Abstract

The prime objective of this paper is to compare Yus’s (2003, 2004, 2008, 2011, 2012ab) and Jodłowiec’s (1991ab, 2008) accounts of jokes based on the assumptions of Relevance Theory (RT; Sperber and Wilson 1995, 2002, 2004). To meet this objective, I explore Yus’s and Jodłowiec’s classifications and models of joke comprehension since there is a strong link between the two phenomena.

1. Introduction

The study of humour abounds in the postulates and proposals anchored in the relevance-theoretic framework elaborated by Sperber and Wilson (Curcó 1995, 1996ab, 1997; Dynel 2010, 2012; Groefsema 1998; Jodłowiec 1991ab, 2008; Higashimori 2008; Larkin 2000; Yus 2003, 2004, 2008; Martínez-Sierra 2009). This contribution aims to present and critically revise Yus’s and Jodłowiec’s approaches to jokes. It will be decided which approach proves to be more systematically and methodologically developed.

The claim that humorous discourse is regarded as any type of ostensive-inferential communication forms the bedrock of Yus’s and Jodłowiec’s accounts. They offer evidence that the analysis of jokes does not require special mechanisms underlying production and comprehension besides those which operate within the model of verbal communication put forth by Sperber and Wilson. Consequently, their accounts demonstrate that Relevance Theory provides a theoretical toolkit which enables the linguists to analyse canned jokes.
Before providing a critical juxtaposition, I first define the object of my study. A canned joke is the most widely acknowledged genre of humour in the pertinent literature. Dynel (2009a: 1284) defines a (canned) joke as “the prototypical form of verbal humour, produced orally in conversations or published in collections”. Hockett (1972 [1977]) claims that the text of a joke encompasses two parts: a ‘build-up’ and a ‘punch’. Many linguists endorse Hockett’s definition, although they slightly change the terminology. A build-up is labelled by Sherzer (1985) as a ‘set-up’ or by Norrick (2001) also as a ‘build-up’. In the same vein, Attardo (1994: 62) opts for a bi-partite structure of a joke distinguishing the narration/presentation and the dialogue. Attardo and Chabanne (1992: 169) regard a joke as a ‘micro-narrative’ implying a ‘micro-text’ which is “oriented to and by a punch line, which lies at the end of the text”. The punchline is the focal part of a joke, and the perception of humour in general, since it brings about a surprise element and this unexpectedness is responsible for “incongruity”, seen as a prerequisite for humorous effects; cf. Forabosco (1992) and Dynel (2009b).

2. Relevance Theory

The relevance-theoretic framework is a cognitive theory devised by Sperber – Wilson (1995) which serves as a reconceptualisation of the Gricean theory of communication. The Cooperative Principle and its subordinate maxims are replaced with a bifurcation of the Principle of Relevance: the Cognitive Principle of Relevance and the Communicative Principle of Relevance. The former principle, being more general and fundamental, assumes that humans are innately equipped with a capacity to pay attention to the most relevant stimulus and to process it in the most relevant way so that a balance of cognitive effects and mental efforts is achieved. The latter principle states that every stimulus should be relevant when optimally processed. While humans optimally process a stimulus, they might assume that the effort will be compensated in terms of effects and a produced stimulus is compatible with the interlocutor’s preferences and abilities.

3. Yus’s classification of jokes

Yus (2003, 2008, 2011, 2012ab, 2013) explores a number of humour-specific issues, one of the aims being to distinguish pragmatic mechanics underlying humorous effects. Yus (2008) puts forward his taxonomy, contingent on the explicature/implicature dichotomy, which includes four types of jokes, viz. jokes in which explicit interpretation is questioned, jokes whose explicit content clashes with contextual information, jokes in which implicated
premises and implicated conclusions are at work, and jokes which play with background encyclopaedic assumptions. The three mechanisms (first, third and fourth) have been mentioned in Yus (2003), however, a four-fold classification was not provided.

