

A Semantic Pragmatic Study of English Jokes

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Abstract

This work is a semantic pragmatic study of English jokes, which entails a multi-disciplinary (both linguistic and paralinguistic) analysis of selected English jokes. Jokes represent a very developed and witty mode of language that requires a good deal of 'domestic knowledge' as well as 'encyclopaedic knowledge', to use cognitive semantic terms. The study is an attempt to highlight the linguistic competence and the cognitive competence that underlie a good English joke. More often than not, there is more to jokes than mere humour and laughter.

This paper tries to bring together language, cognition, and humour relying heavily on studies on the kinds of humorous phenomena which philosophers and linguists have already discussed. It is mainly concerned with unfolding the meaning construction and meaning conception aspects (both the principles and techniques) involved in English jokes, which could, at least partially, account for creativity, sense of humour, and wit within a cognitive semantic and pragmatic framework.

It is hypothesized here that jokes represented by the data collected in this study are reflective of many of the mental abilities (linguistic and otherwise) unique to the human mind with respect to meaning construction and meaning conception. This is tantamount to saying that a good deal of semantic and pragmatic concepts contribute to the construction of an English joke. It is also hypothesized that jokes are, for the most part, based on breaking and/or manipulating the linguistic rules and/or the cognitive semantic-pragmatic principles in a broad sense.

Authors tend to either eschew theoretical aims altogether, e.g. Alexander (1997), or present a grand theory, usually stating it in a few sentences of ordinary language, e.g. Latta (1999). In contrast, we shall proceed by examining small classes of jokes and attempting to find generalisations using technical terms that pertain to the fields that are brought together. The conclusions are summarised as preliminary empirical results, not as general predictive statements. To be more exact, we shall provide a description of particular subclasses of humorous phenomena; illustrate how various classes of jokes can be analysed relatively formally, focusing particularly on the linguistic mechanisms involved; and offer some tentative suggestions about the main information factors in simple jokes.

1. Introduction

The use of humour is a complex and intriguing aspect of human behaviour. Nash (1985, p. 1) goes as far as to claim that 'humour is a specifying characteristic of humanity'. Humour is present throughout social conventions and cultural artefacts, and the use of humour is highly valued in interactions between people. Despite this apparent importance, there is currently no major theory of humour, in the sense of something which explains what is funny, why it is funny, how it is funny, when it is funny, and to whom it is funny (see Raskin, 1998, p. 3). This statement might seem to conflict with the literature on humour, where there are many proposals for dealing with humour, often claiming to be theories, e.g. Berger (1993/1998), Veatch (1998), Latta (1999), and Ritchie (2004). However, most of these works rarely define their basic terms formally, and are insufficiently developed to make precise falsifiable predictions. They are at best interesting informal discussions, but are not formal theories or models.

Arguably, the most rigorous and precise work on humour has taken place within psychology, where there are many experimental results on topics such as the psychology of humour (see, e.g., Goldstein & McGhee, 1972) and the measurement of types of sense of humour (see, e.g., Ruch, 1996). However, such works certainly do not directly illuminate the area of interest here: The exact (cognitive) semantic and pragmatic nature of texts which are deemed humorous.

In this paper, we shall be rather speculative, suggesting some broad but tentative ideas about what might constitute the semantic and pragmatic components of jokes. Our concerns will still be purely structural as we shall consider the question of what causes humour in general, or why jokes are funny. Hopefully, we shall make a contribution to finding the nature of those things that are considered humorous. We shall narrow the task down even further by restricting our attention to humour conveyed in language, i.e. verbally expressed humour, and also by considering only jokes, rather than more general types of humour.

The data have been taken from various sources: Joke books, the internet web pages of jokes, examples cited in academic works on jokes, etc. A total of 100 jokes were scrutinized, from which representative examples of the classes and subclasses offered have been selected.

2. Jokes Defined

Ritchie (2004, p. 15) defines a joke as 'a relatively short text which, for a given cultural group, is recognizable as having, as its primary purpose, the production of an amused reaction in its reader/hearer, and which is typically repeatable in wide range of contexts'.

This definition focuses on the stimulus-side of humour; it states that the essential factors in humour are intrinsic to the stimulus, rather than the audience's reaction to the stimulus.

Another view conceives of jokes in terms of incongruity. Schopenhauer (1883, p. 76), for instance, states that laughter in jokes is simply the result of the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which are thought to be in some relation with it, and laughter itself is merely the expression of this incongruity.

