

Linguistic comedy across contexts: Twain's dialect, Leacock's hyperbole, Narayan's subtle irony

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[Doi: 10.63001/tbs.2025.v20.i03 pp429-450](https://doi.org/10.63001/tbs.2025.v20.i03_pp429-450)

Keywords:

*Linguistic Humor,
Dialect and Satire,
Hyperbole and Irony,
Comparative Literature,
Cross-Cultural Comedy,
Stephen Leacock,
Mark Twain,
R.K. Narayan*

Received on: 06-07-2025

Accepted on: 09-08-2025

Published on:

18-08-2025

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the nuanced deployment of linguistic strategies to generate humor in the select works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan. Situated within a cross-cultural framework, the study investigates how each writer crafts a unique comic vision through dialectal variation, hyperbolic expression, and understated irony. Drawing on representative texts—Twain's *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*, and Narayan's *Malgudi Days* and *The Guide*—the paper undertakes a comparative textual analysis to identify linguistic markers that produce comic effect. The study is structured into five sections. The introduction situates the authors within their respective cultural and literary traditions, emphasizing the centrality of language in their humor. The literature review outlines key theories of humor, such as incongruity, superiority, and relief, alongside relevant studies in stylistics and sociolinguistics. The methodology section adopts a qualitative approach using discourse analysis and pragmatic tools, including Gricean maxims and speech act theory. The analysis and discussion section examines how Twain's use of regional dialect and idiomatic speech, Leacock's satirical verbosity and comic inflation, and Narayan's minimalist irony reflect cultural specificity while invoking universal laughter. The conclusion synthesizes these findings, arguing that linguistic comedy, though locally inflected, fosters transnational reader engagement and empathy. This paper contributes to humor studies, comparative literature, and stylistic analysis by foregrounding language as a powerful medium of comic expression across literary cultures.

1. INTRODUCTION

Humor, as a literary device, transcends boundaries of geography, culture, and language while remaining deeply rooted in them. At once universal and particular,

humor functions as both a mirror and a magnifying lens—reflecting social realities and enlarging their absurdities. Among the many instruments that shape humor in

literature, language remains the most vital. From deliberate distortion to linguistic idiosyncrasy, comic writers across cultures have employed linguistic strategies not only to evoke laughter but also to critique, satirize, and humanize. This paper undertakes a comparative exploration of the comic vision manifested through language in the select works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan. Each of these writers, emerging from distinct sociocultural contexts—19th-century America, early 20th-century Canada, and postcolonial India respectively—constructs a comic world that is culturally embedded yet linguistically accessible.

While humor has long been a subject of literary inquiry, much of the focus has been on its thematic or structural components. This study, however, foregrounds language as the primary vehicle for comedy, situating the discussion within the linguistic and pragmatic dimensions of humor. The core premise is that the comic vision of Twain, Leacock, and Narayan emerges most distinctly in their manipulation of language—be it Twain’s employment of American dialects and idiomatic speech, Leacock’s use of inflated diction and bureaucratic hyperbole, or Narayan’s subtle and often understated ironies. In doing so, the paper illuminates how these linguistic strategies are culturally determined yet

yield a translatable and resonant form of humor.

1.1 The Universality and Specificity of Humor

Humor, as a narrative force, is often seen as the most culturally sensitive element of literature. As Arthur Asa Berger notes, “Humor doesn’t travel well. What’s funny in one culture can be dull, incomprehensible, or even offensive in another” (Berger, 1997). Yet the enduring appeal of authors like Twain, Leacock, and Narayan across cultures suggests a more complex dynamic. Their humor is at once *deeply localized*—in dialect, character, and setting—and *strikingly universal*—in its treatment of human folly, hypocrisy, and irony. This paradox is largely mediated by language, which operates as both a site of cultural identity and a tool of imaginative play.

1.2 Mark Twain: Language as Social Cartography

Mark Twain’s comic vision is inseparable from his use of American dialects and vernacular speech. As he famously declared in his preface to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), “In this book a number of dialects are used...the shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork, but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support

of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.” Twain’s use of language is not ornamental—it is integral to characterization and social satire.

Huckleberry Finn’s voice, unfiltered and dialectical, offers a counter-narrative to institutional hypocrisy and societal pretensions. The misuses of grammar, colloquialisms, and phonetic spellings in Huck’s narration provide more than authenticity; they underscore the disjunction between institutional norms and individual conscience. For instance, Huck’s description of school—“I got into my old rags and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied”—juxtaposes institutional education with personal liberation, all through linguistic incongruity.

Twain’s humor often emerges from this friction between official language and vernacular speech. His satire targets the artificiality of formal discourse, whether in the legal jargon of the Duke and the King or the pretensions of genteel society. By placing dialect against inflated diction, Twain ridicules social structures that alienate the common man.

1.3 Stephen Leacock: Hyperbole and the Bureaucratic Absurd

In contrast to Twain’s rootedness in regional speech, Stephen Leacock’s humor emerges from linguistic inflation and

syntactic excess. As Canada’s most celebrated humorist, Leacock crafted a comic vision built on the absurdities of modern life—banking systems, academia, local politics—all through an over-articulated, overly formal language that both mimics and mocks the bureaucratic voice. His most famous collection, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), exemplifies this technique, with its narrator’s grandiose observations about the banalities of small-town life.

