

Pragmatic and sociolinguistic approaches to humour in intercultural communication

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Abstract: The present paper explores how jokes depend on the social and cultural characteristics of the participants in communication. First, we shed light on the ways in which the teller of the joke influences its interpretation. In particular, we explore how the role of the subject speaker, the communicative intentions and information of the participants and their social characteristics can create a productive ambiguity of the punchline and influence the interpretation of the humorous text. In the second part of the paper we focus on the addressee of the joke. We show that, apart from the linguistic code and the general knowledge of the addressee, the teller of jokes should also take into consideration the social and cultural characteristics of the hearer in order to avoid communicative failures. All in all, from a semiotic point of view, jokes can be regarded as second-level signs, whose connotative potential can be used in different types of persuasive communication, including advertising strategies.

Key words: inferential models of communication, human agency, pragmatic and social approaches to humour, joke types, semiotic potential of jokes.

The recent surge of interest in the pragmatic, social and cultural aspects of humorous texts has been predetermined by the logical development of semiotics and linguistics, i.e., by the change of the focus of study from the structure of sign systems to the specific characteristics of their functioning in different communicative contexts. In modern sign theory attention is drawn to the dynamic interplay between text and context and to the role of human agency in message production and interpretation.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning R. Jakobson's keen observations about the duplicity of the code language model, about the overlapping of narrated and speech events, and the types of shifters. Shifters are regarded as indexical symbols which can be defined only on the basis of their referring to the message itself, to the time or to the participants of the speech event [1]. Thus, Jakobson was one of the first linguists to point out that the message cannot be fully understood without taking into account the speech event and the speaking subject.

Furthermore, D. Sperber and D. Wilson add to the code language model the inferential model of communication that emphasizes the role of pragmatic information and inferential processing of data, providing a deep insight into the mechanisms for deductive reasoning. [2] According to this model, the speaker uses an ostensive stimulus in order to attract the hearer's attention and make him recover the intended meaning by means of inferential mechanisms, taking into account the explicit message and the relevant part of his or her pragmatic information. In a sense, in this model, interlocutors are not only points of reference that could be addressed in the message but also subjects of interpretation and bearers of relevant cognitive content.

Therefore, Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory offers an adequate cognitive framework for the analysis of humour. [3] Jokes illustrate the above-mentioned inferential model perfectly. They clearly show the distance between what we say and what we mean and

the need for adequate interpretation in order to provoke laughter. In this respect, the Spanish scholar Fr. Yus conducts a thorough relevance-theoretic analysis of jokes and lays bare different joke types, pointing out that these types are not mutually exclusive and may overlap. [4] He claims that jokes can be broadly divided into those “whose humorous effects lie in the manipulation of the hearer’s inferential steps towards an explicit interpretation (explicature) or an implicit one (implicature) together with his/her access to contextual information; and, on the other hand, jokes that merely play with social or cultural information (collective representations), often of a stereotypical quality.” [5]

The present paper addresses these two basic kinds of jokes and goes one step further by exploring their dependence on the social and cultural characteristics of the participants in communication. In the following paragraphs, we analyse some empirical examples in order to shed light on the ways in which the participants can influence the interpretation of the joke. We explore consecutively how the role of the subject speaker, the communicative intentions and information of the participants and their social characteristics can create a productive ambiguity of the punchline and influence the interpretation of the humorous text. Such an analysis is in line with U. Eco’s emphasis on the importance of human agency for the functioning of sign systems. As U. Eco claims, the open character of sign systems is in fact predetermined by the creativity of their users [6]. In the second part of the paper we focus on the addressee of the joke. We show that, apart from the linguistic code and the general knowledge of the addressee, the teller of jokes should take into consideration the personal characteristics of the hearer in order to avoid communicative failures. All in all, from a semiotic point of view, jokes can be regarded as second-level signs, whose connotative potential can be used in different types of persuasive communication, including advertising strategies.

The key role of the participants of the narrated and speech events can be illustrated by the following jokes:

Two friends go for a walk in the park and see two beautiful young women sitting on a bench.

‘Oh, what a coincidence,’ exclaims one of them. ‘I can see my wife and my mistress sitting there.’

‘No, you are wrong,’ says his friend. ‘These are my wife and my mistress.’

As we can see the reference of the noun phrases in the joke depends totally on the speakers as main points of reference. The presence of two participants in this situation justifies the double reference and the unpleasant implications.

In the next joke, the speaker’s communicative intentions have a direct effect on the interpretation of one and the same propositional content as different speech acts:

A woman confesses, ‘I have never cheated on my husband.’

‘I don’t quite understand that,’ her friend says. ‘Are you boasting or complaining?’

In the jokes presented so far, the speaker influences the reference of the nominal syntagms or modifies the illocutionary force of the whole utterance. Next, we will proceed to the analysis of jokes based on social and cultural stereotypes. In some cases, the whole text of the joke can acquire additional meanings. For instance, at first glance, the following anecdote confirms the stereotype that old age is associated with loss of physical and mental abilities:

Two elderly ladies meet in a shop and one of them addresses the other saying that she remembers going to the same school with her and being her close friend but unfortunately she can’t remember her name. ‘Could you remind me your name?’, she asks. The other lady keeps silence for a while and then replies, ‘Do you need it urgently?’

