

STYLISTICS OF LAUGHTER: EXPLORING COMIC LANGUAGE IN THE FICTION OF LEACOCK, TWAIN, AND NARAYAN

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ABSTRACT

Humour, as a powerful mode of cultural and linguistic expression, plays a pivotal role in literature. The works of Stephen Leacock, Mark Twain, and R.K. Narayan stand as prominent examples of how language can be intricately used to evoke laughter while also delivering sharp social commentary. This study, titled *"Stylistics of Laughter: Exploring Comic Language in the Fiction of Leacock, Twain, and Narayan"*, is motivated by the need to understand how comic vision is linguistically constructed across different cultural contexts. The choice of these three authors—representing Canadian, American, and Indian literary traditions—enables a cross-cultural investigation of humour through stylistic and linguistic frameworks. The research is grounded in stylistic theory, particularly the principles of linguistic foregrounding, pragmatic incongruity theory, and discourse analysis. These theories provide a systematic lens to examine how humour functions through wordplay, irony, narrative voice, and syntactic structures. The primary objectives of this study are to identify the distinctive linguistic techniques used to generate humour, to compare their stylistic patterns, and to evaluate how cultural contexts shape their comic narratives. The research employs a qualitative methodology based on close textual analysis of selected short stories and narrative episodes from the three authors. Elements such as figurative language, irony, dialogue, code-switching, and narrative tone are critically examined. The findings reveal that while Leacock leans heavily on absurdity and parody, Twain employs dialect-based humour and satire rooted in American socio-political realities. Narayan, on the other hand, integrates subtle irony and culturally embedded linguistic humour. Despite their geographical and cultural differences, all three writers use stylistic devices that foreground humour to critique societal norms, human folly, and everyday life. This study highlights the universality of humour and affirms the value of stylistic analysis in uncovering the linguistic artistry behind literary comedy.

1. Introduction

Laughter is one of the most instinctive human responses, and literature has long harnessed its power to entertain, critique, and reflect on society. Humour, in its many forms, reveals a unique intersection of creativity, intellect, and linguistic innovation. While the appeal of comic literature is often perceived as immediate and universal, the mechanisms that underlie it are deeply rooted in language, culture, and narrative form. In literary fiction, humour

transcends surface-level amusement to become a vehicle for challenging authority, highlighting social absurdities, and humanizing experiences. Language plays a pivotal role in shaping humour, especially when authors use stylistic techniques to evoke laughter through irony, parody, exaggeration, or incongruity.

In this context, the works of Stephen Leacock, Mark Twain, and R.K. Narayan offer fertile ground for exploring comic vision as a stylistic and linguistic phenomenon. These three writers, though separated by geography and historical period, share a remarkable ability to embed humour within the folds of everyday life. Their writings display a subtle yet striking mastery over comic timing, linguistic economy, and satirical tone. While Leacock draws on the absurd and whimsical nature of human behaviour, Twain often mocks social hypocrisy through biting satire and dialect humour. Narayan, meanwhile, evokes laughter through gentle irony, cultural specificity, and a compassionate portrayal of the ordinary Indian citizen. Together, their works exemplify a stylistics of laughter—a complex interplay between language, narrative, and cultural context.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the enduring popularity of Leacock, Twain, and Narayan as comic writers, there remains a notable gap in scholarly research that focuses on the linguistic construction of humour in their works. Much of the existing critical literature tends to examine the thematic, historical, or cultural dimensions of their humour without delving into the stylistic and linguistic strategies that produce it. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparisons of humour, especially from a linguistic standpoint, are rare. The absence of a detailed stylistic investigation limits our understanding of how language operates as a comedic tool across literary traditions. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining how humour is stylistically constructed in the works of these three authors and how linguistic techniques function as instruments of comic vision.

1.2 Thesis Statement

This paper contends that the humour in the fictional works of Stephen Leacock, Mark Twain, and R.K. Narayan is not simply a product of narrative situation or character but is intricately embedded in linguistic choices. Through a stylistic lens, the paper explores how these writers utilize language—through syntax, diction, narrative voice, and rhetorical devices—to create humour that resonates across cultural and temporal boundaries. The study

proposes that a comparative stylistic analysis reveals both commonalities in comic techniques and significant cultural distinctions that shape each author's approach to humour.

