

Wriggly, squiffy, lummoX, and boobs: What makes some words funny?

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Upchuck, bubby, boff, wriggly, yaps, giggle, cooch, guffaw, puffball, and jiggly: the top 10 funniest words in the English language, according to a new study by University of Alberta psychology experts.

The researchers determined that there are two main kinds of predictors of funniness in words: those related to the form of the word and those related to its meaning.

"Humour is, of course, still personal," explained Chris Westbury, professor in the Department of Psychology in the Faculty of Science. "Here, we get at the elements of humour that aren't personal; things that are universally funny."

The purpose of the study was to understand just what it is about certain words that makes them funny. Westbury and his collaborator Geoff Hollis, from the Department of Computing Science, began their work based on a study from the University of Warwick, which had participants rate the humorousness of nearly 5,000 English words. Westbury and Hollis modeled these ratings statistically. "Our model was good at predicting which words participants would judge as funny, and to what extent," explained Westbury.

Predicting humour

The findings show there are two types of funniness predictors: form

predictors and semantic predictors.

Form predictors have nothing to do with the meaning of the word, but rather measure elements such as length, letter and sound probabilities, and how similar the word is to other words in sound and writing. For example, the study found that the letter k and the sound 'oo' (as in 'boot') are significantly more likely to occur in funny words than in words that are not funny

Semantic predictors were taken from a computational [model](#) of language and measure how related each word is to different emotions, as well as to six categories of funny words: sex, bodily functions, insults, swear words, partying, and animals.

"We started out by identifying these six categories," said Westbury. "It turns out that the best predictor of funniness is not distance from one of those six categories, but rather average distance from all six categories. This makes sense, because lots of words that people find funny fall into more than one [category](#), like sex and bodily functions—like boobs."

The paper, "Wriggly, squiffy, lummoX, and boobs: What makes some [words](#) funny?" was published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

More information: Chris Westbury et al, Wriggly, squiffy, lummoX, and boobs: What makes some words funny?, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/xge0000467](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000467)

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