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## **Humour through the Scope of Social Theories and Pragmatic Approaches**

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**Abstract:** For many years, humour has been the subject of scientific research and it has been related to movies, television shows, literature, sociology, and others. When analysing how comic effect is achieved, humour can be complicated and multifaceted. For that reason, there is no specific theory that explains humour ideally. However, the various social theories and pragmatic approaches to humour, each of which focuses on the different aspects of humour functioning, complement each other. The article aims to present the propositions on humour and the central claims of different social theories and pragmatic approaches. Attention is focused on the butt of the ridicule, the psychoanalytic aspect of humour, and the surprise element. In addition, human agency, cultural knowledge, linguistic means and cognition, ostensive stimuli, and inferential reasoning are also outlined. Thus, the article contributes to a more profound and adequate understanding of the inventive and resourceful propositions on humour and comic discourse analysis.

**Keywords:** humour, superiority theory, relief theory, incongruity theory, conversational maxims, relevance theory.

### **Introduction**

Throughout the years, humour has been the subject of scientific research and it has been related to movies and television shows, literature, psychology, sociology, among others. Humour is considered a means of amusing people, in addition to its multiple other functions, and its research dates back to antiquity and Greek philosophers, all the way to the 21st century. Hence, there are many theoretical approaches discussed so far that can be used in the analysis of humour and comic discourse.

The article aims to analyse how comic effect is achieved based on social and linguistic premises through a critical review of the central claims of different social theories and pragmatic approaches. For that reason, humour will be presented through the scope of Superiority Theory, Relief Theory, Incongruity

Theory, Paul Grice and the Cooperative Principle of Communication, and Relevance Theory respectively.

### **Superiority Theory**

The Superiority Theory of humour is considered the oldest approach to the study of humour and is the approach that is most open to criticism compared to other social theories of humour. The theory is based on the idea that laughter is an expression of pride, triumph, and as the name of the theory suggests, superiority over others. In this regard, what the theory suggests is that people tend to laugh **at** someone, not with them, which is why it focuses on people's characteristics and misfortunes. Consequently, it deals with negative stereotypes. Such stereotypes concern people assumed to be less intelligent, e.g. we could consider jokes about blond women. Furthermore, it regards deformities, ethnic groups, and social hierarchy (people of lower social status than the joke teller and/or the audience should be considered).

According to history, the Greek philosopher Plato and his student, Aristotle, have been the earliest to discuss humour and laughter in their work. However, the philosophers held a rather negative view of laughter. Plato was an idealist and he believed that laughter could upset our serious nature, which wasn't in line with our common sense but rather our human instincts, therefore viewing laughter as a threat, however, he did believe that humour and laughter could be useful in pedagogy. On the other hand, Aristotle had a slightly different approach to humour. Indeed, the philosopher believed that laughter could be immoral, but he also believed that it could be a simple reaction towards something incongruous or absurd.

It wasn't until the 17th century that the standard version (the one we have nowadays) and propositions of the theory were discussed. The most wholly associated philosopher with the theory was the English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes, in his book *Leviathan* (1651) wrote: "*Sudden Glory* is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their favour by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others is a sign of Pusillanimity. For of great minds one of the proper works is to help and free others from scorn, and compare themselves only with the most able." (Hobbes, 1968/1651). [1]

Hobbes argues that humour derives from the pleasure of finding oneself superior over others, followed by laughter that is seen as a way of expressing pride, triumph, and superiority. According to the philosopher, joking and laughing at someone's incompetence is not a good thing. It is rather an inferior

thing and if we were to laugh at things that we all universally shared, we would be less likely to become offensive. Consequently, neither the audience nor the joke teller would experience any of those previously mentioned feelings, which can have a negative connotation. In addition, Hobbes argues that the feeling of superiority does not necessarily apply to all jokes.

What we can understand from the Superiority Theory is that it presents some problems when it comes to the study of humour. If we take tremendous misfortunes as an example, such as a war or mental illnesses and physical deformities, that does not necessarily imply that we are experiencing emotions of triumph or superiority over others. Sometimes people end up feeling sorry towards the butt/target of the joke, not amused. Furthermore, if we take TV shows and sitcoms as an example, we laugh at someone's misfortunes without necessarily comparing ourselves to them. Lastly, some jokes simply involve puns and wordplays, which do not necessarily involve any of the emotions above.

### **Relief Theory**

The Relief Theory of humour was most influential during the 40s and 50s and its most prominent defender was the Austrian neurologist and father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. The theory suggests that laughter is a way in which people can release their inner aggression, which is why it is considered a psychoanalytic one.