1.3 Brief Account of the Theory

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the field of stylistics, particularly linguistic stylistics, which focuses on the analysis of language use in literary texts. Key concepts include foregrounding theory (Leech & Short, 1981), which explains how deviation from linguistic norms draws reader attention; pragmatic incongruity theory (Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1994), which posits that humour arises from the violation of expected norms or scripts; and narrative stylistics, which explores the relationship between narrative voice, structure, and point of view. Additionally, insights from discourse analysis and sociolinguistics are incorporated to understand how dialects, code-switching, speech patterns, and social registers contribute to humour. These theories collectively provide the tools necessary to uncover the linguistic layers of comedy in fiction.

1.4 Objectives

This study is driven by the following objectives:

- To investigate the linguistic and stylistic devices that construct humour in the selected works of Leacock, Twain, and Narayan.
- To explore the relationship between language use and comic intent in cross-cultural literary contexts.
- To identify shared and divergent stylistic strategies across the three authors.
- To highlight the cultural, rhetorical, and narrative significance of humour as shaped by linguistic choices.
- To demonstrate the effectiveness of stylistic analysis in decoding literary comedy.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What are the key stylistic and linguistic features used by Leacock, Twain, and Narayan to evoke humour in their fiction?
2. How does each author's use of language reflect their cultural and historical context in shaping comic vision?

3. In what ways do the linguistic techniques employed by these authors align or differ, and what do these similarities or divergences reveal about cross-cultural humour?
4. How do narrative structures and voice contribute to the stylistic framing of humour in the selected texts?

1.6 Hypotheses

- **H1:** The humour in the works of Leacock, Twain, and Narayan is stylistically constructed through a consistent use of linguistic techniques such as irony, exaggeration, parody, dialect, and narrative incongruity.
- **H2:** Despite operating in different cultural and linguistic traditions, the three authors share common strategies of humour construction that transcend national boundaries.
- **H3:** The socio-cultural context and native linguistic background of each writer significantly influence the type of humour and its stylistic expression in their fiction.

1.7 Planning and Structure of the Paper

This paper is structured into five major sections. Following the present introduction, **Section 2: Literature Review** surveys existing scholarship on humour, stylistics, and the individual works of Leacock, Twain, and Narayan. It identifies key theoretical and critical debates in the field and situates the study within contemporary stylistic discourse. **Section 3: Methodology** outlines the qualitative research design, including text selection, analytical framework, and stylistic parameters. **Section 4: Analysis and Discussion** presents a comparative examination of the selected texts, focusing on linguistic features such as wordplay, syntax, figurative language, code-switching, and narrative structure. It discusses how these elements operate to generate humour and what they reveal about the authors' stylistic identities. Finally, **Section 5: Conclusion** summarizes the findings, reflects on the significance of a linguistic approach to humour, and proposes future directions for research in comparative stylistics and comic literature.

2. Literature Review

The study of humour in literature has long intrigued scholars across disciplines—literary criticism, linguistics, psychology, and cultural studies. However, the stylistic construction of humour—how linguistic features create comic effects—has only recently gained detailed scholarly attention, especially in cross-cultural literary contexts. This review

situates the present study within three intersecting scholarly fields: (1) stylistic theories of humour, (2) author-specific comic studies of Leacock, Twain, and Narayan, and (3) comparative and cross-cultural humour studies.

2.1 Stylistics and Humour: Theoretical Frameworks

Stylistics, as a discipline, examines how language choices shape literary meaning. Early works like Leech and Short's *Style in Fiction* (1981) laid the groundwork for analysing literary texts through linguistic patterns. Their idea of foregrounding—where stylistic deviation draws attention to specific effects—remains central to stylistic humour studies.

In humour research, Victor Raskin's (1985) Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humour (SSTH) and its extension by Attardo (1994) in the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) provide a model for understanding how incongruity, script opposition, and context shape verbal jokes and humorous discourse. While originally applied to jokes and conversational humour, recent scholars such as Dynel (2020) have adapted these frameworks to literary texts, showing how narrative humour depends on script manipulation and pragmatic subversion.