3.1 Joke type 1: jokes in which explicit interpretation is questioned

Yus (2008) believes that a humorous effect can be achieved when a humourist manipulates the addressee’s steps of utterance interpretation aimed at a contextual enrichment of a logical form. RT enumerates reference assignment, conceptual adjustment and ambiguity resolution among the stages of comprehension. The first type of jokes follow the multiple-graded interpretation (MGI)/single-covert interpretation (SCI) schema of comprehension (cf. Yus 2003, 2004) which resembles Suls’s (1972: 81–100) “two-stage model of incongruity resolution” and Richie’s (2004: 59–65) “forced reinterpretation” model. The example below illustrates the speaker’s manipulation of ambiguity resolution in which the hearer has to disambiguate the noun pound:


This type of jokes has been presented in Yus (2003) in which he also distinguishes the extraction of implicatures as a possible way of achieving humorous effects, which in Yus (2008) has been regarded as a separate type. Yus (2008) shows that several jokes, in spite of being classified under the first type, can also be found among other types of jokes, for instance those which deal with various stereotypes. This indicates a lack of clear-cut boundaries between the types which would make a joke classifiable exclusively under one type (examples 21, 44, 45 in Yus 2008).

Yus (2003) presents reference assignment as a stage of utterance interpretation which, when manipulated by the humourist, may produce humorous effects. He (2003: 1305) claims that this stage involves “determining the actual meaning of polysemous words or phrases...”. Sperber and Wilson (1995: 187) clearly state that it is ambiguity resolution, not reference assignment which is involved in the resolution of polysemy/homophony. They illustrate the case with the homophonous item straw, e.g. The child left the straw in the glass (indeed, straw can be understood as a cereal stalk or a drinking tube). Notably, Yus’s postulate that reference assignment is connected to polysemous words is ill-advised.
3.2. Joke type 2: explicit interpretation clashing with contextual assumptions

Yus (2008) endorses Curcó’s (1995, 1996ab, 1997) claim that many jokes create humorous effects by the clash between an explicit interpretation and a contextual assumption. Curcó (1997: 231) believes that the key assumption is an implicated premise to whose supply the audience is encouraged whereas the target assumption is the one extracted from the context of interpretation.

(2) A woman walked up to a little old man rocking in a chair on his porch. “I couldn’t help noticing how happy you look,” she said. “What’s your secret for a long happy life?” “I smoke three packs of cigarettes a day,” he said. “I also drink a case of whiskey a week, eat fatty foods, and never exercise!” “That’s amazing,” the woman said. “How old are you?” He thought for a moment, and replied, “Twenty-six.”
- **Target assumption**: It is impossible to live very long with such bad habits (from the hearer’s encyclopaedic knowledge).
- **Key assumption**: It is possible to live very long with such bad habits (inferred from the initial part of the joke) (Yus 2008: 151–152)

In fact, some jokes from this group also resemble the MGI/SCI pattern of comprehension (for a detailed account of this schema, see Section 4.1.). The hearer has to retrieve from his memory an assumption that helps him extract the most easily accessible interpretation consistent with the Principle of Relevance. Hence, the addressee assumes that it is possible to live long with bad habits as extracted from the first part of a joke (the MGI). Then, one has to derive the second interpretation in which it is assumed that, in fact, it is impossible to live long with bad habits which, as claimed by Yus, is inferred from the hearer’s encyclopaedic knowledge. In other words, from the initial part of a joke the addressee derives the key assumption which is then replaced with the target assumption supplied from the second part of the joke.

But it is an unnecessary complication to introduce two terms to denote a contextual assumption. In RT, an implicated premise is a contextual assumption (cf. Carston 2004, Allott 2010) so the key assumption and the target assumption pose a problem in itself.

3.3. Joke type 3: implicated premises and implicated conclusions are at work

Yus believes that a humorous effect is achieved when relevant implicatures are derived on the hearer’s sole responsibility. Sperber and Wilson (1995) distinguish two types of implicit import: implicated premise (contextual assumption) and implicated conclusion (extracted from an explication and assumption derived from the context of interpretation). It is believed that it should be enjoyable for the hearer to find congruence in the text beyond the explicit level.
Jokes from the third group reflect the MGI/SCI pattern of comprehension. This can be noticed when one does not concentrate on the final stage of joke interpretation, that is the effect of the punchline upon the hearer. Generally, the addressee uses the ostensive stimulus (in this case the setting of a joke) to construct a possible interpretation which can be subverted by the subsequent portion of a text.

(3) Matt’s dad picked him up from school to take him to a dental appointment. Knowing the parts for the school play were supposed to be posted today, he asked his son if he got a part. Matt enthusiastically announced that he’d gotten a part. “I play a man who’s been married for twenty years.” “That’s great, son. Keep up the good work and before you know it they’ll be giving you a speaking part.”