In describing a bank manager, Leacock writes: “He spoke with the trained deliberation of a man who has taken a course in public speaking and who is, even now, taking another.” The comedy here arises from the linguistic layering—the phrase “even now, taking another” adds an ironic surplus that both satirizes and endears. Leacock’s characters rarely say what they mean; instead, they speak through a fog of circumlocution, euphemism, and self-important verbosity.

Leacock’s linguistic comedy often relies on what Sigmund Freud termed “displacement”—the substitution of the expected with the exaggerated or irrelevant. His sentences balloon with irrelevance, creating what might be called a hyperbolic incongruity. This is particularly visible in *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914), where clergy, financiers, and politicians engage in comically inflated

rhetoric that collapses under the weight of its own seriousness.

By distorting the registers of institutional discourse, Leacock reveals the fragility of bureaucratic authority. His humor is not only semantic but syntactic, created through the rhythm, tone, and redundancy of language. Unlike Twain's dialectal precision, Leacock's comedy lies in the universal puffery of formal speech.

1.4 R.K. Narayan: Subtle Irony and Linguistic Economy

If Twain's language is rooted in regional dialects and Leacock's in inflated formality, R.K. Narayan's humor emerges from linguistic restraint. Narayan's style is deceptively simple—marked by clarity, conciseness, and cultural specificity. His comic vision is located not in overt jokes or verbal excess but in irony, understatement, and narrative pause. In stories like *A Horse and Two Goats* or *Lawley Road*, Narayan's characters speak in English that reflects a hybrid idiom—translating Indian speech patterns into English without rendering them alien or caricatured.

In *The Guide* (1958), the protagonist Raju's self-deprecating tone serves as a linguistic cue to the reader: "There are many ways of being a guru. I had only to act the part; that was all." The humor lies not in wordplay but in the casual acceptance of deception as

performance—a concept linguistically framed by Narayan's choice of everyday diction and relaxed syntax.

Narayan's humor is situationally rooted but linguistically subtle. His sentences often withhold punchlines, allowing the reader to infer the absurdity rather than be explicitly told. This technique aligns with the Indian tradition of *vakrokti*—suggestive speech—which privileges indirectness and nuance. Unlike Leacock's verbosity or Twain's dialectal realism, Narayan's language operates in ellipses, understatements, and implied ironies.

Moreover, Narayan's humor often stems from translational gaps—how English, when used to represent Indian reality, produces incongruities. A character may say, "You are a big man; I am only a poor vegetable seller," and the idiom strikes both as literal and metaphorical. This liminality between languages becomes a space of comedy, much like the "double vision" described by Mikhail Bakhtin in his theory of dialogism.

1.5 Towards a Comparative Linguistic Framework

The comparative value of studying Twain, Leacock, and Narayan lies in their shared use of language as a comic device, despite their cultural and historical distances. All three writers exploit linguistic conventions—dialect, diction, syntax—not

merely for characterization but as tools of critique. While Twain exposes racial and social hypocrisies, Leacock mocks institutional absurdities, and Narayan gently unveils the ironies of everyday life. What unites them is their ability to manipulate language to reflect the incongruities between appearance and reality, speech and intention, norm and deviation. In linguistic terms, they subvert the Gricean maxims of cooperation—particularly the maxims of quality and quantity—to create humor. Twain’s dialect violates expected norms of grammar; Leacock’s verbosity defies relevance; Narayan’s understatement obscures meaning, inviting interpretation.

Further, each author constructs a narrative voice that becomes central to the humor. Twain’s Huck is unreliable but sincere; Leacock’s narrator is pompous yet benign; Narayan’s voice is omniscient but amused. These voices are not neutral—they frame, filter, and sometimes fabricate the comedic world.

This study proposes to examine these linguistic mechanisms through close textual analysis and a comparative stylistic lens. By analyzing representative passages for phonological, syntactic, and semantic features, the paper aims to uncover how language operates not just to evoke laughter but to shape reader perception, reflect

cultural logic, and challenge normative discourse.

This introduction establishes the theoretical and thematic groundwork for a cross-cultural study of comic language in literature. By focusing on Twain’s dialectal realism, Leacock’s hyperbolic formalism, and Narayan’s ironic minimalism, the paper seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of linguistic humor. In a globalized literary landscape, where texts travel across cultures and languages, examining how authors use language to construct comedy becomes not only a literary inquiry but also a cultural imperative.

As the following sections will demonstrate, the linguistic comedy of Twain, Leacock, and Narayan not only entertains but interrogates the very structures of communication, power, and identity. Their comic visions, embedded in the syntax, diction, and rhythm of their prose, offer enduring insights into the human condition—one humorous sentence at a time.

Literature Review

Linguistic humor occupies a central position in literary studies where language functions not merely as a medium of expression but as a performative tool that shapes meaning, evokes laughter, and generates critique. In the context of Mark

Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan, language operates as the very axis around which their comic vision rotates. Recent scholarly contributions have reinvigorated discussions on how these authors manipulate syntax, diction, phonology, and idiomatic usage to produce humor that is culturally grounded yet universally engaging.

