Humor as a Means of Stratifying the Internet Community

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to overview a number of ways in which humorous texts can be used as a means of stratifying the community of the Web users. The paper contains numerous examples and brief comments on the possible or intended effects of various classes of jokes. Well-established, sociologically grounded approaches to discourse analysis (DA) provide the theoretical basis for these considerations.

Although frequently classified as a part of psycholinguistics, DA has always been showing very strong tendencies to analyze the social aspects of the language use. As numerous prominent researchers proved in the early stage of DA development, language and society interact in many complex ways. Widely known sets of rules for effective communication, proposed by Lakoff (1973), Sacks (1974), or Leech (1983), involve a very strong social or cultural aspect. Discourse occurs in a social and cultural context, and it should not be analyzed out of it. Works of Garfinkel (1967, 1974) and Gumperz (1964, 1982 and 1993), as well as their followers, stress the question of the social order in its relation to language use. It is widely agreed that the perception and the production of language is socially or culturally determined. Language is studied as a tool that helps to create a social order and, on the other hand, as an entity that remains under its strong influence. Language helps to stratify societies and it bears signs of the stratification. Humorous texts are not only a product of stratification: they may be a powerful stratifying factor.

The paper contains many citations from Internet pages and discussion lists, as well as jokes heard from colleagues or friends. Most of the cited texts can be found in various Internet locations, but only selected, widely known and relatively permanent pages are mentioned as the sources (to honor those who have done so much in the field of gathering and classifying computer humor). Unfortunately, the author cannot warrant that the mentioned web pages will be still available after a period of time, so the citations should be preferably treated as "live recordings" of written language production.

2. Internet Community and its Members

Any search engine (like Google, Altavista, or Excite) responds to the query "Internet community" with thousands of web links. However, the term itself may be still considered quite controversial.

Traditional definitions of the community, describing it as a group of people sharing common interests or a profession, living in the same place or subject to the same laws, are not very precise and - considering the unbelievable development of communication technologies - sometimes obsolete. They frequently make use of the equally fuzzy notion of "culture" or "a common sense of identity" (see Internet resources: Elwell's Glossary of Sociology or the Glossary for the NetAcademy).

In spite of these theoretical problems (North 1994) argues very reasonably that the users of the Web can be viewed as a community with its own culture. Although his work originated at the early stage of the Web development, and the group of the Internet users has incredibly grown and has become more diversified, most of his arguments remain valid.

The notion of a "discourse community" (DC), defined as a group of people who attempt to reach certain broadly agreed goals by the use of a common terminology in speaking or writing (Swales 1990) seems to be even more adequate in this context. Various definitions of DC mention "specific mechanisms of intercommunication", "special genres of language", "a threshold level of members", and some other defining features. All the requirements seem to be met by the social entity in question: the entire group of the Web users. No doubt, it is diversified; still, its members have much in common:

a. media of communication: e-mail, web pages, IRC, ICQ, virtual reality pages, etc.;

b. widely accepted codes and rules of proper behavior ("netiqette") informally regulating the use of e-mail, discussion groups, or web-based chat (avoid

spamming, avoid too long mail messages, introduce yourself if you want to openly criticize someone, etc.);

c. there are hundreds of languages used on the web, but "a unifying tendency" can be observed at least at the level of vocabulary, punctuation rules (minimized or discarded punctuation). The use of "smileys" (ASCII code character-based symbols of emotions and feelings) and other international symbols is also a common tendency;

d. common aims and actions (e.g., lower prices on the web access; looking for organs or blood for people who need a transplantation or a transfusion).

The aims of the Web use are diversified and there are many classes of the Web users. However, such a diversification is normal and common to most social groups of that size.

3. Varieties of Humor Stratifying the Internet Community

Hundreds of jokes which belong to the fuzzy category of "computer humor" can be found everywhere on the Web. "Computer humor" includes texts about more or less advanced computer users, about computers and computer programs, as well as about those who are still computer illiterate. There are also "visual" computer jokes (pictures, cartoons, animations, etc.), but this paper is focused solely on texts.

The corpus of texts collected for this study contains humor that mocks mostly five widely defined features:

- ignorance;
- weirdness;
- "excessive" competence (e.g., crazy programmers)
- being extremely involved with computers (computer geeks, game addicts);
- being attached to specific software or hardware (e.g., Windows users, RPG players, and Mac users).

