

5.3 The Unspoken Implication (p. 117)

Making Chopped Liver of Language

A GOOD DEAL OF Jewish humour depends on playing around with language—with what is literally stated vs. what might be meant. Here’s an example:

“Marvin, close the window, it’s cold outside.”

“Mph.”

“Marvin, close the window! It’s cold outside!”

“Urmph.”

“Marvin, CLOSE THE WINDOW!! It’s COLD outside!!”

“Oh, okay. There. So now it’s warm outside?”

This next example needs some background explanation. The Hebrew word *eret* means “land” (as in “land of Israel”), although that doesn’t have any bearing on the story. Gimel is a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, roughly corresponding to “G.” The word *eret* is not spelled with a gimel. The bit of Jewish humour involving these terms is, like the preceding one, a dialogue; but this one isn’t exactly a joke. It’s a bit of almost-sense:

“Why should *eret* be spelled with a gimel?”

“A gimel? It isn’t.”

“Why shouldn’t *eret* be spelled with a gimel?”

“Why *should* *eret* be spelled with a gimel?”

“That’s what I’m asking you—Why should *eret* be spelled with a gimel?”

Is this funny or witty or at least interesting, or just a bit of unintelligible nonsense? Some people I’ve tried it on react with puzzlement—not because there’s some sort of deep puzzle here, but because they just don’t see the point. But Ted Cohen, who reports this joke with evident relish, says that the philosopher Stanley Cavell, “who has a deep appreciation of the wonder of this dialogue ... tells me that he has seen important philosophers transfixed by the exchange.” Go figure.

FOR FURTHER READING: My source for the *eret* dialogue and that report about Cavell is Ted Cohen’s book *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 66–67.

Cohen thinks that the Jewish fascination with tricks of logic and language comes from their tradition of debate and disagreement without any final authority—there is no Jewish pope. (Cohen speculates that this is why there are so few Jesuit stand-up comics.) I’ll say more about Cohen on humour in the chapter on **Jokes and Aesthetics** later on this website.

“In my own household, where a taste for verbal play prevails, it is a rare day that does not see the utterance of at least a dozen patent absurdities before breakfast.”—Stephen Stich¹

¹ *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 31. Stich’s remark pays tribute to a famous passage from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*.