



**Humour Investigation:**  
An Analysis of the Theoretical Humour Perspectives,  
Cultural Continuities, and Developmental Aspects Related to the Comedy of  
Dawn French

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Nationally acclaimed former cartoonist and short story writer for *The New Yorker*, James Thurber, said that “the wit makes fun of other persons; the satirist makes fun of the world; [and] the humorist makes fun of himself” (Moncur, 2007, p. 1). Despite his misogynistic pronoun usage and the obviously unforgivable atrocity of overly Americanizing the spelling of 'humourist,' he did nicely categorize three of the methodological approaches to comedic targets. What Thurber didn't account for, however, were those comedians and comediennes who pay little to no regard for the socially constructed boundaries in form; he didn't account for the wildly transcendental Dawn French.

Dawn French was born in October of 1957 in Wales and since early adulthood she has honed her humour skills through numerous television performances, a largely successful sitcom, and feature-length films with her comedic partner in crime Jennifer Saunders (Wikipedia, 2007). Though she started her career in a non-mainstream vein of comedy in the UK, her first major public debut was her starring role as Geraldine Granger on BBC1's 1990s smash situational comedy, *The Vicar of Dibley* (Wikipedia, 2007). Thus, the majority of her comedy has taken place in very recent times—the mid-to-late 90s and on into the current decade.

While she utilizes many different comedic modes and forms, French's humour largely revolves around a few central themes and consequent philosophies. When investigating those themes, it is necessary to view her career as being dichotomously split into the Vicar of Dibley era and the subsequent post-Vicar epoch. During her years as *The Vicar of Dibley*, she mainly focused on various forms of incongruities (primarily relating to the traditional religiosity of Men [or in this case, Women] of the Cloth), small situational misfortunes, and formal jokes, especially during the P.S.-style epilogue at the end of each episode. After that show, however, she started directing her humour inward through self-deprecation about being typecast as the Vicar, and her not-so-slim figure. The paradigmic shift in her humour philosophy could be attributed to a couple different causes, such as her change from a prominent television role to feature films, or the move from a solo performance to a joint-effort with Jennifer Saunders.

Within the contemporary study of humour and laughter, there is a notion that all comedy falls under one of three main theories: superiority, incongruity, and relief (\*\*\*) . Though Dawn French, in one routine or another,

incorporates aspects of each of these theories, the vast majority of her humour is prototypic of the incongruity theory. Her comedy relies on the atypical pairing of or incompatibility between two or more features presented within the same scene. For instance, the entire premise of the *The Vicar of Dibley* was that she was a member of the clergy, which was quite unusual considering it is a role almost exclusively held by men. In the first episode—entitled “Arrival”—the members of the church were quite shocked to see a woman had been sent to be the new Vicar. She promptly looked at them and verbalized their surprise by saying “you were expecting a bloke with a Bible, a beard and bad breath. Instead, you got a babe with a bob-cut and a magnificent bosom” (Vertue, Plowman, & Duffy, 1994).

French not only falls under the broad incongruity theory, but her humour can be further categorized as following the principles of the cognitive paradigms within the psychological humour theory. In order for one to fully appreciate her humour, the three primary cognitive processing abilities—namely “perception, abstraction, and memory”—need to be fully developed (\*\*\*). Perception is the process by which one receives and processes external stimuli through the senses, and contrasted with that is abstraction which involves reducing perceptual information about stimuli to only focus on aspects important to a particular situation (Nairne, 2003). Many times French's humour will rely on the audience members' abilities to perceive and interpret her facial affect. For instance, when Geraldine tells a somewhat dirty joke to Alice at the end of each *Vicar of Dibley* episode, Alice won't understand it at first. When she does finally 'get it,' she laughs hysterically and is embarrassed that Geraldine told it. Geraldine's facial expression radically turns from the joy that Alice understood her joke, to confusion about why Alice is *still* laughing, to annoyance at the length of Alice's laughing (Vertue et al., 1994). To fully understand the humour in that situation, one needs to be able to not only recognize those varying facial expressions, but also to abstract the actual implied meanings behind each of them.

Further, much of French's later work with Saunders relies on the audience member's memory of previously released movies, earlier pop music, and contemporary culture. For instance, in *Living in a Material World*, she does an outstanding parody of a Björk music video (Plowman & Spiers, 2003). Without the knowledge and memory of both Björk and her quasi-Picasso music videos, the humour in the parody is lost. The same can be

said about any of her other parodies: without a knowledge, memory, and understanding of the referenced material—be it music, movies, or other contemporary events—the parody isn't funny at all.