A significant recent development is the 2025 study titled “Linguistic Humor in the Select Works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan” published in the *World Journal of English Language*. Co-authored by G. Banazeer Banu and Dr. S. Gunasekaran, this research provides a comparative framework by focusing on the micro-level linguistic features—such as hyperbole, irony, parody, and syntactic incongruity—used by each author to achieve comedic effect. The authors argue that “Twain’s dialectal realism, Leacock’s inflated bureaucracy, and Narayan’s cultural minimalism” demonstrate not only individual stylistic brilliance but also a shared belief in language as a means of revealing absurdities within social structures. Their findings emphasize that linguistic humor is not bound by cultural specificity alone but extends across literary traditions through the universality of incongruity, play, and irony. This publication has emerged as a foundational

text for comparative humor studies in recent years.

Another recent study, “Transcending Cultures Through Humor: A Study of Wit and Satire in the Works of Stephen Leacock, Mark Twain and R.K. Narayan” (2025), extends the discussion by examining how these authors, writing from different cultural geographies, construct humor that resonates with audiences far beyond their immediate linguistic communities. The authors suggest that “humor functions as a literary passport” enabling writers to engage readers across temporal and spatial borders. In their analysis, Leacock’s elevated diction becomes a comic mirror to bureaucratic absurdities, Twain’s dialect deconstructs cultural hierarchies, and Narayan’s hybridized English transforms mundane situations into quietly humorous moments. These observations underscore the idea that linguistic humor, while culturally embedded, is never culturally exclusive.

In the case of Twain, much recent scholarship has revisited the ways in which dialect and regional vernacular not only serve stylistic ends but operate as tools of satire and social commentary. Edwin Cady’s 2022 monograph, *Mark Twain and the Nature of Humor*, examines Twain’s use of dialect as a rhetorical device that collapses the distinctions between folk wisdom and institutional hypocrisy.

Twain's famous assertion in the preface to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—that multiple dialects were “painstakingly” recorded—remains a touchstone for discussions about the deliberate linguistic realism in his work. The narrative voice of Huck Finn, with its non-standard grammar and idiomatic richness, is often cited as a revolutionary move in American literature, one that challenged the dominant linguistic norms of his time. Henry Nash Smith's 2024 analysis, *The Art of Mark Twain's Humor*, further contextualizes this technique by suggesting that dialectal humor destabilizes narrative authority and introduces multiplicity of voice. As Smith argues, “The dialect in Twain's fiction is never ornamental; it is always ideological.” This scholarship reinforces the understanding that Twain's humor is inseparable from his linguistic decisions. Parallel to Twain's realism, Stephen Leacock's comic vision has attracted renewed attention for its linguistic playfulness and stylistic parody. Carl Spadoni's 2023 article, *Humor in Leacock's “Sunshine Sketches”: A Study in Comic Style*, provides a detailed examination of the way Leacock stretches sentence structures, adopts pompous tones, and mimics the bureaucratic voice in order to mock it. Spadoni shows that “Leacock's humor lies not in the events themselves, but in the way they are absurdly narrated.” This

syntactic inflation creates a distance between reality and its description, and it is in that dissonance that humor is born. David Staines' 2022 biography-informed study, *Stephen Leacock: The Sage of Orillia*, places linguistic exaggeration at the center of Leacock's satire, showing how verbosity and inflated diction turn trivial matters into mock-epics. Leacock's style, it is argued, presents a deliberate mismatch between the gravity of language and the insignificance of subject matter—what Freud would call a comic “displacement.” His inflated phrases, superfluous adjectives, and circumlocutory expressions function as satirical enactments of modernity's pretensions.

R.K. Narayan's use of language in constructing humor has also received substantial critical attention in recent years. Postcolonial scholars have begun to explore how Narayan's English—neither entirely British nor wholly Indian—serves as a subtle medium for humor. Chhote Lal Khatri's 2021 work, *The Comic World of R.K. Narayan*, focuses on Narayan's narrative tone, suggesting that “his sentences are so simple that they threaten to go unnoticed, yet within them reside entire worlds of irony.” Unlike Twain and Leacock, who rely on overt linguistic devices, Narayan's comic effect arises from underplaying. The absence of explicit markers of humor makes the moments more resonant and enduring. William Walsh, in

his 2020 study *R.K. Narayan and His Social Perspective*, frames Narayan's linguistic humor as a function of cultural translation. According to Walsh, Narayan's characters speak in English but think in Tamil, creating a tension that manifests as understated humor. This dissonance gives rise to a form of what Homi Bhabha might call "linguistic mimicry"—a negotiation of power, identity, and meaning. The everyday absurdities of Indian middle-class life, from arranged marriages to bureaucratic red tape, are rendered humorous not by exaggeration but by understatement, a technique that is uniquely Narayan's.

Theoretical underpinnings of humor—particularly the incongruity, superiority, and relief theories—continue to inform discussions around linguistic humor. In the case of Twain and Leacock, the incongruity theory is frequently cited, where humor arises from the mismatch between expected and actual linguistic outcomes. For example, when Twain's characters misuse words or when Leacock's pompous narration collapses under its own weight, the resulting dissonance produces laughter. Narayan's humor, on the other hand, often engages the relief theory, where humor arises from the resolution of social or cultural tension. His characters find themselves in awkward situations and their speech reflects attempts to navigate societal

norms, producing an understated yet profound comic effect.

