The language of deception and humor – Winter 2022

At their core, deception and humor are both all about our shared understanding of expectations. Deception and humor leverage this understanding to manipulate peoples’ expectations toward very different ends but, in both cases, success or failure often hinges on the ability to exploit norms of cooperative communication and anticipate cognitive heuristics while simultaneously modeling what others know (and what you know they know (and what you know they know you know (and ...))). In the case of humor, this exploitation is (mostly) consensual and playful; the act of ‘playing along with the joke’ means being complicit in our own deception right up until the moment that the punchline is revealed. Deceit, on the other hand, subtracts the elements of consent and play leaving only the exploitation.

To better understand what deception and humor are, how they work, and why we need them, we will consider perspectives from philosophy, linguistics, psychology, sociology, game theory, computer science, and communications, as well as great literature and pulp sci-fi.

Topics in Five Parts – about 2 weeks each:

1. Ænigma
   Language is a hot mess. How so? Why?
   And yet, we manage to reliably extract meaning from messy signals. How?
   What purpose does the messiness serve (or is it an unavoidable flaw)?

2. Bamboozle
   When does cooperation break down and why are lies a special case?
   Is deception part of humor? (or - Why do we delight in misunderstanding?)
   Is humor a tool of deception? (or - Why do we hide behind humor?)
   Are there good or necessary kinds of deception, if so, why?

3. Contagion
   Most untruthful statements are unwittingly spread. Why? What factors are involved?
   The most common deception is self-deception. How does it work? What factors are involved?
   What’s the function of social contagion (for “truth” and other contagions)?
   Is there a common thread of structures, properties, or motivation among:
   Jokes, Riddles, Urban Myths, Factoids, Horror Stories, ... Fables, Allegory?

4. Persuasion
   Emotional manipulation and behavioral heuristics are powerful tools for indirect deception.
   Why is humor a safe way to express dangerous ideas? Does this make it persuasive?
   Hoaxes, Conspiracy-theories, Satire, Jokes – misinformation or persuasion?
   What’s the role of humor in social synchronization and group-identity?

5. Truth
   Jokes, stories, (and even lies) can be a surprisingly reliable channel for honesty.
   Authenticity, being honest with lies, and obfuscating culpability.
   Smiles, laughs, and timing - is humor a high-fidelity window into other minds?
   What we learned and what it all means.
Course requirements and grading
Each section will have its own discussion forum on Canvas. There will be weekly prompts for posts to the forums. These will sometimes involve finding and providing links to and/or analysis of media such as jokes, satire, propaganda, advertising, bits of political rhetoric, urban myths, etc. Section attendance is mandatory (synchronously unless there's a good reason – If you can't attend section in real time then make up for it by participating more on Canvas).

30% of your grade will be based on the discussion section. Each week you will be expected to participate in the discussion threads in the form of short essays, reactions to papers, small projects, etc. The only rules you need to follow in order to ace the discussion grade are
1 contribute to the discussion online or in section every week
2 participate collaboratively (i.e. don’t be ‘that kid’).

30% of your grade will be based on your midterm project - due Monday of week 5
30% of your grade will be based on your final project - due Monday of finals week
10% of your grade will be based on your evaluation and feedback on your peers’ midterm projects.
You will need to grade and provide feedback on two projects from your section for the midterm - the grade for your grading will be based on whether your evaluation was fair and well justified plus the quality of your feedback.

Midterm Project and Final Project
• Must create original research or original media/materials + discussion thereof
• Must include review/discussion of relevant prior research or related work (+ citations)
• You will review and grade two projects from your peers. You will need to justify your grade with some criticism (some of which must be constructive). Your suggested grades are non-binding but you will be graded on the quality of your review of your peers’ work.

Class Philosophy Regarding Inclusivity
Having a diversity of perspectives in discussions makes them more interesting and provides us with a broader range of insights and ideas. This is especially so when the topics of discussion have complex social dimensions and are fraught with emotionally charged issues. In this class, we will try to cultivate an environment that is inclusive and respectful of everybody in terms of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religious background, national origin, immigration status, socioeconomic status, disability, neurodiversity, and various other dimensions of our individual experiences.

This is going to be tricky because some of the material we examine will contain covert or overt threads of hostility and exclusion based on these very features. We’ll approach with mindfulness and caution when we can (sexist jokes, libelous propaganda are obvious cases) but sometimes we’ll stumble unexpectedly or carelessly across some of these tensions. As a rule, we’ll try to be as considerate as possible but we will also inevitably fail at some point, so we will try our best to be charitable as possible when others fail. In fact, unpacking microagressions, implicit biases, unnoticed stereotypes etc. will significantly enrich our understanding of the way that language, humor, and deception are used to encode and reinforce these very things so we will be compassionate with one another while leaning in to the discomfort that comes from putting our own behavior, presuppositions and biases in the spotlight.

I will likely fail at some point and say or present something offensive without having provided appropriate context – you can always call me out in such cases without worry that I’ll be offended. I am in charge of running this class but I have no special moral authority when it comes to the material we will be discussing. If something that someone says in class bothers you and you don’t want to bring it up right then, you can always talk to me or the TAs in person or via email to let us know and we will directly address the issue.