There are also humorous texts that are not intended to mock anyone, but rather to appeal only to certain groups of the web users (advanced programmers, game players, or web masters). In most cases, they concern programming languages, games, operating systems and other computer programs.

Although the lack of technological knowledge is a common object of jokes, there are also "computer jokes" aimed at social ignorance (e.g., neglecting the *netiquette*) or narrow-mindedness. Many jokes about advanced computer users show their helplessness in everyday situations. By mocking someone's ignorance, people separate themselves from the "less knowledgeable strata" of the Inter-

net community or even create small elite subgroups. This class of humorous texts seems to contain fewer jokes than one would expect. As an example, a group of jokes about "blondes" can be mentioned. "Blondes" are extremely stupid or naive women, presumably pretty ones; they occur not only in computer humor.

(1) "Where is the remote control?!" (a blonde who sat at the computer)
(2) "I want to buy a C disk" (a blonde who came to a computer shop)
(3) Who's General Failure & why is he reading my disk?

In this way, a virtual (and perhaps marginal) group of "ignorant" users is extracted from the community of the Web users. Persons who stand at least one step higher in their computer education may enjoy texts that are clearly intended to make them feel more self-assured:

Check out the following excerpts from a Wall Street Journal article by Jim Carlton:

(4) Compaq is considering changing the command "Press Any Key" to "Press Return Key" because of the flood of calls asking where the "Any" key is.
(5) Another AST customer was asked to send a copy of her defective diskettes. A few days later a letter arrived from the customer along with Xeroxed copies of the floppies.

("So you think you're computer-illiterate?" Web Page)

Some jokes convey a very specific message: "If you can understand this, you are one of us." They can, potentially, base on two pillars: (a) intelligence, (b) technical knowledge about computer software and hardware. The reader is also frequently expected to show a special sense of humor or sensitivity. This class of humorous texts is widely present on the entire Web. They could be classified according to the amount of computer knowledge needed to comprehend them.

A degree of computer literacy is necessary to understand the humor of the following lines:

(6) C:\BELFRY is where I keep my .BAT files.
(7) REALITY.DAT not found. Attempting to restore Universe
(8) REALITY.SYS corrupted- reboot Universe (Y/N)?
(9) SENILE.COM found... Out Of Memory.
(10) USER ERROR: replace user and press any key to continue.

The reader is expected to be DOS literate, which may mean that these sentences are not funny to younger Web users. In this way, another division may occur in the Web community: "those who use or know command line operating systems" vs. "those who work only in graphical environment systems". Another group of humorous lines clearly demands MS Windows (or other modern operating system) literacy from the potential readers:

(11)Windows- a 32bit extension and a graphical shell for a 16 bit patch to an 8 bit operating system originally coded for a 4 bit microprocessor written by a 2 bit company that can't stand 1 bit of competition.
(12)Is reading in the bathroom considered Multi-Tasking?
(O'Byrne Files)

Sometimes the author assumes only a very general kind of computer literacy of the potential reader:

(13) Mommy! The cursor's winking at me!
(14) The world will end in 5 minutes. Please log out.
(O'Byrne Files)

In the field of computer humor, ignorance is rarely attributed to "country people". Even in the example below (15-21), the author seems just to play with words and the sentences are certainly not offensive. In any case, this text can also be viewed as a way of creating or assuming the existence of at least two sub-groups of the web users.

Technology for country folk

(15) LOG ON: Makin' a wood stove hotter!
(16) LOG OFF: Don't add no more wood!
(17) MONITOR: Keepin' an eye on the wood stove!
(18) DOWNLOAD: Gettin' the firewood off the truck!
(19) MEGAHERTZ: When your not careful gettin' the firewood!
(20) FLOPPY DISK: Whatcha get from tryin' to carry too much firewood!
(21) RAM: That thing that splits the firewood!
[...]
(from "Technology for country folk" web page)

The reception of the jokes aimed at the lack of computer literacy or technological incompetence may vary and it would need to be analyzed in a more systematic way. One can expect that the reaction "But it's not about me" must be most popular. However, in a number of cases, such a reaction is impossible. Some texts just let you know that you do not belong to a certain stratum of the Internet community, because you cannot comprehend them.