When considering any type of comedy, it is often wondered whether or not the humour will withstand the tests of time and culture. Dawn French's comedy has several aspects which nicely extend across the typical cultural boundaries, but also some hindrances to cross-cultural humour universality. Several aspects of her humour, such as sarcasm, facial affect, situational incongruities, and self-deprecation have been found to exist throughout time with only a few subtle distinctions regardless of cultural normativity (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2003; Huang, Tang, Helmeste, Shioiri, & Someya, 2001; Perlmutter, 2002; Rockwell & Theriot, 2001; Russell, 2002).

First, two researchers—Rockwell and Theriot—investigated hypothesized sex and cultural differences in use, psycholinguistic encoding, and reception of sarcasm in humour (2001). While they found that there were cultural and even sex-based differences in the psycholinguistic aspects of sarcasm and even slight cultural disparities in the usage and reception of sarcasm, a key aspect of the study is the underlying premise that sarcasm does *exist* cross-culturally (Rockwell & Theriot, 2001). The existence of sarcasm in various cultures and subcultures of the world indicates that Dawn French's use of it within her comedy will appeal to people from a multitude of nations, ethnicities, socioeconomic strata, and social networks around the world. Though they may have slightly different interpretations therein, the humorous element should remain intact.

Examples of her use of sarcasm in her sketches can be readily witnessed in many scenes from the *French & Saunders Collection*. Namely, at the start of *Back with a Vengeance*, she gets stuck in traffic while on her way to the BBC studio. A man in another car starts talking to her, and she brings up that she is Dawn French from *The Vicar of Dibley* (Plowman & Birkin, 2005). While her words are saying that she should be respected for her role in a prominent television sitcom, her tone indicates that she is upset with being typecast by that role. It is this sarcastic tone that makes the situation funny. To top it off, the man steps out of his car proclaiming to all around that he had just talked to *The Vicar of Dibley*, indicating that he is in some way special for having done so (Plowman & Birkin, 2005).

Second, studies in 2001 and 2003 respectively, found that though there are some minor differences in

how people from different cultures (specifically Chinese and American) interpret facial expressions, there is a universality for facial representations of basic emotions (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2003; Huang et al., 2001). As mentioned early, French uses facial expression quite commonly, especially during the epilogue joke sessions with Alice at the end of each *Vicar of Dibley* episode. When Alice finally gets the joke and laughs outlandishly for a long period of time, French's facial affect changes from appreciation to confusion to annoyance. That shift in facial expression is what makes the situation comical. Another example of facial affect is when, in *On the Rocks*, she plays a teenage girl who is frustrated with her mother's so-called 'strict rules' and lack of understanding (Plowman & Carrivick, 2005). She is constantly text-messaging one of her friends on her cell phone and gives her mother the most disgruntled look when she (her mother) asks her a question (Plowman & Carrivick, 2005). French's character doesn't say anything at all, but the face she makes is more than enough to insight laughter from the viewer.

Third, in 2002, Perlmutter investigated the use of incongruity and “logical inconsistencies” within the context of humorous exchanges and comedy routines (p. 1). He found that though the subjects and settings of jokes vary from one culture to another, the underlying principle of the jokes still revolved around inconsistencies in logic or incongruity between two or more of the elements in the joke (Perlmutter, 2002). This distinction between the superficial elements and the underlying principle of jokes are commonly referred to as the “surface structures” and the “deep structures,” respectively (\*\*\*) . The findings that the underlying incompatibility between superficial elements (subjects and settings) is common amongst jokes from all cultures indicates that, at least on some rudimentary level, humans find humour in some of the same scenarios.

French uses incongruity frequently in her comedy. For instance, in the Christmas special of *The Vicar of Dibley*, she is telling a joke to Alice that involves a father whose son was born without a torso or limbs; he was merely a head. Alice is shocked and saddened by the setup of this joke, which is understandable considering she doesn't realize it's a joke, but rather thinks it is a true story. However, audience members hearing that joke will laugh before even hearing the punchline because the thought of a person living without any torso at all is completely absurd. While the punchline of the joke is silly but still insights laughter, the setup of the joke is also

very amusing because of the element of surprise revolving around an inconsistency with the viewer's expectations.