*Implicated premise*: Men are not allowed to talk when they are married for very long.

*Implicated conclusion*: Men are dominated by women when they are married for very long.

### 3.4. Joke type 4: targeting background encyclopaedic assumptions

At the beginning of the discussion about the fourth type, let me analyse the example below:

(4) Q: What do you have when a lawyer is buried up to his neck in sand?
   A: Not enough sand. (Yus 2008: 155)

Yus believes that in short jokes the humourist addresses some stereotypes which are commonly known by the society. The only felicity condition to properly understand the joke (4) is to possess the knowledge about the way in which people feel about lawyers, that is they are generally claimed to behave in a cold-hearted manner and this is the main reason why they should be buried in the sand.

This group raises a variety of problems. First, jokes derive their funniness from addressing encyclopaedic assumptions, often of stereotypical quality, which deal with “society, human roles or activities” (Yus 2008: 153). It raises the question of what Yus understands by “human roles”. This phrase can be understood as either occupations or more generally, stereotypes concerning sexes. Second, almost every joke addresses a certain stereotype so this group is not based on a unitary criterion in which a pragmatic mechanism has been singled out (this has been pointed out also by Dynel 2012). Third, it is arguable whether Yus introduces a full-fledged distinction between canned jokes and stand-up performances. At the outset, he states that jokes “reinforce” it [stereotypical information – M.B], *contradict* it and *eliminate* it, or simply remind the audience of the collective quality of this [stereotypical
– M.B.] information” (Yus 2008: 153), which is then negated on the following page “short jokes (...) do not exhibit a private/collective duality or attempt to challenge stereotypes” (Yus 2008: 154). Evidently, canned jokes may target the hearer’s encyclopaedic assumptions in a variety of ways, particularly challenge, contradiction and reinforcement, so that the challenge of assumptions is feasible when the audience and the communicator have opposing assumptions which result in evoking a different set of stereotypes.

In stand-up comedies, the humourist reinforces cultural stereotypes, reminds the audience of the collective quality of cultural stereotypes, or contradicts and challenges cultural and social stereotypes. The claim concerning stand-up comedies triggers another interesting question: why does Yus believe that only cultural stereotypes can be a source of humour in stand-up performances?

4. Jodłowiec’s classification of verbal jokes

To my knowledge, it is Jodłowiec (1991b) who provides the first relevance-theoretic taxonomy of jokes, distinguishing two groups: ambiguity jokes and implicit import jokes. The point of departure for her two-fold classification is the belief that jokes differ in “formal properties and stages of interpretations involved, the presence of certain elements in the text, and ‘felicity conditions’” (Jodłowiec 1991b: 91–92).

4.1. Joke type 1: ambiguity jokes

Ambiguity jokes, as the term suggests, generate humorous effects by using a linguistic form, and the hearer has to possess the knowledge of the code so that he may find the duality in the form. In other words, these jokes create funniness by “utilising resources that are part of the language system itself” (Jodłowiec 1991b: 91). A very general claim regarding the mechanics of comprehension is that there has to be a clash between the interpretation made optimally relevant from the setting and another interpretation optimally relevant from the punchline. A representative example of an ambiguity joke can be found in Section (3.1) where the ambiguous term pound can be understood as either ‘a unit of currency’ or ‘a measure of weight’. Not only lexical ambiguity but also structural and phonological ambiguity may give rise to funniness.

It can be emphasized that Jodłowiec’s ambiguity jokes are similar to Yus’s first type of jokes in which ambiguity resolution is exploited. However, ambiguity jokes constitute a small part of Yus’s first type, so Jodłowiec disregards the possibility of manipulation with the numerous stages of utterance interpretation which leads to the emergence of humorous effects.
4.2. Joke type 2: implicit import jokes

As emphasised by Jodłowiec, implicit import jokes create humorous effects by “what is not explicitly said in them”, which means that there are assumptions mutually manifest from the setting and the punchline, and all the hearer has to do is to supply background assumptions.

There are certain similarities and differences between ambiguity and implicit import jokes. In both of them, a discrepancy between two interpretations consistent with the Principle of Relevance drawn from the setting and the punchline has to be present as well as two contexts have to be reorganised (a further explanation regarding comprehension is provided in Section 4.2.). The main difference is that in ambiguity jokes one can single out stages of interpretation and identify the locus of humour (pivot).

