

# A funny thing about humour

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Humour is a funny thing. Over the centuries it's had different meanings for different people. Ask someone today for a definition of humour, and they're likely to say it's something that makes us laugh, that it's the opposite of serious. Read on and you'll see what a long way humour has come.

In the Latin spoken by the Romans, "humor" was the word for moisture, fluid. As late as the Renaissance, people clung to the ancient belief that a person's physical and mental condition was governed by four fluids in the body – blood, phlegm, cholera (yellow bile) and melancholy (black bile), known as the cardinal humours. When the humours were in a balanced mixture, the person was in good physical and mental health. When the mixture was not balanced, the person became ill or moody – out of humour, as the expression goes.

You're probably wondering what this has to do with humour, as in funny. It's complicated. Let's begin with the genres of ancient Greek drama – whereas tragedy treated elevated themes, comedy dealt with human weaknesses. Comic vices (such as hypocrisy and avarice, which could produce entertaining situations) were attributed to an imbalance of the humours. The genre of comedy developed over time, and by the 1600s, if not earlier, the word humour had expanded to include what we understand by it today. Humour was comedy's style.

The words we use in reference to humour come from a range of sources. Fun and funny derive from the Middle English "fon," which signifies a fool, but the word fool is formed from the Latin "follis," meaning an inflated ball, a

bellows. Humour often induces feelings of hilarity, a word derived from the Latin "hilaritas," meaning cheerfulness, mirth.

Play is an important element of humour. The Old English "plega," meaning exercise, sport, rapid movement, is the root of our modern word play. Ancient Rome had two words to describe slightly different aspects of play – "jocus" and "ludus," from which we formed the terms jocular, joke and ludicrous. However, jest and jester, which we use as synonyms for joke and joker, are based on the Latin "gesta," signifying exploits or doings. Another Latin word for jest is "facetia," which gave us the word facetious, meaning humorous, witty. Droll (perhaps from the Middle Dutch "drolle," meaning imp or goblin) is a synonym for facetious.

Satire, parody and caricature are some common forms of humour. While satire (from the Latin "satira," poetic medley) makes fun of human vices, parody (from the Greek "parodia," burlesque poem) and caricature (from the late Latin "carricare," to load) depend on imitation and exaggeration to achieve a comic effect.

Humour provokes laughter. In Latin, to laugh is "ridere," the basis of our word ridiculous. But our English word laughter has its roots in the Old English "hlaehhan," which ultimately goes back to the Gothic "hlahjan."

All told, humour relies on the unexpected – something that strays from the norm, something skewed. So when you're feeling out of humour (that is, when your humours are out of balance), just remember – laughter is the best medicine. I'm serious.