In the Web community, "weirdness" may be perceived in a number of different ways. Different Internet users may classify completely different features as symptoms of "weirdness". "Being weird" may be sometimes considered positive - as being different and, therefore, having a higher personal value.

For those who are not certain whether they are weird enough to classify themselves as geeks or nerds, there are web pages where they can test themselves:

www.armory.com/tests/nerd.html
spider.lloyd.com/~dragon/nerdtest.html
www.armory.com/tests/nerd500.html

These pages provide valuable resources for those who would like to become weirder. There are also many pages containing various definitions of geeks and their behavior (but: compare the definition in paragraph 5):

(22) "A geek is someone who spends time being "social" on a computer. This could mean chatting on irc or icb, playing multi-user games, posting to alt.sex.bondage.particle.physics, or even writing shareware. Someone who just uses their computer for work, but doesn't spend their free time "on line" is not a geek. Most geeks are technically adept and have a great love of computers, but not all geeks are programming wizards. [...]"
(http://www.darkwater.com/omni/)

"Geek" can also be used as a verb: "to geek" means to sit online, chat, read mail, etc., usually wasting one's time.

Geeks are being mocked, but they are also being admired, and their social position seems to be relatively high. Geeks do not isolate themselves overtly from the rest of the Web users (they are being "social on a computer"), but they sometimes stress the quasi-hermetic character of their group by using a special vocabulary or a code.

Robert A. Hayden developed "The Geek Code", which is a set of detailed rules for a number of communicational situations. One may suspect that the author himself didn't intended it to become a communication standard among geeks, but rather a humorous text showing a special way of thinking. The short citation below illustrates its character:

(23) Nutrition:

Geeks usually consume food. Some eat everything they can grab while some others are quite conscious of their food. (Note: 'n' is used for nutrition as 'f' is used elsewhere.)

n+++	*I graze like a bunny - pass me a carrot!*
n++	*I like the fibers in food*
n+	*I like food - especially when it is healthy.*
n-	*Food? I just grab something from the shelves with meat within it.*
n- -	*I eat only the cheap things - even with artificial meat and vegetables.*
n - - -	*I eat meat - seen Jurassic Park?*
n - - -	*I _live_ on snacks and coke.*
!n	*Eh what? never mind the menu, give me something to eat!*

(Robert A. Hayden: hayden@krypton.mankato.msus.edu)

If treated seriously, "The Geek Code" could be an extreme example of how language can be used to stratify the Web community. Fortunately, such codes are not frequently used even on special geek pages or discussion lists. In fact, In-

ternet features an impressive number of computer jargon dictionaries that provide less advanced users with an appropriate vocabulary, simultaneously providing lots of fun. One of the most impressive is Jargon Dictionary at www.ccil.org/jargon/jargon.html.

Another group of jokes flourishes where the users of various operating systems, programming languages, or office applications meet. The jokes about MS Windows are most popular and they are also invented by the users of MS Windows themselves. Humorous texts about the users of "alternative" systems are less common, but equally interesting:

Features of a declared Linux user:

(24) When he sees a Gnu antilope in the ZOO, he wonders where is its source code and why it was packed in the ZOO format.
(25) Going to a party, he realizes that he hasn't installed SAMBA yet.

One should notice that while the texts above laugh at the users of Linux operating systems, they can be understood only by someone who actually is (or was) a Linux user and understands ambiguity of the words like "GNU", "ZOO", and "SAMBA".

The following lines contain humorous characteristics of two programming languages and an operating systems. The programming task was "to shoot oneself in the foot".

Prolog

(26) You attempt to shoot yourself in the foot, but the bullet, failing to find its mark, backtracks to the gun which then explodes in your face.
or
(27) You tell your program you want to be shot in the foot. The program figures out how to do it, but the syntax doesn't allow it to explain.

Visual Basic

(28) You'll shoot yourself in the foot, but you'll have so much fun doing it that you won't care.

Unix

```
(29) % ls
a.out    ad349d.bk    ad348d.o thesis.bk5    thesis.ps
ad349c.c ad348d.c theis.bk4    thesis.dvi    thesis.tex
% rm * .o
rm: .o: No such file or directory
% ls
%
```

("On computer humor")

While the presented texts express the characteristics of programming languages, there are also jokes that explicitly show the differences in thinking among programmers using different languages. (For example: What kind of answer you get if you meet a Java (Prolog, C++, Pascal, etc.) programmer and ask him the way?) Of course, texts like (29) can be really enjoyed by experienced programmers. Different programming languages represent different ways of thinking or even different life philosophies and perhaps this is why they comprise another source of stratification.

