

FRI-2G.307-1-LL-08

LINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY THEORIES OF HUMOUR

Tanya Borisova, PhD Student

Department of Bulgarian Language, Literature and Arts

“Angel Kanchev” University of Ruse

Phone: 082 – 888 612

E-mail: tborisova@uni-ruse.bg

Abstract: *Humour, laughter, fun and situational jokes are phenomena related to intelligence and are a result of the evolutionary development of humans. Although there are various situations which trigger hearty laughter, verbal jokes and humour are considered to be more sophisticated, refined and requiring more cognitive skills and knowledge. Despite the fact that the term “humour” is largely used in everyday life, it is still hard to define it and it is even harder to explain what makes a text a humorous one. The present paper, therefore, provides an overview of some of the contemporary theories of humour and discusses their similarities and differences by providing specific examples of jokes as an illustration*

Keywords: *Humour, Verbal Jokes, Linguistic Ambiguities, Theories of Humour.*

JEL Codes:

INTRODUCTION

Joking and laughter are part of people’s everyday life. They act as means of communication and have been attributed to several social functions. *Humour* has been an object of study in various disciplines and it has been regarded as an interdisciplinary phenomenon related to philosophy, psychology, physiology, aesthetics, ethics, literature and social studies, for instance. Despite this wide array of scientific disciplines that tackle the issue of humour, there is still not one consistent and detailed review of the multiplicity of theories of humour and verbal jokes in particular. This paper, therefore, focuses on the contemporary theories of *humour* and will compare linguistic aspects and mechanisms in theories of humour in the terms of verbal jokes.

EXPOSITION

Humour as a Term

Before we focus our attention on the incongruity theories of humour, it is necessary to provide a common understanding of the term *humour* since this is the central phenomenon discussed in this text.

The word *humour* comes from Latin – *humor* and means “liquid” or “fluid” (incl. the body fluids). The etymology behind the word is linked to the ideas of the ancient physicians who believed that the balance of the four bodily fluids – blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile were the reason for the well-being of a person. If any of these fluids was not in balance, the person didn’t feel very well. Thus, the word *humour* came to denote “a person whose temperament deviate[d] from the norm” (Carroll, 2014: 5). Such people were ridiculed in the past but nowadays humour is considered an essential element of human life.

If we browse different dictionaries or if we refer to the definitions of humour given by researchers who tackle the topic, we will find a myriad of interpretations. For example: the Cambridge Dictionary of English (2005) defines *humour* as: 1. **amusement** noun (U) – the ability to find things funny, the way in which people see that some things are funny, or the quality of being amusing: *He’s got a great sense of humour* (He is very able to see things as amusing). 2. **mood** noun (C or U) – the state of your feelings; mood: *You seem in a very good humour today*; * *humorous* – adj. funny, or making you laugh: *Her latest book is a humorous look at teenage life* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

One of the oldest approaches to humour can be attributed to Aristotle, Plato and Cicero. All these three philosophers believed that laughter emerges from abuse or malice. They linked humour and the laughable with foolishness and vulgarity, with the irrational and harmful behaviour of people which is typical of low classes.

A similar treatment of humour (as something that should be condemned) is observed in biblical texts. The general attitude of the Christian church to laughter was related to the belief that it was something very dangerous – an emotion associated with filth, foolishness and frivolity. Therefore, humour and laughter were considered inappropriate.

The attitude towards humour remained negative until the 17th century when Thomas Hobbs (1650) suggested that laughter is an expression of our superiority towards the momentary misfortune of others which is a result of someone's clumsiness, stupidity or incompetence.

According to some scholars, such as Arthur Koestler (1964), humour directly addresses creativity since it involves a high level of intellectual and emotional activities. In fact he claims that humour is “a disposal of redundant emotions” (Koestler, 1964: 62) because it liberates the individual and frees him from the fear of losing his liberty.

A similar interpretation of humour can be found in Freud's analysis of the structure of verbal jokes. His definition of wits, based on his study on jokes, is also intriguing: “Wit {Witz} as knack of discovering similarities between dissimilars, that is, of finding hidden similarities” (Freud, 2003: 3) or “playful judgment” (ibid). His idea that “if what gives the character of a joke is not attached to the thought, then we must look for it in the form, in the wording in which it is expressed” (Freud, 2003:10) opens the floor of research on the wording of jokes and gives it linguistic approach.