The theory is based on the functional model of Freudian personality structure, according to which the human psyche consists of the *id* (in Latin, the word stands for *it*) which is unconscious, the *ego* (in Latin, the word stands for *I*), and the *super-ego*, both of which are conscious and unconscious. According to this functional model, the *id* is ruled by the principle of pleasure, while the *ego* is ruled by the principle of common sense and reality. The *super-ego* functions as a form of conscience between right and wrong, it is the source of our guilt. It is important to note that the *id* is responsible for the most basic human needs, such as food, water, and sex, which is why, while growing up, the *ego* functions as a mediator between the *id*, the *super-ego* and the world around us. In addition, it allows the *id* to express some of its desires, desires which are suppressed by the *super-ego*.

For Freud, humour results from the dynamics between the *id*, *ego*, and *super-ego*, or to put it more simply, our conscious and unconscious in the dual structure of personality: "And here at last we can understand what it is that jokes achieve in the service of their purpose. They make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way." (Freud, 1963). [2] Freud argues that every person has primitive impulses and desires. However, our minds have a form of internal censor which suppresses them, ensuring that we behave accordingly to the norms of our society. As people, when we reach adulthood, we are expected to control our emotions, be rational, be able

to tell between right and wrong, and restrain ourselves from silliness. The suppression of our primitive desires and inhibition from silliness is what creates mental tension. What humour does, is that it bypasses that internal censor, functioning as a means of releasing that mental tension, which explains why many jokes deal with taboo topics like sex, violence, and political incorrectness. In this regard, if we were to compare Superiority Theory and Relief Theory, unlike the former which can be morally problematic, the latter can be psychologically healthy. It's healthy for people to periodically open up this mental lid that holds these taboo thoughts in place and express them through comedy, without harming either themselves or the listeners, before putting them back into the unconscious. Jokes are considered to provide pleasure by offering temporary freedom and escape from the constraints reason places upon these taboo thoughts.

Freud claimed that there are two kinds of jokes, the innocent or non-tendentious jokes and the tendentious ones. When distinguishing between these two kinds, Freud's criterion was the effect a joke may have on the audience. To be more specific, innocent jokes are playful and usually involve wordplays, while tendentious ones are more cynical and controversial, they can be sexual or aggressive, points that indicate that inner tension and primitive instincts are involved. Therefore, a joke can be humorous either at the level of its content or that of verbal/linguistic expression. Additionally, Freud studied jokes using the punchline to achieve the comic effect and he claimed that jokes consist of a technique and a thought which may have multiple underlying interpretations. The techniques are mainly used to divert the audience's attention to the underlying meaning of the joke. This meaning can only be expressed indirectly due to the restraints of social conventions.

Three of the most commonly used Freudian techniques are displacement, condensation, and allusion. Allusion is a technique that can be found in the majority of jokes, and it involves inferences. Condensation is related to the creation of double meanings, most commonly through homonymy or homophony. For example, the word *brainiac* is a condensation of the words "brain" and "maniac", indicating a person that is highly intelligent and loves learning new things. Lastly, displacement involves change of subject and emphasis from something logical and important to something illogical through faulty reasoning. That very reasoning is what results in the comic effect of the joke.

Indeed, Relief Theory supports that it is psychologically healthy to release our inner tension through humour, however, as people, we are also capable of discussing taboo topics in a non-humorous way. This leads to the following question: if we were to joke about a specific topic multiple times, wouldn't we be left with nothing more to release? The Relief Theory is not seemingly probable since we do not literally build up and release inner tension. In addition, Freud's model of psychic energy remains a model, since, in reality, it is unprovable.

Lastly, laughter may be simply caused by nervousness, tickling, and others. It does not necessarily have to do with the release of mental tension.

### **Incongruity Theory**

On a rather cognitive approach compared to the aforementioned theories, the Incongruity Theory is the most influential theory nowadays as it is the most broadly known and supported theory of humour. The theory focuses on the **stimulus**, which contributes to and results in the comic effect of an utterance or a joke.

Many linguists argue that humour and laughter arise from expectations that are violated. The bigger the distance between those expectations and the implicit meaning of the punch line, the greater the humoristic effect. Humour is therefore generated by a surprise element. This element can be misleading and ambiguous, followed by the punch line which is essential to incongruity and key to the humoristic effect, as it shows the importance of the surprise element in jokes. In the words of two social psychologists of the 20th century, Anthony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot, they stated that incongruity is a “conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke” (Chapman & Foot, 1976). [3]

An excellent example of incongruous jokes would be the following: “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” (Raskin, 1985). [4] What we have here is a dual perception of a situation, two overlapping “scripts”, where what is relevant to the patient is not relevant to the woman. We are caught by surprise by the punch line “Come right in” since, in addition to the bronchial whisper of the patient and that of the woman, bears sexual innuendo.