So often a joke consists of an initial portion where there are two possible interpretations that can be associated with that text. However, one of these possible interpretations is more obvious and is the one naturally perceived by the hearer, with the other meaning passing unnoticed initially. The final portion of the joke draws this other interpretation to the hearer's notice, suddenly and in a potentially surprising manner (for more details, see Giora, 1988, 1991).

3. Elements of Joke

Ritchie (2004, pp. 70-1) believes that the central idea of the general theory of Attardo and Raskin (1991) about verbal humour is that a joke depends on contributions from six different knowledge resources:

- Script Opposition: A text must be interpretable as two 'opposing' scripts.
- Logical Mechanism: This 'accounts for the way in which the two senses (scripts) in the joke are brought together' (Ruch, Attardo, & Raskin, 1993, p. 125). A joke may have one or more associated logical mechanisms.
- Situation: The situation of a joke is the setting, in terms of characters, objects, location, etc. described in the text.
- Target: The target of a joke is what might be known informally as the 'butt'; that is, the person, group, or entity which is being ridiculed, attacked, or presented in a negative way. This is optional, as some jokes do not have targets.
- Narrative Strategy: This is a broad classification of the linguistic structure or style for presenting the joke.
- Language: This refers to the actual linguistic units (word, phrases, etc.) used in the text.

Attardo (2001, p. 73) characterises the example below as having the following parameter values:

- (1) A: How many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb?
 B: Five. One to hold the light bulb and four to turn the table he's standing on.

Script Opposition: smart/dumb

Logical Mechanism: figure-ground reversal

Situation: light-bulb changing

Target: Poles

Narrative Strategy: riddle or 'question and answer'

Language: 'How'.

Finally, two parts are usually identified in a joke: (1) The set-up, which is the initial part of a joke that paves the ground for the punchline, and (2) the punchline, which is the final part of a joke and so often creates the humorous effect (cf. Norrick, 2001, p. 258; Ritchie, 2004, p. 59).

4. Types of Joke

It is necessary to make a distinction between jokes that embody humour because of some linguistic factor(s) and jokes that embody humour because of propositional factor(s). Not far from this, Attardo (2001, p. 23) makes a

distinction between ‘verbal’ jokes which are wholly dependent on the language used, and is regarded as not translatable into another language and ‘referential’ jokes whereby the amusing substance is in what the joke says, e.g. the events described, the characters, the situations, rather than the details of the language used. The following are examples of the two types (Metcalf, 1994, p. 79):

- (2) A: What do you get if you cross a sheep with a kangaroo?
B: A woolly jumper. (Verbal/Pun)
- (3) A: What’s black and dangerous and sits in a tree?
B: A crow with a machine gun. (Referential/Riddle)

Nonetheless, our exploration of jokes in later sections does not accept this distinction as an axiom. In fact, a semantic pragmatic analysis of jokes requires grouping certain traditionally ‘verbal’ jokes along with certain ‘referential’ ones. We shall provide examples of jokes involving misinterpretation caused by linguistic ambiguity. This is because such misinterpretations appear to constitute a major class of joke, regardless of whether the confusion is based on linguistic factors or not.

5. (Cognitive) Semantic Elements in Jokes

5.1 Background Information

It is uncontroversial to observe that understanding a particular joke may require not just knowledge of the language used to convey the joke, but also other types of knowledge, e.g. factual, cultural, social, etc. This is called ‘encyclopaediac knowledge’ in cognitive semantics (see, e.g., Evans & Green, 2006, p. 288; Saeed, 1997, p. 300). In this respect, a joke is not different from other forms of text; understanding a text depends on familiarity with the relevant vocabulary and grammatical forms, and complete apprehension of the meaning may be dependent upon specialised knowledge. There is no evidence to suggest that jokes have a special requirement beyond that of non-humorous texts, in this respect. What causes a text to be a joke will usually depend on the meaning(s) of that text, and it is the comprehension of these meanings that in turn requires specific linguistic and encyclopaediac knowledge. This applies to both linguistic and propositional jokes explained earlier.

In understanding non-humorous language, an audience may understand a text to a varying degree, depending upon the available background knowledge. Similarly, the appreciation of a joke may depend on the extent of relevant knowledge.

Philosophers and linguists, e.g. Russell (1905), Levinson (1983), and van der Sandt (1988), have drawn attention to a particular kind of required background information, namely presupposition. Roughly speaking, a sentence (S) presupposes some proposition (P) if (P) would have to be true for S to make sense. A classic example is the sentence ‘The king of France is bald’ which is meaningful if there is indeed a king of France (in whatever context the sentence is uttered) of whom baldness could be asserted, whether accurately or not. In a context where there is no such entity, the sentence is hard to categorise as either true or false (also see Attardo 2001, pp. 50-3; Raskin 1985, pp. 69-70).