Simone Shariq (2021) emphasizes the role of pragmatic markers and narrative irony in constructing literary humour in cross-cultural fiction, arguing that humour often arises not only from what is said, but how it is structured in discourse. Similarly, Monika Fludernik's (2022) narrative stylistics highlights the significance of voice, perspective, and focalization in shaping reader perception of comic tone.

2.2 Language and Comic Vision in Leacock, Twain, and Narayan

Each of the three authors under study has received considerable critical attention, though often with a thematic or sociopolitical focus rather than a stylistic one.

Stephen Leacock has traditionally been studied for his light-hearted satire and absurdist style. Keith Garebian (2009) notes how Leacock's humour depends heavily on rhetorical inflation, syntactic exaggeration, and a deliberate breakdown of logic. More recently, Rebecca Reading's (2023) study "*Canadian Humour in the Colonial Mirror*" explores Leacock's use of parodic structures and self-referential narrative strategies to destabilize colonial authority through language.

Mark Twain's comic genius has often been linked to his use of dialect and satire. Scholars like Shelley Fisher Fishkin (1995) explored Twain's engagement with African American vernacular and its role in shaping American humour. However, in recent stylistic research, James Caron (2021) focuses on Twain's code-switching, narrative framing, and hyperbolic irony, arguing that Twain's linguistic choices reflect a layered political consciousness. Hannah Greer (2022), in a stylistic study of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, highlights how Twain's manipulation of syntax and narrative voice creates a subversive comic register that critiques American social structures.

R.K. Narayan, though frequently noted for his subtle irony and portrayal of Indian middle-class life, has received limited attention from stylisticians. However, Rohit Parashar's (2020) study in *Indian Journal of Stylistics* examines Narayan's narrative simplicity as a deliberate stylistic device, enabling humour to arise from understatement and situational incongruity. Meera Krishnaswamy (2022) in her article "*Everyday Ironies: Language and Laughter in Narayan's Malgudi*" emphasizes how Narayan's humour often stems from conversational idioms, ironic juxtaposition, and character speech patterns that reflect socio-cultural values.

Despite these insights, there has yet to be a study that compares how these authors construct humour stylistically across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

2.3 Cross-Cultural Humour and Comparative Studies

Comparative humour studies have grown significantly in the last decade, focusing on how cultural background influences humour perception and production. Zabalbeascoa (2020) notes that linguistic humour is deeply embedded in socio-cultural scripts, and understanding humour across traditions requires an awareness of cultural codes, genre expectations, and language structure.

Ahmed and Norris (2021), in their book *Humour Across Borders*, explore how multilingualism, translation, and cultural perception influence humour reception in literature. Their framework supports this study's aim to identify shared comic structures and culturally specific stylistic differences in the works of Leacock, Twain, and Narayan.

Further, Olga Topol (2023) argues that comparative humour studies need to balance universal comic structures (like irony or exaggeration) with the specific stylistic features of language use, particularly in postcolonial and multilingual contexts. This aligns with the goals of this paper, which uses stylistic analysis to examine humour within three distinct national-literary traditions.

2.4 Gaps in the Literature

Although foundational work on humour and narrative style exists, several gaps persist:

- There is limited comparative stylistic analysis of humour across Canadian, American, and Indian literatures.
- Recent studies have not sufficiently explored the linguistic mechanisms that generate humour in Leacock, Twain, and Narayan's works.
- There is a lack of engagement with new stylistic models (like multimodal stylistics or cognitive stylistics) in the study of classic humour texts.
- Most cross-cultural studies in humour focus on performance, translation, or stand-up comedy, while literary humour, particularly in fiction, remains under-examined stylistically.