Nevertheless, who put the base to the contemporary perception of the term “incongruity” and the theory itself? Throughout the years, many have discussed incongruity, but it wasn’t until the 17th century that it was particularly analysed. The Scottish philosopher and poet James Beattie (1765-1803) was the first one to give the idea of incongruity since he argued that: “Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them”. (Beattie, 1776). [5] The philosopher acknowledges the juxtaposition of two or more parts seen as one thing while their similarities are illogical or false, identifying the essence of incongruity. Comic amusement derives from presupposed norms and our expectations in contrast to how we perceive the world around us.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) wrote that “In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation

into nothing” (Kant, 1790/2005). [6] The philosopher claimed that since incongruity has nothing or little to do with the content of a joke, we tend to find humour in the deviation of the build-up of an expectation, a build-up on that incongruity, only to have it dissolved into nothing.

Another influential German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), argued that “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. ... All laughter then is occasioned by a paradox, and therefore by unexpected subsumption, whether this is expressed in words or in actions. This, briefly stated, is the true explanation of the ludicrous.” (Schopenhauer, 1987). [7] According to the philosopher, any violation of logic is incongruous and laughter arises from our understanding of incongruity, from how we perceive the world around us and how we believe it is or should be in our minds. In addition, the punch line exists to subvert our expectations and contribute to the weight of the comic effect. The world is complex, and so is our way of conceiving it. Therefore, incongruity allows us to feel pleasure in releasing that confusion over its complexities.

In a nutshell, the main essence of incongruity remains more or less the same nowadays. Generally, the human brain anticipates patterns, we expect what may come next, and we can imagine it in our minds, only to have that pattern shattered unexpectedly by the punch line. Laughter arises from the conflict between our expectations and the situation we are in at a given moment, the surprise element.

### **Paul Grice and the Cooperative Principle of Communication**

Humour is a way of communicating and what is essential in humour is that we often tend to make implications about what we are trying to communicate, and inferences about our implied message. Meaning exists not only in our words but also in our actions and inferences, and the philosopher who contributed significantly to our understanding of the latter was Herbert Paul Grice (1913-1988).

Grice’s central claims about communication have to do with logic; they assume that people are rational human beings. In his seminal lecture “Logic and Conversation” (1975), he laid stress on the distinction between what a person says and what they imply. In his attempt to explain those implicatures, the philosopher introduced the **conventional** implicatures, i.e. the meaning of the word should be understood as it is in the dictionary, where the implicature of a sentence is tied to the meaning of part of the latter. He also introduced the **conversational** type, where the implicature goes beyond what someone says with a sentence. The latter should be understood based on the Cooperative Principle.

In a nutshell, the Cooperative Principle helps us understand when to take someone literally or when to search for an implied meaning or an inference. The essence of the Cooperative Principle is that, whenever we communicate with others, we assume that they are being cooperative, therefore rational and maximally effective. In the words of Grice himself: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice, 1975). [8]

The philosopher explained that the Cooperative Principle is made up by the following maxims, as he calls them:

The category of **Quantity** relates to the quantity of information to be provided, and under it fall the following maxims:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Under the category of **Quality** falls a supermaxim – “Try to make your contribution one that is true” – and two more specific maxims:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Under the category of **Relation** I place a single maxim, namely, ‘Be relevant.’

Under the category of **Manner** [...] I include the supermaxim - ‘Be perspicuous’ - and various maxims such as:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly. (Grice, 1975) [9]

As shown by the maxims above, when we communicate, we are expected to give the needed amount of information, be truthful and relevant, and avoid ambiguity on the given topic of conversation. What happens with humour is that we deliberately violate all of those Gricean maxims, therefore resulting in inferences/implicatures. Jokes usually lack relation and/or information, and can be ambiguous.

