

# A SEMIO-PRAGMATIC OUTLOOK OF R.K. LAXMAN'S POCKET CARTOONS 'YOU SAID IT'

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## **Abstract**

*Socio-political cartoons serve as a dynamic fusion of visual and verbal semiotic systems, with humour, satire, and irony emanating from the intricate interplay of these elements. This research focuses on the renowned Indian cartoonist R.K. Laxman and his iconic 'Common Man,' popularized through the 'You Said It' pocket cartoon series. By employing a semio-pragmatic framework, this paper aims to analyse select cartoons, unravelling the nuanced layers of meaning embedded in Laxman's art. Through this exploration, the researcher seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the socio-political commentary within the Indian context, emphasizing the cultural and political significance of Laxman's contributions*

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Pragmatics, Speech act, Humorosity, cartoon, R.K. Laxman

## **INTRODUCTION**

Cartoons are one of the imitative arts that have amused society for a long time. Cartoons, particularly, the socio-political editorial cartoons, on the surface, though not a 'serious' art form, have been successful in helping society understand and make judgments about the extremely complex interactions at work in social and political systems. These cartoons are enormously rich in the complexity of their evaluative meanings. They employ humour with irony or satire. Cartoons, usually, act as visual metaphors, however, many social & political editorial cartoons often include speech balloons or punch lines.

This makes such cartoons a blend of two semiotic systems: visual and verbal. Moreover, visual and verbal choices become variably interdependent. There is moreover a robust tendency between verbal and visual signs for there to be metaphorical transfers of meaning from one evaluative dimension to another. These cartoons express the social and political opinions of the author. The opinions coded in these cartoons are implicit rather than explicit. The discretion of the reader is at work in defining their attitude to the socio-political topic at hand from their prior knowledge of the discourse surrounding the content as displayed by the cartoon. However, the humour and satire intended and achieved through these cartoons owes a lot to the semiotic and pragmatic elements in the discourse.

There have been theoretical (See Victor Ruskin 1985), experimental (See Giritlioglu and Chaudhary 2022) and pragmatic studies (See Medeline Ferar 1993) to uncover the source and degree of humour and satire. However, in the domain of cartoons are seem to be far and few studies that attempt to account for the same in the domain of cartoons. Hence, this invites a fresh approach of inquiry in the making of humour in cartoons. The present paper attempts to explore the workings of cartoons from a semio-pragmatic angle. The paper offers a semio-pragmatic reading of the discourse in socio-political cartoons with particular reference to the pocket cartoon, 'You Said It' by India's premier newspaper cartoonist and writer, R.K. Laxman. The purpose of the paper is only to appreciate the art of R.K. Laxman through the analysis, and not to offer any formulation of a comprehensive theory.

## **Analytical Framework**

As R.K. Laxman's cartoons are observed in light of the concepts involving semiotics, humorosity and pragmatics, it is essential to take a cursory glance at these terms. In the modern world, the major areas of semiotic study are literature, myths, gestures and media text (which includes newspaper articles, advertisements, cartoons, films etc.) Semiotics perceives a cartoon as a complex sign, as it consists of other signs. A better understanding of these cartoons is arrived at when one can identify signs within the text and their meaning, then identify their paradigm sets, and structural relationships between the signifiers (syntagms) and finally identify the functions of the signs in the text and the text as a whole.

There are many theories of humorosity. According to Leacock (1916), humour comes from incongruity, unfitness or disharmony among other things because something is broken out of its shape and purpose. The general theory of verbal humour based on Victor Raskin's (1985) Script Semantic Theory of Humour (SSTH) assumes that there are six Knowledge Resources that shape a humorous text. They are Script Opposition (SO)

which is script overlap, Logical Mechanism (LM) such as juxtaposition, Situation (SI) that is, some event or situation for the joke to be actualized, Narrative Organization (NS) which is the need for a joke to be presented in some form of narrative organization, Targets (TA) and Language (LA), that is, actual verbalization of the joke resulting in its text (Antonopoulou & Sifianou, 745)

According to Levinson (1983), we need to be concerned about the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding, the study of which he calls pragmatics. Scholars in the field of Pragmatics claim that humour is obtained through manipulating some rules of communication, that is, speech act, presupposition, precondition and conversational implicature (See Ibraheem and Nawal 2016). This establishes a sure link between humour and pragmatics.

The above discussion shows a relation between semiotics, humour and pragmatics. What is needed it to see these connections in the socio-political cartoons as discourse. Having said this, let us move to the object of the present study: R.K. Laxman's pocket cartoon "You Said It".