There is a special category of jokes aimed at people who know the art of programming at least at a rudimentary level. We can call them "program code jokes":

(30) The program which solves the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything:

```
ultimage_answer_t deep_thought(
deduction_t rice_pudding, deduction_t income_tax
)
{
sleep(years2secs(7500000));
return ("42");
```

Besides a number of "program code jokes", full descriptions of "new" programming languages can be found. The text about "Tenne-c" programming language seems to be addressed to C programmers:

(31) **General Idiosyncrasies of Tenne-C**

Data is referred to as Ciphers; the start of a data section should be so labelled. Data which is external to a given file is denoted by the term YONDER, similar to the EXTERNAL directive.

Single arguments are not passed to functions individually; rather, multiple passes are made simultaneously to all functions. Thus, in Tenne-C, we speak of feuds rather than arguments. This is an extremely powerful, albeit somewhat destructive feature of Tenne-C.

Relational operators work similarly to those in other languages, but in Tenne-C these are called kinfolk operators. It will be noted that some of these interrelate better than others. Kinfolk operators include:

Bettern - (mines) bettern (yourn)
Boutlack - (mines) boutlack (yourn)
Nearlyboutlack - (mines) nearlyboutlack (yourn)

Worsern - (yourns) worsern (mine)
Nearlyboutsgoods - (yourns) nearlyboutsgoods (mine)
Lack - (mines) lack (yourn)

Sortalack - (mines) sortalack (yourn)
Differrtn - (yourns) differrtn (mine)

The Boolean operators are somewhat different than most. Note the lack of AND and OR operators:

taint
istoo
tis
aintdunnit
nary
nope

Among the variety of the humorous texts meant mainly for the advanced web users, there are also relatively long ones. Some of them are based on widely known, ancient or religious books:

(32) **In the beginning...**

In the beginning God created the Bit and the Byte. And from those he created the Word. And there were two Bytes in the Word; and nothing else existed. And God separated the One from the Zero; and he saw it was good.
[...]

And God created the Programmer; and put him at Data Center; and showed the Programmer the catalog tree and said: You can use all the volumes and subvolumes, but DO NOT USE Windows.

[...]

But Bill was smarter than all the other creatures of God. And Bill said to the User: Did God really tell you not to run any programs?

And the User answered: God told us that we can use every program and every piece of data but told us not to run Windows or we will die.

And Bill said to the User: How can you talk about something you did not even try? The moment you run Windows you will become equal to God. You will be able to create anything you like by a simple click of your mouse.

[...]

And God threw them out of the Data Center and locked the door and secured it with a password.
(O'Byrne files)

The full taste of this text is available to those who know the first book of the Old Testament. This narrows down the group of the potential "conscious" recipients by excluding, for example, narrow minded geeks. In general, such texts may have a number of layers and they can be comic (or not) at various "levels of decoding". The same applies to (33) and (34) below.

The (anonymous?) author of the following text has skillfully used the phraseology and vocabulary of the old Hindu poetry (*Bhagavad-Gita*, *Upanishads*, etc.), mixing it with computer terminology, and employing adequate old English:

(33) **The Loginataka (Dialogue between a Guru and a Newbie) Version 2.1**

Speak, O Guru: How can I become a UNIX Wizard?

O, Nobly Born: know that the Way to Wizardhood is long, and winding, and fraught with Risks. Thou must Attune thyself with the Source, attaining the arcane Knowledge and Conversation of the System Libraries and Internals. Yea; and such an all-consuming Time and Energy Sink is this as to greatly Imperil thy Grade Point Average (if one thou hast), not to mention thy Sex Life (if one thou hast). But persevere, oh Larval One; rewards beyond the Dreams of Lusers await thee!

Speak, O Guru: What books should I study? Are the O'Reilly "Nutshell" guides a good place to start?

O, Nobly Born: know that the O'Reilly books are but the palest Shadow, the outermost Portal of the True Enlightenment.

