

New Perspectives on Understanding Jokes: A Relevance-Theoretic Account

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Abstract

This paper examines various kinds of jokes in the framework of relevance theory (henceforth RT). RT can explain the workings of the brain and give more explicit and exhaustive argumentation about on-line joke interpretations. Topics include ad hoc concept construction, enrichment, reference assignment, six kinds of implicature-based jokes, definition jokes, metalinguistic jokes, three kinds of resemblance-based jokes, and frame-related ethnic jokes. Implicature-based jokes are classified into four classes: a joke which comes from two contradictory implicatures; a joke which comes from an absurd assumption; a joke which is from an absurd implicature; and a joke which is from two contradictory assumptions. Resemblance-based jokes are captured by a variety of resemblance relations: resemblance in sound, resemblance in syntactic and lexical forms and resemblance in propositional forms. I argue that jokes create two relevant interpretations in many ways, and the hearer appreciates the gap or difference between the two. Processing jokes is less economical than processing plain, explicit messages. Certain effort-demanding interpretive paths of jokes are favored in exchange for an increase in humorous effects.

Key words: jokes, Relevance Theory, implicature-based jokes, resemblance-based jokes, metalinguistic jokes, definition jokes,

ethnic jokes,

1 Introduction

Let us first look at some recent analyses of jokes (See Chiaro 1992, Attardo 1993, Norrick 1993):

Muscard (1999:14) characterizes jokes as a form of communication with the following constitutive elements: conceptual incongruity, unexpectedness, or lexical ambiguity, plus impliciness of information given in a joke, plus a sudden shift, triggered by the punch line.

Yus (2003:1300) observes that a more relevant interpretation worth being processed may be activated, despite the supplementary mental effort required. Humorous effects such as the enjoyment of the resolution of an incongruity are worth this extra cognitive effort.

According to RT, processing jokes can be described as less economical than processing plain, explicit messages. Certain effort-demanding interpretive paths of jokes are favored in exchange for an increase in humorous effects.

2 Jokes and Explicatures: Ad Hoc Concept Construction, Enrichment and Reference Assignment¹

While interpreting the joke, the reader/hearer has to process more than one meaning in the message AT AN EXPLICATURE-LEVEL, and this generally involves additional processing effort.

According to RT, the concept explicitly communicated by use of a word is the encoded meaning, undertaken in the search for optimal relevance. 'Narrowing' is defined as the use of word in a more specific sense than the encoded one, and 'loosening' is a process of widening the lexically-specified denotation. According to RT, the type of information accessed in a concept may vary substantially from situation. The content of a concept is constructed ad hoc out of the encyclopaedic information we have at our disposal. Each use of a concept results in a slightly different combination of assumptions from encyclopaedic memory.

2.1 Concept Broadening vs. Literal Meaning

- (1) Man does not live by *bread* alone. (=People need not just food, but also poetry, art, music, etc. to live happily)
- (2) I'm a man who can live by *bread* alone. I can't even afford butter.

In (1) *bread* in the old proverb is interpreted as 'food' by ad hoc concept construction, while *bread* in (2) as a proverb variation can be literally interpreted.

So we can appreciate the proverb variant (2) by the gap between the 'food' interpretation and a literal meaning.

2.2 Concept Loosening (See Sperber and Wilson 1985/1986)

- (3) Why did the elephant get fired from his computer job?

Because he was afraid of the *mouse*!—Yoe (2001:11)

ENCODED CONCEPT in (3): *mouse* (a small mammal with short usually brown, grey or white hair, a pointed face, and a long tail—*Cambridge International Dictionary of English*)

COMMUNICATED CONCEPT in (ii): *MOUSE** (a small device with a ball inside that is moved by hand across a flat surface to control the movement of the cursor (=pointer) on a computer screen—*Cambridge Dictionary of American English*)

In (3), the two explicatures shown in (i) and (ii) can be constructed at the same time by ad hoc concept construction and one of them, that is (ii), is discarded. RT provides a better account of the type of jokes in which there can be two relevant meanings (=cases where both scripts can be true) but one of them is cancelled by using our knowledge of animal relations between the elephant and the mouse and also the connection between the computer job and the mouse. So, in this joke, we can appreciate the gap between (i) and (ii).