In his discussion of the dynamic nature of humour, Freud puts forward the idea that the jokes based on topics such as sexuality and aggression free the individuals from their daily social norms of behaviour and lead to relaxation. Humour, for Freud, is a safe-valve, an outlet of negative emotions (e.g. aggression and anger) that frees people from their inhibitors.

The idea and perception of humour and what is acceptable and laughable at has changed over the years and has led to the development of a rich spectrum of theories of *humour*. Due to the limitations imposed by the current paper in terms of the length of text, the current paper presents and discusses only the contemporary linguistic theories of humour.

Contemporary Linguistic Theories of Humour

Most modern theories of humour are mixed theories since researchers consider humour as a “multiform phenomenon [that can] be incorporated into a single integrated theory” (Kirkmann, 2008: 28). The contemporary *linguistic theories* of humour which focus on the nature of verbal humour are: Arthur Koestler's *Bisociation theory of humour and its perception*, Victor Raskin's *Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humour* (SSTH) and *The General Theory of Verbal Humour*, and Attardo's *Isotopy-Disjunction Model of Jokes* (IDM).

Koestler's Bisociation Theory of Humour

Arthur Koestler's *Act of Creation* is a tractate on creativity comprising two books – Book 1 – *The Art of Discovery and Discoveries of Art* and Book 2 – *Habits and Originality*. The nature of humour is discussed in the first part of Book1 – *The Jester* where Koestler defines laughter as a “luxury reflex” (Koestler, 1964: 69) that arises as a result of the freedom of mind of an individual from his/her emotions.

He coins the term ‘bisociation’ to explain human creativity in humour, science and art. Koestler argues that the creative process in these three fields involves the discovery of hidden similarities between two “habitually incompatible frames of reference” (Koestler, 1964: 35) – M_1 and M_2 which intersect at an event – L (Fig. 1).

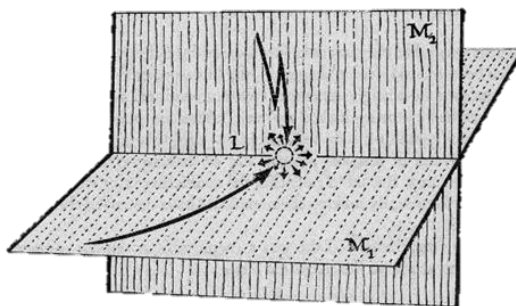


Fig. 1. The bisociation of two habitually inconsistent frames of reference (Koestler, 1964: 85)

The joke which Koestler uses as an illustration runs as follows:

The Prince, travelling through his domains, noticed a man in the cheering crowd who bore a striking resemblance to himself. He beckoned him over and asked: "Was your mother ever employed in my palace?"

"No, Sire", the man replied. "But my father was". (Koestler, 1964: 84)

Koestler suggests that the first frame is the question of the prince (M_1) and the second frame is the reply of the man (M_2). The interpolation and extrapolation meet in the centre of the two planes when the riddle is solved and laughter is triggered.

It has to be noted that Koestler's model, which considers the structural analysis of jokes, can also be applied to jokes in languages different from English. To illustrate this claim, we would use a joke in Bulgarian language:

Преди седмица жена ми започна диета. Отслабнах кило и половина.
(*My wife started dieting a week ago. I have lost a kilo and half so far.*)²⁷

The joke starts with the first frame of reference – the information shared by a man about his wife who has been on a diet for a week (M_1). The second frame of reference (M_2) is the expectation of the listener about the weight lost by the woman as a result of the diet. The clash of these two frames is the unexpected twist – it is not the wife who has lost weight but her husband. It is exactly this clash that leads to laughter.