[...]
(from T. North's web pages)

Not only the entire text of this "epic" story is comprehensible solely to the Unix-literate readers, but it also stresses the distance between the "Guru" and the "Nobly Born", i.e. the newbie (comp. the dialogues in *Bhagavad-Gita*). On the other hand, as noted above, such a text may not appeal to computer freaks, nerds or geeks. Perhaps they are created purposefully, to let the narrow-minded experts know that there is something valuable besides computers and that they are not equally well educated in other areas. However, such texts can be also interpreted as attempts to add the computers and their users a touch of nobility.

Some more popular contemporary texts have also been transformed into computer humor:

(34) **"American Pie" - Hacker Style**

Long, long, time ago, I can still remember
How UNIX used to make me smile...
And I knew that with a login name
That I could play those unix games
And maybe hack some programs for a while.
[...]

And all the passwords got rehashed
The Day That UNIX Died...

And I was singing:
Chorus:

Bye, bye, nroff, rogue and vi
Gave my program to Phil Levy but Phil Levy was high,
The boys on the board were sayin' "kill this, goodbye."
Singin' this'll be the day that I die...
This'll be the day that I die
[...]
(from Omri's Computer Humor Page)

Although the original song is still popular, it may have different emotional connotations for those who were hippies in the seventies and for those who are now in their twenties. This may result in emotionally different interpretations

A number of "surprisingly true" laws, similar to the well-know Murphy's Laws, represents another class of humorous texts:

(35) **Laws of Computer Programming**
Any given program, when running, is obsolete.
If a program is useless, it will have to be documented.
If a program is useful, it will have to be changed.
(www.laughnet.net)
Some others may equally well appeal to less advanced Internet users:

(36) Bradley's Bromide: If computers get too powerful, we can organize them into a committee - that will do them in.
(37) Weinberg's Law: If builders built buildings the way programmers wrote programs, the first woodpecker that came along would destroy civilization.
(38) Hoare's Law of Large Programs: Inside every large program is a small program struggling to get out.
(39) Adding manpower to a late software project makes it later.
(http://www.sirius.com/~uhlwrite/Wisdom_Text.html)

Bradley's Bromide (36) reflects, simultaneously, another line of division: the division between those who believe that computers will achieve or overcome the intellectual power of humans and those who believe that "machines are only machines".

The sentences cited above are funny espectially to those who experienced similar thoughts personally, as a result of their professional experiences.

The following laws and corollaries do not demand any deep technological competence, but the addressee of such a text must be familiar with the realm of the Internet discussion groups:

The Wilcox/McCandlish Law Of Online Discourse Evolution (and Corollaries)

(40) The chance of success of any attempt to change the topic or direction of a thread of discussion in a networked forum is directly proportional to the quality of the current content.

First corollary to the Wilcox/McCandlish Law

(41) The chance of any change to the topic or direction of a thread being a change for the better is inversely proportional to the quality of the content before the change.

The exception to the Wilcox/McCandlish First Corollary

(42) When a thread reaches the flame-war stage, all changes in thread topic or direction will be changes for the worse.
[Bryce Wilcox (wilcoxb@cs.colorado.edu) & Stanton McCandlish (mech@eff.org)]

Of course, this list of computer humor categories is definitely not exhaustive, but it seems to cover a wide variety of most frequently taken perspectives and attitudes, and reflects the contents of the initial corpus gathered for this study.

4. Classes of the Internet Users

As a result of the stratification processes, a number of terms for various classes of Internet users has been, more or less spontaneously, created. Or, taking a different perspective, the terms have been created to achieve a deeper division. In any case, they are vivid evidence that the discussed process of stratification takes place and influences human relations in the Internet community.

A number of commonly used names for different categories of Internet users is presented below. Most of the definitions are based on or cited from the Jargon Dictionary (http://info.astrian.net/jargon/). They may be perceived as humorous, but they are quite serious in their virtual context.

bigot - "a person who is religiously attached to a particular computer, programming language, operating system, editor or other tool (e.g., Apple bigot)"

cracker - A term which was coined against journalistic misuse of "hacker". (dark-side hacker - a criminal or malicious hacker, a cracker)

geek - this term may be used in two quite different meanings. The first one is "one who eats (computer) bugs for a living. One who fulfills all the dreariest negative stereotypes about hackers: an asocial, malodorous, pasty-faced monomaniac with all the personality of a cheese grater" (www.www.xxx). The second meaning seems to be rather positive or at least good-hearted: someone crazy about computers, spending (too) much time working or playing with computers.