In pragmatics, Grice’s Cooperative Principle is what governs the bona-fide communication. In the words of Raskin: “Bona-fide communication is governed by the ‘co-operative principle’ introduced by Grice (1975). According to this principle, the speaker is committed to the truth and relevance of his text, the hearer is aware of this commitment and perceives the uttered text as true and relevant by virtue of his recognition of the speaker’s commitment to its truth and relevance.” (Raskin, 1985). [10] On the other hand, Raskin, in his Semantic

Script Theory of Humour, argues that when it comes to jokes and humour, people opt for the non-bona-fide mode of communication, which, similarly to the bona-fide communication, is governed by its own maxims:

1. Maxim of **Quantity**: Give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke.
2. Maxim of **Quality**: Say only what is compatible with the world of the joke.
3. Maxim of **Relation**: Say only what is relevant to the joke.
4. Maxim of **Manner**: Tell the joke efficiently. (Raskin, 1985) [11]

Compared to the bona-fide mode of communication, the non-bona-fide one does not presume that the speaker is committed to the truth and relevance of their utterances. Instead, the audience is deliberately searching for implicatures and overlapping “scripts” of the joke, knowing that their interlocutor is trying to make them laugh. They do not expect them to be truthful, relevant, or informative.

### **Relevance Theory**

Over three decades ago, inspired by the work of Grice, the cognitive scientists, Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson proposed a new framework in the field of pragmatics and cognitive linguistics for better understanding the interpretation of utterances. They used Grice’s maxims and proposals on communication as a starting point, although referring to the maxim of relevance to the whole communicational game.

What differentiates the theory from the main claims of Paul Grice is its very cognitive aspect. More specifically, the theory’s central claim is that people are rational communicators and communication is inferential. In any form of communication, whether that is verbal or non-verbal, the intention is to produce and identify intentions, while the addressee’s cognitive processes are directed towards recovering that very intention/implicit meaning. According to the Relevance Theory, “The principle of relevance applies without exception: every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of relevance” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995) [12], which means that people do not ‘follow’ the maxim of relevance and they wouldn’t be in a position to violate it, even if they wanted to do so.

Human cognition is great at the maximization of relevance when it comes to processing information and finding the intended message, which results in one of the two main principles of Relevance Theory – that is the Cognitive Principle. The other principle is the Communicative Principle, according to which, utterances create expectations of relevance. In the words of Sperber and Wilson: “communication is successful not when hearers recognize the linguistic meaning of the utterance, but when they infer the speaker’s ‘meaning’ from it” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995). [13]

## **Relevance and Cognition**

Human cognition plays a vital role in Relevance Theory since our cognitive system can allocate resources that are cognitive to process stimuli that are the most relevant to us: “[h]uman cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995). [14] People tend to pay attention to what is most relevant to them, a fact that is directly related to their encyclopedic knowledge – What is relevant to some people, might not be relevant to others.

A stimulus may be utterances, sounds, actions, or cognitive processes in our minds, such as thoughts, memories, etc. Although, despite the cognitive effects a stimulus may have, what makes the latter most relevant to us, is the mental processing effort it takes:

### **Relevance of an input to an individual:**

- a) Other things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater the relevance of the input to the individual at that time.
- b) Other things being equal, the greater the processing effort expended, the lower the relevance of the input to the individual at that time (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2004) [15], [16]

Our capability of accessing, processing, and choosing the information that is most relevant to us, while disregarding the information that is not relevant or beneficial to us, is an automatic biological mechanism. Our cognition can extract information that has the maximum relevance and effects while making the least mental effort. Furthermore, it is in our genes for our cognitive system to locate resources most relevant to us, in order to optimally process the information that we receive in various situations.

## **Relevance and Communication**

Sperber and Wilson propose the ostensive-inferential model of communication, according to which, utterances are viewed as evidence of the implicit message of the speaker, while our comprehension of the intended message is a process of inference based on the given information:

- a) **Informative intention:** to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions.
- b) **Communicative intention:** to make it mutually manifest to audience and communicator that the communicator has this informative intention. (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995) [17]

In an act of ostension, the speaker's intention is to inform their interlocutor of their intentions, while the addressee infers the intended message. Communicators address their audience through an ostensive stimulus, one that is always considered to be relevant (even if it turns out not to be), and its role is to attract attention toward the true meaning of what the speaker is communicating. Such an example would be if we started wearing our jackets in a room with the windows open, inferring that the temperature is cool, encouraging our hosts to close the windows.

Sperber and Wilson also discuss the idea of optimal relevance:

### **Presumption of optimal relevance**

- a) The ostensive stimulus is worth the audience's processing effort.
- b) It is the most relevant one compatible with communicator's abilities and preferences. (Wilson & Sperber, 2004) [18]

On the one hand, they argue that any effort an audience would make to process and comprehend an ostensive stimulus is worth their time since it is none other than relevant among any other given stimuli. On the other hand, the addressee, despite their capabilities and preferences, it is their role to address a stimulus that is both easily comprehensible and relevant.