When a piece of text presupposes some proposition (potential fact), then there are various ways that the hearer of the text may react. If the hearer believes the proposition to be untrue, then the text may be deemed incomprehensible; if the proposition is believed to be true, the text may be regarded as comprehensible even though the hearer may dispute the truth of the text itself; in the absence of information one way or another about the truth of the presupposed information, that presupposition may be accepted as true, since the speaker appears to be assuming it. For example, 'My brother works in France' may lead a hearer to accept, in the absence of contrary evidence, that the speaker has a brother, a fact presupposed by the phrase 'my brother'. This latter case – acceptance of presupposed material in the absence of conflicting knowledge – is known as 'accommodation' (Ritchie, 2004, p. 39). In the following sections, we shall see that understanding jokes involves some special type of accommodation (see example 5 below).

5.2 Polysemy

Sameness of meaning seems to be an indispensable strategy in constructing so many jokes in English. The same word could sometimes be said to have a set of different meanings, i.e. polysemous. The following joke is based on such a phenomenon (for a detailed account of the distinction between 'polysemy' and 'homonymy', see Palmer, 1976, pp. 65-71):

- (4) Diner: Do you serve crabs?
Waiter: We serve anyone, sir.

This joke is entirely based on manipulation of meaning on the part of the waiter who makes use of the polysemous nature of the verb 'serve'. Here the diner uses the verb in the sense of 'providing food or drinks', as in saying 'Do they serve meals in the bar?' (see Walter, 2008, 'serve'). However, the waiter deliberately takes the same verb in the sense of 'dealing with customers in hotels, shops, restaurants, by taking their order, showing or selling them goods, etc.', as in 'Are you being served, madam?' (loc. cit.). The humorous effect results from the discrepancy between the meaning of the verb in the set-up, i.e. the diner's question, and the meaning of the verb in the punchline, i.e. the waiter's reply. More importantly, the waiter forces the hearer or reader to associate the second meaning with the verb 'serve', which is odd with the non-personal object 'crab'. From a cognitive perspective, a case of a shift from one mental space built up by the verb 'serve' to another mental space built by the same verb is clear here (cf. Radden & Dirven, 2007, p. 30).

- (5) A: What do you call a person who puts you in touch with the spirit world?
B: A bartender.

In (5), the first participant (A) uses the word 'spirit' in the sense of the abstract aspects of man as opposed to his body. However, the second participant (B) used the same word in the sense of 'alcoholic drink' and the humorous effect results from the difference between the two senses. If both participants used either of the two senses, there would be no humour whatsoever. In other words, had the first participants used the word in the sense of 'alcoholic drink', the

response on the part of the second participant would not have been humorous in any sense. The same would have held true if the second participant had taken the word in the sense of 'characteristics of man that are separate from the body', i.e. the same sense that the first participant utilizes, responded differently. Example (6) involves the same strategy as it makes use of two of the senses of the verb 'catch', namely that of 'travelling', as used by (A) and that of 'stopping from escaping', as used by (B).

- (6) A: Do you have a mousetrap, please?
 B: Certainly, madam.
 A: And could you be quick? I have a bus to catch.
 B: I'm sorry, madam, we don't make traps that big.

5.3 Pun, Homonymy, and Profiling

Cornwell and Hobbs (1991, pp. 205-6) discuss the importance of social interaction in the making of puns (the literal term for sameness of shape) and homonyms, and draw a distinction between an initiator pun and a responder pun. In an initiator pun, the speaker uses a sound, or closely related sounds, and contrives to shift the listener from one meaning to another. In a responder pun, the listener gives a sound a meaning different from that being used by the initiator and does so in such a way as to cause the initiator to notice the second meaning, too. Examples of initiator puns abound, as they are the conventional form where the joke-teller is in charge and the joke-audience merely listens (see example 15). Responder puns are exemplified by the following dialogue:

- (7) A: I feel like a cup of tea.
 B: You don't look like one!

Here, it is the listener who profiles the second meaning of the homonymous word 'like', the meaning which, judging by the context, the speaker excluded. Cognitive semantically speaking, an element can be made prominent or salient in diverse ways, one of which is through profiling. The profile of an expression is its referent within the conceptualisation it evokes. Every expression profiles some structure. For instance, the concept of 'eye' provides a base or scope for further concepts profiled by the expressions 'iris', 'pupil', or 'cornea'. The two homonymous verbs in (7) differ semantically because of profiling two different things, 'a wish for something' and 'similarity', respectively. The humorous effect results from profiling the second sense which does not go with context of the speech event (for more information on 'profile', see Evans, 2007, p.77; Ferrando, 1998, p. 70).