Explicature:

- (i) Because the elephant was afraid of the (animal) mouse.
- (ii) Because the elephant was afraid of the (computer) mouse.
- (4) When a *cow* laughs, does milk come out of its nose?

A *cow* in (4) refers to a child at school lunch. In (4), the word

is used metaphorically. The hearer would access her encyclopaedic knowledge of the word.

The assumptions about this word is that children at school have milk with their lunch; there is a lot of fooling and joking around at this time; Having milk come out of one's nose is a fairly common experience. When processed against this context, (4) will yield the strong implicature.

In the following examples, the interpretations for 'pupil', 'genius' and 'jam' can be explained in the same way as we have discussed above.

(5) What part of your eye goes to school?

The *pupil*.-Yoe (2001)

(6) What is a worm's favorite city?

The Big *Apple*.

(7) Mark: I think our cat is a *genius*!

Lark: Why?

Mark: Because I asked her what one minus one equals and she said nothing!

(8) What happened when the strawberries got into a car accident?

They caused a traffic *jam*!

2.3 Enrichment

In (9), the one-word utterance 'absence' can be enriched as 'Kid's absence' while the punchline shows that the 'absence' is not 'the kid's absence' but 'the absence of the boy who sits next to him'. So we can appreciate these different enrichment processes between the two. Enrichments of explicit content are driven by the search for an interpretation that satisfies the hearer's expectations of relevance.

(9) Dad: Why did you get such a low score in that test?

Kid: *Absence*.

Dad: You were absent on the day of the test?

Kid: No, but the boy who sits next to me was.—Howell (2003:57)

In (10), the word 'easy' can be enriched as 'The answers were easy for the kid.' But the punchline implied that 'the test questions were easy, but not the answers.' Thus, the discrepancy between the two enrichments

makes us laugh.

(10) Mother: How were the test questions?

Kid: *Easy*.

Mother: Why do you look so miserable, then?

Kid: The questions didn't give me any trouble, but the answers were really hard.

2.4 Reference Assignment

In (11), according to our encyclopaedic knowledge, the reference assignment for 'who' in the teacher's question is normally Columbus, not the boy who went to the map and found North America. But here the humour comes from the unusual reference assignment for 'who', that is, the boy who went to the map and found North America on that paper.

(11) TEACHER: George, go to the map and find North America.

GEORGE: Here it is!

TEACHER: Correct. Now, class, *who* discovered America?

CLASS: George!—*E-Tables 2*, p.184

In (12), 'where' is normally assigned as the actual place name in the United States, but here the answer that it is signed at the bottom of the Declaration of Independence. So different place assignments create the humorous effect.

(12) *Where* was America's Declaration of Independence signed?

At the bottom.—Howell (2003:58)

Similar examples involving different reference assignments can be seen in the following examples.

In RT, pronouns such as 'I' and 'it' can be handled in procedural terms and seen as pointers to particular pointers of referent.

(13) A: 'Constantinople' is a very long word. Can you spell it?

B: Er, C. O. N. S. T. A. N. T. I. N. O. P. L. E?

A: Wrong!. *I. T.*—KKobayashi and Cheetham (2005:126)

(14) I live above a star, but do not burn. I have 11 friends around me. My initials are PRS.

What am *I*?

Answer: I am the number 7 on a touch-tone telephone.—Kim
(2002:56)

(15) I start with the letter “E”, and I end with the letter “E”. I contain only one letter, but I am not the letter “E”! What am I?

Answer: I am an envelope.—Kim (2002:57)

3 Jokes and Implicatures

Implicature-based jokes can be classified into the following six classes: Type 1 is a joke which comes from two contradictory implicatures; Type 2 is a joke which comes from an absurd assumption; Type 3 is a joke which is from an absurd implicature; and Type 4 is a joke which is from two contradictory assumptions. Type 5 is a joke based on parallel processing. Type 6 is a joke which comes from a rhetorical question.