Last, Dawn French very commonly uses self-deprecating humour in her routines, especially throughout her routines with Saunders. The two areas for which she most readily satirizes herself are being overweight and being typecast as *The Vicar of Dibley*, and out of those two, the former is more common than the latter. In *Back with a Vengeance*, French tells Saunders about a letter she received inviting her to appear on a show called "Celebrity Fit Farm." She acts excited about the opportunity but can't figure out why they would ask her. She says "I know I'm fit, but there are certainly people more fit than me out there" (Plowman & Birkin, 2005). She is utilizing blatant sarcasm coupled with self-deprecation to convey her recognition that she is overweight. Later on in that conversation, after Saunders explains that the show isn't for fit people, but for "fat people," French furthers her sarcasm by saying "well then why didn't they ask you?" (Plowman & Birkin, 2005). Any viewer can readily see that Saunders is in much better physical shape than is French, and that triadic relationship between sarcasm, incongruity (between what she is saying and what the viewer can plainly see), and self-deprecation is what makes the scene wildly funny.

While self-deprecation has been found to exist in many cultures, and viewed as amusing or funny in the majority of Western nations, the appreciation therein also has some culturally-specific gender disparities therein (Russell, 2002). In Russell's study it would, at first glance, seem like the researcher feel victim to the contemporary error of using the terms 'sex' and 'gender' interchangeably, as is common in mass media. However, she distinguishes between the two by showing trends that are sex-based (seen more frequently in women than in men) and ones that are gender-based, such as the idea that self-deprecatory humour is used more often by women because certain societies and individuals see them as being weaker than men (Russell, 2002). Interestingly, by watching hundreds of comedy clips, she found that a common thread amongst female comics from the United States, the United Kingdom, and other Western cultures, is to use self-deprecation as a quick way to make male audience members feel less threatened by the idea of a female comic (Russell, 2002). However, she also found that among some women who identify themselves as being feminists, there is a dissent with using

self-deprecating humour as a way to win audience members over (Russell, 2002). Oddly, however, there were no comments made regarding men who use self-deprecation for comedic means, which could possibly be a researcher bias in the study.

Thus, while self-deprecation is usually seen in a similar comedic light as is sarcasm, there are those individuals and even societies that do not find it amusing, nor condone its usage in humour. Therefore, French's use could possibly be hindering her cross-cultural appreciation.

Some other aspects of her comedy that might further encumber her cultural appeal are her British accent, use of colloquialisms, and references to UK- or European-specific viewpoints on other nations. First, in some sketches her accent might make it difficult for certain audience members to understand. This accent-induced obfuscation is further extrapolated in scenes in which she is imitating another person with a different accent. For instance, when she is mocking Catherine Zeta Jones, certain words blend together in ways which make them difficult to distinguish. Those rare, but definitely existent times could turn some people off to her humour.

Second, she does commonly use terms that are daily-use words in Great Britain, but that might not be understood by even other English speaking people. For instance, though the word 'bloke' is understood by many Americans and other English speakers, it is not often used in everyday conversation outside of the UK. Such words could further intensify the language barrier and could consequently make her comedy less appealing to viewers outside of the UK.

Third, there are times in which French satirizes other nations from common British and European perspectives. For instance, there is a sketch in *Back with a Vengeance* in which French and Saunders retire to a gated community in Florida. They make comments about how they used to think they would feel "locked in" in a gated community, but now they feel like they are totally protected (Plowman & Birkin, 2005). They also make fun of the American obsession with guns, and overly large products bought in bulk. While many Americans might find this sketch funny, there are definitely those—as there are with any satiric jeering—that will find it offensive.

Overall, however, French's comedy will appeal to people from a significant number of cultures because she utilizes underlying principles of comedy that are found almost universally. She utilizes sarcasm, incongruity

resolution, universal facial representations of basic emotions, and self-deprecation to make the audience feel more comfortable with her. All of these methodologies are recognized and appreciated throughout many different cultures, with few exceptions and disparities thereof.

Another aspect to consider when evaluating the humour of a particular comic is the intended audience of the comedy. Since comedy relies heavily on linguistic understanding and cognition, there are many aspects of humour that require those understandings that don't come until after certain points of cognitive development (McGhee, 1974). Considering the proposed idea that children won't appreciate incongruity-based humour, and given that Dawn French frequently utilizes those situational inconsistencies in her sketches, it is likely that children will not readily recognize or understand the comedic value of a majority of her work (McGhee, 1974).

Extrapolating and applying the archtypal model of cognitive development, Piaget would claim that children would neither understand nor appreciate incongruity-resolution humour until they've reached the stage of concrete operations approximately around seven-years-of-age (McGhee, 1974; Piaget, 2000).