5.4 Modification and Semantic Roles in Jokes

There are two separate questions that could be asked about the linguistic characteristics of a joke: (1) 'What is the end result of the text, in terms of setting up relationships between entities such as words, meanings, etc?' and (2) 'What linguistic devices are used to arrive at this effect?'. Let us consider the following examples:

- (8) A: Would you like to buy a pocket calculator?
 B: No thanks. I know how many pockets I have.

The noun phrase ‘a pocket calculator’ in (8) exemplifies a noun premodifying another noun. Different semantic relations can be established between the two nouns. Here the first participant (A) uses ‘pocket’ to describe the size of the calculator; it is one that you can carry in your pocket. The second participant (B), however, assigns ‘pocket’ a different semantic role, namely describing what the device calculates. In other words, the relation of calculator-to-pocket is that of a verb-to-object one. The humorous effect results from the difference in the semantic role assigned to the same premodifying element. Moreover, the second participant assigns to the modifier a semantic role that cannot fit the context.

(9) A lady went into a clothing store and asked ‘May I try on that dress in the window?’ ‘Well,’ replied the sales clerk doubtfully, ‘don’t you think it would be better to use the dressing room?’

It could be argued that what makes (9) a joke is the unexpected presentation of a hitherto hidden (and slightly risqué) interpretation of the earlier portion of the text. There are numerous jokes which rely for their effect on syntactic-semantic ambiguity. Here the point that gives rise to humour relates to the item which the prepositional phrase ‘in the window’ postmodifies; is it ‘dress’ or ‘try’? The lady is talking about the dress in the window, but the clerk forces the listener to think of ‘in the window’ as the place for trying on the dress, i.e. as a postmodifier of ‘try’.

(10) Postmaster: Here’s your five-cent stamp.

Shopper (with arms full of bundles): Do I have to stick it on myself?

Postmaster: Nope. On the envelope.

In (10), the particle ‘on’ is related to the verb ‘stick’ as a verb-particle construct (similar to stamp out, brush off, etc.), and since the object is ‘it’ rather than ‘the stamp’, it must appear before the particle ‘on’ because ‘Do I have to stick on it myself?’ would not be an acceptable way of saying this. The shopper uses the possessive pronoun ‘myself’ to emphasise ‘I’ as the doer of the action devoted by the verb ‘stick’, but the postmaster offers the pronoun as the object of the sentence, i.e. the person on whom the stamp is to be stuck, which is funny. If this surface ordering did not occur (e.g. Do I have to stick on the stamp myself?) the ambiguity, and hence the opportunity for the joke, would not arise.

(11) A: Waiter, call me a taxi, please.

B: Okay, sir. You are a taxi.

In (11), the first participant (A) uses the verb ‘call’ as a ditransitive verb. Consequently, the personal pronoun ‘me’ is the indirect object with semantic role of a ‘beneficiary’. The noun phrase ‘a taxi’ is the direct object with the semantic role of an affected entity. In other words, the sentence is a (S)VOC type with the subject (you) ellipted. The humorous effect results from the second participant’s deliberate manipulation of the sentence pattern of ‘call me a taxi’. The second participant (B) takes the verb ‘call’ for a complex transitive verb. Consequently, ‘me’ functions a direct object with the semantic role of an affected person, and ‘a taxi’ functions an object complement with the semantic role of an attribute of the direct object, i.e. he establishes an intensive relationship between ‘me’ and ‘a taxi’, which makes the sentence a (S)VOC type

of sentence. Therefore, the joke is basically the outcome of assigning different semantic as well as syntactic roles to certain elements in the sentence.

(12) A: What makes men mean?

B: The letter a.

The same thing occurs in (12), where the first participant (A) uses 'men' as an affected participant and 'mean' as an attribute of that participant, i.e. as an object complement that is an adjective describing a characteristic inherent in 'men'. However, the second participant (B) takes the question for the thing(s) that would change the word 'men' into the word 'mean', whereby both men and mean keep the same syntactic function, i.e. direct object and object complement, respectively, but with the word 'mean' functioning as an object complement that is a noun, not an adjective, thus involving no description of 'men' whatsoever.

