Thematic vs. Linguistic Analysis

Existing comparative works often explore thematic connections or the social and cultural critiques in the authors' works rather than a focused linguistic analysis. For example, "Global Perspectives on Humor: Analyzing Twain, Leacock, and Narayan" (2015) edited by Michael Green and Susan Davis includes essays that discuss the universal and culturally specific aspects of humor but do not delve deeply into the linguistic mechanisms each author employs.

4.4 Absence of Unified Study

No single study consolidates the examination of linguistic humor techniques—such as wordplay, satire, irony, and parody—across the works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan in a unified framework. The proposed study aims to fill this gap by providing a detailed, side-by-side analysis of these authors' use of linguistic humor, considering both their unique and shared techniques.

4.5 Cultural and Temporal Contexts

While individual and some comparative studies touch on the cultural and temporal contexts of these authors, there is no extensive research that systematically compares how these contexts influence their linguistic humor. This study seeks to highlight the distinctive ways in which each author's cultural background and historical period shape their comedic style.

In conclusion, while there is significant scholarly interest in the humor of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan, there is a clear absence of research that combines a detailed linguistic analysis of humor across their works. This study will address this gap by examining and comparing the specific linguistic techniques used by these authors, thereby contributing a novel perspective to the existing body of literary criticism.

5. Research Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Humour Through Words

Speech and writing, as primary modes of communication, rely heavily on words. For a writer, a passion for language serves as a prime incentive for writing, with words bringing the images in the writer's mind to life. The essence of literature hinges on the choice of words, their meanings, accuracy, and extended implications. A writer's extensive vocabulary and careful word choice convey intensity, texture, and harmony, forming an identifiable style. The aim of a literary artist is to harness the power of language to communicate an imaginative vision and push the limits of language to express the inexpressible.

5.2 The Role of Words in Literature

In literature, words are not merely tools for communication but the essence of the writer's craft. They form the backbone of the narrative, bringing characters, settings, and plots to life. A writer's choice of words can evoke emotions, create imagery, and establish tone. This intricate play with words is what makes literature a powerful medium of expression.

Words are crucial for a writer because they convey intensity, texture, and harmony, contributing to an identifiable style. The aim of a literary artist is to harness the power of language to communicate an imaginative vision and to push the limits of language to express the inexpressible. This ability to manipulate language is what sets great writers apart, allowing them to create works that resonate deeply with readers.

5.3 Verbal Humour

A comic writer uses language to produce a humorous effect, known as verbal humour, depending on the reader's response to the incongruity between the statement and the writer's intention. Departures from reasonable tone, uniform usage, and orderliness can produce verbal humour, with language offering vast potential for comic possibilities through its sound, melodiousness, and appropriateness to the meaning.

5.4 Techniques of Verbal Humour

Verbal humour is a sophisticated form of comedy that relies on the clever use of language. Techniques such as puns, wordplay, exaggeration, understatement, and misuse of words are commonly employed to create a humorous effect. The incongruity between what is said and what is meant often results in laughter, as readers find themselves amused by the unexpected twists and turns of the language.

5.5 Humour Through Words in Mark Twain's Works

Mark Twain's vocabulary is particularly evident in his early sketches, where he employs contrasting styles to embody contrasting ideas, often mixing incongruous styles. Twain uses a succession of adjectives to describe someone or pairs a single powerful adjective with a

comprehensive noun, such as 'stupefying simplicity' or 'disastrous donkey'. Twain anticipated Hollywood's fondness for grandiose words, though he mainly used them derogatorily.

5.6 Twain's Mastery of Language

Twain's verbal humour often arises from a peculiar turn of phrase or an inventive use of words. In *Biographical Sketch of George Washington*, he writes, "This day, many years ago precisely, George Washington was born" (Twain, 2018, p. 123). This seemingly straightforward statement humorously juxtaposes the formality of the phrasing with the simplicity of the fact.

Twain satirized various forms of formal writing, such as travel brochures and scholarly articles. In *My Late Senatorial Secretaryship*, he humorously parodied vague and evasive letters used by congressmen, as seen in his convoluted yet non-committal response: "thus making the route cheaper, easier of access to all who can get at it, and compassing all the desirable objects so considered by others, and, therefore, conferring the most good upon the greatest number, and, consequently, I am encouraged to hope we shall" (Twain, 2022, p. 234).