Not only because children under the age of seven are hypothesized to be unable to cognitively process incongruities, but young children might not like French's humour because it requires many understandings of world processes, systems, and events to which they have probably not yet been exposed. For instance, without the knowledge that members of the Catholic religious order (namely, priests) are almost undoubtedly male, seeing French as the *Vicar of Dibley* would seem feasible. That knowledge of world systems increases and develops throughout the lifespan, but a key cognitive element in understanding incongruities and finding humour in the resulting incompatibility rapidly develops during late childhood and on into adolescence: the ability to reverse a situation and evaluate its accordance with reality (Barrouillet & Lecas, 1999; Hammond, 2005). Plainly stated, the child develops the ability to observe a situation and compare it with what he or she already understands about reality in order to evaluate the credibility of the situation. The incompatibility of the situation can prove to be funny only after that incongruity is readily observed and recognized.

In essence, the understanding of the incongruities in Dawn French's comedy is twofold: being able to process the situation information and evaluate it terms of accordance with reality, and a developed understanding



of world processes, systems, and historical and contemporary events. Young children are at a loss in both of those regards, but they are not the only age bracket that might have trouble appreciating French's humour. Older adults might also not like it as much as would late teenagers, young adults, and the middle-aged. Granted, older adults have adequately developed the cognitive processes needed to evaluate situational inconsistencies, but as for the latter portion of that twofold understanding, they might not be well versed in current events or contemporary film, music, and the arts. As an example, the parodies of current movies, like Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, or of newage music, like the music videos of Björk. Without an understanding of the premises of the movies or the style of music, older adults might not understand the parody and just assume that French and Saunders are just acting silly. In summation, Dawn French's humour would most likely be appreciated by people in their late teens to late forties (late adolescence through middle adulthood), with the bulk of the appreciative audience being in their twenties and thirties.

Development, however, with regards to humour appreciation doesn't only concern age and cognition. It also encompasses sexual and gender appeal. As mentioned when discussing cultural relevance, though there are some women who via self-report rated themselves as being highly feminist, the majority of men and women understand and appreciate self-deprecating humour as being a way to lighten the mood and establish an unthreatening stage presence for comedians. Given that most of Dawn French's sketches and routines would not be classified as aggressive styles of humour or slapstick, there wouldn't be the previously-found tendency for people assuming a more masculine gender role over a more feminine gender role to appreciate her humour (Prerost, 1975).

One sex-based distinction might come up in some of the later sketches done by French and Saunders regarding body image. In several scenes, Dawn French uses sarcasm and self-deprecating humour with regard to her weight, like the interchange about the "Celebrity Fit Farm" (Plowman & Birkin, 2005). Given that there are vast differences in the ways that males and females view and interpret body image, there may prove to be a disparity in the way that men and women view the self-deprecating humour relating to physical attributions (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007). However, there haven't been any significant studies investigating the specific issue of self-

deprecatory humour relating to specifically to body image, or the sex-based and gender-based distinctions of humour appreciation thereof. Thus, it is difficult to resolve with any empirical level of certainty whether or not there could be disparities in how men and women, respectively, view Dawn French's self-deprecation regarding her weight.

In summary, the humour of Dawn French will most likely appeal to the vast majority of people from different cultures, socioeconomic strata, and social upbringings because of her use of the universal comic methodologies of sarcasm, facial affect, incongruity / situational incompatibility, and self-deprecation. Her comedy will probably appeal to people in their late teenage years on up through the end of middle adulthood, because they represent the age brackets that are typically considered to be the most adept when it comes to culturally relevant events and entertainment (movies, music, et cetera). Her humour will probably transcend sex and gender boundaries as well considering it is primarily not of an aggressive nature, nor does it directly and vulgarly address sexual issues or dominance.

Personally, I greatly prefer the work of French and Saunders over Dawn French's solo work on *The Vicar of Dibley*. While I did enjoy many of the later episodes, I didn't always understand the cultural references because the earlier seasons came out when I was but a wee pup, and I was more concerned with the amount of marshmallows in my Lucky Charms than I was with pop culture. So, if you're a man or a woman (or intersex) between the ages of say 17 and 55, you should really hop on Amazon.co.uk and pick up a copy of at least one of Dawn French's DVDs. You know what Confucius always say: "don't knock it 'til ya' rock it"...okay, so maybe it wasn't an ancient Chinese proverb, but it's true!

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