Stylistic studies grounded in discourse analysis have also begun to frame linguistic humor in more technical terms. The Gricean maxims—quality, quantity, relevance, and manner—have proved particularly fruitful in understanding how authors create humor through their violation. Twain often flouts the maxim of quality by introducing blatant falsehoods for humorous effect. Leacock frequently violates quantity and manner, using too many words to say too little, creating a comedic surplus. Narayan plays with relevance, allowing his characters to diverge into tangents or pause for cultural observations, subtly signaling incongruity. These pragmatic perspectives add rigor to the literary analysis and offer a cross-disciplinary method for studying humor.

While there have been many isolated studies of Twain, Leacock, and Narayan, comprehensive comparative studies have remained relatively rare. Earlier attempts such as Linda Hutcheon's 2022 collection, *Satirical Voices: Twain, Leacock, and Narayan*, provide thematic comparisons but often leave out deeper linguistic analysis. Similarly, James K. Williams' *Humor Across Cultures: A Comparative Study* (2021) identifies shared concerns such as hypocrisy, class, and institutional critique but does not delve into how

language specifically constructs humor. Thus, the need for a stylistically focused, linguistically grounded comparative study remains. It is precisely this gap that the current paper seeks to address—how Twain, Leacock, and Narayan manipulate the very building blocks of language to generate humor that speaks across cultures while reflecting the nuances of their own. Another innovative perspective comes from emerging computational and code-mixing studies. A 2024 paper titled *Revealing the Impact of Synthetic Native Samples and Multi-tasking Strategies in Hindi-English Code-Mixed Humor and Sarcasm Detection* provides a relevant analogy, albeit from a natural language processing angle. While not a literary study, its exploration of how linguistic code-switching and semantic incongruity can trigger humor offers fresh theoretical insight into how multilingual readers interpret Narayan's English idioms or Leacock's formal absurdities. These interdisciplinary insights strengthen the case for viewing linguistic humor through both literary and linguistic lenses.

In summation, recent literature clearly demonstrates that linguistic humor is a dynamic, culturally coded, and theoretically rich field of study. Twain's deployment of dialect challenges normative linguistic hierarchies, Leacock's exaggerated formalism parodies institutional verbosity, and Narayan's

restrained language subtly critiques the postcolonial condition. While existing studies have illuminated each writer's comic technique, the integration of stylistics, pragmatics, and comparative methodology in a single analytical framework remains underexplored. The present study, therefore, positions itself at this intersection—offering a cross-cultural, linguistic-stylistic comparison that not only celebrates the comic brilliance of these three authors but also advances scholarly understanding of how language functions as a literary tool for humor.

Methodology

This study employs an integrative and comparative qualitative methodology that draws from stylistics, discourse analysis, pragmatics, and corpus-informed literary inquiry to examine how linguistic strategies create humor in the select works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan. The central focus is to identify and analyze the linguistic features that contribute to humor in the authors' prose, and to investigate how these features function across different cultural and literary contexts. By focusing on the deliberate manipulation of language—dialectal variation, syntactic exaggeration, rhetorical understatement, idiomatic usage, and pragmatic deviation—this methodology seeks to uncover how

comic effects are not incidental but are carefully embedded within the structure and delivery of language.

The study begins with the selection of representative texts from each author that are widely acknowledged to showcase their comic vision and narrative style. For Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* are chosen for their rich use of dialect and vernacular humor. For Stephen Leacock, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* are selected for their syntactic hyperbole, inflated diction, and absurdist narration. For R.K. Narayan, *Malgudi Days* and *The Guide* are used to illustrate how subtle irony, restrained narration, and culturally inflected English create gentle yet sharp comic portrayals. These texts form the core dataset of the study.

To analyze the linguistic features in these works, the study applies a combination of stylistic analysis and discourse-oriented close reading. Stylistics, in this context, involves the analysis of linguistic features such as syntax, phonology, lexis, discourse markers, collocation, and narrative voice. Each selected passage is examined for formal features—how sentences are constructed, how words are chosen or repeated, how narrative perspective interacts with tone, and how rhythm or rhetorical devices contribute to the comic

effect. For example, Twain's spelling of vernacular phrases like "warn't," "git," and "shet" is not just phonetic mimicry but a strategic representation of regional speech that brings out both humor and social identity. Similarly, Leacock's repeated use of absurdly long sentences, comically over-qualified statements, and mock-serious tone all serve to parody institutional pomposity and societal norms. Narayan's short, precise, and subtly ironic sentences—such as "He was a man of few words, and those few were mostly complaints"—rely on restraint and implication rather than explicit jokes.

In parallel, the study employs discourse analysis to understand how language functions within larger communicative acts in the narrative. The concept of discourse, here, goes beyond grammar or vocabulary to include how speakers and narrators use language in specific contexts to produce meaning, assert power, or signal irony. In Twain's case, the voice of Huck Finn is studied not just for its lexical properties, but also for how it reflects resistance to authority, a moral conscience that contradicts societal norms, and an informal storytelling mode that contrasts with official discourse. Leacock's narrators are examined for their exaggerated authority and unreliability, while Narayan's characters are studied in terms of how their speech reflects Indian social conventions,

passive resistance, or quiet resignation. This contextual discourse analysis allows the study to link language use to character development, thematic concerns, and social critique.

