

Stylistic Features of Humor in English Satirical Texts: a Study of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*

Md Barkat Sk
Independent Researcher

Abstract. *Humor, as a literary device, serves multiple functions in English literature, ranging from entertainment to social critique. Satire, in particular, relies on humor to expose human follies, societal vices, and political corruption, often combining wit, irony, and exaggeration. This study examines the stylistic features of humor in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, a seminal work of English satire, emphasizing how linguistic choices, narrative techniques, and rhetorical strategies construct humor and convey social commentary. By analyzing lexical selection, syntactic structures, figurative language, and pragmatic devices, the paper identifies key stylistic mechanisms through which humor is produced and perceived. Furthermore, it explores how Swift's humor engages readers cognitively and affectively, fostering reflection on human nature, governance, and cultural practices. The study underscores the interplay between linguistic artistry and socio-political critique, highlighting the enduring significance of satire as both an aesthetic and ethical literary tool.*

Key words: *Humor, Satire, Stylistics, Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, Irony, Linguistic Humor, Social Critique.*

Introduction

Humor is a complex stylistic phenomenon in English literature, operating at the intersection of language, cognition, and culture. Satirical texts exploit humor to reveal societal shortcomings, challenge norms, and provoke reflection. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) exemplifies the strategic use of humor in literature, blending narrative imagination with linguistic ingenuity to deliver pointed socio-political critique. Swift's satire critiques human pride, institutional corruption, and imperialist tendencies, making his work a rich site for exploring stylistic humor.

Stylistically, humor in satirical texts manifests through lexical choices, syntactic play, figurative language, incongruity, hyperbole, and irony. These features not only entertain but also encode criticism, moral judgment, and cultural reflection. The study of humor through a stylistic lens involves analyzing how language forms generate cognitive and emotional responses, revealing the mechanisms through which satire functions.

Research Questions: This paper aims to investigate the stylistic features of humor in *Gulliver's Travels*, addressing the following questions:

1. What linguistic and rhetorical strategies are employed to produce humor in Swift's satire?
2. How do lexical, syntactic, and figurative elements contribute to satirical effect?
3. In what ways does humor in *Gulliver's Travels* mediate social critique and ethical reflection?

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon two primary theoretical frameworks: **stylistics** and **humor theory**. These frameworks provide complementary lenses to analyze how Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* constructs humor and communicates social critique through linguistic and narrative strategies.

Stylistics: Stylistics, as a branch of applied linguistics, investigates the intricate relationship between linguistic choices and literary effects. According to Leech and Short (2007), stylistics explores how lexical, syntactic, phonological, and semantic features operate collectively to produce meaning, tone, and aesthetic impact. In the context of satire, stylistic analysis is particularly relevant because humor is frequently embedded within specific linguistic and structural patterns. Stylistic features—such as semantic ambiguity, metaphorical language, syntactic inversion, alliteration, and parataxis—can encode irony, exaggeration, and social critique, producing multi-layered textual effects.

In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift's use of lexical selection, particularly formal diction juxtaposed with trivial or absurd subjects, exemplifies stylistic humor. For instance, the verbose and bureaucratic language used to describe the Lilliputians' petty court intrigues magnifies the absurdity of human vanity and institutional corruption. Similarly, syntactic manipulation—such as long, multi-clausal sentences—creates suspense, amplifying the unexpected or comical resolution at the sentence's end. Stylistic analysis allows us to trace how such linguistic choices not only entertain but also construct moral and social meaning. By examining these textual features, this study identifies the mechanisms through which humor is created and perceived in Swift's satire.

Furthermore, stylistics facilitates a **functional reading of text**, connecting micro-level language features with macro-level narrative purpose (Jeffries, 2010). In satire, humor is rarely ornamental; it is integrally tied to critique. The stylistic lens enables a detailed understanding of how humor operates cognitively and socially, highlighting Swift's deliberate manipulation of linguistic norms to produce both laughter and reflection.