6. Pragmatic Elements in Jokes

6.1 Participants in Joke

Jokes are typically expressed interactively, i.e. there is a speaker and a listener in a joke, with the speaker acting as the joke-teller and the listener as the joke-audience who can also act as a second speaker (respondent). So in order to describe how a joke is constructed and conceived, we need to be able to represent or classify the pragmatic status of an utterance (e.g. in terms of the illocutionary force), so as to state the joke interpreting experience on the part of the audience (or victim) of jokes. The knowledge and the shared knowledge of the two participants are of great help in this case.

6.2 Speech Acts in Jokes

It is worth mentioning that in analysing jokes some level of linguistic description beyond the sentence will be needed, where speaker's goals, intentions, beliefs, etc. are represented. This can be efficiently done in terms of the speech act theory. For example, consider the following joke:

(13) Diner: Waiter! There's a fly in my soup!

Waiter: Please don't shout so loudly – everyone will want one.

The waiter in (13) can be seen as misinterpreting the diner's utterance as a boast or cry of pleasure rather than as a complaint, forcing the audience to see this alternative interpretation. Thus, the joke can be classed as a forced reinterpretation joke. It could be said that there is a mismatch between the illocutionary act, i.e. the intended effect of the utterance, and the perlocutionary act, i.e. actual effect it brings about (Yule, 1996, pp. 48-9). In this example, the humour is based on the waiter's presumably deliberate misconception about the nature of the speech act involved – Is the diner complaining or expressing pleasure?

So often a joke involves a mismatch between two of the components of a speech act, i.e. locution, illocution, and perlocution. Let us consider the following example:

(14) 'Is the doctor at home?' the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. 'No', the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply, 'come right in.'

Example (14) does not involve linguistic ambiguity or two 'meanings' in the normal sense of the term; rather, it involves two ways that one of the characters in the joke (the patient) and the audience could make sense of the other character's (the doctor's wife) statement. The humorous effect can be

explained in terms of a discrepancy between the illocutionary act of the query ‘Is the doctor at home?’ on the part of the patient and its perlocutionary effect on the doctor’s wife. The difference in the two ‘meanings’ of the query occurs at some higher level of the character’s plan, and is not directly part of the illocutionary force of the utterance.

6.3 Inference in Jokes

6.3.1 Forced Reinterpretation

There are some jokes where the set-up has two different interpretations, but one is much more obvious to the audience, who does not become aware of the other meaning. The meaning of the punchline conflicts with this obvious interpretation, but is compatible with, and even evokes, the other, hitherto hidden, meaning. The meaning of the punchline can be integrated with the hidden meaning to form a consistent interpretation which differs from the first obvious interpretation. The punchline creates incongruity, and then a cognitive rule must be found which enables the content of the punchline to follow naturally from the information established in the set-up.

According to Ritchie (2004, p. 61), there are various entities involved in the typical forced reinterpretation account. These include: (1) The first (more obvious) interpretation of the set-up text (In1), (2) the second (hidden) interpretation of the set-up text (In2), (3) the meaning of the punchline (MP), (4) an interpretation formed by integrating the meaning of the punchline with the second interpretation of the set-up text (In3). There are also various relationships and properties that are of interest, based on various observations made informally in the literature:

- Obviousness: In1 is more likely than In2 to be noticed by the reader.
- Conflict: MP does not make sense with In1.
- Compatibility: MP makes sense with In2.
- Contrast: There is some significant difference between In1 and In2 (or possibly In1 and In3).
- Inappropriateness: In3 is inherently odd, eccentric or preposterous, or is taboo, in that it deals with matters not conventionally talked of openly, such as sexual matters or forbidden political sentiments. These differ in terms of which norms are being flouted: Those of everyday logic –leading to absurdity – or those of socially acceptable discourse – leading to taboo effects. It could be argued that the hidden meaning is absurd in (9). It additionally has some significant contrast with the more obvious meaning. The following is a representative example:

(15) A man in his fifties goes to the doctor and says, ‘Doctor, I’ve got a problem. You see, when I was younger I always used to get erections that I couldn’t bend with my hand. Now though, I can bend every erection I get. What I want to know is, am I getting stronger or weaker?’

In the example above, the In1 is that there is a patient who has a problem and wants to see the doctor. The patient is supposed to be seeking for some medication. The In2 is that the patient wants to see the doctor not for a health problem he has, but for information. Thus, the punchline makes sense with In2 and does not make sense with In1. So the joke exemplifies both conflict and contrast. Moreover, the In3, which is the association of the punchline with the second interpretation of the set-up text, is a taboo, which makes the joke a good example of inappropriateness as well.

From a cognitive semantic point of view, the joke exemplifies a shift from one a mental space, namely that of doctor-patient, where the patient acts as a person with an illness, to another, namely that of doctor-patient, where the patient acts as an inquirer, hence the humour.