Nevertheless, this joke can acquire new communicative values depending on who tells it. Being told by a young person to elderly people, it can have negative effects despite the display of ingenuity. On the other hand, if the joke is shared in a group of elderly people, it can promote solidarity among them by stressing common traits. And, last but not least, this joke can also be a type of defence tactics, a way to relieve inner pressure, and inferiority complexes. For example, a person who has difficulties memorizing proper names can save the situation by telling such a joke in embarrassing situations. A good sense of humour acts like a disarming smile.

The English are very good at laughing at themselves, at using subtle irony and commenting on their national characteristics. To illustrate this, we give some examples from the book 'How to Be an Alien', which is extremely popular in England and has been republished multiple times. Its author, G. Mikes, comments on pivotal aspects of English identity in an often subversive and ironic way:

The weather. You must never contradict anybody discussing the weather. Should it hail and snow, should hurricanes uproot the trees from the sides of the road, and should someone remark to you: 'Nice day, isn't it?' - answer without hesitation: 'Isn't it lovely?' Learn the above conversation by heart. [7]

Tea. The trouble with tea is that originally it was quite a good drink. So a group of the most eminent British scientists put their heads together, and made complicated biological experiments to find a way of spoiling it. To the eternal glory of British science their labour bore fruit. They suggested that if you do not drink it clear, or with lemon or rum and sugar, but pour a few drops of cold milk into it, and no sugar at all, the desired object is achieved. Once this refreshing, aromatic, oriental beverage was successfully transformed into colourless and tasteless gargling-water, it suddenly became the national drink of Great Britain and Ireland (Mikes, 1964: 26)

Sex. Continental people have sex life; the English have hot-water bottles.. [8]

As we see, humorous attitude can assault and neutralize clichés by playing with them. There is no limit to human interpretation and imagination. A brilliant example of challenging stereotypes are Monty Python's Hell's Grannies, where the roles are switched: the old ladies are arrogant and aggressive members of a subculture, they ride bikes and bully people. It is a refreshing change that is used also in Betty White's "Off Their Rockers" programme with hidden camera in which elderly people play pranks on young people, presenting themselves as sexually uninhibited, fun-loving and living on the edge. A funny illustration of this is the behaviour of an old lady who asks a beautiful young girl to use her picture on Tinder commenting: "Your face and my body can make miracles on Tinder". In this case the stereotypes regarding old age: loss of physical and mental abilities, of attractiveness, sexual interest and general satisfaction with life are put to question.

It is evident that the text of the jokes overlaps with the communicative context, that is, its successful interpretation depends to a great extent on the interlocutors' information, intentions, social and cultural characteristics. A joke is a text within a text and a joke teller must take into consideration the hearer's communicative competence and cognitive environment. After outlining the role of the subject in the functioning of the basic elements of the message, in the next paragraphs we will switch the attention from the teller of a joke to its addressee, of whose cognitive universe the teller should be well aware in order to avoid communicative failures.

We start by analyzing the processing of the explicit message in the first type of jokes, outlined by Yus [9] – the inferentially completed jokes. In punning, for example, wordplays

with linguistic codes play a crucial role and can turn out to be difficult for foreigners. The famous pun *'It is hard to explain puns to kleptomaniacs because they always take things literally'* shows clearly that humorous effects in puns are closely connected with the linguistic code and consist in wordplays with literal and metaphorical meanings.

Likewise, foreigners must have a good command of English in order to understand the full ambiguity of the paronyms in the punchline of the following joke:

A panda walks into a bar and orders a sandwich. After eating it, the panda pulls out a gun and shoots the waiter dead. Then he stands up to go. The bartender shouts, 'Hey! Where are you going? You just shot my waiter and you didn't pay for your sandwich.'
The panda yells back at the bartender, 'Hey man, I am a PANDA! Look it up!'
*The bartender opens the dictionary and sees the following definition for panda: 'A tree dwelling marsupial of Asian origin, characterized by distinct black and white coloring. **Eats, shoots and leaves.**'*

In other jokes the inferential steps taken by the hearer can be predetermined by his or her general knowledge and culture. A good example of this is the following 'philosophical' joke:

Plato and the platypus walk into a bar. The bar tender looks at Plato disparagingly. 'What could I have possibly done,' tries to justify himself Plato. 'It was dark in the cave and I couldn't see her very well.'