An essential aspect of Koestler's interpretation of humour is his association of laughter with aggression and pressure – "whatever the mixture (mixture of humour forms), it must contain one ingredient whose presence is indispensable: an impulse, however faint, of aggression or apprehension" and he calls this ingredient 'aggressive-defensive' or 'self-asserting' tendency. Whereas "subtle humour this tendency is discrete and only careful analysis can detect it." (Koestler, 1964:52). However, the presence of any aggression is disputable as he states that aggression in subtle humour is only detected under deeper analysis but it is still present there. This makes the idea subjective. It is unclear how aggression is implemented and decoded in verbal jokes from the category of "nonsense humour" or "riddles". Consider the two examples:

- (1) *Омръзна ми да седя без пари, затова легнах.*
(*I got bored staying with no money, so I lay down.*)²⁸
- (2) *How is it possible to have a civil war?*

In the first joke (1) it is hard to detect any aggression, neither in the language used nor in the planes of speech. The ambiguous phrase here is "седя без пари", (being/staying without money) which finds its laughable solution in "легнах" (lay down) that is opposite in meaning. The verb

²⁷ My translation

²⁸ My translation

“лягам“ is opposite to “седя” on the second layer, but the listener expects to hear some other way of solving the situation.

Although the second joke (2) is about war, it does not contain any aggression; rather, the second layer of meaning sounds more anti-war like. The English joke is based on polysemy of “civil” and the opposition of one of the meanings to the next word of the collocation – war. In fact, the riddle is based on an oxymoron – civil (not military) and war.

Both jokes are based on linguistic ambiguities and the laughter is triggered more by the sense of satisfaction finding the hidden second layer of the joke than of any aggression.

Victor Raskin’s Script-based Semantic Theory of Humour (SSTH)

Victor Raskin’s theory of humour is based on the assumption that much of “verbal *humour* depends on a partial or complete overlap of two or more scripts all of which are compatible with joke-carrying text” (Raskin, 1985: 332). Polysemy, homonymy and syntactic ambiguity serve as triggers between the scripts and it is especially valid to those jokes that are shallow whereas more complicated jokes include several overlaps occurring simultaneously” (Raskin, 1985: 332). To support his claims he uses the following joke:

*“Any big men born round here?” a tourist asked in a condescending voice.
“No”, responded the native. “Best we can do is babies. Different in the city, I suppose”.*

The joke is based on three overlaps and two ambiguities:

- (1) born (BIRTH: LIFE (after birth))
- (2) big (SIZE: FAME)
- (3) (CITY: VILLAGE)

It is important to mention that not all overlapping two scripts evoke humourous effect. According to Raskin, two overlapping scripts will trigger a humourous effect only if they are distinct or opposite enough of certain semantic features of the scripts. He also points out some standard universally “funny” scripts which always trigger “primitive kind of humour when overlapping with most other scripts” (Raskin, 1985: 333) and among these are the scripts of EXCREMENT and SEX. There are three main kinds of “aggressive” themes which trigger a humourous effect – sexual, ethnic and political.

Raskin’s concept of script involves not only semantic meanings of scripts but also extralinguistic knowledge which also forms the opposing scripts of the jokes. The “distance” between the semantic meanings of the scripts can vary and associations can be made between closer or farther meanings of scripts. Raskin distinguishes four types of scripts which form concentric circles representing the idea of their distance (Fig. 2).