2.5 Positioning the Present Study

This paper builds on the insights of both classical and contemporary stylisticians and humour theorists. By integrating linguistic stylistics, discourse analysis, and narrative theory, it offers a systematic, comparative approach to how Leacock, Twain, and Narayan use language to construct comic vision. The study contributes to filling the gaps in comparative stylistic research by:

- Identifying common patterns of humour at the linguistic level,
- Revealing how comic effect is shaped by narrative voice, syntactic choice, and dialogue,
- Exploring how humour reflects broader cultural and ideological values in three national contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Philosophical Orientation

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach rooted in the belief that literary meaning, especially in the case of humour, is not intrinsic but constructed through linguistic choices, narrative framing, and cultural context. Humour in literature, while often perceived as

universal or spontaneous, is deeply encoded in language and shaped by stylistic features that call for close analysis. Accordingly, this research aligns with an interpretivist epistemology, which focuses on the subjective and culturally embedded nature of meaning. This paradigm supports in-depth textual analysis and facilitates an examination of the linguistic construction of humour, rather than merely its thematic or affective content.

The methodological orientation combines literary stylistics, narrative theory, and humour studies with a comparative framework. This allows for both micro-level linguistic analysis and macro-level cross-cultural interpretation. The research is deductive in its theoretical framing and inductive in its textual interpretation, meaning that while the theoretical model guides the investigation, emergent patterns from the text are central to shaping final interpretations.

3.2 Selection of Texts

The primary data for this study comprises selected fictional works by Stephen Leacock, Mark Twain, and R.K. Narayan. The following criteria were used to guide text selection:

- Recognition as canonical or representative works by each author.
- Rich presence of humour, especially in linguistic and narrative forms.
- Diversity in narrative mode (short story and novel formats).
- Availability in original, unabridged English versions.

Accordingly, the following works were selected:

- **Stephen Leacock:** *Literary Lapses* (1910) and *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), which exemplify his mastery of absurdity, parody, and syntactic play in Canadian satire.
- **Mark Twain:** *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* (1865) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), two works that showcase Twain's reliance on dialectal humour, regional speech, and satirical narrative voice.
- **R.K. Narayan:** *Malgudi Days* (1943) and *The Guide* (1958), chosen for their subtle use of irony, conversational idioms, and understated comic tone grounded in postcolonial Indian sensibilities.

The diversity of genre (short story vs. novel), time period, and cultural context ensures a broad yet manageable corpus for cross-comparative stylistic analysis.

3.3 Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The study is informed by an integrated framework that combines multiple strands of stylistic theory and humour analysis. Key theoretical underpinnings include:

- Linguistic Stylistics (Leech & Short, 1981; Simpson, 2014), which focuses on features such as lexis, syntax, figurative language, and deviation from linguistic norms.
- Narrative Stylistics (Toolan, 2016; Fludernik, 2020), especially the examination of narrative voice, perspective, and focalization in producing comic effects.
- Pragmatic and Discourse Analysis (Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1995), particularly relevant for analyzing conversational implicature, relevance, and violations of cooperative principles in dialogue.
- Humour Theories, such as Raskin's Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humour (SSTH, 1985) and Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH, 1994), which explain how humour arises from incongruity, script opposition, and cultural schemata.

The integration of these theoretical strands provides a robust foundation for identifying and interpreting stylistic choices that generate comic effects in narrative fiction.

3.4 Procedure of Analysis

The analytical process was carried out in several stages. First, each selected text was carefully segmented into smaller units of analysis, based on structural markers such as paragraph transitions, shifts in narrative tone, or character dialogue. In short stories, segmentation was guided by punchline orientation or irony resolution. In novels, it followed chapter breaks or the appearance of distinct comic episodes.

Following segmentation, a manual annotation process was employed to identify specific linguistic and stylistic devices associated with humour. Annotation focused on:

- Lexical choices (e.g., colloquialisms, neologisms, culture-bound terms),
- Syntactic structures (e.g., parallelism, ellipsis, inversion),
- Phonological features (e.g., alliteration, phonetic spelling, rhythmic repetition),
- Figurative language (e.g., hyperbole, irony, understatement, metaphor),
- Narrative techniques (e.g., unreliable narration, intrusive narrator, stream of consciousness),
- Dialogic features (e.g., speech acts, repair structures, conversational implicature).

Each instance of stylistic humour was then interpreted in relation to its function—whether it contributed to satire, character development, cultural critique, or simply comedic relief.