### **Relevance and Comprehension**

So far, it is understood that relevance is a dynamic concept that changes according to the communicative situation, where the transmission of information can be direct or indirect, verbal or non-verbal. The context is also a dynamic concept and it involves implicit and/or explicit information, with the latter having the potential to go beyond what is said linguistically. In order to comprehend the contextual meaning of a situation, the two cognitive scientists formulated the **Relevance-rhetoric comprehension procedure**:

- a) Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.
- b) Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (or abandoned) (Wilson & Sperber, 2004) [19]

According to the procedure, the audience, provided with an easily understood stimulus and following the idea of optimal relevance, ends the process of understanding when they obtain the most relevant interpretation with the least cognitive effort.

Furthermore, Sperber and Wilson lay focus on the implicit and explicit information:

### **Subtasks in the overall comprehension process:**

Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about explicit content (in relevance-theoretic terms, EXPLICATURES) via decoding, disambiguation, reference resolution, and other pragmatic enrichment processes.

- a) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual assumptions (IMPLICATED PREMISES).
- b) Constructing an appropriate hypothesis about the intended contextual implications (IMPLICATED CONCLUSIONS) (Wilson & Sperber, 2004) [20]

Comprehension involves not only presumptions of relevance but also hypotheses and expectations that we have as individuals about the potential relevance an utterance has. Explicatures can be either strong or weak. That depends greatly on the amount of time it takes for us and our process of inferencing to interpret an utterance's implicit meaning. On the other hand, implicated premises are hypotheses we make based on assumptions or our encyclopaedic knowledge, while implicated conclusions are hypotheses made based on the explicit content of the utterance and presumptions. In addition, similarly to explicatures, implicatures may also be strong or weak, and that is based on how necessary or not inputs are for the interpretation of an utterance.

### **Relevance and Humour**

Throughout the years, many scientists have applied the Relevance Theory into humour and many can argue that it is the theory that can better explain humour because of its two main mechanisms.

Firstly, from a linguistic perspective, coding/decoding and ostension/inference play a crucial role in the analysis of jokes. When we joke about something, we tend to say things indirectly – we infer them, and humoristic effects depend greatly on the interplay/contrast between what we say and what we really mean with a joke that we make. That is why in many jokes, when it comes to the punch line, people laugh – that is because people laugh at what they deduce and not necessarily at what they hear. The theory focuses greatly on the inferential processes that are triggered by communicators in finding the most relevant interpretation of a joke and what they infer is the less relevant to the given context. Secondly, the theory focuses on the cultural context and the encyclopaedic knowledge the audience already has, which plays a highly important role in the comprehension and interpretation of jokes. If we are not able to resort to the given information, we are not in a position to properly understand the wordplay, punch line, etc.

## Conclusion

The description of the various theories of humour and pragmatic approaches gives an insight into the explanation of the comic effect on both a social and cognitive/pragmatic level. The ontology of humour is multifaceted, and the different epistemological approaches focus on the different aspects of humour functioning. In real communication, these aspects coexist and interact with each other. Consequently, the theories which study the diverse components of the humorous act complement each other.

Social theories throw the attention mainly to the butt of ridicule, whereas Incongruity Theory studies the linguistic means and techniques, the ostensive stimuli and inferential reasoning, wordplays, etc. More specifically, the Superiority theory explains the feeling of superiority of both the speaker and/or hearer of the joke at the butt target. The Psychoanalytic/Release theory explains the feeling of relief and release of inner tension that we experience, especially when joking about taboo topics. The Incongruity theory is focused on the incompatible stimuli and opposing expectations which lead to the surprise effect, and therefore the humorous effect of a joke or a situation. From a pragmatic perspective, the violation of Grice's maxims and the non-bona-fide communication show us how people create implicatures and how the audience deliberately search for implicatures to understand a given joke, while the Relevance theory is primarily focused on the maxim of relevance and it is applied to the whole communicational game – it concerns cognition, communication, and comprehension, assumptions that are highly important for having adequate comic effects. It is not only focused on the inferential steps of the hearer, but also their cultural/encyclopaedic knowledge.

The analysis of the theoretical assumptions prove that the humorous effect depends greatly on the interplay between what we say and what we mean, the implicit and explicit information. There is an ambiguous coexistence of interpretations that may vary, and they all depend on human agency. For that reason, the encyclopaedic knowledge of a person is crucial for a joke to be better understood. If it is insufficient to process and understand the given information (both explicit and implicit), then the comic effect will be unsuccessful. In this respect, the article ends at contributing to a more profound and adequate understanding of the analysis of humour and comic discourse.

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