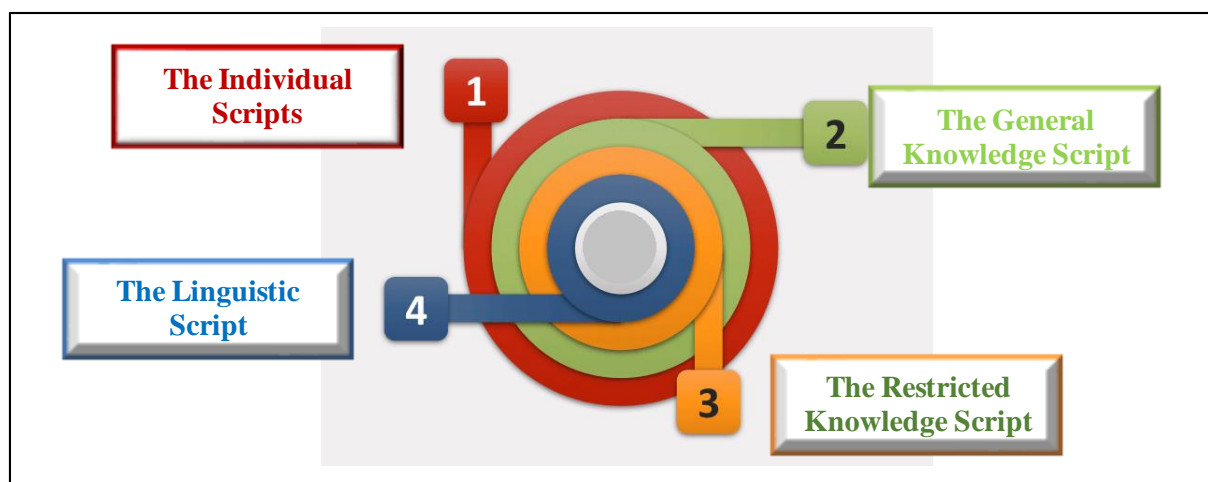


Fig. 2. Types of scripts according to Raskin

The *Linguistic Script* is known by any native speaker of a language, while the other three scripts – *the General Knowledge Scripts*, *the Restricted Knowledge scripts* and *the Individual Scripts* constitute the non-linguistic scripts. The non-linguistic scripts are accessible to speakers in general. Thus, the *General Knowledge Scripts* include the general knowledge of speakers about the world (i.e. the “encyclopedic knowledge”), while the *Restricted Knowledge Scripts* refer to the knowledge of a small group of people who are specialists in a specific area or belong to a specific group in society. The *Individual Scripts* are those that are available to a person and are unique for him/her.

For instance, the *General Knowledge Script* could include the stereotypical idea of blond women as stupid but sexually attractive women and the *Individual Script* will be linked to the knowledge of a specific individual of a blond woman (e.g. a colleague, a friend, a neighbour, etc.) of which this individual will think when he/she hears the joke.

Kirkmann (2008) points out that one of the critiques to this theory is that the *General Knowledge Script* could act as *deus ex machina*, as a resolution to any situation that surprises the audience. However, it stays beyond the semantic analysis of Raskin’s schema of combinational rules for searching the corresponding opposed script (Kirkmann, 2008: 33).

The General Theory of Verbal Humour

The SSTH of Raskin is revised in the light of Attardo’s five-level representation model of jokes which leads to the appearance of the so called *General Theory of Verbal Humour* which is an attempt to produce a theory that will be able to explain any humourous text. Both Ruskin and Attardo come up with a six-level hierarchical model of verbal jokes that establish similarities between the texts of different jokes. This six-level hierarchical model comprises of the following Knowledge Resources (KR):

- **Script Opposition (SO)** – this is the most abstract parameter and it constitutes the lowest level of the hierarchy. Script opposition can lie on “the specifics of narrative organization, its social and historical instantiation, and so on, will vary according to the place and time of production” (Attardo, 1994: 226).
- **Logical mechanism (LM)** – this parameter represents the inner joke logical mechanism or “local logic” and not the real world general logic. Consider the following: “*Madona doesn’t have it, the Pope has it but doesn’t use it, Bush has it short, and Gorbachev long. What is it?*” Answer: *a last name*”.
- **The target (TA)** – the character, personage of the joke (i.e. an individual or a group of individuals) who can be ethnically, socially, politically, physically or otherwise marked.
- **Narrative strategy (NS)** – the “genre” of the joke – dialogue, narrative, a riddle, question-and-answer format.
- **Language (LA)** – the language of the joke and its specifics (phonetical, phonological, morphologic, lexic, pragmatic etc.) that contribute to the punchline.
- **Situation (SI)** – any joke must have some situation. Some rely on it, while others ignore it. For example: A: “*Can you write shorthand?*” – B: “*Yes, but it takes me longer.*” Here writing shorthand is presupposed, but it is left in the “background”. (Attardo, 1994).

As mentioned above, the GTVH model is a hierarchal one and the levels are the following starting from the lowest SO to the highest LA:

$$SO > LM > SI > TA > NS > LA$$

The hierarchical model has been tested by Willibald Ruch as a result of which order of the KRs (as suggested by Attardo and Raskin) have been rearranged (Fig. 3).