In this section, we shall mainly look at the following computations:

- Some jokes create the two interpretations and one of the two interpretations has to be discarded.
- Some jokes produce absurd and nonsensical interpretations.
- Some jokes invalidate a first accessible interpretation in favor of a more unlikely interpretation.
- Some jokes process the two appropriate interpretations at the same time and neither has to be discarded.

3.1 Jokes Based on Two Contradictory Implicatures

(16) Fortune-teller, gazing into crystal ball, to Frog: ‘You are going to meet a beautiful young woman. From the moment she sets eyes on you she will have an insatiable desire to know all about you. She will be compelled to get close to you ... you will fascinate her.’

Frog: ‘Where am I? At a singles club?’

Fortune-teller: ‘Biology Class.’

(Jodlowiec 1991b, 274)...*Reader's Digest*, January 1984)

(See Jodlowiec 1991a)

Analysis:

Utterance by the frog: Where am I? At a singles club?

Assumptions (=The Hearer's knowledge):

- (i) If I (=Frog) am going to meet a beautiful young women, then I must go to a singles club.
- (ii) If I must go to a singles club, then the young woman and I will fall in love.
- (iii) If the young woman and I fall in love, then at least I must be alive.

Utterance + Assumptions (i)(ii)(iii)→Implicature I: The frog must be alive

Utterance by the fortune-teller: Biology Class

Assumptions:

- (iv) If you are in a biology class, then some students dissect frogs.
- (v) If some students dissect frogs, then the frogs will die (=not be alive).

Utterance + Assumptions (iv)(v)→Implicature II: The frog will die.

In short, the appreciation of this joke comes from Two Contradictory Implicatures

3.2 Jokes Based on An Absurd Assumption

(17) A small boy of seven cracked the following rather "sick" joke:
"Doctor, doctor, I've only got fifty-nine seconds to live," cried a patient in despair.

The doctor replied, "Just wait a minute and I'll attend to you."
(Kirkup 1976, 27)

Utterance by the doctor: Doctor, doctor, I've only got fifty-nine seconds to live

An absurd assumption: If the patient can only live for 59 seconds, then the doctor will examine him in 60 seconds.

Implicature: The doctor will examine the patient in 60 seconds (=after his death).

Utterance: P

An Absurd Assumption P→Q

Implicature: Q

3.3 Jokes Based on An Absurd Implicature

(18) “Buried the cat last week.” “Was it dead?” “No, we just didn’t like it very much.”

Utterance: We just didn’t like it (=the cat) very much.

Assumption: If we just didn’t like the cat very much, then we buried it alive.

Utterance + Assumption → An Absurd Implicature: We buried the cat alive.

Utterance: P

Assumptions: P → Q

An Absurd Implicature: Q

3.4 Jokes Based on Two Contradictory Assumptions

(See Curco 1995)

(19) Peter: Who was that gentleman I saw you with last night?

Mary: That was no gentleman. That was a senator.

Utterance: That was no gentleman. That was a senator.

Assumptions:

(i) Senators are gentlemen.

(ii) Senators are not gentlemen.

Utterance: P

Two Contradictory Assumptions: P → +Q

P → -Q

Implicatures: +Q

-Q

3.5 Jokes Based on Parallel Processings

In (20), the word ‘politics’ is processed in a parallel way as ‘a small lie’ and ‘a big lie’, So politics implicates some kind of lie, which creates the humorous effect due to the difference from the normal definition of politics.

- (20) There are three kinds of lies: a big lie and *politics*. —Maruyama (2005:197)

3.6 Jokes Based on Rhetorical Questions

- (21) A strict aunt came to tea and said to her niece, “Eat up your spinach, child, and you’ll grow up to be beautiful.” “*Didn’t they have spinach in your day Auntie?*” came the reply. —*Kids Jokes* (1998:19)

In (21) if X eats up x’s spinach, then x will grow up to be beautiful. So if X didn’t eat spinach in x’s day, then X didn’t grow up to be beautiful. So in (21) the punchline of a rhetorical question ‘Didn’t they have spinach in your day Auntie?’ implies the aunt did not grow up to be beautiful (=is ugly now) because they didn’t have spinach in her day.