6.3.2 Delayed Interpretation

There are also non-forced interpretation jokes where inferring an incongruity seems to be the central joke-creating device, as in the following example:

(16) Sitting on the side of the highway waiting to catch speeding drivers, a State Police Officer sees a car puttering along at 22mph. He thinks to himself, 'This driver is just as dangerous as a speeder!' So he turns on his lights and pulls the driver over. Approaching the car, he notices that there are five old ladies – two in the front seat and three in the back. The driver, obviously confused, says to him, 'Officer, I don't understand, I was doing exactly the speed limit! What seems to be the problem?' 'Ma'am,' the officer replies, 'You weren't speeding, but you should know that driving slower than the speed limit can also be a danger to other drivers.' 'Slower than the speed limit? No sir, I was doing the speed limit exactly twenty-two miles an hour!' the old woman says a bit proudly. The State Police Officer, trying to contain a chuckle, explains to her that '22' is the route number, not the speed limit. A bit embarrassed, the woman grins and thanks the officer for pointing out her error. 'Oh, thank you,' she says, 'It's a good thing you didn't see us on Route 119.' (Adapted from www.jokes2000.com)

Example (16) makes use of a common device in narrative jokes, misinterpretation by a character. However, the humorous effect is not the result of the misinterpretation of information presented in the set-up, and revelation of this misinterpretation in the punchline. The punchline supplies further information which is not in itself humorous or incongruous, but which permits the inference of an amusing consequence of the already established misinterpretation. That inference could be made once the misconception has been stated: Driving at a speed numerically equal to the route number, which is bound to result in some very high speeds, particularly in countries such as the US where speeds are stated in miles per hour. The fact that the driver's behaviour is based on a misconception is not central to the working of the joke. It is the general rule adopted by this character, together with the punchline statement, which allows the inference. Thus we have a further (delayed) presentation of information, in which the punchline stimulates or draws attention to a particular inference from the set-up information.

6.4 The Cooperative Principle and Jokes

Some jokes seem to contain information which is peripheral to the joke. Ritchie (2004, p. 88) uses the term 'extraneous' to refer to information which is not relevant to the logical or presentational structure of the joke. From a pragmatic perspective, however, this can be explained in terms of non-observance of the one or more of the conversational maxims of Grice (1975). Consider the following example:

(17) A man walks into the front door of a bar. He is obviously drunk and staggers up to the bar, seats himself on a stool and, with a belch, asks the bartender for a drink. The bartender politely informs the man that it appears he has already had plenty to drink and that he could not be served additional

liquor. The bartender offers to call a cab for him. The drunk is briefly surprised, then softly scoffs, grumbles, climbs down from the bar stool and staggers out the front door. A few minutes later, the same drunk stumbles in the side door of the bar. He wobbles up to the bar and hollers for a drink. The bartender comes over and – still politely if not more firmly – refuses service to the man and again offers to call a cab. The drunk looks at the bartender for a moment angrily, curses, and shows himself out the side door, all the while grumbling and shaking his head. A few minutes later, the same drunk bursts in through the back door of the bar. He plops himself up on a bar stool, gathers his wits, and belligerently orders a drink. The bartender comes over and emphatically reminds the man that he is drunk and will be served no drinks. He then tells him that he can either call a cab or the police immediately. The surprised drunk looks at the bartender and in hopeless anguish cries, ‘Man! How many bars do you work at?’ (from www.the-jokes.com)

This example is more like a story than a joke as it has a considerable amount of extraneous material, and abounds with descriptive details that are peripheral to the intended humorous meaning, which is the drunk man’s mistaking the same bar for a different one. Pragmatically speaking, the joke could exemplify a flouting or an infringement of both the quantity and quality maxims. In a sense, the composer of the joke could be flouting the two maxims by providing all these extraneous materials to add a sense of suspension, which is typical of narratives, to the joke. But s/he could be infringing the two maxims, i.e. unintentionally not observing the two maxims because of his/her imperfect linguistic knowledge, especially about repetition being a stylistic defect. Better examples of flouting the conversational maxims could be the following:

(18) A: Excuse me, how long will the next bus be?
B: About 12 metres.

(19) A: Guess what was on the TV last night?
B: A vase of flowers.

In (18), the humorous effect of the joke is based on flouting the relation maxim as B’s contribution does not relate to the purpose and context of the conversation in which the utterance occurs. The information ‘about 12 metres’ answers a question about the measurement of the bus from end to end or along its longest side, which is not relevant to the discourse topic. Most importantly, both participants know that the maxim is not observed and this is what makes the answers amusing and humorous. The same applies to (19), where by ‘TV’ the inquirer means ‘TV programme’, but B answers in a way that relates to a question where ‘TV’ means ‘the TV set’.