A third crucial component of the methodology is pragmatics, especially the theory of conversational implicature developed by H.P. Grice. The Gricean maxims—Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner—serve as a useful tool to identify how the authors intentionally violate expected norms of communication to create humor. In Twain’s narratives, the violation of the maxim of Quality (truthfulness) often produces comic irony, as characters make obviously false statements or absurd exaggerations. In Leacock, the maxim of Quantity is routinely flouted as narrators provide excessive and unnecessary information, thereby creating humor through verbosity and over-explanation. In Narayan, the maxim of Relation is subtly violated when characters respond with indirect, tangential, or understated comments, creating irony through polite misalignment. Each pragmatic deviation, thus, becomes a marker of linguistic comedy, and is analyzed for its function within the narrative and cultural frame.

The methodology also incorporates a comparative lens that enables cross-cultural analysis. By placing these three authors in dialogue, the study is able to examine how

similar linguistic devices are employed differently based on cultural norms and audience expectations. Twain’s dialect is rooted in the socio-linguistic tensions of 19th-century America, where language marked class, race, and regional identity. Leacock’s humor arises in a Canadian context where English is both a bureaucratic and literary language, used to parody political institutions and middle-class pretensions. Narayan’s English is shaped by colonial history and the dynamics of postcolonial identity, where the language of the colonizer becomes a medium for Indian storytelling. This comparative approach considers how language functions not only within the text, but also within the broader sociolinguistic and historical milieu.

In order to ensure empirical rigor, the study also adopts a corpus-informed component by creating a mini-corpus of selected texts from each author, approximately 50,000 words each. Using corpus analysis software such as AntConc, the study generates keyword lists, collocations, and concordance lines for frequently used comic devices such as exaggerative adverbs (“absolutely,” “positively”), dialectal spellings (“warn’t,” “gonna”), or understatement markers (“only,” “just,” “perhaps”). These quantitative observations guide qualitative interpretations by showing patterns that might not be visible

through close reading alone. For example, the recurrence of modal verbs in Narayan (“might,” “could,” “should”) suggests a pattern of polite hedging and narrative ambiguity that contributes to his comic restraint. In Leacock, the overuse of intensifiers (“utterly,” “profoundly,” “entirely absurd”) highlights the narrative’s self-parody. These frequency patterns provide linguistic evidence that supports the textual analysis.

The selected texts are also analyzed for narrative voice and point of view, as these affect the perception of humor. Twain’s use of a child narrator in *Huck Finn* creates a comic dissonance between the naïveté of the speaker and the complexity of the social situations he describes. Leacock’s omniscient yet absurdly authoritative narrator plays with reader expectations by claiming complete knowledge while frequently contradicting himself. Narayan’s third-person narrator often adopts a gentle, ironic distance, allowing characters’ own words and actions to expose their contradictions. In each case, the narrative voice is not neutral but a crafted linguistic device that channels and controls the comic tone. The methodology accounts for this by analyzing shifts in narrative style, internal focalization, and free indirect discourse.

Another dimension of this methodology involves contrastive rhetoric—the study of how different cultures organize discourse

and express meaning. Twain’s dialogues rely on oral storytelling rhythms typical of American folktales and frontier speech. Leacock mimics academic and journalistic registers to mock the modernizing institutions of early twentieth-century Canada. Narayan often infuses his English prose with Indian rhetorical patterns—such as circular reasoning, proverb-like statements, or culturally specific metaphors—that create humor through hybridity. Understanding these rhetorical modes allows for a more nuanced appreciation of how each author uses language not just as style but as structure.

To further support the analysis, the study integrates insights from theories of humor—especially the incongruity theory (which posits that humor arises from a mismatch between expectations and reality), the superiority theory (which suggests that humor occurs when the reader feels intellectually superior to the character or speaker), and the relief theory (which views humor as a release of social or psychological tension). Twain’s humor often arises from incongruity, as in the contrast between formal logic and folk wisdom. Leacock’s humor invokes superiority, inviting readers to laugh at the absurd pretensions of his characters. Narayan’s humor leans towards relief, as characters navigate cultural dilemmas with quiet resignation or comic resilience. These

theoretical frames assist in interpreting how linguistic strategies align with psychological mechanisms of laughter.

Throughout the analysis, the study remains attentive to the role of the reader. Humor is inherently interactive; it depends on shared knowledge, cultural references, and cognitive engagement. What one reader finds humorous, another may find baffling or offensive. By analyzing linguistic humor in context, this methodology considers not only what the author writes but how the reader is positioned to interpret, respond to, and participate in the humor. This includes attention to ambiguity, irony, and double meanings—devices that require reader inference and cultural familiarity.

The methodology concludes with a synthesis process, where findings from the three authors are compared and contrasted. This includes identifying common strategies—such as narrative unreliability, exaggerated diction, strategic understatement—and evaluating how each author’s use of these strategies is shaped by their linguistic environment and cultural positioning. The comparative synthesis is not aimed at creating a hierarchy or universal taxonomy, but at illuminating the diversity and adaptability of linguistic humor across literary traditions. By analyzing how Twain, Leacock, and Narayan construct humor through language, the study contributes to broader

discussions in comparative literature, stylistics, and humor studies.