It seems that Yus's fourfold classification of jokes is more accurate and satisfactory as he distinguishes more types of jokes. Nevertheless, his claim that the classification is based on the expicature/implicature dichotomy is contradicted when he presents the fourth type of jokes. There is a remarkable resemblance between Yus's and Jodłowiec's classifications. They believe that in a considerable number of jokes a comic effect is naturally achieved when implicatures are derived and when ambiguity arises.

Yus's jokes are not classified according to a unitary criterion. On the other hand, Jodłowiec's taxonomy is anchored in the explicitness/implicitness distinction. Her taxonomy is simpler and more straightforward and one cannot find any methodological shortcomings. In other words, Jodłowiec applies the relevance-theoretic tools in a more systematic way.

I believe that Yus's and Jodłowiec's taxonomies are top-down in the sense that the linguists use the conceptual tools provided in RT to study humorous texts and then they gather the data which enable them to prove their proposals. However, a bottom-up procedure of analysis makes the categorisation of the data more systematically developed. While applying this procedure, one can be more accurate and avoid terminological rigidity. As noted by Binsted – Ritchie (2001: 280), sometimes it is necessary to conflate these two methods: “In reality, some blend of these two extremes is necessary, and is normally used. One cannot devise a general theory (top-down) without at least keeping an eye on the data, and one cannot work on particular data (bottom-up) without assuming (perhaps implicitly) at least some theoretical basis”.

Unfortunately, Yus and Jodłowiec do not include any information concerning their methodology, viz. the number of jokes studied, the source of jokes (for example, American jokes should be funny in America), whether there were jokes which fall outside their scope of study or jokes in which it was difficult to retrieve pragmatic mechanisms. Yus avoids problems with
jokes in which it is hard to derive a relevance-theoretic mechanism by providing the fourth type of jokes.

5. Yus’s model of incongruity resolution

Yus (2003) believes that his MGI/SCI model resembles Suls’s (1972) model which he applied for canned jokes and captioned cartoons. In Yus’s terms, when the first part of a joke is processed, the hearer should derive the first accessible interpretation which provides a balance between cognitive effects and mental effort. In the theory of relevance, the balance can be reached when mental effort is compensated in terms of cognitive effects. The first part of a joke is labelled as the multiple-graded interpretations part of a joke (MGI) and it may contain a considerable number of alternative interpretations which are graded according to their relevance, that is various degrees of effects and effort they achieve. When the humourist has managed to fool his audience into choosing the interpretation which is invalidated later, s/he is convinced that other interpretations would not be taken into account. Consequently, the speaker creates a cognitive dissonance so that the hearer’s expectations have been disconfirmed by a different set of assumptions manifest from the second part of a joke which is referred to as the single covert interpretation part of a joke (SCI). The hearer has to extract the second interpretation from the punchline so that it is consistent with the whole text, the MGI part included. In other words, the second part brings a resolution to incongruities, which yields the intended humorous effects. This resolution lies in the covert intention aimed at communicating a highly unlikely but finally relevant interpretation.

As argued by Yus, this model for joke comprehension is optional so the question arises how Yus conceptualises a pattern of comprehension when implicatures bring about humorous effects. I claim that the answer lies in the relevance-theoretic framework itself. Since comprehension is an online process in which the identification of explicatures and implicatures constitutes a process of mutual parallel adjustment, the addressee constructs appropriate hypotheses about contextual assumptions and implications. If we accept Hockett’s (1977)’s build-up/punch dichotomy, we can derive implicated premises and conclusions from the build-up and then do the same with the punch. Let us see if it can work with Yus’s third type of jokes:

(5) A dietician was once addressing a large audience in Chicago. “The material we put into our stomachs is enough to have killed most of us sitting here, years ago. Red meat is awful. Vegetables can be disastrous, and none of us realizes the germs in our drinking water. But there is one thing that is the most dangerous of
The build-up presents an overall situation including information about the dietician’s question about the most lethal product. The implicated premise drawn from the build-up comprises a contextual assumption about lethal products: A lethal product is the one which causes death. Here, we have to consider the most stereotypical answer which can be given in the context in which a serious talk with a dietician is taking place. Consequently, one can think about a lethal product in terms of poison, etc. The punchline constitutes the man’s last statement so that an implicated premise can be drawn: *Wedding cake is a cake eaten when celebrating one's marriage*, and an implicated conclusion is: *Wedding cake is the most poisonous thing in a human life.* Please note that I only add implicatures from the build-up. This can testify to the on-line/incremental interpretation of jokes so that Yus’s model of MGI/SCI can still be used when implicatures bring about comic effects.