Humor Theory: Humor theory provides a psychological and cognitive framework for understanding how readers perceive and respond to humor. This study primarily adopts the incongruity-resolution model (Morreall, 1983; Attardo, 1994), which argues that humor arises when there is a discrepancy between expectation and reality. The reader or listener recognizes an incongruity, cognitively resolves it, and experiences amusement. In *Gulliver's Travels*, incongruity is a recurring technique—such as the contrast between Gulliver's rational perspective and the absurd customs of Lilliputians or the hyper-rational society of the Houyhnhnms—which prompts readers to reflect on human irrationality and moral flaws while enjoying the comedic effect.

Complementing incongruity theory are the **superiority** and **relief** models of humor. Superiority theory (Griffin, 1994) posits that humor often arises from the recognition of inferiority or folly in others, fostering a sense of cognitive or moral elevation in the observer. Swift's satirical portraits of human pride, political corruption, and social pretension exemplify this mechanism, as readers are invited to critically evaluate the ridiculousness of human behavior while recognizing their own moral and intellectual engagement. Relief theory (Freud, 1905), on the other hand, emphasizes humor's role in alleviating social, psychological, or moral tension. In *Gulliver's Travels*, laughter provides a safe outlet for confronting uncomfortable truths about war, colonialism, and human vice, allowing readers to process ethical critique through amusement.

By integrating humor theory with stylistics, this study addresses both the **mechanics** of humor (linguistic and textual devices) and the **psychological reception** of humor (reader cognition, affect, and ethical reflection). This combined approach facilitates a comprehensive examination of *Gulliver's Travels*, revealing how Swift orchestrates humor at multiple levels: lexical, syntactic, narrative, and conceptual. It also underscores satire's dual function as a vehicle for entertainment and a medium of moral and social commentary.

The convergence of stylistic analysis and humor theory allows for a holistic understanding of Swift's satire. While stylistics identifies the textual structures that encode humor, humor theory explains how these structures elicit cognitive, emotional, and ethical responses in readers. This dual framework

enables a nuanced exploration of *Gulliver's Travels* as a site where literary form, aesthetic pleasure, and socio-political critique intersect. In particular, it highlights how Swift's linguistic artistry is inseparable from his ethical and cultural engagement, demonstrating the sophisticated interplay between form and function in English satirical literature.

Stylistic Features of Humor in *Gulliver's Travels*

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* employs a sophisticated array of stylistic devices to produce humor, blending linguistic ingenuity with social critique. The humor arises not merely from absurd situations but from the interplay of lexical, syntactic, figurative, pragmatic, and rhetorical strategies that invite both amusement and reflection.

Lexical Humor: Lexical choices are central to Swiftian humor, as words themselves carry connotative and evaluative weight. Swift often exploits semantic ambiguity, euphemism, and incongruity to create cognitive surprise and satirical effect (Leech & Short, 2007). For instance, in the Lilliputian court, the description of the "emperor's footstool" comically exaggerates deference and hierarchical absurdity (Swift, 1726, Part I, Chapter IV). The diminutive imagery contrasts sharply with the grandeur implied by imperial language, generating irony and ridicule.

Swift's lexical play also includes hyperbolic adjectives, formal diction, and repetition to heighten absurdity. Phrases such as "monstrous cruelty" or "ridiculous policy" illustrate the incongruity between language and subject matter: grandiose words describe petty events, producing humor that underscores the satirical critique of political pomposity. Additionally, Swift employs culturally loaded terminology—such as "High Heels" and "Low Heels" to denote conflicting political factions—which functions as lexical punning, subtly lampooning human obsession with trivial distinctions (Greenblatt, 1988).

Syntactic Play: Humor in *Gulliver's Travels* is amplified through syntactic manipulation. Swift frequently employs parataxis, subordination, and syntactic inversion, constructing elaborate sentences whose conclusions often deliver anticlimactic or ironic surprises (Leech & Short, 2007). For example, the meticulous description of Lilliputian political procedure—spanning several lines of subordinate clauses—culminates in the absurdity of a war over which end of an egg is "correctly" broken. The tension created by syntactic complexity is released through incongruous resolution, producing cognitive delight and satirical insight.

Parallelism, ellipsis, and inversion further enhance comedic rhythm and rhetorical emphasis. For instance, in Gulliver's account of the Brobdingnagians, the repetitive syntactic structures describing human frailty—"The men appeared to me like insects, the women like moving dolls"—underscore both exaggeration and ironic distance, allowing the reader to perceive human folly humorously yet critically (Price, 2000).