The most accessible implication of this joke is connected with the lack of beauty of the platypus. But on a deeper level, the usage of the proper name Plato and the allusion to the cave refer to the allegory of the Cave and the Shadows presented by the Greek philosopher in 'The Republic'. The allegory depicts a group of people who live chained to the wall of a cave and observe shadows projected on the wall from objects passing in front of a fire. The shadows are mere reflections, phantoms, false reality. Plato's idea is that the knowledge received through the senses is unreliable. Only philosophy can reveal the true nature of being. The other ostensive stimulus in the text of the joke is the Platypus. It is the 'eye-catcher' that triggers a whole series of inferences connected with Umberto Eco's book "Kant and the Platypus: essays in Language and Cognition", which studies the categorical knowledge, the ways in which we perceive, conceive and categorize the world. In particular, it lays bare the difficulties that scholars have had for eighty years in trying to classify the platypus, which has characteristics of a mammal, of a reptile and of a bird. Consequently, the interpretation of this philosophical joke consists of three possible layers, which depend on the hearer's general knowledge and shared information, on the presence of definite semantic frames, which predetermine the full understanding and intellectual pleasure received from the joke. It is more than evident that in such jokes the teller should carefully choose the addressee and in this case the knowledge of a foreign language is not sufficient.

Furthermore, the second type of jokes outlined by Yus [10], based on ethnic, sexist, regional and other social and cultural stereotypes, can have indexical use and point at the participants of the communicative situation. As a result, instead of entertaining the hearer, such jokes can offend him or her, regardless of the fact that joke telling is a non-serious communication. For example:

'Heaven is where the police are English, the cooks are French, the mechanics are German, the lovers are Italians, and everything is organized by the Swiss.'
Hell is where the police are German, the cooks are English, the mechanics are French, the lovers are Swiss, and everything is organized by the Italians.'

In order to avoid counterproductive effects, the teller of this joke had better be sure that the addressees are not likely to relate to joke protagonists. And again, depending on the social and cultural characteristics of the speaker, the ethnic joke can be easily reinterpreted as a

manifestation of in-group solidarity or defence strategy. Finally, it should not be forgotten that the different types of jokes do not exclude each other and often overlap.

For example, in a famous ad video promoting English language courses for Germans, a German coast-guard hears the following message: “*We are sinking, we are sinking*” to which he replies “*What are you thinking about?*”. The humorous effect connected with the wrong perception and pronunciation of the English phoneme [θ] by Germans is resourcefully used as a cogent argument to promote the need for studying English properly. In a playful way, it persuades people that a good command of English is essential and could even save one’s life. The title of the ad “Language for Life” suggests the same idea in a concise form. By broadening the perspective, the aforementioned phoneme can be regarded as a linguistic marker, a linguistic password, a shibboleth, which can identify a foreigner as a member of the English speaking community and facilitate his or her integration into it. At the same time we see that the semiotic potential of humour, the key role of interpretation in its functioning, and the interaction with the context makes humorous utterances extremely suitable for advertising.

To sum up, the analysis of the jokes in the paper has confirmed the crucial role of human agency in the functioning of jokes and has shown that the change of the speaker in some jokes can modify the perlocutionary effects and add relevant communicative nuances. Joke interpretation is socially and culturally shaped by the interlocutors’ cognitive universes. Lack of adequate reasoning and assessment of the addressee of a joke can lead to cultural misunderstandings and communicative failures. A poignant example of such misunderstanding has been the experience of an Australian presenter who chose the wrong joke to tell his guest – the Dalai Lama. During the interview, the presenter tried to entertain the Dalai Lama but spectacularly failed to do so. The host told the Dalai Lama the following joke that is easy to understand for native English speakers: “*The Dalai Lama walks into a pizza shop and says ‘Make me one with everything’*”. After a short awkward silence, the journalist burst into laughter, whereas the Dalai Lama did not understand the joke and still waited for the punchline. Even the interpreter could not save the situation.

The interpretation of this joke is based on two key factors: the syntactic structure of this English utterance and knowledge of the Buddhist tenet. The syntactic elements “one” and “me” can have a double meaning and each meaning is connected with a different frame: ordering one pizza “with everything” or achieving harmony and “becoming one” with the world and everything through meditation. The humorous effect is based on the ambiguous coexistence of both interpretations, made possible by the English language. It turns out that often humorous effects depend on the interplay between the coded message, the general knowledge and the correct inferential processing of explicit and implicit information.

In conclusion, from a semiotic point of view, humour can be regarded as some kind of a code violation carried out by the subject of communication. As we know from Eco’s “Open Work”, the possibility of code violations enriches the expressive potential of sign systems. In the case of humour, incongruity and surprise effects stimulate the creative potential and the cognitive flexibility of the participants and reveal the infinite nature of semiosis. Human agency is crucial for joke telling. Consequently, we should not analyse jokes separately from their tellers and addressees. It really matters who tells the joke and to whom. Knowing well your addressee can make humour more successful and avoid negative consequences. From a social point of view, humour can facilitate international contacts, develop positive attitude towards each other, and contribute to mutual understanding in intercultural communication. We should not forget that humans are the only animals that laugh and thanks to this can survive better.

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Сп. „Реторика и комуникации“, брой 34, май 2018 г., <http://rhetoric.bg/>
Rhetoric and Communications E-journal, Issue 34, May 2018, <http://journal.rhetoric.bg/>
Special Issue – “Dialogues without borders: strategies of interpersonal and inter-group communication”, 29 – 30 September 2017, Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Sofia, Bulgaria