### 6. Jodłowiec’s model of jokes comprehension

Jodowiec (1991ab) believes that a bi-partite structure of a verbal joke is vital to the explanation of how humorous effects emerge through processing the setting and the punchline. The setting of a joke provides or at least facilitates the derivation of a set of immediately available assumptions, which helps the addressee create the first (or initial, cf. Sperber – Wilson 1995: 140) context on the basis of which a joke achieves its optimal relevance when the first interpretation (hypothesis) is extracted. However, when the punchline is processed there is another possibility of understanding a joke. A different set of assumptions is manifest to the hearer, which in turn facilitates the formulation of the second context which enables the audience to derive the second interpretation.

Jodłowiec argues that the comprehension of ambiguity jokes resembles the comprehension of garden-path utterances (cf., e.g., Dynel 2009b) in which the addressee of a joke is led to entertain the first interpretation which turns out to be wrong and is replaced with another interpretation. The difference between ambiguity jokes and garden-path utterances is that in ambiguity jokes there are two interpretations consistent with the Principle of Relevance whereas in garden-path humour, only one interpretation retains the importance of this principle.

Yus’s and Jodłowiec’s models of joke comprehension converge, however different terms have been adopted. Yus’s model does not hold when every
type of jokes distinguished by him follows the MGI/SCI pattern, for example, jokes based on stereotypes. Jodłowiec, on the other hand, provides a satisfactory, yet not fully-fledged, categorisation of jokes and puts forth a more universal schema of comprehension. In this respect, Jodłowiec's model possesses an advantage over Yus's pattern of comprehension. To describe the point in question I present the analysis of the joke below (6) according to Jodłowiec's model of interpretation:

(6) “Mom,” little Alexander asked, “does Jesus use our bathroom?”
   “Why, no!” his mother said sweetly. “Why do you ask?”
   “Cause every morning, daddy kicks the door and yells, “Christ, are you still in there?” (Rovin 1987: 36–37).

    Following Jodłowiec’s parlance, joke (6) is classified to the group labelled as implicit import jokes. The setting of this joke comprises assumptions in which a general situation is described: little Alexander comes to his mother and asks the question about Jesus's presence in their bathroom, and as such it constitutes the initial context for interpretation. It is claimed that the first context can be extended when some additional encyclopaedic assumptions about Jesus and children’s ridiculous questions are derived, for example children believe in God’s physical presence. The formulation of context extensions depends on a particular hearer so these assumptions vary from person to person. In the course of the context construction, the audience is able to extract the first relevant interpretation from the setting: little Alexander wants to know whether Jesus lives in their bathroom and it can be expected that he has a good reason to hold this belief as true. When the punchline is processed, i.e. the very sentence, the hearer formulates the second context: Alexander's dad question is not to be understood as the actual question about God's presence in their bathroom but the noun God should be interpreted as a vocative. As a result, the second interpretation is extracted: God does not live in the bathroom.

7. Concluding remarks

The present contribution has aimed to review Yus’s and Jodłowiec’s accounts of jokes with special attention given to their taxonomies and models of comprehension. Specifically, I have tried to estimate their accuracy and to enumerate methodological shortcomings. On the whole, it was shown that their joke categorisations and comprehension models are intertwined but the linguists use the models as a starting point for taxonomies. Since they apply a single criterion, that is the manipulation of the steps of comprehension
involved in the emergence of humorous effects, they should describe a model of interpretation under every type of jokes.

NOTES

1 For the sake of clarity, I have changed Yus’s terminological nomenclature concerning correct/incorrect interpretations into relevant/irrelevant ones. In my opinion, Yus has implied that the incorrect interpretation is completely redundant or even not worth the addressee’s processing effort whereas the correct interpretation is the only one which should be arrived at. In fact, the choice of the incorrect interpretation contributes to the overall process of establishing the text’s relevance and resolving the incongruity present in the punchline.

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