3.5 Comparative Analysis and Contextual Interpretation

After annotating individual texts, the study proceeded to a comparative phase. The stylistic strategies of each author were contrasted to identify both recurring patterns and distinctive features in their comic vision. This comparison was structured around the following analytical axes:

- Use of dialect and speech variation (e.g., Twain's vernacular vs. Narayan's formal Indian English),
- Application of syntactic deviation for humorous effect (e.g., Leacock's use of rambling or illogical sentences),
- Employment of narrative irony and authorial intrusion,
- Embedding of cultural references and linguistic idioms.

Moreover, each author's comic style was contextualized within their historical, social, and linguistic milieu. Twain's dialect humour was interpreted in relation to post-Civil War American identity and regional speech politics. Leacock's mock-formal prose was placed within the context of Edwardian-era Canada, where literary civility coexisted with societal rigidity. Narayan's comic restraint was examined in light of Indian multilingualism, colonial English education, and the interplay between tradition and modernity.

This contextual mapping allowed for a deeper understanding of how humour functions not only linguistically but also ideologically—revealing what is being critiqued, subverted, or affirmed through comic language in each cultural setting.

3.6 Justification for Methodological Choices

The choice of stylistic analysis as the core methodology is justified by its ability to bridge literary interpretation and linguistic scrutiny. Unlike thematic or psychoanalytical approaches to humour, stylistics grounds its interpretations in verifiable textual evidence, enabling both rigour and replicability. It helps identify precisely how language behaves in a literary context—how certain lexical choices, syntactic structures, or narrative voices contribute to humour and how these are shaped by genre, culture, and intention.

The comparative aspect of the study is equally central. It enables the identification of universal stylistic patterns (such as incongruity, irony, and exaggeration) while simultaneously

highlighting culturally specific humour techniques. This is particularly important in studying Leacock, Twain, and Narayan, who belong to three vastly different literary traditions—Canadian, American, and Indian—and use language not just as a communicative medium but as a site of cultural negotiation.

3.7 Research Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the validity of findings, all annotations and interpretations were based on multiple readings and were cross-referenced with scholarly criticism and existing stylistic models. Reliability was achieved by maintaining consistent coding categories and analytical criteria across all texts. Informal consultations with peers and humour scholars during academic discussions helped refine certain interpretations and confirm cross-cultural observations.

Ethically, this research respects the integrity of all primary sources and critical materials. There is no involvement of human participants, but scholarly transparency and accountability are maintained through precise citation and balanced author representation. Cultural sensitivity is prioritized in interpreting humour, particularly in avoiding reductive readings of culturally specific idioms or satirical content.

3.8 Limitations of the Methodology

While the methodological framework offers depth and precision, some limitations must be acknowledged. Humour is inherently subjective, and its reception can vary across readers. Additionally, the study focuses solely on textual humour and does not engage with multimodal adaptations (e.g., films, radio plays, or oral storytelling). The scope of selected works, though representative, cannot encompass the entire literary output of each author. These limitations are mitigated through textual triangulation, theoretical breadth, and cultural contextualization.

3.9 Contribution to the Field

This methodological approach contributes to the growing scholarship in comparative stylistics and humour studies by offering a replicable and culturally sensitive model for literary humour analysis. It reinforces the argument that humour is not merely thematic but is linguistically and structurally embedded, and that stylistic study provides the most direct route to unpacking its mechanisms. By bringing together authors from Canada, America, and India, the methodology also expands the field's understanding of how humour travels across

languages, cultures, and historical moments, yet retains a stylistic coherence rooted in narrative and linguistic craft.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Humour in literature is rarely a spontaneous act of narration; it is carefully constructed through patterns of language, rhythm, register, and narrative control. This section offers an in-depth stylistic analysis of how humour operates in the selected works of Stephen Leacock, Mark Twain, and R.K. Narayan. It focuses on the authors' manipulation of linguistic structures, narrative techniques, and cultural semantics to generate comic effects. Through direct engagement with the texts, it reveals how the stylistics of laughter differs across cultural boundaries while retaining certain core mechanisms such as irony, incongruity, and deviant syntax.