6.5 Reference: Riddle Jokes

A riddle can be viewed as a discourse class involving a two-part structure: An initial text (the precedent) in which the speaker supplies a series of clues (generally insufficient or misleading) from which a second text (the sequent) is to be surmised by the listener, i.e. the participant who is to solve the riddle. The precedent is often, but not necessarily, expressed in the form of a question.

Together, the precedent and the sequent make up the riddling text as a whole. This text establishes a link between two scripts or frames of reference. The speaker, through the precedent, deliberately plays up one script and then, through the sequent, awakens the listener's awareness of a second script (see Dienhart 1999, p. 104).

In the case of a riddle, a successful telling of the joke requires the audience merely to indicate ignorance, by saying 'No' or 'I don't know', or something similar. One possible reason for using a question–answer structure might be the options for arranging the information within the text. The question–answer structure provides a very natural way for a particular piece of information to be presented last as an answer. Let us consider the following example:

(20) A: What's black and dangerous and sits in a tree?

B: I don't know.

A: A crow with a machine gun.

Here the speaker is asking the listener to name the referent of something that is 'black and dangerous and sits in a tree'. As the listener fails to do so, the speaker himself names one. The humorous effect is caused by the fact that the named referent is an impossible one. A parallel semantic analysis is also possible in terms of truth-condition, as the named referent can under no circumstances be the truly the referent of something that is 'black and dangerous and sits in a tree'.

6.6 Prediction and Contrast

Prediction can happen in various types of jokes. Usually a specific word seems to be predicted based on the semantic and/or pragmatic context. So often a sudden deviation from expectation contributes to humour or funniness. This takes place via some kind of contrast between the predicted meaning and the actual (unexpected) meaning, as in the following example adapted from Cerf (1964, pp. 102-3):

(21) A distinguished scientist was observing the heavens through the huge telescope at the Mt. Wilson Observatory. Suddenly he announced, 'It's going to rain.' 'What makes you think so?' asked his guide. 'Because', said the astronomer, still peering through the telescope, 'so says my grandmother.'

Based on what the speaker is doing, the set-up in (21) leads to the expectation of a learned scientific reason, rather than the naïve reason given in the punchline. The humour arises from the contrast between these two. The idea of prediction discussed here concerns expectation of specific content on the basis of the content of the set-up.

(22) An American soldier, serving in World War II, had just returned from several weeks of intense action on the German front lines. He had finally been granted R&R and was on a train bound for London. The train was very crowded, so the soldier walked the length of the train, looking for an empty seat. The only unoccupied seat was directly adjacent to a well dressed middle aged lady and was being used by her little dog. The war weary soldier asked, 'Please, ma'am, may I sit in that seat?' The English woman looked down her nose at the soldier, sniffed and said, 'You Americans. You are such a rude class of people. Can't you

see my little Fifi is using that seat?' The soldier walked away, determined to find a place to rest, but after another trip down to the end of the train, found himself again facing the woman with the dog. Again he asked, 'Please, lady. May I sit there? I'm very tired.' The English woman wrinkled her nose and snorted, 'You Americans! Not only are you rude, you are also arrogant. Imagine!' The soldier didn't say anything else. He leaned over, picked up the little dog, tossed it out the window of the train and sat down in the empty seat. The woman shrieked and demanded that someone defend her and chastise the soldier. An English gentleman sitting across the aisle spoke up, 'You know, sir, you Americans do seem to have a penchant for doing the wrong thing. You eat holding the fork in the wrong hand. You drive your autos on the wrong side of the road. And now, sir, you've thrown the wrong bitch out of the window.' (from www.jokes2000.com)

In (22), the same strategy is being used; there is an American soldier throwing an English lady's dog out of the window and there is an English gentleman who interferes and rebukes the soldier. Given this situation, the Englishman is expected to be angry at the soldier for throwing the lady's cat out of the window, but the punchline provides something unexpected; the gentlemen got angry because the soldier should have thrown the lady out of the window, not her cat. In other words, the situation provides for sympathy for the lady on the part of the gentleman, but suddenly antipathy to her has been proved to be the reason behind his interference. The following are other examples of prediction and contrast.

(23) A: Why do birds fly south in winter?

B: It's too far to walk.

(24) Little Johnny saw a lovely new Rolls-Royce. He ran his new spade along the side of the car, scratching it badly. 'I told you not to do that', shouted his father, 'if you break that spade, you're not getting another one'.