### R.K. Laxman's Pocket Cartoons 'You Said It' & the Common Man

R.K. Laxman is one of the rare artists, whose style is instantly recognizable to India's English newspaper reading public. He has been known as a premier newspaper cartoonist, a celebrated satirist and a keen political and social observer who drew his trademark panels for *The Times of India* for more than 7 decades. His cartoons, range from political commentary through the social satire of manners to humour mainly at the expense of politicians & blundering babus. One can easily observe the striking feature in any of R.K. Laxman's cartoons, that is, drama frozen at a crucial moment, with something before and something after it. The reader is put on the spot so that we feel the mood of the situation. R.K. Laxman has always portrayed the common citizens as helpless and choked with frustrations and fury. Laxman's cartoons convert this rage into humour. The 'Common Man' in his cartoons acts as Laxman's vehicle for expressing the bewilderment, long-suffering and resignation of those he has described as "the mute millions of India." The Common Man's ever-befuddled expression serves as much-needed correctives to the lofty but empty rhetoric of pompous officials, politicians and sometimes fellow citizens.

### Analysis of the 'You Said It' cartoons

What makes the cartoons appearing under You Said It title an interesting reading from semio-pragmatic angle is the unique combination of the visual and the verbal. The humour or satire solely depends on this combination. The mere visual aspect would not achieve this effect. In fact, in many of his cartoons, his linguistic strokes appear to be stronger than his brush strokes. The title 'You Said It' is self-explanatory. The significance of what is 'said' depends, at times, on 'who' said it, the speech situation and the non-verbal reaction of the silent listener that is the 'Common Man'. For the analysis purpose, 10 cartoons that appeared in the newspaper *Times of India* between August 2008 and November 2008 have been shortlisted based on the wide range of social issues these include. The analysis uses the concept of speech act and the terms: agent (the speaker/initiator of the speech action), bystander (non-active participant in the speech act), and patient (recipient of the speech action) mainly from the domain of Pragmatics (See Gezgin 2004).



Figure 1: Laxman R.K. 8 September 2008  
**Agent:** Prisoner **Patient:** Another Prisoner  
**Bystander:** Common Man, Reader  
**Speech:** 'Yes, I went underground soon after committing the crime. But it was so overcrowded; there was not even standing space. So, I came out and was arrested!  
**Speech act:** Explanation  
**Spatial Context:** Prison-cell with lots of space  
**Theme:** Crime-rate



Image 2: Laxman R.K. 1 October 2008  
**Agent:** Politician **Patient:** Common Man  
**Bystander:** Servant, Reader  
**Speech:** 'I can't understand these journalists, when their own leader won the elections they buried my victory somewhere in the last pages. Now it is Obama, Obama, Obama in every page in all pages.  
**Speech Act:** Criticism out of frustration  
**Spatial Context:** Office, pile of newspapers lying on the floor  
**Theme:** Crime-rate



Image 3: Laxman R.K. 1 October 2008  
**Agent:** Subordinate Officer **Patient:** a citizen  
**Bystander:** Common Man, Reader  
**Speech:** 'It's no use, Sir. He has lost the habit of talking directly. You have to talk from your mobile even if you are sitting right in front of him!  
**Speech act:** Advice  
**Spatial Context:** Office  
**Theme:** Blundering babudom



Image 4: Laxman R.K. 1 October 2008  
Agent: Police Constable  
Patient: Police Officer  
Bystander: Common Man, Reader  
Speech: 'Reporting a burning bus, sir. Don't know if it is related to terrorism, linguism, communalism, secessionism, goondaism, reservation, border...'  
Speech Act: Reporting  
Spatial Context: Public telephone booth, a burning bus in an open space  
Theme: Social violence



Image 4: Laxman R.K. 1 October 2008  
Agent: A Citizen Patient: Common Man  
Bystander: Reader  
Speech: 'He came howling about bomb scare and this chap came from that side shouting about the US stock market crisis and they dashed against each other!'  
Speech Act: Reporting  
Spatial Context: Public space, two men lying, newspapers in their hands  
Theme: Socio-economic crisis



Image 6: Laxman R.K. 1 October 2008  
Agent: A beggar  
Patient: Another Beggar  
Bystander: Common Man, Reader  
Speech: 'If the economy gets, worse, I will offer to join the moon mission and go to the moon and try my luck there. I am sure it will be better!'  
Speech Act: Speculation  
Spatial Context: Pavement  
Theme: Economic Crisis



Image 7: Laxman R.K. 1 October 2008  
Agent: Chief Minister's Wife  
Patient: Common Man  
Bystander: Reader  
Speech: 'I am tired of reading about those bomb-blasts and terrorist attacks! Normal news about corrupt ministers, bribe taking officials seems to have disappeared!'  
Speech Act: Expressing boredom/ detest (comment)  
Spatial Context: House  
Theme: Social violence and corruption