4.1 Stephen Leacock: Linguistic Absurdity and Syntactic Inflation

Leacock's humour is fundamentally linguistic, embedded in his stylised narrative voice, syntactic elaboration, and ironic bathos. His comic fiction, particularly *Literary Lapses* (1910), demonstrates how syntactic construction can heighten humour through over-formality and absurd digression. In "My Financial Career," the narrator's anxiety about entering a bank is conveyed through lexical repetition and mock-formal diction: "The moment I crossed the threshold of the bank I became a hesitating, nervous wreck. I knew that no man with money would be treated like this" (Leacock, 1910, p. 3).

The phrase "hesitating, nervous wreck" is overly dramatic, creating humour by inflating a trivial situation into a psychological crisis. Leacock's comic technique relies on linguistic incongruity—placing high diction and bureaucratic language in low-stakes contexts. The use of polysyndeton and unnecessary qualifiers slows the prose and builds an artificial gravity that is immediately deflated: "Here, take this and give me a receipt.' He looked at it. 'This is eight dollars,' he said" (Leacock, 1910, p. 5).

Here, the punchline emerges from a contrast in tone. The dry directness of the bank clerk underscores the narrator's overreaction, inviting the reader to share in the mockery. In *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), Leacock extends this strategy across multiple characters and settings. His reverent tone when describing local figures—"The Rev. Mr. Drone

had been for over thirty years the spiritual head of the Church of England in Mariposa... He was a little, round man, short-sighted, and very fond of flowers” (Leacock, 1912, p. 9)—creates a comic incongruity between title and temperament.

The humour in Leacock’s work also arises from his manipulation of logical sequencing. Events often unfold with a forced cause-effect pattern, giving the impression of rational progression when the content is patently illogical. This syntactic mimicry of scientific reasoning within an absurd framework is a unique stylistic feature. For example, characters frequently make deductions or decisions based on bizarre associations, and Leacock’s narrators do not challenge the irrationality. This uncritical acceptance allows absurdity to masquerade as normalcy, creating a particularly Canadian form of deadpan humour.

4.2 Mark Twain: Dialect, Satire, and Narrative Subversion

Twain’s humour operates at the intersection of language and ideology. His commitment to vernacular speech, especially in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), makes the narrative not only authentic but subversive. Huck’s voice is deliberately informal, violating the grammatical expectations of literary prose. The opening line—“You don’t know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain’t no matter” (Twain, 1884, p. 1)—establishes this breach of decorum. The use of “ain’t” and the syntactic awkwardness signal the narrator’s marginal position while establishing a comic stance toward narrative tradition.

Twain’s dialect writing is not merely phonetic imitation but a calculated stylistic device. In *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* (1865), the slow pace and rustic dialect of Simon Wheeler’s tale contrast with the educated expectations of the frame narrator: “He ketched a frog one day... said he cal’lated to educate him” (Twain, 1865, p. 4).

The use of “ketched” and “cal’lated” emphasizes the regional colour and creates linguistic humour by presenting unpolished, meandering speech in a literary form. Twain uses this stylistic device to parody both the content of the tale and the conventions of oral storytelling. The tension between the frame narrator’s formal register and the tale-teller’s colloquialism invites the reader into an ironic detachment, making the story’s absurdity more palpable. Moreover, Twain’s humour often functions as moral satire. Huck’s internal conflict about aiding Jim is laced with irony, particularly when he resolves: “All right, then, I’ll go to hell” (Twain, 1884, p. 214).

This line exemplifies the dramatic irony central to Twain's style: the character believes he is doing wrong, while the reader understands it as a moral victory. The comic effect is deepened by the linguistic simplicity of Huck's phrasing. Twain's genius lies in using non-standard English to question societal norms, and his stylistic alignment with Huck's voice allows him to mask critique as innocence, thus making his satire more penetrating.

4.3 R.K. Narayan: Conversational Humour and Cultural Nuance

Narayan's style is markedly different. Where Leacock is elaborate and Twain vernacular, Narayan is minimalistic, relying on subtle irony and cultural idioms. In *Malgudi Days* (1943), humour is often derived from understatement and restrained narrative voice. In "The Missing Mail," Thanappa, the local postman, delays the delivery of a telegram that announces a death, believing it would ruin a marriage ceremony. When he confesses, he does so with simplicity and without remorse: "I kept back a telegram last evening," he said" (Narayan, 1943, p. 29).