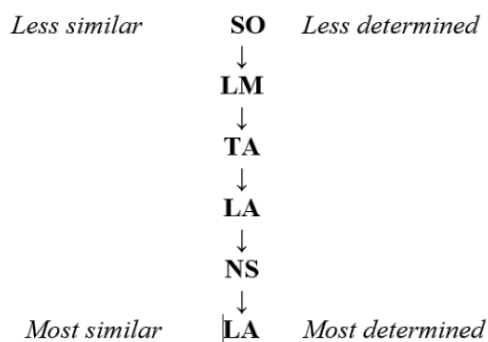


Fig. 3. Hierarchical organization of the KR levels, according to the GTVH (Ruch, Attardo and Ruskin, 1993: 127)

This “new” model has not been considered an optimal one by Ruch and Attardo and Ruskin and underwent several further revisions. In the end Ruch, Attardo and Ruskin (1993) proposed another one – the “Y” shape model (Figure 4). It ranks the SO and SI at the highest level of hierarchy and then downwards is the LM above the TA.

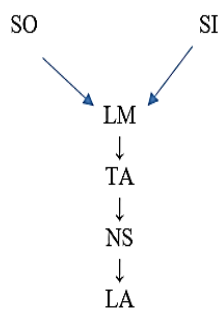


Fig. 4. The “Y” shape model (Kirkmann, 2008: 133)

The GTVH has been further developed by Attardo himself into his Isotopy-disjunction model of jokes.

Attardo’s Isotopy-disjunction Model of Jokes (IDM)

Attardo’s isotopy model deals with the linear syntagmatic organization of verbal jokes. It is a redefinition of Violette Morin’s three-part joke model which states that any joke comprises of three elements: *normalization*, *interlocking* and *disjunction*. The *normalization* is the establishment of the background of the joke and the presentation of the characters. The *interlocking* introduces the problem that has to be solved or the questions that need to be answered. Very often it serves as a connector, a switch between the two planes of the joke. The *disjunction* is the final element of the joke and provides the transition to the humorous effect.

The IDM is a text processing model that rests upon the idea that any joke contains an anomalous element the interpretation of which leads to humorous effect. When the reader/hearer of a joke starts to interpret it, he/she combines the meanings of the words in it, and creates the preliminary sense of the joke – the first isotopy (S₁). The reader/hearer will continue the interpretation in the same way until he/she encounters a semantic barrier (an anomalous element) that can only be overcome by shifting to another opposite isotopy (S₂). The element triggering the shift from S₁ to S₂ is referred to as a *disjunctive*. It corresponds to Raskin’s *script switch trigger*. The *disjunctive* must necessarily follow a *connector* – “any segment of text that can be given two distinct readings” (Attardo, 1994: 95-96). In fact, the IDM states that the disjunctive has a final position. This claim can be illustrated by the following example:

Q: Do you believe in clubs for young people?
A: Only when kindness fails.

(Attardo, 1994: 272)

In this joke the connector “clubs” precedes the disjunctive “Only when kindness fails”.

However, Attardo’s further research on verbal jokes (Attardo *et al.*, 1994) suggests that there are cases in which the disjunctive is not always in final position. Still, he confirms the importance of the final position of the disjunctive in a joke by using the Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) Theory. A central point in FSP is the concept of “communicative dynamism” which represents the central element in the sentence that contributes most to completing its meaning. It is the communicative dynamism that attributes also the development of the communication. Based on this notion and considering the structure of English sentences, Attardo (2017) claims that the final position of the text is “the element with the highest communicative dynamism” (Attardo, 2017: 67), while the element with the lowest communicative dynamism is the beginning of the sentence.

With regard to this Attardo defines jokes into verbal and referential depending on the disjunctive mechanism they possess. Verbal jokes differ from referential since they have a disjunctive and a connector that acts as the ambiguous element. Therefore, referential jokes are translatable from one language to another, whereas the verbal ones are hard to be translated and keep their original humorous effect. Verbal jokes are usually based on phonic or syntactic ambiguity or alliteration.

SUMMARY

All of the presented contemporary linguistic theories of *humour* have contributed to the development of the overall nature and perception and jokes. Despite the deep and thoughtful research on the linguistic character and structuring of verbal jokes made so far, further research on the ways in which humour is expressed through language is needed. Such an analysis would shed light on what speakers of different languages consider funny, as well as on the linguistic mechanisms underlying the ambiguities in jokes.

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