gnubie - Written-only variant of newbie in common use on IRC channels, which implies specifically someone who is new to the Linux/open source/free software world.

luser - /loo'zr/ n. [common] "A user; esp. one who is also a loser. [...]"

newbie - /n[y]oo'bee/ "[...] Usenet neophyte. The label 'newbie' is sometimes applied as a serious insult to a person who has been around Usenet for a long time but who carefully hides all evidence of having a clue [...]."

read-only user - Someone who knows only the basic function, the "surface" of application software, and is far away from any kind of programming.

real user - n. 1. A commercial user. One who is paying real money for his computer usage. 2. A non-hacker. Someone using the system for an explicit purpose (a research project, a course, etc.) other than pure exploration. See user. Hackers who are also students may also be real users.

terminal junkie - A larval stage hacker who spends most of his time wandering the directory tree and writing noddy program s just to get a fix of computer time.

tourist - A guest on the system, especially one who generally logs in over a network from a remote location for trivial purposes. One step below luser.

(Jargon Dictionary)

Web dictionaries define more classes of the Web users (*weenie, nerd, larval stage, samurai, stupid, twink, lurker, mundane, muggle, spod* - just to mention the most popular). A sociolinguistic analysis of the origins of this terminology could give very interesting results. One can immediately notice that most of these definitions are deeply grounded in the virtual world and in the Internet community. Therefore, it would be very wrong to try to understand them out of the full context, or to attempt to understand them in the categories of the "real world". The terminology is sometimes peculiar, but very quite precise.

Numerous explicit classifications of the Internet community or its subcommunities can be found on the Web. Two of them are presented below. The first one does not seem to suggest any "vertical structure" of its categories:

El Explicito: "I tried the thing, ya know, and it worked, ya know, but now it doesn't, ya know?" [...]

Mad Bomber: "Well, I hit Alt-f6, shift-f8, Cntrl-f10, f4, and f9, and now it looks all weird." [...]

Frying Pan/Fire Tactician: "It didn't work with the data set we had, so I fed in my aunt's recipe for key lime pie." [...]

Shaman: "Last week, when the moon was full, the clouds were thick, and formahaut was above the horizon, I typed f77, and lo, it did compile." [...]

X-user: "Will you look at those...um, that resolution, quite impressive, really." [...]

Miracle Worker: "But it read a file from it yesterday!" 'Sir, at a guess, this disk has been swollowed and regurgitated.' "But I did that a month ago, and it read a file from it yesterday!" [...]

Taskmaster: "Well, this is a file in MacWrite. Do you know how I can upload it to MUSIC, transfer it over to UNIX from there, download it onto an IBM, convert it to WordPerfect, and put it in three-column format?" [...]

Maestro: "Well, first I sat down, like this. Then I logged on, like this, and after that, I typed in my password, like this, and after that I edited my file, like this, and after that I went to this line here, like this, and after that I picked my nose, like this..." [...]

Princess: "I need a Mac, and someone's got the one I like reserved, would you please garrote him and put him in the paper recycling bin?" [...] (Omri's Computer Humor Page)

A view to the "vertical structure" is presented on the Progress Humor Archive web pages:

power luser
stupid luser
luser
stupid user
newbie
user
power user
apprentice guru
guru | apprentice wizard
[...] (www.progress.demon.co.uk)

"Power luser" represents the lowest level of the community; the classification itself is very general and seems to be strictly based on the computer knowledge.

Peter Fenelon noted that "most researchers fall into a number of well-defined categories when it comes to programming" and provided us with a humorous classification of "academic programmers" (www.finesse.demon.co.uk/steven/AcademicProg.html). Another funny text (from Omri's Page) shows how the programmer's skills evolve and describes a number of the stages of this process. The tendency is that while the professional position is higher and higher, the programming skills start to decay in the middle of the professional career.

5. Implications and Conclusions

The humorous texts discussed here must be analyzed in the specific context of the Web. This implies a number of facts:

A. Jokes occur in the context of Internet. This means that the group of potential recipients (readers) is limited and that they usually read these humorous texts while sitting alone at a computer.