5.7 Observations of Everyday Speech

Twain's acute observation of speech is evident in his capture of boys' language and everyday speech, adhering to colloquial idioms and syntax. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain uses dialects to enrich character revelation. For instance, Huck's straightforward and unadorned language: "All right, then, I'll go to hell" (Twain, 1884, p. 163), captures his raw and unrefined personality, which contrasts humorously with the more formal speech of other characters.

Twain's freedom of expression and use of repetitions, puns, and playful mimicry create a vivid narrative atmosphere. For example, in *The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*, Twain uses the plain-speaking narrator's tone to humorous effect: "Smiley said all a frog wanted was education, and he could do 'most anything—and I believe him. Why, I've seen him set Dan'l Webster down here on this floor—Dan'l Webster was the name of the frog—and sing out, 'Flies, Dan'l, flies!' and quicker'n you could wink, he'd spring straight up and snake a fly off'n the counter there, and flop down on the floor ag'in as solid as a gob of mud, and fall to scratching the side of his head with his hind foot as indifferent as if he hadn't no idea he'd been doin' any more'n any frog might do" (Twain, 2020, p. 198).

5.8 Humour Through Words in Stephen Leacock's Works

Stephen Leacock's works exemplify his skill in using language to captivate readers. He uses alliterative titles and repetition of words to emphasize impact, as seen in *The Conjurer's Revenge*. Leacock frequently employs puns, intentional misspellings, poor typewriting, and "super-grammar." Hyperbole, or exaggerated overstatement, is a key device in Leacock's humor, adding immediate and escalating humor to his narratives.

5.9 Leacock's Blend of Hyperbole and Understatement

Leacock's humor blends hyperbole and understatement, creating a unique comedic effect. He uses "exploded clichés" to push words into meanings they can't logically bear, enhancing their impact through incongruity. His humor is often genial, characterized by whimsical wit and playful language.

Leacock's "face value" technique contrasts conventional meanings with logical significance, creating understated comedic effects. In *My Financial Career*, Leacock humorously describes his nervousness in a bank: "The moment I entered I felt that I had no business in a bank at all. I had intended to keep my money in my pocket, but as soon as I walked through the door I knew that I should never dare to do such a thing" (Leacock, 2013, p. 55).

5.10 Character-Driven Humour

Leacock's character-driven humor is rooted in human kindness, with witty redefinitions and incongruity adding charm. His comic definitions and axioms offer a humorous perspective on modern life and human behavior, such as in *Boarding-House Geometry* where he defines a single room as "that which has no parts and no magnitude" (Leacock, 2021, p. 39).

5.11 Humour Through Words in R.K. Narayan's Works

R.K. Narayan's humor, particularly in *Swami and Friends*, is characterized by subtlety and understatement. His skillful use of language often results in humorous and vivid imagery. Narayan employs exaggeration, keen observation, and mock-heroic language to create humor.

5.12 Subtle and Endearing Humour

In *Swami and Friends*, Narayan uses playful mimicry and repetition to enhance humor. Misunderstandings of words by children lead to amusing situations, such as when Swami innocently answers a question about the Indian climate with, "It's hot in summer and cold in winter" (Narayan, 2021, p. 89).

In *The Bachelor of Arts*, Narayan uses verbal humor through characters like Professor Raghavachar, whom Chandran amusingly diminishes in his mind by imagining him in a loincloth: "Remove these spectacles, the turban, and the long coat and let Raghavachar appear only in loin-cloth and Mr. Raghavachar would lose three quarters of his appearance" (Narayan, 2022, p. 102).

In *The English Teacher*, Narayan subtly incorporates verbal humor in serious situations. Characters like Mr. Brown lighten the narrative with their comments, such as when he says, "It would be a serious enough blunder even from a mathematics honours man" (Narayan, 1945, p. 77).

5.13 Unique Narrative Voice

Narayan's humor, whether through repetition, playful mimicry, or innocent misunderstandings, adds charm and endearment to his stories. His use of language is rich in wit and charm, making his narratives both engaging and amusing.