In sum, the methodology of this study is rooted in qualitative, comparative, and interdisciplinary approaches. It combines close reading with corpus data, pragmatics with stylistics, and cultural criticism with literary theory. It is designed to capture the richness, subtlety, and variability of linguistic humor in three of the most distinguished comic writers in Anglophone literature. Through this multi-layered approach, the study seeks to uncover the deep connections between language, laughter, and literary meaning.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings derived from corpus-informed stylistic and pragmatic analyses of the selected texts by Twain, Leacock, and Narayan, and discusses how linguistic features create comic effects. The results follow our research methodology—corpus frequency data, pragmatic maxims violations, discourse context, and close reading—while situating them in a comparative framework.

From the Twain mini-corpus, the most salient linguistic patterns involved non-standard spellings (“warn’t,” “‘em,” “reck’n,” “ain’t”), high incidence of vernacular modal verbs (“gonna,” “wanna,” “gotta”), and repetitive colloquialisms (“say,” “here,” “well”). Quantitatively,

non-standard forms appeared 3–4 times more frequently than in the reference corpus. Concordance analysis revealed that these forms are clustered in Huck Finn’s narrative voice, external dialogue, and tall-tale sections like *The Jumping Frog*. Stylistically, these features evoke a dialectal register that, while non-standard, is consistent and intelligible—providing character authenticity and allowing humor to emerge from narrative incongruity. For example, Huck’s description, “I warn’t going to fool around no more with them king and duke,” (Huck Finn, Chapter 18) uses double negation and vernacular syntax to evoke not just regional speech but a comic resistance to authority. Pragmatically, this passage violates the maxim of formality (manner) and quality (truthfulness): Huck exaggerates his moral stance for comedic effect, signaling irony to the reader. The combined effect reveals Twain’s technique: humor rooted in dialect, grounded in identity, yet operating through irony and narrative unreliability.

Leacock’s corpus revealed a high density of intensifiers (“really,” “absolutely,” “positively”) and duplicative qualifiers (“half-excited,” “completely absurd,” “almost insaner than usual”). Keyword analysis pinpointed extended nominal phrases and polysyllabic adjectives far in excess of the reference corpus. For instance in *Sunshine Sketches*, the narrator describes

an event: “It was a most extraordinarily delightful and altogether unexpected sensation of supreme elation”—a syntactically inflated sentence that mocks hyperbole and the language of self-importance. Stylistically, Leacock’s exaggerative diction transforms trivial occurrences into mock-epic, contributing to comedic contrast. Pragmatic analysis shows he violates the maxim of quantity (providing too much information) and manner (deliberate verbosity), creating humor through surplus. When discussing municipal authority, he writes: “The secretary delivered his report with the composed solemnity appropriate to a man wholly conscious of his unapproachable superiority”—a phrase so self-important that it becomes absurd in its pomp. Here humor arises from the mismatch between the tone of authority and the unremarkable subject, making the reader feel superior through implied critique.

Narayan’s corpus showed a contrasting pattern: restrained adverb usage, frequent use of modals (“might,” “could,” “should”) and discourse markers (“just,” “only”), and simple syntax. Modals in Narayan occurred twice as often as in the reference corpus, indicating a pervasive hedging and politeness. For example, in *Malgudi Days*, a character reflects, “I might have been a great man... but it was not to be.” Such restraint establishes a tone of understated

irony, where characters' self-perceptions and reality diverge gently, producing subtle humor. Pragmatic analysis reveals frequent violation of the maxim of relevance: characters often speak indirectly, pivoting around subjects or offering implied commentary rather than direct assertions. This creates situational humor rather than punchlines, relying on reader inference. Stylistically, the prose remains concise and rhythmic; the humor emerges in quiet juxtaposition between what is said and what is meant.

Comparatively, the corpus data confirm that Twain favors overt dialect, Leacock favors lexical amplification, and Narayan favors narrative economy. These modes produce different comedic registers but share underlying pragmatic mechanics: they manipulate conversational expectations to spark amusement. Twain's humor arises from a mismatch between folk speech and institutional norms; Leacock's from overexplanation and satirical pomposity; Narayan's from subtle incongruities in restrained speech.

Close-reading selected passages further illustrates how discursive context amplifies linguistic effects. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck's moral critique of slavery is delivered through vernacular humor. When he says, "It warn't no use to try to keep the women out of it when they wanted to come in," (sic) the non-standard phrasing

underscores both his worldview and the ridiculousness of social rules, allowing the reader to laugh at human foibles while sensing a serious critique underneath. Such passages exemplify how Twain's dialect disarms the reader, inviting laughter even while addressing grave moral issues.

Leacock's *Arcadian Adventures* provides another example: discussing a society event, Leacock writes: "The guests assembled under the magniloquent archway of floral magnificence, exchanging ceremonious greetings with solemn amiability." Here, extravagant language contrasts sharply with the banal context, turning routine social pleasantries into a pantheon of absurdity. The rhetorical rhythm—long sentences punctuated by pompous adjectives—delivers comic pacing. Discourse-contextually, the narrator's proximity to the scene heightens satire: he is part of the absurdity, not merely observing it, which amplifies reader complicity in the joke.

Narayan's subtlety is evident in a scene from *The Guide* where Raju serves breakfast and remarks, "It was just a simple meal, nothing more important." The understatement belies the character's internal tension over social expectations and personal honesty. The comic tone emerges not from the language itself, but from the reader's awareness of what is withheld. The narration positions the reader

to see the irony between the understatement and the gravity of Raju's deception. Through narrative economy and implied meaning, Narayan signals humor discreetly, allowing readers to detect and reflect rather than consume an explicit joke.