B. Humor occurs as written texts or symbols. All the details, which could be added in a spoken interpretation, are absent. The interpretation of a given piece of text may vary, and the impact of the "publisher" is quite limited. However, he can aim at certain groups of potential recipients (e.g., by publishing her or his web page as "humor for newbies" or "humor for programmers").

C. Jokes and humorous texts occur on the web pages as well as in discussion lists or private e-mails. However, in most cases, there is no direct interaction between the "publisher" (or "writer") and the recipient.

D. If any - direct or indirect, synchronous or asynchronous - interaction occurs, it takes place in the virtual reality and often is anonymous. Therefore, it is perceived as safe and this encourages many shy people to "externalize" themselves: to join on-line discussions or publish own pages. On the other hand, some Internet users think of it as a good excuse for being rude or for using taboo words.

E. The anonymity provided by the web encourages people to play roles. For example, an elder man may decide to introduce himself as a handsome young webmaster, while a young girl may want to add herself a few years of age.

F. The above mentioned factors can sometimes deprive the web-based interactions of a degree of human intimacy.

G. Humorous texts can affect (and stratify) the web community not necessarily in the way intended by their authors. Once a joke has been published on the Web, the author has little influence on its distribution or perception.

Although the word "stratification" could suggest that there exist certain clean, separable "strata" of the Internet community, the actual situation is obviously much more complex. It would rather be reasonable to talk about *dynamic groups* or *subcommunities*, which may be of equal or different social status. Such groups can form *ad hoc* or function on a more stable basis within the community. Their dynamics have at least three sources:

A ongoing changes within the community at the level of the "real world";

B changes in the "virtual representation" of the community: members of the community may decide to change their image ("social face") used on the Web;

C contextual or situational changes: for example, when the community fights for certain common goals, the differences among certain groups may decrease in meaning.

The groups within the Internet community can be distinguished from a number of more or less objective viewpoints of varying importance. Only more objective stratifying factors are considered here. For example, the level of general

computer knowledge seems to be a powerful stratifying factor, while the knowledge about history of art seems to be a weaker one. Of course, the weights of respective factors could be probably found through a more systematic and detailed sociological research. The factors listed below may be regarded as a kind of initial hypothesis, drawn on the basis of the initial corpus:

A. General "Internet experience" (experienced vs. inexperienced users);

B. Programming skills and orientations (experienced vs. inexperienced programmers; C++ programmers vs. Visual Basic programmers, etc.);

C. Inclination to particular software or an operating system (e.g., Unix users vs. Windows users; the former group seem to be perceived as more exquisite);

D. The way of employing one's skills (creative freeware programmers vs. dark side crackers)

E. Activity on the web (intensity and character of the web use): from "read-only users", "tourists" to discussion lists moderators or web masters.

F. Groups of interest (game freaks, mp3 freaks, etc.). The fact of belonging to a certain group of interest may be associated with a higher "social status".

G. General cultural knowledge, knowledge about art and history.

H. Gender: male vs. Female users. Although many politically correct popular movies promote the character of a female computer expert, the Internet community itself still seems to be dominated by male experts.

The stratification seems to be especially fine-grained within the subcommunities characterized by a high level of computer competence, e.g., programmers or hackers.

Although computer humor is relatively popular among Internet users (there are thousands of humor pages and discussion lists), we can expect that it comprises only a small part of the Internet-based interactions. A weak point of the presented approach is that it would be hard to determine the impact of the aforementioned classes of humorous texts on the stratification of the Web community more precisely. On the other hand, humor tends to exaggerate and stress social phenomena and, in this way, it facilitates observations. The number and the degree of popularity of jokes concerning certain phenomena may indicate how important a given issue is and how many Internet users are interested in it.

There are good reasons to apply this approach in a more generalized form of text-based studies, taking into account not only humorous texts. Since web communication is mostly text-based, it offers a new, fascinating area for the textual studies, a new field to apply and test the results of the traditional textual linguistic research, as well as to develop new theories of the web-based discourse.

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Humor jako środek stratyfikacji społeczności internetowej

Artykuł pokazuje sposoby użycia humoru do stratyfikacji społeczności użytkowników internetu. Autor wymienia różne typy tekstów humory- stycznych. Analizuje je jako wyznaczniki istniejących podziałów oraz jako potencjalne czynniki klasyfikujące.