

## **AGE-RELATED VARIABILITY OF CHILDREN’S HUMOR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK LANGUAGES**

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### **ANNOTATION**

This article examines the age-related variability of children’s humor in English and Uzbek languages, demonstrating that humor is not a static phenomenon but evolves systematically through four developmental stages: pre-verbal social laughter (0–2 years), phonetic humor (3–6 years), lexical humor (7–10 years), and pragmatic humor (11–14 years). Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of McGhee, Piaget, and Vygotsky, the study provides a comparative analysis of how children in both linguistic traditions develop humor competence at each stage. The findings reveal that while the cognitive progression is universal, the specific linguistic resources and social contexts through which humor manifests differ markedly between the two languages: English children develop humor through dialogic, individual performance, while Uzbek children acquire humor through collective, formula-based folk traditions.

**Keywords:** children’s humor, age-related variability, cognitive development, phonetic humor, lexical humor, pragmatic humor, English language, Uzbek language, Piaget, McGhee, Vygotsky, comparative linguistics.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Humor is one of the most universal human phenomena, yet its development in children remains an underexplored area of cross-linguistic research. While adults may perceive children’s jokes as simple amusement, linguistic analysis reveals that humor in children’s speech is a complex cognitive and social process that evolves in lockstep with language acquisition, intellectual growth, and socialization. A three-year-old child and a thirteen-year-old adolescent may both laugh, yet they rarely understand each other’s humor — a younger sibling does not grasp the joke that makes an older sibling laugh, and vice versa. This mutual incomprehension is not accidental; it is evidence that humor is a dynamic, developmentally bound phenomenon.

The present study examines this age-related variability through a comparative lens, analyzing how children’s humor evolves across four developmental stages in English

and Uzbek — two typologically distinct languages. English, an analytic language with rich polysemic and homophonic resources, and Uzbek, an agglutinative language with strong oral folklore traditions, offer fundamentally different linguistic toolkits for humor construction. By comparing these two systems at each developmental stage, the study aims to disentangle the universal cognitive mechanisms of humor development from the culture-specific and language-specific channels through which humor is expressed.

Three theoretical frameworks are employed in parallel: McGhee’s cognitive stages model, which maps the sequential development of humor types; Piaget’s cognitive development theory, which explains the internal mechanisms enabling each transition; and Vygotsky’s socio-cultural approach, which illuminates why children at the same cognitive level in English and Uzbek produce markedly different humor repertoires.

### Results and Analysis

**Stage 1: Pre-verbal Social Laughter (0–2 years).** The earliest stage of humor development is not yet linked to language, yet it lays the social foundation for all subsequent verbal humor. At this stage, an infant’s laughter emerges as a reaction to physical and social incongruity: a familiar face suddenly produces an unexpected expression, or a caregiver disappears and reappears. The Uzbek game “*qayerda bola — mana bola*” and the English “*peekaboo*” operate through an identical three-phase mechanism: expectation (the face is visible) → disruption (the face is hidden) → restoration (the face reappears with “here!”). The laughter occurs at the moment of restoration. The fact that both cultures independently developed this game based on the same cognitive principle constitutes evidence for the universality of the underlying humor mechanism. At this stage, the child does not create humor — humor exists only as a social phenomenon, mediated entirely by the caregiver’s facial expressions, voice, and actions.

**Stage 2: Phonetic Humor (3–6 years).** As language acquisition progresses, the child enters a new layer of humor: phonetic play. At this stage, children experiment with the sound system of their language — deliberately mispronouncing familiar words, creating rhyming nonsense, and substituting sounds for comic effect. The logic is straightforward: the child first knows what is “*correct*,” then intentionally violates it. This violation signals not error but emerging metalinguistic control.

In English, a characteristic example is the knock-knock joke: “*Knock knock — Who’s there? — Cow says — Cow says who? — No, cow says MOO!*” The phonetic proximity between “*who*” and “*moo*” (both labial-vowel combinations) makes the substitution natural. Crucially, for a 3–6-year-old child, the humor lies not in the

phonetic pun itself (which the child does not yet fully grasp) but in the absurdity of a cow “*interfering*” in a conversation — that is, in the violation of social norms rather than linguistic ones. An older child hearing the same joke laughs at the phonetic mechanism; a younger child laughs at the situational absurdity. This observation demonstrates how the same text is perceived differently depending on the child’s developmental stage.

In Uzbek, phonetic humor at this age is primarily sourced from counting rhymes and rhythmic folk formulas. The formula “*Guldur-gup, og’ziga qulup!*” (“*Bang-thud, a lock on the mouth!*”) combines onomatopoeia, metaphorical imagery, and performative speech act in six syllables. The onomatopoeic “*guldur-gup*” produces joy through sound imitation; “*og’ziga qulup*” creates humor through the absurd visual image of a physical lock on a mouth. Unlike English phonetic humor, which is typically structured as a two-person dialogue, Uzbek phonetic humor is embedded in collective play contexts group games, seasonal songs, and formulaic rituals. This structural difference has a linguistic consequence: English phonetic humor favors open, individually creative formats, while Uzbek phonetic humor relies on fixed, collectively shared formulas.

**Stage 3: Lexical Humor (7–10 years).** Primary school age marks the most significant qualitative shift in humor development, as the child transitions from phonetic to lexical humor. Piaget’s framework explains this shift through three cognitive changes: reversibility (the ability to consider a thought in reverse), decentration (the ability to hold multiple aspects simultaneously), and conservation (understanding that quantity remains constant regardless of appearance). Holding two meanings of a single word simultaneously for instance, “*bright*” as both “*intelligent*” and “*dazzling*” requires precisely the joint operation of reversibility and decentration. Consequently, polysemy-based jokes are cognitively inaccessible to children under seven.