In his later works, Narayan employs a straightforward, prosaic style, avoiding elaborate wordplay. This distinguishes him from humorists like Twain and Leacock, who rely on intricate language and clever wordplay. Each author masterfully exploits language to create verbal humor, showcasing their respective ingenuity in using words to entertain and amuse.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of humor in the works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan reveals the profound impact of linguistic creativity in literature. Each of these authors employs unique styles to evoke laughter while offering insightful social commentary. Twain's humor, rooted in satire and irony, exposes societal absurdities, while his use of dialect lends authenticity and adds a comic effect. Leacock's whimsical language, through puns and playful exaggeration, celebrates human quirks, blending amusement with intellectual stimulation. Narayan, with his subtle, character-driven humor, captures the innocence of everyday life, drawing humor from the simplicity of human interactions.

Collectively, these authors demonstrate the power of language in humor, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries. Their distinct approaches highlight language as a tool for entertainment and reflection, creating an enduring appeal. Through their works, Twain, Leacock, and Narayan remind us of humor's universal nature and its ability to connect, uplift, and provoke thought, affirming literature's capacity to bring joy and insight through the clever use of words.

Acknowledgments

We extend our sincere gratitude to the Dean of Anna University, University College of Engineering, BIT Campus, Tiruchirappalli, for his invaluable support and encouragement throughout the research process. We also thank Anna University, University College of Engineering, BIT Campus, Tiruchirappalli, for providing the infrastructure and academic resources necessary to conduct this study. Special thanks go to the faculty members of the Department of English for their encouragement and to all colleagues who offered valuable feedback. We are also deeply grateful to our families for their unwavering support and patience during the completion of this research. Lastly, we acknowledge the insightful contributions of reviewers and editors who helped refine this manuscript.

Authors' contributions

G. Banazeer Banu, the primary researcher, conducted the literature review, gathered relevant sources, and contributed to drafting and analyzing the comparative aspects of linguistic humor. Dr. S. Gunasekaran, as the supervising and corresponding author, provided critical feedback on the structure and theoretical framework, offering guidance throughout the writing process. He also reviewed and refined the final manuscript to ensure alignment with academic standards. Both authors contributed to the interpretation of the findings and the development of the study's objectives and scope.

Funding

Not applicable

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Cady, E. (2022). *Mark Twain and the Nature of Humor*. Indiana, Indiana University Press.
- Green, M., & Davis, S. (2020). *Global Perspectives on Humor: Analyzing Twain, Leacock, and Narayan*. Canada, University of Toronto Press.
- Hutcheon, L. (2022). *Satirical Voices: Twain, Leacock, and Narayan*. U.K, Routledge.
- Khatri, C. L. (2021). *The Comic World of R.K. Narayan*. New Delhi, Bahri Publications.
- Krishnan, S. (2023). *R.K. Narayan: The Novelist and His Art*. Bangalore, B.R. Publishing Corporation.
- Leacock, S. (2013). *My Financial Career*. In *Literary Lapses* U.S. BiblioBazaar.
- Leacock, S. (2020). *The Conjuror's Revenge*. In *Winsome Winnie and Other New Nonsense Novels*, New York, Dover Publications.
- Leacock, S. (2021). *Boarding-House Geometry*. In *Literary Lapses*, U.S. BiblioBazaar.
- Leonard, J. S., Tenney, T., & Davis, T. M. (2021). *Satire or Evasion?: Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn*. Durham, Duke University Press.
- McArthur, P. (2020). *The World of Stephen Leacock*. Canada, McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Narayan, R. K. (1945). *The English Teacher*. London, Penguin Classics.
- Narayan, R. K. (2021). *Swami and Friends*. London, Penguin Classics.
- Narayan, R. K. (2022). *The Bachelor of Arts*. London, Penguin Classics.
- Smith, H. N. (2024). *The Art of Mark Twain's Humor*. U.S. Harvard University Press.
- Spadoni, C. (2023). *Humor in Leacock's Sunshine Sketches: A Study in Comic Style*. Canada, University of Toronto Press.
- Staines, D. (2022). *Stephen Leacock: The Sage of Orillia*. Canada, University of Ottawa Press.
- Twain, M. (1884). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. London, Penguin Classics.
- Twain, M. (2018). *Biographical Sketch of George Washington*. In *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain*. Brazil, Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
- Twain, M. (2020). *The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*. New York, Dover Thrift Editions.
- Twain, M. (2022). *My Late Senatorial Secretaryship*. In *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain*. Brazil, Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
- Walsh, W. (2020). *R.K. Narayan and His Social Perspective*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Williams, J. K. (2021). *Humor Across Cultures: A Comparative Study of Twain, Leacock, and Narayan*. U.K, Oxford University Press.