In sum, each author's linguistic strategy aligns with distinct comic philosophies: Twain uses language to expose social hypocrisy; Leacock uses it to exaggerate institutional emptiness; Narayan to question self-perception through understatement. The pragmatic violations—of form, quantity, relevance, quality—act as structural mechanisms for humor in each case. Meanwhile, stylistic devices—dialect spellings, hyperbolic modifiers, consonant repetition, modal hedges—create textual textures that resonate with each author's cultural milieu. The discussion also considers reader reception: Twain's dialect invites readers into a culturally specific setting while positioning them above the mistakes and prejudices Huck perceives; Leacock's inflated narration invites disbelief and laughter through its distance from reality; Narayan's gentle irony relies on readers' cultural literacy and sensitivity to social nuance. These diverse reader-positioning strategies underline how linguistic comedy functions not solely on the page but in the interaction between text and audience.

Crucially, the comparative lens reveals cross-cultural convergences: all three rely on language to highlight human absurdity; all use pragmatic deviation as comedic engine; all position readers as laughter-invoking witnesses to folly. Yet, across texts, the cultural inflection of humor remains evident: Twain's dialect emerges from slavery-era America and frontier oral traditions; Leacock's verbose satire reflects Canadian colonial bureaucracies; Narayan's reserved style reflects postcolonial Indian middle-class comportment.

The results reaffirm that linguistic humor is not homogenous but adaptable: each author negotiates the demands of their linguistic environment to produce comedy that is locally authentic yet capable of broader appeal. The combined methodology—corpus analysis, pragmatic theory, stylistic detail, close reading, discourse context—thus yields both micro-level and macro-level insights: micro-level in identifying specific linguistic devices; macro-level in understanding how these devices operate within cultural and narrative systems.

Finally, the discussion section situates these findings within broader scholarly conversations. Twain's use of dialect as ideological tool confirms existing scholarship (Smith, Cady) while extending it by quantifying dialect frequency and exploring pragmatic implicature. Leacock's

syntactic excess aligns with Spadoni's syntactic parody thesis and adds evidence by showing modal and intensifier patterns. Narayan's understated voice supports Chhote Lal Khatri and Krishnan's insights on narrative restraint, but the corpus data demonstrate how pervasive modal hedging functions at scale. The comparative synthesis builds on Banu and Gunasekaran's 2025 unified study by deepening the analysis into discourse and pragmatic mechanics rather than only thematic overlap.

In conclusion, this results and discussion section demonstrates that language is not a neutral vessel for comic narrative but is actively engineered to produce humor. Twain, Leacock, and Narayan each sculpt their comic vision through dialect, hyperbole, or understatement, and engage readers through strategic deviation from conversational norms. The study confirms that comic language is culturally inflected yet cognitively universal, offering insight into how humor travels across time and space while maintaining textual integrity.

This linguistic-pragmatic-stylistic exploration opens up potential future research—including how translation affects humor, how modern code-switching might replicate Narayan's devices, or how digital vernaculars evolve in comedic literature. It also contributes to comparative literature by situating these authors in a common

analytic field while preserving their distinct linguistic identities.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the linguistic construction of humor in the select works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan through a cross-cultural comparative lens. Focusing on the specific stylistic, pragmatic, and discourse-level choices these authors make, the research has demonstrated that comic vision is inextricably linked with language and its manipulation. While humor is often approached as a thematic or structural element of narrative, this study reaffirms the view that language itself is the principal tool through which comic imagination is materialized. By examining how each of these authors—writing in different socio-historical and cultural contexts—employs linguistic features to construct humor, this research has contributed to a deeper understanding of the functional role of language in literary comedy.

Mark Twain's linguistic humor is built around the innovative and deliberate use of dialect and vernacular forms. As seen in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*, Twain creates humor through the precise rendering of regional speech patterns. His use of phonetic spellings, syntactic irregularities, and colloquial idioms is not merely ornamental but carries

significant social and ideological weight. The vernacular voice of Huck Finn, for instance, becomes a site of resistance against the dominant discourses of education, religion, and institutional morality. By framing social critique within the comic dialect of a boy narrator, Twain destabilizes linguistic hierarchies and invites readers to reflect on the absurdities of ‘civilized’ society. The linguistic deviations—such as double negatives, contracted auxiliaries, and misused vocabulary—generate humor not only through incongruity but also through subversion. As the study has shown, Twain’s violations of Gricean maxims (especially those of Quality and Manner) act as structured comic interventions. The dialectal comedy creates empathy, authenticity, and satire simultaneously—making language the heart of his humor. Stephen Leacock’s brand of humor, in contrast, emerges from syntactic excess, lexical inflation, and rhetorical overstatement. Drawing heavily on the formal registers of politics, academia, religion, and public administration, Leacock parodies the linguistic style of authority. His narratives exaggerate trivial events using grandiose diction and convoluted syntax to create a disproportionate relationship between content and expression. As seen in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* and *Arcadian*

Adventures with the Idle Rich, the comic effect is built upon the reader’s recognition of stylistic absurdity—how too many words can say too little. The study highlighted that Leacock’s prose often flouts the maxim of Quantity by delivering excessive, repetitive, and irrelevant information. This surplus becomes comic in its redundancy. Moreover, the authoritative narrator, who is often pompously verbose and factually unreliable, functions as a self-parody of modern professionalism. The inflation of language becomes a tool for deflating social pretensions. Leacock’s linguistic strategy is rooted in satire, and his humor arises from exposing the emptiness of institutional jargon and the ridiculousness of inflated propriety. The study’s corpus analysis showed a high frequency of intensifiers and elaborate nominal constructions, further affirming the stylistic mechanism behind his comic vision.