In English, the characteristic genre at this stage is the riddle. “*Why did the teacher wear sunglasses? — Because her students were so bright!*” activates two semantic layers: “*bright*” as a positive evaluation of intelligence and “*bright*” as dazzling light. The question steers the listener toward the first meaning; the answer abruptly redirects to the second. Another example, “*Why was six afraid of seven? — Because seven ‘eight’ nine!*” exploits the homophonic identity of “*eight*” (number) and “*ate*” (past tense of eat), animating numbers into characters with human relationships. Both jokes operate through the simultaneous activation of two lexical meanings within a single word — the hallmark mechanism of English children’s humor.

In Uzbek, the primary lexical humor genre for this age group is the topishmoq (riddle). However, Uzbek riddles differ from English riddles in a crucial respect: where English

riddles operate at the word level, Uzbek riddles operate through metaphorical transference describing an object's properties through the "language" of another object. "*Qo'lsiz, oyoqsiz eshik ochar*" ("Without hands, without feet, it opens the door") describes the wind through the schema of human action. The child must simultaneously hold two schemas human movement and wind movement and extract their common feature. The riddle "*Yetti tuynukli to'qmoq, buni bilmagan ahmoq*" ("A club with seven holes — whoever doesn't know this is a fool") is especially revealing: its final line equates ignorance of the answer with foolishness, transforming the riddle from a cognitive exercise into a social status marker. This social function humor as a mechanism for establishing prestige among peers is significantly more pronounced in Uzbek than in English children's riddles.

A critical development at this stage is that children begin not only to comprehend but to create humor. While the 3–6-year-old child repeats ready-made formulas, the 7–10-year-old invents new jokes. English children typically create within the knock-knock template, finding new phonetic similarities to generate novel punchlines. Uzbek children, by contrast, create by inventing new riddles or transplanting Afandi anecdotes into new situations. The latter requires constructing situational logic rather than word-level play, making the cognitive load comparatively higher a distinctive feature of Uzbek children's humor.

**Stage 4: Pragmatic Humor (11–14 years).** The onset of adolescence brings a transition from lexical to pragmatic humor. Understanding sarcasm and irony requires the child to recognize the gap between a word's literal meaning and the speaker's actual intention a capacity that demands metacognitive ability, specifically the capacity to model another person's thinking. This capacity is insufficiently developed at 7–10 years and strengthens markedly after age eleven.

In English, a characteristic form at this stage is the two-layered joke: "*I told my doctor I broke my arm in two places. He told me to stop going to those places.*" The word "places" simultaneously means "anatomical locations where the bone fractured" and "physical locations (buildings, areas)." The doctor's advice is logically valid under the second reading but medically absurd under the first. Comprehending this joke requires holding both semantic layers and recognizing the speaker's humorous intent both operations demand metacognitive maturity.

In Uzbek, the adolescent at this stage discovers a new layer in the Afandi anecdote tradition. A notable example: the Khan threatens Afandi with punishment if he cannot answer a question. Afandi replies: "*Your Majesty, if you ask one question, I will give two answers — one correct, one incorrect. If you can determine which is incorrect, then punish me.*" Afandi does not reject the Khan's threat; he restructures the power

dynamic by forcing the Khan into a cognitive task. The 7–10-year-old child sees only Afandi's cleverness; the 11–14-year-old adolescent perceives the semantic inversion of authority the subordinate managing the ruler. This transition is directly linked to metacognitive development.

A significant cultural difference emerges at this stage. While English-speaking adolescents employ sarcasm and satire relatively freely, including in the presence of adults, Uzbek adolescents guided by the cultural principle of respect for elders learn to comprehend social critique through humor but express it only in restricted contexts, primarily among peers. Thus, two adolescents possessing identical pragmatic humor competence deploy it in markedly different ways due to cultural norms. This confirms that age-related humor variability is shaped not only by cognitive factors but equally by cultural transmission patterns.

Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development finds a compelling illustration at this stage. The Uzbek adolescent cannot yet perform *askiya* (traditional competitive verbal humor) independently but begins to understand and appreciate it when mediated by adults. This comprehension itself becomes the foundation for subsequent development the child recognizes a humor level currently beyond independent reach and aspires toward it.

### **Conclusion**

The comparative analysis of age-related humor variability in English and Uzbek confirms that children's humor follows a universal cognitive progression from pre-verbal social laughter through phonetic and lexical stages to pragmatic humor. This progression is governed by the developmental mechanisms described by Piaget (reversibility, decentration, metacognition) and mapped by McGhee's stage model. However, the specific linguistic resources and social contexts through which humor manifests at each stage differ substantially between the two languages.

At the phonetic stage, English children acquire humor through dialogic, two-person exchange, while Uzbek children learn humor through collective, formula-based folk play. At the lexical stage, English humor operates through word-level double meaning (polysemy, homophony), while Uzbek humor operates through metaphorical transference and logical inversion. At the pragmatic stage, both traditions develop metacognitive humor competence, but cultural norms particularly the Uzbek principle of elder respect channel its expression differently.

These findings demonstrate that the study of children's humor requires an integrated approach combining cognitive, linguistic, and cultural perspectives. The universal developmental trajectory confirms the shared cognitive foundations of humor, while

the cross-linguistic differences confirm that language structure and cultural context actively shape not only what children find funny but how, when, and with whom they express it.

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