4 Jokes and Discourse: Definition Jokes in Question-Answer pairs²

- (22) A: What’s the definition of ‘*repetition*’?
B: *Can you say that again, please?*

In this section, I argue that RT can provide a good tool for explaining why definition jokes in question-answer pairs can produce some cognitive effects of humour between ‘non-definitional’ and ‘definitional’ interpretations of a given word.

(22B) implicitly implies the definition for ‘repetition’ so this dialogue shows that (22B) literally says that B does not know the definition for ‘repetition’ while B implicitly gives the correct definition for this word. So the explicit and implicit answer for the definition creates humour in this example.

Similar examples can be seen below:

- (23) A: What’s the definition of ‘shy’?
B: *Are you looking at me? Don’t look at me!*
- (24) A: What’s the definition of ‘angry’?
B: *What do you think I am? A dictionary? Check for yourself!*
- (25) Techer: What’s the difference between *ignorance and indifference?*

Student: *I don't know and I don't care.*

5 Jokes and Metarepresentations: Metalinguistic Jokes⁸

(26) Teacher: What kind of key opens a banana?

Pupil: That's a trick question. You don't need a key to open a banana.

Teacher: Wrong. The answer is a *monkey*.

A joke question can be interpreted as a real world situation, but the answer goes into a metalinguistic world, so humorous cognitive effects come from the two different processings by the speaker and the hearer. As for metalinguistic jokes, the hearer has to process more than one meaning in the joke question, and this generally involves additional processing effort. Jokes are favored in exchange for an increase in humorous effects.

In (26), the pupil looks for the key in the actual world, not metalinguistic world, but the correct answer goes to metalinguistic world, not the actual world. Monkey is a word containing the word *key* in the linguistic form. So the humour comes from the difference between the actual and the metalinguistic world.

The following examples involving spellings also can be explained in the same way:

(27) Teacher: What pet do you think makes the loudest noise?

Pupil: Hmm...perhaps a parrot or a big dog?

Teacher: Think more carefully. It's a *trumpet*.—Howell(2003:37)

(28) Which city gives you lots of shocks?

Electricity

(29) What's the difference between here and there?

The letter "T"!

(30) Why do you need glasses when spelling Mississippi?

You need four *I's*.

(31) Why is the letter "A" like a flowers?

Because a "B" comes after it!

(32) Kid: I had trouble with diarrhea at school today.

Mother: That's terrible! I didn't know you were ill.

Kid: I wasn't, I just couldn't *spell it*. —Howell (2003:10)

(33) In many marriages there have been three rings: an engagement ring, a wedding ring—and *suffering*.

(34) Rearrange the letter of NEW DOOR to write one word.

Answer: ONE WORD—Kim (2002:35)

(35) What five-letter word is always spelled wrong?

Answer: *WRONG*—Kim (2002:46)

(36) Why is the letter "I" like Rome?

Answer: Because both are the *capital*. —Kim (2002:50)

The humour in the following group comes from the difference between the actual world and some linguistic form/analysis.

In (37) and (38), the hearer considers the question as an actual world, but in order to find a correct answer, he or she has to look for a metalinguistic world such as a book and a word.

(37) Where does Sundax come after Monday?

In the dictionary.

(38) What two things can you not eat for breakfast?

Lunch and dinner! —Yoe (2001)

(39) What's kidnap? <COMPOUND WORD>

A baby that's having a sleep!

(40) A: What do the letters NASA stand for? <ACRONYM>

B: *Need Another Seven Astronauts.* (after Space Shuttle disaster)

(41) What do we know about a bird in the hand, class? <IDIOM>

Pupil: That it's worth two in the bush?

Teacher: Well, I'd say *it makes it hard to blow your nose.*

6 Jokes and Linguistic Variants: Proverb, Riddle and Advertisement Variants⁴ (See Black (1999))

A final kind of jokes enters into a variety of resemblance relations. Type I of jokes is based on resemblance in sound, Type II is based on resemblance in syntactic and lexical form and Type III is based on resemblance in propositional content.