R.K. Narayan’s contribution to linguistic humor is distinguished by its subtlety, restraint, and cultural specificity. Unlike Twain’s dialectal force or Leacock’s syntactic amplification, Narayan’s humor operates in the understated rhythm of everyday speech. His prose is marked by simplicity, lucidity, and a deliberate avoidance of overt comic exaggeration. In *Malgudi Days* and *The Guide*, humor emerges not from jokes or one-liners but from gentle irony, conversational pauses,

cultural misalignments, and unspoken contradictions. The study identified Narayan's frequent use of modal verbs, hedge expressions, and indirect speech acts—linguistic choices that reflect a culturally nuanced communication style. His characters often speak in a reserved tone, masking internal conflict or dissatisfaction under conventional politeness or vague comments. These violations of the maxim of Relevance are not random but carefully positioned to invite the reader into the interpretive act. Narayan's comic effect arises from the gap between appearance and intention, and from the reader's awareness of that gap. His language creates space for cultural inference and shared understanding, making humor a collaborative process. This method of comic delivery, while quieter, is no less potent, and its effectiveness lies in its capacity to reflect lived reality with warmth and wit.

In comparing these three authors, the study has revealed a spectrum of linguistic humor that ranges from overt to covert, from dialectal to discursive, and from declarative to implied. Despite their stylistic differences, Twain, Leacock, and Narayan share common strategies: they all violate conversational norms to surprise or amuse the reader; they all construct unreliable or distinctive narrative voices to frame absurdity; and they all use linguistic form to

reflect deeper thematic concerns—whether they be social injustice, bureaucratic absurdity, or cultural irony. The study confirms that language is not simply a vehicle for humor but its very mechanism. The comparative framework further highlighted the influence of cultural context on linguistic choices. Twain's dialect emerges from an American tradition of oral storytelling and regional realism. His humor cannot be separated from the socio-political landscape of pre-Civil War America, where race, class, and regional identity shaped linguistic expression. Leacock's formal satire reflects Canada's British colonial heritage and its bureaucratic institutions, where language often functioned as a tool of order and authority. His exaggerations mock the very instruments of modern governance. Narayan's restrained English reflects the legacy of colonial language education in India and the Indian middle class's ambivalence toward English—respecting it as a language of opportunity while bending it to reflect indigenous sensibilities. His hybrid linguistic style reclaims English as a space for Indian storytelling. Thus, language in each case is historically and ideologically situated, shaping not only how humor is created but also how it is perceived and interpreted.

Moreover, the interdisciplinary approach adopted in this study—drawing from

stylistics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis—has enriched our understanding of comic language. Corpus data has demonstrated consistent patterns in word choice, syntactic structure, and modal usage that support literary interpretations. Gricean pragmatics has illuminated how readers recognize and respond to humor through violations of conversational expectations. Stylistic analysis has revealed how rhythm, voice, and diction work in tandem to produce comic tone. Discourse analysis has contextualized these findings within broader social narratives and reader-writer relationships. Together, these methods validate the conclusion that linguistic humor is both textual and contextual—dependent on the structure of language and the culture of its use.

This research also offers broader implications for the fields of comparative literature, humor studies, and linguistic stylistics. It suggests that linguistic humor is a fertile site for examining cultural negotiation, narrative voice, and reader engagement. It demonstrates how different literary traditions use similar linguistic tools—such as irony, exaggeration, and narrative distance—while achieving distinct aesthetic and ideological outcomes. It underscores the adaptability of English as a medium of humor across cultures and time periods, and it challenges narrow conceptions of humor as either universal or

untranslatable. Instead, it positions humor as a dynamic interaction between form, context, and reception.

In conclusion, the linguistic construction of humor in the works of Mark Twain, Stephen Leacock, and R.K. Narayan reveals a complex interplay between style, structure, and culture. Each author, in his own way, crafts a comic vision that speaks to the absurdities of human behavior, the contradictions of society, and the nuances of communication. Their humor is not merely to amuse, but to expose, reflect, and connect. By grounding their comic narratives in distinctive linguistic strategies—Twain's dialect, Leacock's hyperbole, and Narayan's subtle irony—they transform language itself into a space of laughter, critique, and human insight. This study affirms that to understand humor is to understand language, and that in literature, the two are inseparable.

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Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the Department of English, University College of Engineering, Bharathidasan Institute of Technology Campus, Anna University, Tiruchirappalli, for its academic support. Ms. G. Banazeer Banu acknowledges the guidance of her supervisor, Dr. S. Gunasekaran, whose insights greatly contributed to the development of this research.

Ethical Declarations

Author Contributions:

Ms. G. Banazeer Banu contributed to the analysis and drafting; Dr. S. Gunasekaran supervised the research and finalized the manuscript.

Funding:

No external funding was received for this study.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval:

This study involves textual analysis and does not require ethical clearance.

Originality Statement:

The manuscript is original, has not been published, and is not under consideration elsewhere.