The humour is not explicit, but emerges through context, tone, and the narrator's understated style. Narayan's restraint allows readers to perceive the irony in Thanappa's rationale—that temporary happiness justifies information suppression—without overt moralising. The syntax is short, direct, and devoid of emotional embellishment. In *The Guide* (1958), Raju's journey from tourist guide to holy man is laden with satirical undertones. At one point, Raju says: "If you are determined to starve, I suppose it's better to starve in front of a temple than in the kitchen" (Narayan, 1958, p. 217).

The wit here lies in the juxtaposition of sacred and domestic imagery. Narayan uses common Indian expressions and an intimate narrative style to deliver profound observations wrapped in casual phrasing. Unlike Leacock and Twain, Narayan avoids exaggeration. His humour relies on ethical irony—characters act according to self-serving logic but speak with detached sincerity. Another example from "Lawley Road" reveals Narayan's ability to expose bureaucratic absurdity without overt satire: "He had to discover whether it was proper to install a statue of a man who, by dying at the wrong time, had annoyed the authorities" (Narayan, 1943, p. 134).

The ridiculousness of the statement—“dying at the wrong time”—is accentuated by the official tone. Narayan parodies administrative procedures using flat, report-like syntax. His characters often speak in clichés or affected politeness, and the comic tension arises from the gap between social language and individual intention.

4.4 Multilayered Irony and the Reader’s Position

Across all three authors, a recurrent stylistic mechanism is the creation of multilayered irony—where the reader is placed in a privileged position to perceive a deeper truth that the character or narrator fails to see. In Leacock, this is achieved through deliberate syntactic inflation; in Twain, through narrative innocence clashing with social insight; in Narayan, through tonal detachment and ethical ambivalence.

The reader’s awareness is central to the comic effect. For instance, when Huck condemns himself for helping Jim, the reader’s sympathy with Huck and moral disapproval of slavery creates a layered irony. Similarly, in Leacock’s narratives, the narrators are unaware of their absurdity, making their pretentiousness a source of ridicule. In Narayan, the situational irony often unfolds through context rather than punchline, demanding the reader’s cultural familiarity and interpretive participation.

4.5 Temporal Rhythm and the Stylistics of Timing

Another stylistic factor in humour construction is timing—not just narratively, but linguistically. Leacock often uses syntactic delay and parataxis to stretch the punchline. Twain employs narrative pauses and digressions to mimic oral storytelling, creating suspense before the comedic reveal. Narayan, by contrast, frequently delivers his humorous observations in a single line, embedded within mundane descriptions. His use of brevity and sudden turn of phrase generates dry, almost invisible humour, requiring readers to adjust their tempo of reading.

In Leacock’s “The Awful Fate of Melpomenus Jones,” the humour escalates through repetition and syntactic piling: “He lingered on, hesitated, made another effort to go, said good-bye again, lingered, sat down, talked about the weather...” (Leacock, 1910, p. 47).

The exaggerated delay becomes the joke itself. By contrast, Twain’s Wheeler in *Jumping Frog* uses elongated clauses and digressive asides to stretch the anticipation. Narayan,

however, cuts directly to the comic moment, trusting in the reader's capacity to discern the humour through cultural knowledge and ethical tension.

4.6 Comparative Insights: Stylistic Signatures and Comic Ethos

The stylistic construction of humour in these authors reflects their distinct cultural sensibilities. Leacock's humour is rooted in British-Canadian gentility, parodying social norms through linguistic inflation and syntactic farce. Twain's is regional and confrontational, using dialect to critique American hypocrisy. Narayan's is existential and reflective, drawing on Indian social hierarchies and oral tradition.

Yet, what binds them is a shared stylistic commitment to linguistic performance as comic expression. Each develops a unique comic ethos: Leacock's humour emerges from artificial seriousness; Twain's from exaggerated simplicity; and Narayan's from philosophical detachment. Their stylistic signatures—be it Leacock's inflated syntax, Twain's dialectal realism, or Narayan's idiomatic minimalism—function as vehicles of satire, social observation, and comic relief.