While interpreting the joke which is based on resemblance, the hearer has to process more than one meaning from the encoded message, and this generally involves an additional processing effort that has humorous effects.

6.1 Jokes Based on Resemblance in Sound

(42) How do you start a firefly race?

Ready, steady, glow!

In (42), *Ready, steady go* and *Ready, steady, glow* are quite similar in sound.

6.2 Jokes Based on Resemblance in Syntactic/Lexical Form

(43) A druggist put up a big sign in the front window: “Smoking, or forgetting your wife’s Birthday ,can be hazardous to your health.”

Maruyama, p.135.

The second type of variation of resemblance-based jokes comes from resemblance in syntactic forms which are traditionally called parody (See Carston (1981)). In (43), “Smoking can be hazardous to your health” is a well-known advertisement, and so the addition of ‘or forgetting your wife’s Birthday’ makes us laugh.

6.3 Jokes Based on Resemblance in Propositional Content

In some jokes two meanings are communicated at the same time. NO MATTER and NEVER MIND in (44) can be interpreted in its idiomatic sense; from this interpretation, the hearer would derive an inconsistency between the questions and answers. These sequences can also be interpreted in a literal sense. Neither of the interpretations is to be rejected as irrelevant, since both of them yield substantial contextual effects.

(44) What is Mind? *No Matter*. What is Body? *Never Mind*.

Explicature:

Mind is No Matter

Body is Never Mind

Encyclopaedic entry:

No matter: something is not important and will not affect a situation./No physical substance

Never mind: used to tell someone not to worry or be upset about something/Not one's intellectual powers

This type of joke processes the two appropriate interpretations at the same time, that is, the idiomatic interpretation and its literal meaning, and compare them in order to appreciate the gap between them.

Idioms are stored in our brain as an entity and are easily accessible expressions. Incomplete semantic representation needs a lot of processing effort. Processing jokes involving idioms is less economical than processing of plain, explicit messages. Certain effort-demanding interpretative paths of jokes are favored in exchange for an increase in humorous effects.

7 Jokes and Knowledge: Extensive use of Stereotypes

It is widely accepted that ethnic jokes make extensive use of stereotypes, which, it has been pointed out, are extremely fertile for humor and its appreciation. In terms of RT, they render a maximum contextual effect with a minimum processing effort. Since humor appreciation decreases when it depends on a concept that cannot be understood without an effort or when critical examination is required, speed of processing being essential for the success of a joke, it seems evident that such ready-made conceptualizations are of the utmost utility.

Larkin Galiñanes (2005:87) asserts that the receiver thinks immediately of certain characteristics attached to his or her stereotyped images and therefore forms specific expectations and, on the other hand, the fact that the outcome of the situation thus introduced is incongruous in view of the listener's general sense of appropriateness and, in the best jokes, surprising even in view of his or her expectations but is nevertheless in some way coherent with the latter.

Larkin Galiñanes (2005:88) appropriately argues that "frames of reference" or "scripts" are brought into play; that suggested by the stereotyped image and that supplied by the receiver's encyclopaedic

(normal, everyday, text-external) knowledge of what may happen.

The following ethnic jokes explicitly contain the words such as ‘Irish’ in (45) and (46) and ‘American’ in (47) and we implicitly make use of our stereotyped knowledge of Irish and Americans. In short, in order to appreciate these ethnic jokes, we have to get access to our frame knowledge of Irish foolishness and of the fact that very few Americans study foreign languages.

In (45), Irish are so foolish that their latest invention is outside toilets for the airplanes. In order to understand (45), we have to have known the fact that Irish are foolish.

In (47), the parallelism of bilingual and trilingual is violated by the unexpected word(*American*), which creates the discrepancy between them and makes us laugh.

(45) What’s the latest invention on Irish airplanes? Outside toilets. —
Irish Jokes, P.36

(46) Pity the poor Irish farmer who gave his hens hot water so they’d
lay boiled eggs. —*Irish Jokes*, P.84

(87) Q: What do you call a person who speaks two languages?
A: Bilingual.