Image 8: Laxman R.K. 1 October 2008  
Agent: An artist Patient: Common Man  
Bystander: Reader  
Speech: 'I have had very good sale of these graphs! I have drawn. Stock market dealers, businessmen, bank managers and so many others are buying them and putting up in their establishments!'  
Speech Act: Explanation  
Spatial Context: Pavement, graphs hanging, B.S.E. Building in the background  
Theme: Stock market



Image 9: Laxman R.K. 1 October 2008  
Agent: An astrologer  
Patient: common Man  
Bystander: Reader  
Speech: 'what do you mean, you will not have any? According to my reading you will have a lot of financial problems. Are you going to believe me or the finance minister?  
Speech Act: Rhetoric question  
Spatial Context: Public telephone booth, a burning bus in an open space  
Theme: Social violence



Image 10: Laxman R.K. 1 October 2008  
Agent: Contractor  
Patient: Civil Engineer  
Bystander: Common Man  
Speech: 'Tell that chap to add the word 'Go' in the beginning of the sentence. It is to caution the road traffic.'  
Speech Act: Cautioning/  
Spatial Context: Road construction site, broken drainage, dug-road, sign board  
Theme: Sluggishness of PWD work

**Patterns in You Said It cartoons:**

Based on the analysis, one can observe a specific pattern in these cartoons. The table below (Figure 01) clearly shows that the 'Common Man' is never in the agentive role. He is either a patient or a bystander. The placing of the 'common man' in these roles adds significance to the cartoon. However, the humour that arises from the situation is only felt by an external bystander that is 'reader' as the Common Man does not laugh.

SYNTAGMATIC RELATION			
→			
P A R A D I G M A T I C R E L A T I O N	Agent	Patient	Bystander
	Prisoner	Another Prisoner	Common Man
	Politician	Common Man	Servant
	Govt. officer (Babu)	A citizen	Common Man
	Police constable/officer	Police Officer	Common Man
	Astrologer	Common Man	-
	Fellow citizen	Common Man	-
	Wife	Common Man	-
	Beggar	Another Beggar	Common Man
	An artist	Common Man	Common Man
Contractor	Civil Engineer	Common Man	

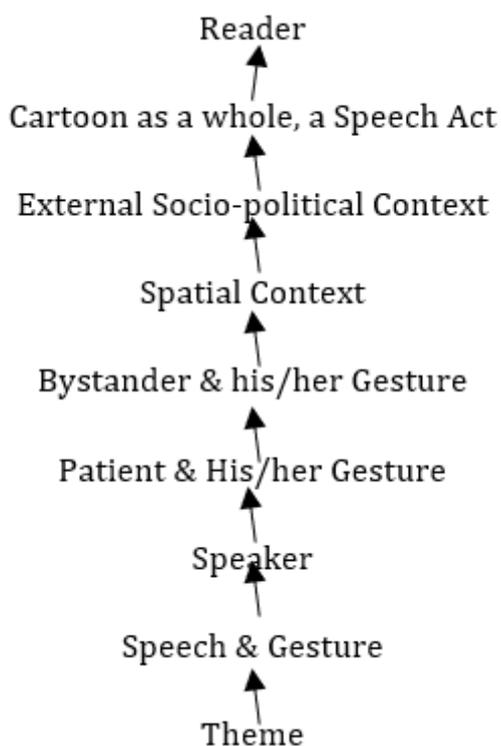
Figure 01

**Speech:**

The speech in these cartoon gets its significance only and only because of the context. This context is provided by the objects in the cartoon which are 'speaker', 'patient' 'bystander', spatial background and external context. Who articulates the utterance plays a vital role in determining the source of humour and irony. For example, in Token 08, a beggar comments on the economy. How many of us expect a beggar to seriously discuss the economy of a country with a fellow beggar? We enjoy the irony in the speech in Token 10 as the contractor directs the civil engineer to correct the painter, however, the visual compels us to understand 'slow work in progress' is very apt. Since the contract fails to understand this, we have a good laugh at the situation.

**Model of contributory factors to humour and satire:**

The following diagram helps us to understand the factors that make these cartoons work as humorous and satirical discourse.



At each aspect, there is a semiotic system involved. A speaker in all the cases is not an individual but a metonym for a belief or a group. For example, the officer in the government office becomes a metonym for the blundering babudom. It is ultimately the understanding of this semiotics that contributes to the intent of the cartoon as a speech act. The pragmatic force is provided by the immediate context (spatial) and the reader's knowledge of the 'present' factual context.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, one can argue that a semio-pragmatic consideration can certainly help one understand the workings of socio-political cartoons. This paper is only an initial musing towards the formation of any concrete theory. It must be understood that to construct a theory, further studies are necessary, which will require cartoons by cartoonists of extremely different mentalities for comparative and analytical purposes.

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