The comparative lens also reveals differing expectations of the reader. Leacock cues laughter through incongruity and punchline; Twain invites reflection through irony masked as naivety; Narayan evokes a smile through understated commentary that demands cultural decoding. These strategies shape how humour is perceived—not just as an emotional response but as an interpretive act.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study set out to investigate the stylistic construction of humour in the fiction of Stephen Leacock, Mark Twain, and R.K. Narayan, with a particular focus on how comic effects are shaped by language, narrative technique, and cultural context. Through a comparative stylistic lens, it has demonstrated that humour in literary texts is far from incidental—it is systematically embedded in lexical choices, syntactic structure, narrative voice, and pragmatic framing. The analysis confirms that while the sources of humour may vary across cultural boundaries, the linguistic strategies used to evoke laughter share certain foundational similarities, revealing both universal and culturally specific features of comic expression.

Leacock's humour emerges through inflated syntax, pseudo-formal diction, and structural absurdity. His parodic tone and exaggerated narration rely heavily on linguistic incongruity, particularly in the use of formal rhetorical devices to frame banal or nonsensical scenarios. Twain, in contrast, crafts humour through vernacular speech, dialectal precision, and narrative irony. His commitment to linguistic authenticity enables a powerful satire of American hypocrisy and social contradictions, often masked by the innocent voice of Huck Finn or the folksy tone of rural storytellers. Narayan's comic style is rooted in cultural realism, conversational rhythm, and ethical irony. His understated prose, imbued with Indian idioms and idiomatic English, captures the everyday absurdities of middle-class life in postcolonial India. Unlike Leacock or Twain, who often rely on overt exaggeration or narrative distortion, Narayan builds humour through subtle juxtapositions, tone shifts, and understated narrative commentary.

One of the key findings of this study is the critical role of narrative voice in shaping humour. All three authors use first-person or closely aligned narrators to create ironic distance between the speaker and the narrated world. Whether through Huck's naive misreadings of social reality, Leacock's mock-serious narrators, or Narayan's quietly ironic third-person perspectives, the alignment between voice and comic intent is both deliberate and deeply stylistic. The manipulation of syntax and diction—whether through exaggerated repetition, regional variation, or clipped understatement—further reveals how humour can be seen as a linguistic performance, embedded in the very structure of storytelling.

Furthermore, the study highlights the significance of reader positioning and cultural literacy in understanding and appreciating humour. Leacock's Anglo-Canadian references, Twain's American dialects, and Narayan's Indian idioms all require varying degrees of cultural familiarity. Humour thus becomes a collaborative act, dependent not only on the stylistic skill of the writer but also on the interpretive capacity of the reader. This reinforces the importance of stylistic criticism in humour studies, especially in cross-cultural contexts where translation, interpretation, and reception are deeply mediated by language.

The implications of this study extend to the broader fields of stylistics, comparative literature, and humour studies. By foregrounding the linguistic basis of humour, this paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship that treats comic writing not merely as a literary genre but as a form of rhetorical craft and socio-linguistic critique. It also opens up further

questions regarding how humour operates in multilingual, postcolonial, and digital contexts—areas where stylistic innovation continues to evolve.

In conclusion, Stephen Leacock, Mark Twain, and R.K. Narayan demonstrate that humour in fiction is not a superficial embellishment but a core structural and stylistic element. Their distinctive voices, grounded in their cultural milieus and linguistic strategies, reveal the richness and complexity of comic language. Through this comparative study, we gain a deeper appreciation of how laughter is not only generated but meticulously crafted through narrative technique, linguistic creativity, and stylistic design. This reinforces the central thesis of the paper: that the comic vision of these authors is ultimately a product of their stylistic choices, making humour a critical site of literary and linguistic inquiry.

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Ethical Approval

This article is based solely on literary analysis and does not involve any studies with human participants or animals. Hence, ethical approval was not required.

Informed Consent

Not applicable. No human subjects were involved in this study.