Q: What do you call a person who speaks three languages?

A: Trilingual.

Q: What do you call a person who speaks one language?

A: *American*. —Maruyama (2002:151)

The next group implicitly shows the Jewish meanness. Without some additional information on a Jewish boy in (48) and I (=a Jewish) in (49), it is too difficult to interpret these examples as ethnic jokes.

(48) When I was little I got a boy to play doctors with me, but he sent
me a bill. —Maruyama (2005:161)

(49) I got this watch from my grandfather. He sold it to me on his
death bed.

8 Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that RT can provide a good tool for

explaining why these different types of jokes can be interpreted as jokes. Jokes can be captured by a variety of resemblance relations. Six kinds of implicature-based jokes have been explicitly explained in the present framework. Metalinguistic jokes, definitional jokes and ethnic jokes have been tackled as interesting domains of research on jokes. Jokes involving ad hoc concept construction, enrichment, and reference assignment also have been further studied from a newly developed Lexical Pragmatics. See Wilson (2004).

It seems to me that the resemblance-based jokes are more easily comprehended than the implicature-based jokes, since resemblance is based on our primitive human cognition, while the inferential computations in our brain take some time to get to the final interpretation. Metalinguistic jokes are related to our metarepresentation ability which is the key to our verbal communication. Word plays such as definition jokes and ethnic jokes are quite common in comedy and can be accounted for in a principled way in the framework of RT.

In order to understand jokes, the reader/hearer has to expend extra mental effort. It is a condition on the receiver's willingness to expend extra mental effort that he is aware of the joke frame of the utterance. RT can provide a better account of various types of jokes in which there can be two different interpretations in the hearer's brain.

- i. Some jokes invalidate a first accessible interpretation in favor of a more unlikely interpretation.
- ii. Some jokes produce absurd and nonsensical interpretations.
- iii. Some jokes process the two appropriate interpretations at the same time and neither has to be discarded.
- iv. Some jokes create the two interpretations and one of the two interpretations has to be discarded.

Notes

- 1 Wilson (2004) asserts that Lexical Pragmatics is a rapidly developing branch of linguistics that investigates the processes by which linguistically-specified ('literal') word meanings are modified in use and that the goal of

lexical pragmatics is to account for the fact that the concept communicated by use of a word often differs from the concept encoded.

2 Definition jokes also can appear as in the following:

- (i) A toe... a part of the body for finding furniture in the dark.
- (ii) Insurance is just like marriage. You pay, pay, pay, and pay, and you get little back.
- (iii) Television is the opium of the masses.
- (iv) Television is the third parent.
- (v) Airport: A place where people hurry up and wait.
- (vi) Insurance: Gambling that you will be lucky enough to have a terrible accident and receive a lot of money.
- (vii) Motorway: A special road where there are no traffic lights, pedestrians, or bicycles to get in the way of the traffic jams.
- (viii) A: What's the difference between a nightwatchman and a butcher?
B: I don't know. What is the difference between a nightwatchman and a butcher?

A: One stays awake and the other weighs a steak.

3 Metarepresentation, then, involves a higher-order representation with a lower-order representation embedded inside it. The higher-order representation is generally an utterance or a thought. Three main types of lower-order representation have been investigated: public representation, e.g. utterances; mental representations, e.g. thoughts; and abstract representations, e.g. sentences, propositions. How do these metarepresentational abilities fit together, with each other and with the architecture of the mind? I will argue that it is worth considering them together and attempting to integrate them with an empirically plausible pragmatic theory. —Wilson (2000)

4 The following illustrates the riddle variants in English.

- (i) Teacher: What is black and white and red (read) all over?
Pupil: *A Penguin with sunburn!* —Howell (2003:38)
- (ii) A: What's black and white and red all over?
B: I don't know. What is black and white, and red all over?
A: *A newspaper.*
- (iii) What is black and white and red all over?
A used newspaper! —Laughlab, p.14

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