7. Conclusions

Some of the most prominent conclusions that can be drawn from the analyses are:

1. When a piece of text presupposes some proposition or potential fact, then there are various ways that the hearer of the text may react. If the hearer believes the proposition to be untrue, then the text may be deemed incomprehensible. Jokes are one way of reaction to such incomprehensibility in terms of providing an improper world wherein the comprehensibility of the proposition is possible (see p. 5).
2. Sameness of meaning is an indispensable strategy in constructing a great number of jokes in English. It is this strategy that gives rise to ambiguity of various types which underlie much, if not all, of verbal humor. It is also this strategy that helps to shift from one mental space to another (see p. 7).
3. Profiling is a recurrent cognitive semantic device in jokes. So often it happens that an item has two different senses. The humorous effect results from profiling a sense which does not go with context of the speech event (see pp. 8-9).
4. Assigning different semantic roles to the same premodifying or postmodifying element at the phrasal level is an important way of being humorous (see pp. 9-10).

5. Double membership of verbs with respect to transitivity and intransitivity provides a good chance for constructing jokes. This enhances the possibility of assigning more than one syntactic pattern to a sentence, which is another important way of expressing a concept humorously or telling jokes. Additionally, many jokes are basically the outcome of assigning different semantic as well as syntactic roles to certain clause elements in the sentence or certain elements with the phrases composing the sentence (see pp. 10-11).
6. So often a considerable number of jokes in English involve a mismatch between two of the components of a speech act, i.e. locution, illocution, and perlocution. Typically, the listener deliberately offers a wrong understanding of the intended meaning of the speaker, which usually results in laughter (see p. 12).
7. There seems to be a considerable number of jokes in English that exemplify non-observance of one or more of the conversation maxims (see pp.15, 16, and 17).
8. A central cognitive issue in jokes is that it is quite common to observe that jokes often rely on some special logic or some distorted form of reasoning which is close to, or analogous with, sound reasoning, but which is sufficiently bizarre to produce humour. In some of those jokes that rely heavily on some faulty form of reasoning, what happens actually runs opposite to what is predicted (see pp. 18-20).

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الخلاصة

"دراسة دلالية تداولية للنكات الإنكليزية"

تقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلاً دلالياً وتداولياً للنكات في اللغة الإنكليزية، وهذا يستدعي الوقوف عند بعض العناصر غير اللغوية أيضاً. تمثل النكات نمطاً متطوراً وذكياً من أنماط استخدام اللغة يتطلب فهمها مزيداً مما يسمى بـ "المعرفة المحلية" و "المعرفة الموسوعية" في علم اللغة الإدراكي. تسلط الدراسة الضوء على الكفاءة اللغوية والكفاءة الإدراكية التي ترتكز عليها النكات، فالنكات تتعدى كونها قطعاً نثرية تثير الدعابة والضحك إلى صياغة لغوية قائمة على أسس معرفية معقدة.

تعنى الدراسة باستعراض عناصر صناعة المعنى وإدراكه في النكات الإنكليزية لاسيما المبادئ والتقنيات، ما يمكنه أن يسهم في تقديم تفسير أكاديمي للإبداع والدعابة وخفة الدم وسرعة البدهة ضمن إطار دلالي إدراكي وتداولي.

تفترض الدراسة الحالية أن النكات تجسد كثيراً من العمليات العقلية التي ينفرد بها الإنسان على مستوى صناعة المعنى وإدراكه. وتفترض الدراسة أيضاً أن النكات قائمة إلى حد بعيد على انتهاك بعض القواعد اللغوية والدلالية-التداولية الإدراكية أو التلاعب بتلك القواعد. فعلى سبيل المثال، الكثير من النكات قائمة على انتهاك معايير مبدأ التعاون الذي أشار إليه Grice (1975).

تصنف الدراسة النكات إلى مجاميع متعددة وفقاً للآليات الدلالية الإدراكية والتداولية التي تستند إليها في صناعة الدعابة، ثم تقدم على مدى صفحاتها وصفاً شكلياً ووظيفياً لكل مجموعة على حدة، ناهيك عن الإشارة إلى عناصر تبادل المعلومة في كل صنف من أصناف النكات. وبعد كل هذا وذلك، استنبطت بعض النتائج التي تمت صياغتها على هيئة بيانات تجريبية تمهيدية، لا بيانات تنبؤية عامة كما هو الحال في بعض الدراسات التي قام بها بعض العلماء في سعيهم لتقديم نظرية شاملة للنكات.