Figurative Language: Figurative devices—including metaphor, simile, and personification—serve as key instruments of Swiftian humor (Attardo, 1994). Comparisons between humans and animals, particularly in the depiction of the rational Houyhnhnms versus the morally flawed Yahoos, produce cognitive incongruity that is simultaneously entertaining and morally instructive (Swift, 1726, Part IV, Chapter I). For example, the description of Gulliver's fellow humans as "creatures more vile than the most odious animals" employs hyperbolic metaphor to highlight ethical deficiencies while eliciting laughter at human pretension.

Similes also function humorously, such as Gulliver likening Lilliputians' armed maneuvers to the motions of ants, creating a visual and cognitive contrast that underscores the triviality of human conflicts while amplifying absurdity. Personification of social institutions—courts, armies, and bureaucracies—renders them subjects of ridicule, revealing social critique embedded in playful imagery (Griffin, 1994).

Irony and Satirical Tone: Irony pervades Swift's humor, operating at verbal, situational, and dramatic levels (Griffin, 1994; Greenblatt, 1988). Verbal irony occurs when Gulliver narrates absurd or morally questionable events in an ostensibly neutral or serious tone, prompting readers to recognize the discrepancy between narration and reality. For instance, the elaborate protocols surrounding

Lilliputian court appointments are described with solemn language, generating humor through contrast with their triviality.

Situational irony is evident in physical contrasts, such as Gulliver's massive size among the miniature Lilliputians, which produces both visual comedy and social satire, critiquing hierarchical pretensions and human self-importance. **Dramatic irony** involves the reader's awareness of social folly that Gulliver may overlook or misinterpret, creating a reflective, ethically infused amusement that encourages critical engagement with human institutions.

Hyperbole and Exaggeration: Exaggeration is central to Swift's satirical humor. Physical hyperbole, such as the Lilliputians' minuscule stature or the Brobdingnagians' enormous size, produces visual humor while magnifying human folly (Price, 2000). Behavioral exaggeration—obsession with trivial disputes, pedantic court rituals, and absurdly meticulous bureaucracy—amplifies the comic effect, emphasizing moral and social critique.

Institutional exaggeration, particularly in depictions of politics, law, and social hierarchy, allows Swift to satirize corruption, pride, and arbitrariness without direct confrontation. The hyperbolic portrayal of emperor decrees, ceremonial formalities, and military rivalries makes the ridiculousness of human pretension both palpable and entertaining.

Pragmatic Humor: Pragmatic devices, such as implicature, presupposition, and conversational maxim flouting, are pivotal in Swiftian humor (Attardo & Raskin, 1991). Gulliver's narration often presupposes that absurd social norms are ordinary, prompting readers to detect incongruities and respond with humor. For example, the Lilliputian law prescribing punishment for the "wrong" end of an egg being broken presupposes an unquestioned societal logic, which readers instantly recognize as ludicrous.

Euphemism and understatement further enhance humor. Gulliver often describes grotesque or morally dubious practices in measured, neutral tones, subtly amplifying satire. These pragmatic manipulations of expectation allow humor to operate beneath the surface, engaging readers cognitively and ethically while delivering amusement (Leech & Short, 2007).

Humor as Social and Political Commentary

Humor in *Gulliver's Travels* functions as a sophisticated instrument of social and political critique, extending far beyond mere entertainment. Swift embeds his satire within narrative and linguistic structures, exposing corruption, absurd bureaucracy, colonialist ideologies, and human vanity, thereby prompting ethical and moral reflection (Greenblatt, 1988; Damrosch, 2003).

For example, the Lilliputian court's obsession with which end of an egg should be broken—the "Big-Endians" versus the "Little-Endians"—parodies the petty sectarian conflicts of 18th-century European politics, particularly the religious and political disputes of England and France (Swift, 1726, Part I, Chapter IV). The humor lies in the disproportionate seriousness accorded to trivial matters, illustrating how linguistic and narrative exaggeration can reveal the absurdity of human pride and factionalism.

Similarly, the depiction of Brobdingnagian society satirizes European imperial ambitions and the follies of human governance. Gulliver's accounts of European military and political pride, described in the context of the morally rational but physically enormous Brobdingnagians, generate humor through contrast and exaggeration, while simultaneously critiquing the corruption and vanity of European courts (Price, 2000). Here, humor becomes an ethical device: it entertains while prompting the reader to assess the moral dimensions of human behavior and societal structures.

Swift's use of linguistic devices—verbal irony, hyperbole, and lexical ambiguity—allows him to deliver pointed criticism without direct confrontation (Attardo, 1994). For instance, Gulliver's understated narration of atrocities in Lilliput or the meticulous detailing of petty laws allows readers to infer moral critique, demonstrating that humor can operate simultaneously at aesthetic and ethical levels (Griffin, 1994). Thus, satire in *Gulliver's Travels* employs humor to mediate critical reflection, encouraging readers to recognize societal flaws while maintaining engagement through amusement.

Cognitive and Affective Engagement

Humor in satire engages readers on both cognitive and affective levels, enhancing comprehension, interpretive reasoning, and emotional involvement (Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1994). The cognitive engagement arises from the need to detect incongruities, resolve semantic or social contradictions, and interpret layered textual meaning. For instance, when Gulliver encounters the Houyhnhnms, readers must reconcile the incongruity between the rational, morally upright horses and the flawed, violent Yahoos—an act of cognitive processing that produces both amusement and insight (Swift, 1726, Part IV, Chapter I).

Affective engagement stems from surprise, delight, and empathetic resonance with the narrated events. The whimsical depiction of Lilliputians' court rituals, the absurd punishments for trivial transgressions, or Gulliver's exaggerated fear of giant Brobdingnagians evokes emotional responses such as laughter, astonishment, or moral indignation. This dual cognitive-affective involvement promotes an interactive reading experience, where humor is not passive but requires active interpretation and reflection.

Research in cognitive stylistics emphasizes that humor enhances memory retention, comprehension, and critical awareness by linking amusement with interpretive problem-solving (Attardo, 1994; Raskin, 1985). In *Gulliver's Travels*, readers negotiate complex linguistic cues, figurative expressions, and syntactic structures to recognize satire. For example, Gulliver's neutral narration of Lilliputian absurdities presupposes cultural norms that are deliberately ludicrous; the reader's awareness of this discrepancy produces both cognitive recognition and affective amusement.

Ultimately, humor in Swift's satire operates as a mechanism for ethical, cognitive, and emotional engagement. It cultivates reflective reading practices by requiring the audience to discern and evaluate social critique embedded within linguistic and narrative forms, thus transforming literary enjoyment into a morally and intellectually instructive experience (Greenblatt, 1988; Damrosch, 2003).

Conclusion

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* demonstrates that humor in English satirical texts is a multifaceted stylistic phenomenon. Lexical, syntactic, figurative, and pragmatic devices coalesce to produce cognitive, aesthetic, and moral effects. Humor operates as both a literary and ethical tool, enabling satire to entertain, critique, and provoke reflection on human nature, society, and governance. Stylistic analysis of such texts elucidates the intricate relationship between language, cognition, and social commentary, affirming the enduring relevance of satire in English literature. Future research could examine cross-cultural reception of Swiftian humor, digital adaptations of satire, and comparative stylistic studies across different English satirical texts, exploring how humor evolves with linguistic, technological, and socio-political change.

Reference

1. Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic theories of humor*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
2. Attardo, S., & Raskin, V. (1991). Script theory revis(it)ed: Joke similarity and joke representation model. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 4(3–4), 293–347.
3. Damrosch, D. (2003). *What is world literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
4. Freud, S. (1905). *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. London: Hogarth Press.
5. Griffin, D. (1994). *Satire: A critical reintroduction*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
6. Greenblatt, S. (1988). *Renaissance self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
7. Jeffries, L. (2010). *Stylistics*. London: Routledge.
8. Leech, G., & Short, M. (2007). *Style in fiction: A linguistic introduction to English fictional prose* (2nd ed.). London: Pearson Education.

9. Morreall, J. (1983). *Taking laughter seriously*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
10. Price, L. (2000). *The Cambridge companion to Jonathan Swift*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
11. Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic mechanisms of humor*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
12. Swift, J. (1726). *Gulliver's travels*. London: Benjamin Motte.